

Monday 26/6/06



21 June 2006

The Commission for
Local Administration in England

Mr M Cuff
Chief Executive
Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council
DX 12606
ROTHERHAM 1

Anne Seex
Local Government Ombudsman

Neil Hobbs
Deputy Ombudsman

Our Ref: Annual Letter 06/AS1/jpd
(Please quote our reference when contacting us)

If telephoning contact: Ms K Hill's Personal Assistant on 01904 380225
If e-mailing: st1york@lgo.org.uk

Dear Mr Cuff

Annual Letter 2005/06

I am writing to give you my reflections on the complaints received against your authority and dealt with by my office over the last year. I hope that in reviewing your own performance you will find this letter a useful addition to other information you hold highlighting how people experience or perceive your services.

This year we will publish the letters on our website and share them with the Audit Commission as there was widespread support from authorities for us to do this. We will wait for four weeks after this letter before making it more widely available in these ways to give you an opportunity to consider and review the letter first. If a letter is found to contain any factual inaccuracy we will reissue it.

In addition to the narrative below 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

We received 108 complaints about your Council in the last year, 33 more than the previous year. This is a substantial increase over the previous two years when we received 75 and 66 complaints respectively. There have been significant increases in highways, other and planning complaints. The other category includes 12 complaints about the laying down of memorial stones in one graveyard. Complaints dropped slightly or stayed steady in the remaining subject areas. The Council may wish to consider whether there are any underlying issues causing the increase in planning and highways complaints.

/...

Beverley House 17 Shipton Road York YO30 5FZ
Tel 01904 380200 Fax 01904 380269
DX 65201 York 5
www.lgo.org.uk

Decisions on complaints

Reports and local settlements

When we complete an investigation we must issue a report. There are a significant proportion of investigations that do not need to be completed because a 'local settlement' is reached during the course of the investigation and it is therefore discontinued.

As in the previous two years, we did not issue any reports about your Council in 2005/6.

Fourteen complaints led to local settlements, including five housing and eight social services complaints. I have not identified any underlying problems in these service areas from the complaints investigated.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

The Council has averaged 35.8 days to respond to first enquiries, slower than the 28 day target set by the Ombudsman and the 28.7 days achieved last year. The Council should look at how it can respond more quickly to my office, as this is a vital part of providing a quality service to people who complain to us. Responses on housing, planning and social services have tended to take the longest and so a focus on these may yield the best improvement for local people.

We decided 90 complaints, 38% of which were "premature", that is the Council had not had a reasonable opportunity to deal with them. Of the complaints decided, ten were premature complaints resubmitted to my office because the complainants were unhappy with the Council's response. Five of these led to a local settlement (50%). This is a relatively high percentage, and the same proportion as last year. The Council should assess whether its complaint procedure is operating effectively and identify any improvements which should be made.

Four social services complaints highlighted delays in the statutory complaints procedure. I trust that these problems have now been resolved and will monitor this over the next year.

Following our comments last year, it is now easier to find information about how to complain on your website. It does refer to the Ombudsman service but it would be helpful if there was also a direct link to the Local Government Ombudsman's website. I would ask the Council to add this link.

Training in complaint handling

Our training in complaint handling is proving very popular with authorities and we continue to receive very positive feedback from participants. Over the last year we have delivered more than 100 courses from the range of three courses that we now offer as part of our role in promoting good administrative practice.

/...

Effective Complaint Handling was the first course we developed, aimed at staff who deal with complaints as a significant part of their job. Since then we have introduced courses in complaint handling for front line staff and in handling social services complaints.

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 range of courses available together with contact details for enquiries and bookings.

Liaison with LGO

You may remember that a series of Liaison Officer Seminars was convened by this office in 2004/5 within York for those officers liaising directly with my staff. It may be that the officers with that responsibility were then unable to attend or that new staff now fulfil that function. I should be grateful to learn therefore whether one or two members of your staff would be interested to attend such a seminar if a second series was convened towards the end of this year or early in 2007. If so, please contact the Assistant Ombudsman whose team covers your Council, who as you may know is currently Karen Hill.

Conclusions/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. I would again very much welcome any comments you may have on the form and content of the letter.

I would again be happy to consider requests for myself 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.

/...

Page 4
Mr M Cuff

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

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Anne Seex".

Anne Seex
Local Government Ombudsman

Enc: Statistical Data
Interpretation of Statistics
Training Material

Complaints received by subject area	Education	Highways	Housing (not incl. HB)	Housing Benefit	Local Taxation	Other	Planning	Social Services	Total
01/04/2005 - 31/03/2006	1	16	25	0	2	32	17	15	108
2004 / 2005	4	3	28	1	6	13	5	15	75
2003 / 2004	5	1	29	1	1	17	4	8	66

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
01/04/2005 - 31/03/2006	0	14	0	0	18	17	7	34	56	90
2004 / 2005	0	15	0	0	17	11	7	22	50	72
2003 / 2004	0	12	0	0	19	15	7	17	53	70

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

Average local authority response times 01/04/2005 to 31/03/2006

Response times	FIRST ENQUIRIES	
	No. of First Enquiries	Avg no. of days to respond
01/04/2005 - 31/03/2006	45	35.8
2004 / 2005	26	28.7
2003 / 2004	28	31.0

Types of authority	<= 28 days %	29 - 35 days %	> = 36 days %
District Councils	53.2	25.3	21.5
Unitary Authorities	41.3	34.8	23.9
Metropolitan Authorities	41.7	30.5	27.8
County Councils	55.9	26.5	17.6
London Boroughs	39.4	39.4	21.2
National Park Authorities	100.0	0.0	0.0