



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Tunbridge Wells 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

I received 14 complaints against your Council in the year 1 April 2006 to 31 March 2007, a slight decrease compared with the previous year. The distribution of complaints was broadly similar.

Decisions on complaints

I also made decisions on 14 complaints in the 2006/2007 year. Of these 4 were 'premature complaints' which I did not think your Council had had sufficient opportunity to deal with through its own complaints procedure. Of the remaining 10 complaints, 4 were outside jurisdiction. I exercised my discretion not to pursue an investigation in the case of one complaint; and I found insufficient evidence of maladministration to merit pursuing an investigation in the other 5. So, I did not uphold any complaints against your Council last year.

Reports and local settlements

When we complete an investigation we must issue a report. There are a significant number of investigations that do not reach this stage. This is because we settle the complaint during the course of our investigation. We call these decisions 'local settlements'. As I did not uphold any complaints against your Council, I issued no reports and sought no local settlements.

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.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

I am pleased to note that your Council's average time to respond to my Investigators' enquiries reduced significantly from 27 days in 2005/2006 to 19.7 days last year. This is well below my 28 calendar day target. I understand that liaison between our organisations continues to be good, with your officers taking a proactive approach to investigating complaints thoroughly and providing a consistently high standard of responses to my enquiries. I am grateful for this assistance from the Council.

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.

Tony Redmond
Local Government Ombudsman
10th Floor, Millbank Tower
Millbank
London SW1P 4QP

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	Public finance	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	2	5	7	0	0	14
2005 / 2006	2	2	6	2	3	15
2004 / 2005	6	3	12	0	3	24

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	0	0	0	5	1	4	4	10	14
2005 / 2006	0	0	0	0	3	4	4	5	11	16
2004 / 2005	0	4	0	0	7	5	7	1	23	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	3	19.7
2005 / 2006	2	27.0
2004 / 2005	6	23.3

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