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| Agenda Item | 8       |
| Report No   | AS/9/18 |

## HIGHLAND COUNCIL

**Committee:** Audit and Scrutiny

**Date:** 14 June 2018

**Report Title:** Corporate Complaints Process

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

### 1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report provides an update for Members on the Council's corporate complaints process for the period 1st April 2017 to 31st March 2018 along with comparative data for the previous year. A high level analysis of the Council's complaint handling performance per Service is also provided.
- 1.2 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 +12.2%. There is a reported increase in performance of +17.5% at Stage 2 where the SPSO target is 20 working days. Such improved performance is attributable to a number of factors including a sharper focus on complaints by all Services.
- 1.3 A LEAN review of the Corporate Complaints process is being undertaken to achieve further improvements with performance.

### 2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are invited to:
- i. Scrutinise the Council's improved 2017/18 annual performance for Stage 1 (+12.2%) and Stage 2 (+17.5%) complaints;
  - ii. Recognise that the number of complaints received is a low volume at 1.5% within the context of the scale of the Council's customer base and the scope of services provided;
  - iii. Support officers continued participation in the Local Authority Complaint Handlers Network;
  - iv. Note the remit of the cross-Service Complaints Co-ordinators' group and the ongoing sharing of leading practice in order to further improve corporate performance for front line resolution (Stage 1) and investigation (Stage 2); and
  - v. Note the progress to date on the LEAN review.

### **3. Background**

- 3.1 Scottish Councils must operate a complaints handling process which provides for complaints to be considered as front line resolution (Stage 1- normally less complex) and where an investigation is required (Stage 2 - 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 front line resolution before then progressing to investigation. When a complaint is received, Services decide the appropriate category according to the nature of the complaint. Compliance is monitored using 8 annual performance indicators as detailed in **Appendix 1** to this report.
- 3.2 The Highland Council's published definition of a complaint is: 'An expression of dissatisfaction by one or more members of the public about the local authority's action or lack of action, or about the standard of service provided by or on behalf of the local authority.'
- 3.3 The Council's performance across these indicators for 2017/18 will be submitted to the SPSO and published in a public-facing Annual Report.

### **4. Service Delivery Model**

- 4.1 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.
- 4.2 As part of the Council / Service restructuring in 2017 that included the new Corporate Resources Service being created, the functions of Revenues, Business Support and Customer Services were amalgamated. This includes that since October 2017 Complaint Co-ordinators have been participating in the Corporate Complaints Improvement Group chaired by the Head of Revenues and Customer Services. All members of the group have agreed that the remit of this group is:

*"To proactively share leading practice and lessons learned in order to consistently achieve quality and timely responses across all Services within the Council. Group members will develop and monitor meaningful key performance indicators that support managers and complaints officers to continuously improve and deliver quality services for customers. The working group will benchmark Highland Council complaints performance internally and within the context of the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman's requirements and associated guidance."*

### **5. Current Performance**

- 5.1 For the 12 month period 1<sup>st</sup> April 2017 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2018 the Council received a total of 2,195 complaints (1,681 2016/17) which is a +30.6% increase on the previous year. The increase in complaints is largely attributable to budget decisions.

5.2 Table 1 below provides a breakdown of the number of complaints received per Service for 2017/18 with comparative data to the same period for 2016/17.

| <b>Table 1<br/>Service</b>   | <b>2016/17</b> | <b>2017/18</b> |
|------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Community Services           | 1,175          | 1,586          |
| Finance                      | 139            | 234            |
| Care & Learning              | 130            | 141            |
| Corporate Development        | 97             | 73             |
| Development & Infrastructure | 118            | 123            |
| Chief Executive's            | 17             | 13             |
| *Awaiting Service Validation | 5              | 25             |
| <b>Totals</b>                | <b>1,681</b>   | <b>2,195</b>   |

\*The volume reported is a snapshot and changes on a daily basis as Services complete the validation process which will result in one of the following outcomes:

- Accept complaint
- Re-classify as request for service
- Re-assign complaint to another Service

5.3 During 2017/18 there were 210,563 customer contacts logged in the Council's Customer Relationship Management system (CRM) with 1.5% of CRM contacts being customer complaints. This is an increase of 51,440 (+32.3%) customer contacts with the main increase in customer contacts attributable to the launch of the Garden Waste permit scheme in May 2017 with approximately 34,000 contacts compared to 2016/17.

5.4 The reasons for complaints can be influenced by seasonal Council activity and weather conditions for example gritting, extreme cold weather and by new initiatives, policy/budgetary decisions and legislative changes. For example, there were three material changes to Council Tax implemented from 1 April 2017 following 10 years of no increases in charges (i) a 3% increase affecting all properties, (ii) introduction of the multiplier affecting all band E to H properties and (iii) the removal of the 10% second home discount; the introduction of a chargeable service for the collection of garden waste and the prolonged period of extremely cold weather. The continued improving complaints performance by Services for both frontline resolution and investigation enables officers to focus on further improving performance within Services.

5.5 Customer preference for making a complaint continues to be self-serve through the Council's website, with 65% of complaints logged this way; an increase of 6.4% as compared to 2016/17.

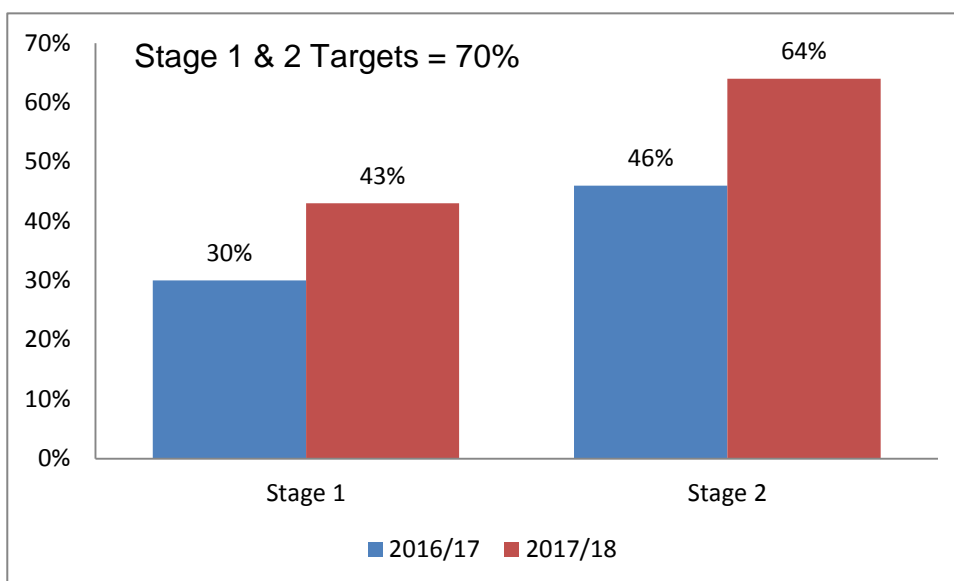
5.6

| <b>Table 2 : Customer Complaint Channels</b> |                |                |                 |
|--|----------------|----------------|-----------------|
|  | <b>2016/17</b> | <b>2017/18</b> | <b>% change</b> |
| By Website                                   | 59%            | 65.4%          | +6.4%           |
| By Telephone                                 | 21.8%          | 21.5%          | -0.3%           |
| By Letter                                    | 6%             | 5.2%           | -0.8%           |
| By Email                                     | 6.8%           | 4.8%           | -2.0%           |
| In Person                                    | 5.7%           | 3%             | -2.7%           |
| By Appointment                               | <1%            | <1%            | =               |

5.7 Council performance on the number of complaints handled within the 5 working day target set by the SPSO at resolution (Stage 1) has improved to 42.6%; an increase of +12.2% on the comparative period in 2016/17. There has also been a significant increase in performance to 63.8% (an increase of +17.5%) at Stage 2 where the SPSO target is 20 working days.

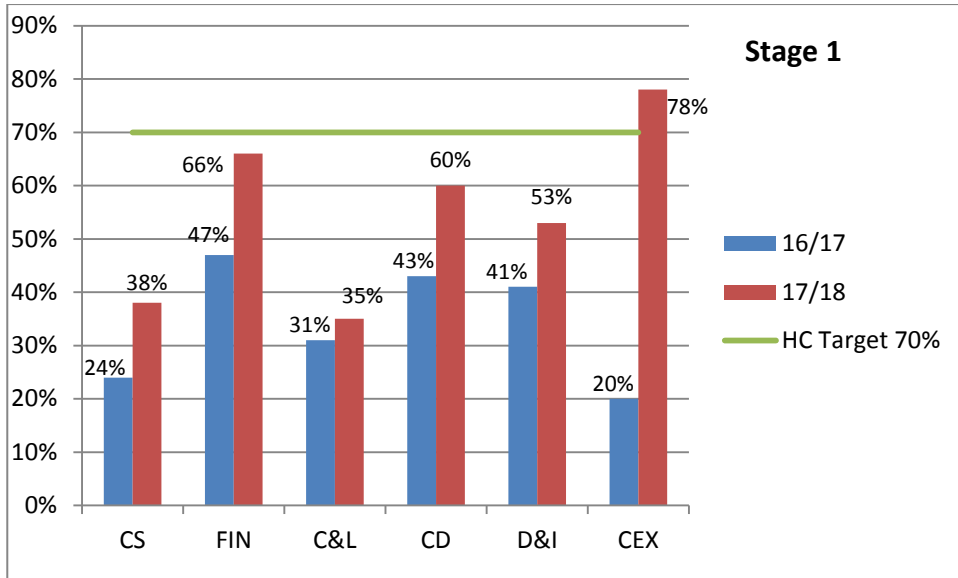
5.8 The graph at paragraph 5.14 demonstrates the overall improving trend across the Council to achieve the internal 70% target of resolving complaints at Stages 1 and 2. While a 12% improvement has been made at Stage 1 (5 working day target), more work still needs to be done to achieve the 70% for 2018/19. Services' performance on Stage 2 complaints (20 working day target) is much closer to target.

5.9 Stages 1 and 2 performance for the Council are measured against the internal target of 70%.



5.10 Information per Service around compliance within set timescales at both Stage 1 and Stage 2 is available below in 5.11 and 5.14. Further detailed information including the average time in working days taken at both Stage 1 and Stage 2 for complaint resolution per Service can be found in **Appendix 2** to this report.

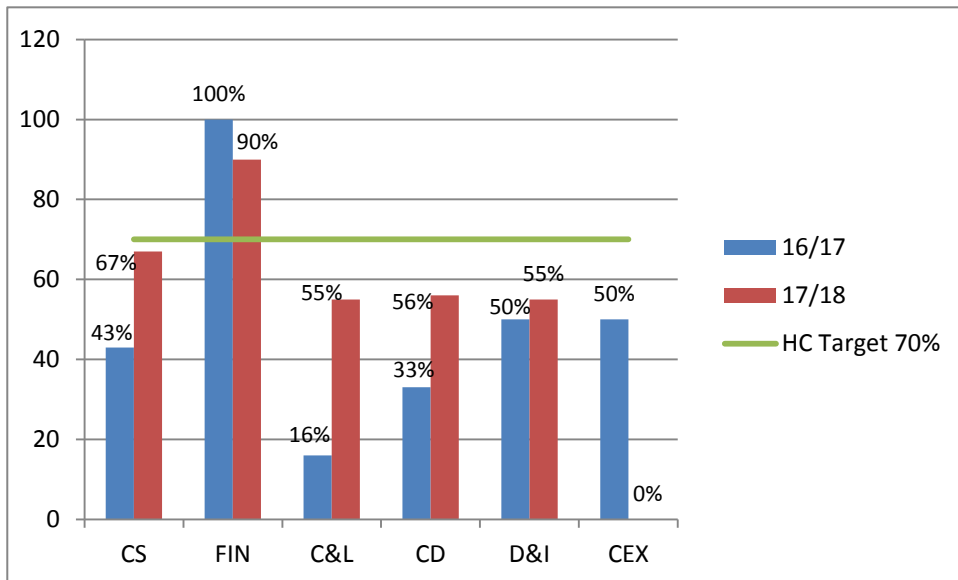
5.11 Stage 1 performance by Service measured against the target of 70% is provided in the following table.



5.12 All Services have improved on the average working days to close a complaint at Stage 1.

5.13 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.

5.14 Stage 2 performance by Service measured against the internal target of 70% is detailed below.



5.15 Services' performance has improved at Stage 2, particularly within the Care and Learning Service and Community Services. It is also important to consider that some complaints can be very complex and as such the investigation may require a period longer than the 20 day target.

## 6. Complaint Reasons

6.1 To drive further improvements into service delivery, we analyse the reasons for complaints. The following table in paragraph 6.2 sets out the 10 most common reasons why customers complained to the Council during 2017/18.

6.2

| Reason  | Ranking |         | No. Complaints Received |         |
|---|---------|---------|-------------------------|---------|
|   | 2016/17 | 2017/18 | 2016/17                 | 2017/18 |
| Roads and Pavements (Pot holes, Street lighting etc.)                           | 2       | 1       | 224                     | 391     |
| Council Housing (including allocation of council housing, housing repairs etc.) | 1       | 2       | 336                     | 366     |
| Land and Property   | >10     | 3       | *                       | 284     |
| Rubbish and Recycling (Bulky uplift, bins for your home etc.)                   | 3       | 4       | 210                     | 228     |
| Council Tax (Billing, Payments etc.)  | 9       | 5       | 90                      | 182     |
| Planning and Building Control (Planning permission, Pre planning Advice, etc.)  | 8       | 6       | 94                      | 104     |
| Schools (Catering etc.)   | >10     | 7       | *                       | 101     |
| Countryside, Farming and Wildlife   | >10     | 8       | *                       | 60      |
| Parking and Car Parks   | 6       | 9       | 97                      | 59      |
| Environmental Health  | >10     | 10      | *                       | 47      |

\*Not within the 10 most common reasons for 2016/17

**NB 1 equals the largest volume of complaints and is based on annual data**

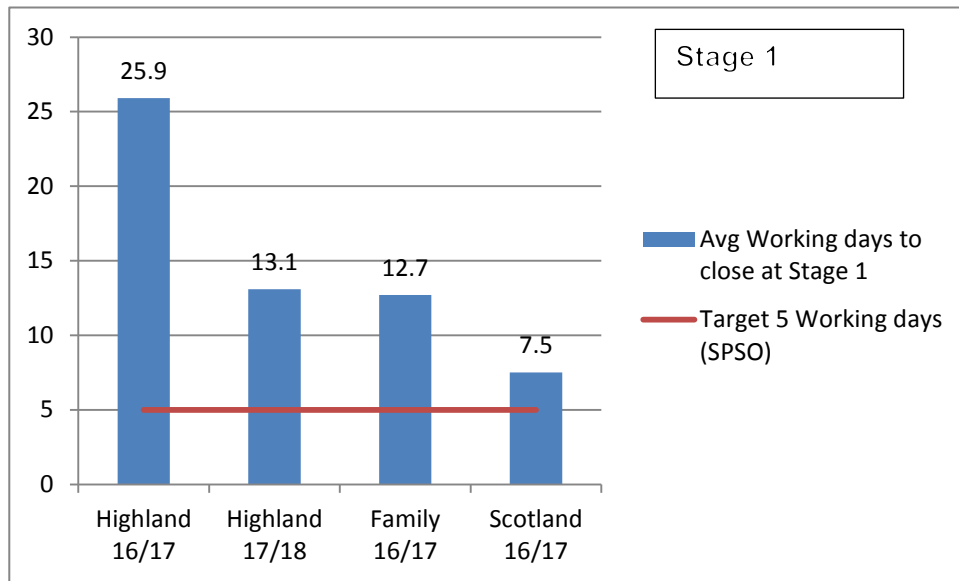
## 7. Benchmarking Performance

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. The Highland Council's family group includes the following Councils: Shetland, Orkney, Western Isles, Scottish Borders, Argyll and Bute, Dumfries and Galloway and Aberdeenshire.

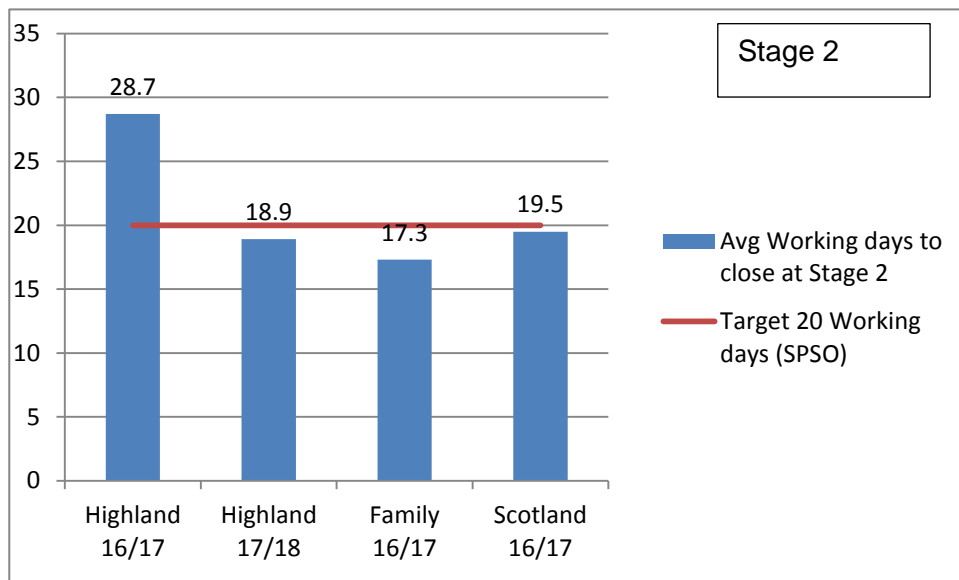
7.2 It is important to note that while this is a valuable exercise there are some key differences that can impact on results. For example not all local authorities have retained their housing stock and some regard a first missed bin as a complaint whereas other local authorities treat such contacts as a request for service. Nonetheless, more will continue to be done including challenging existing processes (as discussed later on Lean in Section 7) and management activities such as benchmarking.

7.3 The chart below benchmarks the Council's 2017/18 performance against the 2016/17 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. The 2017/18 performance for the family group and Scotland had not been published at the time of writing this report.



7.4 The following chart benchmarks current 2017/18 performance against the 2016/17 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.



7.5 These charts demonstrate that while performance is improving within the Council, achieving performance levels within the family group is within the Council's reach for both Stages. While there is a notable difference in the Scotland-wide performance when compared with the Council at Stage 1, local performance at Stage 2 is marginally better than the position for the whole of Scotland.

## 8. Improving Performance

8.1 A LEAN review of the complaints process is ongoing. Key themes are to:

- improve the customer journey by channelling complaints effectively;
- increase the number of complaints dealt with inside the 5 and 20 working day deadlines, as reported at paragraph 5.9; and
- increase frontline resolution and improve customer satisfaction with the resolution of complaints.

8.2 A workshop was held with the Complaints Improvement Group in April 2018. This identified opportunities to improve channelling complaints more effectively. As a result, a review of the current web pages and online form was undertaken to help improve the customer journey by guiding customers to the relevant process to meet their needs. Work on the design changes to the website and online form is underway and due to be implemented from July 2018.

8.3 Increasing performance of frontline resolution was also identified as a key priority. Members of the group agreed that throughout the year there are activities that could be more proactively managed by ensuring Customer Services and other frontline workers have relevant and up to date information. Examples could be complaints activity in winter around gritting routes, or those complaints relating to Council decisions at the time of Budget-setting. Anticipating these potential complaints and empowering frontline staff would result in a further improvement in response times. Accordingly, this will be taken forward during the current financial year.

8.4 A recent review of the Council's responses to complaints has identified some differences in the way complaints are responded to across Services. There are some standard corporate features which should be present in every response to a complaint, therefore a corporate template will be introduced in July 2018 to standardise the look and feel while not restricting the detail of the response.

8.5 During 2017/18 training has been delivered to staff on the complaints process and some Service specific training for example enhanced customer care and awareness of additional needs i.e. Autism awareness.

8.6 The Corporate Complaints Improvement Group will continue to identify and implement improvements as a result of the consideration of complaints.

## 9. Implications

9.1 **Resource:** There are limited resource implications arising from the ongoing LEAN review of complaint handling. All Service Directors have arrangements in place to ensure that the necessary resources are available 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 and to achieving more efficient and effective delivery of services. 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: 14 June 2018

Authors: Sheila McKandie, Benefits and Welfare Manager;  
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Background Papers:

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

**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.   |

## Performance by Service

| <b>Performance Against Timescales by Service – Stage 1</b>   |   |  |                                       |                                       |
|--|---|--|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <b>The number and percentage of complaints at Stage 1 which were closed in full within the set timescales of 5 working days.</b> |   |  |                                       |                                       |
| <b>Service</b>   | <b>Total Number of Stage 1 cases closed</b> | <b>Number closed within 5 working days</b> | <b>% closed within 5 working days</b> | <b>Average working days to close*</b> |
| <b>Community Services</b>  | <b>1,439</b><br>(1,215)                     | <b>552</b><br>(294)                        | <b>38%</b><br>(24%)                   | <b>14</b><br>(36)                     |
| <b>Finance</b>   | <b>204</b><br>(130)                         | <b>134</b><br>(61)                         | <b>66%</b><br>(47%)                   | <b>6</b><br>(12)                      |
| <b>Care &amp; Learning</b>   | <b>95</b><br>(99)                           | <b>33</b><br>(31)                          | <b>35%</b><br>(31%)                   | <b>21</b><br>(37)                     |
| <b>Corporate Development</b>   | <b>63</b><br>(79)                           | <b>38</b><br>(34)                          | <b>60%</b><br>(43%)                   | <b>8</b><br>(28)                      |
| <b>Development &amp; Infrastructure</b>  | <b>72</b><br>(64)                           | <b>38</b><br>(26)                          | <b>53%</b><br>(41%)                   | <b>6</b><br>(12)                      |
| <b>Chief Executive's</b>   | <b>9</b><br>(15)                            | <b>7</b><br>(3)                            | <b>78%</b><br>(20%)                   | <b>5</b><br>(25)                      |

NB Figures in ( ) is the comparative data for the equivalent time period in 2016/17.

| <b>Performance Against Timescales by Service – Stage 2</b>  |   |   |  |                                      |
|---|---|---|--|--------------------------------------|
| <b>The number and percentage of complaints at Stage 2 which were closed in full within the set timescales of 20 working days.</b> |   |   |  |                                      |
| <b>Service</b>  | <b>Total Number of Stage 2 cases closed</b> | <b>Number closed within 20 working days</b> | <b>% closed within 20 working days</b> | <b>Average working days to close</b> |
| <b>Community Services</b>   | <b>67</b><br>(88)                           | <b>45</b><br>(38)                           | <b>67%</b><br>(43%)                    | <b>18</b><br>(35)                    |
| <b>Finance</b>  | <b>30</b><br>(9)                            | <b>27</b><br>(9)                            | <b>90%</b><br>(100%)                   | <b>10</b><br>(6)                     |
| <b>Care &amp; Learning</b>  | <b>38</b><br>(31)                           | <b>21</b><br>(5)                            | <b>55%</b><br>(16%)                    | <b>24</b><br>(53)                    |
| <b>Corporate Development</b>  | <b>9</b><br>(18)                            | <b>5</b><br>(6)                             | <b>56%</b><br>(33%)                    | <b>25</b><br>(27)                    |
| <b>Development &amp; Infrastructure</b>   | <b>49</b><br>(54)                           | <b>27</b><br>(27)                           | <b>55%</b><br>(50%)                    | <b>19</b><br>(25)                    |
| <b>Chief Executive's</b>  | <b>3</b><br>(2)                             | <b>0</b><br>(1)                             | <b>0%*</b><br>(50%)                    | <b>39</b><br>(25)                    |

NB Figures in ( ) is the comparative data for the equivalent time period in 2016/17.