

Item: 5

Monitoring and Audit Committee: 25 September 2025.

Complaints and Compliments Handling.

Report by Chief Executive.

1. Overview

- 1.1. Publication of an annual complaints performance report by an organisation is a requirement prescribed by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman.
- 1.2. Complaints and compliments received by the Council during the period 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025 are detailed in the Annual Complaints and Compliments Handling Report (the Annual Report), attached as Appendix 1 to this report.
- 1.3. The Annual Report contains the complaints handling statistics which correspond to the key performance indicators set out by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman within their Model Complaints Handling Procedures.
- 1.4. The Annual Report provides assurance that monitoring of practice and identification of trends in the Council's Complaints Handling Procedure are being undertaken, as well as examples of compliments received that demonstrate the positive impact and good practice being followed by Council employees.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1. It is recommended that members of the Committee:
 - i. Scrutinise the findings contained in the Annual Complaints and Compliments Handling Report, attached as Appendix 1 to this report, in order to obtain assurance that appropriate monitoring of the Council's complaints handling is in place as required by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman.

3. Background

- 3.1. Revised Model Complaints Handling Procedures from the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman were issued on 1 April 2021 with Part 4 of the revised Model Complaints Handling Procedures covering complaints governance. It sets out the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman's requirements for reporting complaints and publicising complaints information.
- 3.2. The Council's performance is benchmarked by comparing with previous years' performance, the Scottish average, and other Councils in Orkney's benchmarking family group against a set of key performance indicators published by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman.
- 3.3. For complaints handling similar Councils are grouped by their population density, and Orkney Islands Council's family group includes:
 - Comhairle nan Eilean Siar.
 - Argyll and Bute Council.
 - Shetland Islands Council.
 - Highland Council.
 - Scottish Borders Council.
 - Dumfries and Galloway Council.
 - Aberdeenshire Council.
- 3.4. The consistent application and reporting of performance against the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman's key performance indicators can be used to compare, contrast and benchmark complaints handling with other organisations. This will help share learning and enhance complaints handling performance.

4. Complaints Officers Group

- 4.1. Each of the Directorates has at least one nominated service complaints officer and a deputy. Their responsibilities include:
 - Recording complaints.
 - Carrying out Stage 2 investigations (noting that other members of staff within services can be asked to carry out a Stage 2 investigation).
 - Drafting decision letters to customers.
 - Offering advice on the Complaints Handling Procedure to other staff in their Directorate.

- 4.2. The Council's Complaints Officers Group meets quarterly to provide a forum for discussion of issues which may have impacted on complaint responses, and to look at ways of driving forward improvement in complaints handling. Statistics and complaints improvement notices provided by service complaints officers form the basis of this report.

For Further Information please contact:

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Implications of Report

1. **Financial:** None arising directly from this report.
2. **Legal:** None arising directly from this report.
3. **Corporate Governance:** Not applicable.
4. **Human Resources:** Not applicable.
5. **Equalities:** An Equality Impact Assessment is not required for performance monitoring.
6. **Island Communities Impact:** An Island Communities Impact Assessment is not required for performance monitoring.
7. **Links to Council Plan:** The proposals in this report support and contribute to improved outcomes for communities as outlined in the following Council Plan strategic priorities:
 - ☐ Growing our economy.
 - ☐ Strengthening our Communities.
 - ☐ Developing our Infrastructure.
 - ☒ Transforming our Council
8. **Links to Local Outcomes Improvement Plan:** The proposals in this report support and contribute to improved outcomes for communities as outlined in the following Local Outcomes Improvement Plan priorities:
 - ☐ Cost of Living.
 - ☐ Sustainable Development.
 - ☐ Local Equality.
 - ☐ Improving Population Health.
9. **Environmental and Climate Risk:** Not applicable.
10. **Risk:** Not applicable
11. **Procurement:** Not applicable.
12. **Health and Safety:** None arising directly from this report.
13. **Property and Assets:** Not applicable.
14. **Information Technology:** Not applicable.

15. Cost of Living: Not applicable.

List of Background Papers

[Annual Complaints and Compliments Handling Report 2023-24](#)

Appendix

Appendix 1: Annual Complaints and Compliments Handling Report for 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025.



Annual Complaints and Compliments Handling Report

1 April 2024 – 31 March 2025

1. Introduction – Learning from Complaints and Compliments

Orkney Islands Council aims to provide the highest levels of service, however there are times when the expectations of our customers are not met. The Council values the views of residents on its service delivery and actively asks the public what their priorities are.

Some of the most valuable information that the Council receives is when members of the public contact us either to:

- Complain and tell the Council when they think we could do better or that we have done something wrong, or
- Compliment the Council, when they tell the Council when it has got something right, and that they appreciate what staff have done for them.

1.1. Learning from Complaints

Learning from complaints is the eighth indicator set by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO), as referred to in Section 2 below.

The complaints received by the Council in 2024/25 helped in a number of ways, including the following:

- Process put in place to ensure that a response is issued by Roads Inspectors to customer reports of damage caused by potholes, even in situations where potholes are not identified within the specified location.
- Where carers will not be arriving for home visits at the expected time, office employees will ensure that service users are advised in advance, and that steps are taken to ensure that visit times are not moved where this affects medication times.
- Ensuring that Minutes of Community Council meetings are made available online once they have been ratified. Consideration also given to other locations where they could be posted in future, such as the airfield building.
- Waste collection crews updated on how to conduct an assisted collection, and checks made to ensure that all collection vehicles have the necessary equipment available to clean up spillages.
- Reminders given to staff about the importance of communication with service users so that any issues can be corrected as early as possible.
- Additional training around handling difficult customer interactions provided to staff at one of their toolbox talks, and an update to the Council's Policy on Unacceptable Actions and Challenging Behaviour by Service Users undertaken.

Complaints Officers in the different services provide feedback to their colleagues on any lessons learnt that relate to their services, and a regular bi-monthly meeting of Complaints Officers allows for the sharing of good practice and identification of any themes developing from complaints handling.

Lessons learnt from handling complaints are also reported to the Council's Corporate Leadership Team by way of bi-annual presentations of a Complaints Handling report at Corporate Leadership Team meetings.

The Complaints Handling Procedure helps Council staff better understand how the way they deliver their services affects service users. It helps the Council improve how it provides services and its communication with service users. Quarterly training sessions on the Complaints Handling Procedure are also available for staff to access.

1.2. Learning from Compliments

Historically, the Council has paid much more attention to the complaints that it receives. However, the compliments received by the Council can also provide very valuable information.

During 2024/25 the Council received a total of 327 compliments.

Below are examples of compliments received by the Council during 2024/25:

- "Thanks for the support and the efficient speed of action - on my own for periods and the equipment gives me a further feeling of security. You have no idea the difference you have made to my life – you are all heroes!" From a resident receiving support from the Care at Home team.
- "I would like to say that the Roads Department did a very good job gritting the lanes and pavements in Stromness in the icy weather last week. I heard people complaining on Radio Orkney this morning about OIC and I wanted you to know that I thought you did a good job."
- "I would just like to comment on the great service given by a staff member at the Garson recycling centre. I use the centre on a regular basis, and he is almost always seen around the site usually helping or talking to other users. The site is always tidy and looks well looked after. The staff member is always smiling and happy to share a few words, he is a real credit to you. I'd just like to say what an excellent worker you have at the Garson Recycling Centre. He is unfailingly helpful and cheerful - it almost makes the humdrum drudge of dropping off waste a pleasure."
- "I would also like to say how impressed we are with the welcoming and helpful attitude that is always evident whenever we have called in on the One Stop counter at OIC. Thank you for your friendly and helpful attitude and for the swift and successful search for the required document. I wonder if we will find such efficiency when we move back to England!"
- "I would like to thank the men who came out so quickly to attend to a lighting fault that I reported. I don't think that there's any other Council who would attend so quickly. Thank you."
- Compliment received regarding guidance given from the Port Health Officer, and OIC's joint work with NHS Orkney in relation to a ship coming into port with ill persons on board.
- "Just a quick note to thank the Roads team for their prompt action in repairing the road at Leafea, Outertown, Stromness on New Years Eve. The sink hole that had closed the road had cut off a large number of properties but was addressed within a few

hours, which was very reassuring. Thanks to the roads team, Happy New Year to you all.”

The Council will continue to identify from the Compliments examples of good practice to be shared with staff across the organisation.

2. Background to Complaints Handling

Local authorities in Scotland have adopted the Model Complaints Handling Procedure produced by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) to ensure that there is a standardised approach across all Scottish Councils, to implement a consistent process for customers to follow which makes it simpler to complain, to ensure staff and customer confidence in complaints handling, and to encourage organisations to make the best use of lessons learned from complaints.

The indicators within this report have been produced by the SPSO in consultation with local authority stakeholders and Audit Scotland.

The points below are key to a successful complaints process:

The Council should:

- Identify service failures and take appropriate action.
- Identify where services need to improve.
- Identify poor complaints handling practice and put it right.
- Examine good practice and understand how we might repeat it in other areas.
- Identify trends in complaints and proactively address any issues.

The Model Complaints Handling Procedure sets out three types of complaint:

- **Frontline Resolution Stage One:**

- Frontline resolution should be attempted where there are straightforward issues potentially easily resolved with little or no investigation. This should be completed within 5 working days.

- **Investigation Stage Two:**

- Where complaints cannot be resolved at the frontline stage or where complaints are complex, serious, or high risk, a thorough investigation will be undertaken. This typically requires a more thorough examination to establish facts prior to reaching a conclusion. This should be completed within 20 working days.

- **Escalated Investigation Stage Two:**

- Where the complainant remains dissatisfied with the way the Council dealt with their complaint at frontline resolution, the complainant can request a detailed investigation under Stage Two of our complaints handling procedure. This must be undertaken before the complainant can take their complaint to the SPSO to review.

The Local Government Network of Complaints Handlers has Family Groups which bring together broadly similar Councils. Orkney Islands Council is part of Family Group One

(FG1) with Shetland Islands Council, Scottish Borders Council, Aberdeenshire Council, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Argyll and Bute Council, Dumfries and Galloway Council and Highland Council. Throughout the report the statistics for Orkney Islands Council have been compared with the average for Family Group One in 2024/25.

3. Executive Summary

The number of complaints received in 2024/25 was 150, this is lower than the previous year (192) and represents a 22% decrease over the previous reporting period.

No single issue was identified in the previous reporting year to explain the complaint numbers dropping back to levels similar to those seen during 2022/23.

Of the complaints received, 66% were closed off at Stage One, showing that, in the majority of cases, complaints were dealt with at the point closest to service delivery, and the percentage of complaints closed at Stage One has increased slightly from last year (up from 63%). Given that there has not been a significant increase in the number of Stage 1 complaints that were escalated to Stage 2, this indicates that there are still a substantial number of complaints that were received where there was effective initial identification that these would require investigation and a fuller response.

For Stage One complaints the average time to provide an outcome was 4.95 days, which although slightly longer than the previous year (4.4 days), remains within the SPSO timeframe.

The average response time for responding to Stage Two complaints (i.e. those complaints requiring an investigation) was 16.5 days, which is well within the 20-day timescale prescribed by the SPSO, and an improvement on the average of 21 days which was recorded in 2023/24.

4% of Stage One complaints required an extension of time to reply. This compares to 4.5% in 2023/24, presenting a slight improvement on the timeousness of response to that provided over the previous year. This may also reflect a consistently earlier view being taken to investigate more complaints directly under Stage 2 where it had been foreseen that a fuller consideration of the elements of the complaint was required.

This year the monitoring of complaints which involve equality issues has commenced, and two complaints were received which were identified as meeting this criterion. This revealed that a total of 1.3% of our total complaints concerned issues around equality.

Use of a Complaints Handling Procedure ensures that there is clarity and consistency in the processes to be followed when a complaint is received and assists in facilitating ongoing improvement in the way services are delivered.

4. Indicators

4.1. SPSO Indicator 1

Number of Complaints received per 1,000 population

The population of Orkney is around 22,540.

In 2024/25 the Council handled 150 new complaints from service users. This means that, on average, 6.7 complaints were received per 1,000 residents in Orkney.

Expressed in another way, 1 in every 150 residents registered a complaint about the Council's services.

Comment

Compared to the 2023/24 figures, the number of complaints per 1,000 population has fallen from 8.5 to 6.7, a decrease of 21%. This is also slightly lower than the average for FG1, of 6.9 complaints received per 1,000 residents.

4.2. SPSO Indicator 2

Number of Closed Complaints

In 2024/25, the Council received 150 complaints and concluded the responses to 137 complaints.

The Council aims to resolve complaints as soon as possible. Complaints that do not need investigation are called Stage One complaints and the Council aims to resolve these within 5 working days. 66% of the complaints closed by the Council (91 of 137 total complaints) were determined at this initial stage.

Some complaints are more complex and need investigation and the Council aims to resolve these within 20 working days. These are called Stage Two complaints and 24% of the Complaints closed by the Council (33 of 137 total complaints) were determined at this stage which provides additional time for a fuller response to be provided.

A further 10% of complaints (13 of 137 total complaints) were initially dealt with as a Stage One complaint and then 'escalated' to a Stage Two complaint because it was decided that further investigation was needed, or a request had been made by the complainant for consideration at Stage Two.

Comment

The Council is satisfied that the majority of complaints were able to be determined swiftly under Stage One. This is in accordance with an overriding principle of the Council's Complaints Handling Procedure, as suggested by SPSO guidance, to "take every opportunity to resolve service users' complaints at the first point of contact if at all possible".

The proportion of complaints determined under Stage 2 has remained consistent with the previous year, which may be indicative of the approach taken to earlier identify those potentially more complex complaints which are then investigated more fully in the first instance.

The percentage of complaints requiring escalation has reduced from the previous year and may be partially indicative of the continued effective initial identification of those complaints requiring a fuller response.

4.3. SPSO Indicator 3

Number of Complaints Upheld, Not Upheld or Partially Upheld at Each Stage

A complaint is defined as 'upheld' when it is found to be valid and substantiated. A 'partially upheld' complaint results when there are several complaint issues raised and some, but not all, of them are upheld. Complaints are 'not upheld' when they are found to be unsubstantiated; that the service provided had been of an acceptable standard in line with typical expectations; or if a request for service had been misdirected as a complaint.

Stage One:

48% of Stage One complaints were upheld (FG1: 35%).

41% were not upheld (FG1: 51%).

11% were partially upheld (FG1: 14%).

Stage Two:

18% of Stage Two complaints were upheld (FG1: 17%).

67% were not upheld (FG1: 57%).

15% of complaints were partially upheld (FG1: 26%).

Escalated complaints:

15% of escalated complaints were upheld (FG1: 24%).

31% were not upheld (FG1: 49%).

54% of complaints were partially upheld (FG1: 27%).

Comment

Given that just over half of all complaints received were either fully or partially upheld, this demonstrates that mistakes are being acknowledged, and apologies given with learning and improvement outcomes sought and implemented. The percentage of Stage One complaints upheld or partially upheld was higher than the FG1 average, whilst a lower proportion of Stage Two complaints were fully upheld by the Council than the average for other Councils within FG1.

Fewer complaints were escalated from Stage One to Stage Two over the past year, although the majority of these, upon further investigation, were either partially or fully upheld. This may indicate that a more detailed investigation had assisted in identifying additional issues which may not have been sufficiently addressed under the Stage 1 process.

4.4. SPSO Indicator 4

Average Number of Working Days to Provide a Full Response to Complaints at Each Stage

Stage One: average response time was 4.95 days (4.4 days for the Council in 2023/24) (FG1: 8.4 days).

Stage Two: average response time was 16.5 days (21 days for the Council in 2023/24) (FG1: 28.9 days).

Escalated cases: average response time was 15 days (12.6 days for the Council in 2023/24) (FG1: 28.2 days).

4.5. SPSO Indicator 5

Number and Percentage of Complaints Which Were Closed Within the Set Timescales (5 working days for Stage One, 20 working days for Stage Two and Escalated)

Stage One: 84% (77% for 2023/24) (FG1: 67%).

Stage Two: 79% (64% for 2023/24) (FG1: 57.4%).

Escalated complaints: 100% (83% for 2023/24) (FG1: 57.5%).

Total for all complaints: 77% (74% for 2023/24) (FG1: 60.6%).

Comments for 4.4 and 4.5

Although the average response time for closure of Stage One complaints has seen a slight increase since last year, it still remains within the SPSO benchmark. The overall proportion of Stage One complaints closed within the SPSO's target timescale of 5 working days has also improved compared to the previous year and is now significantly above the FG1 average.

Average response times for Stage Two complaints, and the proportion of complaints closed within the 20-working day timeframe, have both improved over the previous year, and the Council's performance remains better than the average of that of other Councils within FG1 indicating quicker average response times and a higher percentage of Stage Two complaints closed within the SPSO timescales than the comparable Councils within FG1.

4.6. SPSO Indicator 6

Number and Percentage of Complaints at Each Stage Where an Extension to the 5 or 20 Working Day Timetable Has Been Authorised

Stage One: 4% of complaints closed at Stage One were granted an extension of time to reply (4.5% for 2023/24) (FG1: 26%).

Stage Two: 2% of complaints closed at Stage Two were granted an extension of time to reply (18.5% for 2023/24) (FG1: 25.9%).

Escalated cases: 0% of escalated complaints were granted an extension of time to reply (0% for 2023/24) (FG1: 8.3%).

Comments

The percentage of Stage One complaints requiring an extension remains similar to the previous year. The Council would always aim to respond to complaints as quickly as

possible, so maintaining this low percentage of complaints that require an extension is a positive indicator.

Where complaints may be more complex and require a more thorough investigation, then it is in line with the views of the SPSO that full and proper investigation of the complaint should be undertaken even if this sometimes means that this will take longer to resolve the complaint and require an extension of the time taken to reply. We have however seen a reduction in Stage Two complaints requiring an extension over the past year, and this proportion remains significantly below the average seen in FG1. The Council will continue to monitor the handling of more complex complaints to see whether identification of common issues or ways of improving information flow between investigating officers can continue to deliver a reduced requirement for the extension of the timeframes which has been seen over the previous year.

The numbers of escalated complaints are small in proportion to the total number of cases, with none requiring an extension this year.

4.7. SPSO Indicator 7

Customer Satisfaction with the Complaints Handling Process

Very little feedback has been received from customers over the past year in relation to the Council's performance in responding to complaints, and any responses collected can often focus upon the outcome of the complaint, rather than the customer's experience of the process, which is what the Council is actually attempting to measure under this Indicator.

Currently the low level of responses is insufficient to enable a report on customer satisfaction in line with the SPSO indicator and allow a reasonable view to be formed on how the public perceives the Council's handling of complaints. It is clear that work needs to be undertaken to encourage customer feedback. Going forward, it is planned to promote use of the Customer Services Platform as a means by which easier communications with customers can be facilitated, and greater feedback on the Council's complaints handling process sought. A review of the current customer feedback forms was undertaken by the Council's Complaints Officers Group, and amendments made to the fields and drop-down options available in the forms. The new forms went live on the Customer Services Platform at the beginning of May 2025; paper versions of the form can also be made available should a customer request one.

The Council will continue to monitor the response rate during the course of the year to identify whether further actions may be required to increase customer feedback.

4.8. SPSO Indicator 8

Lessons Learned

Issues identified during the investigation of complaints are documented in the form of complaints improvement notices issued by the Complaints Officer from the service involved to the Service Manager. These can then be used as learning points or indicators to drive change. Examples of lessons learned are summarised in Section 1.1 of this report.

A recurring theme found in complaints improvement notices during the year was around the importance of the provision of effective communication, and the Council has amended processes and implemented procedures within the relevant services in an attempt to address this.

Some issues around staff conduct towards Customers, particularly in challenging situations have also been identified, leading to additional training being made available and a review of Council policies to support positive engagement of service users.

It was also identified that a number of complaints had been raised surrounding late arrival or lack of continuity of carers, and processes have been strengthened to ensure they contact service users if visits are running late, as well as updating schedules if a service user has medication that has time restrictions so that visit times are not changed.