



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
East Staffordshire 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 East Staffordshire Borough 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 ten complaints during the year, a slight increase on the seven received last year.

Character

Three complaints were about planning-related matters, two about housing and one about local taxation. Of the four complaints that we recorded as 'other', two were about environmental health and one about waste management. We received no complaints during the year about housing benefit matters.

Decisions on complaints

Reports and 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.

As last year, I did not issue any reports against your Council and nor did I uphold any complaints that required a local settlement. The Council is to be congratulated on its performance here.

Other findings

Ten complaints were decided during the year. Of these three were treated as premature and referred back to your Council so that they could first be considered under your Council's own complaints procedure. Two complaints were outside my jurisdiction. The remaining five complaints 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 complaints treated as premature is broadly in line with national figures when viewed as a percentage of all decisions taken. Of the three complaints that were dealt with in this way two were resubmitted to my office during the year but neither was upheld. Overall this points to very satisfactory local complaint handling over the year.

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. In addition to the generic Good Complaint Handling (identifying and processing complaints) and Effective Complaint Handling (investigation and resolution) we can also run open courses for groups of staff from smaller authorities and 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.

We have not delivered any training to your Council during the year. 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 enquiries on two complaints during the year and your Council's average time for responding was 37 days. This is an increase on the previous year's figure of 30 days. On one of those complaints your Council responded in 25 days (inside the target response time of 28 days). However I believe your Council's average response time figure has been skewed as it took 49 days to respond to our enquiries on the other complaint (which I accept was dealt with over the Christmas and New Year period). Given the relatively low number of enquiries that we make of your Council, I hope that you will aim to meet the requested timescale in future.

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 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
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Westwood Business Park
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June 2007

Enc: Statistical data
Note on interpretation of statistics
Details of training courses

Complaints received by subject area	Benefits	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	0	2	4	3	1	10
2005 / 2006	0	1	0	6	0	7
2004 / 2005	1	0	4	6	3	14

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	0	0	0	4	1	2	3	7	10
2005 / 2006	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	5	2	7
2004 / 2005	0	2	0	0	6	4	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	2	37.0
2005 / 2006	1	30.0
2004 / 2005	4	18.3

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