

Agenda Item	6
Report No	AS/21/18

## HIGHLAND COUNCIL

**Committee:** Audit and Scrutiny

**Date:** 29 November 2018

**Report Title:** **Corporate Complaints Progress**

**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 to 30th September 2018 along with comparative data for the previous two years. 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 +3%. There is a reported decrease in performance of -2% at Stage 2 where the SPSO target is 20 working days.
- 1.3** In the first 2 quarters, there has been a significant decrease of 19.6% in the number of complaints received. There has also been a decrease of 5.4% to the reported number of customer transactions through the Customer Relationship Management system (CRM).
- 1.4** It is worth noting that the majority of complaints continue to be resolved at Stage 1.
- 1.5** There is also a substantial reported improvement in the average number of working days taken to close both Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaints. In 16/17 (annual performance) the average time taken to close at Stage 1 was 25.9 days; in Qs1 and 2 18/19 the number of days is now reported as 11- an improvement of 14.9 days. For Stage 2 the reported performance is at 18.5 days for 18/19 so far which is a 10.2 day improvement compared with the annual performance in 16/17 which was 28.7 days.

### **2. Recommendations**

- 2.1** Members are invited to:
  - I. Scrutinise the Council's 6 month performance for Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaints;
  - II. Recognise the decrease in the number of complaints received and also that the number of complaints continues to be a low volume within the context of the scale of the Council's customer base and the scope of services provided;

- III. Recognise the continued improvement in performance at Stage 1 and the ongoing work around Stage 2; and
- IV. Support officers continued participation in the Local Authority Complaint Handlers Network

### **3. Background**

- 3.1 All Scottish Councils 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 mandatory complaint process is defined by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO). It is important to note that a complaint does not need to be considered at front line resolution before progressing to investigation. When a complaint is received, Services decide the appropriate Stage according to the nature of the complaint.
- 3.2 The Highland Council's published definition of a complaint is: 'A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction about one of our services that requires a response.'
- 3.3 The SPSO has issued local authorities with 8 performance indicators which are now reported on a quarterly basis to the Local Authority Complaint Handlers Network for benchmarking.
- 3.4 There is also a requirement for Highland Council to publish an annual performance report. The report for 17/18 was published in October 2018 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).

[\(\[https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/20009/performance/688/annual\\\_complaints\\\_performance\\\_report\]\(https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/20009/performance/688/annual\_complaints\_performance\_report\)\)](https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/20009/performance/688/annual_complaints_performance_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 6 month period to 30th September 2018 the Council received a total of 790 complaints (982 Qs 1 and 2 17/18) which is a 19.6% decrease on the previous year.

5.2 Table 1 below provides a breakdown of the number of complaints received per Service in Q1 and Q2 with comparative data (where available) to the same period in 17/18 and 16/17. Overall reduction in customer complaints received may be partly attributed to re-design of webpage (referenced in paragraph 8.2) which makes it easier for customers to select the appropriate action.

<b>Table 1 Complaints by Service</b>			
<b>Service</b>	<b>16/17</b>	<b>17/18</b>	<b>18/19</b>
Community Services	665	681	547
Care & Learning	64	54	49
Chief Executive's	8	4	9
Corporate Resources	N/A	N/A	103
Development & Infrastructure	59	60	68
Finance	56	118	N/A
Corporate Development	53	51	N/A
<b>Totals</b>	<b>905</b>	<b>968</b>	<b>776</b>

N/A – Council / Service restructuring in 2017 means that some direct comparisons are not available.

<b>Awaiting Service Validation</b>			
	<b>16/17</b>	<b>17/18</b>	<b>18/19</b>
Awaiting Service Validation	40	14	14

The validation process will result in one of the following outcomes:

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

5.3 Year to date (April to September) for 18/19 112,838 customer transactions have been reported via the Council's CRM system across all customer access channels with 0.7% of contacts being customer complaints. This is an overall reduction of 6,488 (5.4%) customer contacts compared to the same period in 17/18. This has also resulted in a corresponding drop of 0.12% complaints as a percentage of overall reported customer contact.

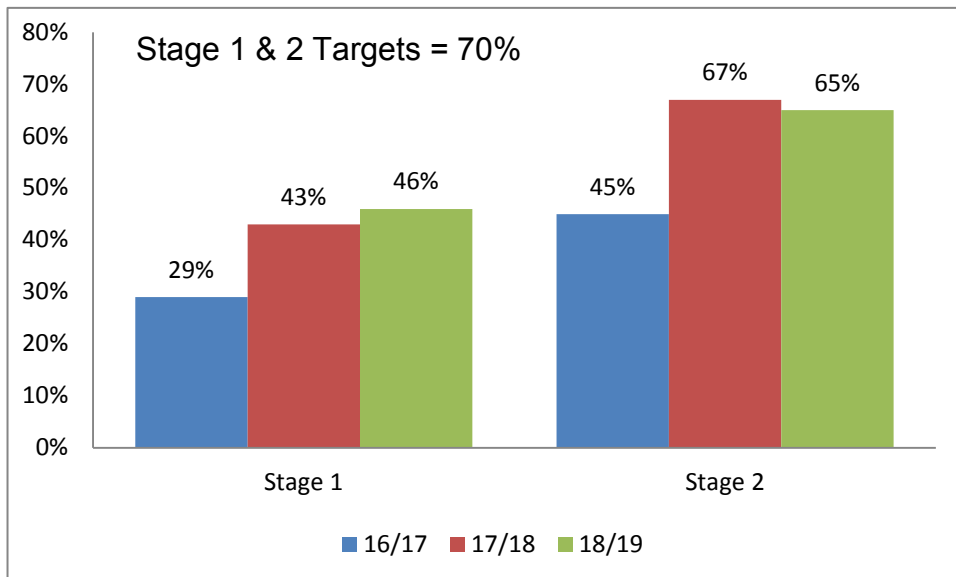
5.4 Customers' preferences for making complaints continues to be self-serve through the Council's website, with 63% (increase of 2.8%) of complaints logged this way as set out in table 2 below.

**5.5**

<b>Table 2 : Customer Complaint Channels</b>			
	<b>Qs 1 and 2 2016/17</b>	<b>Qs 1 and 2 2017/18</b>	<b>Qs 1 and 2 2018/19</b>
By Website	60.5%	60.2%	63%
By Telephone	20.3%	24.3%	21%
By Email	6.7%	5.5%	6%
In person	7.5%	3.7%	5%
By Letter	4.8%	6.3%	5%
By Appointment	0.2%	Less than 1 transaction	Less than 1 transaction

**5.6** The graph at paragraph 5.7 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), with a marginal decline in Qs 1 and 2 performance for Stage 2, Services need to do more to achieve 70% by the end of this financial year.

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



**5.8** Detailed information per Service around compliance within set timescales at both Stage 1 and Stage 2 is available at paragraphs 5.9 and 5.12 below. This includes information on the average time in working days taken at both Stage 1 and Stage 2 for complaint resolution.

## 5.9

<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>481</b> (595)	<b>192</b> (236)	<b>40%</b> (40%)	<b>12</b> (12)
<b>Care &amp; Learning</b>	<b>31</b> (36)	<b>16</b> (11)	<b>52%</b> (31%)	<b>13</b> (23)
<b>Chief Executive's</b>	<b>4</b> (4)	<b>3</b> (3)	<b>75%</b> (75%)	<b>6</b> (5)
<b>Corporate Resources*</b>	<b>90</b> N/A	<b>60</b> N/A	<b>67%</b> N/A	<b>7</b> N/A
<b>Development &amp; Infrastructure</b>	<b>31</b> (35)	<b>21</b> (16)	<b>68%</b> (46%)	<b>5</b> (6)
<b>Finance*</b>	<b>N/A</b> (109)	<b>N/A</b> (62)	<b>N/A</b> (57%)	<b>N/A</b> (6)
<b>Corporate Development*</b>	<b>N/A</b> (46)	<b>N/A</b> (26)	<b>N/A</b> (56%)	<b>N/A</b> (9)

NB Figures in () is the comparative data for the equivalent time period in 17/18.

\*N/A – Council / Service restructuring in 2017 means that some direct comparisons are not available.

**5.10** The Development and Infrastructure Service has achieved the set timescale of 5 working days to close Stage 1 complaints; while Chief Executive's and Corporate Resources Services are very close to meeting the target. The Care and Learning Service has made significant improvements here as well from 23 days to 13 whilst acknowledging there is still some distance to go.

**5.11** 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.

**5.12 Performance Against Timescales by Service – Stage 2**

<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>37</b> (40)	<b>25</b> (27)	<b>68%</b> (68%)	<b>18</b> (16)
<b>Care &amp; Learning</b>	<b>18</b> (14)	<b>8</b> (10)	<b>44%</b> (71%)	<b>21</b> (15)
<b>Chief Executive's</b>	<b>4</b> (0)	<b>2</b> (0)	<b>50%</b> (0%)	<b>24</b> (0)
<b>Corporate Resources*</b>	<b>13</b> (N/A)	<b>12</b> (N/A)	<b>92%</b> (N/A)	<b>12</b> (N/A)
<b>Development &amp; Infrastructure</b>	<b>36</b> (25)	<b>23</b> (14)	<b>64%</b> (56%)	<b>17</b> (18)
<b>Finance*</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>N/A</b>

	(9)	(8)	(89%)	(6)
<b>Corporate Development*</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>N/A</b>
	(5)	(3)	(60%)	(27)

NB Figures in ( ) is the comparative data for the equivalent time period in 17/18.

\*N/A – Council / Service restructuring in 2017 means that some direct comparisons are not available.

- 5.13** Service performance at Stage 2 has been maintained with the majority of Services either close to or exceeding the 20 day target. For some Services, the volumes of Stage 1 and 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.

## 6. Complaint Reasons

- 6.1** To drive further improvements around service delivery, it is important to analyse the reasons for customer complaints. Table 4 below sets out the 10 most common reasons why customers complained to the Council during the 6 month period to 30 September 2018 with comparison to the same period in 17/18.

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

### 6.3

Reason	Ranking		No. Complaints Received	
	2017/18	2018/19	2017/18	2018/19
Council Housing (including allocation of council housing, housing repairs etc.)	1	1	186	189
Land and Property (cross-Service)	10	2	32	108
Roads and Pavements (Pot holes, Street lighting etc.)	4	3	93	87
Rubbish and Recycling (Bulky uplift, bins for your home etc.)	2	4	160	84
Council Tax (Billing, Payments etc.)	3	5	98	75
Planning and Building Control (Planning permission, Pre planning Advice, etc.)	6	6	52	52
Schools (Catering etc.)	7	7	42	32
Parking and Car Parks	8	8	39	25
Public and Community Transport	*	9	*	16
Road Safety	*	9	*	16

\*Not within the 10 most common reasons for 2017/18

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

- 6.4** As highlighted in paragraph 5.1 there has been a significant decrease in the number of customer complaints received (19.6%). This is reflected in the complaint reasons above where there has been a significant drop in complaints about Rubbish and Recycling as an example. Further investigation around the significant increase in Land and Property suggests there is some work to be done around the broad range of category types that fall within this complaint reason.

**6.5** The reasons for complaints can also be influenced by seasonal activity including grass cutting, gritting and new initiatives, policy decisions and legislative changes. For example, the reduction in the volume of complaints received for Rubbish and Recycling can be attributed to the success of the garden waste renewal scheme.

## **6.6 Improving Performance – Factors**

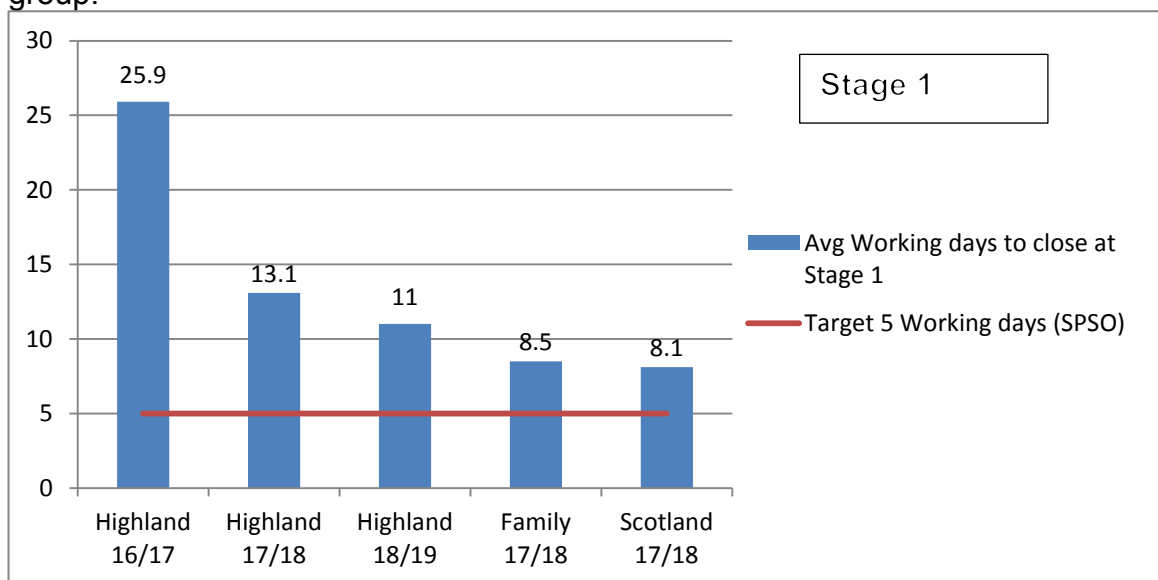
A combination of factors has influenced the overall improving Qs 1 and 2 position. This includes a reduction in the number of overall complaints received, and a closer focus on the complaints process and performance through the Corporate Complaints Improvement Group. A LEAN review of the complaints process has also been completed and has resulted in improvements to the website which has made it easier for customers to diagnose and differentiate between requests for service and complaints.

## **7. Benchmarking Performance**

**7.1** The Highland Council continues to participate 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.

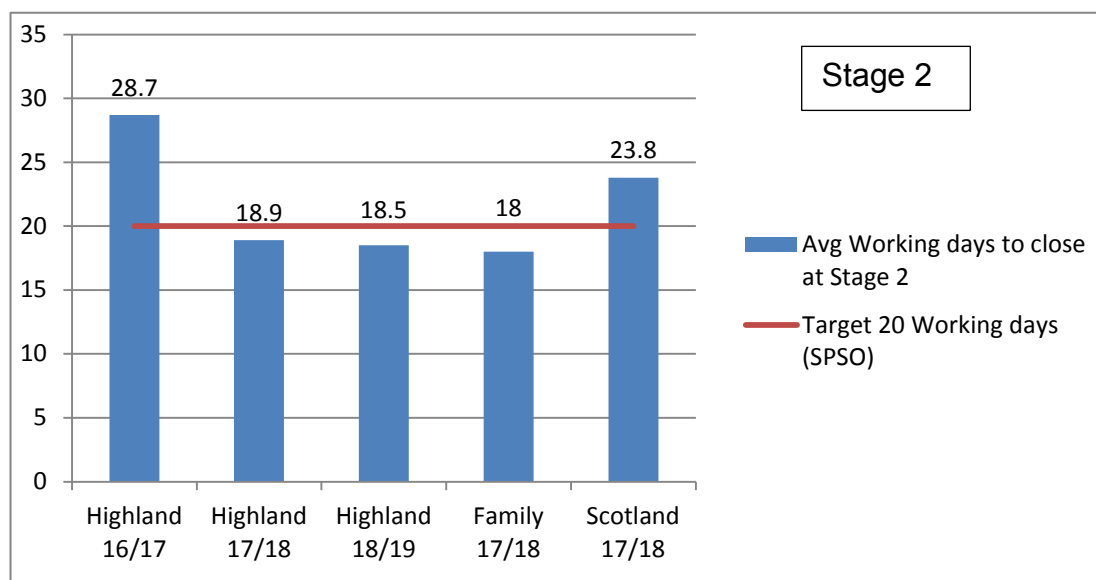
**7.2** It is important to note that while this is a valuable exercise there are some key differences that can impact on results. For example not all local authorities have retained their housing stock and some regard a first missed bin as a complaint whereas other local authorities treat such contacts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

**7.3** The chart below benchmarks the Council's 6-month 18/19 performance against the 17/18 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 2018. So while the Council has made further improvements during quarters 1 and 2 of the current financial year when compared with the annual performance for 17/18, it is not currently possible to benchmark this year's performance within the family group.



Note the 17/18 data used is for a full year.

- 7.4** The following chart benchmarks current 17/18 performance against the 17/18 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 17/18 data used is for a full year.

## 8. Implications

- 8.1** Resource: All Service Directors have put arrangements in place to ensure that the necessary available resources are available to prioritise complaints with the aim of achieving statutory and internal targets.
- 8.2** Legal: The Council participates in 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.
- 8.3** Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural): No known implications.
- 8.4** Climate Change/Carbon Clever: No known implications.
- 8.5** 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.
- 8.6** Gaelic: No known implications

Designation: Depute Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Resources

Date: 20 November 2018

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Background  
Papers:

- Audit and Scrutiny Committee papers June 2018 and November 2017

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.