

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

**Bolton Metropolitan Borough
Council**

**for the year ended
31 March 2009**

The Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) provides 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, the Ombudsmen aim to get it put right by recommending a suitable remedy. The LGO also uses 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 Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council 2008/09

Introduction

This annual review provides a summary of the complaints we have dealt with about Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council.

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 2008/09 and a note to help the interpretation of the statistics.

Changes to our way of working and statistics

A change in the way we operate means that the statistics about complaints received in 2008/09 are not directly comparable with those from 2007/08. Since 1 April 2008 the new LGO Advice Team has been the single point of contact for all enquiries and new complaints. The number of telephone calls to our service has increased significantly since then to more than 3,000 a month. Our advisers now provide comprehensive information and advice to people who telephone, write or e-mail. It enables citizens to make informed decisions about whether to put their complaint to us.

This means that direct comparisons with some previous year-statistics are difficult and could be misleading. So this annual review focuses mainly on the 2008/09 statistics without drawing those comparisons.

Enquiries and complaints received

A total of 86 enquiries and complaints were received against your Council in 2008/09, of which 44 were passed for investigation. The highest number of contacts related to housing (20) of which eight were passed for investigation, followed by planning and building control with 17 contacts, resulting in 13 complaints being passed for investigation.

Complaint outcomes

Local settlements

We will often discontinue enquires into a complaint when a council takes or agrees to take action that we consider to be a satisfactory response – we call these local settlements. In 2008/09, 27.4% of all complaints the Ombudsmen decided and which were within our jurisdiction were local settlements. Of the complaints we decided against your authority eight complaints were locally settled, with a total of £700 compensation being paid in addition to other forms of remedy.

Complaints by service area

Benefits

Only three complaints about benefits were forwarded for investigation, but one of these was particularly unfortunate. The complainant supplied the Council with a death certificate for his mother, but it continued to pursue her for overpayments of council tax benefit. The Council settled the matter by writing to the complainant to apologise and to confirm that the debt had been written

off, as well as paying £50 compensation.

Housing

Housing allocations

In one case the complainant's name had wrongly been removed from the housing register. This was settled by the complainant's name being reinstated on the register and backdated, with an undertaking from the Council to rewrite the relevant part of its housing policy, as well as the payment of £100 compensation.

Managing tenancies

In this case the Council failed to act on a complaint despite it having been sent via my office. This was settled by the officer concerned having a formal interview with the manager, and all relevant staff being advised of the correct complaints procedure, with the introduction of a monitoring and tracking procedure for complaints. The Council also gave the complainant a formal apology and £50 compensation.

Licensing

In a complaint about taxi licensing the Council took too long before agreeing with the complainant that it ought to be taking enforcement action in this case. It commenced enforcement action and paid £150 compensation to the complainant in recognition of its delay.

Planning

Planning applications

The Council settled a complaint about delay in responding to the complainant's concerns about a planning application for a site near his home by issuing an apology, which we felt was a sufficient remedy in the circumstances.

In another case the Council failed to invite the complainant to a Planning Committee meeting, as a result of which the complainant was denied the opportunity to explain the details of their objection. Comments the complainant had made in objecting were taken out of context. The Council had already apologised to the complainant for not sending an invitation to the Committee meeting. It issued a further apology for taking the comments out of context and for failing to address this aspect earlier in the complaints process.

Regeneration and improvement

A complainant complained that delays in remedying defects in a property had meant that the five-year period during which they might be required to repay a grant if they sold the property had not yet started. The Council agreed to complete the outstanding works within four weeks, to inspect the roofs, and pay a total of £350 for the inconvenience caused by the delay as well as the complainant's time and trouble in making the complaint. The starting date for the five-year period should the complainant subsequently decide to sell the property would run from the date on which the repairs should have been completed.

Education

School admissions

As a result of defects in the handling of an appeal against the refusal of a place in the school chosen by the complainant for their child, the Council offered the complainant a further appeal and has addressed a number of procedural and training issues arising out of the case.

In another case about admission appeals, this time centring on an allegation that the Chair of the Appeal Panel had been rude, the Council again agreed to include appropriate training for Panel members.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

The Council's average number of days to respond to enquiries from my office is 24.1. This is slightly up on the previous year but remains below the 28 days within which I would expect a response.

The Council has had a good working relationship with my office in the past, and I am pleased that this continues. It is perhaps worth noting the comment of one of my experienced investigators:

Bolton is always willing to settle locally when there is a genuine problem and their liaison officer is excellent to deal with.

Issues arising out of the school admission appeals complaint referred to above led to an invitation from the Council for one of my Assistant Ombudsmen to visit to discuss issues of common concern.

Training in complaint handling

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

Like any other council, Bolton does not always get it right, but when things go wrong it is prepared to do its best to remedy the situation appropriately. Taken along with the positive attitude of senior staff towards my office, this is indicative of a council that takes complaints seriously.

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 Council's services.

**Mrs A Seex
Local Government Ombudsman
Beverley House
17 Shipton Road
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June 2009

Section 2: LGO developments

Introduction

This annual review also provides an opportunity to bring councils up to date on developments – current and proposed – in the LGO and to seek feedback. It includes our proposal to introduce a ‘statement of reasons’ for Ombudsmen decisions.

Council First

From 1 April 2009, the LGO has considered complaints only where the council’s own complaints procedure has been completed. Local authorities have been informed of these new arrangements, including some notable exceptions. We will carefully monitor the impact of this change during the course of the year.

Statement of reasons: consultation

The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 made provision for the LGO to publish statements of reasons relating to the individual decisions of an Ombudsman following the investigation of a complaint. The Ombudsmen are now consulting local government on their proposal to use statements of reasons. The proposal is that these will comprise a short summary (about one page of A4) of the complaint, the investigation, the findings and the recommended remedy. The statement, naming the council but not the complainant, would usually be published on our website.

We plan to consult local authorities on the detail of these statements with a view to implementing them from October 2009.

Making Experiences Count (MEC)

The new formal, one stage complaint handling arrangement for adult social care was also introduced from 1 April 2009. The LGO is looking to ensure that this formal stage is observed by complainants before the Ombudsmen will consider any such complaint, although some may be treated as exceptions under the Council First approach. The LGO also recognises that during the transition from the existing scheme to the new scheme there is going to be a mixed approach to considering complaints as some may have originated before 1 April 2009. The LGO will endeavour to provide support, as necessary, through dedicated events for complaints-handling staff in adult social care departments.

Training in complaint handling

Effective Complaint Handling in Adult Social Care is the latest addition to our range of training courses for local authority staff. This adds to the generic Good Complaint Handling (identifying and processing complaints) and Effective Complaint Handling (investigation and resolution), and courses for social care staff at both of these levels. Demand for our training in complaint handling remains high. A total of 129 courses were delivered in 2008/09. Feedback from participants shows that they find it stimulating, challenging and beneficial in their work in dealing with complaints.

Adult Social Care Self-funding

The Health Bill 2009 proposes for the LGO to extend its jurisdiction to cover an independent complaints-handling role in respect of self-funded adult social care. The new service will commence in 2010.

Internal schools management

The Apprenticeship, Skills, Children and Learning Bill (ASCL) 2009 proposes making the LGO the host for a new independent complaints-handling function for schools. In essence, we would consider the complaint after the governing body of the school had considered it. Subject to legislation, the new service would be introduced, in pilot form, probably in September 2010.

Further developments

I 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 local 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.

**Mrs A Seex
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June 2009

Appendix 1: Notes to assist interpretation of the statistics 2008/09

Introduction

This year, the annual review only shows 2008/09 figures for enquiries and complaints received, and for decisions taken. This is because the change in the way we operate (explained in the introduction to the review) means that these statistics are not directly comparable with statistics from previous years.

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.

Formal/informal prematures: 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 usually refer it back to the council as a 'premature complaint' to see if the council can itself resolve the matter. These are 'formal premature complaints'. We now also include 'informal' premature complaints here, where advice is given to the complainant making an enquiry that their complaint is premature. The total of premature complaints shown in this line *does not include* the number of resubmitted premature complaints (see below).

Advice given: These are enquiries where the LGO Advice Team has given advice on why the Ombudsman would not be able to consider the complaint, other than the complaint being premature. For example, the complaint may clearly be outside the Ombudsman's jurisdiction. It also includes cases where the complainant has not given enough information for clear advice to be given, but they have, in any case, decided not to pursue the complaint.

Forwarded to the investigative team (resubmitted prematures): These are cases where there was either a formal premature decision, or the complainant was given informal advice that their case was premature, and the complainant has resubmitted their complaint to the Ombudsman after it has been put to the council. *These figures need to be added to the numbers for formal/informal premature complaints (see above) to get the full total number of premature complaints. They also needed to be added to the 'forwarded to the investigative team (new)' to get the total number of forwarded complaints.*

Forwarded to the investigative team (new): These are the complaints that have been forwarded from the LGO Advice Team to the Investigative Team for further consideration. The figures may include some complaints that the Investigative Team has received but where we have not yet contacted 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 2008/09 will already have been in hand at the beginning of the year, and some forwarded to the Investigative Team during 2008/09 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 Ombudsman 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 Ombudsman'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 Ombudsman'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 2008/09

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	2	0	7	2	2	2	4	6	25
Advice given	2	0	0	5	1	1	2	3	3	17
Forwarded to investigative team (resubmitted prematures)	0	0	1	1	0	0	4	0	2	8
Forwarded to investigative team (new)	1	1	5	7	3	1	9	3	6	36
Total	3	3	6	20	6	4	17	10	17	86

Investigative Team

Decisions	MI reps	LS	M reps	NM reps	No mal	Omb disc	Outside jurisdiction	Total
01/04/2008 / 31/03/2009	0	8	0	0	28	11	1	48

Average local authority response times 01/04/2008 to 31/03/2009

Response times	FIRST ENQUIRIES	
	No. of First Enquiries	Avg no. of days to respond
1/04/2008 / 31/03/2009	25	24.1
2007 / 2008	33	22.2
2006 / 2007	37	27.9

Types of authority	<= 28 days %	29 - 35 days %	> = 36 days %
District councils	60	20	20
Unitary authorities	56	35	9
Metropolitan authorities	67	19	14
County councils	62	32	6
London boroughs	58	27	15
National park authorities	100	0	0