

SPSO SOCIAL WORK UPDATE

Changes to social work complaints handling

March 2017

This is the third bulletin from SPSO about the changes to the social work complaints procedure which will be in place from 1 April 2017.

Our second bulletin was published in December. You can [download December's bulletin \(PDF, 142KB\)](#) or read it [online](#).

Background

The following changes will be in place from 1 April 2017:

1. the new two-stage Social Work Model Complaints Handling Procedure (CHP); and
2. the SPSO's extended role to consider social work professional judgment when reviewing social work complaints.

Through our updates, we want to provide information to as wide an audience as possible. Please pass this bulletin on to any colleagues who may have an interest.

The new complaints procedure

The Complaints Standards Authority (CSA) have been working with a range of representatives from social work services and other interested organisations. One of the key outcomes of this work was the Social Work Model CHP, which was published on 15 December 2017, along with a Guide to Implementation for social work services. This Social Work Model CHP follows the key two stages set out in the new NHS and existing local authority CHPs, so social work complaints will be brought into line with other public services.

Since its publication, the CSA has been providing information and advice to authorities as they prepare for implementation of the CHP. Any queries about the SPSO expectations or requirements around implementation should be addressed to CSA@spsorg.org.uk, and we will be happy to do what we can to assist.

Each authority is required to confirm their compliance with the Social Work Model CHP, via a self-assessment check, which must be submitted to the SPSO by 7 April 2017. From our contact with several local authorities, we understand that many are well on the way to having this in place, along with appropriate recording and reporting arrangements.

Complaints handlers network for social work complaints

The CSA are currently looking into options around the development of a complaints handlers network for social work complaints. The experience of the networks for local authority, housing and other sectors, indicate that they provide invaluable support and information sharing in a range of ways, including peer review for complaints performance, and ‘complaint surgeries’, to ensure shared learning in improving customer experience.

We will be considering a range of options, taking into account the need to ensure that social work services delivered by local authorities and health and social care partnerships all have access to a network that will reflect their needs.

SPSO’s extended role with social work complaints

Our prior bulletins explained that our complaints reviewers can currently obtain expert evidence from independent professional advisers (IPAs) when they consider clinical judgment in health complaints. As we will be considering professional judgment within social work complaints, our staff will need access to equivalent, expert advice from social work IPAs.

Among other things, we reviewed a series of social work complaints to identify the underlying themes, issues and areas where professional judgment was challenged. This, added to our discussions with our steering group, helped to build our knowledge and understanding of social work complaints. It also highlighted areas where people are likely to raise complaints in the future and helped us to identify the key areas of expertise needed from our social work IPAs. We have since appointed two social work IPAs with practical experience in the areas of expertise identified.

It will take some time for complaints to be brought to us under our extended role, as Complaints Review Committees will continue after 1 April for complaints that are ‘live’ with organisations on 31 March. As such, our IPAs recently held an initial awareness session to give staff an overview of some key aspects of social work and related issues. This was the first in a series of sessions in the coming weeks that will be informed by some of the complaint themes identified, and we intend to hold more sessions later in the year as we build our experience of the complaints that people bring to us. We also intend to hold other sessions about wider awareness raising of possible user experiences. For example, a gentleman recently spoke to our staff about his experience of caring for his mother who had dementia; although not about social work per se, this provided valuable context and insight to the real lives that may be impacted by the complaints we consider.

SPSO social work complaint fact sheet

We have a range of fact sheets available that give people advice about common topics of complaints that people ask us about. They outline what we can and cannot do in particular areas and they give details of other organisations that might be able to offer help or support. Our fact sheets are available on our [website](#) and can be provided in other languages and formats, such as large print, audio, Braille, or a different file format for use with assistive technology.

We are finalising our updated social work fact sheet in advance of our extended role. We will review and update it as we gain experience of the matters that people raise with us, but we do want to be able to give people as much information as we can from 1 April onwards. We shared it with our steering group for comments and feedback and we will also seek input from our social work IPAs before finalising the fact sheet and making it available on our website.

If you have any questions, please contact:

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