



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

The Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Letter

Dacorum 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

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

Volume and Character

In 2006/7 I received 34 complaints against your Council, a small increase from 2005/6 when I received 30 complaints. Three complainants each made two complaints.

The make up of complaints has been broadly stable. As in 2005/6, the main area of complaint was housing. There were 4 complaints about repairs, 3 homelessness cases, 3 relating to housing allocations and 2 about managing tenancies.

The second largest area of complaint was planning: up to 7 from 4 previously. All were about planning applications. There were also 6 complaints about housing benefit. Four within our 'other' category concerned anti-social behaviour.

Decisions on complaints

I made 33 decisions on complaints against your Council; this includes 7 complaints which were referred back to the Council for consideration because I was not satisfied that the Council had had a reasonable opportunity to consider them before I became involved. Of these 7 complaints 3 were housing complaints, 2 were about anti social behaviour and one complaint was about a planning matter.

There were 7 complaints which were outside my jurisdiction to investigate and in 11 cases I found no or insufficient fault to warrant my involvement. In a further 6 cases I decided to use my discretion not to pursue the matter further, generally this is because there is insufficient injustice for me to pursue the matter.

Reports and local settlements

I 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 I determine. When I complete an investigation I must issue a report. I issued no reports against the Council but 2 complaints were closed as local settlements (2 less than 2005/6).

One local settlement concerned the Council's delay in amending the complainant's tenancy details, which resulted in an overpayment of housing benefit which confused the complainant. The Council agreed to write off this amount. The other local settlement concerned the Council's failure to include the complainant's property in a programme of redecorations, as it should have done. The Council agreed to include the complainant's property in these works and to make a small ex gratia payment to recognise the complainant's time and trouble in pursuing the matter. /...

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

The 7 complaints which I referred back to the Council as premature were in line with the proportion of such complaints referred back nationally.

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. My staff have recently run one Effective Complaint Handling course for your staff and further courses are planned.

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

Our target time is for councils to respond to our enquiries within 28 days. In 2006/7 the Council took 25.3 days on average, whereas in the previous year it was 17.2 days. So there has been an increase in the time taken, but the Council is still within our target. The average time it took the Council to respond to complaints about housing was 18.2 days. With local taxation complaints it was 35.7 days. So, more consistency would improve the Council's response times. My office is now using email as its preferred method of correspondence: this may help the Council to maintain its good record.

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.

Tony Redmond
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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	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	6	12	5	7	1	3	34
2005 / 2006	5	11	5	4	3	2	30
2004 / 2005	1	7	4	14	2	2	30

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	11	6	7	7	26	33
2005 / 2006	0	4	0	0	10	3	9	7	26	33
2004 / 2005	0	3	0	0	7	4	4	8	18	26

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	15	25.3
2005 / 2006	9	17.2
2004 / 2005	9	19.9

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