



The Commission for  
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's  
Annual Letter  
Bracknell Forest 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**

We received 16 complaints during the year. This is a substantial decrease from the previous year when we received 31, although seven of them were about a single planning application. There were four complaints about education (three were about school admissions), four about planning and building control (two each about planning applications and planning enforcement) and the remaining complaints covered a range of service areas.

## **Decisions on complaints**

### ***Reports and local 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. When we complete an investigation we must issue a report.

I issued no reports against the Council during the year and I decided four complaints as local settlements. The Council paid compensation totalling £1,750 compensation, most of which was for the injustice caused by delay in investigating allegations of elder abuse. By the time the complaint was made to me the Council had already decided to appoint a dedicated adult protection co-ordinator with the aim of preventing such problems occurring in the future.

The other local settlements were obtained in complaints about delay in providing adaptations to meet mobility needs; a delay in dealing with council tax benefit; and a delay in the Council telling the complainant its view of a reported noise nuisance.

### ***Other findings***

In one complaint which was not upheld, we expressed concerns about lack of clarity in the Council's publications and website explaining how points are allocated under the housing allocation scheme for, for example, social and welfare needs and local connection. The Council agreed to review the consistency of information supplied to housing applicants and it would be helpful if you could confirm the outcome of this review and provide me with a copy of the revised guidance to applicants.

## **Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints**

During the year we referred just one complaint back to the Council for consideration through its own complaints procedure. I decided three complaints which had previously been sent back to the Council in this way and where the complainants had resubmitted their complaints. All were about the same issue and I did not uphold the complaints. /...

## 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

The target time for responses to our enquiries is 28 days. The average time taken by the Council to reply to our written enquiries increased from 27.5 days to 32.9 days. Although our two enquiries about adult services took the most time, there is room for improvement across all service areas and I hope you may be able to reduce significantly the average response time in the current year.

I was pleased that one of my staff had the opportunity to contribute to a training day for education admission appeal panel members in February of this year.

## 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	Adult care services	Benefits	Children and family services	Education	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	1	1	0	4	2	2	4	0	2	16
2005 / 2006	1	1	3	3	4	3	16	0	0	31
2004 / 2005	1	1	0	3	1	9	5	1	2	23

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	9	2	1	22	23
2005 / 2006	0	1	0	0	8	1	4	8	14	22
2004 / 2005	0	5	0	0	5	7	5	3	22	25

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	14	32.9
2005 / 2006	11	27.5
2004 / 2005	9	23.7

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