

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Review
Bristol City 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.

Contents of Annual Review

Section 1: Complaints about Bristol City Council 2008/09.....	3
Introduction.....	3
Enquiries and complaints received.....	3
Complaint outcomes.....	3
Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman.....	5
Training in complaint handling.....	6
Conclusions.....	6
Section 2: LGO developments.....	7
Introduction.....	7
Council First.....	7
Statement of reasons: consultation.....	7
Making Experiences Count (MEC).....	7
Training in complaint handling.....	7
Adult Social Care Self-funding.....	8
Internal schools management.....	8
Further developments.....	8
Appendix 1: Notes to assist interpretation of the statistics 2008/09.....	9
Appendix 2: Local authority report 2008/09	

Section 1: Complaints about Bristol City Council 2008/09

Introduction

This annual review provides a summary of the complaints we have dealt with about Bristol 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 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 calls to our service has increased significantly since then. It handles more than 3,000 calls a month, together with written and emailed complaints. Our advisers now provide comprehensive information and advice to callers at the outset with a full explanation of the process and possible outcomes. It enables callers to make a more informed decision about whether putting their complaint to us is an appropriate course of action. Some decide to pursue their complaint direct with the council first.

It means that direct comparisons with some of the previous year's 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

Our Advice Team received 180 complaints and enquiries during the year. Of these 38 were about housing issues, 31 about planning-related matters, 16 were in the public finance and local taxation category, and 14 concerned transport and highway issues, eight were about adult care services and 11 concerned children and family services. The remaining 62 concerned education, benefits and other topics.

We treated 54 of those complaints and enquiries as premature and in a further 35 cases advice was given (usually to make a complaint direct to the Council). The remaining 91 complaints were forwarded to the investigative team - 75 as new complaints and 16 as premature complaints that had been resubmitted.

Complaint outcomes

I decided 120 complaints against the Council during the year. In 37 of those cases (30%) I found no evidence of maladministration. I used my discretion not to investigate a further 23. Typically

these are cases where even though there may have been some fault by the Council there is no significant injustice to the complainant. In 19 cases (which represents 15% of all decisions made in the year) I took the view that the matters complained about were outside my jurisdiction and so they were not investigated.

Reports

When we complete an investigation, we generally issue a report. This year we issued one report against the Council. Thirty residents who live close to an established sports stadium complained to me that there were errors in the way the Council dealt with a planning application for its redevelopment and enlargement. They said they would be caused an avoidable loss of amenity, and suffer increased levels of disturbance, inconvenience and pollution from increased traffic. While I found that there were some administrative faults in the way the Council dealt with the application I did not conclude that those errors undermined the decision to approve the application. I said that the maladministration I had identified was at the margins of the complex consideration that the Council had to give to this development proposal. In those circumstances, while I recognised the complainants' outrage, I concluded that their injustice was insufficient for me to recommend that the Council should make any compensation payments. I did, however, recommend that the Council should review the implementation of its policies and procedures in respect of:

- consultation on planning applications;
- consideration of environmental impact;
- substitution of Members at Planning Committees; and
- its Planning Code of Conduct.

In complaints like these that generate high levels of public interest I believe it is better for councils to err on the side of procedural caution, which may involve additional consultation periods for example, than to be driven by timetables and targets. It is often appropriate to issue a report on this type of complaint so that my consideration of the matter and my findings can be in the public domain. This is what I did in this case. I am pleased to note that the Council has already begun to review the operation of the protocols that were highlighted in my report.

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 2008/09, 27.4% of all complaints the Ombudsmen decided and which were within our jurisdiction were local settlements. Of the complaints against your Council 11 were decided as local settlements.

Three of the local settlements related to complaints about education. In one case the Council accepted that there had been faults in dealing with a teenager's possible reintegration into mainstream school following a period in a Pupil Referral Unit. In recognition of the delays and periods when he had been out of school the Council agreed to pay for driving lessons to help him enter employment as by this time he was no longer in education. The Council also made the boy's mother a compensatory payment of £500 in recognition of the inconvenience she had been caused.

In another case the Council failed to make appropriate educational provision for about six months for a child while his special educational needs were being assessed. As a result his father had to look after him and so could not find work. I was pleased that the Council agreed to make a compensatory payment to the boy's father.

The other education case concerned a child transferring between schools. The Council accepted that its procedures were at fault which resulted in a delay in the child starting at the new school. In addition to making a compensatory payment to reflect the distress caused the Council also reviewed its procedure to prevent the situation happening to other children who transfer schools.

I decided four housing-related cases as local settlements. In one case the Council agreed to reassess a council tenant's medical needs which resulted in her being offered alternative accommodation. Two cases concerned delays in dealing with minor repairs issues. In the other case the Council agreed to review some aspects of its practice in deciding how much it charges tenants for heating and hot water provided by a communal system.

The Council agreed to compensate two complainants for errors in dealing with their council tax. In one case the Council sent the same liability order to two sets of bailiffs which caused confusion and distress. In the other case the Council incorrectly amended a complainant's council tax liability when he took in a lodger. This resulted in the complainant being pursued for charges that he did not owe.

The Council failed to notify a complainant of a planning application for development on land next to her property. In addition to making a compensatory payment of £1,000 the Council also agreed to ensure that a new boundary fence would be provided and accepted that further guidance should be issued to officers reminding them that appropriate publicity should be carried out before planning applications are determined.

The Council remedied these 11 complaints in ways which I considered was appropriate and paid a total of just over £5,600, as well as providing other benefits, to the people affected.

Twelve of the cases that were decided in the year were ones that had been resubmitted after initially being referred to your Council as premature. In all but one case I did not pursue those complaints further. The only case I did investigate was the council tax complaint where the same liability order had been sent to two sets of bailiffs.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

Formal enquiries were made on 46 complaints during the year. Your Council's average response time of 31 days is slightly less than last year's time of 32 days but remains outside the 28 days requested. I note that, on average, responses to enquiries on complaints about planning, housing, and transport and highways take longer than responses on other service areas.

My officers continue to appreciate the readiness of your staff to consider taking early action to resolve complaints.

I was pleased to be able to meet with senior staff from your Council during the year and to have the opportunity to discuss, among other things, issues relating to my rationale for publishing reports.

Training in complaint handling

I am pleased that during 2008/09 we provided a training course in Effective Complaint Handling to staff from your authority.

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 Council's services.

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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.

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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	3	5	1	11	4	10	9	2	9	54
Advice given	0	1	0	4	2	1	3	5	19	35
Forwarded to investigative team (resubmitted prematures)	1	0	0	3	1	1	4	1	5	16
Forwarded to investigative team (new)	4	5	8	20	1	4	15	6	12	75
Total	8	11	9	38	8	16	31	14	45	180

Investigative Team

Decisions	MI reps	LS	M reps	NM reps	No mal	Omb disc	Outside jurisdiction	Total
01/04/2008 / 31/03/2009	30	11	0	0	37	23	19	120

Response times	FIRST ENQUIRIES	
	No. of First Enquiries	Avg no. of days to respond
1/04/2008 / 31/03/2009	46	31.9
2007 / 2008	90	32.1
2006 / 2007	66	30.5

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

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