



The Commission for  
Local Administration in England

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

Last year eight complaints were received against the Council, just under half those received during the previous year (17).

### ***Character***

Half of the complaints received were about housing, a similar number to the previous year, while two were about planning and building control, a similar number to the previous year.

## **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.

Last year two complaints were locally settled. In one case compensation of £100 was paid to the complainant as the Council had chosen to erect a fence close to the complainant's window with no consultation with him. There were no records of who had put the fence up, and initially the Council claimed that it had been erected by the County Council. This was untrue.

When we complete an investigation we must issue a report. Although I issued a report critical of the Council in the previous year I did not need to issue one last year.

### ***Other findings***

Decisions were made upon eight complaints last year, of which one was considered premature complaints in the sense that the Council had not yet had a proper opportunity to consider and respond to those complaints as is required by law. Three complaints lay outside my jurisdiction. One was not pursued, exercising my discretion, and another because no maladministration was found.

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

There is no readily identifiable direct link from the Council's website to the Commission's website. I am hopeful that during the current year this omission may be rectified, so that those complainants unhappy with the decision reached upon their complaint by the Council, may be readily signposted to the Commission's own complaints procedure.

## 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.

I am pleased to note that Wansbeck, like other Northumberland councils, is considering the possibility of a training course run for the collective benefit of Northumberland councils, and I hope that this may come to fruition during the coming year.

## Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

During the year you welcomed the Assistant Ombudsman who now leads the team of investigators dealing with complaints against your Council. This visit was a useful opportunity to explain changes within the Commission's structure, procedures and objectives; discuss complaints; consider training and to meet the staff who deal with our enquiries. I hope that the relationship will continue to be constructive.

However, less impressive was the average time taken by the Council to respond to initial enquiries upon three complaints last year. This took the Council an average of 63 calendar days, almost twice as long as during the previous year (when the Council responded upon three times as many complaints) and way beyond the Commission's new target of 28 calendar days. The Council took too long during the previous year and longer still during the year before that. It is to be hoped that during the coming year the Council will make a concerted effort to respond promptly to the relatively small number of complaints which are addressed to the Council with enquiries.

## 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	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	1	4	0	2	1	8
2005 / 2006	3	4	7	3	0	17
2004 / 2005	0	3	4	5	0	12

**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	1	1	3	1	7	8
2005 / 2006	1	7	0	0	3	2	2	5	15	20
2004 / 2005	0	1	0	0	3	3	1	1	8	9

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	63.0
2005 / 2006	9	33.0
2004 / 2005	6	44.2

**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