



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Norwich City 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 Norwich City 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 a total of 27 complaints during the year, the same as last year.

Character

Fourteen complaints related to housing matters, three more than last year and accounting for over half the total number of complaints received. The complaints included two about homelessness, four each about housing allocations and housing repairs, three about housing sales/leaseholds and one about private housing grants. The majority of complaints in the last three years have been about housing. Only two complaints were received about benefits, which indicates that your Council provides a good complaint handling service in this area. Complaints about transports and highways increased this year from one to four but that is still lower than the eight received in 2004-2005. We expect to see numbers vary from year to year.

Decisions on complaints

Reports and 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.

Ten local settlements were agreed this year. Two related to complaints about antisocial behaviour and eight to housing matters.

In an antisocial behaviour complaint, which also involved delays in repairs and faults with dealing with a housing application and rent accounts, the Council apologised and made a compensation payment of £600.

In a homelessness complaint, the Council's errors in managing tenancies and processing housing benefit applications directly resulted in the complainants being evicted. The whole family suffered serious hardship and insecurity for over five years. The Council had offered £6,000 in settlement and subsequently increased this figure to £13,000 which I felt was fair and reasonable. It also finalised the balances on the various tenancy accounts.

In another homelessness case the Council failed to update the complainant's housing application at the time of enquiries about making a homelessness application. It remedied the complaint by doing so.

In two separate housing allocation complaints the Council failed to follow its own policies and paid compensation of £100 and £250 respectively. In another housing allocation complaint, the Council had lost the relevant file and it was possible that information about two separate tenancies had been confused. The loss of the file meant that the Council could not demonstrate that it was not at administrative fault and so it wrote off rent arrears of £192 and cancelled an invoice for £404. In the fourth housing allocations case, I identified delay in carrying out repairs and responding to complaints of neighbour nuisance. There were also errors in handling a housing application and rent accounts. The Council made the complainant a payment of £600. In another similar complaint, the Council also made a payment of £600.

When making a new claim for housing benefit, the complainant gave the Council details of her new bank account. The Council failed to take account of this and paid the benefit into her old account which was overdrawn. She was unable to pay her rent. The Council agreed to make a payment of £350.

The Council paid a total of £15,983 in compensation this year. I welcome your Council's willingness to settle complaints when fault is identified.

I issued no reports against the Council during the year.

Other findings

Twenty eight complaints were decided during the year. Of these two were outside my jurisdiction for a variety of reasons. Two complaints were premature and, as I mentioned earlier, ten were settled locally. The remaining 14 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 (two) is low when compared to the total number of incoming complaints (27). They account for some 8% of complaints and this is well below the national average of 28%. This suggests that the Council's complaints process is highly visible and that staff, when dealing with requests for assistance, properly signpost the complaints process for customers who remain unhappy with what the Council has done.

One complaint was re-submitted to me but I found no cause to pursue an investigation.

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) and 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 16 complaints this year, and the average time for responding was 38 days, an increase of ten days from last year. Response times varied between seven and 81 days. Half the responses took more than 35 days. I have no doubt that the way my enquiries are dealt with by the Council could be improved. I trust the Council will seek to return to its previous standard of performance in the year to come.

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 later in November. If so, please let Barbara Hedley, Assistant Ombudsman, know and she will arrange for an invitation to be sent.

I was pleased to accept your invitation to host a presentation for officers, Members and representatives of other Norfolk authorities on 8 March 2007.

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 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
Details of training courses

Complaints received by subject area	Benefits	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	2	14	4	3	0	4	27
2005 / 2006	2	11	7	5	1	1	27
2004 / 2005	1	17	1	3	0	8	30

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	10	0	0	12	2	2	2	26	28
2005 / 2006	0	4	0	0	5	2	3	9	14	23
2004 / 2005	0	5	0	0	14	2	5	10	26	36

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	16	38.0
2005 / 2006	11	27.7
2004 / 2005	12	39.1

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