



ORKNEY
ISLANDS COUNCIL

Item: 1

Monitoring and Audit Committee: 24 September 2026.

Complaints and Compliments Handling.

Report by Deputising Chief Executive.

1. Overview

- 1.1. This report presents the annual complaints and compliments handling report for 2025/26 for members' scrutiny.
- 1.2. Publication of an annual complaints performance report by an organisation is a requirement prescribed by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman.
- 1.3. Complaints and compliments received by the Council during the period 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026 are detailed in the Annual Complaints and Compliments Handling Report (the Annual Report), attached as Appendix 1 to this report.
- 1.4. 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.
- 1.5. 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. The 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 local authorities 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 local authorities 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 Complaints Officers Group meets quarterly to provide a forum for discussion of issues which may have impacted on complaint response, 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:

Paul Kesterton, Information Governance Officer, Extension 2241, email paul.kesterton@orkney.gov.uk

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

[Council Complaints Handling Procedure](#)

Appendix

Appendix 1: Annual Complaints and Compliments Handling Report for 1 April 2025 – 31 March 2026.



Annual Complaints and Compliments Handling Report

1 April 2025 – 31 March 2026

All our written information can be made available, on request, in a range of different formats and languages. If you would like this document in any other language or format, please contact on 01856 873535 or email [Chief Executive's Service](#)

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 4 below.

The complaints received by the Council in 2025/26 helped in a number of ways, including the following:

- A review has been undertaken on the system within the HR&OD Service for logging and monitoring of pension appeals to ensure that responses are dealt with in a timely manner and that the process is completed within the two-month period outlined in the appeal process.
- Where carers are not able to arrive for home visits at the expected time, office staff will notify service users as early as possible and take appropriate steps to ensure that any revised visit times do not impact the timely administration of medication.
- Community Council meeting minutes will be made available online following ratification, and opportunities to publish them in other accessible locations, will also be explored.
- A stock of 'complaint cards' has been passed to the waste team to carry in vehicles, if they face a difficult situation with a customer, they can hand them a card and ask the customer to contact the Council who can formally progress their complaint.
- Staff were reminded of the importance of maintaining effective communication with service users to ensure any issues are identified and addressed at the earliest opportunity, with options being explored to find the most effective ways to better communicate with internal and external customers.
- Setting up of an out of office email on generic email accounts to automatically acknowledge contact and letting the customer know when we will respond. Also to consider if additional communication is required to alert customers to the 'report it' section of the web site.

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 2025/26 the Council received a total of 315 compliments.

Below are examples of compliments received by the Council during 2025/26:

- "The staff at Kalisgarth go above and beyond...I know you'll contact me if there's something, so I don't worry, the quality of care is excellent!"
- "I just wanted to say how great the building inspectors were when they came out. They checked everything. They took me seriously and listened to what I had to say. Took down notes of everything and are going to get it sorted. Can you please pass on my thanks."
- "We wanted to say many thanks to the roads and waste teams who have done an excellent job during the last week of adverse weather, the conditions have been so bad but teams have been out early in very cold weather and working long hours to help the community get back to normal. Well done, not sure what we would do without these services."
- "On behalf of BID, I would like to say thank you for the excellent services OIC provided in keeping the streets clean and toilets serviced during the Games. I was around and about for the duration of the games and the streets and the sites looked excellent. I know what a huge undertaking the Games were for Orkney and how much of their success was down to well-run services. Many thanks again on a job well done and for your time and efforts in working with us up to the Games."
- "I am writing to express my appreciation for your prompt service. Following the recent snow and ice, I contacted OIC to request a grit bin for our street as we did not have one. Your team have just dropped it off, and I wanted to say well done and thank you for the quick turnaround."
- "Our social worker has been professional, courteous and has explained the process clearly from the start. We have felt supported by him and welcome any additional support we can access as a family, given that the needs of our children are complex and very different from each other."
- "Could you please pass my thanks onto the bin man who collected the recycling today from Shapinsay. Blowing a force 9 it was not a good day, but you still collected the bags."

- “As a visitor to Orkney, I was so impressed with how your public toilets are clean, tidy and stocked with sanitary products. Also, all your pubs and restaurants have baby change facilities which can be used by women or men. Thank you and well done for having such a welcoming, progressive community.”

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:

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

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

- **Frontline Resolution Stage One:**

- o 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:**

- o 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:**

- o 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 2025/26.

3. Executive Summary

The number of complaints received in 2025/26 was 140, this is lower than the previous year (150) and represents a 7% decrease over the previous reporting period.

A modest reduction has been seen in the number of complaints received compared to the previous year, and the number of complaints received per capita remains lower than the average of comparable authorities within the Family Group.

Of the complaints received, 61% were closed off at Stage One, showing that in most cases complaints were dealt with at the point closest to service delivery, although the percentage of complaints closed at Stage One has decreased slightly from last year (down from 66%). Given that there are only a relatively small number of Stage 1 complaints that required to be escalated to Stage 2, this indicates that there are a substantial number of complaints where there was effective identification at the outset that these would require investigation and a fuller response.

For Stage One complaints the average time to provide an outcome was 4.8 days, which is faster than the previous year (4.95 days), and better than the average seen within the Family Group.

Only 3% of Stage One complaints required an extension of time to reply. This compares to 4% in 2024/25, presenting an improvement on the timeousness of response to that provided over the previous year, and underlining the good performance in relation to the prompt resolution of Stage One complaints. This may also reflect a consistently earlier view being taken to investigate more complaints directly under Stage 2 where it was foreseen that a fuller consideration of the elements of the complaint was required.

The average response time for responding to Stage Two complaints (i.e. those complaints requiring an investigation) was 26 days, which is outwith the 20-day timescale prescribed by the SPSO, and a significant drop on the average of 16.5 days which was recorded in 2024/25.

Over the past year there has been a notable increase in the receipt of complaints which appear to have utilised AI assistance in their generation. These complaints are often voluminous, not always clear as to the outcome sought by the complainant and contain multiple associated issues ancillary to the main focus of the complaint. With this increasing complexity has come a commensurate increase in the time required to conclude the response, which alongside staffing pressures relating to the availability of a complaints officer within the Education, Communities & Housing directorate for a period during the year, has contributed to an increase in the average response time for Stage Two complaints this year.

As a result of these issues 32% of Stage Two complaints required an extension of time to reply, which is higher than the Family Group average of 24.4%.

Monitoring of complaints which involve equality issues has continued this year, and two complaints were received which were identified as meeting this criterion. This revealed that a total of 1.5% of our total complaints concerned issues around equality, which remains consistent with that seen over the previous year (1.3%).

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, and since February 2026 there has also been an updating of the forms accessible via the relevant links and web pages across the Council website. This has separated out the complaints, compliments and comments forms on the Customer Service Platform to further assist in enabling customers to access the procedure when required and streamlining the process for officers managing cases.

4. Indicators

4.1. SPSO Indicator 1

Number of Complaints received per 1,000 population

The population of Orkney is around 22,540.

In 2025/26 the Council handled 140 new complaints from service users. This means that, on average, 6.4 complaints were received per 1,000 residents in Orkney.

Expressed in another way, on average, 1 in every 160 residents registered a complaint about the Council's services.

Comment

Compared to the 2024/25 figures, the number of complaints per 1,000 population has fallen from 6.7 to 6.4, a decrease of 5%. This is also moderately lower than the average for FG1, of 7.4 complaints received per 1,000 residents.

4.2. SPSO Indicator 2

Number of Closed Complaints

In 2025/26, the Council received 140 complaints and concluded the responses to 126 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. 61% of the complaints closed by the Council (77 of 126 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 34% of the Complaints closed by the Council (43 of 126 total complaints) were determined at this stage which provides additional time for a fuller response to be provided.

A further 5% of complaints (6 of 126 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 Two has increased since the previous year, which may be indicative of the approach to identify as soon as possible those potentially more complex complaints which are then investigated more fully in the first instance. There has also been an increase in complaints submitted which are more lengthy or complex and may be indicative of complainants' usage of AI to assist in complaint submission.

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 for direct routing to Stage Two consideration.

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 substantiated or confirmed. 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 was of an acceptable standard in line with typical expectations; or if a request for service was misdirected as a complaint.

Stage One:

48% of Stage One complaints were upheld (FG1: 43.5%).

45% were not upheld (FG1: 42.5%).

7% were partially upheld (FG1: 14%).

Stage Two:

37% of Stage Two complaints were upheld (FG1: 19%).

44% were not upheld (FG1: 54%).

19% of complaints were partially upheld (FG1: 27%).

Escalated complaints:

14% of escalated complaints were upheld (FG1: 22%).

28% were not upheld (FG1: 45%).

58% of complaints were partially upheld (FG1: 33%).

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 in line with the FG1 average, whilst a higher 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 then partially upheld. This may indicate that a more detailed investigation had assisted in identifying some 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 4.8 days (4.95 days for the Council in 2024/25) (FG1: 7 days).

Stage Two: average response time was 26 days (16.5 days for the Council in 2024/25) (FG1: 24.8 days).

Escalated cases: average response time was 14.5 days (15 days for the Council in 2024/25) (FG1: 26.5 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: 83% (84% for 2024/25) (FG1: 73.4%).

Stage Two: 54% (79% for 2024/25) (FG1: 60.3%).

Escalated complaints: 100% (100% for 2024/25) (FG1: 53.6%).

Total for all complaints: 79% (77% for 2024/25) (FG1: 62.5%).

Comments for 4.4 and 4.5

The average response time for closure of Stage One complaints has seen a slight improvement since last year, and it remains within the SPSO benchmark. Compared to the average time taken by comparator authorities within FG1 to close Stage One complaints the Council is performing well, resolving Stage One complaints on average two days more quickly. The overall proportion of Stage One complaints closed within the SPSO's target timescale of 5 working days has declined slightly compared to the previous year but remains 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 dropped from the figures seen in the previous year, and the Council's performance in this area is lower than the average of that of other councils within FG1. This indicates slower average response times and a consequently smaller percentage of Stage Two complaints closed within the SPSO timescales than the comparable Councils within FG1.

The SPSO does not prescribe a target percentage of complaint closures within the prescribed timescales that organisations must achieve. Instead, organisations are required to record, monitor, report and publish their own performance against these statutory timescales. "Good performance" is usually judged by comparison with peer organisations and by whether the trend is improving year on year. It is clear that a mixed picture has emerged over the past year with continued good performance in relation to Stage One handling, whilst resolution of Stage Two complaints is now taking longer to achieve.

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: 3% of complaints closed at Stage One were granted an extension of time to reply (4% for 2024/25) (FG1: 19%).

Stage Two: 32% of complaints closed at Stage Two were granted an extension of time to reply (2% for 2024/25) (FG1: 24.4%).

Escalated cases: 0% of escalated complaints were granted an extension of time to reply (0% for 2024/25) (FG1: 14.7%).

Comments

The percentage of Stage One complaints requiring an extension is slightly reduced, although still similar to the previous year. The Council would always aim to respond to complaints as quickly as possible, particularly at Stage One where an issue tends to be more straightforward and able to be resolved at the frontline. 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 significant increase in Stage Two complaints requiring an extension over the past year, and this proportion remains higher than the average seen in FG1. It is possible that the increase in length and complexity of complaints, particularly where it appears AI assistance in submission has been utilised may also have led to a requirement to extend response timeframes.

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 deliver a reduced requirement for the extension of the timeframes which has seen an increase 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 continue 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.

A continuing 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.

Some complaints were received regarding the fact that out of date information was displayed on the OIC website, and details were not always accurate. This has led to a review and updating of pages across the website.