



The Commission for  
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's  
Annual Letter**

**Stevenage 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 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***

In 2006/2007, I received 13 complaints against the Council, compared with 18 in 2005/2006 and 21 in 2004/2005. While I expect complaint numbers to fluctuate year to year, I welcome this reduction.

### ***Character***

As in previous years, the majority of complaints were about housing matters. But these were down to 7 from 14 in 2004/2005 and 9 in 2005/2006. The remaining complaints comprised 3 about planning applications, 2 about transport and highways and 1 about public finance (local taxation).

## **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.

In 2006/2007, I made decisions on 12 complaints against the Council. I issued no reports but I concluded local settlements on 3 complaints. In one case, I found that the Council had delayed unreasonably for over a year in dealing with representations about a housing benefit overpayment and then it delayed in dealing with the complaint about the matter. The Council refunded the overpayment, apologised and paid £200 compensation. I commend the Council for promptly offering an appropriate remedy for the complaint.

In another case, I found that the Council delayed for seven months in repairing a communal entrance door to a block of flats. The complainant, who was a wheelchair user, was unable to leave or enter the block after 12:30pm until morning. In response, the Council repaired the door and paid compensation totalling £625.

The third local settlement concerned delay in dealing with correspondence related to a planning enforcement case. The Council had reasonable grounds for deciding not to act, but should have kept the complainant informed about what it was doing and why. It agreed to pay the complainant £100 for his time and trouble in pursuing the matter.

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### ***Other findings***

Of the remaining 9 decisions, I found no fault which warranted my involvement on 4 occasions and I used my discretion not to pursue one other complaint. In a further 4 cases the Council had not had a reasonable opportunity to deal with matters before I became involved.

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

I referred four complaints back to the Council so that it could investigate them before I became involved. Nationally, 28.2% of all complaints are referred back to councils before my colleagues or I can consider matters, so this is in line with the national average.

In my annual letter for 2005/2006, I noted that, while the Council's performance had improved, its average response time to my initial enquiries remained outside my target of 28 calendar days. In 2006/2007, the average response time was 43.4 days (an increase of 11.6 days from the year before). The average was significantly affected by a complaint about managing tenancies, where it was 100 days before I received the Council's response, although some other responses were also well outside my target time. I expect the Council is keen to reverse this trend and trust that it does so during 2006/2007.

### **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 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**

As you know, I seek to visit all councils in my jurisdiction periodically, although neither I nor any senior member or my staff has visited your Council since October 2004. Please let me know if you would find a further meeting useful during 2007/2008.

### **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.

**Tony Redmond**  
**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	0	7	0	3	1	2	13
2005 / 2006	2	9	6	3	0	1	21
2004 / 2005	0	14	1	3	0	0	18

**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	3	0	0	4	1	0	4	8	12
2005 / 2006	0	3	0	0	3	3	3	7	12	19
2004 / 2005	0	5	0	0	8	4	1	1	18	19

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	7	43.4
2005 / 2006	5	31.8
2004 / 2005	10	33.6

#### 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