



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
South Northamptonshire
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 South Northampton 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 just 13 complaints during the year, a reduction on the 21 received in the previous year, and fewer than half the number of complaints received during 2004/05. Although I expect to see some fluctuations year on year, such a reduction is unusual and welcome. I comment further on this below.

Character

Four complaints were received about planning, and six about housing matters, including two about the administration of housing benefit. The remaining three complaints were about land, anti social behaviour and local taxation.

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.

This year, one complaint was settled locally. This was a complaint about land, where the Council had given the complainant incorrect and conflicting information as to the position of a boundary. The Council agreed to pay £200 to the complainant for his time and trouble and commissioned an independent assessment of the boundary, to try to determine just where it lay. I am grateful to the Council for it's assistance in settling this complaint.

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

Other findings

Thirteen complaints in all were decided during the year. Of these three were outside my jurisdiction because the complainants could appeal to another body (on two occasions this was the Planning Inspectorate, and in the other the Appeals Service to settle a dispute about housing benefit). A further four complaints were premature and so I asked the Council to deal with them through its own complaint procedures, giving the complainant a chance to resubmit their complaint later. As I mentioned earlier, one complaint was settled locally and the remaining five 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

I am satisfied that the Council's complaint procedure is working effectively. The reduced number of complaints indicates that the Council is able to resolve most complaints at an early stage or else is performing so well that it is the subject of few complaints. Either is commendable. Second, the relatively few premature complaints I receive suggest that citizens know how to complain about the Council if they want to and that its complaint procedures are effectively publicised. This is borne out by the Council's website, which I am pleased to see continues to signpost complaint procedures and has now been amended in line with my recommendation last year to clarify my role in investigating complaints. I know that accessibility to Councils via websites is a facility that is much valued by the public and increasingly used.

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. I note that in 2005-06 your Council received our Effective Complaint Handling course (investigation and resolution) and I trust this has continued to be beneficial for those who attended.

I have enclosed some information on the full range of courses available together with contact details for enquiries and any further bookings, should the Council want to consider any further training. All courses are presented by an experienced investigator so participants benefit from their knowledge and expertise of complaint handling.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

We made enquiries on three complaints this year, and the average time for responding was 26 days, against a target of 28 days. That is a significant decrease on the 42 days it took last year. I am pleased to see such an improvement. The Council has made a real effort to improve its performance in this area and I am very grateful.

If it would be helpful for Stephen Purser, the Assistant Ombudsman, to visit the Council and give a presentation about how we investigate complaints then please contact him.

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	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	2	4	2	4	1	13
2005 / 2006	0	7	4	6	4	21
2004 / 2005	3	4	6	11	3	27

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	1	0	0	3	2	3	4	9	13
2005 / 2006	0	3	0	0	8	3	2	7	16	23
2004 / 2005	0	10	0	0	12	3	3	4	28	32

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	3	26.3
2005 / 2006	11	42.3
2004 / 2005	17	37.1

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