

**SCOTTISH
PUBLIC
SERVICES
OMBUDSMAN**



People Centred | Improvement Focused

Strategic Plan

2024-2028





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Foreword

Welcome to the SPSO's strategic plan which sets out our priorities and approach for the next four years; 2024/25—2025/28.

The next four years will continue to be unsettled and demanding for all of Scottish public services, including the SPSO. While my powers and duties are set out in legislation, I and my team recognise that we not only have a critical role in the oversight of Scottish public services, but also that as a Parliamentary office holder, funded by the public purse, SPSO is part of that wider environment.

Many of the challenges SPSO face, are the same as for organisations under jurisdiction and for people making, or trying to make complaints or raise concerns. These include

- scarce resources, financial and human
- rising costs
- changes in working practices

The organisation also faces the specific challenge of a change in Ombudsman in 2025—26.

I and my team remain deeply committed to our values and ensuring that we contribute actively and positively to the wider rights-based approach to public service delivery. We also recognise the need to drive our own and public service efficiency.

We have reflected on and learned from the experience of the last four years. We have learned that we can be more agile and flexible, that we can be more efficient if local complaint handling is good and that there

is more we can do to reach out to people and communities who don't complain, but should.

This learning, coupled with our commitment to values and rights will guide and inform us over the next four years.

SPSO are a great team. I cannot thank enough my organisation for their dedication and commitment, driven, as we all are, by our shared and deep-rooted values of being people centred, fair, independent, and learning and improvement.



Rosemary Agnew
Scottish Public Services Ombudsman

April 2024



About the SPSO

It is all too easy to think of the SPSO as being simply a complaint handling body. It is where the majority of our resources are consumed, and the most public of our work. Complaints about public services and whistleblowing are an essential part of the access to justice and alternative dispute resolution landscape, providing a route for people to seek redress; but that is not all we do.

As can be seen from our statutory functions we are more than that, adding **value** to Scottish public services in many ways:

- we set and monitor complaints and whistleblowing standards and performance
- our Scottish Welfare Fund reviews help people in crisis and need
- our work emphasises the importance of local resolution, consistency of decision-making in line with statutory or national guidance, and the value of good complaint handling
- we encourage learning for improvement to enable more efficient delivery of Scottish public services
- we provide essential advice and guidance for our service users – existing and prospective - and Scottish public bodies under our jurisdiction.

SPSO statutory functions

The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman has a wide remit, covering a variety of functions and services. The Ombudsman's powers and duties come (predominantly) from the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman Act 2002, which bestows four distinct type of statutory functions

1. the final stage for complaints about most devolved public services in Scotland including councils, the health service, prisons, water and sewerage providers, Scottish Government, universities, and colleges
2. specific powers and responsibilities to publish complaints, and whistleblowing concerns (for the NHS), handling procedures, and to monitor and support best practice
3. 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
4. Independent National Whistleblowing Officer for the NHS in Scotland (INWO) providing the final stage for complaints about how the NHS considers whistleblowing disclosures and the treatment of individuals concerned.

Vision and values

Vision

The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman puts people and learning at the heart of what we do. We achieve the best outcomes for people and drive efficiency in public services through the impact of shared learning from complaints oversight.

Strategic themes

We will live our values through four strategic themes that drive our activity and annual business plans

1. Access to justice through everyday rights
2. Agile capacity
3. Standards and impact
4. Efficiency

Values

We are driven by our values

- Independent
- People centred
- Fair
- Learn and improve





Strategic theme: Access to justice through everyday rights

Good is ... Scottish public services are accessible without barriers. People can access them when they need them in the way they need to. People are listened to, treated with kindness and respect, and have access to redress through exercising their right to complain.

Success is

- People accessing complaints systems in a way that meets their needs
- SPSO and Scottish public bodies complaints procedures are rights based
- SPSO and Scottish public bodies demonstrate they are respecting rights in how they respond to complaints
- Having an engaged stakeholder network which considers accessibility to complaints and learns from them to improve accessibility to public services
- Positively influencing the access to justice landscape, including promoting simplification and effective signposting

Our strategic objectives

1. We will develop and adopt rights-based approaches to complaints handling; updating and monitoring Model Complaints Handling Procedures and Model National Whistleblowing Standards to ensure rights are reflected in accessibility to public bodies complaints handling.
2. We will make our own services as accessible, and rights based as they can be, promoting awareness of the right to complain.
3. We will continue to develop stakeholder relationships to contribute to development of fair, accessible Scottish public services, and wider access to justice environment.
4. We will push for legislative change to enable us to make our services and those of other Scottish public bodies accessible and rights based.

**Supports
National
Performance
Framework**

Human Rights



Health



Children



Strategic theme: Agile capacity

Good is ... SPSO and Scottish public services have the capacity to deliver their functions efficiently, effectively, and fairly. This is supported by learning from complaints and whistleblowing concerns and guidance which enables an agile and flexible approach.

Success is ...

- SPSO have sufficient resources across all our functions
- A happy, engaged, knowledgeable team
- Recognition through accreditation for investors in people and well-being
- Having an inquisitive and agile approach to adapting services for continuous improvement
- Providing accessible, helpful support, guidance, and training for stakeholders, to support agile approaches to complaint handling

Our strategic objectives

5. We will build and maintain our capacity, financial, human and infrastructure, to implement and deliver our statutory functions, taking an agile and flexible approach.
6. We will be acknowledged for having well-trained, properly supported people, who have the tools they need to deliver our services.
7. We will review and develop the support, guidance and training we offer to public bodies, complainants, and whistleblowers to enable them to develop their own capacity, to handle service complaints, whistleblowing concerns and applications to the Scottish welfare fund.

**Supports
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Performance
Framework**

Human Rights



Health



Children



Fair Work & Business





Strategic theme: Standards and impact

Good is ... SPSO's monitoring, and application of complaint handling standards has demonstrable impact on complaints and whistleblowing concerns handling and learning from complaints

Success is ...

- SPSO's support and intervention has impact and drives improvement
- Model procedures and guidance are fit for purpose and effective
- Having an effective data and information management approach to inform activity and target resources for greatest impact
- Information and intelligence are shared through engagement, information sharing agreements and consultations

Our strategic objectives

8. We will monitor Scottish public bodies' complaint handling, Scottish Welfare Fund applications and whistleblowing handling, holding them to account for poor performance and giving credit for good performance.
9. We will review the Model Complaints Handling Procedures and National Whistleblowing Standards, to ensure they remain fit for purpose.
10. We will contribute to the development and/ or review of other standards and guidance to ensure they deliver services to the standards required.
11. We will develop our capacity to gather and share information and data to enable us to make efficient and impactful interventions when complaint, and Scottish welfare fund services handling falls below accepted standards.
12. We will promote good practice to drive efficiency in public sector complaints and Scottish welfare fund applications handling, to ensure learning is captured and applied to service delivery improvements.

**Supports
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Efficiency

Good is ... SPSO's delivers services efficiently and effectively, through a well-managed and governed organisation. We innovate to work more efficiently while still being people centred and compliant with legislation, standards, and guidance. Good practice is shared with stakeholders to contribute to collective efficiency gains.

Success is ...

- Delivering our services within budget
- Taking an agile approach to continuous improvement, delivering more for the same resources, and/ or reducing the resources needed to deliver statutory functions to time and quality
- Setting realistic performance indicators and achieving them efficiently and effectively
- Working with other Parliamentary Office holders to drive efficiency through shared services
- Supporting Scottish public services to deliver efficient and effective complaints and SWF services

Our strategic objectives

13. We will manage the organisation to deliver our statutory functions within budget in line with legislative requirements, our published customer service standards, and our performance targets.
14. We will keep our approach under review to drive efficiency and ensure business continuity, taking an agile and open-minded approach to business and process development.

Supports National Performance Framework

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Health



Children



Fair Work & Business





Reporting progress

Annually

The SPSO will report achievement against plans through our Annual Report and Financial Statements and other statutory reports. These will set out achievement against the published strategic and business plans.

The annual business plan sets out the activities of the organisation and how they each support the delivery of strategic aims. The plan is a mixture of regular business as usual activity, and initiatives to deliver specific pieces of work.

Quarterly

A quarterly update will be published providing an overview of progress against the business plan.

Other

Achievement and progress will also be reported through other mechanisms as needed including:

- Parliamentary scrutiny, including appearing before Parliamentary committees.
- Specific reports required by legislation and national guidance
- Special reports
- Publication of documents such as minutes and governance reports
- Ad hoc reports
- Stakeholder engagement with a range of stakeholders, including the public, public bodies, third sector and advocacy bodies and others with an interest in our work



Risk and resources

Risk and sustainability overview

The most significant strategic risks facing the SPSO are

SPSO resources

- Having inadequate, inflexible, and unsustainable funding levels to deliver our statutory functions and strategic plan remains a perennial risk.
- On the supply side, this is exacerbated by the annuality of funding allocations, and our ability to build or adapt capacity quickly because of the time taken to train and develop new team members for the intellectually, technically, and emotionally demanding functions we deliver.
- On the demand side, the unpredictability of work volumes, the increasing complexity of casework and the impact of the economic environment on Scottish public services, provide particular challenges to short to medium term planning.

Cyber security

- SPSO recognises that at any point in time we hold significant sensitive data and make it a priority to manage and protect that data. We continue to develop and update our cyber security strategy to minimise the risk and impact of a cyber-attack.
- Our strategy recognises that this requires constant vigilance and investment; in technology, training, information, and data systems, and how we communicate and share data (particularly on casework).

Resource planning assumptions

SPSO recognises that the Ombudsman is accountable for how we manage resources. Our planning approach follows these basic assumptions

1. Our baseline consolidated budget will not increase, other than as currently, for pay uplifts and cost of living increases that cannot be absorbed or mitigated.
2. Project work will focus on development that impacts on our ability to absorb workload fluctuations and/ or constructively influence demand for our services.
3. Seeking additional consolidated funding for volume changes will be a last resort.
4. Priority for case based resources will be balanced against resourcing of other functions that deliver quality and efficiency improvements in complaint and application handling by front-line services.
5. Shared services with other Parliamentary office holders will be considered and reviewed constantly.
6. Corporate services are structured to support shared services. The impact of any resource changes will consider the wider impact on other Parliamentary office holders



Funding sources

SPSO will seek funding from five sources:

1. **The annual consolidated budget from the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body (SPCB).** For the purposes of this strategic plan, the baseline budget is the 2024—25 consolidated budget. It is the minimum required to deliver our statutory functions to the current times and quality standards. Salary related costs, such as pay uplifts will continue to be met by the SPCB. Only if volumes increase will SPSO consider seeking additional funding, and only then if increases cannot be absorbed through internal efficiencies.
2. **Operational contingency funding.** SPSO does not hold contingency funding for one-off unplanned expenditure that cannot be absorbed through internal efficiencies, reallocation of resources, or re-prioritisation of work. For funding demands that cannot be absorbed, SPSO will apply to the SPCB's office holder contingency funding in line with agreed procedures and frameworks.
3. **Project funding.** Funding will be sought from the SPCB for one-off planned projects or initiatives. Requests will be based on demonstrating the added value of the work and the benefits to the SPSO and Scottish public services. The projects themselves will not impose on-going increases to the SPSO's consolidated budget. SPSO will also consider working with third-party stakeholders to leverage greatest value from resources.



4. **New and changing functions.** If the SPSO is given additional functions, or external drivers change or expand existing functions, additional funding will be sought for:

- *Development and set-up costs.* These will be one-off, unconsolidated funding required to scope, develop, and implement the new functions.
- *Consolidated funding,* included in the SPSO's baseline budget for ongoing delivery of expanded or new functions.

While it is expected the funding will be accessed via the SPCB, the SPSO will liaise with other stakeholders, such as the Scottish Government, for provision of funding, particularly in relation development projects. Consolidated funding for new functions will be subject to review as agreed with SPCB and other stakeholders to ensure it is at the appropriate level.

5. **Changes in volumes.** The SPSO's remit is both complex and wide-ranging. This combined with the unpredictability of complaints about public bodies, Scottish Welfare Fund review applications and whistleblowing complaints makes a single approach to volume related funding challenging.

In *broad terms* our approach considers the impact of changing volumes in relation to each specific volume-based statutory function, and the knock-on impact on other functions. The costed illustrations include the direct investigation and review resource and the additional resources required to support the functions. These include externally focused functions such as Standards,

Engagement, and good complaints handling practice, and internal support costs such as HR, Health and Safety, management, and IT.

Reductions

- If volumes in one functional area decrease, in the short-term (one to two years) resources will be redeployed to where they add the greatest value, or will be used to absorb increases in other volume-based functions. This will enable SPSO to retain vital experience, skills, and competence; essential for roles that require significant investment to develop.
- If volumes in one functional area demonstrate a sustained decrease, the SPSO will liaise directly with the SPCB about redeploying or resources permanently, using funding for contingency, or reducing the consolidated budget.

Increases

Increases in volumes are effectively a cut in resources, as volume increases (or significant fluctuations) impact on risks related to service delivery, such as delays, and risk relating to capacity to support access to justice through complaints handling.

- in the immediate short-term the SPSO will seek to absorb the increases through efficiencies and an agile approach to capacity management.
- in the short to medium terms. In the one to two year time frame the SPSO will seek unconsolidated funding to assist in managing the increase, recognising that it may be a fluctuation rather than sustained increase.

- In the medium to long term, if volumes in one functional area demonstrate a sustained increase, the SPSO will liaise directly with the SPCB to seek an increase in the baseline consolidated budget.

The image contains three vertically stacked boxes, each with a circular icon on the left and text on the right.

- Consolidated baseline budget** (light blue box):
 - informed by data modelling
 - efficiency focus
 - impact assessment
- Project** (pink box):
 - improve complaint handling by ourselves and others through learning
 - identify and drive efficiency and quality improvement
 - embedding rights
- Scenario planning** (purple box):
 - developing and using scenarios to inform resource decision making

Illustrations of volume increases on resources

By way of illustration, based on current workloads and practice

1. Public Services Complaints

- ▲ 10% increase in PS complaints will require additional 5 members of staff: 3 investigators, and 2 members of staff for supporting casework, such as front line enquiries and advice and guidance for public bodies. The total cost would be £428,000.



- ▲ 20% increase in PS complaints will require an additional 9 members of staff, including an additional 5.5 investigators, at a total cost of £795,900
- ▲ 25% increase in PS complaints will require an additional 12 members of staff, including an additional 7 investigators, staff at a cost of £1,030,600.
- ▼ 10% reduction in PS complaints will require 3.8 fewer staff, including 2.5 investigators, with a cost saving of £286,000.
- ▼ 20% reduction in PS complaints will require 9 fewer staff, including 6 investigators, with a cost saving of £686,300.

2. Whistleblowing Complaints

- ▲ Whistleblowing complaint volumes are unpredictable due to the newness of the function. 26% increase in whistleblowing complaints will require 1 additional member of staff, with 0.5 of the resource focused on investigation. This would increase costs by £68,500.



- ▼ 25% reduction in whistleblowing complaints will require 1.2 fewer staff which would reduce costs by £90,000.

3. Scottish Welfare Fund Review Service

- ▲ 15% increase in Scottish Welfare Fund case volumes will require 2.4 additional staff, at a total cost of £93,476. Additional resource for volume increases in this area of business is critical and time sensitive as it is subject to statutory timescales and meets an immediate need for those in the most vulnerable of situation.
- ▲ 25% increase in in Scottish Welfare Fund case volumes will require 3.6 additional staff, at a total cost of £249,300.
- ▼ SWF cases can also be the most variable in the short term, so it is critical for service and business continuity that in the short to medium term, reductions in staff requirements are avoided. The resource would be redeployed to other SWF related work such as best practice guidance and training and awareness raising. 20% reduction in SWF case volumes would reduce overall staffing by 2, with a cost saving of £117,643.
- ▼ 25% reduction in SWF cases would reduce overall staffing requirements by 3, with a potential cost saving of £188,228. The feasibility of this would require careful consideration to enable the team to be viable in delivering the function.



Summary of strategic objectives

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- 2.** We will make our own services as accessible, and rights based as they can be, promoting awareness of the right to complain.
- 3.** We will continue to develop stakeholder relationships to contribute to development of fair, accessible Scottish public services, and wider access to justice environment.
- 4.** We will push for legislative change to enable us to make our services and those of other Scottish public bodies accessible and rights based.
- 5.** We will build and maintain our capacity, financial, human and infrastructure, to implement and deliver our statutory functions, taking an agile and flexible approach.
- 6.** We will be acknowledged for having well-trained, properly supported people, who have the tools they need to deliver our services.
- 7.** We will review and develop the support, guidance and training we offer to public bodies, complainants, and whistleblowers to enable them to develop their own capacity, to handle service complaints, whistleblowing concerns and applications to the Scottish welfare fund.
- 8.** We will monitor Scottish public bodies' complaint handling, Scottish Welfare Fund applications and whistleblowing handling, holding them to account for poor performance and giving credit for good performance.
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This document is laid before the Scottish Parliament by Rosemary Agnew, the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) as required by section 17A of the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman Act 2002. **XXXXXX**