



The Commission for  
Local Administration in England

# **The Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Letter to Scarborough 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**

This annual letter provides a summary of the complaints we have received about your authority. Where possible, we comment on the authority's performance and complaint-handling arrangements to assist with your 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.

Two attachments 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 & Character***

Complaints about the Council in 2006/07 remained the same as in the previous year at 46. I cannot ascribe any significance to the rise in complaints about housing (from zero to six) or the fall in complaints about planning (from 19 to 14).

## **Decisions on complaints**

### ***Reports and local settlements***

A 'local settlement' is a complaint that is resolved by the Council taking, or agreeing to take, action which we consider is a satisfactory response to the complaint so that the investigation can be discontinued. In 2006/07 27.7% of complaints dealt with by the three Local Government Ombudsmen (excluding premature and those outside jurisdiction) were resolved by local settlement. When we complete an investigation we must issue a report.

I did not issue any reports against the Council during the year. In only two cases was there any call for a remedy and that reflects well on the Council. In one case there was only a very minor issue to address, and I note the very favourable comment of my investigator who described the approach of the Council's officer with whom she dealt as "excellent".

### ***Other findings***

39 complaints were decided by my staff of which four were premature – ie the Council had not had a prior opportunity to investigate and respond before I become involved. Six complaints were outside of my jurisdiction, and in seven cases my Investigators exercised their discretion not to investigate the complaints. In 20 cases there was no evidence of maladministration after investigation.

## **Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints**

I am not aware of any problems with the way the Council deals with complaints from members of the public.

## **Training in complaint handling**

Part of our role is to provide advice and guidance about good administrative practice. We offer training courses for all levels of local authority staff in complaints handling and investigation. The feedback from councils that have taken up the training 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 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**

The average time taken by the council to respond to 20 letters of enquiry was 28.2 days. This is slightly worse than the previous year (24 days) and almost at the target of 28 days which we set. Within that average are five complaints (four concerning planning issues) where the responses took 44 days. Whilst I have seen far worse from some other Councils, I am sure the Council would wish to improve next year.

During the course of the year the Assistant Ombudsman who led the team dealing with Scarborough met a representative group of planners from North Yorkshire, including a representative of the Council. Issues of mutual interest were discussed.

Working relations between our offices remain excellent.

### **LGO developments**

You may be interested in the development of our initiative to improve the first contact that people have with us. A new Access and Advice Service will provide a gateway to our services for all complainants and enquirers. It will encourage telephone contact but will also deal with email, text and letter correspondence. We will let you have further details about how it will operate and the expected timescales and discuss with you the implications for the Council.

I hope you have received our latest special report about telecommunications masts. It draws on our experience of dealing with complaints about planning applications for masts which can be highly controversial. We recommend simple measures that councils can adopt to minimise the chances of maladministration occurring.

In July we will be publishing a special report about the difficulties that can be encountered with complaints when local authorities deliver services or discharge their functions through partnerships. *Local partnerships and citizen redress* provides advice and guidance on how these problems can be overcome by good governance arrangements that include an effective complaints protocol.

## **Conclusions and general observations**

I welcome this opportunity to comment on our experience of complaints about the Council over the past year. I hope that you find the information and assessment provided useful when seeking improvements to your Council's services.

**Anne Seex**  
**Local Government Ombudsman**  
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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	4	6	12	14	2	8	46
2005 / 2006	4	0	10	18	1	13	46
2004 / 2005	5	4	10	15	2	7	43

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	20	7	6	4	35	39
2005 / 2006	0	1	0	0	6	6	5	22	18	40
2004 / 2005	3	8	0	0	7	18	5	10	41	51

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	20	28.2
2005 / 2006	11	24.0
2004 / 2005	11	27.3

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