

THE VALE OF GLAMORGAN COUNCIL

CABINET: 25TH APRIL 2022

REFERENCE FROM CORPORATE PERFORMANCE AND RESOURCES
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE: 14TH APRIL 2022

“ UNACCEPTABLE ACTIONS BY CITIZENS AND SOCIAL MEDIA POLICIES
(REF) –

The reference from Cabinet on 11th April was presented, firstly, by the Operational Manager for Customer Relations, who outlined to the Committee the following:

- The Policy on Unacceptable Actions by Citizens recognised that opportunities for interaction with the Council and its officers had multiplied with the increase in popularity of social media platforms. Communication was quick and easy, it provided opportunities to increase transparency and to improve services but could, for a small minority of interactions, become intrusive and difficult to manage on both professional and private profiles. Subsequently this could impact the Council's ability to deliver services and it could adversely affect other citizens because the Council was not able to deliver those services effectively. In extreme cases, it could also affect the wellbeing of both staff and Councillors.
- This new policy replaced the previous Unreasonable Complainants Policy which the Council had operated for a number of years, and which had been effective in managing the impact on staff and services when complainants became unreasonably persistent, aggressive, or demanding in their approach. It also being noted that under the old policy, this had only been applied to a very small number (less than 5) individuals when either the frequency of their contact or the nature of their contacts had hindered the handling of other complaints or impacted unacceptably on an Officer's or Councillor's time. Similarly, the new policy, even though it had had its remit expanded to include all types of interactions rather than just complaints, was also anticipated to be applied only very infrequently going forward.
- The new policy set out how the Council would ensure a fair and consistent approach to applying this policy, as well as clearly defining what 'unacceptable' actions and behaviours were i.e. aggressive or abusive behaviour, unreasonable demands and / or where the citizen was unreasonably persistent in their approach.
- Any application to apply the policy would be considered by an independent panel of a minimum of three Chief Officers appointed by the Chief Executive to ensure an objective review of that application. Also, those citizens who the policy may be applied to would be given an opportunity to provide information to the panel before a final decision was made. The panel had a range of different options that could be considered depending on the individual situation and what was most appropriate and a procedure note was also

included for colleagues, which clearly set out when and how the policy should be applied for consistency of approach.

- In summary, the policy provided a fair, consistent and robust process to protect services, colleagues, but citizens as well from the adverse impacts that on very rare occasions resulted from unacceptable behaviour from a very small number of citizens.

The Communications Manager followed on with the key points from the related Social Media Policy:

- The Social Media Policy set out how the Council used social media to keep people informed about services and events as well as promoting the work of the Council and how it engaged with people online.
- The Policy would formalise the way the Council had been working in these areas for the last few years, thereby ensuring there was transparency with this approach and would share with residents exactly how the Council operated these accounts.
- Once it had been agreed, the Policy would then be linked from all of the Council's corporate accounts via their biographies.
- The Policy would set out what citizens could expect from the Council via social media and online interactions, i.e. to be helpful and transparent when engaging with customers via social media and aim to provide a clear, concise answer to queries where possible, and then what the Council would expect from citizens as part of these types of engagement too.
- The social media accounts were operated by the Council's Communications Team and the Policy outlined where they could respond to things immediately from within the team, they would, or where they needed to go and seek a response from other departments, they would seek out that info and relay it back to residents.
- As with the Unacceptable Actions by Citizens Policy, the Social Media Policy acknowledged that there were a very small number of citizens whose actions the Council considered to be unacceptable. The approach described in the Policy was to manage these actions based on their nature and extent and the action that may be taken.
- The Policy would help to create a public forum online which would be managed in order for it to be a 'safe space' for people to engage with the Council. Therefore, the Council would remove any replies or comments that were abusive or misleading and promoted third party services or sought to publish the personal details of any Council staff, etc.

Following the presentation of the report, the subsequent comments and questions were raised by the Committee:

- Councillor John stated that both policies would be extremely beneficial and would not stop the public being able to ask questions of the Council, etc. However, the policies would help to address those instances where a very small number of residents were abusive and extremely disrespectful to elected Members and Council staff and who would not accept an answer or decision provided by them.

- Councillor Carroll whilst echoing the points raised around the need for courtesy or respect to be shown to those people in public facing roles and the challenges around vexatious complaints, also warned against a potential 'mission creep' for these policies i.e. the risk of these being used to not engage and to 'park' difficult and persistent, but genuine, complaints or queries made by residents. In order to prevent this, the policies needed to be monitored very carefully and to be applied only in very limited circumstances, with all other options exhausted. He asked if there were safeguards in place for such circumstances, to which the Operational Manager for Customer Relations replied that the Council would only consider applying the Unacceptable Actions by Citizens Policy in the most serious of circumstances and only after the application had gone to the Chief Executive who would appoint an independent panel to look at the reasons why application of the policy was being proposed. Also, any application of the Policy would result in it being recorded centrally so that it could be very quickly and easily seen if there was an escalation of the number of times the Policy was being applied or not.
- The Chair recommended that a monitoring report or update on the policies and any related actions or complaints be provided annually to the Committee and Cabinet; the Head of Policy & Business Transformation suggested that this could be combined with the Complaints and Compliments report which, under recent legislation, was required to go to the Governance and Audit Committee and would give a holistic picture of complaints, compliments and unacceptable actions in one place and allow both committees to scrutinise these.

Scrutiny Committee, having considered the report and all the issues and implications contained therein

RECOMMENDED –

- (1) T H A T the Unacceptable Actions by Citizens Policy and Social Media Policy be endorsed.
- (2) T H A T the Corporate Performance and Resources Scrutiny Committee, Cabinet and Governance and Audit Committee receive an annual update on the Unacceptable Actions by Citizens and Social Media Policies, as part of the annual Complaints and Compliments report.

Reasons for recommendations.

- (1) Having regard to the contents of the report and discussions at the meeting.
- (2) That the Scrutiny Committee, Cabinet and Governance and Audit Committee are kept up to date on these policies and on any related actions / complaints."