

Corporate complaints – Supporting service improvement

Vale of Glamorgan Council

November 2025

About us

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Audit snapshot

- 1 The purpose of this audit is to assure the public, council officers and members that the Council has appropriate measures in place to deal with complaints. These measures should include proper handling, monitoring, reporting and learning from complaints.

What we looked at

- 2 We looked at the Council's approach to handling complaints. This included its updated complaints policy and its arrangements to process and respond to complaints in line with this policy. We also looked at how it monitors and learns from complaints.
- 3 We did not consider the Council's Welsh language complaints, complaints against Members, or education and social services complaints processes as these have different procedures. However, we did ask if learning from different departments' complaints processes is being shared.

Why this is important

- 4 The Council identified complaints as an area for improvement in its 2024 Annual Self-Assessment and proactively discussed this with Audit Wales as an area of focus for our work.
- 5 The numbers of complaints received by the Council have increased by a third since 2018-19. In 2024, the Council was the Council with the highest proportion of complaints to the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (PSOW) per head of population.¹ Whilst the overall number of complaints to the PSOW reduced in 2024-25, the five-year trend shows an increase in complaints. Over the past five years, 20% of complaints to the PSOW have been about the Council's complaint handling, peaking at 27% in 2023-24.
- 6 When a member of the public makes a complaint, this is often a last resort. They may have already been through different avenues to raise their concerns. Dealing with complaints can be resource intensive.
- 7 The PSOW sets out that a Council's complaints handling process should be:
 - complainant focused;
 - simple;
 - fair and objective;
 - timely and effective;
 - accountable; and
 - committed to continuous improvement.²
- 8 PSOW's guidance on the Principles of Good Administration recognises there is a balance between being sensitive to the needs of a service user and yet acting proportionately to maximise the effective use of public resources.³
- 9 Effective complaints arrangements help the public to raise any concerns and enable the Council to quickly address them and to consider how they can learn from those complaints to improve service delivery.

¹ Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (PSOW), [Annual Report and Accounts 2023/2024](#), June 2024

² PSOW, [Complaint Handling Processes – Statement of Principles](#), July 2019

³ PSOW, [Principles of Good Administration](#), January 2022

What we found

10 The Council has taken steps to improve its complaints arrangements, but the Council is not always responding to complaints in a timely way and there are weaknesses in its arrangements to support service improvement and reduce the number of complaints. For example, in 2022, the Council implemented a new IT system to track its complaints and, in 2025, it updated its complaints policy. However, we have identified some areas which could be strengthened, particularly given the numbers of complaints to the PSOW about the Council's complaints arrangements. These include application of its new policy, IT system, staff training and oversight.

What we recommend

11 We have made four recommendations to the Council about:

- further developing its complaints policy;
- improving the functionality of its IT system for complaints handling;
- improving staff training;
- improving monitoring and learning from complaints.

Key facts and figures

- In 2023-24, the PSOW received 77 complaints about the Council, amounting to 0.58 per 1,000 residents. This was the highest number of complaints per 1,000 residents of all councils in Wales.

- The number of complaints received by the PSOW about the Council has increased in four out of five reported years up to and including 2023-24 (**Exhibit 2**). This is in line with the figures reported by PSOW, which show a 37% increase in new complaints about all public services since 2019 and a 17% increase this year.

- Over a fifth of complaints received by the PSOW in 2023-24 were about the Council's complaints handling.

- The Council's own data shows that complaints to them have increased by a third since 2018-19.

- The Council dealt with 44% of complaints within target timescales in 2023-24.

- In 2024-25, the Council received 176 customer satisfaction survey responses and results show:
 - 19% of respondents think the Council responded in a reasonable timeframe;
 - 12% of respondents answered 'yes' when asked if their complaint was assessed and reviewed fairly; and
 - 27% said they would use the online complaint system in the future.

Our findings

The Council has updated its complaints policy, but there are shortcomings to support its implementation, and it is not supported by an Equalities Impact Assessment

The Council's complaints policy

- 12 At the start of our audit, the Council's complaints policy was dated 2013 having adopted the Welsh Government's model concerns and complaints policy at that time. The PSOW confirmed that the policy complied with the model in 2021.
- 13 The Council adopted its updated Corporate Concerns and Complaints policy in June 2025. There were minimal changes to the policy. It now contains clearer definitions of what constitutes a complaint in line with PSOW guidance. However, we have identified some weaknesses in arrangements to develop the policy and support its implementation:
 - aside from those staff who had led on drafting the new policy, other staff we spoke to had had little involvement in its development and little awareness of the new policy;
 - not all staff we spoke to were clear on the standards and expectations set out in the policy;
 - there was no equalities impact assessment (EIA) for the revised policy;
 - the updated policy could be clearer on how staff should deal with malicious and vexatious complaints and complaints on social media.
- 14 As involvement is one of the five ways of working central to delivering the Council's well-being goals, involving staff in policy development helps ensure principles within the policy are carried out in practice. If staff are not aware of the policy, this risks inconsistent and poor complaints handling.

- 15 An EIA is an important part of the approach to tackling discrimination and promoting equality in Wales. Under the Equality Act 2010, the Council must assess the likely impact of proposed changes to existing policies or practices on their ability to meet the Public Sector Equality Duty. Our [national report](#) sets out the benefits of EIAs in supporting policy development and decision making.
- 16 Senior managers told us that the Communications team are responsible for identifying potential complaints on its social media platforms, in line with the Council's social media policy. Once identified, they start the complaints process by asking complainants to complete a complaint form. The Council told us the key consideration is whether the issues raised fall within the definition of a complaint within the scope of the policy. However, the new Complaints policy could be clearer on the process for identifying, dealing with, and monitoring complaints made on social media. For example, the Council did not integrate or signpost in its new policy the relevant sections of its Social Media Policy and its 'Unacceptable Actions by Citizens' guidance.

Information on how to make a complaint

- 17 The Council has set out some service standards, so the public knows what to expect when making a complaint. Three service standards for timeliness are integrated into the updated policy.
- 18 Information on how to make a complaint is available in several formats and from different Council buildings, but online information is not always accessible. A search of the Council's website returns several different avenues for how to make complaints about service areas, including schools, social services and planning, and these are clearly labelled. However, we found it difficult to find out how to make a complaint without using the search function. From the 'Contact us' link at the bottom of the main page, the relevant button is labelled 'we are listening and learning', which does not inform the public that this is where they should go for complaints information. The Council has not yet updated the webpage with its updated complaints policy. It currently refers to the 2013 version.

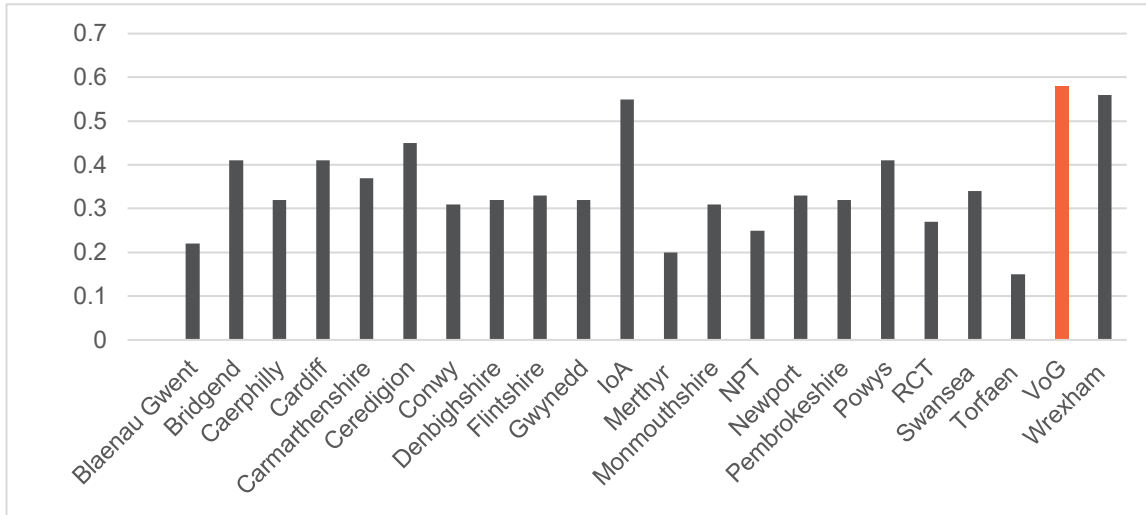
Service planning

- 19 We found limited evidence that the Council's service plans take account of learning from complaints and improving services. This is important because learning from complaints to improve services is a key aspect of the complaints policy.
- 20 The Corporate Resources Directorate service plan for 2025-26 outlines the Council's ambition to engage with residents and get feedback. However, while senior managers see the Council's complaints process as an enabler to help the Council achieve its corporate objectives, few service plans mention complaints. Developing the 2026-27 directorate and service plans provides an opportunity for the Council to address this.

Despite many complaints to the Ombudsman being about the Council's complaints arrangements, the Council has not fundamentally changed how it handles complaints

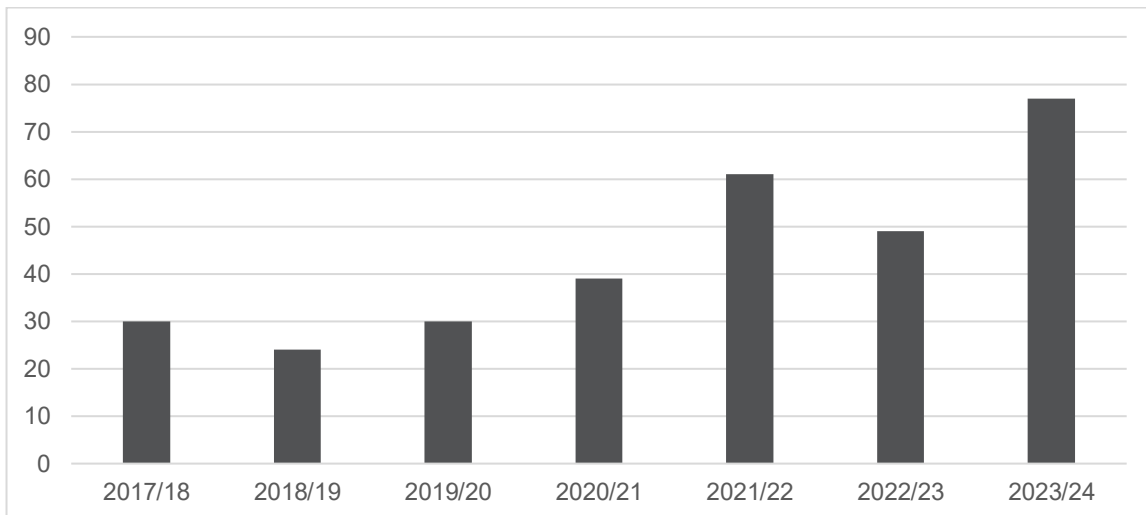
- 21 In 2023-24, over a fifth of the complaints about the Council to the PSOW were about the Council's complaints arrangements. Whilst the Council has updated its complaints policy, as set out in the Cabinet report which accompanied the new policy, it has not made changes to its processes and procedures for managing complaints. The Council mentions procedures will change in the future, but it has not outlined any milestones or firm commitment to do so. Therefore, it is difficult to see how the Council is going to reduce the numbers of complaints about its arrangements.
- 22 **Exhibit 1** shows that in 2023-24, the PSOW received the highest number of complaints about the Council per head of population than any other Welsh council. **Exhibit 2** shows how the numbers of complaints about the Council to the PSOW have increased over time since 2017. Over a quarter of these complaints relate to complaints handling.

Exhibit 1: Number of complaints per 1,000 residents received by PSOW, by Council, 2023-24



Source: [PSOW Annual Report to Vale to Glamorgan Council 2023-24](#)

Exhibit 2: number of complaints about the Council received by PSOW since 2017



Source: [PSOW Annual letters to Vale of Glamorgan Council](#)

- 23 PSOW data also shows that of the cases it closed relating to the Council in 2023-24, 20.3% were found to be worthy of some sort of intervention. All of these cases were settled with an early resolution or a voluntary settlement. Compared to other councils in Wales, this is the third highest proportion of interventions, in relation to all cases dealt with.

Complaints are not responded to in a timely manner and there are some weaknesses in the Council's complaints system

Responding to complaints

- 24 The Council aims to respond to complaints in line with the timescales set out in its updated Complaints Policy. Once a complaint is logged onto the system, there is a clear process for response and escalation if appropriate.
- 25 During 2024-25:
- 944 complaints were recorded;
 - 677 were resolved;
 - 267 were still under investigation at the end of the year.
- 26 Of the complaints resolved in 2024-25:
- the Council dealt with 44% within target timescales;
 - it missed its target of 65%;
 - performance was worse than its performance in 2023-24 (57%).
- 27 To help staff respond efficiently to complaints, staff use correspondence templates. Templates we examined are clear and in line with latest PSOW guidance, including guidance to follow where complaints span more than one provider or contractor. More recently, the Council is working on a 'Brilliant Basics' initiative to help improve customer service and has issued new 'Tone of Voice' guidance to all staff.

The Council's IT system for complaints

- 28 The Council introduced a new IT system in 2022 for recording and tracking complaints. Officers demonstrated the system to us and we found it to be comprehensive and intuitive, with service standards and email prompts integrated to assist tracking. Feedback from staff is welcomed and the process for allocating complaints to investigators is being updated as a result.
- 29 However, our focus group with staff who manage complaints identified some shortcomings in the system. Staff told us that there were some difficulties getting accurate information from the system and difficulties reassigning complaints. This impacts on the system being able to accurately track the progress of complaints. We were told of instances where complainants had chased the Council for a response but despite the complaints being logged, these had not been progressed due to confusion over allocation. There is clearly scope for the Council to review the functionality of its IT system to ensure that complaints are handled in a timely way.

There are opportunities to improve training and oversight of complaints arrangements

Training and support

- 30 The Council delivers training on complaints handling, with the latest training sessions held in 2025. The training and guidance for complaints handling is included on the Council's Complaints SharePoint site. However, gaps in training and support are leading to inconsistency and affecting the quality of complaints handling. Training on the complaints system is available for those who regularly deal with complaints, but some staff we spoke to had mixed feelings on the quality of the training available and some had not received any formal training at all.
- 31 Training sessions do not always refer staff to relevant policies. For example, despite having a policy on unacceptable actions by citizens, this is not covered. Ensuring staff know how to apply this policy when assessing a complaint would help to identify vexatious and malicious complaints.

Monitoring, oversight and learning

- 32 The Council has several mechanisms for reporting and monitoring its complaints:
- The Corporate Performance and Resources Scrutiny Committee receives quarterly updates on local indicators, including those escalated to PSOW.
 - Senior Leadership Team regularly receive complaints data.
 - The Governance and Audit Committee (GAC) receives the Annual Complaints report which sets out a summary of PSOW interventions and Welsh language complaints.
 - Dedicated SharePoint site for complaints and performance dashboard.
 - The Council reports three Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) on complaints quarterly. These are:
 - percentage of corporate complaints dealt with within target timescales;
 - number of Ombudsman complaints upheld against the Council; and
 - percentage residents' satisfaction with how their complaint has been dealt with overall.
- 33 The Council understands the reasons for the increase in complaints. The staff we spoke to were able to articulate reasons why complaints are being made and some of the challenges the Council is facing.
- 34 The Council is building a supportive learning culture around complaints. Initiatives include regular bulletins to complaints investigators and a portal to report any lessons learned or good practice. The Council also sends surveys to people making complaints to understand how effectively they dealt with their complaints.
- 35 The updated complaints policy states that the Council will learn from complaints by relying on individual service areas to identify and embed changes to policies, procedures, systems or staff training. However, more could be done to better evaluate the causes and themes of complaints across all service areas.

- 36 We identified that staff were not always completing the Learning Outcomes open text section on the system once a complaint had been closed. There is an opportunity for the Council to encourage staff to provide fuller information to help it understand the service improvements identified and any themes arising to inform its evaluation and learning.
- 37 To date, the Council's actions have not impacted on improving response times and reducing the numbers of complaints. More work is needed to embed its actions and initiatives, and to analyse their impact to help the Council improve complaints handling and service delivery.
- 38 The Council is a member of the All Wales Corporate Complaints Officer Group, which meets regularly to discuss common issues. However, the Council is unaware of how its performance on complaints compares to other authorities, beyond those complaints to the PSOW. The Council does not publicly report benchmarking against well-performing councils.
- 39 The Council places responsibility on service managers to manage complaints about their service. There is no arrangement centrally to oversee handling of stage 1 complaints, which is left to individual managers in each service area to monitor progress. The Council is introducing a dashboard to allow this to take place by Directors. This was not in full use at the time of our fieldwork.
- 40 Under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, the Council's Governance and Audit Committee (GAC) must review and assess the Council's ability to handle complaints effectively. GAC can make recommendations to the Council on how this could be improved.
- 41 GAC considers the Council's annual complaints report. The format of the report reflects feedback from members of the GAC. The 2023-24 annual complaints report provides detailed information and commentary on systems, processes and basic performance data. But, despite examples showing how the Council has learnt from complaints, there is scope for the report to be more evaluative to help GAC assess if the Council's complaints arrangements are working effectively.

- 42 GAC considered the Council's annual complaints report for 2023-24 in December 2024 and the Corporate Concerns and Complaints Policy in June 2025. But there was limited discussion and oversight by GAC of how the Council has improved services and actions to improve timeliness. This was despite the Council's poor performance in responding to complaints and high numbers of PSOW complaints in 2023-24. At the time of our audit, the Annual Complaints report for 2024-25 had not yet been reviewed by GAC.

Recommendations

- R1 To strengthen complaints handling and support the implementation of the Council's new policy, the Council should:**
- 1.1** undertake an equalities impact assessment for the updated complaints policy and, if necessary, update the policy to ensure the Council meets its obligations under the public sector equalities duty (**paragraph 15**);
 - 1.2** integrate key elements of the Council's Policy on Unacceptable Actions by Citizens and the Council's social media policy, so complaints investigators can deal with vexatious and malicious complaints and social media commentary quickly and consistently (**paragraph 16**); and
 - 1.3** improve signposting on how to make a complaint, to help the public to find this information more easily (**paragraph 18**).
- R2 The Council should improve the functionality of its IT system for complaints handling by:**
- 2.1** configuring the system to recognise where complaints have been reassigned to a new owner, to ensure all complaints are handled in a timely way (**paragraph 29**).

R3 The Council should improve the impact of staff training on complaints by:

- 3.1** ensuring all complaints handlers are suitably trained and kept updated on changes to the complaints system, processes and policy (**paragraph 30**).

R4 The Council should improve its monitoring and learning from complaints by:

- 4.1** improving the annual report on complaints to clarify learning and service improvements as a result of complaints (**paragraph 41**);
and
- 4.2** including Council benchmarking data in the Annual Complaints report as well as PSOW data to maximise the opportunity to share best practice with members of the Governance and Audit Committee and improve complaints handling (**paragraph 38**).

About our work

Scope of the audit

This audit considered to what extent the Council's complaints processes contribute towards achieving its well-being objectives, secure value for money, and meet corporate priorities.

The scope did not include consideration of personal information, Human Resources process, or complaints about Members, Social Services or Education.

Audit questions and criteria

Questions

Our work used the following high-level questions:

- Does the Council have a clear and strategic approach to complaints handling?
- Are complaints handled professionally and efficiently, in line with the Council's complaints policy?
- Does the Council review its complaints arrangements to ensure they are working effectively?
- Does the Council review and monitor complaints to help prevent or reduce the level of complaints in the future?

Criteria

We evaluated performance using guidance from the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales and the Complaints Standards Authority.

Methods

We reviewed 31 documents including:

- the PSOW Annual Report to the Council;
- the PSOW model Concerns and Complaints Policy;
- the Council's Annual Corporate Complaints and Compliments Report;
- the Council's Annual Complaints Report to Governance and Audit Committee;
and
- the Council's Corporate Concerns and Complaints Policy (2013 and 2025).

We interviewed officers and members and held a focus group with managers and team leaders involved in complaints. We also observed recordings of Governance and Audit Committee meetings that looked at annual reports about complaints, and analysed data.

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