

Complainant Survey Published

SPSO service improvements

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The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) is making further improvements to the complaint handling service it provides following an independent customer research survey which was published on 21 February.

The SPSO handles over 4,200 enquiries and complaints a year about public services in Scotland, including about councils, the National Health Service, housing associations, the Scottish Government and colleges and universities. This is the first systematic survey it has conducted of complainants' perceptions of its service.

The Ombudsman, Professor Alice Brown, said:

"I believe the SPSO provides a valuable service for individuals seeking justice, but we are continuously seeking to improve that service. This survey will help us target our development work and I am very grateful to the 715 people who participated in it. We will look carefully at the concerns that complainants have expressed and take action to address those concerns. It is encouraging that the survey demonstrates that people's perceptions of us have improved over time. Changes to our processes and an increase in resources have made a positive difference and I am determined that we use the valuable lessons from this survey to make further improvements."

Key findings and actions for improvement

Changes in satisfaction over time

The survey demonstrates that complainants are progressively more satisfied with the SPSO. Those who brought their complaint to the SPSO in 2007 were more satisfied than those who had brought their complaint earlier. In response, the SPSO will:

- analyse this data further in order to fully understand the reasons for this improvement in satisfaction levels.
- survey those who use its service on a systematic basis from April 1 2008. This will provide regular feedback on how all complainants experience the service and put the organisation in a stronger position to identify and make any necessary operational changes at an early stage.

Managing Expectations

The survey showed the need to explain the role of the SPSO more clearly, particularly its remit and powers.

The scope of the Ombudsman's remit is governed by the SPSO Act 2002. The Act directs that there are some requirements which must always be met before the SPSO can investigate a complaint. Many of the complaints received relate to matters which are not within the SPSO's jurisdiction.

Some complainants were unhappy with the powers of the SPSO. The SPSO can make recommendations to provide redress to the individual complainant (for example, an explanation, an apology or re-imburement of costs incurred as a result of the organisation's fault), or to improve general working practices within the organisation (for example, a change in procedure). However, the SPSO cannot directly enforce its recommendations – if an organisation failed to implement recommendations the Ombudsman could lay a 'special' report before the Scottish

Parliament highlighting any concerns, and the Parliament could take action as it sees fit.

To improve understanding among complainants and other stakeholders, the SPSO:

- has begun a review of its website, printed literature, and its communication with complainants. The website will include a new area called 'Our Process' which will better inform the public and other stakeholders about its remit and powers.
- will adapt its monthly Ombudsman Commentaries to give more information about the great majority of complaints which the office handles but which receive little outside attention because they are not laid as investigation reports before the Parliament. (More than 80% of the complaints received by the SPSO fall into this category). In its January 2008 Commentary the SPSO began to emphasise the aspects of its work that do not relate to published reports, and will continue to do so, particularly from April when more comprehensive statistics relating to that work will be published.

Accessibility

Other important survey findings related to the perception of the availability of the investigator looking into their complaint. Some complainants wished for more telephone or face-to-face contact. In response, the SPSO is:

- exploring how, within its resources, it could increase the frequency of telephone contact and, where appropriate, face-to-face meetings, with those who prefer such methods of contact. This is particularly relevant given the relatively high proportion of complainants (28%) in the survey who state that they have a disability.

Press contact:

Emma Gray, Communications and Outreach Manager
Tel: 0131 240 2974 or egray@spsso.org.uk

Notes for Editors:

1. The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) was set up in 2002 replacing three previous offices - the Scottish Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, the Local Government Ombudsman for Scotland and the Housing Association Ombudsman for Scotland. Its role was extended to include other bodies delivering public services. The service is independent, impartial and free.

2. The SPSO is the 'last resort' in handling complaints about councils, housing associations, the National Health Service, the Scottish Government and its agencies and departments, the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, colleges and universities and most Scottish public authorities. Where maladministration or service failure is found, the SPSO may make recommendations to provide redress for the individual complainant. The SPSO also aims to share the learning from its work in order to improve the delivery of public services and promote good complaint handling in public bodies.

3. The activities of the SPSO are governed by the SPSO Act 2002.

4. In 2006-07 the SPSO received 2,386 enquiries and 1,842 complaints. They determined 1,826 complaints, as follows:

*Progressed to full investigation: 315 (17%) – 41 fully upheld, 105 partially upheld
Withdrawn by complainant or they failed to provide information: 211 (12%)
Discontinued (for reasons such as insufficient evidence): 185 (10%)
Premature (not yet been through the complaints process of the organisation concerned): 758 (41%)
Out of jurisdiction: 357 (20%)
Respondents pool and satisfaction with Ombudsman services in general*

5. The survey recorded the views of people who had had their complaint determined during the period 1 July 2006 to 30 June 2007. A questionnaire was sent to 2,056 complainants who had had their complaint determined during that period. In total, 715 questionnaires were completed and returned, a response rate of approximately 35%.

Those who chose to fill out the survey were over three times as likely to have had their complaint progressed to the final investigation stage than the general complainant to the SPSO (52% of survey respondents, compared to 17% of complainants overall in 2006-07).

Of the 52% of respondents whose complaint was taken to final investigation stage, 10% had their complaint fully upheld, 14% partially upheld, and 28% not upheld. Surveys conducted by other Ombudsman offices have established the outcome of a complaint is often linked to the level of satisfaction expressed. See, for example:

UK Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman

Local Government Ombudsman (England)

6. The research was carried out by market research firm ORC International and cost £15,628 + VAT.