

SPSO Customer Survey Report 2015-16

November 2016

Introduction and Purpose

This is the end of year report of the findings of the SPSO's 2015-16 customer satisfaction survey. It explains how and why we developed the survey, basing it on our refreshed customer service standards. These standards are now being developed by the Ombudsman Association in partnership with the British Standards Institution (BSI) as a service standards framework for use by ombudsman schemes and complaints handlers across the UK and Ireland.

This report summarises the findings of our survey and lists all the recommendations made in the quarterly reports and actioned via our internal service improvement group during the year. Overall, we are pleased that respondents expressed positive levels of satisfaction with our service (of the 14 questions, 6 scored over 75% and 5 scored over 60%). Three main areas of dissatisfaction were identified. The amount of time we took to deal with the complaint was a focus of concern, despite SPSO working to and generally meeting its published timescales for case handling. Satisfaction with the outcome – there was a clear proven link identified between levels of satisfaction and the outcome of the complaint (ie whether or not it was upheld). In the very small number of cases where individuals responded that they had complained about our service, there were also low levels of satisfaction.

While the findings reinforce the link between satisfaction and outcome, we want to ensure that we are providing as good a service as we can regardless of the outcome. This report outlines additional steps we are planning to further support us in improving our service.

1. Background

As part of our continuous organisational improvement, we draw on a range of feedback mechanisms to identify ways to make our service better, for example through quality assurance processes, requests for reviews of decisions,¹ customer service complaints, solicited and unsolicited feedback from complainants and public authorities as well as regular discussion and input from staff. To support us in this, we established three sounding boards in 2013, including a customer sounding board that is made up of representatives of advocacy and advice groups who help people using our services. The sounding board provides us with current, relevant feedback.² All of this intelligence is fed back into the organisation in a structured way through an internal service improvement group to maintain a focus on how we can work better and be a learning and improving organisation.

As a small office with limited resources, it is important that we capture this information in as cost effective a way as possible and that we do not divert crucial resources away from delivering our

¹ Our review process is open to complainants and authorities and reviews can consider decisions not to look at a complaint as well as the decisions we make after investigating. The process applies to the vast majority of complaints we consider and is not the same as judicial review. For more information see www.spso.org.uk/decision-review-process

² Links to minutes can be found at www.spso.org.uk/sounding-boards

frontline services. For this reason, to date we opted to carry out external customer surveys on an intermittent basis in 2009 and 2012. As we have explained to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee in our briefing document in December 2014, we felt that this approach was the most proportionate way of gathering this information. We used the findings from these surveys as a basis for developing actions for improvement.³

In our 2014-15 business plan, we committed to reviewing how we would gather feedback about our service in the future. Sitting alongside this was a commitment to refresh and update our service standards. It was essential that we ensured that our service standards were up-to-date and clearly explained to our staff and those using our service, so that when we would come to assess how well the service was being delivered, we were clear about ‘what good looked like’.

To ensure that our service standards were robust and accurately reflected our role and purpose, we consulted with other ombudsman schemes and our customer sounding board before agreeing them. The service standards were re-launched in April 2015.⁴ As we say above, they are now being developed by the Ombudsman Association with the BSI to be used as a service standards framework by UK and Ireland ombudsman and complaints handlers schemes.

In quarter one of 2015-16 we brought our quality assurance approach in line with our refreshed service standards. We then adopted the refreshed service standards as the framework against which to assess our service delivery. In order to minimise costs and to ensure that the questionnaire was fit-for-purpose, we decided to trial a survey. We set up an internal working group that developed a pilot survey that ran between December 2014 and May 2015. We tested and developed the survey for people using our service between January and March 2015.

We finalised and launched our new survey approach for people receiving SPSO decisions from April 2015 onwards. The customer feedback surveys were analysed quarterly and a quarterly internal report was produced capturing key findings and making recommendations for actions for improvement. The reports are discussed by our service improvement group and senior management team.

Because the survey approach is new, the findings for this year are not directly comparable with previous years. However, there are some consistent themes and messages and these are drawn out where appropriate.

2. Survey Response Rates

During 2015-16, we issued 762 customer surveys to all complainants where a decision was made on their complaint.⁵ Two hundred surveys were completed and returned, giving a response rate of 26%. This response rate is comparable to that of other UK ombudsman schemes.

Of those who responded, there is broadly equal representation from respondents whose decisions were fully, partly, or not upheld.

³ The surveys and subsequent action plans can be found at www.spso.org.uk/research-and-surveys

⁴ See www.spso.org.uk/customer-service-standards

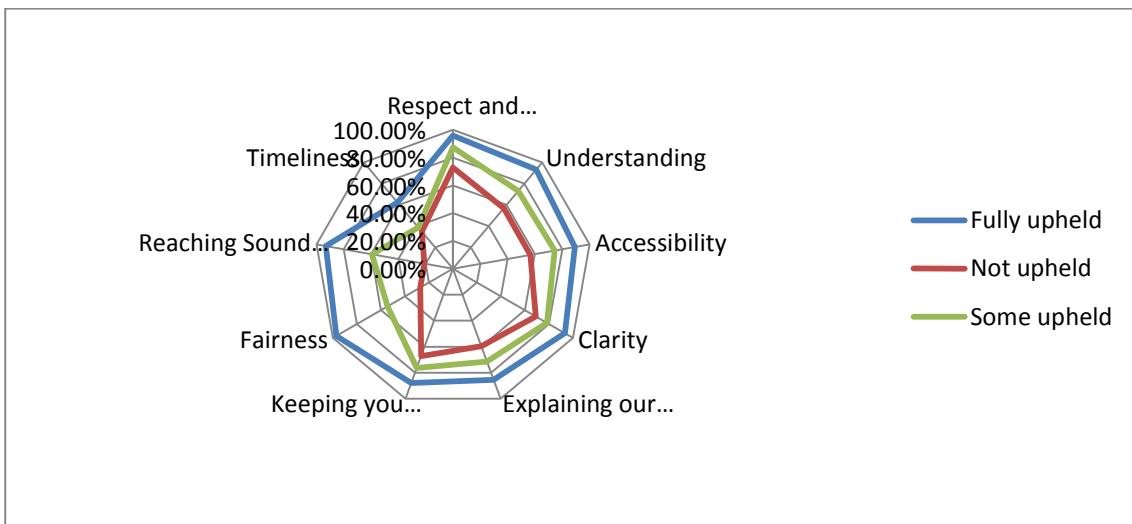
⁵ Excluding prisoners, since our pilot survey showed us that they have different communication needs. In 2016-17, we are developing a specific survey project to gather feedback from prisoners.

3. Link Between Outcome and Satisfaction Levels

Figure 1 below shows the survey feedback split by outcome (whether the complaint was upheld, partly upheld or not upheld). We gather this information by collectors, grouping survey recipients by outcome to ensure that their anonymity is preserved. As the figure shows, there is a direct correlation between the outcome and levels of satisfaction with all aspects of our service standards. This is in keeping with the findings from previous years and with other UK ombudsman schemes.

The link between the outcome and satisfaction is particularly stark in relation to Fairness and Reaching Sound Outcomes. In other words, when respondents received a decision that they were not happy with they were much more likely to feel that SPSO had acted unfairly.

Figure 1: Link between outcome and satisfaction



4. Key Findings

The survey asks a series of questions which align with our customer service standards so that we can assess to what extent we are meeting the standards we set. Table 1 shows how respondents rated us against these standards.

4.1 The results show that areas where respondents scored our service most positively (overall over 75%) were that SPSO treated people with dignity and respect; communicated with them clearly; kept them informed and checked what they wanted to happen. Our performance in these areas is better than in response to similar questions in previous years and to similar questions asked by other UK ombudsman organisations.

4.2 Areas where respondents also scored us well (overall between 75% and 60%) were in relation to: accessibility; explaining our scope; and fairness. Many positive comments were made about the professionalism and helpfulness of SPSO staff, and about our regular communications.

4.3. The areas of dissatisfaction were about the outcome of complaints, the time taken to deal with complaints, and our handling of concerns raised about our customer service. There were also some negative comments about issues such as: unhelpful communications; complaints not being properly understood or information ignored and SPSO lacking integrity and independence.

As Figure 1 above shows, and as was evidenced in previous SPSO customer surveys, there is a strong correlation between the outcome of a complaint and satisfaction with service. The table below provides the overall satisfaction rate, and the satisfaction rate according to whether the complaint was upheld, partly upheld or not upheld. It shows that the respondents who were most dissatisfied with the outcome were those whose decision was not upheld. People whose complaint was not upheld were also more likely to say that SPSO acted unfairly.

Table 1: Overall levels of satisfaction for 2015-16

Service Standard	Question	Overall % agree ⁶	Fully upheld % agree	Partly upheld % agree	Not upheld % agree
Respect and dignity	1. SPSO staff treated me with courtesy	86	96	89	73
	2. SPSO staff treated me respectfully	85	96	85	72
Clarity	3. SPSO communication with me was clear	82	95	76	74
	4. It was clearly explained to me how my complaint would be handled	79	92	80	63
Keeping you informed	5. I was told clearly how my complaint was being progressed	78	88	76	67
Understanding	6. SPSO checked what I wanted to happen	78	94	73	50
Accessibility	7. I was provided with all the support I needed from SPSO to access its service	74	89	75	57
Understanding	8. SPSO staff listened to me and understood my complaint	73	94	71	64
Explaining our scope	9. SPSO clearly told me what outcomes they may or may not be able to achieve for me	73	85	71	60
Reaching sound outcomes	10. I was given a clear explanation for SPSO's decision(s)	71	93	74	39
Fairness	11. I felt my complaint was dealt with fairly	61	97	54	27
Reaching sound outcomes	12. I was satisfied with the outcome of my complaint*	47	89	45	3
Timeliness	13. The time it took to deal with my complaint was reasonable	46	62	39	35

*Question 12: this question, as phrased, is about our decision rather than about our service. There is more explanation at point 6.9 below.

⁶ Respondents select from: agree; disagree; neither agree or disagree; don't know.

Table 2: Levels of satisfaction in response to question 14

Service Standard	Question	Overall % agree	Fully upheld % agree	Partly upheld % agree	Not upheld % agree
Putting things right	14. Any concerns I raised about SPSO's customer service were handled properly	22	50	0	25

This question was intended for those individuals who had raised a complaint about the service they had received from SPSO. It is dealt with separately because of the low number of people likely to be within this category and the understandably low response rate - of all the approximately 5,000 people who used SPSO's services last year, less than 1% or just under 50 of them were recorded as raising service complaints issues.

Twenty-seven people responded to question 14. Based upon the information above, we know that not all of these people used the customer complaints process to raise their concerns. Of the 27 respondents six were satisfied, 15 were dissatisfied and the others neither agreed nor disagreed. We address the low levels of satisfaction at point 6.11 below.

5. Recommendations

As outlined above, each quarter's findings were analysed and discussed by our internal service improvement group and senior management team. There is a full list of the quarterly recommendations made in 2015-16 at the end of this report. They have all been actioned and we are continuing to closely monitor their impact.

6. Findings by Service Standard

The most positive areas of satisfaction (overall satisfaction level above 75%) were:

6.1. Respect and dignity

Eighty-six percent of all respondents said they were treated with courtesy, and 85% were treated respectfully. This is better than the response to a similar question asked previously: in 2009, 80% of all respondents said they were treated with courtesy.

6.2. Clarity

Eighty-two percent of all respondents said that we communicated with them clearly, and 79% said we clearly explained how their complaint would be handled. This is higher than for similar questions asked in previous years where the comparable satisfaction levels were 73% and 66%.

6.3. Keeping you informed

Seventy-eight percent of all respondents said they were told clearly how their complaint was being progressed. This is an area where previous SPSO end of year surveys identified the need for action to ensure that complainants were kept informed about the progress of their complaint, and to ensure that plain English was used in communications. From the comments made in the 2015-

16 survey it appears that complainants are now more satisfied in this area as a result of the actions we took.

There are a number of very positive comments about updates having been provided, particularly by phone. There are also a number of comments suggesting that people appreciated being able to talk to the complaints investigator.

Our current practice is to phone complainants with updates and other information as much as possible, and these comments support us in continuing this practice.

There are also comments from some respondents about their case being transferred between different people within SPSO. Where this happened, this appeared to raise concerns about the continuity of the case and fears that important information may be lost or misinterpreted.

After our service improvement group discussed the comments we received about the transfer of cases, we introduced a change in how the advice team handle cases when the office receives them. At the advice stage, complaints can be administered by several different people and our practice had been to give complainants the various names of the advice team members who handled their complaint. To reduce the number of names we were giving complainants, we moved to a practice of signing our initial responses as being from the advice team, while continuing to encourage people to phone any member of that team if they have questions about their complaint.

Where cases transfer from our early resolutions stage to the investigations stage, our current practice is to limit transfers as far as possible, although sometimes this is unavoidable because of illness or staff leaving the organisation. While some transfers are unavoidable as cases move through our triage process, we will continue wherever possible to minimise these, in particular for highly sensitive cases or for vulnerable individuals where we will automatically fast track cases. This issue was captured in a quarterly report and a recommendation was made (Table 3, item 1).

6.4. Understanding

Seventy-eight percent of all respondents said we checked what they wanted to happen and 73% said that staff listened to them and understood their complaint.

Areas where respondents also rated us positively (overall satisfaction level between 74% and 60%):

6.5. Accessibility

Seventy-four percent said they were provided with all the support they needed from SPSO to access our service. Our advice team and complaints reviewers are trained to support people in making complaints and our guidance has a specific section about how to provide assistance, especially where adjustments may need to be made. However, a few comments were made suggesting that our written communications contain jargon, are overly complex, and questioning whether our literature is appropriate for people with low literacy levels.

This issue was captured in a quarterly report and a recommendation was made (Table 3, item 3).

6.6. Explaining our scope

Seventy-three percent said SPSO clearly told them what outcomes we may or may not be able to achieve for them. In previous years, recommendations were made to improve on this issue and we took action over the past several years to review the SPSO website and information leaflets for the public. While this is a relatively high satisfaction rate, it appears from comments made this year that there is still some misunderstanding about our role and the scope of our work. We lay out in the conclusion steps we are planning to further improve in this area.

6.7. Fairness

Overall, sixty-one percent of people said that their complaint was dealt with fairly. This is broken down in Table 1 , which shows:

- 97% of respondents whose complaint was fully upheld agreed that we dealt with their complaint fairly
- 54% of respondents whose complaint was partly upheld agreed that we dealt with their complaint fairly
- 27% of respondents whose complaint was not upheld agreed that we dealt with their complaint fairly.

It is clear that perceptions of fairness are very closely linked to the decision reached on complaints. This is consistent with the findings of other ombudsman organisations. As has been highlighted in previous surveys, it will be very difficult for us to significantly affect satisfaction with this service standard.

6.8. Reaching sound outcomes

In response to question 10, seventy-one percent said they were given a clear explanation for SPSO's decision. Again, responses showed a clear correlation between satisfaction and outcome.

Areas where respondents rated us less than 50% were:

6.9. Reaching sound outcomes

Although overall satisfaction about this area was 71% in response to question 10, it was only 47% in response to question 12 ('I was satisfied with the outcome of my complaint'). This is consistent with previous years and with comparable findings of other UK ombudsman surveys.

As this question is phrased, we are asking people if they are satisfied with the decision we reached. Clearly, people are unlikely to be satisfied with a decision that did not go the way that they wanted. We may wish to revise this question so that it focuses more clearly on the service we provided (which we do want to be satisfactory to as many people as possible) rather than the decision we made (where we accept that people who did not get the outcome they wanted will not be satisfied with that outcome, regardless of the service we provide).

6.10. Timeliness

Overall, only 46% said the time it took to deal with their complaint was reasonable. Figure 1 and Table 1 above show low satisfaction with the time taken regardless of whether the complaint was

fully, partly, or not upheld. This is consistent with the response to similar questions asked in other UK ombudsman surveys. While this is clearly an area of concern, it is not an uncommon problem for ombudsman schemes.

The challenge of dealing with complaints quickly within existing resources is an issue we have publicly reported.⁷ In 2015-16, despite rising caseload complexity, we managed to meet two of our three timescale performance indicators and made further progress against the indicator that we did not meet. However, we have, with regret, taken some further measures to manage our caseload that have resulted in an extension to our timescales. We have also laid out other options we may need to take if our resources remain static and caseload complexity remains high.

We made a recommendation during the year in relation to this issue (see Table 3, item 5). As well as this, our service improvement group agreed that staff would be reminded that a telephone call should be made to the complainant within 10 days of the case being allocated (in those cases where we have a telephone number and the complainant is happy to be contacted by phone) so that can we explain the timescale and our approach to reaching decisions. These measures should further ensure high standards of communication about our timescales and how we approach decisions.

6.11. Putting things right

In total, 27 respondents said they had raised a concern about SPSO's customer service. It was unclear whether the respondents had raised their concern through our customer service process. Of those who responded to this question, 6 agreed that their concern was handled properly, 15 disagreed and the others neither agreed nor disagreed. While 27 respondents is a small sample size, we will continue to monitor this area of dissatisfaction closely.

During the year, a recommendation (Table 3, item 6) was made in relation to this area to reinforce the importance of ensuring that any service issues raised by complainants are recorded and dealt with under our customer service process. Under this process, we receive direct feedback from people who are unhappy with our service, and we discuss these at our service improvement group, senior management team and Audit and Advisory Committee meetings. Customer service complaints are reported externally on our website along with the actions we take on areas where we can improve.⁸

7. Recommendations for Improvement

During the year, our quarterly analysis resulted in seven recommendations as shown in Table 3. We are continuing to monitor the impact of our implementation of these recommendations as we carry out the survey this year (2016-17). In the conclusion below, we outline further actions we plan to make in response to the survey's findings.

⁷ www.spso.org.uk/news-and-media/spso-launches-draft-strategic-plan-2016-20-consultation

⁸ You can read our customer service reports at www.spso.org.uk/complaints-about-our-service

Table 3: Recommendations actioned following quarterly analysis

	Recommendation	Service standard
1.	That managers try to ensure that cases are not transferred between different complaint reviewers on the same team unless this is absolutely necessary. When a case is transferred, there should be a clear explanation about the reasons for this.	Keeping you informed
2.	That examples of informative updates identified during the QA process are shared with complaints reviewers.	Keeping you informed
3.	That the relevant section from the Complaints and Investigation guidance on providing assistance to complaints who need help to submit a complaint is circulated to staff. [To address concerns about literacy issues and complexity of the complaints procedure.]	Accessibility
4.	Complaint reviewers are reminded that where a reasonable request is made for information to be provided on the progress of a recommendation we should either provide this or ask the authority to do so.	Keeping you informed
5.	The introduction letters should be reviewed with a view to reinforcing the information in the leaflet “Your Complaint at the SPSO” and providing additional information about possible timescales and our approach to reaching decisions.	Timeliness
6.	That complaint reviewers are reminded that complaints raised about our service should be recorded and dealt with under the customer service complaints process.	Putting things right
7.	That a selection of the positive comments are circulated to staff to show the positive impact of our service.	Reaching sound outcomes

8. Conclusion

Overall, we are pleased that respondents expressed high levels of satisfaction with the majority of areas of our service. While the survey has reinforced the link between satisfaction and outcome, we remain committed to providing a high quality of service, both where we are able to achieve the outcome the person wants and where we cannot. There are areas where we could further improve, and we have made recommendations throughout the year to address these.

There are some additional actions we will take to improve some of the areas of dissatisfaction that respondents highlight. These are:

Accessibility and Explaining our Scope

We already use an external agency to validate our use of plain English in our general complainant literature. We also have an Easy read version of our main leaflet explaining how to complain.

To further enhance how we explain our role and remit and ensure that our communications are easy to understand, we will, as we outlined to our customer sounding board at the June 2016 meeting,⁹ seek to involve service users in helping us identify any specific areas where our

⁹ www.spso.org.uk/customer-sounding-board

communications could be improved. This will be done through our new customer forum, an objective in our 2016-17 business plan.

Benchmarking

Currently, it is not possible to make direct comparisons with other UK ombudsman organisations due to differences in the questions and samples, although comparisons have been sought where the questions are similar.

Looking ahead, we are pleased that the work currently underway by the Ombudsman Association and BSI may enable greater opportunities for benchmarking with organisations of a similar size and with a similar role and remit.