



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Lancaster City 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 Lancaster City Council 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 31 complaints during the year, a significant increase on the 17 received in the previous year. But, we expect to see these fluctuations over time. And the number of complaints remains small in relation to the many decisions taken by the Council behalf of its citizens each year.

Character

Seven complaints were about benefits, five about public finance, and six about housing. Two complaints were about planning and three about highways. Of the eight complaints in the 'other' category, five were about anti-social behaviour, two were about environmental health and one 'miscellaneous'.

Decisions on complaints

Reports and 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.

Two complaints were settled locally. One concerned a failure to notify the complainant about a small outstanding balance for street works which was registered as a land charge. The Council agreed to refund the complainant £282, the interest accrued over 19 years, and to review the procedures for handling old accounts. In a complaint about environmental health, the Council agreed to pay the complainant £500 to reflect failure to notice non-compliance with building regulations for a neighbour's oil storage tank and the delay in resolving the matter. The total compensation paid was £782 and I am grateful to the Council for its assistance in settling these complaints.

When we complete an investigation we must issue a report. I issued no reports against the Council during the year.

Other findings

Thirty one complaints were decided during the year. Of these six were outside my jurisdiction for a variety of reasons. Eight complaints were premature and, as I mentioned earlier, two were settled locally. The remaining fifteen were not pursued because no evidence of maladministration was seen or because it was decided for other reasons not to pursue them.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

Your Council's complaints process appears clear and is readily available on the website. Complaints can be made online, a facility increasingly valued by citizens. No issues arose in the complaints I have investigated which relate to the complaints process. I am pleased to note that, as I requested last year, the Council has now included a link to our website in the same way as for the Standards Board.

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. 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

We made enquiries on ten complaints this year, and the average time for responding was a commendable 29 days. This is a real improvement on the 35 days it took last year and is very close to our target response time of 28 days.

While I note that the Council's Link Officer has attended local training run by the York Ombudsman's office no one from the Council has attended Coventry's annual link officer seminar recently and you may wish to consider sending someone to the seminar to be held in November. If so, please let Stephen Purser, the Assistant Ombudsman, know and he will arrange for an invitation to be sent.

In addition, if it would help for Mr Purser to visit the Council and give a presentation about how we investigate complaints I would be happy to arrange 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 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.

J R White
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June 2007

Enc: Statistical data
Note on interpretation of statistics
Details of training courses

Complaints received by subject area	Benefits	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	7	6	8	2	5	3	31
2005 / 2006	3	6	4	3	0	1	17
2004 / 2005	0	6	9	3	1	0	19

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	11	4	6	8	23	31
2005 / 2006	0	2	0	0	4	4	2	2	12	14
2004 / 2005	0	4	0	0	8	2	4	4	18	22

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	10	29.4
2005 / 2006	6	35.0
2004 / 2005	11	35.1

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