

Audit and Standards Committee

Meeting held 17 November 2022

PRESENT: Councillors Colin Ross (Chair), Angela Argenzio, Simon Clement-Jones, Tom Hunt, Kevin Oxley and Ms Alison Howard

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

1.1 An apology for absence was received from Councillor Ben Curran.

2. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

2.1 No items were identified where resolutions may be moved to exclude the press and public.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

3.1 There were no declarations of interest.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

4.1 The minutes of the meetings held on 22 September, 2022 were agreed as an accurate record.

5. ANNUAL CORPORATE COMPLAINTS REPORT & ANNUAL OMBUDSMAN REPORT 2021/22

5.1 The Committee received a report of the Director of Human Resources and Customer Services (Mark Bennett) and the Monitoring Officer (David Hollis). The report provided members of the Committee with an overview of the annual corporate and ombudsman complaints received and formally referred and determined by the three Ombudsmen (Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman, Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman and Housing Ombudsman) during the 12 months from 1 April, 2021 to 31 March, 2022. The report also identified future developments and areas for improvement in complaint management.

5.2 Paul Taylor, Head of Customer Services, attended the meeting to present the report to the Committee.

5.3 Mr Taylor explained that during the financial year 2021-2022, the system that complaints were recorded on was moved onto a customer relations management system. This aimed to give a better representation of complaints. This was a cultural change that allowed the Council to energise the way that complaints were dealt with, and made every service take complaints seriously. The report included data from the old system until November 2021, when the new system commenced.

- 5.4 Mr Taylor advised that the Council, together with Amey and Veolia as partners, dealt with 2,463 complaints through the formal process in 2021-2022, which was a 22% increase on the previous year. Amey and Veolia accounted for 57% of those complaints and other Council services accounted for 43%. The largest number of complaints relating to Council services were Resources (8%), Children and Social Care (6%), and Council Housing repairs (5%). Mr Taylor also noted that 46% of complaints had been responded to within 28 days, and the average escalation rate was 27%. The most frequent reason for complaints was quality of service (21%).
- 5.5 Mr Taylor stated that it was important to flag improvements and ongoing developments, and understand why the number of complaints had risen. He noted that complaints that had been dealt with within three days under the Problem Solving procedure were not registered on the previous complaints system. Since November 2021 this information had been captured.
- 5.6 He outlined the improvements and ongoing developments to the complaints system and explained that there was now an emphasis on effective training to ensure that complaints were accurately recorded and responded to. A new Sharepoint site enabled managers to see where there might be slippage. Tracking, monitoring and chasing mechanisms had been improved, which it was hoped would minimise risk to the organisation. Improvements and support had been given to services to ensure that citizens can easily see what is being done.
- 5.7 In terms of equality data, Mr Taylor noted that, on average, 5% of equality monitoring forms were returned, so further development was needed on this.
- 5.8 Mr Taylor noted that there were now mandatory fields on the complaints system which aimed to help record complaints properly. Training for staff was not mandatory, but training attendance had been good. He reported that the turnover of staff within the complaints team was not an issue, but it was important to ensure that any new staff were trained to the same standard.
- 5.9 He explained that it was hoped to gain a better understanding of common themes, and to capture 'lessons learnt' for each complaint and build on this.
- 5.10 Mr Taylor noted concerns from members about data in the report and explained that the new system included a very clear system of accountable and responsible officers. He expected directors to have more involvement in changing the culture of dealing with complaints, and direction to improve the customer experience.
- 5.11 Mr Taylor hoped to get to a point where there were customer accounts in place that would be able to capture equalities data, and to build equalities questions into the forms in a different way. He said that it was important to work with the equalities team to further understand the make-up of those making complaints.
- 5.12 Mr Taylor noted that a breakdown of data relating to Amey and Veolia was not available and agreed to come back with more information on this.

- 5.13 In response to concerns about the escalation rate, he understood this to be partly due to the pressure on the Service coming out of the pandemic, and that a backlog of housing repair complaints had also contributed to this. He noted that structural changes within services might be needed to improve this.
- 5.14 Mr Taylor continued with the presentation and confirmed that the Ombudsman was concerned about the 20% increase in complaints referred to them. The largest number received were for Housing, Adult Social Care, and Education and Children. He advised that Ombudsman deadlines had changed during recovery from the pandemic.
- 5.15 Mr Taylor explained that 17 of the Ombudsman complaints had been upheld, no public reports were issued, and the Council paid £8445.49 in compensatory payments as a result of Ombudsman enquiries, which was a marked improvement from the previous year.
- 5.16 He outlined examples of learning outcomes during 2021-2022, which included regular joint meetings between services to help them work better together, encouraging services to become more proactive and make policy changes where appropriate.
- 5.17 Mr Taylor advised that the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman upheld 75% of complaints and that Sheffield City Council had 100% compliance with their recommendations.
- 5.18 Mr Taylor asked the Committee to consider the report in order to provide its view on the performance of the Corporate and Ombudsman complaints and the issues raised.
- 5.19 Members of the Committee asked questions and the following responses were provided: -
- 5.20 Mr Taylor confirmed that directors had access to the same level of detail regarding complaints as the complaints team had, and that they had quarterly updates on how this was developing. He considered this to be vital in ensuring that directors could take complaints seriously and build into their service delivery plans.
- 5.21 Mr Taylor noted that it was important to understand where fewer complaints had been received and the reasons for this, for example, if members of the public had found it too difficult to report a complaint, or where they believed that their complaint had not been actioned.
- 5.22 In response to concerns about the Committee receiving reports in a timely way, Mr Taylor confirmed that the new system was expected to evolve and allow for reports to be generated at the press of a button.
- 5.23 Mr Taylor explained that in order to improve the complaints process and response times, clear guidance would need to be given to people in communities, and work was needed with community groups to ensure that people were able to

fully access the complaints system.

5.24 Mr Taylor advised that he would investigate options to access a breakdown of complaints across wards and to identify key areas.

5.25 In response to Members concerns about their being fully briefed on complaints data, Mr Taylor advised that an interim report with details of the first two quarters of 2022/23 could be brought to a future meeting of the Committee if appropriate.

5.26 Ryan Keyworth noted that the role of the Committee was to ensure the Council was running to the right standard and not to scrutinise the performance data.

5.27 **RESOLVED:** That the Audit and Standards Committee:-

- (a) notes the contents of the report now submitted, together with the comments now made;
- (b) notes it's dissatisfaction with Sheffield City Council's complaints handling and performance as presented in the report; and
- (c) requests that:
 - (i) Directors ensure that complaint response times are met in a timely manner and are built into their Service Plans;
 - (ii) options are explored to capture equalities and geographical data within the complaints system;
 - (iii) a breakdown of complaints from Amey and Veolia is provided to the Committee, and information on how their complaints are dealt with;
 - (iv) these recommendations are shared with Kate Josephs, Chief Executive of Sheffield City Council;
 - (v) a report on the findings of these recommendations is added to the work plan and brought to the meeting of the Committee on 16 February, 2022; and
 - (vi) Sheffield City Council responds to any findings in a way that enhances its reputation as a caring organisation that listens to its population.

6. WORK PROGRAMME

6.1 The Committee considered a report of the Director of Legal and Governance that outlined the work programme for the remainder of the municipal year. Members were asked to identify any further items for inclusion.

6.2 The Committee agreed to include a report on the work programme, as mentioned at 5.27 (c) (v) of these minutes.

6.3 Members of the Committee discussed the Open House Management System and the following points were raised:-

6.4 A Member of the Committee considered that the Audit and Standards Committee should be able to request further information, where a report had been presented that had highlighted problems or challenges, to ensure accountability and 'lessons learned'. There were mixed views from Committee members as to

whether this would be appropriate, as this issue fell within the remit of the Housing Policy Committee.

- 6.5 A suggestion was made to refresh the Terms of Reference of the Committee.
- 6.6 It was noted by a member of the Committee that implementation of the new housing system was not due to start until September 2023. Due to the significance of this work to the Audit and Standards Committee, the Member considered it to be appropriate for the Committee to receive an update on the progress of the procurement and implementation of the new system.
- 6.7 Robert Parkin, Assistant Director of Legal and Governance, noted that the constitution set out committee remits and that duplication should be avoided. He added that members and officers were still finding their way through the policy committee structure, and that it was important to ensure that the right level of information was brought to the Audit and Standards Committee. In order to ensure that the Committee did not stray into the realms of Policy Committees, but to also ensure that housing issues did not 'slip', further discussions on Committee remits would be needed between the Monitoring Officer and legal officers of Sheffield City Council.
- 6.9 RESOLVED: That the Audit and Standards Committee:-
- (a) notes the work programme; and
 - (b) requests that:-
 - (i) a report on the findings of the recommendations by the Committee on the Annual Complaints and Ombudsman Report be included on the work programme for February 2023; and
 - (ii) an update be provided to the Committee on the Open House Management System, in the form of an audit focussed report as to what checks and internal controls were in place to ensure that it was delivered within scope and budget, and to note any further management actions required from an audit perspective looking forward.

7. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

- 7.1 It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee would be held on 22 December, 2022.
- 7.2 The Chair expressed thanks to Ryan Keyworth for his attendance at this meeting and previous meetings, and for all the work that he had put into the budget process.

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