

To: Audit, Risk and Scrutiny Board

On: 25 October 2021

Report by: Chief Executive

Heading: 2020/21 Complaints Handling Performance

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 2020 to 31 March 2021 and performance on key indicators, as well as highlighting improvements made to the complaints handling procedure (CHP) over the past year to ensure that complaints are handled well, and the organisation learns from them and improves services.
- 1.4 2020/21 has been a year of unprecedented challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with no service being untouched by changes to service delivery and with a range of new services requiring to be delivered in response to restrictions in place. It is recognised by the SPSO and Councils that the pandemic also had an impact on complaints handling, as many staff who are responsible for complaints handling were redeployed to critical response work, or provided advice on new services, grants or support available. Despite the significant challenges of the pandemic, services have continued to strive to resolve complaints and support customers through the process, as a result performance for

complaints handling has remained comparatively stable over 2020/21, which is a credit to our committed workforce.

1.5 The key messages highlighted in the report are as follows:

- 6,179 complaints were received in 2020/21, which has decreased from 7,294 in 2019/20
- 84.1% of our complaints are dealt with as frontline response, demonstrating the Council's commitment to getting it right first time in response to complaints (86.8% in 2019/20)
- 73% of frontline complaints and 74.8% of investigation complaints received were completed within target timescales (72% and 87% respectively in 2019/20)
- the average time to respond to frontline complaints was 10 days, which is above the SPSO target of 5 days, further information is provided in section 6 of the report
- the average time to respond to an investigation complaint was 15 days, which is within the SPSO target of 20 days
- 2020/21 breakdown of complaints received by services is broadly reflective of the volume of services provided, with Environment and Infrastructure delivering the highest volume and widest scope 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, which all local authorities were required to implement by April 2021
- a new system to support the logging of and learning from complaints was launched by the Council in April 2020, which has meant performance data comes from a single source, this will improve business intelligence and customer insight data
- over the Summer the SPSO issued a Performance Indicators framework for consultation, as part of the revised model complaints handling procedure (MCHP).

1.6 A performance scorecard has been included within the appendix of this report to provide additional data. The performance indicators that have declined in performance for 2020/21 will be further explored and monitored, working closely with services to identify where additional support and guidance is required.

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, and has been reviewed to include updated guidance over the years.

- 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 complains that a staff member failed to attend a scheduled appointment. When this is reported, the service should provide an apology and reschedule the appointment at a suitable time for the customer.

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 complaint may relate to the standard or nature of a repair within a Council property which requires an inspection or visit to investigate. As a supervisor or manager might need to examine the repair to assess this and agree with the customer the corrective work required, this will most likely require the 20 day timescale.

- 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'.

- 3.6 As there is no longer a standalone Social Work Model Complaints Handling procedure from the SPSO, social work complaints are handled as part of the SPSO Local Authority procedure, the data for these services are included in the service charts below. The 77 complaints across social work services relate to services provided by Children's Services and the Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP), Social Work Children's Services received 40 complaints, and the HSCP received 37 complaints.

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 in 2019, Local Authorities had 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:
- a new outcome to a complaint has been 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 2021, the focus has been on communicating these national changes to staff. The Council's complaints policy has been updated to reflect these changes with additional guidance provided to staff.

5. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on complaints handling

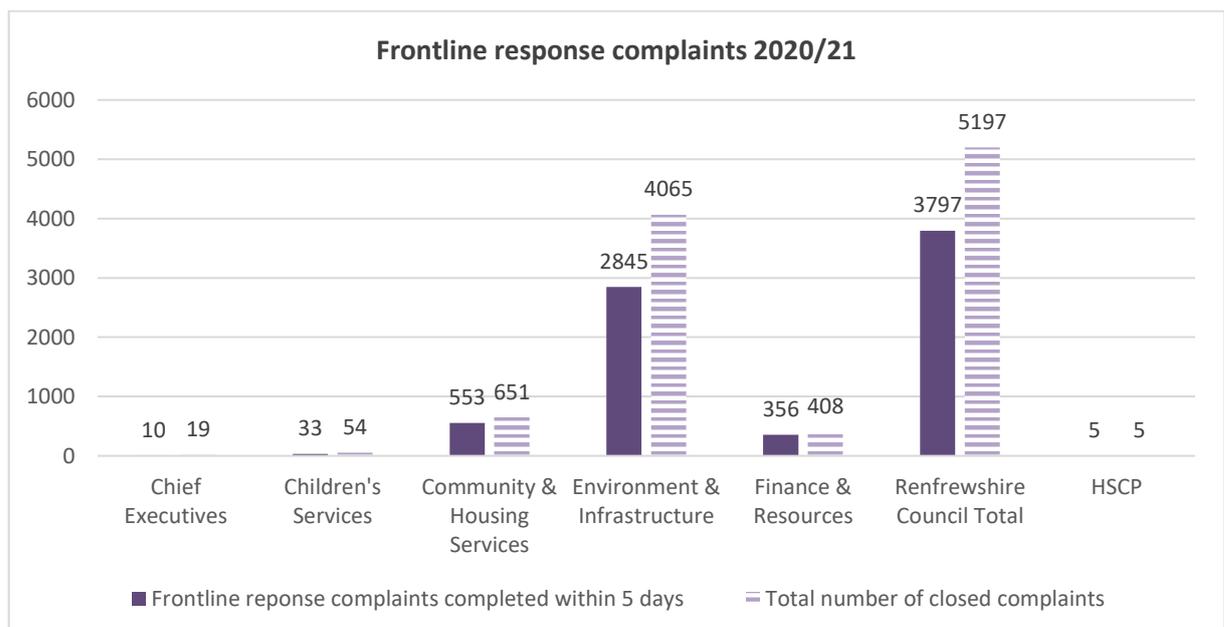
- 5.1 Nationally, the COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on complaints handling and it is recognised by Councils that many staff who are responsible for complaints handling were redeployed to critical response work, or provided advice on new services, grants or support available. Despite the significant challenges of the pandemic, services have continued to strive to resolve complaints at frontline, they have quickly adapted to the roll out of a new complaint system, the Council's statutory requirements were met, and the new MCHP was implemented on time.

- 5.2 In terms of the impact that the pandemic has had on the Council's complaints handling for 2020/21, some areas to note are:
- **variation in quarterly data** – during the first lockdown, there was a 53% decrease in number of complaints received in quarter 1, April to June 2020, than with the previous year's quarter (for quarter 1 in 2019/20 the Council received 1,780 complaints compared to 882 received for quarter 1 in 2020/21). However, for quarter 4, January to March 2021, the Council received almost 1,000 more complaints than the previous year's comparator quarter.
 - **channel shift**– during lockdowns/tier 4 restrictions there was a notable channel shift by customers, with an increase of complaints made directly through a customer's MyAccount. For April 2020 this represented 43% and for January 2021 this was 37% of all complaints logged, yet when restrictions eased this decreased and there was an increase through the Customer Service Unit to log complaints.
 - **targets** – the SPSO made no changes to the statutory targets for the complaints handling procedure during the initial stage of the pandemic, this was in contrast to the Information Commissioner who extended the provision for FOIs from 20 working days to 60 working days for April and May 2020. The Council also received an increase in complex investigation complaints, and as such there was a decrease in investigation complaints completed within the target of 20 days from 87% in 2019/20 to 74.8% for 2020/21.
 - **escalation and extension** – the SPSO reminded public bodies that the MCHP provides some flexibility in terms of timescales if the process is followed, and complainers are kept informed. This advice included escalating a frontline response complaint or applying an extension of timescales for investigation complaints. For 2020/21, there was a significant increase in applying an agreed extension as a percentage of all complaints closed at investigation, for 2019/20 this was 0.03% and this increased to 9% or 81 complaints for 2020/21 (9% extension for investigation complaints is in line with the Scottish average position).
- 5.3 When reviewing 2021/22 performance these factors are actively being considered to identify any trends and comparisons.

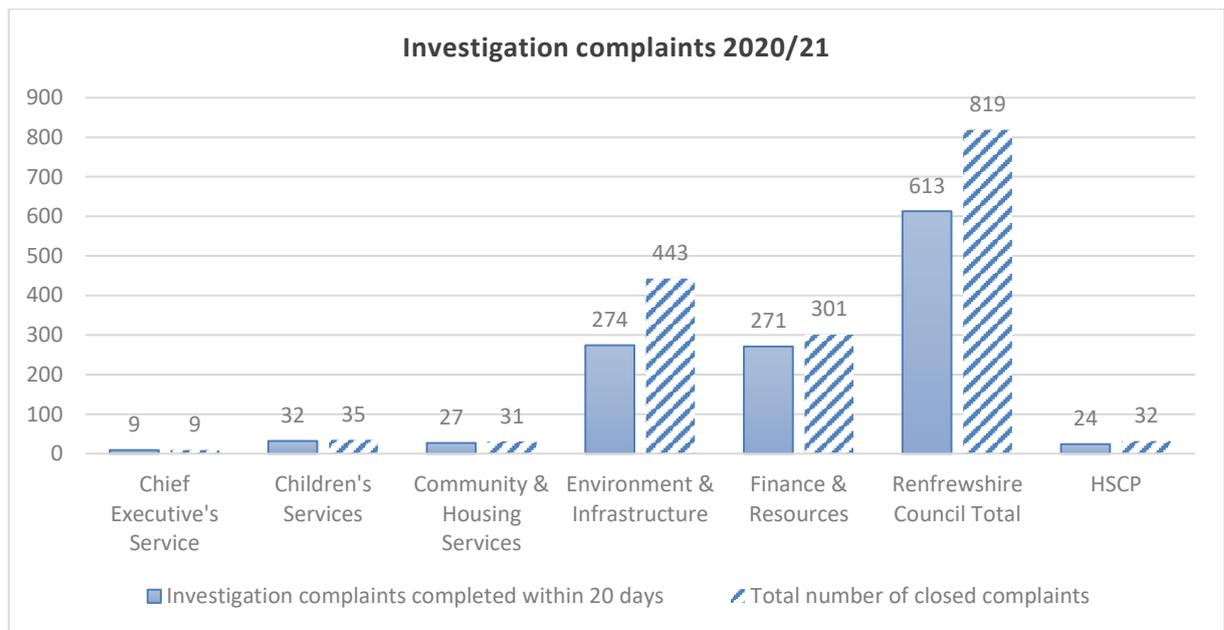
6. 2020/21 Council Performance

- 6.1 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 key performance indicators related to the SPSO complaints handling procedure. This report provides information on the complaints closed during the period 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021 and Appendix 1 details Renfrewshire Council's complaints performance for 2020/21 against these key SPSO performance indicators.
- 6.2 With the new complaints system, launched in April 2020, all Council services (with the exception of schools) logged their complaints on the same system. This means that for reporting purposes, all performance data is now taken from a single source for the first time and comparisons between years should be treated with caution.
- 6.3 In 2020/21, the number of complaints received decreased from 7,924 to 6,179. This reduction is likely to be attributed to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has affected both the number of complaints being received, and the nature of complaints.

- 6.4 The Council strives to ensure that complaints are answered correctly first time and that customers are responded to quickly, and during 2020/21 84.1% of complaints were addressed through a frontline response. 73% of frontline complaints and 74.8% of investigation complaints received were completed within target timescales, this compares with 72% and 87% respectively in 2019/20.
- 6.5 The average time to respond to an investigation complaint was 15 days, which is within the SPSO target of 20 days. As highlighted in previous reports, prior to April 2020, both Environment and Infrastructure and Children’s Services used a different system and therefore the Council’s average time to complete frontline and investigation complaints performance indicators did not previously include these service areas. Since all services have now moved to use the new system this has resulted in a significant increase in the indicator for frontline complaints - the average time to respond to a frontline response complaint was 10 days, which is above the SPSO target of 5 days. The reasons for the increase in days to respond are being explored and early indications suggest a mixture of longer response times, the impact of COVID-19 both on service provision and on back-office functions and also the roll out of this new system to a high-volume service. Performance for 2021/22 has improved so far, for quarter 1 (April to June 2021) the average time to respond to a frontline response complaint was 5.15 days.
- 6.6 The bar charts below show the service breakdown of total complaints received and those closed within the timescales, during the period 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021. This is for both frontline response and investigation complaints. The complaints for social work services are included in services provided by Children’s Services and the Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP), whilst the data for the Chief Executive’s Service also includes those complaints directly to the Chief Executive. The data for the HSCP has been included in the below bar charts, yet it is excluded in the total Renfrewshire Council position and in the scorecard at appendix 1.



6.7 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, and the most diverse, covering over 270 Council premises, 92,000 households and businesses, collects 155,000 bins each week and supports more than 849 km of roads and transport infrastructure. 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 received by this service in 2020/21, due to a strengthening of the complaints process within the service.



6.8 For the indicators that have declined in performance, the reasons will continue to be explored to understand the trends and the impact of COVID impact over time, working closely with services to identify where additional support and guidance is required. Work is also ongoing in partnership between the Council and our system supplier to continue to develop the new complaints system to ensure it meets the needs of all services and allows us to accurately reflect performance. Performance will continue to be closely monitored across all services throughout the year.

6.9 Within the capabilities of the new complaints system, customers can also provide comments and compliments. During 2020/21, some of these were in relation to services the Council continued to provide during lockdown or new services/support that were provided during the pandemic. A few examples of these compliments are provided below:

- "Just to say a very BIG thank you to our Refuse Collectors. Thanks for your prompt service in lifting my missed Brown Bins. And also, for continuing to provide a service during this crisis."
- "Thank you so much for your time and effort for helping me with my Small Business Bonus Scheme (SBBS) grant application. I really appreciate your help. The staff were kind and very approachable. Thank you."
- "I would like to thank all the employees who are continuing to work throughout this difficult period in order to support Council services. They are doing a fantastic job."

- “With care and social distancing they just got on with the work [housing repair], keeping us fully informed of what was happening and reassuring us that the problem would be resolved asap, to which they did. All of their team were so helpful. We can't thank them enough.”

7. Learning from complaints and improving the Council's complaints procedure

- 7.1 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 single system. Customers not on MyAccount can also still log a complaint online using an online form 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.
- 7.2 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 remains in place.
- 7.3 In preparation for the implementation of the SPSO's revised complaints procedure, additional training materials were developed, highlighting the key changes to the procedure, as well as updated staff guides.
- 7.4 Learning and benchmarking opportunities have continued to be pursued through the Local Authority Complaint Handlers Network (LACHN) and regular meetings with the complaint system supplier occur to identify future developments for the system. The Complaints Development and Review Group continue to meet to identify where additional support and guidance is required, training and learning opportunities for services, and discuss and consult on national developments.

8. New statutory developments

- 8.1 In line with the revised Model Complaints Handling Procedure, the SPSO circulated draft complaints performance indicators for consultation in June 2021. These consist of five core indicators (which are broadly in keeping with the indicators currently reported) and three recommended indicators, which include raising awareness, staff training and customer satisfaction. In conjunction with the internal Complaints Development and Review Group, a response to the consultation has been sent to the Local Authority Complaints Handlers Network who will draft a response to the SPSO on behalf of all Local Authorities. Once the consultation is complete and the indicators published, these will be used to monitor performance for 2021/22 data collection.
- 8.2 In preparation for collating this new return, work is underway to measure the complaints training accessed by employees, either through internal channels (such as the iLearn course), or through external sources. This will also provide an opportunity to develop a programme of training courses and materials that can be shared with officers to continue their professional development in this key area of service delivery.

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: Draft 'SPSO Key Performance Indicators for the Model Complaints Handling procedure'

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Appendix 1: Renfrewshire Council Annual Complaints Report SPSO Indicators



The total number of complaints received, frontline and investigation	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Total number of complaints received (open and closed)	8,200	7,924	6,179
Number of complaints closed at Frontline Response as a percentage of all complaints	89.1%	86.8%	84.1%
Number of complaints closed at Frontline Response	7,307	6,879	5,197
Number of complaints closed at Investigation	893	1,045	819
Number of complaints closed at Investigation as a percentage of all complaints	10.89%	13.2%	13.2%
Number of complaints closed at Investigation after escalation	7	3	81
Number of complaints closed at Investigation after escalation as a percentage of all complaints	0.8%	0.03%	1.31%
The average time in working days for a full response to complaints at each stage	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Average time in working days to respond to complaints at Frontline Response	5.3*	3.3 *	10

The average time in working days for a full response to complaints at each stage	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Average time in working days to respond to complaints at Investigation	15*	13.3*	15
Average time in working days to respond to complaints after escalation	9*	11 *	10

**the data excludes Environment & infrastructure and Children's Services, who used a different complaint system before 2020/21*

The number and percentage of complaints at each stage which were responded to in full within the set timescales	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Number of complaints closed at Frontline Response within 5 working days as a percentage of the total number of Frontline Response complaints	77.5%	72%	73%
Number of complaints closed at Investigation within 20 working days as a percentage of total number of Investigation complaints	73.9%	87%	74.8%

The number and percentage of complaints where an extension to the timescale has been authorised	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Number of complaints closed at Frontline Response where extension was authorised, as a percentage of all complaints at Frontline Response	0.2%*	0.0%*	0.0%
Number of complaints closed at Investigation where extension was authorised, as a percentage of all complaints closed at Investigation	0.6%*	0.03% *	8.96%

**the data excludes Environment & infrastructure and Children's Services, who used a different complaint system before 2020/21*