

CYNGOR SIR CEREDIGION COUNTY COUNCIL

Report to: Council

Date of meeting: 28th November 2024

Title: Annual Report of Compliments, Complaints, and Freedom of Information (2023-2024)

Purpose of the report: To provide Council with a comprehensive overview of the Compliments, Complaints and Freedom of Information (FOI) activity (including Environmental Information Regulations - EIR) received by the Local Authority between 1st April 2023 and 31st March 2024. This report also provides information about the complaints activity referred to the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales during this reporting period.

For: Information

Cabinet Portfolio and Cabinet Member:
Councillor Bryan Davies, Leader of the Council

Background

The Annual Report, **see Appendix 1**, provides information relating to the Council's Compliments, Complaints and Freedom of Information activity between 1st April 2023 and 31st March 2024. The report is broken down into the following sections:

1. ***Introduction*** – an outline of the work of the Complaints and FOI Team and the Council's obligations under each of the policies covered by this report.
2. ***Compliments*** – details of all compliments passed to the Complaints and FOI Team during this reporting period.
3. ***Complaints*** – data regarding the number and type of complaints received, the outcomes of the investigations undertaken, the Council's performance against prescribed timescales and information relating to the lessons identified. Examples of some of the lessons identified are included at the end of the report.
4. ***Ombudsman Activity*** – details of all Ombudsman referrals, their outcomes and information surrounding the Early Resolution and/or Voluntary Settlements that were agreed by the Council during 2023-2024.
5. ***Freedom of Information (FOI) and Environmental Information Regulations (EIR)*** – the number of information requests received by the Council during the reporting period, details of the Council's performance with the statutory timescales and comparative data from previous reports.

The Annual Letter from the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales ("the Ombudsman"), dated 9th September 2024, accompanies this report – see **Appendix 2**. The Ombudsman's letter gives specific details about all activity relating to Ceredigion, as well as the performance of other local authorities across Wales.

Whilst this is the second consecutive year whereby the number of Ombudsman referrals has fallen compared with the previous reporting period; it is acknowledged that the Council continues to have a consistently high rate of Early Resolution/Voluntary Settlement agreements.

Challenges remain with regards to managing the complexity of some complaints and there is a marked increase in complaints and FOI/EIR activity compared with what was received during 2022-2023.

As a consequence of the difficulties identified within earlier reports about complaints handling and the management of information requests under FOI and EIR, Leadership Group agreed a number of corporate actions that are focused on improving the Council’s ability to effectively deal with these matters in a robust and resilient way. Work is ongoing to complete these actions and is monitored and reviewed on a quarterly basis.

Brief Overview:

300	Compliments Received	↓ 35%
314	Enquiries (processed by Complaints and FOI Team)	↓ 22%
228	Complaints Received: Stage 1 = 144 Stage 2 = 84	↑ 58%
32	Ombudsman Contacts	↓ 9%
7	Early Resolution / Voluntary Settlements agreed with the Ombudsman	↓ 46%
1068	FOI & EIR Requests	↑ 21%

Summary

- Fewer compliments were recorded during 2023-2024 and although a significant amount of work has been done to improve the way that this activity is managed, the Complaints and FOI Team is currently in the process of raising staff awareness across the Council, to ensure that all messages of appreciation are captured. Part of this work has involved the introduction of an online [Compliment Form](#) on the Council’s website, a monthly returns template to be distributed to services (not yet operational), and an internal communications campaign is due to run in the next few weeks to raise awareness of the importance of recording compliments.
- The Complaints and FOI Team managed fewer enquiries during this reporting period, mainly by directing these to the relevant services for early resolution prior to initiating the complaints procedures. However, a significant number of enquires continue to be processed and managed by the Complaints and FOI Team, though this is usually when an individual is seeking to make a complaint, but the complaints procedures may not apply, for whatever reason.
- It is acknowledged that work is required with managers to prevent the unnecessary escalation of complaints to Stage 2, simply because it was not possible to respond within the prescribed timescale of ten-working-days. Guidance, advice and training is available to all officers in relation to managing complaints effectively.
- The Complaints and FOI Team continues to face challenges in meeting the demands of rises in the numbers of complaints and FOI/EIR activity. It is encouraging that there were

far fewer Ombudsman interventions during 2023-2024, though it is acknowledged that further work can be done to reduce this in the forthcoming year.

- Complaints about the Refuse Collection Service and Planning matters continue to be the service areas in receipt of the highest number of complaints. It should be noted that these services are somewhat predisposed to attracting complaints, by their nature, and the number of complaints received should be taken in context with the level of activity these two service areas manage.
- Significant improvements have been made to the Council's compliance with Freedom of Information (FOI) and Environmental Information Regulations (EIR) timescales. Whilst there is still room for improvement, the Council responded to 80% of all requests within prescribed timescales during 2023-2024.

Wellbeing of Future Generations:

Has an Integrated Impact Assessment been completed? If not, please state why.

No IIA has been completed because there is no policy or service change proposed within this report.

Summary of Integrated Impact Assessment:

Long term: N/A

Collaboration: N/A

Involvement: N/A

Prevention: N/A

Integration: N/A

Recommendation(s):

1. To note the contents of the Council's Annual Report for Compliments, Complaints and FOI Activity 2023-24 (Appendix 1)
2. To note the contents of the Ombudsman's Annual Letter (Appendix 2) including the actions contained therein.
3. To note the feedback from the Cabinet committee dated 5th November 2024, following its prior presentation at the Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Meeting (dated 8th October). Both committees **'agreed to note the contents of the report'** in advance of this Council meeting.

Reasons for decision:

To ensure continuous improvement and ensure that all elected members are aware of the Council's performance in relation to compliments, complaints, FOI/EIR and Ombudsman activity.

Overview and Scrutiny:

As outlined above, the appendices contained in this report were considered and agreed by Cabinet on 5th November 2024, and by the Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting on 8th October 2024.

Policy Framework:

Concerns and Complaints Policy

Social Services Complaints Policy and Procedures

Freedom of Information Policy

Environmental Information Regulations Policy

Corporate Well-being Objectives:

Boosting the Economy, Supporting Business and Enabling Employment
Creating Caring and Healthy Communities
Providing the Best Start in Life and Enabling Learning and all Ages
Creating Sustainable, Green and Well-connected Communities

Finance and Procurement implications:

N/A

Legal Implications:

N/A

Staffing implications:

N/A

Property / asset implications:

N/A

Risk(s):

There is a risk of reputational damage to the Local Authority in the event that the mechanisms for adhering to our statutory requirements in respect of complaints handling and information access rights (specifically FOI and EIR) are not robust.

Statutory Powers:

N/A

Background Papers:

N/A

Appendices:

Appendix 1 – Compliments, Complaints and FOI Report 2023-2024
Appendix 2 – Ombudsman’s Annual Letter (dated 9th September 2024)

Corporate Lead Officer:

Alun Williams, Corporate Lead Officer for Policy, Performance & Public Protection

Reporting Officer:

Marie-Neige Hadfield, Complaints & FOI Manager

Date:

6th November 2024