



The Public Services Ombudsman for Wales

Biodiversity, Resilience of Ecosystems and Sustainability Annual Report 2020/21

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Introduction

Protecting the environment remains a key priority. Where possible, we work to reduce the impact of the office on the environment and seek to operate in a sustainable and responsible manner.

This report presents our performance and actions during 2020/21 under the biodiversity and resilience of ecosystems duty, in compliance with the Environment (Wales) Act 2016. It also outlines our progress in the areas for improvement that we identified in 2019/20:

- further reducing confidential and paper waste
- increasing the proportion of waste that is recycled (36% in 2019/20)
- improving how we monitor emissions generated by staff business travel and commuting
- reviewing existing suppliers and procurement arrangements
- improving staff awareness of ways to reduce their carbon footprint.

Covid-19 has impacted the way we work and how we use our facilities. During 2020/21, nearly all our staff worked from home, with only a small number of staff in the office to carry out essential office-based duties. As restrictions were eased, remaining staff were able to work in the office for Wellbeing reasons, to undertake particular tasks or where there were temporary IT issues affecting productivity at home.

These changes to working patterns required a significant investment in IT hardware and software to enable people to work from home. As a result, we have seen a positive reduction in our office-based waste outputs, electricity consumption and commuting mileage, which is continuing into 2021/22. We plan to move to a blended working model in the future, with most staff working partly in the office and partly at home.

Biodiversity and resilience of ecosystems duty background

The Environment (Wales) Act 2016 introduced an enhanced biodiversity and resilience of ecosystems duty (the section 6 duty) for public authorities in the exercising of functions in relation to Wales.

The section 6 duty requires that public authorities 'seek to maintain and enhance biodiversity so far as consistent with the proper exercise of their functions and in so doing promote the resilience of ecosystems'.

To comply with the duty, public authorities should embed the consideration of biodiversity and ecosystems into their early thinking and business planning, including any policies, plans, programmes and projects, as well as in their day-to-day activities.

PSOW falls within the definition of public authority under the terms of the Act and is required to publish a report on how it complied with the section 6 duty.

Although PSOW is not subject to the full duties of the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, we fully support the vision of the Act to create a more sustainable Wales.



About us

Our role

The Ombudsman has three specific roles. The first is to consider complaints about public service providers in Wales; the second is to consider complaints that members of local authorities have breached the Code of Conduct; the third is to set complaints handling standards for public service providers and support public service improvement. The Ombudsman is independent of all government bodies and the service provided is free of charge.

Our building

We continue to occupy one office in Pencoed, near Bridgend. We originally took up the lease for the ground floor in 2005 and have, since then, expanded to occupy part of the first and second floors to accommodate over 70 staff and visitors in a largely open plan office space.

Building	Constructed	No. of Floors	Total Usable Floor Area (ft²)	Heating Type
1 Ffordd yr Hen Gae	2004	3	16,460	Air Handling Units

Electricity is the only energy supply used and this provides lighting and heating/cooling as well as powering normal office equipment.

Action report

Engage and support participation and understanding to embed biodiversity throughout decision making at all levels

Attention to sustainability is integrated into key PSOW policies and strategic plans. For example:

- PSOW's Corporate Plan 2019/20-2021/22 contains a commitment to 'embed the principle of sustainable development in the way we run our business, and to maximise our contribution to achieving the seven Welsh Wellbeing Goals'. The Plan also identifies Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) in relation to waste and electricity.
- PSOW's Procurement Policy requires that 'all procurement should consider sustainability issues'.

PSOW endeavours to ensure that staff have opportunities to contribute to sustainable practice of the office. In 2017/18, staff participated in a workshop on sustainability and identified a number of measures to improve the management of energy usage. These were taken forward.

With COVID-19 restrictions in place during 2020/21, we have had to adapt the way staff work and communicate. With this in mind, we are aware of the need to promote and continue to work in ways that reduce staff carbon footprints. One significant contributor is staff commuting. As indicated above, our future blended working arrangements will include elements of home working, to maintain some of the benefits of reduced commuting.

Since April 2020, meetings with staff and external parties have almost entirely been via video (MS Teams or Zoom). These are facilities that can now continue for the future and they are expected to reduce future business travel from pre-pandemic levels.

We have signed up to a Cycle to Work scheme which will be in place during 2021, in preparation for staff returning to work in the office when this is appropriate.

Tackle key pressures on species and habitats

As our operations are primarily administrative and office or home based, most of our impacts on bio-diversity are indirect in nature, arising through our supply chain.

Our office building is leased, which limits our ability to make changes to the energy efficiency of the building. Consequently, our work to ensure and improve sustainability and reduce any adverse impact on the environment has over the years focused on reducing waste, energy use and emissions.

Our performance during 2020/21 has been significantly affected by the arrangements put in place in response to the Covid-19 outbreak. In particular, the move to work from home has reduced our office-based waste, electricity consumption and emissions. Whilst the circumstances driving these reductions are temporary, we will work to minimise increases as we return to office-based working and will seek to keep waste, energy use and emissions below 2019/20 levels.

Waste

Over recent years, we have taken steps to significantly reduce our waste. Building on the performance last year, all our case files are now sent to our professional advisors in an electronic (rather than hard-copy) format. We also invested in new software (Objective Connect) to ensure that large files can be sent securely online.

Overall, since April 2020, there has been a significant reduction in the amount of our confidential waste. This has been largely due to the Covid-19 outbreak. As we were prevented from using the office fully from March 2020, much of the normal day to day confidential waste was not being produced. We have continued to work as a 'paper-light' organisation, with staff working from electronic records only whilst working at home. Collections of confidential waste from the office include planned destruction of older hard-copy case files, in accordance with PSOW's retention policy.

Also, as Covid-19 has limited our use of the office, the amount of waste and recycling produced has drastically reduced.

Waste Type	April 19 – March 20	April 20 – March 21	Observation
Confidential Waste	8,650 kgs	1,480 kgs	Reduced by 83%
Mixed Recycling	2,346 kgs	1,266 kgs	Reduced by 46%
General Waste	16,000 kgs	1,242 kgs	Reduced by 92%
TOTAL	26,996 kgs	3,988 kgs	Overall reduction 85%

Waste and recycling figures since April 2020 show that 69% of waste produced by PSOW was able to be recycled. The remaining waste avoided landfill by being taken to an incineration site, where the waste is converted into steam and processed through a cogeneration plant which converts the steam into electricity and heat. The electricity is then fed into the public grid and the residual heat is fed into a heat exchanger to supply local homes with heating or hot water.

As we return to some level of regular office-based working, waste generated will inevitably increase, but we will work to minimise that increase.

Electricity

As with waste, our electricity usage also dropped dramatically compared to last year. We will be working to minimise future increases in electricity usage as we return to some form of office working.

Electricity usage (kWh)		Reduction
2019/20	2020/21	
104,521	71,668	-31%

Emissions

We noted in our Annual Report 2019/20 that, during the year, more of our staff had started to work from home as part of the normal working week. However, the Covid-19 lockdown and travel restrictions imposed in March 2020 had a colossal impact on the emissions generated by staff business travel and commuting. When looking at comparable figures and the impact that working from home has had, it is challenging to quantify the savings, as household emissions may have increased but this will not all be attributable to PSOW's work.

	2019/20	2020/21
Number of staff (part time / full time)	72 (21 PT/51 FT)	72 (20 PT/52 FT)
Number of staff WAH	11	72
WAH days per average week	17	308
Average commuting mileage a day saved	81.27	2,281
Average kgs of CO2 in emissions avoided	9,367	182,309

Whilst the Covid-19 outbreak clearly has had a substantial effect on our emissions performance in the short term, in the longer term we are likely to see an increase in working at home on a more regular and permanent basis.

Research by the International Energy Agency suggests that there is a positive reduction in work related carbon emissions, where staff live over 6 kilometres from the office and travel by car. However, the reverse of this could be true for people living closer to the office or who travel using public transport or 'active travel' to get to the office. As such, we plan to review the way we measure the carbon footprint of our operations, as the move to a more flexible way of working becomes permanent.

During COVID-19 restrictions, much of our purchasing of goods and services has been online. We have been able to have items delivered directly to staff at home rather than to the office and then dispatched to individuals.

The need to respond rapidly to purchasing on-line in response to the pandemic, has meant our planned review of procurement was postponed. The review will now need to take account of the changes in working practices and the increase in working at home.

Put in place a framework of governance and support for delivery

Responsibility for PSOW's performance on sustainability lies with the Chief Operating Officer & Director of Improvement and the Head of Corporate Services. The Head of Corporate Services undertakes internal reviews of PSOW's performance on sustainability on a biannual basis. The findings of the process are communicated to PSOW's Management Team and serve to inform the Ombudsman's strategic planning as well as the annual sustainability report.

While most of PSOW's work on sustainability is delivered through internal policies, procedures and actions, the Ombudsman also seeks to support the environment by partnering with external organisations. For instance, in October 2019, PSOW staff participated in a volunteering day with the Glamorgan Heritage Coast Centre, Dunraven Park. Activities on the day included litter and plastic collection as well as maintenance of Heritage Coast grasslands.

Covid restrictions have affected plans for further volunteering, but we plan to resume this when possible. In the meantime, we are also investigating other ways on which we can support bio-diversity, such as the use of 'plant-a-tree' browser extensions.



Reporting and planning

We continue to monitor and report on performance on sustainability on a 6-monthly basis. In compliance with the requirements under section 6, sub-section (6) of the Environment Act 2016, we identify at the same time any areas for improvement:

- Review our methodology for measuring our greenhouse gas emissions to include emission from home working
- Work to limit increases in office waste generated and energy used, as we return to some office-based working
- Review the impact of Covid on our supplier and procurement arrangements
- Encourage staff to consider ways they can reduce their environmental impact
- Work with the Wellbeing Group to consider volunteer activities that support the environment
- Consider using 'plant-a-tree' schemes such as search engine extensions with our browsers.

Conclusion

2020/21 was an extraordinary year and the Covid pandemic has had huge negative impacts across Wales. The pandemic will inevitably have longer term consequences, including for the way we work. There have been some positive aspects of working under Covid restrictions, and we look forward to a future where we can sustain some of the reductions in waste, emissions and energy consumption as we move to our new working arrangements and a 'new normal'.