

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

**Royal Borough of Kingston
upon Thames
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.

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Section 1: Complaints about Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames 2009/10

Introduction

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

Enquiries and complaints received

In 2009/10 we received 50 enquiries and contacts relating to the council. A total of 12 of these were about housing, six about transport and highways, five about public finance, five about education, five about adult care services, two about benefits, two about planning and building control, one about children and family services and 12 others, including areas such as anti-social behaviour and environmental health.

A total of 26 were passed to the investigative team (23 new complaints and three resubmitted premature complaints). We treated 15 complaints as premature and either referred them to the council or advised the complainant to make a complaint direct. In a further nine cases we gave the complainant advice.

This compares with 55 complaints and enquiries in 2008/09, 25 of which were forwarded to the investigative team. We expect to see slight fluctuations of this kind over time.

Complaint outcomes

We decided 28 complaints against the council during the year. In eight cases we found no evidence of maladministration, and four complaints were outside my jurisdiction. In a further nine cases we exercised discretion not to investigate further. Typically these are cases where even though there may have been some fault by the council there is no significant injustice to the complainant.

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 we decided against your authority seven were local settlements, representing 25% of complaints decided. We recommended that the council should pay a total of £2,500 in compensation in 2009/10. In this letter I shall deal with some of the more noteworthy examples.

Adult care services

We dealt with a number of cases about adult care services. In one of those cases the council had already conceded fault in how it had handled a service user's case. In that case the concerns the service user had raised about their independent living arrangements had not been followed up, travel arrangements had been incorrectly cancelled and the council had failed to provide the service user and their family with adequate information. The council had already apologised to the service user and reviewed its case recording and care planning processes. We were pleased that in this case the council agreed to increase the amount of compensation it had offered the service user from £300 to £500 and to compensate the service user's parents, by paying them £250 compensation in recognition of their distress and the time and trouble they had to go to in order to pursue the complaint.

Enforcement

In one case the council discharged a landscaping condition relating to a development on land adjoining the complainant's without noticing that no landscaping was proposed for the complainant's boundary where it had been proposed for the boundaries with other neighbouring properties. The council also failed to take action in response to the complainant's letter about lighting on the site. As remedy for the complaint the council agreed to apologise to the complainant, fund landscaping on the boundary and pay £250 compensation.

Housing

We dealt with a number of complaints about housing allocations. In one case the council failed to keep notes of a surveyor's report on the standard of a council property before it was let to the complainant, who later challenged whether the property met the minimum lettable standard. The council also withdrew an agreement to strip the walls in the property to allow the complainant to redecorate on occupation. To remedy that complaint the council agreed to pay the complainant £500 compensation for raised expectations and distress and ensure that surveyors keep inspection records, stating the reasons why properties meet the required standards prior to being let.

In another complaint about housing allocations the complainant was incorrectly assessed as being in band B to be re-housed, when band C should have been allocated. In that case the complainant's expectations were raised and they suffered distress when a house was offered and then withdrawn. We were particularly concerned in that case as the complainant was living in overcrowded accommodation and the difference in banding meant that they would have been likely to be actively looking in the private sector much sooner had the council allocated the correct banding. In that case the council agreed to amend its allocations policy and revise its forms to provide greater clarity on how banding should be allocated. It also agreed to pay £250 compensation to the complainant for raised expectations and distress.

Planning

In a complaint about planning there was delay in placing amended plans for a planning application on the council's website. The report for the planning committee was also misleading, as one section implied that the development would not be visible at ground floor level when that was not correct. In addition, there was delay in responding to the complainant. The injustice to the complainant was mitigated by the fact that the council had already agreed to provide screening on the complainant's boundary. Nevertheless, the council agreed to pay the complainant £500 compensation for his sense of outrage and amend its procedures for placing amended plans on the council's website.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

We made formal enquiries on 13 complaints this year. In the annual review for 2009, my predecessor raised concerns that the council's response time was worse than that recorded in 2007/08. I am pleased to see that the council's response times have improved significantly this year, although at an average of 46.8 days it is still significantly above the 28 day target I set for councils. I hope the council continues to improve in the coming year with the intention of meeting the target of 28 days in 2010/11.

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 | 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 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 5 | 15 |
| Advice given | 1 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 9 |
| Forwarded to investigative team (resubmitted prematures) | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 |
| Forwarded to investigative team (new) | 4 | 0 | 2 | 6 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 5 | 3 | 23 |
| Total | 5 | 1 | 5 | 12 | 2 | 5 | 2 | 6 | 12 | 50 |

Investigative Team

| Decisions | MI reps | LS | M reps | NM reps | No mal | Omb disc | Outside jurisdiction | Total |
|------------------|----------------|-----------|---------------|----------------|---------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|--------------|
| 2009 / 2010 | 0 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 8 | 9 | 4 | 28 |

| Response times | FIRST ENQUIRIES | |
|------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|
| | No. of First Enquiries | Avg no. of days to respond |
| 1/04/2009 / 31/03/2010 | 13 | 46.8 |
| 2008 / 2009 | 17 | 78.8 |
| 2007 / 2008 | 14 | 46.8 |

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 |