



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
London Borough of Richmond
upon Thames
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 67 complaints against your authority, compared with 43 in the previous year.

This increase is largely accounted for by complaints about planning and building control, education and housing. However, of the planning complaints I received, 20 concerned just one development. The complaints I received about education and housing are still small in number and do not indicate any particular problem in service delivery. The distribution of other complaints remained broadly the same.

Decisions on complaints

During the year my office made decisions on 55 complaints against your authority. We found no maladministration in 11 complaints and we exercised discretion to close a further 4 without requiring any action by the Council. We found that 7 were outside jurisdiction.

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 issued no reports against your authority this year. We settled nine complaints resulting in compensation of £3000. I give details of some of the settlements below.

One case concerned the Council's failure to address parents' concerns about the level of care provided for their severely disabled son in a registered home. As neither the staff in the home nor the Council could allay the parents concerns they took their son home and cared for him for a number of months before suitable alternative accommodation was found. During this time they were not provided with the level of support to which they were entitled in terms of day care provision and respite care. The Council settled the complaint by paying £2000 compensation.

Four cases concerned planning matters including two about enforcement. The Council paid a total of £1000 compensation. I do not consider that the complaints raised any issues of general concern.

Two complaints concerned the Council's handling of admission appeals. The Council accepted a number of criticisms about the way the appeal panels had conducted the hearings and about some minor administrative matters contained in the Council's composite prospectus for children about to move to secondary school. The Council settled the complaints by arranging re-hearings.

I am grateful for the Council's assistance in settling these and the other complaints.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

My office referred 24 'premature complaints' to your authority for consideration, as we did not think you had had sufficient opportunity to deal with them through your own procedures. This is over 40% of all decisions and so well above the national average. However this figure was inflated by the complaints I received about one development, 13 of which I initially referred back to the Council to deal with.

Ten premature complaints were resubmitted to me during the period. Seven of these concerned the one planning development and are yet to be decided. I did not pursue any of the other three.

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. 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 was pleased to offer training to your staff this year in effective complaint handling and I hope they found 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 target time for councils to respond when we make enquiries is 28 days. Your Council's average response time was just over 28 days, an improvement on last year's average of almost 33 days. I am grateful to your officers for the progress that has been made here. My investigators also inform me that the quality of your officers' responses is good.

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.

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.

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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	Social Services - other	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	2	1	5	9	6	6	31	1	0	6	67
2005 / 2006	3	1	3	3	1	7	16	3	1	5	43
2004 / 2005	1	3	8	6	4	4	15	2	0	7	50

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	9	0	0	11	4	7	24	31	55
2005 / 2006	0	7	0	0	10	7	8	12	32	44
2004 / 2005	0	5	0	0	14	10	10	12	39	51

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	11	28.5
2005 / 2006	16	32.9
2004 / 2005	22	30.0

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