

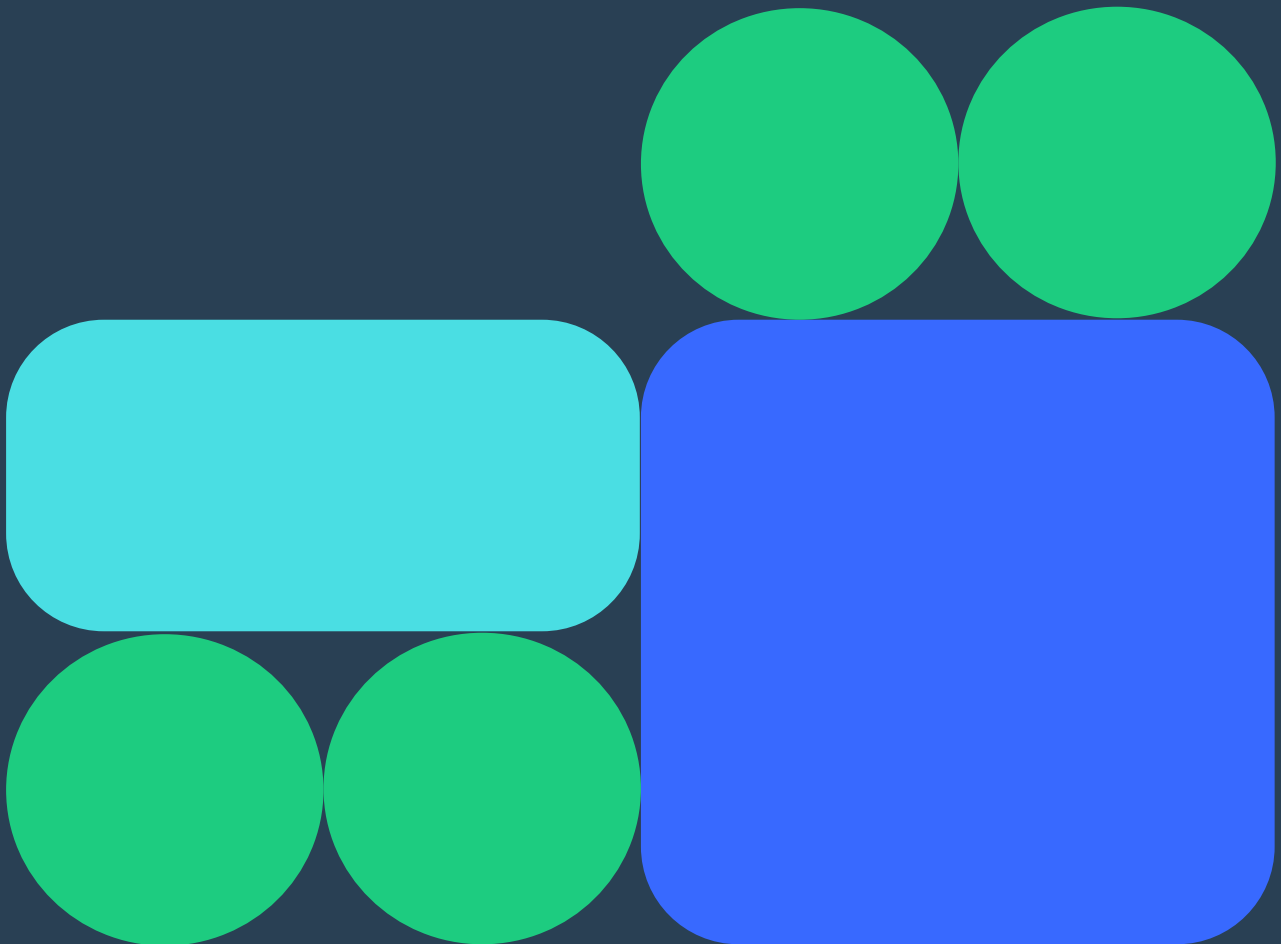


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May 2026

Strategic Plan 2026-29



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Strategic Plan

2026-29



Foreword

Michelle Morris

Public Services Ombudsman for Wales



We launch our new Strategic Plan in the year that marks the 20th anniversary of the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales.

It is a natural point to pause and reflect. Over two decades, the role and expectations of our office have changed significantly. What began as a predominantly complaints-handling service has developed into an organisation that also works proactively to influence public services and strengthen access to justice.

That shift was reinforced in 2019, when the Senedd granted us new powers to investigate on our own initiative, to set and monitor complaints standards, and to accept complaints made other than in writing.

The values that have always guided us - independence, impartiality and fairness - remain at the centre of everything we do. We have shown that we can deliver for the people of Wales even when pressures are high.

Over the past three years – under our previous Strategic Plan – we have handled record numbers of complaints. We have resolved more complaints early. Public confidence in our office has reached its strongest levels. The Senedd’s Finance Committee concluded that the powers granted to us in 2019 have enabled us to take a more proactive, accessible and inclusive approach. An independent review of our Code of Conduct work gave us assurance that our investigation process is appropriate, fair and impartial and free from political bias. These achievements are a credit to our dedicated and committed staff.

But we know that there remain challenges to tackle. Some communities remain under-represented in our caseload. Very few people use our service in Welsh, even though it is fully available. And demand for our own service continues to rise – we now accept three times as many complaints about public services as 20 years ago.

Looking beyond our office, many people still find it hard to complain to public service providers. Persistent issues – such as damp and mould in housing or gaps in carers’ support – show why deeper, system-wide improvement is essential. There also remain areas of public services in Wales where access to justice is incomplete.

These challenges call for action with clarity, ambition and determination. Over the last 20 years, we have evolved to deliver the best service possible. We must now continue to adapt, to build a stronger service for years to come.

This Plan introduces a more outward-facing, proactive and impact-led approach. It places people’s lived experience at the heart of our priorities. It commits us to working smarter – using data better, removing barriers, and strengthening how we utilise digital tools and innovative technology. And it sets us on the path towards more agile ways of working, so we can respond quickly to new challenges, improve continuously and direct our resources where they make the greatest difference.

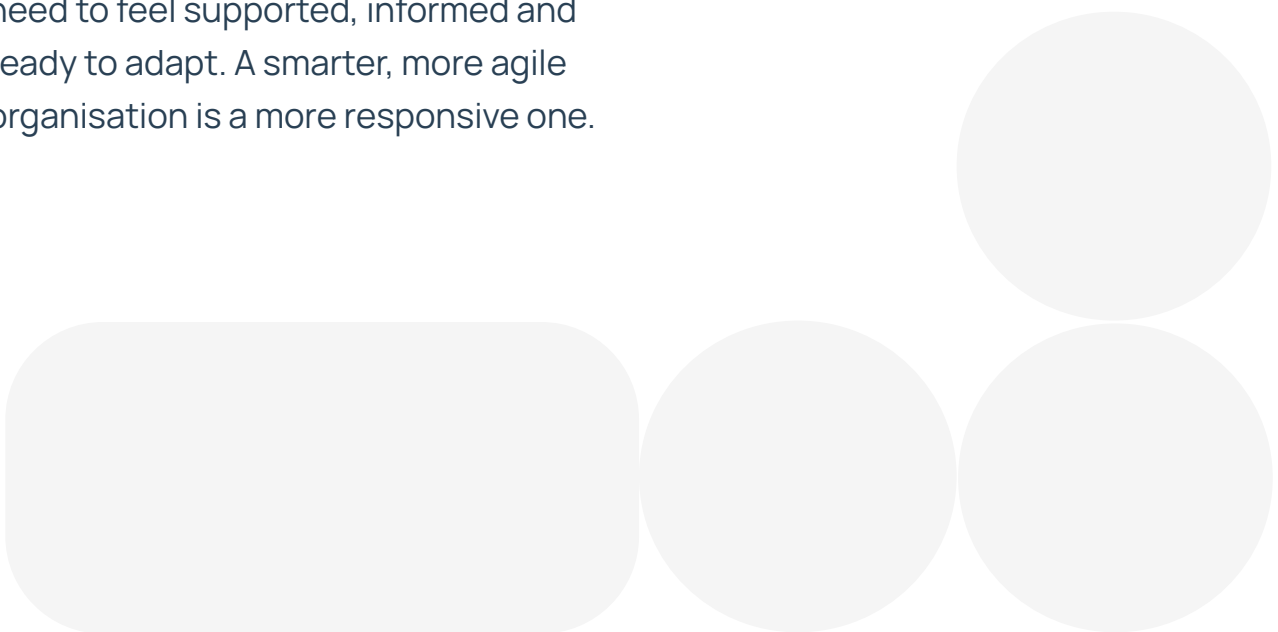
We will expand the reach and influence of our Complaints Standards work. We will deepen our engagement with communities and a range of partners, particularly those organisations and stakeholders that advise, support and represent complainants. We will further develop how we use our statutory powers of own initiative investigation to identify more systemic issues affecting users of Welsh public services. We will also continue to improve access to our own service and help more people feel confident to seek justice when things go wrong.

We will continue to invest in our foundations. We are proud that 88% of our staff say that PSOW is a good place to work. Our people, systems, digital capability and governance must be strong and resilient. To uphold our core values, our staff need to feel supported, informed and ready to adapt. A smarter, more agile organisation is a more responsive one.

Above all, this Plan is shaped by one principle: our work must make a real difference. A difference to individuals seeking justice. A difference to public services striving to improve. And a difference to the democratic life of Wales, which depends on fairness, openness and accountability.

As we recognise twenty years of the Ombudsman's service to Wales, we do so with our eyes firmly on the future and our ambition clear: to deliver a stronger service, with better impact for the people of Wales.

I am grateful to everyone - members of the public, staff, public and third sector bodies and other stakeholders - who helped shape this Plan. I look forward to the work ahead.



Our role

We have three main roles.



We investigate complaints about public services.

We consider complaints about councillors breaching the Code of Conduct.



We drive systemic improvement of public services and standards of conduct in local government in Wales.



The evidence shaping our Plan

The scope of our new Plan was shaped by rich evidence and insights from across the organisation. Our staff, Management Team and Independent Members played a central role. We also received valuable feedback from a range of stakeholders during our public consultation on the proposals. This evidence helped us identify the key issues we feel we need to address or strengthen. We outline some of the key areas below.

Capturing and communicating impact

Capturing impact is essential for any accountable and well governed public body: it demonstrates whether our work delivers tangible improvements for individuals, public services and democratic standards, and it strengthens transparency, learning and public confidence. Yet measuring impact - particularly systemic change across public services or shifts in standards of conduct in local government - remains challenging. Such outcomes develop over time, can be influenced by multiple factors, and are often difficult to evidence in a consistent way.

Nevertheless, as we mark twenty years of service, our focus is firmly on strengthening how we capture and evidence that impact, ensuring we deliver a stronger service with clearer, measurable benefits for the people of Wales.

Managing increasing demand

The key ongoing challenge is the relentless growth in demand for our service. Since we launched our last Strategic Plan, the volume of new complaints about public services has risen sharply. We now receive three times as many as we did in our first year of operation two decades ago.

We have always welcomed complaints, as they show that people know about our office and understand their right to raise concerns.

But this sustained increase also brings significant pressures - on our staff, our ability to maintain excellent service, and our resources at a time when public finances remain under strain.

Much of the work under our new Plan will focus on how we can manage this increasing demand across all aspects of what we do and how we work.

Expanding our improvement work

In 2019, the Senedd entrusted us with new powers to strengthen our ability to drive improvement across public services. Since then, a significant part of the Welsh public sector has come under our Complaints Standards framework, with thousands of people benefiting from our training on good complaint handling.

Expanding our improvement work (continued)

We have also completed a number of own-initiative investigations, enabling us to look into issues without requiring an individual complaint. In 2025, the Senedd's post legislative review of our Act concluded that we have used these new powers to take a more proactive, accessible and inclusive approach.

However, we agree with the Senedd that there is further potential to expand this work, so that we can deliver better outcomes for even more people and tackle some of the factors that drive an increase in complaints volumes across Wales.

Expanding our work on accessibility, outreach and engagement

We are the Welsh Public Services Ombudsman, and our service is open to all who need it. Yet we know that some groups do not use our service as often as expected. More broadly, there are areas of public service where people do not complain enough, whether to us or to service providers. The process should be straightforward but too often it is not - and vulnerable groups in particular may struggle to have their voices heard.

Under our new Strategic Plan, we will reaffirm our commitment to ensuring seamless access to our service, while using our full suite of powers and working closely with partners to better identify and address issues affecting people on the ground.

Making better use of our data

How we use our data, and how we can use it better, emerged as a strong and consistent theme in the evidence we gathered. As a public sector organisation, we must handle data securely and in line with all legal and ethical standards. But we also need to make full use of the information we hold to work smarter. Better analysis of our data can help us manage our caseload more efficiently, target our complaints standards, own initiative and outreach work where it adds most value, and strengthen our business processes - all for the benefit of the people of Wales.

Taking advantage of new technology and AI

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is here to stay and it is already reshaping public service delivery. Like many other public sector organisations, we can see how this technology can help us deliver better service and better outcomes for the people of Wales.

Under our new Strategic Plan, we want to maximise these opportunities. However, we will never compromise on our integrity and commitment to fairness. We are committed to using AI and other innovative technologies responsibly, ethically, and transparently, with human oversight at every step.

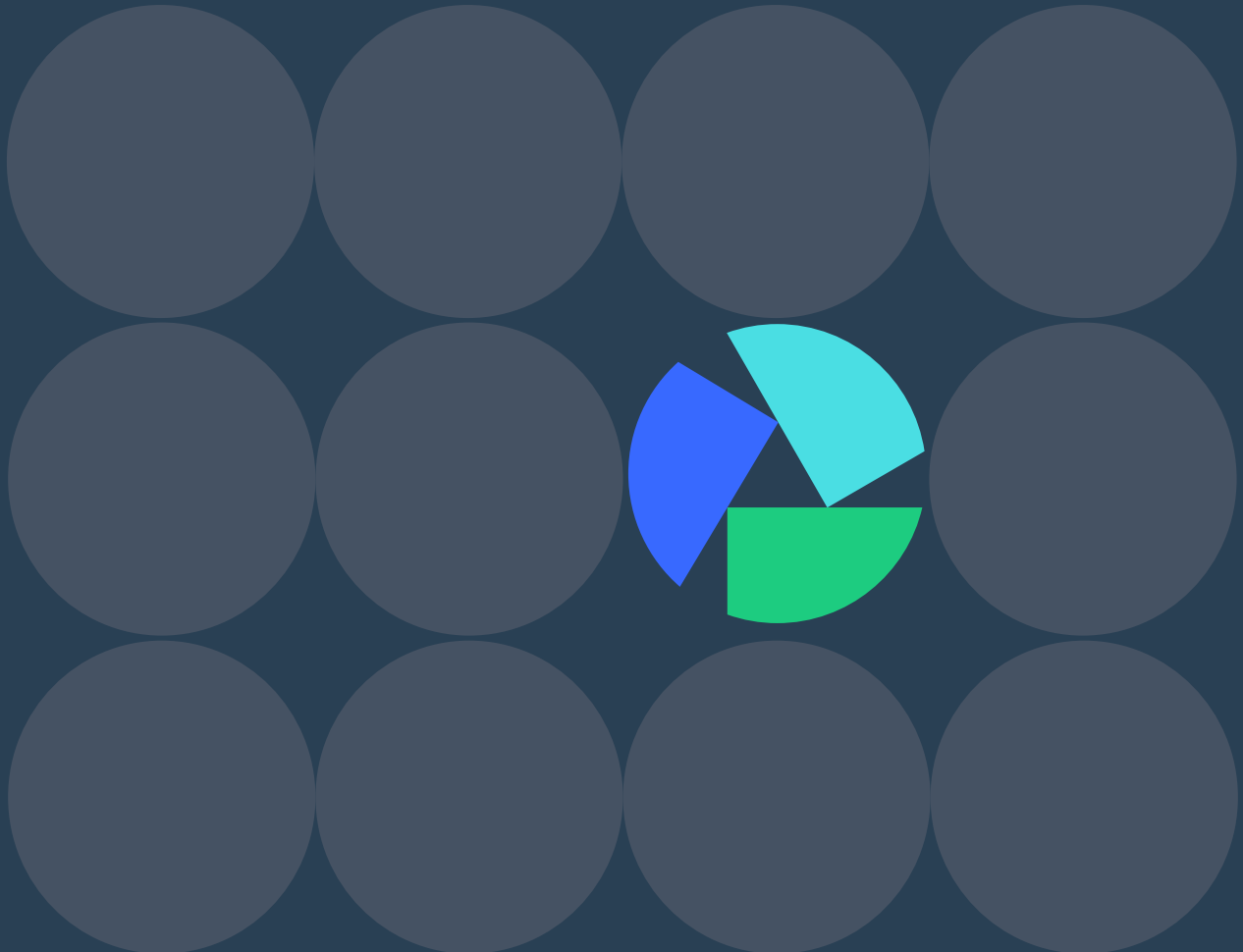
Maximising efficiency, agility and resilience of our people, resources, and processes

For us to be able to deliver stronger service and better impact, we must always build on strong foundations. This includes first and foremost our people. Our staff tell us that PSOW is a good place to work. Our challenge is how to maintain this level of job satisfaction and support wellbeing of our dedicated and committed staff in the face of ever-growing demand for our service.

Under our new Strategic Plan, we want to work smarter and in a more agile and responsive way equipping our people to be able to adjust to change while also streamlining our key processes. As always, we will do so without compromising our commitment to good governance, accountability and transparency.

Our vision:

To have a positive impact on people and public services in Wales.



Our ambitions:



People of Wales feel that public services treat them fairly and respond when things go wrong.



Welsh public services listen to individuals and use their complaints to learn and improve.



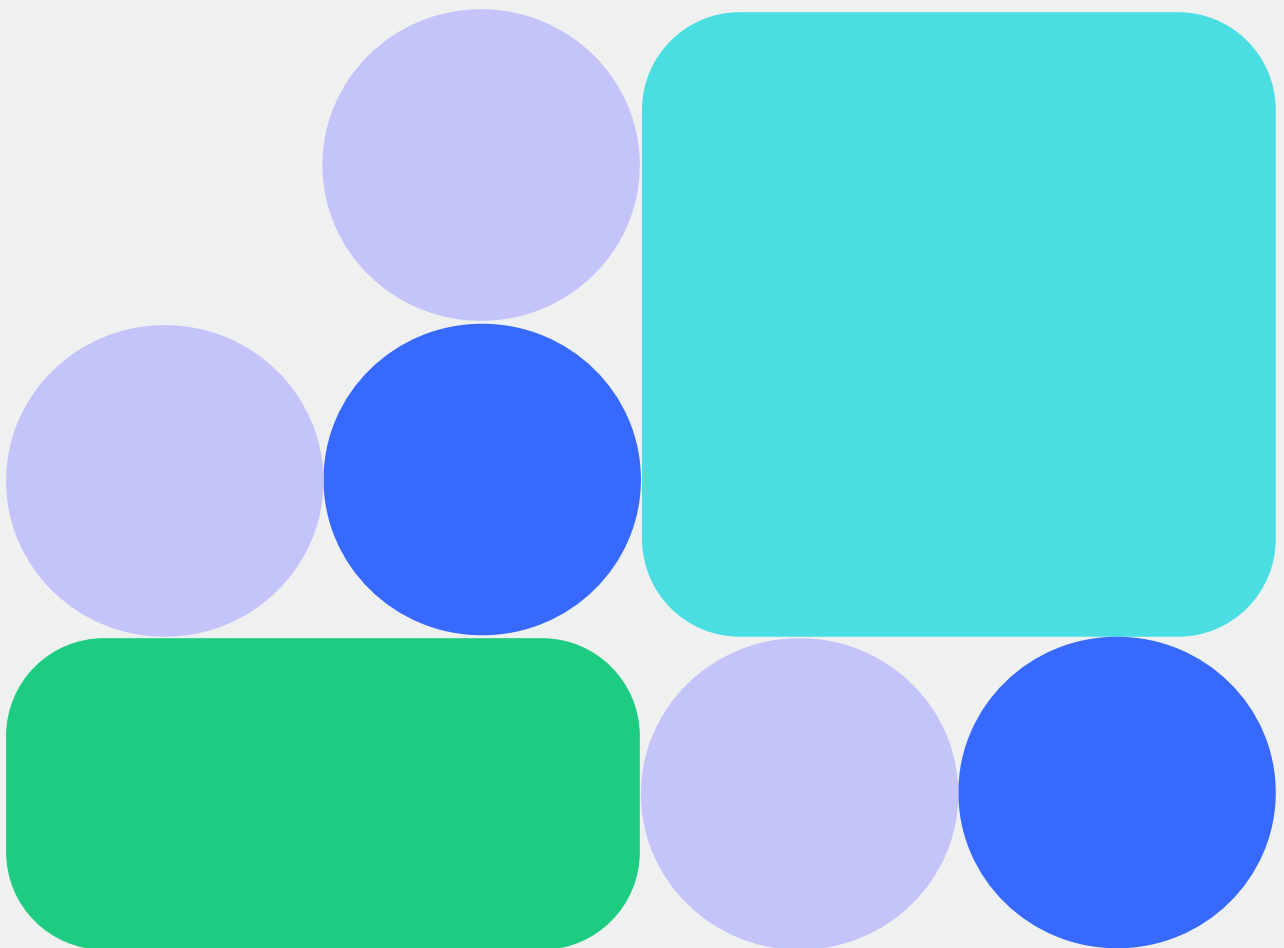
Welsh local government is trusted to deliver the highest standards of conduct.



We continue to be an influential and respected voice in public service improvement.

Strategic Aim 1

Deliver justice with positive impact for people of Wales.



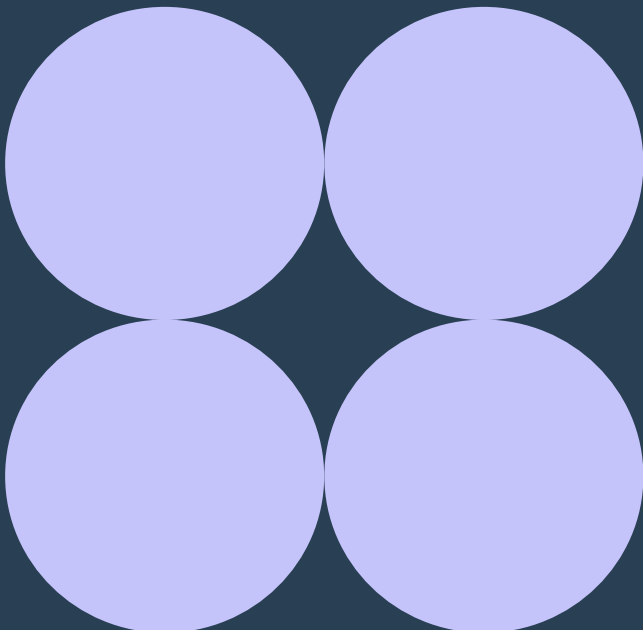
We deliver an empathetic, proportionate and efficient service that leaves people feeling heard and understood. Our recommendations are reasonable, consistent and effective.

The impact we want to see:

- It takes us less time to consider complaints.
- People who complain to us agree that we treated them with courtesy and respect and that we clearly explained our decision.
- Organisations comply with our recommendations within the agreed time.
- We use our investigation resources wisely to highlight systemic failures and issues of real importance to the standard of local democracy in Wales.

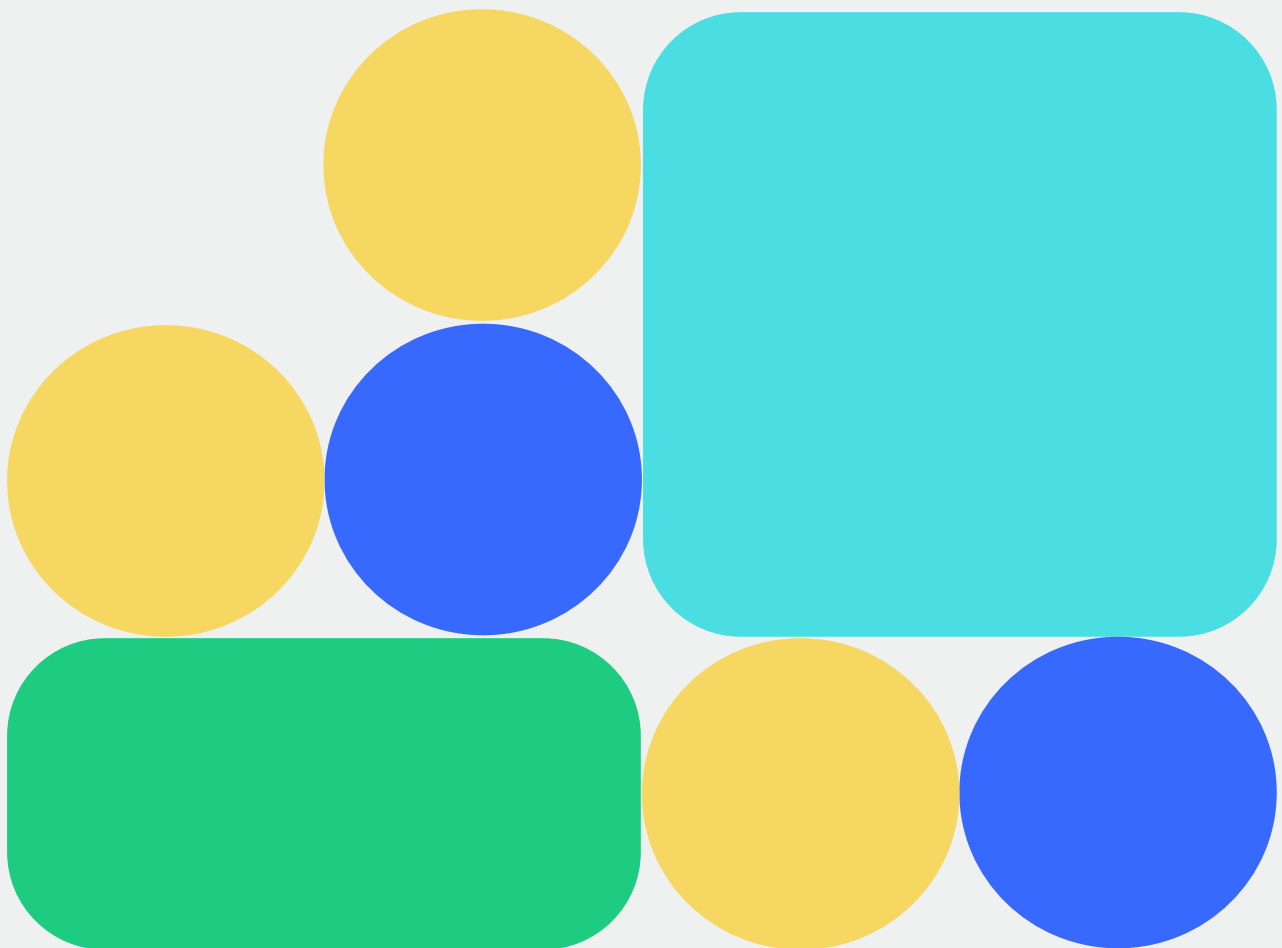
We will

- invest in developing digital technology solutions to facilitate access for service providers and complainants.
- explore new, agile ways of working to ensure that we consider complaints quickly and effectively, with ongoing commitment to resolve complaints earlier.
- further enhance the quality of our service delivery, to ensure that more of our complainants feel respected and heard.
- review our recommendations, ensuring better consistency and impact for complainants and service providers.
- continue to strengthen how we monitor and ensure compliance with our recommendations.
- continue to fairly and effectively apply our public interest test, focusing on the right complaints about Code of Conduct.



Strategic Aim 2

Influence positive change in public services and high standards of conduct in local government.



We systematically improve public services through our Complaints Standards work, own initiative (OI) investigations and public interest and thematic reports.

We identify good practice and lessons learnt, communicating these effectively to contribute to improvement of public services.

We support high standards of conduct amongst councillors.

The impact we want to see:

- Our complaints standards work leads to improvements in how organisations handle complaints.
- Case studies and other research demonstrate positive impact of our improvement work on public services.
- Through our Code of Conduct referrals, we promote the highest standards in public life.

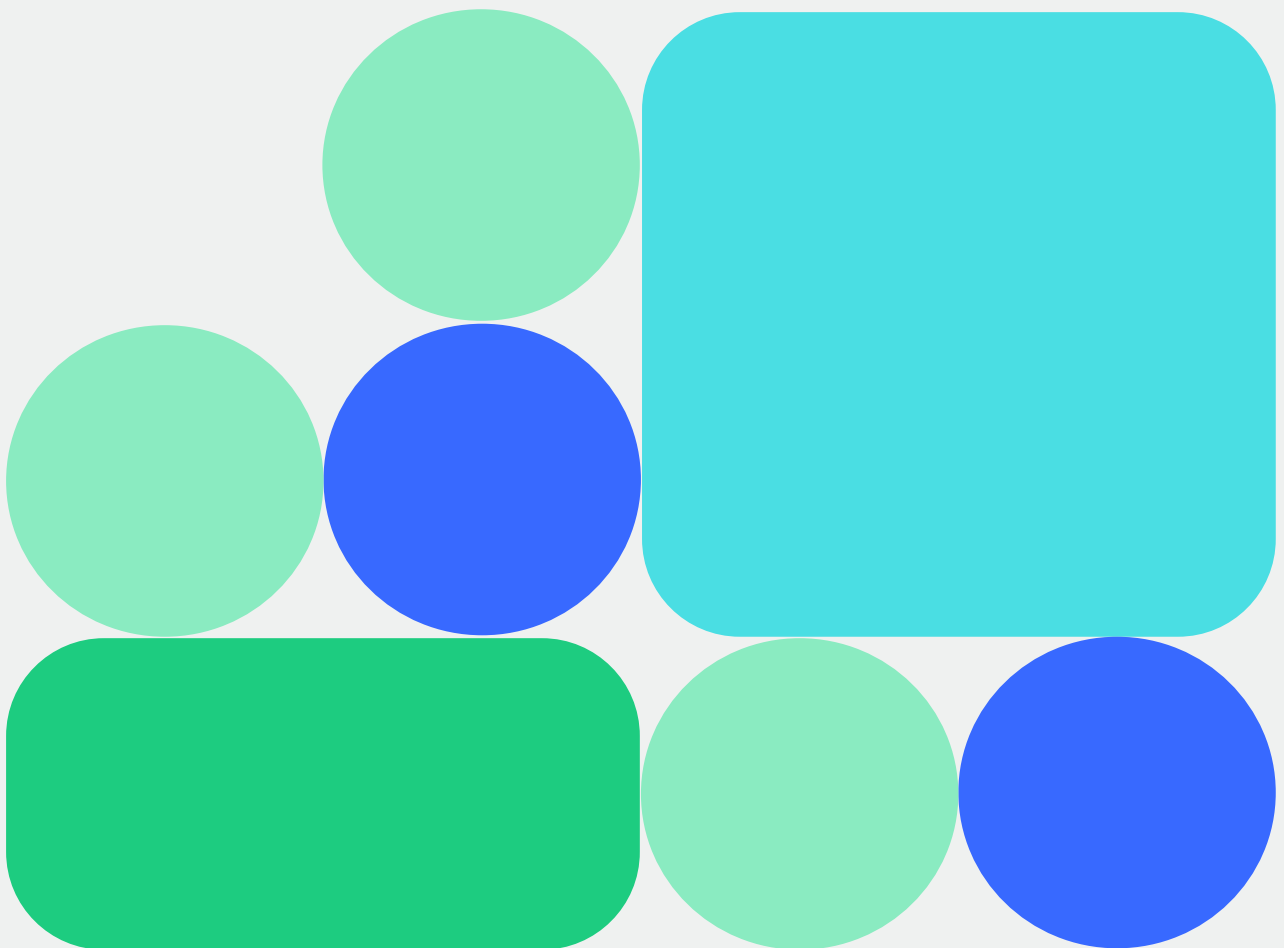
We will

- continue to expand and bring more organisations under our Complaints Standards.
- use our own initiative (OI) powers in increased number of cases, streamlining the process and strengthening engagement with key stakeholders.
- introduce new ways to systematically capture impact and learning from our work.
- review and develop our approach to the media to strengthen coverage and impact of our work.
- develop and keep under review accessible resources to raise awareness of local government members of their duties and our role in relation to the Code of Conduct.



Strategic Aim 3

Strengthen access and impact for those who need our service the most.



We continue to improve access to our service. We promote our service to those who may need it the most, including through key organisations and stakeholders that advise, support and represent complainants. We ensure that we focus our efforts on issues affecting most vulnerable groups.

The impact we want to see:

- People who use our service find it easy to contact us.
- Awareness of our office, including among our target groups, continues to increase.
- We accept more oral complaints, including from under-represented groups.
- More people use Welsh when interacting with us.
- New members of the Senedd and their staff know about us and understand how we work, helping them to support their constituents.
- Third sector organisations have good awareness of our role and have meaningful input into our work.

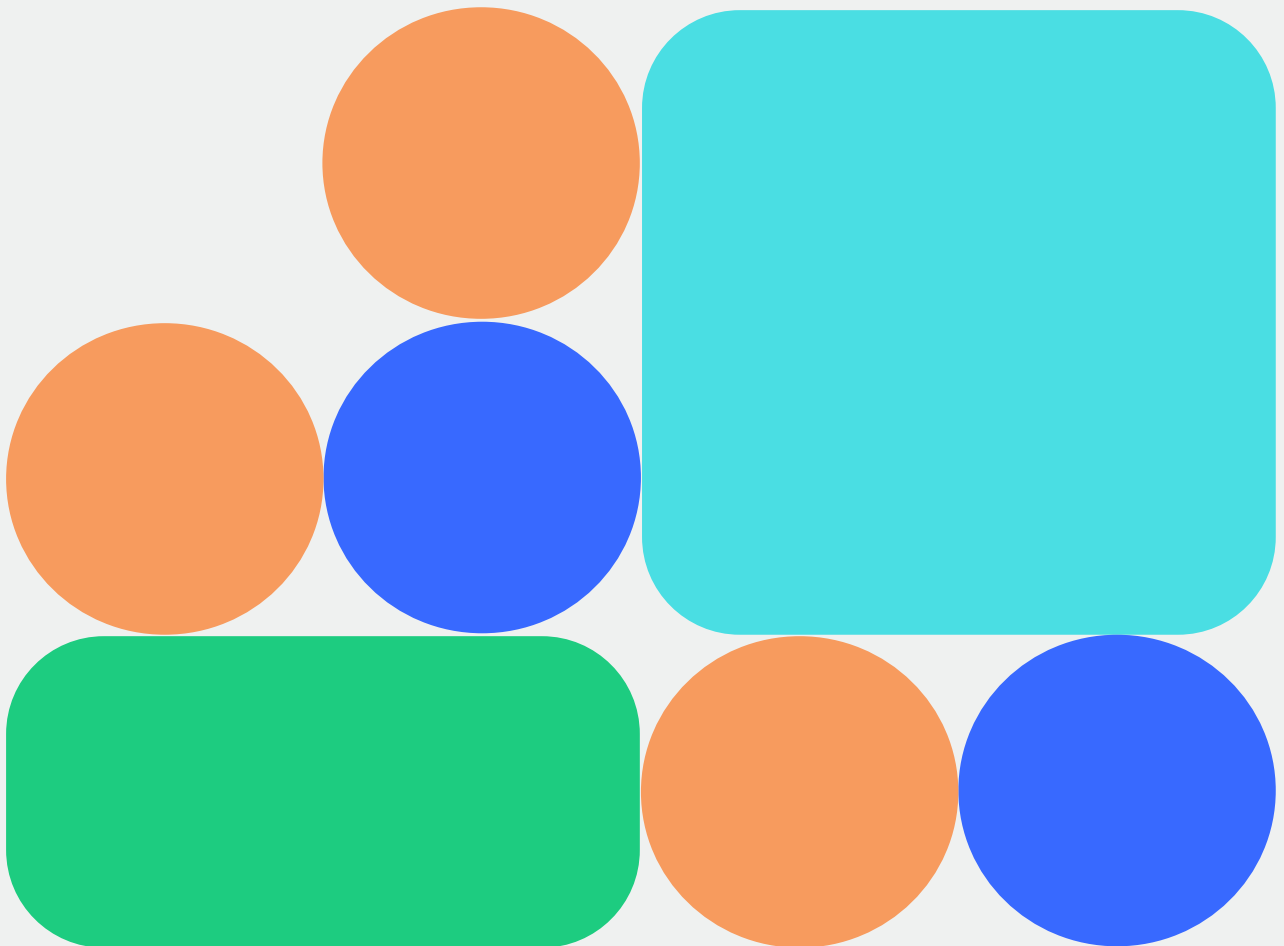
We will

- continue to ensure seamless access for anyone who needs our service.
- consider opportunities to streamline and improve our oral complaints process and do more to promote this service.
- review our approach to our outreach and engagement work with particular emphasis on reaching and engaging with specific under-represented groups.
- take further steps to strengthen the use of our service and resources in Welsh.
- expand targeted engagement to work in partnership with key organisations and stakeholders that advise, support and represent complainants.
- secure consistent and reliable insights from third sector organisations, to gather better information on issues affecting users of public services, with special focus on vulnerable and under-represented groups.
- work with the Senedd, the Welsh Government and other partners, to scope the feasibility of widening our remit to include complaints about schools.



Strategic Aim 4

Ensure that we are a resilient, agile and accountable organisation.



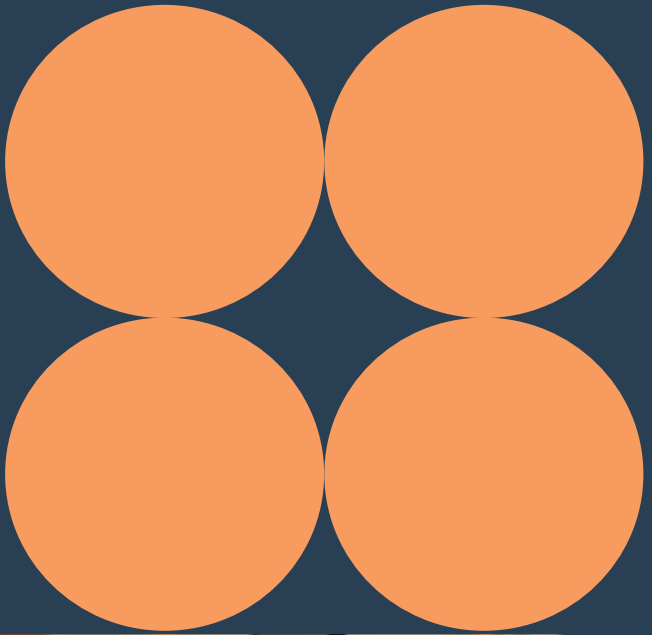
We maintain and improve efficient and effective staff, finance, and IT resources, and ensure good governance, accountability and transparency.

The impact we want to see:

- Our workforce remains skilled, resilient, engaged and inclusive.
- We continue to demonstrate the highest standards of sound and responsible financial management.
- We maximise opportunities arising from data, innovative technology, digital tools and ethical use of AI.
- Our systems continue to be secure and resilient.

We will

- support our staff to develop agility and resilience to achieve continued high performance.
- streamline our processes and adjust how we work to quickly respond to challenges and opportunities.
- remain committed to good governance, financial accountability and manage our resources with the highest standards of economy, efficiency, and effectiveness.
- continue to make data central to our operations and use it to innovate, improve efficiency, and inform every decision.
- adopt technology thoughtfully to support and improve our services, with every decision centered on creating better experiences for our service users.
- embed security and resilience into every layer of our technology, ensuring dependable services that protect people and data.
- continue to play our part in protecting the environment, consolidating our measures to reduce our carbon footprint.



Next steps

The Strategic Plan is a high-level document. However, we will produce more detailed Strategies for different areas of our work as well as an annual Business Plan for each year of the Strategic Plan.

The Business Plan will include detailed actions to deliver our Strategic Aims - for example, which groups we intend to target in our outreach work.

The Business Plan will also include the Key Performance Indicators (KPI) that we will use to monitor our performance and impact in areas that we can control or influence. Although the Business Plan will be an internal document, to ensure transparency and accountability we will publish our priorities and KPIs for each year.



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