



AGENDA ITEM: 11

NORTH WALES FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY EXECUTIVE PANEL

24th January 2007

COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

**Report by Colin Hanks,
Assistant Chief Fire Officer (Service Support)**

Purpose of Report

- 1.** To inform the Executive Panel of a review undertaken of the Fire and Rescue Authority's complaints procedure.

Background

- 2.** The current complaints procedure was first adopted by the Authority in 1996 and was subject to a further review in August 2005. At a meeting of the Fire and Rescue Authority on the 23rd October 2006 the method for a complainant to have their complaint heard by the Fire and Rescue Authority under stage three of the process was ratified. During that meeting it was also agreed that a further review be undertaken of the current complaints procedure to ensure compliance with the latest guidance issued by the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales.



Information

3. The review considered the most recent advice given by the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales in the "Guidance to Local Authorities on Complaints Handling" published in September 2006. Consideration was also given to the complaints procedures of the six unitary authorities within North Wales, and the other two Welsh Fire and Rescue Authorities.

Ombudsman's Advice

4. The latest guidance issued by the Ombudsman lists the essential elements of a good complaints process, which are that it:
 - Is comprehensive, covering all of the services provided by or on behalf of the Service.
 - Is clearly defined, with procedures which are easy to understand and straightforward to use.
 - Is quick but sufficiently thorough.
 - Is fair and objective.
 - Is sensitive to the special needs and circumstances of the complainant.
 - Ensures effective communication with the customer.
 - Is decisive and capable of putting things right where necessary.
 - Is effectively managed and regularly analysed to spot patterns of complaints and lessons for service improvement.
5. There should be specifications in the contracts of contractors or commissioned agencies who work on behalf of the Authority referring to the handling of complaints. It should be possible for such complaints to be monitored by the authority via its own complaints procedure.



Ombudsman's Advice *(continued)*

6. Complaints that relate to actions of a partnership of which the Authority is a member can be confusing for the complainant in identifying who to contact and how. Partnership agreements and documents should specify clearly how complaints are to be handled.
7. The advice from the Ombudsman is that there should be no more than three stages of complaint handling within a complaints procedure:
 - Stage 1-Local Resolution
 - Stage 2-Formal Consideration
 - Stage 3- The Independent Panel
8. The Ombudsman also advises that where an organisation has a three stage process the complainant should be advised, following the completion of stage 2, of their right to take their complaint either to stage 3 (with the right to go to the Ombudsman thereafter) or of referring their complaint to the Ombudsman at this point.

Amended NWFRS Complaints Policy.

9. Following examination of NWFRS complaints policy by the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales, the following amendments are proposed.



Amended NWFRS Complaints Policy *(continued)*

10. Stage one (10 working days)

An informal local resolution by front line staff, which is considered to be an important and integral part of a complaints process.

Stage two (20 working days)

An investigation by an independent investigating officer. The Assistant Chief Fire Officer (Service Support) will provide support to the investigating officer on more difficult complaints.

Stage three (6 weeks)

Complaint considered by the Fire and Rescue Authority. This would involve the complaint being considered by an ad hoc committee of 3 members, appointed by the Authority's Executive Panel, who have not previously been involved in the matter that is the subject of the complaint.

Amendments to the existing complaints leaflet to explain what constitutes a complaint and procedure if still dissatisfied for contacting the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales.

Additional Information

- 11.** During the 2005 reporting year twenty five complaints were received of which one complaint continued to stage 2 of the current process. From the 1st April 2006 twenty three complaints have been received all of which have been resolved at stage one. Although the complaint procedure allows complainants to use several means to make their complaints the vast majority are received via the telephone.



Additional Information *(continued)*

- 12.** Customer feedback forms are sent out to complainants when the process has come to an end, unfortunately the questionnaires are rarely completed and the Service is considering an alternative method, such as telephone interview.

Recommendations

- 13.** That members:
 - 13.1** Note the contents of the report and in particular the proposed amendments following advice from the Ombudsman; and
 - 13.2** That any changes the Authority resolves to make to the current complaints procedure should come into force on the 1st April 2007.