HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee:	Audit and Scrutiny
Date:	23 November 2017
Report Title:	**Corporate Complaints Process**
Report By:	**Depute Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Resources**

Purpose/Executive Summary

This report provides an update for Members on the Council's corporate complaints process for the period 1st April to 30th September 2017 along with comparative data for the previous year. A high level analysis of the Council's complaint handling performance per Service is also provided.

Council performance on the number of complaints handled within the 5 working day target set by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) at Stage 1 has a reported improvement of +14.2%. There is a reported increase in performance of +21.5% at Stage 2 where the SPSO target is 20 working days.

In the first 2 quarters, there has been a small increase of 3.8% in the number of complaints received. However overall this is a drop of 18% in the number of complaints received as a percentage of the number of customer transactions when compared to last year. It is also worth noting that the majority of complaints continue to be resolved at Stage 1.

A LEAN review of the Corporate Complaints process is being undertaken to achieve further improvements with performance.

Recommendations

Members are invited to:

- Scrutinise the Council's 6 month performance for Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaints;

- Recognise that the number of complaints received is a low volume within the context of the scale of the Council's customer base and the scope of services provided;

- Support officers continued participation in the Local Authority Complaint Handlers Network; and

- Agree that Officers undertake a review of the questions relating to complaints within the Highland Council's Annual Survey of Performance and Attitudes (paragraph 7.6 refers).

- Note that the LEAN review of the Corporate Complaints process is ongoing.

2. Background

2.1 All Scottish Councils must operate a complaints handling process which provides for complaints to be considered as Stage 1 (i.e. Front Line Resolution and normally less complex) and Stage 2 (i.e. Where an investigation is required or complex cases). This is a mandatory complaint process and is defined by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO). A complaint does not need to be considered at Stage 1 before then progressing to Stage 2. When a complaint is received, Services decide whether to treat it as a Stage 1 or Stage 2 complaint. Compliance is monitored using 8 annual performance indicators as detailed in **Appendix 1** to this report. The Highland Council's annual performance report for 16/17 was published in August 2017 and is available on the Council's website using the following link: Annual Complaints Report.
(https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/20009/performance/688/annual_complaints_ performance_report)

2.2 The Council's performance across these indicators for 17/18 will be reported to the June 2018 Audit and Scrutiny Committee.

3. Service Delivery Model

3.1 Service Directors are responsible for managing the performance of complaints for their respective Service and each Service has a Complaint Co-ordinator who engages with their respective Heads of Service so that complaints are allocated, prioritised and resolved appropriately. Across the Council, there is some variation around complaint handling. For example, some Services manage complaints from a single point whereas other Services allocate complaints directly to an appropriate officer in order that they may investigate and provide a suitable response. There is a wide variance in the volumes of complaints received by Service Directors (paragraph 4.2 below refers) which is said to be the main reason why different service delivery models currently exist.

3.2 Complaint Co-ordinators currently meet on a quarterly basis to discuss the current performance of their Service; lessons learned; and to share best practice. Historically, this group has been chaired by the Head of Digital Transformation and with the advent of the Corporate Resources Service will now be chaired by the Head of Revenues and Customer Services. Since December 2016 all Co-ordinators access a weekly monitoring tool, developed by Community Services, which is broken down by Service and provides data regarding the progress of each complaint at Stages 1 and 2. Complaint Co-ordinators then liaise with their respective Heads of Service to escalate and re-prioritise complaints that are approaching or have exceeded the 5 and 20 day targets. This monitoring tool has significantly supported the improvements in complaints handling as reported at paragraph 4.7 to this report.

4.   Current Performance

4.1   For the 6 month period to 30th September 2017 the Council received a total of 982 complaints (945 Qs 1 and 2 16/17) which is a 3.8% increase on the previous year.

4.2   Table 1 below provides a breakdown of the number of complaints received per Service in Q1 and Q2 with comparative data to the same period 16/17.

Table 1 Service	16/17	17/18
Community Services	665	681
Finance	56	118
Care & Learning	64	54
Corporate Development	53	51
Development & Infrastructure	59	60
Chief Executive's	8	4
*No Service Allocated	40	14
Totals	**945**	**982**

*A considerable amount of work has gone into ensuring that all complaints are now allocated to a Service. This has meant a reduction in the complaints recorded as "no Service allocated" and also ensures that a responsible officer can take ownership quickly to resolve complaints. No Service allocated complaints are subsequently closed by the lead Service.

4.3   It is important to note that during Q1 16/17 there were 65,006 customer transactions logged in the Council's Customer Relationship Management system (CRM) with 1% of CRM transactions being customer complaints. Year to date for 17/18 there has been a significant increase to 119,326 customer transactions reported via the Council's CRM system across all customer access channels. CRM transactions include but are not limited to requests for service; complaints; enquiries; missed bins; and blue badge applications. It is also important to note that the number of complaints received for this latest period is 982 (across all Services) and as a percentage of overall CRM transactions is 0.82%; this is a decrease of 18% when comparing complaints with transactions for comparative periods in 16/17. Removing the brown bin transactions also demonstrates improvements of 0.3% decrease when comparing complaints to transactions.

4.4   There has been a 54.5% increase in customer transactions for the comparative first 2 quarters, with the majority of this increase directly attributable to increased online use. The charge for brown bin collections, which was launched in May 2017, generated in excess of 32,000 transactions as compared to the same time period in 16/17. To provide comparative data, removing the contacts relating to brown bins, results in a 34.3% increase in demand for the 6 month period to 30 September 2017.

4.5   Table 2 below provides a breakdown of the channels used by customers to transact their business as recorded in the Council's CRM system. This data shows that the majority of customers prefer to transact with the Council via the website (36%) or by telephone (37%) reflecting the positive Digital First initiatives being developed by the Council.

4.6

Table 2 : Customer Transaction Channels (CRM)		
	Qs 1 and 2 2016/17	Qs 1 and 2 2017/18
By Website	19%	36%
By Telephone	42%	37%
By Letter	<1%	<1%
By Email	2%	1%
In person	36%	26%
By Appointment	<1%	<1%

4.7   At the June 2017 Audit and Scrutiny Committee a reduced target of 70% (from 80%) was agreed as this was considered both attainable and a driver to improve performance. Council performance on the number of complaints handled within the 5 working day target set by the SPSO at Stage 1 has improved to 42.9% (an increase of +14.2% on the comparative period in 2016). There has also been a significant increase in performance to 66.7% (an increase of +21.5%) at Stage 2 where the SPSO target is 20 working days.

4.8   While 37% of all customer transactions are via the telephone, customer preference for making a complaint continues to be self-serve through the Council's website, with 60% of complaints logged this way.

4.9

Table 3 : Customer Complaint Channels		
	Qs 1 and 2 2016/17	Qs 1 and 2 2017/18
By Website	60.5%	60.2%
By Telephone	20.3%	24.3%
By Letter	4.8%	6.3%
By Email	6.7%	5.5%
In person	7.5%	3.7%
By Appointment	0.2%	Less than 1 transaction

4.10   The graph at paragraph 4.11 demonstrates the overall improving trend across the Council to achieve the internal 70% target of resolving complaints at Stages 1 and 2. While a 14% improvement has been made at Stage 1 (5 working day target), Services need to do more to achieve 70% by the end of this financial year. In contrast, Services are commended for the sharper focus on Stage 2 complaints and enhanced use of monitoring tools to bring performance much closer to target in the first 6 months.

4.11   Stages 1 and 2 performance measured against the internal target of 70%

Stage 1 & 2 Targets = 70%

16/17   17/18
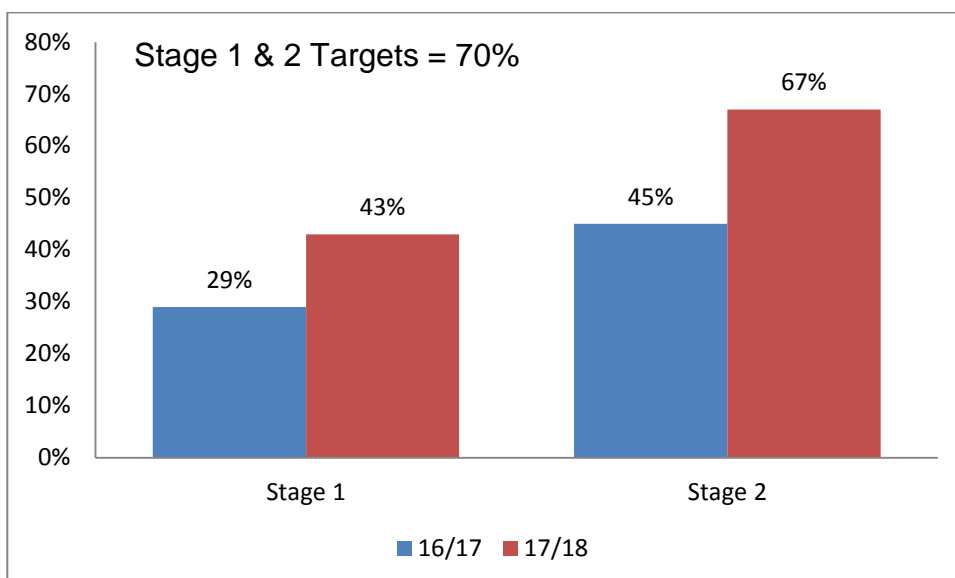
4.12   Detailed information per Service around compliance within set timescales at both Stage 1 and Stage 2 is available at paragraphs 4.13 and 4.16 below. This includes information on the average time in working days taken at both Stage 1 and Stage 2 for complaint resolution.

4.13

Performance Against Timescales by Service – Stage 1				
The number and percentage of complaints at Stage 1 which were closed in full within the set timescales of 5 working days.				
Service	Total Number of Stage 1 cases closed	Number closed within 5 working days	% closed within 5 working days	Average working days to close*
Community Services	595 (499)	236 (121)	40% (24%)	12
Finance	109 (53)	62 (15)	57% (28%)	6
Care & Learning	36 (43)	11 (21)	31% (49%)	23
Corporate Development	46 (40)	26 (18)	56% (45%)	9
Development & Infrastructure	35 (30)	16 (15)	46% (50%)	6
Chief Executive's	4 (7)	3 (2)	75% (29%)	5

NB Figures in () is the comparative data for the equivalent time period in 16/17.
*Comparative data for 16/17 is not available.

4.14   Community Services, as one of the Council's largest customer facing service providers, continue to receive the majority of complaints. At Stage 1 Community Services received 61% of all complaints. There has been a significant increase in improvement for this Service with the number of complaints handled within the 5 working day target for the comparative period rising from 121 to 236. This has been achieved by a number of factors including a greater focus from Heads of Service and their management teams and the use of enhanced monitoring tools. Community Services' overall percentage of complaints closed within the target of 5 working days has increased from 24% to 40%.

4.15   It is important to note that some complaints are dealt with by Services and Schools in real-time and are therefore not recorded in CRM. As a result these real-time resolutions are not reflected within this report.

4.16

| Performance Against Timescales by Service – Stage 2

The number and percentage of complaints at Stage 2 which were closed in full within the set timescales of 20 working days.				
Service	Total Number of Stage 2 cases closed	Number closed within 20 working days	% closed within 20 working days	Average working days to close
Community Services	40 (37)	27 (15)	68% (41%)	16
Finance	9 (3)	8 (3)	89% (100%)	6
Care & Learning	14 (17)	10 (5)	71% (29%)	15
Corporate Development	5 (8)	3 (3)	60% (38%)	27
Development & Infrastructure	25 (27)	14 (15)	56% (56%)	18
Chief Executive's	0 (1)	0 (1)	0 (100%)	0

NB Figures in () is the comparative data for the equivalent time period in 16/17.

Services' performance has improved at Stage 2, particularly within the Care and Learning Service. It is important to consider context as well as some of these complaints can be very complex. For some Services, the volumes of Stage 2 complaints are relatively low and as a result a small number of responses that are out with the 20 working days can have a disproportionate impact on reported performance.

5.   Complaint Reasons

5.1   To drive further improvements into service delivery, it is important to analyse the reasons for complaints. The following table sets out the ten most common reasons why customers complained to the Council during the 6 month period to 30 September 2017.

5.2   This level of detail, plus more, is shared with Heads of Service and Complaints Co-ordinators so that there is an opportunity to explore the root cause of complaints, learn from them and address the issues.

5.3

17/18	Reason	No. Complaints Received
1*	Council Housing (including allocation of council housing, housing repairs etc.)	186
2	Rubbish and Recycling (Bulky uplift, bins for your home etc.)	160
3	Council Tax (Billing, Payments etc.)	98

4	Roads and Pavements (Pot holes, Street lighting etc.)	93
5	Countryside, Farming and Wildlife	54
6	Planning and Building Control (Planning permission, Pre planning Advice, etc.)	52
7	Schools (Catering etc.)	42
8	Parking and Car Parks	39
9	Environmental Health	36
10	Land and Property	32

*NB 1 equals the largest volume of complaints and is based on six months' data

5.4 It is important to note that the reasons for complaints can be influenced by seasonal activity for example grass cutting or gritting and by new initiatives, policy decisions and legislative changes. For example, the first annual increase in Council Tax was implemented from 1 April 2017 following 10 years of no increases in charges. The improving performance achieved by Services for both Stage 1 and 2 complaints means fewer customers contact the Council to pursue their complaint and as a consequence reduced officer time is spent responding to such contacts. This in turn enables officers to focus on responding to complaints whenever possible within the required timescales.

6. Lessons Learned

6.1 **Appendix 2** contains a summary of some of the Service improvements that have been put in place as a direct result of complaints that were recorded in 2016/17. This includes staff training around customer care and complaint handling and the corporate electronic complaints monitoring tool developed by Community Services.

7. Benchmarking Performance

7.1 The Highland Council participates in quarterly meetings of the Local Authority Complaint Handlers Network (LACHN) which is run in partnership with the SPSO. A key outcome of this group has been the development of benchmarking family groups. Benchmarking data is based on the 8 performance indicators as detailed at **Appendix 1** to this report. Highland's family group includes the following Councils: Shetland, Orkney, Western Isles, Scottish Borders, Argyll and Bute, Dumfries and Galloway and Aberdeenshire.

7.2 It is important to note that while this is a valuable exercise there are some key differences that can impact on results. For example not all local authorities have retained their housing stock and some regard a first missed bin as a complaint whereas other local authorities treat such contacts as a request for service.

7.3 The chart below benchmarks the Council's 6-month 17/18 performance against the 16/17 **annual** performance of the Council, the LACHN family group and the Scottish local authority average for average working days taken to close a Stage 1 complaint. There is no available comparable data for the family group in respect of the first 6 months to 30 September 2017. So while the Council has made significant improvements during quarters 1 and 2 of the current financial year when compared with the annual performance for 16/17,

it is not currently possible to benchmark this year's performance within the family group.
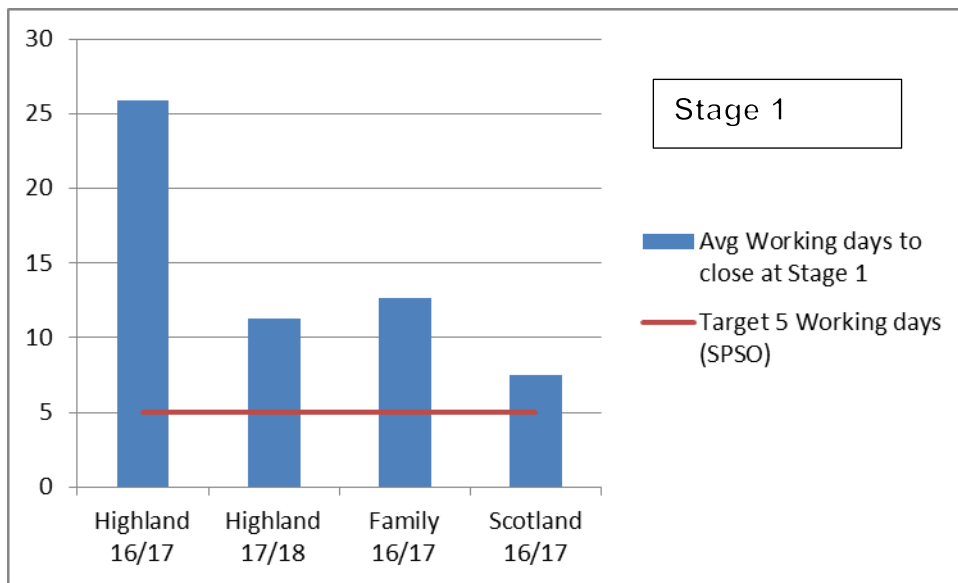
Note the 16/17 data used is for a full year.

7.4   The following chart benchmarks current 17/18 performance against the 16/17 annual performance of the Council, the LACHN family group and the Scottish Local Authority average for average working days taken to close a Stage 2 complaint. As with Stage 1, although there is no comparative data for the family group, performance in the Council is improving for the first 2 quarters of the current financial year.
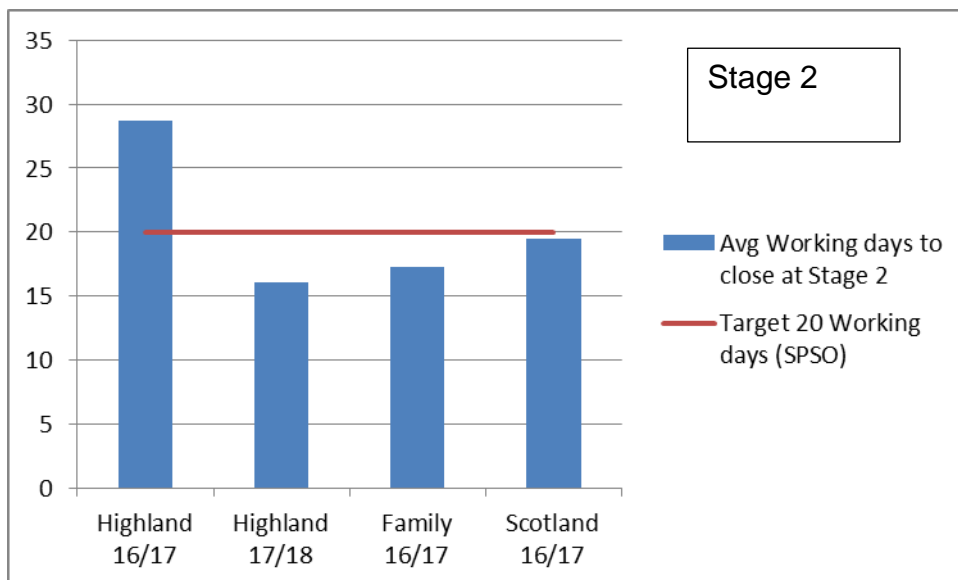
Note the 16/17 data used is for a full year.

7.5   At the most recent LACHN meeting the new Ombudsman, Rosemary Agnew, advised that she is keen to progress a review of the current key performance indicators to ensure they are reflective of learning and outcomes around complaints. She also highlighted her intention to review the communication with customers when extensions to timelines are applied. The importance of

maintaining a customer focus around complaints was emphasised as was the need for complaints to be allocated to the correct Stage from the outset in order to achieve the best outcomes for customers. This may result in an increase in complaints dealt with at Stage 2.

7.6   LACHN representatives also discussed Indicator 7, which is the Customer Satisfaction Survey. Across Councils, return rates are generally low. This is therefore another area that is likely to be explored in the future to review survey methods, frequency, questions and analysis.

8.   Improving Performance – Factors

8.1   As reported to the Audit & Scrutiny Committee in June 2017, the SPSO complaints improvement framework is a voluntary tool available to all Councils to aid the improvement of complaint handling. The framework includes a set of predefined questions in relation to the following 6 categories:

Organisational Culture	Accessibility	Process and Procedure
Quality	Learning from Complaints	Complaints Handling Performance

8.2   Following an analysis within each Service of each of these categories, the outputs are usefully informing the LEAN review of the Council's complaints process that is currently underway.

9.   Implications

9.1   **Resource:** There are limited resource implications arising from the ongoing LEAN review of complaint handling. All Service Directors have put arrangements in place to ensure that the necessary resources are to prioritise complaints with the aim of achieving statutory and internal targets.

9.2   **Legal:** The Council participates in the benchmarking undertaken in partnership with the SPSO and the Council's complaint process is fully compliant with the SPSO's statutory Stages 1 and 2.

9.3   **Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural):** No known implications

9.4   **Climate Change/Carbon Clever:** No known implications

9.5   **Risk:** Complaints management is a critical component of the Council's overall approach to customer engagement. This includes managing the various changes required as a part of the Council's strategic efforts to manage reducing resources.

9.6   **Gaelic:** No known implications

Designation: Depute Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Resources

Date: 16 November 2017

Authors: Sheila McKandie, Benefits and Welfare Manager;
Moira Grant, Customer Service Delivery Manager and
Jane Ross, Senior Business Support Officer

Background
Papers:

- Audit and Scrutiny Committee papers June 2017 and November 2016
- SPSO Benchmarking Data 16/17 and LACHN minutes

Appendix 1

Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO)
Annual Performance Indicators

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.

Learning from Complaints
Service Improvements

The following is a summary of some of the service improvements that were introduced as a direct result of analysing the complaints received during 2016/17.

➢ Enhancements to the Council's automated Switchboard facility that makes it easier for customers with an existing enquiry to contact direct, the Service or Officer they wish to speak with.

➢ Refresher training provided to Customer Services staff on the complaints process. This included the online learning modules developed by the SPSO.

➢ Blue badge process refresher training undertaken by dedicated team (Customer Services).

➢ Dementia Friendly training sessions in partnership with Alzheimer's Scotland across the Customer Services network to improve customer engagement.

➢ Development of an internal dashboard by Community Services to monitor and drive complaints performance improvements in particular around timeliness of responses. This dashboard has meant that a brand new and up to date FOI and complaints report is generated every day that is sent out with daily audit/chase-ups to managers and officers with cases against their names, whilst copying in the relevant Head of Service.