



The Commission for  
Local Administration in England

# **The Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Letter to Wear Valley District 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**

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

The number of complaints against the Council received by my office fell from 33 in the previous year to 24 in 2006/07. That will be welcome news to the Council but it would be wrong to read too much into this fall. Complaints levels vary from year to year by this sort of amount without any discernable cause. Specifically, I note the fall in complaints about housing, from 10 to two. I note that at the start of the year the council set up an arms length management organisation (Dale and Valley Homes) to administer housing functions on its behalf.

## **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 have not issued any reports against the Council during the year. Three complaints were resolved by local settlements. One of those involved the failure to keep a proper record. This common and easily rectifiable fault can cause significant problems and I encourage the Council to ensure that its staff are aware of the need for propionate record keeping.

### ***Other findings***

28 complaints were decided by my staff. Of these four were premature and referred back to the Council to go through its complaints procedure. Two complaints were outside of my jurisdiction, and in five cases my Investigators exercised their discretion not to pursue the complaints. No fault was found in 14 cases.

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

I am not aware of any problems with the way the Council deals with complaints from members of the public.

## **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**

In last year's letter I was critical of the Council for the time it took on average to respond to enquiries from my office. Times to respond remain roughly the same at just over 36 days. Within that average are some unacceptable figures including one complaint where the response took 103 days and another where it took 54 days. I would now like the Council to tell me what it intends to do.

### **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**  
**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>Benefits</b>	<b>Housing</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Planning &amp; building control</b>	<b>Public finance</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007</b>	2	2	6	13	1	<b>24</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	2	10	8	13	0	<b>33</b>
<b>2004 / 2005</b>	3	9	7	20	0	<b>39</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	14	5	2	4	24	<b>28</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	0	3	0	0	9	6	5	11	23	<b>34</b>
<b>2004 / 2005</b>	0	5	0	0	8	2	6	10	21	<b>31</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>	12	36.1
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	14	36.4
<b>2004 / 2005</b>	19	38.8

**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