

Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) Advisory Forum

Notes from meeting held on 7 April 2016

Attendees

Name	Representing
CB	LGO Service User
JM	LGO Service User
LW	LGO Service User
NC	LGO Service User
KB	LGO Service User
ER	LGO Service User
DM	National Complaints Managers' Group
SP	Coventry Citizens Advice
J Martin	Local Government Ombudsman
M King	Chief Executive, LGO (Chair)
TM	Head of Policy and Communications, LGO
ID	Communications Manager, LGO
MB	Policy and Research Manager, LGO (secretariat)

Apologies – RH, VH

1) Welcome

Members of the Advisory Forum were welcomed to the LGO by Jane Martin (JM) and thanked for attending the meeting. JM described the current situation at the LGO as largely positive, with no significant budget cuts to implement this year and a continued positive relationship with the LGO's sponsor department.

2) Introduction and updates

Mick King (MK) thanked members for attending and for the contributions made during the last meeting. MK described the impact the group's comments and suggestions had already made to the way we work. A new system has been introduced to ensure the implementation of the remedies we have recommended. While some remedies are simple to follow up (a payment to a complainant, for example), where we have recommended a change to policy or procedure, satisfactory evidence of the change is required. To support this new process, we have focused on ensuring that when we make our recommendations they include a set timescale for completion.

The group's previous feedback about communication style, demonstrating empathy and being kept up to date has influenced one of our Business Plan items for this year that will aim to improve the telephone skills of our investigative staff.

MK highlighted the reports published since the last meeting, demonstrating how we continue to share the learning from our complaints to influence service improvement. [Making a house a home](#), a focus report on Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) highlighted the complications that can follow when councils delegate responsibilities to other organisations. The report received significant trade press coverage.

[Full House](#) highlighted the common problems we see around social housing allocations and, again, received coverage in trade and local government press.

Our single case reports continue to receive significant media coverage, specifically, a complaint about the financial abuse of an older person and the failure of the local authority to properly safeguard him.

MK outlined some significant policy developments since the Forum last met. The Government has published its [education White Paper](#) and highlighted the deficit in parents' ability to complain about the school admissions process of an academy or free school. The paper also highlights parents' right to complain about what happens in a school.

Updating members on the expected legislation to reform public ombudsmen, MK explained that legislation is unlikely to be published until after the EU referendum. Legislation is therefore not likely to be passed until 2017, after which it would take approximately 18 months before any new organisation was formed. In the meantime, the focus remains on ensuring the LGO is working well.

MK explained that hearing the members of the Forum describe their experience of the service was powerful and something we would like to share more widely with staff and our Board members. Members were encouraged to consider if they would be happy to be filmed describing their experience of the service and to contact Marie Bench if they would.

A member of the Forum asked who the focus reports are sent to when they are published. ID explained that each report is sent to a targeted group of stakeholders who are likely to be interested in the subject of the report, as well as a standard group of stakeholders, including link officers, chief executives and councillors at local authorities. Relevant media outlets are also targeted. It was noted that members of the public would want to receive the reports too. It was explained that on the newly launched LGO website, people can subscribe to receive the information they would like to receive from us, including the reports we publish.

Referring to the report on DFGs, a member expressed how a local authority's funding for grants can be related to local political pressure and mood and the difficulties for the private provider involved in getting the money to provide the

adaptation. MK responded that the report is in response to such issues and the complaints they generate.

A member of the Forum noted experience of a recent complaint and the positive and noticeable difference in the way the recommendations were made.

A member asked how the LGO can work with voluntary organisations more, noting that organisations can better understand how the LGO works and can help and support people to access its service. TM explained that we understand that working with charities and the advice sector is important and outlined a piece of work currently being scoped out with Citizens Advice to better understand the existing knowledge of our service within their network of advisers and how we can target any gaps.

A member noted that advocacy support is often required for a person to access the LGO's service. It was asked if the LGO has considered providing such a service. TM explained that work to understand the feasibility of us providing an advocacy service had been explored, however, we are not funded to provide such a service and we are required to remain independent; the provision of an advocacy service may appear that we are favouring one side over another. We have highlighted the lack of and inconsistent provision of social care complaints advocacy in previous reports and have called for social care complaints advocacy to be given the same statutory footing as health complaints advocacy.

3) Discussion 1: LGO's website

TM introduced a discussion on the LGO's website, launched yesterday. The old website was not compatible with smart phones and tablets and previous Advisory Forums had provided feedback about the site, noting its appearance was cluttered and that some pages were not up to date. In addition, through efforts to increase transparency, we have tended to put a lot of information on the website, but an ineffective search facility meant that people were struggling to find what they needed. As a result, valuable information, including our published decisions, was not getting full prominence.

It was also recognised that while the website is an important channel for customers to make contact with us, and we want it to encourage more people who want to, to contact us using the complaint web form on our site, it is not the only way and will not replace other contact channels.

ID presented the new website with its simpler and clearer design. The home page is divided into six clear sections, plus prominent 'Contact Us' and 'Online Complaint' links.

The Browsealoud function, which reads the text on the screen and in a variety of languages, was demonstrated, alongside the display options that vary the text size and colour options.

A member of the Forum suggested that while these functions were positive, there may be areas of the site that do not currently comply with the minimum standards that are set out in the Equalities Act. It was agreed that this would be checked.

Members felt it was important to properly explain the functionality Browsealoud offers. If people aren't aware of what it can do, and are unfamiliar with the symbol, a fuller explanation would be needed to direct them to it.

ID highlighted the 'Adult Social Care' section of the site, including the resources available for care providers. A member suggested that, as well as providing guidance and support for providers, it would be useful to provide similar for people making a complaint; for example, top tips, a checklist for what to include in a complaint letter etc.

Members asked if the website included useful links that would direct people to other organisations that might be able to help them. In response, it was explained that information and links to other ombudsman schemes we work more closely with, such as the Housing Ombudsman, are included on the site, in an effort to provide clear, succinct information, we do not provide numerous links to other organisations. We do, however, monitor the calls received by the Advice team and can include information about other organisations on our website where we identify we are regularly providing it to customers over the telephone.

It was agreed that, by working with other ombudsman schemes, we can determine what information we should include about each others' work on individual sites.

Commenting on the Online Complaint Form, members commented that it assumed the complaint related to a specific or single incident. Members explained that, in their experience, a complaint often involved a series of events over a period of time and that it would be helpful if the language of the complaint form recognised this.

Members fed back on a number of specific bugs they had discovered whilst exploring the new site.

4) Discussion 2: Feedback on '*Meeting your needs*'

Ahead of the meeting, members of the Forum were asked to consider a document intended to be available on our website that explains how we will meet a person's needs and make reasonable adjustments and feedback their thoughts and how it could be improved.

Members made the following comments:

- Use fewer synonyms, cut out additional 'unnecessary' words and use shorter sentences.
- Use more pictures and images.

- Consider how a person with a learning disability, or other needs, would locate, read, and understand this information. If a person needs Easy Read or large print, the document should be available in Easy Read and large print.
- The document is probably suitable to explain the approach taken and may be useful for advisers, but it is probably not suitable for people who would actually need to have adjustments made for them.
- Consider a short video explaining what adjustments can be made, rather than a written document alone.
- Ensure that the information manages people's expectations of the adjustments that might be made; resources are not unlimited.
- A home visit is one of the options available to people who have mobility difficulties; research should be undertaken to get a sense of how many people might be likely to take this offer up to better understand if it could be resourced.
- Make clear which other organisations might be able to help and assist the person to make a complaint and include links.
- Include a link to a postcode search facility that can highlight local support.
- Place an onus on local authorities and providers to explain the range of ways a person can access our service when they signpost to us. This suggestion will be picked up through existing work to produce a manual for link officers.

Following the discussion, members asked what mechanisms are available if a council does not implement a recommendation within the timeframe specified. MK explained that each local authority receives an Annual Letter detailing the numbers of complaints received and decided in the financial year. The letter also provides an opportunity to comment on elements of the council's performance, including how responsive they have been to putting things right when fault has been found. These letters are published on our website and publicised with local press.

A member asked if recommendations are sent to councillors. MK responded, explaining that a council's Monitoring Officer has a responsibility to report fault to its elected members. Complaints that result in a public interest report being published are sent to council Leaders, and Annual Letters are sent to Leaders and, this year, Scrutiny Chairs.

A member described their experience of the LGO's system not linking two complaints, about the same authority and same issue.

A member noted that while our focus is on an individual complaint, a motivating factor for people complaining is to improve things for others. If our decisions were to emphasise this element of our work more, people may be more satisfied.

5) Closing remarks

JM reflected on the meeting and highlighted several key messages:

- A lack of resources is not always an appropriate reason to not take on developmental opportunities and ideas.
- There are more opportunities for us to explore around the website and how we link to other ombudsman schemes and regulators, plus how we can provide a customer portal system to track case progression more easily.
- When discussing how we meet people's needs, the discussion highlights that there is more to it than initially thought. The document needs not only a re-write but a strategic re-think about our approach and how we can be accessible to people directly.

TM and his team were thanked for their work on the website. Members were thanked for giving up their time to attend the meeting and for their contributions.

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