

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

**Knowsley Metropolitan  
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 Knowsley Metropolitan 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**

I received 27 complaints about the Council in 2007/08. This is the same as in the previous year and, as the attached statistical information shows, covered a range of service areas. The overall number is relatively low and does not enable meaningful conclusions to be drawn about either volume or type of complaint.

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

I am aware that your Council is proactive in the way in manages information requests and I thank you for Council's continued commitment to good service. However, as the statistical information shows, the average response time has risen from 25.6 days in 2006/07 to 35.9 days in 2007/08. We record the time taken from the date we ask for information, while the Council records it from the date the request is received. This difference cannot explain the increased time taken to respond and I hope that the Council will be able to restore its previous performance.

## **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. Five complaints were determined as local settlements, three of these relating to Social Services complaints (Two adult services and one children's services).

### ***Other findings***

In total, I made 30 decisions on complaints about the 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, ten of these were premature, four outside my jurisdiction and of the 16 substantive decisions, five resulted in a finding of no maladministration.

Overall, I have not drawn any conclusions from this information as the number of complaints was relatively small.

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

In one of the complaints our finding was that the Council had failed to notify the complainant of the next stage of the Statutory Social Services complaint procedure. While we were critical of that, the outcome was an example of the Council's positive approach. Officers revised procedures about how your Council notifies people about complaints handling. This reaction by your Council was typical of a more generally demonstrated commitment your Council has to resolving complaints and improving services.

## **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  
Local Government Ombudsman  
Beverley House  
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YORK  
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**June 2008**

Enc: 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>01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008</b>	4	3	0	4	2	4	2	2	6	<b>27</b>
<b>2006 / 2007</b>	4	3	2	1	2	7	3	1	4	<b>27</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	2	2	1	1	5	5	11	0	1	<b>28</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>01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008</b>	0	5	0	0	4	7	4	10	20	<b>30</b>
<b>2006 / 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>

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>01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008</b>	8	35.9
<b>2006 / 2007</b>	8	25.6
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	10	39.1

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

<b>Types of authority</b>	<b>&lt;= 28 days %</b>	<b>29 - 35 days %</b>	<b>&gt; = 36 days %</b>
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