



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Canterbury 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 2006/07 I received 48 complaints against your authority, down from 55 complaints the previous year.

I received 16 complaints about housing matters, up from ten the previous year. I also received five complaints about waste management, compared with two the previous year. However, the number of complaints about these two service areas is still low, and year on year fluctuations are small.

There has been no significant change in other service areas.

Decisions on complaints

During the year we made decisions on 51 complaints against your authority. We found no maladministration in 15 complaints and we exercised discretion to close a further 8 without requiring any action by the Council. I found that 7 were outside my jurisdiction.

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 did not issue any reports against your authority last year. My office settled seven complaints. Of these, two were about housing allocations. In one case the Council offered the complainant and one other housing applicant the same property and then let the property to the other applicant. The Council settled this by agreeing to offer the complainant the next available suitable property. In the second case, the Council delayed assessing an application for rehousing (although the complainant did not miss the opportunity to move as a result) and delayed for one year in repairing an intercom. The Council paid a total of £100 for these delays.

The remaining five concerned a variety of matters. In one the Council wrongly advised a complainant that he could build a two metre high fence, contrary to a covenant. The Council then asked the complainant to reduce the height of the fence. The Council agreed to pay the complainant £445 to do so, and a further £820 towards his legal fees and time and trouble. The second concerned private housing grants. The Council failed to warn the complainant that her new radiators would have some audible noise. There were also some faults in the way the system was installed. The Council agreed to rectify the faults and to improve the system to reduce the noise. The complainant wished to organise these repairs herself and so the Council agreed to pay her £890, this being the cost to the Council had it done the repairs.

The third concerned the Council's failure to respond to a letter expressing concern that the Council had not properly considered the effect on the complainant and others of allowing a white line road marking opposite the drive of only one resident in the road. The Council met the complainant and agreed to remove the road markings. The fourth concerned a failure of liaison between the Council tax and the Council tax benefit departments. As a result a discount remained on the complainant's council tax account longer than it should leading to recovery of overpaid Council tax benefit. The Council agreed to waive the court costs the complainant incurred as a result.

The last concerned the Council's failure to collect refuse from a complainant for five months. It agreed to collect the accumulated refuse and pay the complainant £50 for his inconvenience and time and trouble.

Other decisions

My office did not pursue a complaint about a penalty charge notice (i.e. a parking ticket) as the Council had resolved matters following its own consideration. But we noted that the complainant experienced problems getting information from parking staff about how to appeal. So, we asked the Council to ensure its parking staff are familiar with the process for appealing against parking tickets, including how to appeal to the National Parking Adjudication Service. I would be grateful to know the outcome of this.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

My office referred 14 'premature complaints' to your authority for consideration, as we did not think you had had sufficient opportunity to deal with them through your own procedures. At 27% of all decisions this is very close to the national average.

Seven premature complaints were resubmitted to me during the period. Of these, four were outside my jurisdiction, and we found no maladministration in two. The final complaint resubmitted to me is referred to under *Other decisions* above.

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 councils to respond when we make enquiries is 28 days. Your Council's average response time was 30 days, an increase on last year. This average was inflated slightly by the Council's decision to respond direct to a housing complainant rather than to my investigator and by my office making additional enquiries on a planning complaint before the Council was able to respond to my first enquiries. However, there were two other housing complaints where the response times were 38 and 40 days. I hope the Council is able to reduce its response times in the coming 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.

Conclusion

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
10th Floor
Millbank Tower
Millbank
LONDON SW1P 4QP

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	Public finance	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	4	16	7	16	1	4	48
2005 / 2006	4	10	17	18	3	3	55
2004 / 2005	3	9	6	15	2	1	36

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	7	0	0	15	8	7	14	37	51
2005 / 2006	0	4	0	0	15	3	8	15	30	45
2004 / 2005	1	2	0	0	11	8	4	6	26	32

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	19	30.1
2005 / 2006	25	26.6
2004 / 2005	6	31.7

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