



The Commission for  
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's  
Annual Letter  
Broadland 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**

The aim of the annual letter is to provide a summary of information on the complaints about Broadland District 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 22 complaints during the year, five more than the 17 last year.

### ***Character***

The number of complaints about planning and building control rose from 11 last year to 16 this. No complaints about benefits were received and the spread of the other complaints reflects the range of services provided by the Council. We expect to see fluctuations from year to year and I see nothing significant in the rise. The volume of planning complaints has increased nationally in recent years.

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

As I did not find fault with the Council's handling of any of the complaints made to me there were no local settlements this year.

I issued no reports against the Council during the year.

### ***Other findings***

Seventeen complaints were decided during the year. Of these two were outside my jurisdiction for a variety of reasons. Six complaints were premature. The remaining nine were not pursued because no evidence of maladministration was seen or because it was decided for other reasons not to pursue them, mainly because no significant injustice flowed from the fault alleged.

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

The number of premature complaints (six) represents some 27% of all the complaints the Council received. This is on a par with the national average of 28%. This indicates that the Council's complaints process is visible to customers and that staff, when dealing with requests for assistance, signpost the complaints process for those who remain unhappy with what the Council has done.

Three complaints were re-submitted to me in the year. One file is still open and the other two have been discontinued because no maladministration was identified in one case and the other was outside jurisdiction.

### **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 can also run open courses for groups of staff from smaller authorities and 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.

If we can provide any training for you please let Barbara Hedley, Assistant Ombudsman, know.

### **Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman**

We made enquiries on six complaints this year, and the average time for responding was 27.2 days. That is within our response time target of 28 days and similar to your response time last year. I appreciate that the Council has made significant efforts to effect improvements in the last three years, and the Council is to be congratulated on its timeliness here.

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 Barbara Hedley, Assistant Ombudsman, know and she will arrange for an invitation to be sent.

### **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

<b>Complaints received by subject area</b>	<b>Benefits</b>	<b>Housing</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Planning &amp; building control</b>	<b>Public finance</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007</b>	0	1	4	16	1	<b>22</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	0	3	2	11	1	<b>17</b>
<b>2004 / 2005</b>	2	0	3	15	0	<b>20</b>

**Note:** these figures will include complaints that were made prematurely to the Ombudsman and which we referred back to the authority for consideration.

<b>Decisions</b>	<b>MI reps</b>	<b>LS</b>	<b>M reps</b>	<b>NM reps</b>	<b>No mal</b>	<b>Omb disc</b>	<b>Outside jurisdiction</b>	<b>Premature complaints</b>	<b>Total excl premature</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007</b>	0	0	0	0	7	2	2	6	11	<b>17</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	0	2	0	0	10	3	1	2	16	<b>18</b>
<b>2004 / 2005</b>	1	1	0	0	5	6	2	5	15	<b>20</b>

See attached notes for an explanation of the headings in this table.

<b>Response times</b>	<b>FIRST ENQUIRIES</b>	
	<b>No. of First Enquiries</b>	<b>Avg no. of days to respond</b>
<b>01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007</b>	6	27.2
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	10	27.6
<b>2004 / 2005</b>	8	33.4

**Average local authority response times 01/04/2006 to 31/03/2007**

<b>Types of authority</b>	<b>&lt;= 28 days %</b>	<b>29 - 35 days %</b>	<b>&gt;= 36 days %</b>
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