

METROPOLITAN BOROUGH OF WIRRAL

STANDARDS COMMITTEE – 27 NOVEMBER 2006

REPORT OF THE DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE/DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE SERVICES

LOCAL GOVERNMENT OMBUDSMAN ANNUAL LETTER 2005/06

1. **Executive Summary**

This report provides members with an update on progress on an Action Plan to reduce the time taken to respond to Ombudsman complaints. Members are asked to note the report and make any comments.

2. **Background**

Members will recall that at its last meeting on 25 September 2006, the Committee resolved:-

- (1) that the Ombudsman's Annual Letter 2005/06 be noted, together with the proposal to prepare an Action Plan to address issues such as the time taken to respond to complaints and training for staff;
- (2) that the Action Plan be forwarded to the Ombudsman as soon as it has been finalised; and
- (3) that the opportunity to meet the Assistant Ombudsman be welcomed and the Head of Legal and Member Services enquire whether it might be possible for members of the committee to sit in on that meeting;
- (4) that the Head of Legal and Member and Services provide members with a key to the various abbreviations within the Ombudsman's report.

3. **Progress**

- 3.1 Shortly after the last meeting, the Head of Legal and Member Services was in contact with Mr. Rob Stay, the Assistant Ombudsman, who had been involved in the preparation of the Annual Letter. Mr. Stay was to visit Wirral to interview a complainant, and the Head of Legal and Member Services requested that the opportunity be taken to discuss the Annual Letter. He also enquired about the possibility of members of the committee sitting in on the meeting. Mr. Stay readily agreed to discuss the Annual Letter but time did not allow for members to become involved, and Mr. Stay felt that it was appropriate for the meeting to be at officer level in the first instance.
- 3.2 The Assistant Ombudsman and Head of Legal and Member Services met on 31 October. Mr. Reaney pointed out that the Parental Appeals Panel in its annual training session had already received training on disability issues, as required out in the Annual Letter. Indeed, an event was held recently in Liverpool, jointly between Wirral's Parental Appeals Panel and Liverpool City Council, and disability issues were again dealt with.

- 3.3 Another joint event with Liverpool will take place on 12 December 2006, and again training will include disability issues.
- 3.4 Mr. Stay was also advised that strenuous efforts had been made to recruit further independent persons to become involved in Social Services Stage 3 Complaints with a view to reducing the backlog of complaints in as a timely a fashion as ever possible.
- 3.5 Attention then focused on the time taken for responses to the made to Ombudsman complaints. The Assistant Ombudsman indicated that in future, complaints would be forwarded to local authorities by e-mail, thereby reducing postage time, as the time limit ran from the date of the Ombudsman's letter, rather than from receipt by the local authority. This would assist onward transmission within Council departments as well. It was felt that response times were essentially a management issue, and that it would be appropriate for the Head of Legal and Member Services to discuss the position with the Chief Executive and raise the issue at the Chief Officers' Management Team.
- 3.6 The Chief Officers Management Team received a presentation from the Head of Legal and Member Services on 16 November 2006, and the Chief Executive stressed the need for responses to complaints to be provided with as high a degree of urgency as ever possible. It was agreed that the time which had been taken in the Year 2005/06 to respond to complaints was unacceptable, and significant improvements had to be made.
- 3.7 The Head of Legal and Member Services drew the Chief Officers Management Team's attention to training opportunities offered by the Local Government Ombudsman, and in particular to a course entitled "Effective Complaint Handling". It was agreed that a booking be made for that course to be held in Wirral for key officers as soon as possible, at a cost of £780.

4. **Key to Abbreviations**

Members had asked at the last meeting that a key be provided to the abbreviations provided in the table annexed to the Annual Letter which are as follows:-

MI Reps	Reports on cases involving maladministration with injustice
LS	Local Settlement
M Reps	Maladministration reports
NM Reps	Reports in cases where there was no maladministration
No Mal	No maladministration (no report produced)
Omb Disc	Ombudsman's discretion

5. **Financial and Staffing Implications**

The recommended training course will cost £780 which will be met from existing resources.

6. **Equal Opportunities Implications**

There are none arising directly from this report.

7. Human Right Implications

There are none arising directly from this report.

8. Local Agenda 21 Implications

There are none arising directly from this report.

9. Community Safety Implications

There are none arising directly from this report.

10. Planning Implications

There are none arising directly from this report.

11. Local Member Support Implications

There are none arising directly from this report.

12. Background Papers

There are no background papers other than the Ombudsman's Annual Letter, dated 21 June 2006.

13. Recommendations

- (1) That members note the actions that have been taken and make any comments, and the Local Government Ombudsman be notified accordingly.
- (2) The Local Government Ombudsman be asked to provide the training course "Effective Complaints Handling" for up to 15 key staff, as soon as practicable.

J. WILIKE

Deputy Chief Executive/
Director of Corporate Services

MER/LW. WBC/G1/5
17 November 2006