

Annual Complaints Performance Report 2019/2020

Valuing Customer Feedback

Listening * Open * Valuing * Improving * Supporting * Partnering * Delivering
Èisteachd * Fosgailte * Luach * Leasachadh * Taic * Com-pàirteachas * Libhrigeadh

Ambitious

Sustainable

Connected

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Executive Summary

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.'

The principles that underpin the Council's values include that we will be fair, open and accountable. Elected members were advised that a public-facing Annual Report would be published, and I am pleased to present our 2019/20 report.

In December 2018 Elected members agreed an overarching new vision for the Highlands. This is that the Council will be "ambitious for a sustainable and connected Highland" and will support its communities in this goal.

This report gives us the opportunity to share our complaints management performance with you. Key Performance Indicators are set across all Scottish Councils by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman. In our report, we will provide you with detail on how we performed against these indicators and how we used this information to monitor trends and patterns in complaints and the actions that we have taken to embed improvements in our processes.

We are committed to providing high quality services. Sometimes, as a customer you may feel that the service you received has fallen below the Council's standards. When this happens, we want to understand the situation, fix any issues quickly and learn from them.

Report Headlines

Customer preference to make complaints through the Council's website continues to increase, with 62% logged this way thus avoiding paper and therefore providing positive climate impacts.

Most complaints (73.7%) are received and resolved at Frontline and did not require an Investigation. We reasonably concluded on that basis that most customers were satisfied with the way that we responded to their complaints.

The average number of days taken to respond to Frontline complaints has increased from 11.5 days in 2018/19 to 13.3 days in 2019/20. These are complaints that do not require an investigation.

The number of Frontline complaints handled within the 5 working day target set by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman has improved to 49.54%, an increase of +4.1% on the comparative period in 2018/19. There has however been a reported decrease in performance to 54.55% (a decrease of -10.15%) at Investigation where the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman target is 20 working days.

Our analysis of complaints has enabled The Highland Council to deliver service improvements and identify various initiatives to further improve our performance and customer satisfaction levels.

Further information relating to our performance is provided in more detail below. The Highland Council will continue to monitor complaints performance to inform how we design and deliver our services for the people of the Highlands within available resources.

Liz Denovan
Executive Chief Officer – Resources & Finance

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Report Context

At the Council's Audit and Scrutiny Committee of 24 September 2020 a report was presented to elected members providing them with an update on the Council's corporate complaints process for the period 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020. A high-level analysis of the Council's complaints handling performance per Service was also provided.

You can find the report [here](#)

As background and for some perspective, the Highland Council serves approximately 235,000 people across 26,484 sq. km.

Customer enquiries, requests for service and complaints are recorded on our customer relationship management system. For context there were **171,542 transactions in 2019/20** (188,867 during 2018/19) of which **1,726** (1%) were customer complaints. This is a **decrease of 17,325** (-9%) of customer contacts compared to 2018/19.

During 2019/2020 The Highland Council delivered a wide range of functions through 5 Services. These are detailed in Appendix 1 to this report.

All Scottish Councils operate a complaints management process which provides for complaints to be considered as **Frontline resolution** (Frontline- normally less complex) and where an **Investigation** is required (Investigation - 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 Frontline resolution before progressing to Investigation. When a complaint is received, Services diagnose in accordance with the framework the appropriate stage according to the nature of the complaint.

Frontline. Straightforward issues that are easily resolved, requiring little or no investigation. This could mean an on-the-spot apology, explanation or other action to resolve the complaint within 5 working days.

Investigation. For issues that have not been resolved at the frontline or that are complex or require a detailed examination before we can state our position. We aim to provide a definitive response is provided within 20 working days following a thorough investigation of the points raised.

Where customers are dissatisfied with our decision following an Investigation, they can ask the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman to consider their complaint further.

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Scottish Public Services Ombudsman Annual Performance Indicators

The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman has established **8 performance indicators** which are used by local authorities to monitor complaints and to benchmark their performance with other local authorities which are similar in scale and demography.

These are set out below together with The Highland Council's annual performance for 2019/20.

Note: As a consequence of COVID-19 the Local Authority Complaint Handlers Network (LACHN) has been unable to collate Scottish Local Authority national average data for 2019/20.

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Indicator 1

The total number of complaints received per thousand of population.

This indicator records the total number of complaints received by The Highland Council in the period 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020. To allow for a fair comparison across all 32 Scottish councils, the number of complaints per 1,000 of population is used.

For The Highland Council there were 7.3 complaints logged per 1,000 of population during 2019/20 as compared to 6.1 complaints logged per 1,000 of population during 2018/19.

	The Highland Council 2016/17	The Highland Council 2017/18	The Highland Council 2018/19	The Highland Council 2019/20
Population Estimate	232,910	234,770	235,180	235,540
Complaints Per 1,000	7.2	9.3	6.1	7.3

For the 12 month period 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020 the Council received a total of **1,726 complaints** (1,424 2018/19) which is a **21% reported increase** on the previous year.

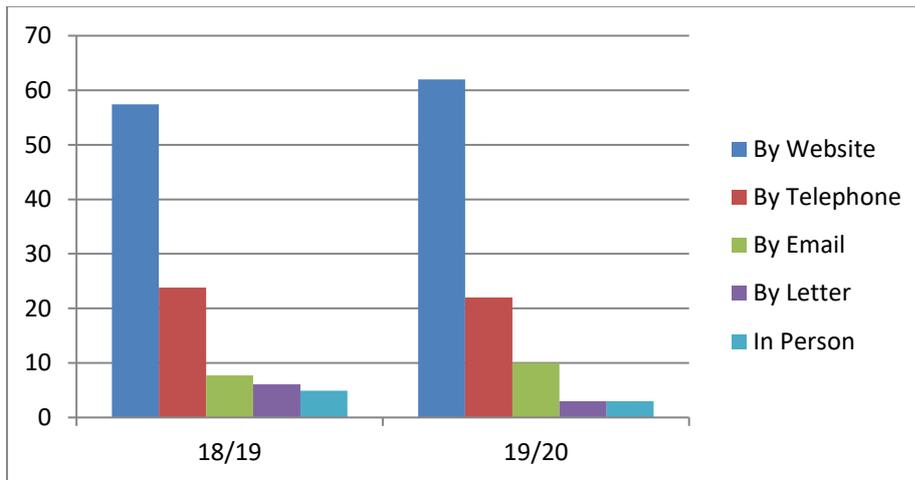
Policy and legislative changes, together with seasonal, social, economic and other external factors throughout the year, influence the volume of complaints received.

With the exception of the Development & Infrastructure Service, all Services experienced an increased volume of complaints during 2019/20.

Customer 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**, a 6.9% increase in digital engagement when compared to 2018/19, thus supporting the Council's environmental commitments.

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%).



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Indicator 2

Complaints closed at Frontline and Investigation as a percentage of all complaints closed.

The term 'closed' refers to those complaints where a response has been provided for the customer and at the time no further action is required (regardless of whether it is Frontline or Investigation and whether any subsequent action takes place).

This indicator provided information on the number of complaints closed at Frontline, Investigation and those Frontline complaints that have been closed and subsequently progress to Investigation.

	The Highland Council % of all cases closed 2016/17	The Highland Council % of all cases closed 2017/18	The Highland Council % of all cases closed 2018/19	The Highland Council % of all cases closed 2019/20
Closed at Frontline	88.7	90.6	82.7	73.7
Closed at Investigation	11.3	5.9	12.6	22.7
Closed after progression from Frontline to Investigation	N/A	3.5	4.7	3.5

There were **1,634 complaints closed** during 2019/20, 1,205 (73.7%) at Frontline, 371 (22.7%) at Investigation and 58 (3.5%) after progression from Frontline to Investigation.

Most of our complaints are received and resolved at Frontline; however there has been a **decrease of 9%** of total complaints being resolved at this stage compared to 2018/19 whilst those being resolved at Investigation have increased by 10.1%.

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Indicator 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.

There is a requirement for a formal outcome to be recorded for each complaint. The Highland Council applies the following formal outcomes; complaint upheld, complaint partially upheld and complaint not upheld. Performance figures for 2019/20 are below along with 2018/19, 2017/18 and 2016/17 for comparison.

The Highland Council	Upheld	Partially Upheld by	Not Upheld
Frontline 2016/17	375 (25.2%)	273 (18.3%)	842 (56.5%)
Frontline 2017/18	498 (26.5%)	431 (22.9%)	953 (50.6%)
Frontline 2018/19	284 (25.7%)	256 (23.1%)	567 (51.2%)
Frontline 2019/20	250 (20.7%)	256 (21.2%)	699 (58.0%)
Investigation 2016/17	42 (22.1%)	33 (17.4%)	115 (60.5%)
Investigation 2017/18	20 (16.3%)	38 (30.9%)	65 52.8%
Investigation 2018/19	30 (17.8%)	50 (29.6%)	89 52.7%
Investigation 2019/20	65 (17.5%)	104 (28.0%)	202 (54.4%)

All Council Services continue to analyse the types of complaints that are upheld, and partially upheld to establish whether there is a requirement to improve processes, address training needs or amend policies or procedures to reduce complaint recurrence and improve customer satisfaction. Examples of applying this best practice can be found in the [Key Performance Indicator 8](#).

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Indicator 4

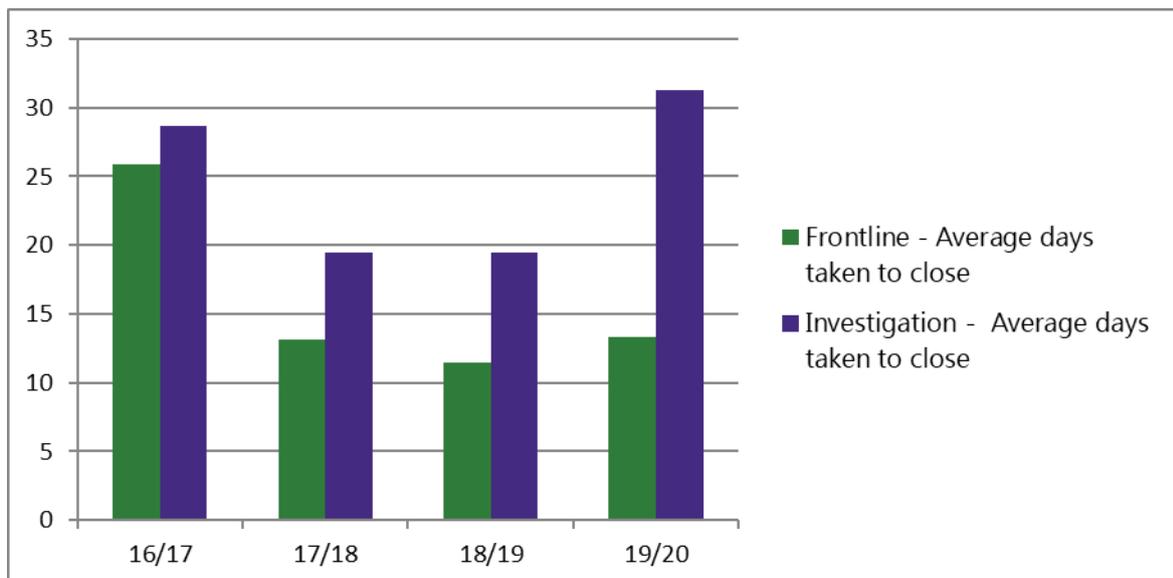
The average time in working days for a full response to complaints at each stage.

The Council aims to respond to **Frontline** complaints within **5 working days** and an **Investigation** complaint within **20 working days**.

The average number of days taken to respond at **Frontline** has moved from 25.9 days in 2016/17, 13.1 days in 2017/18, 11.5 days in 2018/19 and 13.3 days in 2019/20.

We recognise that The Highland Council's performance for the number of days taken to close a Frontline complaint has slipped from 2018/19 and we need to further improve this indicator. Initiatives which will improve our performance are detailed under [Indicator 8](#).

The average number of days taken to respond to **Investigation** complaints in 2019/20 was **31.3 days**.



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Indicator 5

The number of complaints which were closed in full within the set timescales of 5 working days and 20 working days.

This indicator reports the number and percentage of complaints at each stage which were closed in full within the set timescales of 5 and 20 working days, including cases where an extension to the timescales has been agreed.

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Closed at Frontline Resolution within 5 working days	453 (30.4%)	802 (42.6%)	502 (45.4%)	597 (49.5%)
Closed at Investigation within 20 working days	88 (46.3%)	78 (63.8%)	109 (64.7%)	234 (63.1%)
Closed after progression within 20 working days	N/A	55 (75.3%)	39 (61.9%)	40 (69.0%)

Council performance on the number of Frontline complaints managed within the 5 working day target set by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman has improved to **49.5%**, an increase of **4.1%** on the comparative period in 2018/19. There has been a slight decrease in Investigation performance to **63.1%** (a decrease of **1.6%**) where the SPSO target is 20 working days.

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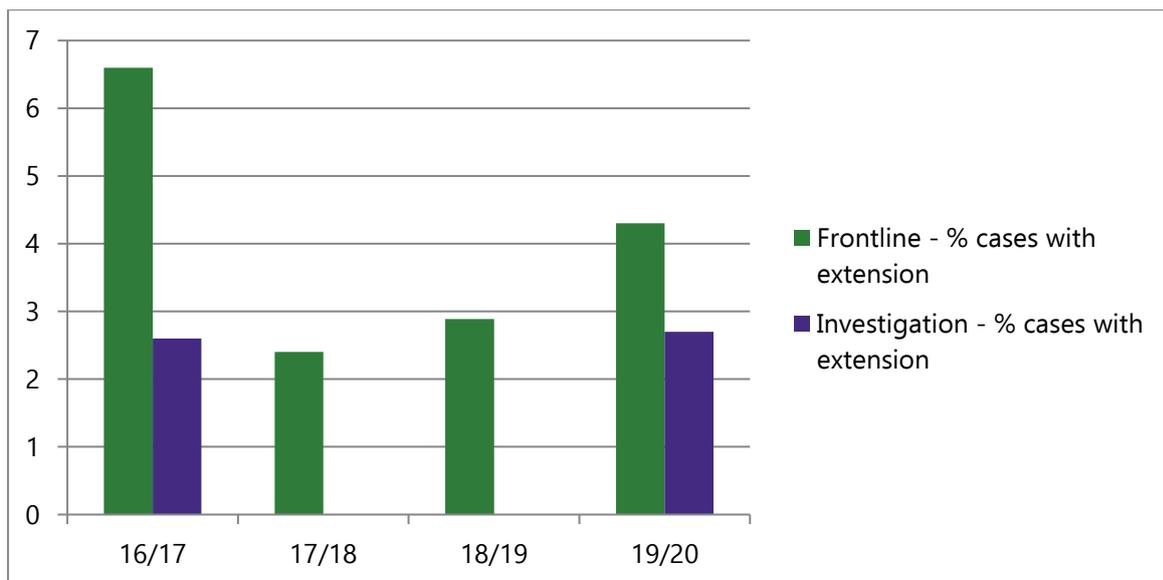
Indicator 6

The number and percentage of complaints at each stage where an extension of 5 or up to 20 days timelines have been authorised.

52 (4.3%) Frontline complaints (32 during 2018/19) were authorised with a 5 day extension.
10 (2.7%) Investigation complaints were authorised with an extension up to 20 working days.

With agreement from the customer we can apply an extension when it is deemed absolutely necessary due to the complexity of the issue.

Extension to Investigation complaints are by exception and are generally approved by Executive Chief Officers. We will continue to challenge our Frontline performance for extending the number of days to resolve these complaints. Our aim is to further reduce the number of instances when extensions are necessary.



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Indicator 7

The Complaints Handling Procedure followed by the Council requires us to report on customer satisfaction with the complaints service provided. An annual survey of performance and attitudes is conducted with specific questions on complaint management and performance.

Levels of Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction	2013 %	2014 %	2015 %	2016 %	2017 %	2018 %	2019 %
Very Satisfied	8	10	14	8	13	4	8
Fairly satisfied	20	20	19	26	12	19	23
Total of Very + Fairly satisfied	28	30	33	34	25	23	31
Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	25	18	14	18	29	22	20
Fairly dissatisfied	24	22	26	29	19	26	15
Very dissatisfied	24	30	27	19	27	29	34
Total of Very + Fairly dissatisfied	48	52	53	48	46	55	49

This demonstrates that those surveyed are less satisfied with the service they received when making a complaint to the Council. Initiatives which will improve customer satisfaction levels with the complaints service provided are detailed under [Indicator 8](#).

Respondents were also asked: "If you were dissatisfied with how a complaint was handled, please identify the reasons by selecting all that apply."

Reason for dissatisfaction	2013 %	2014 %	2015 %	2016 %	2017 %	2018 %	2019 %
Outcome	66	54	58	55	34	52	33
Quality of response	44	59	49	48	55	48	39
Timescale	42	41	28	34	39	29	39
Complaint partially responded to	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	27	14
Complaint process	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	16	14
Other	6	4	35	19	35	12	21

This tells us that the quality of response and timescale are the most common reason for customer dissatisfaction.

Over the last year The Highland Council also received compliments and comments for the services provided. The following are a small sample of the compliments received during 2019/20. It is important to recognise that excellent services are being delivered and that improvement actions are being progressed to deliver continuous improvement for this important activity within the Council.

The Golspie Branch of the Royal British Legion Scotland would like to thank the staff involved in keeping our War Memorial Garden so neat and tidy over the years and helping us attain a first place in this year's RBL Highlands & Islands Area competition for the Best Kept Memorial and Garden Small Community category. Please could someone pass on our most sincere gratitude to all staff involved. Thank you!

"I simply cannot thank you enough for the way this has been impeccably handled and our situation being fully taken into consideration "
[Burials]

"I would like to inform you that we recently completed a 2 week tour of Scotland of the Highlands and also the north coast 500. We used several toilet facilities on the West coast which were absolutely immaculate and the lady toilet attendant who had 11 premises on her route from Achmelvich was a fabulous person and a delight to talk to. She gave us lots of tips and was so friendly. She is a credit to the area and I wanted to ensure management were aware of this compliment."

"Would like it noted that I highly regard the council staff. In all my dealings with them have found staff to be very courteous, efficient and friendly. They work very hard in the current climate due to cutbacks which must be very stressful"

"Feels the bin refuse team do a fantastic job and never has any issues with them. He wished to pass on his thanks as he felt it was perhaps a job whereby they would not hear that as much as they should"

"Work was completed by a joiner called Xxxxx. Xxxxx was absolutely brilliant, left me to get on with my book while he completed all the jobs with no disturbance or mess"

"Today I have had a joiner out to fix my front door, it's a person I have had here a few times now and always delivers excellent service. He is polite, courteous, and does a good job."

"I would like to say a massive thank you to the teachers and staff at our local primary school. I've seen, and rightly so, people thanking nurses and other services facing frontline with Covid-19 but not many mention our wonderful teachers who not only are dealing with their own emotions, colleagues but dealing with our children's emotions. (The school) have been fantastic and I'm so proud of them for the measures and support they are giving to everyone!"

"To the community payback team. Sending my heartfelt thanks for a job well done. Thank you for your help tidying and preparing my garden for Spring. It was a job beyond my capabilities and thanks to your team myself and my son can look forward to a summer in a garden that is no longer overgrown and unmanageable"

"I have seen your staff out [repairing potholes] in the most foul weather recently, and I take my hat off to them"

"XX has been an enormous help in arranging my financial entitlements, enabling welfare support and for providing me with helpful ongoing updates. XX has been incredible."

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Indicator 8

Outlining improvements to services or procedures as a result of the consideration of complaints

This qualitative indicator is intended to detail service improvements that were derived from complaints during the reporting period. We use information from complaints to change or improve our services.

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.

Since October 2017 complaint coordinators from each Service have been participating in our Corporate Complaints Improvement Group chaired by the Head of Revenues and Customer Services. Our remit 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.”

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.

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.

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](#)

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Complaints investigated by the Scottish Public Service Ombudsman (SPSO)

When a customer is not satisfied with our final response to a complaint, they can ask the Scottish Public Service Ombudsman to investigate their complaint. The Scottish Public Service Ombudsman is the final arbiter for complaints about public services.

At our Audit and Scrutiny Committee of 26 November 2020, elected members were presented with a report which set out the number and types of complaints relating to the Council that have been considered by the SPSO in 2019/20 and the subsequent judgements in the cases where the Scottish Public Sector Ombudsman's inquiry has concluded. Our report also provided a comparison with the Council's performance in 2018/19.

53 cases relating to The Highland Council were considered by the SPSO in 2019/20, **5 less** than in the previous year. Of those, **only 3** were taken forward for full investigation, **1** was **fully upheld** and **1 partially upheld**.

The number of **premature cases has fallen from 25.9% to 20.8%** in the same period, showing improved performance over the year and indicates that we have improved our signposting to ensure customers know how to make and escalate a complaint if they are dissatisfied with the Council's performance.

The full report can be found [here](#)

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Conclusion

Customers are at the centre of our service delivery. We focus on listening to our customers and use their feedback to make changes so that we can deliver improvements.

This report demonstrates how we continue to make use of our Complaints Management Procedure and our Corporate Complaints Improvement Group to achieve continuous improvements.

In the current climate, there can be challenges facing local authorities around service delivery and achieving positive results around complaints. The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman's Complaints Improvement Framework contributes to a sound understanding of the effectiveness of our overall complaints handling arrangements.

We use this Framework to assess how our organisation manages complaints, how accessible our complaints procedure is and the effectiveness of our governance and monitoring arrangements. We continue to review and to challenge our processes in order to deliver quality services within our overall budget.

If you have any queries relating to this report, please contact:

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Appendix 1 – Main Service functions

During 2019/2020 The Highland Council delivered a wide range of functions through 5 Services. The Council is currently transitioning to a new organisational structure.

	Main service functions
Chief Executive's Office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Policy and Reform Ward Management Corporate Leadership Support Communications and Resilience Office Corporate Governance Freedom of Information and Data Protection Redesign
Care and Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children's Health and Social Care Education Additional Support Needs Criminal Justice Social Work Mental Health Officers Out of Hours Social Work
Community Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Housing Road Maintenance Waste Management Community works Cleaning Transport Facilities Management Environmental Health Emergency Planning Harbours Street Lighting
Corporate Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Corporate Audit and Performance Corporate Finance and Commercialism Revenues and Customer Services People and ICT
Development and Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planning and Building Standards Catering, Cleaning and Facilities Management Capital Projects Housing Development Economic Development Europe Environment Assets

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