



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Alnwick 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 possible, we comment on the authority's performance and complaint-handling arrangements to annual letter provides a summary of the complaints we have received about your authority. Where 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

Last year 10 complaints were received against the Council, comparable with the 11 complaints received in both of the two previous years.

Character

As in the two previous years the majority of these (eight or just over half) were about planning matters.

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.

Other findings

Last year decisions were taken upon 11 complaints, of which four were considered to be premature, in the sense that the Council had not yet had a proper opportunity itself to consider these complaints. A further three lay outside my jurisdiction. There was no need therefore to locally settle any of these complaints, as no maladministration was found on the part of the Council, nor was there any need therefore to issue a report against the Council.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

I found the advise given to potential complainants upon the Council's website less clear than most, so that at one point viewers are advised to read the Council's complaints procedure "before filling in the form", but no guidance is provided on how or where to access that complaints procedure. Further there is no clear linkage to the Commission's own website, so that complainants choosing to use our services are not well guided in that direction.

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.

I am pleased to note that Alnwick, like other Northumberland councils, is considering the possibility of a training course run for the collective benefit of Northumberland councils, and I hope that this may come to fruition during the coming year.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

I cannot comment upon the Council's speed in responding to enquiries made by the Commission's investigators upon complaints they have chosen to investigate, because no such enquiries were made last year. However, I note that in the two previous years the Council responded with commendable speed to the small number of complaints upon which enquiries were made in those two years.

During the year you welcomed the Assistant Ombudsman who now leads the team of investigators dealing with complaints against your Council. This visit was a useful opportunity to explain changes within the Commission's structure, procedures and objectives; discuss complaints; consider training and to meet the staff who deal with our enquiries. I hope that the relationship will continue to be constructive.

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	Benefits	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	0	0	2	8	10
2005 / 2006	1	1	1	8	11
2004 / 2005	1	2	5	3	11

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	3	1	3	4	7	11
2005 / 2006	0	1	0	0	2	3	2	3	8	11
2004 / 2005	0	0	0	0	3	1	1	3	5	8

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	0	0.0
2005 / 2006	6	20.3
2004 / 2005	3	18.7

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