



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

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

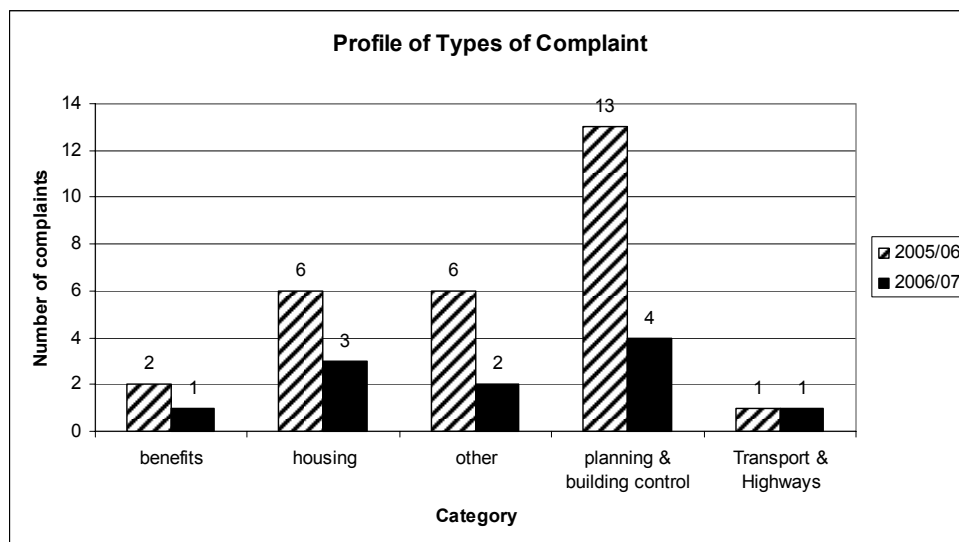
This annual letter provides a summary of the complaints we have received about your authority. Where possible, we comment on the authority's performance and complaint-handling arrangements to assist with your service improvement.

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

I received 11 complaints about your Council in the twelve months up to 31 March 2007. This is a fall of 61% on the previous year's figure of 28. While the numbers themselves are too small to enable meaningful conclusions to be drawn, it is interesting to compare the profile of the complaints received over the last two years.



As the chart shows, there were fewer complaints across most categories, but the most dramatic fall was in the number of planning complaints I received. This dropped to four, the same as it was in 2004/05. Nationally, the number of planning complaints as a proportion of the total remained constant last year. The challenge for your Council over the coming months will be to keep the number low through effective delivery of planning services and handling of complaints through your own procedures.

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 about your Council last year and did not identify fault that moved me to seek any local settlements.

Decisions

In total, I determined 15 complaints, a figure which differs from the number of complaints received because of work in hand at the start and finish of the year.

Of those 15 decisions: one complaint was outside my jurisdiction, three I exercised discretion not to investigate, in nine (six of which were planning complaints) I found no evidence of maladministration and two were 'premature' (in our view the Council had not been given adequate opportunity to investigate and resolve them for itself, so were returned to the Council to consider through its internal complaint procedure).

Overall I did not find issues that gave significant concern or that were indicative of systemic problems in the way the Council administers its services.

Other findings

Your Council continues to respond to our enquiries within the requested 28 days. Over the twelve months the average response time was 23.1 days. I am grateful to the Council for this level of service and its continued co-operation in this respect.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

The Council's commitment to providing effective complaint handling is demonstrated both in the way it responds to our enquiries and in the information it publishes about its own complaint procedure. The information is accessible via the Council's web-site and I am pleased to see you have also put a link on it to the LGO.

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

Your staff continue to provide us with an effective liaison service. We do not experience any difficulties in obtaining responses to our enquiries or supporting general information. This is of great help in our investigations and much appreciated.

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

Encs: 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	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	1	3	2	4	1	11
2005 / 2006	2	6	6	13	1	28
2004 / 2005	2	12	3	4	0	21

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	0	0	0	9	3	1	2	13	15
2005 / 2006	1	2	0	0	6	4	6	4	19	23
2004 / 2005	0	0	0	0	2	3	4	8	9	17

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	23.1
2005 / 2006	9	23.4
2004 / 2005	7	21.6

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