

GOVERNANCE & AUDIT COMMITTEE: 23 JANUARY 2024

COUNCIL COMPLAINTS – MID-YEAR REPORT

AGENDA ITEM: 8.1

REPORT OF THE CHIEF DIGITAL OFFICER

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 - Halo

3. Members will be aware from previous committee meetings that the Authority has committed to the introduction of a single, corporately owned system for Complaints, Cabinet Member Enquiries & Member Enquiries (Halo). The aim of the council-wide system is to improve the handling process, increase efficiency and provide corporate oversight of the complaints and member / cabinet enquiries across the organisation.
4. Members of the Committee have been actively involved in our transformative journey since our initial presentation in July 2022. As of the publication of this report, Members are well-informed about our imminent launch scheduled for the end of January 2024. Your engagement and support has been pivotal in shaping the successful development and impending deployment of our initiatives.
5. The journey undertaken has not only involved the establishment of a robust and efficient mechanism for handling complaints and enquiries but has also seen a significant increase in member and staff engagement regarding the system. This comprehensive initiative reflects our commitment to transparency, accountability and continuous improvement.
6. The journey began with meticulous planning, involving extensive stakeholder consultation and a thorough assessment of existing systems. All of the above has been detailed during previous presentations in 2022 and 2023. Each phase of the implementation process was carefully executed to ensure minimal disruption and the creation of a dedicated Project Manager and Project Board has meant minimal disruption to the Council's day-to-day complaints work.

7. As a summary for Committee, Phase 1 (configuration and testing phase) involved intensive testing of the system with any identified bugs and issues raised with Halo for fixes. During this time, a Project Manager was appointed in addition to a dedicated ICT Halo Support Engineer. Comprehensive meetings were undertaken with shareholders to discuss dashboards and reporting requirements. In addition to ongoing fixes for bugs and issues discovered through testing, further configuration and development work has taken place including HTML templates, emails, notifications, and attachment views. A Cabinet and Members 'test' instance was created and trialled (soft launch) in April 2023 ahead of full launch in August 2023. All testing of instances were completed over a series of days at County Hall, with ICT present to resolve issues and make configuration changes as needed. The Training resource for the Cabinet / Members instance was finalised and added to the SharePoint landing area. Finally, communications were created to make staff aware of the introduction of a new system.
8. Following this, the launch of Cabinet and Member Enquiries (Phase 2 of the project) took place in August 2023 and has been very well received with no significant issues reported. A review workshop took place in December 2023 and, following system and process changes discussed during the workshop, this enabled the Project Board to continue with Phase 3 and the long-awaited Complaints instance of the Halo project. Work was a continuation from the significant work that which had already taken place with creation of Cabinet and Member Enquiries instance.
9. ICT subsequently created the Complaints test instance and the Project Team have had several run-throughs of the system with end-to-end tickets. All has been reported to work well and workshops have taken place with Complaints Officers and Projects Team to run through the process in anticipation of the imminent launch. As mentioned, the Corporate Complaints ticket type is based on the Enquiries workflow, meaning many officers will already have awareness of the system.
10. The main point of discussion for the complaints instance has been the creation of an Application Programming Interface (API) - a way for two systems to connect with each other. This has needed to be created to enable the connection of the C2C escalations system (through which main complaints are received) with Halo. This has been successfully created and test tickets have been successfully sent from C2C to Halo.
11. Numerous training sessions have been implemented, both face-to-face and online. We have also developed a comprehensive user guide and accompanying video which will assist with some of the common issues and questions our colleagues may have.
12. We have recognised the growing demand on support officers and there has been a strategic shift in our approach as a result. Going forward, we will encourage service areas and users to utilize the SharePoint area directly rather than reaching out directly to the project team and Corporate Complaints. This transition aims to streamline operations and alleviate the strain on support officers, ensuring a more efficient and sustainable workflow.
13. In recognition of this, the project team has successfully produced 11 concise 'how-to' videos in advance of the introduction of Phase 3. These videos have been distributed to Service Areas and added to the SharePoint site.
14. Further meetings have taken place with Halo to discuss building bespoke reports and dashboards. This is in addition to the comprehensive report function where pre-built reports already exist.

15. A dedicated SharePoint page has been created and which has links to training options. Over the last eighteen months, we have developed comprehensive training packages (some in conjunction with the Ombudsman) and these are available for our staff that will handle complaints. These training resources will encourage quality and consistency in our complaint responses.
16. Regular project updates have taken place with Operational Managers and Senior Managers (who will be approving responses within the new system). This is to remind them of their responsibilities and to encourage the “buy-in” necessary for this project to succeed.
17. During our previous visits, we have presented to members that it is our contention that we do currently deal with complaints effectively. However, 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.
18. The successful implementation of the council-wide complaints system represents a milestone in our commitment to “handle complaints effectively”. The journey undertaken over the past two years has not only modernised our approach to complaint management but has also strengthened our relationship with stakeholders. As we move forward, continuous monitoring and adaptation will be key to ensuring the sustained success of the system and meeting the evolving needs of our citizens.

Internal Audit

19. In June 2023, as part of the Council’s Internal Audit Plan, a review was completed on the Council’s Complaints and Compliments arrangements across the Council. The objectives of the audit mirrored the areas that the Governance & Audit Committee require assurance on, and included; to review and assess the authority’s ability to oversee compliments and complaints effectively and efficiently, ensure policies and procedures are in place and accurate records are maintained and that the procedures are supported by guidance and training for all staff involved in the compliments and complaints process.
20. Following the audit, the auditor was able to provide an assurance level of **Effective with opportunity for improvement** and there were five recommendations that were raised in the audit, the first four relating to our Corporate Complaints team with the fifth related to Education- Governor Services. These recommendations included:
 - Re-establishment of Corporate Complaints office meetings on a quarterly basis, to be chaired by the corporate team and where officers can learn from the complaints ‘group’ and receive peer support.
 - Update of Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) particularly around definition of a complaint – and to discuss with complaints group – to support consistent application of the policy across the Council.
 - For all efforts to be made to get the HALO system implemented within set timescales.
 - Following the roll-out of HALO, a quality assurance system to be developed centrally on compliance and the efficiency and effectiveness of complaints handling.
 - For a briefing note to be provided to schools and their Governing Bodies at the end of each financial year, together with a termly checklist to remind them of key responsibilities.

21. We can confirm that recommendations 1 and 2 are complete and we are making steady progress with recommendations 3 and 4. Recommendation 5 has been accepted by Governor Services for delivery in March 2024. A copy of the Action Plan is found at Appendix C.

Complaints Handling

22. 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. During the last twelve to eighteen months, the Committee has received assurance and high-level details of complaints handling arrangements in each of the above arrangements.

23. 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.

24. 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.

25. The Corporate Complaints Team continue to provide advice and support to complaints contacts across the council on a weekly basis. As recommended by the Internal Audit, 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.

26. Complaints Officers in each Directorate have access to appropriate training and the Authority has developed a bespoke training package (in conjunction with the Ombudsman) which is available to all council officers. The Corporate Complaints Team make the recommendation that complaints-specific training will be compulsory for all officers who handle complaints and these officers will receive training by the end of the calendar year.

27. During 2022/23, a Standard Operating Procedures has been introduced to assist complaints officers in terms of how to handle complaints. This document has been developed to ensure an increased consistency of approach across the Authority and should result in greater efficiency.

28. The Complaints Team have undertaken broader initiatives related to complaints, including the enhancement of our website interface. This involved a revision of our online complaints form as citizens had been complaining about matters that we would not ordinarily consider under our Corporate Complaints process. To clarify, these citizens are now signposted to more appropriate channels in which to share their concerns, such as those matters that have their own separate appeal mechanism e.g. Council Tax appeals, Homelessness appeals, Planning applications and Penalty Charge Notices.

29. This change took place in November, and it has been reported that complaints received by the above channel are down by over 50% since this change. Ultimately, this change has improved consistency as we now have a truer value of what is a complaint and what is not.

Mid-Year Complaints Report

30. Our Mid-Year Complaints Report 2023-24 can be found at Appendix 1. Members of the Committee will note that 1,856 complaints were recorded by Cardiff Council during the first

six months of the financial year. Though this figure only represents six months, it does suggest that we will receive more complaints than in 2022-23, when 3,071 complaints were recorded.

31. Though the number of complaints is set to increase, early indications are that our response rate will improve in 2023-24. For the first six months of 2023-24, 73.4% of our complaints received a full response within our corporate timescales (20 working days). This represents an increase from 2022-23 when 56% received a response within 20 working days.
32. It is envisaged that, once the council-wide system is in place, future Complaints and Compliments Reports 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.
33. Members are reminded that there are separate processes for dealing with complaints about Social Services and that Social Services have their own procedure and teams for managing complaints.

Legal Implications

34. 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

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

RECOMMENDATIONS

36. 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 are attached:

- Appendix A:** Mid-Year Complaints Report 2023-24
- Appendix B:** Presentation Slides
- Appendix C:** Internal Audit Action Plan