

SPSO Customer Surveying Pilot 2015-16

Summary

This paper summarises the steps SPSO has taken in developing its approach to customer surveying in 2015-16. This work was carried out between December 2014 and May 2015 in preparation for starting to survey all service users in receipt of an investigation decision from April 2015 onwards.

The SPSO is committed to continuous improvement. At the heart of this is the way we deliver our complaints handling service. The SPSO draws on a range of feedback mechanisms to identify ways to improve its service, for example through quality assurance processes, requests for reviews of decisions, customer service complaints, solicited and unsolicited feedback from complainants and public authorities as well as regular discussion and input from staff. In 2013 we established three sounding boards, including a customer sounding board that is made up of representatives of advocacy, advice and mediation groups who support people in using our services and provide us with current, relevant feedback. Links to minutes can be found at <http://www.spsso.org.uk/sounding-boards>. All of this intelligence is fed back into the organisation in a structured way through a service improvement forum to maintain a focus on how we can work better and be a learning and improving organisation.

As a small office with limited resources, it is important that we capture this information in as cost effective way as possible and that we do not divert crucial resources away from delivering the frontline service. For this reason, we opted to carry out external customer surveys on an intermittent basis in 2009 and 2012. As we explained to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee in our briefing document of 15 December 2014, we felt that this approach was the most proportionate way of gathering this information. We used the findings from these surveys as a basis for developing actions for improvement – the surveys themselves and the action plans can be found at <http://www.spsso.org.uk/research-and-surveys>.

In our 2014-15 Business Plan, we committed to reviewing how we would undertake gathering feedback about our service in the future. Sitting alongside this was a commitment to refresh and update our service standards. It was essential that we ensure that our service standards were up-to-date and clearly explained both to our staff and to those using our service, so that when we would come to assess how well the service was being delivered, we were clear 'what good looked like'.

To ensure that our service standards were robust and accurately reflected our role and purpose, we consulted with other ombudsman schemes and our customer sounding board before agreeing them. The service standards, which were re-launched in April 2015 and can be found at <http://www.spsso.org.uk/customer-service-standards>, are now being developed by the Ombudsman Association to be used as a common set of service standards and recommended to all ombudsman schemes and complaints handlers across the UK and Ireland. In quarter one of 2015-16 we brought our quality assurance approach in line with our refreshed service standards.

We then adopted the refreshed service standards as the framework against which to assess our service delivery. In order to minimise costs we decided to trial a survey. We set up an internal working group that developed a pilot survey that ran between December 2014 and May 2015. We tested and developed the survey for people using our service between January and March 2015.

We finalised and launched our new survey approach for people receiving SPSO decisions from April 2015 onwards. The 2015-16 results will be published in 2016-17 once the full results for the year have been gathered in.

This document sets out the approach taken to develop the current survey and next steps for action.

Pilot stage (January – March 2015)

The Customer Survey Pilot Working Group (CSPWG) was established in December 2015. Within the group there was a range of experience in designing and implementing questionnaires. The CSPWG was responsible for trialling and developing a questionnaire to be used from April 2015 onwards. The initial set of questions used examples from other similar organisations and previous SPSO surveys. The CSPWG aligned the questions with the refreshed customer service standards. Surveys were issued on a monthly basis for the months of January, February and March 2015. In total 550 individuals were issued with surveys and 146 responses were received (a response rate of 26.5%) as follows:-

January 2015 Survey Responses

	Return		email	paper
ER1	23/110	20.9%	13/74	10/36
not upheld	10/30	33.3%	06/21	04/09
some upheld	03/12	25%	03/12	00/00
fully upheld	08/19	42.1%	06/13	02/06
Overall	44/171	25.7%	28/120	16/51

February 2015 Survey Responses

	Return		email	paper
ER1	27/89	30.3%	18/63	09/26
not upheld	04/25	16.0%	03/19	01/06
some upheld	04/15	26.6%	02/09	02/06
fully upheld	09/25	36.0%	06/15	03/10
Overall	44/154	28.5%	29/106	15/48

March 2015 Survey Responses

	Return		email	paper
ER1	31/137	22.62%	16/88	15/49
not upheld	16/45	35.55%	12/32	04/13
some upheld	04/19	21.05%	03/13	01/06
fully upheld	07/24	29.16%	04/20	03/04
Overall	58/225	25.77%	35/153	23/72

The CSPWG met after each month's pilot response to review the results and to identify any issues arising as a result of the structure or format of the survey. The response rates were in line with previous surveys and what had been anticipated.

Pilot survey results

The purpose of the piloting phase was primarily to develop an approach that was tailored and appropriate to accurately assess the delivery of the service going forwards. The sample sizes from the pilot were very small and therefore not necessarily statistically robust. As set out below, the questions used were updated during the course of the pilot, which meant it was not possible to directly compare month on month results. However, it was possible to draw some broad conclusions.

In terms of responses, there were some significant variances between the four different outcome categories (no decision/early resolution, uphold, some upheld, not upheld). This was anticipated and in line with previous surveys as well as the findings of other ombudsman schemes.

The no decision/early resolution category of service users were receiving a different type of service/outcome to the other three groups. None of the complaints in this category would have been progressed further to investigation and contact with SPSO is likely to have been limited relative to the other categories, whose complaints progress to investigation. In the early resolution group, there were 81 responses in total over the course of the pilot. On average, less than 25% reported being satisfied with the outcome of their complaint.

Despite the variation in questions, there were some commonalities in the results in the different groups. Being shown respect and courtesy and receiving a clear explanation of how a complaint would be handled scored highest in all four groups and not being satisfied with the decision and the decision being unfair scored the lowest.

When the CSPWG considered the results, they noted that a number of the questions within the pilot survey potentially relate to aspects of the service that complainants at the earlier stages in the process would not necessarily be in a position to be able to assess because of their more limited contact. A large proportion of the further comments from this group expressed dissatisfaction based on bias, competence or powers to look at the issues they had brought. Very few of the comments related to service issues such as timeliness or communication. A number of other ombudsman schemes have trialled surveying this group prior to giving a decision in order to try to remove the negative bias towards the service that is inevitably created by a decision not to progress a case further. For these reasons the CSPWG took the decision to review further the way in which this group of service users are surveyed.

The other three groups, fully upheld, some upheld and not upheld, will all have passed through and received services at the early resolution stage also. As anticipated, the results for these three groups showed that there was a direct relationship between the outcome and the level of satisfaction with the services. For example, of the 21 responses received from service users where decisions were fully upheld, levels of dissatisfaction were largely below 15% with the biggest majority being zero. Timescales were referenced as a concern in the commentary even for this group, although people also noted where there had been good contact to keep them informed of progress and, in one case, acknowledged the level of complexity involved.

This correlation between the decision and level of satisfaction with the service is well recognised and documented from previous surveys and the work of other ombudsman schemes. In analysing future results it may help to also consider the ranking/order of scores within each category as well as the actual % scores, to help reduce this bias and to be able to assess performance against standards relative to other standards.

Results from the prisoner service users group returned responses that indicated to the CSPWG that more development was required to produce a survey that takes account of the particularly unique contact and communication that we have with this particular user group. A survey that is tailored to more closely reflect our existing materials for prisoners will be developed by the CSPWG, taking into account literacy issues and clarifying that the survey is about the SPSO (using the name Scottish Ombudsman as on all other prisons literature), and is not connected to the prison service or their internal complaints handling service.

Developing the survey questions in line with the customer service standards

The survey questions were designed to align with the refreshed customer service standards. The customer service standards can be found in full at <http://www.spsso.org.uk/customer-service-standards>. The information leaflet setting out the service standards can be found at http://www.spsso.org.uk/sites/spsso/files/communications_material/leaflets_public/general/Customer_ServiceStandards.pdf

The three pilot versions of the survey can be found at Annex 1. Following each set of results, the survey was amended or updated to ensure the questions were as clear as possible as well as being directed towards the service standard being assessed. During the pilot phase, the CSPWG looked for areas where responses indicated a lack of clarity in the question to ensure that what we were intending from each question was as clear as possible to the reader. We focused on questions where we had multiple 'don't know' responses and took this as an indicator that the question being posed was either not clearly understood or it was not possible for the reader to assess or know how to respond.

In terms of the finalised survey that was launched in 2015-16, the table below shows how the finalised questions relate to each individual service standard. Not all of the service standards can be tested through survey responses. These are indicated below along with the identified reasons for this.

SERVICE STANDARD	SURVEY QUESTION
Respect and Dignity Respect and Dignity	SPSO staff treated me with courtesy SPSO staff treated me respectfully
Keeping you informed	I was told clearly how my complaint was being progressed
Timeliness	The time it took to deal with my complaint was reasonable
Clarity Clarity	SPSO communication with me was clear It was clearly explained to me how my complaint would be handled
Accessibility	I was provided with all the support I needed from SPSO to access its service
Understanding Understanding	SPSO staff listened to me and understood my complaint SPSO checked what I wanted to happen
Transparency	Covered under keeping you informed
Fairness	I felt my complaint was dealt with fairly
<i>Impartiality and independence</i>	<i>No specific question asked - relates to an independent evaluation of the evidence (in order to reach a fair decision). It is therefore covered by fairness question above</i>
<i>Expertise</i>	<i>Not able to test through survey - relates to knowledge and skills of the Ombudsman that would not routinely be shared with complainant</i>
Explaining our Scope	SPSO clearly told me what outcomes they may or may not be able to achieve for me*
Reaching Sound Outcomes Reaching Sound Outcomes	I was given a clear explanation for SPSO's decision(s) I was satisfied with the outcome of my complaint
<i>Ensuring Impact</i>	<i>Not able to test through survey - relates to effectiveness of our wider communications and engagement strategy</i>
<i>Handling information</i>	<i>Not able to test through survey - relates to meeting our statutory duties under FOI/DPA</i>
Putting things right	Any concerns I raised about SPSO's customer service were handled properly

Next steps

In July 2015, the finalised version was launched and issued to all those individuals receiving an SPSO decision. Surveys are now issued on a monthly basis for this group of service users. The results are being provided as raw data to the senior management team and to the internal service improvement forum for consideration on a quarterly basis. Summarised updates of the quarterly survey findings are also being provided to the SPSO's Audit Advisory Committee and sounding boards on a regular basis.

The service improvement forum has established a sub group to consider the quarterly findings from this year's finalised survey in detail on an on-going basis and to propose service changes as a result and replication and promotion of good practice where identified. This sub group includes

representatives from the operational teams to ensure any agreed changes are effectively implemented and monitored in teams. The first meeting of this group took place in January 2016. The full 2015-16 year's results and a summary of actions taken as a result will be published in 2016-17 once the results have been gathered in. In addition, the original CSPWG has been tasked with identifying appropriate and proportionate methods for surveying those service users who are not included in the current survey including by the end of this business year:

- people who have contact with SPSO at the earlier stages in the process (at advice and early resolution);
- prisoners.

Following completion of the pilot survey, the production of this report and acceptance of its findings and recommendations by the senior management team, all data gathered during the pilot will be destroyed in line with the SPSO's data retention policy.

Annex 1 Pilot Questions

	Original draft	Draft 2	Draft 3
Q3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I was provided with all the support I needed to access SPSO's Service SPSO staff listened to me and understood my complaint It was clearly explained to me how my complaint would be handled I was told clearly what outcomes SPSO may be able to achieve for me 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I was provided with all the support I needed to access SPSO's Service New Q – I was provided all the support I needed from SPSO to access it's service. SPSO staff listened to me and understood my complaint New Q – SPSO staff understood my complaint It was clearly explained to me how my complaint would be handled I was told clearly what outcomes SPSO may able to achieve for me New Q – SPSO clearly told me what outcomes they may or may not be able to achieve for me 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I was provided all the support I needed from SPSO to access it's service. SPSO staff understood my complaint New additional Q – SPSO treated me with courtesy New additional Q – SPSO checked what I wanted to happen It was clearly explained to me how my complaint would be handled SPSO clearly told me what outcomes they may or may not be able to achieve for me
Q4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I was kept up to date with how my complaint was progressing SPSO communication with me was clear I was satisfied with the time it took to deal with my complaint I felt my complaint was dealt with fairly I was given clear explanation for SPSO's decision(s) and any recommendations I felt that the staff who I dealt with had the experience to handle my case 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I was kept up to date with how my complaint was progressing New Q – I was clearly told how my complaint was being progressed SPSO communication with me was clear New additional Q – SPSO staff treated me respectfully I was satisfied with the time it took to deal with my complaint New Q – The time it took to deal with my complaint was reasonable I felt my complaint was dealt with fairly (removed) New additional Q – SPSO staff considered all the information I provided before reaching a decision I was given a clear explanation for SPSO's decision(s) and any recommendations New Q – I was given a clear explanation for SPSO's decision(s) I felt confident that the staff who I dealt with had the experience to handle my case (removed) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I was told clearly how my complaint was being progressed SPSO communication with me was clear SPSO staff treated me respectfully The time it took to deal with my complaint was reasonable SPSO staff considered all the information I provided before reaching a decision I was given a clear explanation for SPSO's decision(s)
Q5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SPSO staff treated me with respect Any concerns I raised about SPSO's service were handled properly I was satisfied with the outcome of my complaint 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SPSO staff treated me with respect (moved and reworded question) Format of these questions have been changed - Any concerns I raised about SPSO's service were handled properly New Q - Any complaints raised about SPSO customer service were handled properly I was satisfied with the outcome of my complaint 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Any complaints raised about SPSO customer service were handled properly I was satisfied with the outcome of my complaint