

## **GOVERNANCE & AUDIT COMMITTEE: 29 NOVEMBER 2022**

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### **COUNCIL COMPLAINTS – MID-YEAR REPORT**

**AGENDA ITEM: 7.1**

### **REPORT OF THE CHIEF DIGITAL OFFICER**

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#### **Reason for this Report**

1. This report has been produced to enable the Governance and Audit Committee to review and assess the authority's ability to handle complaints effectively, and make any associated reports and recommendations.
2. The Governance and Audit Committee has incorporated the above responsibility into its terms of reference, as required in accordance with the provisions of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

#### **Background**

3. Members will be aware that the Authority has committed to the introduction of a single, corporately owned system for Complaints, Correspondence and Members Enquiries (Halo). The aim of the council-wide system is to improve the handling process, increase efficiency and provide corporate oversight of the complaints, compliments and member/cabinet enquiries across the organisation.
4. On 19 July 2022, Members received a presentation on corporate complaints handling arrangements and the work that had taken place regarding the new system. We believe the Committee were particularly comforted with the work carried out regarding stakeholder engagement. Members were advised that the new system would be introduced on a phased incremental basis and we can confirm that the system has since been piloted with three distinct sections; the Cabinet Support team, Adult Services and Planning, Transport and Environment.

#### **Update**

5. Unfortunately, during August 2022, the Project Manager advised members of the Halo Board that she would be leaving the Council. A request for a full-time Project Manager has been made but the resource has not yet been identified and this has presented a challenge for the project.
6. During our previous visit in July 2022, we presented to members that it is our contention that we do deal with complaints effectively. Members had praised officers for work that had taken place in choosing the system and had noted complaints and compliments provide a wealth of information for organisational learning. It remains our position that the implementation of the council-wide system will drive efficiencies and improvements via a standardisation of approach and greater monitoring capabilities, particularly when it comes to recording and reporting on complaints. Without the new system, it will be increasingly difficult to monitor both the

effectiveness of the complaints process and how complaints data is being used to improve services. This is information that could be used to contribute to service development including additional training, changes to internal procedures, improvements to council processes and increased monitoring.

7. Amongst the benefits that can be achieved through the implementation of the new corporate system include improved performance against statutory timescales. In July, Members asked to be provided with a suite of complaint handling KPIs, which would evidence improving public services. It was agreed that these would be shared once approved by the Halo Board, however, a draft version of the KPIs can be found at Appendix C. On a similar note, the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales has recently shared her draft Strategic Plan, setting out the Ombudsman's ambition for the office over the next three years. The Strategic Plan mentions that the Ombudsman's office will be monitoring their own complaint handling performance using KPIs and we have asked for further information on this as it will inform our own KPIs and may lead to national benchmarking of data.
8. Members have previously received a copy of the Complaints and Compliments Annual Report 2021/22 as it was considered by Committee in July 2022. The report was subsequently considered at Senior Management Team meeting before being presented at Cabinet in September 2022. As the report had a Traffic Light Status of 'Green' (signifying the report contents were not controversial), there was thought to be no need for the report to be considered by Scrutiny.
9. In 2019, the Ombudsman gained new powers under the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales Act 2019, this received Royal Assent in May 2019. Part of the act detailed a commitment for Local Authorities to report on complaints to senior management twice a year. The Local Authority will continue to provide an Annual Complaints Report every year to Cabinet. A second "mid -year" report is provided to Informal Cabinet and allows the Local Authority to take stock at the six-month period. A draft version of our Mid-Year Report 2022/22 can be found at Appendix A.
10. The Authority has separate teams to deal with our Adult Services, Children's Services and Corporate Complaints respectively, whilst each school Governing Body will have its own arrangements for complaints handling in their respective school. Following the last Committee meeting, the Committee has received assurance and high-level details of complaints handling arrangements in each of the above arrangements. Arrangements have been made for the Committee to receive an overview of the arrangements in Adult Services, Children's Services and Schools from the respective director as part of their control environment updates to the Committee this municipal year.
11. The Committee's terms of reference include the responsibility to "review and assess the authority's ability to handle complaints effectively", for which further details are provided in the following paragraphs.
12. In terms of current assurances, the Authority can take assurance from the consideration of the Ombudsman that the Council's complaints handling policy is deemed to be compliant with the Ombudsman principles and model complaints handling policy
13. As mentioned, we have also provided a draft mid-year report which will be considered by Informal Cabinet in December 2022. The report shows that, during the first six months of 2022/23, the Council has recorded a total of 1,348 complaints. Though this figure only represents six months, it does suggest that we will receive fewer complaints than in 2021/22, when 3,633 complaints were recorded.
14. Members can also find attached the Ombudsman Annual Letter 2021-22 at Appendix B. Data contained within this letter had previously been presented within the Complaints Annual Report

2021-22, considered by Committee in July 2022. However, the Ombusman's Letter was published shortly after this, in August 2022. The Ombudsman has specifically requested that her annual letter be presented "to the Governance & Audit Committee to assist members in their scrutiny of the Council's performance". Furthermore, the Ombudsman has asked if any feedback from the Governance & Audit Committee can be shared with her office.

15. The Corporate Complaints Team continue to provide advice and support to complaints contacts across the council on a weekly basis. The team also facilitates a quarterly meeting of the complaints contacts to discuss any key issues, share good practice and to capture any lessons that can be learned to inform service improvement.
16. Complaints Officers in each Directorate continue to receive appropriate training and the Authority has developed a bespoke training package in conjunction with the Ombudsman to roll out internally for council officers. As of November 2022, we are the only Local Authority to have developed such a package. This complaints-specific training will be compulsory for all officers who handle complaints and these officers will receive training by the end of the financial year.
17. During 2021/22, a library of supporting documents (Statement of Principles) have been introduced to assist complaints officers in terms of how to handle complaints. These documents have been developed to ensure an increased consistency of approach across the Authority and should result in greater efficiency.
18. Though the council-wide system has suffered a setback, there have been many positive achievements that have come about while the project is being developed.
19. During Phase 1, we were able to carry out several improvements to the potential system. These improvements included improved workflow, categorisation and routing and have been achieved as a result of our extensive engagement with stakeholders in the pilot sections - the Cabinet Support team, Adult Services and Planning, Transport and Environment.
20. Members will also be assured that the suppliers (Halo) have been very positive to work with during Phase 1. There has been consistent, ongoing dialogue to configure the system according to our needs and they have offered solutions to any issues that arise in a timely fashion.
21. The pilot of the new system is proceeding well with Cabinet enquiries, Adult Services and Planning, Transport and Environment. These teams have been specifically chosen on the basis that they either receive a high volume of complaints or complaints with increased complexity.
22. A benefit of the council-wide system is Halo's comprehensive reporting module with 150 reports built in and a further 2,500 available to import from the online repository. During the pilot stage, officers have been considering the reporting capabilities of Halo.
23. A central landing page has been created on Sharepoint and subsequently completed by the project team. This landing page will be a central resource for all employees to access. The landing page will assist the organisation with complaint training, up to date information on Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) and policies for dealing with complaints and cabinet and members enquiries. This approach will ensure consistency and that staff across the Council are given the same information.
24. At this point, we are now working on a new timescale for rollout of the council-wide system. However, Members can be assured that we have always taken appropriate time to make the right decisions and with engagement from our key stakeholders.

25. It is envisaged that, once the council-wide system is in place, future reporting will place more importance on what we as an Authority are learning from complaints, to support improvement in complaint handling and in service delivery. This information will be regularly collated and analysed so that decision makers can regularly review the information gathered from complaints when planning service delivery. With that in mind, officers are working to ensure that a dedicated resource is identified to make sure that momentum is maintained for this essential project.

### **Legal Implications**

26. Under Part 6 of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, section 115, Governance and Audit Committees are given new statutory functions, with effect from 1st April 2021, to 'review and assess the authority's ability to handle complaints effectively', and 'make reports and recommendations in relation to the authority's ability to handle complaints effectively'. The information set out in the report and appendices is provided for the Committee to review, assess and consider whether to make any reports and recommendations to the authority in this regard. In discharging its functions, the Committee must have regard to any relevant guidance issued by the Welsh Government.

### **Financial Implications**

27. The financial implications (if any) arising from this report have been contained within the body of the report.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

28. That the Governance and Audit Committee considers and notes the content of the report, in respect of its role to review and assess the authority's ability to handle complaints effectively, and to make any associated reports and recommendations.

**Isabelle Bignall**  
**Chief Digital Officer**

The following is attached:

**Appendix A:** Draft Mid Year Complaints Report 2022/23

**Appendix B:** Ombudsman Annual Letter 2021/22

**Appendix C:** Draft Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

### Background Papers

[Report to Governance & Audit Committee - 19.07.2022](#)

[Report to Cabinet 28.09.22 - Covering Report and Appendix](#)

[Report to Governance & Audit Committee - 23.11.21](#)

[Report to Governance & Audit Committee - 20.07.21](#)