

## April 2020

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### COVID-19 update

The current unprecedented circumstances present us, in keeping with all public services, with substantial resourcing challenges.

Our Scottish Welfare Fund review service is operating as normal and is available by Freephone 0800 014 7299. This is critical as it provides an essential service to people in need and hardship.

In other areas the challenges inevitably mean that unfortunately:

- Our office is closed to visitors.
- We are unable to take phone enquiries relating to complaints, but are responding to emails and written enquiries.
- There are delays in our response times.
- Our ability to investigate complaints is impacted by both our resources and the resources Scottish public bodies have to respond to our enquiries.

We monitor and assess impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) continually, looking for ways we can develop our capacity to continue to deliver high quality services.

We understand that public services are under great resource pressures as they focus on the response to COVID-19 and the delivery of essential services. We have therefore produced some resources to answer common questions and provide suggestions on how to manage complaints in the current situation:

- [Guide for public service organisations](#) - complaints handling advice during COVID-19
- [Guide for MSPs and Councillors](#) - supporting constituents who have concerns or complaints about public services during COVID-19

In addition to updating our stakeholders, we are also very mindful of the need to support and update our own team, and update staff regularly. We have put in place resources to support wellbeing, which is supplemented by trying out different ways of working and communicating as a team.

## Our findings

### Complaints

Due to the impact of COVID-19 on our staffing resources and how we prioritise our work, we are not in a position to publish summary decision reports this month. However, we continue with the publication of our investigation reports.

### *Investigation report*

This month we are publishing one full investigation report: [201811019 The Moray Council](#) relating to the care and support of the complainant's son. The report highlights failings in a lack of transition planning and a pathway assessment as he moved from child to adult services, for not taking reasonable steps to ensure he could make informed choices about his own care and failing to communicate reasonably with the complainant surrounding this care and support.

We also found that the Council's complaints handling fell below a reasonable standard. The complaint response was delayed and had been copied directly from an email that had been sent to the complainant before she submitted her complaint. It also did not cover all the issues the complainant raised or indicate whether the complaint was upheld or not.

We made nine recommendations directly in relation to these findings, which the Council have accepted. These included asking the Council to apologise to the complainant and her son, consider funding his residential placement, review their Continuing Care procedure and consider any potential training needs for social work staff.

### Scottish Welfare Fund reviews

#### *Statistics*

During March we:

- responded to 113 enquiries
- made 90 decisions:
  - 29 community care grants
  - 61 crisis grants
- changed the council's decision on 21 (72%) community care grants and 15 (25%) crisis grants

We also signposted an additional 108 applicants to alternative sources of assistance, which in the majority of cases, was their local council. Sixteen of these applicants told us that they were contacting us because their local council had no Freephone number, and they therefore had no way of getting in touch

with them. In these instances we asked the councils concerned to make contact with the applicants.

In recent weeks we have handled a number of review applications from people who have been awarded household items from the fund that do not sufficiently meet their needs. Related case studies can be found in the searchable directory [on our website](#) under the subject *Meeting the need*.

## SPSO Strategic Plan 2020-24

On Friday 17 April 2020, the Ombudsman, Rosemary Agnew, laid her Strategic Plan 2020-2024 before the Scottish Parliament. In it the Ombudsman sets out her vision for the delivery of the SPSO's functions under the strategic themes of accessibility, access to justice, capacity and standards.

While it is critical we are focused on the immediate demands of COVID-19, it is also important that we plan for the future. The Plan acknowledges the additional challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic presents to the SPSO and Scottish public services, highlighting that the longer-term impact is likely to span years rather than months.

The key strategic risk to the SPSO is capacity, in particular the adequacy of resources and impact of the unpredictability of work volumes.

Rosemary acknowledges, and is grateful for, the dedication of the organisation and staff who are driven by our values of being people-centred, fair, independent and learning and improvement.

[The plan is now available to read in full on our website.](#)

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