



Cyngor Castell-nedd Port Talbot
Neath Port Talbot Council

CABINET

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF LEGAL AND DEMOCRATIC SERVICES – MR CRAIG GRIFFITHS

13th November 2024

Matter for Information

Wards Affected: All Wards

Public Service Ombudsman for Wales Annual Report 2023/2024

Purpose of the Report:

1. To advise Members of the receipt of the Ombudsman's Annual Report for 2023/2024 in respect of Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council.

Executive Summary:

2. The Public Service Ombudsman for Wales ("the Ombudsman") has two specific roles:
 - (a) To consider complaints about public service providers in Wales; and
 - (b) To consider complaints that members of local authorities or town and community councils have breached their Code of Conduct.
3. The Ombudsman sends letters on an annual basis to county borough councils and local health boards concerning the complaints they have received and considered during the previous financial year. The aim of the Annual Report is to provide the relevant bodies with information to help them improve their complaint handling and the services that they provide.

Background:

4. In recent years the Ombudsman has adopted the practice of sending an annual letter to each local authority which comes within their jurisdiction. A

full copy of the letter and Factsheet is reproduced for Members at Appendix 1.

5. Members should note that this letter relates to the period 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024. Information received during this year will, bring insights on how public services reacted in the face of unprecedented demand and the most difficult of circumstances.
6. Comparatively little commentary is required on the Annual Letter. The number of service complaints received by the Ombudsman is set out in Table A of the Factsheet. This Council received thirty five (35) complaints – a decrease from thirty nine (39) in the previous financial year. Therefore, the number of complaints received is slightly less of the national average, compared with what one would expect from the population size of the Council area. However, it should be noted that when considering complaints per 1,000 residents, the Council is ranked 17th out of the 22 local authorities in Wales in the number of complaints received.
7. The mix of complaints is dealt with in Table B of the Factsheet. The numbers in the various categories are similar to the Welsh average overall.
8. The percentage of cases requiring intervention from the Ombudsman is comparatively low (see Table C), with only five of the thirty five complaints being marked as early resolution. The intervention provided the opportunity with the Council to look again at the issue and ensure that remedies could be achieved which met the needs of the complainant. In a lot of cases the Council's position did not change but the complainant was satisfied that a fresh view had been taken. The comparison of complaint outcomes with average outcomes is again broadly in line with the national average (as shown in Table D).
9. Table E indicated that the PSOW made 14 recommendations to the Council during the year but only 29% were complied with in the timescale specified. In respect of two of the early resolution cases, the reason for this is that the complaints in question took longer to investigate and prior agreement was achieved with the complainant, which was inadvertently not notified to the PSOW. All complaints though were resolved in timescales agreed with the complainant. Steps have been put in place to ensure the PSOW is aware of such extensions where appropriate. In addition, in the other cases the recommendations were complied with, and a copy of the final response was not issued to the PSOW in the timescale required.

10. The number of national Code of Conduct complaints increased slightly in 2023/2024 in respect of Local Authority elected members. In the Neath Port Talbot locality, the number of Code of Conduct complaints against County Borough Councils is low, there being just eight (8) (Table F), and in each case, bar one, the PSOW determined there was no case to answer. On however, was referred to the Standards Committee which saw the said Councillor suspended for a period of four (4) calendar months. In addition, there was a decrease in the number of complaints against town and community councils (Table G) (going from eleven (11) to four (4)), but as can be seen no further action was taken in respect of these matters and they were either closed after initial consideration, discontinued or withdrawn.
11. Overall, cuts in public expenditure create an environment in which there can be a mismatch between public expectations and the service which can be provided. This will make it even more important to deal promptly with any complaints which arise and look for practical and achievable solutions. The Council continues to work collaboratively with the PSOW to resolve any matter that might be referred to them by a member of the public whether that be via an early settlement or to provide clarification and documentation to assist in any investigation being undertaken.
12. The Complaints Standards Body has now implemented a model complaints policy with nearly 56 public bodies, and delivered 140 training sessions, completely free of charge, during the last financial year. The feedback has been excellent, and the training has been very popular and officers of the Council have engaged with this training process and found it extremely beneficial. The model complaints policy has now been adopted by Neath Port Talbot Council
13. Officers will continue improvement work in 2024/2025 and onwards and steps will be taken to try and reduce the number of cases which require intervention by the Ombudsman. This will include:
 - (a) Ensuring officers are aware of their obligations in responding to complaints and how the Council's Complaints Process functions to reduce the prospect of complaints being made to the Ombudsman stemming from process related issues.
 - (b) Ensuring systems are in place to keep the PSOW office aware of any extensions of time needed, which will be controlled via the Monitoring Officer. This will ensure they are aware that all recommendations had been complied with.

- (c) Ongoing review of the Council complaints process and the guidance provided to the public on how complaints can be made – including an easy read guide will be developed and publicised, with information on such processes in our Participation Strategy.
- (d) Further facilitating a working group of officers to consider complaints handling and steps that should be taken in responding to complaints and to consider the Ombudsman response to any complaints so that lessons can be learnt. These officers are also involved in Data Protection and Freedom of Information Act responses so training will also be provided in these areas to ensure compliance in those fields. Taking the opportunity to learn from complaints can contribute to the development of services that meet the needs and expectations of our citizens. In this way, citizens can be involved in improving services and ensuring that they meet long term needs and are sustainable. The ability to identify causes of complaint and service failure can also present an opportunity to design in service features which have a preventative impact.
- (e) Liaising with the Ombudsman to determine whether resources such as training are available from them to assist in complaint handling process.
- (f) Undertaking further training with Local Authority Elected Members on Code of Conduct matters and in particular the use of social media, which appears to be the source of numerous complaints to the Ombudsman. Training was provided in May 2022 and as part of member induction and will continue to form part of Code of Conduct Training in refresher sessions, on a bi annual basis
- (g) Specific sessions of training have been undertaken to group leaders in light of the new duties to ensure compliance with the code of conduct within political groups and Group Leaders have attended the Standards Committee to provide an overview of their approach to standards throughout 2023/2024
- (h) Continuing our Standards and Code of Conduct forum with Town and Community Council Clerks to ensure that standards and ethics of decision makers is considered actively within that setting and officers of those organisations are aware of key legal obligations.
- (i) The Standards Committee have implemented a Forward Work Programme (contained in their 2023/2024 Annual Report) to continue to enshrine the importance of the standards regime in the Council
- (j) Providing opportunities for members of the Standards Committee to attend meetings of Town and Community Councils to observe meetings and feedback any matters relevant to standards.
- (k) A review of the Constitution has recently been concluded (imbedding the Codes of Conduct further into documents) to ensure appropriate arrangements are in place to meet any obligations in respect of

complaints and this review will continue in future years via the Democratic Services Committee.

14. It should also be noted that the Ombudsman is now in receipt of a number of additional powers of investigation, recently granted by the Welsh Government. These include the ability to undertake “own initiative” complaints. These investigations are not instigated by a complaint from a resident but may occur where the Ombudsman suspects potential systemic failures of services or where residents feel unable to complain due to the fact that they are dependent on Council services or because they are vulnerable.

Financial Impacts:

15. No implications. Though it should be noted the Ombudsman has legal powers to require the Council to make payments to complainants where they have suffered financial loss or in compensation for “time and trouble”.

Integrated Impact Assessment:

16. An Integrated Impact Assessment is not requirement for this report.

Valleys Communities Impacts:

17. No implications

Workforce Impacts:

18. No implications

Legal Impacts:

19. No implications

Consultation:

20. There is no requirement for external consultation on this item

Recommendations:

21. That Members note the content of the Public Service Ombudsman Annual Report for Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council for 2023/2024

enclosed at Appendix 1 and the steps that officers will continue to embark on as part of general improvement work.

Appendices:

22. Appendix 1 – Annual Letter of the Public Service Ombudsman for Wales for Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council

List of Background Papers:

23. None

Officer Contact:

Mr Craig Griffiths
Head of Legal and Democratic Services