

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

As the attached statistical data shows, I received 17 complaints about the Council in 2007/08. This is a reduction of 12 on the previous year's 29 and planning and building control complaints fell from 15 to two. The volume of complaints is too small to enable definitive conclusions to be drawn.

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 has fallen from 35.7 days in 2006/07 to 18.5 in 2007/08. These times are very good and well within the requested 28 days. 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.

The Council will be interested to note that the two complaints that took the longest to respond on were planning complaints. But for these two complaints, the average response time would have been 11.5 days. The fall in response times from last year coincides with a fall in the number of planning complaints made to me.

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 11 complaints I investigated I determined three as local settlements. In two of these complaints the Council agreed to take action. I thank you for your positive and prompt response on these.

The third local settlement involved action and a payment to the complainant. As a result of this investigation my Assistant Ombudsman raised an issue about the process by which the Council agrees any financial element of a local settlement. A payment of £150 had to be agreed via a portfolio holder, with the possibility of being called-in by your scrutiny committee. This was time consuming for such a small amount and I encourage the Council to consider whether settlement of complaints (not just those that come to me) could be simplified.

Other findings

In total, I made 22 decisions on complaints about your Council. This number differs slightly from the number of complaints received as it includes complaints received in the previous year. As you can see from the statistical information, seven of these were premature, four were outside my jurisdiction and of the 11 other decisions five resulted in a finding of no maladministration.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

I only saw a small number of complaints about your Council, none of which gave me any concerns about complaint-handling, above the issue of local settlements already covered.

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 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
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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	Benefits	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Total
01/04/2007 - 31/03/2008	0	10	3	2	2	17
2006 / 2007	1	7	6	15	0	29
2005 / 2006	0	8	4	11	6	29

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	3	0	0	5	3	4	7	15	22
2006 / 2007	0	3	0	0	7	3	3	10	16	26
2005 / 2006	0	4	0	0	10	5	2	8	21	29

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	6	18.5
2006 / 2007	9	35.7
2005 / 2006	9	33.4

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