



The Commission for  
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's  
Annual Letter  
Cambridgeshire County  
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 Cambridgeshire County 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 36 complaints during the year, an increase on the 20 received in the previous year. We expect to see some fluctuations over time and I see no particular significance in the rise. But the Council may want to consider whether there are any steps it could take to improve the visibility of its complaints process to ensure as many complaints as possible are dealt with by that route rather than by citizens complaining to me. I comment on this further below.

### ***Character***

Ten complaints were received about transport and highways, and seven each about adult care services and education. Four complaints were received about children and family services and two about planning and building control. Six complaints were received in the 'other' category; two of these were about drainage, one each concerned consumer affairs and land and two were recorded as miscellaneous.

## **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. The Council has raised a concern that the term 'local settlement' implies that there has been maladministration; but the term is also used when no fault has been found but the action taken means that the investigation does not need to be pursued. Local settlements form a significant proportion of the complaints we determine. Six complaints were settled locally. Three of these were about education and in two the Council was able to resolve the complaints by providing fresh school admissions appeals. In the third case the complaint was settled when the complainant's child was offered a place at the desired school because of the child's position on the waiting list.

In one complaint about administrative delays in the handling of an insurance claim, the Council agreed to pay compensation and to meet some of the costs incurred by the complainant in pursuing his claim against the Council. My investigator concluded that the compensation was a suitable settlement of the complaint. In a complaint regarding financial support for care services the Council met the complainant and reviewed its policies and procedures to address the concerns raised about information provided to those seeking support from the Council. My investigator decided that these steps and the £100 compensation that the Council agreed to pay in respect of delays achieved a suitable settlement for the complaint. The final complaint concerned delay in completing repairs to the highway. The Council sent a formal apology to the complainant, agreed a course of action to be taken if further problems were caused to the complainant by highways defects and explained the action taken to improve the service provided by the department.

The total compensation paid was £500. I am grateful for the Council's ready willingness to accept a local settlement where something appears to have gone wrong.

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

### ***Other findings***

Thirty three complaints were decided during the year. Of these four were outside my jurisdiction for a variety of reasons. Ten complaints were premature and, as I mentioned earlier, six were settled locally. The remaining 13 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**

The number of premature complaints (ten) is relatively high when set against the number of decided complaints. Six of these were resubmitted, also a relatively high proportion; three of these were about highways although they involved different issues. One of them was settled only after my involvement, one was outside my jurisdiction and I did not find maladministration in the other. Three of the resubmitted complaints are currently under investigation. The Council may want to review these cases to see if the citizens involved could have been dealt with in a more effective way through the complaints process so as to resolve their complaints without the need to come to me.

In last year's letter I commented that the Council's complaints process was clear and accessible through the Council's website and I note that complaints can be made online.

### **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**

We made enquires on 21 complaints this year and the average time for responding was 23 days, an increase on the 12 days it took last year but well within our requested response time of 28 days. The increase in response time is partly explained by one complex case where the Council requested further time to provide the necessary information required to carry out the investigation. In general the Council's performance here is highly commendable, and has been so for a number of years.

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 Stephen Purser my Assistant Ombudsman know and he will arrange for an invitation to be sent.

In addition, if it would help for Mr Purser to visit the Council and give a presentation about how we investigate complaints I would be happy to arrange this.

I would like to hold a regional seminar in Cambridgeshire during 2007/2008. These seminars have proved popular and enable Members and Officers to obtain a better understanding of my role and of our role in complaint handling. If your Council would be willing to host such a seminar please let Stephen Purser know. Assuming a venue can be found, I will be sending out invitation letters later in the 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.

**J R White**  
**Local Government Ombudsman**

**The Oaks No 2**  
**Westwood Way**  
**Westwood Business Park**  
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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	Children and family services	Education	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	7	4	7	0	6	2	10	36
2005 / 2006	2	4	2	1	4	2	5	20
2004 / 2005	5	4	2	0	4	4	9	28

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	6	0	0	12	1	4	10	23	33
2005 / 2006	0	0	0	0	5	3	6	6	14	20
2004 / 2005	1	2	0	0	19	6	1	4	29	33

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	21	23.3
2005 / 2006	5	12.4
2004 / 2005	13	19.7

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