

May 2020

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COVID-19 update

Complaints

We continue to monitor and follow the latest Scottish Government and NHS Inform information and guidelines. As such, changes to our service remain in place and our office is closed to visitors. We are still not in a position to take phone enquiries but are responding to email and written enquiries, and taking new complaints. We are sorry for the delays in our response times but assure you that we are doing our utmost to provide as near a normal service as we can.

We understand that public services are under huge pressure and are focused on responding to COVID-19 and the delivery of essential services. This is likely to impact on organisations' ability to continue to deliver services to the standards that they normally would, including complaints handling, as resources are directed elsewhere. However, it is important that customers continue to have access to complaints procedures during this time.

Remember, the Model Complaints Handling Procedure allows for timescales to be extended where appropriate. This extension should be used by organisations where applicable. Please ensure to keep your customers updated where this extension is applied.

We have also published 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

We continue to update information on our website for both [customers](#) and [organisations](#) as we monitor the ongoing COVID-19 situation.

Scottish Welfare Fund

Our Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF) team is providing an essential service to people in need and hardship and is available by phone as normal on Freephone 0800 014 7299.

To help us monitor the impact of COVID-19 on the handling of SWF applications, we have introduced some new findings categories. We acknowledge that the Scottish Government has issued advice to councils about relaxing the requirement to issue decision letters, and around the timescales for making decisions. While we are very sympathetic to the operational difficulties and pressures faced by councils, it is incumbent upon us to monitor how and where this impacts on the service and support provided to applicants, many of whom are vulnerable and at risk of that vulnerability increasing because of the impact of COVID-19.

One area where we have observed variances in approach is applications from those who have applied for a crisis grant after already having received three or more awards in the previous 12-month period. In such cases, we assess whether the council has taken account of the full circumstances of the application. This includes the impact of COVID-19 and the advice from the Scottish Government to suspend the sections of the statutory guidance which cover the assessment of exceptional circumstances (7.21 to 7.23).

Other feedback categories include:

- delays in processing applications within target;
- instances of decision letters not being issued;
- where insufficient information has been gathered to make a robust decision; and
- when case notes do not adequately record the decision.

These findings categories will only apply to applications where we identify a clear link to the COVID-19 pandemic. Our existing findings categories will continue to apply to record feedback on other applications.

Our findings

Complaints

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

Scottish Welfare Fund reviews

Statistics

During April we:

- responded to 80 enquiries
- made 62 decisions:
 - 22 community care grants
 - 40 crisis grants
- changed the council's decision on 16 (73%) community care grants and 14 (35%) crisis grants

Case studies

In recent weeks, we have observed a number of examples where councils have not recorded separate applications in situations where both crisis and community care grant assistance has been requested. Related case studies can be found in the searchable directory [on our website](#) under the subject *Administration of applications*.

Crisis grant calculations

To reflect the 1.7% rise in income support that was introduced in April 2020, we are now applying this increase to crisis grant calculations. We highlighted to the Scottish Government that, following discussions during the most recent review of the statutory guidance, the daily rate for children is in need of review.

Independent National Whistleblowing Officer

The COVID-19 crisis has challenged many aspects of life, and in particular, our health services. In consultation with the Scottish Government, we have paused our work with boards helping them prepare for implementation of the National Whistleblowing Standards.

We will be reviewing the implementation timescales with the Scottish Government in June, to decide whether implementation of the standards should be delayed from the planned date of July 2020, and if so for how long. We will update on the position when it is clearer.

In the meantime, we are continuing with our implementation preparations, including the recruitment of our INWO investigations team, development of our systems and processes, and the support we will provide for boards and other providers, once timescales are clear.

If you have any queries about this work, please contact us at CSA@sps.gov.scot.

SPSO conference questions & answers

Thank you again to everyone who attended our Complaints Improvement Conference 2020 back in February. We took away a number of your questions and have now published these along with our answers in a [Q&A document](#).

You can find this document along with other conference materials [on our website](#).

The Infected Blood Inquiry

The Infected Blood Inquiry was set up to examine:

- why men, women and children in the UK were given infected blood and/or infected blood products; the impact on their families;
- how the authorities (including government) responded;
- the nature of any support provided following infection; and
- questions of consent; and whether there was a cover-up.

The Inquiry has been in contact with SPSO and we have agreed to share some information relevant to their work. The Inquiry is keen to hear from anyone who may hold evidence or have experience relevant to their work.

More details can be found on their website: www.infectedbloodinquiry.org.uk

Tel: 0808 169 1377

Email: contact@infectedbloodinquiry.org.uk

For further information contact:

Communications team

Email: communications@spsso.gov.scot

SPSO Assessment and Guidance team

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