

Annual Customer Service Complaints Report – 2016-17

From: **John Stevenson, Head of Complaints Standards Authority (CSA)**
When: **May 2017**
Annexes: Annex 1 Service failures identified through customer complaints

Purpose

This report provides a summary overview of customer service complaints received and responded to by the SPSO in the year 2016-17. 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 2016-17 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 web site 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.

Key points for 2016-17

- We received 49 service complaints. This is a slight increase from the previous year (2015-16) when we received 47 service complaints.
- We closed 50 service complaints. In the previous year, we closed 52 service complaints.
- The Independent Customer Complaints Reviewer (ICCR) received 7 referrals and completed 2 full reviews. This is significantly lower than the previous year when the ICCR received 18 referrals and completed 8 reviews.
- We closed 31 service complaints at Stage 1 (63% of all complaints received) and we closed 19 complaints (including 7 that were escalated from stage 1 to stage 2) at stage 2. This represented 39% of all complaints received.
- We upheld a total of 11 complaints - seven at stage 1 (22.6% of all stage 1 complaints), three at stage 2 (25% of all stage 2 complaints). One complaint was upheld after escalation (14.3% of escalated complaints).
- Each of the two reviews completed by the ICCR resulted in some of the issues being complained about being upheld. Of a total of 11 issues considered within these two reviews, 4 were upheld and 1 was partially upheld.
- Average timescales at stage 1 were 2.8 working days (against a target of 5 working days). At stage 2 we took on average 22.14 working days (against a target of 20 working days), and

for escalated complaints the average time to issue a decision was 30.75 working days (against a target of 20 working days).

- Average timescales at stage 2 and for escalated complaints were adversely impacted by two 'outliers' which skewed the overall performance. Removing these two outliers would mean that average timescales at stage 2 are 16.8 working days and for escalated complaints 17.25 working days.

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

Received and closed complaints and stage at which these are resolved

Received and closed

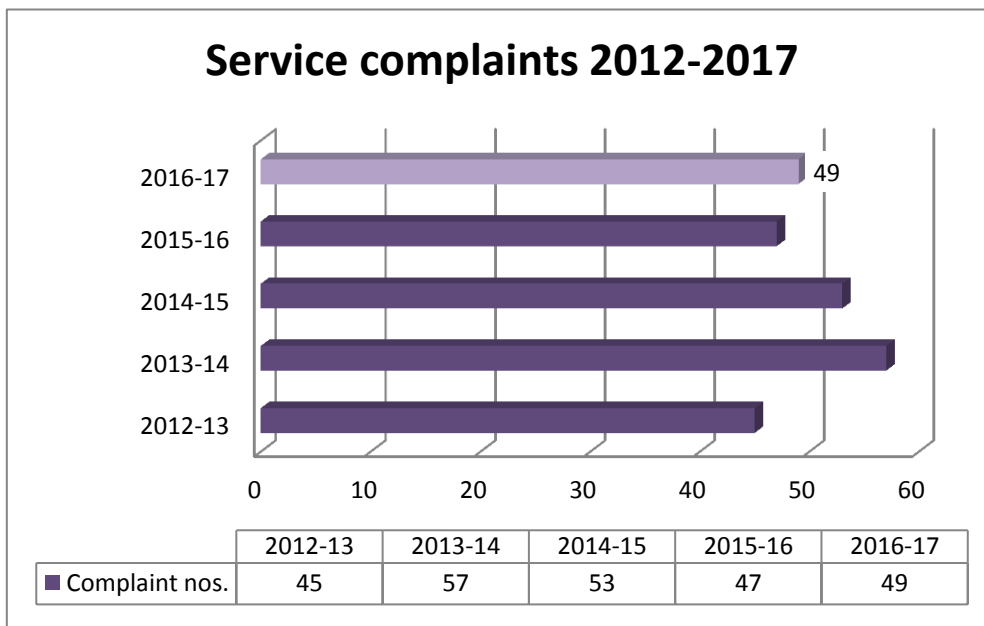
SPSO's caseload in 2016-17 was 4,182. We received 49 service complaints, and closed 50 service complaints. The ICCR completed 2 full reviews.

Of those complaints we responded to:

- 31 at stage 1 (Frontline resolution)
- 12 at stage 2 (Investigation by Senior Management)
- 7 after escalation from stage 1 to stage 2 (Investigation by Senior Management)
- 2 by the ICCR.

Year on year analysis

The numbers received in 2016-17 are broadly similar to the previous year. This is in line with the 5 year average of 50 per year in respect of complaints received about service. Year on year figures are summarised in the chart below:



Complaints outcomes - upheld, partially upheld and not upheld

The breakdown of closed complaints by stage and outcome is shown in the table below (including ICCR). Each complaint contains a number of individual heads of complaint so the decision outlined represents an aggregate of the outcome of these.

CSCs Closed - Summary of Outcomes at each stage

<i>Type</i>	<i>Upheld</i>	<i>Not Upheld</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>% upheld</i>
Stage 1	7	24	31	22.6
Stage 2	3	9	12	25
Stage 2 escalated	1	6	7	14.3
Stage 3 - ICCR*	2	0	2	100
Total	13	39	52	25

* We have taken the view that where some but not all aspects of a complaint are upheld, we will report that as an overall upheld complaint. In the case of the two complaints considered by the ICCR, the reviewer considered 11 separate issues, upheld 4 and partially upheld 1. As each case had at least one issue partially upheld, we have reported this as 2 upheld complaints.

Performance against timescales

The target for responding to customer service complaints is:

- 5 working days at stage 1 (with the ability to extend to 10 days) and
- 20 working days at stage 2 (with the ability to extend where this is required).

Stage 1: The average time taken to handle complaints at stage 1 for the year was 2.4 working days. This is a significant improvement on our performance for the previous year (2015-16) when we reported an average timescale of 4.4 working days at stage 1. The proportion of complaints responded to within five working days was 90%, which is an improvement on the previous year's figure of 84%.

Stage 2: The average time to respond to complaints at stage 2 was 28 working days. This is a significant deterioration on the previous year's performance of 19 working days. Similarly, the average time to respond to escalated complaints at stage 2 was 34 working days, against the target of 20 working days. In each measurement, however, the average timescales were adversely impacted by two outlier cases. In context, with the two outliers removed, the average timescales at stage 2 are 16.8 working days and for escalated complaints 17.25 working days. In the previous year (2015-16), the average time to respond to complaints at stage 2 was 22.6 working days.

The proportion of complaints responded to within 20 working days was 66.7% for cases handled directly at stage 2 and 78% for cases escalated to stage 2. The proportion of complaints responded to within 20 working days in 2015-16 was 53%.

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.

The link between the outcome of a case decision and the level of satisfaction with the service provided is well known. Over time, it has been well-documented by different ombudsman services, that perceptions about the outcome of a decision can negatively influence perceptions of the service. This can, at times, make it difficult for service users and for SPSO to separate out and identify dissatisfaction with the service as distinct from dissatisfaction with the decision.

While we welcome and encourage feedback in all forms, including complaints, we recognise that it is important for service users to raise issues through the route that ensures their issues will be considered in the most effective way. This is why we endeavour to provide clear guidance to service users about how to raise service issues as opposed to requesting a review of a decision reached by this office.

We try to act on what we learn quickly and to make sure this is shared. In the course of reviewing customer service complaints, individual instances of service failure are escalated to the senior management team, where necessary, and to the relevant staff and managers involved where appropriate.

Appendix 1 provides a summary of service failures identified during 2016-17 including a note of the action taken.

Appendix 1

Service failures identified through customer complaints

In all cases where our service was not up to the standards expected, we apologised to the complainant and, where possible, took action to help ensure no reoccurrence.

2016-17

Service failure identified	What we did in response
<p>The complainant had provided details of her dyslexia and other factors which affected her ability to read documents at the start of SPSO's process when she submitted her complaint. These difficulties were the reason why the complainant, at the end of our process, had asked for her decision letter to be read. This did not happen, and we should have acted on the information she provided at the start of the process and agreed with her any reasonable adjustments we could put in place.</p> <p>The complainant advised that this had affected her ability to request a review of the decision within the timescale.</p>	<p>We apologised to the complainant for the fact that we did not read her decision letter to her and put reasonable adjustments in place.</p> <p>We agreed to discuss flexibility with the timescale, should she choose to request a review. We fed back to our investigation teams the need to identify any needs as soon as possible in the complaint assessment.</p>
<p>The language used to explain our process made the complainant feel that matters had been (or would be) excluded or pre-judged.</p>	<p>We apologised for our use of language, and for the fact that we did not identify the issues highlighted by the ICCR in our own earlier investigation of our customer service complaints process. Additionally we apologised for the inconvenience this caused the complainant.</p> <p>Finally, we apologised for our delay in implementing the ICCR recommendation in relation to the complaint, specifically the recommendation to apologise to the complainant, and offered a full apology to the individual as requested by the ICCR.</p>
<p>We issued a letter from a member of staff very close to the date that member of staff was due to leave the organisation, but invited the customer to call them, even though the employee would already have left SPSO's employ by the time the complainant received it.</p>	<p>We agreed that this was poor customer service and meant that the complainant had lost the opportunity for a fuller discussion with the Complaints Reviewer who had originally worked the case. We upheld the complaint and discussed with the complainant what further action he wanted us to take on his complaint.</p>
<p>We did not treat a service complaint as such</p>	<p>We upheld this complaint and apologised to the</p>

Service failure identified	What we did in response
immediately and there was a delay of approximately two weeks in the complainant's request being passed to the correct process.	complainant.
A customer told us '...my completed Service Complaint form which was emailed to four different recipients at the SPSO, was not responded to for more than ten working days; it received a response only after further contact from myself. Supposedly all recipients forwarded the complaint to the wrong person; a person that seemingly decided to take no action to rectify the error.'	We realised this mistake only when we received a follow-up email from the complainant. At that point we apologised and considered the complaints straight away at Stage 1. Inevitably this had caused the complainant additional frustration, and we committed to reminding colleagues that customer complaints should be dealt with by them and their manager at Stage 1 and passed to the Executive PA if it is at Stage 2.
We told a complainant that two aspects of their complaint were for the review process, whereas they were about communication and should have been taken through the customer service complaint process.	We apologised to the complainant for this failing and again committed to reminding colleagues that if they are in any doubt, to send the correspondence to both the Executive Casework Officer and Head of Communications and Engagement to ensure that it is handled under the correct process.
The customer complained that she tried to contact a Complaints Reviewer a number of times but was unable to speak with him. She had sent emails / letters but not received a response to these.	<p>It transpired that some of the relevant correspondence sent by the customer by email had been routed to the Complaint Reviewer's 'junk' email folder. The team manager made a point of writing to all staff to remind them to regularly check their 'junk' mailbox, in case any complaint correspondence goes in there instead of the inbox.</p> <p>The Complaints Reviewer contacted the customer and acknowledged that there had been a failure to respond to correspondence. He acknowledged that our handling of the customer's correspondence did not meet our service standards and apologised for these failings.</p>
The customer was unhappy with the time we had taken to decide that her case should be closed (180 days).	<p>The Complaints Reviewer explained the reason that it had taken until this time to decide on the complaint, and apologised to the customer.</p> <p>While there was a delay in reaching the decision in this case, this was in part unavoidable. Generally staff have been reminded of the need</p>

Service failure identified	What we did in response
	to keep customers updated throughout the SPSO process.
There was a delay in responding to the initial customer complaint.	<p>The Complaints Reviewer, the Team Manager and the Executive Casework Officer had all previously apologised for the delay, which was avoidable. The complaint was upheld on this basis. As a result of this failing we reminded relevant staff of the correct process for handling customer service complaints, to minimise the likelihood of this happening again.</p> <p>The learning in this case stems from the failure to properly apply the customer service complaints procedure requirements when the original complaint was received. We will work to raise staff awareness of the requirements of the customer service complaints process through the year 2016-17</p>