



The Commission for  
Local Administration in England

## **The Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Letter**

# **Ribble Valley Borough 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 seven complaints about your Council in the twelve months ending 31 March 2007. This is four less than the previous year. While the reduction is welcomed, the relatively small numbers are too small from which to draw any meaningful conclusions.

Of the seven complaints, six were in relation to planning issues.

While the majority of cases relate to planning, it may give the Council some comfort to know that I did not identify maladministration in any of the planning complaints I determined in 2006/07

## **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 issued one report against your Council last year and agreed one local settlement. Significantly both of these were in relation to land.

The report I issued gave me considerable concerns about the process followed in the disposal of land and failure to consider that disposal in accordance with recognised good practice.

### ***Decisions***

In addition to the report and the local settlement, I made decisions on eight complaints. Of those eight decisions: one complaint was outside my jurisdiction, in five (four of which were planning related) 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).

I did not identify any underlying or systemic problems or concerns.

### ***Other findings***

As you are aware, we ask for comprehensive responses to our enquiries within 28 days. Your Council responded in 86 days on average. To be fair, this figure is greatly skewed by one complaint. Taking that one complaint into account, the average response time was a little over 30 days.

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

It is evident from the clear information the Council provides about making complaints, the ease of access to the process through its web-site and the direct references and links to the LGO that the Council takes complaints handling seriously.

This view was reinforced by our own experience in settling a complaint. The Council offered to settle a complaint as soon as it became aware there was an issue with the way it had handled the matter concerned. This proactive approach is of credit to the Council.

## **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**

Liaison arrangements between our two organizations operate effectively and I am grateful to the Council for its co-operation in providing the information we request.

## **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	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	0	1	6	7
2005 / 2006	1	3	7	11
2004 / 2005	0	3	4	7

**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	1	1	0	0	5	0	1	2	8	10
2005 / 2006	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	2	4	6
2004 / 2005	0	1	0	0	3	1	1	2	6	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
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	3	86.0
2005 / 2006	5	37.6
2004 / 2005	4	21.5

### 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