

24 June 2011

Mr Malcolm Morley
Chief Executive
Harlow District Council
Civic Centre
Harlow
Essex CM20 1WG

Dear Mr Morley

Annual Review Letter

I am writing with our annual summary of statistics on the complaints made to me about your authority for the year ending 31 March 2011. I hope the information set out in the enclosed tables will be useful to you.

The statistics include the number of enquiries and complaints received by our Advice Team, the number that the Advice Team forwarded to my office and decisions made on complaints about your council. Not all complaints are decided in the same year that they are received. This means that the number of complaints received and the number decided will be different.

The statistics also show the time taken by your authority to respond to written enquiries and the average response times by type of authority. The Council's response times are poor.

Enquiries and complaints received

We received 42 enquiries and complaints about your Council in 2010/11. As in previous years, the majority of enquiries and complaints concerned housing.

Complaint outcomes

We decided 21 complaints during the year, including one public report. The Council delayed repairs to an unstable bedroom ceiling following a leak. The bedroom could not be used for 18 months and this caused considerable inconvenience, frustration and distress to the complainant's family. The Council accepted that it had been at fault and was positive in responding to the complaint, in implementing procedural improvements, revising insurance procedures with its contractor and paying the complainant £4,500 compensation.

Other complaints involving disrepair were resolved without the need for a report. In one, the Council accepted that it had failed to keep the complainant informed about progress in getting his windows repaired. So it paid modest compensation and confirmed when the work would be done. Another complaint was resolved by the Council replacing a single glazed window with a double glazed unit. And in a more serious case, the Council took a year longer than it should have done to attend to damp and mould in a family home. The Council agreed to pay compensation of £1,250.

I also found that the Council delayed by almost a year in dealing with a complaint about a neighbour's antisocial behaviour. The case also involved failures to keep the complainant informed of developments, inadequate record keeping and poor liaison with other agencies. The Council

apologised, paid £750 compensation, made procedural changes and shared lessons from the case at staff training events.

The Council also provided remedies in two complaints related to planning. In one, the complainant was given misleading information about whether he could build an extension on land he was proposing to buy from the Council. In the other case, planning officers did not properly consider the effect upon the complainant's property of new development close to the boundary. In both cases the injustice was remedied by the payment of compensation.

Communicating decisions

We want our work to be transparent and our decisions to be clear and comprehensible. During the past year we changed the way we communicate our decisions and reasons. We now provide a stand-alone statement of reasons for every decision we make to both the citizen who has complained and to the council. These statements replace our former practice of communicating decisions by letter to citizens that are copied to councils. We hope this change has been beneficial and welcome comments on this or any other aspect of our work.

In April 2011 we introduced a new IT system for case management and revised the brief descriptions of our decisions. My next annual letter will use the different decision descriptions that are intended to give a more precise representation of complaint outcomes and also add further transparency to our work.

Extended powers

During 2010/11 our powers were extended to deal with complaints in two significant areas.

In October 2010 all complaints about injustice connected to adult social care services came under our jurisdiction. The greater use of direct payments and personalised budgets mean that it is particularly important for us to be able to deal with such complaints irrespective of whether a council has arranged the care. The increasing number of people who arrange and pay for their own social care now have the right to an independent and impartial examination of any complaints and concerns they may have about their care provider.

In the six months to April 2011 we received 89 complaints under our new adult social care powers. Between 2009/10 and 2010/11 complaints about care arranged or funded by councils doubled from 657 to 1,351.

The Apprenticeships, Skills, Children & Learning Act 2009 introduced powers for us to deal with complaints about schools by pupils or their parents. This was to be introduced in phases and currently applies in 14 council areas. By the end of 2010/11 we had received 169 complaints about schools in those areas and 183 about schools in other areas where we had no power to investigate. The Education Bill currently before Parliament proposes to rescind our new jurisdiction from July 2012.

Our new powers coincided with the introduction of Treasury controls on expenditure by government departments and sponsored bodies designed to reduce the public spending deficit. This has constrained our ability to inform care service users, pupils and their parents of their new rights.

Assisting councils to improve

For many years we have made our experience and expertise available to councils by offering training in complaint handling. We regard supporting good complaint handling in councils as an important part of our work. During 2010/11 we surveyed a number of councils that had taken up the training and some that had not. Responses from councils where we had provided training were encouraging:

- 90% said it had helped them to improve their complaint handling
- 68% gave examples of how the knowledge and skills gained from the training had been applied in practice
- 55% said that complaints were resolved at an earlier stage than previously
- almost 50% said that citizens who complained were more satisfied.

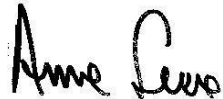
These findings will inform how we develop and provide training in the future. For example, the survey identified that councils are interested in short complaint handling modules and e-learning.

Details of training opportunities are on our web site at www.lgo.org.uk/training-councils/

More details of our work over the year will be included in the 2010/11 Annual Report. This will be published on our website at the same time as the annual review letters for all councils (14 July).

If it would be helpful to your Council I should be pleased to arrange for me or a senior manager to meet and explain our work in greater detail.

Yours sincerely



Anne Seex
Local Government Ombudsman

For information on interpretation of statistics click on this link to go to www.lgo.org.uk/CouncilsPerformance

LGO Advice Team

Enquiries and complaints received	Adult Care Services	Benefits & Tax	Corporate & Other Services	Education & Childrens Services	Environmental Services & Public Protection & Regulation	Highways & Transport	Housing	Other	Planning & Development	Total
Formal/informal premature complaints	0	2	0	0	1	2	6	0	0	11
Advice given	0	1	0	0	2	0	7	1	0	11
Forwarded in investigative team (resubmitted)	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	2
Forwarded to investigative team (new)	1	2	2	0	3	0	9	0	1	18
Total	1	5	2	0	7	2	23	1	1	42

Investigative Team

Decisions	Reports: maladministration and injustice	Local settlements (no report)	Reports: Maladministration no injustice	Reports: no Maladministration	No Maladministration (no report)	Ombudsman's discretion (no report)	Outside jurisdiction	Total
2010 / 2011	1	8	0	0	5	5	2	21

No adult social care decisions were made in the period

Response times	First enquiries	
	No of first Enquiries	Avg no of days to respond
01/04/2010 / 31/03/2011	11	34.0
2009 / 2010	17	30.8
2008 / 2009	15	50.1

Provisional comparative response times 01/04/2010 to 31/03/2011

Types of authority	<= 28 days %	29 - 35 days %	> = 36 days %
District councils	65	23	12
Unitary authorities	59	28	13
Metropolitan authorities	64	19	17
County councils	66	17	17
London boroughs	64	30	6
National parks authorities	75	25	0