

METROPOLITAN BOROUGH OF WIRRAL

STANDARDS COMMITTEE - 22 JULY 2003

REPORT OF THE BOROUGH SOLICITOR AND SECRETARY

ANNUAL REPORT OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT OMBUDSMAN

1. Summary

This report sets out the annual report of the Local Government Ombudsman and advises of ways in which the Council will seek to improve its performance in relation to issues contained within the report.

2. Background

- 2.1 Earlier this year the Local Government Ombudsman wrote to the Council and advised us that they would not be issuing an annual letter this year because they proposed to introduce a new annual letter with summary performance information in 2004. Instead, the Local Government Ombudsman was to issue an annual letter only to a pilot number of authorities. I contacted the Local Ombudsman and asked if Wirral could be included with a number of pilot authorities who would have performance information around their complaints. The Ombudsman agreed to do that so we have been added to the pilot, and we have therefore received an annual letter.
- 2.2 The Ombudsman's letter is attached. Overall, in the last three years, the number of complaints against the Council has decreased by 24% and in particular housing benefit complaints have dropped significantly. Education complaints have risen somewhat and a further analysis will come to the next meeting of Standards Committee. It is believed that these largely relate to unsuccessful appeals concerning parental choice in relation to secondary schools and have not increase the number of maladministration findings against the Authority.
- 2.3 A particular concern is the amount of time that the Council is taking to respond to initial enquiries. Complaints should be dealt with within 21 days and the Council's average performance has been 42. Quite often that first response has in fact resolved the matter immediately; nonetheless the time frame is unacceptable and I have put in place measures to ensure that this reduces over the current year.
- 2.4 The Ombudsman has asked for comments about the report. It is my recommendation that we should welcome an annual report in this format and that in future it would be of value to include comparative statistics, that is comparisons of both neighbouring authorities and comparable authorities to Wirral. Members views are sought on that. The Ombudsman is also asking whether these reports should be published openly in the future and again it is my view that this should happen.

2.5 Members can see attached the questions the Ombudsman is asking and if they have any particular views that they would like me to feed back then I will be happy to do so.

2.6 Following along from this report, members may wish to see in a little more detail an analysis in broad terms of the some of the subject area concerned.

3. Financial and Staffing Implications

There are no financial or staffing implications arising out of this report.

4. Other Implications

There are no implications arising directly out of this report in terms of equal opportunities, ethnic minorities, the elderly or the disabled; nor are there any direct community safety, human rights, Local Agenda 21, planning or other implications.

5. Background Papers

The only background papers used in the preparation of this report is the letter dated 18 June 2003 from the Local Government Ombudsman (Appendix 1)

6. Local Member Support Implications

This report has no implications for specific wards.

7. Recommendation

Members are requested to note the report and make any representations concerning the Local Government Ombudsman's annual letter.

JOHANNA MILLER

Borough Solicitor
and Secretary

JEM/LW.
16 July 2003