



The Commission for  
Local Administration in England

# **The Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Letter to Warrington 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.

As you are a local Social Services authority I want to take this opportunity to draw your attention to an issue of significant public interest. In the last two years I have issued reports following complaints from people living in Blackpool, Liverpool and Sheffield about failings in home care services provided under contract.

In each case a vulnerable person was placed at significant risk as a result of carers failing to visit, calling late and failing to provide the specified care. Tragically, in one case the actions of a carer resulted in a death. Complaints had been made to all three Councils but no effective action had been taken. Although the services were provided under contract, it seems clear that similar problems could occur even if the carers are directly employed. I urge you to ensure that senior staff responsible for care services to adults are aware of the issues raised by these reports (which can be found on our web-site) and consider whether action needs to be taken by your Council. The 2006 report of the Commission for Social Care Inspection 'Time to Care? An Overview of Home Care Services for Older People in England' provides very useful contextual information.

## **Complaints received**

### ***Volume & Character***

During the year my office received 50 complaints against the Council. This is slightly less than in the previous year but that is of no real significance. Nor is there anything of significance in the way that those complaints are distributed between departmental areas.

## **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 did not issue any reports against the Council during the year. Three cases merited some form of remedy after fault had been identified by my staff.

### ***Other findings***

We decided 39 complaints in the year of which 14 were premature – ie the Council itself had not been given a prior opportunity to investigate and respond. Such complaints are simply referred back to the Council with a request that they go through its complaints procedure. A further four complaints lay outside of my jurisdiction. In six cases my Investigators exercised their discretion not to investigate the complaints, and in 12 cases there was no evidence of maladministration.

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

Please see my comments below in relation to liaison with this office.

### **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. 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 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 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.

### **Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman**

The time it takes for the Council to respond to our enquiries has also deteriorated – from an average of 33.4 days to 35.8 against our target of 28 days. Within that average was one response that took over 60 days and two others that took 40 days or more. In one of the complaints that was resolved by local settlement the Council's handling of the complaint gave cause for concern. I drew attention in last year's letter to problems that I saw in the way that the Council dealt with complaints. In February one of my Assistant Ombudsmen met with the new Chief Executive and the officer responsible for dealing with complaints.

The historic problems were discussed and the officers were concerned to avoid these in future. It was generally a helpful, open and positive meeting.

The training we offer in complaints handling may be of assistance.

### **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 we will discuss with you the implications for your Council.

I hope you have received our latest special report about telecommunication 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**  
**Beverley House**  
**17 Shipton Road**  
**York**  
**YO30 5FZ**

**June 2007**

Enc: Statistical data  
Note on interpretation of statistics  
Leaflet on training courses (with posted copy only)

<b>Complaints received by subject area</b>	<b>Adult care services</b>	<b>Benefits</b>	<b>Children and family services</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Housing</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Planning &amp; building control</b>	<b>Social Services - other</b>	<b>Transport and highways</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007</b>	1	1	5	5	9	9	19	0	1	<b>50</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	2	0	7	1	10	14	17	0	0	<b>51</b>
<b>2004 / 2005</b>	3	0	3	6	7	5	26	1	5	<b>56</b>

**Note:** these figures will include complaints that were made prematurely to the Ombudsman and which we referred back to the authority for consideration.

<b>Decisions</b>	<b>MI reps</b>	<b>LS</b>	<b>M reps</b>	<b>NM reps</b>	<b>No mal</b>	<b>Omb disc</b>	<b>Outside jurisdiction</b>	<b>Premature complaints</b>	<b>Total excl premature</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007</b>	0	3	0	0	12	6	4	14	25	<b>39</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	1	4	0	0	21	10	6	12	42	<b>54</b>
<b>2004 / 2005</b>	1	3	0	0	25	11	2	11	42	<b>53</b>

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

<b>Response times</b>	<b>FIRST ENQUIRIES</b>	
	<b>No. of First Enquiries</b>	<b>Avg no. of days to respond</b>
<b>01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007</b>	14	35.8
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	25	33.4
<b>2004 / 2005</b>	27	27.2

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

<b>Types of authority</b>	<b>&lt;= 28 days %</b>	<b>29 - 35 days %</b>	<b>&gt;= 36 days %</b>
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