

**The Local Government Ombudsman's  
Annual Letter  
Halton 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 Halton Borough Council and comments on the authority's performance and complaint-handling arrangements.

As a result of the Secretary of State's decision on the future structure of local government in Cheshire this is the last Annual Letter that I shall be sending to the Council. I should like to take this opportunity of thanking all the members and officers who have dealt with my office for their courtesy and co-operation and wish you well for the future.

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**

During the year my office received 18 complaints against the Council. No theme or pattern emerged during the year to give me or the Council any cause for concern. Indeed the number of complaints received was too small to enable me to offer any meaningful observations.

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

I ask all authorities to respond to my initial enquiries within 28 calendar days. I am pleased to acknowledge that the Council, this year, took just 20.3 days on average to reply to my office. This reflects well on the Council and I thank the Council for the effort it has clearly made during the year in this regard.

## **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 issued no reports against the Council during the year.

### ***Other findings***

I determined 16 complaints during the year, a figure which differs from the number of complaints received because of work in hand at the beginning and end of the year. Of these complaints 3 were sent to me prematurely while 2 were outside of my jurisdiction. In 2 cases I exercised my general discretion not to pursue the matter and in 3 cases I found no evidence of maladministration by the Council. The Council agreed to settle the final 3 cases and I am grateful to the Council for the willingness it has shown to acknowledge when something has gone wrong and to recognise the appropriateness of some form of remedy for the complainant. In two of the cases settled by the Council my investigators here noted the positive attitude shown by the Council and the speed of the action taken by the Council in offering a remedy. This too reflects well on the Council and the working relationship it has with my office.

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

No issues have arisen during the year to suggest that there are any problems with the way in which the Council handles complaints made to it by members of the public.

## **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>             | 1                          | 1               | 3                                   | 4                | 1              | 3            | 4                                      | 1                     | 0                             | <b>18</b>    |
| <b>2006 / 2007</b>                         | 0                          | 0               | 5                                   | 3                | 2              | 6            | 3                                      | 0                     | 0                             | <b>19</b>    |
| <b>2005 / 2006</b>                         | 3                          | 0               | 7                                   | 3                | 5              | 8            | 3                                      | 1                     | 1                             | <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              | 3         | 0             | 0              | 6             | 2               | 2                           | 3                           | 13                          | <b>16</b>    |
| <b>2006 / 2007</b>             | 0              | 6         | 0             | 0              | 5             | 1               | 1                           | 6                           | 13                          | <b>19</b>    |
| <b>2005 / 2006</b>             | 0              | 6         | 0             | 0              | 11            | 7               | 2                           | 9                           | 26                          | <b>35</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> | 6                             | 20.3                              |
| <b>2006 / 2007</b>             | 9                             | 26.2                              |
| <b>2005 / 2006</b>             | 18                            | 36.3                              |

**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                     |