



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Erewash 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

We received nineteen complaints about your Council during 2006/07, returning to the number received in 2003/04 after two years of fewer complaints. This is the kind of fluctuation we would normally expect to see in complaint levels over time. Looking at the types of complaint received, there were small increases in benefits, other, housing and public finance complaints and small reduction in planning and building control complaints. There were four complaints about planning applications this year, compared to eight last year. Given the small number of complaints involved, it is not possible to draw any conclusions on trends.

Decisions on complaints

As in the previous three years, we did not issue any reports about your Council during 2006/07. There were two local settlements. One related to the failure to monitor compliance with a section 106 agreement and to consider or take enforcement action. The other settlement concerned inadequate explanations of terms on planning notices which meant the public could not make representations without further information. The Council agreed to provide short explanations of such terms on planning notices in future.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

The Council averaged 25.3 days to respond to eight initial enquiries, an improvement in response times over the previous two years and more than meeting the target of 28 days. I am pleased that the Council is responding promptly, as this helps me provide a good quality service to complainants and I hope this continues in the future.

We made seventeen decisions on complaints about your Council during the year. Of these, seven complaints (41.2%) were premature, that is the Council had not had a reasonable opportunity to respond to the complaint. Four of the complaints we decided were resubmitted premature complaints, where the complainant was not satisfied with the Council's response. Of these, one led to a local settlement. These figures are similar to those of last year. Given the small numbers involved it is not possible to draw meaningful comparisons with the national figures.

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.

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	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	3	1	6	8	1	19
2005 / 2006	1	0	3	11	0	15
2004 / 2005	0	2	3	6	2	13

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	4	2	2	7	10	17
2005 / 2006	0	3	0	0	5	3	1	7	12	19
2004 / 2005	0	2	0	0	6	0	1	3	9	12

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	25.3
2005 / 2006	8	28.9
2004 / 2005	2	28.0

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