

# Complaints Handling Procedure

January 2021

## SPSO Model CHP version history

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# Contents

<b>CONTENTS</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>FOREWORD</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>OVERVIEW OF THE CHP</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>EXPECTED BEHAVIOURS</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>MAINTAINING CONFIDENTIALITY AND DATA PROTECTION</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>WHAT IS A COMPLAINT?</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>WHO CAN MAKE A COMPLAINT?</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>SUPPORTING THE CUSTOMER</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>HOW COMPLAINTS MAY BE MADE</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>TIME LIMIT FOR MAKING COMPLAINTS</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>PARTICULAR CIRCUMSTANCES</b> .....	<b>12</b>
COMPLAINTS BY (OR ABOUT) A THIRD PARTY .....	12
COMPLAINTS RAISED BY OFFICIALS SUCH AS MP'S, MSP'S OR ELECTED MEMBERS .....	12
SERIOUS, HIGH-RISK OR HIGH-PROFILE COMPLAINTS .....	12
ANONYMOUS COMPLAINTS .....	13
WHAT IF THE CUSTOMER DOES NOT WANT TO COMPLAIN? .....	13
COMPLAINTS INVOLVING MORE THAN ONE AREA OR ORGANISATION .....	13
COMPLAINTS RELATING TO A SOCIAL WORK SERVICE AND ANOTHER SERVICE .....	14
COMPLAINTS ABOUT CONTRACTED OR COMMISSIONED SERVICES / ALEOs .....	15
COMMISSIONED SOCIAL WORK SERVICES .....	15
COMPLAINTS ABOUT SENIOR STAFF .....	15
<b>COMPLAINTS AND OTHER PROCESSES</b> .....	<b>16</b>
COMPLAINTS AND SERVICE REQUESTS .....	16
COMPLAINTS AND DISCIPLINARY OR WHISTLEBLOWING PROCESSES .....	16
<b>COMPLAINTS AND COMPENSATION CLAIMS</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>COMPLAINTS AND LEGAL ACTION</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>SOCIAL WORK COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>SOCIAL WORK COMPLAINTS AND THE DUTY OF CANDOUR</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>COMPLAINTS FOR THE CARE INSPECTORATE</b> .....	<b>18</b>
<b>COMPLAINTS ABOUT PERSONAL ASSISTANTS</b> .....	<b>18</b>
<b>COMPLAINTS RELEVANT TO OTHER AGENCIES</b> .....	<b>19</b>
<b>WHAT TO DO IF THE CHP DOES NOT APPLY</b> .....	<b>19</b>
<b>THE COMPLAINTS HANDLING PROCESS</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>RESOLVING THE COMPLAINT</b> .....	<b>21</b>

<b>WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU RECEIVE A COMPLAINT .....</b>	<b>21</b>
STAGE 1: FRONTLINE RESPONSE .....	22
NOTIFYING STAFF MEMBERS INVOLVED .....	22
TIMELINES .....	23
EXTENSION TO THE TIMELINE .....	23
CLOSING THE COMPLAINT AT THE FRONTLINE RESPONSE STAGE .....	23
<b>STAGE 2: INVESTIGATION.....</b>	<b>24</b>
ACKNOWLEDGING THE COMPLAINT .....	24
AGREEING THE POINTS OF COMPLAINT AND OUTCOME SOUGHT.....	24
NOTIFYING STAFF MEMBERS INVOLVED .....	25
INVESTIGATING THE COMPLAINT .....	26
ALTERNATIVE COMPLAINT RESOLUTION APPROACHES.....	26
MEETING WITH THE CUSTOMER DURING THE INVESTIGATION .....	27
TIMELINES .....	27
EXTENSION TO THE TIMELINE .....	27
CLOSING THE COMPLAINT AT THE INVESTIGATION STAGE .....	28
SIGNPOSTING TO THE SPSO .....	28
FACTORING COMPLAINTS AND COMPLAINTS FROM SHARED OWNERS .....	30
POST-CLOSURE CONTACT.....	30
<b>ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>RECORDING, REPORTING, LEARNING FROM AND PUBLICISING COMPLAINTS.....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>RECORDING COMPLAINTS .....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>LEARNING FROM COMPLAINTS.....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>REPORTING OF COMPLAINTS.....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>PUBLICISING COMPLAINTS INFORMATION .....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>APPENDIX 1 – COMPLAINTS.....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>APPENDIX 2 – WHAT IS NOT A COMPLAINT?.....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>APPENDIX 3 – COMPLEX SOCIAL WORK SCENARIOS .....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>APPENDIX 4 - TIMELINES .....</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>APPENDIX 5 – THE COMPLAINT HANDLING PROCESS (FLOWCHART FOR STAFF).....</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>APPENDIX 6 – COMPLAINTS PRO FORMA .....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>APPENDIX 7 – EMPLOYEE QUICK GUIDE TO COMPLAINTS .....</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>APPENDIX 8 ACKNOWLEDGEMENT EXAMPLE .....</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>APPENDIX 9 – COMPLAINTS RECEIVED FROM OFFICIALS .....</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>APPENDIX 10 – EMAIL TEMPLATES – COMPLAINTS RECEIVED FROM OFFICIALS .....</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>APPENDIX 11 – GUIDE TO RESOLUTION .....</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>APPENDIX 12 – EXAMPLE RESPONSES .....</b>	<b>65</b>

## Foreword

Our Complaints Handling Procedure reflects the Council and Health and Social Care Partnership's (HSCP) commitment to valuing complaints. It seeks to resolve customer dissatisfaction as close as possible to the point of service delivery and to conduct thorough, impartial and fair investigations of customer complaints so that, where appropriate, we can make evidence-based decisions on the facts of the case.

As far as is possible we have developed an approach to handling complaints that is consistent with other public services in Scotland, which complies with the [SPSO's guidance on a MCHP](#). This procedure aims to help us 'get it right first time'. We want quicker, simpler and more streamlined complaints handling with local, early responses by capable, well-trained staff.

All our staff involved in dealing with complaints are trained to do so to ensure they are confident in identifying complaints, empowered to resolve simple complaints on the spot, and familiar with how to apply this procedure (including recording complaints).

Complaints give us valuable information we can use to improve service provision and customer satisfaction. Our Complaints Handling Procedure will enable us to improve customer satisfaction and help us prevent the same problem from happening again. For our staff, complaints provide a first-hand account of the customers' views and experience, and can highlight problems we may otherwise miss. Handled well, complaints can give our customers a form of redress when things go wrong, and can also help us continuously improve our services.

The Complaints Handling Procedure will help us provide better services, improve relationships with our customers and enhance public perception of the Council and HSCP. It will help us keep the customer at the heart of the process, while enabling us to better understand how to improve our services by learning from complaints.

Pippa Milne

Chief Executive

Argyll and Bute Council

Joanna MacDonald

Chief Officer

Argyll and Bute Health and Social Care Partnership

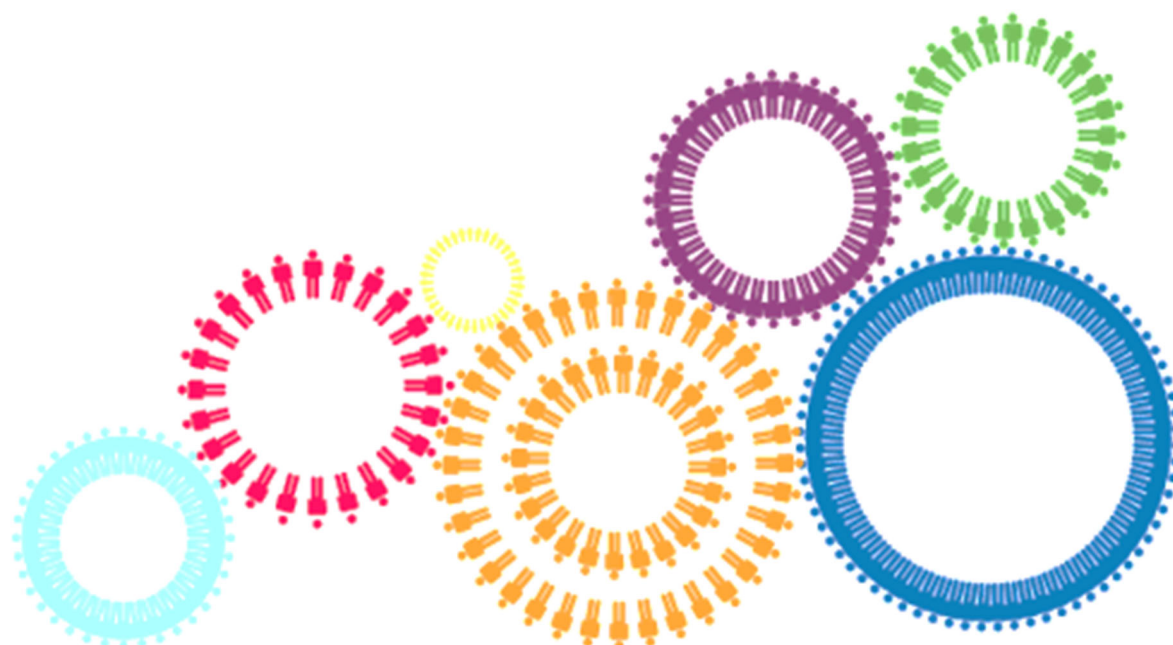
## Introduction

The local authority procedure was first developed by local government complaints handling experts, working closely with the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO). A separate procedure for social work complaints was developed by social work experts and third sector organisations working with the SPSO.

The Model Complaints Handling Procedures (MCHPs) were revised in 2019 by the SPSO in consultation with all sectors. As part of this, the local authority and social work procedures were combined into a single procedure. This new edition includes a core text, which is consistent across all public services in Scotland, with some additional text and examples specific to local authorities and health and social care partnerships (HSCPs) handling social work complaints. The procedural elements tie in very closely with those of the National Health Service Complaints Handling Procedure, so where complaints cut across services, they can still be handled in much the same way as other complaints.

This procedure sets out the process for handling complaints, what can and cannot be treated as a complaint and our expectations of staff and customer behaviour during the complaints process. It provides some examples about how certain issues may be handled, and guidance around particular issues which may come up as we handle this type of contact with our customers.

Our staff are encouraged to resolve issues for customers as quickly and effectively as possible, and this procedure helps us to ensure that any failings or shortfalls in the services we provide are recorded, and improvements made where appropriate.



## Overview of the CHP

Anyone can make a complaint, either verbally or in writing, including face-to-face, by phone, letter or email.

We will try to resolve complaints to the satisfaction of the customer wherever this is possible. Where this isn't possible, we will give the customer a clear response to each of their points of complaint. We will always try to respond as quickly as we can (and on the spot where possible).

Our complaints procedure has two stages. We expect the majority of complaints will be handled at stage 1. If the customer remains dissatisfied after stage 1, they can request that we look at it again, at stage 2. If the complaint is complex enough to require an investigation, we will put the complaint into stage 2 straight away and skip stage 1.

<b>Stage 1: Frontline response</b>	<b>Stage 2: Investigation</b>	<b>Independent external review (SPSO or other)</b>
<p>For issues that are straightforward and simple, requiring little or no investigation</p> <p>'On-the-spot' apology, explanation, or other action to put the matter right</p> <p>Complaint resolved or a response provided in <b>five working days</b> or less (unless there are exceptional circumstances)</p> <p>Complaints addressed by any member of staff, or alternatively referred to the appropriate point for frontline response</p> <p>Response normally face-to-face or by telephone (though sometimes we will need to put the decision in writing)</p> <p>We will tell the customer how to escalate their complaint to stage 2</p>	<p>Where the customer is not satisfied with the frontline response, or refuses to engage at the frontline, or where the complaint is complex, serious or 'high-risk'</p> <p>Complaint acknowledged within <b>three working days</b></p> <p>We will contact the customer to clarify the points of complaint and outcome sought (where these are already clear, we will confirm them in the acknowledgement)</p> <p>Complaint resolved or a definitive response provided within <b>20 working days</b> following a thorough investigation of the points raised</p>	<p>Where the customer is not satisfied with the stage 2 response from the service provider</p> <p>The SPSO will assess whether there is evidence of service failure or maladministration not identified by the service provider</p> <p>In relation to social work decisions the SPSO can also look at professional decisions</p> <p>Some complaints may also have an alternative route for independent external review</p>

For detailed guidance on the process, see **The complaints handling process**.

## Expected behaviours

We expect all staff to behave in a professional manner and treat customers with courtesy, respect and dignity. We also ask customers bringing a complaint to treat our staff with respect. We ask customers to engage actively with the complaint handling process by:

- telling us their key issues of concern and organising any supporting information they want to give us (we understand that some people will require support to do this)
- working with us to agree the key points of complaint when an investigation is required; and
- responding to reasonable requests for information.

We have a policy in place for when these standards are not met which is our Unacceptable Actions policy

We recognise that people may act out of character in times of trouble or distress. Sometimes a health condition or a disability can affect how a person expresses themselves. The circumstances leading to a complaint may also result in the customer acting in an unacceptable way.

Customers who have a history of challenging or inappropriate actions, or have difficulty expressing themselves, may still have a legitimate grievance, and we will treat all complaints seriously. However, we also recognise that the actions of some customers may result in unreasonable demands on time and resources or unacceptable behaviour towards our staff. We will, therefore, apply our policies and procedures to protect staff from unacceptable actions such as unreasonable persistence, threats or offensive behaviour from customers. Where we decide to restrict access to a customer under the terms of our policy, we have a procedure in place to communicate that decision, notify the customer of their right of appeal, and review any decision to restrict contact with us. Our Unacceptable Actions policy can be found here: <http://intranet.argyll-bute.gov.uk/content/procedure-unacceptable-actions-customers>

If we decide to restrict a customer's contact, we will be careful to follow the process set out in our policy and to minimise any restrictions on the customer's access to the complaints process. We will normally continue investigating a complaint even where contact restrictions are in place (for example, limiting communication to letter or to a named staff member). In some cases, it may be possible to continue investigating the complaint without contact from the customer. Our policy allows us in limited circumstances to restrict access to the complaint process entirely. This would be as a last resort, should be as limited as possible (for a limited time, or about a limited set of subjects) and requires management approval. Where access to the complaint process is restricted, we must signpost the customer to the SPSO (see [Signposting to the SPSO](#)).

The SPSO has [guidance on promoting positive behaviour and managing unacceptable actions](#).

## Maintaining confidentiality and data protection

Confidentiality is an important part of complaints handling. This includes maintaining the customer's privacy, and confidentiality in relation to information about staff members, contractors or any third parties involved in the complaint.

This should not prevent us from being open and transparent, as far as possible, in how we handle complaints. This includes sharing as much information with the complainant (and, where appropriate,

any affected staff members) as we can. When sharing information, we should be clear about why the information is being shared and our expectations on how the recipient will use the information.

We must always bear in mind legal requirements, for example data protection legislation, as well as internal policies on confidentiality and the use of customer information. If you have any questions or require further advice on data processing these should be passed to Legal and Regulatory Support for guidance at [data.protection@argyll-bute.gov.uk](mailto:data.protection@argyll-bute.gov.uk)

The complaints privacy notice can be found here <https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/privacy/complaints>

The following situations are examples where a response to a complaint may be limited by confidentiality, such as:

- where a complaint has been raised against a staff member and has been upheld – we will advise the customer that their complaint is upheld, but would not share specific details affecting staff members, particularly where disciplinary action is taken.
- where someone has raised a concern about a child or an adult's safety and is unhappy about how that has been dealt with – we would look into this to check whether the safety concern had been properly dealt with, but we would not share any details of our findings in relation to the safety concern.

## What is a complaint?

Our definition of a complaint is: 'any expression of dissatisfaction by one or more members of the public about the Council/Partnership's action or lack of action, or about the standard of service provided by or on behalf of the Council/Partnership.'

For clarity, where an employee also receives a service from the Council/Partnership as a member of the public, they may complain about that service.

Our Customer Service Charter can be found here: [Customer Service Charter](#). This explains what standards a customer can expect from our staff.

A complaint may relate to the following, but is not restricted to this list:

- failure or refusal to provide a service
- inadequate quality or standard of service, or an unreasonable delay in providing a service
- dissatisfaction with one of our policies or its impact on the individual
- failure to properly apply law, procedure or guidance when delivering services
- failure to follow the appropriate administrative process
- conduct, treatment by or attitude of a member of staff or contractor (**except** where there are arrangements in place for the contractor to handle the complaint themselves: see **Complaints about contracted services**); or
- disagreement with a decision, (**except** where there is a statutory procedure for challenging that decision, or an established appeals process followed throughout the sector).

**Appendix 1** provides a range of examples of complaints we may receive, and how these may be handled.



A complaint is **not**:

- a routine first-time request for a service (see **Complaints and service requests**)
- a first-time report of a fault (for example, potholes or street lighting)
- a request for compensation only (see **Complaints and compensation claims**)
- issues that are in court or have already been heard by a court or a tribunal (see **Complaints and legal action**)
- disagreement with a decision where there is a statutory procedure for challenging that decision (such as for freedom of information and subject access requests), or an established appeals process followed throughout the sector – such as council tax, planning, or a parking ticket appeal (see also **Complaints and social work appeals**)
- disagreement with decisions or conditions that are based upon social work recommendations, but determined by a court or other statutory body, for example decisions made by a children's panel, parole board or mental health tribunal
- a request for information under the Data Protection or Freedom of Information (Scotland) Acts
- a grievance by a staff member or a grievance relating to employment or staff recruitment
- a concern raised internally by a member of staff (which was not about a service they received, such as a whistleblowing concern)
- a concern about a child or an adult's safety
- an attempt to reopen a previously concluded complaint or to have a complaint reconsidered where we have already given our final decision
- abuse or unsubstantiated allegations about our organisation or staff where such actions would be covered by our *Unacceptable Actions Policy*
- a concern about the actions or service of a different organisation, where we have no involvement in the issue (**except** where the other organisation is delivering services on our behalf: see **Complaints about contracted services**).
- a complaint about the conduct of a councillor these are dealt with by the Ethical Commissioner for Scotland (Thistle House, 91 Haymarket Terrace, Edinburgh EH12 5HE at [www.ethicalstandards.org.uk](http://www.ethicalstandards.org.uk) or by telephone: 0300 011 0550)

We will not treat these issues as complaints, and will instead direct customers to use the appropriate procedures. Some situations can involve a combination of issues, where some are complaints and others are not, and each situation should be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

If a matter is not a complaint, or not suitable to be handled under the CHP, we will explain this to the customer, and tell them what (if any) action we will take, and why. See **What if the CHP does not apply**.

**Appendix 2** gives examples of more complex complaints, some of which are not appropriate for this CHP (**Appendix 3** gives examples specific to social work). The section on **Complaints relevant to other agencies** provides information about some of the other agencies that may be able to assist customers if their complaint is not appropriate for this CHP.

## Who can make a complaint?

Anyone who receives, requests, or is affected by our services can make a complaint. This is not restricted to 'service users' and their relatives or representatives, but may also include people who come into contact with or are affected by these services, for example people who live in close proximity to a social work service provision, such as a care home or day centre. In this procedure these people are termed 'customers', regardless of whether they are or were using a service.

We also accept complaints from the representative of a person who is dissatisfied with our service. See **Complaints by (or about) a third party**.

## Supporting the customer

All members of the community have the right to equal access to our complaints procedure. It is important to recognise the barriers that some customers may face complaining. These may be physical, sensory, communication or language barriers, but can also include their anxieties and concerns. Customers may need support to overcome these barriers.

We have legal duties to make our complaints service accessible under equalities and mental health legislation. *For example:*

- the Equality Act (Scotland) 2010 – this gives people with a protected characteristic the right to reasonable adjustments to access our services (such as large print or BSL translations of information); and
- the Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003 – this gives anyone with a 'mental disorder' (including mental health issues, learning difficulties, dementia and autism) a right to access independent advocacy. This must be delivered by independent organisations that only provide advocacy. They help people to know and understand their rights, make informed decisions and have a voice.

Examples of how we will meet our legal duties are:

- proactively checking whether members of the public who contact us require additional support to access our services
- providing interpretation and/or translation services for British Sign Language users; and
- helping customers access independent advocacy (the Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance website has information about local advocacy organisations throughout Scotland).

In addition to our legal duties, we will seek to ensure that we support vulnerable groups in accessing our complaints procedure. Actions that we may take include:

- helping vulnerable customers identify when they might wish to make a complaint (for example, by training frontline staff who provide services to vulnerable groups)
- helping customers access independent support or advocacy to help them understand their rights and communicate their complaints (for example, through the Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance or Citizen's Advice Scotland); and
- providing a neutral point of contact for complaints (where the relationship between customers and frontline staff is significant and ongoing).]

These lists are not exhaustive, and we must always take into account our commitment and responsibilities to equality and accessibility.

## How complaints may be made

Complaints may be made verbally or in writing, including face-to-face, by phone, letter or email.

Where a complaint is made **verbally**, we will make a record of the key points of complaint raised. Where it is clear that a complex complaint will be immediately considered at stage 2 (investigation), it may be helpful to complete a complaint form with the customer's input to ensure full details of the complaint are documented. However, there is no requirement for the person to complete a complaint form, and it is important that the completion of a complaint form does not present a barrier to people complaining.

Complaint issues may also be raised on **digital platforms** (including **social media**).

Where a complaint issue is raised via a digital channel managed and controlled by the Council/Partnership (for example an official Twitter address or Facebook page):

- We will confirm that we do not normally respond to complaints via social media and advise the person that a response will be issued through an alternative channel e.g. email or letter should the information be available. A link to the complaints process will also be provided.
- In exceptional circumstances, we may respond to very simple complaints on social media. This will normally only be appropriate where an issue is likely to affect a large number of people, and we can provide a very simple response (for example, an apology for a cancelled bus service or late cancellation of a class).

We may also become aware that an issue has been raised via a digital channel not controlled or managed by us (for example a YouTube video or post on a private Facebook group). In such cases we **may** respond, where we consider it appropriate, by telling the person how they can complain.

We must always be mindful of our data protection obligations when responding to issues online or in a public forum. See **Maintaining confidentiality and data protection**.

## Time limit for making complaints

The customer must raise their complaint within six months of when they first knew of the problem, unless there are special circumstances for considering complaints beyond this time (for example, where a person was not able to complain due to serious illness or recent bereavement).

Where a customer has received a stage 1 response, and wishes to escalate to stage 2, unless there are special circumstances they must request this either:

- within six months of when they first knew of the problem; or
- within two months of receiving their stage 1 response (if this is later).

We will apply these time limits with discretion, taking into account the seriousness of the issue, the availability of relevant records and staff involved, how long ago the events occurred, and the likelihood that an investigation will lead to a practical benefit for the customer or useful learning for the organisation.

We will also take account of the time limit within which a member of the public can ask the SPSO to consider complaints (normally one year). The SPSO have discretion to waive this time limit in special circumstances (and may consider doing so in cases where we have waived our own time limit).

## Particular circumstances

### Complaints by (or about) a third party

Sometimes a customer may be unable or reluctant to make a complaint on their own. We will accept complaints from third parties, which may include relatives, friends, advocates and advisers. Where a complaint is made on behalf of a customer, we must ensure that the customer has authorised the person to act on their behalf. It is good practice to ensure the customer understands their personal information will be shared as part of the complaints handling process (particularly where this includes sensitive personal information). This can include complaints brought by parents on behalf of their child, if the child is considered to have capacity to make decisions for themselves.

The provision of written consent from the customer will normally be sufficient for us to investigate a complaint. If we consider it is appropriate we can take verbal consent direct from the customer to deal with a third party and would normally follow up in writing to confirm this.

In certain circumstances, a person may raise a complaint involving another person's personal data, without receiving consent. The complaint should still be investigated where possible, but the investigation and response may be limited by considerations of confidentiality. The person who submitted the complaint should be made aware of these limitations and the effect this will have on the scope of the response.

See also **Maintaining confidentiality and data protection**.

If a complaint is made by a third party by someone with Guardianship Arrangements or a Power of Attorney in place, evidence of this would require to be provided to enable the Council/Partnership to discuss the complaint response with the third party. If someone is involved in all care decisions etc. for a person but does not have POA or Guardianship in place we may still be able to discuss or take forward a complaint on behalf of the person.

### Complaints raised by Officials such as MP's, MSP's or Elected Members

When a complaint is received from an Official on behalf of a constituent, it is important that this should still follow the Complaints Handling Procedure and consent should be obtained. Although consent may have been provided by the customer along with the complaint it is important that confirmation is sought from the customer that they are content that a full copy of the response is issued to the Official.

There are amended email templates and a process map that can be used alongside the Complaints Handlings Procedure. **See Appendix 9 and Appendix 10**

### Serious, high-risk or high-profile complaints

We will take particular care to identify complaints that might be considered serious, high-risk or high-profile, as these may require particular action or raise critical issues that need senior management's direct input. Serious, high-risk or high-profile complaints should normally be handled immediately at stage 2 (see **Stage 2: Investigation**).

We define potential high-risk or high-profile complaints as those that may:

- *involve a death or terminal illness*
- *involve serious service failure, for example major delays in providing, or repeated failures to provide, a service*
- *generate significant and ongoing press interest*
- *pose a serious risk to our operations*
- *present issues of a highly sensitive nature, for example concerning:*
  - *immediate homelessness*
  - *a particularly vulnerable person*
  - *child protection, or*
  - *adult protection.*

## **Anonymous complaints**

We value all complaints, including anonymous complaints, and will take action to consider them further wherever this is appropriate. Generally, we will consider anonymous complaints if there is enough information in the complaint to enable us to make further enquiries. Any decision not to pursue an anonymous complaint must be authorised by an appropriate manager following discussion with the Departmental Complaints Officer.

If we pursue an anonymous complaint further, we will record it as an anonymous complaint together with any learning from the complaint and action taken.

If an anonymous complainant makes serious allegations, these should be dealt with in a timely manner under relevant procedures. This may not be the complaints procedure and could instead be relevant child protection, adult protection or disciplinary procedures.

## **What if the customer does not want to complain?**

If a customer has expressed dissatisfaction in line with our definition of a complaint but does not want to complain, we will explain that complaints offer us the opportunity to improve services where things have gone wrong. We will encourage the customer to submit their complaint and allow us to handle it through the CHP. This will ensure that the customer is updated on the action taken and gets a response to their complaint.

If the customer insists they do not wish to complain, we are not required to progress the complaint under this procedure. However, we should record the complaint as an anonymous complaint (including minimal information about the complaint, without any identifying information) to enable us to track trends and themes in complaints. Where the complaint is serious, or there is evidence of a problem with our services, we should also look into the matter to remedy this (and record any outcome).

Please refer to the example in **Appendix 1** for further guidance.

## **Complaints involving more than one area or organisation**

If a complaint relates to the actions of two or more areas within our organisation, we will tell the customer who will take the lead in dealing with the complaint, and explain that they will get only one response covering all issues raised.

If a customer complains to us about the service of another organisation or public service provider, but we have no involvement in the issue, the customer should be advised to contact the appropriate organisation directly.

If a complaint relates to our service and the service of another organisation or public service provider, and we have a direct interest in the issue, we will handle the complaint about the Council/Partnership through the CHP. If we need to contact an outside body about the complaint, we will be mindful of data protection. See **Maintaining confidentiality and data protection**.

Such complaints may include:

- a complaint made to us about a claim for housing benefit where the customer's dissatisfaction relates to the service we have provided and the service the DWP has provided, or
- a complaint made to us about anti-social behaviour where the customer's dissatisfaction relates to the service we have provided and the service the housing association has provided.

## **Complaints relating to a social work service and another service**

The Public Bodies (Joint Working) (Scotland) Act 2014, (which implemented health and social care integration), requires adult social work functions to be delegated to HSCPs. All other services such as children's social care and criminal justice social work are also delegated within the Argyll and Bute HSCP. It is important for staff investigating social work complaints to be aware of the delegation arrangements in their area, so they can take appropriate account of these, even if they are not themselves working within a delegated service.

A complaint may relate to a social work service (provided by the local authority or a HSCP) and another service provided by the same organisation. An example is:

- a social work service and a care service both provided by a HSCP

In such cases, a joint response must be given following the guidance above.

Alternatively, a complaint may involve services from different organisations. An example is:

- a complaint about a social work service provided by the HSCP and a housing service provided by the housing association.

The aim with such complaints is still to provide a joint response (particularly where the organisations are linked, e.g. NHS providers), though this may not always be possible. Contact must be made with the customer to explain that their complaint partly relates to services which are delivered by another organisation, and that to respond to their complaint, we will need to share information with this organisation. Staff must check whether specific consent is needed from the customer before we can share their information with the other services, and take appropriate action where necessary, bearing in mind any data protection requirements. See **Maintaining confidentiality and data protection**.

If it is possible to give a joint response, a decision must be taken as to which service will lead the process. We must ensure that all parties are clear about this decision. The response must cover all parts of the complaint, explain the role of both services, and (for investigation stage complaints) confirm that it is the final response from both services.

If a joint response is not possible, you should explain to the person making the complaint the reasons why they will receive two separate responses, and who they can get in contact with about the other aspects of their complaint. You must also write to both the customer and the other services involved, setting out which parts of the complaint you will be able to respond to.

## **Complaints about contracted or commissioned services / ALEOs**

We may use Arm's Length External Organisations (ALEOs) to deliver certain services. They are 'arm's-length' because the Council/Partnership retains a degree of control or influence, usually through a funding agreement, and 'external' because they have a separate identity to the Council/Partnership. An example might be a charitable organisation delivering leisure and culture services on our behalf.

Where we use an ALEO or contractor to deliver a service on our behalf we recognise that we remain responsible and accountable for ensuring that the services provided meet the Council's/Partnership's standard (including in relation to complaints). We will either do so by:

- ensuring the contractor complies with this procedure; or
- ensuring the contractor has their own procedure in place, which fully meets the standards in this procedure. At the end of the investigation stage of any such complaints the contractor must ensure that the customer is signposted to the SPSO.

We will confirm that service users are clearly informed of the process and understand how to complain. We will also ensure that there is appropriate provision for information sharing and governance oversight where required.

The Council has discretion to investigate complaints about organisations contracted to deliver services on its behalf even where the procedure has normally been delegated.

## **Commissioned social work services**

Where social work services are commissioned on behalf of the Health and Social Care Partnership customers can make complaints under this CHP in relation to the assessment of need, the commissioning or recommendation process, and any element of the service that has been publicly funded. Complaints about any part of service that has been privately funded cannot be considered through this CHP.

These services may also be registered as a care service with the Care Inspectorate to deliver a care or support service. If this is the case, customers have the right to complain directly to the Care Inspectorate or to make use of the provider's CHP and thereafter make a complaint to the Care Inspectorate: see **Complaints for the Care Inspectorate**.

## **Complaints about senior staff**

Complaints about senior staff can be difficult to handle, as there may be a conflict of interest for the staff investigating the complaint. When serious complaints are raised against senior staff, it is particularly important that the investigation is conducted by an individual who is independent of the

situation. We must ensure we have strong governance arrangements in place that set out clear procedures for handling such complaints.

Where a complaint concerns allegations about senior staff then these must be referred to the Executive Director or Chief Executive for consideration on how to proceed. If the complaint relates to the Chief Executive or Chief Officer, further guidance should be sought from the Corporate Complaints Officer.

**No investigating officer should be involved in investigating a complaint relating to his or her own actions.**

## Complaints and other processes

Complaints can sometimes be confused (or overlap) with other processes, such as disciplinary or whistleblowing processes. Specific examples and guidance on how to handle these are below.

## Complaints and service requests

If a customer asks the Council/Partnership to do something (for example, provide a service or deal with a problem), and this is the first time the customer has contacted us, this would normally be a routine service request and not a complaint.

Service requests can lead to complaints, if the request is not handled promptly or the customer is then dissatisfied with how we provide the service.

## Complaints and disciplinary or whistleblowing processes

If the issues raised in a complaint overlap with issues raised under a disciplinary or whistleblowing process, we still need to respond to the complaint.

Our response must be careful not to share confidential information (such as anything about the whistleblowing or disciplinary procedures, or outcomes for individual staff members). It should focus on whether the Council/Partnership failed to meet our *expected standards* and what we have done to improve things, in general terms.

Staff investigating such complaints will need to take extra care to ensure that:

- we comply with all requirements of the CHP in relation to the complaint (as well as meeting the requirements of the other processes)
- all complaint issues are addressed (sometimes issues can get missed if they are not also relevant to the overlapping process); and
- we keep records of the investigation that can be made available to the SPSO if required. This can be problematic when the other process is confidential, because SPSO will normally require documentation of any correspondence and interviews to show how conclusions were reached. We will need to bear this in mind when planning any elements of the investigation that might overlap (for example, if staff are interviewed for the purposes of both the complaint and a disciplinary procedure, they should not be assured that any evidence given will be confidential, as it may be made available to the SPSO).

The SPSO's report [Making complaints work for everyone](#) has more information on supporting staff who are the subject of complaints.



## **Complaints and compensation claims**

Where a customer is seeking financial compensation only, this is not a complaint. However, in some cases the customer may want to complain about the matter leading to their financial claim, and they may seek additional outcomes, such as an apology or an explanation. Where appropriate, we may consider that matter as a complaint, but deal with the financial claim separately. It may be appropriate to extend the timeframes for responding to the complaint, to consider the financial claim first.

## **Complaints and legal action**

Where a customer says that legal action is being actively pursued, this is not a complaint.

Where a customer indicates that they are thinking about legal action, but have not yet commenced this, they should be informed that if they take such action, they should notify the complaints handler and that the complaints process, in relation to the matters that will be considered through the legal process, will be closed. Any outstanding complaints must still be addressed through the CHP.

If an issue has been, or is being, considered by a court, we must not consider the same issue under the CHP.

## **Social work complaints and appeals**

While some social work decisions may be reviewed under alternative arrangements at a local level (for example through appeal or peer review), the SPSO has the power to consider professional social work decisions. The customer should not be required to seek a reconsideration of a decision under both appeal and complaint processes, nor should they be required to make further complaint if dissatisfied with the outcome of an appeal.

Therefore, whilst we have discretion to operate appeals procedures, these must be regarded as a special form of complaint investigation (stage 2 of this CHP). Such appeals processes must be compliant with this procedure in terms of the rigour and documentation of the process, must be concluded within 20 working days where possible with a written response to the customer, and must be recorded as a stage 2 complaint on the relevant complaints database (unless recorded elsewhere as an appeal). If the customer raises additional issues of dissatisfaction as well as challenging a professional decision, then the process must consider and respond to every element of the customer's dissatisfaction so that no additional complaint process is required.

The final response letter must provide relevant text advising the customer of their right to refer the matter to the SPSO for independent consideration. The SPSO will then investigate matters in full, in line with their standard procedures.

## **Social Work Complaints and the Duty of Candour**

In some cases, a complaint may be prompted by a duty of candour disclosure, or a complaint investigation may itself prompt a disclosure. In such cases, we must comply with both this CHP and our duty of candour requirements.

It will often be possible to conduct a single review for the purposes of both the complaint investigation and the duty of candour. We should, however, take care to ensure that all the issues raised in the complaint are dealt with (including any that are not relevant to the duty of candour disclosure).

## Complaints for the Care Inspectorate

Local Authorities and any contractors that provide care services must be registered with the Care Inspectorate. This is the independent scrutiny and improvement body for care and social work across Scotland, which regulates, inspects and supports improvement of care services.

The Care Inspectorate has a procedure for receiving information, concerns and investigating complaints from members of the public, or their representatives, about the care services they use. The Care Inspectorate's complaints procedure is available even when the service provider has an alternative complaints procedure in place.

The Care Inspectorate encourages people to complain directly to the organisation they receive a service from. However, some people are not comfortable doing this and to support them, the Care Inspectorate may take complaints about care services directly.

When complaints are brought to us about registered care services, we have the right to share complaint information about the registered care provider with the Care Inspectorate, to decide who is best placed to investigate the complaint. We can also share the outcome of complaints about contracted and registered services with the Care Inspectorate.

Contact details for the Care Inspectorate can be found on their website:

<https://www.careinspectorate.com/>

## Complaints about Personal Assistants

Where an individual directly employs a Personal Assistant to provide their support, using a Direct Payment (as part of a Self-directed Support package), the Personal Assistant is not subject to registration with the Care Inspectorate under the Public Services Reform (Scotland) Act 2011, its regulations and amendments. The individual directly employing the Personal Assistant remains responsible for the management of their employee, including their performance management. The Care Inspectorate would only be able to take complaints about such support workers if they work for a registered care agency.

## Complaints relevant to other agencies

Customers may raise concerns about issues which cannot be handled through this CHP, but which other agencies may be able to provide assistance with or may have an interest in. This may include:

The Mental Welfare Commission:

Website: [www.mwcscot.org.uk](http://www.mwcscot.org.uk)

The Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland:

Website: [www.cycps.org.uk](http://www.cycps.org.uk)

The Scottish Social Services Council:

Website: [www.sssc.uk.com](http://www.sssc.uk.com)

This list is not exhaustive, and it is important to consider the circumstances of each case, and whether another organisation may also have a role to play.

## What to do if the CHP does not apply

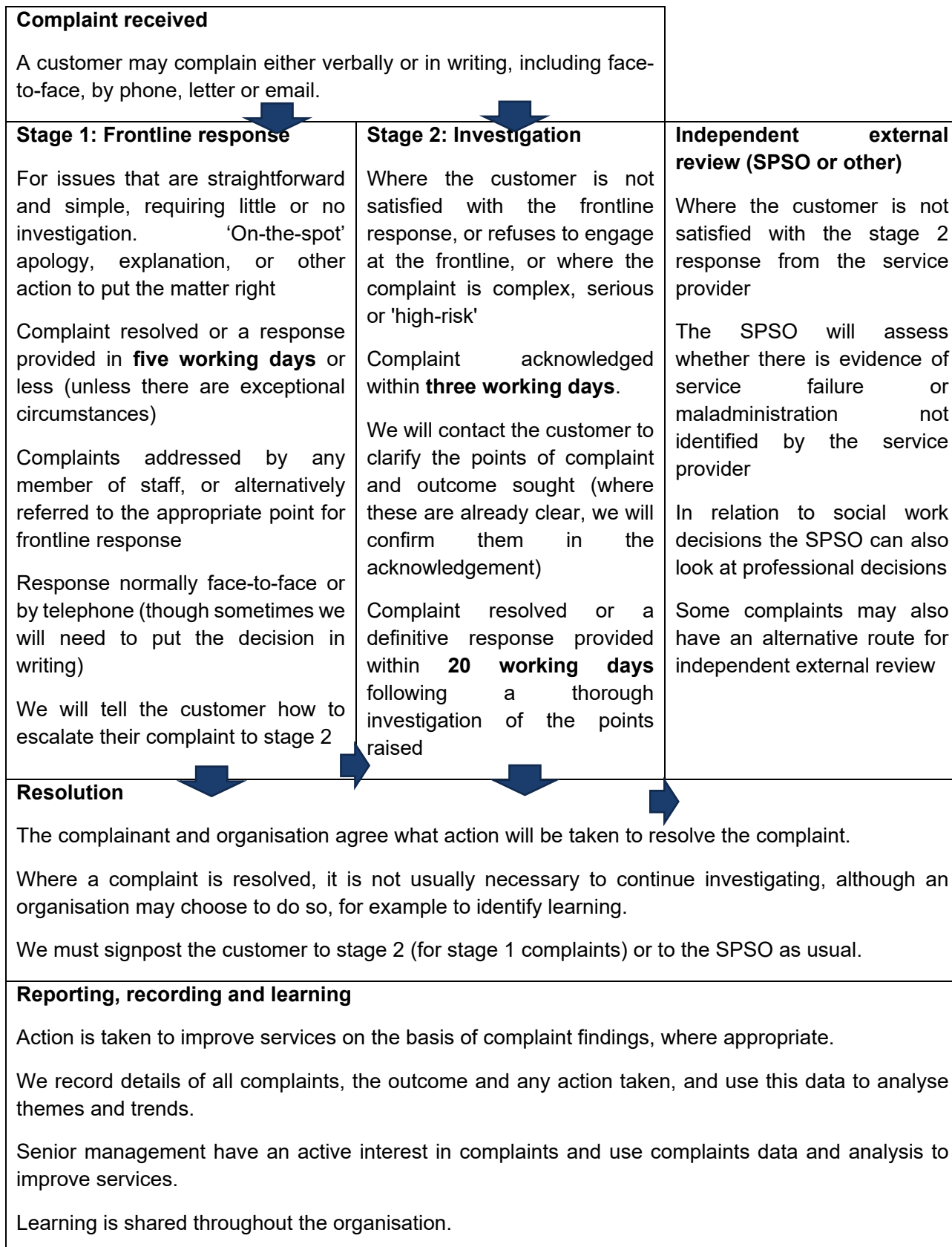
If the issue does not meet the definition of a complaint or if it is not appropriate to handle it under this procedure (for example, due to time limits), we will explain to the customer why we have made this decision. We will also tell them what action (if any) we will take (for example, if another procedure applies), and advise them of their right to contact the SPSO if they disagree with our decision not to respond to the issue as a complaint.

Where a customer continues to contact us about the same issue, we will explain that we have already given them our final response on the matter and signpost them to the SPSO. We may also consider whether we need to take action under our Unacceptable Actions policy.

The SPSO has issued a [template letter for explaining when the CHP does not apply](#).

## The complaints handling process

Our Complaints Handling Procedure (CHP) aims to provide a quick, simple and streamlined process for responding to complaints early and locally by capable, well-trained staff. Where possible, we will **resolve** the complaint to the customer's satisfaction. Where this is not possible, we will give the customer a clear and reasoned response to their complaint.



## Resolving the complaint

A complaint is **resolved** when both the Council/Partnership and the customer agree what action (if any) will be taken to provide full and final resolution for the customer, without making a decision about whether the complaint is upheld or not upheld.

We will try to resolve complaints wherever possible, although we accept this will not be possible in all cases.

A complaint may be resolved at any point in the complaint handling process, including during the investigation stage. It is particularly important to try to resolve complaints where there is an ongoing relationship with the customer or where the complaint relates to an ongoing issue that may give rise to future complaints if the matter is not fully resolved.

It may be helpful to use alternative complaint resolution approaches when trying to resolve a complaint. See **Alternative complaint resolution approaches**.

Where a complaint is resolved, we do not normally need to continue looking into it or provide a response on all points of complaint. There must be a clear record of how the complaint was resolved, what action was agreed, and the customer's agreement to this as a final outcome. In some cases it may still be appropriate to continue looking into the issue, for example where there is evidence of a wider problem or potential for useful learning. We will use our professional judgment in deciding whether it is appropriate to continue looking into a complaint that is resolved.

In all cases, we must record the complaint outcome (resolved) and any action taken, and signpost the customer to stage 2 (for stage 1 complaints) or to the SPSO as usual (see **Signposting to the SPSO**).

If the customer and the Council/Partnership are not able to agree a resolution, we must follow this CHP to provide a clear and reasoned response to each of the issues raised.

## What to do when you receive a complaint

Members of staff receiving a complaint should consider four key questions. This will help them to either respond to the complaint quickly (at stage 1) or determine whether the complaint is more suitable for stage 2:

### **What exactly is the customer's complaint (or complaints)?**

It is important to be clear about exactly what the customer is complaining about. We may need to ask the customer for more information and probe further to get a full understanding.

We will need to decide whether the issue can be defined as a complaint and whether there are circumstances that may limit our ability to respond to the complaint (such as the time limit for making complaints, confidentiality, anonymity or the need for consent). We should also consider whether the complaint is serious, high-risk or high-profile.

If the matter is not suitable for handling as a complaint, we will explain this to the customer (and signpost them to SPSO). There is detailed guidance on this step in [When to use this procedure](#).

In most cases, this step will be straightforward. If it is not, the complaint may need to be handled immediately at stage 2 (see **Stage 2: Investigation**).

### **What does the customer want to achieve by complaining?**

At the outset, we will clarify the outcome the customer wants. Of course, the customer may not be clear about this, and we may need to probe further to find out what they expect, and whether they can be satisfied.

### **Can I achieve this, or explain why not?**

If a staff member handling a complaint can achieve the expected outcome, for example by providing an on-the-spot apology or explain why they cannot achieve it, they should do so.

The customer may expect more than we can provide. If so, we will tell them as soon as possible.

Complaints which can be resolved or responded to quickly should be managed at stage 1 (see **Stage 1: Frontline response**).

### **If I cannot respond, who can help?**

If the complaint is simple and straightforward, but the staff member receiving the complaint cannot deal with it because, for example, they are unfamiliar with the issues or area of service involved, they should pass the complaint to someone who can respond quickly.

If it is not a simple and straightforward complaint that can realistically be closed within five working days (or ten, if an extension is appropriate), it should be handled immediately at stage 2. If the customer refuses to engage at stage 1, insisting that they want their complaint investigated, it should be handled immediately at stage 2. See **Stage 2: Investigation**.

## **Stage 1: Frontline response**

Frontline response aims to respond quickly (within five working days) to straightforward complaints that require little or no investigation.

Any member of staff may deal with complaints at this stage (including the staff member complained about, for example with an explanation or apology). The main principle is to respond to complaints at the earliest opportunity and as close to the point of service delivery as possible.

We may respond to the complaint by providing an on-the-spot apology where appropriate, or explaining why the issue occurred and, where possible, what will be done to stop this happening again. We may also explain that, as an organisation that values complaints, we may use the information given when we review service standards in the future. If we consider an apology is appropriate, we may wish to follow the [SPSO guidance on apology](#).

**Appendix 1** gives examples of the types of complaint we may consider at this stage, with suggestions on how to resolve them.

Complaints which are not suitable for frontline response should be identified early, and handled immediately at stage 2: investigation.

## **Notifying staff members involved**

If the complaint is about the actions of another staff member, the complaint should be shared with them, where possible, before responding (although this should not prevent us responding to the complaint quickly, for example where it is clear that an apology is warranted).

## Timelines

Frontline response must be completed within **five working days**, although in practice we would often expect to respond to the complaint much sooner. 'Day one' is always the date of receipt of the complaint (or the next working day if the complaint is received on a weekend or public holiday).

## Extension to the timeline

In exceptional circumstances, a short extension of time may be necessary due to unforeseen circumstances (such as the availability of a key staff member). Extensions must be agreed with an appropriate manager. We will tell the customer about the reasons for the extension, and when they can expect a response. The maximum extension that can be granted is five working days (that is, no more than **ten working days** in total from the date of receipt). The details of an extension must be logged on the Complaints system.

If a complaint will take more than five working days to look into, it should be handled at stage 2 immediately. The only exception to this is where the complaint is simple and could normally be handled within five working days, but it is not possible to begin immediately (for example, due to the absence of a key staff member). In such cases, the complaint may still be handled at stage 1 if it is clear that it can be handled within the extended timeframe, i.e within ten working days in total.

If a complaint has not been closed within ten working days, it should be escalated to stage 2 for a final response.

**Appendix 4** provides further information on timelines.

## Closing the complaint at the frontline response stage

If we convey the decision face-to-face or on the telephone, we are not required to write to the customer as well ((although we must ensure we keep a detailed record of the verbal response, and may choose to follow up in writing if appropriate)). We must:

- tell the customer the outcome of the complaint (whether it is resolved, upheld, partially upheld or not upheld)
- explain the reasons for our decision (or the agreed action taken to resolve the complaint, or the agreed action taken to resolve the complaint (see **Resolving the complaint**); and
- explain that the customer can escalate the complaint to stage 2 if they remain dissatisfied and how to do so (we should not signpost to the SPSO until the customer has completed stage 2).

We will keep a full and accurate record of the decision given to the customer. If we are not able to contact the customer by phone, or speak to them in person, we will provide a written response to the complaint where an email or postal address is provided, covering the points above.

If the complaint is about the actions of a particular staff member/s, we will share with them any part of the complaint response which relates to them, (unless there are compelling reasons not to).

The complaint should then be closed and the complaints system updated accordingly.

During the investigation of the complaint, the staff member handling the complaint should consider whether any learning or improvement needs are required. See **Learning from complaints**.

## Stage 2: Investigation

Not all complaints are suitable for frontline response and not all complaints will be satisfactorily addressed at that stage. Stage 2 is appropriate where:

- the customer is dissatisfied with the frontline response or refuses to engage at the frontline stage, insisting they wish their complaint to be investigated. Unless exceptional circumstances apply, the customer must escalate the complaint within six months of when they first knew of the problem or within two months of the stage 1 response, whichever is later (see **Time limits for making a complaint**)
- the complaint is not simple and straightforward (for example where the customer has raised a number of issues, or where information from several sources is needed before we can establish what happened and/or what should have happened); or
- the complaint relates to serious, high-risk or high-profile issues (see **Serious, high-risk or high-profile complaints**).

An investigation aims to explore the complaint in more depth and establish all the relevant facts. The aim is to resolve the complaint where possible, or to give the customer a full, objective and proportionate response that represents our final position. Wherever possible, complaints should be investigated by someone not involved in the complaint (for example, a line manager or a manager from a different area).

Details of the complaint must be recorded on the complaints system. Where appropriate, this will be done as a continuation of frontline response. If the investigation stage follows a frontline response, the officer responsible for the investigation should have access to all case notes and associated information.

The beginning of stage 2 is a good time to consider whether complaint resolution approaches other than investigation may be helpful (see **Alternative complaint resolution approaches**).

## Acknowledging the complaint

Complaints must be acknowledged within three working days of receipt at stage 2.

We must issue the acknowledgement in a format which is accessible to the customer, taking into account their preferred method of contact.

Where the points of complaint and expected outcomes are clear from the complaint, we must set these out in the acknowledgement and ask the customer to get in touch with us immediately if they disagree. See **Agreeing the points of complaint and outcome sought**

Where the points of complaint and expected outcomes are not clear, we must tell the customer we will contact them to discuss this.

## Agreeing the points of complaint and outcome sought

It is important to be clear from the start of stage 2 about the points of complaint to be investigated and what outcome the customer is seeking. We may also need to manage the customer's expectations about the scope of our investigation.

Where the points of complaint and outcome sought are clear, we can confirm our understanding of these with the customer when acknowledging the complaint (see **Acknowledging the complaint**).



Where the points of complaint and outcome sought are not clear, we must contact the customer to confirm these. We will normally need to speak to the customer (by phone or face-to-face) to do this effectively. In some cases it may be possible to clarify complaints in writing. The key point is that we need to be sure we and the customer have a shared understanding of the complaint. When contacting the customer we will be respectful of their stated preferred method of contact. We should keep a clear record of any discussion with the customer.

In all cases, we must have a clear and shared understanding of:

- **What are the points of complaint to be investigated?**

While the complaint may appear to be clear, agreeing the points of complaint at the outset ensures there is a shared understanding and avoids the complaint changing or confusion arising at a later stage. The points of complaint should be specific enough to direct the investigation, but broad enough to include any multiple and specific points of concern about the same issue.

We will make every effort to agree the points of complaint with the customer (alternative complaint resolution approaches may be helpful at this stage). In very rare cases, it may not be possible to agree the points of complaint (for example, if the customer insists on an unreasonably large number of complaints being separately investigated, or on framing their complaint in an abusive way). We will manage any such cases in accordance with our **Unacceptable Actions policy** bearing in mind that we should continue to investigate the complaint (as we understand it) wherever possible.

- **Is there anything we can't consider under the CHP?**

We must explain if there are any points that are not suitable for handling under the CHP (see [What to do if the CHP does not apply](#)).

- **What outcome does the customer want to achieve by complaining?**

Asking what outcome the customer is seeking helps direct the investigation and enables us to focus on resolving the complaint where possible.

- **Are the customer's expectations realistic and achievable?**

It may be that the customer expects more than we can provide, or has unrealistic expectations about the scope of the investigation. If so, we should make this clear to the customer as soon as possible.

## Notifying staff members involved

If the complaint is about the actions of a particular staff member/s, we will notify the staff member/s involved (including where the staff member is not named, but can be identified from the complaint).

We will:

- share the complaint information with the staff member/s (unless there are compelling reasons not to)
- advise them how the complaint will be handled, how they will be kept updated and how we will share the complaint response with them

- discuss their willingness to engage with alternative complaint resolution approaches (where applicable); and
- signpost the staff member/s to a contact person who can provide support and information on what to expect from the complaint process (this must not be the person investigating or signing off the complaint response).

If it is likely that internal disciplinary processes may be involved, the requirements of that process should also be met. More information on the Council's Disciplinary Procedure can be found here: <http://intranet.argyll-bute.gov.uk/my-hr/managers-disciplinary-guidance>. See also **Complaints and disciplinary or whistleblowing processes**.

## Investigating the complaint

It is important to plan the investigation before beginning. The staff member investigating the complaint should consider what information they have and what they need about:

- what happened? (this could include, for example, records of phone calls or meetings, work requests, recollections of staff members or internal emails)
- what should have happened? (this should include any relevant policies or procedures that apply); and
- is there a difference between what happened and what should have happened, and is the Council/Partnership responsible?

In some cases, information may not be readily available. We will balance the need for the information against the resources required to obtain it, taking into account the seriousness of the issue (for example, it may be appropriate to contact a former employee, if possible, where they hold key information about a serious complaint).

If we need to share information within or outwith the organisation, we will be mindful of our obligations under data protection legislation. See **Maintaining confidentiality and data protection**.

The SPSO has resources for conducting investigations, including:

- [Investigation plan template](#)
- [Decision-making tool for complaint investigators](#)

## Alternative complaint resolution approaches

Some complex complaints, or complaints where customers and other interested parties have become entrenched in their position, may require a different approach to resolving the matter. Where we think it is appropriate, we may use alternative complaint resolution approaches such as complaint resolution discussions, mediation or conciliation to try to resolve the matter and to reduce the risk of the complaint escalating further. If mediation is attempted, a suitably trained and qualified mediator should be used. Alternative complaint resolution approaches may help both parties to understand what has caused the complaint, and so are more likely to lead to mutually satisfactory solutions.

Alternative complaint resolution approaches may be used to resolve the complaint entirely, or to support one part of the process, such as understanding the complaint, or exploring the customer's desired outcome.

The SPSO has guidance on [alternative complaint resolution approaches](#).

If the Council/Partnership and the customer (and any staff members involved) agree to using alternative complaint resolution approaches, it is likely that an extension to the timeline will need to be agreed. This should not discourage the use of these approaches.

## Meeting with the customer during the investigation

To effectively investigate the complaint, it may be necessary to arrange a meeting with the customer. Where a meeting takes place, we will always be mindful of the requirement to investigate complaints (including holding any meetings) within 20 working days wherever possible. Where there are difficulties arranging a meeting, this may provide grounds for extending the timeframe.

As a matter of good practice, a written record of the meeting should be completed and provided to the customer. Alternatively, and by agreement with the person making the complaint, we may provide a record of the meeting in another format. We will notify the person making the complaint of the timescale within which we expect to provide the record of the meeting.

## Timelines

The following deadlines are appropriate to cases at the investigation stage (counting day one as the day of receipt, or the next working day if the complaint was received on a weekend or public holiday):

- complaints must be acknowledged within **three working days**
- a full response to the complaint should be provided as soon as possible but not later than **20 working days** from the time the complaint was received for investigation.

## Extension to the timeline

Not all investigations will be able to meet this deadline. For example, some complaints are so complex that they require careful consideration and detailed investigation beyond the 20 working day timeline. It is important to be realistic and clear with the customer about timeframes, and to advise them early if we think it will not be possible to meet the 20 day timeframe, and why. We should bear in mind that extended delays may have a detrimental effect on the customer.

Any extension must be approved by an appropriate manager. We will keep the customer and any member/s of staff complained about updated on the reason for the delay and give them a revised timescale for completion. We will contact the customer and any member/s of staff complained about at least once every 20 working days to update them on the progress of the investigation. The details of an extension must be logged on the Complaints system

The reasons for an extension might include the following:

- essential accounts or statements, crucial to establishing the circumstances of the case, are needed from staff, customers or others but the person is not available because of long-term sickness or leave
- we cannot obtain further essential information within normal timescales; or
- the customer has agreed to alternative complaint resolution approaches as a potential route for resolution.

These are only a few examples, and we will judge the matter in relation to each complaint. However, an extension would be the exception.

**Appendix 1** provides further information on timelines.

## Closing the complaint at the investigation stage

The response to the complaint should be in writing (or by the customer's preferred method of contact) and must be signed off by a manager or officer who is empowered to provide the final response on behalf of the Council/Partnership. For the Council this should be Head of Service, Executive Director or the Chief Executive. For the Health and Social Care Partnership this should be either a Head of Service or the Chief Officer.

We will tell the customer the outcome of the complaint (whether it is resolved, upheld, partially upheld or not upheld). The quality of the complaint response is very important and in terms of good practice should:

- be clear and easy to understand, written in a way that is person-centred and non-confrontational
- avoid technical terms, but where these must be used, an explanation of the term should be provided
- address all the issues raised and demonstrate that each element has been fully and fairly investigated
- include an apology where things have gone wrong (this is different to an expression of empathy: see [the SPSO's guidance on apology](#))
- highlight any area of disagreement and explain why no further action can be taken
- indicate that a named member of staff is available to clarify any aspect of the letter; and
- indicate that if they are not satisfied with the outcome of the local process, they may seek a review by the SPSO (see **Signposting to the SPSO**).

Where a complaint has been **resolved**, the response does not need to provide a decision on all points of complaint, but should instead confirm the resolution agreed. See **Resolving the complaint**.

If the complaint is about the actions of a particular staff member/s, we will share with them any part of the complaint response which relates to them, (unless there are compelling reasons not to).

We will record the decision, and details of how it was communicated to the customer, on the complaints system.

The SPSO has guidance on responding to a complaint:

- [Template decision letter](#)
- [Apology guidance](#)

During the investigation of the complaint, the staff member handling the complaint should consider whether any learning or improvement needs are required. See **Learning from complaints**.

## Signposting to the SPSO

Once the investigation stage has been completed, the customer has the right to approach the SPSO if they remain dissatisfied. We must make clear to the customer:

- their right to ask the SPSO to consider the complaint
- the time limit for doing so; and
- how to contact the SPSO.

The SPSO considers complaints from people who remain dissatisfied at the conclusion of our complaints procedure. The SPSO looks at issues such as service failure and maladministration (administrative fault), and the way we have handled the complaint. There are some subject areas that are outwith the SPSO's jurisdiction, but it is the SPSO's role to determine whether an individual complaint is one that they can consider (and to what extent). All investigation responses must signpost to the SPSO.

The SPSO recommends that we use the wording below to inform customers of their right to ask the SPSO to consider the complaint. This information should only be included on the Council/Partnership's final response to the complaint.

### **Information about the SPSO**

The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) is the final stage for complaints about public services in Scotland. This includes complaints about the Council/Partnership. The SPSO is an independent organisation that investigates complaints. It is not an advocacy or support service (but there are other organisations who can help you with advocacy or support).

If you remain dissatisfied when you have had a final response from the Council/Partnership, you can ask the SPSO to look at your complaint. You can ask the SPSO to look at your complaint if:

- you have gone all the way through the Council/Partnership's Complaints Handling Procedure
- it is less than 12 months after you became aware of the matter you want to complain about, and
- the matter has not been (and is not being) considered in court.

The SPSO will ask you to complete a complaint form and provide a copy of this letter (our final response to your complaint). You can do this online at <https://www.spsos.org.uk/complain/form/start/> or call them on Freephone 0800 377 7330.

You may wish to get independent support or advocacy to help you progress your complaint. Organisations who may be able to assist you are:

- Citizens Advice Bureau
- Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance

The SPSO's contact details are:

SPSO

Bridgeside House

99 McDonald Road

Edinburgh

EH7 4NS

(if you would like to visit in person, you must make an appointment first)

Their freepost address is:

FREEPOST SPSO

Freephone: 0800 377 7330

Online contact [www.spsso.org.uk/contact-us](http://www.spsso.org.uk/contact-us)

Website: [www.spsso.org.uk](http://www.spsso.org.uk)

## Factoring complaints and complaints from shared owners

The SPSO does not normally look at complaints about our factoring service or complaints from shared owners. These complaints can be considered by the First Tier Tribunal for Scotland (Housing and Property Chamber). Their contact details are on their website: <https://www.housingandpropertychamber.scot/>

Where the complaint relates to social housing, we should still signpost these complaints to the SPSO, as there may be some aspects the SPSO can consider (for example, if the customer is dissatisfied with how we have handled their complaint). However, we should also notify the customer of their right to approach the Tribunal if they are dissatisfied with our response to these kinds of complaint.

## Post-closure contact

If a customer contacts us for clarification when they have received our final response, we may have further discussion with the customer to clarify our response and answer their questions. However, if the customer is dissatisfied with our response or does not accept our findings, we will explain that we have already given them our final response on the matter and signpost them to the SPSO.

## Roles and responsibilities

All staff will be aware of:

- the Complaints Handling Procedure (CHP)
- how to handle and record complaints at the frontline response stage
- who they can refer a complaint to, in case they are not able to handle the matter
- the need to try and resolve complaints early and as close to the point of service delivery as possible; and
- their clear authority to attempt to resolve any complaints they may be called upon to deal with.

Training on this procedure will be part of the induction process for all new staff. Refresher training will be provided for current staff on a regular basis.

Senior management will ensure that:

- the Council/Partnership's final position on a complaint investigation is signed off by an appropriate manager or officer in order to provide assurance that this is the definitive response of the Council/Partnership and that the complainant's concerns have been taken seriously

- it maintains overall responsibility and accountability for the management and governance of complaints handling (including complaints about contracted services)
- it has an active role in, and understanding of, the CHP (although not necessarily involved in the decision-making process of complaint handling)
- mechanisms are in place to ensure a consistent approach to the way complaints handling information is managed, monitored, reviewed and reported at all levels in the Council/Partnership; and
- complaints information is used to improve services, and this is evident from regular publications.

**Chief executive/Chief Officer:** Provides leadership and direction in ways that guide and enable us to perform effectively across all services. This includes ensuring that there is an effective CHP, with a robust investigation process that demonstrates how we learn from the complaints we receive. The chief executive/officer may take a personal interest in all or some complaints, or may delegate responsibility for the CHP to senior staff. Regular management reports assure the Chief Executive/Officer of the quality of complaints performance.

The Chief Executive/Officer is also responsible for ensuring that there are governance and accountability arrangements in place in relation to complaints about contractors/ALEOs. This includes:

- ensuring performance monitoring for complaints is a feature of the service/management agreements between the Council/Partnership and contractors/ALEOs
- setting clear objectives in relation to this complaints procedure and putting appropriate monitoring systems in place to provide the Council/Partnership with an overview of how the contractor/ALEO is meeting its objectives

**Chief Social Work Officer (CSWO):** The CSWO has an important role in the consideration of social work complaints information and, on occasion, the content of individual complaints. Their role in overseeing the effective governance of social work services and monitoring these arrangements includes complaints about social work services. The CSWO should also take appropriate account of complaints information in fulfilling their obligations to promote continuous improvement and best practice. Furthermore, the CSWO or their delegated officers may have specific interest in complaints relating to individuals for whom they have decision-making responsibilities.

**Executive Directors:** On the chief executive's behalf, Executive Directors may be responsible for:

- managing complaints and the way we learn from them
- overseeing the implementation of actions required as a result of a complaint
- investigating complaints; and
- deputising for the chief executive on occasion.

They may also be responsible for preparing and signing off decisions for customers, so they should be satisfied that the investigation is complete and their response addresses all aspects of the complaint. However, directors may decide to delegate some elements of complaints handling (such as investigations and the drafting of response letters) to other senior staff. Where this happens, directors should retain ownership and accountability for the management and reporting of complaints.

**Heads of service:** Heads of service will be responsible for the operational investigation and management of complaints handling for their service. As senior officers they will be responsible for preparing and signing decision letters to customers, so they should be satisfied that the investigation is complete and their response addresses all aspects of the complaint.

**Complaints investigator:** The complaints investigator is responsible and accountable for the management of the investigation. They may work in a service delivery team or as part of a centralised customer service team, and will be involved in the investigation and in coordinating all aspects of the response to the customer. This may include preparing a comprehensive written report, including details of any procedural changes in service delivery and identifying wider opportunities for learning across the organisation.

**Corporate Complaints Officer/SPSO liaison officer:** This Officer has overall responsibility for the recording, monitoring and reporting of complaints across the Council. It also includes promoting the use of the corporate complaints procedure, providing advice and training (including induction training) to officers, liaising with departmental complaints co-ordinators and reporting on complaints through the Strategic Management Team. The SPSO liaison officer's part of this role may include providing complaints information in an orderly, structured way within requested timescales, providing comments on factual accuracy on our behalf in response to SPSO reports, and confirming and verifying that recommendations have been implemented.

**Departmental Complaints Officers:** All Directorates should have a designated officer with responsibility for monitoring and reporting on complaints at both Stage 1 and Stage 2 of the process. This role includes maintaining and collating information on complaints and reporting to the Departmental Management Team, ensuring the process is being followed by the service, identifying any issues which require a change in procedure or other management action, providing regular feedback to employees on procedure/policy changes and implementing and monitoring systems to ensure all new employees are made aware of the process.

**Departmental Complaints Co-ordinator:** Co-ordinators will log (Complaints received directly by department), update and close all complaints on the corporate complaints system. They will be responsible for issuing the complaints to the relevant Service Officer or Head of Service to provide a response. They will assist the Departmental Complaints Officer in managing the resolution of case alerts arising from unresolved cases and will liaise with the Customer Service Centre regarding queries from customers about the progress of unresolved cases.

**All Staff:** It is essential that all staff, particularly those staff in posts which involve a direct interface with the customer are aware of their responsibilities in relation to dealing with complaints – specifically the need for all complaints to be logged on the corporate complaints database.

## **Recording, reporting, learning from and publicising complaints**

Complaints provide valuable customer feedback. One of the aims of the CHP is to identify opportunities to improve services across the Council/Partnership. By recording and analysing complaints data, we can identify and address the causes of complaints and, where appropriate, identify training opportunities and introduce service improvements.

We also have arrangements in place to ensure complaints about contractors or ALEOs are recorded, reported on and publicised in line with this CHP.



## Recording complaints

It is important to record suitable data to enable us to fully investigate and respond to the complaint, as well as using our complaint information to track themes and trends. As a minimum, we should record:

- the customer's name and contact details
- the date the complaint was received
- the nature of the complaint
- the service the complaint refers to
- staff member responsible for handling the complaint
- action taken and outcome at frontline response stage
- date the complaint was closed at the frontline response stage
- date the investigation stage was initiated (if applicable)
- action taken and outcome at investigation stage (if applicable)
- date the complaint was closed at the investigation stage (if applicable); and
- the underlying cause of the complaint and any remedial action taken.
- the outcome of the SPSO's investigation (where applicable) and any actions required along with details of when completed.

If the customer does not want to provide any of this information, we will reassure them that it will be managed appropriately, and record what we can.

Individual complaint files will be stored in line with our document retention policy, which is contained within our Information Asset Registers.

## Learning from complaints

We must have clear systems in place to act on issues identified in complaints. As a minimum, we must:

- seek to identify the root cause of complaints
- take action to reduce the risk of recurrence; and
- systematically review complaints performance reports to improve service delivery.

Learning may be identified from individual complaints (regardless of whether the complaint is upheld or not) and from analysis of complaints data.

Where we have identified the need for service improvement in response to an individual complaint, we will take appropriate action:

- the action needed to improve services must be authorised by an appropriate manager
- an officer (or team) should be designated the 'owner' of the issue, with responsibility for ensuring the action is taken
- a target date must be set for the action to be taken

- the designated individual must follow up to ensure that the action is taken within the agreed timescale
- where appropriate, performance in the service area should be monitored to ensure that the issue has been resolved; and
- any learning points should be shared with relevant staff.

Heads of Service will be responsible for ensuring service improvements or changes are implemented.

SPSO has guidance on **Learning from complaints**.

Senior management will review the information reported on complaints regularly to ensure that any trends or wider issues which may not be obvious from individual complaints are quickly identified and addressed. Where we identify the need for service improvement, we will take appropriate action (as set out above). Where appropriate, performance in the service area should be monitored to ensure that the issue has been resolved.

## Reporting of complaints

We have a process for the internal reporting of complaints information, including analysis of complaints trends. Regularly reporting the analysis of complaints information helps to inform management of where services need to improve.

We will report at least **quarterly** to senior management on:

- performance statistics, in line with the complaints performance indicators published by SPSO
- analysis of the trends and outcomes of complaints (this should include highlighting where there are areas where few or no complaints are received, which may indicate either good practice or that there are barriers to complaining in that area).

## Publicising complaints information

We publish on a **quarterly** basis, information on complaints outcomes and actions taken to improve services.

This demonstrates the improvements resulting from complaints and shows that complaints can help to improve our services. It also helps ensure transparency in our complaints handling service and will help to show our customers that we value their complaints.

We will publish an **annual** complaints performance report on our website in line with SPSO requirements, and provide this to the SPSO on request. This summarises and builds on the quarterly reports we have produced about our services. It includes:

- performance statistics, in line with the complaints performance indicators published by the SPSO; and
- complaint trends and the actions that have been or will be taken to improve services as a result.

These reports must be easily accessible to members of the public and available in alternative formats as requested. **See Appendix 14** for more information on reporting.

## Appendix 1 – Complaints

The following tables give examples of complaints that may be considered at the frontline stage, and suggest possible actions. For ease of reference, examples of social work complaints are provided in a separate table.

Complaint	Possible actions
The customer complains that her council tax direct debit has been set up wrongly.	Apologise to the customer and update the direct debit details.
The customer has provided evidence to verify his claim for benefits, but the Benefits Service has not updated his case records with this information.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Apologise to the customer.</li> <li>• Update the customer's benefit record to record receipt of evidence.</li> <li>• Check that the benefit award is corrected from the appropriate date.</li> </ul>
The customer complains that a workman did not attend to carry out a housing repair as we had agreed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speak to the workman, the service or the service manager to explain the customer's complaint and to agree how to address the issue, for example by arranging a new time and date to do the repair.</li> <li>• Explain the reasons for the failed appointment and apologise to the customer.</li> </ul>
The customer complains that the quality of a repair done by us or our contractor is not satisfactory.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask the service department to examine the repair to assess whether or not it is acceptable.</li> <li>• If appropriate, agree that the service department should do more work.</li> <li>• Explain and apologise to the customer.</li> <li>• Obtain a report from the service or contractor to confirm that the repair is now complete.</li> <li>• Feedback the lessons learned from the complaint into a service improvement plan.</li> </ul>
The customer complains that a road which is on our winter gritting route has not been gritted despite previous assurances that it would be.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confirm if the roads are on our agreed gritting routes.</li> <li>• If assurance had been provided that the road would be gritted, check to confirm if this action occurred, and when.</li> </ul>

Complaint	Possible actions
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where appropriate, provide an explanation and apologise to the customer.</li> <li>• Obtain confirmation from the service to confirm when the road will be gritted</li> <li>• Feedback the lessons learned from the complaint into a service improvement plan.</li> </ul>
<p>The customer complains that his home carer turned up late and was smoking.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contact the care service to discuss the matter with a service manager.</li> <li>• The care service should check the timetable for visits and discuss with the home carer the complaint about smoking. The care service should let you know the outcome.</li> <li>• You in turn contact the customer to explain the policy, confirm the timing of visits (for example between 08:00 and 12 noon) and, where appropriate, apologise for the inconvenience.</li> </ul>
<p>The customer complains that a night-working refuse collector woke her up by making excessive noise.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explain our policy on refuse collection, in particular the approach to night working.</li> <li>• Tell the customer that you will pass on details of the complaint to the service to highlight the noise issue and ask the service to do what they can to control noise.</li> <li>• Apologise to the customer for the inconvenience.</li> </ul>
<p>The customer expresses dissatisfaction in line with the definition of a complaint, but says she does not want to complain – just wants to tell us about the matter.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell the customer that we value complaints because they help to improve services. Encourage them to submit the complaint.</li> <li>• In terms of improving service delivery and learning from mistakes, it is important that customer feedback, such as this, is recorded, evaluated and acted upon. Therefore, if the customer still insists that</li> </ul>

Complaint	Possible actions
	they do not want to complain, record the matter as an anonymous complaint. This will avoid breaching the complaints handling procedure. Reassure the customer that they will not be contacted again about the matter.

Social work complaint	Possible actions
A service user complains that a social worker did not turn up for a planned visit.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Apologise to the service user</li> <li>• Explain that you will look into the matter</li> <li>• Contact the social worker/manager to find out the reason for the missed appointment, then</li> <li>• Explain the reasons and offer a new appointment.</li> </ul>
A member of the public complains that a home carer parked in a private resident's car parking place.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take the customer's details and explain that you will look into the matter</li> <li>• Contact the home care service to find out if this is the case</li> <li>• If so, request that this does not happen again, and</li> <li>• Contact the customer, apologise and advise that the worker has been asked to find alternative parking.</li> </ul>
A member of public complains that his neighbours (residents of a children's house) have been playing football in the street where they live and are being abusive to passers-by.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explain to the customer that you will look into the matter and call them back</li> <li>• Contact the manager of the children's house to verify the facts</li> <li>• Request that the manager meet with the neighbour to apologise and engender good relations, then</li> <li>• Call back the customer to update them.</li> </ul>
A complaint about a service provider commissioned by social work services.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discuss with the customer the different ways for this complaint to be handled, i.e. by a complaint to the Care Inspectorate or through the provider's own CHP, and</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure, whatever process is agreed, that the customer is clear how they can progress their complaint to the next stage, should they remain dissatisfied. This may be within the provider’s CHP, to the Authority / HSCP or to the Care Inspectorate. The customer should be advised that they can come back to Authority / HSCP for further advice if they need to at any stage.</li> </ul>
<p>A service user complains that their care needs assessment does not accurately reflect their needs, or that the care package proposed would not meet the needs identified in their assessment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarify with the customer whether the complaint relates to an assessment of needs or a proposed care package. Establish specifically what the customer is complaining about and what has happened so far. Ask them what they are seeking from their complaint, and explain that you will look into the matter</li> <li>• Make internal enquiries to establish what stage the assessment and care planning processes are at</li> <li>• While considering the complaint, if the team indicate that a new assessment or care planning meeting may be offered, pass this offer onto the customer, and ask the team to contact the customer to take this forward, and</li> <li>• If the team are not prepared to look at the matter again, explain why the assessment or care package decision is considered to be adequate, and signpost to the next stage of the CHP.</li> </ul>
<p>A customer complains about social work services impacting on their discharge from hospital.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Check with the hospital social work team about the customer’s care planning in relation to discharge from hospital, and the timing of medical decisions and social work input</li> <li>• It may become apparent at that stage that the discharge process was complicated by a range of issues, in which case it may be appropriate to escalate the complaint to investigation</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• It may also become apparent that the customer is still in hospital, and may or may not be considered ready for discharge. If they are ready, then pass the complaint onto the team directly involved to respond to as quickly as possible</li><li>• If the situation is not current, and there were delays from social work services, find out why these happened, and</li><li>• Respond to the customer by their preferred method, to inform them of the outcome of their complaint. Offer an apology if appropriate, and outline what steps have been put in place to prevent a recurrence of the situation.</li></ul>
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## **Appendix 2 – What is not a complaint?**

A concern may not necessarily be a complaint. For example, a customer might make a routine first-time request for a service. This is not a complaint, but the issue may escalate into a complaint if it is not handled effectively and the customer has to keep on asking for service.

In some cases a measure of discretion or further clarification is required in determining whether something is a complaint that should be handled through this procedure or another matter which should be handled through another process. There are also some specific circumstances when complaints should be handled in a particular manner.

The following paragraphs provide examples of the types of issues or concerns that must not be handled through the complaints handling procedure. This is not a full list, and you should decide the best route based on the individual case.

### **Planning**

Customers may express dissatisfaction after the refusal of planning or other related permissions. An example would be dissatisfaction with a condition of consent or an enforcement action.

Planning applicants, or their agent, have the right to appeal to Scottish Ministers on planning or related matters determined by Committee or decided under delegated powers. Appeals are usually, but not always, decided by a Reporter from the Directorate of Planning and Environmental Appeals and can be considered on the basis of written submissions or by a hearing or public inquiry. The Reporter appointed to consider the appeal will manage the whole process and consider how to gather enough information to make a decision.

Customers who are dissatisfied with one of our planning decisions, and who have a right to appeal to Scottish Ministers, should be directed to this service. However, some complaints about planning matters are from third parties such as neighbours. These customers do not have the right of appeal to Scottish Ministers. These complaints should, therefore, be considered through the CHP.

### **Benefits**

A customer may be dissatisfied or disagree with a decision about their housing or council tax benefit claim. This is not a complaint. The customer may ask us to review the decision. If they remain dissatisfied at the outcome of the review or reconsideration of their claim, they may also appeal against our decision to an independent appeal tribunal. Where they want to do so, you should direct them appropriately.

### **Claims for compensation**

A customer may seek compensation from us if they consider us liable. This includes issues such as personal injury or loss of or damage to property. Claims for compensation only are not complaints, so you must not handle them through the complaints handling procedure. You should be clear, however, that where a customer wants to complain about the matter leading to their request for compensation, for example workmen damaging their home, or the condition of a public road causing damage to a motor vehicle, you may consider that matter as a complaint, but deal with the request for compensation separately. You may decide to suspend complaint action pending the outcome of the claim for compensation. If you do this, you must notify the customer and explain that the complaint will be fully considered when the compensation claim has been decided.



If you receive a compensation claim, you should explain to the customer the process for claiming compensation in line with our policy on these claims.

### **Licence decisions**

We are responsible for issuing various licences, including public entertainment, HMO (houses in multiple occupation), liquor and taxi licences. These have their own legal redress. Customers who are dissatisfied with these decisions will have to pursue this through the correct procedure for the type of licence they want.

### **School exclusions and placing requests**

Decisions on appeals against a pupil's exclusion from school or a refusal of a school placing request are made by Committee. Once the Committee has ruled, the customer cannot then use the complaints process to continue their case.

### **School exam results**

Schools have devolved authority to offer examinations on the awarding body's behalf. In most cases this will be the SQA. If a customer is dissatisfied with the result of an exam, the school should refer it to the awarding body.

Remember that although there may be an alternative form of redress for the customer as detailed above, you must consider carefully whether or not a customer's representations should be managed within the complaints handling procedure. Dissatisfaction with certain local authority decisions may simply require an explanation and directing to the correct route. If, however, a customer says they are dissatisfied with the administrative process we have followed in reaching a decision, you may consider that dissatisfaction through the complaints handling procedure. An example may be a complaint from a customer who is dissatisfied with a decision and alleges that we failed to follow or apply the appropriate guidance in reaching that decision.

## Appendix 3 – Complex social work scenarios

### Child or adult protection concerns

Customers may express concerns that a child or adult is at risk, but frame their concern in terms of dissatisfaction that 'nothing has been done about this'. The member of staff will need to consider whether the person is authorised to make complaints on behalf of the child or adult in question, whether they expect the matter to be handled as a complaint and whether the professional view is that these matters are best addressed through initiating the applicable protection procedures. Where the need to initiate protection procedures and investigate concerns within those procedures is identified, the complaint should be closed. The person making the complaint should be advised of this and signposted to the SPSO.

Where a complaint is received about some aspect of protection processes that have already been initiated, for example in relation to the way the processes was applied, this should be considered a complaint, and progressed within the complaints handling procedure.

### Complaints about professional social work decisions

A customer may wish to complain about or appeal against a social work decision. Such decisions must be considered in line with the timescales for complaints as specified in the CHP.

Some decisions may be considered through an internal appeal procedure. However, any such appeal route must be considered as constituting a special form of stage 2 of this procedure, in that it will result in a thorough response **to all concerns** and onward referral to the SPSO. See also **Social work complaints and appeals**.

### Legal action

Legal action takes several forms and each must be handled in a distinctive way:

- (a) **Judicial Review:** If a person wishes to seek judicial review of a decision then they should be encouraged to seek legal advice.
- (b) **Litigation:** Where a customer says that they are seeking compensation and that legal action is being actively pursued, this is not a complaint. Where a customer indicates that they intend to litigate but have not yet commenced legal action, they should be informed that if they take such action, they should notify the complaints handler and/or the Complaints Manager and that the complaints process, in relation to the matters that will be considered through the legal process, will be closed. If it becomes apparent that legal action is being pursued, the complaints handler must clarify with the customer if all the issues they have raised will be considered through legal action; any outstanding issues must still be addressed through the CHP.
- (c) **Legal tribunals, etc.:** Sometimes the matter complained of may be the subject of ongoing consideration by a relevant legal body, for example where a customer complains of lack of contact with their child who is being looked after by the Partnership, when that matter falls to be determined by the Children's Panel. In such cases the customer should be directed to raise the matter either directly or through their legal representatives within that other defined process and the matter should not be accepted as a complaint.

This is distinct from a complaint that the Partnership and its staff have failed to properly carry out their roles and responsibilities. In the example above, a Children's Panel may have set contact frequency but it is not being properly facilitated by social work staff due to staffing shortages or some other factor. That is a matter of legitimate complaint under this procedure.

### **Complaints about the content of social work reports submitted to legal bodies**

The Partnership may receive complaints about the accuracy of reports by professional social work staff submitted to Courts or other bodies such as Children's Panels, Parole Boards or Mental Health Tribunals. In such circumstances, the report is provided as a service to the court or tribunal, not as a service to the customer. The customer has no right to veto such reports or insist that content is subject to their approval but they can complain about the content of the report.

The Partnership should consider each complaint and it will usually be necessary to undertake a short screening process to establish whether the issue is appropriate for the CHP. This will depend on the nature and seriousness of alleged inaccuracy, and the status of the report in relation to the progress of court or other proceedings. In particular the partnership should consider whether the complaint relates to accuracy of facts, to opinion or to the standard and quality of the work carried out by the professional concerned, and should take one of three actions accordingly:

- a. advise the customer that, due to the timescales involved, the issue should be raised when the report is presented in court/to the relevant body, as that is the appropriate forum for deciding on the matter
- b. advise the customer that the complaint raises issues that will be considered under the CHP (such as issues of fact), and progress accordingly, or
- c. advise the customer that the complaint raises a mixture of issues that will be considered under the CHP and other issues that should be raised within the relevant forum when the report is submitted.

If you refuse to consider some or all issues as per (a) or (c) above and direct the customer to raise the matter within the legal process, you must still provide clear information about the reason for this decision, and signpost the customer to the SPSO for access to a review of this decision.

The Partnership should also consider whether the complaint relates to a breach of data protection legislation, in which case it must be processed accordingly. See **Maintaining confidentiality and data protection**.

### **Campaigns**

The introduction of a new policy or changes in service, such as the closure of a facility, may lead to a high volume of complaints being received. These should be handled under this procedure on an individual basis on their merits, addressing the issue of how that particular customer is affected by the change. It may be appropriate to provide information about the process that led to the changes, or when the policy may next be reviewed.

Occasionally, however, such complaints are evidently part of an organised campaign. Indicators may be that all complaints have identical content or are on a 'form' letter or that all complainers are known to be members of a pressure group that has made separate representations through the Council/Partnership's petitions or elected members.

The Council/Partnership should not accept an unreasonable burden on its complaints processes produced by an organised campaign. Instead, they may either issue a single 'form' response or may ask the organisers to nominate a single person to make a single complaint on behalf of the group. In such circumstances it would be important to be clear that all the complaints being brought to the Council/Partnership are identical, and setting out clearly what issues are being considered under the complaint. Any other additional concerns that individuals may have would need to be handled as new complaints.

### **Persons under investigation**

The Partnership is likely to have a role in investigating the actions of individuals towards other, more vulnerable people, for example those suspected of child or adult abuse or Guardians and Powers of Attorney who are allegedly misusing their powers.

Those individuals are still customers as defined within this procedure and any complaint from them must be considered on its individual merits. For example, a complaint about an improper exercise of investigative procedures should be looked into as a complaint. Any response should take into account any confidentiality issues, and this should be explained to the customer.

However, if it is evident that the person is not complaining about the process or the actions of staff, but is complaining that they are under investigation, this should not be accepted as a complaint. Instead it should be explained to the customer that the Partnership has a statutory obligation to investigate such matters, and this is not conditional upon their agreement or approval. Their objection to the process is not considered to be a complaint, though they may be directed to seek appropriate legal advice to protect their rights.

### **Looked after and accommodated children/adults under local authority guardianship**

The Partnership has a special duty of care to children in its care or adults for whom it exercises decision-making powers. Special care should be taken when investigating complaints made by or on behalf of those individuals.

Artificial barriers of confidentiality should not be imposed to prevent people with a relevant interest in the affairs of an incapacitated adult from complaining on their behalf.

Children who are looked after by the Local Authority may complain. They may have little in the way of a support network and may be estranged from their family. It may also be inappropriate for the family to represent the child's interests. Particular care, therefore, should be taken to ensure that the child's complaint is understood and, particularly for younger children, that the response is understood by them.

In both cases, the need for personal contact with the customer, and the possible involvement of advocacy services, should be actively considered. We must also always bear in mind our obligations under data protection information. See **Maintaining confidentiality and data protection**.

### **Allegations of fraud/criminality/professional malpractice or incompetence**

Discretion is required where the complaint is so serious as to immediately merit investigation under disciplinary processes or referral to another agency.

If it is determined that the complaint falls into this category, you should be careful to follow the CHP and mindful of our obligations under data protection legislation. See **Maintaining confidentiality and data protection**.

## Complaints brought by foster carers

Complaints brought by foster carers can relate to the support services they receive from the Partnership, the way our staff engage with them, or services a child in their care is or was receiving or has requested from us.

Any complaint brought by a foster carer on behalf of a foster child in the care, or formerly in their care, should be considered under this CHP. Where possible, the views of the child should also be taken into account.

Foster carers who are recruited and supported by us may bring complaints about these services. However, approval and de-registration of the carer by the Partnership may be considered through alternative appeal mechanisms. As noted under **Social work complaints and appeals**, these appeals must be handled in line with the CHP timescales, where possible, and end with signposting to the SPSO.

Complaints from foster carers supported by private agencies will not be addressed within this CHP if the complaint is wholly about their own circumstances and support rather than those of the child. Such complaints should be directed to the complaints process of the relevant agency.

An agency foster carer may still complain about the way our staff have interacted with them or about any element of service that they might reasonably expect to be provided by the Partnership, for example invitations to meetings, provision of information about the child in their care or the manner and content of communications with the Partnership. This list is not exhaustive and such complaints should be carefully considered in terms of the role of the Partnership's staff, before directing them to pursue their complaint with their fostering agency.

Where a complaint cannot be considered in part or in whole by the Partnership, the customer must be given a clear explanation as to why this is, what (if any) parts of their complaint will be investigated and how they may refer the matter to the SPSO.

## Appendix 4 - Timelines

### General

References to timelines throughout the CHP relate to working days. We do not count non-working days, for example weekends, public holidays and days of industrial action where our service has been interrupted.

We do not count school holidays as non-working days. Complaints received during school holidays should follow the same timelines as set out for frontline response and investigation, unless there are special circumstances which would extend these timelines.

### Timelines at frontline response (stage 1)

We will aim to achieve frontline response within five working days. The date of receipt is **day one**, and the response should be provided (or the complaint escalated) on **day five**, at the latest.

If we have extended the timeline at the frontline response stage in line with the CHP, the response should be provided (or the complaint escalated) on **day ten**, at the latest.

### Transferring cases from frontline response to investigation

If the customer wants to escalate the complaint to the investigation stage, the case must be passed for investigation without delay. In practice this will mean on the same day that the customer is told this will happen.

### Timelines at investigation (stage 2)

For complaints at the investigation stage, **day one** is:

- the day the case is transferred from the frontline stage to the investigation stage
- the day the customer asks for an investigation or expresses dissatisfaction after a decision at the frontline response stage; or
- the date we receive the complaint, if it is handled immediately at stage 2.

We must acknowledge the complaint within three working days of receipt at stage 2 i.e. by **day three**.

We should respond in full to the complaint by **day 20**, at the latest. We have 20 working days to investigate the complaint, regardless of any time taken to consider it at the frontline response stage.

Exceptionally, we may need longer than the 20 working day limit for a full response. If so, we will explain the reasons to the customer, and update them (and any staff involved) at least once every 20 working days.

### Frequently asked questions

*What happens if an extension is granted at stage 1, but then the complaint is escalated?*

The extension at stage 1 does not affect the timeframes at stage 2. The stage 2 timeframes apply from the day the complaint was escalated (we have 20 working days from this date, unless an extension is granted).

*What happens if we cannot meet an extended timeframe?*

1. If we cannot meet the extended timeframe at stage 1, the complaint should be escalated to stage 2.
2. The maximum timeframe allowed for a stage 1 response is ten working days.

2. If we cannot meet the extended timeframe at stage 2, a further extension may be approved by an appropriate manager if there are clear reasons for this. This should only occur in exceptional circumstances (the original extension should allow sufficient time to realistically investigate and respond to the complaint). Where a further extension is agreed, we should explain the situation to the customer and give them a revised timeframe for completion. We must update the customer and any staff involved in the investigation at least once every 20 working days.

*What happens when a customer asks for stage 2 consideration a long time after receiving a frontline response?*

Unless exceptional circumstances exist, customers should bring a stage 2 complaint within six months of learning about the problem, or within two months of receiving the stage 1 response (whichever is latest). See **Time limits for making a complaint**.

## Appendix 5 – The complaint handling process (flowchart for staff)

<p>A customer may complain verbally or in writing, including face-to-face, by phone, letter or email.</p> <p>Your first consideration is whether the complaint should be dealt with at stage 1 (frontline response) or stage 2 (investigation).</p>	
<p><b>Stage 1: Frontline response</b> ↓</p>	<p><b>Stage 2: Investigation</b> ↓</p>
<p>Always try to respond quickly, wherever we can</p>	<p>Investigate where:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The customer is dissatisfied with the frontline response or refuses to engage with attempts to resolve the complaint at stage 1</li> <li>• It is clear that the complaint requires investigation from the outset</li> </ul>
<p>Record the complaint and notify any staff complained about</p>	<p>Record the complaint and notify any staff complained about</p> <p>Acknowledge the complaint within <b>three working days</b></p>
	<p>Contact the complainant to agree:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Points of complaint</li> <li>• Outcome sought</li> <li>• Manage expectations (where required)</li> </ul> <p><i>(these can be confirmed in the acknowledgement where the complaint is straightforward)</i></p>
<p>Respond to the complaint within <b>five working days</b> unless there are exceptional circumstances</p>	<p>Respond to the complaint as soon as possible, but within <b>20 working days</b> unless there is a clear reason for extending the timescale</p>
<p>Is the customer satisfied?</p> <p>You must always tell the customer how to escalate to stage 2</p>	<p>Communicate the decision, normally in writing</p> <p>Signpost the customer to SPSO and advise of time limits</p>
<p>(Yes) Record outcome and learning, and close complaint.</p> <p><i>(No) -&gt; to Stage 2: Investigation</i></p>	<p>Record outcome and learning, and close complaint</p>
<p>Follow up on agreed actions flowing from the complaint</p> <p>Share any learning points</p>	



## Appendix 6 – Complaints Pro Forma

### Section 1 – Details of the Complaint

Complainant Details			
Name:	Click here to enter text.	Telephone:	Click here to enter text.
Address:	Click here to enter text.	Email:	Click here to enter text.
Respondent Details			
Responsible Officer:	Click here to enter text.	Service/Team	Click here to enter text.
Complaint Details:			
Oracle Reference:	Click here to enter text.	Date Received:	Click here to enter a date.
Complaint Stage:	Choose an item.	Due date:	Click here to enter a date.

Summary of the complaint:
Click here to enter text.

Action taken to resolve the complaint:
Click here to enter text.

Complaint Outcome:							
Upheld	<input type="checkbox"/>	Partly Upheld	<input type="checkbox"/>	Not Upheld	<input type="checkbox"/>	Resolved	<input type="checkbox"/>

Explain why the complaint was upheld or partly upheld:
Click here to enter text.

Response Time			
On Time	<input type="checkbox"/>	Late	<input type="checkbox"/>

Explain why the complaint was not issued on time:
Click here to enter text.

**Section 2 – Preventing recurrence and implementing improvements**

<b>What actions will be taken to prevent this type of complaint happening again?</b>
Click here to enter text.

Who will carry out the actions necessary to avoid recurrence?	Click here to enter text.
---	---------------------------

What is the timescale for implementing the action?	Click here to enter text.
--	---------------------------

Who has responsibility for overseeing that the action is implemented?	Click here to enter text.
---	---------------------------

<b>Policy/Procedural Changes</b>	
Please detail policy and procedural implications as a result of this complaint. Please indicate if you would like assistance with updating procedures or any aspect of the improvement.	
Click here to enter text.	
Name of the Officer completing this form:	Click here to enter text.
Date of form completion:	Click here to enter a date.

## Appendix 7 – Employee Quick Guide to Complaints

### Why do we have a complaints handling procedure?

We are committed to providing high-quality services in our community. Occasionally things go wrong and when this happens it is important that we act quickly to resolve the situation. Complaints show us where we are not achieving what people expect of us, and where we are failing to meet our own standards. In other words, they give us a chance to improve our service. Listening to our customers helps us to:

- put things right
- improve our services; and
- learn from our mistakes.

Therefore, in line with other Scottish Council's, we have introduced a standardised complaints handling procedure. This leaflet gives you a guide to it. A fuller version of the procedure can be found on the HUB.

### What is a complaint?

A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction about the Council's action or lack of action, or about the standard of service provided by us or on our behalf. For example:

- Failure to provide a service
- The standard of service provided
- The treatment by, attitude or conduct of a member of staff
- Delays or refusal to give advice or answer questions in response to enquiries or requests
- The Council's failure to follow the proper administrative process
- Dissatisfaction with the way in which a Council policy has been applied
- Dissatisfaction with Council policies e.g. if a customer is unhappy about the changes to refuse collection service.

### What is not a complaint?

The above complaint definition is broad, but not every concern raised with the Council is a complaint. For example, a complaint is not:

- a request for information or an explanation of policy or practice
- a request under the Freedom of Information Act or Data Protection legislation

There are also some matters we can't deal with under the Complaints Procedure. These include:

- A first time request for a service e.g. a request for a street-lighting repair
- A request for compensation only
- Where there is a statutory or other formal right of appeal e.g. decision on housing or council tax benefit or in regard to formal enforcement action

- Insurance claims or potential claims concerning injury to people or damage to property, however if they are also complaining about the cause of the injury/damage this part should be dealt with as a complaint.
- Matters which are currently subject to court proceedings or have already been heard in court or at a tribunal
- Complaints regarding the conduct of a Councillor
- disagreement with decisions or conditions that are based upon social work recommendations, but determined by a court or other statutory body, for example decisions made by a children's panel, parole board or mental health tribunal
- a concern about a child or an adult's safety
- A complaint which has already been investigated and a final decision given

## Who can complain?

Anyone can make a complaint in person at any of our offices, by telephone, by email, in writing or via the Council's website.

## What should you do when someone complains?

You should try to resolve complaints on the spot to the customer's satisfaction whenever this is possible. If you need to take any other action to resolve the issue, you should always aim to do this as quickly as possible.

Our complaints procedure has two stages. We expect the majority of complaints will be resolved at Stage 1.

If the customer is dissatisfied after Stage 1, they can request that we look at it again at Stage 2. If the complaint is complex enough to require a full investigation from the outset, we will put the complaint to Stage 2 straight away.

## Stage 1: Frontline Resolution

We aim to resolve complaints quickly and as close to the point of service delivery as possible, within five working days or less, unless there are exceptional circumstances.

Generally these will be the more straight forward complaints that we can resolve on the spot with an apology and action to put the matter right, or take other action to resolve the complaint quickly.

We do not always need to respond to the customer in writing. We may be able to resolve many complaints by talking about the issue, either face to face or by telephone, and this is all that is needed. However, sometimes we will have to provide the decision in writing. Generally we should do so if the customer asks for this or if we think it will help to confirm or clarify the facts or outcome of the complaint for the customer or the Council.

You should always advise your departmental complaints co-ordinator that you have received a complaint so that it can be recorded on our complaints database. We need to record the details of the complaint, the action taken, the final outcome and any improvements identified. We can then use this information to improve services.

## Stage 2: Investigation

Complaints that reach this stage have either not been resolved at Stage 1 or are so complex that they need more investigation before we can provide a decision.

When dealing with complaints at this stage we should:

- record the complaint at Stage 2
- acknowledge receipt of the complaint within **three** working days, and confirm our understanding of the main points of the complaint
- discuss the complaint with the customer to understand the reasons for it and what outcome they want – sometimes this will involve managing the customer's expectations by explaining how we might be able to resolve the complaint
- provide a full response to the complaint as soon as possible but no later than **20** working days.

If our investigations will take longer than 20 working days to complete, we need to agree revised time limits with the customer and keep them updated on progress. Complaints with an agreed extension are still reported as late, so keep this in mind when considering an extension. Be sure to record details of the action taken and the outcome, as this helps us improve our service standards.

### What if the customer is still dissatisfied?

If we have fully investigated the complaint and the customer is still dissatisfied with our response or the way we have dealt with the complaint, they can ask the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) to consider it further. Please see the complaints handling procedure or the customer complaints leaflet for details of how to direct customers to the SPSO.

### Do's and don'ts when customers complain

#### Do

- be aware of our responsibility to try to resolve the complaint or seek help to resolve it
- be aware of service procedures as this may help you to clarify matters for the customer
- say who you are
- ask for the customer's name, address and telephone number
- be sensitive – making a complaint can be stressful, so respond with courtesy, tact and empathy
- listen carefully to what the customer is saying without interrupting. This helps you to get the details right first time and shows you are taking the matter seriously. Take notes and read them back to the customer to check that you have understood the problem
- ask open-ended questions to get more detailed information. This sometimes helps you to find a solution that will satisfy the customer
- provide an apology and explanation if it is clear we have made a mistake
- make sure you agree a course of action that is satisfactory to the customer and to the service. If in doubt, discuss the matter with your line manager
- check what we did and what we said we'd do, then follow up by contacting the customer to check that they agree it has been done

- explain the next stage of the procedure of the problem hasn't been resolved to the customer's satisfaction. This will be:
  - an explanation of the investigation stage; or
  - details of how the customer may ask the SPSO to consider their complaint
- record all the complaint details in line with the correct procedures
- treat all information in confidence.

Don't:

- refuse to accept there is a problem. If the customer thinks there is a problem, you must help
- be defensive or argue
- jump to conclusions - wait until you have the whole story
- make promises you can't keep.

## Appendix 1

### Final paragraph for a stage 1 response

If you are not satisfied with this response then you can ask the Head of Service for a further investigation to be carried out.

You can do this by contacting the Departmental Complaints Officer, xxxxx Services, Argyll and Bute Council, Kilmory, Lochgilphead, Argyll, PA31 8RT / email: [xxxx@argyll-bute.gov.uk](mailto:xxxx@argyll-bute.gov.uk) to advise why you are not satisfied and enclosing a note of the original complaints case reference number.

### SPSO information for stage 2 response

The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) is the final stage for complaints about public services in Scotland. This includes complaints about the Council/Partnership. The SPSO is an independent organisation that investigates complaints. It is not an advocacy or support service (but there are other organisations who can help you with advocacy or support).

If you remain dissatisfied when you have had a final response from the Council/Partnership, you can ask the SPSO to look at your complaint. You can ask the SPSO to look at your complaint if:

- you have gone all the way through the Council/Partnership's Complaints Handling Procedure
- it is less than 12 months after you became aware of the matter you want to complain about, and
- the matter has not been (and is not being) considered in court.

The SPSO will ask you to complete a complaint form and provide a copy of this letter (our final response to your complaint). You can do this online at <https://www.spsso.org.uk/complain/form/start/> or call them on Freephone 0800 377 7330.

You may wish to get independent support or advocacy to help you progress your complaint. Organisations who may be able to assist you are:

- Citizens Advice Bureau
- Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance

The SPSO's contact details are:

SPSO  
Bridgeside House  
99 McDonald Road  
Edinburgh  
EH7 4NS

(if you would like to visit in person, you must make an appointment first)

Their freepost address is:

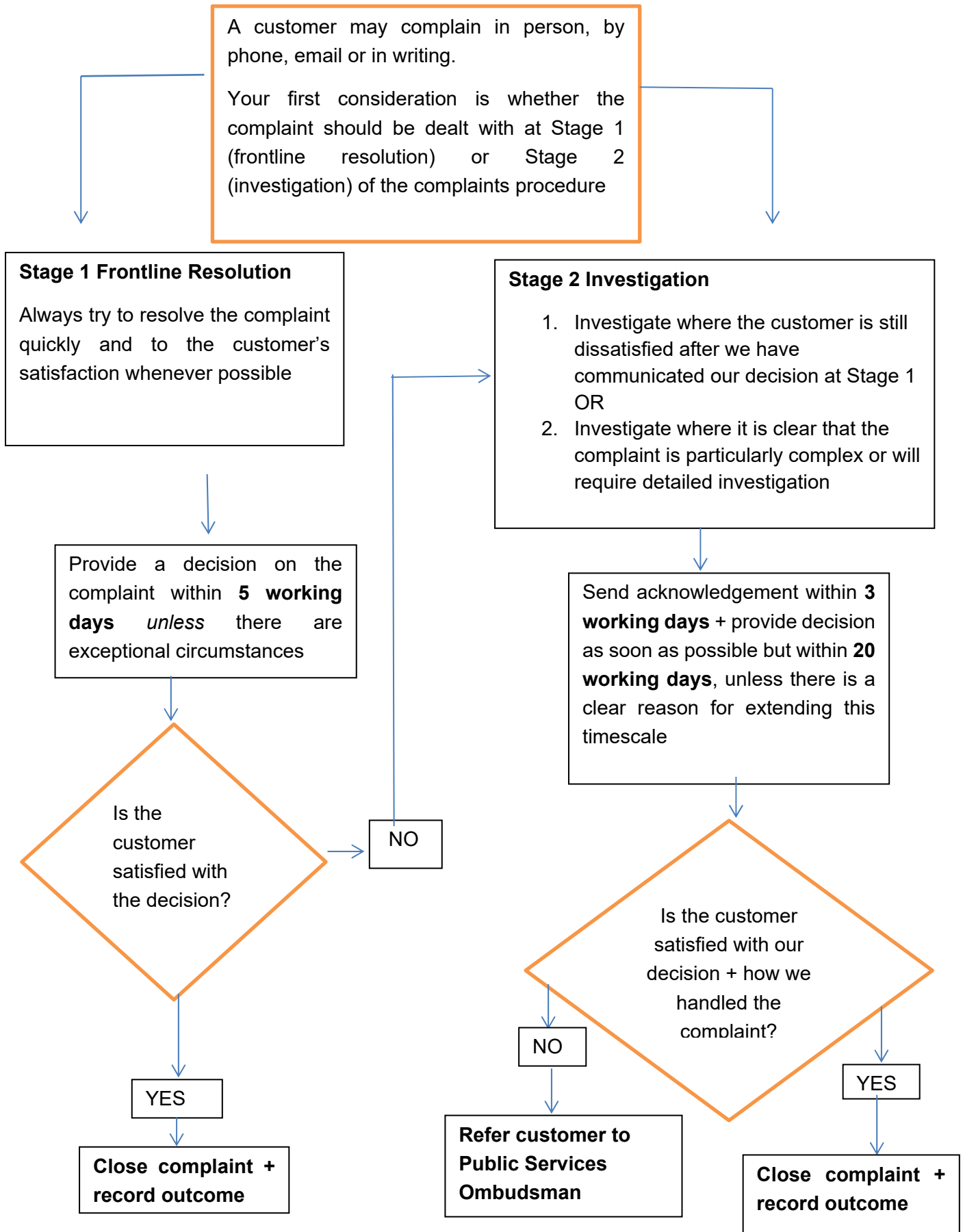
FREEPOST SPSO

Freephone: 0800 377 7330

Online contact [www.spsso.org.uk/contact-us](http://www.spsso.org.uk/contact-us)

Website: [www.spsso.org.uk](http://www.spsso.org.uk)

Flow chart of the complaints handling process





## Appendix 8 Acknowledgement Example

Dear

Stage 2 Complaint – [Insert Reference]

I refer to your complaint dated [Insert Date] which was received on [Insert Date].

You have raised the following issues which will be investigated within this complaint:  
[List points of complaint]

Our understanding is that the outcome you seek is [Insert outcome sought]

If any of these points are incorrect, please contact us as soon as possible as the investigation and response to this complaint will be based on these points.

or

It is not clear from your correspondence the exact issues which you would like us to investigate as part of the complaint. The investigating officer will require to clarify this complaint further with you prior to beginning any investigation.

I can confirm that [Insert HOS Name], Head of [Insert Service] will instruct an investigation of the issues, in terms of the complaints handling procedure, as a stage 2 complaint. More information on the complaints handling procedure can be found here:

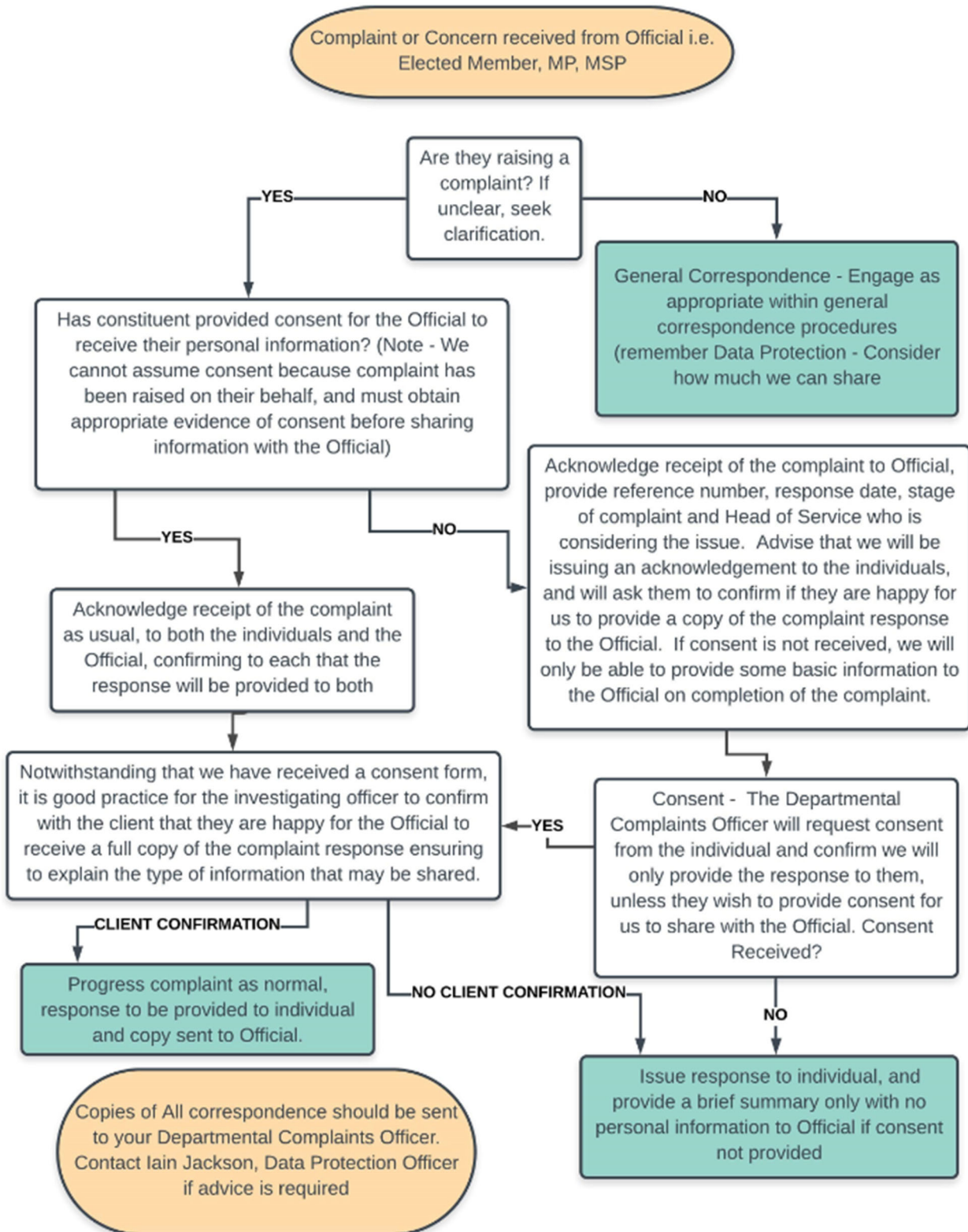
<https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/do-it-online/comments-and-complaints>

The reference number is [Insert Reference] and a full response will be issued no later than [Insert Due Date].

If you have any questions about the procedure or how your complaint is being progressed, please feel free to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

## Appendix 9 – Complaints Received from Officials



## Appendix 10 – Email Templates – Complaints Received from Officials

### Acknowledgement to Official – No Consent

Dear

I refer to your complaint dated [Insert Date] which was received on [Insert Date]. I note you have raised this complaint on behalf of [Insert Name].

You have raised the following issues which will be investigated within this complaint:

[List points of complaint] If any of these points are incorrect, please contact us as soon as possible as the investigation and response to this complaint will be based on these points.

Or

It is not clear from your correspondence the exact issues which you would like us to investigate as part of the complaint. The investigating officer will require to clarify this complaint further prior to beginning any investigation. *(If using this paragraph please ensure to use paragraph in green below)*

I am sorry that you have had to raise these issues with us and I can confirm that [Insert HOS Name], Head of [Insert Service] will instruct an investigation of the issues, in terms of the complaints handling procedure, as a stage 2 complaint. More information on the complaints handling procedure can be found here:

<https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/do-it-online/comments-and-complaints>

The reference number is [Insert Reference] and a full response will be issued no later than [Insert Due Date].

A letter of acknowledgment will also be issued to [Insert Name]. This letter will request that they provide consent for us to share a full copy of the complaint response with you. The investigating officer will also confirm with [Insert Name] that they are happy for you to receive a full copy of the complaint response. Should we not receive this consent, the full response will be issued to [Insert Name] and you will be issued with a brief summary of the outcome.

The letter has also advised that the investigating officer will require to speak to them to clarify the points of complaint.

If you have any questions about the procedure or how your complaint is being progressed, please feel free to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Acknowledgement to Official – Consent

Dear

I refer to your complaint dated [Insert Date] which was received on [Insert Date]. I note you have raised this complaint on behalf of [Insert Name].

You have raised the following issues which will be investigated within this complaint:

[List points of complaint] If any of these points are incorrect, please contact us as soon as possible as the investigation and response to this complaint will be based on these points.

Or

It is not clear from your correspondence the exact issues which you would like us to investigate as part of the complaint. The investigating officer will require to clarify this complaint further prior to beginning any investigation. (If using this paragraph please ensure to use paragraph in green below)

I am sorry that you have had to raise these issues with us and I can confirm that [Insert HOS Name], Head of [Insert Service] will instruct an investigation of the issues, in terms of the complaints handling procedure, as a stage 2 complaint. More information on the complaints handling procedure can be found here:

<https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/do-it-online/comments-and-complaints>

The reference number is [Insert Reference] and a full response will be issued no later than [Insert Due Date]. A letter of acknowledgment and a copy of the full response will be issued to [Insert Name].

The letter has also advised that the investigating officer will require to speak to them to clarify the points of complaint.

The investigating officer will also confirm with [Insert Name] that they are happy for you to receive a full copy of the complaint response.

If you have any questions about the procedure or how your complaint is being progressed, please feel free to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Acknowledgement to Client – No Consent

Dear

I refer to your complaint dated [Insert Date] which was received on [Insert Date]. I note that this complaint was raised by [Insert MP, MSP etc.] on your behalf.

You have raised the following issues which will be investigated within this complaint:

[List points of complaint] If any of these points are incorrect, please contact us as soon as possible as the investigation and response to this complaint will be based on these points.

Or

I understand that you have raised this complaint via [Insert Official name] however the investigating officer will need to discuss with you directly the points of your complaint as it is not clear from the correspondence the exact issues which you would like us to investigate. The investigating officer will require to clarify this complaint further prior to beginning any investigation.

I am sorry that you have had to raise these issues with us and I can confirm that [Insert HOS Name], Head of [Insert Service] will instruct an investigation of the issues, in terms of the complaints handling procedure, as a stage 2 complaint. More information on the complaints handling procedure can be found here:

<https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/do-it-online/comments-and-complaints>

The reference number is [Insert Reference] and a full response will be issued no later than [Insert Due Date].

A letter of acknowledgment has also been issued to [Insert MP, MSP etc.]. In order for us to be able to provide them with a copy of the full response to your complaint we will require your consent. Should we not receive this consent, the full response will be issued to you and [Insert MP, MSP etc.] will only be issued with a brief summary of the outcome. I would be grateful if you could provide written consent to allow us to share this information.

If you have any questions about the procedure or how your complaint is being progressed, please feel free to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Acknowledgement to Client –Consent

Dear

I refer to your complaint dated [Insert Date] which was received on [Insert Date]. I note that this complaint was raised by [Insert MP, MSP etc.] on your behalf.

You have raised the following issues which will be investigated within this complaint:

[List points of complaint] If any of these points are incorrect, please contact us as soon as possible as the investigation and response to this complaint will be based on these points.

Or

I understand that you have raised this complaint via [Insert Official name] however the investigating officer will need to discuss with you directly the points of your complaint as it is not clear from the correspondence the exact issues which you would like us to investigate. The investigating officer will require to clarify this complaint further prior to beginning any investigation.

I am sorry that you have had to raise these issues with us and I can confirm that [Insert HOS Name], Head of [Insert Service] will instruct an investigation of the issues, in terms of the complaints handling procedure, as a stage 2 complaint. More information on the complaints handling procedure can be found here:

<https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/do-it-online/comments-and-complaints>

The reference number is [Insert Reference] and a full response will be issued no later than [Insert Due Date]. As you have provided consent for your information to be shared, a letter of acknowledgment and a full copy of the response will also be issued to [Insert MP, MSP etc.].

If you have any questions about the procedure or how your complaint is being progressed, please feel free to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Email to Head of Service Where Consent Received

**Complaint Ref: [Insert Ref no.] Response date: [Insert Due Date]**

Please find enclosed a new Stage 2 complaint for your attention. Please note this complaint has been raised by [Insert MP/MSP etc.]. Consent has been provided by the customer to share their information so a full copy of the complaint response may be sent to both [Insert MP/MSP etc.] and the client.

Notwithstanding that we have received a consent form, it is good practice for the investigating officer to confirm with [Insert Name} that they are happy for [Insert MP/MSP etc.] to receive a full copy of the complaint response.

Please could advise who will be investigating this complaint? Once we have received confirmation from the investigating officer whether the points of the complaint are clear, an acknowledgement will be issued to both the client and Elected Member/MP/MSP.

Email to Head of Service Where No Consent Received

**Complaint Ref: [Insert Ref no.] Response date: [Insert Due Date]**

Please find enclosed a new Stage 2 complaint for your attention. Please note this complaint has been raised by [Insert MP/MSP etc.]. Consent has not yet been provided by the customer to share their information and we have asked them to provide it.

The investigating officer should also confirm with [Insert Name} that they are happy for [Insert MP/MSP etc.] to receive a full copy of the complaint response.

Please could advise who will be investigating this complaint? Once we have received confirmation from the investigating officer whether the points of the complaint are clear, an acknowledgement will be issued to both the client and Elected Member/MP/MSP.

Prior to the complaint response being issued, please contact the Compliance & Regulatory Team (if you have not had contact already) to confirm whether consent has been received.

Should consent be received the response should be issued to both [Insert MP/MSP etc.] and the customer. If no consent is received the response should be issued to the customer and the Elected Member/MP/MSP should be issued with a brief summary only with no personal information.

## Appendix 11 – Guide to Resolution

In this model complaint handling procedure, we can now use “resolution” to close a complaint, rather than having to make a decision about whether the complaint is upheld or not upheld. If a complaint is to be classed as resolved, the planned action to resolve the issue must have been agreed with the customer, and there should be a clear record of the customer’s agreement to the resolution. The customer should also be signposted to the next appropriate stage, if they are not satisfied with the action taken.

### Difference between upheld and resolved

It can be difficult to decide if a complaint should be classed as upheld or resolved. The difference is:

**Upheld** complaints are where we have found some failing by our organisation.

**Resolved** complaints are where we have taken (or will take) action without reaching any conclusion about whether there were failings.

If it is clear that the service has fallen short of expected standards, the complaint should always be upheld (or partly upheld) and an apology provided to the customer.

### Examples

A customer calls up angry, and wishes to make a complaint because their bins were not uplifted that day. The customer service agent checks the information available, and can see that the service is scheduled for the following day, due to a vehicle breakdown. The customer is happy with this, and does not wish to pursue the complaint any further – provided the bins are emptied the next day. This complaint can be logged as a stage 1 and marked as resolved, and the customer should be provided with details about how to escalate the complaint if the action is not satisfactory.

### Who can decide if a complaint can be “resolved”?

Everyone – we would encourage staff who directly deal with customers to take appropriate action to resolve a complaint if possible. If you resolve an issue for a customer, it can be recorded as a Stage 1 complaint within Oracle. Departmental Complaints Officers, or the central team within Legal and Regulatory Support, can provide advice about handling complaints.



## Appendix 12 – Example Responses

Letterhead

Customer Name  
Customer Address

Dear Customer Name

### **Stage 1 Complaint - [Complaint Reference]**

Thank you for your correspondence on [Insert Date]. [Insert summary of complaint]. [Insert outcome that the customer is looking to achieve from complaint]

Explain any investigation carried out and findings

Explanation of complaint outcome

If you are not satisfied with this response then you can ask the Head of Service for a further investigation to be carried out within 2 months of receiving this response.

You can do this by contacting the Departmental Complaints Officer, XXX Services, Argyll and Bute Council, Kilmory, Lochgilphead, Argyll, PA31 8RT / email: [xxx@argyll-bute.gov.uk](mailto:xxx@argyll-bute.gov.uk) to advise why you are not satisfied and enclosing a note of the original complaints case reference number.

Yours Sincerely

## Example Stage 2 Response

Letterhead

Customer Name  
Customer Address

Dear Customer Name

### **Stage 2 Complaint – [Complaint Reference]**

Thank you for speaking with the Investigating Officer [Insert Name] on [Insert Date]. [Insert summary of investigation carried out – were staff interviewed? If so who?, Were records searched? Etc.]

### **Summary of Complaint**

[Insert summary of complaint]

### **Points of Complaint**

The following points of complaint were agreed during your meeting/telephone conversation/email correspondence (delete as appropriate) with [Insert Investigating Officer];

[Breakdown points of complaint if necessary]

[Insert outcome that the customer is looking to achieve from complaint]

### **Investigation**

Explain full investigation carried out and findings

### **Conclusion**

#### **Point 1; Insert Outcome i.e. Upheld, Not Upheld, Partially Upheld, Resolved**

Explanation of complaint point outcome

#### **Point 2; Insert Outcome i.e. Upheld, Not Upheld, Partially Upheld, Resolved**

Explanation of complaint point outcome

#### **Point 3; Insert Outcome i.e. Upheld, Not Upheld, Partially Upheld, Resolved**

Explanation of complaint point outcome

The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) is the final stage for complaints about public services in Scotland. This includes complaints about the Council/Partnership. The SPSO is an independent organisation that investigates complaints. It is not an advocacy or support service (but there are other organisations who can help you with advocacy or support).

If you remain dissatisfied when you have had a final response from the Council/Partnership, you can ask the SPSO to look at your complaint. You can ask the SPSO to look at your complaint if:

- you have gone all the way through the Council/Partnership's Complaints Handling Procedure
- it is less than 12 months after you became aware of the matter you want to complain about, and
- the matter has not been (and is not being) considered in court.

The SPSO will ask you to complete a complaint form and provide a copy of this letter (our final response to your complaint). You can do this online at <https://www.spsso.org.uk/complain/form/start/> or call them on Freephone 0800 377 7330.

You may wish to get independent support or advocacy to help you progress your complaint. Organisations who may be able to assist you are:

- Citizens Advice Bureau
- Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance

The SPSO's contact details are:

SPSO  
Bridgeside House  
99 McDonald Road  
Edinburgh  
EH7 4NS  
(if you would like to visit in person, you must make an appointment first)

Their freepost address is:

FREEPOST SPSO

Freephone: 0800 377 7330

Online contact [www.spsso.org.uk/contact-us](http://www.spsso.org.uk/contact-us)

Website: [www.spsso.org.uk](http://www.spsso.org.uk)

Yours sincerely

**Head of Service**