



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
St Albans City and 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 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 2006/2007 I received 26 complaints against your Council, three less than the year before and two less than in 2004/2005. As with preceding years, the majority of complaints (13) concerned planning, with housing the second largest subject category (5).

Decisions on complaints

Reports and local settlements

In 2006/2007 I made 23 decisions on complaints against your Council. In 14 cases no maladministration was found and in four cases the complaints were outside my jurisdiction. One complaint was referred back to the Council so it could have the opportunity to address the problem before I considered it, and I decided in two cases to use my discretion to end consideration of the complaints because it did not seem that significant injustice had been caused.

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 Council last year, but local settlements were reached on two complaints. In one case the Council delayed for approximately a year in taking enforcement action about unauthorised development to a garage at a property adjacent to the complainants' home. It also incorrectly informed the complainants that the building was in accordance with the approved plans. The Council agreed to pay the complainants £200 compensation and took enforcement action. In the second case the Committee report on a planning application for a replacement staircase at the complainant's block mistakenly said that this would replicate the brick and bonding pattern of the original development. In fact, the staircase was to be built in concrete. I did not consider I could conclude permission would not have been granted, but a £150 time and trouble payment to the complainant was agreed with the Council to resolve the matter.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

I expect councils to reply to my initial enquiries within 28 calendar days. In 2006/2007 the Council's average response time was 34.1 days, 6 days outside my target, and a disappointing increase on the preceding years. All the complaints on which I made enquiries concerned planning issues. In two cases it took the Council 50 days to respond. I consider that there is room for significant improvement here.

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

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
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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	Benefits	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	1	5	3	13	1	3	26
2005 / 2006	0	4	7	17	0	1	29
2004 / 2005	0	4	5	19	0	0	28

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	14	2	4	1	22	23
2005 / 2006	1	2	0	0	7	6	2	9	18	27
2004 / 2005	0	2	0	0	9	4	3	6	18	24

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	10	34.1
2005 / 2006	14	29.6
2004 / 2005	6	24.3

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