



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Cambridge City 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

In 2006 -7 I received 25 complaints against your authority. This represents a slight increase on the previous year and was due to a rise in planning and building control and housing complaints. But the numbers involved are small and the overall total is less than the number received in 2004-05. I do not attach any particular significance to these fluctuations, which I expect to see from year to year.

Decisions on complaints

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.

During 2006-7 I made decisions on 16 complaints, excluding premature complaints. I did not issue any reports against your Council. Two complaints were upheld wholly or in part and remedied by way of local settlement. In one of these the Council failed to follow its procedures for dealing with complaints of antisocial behaviour from the complainant's neighbour. It delayed for approximately three months in referring the case to its Antisocial Behaviour Team. It then decided the nuisance was low level but did not inform her that it would therefore take no further action. The Council later revised its view because the complainant said her daughter was at risk and offered her a management housing move. The Police did not substantiate this claim but the Council decided not to withdraw its offer. The Council also delayed for two months in responding to her formal complaint. As the Council had already offered a more than adequate remedy I did not seek any further compensation or action. I would comment that the Council made great efforts to settle this complaint, holding many meetings with the complainant and her neighbour in addition to seeking corroboration from third parties. Its commitment to putting matters right was exemplary.

In the second case the Council delayed for nine months in arranging for compensation to be paid for the excess the complainant had incurred when she claimed on her insurance for damage to her property. The damage had occurred when the Council repaired the flat upstairs. The Council's contractors had insisted on issuing a cheque in full and final settlement of the claim but following my intervention the Council promptly reissued the cheque without conditions.

In ten of the remaining 14 complaints I found no or insufficient maladministration by the Council causing injustice. One of these complaints was about the Council granting planning permission for a

residential apartment block in the middle of a conservation area. I found there was fault by the Council in its failure to record its reasons for granting permission contrary to officer advice. I also considered there was potential fault in Members of the Planning Committee attending a display by the developer in advance of the key Committee meeting. There was no record on the planning file of the invitation, attendance or hospitality provided. These failures gave the appearance of impropriety even though I was ultimately unable to conclude that any had occurred. I commend the Council for introducing, as a result of this complaint, a 'Code of Good Practice' providing guidance for Members on dealing with planning applications. It should prevent this situation recurring.

In another three complaints I exercised my discretion to discontinue my investigation and one complaint was outside my jurisdiction.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

My previous letter referred to some concerns over the role of the Council's Independent Complaints Investigator following confusion expressed by complainants. Thank you for your comments and your commitment to review the information you include in the complaint leaflet and on your website about this matter. I note that the Council's website contains an informative leaflet relating to this stage of the complaints procedure and clearly refers to the difference between the Investigator and myself.

In 2006-07 I referred six premature complaints to the Council for it to consider, one fewer than the previous year. Half of these were resubmitted to me at the end of the process, but I do not consider this reflected any problems in dealing with these complaints after referral. I believe the Council's complaints procedure is working well.

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 staff continued to have a positive working relationship with the Council's officers during the year and the quality of the Council's responses is good. My Assistant Ombudsman, Ms Jones gave a presentation to your officers in November 2006 on the work of the Local Government Ombudsman. I hope you found this useful.

I made enquiries on 14 complaints this year which was double that of previous years and the average response time to our first enquiries was 28.9 days. I commend the Council for achieving a further improvement on the previous year (31.1) and only just falling short of our target time of 28 days. Thank you for your efforts in this respect and I hope the good work continues.

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.

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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	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	0	1	9	5	8	0	2	25
2005 / 2006	0	2	4	5	4	3	0	18
2004 / 2005	1	1	9	6	3	6	1	27

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	10	3	1	6	16	22
2005 / 2006	0	1	0	0	6	3	1	7	11	18
2004 / 2005	2	5	0	0	4	5	2	11	18	29

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	28.9
2005 / 2006	7	31.1
2004 / 2005	7	43.0

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