

Council told to say sorry over council tax mix up

The City of Edinburgh Council has been told to apologise to a vulnerable resident repeatedly threatened with legal action for not paying council tax – after they had already set up a payment plan.

The ombudsman found “serious and repeated failures” by the council following an investigation.

Staff acted “without any consideration or accommodation” of the individual’s vulnerability, it said, and called on the local authority to deal with and respond to complaints more promptly in future.

The council said it has since apologised and had put in place “additional measures” to prevent a similar situation.

The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) was asked to investigate following a complaint from the resident, known only as ‘C’, about the administration of their council tax account.

A report published this month said the complainant reported they were “issued reminders for council tax arrears and threats of legal action when they had paid their council tax in accordance with a payment arrangement”.

In addition it was claimed the council “failed to respond to their complaint” in accordance with its own complaints

handling procedures which an apology was given for.

However, the council argued continued letters requesting money and threatening legal action were sent as a payment was made without using their reference number. "This had meant that the payment hadn't been allocated to C's account," the report said.

"C remained unhappy and asked us to investigate.

"C complained that the council had failed to respond to their correspondence and had failed to take the fact that they are a vulnerable person into account.

"We found that the council had repeatedly failed to engage with C's correspondence over a significant period of time.

"We found serious and repeated failures by the council to adhere to their complaints handling procedure. We considered that the council acted without any consideration or accommodation of C's vulnerability. Therefore, we upheld C's complaints."

The council was ordered to apologise to the resident for the failings identified by the watchdog.

The SPSO said to put things right in future the council should ensure enquiries about council tax payments, especially where the council is claiming no payment has been made and the customer is stating the contrary, "should be dealt with and responded to promptly".

It said: "The necessary systems and procedures should be in place to ensure that complaints are handled in line with the council's complaints policy and procedure and that all staff are aware of the complaints handling policy and procedure.

"We have asked the organisation to provide us with evidence that they have implemented the recommendations we have made on this case by the deadline we set."

Councillor Mandy Watt, Finance and Resources Convener for the City of Edinburgh Council, said: "On this occasion our service fell short of our high standards and we have apologised to the customer.

"We fully accept the Ombudsman's findings and have put in place additional measures to improve our service. These include updated guidance for staff re missing payments, recruiting additional staff and mandatory refresher training around handing complaints.

"I am confident that the actions we have taken will prevent any other customers having similar experiences."

by Donald Turvill, Local Democracy Reporter.

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