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| Agenda Item | 10       |
| Report No   | AS/12/19 |

## HIGHLAND COUNCIL

**Committee:** Audit and Scrutiny

**Date:** 13 June 2019

**Report Title:** **Corporate Complaints Performance Report**

**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 2018 to 31st March 2019 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 frontline resolution (Stage 1) has a reported annual improvement of +2.8%. There is a reported annual increase in performance of +0.9% when an investigation is required (Stage 2) where the SPSO target is 20 working days. Overall the performance for Stage 1 has increased by +15% since 1<sup>st</sup> April 2017 and +18.4% for Stage 2.

### 2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are invited to:
- i. Scrutinise the Council's continued improving annual performance for Stage 1 (+2.8%) and Stage 2 (+0.9%) complaints;
  - ii. Recognise the Council's continued improved performance since 2017, +15% for Stage 1 and +18.4% at Stage 2;
  - iii. Note that 65% of complaints were received via a digital channel (website and email) supporting the corporate digital agenda;
  - iv. Note that the number of complaints received is a low volume at 1% within the context of the scale of the Council's customer base and the scope of services provided;
  - v. Support officers continued participation in the Local Authority Complaint Handlers Network;
  - vi. Recognise the positive contribution the cross-Service Complaint's Co-ordinators group is making to national policy/guidance set by the SPSO;
  - vii. Be aware of the positive impact the cross-Service Complaints Co-ordinators'

- group is having on the improving performance within Services and the Council's overall performance; and
- viii. Note the implementation of the outcomes from the LEAN review.

### **3. Background**

- 3.1 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.'*
- 3.2 All Scottish Councils must operate a complaints handling process which provides for complaints to be considered as frontline 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 frontline 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.
- 3.3 The Council's performance across these indicators for 2018/19 is submitted to the SPSO and will be published in a public-facing Annual Report. Although Officers aim to publish the report in August 2019, the timing is reliant on the data for the family group and Scotland wide being produced by the external Local Authority Complaint Handlers Network.

### **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. The Complaints Co-ordinators are key members of the Corporate Complaints Improvement Group and have successfully improve the performance of complaints for their respective Services.
- 4.2 The Corporate Complaints Improvement Group chaired by the Acting Head of Revenues and Customer Services meet on a regular basis. The remit of this group is to proactively share leading practices and lessons learned in order to consistently achieve quality and timely responses to complaints received across the Council. Collectively, the group is continually challenging existing processes and implementing improvements on an ongoing basis.

### **5. Current Performance**

- 5.1 For the 12 month period 1<sup>st</sup> April 2018 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019 the Council received a total of 1,424 complaints (2,195 2017/18) which is a significant -35% reported decrease on the previous year. Further detail on this decrease can be found in paragraphs 5.4 and 5.5.

5.2 Table 1 below provides a breakdown of the number of complaints received per Service for 2018/19 with comparative data to the same period for 2017/18 and 2016/17.

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

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

5.3 During 2018/19 there were 188,867 (210,563 17/18) customer contacts logged in the Council's Customer Relationship Management system (CRM) with 1% of CRM contacts being customer complaints. This is a decrease of 21,696 (-10.3%) of customer contacts compared to 2017/18 with the main decrease (85.4%) attributable to complaints, general enquiries, road maintenance and missed bin reports.

5.4 Members are reminded that for 2017/18, there was an overall increase of 23% in complaints which was mainly attributable to budget decisions. As referred to in paragraph 5.1, there are a number of drivers influencing the 35% reduction in complaints during 2018/19, including fewer complaints relating to budget decisions.

5.5 Community Services has seen a significant reduction in the volume of complaints reported including those relating to seasonal Council activity and improved weather conditions (eg extreme cold weather conditions prevailed during 2017/18).

5.6 Customer preference for making a complaint continues to be self-serve through the Council's website, with 57% of complaints logged this way. When combined with email channel, 65% of complaints were received via a digital channel.

5.7

| <b>Table 2: Customer Complaint Channels</b> |                |                |                |                 |
|---|----------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------|
|   | <b>2016/17</b> | <b>2017/18</b> | <b>2018/19</b> | <b>% change</b> |
| By Website                                  | 59%            | 65.4%          | 57.4%          | -8%             |
| By Telephone                                | 21.8%          | 21.5%          | 23.8%          | +2.3%           |
| By Email                                    | 6.8%           | 4.8%           | 7.7%           | +2.9%           |
| By Letter                                   | 6%             | 5.2%           | 6.1%           | +0.9%           |
| In Person                                   | 5.7%           | 3%             | 4.9%           | +1.9%           |
| By Appointment                              | <1%            | <1%            | <1%            | 0               |

5.8

It is noted that website usage has decreased when compared with 2017/18. This is mainly attributable to a reduction in the types of complaints that are typically made via the website. For example, there have been notable reductions in complaints relating to road maintenance and waste.

5.9

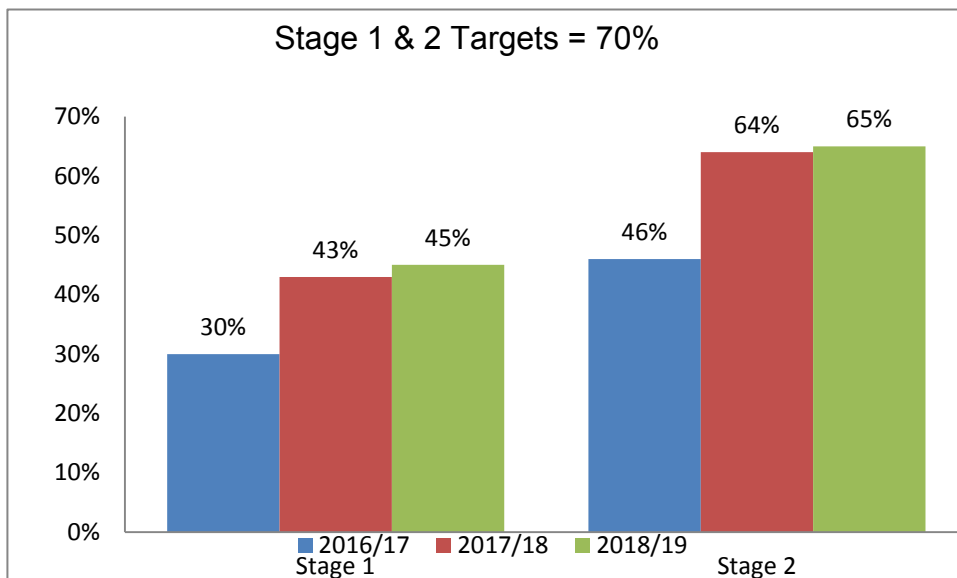
Council performance on the number of complaints handled within the 5 working day target set by the SPSO at frontline resolution (Stage 1) has improved to 45.4%; an increase of +2.8% on the comparative period in 2017/18 (+15% 2016/17). There has also been a gradual increase in performance to 64.7% (an increase of +0.9%; +18.4% 2016/17) for complex complaints (Stage 2) where the SPSO target is 20 working days.

5.10

The graph at paragraph 5.11 demonstrates the overall improving trend across the Council to achieve the internal 70% target of resolving frontline complaints within 5 working days and complex complaints within 20 working days. While further improvement has been made on frontline complaints, more work still needs to be done to achieve the 70% target for 2019/20. In contrast, Services' performance of complex complaints is much closer to target. Work is ongoing with Services to ensure that complaints are appropriately categorised at point of receipt.

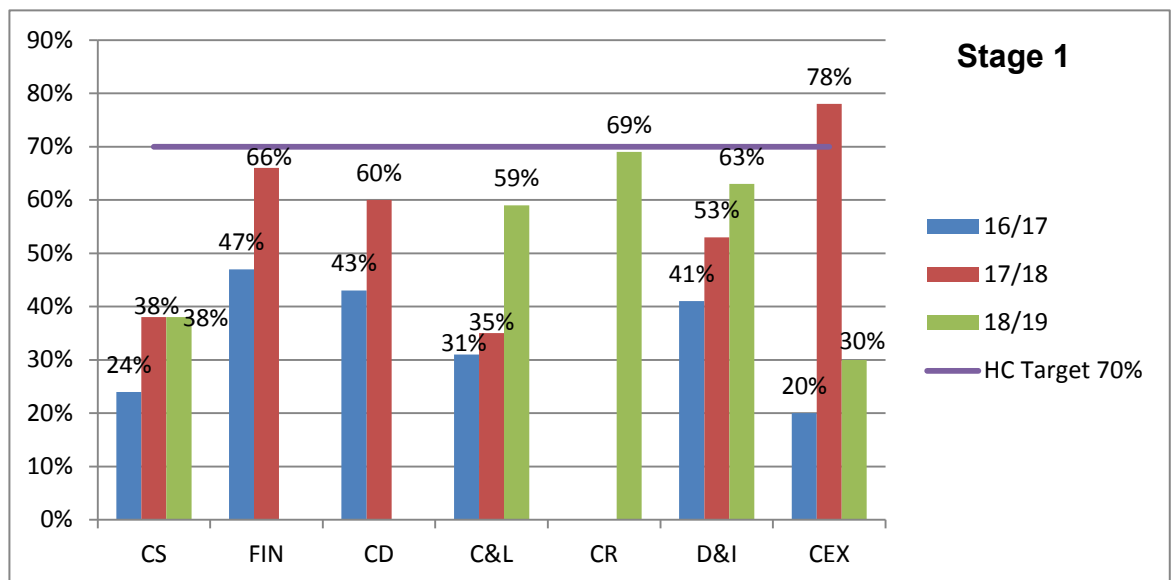
5.11

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



5.12 Information per Service around compliance within set timescales at both frontline resolution (Stage 1) and complex cases requiring investigations (Stage 2) is available below in paragraphs 5.13 and 5.16. Further detailed information, including the average time in working days taken, for complaint resolution per Service can be found in **Appendix 2** to this report.

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



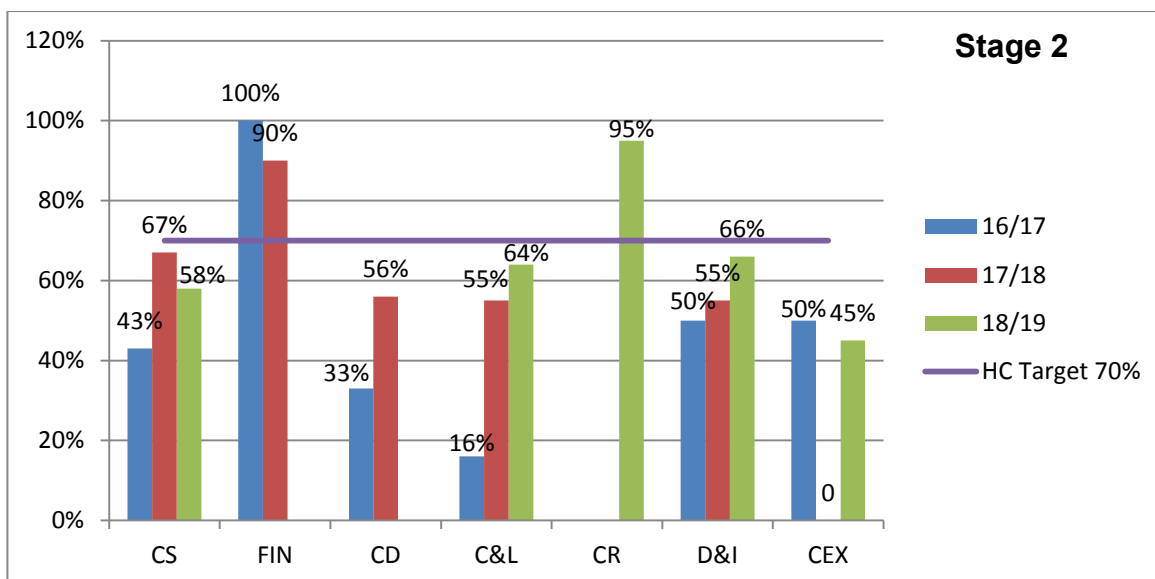
5.14 Most Services have improved on the average working days to close a complaint at frontline resolution. Due to the service restructure in late 2017 there is no comparative data for CR (Corporate Resources Service). Performance reported for the Chief Executive’s Service includes cross-service complaints and Service-specific complaints that are being centrally co-ordinated.

5.15 Some complaints are dealt with by Services and Schools in real time and are not therefore recorded in CRM. As a result, these real-time resolutions are not reflected in the reported performance.

5.16 Performance of complex complaints, by Service, measured against the internal target of 70% is detailed below at paragraph 5.18.

5.17 There have been good performance improvements within the Care & Learning and Development & Infrastructure 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.

5.18



## 6. Complaint Reasons

6.1 To drive further improvements into service delivery, the reasons for complaints are analysed as this enables Services to focus on high demand and to consider how further improvements can be achieved. The following table in paragraph 6.2 sets out the 10 most common reasons why customers complained to the Council during 2018/19.

6.2

| Reason  | Ranking |         |         | No. Complaints Received |         |         |
|---|---------|---------|---------|-------------------------|---------|---------|
|   | 2016/17 | 2017/18 | 2018/19 | 2016/17                 | 2017/18 | 2018/19 |
| Council Housing (including allocation of council housing, housing repairs etc.) | 1       | 2       | 1       | 336                     | 366     | 366     |
| Roads and Pavements (Pot holes, Street lighting etc.)                           | 2       | 1       | 2       | 224                     | 391     | 161     |
| Land and Property   | >10     | 3       | 3       | *                       | 284     | 144     |
| Council Tax (Billing, Payments etc.)  | 9       | 5       | 4       | 90                      | 182     | 136     |
| Rubbish and Recycling (Bulky uplift, bins for your home etc.)                   | 3       | 4       | 5       | 210                     | 228     | 125     |
| Schools (Catering etc.)   | >10     | 7       | 6       | *                       | 101     | 106     |
| Planning and Building Control (Planning permission, Pre-planning Advice, etc.)  | 8       | 6       | 7       | 94                      | 104     | 91      |
| Parking and Car Parks   | 6       | 9       | 8       | 97                      | 59      | 40      |
| Road Safety   | >10     | >10     | 9       | *                       | *       | 31      |
| Public and Community Transport  | >10     | >10     | 10      | *                       | *       | 24      |

\*Not within the 10 most common reasons for 2016/17 or 2017/18.

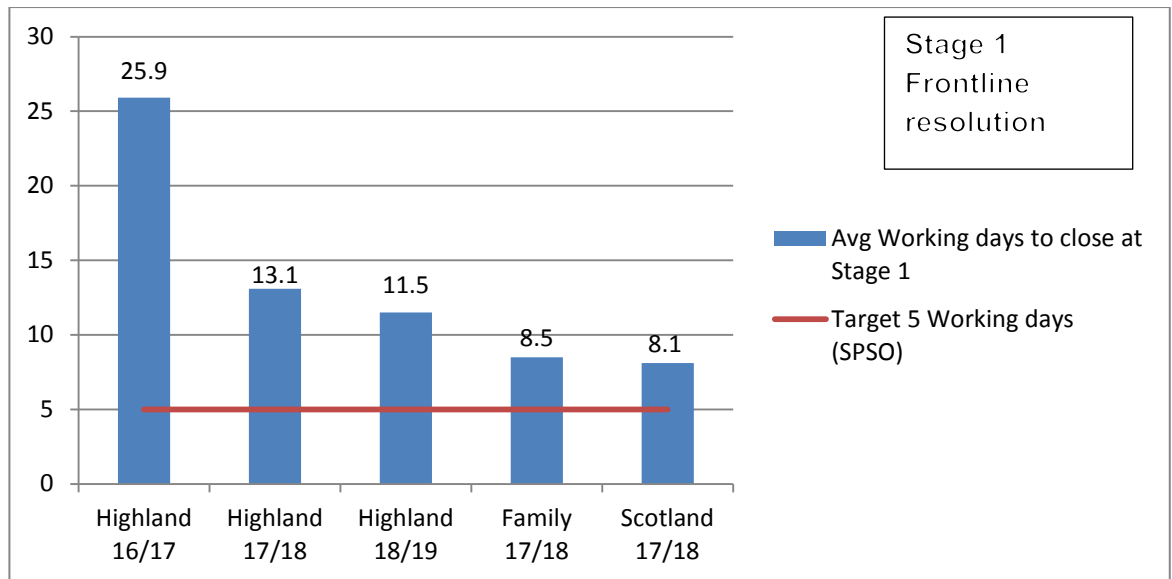
NB 1 equals the largest volume of complaints and is based on annual data.

- 6.3 While council housing has remained in the top 2 reasons for complaints over the past three years, this is within the context that the Council currently has 14,000 tenants with a further 8,000 on the waiting list. For 2018/19 the level of complaints received equates to 2.5 complaints per 100 homes as compared to 3.3 complaints per 100 homes for all Scottish Local Authorities in 2017/18. (The Scottish average for 2018/19 was not available at time of writing this report.)
- 6.4 In 2017/2018 there was an increase in the number of complaints received relating to Council Tax matters. This was primarily in response to budget decisions, e.g. the removal of the 10% second home discount, implementing a 200% charge on long term empty properties and the increase in Council Tax (including the Scottish Government multiplier increase for band D to F properties). During 2018/2019 the Council still received complaints on these issues, however not to the same degree.

## 7. **Benchmarking Performance**

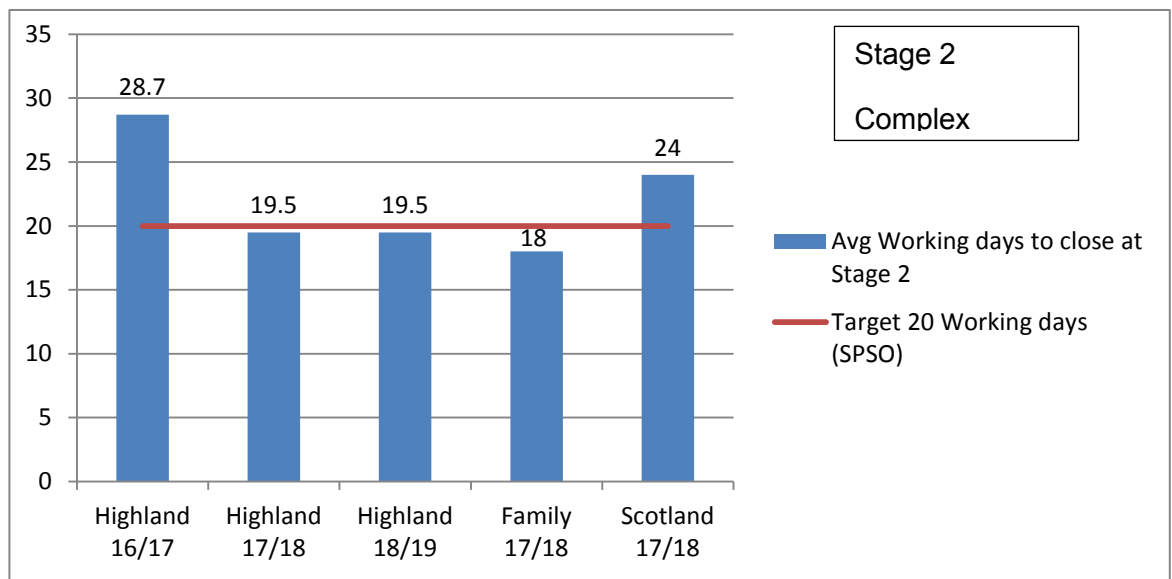
- 7.1 The Highland Council participates in quarterly meetings of the Local Authority Complaint Handlers Network (LACHN) which is run in partnership with the SPSO. A key outcome of this group has been the development of benchmarking family groups. Benchmarking data is based on the 8 performance indicators 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.
- 7.3 The chart below at paragraph 7.5 benchmarks the Council's 2018/19 performance against the 2017/18 annual performance of the Council, the LACHN family group and the Scottish local authority average for average working days taken to close a complaint categorised as frontline resolution. The 2018/19 performance for the family group and Scotland had not been published at the time of writing this report.
- 7.4 This demonstrates that the Council has continued to improve performance of frontline complaints whilst acknowledging that there is still some work to be done to achieve the Family and Scotland wide performance.

7.5



7.6

Paragraph 7.7 sets out current 2018/19 performance against the 2017/18 annual performance of the Council, the LACHN family group and the Scottish Local Authority average for average working days taken to close those complaints assessed as being complex.



7.7

The focus and commitment of the Council's dedicated Complaints Co-ordinators in each of the Services continues to deliver performance within the 20 days statutory target and can be considered favourably when compared with both Family and Scotland performance for 2017/18.

## 8. Improving Performance

8.1

A LEAN review of the complaints process was completed during 2018/19 with the main actions 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 5.11; and
- increase frontline resolution and improve customer satisfaction with the resolution of complaints.

8.2 Redesign work was carried out on the Council website page 'How To Make a Complaint' with the primary aim being to enable customers to quickly and easily navigate to the relevant process for their purposes. The redesigned page went live on 2 August 2018 and has resulted in 432 fewer cases having to be reassigned to the appropriate process (eg, report or request a service). In doing so, manual intervention by Services has reduced and customers are accessing the correct channel at first point of contact.

8.3 Increased performance of frontline resolution was also identified as a key priority. Throughout the year there were activities that could be more proactively managed by ensuring frontline workers had relevant and up to date information to hand on areas that were likely to generate potential frontline resolution (Stage 1) complaints. For example, enhanced complaint guidance for winter maintenance and road conditions has been successful.

8.4 The Corporate Complaints Improvement Group will continue to identify and implement improvements with the aim of further improving the service for customers.

## 9. **SPSO Consultation**

9.1 In early January 2019 members of the Corporate Complaints Improvement Group met to consult on a review of the current model complaints procedure being led by the SPSO. The group enthusiastically discussed a series of questions posed in regards to the current procedure and a comprehensive response from the Council was submitted prior to the SPSO's deadline. It is understood that the SPSO is working through all responses received and a final report is scheduled by March 2020.

9.2 The SPSO's new Support and Intervention Policy came into place on 1 April 2019. This policy formalises the mechanisms already in use to offer support to organisations and take intervention when required. It sets out how organisations can expect to hear from the SPSO in the course of a complaint being considered by them, and what the SPSO expects from organisations. The policy can be found at: <http://www.valuingcomplaints.org.uk/support-and-intervention-policy>

## 10. **Implications**

10.1 **Resource:** 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.

10.2 **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.

- 10.3 **Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural):** No known implications
- 10.4 **Climate Change/Carbon Clever:** No known implications
- 10.5 **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.
- 10.6 **Gaelic:** No known implications

Designation: Depute Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Resources

Date: 30 May 2019

Authors: Sheila McKandie, Acting Head of Revenues & Customer Services;  
Moira Grant, Customer Service Delivery Manager; and  
Jane Ross, Senior Business Support Officer

Background Papers:

- Audit and Scrutiny Committee papers June and November 2018
- SPSO Benchmarking Data 17/18

**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><br>The number and percentage of complaints at Stage 1 which were closed in full within the set timescales of 5 working days. |   |  |                                       |                                       |
|---|---|--|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <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>801</b><br>(1,439)                       | <b>307</b><br>(552)                        | <b>38%</b><br>(38%)                   | <b>13</b><br>(14)                     |
| <b>Corporate Resources</b>  | <b>153</b><br>(N/A)                         | <b>105</b><br>(N/A)                        | <b>69%</b><br>(N/A)                   | <b>6</b><br>(N/A)                     |
| <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>86</b><br>(95)                           | <b>51</b><br>(33)                          | <b>59%</b><br>(35%)                   | <b>8</b><br>(21)                      |
| <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>57</b><br>(72)                           | <b>36</b><br>(38)                          | <b>63%</b><br>(53%)                   | <b>7</b><br>(6)                       |
| <b>Chief Executive's</b>  | <b>10</b><br>(9)                            | <b>3</b><br>(7)                            | <b>30%</b><br>(78%)                   | <b>11</b><br>(5)                      |

| <b>Performance Against Timescales by Service – Stage 2</b><br>The number and percentage of complaints at Stage 2 which were closed in full within the set timescales of 20 working days. |   |   |  |                                      |
|--|---|---|--|--------------------------------------|
| <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>79</b><br>(67)                           | <b>46</b><br>(45)                           | <b>58%</b><br>(67%)                    | <b>25</b><br>(18)                    |
| <b>Corporate Resources</b>   | <b>22</b><br>(N/A)                          | <b>21</b><br>(N/A)                          | <b>95%</b><br>(N/A)                    | <b>11</b><br>(N/A)                   |
| <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>55</b><br>(38)                           | <b>35</b><br>(21)                           | <b>64%</b><br>(55%)                    | <b>17</b><br>(24)                    |
| <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>65</b><br>(49)                           | <b>43</b><br>(27)                           | <b>66%</b><br>(55%)                    | <b>17</b><br>(19)                    |
| <b>Chief Executive's</b>   | <b>11</b><br>(3)                            | <b>5</b><br>(0)                             | <b>45%</b><br>(0%)                     | <b>30</b><br>(39)                    |

NB Figures in () is the comparative data for the equivalent time period in 2017/18.