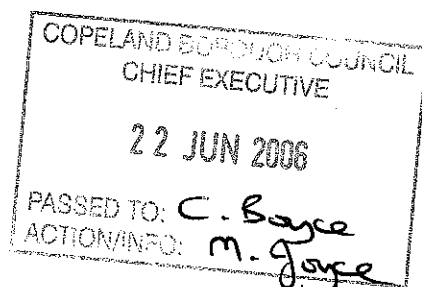


21 June 2006



The Commission for  
Local Administration in England

Mr Liam Murphy  
Chief Executive  
Copeland Borough Council  
PO Box No 19, Council Offices  
Catherine Street  
WHITEHAVEN CA28 7NY

Anne Seex  
Local Government Ombudsman

Neil Hobbs  
Deputy Ombudsman

Our ref: Annual Letter 06/AS/jib  
(Please quote our reference when contacting us)

If telephoning contact: Mr Cobley's Personal Assistant on 01904 380238  
If e-mailing: [st2york@lgo.org.uk](mailto:st2york@lgo.org.uk)

Dear Mr Murphy

### 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

During the last year (2005/6) 16 complaints were received against Copeland Borough Council, showing a marginal decrease upon the previous year (18). The largest category of complaints remains those against the Council's planning services, though these reduced slightly from 9 during the previous year (2004/5) to 8 last year (2005/6).

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### **Decisions on complaints**

I chose to refer 6 complaints back to the Council because they were premature in the sense that the Council had not a proper opportunity, as the law requires, to consider these complaints itself. Excluding these 6 complaints I determined a further 13 complaints during 2005/6.

### **Reports and local settlements**

When we complete an investigation we must issue a report, but 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.

Last year there were 3 such complaints all of which concerned local taxation. In the first case the Council failed to act on information which it had received and delayed for about six months processing a claim for Council tax benefit. As a result the Council promptly agreed to pay compensation on £150 to the complainant. In a second case the Council pursued the complainant for the wrong amount of business rate and delayed correcting the bill and providing the right bill. The Council agreed to provide an explanation for the correct bill and paid the complainant compensation of £50. In the third case, the Council again failed to act upon information sent by the complainant for well over a year and then presented revised bills in a way which confused the complainant. The Council apologised for its error, waived a payment, and agreed to accept other payments by instalment. The Council also readily recognised that some processes needed to be changed and implemented those improvements in its procedures.

### **Other findings**

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

I am pleased to note that in successive years the Council has rapidly reduced the time it has taken on average to respond to my enquiries upon complaints. In 2003/4 the Council took an average of 35 calendar days to respond to such enquiries. Last year (2005/6) that time had been halved and the Council responded within just over 18 calendar days to the enquiries made upon three complaints. Just over half of all district councils respond to the new target of 28 days for such enquiries, and I am pleased to note that Copeland Borough Council now significantly outperforms that target.

#### **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 Local Government Ombudsman**

I was pleased to note the warm reception received by the Assistant Ombudsman, Chris Cobley, leading the team of investigators dealing with complaints against the Council when he visited Copeland. I was also pleased to note the alacrity with which the Council responded to his suggestions about possible delays in determining housing benefit applications following his discussions with the Citizens Advice Centre in Copeland. I note that no complaints about housing benefit were made against Copeland last year.

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 let me know or contact Chris Cobley.

### **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.

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Mr L Murphy

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 black ink, appearing to read 'Anne Seex', written in a cursive style.

Anne Seex  
Local Government Ombudsman

Enc: Statistical data  
Note on interpretation of statistics  
Details of training courses

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Complaints received by subject area	Highways	Housing (not incl. HB)	Housing Benefit	Local Taxation	Other	Planning	Social Services	Total
01/04/2005 - 31/03/2006	1	0	0	4	3	8	1	17
2004 / 2005	1	2	0	4	2	9	0	18
2003 / 2004	0	3	1	0	4	8	0	16

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	3	0	0	2	4	4	6	13	19
2004 / 2005	0	0	0	0	9	3	3	5	15	20
2003 / 2004	0	1	0	0	3	3	4	4	11	15

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	3	18.7
2004 / 2005	9	26.3
2003 / 2004	5	35.2

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

# Notes to assist interpretation of the Commission's local authority statistics

## 1. Complaints received

This information shows the number of complaints received by the LGO, broken down by service area and in total within the periods given. These figures include complaints that are made prematurely to the LGO (see below for more explanation) and that we refer back to the council for consideration. The figures may include some complaints that we have received but where we have not yet contacted the council.

## 2. Decisions

This information records the number of decisions made by the LGO, broken down by outcome, within the periods given. **This number will not be the same as the number of complaints received**, because some complaints are made in one year and decided in the next. Below we set out a key explaining the outcome categories.

**MI reps:** where the LGO has concluded an investigation and issued a formal report finding maladministration causing injustice.

**LS (local settlements):** decisions by letter discontinuing our investigation because action has been agreed by the authority and accepted by the Ombudsman as a satisfactory outcome for the complainant.

**M reps:** where the LGO has concluded an investigation and issued a formal report finding maladministration but causing no injustice to the complainant.

**NM reps:** where the LGO has concluded an investigation and issued a formal report finding no maladministration by the council.

**No mal:** decisions by letter discontinuing an investigation because we have found no, or insufficient, evidence of maladministration.

**Omb disc:** decisions by letter discontinuing an investigation in which we have exercised the Ombudsman's general discretion not to pursue the complaint. This can be for a variety of reasons, but the most common is that we have found no or insufficient injustice to warrant pursuing the matter further.

**Outside jurisdiction:** these are cases which were outside the Ombudsman's jurisdiction.

**Premature complaints:** decisions that the complaint is premature. The LGO does not normally consider a complaint unless a council has first had an opportunity to deal with that complaint itself. So if someone complains to the LGO without having taken the matter up with a council, the LGO will usually refer it back to the council as a 'premature complaint' to see if the council can itself resolve the matter.

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**Total excl premature:** all decisions excluding those where we referred the complaint back to the council as 'premature'.

### 3. Response times

These figures record the average time the council takes to respond to our first enquiries on a complaint. We measure this in calendar days from the date we send our letter/fax/email to the date that we receive a substantive response from the council. The council's figures may differ somewhat, since they are likely to be recorded from the date the council receives our letter until the despatch of its response.

### 4. Average local authority response times 2005/06

This table gives comparative figures for average response times by authorities in England, by type of authority, within three time bands.

## Training from the Local Government Ombudsman



Email: [training@lgo.org.uk](mailto:training@lgo.org.uk)  
Telephone: 01904 380226

The Commission for  
Local Administration in England

Good complaint handling is an essential part of customer care, and local authorities are becoming more and more aware of its benefits in enhancing customer relations, helping the organisation to learn and improve and providing a better public service.

The Local Government Ombudsman (LGO), as part of its advice giving role, provides a range of training courses for local authority staff. All of our courses are presented by experienced investigative staff with considerable expertise in complaint handling and knowledge of the theory and practice covered.

More than 150 courses have been delivered since October 2004. Feedback from participants shows that they find it stimulating, challenging and beneficial in their work in dealing with complaints.

### **Good Complaint Handling (Level 1)**

A one-day course for staff who have direct contact with service users, who receive complaints as part of their day to day work and deal with the early stages of the complaints procedure. This course aims to help participants develop their awareness and understanding of complaint handling. It covers areas such as distinguishing complaints from other contacts such as service requests, helping to clarify complaints, managing expectations, settling complaints where appropriate, and improving services.

### **Effective Complaint Handling (Level 2)**

This is our main course and has been extremely well received. It is a one day course for managers, team leaders, departmental and corporate complaints officers. The course is designed to help those dealing with the higher levels of the complaints procedure to develop their skills in complaint investigation and resolution and to avoid the pitfalls that can result in dissatisfaction and referral to the Ombudsman.

The aims of this course are to help participants to: define complaints accurately, identify and use sources of information, make and communicate robust decisions and resolve complaints quickly and appropriately.

### **Effective Complaint Handling in Social Services (Level 2)**

This is a variation on the Effective Complaint Handling Course specifically designed to meet the needs of those dealing with the statutory social services complaints procedures.

*'Effective Complaint Handling' courses in other specific subject areas are being researched and developed. For further information contact us.*



## **Open Courses**

We plan to run open courses in November 2006 and February 2007 (subject to demand) for authorities who wish to train small numbers of staff and to give staff an opportunity to share ideas and experience. Alternatively, smaller authorities may wish to get together with neighbouring authorities to hold a regional LGO training event, and so share the costs.

## **Customised Training**

We can provide some training for authorities where they have identified particular problems or where they are in the process of reviewing or improving their complaints procedures.

## **Prices**

*(Our prices are currently under review and may increase slightly during 2006/7.)*

The charges we make for our standard courses cover only our costs in delivering training.

One-day course for a group of up to 15, with one presenter:	£750
One-day course for a group of up to 30, with two presenters:	£1270

[Prices exclude VAT. No extra charge made for trainer's travel and expenses. Prices assume you will supply the venue for the course. Full details of venue requirements and of our terms and conditions for supplying training provided on request.]

Customised courses will include a charge for course development as well as course delivery.

## **For further information or bookings please contact:**

**Theresa Kimble  
Communications Project Officer  
Local Government Ombudsman  
Beverley House  
17 Shipton Road  
York YO30 5FZ**

tel. 01904 380226 or e-mail [training@lgo.org.uk](mailto:training@lgo.org.uk)

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