



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Dorset 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 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

In the year to 31 March 2007 my office received 19 complaints against your Council, two fewer than the previous year, and the same number as the year before that. We expect to see fluctuations in numbers of complaints from year to year. The number received against your authority over the last few years appears to be stable, and is small in relation to the number of transactions your Council carries out with its citizens each year.

Character

As might be expected for a county authority, the complaints we received were spread more or less evenly between Highways, Education, and Social Services, now split clearly between Adults' and Children's services, with only two complaints about Planning matters. The numbers of complaints in each subject area was broadly similar to that in previous years.

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. These form a significant proportion of the complaints we determine. When we complete an investigation we must issue a report.

I am pleased to say that I had no need to issue a report on my investigations into any complaints against your Council last year, continuing the same pattern as in the previous two years. In two cases your Council offered to settle complaints locally in ways which resolved them and allowed the investigation to be discontinued. In one case the Council had already offered to reconsider the complainant's challenge to a parking Penalty Charge Notice before the complaint was made to me, because it had recognised that its action up to that point was not beyond criticism. The action the Council had proposed was sufficient to remedy any injustice to the complainant and so no further investigation was required. In another case there were some discrepancies in charges for care services provided to the complainant's mother and in the payments made for those services. Your Council readily agreed that a senior officer should visit the complainant to discuss and try to resolve outstanding issues. The Council put significant effort into achieving this. These two cases are good examples of how positive practical action can provide a satisfactory outcome for the complainant and I welcome your Council's approach in both cases. In neither case was it necessary for me to recommend that the Council pay compensation.

Other findings

Including the two cases mentioned above, my office decided 17 complaints against your Council last year, slightly fewer than the previous two years. Three of these were cases to which your Council had not had the opportunity to respond through its own complaints procedure and which were referred back to you for this to happen. Of the remainder, five complaints were about matters which are outside my jurisdiction, and in seven cases investigations were discontinued either because there appeared to be insufficient evidence of fault by the Council, or because the Council's actions did not appear to have resulted in significant injustice for the complainant. There were minor fluctuations in these figures from previous years, but the overall numbers are relatively low and do not suggest any significant trends which concern me.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

Three of the complaints decided last year had not previously been put through the Council's own complaints procedure and were therefore referred back to the Council by my office as 'premature'. Only one complaint received last year was resubmitted after referral to the Council as premature.

Together with other councils in the county area, your Council is a partner in the 'dorsetforyou.com' website, which provides easy access to information about making complaints, an online complaints form, and a version for download and printing. Information on the site is very clear and understandable, and this initiative is commendable.

In general, it seems to me that the Council's complaints procedures are working very effectively.

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. One of our trainer investigators delivered an Effective Complaints Handling Course to your Social Services staff in January 2007 and I hope they found it useful and informative as well as enjoyable. 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, as some of your staff will already know.

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

Your Council continues to provide information and comments which are clear and helpful to my investigations. And I am pleased to see that you have continued to improve on your response times, which are now within our 28 day target. All that helps produce an outcome for the complainant in a timely way.

We shall continue to hold, here in Coventry, seminars for those council officers with responsibility for liaison with my office to further improve the understanding of my role and the investigative process, and allow officers to share good practice with their counterparts in other councils. Feedback from delegates on previous seminars shows how useful they have found the exercise. If you are interested in sending someone from your Council to a future seminar, please contact my office for more details.

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.

Jerry White
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	Adult care services	Children and family services	Education	Other	Planning & building control	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	3	1	6	0	2	7	19
2005 / 2006	2	4	6	3	1	5	21
2004 / 2005	0	3	7	4	1	4	19

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	3	4	5	3	14	17
2005 / 2006	0	1	0	0	9	3	8	2	21	23
2004 / 2005	0	2	0	0	5	3	10	2	20	22

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	4	25.8
2005 / 2006	10	28.3
2004 / 2005	5	31.0

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