

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Review
St Albans City and District
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.

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Section 1: Complaints about St Albans City and District Council 2009/10

Introduction

This annual review provides a summary of the complaints we have dealt with about St Albans City and District 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 there were 20 enquiries and complaints about your Council, a significant drop from 38 in 2008/09. Seven were premature (because the Council had not yet had an opportunity to deal with the matter itself) and two enquirers were given advice. The majority of complaints related to planning and building control (eight) or housing matters (seven).

Of the 11 complaints forwarded to the investigative team, six were about planning and building control. Three of these concerned planning applications, one was about planning advice and one was about planning enforcement. The other was a building control matter.

The other main subject of complaints was housing. Two were about repairs, one concerned homelessness, and the other related to housing allocations.

The final complaint was about an environmental health matter.

Complaint outcomes

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 14 complaints I decided against your authority, three resulted in local settlements. These related to two planning matters and one housing allocations complaint. The Council agreed to pay compensation of £740.

In the first planning case the complainant had a meeting with a Council officer at which, on the balance of probability, I concluded they were given inaccurate advice about rights to extend, without planning permission, a property they were intending to buy. When the position was subsequently corrected the complainant pulled out of the purchase. But they had by then incurred some costs. In recognition of this and the unnecessary time and trouble the complainant had been put to the Council agreed to pay £665. I welcomed the positive approach the Council took to resolving this matter

In the other planning case the Council did not notify the complainant of a planning application submitted by their neighbour. So they lost the opportunity to comment on it. The decision to

approve the application appeared to be in accordance with the Council's policy, but the Council agreed to pay the complainant £75 in recognition of the unnecessary time and trouble they had been put to in pursuing a complaint. I considered the Council had undertaken a good investigation of this matter, and I welcomed its proposed settlement.

The housing allocations case involved the impending closure of the complainant's supported housing unit. They were concerned that adequate steps had not been taken to find alternative accommodation. I did not feel there was evidence of significant fault by the Council here but, following my intervention, the Council agreed to carry out additional works at the new property the complainant had by then been offered. This was a reasonable way of resolving the matter.

Other decisions

I found no fault by the Council in six other cases. Of these, four were about planning and building control issues.

I concluded that two complaints were outside my jurisdiction; in a homelessness case the issues raised dated back to 2001, and I saw no reason to exercise my discretion to investigate a matter so long outside the 12 month period which the law normally provides. The other case was about what the complainant saw as the Council's poor refuse collection service: they wanted a refund of council tax to fund a private service. The issues raised here, however, were ones that affected all or most of the people in the Council's area and I cannot investigate such matters.

I exercised my discretion not to pursue three complaints. In one case, about alleged encroachment onto Council land, I concluded there had been fault by the Council but I found the costs the complainant said they had incurred as a result predated this fault.

In a planning advice case I found that although the complainant may have been given inaccurate advice over the phone, the Council had made clear they should seek written confirmation. The complainant started the works before receiving this further advice (which differed from what they were previously told), and I concluded these works had been at their own risk and the costs incurred were not the Council's responsibility. As part of this investigation I did however identify some changes that could be made to improve the Council's Building Notice form and was pleased to learn these have now been made.

I also decided not to pursue a homelessness complaint. This was in part because the complainant had 'rights of appeal' rights against the Council's decision on their application. And also, the Council said it would continue to provide accommodation until the outcome was known.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

We ask councils to respond to our enquiries within 28 days. The Council's average response time this year was 25.2 days. This is within my target and represents a slight improvement on the previous year. I welcome this. I am also pleased to note the positive comments that have been made by my investigators about the Council's proactive attitude to resolving complaints.

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	Planning and building control	Transport and highways	Other	Total
Formal/informal premature complaints	2	2	1	2	7
Advice given	1	0	0	1	2
Forwarded to investigative team (resubmitted prematures)	1	2	0	0	3
Forwarded to investigative team (new)	3	4	0	1	8
Total	7	8	1	4	20

Investigative Team

Decisions	MI reps	LS	M reps	NM reps	No mal	Omb disc	Outside jurisdiction	Total
2009 / 2010	0	3	0	0	6	3	2	14

Response times	FIRST ENQUIRIES	
	No. of First Enquiries	Avg no. of days to respond
1/04/2009 / 31/03/2010	5	25.2
2008 / 2009	7	26.0
2007 / 2008	16	33.0

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