



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Huntingdonshire District
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 Huntingdonshire District 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 16 complaints this year, a small increase on the 12 received in the previous year. As I noted in last year's letter the largest number of complaints related to planning and the number of issues complained about has been broadly similar year on year.

Character

Nine complaints were received about planning, and five in the 'other' category. One of these was about environmental health, one about waste management and three were recorded as 'Miscellaneous'. Two complaints were received about housing benefit and one of these is still under investigation.

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.

One complaint was settled locally and concerned a delay in the investigation of noise nuisance from a factory. The Council had brought the potential for noise to the attention of the factory owners and when the monitoring was eventually carried out the Council concluded that the noise was not a statutory nuisance. There was, however delay in carrying out noise monitoring on a day when the nuisance was likely to occur and so the Council agreed to pay the complainant £150. The £150 represented the total amount of compensation paid during the year.

When we complete an investigation we must issue a report. I issued no reports against the Council during the year.

Other findings

Seventeen complaints were decided during the year. Of these three were outside my jurisdiction for a variety of reasons. Three complaints were premature, and, as I mentioned earlier, one was settled locally. The remaining ten 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 premature complaints (three) is low when set against the number of incoming complaints (16). Only one of these complaints was resubmitted and I did not find maladministration in this case. This suggests that there is good public awareness of the complaints process and a willingness on the part of officers to refer customers to it.

In last year's letter I commented that the Council's complaints process was available on the Council's website and that complaints could be made online. The Council might wish to see whether the information could be better signposted from the home page so that customers can find the online complaints facility quickly.

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 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 made enquiries on only six complaints this year, and the average time for responding was 27 days against a target of 28 days, a significant improvement on last year. The Council's performance here has been commendable and I am very grateful for your efforts.

No one from the Council has attended the annual link officer seminar recently and you may wish to consider sending someone to the seminar to be held in November. If so, please let Stephen Purser, my Assistant Ombudsman, know and he will arrange for an invitation to be sent.

In addition, if it would help for Mr Purser to visit the Council and give a presentation about how we investigate complaints I would be happy to arrange this.

I would like to hold a regional seminar in Cambridgeshire during 2007/2008. These seminars have proved popular and enable Members and Officers to obtain a better understanding of my role and of our role in complaint handling. If your Council would be willing to host such a seminar please let Stephen Purser know. Assuming a venue can be found, I will be sending out invitation letters later in the year.

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.

J R White
Local Government Ombudsman
The Oaks No 2
Westwood Way
Westwood Business Park
Coventry
CV4 8JB

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	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	2	0	5	9	0	0	16
2005 / 2006	0	0	3	6	1	2	12
2004 / 2005	1	2	5	8	4	2	22

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	1	0	0	7	3	3	3	14	17
2005 / 2006	0	5	0	0	9	1	0	2	15	17
2004 / 2005	0	0	0	0	8	1	3	4	12	16

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	6	27.8
2005 / 2006	10	43.2
2004 / 2005	11	30.2

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