

# Effective Complaints Management

## 2: Commitment

### 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.

### A commitment to your customers

Today's community expects public agencies will operate ethically and efficiently and that government at all levels will have systems to ensure this happens. People are better informed of their rights and more likely to complain about decisions they perceive to be unfair.

The Northern Territory Ombudsman believes that the current Australian and International Standards for complaints handling are a good starting point for agencies to base their own complaints handling systems.

In essence, these standards suggest that your agency should have policies and procedures to enable you to do the following.

### Demonstrate your commitment

Whether your agency is large or small, it is essential you commit to a complaints management process that will suit your business needs. Large departments may need to establish a centralised complaints unit, while smaller agencies may assign a senior manager to handle complaints.

Here are some suggestions on how you can demonstrate your commitment to effective complaints management:

- **Priority** – Chief Executives and senior management should clearly signal to staff their support for the system
- **Proximity** – the process should be close to senior management
- **Staff** – complaints processing staff should have in-depth knowledge of their task and the agency
- **Authority** – staff assigned to this work should have the necessary authority to take action to remedy complaints and to make or recommend changes to procedures
- **Mandate** – ensure it is a recognised and accepted function within the organisation by clearly publishing how it works and discussing its purpose and objectives with staff.

### Choosing the best system for your agency

The literature on complaints management demonstrates there is no 'ideal' model to guide the development of effective systems.

However, the Australian Standard AS 4269-1995 *Complaints Handling* is a good starting point for agencies, regardless of their size or complexity.

In essence, AS 4269 states that organisations should have policies and processes that enable them to:

- promote and support complaints handling from the highest level
- be receptive to consumer complaints
- develop a culture that respects people's right to complain about any aspect of the organisation's operations
- encourage consumer feedback
- ensure appropriate resources for complaints management systems
- determine and implement remedies
- offer complaints services free to consumers
- report on the operation of complaints handling processes
- use the data from complaints to identify and rectify systemic and recurring problems.

Ideally, complaints management systems include processes that allow for formal and informal complaints resolution and provide advice on external review for customers who are not satisfied with an agency's responses.

### Useful tip

The overriding aim of any complaints handling process is to turn dissatisfied consumers into satisfied consumers (AS4269).

## EFFECTIVE COMPLAINTS MANAGEMENT - COMMITMENT

### Demonstrating commitment – an NT Government agency's track-record speaks for itself

The Department of Primary Industry, Fisheries and Mines (DPIFM) was formed in mid-2005 as part of a re-organisation of NT Government agencies. Creation and establishment of the department, one of the larger and more complex in the NT Public Sector, has required considerable structural change on many levels. Priority was given to developing a whole-of-department complaint handling policy and procedure and this was established by November 2005. While acknowledging that there is still work to do to meet best practice in complaint handling, the department has implemented the policy in order to meet its stated commitment to individual accountability towards its customers.

*The DPIFM complaint handling system includes:*

- a policy which affirms the right of departmental service users to provide feedback and to have their complaints heard and resolved by appropriate people
- a procedural document to guide staff in resolving complaints, which sets out the acceptable timeframes for resolving complaints and establishes clear lines of responsibility
- a position dedicated to the handling of complaints (Complaint Manager)
- a tiered process of complaint resolution, with a focus on resolution at the front-line wherever possible
- plans for staff training and the development of information brochures for stakeholders
- a database - developed in-house - to track complaints and enable effective reporting to management on recommendations arising from the resolution of complaints.

DPIFM is to be congratulated for its achievement in making such strong progress toward a comprehensive complaint handling system in such a short length of time.

### A Guide to Demonstrating Commitment

#### Ensure you have a complaints policy and guidelines

Your **policy** should explain your strategic intent – the '**why**' of your commitment to the principles that underpin your complaints management system.

Your complaints management **procedures** should identify the steps needed to handle complaints – the '**how**' of managing the system.

Staff who are receptive to customer complaints will reflect your commitment and goodwill to your customers. Those who handle complaints should be recognised for their:

- knowledge of your operations
- specialised complaints management training
- analytical and decision-making skills
- desire to maintain good relationships with customers.

Involving staff in the development and ongoing maintenance of your system will help you to develop a broad commitment to a customer service culture that is receptive to feedback.

Policy and procedures go only so far. A positive attitude that views customer concerns as opportunities for improvement is also required.

#### Allocate sufficient resources

Provide appropriate resources for complaints management. Establishing and maintaining a system to record complaints and monitor and report on trends over time is essential. This does not always mean greater costs – your existing technology may have the capacity to manage complaints information.

If you already have a complaints system in place that meets some of your needs, you may be able to streamline or modify it for better results.

### Monitor progress

Regularly monitor your complaints management process as part of your business improvement strategy. The performance of individual decision-makers and work units can be compared for consistency in approach, with regular informed feedback given to ensure mistakes are not repeated.

Regular management reviews following consultation with staff will identify what is working and what perhaps needs more attention. Ideally, your customers should be involved in assessing the effectiveness of your system (see Fact Sheet 12, *Reviewing Internal Systems*, for further information).

### Make it easy to complain

Make sure your customers know you welcome their feedback, even if it is negative, by providing:

- easy access to your complaints policy
- simple information on how to lodge a complaint on your **website**
- a 'Complaints' heading with a toll-free number on your **telephone listing**
- **call centre staff** with information so they know the right section to connect people to if they have a problem.

It is also a good idea to advise complainants of their right to external review by an independent agency such as the NT Ombudsman if they are unhappy with the outcome of their complaint (see Fact Sheet 13, *External Review*, for further information).

#### Reap the rewards of your commitment

When you make it easy for customers to complain and staff to resolve issues, you will build a bank of goodwill in the community and a reputation as a responsive organisation. You may even see the complaint numbers fall and compliments increase!

How you manage complaints reflects your overall commitment to customer service. Done effectively, the entire organisation reaps the rewards of its collective commitment.

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