



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Wellingborough 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 Wellingborough Borough Council 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

We received 14 complaints during the year, which is consistent with numbers in recent years.

Character

Five complaints were received about planning, three about housing, two about public finance and four about other matters including land and waste management.

Decisions on complaints

Reports and 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.

This year, two complaints were settled locally. The first was a complaint about planning enforcement, involving the condition of a garden next to the complainant's property. The Council gave her the impression that it would take enforcement action against her neighbour, but failed to do so, instead allowing him more time to bring the garden to an acceptable standard. The Council acknowledged that it had not kept sufficient records of its dealings with the complainant and that it failed to keep her properly informed of developments. It therefore apologised and paid her £100 compensation for her time and trouble. It also agreed to ensure the garden was brought up to an acceptable standard.

In the other case, the Council acted quickly to resolve a complaint about refuse collection, agreeing to an alternative collection arrangement after consultation with the complainant. I am grateful to the Council for its assistance in settling these complaints.

When we complete an investigation we must issue a report. I issued no reports against the Council during the year.

Other findings

Thirteen complaints in all were decided during the year. Of these six were premature and so I asked the Council to deal with them through its own complaints procedures, giving the complainant a chance to resubmit their complaint later. As mentioned above, two complaints were settled locally and the remaining five were not pursued because no evidence of maladministration was seen or because it was decided for other reasons not to pursue them.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

I am generally satisfied that the Council's complaint procedure is working effectively once citizens access it. The small number of complaints I receive indicates that the Council is able to resolve most complaints at an early stage or else is performing so well that it is the subject of few complaints. Either is commendable. But I do have some concern that a relatively high proportion of the complaints I received had to be referred back to the Council as premature. This might suggest that citizens are not fully aware about how to complain to the Council and that its complaint procedures may need better signposting.

I am also disappointed to note that the Council has not made improvements to the complaint procedure it publishes on its website, despite my recommendation last year that it should do so. The procedure continues to state that a complaint must go through the Council's complaint procedure before I can consider it. As I explained last year, while this is generally the case, there are instances when I will use my discretion to look at a complaint at an earlier stage (for example if the Council has been made aware of a complaint but not referred it through its own complaint procedure and the matter complained of is urgent).

Can the Council please now give this matter its urgent attention. It may also want to provide its website users with a link to this office. I know that accessibility to Councils via websites is a facility that is much valued by the public and increasingly used. It is important therefore that the Council maximises use of this resource and ensures the information it contains is accurate.

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. 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

We made enquiries on four complaints this year, and the average time for responding was 32 days, against a target of 28 days. That is an increase on the 26 days it took last year and is the first time in recent years that the Council has not met the requested target. I hope that this is a temporary drop in performance and the Council will improve its response times here, particularly given the relatively low number of enquiries I made.

No one from the Council has attended the annual link officer seminar recently and you may wish to consider sending someone to the seminar to be held later in November. If so, please let the Assistant Ombudsman Stephen Purser know and he will arrange for an invitation to be sent. In addition, if it would be helpful for Mr Purser to visit the Council and give a presentation about how we investigate complaints then please contact him.

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 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.

J R White
Local Government Ombudsman
The Oaks No 2
Westwood Way
Westwood Business Park
Coventry
CV4 8JB

June 2007

Enc: Statistical data
Note on interpretation of statistics
Details of training courses

Complaints received by subject area	Benefits	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	0	3	3	5	2	1	14
2005 / 2006	0	6	3	5	1	0	15
2004 / 2005	1	4	4	9	2	0	20

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	3	2	0	6	7	13
2005 / 2006	0	2	0	0	8	1	3	5	14	19
2004 / 2005	0	1	0	0	9	2	2	2	14	16

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	4	32.3
2005 / 2006	9	26.4
2004 / 2005	14	26.7

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