

**To: Audit, Risk and Scrutiny Board**

**On: 22 August 2023**

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**Report by: Chief Executive**

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**Heading: 2022/23 Complaints Handling Performance**

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## **1. Summary**

- 1.1 Renfrewshire Council's complaint handling procedure (CHP) helps the Council to improve services and processes based on customer feedback. It is one of a range of methods to help the Council understand how well it is delivering its services.
- 1.2 Introduced in 2013, the Council's CHP complies with the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman's (SPSO) guidance and aims to help 'get it right first time'. The expectation is to have quicker, simpler and more streamlined complaints handling with early response by capable, well-trained staff. As part of the procedure, all complaints are recorded and monitored.
- 1.3 This report provides information on complaints closed during the year from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023 and performance on key indicators, as well as highlighting improvements made to the complaints handling procedure (CHP) to ensure that complaints are handled well, and the organisation learns from them and improves service delivery where appropriate. Data is taken from the Council's DASH system, which is used by all services and allows for consistency in recording and reporting of complaints information.
- 1.4 The key messages highlighted in the report are as follows:

- 9,155 complaints were received in 2022/23, compared with 9,193 in 2021/22;
- 88.3% of our complaints are dealt with as frontline response, demonstrating the Council's commitment to getting it right first time in response to complaints (87.9% in 2021/22);
- 83.8% of frontline complaints and 89.5% of investigation complaints received were completed within target timescales (80.6% and 76.7% respectively in 2021/22);
- the average time to respond to frontline complaints was 4 days, against a target of 5 days and is an improvement from the previous year's figure of 5 days;
- the average time to respond to an investigation complaint was 14 days, an improvement on the 2021/22 figure of 16.5 days and well within the SPSO target of 20 days; and
- the 2022/23 breakdown of complaints received by services continues to be broadly reflective of the volume of services provided, with Environment and Infrastructure delivering the highest volume and widest scope of frontline Council services and consequently receiving the highest volume of customer interactions.

1.5 A performance scorecard has been included within the appendix of this report to provide additional data for 2022/23 performance. The appendix also shows the impact of the pandemic on performance during 2020/21 as well as the improvements in 2021/22 as services moved into the pandemic's recovery phase.

1.6 All indicators will continue to be monitored regularly and support and guidance will be provided to all services to assist with analysing and improving performance where required.

## **2. Recommendations**

2.1 It is recommended that members of the Audit, Risk and Scrutiny Board:

- Note the content of this report.

## **3. Background**

3.1 Renfrewshire Council's Complaint Handling Procedure (CHP) was implemented in 2013 and complies with the model complaints handling procedure for local authorities introduced by the Scottish Public Services

Ombudsman at that time. It is regularly reviewed to include updated guidance. The most recent guidance was implemented in 2020/21.

- 3.2 The CHP reflects Renfrewshire Council's ongoing commitment to the provision of high-quality complaints handling. The CHP operates to ensure that complaints are processed and responded to consistently within target timescales, with a particular focus on working to resolve customer dissatisfaction as close as possible to the point of contact or service delivery.
- 3.3 Services are required to record, analyse and monitor complaints performance and use the information gathered through the CHP to improve service delivery wherever possible.
- 3.4 In line with the SPSO complaints handling procedure, Renfrewshire Council's CHP uses a two-stage process, Frontline Response and Investigation (also referred to as Stage 1 and Stage 2).
- 3.5 The frontline response stage aims to quickly resolve straightforward customer complaints that require little or no investigation. Any member of staff may deal with complaints at this stage, and these are often dealt with 'on the spot' – an explanation, apology or an action to put something right may all be appropriate responses to a frontline complaint.
- 3.6 The main principle is to seek an early response, resolving complaints at the earliest opportunity and as close to the point of service delivery as possible. This may mean a face-to-face discussion with the customer or asking an appropriate member of staff to deal directly with the complaint. The Council has 5 days to respond to these complaints.
- 3.7 An example of a complaint which may be addressed at the frontline response stage is where a customer complains that a staff member failed to attend a scheduled appointment. When this is reported, the service should provide an apology and reschedule the appointment at a suitable time for the customer.
- 3.8 Not all complaints are suitable for frontline response and not all complaints will be satisfactorily resolved at this stage. Investigation complaints are typically complex or require a detailed examination before resolving. These complaints may already have been considered at the frontline response stage, or they may have been identified from the start as needing investigation. In these cases, the customer should receive an acknowledgement of their complaint within three working days and be advised that it is being dealt with as an investigation.
- 3.9 An investigation aims to establish all the facts relevant to the points made in the complaint and to give the customer a full, objective and proportionate

response that represents the final position. The Council has 20 days to respond to these complaints.

- 3.10 An example of an investigation complaint may relate to the standard or nature of a repair within a Council property which requires an inspection or visit to investigate. As a supervisor or manager might need to examine the repair to assess this and agree with the customer the corrective work required, it may require the 20-day timescale. Services may also agree an extension to the timescale with the customer. The SPSO procedures allow councils to extend an investigation for a further 10 working days.
- 3.11 In line with the model complaints handling procedure provided by the SPSO and with practice in other local authorities, Renfrewshire's complaints policy does not include a number of service areas that are processed through other means, some examples include: the right to appeal a refusal of planning permission or to appeal planning conditions (this is made to the Local Review Body or the Scottish Ministers); allegations of bullying in schools (these are treated and investigated as bullying incidents by the education establishment); and a compensation claim for personal injury, loss of or damage to property (these are processed through the Council's standard 'Public Liability Claim Form').
- 3.12 Since April 2017, social work complaints have been handled as part of the standard SPSO local authority procedure rather than as a separate process. Complaints relating to social work and social care for justice social work and for children and families are reported as part of the Children's Services total. The figures for Renfrewshire Health and Social Care Partnership relate to social work and social care services for adults; the HSCP data does not include complaints about NHS services.

#### **4. National guidance from the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO)**

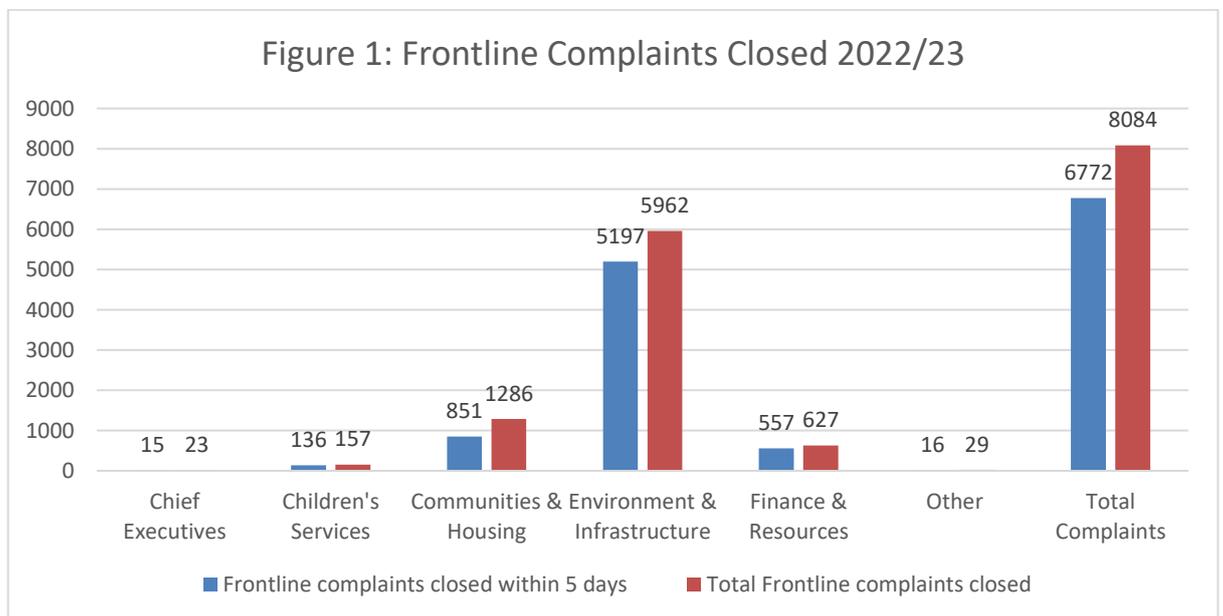
- 4.1 The SPSO completed a review on their own guidance and model complaints handling procedure in 2019. Local authorities had until 1 April 2021 to implement these national changes, the key changes to the statutory model are set out below:
- a new outcome to a complaint was introduced, where a complaint can be classed as resolved. A complaint is resolved when both the Council and the customer agree what action (if any) will be taken to provide full and final resolution for the customer, without making a decision whether the complaint is upheld or not upheld;

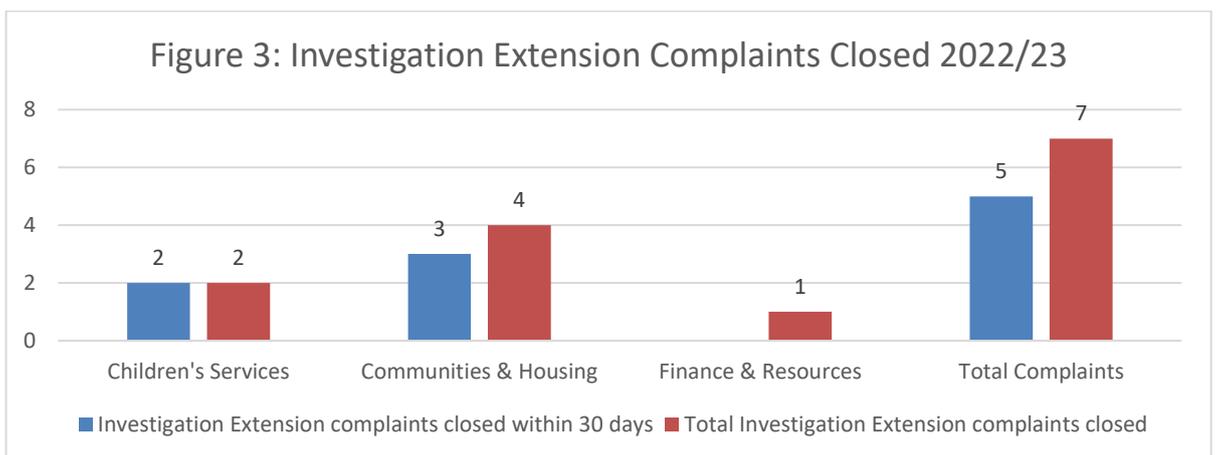
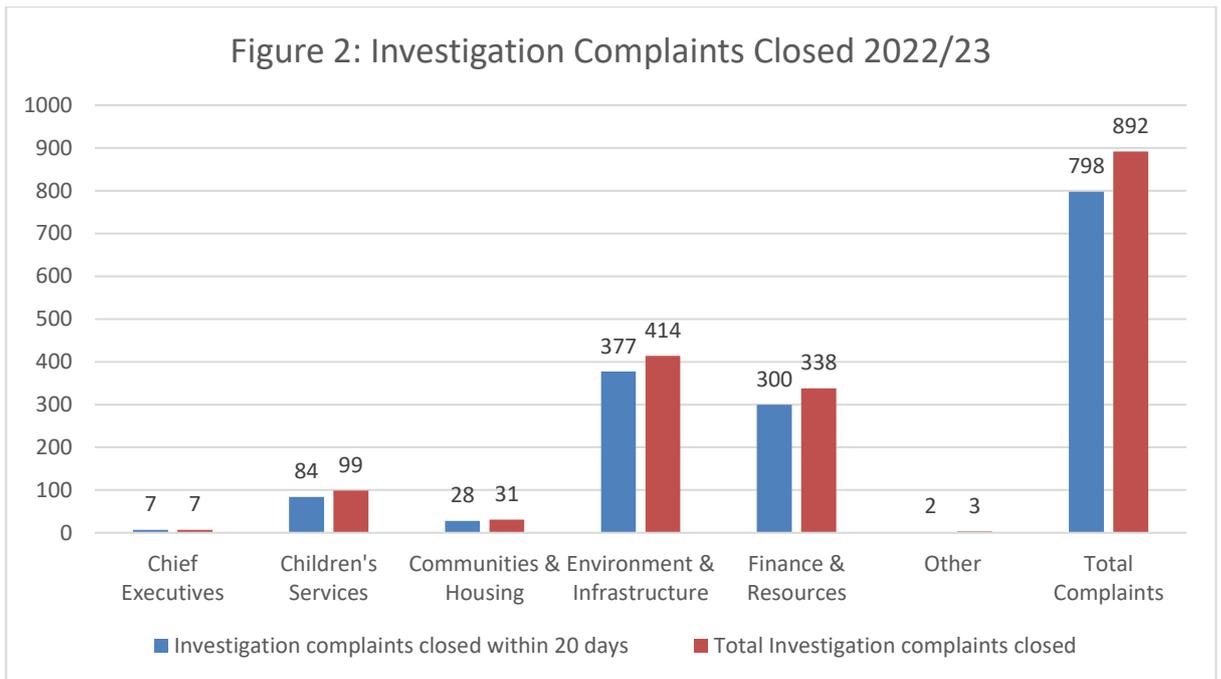
- where a customer has received a frontline response to their complaint and wishes to escalate their complaint to investigation, they must request this either within 6 months of when they first knew of the problem, or within two months of receiving their response to their frontline complaint (if this is later); and
  - the point of an investigation complaint and expected outcomes are clear from the complaint, these must be set out in the initial acknowledgment asking the customer to get in touch if they disagree.
- 4.2 When the Council's new complaints system was being developed it was configured to make sure it could capture any new information required ahead of the April 2021 deadline, such as adding the new resolved outcome and the change of terminology required. The Council's complaints policy has been updated to reflect these changes with additional guidance provided to staff.

## **5. 2022/23 Council Performance**

- 5.1 Complaints are crucial in identifying areas or processes that need to be improved for our customers and Councils are required to report their complaints handling performance against a range of key performance indicators related to the SPSO complaints handling procedure. This report provides information on the complaints closed during the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023 and Appendix 1 details Renfrewshire Council's complaints performance for 2022/23 against these key SPSO performance indicators. The SPSO publishes all local authority complaints annual reports on its website.
- 5.2 A new complaints system was launched in April 2020 and has now been fully rolled out with all Council services logging their complaints on the same system. This means that for reporting purposes, all performance data is now taken from a single source. The data includes all issues raised by customers through our complaints process, even where they are reviewed and found not to be a complaint. Examples would be where someone has used the system to report a missed bin collection, or to complain about a decision made by an organisation other than the Council.
- 5.3 The figures provided at a service level are split according to the Council's structure in 2022/23, with Communities and Housing as a distinct service at that time. Future reports will reflect the new structure, with the new Environment, Housing and Infrastructure service.
- 5.4 In 2022/23, the number of complaints received remained steady with the previous year with 9,155 received this year and 9,193 received during 2021/22. Complaints were lower than usual in 2020/21 due to the pandemic.

- 5.5 All Council services strive to ensure that complaints are answered correctly first time and that customers are responded to quickly. During 2022/23, 88.3% of complaints were addressed through a frontline response, with 83.8% of frontline complaints and 89.5% of investigation complaints received completed within target timescales. This compares with 80.6% and 76.7% respectively in 2021/22.
- 5.6 Councilwide, the average time to respond to a frontline investigation was 4 days, and investigation complaint 14 days, both within the SPSO target of 20 days.
- 5.7 Figures 1 and 2 below show the service breakdown of total complaints received and those closed within the timescales, during the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023. This is for frontline response and investigation complaints. Figure 3 shows the breakdown by service of investigations which were granted an extension. The complaints for social work services are included in services provided by Children’s Services, whilst the data for the Chief Executive’s Service also includes those complaints sent directly to the Chief Executive but which can relate to any service area within the Council. ‘Other’ are those complaints which relate to our partner organisations OneRen and Renfrewshire Health and Social Care Partnership.





5.8 Scrutiny of complaints data and performance continues to be carried out on a regular basis at service-level management team meetings and has been supported by improvements in both data analytics and access to management information. This focus is having a positive impact with response rates for frontline resolutions completed within timescale improving from 73% in 2020/21 to 80.6% in 2021/22 and increasing further to 83.8% during 2022/23.

5.9 Similar improvements have also been seen in terms of investigation response rates, having improved from 74.8% in 2020/21 to 76.7% in 2021/22 and a substantial increase to 89.5% during 2022/23.

5.10 Overall the breakdown of complaints received by services is broadly reflective of the volume of services provided. Environment and Infrastructure delivers the highest volume of frontline Council services, and the most diverse, covering over 270 Council premises, 91,000 households and businesses,

supports more than 849 km of roads and transport infrastructure and collects more than 155,000 bins weekly. It is to be expected therefore that the service will receive the highest volume of customer interactions.

- 5.11 Environment and Infrastructure received over six thousand complaints during 2022/23, accounting for over 70% of all cases received during the reporting year. Waste remains the top subject category with a number of other categories featuring as the most common categories used Council-wide including Building Services, Streetscene, grass cutting, roads and waste – other. The service has demonstrated strong performance during the reporting year with the average frontline case completed in less than 4 days and investigations within 14 days, well within the target timescales.
- 5.12 Complaints received by the Chief Executive's Service mainly relate to delays with planning applications and building warrants, with the average complaints investigation taking less than 13 days to complete.
- 5.13 The majority of complaints made to Finance and Resources related to Council Tax or benefits, with 20% of complaints relating to delays in processing (benefits, revenues, SWF). The service responds to 11% of all complaints received Council-wide and showed strong performance on timescales with the average frontline case taking 2.87 days and 13.48 days for investigation cases.
- 5.14 Complaints in Children's Services are often complex as they typically relate to people rather than processes. The service makes every effort to respond to complaints in a timeous manner, taking cognisance of any sensitivities or complexities related to the child/young person, or associated provision. Current complaints data relates to social work services for children and families, to justice social work, and to those complaints made directly to senior managers about early years and education; it does not yet include frontline complaints dealt with directly by schools and early years establishments. Work is underway to roll out the system with schools.
- 5.15 Children's Services dealt with 258 complaint cases during 2022/23 with this increase partly attributed to increased centralisation of recording and reporting in the service. Almost all cases are dealt with as investigations due to complexity, with the average timescale under 15 days. The main reason for complaints relates to schools.
- 5.16 In Communities and Housing, the number of cases continued to increase into 2022/23 with Responsive Repairs the most common reason for complaints within the service and the third most common cause for complaints across the Council. Investigation complaints took, on average, just over 16 days for

completion, well within the SPSO target timescale. The service responds to 15% of the total cases received Council-wide.

5.17 As part of the functionality of the complaints system, customers can also provide comments and compliments, with 133 cases recorded during 2022/23 (117 comments and 16 compliments). A few examples of these compliments are provided below:

- “Customer said that they called the neighbourhood office with an enquiry and member of staff they spoke to was very pleasant and polite.”
- “I have just had a team fixing paving stones in my garden as path was very narrow and I had many falls due to this...I had a great team of workers who did a brilliant job of replacing and adding extra width to path with extra stones. Couldn't be happier.”
- “We attended the Paisley Halloween event Saturday 29th for the first time and we thoroughly enjoyed it, it was well executed, well thought out and well planned, something to see and do everywhere we walked, even the rain didn't put us off!! Each of the planned shows was timed perfectly, we enjoyed everything on offer, all those that participated in the shows were fantastic! Real skills and showmanship! Even the marshals were polite, directing people to the areas they wanted. Well done to all involved.”
- “The guy who came out yesterday, was a total tonic. As well as fitting the new part, which hopefully stops the problems I've been having, he was so friendly and kind. I've not been very well and he was funny, respectful and a breath of fresh air.”

## **6. Learning from complaints and improving the Council's complaints procedure**

6.1 The complaint system, Dash, went live on 1st April 2020. It is part of the MyAccount platform, allowing current MyAccount users to log, track and receive a response to their complaint or compliment on this single system. Customers can also still log a complaint online using an online form or by writing, phoning or emailing the Council. As mentioned above, the system was configured to address some of the new national complaints procedure, such as the renaming of frontline complaints and adding the new outcome of resolved complaints.

6.2 As the roll out of the new system was carried out during the pandemic, it was supported by online training materials, webinars and a system helpdesk for relevant officers using the new system. Work will continue with schools to progress a roll-out there.

- 6.3 In preparation for the implementation of the SPSO's revised complaints procedure, additional training materials were developed, highlighting the key changes to the procedure, as well as updated staff guides.
  - 6.4 Services have access to live data from the complaints system to support them in understanding trends and performance. Council-wide performance is monitored quarterly by CMT and a recent "deep dive" performance focus provided senior leaders with granular-level data at council and service level. This data supports services to identify opportunities for improvement.
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## **Implications of the Report**

1. **Financial** – none
2. **HR & Organisational Development** - none
3. **Community/Council Planning** –  
We consider our services performance against a number of strategic outcomes to measure how we are delivering better outcomes for our local communities:  
  
Living our Values – complaints are monitored under this outcome of the Council Plan and service improvement planning process.
4. **Legal** - none.
5. **Property/Assets** - none
6. **Information Technology** - none.
7. **Equality & Human Rights** - The Recommendations contained within this report have been assessed in relation to their impact on equalities and human rights. No negative impacts on equality groups or potential for infringement of individuals' human rights have been identified arising from the recommendations contained in the report because it is for noting only.
8. **Health & Safety** – none
9. **Procurement** – none
10. **Risk** – none
11. **Privacy Impact** – none

12. **COSLA Policy Position** – none

13. **Climate Risk-** none

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**List of Background Papers:** none

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## Appendix 1: Renfrewshire Council Annual Complaints Report SPSO Indicators

(due to rounding, percentages may not total 100)



Total number of complaints received, frontline and investigation	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Total number of complaints received ( <b>open and closed</b> )	6,179	9,193	9,155
Number of complaints <b>closed</b> at Frontline Response	5,197	8,082	8,084
Complaints <b>closed</b> at Frontline Response as a percentage of all complaints closed	84.1%	87.9%	88.3%
Number of complaints <b>closed</b> at Investigation	819	1,212	892
Complaints <b>closed</b> at Investigation as a percentage of all complaints	13.2%	13.2%	9.7%
Number of complaints <b>closed</b> at Investigation after escalation	81	60	7
Complaints <b>closed</b> at Investigation after escalation as a percentage of all complaints	1.31%	0.6%	0.1%

<b>Average time in working days for a full response to complaints at each stage</b>	<b>2020/21</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2022/23</b>
Average time in working days to respond to complaints at Frontline Response	10	5	4
Average time in working days to respond to complaints at Investigation	15	16.5	14
Average time in working days to respond to complaints after escalation	10	9.2	9

<b>Percentage of complaints at each stage which were responded to in full within the set timescales</b>	<b>2020/21</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2022/23</b>
Complaints closed at Frontline Response within 5 working days as a percentage of the total number of Frontline Response complaints	73%	80.6%	83.8%
Complaints closed at Investigation within 20 working days as a percentage of total number of Investigation complaints	74.8%	76.7%	89.5%

<b>Number and percentage of complaints where an extension to the timescale has been authorised</b>	<b>2020/21</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2022/23</b>
Complaints closed at Frontline Response where extension was authorised, as a percentage of all complaints at Frontline Response	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Complaints closed at Investigation where extension was authorised, as a percentage of all complaints closed at Investigation	8.96%	4.89%	0.77%