



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
North West Leicestershire
District Council
for the year ended
31 March 2007**

The Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) investigates complaints by members of the public who consider that they have been caused injustice through administrative fault by local authorities and certain other bodies. The LGO also uses the findings from investigation work to help authorities provide better public services through initiatives such as special reports, training and annual letters.

Annual Letter 2006/07 - Introduction

The aim of the annual letter is to provide a summary of information on the complaints about North West Leicestershire District Council that we have received and try to draw any lessons learned about the authority's performance and complaint-handling arrangements. These might then be fed back into service improvement.

I hope that the letter will be a useful addition to other information your authority holds on how people experience or perceive your services.

There are two attachments which form an integral part of this letter: statistical data covering a three year period and a note to help the interpretation of the statistics.

Complaints received

Volume

We received 19 complaints during the year, an increase on the 11 in the previous year. We expect numbers of complaints to vary from year to year. The increase here reflects a rise in planning complaints; there has been a similar rise in rural authorities nationally.

Character

Eight complaints were received about planning, five about housing, one about housing benefit and two about local taxation. Of the three complaints in the "other" category, one was about leisure and culture, one was about waste management and one about anti-social behaviour.

Decisions on complaints

Reports and settlements

We use the term 'local settlement' to describe the outcome of a complaint where, during the course of our investigation, the Council takes, or agrees to take, some action which we consider is a satisfactory response to the complaint and the investigation does not need to be completed. These form a significant proportion of the complaints we determine. When we complete an investigation we must issue a report.

One complaint was settled locally. There was delay in an environmental health officer visiting to assess a noise complaint. Although the noise problem was not severe, the works recommended by the environmental health officer resolved the problem and the Council apologised for the delay. I am grateful to the Council for its assistance in settling this complaint.

I issued no reports against the Council during the year.

Other findings

Fourteen complaints were decided during the year. Of these one was outside my jurisdiction, six complaints were premature and, as I mentioned earlier, one was settled locally. The remaining six were not pursued because no evidence of maladministration was seen or because it was decided for other reasons not to pursue them.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

The number of premature complaints (six) is higher than the national average (28.2%).

In last year's letter I said "I could not easily access details of the complaint procedure on the Council's website." I am pleased to see that the Council has now published its corporate complaint procedure on its website and that complaints can be easily submitted online. I hope that this will increase publicity of the Council's complaints process and reduce the number of premature complaints submitted to me.

Training in complaint handling

As part of our role to provide advice in good administrative practice, we offer training courses for all levels of local authority staff in complaints handling and investigation. The feedback from courses that have been delivered over the past two and a half years is very positive.

The range of courses is expanding in response to demand and in addition to the generic Good Complaint Handling (identifying and processing complaints) and Effective Complaint Handling (investigation and resolution) we can run open courses for groups of staff from smaller authorities and also customise courses to meet your council's specific requirements.

All courses are presented by an experienced investigator so participants benefit from their knowledge and expertise of complaint handling.

I have enclosed some information on the full range of courses available together with contact details for enquiries and any further bookings. If we can provide any further training for you please let Barbara Hedley, Assistant Ombudsman, know.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

We made enquiries on four complaints this year, and the average time for responding was 37 days, a small decrease from the 40 days it took last year. I appreciate that the Council has put significant efforts this year into improving its complaints handling and that this is starting to improve the Council's response time. But given the relatively low number of enquiries I have needed to make of the Council I hope that the Council will take steps to return to the excellent performance it was achieving in this area two years ago.

In the last two years I have arranged Regional Seminars in various county areas, inviting Members and Officers of each Council within the locality to meet me to explain the work of the Ombudsman and to explore common concerns. I would like to hold such a seminar in Leicestershire during 2007/08 and would be glad to receive an indication from your Council about whether this would be of interest. We would naturally contact you with further details nearer the time.

LGO developments

I thought it would be helpful to update you on a project we are implementing to improve the first contact that people have with us as part of our customer focus initiative. We are developing a new Access and Advice Service that will provide a gateway to our services for all complainants and enquirers. It will be mainly telephone-based but will also deal with email, text and letter correspondence. As the project progresses we will keep you informed about developments and expected timescales.

Changes brought about by the Local Government Bill are also expected to impact on the way we work and again we will keep you informed as relevant.

We have just issued a special report that draws on our experience of dealing with complaints about planning applications for phone masts considered under the prior approval system, which can be highly controversial. We recommend simple measures that councils can adopt to minimise the problems that can occur.

A further special report will be published in July focusing on the difficulties that can be encountered when complaints are received by local authorities about services delivered through a partnership. *Local partnerships and citizen redress* sets out our advice and guidance on how these problems can be overcome by adopting good governance arrangements that include an effective complaints protocol.

Conclusions and general observations

I welcome this opportunity to give you my reflections about the complaints my office has dealt with over the past year. I hope that you find the information and assessment provided useful when seeking improvements to your Council's services.

J R White
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June 2007

Enc: Statistical data
Note on interpretation of statistics
Details of training courses

Complaints received by subject area	Benefits	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	1	5	3	8	2	0	19
2005 / 2006	0	5	5	1	0	0	11
2004 / 2005	0	5	7	4	2	4	22

Note: these figures will include complaints that were made prematurely to the Ombudsman and which we referred back to the authority for consideration.

Decisions	MI reps	LS	M reps	NM reps	No mal	Omb disc	Outside jurisdiction	Premature complaints	Total excl premature	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	0	1	0	0	4	2	1	6	8	14
2005 / 2006	0	1	0	0	6	2	0	1	9	10
2004 / 2005	0	1	0	0	10	2	3	6	16	22

See attached notes for an explanation of the headings in this table.

Response times	FIRST ENQUIRIES	
	No. of First Enquiries	Avg no. of days to respond
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	4	36.8
2005 / 2006	7	40.4
2004 / 2005	6	22.8

Average local authority response times 01/04/2006 to 31/03/2007

Types of authority	<= 28 days %	29 - 35 days %	>= 36 days %
District Councils	48.9	23.4	27.7
Unitary Authorities	30.4	37.0	32.6
Metropolitan Authorities	38.9	41.7	19.4
County Councils	47.1	32.3	20.6
London Boroughs	39.4	33.3	27.3
National Park Authorities	66.7	33.3	0.0