



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Reading Borough 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 your authority 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

In 2006/07 I received 55 complaints against your authority, a reduction of 11 compared to the number received in the previous year.

The drop in the number of complaints was most marked in complaints about education where the number received was 4 compared to 18 in the previous year. Notably, I received no complaints about school admissions.

There was an increase in complaints about transport and highways, up to 15 from 9 the previous year. These included complaints about the issue of parking penalty charge notices and general traffic management issues.

Complaints about planning increased from 6 to 11 but this may be explained by a multiple complaint about a planning application for a large block of flats.

We received 10 complaints about housing, mainly about housing allocations and repairs.

Decisions on complaints

Reports and local 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.

I did not issue any reports against your Council last year. Of the complaints I decided in 2006/07, 10 were local settlements. I give below details of some of the settlements.

I settled 4 complaints about transport and highways issues. One was about a failure to respond to correspondence about the proposal to make the Inner Distribution Road a one way system, which was settled by providing information and having a meeting with the complainant. I also decided to discontinue investigation of another complaint about the same issue and have recently received a new complaint about the matter.

The other transport and highways complaints I settled were about failure to answer a letter about a controlled parking zone; failure to respond to representations about a parking penalty charge notice; and, delay and confusion in dealing with a complaint about the documentation required to renew a parking permit, and delay in issuing the permit after the complaint was dealt with. None of these settlements involved financial compensation (other than the refund or cancellation of penalty charges), but were resolved by the Council taking action to address the concerns which had been raised.

Two of the complaints I settled were about housing. One of these was about disrepair between 1997 and 2001 and delays over several years in dealing with a complaint about this. The Council paid £1,000 in addition to the £500 it had offered through its own complaints process. The other was about a complaint that the Council had removed and destroyed the complainant's possessions from a communal room. The Council had delivered letters to tenants warning that goods would be destroyed but the complainant disputed this. The Council paid £125 as a goodwill payment and I settled the complaint on that basis.

In a planning matter, a planning officer visited the complainant's property without his knowledge and then failed to tell him the outcome of its visit; there were delays in dealing with his complaint about this. The complaint was settled when the Council agreed to pay the complainant £100.

I settled one complaint in March 2007 about delay in ensuring the educational needs of a child that had been excluded from school were met, and a new school identified. The Council paid £1,000 but at the time of settling the complaint a permanent placement had not been found; the complainant was advised that they could come back to me if there were further difficulties. In this case the Council was helpful in being prepared to discuss the issues and the way that it kept my investigator informed about progress.

Other settlements were about incorrectly issuing a summons and liability order for Council Tax where the arrears had been wrongly charged; and an anti social behaviour complaint where the Council lost diary sheets that the complainant had faxed to it.

The proportion of my decisions that led to reports or local settlements was slightly lower than the average for all authorities.

Other findings

I dealt with a complaint about confusing signs in a residents' parking area which was in addition to several about the same issue that I decided last year. Although there was no maladministration, the Council agreed to replace the signs.

There was one fairly high profile complaint about school admissions where complainant parents argued that a music room should be used as an additional class room. Although there was evidence of fault in the way that the appeal was dealt with, I decided not to pursue the investigation as the outcome was unlikely to have been different. The Council subsequently informed me that it had made several changes to its procedures, including: additional guidance for those chairing appeal panels; a reminder to appeal clerks about the need to raise concerns about panel members in a timely way; the discontinuation of pre-meetings to discuss procedural matters; a review of the wording of decision letters in cases of infant class size prejudice. I am grateful to the Council for its helpful response.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

Some of the complaints mentioned above were, in part, about delays by the Council when dealing with the complaints through its own complaint procedure. During the year I decided five complaints which had previously been referred back to the Council but where the complainants resubmitted them to me. I did not find in the complainant's favour in any of those.

If the Council has any reports of its own on the performance of its complaints procedure I should be interested in seeing these.

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 now offer these courses specifically for social services staff. We have also successfully piloted a course on reviewing complaints for social services review panel members. I am pleased that the Council has asked us to provide an Effective Complaint Handling course this year and hope that you will find it useful.

I have enclosed some information on the full range of courses available together with contact details for enquiries and any further bookings.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

The time taken by the Council to respond to first written enquiries from my office was 28.3 days which is very close to the target I set of 28 days. This was fairly consistent across all categories of complaint with those about planning and building control taking marginally longer at 30 days on average. Enquiries about housing complaints were responded to in 23.5 days on average, well within my target.

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 that 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.

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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.

Tony Redmond
Local Government Ombudsman
10th floor, Millbank Tower
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June 2007

Enc: Statistical data
Note on interpretation of statistics
Leaflet on training courses (with posted copy only)

Complaints received by subject area	Adult care services	Benefits	Children and family services	Education	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	4	0	0	4	10	7	11	4	15	55
2005 / 2006	0	3	0	18	13	9	6	8	9	66
2004 / 2005	1	4	3	0	13	8	7	10	9	55

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	10	0	0	12	10	9	18	41	59
2005 / 2006	0	5	0	0	21	13	17	12	56	68
2004 / 2005	0	7	0	0	13	8	3	12	31	43

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	17	28.3
2005 / 2006	25	29.5
2004 / 2005	22	32.1

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