



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Environment Agency
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 Agency that we have received and try to draw any lessons learned about the Agency'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 Agency 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 10 complaints during the year, a slight decrease on the 14 received in the previous year. Of those 10, one was received in our London office; two in our York office and seven in our Coventry office.

Character

Nine complaints were recorded as "other" and these were about drainage and flooding. The other one was primarily about a planning matter.

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, an authority 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 we did not issue any reports against your Agency. Nor did we uphold any complaints that required a local settlement.

Other findings

We made decisions on 16 complaints in the year: two in our London office; six in our York office and eight in our Coventry office. Of these complaints two were referred to your Agency so that they could first be considered under your own complaints procedure.

Two complaints were not pursued because they were outside our jurisdiction. The remaining 12 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

Neither of the two complaints that we referred to your Agency was resubmitted to our offices during the year.

Given the relatively low number of complaints about the Agency's work that we receive it is difficult to draw any conclusions about your Agency's complaint handling process. The section of your web site about how to make complaints about the Agency appears to be easily accessible to service users. It also provides a helpful summary of the respective jurisdiction of the Local Government and Parliamentary Ombudsman in connection with our role in considering complaints about the Agency.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

We made enquiries on three complaints during the year and your Agency's average time for responding was 40 days. This is an increase on the previous year's figure of 33 days. Given the relatively low of enquiries that we make of the Agency I hope that you will do all you can to meet the requested timescale of 28 days in the 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 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 Agency's services.

Tony Redmond
Chairman

June 2007

Enc: Statistical data
Note on interpretation of statistics

Complaints received by subject area	Other	Planning & building control	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	9	1	10
2005 / 2006	10	4	14
2004 / 2005	10	4	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	9	3	2	2	14	16
2005 / 2006	0	3	0	0	4	2	0	2	9	11
2004 / 2005	2	1	0	0	7	1	1	1	12	13

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	3	40.0
2005 / 2006	8	33.5
2004 / 2005	5	39.8

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