

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF LEGAL AND MEMBER SERVICES

ANNUAL REPORT 2004/05 OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT OMBUDSMAN

1. Summary

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

2. Background

2.1 The Ombudsman's letter is attached, which is self-explanatory.

2.2 The Ombudsman received 81 complaints against the Council in the twelve months up to 31 March 2005, which is remarkably consistent with previous years. The nature of complaints received reveals no particular cause for concern.

2.3 The Ombudsman made 84 decisions in the year, which includes those complaints in hand at the beginning of the year. The Council agreed to settle 9 complaints and the Ombudsman has expressed gratitude to the Authority for its willingness to respond so positively in these situations. One report was issued against the Council.

2.4 Of particular concern, however, is the time taken for the Council to respond to complaints. Against a target time of 21 days, I have to report that the Council took an average 41 days to reply to initial enquiries. This is worse than the 34 day average of the previous year and broadly equates to the position two years ago. Notwithstanding the complexity of some complaints, this is clearly not acceptable. The Chief Executive has commissioned a piece of work to investigate areas where delay has occurred, to see if a pattern exists. This work is ongoing. In the meantime, I have already taken action to address the problem. I have arranged for automatic reminders to be generated to my officers dealing with complaints when a deadline is approaching. They will then liaise with their contacts in other departments to ensure that they are reminded of the impending deadline as well. I would also point out that the Ombudsman has recognised that some complaints do demand more time and therefore has amended the target time to 28 days. The Ombudsman has confirmed that she looks to the Council to make every effort to meet this new target, and the Chief Executive and I concur.

3. Training

Members will recall that the Ombudsman had been piloting courses which can be delivered to authorities across the country. I understand that those pilots have been successful and that the training sessions are now available. I am

making arrangements for one to take place in Wirral with complaints officers as soon as ever possible.

4. Financial and Staffing Implications

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

5. Other Implications

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

6. Background Papers

The only background paper used in the preparation of this report has been the Ombudsman's letter dated 21 June 2005, which is appended to this report.

7. Local Member Support Implications

This report has no implications for specific wards.

8. Recommendation

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

M E Reaney
HEAD OF LEGAL AND MEMBER SERVICES &
MONITORING OFFICER