

Effective Complaints Management

1: Setting the Scene

INFORMATION FOR NORTHERN TERRITORY PUBLIC SECTOR AGENCIES:

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This Fact Sheet forms part of a series designed to assist public sector agencies to ensure they have appropriate procedures in place to effectively manage customer complaints.

The Fact Sheet series has been kindly made available by the Queensland Ombudsman. It has been adapted for use in the Northern Territory.

For further information or advice, please contact the Northern Territory Ombudsman's Office on 08 8999 1818.

Our commitment to public agencies

The Northern Territory Ombudsman is committed to helping public sector agencies manage customer complaints and follow good administrative practices.

When we refer a complainant back to an agency initially it reflects poorly on us as well as on the agency if that person does not find a responsive, effective complaint resolution process.

The information contained in this series of Fact Sheets is designed to assist agencies to implement new or enhanced systems to meet the community's expectation that public agencies will be customer-focused and responsive to their feedback.

The series has been kindly made available to NT Public Sector agencies by the Queensland Ombudsman's Office. It is based on many years' experience in reviewing agencies' administrative decisions and working with them to enhance systems and prevent the recurrence of systemic problems.

The series of Fact Sheets has also drawn upon literature in the field, particularly AS 4269-1995 *Complaints Handling* and the International Organisation for Standardisation, *ISO 10002:2004 Quality Management – Customer Satisfaction – Guidelines for complaints handling in organisations*. The last Fact Sheet in the series, *Further Information and Reference Material*, includes a full listing of the material drawn upon.

The principles outlined are general rather than prescriptive. We understand there is no 'one model suits all' formula that will work across the different sizes and functions of Northern Territory public sector agencies.

We recommend that agency senior management use the information to review their current system. They should also consult broadly with staff and customers to determine needs, and make a careful decision about the shape of their complaints management system. To help understand the effectiveness of your current system, the Queensland Ombudsman has kindly made available its *Effective Complaints Management Self Audit Checklist*. This comprehensive self-assessment tool allows agencies to identify potential areas for improving their current complaints system. The checklist is aligned with the critical elements identified in this Fact Sheet series. (See Fact Sheet 14, *Further Information and Reference Material*, for further information on the *Self Audit Checklist*).

A number of terms throughout this series are common in the literature on complaints management. The following definitions are given to assist readers.

Definitions

AS 4269-1995 Complaints Handling – Sets out the essential elements for the management of complaints from inception to satisfaction or final determination, as the case may be. It further provides guidelines for the implementation of a complaints handling process.

ISO 10002:2004 – Quality Management – Customer Satisfaction – Guidelines for complaints handling in organizations – Provides guidance on the process of complaints handling within an organisation, including planning, design, operation, maintenance and improvement. The complaints handling process described is suitable for use as one of the processes of an overall quality management system.

We thank Standards Australia for their permission to refer to these Standards in this series.

Complaint – An expression of dissatisfaction, orally or in writing, about the service or actions of an agency or its staff affecting an individual or group. It can also concern a failure by an agency to comply with its charter or mission regarding services it provides to the public.

Complaints handling/complaints management system – the way individual complaints are dealt with by an agency encompassing the policy, procedures, practices and technology.

Complaints review officer – has the role of ensuring the complaints management process is efficient and effective.

Complainant/customer/client – someone to whom an agency provides or offers a product or service or who is affected in some way by the action or inaction of an agency.

Feedback – can be a complaint, compliment or suggestion.

Maladministration – includes a decision or action that is:

- unlawful
- unfair
- unreasonable, unjust, oppressive or improperly discriminatory
- an improper exercise of a power or discretion
- based on a mistake of fact or law
- taken on irrelevant grounds or
- simply wrong.

See s.26 *Ombudsman (Northern Territory) Act 1978* for a full definition.

EFFECTIVE COMPLAINTS MANAGEMENT - SETTING THE SCENE

Western Australian Experience

In 2004, The Western Australian Government directed all public sector agencies to implement effective complaints handling systems.

A whole of government complaints management policy has been established to ensure the people of Western Australia are provided with mechanisms for making complaints about public services. The Statement of Principles says:

You are entitled to:

- *complain when you are unsatisfied with a service or product provided by a Western Australian government agency*
- *to have your complaint taken seriously*
- *be treated with courtesy and respect.*

A complaints information brochure, *Making a Complaint about Government Services*, is available from the Western Australian Department of Premier and Cabinet at www.complaints.wa.gov.au.

Good complaints management is an integral part of quality customer service and also provides benefits for the agency and staff. Effective systems enable poor decisions to be quickly and efficiently rectified and deliver information identifying areas for improvement. Additionally, effective systems reduce staff stress by providing training and support to help them deal with unhappy customers.

Public sector agencies — defined here as including government departments, local councils, university, board or other statutory authorities, or statutory government-owned corporations.

Public Sector Principles— the principles and standards of proper conduct in the administrative sphere of government. Good decision-making has its foundation in sound ethical principles. Section 2 of the Public Sector Employment & Management Regulations 1993 and the NTPS Principles and Code of Conduct booklet establish a philosophical framework for employment and management in the Public Sector.

Risk management — a systematic approach to identify and manage corporate risks that aids decision-making and helps agencies to meet targets and objectives.

Systemic problem — difficulties identified in service, products, delivery systems, policies or procedures, often identified through customer complaints. The impact of a serious systemic problem is likely to be ongoing and to apply in multiple cases.

The main reasons public agencies need effective complaints management systems:

- Citizens have a right to complain and seek a remedy for a decision that is unfair or wrong.
- They can identify areas that need improvement.
- They can promote customer satisfaction.
- They save money by resolving problems internally, close to the source. They can prevent complaints from escalating and multiplying, a situation that can be resource-intensive and lead to adverse publicity.
- They are fundamental to good administrative practice.

Many public agencies have customer service charters that support their processes and procedures. They should include avenues for customer feedback such as complaints.

The genesis of complaints

Complaints arise because people are unhappy with a decision, the level of service, or the behaviour of staff. If you are serious about reducing complaints, ensure that your agency:

- publishes its complaints policies
- explains its policies to customers upon request
- has clear complaint procedures that are understood by staff
- has skilled, knowledgeable and courteous staff to assist customers resolve their concerns.

The Northern Territory Ombudsman's role

The Northern Territory Ombudsman investigates complaints about the decisions and actions of Northern Territory public agencies that may involve maladministration.

We encourage people to make genuine attempts to resolve their problems with the agencies concerned before complaining to our Office. Nevertheless, we accept hundreds of complaints each year.

Our investigations can lead to recommendations that the agency take some action, such as providing a remedy for the complainant or changing policies or procedures that have contributed to the problem.

Can the Ombudsman help you?

We place a high priority on assisting public agencies to manage their internal complaints management systems. Please contact us if we can assist you with any aspect of complaints handling within your agency.

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