

To: Audit, Risk and Scrutiny Board

On: 25 January 2021

Report by: Chief Executive

Heading: 2019/20 Complaints Data

1. Summary

- 1.1 Renfrewshire Council's complaint handling procedure (CHP) helps the Council to improve services and processes based on customer feedback. It is one of a range of methods to help the Council understand how well it is delivering its services.
- 1.2 Introduced in 2013, the Council's CHP complies with the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman's (SPSO) guidance and aims to help 'get it right first time'. The expectation is to have quicker, simpler and more streamlined complaints handling with early response by capable, well-trained staff. As part of the procedure, all complaints are recorded and monitored.
- 1.3 This report provides information on complaints closed during the year from 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020 and performance on key indicators, as well as highlighting improvements made to the CHP over the past year to ensure that complaints are handled well, and the organisation learns from them.
- 1.4 Given the reporting timescales, it should be noted that the coronavirus pandemic and subsequent national lockdown has not impacted on the figures reported here as this report covers up to the end of March 2020. Due to the pandemic and the focus of officers on the response phase, it was not possible however to finalise this report for submission to the Board as intended in Autumn 2020.
- 1.5 The key messages highlighted in the report are as follows:
 - 7,924 complaints were received in 2019/20, which has decreased from 8,200 in 2018/19;
 - 86.8% of our complaints are dealt with as frontline response, demonstrating the Council's commitment to getting it right first time in response to complaints;

- 72% of frontline complaints and 87% of investigation complaints received were completed within target timescales;
- the average time to respond to an investigation complaint was 13.3 days, which is within the SPSO target of 20 days;
- 2019/20 breakdown of complaints received by services is broadly reflective of the volume of services provided, with Environment and Infrastructure Services delivering the highest volume of frontline Council services and consequently receiving the highest volume of customer interactions;
- the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) introduced changes to the national complaints handling process and all local authorities are required to introduce these changes by April 2021; and
- a new system to support the logging of and learning from complaints was launched by the Council in April 2020.

1.6 A performance scorecard has been included within the appendix of this report to provide additional data.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 It is recommended that members of the Audit, Risk and Scrutiny Board:
- Note the content of this report

3. Background

- 3.1 Renfrewshire Council's complaint handling procedure was implemented in 2013 and complies with the model complaints handling procedure for local authorities introduced by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman at that time.
- 3.2 The CHP reflects Renfrewshire Council's ongoing commitment to the provision of high-quality complaints handling. The CHP operates to ensure that complaints are processed and responded to consistently within target timescales, with a particular focus on working to resolve customer dissatisfaction as close as possible to the point of contact or service delivery.
- 3.3 Services record, analyse and monitor complaints performance and use the information gathered through the CHP to improve service delivery wherever possible.
- 3.4 In line with the SPSO complaints handling procedure, Renfrewshire Council's CHP uses a two-stage process, Frontline Response and Investigation:

Frontline Response

The frontline response stage 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 principle is to seek an early response, resolving complaints at the earliest opportunity and as close to the point of service delivery as possible. This may mean a face-to-face discussion with the customer or asking an appropriate member of staff

to deal directly with the complaint. **The Council has 5 days to respond to these complaints.**

An example of a complaint which may be addressed at the frontline response stage is where a customer has provided evidence to verify their claim for benefits, but the Benefits Service has not updated their case records with this information. When this is reported, the service would apologise, update the customer's benefit record to record receipt of evidence and check that the benefit award is corrected from the appropriate date.

Investigation

Not all complaints are suitable for frontline response and not all complaints will be satisfactorily resolved at this stage. Investigation complaints are typically complex or require a detailed examination before resolving. These complaints may already have been considered at the frontline response stage, or they may have been identified from the start as needing investigation.

An investigation aims to establish all the facts relevant to the points made in the complaint and to give the customer a full, objective and proportionate response that represents the final position. **The Council has 20 days to respond to these complaints.**

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.

- 3.5 In line with other authorities, our complaints policy does not include a number of service areas that are processed through other means, some examples include: the right to appeal a refusal of planning permission or to appeal planning conditions - this is made to the Local Review Body or the Scottish Ministers; allegations of bullying are treated and investigated as bullying incidents - by the education establishment; and a compensation claim for personal injury, loss of or damage to property - are processed through the Council's standard 'Public Liability Claim Form'.

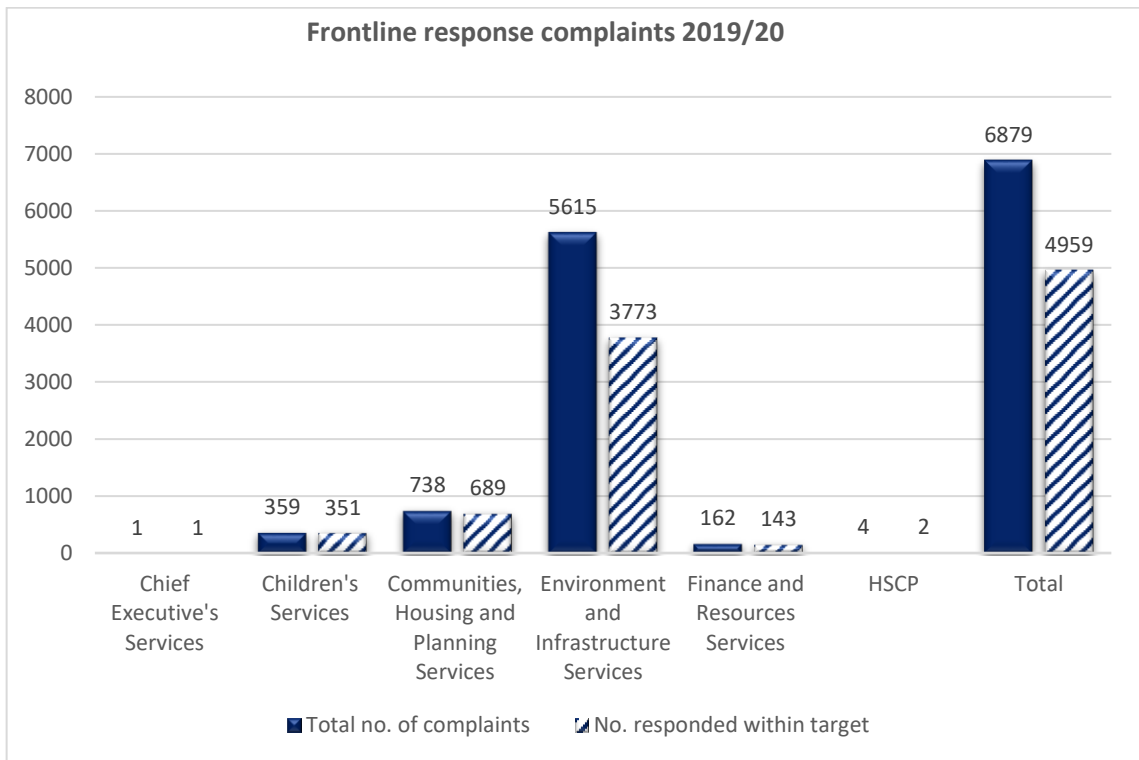
4. Revised national guidance Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO)

- 4.1 The SPSO completed a review on their own guidance and model complaints handling procedure and have updated their 2013 model. Local Authorities have one year to implement these national changes (1 April 2020 to 1 April 2021), the key changes to the statutory model are set out below:
- the updated procedure is still a '2 stage process', but the first stage has been renamed **Frontline Response** (changed from Frontline Resolution in the previous CHP);
 - a new outcome to a complaint is being introduced, where a complaint can be classed as **resolved**. A complaint is resolved when both the Council and the customer agree what action (if any) will be taken to provide full and final resolution for the customer, without making a decision whether the complaint is upheld or not upheld;
 - where a customer has received a frontline response to their complaint and wishes to escalate their complaint to investigation, they must request this either within 6 months of when they first knew of the problem, or **within two months of receiving their response to their frontline complaint** (if this is later); and

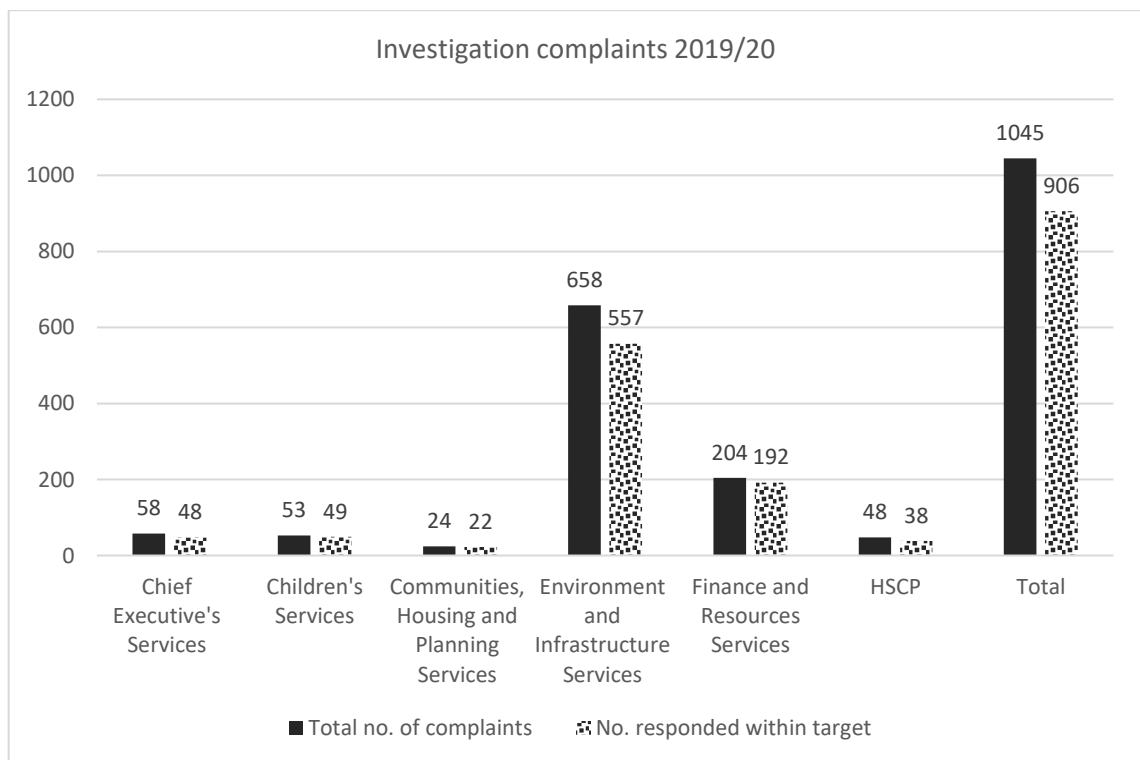
- the points of an investigation complaint and expected outcomes are clear from the complaint, **these must be set out** in the initial acknowledgment asking the customer to get in touch if they disagree.
- 4.2 When the Council's new complaints system was being developed it was configured to make sure it could capture any new information required ahead of the April 2021 deadline, such as adding the new resolved outcome and the change of terminology required. From January, the focus will be on communicating these national changes to staff. The Council's complaints policy will be updated to reflect these changes and additional guidance will be provided to staff, including updated template letters for the new approach to acknowledging an investigation complaint.
- 4.3 Through the Local Authority Complaint Handlers Network (LACHN) it has been requested that training materials and guidance are provided by the SPSO, to ensure all 32 Councils are applying the new policy consistently and to assist Councils in communicating, training and rolling out the updated model.

5. 2019/20 Council Performance

- 5.1 Complaints are crucial in identifying areas or processes that need to be improved for our customers and Councils are required to report their complaints handling performance against a range of high-level performance indicators related to the SPSO complaints handling procedure. This report provides information on the complaints closed during the period 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020 and Appendix 1 details Renfrewshire Council's complaints performance for 2019/20 against these key SPSO performance indicators.
- 5.2 In 2019/20, the number of complaints received decreased from 8,200 to 7,924. The Council strives to ensure that complaints are answered right first time and customers are responded to quickly, and during 2019/20 86.8% of complaints were addressed through a frontline response. 72% of frontline complaints and 87% of investigation complaints received were completed within target timescales. The average time to respond to a frontline response complaint was 3.3 days, which is below the SPSO target of 5 days. The average time to respond to an investigation complaint was 13.3 days, which is within the SPSO target of 20 days - however the average time indicator excludes Environment and Infrastructure Services and Children Services, who used a different complaint system during 2019/20.
- 5.3 From 1 April 2017, the process for handling social work complaints was brought in line with the Council-wide complaints process. There is still a minor difference between the two procedures - under the social work procedure, frontline complaints may be extended by up to 10 working days in agreement with the complainant. This extension was not applied to any complaints in 2019/20. Therefore, as all 2018/19 and 2019/20 social work complaints were handled under the same procedure and the data has been included in the service charts below. The complaints across social work services relate to services provided by Children's Services and the Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP).
- 5.4 The bar charts below show the service breakdown of those complaints closed within the timescales, during the period 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020. This is for both frontline response and investigation complaints.



5.5 Overall the breakdown of complaints received by services is broadly reflective of the volume of services provided. Environment and Infrastructure delivers the highest volume of frontline Council services, which includes refuse collection, roads maintenance, Streetscene and land services, parks and cemeteries and street lighting. It is to be expected therefore that the service will receive the highest level of customer interactions. There was also an increase in investigation complaints experienced by this service in 2019/20, due to a strengthening of the complaints recording process within the service



6. Complaints escalating to SPSO

- 6.1 In November 2020, the Audit, Risk and Scrutiny Board considered a report relating to the SPSO annual report for 2019/20. The SPSO will not generally consider a complaint in relation to a local authority unless the complainant has gone through the Council's complaints procedure. During the period of the report the SPSO determined 47 complaints relative to Renfrewshire Council (out of a total of 7,924) compared with 48 in 2018/19. Of the 47 complaints determined by the SPSO during 2018/19, none went to investigation stage.

7. Improving the Council's complaints handling procedure

- 7.1 The 2018 internal review identified the requirement to revise the CHP and an opportunity to update the provision of training and guidelines for officers, for social work complaints to be in line with the Council-wide procedure and for a more robust system to support the logging of and learning from complaints.
- 7.2 The new complaint system, "Contact Us" went live on 1st April 2020. It is part of the MyAccount platform, allowing current MyAccount users to log, track and receive a response to their complaint or compliment on this one system. Customers not on MyAccount can also still log a complaint online by skipping the registration process or by writing, phoning or emailing the Council. As mentioned above, the system was configured to address some of the new national complaints procedure, such as the renaming of frontline complaints and adding the new outcome of resolved complaints.
- 7.3 As the roll out of the new system was carried out during the pandemic, it was supported by online training materials, webinars and a system helpdesk for relevant officers using the new system. Furthermore, it was also agreed to postpone the roll out of the new system to schools and an interim process is in place.
- 7.4 During 2020, further guidance on complaints handling has been made available on the intranet, for all employees, which also includes guidance on dealing with unacceptable behaviour and, as part of the Learning at Work week in October 2020, complaints handling advice was communicated to staff.
- 7.5 As mentioned above, we will also be developing additional guidance to staff on the changes to the national policy. Learning and benchmarking opportunities have continued to be pursued through the Local Authority Complaint Handlers Network (LACHN).

Implications of the Report

1. **Financial** – none
2. **HR & Organisational Development** - none
3. **Community/Council Planning** –
We consider our services performance against a number of strategic outcomes to measure how we are delivering better outcomes for our local communities:

Working together to improve outcomes – complaints are monitored under this outcome of the Council Plan and service improvement planning process.

4. **Legal** - none.
5. **Property/Assets** - none
6. **Information Technology** - none.
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** – none
10. **Risk** – none
11. **Privacy Impact** – none
12. **Cosla Policy Position** – none
13. **Climate Risk**- none

List of Background Papers: none

Author: *Nicola Irvine-Brown, Planning & Policy Development section, Chief Executive Services. 0141 618 7414*

Appendix 1: Renfrewshire Council Annual Complaints Report SPSO Indicators



The total number of complaints received, frontline and investigation	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Total number of complaints received (open and closed)	6,752	8,200	7,924
Number of complaints closed at Frontline Response as a percentage of all complaints	95.9%	89.1%	86.8%
Number of complaints closed at Frontline Response	6,478	7,307	6,879
Number of complaints closed at Investigation	274	893	1,045
Number of complaints closed at Investigation as a percentage of all complaints	4.05%	10.89%	13.2%
Number of complaints closed at Investigation after escalation	9	7	3
Number of complaints closed at Investigation after escalation as a percentage of all complaints	0.13%	0.8%	0.03%
The average time in working days for a full response to complaints at each stage	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20*
Average time in working days to respond to complaints at Frontline Response	5.9	5.3	3.3

The average time in working days for a full response to complaints at each stage	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20*
Average time in working days to respond to complaints at Investigation	12.7	15	13.3
Average time in working days to respond to complaints after escalation	20	9	11

**the data excludes Environment & infrastructure Services and Children Services, who used a different complaint system during 2019/20*

The number and percentage of complaints at each stage which were responded to in full within the set timescales	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Number of complaints closed at Frontline Response within 5 working days as a percentage of the total number of Frontline Response complaints	72.4%	77.5%	72%
Number of complaints closed at Investigation within 20 working days as a percentage of total number of Investigation complaints	94.96%	73.9%	87%

The number and percentage of complaints where an extension to the timescale has been authorised	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Number of complaints closed at Frontline Response where extension was authorised, as a percentage of all complaints at Frontline Response	0.09%	0.2%	0.0%
Number of complaints closed at Investigation where extension was authorised, as a percentage of all complaints closed at Investigation	0%	0.6%	0.03% *

**the data excludes Environment & infrastructure Services and Children Services, who used a different complaint system during 2019/20*