



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter
South Kesteven District
Council
for the year ended
31 March 2007**

The Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) investigates complaints by members of the public who consider that they have been caused injustice through administrative fault by local authorities and certain other bodies. 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 2006/07 - Introduction

This annual letter provides a summary of the complaints we have received about your authority. Where possible, we comment on the authority's performance and complaint-handling arrangements to assist with your service improvement.

I hope that the letter will be a useful addition to other information your authority holds on how people 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

Volume

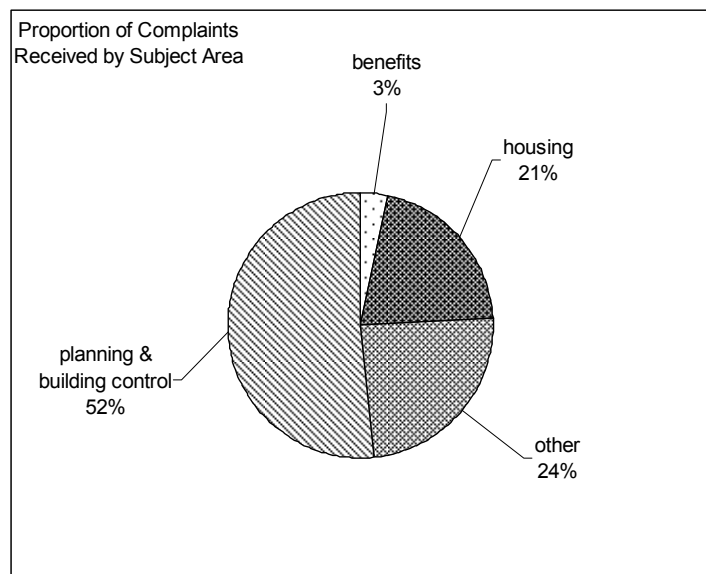
In the year ending 31 March 2007, I received 29 complaints about your Council. Exactly the same number as last year.

Character

You will recall when I wrote last year, I brought the Council's attention the fact that planning complaints constituted 30% of all complaints made to the Council.

You will see from this chart that the proportion has risen to 52%.

The actual number of complaints, 15, is quite small but I urge the Council to consider whether there are any changes in the way that it investigates planning complaints that might result in fewer complaints proceeding to me. You might find it helpful to consider this in the context of feedback from your own complaints procedure.



The Council can draw some comfort from the fact that my investigations of planning complaints, while highlighting some issues (such as communication) did not identify systemic problems.

Decisions on complaints

Reports and local settlements

A 'local settlement' is a complaint that is resolved by the Council taking, or agreeing to take, action which we consider is a satisfactory response to the complaint so that the investigation can be discontinued. In 2006/07 27.7% of complaints dealt with by the three Local Government Ombudsmen (excluding premature and those outside jurisdiction) were resolved by local settlement. When we complete an investigation we must issue a report.

During the twelve months we agreed local settlements on three complaints. Those complaints were disparate in nature and (subject to my comment about complaint handling in the next section) did not indicate underlying service delivery problems.

I did not issue any reports.

Decisions

In addition to the three local settlements, I determined 23 decisions, a figure which differs from the number of complaints received because of work in hand at the start and finish of the year.

Of those 23 decisions: three complaints were outside my jurisdiction, three I exercised discretion not to investigate, in seven I found no evidence of maladministration and 10 were 'premature' (in our view the Council had not been given adequate opportunity to investigate and resolve them for itself, so were returned to the Council to consider through its internal complaint procedure).

Other findings

As you are aware, we ask for comprehensive responses to our enquiries within 28 days. Your Council responded in a little over 35 days on average. This figure was skewed by one complaint that it took your Council 94 days to respond to (that said the quality of the response received was very good!). But for that one complaint, the average response time was 28.4 days. I am grateful to your Council for its cooperation in this respect.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

It is interesting to note that one of the complaints we agreed to settle was specifically about failure to investigate a complaint I had referred to your Council as premature. While clearly one complaint cannot be indicative of a general approach, I urge the Council to consider this in the context of other feedback it receives from the public.

That said, it is evident from the information you publish and which is available via your web-site that your Council is committed to effective complaint handling. I am pleased to see direct reference to the LGO in your information leaflet.

I am aware from contact your complaints staff have had with my assistant ombudsman that your Council has worked hard and continues to work hard to develop your complaint handling and draw your attention to the information about training.

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. The feedback from councils that have taken up the training is very positive.

The range of courses is expanding in response to demand and in addition to the generic Good Complaint Handling (identifying and processing complaints) and Effective Complaint Handling (investigation and resolution), we can run open courses for groups of staff from smaller authorities and also customise courses to meet your Council's specific requirements.

All courses are presented by an experienced investigator so participants benefit from their knowledge and expertise of complaint handling.

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

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

The liaison arrangements between our two organizations work well (notwithstanding the occasional hiccup over response times).

Your designated liaison staff are helpful and professional in their dealings with us, an approach that is greatly appreciated. I urge the Council to consider whether this could be enhanced by ensuring that within the Council the internal liaison and provision of information works as effectively.

LGO developments

You may be interested in the development of our initiative to improve the first contact that people have with us. A new Access and Advice Service will provide a gateway to our services for all complainants and enquirers. It will encourage telephone contact but will also deal with email, text and letter correspondence. We will let you have further details about how it will operate and the expected timescales and discuss with you the implications for the Council.

I hope you have received our latest special report about telecommunications masts. It draws on our experience of dealing with complaints about planning applications for masts which can be highly controversial. We recommend simple measures that councils can adopt to minimise the chances of maladministration occurring.

In July we will be publishing a special report about the difficulties that can be encountered with complaints when local authorities deliver services or discharge their functions through partnerships. *Local partnerships and citizen redress* provides advice and guidance on how these problems can be overcome by good governance arrangements that include an effective complaints protocol.

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 2007

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

Complaints received by subject area	Benefits	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	1	6	7	15	0	29
2005 / 2006	0	8	4	11	6	29
2004 / 2005	1	6	3	6	2	18

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

Decisions	MI reps	LS	M reps	NM reps	No mal	Omb disc	Outside jurisdiction	Premature complaints	Total excl premature	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	0	3	0	0	7	3	3	10	16	26
2005 / 2006	0	4	0	0	10	5	2	8	21	29
2004 / 2005	0	1	0	0	3	3	1	5	8	13

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

Response times	FIRST ENQUIRIES	
	No. of First Enquiries	Avg no. of days to respond
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	9	35.7
2005 / 2006	9	33.4
2004 / 2005	6	21.3

Average local authority response times 01/04/2006 to 31/03/2007

Types of authority	<= 28 days %	29 - 35 days %	>= 36 days %
District Councils	48.9	23.4	27.7
Unitary Authorities	30.4	37.0	32.6
Metropolitan Authorities	38.9	41.7	19.4
County Councils	47.1	32.3	20.6
London Boroughs	39.4	33.3	27.3
National Park Authorities	66.7	33.3	0.0