



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Copeland 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

This annual letter provides a summary of the complaints we have received about your authority. Where possible, we comment on the authority's performance and complaint-handling arrangements to assist with your 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.

Two attachments 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

Last year there were 16 complaints against the Council, compared to 17 during the previous year and 18 complaints during the year before that.

Character

Complaints against planning and building control services were halved from 8 during the previous year to 4 last year; complaints about public finance also halved from 4 during the previous year to only 2 last year. However, I note that whereas there were no complaints about housing services during the previous year, there were 4 such complaints last year.

Decisions on complaints

Reports and local settlements

A 'local settlement' is a complaint that is resolved by the Council taking, or agreeing to take, action which we consider is a satisfactory response to the complaint so that the investigation can be discontinued. In 2006/07 27.7% of complaints dealt with by the three Local Government Ombudsmen (excluding premature and those outside jurisdiction) were resolved by local settlement. When we complete an investigation we must issue a report.

No reports were issued against the Council last year, but the Council resolved three complaints by local settlement making payments totalling £350 to compensate those complainants. In one case the Council had failed to notify the complainant of a planning application for the conversion of an adjoining building and there was no evidence of a site visit by the case office, who had also failed to notice errors on the plans submitted by the developer. The complainant's amenity had not been properly considered in assessing the application, and the complainant was not informed of the outcome of the application.

In another case, about local taxation, the complainant had been put to time and trouble in chasing his initial claim, and no work had been done on it by the Council for five months. However, the Council responded quickly to the suggestion that the complainant be paid £100 in compensation, and it wrote a sincere letter of apology. The Council also acted imaginatively in seconding two officers from a nearby Council to assist it with its backlog.

Other findings

Decisions were made upon 14 complaints last year, of which 4 complaints were premature as the Council had not had an opportunity to consider and respond.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

The Council's website refers to your complaints procedure but in terms that are not encouraging to the average complainant. The Council may wish to review and rewrite the entry. I also note that there is no direct link to the Commission's website, where complainants may obtain details of how to complain to this office in the event that they do not receive satisfaction through the Council's own complaints procedure. I encourage you to provide a link.

Training in complaint handling

Part of our role is to provide advice and guidance about good administrative practice. We offer training courses for all levels of local authority staff in complaints handling and investigation. The feedback from councils that have taken up the training 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 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.

I am pleased to note that, together with other councils in Cumbria, Copeland is considering the possibility of contributing to a collective training course for complaints handling in Cumbria, and I hope that this proposal may reach fruition during the coming year.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

Last year the Council responded within an average of 26 calendar days to the enquiries made by investigators upon 8 complaints. While this is significantly longer than the average of only 19 calendar days which the Council took during the previous year, it is nevertheless comfortably within the new target set by the Commission of 28 calendar days, and I hope that the Council may continue during the coming year to provide responses promptly as it has done last year.

During the year you welcomed the Assistant Ombudsman who now leads the team of investigators dealing with complaints against your Council. This visit was a useful opportunity to explain changes within the Commission's structure, procedures and objectives; discuss complaints; consider training and to meet the staff who deal with our enquiries. I hope that the relationship will continue to be constructive.

LGO developments

You may be interested in the development of our initiative to improve the first contact that people have with us. A new Access and Advice Service will provide a gateway to our services for all complainants and enquirers. It will encourage telephone contact but will also deal with email, text and letter correspondence. We will let you have further details about how it will operate and the expected timescales and discuss with you the implications for the Council.

I hope you have received our latest special report about telecommunications masts. It draws on our experience of dealing with complaints about planning applications for masts which can be highly controversial. We recommend simple measures that councils can adopt to minimise the chances of maladministration occurring.

In July we will be publishing a special report about the difficulties that can be encountered with complaints when local authorities deliver services or discharge their functions through partnerships. *Local partnerships and citizen redress* provides advice and guidance on how these problems can be overcome by good governance arrangements that include an effective complaints protocol.

Conclusions and general observations

I welcome this opportunity to comment on our experience of complaints about the Council over the past year. I hope that you find the information and assessment provided useful when seeking improvements to your Council's services.

**Anne Seex
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	Benefits	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Social Services - other	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	1	4	5	4	2	0	0	16
2005 / 2006	0	0	3	8	4	1	1	17
2004 / 2005	0	1	3	9	4	0	1	18

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	3	0	0	1	3	3	4	10	14
2005 / 2006	0	3	0	0	2	4	4	6	13	19
2004 / 2005	0	0	0	0	9	3	3	5	15	20

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	8	25.9
2005 / 2006	3	18.7
2004 / 2005	9	26.3

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