



To: Audit, Risk and Scrutiny Board

On: 19 January 2026

Report by: Director of Finance & Resources

Heading: Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) Annual Report 2024/25

1 Summary

- 1.1 The new Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) has issued his [SPSO Annual Report and Financial Statements 2024-25](#).
 - 1.2 The SPSO is the final stage for complaints about councils, the National Health Service, housing associations, colleges and universities, prisons, most water providers, the Scottish Government and its agencies and departments and most Scottish authorities.
 - 1.3 The report advised that Public Service cases received in 2024/25 increased in comparison to 2023/24.
 - 1.4 It was noted that the health sector was the sector about which the SPSO received most complaints (32.1%), with local authority cases receiving the second highest number (31.6%).
 - 1.5 The statutory functions of the Ombudsman, together with the complaints process and a look forward to the coming year are set out within the SPSO's report.
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2 Recommendations

- 2.1 That the SPSO's 2024/25 Annual Report be noted; and
 - 2.2 That it be noted that 52 complaints relative to Renfrewshire were determined by the SPSO in 2024/25 and none went to public investigation.
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3 **Background**

3.1 **Corporate Governance**

In April 2025, at the end of her eight-year tenure, the SPSO said farewell to Rosemary Agnew, Ombudsman. The newly appointed Ombudsman, Paul McFadden, joined the organisation on 20 October 2025. In the interim, from 1 May to 19 October 2025, Andrew Crawford was appointed Acting Ombudsman. Throughout 2024/25, following the departure of the Director in April, the Ombudsman had in place a temporary leadership structure, which will continue into 2025/26. This is to afford the next Ombudsman the flexibility to shape the organisation.

3.2 **SPSO Role and Function**

The SPSO has a wide remit which covers a variety of functions and services. There are four distinct statutory functions:

- the final stage for complaints about most devolved public services in Scotland;
- powers and responsibilities to publish complaints handling principles and procedures and monitoring and supporting best practice in complaints handling;
- independent review service for the Scottish Welfare Fund with the power to overturn and substitute decisions made by councils on Community Care and Crisis Grant applications; and
- Independent National Whistleblowing Officer for the NHS in Scotland; the final stage for complaints about how the NHS considers whistleblowing concerns and the treatment of individuals concerned.

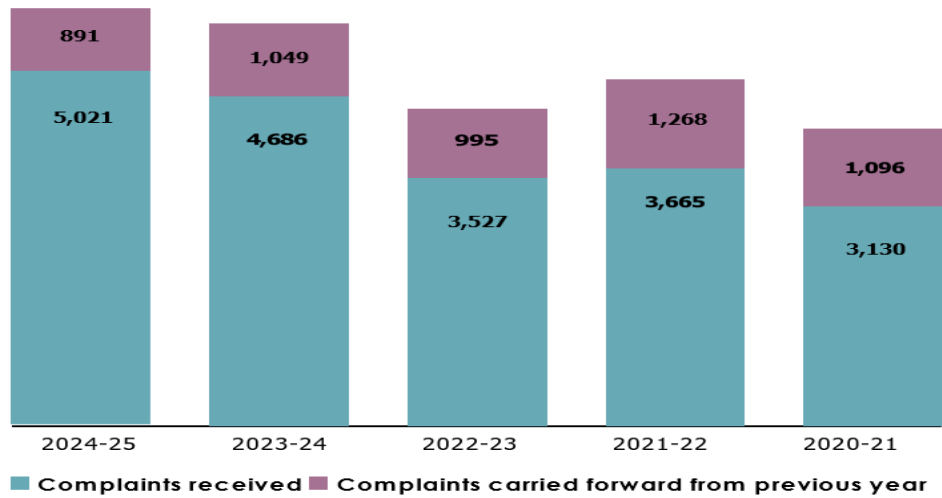
4 **Complaints Overview**

4.1 The report advised that case numbers received in 2024/25 increased by 7% which was a lower increase in comparison to 2023/24 which saw a 33% increase. While the SPSO could not attribute this rise to any specific issue, they advised it was likely the impact of several factors; pressures on public service resources, cost of living pressures, and a greater awareness of the SPSO as they developed and implemented their engagement and communication strategy and visibly contributed to public consultations.

4.2 Despite rising volumes, the SPSO closed more complaints than were received. The number of open cases dropped to 891, down 15% from last year. The report highlighted that efficiency improvements had a positive impact.

4.3 Public Service Complaints received and carried forward

The report noted that nationally, in 2024/25 the SPSO received a total of 5,021 complaints (5,912 in total when including complaints carried over from last year) compared with 4,686 complaints received in 2023/24 and 3,527 in 2022/23.



4.4 The table below shows the breakdown of public service complaints received by sector and remains generally consistent with previous years. Once again, health is the highest subject of complaint followed by local authorities.

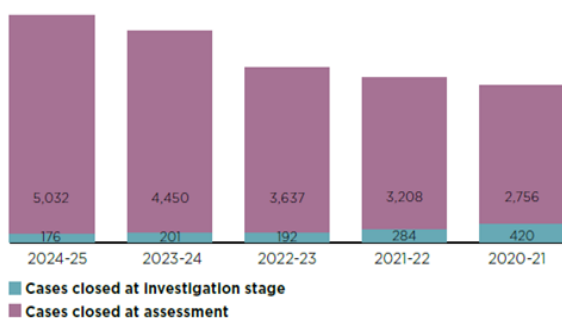
PSCs received by sector

Authority Sector	2024-25	% of 2024-25 total received	2023-24	2022-23	2021-22	2020-21
Colleges	25	0.5%	28	20	24	21
Health (including prison healthcare)	1,610	32.1%	1,544	1,193	1,238	1056
Housing Associations	496	9.9%	476	361	295	224
Joint Health & Social Care	264	5.3%	210	145	188	163
Local Authority	1,585	31.6%	1,393	1,051	1,189	951
Other	67	1.3%	86	54	39	33
Prisons (non-healthcare)	299	6.0%	321	253	235	219
Scottish Government & Devolved Administration	278	5.5%	251	174	182	147
Universities	289	5.8%	285	208	187	205
Water	108	2.2%	92	68	88	111
Total	5,021	100%	4,686	3,527	3,665	3,130

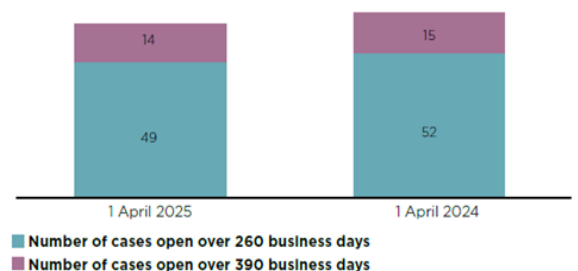
4.5 Public Service Complaints closed

There were 5,032 cases closed in 2024/25, 176 went to investigation stage compared to 201 in 2023/24. A breakdown of Public Service complaints which were closed at assessment and after investigation is outlined in table below:

PSC total cases closed



Case age

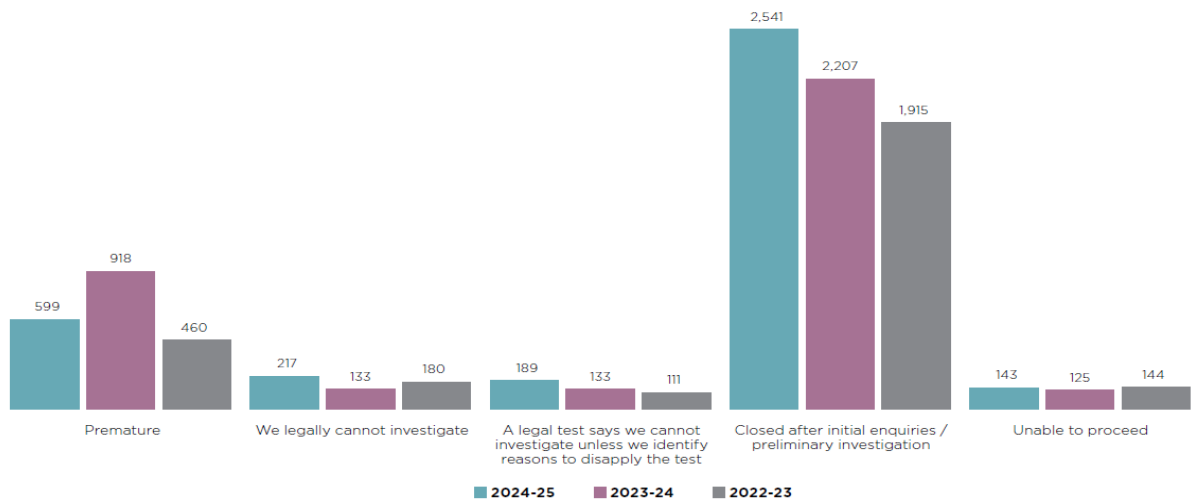


4.6 The number of cases closed at investigation stage was 176 and this was a decrease by a 12.44% from 2023/24.

4.7 Complaints Assessment

The breakdown of assessment outcomes below does not include some cases closed at first contact. As a result, the figures may not exactly match those detailed in Complaints overview. A description of the assessment outcomes is detailed on page 28 of the SPSO annual report.

Assessment outcomes¹



4.8 The report advised that premature complaints made up 11% of their total caseload this year. However, there was a significant decrease this year. The actual number of premature complaints received decreased by 42.5% (599 in 2024/25 compared to 918 in 2023/24). A premature complaint is one that has been submitted to the SPSO before the organisation’s complaint process has been completed. Normally these are returned to complainants offering them advice on how to progress their complaint.

5 Public Reports

5.1 Of the investigations completed in Scotland as a whole, five cases were reported in full as public investigation reports (same as last year). These were cases where the SPSO decided to publish the investigation in full because there was evidence of significant personal injustice or hardship, systemic failure, significant complaints handling failures, or it is a test/precedent case. None of these cases involved Renfrewshire Council.

Public reports

2024-25	2023-24	2022-23	2021-22	2020-21
5	5	2	7	7

5.2 Cases that are not published in full as public investigation reports are usually published as decision summaries. Public reports and decision summaries can be found in the ['Our findings' section](#) of the SPSO website.

7 Complaints in relation to Renfrewshire Council 2024/25

7.1 No complaint details for specific organisations were included in the SPSO annual report. However, information contained within the [2024/25 statistics on the SPSO website](#) and from information received separately from the SPSO, indicated that the number of complaints determined by the SPSO relative to Renfrewshire was 52 compared with 54 in 2023/24 and 35 in 2022/23. Of the 52 cases 22 reached the advice stage, 29 were completed at the early resolution stage and one was resolved at the investigation stage. A copy of the investigation report is attached as Appendix 1.

		Council
Stage	Outcome Group	Renfrewshire Council
Advice	A&G - Complaint submissions - mature	4
	A&G - Complaint submissions - premature	7
	A&G - Enquiries	11
	Unable to proceed	0
	Total	22
Early Resolution	Cause and impact test not met (s 5 (3))	0
	Discretion – Alternative action proposed	0
	Discretion – Alternative route used or available	1
	Discretion – Good complaint handling	17
	Discretion – Insufficient benefit would be achieved by investigation	5
	Discretion – Referred back	4
	Discretion – Resolved - both parties satisfied with proposed outcome	1
	Member of the public test not met (s 5 (6))	1
	Premature	0
	Right of appeal to court/tribunal/Scottish ministers (s 7 (8))	0
	Subject matter not in jurisdiction	0
	Time limit (s 10)	0
	Unable to proceed	0
	Total	29
Investigation	Fully upheld	1
	Not duly made or withdrawn	0
	Not upheld	0
	Some upheld	0
	Total	1
Total		52

7.2 Of the 52 cases received in 2024/25 relative to Renfrewshire, the main subjects of these are as follows, with 2023/24 figures in brackets. The subjects are the SPSO's and may not relate directly to the way Renfrewshire Council services are organised: Education 4 (7); Environmental Health & Cleansing 5 (15); Finance 2 (6); Housing 23 (14); Land & Property* 4 (*NEW); Legal & Admin 2 (1); Planning 2 (2); Roads & Transport 3 (2); Social Work 6 (8); Subject Unknown/Out of Jurisdiction 1 (2).

8 Looking Forward

- 8.1 This year saw the SPSO prepare for the transition to a new Ombudsman, adapting roles and responsibilities to ensure continuity until their new office holder took up post in October 2025. Externally, they continued to face significant risk, particularly in relation to cyber security and the increase in complaint volumes. However, they continued to absorb these rises through new and efficient ways of working which are detailed within the report.
- 8.2 The SPSO remains committed to delivering high quality services with continuity and ambition and have made a pledge to reduce the time it takes to allocate and investigate complaints, while engaging with wider stakeholders to ensure public services are effective and accessible.
- 8.2 Their Business Plan for next year sets out our priorities and projects; they continue to pursue agile initiatives to improve efficiency; and they are increasingly aware of the growing risk posed by rising complaint volumes. Therefore, they have committed to focusing on strategic and high priority projects. This includes their workforce and medium-term financial planning.
- 8.5 The report finally notes that they are optimistic about this new chapter for the SPSO. They remain committed and proactive in addressing the challenges they will face in 2026/26 and beyond.

Implications of the Report

1 Financial – None

2 HR & Organisational Development – None

3 Community Planning – None

4 Legal – None

5 Property/Assets – None

6 Information Technology – None

7 Equality & Human Rights – The recommendations contained within this report have been assessed in relation to their impact on equalities and human rights. No negative impacts on equality groups or potential for infringement of individuals' human rights have been identified arising from the recommendations contained in the report. If required following implementation, the actual impact of the recommendations and the mitigating actions will be reviewed and monitored, and the results of the assessment will be published on the Council's website.

8 Health & Safety – None

9 Procurement – None

10 Risk - None.

11 Privacy Impact – None

12 COSLA Policy Position Implications – None

13 Climate Risk – None

14 Children's Rights - None

List of Background Papers

- (a) Background Paper 1 - SPSO Annual Report and Financial Statements 2024/25. SPSO's website
https://www.spsso.org.uk/sites/spsso/files/communications_material/annual_report/SPSO%20Annual%20Report%20and%20Financial%20Statements%202023-24.pdf.
- (b) Background Paper 2 - Data tables for the 2023/24 annual statistics - [Statistics 2024-25 | SPSO](#) website
- (c) Background Paper 3 – SPSO database – Investigation Reports - [Investigation Reports | SPSO](#)
- (d) email from SPSO (5/12/24) detailing confidential data list for closed complaints for Renfrewshire Council for 2024/25

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Decision Report 202210537

Case ref:	202210537
Date:	August 2024
Body:	Renfrewshire Council
Sector:	Local Government
Outcome:	Upheld, recommendations
Subject:	Handling of application (complaints by opponents)

Summary

C complained that the council approved an application for non-material variation (NMV) to a planning consent, despite the variation significantly altering the originally agreed plot levels and having major effects on existing properties that bordered onto the new development. We took independent planning advice, which highlighted that it is ultimately a matter for the planning authority to determine whether or not a proposed change to a planning application is material. However, there should be clear and transparent records to support the council's decision making and justify their decision. The council accepted that was lacking in this case, in terms of the content of the worksheet for the NMV.

We found that the NMV worksheet did not contain sufficient information to explain why the council concluded that the change was non-material. The records did not adequately demonstrate that the council considered

the potential impact on neighbouring properties, and continued compliance with the relevant Development Plan in this regard. It was not demonstrated e.g. via adequate / relevant cross sections through the site, how the council concluded that there was sufficient separation distances between new and existing properties. It would also have been good practice for the council to keep a record of any site visit carried out, recognising that there is no statutory requirement to visit the site.

While we found that the council failed to keep adequate records to justify their decision, it was not possible for us to determine that the decision to approve the changes as a NMV was incorrect. That remained a discretionary matter for the council. However, on the basis of poor record keeping, we concluded that the council's handling of the NMV application was unreasonable, and we upheld this complaint.

Recommendations

What we asked the organisation to do in this case:

- Apologise to C for the issues identified in this decision notice. The apology should meet the standards set out in the SPSO guidelines on apology available at www.spsso.org.uk/information-leaflets.

What we said should change to put things right in future:

- Worksheets for future applications for NMVs should provide sufficient detail to make it clear why a particular conclusion has been reached, including continued compliance with all relevant Development Plan policies. When a site visit is carried out in respect of an application, a record should be kept of that visit. The council should ensure that they have sufficient information to determine the application e.g. adequate / relevant cross sections.

We have asked the organisation to provide us with evidence that they have implemented the recommendations we have made on this case by the deadline we set.

Related reading

[View Decision Report 202210537 as a PDF \(26.85 KB\)](#)

Updated: August 21, 2024

Making a complaint

[How to complain](#)
[How we handle complaints](#)
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[FAQs](#)

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[What to expect when we receive a complaint about your organisation](#)
[How to handle complaints](#)
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