

Annual Customer Service Complaints Report – 2017/18

From: **John Stevenson, Head of Improvement Standards and Engagement**
 When: **June 2018**
 Annexes: Annex 1 Independent Service Delivery Complaints Reviewer
 Annual Report 2017-18
 Recommendations: The LT is invited to note this update and its content for publication as part of our annual reporting.

Purpose

This report provides a summary overview of Customer Service Complaints received and responded to by the SPSO in the year 2017-18. It includes details of the actions taken and key learning points for SPSO service improvement. Supplementary information to the report is included in the attached appendix.

Reporting customer service complaints

In line with CSA requirements, details of all customer service complaints in 2017/18 were recorded and reported on a quarterly basis. A summary of the outcome of complaints received and responded to during the year was published on our website on a quarterly basis. These reports provide information on our performance in handling customer service complaints in line with SPSO's Customer Service Complaints Handling Procedure.

This annual report brings together the information already reported quarterly to provide the annual overview of customer service complaints. This information is published to help ensure transparency in our handling of customer service complaints and to demonstrate to our customers that we value complaints and, wherever possible, we use the learning from them to improve our services.

Summary of complaints outcomes and service failures 2017/18

Statistics for customer service complaints

Received & closed

Table 1 provides a breakdown of complaints received and closed

Summary	<i>Received</i>	<i>Closed</i>
Stage 1 - Frontline resolution	42	42
Stage 2 - Investigation	15	16
Escalated Complaints (escalated from stage 1 to stage 2)	14	13
Total	71	71

Upheld/Not upheld

Table 2 provides a breakdown of complaints upheld and not upheld

Summary	<i>Upheld</i>	<i>Not Upheld</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>% upheld</i>
Stage 1 - Frontline resolution	6	36	42	14%
Stage 2 - Investigation	4	12	16	25%
Escalated Complaints	7	6	13	54%
Total	17	54	71	

Timescales

The timescales to close complaints are:

- 5 working days at stage 1
- 20 working days at stage 2
- 20 working days for 'escalated' complaints.

Table 3 provides further information about our performance in relation to timescales.

Timescales	<i>Met timescale (cases)</i>	<i>Did not meet timescale (cases)</i>	<i>Total number of working days</i>	<i>Average time in working days to close</i>
Stage 1 - Frontline resolution	29	11	169	4.2
Stage 2 - Investigation	12	4	362	22.6
Escalated Complaints	11	2	221	17
Total	52	17	N/A	N/A

Key points

- We received 71 service complaints in 2017/18. This is a notable increase from the previous year (2016/17) when we received 49 service complaints.
- We closed 71 service complaints in the year 2017/18. In the previous year (2016/17) we closed 50 service complaints.
- We closed 42 service complaints at Stage 1 (59% of all complaints received) and we closed 29 complaints (including 13 that were escalated from Stage 1 to Stage 2) at Stage 2. This represented 41% of all complaints received.
- We upheld a total of 17 complaints. Six at Stage 1 (14% of all Stage 1 complaints), four at Stage 2 (25% of all Stage 2 complaints). Seven complaints were upheld after escalation (54% of escalated complaints).
- During the year the ICRS received 14 referrals and completed 2 full investigations and 2 short reviews. They did not uphold any complaints.
- Average timescales at Stage 1 were 4.2 working days (against a target of 5 working days), at Stage 2 we took on average 22.6 working days (against a target of 20 working days), and for

escalated complaints the average time to issue a decision was 17 working days (against a target of 20 working days).

Learning from complaints information, including all service failures, how we responded to these and how we shared the learning, is outlined below.

Learning from complaints

The SPSO is committed to improving our service as a result of learning from customer service complaints. In addition to putting things right for our customer, where possible, when our service has not met our service standards, we always seek to learn the lessons from any service failures and address any systemic issues that may be identified. In the course of reviewing customer service complaints, individual instances of service failure are highlighted to the Leadership Team, where necessary, and to the relevant staff and managers involved where appropriate.

The two main areas of poor service provision identified throughout the year related to communications and delays. In each case we apologised for the failing. Staff were reminded of the service standards. We will take account of the findings in respect of communications in a planned update of the SPSO Communications strategy

ICRS Independent Service Delivery Complaints Reviewer

Appendix 2 includes the Independent Service Delivery Complaints Reviewer's Annual Report for 2017-18.

Appendix 2

ICRS Independent Service Delivery Complaints Reviewer for SPSO Annual Report 2017-18

The role of ICRS is to provide a final external stage for complaints about the service delivered by SPSO. Where a complainant has made a service complaint to SPSO and is dissatisfied with the final response, we review SPSO's handling of matters and give our view on whether SPSO has lived up to its Service Delivery Standards. We aim to provide closure for complainants by giving thorough, independent assessments of the issues, and, if we find any service failures, recommendations for appropriate redress. For SPSO we aim to offer constructive feedback and practical ideas for further improvement.

During the year we received 14 referrals and completed 2 full investigations and 2 short reviews. One case was withdrawn by the complainant and in 5 cases we were unable to assist because the complaints were outside our terms of reference meaning they were not about the service provided by SPSO, rather they were disagreements with the decision reached by SPSO in their consideration of the complaint about another public sector organisation. Compared with 2016-17 (when we received 7 requests for review) there was an increase in referrals but the number of completed investigations was the same. At the end of the year 3 investigations were still in progress. The outcomes of the 2 full investigations are set out in table 1 below.

Two complaints raised concerns about bias on the part of SPSO. We did not find evidence of bias, however, given the importance for an Ombudsman service to be able to demonstrate their independence we did suggest that SPSO should consider whether there are further steps it can take to demonstrate impartiality and avoid creating an impression of bias. In another case we found that, in spite of SPSO taking all usual steps to explain its role and procedures, the complainant had continued to hope for results that SPSO had no power to deliver. We did not uphold the complaint but suggested that SPSO could have made a more concerted effort to manage the complainant's unrealistic expectations. Otherwise we were satisfied that SPSO had either handled matters appropriately or that it had already recognised and addressed any service failures.

We are grateful to have had opportunity to attend meetings of the Audit and Advisory Committee and to report directly to the Committee on our work.

Finally we should like to express thanks to SPSO staff for the assistance they have provided – supplying files and responding to questions about policy and procedure. Without this support we would have been unable to deliver an effective, timely, service.

	Complaint issues	Issues upheld	Issues partially upheld	Recommendations
1 Ms A	3	0	0	1
2 Ms B	7	0	0	0
	10	0	0	1

Additional information for Audit and Advisory Committee

Summary of cases fully investigated

Ms A complained that an SPSO complaints reviewer had acted unprofessionally on the telephone and in correspondence, failing to show compassion and impartiality, that SPSO had responded to her service complaint before she had the opportunity to supply all the details and also that SPSO had been too slow to respond to her request for a decision review. SPSO had already accepted that it had not given Ms A proper opportunity to explain her service complaint and also that there had been delays in completing the decision review. Taking into account the admissions and apologies Ms A had already received, we did not uphold any of her complaints. With regard to the decision review we were satisfied that overall SPSO had handled the situation appropriately, keeping Mrs A updated on progress and apologising for delays. In respect of the handling of the service complaint we found that SPSO had offered appropriate redress. We suggested, however, that Ms A had been confused about the difference between a decision review and a service complaint, and that making the distinction clearer could help to reduce the risk of similar problems in future. On the issue of unprofessional conduct we accepted SPSO's view that there was no objective evidence of this. We could understand, however, in view of what the complaints reviewer had said about his past experience, why Mrs A might have questioned his impartiality. We recommended that SPSO should consider extra safeguards to avoid perceptions of bias. SPSO responded positively, agreeing to look at its guidance on impartiality and conflicts of interest, while also pointing out that it is useful for reviewers to have experience that is relevant to the complaints they investigate.

Ms B asked us to look into concerns about several aspects of SPSO's service. She complained that staff had promised to re-investigate a complaint but failed to do so, had unreasonably ended a telephone call, refused requests for a meeting and deleted emails, had failed to answer her questions about the investigation, and had acted unfairly in informing her just before Christmas of the result of her request for a decision review. We did not uphold any of the complaints as we found that SPSO had on the whole followed appropriate procedures and tried hard to communicate clearly. We concluded that the root of Ms B's dissatisfaction was that she had unrealistic expectations, particularly with regard to the decision review process. Although we were satisfied that SPSO had taken all the usual steps to explain its remit and approach we suggested that it would have been appropriate for SPSO to have responded more firmly when it became clear that Ms B continued to hope for outcomes that were unrealistic.