



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

The Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Letter

Greater London Authority

**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 seven attachments which form an integral part of this letter: statistical data covering a three year period for the GLA and its constituent bodies that are within my jurisdiction, a copy of the separate annual letter I have sent to Transport for London, and a note to help the interpretation of the statistics.

Complaints received

Volume

This year we received just eight complaints against the GLA and its constituent bodies; four against the GLA itself, two against the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority (LFEPA), two against the London Development Agency (LDA) and none against the Metropolitan Police Authority (MPA). This compares with the 19 complaints which were made to my office in 2005/6 about these authorities last year. We did however receive 176 complaints against Transport for London (TfL) a very slight increase from last year when 167 complaints were made. I enclose a separate letter that I have written to TfL about these complaints.

Character

Of the four complaints made to me about the GLA, one was in respect of the contribution London Council Tax payers make towards the costs of the GLA and the services it provides, one was in respect of the personal views purportedly held by the Mayor, one complaint arose as the result of an employment issue, and one concerned the extent to which the GLA did or did not intend to ask respondents to give details of their sexuality when conducting equal opportunities monitoring of its service users.

The two complaints made against the LFEPA were in respect of the way the causes of house fires had been adequately investigated whilst the two complaints made against LDA concerned the same issue which was the Agency's decision to withdraw its offer of a grant for a community training facility having previously approved it. When I first received the complaint I passed it back to the LDA as it did not seem that it had yet had a reasonable opportunity of dealing with it through its own complaints procedure. The complainant later referred the matter back to me as he remained dissatisfied with the Agency's decision on his complaint.

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.

Excluding the decisions I made against TfL which are documented in a separate letter, I decided eleven complaints against the GLA and its constituent bodies this year. The measure of administrative fault causing injustice is not the total number of decisions by my office but the number of settlements and formal reports which found maladministration and injustice. I did not issue any reports against your Council this year and made no findings of fault causing injustice which would necessitate a local settlement. This is an impressive achievement when compared with the national average settlement rate of 27% for all authorities (excluding complaints which are either premature – as they have been made to me before a council has had a reasonable opportunity of dealing with them – or outside jurisdiction).

Of the eleven complaints I decided, two were passed back to the relevant authority to deal with as they had not yet had a sufficient opportunity to address the concerns that had been raised by the complainants. I was unable to consider six complaints as they were not within my jurisdiction. These included complaints which had arisen in the course of a complainant's employment with the GLA or one of its constituent bodies, complaints made about the conduct of the Mayor, and those which affected all or most people within the Greater London area. I found no evidence of administrative fault in two cases, and I exercised my discretion to discontinue my involvement in the remaining complaint due to a lack of evidence of any significant injustice to the complainant.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

As has been mentioned previously we referred two complaints back to the GLA's constituent bodies as 'premature' in that they had not had an adequate chance to respond to them. Only one of these complaints was subsequently re-submitted to my office as the complainant was not satisfied with the Council's response. I have yet to make a decision on that complaint.

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 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.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

We have not needed to make any enquiries of your office, the LDA, LFEPA or MPA this year. You will see from the separate letter to TfL that the average time it takes to respond to our enquiries is 29.6 days, only slightly above our target time of 28 days. Of the two complaints which were passed to the LDA and LFEPA to deal with in the first instance there were no difficulties in the liaison arrangements and the complaints were quickly picked up and investigated at the appropriate level.

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 Authority's services.

Tony Redmond
Local Government Ombudsman

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June 2007

Enc: Statistical data
Copy of the separate letter sent to Transport for London
Note on interpretation of statistics
Leaflet on training courses (with posted copy only)

Complaints received by subject area	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	3	0	1	0	4
2005 / 2006	13	0	0	1	14
2004 / 2005	2	1	0	0	3

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	1	1	4	0	6	6
2005 / 2006	0	0	0	0	1	0	12	0	13	13
2004 / 2005	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	2	2

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	0	0.0
2005 / 2006	0	0.0
2004 / 2005	1	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