

To: Finance, Resources and Customer Services Policy Board

On: 27 March 2019

Report by: Chief Executive

Heading: Complaints Handling Policy

1. Summary

- 1.1 Renfrewshire Council's existing Complaints Handling Procedure (CHP) was approved in 2013. The CHP applies to all Renfrewshire Council Services. Lagan was introduced as the sole system for recording, monitoring and evaluating the handling of complaints.
 - 1.2 In February 2018, the Corporate Management Team (CMT) approved a formal council-wide review of complaints handling as part of our commitment to improving customer service, learn from others, continuing to drive improved complaints handling performance and to bring the social work complaints in line with the council-wide procedure.
 - 1.3 The review concluded late 2018 and recommended improvements which have been taken forward by a complaint's development and review group (CDRG).
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2. Recommendations

- 2.1 It is recommended that members:
 - Note the key findings and recommendations from the complaints handling review; and
 - Approve the refreshed complaints handling policy for customers as provided as appendix 1.
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3. Background

- 3.1 Renfrewshire Council's current Complaints Handling Procedure (CHP) was introduced in 2013, this is based on guidance from the Scottish Public Service Ombudsman (SPSO). At the same time, a management information system, Lagan, was introduced as the system for recording, monitoring and reporting on complaints.
- 3.2 Complaints handling is delegated to each service for recording, responding, monitoring and review with overall annual council reporting coordinated by the Chief Executive's Service. The procedure was designed to provide a consistent process for customers to follow making it simpler to complain; ensure staff and customers have confidence in complaints handling; help us monitor and report on trends and make the best use of the lessons learned from complaints; and to be able to benchmark with other Councils.
- 3.3 The Council's current complaints handling procedure provides two definitions for complaints handling, which are detailed below:

Stage One – Frontline Resolution: Frontline resolution aims to quickly resolve straightforward customer complaints that require little or no investigation. Any member of staff may deal with complaints at this stage. The main aim is to seek early resolution, resolving complaints at the earliest opportunity as close to the point of service delivery as possible. Frontline resolution must be completed within five working days.

An example of a complaint which may be addressed at the frontline resolution stage is where a tenant has been waiting in for an appointment and the workmen failed to turn up. When this is reported the service would apologise and arrange a new suitable appointment.

Stage Two – Investigation: Complaints handled at the investigation stage of the complaints handling procedure are typically complex or require a detailed examination. These complaints may already have been considered at the frontline resolution stage, or they may have been identified from the start as needing immediate investigation. Investigation should not take longer than twenty working days.

An example of an investigation may relate to the standard or nature of a repair within a council property which requires an inspection or visit to investigate.

- 3.4 A customer can make a complaint in writing, in person, via social media, by telephone, by email, online or by having someone complain on their behalf.

4. Review of complaints handling procedure and practices

- 4.1 The Council is committed to the provision of high-quality complaints handling. The CHP operates to ensure that complaints are processed and responded to consistently within targeted timescales, with a particular focus on working to resolve customer dissatisfaction as close as possible to the point of contact or service delivery.
- 4.2 Since the implementation of the CHP, there has been a number of structural changes to service departments including the creation of Children's Services in 2015 and the formalisation of Renfrewshire Health and Social Care Partnership in 2016, as well as ICT changes to the recording and monitoring of complaints. As such, refreshing awareness and understanding of the CHP has been identified as key to ensuring we continually improve our complaints handling process.
- 4.3 To address these points and strengthen the Council's complaints handling process, a council-wide complaints review took place in 2018. The review considered the following:
- the existing Complaints Handling Policy and Procedures;
 - benchmarking across the public and private sector;
 - staff training and development; and
 - how services logged, recorded, and monitored performance of complaints.
- 4.4 Fundamental to the 2018 review was the commitment to understanding and improving the customer journey and maintaining standards set out by the SPSO. Service design principles were deployed in the reshaping of the CHP, with consultation taking place with customers that had been through the complaints process in the previous six months to understand how the procedure worked in practice and to recognise any particular issues that had been encountered.

5. Findings of the review and refreshed CHP

- 5.1 While the review highlighted the strong principles staff adhere to, it identified an opportunity to build upon and refresh these across services to continue to meet the expectations of customers.
- 5.2 The findings of the review also concluded that there requires to be a re-stating of the complaints policy through a communications and marketing campaign, updated provision of training and guidelines for officers, that social work complaints are in line with the council-wide procedure and a more robust system to support the logging of and learning from complaints.
- 5.3 Therefore, it is requested that the Finance, Resources and Customers Board members approve the refreshed complaints handling policy for customers as

provided as appendix 1 and that it will be made available from the 1st April 2019. This will be part of the wider public awareness and internal communication campaign to reaffirm the Council's complaints handling policy.

- 5.4 The CDRG will continue to meet quarterly to ensure the above actions are implemented, that complaints are handled to a consistently high standard and to allow services the opportunity to exchange good practice.

6. SPSO review

- 6.1 In January 2019, the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman undertook their own review on the national model complaints handling process. The Council submitted a response to the questionnaire and the CRDG will monitor the outcome of the SPSO's review. Any statutory changes to the national model will need to be reflected in our own procedure and practices and non-statutory improvements will be considered by the CRDG in the first instance.
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Implications of the Report

1. **Financial - none.**
2. **HR & Organisational Development - none**
3. **Community/Council Planning – none**
4. **Legal – none.**
5. **Property/Assets – none**
6. **Information Technology –** the development and implementation of a staff training programme for any newly procured MIS for complaints handling

7. Equality & Human Rights

The Recommendations contained within this report have been assessed in relation to their impact on equalities and human rights. No negative impacts on equality groups or potential for infringement of individuals' human rights have been identified arising from the recommendations contained in the report because it is for noting only. If required following implementation, the actual impact of the recommendations and the mitigating actions will be reviewed and monitored, and the results of the assessment will be published on the Council's website.

8. **Health & Safety – none**

9. **Procurement** – the procurement of a new complaints handling management information system (MIS) to replace Lagan when it is decommissioned in 2019.
 10. **Risk** – the revised complaints handling policy and procedures ensure that the Council is compliant with relevant SPSO guidance.
 11. **Privacy Impact – none**
 12. **Cosla Policy Position – none**
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List of Background Papers


- Renfrewshire Council Complaints Handling Policy and Procedures
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Complaints Handling Procedure

Quick guide for staff

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Introduction

At Renfrewshire Council, we are committed to getting it right for our customers. But sometimes, things go wrong.

Our complaints handling procedure is designed to help when these things happen.

Complaints are valuable to us. We need customers to tell us why they are dissatisfied—to give their views and share their experience. They may highlight problems that we otherwise may miss. They also give us valuable information which might help prevent these problems happening again. Complaints are vital to improving services.

The procedure aims to deal with complaints at the earliest point possible. Dealing with them locally and quickly and preventing them escalating creates better relations with customers, saves money and prevents increased workload.

By reading this quick guide and building your understanding of the complaints handling procedure, you are making an important contribution. We want complaints handled swiftly by capable, well-trained employees and you are taking an important step here in helping us to achieve this.

Our complaints handling procedure reflects Renfrewshire Council's commitment to valuing complaints. It seeks to resolve customer dissatisfaction at the earliest possible point and to help us conduct thorough, objective and fair investigations.

Complaints give us valuable information so that we can improve our services. Our complaints handling procedure enables us to address a customer's dissatisfaction and may also prevent the same problems that led to the complaint from happening again. For our employees, complaints provide a first-hand account of the customer's views and experience and can highlight problems we may otherwise miss.

Handled well, complaints can give our customers a form of redress when things go wrong and can also help us continuously improve our services. Resolving complaints early saves money and time and creates better relationships with our customers. Sorting them out as close to the point of service delivery as possible means we can deal with them locally and quickly, so they are less likely to escalate to the next stage of the procedure. Complaints that we do not resolve swiftly can greatly add to our workload.

Our procedure complies with the Scottish Public Service Ombudsman guidance on a model complaints handling procedure and aims to help us 'get it right first time'. We want quicker, simpler and more streamlined complaints handling with local, early resolution by capable, well-trained staff.

The complaints handling procedure helps us do our job better, improve relationships with our customers and enhance public perception of the Council. It helps keep our customers at the heart of the process, while enabling us to better understand how to improve our services.

Sandra Black

Chief Executive

Renfrewshire Council

Our Principles

1. Transparency

Renfrewshire Council is committed to informing all stakeholders about the complaints and appeals processes, including estimated response times, and signposting customers to online information.

2. Accessibility

Renfrewshire Council is committed to communicating effectively with our stakeholders so mechanisms for registering complaints shall be made clear and easily accessible to all parties.

3. Mutual respect

Everyone presenting a complaint or feedback will be treated with respect, regardless of the motivation behind the claim. In return, Renfrewshire Council expects those people making a complaint to show respect for the organisation and its staff, as well as for the complaints handling procedure.

4. Good faith

It shall be assumed that those presenting a complaint are acting in good faith in terms of the authenticity of the claim, and that their actions do not have any malicious intent.

5. Confidentiality

Renfrewshire Council is committed to safeguarding confidentiality in the complaints process and protecting the personal information of those involved from persons and entities related to the case. Personal information will be dealt with according to the General Data Protection Regulations.

6. Impartiality

Renfrewshire Council shall handle all complaints in an objective way.

7. Timely response

Renfrewshire Council will aim to meet the timescales set within our Complaints Handling Procedure—five days for frontline resolution and 20 days for investigation.

8. Continuous improvement

Renfrewshire Council will actively use complaints for learning and continuous improvement.

Why do we have a complaint handling procedure?

We are committed to providing high-quality services to our community. Occasionally, things go wrong and when this happens it is important that we act quickly to resolve the situation. Complaints show us where we are not achieving what people expect of us, and where we are failing to meet our own standards. In other words, they give us a chance to improve our service.

Listening to our customers helps us to:

- put things right;
- improve our services; and
- learn from our mistakes.

Renfrewshire Council's Complaints Handling Procedure (CHP) complies with the requirements of the Scottish Public Service Ombudsman (SPSO).

What is a complaint?

Our definition of a complaint is:

‘Any expression of dissatisfaction about our action or lack of action, or about the standard of service provided by us, or on our behalf.’

A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction about the Council’s action or lack of action, or about the standard of service provided by us or on our behalf. For example:

- delays in responding to enquiries and requests;
- failure to provide a service;
- failure to meet our service standards;
- refusal to give advice or answer questions;
- dissatisfaction with our policy;
- treatment by, or attitude of, a member of staff or a contractor; and
- failure to follow the proper administrative process.

What is not a complaint?

Not every concern raised with the Council is a complaint. For example, a complaint is not:

- a first request for a service;
- a request for information or an explanation of policy or practice; and
- a request under the Freedom of Information Act or Data Protection Act.

In these cases, a request will not be dealt with under this policy.

There are also some other matters we can’t deal with under the complaints procedure. These include:

- where a statutory right of appeal exists (e.g. parking tickets or housing benefit);
- any service where people can use other methods to appeal (e.g. exclusions from school or pupil placements);
- reports of alleged bullying made by pupils/parents/others. These will be treated as bullying incidents under the Council’s bullying policy ‘Respect Me’. Further information on this policy is available online at www.renfrewshire.gov.uk/bullying
- insurance claims;
- a complaint we have already investigated and given a final decision on;
- complaints that are in court or have already been heard by a court or a tribunal; and
- complaints against councillors.

Who can complain?

Anyone can make a complaint in person at any of our offices or establishments, by telephone, by e-mail or in writing.

What should you do when someone complains?

Employees must try to resolve complaints on the spot to the customer's satisfaction if possible – this is known as '*frontline resolution*'.

Our complaints procedure has two stages. The second stage is known as '*investigation*'. We expect the majority of complaints will be resolved at frontline. However, if the customer remains dissatisfied, we can look at it again in the investigation stage.

In addition, if the complaint is complex enough to require an investigation, we will put the complaint into the investigation stage straight away.

Frontline resolution

We aim to resolve complaints quickly and as close to the point of service delivery as possible, within 5 working days or less, unless there are exceptional circumstances. Generally, these will be the more straightforward complaints that you can resolve on the spot with an apology and action to put the matter right, or another action to resolve the complaint quickly.

If you think that you need more time to investigate at the frontline stage, you must agree this with the customer within **three** working days of the complaint being made and respond within 10 working days.

You do not always need to respond to the customer in writing. You'll be able to resolve many complaints face-to-face or by telephone, and this is all that is needed. However, sometimes you will have to provide the decision in writing. This should only be done if the customer asks for this or if you think it will help to confirm or clarify the facts or outcome of the complaint for the customer or the Council.

All complaints must be recorded. This way, we can clearly monitor our complaints and learn from them.

We have a statutory duty to record all complaints.

Investigation stage

Complaints in this stage have not been resolved at frontline or are so complex that they need more investigation before we can provide a decision.

When dealing with complaints at this stage, you should:

- record the complaint;
- acknowledge receipt of the complaint within **three** working days and advise of the 20 day deadline;
- discuss the complaint with the customer to understand the reasons for it and what outcome they want - sometimes this will involve managing the customer's expectations by explaining how we might be able to resolve the complaint;
- provide a full response to the complaint as soon as possible but no later than 20 working days;
- ensure that your head of service has sight of your response (they do not need to sign the response).

If our investigations will take longer than 20 working days to complete, you need to agree revised time limits with the customer and keep them updated on progress.

Be sure to record details of the action taken and the outcome, as this helps us improve our service standards. Please use current systems to monitor and track these complaints.

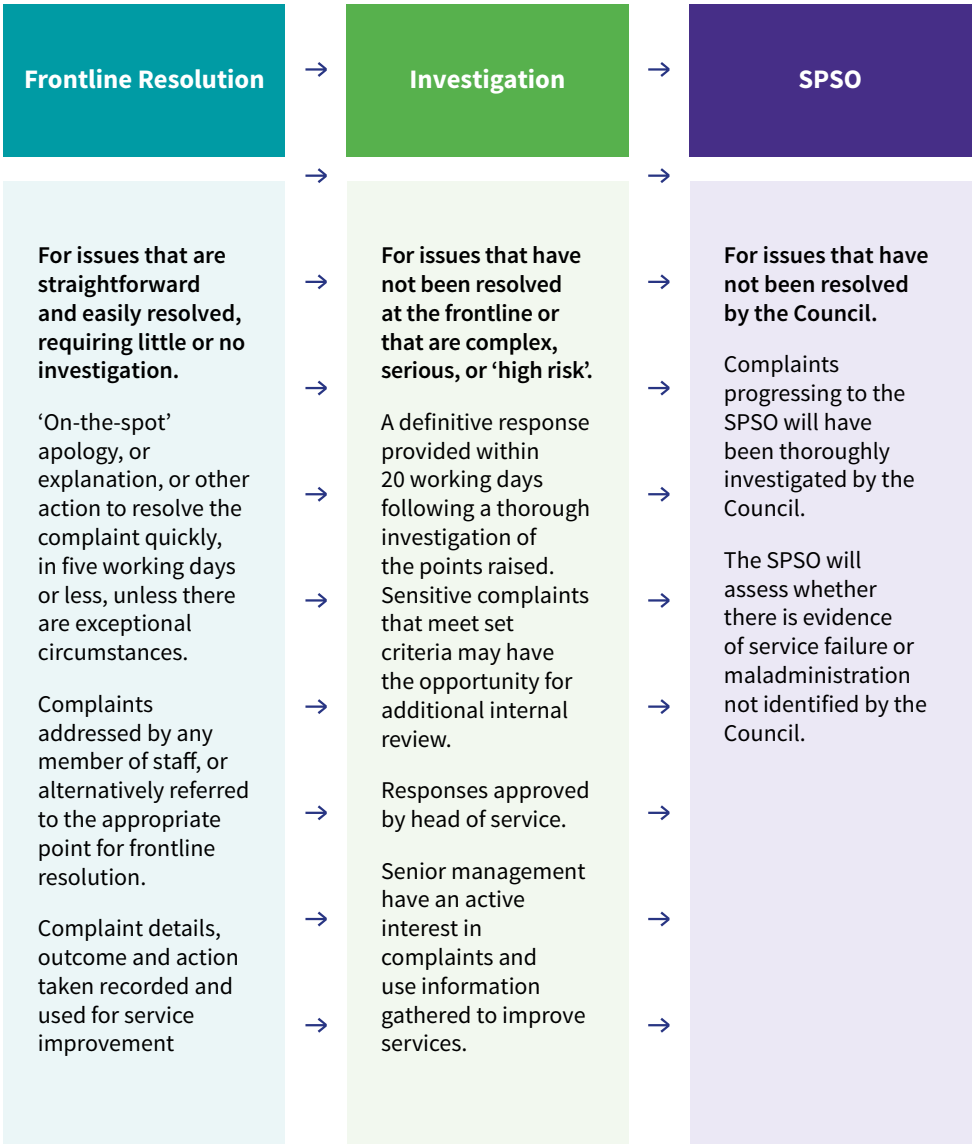
It is critical that you agree your response with a head of service as there are no further stages to the complaints process.

What if the customer is still dissatisfied?

When we have fully investigated the complaint and the customer is still dissatisfied with our response or the way we have dealt with the complaint, they can ask the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) to consider it further.

Please see the complaints handling procedure or information on the dedicated Complaints Handling page on the intranet for details of how to direct customers to the SPSO.

The model complaints handling procedure



Checklist

Frontline resolution	
	Do you have the full details about what the complaint is about?
	Has the complaint been logged in our system?
	Do you have the person's contact details?
	Do all issues fall within our remit? Do I need to refer any issues to another party (internal or external)?
	Have there been previous complaints about this matter?
	Has the complainant identified a solution/their preferred outcome?
	Can the problem be resolved immediately?
	If this is not something we can do, has this been explained?
	If it will take some time to resolve, has the customer been informed of timescales?
	Have I given the customer details of the next stage should they remain unhappy?
	Has the outcome been logged on the system?
Investigation	
	Where a complaint cannot be resolved at initial point of contact and requires some investigation, up to a maximum of 20 days, has this been approved by your line manager?
	Where a complaint has gone into full investigation stage, has the complaint been acknowledged within 3 working days?
	Where the response timescale cannot be met, has a holding response been sent?
Responding	
	Can you meet the response deadline?
	Does your response address all issues raised?
	Have you used plain English and avoided the use of technical jargon?
	Is your response using a tone that is sympathetic?
	Have you explained the reason for any decisions and/or actions taken?
	Have you given the customer details of how to appeal to the Ombudsman should they remain unhappy?
	Do any policies/procedures need to change as a result of this complaint?

