



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Ipswich 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 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 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

The numbers of complaints received has risen steadily over the last few years from 19 in 2003/4 to 29 in the last year.

Last year saw a large increase in the number of complaints about housing benefit: up from 2 to 11. You may wish to consider the reasons for the increase in this service area.

Complaints about local taxation rose from 1 to 5. I am unclear why these complaints should have risen. There were only two complaints concerning planning, which was a notable reduction on previous years. Other complaint numbers were broadly stable.

Decisions on complaints

I made decisions on 30 complaints in 2005/6. Four were outside my jurisdiction and in nine cases I used my discretion not to investigate further. With seven complaints I found there was no or insufficient evidence of fault to warrant my involvement.

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. Here, in three cases a local settlement was agreed. When we complete an investigation we must issue a report. As in previous years I did not issue any formal reports against your Council.

Two of the local settlements concerned housing benefit. In one case the Council appeared to have delayed assessing the complainant's benefit for three months and this had resulted in the complainant being threatened with eviction. When my investigator contacted the Council and complainant, however, the benefit was about to be paid and the eviction threat was to be withdrawn. As the complainant was happy to settle the complaint on this basis, I took no further action. The other housing benefit complaint also concerned delay. In this case, there was a six month delay in forwarding an appeal to the Appeals Service and a three month delay in assessing a new claim. The Council was responsive to my investigator's enquiries and forwarded the appeal. It also agreed to pay the complainant £150 in compensation for the delays.

The other local settlement concerned problems with Council contractors undertaking refurbishment work. The contractors used a property as a base for its workmen and as a result the complainant suffered from noise and rubbish blown into their garden. There had been some delay in dealing with the problem, but by the time the complaint was made to us steps were being taken to prevent the problems continuing. The Council paid £100 compensation for the distress and time and trouble the complainant had been put to.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

Previously I have commented on the high level of complaints which I have had to refer back to the Council because it has not had a reasonable opportunity of considering them before I became involved. These were half of my decisions in previous years. This time, seven of the 30 complaints were referred back to the Council as premature, compared with 28% of all complaints nationally.

It cannot be assumed that higher levels of complaints are necessarily a result of poorer services, and I am pleased to see that the Council's complaint procedure is now publicised on its website. It is possible that increased publicity for the complaints procedure has resulted in a higher level of complaints. But I do have some concerns about your complaints procedure.

One of the complainants to me commented on what he saw as the Council's general reluctance to put complaints through its internal procedures. On another complaint I pointed out that, while the Council explains at the outset how its four stage complaints procedure works, it does not signpost the next step at the end of the preceding stage. It was suggested that, if the Council did this, complaints to me might be reduced. My Deputy wrote in March, chased in April, asking whether the Council intended to amend its practice here, but we have not heard from you further. On another complaint, one of your staff told my investigator that if a complaint covered more than one department the complainant would be expected to make separate complaints to each. There may be a training need, but this does not appear to me to be an appropriate or customer focused approach. You may wish to comment on these matters.

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 have also successfully piloted a course on reviewing complaints for social services review panel members. 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

I ask councils to reply to enquiries within 28 calendar days. Your Council's average response time was within this limit, for which I am grateful.

If a Council Committee formally considers this letter it would be helpful to be sent a copy of the minutes of the meeting, along with a copy of any report to the Committee.

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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.

Tony Redmond
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	Children and family services	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	11	0	5	5	2	5	1	29
2005 / 2006	2	0	5	6	9	1	2	25
2004 / 2005	2	1	6	1	6	2	0	18

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	3	0	0	7	9	4	7	23	30
2005 / 2006	0	0	0	0	4	3	5	11	12	23
2004 / 2005	0	1	0	0	4	1	2	8	8	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	26.8
2005 / 2006	7	25.4
2004 / 2005	2	25.5

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