

CONFIDENTIAL

Our ref: RA/C19200325

26 March 2020

Dear Chief Executive

[cc: Liaison Officers]

SPSO services and complaint handling

1. I, and my office, recognise that Scotland is experiencing unprecedented, challenging times. The impact on public services, and daily life, of Coronavirus (COVID-19) is huge and is forcing all of us public sector leaders and managers to make difficult decisions about resources and the services we provide.
2. The SPSO is following Government advice in relation essential work, travel and social and self-isolation. Our office is closed to all visitors and all but a very small number of staff, with the majority of us working from home. The essential support staff are ensuring we continue to deliver essential services. We have prioritised Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF) reviews and processing of certain complaints as essential.
 - SWF reviews are essential as they are processing of a welfare benefit for the most vulnerable, including those in crisis and destitute. SWF review applications are being handled as far as possible as normal and Local Authorities (which process the benefit claims) should not see a significant difference in the level of service. If your local Authority is experiencing difficulties responding to our enquiries, please contact us immediately.
 - As regards complaints, we have not stopped taking postal deliveries or new complaints, but the work done on them will be severely limited for the foreseeable future. We are scanning post and new complaints to identify complaints that concern COVID-19 or its impact and relate directly to current service provision for vulnerable people, and those where we believe there is a real and present risk to public health and safety.
3. We appreciate that public services are under huge resource pressures as you focus on responding to COVID-19 and the delivery of essential services. Please be assured that we are taking full account of the current context in how we operate. While we are committed to delivering our statutory responsibilities, we in no way wish to put unnecessary pressure on you.



4. We will be progressing 'essential' new complaints. It may be that we need to contact you for information about them, or to discuss them with you immediately. Whilst we recognise you are under pressure, we hope you can appreciate their urgent nature and so would greatly appreciate you engaging with us on them. We do not expect them to be large in number.
5. As regards all other complaints, we are trying to progress these as far as possible, as we recognise that they are important to both complainers and to public bodies, and their staff, being complained about.
6. We understand that you may not be in a position to respond to us within the usual time frames. With this in mind, when we start an investigation, it would be helpful if you could tell us whether you are in a position to engage in that investigation. We understand that your resources are likely to be stretched so we will avoid contacting where we can and we will take full account of what you tell us about your ability to respond and engage.
7. More generally, we would be grateful if you could keep us informed, as to the current position in your organisation in terms of your capacity engage with us and in particular if contact details have changed temporarily.
8. We also recognise that you may be receiving challenges from complainers who do not receive the service they expect in relation to complaint handling. With this in mind we are endeavouring to maintain our advice service to public bodies, and encourage you, if you have questions about complaint handling or concerns about the model complaint handling process to contact us in the normal way.
9. I wish you, your staff and your service users well and hope you stay fit and well.

Yours sincerely

Rosemary Agnew
Scottish Public Services Ombudsman

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