

Local Government
OMBUDSMAN

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
Watford Borough Council
for the year ended
31 March 2008**

The Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) provides a free, independent and impartial service. We consider complaints about the administrative actions of councils and some other authorities. We cannot question what a council has done simply because someone does not agree with it. If we find something has gone wrong, such as poor service, service failure, delay or bad advice, and that a person has suffered as a result, the Ombudsmen aim to get it put right by recommending a suitable remedy. 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 2007/08 - Introduction

This annual letter provides a summary of the complaints we have received about your authority. We have included comments on the authority's performance and complaint-handling arrangements, where possible, so they can 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

In 2007/08 I received 18 complaints against your Council, a number lower than the 22 received last year and not dissimilar to the number in previous years.

Character

Five of the complaints were about housing matters, half the number of the previous year. The Council transferred its housing stock in September 2007 to a housing association. This may well explain the reduction and may have an appreciable effect on the number of complaints I receive in future. All the housing complaints concerned repairs and so could be a residual effect of the problems noted in my previous letter.

Of the remaining 13 complaints, three concerned planning applications. Two of the complaints in our 'Other' category concerned antisocial behaviour, and two concerned waste management.

Decisions on complaints

Reports and local settlements

A 'local settlement' is a complaint where, during the course of our investigation, the Council has agreed to take some action which we consider is a satisfactory response to the complaint. The investigation is then discontinued. In 2007/08 the Local Government Ombudsmen determined 27% of complaints by local settlement (excluding 'premature' complaints - where councils have not had a proper chance to deal with them - and those outside our jurisdiction).

This year I issued a report on a complaint about the Council's handling of a housing repair case. The Council acted as managing agent for a county council owned property. I found that the Council failed to liaise with the county council over repairs, and there were delays of up to 18 months in making necessary repairs. The Council agreed to a payment of £2,000 to reflect the unsatisfactory living conditions of the complainant and the time and trouble taken by the complainant.

I also concluded six local settlements. Two of these again concerned housing repairs. The most significant of the settlements concerned a delay by the Council in carrying out a timely inspection of the complainant's property. The repairs which followed led to the flooding of the complainant's home. The Council agreed to a payment of £200 in compensation to reflect the distress caused by its actions and also met the complainant's insurance claim of £1,000.

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As a result of the settlements and report, the Council made payments of £3,450 in total to the complainants.

Other findings

In cases concerning housing repairs, private housing grants, antisocial behaviour, planning enforcement and planning applications (five cases in total) I did not find the Council to be at fault. Four complaints concerned matters outside my jurisdiction. In one case, I used my discretion not to investigate further. Finally, four cases were referred back to the Council as I did not consider you had an adequate opportunity to consider and respond before I became involved.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

My target response time for enquiries made to councils remains at 28 days. The Council's average response time was 29.7 days. This is better than the 32.4 days the year before, but the time taken to respond to housing complaints was again disappointing, at 34.3 days. Perhaps more worryingly in view of the transfer of the Council's housing stock, the average time taken to respond to planning complaints was 36.3 days. I hope that the Council will improve its performance in this area.

One of your staff attended a seminar for our link officers last year. I trust that she found the event useful.

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. This year we carried out a detailed evaluation of the training with councils that have been trained over the past three years. The results are 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 now offer these courses specifically for social services staff and a course on reviewing complaints for social care review panel members. We can run open courses for groups of staff from different 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.

LGO developments

We launched the LGO Advice Team in April, providing a first contact service for all enquirers and new complainants. Demand for the service has been high. Our team of advisers, trained to provide comprehensive information and advice, has dealt with many thousands of calls since the service started.

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The team handles complaints submitted by telephone, email or text, as well as in writing. This new power to accept complaints other than in writing was one of the provisions of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act, which also came into force in April. Our experience of implementing other provisions in the Act, such as complaints about service failure and apparent maladministration, is being kept under review and will be subject to further discussion. Any feedback from your Council would be welcome.

Last year we published two special reports providing advice and guidance on 'applications for prior approval of telecommunications masts' and 'citizen redress in local partnerships'. Again, I would appreciate your feedback on these, particularly on any complaints protocols put in place as part of the overall governance arrangements for partnerships your Council has set up.

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
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June 2008

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
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	1	5	5	3	2	2	18
2006 / 2007	0	10	4	4	3	1	22
2005 / 2006	2	1	3	1	0	2	9

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
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	1	6	0	0	5	1	4	4	17	21
2006 / 2007	0	4	0	0	7	1	1	4	13	17
2005 / 2006	0	0	0	0	5	2	1	0	8	8

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
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	11	29.7
2006 / 2007	9	32.4
2005 / 2006	3	26.0

Average local authority response times 01/04/2007 to 31/03/2008

Types of authority	<= 28 days %	29 - 35 days %	> = 36 days %
District Councils	56.4	24.6	19.1
Unitary Authorities	41.3	50.0	8.7
Metropolitan Authorities	58.3	30.6	11.1
County Councils	47.1	38.2	14.7
London Boroughs	45.5	27.3	27.3
National Park Authorities	71.4	28.6	0.0