

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

Peterborough City 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 Peterborough 2009/10

Introduction

This annual review provides a summary of the complaints we have dealt with about Peterborough City 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

In 2009/10 we received 45 enquiries and complaints relating to the council, similar to the figure of 43 complaints and enquiries in 2008/09. A total of six of these were about education, seven for both planning and building control, and children and family services, five for transport and highways, and public finance, four about adult care services, and three about benefits. One of the remainder was about housing and the rest fell into our 'other' category, which includes areas such as anti-social behaviour and environmental health.

A total of 20 complaints were passed to the investigative team (16 new complaints and 4 resubmitted premature complaints). The fairly low rate of resubmitted complaints suggests that the council uses its own complaints procedure effectively to resolve complaints where possible. We treated 12 complaints as premature and either referred them to the council or advised the complainant to make a complaint direct. In a further 13 cases we gave the complainant advice.

Complaint outcomes

We decided 24 complaints against the council during the year. In 12 cases we found no evidence of maladministration, and two complaints were outside my jurisdiction. In a further six cases we exercised discretion 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 two of these cases my officers alerted the council to shortcomings in documented procedures as a result of investigations. One related to bankruptcy proceedings to recover council tax debt, and the other to the allocation of school places after the start of term.

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 four were local settlements, representing approximately 18% of complaints within jurisdiction decided. We recommended that the council should pay a total of £1,500 in compensation in 2009/10.

Like many authorities, the council has a small number of unreasonably persistent complainants. In one case, the council was undertaking annual reviews of its classification of one such person, where its procedure (and our guidance) stated that the matter should be reviewed every six months. The council undertook to ensure that six monthly reviews took place and we were satisfied with this outcome, as there was no indication that had a review taken place earlier the classification might have been altered.

After the council reviewed parking restrictions in the city, we received a complaint about its decision to impose new restrictions on one particular street. We found that the council could not demonstrate that it had given proper consideration to all the relevant information, and as a result its decision to introduce restrictions on this street appeared arbitrary. We could not conclude that the decision itself was wholly unreasonable but the council had not informed objectors of why their objections had been overruled until after the restrictions had been introduced. The council agreed to write to all residents of the street apologising for its failings, and to pay the complainant £250 compensation for the time and trouble pursuing the matter.

In a building control case, the council had issued a completion certificate for an extension without inspecting the work. Had it done so, serious shortcomings in the workmanship would have been apparent, and rectified, before the complainants bought the property. The complainants had not protected their interests by commissioning a structural survey before purchasing, so we recommended that the council should pay compensation of £1,000 which, while only covering a proportion of the cost of the necessary remedial work, would enable the complainants to begin legal action against the builder.

In another complaint, the council had failed to notify a neighbour of a planning proposal. We could not conclude that the outcome would have been different had the complainant had the opportunity to object, so we recommended that the council should pay compensation of £250 for outrage. The council was very willing to do this and had already offered this amount as a result of its own investigation.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

We made formal enquiries on 16 complaints this year. In the annual review for 2008/09, my predecessor noted an improvement in average response time and I am pleased that this improvement has continued. The average response time in 2009/10 was 29.3, which is only just over our 28 day target, and I hope that the council can continue its efforts here.

However, the average masks significant variations. The council took 53 days to respond to enquiries about an adult social care complaint, and 140 days to provide the information requested about a children and family services complaint. Response times such as these are extremely frustrating and I trust the council will take steps to ensure such delays are avoided where possible in the future. I am pleased to note that such occurrences are quite rare, and balanced by the two occasions on which the council responded by email on the same day that enquiries were sent. The council has also provided information swiftly in response to enquiries about education complaints, where we highlight the importance of reaching an early final outcome.

The council's general standard of internal investigation of complaints continues to be good and I commend the council for its thoroughness and its willingness to resolve complaints and learn from them. The council makes good use of our published guidance on remedies and council officers have also consulted my investigative staff in individual cases.

Training in complaint handling

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.

In November 2009 we delivered a course in effective complaint handling to staff from your authority. We have extended the range of courses we provide and 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.

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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.

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