

22 June 2012

Local Government
OMBUDSMAN

Mr T Riordan
Chief Executive
Leeds City Council
Ground Floor West Gate
6 Grace Street
LEEDS LS1 2RP

Dear Mr Riordan

Annual Review Letter

I am writing with our annual summary of statistics on the complaints made to me about your authority for the year ended 31 March 2012. I hope the information set out in the enclosed tables will be useful to you.

The statistics include the number of enquiries and complaints received by our Advice Team, the number forwarded by the Advice Team to my office, and decisions made on complaints about your authority. The decision descriptions have been changed to more closely follow the wording in our legislation and to give greater precision. Our guidance on statistics provides further explanation ([see our website](#)).

The statistics also show the time taken by your authority to respond to written enquiries.

I want to draw the Council's attention to one particular case. The Council offered a house to a woman with a disabled husband and three children. She accepted the offer and gave notice to her private landlord expecting to move into the new property by Christmas 2010.

There were various delays caused by events outside the Council's control. It arranged to do work that was needed at the end of March 2011. It finally removed the steel shutters and gave the woman the keys on 14 April. She moved in on 21 April.

Even before she moved in the Council wrote saying she was in arrears with rent for the property. It said she owed rent from 21 March to 13 April (she paid the rent from 14 April) and continued to demand payment for the next six months, ignoring letters from her and her Outreach Support worker. This was particularly worrying for the woman as she had an introductory tenancy and feared that she would lose her home because of the claimed arrears.

On 4 November the Council issued a notice seeking possession but cancelled the court hearing when my investigation began. It then agreed to amend the rent account to remove the claimed arrears and told the woman on 17 January.

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Officers accepted that the Council had been wrong to claim the rent was in arrears and had missed many chances to put things right. They agreed to pay the woman £500 in recognition of her time, trouble and distress in pursuing the complaint and another about repairs.

I know the Council has a good process for learning from complaints to avoid problems recurring. I hope it has been applied to this complaint.

Changes to our role

I am also pleased to have this opportunity to update you on changes to our role. Since April 2010 we have been exercising jurisdiction over the internal management of schools on a pilot basis in 14 local authority areas. This was repealed in the Education Act 2011 and the power restored to the Secretary of State for Education. During the short period of the pilot we believe we have had a positive impact on the way in which schools handle complaints. This was endorsed by independent research commissioned by the Department for Education which is available [on their website](#).

Our jurisdiction will end in July 2012 and all complaints about internal school matters will be completed by 31 January 2013.

From April 2013, as a result of the Localism Act 2011, local authority tenants will take complaints about their landlord to the Independent Housing Ombudsman (IHO). We are working with the IHO to ensure a smooth transition that will include information for local authority officers and members.

Supporting good local public administration

We launched a new series of Focus reports during 2011/12 to develop our role in supporting good local public administration and service improvement. They draw on the learning arising from our casework in specific service areas. Subjects have included school admissions, children out of school, homelessness and use of bankruptcy powers. The reports describe good practice and highlight what can go wrong and the injustice caused. They also make recommendations on priority areas for improvement.

We were pleased that a survey of local government revenue officers provided positive feedback on the bankruptcy focus report. Some 85% said they found it useful.

In July 2011, we also published a report with the Centre for Public Scrutiny about how complaints can feed into local authority scrutiny and business planning arrangements.

We support local complaint resolution as the most speedy route to remedy. Our training programme on effective complaint handling is an important part of our work in this area. In 2011/12 we delivered 76 courses to councils, reaching 1,230 individual learners.

We have developed our course evaluation to measure the impact of our training more effectively. It has shown that 87% of learners gained new skills and knowledge to help them improve complaint-handling practice, 83% made changes to complaint-handling practice after training, and 73% said the improvements they made resulted in greater efficiency.

Further details of publications and training opportunities are on [our website](#).

Publishing decisions

Following consultation with councils, we are planning to launch an open publication scheme during the next year where we will be publishing on our website the final decision statements on all complaints. Making more information publicly available will increase our openness and transparency, and enhance our accountability.

Our aim is to provide a comprehensive picture of complaint decisions and reasons for councils and the public. This will help inform citizens about local services and create a new source of information on maladministration, service failure and injustice.

We will publish a copy of this annual review with those of all other English local authorities on our website on 12 July 2012. This will be the same day as publication of our Annual Report 2011/12 where you will find further information about our work.

We always welcome feedback from councils and would be pleased to receive your views. If it would be helpful, I should be pleased to arrange a meeting for myself or a senior manager to discuss our work in more detail.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Anne Seex". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'A'.

Anne Seex
Local Government Ombudsman