

Information/Discussion Paper

Standards Committee - 11th September 2009

Customer Relations - Position Statement

1 April 2008 – 31 March 2009

1. Why has this come to the Standards Committee?

- 1.1 The Standards Committee has a role in overseeing complaints handling and Local Government Ombudsman investigations. Over the last twelve months the existing complaints policies have been revised and improved. A customer relations framework has been produced covering complaints, compliments and comments (feedback) as well as information requests made under the Data Protection Act 1998, the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and Environmental Information Regulations. The revised policies will be rolled out from September 2009.

A summary of complaint statistics for the year 1 April 2008 to 31 March 2009, including Local Government Ombudsman complaints, follows for the committee to note.

2. Local Government Ombudsman – Annual Report 2008/2009

- 2.1 The Local Government Ombudsman received 12 new complaints about Cheltenham Borough Council which were forwarded for investigation. The LGO has made itself much more accessible to the public and it is therefore unsurprising that the number of complaints has increased slightly from 10 last year to 12 this year. These complaints are broken down against service areas as follows:

Waste management	1
Housing	2 (1 hsg allocations/ 1 housing repairs)
Anti-social behaviour	1
Non-local government	1 (still open)
Public finance	1
Building control	1
Planning applications	<u>5</u> (3 of which are still open)
	<u>12</u>

Please note:

- A change in the way the LGO operates means that the statistics about complaints received in 2008/09 are not directly comparable with those from 2007/08.
- 4 of these complaints are still open and therefore no decision has been made by the LGO.

The Council has again reduced the number of days it takes to respond to the Ombudsman. In 2008/09 the Council's average response time reduced to 18.8 days from 22.3 days the year before.

Year	Average response time in days
2008/09	18.8 days
2007/08	22.3 days
2006/07	21.2 days
2005/06	31.3 days

A copy of the Local Government Ombudsman Annual Letter 2008/09 from which this information has been extracted is attached for your information at appendix 1.

3. Complaints, comments and compliments

- 3.1 The Council logged a total of 166 complaints in 2008/09 (166 at stage 1, 6 at stage 2 and 7 at stage 3) – this is 22 less complaints than last year. Across the Council 129 compliments were logged. The complaints and compliments are broken down by service area on the attached table (appendix 2).
- 3.2 The corporate customer feedback leaflet will be reviewed this year but this will never replace the need for service specific feedback gained within each service area.
- 3.3 A policy on dealing with persistent complainants has been produced in line with the Local Government Ombudsman guidance. This will also be rolled out once finally approved. A policy on dealing with unacceptable behaviour from customers has also been produced.

4. Freedom of Information requests

- 4.1 The Council responded to 252 requests for information in 2008/2009 which is significantly up on the previous year (an increase of 97 requests). A breakdown of requests by service area is attached (appendix 3).
- 4.2 A number of requests have been responded to outside of the required time, mainly due to resource issues.
- 4.3 The most time consuming information requests seem to be from data research companies, political groups/MP's and the local media, **not** members of the public. The increase in the number of information requests seems to be the same for other public bodies across Gloucestershire and as a result the Gloucestershire Information Management Group is collecting statistics to consider trends and assess the impact on resources.

5. Recommendations

- 5.1 The Committee notes the content of this discussion/briefing paper.
- 5.2 The Committee currently receives this report annually but it may wish to consider receiving such a report half yearly.

Background Papers

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Accountability	Councillor Steve Jordan, Leader
Scrutiny Function	Economy and Business Improvement