

Subject: Local Government Ombudsman – Annual Letter for the year ended 31st March 2008 and Annual Complaints Review
Status: For Publication

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| Report to: Performance Scrutiny Committee | Date: 4 th September 2008 |
| Standards Committee | 22 nd September 2008 |
| Full Council | 24 th September 2008 |
| Development Control | 6 th October 2008 |

Report of: Executive Director - Business and the Head of Customer Services and ICT

Portfolio

Holder: Finance and Resources

Key Decision: No

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To inform Members of the improvements contained within with Local Government Ombudsman’s Annual Letter for the year ended 31st March 2008.
- 1.2 To provide Members with an annual update on activities within the Complaints and Feedback Process.

2. CORPORATE PRIORITIES

- 2.1 The matters discussed in this report impact directly on the following corporate priorities and associated corporate objective.
 - Delivering Quality Services to Customers (Customers, Improvement)
 - Well Managed Council (Improvement, Community Network)

3. RISK ASSESSMENT IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 There are no specific risk issues for members to consider arising from this report.

4. BACKGROUND AND OPTIONS

Ombudsman Complaints

- 4.1 The Local Government Ombudsman provides an annual summary of complaints they have received against the Council in period 1st April 2007 to 31st March 2008. A copy of this letter is attached as Appendix A, however the letter is briefly summarised as follows:
- 4.2 The Local Government Ombudsman received 23 complaints against the Council. This is an identical figure to 2006/07.
- 4.3 The greatest number of complaints continues to be in relation to planning matters which account for 70% of the total, however the numbers concerned are low. A full report on planning complaints is attached in Appendix F.
- 4.4 The Local Government Ombudsman requires responses within 28 calendar days. The starting date of this response time is taken from the date of the Ombudsman's correspondence, and not the date that the letter is received by the Council.
- 4.5 In the period 1st April 2007 to 31st March 2008 the Council's initial response times to first enquiries were:

| Time Period | Average No. of days to respond |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 01/04/2007 – 31/03/2008 | 22.8 |
| 2006/2007 | 41.1 |

- 4.6 As the statistical information shows, the average response time has fallen from 41.1 days in 2006/07 to 22.8 in 2007/08. These times are very good and well within the requested 28 days. The average would have been 17.7 days but for a particular planning complaint. The Ombudsman thanks the Council for its continued cooperation in this as it helps her staff to reduce the time it takes to respond to complaints, ensuring a better service for complainants.
- 4.7 When dealing with Ombudsman enquiries correspondence is done mainly through email which speeds up the response process. The weekly monitoring system highlights any outstanding enquiries and liaison officers are able to work with departments to ensure the Ombudsman receives a timely response. This liaison process has increased co-operation with the various departments of the Council. The Ombudsman has reported good working relationships with the Council's liaison officers, who provide timely responses to initial enquiries, and also report that they find the liaison officers helpful and approachable, demonstrating a real commitment to service improvement and complaint handling.
- 4.8 The breakdown of complaints is examined in more detail at Appendix B.

- 4.9 The current number of open Ombudsman complaints as at the date of production of this report (27/08/2008) is as follows:

| Service Area | Number of complaints |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| Planning | 6 |
| Leisure and Culture | 1 |

This figure includes premature complaints that were sent to the Ombudsman rather than to the Council to be investigated through our own complaints procedure. Out of these complaints 43% have been generated by one complainant.

Customer Complaints and Feedback

- 4.10 As part of the ongoing development of the overall customer feedback process, data is now collated relating to both complaints and compliments. A weekly report is sent to the Senior Management Team and Portfolio Holders showing progress with the resolution of complaints by service area and the cumulative number of compliments received by service area during each quarter.

Complaints

- 4.11 An analysis of complaint data by service area, showing average days to deal with complaints in both 2006/07 and 2007/08, is attached at [Appendix C](#).
- 4.12 It is encouraging to note a small reduction year on year in overall complaints received, down from 203 in 2006/07 to 189 in 2007/08 (-6.9%). Of particular note is the reduction in the overall average days to deal with complaints, down from 11.0 days in 2006/07 to 7.0 days in 2007/08. The target for complaint response is 10 days.
- 4.13 The methods used by customers to register formal complaints about the Council are as follows:

| Complaint Method | April 2006 – March 2007 | | April 2007 – March 2008 | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------|
| | No. of complaints | % of total | No. of complaints | % of total |
| Feedback form | 54 | 26.6 | 41 | 21.7 |
| E-mail | 53 | 26.2 | 71 | 37.6 |
| Letter | 75 | 36.9 | 58 | 30.7 |
| Telephone | 10 | 4.9 | 16 | 8.5 |
| Fax | 1 | 0.5 | - | - |
| Ombudsman referral | 10 | 4.9 | 2 | 1.0 |
| via Area Forum | - | - | 1 | 0.5 |
| Total | 203 | | 189 | |

The two years' data above shows a trend away from the conventional methods of complaining – feedback form or letter – and a corresponding increase in the use of e-mail as the customers' preferred complaint channel.

- 4.14 Analysis of the root cause of complaints was implemented for 2007/08, with complaints being categorised into 7 main types. The tables at [Appendix D](#)

shows the breakdown of complaint types by service area. In overall terms for the year 2007/08, the breakdown of complaints was as follows:

| Complaint type | No. of complaints | % of total |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| Technical/legal/regulatory | 36 | 19.0 |
| Poor communication | 19 | 10.1 |
| Delayed response/lack of response | 46 | 24.3 |
| Complaint against named officer | 9 | 4.8 |
| Complaint received via MP | 2 | 1.1 |
| Complaint received via Councillor | 3 | 1.6 |
| Complaint re RBC policy or procedure | 74 | 39.1 |
| Total | 189 | |

Compliments

- 4.15 During 2007/08, a total of 58 compliments were received and an analysis of those compliments by service area is attached at Appendix E. This represents an increase 241.7% compared with the total of 24 compliments received in 2006/07.

COMMENTS FROM STATUTORY OFFICERS:

5. SECTION 151 OFFICER

- 5.1 There are no financial implications arising from this report.
- 5.2 The Council does however face the risk of financial penalty should the Ombudsman find against the council in any existing or future complaints.

6. MONITORING OFFICER

- 6.1 The Council treats all complaints very seriously and we learn from any situations where we get things wrong. The Ombudsman had commented that some planning complaints are missing our complaint procedure during the period we are processing applications. It is important to consider how many complaints have been upheld and not just to focus on numbers. The Council is continually improving in Planning and the way we deal with our customers.

7. HEAD OF PEOPLE AND ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (ON BEHALF OF THE HEAD OF PAID SERVICE)

- 7.1 There are no Human Resources implications.

8. CONCLUSION

- 8.1 The Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Letter contains significant improvements on the 2006/07 letter. Although the number of complaints remains the same, the Council's response times have improved significantly.
- 8.2 The Council recognises that the majority of complaints (both Ombudsman and Formal) are in respect of the Planning Department. Much of this can be

attributed to the fact that planning is, and always will be, an emotive and contentious issue.

- 8.3.1 The recent improvements to the customer services pages, which now include information on how to complain to the Ombudsman have proved successful. The Ombudsman has reported that whilst the number of complaints they have investigated is small, the feedback from the complaints investigated suggests that the new procedures are having a positive effect.

9. RECOMMENDATION

- 9.1 That Members note the content of the Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Letter for the period 1st April 2007 to 31st March 2008 and place on record their thanks to the Local Government Ombudsman's Office for their support and guidance over the past year.

10. CONSULTATION CARRIED OUT

- 10.1 None.

11. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

Is an Equality Impact Assessment required No

12. BIODIVERSITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

Is a Biodiversity Impact Assessment required No

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| Appendices | |
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| Appendix A | Local Government Ombudsman Annual Letter 2007/08 |
| Appendix B | Breakdown of Complaint Data |
| Appendix C | Complaints to RBC by Service Area & Average Response Times |
| Appendix D | Root Cause of Complaints by Service Area |
| Appendix E | Compliments Received by Service Area 2007/08 |
| Appendix F | Annual Review of Planning Complaints 2007/08 |