

22 June 2012

By email

Ms Mary Harpley
Chief Executive
London Borough of Hounslow
Civic Centre
Lampton Road
Hounslow TW3 4DN

Dear Ms Harpley

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. The average time your Council took to respond to my enquiries was 28.5 days. This is just over the 28 day target. Housing complaints had an average response time of 34.6 days (and six complaints took over 40 days).

Complaint Outcomes

We decided 90 complaints during the year. I concluded 23 cases were outside jurisdiction. In many cases this was because the complainant had an alternative remedy I felt it was reasonable for them to use. I did not investigate a further nine cases. Mostly this was because the alleged fault or claimed injustice did not warrant investigation.

I issued one report against your authority. This was a homelessness case where the complainant sought housing assistance from the Council following domestic violence. She needed assistance with a rent deposit. I found some significant faults including a failure to deal with her homelessness application, failure to offer temporary accommodation, and a lack of proactive action to secure

private sector accommodation for the complainant. For almost a year she was staying in overcrowded conditions while making a four hour round trip across London to get her children to school and get to work. She then had to borrow for the rent deposit.

I was concerned that the response to the enquiries I made about the case was inadequate. But I welcomed the Council's agreement to refund the complainant with the deposit she had paid, and to pay her compensation in recognition of distress and time and trouble she suffered. I also recommended a review of the Council's procedures, including to ensure offices dealing with homelessness applications are clear about their statutory responsibilities and that it keeps proper records.

Similar issues arose in other homelessness complaints I dealt with this year. In one case there was delay in referring matters to the direct lets scheme and the Council was not sufficiently proactive in looking for accommodation outside of its area. The Council agreed to pay compensation to recognise the uncertainty and inconvenience that resulted from these faults. In four other cases I found there was delay in either accepting a homelessness application or investigating once this had taken place. The common themes here suggested there could be wider issues for the Council to consider. So I was pleased to see the action plan the Council produced in response to my report and in particular the organisational changes this included. I will continue to monitor complaints received to see if this addresses the problems identified.

In 18 of the other cases I investigated the Council agreed my recommendations to settle the complaint. These included apologising, reviewing procedures and carrying out repairs. The Council paid compensation totalling £2,030.

I did not find evidence of fault in 20 complaints and did not pursue a further 14 for other reasons. Generally this was because the complainant had not been caused a significant injustice. However, in two cases I did record concerns about the Council's own complaint handling procedures. These included a failure to identify complaints or to respond to them. An Assistant Ombudsman met with officers from your authority in October this year to discuss complaint handling and would be happy to continue to provide advice and guidance.

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". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a short horizontal line.

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	5	5	2	5	0	8	15	3	43
Premature complaints	1	39	2	4	6	8	16	9	85
Forwarded to Investigative team (resubmitted)	0	7	1	1	1	0	7	1	18
Forwarded to Investigative team (new)	2	7	1	14	1	13	20	5	63
Total	8	58	6	24	8	29	58	18	209

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		
6	17	9	20	18	19	1	90

	No of first enquiries	Avg no of days to respond
Response times to first enquiries	31	28.5