



House of Commons

Communities and Local
Government Committee

**Further review of the
work of the Local
Government
Ombudsman**

Fifth Report of Session 2013–14



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*Report, together with formal minutes relating
to the report*

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The Communities and Local Government Committee

The Communities and Local Government Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Department for Communities and Local Government.

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Publication

The Reports of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the internet at www.parliament.uk/parliament.uk/clg. A list of Reports of the Committee in the present Parliament is at the back of this volume.

The Reports of the Committee, the formal minutes relating to that report, oral evidence taken and some or all written evidence are available in a printed volume.

Additional written evidence may be published on the internet only.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Glenn McKee (Clerk), Sarah Coe (Second Clerk), Stephen Habberley (Inquiry Manager), Kevin Maddison (Committee Specialist), Emma McIntosh (Senior Committee Assistant), Mandy Sullivan (Committee Assistant), and David Foster (Assistant Media Officer).

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Summary

The Local Government Ombudsman has made a concerted effort to improve its performance over the past 12 months and we commend it. Since late 2012 it has sought to become more accountable, efficient and transparent. It has done so by, for example, publishing its decisions online, making considerable budget savings and creating a forum in which to hear the views of its service users. Although it has succeeded in several areas, further work needs to be done. The Government has said it will restructure the organisation if it can find the parliamentary time to do so, and in the meantime we make four recommendations that would not require any change in the law. If adopted they would enable the LGO to continue to improve its accountability, efficiency and transparency. First, it should publish its staff survey in full, rather than summarising it as it did in 2012. Second, it should ensure that the timeliness of its decisions and its new case-handling quality control system are externally reviewed, so that recent improvements in both are maintained. Third, at least one independent member should be appointed to the board that oversees the LGO. And finally, the LGO should introduce an independent evaluator of complaints focused on the operation of its systems and services, not its decisions. The LGO and its staff have worked hard to enhance the organisation's transparency and to create a new culture of public accountability. Our proposals would reinforce those reforms, and we look forward to seeing them introduced.

The performance of the Local Government Ombudsman since 2012

Introduction

1. We held an inquiry into the work of the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) in 2012. The evidence we received led us to publish a critical report setting out a number of concerns.¹ At the time the organisation was seeking to implement a transformation plan based on an independent review of its operations commissioned the previous year. (In this report the 'Local Government Ombudsman' and the 'LGO' refer to the organisation; the 'Ombudsman' refers to the current officeholder, Dr Jane Martin.)

2. Of the key conclusions and recommendations in our 2012 report, we:

- called for more detail on, and a timetable for, the planned changes to the LGO's investigation process;
- recommended that it undertake customer and staff surveys;
- expressed particular concern about the length of time it was taking to determine some of its cases; and
- urged the LGO to introduce an annual evaluation of the organisation by an external, independent reviewer.²

The LGO responded positively to our report in October 2012 and embarked on a number of changes to its operations.³ This is a follow-up inquiry and report to check on the progress it has made.

3. In the period between our inquiries the LGO has undergone two further reviews. First, acting on one of our recommendations, it appointed an independent, external evaluation team to review its entire operation. This work was undertaken by Richard Thomas CBE, then Chair of the Administrative Justice and Tribunals Council, Jim Martin, the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman, and Dr Richard Kirkham from the University of Sheffield. They reported in April 2013, and we consider their recommendations at paragraph 12.⁴

4. Second, the Government commissioned Robert Gordon, a former senior civil servant, to review the LGO's governance structures.⁵ These have changed very little since the LGO was

1 Communities and Local Government Committee, Third Report of Session 2012-13, *The Work of the Local Government Ombudsman*, HC 431

2 Communities and Local Government Committee, *The Work of the Local Government Ombudsman*, paras 34, 48, 52, 57 and 72.

3 Communities and Local Government Committee, First Special Report of Session 2012-13, *The work of the Local Government Ombudsman: Local Government Ombudsman's Response to the Committee's Third Report of Session 2012-13*, HC 615

4 Richard Thomas CBE, Jim Martin, Richard Kirkham, *External Evaluation of the Local Government Ombudsman*, April 2013

5 Department for Communities and Local Government, *Governance Review of the Local Government Ombudsman Service: A report for the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government*, November 2013

