

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

**London Borough of Richmond
upon Thames
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.

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Section 1: Complaints about the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames 2008/09

Introduction

This annual review provides a summary of the complaints we have dealt with about the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames. We have included comments on the authority's performance and complaint-handling arrangements, where possible, so they can assist with your service improvement.

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 calls to our service has increased significantly since then. It handles more than 3,000 calls a month, together with written and emailed complaints. Our advisers now provide comprehensive information and advice to callers at the outset with a full explanation of the process and possible outcomes. It enables callers to make a more informed decision about whether putting their complaint to us is an appropriate course of action. Some decide to pursue their complaint direct with the council first.

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

Enquiries and complaints received

In 2008/09 our Advice Team received a total of 62 enquiries and complaints about your authority. The two largest groups concerned planning and building control and transport and highways. The Advice Team forwarded 35 complaints for investigation. Planning and building control and transport and highways again featured in this number, along with complaints about education. Five of the complaints forwarded for investigation had previously been referred to your authority to consider through its own complaints procedure and had then been resubmitted to my office.

Complaint outcomes

This year I decided 43 complaints. I agreed four local settlements with your Council and asked you to pay compensation totalling £1,600. There were 17 complaints where I found no or insufficient evidence of fault by the Council to justify further investigation.

There were nine complaints which fell outside my jurisdiction. I exercised my discretion to close a further 13. Five of the complaints I decided had been resubmitted to my office after they had been considered by your authority. I did not uphold any of these.

A 'local settlement' is a complaint where, during the course of our investigation, the Council has agreed to take some action which we consider is a satisfactory response to the complaint. In 2008/09, 27.4% of all complaints the Ombudsmen decided, which were within our jurisdiction were local settlements. Of the complaints I decided against your authority, which were within my jurisdiction, four (12.5%) were local settlements.

Complaints by service area

Planning and building control

I decided 15 complaints about planning and building control. The majority concerned the Council's handling of planning applications; there were also three cases about enforcement action and one about trees. Two complaints were outside my jurisdiction and I either found no maladministration or exercised my discretion not to pursue a further 12. I settled just one complaint, as a result of which the Council paid £100 to acknowledge delay in recognising that a development was not being built in accordance with the planning permission. I sought only modest compensation as the matter was subsequently regularised by the grant of permission for the development as built.

Transport and highways

I decided seven complaints about transport and highways. Three were about receipt of penalty charge notices, one about a crossover and three about the introduction and operation of Controlled Parking Zones (CPZs). I did not uphold any of the substantive complaints. In one, about a CPZ, I found that the Council had delayed in dealing with the matter at the final stage of its own complaints procedure, for which it agreed to apologise.

Education

I decided seven complaints about education, four of which concerned admissions. One was outside my jurisdiction and I either found no maladministration or exercised my discretion not to pursue any of the other six. One complaint concerned the exclusion of a child from school. While I did not pursue the complaint I did draw to the Council's attention some concerns I had about the way an appeal against the exclusion had been dealt with.

Other

I settled one complaint about the way the Council dealt with an application for assistance from a homeless and pregnant woman. I found that the Council had delayed in accepting the application and in offering interim accommodation. As a result the complainant and in due course her new born child lived in unsatisfactory accommodation for six months longer than she should. The Council agreed to pay compensation of £1,000.

I settled one complaint about the way the Council twice debited a housing benefit overpayment of just over £1,000 from the rent account of a former tenant. The complainant was initially not aware of the resulting increased arrears because the Council does not routinely send rent statements to former tenants. The Council then delayed in identifying the reason for the increased arrears. The Council reinstated the debited sum and paid £250 compensation to reflect the complainant's time and trouble in resolving matters. At my request the Council reviewed its practice on sending rent statements to former tenants but concluded that its current software is not capable of doing this on a regular basis.

I settled one complaint about the Council's delay in responding to enquiries about discounts and exemptions for Council tax. The Council did not recognise that the Local Government Finance Act 1992 gives it discretion to reduce Council tax in individual cases. The Council agreed to pay £250 to reflect the complainant's time and trouble and has drawn up a written policy and guidance for staff in exercising its discretion under the Act.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

The average time taken by the Council to reply to our written enquiries was 22.8 days. This is comfortably within my target time of 28 days and is an improvement on the previous year's average.

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. 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 groups of individuals from different authorities.

In previous years we have provided training for your authority in effective complaint handling. I have enclosed some information about the full range of courses currently 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.

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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.

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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	0	1	0	7	0	1	5	2	1	17
Advice given	1	0	1	0	2	1	1	4	0	10
Forwarded to investigative team (resubmitted prematures)	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	3	0	5
Forwarded to investigative team (new)	0	1	6	4	0	3	9	4	3	30
Total	1	2	7	11	2	5	17	13	4	62

Investigative Team

Decisions	MI reps	LS	M reps	NM reps	No mal	Omb disc	Outside jurisdiction	Total
01/04/2008 / 31/03/2009	0	4	0	0	17	13	9	43

Average local authority resp 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	16	22.8
2007 / 2008	28	28.0
2006 / 2007	11	28.5

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 Parks Authorities	100	0	0