

Annual Complaints Performance Report 2020/2021

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 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.”

Following on from reviews of complaints performance in 2019/2020, the governance arrangements for complaints changed in 2020/2021. The Corporate Complaints Process now sits under the Community Operations and Logistics section of the Communities and Place Service, and as part of the wider Customer Services Team. A new Customer Resolution Team was established, bringing together the Customer Services Officers from their former services, into a new corporate team, to manage all complaints Freedom of Information requests, Subject Access Requests, Parliamentary correspondence and Senior Management (customer) correspondence - a Team leader was appointed in November 2020 and Indicator 8 on Page 18 explains the work to date.

We have provided our complaints performance, with Key Performance Indicators as specified by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) for all Scottish Local Authorities. In this report, we will explain how we performed against these indicators and how we have used this information to monitor trends and make improvements in our processes. Our results are improving and we aim for this to continue.

The Council is committed to providing high quality and timely 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.

If you wish to provide feedback on this report, please contact customerresolution@highland.gov.uk

Carron McDiarmid - Executive Chief Officer – Communities & Place

Report Headlines

Citizens' preference for making a complaint continues to be self-serve through the Council's website, with an increase to **69% of complaints** logged this way. When combined with email channel, **83% of complaints are received via a digital channel**. Citizens who engage with us online are immediately through to the Customer Resolution & Improvement Team, further enhancing the first contact resolution.

Most complaints (**72%**) 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 decreased to **8.4 days in 2020/21** from 13.3 days in 2019/20. These are complaints that do not require an investigation.

The percentage of frontline complaints handled within the 5 working day target set by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman has improved to **54.1%**, an increase of **4.6%** on the comparative period in 2019/2020. There has also been an increase in Investigation performance to **68.7%** (an increase of **5.6%**) where the SPSO target is 20 working days.

Across a range of indicators performance has improved in the last year and as part of an improving trend over the past 5 years. There is still work to be done to continuously improve our performance and our new customer resolution team is well placed to drive and support the change required. While the majority of frontline complaints are now handled within both of the target timescales (5 and 20 days), in 2020/21, 45.9% of frontline complaints were not concluded in 5 days and 31.3% were not investigated in the 20-day target. This will remain a focus for the team, working with colleagues across the Council, in 2021/22.

Looking Forward into 2021/22

In April 2021 the Council successfully implemented, on time, the new revised Scottish Publish Services Ombudsman's (SPSO), Model Complaints Handling Procedure (MCHP) – a copy can be found at this [link](#) – this document underpins the complaints process and provides clear policy documentation to staff, citizens and organisations.

These documents will underpin the training which will be delivered to all members of staff during 2021/22.

The implementation action plan is detailed in the report to the Audit and Scrutiny Committee of 17 June 2021 as Appendix 1 - [here](#)

The four key themes are –

- Training
- Communication
- Reporting
- Service Engagement

In addition to weekly complaint case data to the Executive Leadership Team, quarterly reports will be provided to the Executive Leadership Team and each Service Management Teams. The reports will focus on the key outcomes from complaints, concentrating on lessons learnt and the improvements which can be made. This information will be made available to our staff and customers.

The SPSO will also publish their revised list of performance indicators in 2021/22.

Background

At the Council's Audit and Scrutiny Committee of 17 June 2021 a report was presented to elected members providing an update on the Council's Corporate Complaints process for the period 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021. An analysis of the Council's complaints handling performance per Service was also provided. The report can be viewed [here](#)

During 2020/2021 The Highland Council delivered a wide range of functions through [8 Services](#) - detailed in Appendix 1

Customer enquiries, requests for service and complaints are recorded on our customer relationship management system. For context there were 153,060 transactions in 2020/21 of which 1,048 (0.7%) were customer complaints. Compared to 2019/20 this is a 11% decrease in customer contacts and a 39% decrease in complaints, probably affected by Covid impacts.

Scottish Councils operate a complaints process which considers complaints as either -

- **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 within 20 working days following a thorough investigation of the points raised.

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, the Customer Resolution and Improvement Team assess in accordance the appropriate stage according to the nature of the complaint – in many instances the team can now resolve the complaint straightaway. Where customers are dissatisfied with our decision following an Investigation, they can ask the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman to consider their complaint further.

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 2020/2021.

Note: Due to COVID-19 the Local Authority Complaint Handlers Network (LACHN) has been unable to collate Scottish Local Authority national average data for 2020/21.

Indicator 1

The total number of complaints received per thousand of population.

This indicator records the total number of complaints received by the Council in the period 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021 per 1,000 population.

For Highland there were 4.4 complaints logged per 1,000 of population during 2020/21, an improvement from the rate of 7.3 complaints per 1,000 population during 2019/20 and the highest rate of 9.3 per 1,000 population recorded in 2017/18.

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Population Estimate	232,910	234,770	235,180	235,540	235,830
Complaints Per 1,000	7.2	9.3	6.1	7.3	4.4

The Council received a total of 1,048 complaints, 11% lower than the 1726 received in 2019/20. This decrease was probably affected by the pandemic period. Policy and legislative changes, together with seasonal, social, economic and other external factors throughout the year, can all influence the volume of complaints received.

Citizens' preference for making a complaint continues to be self-serve through the Council's website, with an increase to **69% of complaints** logged this way. When combined with email channel, **83% of complaints are received via a digital channel**. Citizens who engage with us online are going directly to the Customer Resolution & Improvement Team, further enhancing the first contact resolution.

Citizens who choose to engage digitally with the Council's complaints process receive email responses which provides for quicker delivery timescales than traditional methods.

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.

	% of all cases closed 2016/17	% of all cases closed 2017/18	% of all cases closed 2018/19	% of all cases closed 2019/20	% of all Cases closed 2020/21
Closed at Frontline	88.7	90.6	82.7	73.7	72.0
Closed at Investigation	11.3	5.9	12.6	22.7	24.6
Closed after progression from Frontline to Investigation	N/A	3.5	4.7	3.5	3.4

There were **1,024 complaints closed** during 2020/21, 737 (72.0%) at Frontline, 252 (24.6%) at investigation and 35 (3.4%) after progression from frontline to investigation. Most of our complaints are received and resolved at frontline; however, there has been a **decrease of 1.7%** of total complaints being resolved at this stage compared to 2019/2020 whilst those being resolved at investigation have increased by 1.9%

The consequential increase in complaints being closed after investigation (up from 5.9% in 2017/18 to 24.6% in 2020/21) may indicate an increasing complexity in the nature of complaints

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. Formal outcomes are that the complaint is either upheld, partially upheld or not upheld. Performance over time is shown below. The trend for the majority of complaints not being upheld was disrupted in 2020/21. Reasons may include new processes and/or Covid impacts. Data for 2021/22 will aid further analysis.

The Customer Resolution & Improvement Team record and analyse the types of complaints and their outcomes, 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.

This information will be provided to Services, Staff, and Customers on a quarterly basis and the Customer Resolution & Improvement Team Leader will work with key stakeholders in each Service to embed improvements for customers.

Examples of applying this best practice can be found at Indicator 8

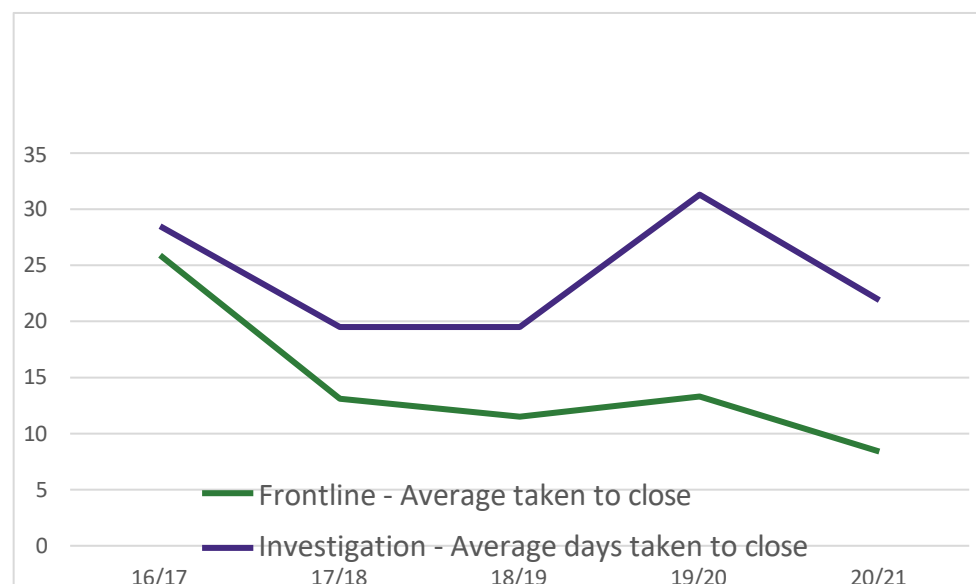
	Upheld	Partially Upheld	Not Upheld
Frontline 2016/17	375 (25.2%)	273 (18.3%)	842 (56.5%)
Frontline 2017/18	498 (26.5%)	431 (22.9%)	953 (50.6%)
Frontline 2018/19	284 (25.7%)	256 (23.1%)	567 (51.2%)
Frontline 2019/20	250 (20.7%)	256 (21.2%)	699 (58.0%)
Frontline 2020/21	230 (31.2%)	241 (32.7%)	266 (36.1%)
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%)
Investigation 2020/21	55 (21.8%)	107 (42.5%)	90 (35.7%)

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**.

As shown on the chart below, the average number of days taken to respond at **Frontline** complaints has **reduced from 25.9 days in 2016/17 to 8.4 days in 2020/21**. The average number of days taken to respond to **Investigation** complaints has **reduced from 28.5 days in 2016/17 to 21.9 days in 2020/21**, with a notable decline from 31.3 days in 2019/20.



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	2020/21
Closed at Frontline Resolution within 5 working days	453 (30.4%)	802 (42.6%)	502 (45.4%)	597 (49.5%)	399 (54.1%)
Closed at Investigation within 20 working days	88 (46.3%)	78 (63.8%)	109 (64.7%)	234 (63.1%)	173 (68.7%)
Closed after progression within 20 working days	N/A	55 (75.3%)	39 (61.9%)	40 (69.0%)	35 (85.7%)

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 **54.1%**, an increase of **4.6%** on the comparative period in 2019/20. There has also been an increase in investigation performance to **68.7%** (an increase of **4.6%**) where the SPSO target is 20 working days.

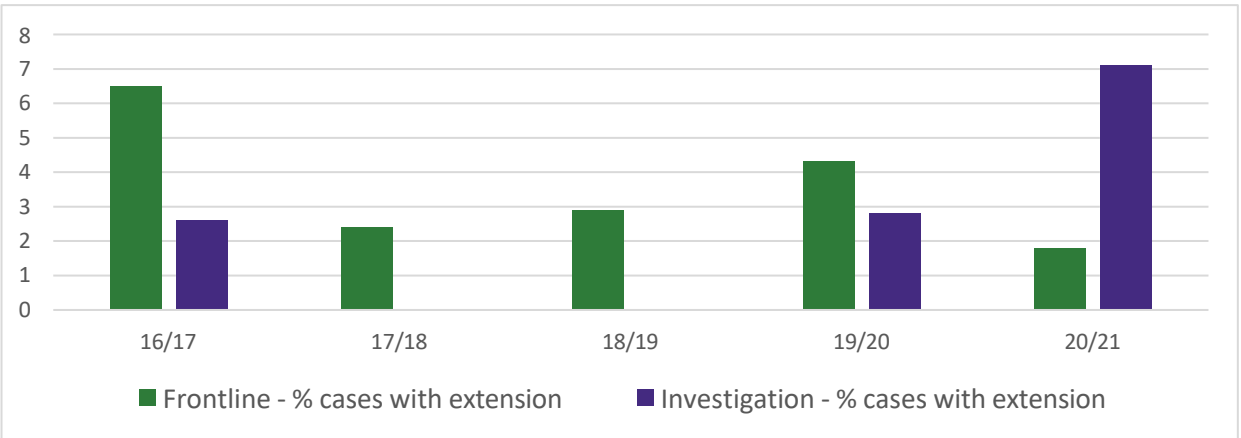
Indicator 6

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

13 (1.8%) frontline complaints (52 during 2019/2020) were authorised with a 5-day extension. 18 (7.1%) 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 necessary due to the complexity of the issue.

Extension to investigation complaints is by exception and are generally approved by Heads of Service/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.



Indicator 7

The Complaints Handling Procedure followed by the Council requires us to report on customer satisfaction with the complaints service provided.

Normally the Council conducts an annual survey of performance and attitudes from its Citizens' Panel. It includes specific questions on complaint management and performance. However, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic the survey was not run in 2020. In 2021 the Panel is being refreshed with the next survey is planned for 2022. The Customer Resolution & Improvement Team Leader is exploring shorter customer survey mechanisms, which can be used to provide customer feedback in the intervening period.

Results from previous surveys of satisfaction from 2013 to 2019 are shown below for information. An improving trend is required.

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

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

apply.” They could select more than one reason.

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 indicates scope for improvement in the quality of response and timescale and these will be key priorities for the Customer Resolution & Improvement Team.

Compliments

Over the last year The Highland Council also received many compliments for the services provided. Some examples of compliments received during 2020/21 are shown below. It is important to recognise when excellent services are being delivered and the Customer Resolution and Improvement Team thank all customers for their compliments and ensure the details are passed on to the member of staff directly.

I raised a job for a defective shower, which was resolved quickly by two of the Highland Councils contractors. I want to thank everyone from the Service Centre staff who took the initial call to everyone else involved and the two fitters for a very efficient job start to finish

"Your email and its contents are a breath of fresh air after all this time. I thank you and please could you also pass my thanks to the Operations Team for addressing this and clearing up the matter for me. It is greatly appreciated.

I just want to say thank you to the crew working the bin lorries in Nairn. Every time my daughter (4) sees them she is outside waving, saying Hi and watching them work. The crew always wave back when they see her which makes her day. I just felt it important that their work and community engagement was acknowledged

I contacted the Council as I had specific queries about recycling plastic. The phone was answered by Service Centre staff who made enquiries on my behalf and came back with information, they then forwarded to me by email very relevant information which put my mind at rest and forwarded further information. I definitely think they

I would like to pass on my thanks to the Business Support Team Leader in HQ, who I have been in contact with on a matter that I have been trying to resolve for a while without any success. They have been extremely helpful and determined to investigate and resolve my query in a very timeously manner. They were very friendly and professional during our telephone conversation and has followed up on her promise to help. Please pass on my thanks to them for the exceptional level of service they provided.

I would like to take this opportunity to show my appreciation for the kindness and compassion shown to me by the Registration Staff in Inverness.

My husband passed away unexpectedly and during a time of turmoil and devastation they were patient and informative, balancing genuine grace with professionalism they led me through the registration process. In particular (name removed) is a truly remarkable member of staff who deserves great credit for their abilities and is an invaluable asset to the front of house team in Inverness - My family and I are so very grateful.

Indicator 8

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

As detailed in the Executive Summary, following on from rapid reviews of complaints performance in 2019/2020, the governance arrangements for complaints changed in 2020/2021, at the same time as a reorganisation of the Council structure.

The Communities and Place Committee were presented with a paper on 19 August 2020, which outlines the changes necessary to improve the Council's performance in this area. The report can be accessed [here](#)

The Customer Resolution & Improvement Team Leader was appointed in November 2020 and leads the team of Customer Services Officers from their old Service structure in a new Corporate team. Up until 31 March 2021 activities have included -

- Engagement with Service Management Teams
- Merger of former Service structures into one new 'Customer Resolution & Improvement Team' brand with mailboxes replaced
- Engagement with Digital Services to deliver new processes within the new Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system
- Implementation of new corporate complaints process
- Targeted engagement with sections of the Council receiving the most complaints
- Targeted complaints training
- Movement to task-based (corporate) workload rather than Service based
- Renewed focus on resolution as an outcome and shift to the team managing to resolve customer complaint at first point of contact.
- Ongoing 'lessons learnt' implementation
- Training needs analysis underway for team
- Focus on quality assurance procedures to ensure responses are provided to customers of a corporate standard
- Look forward to utilising reporting tools in the new CRM system to aid analysis of complaints with targeted intervention for specific services and/or teams and identifying the potential of a Councillor Portal

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.

Each year, elected members are presented with a report which set out the number and types of complaints relating to the Council that have been considered by the SPSO and the subsequent judgements in the cases where the Scottish Public Sector Ombudsman's inquiry has concluded. The detailed report will be presented to the Audit and Scrutiny Committee in November 2021.

However, in 2020/21 **41 cases** relating to The Highland Council were considered by the SPSO in 2020/21, **12 less** than in the previous year. Of those, **only 2** were taken forward for full investigation, (3 in 2019/20) **1** was **fully upheld** and **1 partially upheld** (the same as 2019/20).

The number of **premature cases has fallen from 20.8% to 17.1%** 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.

Conclusion

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

This report demonstrates how we are continuously improving our performance and are actively looking to make significant changes to the way in which the Council manages complaints. This includes supporting a learning culture in the organisation where we use the rich data we are provided by our customers for improvement.

In the current financial climate, there are challenges facing local authorities in their service delivery and in achieving positive results around complaints. However, the MCHP framework of positive customer engagement, ensuring customers are involved from the outset and providing channels which make it easier for them to let us know when things go wrong, underpin our improvement ambitions.

While the Council and citizens experienced considerable disruption arising from the response to Covid, 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 to deliver quality services within our overall budget.

If you have any queries relating to the work of the Customer Resolution & Improvement Team, please contact:

Angela Morrison

Customer Resolution & Improvement Team Leader

Email: angela.morrison@highland.gov.uk

Appendix 1 – Main Service functions

During 2020/21 the Council delivered a wide range of functions through the following Services.

Communities and Place	Education and Learning	Health and Social Care	Infrastructure, Environment and Economy	Performance and Governance	Property and Housing	Resources and Finance	Transformation
Bereavement Services, burials and cremations	Additional Support for Learning	Adult Protection	Building Standards	Best Value	Affordable warmth	Annual Accounts and Quarterly Financial Performance Reporting	Business Analysis
City & Ward Management	Additional Support Services	Adult Social Care NHS Partnership Lead Agency	Business Development & Systems Support	Business Intelligence	Catering, Cleaning of Facilities Management	Benefits	Business Change Management
Community Asset Transfer	Allowance/Bursaries	Allied Health Professionals	Business Gateway	Climate Change	Corporate Asset Management	Capital	Business Improvement
Community Engagement	Curriculum 3-18	Chief Social Work Officer	Capital Schemes – infrastructure	Corporate Communications	Corporate Property Client	Corporate Business Support	Centre of Excellence for Programme & Projects
Community Planning	Developing Scotland's Young Workforce	Child Protection	Car Parking	Corporate Fraud	Depots	Financial management support to Council Services	Change Fund Management
Customer/Contact Services	Early Years	Child Protection Advisors (Health)	City Region Deal	Corporate Leadership Support (Members)	Energy	HR	Futures Thinking/Visioning
Environment/Health	Eden Court	Children's Services: Social Care	Commercial Property Development	Corporate Performance Management	Estates management	Insurance	Innovation
Equalities & Human Rights	Education Improvement	Corporate Parenting	Cultural Strategy	Corporate Plan development	Estates Planning and Capital Investment	Learning & Development	ICT/Digital services (including ICT Education)
Fleet and Plant	Education Maintenance	Criminal Justice	Development & Regeneration	Corporate Risk Management	FM Client	Occupational Health, Safety & Wellbeing	Improvement Service Liaison (Transformation)
Placed Based Approaches and Area Profiles	Gaelic Education Strategy	Edge of care	Economy	Democratic Services	H&CS and Property Housing input into Care Services	Organisational Development	Partnership Working & Networking
Play areas, amenities and grounds maintenance	Gateway	Family Nursing	Employability	Elections	Homeless	Payroll & Pensions	Programme Management Office (planning, governance, assurance, risk management)
Police & Fire Scrutiny	HLH/Community Learning & Development	Fostering and Adoption	Environment	Fraud investigation	HRA (Management of Council Housing)	Procurement	Project Management
Public Conveniences	Home Education and Partnership with parents	Health Improvement	Ferries	Freedom of information and data protection policy	In-house Building Maintenance Team	Revenues	Research & Development
Registrar Services	Improving Outcomes	Health Visiting	Flood Act Duties	Gaelic Development	Office Accommodation Management	Taxation	Transformation – Strategy (Alignment/Direction)
Stores & Logistics	Looked after children and corporate parenting – educational outcomes	Looked After Children	Gaelic Economy	Internal Audit	Project & Cost Management	Trade Union Partnership	

Communities and Place	Education and Learning	Health and Social Care	Infrastructure, Environment and Economy	Performance and Governance	Property and Housing	Resources and Finance	Transformation
Street Cleaning	Mental Health Strategy for children and families -universal and tier 1/2 provision	Mental Health Officer	Harbours and Marine Facilities	Legal Services	Property Capital Projects – budget and delivery	Treasury Management	
Tackling Poverty and Inequality	Parental engagement	Mental Health Strategy for children and families – targeted interventions and support ; tiers 2 plus	Housing Development	Licensing	Property Design	Valuation Joint Board Support	
Travel Desk	Primary Schools	NHS Commissioned Services	Inward Investment	Member Services	Property Engineering Design Services	Welfare/People	
War Memorials	Psychological Services	Out of Hours Social Work	IT Infrastructure (fire, 5G mobile) external	Parliamentary and political liaison	Property Maintenance		
Waste Disposal	Secondary Schools	Prevention Strategy	Laboratory and Quarry	Policy	Property Support Team		
Waste Operations including waste collections and Household Waste Recycling Centres	Staff Development including professional learning and update, leadership and empowerment	Residential Care	Planning	Public Performance Reporting	Schools Catering & Cleaning (client)		
Waste Strategy	Transitions – Young People	School Nursing	Public and School Transport	Resilience & Emergency Planning	Tenant Participation		
	Workforce Planning & Staffing Unit	Self-Directed Support	Roads & Winter Maintenance	Regulatory Services			
		Throughcare/Aftercare	Safety Inspections – bridges & other structures, drainage & other restraint systems	Scottish Public Services Ombudsman			
		Young Carers	Systems Lighting	Trading Standards			
			Tourism				
			Transport Planning				