



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Rutland County 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 Rutland County 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 nine complaints during the year, a slight increase on the six received in the previous year. We expect numbers of complaints to vary from year to year and given the small number of complaints involved the increase is not significant.

Character

One complaint was about adult care services, four were about housing, three were about planning and building control and one about transport and highways.

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.

Two complaints were settled locally. In one about the allocation of Council housing, the Council failed to reassess a housing application when further information was provided about the complainant's medical and social circumstances. This prevented the complainant from being allocated a property that became available three months later. The complaint was settled by paying compensation of £500 and by making an offer of housing to the complainant.

The Council offered a settlement on a complaint that it failed to respond adequately to enquiries about traffic calming. Even though there was no evidence of error, the Council met with the complainant, who was happy with the outcome of the meeting.

I issued no reports against the Council during the year. And I am grateful for the helpful and responsive way in which the Council deals with citizen's grievances.

Other findings

Seven 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, two were settled locally. The remaining complaint was not pursued because no evidence of maladministration causing injustice was seen.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

The number of premature complaints (two) in relation to the total number of complaints is broadly in line with national figures. This suggests that complainants can easily access the Council's complaints procedure and I note that an electronic complaint form is available on the Council's website.

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. If we can provide any training for you please let Barbara Hedley, Assistant Ombudsman, know.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

We made enquiries on two complaints this year, and the average time for responding was 50 days a significant increase on the 26 days it took last year. The increase was mainly because the Council took 67 days to respond to enquiries on one complaint. I am pleased that the Council kept us informed about the time it would take to respond but I hope the Council will improve its response times here, particularly given the relatively low number of enquiries I have needed to make of the Council.

In the last two years I have arranged Regional Seminars in various county areas, inviting Members and Officers of each Council within the locality to meet me to explain the work of the Ombudsman and to explore common concerns. I would like to hold such a seminar in Leicestershire during 2007/08 and would be glad to receive an indication from your Council about whether this would be of interest. We would naturally contact you with further details nearer the time.

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	Adult care services	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	1	4	0	3	1	9
2005 / 2006	0	1	1	4	0	6
2004 / 2005	1	1	3	8	4	17

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	0	1	2	2	5	7
2005 / 2006	0	0	0	0	4	3	0	0	7	7
2004 / 2005	0	2	0	0	7	7	2	3	18	21

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	2	50.0
2005 / 2006	5	26.0
2004 / 2005	12	53.3

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