

Ariane Burgess MSP
Convener of the Local Government, Housing and
Planning Committee

15 October 2025

Dear Ariane,

SPSO six-month update.

1. I am pleased to be providing the six-month update on the SPSO's performance. This update covers Q1 and Q2 of 2024-2025 (April to September 2025).
2. As the new Ombudsman takes up Office this month, this update, effectively spans the period I have been Acting Ombudsman.
3. On behalf of the Leadership Team, I would like to publicly acknowledge that the progress made during this period has been the result of a collective effort. We wish to formally record our sincere thanks to all SPSO colleagues for their dedication and support. As we hand over to the new Ombudsman, Paul McFadden, we do so with confidence in an organisation that has demonstrated both strength and resilience, operating effectively and efficiently throughout the interim.
4. However, as the update shows, there are ongoing challenges, especially around public service complaint numbers and resources. We are committed to working with the SPCB and the new Ombudsman to meet these challenges and further improve the service we provide.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Crawford
Acting Scottish Public Services Ombudsman



Scottish Public Services Ombudsman

Q1 and Q2 Performance update

Public Service Complaints¹

1. We received 3,225 complaints.

- 1.1. This was **27%** more cases than last year. It is also an increase on our pre-covid base-line year (2019/20) of **39%**.

2019/2020	2024/2025	2025/2026
2,316	2,544	3,225
Increase on baseline	10% increase	39% increase

- 1.2. The increase was, again, driven by the health and local authority sectors. Health complaints have increased by 33% and local authority by 21% compared to the same quarters last year.

2. Impact on waiting times:

- 2.1.1. **We closed 2,981 complaints** – a 15% productivity increase compared to 2,587 over the same period last year.
- 2.1.2. However, despite our best efforts, we were not able to prevent the number awaiting allocation from rising significantly. At the end of quarter 2, this was **369**, it had been at **167** at the end of April 2025.
- 2.1.3. And, while initially, we were able to maintain waiting times (our longest waiting time had decreased from **56 days** at the end of April 2025 to **54 days** at the start of October.) **This week we have had to inform complainants to expect a waiting time of 16 weeks.** (Priority cases continue to be allocated within four weeks and often much more quickly).
- 2.1.4. The Committee will appreciate that this situation is causing us concern. We have been taking steps to mitigate this as far as possible.
- 2.1.4.1. We held a project week which diverted resources for a short period to identify and close cases where we could do so quickly. We closed 124 cases. While this helped us to delay the increase in waiting times, it is not something we could do in the longer term as resources were temporarily diverted from other public service complaints activity to achieve this result.

¹ These figures are based on initial analysis and are subject to change.



- 2.1.4.2. We have made a request for one additional Assessment and Guidance officer as part of our 2026/27 budget submission.
- 2.1.4.3. We have temporarily seconded a member of staff from the Scottish Welfare Fund to support the Assessment and Guidance team in the meantime.
- 2.2. Although these actions are helping to limit the growth in the waiting times and allocation pool, as can be seen from the figures can only do so much given the increase in volume of cases received.

NHS Whistleblowing concerns

- 3. **We received 87** whistleblowing concerns an **increase of 47%** compared to 59 at the same point last year.
 - 3.1. **We closed 88** whistleblowing concerns. A productivity **increase of 29%** compared to 68 last year. This allowed us to keep pace with the increased demand, albeit with some reduction in the capacity within the team available for outreach and improvement work. Some of this work has been taken on by our Improvement, Standards and Engagement team.

Scottish Welfare Fund crisis and community care grants.

- 4. **We received 348 reviews.** A 19% reduction compared to last year's total of 428.
- 5. **We dealt with 349.** A 22% reduction compared to the 445 dealt with last year (reflecting the reduced volume received).
- 6. Review requests have been steadily reducing from the peak during the pandemic when self-isolation support grants were added to the workload. This has allowed us to undertake proactive improvement and support work with local authorities; something planned for some time but which we had been unable to take forward because of the volume of reviews.
 - 6.1. For example, an analysis of our data showed that we were receiving a lower level than anticipated from some local authorities. Targeted support and awareness raising has been put in place, to ensure that access to the review process is fair and consistent across the whole of Scotland.

Other highlights

- 7. While during this interim phase, we were not in a position to make major changes, we would like to point to several significant achievements.

Supporting public services and improving our own service

- 8. In the first two quarters of 2025-2026
 - 8.1. We launched the first revision of the SPSO Complaints Handling Principles since 2022. The new principles shift focus to a more person-



centred language and rights-based approach reflecting changing expectations of public services over the last decade. Our training packages have been updated to help public bodies fully implement the new principles.

- 8.2. Delivered investigation skills training to 101 public sector staff over four days. An additional 342 people completed our online complaint handling courses.
- 8.3. We have developed guidance for complainants on how to progress their complaint with the public sector organisation where they are experiencing delays in the consideration/investigation of their complaint.
- 8.4. Further to successfully piloting an online complaint form specifically designed for complaints about health services, we produced a paper version of the form, ensuring no service users are digitally excluded
- 8.5. We increased the visibility of our *how to make a complaint* video on our website and have a video available for our Scottish Welfare Fund function.
- 8.6. We attended and contributed to six complaint handling sector network meetings.
- 8.7. We published a new respectful engagement policy and produced internal guidance to support SPSO staff in the implementation of this policy
- 8.8. We consulted on our revised British Sign Language Plan which will be launched during Q3
- 8.9. The Scottish Welfare Fund team produced online learning modules and a programme of in-person training to help local authorities get decisions right first time.
- 8.10. The annual NHS whistleblowing Speak-up Week in late September/early October, show-cased good practice and shared the benefits of building trust in whistleblowing systems.
- 8.11. Our biannual complaints conference, to be held in November 2025, will provide an opportunity to complaints handlers from across Scotland, to share learning and support improvement.

Customer Feedback

9. An area that we know is of interest to the Committee is customer feedback. We obtain this in several ways and have recently completed the first year of our revised customer surveys.
10. The 2024-2025 results for all areas of our work, Public Service Complaints, Independent National Whistleblowing Officer for the NHS and the Scottish Welfare Fund were considered at our Governance meeting in August. A summary of the results will be published on our website during Q3.



11. We shared interim survey results internally throughout the year to provide a useful guide for colleagues about what drives customer satisfaction and what we can improve upon, creating a sense of ownership and responsibility for our customer service standard commitments.
12. The bulk of our work, and survey responses received, relate to Public Service Complaints. They have been used to gain insight into complainants' needs and preferences and to make improvements to our complaints service.
 - 12.1. For example, we have acted upon concerns raised about explanations of our decisions by introducing an improved method of writing decisions at the preliminary decision stage of our process. As well as enhancing clarity for our users, it is proving to be more efficient.
13. We have seen lower ratings in some key areas for complaints. Unsurprisingly, time taken to consider complaints received a low satisfaction response rate.
14. We also recognise that we are not always able to achieve the outcome(s) complainants are looking for as a resolution to their complaint and this can result in dissatisfaction being expressed in survey feedback. During 2024-25 we developed a website complaint checker to help in managing complainants' expectations. We have continued to promote this during Q1/Q2 2025-26 and this function is being well used by visitors to our website.
15. Positive feedback and comments on our website and in particular the accessibility of our online complaint form reflect the careful consideration we have given to the design of both. We also received many positive comments on communication from complainants. We recognise that complainants value being kept informed regularly and our commitment to treating them with dignity and respect.
16. During 2024-25 and Q1 2025-26 we narrowly missed the target of 10% we have set on receiving survey returns. Having trialled sending reminders for surveys to be completed during Q2 we are pleased to report an increase in return rate to 13%.

Shared services

17. We continue to work with the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body and the other officeholders to ensure the most efficient use of public money by providing shared services where appropriate. Over this period, we took steps to prepare to support the new Patient Safety Commissioner. We look forward to providing a similar service to the newly approved Victims and Witnesses Commissioner.