

**Annual Customer Service Complaints Performance Report**

October 2023

**April 2022- March 2023**

# Introduction

SEPA’s Complaints Handling Procedure (CHP) is in accordance with the requirements of the Model Complaints Handling Procedure published by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) and requires us to publish an annual report on our performance against four key indicators, including complaint trends and the actions that have been or will be taken to improve services as a result.

For comparative purposes, the performance figures for the year April 2022 to March 2023 inclusive, are presented alongside the corresponding figures for the previous year April 2021 to March 2022 inclusive.

# Indicators

## Indicator One - total number of customer service complaints received

This indicator is a measure of the sum of the number of service complaints received at Stage 1 (this includes escalated complaints as they were first received at Stage 1), and the number of complaints received directly at Stage 2.

A total of 32 service level complaints were received in the reporting period and handled under the SEPA’s CHP, with 21 being handled at Stage 1 and 11 at Stage 2.

Table 1: Bar graph showing total number of Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaints.

This represents an overall increase of 39% from the total number of complaints (23) handled in the previous year 2021/22. The number of Stage 1 complaints handled in this reporting year increased by 62% (from 13 to 21), with Stage 2 complaints increasing only by 9% (from 10 to 11).

## Indicator two - number and percentage of complaints at each stage that were closed in full within the set timescales of five and 20 working days

This indicator reports on the number of complaints closed in full at Stage 1, Stage 2 and after escalation within MCHP timescales as % of all Stage 1, Stage 2 and escalated complaints responded to in full.

Table 2: Bar graph showing number of Stage 1 complaints closed within timescales.

Table 3: Bar graph showing number of Stage 2 complaints closed within timescales.

## Indicator Three - average time in working days for a full response to complaints at each stage

This indicator records the average (mean) time in working days to respond at Stage 1, Stage 2 and after escalation.

Response times to Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaints improved in the reporting year with the average number of days for Stage 1 complaints reducing from 6 days in 2021/22 to 5 days in 2022/23 and the average number of days for Stage 2 complaints reducing from 33 to 21 days.

We assess this as being due to continued recovery from the 2020 cyberattack, enhanced staff awareness and understanding of the complaints handling processes following roll-out of training modules, and the priority given to customer complaints by SEPA management at the highest level.

## Indicator Four - outcome of complaints at each Stage

This indicator quantifies the number of complaints upheld, partially upheld, not upheld and resolved at Stage 1, Stage 2 and after escalation as % of all complaints closed at Stage 1, Stage 2 and after escalation.

Table 4: Bar graph showing the outcomes of complaints at each stage (upheld, not upheld, partially upheld, and resolved.)

Of the 21 Stage 1 complaints closed in the reporting period, one (5%) was found Upheld, 17 (81%) were found Not Upheld and three (14%) were Resolved.

The Upheld complaint concerned a failure by SEPA to deliver a timely service and provide the customer with regular updates about a then ongoing discharge of sewage into a watercourse. The relevant Unit Manager apologised, explained the reasons for delay and committed to further action and regular contact with the customer.

In two of the three Stage 1 complaints which were Resolved, courses of action to address the respective complaints were proposed and subsequently agreed by the complainants, who considered the complaints Resolved. In the third case, SEPA understood that the complainant had accepted a proposed course of action and considered the complaint to be Resolved. However, the complainant subsequently disagreed with this outcome, and the complaint was escalated for investigation at Stage 2 of the CHP, where it was found Partially Upheld.

Of the 11 Stage 2 complaints closed in the period, 10 (91%) were found Not Upheld and one (9%) was Partially Upheld. In the Partially Upheld complaint, one of the Points of Complaint investigated was upheld, due to an inordinate delay in communication with the complainant. That delay was caused by a combination of post-Covid and post-cyberattack impacts on SEPA’s ability to respond at the time and which have since been resolved. However, the other Points of Complaint investigated were not upheld, resulting in the outcome of Partially Upheld.

# Complaint trends

No clear trends were identified from the complaints handled in the reporting period, but this will continue to be monitored and reported.

# Lessons learned/actions taken

A key part of SEPA's CHP is to learn from the complaints and implement changes to improve service.

In the Stage 1 complaint which was found to be Upheld, the customer was provided with an apology, an explanation for the service failure and was given assurances that appropriate actions would be taken to address those failures, improve service and prevent any recurrence.

Whilst no Stage 2 complaints were found to be Upheld in the reporting year, one was Partially Upheld due to an inordinate delay in communicating with the complainant. That delay was due in part to impacts of the pandemic and subsequent cyberattack on SEPA staff resource; nevertheless, an apology was issued, and the delay highlighted to relevant staff for future noting.

# Improving services and performance from complaints

As part of SEPA’s commitment to learning from complaints, the outcomes and lessons learned are reported to management at the highest level. This demonstrates the significance SEPA places on learning from complaints. Where any necessary outcome actions are identified, these are shared with appropriate management and monitored to ensure they are implemented, and that service improvements are delivered.

To ensure that complaints handling is embedded across the business, a programme of training in handling Stage 1 complaints has been developed and is being delivered for all SEPA staff who engage with customers directly; this will enable them to handle Stage 1 complaints in accordance with the CHP. Similarly, training for managers has been developed to provide them with guidance on supporting staff through the complaints process.

These CHP training resources will be maintained as an open-access reference library, allowing staff to refresh their knowledge and skills on an ongoing basis, and with additional support and guidance available from members of SEPA’s Resolution function.

To further build on the Stage 1 and Managers’ CHP training modules, ad hoc online “drop-in” sessions are held to refresh teams’ awareness of the CHP processes and provide further support in complaints handling.

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