

Audit Committee Briefing Note.

Summary.

This report provides details of the response times to Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) enquiries and looks at the decline in performance in this area to see what might have caused it.

The LGO has a time scale for responses from councils to their enquiries of 28 calendar days. For the year 2011/12, the Council's average response time was 33.4 days. This represented the second year of increased response times with the figure for 2010/11 being 27.2 and for 2009/10 being 24.7.

Background.

Liaison with the LGO is undertaken by the corporate complaints team with the corporate complaints manager acting as Link Officer. The Team consists of two senior complaints officers and a complaints support officer and came into being in January 2007 following the amalgamation of the then Neighbourhood & Housing Department complaints team and the post of corporate complaints manager.

One of the many tasks that the team began to undertake was to tighten up LGO response times by introducing individual monitoring of each enquiry and setting our own reduced time scale of 21 days for a response. It was this work that led to the figure of 24.7 days in 2009/10, the best figure the Council has ever achieved.

The work of progress-chasing LGO responses was the responsibility of the complaints support officer who, through a combination of the internal deadline of 21 days and the development of relationships with key service staff, was able to secure timely responses with only the occasional exception.

In July 2011, the complaints support officer post holder went on secondment. It took many weeks to recruit into the post and within two months, the successful candidate secured a post outside the Council and the recruitment process began again. The post was finally filled in February this year.

The effects of this upheaval have unquestionably had an impact on the Team's capacity to keep a control on response times and whilst not the sole reason for the decline in performance, it will undoubtedly have had a significant impact.

These events took place at the same time as significant re-organisations within the Planning and Housing services. The re-alignment and re-ordering of management responsibilities has impacted on the ability of managers to spend the time required in producing responses.

The Data.

We receive a large number of communications from the LGO throughout the year but it is only our response to their enquiries that are measured. Each "enquiry" represents an investigation of a complaint by the LGO on behalf of a complainant who has exhausted the Council's own complaints procedure. The numbers of these enquiries have remained fairly consistent over the years, fluctuating between the high 40's and low 50's.

Data Analysis.

Scatter graphs of the data have been created for each of the three years in question (appendix A), showing the distribution of response times for every enquiry made in the year. What is immediately obvious is the increase in the number of responses exceeding the 28 days across the three years and the number well outside of the deadline in 2011/12. The table below shows some further analysis.

	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
No. of enquiries received	50	47	54
No. exceeding 28 days.	18	16	29
% of those exceeding 28 days	36	34	53
No. taking more than double 28 days	1	5	8

Taking the last row of the table above, I have looked into the background to each of these cases to see what reasons there were for them being so far beyond the deadline.

All of the six cases in 2009/10 and 10/11 were complex and required considerable amounts of work in producing a response. This is largely the reason for the delays. However, in 2011/12, the picture is more mixed and it is clear that in some cases, failures by the Complaints team in the early stages to move the enquiry to the service manager brought about a delay. In other cases it was simply the demands on the service manager were such that it took far longer than it should to elicit a response.

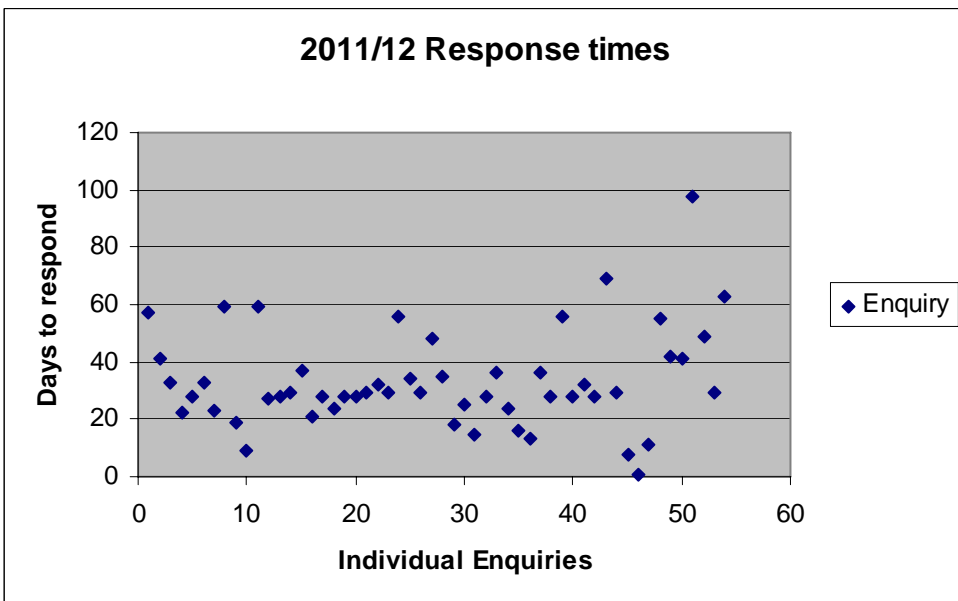
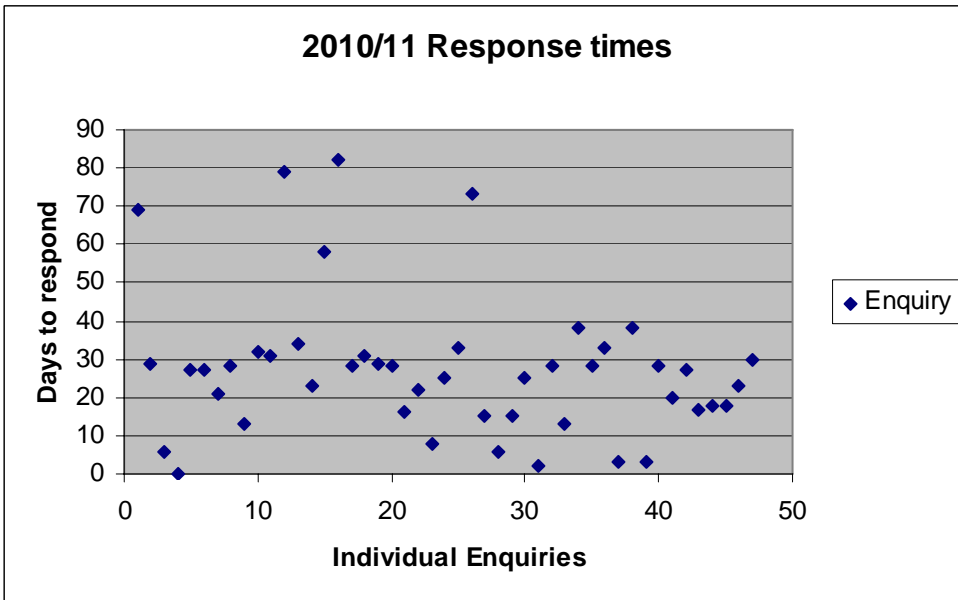
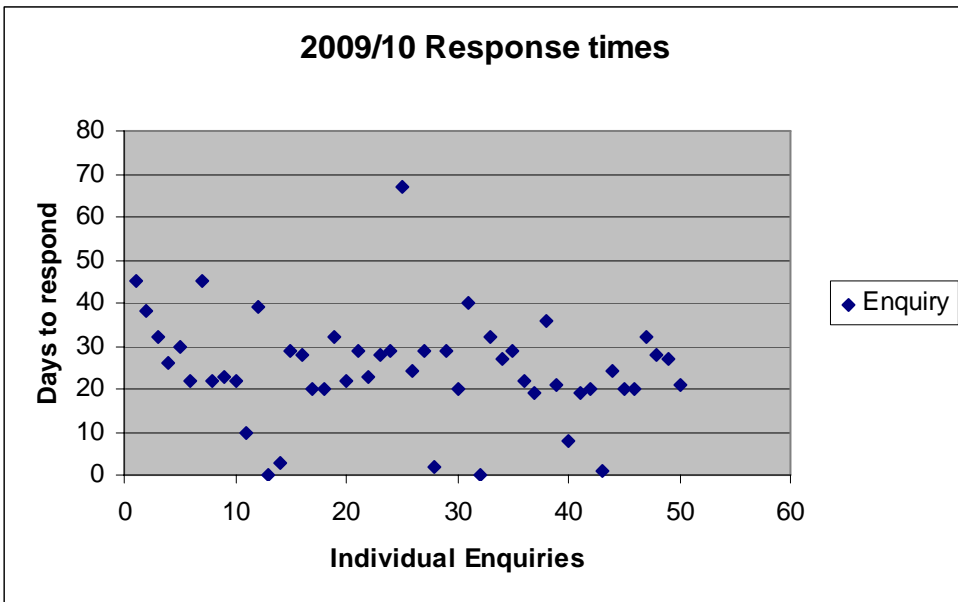
Conclusion.

There will always be the occasional LGO enquiry that requires such a lot of information gathering that meeting the 28 day deadline will be a struggle. However, the majority of cases will have already been through all three stages of the Council's own complaints procedure, so a great deal of the information will already be available. Meeting the target then, is largely about co-ordination and progress-chasing, and this has slipped in last 12 months.

The future.

A re-organisation is currently underway with intention of bringing together the H&SC, CYPS and corporate complaints teams into a single unit. This task should be complete by the end of the year. Once the new team is in place, we will seek to resurrect the progress-chasing function and hopefully, restore the performance we once enjoyed.

Tim Sheppard
Corporate Complaints Manager
12th September 2012



(Note: one or two enquiries are shown as taking zero days for a response. This represents situations in which the LGO opened an enquiry in error. These cases need to remain in the calculations to maintain the credibility of the figures.)