

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

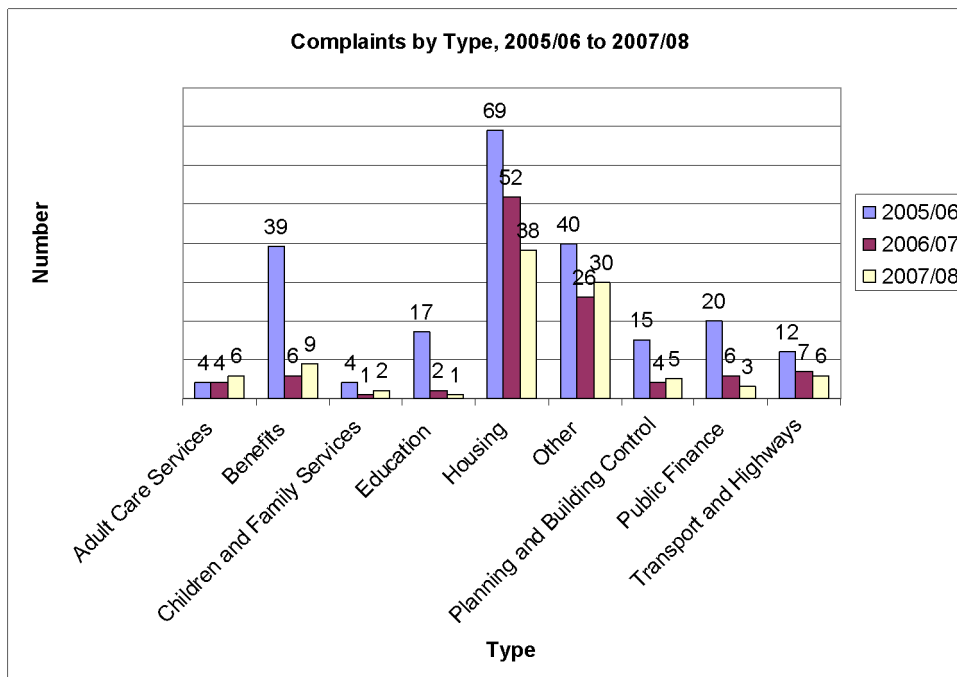
## Complaints received

### Volume

I received 100 complaints about the council in 2007/08. As the attached statistical information shows, this is consistent with the numbers received in the previous two years.

### Character

As in previous years the type of complaints I received were distributed across a range of service areas.



As this chart shows, the profile of complaints has remained very similar over the last three years, with the highest concentration of complaints being about housing matters.

- Y The fall in complaint numbers appears to be a downward trend
- Y Many of the complaints made in 2007/08 were in relation to historical issues. It is worth noting that of the 38 received, 23 were in the period April 2007 to September 2007. Your Council might find it helpful to compare it to data your Council (and Nottingham City Homes) collected to see if any trends can be identified
- Y 21 of the 38 complaints were in relation to housing repairs of which over half were received between April 2007 and September 2007.
- Y Complaints can rise when complaints procedures are revised and complaint-handling becomes more effective.

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

Liaison with the Council is effectively liaison with two discrete organisations: the Council corporately and with Nottingham City Homes for most housing related complaints. In both, the relationship with the liaison officers is positive. My investigators find them to be professional and approachable with commitment to complaint-handling and service improvements. The service they and their colleagues personally provide is appreciated by my office.

As the statistical information shows, the average response time has fallen from 34.6 days in 2006/07 to 26.8 in 2007/08. These times are good and well within the requested 28 days.

The average times mask a wide variation in times and do not give any indication of the quality of responses. Complaints about housing issues are a good example. Fourteen 'initial' enquiries were made about allocations, repairs and managing tenancies. The average response time was 36.4 days, the quickest being one day and the slowest 71 days. Of the 14 responses, half took 37 days or longer. Of greater concern was the quality of responses. In one case, my investigator was moved to comment *'two responses which came back from Nottingham City Homes were actually wrong – done ... without checking the address properly'*. This was not the case in all complaints. Nor do I believe it to be a reflection of the quality of the liaison service. There is evidence to suggest that the issue may be more about the information provided by the various departments to the liaison officer.

These observations are not confined to the Nottingham City Homes. The liaison officer who co-ordinates corporate responses is helpful but responses from the various departments can be defensive rather than constructive.

## **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 issued one report about your council during the year. This complaint concerned the way in which the Council allocated a house that was so filthy it could not be lived in.

I determined 23 complaints as local settlements, 14 of these related to housing repair issues.

## ***Other findings***

In total, I made 125 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, 51 of these were premature, 15 were outside my jurisdiction and of the 59 other decisions, 21 resulted in a finding of no maladministration.

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

During the year, I have seen examples of both poor and excellent complaint handling.

I am aware of the Council's commitment to effective complaint-handling and was very pleased to note that Nottingham City Homes staff received training following the introduction of its new complaint procedures and as part of its ongoing quality improvement programme.

## **Training in complaint handling**

As you are aware, 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. 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  
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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	6	9	2	1	38	30	5	3	6	100
2006 / 2007	4	6	1	2	52	26	4	6	7	108
2005 / 2006	4	12	1	6	39	22	14	7	2	107

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	1	23	0	0	21	14	15	51	74	125
2006 / 2007	1	12	0	0	20	12	10	41	55	96
2005 / 2006	0	13	0	0	23	19	9	31	64	95

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	36	26.8
2006 / 2007	36	34.6
2005 / 2006	40	28.4

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