

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

I received 26 complaints about your Council in 2007/08. This is the same number as in the previous year. As the attached statistical data show, these complaints were spread across all service areas. The numbers of complaints are too low to allow any meaningful conclusions to be drawn.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

My office continues to enjoy a good relationship with your Council's liaison officer who provides timely responses to our initial enquiries. As the statistical information shows, the average response time is 27.3 days - within the requested 28 days. I thank your Council for its continued cooperation in this as it helps my staff reduce the time it takes to respond to complaints, ensuring a better service for our complainants. It is worth noting that the average would have been 22.6 days but for two complaints that it took your Council 42 and 50 days on which to respond.

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 your Council. Just one complaint was determined as a local settlement. This complaint raised an interesting issue. It was about housing benefit and required information from housing files which had recently been transferred to a housing association along with the housing stock. My investigator had difficulty in getting any responses from your Council initially and it later transpired the files had been lost. This raised concerns about the specific complaint and more generally the transfer arrangements.

Other findings

In total, I made 27 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, six of these were premature, three were outside my jurisdiction and of the 18 other decisions, the majority (12) resulted in a finding of no maladministration.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

My investigations did not identify any widespread issues or problems with your Council's handling of complaints – nor could they, being such a small cross section. However, I encourage your Council to reflect on the complaints that were submitted to me in the context of your own complaint-handling data. In particular I encourage you to consider whether complaints could have been avoided had they been dealt with more effectively through your own processes. As good example of where this might

have been the case, is the local settlement where my investigation showed that your Council failed to respond to the complaint at all.

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. 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	Benefits	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	6	3	10	5	1	1	26
2006 / 2007	4	4	9	6	2	1	26
2005 / 2006	2	19	3	5	3	5	37

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	1	0	0	5	9	6	8	21	29
2006 / 2007	0	0	0	0	6	4	1	10	11	21
2005 / 2006	0	5	0	0	5	6	3	18	19	37

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	10	27.3
2006 / 2007	4	28.5
2005 / 2006	13	22.1

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