



The Commission for  
Local Administration in England

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

# **Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council**

**for the year ended  
31 March 2007**

**The Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) investigates complaints by members of the public who consider that they have been caused injustice through administrative fault by local authorities and certain other bodies. 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 2006/07 - Introduction

This annual letter provides a summary of the complaints we have received about your authority. Where possible, we comment on the authority's performance and complaint-handling arrangements to assist with your service improvement.

I hope that the letter will be a useful addition to other information your authority holds on how people 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.

As you are a local Social Services authority I want to take this opportunity to draw your attention to an issue of significant public interest. In the last two years I have issued reports following complaints from people living in Blackpool, Liverpool and Sheffield about failings in home care services provided under contract.

In each case a vulnerable person was placed at significant risk as a result of carers failing to visit, calling late and failing to provide the specified care. Tragically, in one case the actions of a carer resulted in a death. Complaints had been made to all three Councils but no effective action had been taken. Although the services were provided under contract, it seems clear that similar problems could occur even if the carers are directly employed. I urge you to ensure that senior staff responsible for care services to adults are aware of the issues raised by these reports (which can be found on our web-site) and consider whether action needs to be taken by your Council. The 2006 report of the Commission for Social Care Inspection 'Time to Care? An Overview of Home Care Services for Older People in England' provides very useful contextual information.

## Complaints received

In the twelve months ending 31 March 2007, I received 28 complaints about your Council. These break down by type of complaint as follows. The figures for 2005/06 are shown in brackets.

adult care services	benefits	children & family services	education	housing	other	planning & building control	public finance	transport & highways	total
4 (2)	3 (2)	2 (1)	1 (1)	3 (5)	7(5)	3 (11)	1 (0)	4 (1)	28 (28)

Overall the numbers are relatively low and I do not draw any conclusions from them. The drop in the number of complaints about planning matters means the proportion of complaints I received about your Council that were about planning has dropped from 39% to 11%, a figure well below the national average of just short of 23%.

## Decisions on complaints

### **Reports and local settlements**

A 'local settlement' is a complaint that is resolved by the Council taking, or agreeing to take, action which we consider is a satisfactory response to the complaint so that the investigation can be discontinued. In 2006/07 27.7% of complaints dealt with by the three Local Government Ombudsmen (excluding premature and those outside jurisdiction) were resolved by local settlement. When we complete an investigation we must issue a report.

### **Decisions**

In 2006/07 I took 27 decisions, a figure which differs from the number of complaints received because of work in hand at the start and finish of the year.

Of those 27 decisions: three were outside my jurisdiction, four I exercised discretion not to investigate, in 12, I found no evidence of maladministration and seven were 'premature' (in our view the Council had not been given adequate opportunity to investigate and resolve them for itself, so were returned to the Council to consider through its internal complaint procedure).

The remaining decision was a local settlement. I did not issue any reports against your council and overall did not find issues that gave significant concern or that were indicative of systemic problems in the way the Council administers its services.

### ***Other findings***

As you are aware, we ask for comprehensive responses to our enquiries within 28 days. I am pleased to say your Council responded in a little under 26 days on average.

This is a significant improvement on the 39 days it was taking the year before and I am grateful for that. The Council may wish to note that the longest average time taken to respond to our enquiries was in relation to planning complaints. These took an average of 39.5 days, the longest taking 44. If the response times for these complains was reduced to 28 days, the overall average would be below 28 at just under 23.

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

I am aware from discussions with my Assistant Ombudsman of the considerable work your Council has corporately put into improving the way it handles complaints, since this time last year. None of the complaints we have investigated have highlighted any problems with your Council's complaints procedures over the last twelve months, suggesting the changes you have put in place are effective.

Your complaint process is explained very well in the information you publish and accessible via your web-site which is straightforward to navigate. I am also pleased to see you make direct reference to the LGO.

## **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. The feedback from councils that have taken up the training is very positive.

The range of courses is expanding in response to demand. In addition to the generic 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 have also successfully piloted a course on reviewing complaints for social services review panel members. We can run open courses for groups of staff from different smaller authorities and also customise courses to meet your Council's specific requirements.

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 full range of courses available together with contact details for enquiries and any further bookings.

## **Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman**

I am pleased to say I have little to say about this. The generally good response times and clear responses we receive suggest to me the liaison arrangements in place work well.

## **LGO developments**

You may be interested in the development of our initiative to improve the first contact that people have with us. A new Access and Advice Service will provide a gateway to our services for all complainants and enquirers. It will encourage telephone contact but will also deal with email, text and letter correspondence. We will let you have further details about how it will operate and the expected timescales and we will discuss with you the implications for your Council.

I hope you have received our latest special report about telecommunication masts. It draws on our experience of dealing with complaints about planning applications for masts which can be highly controversial. We recommend simple measures that councils can adopt to minimise the chances of maladministration occurring.

In July we will be publishing a special report about the difficulties that can be encountered with complaints when local authorities deliver services or discharge their functions through partnerships. *Local partnerships and citizen redress* provides advice and guidance on how these problems can be overcome by good governance arrangements that include an effective complaints protocol.

## **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**  
**Local Government Ombudsman**  
**Beverley House**  
**17 Shipton Road**  
**York**  
**YO30 5FZ**

**June 2007**

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

<b>Complaints received by subject area</b>	<b>Adult care services</b>	<b>Benefits</b>	<b>Children and family services</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Housing</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Planning &amp; building control</b>	<b>Public finance</b>	<b>Transport and highways</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007</b>	4	3	2	1	3	7	3	1	4	<b>28</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	2	2	1	1	5	5	11	0	1	<b>28</b>
<b>2004 / 2005</b>	4	6	1	3	5	7	8	3	1	<b>38</b>

**Note:** these figures will include complaints that were made prematurely to the Ombudsman and which we referred back to the authority for consideration.

<b>Decisions</b>	<b>MI reps</b>	<b>LS</b>	<b>M reps</b>	<b>NM reps</b>	<b>No mal</b>	<b>Omb disc</b>	<b>Outside jurisdiction</b>	<b>Premature complaints</b>	<b>Total excl premature</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007</b>	0	1	0	0	12	4	3	7	20	<b>27</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	0	3	0	0	6	1	4	12	14	<b>26</b>
<b>2004 / 2005</b>	0	12	0	0	8	5	6	10	31	<b>41</b>

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

<b>Response times</b>	<b>FIRST ENQUIRIES</b>	
	<b>No. of First Enquiries</b>	<b>Avg no. of days to respond</b>
<b>01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007</b>	8	25.6
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	10	39.1
<b>2004 / 2005</b>	16	27.1

**Average local authority response times 01/04/2006 to 31/03/2007**

<b>Types of authority</b>	<b>&lt;= 28 days %</b>	<b>29 - 35 days %</b>	<b>&gt;= 36 days %</b>
District Councils	48.9	23.4	27.7
Unitary Authorities	30.4	37.0	32.6
Metropolitan Authorities	38.9	41.7	19.4
County Councils	47.1	32.3	20.6
London Boroughs	39.4	33.3	27.3
National Park Authorities	66.7	33.3	0.0