

METROPOLITAN BOROUGH OF WIRRAL**STANDARDS COMMITTEE – 25 SEPTEMBER 2006****REPORT OF THE DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE/DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE SERVICES****ANNUAL LETTER 2005/06 OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT OMBUDSMAN**

1. Executive Summary

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

2. Background

- 2.1 The Ombudsman's letter is attached which is self explanatory (Appendix 1).
- 2.2 The Ombudsman received 128 complaints against the Council in the year, which on the face of it appeared to be a substantial increase in the figures for the previous three years which have held steady at around 80. However, 22 of those complaints were, in fact, a multiple complaint about one issue which had been regarded as premature and then reappeared later. Therefore, one single issue accounted for 52 of the total meaning that the underlying figure was very similar to that of the previous few years. There was, however, an increase in complaints about Social Services from 12 in 2004/05 to 21 in 2005/06.
- 2.3 101 complaints were decided, of which 41 were closed as premature. Bearing in mind the comments above about the large number of complaints from a single issue, the Ombudsman has used 16 as the true figure of cases where the complainants had not been satisfied with the Council responses. This was around 16% of the total against a national figure of 27%.
- 2.4 There were no adverse reports issued by the Ombudsman during the year. Eleven complaints were settled locally. This represents about 20% of the non-premature complaints. The national figure is 27% and the Ombudsman points out that the Council can take some encouragement from that.
- 2.5 The Ombudsman draws attention to two cases concerning the actions of the School Admissions Appeals Panel where a need for training was identified. That has already been addressed.
- 2.6 The Ombudsman refers to issues surrounding the statutory complaints procedure in Social Services and problems caused by difficulties in recruiting and retaining persons involved in the final panel stage. Significant progress has been made to ensure that panels are convened in a timely manner.
- 2.7 Members will recall the Ombudsman having been critical in 2004/05 of the Council's average time to respond to complaints. At that stage the figure was 41 days which fell in 2005/06 to 36.2 days. This is still short of the 28 days the

Ombudsman aims to see Councils achieve. She does, however, point out that of the 46 complaints in which enquiries were made of the Council, 18 were subject to delays of over 40 days, of which eight took more than 50 and three more than 70. She is further critical of the fact that the requested 14 days for response to enquiries about school admission appeals has not been achieved in a number of cases and there have, in some cases, been considerable delays. The Ombudsman does refer in the letter to her legal powers to require information in good time and identifies delays as a key issue for discussion with the Assistant Ombudsman.

- 2.8 The Ombudsman has asked that the Assistant Ombudsman arrange a liaison meeting in the near future, which will obviously be of a great assistance. She points out that there are some real problems to address but records that at a personal level, the relevant staff of the Authority remain helpful and professional and the Council remains positive about resolving issues once fault is pointed out.

3. **Financial and Staffing Implications**

There are no financial or staffing implications arising directly from this report.

4. **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.

5. **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

The only background paper used in the preparation of this report has been the Ombudsman's letter, dated 21 June 2006 which is appended to this report.

6. **LOCAL MEMBER SUPPORT IMPLICATIONS**

The 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.

J. WILKIE

Deputy Chief Executive/
Director of Corporate Services

MER/LW.
14 September 2006