

SUBJECT: WHOLE AUTHORITY AND SOCIAL SERVICES CUSTOMER FEEDBACK

MEETING: Governance & Audit Committee

DATE: 30 March 2023

DIVISION/WARDS AFFECTED: All Wards

1. PURPOSE:

- 1.1 To provide Governance and Audit committee with an overview on the number and types of complaints, comments and compliments received and dealt with from 1 April 2021 until 31 March 2022 relating to our whole authority complaints procedure and the Social Services complaints procedure.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 That the committee use the reports in Appendix 1 and 2 to seek assurance about the effectiveness of the authority's processes for dealing with complaints and compliments.

3. KEY ISSUES:

Whole Authority Complaints and Compliments

- 3.1 Our Whole Authority Complaints and Compliments policy and procedure follows the Model that the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales asked each local authority to adopt in 2011.
- 3.2 The whole authority procedure has two stages; **the informal resolution stage** and the **formal investigation stage**. The informal resolution stage aims to resolve the complaint locally wherever possible by means of discussion and problem solving. If it is not possible to resolve the concern, the matter is escalated to the formal investigation stage.
- 3.3 Where initial discussions have not achieved a resolution, complainants have the right to make a formal complaint. Investigations are undertaken and the complainant receives a full response detailing findings, conclusions and any recommendations made. This is the end of the internal process.
- 3.4 Complainants can contact the Public Services Ombudsman if they still remain dissatisfied. The Ombudsman provides an external independent service to consider complaints about all local authority services. The Ombudsman is concerned with maladministration causing injustice and will normally require complainants to have used their local council's procedures before accepting a complaint for investigation. This Committee received the

Ombudsman's annual letter for 2021-22 in January which showed that the number of complaints received about Monmouthshire was 0.21 per 1000 residents, below the average for Welsh local authorities of 0.25.

- 3.5 This report also covers comments received. This is feedback from members of the public about service quality which does not require formal resolution and therefore isn't counted as a stage one complaint but still requires a significant commitment of staff time and generates useful learning. The number of comments increased by 20% from 379 in 2020-21, to 455 in 2021-22.
- 3.6 The service areas receiving the largest number of complaints are waste and street services; development management and planning policy and highways. Services such as waste and highways are used by all households throughout the year and have the largest number of customer interactions so it is not surprising that this is where the largest volume of complaints arise. Further details are shown in Appendix 1 to this report along with a representative selection of comments and compliments.
- 3.7 Work is ongoing to improve processes in areas where officers have identified the highest volume of service requests relating to services, for example, missed refuse. This work is not about improving the complaints process itself but does give an indication of some of things being done to improve customer satisfaction.

Social Services Representations and Complaints

- 3.8 This report also includes social services complaints which are enclosed as Appendix 2. It is a statutory requirement that Local Authority Social Services are required to operate a complaints procedure that follows the Social Services Complaints Procedure (Wales) Regulations 2014 and The Representations Procedure (Wales) Regulations 2014.
- 3.9 The guidance on handling complaints and representations by local authority social services state that we must publish an annual report on the handling and statistical information relating to the complaints and representations we've dealt with. The guidance also states that the Annual report should be discussed at the appropriate Committee.
- 3.10 There are two stages to the Social Services complaints procedure: **Stage One Local Resolution and Stage Two Formal Consideration**. The emphasis at stage one is to resolve the complaint by means of discussion and problem solving, whilst adhering to the 17 working days response time that has been imposed under the Regulations.
- 3.11 Stage Two the formal consideration stage is where the complainant remains dissatisfied after completion of stage one, and they may request that the complaint proceeds to stage two of the process. This involves a formal investigation of the complaint with a report being produced by the external investigating officer appointed to the case. The timescale for dealing with Stage Two is 25 working days.
- 3.12 If the complainant remains dissatisfied with the outcome of the stage two investigation, they may progress their complaint to the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales.

- 3.13 In Children's Services the number of stage 1 complaints are generally the same as last year with 3 complaints dealt with at the formal stage of the complaints procedure. The trend running through the complaints relates to staffing and communication issues which features in most of the complaints. Again, this remains consistent with previous years.
- 3.14 In Adult Services the numbers of Stage 1 complaints have stayed more or less the same as last year. However, stage 2 complaints have doubled. There's no particular trend of complaint, apart from issues with communication and quality of services.

Learning from Complaints

- 3.15 Not only is it important to deal with complaints effectively, investigating and putting things right for the complainant where necessary, it is also vital to learn from them to minimise the changes of the same problem occurring again. It's important that services use the findings from complaints investigations and customer feedback, alongside data and other evidence, to prioritise improvements. Managers receive action plans after formal complaints are investigated that outline the recommendations made and for them to respond and implement them as part of the resolution of the complaint.
- 3.16 The Public Service Ombudsman for Wales provides online training sessions for local authorities on communication skills, handling complaints and investigation skills. This ensures that our staff are trained to deal with complaints in line with the authority's policy and best practice identified nationally. 120 staff have attended the training sessions so far with more sessions programmed. However, as officer capacity becomes increasingly stretched it is becoming more difficult to identify people to conduct investigation which can affect the timeliness of this work.

4. OPTIONS APPRAISAL:

- 4.1 There are no alternative options associated with the recommendations in this report.

5. EVALUATION CRITERIA:

- 5.1 The effectiveness of a complaints process is not always easy to assess. A low number of complaints may mean that an organisation has made it too difficult to complain or that customers see little point in doing so. A very high number of complaints could be a sign of real problems. For this reason, it is important to look at trends over time rather than any one year in isolation. One of the key metrics which does give a good indication of effectiveness is the number of complaints that cannot be resolved by the authority and which require determination by the Public Service Ombudsman for Wales.
- 5.2 The related issue of service quality sits alongside this and is inter-linked since, if we are learning from complaints, our systems and processes should improve and we should receive better feedback and see less issues being logged. Again, this needs to be

balanced against improvements in technology which have made it easier to report issues via app and chatbot as well as the traditional method of phone and e-mail.

6. REASONS:

To ensure that Members are aware of the types of complaints, comments and compliments received and dealt with.

7. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

Whole Authority Complaints and Compliments. There are no extra resource implications associated with the recommendations of the report. The management of the complaints process is done within existing budgets. Where officers from other departments are used to conduct investigations it will take them away from their regular roles but there is not a direct salary cost.

Social Services. The legislation requires that external independent investigating officers must be appointed for formal Stage 2 investigations. There is an existing budget for this work and we will endeavour to keep within the budget expenditure. However, we cannot forecast how many complaints will be made.

8. WELLBEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS IMPLICATIONS (INCORPORATING EQUALITIES, SUSTAINABILITY, SAFEGUARDING and CORPORATE PARENTING):

There are no specific implications that have been identified in respect of this proposal.

9. CONSULTEES:

Strategic Leadership Team
Heads of Service

10. AUTHOR:

Annette Evans, Customer Relations Manager

11. CONTACT DETAILS

Tel: 01633 644647

Email: annetteevans@monmouthshire.gov.uk