

Effective Complaints Management

3: Complaints Management Models

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 model approach to complaints management

A complaints management system is a staged way of receiving, recording, processing, responding to and reporting on complaints as well as using them to improve services and decision-making.

It outlines the stages and primary areas of responsibility for managing complaints.

A good system provides a simple process that is clear for customers and staff. It is a way to resolve problems and avoid delays that may arise when matters pass through various levels within an agency.

The process must be transparent, timely and user-friendly. An effective process ensures information is widely available to your clients on how to make a complaint.

Staff should be equipped to provide verbal advice about the complaints handling process and assist people to make complaints. Discussions are often effective as a first step in resolving issues, as people often prefer to talk to someone rather than write to a faceless agency official.

Structure

An effective complaints management system is structured to allow a fair and detailed consideration of complaints and provides for internal and independent review if the customer remains dissatisfied.

The exact structure you implement will be guided by the size and nature of your business operations. Some authorities suggest a three-tier process for reviewing the decision that has impacted on the complainant.

Others believe this can elongate the process and lead to 'review fatigue' where customers get bogged down in red tape and feel their concerns are not being taken seriously. Even two tiers may be too complex in some circumstances, leading to customer frustration.

It is also recognised that customers often contact the original decision-maker if they know that person's identity.

A model that may suit many agencies has the following attributes:

1. **A frontline or customer service function** with the authority to deal with specified low-level customer complaints, such as incorrect address, lack of advice, response to correspondence or telephone calls and errors in records.

This stage includes complaints registration and attempted resolution. If the initial contact is handled well it will build confidence in the agency.

2. **An internal complaints review** mechanism that is triggered by:

- the complainant's request for a review of the frontline decision outlined in 1 above (i.e. low-level complaints) or
- a decision that the matter is unsuitable for frontline review (i.e. higher-level decisions).

The process involves the agency reviewing, usually at the request of an affected person, a decision or action taken by someone within that agency. It can look at the process and the merits involved in the decision or action, and should be undertaken at a level no less senior than the officer whose decision or action is to be reviewed.

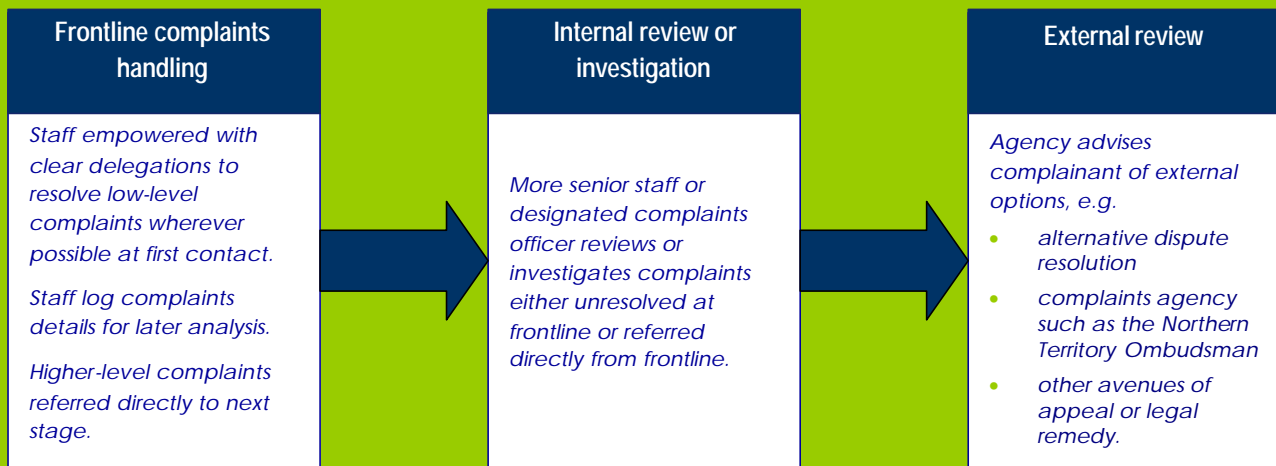
The reviewing officer should know the procedure for investigating complaints and have the authority to overrule any decision that has led to the complaint. Further information on this role is outlined in Fact Sheet 8, *Personnel and Training*.

3. **An independent external review body** to carry out further investigation if matters remain unresolved after internal review.

Complainants may be referred to a specific complaints handling body such as the Northern Territory Ombudsman or tribunal (see also Fact Sheet 13, *External Review*).

EFFECTIVE COMPLAINTS MANAGEMENT – COMPLAINTS MANAGEMENT MODELS

Possible stages of complaint management



Model adapted from the New South Wales Ombudsman's *Effective Complaint Handling* (2000) and Department of Local Government and Planning and Queensland Ombudsman's *Complaint Management – Guidelines for local government* (2001).

Preparing and updating a complaints management system

The development of or changes to your complaints management system should complement your agency's vision, mission and values.

Handling complaints effectively requires the systematic logging of complaints data that will enable sound analysis of the causes of problems. The sample complaints and complaints data collection form accompanying Fact Sheet 11, *Business Improvement*, may assist you to tailor processes to capture and analyse information.

During the process of preparing a new system or revising an existing one, make sure you consider the principles and elements outlined in this series of Fact Sheets.

You may also need to clarify your legal responsibilities. For example, your legislation may contain particular responsibilities for reviewing actions or decisions.

It is also important to consult with staff, customers and community groups and have the endorsement of your Chief Executive for your recommended system.

Above all, make sure that your performance standards are realistic.

Authority and guidelines

Before your system is implemented or significant changes are made, clear lines of authority and guidelines should be developed for review staff who need:

- a mechanism for implementing a decision in favour of the complainant
- direct lines of communication to the appropriate section for concerns about systemic issues arising from the review
- a process which is adequately documented with clear lines of authority (e.g. interview sheets, check lists)
- control mechanisms to ensure consistent outcomes
- easy access to relevant agency material.

Admit when you're wrong – know when you're right

There are many reasons why an agency's decisions or actions can lead to a complaint. It can be a simple error of judgement, a failure to take a citizen's interests into account or something more serious. If the agency is in the wrong, admit it and try to find the best way of remedying the adverse effect the decision has had on the complainant.

To help your customers understand the findings of your internal review, provide clear, written reasons addressing the complainant's concerns, even if the decision is negative.

Customers are not always willing to accept the outcome of internal review and may wish to seek external review of their complaint. Therefore, inform them of external review rights (see Fact Sheet 13, *External Review*, for further information).

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