

MEETING:	GOVERNANCE AND AUDIT COMMITTEE
DATE:	17 NOVEMBER 2022
TITLE:	ANNUAL COMPLAINTS AND SERVICE IMPROVEMENT REPORT 2021/22
PURPOSE:	PROVIDE AN OVERVIEW OF THE COUNCIL'S ARRANGEMENTS AND PERFORMANCE IN RELATION TO DEALING WITH COMPLAINTS AND IMPROVING SERVICES DURING 2021/22
AUTHOR:	IAN JONES, HEAD OF CORPORATE SUPPORT
CABINET MEMBER:	COUNCILLOR MENNA JONES

The Portfolio Leader, Councillor Menna Jones submitted the report to the Cabinet on 25 October, and we believe that the contents of the Report is also appropriate to submit to the Governance and Audit Committee.

No comments or suggestions were received on the report by the Cabinet Members apart from a note of thanks and an acknowledgement of the progress.

1. PURPOSE

The purpose of the report is to provide an overview of the Council's arrangements and performance in relation to dealing with complaints and improving services during 2021/22, highlighting successes, challenges and developments.

An analysis of quantitative and qualitative data is submitted, which is a measure of the Council's performance in this context.

The Committee is asked to accept the report and to offer any relevant observations or suggestions.

2. ROLE OF THE COMMITTEE

The Committee is required to ensure that there are effective arrangements for dealing with complaints within the Council.

The Committee is invited to consider the information submitted, and offer any relevant observations or suggestions.

3. INTRODUCTION

3.1 Background

The Council's "Complaints and Service Improvement procedure" was introduced in 2015, drawn up under the supervision of the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales. It corresponds with Welsh Government guidelines and is therefore in line with the complaints procedures of other public bodies.

The Cabinet adopted the procedure with the aim of bringing specific benefits to the citizen by focusing on the solution instead of the process, and allow Officers to deal quicker with complaints.

The ownership over responding to complaints was moved to the individual Departments, but with the function of harmonizing and offering guidance continuing under the leadership of the Monitoring Officer with the support of the Service Improvement Officer.

The *Concerns and Complaints Policy* was updated on 1 April 2021, and responsibility for the implementation of the *Complaints and Service Improvement* procedure was transferred to the Corporate Support Department under the care of the *Service Improvement Officer* within the *Organisational Learning and Development* team.

It should be noted that this procedure is not relevant to Social Services users as there is a statutory procedure for them. Schools also implement their own complaints procedures.

3.2 Responding to Complaints - An explanation of the terminology that is used

3.2.1 Resolving Informal Complaints

Complainant informally contacts the Service Improvement Officer or the relevant service to resolve the concern.

3.2.2 Investigating Formal Complaints

The complaint is investigated within the relevant Department, by an officer who is senior enough and is independent from the source of the complaint.

3.2.3 Complaint to the Ombudsman

The complainant could go to the Ombudsman if they are not satisfied with the Council's formal response.

After looking at the complaint, the Ombudsman may decide on one of the following:

- *No Investigation* – where the Ombudsman is satisfied with the way the authority has dealt with the matter, and feels that there is no need for a further investigation. It could also be a matter beyond its jurisdiction.
- *Premature* - if the Ombudsman is of the opinion that the authority has not yet had an opportunity to consider the matter.
- *Hold a further investigation* - where the Ombudsman feels that further investigation is needed, to assess how the authority has dealt with the matter.
- *Settlement* – where there is an agreement with the complainant and they accept the resolution.

4. FREQUENCY OF THE REPORT

Due to the unique circumstances of the past few years, the period of reporting to the Cabinet has varied from between 6 and 12 months. The Concerns and Complaints Policy notes that a report should be submitted to the Senior Leadership Team every quarter and to the Cabinet twice a year and this is the intention for the future.

'Live' data is available to Heads of Department, the Senior Leadership Team, the Cabinet and the Committee at any time upon request.

This Report summarises the developments for the period 01.04.2021 - 31.03.2022, focusing on Valid Formal Complaints and complaints submitted to the Ombudsman.

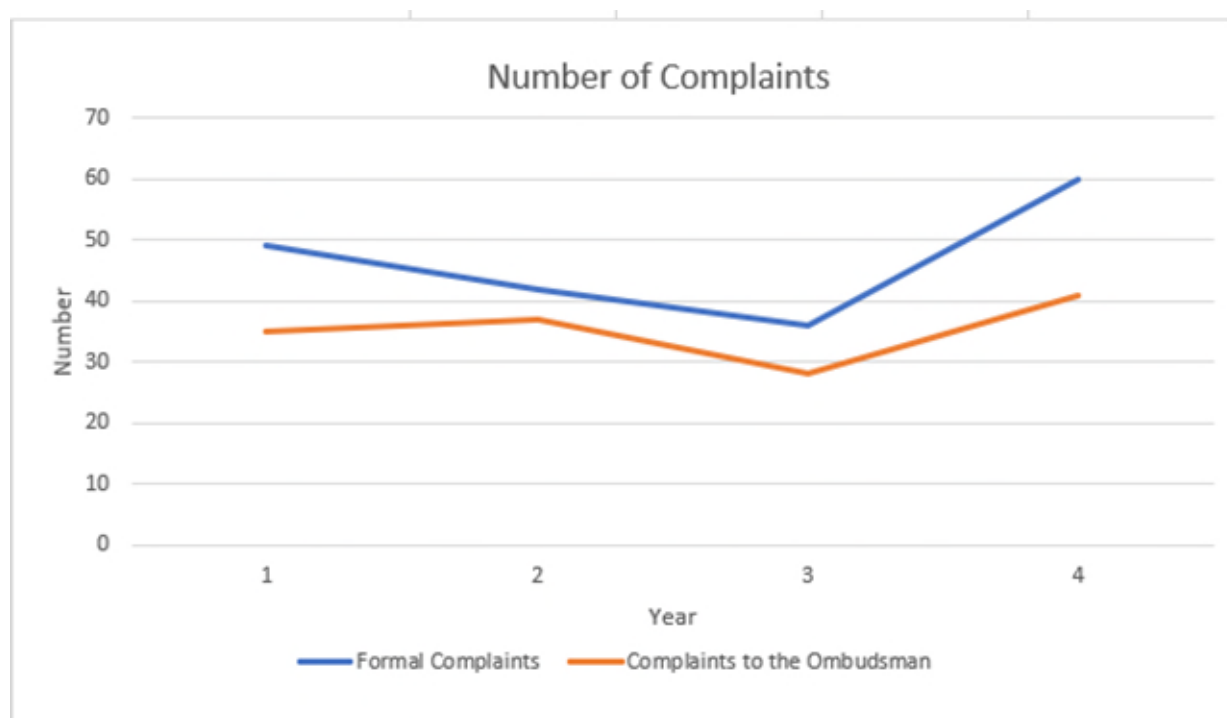
5. QUANTITATIVE DATA

5.1 Number of Complaints: Current Situation

Type of Complaints	Number 2020/21 (01/04/2020 - 31/03/2021)	Number 2021/22 (01/04/2021 - 31/03/2022)
Formal Complaints (Valid)	36	60
Complaints to the Ombudsman	28: 15 No Investigation 5 Premature 0 No response 6 Settlement 0 Enquiry 1 Investigation closed 1 Report 0 Complaint withdrawn	41: 33 No Investigation 2 Premature 0 No response 5 Settlement 0 Enquiry 0 Investigation closed 0 Report 1 Complaint withdrawn

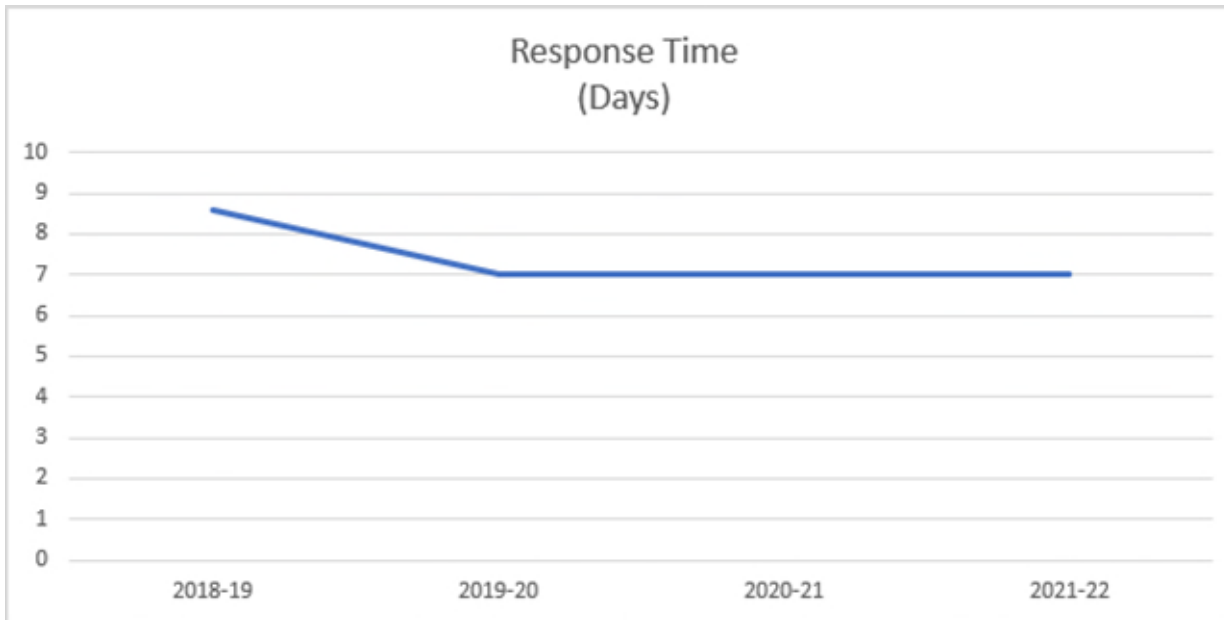
5.2 Number of complaints: Situation over a Period Since 2018-19

Type of Complaints	Number 2018-19	Number 2019-20	Number 2020-21	Number 2021-22
Valid Formal Complaints	49	42	36	60
Complaints to the Ombudsman	35	37	28	41



5.3 Response Time over a Period Since 2018-19

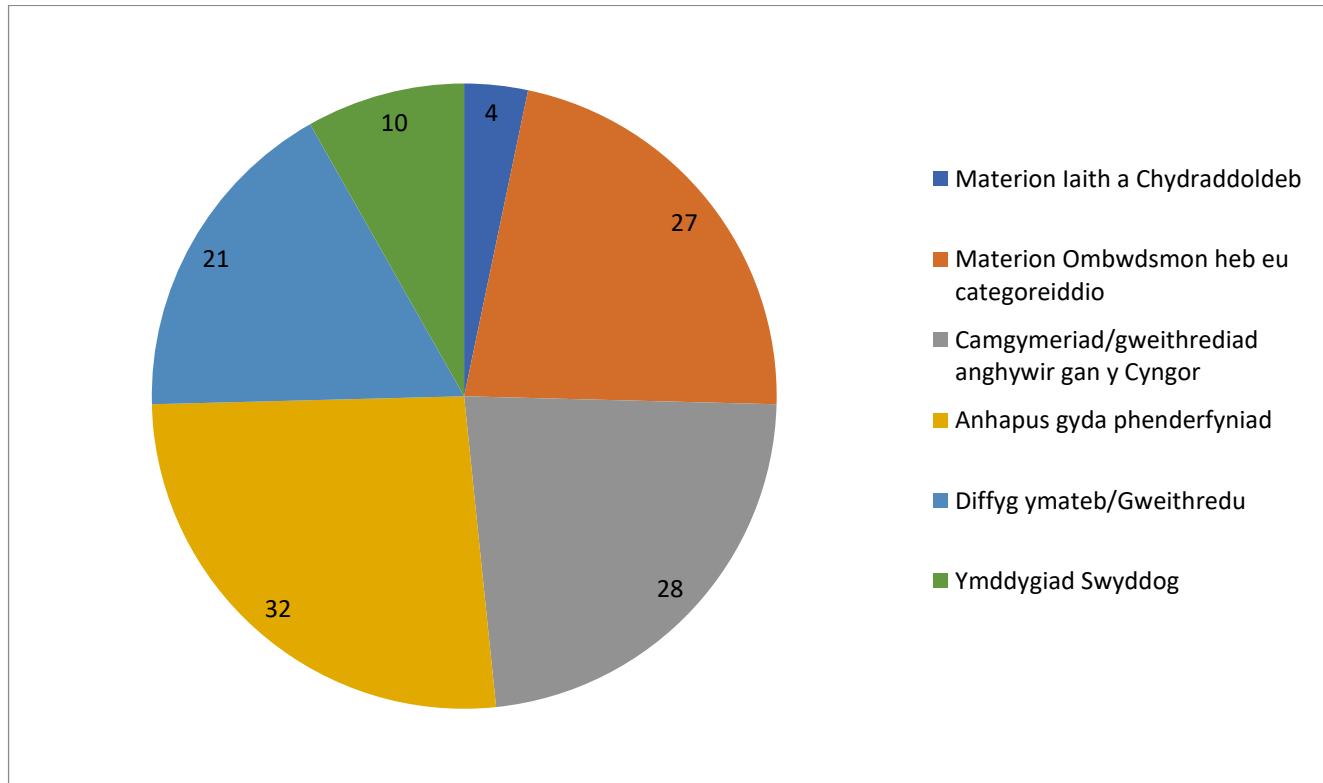
2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
<i>8.6 days</i>	<i>7 days</i>	<i>7 days</i>	<i>7 days</i>



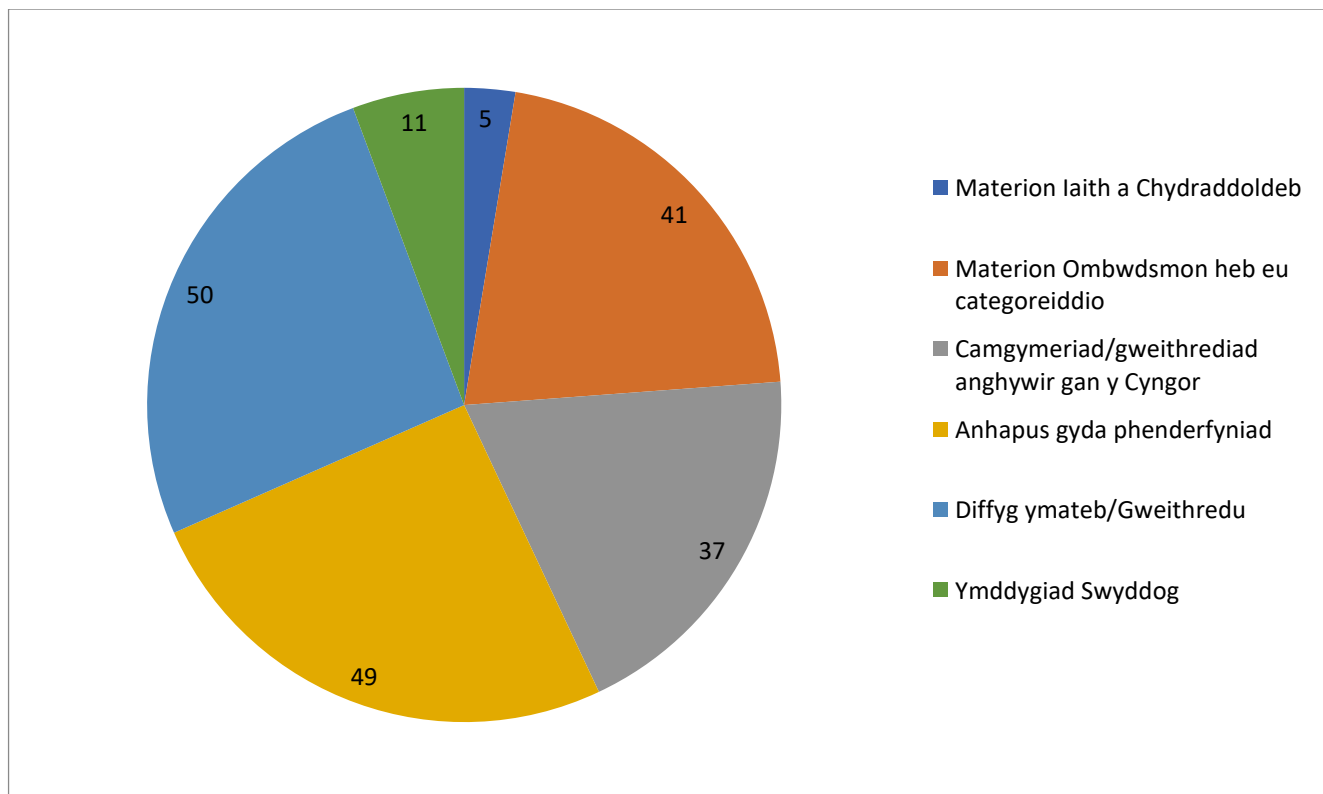
6. ANALYSIS OF THE COMPLAINTS (General)

(Categories - Language and Equality; Uncategorised Complaints to the Ombudsman; Mistakes/Incorrect action by the Council; Unhappy with a Decision; Lack of response/Action; Staff conduct)

Per Category 2020/21 Year Quarter 1 – 4



Per Category 2021/22 Year Quarter 1 – 4



Analysis per Department – See Appendix 1

Detailed information can be provided about specific Complaints if needed.

7. MAIN MESSAGES

- Initially, a reduction was seen, followed by a substantial increase in Formal Complaints during the pandemic period; however, the number of Ombudsman Complaints have remained consistent.

COMMENT: *The majority of Authorities are seeing a similar pattern (confirmed by the Ombudsman).*

- The pattern / trend over a longer period shows that the number of Formal Complaints has reduced gradually since 2018-19, but has increased recently.
- The response time has remained consistent on 7 days (8.6 days in 2018-19).
- A change in culture was seen, with Services on the whole receiving complaints in a more positive and constructive way in order to learn from them, with the response time reducing.

8. THE OMBUDSMAN'S ANNUAL LETTER AND NATIONAL DATA

The Ombudsman's Annual Letter (2021/22) to Gwynedd Council has just been received (**Appendix 2**).

The letter is intended to assist members to scrutinise the Council's complaints performance and identify any steps to be taken as a result.

As requested in the letter, we will:

- Engage with the Ombudsman's Complaints Standards work
- Give training to staff
- Provide data on complaints
- Inform the Ombudsman about the outcome of considerations and proposed Council actions in relation to the above matters by 30 September

As it was not possible to report to the Cabinet before this, a message has already been sent to the Ombudsman to explain the situation. To please note the reporting dates and our actions, in order to ensure that we comply with the requirements of the Annual Letter.

National data was published by the Ombudsman's Office as appendices to the Annual Letter, which summarises the Complaints figures reported by Welsh Authorities.

We contacted the Ombudsman Officer to ask for an interpretation of the figures. They welcomed our enquiry and noted that they wished for every Authority to consider the data as carefully as we do.

The following was noted (verbally):

- The table should not be considered as a 'league table'
- The low numbers do not mean that Councils are better than those with higher numbers, and it was possible that Councils did not record their complaints in the same way
- Gwynedd's figures appear to be realistic
- The complaints procedure in Gwynedd is obviously working, and we are ready to learn lessons from Complaints

9. LOOKING TO THE FUTURE/NEXT STEPS

For information, the situation to date this year is -

- 20 Valid Formal Complaints between 01/04/22 and 31/08/22
 - 15 Ombudsman Complaints between 01/04/22 and 31/08/22
- (11 No Investigation; 2 No Investigation – Premature; 1 Settlement; 1 Investigation)

Due to the way that the Ombudsman's Office records its data, the fact that the Recycling and Waste Service is transferring to the Environment Service will make it easier to reconcile figures with the Ombudsman's Annual Letter from now on. Previously, considerable analysis work had to be done as we were unfortunately unable to record them in the same manner.

We have collaborated closely with the Ombudsman Office's Training Officer on the development of 'Customer Care' training, by using complaints as a learning tool. We received very positive feedback from the attendees of the pilot course and a further session that was held, and a programme of dates are in place for the year to come.

We intend to continue to work with Departmental management teams and officers within the Service to ensure an understanding of the Complaints procedure and their commitment to implement them. In light of this, we hope to reduce the time we take to respond to Complaints, and continue to improve services.

Work is currently underway to create new "Responding to Correspondence" Training, as a recent investigation into this has highlighted that not everyone appreciates the importance of a timely response.

The Successes Wall is still growing, and it is very good to see that a large number of Thanks/Compliments have come in from the public. Seeing the public's appreciation is a great help in raising staff morale, especially front-line staff.