



The Commission for  
Local Administration in England

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

# **Wyre 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.

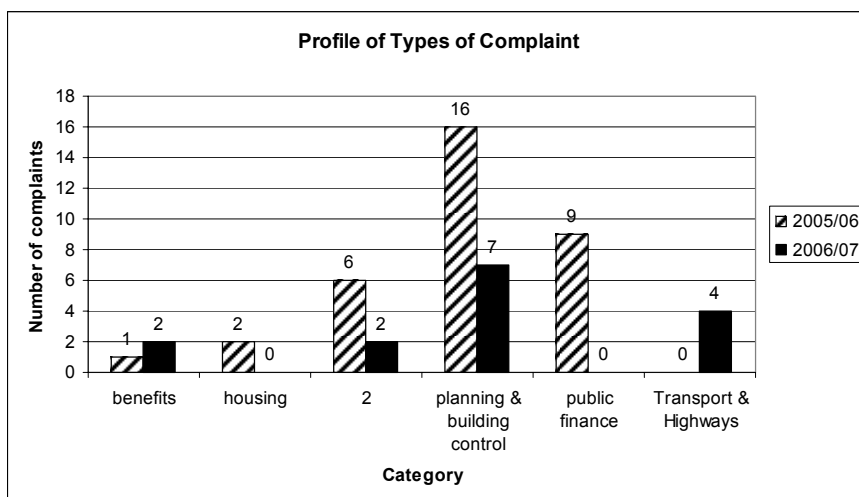
Two attachments form an integral part of this letter: statistical data covering a three year period and a note to help the interpretation of the statistics.

## Complaints received

I received 15 complaints about your Council in the 12 months up to 31 March 2007. This is fewer than half of the 34 I received the year before.

As this chart illustrates, the profile of the type of complaint I received about your Council changed between 2005/06 and 2006/07.

The two most notable reductions are those in public finance (administration of Council Tax) where there were no complaints at all and in planning & building control.



Complaints about planning issues have fallen by more than a half, although they still account for 47% of the total (against a national average of 23.6%).

The numbers concerned are quite small and do not allow for meaningful conclusions to be drawn about the Council's services.

## 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 about your Council last year.

I asked for three complaints to be settled locally, and although I was critical of the Council's actions the Council can draw some comfort from the fact that my investigations did not reveal evidence of systemic or widespread problems in the way your Council administers its services.

### **Decisions**

In addition to the three local settlements, I took 15 decisions making 18 in all, a figure which differs from the number of complaints received because of work in hand at the start and finish of the year.

Of those 15 decisions: one complaint was outside my jurisdiction, two I exercised discretion not to investigate, in nine I found no evidence of maladministration and three 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).

### **Other findings**

As you are aware, we ask for comprehensive responses to our enquiries within 28 days. Your Council continues to far exceed our expectations and last year took an average of just 15 days to send us full responses. I am grateful to your Council for its cooperation in this respect.

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

No obvious issues have arisen about the Council's handling of complaints during the course of my investigations. The indications from the complaints we have investigated are that your Council remains committed to dealing with complaints proactively and effectively.

A statistic which is of interest to me, and one the Council may wish to explore further in the context of its own information about complaint handling, is a change in the number of premature complaints. In 2005/06 I referred 11 complaints back to the Council for investigation. This was 32.3% of the total I received. This last year I had need to refer just three to you as premature. This was 20% of the total I received. In isolation this reduction does not reveal much about complaint handling, but in the context of more data may prove illuminating.

I am aware the Council publishes information about its complaint procedure and I am pleased to see reference to the LGO in its leaflet.

### **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**

The excellent response times your Council achieves are testament to the effective liaison arrangements between our two organizations. Your staff are helpful and responsive in dealing with our enquiries.

## **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**

Encs: 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
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	2	0	2	7	0	4	15
2005 / 2006	1	2	6	16	9	0	34
2004 / 2005	0	2	8	17	6	6	39

**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	0	3	0	0	9	2	1	3	15	18
2005 / 2006	0	2	0	0	9	7	3	11	21	32
2004 / 2005	2	1	0	0	16	4	3	14	26	40

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	13	15.0
2005 / 2006	15	19.2
2004 / 2005	10	33.9

**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