

# CULTURE & REGENERATION OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

## AGENDA

7.30pm

Wednesday  
14 November 2007

Havering Town Hall  
Main Road, Romford

Members 6: Quorum 3

### COUNCILLORS:

Robert Benham (C)

Clarence Barrett

John Clark

Lesley Kelly

Ray Morgon

Lynden Thorpe

For information about the meeting please contact:  
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# NOTES ABOUT THE MEETING

## 1. HEALTH AND SAFETY

The Council is committed to protecting the health and safety of everyone who attends meetings of its Committees.

At the beginning of the meeting, there will be an announcement about what you should do if there is an emergency during its course. **For your own safety and that of others at the meeting, please comply with any instructions given to you about evacuation of the building, or any other safety related matters.**

## 2. MOBILE COMMUNICATIONS DEVICES

Although mobile phones, pagers and other such devices are an essential part of many people's lives, their use during a meeting can be disruptive and a nuisance. Everyone attending is asked therefore to ensure that any device is switched to silent operation or switched off completely.

## 3. CONDUCT AT THE MEETING

Although members of the public are welcome to attend meetings of the Committee, they have no right to speak at them. Seating for the public is, however, limited and the Council cannot guarantee that everyone who wants to be present in the meeting room can be accommodated. When it is known in advance that there is likely to be particular public interest in an item the Council will endeavour to provide an overspill room in which, by use of television links, members of the public will be able to see and hear most of the proceedings.

The Chairman of the meeting has discretion, however, to invite members of the public to ask questions or to respond to points raised by Members. Those who wish to do that may find it helpful to advise the Committee Officer before the meeting so that the Chairman is aware that someone wishes to ask a question.

**PLEASE REMEMBER THAT THE CHAIRMAN MAY REQUIRE ANYONE WHO ACTS IN A DISRUPTIVE MANNER TO LEAVE THE MEETING AND THAT THE MEETING MAY BE ADJOURNED IF NECESSARY WHILE THAT IS ARRANGED.**

If you need to leave the meeting before its end, please remember that others present have the right to listen to the proceedings without disruption. Please leave quietly and do not engage others in conversation until you have left the meeting room.

## AGENDA ITEMS

### **1. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Chairman will announce details of the arrangements in case of fire or other events that might require the meeting room or building's evacuation.

### **2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND ANNOUNCEMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (if any) - receive.**

### **3. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS**

Members are invited to declare any interests in any of the items on the agenda at this point of the meeting. Members may still declare an interest in an item at any time prior to the consideration of the matter.

### **4. MINUTES**

To approve as a correct record the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 20 September 2007 and to authorise the Chairman to sign them.

### **5. LOCAL GOVERNMENT OMBUDSMAN'S ANNUAL LETTER**

Report attached.

### **6. URGENT BUSINESS**

To consider any other item in respect of which the Chairman is of the opinion, by reason of special circumstances which shall be specified in the minutes, that the item should be considered at the meeting as a matter of urgency.

**Cheryl Coppel**  
**Chief Executive**



**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE CULTURE AND REGENERATION  
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**Havering Town Hall, Romford  
Thursday, 20 September 2007 (7:30pm-8:00pm)**

**Present:**

Councillors Robert Benham (In the Chair), John Clark, Lesley Kelly +Gillian Ford.

Apologies for absence were received from Clarence Barrett, and Ray Morgon.

+Substitute Member: Councillor Gillian Ford (for Clarence Barrett).

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There were no declarations of interest.

The Chairman announced the arrangements to be followed in the event of the building needing to be vacated as the result of an emergency.

**3 MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 14 June 2007 were approved as a correct record and were signed by the Chairman.

**4 PERFORMANCE INFORMATION**

Members considered the information contained within their performance indication packs.

It was **RESOLVED**

To note the information

**5 REPORT OF THE CULTURE & REGENERATION OVERVIEW AND  
SCRUTINY REVIEW OF COUNCIL'S INFLUENCE ON PUBLIC  
TRANSPORT OPERATORS**

Members were reminded that in November 2006 the Committee approved the establishment of a Topic Group to examine the Council's influence on public transport operators.

The Topic Group's main objectives were to establish

- Current range of transport services available in the borough

- Review the current transport problems faced by residents and visitors to the borough
- Ways to improve the transport system in the borough

During the review the following areas were highlighted by the Topic Group

- Limited bus services in the outlying villages of the borough including no service on Sundays
- Lack of Oyster card services within some areas of the borough especially the Havering-atte-Bower area.
- Limited access for mobility impaired people at railway stations

The Group also suggested that there was a need for more fast train services to and from London during peak times from Romford station.

The Topic Group recommended that continued pressure be placed on Transport for London(TFL) to review bus services in all parts of the borough paying attention in particular to the outlying areas and the provision of a direct bus route from these areas to Queens Hospital. It was also recommended to continue lobbying London Buses to improve punctuality of bus services across the borough.

It was also recommended that the Transport Planning Team give an update on the possible future availability of the Oyster card scheme at Romford Station. Members also noted the Topic Group's recommendation that continued support for the Crossrail transport scheme be continued.

It was **RESOLVED**

To note the report and agree that the recommendations be forwarded to Cabinet.

## **6 WORK PROGRAMME**

Committee members considered work topics that could be considered for review by the next round of Topic Groups.

The subjects chosen were

- A review of music facilities in Havering and strategies for maximising community awareness/wellbeing and participation through music/performance.
- A review of heritage in Havering aimed at promoting local history and heritage and increasing community focus. This was an amalgam of three proposals a topic group looking at museum strategy, a topic group to develop a Heritage in Havering

directory and a Heritage Route through the borough and a topic group to initiate a Heritage in Havering day.

**7 URGENT BUSINESS**

A Member of the Committee wished to place on record that Councillor Clarence Barrett wished to be considered for the position of Vice Chair of the Committee

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Culture & Regeneration Overview & Scrutiny Committee 20 September 2007





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MEETING	DATE	ITEM
CULTURE & REGENERATION OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE	14 NOVEMBER 2007	<b>5</b>

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### **REPORT OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE**

**SUBJECT: LOCAL GOVERNMENT OMBUDSMAN'S ANNUAL LETTER 2006/07**

SUMMARY
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Since 2003, the Local Government Ombudsman (the Ombudsman) has circulated an "Annual Letter" to inform Members' of his impression of the Council's handling of complaints that are referred to him, to provide statistical information and to enable him to draw attention to issues of particular concern.

At the request of the Adjudication & Review Committee, the Annual Letter for 2006/07, is appended. The Committee's attention is drawn to issues raised by the Ombudsman affecting the services scrutinised by the Committee.

RECOMMENDATIONS
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- 1 That the content of the Annual Letter, and the officers' response, be noted.
- 2 That the Committee consider whether there are any points arising from this report which the Committee wishes to explore further or to comment upon.

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- 3 That the Committee note the need to improve the quality and level of contact with the public and the need to promote a more pro-active complaints handling process, especially when this involves Ombudsman investigations.
- 4 That the Committee's views be referred to the Adjudication & Review Committee.

REPORT DETAIL
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- 1.1 The Annual Letter of the Ombudsman, received in June, is appended, together with the table of statistics referred to in it and some notes on methodology.
- 1.2 This report comments on the points raised by the Ombudsman in the Letter.

**Complaints received – *Not just Culture & Regeneration***

- 2.1 The Ombudsman notes that the format of his Annual Letter has been varied to that of last year and asks for any comments. He confirms that the letters will be published on the web, and observes that they will be shared with the Audit Commission – a clear indication of the manner in which the Ombudsman and Audit Commission are sharing information on performance. He comments on the Audit Commission's Corporate Assessment Report where the Council was deemed to be improving, however, he observes that this does not appear to correlate with the increase in complaints he has received. It should be noted however, that Homes in Havering are still "settling-in" and that problems are being addressed and procedures changed as they arise. Furthermore, the Audit Commission has recently completed its review of Homes in Havering and the outcome of this review could enhance their customer complaints handling process.
- 2.2 During 2006/07, the Ombudsman received 109 complaints – a considerable increase on 2005/06 (85) but 13 cases concern one issue. He comments that housing remains the largest single area of complaint. The direct impact of Ombudsman investigations in respect of Culture and Regeneration is, by and large, centred on the way in which the Council manages its public areas – parks and open

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spaces, for example – as such, the Committee has less exposure to complaints by residents than does, say, Housing or Planning.

- 2.3 Regeneration concerns (as expressed in large-scale building/development projects) will impact on individuals and those who feel particularly aggrieved - or believe that their views are not being taken into account - will approach the Ombudsman to seek redress. Should there be issues relating to regeneration projects, the Committee would be invited to comment. In the year under review, there were no such complaints.
- 2.4 The Ombudsman records that there was an increase in his “catch-all” “Other” category (7 to 19), and observes that in both anti-social behaviour and environmental health, there are instances where two complaints have been made by a single complainant.

### **Decisions on complaints**

- 3.1 The Ombudsman refers to having made 110 decisions this year (88 last year) and acknowledges that there was insufficient evidence to warrant his involvement in 25 cases.
- 3.2 He states that in 16 cases he exercised his discretion to discontinue his investigations and that formal reports were issued in 14 cases of Maladministrations – 13 of which arose from the Langtons Registry Office complaint considered by Full Council in March 2007 and “local settlements” which give a combined total of 29 cases in which the Council was obliged to pay compensation. It should be noted though that the Langtons case is quite exceptional – for a number of reasons – and that in real terms, the Council was dealing with only **one** issue (and that was quickly rectified and procedures put in place to ensure that it could not happen again). However, the nett effect was to skew the overall figures and give a distorted picture of administrative capability and failings in the borough.
- 3.3 The letter then evaluates these findings in greater detail looking at “Reports”, “Local Settlements” and “Other Findings”. Under this last category he reminds the Council that it had agreed to “*review its procedures and consult with other authorities about the issue of top up fees for residential care*” and comments that he would like to know the outcome of that review. At present it would appear that this review is still outstanding.
- 3.4 Concerning complaints impacting on Culture and Regeneration complaints, the statistics are:

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- **1 Local Settlements – no penalty:** The Ombudsman accepted that the Council had rectified matters and that this was sufficient.
  - **2 No Maladministrations – after investigation:** The Council was obliged to respond to the Ombudsman and its responses were accepted as evidencing that it had done nothing wrong.
- 3.5 The total number of cases recorded as falling within the remit of Culture & Regeneration through the year was therefore 3. There were no cases brought forward from the previous year and all decisions were given before the end of it. Two cases exceeded the 28 day initial response period given by the Ombudsman in which the Council is expected to provide a response. The longest period was 45 days one was 43 and the third was just 28. However, the Committee should be aware that irrespective of the reasons, any time over the 28 days given affects the overall response statistic for the Council as a whole and this is reflected in the Ombudsman's comments concerning responses.
- 3.6 It should be noted that the Ombudsman does not accept "holding" responses and that until a substantive response is received, the clock continues ticking. Services have been urged to keep to the time given to them (usually just over three weeks) and to return their replies sooner rather than later, but it is accepted in some circumstances this might not always be possible. The Council will, if it notifies the Ombudsman soon enough, obtain extensions, but it is still the responsibility of each Head of Service to ensure that sufficient resources are made available and that the response is given sufficient priority. All responses should be reviewed by a senior manager or (ideally) a Head of Service to ensure that it is accurate, factual, and addresses each of the points raised by the Ombudsman.

**The Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints**

- 4.1 The Ombudsman notes that of all referrals to the Council as "premature complaints", (31), eight went on to investigation, though he accepts that of these only one led to a local settlement and one remained open at the time of writing.
- 4.2 The Ombudsman concludes that the Council might wish to consider if there is any reason why so many people appear to approach his office before seeking redress through the Council's complaints procedure – especially in respect of council tax matters. The Council has – through Overview and Scrutiny – undertaken such an investigation which has embraced this concern of the Ombudsman.

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With respect to the specific reference to council tax, that service has accepted that there were short-comings (due entirely to resource based issues which have been addressed) and procedures have been put in place to ensure that complaints handling – both Ombudsman and direct approaches – are given higher priority irrespective of other commitments and that issues are resolved at an earlier stage if at all possible.

- 4.3 The Culture and Regeneration Overview & Scrutiny Committee may wish to give the Adjudication & Review Committee the benefit of its experience in public access matters in order that the Council can become more effective at resolving problems at an early stage or, if necessary, of responding to Ombudsman enquiries with greater speed.

### **Training in complaint handling**

- 5.1 The Ombudsman refers to the training programme and recommends the range and quality of it in the continuous changing environment of complaint management and handling.

### **Liaison with LGO**

- 6.1. Response was asked for within 28 calendar days and he notes that, on average, the Council's response time has slipped from 26 days last year to 32. He notes that this is a retrograde step and points out the enormous discrepancies between responses in some cases to those in other service areas. He urges the Council to look at ways in which it could even out these swings. This has been addressed (see comments below).
- 6.2. The Ombudsman points out that his staff report ***“generally good working relationships with (the Council’s) officers and that the Council has generally responded positively to their enquiries.”*** He hopes that this will continue in the future.

### **LGO developments**

- 7.1. The Ombudsman announced that he is developing an Access and Advice service to improve first contact and provide a gateway to complainers and enquirers. He adds that the Local Government Bill may have an impact on his methods of working.

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- 7.2. He mentions recent special reports dealing with applications for 'phone masts and recommends that councils adopt simple approaches to resolving problems in this area and also one concerned with local partnerships and citizen redress.

**Conclusions/general observations**

- 8.1 The Ombudsman expresses his hopes that his comments will be helpful to the Council and asks for any comment or suggestion for future improvement to the letter.
- 8.2 He concludes by offering the services of either himself or a senior colleague to visit the Council to present the letter or discuss its contents with Councillors or staff.

**Observations on the Letter**

- 9.1 Discounting the Langtons 13, there was still an increase in complaints to the Ombudsman. This is due, in part, to complainants making greater use of his service either because they are computer literate (more complaints are initiated on line than was the case over the past two years), or that his service has a higher profile than before. Some complainants approach the Ombudsman because they feel the Council is not listening to them – though a review of the CRM database indicates that many people confuse “complaint” with advising the Council of a failure; such as paving that needs replacing or repairing. When it is not dealt with within a period they feel is appropriate, they go to the Ombudsman rather than returning to the Council to complain that it has not been rectified.
- 9.2 An Overview and Scrutiny Topic Group has recently reported on the Council's complaints procedure and made certain recommendations to Cabinet to improve the system. As and when changes are implemented, it may be possible to reduce the number of premature approaches to the Ombudsman simply by ensuring that procedures are in place to improve the advice given to people reporting a fault, at the time by asking them to come back to the Council if the problem has not been resolved within a given time-scale.
- 9.3 Although the tone of the Letter suggests that the Council is not performing as well as last year, it should be noted that in services where initial responses have been slow, action has been taken at managerial level to ensure faster turn-round. Where it has become apparent that Ombudsman requests are not receiving the

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appropriate level of priority, this is being vigorously challenged in order to make certain that response times are more frequently met by all of the services.

**Financial Implications and Risks:**

Any points arising from this report, which the Committee wishes to explore further or comment upon may have financial implications; depending on the nature of the action required. These will be determined as appropriate.

The Council is continuing to review and improve the quality of its complaints handling systems. This is an ongoing process and resource and reprioritisation issues will be considered as part of a forthcoming report, to be presented later this year.

In the meantime adjustments made within individual services to improve processes will need to be met from within existing resources.

**Environmental Implications and Risks:**

There are no environmental implications or risks arising from this report.

**Equalities Implications and Risks:**

There are no equalities implications or risks arising from this report.

**Legal Implications and Risks:**

There are no legal implications or risks arising from this report.

**Background papers list**

Ombudsman's Decisions by Ward  
The Annual Letter is appended.

Cheryl Coppel  
Chief Executive

**Culture & Regeneration O & S Committee, 14 November 2007**

**Contact Officer:** Grant Söderberg, Committee Officer

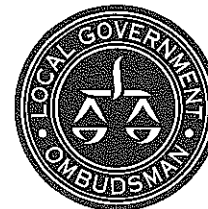
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**Culture & Regeneration O & S Committee, 14 November 2007**

20 June 2007



The Commission for  
Local Administration in England

Mrs Cheryl Coppel  
Chief Executive  
London Borough of Havering  
Town Hall  
Romford  
Essex  
RM1 3RD

**Tony Redmond**  
Local Government Ombudsman

**Peter MacMahon**  
Deputy Ombudsman

Our ref: RS/LP  
(Please quote our reference when contacting us)

**If telephoning please contact Richard Shaw on 020 7217 4669  
email address: r.shaw@lgo.org.uk**

Dear Mrs Coppel

**Annual Letter 2006/07**

I am writing to give you a summary of the complaints about your authority that my office has dealt with over the past year and to draw any lessons learned on your authority's performance and complaint-handling arrangements. I hope you find this letter a useful addition to other information you have on how people experience or perceive your services.

The format of the annual letter is slightly different to last year and is set out as a separate document attached. I would again very much welcome any comments you may have on the form and content of the letter.

We will publish all the annual letters on our website ([www.lgo.org.uk](http://www.lgo.org.uk)) and share them with the Audit Commission, as we did last year. We will again wait for four weeks after this letter before doing so, to give you an opportunity to consider the letter first. If a letter is found to contain any material factual inaccuracy we will reissue it.

I would again be happy to consider requests for me or a senior colleague to visit the Council to present and discuss the letter with councillors or staff. We will do our best to meet the requests within the limits of the resources available to us.

/...

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I am also arranging for a copy of this letter and its attachments to be sent to you electronically so that you can distribute it easily within the Council and post it on your website should you decide to do this.

Yours sincerely



Handwritten signature of Tony Redmond in black ink, written in a cursive style.

Tony Redmond



The Commission for  
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's  
Annual Letter  
London Borough of Havering  
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**

In 2006/2007 I received 109 complaints against your Council. This was about a quarter more than in the previous two years. As before, housing complaints were by far the most numerous. They increased by 50% to 42 and were 38% of the total number against the Council. Nationally, housing complaints are 21% of the total, so this is noticeably higher than the norm. Thirteen of the housing complaints were about repairs and another 13 concerned allocations. Other complaints related to managing tenancies and homelessness.

Our 'other' category covers a range of services. Complaints here have gone from 7 in 2004/05 to 19 last year. Six of these concerned the well publicised problem connected to weddings at the registry office at Langtons House, to which I refer below. A further five complaints related to anti-social behaviour and five more concerned environmental health issues. (In each of these areas, the numbers include two complaints made by a single complainant.) The other main areas of complaint were planning and transport and highways.

I note that the Audit Commission's most recent Corporate Assessment Report commented on a significant improvement in previously poorly performing areas such as planning, housing and social services. These improvements do not seem to correlate, however, with the level of complaints to me, particularly in relation to housing matters.

## **Decisions on complaints**

### **General**

I made 110 decisions on complaints against your Council last year. In 25 cases I found no or insufficient evidence of fault to warrant my involvement, and in another 16 cases I exercised my discretion not to pursue matters further. This was mostly because the level of injustice caused to the complainants did not justify further investigation. I was unable to consider a further nine complaints because they fell outside of my jurisdiction.

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. I issued formal reports in respect of 14 complaints against your Council in 2006/2007, and I concluded local settlements in 15 other cases.

/...

### **Reports**

I issued a report finding maladministration causing injustice in respect of 13 complaints I received about the Council's registry service at Langtons House. The Council failed to renew a premises licence for wedding rooms. This cast doubt on the validity of 193 marriages conducted in 2004 and 2005. I found the failure to renew the licence was wholly avoidable. The Council eventually agreed to fund a test case in the High Court which established that the marriages were lawful. But I recommended it should pay £150 compensation, not just to the 13 complainants who had come to me, but to each of the 193 couples because they had been caused unnecessary distress and had been uncertain about their legal status for some time. The Council also agreed to make procedural changes to ensure that premises licences are renewed on time in future.

The other report I issued in 2006/2007 concerned a complaint about the Council's decision to grant planning permission for a block of flats. The complainant was a neighbouring resident who said the development had adversely affected her amenity. Planning consent was given after the Committee Chair used his casting vote. But I concluded that the Chair should not have taken part in the decision making in view of his prior involvement with the developer, and he should have stood down before the vote was taken. This breach of the Council's Protocol meant the decision was flawed. I could not say that the application would not have been approved in any case, but I considered the complainant had suffered some distress from what happened and had to take time and trouble in pursuing the matter. I recommended that the Council should pay the complainant £200 compensation and should consider periodically reminding councillors dealing with planning applications about their responsibilities.

### **Local settlements**

I concluded 15 local settlements in 2006/2007. 12 of these were in housing cases, including six relating to allocations issues. The other three settlements involved adult care services, planning, and transport and highways complaints.

In a case involving a housing sales issue, I endorsed the Council's finding under its own complaints procedure that it had given wrong advice to the complainants about their Right to Buy. I agreed that the Council's offer of £1,000 compensation was not unreasonable in light of the distress caused by this. The other housing settlements involved a range of faults such as delays and failures in communications or record keeping.

The adult care case involved a complaint about the Council's decision that top up fees should be paid towards the residential care of an elderly man. They did this without proper consultation. The Council agreed to pay the full cost of the placement and refund the £2,870 fees already paid. It also agreed to review its practices in the light of the case.

### **Other findings**

I am grateful to the Council for agreeing to review various aspects of its policies and procedures in response to my findings in 2006/2007. I am aware that the Council has already amended its procedures regarding the renewal of premises licences for marriages. The Council also said it would review its procedures and consult with other authorities about the issue of top up fees for residential care. So I should be grateful to know the outcome of that review. Eleven of the settlements involved the payment of compensation. Importantly, in addition to procedural changes and refunds, the Council gave its apologies.

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### **Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints**

I referred 31 complaints back to the Council in 2006/2007 as it had not had a reasonable opportunity to deal with them before I became involved. I note that in eight cases the complainant remained dissatisfied and resubmitted the complaint after the Council had considered matters. I found there was no maladministration in six of these cases but I concluded a local settlement in one case. The other re-submitted complaint is still under investigation.

The overall proportion of premature complaint decisions for your Council is close to the average for all authorities. But I note that 6 out of 10 public finance (council tax) complaints we received were considered as premature. So the Council may wish to consider if there is any reason for the number of people coming to me before the Council has dealt with their complaints about council tax matters.

### **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 we provide 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 now offer these courses specifically for social services staff. We have also successfully piloted a course on reviewing complaints for social services review panel members. 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**

I ask for responses to my initial requests for information to be provided within 28 calendar days. On average, the Council's responses in 2006/2007 took over 32 days, which is longer than the average for the previous two years. I am aware that the Council has generally replied to me in a reasonable timescale. But there have been some wide fluctuations in performance. For instance, three housing responses took over 50 days, and three out of four transport responses took more than 40 days. It would help us in providing a prompt service to complainants if the Council could endeavour to meet our target response time more consistently.

I am pleased that my staff report generally good working relationships with your officers. I note that the Council has usually responded positively to our enquiries and has been willing to agree suitable settlements as appropriate. I hope that we can continue to work together to secure further improvements in complaint handling in future.

As you know, I seek to visit all councils in my jurisdiction periodically and I was pleased to meet with the Council's Management Board earlier this year to discuss issues raised by complaints. I found this meeting to be helpful and hope that Board members shared this sentiment.

/...

## **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**  
10<sup>th</sup> Floor  
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	Adult care services	Benefits	Children and family services	Education	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Social Services - other	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	6	6	2	2	42	19	12	10	0	10	109
2005 / 2006	3	6	1	7	28	13	7	9	1	10	85
2004 / 2005	4	0	4	10	25	7	16	7	2	9	84

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	14	15	0	0	25	16	9	31	79	110
2005 / 2006	0	12	0	0	20	7	20	29	59	88
2004 / 2005	2	10	0	0	25	11	9	18	57	75

See attached notes for an explanation of the headings in this table.

**Average local authority response times 01/04/2006 to 31/03/2007**

Response times	FIRST ENQUIRIES	
	No. of First Enquiries	Avg no. of days to respond
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	40	32.7
2005 / 2006	30	26.0
2004 / 2005	32	28.1

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

**OMBUDSMAN DECISIONS by WARD**

**Cases within the remit of the Culture & Regeneration OSC  
to 31 March 2007. Total referrals for the year: 3**

