

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

**The London Borough of  
Hillingdon  
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 the London Borough of Hillingdon 2009/10

## Introduction

This annual review provides a summary of the complaints we have dealt with about the London Borough of Hillingdon. 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

A total of 65 enquiries and complaints were received about your Council in 2009/10, compared with 72 in the previous year. These covered a variety of service areas including housing (18), public finance (which includes council tax) (9), benefits (6) and planning and building control (6). Twenty three cases were regarded as being premature because it did not appear that your Council had had a reasonable opportunity to deal with the matter. In another 10 cases, the prospective complainants were given advice about the options open to them.

Thirty two complaints were forwarded to my investigative team to consider. There was no predominant theme: complaints were received across all the Council's main service areas.

## Complaint outcomes

I decided 35 complaints about your Council during the year.

In 14 cases, I found no or insufficient evidence of fault by your Council to warrant my involvement. These included a complaint about a penalty charge notice for a parking contravention which was, quite properly, sent to the registered keeper of the vehicle. The registered keeper was, however, the company from which the complainant leased the vehicle. The company paid the penalty and passed on the cost to the complainant under the terms of the lease. While I understood the complainant's sense of grievance, because he had no right of appeal, your Council had done nothing wrong. Other cases where I found no or insufficient fault to justify me pursuing an investigation included four about adult care services, two about anti social behaviour and two about school admissions.

In 12 cases, I exercised my discretion not to continue the investigation. In nine of these, I considered that, even if there had been some fault, the injustice caused to the complainant would not be so great that I would be justified in pursuing the matter further. For example, in a case about a school admissions appeal, part of your Council's case was not as clearly set out in the papers sent in advance of the hearing as it should have been. However, it was clear that the issue was properly discussed at the appeal and I concluded that the outcome was unaffected by the original failing.

A further four complaints were outside my jurisdiction to investigate. In one example, the complainant raised issues about services provided to her mother. However, her mother had no

such concerns and had not consented to the complaint being made on her behalf. Another was about what had been said by a council officer during a court case in which the complainant was being prosecuted: the law provides that I cannot look at proceedings before a court of law.

### **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 I decided against your authority, 5 were local settlements, which is 16.1% of those in jurisdiction. This compares with 40% in the previous year.

In one case, it was found that there had been delays in carrying out initial and core assessments for a child in need, and in providing support to meet the child's needs for up to about five months. To improve processes, your Council was developing a new strategy (which has since been published): "Aiming Higher. To address the injustice to the child and their family, your Council agreed to pay them £3,500 compensation and to help with additional support in the future.

A family complained to me about the temporary accommodation provided by your Council after they had made a homelessness application. The property was initially considered to be large enough to meet the family's needs. But one of the 'bedrooms' could not be used as sleeping accommodation. When this error became apparent as a result of my investigation, the family were immediately rehoused. I considered that, although not severely overcrowded, the family had been in unsuitable accommodation for about a year and you agreed to pay them £500 compensation for the injustice caused.

A further settlement concerned delay in making a payment of housing benefit, during which the complainant's life was disrupted. Your Council had already offered some compensation to recognise the injustice caused, but I considered this to be insufficient, and you agreed to increase the payment to £200.

The remaining two settlements involved the costs associated with varying a covenant on land and your Council apologising to a complainant who was led to believe that permission would be required to vary a planning condition. This had been superseded by a subsequent planning permission, and no longer applied. Although there had been some fault here, I did not consider that the resulting injustice to the complainant required any specific remedy.

### **Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman**

Last year I commented positively on both your response times for my enquiries and the improvement from the previous year. I am happy to be able say that the average response time of 19 days was well within our target of 28 days and was again better than the preceding year.

### **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**

Last year, I commented that there was a relatively low number of complaints received in service areas which sometimes prompt large numbers of complaints; parking, school admissions and Housing Benefit. It is pleasing to note that this remained the case in 2009/10.

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.

**Tony Redmond**  
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**SW1P 4QP**

**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/](http://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](http://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**

<b>Enquiries and complaints received</b>	<b>Adult care services</b>	<b>Children and family services</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Housing</b>	<b>Benefits</b>	<b>Public Finance inc. Local Taxation</b>	<b>Planning and building control</b>	<b>Transport and highways</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Total</b>
Formal/informal premature complaints	0	0	0	10	3	5	2	1	2	23
Advice given	1	1	0	2	0	2	2	0	2	10
Forwarded to investigative team (resubmitted prematures)	1	0	0	2	1	1	1	1	0	7
Forwarded to investigative team (new)	3	4	5	4	2	1	1	1	4	25
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>65</b>

**Investigative Team**

<b>Decisions</b>	<b>MI reps</b>	<b>LS</b>	<b>M reps</b>	<b>NM reps</b>	<b>No mal</b>	<b>Omb disc</b>	<b>Outside jurisdiction</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>2009 / 2010</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>35</b>

## 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	17	19.0
2008 / 2009	22	19.9
2007 / 2008	29	26.0

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