

AUDIT COMMITTEE

Local Government Ombudsman – Annual Review 2010/11 21 September 2011

Report of Head of Governance

PURPOSE OF REPORT

To enable Members to consider the Ombudsman's Annual Review Letter and Report for 2010/11.

This report is public

RECOMMENDATIONS

- (1) **That the Ombudsman's Annual Review letter and report for 2010/11 be noted.**

1.1 Background

The Local Government Ombudsman's (LGO) stated purpose is to provide independent, impartial and prompt investigation and resolution of complaints of injustice caused through maladministration by Local Authorities and to offer guidance in promoting fair and effective administration in Local Government.

For administrative purposes the country is divided into three broad geographical areas, and the Ombudsman has offices in London, Coventry and York.

The Local Government Ombudsman has recently published its Annual Report for 2010/11, which is an overview of its work nationally and which, together with national statistics about complaints, is available on its website <http://www.lgo.org.uk>. In addition, for each council it has published an annual review letter and report, and those relating to this Council are appended to this report.

1.2 Key Issues in 2010/2011

The Local Government Ombudsman has changed the way it communicates decisions and reasons. It now provides a stand-alone statement of reasons for every decision to both the complainant and the council. These statements replace the former practice of communicating decisions by letter to the complainant with a copy to the council. The Ombudsman's power has been extended to include dealing with adult social care complaints as well as those about schools by pupils or their parents, although these extensions do not directly affect the City Council.

(a) Performance

In 2010/11 the Ombudsmen received a total of 21, 840 complaints, compared with 18,020 in the previous year – an increase of 21.2 per cent. The highest numbers of complaints were received from the housing category, particularly in the area of housing repairs and housing allocations.

(b) Assisting Councils to Improve

In the letter to the Council, the Ombudsman reminds the Council that it continues to offer training to councils in complaints handling. In 2010/11 the Ombudsman surveyed a number of councils that had taken up the training and some that had not. Responses from councils where they had provided training revealed that:

- 90% said it had helped them to improve their complaint handling
- 68% gave examples of how the knowledge and skills gained from the training had been applied in practice
- 55% said that complaints were resolved at an earlier stage than previously
- almost 50% said that citizens who complained were more satisfied

(c) Website

Further information regarding the Annual Report and other publications can be found on the Ombudsman's Website. The address is: <http://www.lgo.org.uk>.

1.3. Complaints against Lancaster City Council

The purpose of the Annual Review is to give the Ombudsman's reflections on the complaints received against this Council and dealt with by the Ombudsman's Office over the last year. It is intended that the review will provide a useful addition to other information held by the Council and highlight how people experience or perceive the services offered and in particular will: -

- Help the Council learn from the outcome of complaints;
- Underpin effective working relations between the Council and the Ombudsman's Office;
- Identify opportunities for the Ombudsman and his staff to provide assistance that a Council may wish to seek in bringing improvements to its internal complaint handling;
- Provide complaint-based information that the Council might find useful in assessing and reviewing the Council's performance.

The report provides a summary of enquiries and complaints received by the LGO team and those forwarded to the Investigation Team. A total of 28 cases were received by the Ombudsman in 2010/11, and eleven of these were forwarded to the investigation team.

Members will note that there were no findings of maladministration against the Council in 2010/11. One case was resolved by local settlement. This was a complaint concerning the provision of hot water in a Council house. The boiler/hot water system was repaired by the Council, but not as quickly as it

might have been, and the Council agreed to apologise to the tenant and pay £150 in compensation.

Of the other fifteen cases in which decisions were made in 2010/11, two related to planning applications and two to planning advice. The others related to forward planning, drainage, environmental health, housing allocation, housing benefit, local taxation, contractual and business matters, land, parking, licensing and anti-social behaviour.

There was an improvement in the average number of days taken to respond to from 35.0 days in 2009/10 to 29.7 days in 2010/11 but this still remains above the 28 day limit set by the Ombudsman. The Council's Information Management Officer, who co-ordinates the Council's responses, was appointed in early 2010, the post having been vacant for some time, and it is hoped that the 2011/12 response times will show a further improvement.

2.0 Proposal Details

2.1 The Committee is asked to note the Annual Review Letter and Report.

3.0 Consultation

3.1 There has been no consultation

4.0 Options and Options Analysis (including risk assessment)

4.1 There are no options, as the report is for noting, although it would be open to the Committee to respond to the Annual Review if it so wished. Members will note that the letter contains an offer for the Ombudsman or a senior manager to meet with the Council and explain their work in greater detail if that would be helpful.

CONCLUSION OF IMPACT ASSESSMENT (including Diversity, Human Rights, Community Safety, Sustainability and Rural Proofing)

None arising from this report.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.
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FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.
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OTHER RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

Human Resources:

None

Information Services:

None

Property:

None

Open Spaces:

None

SECTION 151 OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The s151 Officer has been consulted and has no comments to add.

MONITORING OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The Monitoring Officer has been consulted and her comments incorporated in the report.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

1. Local Government Ombudsman Annual Local Authority Report – Lancaster City Council 2010/11
2. Local Government Ombudsman Annual Review Letter 2010/11

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