

The background of the slide features a large, light blue watermark of the Coat of Arms of the City of Edinburgh. The crest includes a crown with four thistles, a shield divided into four quarters (top-left: a saltire, top-right: a stag's head, bottom-left: a ship, bottom-right: an eagle), and a motto scroll at the bottom with the text 'ANE FOR A'.

Agenda Item 7

Complaints Annual Report 2019/20

Falkirk Council

Title: Complaints Annual Report 2019/20
Meeting: Scrutiny Committee
Date: 12 November 2020
Submitted By: Director of Corporate & Housing Services

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to present the Council's Complaints Annual Report for 2019/20 (Appendix 1).

2. Recommendation

2.1 The Scrutiny Committee is asked to: -

(1) consider the Council's complaints performance between April 2019 and March 2020.

3. Background

- 3.1 As Members will be aware, the Council's Complaints Handling Procedure (CHP) follows the model developed by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO). The model CHP applies to all local authorities and all local authority services.
- 3.2 The Council's CHP is based on a two-stage process, the first being frontline resolution and the second being investigation. The term "frontline" is used to mean the first stage of the complaints procedure, not a job role within the Council.
- **Frontline resolution** – issues that are straightforward and easily resolved, requiring little or no investigation. This means "on the spot" apology, explanation or other action to resolve the complaint within five working days. Complaints are addressed by staff or referred to the appropriate point for resolution. Complaint details, outcome and action taken are recorded and used for service improvement.
 - **Investigation** – issues that have not been resolved at the first stage or that are complex, serious or "high risk". This means a definitive response is provided within 20 working days following a thorough investigation of the points raised. Responses are signed off by senior management. Senior management are expected to have an active

interest in complaints and to ensure the information gathered is used to improve services.

- 3.3 The second stage investigation is the Council's final opportunity to address a complaint before it is considered by the SPSO. Investigations are carried out by Service Unit Managers, with the final complaints responses signed off at Head of Service level or above. Following investigation, if customers are still dissatisfied with our decision or the way we dealt with their complaint, they can ask the SPSO to look at it.
- 3.4 Each Service has a nominated lead officer for complaints and a Complaints Officers' Working Group is in place. At a national level, a Local Authority Complaints Handlers network has been established in conjunction with the SPSO and a Knowledge Hub forum has been set up so that Councils can share good practice and common queries. Falkirk Council is part of this group which meets on a quarterly basis.

4. Considerations

- 4.1 The SPSO has set eight indicators for complaints performance. Councils are required to report on these on a yearly basis and to publish an annual complaints report. The indicators are:
- Complaints received per 1,000 population
 - Number of complaints closed
 - Complaints upheld, partially upheld and not upheld
 - Average response times
 - Performance against timescales
 - Number of cases where an extension is authorised
 - Customer satisfaction
 - Learning from complaints.
- 4.2 Appendix 1 provides information on complaints handling within the Council during 2019/20. It sets out our performance against the indicators set by the SPSO and compares it with the previous year. National benchmarking information is not available, however in previous years the figures for Falkirk Council were close to or better than the national average in terms of the number of complaints closed at stage one and the number of complaints upheld. 4.3 In 2019/20, the Council received more complaints per 1,000 population than in the previous year (30.9 compared to 22.9) and 91% of these were closed at stage one. In total 4,979 complaints were received, as against 3670 in 2018/19. The areas of service that generated the highest volume of complaints were household waste collection (984) housing repairs (980) and staff conduct (521). There was an increase in complaints about household waste collection, with 984 in 2019/20 compared to

456 in 2018/19. The reporting period covered the start of the coronavirus outbreak, where the service was most impacted with absence and coronavirus restrictions resulting with the suspension of brown bin collections on 19 March, suspension of the blue and burgundy bins from 24 March and closure of Household Waste Recycling Centres on 26 March. As well as the impact of coronavirus outbreak, the service went through a significant change with the implementation of the burgundy bin across the authority in the latter half of 2019 and the rise in complaints is attributable to these factors.

- 4.3 There was no significant variance in the percentage of complaints closed at stage two or the number closed at stage two after escalation. Escalated complaints are those that proceed straight to stage two due to being serious, high risk or requiring complex investigation.
- 4.4 In terms of performance against timescales, 89% of stage one complaints were closed within the five-day deadline and 63% of stage two complaints were closed within the 20-day deadline. This is an increase from 58% of stage two complaints closed within the timescale in 2018/19. It should be noted that relatively few complaints are considered at stage two, only 75 in 2019/20 and 62 in 2018/19.
- 4.5 43% of complaints were upheld or partially upheld at stage one and 49% were upheld or partially upheld at stage two. The figures for 2018/19 were 51% and 49% respectively. There was a significant increase in the number of complaints referred to the SPSO for resolution, from 22 last year to 42 in 2019/20, however only one of them was investigated by the SPSO. It was not upheld and there were no recommendations.
- 4.6 The top ten areas for complaints received from 1 April 2019 - 31 March 2020 were:

Stage 1 Top 10 Complaints

Household waste collection	984
Housing repairs	980
Staff conduct	521
Other	173
Recycling advice	171
Household waste assisted collection	118
Local schools	109
Tenant support	109
Council tax account enquiries	104
Bulky household waste collection	59

Stage 2 Top 10 Complaints

Housing repairs	78
Household waste collection	57
Staff conduct	56
Local schools	30
Communal housing repairs	20
Household waste assisted collection	15
Housing nuisance	15
Recycling advice	11
Tenant support	10
Other	9

- 4.8 Customer satisfaction with contact with the Council is captured using a variety of channels. We have previously carried out a survey of our Citizens Panel to see how satisfied they were with how the Council deals with complaints. This exercise will be refreshed during 2021 and the complaints officers' working group is looking at options such as surveying all customers at the end of the process to gather their views. This means an annual evaluation could be carried out and improvements made where required.
- 4.9 The SPSO is clear that Councils should have processes in place to help them learn from complaints and review and change service delivery if required. The annual report contains examples of how complaints learning has been applied in Services. This includes additional training for staff, the creation of a new Customer Services team in Housing and increased use of online forms in Revenues & Benefits.

5. Consultation

- 5.1 This report has been prepared in consultation with the Corporate Complaints Group.

6. Implications Financial

- 6.1 There are no financial implications arising from this report.

Resources

- 6.2 There are no resource implications arising from this report.

Legal

- 6.3 There are no legal implications arising from this report.

Risk

- 6.4 There are no risk implications arising from this report.

Equalities

- 6.5 No equalities assessment was required.

Sustainability/Environmental Impact

- 6.6 No sustainability assessment was required.

7. Conclusions

- 7.1 As noted in the report, the Council is required to report on complaints performance on an annual basis and publishing the information in Appendix 1 will fulfil that obligation.

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Appendices

Falkirk Council Complaints Annual Report 2019/20

List of Background Papers:

The following papers were relied on in the preparation of this report in terms of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973:

None

Falkirk
Council
Complaints
Annual
Report
2019/20

Falkirk Council takes complaints seriously and wants to learn from them.

This report provides information about how the Council dealt with complaints from the public during 2019/20.



Performance indicators are set by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) and Councils have to report on their performance annually.

This report sets out the Council's performance against the indicators set by the SPSO during 2019/20. It also provides information about how Council services are learning from complaints.



Our Complaints Procedure

The Council’s Complaints Handling Procedure (CHP) follows the model developed by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO). The model CHP applies to all local authorities and all local authority services, including Social Work which implemented the CHP on 1 April 2017.

The Council’s CHP is based on a two-stage process. The first stage is frontline resolution and the second is investigation.

Frontline resolution is for issues that are straightforward and easily resolved, requiring little or no investigation. This means ‘on the spot’ apology, explanation or other action to resolve the complaint within five working days or less. Complaints are addressed by staff or referred to the appropriate point for resolution. Complaint details, outcome and action taken are recorded and used for service improvement.

Stage Two investigations are for issues that have not been resolved at the first stage or that are complex, serious or ‘high risk’. This means a response is provided within 20 working days following an investigation of the points raised.

Following investigation, if customers are still dissatisfied with our decision or the way we dealt with their complaint, they can ask the SPSO to look at it. The SPSO cannot normally look at a complaint that has not completed our complaints procedure first.

This report provides information on complaints handling within the Council during 2019/20. It sets out our performance against the indicators set by the SPSO and includes benchmarking information, drawn from past exercises carried out by the Improvement Service and Audit Scotland.

Each Service has a nominated lead officer for complaints and a complaint officers’ Working Group is in place. At a national level, a Local Authority Complaint Handlers Network has been established for a few years now in conjunction with the SPSO and a Knowledge Hub forum is also established so that Councils can share good practice and common queries. Falkirk Council is part of this group which meets on a quarterly basis.

Complaints Indicators

The SPSO has set eight indicators for complaints performance. These cover:

- Complaints received per 1,000 population
- Number of complaints closed
- Complaints upheld, partially upheld and not upheld
- Average response times
- Performance against timescales
- Number of cases where an extension is authorised
- Customer satisfaction
- Learning from complaints

The Council’s performance against these indicators for 2019/20 is set out with comparative information for 2018/19.

Indicator One Complaints Received Per 1,000 Population

The population of the Council area is 160,890.

2019/20	2018/19
Complaints received - 4979	Complaints received - 3670
Complaints per 1000 - 30.9	Complaints per 1000 - 22.9

Indicator Two Closed Complaints

	2019/20	%	2018/19	%
Total complaints closed	4979	99.81%	3660	100%
Total complaints closed at stage 1	4544	91%	3310	90%
Total complaints closed at stage 2	75	2%	62	2%
Total complaints closed at stage 2 after escalation	351	7%	288	8%

Indicator Three Complaints Upheld, Partially Upheld & Not Upheld

Stage One Complaints

	2019/20	2018/19
Number of complaints closed at stage 1	4544	3310
Number of complaints upheld at stage 1	1099	999
Number of complaints upheld at stage 1 as a % of all complaints closed in full at stage 1	24.19%	30%
Number of complaints partially upheld at stage 1	836	685
Number of complaints partially upheld as a % of all complaints closed in full at stage 1	18.40%	21%
% of complaints upheld or partially upheld at stage 1	42.59%	51%
Number of complaints not upheld at stage 1	2609	1626
Number of complaints not upheld at stage 1 as a % of all complaints closed in full at stage 1	57.41%	49%

Stage Two Complaints

	2019/20	2018/19
Number of complaints closed at stage 2	75	62
Number of complaints upheld at stage 2	14	7
Number of complaints upheld at stage 2 as a % of all complaints closed in full at stage 2	18.66%	11.29%
Number of complaints partially upheld at stage 2	23	17
Number of complaints partially upheld as a % of all complaints closed in full at stage 2	30.67%	27.42%
% of complaints upheld or partially upheld at stage 2	49.33%	39%
Number of complaints not upheld at stage 2	38	38
Number of complaints not upheld at stage 2 as a % of all complaints closed in full at stage 2	50.67%	61.29%

Escalated Complaints

	2019/20	2018/19
Number of complaints closed after escalation	351	288
Number of complaints upheld after escalation	101	47
Number of escalated complaints upheld at stage 2 as a % of all escalated complaints closed in full at stage 2	28.77%	16%
Number of complaints partially upheld after escalation	91	84
Number of escalated complaints partially upheld at stage 2 as a % of all escalated complaints closed in full at stage 2	25.93%	29%
Number of complaints not upheld after escalation	159	157
Number of escalated complaints not upheld at stage 2 as a % of all escalated complaints closed in full at stage 2	45.30%	55%

Indicator Four Average Response Times

Stage 1	2019/20	2018/19
Number of complaints closed at stage 1	4544	3310
Average time in working days for a full response at stage 1	5 (target 5)	5 (target 5)
Stage 2		
Number of complaints closed at stage 2	75	62
Average time in working days for a full response at stage 2	26 (target = 20)	21 (target = 20)
Escalated		
Number of complaints closed after escalation	351	288
Average time in working days for a full response after escalation	20 (target = 20)	16 (target = 20)

Indicator Five Performance Against Timescales

Stage 1	2019/20	2018/19
Number of complaints closed at stage 1	4544	3310
Number of complaints closed at stage 1 within 5 working days	4035	2872
Number of complaints closed at stage 1 within 5 working days as a % of total stage 1 complaints	89%	87%
Stage 2		
Number of complaints closed at stage 2	75	62
Number of complaints closed at stage 2 within 20 working days	47	36
Number of complaints closed at stage 2 within 20 working days as a % of total stage 2 complaints	63%	58%
Escalated		
Number of complaints closed after escalation	351	288
Number of complaints closed after escalation within 20 working days	274	247
Number of complaints closed after escalation within 20 working days as a % of total escalated complaints	78%	86%

Indicator Six Use of Extensions

Stage One	2019/20	2018/19
Number of complaints closed at stage 1	4544	3310
Number of complaints closed at stage 1 where an extension was authorised	78	102
Number of complaints closed at stage 1 where an extension was authorised as a % of total stage 1 complaints	2%	3%

Stage Two	2019/20	2018/19
Number of complaints closed at stage 2	75	62
Number of complaints closed at stage 2 where an extension was authorised	9	11
Number of complaints closed at stage 2 where an extension was authorised as a % of total stage 2 complaints	12%	18%
Escalated		
Number of complaints closed after escalation	351	288
Number of complaints closed after escalation where an extension was authorised	11	7
Number of complaints closed after escalation where an extension was authorised as a % of all complaints escalated	3%	2%

Indicator Seven Customer Satisfaction

We are aware consultation is needed and the complaint officers’ Working Group is looking at options which include surveying all customers at the end of the complaints process for their views. This means an annual evaluation can be carried out and improvement made where needed.

Promotional activity will continue to refresh the current Citizens Panel to encourage greater resident participation.

Indicator Eight Learning from Complaints

The SPSO is clear that Councils should have processes in place to help them learn from complaints and review and change service delivery if required. This section outlines areas where service provision has been reviewed and improved in response to complaints. To help identify cross-cutting issues, the complaints working group is identifying themes against which complaints will be recorded eg service failure, information failure, and attitude of staff. This will allow recurring issues to be addressed on a Council-wide basis with further guidance and training provided if required.

The areas of service which generated the highest volume of complaints over the year were household waste collection, housing repairs and staff conduct.



Children’s Services

Throughout 2019/20 we continued to make use of the ‘theme’ field in Customer First which enables us to identify any recurring or similar complaints received by Children’s Services.

One of the themes identified was ‘service delivery’. For example, from a complaint we received in relation to approaches to Early Years pedagogy it was identified that further work is required to support parents’ understanding of this area. This particular complaint was dealt with at ELC/School level, with discussions with the parent and ended in a satisfactory resolution.

The theme field has also helped flag up any communication issues which may arise from time to time within our Service. We are reviewing areas and the methods we use to ensure we communicate quickly and clearly.

We intend to continue to use this tool for identifying lessons learned and to encourage its use by schools and ELCs when recording and closing complaints on Customer First.

Adult Social Work

Monitoring and managing complaints is an important aspect of governance and quality management with Adult Social Work. It also helps ensure that any necessary improvement actions arising from complaints are followed up and implemented.

Our performance continues to improve, with a significantly lower proportion of both Stage 1 and 2 complaints being upheld, a trend since 2018/19. It is important to note that the number of complaints remains low given the large number of service user contacts during the year, with around 9,000 people receiving an assessment/review. Because of the low numbers, relatively small changes to meeting the timescales can seem significant.

The Partnership Management Team is keen to learn from complaints and ensure that all complaints are responded to within appropriate timescales. Complaint compliance now forms part of the standing agenda for their meeting, and complaints are reviewed on a monthly basis with any action being taken forward by senior managers. Weekly reports of complaints outstanding are provided to the Head of Service and Service Managers.

Corporate & Housing Services

Housing and Communities

2019/2020 has been a year of change for our service. The service has undergone restructuring, and we created a new Customer Service team whose focus is on our interactions with our customers.

We noticed an increase in complaints in 2019/2020, which we attribute to better recognition of being raised as complaints, and to making it easier for customers to engage with us, both digitally and through our dedicated Income and Customer Relations team.

We will continue to prioritise complaints and view them as a tool for learning and service improvement, although we recognise that this may be challenging in the current Covid-19 environment.

We will evaluate what we have learned from complaints through our case review group and ensure that we act on that learning. We will also ensure that staff are empowered to resolve issues quickly where possible, to prevent them from escalating. We will do this by providing further training and guidance to staff on dealing effectively with complaints. In addition, we will continue to analyse the information we have available on complaints, seeking to make better use of all the data we hold to identify trends and areas for improvement.

Revenues & Benefits

By engaging early and tailoring contact to customer preferences, we are continuing to reduce the number of complaints we receive in the pursuit of rent and Council Tax. We are also providing more flexible payment options and able to offer practical solutions to any customer who falls into debt.

Our Welfare Benefits & Debt Advice team are an integral part of the service allowing more informed decision making, better recognition of the needs of our most vulnerable customers and, where appropriate, a collaborative approach to ensure holistic and effective remedies are implemented when issues do arise.

We continue to develop our online forms and the associated automation to speed up outcomes for customers. All complaints are monitored weekly by senior managers to make sure prompt responses are provided and any live issues identified and addressed.

Development Services

Our senior managers continue to monitor complaints weekly to ensure that any issues are identified and responded to promptly. Where a complaint is upheld, our management team make sure that suitable lessons are learnt and that steps are taken to improve service delivery to better meet the needs of our customers.

We are progressing a number of workstreams to improve how we communicate with our customers through My Falkirk, including the introduction of new service-specific web forms and process automation that will speed-up these interactions.



Complaints Considered by the SPSO

During 2019/20 42 new complaints were notified to the Council by the SPSO. These are broken down by Service area in the table opposite.

Corporate & Housing Services		
Number of new complaints received		
2019/20	2018/19	Difference
21	9	+12

Development Services		
Number of new complaints received		
2019/20	2018/19	Difference
9	6	+3

Children's Services		
Number of new complaints received		
2019/20	2018/19	Difference
11	7	+4

Social Work Adult Services		
Number of new complaints received		
2019/20	2018/19	Difference
1	0	1

Total		
Number of new complaints received		
2019/20	2018/19	Difference
42	22	+20