

Local Government  
**OMBUDSMAN**

**The Local Government Ombudsman's  
Annual Letter  
South Holland District 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 South Holland District 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 24 complaints about your Council in 2007/08; nearly double the 13 received the year before. While the numbers are relatively low and so do not enable me to draw definitive conclusions, your Council may wish to consider this in light of the fact that complaints about planning matters have risen four-fold, from three to 14 and in light of my later comments about complaint handling.

While I do not have sufficient data from which to draw conclusions, I encourage your Council to analyse the complaints in the context of data from your own complaints procedures to see if trends or issues can be identified, and the reasons for them.

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

My office continues to enjoy a good relationship with your Council's liaison officer who provides timely responses to our initial enquiries. As the statistical information shows, the average response time is just 23.8 days - well within the requested 28 days.

I thank your Council for its continued cooperation in this as it helps my staff reduce the time it takes to respond to complaints, ensuring a better service for our complainants.

## **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 your Council in 2007/08. I determined two complaints as local settlements. While I was critical of your Council about the way in which it dealt with reports of antisocial behaviour, I was impressed with your Council's readiness to learn and commitment to service improvement in this area.

### ***Other findings***

In total, I made 18 decisions on complaints about your Council. This number differs slightly from the number of complaints received as it includes complaints still under investigation. As you can see from the statistical information, nine of these were premature and of the nine other decisions, five resulted in a finding of no maladministration.

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

While my investigations did not identify particular issues with your Council's complaints procedures, I do have one observation to make.

The number of decisions that complaints were premature was nine. Of this nine, seven were complaints about planning applications. This coupled with the rise in complaints about planning matters leads me to question how effective your Council is at capturing and dealing with planning related complaints. I would encourage your Council to consider this in the context of your own data about complaints and whether changes in process or the way in which your complaints procedure is publicised is needed.

## **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. 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 understand your Council participated in effective complaints handling training in June 2007 that was delivered jointly to a number of Council in the area. I enclose information on the full range of courses available together with contact details for enquiries and any further bookings should you be interested in extending that training further. I hope your staff enjoyed the course and took a lot from it. I know our trainer found it to be a very positive experience.

## **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  
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**June 2008**

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

Complaints received by subject area	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Total
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	3	6	14	1	24
2006 / 2007	3	7	3	0	13
2005 / 2006	1	6	5	0	12

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
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	0	2	0	0	5	2	0	9	9	18
2006 / 2007	0	2	0	0	4	2	0	5	8	13
2005 / 2006	0	1	0	0	3	2	0	4	6	10

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
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	9	23.8
2006 / 2007	3	22.7
2005 / 2006	5	22.4

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

Types of authority	<= 28 days %	29 - 35 days %	> = 36 days %
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