

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

Blackpool Borough 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 Blackpool Borough 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

As the attached statistical information shows, I received 49 complaints about the Council in 2007/08. This is a slight increase on the previous year, but the numbers are relatively small and so I read nothing into that. The complaints were dispersed across all service areas, and while I do not draw any conclusions from either the volume or type of complaint, I urge the Council to analyse the information in the context of its own complaint-handling data.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

My staff continue to find your liaison officer to be approachable, professional and helpful. However, we have experienced difficulties over 2007/08 in getting timely, meaningful information from the Council. The average time taken to respond to first enquiries has risen from 25.3 days in 2006/07 to 44.3 days in 2007/08. One enquiry took 126 days and another 95 days. Without these two complaints the average would have been 32 days.

Also of concern was the quality of some of the information provided by some departments; the time taken to provide responses to follow-up enquiries; and to accept suggestions for action. In one case my staff proposed a course of action in February 2007 that was not finally achieved until July and only then after a lot of chasing. This does not provide a good service to complainants. This comment does not apply to all your departments as some were prompt and helpful.

I appreciate that there were issues with sickness during the year, but we do need a timely meaningful liaison service that has the co-operation and backing of the wider Council.

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 discontinued enquiries into eight complaints as local settlements. These complaints covered a range of service areas which had in common:

- ÿ Poor record keeping
- ÿ Inadequate communication, particularly in keeping service users informed and in responding to their enquiries
- ÿ Delay in responding to complainants or in taking action.

Other findings

In total, I made 48 decisions on complaints about your Council. This number differs slightly from the number of complaints received as some complaints received are still under investigation. As you can see from the statistical information, 16 of these were premature, 7 were outside my jurisdiction and 8 were local settlements. Of the 17 other decisions, the majority (15) resulted in a finding of no maladministration.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

While it is difficult to draw meaningful conclusions from such a small number of complaints as I have seen, the indications are that the Council could improve the way it deals with complaints. A common feature of the complaints we considered seems to be service users contacting the Council to complain and not receiving responses. This could be indicative of a problem in capturing complaints and something the Council might explore through its own complaints-handling data. It might also be indicative of a need to deal with complaints proactively and for every member of staff to see them as an essential part of customer service.

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	1	11	2	1	4	10	7	3	10	49
2006 / 2007	0	5	1	3	12	10	5	1	4	41
2005 / 2006	3	9	3	1	13	15	15	2	4	65

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	8	0	0	15	2	7	16	32	48
2006 / 2007	0	6	0	0	19	2	2	19	29	48
2005 / 2006	1	7	0	0	21	6	6	25	41	66

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	13	44.3
2006 / 2007	15	25.3
2005 / 2006	23	35.9

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