



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Peterborough 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 Peterborough 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 32 complaints this year, a substantial reduction on the 57 received last year.

Character

Seven complaints were received about planning, six each about local taxation (which we now record as public finance) and in the 'other' category (two complaints about employment and pensions, which are outside my jurisdiction, and one each about a commercial matter, environmental health and land). One complaint in the 'other' category was recorded as 'miscellaneous'. Four complaints were received about highways and two each about benefits, education, housing and children and family services. One complaint was about adult care services.

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.

Four complaints were settled locally. One was about the Council's failure to keep to an undertaking provided many years ago in a Special Educational Needs matter. I did not consider there to be failings in the way the complaint was investigated by the Council but considered that as a result of a failure to keep to the undertaking the complainant had been caused significant time and trouble in pursuing his complaint. The Council apologised personally when the complainant met the Chief Executive and agreed to review procedural failings identified by the complainant. It also agreed to pay the complainant compensation of £1000. In a complaint about the sale of land my investigator identified that the Council did not give the complainant the same assistance as another resident when he enquired about the possible purchase of a piece of land. The Council agreed to make a payment of £500 to the complainant and it waived charges that it could have recovered from him. My investigator considered that this resolved the matter. In a complaint about Trading Standards the Council agreed to pay £50 to a complainant as a goodwill gesture and in a complaint about local taxation the Council apologised for acting prematurely in issuing an attachment of earnings order when a payment arrangement had been offered by one of its officers two days prior to this action.

The total compensation paid was £1550. I am grateful to the Council for its assistance in settling these complaints.

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

Other findings

Thirty five complaints were decided during the year. Of these, six were outside my jurisdiction for a variety of reasons. Ten were premature and, as I mentioned earlier, four were settled locally. The remaining 15 were not pursued because no evidence of maladministration was seen or because it was decided for other reasons not to pursue them. One of the cases outside my jurisdiction related to rights of appeal that are available where there are disputes about Council Tax bills. My Investigator identified that citizens may not be advised of their rights of appeal when receiving their bills and that some of the appeal rights may only be revealed after a complaint is made. It is best for everyone if information about such rights of appeal is provided at the outset so that there is no need to make a complaint or to involve me. I hope the Council will consider reviewing the information that it provides with Council Tax bills so that residents are aware of their rights of appeal.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

In last year's letter I commented that the Council's complaints process was clear and accessible through the Council's website and that the facility to make complaints online was of benefit to citizens. I am encouraged that this remains the case and that customers can make complaints quickly and effectively via the Council's website. Even so the number of premature complaints (ten) is relatively high when set against the number of incoming complaints (32). And it may be that staff need further training and guidance on just when potential complainants should be directed to the formal 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 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

We made enquires on 12 complaints this year and the average time for responding was 34 days. This was against a target of 28 days, and the same as last year. I have no doubt that the way my enquiries are dealt with centrally by the Council could be improved. I hope the Council will speed up its response times here, particularly given the relatively low number of enquiries I made of the Council.

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 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.

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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	Children and family services	Education	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Social Services - other	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	1	2	2	2	2	6	7	6	0	4	32
2005 / 2006	1	5	1	4	5	17	7	3	3	11	57
2004 / 2005	4	0	2	8	9	13	6	2	0	3	47

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	4	0	0	12	3	6	10	25	35
2005 / 2006	1	10	0	0	20	2	11	18	44	62
2004 / 2005	0	4	0	0	17	9	6	14	36	50

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	12	34.8
2005 / 2006	28	34.9
2004 / 2005	14	36.4

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