

Request for rates bill dropped after Ombudsman intervention

A man contacted the Ombudsman's ASSIST team to say that he was being unfairly asked to pay an overdue rates bill. He said that the rates demand had left him stressed and worried.

Ombudsman staff looked at the details of the complaint, and contacted the Land and Property Service (LPS) who had sent out the bill to ask for more information.

The man said he phoned the LPS to make sure they were aware of an agreement between him and his landlord that the landlord had taken responsibility to pay the rates. This was based on the value of the property. The LPS billed the landlord.

Five years later the man unexpectedly received a bill for over £6,500, telling him that he was now liable. He said that if they had told him earlier he would have known he could not afford to rent the property.

The Ombudsman investigator looked at the information held by the LPS. It showed that the man's wife had telephoned them to discuss the rates issue, but was told she could not do so because of the organisation's data protection procedures.

At this stage the rateable value of the property had changed, making the tenant now liable. However, the LPS incorrectly continued to bill the landlord. When the landlord was declared insolvent a further opportunity to tell the tenant that he was responsible for the rates was missed.

The LPS admitted to the man that there had been mistakes in the way his account had been handled, and that he should have been told he was going to receive a bill backdated three years. It applied a reduction to his account of around £1,300. The man remained upset that he was still being penalised when he believed he had done nothing wrong.

The Ombudsman investigator explained to the LPS that a more detailed investigation may be required but that she was keen to explore whether there could be an early settlement of the complaint. She asked if the LPS were prepared to look again at the case and proposed another reduction beyond the 25% already applied.

In response the LPS replied that it had reconsidered the case, and because of the attempts made by the man to find out if he was liable for the rates it had decided to reduce his liability to zero, thereby cancelling the bill.

The investigator agreed that this Settlement was a satisfactory outcome to the complaint.