

### **Outcomes of investigations**

We decided 54 complaints in all. We issued no reports and there were five local settlements. Two of these related to planning matters, two to highways and one to Housing Benefit. The Council paid a total of £1,258.06 in compensation. There were no discernible patterns in these cases. But in one planning case the Council agreed to review the definition of "habitable room" in its design and layout guidelines for neighbouring development. I would welcome further details of its proposed revisions.

The incidence of administrative fault causing injustice is not reflected in the number of complaints made or determined but in the number of critical reports issued or of local settlements agreed. The figures show five cases where there was administrative fault, 9% of the total decisions, which compares favourably with the national average of 18%.

### **Liaison between the Ombudsman's office and the Council**

We have had no meetings over the last year although some of my officers have visited the Council in the course of investigating complaints. They have commented on the helpfulness of the Council's staff in assisting with the consideration of complaints.

The Council has reduced its average response time to our first enquiry letters to 28 calendar days. This amounts to a reduction of nearly 40% since last year. This is a significant achievement and helps my office in turn reduce the time taken to decide complaints.

### **General observations**

This is the first year that an annual letter has been sent to all councils and I would very much welcome any comments you may have to help improve the presentation and content of future letters.

There is also one specific matter on which I would welcome your views. As part of the development of our statutory remit to promote good administrative practice, over time we propose to increase significantly the amount of training we currently offer to councils in complaint handling. We have carried out exploratory research, including talking to a number of councils in depth and surveying the views of others. The responses we have received show that councils would value training from us, and we want to be responsive to such demands and ensure that we make a positive contribution to improvements in local government.

During this financial year we are, therefore, developing and trialling standard courses which can be delivered either to a single local authority or to staff from a group of authorities at a regional centre. We shall evaluate these courses, in conjunction with the councils concerned, together with tailored courses that we currently provide to a limited number of councils, and from there decide on future provision.