



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

The Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Letter to Richmondshire 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

This annual letter provides a summary of the complaints we have received about your authority. Where possible, we comment on the authority's performance and complaint-handling arrangements to assist with your 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.

Two attachments 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 & Character

The number of complaints against the Council received by my office had remained broadly the same as last year, being 14. Nothing in the distribution of those complaints between departmental areas calls for any comment by me.

Decisions on complaints

Reports and local settlements

A 'local settlement' is a complaint that is resolved by the Council taking, or agreeing to take, action which we consider is a satisfactory response to the complaint so that the investigation can be discontinued. In 2006/07 27.7% of complaints dealt with by the three Local Government Ombudsmen (excluding premature and those outside jurisdiction) were resolved by local settlement. When we complete an investigation we must issue a report.

I have not issued any reports against the Council during the year. Two complaints resulted in settlements at the prompting of my staff. One concerned the way that the Council had worded a letter, causing unnecessary upset to a citizen. I am pleased to record that the Council altered its standard wording in response to this finding.

Other findings

In all, 15 complaints were decided by my staff. Of these one was premature as the Council had not itself been given a proper opportunity to investigate and respond. One other was outside of my jurisdiction. No maladministration was found in 10 cases. In one other case my Investigator exercised their discretion not to investigate the matter.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

I am not aware of any problems with the way the Council deals with complaints from members of the public.

During the year I took action to limit the impact that one individual was having on work and staff at my office and no doubt at the Council's. It is only fair to record in this letter that a particular individual can take a disproportionate share of the Council's resources and cause needless anxiety and concern for staff. Whilst anyone is entitled to complain on legitimate grounds there is a limit as to how much time need be devoted to malicious and specious issues. The Council is entitled to deal robustly with such people (whilst taking care not to miss a valid complaint if such there be).

Training in complaint handling

Part of our role is to provide advice and guidance about good administrative practice. We offer training courses for all levels of local authority staff in complaints handling and investigation. The feedback from councils that have taken up the training 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.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

The Council responded to seven enquiries from my staff and achieved a slight improvement on last year – just over 26 days. This is commendably within the target of 28 days that we set. Unlike last year, no individual case took longer than it should.

The Assistant Ombudsman who then led the team dealing with the Council's area met a representative group of planners from North Yorkshire during the year to discuss issues of mutual interest. A representative of the Council attended that meeting.

Working relations between our offices remain good.

LGO developments

You may be interested in the development of our initiative to improve the first contact that people have with us. A new Access and Advice Service will provide a gateway to our services for all complainants and enquirers. It will encourage telephone contact but will also deal with email, text and letter correspondence. We will let you have further details about how it will operate and the expected timescales and discuss with you the implications for the Council.

I hope you have received our latest special report about telecommunications masts. It draws on our experience of dealing with complaints about planning applications for masts which can be highly controversial. We recommend simple measures that councils can adopt to minimise the chances of maladministration occurring.

In July we will be publishing a special report about the difficulties that can be encountered with complaints when local authorities deliver services or discharge their functions through partnerships. *Local partnerships and citizen redress* provides advice and guidance on how these problems can be overcome by good governance arrangements that include an effective complaints protocol.

Conclusions and general observations

I welcome this opportunity to comment on our experience of complaints about the Council over the past year. I hope that you find the information and assessment provided useful when seeking improvements to your Council's services.

Anne Seex
Local Government Ombudsman
Beverley House
17 Shipton Road
York
YO30 5FZ

June 2007

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

Complaints received by subject area	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	1	4	9	14
2005 / 2006	0	7	8	15
2004 / 2005	0	5	4	9

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	2	0	0	10	1	1	1	14	15
2005 / 2006	0	0	0	0	5	1	3	3	9	12
2004 / 2005	0	0	0	0	8	4	1	0	13	13

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	7	26.1
2005 / 2006	4	26.8
2004 / 2005	9	29.8

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