

OMBUDSMAN LETTER AND COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS MONITORING 2006/07

PORTFOLIO RESPONSIBILITY: CORPORATE AND CUSTOMER SERVICES AND HUMAN RESOURCES

CABINET

6TH SEPTEMBER, 2007

Wards Affected

County-wide

Purpose

To inform Cabinet of the Ombudsman Annual Letter 2006/07 and the figures for complaints recorded including complaints determined by the Local Government Ombudsman and the Complaints Panel for the year ended 31st March 2007

Key Decision

This is not a Key Decision

Recommendation

THAT the report be noted.

Considerations

1. The Local Government Ombudsman issues an Annual Letter for all councils reflecting on the complaints they receive against individual authorities and any recommended action. The Herefordshire Council Annual Letter for 2006/07 is appended to this report as Appendix A
2. The Ombudsman comments favourably on several aspects of our complaints handling arrangements.
 - During this period 52 complaints were determined. Of these 9 complaints were referred back to the Council because they were premature, 3 were outside the Ombudsman's jurisdiction, 27 showed no or insufficient evidence of maladministration and the Ombudsman decided not to investigate a further 10 under his general discretion, mainly because complainants had not suffered significant injustice from the fault claims.
 - No reports of maladministration were issued against the Council
 - 9 out of 52 complaints were received back by the Council because they were premature. This represents almost 20% of the complaints that were received against the Council.
 - Favourable comments that the Council's complaints procedure is well publicised

- in comparison with other councils.
 - Commended that the Council's website includes helpful information for complainants on how to complain to him if they are unhappy with how we have dealt with their complaints
 - The Council has taken steps to improve its performance with regard to reducing the time taken to respond to enquiries from his office from 31.8 days to 29.3 a further improvement on 2005/06 and the Council is now well placed to be in the top quartile of response of 28 days in the next year
3. The Ombudsman commented that during the period 52 complaints were received against the Council which is a decrease of 10% compared with the previous year. Planning complaints have fallen in this period from 35 in 2005/06 to 21 in 2006/07.

Performance 2006/07

4. The table below shows the total number of complaints received by the Ombudsman for Herefordshire in 2006/07 and the two previous years.

	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Total number of complaints determined by the Ombudsman	35	72	49
Total number of complaints to the Ombudsman settled locally.	1	3	3

5. The table below sets out the number of complaints received by the Ombudsman by subject area, as classified by the Ombudsman, for 2006/07.

Complaints received by subject area	Adult care services	Benefits	Children and family services	Education	Housing	Other	Planning & Building control	Public Finance	Social Services – other	Transport and Highways	Total
2006/07	2	6	1	1	2	6	21	2	0	8	49
2005/06	2	3	0	12	2	9	35	0	1	8	72
2004/05	1	2	0	3	0	3	15	3	1	7	35

Response Times

6. The table below shows the average time the council takes to respond to the Ombudsman's first enquiries on a complaint. It is measured in calendar days from the date they send their letter/fax/email to the date that they receive a substantive response from the Council.

	First Enquiries	
	No. of First Enquiries	Avg no. of days to respond
2006/07	29	29.3
2005/06	32	31.8

2004/05	15	47.9
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7. The Council has improved its response times from 47.9 days down to 29.3 days. It is to be noted, and the point has been raised with the Ombudsman, that there appears to be a significant delay in receipt of the Ombudsman's post in their office which appears to have impacted on our response time by up to 2 days and on some occasions by as many as 4 days. It has been agreed that in order to improve response times and in order to achieve the 28 day response time, that responses be e-mailed to the Ombudsman and the Ombudsman will also e-mail his notification to the Council of complaints. This should reduce delays by up to 4 to 5 days.

Herefordshire's Comments and Complaints Procedure

8. Recording of the Level I, II and III comments, complaints and compliments received within each Directorate/Department, are currently maintained by the relevant Complaints Administrator using a combination of the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and ComTrac, the Council's computerised recording system. Reports can be produced for each respective Directorate Management Team from COMTRAC.
9. Leaflets are available at receptions, libraries and Info Shops or Points to enable the public to register their comments, complaints and compliments. This leaflet now incorporates a cut of section to enable the Council to monitor the ethnicity of complainants and report accordingly.
10. The public can also register their feedback on line by accessing the Herefordshire Council website to complete the electronic complaints form.
11. BVPI 174 and 175 states that all complaints concerning Diversity should be recorded, investigated and reported on thoroughly. As COMTRAC is unable to capture this information, development work within Northgate CRM was undertaken during 2005/06 to record all Level 1 complaints, comments and compliments and this work also incorporated Diversity. This went live on 4th October 2005. Complaints are investigated by the Diversity Team and fed back to the relevant directorate with recommendations for action, which are subsequently monitored by the Diversity Team.
12. A breakdown of the informal and formal complaints received by Directorate/Department, is shown in Appendix B.
13. A project is already underway to consolidate the Corporate Complaints process into a single client database. A programme of staff training will precede its planned introduction this year.

Herefordshire's Compliments Procedure

14. All compliments are now recorded on Northgate CRM as of 4th October 2006. Appendix C shows the number of compliments received during 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07.

Ethnicity Monitoring

15. Diversity monitoring is included in all totals for 2006/07

Complaints Panel

16. The Complaints Panel (Level III meet to hear unresolved complaints from members of the public following review at Level I (by the local manager) and Level II (by Director). The Panel comprises the Chief Executive and two Group Leaders advised by the Head of Legal and Democratic Services. During 2006/07 it heard a total of 9 complaints. 1 was partially upheld.

Directorate/ Department	No. of Complaints / Section	Outcome
Environment	5 - Planning 1 – Highways and Transportation 1 – Environment Health & Trading Standards	5 Not upheld 1 Not upheld 1 Not upheld
Adult & Community Services	1 – PROW	1 Upheld
Children's Services	1 – Schools and Services	Not upheld

Risk Management

Not applicable

Alternative Options

There are no Alternative Options

Consultees

None

Appendices

Appendix A - The Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Letter for the year ended 31 March 2007

Appendix B - Complaints Informal and Formal 2006/07

Appendix C - Compliments received 2006/07

Background Papers

None identified