

EVIDENCE TO THE REVIEW OF SPCB SUPPORTED BODIES COMMITTEE FROM CONOR MCNALLY

I understand that you are conducting a review of the SPSO.

I have experience of using the SPSO to pursue a complaint involving GHA (overcharging of VAT on home improvements), and would like to offer the following recommendations for the future improvement of the service:

(1) Allow more discretion on validating the complaints. SPSO rejected my complaint because I had not gone through GHA's long-winded complaints process, despite me offering clear evidence that GHA had already dismissed the complaint at the highest level board meeting, and that achieving a resolution was time-critical with a limited window to appeal the VAT decision.

(2) Don't let SPSO hide behind the organisations' own complaint processes. My experience of GHA is that it is virtually impossible to get to the point where SPSO would actually validate a complaint. Let SPSO audit whether the organisation's process is actually reasonable and effective.

(3) Allow SPSO to rule on cost. Another reason that SPSO rejected my complaint was because it apparently does not have the power to rule on matters of cost or value for money. This oversight means that GHA can charge me what it likes, and I have got absolutely no recourse when it proves unreasonable.

(4) SPSO shouldn't send the complaint verbatim to the organisation. Despite SPSO ruling my complaint invalid, they still sent it verbatim to GHA. This action weakened my own case, and would also have intensified any harassment or bullying had this been taking place. If SPSO decides that a complaint is invalid, then they should explain the situation to the complainant, and there is no need to involve the organisation.

(5) Don't insist on such secrecy. Despite its decision to reject my complaint, every letter I got from SPSO contained prominent warnings about it being an offence to discuss the contents with anybody else. Such warnings left me feeling very isolated about the next stage of my complaint.

(6) Offer more help to the complainant. SPSO left me feeling that it simply did not want to help -- only to dismiss my complaint as quickly as it could and leave me on my own. It could certainly have offered

more help and empathy.

Happily, after recovering from my poor experience with SPSO, I achieved a successful outcome to my complaint through a different route -- sustained public pressure, and an appeal to the VAT and Duties Tribunal. It is unfortunate that SPSO had not encouraged this path itself.

I wish you well with your review of SPSO, and hope that it results in a more effective service.

Let me know if I can provide any further information that will help your study.

Conor McNally
4 January 2009