

Agenda Item	13
Report No	AS/10/20

HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: Audit and Scrutiny

Date: 24 September 2020

Report Title: **Corporate Complaints Process**

Report By: Executive Chief Officer, Resources and Finance

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report provides an update for Members on the Council's corporate complaints performance for the period 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020 along with comparative data for the previous two years. A high-level analysis of the Council's 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 front-line resolution (Stage 1) has a reported annual improvement of +4.1%. There is a reported annual decrease in performance of -10.15% when an investigation is required (Stage 2) where the SPSO target is 20 working days.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are invited to:
- i. Scrutinise the Council's performance for Stage 1 (+4.1%) and Stage 2 (-10.15%) complaints;
 - ii. Reflect upon the volume of complaints received (1,726), which is a 21% increase when compared with the previous year;
 - iii. Recognise that the number of complaints received is a low volume at 1% within the context of the scale of the Council's citizen base and the scope of services provided;
 - iv. Support officers' continued participation in the Local Authority Complaint Handlers Network and;
 - v. Support the changes to the delivery model to bring together a corporate approach and drive performance improvement.

3. Implications

- 3.1 **Resource:** Executive Chief Officers have arrangements in place to prioritise complaints with the aim of achieving statutory and internal targets.
- 3.2 **Legal:** The Council's complaint process is fully compliant with the SPSO's statutory Stages 1 and 2 and Officers participate in the benchmarking undertaken in partnership with the SPSO.
- 3.3 **Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural):** Analyses and learning from complaints helps inform improvements in the design of our services and policies while supporting actions to mitigate inequalities and poverty, and to advance community engagement.
- 3.4 **Climate Change/Carbon Clever:** 72% of complaints were received and responded to via the website and by email thus reducing paper usage.
- 3.5 **Risk:** Complaints management is a critical component of the Council's overall approach to citizen and public 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.
- 3.6 **Gaelic:** No known implications

4. Background

- 4.1 All 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 mandatory complaint process 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.
- 4.2 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.'***
- 4.3 The Council's performance across these indicators for 2019/20 is submitted to the SPSO and will be published in a public-facing Annual Report.

5. Service Delivery Model

- 5.1 Executive Chief Officers (ECOs) are responsible for managing the performance of complaints for their respective Service and each Service has a Complaint Co-ordinator to engage with their respective Heads of Service so that complaints are allocated,

prioritised and resolved appropriately. The Complaints Co-ordinators are key members of the Corporate Complaints Improvement Group.

- 5.2 The Corporate Complaints Improvement Group, chaired by the Head of Revenues & Customer Services, met on a regular basis during 2019/20. The remit of this group was to proactively share leading practices in order to consistently achieve quality and timely responses to complaints received across the Council. The rich learning from complaints was shared by the Group and used by Executive Chief Officers, and their teams, to improve front line services, to help mitigate inequalities and poverty, and to advance engagement with our communities.
- 5.3 Sponsored by the Head of Revenues & Customer Services, a review of the existing Customer Relationship Management IT system commenced during 2019/20. The project deliverables aim to implement an IT system that supports the Council's ambition to advance digital delivery and further meet the expectations of our citizens, elected members and our workforce. This included progressing work to identify the Council's business requirements and to assess the capabilities of available software and their fit with these business requirements. This project is being taken forward by the Head of Performance & Resources, Communities and Place, following corporate responsibility for complaints transitioning in February 2020.
- 5.4 With the move to the new ECO structure, a paper was presented at Communities and Place Committee on 19 August 2020. This paper outlines changes necessary to improve the Council's performance in relation to enquiries, complaints, Freedom of Information requests, Subject Access Requests, and MP/MSP contacts. It also sets out work underway to replace the Council's ICT system for managing citizen relationships. The report can be accessed at the following link.

[Approach to developing and improving citizen and citizen contact and relationships](#)

6. Current Performance

- 6.1 For the 12-month period 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020, the Council received a total of 1,726 complaints (1,424 2018/19) which is +21% increase on the previous year.
- 6.2 Table 1 below provides a breakdown of the number of complaints received per Service for 2019/20 with comparative data for the same period for 2018/19, 2017/18 and 2016/17. Policy and legislative changes, together with seasonal, social, economic and other external factors throughout the year, influence the volume of complaints received.
- 6.3 With the exception of the Development & Infrastructure Service, all Services experienced an increased volume of complaints during 2019/20.
- 6.4 During 2019/20 there were 171,542 (188,867 for 2018/19) citizen contacts logged in the Council's Customer Relationship Management system (CRM) with 1% of CRM contacts being citizen complaints. This is a decrease of 17,325 (-9%) of citizen contacts compared to 2018/19.

Table 1 Service	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Community Services	1,175	1,586 (+26%)	921 (-42%)	1,079 (+17%)
Corporate Resources**	N/A	N/A	175	313 (+78%)
Finance**	139	234 (+41%)	N/A	N/A
Care & Learning	130	141 (+8%)	152 (+7%)	182 (+20%)
Corporate Development**	97	73 (-25%)	N/A	N/A
Development & Infrastructure	118	123 (+4%)	123 (0)	102 (-17%)
Chief Executive's	17	13 (-24%)	22 (+41%)	33 (+50%)
*Awaiting Service Validation	5	25 (+80%)	31 (+19%)	17 (-45%)
Totals	1,681	2,195 (+23%)	1,424 (-35%)	1,726 (+21%)

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

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

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

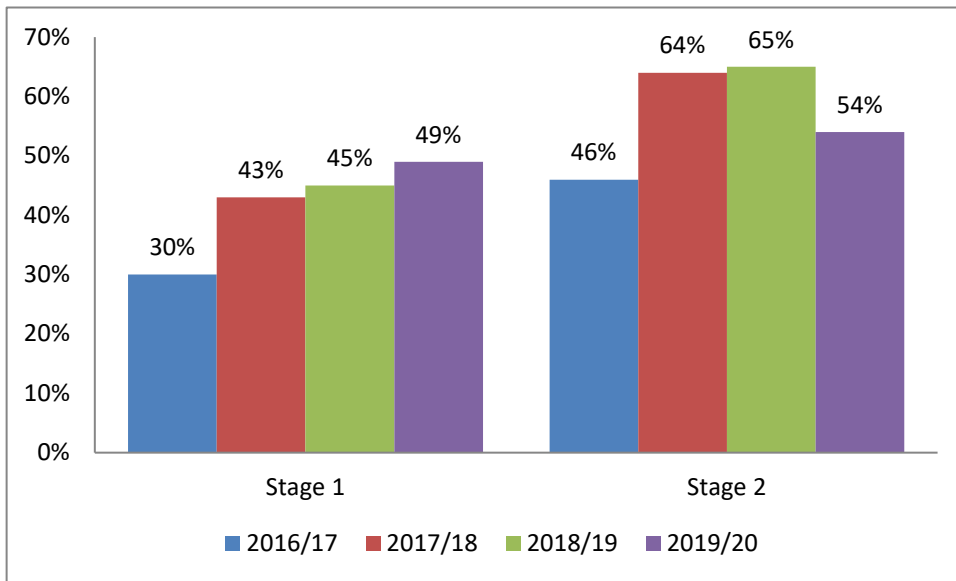
6.5 Citizens' preference for making a complaint continues to be self-serve through the Council's website, with 62% of complaints logged this way. When combined with email channel, 72% of complaints are received via a digital channel as seen in table 2 below; a 6.9% increase in digital engagement when compared with 2018/19. Citizens who choose to engage digitally with the Council's complaints process receive email responses which provides for quicker delivery timescales than traditional methods. This channel shift has seen the greatest movement away from postal complaints (-3.1%).

6.6

Table 2: Citizen Complaint Channels					
	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	% change
By Website	59%	65.4%	57.4%	62%	+4.6%
By Telephone	21.8%	21.5%	23.8%	22%	-1.8%
By Email	6.8%	4.8%	7.7%	10%	+2.3%
By Letter	6%	5.2%	6.1%	3%	-3.1%
In Person	5.7%	3%	4.9%	3%	-1.9%
By Appointment	<1%	<1%	<1%	0	-

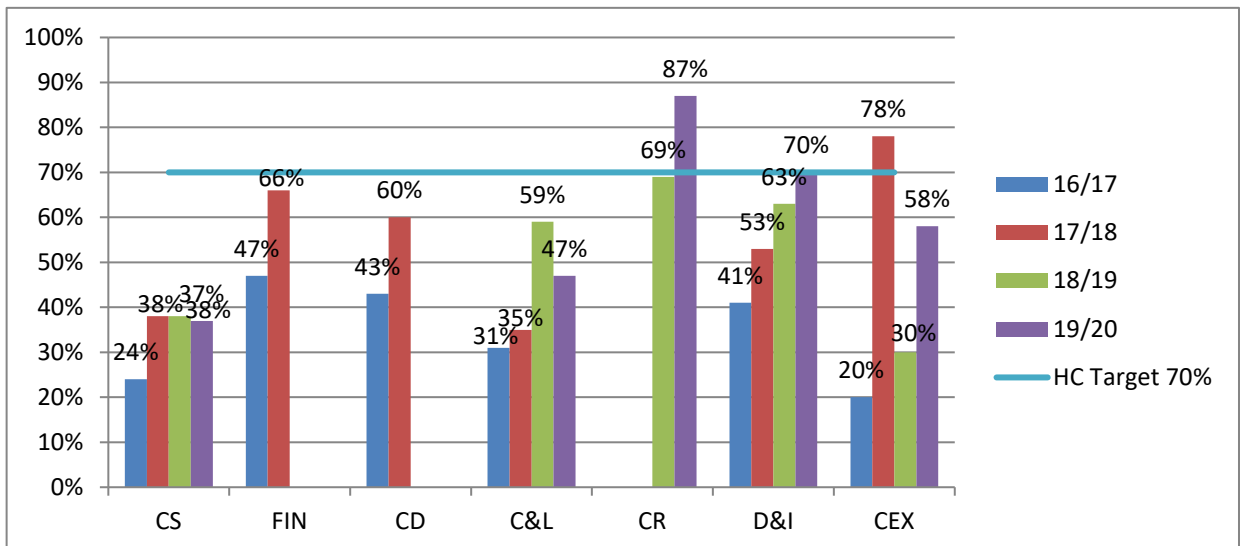
6.7 Council performance on the number of complaints handled within the 5 working day target set by the SPSO at front-line resolution (Stage 1) has improved to 49.54%; an increase of +4.1% on the comparative period in 2018/19. There is a reported decrease in performance to 54.55% (-10.15%) for complex complaints (Stage 2) where the SPSO target is 20 working days.

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



6.9 Information per Service around compliance within set timescales at both Stages 1 and 2 is available below in paragraphs 6.10 and 6.13. Further detailed information including the average time in working days taken at both Stages 1 and 2 for complaint resolution per Service is provided at **Appendix 2** to this report.

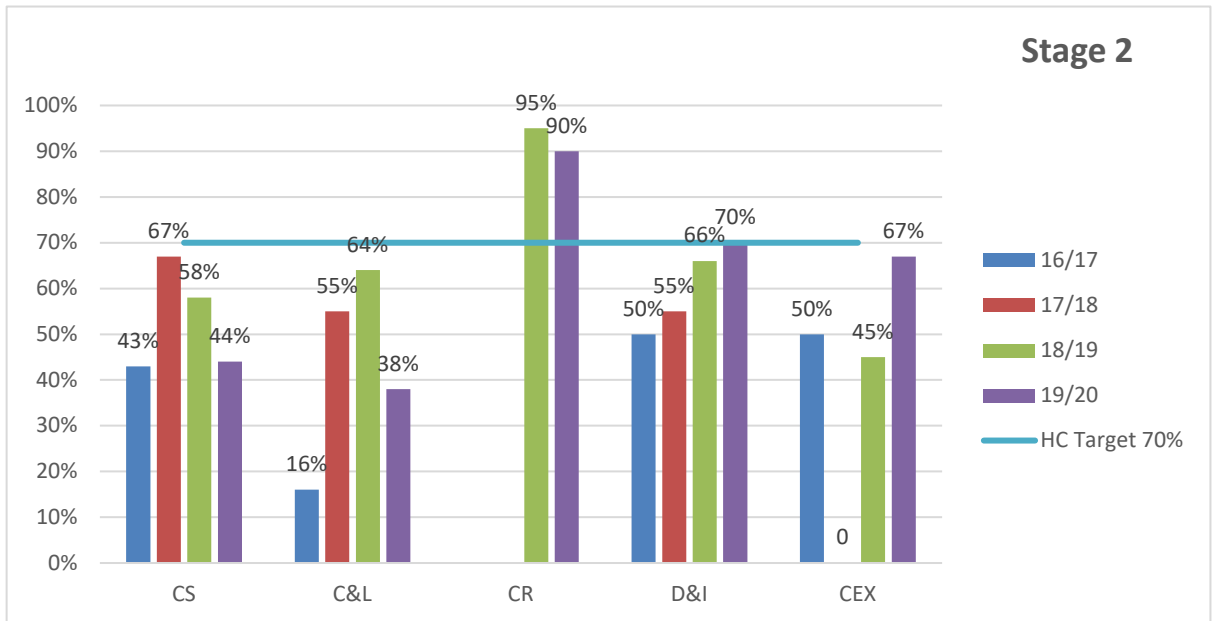
6.10 Stage 1 performance by Service measured against the corporate target of 70% is provided in the following graph.



6.11 Most Services improved on the average working days to close a complaint at Stage 1 with the Development & Infrastructure Service achieving the corporate target of 70%

and the Corporate Resources Services exceeding the corporate performance target at 87%.

- 6.12 Some complaints are dealt with by Services and Schools in real-time and are therefore not recorded in CRM. As a result, these positive turnaround times are not reflected in the Council’s reported performance.
- 6.13 Stage 2 performance by Service measured against the corporate target of 70% is detailed below.



- 6.14 Performance at Stage 2 needs more attention to achieve the corporate target. Where a complaint spans more than one Service, it is reported under the Chief Executive column in the bar chart, and as can be seen shows significant improvement. As with Stage 1, the Development & Infrastructure Service has achieved the 70% corporate target and the Corporate Resources Service has exceeded the corporate target by 20%, having achieved 90% performance.
- 6.15 It is important to recognise that some complaints can be very complex and as such the investigation may require a period longer than the 20-day target to be fully investigated and for a comprehensive response to be provided to the complainant.

7. Complaint Reasons

- 7.1 To drive further improvements into service delivery, the reasons for complaints are analysed and learning is shared, as this enables Services to focus on insightful feedback from our citizens. The following table in paragraph 7.2 sets out the 10 most common reasons why citizens complained to the Council during 2019/20.

7.2

Reason	Ranking				No. Complaints Received			
	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Council Housing (including allocation of council housing, housing repairs etc.)	1	2	1	1	336	366	366	386
Roads and Pavements (Pot holes, Street lighting etc.)	2	1	2	2	224	391	161	235
Land and Property	>10	3	3	3	*	284	144	187
Service Income	*	*	*	4	*	*	*	163
Rubbish and Recycling (Bulky uplift, bins for your home etc.)	3	4	5	5	210	228	125	147
Schools (Catering etc.)	>10	7	6	6	*	101	106	107
Council Tax (Billing, Payments etc.)	9	5	4	7	90	182	136	102
Planning and Building Control (Planning permission, Pre-planning Advice, etc.)	8	6	7	8	94	104	91	72
Childcare and Family care	*	*	*	9	*	*	*	37
Parking and Car Parks	6	9	8	10	97	59	40	32

*Not within the 10 most common reasons for 2016/17, 2017/18 or 2018/19

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

While Council Housing has remained in the top 2 reasons for complaints over the past four years it should be noted that the Council currently has 14,000 tenants with a further 8,000 on waiting lists.

8. Benchmarking Performance

- 8.1 The Highland Council participates in quarterly meetings of the Local Authority Complaint Handlers Network (LACHN) which is operated 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 & Bute, Dumfries & Galloway and Aberdeenshire.
- 8.2 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.

- 8.3 The 2019/20 performance for Scotland and the family groups had not been published at the time of writing this report and as a result benchmarking the Council's performance with the Scottish position and with those in the family group has not been possible.
- 8.4 Officers will continue to work as part of The Local Authority Complaints Handlers Network to share and gain best practices to improve performance and to inform service design. As detailed at paragraph 5.4 above, a paper was presented at Communities and Place Committee on 19 August 2020, which outlined changes necessary to improve the Council's performance including in relation to complaints and sets out work underway to replace the Council's ICT system for managing citizen relationships.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer, Resources & Finance

Date: 24 September 2020

Authors: Sheila McKandie, Head of Revenues and Business Support; and
Jane Ross, Acting Citizen Service Delivery Manager

Background Papers:

- Audit and Scrutiny Committee papers June 2019 and November 2019
- SPSO Benchmarking Data 18/19

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.	Citizen Satisfaction Survey.
8.	Outlining improvements to services or procedures as a result of the consideration of complaints.

Performance by Service

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	792 (801)	293 307)	37% (38%)	17 (13)
Corporate Resources	241 (153)	210 (105)	87% (69%)	4 (6)
Care & Learning	104 (86)	49 (51)	47% (59%)	14 (8)
Development & Infrastructure	44 (57)	31 (36)	70% (63%)	4 (7)
Chief Executive's	24 (10)	14 (3)	58% (30%)	14 (11)

NB Figures in () is the comparative data for the equivalent time period in 2018/19.

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	233 (79)	103 (46)	44% (58%)	36 (25)
Corporate Resources	70 (22)	63 (21)	90% (95%)	10 (11)
Care & Learning	63 (55)	24 (35)	38% (64%)	34 (17)
Development & Infrastructure	57 (65)	40 (43)	70% (66%)	22 (17)
Chief Executive's	6 (11)	4 (5)	67% (45%)	13 (30)

NB Figures in () is the comparative data for the equivalent time period in 2018/19.