

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

Central Bedfordshire 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 Central Bedfordshire Council 2009/10

Introduction

This annual review provides a summary of the complaints we have dealt with about Central Bedfordshire Council and the former district councils. 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 we received 39 complaints and enquiries against your council, compared to 81 received against your predecessor councils in 2008/09. Thirteen were about planning and building control, five concerned transport and highways; four were about housing, four concerned adult care services, three about education; two about children and family services, and one about public finance. A further seven complaints concerned other areas such as leisure and culture.

We treated 12 of these complaints as premature and referred them to the council. In a further nine cases advice was given, usually to make a complaint to the council direct. The remaining 18 were forwarded to the investigative team, of which four premature complaints had been resubmitted. The proportion of premature complaints is quite high compared with the national average, and I would be grateful for any steps the council can take to make its service users more aware of its complaints procedure.

In 2009/10 we received three complaints and enquiries about the former South Bedfordshire District Council, all of which were made about planning and building control.

In one case advice was given. The remaining two complaints were forwarded to the investigation team, of which one was a premature complaint that had been resubmitted.

In 2009/10 we received three complaints and enquiries against the former Mid Bedfordshire District Council. One complaint was made about planning and building control and the other two were about services within the other category, namely land and licensing. All three were forwarded to the investigative team with one of those complaints having been resubmitted.

Complaint outcomes

In 2009/10 I took decisions on seven complaints. In three cases I found no or insufficient evidence of maladministration. I found one complaint to be outside my jurisdiction. In another I exercised my discretion not to investigate the complaint further because while there were concerns that there may have been fault on the part of the council it had not led to a final decision causing any substantial injustice to the complainant. In the remaining two cases the council agreed to settle the complaint locally.

In 2009/10 we took three decisions on complaints against the former South Bedfordshire District

council. One complaint was outside jurisdiction and in the other two cases Ombudsman's discretion was exercised not to investigate further. 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 2009/10 we took decisions on five complaints against the former Mid Bedfordshire District Council. One complaint was outside jurisdiction and in another case the council agreed to settle the complaint locally. In three other cases Ombudsman's discretion was exercised not to investigate further. Typically these are cases where even though there may have been some fault by the council there is no significant injustice to the complainant.

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 complaints we decided against your authority two were local settlements (28%), and the council paid a total of £750 in compensation.

In one of those complaints the council had not given the assistance in finding a property that it had promised to give the complainant, but once that was drawn to the council's attention it identified a suitable property achieving the outcome desired by the complainant.

In another complaint the council attempted to use inappropriate procedures to deal with a dispute involving a contractor. My predecessor recommended that the council should have in place an appropriate dispute resolution procedure and should pay to the complainant £750 for the time and inconvenience caused. The council agreed to review its procedures to prevent the circumstances recurring.

The former Mid Bedfordshire District council agreed a local settlement in a complaint where it recognised that when investigating allegations that a local business had acted in breach of planning conditions, it had failed to properly investigate the breach of noise conditions. Later investigation demonstrated there was a breach of noise conditions and so it seemed there may have been earlier breaches. The council agreed to pay to the complainant a sum of £250 in relation to the time and inconvenience of having to bring a complaint.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

We made formal enquiries on five complaints in 2009/10. The council's average response time is 26.2 days which is an improvement of that of its predecessor authorities and within our target time of 28 days. I would like to thank the council for exceeding our target and hope that in the future it can maintain this level of service.

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.

**Dr Jane Martin
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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	Adult care services	Children and family services	Education	Housing	Public Finance inc. Local Taxation	Planning and building control	Transport and highways	Other	Total
Formal/informal premature complaints	1	1	1	1	0	3	2	3	12
Advice given	0	1	1	1	0	4	1	1	9
Forwarded to investigative team (resubmitted prematures)	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	4
Forwarded to investigative team (new)	3	0	1	1	1	5	1	2	14
Total	4	2	3	4	1	13	5	7	39

Investigative Team

Decisions	MI reps	LS	M reps	NM reps	No mal	Omb disc	Outside jurisdiction	Total
2009 / 2010	0	2	0	0	3	1	1	7

Response times

	FIRST ENQUIRIES	
	No. of First Enquiries	Avg no. of days to respond
1/04/2009 / 31/03/2010	5	26.2

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

LGO Advice Team

Enquiries and complaints received	Planning and building control	Other	Total
Forwarded to investigative team (resubmitted prematures)	1	0	1
Forwarded to investigative team (new)	0	2	2
Total	1	2	3

Investigative Team

Decisions	MI reps	LS	M reps	NM reps	No mal	Omb disc	Outside jurisdiction	Total
2009 / 2010	0	1	0	0	0	3	1	5

Average local authority resp times 01/04/2009 to 31/03/2010

Response times	FIRST ENQUIRIES	
	No. of First Enquiries	Avg no. of days to respond
1/04/2009 / 31/03/2010	1	29.0
2008 / 2009	7	28.3
2007 / 2008	8	25.9

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

LGO Advice Team

Enquiries and complaints received	Planning and building control	Total
Advice given	1	1
Forwarded to investigative team (resubmitted prematures)	1	1
Forwarded to investigative team (new)	1	1
Total	3	3

Investigative Team

Decisions	MI reps	LS	M reps	NM reps	No mal	Omb disc	Outside jurisdiction	Total
2009 / 2010	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	3

Average local authority resp times 01/04/2009 to 31/03/2010

Response times	FIRST ENQUIRIES	
	No. of First Enquiries	Avg no. of days to respond
2008 / 2009	9	39.8
2007 / 2008	12	29.5

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

LGO Advice Team

Enquiries and complaints received	Education	Planning and building control	Transport and highways	Total
Formal/informal premature complaints	0	1	0	1
Forwarded to investigative team (new)	1	0	1	2
Total	1	1	1	3

Investigative Team

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

Response times

	FIRST ENQUIRIES	
	No. of First Enquiries	Avg no. of days to respond
2008 / 2009	20	24.9
2007 / 2008	14	36.6

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