



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
New Forest 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 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

Volume

In 2006/07 I received 36 complaints against your Council, eight more than the previous year but similar to the level in 2004/05. We expect to see some fluctuation from year to year and I see no significance in the rise.

Character

The change last year was mainly accounted for by the increase in complaints about planning matters. There were also slight increases in complaints about housing, public finance and transport and highways matters and a slight decrease in other complaints.

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.

In the last year, two complaints against your Council were settled locally. In one case, the Council sought to introduce kerbside refuse collection, which was difficult for the complainant to comply with. The Council had agreed that the complainant could leave his refuse at a different point for collection but failed to collect the refuse twice in three months. To settle the complaint, the Council promised to honour its agreement and the matter has not been brought back to me by the complainant. The other settlement concerned a housing complaint. Before my office could investigate the complaint in any depth, the Council offered the complainant alternative accommodation, which was accepted as a settlement of his complaint.

I am pleased to note that I had no need to issue a formal report against the Council last year.

Other findings

In addition to the two settled complaints, last year my office made decisions on 31 complaints against your Council. In seventeen cases we found no fault with the Council. Six complaints were referred

back to you as the Council had not yet had sufficient opportunity to deal with them. The remaining complaints were not upheld for other reasons.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

I note that your complaints procedure is described on your website, with a link to an online complaints form. The proportion of complaints that we refer back because your Council has not had enough opportunity to deal with them remains low. Three of the six 'premature' complaints last year were later resubmitted to my office but none was upheld. This suggests the Council's complaints procedure is accessible and works well for service users.

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. We offer generic courses in 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

Last year, the Council's average time to respond to our enquiries was 22.1 days. This is well within the 28 days we ask for and I am most grateful to your officers for their co-operation.

We are arranging a seminar for link officers to be held in November. If you would like any of your officers to attend, please let us know.

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
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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	Adult care services	Benefits	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	1	0	8	6	16	2	3	36
2005 / 2006	0	0	6	8	10	1	1	26
2004 / 2005	0	1	3	6	19	1	4	34

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	17	5	3	6	27	33
2005 / 2006	0	1	0	0	12	6	1	5	20	25
2004 / 2005	0	1	0	0	35	5	4	9	45	54

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	11	22.1
2005 / 2006	14	23.9
2004 / 2005	17	27.5

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