



Orkney & Shetland
Valuation Joint Board



Comments & Complaints Handling Procedure

Issued: January 2013

Comments and Complaints Handling Procedure

Foreword

Our Comments and Complaints handling procedure reflects Orkney and Shetland Valuation Joint Board's commitment to valuing complaints. It seeks to resolve customer dissatisfaction as close as possible to the point of service delivery and to conduct thorough, impartial and fair investigations of customer complaints so that, where appropriate, we can make evidence-based decisions on the facts of the case.

The procedure has been developed using the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) Local Authority Model Complaints Handling Procedure. This procedure aims to help us 'get it right first time'. We want quicker, simpler and more streamlined complaints handling with local, early resolution by capable, well-trained staff.

Complaints give us valuable information we can use to improve customer satisfaction. Our Comments and Complaints Handling Procedure will enable us to address a customer's dissatisfaction and may also prevent the same problems that led to the complaint from happening again. For our staff, comments and complaints provide a first-hand account of the customer's views and experience, and can highlight problems we may otherwise miss. Handled well, complaints can give our customers a form of redress when things go wrong, and their comments can also help us continuously improve our services.

Resolving complaints early saves money and creates better customer relations. Sorting them out as close to the point of service delivery as possible means we can deal with them locally and quickly, so they are less likely to escalate to the next stage of the procedure. Complaints that we do not resolve swiftly can greatly add to our workload.

The Comments and Complaints Handling Procedure will help us do our job better, improve relationships with our customers and enhance public perception of the Valuation Joint Board. It will help us keep the user at the heart of the process, while enabling us to better understand how to improve our services by learning from complaints.

Michael A Forbes
Assessor & Electoral Registration Officer
January 2013

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Introduction

One of The Orkney and Shetland Valuation Joint Board's main duties is to provide high quality and professional valuation and electoral services to all of its stakeholders and to do so in an effective and responsible way having regard to the principles of Best Value, equality and Data Protection.

Our Vision is to provide high quality, effective and responsive services to all of our stakeholders.

Our Aims and Objectives include commitments to:

- Consult stakeholders about their needs and expectations
- Treating all stakeholders in a fair, consistent manner and in accordance with equal opportunities requirements
- Monitor performance levels
- Strive for continuous improvement in all aspects of service delivery
- Ensuring we are accountable to all stakeholders

It is important that a high level of independence is afforded to Assessors in order that they can carry out, and be seen to carry out, their statutory duties in a fair and impartial manner. It is also important to distinguish between the Assessor's statutory independence in matters of Valuation, Council Tax and Electoral Registration and his accountability for his conduct in the operation of his duties. The independence of the Assessor in matters of Valuation, Council Tax and Electoral Registration, where there are effective appeals systems in place, has been acknowledged. The Assessor is, however, accountable to the Valuation Joint Board and the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman, for his/her conduct in carrying out his/her duties.

This Comments and Complaints procedure:-

- Confirms our commitments to customer focus and stakeholder consultation, allowing service users to inform us when we fail to meet acceptable standards of practice, procedure or their expectation of service provision.
- Will provide information to help improve service provision and identify training needs.
- Will highlight instances of bias, discrimination or unhelpfulness.
- Satisfies the requirement to ensure accountability in matters of practice and procedure.
- Recognises the Ombudsman's view that "good complaint handling should be integral to high quality delivery of public service".

This Procedure covers:

- The definition of a 'Complaint'
- The stages of the Comments & Complaints Process
- Roles and Responsibilities
- Co-ordination, monitoring and reporting arrangements

2.0 How to use this Model Complaints Handling Procedure

This document explains to staff how to handle complaints. Another document provides information for customers on the complaints procedure. Together, these form our complaints handling procedure.

The document contains references and links to more details on parts of the procedure, such as how to record complaints, and the criteria for signing off and agreeing time extensions. These explain how to process, manage and reach decisions on different types of complaints.

When using this document, please also refer to the 'SPSO Statement of Complaints Handling Principles' and best practice guidance on complaints handling from the Complaints Standards Authority at the SPSO.

<http://www.valuingcomplaints.org.uk>

3.0 What is a complaint?

Orkney and Shetland Valuation Joint Board's definition of a complaint is:

'An expression of dissatisfaction by one or more members of the public about the Valuation Joint Board's action or lack of action, or about the standard of service provided by or on behalf of the Valuation Joint Board.'

A complaint may relate to:

- failure to provide a service
- inadequate standard of service
- dissatisfaction with the Valuation Joint Board's policy
- treatment by or attitude of a member of staff
- disagreement with a decision where the customer cannot use another procedure (for example an appeal) to resolve the matter
- the Valuation Joint Board's failure to follow the appropriate administrative process.

This list does not cover everything.

[Appendix 1](#) provides a range of examples of complaints we may receive, and how these may be handled.

A complaint is **not**:

- A routine first-time request for a service
- A request for compensation only
- An issue that is in court or has already been heard by a court or a tribunal
- A disagreement with a decision where a statutory right of appeal exists, for example in relation to council tax or non-domestic rating appeals or Electoral Registration objections.
- An attempt to reopen a previously concluded complaint or to have a complaint reconsidered where we have already given our final decision.

You must not treat these issues as complaints, and should instead direct customers to use the appropriate procedures.

[Appendix 2](#) gives more examples of 'what is not a complaint' and how to direct customers appropriately.

3.1 Handling anonymous complaints

The Valuation Joint Board values all complaints. This means we treat all complaints including anonymous complaints seriously 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. If, however, an anonymous complaint does not provide enough information to enable us to take further action, we may decide not to pursue it further. Any decision not to pursue an anonymous complaint must be authorised by the Assessor and ERO or Assistant Assessor.

If an anonymous complaint makes serious allegations, we will refer it to a senior officer immediately.

If we pursue an anonymous complaint further, we will record the issues as an anonymous complaint on the complaints system. This will help to ensure the completeness of the complaints data we record and allow us to take corrective action where appropriate.

3.2 What if the customer does not want to complain?

If a customer has expressed dissatisfaction in line with our definition of a complaint but does not want to complain, tell them that we do consider all expressions of dissatisfaction, and that complaints offer us the opportunity to improve services where things have gone wrong. Encourage the customer to submit their complaint and allow us to deal with it through the complaints handling procedure. This will ensure that the customer is updated on the action taken and gets a response to their complaint.

If, however, the customer insists they do not wish to complain, record the issue as an anonymous complaint. This will ensure that the customer's details are not recorded on the complaints database and that they receive no further contact about the matter. It will also help to ensure the completeness of the complaints data recorded and will still allow us to fully consider the matter and take corrective action where appropriate.

3.3 Who can make a complaint?

Anyone who receives, requests or is affected by our services can make a complaint. Sometimes a customer may be unable or reluctant to make a complaint on their own. We will accept complaints brought by third parties as long as the customer has given their personal consent.

3.4 Complaints involving more than one service or organisation

If a complaint relates to the actions of both the Valuation Joint Board and one or more local authority services, you must tell the customer who will take the lead in dealing with the complaint, and explain that we may only be able to provide a response in respect of the actions of the Valuation Joint Board.

If a customer complains to the Valuation Joint Board about the service of another local authority, agency or public service provider, but the Valuation Joint Board has no involvement in the issue, the customer should be advised to contact the appropriate organisation directly. However, where, a complaint relates to the Valuation Joint Board service and the service of another agency or public service provider, (for example a housing association or a government department), and the Valuation Joint Board has a direct interest in the issue, you must handle the complaint about the Valuation Joint Board through the CHP. If you need to make enquiries to a local authority or an outside agency in relation to the complaint always take account of data protection legislation and our guidance on handling our customer's personal information. The Information Commissioner has detailed guidance on data sharing and has issued a data sharing code of practice. (SEE

http://www.ico.gov.uk/for_organisations/data_protection/topic_guides/~//media/documents/library/Data_Protection/Detailed_specialist_guides/data_sharing_code_of_practice.aspx

Such complaints may include:

- a complaint made to us about a delay in issuing a Council Tax bill, where the customer's

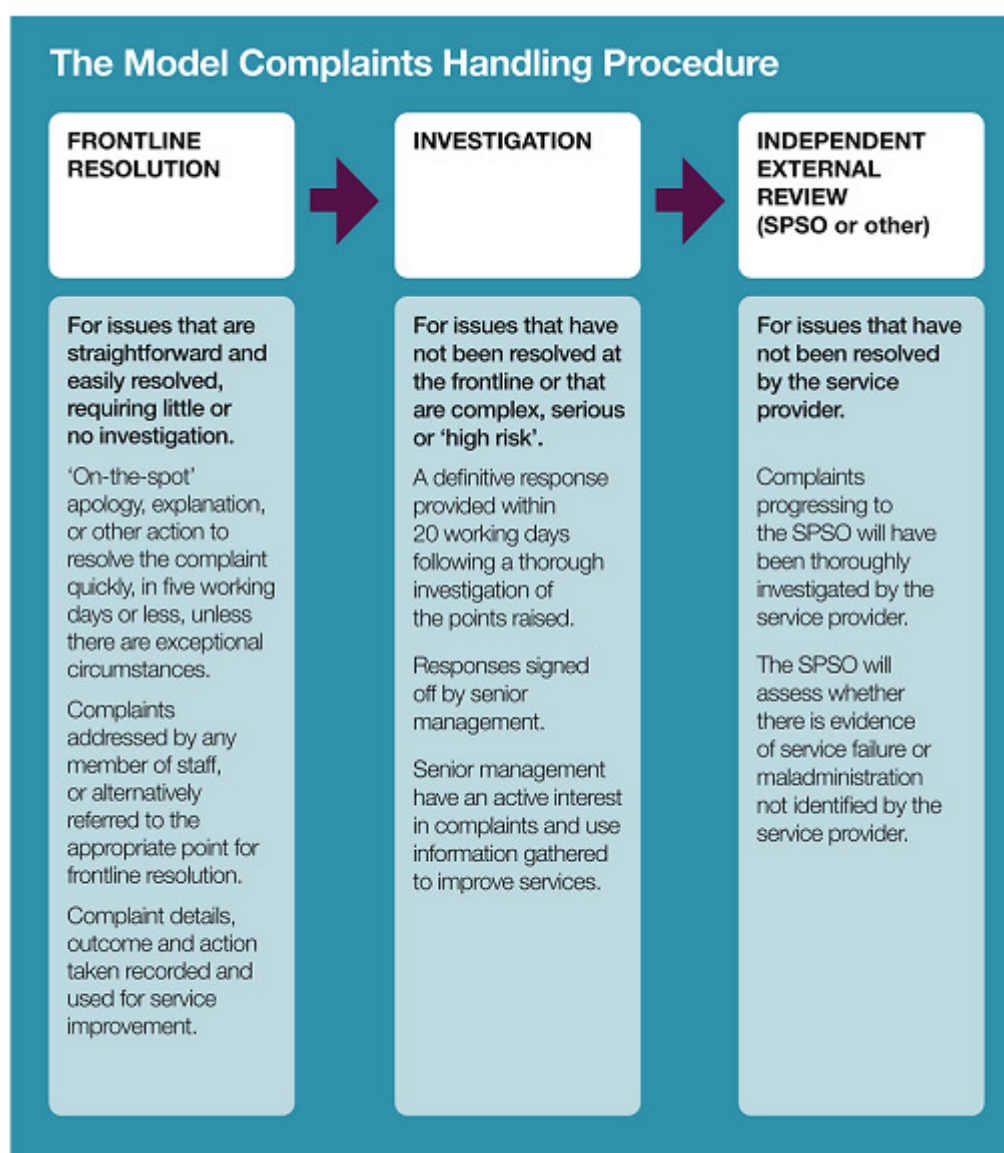
dissatisfaction relates to the service we have provided and the service the billing authority has provided

4.0 The complaints handling process

Our complaints handling procedure aims to provide a quick, simple and streamlined process for resolving complaints early and locally by capable, well-trained staff.

Our complaints process provides two opportunities to resolve complaints internally:

- **frontline resolution**, and
- **investigation**.



For clarity, the term 'frontline resolution' refers to the first stage of the complaints process. It does not reflect any job description within the Valuation Joint Board **but means seeking to resolve complaints at the initial point of contact where possible.**

4.1 Stage one: frontline resolution

Frontline resolution aims to quickly resolve straightforward customer complaints that require little or no investigation. Any member of staff may deal with complaints at this stage.

The main principle is to seek early resolution, resolving complaints at the earliest opportunity and as close to the point of service delivery as possible. This may mean a face-to-face discussion with the customer, or asking an appropriate member of staff to deal directly with the complaint.

Appendix 1 gives examples of the types of complaint we may consider at this stage, with suggestions on how to resolve them.

In practice, frontline resolution means resolving the complaint at the first point of contact with the customer, either by the member of staff receiving the complaint or other identified staff.

In either case, you may settle the complaint by providing an on-the-spot apology where appropriate, or explaining why the issue occurred and, where possible, what will be done to stop this happening again. You may also explain that, as an organisation that values complaints, we may use the information given when we review service standards in the future.

A customer can make a complaint in writing, in person, by telephone, by email, or by having someone complain on their behalf. **You must always consider frontline resolution, regardless of how you have received the customer's complaint.**

4.1.1 What to do when you receive a complaint

- 1 On receiving a complaint, you must first decide whether the issue can indeed be defined as a complaint. The customer may express dissatisfaction about more than one issue. This may mean you treat one element as a complaint, while directing the customer to pursue another element through an alternative route (see **Appendix 2**).
- 2 If you have received and identified a complaint, record the details on our complaints system (see **Appendix 5**).
- 3 Next, decide whether or not the complaint is suitable for frontline resolution. Some complaints will need to be fully investigated before you can give the customer a suitable response. You must escalate these complaints immediately to the investigation stage.
- 4 Where frontline resolution is appropriate, the person dealing with the complaint must consider four key questions:
 - What exactly is the customer's complaint (or complaints)?
 - What does the customer want to achieve by complaining?
 - Can I achieve this, or explain why not?
 - If I cannot resolve this, who can help with frontline resolution?

What exactly is the customer's complaint (or complaints)?

It is important to be clear about exactly what the customer is complaining of. You may need to ask the customer for more information and probe further to get a full picture.

What does the customer want to achieve by complaining?

At the outset, clarify the outcome the customer wants. Of course, the customer may not be clear about this, and you may need to probe further to find out what they expect, and whether they can be satisfied.

Can I achieve this, or explain why not?

If you can achieve the expected outcome by providing an on-the-spot apology or explain why you cannot achieve it, you should do so. If you consider an apology is appropriate, you may wish to follow the SPSO's guidance on the subject:

SPSO guidance on apology

The customer may expect more than we can provide. If so, you must tell them as soon as possible. An example would be where the customer is seeking exemption from rates payments.

You are likely to have to convey the decision face to face or on the telephone. If you do so face to face, by telephone or by email, you are not required to write to the customer as well, although you may choose to do so. It is important, however, to keep a full and accurate record of the decision reached and passed to the customer.

If I can't resolve this, who can help with frontline resolution?

If you cannot deal with the complaint because, for example, you are unfamiliar with the issues or area of service involved, pass details of the complaint to someone who can attempt to resolve it.

4.1.2 Timelines

Frontline resolution must be completed within **five working days**, although in practice we would often expect to resolve the complaint much sooner.

You may need to get more information from other services to resolve the complaint at this stage. However, it is important to respond to the customer within five working days, either resolving the matter or explaining that their complaint is to be investigated.

4.1.3 Extension to the timeline

In exceptional circumstances, where there are clear and justifiable reasons for doing so, you may agree an extension of no more than five working days with the customer. This must only happen when an extension will make it more likely that the complaint will be resolved at the frontline resolution stage.

When you ask for an extension, you must get authorisation from the Assessor or Assistant Assessor as the case may be, who will decide whether you need an extension to effectively resolve the complaint. Examples of when this may be appropriate include relevant staff being temporarily unavailable. If, however, the issues are so complex that they cannot be resolved in five days, it may be more appropriate to escalate the complaint straight to the investigation stage. You must tell the customer about the reasons for the delay, and when they can expect your response.

If the customer does not agree to an extension but it is unavoidable and reasonable, the Assessor or Assistant Assessor must decide on the extension. You must then tell the customer about the delay and explain the reason for the decision to grant the extension.

It is important that such extensions do not become the norm. Rather, the timeline at the frontline resolution stage should be extended only rarely. All attempts to resolve the complaint at this stage must take no longer than **ten working days** from the date you receive the complaint.

The proportion of complaints that exceed the five-day limit will be evident from reported statistics. These statistics must go to the Assessor or Assistant Assessor on a quarterly basis.

[Appendix 3](#) provides further information on timelines.

4.1.4 Closing the complaint at the frontline resolution stage

When you have informed the customer of the outcome, you are not obliged to write to the customer, although you may choose to do so. You must ensure that our response to the complaint addresses all areas that we are responsible for and explains the reasons for our decision. **It is also important to keep a full and accurate record of the decision reached and given to the customer.** The complaint should then be closed and the complaints system updated accordingly.

4.1.5 When to escalate to the investigation stage

A complaint must be escalated to the investigation stage when:

- frontline resolution was tried but the customer remains dissatisfied and requests an investigation into the complaint. This may be immediately on communicating the decision at the frontline stage or could be some time later
- the customer refuses to take part in the frontline resolution process This would include where the customer immediately requests to speak to a more senior member of staff.
- the issues raised are complex and require detailed investigation
- the complaint relates to serious, high-risk or high-profile issues.

When a previously closed complaint is escalated from the frontline resolution stage, the complaint should be reopened on the complaints system.

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 or Assistant Assessor's direct input. The SPSO defines potential high-risk or high-profile complaints as those that may:

- involve a death or terminal illness
- 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 the Valuation Joint Board's operations
- present issues of a highly sensitive nature, for example concerning:
 - immediate homelessness
 - a particularly vulnerable person
 - child protection.
 - personal data

4.2 Stage two: investigation

Not all complaints are suitable for frontline resolution and not all complaints will be satisfactorily resolved at that stage. Complaints handled at the investigation stage of the complaints handling

procedure are typically complex or require a detailed examination before we can state our position. These complaints may already have been considered at the frontline resolution stage, or they may have been identified from the start as needing immediate investigation.

An investigation aims to establish all the facts relevant to the points made in the complaint and to give the customer a full, objective and proportionate response that represents our final position.

Investigations should be completed by a member of staff, normally the Assessor or Assistant Assessor, who was NOT involved in any Frontline Resolution stage.

4.2.1 What to do when you receive a complaint for investigation

It is important to be clear from the start of the investigation stage exactly what you are investigating, and to ensure that both the customer and the service understand the investigation's scope.

It may be helpful to discuss and confirm these points with the customer at the outset, to establish why they are dissatisfied and whether the outcome they are looking for sounds realistic. In discussing the complaint with the customer, consider three key questions:

1. What specifically is the customer's complaint or complaints?
2. What does the customer want to achieve by complaining?
3. Are the customer's expectations realistic and achievable?

It may be that the customer expects more than we can provide. If so, you must make this clear to the customer as soon as possible.

Where possible you should also clarify what additional information you will need to investigate the complaint. The customer may need to provide more evidence to help us reach a decision.

Details of the complaint must be recorded on the system for recording complaints. Where appropriate, this will be done as a continuation of frontline resolution. The details must be updated when the investigation ends.

If the investigation stage follows attempted frontline resolution, you must hand over all case notes and associated information to the officer responsible for the investigation, and record that you have done so.

4.2.2 Timelines

The following deadlines are appropriate to cases at the investigation stage:

- complaints must be acknowledged within **three working days**
- you should provide a full response to the complaint as soon as possible but not later than **20 working days** from the time you received the complaint for investigation.

4.2.3 Extension to the timeline

Not all investigations will be able to meet this deadline. For example, some complaints are so complex that they require careful consideration and detailed investigation beyond the 20-day limit. However, these would be the exception and you must always try to deliver a final response to a complaint within 20 working days.

If there are clear and justifiable reasons for extending the timescale, the Assessor or Assistant Assessor will set time limits on any extended investigation, as long as the customer agrees. You

must keep the customer updated on the reason for the delay and give them a revised timescale for completion. If the customer does not agree to an extension but it is unavoidable and reasonable, then the Assessor or Assistant Assessor must consider and confirm the extension. The reasons for an extension might include the following:

- Essential accounts or statements, crucial to establishing the circumstances of the case, are needed from staff, customers or others but they cannot help because of long-term sickness or leave.
- You cannot obtain further essential information within normal timescales.
- Operations are disrupted by unforeseen or unavoidable operational circumstances, for example industrial action or severe weather conditions.
- The customer has agreed to mediation as a potential route for resolution.

These are only a few examples, and you must judge the matter in relation to each complaint. However, an extension would be the exception and you must always try to deliver a final response to the complaint within 20 working days.

As with complaints considered at the frontline stage, the proportion of complaints that exceed the 20-day limit will be evident from reported statistics. These statistics must go to the Assessor or Assistant Assessor on a quarterly basis.

[Appendix 3](#) provides further information on timelines.

4.2.4 Mediation

Some complex complaints, or complaints where customers and other interested parties have become entrenched in their position, may require a different approach to resolving the complaint. Where appropriate, you may consider using services such as mediation or conciliation using suitably trained and qualified mediators to try to resolve the matter and to reduce the risk of the complaint escalating further.

Mediation will help both parties to understand what has caused the complaint, and so is more likely to lead to mutually satisfactory solutions.

If you and the customer agree to mediation, revised timescales will need to be agreed.

4.2.5 Closing the complaint at the investigation stage

You must let the customer know the outcome of the investigation, in writing or by their preferred method of contact. Our response to the complaint must address all areas that we are responsible for and explain the reasons for our decision. You must record the decision, and details of how it was communicated to the customer, on the system for recording complaints.

You must also make clear to the customer:

- their right to ask SPSO to consider the complaint
- the time limit for doing so, and
- how to contact the SPSO.

4.2.6 Independent external review

Once the investigation stage has been completed, the customer has the right to approach the SPSO if they remain dissatisfied.

The SPSO considers complaints from people who remain dissatisfied at the conclusion of our complaints procedure. The SPSO looks at issues such as service failures and maladministration (administrative fault), as well as the way we have handled the complaint.

The SPSO recommends that you use the wording below to inform customers of their right to ask SPSO to consider the complaint. The SPSO also provides a leaflet, [The Ombudsman and your organisation](#), which you may find helpful in deciding how and when to refer someone to the SPSO.

Information about the SPSO

The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) is the final stage for complaints about public services in Scotland. This includes complaints about Scottish local authorities. If you remain dissatisfied with the Valuation Joint Board after its complaints process, you can ask the SPSO to look at your complaint. The SPSO cannot normally look at complaints:

- where you have not gone all the way through the council's complaints handling procedure
- more than 12 months after you became aware of the matter you want to complain about, or
- that have been or are being considered in court.

The SPSO's contact details are:

SPSO
4 Melville Street
Edinburgh
EH3 7NS

SPSO
Freepost EH64 1
Edinburgh
EH3 0BR

Freephone: **0800 377 7330**
Online contact www.spsso.org.uk/contact-us
Website: www.spsso.org.uk
Mobile site: <http://m.spsso.org.uk>

5.0 Governance of the Complaints Handling Procedure

5.1 Roles and responsibilities

Overall responsibility and accountability for the management of complaints lies with the Assessor and Assistant Assessor who form a management team.

Our final position on the complaint must be signed off by either the Assessor or Assistant Assessor and we will confirm that this is our final response. This ensures that the Assessor or

Assistant Assessor are accountable for the decision. It also reassures the customer that their concerns have been taken seriously.

The following paragraphs identify the roles and responsibilities of staff in relation to the Procedure:

The Assessor & ERO: *The Assessor & ERO provides leadership and direction in ways that guide and enable us to perform effectively across all services. This includes ensuring that there is an effective complaints handling procedure, with a robust investigation process that demonstrates how we learn from the complaints we receive.*

The Assessor & ERO and/or The Assistant Assessor, will take a personal interest in all complaints, though he may delegate responsibility for the complaint handling procedure to senior staff. Regular management reports assure the Assessor & ERO of the quality of complaints performance.

The Assessor & ERO's role will also include providing complaints information in an orderly and structured way within requested timescales, providing comments on factual accuracy on our behalf in response to SPSO requests and/or reports, and confirming and verifying that recommendations have been implemented.

The Assessor and Assistant Assessor will be responsible for:

- managing complaints and the way we learn from them*
- overseeing the implementation of actions required as a result of a complaint*
- investigating complaints*
- The Assessor or Assistant Assessor may take over responsibility for a complaint where the Assessor or Assistant Assessor feels uncomfortable dealing with the issues through familiarity and the complaint would be better dealt with from out with the Island Area where the Assessor or Assistant Assessor has responsibility. An example might be where the complainant knows the Assessor or Assistant Assessor or is related to him. In matters relating to Electoral Registration the Assessor may delegate the complaint to the Senior Electoral Assistant.*

The Assessor or Assistant Assessor may, however, decide to delegate some elements of complaints handling (such as investigations and the drafting of response letters) to other members of staff. Where this happens, they should retain ownership and accountability for the management and reporting of complaints. He/She will also be responsible for signing decision letters to customers, so he/she should be satisfied that the investigation is complete and the response addresses all aspects of the complaint.

Complaints investigator: *The complaints investigator is responsible and accountable for the management of the investigation. He/She will be involved in the investigation and in co-ordinating all aspects of the response to the customer. This may include preparing a comprehensive written report, including details of any procedural changes in service delivery that could result in opportunities for learning. He/she will be delegated the complaint by either the Assessor or Assistant Assessor as the case may be. He/she will be delegated to deal with the complaint as the most suitable officer for the type of complaint raised.*

Assessor or Assistant Assessor: *The Assessor or Assistant Assessor will be responsible for maintaining a record of all complaints received for each of their areas. All front line complaints*

will be reported to the Assessor or Assistant Assessor as overall responsible officer in each Island area.

All staff: A complaint may be made to any member of staff in the Joint Board so all staff must be aware of the complaints handling procedure (see separate Guidance) and how to handle and record complaints at the frontline stage. They should also be aware of who to refer a complaint to, in case they are not able to personally handle the matter. We encourage all staff to try to resolve complaints early, as close to the point of service delivery as possible, and quickly to prevent escalation.

5.2 Complaints about senior staff

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. .

If the complaint is an internal one it may be more appropriate to refer to the Valuation Joint Board's lead authority's "Reporting Concerns at Work Policy" and/or "grievance Procedures"

5.3 Recording, reporting, learning and publicising

Complaints provide valuable customer feedback. One of the aims of the complaints handling procedure is to identify opportunities to improve services within the Orkney and Shetland Valuation Joint Board. We must record all complaints in a systematic way so that we can use the complaints data for analysis and management reporting. By recording and using complaints information in this way, we can identify and address the causes of complaints and, where appropriate, identify training opportunities and introduce service improvements.

5.3.1 Recording complaints

To collect suitable data it is essential to record all complaints in line with SPSO minimum requirements, as follows:

- the customer's name and address
- the date the complaint was received
- the nature of the complaint
- how the complaint was received
- the service the complaint refers to
- the date the complaint was closed at the frontline resolution stage (where appropriate)
- the date the complaint was escalated to the investigation stage (where appropriate)
- action taken at the investigation stage (where appropriate)
- the date the complaint was closed at the investigation stage (where appropriate)
- the outcome of the complaint at each stage
- the underlying cause of the complaint and any remedial action taken.

We have structured systems for recording complaints, their outcomes and any resulting action. (See [Appendix 5](#)) These provide a detailed record of services that have failed to satisfy customers. These provide a detailed record of services that have failed to satisfy customers. [Appendix 5](#) contains guidance to employees on the logging and recording of complaints.

5.3.2 Reporting of complaints

Complaints details are analysed for trend information to ensure we identify service failures and take appropriate action. Regularly reporting the analysis of complaints information helps to inform management of where services need to improve.

Because we are a small Board with only six members of staff in Shetland and five in Orkney, complaints are discussed over the phone or by email on a daily basis by the Assessor and Assistant Assessor. Any complaints that are not resolved under Stage 1 above [Frontline Resolution](#) will follow the more formal procedure under [Stage 2](#) Investigation.

Complaints that are dealt with under Stage 2 will be reported to the Orkney and Shetland Valuation Joint Board annually as part of the Assessor's Progress Report in August each year. The report will cover Number of Complaints, their outcome and the actions we have taken in response to them. This demonstrates the improvements resulting from complaints and shows that complaints can influence our services. It also helps ensure transparency in our complaints handling service and will help to our customers and service users that we value their complaints.

We will:

- publicise on an annual basis any complaints outcomes, trends and actions taken
- use case studies and examples to demonstrate how complaints have helped improve services.

5.3.3 Learning from complaints

At the earliest opportunity after the closure of the complaint, the complaint handler should always make sure that the customer and staff involved understand the findings of the investigation and any recommendations made.

The Assessor and Assistant Assessor will review the information gathered from complaints regularly and consider whether our services could be improved or internal policies and procedures updated. Any resultant change in policies and procedures can be implemented immediately following the review rather than waiting until the complaint is reported to the Board.

As a minimum, we must:

- use complaints data to identify the root cause of complaints
- take action to reduce the risk of recurrence
- record the details of corrective action in the complaints file, and
- systematically review complaints performance reports to improve service delivery.

Where we have identified the need for service improvement:

- the action needed to improve services must be authorised
- an officer (or team) should be designated the 'owner' of the issue, with responsibility for ensuring the action is taken
- a target date must be set for the action to be taken
- the designated individual must follow up to ensure that the action is taken within the agreed timescale
- where appropriate, performance in the service area should be monitored to ensure that the issue has been resolved
- we must ensure that staff learn from complaints.

5.3.4 Publicising complaints performance information

We also report on our performance in handling complaints annually in line with SPSO requirements. This includes performance statistics showing the volumes and types of complaints and key performance details, for example on the time taken and the stage at which complaints were resolved.

5.4 Maintaining confidentiality

Confidentiality is important in complaints handling. The Orkney and Shetland Valuation Joint Board have small offices so it is particularly important to ensure that confidentiality is not compromised. It includes maintaining the customer's confidentiality and explaining to them the importance of confidentiality generally. We must always bear in mind legal requirements, for example, data protection legislation, as well as internal policies on confidentiality and the use of customers' information.

5.5 Managing unacceptable behaviour

People may act out of character in times of trouble or distress. The circumstances leading to a complaint may result in the customer acting in an unacceptable way. Customers who have a history of challenging or inappropriate behaviour, or have difficulty expressing themselves, may still have a legitimate grievance.

A customer's reasons for complaining may contribute to the way in which they present their complaint. Regardless of this, we must treat all complaints seriously and properly assess them. However, we also recognise that the actions of customers who are angry, demanding or persistent may result in unreasonable demands on time and resources or unacceptable behaviour towards our staff. We will, therefore, apply our policies and procedures to protect staff from unacceptable behaviour such as unreasonable persistence, threats or offensive behaviour from customers including any form of violent conduct.

5.6 Supporting the customer

All members of the community have the right to equal access to our complaints handling procedure. Customers who do not have English as a first language may need help with interpretation and translation services, and other customers may have specific needs that we will seek to address to ensure easy access to the complaints handling procedure.

We must always take into account our commitment and responsibilities to equality. This includes making reasonable adjustments to our service to help the customer where appropriate.

Several support and advocacy groups are available to support customers in pursuing a complaint and customers should be signposted to these as appropriate.

5.7 Time limit for making complaints

This complaints handling procedure sets a time limit of **six months** from when the customer first knew of the problem, within which time they may ask us to consider the complaint, unless there are special circumstances for considering complaints beyond this time.

We will apply this time limit with discretion. In decision making we will take account of the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman Act 2002 (Section 10(1)), which sets out the time limit within which a member of the public can normally ask the SPSO to consider complaints. **The limit is one year from when the person first knew of the problem they are complaining about, unless there are special circumstances for considering complaints beyond this time.**

If it is clear that a decision not to investigate a customer's complaint will lead to a request for external review of the matter, we may decide that this satisfies the special circumstances criteria. This will enable us to consider the complaint and try to resolve it.

Appendix 1 – Complaints – FRONTLINE STAGE

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

| Complaint | Possible actions to achieve resolution |
|---|---|
| The customer complains that her application to be registered on the Electoral Register has not been dealt with timeously. | Apologise to the customer and resolve the issue by processing the application without further delay. |
| The customer has provided evidence to verify his claim for a reduction in Rateable Value but no response has been provided. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apologise to the customer. • Consider the evidence as a matter of priority and/or in line with the relevant appeal procedures. |
| The customer complains that a member of staff did not attend a pre-arranged meeting. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speak to the member of staff, or the line manager to explain the customer's complaint and to agree how to resolve the issue, for example by arranging a new time and date for the meeting. • Explain the reasons for the failed appointment and apologise to the customer. |
| The customer complains that the quality of advice provided is not satisfactory. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask the relevant staff involved to review the guidance provided to assess whether or not it is acceptable. • If appropriate, agree that more/better information should be provided. • Explain and apologise to the customer. • Obtain a report from the member(s) of staff involved to confirm that further information has been provided to the satisfaction of the customer. • Feedback the lessons learned from the complaint into a service improvement plan. |
| 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. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell the customer that we value complaints because they help to improve services. • Encourage them to submit the complaint. • 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 |

| Complaint | Possible actions to achieve resolution |
|------------------|---|
| | contacted again about the matter. |

Appendix 2 - What is not a complaint

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.

A customer may also be concerned about matters which have their own specific review or appeal procedures, and, where appropriate, customers must be directed to the relevant procedure. This procedure should not, therefore, be used for dealing with customer complaints that are covered by the statutory appeal systems, listed below:

| | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Non-Domestic Rating Valuation | Formal Appeal to Assessor, Local Valuation Appeal Committee, Lands Tribunal, Lands Valuation Appeal Court |
| Council Tax | Formal Proposal to Assessor, Local Valuation Appeal Committee, Court of Session |
| Electoral Registration | Appeal to ERO, Sheriff Court |
| Freedom of Information | Seek redress via FOI 'Review' process or Appeal to Information Commissioner. |

Appendix 3 - Timelines

General

References to timelines throughout the complaints handling procedure relate to working days. When measuring performance against the required timelines, we do not count non-working days, for example weekends, public holidays and days of industrial action where our service has been interrupted.

Timelines at frontline resolution

You must aim to achieve frontline resolution within five working days. The day you receive the complaint is day 1. Where you receive it on a non-working day, for example at the weekend or on a public holiday, day 1 will be the next working day.



Day 1:

Day complaint received by the Valuation Joint Board, or next working date if date of receipt is a non-working day.

Day 5:

Frontline resolution achieved or complaint escalated to the investigation stage.

Extension to the five-day timeline

If you have extended the timeline at the frontline resolution stage in line with the procedure, the revised timetable for the response must take no longer than 10 working days from the date of receiving the complaint.



Day 1:

Day complaint received by the Valuation Joint Board, or next working date if date of receipt is a non-working day.

In a few cases where it is clearly essential to achieve early resolution, you may authorise an extension within five working days from when the complaint was received. You must conclude the frontline resolution stage within 10 working days from the date of receipt, either by resolving the complaint or by escalating it to the investigation stage.

Day 10:

Frontline resolution achieved or complaint escalated to the investigation stage.

Transferring cases from frontline resolution to investigation

If it is clear that frontline resolution has not resolved the matter, and the customer wants to escalate the complaint to the investigation stage, the case must be passed for investigation without delay. In practice this will mean on the same day that the customer is told this will happen.

Timelines at investigation

You may consider a complaint at the investigation stage either:

- after attempted frontline resolution, or

- immediately on receipt if you believe the matter to be sufficiently complex, serious or appropriate to merit a full investigation from the outset.

Acknowledgement

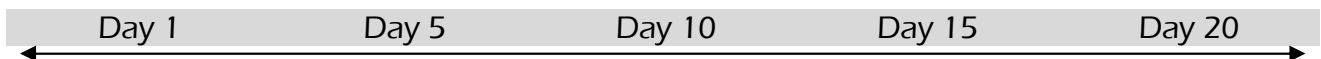
All complaints considered at the investigation stage must be acknowledged within **three working days** of receipt. The date of receipt is:

- the day the case is transferred from the frontline stage to the investigation stage, where it is clear that the case requires investigation, or
- the day the customer asks for an investigation after a decision at the frontline resolution stage. You should note that a customer may not ask for an investigation immediately after attempts at frontline resolution, or
- the date you receive the complaint, if you think it sufficiently complex, serious or appropriate to merit a full investigation from the outset.

Investigation

You should respond in full to the complaint within **20 working days** of receiving it at the investigation stage.

The 20-working day limit allows time for a thorough, proportionate and consistent investigation to arrive at a decision that is objective, evidence-based and fair. This means you have 20 working days to investigate the complaint, regardless of any time taken to consider it at the frontline resolution stage.



Day 1:

Day complaint received at investigation stage, or next working day if date of receipt is a non-working day. Acknowledgement issued within three working days.

Day 20:

Valuation Joint Board's decision issued to customer or agreement reached with customer to extend deadline

Exceptionally you may need longer than the 20-day limit for a full response. If so, you must explain the reasons to the customer, and agree with them a revised timescale.



Day 1:

Day complaint received at investigation stage, or next working day if date of receipt is a non-working day.

By Day 20:

In agreement with the customer where possible, decide a

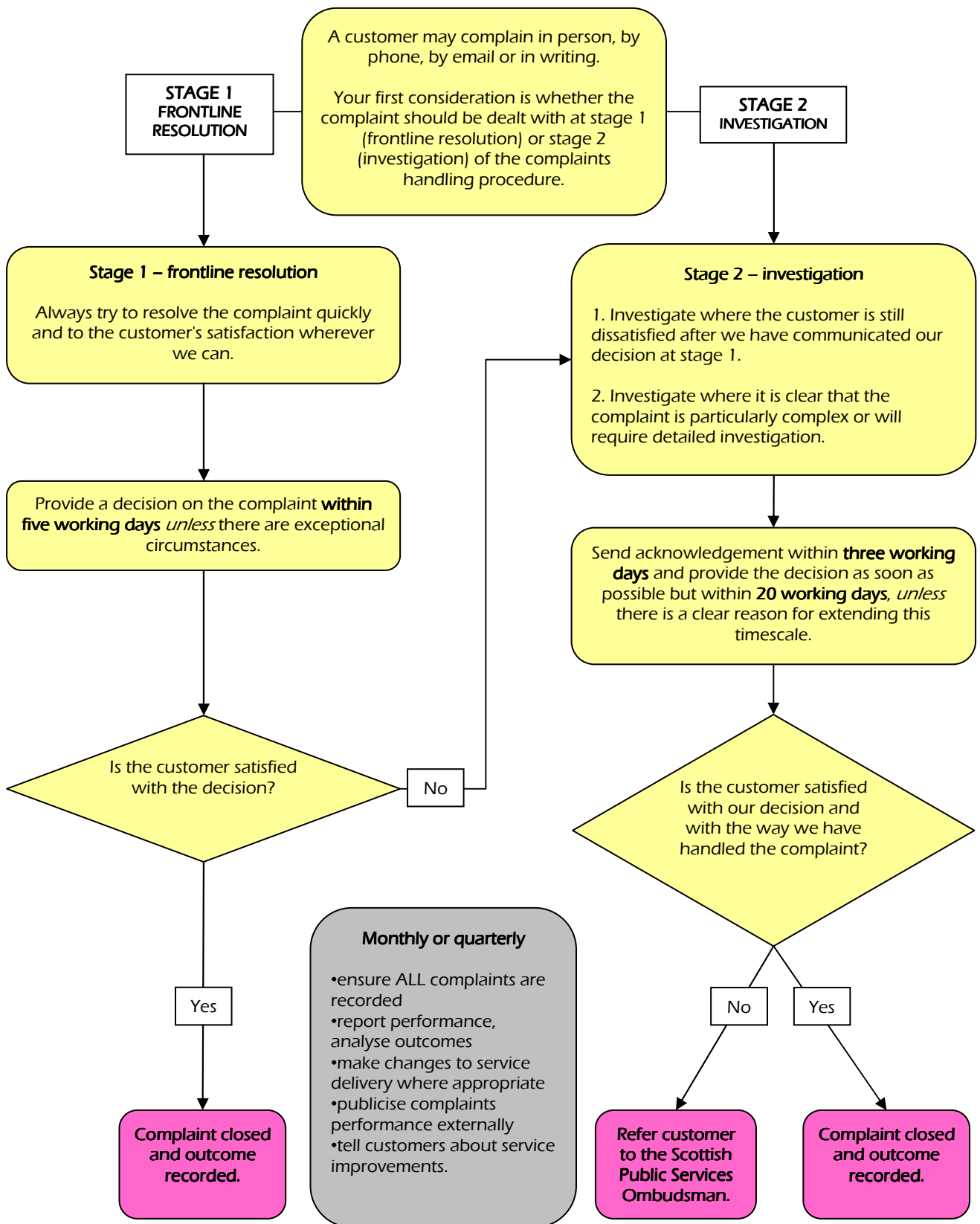
By agreed date:

Issue our final decision on the complaint

Acknowledgement
issued within three
working days.

revised
timescale for
bringing the
investigation
to a
conclusion.

Appendix 4 - The complaints handling procedure Appendix 4



Appendix 5 - The complaints handling procedure in Orkney and Shetland VJB

COMPLAINTS LOGGING & RECORDING GUIDANCE

1. The recipient of the Complaint should make out a Logging Sheet to include the following:-

- Complainants Name
- Complainant's Address
- Complainant's Telephone No(s) and/or E-mail Address
- Subject/Relevant Address (if different)
- Date Received
- How received (i.e By mail, e-mail etc)
- Received by (Name of member of staff)
- Nature of Complaint
- Complaint Number

The complaint number should be a simple, consecutive number within each year, which will be obtained by contacting the Assessor or Assistant Assessor.

2. A copy of the Logging & Recording sheet containing the above details should be passed to the Admin Manager (or Principal Administrative Officer in Admin Manager's absence) and the relevant Line Manager should be informed.

3. The person dealing with the complaint should maintain the Logging & Recording Sheet through the Frontline Resolution Stage of the process and pass to the Investigating Officer if the complaint proceeds to that Stage. The person dealing with the complaint at the Frontline Resolution stage may be the recipient or it may be more appropriate for a Line Manager or other member of staff to deal with the complaint – this will be very dependent upon the nature of the complaint.

4. Likewise, the Investigating Officer should maintain the Logging & Recording Sheet through the Investigation Stage.

5. At each significant step forward in the process, the sheet should be updated and a copy passed to the Admin Manager for the Recording Sheet to be updated.

6. Any Complaint which is referred to the SPSO should be dealt with by the Assessor & ERO and notified to the Admin Manager on receipt.

6. All live Logging & Recording sheets should be referred to the Management Team by the Admin Manager for its regular meetings until the complaint is resolved.

7. The Admin Manager will provide the MT with regular reports on Complaints received and resolved. (See relevant spreadsheet)

Michael A Forbes
Assessor & ERO
January 2013