

SPSO complaints self assessment indicators for the housing sector

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Section 1 Complaints monitoring in the housing sector – setting the context

Purpose

This document sets out a list of high level indicators for monitoring complaints handling under the SPSO's model complaints handling procedure (CHP) for registered social landlords (RSLs) and the local authority (LA) model CHP in relation to housing complaints. The indicators provide the basis for potential self assessment and benchmarking activities, though landlords may also find more detailed measures useful.

The SPSO's Complaints Standards Authority (CSA) developed these indicators in association with the Chartered Institute of Housing, the Scottish Housing Best Value Network and HouseMark. By working together to develop a consistent set of performance indicators, the CSA hopes that RSLs and LA housing services will be able to compare their complaints handling performance, building on their existing benchmarking arrangements. We very much appreciate the input of all these partners.

Background: the model complaints handling procedures

The CSA has been working with public service providers to develop model CHPs in partnership with each sector. In March 2012 the CSA published a model CHP for the LA sector, and in April 2012 it published the RSL model CHP. The Public Services Reform (Scotland) Act 2012 requires social landlords in both sectors to have CHPs that are compliant with the relevant model CHP within six months of its publication.

Following the development of the model CHPs, the CSA is now working with landlords to support them in improving complaints handling. The development of these complaints performance indicators provides one strand of this work.

Monitoring complaints information

The LA and RSL model CHPs require all social landlords to record all the complaints that come to them. This information provides a clear basis for identifying service failures within these organisations ('learning from complaints') and information on how effectively the organisation is handling complaints ('complaints performance'). The focus here is on complaints performance.

The development of the RSL and LA model CHPs came alongside the delivery of the Scottish Social Housing Charter (the Charter)¹. The Charter includes one outcome that relates specifically to complaints:

Outcome 2: Communication

Social landlords manage their businesses so that:

- > *tenants and other customers find it easy to communicate with their landlord and get the information they need about their landlord, how and why it makes decisions and the services it provides.*

This outcome covers all aspects of landlords' communication with tenants and other customers. It is not just about how clearly and effectively a landlord gives information to those who want it. It also covers making it easy for tenants and other customers to make complaints and provide feedback on services, using that information to improve services and performance, and letting people know what they have done in response to complaints and feedback. It does not require landlords to provide legally protected, personal or commercial information.

Source: Scottish Government (2011) Scottish Social Housing Charter

The Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR) has set out its plans for monitoring the Charter², along with a timetable for annual monitoring to provide tenants and the SHR with assurance that the outcomes in the Charter are being met. This timetable is summarised as:

When	Who	What
Throughout year	Landlord	Assesses performance against the Charter
May	Landlord	Completes and submits Annual Return on the Charter (ARC) to SHR
August	SHR	Publishes on the SHR website a report about each landlord with key data from its ARC
October	Landlord	Reports its performance to all its tenants
By March	SHR	Publishes regulation plans for RSLs and contributes to Assurance and Improvement Plans for councils
By March	SHR	Publishes a report on the analysis of the sector's performance in achieving the Charter

Source: SHR (2012) Monitoring the Social Housing Charter

¹ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0039/00390305.pdf>

² http://www.scottishhousingregulator.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/SHR%20RF%20Chapter%203_web.pdf

The Annual Return on the Charter represents the key statistical reporting requirement to the SHR. The SHR have developed a set of indicators for landlords to report against³. These include two indicators on complaints:

Indicators 4 & 5	Percentage of 1st and 2nd stage complaints, including those related to equalities issues, responded to in full in the last year, that were resolved by the landlord and also the percentage upheld
	Percentage of 1st and 2nd stage complaints responded to in full in the last year, within the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) Model Complaints Handling Procedure (CHP) timescales

Source: SHR (2012) Scottish Social Housing Charter: Indicators and Context Information

Further information is provided in the Technical Guidance for Landlords⁴, which details how the SHR expects their indicators to be calculated.

The information required to report on the SHR indicators is entirely contained within the indicators listed here for self assessment. *However*, some of the calculations vary from those required for the SHR, as the SHR indicators use the number of complaints received in each year as the comparator for each of their calculations. The indicators outlined in this document generally use the number of complaints ‘responded to in full’ as the comparator (except for Indicator 1) as we consider this to provide a clearer indication of complaints handling performance.

As well as the complaints performance information required for the Annual Return on the Charter there is also a requirement to develop mechanisms and systems for learning from complaints – using the data and detail of complaints information to identify service improvements. Some of this information will be useful in other elements of a landlord’s reporting on the Charter, for example, their annual report to tenants.

The model CHP is also closely related to one of the SHR’s Regulatory Standards, as set out in their Regulatory Standards of Governance and Financial Management⁵ (see below). This refers to accountability and a focus on the needs and priorities of tenants, and therefore has a clear link with the delivery of a complaints service which responds to customers’ concerns. Information that is developed in relation to good complaints handling has the potential to provide clear evidence of compliance with this regulation.

Regulatory Standard 2:

The RSL is open about and accountable for what it does. It understands and takes account of the needs and priorities of its tenants, service users and stakeholders. And its primary focus is the sustainable achievement of these priorities.

Source: SHR (2012) Regulatory Standards of Governance and Financial Management

³ http://www.scottishhousingregulator.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Charter%20Indicators%20Document%20-%20Final%20Draft%20-%2027%20September_0.pdf

⁴ <http://www.scottishhousingregulator.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Technical%20Guidance.pdf>

⁵ http://www.scottishhousingregulator.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/SHR%20RF%20Chapter%205_web.pdf

Measuring complaints information in context

The implementation of the model CHPs by social landlords means that for the first time all social landlords will be expected to record, report and publish information on all the complaints they receive, including those dealt with at the frontline. This will provide significant opportunities for organisations to identify service improvements from data that goes unrecorded at present.

It is also clear that this is likely to result in a substantial increase in the number of complaints that are recorded by each landlord, particularly at the Frontline Resolution stage (1). We anticipate that this rise may continue for a period as the organisation beds in the new approach to complaints, and as all frontline staff become aware of the benefits of recording complaints, and see the way this can lead to service improvements. This likely rise in complaints does not reflect any worsening of service performance but rather is an indicator that the complaints system is more accessible, and recording of data is more robust. However, once this bedding in process has been achieved, the number of complaints will provide a measure of service delivery across the organisation, and changes in numbers may (particularly if they relate to specific service areas) indicate potential service failure issues.

Alongside complaints data, it will be important to take into consideration any other contextual information when taking account of changes in complaints volumes. For example, the introduction of new services may impact on existing services, or may generate feedback themselves. Equally, an increased focus on complaints internally may lead to improvements in complaints handling, with more complaints recorded. We would therefore encourage organisations to monitor changes in complaint volumes and critically analyse the reasons for these changes.

Closing complaints

Through our work in developing these performance indicators, it has become evident that practices currently vary in relation to when a complaint is 'closed'. It is worth being clear about our expectations on this from the outset.

A complaint can be closed as soon as an organisation has come to a decision on the case and communicated this decision to the customer. There is no need to wait until any follow-up action has been taken to 'resolve' the underlying issue. For example, if a complaint is upheld and, as a result of this, a need for a repair is identified, the case can be closed before the repair has been completed. Good practice would recommend that the case is flagged to be checked in the future to ensure that the repair has been completed to the customer's satisfaction. But the complaint can be closed ahead of this.

Similarly, there is no need to wait for the customer to decide whether or not they are satisfied with the response at the Frontline Resolution stage before the case is closed. Customers have up to six months to come back to their landlord if they are not happy with the response at the Frontline Resolution stage. It is therefore not appropriate to hold a case open for a limited amount of time to see if the customer wishes to progress the complaint to the next stage.

Given this system for closing complaints, it is important for complaints logging systems to be able to re-open a case at the Investigation stage (2) which has already been responded to and closed at the Frontline Resolution stage (1).

The performance indicators provided here refer to complaints being 'responded to in full'. This is defined as: *'where the landlord has either met the service user's expectations or, where this is not appropriate, provided a full explanation of the landlord's position'*. This terminology has been used for clarity and consistency: to align with the SHR's Charter Indicators, and because some landlords may still choose to adopt a different methodology for closing complaints.

Section 2 Complaints performance indicators

The indicators below provide a basis from which social landlords can monitor their complaints handling performance.

- 1a Total number of complaints received from social rented stock, per thousand units**
- 1b Total number of complaints received from managed properties, per thousand units**

Definition:

Number of complaints received at stage 1 + number of complaints received directly to stage 2. (This ensures that complaints that are escalated from stage 1 to stage 2 are not double counted.)

Some landlords may choose to break this down by service area. The CSA have not set out standardised complaints categories or service areas. This is an area we would seek to gain consensus on as complaints recording becomes more standard across the housing sector.

For benchmarking purposes, it would be helpful to relate this to the scale of the organisation. We therefore recommend relating the number of complaints received to the organisation's stock. In identifying the number of stock, we use the following definitions:

Social rented stock includes:

- > General needs
- > Sheltered / housing for older people
- > Very sheltered / supported

Managed properties includes:

- > Factored
- > Shared ownership

The following stock types are excluded:

- > Properties owned, but not managed, by the landlord
- > Non-social housing e.g. market rent
- > Non-residential properties

This is the only indicator where a breakdown of stock types is required. In all other indicators our definition refers to complaints relating to all housing services, but excludes complaints about any other services, such as care services. This could include allocations and lettings, anti-social behaviour, estate services, tenancy management, resident involvement, rents and service charges, repairs, regeneration, home ownership and factored, homelessness services, sheltered and housing support services. This is, however, only a suggested list, and it is for each organisation to determine which services would be appropriate for them to include for benchmarking, based on the structures within which they work.

Similar performance indicators can be used for care services for self assessment, but for benchmarking purposes it is anticipated that analysis of housing service complaints alone will provide greater consistency.

2a Complaints responded to in full at stage 1 and stage 2 as a percentage of all complaints responded to in full

This can be broken down into:

- Number of complaints responded to in full at stage 1*
- Number of complaints responded to in full at stage 2*
- Number of complaints responded to in full at stage 1 as a % of all complaints responded to in full
- Number of complaints responded to in full at stage 2 as a % of all complaints responded to in full

* *This data is also required for the Charter Indicators*

Definition:

The term 'responded to in full' is where the landlord has either met the service user's expectations or, where this is not appropriate, provided a full explanation of the landlord's position.

2b Number and percentage of complaints responded to in full at stage 1 and stage 2 that relate to equalities issues*

* *This indicator relates to one of the SHR Charter Indicators*

This can be broken down into:

- Number of complaints responded to in full where equalities issues were raised in the complaint at stage 1*
- Number of complaints responded to in full where equalities issues were raised in the complaint at stage 2*
- Number of complaints responded to in full where equalities issues were raised in the complaint at stage 1* as a % of all stage 1 complaints responded to in full*
- Number of complaints responded to in full where equalities issues were raised in the complaint at stage 2* as a % of all stage 2 complaints responded to in full*

* *This data is also required for the Charter Indicators*

Definition:

Equalities issues can cut across all services and complaints, regardless of the service or issue that is being complained about. This indicator refers to any complaint that makes reference to discrimination, victimisation or harassment, or any policy that has a detrimental impact on any of the nine protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010, which are: age; disability; gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion and belief; sex; or sexual orientation.

3 Complaints that are escalated from stage 1 to stage 2 as a percentage of all complaints responded to in full at stage 1

Definition:

This can be broken down into:

- Number of complaints responded to in full at stage 1*
- Number of complaints received at stage 2 that were escalated from stage 1

The calculation would be:

Escalation rates to stage 2 = (number of complaints responded to in full at stage 1 – number of complaints received at stage 2 that were escalated from stage 1) / number of complaints responded to in full at stage 1.

* *This data is also required for the Charter Indicators*

Comments:

This is an important indicator because the model CHPs aim to deliver improved frontline complaints handling, with more complaints resolved close to the point of service delivery and as quickly as possible. An organisation that has a high proportion of complaints going to stage 2 would indicate that this is not being achieved. Over time, the proportion going to Stage 2 should reduce, to reflect increased frontline resolution.

4 The number of complaints upheld / not upheld at each stage as a percentage of complaints responded to in full at each stage

This can be broken down into:

- Number of complaints upheld at stage 1* as % of all complaints responded to in full at stage 1
- Number of complaints *not* upheld at stage 1 as % of all complaints responded to in full at stage 1
- Number of complaints upheld at stage 2* as % of all complaints responded to in full at stage 2
- Number of complaints *not* upheld at stage 2 as % of all complaints responded to in full at stage 2

* *This data is also required for the Charter Indicators*

Definition:

'Upheld' refers to where the landlord decided, on the basis of the evidence, that there was a service failure as claimed by the complainant, and so found in favour of the complainant. The number of complaints upheld includes those 'partially upheld', where one or more elements of the complaint were decided in favour of the complainant, even if other parts of the complaint were not upheld.

Comment:

Over time, the proportion of upheld/ not upheld cases at stage 1 will give an indication of the level of service failure. An increase in upheld complaints may indicate difficulties in service provision, or a mis-match between service provision and customer expectations.

NB For systems to accurately reflect this, the outcome of the complaint must be noted as soon as the decision is issued, irrespective of whether the case is closed immediately (as we recommend above) or not. It therefore includes all stage 1 cases, including those that are escalated to stage 2, which would, by definition, not have been upheld.

5 The average time in working days for a full response to complaints at each stage

This can be broken down into:

- Average time in working days for a full response to stage 1 complaints
- Average time in working days for a full response to stage 2 complaints

6 The number and percentage of complaints at each stage which were responded to in full within the set timescales of 5 and 20 working days

This can be broken down into:

- Number of complaints at stage 1 which were responded to in full within the set timescale of 5 working days*
- Number of complaints at stage 2 which were responded to in full within the set timescale of 20 working days*
- % of all complaints responded to in full at stage 1* that were responded to in full within 5 working days
- % of all complaints responded to in full at stage 2* that were responded to in full within 20 working days

* This data is also required for the Charter Indicators

7 The number and percentage of complaints at each stage where an extension to the 5 or 20 working day timeline has been authorised

This can be broken down into:

- Number of stage 1 complaints where an extension to the 5 working day timeline has been authorised
- Number of stage 2 complaints where an extension to the 20 working day timeline has been authorised
- Number of stage 1 complaints where an extension to the 5 working day timeline has been authorised as a % of all stage 1 complaints responded to in full
- Number of stage 2 complaints where an extension to the 20 working day timeline has been authorised as a % of all stage 2 complaints responded to in full

NB Indicators 2 – 5 look specifically at individual stages of the procedure, including complaints that were responded to at stage 1 and then subsequently escalated to stage 2. If these numbers are added together these complaints will be double counted, and will not reflect the total number of complaints received overall.

Indicators 6 and 7 relate to those complaints that did or did not require extensions. They are therefore not comparable with overall complaint numbers.

8 Measure of customer satisfaction with the complaints service

This can be broken down into:

- The % of complainants satisfied with the way their complaint was handled and
- The % of complainants satisfied with the outcome of their complaint.

Definition:

The percentage of satisfied complainants relates to the number of respondents who said they were very or fairly satisfied with the outcome of the complaint as a percentage of all valid responses to the question. All complainants should be given the opportunity to provide feedback.

Comment:

Both measures will be helpful in assessing how well the organisation handles complaints management.

9 Measures on reporting and learning from complaints

This can be broken down into:

- How often reports go to senior management/ management committee
- How often complaints outcomes, trends and actions taken are published
- Number of services changed, improved or withdrawn as a result of complaints

Comment:

It is essential to demonstrate that the organisation is actively managing the complaints process, and this requires monitoring of performance on individual complaints by the organisation's senior management. This in turn implies that the organisation is learning from complaints, and should be able to identify where improvements have been made. Providing examples will also help with self-assessment on the Charter outcomes.

Section 3 Additional support with complaints handling and benchmarking

The CSA is working with most public service providers to improve standards in complaints handling. They are keen to provide support to social landlords who are developing their complaints handling. This may be in the form of information and advice, through the guidance that the CSA develops or through the online Forum that the CSA hosts. This provides the opportunity to ask questions of the CSA and of other social landlords, and to learn from the experiences of others. The Valuing Complaints Forum can be accessed through the CSA's website: **www.valuingcomplaints.org.uk**. Alternatively, contact the CSA directly at: **csa@spsso.org.uk**.

HouseMark runs the only cross-sector UK wide complaints benchmarking service, developed in consultation with landlords, the SPSO, other housing ombudsmen across the UK and tenants representatives. In addition, HouseMark's Complaints accreditation service enables all housing providers to demonstrate to their tenants, partners and the regulator how they are responding to customer complaints, comments and compliments. Landlords volunteering for accreditation will have their complaints service assessed against a series of 'Complaints Commitments' and associated building blocks. These are based on current SPSO, regulatory expectations and sector best practice. For more information about these services go to **www.housemark.co.uk** or contact Kirsty Wells by email: **kirsty.wells@housemark.co.uk** or phone: **07730 764225** or **01968 661179**.

SHBVN is the national benchmarking club in Scotland and plays a vital role in supporting the social housing sector to analyse and improve services by benchmarking cost and performance. With their 80 members in Scotland they also support landlords to conduct and review self assessment frameworks and identify and share good practice. For more information on their services go to **www.shbvn.org.uk** or call **0131 240 5227**.