

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Review
Spelthorne Borough 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 Spelthorne Borough Council 2009/10

Introduction

This annual review provides a summary of the complaints we have dealt with about Spelthorne Borough 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 2009/10 and a note to help the interpretation of the statistics.

Enquiries and complaints received

I received a total of 16 enquiries and complaints about your Council in 2009/10, compared with 14 in the previous year. Half the enquiries and complaints were about planning and building control: it is not unusual for authorities such as yours to receive a relatively high number of complaints about this area.

Four of the enquiries and complaints were premature (because the Council had not first been given an opportunity to deal with the complaint itself) and advice was provided to two enquirers. Ten cases were forwarded to my investigation team to consider (of which two were complaints that had previously been treated as premature and had been resubmitted). Five of the forwarded complaints concerned planning applications.

Complaint outcomes

I made decisions on nine complaints during 2009/10. One was that the complaint was outside my jurisdiction because it alleged a breach of the Data Protection Act. A complaint about this matter had been made to the Information Commissioner and there was a specific court remedy for damages which I considered the complainant should pursue. Another case concerned the suitability of a flat provided by a private landlord. Here I found no or insufficient evidence of fault by the Council to investigate further.

In two cases, I exercised my general discretion to discontinue an investigation. In one case, I considered that the Council's decision to recover an advance payment made to a landlord was not unreasonable, but asked it to consider clarifying the procedures. In the other, a complaint that stored items were wrongly removed by the Council's refuse collectors was discontinued in the absence of any evidence about the matter.

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. Five of the eight decisions on complaints against your authority were local settlements. The numbers are relatively small, but at 62.5% of decisions made, this is much higher than average. Furthermore, all of the complaints settled were about planning applications, and the Council may wish to give some consideration to this.

Two settlements concerned the same planning permission for a development of flats. The Council accepted there had been some fault in how the application had been considered, but as the permission could not lawfully be implemented for other reasons, I concluded the injustice resulting from the fault was mitigated. Compensation was therefore limited in each case to £150 to reflect the complainants' time and trouble.

In a further planning complaint, there were faults in the officer's report in addressing the impact of a neighbour's extension on the complainant's amenities: in considering loss of light to their property a kitchen was said not to be a habitable room, when it was, and policy guidance referred to was for single storey extensions when the proposal here was two storeys. I could not conclude the decision would have been different, but the Council readily admitted the fault and agreed compensation of £300 for time and trouble and the uncertainty as to what the outcome might have been. Another planning complaint was decided under delegated powers when it should have gone to committee. Though I did not consider there was fault in how the delegated decision had been considered, I asked the Council to pay the complainant £200 because they will always be uncertain whether the decision might have been different.

Lastly, in a complaint about the Council's agreement to minor amendments to a planning permission where overlooking was involved, the Council accepted there had been some fault, and agreed to address the complainant's concerns with a planning condition requiring the maintenance of screening.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

We ask Councils to respond to our enquiries within 28 days. Last year, all of the formal enquiries I made related to planning applications. Disappointingly, the Council's average response time to these enquiries was 34.8 days, with none meeting my target and one taking 41 days.

Training in complaint handling

I am pleased that the Council's Link Officer was able to join a Link Officer's seminar at our offices last year, and hope that this was useful. I have also 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.

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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	Housing	Benefits	Planning and building control	Other	Total
Formal/informal premature complaints	2	1	0	1	4
Advice given	0	0	2	0	2
Forwarded to investigative team (resubmitted prematures)	0	0	2	0	2
Forwarded to investigative team (new)	1	0	4	3	8
Total	3	1	8	4	16

Investigative Team

Decisions	MI reps	LS	M reps	NM reps	No mal	Omb disc	Outside jurisdiction	Total
2009 / 2010	0	5	0	0	1	2	1	9

Response times	FIRST ENQUIRIES	
	No. of First Enquiries	Avg no. of days to respond
1/04/2009 / 31/03/2010	4	34.8
2008 / 2009	1	32.0
2007 / 2008	4	25.3

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