

## ***Applying the commitments to effective complaint handling - guidance for agencies***

# Applying the Commitments

Improving satisfaction with government services is a Premier's Priority.

The Customer Service Commissioner's 2015 Customer Satisfaction Measurement Survey found that customers of government agencies who had their complaints handled well had higher than average overall satisfaction. However, more than half of those surveyed thought their complaint was handled poorly.

### **What do customers want?**

Customers told the Customer Service Commissioner in a follow up complainant experience survey that they want:

- a dedicated person or team to manage their complaint, plus someone they can easily contact to get more information
- more regular updates on the status of their complaint through their preferred method of communication
- up-to-date and relevant information on the complaint process and what to expect from it – before they lodge their complaint
- complaints dealt with in a reasonable time frame
- information about how long their complaint will take to finalise.

They also want it to be easy to make a complaint and to see real changes as a result of having made a complaint. Some people who were dissatisfied with a service did not complain because they didn't think anything would change or believed it was too hard to make a complaint.

### **The Commitments**

Based on feedback from customers, the NSW Ombudsman's office developed, six high level principle-based 'Commitments to Effective Complaint Handling' in consultation with agencies. In July 2016, the Secretaries Board endorsed the commitments and agreed they would be implemented by all the major agencies within the ten NSW Government clusters.

#### **The six Commitments are:**

- 1. Respectful treatment**
- 2. Information and accessibility**
- 3. Good communication**
- 4. Taking ownership**
- 5. Timeliness**
- 6. Transparency**

These commitments are a guarantee to customers on what they can expect when they complain to a NSW Government agency about its processes, services and/or employees. The commitments:

- represent the NSW Government's undertaking to improve complaint handling and service delivery
- are the first step along a path to a whole-of-government approach to complaint handling
- are based on insights about things that matter most to customers
- lay the foundation on which agencies can build their own complaint management systems.

Improved complaint handling benefits agencies in a number of key areas, including:

- better customer satisfaction
- strengthened relationships with customers
- reduced impact on resources from poorly handled complaints
- continuous improvement through feedback and the opportunity to identify systemic issues.

### Applying the Commitments - The importance of culture

Successful agencies see effective complaint handling as a 'customer recovery opportunity' which can build customer trust and satisfaction.

An organisational culture that values complaints does not see them as a mark against the agency, but as valuable feedback and an opportunity to improve their services. This 'culture' is reflected in the:

- attitudes and decisions of senior management
- policies and processes used by the agency
- resources allocated to complaint handling training and staffing
- internal recording and reporting of complaint data
- publicly available information about complaint processes and outcomes.

#### For more information about developing a positive complaint handling culture, please see:

- NSW Ombudsman, *Complaint Management Framework 2015* – section 2.1, Commitment: Develop a culture that values complaints.

- NSW Ombudsman, *Effective complaint handling guidelines* (3rd edition) February 2017 – section 3.1, Developing a culture that values complaints.
- *Australian and New Zealand Standard Guidelines for complaint management in organizations* (AS/NZS 10002:2014) – guiding principles.

### Complaint management systems

Agencies should aim to develop complaint management systems – including policies and procedures – that are consistent with best practice, are fair, and are seen to be fair by everyone.

The Australian and New Zealand Standard (AS/NZS 10002: 2014) is recognised in both countries as the best practice standard in complaint management. It provides guidance on the planning, design, operation, maintenance and improvement of an agency's complaint management system.

Complaint management systems should be fit for purpose – having regard to the agency's size, volume of complaints, functions and customer base. Compliance with the six commitments will ensure that an agency's complaint management system is consistent with the Standard.

#### For more information about developing a complaint management system, please see:

- NSW Ombudsman, *Complaint management framework and model policy* June 2015.
- NSW Ombudsman, *Effective complaint handling guidelines* (3rd edition) February 2017 – section 3, A complaint management framework.
- *Australian and New Zealand Standard Guidelines for complaint management in organizations* (AS/NZS 10002:2014).

## Commitment 1 Respectful treatment

*We treat you with courtesy and respect. We are responsive and will ensure you receive no detriment for having complained.*

- a) *We have a complaint policy that requires staff to treat you with courtesy and respect.*
- b) *Our public contact staff are trained in customer service, complaints and managing unreasonable behaviour.*
- c) *We review the type and number of complaints we receive about our staff, and take appropriate action to respond as necessary.*

Respect and dignity go hand-in-hand. Showing respect is fundamental to good complaint handling and dispute resolution. Dignity relates to a person's feelings of self-worth – and they may feel their dignity has been lost if they are not treated with respect. For example, they may feel that they were not believed or taken seriously, or their knowledge or ethics were questioned.

It is important to treat people with respect and appropriately handle any complaint from the outset. If you don't, this may result in unnecessary escalation and challenging behaviour from a complainant.

The following strategies can help complaint handlers to show respect and restore dignity. Agencies should provide training to develop these skills and support/monitor their staff to make sure they are able to:

- Use appropriate active and reflective listening skills. Make sure complainants are given an opportunity to be heard. Show them that you have understood the issues they are raising.
- Use inclusive and personal language. This shows that you and the complainant are communicating and working together to try to resolve the issues.
- Check the person's understanding of the complaint process – including any information you will rely on to make a decision.
- Manage expectations. Find out what the complainant expects from the process and correct those expectations, particularly if they are unreasonable or unrealistic.
- Respond to any perception expressed by the complainant that the process has been unfair.

- Treat complainants with sensitivity. This might include acknowledging their situation, feelings, concerns or point of view as valid and their own personal experience.
- Apologise for any shortcomings if appropriate.

**For more information about respectful treatment, please see:**

- NSW Ombudsman Fact Sheet – *Respectful Treatment*.
- NSW Ombudsman, *Effective complaint handling guidelines* (3rd edition) February 2017 – section 6, Managing people who make complaints.
- NSW Ombudsman, *Managing Unreasonable Complainant Conduct Manual* 2012.

## Commitment 2 Information and accessibility

*We make it easy and accessible for you to make a complaint and if you need help to lodge a complaint we will help you. You can readily access information about our complaint processes in a variety of formats and across a range of media. This information includes:*

- a) *available avenues to make a complaint for example electronic (email and online), in person, in writing, etc.*
- b) *what you can expect about the process, for example next steps and time frames*
- c) *a contact point to enable you to get more information about the complaint process*
- d) *examples of how complaints have helped improve our services.*

Provide information about how and where complaints may be made on your website and in information brochures or fact sheets. Make this information easy to find and easy to understand, with clear headings and links to online forms and fact sheets. Explain what complaints you can and cannot deal with.

Provide multiple and accessible ways to make complaints – e.g post, email, fax, in person, over the phone and online – and be clear about what information you need from complainants to assess their complaints.

Provide a time frame for responses at the key stages in handling a complaint – e.g the number of days for acknowledging and assessing a complaint, and contact times for matters not finalised within two weeks of receipt.

To make sure the complaints process is accessible to everyone, agencies can:

- Provide a toll free phone number for regional areas.
- Help people who may need it – because of their age, language, literacy, ethnicity or disability – to make a complaint.
- Have fact sheets and other information that is clearly written, appropriate for the audience, and available in different languages.
- Provide information on your website about help through the Translating and Interpreter Service (TIS) on 131 450 for non-English speaking people. Allow complainants to bring someone with them who can translate for them.
- Provide contact information about how to use the National Relay Service for people who are deaf or have a hearing or speech impairment.
- Ensure your offices are wheel chair accessible.
- Provide access to your website for people using screen readers and have a resizing option for text online.
- Consider making information and correspondence available in Braille, large print or audio formats.

Communicate with complainants through any person or agency they have chosen to represent them – e.g advocate, family member, legal or community representative, member of Parliament, or another organisation.

One reason people don't complain when they have an issue is because they don't believe anything will change. Provide information on how complaints and feedback have improved your service delivery. If an individual complaint has led to a systemic improvement, tell the complainant about it.

Analyse information from feedback and complaints – and actively seek feedback to assess whether the process is accessible, whether it delivers a satisfactory service to people from a wide range of backgrounds, and how it can be improved.

If your agency has high numbers of indigenous customers, appoint an indigenous liaison officer to improve access to your services and complaint handling systems. Provide training for complaint handlers in cultural awareness. Make meetings informal and comfortable wherever possible. Communicate via a person's preferred channel if possible and try to accommodate any specific needs, particularly if these relate to a person's disability.

## For more information about accessibility, please see:

- AS/NZS 10002:2014 – Annexure B: Guidance on accessibility.
- NSW Ombudsman, *Tips for Accessible Complaint Handling – a practical guide for frontline staff about adopting a person-centred and inclusive approach to complaints*.
- My Right To Be Heard – A video featuring five people with disability who provide personal insights into their lives and the importance of being heard. The video can be viewed here: <https://youtu.be/s5h5eHPTji8>.
- NSW Ombudsman, *Effective complaint handling guidelines* (3rd edition) February 2017 – section 3.2, Making it easy for people to make complaints.
- NSW Ombudsman, *Complaint Management Framework 2015* – section 2.2, Facilitation: Make it easy for people to make complaints to your organisation.

## Commitment 3 Good communication

We keep you informed about the status of your complaint by:

- a) *acknowledging receipt of your complaint and providing you with information about the process that includes:*
  - a contact point for inquiries
  - the likely next steps of the complaint process
  - the expected time frame to finalise your complaint.
- b) *providing you with updates on your complaint at regular intervals as specified in our procedures*
- c) *communicating the outcome of your complaint and the reasons for the outcome through the most appropriate channel*
- d) *providing you with information about internal and external avenues of review where available.*

Good communication for effective complaint handling means:

- listening
- treating the complainant with respect
- managing the complainant's expectations from the start

- keeping the complainant informed about the progress of their complaint
- communicating the outcome of the complaint.

To lay solid foundations for good communication, you should also provide:

- an explanation and apology when things go wrong
- a reasonably detailed explanation of the outcome of the complaint e.g what action was taken, the reason for the decision and – where relevant – what remedy or resolution was put in place.

**For more information about good communication, please see:**

- NSW Ombudsman, *Complaint Management Framework 2015* – section 2.5, Guidance: Develop policies and procedures to guide staff in the management of complaints and section 3.2, Respond to complaints.
- NSW Ombudsman Fact Sheets:
  - *Quality customer service*
  - *Reasons for decisions*
  - *Apologies*
  - *Service provision expectations.*
- NSW Ombudsman, *Effective complaint handling guidelines* (3rd edition) February 2017 – section 4.2, Acknowledging complaints and section 6.2, Managing expectations and perceptions.

## Commitment 4 Taking ownership

*The staff who manage your complaint are appropriately trained and skilled. One person and/or a team is responsible for managing your complaint, and their contact details are made available to you. We will inform you if your complaint is transferred to another person or team.*

To help ensure relevant staff are able to take ownership of complaints, an agency should:

- Recruit staff with the required skills and attributes for jobs with a complaint handling component.
- Train all staff who handle complaints in:
  - › implementing complaint management procedures relevant to their role
  - › receiving and resolving complaints from disadvantaged and vulnerable people who need assistance

- › good communication and respectful treatment
- › dealing with unreasonable conduct.
- Give staff clear delegations and authority to resolve complaints, including the level of discretion and any financial delegations. The unnecessary escalation of complaints leads to delays and increased dissatisfaction.
- Provide staff with opportunities to debrief and/or external employee assistance programs, as complaint handling can be stressful.
- Provide staff with guidance and support materials.
- Check the quality and consistency of complaint handling.

**For more information about staff empowerment and taking ownership, please see:**

- NSW Ombudsman, *Complaint Management Framework 2015* – section 2.3, Resourcing: Appropriately train, empower and adequately resource staff managing complaints.
- NSW Ombudsman, *Good Conduct and Administrative Practice Guidelines* (revised) 2017 – Module 7 & 8.
- AS/NZS 10002:2014 – Annexure F: Responsibilities of Management, Employees and Complaint Handling Personnel.

## Commitment 5 Timeliness

*We do our best to deal with your complaint as soon as possible. We have set and made public expected timeframes and KPIs for finalising complaints which recognise differing levels of seriousness, urgency and complexity of complaints received. If there are unavoidable delays in dealing with your complaint we will inform you and explain the reasons.*

Timeliness is one of the top expectations and contributing factors to satisfaction with government services.

Research conducted in Canada indicates that customers expect a same day response for a reply to an email or voicemail and one to two weeks for a reply to a letter.

What this tells us about satisfaction with timeliness is that agencies should either meet these expectations or, if they cannot, actively manage the complainant's expectations as to when to expect a response.



Complaints should be dealt with as soon as possible. The more promptly a complaint is resolved, the more likely that the customer will be satisfied and have better regard for the agency. Dissatisfaction increases with time, especially if progress and/or reasons for delays are not communicated. During the initial assessment, consider if there are any issues that may require a quicker response.

Agencies should set KPIs for finalising complaints and publicise them in:

- their complaint management policy
- publicly available information on the complaint process
- the acknowledgement sent to the complainant at the outset.

Agencies should consider publishing time frames for the key stages of the complaint process – eg how long it will take to acknowledge, assess and finalise the complaint. It is important to give realistic time frames for finalising complaints, especially complex and protracted matters.

If the complaint cannot be finalised within KPIs, contact the complainant and explain the reasons for the delay.

Inevitably some complaints will take longer to deal with. Good complaint handlers anticipate setbacks and continually manage expectations through good communication.

### **For more information about timeliness and managing expectations, please see:**

- NSW Ombudsman, *Complaint Management Framework 2015* – section 2.1, Commitment: Develop a Culture that values complaints.
- NSW Ombudsman Fact Sheet – *Quality customer service*.  
NSW Ombudsman Fact Sheet – *Service provision expectations*.
- NSW Ombudsman, *Good Conduct and Administrative Practice Guidelines* (revised) 2017.

## **Commitment 6 Transparency**

*We record and analyse information on our complaint handling processes, including:*

- a) the number of complaints received*
- b) the number of complaints finalised*
- c) the percentage of complaints finalised within our KPIs*
- d) the issues raised by complaints*
- e) the actions taken in response to complaints*
- f) the systemic issues identified*
- g) the number of requests received for internal and/or external review.*

The purpose of collecting data about complaints is to collect information that is objective and can be used to inform decision making, including providing insights for improving service delivery and designing policies. By analysing complaints, agencies can:

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

Analysis of complaints should be done regularly and reported on internally to management. It should include a review of:

- volumes and trends over time
- the types of issues being raised and their impact
- outcomes
- the demographics of the people making complaints.

Importantly, agencies should share with the public how this information is being used to improve service delivery.

### **For more information about transparency, please see:**

- AS/NZS 10002:2014 – Annexure C: Data collection, analysis and reporting for complaint information.
- NSW Ombudsman, *Good Conduct and Administrative Practice Guidelines* (revised) 2017 – Module 14.
- NSW Ombudsman, *Complaint Management Framework 2015* – section 2.4: Learning: Analyse complaints and their outcomes to improve systems and processes
- NSW Ombudsman Fact Sheet – *Handling complaints*.

# The Commitments to effective complaint handling

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- d) the issues raised by complaints
- e) the actions taken in response to complaints
- f) systemic issues identified
- g) the number of requests received for internal and/or external review.

# Applying the Commitments

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## Contact us for more information

Our business hours are: Monday to Friday, 9am–5pm (*Inquiries section closes at 4pm*)

If you wish to visit us, we prefer you make an appointment. Please call us first to ensure your complaint is within our jurisdiction and our staff are available to see you.

Level 24, 580 George Street  
Sydney NSW 2000

**Email** [nswombo@ombo.nsw.gov.au](mailto:nswombo@ombo.nsw.gov.au)

**Web** [www.ombo.nsw.gov.au](http://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au)

**General inquiries** 02 9286 1000

**Facsimile** 02 9283 2911

**Toll free** (outside Sydney metro) 1800 451 524

**National Relay Service** 133 677


Telephone Interpreter Service (TIS): 131 450

We can arrange an interpreter through TIS or you can contact TIS yourself before speaking to us.

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