



# **SQA (awarding body) Annual complaints handling report**

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## Context

This is a report on SQA's (the awarding body) annual performance in complaints handling for the year April 2023 – March 2024.

SQA operates complaints handling procedures for both its awarding and accreditation functions in line with the requirements of the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) Act 2002. The SPSO is the final escalation stage for complaints about local authorities, 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. The SPSO has the statutory power to determine how these public bodies manage, respond to and report complaints.

This report covers SQA's awarding function, and references to 'SQA' here mean its awarding function. It is presented in accordance with [requirements published by the SPSO in March 2022](#).

## SQA's complaints handling procedures

The SPSO requires public sector bodies in Scotland to adopt a [mandatory complaints handling procedure](#). The procedure outlines the way SQA considers and responds to complaints.

Our complaints handling procedure is available [on our website](#).

On receipt of any communication that appears to express dissatisfaction, we are required to consider whether the points raised meet the definition of a complaint. It is then categorised as being eligible for the complaints handling procedure, or not eligible. It is important to highlight that disagreement about academic judgment is specifically excluded from eligibility because the SPSO cannot look at the exercise of academic judgment.

Ineligible communications are then handled as enquiries by colleagues across the organisation. They are not included in this report.

## Reporting of complaints

Complaints can be closed at these stages (as specified by the SPSO):

- ◆ Frontline (stage 1) — complaints that are straightforward to resolve.
- ◆ Investigation (stage 2) — more complex complaints can be submitted for investigation.
- ◆ Some complaints are escalated from frontline to investigation before being closed.

## Complaints performance indicators

SQA is required to report against four performance indicators set by the SPSO:

- 1 Number of complaints received.
- 2 Number and percentage of complaints at each stage that were closed within the set timescales.
- 3 Average time for a full response at each stage.
- 4 Outcome of complaints at each stage.

## Our performance measured against the indicators

Additional contextual information related to figures is provided through footnotes at the end of each page.

### Indicator 1: The total number of complaints received

This is the sum of the number of complaints received at Stage 1 (this includes escalated complaints as they were first received at Stage 1), and the number of complaints received that are handled directly<sup>1</sup> at Stage 2.

	2023–24	2022–23
Total number of complaints received	104 <sup>2</sup>	45
Handled at Stage 1	99	39
Handled directly at Stage 2	2	5
Escalated to Stage 2 following Stage 1	3	1

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<sup>1</sup> That is, not escalated from Stage 1

<sup>2</sup> Compared to the previous year, the figure is influenced by 50 complaints received in Quarter 1 during the 2023 National Qualifications examination period about the perceived audio quality of Spanish Listening Exams in National Qualifications at National 5 and Higher levels. All of these complaints were addressed at stage 1, with no escalations to stage 2.

## Indicator 2: The number and percentage of complaints at each stage that were closed in full within the set timescales

SQA’s complaint handling procedure requires complaints to be closed in full<sup>3</sup> within five working days at Stage 1 and 20 working days at Stage 2. Extensions to these timescales can be authorised in exceptional circumstances. However, if an extension is authorised, the complaint is considered as ‘late’ — closed outwith the set timescales.

This indicator will report:

- 1 The number of complaints closed in full at stage 1 within five working days as a percentage of all stage 1 complaints responded to in full.
- 2 The number of complaints closed in full at stage 2 within 20 working days as a percentage of all stage 2 complaints (treated directly as stage 2) responded to in full.
- 3 The percentage of escalated complaints closed in full after escalation within 20 working days.
- 4 The number of complaints closed in full with an extension to the initial target timescale, in accordance with the SPSO’s model, as a percentage of all complaints.

	2023–24	2022–23
1 Complaints closed in full on time at Stage 1	98 (99%) <sup>4</sup>	33 (85%) <sup>5</sup>
2 Complaints closed in full on time at Stage 2 (excluding escalated responses)	2 (100%)	4 (80%) <sup>6</sup>
3 Complaints closed following escalation to Stage 2 after a Stage 1 response	3 (100%)	1 (100%)
4 Complaints closed in full during a permitted extension to timescale, as % of all complaints	N/A	3 (7%)

<sup>3</sup> This is where a full response has been given to the customer or resolution has been reached – and includes those complaints where action is still to be taken once the complaint is closed.

<sup>4</sup> This figure is influenced by one stage 1 complaint in Quarter 1 that exceeded the five-working-day response time without an approved extension.

<sup>5</sup> This figure is influenced by six complaints in Quarter 1 and Quarter 3 being handled beyond the permitted five working days (of which two were a permitted extension to timescale — these are indicated in row 4 ‘Complaints closed in full during a permitted extension to timescale’).

<sup>6</sup> This figure is influenced by one investigation response that involved legal considerations and was undertaken during the 2022 National Qualifications examination period, which went beyond the 20 working day target and is included in row 4 ‘Complaints closed in full during a permitted extension to timescale’.

### Indicator 3: The average time in working days for a full response to complaints at each stage

This indicator will report:

- 1 The average time in working days to respond to complaints at stage 1.
- 2 The average time in working days to respond to complaints at stage 2 (treated directly as stage 2).
- 3 The average time in working days to respond to complaints after escalation.

	<b>2023–24</b>	<b>2022–23</b>
1 Average time in working days to respond at Stage 1	3 Days	4 Days
2 Average time in working days to respond for Stage 2 (excluding escalated responses)	9 Days	29 Days <sup>7</sup>
3 Average time in working days to respond after escalation	7 Days	10 Days

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<sup>7</sup> This figure is influenced by a complex investigation response that involved historical records, third parties, legal advice and was undertaken during the 2022 National Qualifications examination period.

## Indicator 4: The outcome of complaints at each stage

This indicator provides the outcomes for complaints at each stage for the period April 2023 – March 2024.

There are four outcome categories: resolved, upheld, partially upheld or not upheld. This indicator will report:

- 1 The number of complaints (a) upheld, (b) partially upheld, (c) not upheld and (d) resolved as a percentage of all complaints closed at stage 1.
- 2 The number of complaints (a) upheld, (b) partially upheld, (c) not upheld and (d) resolved as a percentage of all complaints closed at stage 2 (treated directly as stage 2).
- 3 The number of complaints (a) upheld, (b) partially upheld, (c) not upheld and (d) resolved after escalation as a percentage of all complaints closed after escalation.

	Upheld	Partially upheld	Not upheld	Resolved
1 Stage 1	4 (4%)	1 (1%)	5 (5%)	89 (90%)
2 Stage 2 (excluding escalated responses)	-	2 (100%)	-	-
3 Escalation	-	-	3 (100%)	-

## Complaint outcomes and improvements

At SQA, we learn from the complaints we receive. Every quarter, we share the outcomes of these complaints, and the improvements we've made, [on our website](#).