

22 June 2012

*By email*

Mr K Crompton  
Chief Executive  
London Borough of Haringey  
5th floor, River Park House  
225 High Road  
Wood Green N22 8HQ

Dear Mr Crompton

### **Annual Review Letter**

I am writing with our annual summary of statistics on the complaints made to me about your authority for the year ended 31 March 2012. I hope the information set out in the enclosed tables will be useful to you.

The statistics include the number of enquiries and complaints received by our Advice Team, the number forwarded by the Advice Team to my office and decisions made on complaints about your authority. The decision descriptions have been changed to more closely follow the wording in our legislation and to give greater precision. Our guidance on statistics provides further explanation ([see our website](#)).

The statistics also show the time taken by your authority to respond to written enquiries.

### **Complaint Outcomes**

There are some issues arising from the complaints that I want to bring to your attention.

In last year's annual letter I highlighted a case where housing benefit was sent by mistake to the tenant instead of the landlord. This year there are two further examples.

In the first case direct payments to the landlord stopped after the tenant, who had a history of rent arrears, made a new benefit claim. The tenant was awarded benefit but did not pay the landlord. The landlord obtained a court judgement but could not enforce it after the tenant moved. I was concerned about the failure by officers to assess the tenant's history when deciding who to pay. As a remedy, the Council agreed to pay the complainant over £600.00 (half the benefit payment to the tenant).

In the second case housing benefit was paid to the tenant. But the landlord sent evidence showing he was owed over eight weeks rent arrears. In these circumstances the Council must make direct payments of benefit to the landlord unless s/he is not a fit and proper person to receive such payments. The Council at first suspended the claim but then resumed payments to the tenant. Again the tenant did not pay the rent. If proper checks had been made, payments would have been sent to the landlord. The Council agreed to pay the landlord a financial remedy in excess of

£1,000. It also introduced changes to work processes to help avoid similar problems occurring in the future.

In some cases my investigations revealed poor handling of correspondence. A complainant wrote to the Council three times about a neighbour's planning application. It took the Council five months to reply. The reply was brief and did not explain the delay. In another planning case, it took the Council about nine months to respond substantively to a formal complaint about a development near the complainant's home. The Council did not deal promptly with letters from a complainant who was at risk of losing his home. The Council agreed to look at how it deals with incoming post so that urgent cases are identified in good time. A landlord who made it clear that she wanted to use the complaints procedure about a housing benefit issue could not get the matter progressed beyond the first stage. I would appreciate your following up these matters.

### ***Changes to our role***

I am also pleased to have this opportunity to update you on changes to our role. Since April 2010 we have been exercising jurisdiction over the internal management of schools on a pilot basis in 14 local authority areas. This was repealed in the Education Act 2011 and the power restored to the Secretary of State for Education. During the short period of the pilot we believe we have had a positive impact on the way in which schools handle complaints. This was endorsed by independent research commissioned by the Department for Education which is available [on their website](#).

Our jurisdiction will end in July 2012 and all complaints about internal school matters will be completed by 31 January 2013.

From April 2013, as a result of the Localism Act 2011, local authority tenants will take complaints about their landlord to the Independent Housing Ombudsman (IHO). We are working with the IHO to ensure a smooth transition that will include information for local authority officers and members.

### ***Supporting good local public administration***

We launched a new series of Focus reports during 2011/12 to develop our role in supporting good local public administration and service improvement. They draw on the learning arising from our casework in specific service areas. Subjects have included school admissions, children out of school, homelessness and use of bankruptcy powers. The reports describe good practice and highlight what can go wrong and the injustice caused. They also make recommendations on priority areas for improvement.

We were pleased that a survey of local government revenue officers provided positive feedback on the bankruptcy focus report. Some 85% said they found it useful.

In July 2011, we also published a report with the Centre for Public Scrutiny about how complaints can feed into local authority scrutiny and business planning arrangements.

We support local complaint resolution as the most speedy route to remedy. Our training programme on effective complaint handling is an important part of our work in this area. In 2011/12 we delivered 76 courses to councils, reaching 1,230 individual learners.

We have developed our course evaluation to measure the impact of our training more effectively. It has shown that 87% of learners gained new skills and knowledge to help them improve complaint-handling practice, 83% made changes to complaint-handling practice after training, and 73% said the improvements they made resulted in greater efficiency.

Further details of publications and training opportunities are on [our website](#).

### ***Publishing decisions***

Following consultation with councils, we are planning to launch an open publication scheme during the next year where we will be publishing on our website the final decision statements on all complaints. Making more information publicly available will increase our openness and transparency, and enhance our accountability.

Our aim is to provide a comprehensive picture of complaint decisions and reasons for councils and the public. This will help inform citizens about local services and create a new source of information on maladministration, service failure and injustice.

We will publish a copy of this annual review with those of all other English local authorities on our website on 12 July 2012. This will be the same day as publication of our Annual Report 2011/12 where you will find further information about our work.

We always welcome feedback from councils and would be pleased to receive your views. If it would be helpful, I should be pleased to arrange a meeting for myself or a senior manager to discuss our work in more detail.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J Martin" with a horizontal line underneath.

**Dr Jane Martin**  
**Local Government Ombudsman**

**LGO advice team**

Enquiries and complaints received	Adult Care Services	Benefits & Tax	Corporate & Other Services	Education & Childrens Services	Environmental Services & Public Protection & Regulation	Highways & Transport	Housing	Planning & Development	Total
Advice given	3	5	5	1	3	8	15	4	44
Premature complaints	5	18	0	9	5	7	27	3	74
Forwarded to Investigative team (resubmitted)	1	7	1	2	0	3	8	2	24
Forwarded to Investigative team (new)	4	21	5	23	4	7	21	8	93
<b>Total</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>235</b>

**Investigative team - Decisions**

Not investigated			Investigated			Report	Total
No power to investigate	No reason to use exceptional power to investigate	Investigation not justified & Other	Not enough evidence of fault	No or minor injustice & Other	Injustice remedied during enquiries		
4	13	25	25	9	45	0	121

	No of first enquiries	Avg no of days to respond
Response times to first enquiries	70	23.1