

SPSO Complainant Survey Analysis 2008

Initial Findings (Quarters 1 and 2: 2008)

by



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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) has commissioned research into its customers' experiences of its service. The research will look at levels of satisfaction, strengths and areas for improvement. This is the second year in which independent research has been undertaken, with the findings of last year's study published in February 2008¹.

Methodological Approach

- 1.2. The research is being undertaken through postal survey using a self-completion questionnaire. The surveys are being issued to all those who have made a complaint to the SPSO and had their case determined. The surveys are being issued by the SPSO themselves. Completed surveys are returned directly to Craigforth using the pre-paid envelope issued with the survey.
- 1.3. The original research brief and proposal envisaged that the 2008 research period would run from July 2008 to August 2009. However, following the project inception meeting, it was decided that the timetable could helpfully be amended to allow for the publication of research findings within the SPSO's 2009 annual report.
- 1.4. As a result the SPSO issued surveys for the April - June 2008 period in July 2008. They continue to issue surveys on a rolling basis. The analysis for this report is based on surveys returned to Craigforth by 24th September 2008.
- 1.5. It was originally intended to produce 3 quarterly reports followed by a final report. However, given that the early stages of the research have effectively been compressed, this report covers the first two quarters of the study period. A second update report will be produced in January 2009 and final reporting is now scheduled for May 2008.
- 1.6. As surveys are being issued on a rolling basis, it will not be possible to calculate an exact response rate until the end of the study period. However, based on information on number of surveys issued to date we estimate that the 200 survey responses received by 24th September represents a response rate of around 32%². This is a reasonable response rate, given that reminders are not being issued to non respondents. Of the 200 responses received, 196 were analysable.
- 1.7. It should be noted that the base numbers will vary on a question by question basis as not every respondent answered every question. On occasions the base number may be lower than the total number of responses; this occurs when respondents are given the opportunity to select multiple responses if they wish.

¹ It should be noted that the 2007 research gathered the views of complainants who had had their complaint determined between July 2006 and June 2007. This meant that some complainants had first contacted the SPSO as early as 2004, when different complaints handling procedures were in place.

² This is based on the assumption that approximately 620 surveys were issued within the time period that would have allowed for their return to Craigforth by 24/09/08.

- 1.8. This report sets out the findings from the first two quarters of the study. Throughout this report this year's study will be referred to as the 2008 study. Where appropriate, comparison is made to results from last year and these will be identified as the 2007 research³.
- 1.9. It should be noted that the survey questions have undergone significant revision between the two research periods. Results will be compared when it is relevant and informative to do so. Where questions have remained substantively the same any differences in the phrasing will be identified.
- 1.10. The report presents basic frequency analysis against each of the questions asked in the 2008 survey. More detailed analysis, including cross tabulation of key areas of satisfaction against complaint type and the profile of complainants, will be included in the main annual report. Given that base numbers remain relatively low at this stage we have not yet drawn any overall conclusions about overall performance relating to customer satisfaction. Again, this will be covered in the final reporting in May 2009.

³ It should be noted that the 2007 study surveyed complainants who had made a complaint to the SPSO
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2. WHO WERE THE RESPONDENTS?

- 2.1. This section examines the key characteristics of those who responded to the survey.
- 2.2. As in 2007, well over 9 out of 10 of respondents are aged above 35, although the proportion actually rose slightly from 92% in 2007 to 95% this year.
- 2.3. There was a corresponding slight decrease in the proportion of respondents aged under 35, falling from 9% to 6%. The proportion of survey respondents who were under 25 remained constant at only 2%. This low proportion of responses from younger people is a common issue in these types of surveys; it is difficult to say whether this is because they are less likely to use the SPSO's services or whether they do use the service but are less likely to respond to research surveys of this type. In reality it is likely to be a little of both.

Age of respondents

Age	2008 Q1 and Q2	2007
Under 16	1%	2%
16-18	-	
19-24	1%	
25-34	4%	7%
35-44	15%	15%
45-54	27%	27%
55-64	27%	26%
65 +	26%	24%
Base (n)	185	688

- 2.4. The ethnicity of survey respondents is set out on the table below. In the 2007 research, 4% of respondents were from a non white group. In the first two quarters of this year's research only one survey respondent reported that they are from an ethnic minority group.
- 2.5. Given the relatively small base number of responses this is not a particular cause for concern at this stage in the research. However, should numbers remain so low by the end of the survey period, this issue will need to be given appropriate consideration when devising any ongoing research programme.

Ethnicity of Respondents

		2008 Q1 and Q2
White	Scottish	79%
	Other British	16%
	Irish	1%
	Any other White background	3%
Asian, Asian Scottish or Asian British	Indian	-
	Pakistani	-
	Bangladeshi	-
	Chinese	-
	Any other Asian background	-
Black, Black Scottish or Black British	Caribbean	1%
	African	-
	Any other Black background	-
Other	Any Mixed background	-
	Any other background	-
	Base (n)	184

- 2.6. Finally in this section, the questionnaire asked respondents to identify any disabilities they have. Three out of four respondents (75%) said that they had no disability. This represents a slight decrease compared to the 71% of respondents reporting having no disability in 2007⁴.
- 2.7. Of the 1 out of 4 respondents (25%) reporting a disability, problems with physical mobility was the most common. Just over 1 out of 6 respondents (16%) reported having problems with physical mobility, while 6% reported having impaired hearing and 3% had poor sight or were blind. Just less than 1 out of 6 respondents (14%) indicated that they had another type of disability.
- 2.8. Based on other work, Craigforth's experience is that the proportion of survey respondents reporting a disability can be relatively high, even after accounting for the high proportion of respondents that fall within the older age ranges. Nevertheless, this can be viewed positively as suggesting that disability in no way acts as a barrier to making a complaint to the SPSO. However it is worth bearing in mind that the SPSO's remit, particularly in relation to health services, may mean that a relatively high proportion of its 'potential' service users may have a disability.

⁴ The 2007 research reported that 67% of complainants had no disability, 28% did, and 5% did not answer the question. With the base provided (715) we calculate that 36 people (approximately) did not answer and that approximately 479 answered no, giving a total of 71% of those that answered reporting no disability.

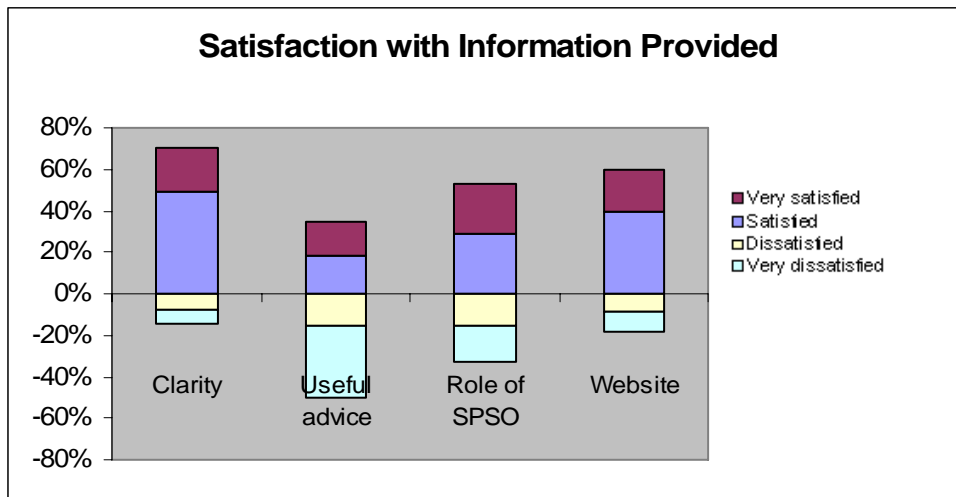
Type of disability

	2008 Q1 and Q2
Impaired hearing	6%
Poor sight/ blindness	3%
Problems with physical mobility	16%
Other disability	14%
None reported	75%
Base (n)	177

3. INFORMATION PROVIDED BY THE SPSO

- 3.1. Respondents were asked about the information that the SPSO had provided to them. The survey presented four statements and asked respondents to rate how satisfied they were with each aspect of the service they had received⁵.
- 3.2. Overall, 7 out of 10 respondents (70%) were satisfied that the information or leaflets they received from the SPSO clearly explained how their complaint was going to be handled, with 1 out of 5 (21%) very satisfied. While the question was not directly comparable, last year's research suggested that around 8 out of 10 respondents were satisfied with the clarity of information contained within SPSO leaflets.
- 3.3. Just under 1 out of 6 (14%) of the 2008 respondents were dissatisfied, including 7% who were very dissatisfied.
- 3.4. Moving on to consider the SPSO website, 6 out of 10 respondents (60%) were satisfied with the information that the SPSO provides on its website, and 4 out of 10 (40%) were very satisfied. However, just under 2 out of 10 (18%) of respondents were dissatisfied, including 1 out of 10 (10%) who were very dissatisfied. The 2007 survey asked a broad range of website related questions but focussed primarily on functionality. However, the research did not cover satisfaction with the information made available through the site.
- 3.5. Just over 1 out of 2 respondents (53%) were satisfied that the SPSO had clearly explained what the organisation can or cannot do to try and resolve someone's complaint i.e. effectively their remit. Encouragingly, just under 1 out of 4 (24%) were very satisfied. However, 1 out of 3 (32%) of respondents were dissatisfied, including 17% who were very dissatisfied. While this level of dissatisfaction is relatively high it does suggest some improvement has been made compared to the most comparable question in 2007; 60% of 2007 respondents reported that they were dissatisfied with the explanation given for a complaint not being taken to the formal investigation stage and an extremely high 43% were very dissatisfied.
- 3.6. It also needs to be remembered that respondents views on information provided in this area may be coloured by their dissatisfaction with the organisation's actual remit.
- 3.7. What is perhaps more concerning is the high level of dissatisfaction with the usefulness of advice given if the SPSO was unable to consider the respondents complaint. While the base numbers remain relatively low at this stage, 1 out of 2 respondents (50%) reported dissatisfaction with this aspect of the SPSO's service and this included 1 out of 3 (34%) who were very dissatisfied. Again, however, these levels of dissatisfaction may be affected by dissatisfaction with the remit itself.

⁵ 'not applicable' answers have been removed from the analysis as some questions could not be answered by all respondents e.g. they may not have used that particular aspect of the SPSO's service. For this reason the base numbers for each question will vary due to the exclusion of people who answered not applicable or who did not answer the question at all.



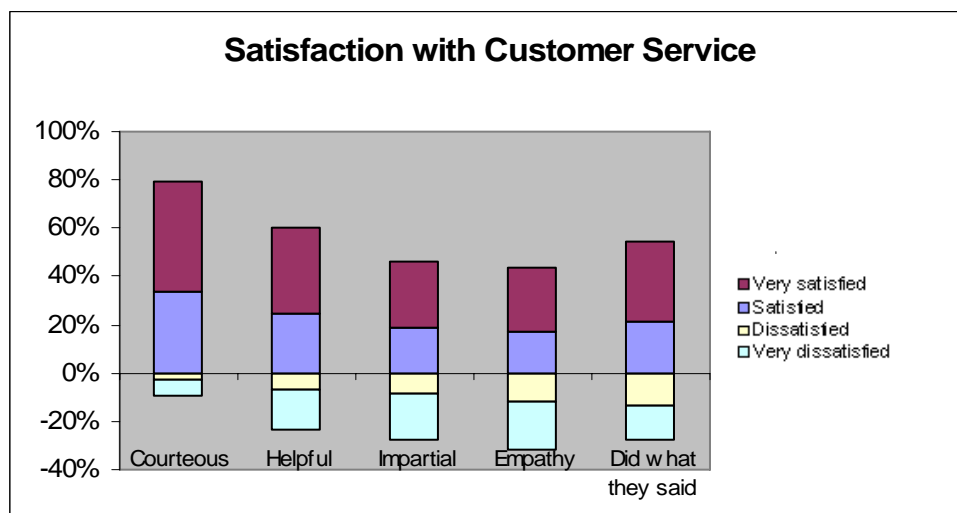
Information you were given by the SPSO

	Base (n)	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
The information / leaflets you received clearly explained how your complaint would be handled	191	21%	49%	15%	7%	7%
If the SPSO was unable to consider your complaint, they gave useful advice about where you could look for assistance	102	16%	19%	16%	16%	34%
The SPSO clearly explained to you what they can and cannot do to try to resolve your complaint	192	24%	29%	15%	15%	17%
The information on the SPSO's website	96	20%	40%	22%	8%	10%

4. CUSTOMER SERVICE

- 4.1. The survey then moved on to ask about experience of the Ombudsman's staff. Our work with other ombudsman organisations suggests that this can be a key determinant of overall satisfaction with how an organisation performs; when staff are well regarded a complainant is much more likely to be satisfied with their overall experience. In the 2008 survey complainants are being provided with five short statements relating to the staff and were asked to rate their satisfaction against each. The areas covered are courteousness, helpfulness, impartiality, empathy and reliability. The 2007 survey covered similar areas but divided the findings between initial contact, those that had not had a complaint taken to the formal complaint stage and those that had.
- 4.2. This year, the highest levels of staff related satisfaction were with being treated in a courteous manner. Just under 8 out of 10 were satisfied (79%) and most of them (45%) were very satisfied. Perhaps most comparable from the 2007 findings was the rating of the professionalism of staff; just over 6 out of 10 of the 2007 complainants said they felt the staff had acted professionally at the first contact stage.
- 4.3. The next most highly rated aspect was helpfulness, with 6 out of 10 respondents satisfied and more than 1 out of 3 (36%) very satisfied. However, almost 1 out of 4 (23%) were dissatisfied, including 16% who were very dissatisfied. These figures are very similar to those for 2007, when 61% of respondents were satisfied with the helpfulness and approachability of staff at first contact and 37% were very satisfied. Levels of dissatisfaction also remain broadly the same.
- 4.4. More than 1 out of 2 respondents (54%) said they were satisfied that staff had done what they said they would. However, there were relatively high levels of dissatisfaction in this area with almost 1 out of 3 dissatisfied (28%) and 1 out of 6 (15%) very dissatisfied. This is an area where it is not really possible to draw comparison to last year's findings.
- 4.5. The lowest levels of satisfaction related to the empathy and impartiality of staff. In both cases less than 1 out of 2 respondents were satisfied (46% with staff impartiality and 43% that staff had shown empathy). While around 1 out of 4 respondents gave a neutral response (25% and 26% respectively) there were relatively high levels of dissatisfaction; around 1 out of 3 respondents were dissatisfied, 28% with the impartiality of staff and 32% with the empathy they had shown.
- 4.6. While these levels of dissatisfaction remain relatively high, the signs from the first 2 quarters of the 2008 study are positive. Most notably, in 2007 only 39% of those who had a complaint taken to the formal investigation stage said they were satisfied that the Complaints Investigator had been impartial. Just 38% of the 2007 respondents reported satisfaction with the level of understanding / empathy shown regarding their complaint and 51% said they were dissatisfied.

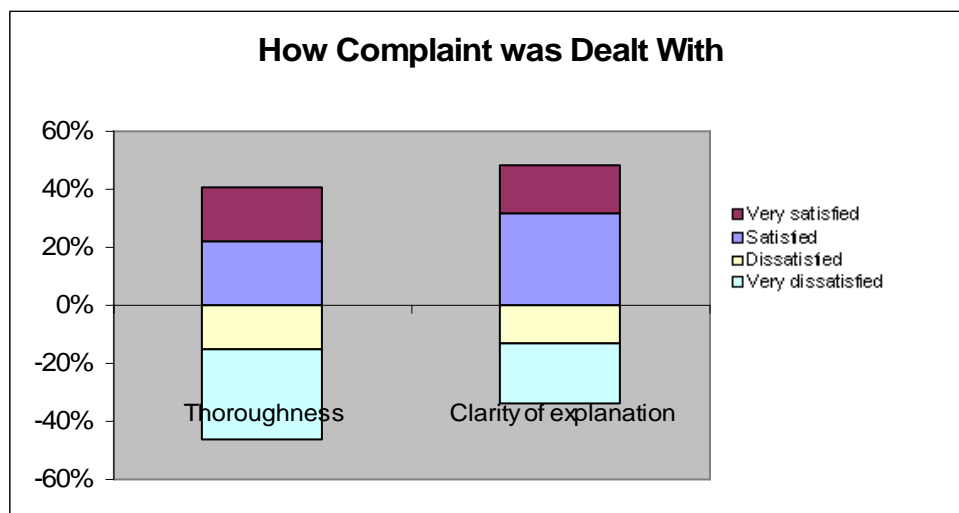
4.7. Finally, within this section it is worth noting that not all of those that contact the SPSO will be looking for staff to be impartial but may instead be looking for the SPSO to be very firmly 'on their side'. This view emerged from some of the additional comments made by survey respondents, with one complainant reporting that he had expected the SPSO to act as 'a people's champion'. This can be a difficult and persistent challenge to address, irrespective of the quality of information provided about the remit and role of ombudsman organisations.



	Base (n)	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
Staff were courteous	171	45%	34%	12%	3%	6%
Staff were helpful	172	36%	24%	16%	7%	16%
Staff were impartial	158	27%	19%	26%	8%	20%
Staff showed empathy	159	26%	17%	25%	12%	20%
Staff did what they said they would do	168	33%	21%	18%	13%	15%

5. THE COMPLAINT

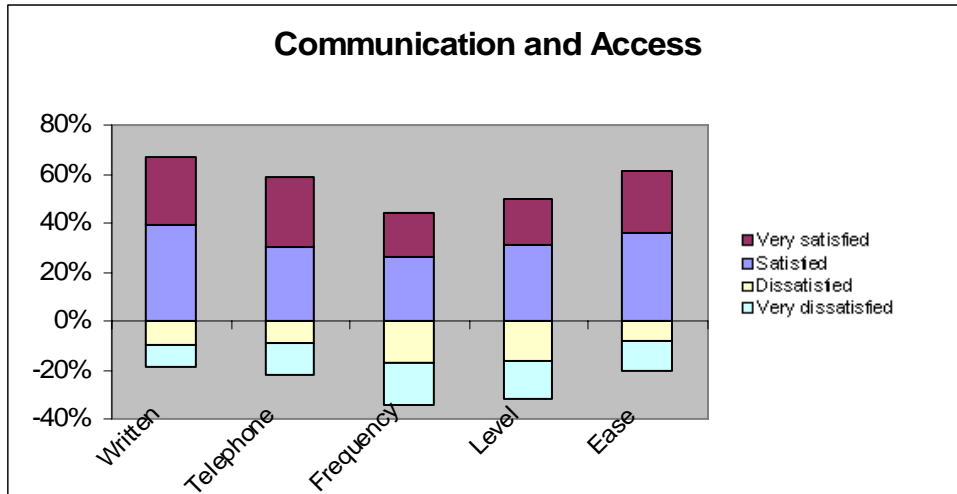
- 5.1. The survey then asked respondents about their satisfaction with how the SPSO had dealt with their complaint, focussing on thoroughness of the examination of the complaint and how clearly the outcome of the complaint was explained.
- 5.2. Overall, the results in this area for the 2008 survey to date are a little disappointing. While over 4 out of 10 respondents (41%) were satisfied with the thoroughness of the investigation, including 19% who were very satisfied, a higher proportion were dissatisfied (46%). At just over 3 out of 10 (31%) the high proportion that were very dissatisfied is notable. Nevertheless, these figures suggest an improvement compared to the 2007 research when 37% of respondents were satisfied with the 'thoroughness of the investigation' and 50% were dissatisfied.
- 5.3. Of course, it needs to be remembered here that these satisfaction ratings do not necessarily reflect how thoroughly the SPSO is examining complaints, rather they are about customer perception. These early findings, albeit to be treated with caution at this stage, seem to suggest that the SPSO may need to revisit the extent and clarity of information provided (with verbally or in written form) about the this aspect of their service.
- 5.4. Just under 1 out of 2 respondents (48%) were satisfied that the outcome of their complaint had been clearly explained to them, with 1 out of 6 (16%) very satisfied. Just over 1 out of 3 (34%) were dissatisfied to some extent, including 21% of respondents that were very dissatisfied.
- 5.5. This may be another area warranting review, particularly for cases where the complainant feels that their case has gone against them.



	Base (n)	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
The thoroughness of the SPSO's examination of your complaint	185	19%	22%	13%	15%	31%
The outcome of your complaint was explained clearly to you	182	16%	32%	18%	13%	21%

6. COMMUNICATION AND ACCESS

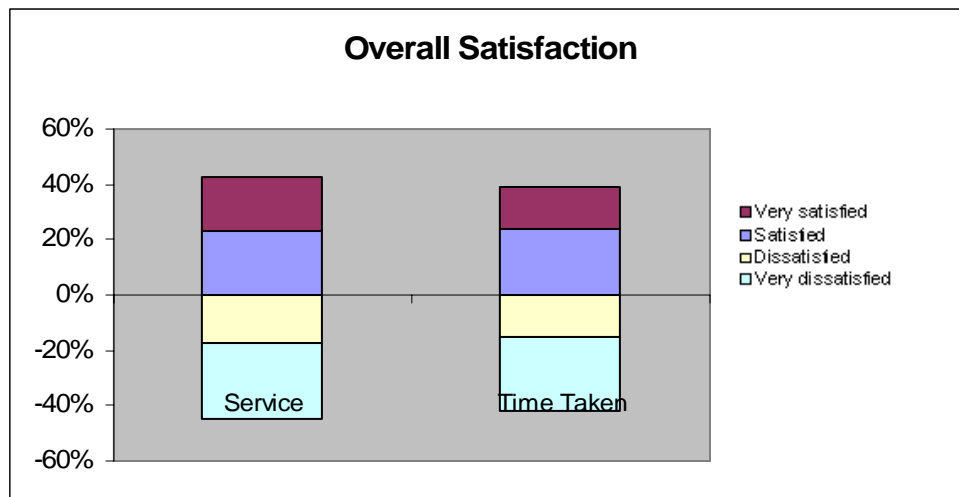
- 6.1. The next section of the questionnaire deals with how satisfied complainants were with the various ways in which the SPSO communicated with them. Results are fairly positive all-round in this area and suggest that, overall, the SPSO is effective at communicating with those who use its services.
- 6.2. For example, over 2 out of 3 complainants (67%) were satisfied with the way that the SPSO had communicated with them in writing. This included 28% who were very satisfied. Just 19% were dissatisfied, including 9% who were very dissatisfied. The SPSO also scored highly in this area in the 2007 research, with 66% satisfied with written communication and 21% dissatisfied.
- 6.3. Moving on to consider communication by telephone, just under 6 out of 10 (59%) said they were satisfied with the SPSO's performance in this area, with 3 out of 10 (29%) very satisfied. The proportion that were dissatisfied is currently just over 2 out of 10 (22%). Again, this year's early results paint a similar picture to those of 2007, when 61% were satisfied and 20% dissatisfied.
- 6.4. By and large respondents were also satisfied with how easy it was to get in touch with the relevant staff member – just over 6 out of 10 (61%) were satisfied, including 25% that were very satisfied. However, 2 out of 10 (20%) were dissatisfied, including 12% that were very dissatisfied. There has been a slight improvement here compared to 2007, when 56% were satisfied and 23% dissatisfied with how easy it was to contact staff.
- 6.5. Relatively speaking, 2008 respondents were less satisfied with the frequency of any updates they received. While over 4 out of 10 (44%) were satisfied, over 1 out of 3 (34%) were dissatisfied. Last year's research found that 1 out of 2 respondents (50%) were satisfied and 34% were dissatisfied.
- 6.6. However, when they had received an update respondents were generally positive about the level of information they were given. One out of two respondents (50%) were satisfied, with 2 out of 10 (19%) saying they were very satisfied. Just under 1 out of 3 (32%) were dissatisfied, with 16% being very dissatisfied.
- 6.7. To date, only 12 respondents have answered the question regarding alternative formats or languages. Of these, 5 were satisfied and 2 very dissatisfied. However both of these later 2 complainants reported very high levels of dissatisfaction across all categories.



	Base (n)	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
The way in which the SPSO communicated with you in writing	186	28%	39%	14%	10%	9%
The way in which the SPSO communicated with you by telephone	129	29%	30%	19%	9%	13%
The frequency of updates.	167	18%	26%	22%	17%	17%
The level of information when you received an update	167	19%	31%	20%	16%	16%
How easy it was to get in touch with the member of staff dealing with your complaint	157	25%	36%	18%	8%	12%
If you used a different format (e.g. Braille) or language, the quality of the communication	12	3	2	5	0	2

7. OVERALL SATISFACTION

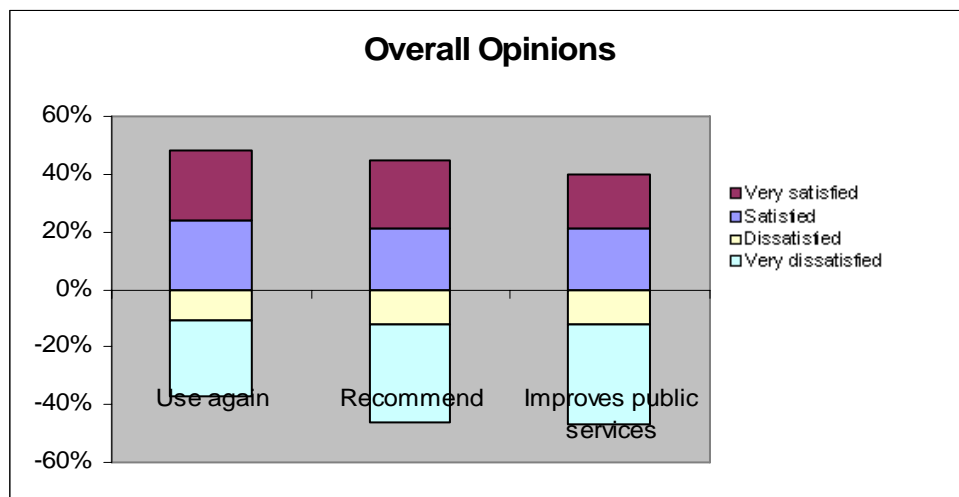
- 7.1. The final two survey questions asked respondents about their overall satisfaction with the service they had received from the SPSO and with the length of time their case had taken to reach conclusion. The results for the first 2 quarters of 2008 are perhaps slightly disappointing. While over 4 out of 10 respondents (43%) were satisfied with the overall service they had received a slightly higher proportion (45%) were dissatisfied. This includes just under 3 out of 10 (28%) of very dissatisfied respondents.
- 7.2. Turning to the length of time the complaint took to reach its conclusion, just under 4 out of 10 (39%) were satisfied with 1 out of 6 (15%) very satisfied. Again a slightly higher proportion were dissatisfied than satisfied; just over 4 out of 10 respondents (42%) were dissatisfied, with 27% being very dissatisfied. However, this nevertheless represents a notable improvement on last year's results in which just over 1 out of 2 respondents (51%) were dissatisfied with the time taken to complete the investigation, and just 3 out of 10 (31%) were satisfied.



	Base (n)	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
The service you received from the SPSO	192	20%	23%	13%	17%	28%
The length of time it took the SPSO to deal with your complaint	190	15%	24%	19%	15%	27%

- 7.3. The final survey questions asked complainants whether they would use the SPSO's service again or recommend it a friend and then whether or not they consider the SPSO is contributing to improving public services in Scotland.

- 7.4. Just under 1 out of 2 respondents (48%) agreed that they would use the SPSO again and 1 out of 4 (24%) strongly agreed. However, this still means that just under 4 out of 10 respondents (37%) are suggesting that they would be unlikely to approach the SPSO again. These findings are more or less in line with the 2007 results, when 50% said they would use the SPSO again and 39% said they would not.
- 7.5. Interestingly, a slightly lower proportion of respondents would recommend the SPSO to a friend than would consider approaching the organisation again themselves. In particular while 45% said they would recommend the SPSO, 46% said they would not. This included around 1 out of 3 (34%) who felt strongly. Again, these findings are broadly similar to those from 2007 when 46% of respondents were likely to recommend the SPSO and 47% were not.
- 7.6. Finally, respondents were asked whether they agreed that the SPSO contributes to the improving of public services in Scotland. Here just 4 out of 10 (40%) of respondents agreed, and only 2 out of 10 (19%) strongly agreed. Almost 1 out of 2 (47%) disagreed with this statement, and 35% strongly disagreed.



	Base (n)	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
You would use the SPSO again	185	24%	24%	15%	11%	26%
You would recommend the SPSO to others	189	24%	21%	10%	12%	34%
The SPSO contributes to improving public services in Scotland	185	19%	21%	13%	12%	35%

- 7.7. The final part of the survey gave respondents the opportunity to comment on any aspects of the SPSO's service that they were particularly satisfied or dissatisfied with. Of the 161 comments made, 50% were from people who were dissatisfied with the overall service, and 37% were from people who were satisfied i.e. people were slightly more likely to provide additional comments if they were dissatisfied than if they were satisfied. Of the 161 comments, 34 respondents simply said that they had no comment to make giving a base number of 127. Some of those who commented made a number of separate points.
- 7.8. A wide variety of comments were made and they have been grouped into broad categories by the research team. These groupings are set out in the table below.
- 7.9. It is worth noting that negative comments did not always come from those who were dissatisfied with the overall process, or vice versa. Some respondents were generally satisfied with the service they had received, but nevertheless had one or two issues they wished to raise. Likewise, there were people who were generally dissatisfied, but nevertheless made positive comments, for example that staff had generally been polite and helpful.

Aspects Respondents Particularly Satisfied/Dissatisfied With

	Number	%
SPSO biased/ineffective	42	23%
Complaint not investigated thoroughly	37	21%
Poor communication / overly complicated process	25	14%
Too slow a process	21	12%
SPSO effective / good communication	14	8%
SPSO staff professional and helpful	10	6%
SPSO advised poorly / lack of expertise	8	4%
Non SPSO issue	6	3%
More face to face contact or site visits	4	2%
Other	12	7%
Base (n)	179	

- 7.10. The most common issue to be raised centred around a perception that the SPSO was either biased against the complainant or in favour of the public service body. Around 1 out of 4 of the comments raised this concern:
- Views were mixed as to the extent of the bias. Some felt that there was a strong bias against them and that they never really had a chance of getting a decision in their favour. In some of these cases there did appear to be an element of misunderstanding regarding the role of the ombudsman, with one respondent commenting that he was under the impression the SPSO was supposed to be a 'people's champion';

- Some respondents also felt that the SPSO was either unwilling or unable to stand up to public services. In cases where the respondent felt it was the respondent's word against that of a public body, there was a feeling that the SPSO took the latter's side;
 - Others felt a lack of transparency regarding what the SPSO was doing meant that it was difficult to see them as an impartial body. A couple of respondents also called for more powers to be given to the SPSO to allow them to investigate more cases;
 - Some felt that any impact the SPSO could have was seriously compromised by its lack of powers to enforce its decisions.
- 7.11. Just over 1 out of 5 (21%) of the comments made related to concerns that the investigation of their case had not been thorough enough. For example:
- Some respondents were concerned that the SPSO had not taken all relevant evidence on board, particularly if had been submitted once the case investigation was already underway;
 - Some respondents felt they were not given sufficient opportunity to put their point across in the way in which they wanted. This led to several complaints that the final report contained errors and statements that were inaccurate.
- 7.12. Another common area for comment related to the standard of communication between the SPSO and its complainants. For example:
- Some respondents felt that they had received insufficient updates on the progress of their case or that when progress updates had been provided given they were not always clear;
 - Some respondents said they had found the overall process very complicated and off putting, that leaflets or other information provided did not offer sufficient explanation of how the complaint would be investigated, and in particular did not clarify what type of cases the SPSO could actually take on;
 - Others complained about what they saw as the lack of professionalism from some staff. Some suggested that staff had been rude, appeared to be operating under a considerable amount of pressure, seemed disinterested in their complaint, or were not listening to what the complainant had to say. Some respondents made reference to having been told that the SPSO was very understaffed.
- 7.13. Over 1 out of 10 comments (12%) felt that the complaints process had taken too long to reach final resolution. Some of these comments were made by respondents who were generally dissatisfied with the service they had received. In other cases, respondents were generally satisfied but suggested their satisfaction would have been even higher if the process had taken less time.

- 7.14. Finally within this report of early findings, it is worth noting that a number of comments (8% of the total) offered a positive view of the SPSO as an efficient organisation that communicated well. A number of respondents also made complimentary comments about the performance of the SPSO's staff team.

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