

The background of the cover is a photograph of a modern building with a blue and white facade, taken from a low angle looking up. A large, dark grey semi-transparent rectangle is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing the title text. The text is arranged in six lines, with varying colors: 'Falkirk' and 'Council' are white, 'Complaints' is yellow-green, 'Annual' and 'Report' are pink, and '2015/16' is also pink.

Falkirk
Council
Complaints
Annual
Report
2015/16

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
2015/16.





Performance indicators for complaints 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 2015/16. It includes benchmarking information so that our performance can be compared to that of other Councils. This information is drawn from recent exercises carried out by the Improvement Service and Audit Scotland. The report 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, with the exception of Social Work which will implement the CHP in 2017. The procedure also applies to arm's length organisations and has been adopted by Falkirk Community Trust.

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

- **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 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.
- **Investigation** - 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 2015/16. It sets out our performance against the indicators set by the SPSO and includes benchmarking information, drawn from recent exercises carried out by the Improvement Service and Audit Scotland.

Each Service has a nominated lead officer for complaints and a Complaints Officers' Working Group is in place.

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 2015/16 is set out in this report, with comparative information from previous years.

For some indicators, national benchmarking information is also included. This is drawn from an exercise carried out in 2015 by the Improvement Service when all Councils were asked to submit performance information. There were some significant differences across the 32 local authorities, however the figures for Falkirk Council appear to be close to or better than the national average in terms of performance against timescales.

Indicator One

Complaints Received Per 1,000 Population

The population of the Council area is 157,640.

2015/16	2014/15	2013/14	All LAs 2014/15
Complaints received - 2,476	Complaints received - 1,788	Complaints received - 1,287	Total 67,620
Complaints per 1,000 - 16	Complaints per 1,000 - 11	Complaints per 1,000 - 8	Per 1,000 - 12.9

Indicator Two

Closed Complaints

	15/16	%	14/15	%	13/14	%	All LAs 14/15
Total complaints closed	2,483	100%	1,744	100	1,287	100	100
Total complaints closed at stage 1	2,289	92.2%	1,567	89.9%	1,193	93%	82%
Total complaints closed at stage two	194	7.8%	177	10.1%	94	7%	18%

Indicator Three

Complaints Upheld, Partially Upheld & Not Upheld

Stage One Complaints

	2015/16	2014/15	All LAs
Number of complaints closed at stage 1 (frontline resolution)	2,289	1,567	-
Number of complaints upheld at stage 1	884	614	-
Number of complaints upheld at stage 1 as a % of all complaints closed in full at stage one	38.6%	39.2%	-
Number of complaints partially upheld at stage 1	331	258	-
Number of complaints partially upheld at stage 1 as a % of all complaints closed in full at stage one	14.5%	16.5%	-
% of complaints upheld or partially upheld at stage 1	53.1%	55.7%	68.1%
Number of complaints not upheld at stage 1	1,074	695	-
Number of complaints not upheld at stage 1 as a % of all complaints closed in full at stage 1	46.9%	44.4%	31.9%

Stage Two Complaints

	2015/16	2014/15	All LAs
Number of complaints closed at stage 2 (investigation)	194	177	-
Number of complaints upheld at stage 2	44	34	-
Number of complaints upheld at stage 2 as a % of all complaints closed in full at stage one	22.7%	19.2%	-
Number of complaints partially upheld at stage 2	52	57	-
Number of complaints partially upheld at stage 2 as a % of all complaints closed in full at stage one	26.8%	32.2%	-
% of all complaints upheld or partially upheld at stage 2	49.5%	51.4%	68.9%
Number of complaints not upheld at stage 2	98	86	-
Number of complaints not upheld at stage 2 as a % of all complaints closed in full at stage 2	50.5%	48.6%	31.1%

Escalated Complaints

	2015/16	2014/15
Number of complaints closed after escalation	149	120
Number of complaints upheld after escalation	38	26
The number of escalated complaints upheld at stage 2 as a % of all escalated complaints closed in full at stage 2	25%	21.7%
Number of complaints not upheld after escalation	71	57
The number of escalated complaints not upheld at stage 2 as a % of all escalated complaints closed in full at stage 2	47.7%	47.5%
The number of complaints partially upheld after escalation	40	37
The number of escalated complaints partially upheld at stage 2 as a % of all escalated complaints closed in full at stage 2	26.8%	30.8%

Indicator Four

Average Response Times

Stage 1	2015/16	2014/15	All LAs
Sum of the total number of working days taken for all complaints closed at stage 1	11,573	8,386	-
Number of complaints closed at stage 1 (frontline resolution)	2,289	1,567	-
Average time in working days for a full response at stage 1	5.1 (target = 5)	5.4 (target = 5)	4.4 days
Stage 2			
Sum of the total number of working days taken for all complaints closed at stage 2	3,077	2,806	-
Number of complaints closed at stage 2 (investigation)	194	177	-
Average time in working days for a full response at stage 2	15.9 (target = 20)	15.9 (target = 20)	18.6 days
Escalated			
Sum of the total number of working days taken for all complaints closed after escalation	2,359	1,963	-
Number of complaints closed after escalation	149	120	-
Average time in working days for a full response after escalation	15.8	16.4	-

Indicator Five

Performance Against Timescales

Stage One	2015/16	2014/15	All LAs
Number of complaints closed at stage 1 (frontline resolution)	2,289	1,567	-
Number of complaints closed at stage 1 with 5 working days	1,958	1,278	-
Number of complaints closed at stage 1 within 5 working days as a % of total stage 1 complaints	85.5%	81.6%	80.8%
Stage Two			
Number of complaints closed at stage 2 (investigation)	194	177	-
Number of complaints closed at stage 2 within 20 working days	159	143	-
Number of complaints closed at stage 2 within 20 working days as a % of total stage 2 complaints	82%	80.8%	84.5%
Escalated			
Number of complaints closed after escalation	149	120	-
Number of complaints closed after escalation within 20 working days	119	95	-
Number of complaints closed after escalation within 20 working days as a % of total escalated complaints	79.9%	79.2%	-

Indicator Six

Use of Extensions

Stage One	2015/16	2014/15	All LAs
Total number of complaints closed at stage 1	2,289	1,567	-
Total number of complaints closed at stage 1 where an extension was authorised	163	115	-
Total number of complaints closed at stage 1 where an extension was authorised as a % of all complaints at stage 1	7.1%	7.3%	4%

Stage Two	2015/16	2014/15	All LAs
Total number of complaints closed at stage 2	194	117	-
Total number of complaints closed at stage 2 where an extension was authorised	18	18	-
Total number of complaints closed at stage 2 where an extension was authorised as a % of all complaints at stage 2	9.3%	10.2%	13.6%
Escalated			
Total number of complaints closed after escalation	149	120	-
Total number of complaints closed after escalation where an extension was authorised	13	13	-
Total number of complaints closed after escalation where an extension was authorised as a % of all complaints escalated	8.7%	10.8	-

Indicator Seven

Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction with contact with the Council is captured regularly using a variety of channels. The Citizens Panel questionnaire issued in February 2016 included a section on complaints, asking if panel members had made a complaint and what their experience of the process was. Areas covered included the following:

- Awareness of the complaints procedure
- Whether they had used it
- If the complaint was resolved to their satisfaction
- Satisfaction with the way it was handled
- Attitude of staff - sensitivity, time taken to deal with it, overall service
- The level of information they received
- How the process could be improved

The responses received show there is scope to improve the way that complaints are dealt with. Areas for improvement include dealing with problems promptly, level of information supplied and satisfaction with the final outcome. The findings will be reviewed by Service complaints leads and an improvement plan will be developed. Feedback from this exercise and from officers during recent training suggests that there can be a culture of defensiveness about complaints in some parts of the Council, rather than them being viewed as a genuine opportunity to improve services. To address this, strong and consistent messages about the importance of dealing with complaints positively need to come from managers.

Indicator Eight

Learning from Complaints

The SPSO is clear that Councils should have processes in place to help them learn lessons from the 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 e.g. service failure, information failure, attitude of staff. This will allow recurring issues to be addressed on a Council-wide basis, with further guidance and training provided if required.

How the Council learns from complaints is an area that Members are particularly interested in and it will be the subject of a future Scrutiny Panel led by Members.



Waste Management

Following changes to waste collection schedules earlier this year, a high number of complaints and enquiries were received. A number of these were about being unable to get through on the phone. In advance of the next change to collections the waste management team plan to put in place measures to minimise enquiries and complaints and to deal with them promptly. They have been working with the corporate communications team as well as the contact centre to ensure residents are as informed as possible about the changes and can make good use of the Council's website.

Development Management

A complaint about a conservatory extension within a conservation area highlighted the need for consistency in the wording of Planning Supplementary Guidance and conservation area management plans. A complainant raised the issue that the conservation management plan indicates that all applications should include submission of a design statement. The Service concluded that this was not what the guidance said and did not uphold the complaint. However, it was agreed that the guidance could be clearer and this would be addressed in the new Supplementary Guidance and in future revisions to the conservation management plans. The lesson learned was the need for guidance across documents to be consistent.

Housing

The findings of an SPSO enquiry recommended that training was provided to staff on our choice of language used in case notes (including house file notes, notes within our Capita System or other notes that have been used to log incidents etc.). In view of this, a training course was delivered to all staff who are responsible for completing case notes; this was sourced through Chartered Institute of Housing and delivered by a professional in this field. The purpose of this course was to ensure staff know what language is appropriate on case notes. Approximately 80 staff attended and feedback was 98% positive. A guidance note for staff to refer to has also been created, along with an online learning course on the principles of Data Protection which is compulsory for all new housing staff and also has to be completed by existing housing staff.

Further complaints training has also been delivered to housing staff, jointly with the Contact Centre. The training was well-received and highlighted the fact that complaints should be viewed as an opportunity to improve / change our service. Our aim was to pull away from the negativity that surrounds complaints and the myths with how long it takes to log complaints; we also wanted to staff to fully grasp that taking complaints from our customers is part of everyone's role and by capturing what customers are complaining about we can identify themes which will help to influence the future of our services.



Revenues & Benefits

A number of complaints resulted in changes to process / procedures. These included a complaint from a landlord regarding our inability to make payment of LHA to their Credit Union account. Partly as a result of this, payment to credit union account has been considered as a viable alternative method of payment.

Two complaints were made regarding the length of time taken to progress their appeal to tribunal. Additional resources were deployed to assist in the preparation of submissions which are then signed off by the Appeals Officer.

There were several complaints about the length of time taken to process Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction claims during a period where the service was experiencing backlogs due to a system upgrade. To respond to changes in volume and demand for service, a temporary centralised processing team was set up throughout the busier periods of the year to concentrate resources on this area of work.

There was a complaint as a result of data breach due to mail being issued to an out-of-date correspondence address. Additional checks are now built into the EDMS process maps prompting staff to check that any correspondence addresses on our Council Tax or Benefit records are accurate and up-to-date. Finally, there was a complaint as a result of a customer being advised that they must make a complaint in writing. Increased awareness is being promoted amongst staff on the various ways a complaint can be made, including verbally.

Children's Services

Between November 2015 and January 2016 a series of training events took place, led by a representative of the SPSO. These events covered both stage one and stage two complaints handling. Stage 1 training was well attended by the majority of head teachers employed by the Council, as well as some central staff. Issues covered in the training sessions included the distinction between a complaint and an enquiry, the requirement to meet timescales, responding to vexatious and other difficult complaints and how to make an apology if appropriate. Stage 2 training was attended by central staff and covered issues such as the investigation process, the complaints experience, defining a complaint, reaching a decision, apologies and managing unreasonable behaviour.

The Early Years Admission Policy has been clarified following a complaint received from a parent regarding siblings being admitted to the same educational establishment. In Community Learning and Development, there were improvements made to various processes for working with vulnerable people as a result of a complaint. This included developing new strategies.

Data on the complaints/enquiries received is considered on a regular basis by Children's Services Management Team. Information about issues arising from the complaints data is used to update and revise policies and procedures at the Centre and in schools. The complaints data also informs School Reviews, Improvement Meetings, HMIe Inspections and the monitoring of the priority schools.



Complaints Considered by the SPSO

During 2015/16, 20 new complaints were notified to the Council by the SPSO. These are broken down by Service area in the table below. This compares favourably with the 25 complaints reported to the SPSO in 2014/15.

Corporate & Housing Services - Finance		
Number of new complaints received		
2015/16	2014/15	Difference
4	3	+1

Corporate & Housing Services - Housing		
Number of new complaints received		
2015/16	2014/15	Difference
9	13	-4

Development Services		
Number of new complaints received		
2015/16	2014/15	Difference
4	4	0

Children's Services		
Number of new complaints received		
2015/16	2014/15	Difference
1	4	-3

Social Work Adult Services		
Number of new complaints received		
2015/16	2014/15	Difference
2	1	+1

Total		
Number of new complaints received		
2015/16	2014/15	Difference
20	25	-5