

**Organisation learning from Customer Service Complaints
2015-16 Q4**

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Purpose

To provide a summary of Customer Service Complaints (CSCs) received and responded to by the SPSO and the SPSO Independent Customer Complaints Reviewer (ICCR) in the three months from January to March (Q4 2015-16) and provide a summary of outcomes, trends and actions taken as a result of these complaints including, where appropriate, key learning points for SPSO service improvement.

Reporting customer service complaints

In line with CSA requirements, details of all CSCs are recorded on WorkPro and we publish on a quarterly basis the outcome of complaints and the actions we have taken in response. These are then analysed for trend information to ensure we identify areas where our service could improve and take appropriate action.

We publish this report on a quarterly basis to help ensure transparency in our complaints handling and to demonstrate to our customers that complaints can influence our service. We also publish, on an annual basis, more detailed information on our performance in handling complaints. This includes statistics showing the volumes and types of complaints and key performance details, including the time taken and the stage at which complaints were resolved.

Complaints received and responded to

Received

We received 10 customer service complaints in Q4, and responded to 12. This is the same number of received as the previous quarter 3. This represents a decrease of 33% on quarter 2 (15 received), which follows an increase of 66% between quarter 1 and 2.

The breakdown of received complaints, by stage, in Q4 is as follows:

- 7 at Stage 1 Manager
- 5 at Stage 2 Senior Management (two of which had already been responded to at stage 1)

The Independent Customer Complaints Reviewer (**ICCR**) received three complaints following the completion of our internal process (one down on the previous quarter 3).

Responded to

SPSO responded to 12 service complaints in this period (up from one in the previous quarter 3 and down from 20 in quarter 2).

Seven were responded to at stage 1 (Officer / Manager):

- Two of these were responded to at Advice Team;
- Three of these were responded to at Early Resolution;
- Two of these were responded to at Investigations.

Five were responded to at stage 2 (Director / Head of Complaints Standards):

- One related to Advice team
- Three were related to Early Resolution;
- One related to Investigations Team.

The Independent Customer Complaints Reviewer (ICCR) responded to five complaints. This was the same as the previous quarter 3 and an increase from two in the previous quarter 2.

Summary of complaints outcomes and service failures

Breakdown of complaints responded to by stage and outcome is shown in the table below. Each complaint contains a number of individual heads of complaint so the decision outlined represents a summary of these complaint outcomes.

Complaint Type	Complaint withdrawn and/or no grounds to pursue	Not Upheld	Some Upheld	Upheld	Total	Q3 % total upheld	Q4 % total upheld
Stage 1 – Officer / Manager	1	5	0	1	7	0%	14%
Stage 2 – Senior Management	0	3	1	1	5	20%	40%
SPSO Total	1	8	1	2	12	9%	25%
Independent Customer Complaints Reviewer	2	0	2	1	5	40%	60%
Total	3	8	3	3	17	19%	35%

Upheld complaints

Of the 12 complaints responded to by SPSO in this period, three were fully upheld or some upheld (25%). Nine (75%) were not upheld or withdrawn / not pursued. This is a higher upheld rate than in previous quarters (12.5%, 15% and 9% in quarters 1, 2 and 3 respectively).

The ICCR responded to five complaints in Q4. Two of these complaints were not taken forward as the issues the complainant was unhappy about were not matters that the ICCR could review (the decision or outcome on their complaint about a public body, for example). Two complaints were some upheld and one was fully upheld (overall rate of 60%).

For comparison, SPSO internal upheld rates in 2014/15 ranged from 15% to 33% by quarter, averaging at 24% for the year. The ICCR upheld rate for the year was 18%.

Service failures identified

Specific service failures identified in Quarter 4 are summarised below.

Stage 1 (Officer / Manager)

We apologised to a complainant that it had taken us some time, and unpicking of the details, to fully understand their complaint and, therefore, reach a decision. We explained that the case was not a straightforward one and that is why it had taken us a number of exchanges with the

complainant to reach a final view. We recognised that this had caused the complainant distress and apologised for this and for difficulties in communication.

Stage 2 (Director / Head of Complaints Standards)

In one case:

- We received a complaint about a telephone call with SPSO staff which the complainant found to be distressing. The complainant felt that SPSO had not taken into account all of the information they had provided about the reasonable adjustments they might require. The complainant also complained that they were not allowed to make a service delivery complaint over the telephone and that an SPSO member of staff had unreasonably referred to the unacceptable actions policy.
- We upheld these complaints, stating that, in applying our guidance in relation to not being overly intrusive in questioning people about disabilities, we missed an opportunity to raise and discuss with them reasonable adjustments that we might be able to put in place.
- Staff had found it difficult to provide advice or input into the conversation in a way that they believed was helpful to the complainant. We recognised the impact this had had on the complainant, including the fact that this had been distressing and difficult for the complainant, and apologised for this.
- We proposed and put in place reasonable adjustments to be made from that point on to help ensure that this situation did not arise again in future, including supporting staff to be better aware of these situations.

In another case:

We upheld a complaint about communication. Although the complainant had been given sufficient opportunity to provide information on their complaint and that, on the whole, had been kept updated regularly and fully in line with our process, there was one exception to this which was at the point of transfer of the case to the investigations team. It would have been in line with our process for the new complaints reviewer in the investigations team to contact the complainant within 10 working days to introduce himself and confirm the complaints under investigation. This did not happen in this case. We apologised for not contacting the complainant within this timescale in line with our process and for the this inconvenience had caused.

Independent Customer Complaints Reviewer (ICCR)

Case 1

The ICCR upheld a complaint relating to communication and delay in the service complaints process. They made recommendation that SPSO should apologise for the fact that, in spite of an auto reply to their email, the complainant did not receive any further response to their email. The ICCR also recommended that SPSO should consider whether it needs to take steps to ensure that, in cases where the service complaint 20 day target cannot be met, complainants are contacted before the target date, with a brief explanation of the reasons for the delay and a revised estimate of when a response will be sent.

SPSO accepted the recommendations, explaining that the email issue was, in part, due to a system fault which prevented the email from getting through the SG security filter to some

individuals, which had not been known to others cc'd in the email. We also acknowledged that it had taken longer than the stated target to respond to the service complaint and accepted that communication could have contained more information about revised timescales and confirmed that we would look to ensure that happens more routinely. We apologised to the complainant for the inconvenience this had caused.

Case 2

The ICCR concluded that SPSO could have done more to explain the reasons for their findings in the complaint and that, in the absence of a fuller explanation, it was understandable that the complainant took issue with the tone of the letter. The ICCR also concluded that it would have been appropriate for SPSO to have acknowledged the complainant's feelings of distress. The ICCR recommended that SPSO acknowledge that the letter caused the complainant to feel that SPSO was defensive and dismissive of their concerns and apologise for causing the complainant distress. We accepted that the letter to the complainant did not articulate fully the reasons for our position and that, without this, it was understandable that the complainant took issue with its tone. We apologised for the distress this caused to the complainant.

Case 3

The ICCR partly upheld a complaint about delay and communication, including delay with the service complaints process. Although the ICCR did not consider the overall time taken to investigate the complaint to be unreasonable, they concluded that some of SPSO's communication with about this could have been clearer about its role, process and approach. SPSO also failed to meet its target response time for service complaints and to signpost to the ICCR. The ICCR recommended that SPSO consider whether it needs to take further steps to ensure that, in cases where the 20-day target for service complaints cannot be met, complainants are advised with a brief explanation of the reasons and a revised estimate. SPSO should also review its standard letters to ensure that information about how and when to approach ICCR is included in the body of the text. We accepted and actioned the recommendations.

Service complaint handling performance

Key points in terms of SPSO's handling of customer service complaints:

Complaints numbers

- Complaints received and responded by SPSO have remained stable from the previous quarter

Timescales

- *Stage 1:* All complaints (**100%**) at stage 1 were responded to within the target of 5 working days (Q3 67%; Q2 71%; Q1 55%; Q4 14/15 90%). The average timescales for responding to Stage 1 complaints was **2.4 working days**, which is within the 5 working day target
- *Stage 2:* All complaints (**100%**) at stage 2 were responded to within the target of 20 working days (40%, 69%, 70% and 70% in the previous four quarters). The average timescales for responding to Stage 2 complaints was 18.4 working days which was within the target of 20 working days.

Key learning points and trends

There were no significant service failures identified in the complaints responded to in this period which indicates a concerning trend or requiring attention, although there was a significant increase in complaints about communication (from three to ten). SMT will continue to monitor this in future quarters to identify and highlight to the Service Improvement Group any action that may help ensure learning from this.

The most common areas of complaint in quarter 4 were:

- *Communication*: Ten complaints, compared to three and five in the previous two quarters, complained about elements of communication such as failures to contact within agreed timescales, accuracy of communications or failure to explain elements of our process clearly.
- *Specific elements of our process*: Two complaints, compared to three and six in the previous two quarters, involved some element of complaint about our process, including the process for agreeing heads of complaint or transferring complaints between CRs.
- *Meeting needs* – including complaints about making reasonable adjustments
- *Delay* – two complaints
- *Attitude* – two complaints, compared to four and two in the previous quarter, related to staff attitude.

Action Taken

Individual instances of service failure have been highlighted to SMT, where necessary, and to the relevant staff and managers involved. This paper will be provided to the Service Improvement Group for discussion and action where appropriate. There were no individual or collective training needs identified. As outlined above SMT will continue to monitor complaints about communication in future quarters to identify and highlight to the Service Improvement Group any action that may help ensure learning from this.

ICCR recommendations have been accepted and have been, or are being, acted upon.
