

Mr Steve Barron
Chief Executive
The Highland Council
Regional Buildings
Glenurquhart Road
INVERNESS
IV3 5NX

4 September 2013

Dear Mr Barron

Annual letter 2012/13

This year, for the first time, we are publishing sectoral complaints reports. A copy of the local government report is enclosed with this letter, and I have also provided statistics about complaints to SPSO about your authority in 2012/13.

As I highlight in the complaints report introduction, the most significant change in complaints handling last year was the standardised model complaints handling procedure (CHP) that has now been implemented across all councils. I also record my gratitude to local authorities for their partnership with us and acknowledge the hard work that has made this important change possible. I am confident that the new procedures will benefit the public and authorities alike.

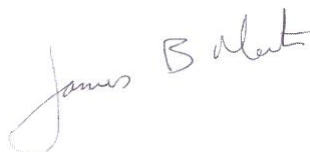
The model CHP lays the groundwork for future continuous improvement. It requires authorities to publish complaints information and monitor progress against performance indicators that have been agreed. It is now the responsibility of individual authorities to fulfil these requirements and publish the information, which Audit Scotland will use to inform the Shared Risk Assessment process and the Annual Audit Report for each authority.

To support you in this work, our Complaints Standards Authority (CSA) continues to provide guidance in good complaints handling. The CSA website (www.valuingcomplaints.org.uk) hosts a forum for discussing complaints handling issues. It also hosts our training centre, including e-learning modules in good complaints handling tailored for council frontline staff. In 2012/13, the CSA established a local authority complaints handlers network which is now led by the sector.

The complaints statistics about your authority that we enclose should now form part of a much more detailed and responsive picture of complaints that your authority is responsible for gathering and making available under the model CHP. This demonstration of transparency and learning is a key part of the new ownership approach that underpins the model CHP.

I look forward to continuing to work with you to improve the quality of complaints handling across public services in Scotland.

Yours sincerely



Jim Martin
Ombudsman

In light of feedback received last year, we have expanded our explanations and answered some frequently asked questions. If you have any further queries, please contact our Casework Knowledge Manager, Annie Shanahan, at ashanahan@spsso.org.uk, or by calling 0131 240 8843.

Statistics

The following tables show the complaints we handled about your organisation in 2012/13. **Table 1** shows complaints **received** by main subject area, both about your organisation and overall in your sector, for the past two years. **Table 2** shows the **outcomes** of the complaints we handled about your organisation for the same period. It also highlights the rate of premature and fully/partly upheld complaints and overall rates for your sector over the past two years.

As a result of last year's feedback, we have amended the table showing complaints received. For 2012/13, these are shown ranked from the most received to the least. For comparison, we have added each subject's ranking in 2011/12 to that year's table.

Subjects of complaint and outcomes

The feedback included a number of questions about comparing tables 1 and 2, and we want to make it clear that they provide statistics for two quite different stages of our work. **Table 1** describes the subjects about which we **received** complaints between 1 April 2012 and 30 March 2013, while **Table 2** shows information about the **outcomes** of the complaints that we handled over the same period. The two figures are unlikely to tally, especially where complaints numbers are relatively large. This is because at the end of each business year we are still working on some of the complaints received at the end of the previous year.

Frequently asked questions

What are complaints that are 'fit for SPSO'?

These are complaints that were valid for us to investigate. This normally means that they have gone through the complaints process of your organisation, and are about something that the law allows us to look at.

What does 'determined' mean?

Determined complaints are those that we have looked at and for which we have closed our file. We will either have given the person a decision by letter or public report, or told them that we can't investigate their complaint.

What are 'upheld' complaints?

Upheld and partly upheld complaints are ones where we investigated, and found that something had gone wrong. In all cases, the complaint was fit for SPSO, and we gave a decision at the Early Resolution (ER2) or Investigation (INV1 or 2) stages of our process. (ER2 and INV1 cases are investigations that end with us sending a decision letter to you and to the complainant). In the majority of these cases we also publish a short summary of the complaint and its outcome on our website. INV 2 are cases that meet our public interest criteria and are published in full.)

How do you define a premature complaint?

It's a complaint that's been sent to us too early - i.e. before it has completed your complaints process.

Would you ever take a complaint before it completes our process?

Yes, but only where we think the circumstances are appropriate. The most likely examples would be where we conclude that you have delayed unreasonably in responding, or where the person who's complained appears to be particularly vulnerable. But this only happens in a very small number of cases. We normally expect people to complete your complaints process to allow you to respond to the matters raised, and we will normally tell them to contact you if they haven't.

I don't seem to know about all of the complaints that you've counted as premature. Why?

There are several possible reasons. We don't write to you about all the premature cases we receive (see the next question for more information about this). When we refer someone back to the complaints process, you may resolve the matter to the person's satisfaction without necessarily knowing that it came to us first.

Alternatively, the person may, after we've told them they need to go through your process, decide not to take it further. People often bring us issues that are premature, but that are also outwith our jurisdiction, or where they're asking for an outcome that we can't achieve. When we reply, we'll tell them that we're not looking at it because it's premature, but we also explain that even if they go back through your process, it's unlikely we'd take the complaint up because of the other issue. For example, if they're asking us to change a planning decision or if it's a personnel-related matter we'd explain that we couldn't do that at all, whether or not they went through your process. It's then for the complainant to decide what to do next.

When do you tell us about premature complaints?

We determine many of these very quickly (within one or two days of receiving them). This normally happens where the complaint has clearly come to us too early and there's little or no information with it. We record these on our computer system, but don't open a file. In most cases we simply return the letter explaining that they've sent us the complaint too soon and that they need to complain to you. We don't normally tell you about these, and we usually have only minimal information about the complaint ourselves.

In cases where the person has sent us information, but the complainant doesn't appear to have completed your complaints process, we'll open a paper file. We'd normally then write to you explaining that the matter has come to us too soon, and we've told the person to take the complaint back to you. We then close our file, which we can reopen if the person completes your process and brings the complaint back to us.

Can you provide a more detailed breakdown of the premature complaints received for my organisation?

We can provide numbers and general categories of complaints received prematurely. These are broken down into two areas – complaints that do not appear to have been made to you at all, and those that have started but not completed your process. (We don't record which point in your process they've reached – usually we don't know this.) We can usually identify the department and the subject matter involved, but at this early stage categorisation may not be accurate because of the lack of detailed information.

The categories of complaints on your letter don't match those in our records - does this mean that our statistics are wrong?

We have our own method of categorising the complaints we receive, which is not based on those of any particular organisation. If you would like an explanation of a particular category, please contact us.

Complaints Received by Subject 2012-13

Subject Group	Highland Council	Rank	Complaints as % of total	Sector Total	Rank	Complaints as % of total
Planning	16	1	26%	197	2	13%
Housing	8	2	13%	361	1	24%
Social Work	4	3=	7%	183	3	12%
Education	4	3=	7%	76	5	5%
Environmental Health & Cleansing	4	3=	7%	60	7	4%
Finance	3	6=	5%	85	4	6%
Roads & Transport	3	6=	5%	73	6	5%
Legal & Admin	3	6=	5%	48	8	3%
Other	2	9	3%	10	12	1%
Building Control	1	10=	2%	26	10	2%
Recreation & Leisure	1	10=	2%	20	11	1%
Land & Property	0	-	0%	28	9	2%
Consumer Protection	0	-	0%	9	13	1%
Personnel	0	-	0%	7	14	0%
Valuation Joint Boards	0	-	0%	6	15	0%
Fire & Police Boards	0	-	0%	2	16	0%
Economic Development	0	-	0%	1	17	0%
Out Of Jurisdiction	0	-	0%	20	-	1%
Subject Unknown	12	-	20%	293	-	19%
Total	61		100%	1,505		100%
<i>Complaints as % of Sector</i>		4.1%		100%		

Complaints Received by Subject 2011-12

Subject Group	Highland Council	Rank	Complaints as % of total	Sector Total	Rank	Complaints as % of total
Housing	13	1	19%	341	1	22%
Planning	10	2	15%	210	2	14%
Social Work	8	3	12%	182	3	12%
Education	5	4	7%	77	5	5%
Finance	3	5	4%	73	6	5%
Roads & Transport	2	6=	3%	96	4	6%
Personnel	2	6=	3%	11	13	1%
Legal & Admin	1	8=	1%	44	7	3%
Building Control	1	8=	1%	42	8	3%
Environmental Health & Cleansing	1	8=	1%	40	9	3%
Land & Property	1	8=	1%	30	10	2%
Recreation & Leisure	1	8=	1%	23	11	2%
Consumer Protection	1	8=	1%	10	14	1%
Valuation Joint Boards	1	8=	1%	9	15	1%
Other	0	-	0%	12	12	1%
Fire & Police Boards	0	-	0%	1	16=	0%
National Park Authorities	0	-	0%	1	16=	0%
Subject Unknown or Out Of Jurisdiction	17	-	25%	325	-	21%
Total	67		100%	1,527		100%
<i>Complaints as % of sector</i>		4.4%		100%		

Complaints Determined by Outcome 2012-13

Stage	Outcome Group	Highland Council	Sector Total
Advice	Matter out of jurisdiction (discretionary)	1	19
	Matter out of jurisdiction (non-discretionary)	1	40
	No decision reached	6	239
	Outcome not achievable	0	13
	Premature	32	704
	Total	40	1,015
Early Resolution 1	Matter out of jurisdiction (discretionary)	1	40
	Matter out of jurisdiction (non-discretionary)	1	99
	No decision reached	0	38
	Outcome not achievable	2	26
	Premature	5	46
	Total	9	249
Early Resolution 2	Fully upheld	0	10
	Partly upheld	1	19
	Not upheld	0	48
	No decision reached	0	4
	Total	1	81
Investigation 1	Fully upheld	1	16
	Partly upheld	3	63
	Not upheld	6	75
	No decision reached	0	2
	Total	10	156
Investigation 2	Fully upheld	1	3
	Partly upheld	0	3
	Total	1	6
Total Complaints		61	1,507

Total Premature Complaints	37	750
Premature Rate	60.7%	49.8%

Fit for SPSO Total (ER2, Inv1 & Inv2)	12	243
Total Cases Upheld / Partly Upheld	6	114
Uphold Rate (total upheld / total fit for SPSO)	50.0%	46.9%

NOTE : 'No decision reached' includes complaints not duly made, withdrawn and resolved

Complaints Determined by Outcome 2011-12

Stage	Outcome Group	Highland Council	Sector Total
Advice	Matter out of jurisdiction (discretionary)	0	18
	Matter out of jurisdiction (non-discretionary)	3	20
	No decision reached	13	258
	Outcome not achievable	0	10
	Premature	28	729
	Advice Total		44
Early Resolution 1	Matter out of jurisdiction (discretionary)	2	53
	Matter out of jurisdiction (non-discretionary)	1	43
	No decision reached	0	52
	Outcome not achievable	2	28
	Premature	1	51
	Early Resolution 1 Total		6
Early Resolution 2	Fully Upheld	1	10
	No decision reached	0	3
	Not upheld	3	78
	Partly Upheld	2	14
Early Resolution 2 Total		6	105
Investigation 1	Fully Upheld	0	6
	No decision reached	0	12
	Not upheld	2	63
	Partly Upheld	0	38
Investigation 1 Total		2	119
Investigation 2	Fully Upheld	0	6
	No decision reached	0	2
	Not upheld	0	2
	Partly Upheld	0	1
Investigation 2 Total		0	11
Total Complaints		58	1,497

Total Premature Complaints	29	780
Premature Rate	50.0%	52.1%

Fit for SPSO Total (ER2, Inv1 & Inv2)	8	235
Total Cases Upheld / Partly Upheld	3	75
Uphold Rate (total upheld / total fit for SPSO)	37.5%	31.9%