



Complaints Handling Procedure

Annual performance indicator report 2014/15

Introduction

The national Local Authority Model Complaints Handling Procedure (CHP) was implemented across all councils in Scotland on 1 April 2013. This procedure comprises two stages for handling complaints received from the public.

To help each council assess their performance in handling complaints and monitor compliance with the CHP and corresponding timescales, the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) Complaints Standards Authority (CSA) developed a set of performance indicators in association with the Local Authority Complaints Handlers Network. The performance indicators are also a valuable source of information about council services as this helps to identify recurring or underlying problems, derive learning from complaints, and highlight potential areas for improvement.

The sector has published a second annual performance indicator report showing progress against the indicators. This summary provides an overview of the national results for 2014/15; information for the previous year (2013/14) is included to provide indicative year on year comparisons.

Key highlights

Volume of complaints received and closed per 1,000 population

- **67,620** complaints were received during 2014/15, an increase from **57,748** in 2013/14. This is equivalent to **12.9** complaints per 1,000 population (**11.5** per 1,000 population in 2013/14).
- **63,704** complaints were closed during 2014/15, an increase from **54,361** the previous year. This is equivalent to **12.2** complaints per 1,000 population (**10.8** per 1,000 population in 2013/14).

Key points of note:

- * Complaints received reflects those received between 1st April 2014 and 31st March 2015, but not all received during this period are necessarily resolved during this period. Those closed refer to complaints that have been resolved during this period. Small differences may occur in the volume of complaints received compared to the volume of complaints closed in any financial year as not all are resolved on the day received; some may be more complex and require more time for further investigation and may therefore be not be resolved until the following financial year.
- * The volume of complaints can provide an early warning of failure in service delivery; however a high number of complaints does not necessarily mean poor performance or increasing customer dissatisfaction. A number of factors can influence volume, such as the size of a council and the size and makeup of the population which a council serves or the volume of visitors/tourists to an area. A higher volume may also mean that information provided by councils about how to make a complaint is becoming clearer and/or that councils have improved their methods for complaints handling.
- * Consideration of the volume of complaints in isolation does not show differences in the make up of councils, or the range of services provided, for example not all councils have housing stock or report complaints for arms length external organisations.

Complaints closed at stage 1 compared to stage 2

- **82%** of complaints were closed at stage 1 in 2014/15, compared to **18%** at stage 2.
- This compares to **83%** closed at stage 1 in 2013/14, with **17%** at stage 2.

Key points of note:

- * Stage 1 is classed as frontline resolution - one of the main aims of the CHP is to seek early resolution, resolving as many complaints as possible at the earliest opportunity and as close to the point of service delivery (at the frontline stage) as possible. Stage 2 relates to those unable to be resolved at the frontline - where more time is needed to carry out further investigation as the nature of the complaint may be more complex, sensitive, or serious.
- * Figures show that the local government sector has maintained similar performance to last year, resolving over 80% of all complaints at the frontline. Further analysis shows that the small decrease in the ratio from last year to this year can mainly be attributed to the increased volume of complaints dealt with, as more than half of councils have shown improvement from last year in terms of increasing the volume of complaints resolved at the frontline.

Outcome of complaints

- **68.1%** complaints were either upheld or partially upheld at stage 1 in 2014/15, compared to **72.4%** in 2013/14.
- **68.9%** complaints were either upheld or partially upheld at stage 2, compared to **58.5%** last year.

Key points of note:

- * There is a requirement for a formal outcome (upheld, partially upheld, or not upheld) to be recorded for each complaint and this indicator reflects the volume of complaints where councils admit responsibility to all or some of the points raised in a complaint.
- * Making the decision whether a complaint is upheld, not upheld or partially upheld is the responsibility of each council after full consideration of the facts of each complaint. The rationale for each decision should be clearly outlined in response letters.

Response times

- On average the sector took **4.4** days to respond to stage 1 complaints in 2014/15, a slight improvement from **4.5** days in 2013/14 which was achieved notwithstanding the overall increase in the volume of complaints handled.
- On average stage 2 complaints took **18.6** days, compared to an average of **21** days in the previous year.
- **80.8%** stage 1 complaints were responded to within 5 working days during 2014/15 compared to **64.1%** last year.
- **84.5%** stage 2 complaints were responded to within 20 working days, compared to **62.9%** last year.

Key points of note:

- * The CHP requires that stage 1 complaints are responded to within 5 working days, while stage 2 complaints should be responded to within 20 working days, therefore this information reflects how effective councils are in handling complaints within the prescribed timescales.
- * Nationally 4 out of every 5 complaints are handled within the response target times and the figures above clearly show overall improvement in the sector from 2013/14 to 2014/15 in terms of meeting response timescales.

Use of extension

- Out of all complaints closed at stage 1, an extension was authorised for only **4%** of these, compared to **2.3%** in the previous year.
- Out of all complaints closed at stage 2, an extension had been authorised for **13.6%** of these, compared to **4%** in the previous year.

Key points of note:

- * The CHP allows for an extension to timescales to be authorised but only in exceptional circumstances, and where there are clear and justifiable reasons for doing so. National figures show that generally councils continue to ensure that the use of this function is kept to a minimum.

Customer satisfaction

Councils are required to assess customer satisfaction with the complaints service, this includes for example, assessing access to the CHP, evaluating the way in which customers are treated by staff, how well staff understand the customer's perspective, meet timescales and provide updates, and the effectiveness of the council in providing clear decisions with sound rationale.

Councils are responsible for developing their own approach to assessing customer satisfaction and further information can be found on each council's website or within their complaints performance reports.

Learning from complaints

Councils are required to outline changes or improvements to services or procedures as a result of the consideration of complaints. This can include for example, information on frequency of reports to senior management, publication of complaints outcomes, and trends, a summary of information communicated to customers, number of services changed or improved as a result of complaints together with a description of the action taken to reduce the risk of recurrence or to ensure that staff learn from complaints.

Councils are responsible for developing their own approach to using complaints information to inform changes to ways of working and improvements to public services and information can be found on each council's website or within their complaints performance reports.

Foot notes:

- * 31 out of 32 councils returned data in 2014/15, compared to 28 out of 32 in 2013/14.
- * 2013/14 figures should be treated with caution as this was the first year of the CHP, the indicators, and the data collection processes, and arrangements were still being bedded in.
- * In the main, returns from councils do not include social work complaints as, due to legislation, social work services still operate the former 3 stage complaints process and are responsible for producing their own performance reports.

This summary has been produced by the Local Authority Complaints Handlers Network. For any queries or further information please contact each council's lead complaints officer.