

Agenda Item	7
Report No	AS/11/17

HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: Audit and Scrutiny

Date: 26 June 2017

Report Title: **Corporate Complaints Process**

Report By: **Depute Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Development**

Purpose/Executive Summary

This paper provides an update for Members on the Council's Corporate Complaints Process for the period 1st April 2016 to 31st March 2017 along with comparative data for the previous year which includes a high level analysis of our complaint handling performance for each service.

Performance indicators are reported to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman on an annual basis and Council performance on the average time in working days for a full response at Stage 1 has declined; while Stage 2 has remained on par with previous performance. A LEAN review of the Corporate Complaints process is being undertaken to improve performance in this area. Overall there has been a small increase (31) in the number of complaints received as compared to last year with the majority of complaints continuing to be resolved at Stage 1.

The new process for Social Work complaints came into effect from 01 April 2017 with the Corporate Complaints process revised accordingly along with the Customer Complaint Leaflet and information on our website.

Recommendations

Members are asked to:

- Scrutinise the Council's annual performance for Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaints;
- Consider the LEAN review of the Corporate Complaints process that is being undertaken by the Corporate Improvement Team (CIT);
- Agree a revised corporate target for resolving customer complaints of 70% for Stage 1 and Stage 2; within 5 and 20 working days respectively.
- Recognise that the number of complaints received is a low volume considering the scale of the Councils customer base and the scope of services provided.

2. Background

2.1 Highland Council along with all other Scottish Councils operates a 2 stage complaints handling process. This is a mandatory complaints process and is defined by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) who put in place a series of 8 performance indicators, which are reported to the SPSO on an annual basis.

2.2 These indicators are as follows:

1. The total number of complaints received per thousand of population.
2. Complaints closed at Stage 1 and Stage 2 as a percentage of all complaints closed.
3. The number of complaints upheld or partially upheld/not upheld at each stage as a percentage of complaints closed in full at each stage.
4. The average time in working days for a full response to complaints at each stage.
5. The number of complaints which were closed in full within the set timescales of 5 working days and 20 working days.
6. The number and percentage of complaints at each stage where an extension of 5 or up to 20 day timelines has been authorised.
7. Customer Satisfaction Survey.
8. Outlining improvements to services or procedures as a result of the consideration of complaints.

2.3 In addition to these SPSO indicators, the Highland Council has set its own targets of 80% of complaints to be resolved in full at both Stage 1 and Stage 2 as a Key Performance Indicator. The timescales are that complaints must be dealt with, in full, in 5 working days for Stage 1 and 20 working days for Stage 2. As per the policy, complex Stage 1 complaints can be extended with the agreement of the Customer.

2.4 At the Audit & Scrutiny Committee meeting on the 24th November 2016, the Committee agreed that the target which had been set by the Council for 80% of complaints to be resolved in full at both Stage 1 and Stage 2 should be reviewed to assess as to whether it was still realistic under the current circumstances.

3. Annual Performance

3.1 There has been a minor increase (31 +1.9%) in the total number of customer complaints received in 2016/17 compared to 2015/16. The Council continues to resolve the majority of complaints at Stage 1 of the process, with a target resolution timescale of 5 working days. From 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017, there were a total of 1,681 complaints received. There were 1,491 complaints handled at Stage 1 with 468 (31.4%) resolved within 5 working days. During this period there were also 190 Stage 2 complaints with 88 (46.3%) resolved within 20 working days.

3.2 There have been a number of factors that have influenced performance during the last 12 months. As previously reported to Audit and Scrutiny Committee in November 2016, the Voluntary Redundancy staffing reductions within Council services have impacted on Officer numbers which has meant that resources have become stretched for handling complaints as well as to avoid them

happening in the first place. The new Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system implemented in May 2016 has also impacted for a period on performance as it took time to bed in and staff also took time to become familiar with this new system. These factors have contributed to an increase in time taken to resolve complaints at both Stage 1 and Stage 2 therefore impacting on the internal key performance indicator of 80% percentage set by Highland Council. Stage 2 (Investigation) complaints can take a considerable amount of time and resource to complete due to the level of investigation required and due to the complexity of the issues. Stage 2 complaints can also cross over several services requiring input from multiple responsible officers.

- 3.3 An internal review of the 80% indicator has been carried out and a new target of 70% is recommended. This new target has recently been achieved by some services so this new target is attainable while still working as a driver to improve performance; and can be monitored and reviewed on an annual basis.
- 3.4 Detailed information per service around compliance with set timescales at both Stage 1 and Stage 2 is available in Appendix 1. It should also be noted that Social Work complaints continued to follow a statutory process, which followed a different process up to 31st March 2017.
- 3.5 Community Services as one of our main customer facing services receives the largest number of complaints. A performance dashboard has been created by Community Services to highlight and drive improvement to handling times. Since its inception in November 2016 Community Services has seen a good improvement on handling times compared to the first half of the reporting year with an increase of complaints resolved in full within the set timescales (+11% at Stage 1 and +21% at Stage 2). As good practice Community Services have shared this dashboard with all Council services to improve focus and deliver overall improvement.
- 3.6 Further detail on the top 10 reasons for contacting the Council about a complaint for the period 16/17 are outlined below:

Rank	Subject	Number of Complaints	% of total number of complaints
1	Council Housing	336	19.9%
2	Roads and Pavements	224	13.3%
3	Rubbish and Recycling	210	12.5%
4	Housing Repair	207	12.3%
5	Staff Behaviour	105	6.2%
6	Parking and Car Parks	97	5.8%
7	Chasing Progress	96	5.7%
8	Planning and Building Control	94	5.6%
9	Council Tax	90	5.4%
10	Grass Cutting	81	4.8%

(For context there were 159,123 enquiries logged in CRM, which means 1% of CRM contacts were customer complaints. Complaints by service as a percentage of overall CRM transactions is included in Appendix 1)

4. Ombudsman Update

- 4.1 The Highland Council has submitted our latest annual performance figures for the period (1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017) to the SPSO. Through the Local Authority Complaints Handlers Network we can benchmark our performance against other similar local authorities and identify opportunities for improvement and to put best practice into place. High level detail around our annual complaints performance and insight into how we are performing as an organisation against some key SPSO set indicators is available in Appendix 2.
- 4.2 Customer Services recognises the importance of continuing to contribute to the Local Authority Complaints Handlers Network. A working group has been set up with one representative per family group. Our family group representative is from Scottish Borders Council. The working group meets on a quarterly basis with the first meeting having taken place in January 2017. The remit of the working group is to progress benchmarking activity based on the Local Authority Complaints Handlers Network and informed by the Annual Complaints Handling Performance Benchmarking Report.
- 4.3 Work has been ongoing to move our Social Work complaints handling into the Corporate Complaint Handling process in line with directive from the SPSO. The new process for Social Work complaints came into effect from 01 April 2017. The Corporate Complaints process was revised accordingly along with the Customer Complaint Leaflet and information on our website.

5. Complaints Improvement Framework

- 5.1 The SPSO Complaints Improvement Framework was issued to all services to complete as an internal exercise to aid the improvement of complaint handling. Once all responses have been received analysis will be undertaken on the results and an action plan of improvement will be drawn up and discussed and managed through the internal complaint handlers meetings.
- 5.2 A LEAN review was agreed to be undertaken on the Corporate Complaints Process at the Digital First Project Board in February. The review will identify improvement activities required to drive efficiencies across the end to end process. This review will work in conjunction with the analysis taken from the SPSO Complaints Improvement Framework, which will report out in September 2017 and the actions will be reported to Audit and Scrutiny in November.

6. Implications

- 6.1 Resource – There are limited resource implications against any actions from the SPSO Complaints Improvement Framework. All services have been requested to ensure that the necessary resources are in place and to continue to prioritise the improvement of complaints handling in order to meet the corporate performance targets.

Legal - no known implications

Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural) - no known implications

Climate Change/Carbon Clever - no known implications

Risk – Complaints handling performance is a critical area of the Council in how it handles its customer contact. Should the Council fail to meet the

performance targets it could impact negatively on the overall performance of the Council. We have to acknowledge a significant risk that there will be an increase in complaints at a time when the Council will have less resource available to resolve complaints within the allocated timeframes.

Gaelic - no known implications

Designation: Customer Services Delivery Manager

Date: 15 June 2017

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Background Papers: N/A

Appendix 1:

- Performance Against Timescales by Service
- Number of complaints per service as a percentage of CRM transactions

Performance Against Timescales by Service – Stage 1			
<i>The number and percentage of complaints at Stage 1 which were closed in full within the set timescales of 5 working days.</i>			
Service	Total No. of Stage 1 Cases	No. in Target	% in Target
Community Services	1120	296	26.43%
Finance	117	61	52.14%
Care & Learning	77	32	41.56%
Corporate Development	72	34	47.22%
Development & Infrastructure	63	26	41.27%
Chief Executive's	13	3	23.08%
No Service Allocated	28	1	3.57%
TOTAL	1490	453	30.40%
Complaints which are allocated as 'no service allocated' are complaints which have not been assigned to a single service at the time of reporting, in these cases corporate customer services will work in conjunction with the services concerned to allocate and resolve. The decision of Care and Learning was that complaints reported at schools are best resolved locally by the Head Teacher and therefore are not recorded in these figures.			

Performance Against Timescales by Service – Stage 2			
<i>The number and percentage of complaints at Stage 2 which were closed in full within the set timescales of 20 working days.</i>			
Service	Total No. of Stage 2 Cases	No. in Target	% in Target
Community Services	84	38	45.24%
Development & Infrastructure	52	27	51.92%
Care & Learning	27	6	22.22%
Corporate Development	14	6	42.86%
Finance	9	9	100%
Chief Executive's	3	2	66.67%
No Service Allocated	1	0	0%
TOTAL	190	88	46.32%
Complaints which are allocated as 'no service allocated' are complaints which have not been assigned to a single service at the time of reporting, in these cases corporate customer services will work in conjunction with the services concerned to allocate and resolve.			

Number of Complaints by Service as a Percentage of CRM Transactions		
<i>There were 159,123 transactions logged in CRM, which means that overall 1% of CRM contacts were customer complaints.</i>		
Service	Total No. of Complaints	% of CRM transactions
Community Services	1204	0.7%
Development & Infrastructure	115	0.07%
Care & Learning	114	0.07%
Corporate Development	86	0.05%
Finance	126	0.08%
Chief Executive's	16	0.01%

Appendix 2 – Annual Performance – Comparative Data

Annual Performance – Comparative Data (Periods 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2016 & 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017)		
	1 April 2015 to 31 March 2016	1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017
Number of Complaints closed at Stage 1 & Stage 2 as a % of all complaints closed.	1,650 closed in total. 1,330 (80.6%) at Stage 1 and 319 (19.3%) at Stage 2	1,681 closed in total. 1,491 (88.7%) at Stage 1 and 190 (11.3%) at Stage 2
<p>What does this tell us?</p> <p>This tells us that there was a small increase (31 +1.9%) in the number of complaints received in 16/17 compared to the previous year and that we continue to receive and resolve the majority of our complaints at Stage 1. This means that we are speaking to our customers sooner and addressing more complaints at the first point of contact.</p>		
Average time in working days for a full response to complaints at each stage.	Average for Stage 1 12.2 days Average for Stage 2 27.8 days	Average for Stage 1 25.9 days Average for Stage 2 28.7 days
<p>What does this tell us?</p> <p>There is a need to focus on meeting, where we can, timescales particularly on Stage 1 complaints to reduce our response times. It is important to note that having even a small number of complaints that take a long period of time to resolve can have a very adverse impact on this indicator. A number of factors have influenced our performance during 2016/17 including the implementation of our new CRM system and the reduction in staffing levels to handle complaints as well as to avoid them happening in the first place as the organisation contracts.</p>		
Number of complaints which were closed in full within the set timescales of 5 & 20 working days.	574 Stage 1 complaints closed in full within set timescale of 5 working days. (43.15%) 170 Stage 2 complaints closed in full within the set timescale of 20 working days. (53.3%)	453 Stage 1 complaints were closed in full within set timescale of 5 working days. (30.4%) 88 Stage 2 complaints closed in full within the set timescale of 20 working days. (46.3%)
<p>What does this tell us?</p> <p>As a local authority we have set our own internal target of 80% (this is not a requirement of the SPSO). We recognise that meeting this target is a challenge and are proposing to re-set that target to a more realistic 70% which some services are near achieving. This would provide us with an opportunity to challenge our performance while still being an achievable target. We will continue to use this internal target to benchmark our performance and drive improvement.</p>		