

Agenda Item	8
Report No	AS/28/21

HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: Audit & Scrutiny

Date: 25 November 2021

Report Title: Corporate Complaints Performance Monitoring

Report By: Executive Chief Officer, Communities & Place

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report provides performance information on complaints for the period 1 April 2021 to 30 September 2021, along with comparison data for 20/21.
- 1.2 Over this period complaints represent 0.3% of all customer contact recorded.
- 1.3 Corporately there is an improvement in meeting timescales for handling complaints with 67.2% of frontline and 81.8% of investigation complaints closed within timescale in Q2. Whilst these are encouraging performance figures and an improvement on Q1 (from 54.1% and 61.7% respectively) it demonstrates the ongoing work required to improve on performance and achieve sustained improvement.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are invited to:
- 2.2
 - i. Scrutinise the Councils 6-monthly complaint performance for frontline and investigation complaints under the Model Complaints Handling Procedure
 - ii. Note the continued and significant improvement in performance in Q2 across the Council corporately
 - iii. Continue to support the Council in handling complaints by signposting their constituents to the most appropriate channel for their query or complaint - https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/591/council_and_government/535/customer_services

3. Implications

- 3.1 Resource implications
Prior to March 2020 Customer Services Officers were based within individual services, they have now been brought together to form a corporate team with a new team leader, focussing on a consistent approach with first contact customer resolution. The plan to take this approach was [reported](#) to the Committee in August 2020. Good progress and improved outcomes have been achieved since then. As we move to develop performance indicators including target setting these must be linked to resource availability and benchmarking.
- 3.2 Legal implications
The Council's complaint process is fully compliant with the SPSO's statutory front-line resolution and complex investigation complaint processes and Officers participate in the benchmarking undertaken in partnership with the SPSO.
- 3.3 Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural) implications
Analyses and learning from complaints help inform improvements in the design of our services and policies. Improving performance in contact with our citizens and customers is part of our approach to improving engagement and openness with our communities across Highland.
- 3.4 Climate Change / Carbon Clever implications
85% of complaints were received and responded to via digital channels which reduces paper usage and printing which helps contribute to reducing our carbon footprint.
- 3.5 Risk implications
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. Arrangements in place via the central team in the Communities & Place Service to prioritise complaints and Freedom of Information (FOI) enquiries and achieve statutory targets. Weekly performance reports are circulated for senior management monitoring and intervention.
- 3.6 Gaelic implications
There are no new implications arising from this report.
- 4. Overview**
- 4.1 Complaints handling is managed by the Customer Resolution & Improvement Team, part of the wider Customer Services Team within the Communities and Place Service. They manage all complaints, together with all Freedom of Information Requests, MSP/MP Correspondence, Subject Access Requests under GDPR, CEX/ECO customer correspondence, and compliments received by the Council.
- 4.2 After agreement at Communities and Place Committee on [19 August 2020](#) the model for managing complaints was changed from a service based delivery to a corporate model in 2020/21. Previous reports to the Audit and Scrutiny Committee on [17 June 2021](#) provided Annual Performance for 20/21 and an update on the work of the team. The recent report to the Communities and Place Committee on [31 August 2021](#) provided the full annual report and further information on the performance of the Customer Resolution & Improvement Team and future activity.
- 4.3 The Council follows the 2 Stage Model Complaints Handling Procedure (MCHP) laid down by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO), a copy of the Highland

version can be found [here](#) – the key emphasis of this document is quality and customer care and how we manage our relationships with our customers and citizens.

- 4.4 On receipt of a complaint the Customer Resolution & Improvement Team assess it according to the MCHP. Many complaints received are often first requests for service, appeals, or other administrative processes, rather than complaints and are moved into the correct channel for action. Complaints validated are managed as either a frontline (response within 5 working days for less complex complaints) or an investigation (response within 20 working days for more complex cases). Complaints do not have to move through both stages, if on initial assessment the matters are deemed complex, they will be moved to the investigation stage and the customer informed accordingly.
- 4.5 Complaints can be extended at frontline to 10 working days, but only in *exceptional* circumstances. No frontline complaint should go over 10 working days and if it does it is escalated to an investigation complaint for oversight and signature of the relevant Head of Service or ECO. Equally an investigation complaint can be extended past the 20-working day deadline, it is rare to do so but these require very detailed investigation. In Q1 we extended only 8 cases, and none were extended in Q2. The SPSO expects the customer to be kept informed at all stages.
- 4.6 The Council continues to participate in quarterly meetings of the Local Authority Complaints Handlers Network (LACHN), operating in partnership with the SPSO. Benchmarking activity has been developed in recent years, with Highland part of a family group which includes Shetland, Orkney, Western Isles, Scottish Borders, Argyle & Bute, Dumfries & Galloway and Aberdeenshire councils. The data is based on 8 performance indicators as detailed at **Appendix 1**.

5. Corporate Performance

- 5.1 For the period 1 April 2021 to 30 September 2021, the Council received 622 complaints, a 29% increase on the previous year (482 over the same period in 20/21). The pattern and scale of complaints has been affected by Covid last year and this year.
- 5.2 Due to the pandemic in 20/21 and subsequent lockdown periods, complaints considerably dropped in number and this increase in complaints is to be expected for 21/22.

Appendix 2 provides a breakdown of complaints received per Service for the above period.

- 5.3 For Q1 and Q2 there were 188,052 customer transactions reported via the Councils CRM system, this is an 84% increase across all processes from the same period in 2019/20 (101,929).

Complaints were 0.9% of all contact in 2019/20 (Q1 and 2) and 0.33% of all contact in 2020/21 (Q1 and 2).

These figures include all customer contact across the new system, either logged by the customer, or on their behalf by Customer Services staff, and include all transactions as a result of COVID including additional forms created to support

services delivering services, community support assistance and support, and business support grants.

- 5.4 There is an overall improving trend across the Council to meet the timescales laid down by the SPSO. The closure of frontline complaints against timescales has shown an improvement in Q2, despite an increase of nearly 18% on Q1.

A key target for the team is to improve on the for the full year corporate figures of 20/21 which were 54.1% for frontline and 68.7% for investigation closed within their respective 5 and 20 working day timescales.

Appendix 3 details the performance of both frontline and investigation complaints in Q1 and Q2.

- 5.5 To continue with improvement, the Customer Resolution & Improvement Team are committed to ensuring customers are dealt with quickly and smoothly. Where customers complain at frontline and the team can respond, often with a quick phone call, they do so. Where they allocate a case to a Service, they build up relationships with colleagues to ensure the best outcome for the customer.
- 5.6 It is acknowledged there is much more to do to improve performance and achieve consistency, not just with timescales but with the quality of responses, the development of investigators complaint handling skills and to influence culture and change in the organisation.
- 5.7 The focus on quality underpins the work of the Customer Resolution & Improvement Team, and responses are consistently spot checked to meet standards. The aspect of quality and corporate standards will inform future online training to be rolled out to all staff in 21/22.

6 **Complaint Outcomes**

- 6.1 The MCHP which was adopted by the Council in April 2021 introduced the outcome of **resolved**, to complement the existing three outcomes of upheld, partially upheld, and not upheld. The SPSO aims for Local Authorities to seek a resolution with the customer at every opportunity, and a complaint can be resolved at any point in the process. The definition of resolved is when the “complaint is closed to the customer and the Council’s mutual satisfaction”.
- 6.2 Early indicators show the Council has been able to resolve many complaints to the customer and Council’s satisfaction with **Appendix 4** providing the detail for Q1 and Q2.
- 6.3 Further analysis is underway to establish how successfully the outcome of resolved is being used. A key guide to this are the numbers of complaints which are resolved and do not involve any further escalation.

7. **Complaint Subjects and Improvement**

- 7.1 To drive improvements, it is essential we understand the reasons customers complain and focus resource on reducing complaints in these areas where common themes are identified. **Appendix 5** details the most complained about subject matter in Q1 and Q2 to date, with the focus on the functions rather than the Services

of the Council which received the most complaints. Complaints are categorised are per the Council structure paper of [13 May 2021](#).

7.2

With the introduction of the new CRM system in January 2021, the way in which we present the subjects most complained about has changed, and previous comparison ranking is not possible. The functionality of the older CXM system and how complaints were categorised was confusing and not detailed. The new CRM system allows us to drill down to Service and function. The team have been working with Services to ensure the recording of this detail is as accurate as possible, and further functionality is being explored with our colleagues in the Web and User Experience Team to report to a specific area or team.

7.3

The focus of the Customer Resolution and Improvement Team in its first year has been on functions of the Council where there were higher volumes of complaints – waste complaints often relate to policy decisions on recycling, higher after lockdown as customers returned to recycling centres, roads complaints have included customer frustration with Council process, and as the Council currently has 14,000 tenants with a further 8,000 households on waiting lists, complaints about housing repairs and management of tenancies are often high in number. The team continue to engage with staff in these functions to drive forward improvements. This includes reviewing existing online forms, providing more information to frontline Customer Services, and reviewing back-office functions so the customer can be responded to quicker. Sometimes a small change on the website or in a process will make a large difference in the volume of complaints received.

7.4

The complaints webpage has been developed and made more user friendly, with customers finding this easier to make a complaint. This is due, in part, to the SPSO who has asked all Local Authorities to publish an email address in addition to their online forms, to make it easier for customers to submit a complaint. Customers have started to use this channel which is received directly by the team. Work has also been undertaken with colleagues in the Web and User Experience team to ensure Google searches direct customers to the most appropriate point on our website.

8

Looking Forward

8.1

The Customer Resolution and Improvement team are committed to driving performance enhancement and will be piloting the Council's new approach to self-assessment in January, using the Public Services Improvement Framework (PSIF).

8.2

The SPSO has revised its KPI requirements with a draft version provided to the LACHN group. The focus will be on 5 mandatory quantitative indicators and 3 optional qualitative indicators which focus on training of the organisation, how to engage with vulnerable groups and customer satisfaction. It is the intention to deliver all 8 KPI's and discussions are ongoing to progress this. This will be subject to future performance reporting.

8.3

As part of the implementation of the MCHP a new Corporate Complaints Group will meet for the first time in Q3. All Services have been asked to identify a key member of staff in their service, who has an interest and responsibility for complaint handling and/or customer contact. The focus of this group will be to examine best practice, identify common themes and implement lessons learnt.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer – Communities & Place

Date: 9/11/21

Author: Angela Morrison, Customer Resolution & Improvement Team
Leader

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 Frontline and Investigation 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.

Appendix 2

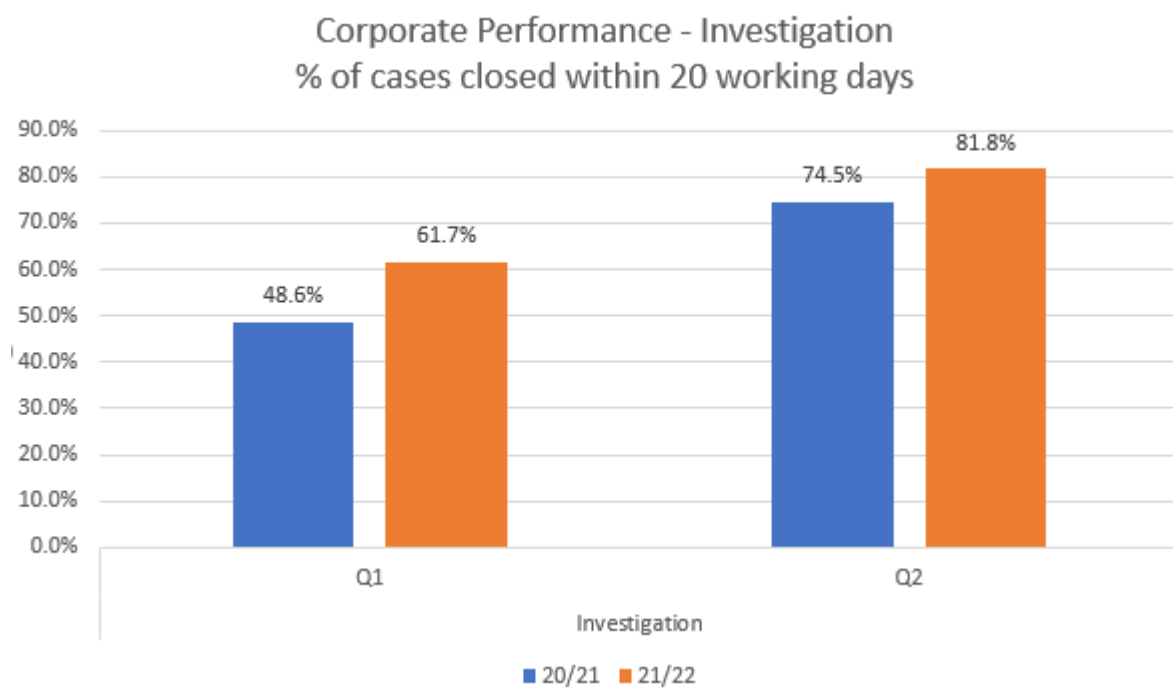
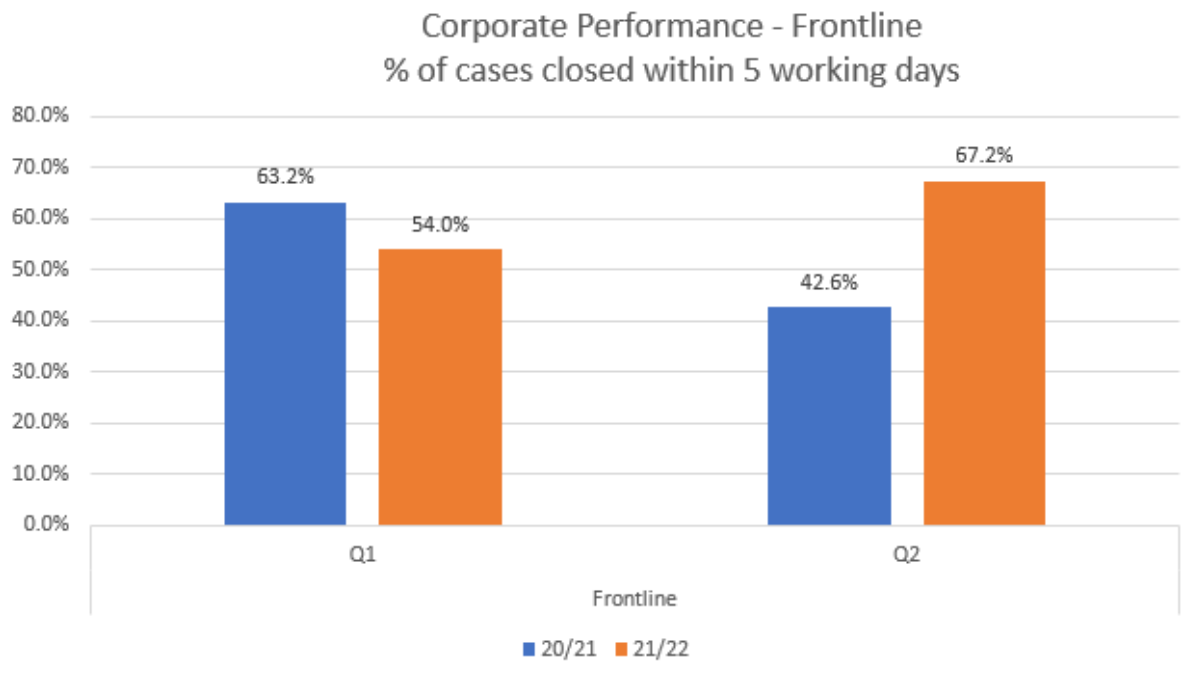
Service*	**20/21	21/22
Communities & Place	160	187
Education & Learning	27	35
Health & Social Care	11	23
Infrastructure, Environment & Economy	99	155
Performance & Governance	2	6
Property & Housing	140	150
Resources & Finance	42	60
Transformation	1	0
No Service Allocated***	0	6
Totals	482	622

***Please note comparisons with years prior to 2020/21 is not available due to Council/Service restructuring.**

****Figures for 20/21 are set against the background of service restructuring, some complaint may be categorised by their old service structure i.e., Economy was under Transformation and Economy for some of the year**

*****No Service Allocated is due to the complaint still being open on the system at the time of writing this report**

Appendix 3



Appendix 4

Complaint Outcomes

	Q1	Q2
Stage 1		
Upheld	3.5%	4.26%
Partially Upheld	0.5%	1.70%
Not Upheld	13%	10.21%
Resolved	82.5%	83.83%
Stage 2		
Upheld	2.13%	4.55%
Partially Upheld	14.89%	4.55%
Not Upheld	17.02%	36.36%
Resolved	65.96%	54.55%
Escalated		
Upheld	10.53%	3.57%
Partially Upheld	7.89%	14.29%
Not Upheld	21.05%	21.43%
Resolved	57.89%	60.71%

Appendix 5

Functions where more than 10 complaints have been received in rank order

Function	Number	New Ranking
	Q1 & 2 20/21	
Waste Management/Waste Strategy	93	1
Roads	84	2
HRA (Management Of Council Housing)	65	3
In-House Building Maintenance Team	63	4
Taxation*	31	5
Grounds Maintenance**	27	6
Revenues	25	7
Planning	24	8
Car Parking	23	9
Public Conveniences	22	10
Customer Services	16	
Children's Services: Social Care	15	
Schools – Other	13	
Property Maintenance	11	
Environmental Health	10	
Fleet	10	

*Taxation and Revenues were previously ranked together

**Grounds Maintenance and Burials were previously ranked together