



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

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

West Dorset 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

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 the year ended 31 March 2007 my office received 19 complaints against your authority, the same number as the previous year.

Character

The majority of complaints we received against your authority, 12 in number, was about Planning and Building Control, although these were slightly fewer than the previous year. The subject spread of the remaining seven complaints does not show any particular pattern, and is similar to previous years.

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.

I am pleased to report that, as in the previous two years, I did not need to issue any reports on investigations against your Council last year. One complaint was the subject of a local settlement, and I am grateful for your Council's willingness to resolve it promptly. It involved a failure by the Council to notify the complainant that it had received an application for planning permission which could have affected him. Your Council apologised, made the complainant a payment of £250, and agreed to review its procedures to try to prevent this happening in future.

Other findings

My office decided a total of 19 complaints against your Council last year, including three which were referred back to you to be put through the Council's own complaints procedure and to which I shall refer below. Of the remaining 16, two were about matters which I could not by law investigate. In nine cases there was insufficient evidence of fault by the Council to warrant further investigation, and in four cases there was no significant injustice to the complainants so the investigation was discontinued.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

My office referred three complaints back to your Council last year to be put through the Council's own complaints procedure, because the law requires me to give the Council a reasonable opportunity to deal with a complaint before I consider it. We call these premature complaints. Of the complaints we received last year, only one appears to have been treated previously as premature in this way.

Together with other councils in the county area, your Council is a partner in the dorsetforyou.com website, which provides easy access to information about making complaints, an online complaints form, and a version for download and printing. Information on the site is very clear and understandable, and this initiative is commendable.

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. We offer generic courses in 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

Last year I reported in the annual letter that the time your Council took to provide information and comments in response to enquiries by my staff was marginally outside the target of 28 days within which we generally expect councils to respond. In your response to this information, you promised to encourage your staff to respond more quickly where practicable. This year I am pleased to report that average response times from your Council have improved to within the target time, and now stand at just over 25 days. And although responses on Housing complaints have taken a little longer than those on complaints about Planning and Other matters, all sections of the Council have responded within the target time. My staff continue to report that the information and comments you provide are clear and helpful, and you and your teams are to be commended for this and for the improvement in response times.

We continue to provide, here in Coventry on an annual basis, a seminar for those Council officers responsible for liaison with my office. As you have not sent a delegate to the last seminar in November 2006, you may wish to consider doing so when the next one is held. Participants tell us it is a very worthwhile exercise and allows them to learn more about the work of my office as well as sharing good practice with other officers from a wider area. Please contact my office if this would be of interest in the coming year.

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.

Jerry White
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	1	4	12	0	2	19
2005 / 2006	0	2	0	14	2	1	19
2004 / 2005	1	0	0	11	1	0	13

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	9	4	2	3	16	19
2005 / 2006	0	0	0	0	11	0	3	4	14	18
2004 / 2005	0	0	0	0	7	5	6	2	18	20

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	6	25.2
2005 / 2006	7	31.1
2004 / 2005	4	16.3

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