

**SPSO Service and Awareness Survey of
Bodies Under Jurisdiction**

2008/09

Report

by

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KEY FINDINGS

- An independent research company (Craigforth), has undertaken a survey of those Bodies Under Jurisdiction (BUJ) about which one or more complaints have been made to the SPSO. More than half of the 152 BUJs surveyed responded, yielding useful information to inform service development within the SPSO.
- Overall, the survey results suggest that BUJs have a good understanding of the role and responsibilities of the SPSO and see it as an organisation which communicates well and has high standards of customer service.
- BUJs report that decisions made by the SPSO are influencing their organisation and that the SPSO is a positive driver for improvement in the area of complaints handling specifically as well as more widely across their organisation.
- A large majority of BUJs also felt that the work of the SPSO is contributing to improving public services across Scotland.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. In March 2009 the Scottish Public Service Ombudsman (SPSO) commissioned Craigforth to undertake a service and awareness survey of Bodies under their Jurisdiction. These Bodies under Jurisdiction (BUJ) of the SPSO provide most of Scotland's public services and include local authorities, the National Health Service, universities and colleges of further education, housing associations and the Scottish Government.
- 1.2. The SPSO is the final stage for complaints made about these organisations and BUJs have a statutory duty to inform complainants of their right to take their case to the SPSO. In 2008/09 the SPSO received 2,953 complaints: the majority of these complaints (1,604) were made about local authorities, a further 684 were health related, 303 were made about housing associations, 210 about the Scottish Government or the Devolved Administration and 93 about universities or colleges of further education.¹

Methodological Approach

- 1.3. The survey was carried out through self completion postal survey. The survey form was devised by the SPSO and covers case handling, general views of the service provided and communications. Respondents were also given the opportunity to give further comments. A copy of the survey is included within the appendices to this report.
- 1.4. The survey was issued by the SPSO to all BUJs that had received a decision from the SPSO in the preceding 6 months. To have reached a decision all complaints must have reached Stage 2 or beyond according to SPSO processes. The 4 stages a complaint goes through are as follows:
- Stage 1 relates to complaints that were regarded as premature following consideration;
 - Stage 2 relates to complaints that were considered premature or out of jurisdiction following further consideration;
 - Stage 3 covers those complaints that were determined after detailed consideration; and
 - Stage 4 is the complaints that were investigated.
- 1.5. A total of 152 BUJs were surveyed with only one survey issued to each BUJ, irrespective of the number of complaints that had been made about them. Surveys were issued to all with a prepaid reply envelope addressed to Craigforth in late April 2009.
- 1.6. Three to four weeks later a reminder letter was issued to all BUJs that had not responded to the initial survey.
- 1.7. The survey was closed on 10th June 2009. By this date a total of 82 analysable returns had been received, representing a response rate of 54%.

¹ SPSO statistics are available at <http://www.spsos.org.uk/statistics>

- 1.8. This report presents basic frequency analysis. It includes some more detailed cross-tabulations but only when it is relevant and informative to do so. Throughout this report base numbers in tables will vary slightly as not every respondent answers every question. Given the number of responses, results are generally presented as numbers rather than percentages.
- 1.9. On some occasions results have been banded according to the number of complaints about which a BUJ had received a decision.

2. PROFILE OF BUJ RESPONDENTS

- 2.1. As noted earlier a total of 82 analysable survey returns were received representing a response rate of 54%.
- 2.2. In the table below these are presented according to the sector in which the respondent BUJ operates. The breakdown of responses received by sector is broadly in line with that of surveys issued, although education and local government BUJs were slightly more likely to have responded and those operating in the health sector or related to the Scottish Government or the Devolved Administration slightly less likely to have responded.

Sector in which BUJs Operates

	Number of respondents	% of survey respondents	% of surveys issued
Further/ Higher Education	11	13%	11%
Health	31	38%	41%
Housing Association	20	24%	26%
Local Government	19	23%	20%
Scottish Government & Devolved Administration	1	1%	3%
Base	82	82	152

Note: % may not sum to 100% due to rounding

- 2.3. When the number of complaints about any one BUJ is considered, there is also a broad range among respondents. While over half of all respondents had only one complaint going to the SPSO, others had considerably more and at the top end there were 5 organisations which had more than 20 complaints dealt with by the SPSO. All of the survey results have been analysed by number of complaints (these have been banded as set out in table below), and where there appears to be a relationship between number of complaints and satisfaction with the SPSO, this is examined.

Number of decisions received by respondents in preceding 6 months

Number of decisions	Number of respondents
Only 1	44
2-5	13
6-10	15
11-15	4
16-20	1
21 or more	5
Base	82

3. CASE HANDLING

- 3.1. The survey asked BUJs a series of questions relating to their satisfaction with the SPSO's case handling. The first set of questions asked specifically about communication and access and the results are set out below. Satisfaction overall was very high in this area, particularly with regard to the way the SPSO communicated in writing and the ease of getting in touch with the person handling the complaint (combined satisfaction ratings of 90% and 89% respectively).
- 3.2. It is also notable that very few, and in some cases no, BUJs expressed dissatisfaction with this aspect of the SPSO's service. The very small numbers of BUJs that were dissatisfied tended to have had only one case dealt with by the SPSO.

Communication and Access

	Base (n)	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
The way in which the SPSO communicated with you in writing	82	38	36	7	1	-
The way in which the SPSO communicates with you by telephone	74	32	31	11	-	-
The frequency of SPSO updates	80	15	44	18	2	1
The level of information when you receive an update	79	16	42	19	1	1
Ease of getting in touch with the SPSO complaint handler	77	31	38	7	1	-

- 3.3. BUJs were also asked to rate the customer performance of SPSO staff against 4 key criteria: courteousness and helpfulness, impartiality, approachability and reliability. Again, the results were positive and suggest that SPSO staff are highly rated by their counterparts in the BUJs.
- 3.4. The most positive result related to the courteousness and helpfulness of SPSO staff, with more than 3 out of 5 BUJs strongly agreeing that staff were performing well in this area. The only category in which fewer BUJs strongly agreed than agreed with the statement presented related to staff impartiality. However, even in this instance more than 1 out of 3 BUJs strongly agreed that staff were impartial and more than 3 out of 4 either agreed or strongly agreed that staff act impartially.
- 3.5. There was no apparent relationship between BUJs' appraisal of SPSO staff and the number of complaints that had been made about the BUJ, suggesting that SPSO staff are performing well irrespective of whether there is an established working relationship with the BUJ or not.

Customer Service

	Base (n)	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
SPSO staff are courteous and helpful	81	50	26	5	-	-
SPSO staff are impartial	81	28	34	17	1	1
SPSO staff are approachable	81	36	36	8	1	-
SPSO staff do what they say they will do	80	36	33	9	2	-

- 3.6. Moving on to consider some of the SPSO's processes, more than 4 out of 5 BUJs were satisfied overall with the level of information given at first notification of a complaint and with the thoroughness of the SPSO's consideration of complaints made about them (83% and 84% respectively).
- 3.7. While satisfaction with the complaint handler's knowledge of the complaint subject matter was lower, at 7 out of 10 BUJs, this is still a positive result and it is worth noting that the vast majority of those that were not satisfied gave a neutral response and very few expressed dissatisfaction.

The Process

	Base (n)	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
The level of information given about the complaint(s) when you are first notified	81	23	44	9	5	-
The SPSO complaint handler's knowledge of the complaint(s) subject matter	80	19	37	20	4	-
The thoroughness of SPSO's consideration of the complaint	81	30	38	10	3	-

- 3.8. Respondents were asked to consider a series of statements relating to decisions made by the SPSO and covering areas such as the impartiality and consistency of decisions and how clearly they were explained. In all cases around 7 out of 10 or more BUJs either agreed or strongly agreed with each statement and this rose to 4 out of 5 with respect to the clarity of the explanation given. The consistency of decisions made was the least positively related area, although again those respondents that did not agree gave a neutral response.

Decisions

	Base (n)	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Decisions made by the SPSO are impartial	82	25	38	17	1	1
Decisions made by the SPSO are consistent	79	22	33	19	5	-
Decisions made by the SPSO take into consideration all relevant facts	81	23	39	14	4	1
Decisions made by the SPSO are clearly explained	82	34	34	9	5	-
I understand the basis on which the SPSO makes decisions	82	26	38	13	5	-

3.9. When asked to consider the SPSO's case handling service overall just under 4 out of 5 BUJs (79%) were either very satisfied or satisfied. Respondents were also asked about their satisfaction with the length of time the SPSO takes to deal with complaints. Although a clear majority of BUJs were either satisfied or very satisfied (64%) around 1 out of 6 (14%) were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.

3.10. This dissatisfied group included both BUJs that have only had one complaint handled by the SPSO and BUJs that had higher numbers of complaints made about them.

In Summary

	Base (n)	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
The case handling service you receive from the SPSO	82	27	38	12	4	1
The length of time it takes the SPSO to deal with the complaint(s)	80	17	34	18	8	3

4. GENERAL VIEWS & COMMUNICATIONS

- 4.1. BUJs were also asked to consider the impact of the SPSO on both their own organisation's complaints handling processes and on improving public services in Scotland more generally.
- 4.2. BUJs report that decisions made by the SPSO are influencing their organisation and that the SPSO is seen as a positive driver for improvement in the area of complaints handling specifically as well as more widely across their organisation.
- 4.3. A large majority of BUJs (85%) also felt that the work of the SPSO is contributing to improving public services across Scotland. The two organisations that strongly disagreed both had only had one complaint dealt with by the SPSO.

Decisions

	Base (n)	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Decisions made by the SPSO influence my organisation	81	17	52	11	1	-
Complaints generally, and the outcomes of SPSO investigations specifically, are a good way to learn about ways to improve the quality of our work	82	33	37	10	1	1
The SPSO is a good source of guidance and support in improving my organisation's complaint handling	82	24	43	11	3	1
I value the SPSO's role as the final stage in the process, enabling complaints to be brought to a closure	82	43	30	8	-	1
The SPSO contributes to improving public services in Scotland	82	34	36	10	-	2

- 4.4. Respondents were also asked to assess some specific aspects of how the SPSO communicates with BUJs and the results are set out below. There were very high satisfaction ratings for the approachability of SPSO when BUJs were looking for general advice and guidance; more than 9 out of 10 BUJs (92%) were satisfied or very satisfied with this aspect of the SPSO's service. The quality of information provided about general complaint handling was also highly rated.
- 4.5. With regard to conferences, seminars and training, and while the base number of respondents is relatively low (57 respondents), compared to other areas of SPSO service fewer BUJs are either satisfied or very satisfied (68% overall with the remaining 32% neither satisfied nor dissatisfied).

Communications

	Base (n)	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
Approachability of SPSO staff when seeking general advice and guidance	73	32	35	6	-	-
Quality of information provided by SPSO staff about general complaint handling	71	22	40	9	-	-
Conferences, seminars, training and presentations organised by SPSO	57	11	28	18	-	-

SPSO Publications

- 4.6. The survey then moved on to ask BUJs more specifically about the various publications the SPSO produces, including the Annual Report, guidance and policy information and sector specific information. Given the nature of some of the questions some of the base numbers here are relatively low as only BUJs operating within that particular sector were in a position to answer some of the questions.
- 4.7. All of the general publications received overall satisfaction ratings of 80% or more, although BUJs tended to be satisfied rather than very satisfied.
- 4.8. Levels of satisfaction did fall off very slightly in relation to sector specific materials the lowest being 64% for planning leaflets.
- 4.9. There was virtually no dissatisfaction with SPSO publications among the BUJs.

SPSO Publications

	Base (n)	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
Annual Report	68	13	42	13	-	-
Guidance on Apology	56	13	34	8	1	-
Making a complaint about a public body	58	11	39	8	-	-
Ombudsman's Monthly Commentary / e-Newsletter	64	17	36	11	-	-
Redress Policy and Guidance	54	7	37	10	-	-
Unacceptable Actions Policy	55	9	36	10	-	-
Annual Statistics Letter to Chief Executive (Local Government only)	29	3	20	6	-	-

Performance Update	46	4	28	14	-	-
Planning Leaflets	36	4	19	12	1	-
Housing Options Leaflet	31	4	19	8	-	-
Housing News (RSLs only)	29	4	18	7	-	-

- 4.10. Respondents were also asked to comment on the quality of information on the SPSO and Valuing Complaints websites. Both were highly rated, although satisfaction was higher (at 86%) with the SPSO website than the Valuing Complaints site (with which 74% were either satisfied or very satisfied).

Other

	Base (n)	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
Quality of information on the SPSO website – www.spsso.org.uk	71	14	47	10	-	-
Quality of information on the Valuing Complaints website – www.valuingcomplaints.org.uk	58	10	33	15	-	-

5. COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS

5.1. The final section of the survey gave BUJs the opportunity to make any further comments about particular aspects of the SPSO's service with which they were satisfied or dissatisfied. It also asked for suggestions on service improvement and any publications or conferences at which the SPSO could promote good complaint handling.

5.2. By and large people responding to surveys tend to be more inclined to offer criticism than praise when asked open questions of this type and the fact that the majority of comments were about the helpfulness of SPSO staff and the quality of the service overall is notable.

5.3. Broadly in line with the earlier findings any dissatisfaction expressed and suggestions for improvement tended to relate to the length of time processes took or was around a need to improve communications systems.

Areas of Particular Satisfaction or Dissatisfaction

Comment	n
Helpful Staff/ Good Quality Service	22
Need improved contact/ updates	8
Too long a process	7
Value informal discussions	5
Excellent Guidance	2
Impartiality of SPSO	1
Other	5
Base (n)	40

Note: responses sum to more than base of responses as more than one comment could be made

Suggestions for Improvement

Comment	n
Information/ Communication	7
Improved/ clearer timescales	3
Training/ events	3
Happy with service	3
Base (n)	16

5.4. Finally, a small number of respondents made specific suggestions about conferences, events or publications through which the SPSO could promote good complaint handling. These included:

- Attending housing related conferences such as those run by the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations and the Chartered Institute of Housing;
- Attending the Scottish Practice Managers Conference
- Through the National Complaints Personnel Association; and
- By developing e-learning modules with case studies.