

SUMMER 2010



Advice and Outreach Team

**Welcome** to the seventh edition of the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman's bi-annual newsletter for frontline staff of registered social landlords.

Since our last newsletter, we have started to implement changes in how we handle complaints,

following a review of our process. We have also produced new literature for the public to help them make a complaint and to advise them of the kinds of subjects that we can, and cannot, look at. Another place for information about housing complaints is the HouseMark scheme, which the SPSO joined in July 2010 – there is more information about this on page two.

A big development, and one that will impact on frontline staff across the public sector, is that the SPSO has been asked to set up a Complaints Standards Authority. The first step in this process is our consultation on the Principles and Guidance on Model Complaints Handling Procedures. There is more about the consultation and the CSA on page three.

This edition also contains complaints statistics for the year 2009 – 10 and details of recommendations we made to RSLs. For our 'Day in the Life' feature we were delighted to talk to South African housing professional, Doreen Van Wyk of Cape Town Community Housing Company, about her typical day.

We hope you enjoy this edition. We always appreciate feedback and would be delighted to receive any suggestions for additions or improvements. Please email [newsletter@spsso.org.uk](mailto:newsletter@spsso.org.uk)

Best wishes

**The Advice and Outreach Team**

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# Ombudsman Says 'Yes' to HouseMark Scheme

One place you can find information about housing complaints is the HouseMark scheme, which the SPSO joined in July 2010. It is jointly owned by the Chartered Institute of Housing and the National Housing Federation and is a key source of performance improvement and value for money solutions for the social housing sector.

HouseMark's online initiative 'Ombudsman Says' which was set up in conjunction with the Housing Ombudsman in England in April 2009 gives public access to case digests of the most important Ombudsman decisions.

The service has since expanded to include the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales and the Local Government Ombudsman, and Scottish RSLs will now be able to access the SPSO's reports. 'Ombudsman Says' can be found at [www.ombudsmansays.info](http://www.ombudsmansays.info) The case digests can also be found in HouseMark's subscriber website in a section of the Knowledge Base called 'Ombudsman Says'.



Photo by Erik P.Zardo Araujo

## Changing how we work

In May this year, we started to apply the changes brought about by the review of our process which the Ombudsman, Jim Martin, announced last October.

### Getting it right first time

The main change to our service is a greater emphasis on resolving complaints early. We now have two teams: **Early Resolution** – providing advice to both the public and complaint handlers within public sector organisations and discussing possible solutions at an early stage and **Investigation** – carrying out a more forensic examination of the issues raised.

Our Outreach Team has become the **Advice and Outreach Team** which is now part of **Early Resolution**.

We would encourage complaints handlers as well as the public to ask us for advice. All those involved in a complaint should feel free to discuss possible solutions and remedies with us. If our advice line team cannot answer your question, they will put you through to someone who can – so please feel that you can talk to us.

Adviceline freephone **0800 377 7330**

# SPSO Consultation

In mid-June, we launched a consultation that aims to pave the way for better complaints handling in the public sector. The Consultation on a Statement of Complaints Handling Principles and Guidance on a Model Complaints Handling Procedure runs until 8 September 2010. Following the consultation, the statement of principles will be sent to the Scottish Parliament for approval in the autumn.

*“This consultation marks the next, important, step in a journey towards better complaints handling across the public sector in Scotland. The right complaints culture can pay dividends: restoring trust between the service user and provider, improving public services, and cutting costs to the public purse.”* Ombudsman, Jim Martin



## The Complaints Standards Authority

The **Public Services Reform (Scotland) Act 2010** gives the Ombudsman the lead role in developing standardised public service complaints handling systems. The Act requires the Ombudsman to publish a statement of principles on which all public service complaints handling procedures should be based. The statement requires Parliamentary approval.

The Act also provides the Ombudsman with the power to publish model complaints handling procedures (CHPs). This is intended to provide broad direction and support to public service providers, including registered social landlords. It will set out a ‘model’ CHP to be used by service providers to inspire the design of their own procedures.

Based on the principles and guidance, the Ombudsman will establish a complaints standards authority (CSA). Working in partnership with individual public sector areas, the CSA will oversee the process of developing simplified and standardised model complaints handling procedures for each sector. The CSA will be in place later this year and ready to start to implement the project early in 2011.

### For further information

The SPSO’s Valuing Complaints website will act as the resource and reference point for public service providers to support them in ensuring that their procedures comply with the principles and are in line with the guidance. Visit [www.valuingcomplaints.org.uk](http://www.valuingcomplaints.org.uk)

EAST ELEVATION OF MSP OFFICE BUILDING AT THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT AT HOLYROOD, EDINBURGH.  
PIC: ADAM ELDERS/SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT PHOTOGRAPHY © SCOTTISH PARLIAMENTARY CORPORATE BODY.



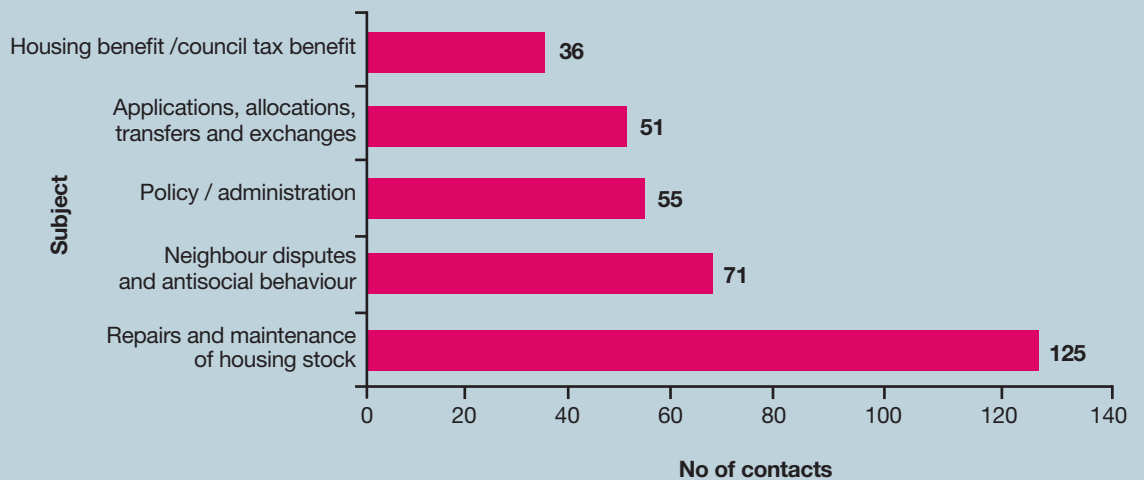
# How are we doing?

In June 2010 we published our third annual Performance Update. This annual summary details our performance and impact over the 2009 – 10 financial year, and shows that:

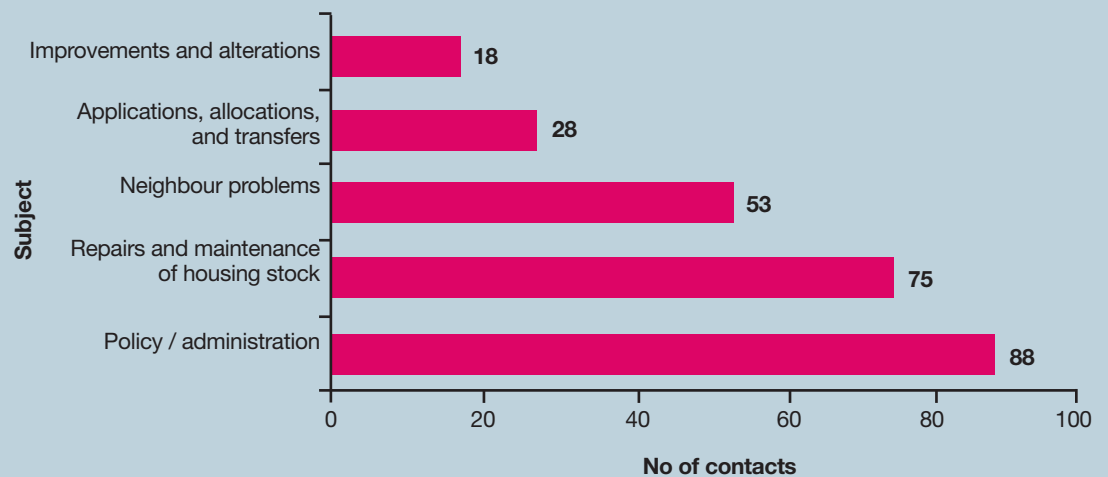
- > we received 4,210 complaints and enquiries – complaints alone increased by 12% compared with the previous year
- > we resolved 4,430 complaints and enquiries, almost 10% more than in the previous year
- > we resolved 3,524 complaints, an increase of more than 22% on 2008 – 09
- > in investigation reports alone, we made over 400 recommendations for improvement about almost 300 issues in more than 50 different bodies.

The charts below shows top subjects of contacts (enquiries and complaints) we received about housing issues:

## Subject of housing contacts about councils (2009–10)



## Subject of housing contacts about housing associations (2009–10)



## In 2009 – 10, our recommendations to Housing Associations included that they:

- > Consider asking their insurance agents to revisit an insurance claim from a tenant
- > Ensure that agencies acting on their behalf fully understand their responsibilities
- > Apologise for confusion and delay in handling an application
- > Apologise for poor complaint handling

## We also recommended that Councils:

- > Discuss and agree required home repairs with a complainant
- > Apologise fully for failings in Council procedures, complaints handling and timescales
- > Audit complaints procedures and move on them

As well as providing complaints statistics, the update contains information about the SPSO's widening remit. It outlines our preparation for the transfer of prisons and water complaints to the SPSO and our new complaints standards authority role.

For a hard copy of the **Performance Update** please email Gráinne Byrne, Communications Officer [gbyrne@spsso.org.uk](mailto:gbyrne@spsso.org.uk)

Our **Annual Report**, which we will lay before Parliament after the summer recess, will contain more detailed statistics along with case studies and trends in complaints about different public service areas.

We publish details of investigation outcomes on a monthly basis – all our published Investigation Reports are available online where they can be searched for by sector, body and subject. Please visit [www.spsso.org.uk/reports](http://www.spsso.org.uk/reports).



Photo by Dan Penton



# Ask the Advice & Outreach team



**Our Advice & Outreach Team are always happy to talk to your organisation about the work of our office. We would like to encourage frontline staff to get in touch using our free advice line or email address so that we can raise awareness of our service and share learning from complaints.**

Staff are welcome to contact our office for general advice on complaints handling or to learn more about the role and remit of the SPSO. **We are always happy to provide guidance and support** at any stage and can give advice on handling complaints and also on when and how to use them as a means of learning and improvement.

**We have a Complaints Reviewer on duty each day** to assist members of the public and service providers with detailed enquiries about SPSO jurisdiction and complaints handling.

**Our Advice and Early Resolutions Manager, Kathleen Steindl can be contacted with any detailed complaint enquiries** you may have on 0131 240 2975 or [ksteindl@spsso.org.uk](mailto:ksteindl@spsso.org.uk).

If your organisation comes within the SPSO's remit, **we can send you material to help with your statutory requirement to publicise the SPSO** to your service users and staff. Our website is a useful tool; it carries information about what we do and gives examples of investigated complaints.

We publicise the outcomes of our investigation reports on a monthly basis in the Ombudsman's Commentary. It is available on our website but you can also subscribe to our email newsletter which provides details of the individual reports. **To subscribe please email [newsletter@spsso.org.uk](mailto:newsletter@spsso.org.uk) with the subject heading: Add Me.**

The Advice & Outreach Team look forward to hearing from you about how we can assist you, or to answer any questions about our work.

**Please email us at [ask@spsso.org.uk](mailto:ask@spsso.org.uk)  
or call us free on 0800 377 7330**

# new leaflets

We now have fifteen information leaflets based on common areas of enquiry to our office. The aim of the leaflets is to help people understand what kinds of subjects and organisations we can look at. For a person who has a concern about something we cannot look at, the leaflet signposts people to the right place for advice and support. The leaflets include:

- > Planning
- > Council tax banding
- > Antisocial behaviour / neighbour problems
- > Social work
- > Council tax benefit and housing benefit

**They are all available to download from the 'online leaflets' section of our website.**



## SPSO on Accessibility



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We are always trying to find ways to make our service accessible. Over the last year we have taken the following steps to make it easy for people to find out about our office and the role we play in complaints handling.

Since 2009 we have, with the help of Update – Scotland's National Disability Information Service, provided audio versions of our most requested leaflets. We have a total of five leaflets in MP3 format. These are also Plain English approved.

With the help of the Care Commission's communications team we produced an 'easy read' leaflet to improve our accessibility to a wider range of service users, especially those with learning difficulties. It outlines what SPSO does and how to complain. To read it, visit [www.spsso.org.uk/online-leaflets](http://www.spsso.org.uk/online-leaflets)

We added a Browsealoud facility to the SPSO website in March this year. Browsealoud enables our website to 'talk' to service users (in an accent of their choice!) and to highlight information on screen so that it is easier to see. It is useful for service users with visual impairment, literacy problems and other requirements who wish to access our online information.

If you have any questions about the new leaflets or accessibility, please contact Gráinne Byrne, Communications Officer at [gbyrne@spsso.org.uk](mailto:gbyrne@spsso.org.uk).

# a day in the life of

## **Doreen Van Wyk, Client Relations Manager – Cape Town Community Housing Company, South Africa**

Cape Town Community Housing Company is an accredited social housing institution and one of the three social housing partners of the City of Cape Town.

### **Tell us about your role in the organisation**

I'm the client relations manager who heads the client contact centre of Cape Town Community Housing Company (CTCHC) in Mitchell's Plain, Cape Town. At the client contact centre we handle enquiries about available housing, screen potential beneficiaries, provide workshops to educate first time homeowners about their responsibilities and handle complaints from clients.

### **What is your background?**

I have a diploma in project management and community development. I worked for a private housing developer for 20 years before joining Cape Town Community Housing Company.

### **Describe your morning routine at CTCHC**

I start my day by checking my e-mails and plan my day around the meetings scheduled for the day. I follow up on queries of the past day and delegate duties if required.

### **What kind of complaints and service requests do you normally deal with in spring and summer?**

Most complaints are about payments and defects that have not been completed. Many people also enquire about new housing developments by our company.

### **How do you share information and learning gathered from complaints in your organisation?**

All complaints are logged, and based on the complaints we sit down as a team to discuss them and review how complaints are dealt with to improve our service to the clients.

### **What gives you satisfaction in your job?**

When I'm able to assist and resolve client complaints. Most importantly, when we hand over the keys to houses and I see the joy on the faces of the beneficiaries, I find my job most rewarding.

### **Are there any aspects of your job that you find particularly challenging?**

There are so many people who need housing and I wish we could help even more people. It is also very challenging when people do not realize the value of owning their own home and risk losing it.

### **What's the most memorable impact you have made on someone's life in your role?**

I encouraged a client who was unemployed and faced eviction to get a job. I facilitated employment for her so she could pay off her house. By the end of August this year her account will be settled in full and she will own a valuable asset.

### **As you go about your daily life, is there anything that you feel like complaining about?**

There doesn't seem to be enough time in a day and contractors can drive me



**Doreen Van Wyk, CTCHC**

crazy with their complaints. I do not like to be surprised by unannounced or unscheduled meetings.

### **And finally, what is the last thing you do before leaving the office in the evening?**

I check my check list to see that I have done everything that was planned for the day.

[www.ctchc.co.za](http://www.ctchc.co.za)



**Sisters Whitney and Zoey Ventura in front of their new home in Mitchells Plain, Cape Town**

Get in touch with the Outreach Team

Email: [ask@spsso.org.uk](mailto:ask@spsso.org.uk) Tel: 0800 377 7330

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