

COMPLAINT MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

June 2015

Complaint Management Framework

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Foreword

As recognised in the Australian and New Zealand Standard *Guidelines for complaint management in organizations* (AS/NZS 10002:2014), everybody has the right to complain.

An effective complaint management system enables us to correct errors, identify system improvements and promote fairness and integrity in our decision-making processes. The attitude of the general public who interact with us will be strongly influenced by their perception of the fairness of the procedures we use to handle complaints. This includes our interactions with people making complaints and the information we provide them about the process, progress and outcome/s of their complaint. By appropriately handling complaints about our products [where relevant], services, staff and complaint handling we will be protecting our good reputation as well as promoting general trust in government.

This Framework and Model Policy are intended to assist organisations implement a complaint management system that will ensure the efficient and effective handling of complaints made to or about them.



Bruce Barbour
Ombudsman.

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PART 1

Introduction to the Complaint Management Framework

Nobody is perfect. Mistakes can, and invariably do occur. What matters is how an organisation responds to such incidents. The most effective response is to fix the mistake and improve services, systems, practices, procedures and/or products to reduce the likelihood of incidents occurring again.

Complaints, as defined in the Australian and New Zealand Standard *Guidelines for complaint management in organizations* (AS/NZS 10002:2014), are "expressions of dissatisfaction made to or about an organisation related to its products, services, staff or the handling of a complaint, where a response or resolution is explicitly or implicitly expected or legally required."

Complaints are a valuable source of information about how and where mistakes have occurred and can pinpoint weaknesses in the system.

While many organisations have a complaint handling policy and a way to collect and record complaints, they often fail to integrate the essential components of an effective complaint management system, leading to lost opportunities for improvement and continued client satisfaction.

The essential components of an effective complaint management system are:

1. Commitment
2. Facilitation
3. Resourcing
4. Learning
5. Guidance.

This Framework aims to assist organisations think about these components and how together, they can support effective complaint management and improve general business practices.

This Framework also provides organisations with guidance on best practice principles of complaint management, as outlined in the Australian and New Zealand Standard on complaint management in organisations.¹ It aims to help organisations understand what is involved in establishing a comprehensive and effective complaint management system and provides a self-assessment checklist for each component of such a system.

Finally, the Framework includes further reading and resources, including a *Model Complaint Handling Policy*.

Commitment

Facilitation

Resourcing

Learning

Guidance

¹ AS/NZS Standard: *Guidelines for complaint management in organizations* (AS/NZS 10002:2014)

PART 2

Components of the Framework

2.1 Commitment: Develop a culture that values complaints

Guiding principles for appropriate culture and organisational commitment:

People focus: Be open to complaints from members of the public about standards of service delivery and organisational policies, procedures and practices. Be committed to promoting and implementing an accessible complaints system as a means to address problems with service delivery and to enhance the performance of the organisation and its staff.

Responsiveness: Respond to complaints in a timely manner. Recognise and reward good complaint handling by staff.

Objectivity and fairness: Address each complaint with integrity and in an objective and impartial manner.

No detriment: Take all reasonable steps to ensure that people making complaints are not adversely affected because a complaint is made by them or on their behalf.

Organisations that promote and encourage complaints and respond to them fairly and promptly are more likely to:

- strengthen relationships
- identify problems
- improve service delivery and systems, and
- improve customer service.

A commitment to good complaint handling is needed at all levels within an organisation. It is the foundation on which all other components of the Complaint Management Framework are built.

The head of the organisation and senior management should champion effective complaint handling as a way of achieving the organisation's corporate purpose as well as the Government's commitment to good customer service. Ways the head of the organisation and senior management can achieve this goal include:

Complaint management system:

- Support the development of a system that promotes the right to complain and enables the organisation to receive and respond to complaints promptly and fairly.
- Develop and make publicly available a policy on how complaints can be made to the organisation and how they will be managed.
- Advise all staff that people making complaints are not to be victimised.

Complaint handling staff:

- Ensure that frontline staff and staff dedicated to handling complaints are well trained, supervised and supported in the management of complaints.
- Recognise and reward good complaint handling by staff.

Learn from complaints:

- Send a clear message to staff that complaints can be a valuable source of feedback on the organisation's systems, services and staff.
- Emphasise to staff and the public that the focus of complaint handling is on fixing issues and improving systems, not apportioning blame.
- Foster a culture of disclosure when mistakes are made (e.g. that disclosed mistakes will result in rectification action, not punishment).
- Implement changes to services, systems, practices, procedures and/or products where weaknesses are identified through the management and analysis of complaints, and
- Communicate to staff and the public changes and improvements brought about through the handling of complaints and their analysis so that all may see the tangible benefits flowing from complaints.

Note: It is not possible to be definitive about time frames for dealing with complaints as there are many variables that can affect an organisation's response time. This includes: the complexity of the issue/s raised in the complaint, the availability of evidence and the size and complaint handling/ investigative resources of the organisation. What an organisation should note, however, is that research shows that:

- People are likely to expect a substantive response to a letter of complaint within 14 days, and 24 hours for emails and,
- Timeliness is the single most important driver in customer satisfaction across all services and levels of government.

Therefore, organisations must manage the expectations of people who make complaints.

If an organisation is likely to take longer to respond than what is reasonably expected (or documented in the organisation's Complaint handling Policy) this should be explained in the acknowledgement letter. Other than for very simple complaints, appropriate inquiries, assessment of the evidence, the drafting of a response and decision-making may well take some time.

Further reading and resources

NSW Ombudsman *Good Conduct and Administrative Practice Guidelines* (2nd edition) 2006

NSW Ombudsman *Complaint handling at Universities: Best Practice Guidelines* 2015

NSW Ombudsman *Complaint handling toolkit for community service organisations (CS-CRAMA)* 2013

Commonwealth Ombudsman *Better Practice Guide to Complaint Handling 1*, April 2009

Disability Services Commissioner Victoria *Good Practice Guide and Self Audit Tool* 2nd Edition 2013

Australian and New Zealand Standard: *Guidelines for complaint management in organizations (AS/NZS 10002:2014)*, Appendix:

- A: Guidance for small organizations
- D: Objectivity, and
- O: Role of information in reducing complaints.

² See the research project called 'Citizens First' undertaken under the coordination of the Institute of Citizens-Centred Service, Canada for more information.

2.2 Facilitation: Make it easy for people to make complaints to your organisation

Guiding principles for facilitating complaints:

Visibility and transparency: Widely publicise information about how and where complaints may be made to your organisation.

Accessibility: Implement a system to manage complaints that is easy to understand and accessible to people who may require assistance.

Supporting: Support and assist people who need help to make a complaint.

Flexibility: Be flexible in how complaints may be made to or about your organisation. Ensure making a complaint is free of charge.

Acceptance: Accept anonymous complaints where they raise significant issues and there is enough information to be able to look into the issues raised.

Being committed to good complaint handling will not, by itself, facilitate complaints or result in their effective management. Organisations need to make it easy for people to voice their concerns. In order to do this, organisations need to develop systems that are readily accessible, simple to use and in Plain English.

By dealing with complaints directly and facilitating the making of complaints, organisations will not only improve public confidence in their services but reduce the chance of the matter unnecessarily escalating (internally and/or externally) and taking up disproportionate amounts of resources.

Ways in which an organisation can facilitate the making of complaints include:

- publicising the organisation's complaint handling policy on its website and through other reference material available to the public
- integrating complaints and feedback with frontline service initiatives aimed at vulnerable groups
- being proactive in seeking feedback from vulnerable groups through visits and outreach programs especially in rural and remote areas and Aboriginal communities (where applicable), and
- encouraging complaints and feedback from representatives and advocates who may service vulnerable groups, and
- providing flexible and varied methods for the making of complaints e.g. in person, over the phone, in writing, online and via social media channels.

Organisations need to be aware that there are a range of personal, cultural and structural barriers that can impact on the ability of certain people to make a complaint. If organisations understands these barriers, they can develop strategies to overcome them. This may entail ensuring that all aspects of service provision and complaint handling functions can be adapted to meet a person's developmental age, physical or intellectual ability. It may also entail implementing proactive and innovative approaches to sourcing complaints from vulnerable people and groups. Ways an organisation can achieve this goal include:

Information:

- Ensuring that information provided to the public about the organisation's complaint handling system is available in a range of languages and alternate formats e.g. large print, Braille, Simple English.
- Using Australian Sign Language (AUSLAN) video presentations of material on the organisation's website.

Technology:

- Enabling people to adjust the font size of information contained on the website.
- Utilising text telephones (TTY) and the national relay service (NRS). Training frontline and complaint handling staff to identify people who may require additional assistance.

Assistance:

- Assisting people to make a complaint, if needed.
- Undertaking outreach and visiting programs especially in remote areas to encourage complaints and feedback, e.g. from Aboriginal communities.
- Accepting complaints from authorised representatives of complainants (including their family, friends, Members of Parliament, legal representatives etc).

Communication:

- Communicating with people making complaints in a format accessible to all parties.

Tip: *One way to ensure that staff have knowledge of, and sensitivity to, people who may require assistance to make complaints, and about issues regularly facing young people and/or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, is to provide targeted training and guidance to staff on these issues.*

Further reading and resources

Under the *National Disability Strategy – NSW Implementation Plan 2012-2014*, the NSW Ombudsman has been tasked with ‘the development and distribution of resources for government agencies to improve access to complaints handling in relation to people with disability’. These guidelines and resources will be available on our website in 2015.

NSW Ombudsman *Guidelines for dealing with youth complaints*, April 2008

NSW Ombudsman *Aboriginal Policy*

Disability Services Commissioner Victoria *Good Practice Guide and Self Audit Tool* 2nd Edition 2013

Australian and New Zealand Standard: *Guidelines for complaint management in organizations* (AS/NZS 10002:2014), Appendix B: Guidance on accessibility.

2.3 Resourcing: Appropriately train, empower and adequately resource staff managing complaints

Guiding principles for equipping staff to manage complaints:

Training: Provide appropriate training, support and resources to staff who handle complaints.

Recognition: Recognise and reward good complaint handling by staff.

Delegations: Provide staff with appropriate authority and guidance to be able to resolve issues that commonly arise in the handling of complaints.

Empowering: Empower staff to effectively implement the organisation's complaint handling policies and procedures as relevant to their role.

An effective complaint management system encompasses the policies, procedures, practices, staff, hardware and software used by an organisation for the management of complaints.³

The size and scale of an organisation's complaint management system may vary depending on the function/s and the number of complaints the organisation receives. Regardless of these factors however, the organisation should review the adequacy of the resources it devotes to complaint handling to ensure that staff are appropriately equipped to manage complaints consistently and promptly.

Properly resourcing the complaint management system includes having:

- sufficient numbers of skilled staff to respond and appropriately deal with complaints received by the organisation, and
- adequate materials and equipment, including a system to record complaint data and track the progress of complaints.

All staff should be aware of their responsibilities with regards to the management of complaints. Staff whose responsibilities do not include complaint handling should be alert to and promote complaints and be aware of where/who they can refer a complaint to internally should they receive one.

Staff whose duties include complaint handling need to have appropriate aptitude, knowledge and skills to be able to respond to complaints effectively. Consideration should be given to recruiting people who demonstrate the skills and attributes of a successful complaint handler.

These attributes include:

- resilience
- empathy
- patience
- discretion
- analytical thinking
- creativity
- good judgment, and
- desire to resolve issues raised by people making complaints.

In addition to demonstrating the attributes listed above, staff handling complaints need to:

- receive ongoing training in effective complaint handling and the organisation's complaint management system
- receive clear delegations of authority and written guidance as to their discretion to respond to issues raised with them in the course of managing complaints

³ AS/NZS Standard: Guidelines for complaint management in organizations (AS/NZS 10002:2014)

- be encouraged to be creative and flexible in problem solving and in responding to accessibility issues within the parameters of the organisation's policy and procedures
- be provided with training on using and arranging various accessibility measures available to people making complaints, e.g. interpreters, text telephones (TTY) and the national relay service (NRS), and
- take ownership of complaints where appropriate and promptly resolve the issues raised.

Staff managing complaints also need to be provided with adequate support to manage people making complaints and the issues they raise. Organisations may therefore consider:

- providing staff with access to internal debriefing sessions and/or external employee assistance programs, and
- policies and procedures on how to deal with unreasonable conduct by people making complaints.

Further reading and resources

NSW Ombudsman *Effective Complaint handling Guidelines* (2nd Edition) 2010

NSW Ombudsman *Managing Unreasonable Complainant Conduct Practice Manual* 2012

NSW Ombudsman *Managing Unreasonable Complainant Conduct Model Policy* 2013

NSW Ombudsman *Good Conduct and Administrative Practice Guidelines* (2nd edition) 2006

NSW Ombudsman *Investigating Complaints – A Manual for Investigators* 2004

Australian and New Zealand Standard: *Guidelines for complaint management in organizations* (AS/NZS 10002:2014), Appendix:

- B: Guidance on accessibility
- D: Objectivity
- E: Unreasonable conduct by complainants, and
- F: Responsibilities of management, employees and complaint management personnel.

2.4 Learning: Analyse complaints and their outcomes to improve systems and processes

Guiding principles for learning from complaints:

Record keeping: Have appropriate record keeping policies and procedures in place and implemented to ensure that adequate records are made and retained about the receipt, handling and outcomes of complaints.

Monitor trends: Organisations should monitor trends on a regular basis as part of their activities directed at continuous improvement.

Continuous improvement: Regularly analyse, report and review the subject matter and outcomes of complaints to measure the quality of the organisation's service and make system improvements.

Integration: Use information gathered from complaints to review the products, systems, services and procedures or the organisation as a whole.

Complaints are a valuable resource for organisations. Through the analysis of complaints organisations can:

- monitor the quality of their services and systems
- identify recurring issues or trends
- make improvements to systems and customer service where appropriate, and
- improve their reputation.

In order to undertake effective complaint analysis, organisations should make and retain good records, including:

- details of complaints
- categories or common issues raised in complaints
- the steps taken to address complaints
- complaint outcomes, and
- any undertakings given to the person making a complaint about actions that are to be taken to resolve the problems identified as a result of their complaint.

Analysis of complaints should be conducted regularly as part of general business practices, including a review of the following information:

- number of complaints received and trends in complaint numbers over time
- types of issues raised in complaints
- whether issues raised in complaints are likely to impact on other people and/or agencies
- outcome of complaints, and
- demographics of the people making complaints.

When conducting regular reviews of complaints data it is important to identify whether there have been any internal or external factors (such as changes to legislation or applicable policies, organisational structures or responsibilities, resources or systems) that could have impacted the period under review.

The organisation and senior management should review the information gathered from complaint analyses and report their findings to staff and members of the public (through internal memos, the organisation's website and any annual reporting mechanisms). Organisations should also report on any action being taken in response to issues identified in the review process.

Note: *There are many methods by which an organisation can analyse complaint data. Root Cause Analysis is one such method. For more information on this method see Appendix K of the Australian and New Zealand Standard: Guidelines for complaint management in organizations (AS/NZS 10002:2014).*

Further reading and resources

NSW Ombudsman *Good Conduct and Administrative Practice Guidelines* (2nd edition) 2006

Australian and New Zealand Standard: *Guidelines for complaint management in organizations* (AS/NZS 10002:2014), Appendix:

- C: Data collection, analysis and reporting for complaint information
- K: Implementing a root cause analysis system for complaints: a guide to investigating, preventing and reporting
- L: Information to collect on a complaint form and usage of information
- M: Continual monitoring, and
- N: Audit.

2.5 Guidance: Develop policies and procedures to guide staff in the management of complaints

Guiding principles for the development of policies and procedures for the management of complaints

Clarity: Develop policies and procedures regarding how complaints will be received, recorded, managed and reported.

Availability: Ensure policies regarding how complaints will be managed are available and communicated clearly to the public and staff.

A complaint handling policy outlines an organisation's commitment to resolving complaints fairly and quickly. It also reinforces the important role that complaints play in improving services and systems.

A complaint handling procedure describes the steps that need to be taken by staff to implement the aims of an organisation's complaint handling policy and respond to complaints. They provide a standard against which the organisation and its stakeholders can measure the organisation's complaint handling performance.

Together, the complaint handling policy and procedures provide information to staff and the public about:

- the difference between complaints, feedback and service requests
- the guiding principles of the organisation's complaint management system
- how people can complain to the organisation
- what people can complain about
- the assistance available to help people make a complaint,
- responsibilities and procedures for:
 - receiving, recording, assessing and resolving complaints
 - investigating complaints
 - providing feedback and advice to people about the progress and outcome of their complaints
 - how complaints are handled when services may be delivered by multiple agencies and contracted providers on behalf of agencies
- time frames in which each complaint process should be progressed
- the various levels of delegated authority given to staff to deal with complaints
- responsibilities and processes for analysing complaints, referring systemic and other issues for management action and reporting on complaint outcomes
- avenues for review, both internal and external
- fairness and equity requirements
- privacy and confidentiality requirements, and
- strategies to deal with unreasonable conduct by people making complaints.

Further reading and resources

NSW Ombudsman *Model Complaint handling Policy 2015* (Annexed to this Framework).

Australian and New Zealand Standard: *Guidelines for complaint management in organizations* (AS/NZS 10002:2014), Appendix:

- F: Responsibilities of management, employees and complaint management personnel
- G: Dispute prevention and management
- H: Three levels complaint handling
- I: Effective Apologies, and
- J: Options for redress.

Annexure 1

Organisation self-assessment checklists

1. Commitment

Have we taken appropriate action to ensure that:

- Staff are aware of our commitment to prompt complaint handling?
- We have a system which allows us to record, track and respond to complaints?
- All staff understand that if a complaint is made about them, the focus is on rectifying issues and improving systems?
- We reward good complaint handling by staff?
- People making complaints and/or their representatives are protected from adverse action due to their making of a complaint?

2. Facilitation

Have we taken appropriate action to ensure that:

- Information about our complaint management system and complaint handling policy is widely publicised to staff and the public?
- Information about our complaint management system and complaint handling policy is readily available to the public in languages spoken by significant groups of people who interact with us?
- Our complaint management system is easy for the public to understand and access, particularly people who may require assistance?
- Staff have knowledge of, and sensitivity to, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural issues?
- We allow people to make complaints to us in a variety of ways, e.g. telephone, email, in person? (Do we need additional ways given our customer base?)
- We regularly consult with and seek feedback from community groups and Non Government Organisations (NGOs) that advocate for vulnerable members of our client base?
- We have an internal review mechanism for people who are dissatisfied with the outcome of their complaint and/or our handling of it?
- People wishing to complain about our handling of their complaint are advised of any external review mechanisms available to them?

3. Resources

Have we taken appropriate action to ensure that:

- Staff whose duties include complaint handling have delegation or authority to resolve complaints?
- Staff are aware of their delegation or authority to resolve complaints?
- Staff whose duties include complaint handling have good communication skills and a desire to resolve issues raised by people making complaints?
- Staff whose duties include complaint handling are provided with training and supervision on effective complaint handling?
- Staff have knowledge of and sensitivity to young people, people with disability, Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander people and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds?
- Staff whose duties include complaint handling have adequate resources to manage complaints, including policies and procedures on how complaints should be dealt with?
- Staff are rewarded for good complaint handling?
- Support is provided to staff managing complaints?
- Staff who are not part of the complaint management area provide prompt and appropriate assistance and information to colleagues handling complaints?

5. Guidance

Have we taken appropriate action to ensure that:

- We have a complaint handling policy and procedures?
- Our complaint handling policy and procedures provide guidance to staff on how to manage complaints?
- Staff and contracted service providers are aware of our complaint handling policy and procedures?
- We provide regular training and feedback to staff managing complaints on their compliance with our policies and procedures?
- We have a system to record, track, analyse and report on complaints?

Annexure 2

Complaint Handling Model Policy

How to use this Model Policy

This policy is intended to provide guidance to organisations on the key principles and concepts of an effective and efficient complaint management system.

The policy is designed to be used as a guide for the development or update of your organisation's complaint handling policy.

Your organisation may consider developing a procedure to accompany its complaint handling policy. Such a document would provide guidance to staff on how complaints will be managed specifically by the organisation in accordance with its documented policy.

The head of your organisation should personally adopt and promote your organisation's complaint handling policy and ensure that staff adhere to it through regular reporting and reviews.

The Ombudsman intends to use this policy as a benchmark when auditing complaint handling policies and procedures of organisations within its jurisdiction.⁴

Most of the model policy can be used as a template and replicated by organisations. We have also provided advice and guidance [\[marked in blue text\]](#) on what you may wish to consider when modifying the policy to suit your particular needs – such as details of time frames.

Acknowledgements

The development of this policy has been informed by the following:

- Australian and New Zealand Standard *Guidelines for complaint handling in organizations* AS/NZS 10002:2014
- NSW Ombudsman *Effective complaint handling guidelines*, 2nd Edition, December 2010
- Victorian Ombudsman *Councils and complaints - a good practice guide*, February 2015
- Joint publication of the NSW Ombudsman and Department of Local Government Complaints Management in Councils Practice note no. 9, revised July 2009
- Ombudsman Western Australia *Guidelines on complaint handling*, November 2010
- Commonwealth Ombudsman *Better Practice Guide to Complaint handling 1*, April 2009
- NESTA *Grumbles Gripes and Grievances The Role of Complaints in Transforming Public Services*, April 2013
- Scottish Public Services Ombudsman *SPSO Statement of Complaint handling Principles*, 2011
- The British and Irish Ombudsman Association *Guide to Principles of good complaint handling*, 2007
- NSW Ombudsman *Managing Unreasonable Complaint Conduct – a Model Policy and Procedure 2012*
- Victorian Ombudsman *Good Practice Guide*, November 2007
- Disability Services Commissioner Victoria *Good Practice Guide and Self Audit Tool*, 2nd Ed. 2013.

⁴ Agencies within the NSW Ombudsman's jurisdiction include NSW public authorities, local councils, and organisations funded, licensed or authorised by the Minister for Community Services, the Minister for Ageing and the Minister for Disability Services. Such community service organisations are also required to comply with *Community Services (Complaints, Reviews and Monitoring) Act 1993* (CS-CRAMA).

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose

This policy is intended to ensure that we handle complaints fairly, efficiently and effectively.

Our complaint management system is intended to:

- enable us to respond to issues raised by people making complaints in a timely and cost-effective way
- boost public confidence in our administrative process, and
- provide information that can be used by us to deliver quality improvements in our products [where relevant], services, systems and complaint handling.

This policy provides guidance to our staff and people who wish to make a complaint on the key principles and concepts of our complaint management system.

1.2 Scope

This policy applies to all staff receiving or managing complaints from the public made to or about us, regarding our products [where relevant] services, staff and complaint handling.

Staff grievances, code of conduct complaints (for local councils) and public interest disclosures are dealt with through separate mechanisms.

1.3 Organisational commitment

This organisation expects staff at all levels to be committed to fair, effective and efficient complaint handling. The following table outlines the nature of the commitment expected from staff and the way that commitment should be implemented.

Who	Commitment	How
Head of [organisation name]	Promote a culture that values complaints and their effective resolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report publicly on [organisation name]'s complaint handling. • Provide adequate support and direction to key staff responsible for handling complaints. • Regularly review reports about complaint trends and issues arising from complaints. • Encourage all staff to be alert to complaints and assist those responsible for handling complaints resolve them promptly. • Encourage staff to make recommendations for system improvements. • Recognise and reward good complaint handling by staff. • Support recommendations for [where relevant], product, service, staff and complaint handling improvements arising from analysis of complaint data.
Manager responsible for complaint handling	Establish and manage our complaint management system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide regular reports to [the head of the organisation] on issues arising from complaint handling work. • Ensure recommendations arising out of complaint data analysis are canvassed with [the head of the organisation] and implemented where appropriate.

continued overleaf

Who	Commitment	How
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruit, train and empower staff to resolve complaints promptly and in accordance with [organisation name]'s policies and procedures. • Encourage staff managing complaints to provide suggestions on ways to improve the organisation's complaint management system. • Encourage all staff to be alert to complaints and assist those responsible for handling complaints resolve them promptly. • Recognise and reward good complaint handling by staff.
Staff whose duties include complaint handling	Demonstrate exemplary complaint handling practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Treat all people with respect, including people who make complaints. • Assist people make a complaint, if needed. • Comply with this policy and its associated procedures. • Keep informed about best practice in complaint handling. • Provide feedback to management on issues arising from complaints. • Provide suggestions to management on ways to improve the organisation's complaints management system. • Implement changes arising from individual complaints and from the analysis and evaluation of complaint data as directed by management.
All staff	Understand and comply with [organisation name]'s complaint handling practices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Treat all people with respect, including people who make complaints. • Be aware of [organisation name]'s complaint handling policies and procedures. • Assist people who wish to make complaints access the [organisation name]'s complaints process. • Be alert to complaints and assist staff handling complaints resolve matters promptly. • Provide feedback to management on issues arising from complaints. • Implement changes arising from individual complaints and from the analysis and evaluation of complaint data as directed by management.

2. Terms and definitions

Complaint

Expression of dissatisfaction made to or about us, our products [where relevant], services, staff or the handling of a complaint where a response or resolution is explicitly or implicitly expected or legally required.

A complaint covered by this Policy can be distinguished from:

- staff grievances (see our grievance policy)
- public interest disclosures made by our staff (see our internal reporting policy)
- code of conduct complaints (see our code of conduct)
- responses to requests for feedback about the standard of our service provision (see the definition of 'feedback' below)
- reports of problems or wrongdoing merely intended to bring a problem to our notice with no expectation of a response (see definition of 'feedback')
- service requests (see definition of 'service request' below), and
- requests for information (see our access to information policy).

Complaint management system

All policies, procedures, practices, staff, hardware and software used by us in the management of complaints.

Dispute

An unresolved complaint escalated either within or outside of our organisation.

Feedback

Opinions, comments and expressions of interest or concern, made directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly, to or about us, about our products [where relevant], services or complaint handling where a response is not explicitly or implicitly expected or legally required.

Service request

The definition of a service request will vary depending on the organisation's core business. However, it is likely to include:

- requests for approval
- requests for action
- routine inquiries about the organisation's business
- requests for the provision of services and assistance
- reports of failure to comply with laws regulated by the organisation
- requests for explanation of policies, procedures and decisions.

Grievance

A clear, formal written statement by an individual staff member about another staff member or a work related problem.

Policy

A statement of instruction that sets out how we should fulfil our vision, mission and goals.

Procedure

A statement or instruction that sets out how our policies will be implemented and by whom.

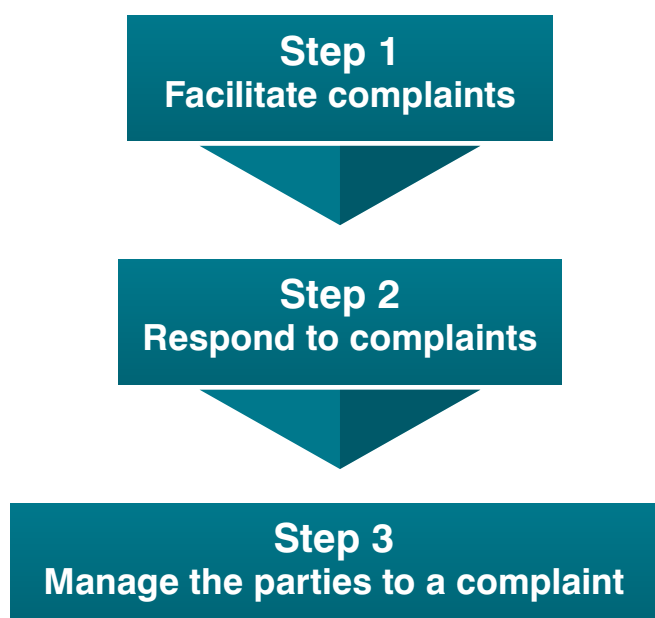
Public interest disclosure

A report about wrong doing made by a public official in New South Wales that meets the requirements of the *Public Interest Disclosures Act 1994*.

Note:

Agencies should amend the above mentioned definition to ensure that it is accurate for their jurisdiction.

3. Guiding principles



3.1 Facilitate complaints

People focus

We are committed to seeking and receiving feedback and complaints about our services, systems, practices, procedures, products and complaint handling.

Any concerns raised in feedback or complaints will be dealt with within a reasonable time frame.

Note: While the response times to complaints may differ depending on organisation size, purpose and resources, the Ombudsman generally expects that organisations will deal with formal complaints promptly. Organisations should specify key performance indicators for key stages in the handling of complaints. For example, the number of days in which a complaint will be acknowledged, the number of days in which a complaint will be assessed and the period in which progress reports will be made in relation to matters not finalised within two weeks of receipt. For further guidance on this issue see Part 2.2 of the Ombudsman's *Complaint Management Framework (2015)*.

People making complaints will be:

- provided with information about our complaint handling process
- provided with multiple and accessible ways to make complaints
- listened to, treated with respect by staff and actively involved in the complaint process where possible and appropriate, and
- provided with reasons for our decision/s and any options for redress or review.

No detriment to people making complaints

We will take all reasonable steps to ensure that people making complaints are not adversely affected because a complaint has been made by them or on their behalf.

Note: For certain community service providers in NSW: the *Community Services (Complaints, Reviews and Monitoring) Act 1993* (CS CRAMA) stipulates that taking, or threatening to take, detrimental action against anyone who complains or intends to complain (retribution) is a criminal offence.

Anonymous complaints

We accept anonymous complaints and will carry out an investigation of the issues raised where there is enough information provided.

Accessibility

We will ensure that information about how and where complaints may be made to or about us is well publicised. We will ensure that our systems to manage complaints are easily understood and accessible to everyone, particularly people who may require assistance.

If a person prefers or needs another person or organisation to assist or represent them in the making and/or resolution of their complaint, we will communicate with them through their representative if this is their wish. Anyone may represent a person wishing to make a complaint with their consent (e.g. advocate, family member, legal or community representative, member of Parliament, another organisation).

Note: Information about the various ways complaints can be made and the types of support available to people making complaints can be found in Annexure B (titled 'Guidance on accessibility') of the *Australian and New Zealand Standard Guidelines for complaint handling in organizations (AS/NZS 10002:2014)*. The Ombudsman will also be releasing new resources in 2016 to assist organisations when handling complaints from people with disability.

No charge

Complaining to us is free.

3.2 Respond to complaints

Early resolution

Where possible, complaints will be resolved at first contact with [organisation name].

Note: Organisations may wish to consider recording complaints resolved at first point of contact, the frontline. Such record keeping will arguably add to the pool of data organisations regularly analyse to identify system issues and track more accurately the complaint handling activities of staff.

Responsiveness

We will promptly acknowledge receipt of complaints.

We will assess and prioritise complaints in accordance with the urgency and/or seriousness of the issues raised. If a matter concerns an immediate risk to safety or security the response will be immediate and will be escalated appropriately.

We are committed to managing people's expectations, and will inform them as soon as possible, of the following:

- the complaints process
- the expected time frames for our actions
- the progress of the complaint and reasons for any delay
- their likely involvement in the process, and
- the possible or likely outcome of their complaint.

We will advise people as soon as possible when we are unable to deal with any part of their complaint and provide advice about where such issues and/or complaints may be directed (if known and appropriate).

We will also advise people as soon as possible when we are unable to meet our time frames for responding to their complaint and the reason for our delay.

Objectivity and fairness

We will address each complaint with integrity and in an equitable, objective and unbiased manner.

The person handling the complaint will be different from any staff member whose service or conduct is being complained about. Conflicts of interests, whether actual or perceived, will be managed responsibly. In particular, internal reviews of how a complaint was managed will be conducted by a person other than the original decision maker.

Responding flexibly

Our staff are empowered to resolve complaints promptly and with as little formality as possible. We will adopt flexible approaches to service delivery and problem solving to enhance accessibility for people making complaints and/or their representatives.

We will assess each complaint on its merits and involve people making complaints and/or their representative in the process as far as possible.

Confidentiality

We will protect the identity of people making complaints where this is practical and appropriate.

Personal information that identifies individuals will only be disclosed or used by the [organisation name] as permitted under the relevant privacy laws, secrecy provisions and any relevant confidentiality obligations.

3.3 Manage the parties to a complaint

Complaints involving multiple agencies

Where a complaint involves multiple organisations, we will work with the other organisation/s where possible, to ensure that communication with the person making a complaint and/or their representative is clear and coordinated.

Subject to privacy and confidentiality considerations, communication and information sharing between the parties will also be organised to facilitate a timely response to the complaint.

Where a complaint involves multiple areas within our organisation, responsibility for communicating with the person making the complaint and/or their representative will also be coordinated. Where our services are contracted out, we expect the contracted service providers to have an accessible and comprehensive complaint management system. In such circumstances, we will take complaints about the products, services and staff of our organisation and that of the service providers.

Where our services are contracted out, we expect contracted service providers to have an accessible and comprehensive complaint management system. We take complaints not only about the actions of our staff but also the actions of service providers.

Complaints involving multiple parties

When similar complaints are made by related parties we will try to arrange to communicate with a single representative of the group.

Empowerment of staff

All staff managing complaints are empowered to implement our complaint management system as relevant to their role and responsibilities.

Staff are encouraged to provide feedback on the effectiveness and efficiency of all aspects of our complaint management system.

Managing unreasonable conduct by people making complaints

We are committed to being accessible and responsive to all people who approach us with feedback or complaints. At the same time our success depends on:

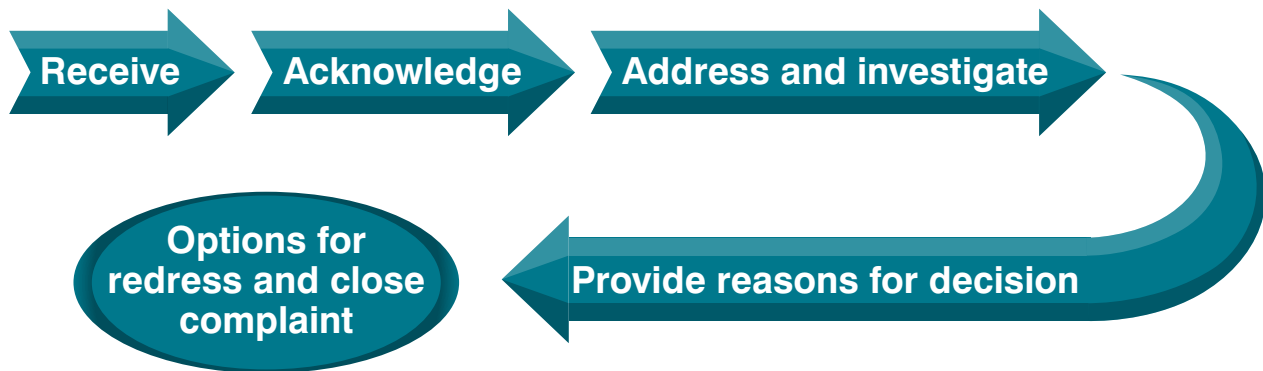
- our ability to do our work and perform our functions in the most effective and efficient way possible
- the health, safety and security of our staff, and
- our ability to allocate our resources fairly across all the complaints we receive.

When people behave unreasonably in their dealings with us, their conduct can significantly affect the progress and efficiency of our work. As a result, we will take proactive and decisive action to manage any conduct that negatively and unreasonably affects us and will support our staff to do the same in accordance with this policy.

For further information on managing unreasonable conduct by complainants please see (either our policy on managing unreasonable conduct by people making complaints OR the Ombudsman's *Managing Unreasonable Complainant Conduct Model Policy* 2012).

Note: Organisations that do not have a policy on managing unreasonable conduct by people making complaints can refer to the Ombudsman resources on this subject (available at www.ombo.nsw.gov.au).

4. Complaint management system



4.1 Introduction

When responding to complaints, staff should act in accordance with our complaint handling procedures as well as any other internal documents providing guidance on the management of complaints. Staff should also consider any relevant legislation and/or regulations when responding to complaints and feedback.

The five key stages in our complaint management system are set out below.

4.2 Receipt of complaints

Unless the complaint has been resolved at the outset, we will record the complaint and its supporting information. We will also assign a unique identifier to the complaint file.

The record of the complaint will document:

- the contact information of the person making a complaint
- issues raised by the person making a complaint and the outcome/s they want
- any other relevant information, and
- any additional support the person making a complaint requires.

Note: As mentioned earlier, organisations may wish to consider recording complaints resolved at the outset. Such record keeping will add to the pool of data organisations regularly analyse to identify system issues and track more accurately the complaint handling activities of staff.

4.3 Acknowledgement of complaints

We will acknowledge receipt of each complaint promptly, and preferably within [specify number] working days.

Consideration will be given to the most appropriate medium (e.g. email, letter) for communicating with the person making a complaint.

4.4 Initial assessment and addressing of complaints

Initial assessment

After acknowledging receipt of the complaint, we will confirm whether the issue/s raised in the complaint is/are within our control. We will also consider the outcome/s sought by the person making a complaint and, where there is more than one issue raised, determine whether each issue needs to be separately addressed.

When determining how a complaint will be managed, we will consider:

- how serious, complicated or urgent the complaint is
- whether the complaint raises concerns about people's health and safety
- how the person making the complaint is being affected
- the risks involved if resolution of the complaint is delayed, and
- whether a resolution requires the involvement of other organisations.

Addressing complaints

After assessing the complaint, we will consider how to manage it. To manage a complaint we may:

- give the person information or an explanation
- gather information from the person or area that the complaint is about, or
- investigate the claims made in the complaint.

We will keep the person making the complaint up to date on our progress particularly if there are any delays. We will also communicate the outcome of the complaint using the most appropriate medium. Which actions we decide to take will be tailored to each case and take into account any statutory requirements.

4.5 Providing reasons for decisions

Following consideration of the complaint and any investigation into the issues raised, we will contact the person making the complaint and advise them:

- the outcome of the complaint and any action we took
- the reason/s for our decision
- the remedy or resolution/s that we have proposed or put in place, and
- any options for review that may be available to the complainant, such as an internal review, external review or appeal.

If in the course of investigation, we make any adverse findings about a particular individual, we will consider any applicable privacy obligations under the *Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act 1998* and any applicable exemptions in or made pursuant to that Act, before sharing our findings with the person making the complaint.

Note: Organisations should amend the above mentioned paragraph to ensure that the reference to privacy legislation is relevant to their jurisdiction.

4.6 Closing the complaint, record keeping, redress and review

We will keep comprehensive records about:

- how we managed the complaint
- the outcome/s of the complaint (including whether it or any aspect of it was substantiated, any recommendations made to address problems identified and any decisions made on those recommendations, and
- any outstanding actions that need to be followed up.

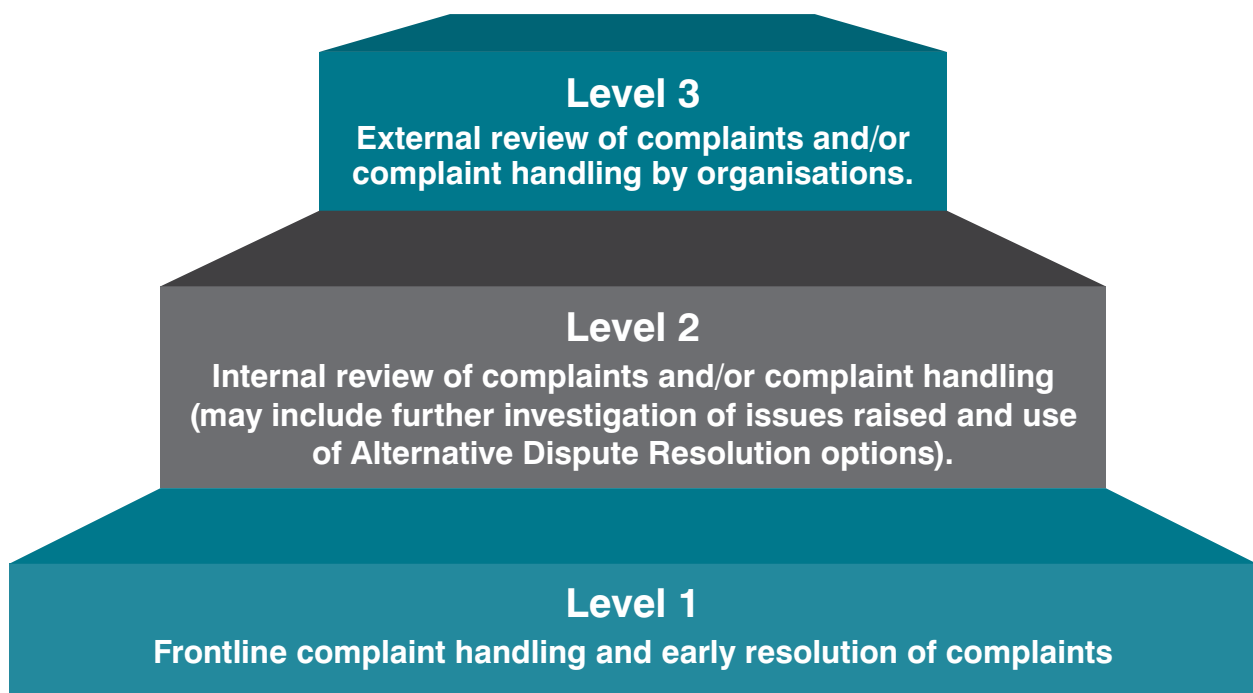
We will ensure that outcomes are properly implemented, monitored and reported to the complaint handling manager and/or senior management.

4.7 Alternative avenues for dealing with complaints

We will inform people who make complaints to or about us about any internal or external review options available to them (including any relevant Ombudsman or oversight bodies).

Note: Organisations should also consider advising people who make complaints of other review bodies that apply to their jurisdiction. For example, NSW councils should include the Office of Local Government.

4.8 The three levels of complaint handling



We aim to resolve complaints at the first level, the frontline. Wherever possible staff will be adequately equipped to respond to complaints, including being given appropriate authority, training and supervision.

Where this is not possible, we may decide to escalate the complaint to a more senior officer within [organisation name]. This second level of complaint handling will provide for the following internal mechanisms:

- assessment and possible investigation of the complaint and decision/s already made, and/or
- facilitated resolution (where a person not connected with the complaint reviews the matter and attempts to find an outcome acceptable to the relevant parties).

Where a person making a complaint is dissatisfied with the outcome of [organisation name] review of their complaint, they may seek an external review of our decision (by the Ombudsman for example).

5. Accountability and learning

5.1 Analysis and evaluation of complaints

We will ensure that complaints are recorded in a systematic way so that information can be easily retrieved for reporting and analysis.

Regular reports will be run on:

- the number of complaints received
- the outcome of complaints, including matters resolved at the frontline
- issues arising from complaints
- systemic issues identified, and
- the number of requests we receive for internal and/or external review of our complaint handling.

Regular analysis of these reports will be undertaken to monitor trends, measure the quality of our customer service and make improvements.

Both reports and their analysis will be provided to [organisation name]'s CEO and senior management for review.

5.2 Monitoring of the complaint management system

We will continually monitor our complaint management system to:

- ensure effectiveness in responding to and resolving complaints, and
- identify and correct deficiencies in the operation of the system.

Monitoring may include the use of audits, complaint satisfaction surveys and online listening tools and alerts.

5.3 Continuous improvement

We are committed to improving the effectiveness and efficiency of our complaint management system. To this end, we will:

- support the making and appropriate resolution of complaints
- implement best practices in complaint handling
- recognise and reward exemplary complaint handling by staff
- regularly review the complaints management system and complaints data, and
- implement appropriate system changes arising out of our analysis of complaints data and continual monitoring of the system.

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