

18 June 2003

Mrs J Miller
 Borough Solicitor and Secretary
 Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council
 DX 708630
 SEACOMBE

Borough Solicitor & Secretary
File Ref:
19 JUN 2003
Officer
JSM/CH

*I have passed a
 copy to Dave Davies*



The Commission for
 Local Administration in England

Patricia Thomas
 Local Government Ombudsman

Hilary Bainbridge
 Deputy Ombudsman

Our Ref: Annual Letter/PAT/jib

If telephoning please contact: Mr Cobley's personal assistant on 01904 380201
If e-mailing: st3york@lgo.org.uk

Dear Mrs Miller

Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Letter 2002/03

Earlier in the year I wrote to you about the introduction of an annual letter to be issued to you in 2004. However, you expressed an interest in receiving an annual letter for the year ended 31 March 2003 and I am pleased to be able to do so.

You may recall that my hope was that the annual letter would help councils learn from the outcome of complaints to me, underpin effective working relationships between councils and my office and generally provide complaint based information which councils would find useful in assessing and reviewing their performance. This is the first annual letter and, as you will see, I am seeking your comments to help improve the presentation and content of future letters.

Statistical Information

I attach as Appendix 1 statistical data relating to complaints received by my office during the last three years (including a service breakdown of these), including details of the outcome of decisions made during each year, and your Council's average response times to our enquiries.

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I have not at this stage sought to include comparative data drawn from other "similar" councils. I believe that generally councils may find such comparisons useful, and, if so, would be grateful to know which comparisons you consider would be most appropriate.

Turning to Appendix 1, I am pleased to note an overall drop of 24% in the numbers of complaints against your Council over the last three years. It is, for example, particularly gratifying at a time when several councils are having great difficulty in delivering their housing benefit service without delay to note that housing benefit complaints against your Council have fallen by 69% to only 7 during the last year. Similarly, it is clear that complaints about local taxation, planning services and social services have all fallen by about 50% across the last three years. However, education complaints have risen by some 38% during the last three years, which is not so encouraging. In each case of course the samples are very small. Thus, the most reliable statistic is the overall drop in complaints.

You will also see from the table about response times that responses from your Council have generally taken some 30% longer following our initial enquiries than three years previously: rising from 32 days to 42 days. As you will know, our expectation and hope is that responses from councils to such initial enquiries take no more than 15 working days (ie usually 21 days). Clearly any longer than this is unhelpful to our complainants and handicaps our investigators in their work planning and the effectiveness of their responses to complaints. I should therefore be most grateful if you could seek wherever possible to provide quicker responses than heretofore. Councils sometimes have difficulty in providing swift responses because of the volume of enquiries that are made, but I note that in your case there were slightly more enquiries made three years ago than during the last year.

At present we do not routinely receive copies of any periodic reports monitoring the effectiveness of your Council's internal complaints procedures and the lessons learned by your council from complaint handling. If you do prepare such reports, it would be helpful if we could receive copies for our general information.

Conclusion

This is the first annual letter I have written to your Council. I hope you have found it useful but I would very much value any comments you may have about the presentation and content of the letter. This is a learning experience for us as well as for councils. My aim is that future letters should be as responsive as possible to the needs of local government and that the letters contain information and assessments that are helpful to councils seeking to improve their services. I enclose a questionnaire for your use. But I am happy for you to send me your comments in any way that you may choose.

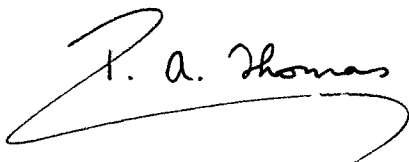
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Mrs J Miller

It would be helpful to receive your comments not later than Friday, 25 July 2003. This will then enable us to analyse the responses and make any adjustments.

If you have any queries about this letter please feel free to write to me, or you may prefer to talk to the Assistant Director, Chris Cobley, whose team of investigators deals with complaints against your authority.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "P. A. Thomas". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the left and then curves back under the name.

Mrs P A Thomas

Enc: Appendix 1
Notes to assist interpretation of the Commission's Local Authority Statistics
Questionnaire

ANNUAL LETTER INFORMATION SUMMARY – WIRRAL METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

COMPLAINTS RECEIVED

Category	2000/2001	2001/2002	2002/2003
Education	13	12	18
Highways	3	2	2
Housing (not incl HB)	16	13	19
Housing Benefit	22	14	7
Local Taxation	11	7	6
Other	6	6	14
Planning	32	19	16
Social Services	14	10	7
Total	117	83	89

DECISIONS

Category	2000/2001	2001/2002	2002/2003
Complaints not subject to formal report			
Local Settlement	11	16	11
No Maladministration	36	22	26
Ombudsman's Discretion	25	18	10
Outside Jurisdiction	4	7	12
Complaints subject to formal report			
Maladministration causing injustice	0	0	0
Maladministration, no injustice	0	0	0
No Maladministration	0	0	0
Local Settlement	0	0	0
Total (excl Prematures)	76	64	59
Premature Complaints	36	26	20
Total (incl Prematures)	112	90	79

RESPONSE TIMES TO FIRST ENQUIRIES

Year	2000/2001	2001/2002	2002/2003
No of replies to first enquiries in year	41	24	38
Average no of days to respond to first enquiries	32.2	35.6	42.1

NOTES to assist interpretation of the Commission's Local Authority Statistics

1. General

We have used the most up to date figures available to us at the time of issuing this annual letter. There may be some minor corrections to be made over the next few months before we can completely finalise the figures. However any adjustments should not be significant.

The periods used are all financial years, from 1 April to 31 March.

2. Decisions

This information records the number of decisions made by the Ombudsman, by outcome, within the periods mentioned. (This number will not be the same as the number of complaints received.) Below we provide further explanation of some of the outcome categories.

No maladministration: these are decisions by letter discontinuing our investigation because we have found no, or insufficient, evidence of maladministration.

Ombudsman's discretion: these are decisions by letter in which we have exercised the Ombudsman's general discretion not to pursue the complaint.

Outside jurisdiction: these are decisions that the complaint is outside the Ombudsman's jurisdiction.

3. Response Times

These figures record the time taken from the date we send our letter with first enquiries on a complaint to the date that a substantive response is received from the council. Councils' own figures may differ somewhat since they tend to be recorded from the date our letter is received until despatch of their response. The average number of days shown represents calendar days (not working days) since at present our computer database does not enable us to calculate working days.

QUESTIONNAIRE

Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Letter 2002/03

We welcome comments from all councils who have received an annual letter this year. This is the first year we have produced annual letters. We wish to learn how you think we might improve this initiative as we take it forward and write to all councils within our jurisdiction next year. So please may I persuade you to complete this short questionnaire, which includes some issues raised by pilot authorities during our consultation exercise last year. We will let you have a summary of the feedback we receive and tell you what changes we may make as a result.

Whilst you are encouraged to use this questionnaire when providing feedback, you may wish to send this in some other way. Whatever you decide, please send your comments to:

Mrs P A Thomas
Local Government Ombudsman
Beverley House
17 Shipton Road
York
YO30 5FZ
Email: a.mcsorley@lgo.org.uk

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1. Was the information in the letter adequately detailed and easy to understand?
 2. In future letters, would you value the inclusion of comparative statistics? If so, what comparators would you propose?
 3. Was the anonymity of complainants, in cases described in the letter, properly protected?

4. **Were our assessments of the Council's actions or performance considered to be fair and reasonable?**

5. **Did the letter serve a purpose in terms of providing useful management information to Members and Officers?**

6. **Was the letter made available to the public? If so, how and with what outcome?**

7. **What improvement issues did the letter highlight which the Council intends to pursue?**

8. **Could the timing of the letter be improved?**

9. **What is your view on the suggestion made by some councils that there should be prior consultation on a draft letter before its issue?**

10. Do you consider that the letter contributes to effective working relationships between ourselves and the Council?

General Comments:

Please add any additional comments here and use further sheets if necessary.