

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

**St Helens Metropolitan  
Borough Council**

**for the year ended  
31 March 2008**

The Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) provides 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, the Ombudsmen aim to get it put right by recommending a suitable remedy. The LGO also uses the findings from investigation work to help authorities provide better public services through initiatives such as special reports, training and annual letters.

## **Annual Letter 2007/08 - Introduction**

This annual letter provides a summary of the complaints received about St Helens Metropolitan Borough Council and comments on the authority's performance and complaint-handling arrangements.

I hope that the letter will assist you in improving services by providing a useful perspective on how some people who are dissatisfied experience or perceive your services.

Two attachments form an integral part of this letter: statistical data covering a three year period and a note to help the interpretation of the statistics.

## **Complaints received**

I received 29 complaints about the Council in 2007/08. As you can see from the statistical data attached, this is comparable with last year and consists of complaints across all service areas. Complaints about planning and building control matters reduced from 13 to 6.

The number of complaints is too low for me to draw any meaningful conclusions from this information, I encourage the Council to consider this data in the context of its own complaint-handling data.

## **Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman**

The Council's liaison officer provides timely responses to our initial enquiries. As the statistical information shows, the average response time is 28 days, exactly meeting the timescale requested. I thank the Council for its continued cooperation in this as it helps my staff reduce the time to respond to complaints, ensuring a better service for complainants.

In addition to contact through your liaison officer, my Assistant Ombudsman has frequent contact with your Social Services complaints officers about general complaint handling matters. I understand that your Council has made significant efforts over the past year to improve complaint handling under the statutory social services procedures. My staff have been impressed by the commitment shown to improving both complaint handling and services in this area.

## **Decisions on complaints**

### ***Reports and local settlements***

We will often discontinue enquires into a complaint when a council takes or agrees to take action that we consider to be a satisfactory response – we call these local settlements. In 2007/08 the Local Government Ombudsmen determined 27% of complaints by local settlement (excluding 'premature' complaints - where councils have not had a proper chance to deal with them - and those outside our jurisdiction). If an investigation is completed I issue a public report.

I did not issue any reports about the Council in 2007/08. Of the 16 complaints I investigated, two were determined by local settlement. Our experience of the two investigations was quite different. One of the complaints, about Adult Care Services, was handled very efficiently by your Council who proposed the appropriate local settlement and was proactive in its responses to the complainant. The other complaint concerned planning enforcement.

## ***Other findings***

In total, I made 29 decisions on complaints about your Council. As you can see from the statistical information, 11 of these were premature, two were outside my jurisdiction and of the 16 other decisions, seven resulted in a finding of no maladministration.

## **Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints**

My investigations did not raise any concerns about your Council's own complaints procedures.

## **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. A detailed evaluation of the training provided to councils over the past three years shows very high levels of satisfaction.

The range of courses is expanding in response to demand. In addition to Good Complaint Handling (identifying and processing complaints) and Effective Complaint Handling (investigation and resolution), we now offer these courses specifically for social services staff and a course on reviewing complaints for social care review panel members. We will customise courses to meet your Council's specific requirements and provide courses for groups of staff from different smaller authorities.

Participants benefit from the complaint-handling knowledge and expertise of the experienced investigators who present the courses.

I enclose information on the full range of courses available together with contact details for enquiries and any further bookings.

## **LGO developments**

We launched the LGO Advice Team in April, providing a first contact service for all enquirers and new complainants. Demand for the service has been high. Our team of advisers, trained to provide comprehensive information and advice, has dealt with many thousands of calls since the service started.

The team handles complaints submitted by telephone, email or text, as well as in writing. This new power to accept complaints other than in writing was one of the provisions of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act, which also came into force in April. Our experience of implementing other provisions in the Act, such as complaints about service failure and apparent maladministration, is being kept under review and will be subject to further discussion. Any feedback from your Council would be welcome.

Last year we published two special reports providing advice and guidance on 'applications for prior approval of telecommunications masts' and 'citizen redress in local partnerships'. Feedback on special reports is always welcome. I would particularly appreciate information on complaints protocols in the governance arrangements of partnerships with which your Council is involved.

## **Conclusions and general observations**

I welcome this opportunity to comment on our experience of complaints about the Council over the past year. I hope that you find the information and assessment provided useful when seeking improvements to your Council's services.

**Anne Seex  
Local Government Ombudsman  
Beverley House  
17 Shipton Road  
YORK  
YO30 5FZ**

**June 2008**

Enc: Statistical data  
Note on interpretation of statistics  
Leaflet on training courses (with posted copy only)

<b>Complaints received by subject area</b>	<b>Adult care services</b>	<b>Benefits</b>	<b>Children and family services</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Housing</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Planning &amp; building control</b>	<b>Public finance</b>	<b>Transport and highways</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008</b>	5	0	2	3	1	8	6	2	2	<b>29</b>
<b>2006 / 2007</b>	3	0	1	3	1	6	13	1	0	<b>28</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	4	1	1	3	0	6	16	0	0	<b>31</b>

**Note:** these figures will include complaints that were made prematurely to the Ombudsman and which we referred back to the authority for consideration.

<b>Decisions</b>	<b>MI reps</b>	<b>LS</b>	<b>M reps</b>	<b>NM reps</b>	<b>No mal</b>	<b>Omb disc</b>	<b>Outside jurisdiction</b>	<b>Premature complaints</b>	<b>Total excl premature</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008</b>	0	2	0	0	7	7	2	11	18	<b>29</b>
<b>2006 / 2007</b>	0	1	1	0	18	5	3	9	28	<b>37</b>
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	0	2	0	0	7	2	0	10	11	<b>21</b>

See attached notes for an explanation of the headings in this table.

<b>Response times</b>	<b>FIRST ENQUIRIES</b>	
	<b>No. of First Enquiries</b>	<b>Avg no. of days to respond</b>
<b>01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008</b>	11	28.0
<b>2006 / 2007</b>	9	21.3
<b>2005 / 2006</b>	17	21.5

**Average local authority response times 01/04/2007 to 31/03/2008**

<b>Types of authority</b>	<b>&lt;= 28 days %</b>	<b>29 - 35 days %</b>	<b>&gt; = 36 days %</b>
District Councils	56.4	24.6	19.1
Unitary Authorities	41.3	50.0	8.7
Metropolitan Authorities	58.3	30.6	11.1
County Councils	47.1	38.2	14.7
London Boroughs	45.5	27.3	27.3
National Park Authorities	71.4	28.6	0.0