



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Wycombe 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

We received 36 complaints this year, a slight increase from last year but broadly in keeping with the level of complaints received in the past. As in previous years the largest category of complaint was planning and building control which made up over 50% of the complaints received. Many of the planning complaints involved dissatisfaction with decisions to grant planning permission or not to take enforcement action. As you know as long as there has been no fault in the way a local planning authority has reached a decision on a planning application or whether or not enforcement action is expedient, I have no power to question the merits of that decision.

Eight complaints related to housing issues. One was a complaint of anti social behaviour made by a leaseholder about a Council tenant. The other complaints related to how the Council dealt with a homelessness application, housing allocations, housing repairs and other housing management issues.

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.

The measure of administrative fault causing injustice is not the total number of decisions by my office but the number of settlements and formal reports which found maladministration and injustice. There were six local settlements this year and I issued no reports. Three of these settlements related to local taxation. In one case there was a delay in assessing Council Tax Benefit and in another a failure to note a reported change of circumstances which resulted in a fraud investigation being conducted when it should not have been. I felt both of these complainants should be compensated.

In a housing complaint a family which had become homeless was placed in an unsuitable room in a Council hostel for three months. The room was too small for the household and the son's single bed blocked the only means of escape route in the event of a fire. The family were moved to a larger room and your Council paid £400 compensation.

A further housing complaint raised an interesting issue. A complainant, for religious reasons, did not want to be involved in gambling and so felt he was unable to return a Council questionnaire on the services it provided as completed forms were automatically entered in a prize draw. Your Council agreed to include an opt-out choice on any future forms.

In all the settlements which my office dealt with this year I was impressed by your Council's prompt response to proposals and willingness to accept improvements in procedures.

Other findings

We decided 35 complaints in total during the year. Five complaints were referred back to your Council because you had not yet had an opportunity to deal with them. Of the remaining 30, I found no fault in half the cases. Five were outside my jurisdiction, and I did not pursue a further five because I found the injustice claimed by the complainant was insufficient to warrant investigation.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

The complaints referred back to your Council made up 17% of the total complaints decided. This is well below the national average of 28 %. Two of these complaints were resubmitted during the year. One resulted in a local settlement and in the other I found no evidence of fault.

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 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

My office made enquiries in 15 of the 36 complaints received. The average response time to these enquiries was 26.5 days which is within our target of 28 days. This is a significant improvement on last year's response times and I congratulate the Council on this.

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
Millbank Tower
Millbank
London SW1P 4QP

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	2	8	2	19	3	2	36
2005 / 2006	1	4	7	12	6	0	30
2004 / 2005	5	5	5	11	4	3	33

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	5	0	0	15	5	5	5	30	35
2005 / 2006	0	2	0	0	13	4	6	6	25	31
2004 / 2005	0	2	0	0	10	2	3	9	17	26

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	15	26.5
2005 / 2006	11	30.3
2004 / 2005	9	30.1

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