



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Watford 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

Volume

In 2006/07 I received 22 complaints against the Council, markedly higher than the nine of the year before but broadly in line with previous years.

Character

Ten of the complaints were about housing matters. This is a noteworthy increase as I did not receive any complaints about housing in 2005/06. Seven of these housing complaints were about repairs to the Council's housing stock. The Audit Commission's current assessment of the Council's performance is 'weak' with specific problems identified in aspects of its housing performance and implementation of the government's 'Decent Homes Standard'. Complaints here may be a reflection of these problems. I note that the Council intends shortly to transfer its housing stock to a housing association.

Of the remaining twelve complaints, four concerned planning applications and three were about public finance issues.

Decisions on complaints

Reports and local settlements

In 2006/07 I made decisions on 17 complaints against the Council. I found no or insufficient evidence of fault to warrant action in seven cases and used my discretion not to pursue a complaint on one occasion. One complaint, concerning homelessness, was outside my jurisdiction to investigate and in four cases (including two related to public finances) the Council had not been given a reasonable opportunity to deal with the matter before the complaint was made to me.

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.

This year, I did not issue any formal reports against the Council. I did, however, conclude four local settlements. The first of these concerned a parking ticket. I felt that the complainant may have been misled, because he was told that he could make formal representations to the Council but if these were rejected the full charge would be due. This was inaccurate as it made no reference to the statutory right of appeal to an independent adjudicator. The Council agreed to repay the penalty paid, and to amend its letters so that they referred to appeal rights.

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A second settlement concerned delay in making repairs to the complainant's home. The Council agreed to do the repairs within a specified period and also agreed to pay £300 for the complainant's distress and the time and trouble to which they were put. In another housing case, a settlement was agreed following the Council's inspection of a property in the course of a mutual exchange. I found that the Council did not provide alternative facilities for cooking whilst it carried out repairs in the complainant's home. The Council agreed to a modest payment to reflect the inconvenience caused to the complainant.

The final settlement arose in a complaint about the Council's delay in telling the complainant that they needed a new planning application to deal with alterations to approved plans. The Council agreed to a modest payment for the time and trouble the complainant faced in pursuing matters further.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

I referred four complaints back to Council as premature. Nationally 28% of all complaints to me were referred back to councils, so this is in line with expectations.

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

My target is to receive council's responses to my enquiries within 28 days. In the course of my investigations this year, I made nine enquiries of the Council. The average response time was 32.4 days. This is disappointing as the Council's response times in previous years have been within my target. The reason for the disappointing performance was that it took an average of 40.6 days for me to receive responses on housing complaints. No response on a housing complaint was received within my target period. I trust that the Council will consider ways in which its performance can be improved.

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.

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	0	10	4	4	3	1	22
2005 / 2006	2	1	3	1	0	2	9
2004 / 2005	1	3	3	8	2	2	19

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	4	0	0	7	1	1	4	13	17
2005 / 2006	0	0	0	0	5	2	1	0	8	8
2004 / 2005	0	0	0	0	10	2	3	6	15	21

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	9	32.4
2005 / 2006	3	26.0
2004 / 2005	7	22.1

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