



# The SPSO Local Authority Model Complaints Handling Procedure as adapted for Grampian Assessor & ERO

## Part 2: When to use this procedure

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## What is a complaint?

1. *Our definition of a complaint is: '*

'An expression of dissatisfaction by one or more members of the public about our action or lack of action, or about the standard of service provided by or on behalf of the Grampian Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer.'

2. For clarity, where an employee also receives a service from the organisation as a member of the public, they may complain about that service.

3. A complaint may relate to the following, but is not restricted to this list:

- failure or refusal to provide a service
- inadequate quality or standard of service, or an unreasonable delay in providing a service
- dissatisfaction with one of our policies or its impact on the individual
- failure to properly apply law, procedure or guidance when delivering services
- failure to follow the appropriate administrative process
- conduct, treatment by or attitude of a member of staff or contractor (**except** where there are arrangements in place for the contractor to handle the complaint themselves: see **Complaints about contracted services on p.11**); or
- disagreement with a decision, (**except** where there is a statutory procedure for challenging that decision, or an established appeals process followed throughout the sector).

4. **Appendix 1** provides a range of examples of complaints we may receive, and how these may be handled.

5. A complaint **is not**:

- a routine first-time request for a service (see **Complaints and service requests on p.11**)
- a first-time report of a fault or error such as an error on our website.
- a request for compensation only (see **Complaints and compensation claims on p.12**)
- issues that are in court or have already been heard by a court or a tribunal (see **Complaints and legal action on p.13**)
- a disagreement where there is a statutory procedure for challenging a decision (such as for freedom of information and subject access requests),
- a disagreement where a statutory right of appeal, complaint or challenge exists – such as a disagreement, challenge or objection concerning an information notice or its related civil penalty, the valuation roll, the valuation list or the electoral register and its associated absent voter and overseas elector lists.
- a request for information under the Data Protection or Freedom of Information (Scotland) Acts
- a grievance by a staff member or a grievance relating to employment or staff recruitment
- a concern raised internally by a member of staff (which was not about a service they received, such as a whistleblowing concern)
- an attempt to reopen a previously concluded complaint or to have a complaint reconsidered where we have already given our final decision

- abuse or unsubstantiated allegations about our organisation or staff where such actions would be covered by our Unacceptable Actions policy; or
- a concern about the actions or service of a different organisation, where we have no involvement in the issue (**except** where the other organisation is delivering services on our behalf: see **Complaints about contracted services on p.11**).

We will not treat these issues as complaints, and will instead direct customers to use the appropriate procedures. Some situations can involve a combination of issues, where some are complaints and others are not, and each situation should be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

6. If a matter is not a complaint, or not suitable to be handled under the CHP, we will explain this to the customer, and tell them what (if any) action we will take, and why. See **What if the CHP does not apply on p.14**.
7. **Appendix 2** gives examples of more complex complaints.

## Who can make a complaint?

8. Anyone who receives, requests, or is affected by our services can make a complaint. This is not restricted to 'service users' and their relatives or representatives, but may also include people who come into contact with or are affected by these services, for example people who live near our offices may wish to complain about aspects of our use of the premises.
9. We also accept complaints from the representative of a person who is dissatisfied with our service. See **Complaints by (or about) a third party**.

## Supporting the customer

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10. All members of the community have the right to equal access to our complaints procedure. It is important to recognise the barriers that some customers may face complaining. These may be physical, sensory, communication or language barriers, but can also include their anxieties and concerns. Customers may need support to overcome these barriers.
11. We have legal duties to make our complaints service accessible under equalities and mental health legislation. For example:
  - the Equality Act 2010 – gives people with a protected characteristic the right to reasonable adjustments to access our services (such as large print or BSL translations of information); and
  - the Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003 – gives anyone with a 'mental disorder' (including mental health issues, learning difficulties, dementia and autism) a right to access independent advocacy. This must be delivered by independent organisations that only provide advocacy. They help people to know and understand their rights, make informed decisions and have a voice.
12. Examples of how we will meet our legal duties are:
  - Whilst we are a small organisation we work with partners in local government and the third sector to provide translation support, large print and access to independent advocacy.
13. In addition to our legal duties, we will seek to ensure that we support vulnerable groups in accessing our services and our complaints procedure by
  - helping vulnerable customers identify when they might wish to make a complaint through training our frontline staff; and
  - helping customers access independent support or advocacy to help them understand their rights and communicate their complaints.
14. These activities are not exhaustive, and we must always take into account our commitment and responsibilities to equality and accessibility.

## How complaints may be made

15. Complaints may be made verbally or in writing, including face-to-face, by phone, letter, email or online.
16. Where a complaint is made **verbally**, we will make a record of the key points of complaint raised. Where it is clear that a complex complaint will be immediately considered at stage 2 (investigation), it may be helpful to complete a complaint form with the customer's input to ensure full details of the complaint are documented. However, there is no requirement for the person to complete a complaint form, and it is important that the completion of a complaint form does not present a barrier to people complaining.
17. We do not operate interactive digital channels such as social media and as a matter of policy and will not accept complaints made in online public forums or digital channels not controlled or managed by us.

## **Time limit for making complaints**

18. The customer must raise their complaint within six months of when they first knew of the problem, unless there are special circumstances for considering complaints beyond this time (for example, where a person was not able to complain due to serious illness or recent bereavement).
19. Where a customer has received a stage 1 response, and wishes to escalate to stage 2, unless there are special circumstances they must request this either:
  - within six months of when they first knew of the problem; or
  - within two months of receiving their stage 1 response (if this is later).
20. We will apply these time limits with discretion, taking into account the seriousness of the issue, the availability of relevant records and staff involved, how long ago the events occurred, and the likelihood that an investigation will lead to a practical benefit for the customer or useful learning for the organisation.
21. We will also take account of the time limit within which a member of the public can ask the SPSO to consider complaints (normally one year). The SPSO have discretion to waive this time limit in special circumstances (and may consider doing so in cases where we have waived our own time limit).

## Particular circumstances

### Complaints by (or about) a third party

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22. Sometimes a customer may be unable or reluctant to make a complaint on their own. We will accept complaints from third parties, which may include relatives, friends, advocates and advisers. Where a complaint is made on behalf of a customer, we must ensure that the customer has authorised the person to act on their behalf. It is good practice to ensure the customer understands their personal information will be shared as part of the complaints handling process (particularly where this includes sensitive personal information). This can include complaints brought by parents on behalf of their child, if the child is considered to have capacity to make decisions for themselves.
23. The provision of a signed mandate from the customer will normally be sufficient for us to investigate a complaint. If we consider it is appropriate we can take verbal consent direct from the customer to deal with a third party and would normally follow up in writing to confirm this.
24. In certain circumstances, a person may raise a complaint involving another person's personal data, without receiving consent. An example that sometimes arises relates to when a parent or guardian contacts us regarding a member of their household who is a young elector who may be as young as 14 years old. The complaint should still be investigated where possible, but the investigation and response may be limited by considerations of confidentiality. The person who submitted the complaint should be made aware of these limitations and the effect this will have on the scope of the response.
25. See also **Part 1: Maintaining confidentiality and data protection** (p.7)

### Serious, high-risk or high-profile complaints

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26. We will take particular care to identify complaints that might be considered serious, high-risk or high-profile, as these may require particular action or raise critical issues that need the Assessor and ERO's direct input. Serious, high-risk or high-profile complaints should normally be handled immediately at stage 2 (see **Part 3: Stage 2: Investigation**).
27. We define potential high-risk or high-profile complaints as those that may:
- *involve serious service failure, for example major delays in providing, or repeated failures to provide, a service*
  - *generate significant and ongoing press interest*
  - *pose a serious risk to our operations*
  - *present issues of a highly sensitive nature, for example concerning:*
    - *a particularly vulnerable person*
    - *child protection, or*
    - *adult protection.*

### Anonymous complaints

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28. We value all complaints, including anonymous complaints, and will take action to consider them further wherever this is appropriate. Generally, we will consider anonymous complaints if there is enough information in the complaint to enable us to make further enquiries. Any decision not to pursue an anonymous complaint must be authorised by a Depute Assessor

29. If we pursue an anonymous complaint further, we will record it as an anonymous complaint together with any learning from the complaint and action taken.
30. If an anonymous complainant makes serious allegations, these should be dealt with in a timely manner under relevant procedures. This may not be the complaints procedure and could instead be relevant disciplinary procedures or enforcement authority (eg Police Scotland).

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## What if the customer does not want to complain?

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31. If a customer has expressed dissatisfaction in line with our definition of a complaint but does not want to complain, we will explain that complaints offer us the opportunity to improve services where things have gone wrong. We will encourage the customer to submit their complaint and allow us to handle it through the CHP. This will ensure that the customer is updated on the action taken and gets a response to their complaint.
32. If the customer insists they do not wish to complain, we are not required to progress the complaint under this procedure. However, we should record the complaint as an anonymous complaint (including minimal information about the complaint, without any identifying information) to enable us to track trends and themes in complaints. Where the complaint is serious, or there is evidence of a problem with our services, we should also look into the matter to remedy this (and record any outcome).
33. Please refer to the example in **Appendix 1** for further guidance.

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## Complaints involving more than one area or organisation

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34. If a complaint relates to the actions of two or more areas within our organisation, we will tell the customer who will take the lead in dealing with the complaint, and explain that they will get only one response covering all issues raised.
35. If a customer complains to us about the service of another organisation or public service provider, but we have no involvement in the issue, the customer should be advised to contact the appropriate organisation directly.
36. If a complaint relates to our service and the service of another organisation or public service provider, and we have a direct interest in the issue, we will handle the complaint about our organisation through the CHP. If we need to contact an outside body about the complaint, we will be mindful of data protection. See **Part 1: Maintaining confidentiality and data protection** (p.7)
37. Such complaints may include:
- a complaint made to us about a claim for a rates rebate where the customer's dissatisfaction relates to the service we have provided and the service the levying authority has provided.

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## Complaints about contracted or commissioned services

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38. We may use external bodies such as contractors to deliver elements of our services.
39. Where we use an external body to deliver a service on our behalf we recognise that we remain responsible and accountable for ensuring that the services provided meet our standard (including in relation to complaints). We will either do so by:
- ensuring the contractor complies with this procedure; or

- ensuring the contractor has their own procedure in place, which fully meets the standards in this procedure. At the end of the investigation stage of any such complaints the contractor must ensure that the customer is signposted to the SPSO.
40. We will confirm that service users are clearly informed of the process and understand how to complain. We will also ensure that there is appropriate provision for information sharing and governance oversight where required.
41. We have discretion to investigate complaints about organisations contracted to deliver services on its behalf even where the procedure has normally been delegated.

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## **Complaints about senior staff**

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42. Complaints about senior staff can be difficult to handle, as there may be a conflict of interest for the staff investigating the complaint. When serious complaints are raised against senior staff, it is particularly important that the investigation is conducted by an individual who is independent of the situation. We must ensure we have strong governance arrangements in place that set out clear procedures for handling such complaints. See Part 4 Governance p.3 for more detail.

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## **Complaints and other processes**

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43. Complaints can sometimes be confused (or overlap) with other processes, such as disciplinary or whistleblowing processes. Specific examples and guidance on how to handle these are below.

### **Complaints and service requests**

44. If a customer asks us to do something (for example, provide a service or deal with a problem), and this is the first time the customer has contacted us, this would normally be a routine service request and not a complaint.
45. Service requests can lead to complaints, if the request is not handled promptly or the customer is then dissatisfied with how we provide the service.

### **Complaints and disciplinary or whistleblowing processes**

46. If the issues raised in a complaint overlap with issues raised under a disciplinary or whistleblowing process, we still need to respond to the complaint.
47. Our response must be careful not to share confidential information (such as anything about the whistleblowing or disciplinary procedures, or outcomes for individual staff members). It should focus on whether there was a service failure and what we have done to improve things, in general terms.
48. Staff investigating such complaints will need to take extra care to ensure that:
- we comply with all requirements of the CHP in relation to the complaint (as well as meeting the requirements of the other processes)
  - all complaint issues are addressed (sometimes issues can get missed if they are not also relevant to the overlapping process); and
  - we keep records of the investigation that can be made available to the SPSO if required. This can be problematic when the other process is confidential, because SPSO will normally require documentation of any correspondence and interviews to show how conclusions

were reached. We will need to bear this in mind when planning any elements of the investigation that might overlap (for example, if staff are interviewed for the purposes of both the complaint and a disciplinary procedure, they should not be assured that any evidence given will be confidential, as it may be made available to the SPSO).

49. The SPSO's report [Making complaints work for everyone](#) has more information on supporting staff who are the subject of complaints.

### **Contact from MPs, MSPs or Councillors**

50. Regardless of who raises the matter, where a matter is being dealt with as a complaint, it must be handled in line with this CHP. Organisations should be careful not to operate a 'two-tier' complaint system with preferential treatment for some customers.
51. Care should be taken to ensure that third party consent has been obtained when dealing with a matter concerning an individual that is raised by a MP/MSP/Cllr/Board Member. the Information Commissioner's Office has guidance on this: <https://ico.org.uk/media/for-organisations/documents/1432063/constituency-casework-of-mps-and-the-processing-of-sensitive-personal-data.pdf>

### **Complaints and compensation claims**

52. As the functions of the Assessor and ERO are provided within a statutory framework that includes a full range of statutory remedies available to a customer who disagrees with the decision or outcome of the statutory assessment or registration process, the question of compensation does not normally arise. Where a customer seeks financial compensation only, this is not a complaint. However, in some cases the customer may want to complain about the matter leading to their financial claim, and they may seek additional outcomes, such as an apology or an explanation. Where appropriate, we may consider that matter as a complaint, but deal with the financial claim separately.

### **Complaints and legal action**

53. Where a customer says that legal action is being actively pursued, this is not a complaint.
54. Where a customer indicates that they are thinking about legal action, but have not yet commenced this, they should be informed that if they take such action, they should notify the complaints handler and that the complaints process, in relation to the matters that will be considered through the legal process, will be closed. Any outstanding complaints must still be addressed through the CHP.
55. If an issue has been, or is being, considered by a court, we must not consider the same issue under the CHP.

## What to do if the CHP does not apply

56. If the issue does not meet the definition of a complaint or if it is not appropriate to handle it under this procedure (for example, due to time limits), we will explain to the customer why we have made this decision. We will also tell them what action (if any) we will take (for example, if another procedure applies), and advise them of their right to contact the SPSO if they disagree with our decision not to respond to the issue as a complaint.
57. Where a customer continues to contact us about the same issue, we will explain that we have already given them our final response on the matter and signpost them to the SPSO. We may also consider whether we need to take action under our Unacceptable actions policy.
58. The SPSO has issued a [template letter for explaining when the CHP does not apply](#).

## Appendix 1 – Complaints

The following tables give examples of complaints that may be considered at the frontline stage, and suggest possible actions.

Complaint	Possible actions
<p>The customer complains that her application to be registered has not been dealt with timeously.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Check all the facts including registration update and notification timeline.</li> <li>• Explain the procedure and if the application has been held up through service issues apologise to the customer and resolve the matter.</li> </ul>
<p>The customer expresses dissatisfaction in line with the definition of a complaint, but says she does not want to complain – just wants to tell us about the matter.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell the customer that we value complaints because they help to improve services. Encourage them to submit the complaint.</li> <li>• In terms of improving service delivery and learning from mistakes, it is important that customer feedback, such as this, is recorded, evaluated and acted upon. Therefore, if the customer still insists that they do not want to complain, record the matter as an anonymous complaint. This will avoid breaching the complaints handling procedure. Reassure the customer that they will not be contacted again about the matter.</li> </ul>
<p>The customer has provided evidence to verify his claim for a reduction in Rateable Value but no response has been provided</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Check all the facts, what was provided, when and in what circumstances.</li> <li>• Where a response has been held up through service issues, apologise to the customer and make arrangements for a response to be made.</li> </ul>
<p>The customer complains that a member of staff did not attend a pre-arranged meeting.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Check all the facts.</li> <li>• Speak to the member of staff or line manager to explain the complaint and agree on a course of action to resolve matters.</li> <li>• Where there has been a service failure, explain the reasons as appropriate and apologise to the customer.</li> </ul>

## Appendix 2 – What is not a complaint?

1. A concern may not necessarily be a complaint. For example, a customer might make a routine first-time request for a service. This is not a complaint, but the issue may escalate into a complaint if it is not handled effectively and the customer has to keep on asking for service.
2. In some cases a measure of discretion or further clarification is required in determining whether something is a complaint that should be handled through the CHP or a matter which should be handled through another process. There are also some specific circumstances when complaints should be handled in a particular manner.
3. The following paragraphs provide examples of the types of issues or concerns that must not be handled through the complaints handling procedure. This is not a full list, and you should decide the best route based on the individual case. Seek advice if you are not certain

Valuation Roll including Assessor information notices and civil penalties	Formal Proposal/Appeal/complaint procedure to Assessor, Local Valuation Appeal Committee, Lands Tribunal, Lands Valuation Appeal Court
Council Tax Valuation Roll	Formal Proposal to Assessor, Appeal to the Local Valuation Appeal Committee, Court of Session
Electoral Register	Appeal to ERO, Sheriff Court
Freedom of Information	Seek redress via FOI 'Review' process or Appeal to Information Commissioner.

### Claims for compensation

4. A customer may seek compensation from us if they consider us liable. This includes issues such as personal injury or loss of or damage to property. Claims for compensation only are not complaints, so you must not handle them through the complaints handling procedure. You should be clear, however, that where a customer wants to complain about the matter leading to their request for compensation, for example a member of staff damaging property whilst surveying a property, you may consider that matter as a complaint, but deal with the request for compensation separately. You may decide to suspend complaint action pending the outcome of the claim for compensation. If you do this, you must notify the customer and explain that the complaint will be fully considered when the compensation claim has been decided.
5. If you receive a compensation claim, you should refer the matter to the Assessor & ERO.