

Complaint Management Framework for the Northern Territory Public Sector



2016

Contents

1. Perspective.....	1
1.1. Why bother with complaints?.....	1
1.2. Walk in the shoes of the complainant.....	1
1.3. Best process fundamentals	2
2. Framework and Model Policy.....	3
3. Key sources	3
4. Complaint Management Framework.....	4
4.1. Essential components.....	4
4.2. Commitment/Culture	5
4.3. People / Resources.....	7
4.4. Facilitation/Accessibility.....	8
4.5. Principles	10
4.6. Process.....	12
4.7. Learning/Analysis	14
5. Why bother with complaints (reprise).....	15

1. Perspective

1.1. *Why bother with complaints?*

Acting fairly — ‘Doing the right thing’ — must be a fundamental basis for all our actions as public servants.

This must extend to correcting mistakes when they occur and working to improve systems to reduce the chance of mistakes being repeated.

Having an effective complaint management system in place helps to identify and correct mistakes.

Beyond that, dealing with complaints effectively builds strong relationships with clients and enhances the reputation of the agency. Careful analysis of complaints and why they are being made can improve the way you do business.

Two more detailed discussions of the importance of complaints to your business are set out at the end of this document.

1.2. *Walk in the shoes of the complainant*

We have discussed above what’s in it for you, as an agency and as a public sector officer. However any policy development and implementation must always have a strong focus on the complainant.

Before moving on to the detail of the Framework, it is first worth stepping back and considering the point of view of the complainant. What do they want from the complaints process?

You may say, “That’s easy. They want to get their own way. They want a win.” However, in reality, most complainants are just as concerned with having an accessible, fair and reasonable process in place to deal with their concerns. They want to be treated reasonably and fairly whatever the final outcome.

It is vital to reflect on the nature of your clients and prospective complainants to consider what they are looking for when they contact you about a complaint.

A good starting point is, “What would I expect if I made a complaint?”

However, it is important to go further and put yourself in the shoes of different complainants from different backgrounds.

The complainant could be your grandmother, your brother, your son or daughter, or a neighbour who has just arrived from overseas.

What about a homeless person? Someone whose first language is not English? A child? Someone with a visual or hearing impairment? A victim of domestic violence? Someone who has recently lost a loved one?

What would they expect and how can you accommodate their different needs and expectations?

In the Northern Territory we have an incredibly diverse mix of people from a wide variety of backgrounds. They not only have different language skills but also different cultural and life experiences.

For some, their culture and past negative interactions with authorities may discourage complaint. A good complaint handling system must recognize this diversity in order to encourage complaints and feedback that will improve the way you do business.

You cannot necessarily cater for every situation but you should consider circumstances that are more likely to arise for potential complainants to your organisation. Cast your net as wide as reasonably possible. How can your complaint processes encourage and assist them?

1.3. Best process fundamentals

From experience in dealing with complaints, there are a number of elements that complainants commonly want, for example:

1. a variety of ways to make a complaint, so the complainant can pick what suits them;
2. prompt initial acknowledgement of the complaint;
3. someone who is willing to take time to listen to their complaint;
4. someone who shows understanding of their complaint;
5. someone who shows empathy with their frustration or annoyance, without necessarily agreeing with them immediately;
6. a description of likely timeframes, and if the timeline is substantial, an explanation;
7. a description of potential outcomes and any limits on what can be done for them;
8. regular updating, including explanation of any unforeseen or extended delay;
9. a clear statement explaining the outcome of their complaint, whether favourable or not;
10. some indication that, even if they have not got the outcome they were looking for, their complaint will lead to improved processes in the future.

Policy and procedural development should always be undertaken with the client's perspective front and centre. Any complaint management system must recognise and accommodate a wide range of diverse backgrounds and circumstances.

2. Framework and Model Policy

This document is designed to provide guidance to public sector officers involved in development or review of their agency's complaint management system.

No two agencies are identical and each agency should take care to design a system that meets its needs and the needs of its clients.

It is one of two documents that should be read together:

- **Complaint Management Framework**
This document. It discusses the types of issues that have to be dealt with in the development and implementation of a policy and procedures for complaint management.
- **Complaint Management Model Policy**
Sets out a model policy that can be used as a template / departure point for the agency's policy development.

3. Key sources

The key document in development of any complaint management system should be:

- *Guidelines for complaint management in organizations, Australian and New Zealand Standard (AS/NZS 10002:2014) – available for purchase from Standards Australia.*

In addition to the Guidelines, the Australian Standard has numerous appendices that give guidance on particular topics, for example, Accessibility, Objectivity, Dispute Prevention and Management, Three Level Model of Complaint Handling, Effective Apologies, Options for Redress, Audit and Role of Information in Reducing Complaints.

Other very useful publications are:

- [Complaint Management Framework, NSW Ombudsman, 2015](#)
- [Better Practice Guide to Complaint Handling, Commonwealth Ombudsman, 2009](#)

Substantial parts of this document refer to or are reproduced or adapted from those two documents with thanks.

4. Complaint Management Framework

4.1. Essential components

In developing and implementing policies and procedures relating to complaint management, it is important for an agency to make sure they address all essential components.

The Australian Standard (AS) sets out 17 guiding principles relating to complaint management grouped under four headings (some aspects of those principles are identified in italics):

Enabling complaints

People focus – pro-active, treat with respect, active involvement in process

Ensuring no detriment to complainant

Visibility and transparency

Accessibility – provide support, allow assistance and representation

No charges

Managing complaints

Responsiveness – prompt acknowledgment, efficiency, manage expectations

Objectivity and fairness – avoid conflicting interests, defer action where appropriate

Equity

Privacy and disclosure

Communication – provide explanations for policies, procedures and decisions

Managing the parties

Conduct of parties – make expectations clear in policies or guidelines

Work health and safety

Complaint involving multiple parties – co-ordination of communication with complainant

Empowerment of staff – ensure staff empowered, encourage staff feedback on system

Accountability, learning and prevention

Accountability – ensure accountability for system is clear

Continuous improvement – complaints should be integral part of quality improvement

Prevention of ongoing disputes – minimise possibility of escalation into ongoing disputes.

The Commonwealth Ombudsman's Better Practice Guide to Complaint Handling describes five key elements of effective complaint handling:

1. **Culture.** *Agencies must value complaints as a means of strengthening their administration and improving their relations with the public.*
2. **Principles.** *An effective complaint handling system must be modelled on the principles of fairness, accessibility, responsiveness, efficiency and integration.*
3. **People.** *Complaint handling staff must be skilled and professional.*

4. **Process.** *The seven stages of complaint handling—acknowledgment, assessment, planning, investigation, response, review, and consideration of systemic issues — should be clearly outlined.*
5. **Analysis.** *Information about complaints should be examined as part of a continuous process of organisational review and improvement.*

The NSW Ombudsman’s Complaint Management Framework sets out five essential components:

1. **Commitment.** *Develop a culture that values complaints.*
2. **Facilitation.** *Make it easy for people to make complaints to your organisation.*
3. **Resourcing.** *Appropriately train, empower and adequately resource staff managing complaints.*
4. **Learning.** *Analyse complaints and their outcomes to improve systems and processes.*
5. **Guidance.** *Develop policies and procedures to guide staff in the management of complaints.*

4.2. Commitment/Culture

Commitment to effective complaint management must be demonstrated at all levels of the agency and particularly by the most senior staff.

Commitment must be unambiguous and ongoing. Senior managers should champion effective complaint handling.

Commitment from senior management should include:

- a) ensuring that a detailed complaint management policy is established within the agency;
- b) alignment of complaints and quality improvement and assurance policies and procedures of the agency;
- c) ensuring that complaint management procedures and processes are planned, designed, implemented and maintained in accordance with the complaint management policy;
- d) identifying and allocating the resources needed for effective and efficient implementation of the complaint management policy and procedures, including promotion of awareness and staff training;
- e) ensuring the promotion of awareness throughout the agency of the complaint management policy and procedures, their importance to the agency and the need for a customer focus;
- f) ensuring that information about the complaint management policy and procedures is communicated to customers, complainants, and, where applicable, other parties directly concerned in an easily accessible manner;
- g) nominating an executive level officer responsible for oversight of complaint management;
- h) appointing a senior level complaint management representative and clearly defining his or her responsibilities and authority;
- i) ensuring that there is a process for rapid and effective notification to senior management of any significant complaints;
- j) periodically reviewing the complaint management policy and procedures to ensure that they are effectively and efficiently maintained and continually improved.

Senior management can promote the importance of complaints by such steps as:

- a) a brief plain English statement from the chief executive and senior managers acknowledging the importance of feedback and complaints – this can be published prominently on the agency's website and disseminated to staff;
- b) stressing to staff that the focus of complaints management is on fixing issues and improving systems, not apportioning blame;
- c) regular advice and reiteration to staff that complaints are valued and that people who make complaints are not to be victimised;
- d) regular reference to the importance of complaints in various forums, for example, positive comments in staff forums, public presentations, newsletters and correspondence;
- e) advising staff of cases where feedback or complaints have prompted system improvements;
- f) raising the prominence of complaint handling and lessons learned, with regular reports and discussion at senior management meetings;
- g) personal attention of the chief executive to the progress of significant complaints and any emerging trends.

The role of the complaint management representative should be clearly defined. It should include:

- a) establishing a process of performance monitoring, evaluation and reporting;
- b) reporting to senior management on the complaints management process, with recommendations for improvement;
- c) maintaining the effective and efficient operation of the complaint management process, including the recruitment and training of appropriate personnel, technology requirements, documentation, setting and meeting target time limits and other requirements, and process reviews.

Other managers involved in the complaints management process should, as applicable within their area of responsibility:

- a) ensure that the complaints management process is implemented;
- b) liaise with the complaint management representative;
- d) ensure the promotion of awareness of the complaint management process and of the need for a customer focus;
- c) ensure that information about the complaint management process is easily accessible;
- d) report on actions and decisions with respect to complaints handling;
- e) ensure that monitoring of the complaint management process is undertaken and recorded;
- e) ensure that action is taken to correct a problem, prevent it happening in the future, and that the event is recorded;
- f) ensure that complaint management data are available for senior management review.

4.3. *People / Resources*

Commitment can only be turned into practical application if staff of the agency are adequately trained, empowered and resourced to do the job.

The NSW Ombudsman notes four guiding principles in this regard:

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.

There must be an ongoing commitment of resources for enquiry and complaint staff training.

It is also important that staff be given the power and flexibility to resolve matters. This may involve several layers of decision making, with authority to make judgments for routine matters delegated to officers at a relatively junior level.

Particularly for agencies that deal with large numbers of routine complaints, one of the biggest obstacles to an effective complaint system can be a tendency to guard decision-making delegations too closely, to leave even relatively minor decisions to senior officers. This not only limits the ability of front line complaint handlers to quickly resolve matters but can impact substantially on timeliness and the cost of complaint handling.

For most routine matters, substantial delegations for front line staff, accompanied by broad written guidance, is the best recipe for a fast and effective system.

It is also important for staff to have recourse to timely advice and support. Dealing with enquiries and complaints on a regular basis can be a challenging and at times draining experience. Complainants are often frustrated and some can display challenging behaviours.

The ability to get quick advice and confirmation of a proposed resolution from a supervisor can help ameliorate a difficult situation. Timely support from supervisors and access to other support mechanisms, including counselling, should be readily available.

It is also important to make time spent in the complaint management area attractive to staff within the agency. Various steps can be taken including acknowledgement that working in the area is likely to develop a broad knowledge of functions across the agency, provision of professional development opportunities, regular access to senior management and acknowledgement of good work overall or in individual cases.

In addition to training and support for staff, the complaint management system must itself be adequately resourced. This must extend to all aspects of the system, including information technology systems, complaint mechanisms, public awareness and education, reporting and analysis.

With regard to case management, the Commonwealth Ombudsman states:

Unless complaints are few in number, there must be an electronic system for entering, tracking and monitoring complaints and for analysing complaint data. The system should incorporate the following features:

- *simple data entry*
- *the ability to search across various fields, such as:*
 - *the complainant's name—to track the progress of an individual complaint*
 - *the staff member's name—to conduct quality assurance reviews*
 - *the type of problem—to identify emerging trends and ensure consistency in how the agency responds to complaints*
 - *the location of the problem—to highlight regional or institutional trends in complaints and how they are handled*
 - *the time taken to resolve the complaint—to monitor timeliness and efficiency*
- *regular reporting, to prompt the agency to monitor trends and quickly identify and respond to new challenges*
- *simple access by all staff involved in complaint handling*
- *compliance with the agency's recordkeeping practices*
- *compliance with any legislation that regulates how the agency is to make, record and notify decisions or resolve complaints, as well as with information privacy principles.*

4.4. Facilitation/Accessibility

The NSW Ombudsman recognises five guiding principles relating to awareness and access:

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.

Consider the discussion earlier in this document in Walk in the shoes of the complainant.

The key is to encourage people to give feedback and make complaints.

Not everyone is the same. Often, the people who are most likely to have problems with the system are the ones who need the most encouragement and support to raise issues about it.

The complaint management system needs to do everything it reasonably can to promote easy access for all. There should be no fee to complain (AS, 5.1.5).

The NSW Ombudsman states:

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 understand 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.*

4.5. Principles

Underlying the complaint management system must be a fundamental commitment to fairness. In that regard, the Commonwealth Ombudsman states:

A complainant must be treated fairly. It should be recognised that there is often a power imbalance between them and the agency they are complaining about. Fairness rests on three qualities—impartiality, confidentiality and transparency.

Impartiality

Impartial investigation is vital to the credibility and success of a complaint handling system.

Complaint handling staff should not be defensive about their agency or its staff. Nor should a complainant be obliged to prove they are right or the agency is wrong. A complaint should be treated on its merits, with an open mind and without prejudice arising from any previous contact between the complainant and the agency.

There should be a full and objective evaluation of the facts or evidence provided in support of a complaint. Contrary evidence provided by agency staff should not be given added weight or be presumed to be correct. If one version of events is preferred over another, there should be a good reason for this.

Complaint handling staff should also be encouraged to disclose to their supervisors any matters that might affect, or could be seen to affect, their handling of the complaint—such as a close relationship with the complainant or some other personal interest in the complaint.

Special care may be needed in responding to someone who has complained on numerous previous occasions. A temptation that should be resisted is assuming that a new complaint lacks credibility if similar complaints have been dismissed in the past. Any fresh complaint should be treated on its merits.

A complaint about a staff member should be investigated by a different person in the agency. The views of the staff member concerned will be relevant, but to avoid any perception of bias a different person should be chosen to handle the complaint. There should be a clear policy on the independent investigation of complaints against complaint handling staff.

Complaint material published by an agency should include a statement of guarantee that a complainant will not be victimised or suffer negative treatment because they have made a complaint. In business dealings with clients, staff should be instructed not to be influenced by the fact that a person has lodged a complaint on another occasion.

Confidentiality

Clients have a right to expect that their privacy will be respected and their complaint will be investigated in private.

Information privacy principles spelt out in privacy legislation ... should be observed when collecting, storing, using and disclosing personal information obtained in complaint handling. This usually means that complaint information should be stored on a system that is separate from other recordkeeping systems the agency uses. Access to the complaints database should be restricted to authorised staff. Except to the extent necessary, a complainant's identity or personal details should not be disclosed to other staff. ...

Personal details that need to be disclosed for one purpose might need protection in other situations. For example, it will often be necessary to identify a complainant to the staff member whose actions have been complained about, but the same details may not need to be disclosed in a management report on complaint incidents and trends. Importantly, great care should be taken when making public information about complaints and the outcomes of investigations.

It is generally good practice to accept anonymous complaints, even though it can be difficult to conduct a full investigation without knowing the identity of a complainant. This should be explained to the complainant, and they should be asked how they want to be advised of the outcome of an investigation.

Special measures are needed to ensure that whistleblowers' complaints are received and handled in confidence. One of the underlying principles is that a whistleblower should not be subject to reprisals because they have made an allegation. ...

Transparency

A complainant is entitled to know how a complaint will be handled and the outcome of the investigation. An agency's complaint procedures should ensure that:

- *at the time of making a complaint, complainants are advised of the steps in the complaint process and expected timeliness standards for handling the complaint*
- *a contact number is given to each complainant, preferably with the name of a contact person*
- *a report on progress is provided if a complaint is not resolved promptly, with an explanation for the delay*
- *the outcome of an investigation is explained and reasons are provided if the evidence presented by the complainant is not accepted*
- *the complainant is given an opportunity to respond or to seek internal review if they are not satisfied with the decision made about their complaint.*

The NSW Ombudsman has identified these guiding principles in this regard:

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.

With regard to Responsiveness, the NSW Ombudsman notes:

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.

Complainants should be treated with respect and be actively involved in the complaints process as far as practicable and appropriate in the circumstances (AS, 5.1.1).

Objectivity can at times be hard to maintain in the face of difficult behaviours from a complainant or ongoing complaints about the same or similar issues from one source. The fact that a complainant may exhibit challenging conduct does not mean that their complaint does not have substance.

Complaints must be assessed and dealt with impartially on their merits. There are many strategies for dealing with unreasonable complainant conduct. For more on this issue, see the [Unreasonable Complainant Conduct](#) section of the NT Ombudsman website.

Where appropriate, the agency should defer actions that might have significant detrimental impact on the complainant until their complaint has been finalised (AS, 5.2.2). It is important to establish a clear policy on the factors relevant in deciding when a decision or action should be deferred.

A comprehensive policy needs to consider building trust and support for vulnerable people to overcome any concerns they may harbour about retaliation for lodging a complaint, regardless of whether this fear is justified or not.

It is imperative that a policy addresses any preconceived notion that making a complaint may incur reprisal or some other adverse outcome. It is especially important for vulnerable members of our society that protections available in making a complaint are openly communicated. It is important to state that reprisal action will not be tolerated and set out the steps that will be taken to address such concerns, including how a person can notify the agency of this unwanted conduct.

Accepting anonymous complaints is one way of encouraging complaints from vulnerable people who are concerned about reprisal action. Understandably there are challenges with receiving anonymous complaints. One such challenge is insufficient information being provided. Despite this, anonymous complaints can provide valuable information and should be considered in policy development.

4.6. Process

The Commonwealth Ombudsman identifies and discusses in detail seven steps in an effective complaint handling process — acknowledgment, assessment, planning, investigation, response, review, and consideration of systemic issues.

It is important to have a clearly defined process in place but the process itself must have a degree of flexibility built in to meet the circumstances of each particular situation.

Initial acknowledgment is important. Acknowledgment should be made quickly and should include basic information about the likely process.

In some cases, for example, if the complaint is misdirected, the initial acknowledgement may also include assessment and a pointer to other possible alternative options for complaint which finalises the matter.

In other cases, the initial assessment will often point to how the complaint is likely to be progressed. An assessment that identifies a simple issue likely to be resolved within a short time may give rise to a different process than a more complex matter likely to require detailed investigation. Assessment should also identify whether a matter requires urgent or priority attention.

Early contact with the complainant is vital in establishing a clear understanding of what the agency can and cannot do and the process likely to be followed. Establishing clear expectations for the complainant plays a large part in effective management of a complaint.

The agency should always encourage the complainant to set out their desired outcome as part of the process of making a complaint and follow this up at an early stage if the desired outcome is not described or is unlikely to be achieved through the complaint process.

If an agency works closely with another agency or external contractor in the provision of services, consideration should be given to establishment of effective processes to deal with complaints of joint interest. In that regard, the Commonwealth Ombudsman states:

Integration between organisations

Few agencies work independently of other organisations. Two or more agencies may provide a joint service or work alongside each other in regulating activity in the private sector. Decisions made by one agency can partly depend on actions taken or information supplied by another agency. In addition, government functions are increasingly being delegated or outsourced to the private sector.

When a problem arises a client might not understand the division of functions or responsibilities between organisations. There can be confusion about who to complain about or who to complain to. The confusion will be made worse if agency staff lack insight, wrongly deny responsibility, or are ill-informed about other agencies' complaint handling arrangements.

Agencies should consider whether and how their different complaint handling systems can be integrated. There are a number of factors to take into account:

- *Complaint staff should be fully informed of activities in their agency that interact with those of other organisations.*
- *Organisations should exchange information about their complaint handling systems and how a complaint can be lodged.*
- *Consideration should be given to establishing a procedure for referring complaints (or complainants) between organisations and ensuring that a list of contact officers is maintained.*
- *If staff of different agencies work alongside each other in a public area—for example, in the arrivals and security screening areas of airports—steps should be taken to ensure that staff and their employing agency can easily be identified and to ensure cooperation between agencies in dealing promptly with clients' complaints.*
- *If different agencies work together to deliver a service or regulate an activity, consideration should be given to joint publication of information about how to complain or to creating a joint process for handling complaints.*
- *If functions of a government agency are outsourced to a non-government organisation, the contract should stipulate how complaints from clients will be handled and reported (individually or periodically) to the agency. As part of its continuing responsibility for*

delivery of those functions, the agency will also need a procedure for receiving and investigating complaints against the contractor.

4.7. Learning/Analysis

The NSW Ombudsman recognises four guiding principles relating to 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.

Good record keeping is not only essential for the management of complaints. It is vital for the effective reporting and analysis of complaints and outcomes.

What issues are being raised? What problems with the system do they point to? What outcomes are complainants looking for and what outcomes are effective in resolving complaints?

Even where complaints do not point to obvious problems with a particular system or the investigation shows that actions are being taken in line with a soundly based policy, a number of related complaints may show that the policy or the rationale behind it is not being effectively communicated to clients. Issues with communication are frequent sources of complaint. There is a detailed discussion of the *Role of Information in Reducing Complaints* in Appendix O to the Australian Standard.

Agencies need to have the capacity and take the time to analyse complaints and consider that analysis at the most senior levels.

5. Why bother with complaints (reprise)

Set out below are two commentaries on why complaints are 'good medicine', even if they sometimes have a bitter taste.

A complaint is your best friend forever¹

That is, the friend who tells you you've probably had one too many drinks and its time to go home. The friend who quietly lets you know that your fly is undone. The sometimes annoying friend who lets you know you could do better.

A complaint is a friend to your business. And there are three Big BFF benefits you can take advantage of:

- 1. As tools to cement your relationship with client/stakeholders.*
- 2. As your best guide to identify systemic issues.*
- 3. As your best guide to business solutions.*

BFF 1 - Best chance to build relationships

So to the first thing your best friend can help you with is relationship building.

We've all seen them: disaster movies, cop shows, war movies, romantic comedies. They're all the same. Two people get off to a bad start, then build bonds through argument and adversity. Adversity builds mateship. It leads to romance, apparently!

Working through problems together in a constructive way builds a lasting relationship. And so it is with complaints. In my experience, if someone listens to my complaint and tries to help they have a much happier camper on their hands.

Working through a difficult situation with a positive approach can build trust. It can:

- win over a client to maintain a strong and lasting relationship;*
- mean that the next time there is a problem, the client is far more willing to adopt a constructive approach to resolution rather than immediately escalating the problem;*
- reduce the scope for complaints about minor issues because the client has a better understanding of the competing factors that have to be considered and demands on your agency; and*
- make it far more likely that the client will reflect a positive attitude to your agency when they are talking to others.*

¹ Extracted from presentation by P Shoyer, Ombudsman NT, *I'd like to register a complaint: Gaining from public sector complaints and investigations*, Governance Institute of Australia, Public Sector Update, 2013.

BFF 2 – Best guide to systemic issues

So, you have developed a great relationship with your individual client / complainant. Next you need to identify systemic issues. The big issues you need to fix to improve efficiency and effectiveness.

Complaints are a great source of information on where you need to improve.

Depending on how many clients you have out there, you potentially have hundreds and even thousands of people who can feed you information about your systems. They are doing the monitoring for you.

There are many ways of working on improving efficiency and effectiveness. Retreats, investigations, audits, consultant's reviews, think tanks, love-ins, staff suggestion boxes. You name it. None will be better placed to let you know where you need to improve than feedback from the people who are using your service.

So you need to listen carefully to what they say. You need systems in place to record, collate and analyse complaints and the issues they raise in order to identify trends.

When you get complaint information you need to treat it like gold. Good recording systems are vital and frequent monitoring is essential. You need to pay attention when lights turn yellow. It is important to try to pick up on problems before they develop into major issues. Don't wait until the light turns red. "The time to repair the roof is when the sun is shining." (John F Kennedy).

BFF 3 - Best guide to solutions

So, moving on to BFF 3. You have cemented your relationship with your client. They have helped you identify areas where you can improve.

But wait there's more. It's even better than that. These people will tell you how to fix the problem. If you have systems that take on board complaints in the right way, they will offer you up solutions. Always ask them what they want. What they expect to get out of the complaint. They will tell you.

Don't get me wrong. The customer isn't always right. But they often have some jolly good ideas about what good service is. They can present a perspective that will help shape your thinking on process and systemic improvements.

And again, you need to record and monitor what people have asked for, and what has worked, in order to best inform your decisions about service improvement.

So there we have it. Complaints will help you:

- *build better relationships with your clients and stakeholders;*
- *identify areas of your business that need improvement; and*
- *identify potential solutions.*

Could your best friend do any better?

Grumbles, Gripes and Grievances²

Complaints are not often associated with innovation and creativity. When we think of complaints, we tend towards negative association – frustration, failure, poor service, something to be dealt with promptly and filed away. Receiving lots of complaints is seen as something to be wary of, not celebrated.

But getting complaints is much better than not getting complaints – they show that people think it's worth complaining and that they will be listened to, and that they believe that they have power to influence the system. They are a good sign of democracy in action.

...

Given the changing nature of demand, public services need to be centred around citizens and responsive to their needs, and work in different ways to engage and involve the public, communities and front-line staff. This implies rethinking and reshaping the relationship between citizens and the state. Public services need to shift from a delivery model to a 'relational' model. This is particularly important in areas of policy where there is a strong relational element such as in family support services, long-term condition management and rehabilitation, where there is a strong case for services needing to be provided 'with', rather than 'to' or 'for'.

...

Within a 'delivery' model of public services, complaints can instil a reaction of fear in a culture where failure is leapt upon by media and public scrutiny. If there is a culture of closed decision making and information, a complaint can feel challenging and unsettling. If there is little opportunity to engage with those making complaints and develop a shared understanding of issues, relations can become tense.

But complaints are a useful way of stimulating innovation, and are a powerful form of knowledge. Work by the Institute of Customer Service has shown how complaints are useful early warning signs that something has gone wrong, which uncover problems and enable engagement with service users. Complaints can help to:

- *Identify and prioritise need.*
- *Highlight opportunities to change.*
- *Challenge established wisdom.*
- *Co-create and co-produce solutions.*
- *Uncover system failures.*

...

Within a relational model of public services, complaints provide an opportunity to open a dialogue with the public. A relational model means being open to criticism and making it easy for people to complain by seeking and encouraging feedback. It means being responsive in dealing with complaints, responding appropriately, having a culture of listening to what citizens have to say, learning from it and working with them to co-produce better outcomes.

² Extracted from R Simmons & C Brennan, *Grumbles, Gripes and Grievances: The role of complaints in transforming public services*, Nesta..., 2013, pages 5-7 and 10.