

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Review
Plymouth City 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 Plymouth City 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.....	4
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 Plymouth City Council 2009/10

Introduction

This annual review provides a summary of the complaints we have dealt with about Plymouth City 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

In 2009/10 we team received 87 enquiries and complaints relating to your council, compared with 111 the previous year. Of the 87, 11 were about transport and highways, ten were about housing, eight were about planning and building control, eight were about children and family services, seven were about benefits, three were about public finance, two were about adult care services, and two were about education. The remaining 36 complaints were about other matters with a high proportion relating to waste management.

We treated 23 of the complaints and enquiries we received as premature and either referred them to the council or advised the complainant to contact the council direct. In 15 further cases we gave the complainant advice. The remaining 49 complaints (nine resubmitted premature complaints and 40 new ones) were passed to the investigative team. .

Complaint outcomes

We decided 48 complaints against the council during the year. In 25 cases we found no evidence of maladministration and seven complaints were outside jurisdiction. In a further five cases, the Ombudsman's discretion was exercised not to investigate. 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, eleven resulted in local settlements. The settlements involved various practical measures and payments to complainants totalling £1,375.

Waste management

Seven of the complaints settled locally were about waste management issues. Several complainants complained to us independently about missed collections of domestic and recyclable waste and about failures by the council to respond effectively to their complaints about these matters. The council paid these complainants a total of £900 and undertook to monitor and improve its waste collection service.

Housing

Responding to a complaint about landlord behaviour, the council accepted that it had caused the complainant unnecessary distress and uncertainty in the course of telephone conversations concerning a former tenant and it remedied this complaint by making a payment of £200.

In a complaint about housing allocations, the council accepted that it had made an error in offering a property which was not of an appropriate standard for letting, and before the Ombudsman became involved it sought to remedy the complaint by making several direct offers of alternative accommodation. The council also sent the complainant to view an unsuitable property and they were put to some time and trouble as a result. The council paid the complainant £100 in recognition of this.

Housing benefit

One complaint about housing benefit resulted in a local settlement. The council accepted that it had broken its promise to send housing benefit payments direct to the landlord: it had issued a payment to the tenant in error. Although it had already paid the complainant £50, it agreed to make a further payment of £100 because of the time and trouble the complainant had been put to as a result of its error, and to apologise.

Environmental health

A local settlement was also provided in respect of a complaint about incorrect information on its website about the availability of public toilets and about a failure to reply to the complainant about that matter. In this case the council issued an apology and paid the complainant £75 in recognition of the trouble caused to them as a result of the error in the published information.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

We made enquiries on 28 complaints during 2009/10, fewer than in 2008/09 (33 enquiries). We ask councils to respond to our initial enquiries within 28 days. Your council's average response time was 25.1 days, a significant improvement on the previous year when the average response time was 32.6 days. I am grateful to the council for its efforts to improve the response times to our enquiries.

Training in complaint handling

I am pleased that during 2009/10 some staff from your authority attended our training courses in Effective Complaint Handling in Social Care and in Effective Complaint Handling in Adult Social Care. I trust that they found the courses useful. 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.

**Dr Jane Martin
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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	4	0	4	1	0	1	4	9	23
Advice given	0	1	1	2	1	0	0	3	7	15
Forwarded to investigative team (resubmitted prematures)	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	4	9
Forwarded to investigative team (new)	1	2	1	3	4	3	7	3	16	40
Total	2	8	2	10	7	3	8	11	36	87

Investigative Team

Decisions	MI reps	LS	M reps	NM reps	No mal	Omb disc	Outside jurisdiction	Total
2009 / 2010	0	11	0	0	25	5	7	48

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

Response times	FIRST ENQUIRIES	
	No. of First Enquiries	Avg no. of days to respond
1/04/2009 / 31/03/2010	28	25.1
2008 / 2009	33	32.6
2007 / 2008	29	32.8

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