

Local Government
OMBUDSMAN

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter**

Liverpool City Council
for the year ended
31 March 2008

The Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) provides a free, independent and impartial service. We consider complaints about the administrative actions of councils and some other authorities. We cannot question what a council has done simply because someone does not agree with it. If we find something has gone wrong, such as poor service, service failure, delay or bad advice, and that a person has suffered as a result, the Ombudsmen aim to get it put right by recommending a suitable remedy. The LGO also uses the findings from investigation work to help authorities provide better public services through initiatives such as special reports, training and annual letters.

Annual Letter 2007/08 - Introduction

This annual letter provides a summary of the complaints received about Liverpool City Council and comments on the authority's performance and complaint-handling arrangements.

I hope that the letter will assist you in improving services by providing a useful perspective on how some people who are dissatisfied experience or perceive your services.

Two attachments form an integral part of this letter: statistical data covering a three year period and a note to help the interpretation of the statistics.

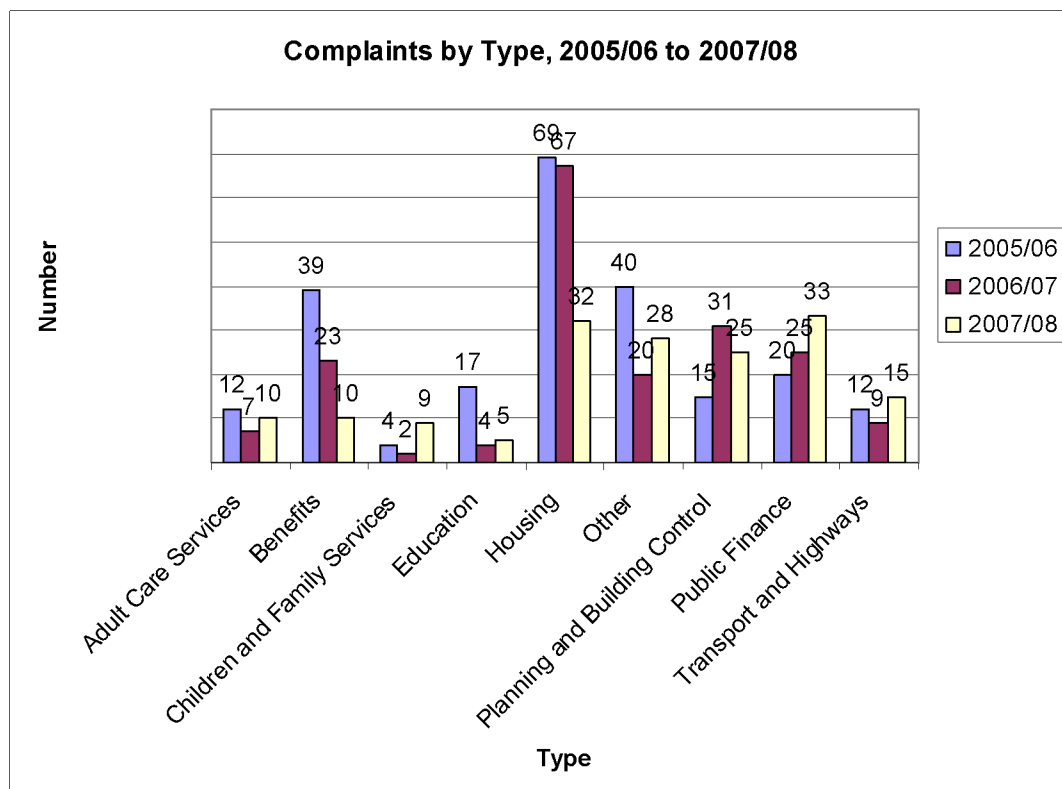
Complaints received

Volume

I received 167 complaints about your Council in 2007/08. As the attached statistical information shows, this is 21 fewer than in 2006/07 and 40 fewer than in 2005/06.

Character

As in previous years, the types of complaint are dispersed across a range of service areas. As you can see from this chart, the profile of complaint types is broadly similar across the last three years.



The type of complaint which has shown the greatest fall in numbers is housing complaints. I would expect housing related complaints to fall again this year now that the Council has completed its stock transfer.

The numbers of complaints I receive about the Council are only a very small sample of the issues and complaints with which the Council deals and it should consider complaints made to me in the context of its own more extensive data.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

Liaison with your council takes a number of forms. We have day-to-day dealings with your corporate liaison staff through whom we make our enquiries. We find officers helpful, professional and very approachable. We receive a first-rate service that maintains professional distance and integrity.

The liaison staff work hard to co-ordinate and chase responses from the various Council departments. The effectiveness of this co-ordination is demonstrated in your response times. As the attached statistical information shows, the average response time is just 18.9 days. It is rare that we wait longer than 30 days. The liaison staff are proactive in keeping us up to date and where responses are likely to be delayed, usually contact us to let us know why. I thank the Council for its continued cooperation in this as it helps my staff reduce the time to respond to complaints, ensuring a better service for our complainants.

We also had contact with a range of staff in relation to general complaint queries. In the main this is with the corporate liaison staff, but we also had a significant amount of contact with the complaints staff who deal with the statutory social services complaints procedures. We find officers to be open and to demonstrate a strong commitment to complaint-handling and customer service. It is clear that the Council has a pro-active approach to complaint handling.

Decisions on complaints

Reports and local settlements

We will often discontinue enquires into a complaint when a council takes or agrees to take action that we consider to be a satisfactory response – we call these local settlements. In 2007/08 the Local Government Ombudsmen determined 27% of complaints by local settlement (excluding ‘premature’ complaints - where councils have not had a proper chance to deal with them - and those outside our jurisdiction). If an investigation is completed I issue a public report.

I did not issue any reports about the Council in 2007/08.

I determined a total of 27 complaints as local settlements. As you can see from this table, these local settlements covered a range of Council services and departments.

Complaints about local taxation (ie council tax) accounted for eight out of the 27 local settlements. In total I received 33 complaints about council tax and the administration of council tax accounts (20% of the total compared to the national figure of 6%). This number is a minute proportion of the number of council tax accounts administered each year.

A number of complaints concerned action taken to recover arrears and old debts

The types of general issues that emerged from complaints resolved as local settlements were:

- Y Inadequate record keeping and recording procedures
- Y Delay in providing responses to enquiries and other correspondence
- Y Delay in taking action

- Y Failure to take action in accordance with its own procedures
- Y Delay in carrying out action already promised
- Y Poor explanations about actions, policies and published information

While the Council properly questions my findings and recommendations, it usually does so in a constructive way and I am impressed by the way in which officers, once problems were identified and accepted, demonstrated willingness to acknowledge and apologise for shortcomings.

Other findings

In total, I made 189 decisions on complaints about your Council. This number differs slightly from the number of complaints received as it includes complaints received in the previous year. As you can see from the statistical information, 71 of these were premature, 18 were outside my jurisdiction and of the 100 other decisions, 40 resulted in a finding of no maladministration.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

For a Council as large as yours, the negative feedback I see about your handling of complaints is minimal. There have been one or two where my investigators concluded that had your Council responded differently to the complaint, it would probably not have reached me, but these are rare.

I rarely receive complaints about the Council's handling of complaints. It is the lack of information for a Council as large as yours that is the most telling indicator.

Training in complaint handling

Part of our role is to provide advice and guidance about good administrative practice. We offer training courses for all levels of local authority staff in complaints handling and investigation. A detailed evaluation of the training provided to councils over the past three years shows very high levels of satisfaction.

The range of courses is expanding in response to demand. In addition to Good Complaint Handling (identifying and processing complaints) and Effective Complaint Handling (investigation and resolution), we now offer these courses specifically for social services staff and a course on reviewing complaints for social care review panel members. We will customise courses to meet your Council's specific requirements and provide courses for groups of staff from different smaller authorities.

Participants benefit from the complaint-handling knowledge and expertise of the experienced investigators who present the courses.

I enclose information on the full range of courses available together with contact details for enquiries and any further bookings.

LGO developments

We launched the LGO Advice Team in April, providing a first contact service for all enquirers and new complainants. Demand for the service has been high. Our team of advisers, trained to provide comprehensive information and advice, has dealt with many thousands of calls since the service started.

The team handles complaints submitted by telephone, email or text, as well as in writing. This new power to accept complaints other than in writing was one of the provisions of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act, which also came into force in April. Our experience of implementing other provisions in the Act, such as complaints about service failure and apparent maladministration, is being kept under review and will be subject to further discussion. Any feedback from your Council would be welcome.

Last year we published two special reports providing advice and guidance on 'applications for prior approval of telecommunications masts' and 'citizen redress in local partnerships'. Feedback on special reports is always welcome. I would particularly appreciate information on complaints protocols in the governance arrangements of partnerships with which your Council is involved.

Conclusions and general observations

I welcome this opportunity to comment on our experience of complaints about the Council over the past year. I hope that you find the information and assessment provided useful when seeking improvements to your Council's services.

Anne Seex
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June 2008

Enc: Statistical data
Note on interpretation of statistics
Leaflet on training courses (with posted copy only)

Complaints received by subject area	Adult care services	Benefits	Children and family services	Education	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	10	10	9	5	32	28	25	33	15	167
2006 / 2007	7	23	2	4	67	20	31	25	9	188
2005 / 2006	12	39	4	17	69	40	15	20	12	228

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
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	0	27	0	0	40	33	18	71	118	189
2006 / 2007	1	46	0	0	39	19	16	69	121	190
2005 / 2006	0	51	0	0	44	18	21	79	134	213

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

Response times	FIRST ENQUIRIES	
	No. of First Enquiries	Avg no. of days to respond
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	53	18.9
2006 / 2007	69	17.4
2005 / 2006	88	19.4

Average local authority response times 01/04/2007 to 31/03/2008

Types of authority	<= 28 days %	29 - 35 days %	> = 36 days %
District Councils	56.4	24.6	19.1
Unitary Authorities	41.3	50.0	8.7
Metropolitan Authorities	58.3	30.6	11.1
County Councils	47.1	38.2	14.7
London Boroughs	45.5	27.3	27.3
National Park Authorities	71.4	28.6	0.0