

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

Gravesham Borough Council

**for the year ended
31 March 2010**

Local Government Ombudsmen (LGOs) provide 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, we aim to get it put right by recommending a suitable remedy. We also use 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 Gravesham Borough Council 2009/10.....	3
Introduction.....	3
Enquiries and complaints received.....	3
Complaint outcomes.....	3
Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman.....	4
Training in complaint handling.....	4
Conclusions.....	5
Section 2: LGO developments.....	6
Introduction.....	6
New schools complaints service launched.....	6
Adult social care: new powers from October.....	6
Council first.....	6
Training in complaint handling.....	7
Statements of reasons.....	7
Delivering public value.....	7
Appendix 1: Notes to assist interpretation of the statistics 2009/10.....	8
Appendix 2: Local authority report 2009/10	

Section 1: Complaints about Gravesham Borough Council 2009/10

Introduction

This annual review provides a summary of the complaints we have dealt with about Gravesham Borough Council. 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 2009/10 and a note to help the interpretation of the statistics.

Enquiries and complaints received

I received a total of 27 enquiries and complaints about your Council in 2009/10. Our Advice Team forwarded 13 of these to the investigative team, including one which had previously been referred to the Council to consider and which had then been resubmitted to my office. Once again housing generated the most contacts; eight in total of which five were forwarded to the investigative team. However, there were also five contacts relating to public finance, including local taxation, and three about benefits.

Complaint outcomes

This year I made decisions on 13 complaints against your Council. There were seven complaints in which I found no or insufficient evidence of fault by the Council to warrant further investigation. In the remaining six cases I agreed local settlements.

Local settlements

A 'local settlement' is a complaint where, during the course of our investigation, a council takes or agrees to take some action that we consider to be a satisfactory response to the complaint. In 2009/10, 26.9% of all complaints the Ombudsmen decided and which were within our jurisdiction were local settlements. Of the complaints closed as local settlements, two were about planning applications; two about benefits; one about local taxation; and one about housing. This means that I asked your Council to settle 46% of complaints decided which were within our jurisdiction. This was considerably more than the national average.

One of the benefits complaints concerned a delay of 10 months in considering the complainant's request for a review of the Council's decision on a housing benefit claim, and a further three months sending the subsequent appeal to the Tribunal Service. I asked the Council to make a payment of £250 in recognition of these delays.

A second benefits complaint related to council tax benefit. The Council delayed from August 2007 to March 2009 in considering the complainant's request to appeal against its refusal to backdate council tax benefit. However, I concluded that the injustice to the complainant was limited in this case to uncertainty about the true level of their council tax arrears, since the Council did not change its determination when it did review the matter. I asked the Council to pay £170 in

recognition of this extensive delay. But, I considered it reasonable for the Council to offset this sum against the outstanding council tax arrears.

The local taxation case I dealt with also related to delay. In this case the Council took almost two years to resolve outstanding council tax issues relating to a property the complainant used to own. During this time, it instigated legal proceedings against him. When the Council eventually agreed it had been at fault and carried out a review of its operating procedures, officers still refused at first to recognise the extent of the unnecessary time, trouble and inconvenience the complainant had been put to. I asked the Council to pay £200 in recognition of unreasonable delay and the wrongful issue of a summons.

I was pleased to note, in the cases I have commented on above, the prompt and constructive responses my staff received to their enquiries from the Head of Revenues and Benefits against whose service area these complaints were made.

I also settled a complaint about housing allocations which I considered raised significant issues. In this case I found that the Council's allocations policy did not reflect the national code of guidance and was causing the Council to fetter its discretion as it precluded housing applicants with a past history of anti-social behaviour from being considered for re-housing. My investigator found no written evidence of how the complainant's application for re-housing was considered, and no indication that officers considered the complainant's good behaviour in their present tenancy and during the period since the Council had gained possession of their previous home, which had been a joint tenancy with a former partner.

Officers did not review the complainant's individual contribution to the general anti-social behaviour that had taken place, or consider if this would have still happened if they had been the sole tenant. Nor did officers consider any up to date medical assessment of the complainant in the light of their disabilities and consequent vulnerability. I asked the Council to pay the complainant £500; to invite them to make a fresh housing application, to be properly assessed taking account of all the relevant circumstances; and to review its allocations policy to ensure it is lawful and does not cause the Council to fetter its discretion. Again I was pleased to note the prompt and helpful response I received from officers to my proposals, all of which the Council has now complied with.

The total amount of financial compensation I asked the Council to pay during 2009/10 amounted to £1,520.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

The average time taken by the Council to reply to our written enquiries about complaints was 28.7 days. This is a significant increase on last year's average response time of 23.7 days and brings it just outside the 28 day target we set for responding to our first written enquiries.

Training in complaint handling

I would like to 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.

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 authority's services.

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June 2010

Section 2: LGO developments

Introduction

This annual review also provides an opportunity to bring councils up to date on developments in the LGO and to seek feedback.

New schools complaints service launched

In April 2010 we launched the first pilot phase of a complaints service extending our jurisdiction to consider parent and pupil complaints about state schools in four local authority areas. This power was introduced by the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.

The first phase involves schools in **Barking and Dagenham, Cambridgeshire, Medway and Sefton**. The Secretary of State no longer considers complaints about schools in these areas. In September the schools in a further 10 local authority areas are set to join the pilot phase.

We are working closely with colleagues in the pilot areas and their schools, including providing training and information sessions, to shape the design and delivery of the new service. It is intended that by September 2011 our jurisdiction will cover all state schools in England.

A new team in each office now deals with all complaints about children's services and education on behalf of the Ombudsman. Arrangements for cooperation with Ofsted on related work areas have been agreed.

For further information see the new schools pages on our website at www.lgo.org.uk/schools/

Adult social care: new powers from October

The Health Act 2009 extended the Ombudsmen's powers to investigate complaints about privately arranged and funded adult social care. These powers come into effect from 1 October 2010 (or when the Care Quality Commission has re-registered all adult care providers undertaking regulated activity). Provision of care that is arranged by an individual and funded from direct payments comes within this new jurisdiction.

Each Ombudsman has set up a team to deal with all adult social care complaints on their behalf. We expect that many complaints from people who have arranged and funded their care will involve the actions of both the local authority and the care provider. We are developing information-sharing agreements with the Care Quality Commission and with councils in their roles as adult safeguarding leads and service commissioners.

Council first

We introduced our Council first procedure in April last year. With some exceptions, we require complainants to go through all stages of a council's own complaints procedure before we will consider the complaint. It aims to build on the improved handling of complaints by councils.

We are going to research the views of people whose complaints have been referred to councils as premature. We are also still keen to hear from councils about how the procedure is working, particularly on the exception categories. Details of the categories of complaint that are normally treated as exceptions are on our website at www.lgo.org.uk/guide-for-advisers/council-response

Training in complaint handling

Demand for our training in complaint handling has remained high, with 118 courses delivered over the year to 53 different authorities. Our core Effective Complaint Handling course is still the most popular – we ran some of these as open courses for groups of staff from different authorities. These are designed to assist those authorities that wish to train small numbers of staff and give them an opportunity to share ideas and experience with other authorities.

The new Effective Complaint Handling in Adult Social Care course, driven by the introduction of the new statutory complaints arrangements in health and adult social care in April 2009, was also popular. It accounted for just over a third of bookings.

Over the next year we intend to carry out a thorough review of local authority training needs to ensure that the programme continues to deliver learning outcomes that improve complaint handling by councils.

Statements of reasons

Last year we consulted councils on our broad proposals for introducing statements of reasons on the individual decisions of an Ombudsman following the investigation of a complaint. We received very supportive and constructive feedback on the proposals, which aim to provide greater transparency and increase understanding of our work. Since then we have been carrying out more detailed work, including our new powers. We intend to introduce the new arrangements in the near future.

Delivering public value

We 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 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.

Mindful of the current economic climate, financial stringencies and our public accountability, we are determined to continue to increase the efficiency, cost-effectiveness and public value of our work.

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June 2010

Appendix 1: Notes to assist interpretation of the statistics 2009/10

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.

Premature complaints: 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 either refer it back to the council as a 'premature complaint' to see if the council can itself resolve the matter, or give advice to the enquirer that their complaint is premature.

Advice given: These are enquiries where the LGO Advice Team has given advice on why the LGO would not be able to consider the complaint, other than the complaint is premature. For example, the complaint may clearly be outside the LGO's jurisdiction.

Forwarded to the investigative team (resubmitted premature and new): These are new cases forwarded to the Investigative Team for further consideration and cases where the complainant has resubmitted their complaint to the LGO after it has been put to 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 2009/10 will already have been in hand at the beginning of the year, and some forwarded to the Investigative Team during 2009/10 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 LGO 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 LGO'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 LGO'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 2009/10

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	Housing	Benefits	Public Finance inc. Local Taxation	Planning and building control	Transport and highways	Other	Total
Formal/informal premature complaints	2	1	3	0	1	4	11
Advice given	1	0	1	0	0	1	3
Forwarded to investigative team (resubmitted prematures)	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Forwarded to investigative team (new)	5	1	1	2	0	3	12
Total	8	3	5	2	1	8	27

Investigative Team

Decisions	MI reps	LS	M reps	NM reps	No mal	Omb disc	Outside jurisdiction	Total
2009 / 2010	0	6	0	0	7	0	0	13

Response times	FIRST ENQUIRIES	
	No. of First Enquiries	Avg no. of days to respond
1/04/2009 / 31/03/2010	9	28.7
2008 / 2009	10	23.7
2007 / 2008	6	28.8

Average local authority resp times 01/04/2009 to 31/03/2010

Types of authority	<= 28 days %	29 - 35 days %	> = 36 days %
District Councils	61	22	17
Unitary Authorities	68	26	6
Metropolitan Authorities	70	22	8
County Councils	58	32	10
London Boroughs	52	36	12
National Parks Authorities	60	20	20