



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Oswestry 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 to 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 21 complaints during the year, an increase on the fifteen complaints we received last year. We expect to see fluctuations year on year and I note that the number this year included several complaints about the same matter.

Character

As previously, by far the largest number of complaints related to planning matters, which is typical for councils in non-metropolitan areas. This year we received 18 planning complaints, but 11 of these concerned the same application for prior notification for the installation of a telecommunications mast. The other three complaints concerned public finance and benefits.

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.

No complaints were settled locally this year. And I am pleased to say that there was no need to issue a report. The Council's record here has been impressive.

Other findings

Of the 17 complaints decided, four were premature. The 11 complaints concerning the telecommunications mast were not pursued because it was not possible for me to establish the level and significance of any injustice caused to the complainants until the operator's appeal to the Planning Inspectorate had been determined. The remaining two complaints were not pursued for various reasons.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

I note that the Council's website has details of how to make a complaint to the Council together with a link to our website. The number of premature complaints has reduced from last year which suggests that there is improved public awareness and use of your complaints procedure.

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 four complaints this year and the average time for responding was 33.8 days, a small increase on the 32.8 days it took last year. Our target is 28 days and an increasing number of councils are achieving it. Last year I said that I hoped the Council would make efforts to bring performance back to that achieved in previous years and it is disappointing that there has been no improvement this year. I have no doubt that response times can be improved and I hope the Council will now take appropriate steps to improve matters.

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	Benefits	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	1	0	0	18	2	0	21
2005 / 2006	0	0	3	8	4	0	15
2004 / 2005	0	1	3	4	1	1	10

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	0	13	0	4	13	17
2005 / 2006	0	3	0	0	3	3	2	6	11	17
2004 / 2005	0	0	0	0	4	0	1	2	5	7

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	4	33.8
2005 / 2006	4	32.8
2004 / 2005	7	26.6

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