

## **Report of the Assistant Chief Officer and Monitoring Officer**

### **Annual Compliments, Complaints, Concerns and Requests for Information 2023/24**

#### **Purpose of report**

1. To update the Committee with details of compliments, complaints, concerns and requests for information made by the public to the Service over the past 12 months.
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#### **Recommendations**

***It is recommended that the Committee notes that during the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024:***

- i) a total of 117 requests for information containing 433 queries about the Service were received. This number has reduced compared to last year's figure because requests for incident information are now categorised separately as Miscellaneous Information Requests (MIRs). There were 174 MIRs during this period. No requests were passed to the Information Commissioners Office for review.***
- ii) a total of 53 compliments were received from the public;***
- iii) 43 complaints or concerns about Service activities were made;***
- iv) 39 other complaints or concerns were received about activities carried out by other organisations or individuals;***
- v) 3 of the complainants appealed the response provided but none were passed to the Local Government Ombudsman for further investigation;***
- vi) 28 concerns were received via the internal 'Say So' confidential and an anonymous reporting tool, from staff; and***
- vii) 1 concern was received via 'Say So PLUS' the confidential and anonymous reporting tool for members of the public.***

#### **Introduction and Background**

2. It is important that the Authority has good corporate governance arrangements to ensure services are run in an open and accountable manner. The role of the

Committee includes the monitoring and review of the Authority's corporate governance arrangements, which includes responsibility to consider the process and review of compliments, complaints, concerns and information requests made by the public about the Service.

### **Complaints and Concerns Received 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024**

(Last year's figures are shown in brackets for comparison)

3. The Service received a total of 82 (65) complaints and concerns from the public, with 43 (39) being concerned with Service activities and 39 (26) concerning activities carried out by other organisations or individuals. 16 (14) of the complaints about the Service were upheld, a summary is set out below.

#### **Summary of complaints upheld**

<b>Complaint Category</b>	<b>Number of complaints upheld</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
Driving Standards	3	Apology, investigation, passed to insurers
Staff Behaviour	4	Apology, addressed with members of staff, revisited procedures and training
Damage to Property	3	Remedial action and apology. Insurance details provided
Poor Response/Service	1	Apology, review of procedures and training
Other	3	Remedial action, apology and matter addressed with staff
Fire Safety Inspection	1	Remedial action and apology
Use of Facilities	1	Third party rectified issue

4. Three of the complainants appealed to the Assistant Chief Fire Officer regarding dissatisfaction with the response provided by the Service. The appeals were not upheld by the Assistant Chief Fire Officer.
5. It should be noted that the complaints and concerns received regarding the responsibilities of other organisations or individuals included concerns over poor fire safety at business and residential premises and the potential lack of access to properties in an emergency. Where possible these types of concerns are directed straight to Prevention and Protection.
6. All complaints and concerns were acknowledged within 3 working days of receipt and all but 4 received a response within 10 working days.

## **Compliments Received 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024**

(Last year's figures are shown in brackets for comparison)

7. The Service received 53 (60) compliments during this period and it should be noted that the majority came following Service attendance at a fire or rescue, and conducting Safe and Well Checks. There were a number of compliments following Service attendance at an event or making a visit with the remainder concerning Service involvement at RTCs.

## **Freedom of Information (FOI) and Subject Access Requests (SAR) Received 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024**

(Last year's figures are shown in brackets for comparison)

8. The Service received 310 (292) requests for information including 19 (14) SARs during this period. Themes included requests for information on fires (in particular, information regarding e-bike & e-scooter fires was sought by multiple media outlets), ICT, HR and fleet information. From 1 April 2020 we have also recorded the number of queries within each FOI request, for example one email received under FOI on a particular topic could contain a list of queries or sub-requests about a variety of related issues that need to be dealt with individually. In total we have received 433 queries within the 117 FOI requests during 2023-2024.
9. The seemingly small number of SARs received this year does not truly reflect the workload associated with them. SARs often require a significant amount of staff time due to their complex nature and because they often involve processing large amounts of data that must be collated, reviewed and disclosed accurately within statutory timeframes. SARs will usually involve numerous officers from departments across the whole Service requiring coordination and accurate scrutiny of different systems.

## **Say So**

10. In mid-March 2023, a confidential and anonymous staff reporting line was introduced. This is coordinated by a contracted company called 'Say So'. Representatives from Say So have so far briefed 300 HWFRS firefighters and staff about the reporting line via 11 online video calls and 23 physical visits. Say So reporting products have also been extensively advertised across the organisation.
11. Say So is an external, independent and impartial service for any employee of HWFRS to report any type of workplace issues or concerns, it is not just for behavioural concerns. Say So can securely accommodate anonymous, confidential, or fully open reports and these are cleansed where necessary to prevent identification of the reporter. Their systems and protocols have been designed to manage all data securely. Additionally, their staff are all safeguarding trained and very experienced.

12. The aim of Say So is to support individuals by receiving and processing their concerns and then making them accessible directly to the relevant senior leaders, so that the issue can be investigated if necessary, and a resolution sought where it is required. Say So have been commissioned so that all employees can safely and confidently engage and be included by having issues assessed and acted upon where appropriate. Wherever possible our collective aim is to identify learning to ensure the best possible workplace culture.
13. However it must be noted that Say So is an additional staff reporting mechanism. It does not replace the current reporting procedures available within HWFRS. Staff should always try to report matters internally with managers in the first instance, before using Say So and this happens in the majority of cases. All employees are encouraged to challenge directly, or report to a manager promptly, all inappropriate behaviour, whenever it is encountered, in any form in the workplace. Say So provides a route for an employee to report a concern where they feel they cannot openly or directly report the matter to their managers.
14. On 30 March 2023, the HMICFRS Spotlight Report recommended that by 1 October 2023, Chief Fire Officers should make sure their Services provide a confidential way for staff to raise concerns and that staff are aware of whistleblowing processes. Having a confidential independent reporting line in place ensures that the Service meets this requirement.
15. Since March 2023, there have been 28 concerns raised via Say So by members of staff.
16. Figure 1 shows how many concerns have been received by month, clearly showing how the numbers of concerns have reduced more recently:

<b>Month 2023/2024</b>	<b>Number</b>
March/April	8
May	5
June	1
July	4
August	3
September	4
October	2
November	0
December	0
January	1
February	0
March	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>

*Figure 1 - Total concerns per month 23/24*

17. Having reviewed the concerns received these have been classified into the following themes:

<b>Type of Concern</b>	<b>Number</b>
Policy	1
Equipment	1
Culture	3
Line Manager	1
Conduct	14
Contract/T&Cs	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>

*Figure 2 – Concerns by type*

18. Once received, each concern is followed up. These are dealt with via the most appropriate manager and responses provided via the Say So portal where an anonymous concern has been raised or directly to the individual when they have provided their name. Some concerns raised are either linked to each other or already under investigation, and can easily be dealt with via one investigation or a simple review. On occasions when the concern has been raised anonymously or accusations have been made, there is often insufficient information provided to support a further investigation. In these circumstances managers will seek out further information locally and the person raising the concern is contacted via the portal or directly and asked to provide more information. Where further information is not forthcoming the matter is noted and recorded and no further action is taken unless more information come to light.
19. Matters raised through Say So in the last year have resulted in:
- Broken equipment being fixed expediently
  - Policy review, restating of terms and conditions
  - Reviews of potential fairness/equality issues
  - Misconduct being identified and addressed
  - Staffing levels/minimums being re-enforced
20. Of note, only one concern has resulted in the suspension and dismissal of staff. This case was related to an allegation of drug use, which after investigation and a full hearing resulted in the dismissal of two employees.
21. In September 2023, Say So PLUS was introduced. Say So PLUS is for use by members of the public who wish to provide feedback or make complaint about service provided by an organisation who subscribes to the Say So PLUS service. Since inception there has been one concern raised.

## Summary

22. The role of the Audit and Standards Committee includes the monitoring and review of the Authority's corporate governance arrangements. This includes responsibility for considering the process with regards to compliments, complaints and concerns made by the public. This process was last reviewed in December 2018 and was considered to be robust and fit for purpose. There have been no significant issues that have arisen since this date and it has not been necessary to make any changes in Service delivery. The FOI and SAR processes are continually monitored for improvement opportunities.
23. Your officers are satisfied that there are no significant levels of recurring themes or trends in complaints being reported to give any cause for concern.

## Corporate Considerations

<p><b>Resource Implications</b> (identify any financial, legal, property or human resources issues)</p>	<p>The complaints, concerns and compliments process uses existing resources.</p> <p>The FOI and SAR process uses existing resources.</p>
<p><b>Strategic Policy Links &amp; Core Code of Ethics</b> (Identify how proposals link with current priorities &amp; policy framework and align to the Core Code of Ethics)</p>	<p>The complaints, concerns and compliments process links to the Authority's Code of Corporate Governance.</p> <p>The FOIA and SAR process links to statutory and legislative frameworks. (GDPR and DPA 2018 FOIA 2000)</p>
<p><b>Risk Management / Health &amp; Safety</b> (identify any risks, the proposed control measures and risk evaluation scores).</p>	<p>The Audit &amp; Standards Committee receive an annual report to provide assurance to Members that the processes are effective. Legal Services Officers monitor for any emerging trends in reported concerns and complaints on a monthly basis.</p>
<p><b>Consultation</b> (identify any public or other consultation that has been carried out on this matter)</p>	<p>N/A – no policy change is recommended</p>
<p><b>Equalities</b> (has an Equalities Impact Assessment been completed? If not, why not?)</p>	<p>N/A – no policy change is recommended</p>

<b>Data Protection Impact Assessment</b> (where personal data is processed a DPIA must be completed to ensure compliant handling)	N/A
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### **Supporting Information**

Background papers:

Hereford & Worcester Fire Authority Annual Governance Statement and Code of Corporate Governance