
OVERVIEW OF COMPLAINTS MADE TO OMBUDSMAN

Responsible Cabinet Member(s) - Councillor John Williams, Leader

Responsible Director(s) - Paul Wildsmith, Director of Corporate Services

Purpose of Report

1. To provide Members with details of an overview of complaints against the Borough Council dealt with by the Local Government Ombudsman over the course of the last year.

Information and Analysis

2. Members will be aware that at each meeting of Cabinet an update of the outcome of cases which have been considered by the Local Ombudsman is submitted, indicating any points for particular attention and/or referral to the Standards Committee.
3. The Local Government Ombudsman initiated a pilot exercise in 2003, whereby the Ombudsman sent a letter to a representative sample of Councils spelling out the details of complaints against those Councils which the Ombudsman had determined during the year and drawing any lessons the Ombudsman thought appropriate in respect of the performance of the Council, its complaints handling arrangement generally and how lessons might be fed back into service improvement. The Ombudsman has now introduced that arrangement for all Councils in 2004.
4. **Attached** is a copy of a letter dated 22nd June, 2004 from the Local Government Ombudsman to the Chief Executive with an enclosed note on how to interpret the Local Authority statistics.
5. Members will note that the character of the complaints received in the 12 months up to 31st March, 2004 revealed no serious areas of concern. The number of complaints did rise sharply when compared with the previous 12 months but this is in line with the national trend and does not reflect badly on the Council. The Ombudsman does not necessarily equate rising complaints with poor performance. Indeed, she points out that rising complaints may simply reflect the emphasis placed by the Council on customer service and the transparency of and ease of access to the complaints procedure.
6. The Ombudsman is generally satisfied with the way in which the Council deals with complaints referred to the Council by the Ombudsman and there are a number of very positive points made by the Ombudsman in respect of the Council's procedure.

7. There are always areas which could be improved. The format of response letters would benefit if it were standardised, a point made at a seminar recently held by the Local Government Ombudsman for the benefit of Monitoring Officers, and steps have been taken to comply with that request from the Ombudsman. Additionally, Members will see that on the third page of the letter from the Ombudsman, reference is made to training in complaint handling, which would appear to be a useful exercise to ensure that the complaint handling system is as consistent across Local Authorities and effective as possible. A further spin-off is the insight it gives into the Ombudsman's approach to complaint handling. It would be the intention of Officers to take advantage of any course offered.
8. A review of complaints handling within the Council has recently been completed and training was identified as a key issue there. It appeared that there would be benefits in additional training being given to Investigating Officers dealing with Stage 2 and Stage 3 complaints and an interest has been expressed in some form of investigative training, conflict management and mediation training. As a result a mapping exercise to assess the current gap in training requirements is being carried out and this is being incorporated in an implementation plan. Training offered by the Ombudsman would sit neatly with these proposals.

Outcome of Consultation

9. The issues contained within this report do not require formal consultation.

Legal Implications

10. This report has been considered by the Borough Solicitor for legal implications in accordance with the Council's approved procedures. There are no issues which the Borough Solicitor considers need to be brought to the specific attention of Members, other than those highlighted in the report.

Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998

11. The contents of this report have been considered in the context of the requirements placed on the Council by Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, namely, the duty on the Council to exercise its functions with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area. It is not considered that the contents of this report have any such effect.

Council Policy Framework

12. The issues contained within this report do not represent change to Council policy or the Council's policy framework

Decision Deadline

13. For the purpose of the 'call-in' procedure this does not represent an urgent matter

Recommendation

It is recommended that the contents of the report be noted.

Reasons

14. The recommendation is supported as it is important that Members are aware of the views of the Local Ombudsman on the Council's handling of complaints referred to it via the Ombudsman.

**Paul Wildsmith,
Director of Corporate Services**

Background Papers

No Background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

Peter Kearsley : Extension 2307
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