

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

**City of Bradford Metropolitan
District Council**

**for the year ended
31 March 2009**

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 reviews.

Contents of Annual Review

Section 1: Complaints about City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council 2008/09	3
Introduction.....	3
Enquiries and complaints received.....	3
Complaint outcomes.....	4
Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman.....	6
Training in complaint handling.....	6
Conclusions.....	6
Section 2: LGO developments	7
Introduction.....	7
Council First.....	7
Statement of reasons: consultation.....	7
Making Experiences Count (MEC).....	7
Training in complaint handling.....	7
Adult Social Care Self-funding.....	8
Internal schools management.....	8
Further developments.....	8
Appendix 1: Notes to assist interpretation of the statistics 2008/09	9
Appendix 2: Local authority report 2008/09	

Section 1: Complaints about City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council 2008/09

Introduction

This annual review provides a summary of the complaints we have dealt with about Bradford Metropolitan District Council.

I hope that the review will be a useful addition to other information your authority holds on how people experience or perceive your services.

Two appendices form an integral part of this review: statistical data for 2008/09 and a note to help the interpretation of the statistics.

Changes to our way of working and statistics

A change in the way we operate means that the statistics about complaints received in 2008/09 are not directly comparable with those from 2007/08. Since 1 April 2008 the new LGO Advice Team has been the single point of contact for all enquiries and new complaints. The number of telephone calls to our service has increased significantly since then to more than 3,000 a month. Our advisers now provide comprehensive information and advice to people who telephone, write or e-mail. It enables citizens to make informed decisions about whether to put their complaint to us.

This means that direct comparisons with some previous year-statistics are difficult and could be misleading. So this annual review focuses mainly on the 2008/09 statistics without drawing those comparisons.

Enquiries and complaints received

The number of enquiries and complaints about the Council received this year totalled 103. Our Advice Team gave advice in 16 cases and a further 25 complaints were judged to be premature. In these cases we either asked the Council directly to address the complaint or we advised the complainant to make a formal complaint to the Council. My office received 62 new complaints during the year. Of these, seven were complaints initially determined by our Advice Team as premature but re-submitted to me by complainants dissatisfied with the way in which the Council had dealt with their complaint. The remaining 55 complaints were new complaints.

The Council will wish to know that the subject areas of the complaints received by me during the year break down as follows.

Adult Social Care	2
Benefits	3
Children and Family Services	3
Education	23
Planning and Building Control	16
Public Finance	3
Transport and Highways	4
Other	8

Complaint outcomes

I determined 72 complaints against the Council during the year a figure which differs from the number of complaints received because of work in hand at the beginning of the year. Of these 72 complaints, 14 were outside of my jurisdiction while in 13 cases I exercised my general discretion not to pursue the matter. I found no evidence of maladministration by the Council in 35 cases. I comment on the remaining cases below.

Local settlements and reports

We will often discontinue enquiries 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 2008/09, 27.4% of all complaints the Ombudsmen decided and which were within our jurisdiction were local settlements. Of the complaints I decided against your authority during the year the Council agreed to settle nine and I give the Council full credit for its willingness generally to settle complaints when asked to do so. This amounts to 12.5% of the number of decisions made against the Council during the year but I draw no adverse inference from a figure less than half of the national figure.

When we complete an investigation, we generally issue a report. This year I issued one report against the Council about a planning matter and I refer to this in more detail below.

Complaints by service area

Education

I decided 24 complaints about education matters. Of these complaints, 20 concerned education admission appeals. The Council, accepting that the Appeal Panel had not properly considered the appeal, offered to settle one of these complaints by offering the complainant a place at the school of their choice and I was grateful to the Council for the speed of its response in this case. I found no evidence of maladministration by the Council in 18 of the remaining education admission appeal complaints. I closed one complaint on the basis that it was outside of my jurisdiction while the final case was closed exercising the general discretion available to me not to pursue a complaint.

The remaining education complaints concerned school transport matters, special educational needs, a complaint from someone disappointed not to have been appointed as a school governor and a complaint about the way in which the Council had dealt with the exclusion of a pupil from a school. I found no evidence of maladministration by the Council in any of these cases.

Planning and Building Control

I determined 16 complaints in this category during the year. One complaint concerned building control [closed without investigation at my discretion] while four concerned enforcement matters. Two of these complaints were outside of my jurisdiction, one was closed at my discretion while I found no evidence of maladministration by the Council in the final complaint.

The remaining 11 complaints all concerned the way in which the Council had considered planning applications. I found two of these complaints to be outside of my jurisdiction and exercised the discretion available to me not to pursue two further complaints. I found no evidence of maladministration by the Council in four cases. The Council agreed to settle two complaints in this category.

In both of these cases the Council agreed to pay compensation respectively of £250.00 and £200.00 accepting in one case that it gave misleading advice and in both cases to have failed adequately to have considered the impact of development upon the residential amenity of the complainants. In neither case did I feel that the decision to approve the planning applications in question was wrong or would have been different but for the maladministration of the Council.

I issued one report during the year and this concerned the way in which the Council allowed a low level psychiatric facility to be developed in the neighbourhood of the complainant. I found that the Council had not properly addressed the concerns expressed by residents about safety and security when considering the application. I asked the Council to pay compensation to the complainant of £500.00 but more importantly for the Council to explore the possibilities of assisting those who operate the psychiatric facility to deal with the issue of absconding which has caused upset locally. The response of the Council to my report was commendably positive. The compensation was paid to the complainant very quickly and was accompanied by a sincere apology. The Council agreed to my recommendation that it meet with the management of the psychiatric unit and, at the time of writing this letter, agreed to let me know of the outcome of that meeting when it eventually took place.

Transport and Highways

This category made up the third largest group of complaints about which I made decisions last year. I made six decisions in total of which three were determined on the basis of no maladministration by the Council, one was outside of my jurisdiction and one was closed exercising my general discretion not to pursue a complaint. The Council agreed to settle the remaining complaint which concerned a parking ticket following the issue of which the Council failed to respond to a letter from the complainant disputing the ticket. The result of this was that the complainant lost the chance to appeal but the Council, to its credit, apologised for its error and refunded the parking fine.

Social Services – Adult Social Care and Children and Family Services

I determined five complaints in these two categories, two in adult social care and three in children and family services. I found no evidence of maladministration in three cases while two were outside of my jurisdiction.

Benefits

I considered one complaint about a council tax benefit matter during the year and this was a complaint the Council agreed to settle. This complaint concerned delay by the Council in dealing with correspondence following the death of the complainant's father. The response of the Council to my enquiries was very detailed and very positive and the Council offered to pay £50.00 in compensation which I regarded as a good settlement reflecting well upon the Council.

The other three complaints in this category all concerned housing benefit. I was critical of the Council in none of these cases.

Housing

I determined two complaints relating to housing matters during the year. I decided not to pursue one of these cases but the Council agreed to settle the other complaint which concerned a private housing grant matter. This complaint was a complex matter made more complicated because I initially decided not to pursue the matter but was later persuaded by the complainant that I should.

I apologised to the Council for this at the time recognising that I was asking the Council to undertake a great deal more work in response to a complaint it thought it had dealt with. However I felt that the complainant had not been treated fairly by the Council because he had not been given clear advice about his application for a grant to bring his home up to a decent standard. I was pleased when the Council finally accepted this and agreed to provide a remedy for the complainant.

Others

The remaining complaints fall into the miscellaneous category as no other single subject area raised significant numbers of complaints. There were three further local settlements. One concerned a damaged headstone in one of the Council's cemeteries [the Council agreed to repair the damage and had made the offer even before the complaint reached me], one concerned a complaint about land [again the Council had responded positively to the complainant before he approached me] and the final case concerned the failure of the Council to provide a copy of a letter and to arrange a meeting concerning a child protection enquiry. In this case the Council very speedily provided a copy of the letter as required and arranged the meeting sought.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

I remain very happy with the working relationship between my investigative and administrative staff and those officers of the Council who routinely handle enquiries from my office. I ask for responses from all authorities to reach my office within 28 calendar days and I am very pleased to note that the Council took on average just 19.8 days to reply to my enquiries in the last year. The quality of the responses sent to me by the Council remains consistently high but to respond so quickly reflects very well on the Council and I am grateful to the Council for its co-operation in this regard.

Training in complaint handling

The Council has, in the past, asked for and received training from us but I would take this opportunity to remind the Council that 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. All courses are presented by experienced investigators. They give participants the opportunity to practise the skills needed to deal with complaints positively and efficiently. We can also provide customised courses to help authorities to deal with particular issues and occasional open courses for individuals from different authorities.

In previous years we have provided training in Good/Effective Complaint Handling to staff from your authority. We have extended the range of courses we provide and I have enclosed some information on the full range of courses available together with contact details for enquiries and bookings.

Conclusions

I welcome this opportunity to give you my reflections about the complaints my office has dealt with over the past year. I hope that you find the information and assessment provided useful when seeking improvements to your Council's services.

**Mrs A Seex
Local Government Ombudsman
Beverley House
17 Shipton Road
YORK
YO30 5FZ**

June 2009

Section 2: LGO developments

Introduction

This annual review also provides an opportunity to bring councils up to date on developments – current and proposed – in the LGO and to seek feedback. It includes our proposal to introduce a ‘statement of reasons’ for Ombudsmen decisions.

Council First

From 1 April 2009, the LGO has considered complaints only where the council’s own complaints procedure has been completed. Local authorities have been informed of these new arrangements, including some notable exceptions. We will carefully monitor the impact of this change during the course of the year.

Statement of reasons: consultation

The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 made provision for the LGO to publish statements of reasons relating to the individual decisions of an Ombudsman following the investigation of a complaint. The Ombudsmen are now consulting local government on their proposal to use statements of reasons. The proposal is that these will comprise a short summary (about one page of A4) of the complaint, the investigation, the findings and the recommended remedy. The statement, naming the council but not the complainant, would usually be published on our website.

We plan to consult local authorities on the detail of these statements with a view to implementing them from October 2009.

Making Experiences Count (MEC)

The new formal, one stage complaint handling arrangement for adult social care was also introduced from 1 April 2009. The LGO is looking to ensure that this formal stage is observed by complainants before the Ombudsmen will consider any such complaint, although some may be treated as exceptions under the Council First approach. The LGO also recognises that during the transition from the existing scheme to the new scheme there is going to be a mixed approach to considering complaints as some may have originated before 1 April 2009. The LGO will endeavour to provide support, as necessary, through dedicated events for complaints-handling staff in adult social care departments.

Training in complaint handling

Effective Complaint Handling in Adult Social Care is the latest addition to our range of training courses for local authority staff. This adds to the generic Good Complaint Handling (identifying and processing complaints) and Effective Complaint Handling (investigation and resolution), and courses for social care staff at both of these levels. Demand for our training in complaint handling remains high. A total of 129 courses were delivered in 2008/09. Feedback from participants shows that they find it stimulating, challenging and beneficial in their work in dealing with complaints.

Adult Social Care Self-funding

The Health Bill 2009 proposes for the LGO to extend its jurisdiction to cover an independent complaints-handling role in respect of self-funded adult social care. The new service will commence in 2010.

Internal schools management

The Apprenticeship, Skills, Children and Learning Bill (ASCL) 2009 proposes making the LGO the host for a new independent complaints-handling function for schools. In essence, we would consider the complaint after the governing body of the school had considered it. Subject to legislation, the new service would be introduced, in pilot form, probably in September 2010.

Further developments

I hope this information gives you an insight into the major changes happening within the LGO, many of which will have a direct impact on your local authority. We will keep you up to date through LGO Link as each development progresses but if there is anything you wish to discuss in the meantime please let me know.

**Mrs A Seex
Local Government Ombudsman
Beverley House
17 Shipton Road
YORK
YO30 5FZ**

June 2009

Appendix 1: Notes to assist interpretation of the statistics 2008/09

Introduction

This year, the annual review only shows 2008/09 figures for enquiries and complaints received, and for decisions taken. This is because the change in the way we operate (explained in the introduction to the review) means that these statistics are not directly comparable with statistics from previous years.

Table 1. LGO Advice Team: Enquiries and complaints received

This information shows the number of enquiries and complaints received by the LGO, broken down by service area and in total. It also shows how these were dealt with, as follows.

Formal/informal prematures: The LGO does not normally consider a complaint unless a council has first had an opportunity to deal with that complaint itself. So if someone complains to the LGO without having taken the matter up with a council, the LGO will usually refer it back to the council as a 'premature complaint' to see if the council can itself resolve the matter. These are 'formal premature complaints'. We now also include 'informal' premature complaints here, where advice is given to the complainant making an enquiry that their complaint is premature. The total of premature complaints shown in this line *does not include* the number of resubmitted premature complaints (see below).

Advice given: These are enquiries where the LGO Advice Team has given advice on why the Ombudsman would not be able to consider the complaint, other than the complaint being premature. For example, the complaint may clearly be outside the Ombudsman's jurisdiction. It also includes cases where the complainant has not given enough information for clear advice to be given, but they have, in any case, decided not to pursue the complaint.

Forwarded to the investigative team (resubmitted prematures): These are cases where there was either a formal premature decision, or the complainant was given informal advice that their case was premature, and the complainant has resubmitted their complaint to the Ombudsman after it has been put to the council. *These figures need to be added to the numbers for formal/informal premature complaints (see above) to get the full total number of premature complaints. They also needed to be added to the 'forwarded to the investigative team (new)' to get the total number of forwarded complaints.*

Forwarded to the investigative team (new): These are the complaints that have been forwarded from the LGO Advice Team to the Investigative Team for further consideration. The figures may include some complaints that the Investigative Team has received but where we have not yet contacted the council.

Table 2. Investigative Team: Decisions

This information records the number of decisions made by the LGO Investigative Team, broken down by outcome, within the period given. **This number will not be the same as the number of complaints forwarded from the LGO Advice Team** because some complaints decided in 2008/09 will already have been in hand at the beginning of the year, and some forwarded to the Investigative Team during 2008/09 will still be in hand at the end of the year. Below we set out a key explaining the outcome categories.

MI reps: where the LGO has concluded an investigation and issued a formal report finding maladministration causing injustice.

LS (local settlements): decisions by letter discontinuing our investigation because action has been agreed by the authority and accepted by the Ombudsman as a satisfactory outcome for the complainant.

M reps: where the LGO has concluded an investigation and issued a formal report finding maladministration but causing no injustice to the complainant.

NM reps: where the LGO has concluded an investigation and issued a formal report finding no maladministration by the council.

No mal: decisions by letter discontinuing an investigation because we have found no, or insufficient, evidence of maladministration.

Omb disc: decisions by letter discontinuing an investigation in which we have exercised the Ombudsman's general discretion not to pursue the complaint. This can be for a variety of reasons, but the most common is that we have found no or insufficient injustice to warrant pursuing the matter further.

Outside jurisdiction: these are cases which were outside the Ombudsman's jurisdiction.

Table 3. Response times

These figures record the average time the council takes to respond to our first enquiries on a complaint. We measure this in calendar days from the date we send our letter/fax/email to the date that we receive a substantive response from the council. The council's figures may differ somewhat, since they are likely to be recorded from the date the council receives our letter until the despatch of its response.-

Table 4. Average local authority response times 2008/09

This table gives comparative figures for average response times by authorities in England, by type of authority, within three time bands.

LGO Advice Team

Enquiries and complaints received	Adult care services	Children and family services	Education	Housing	Benefits	Public Finance inc. Local Taxation	Planning and building control	Transport and highways	Other	Total
Formal/informal premature complaints	1	2	0	1	1	2	9	2	7	25
Advice given	1	1	4	0	2	2	1	2	3	16
Forwarded to investigative team (resubmitted prematures)	0	1	0	0	2	0	2	0	2	7
Forwarded to investigative team (new)	2	2	23	0	1	3	14	4	6	55
Total	4	6	27	1	6	7	26	8	18	103

Investigative Team

Decisions	MI reps	LS	M reps	NM reps	No mal	Omb disc	Outside jurisdiction	Total
01/04/2008 / 31/03/2009	1	9	0	0	35	13	14	72

Average local authority response times 01/04/2008 to 31/03/2009

Response times	FIRST ENQUIRIES	
	No. of First Enquiries	Avg no. of days to respond
1/04/2008 / 31/03/2009	36	19.8
2007 / 2008	41	30.9
2006 / 2007	35	32.9

Types of authority	<= 28 days %	29 - 35 days %	> = 36 days %
District councils	60	20	20
Unitary authorities	56	35	9
Metropolitan authorities	67	19	14
County councils	62	32	6
London boroughs	58	27	15
National park authorities	100	0	0