

Effective Complaints Management

5: Visibility and Access

INFORMATION FOR NORTHERN TERRITORY PUBLIC SECTOR AGENCIES:

1. Setting the Scene
2. Commitment
3. Complaints Management Models
4. Communication
5. Visibility and Access
6. Responsiveness and Fairness
7. Resources
8. Personnel and Training
9. Assessment and Investigation
10. Remedies
11. Business Improvement
12. Reviewing Internal Systems
13. External Review
14. Further Information and Reference Material

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.

Ignore customers at your peril!

Consider this scenario: Jane Citizen is unhappy with some aspect of your agency's service. She decides to contact you to lodge a complaint and seek an apology for the inconvenience she has experienced.

Jane opens the White Pages and looks for a contact number for your complaints section, but there is no listing for this service.

She logs onto the Internet and goes to your website, but a search for 'complaints' directs her to 25 irrelevant documents.

She calls your main switchboard, asks to be put through to your complaints section, and is transferred to three different people, none of whom can assist her.

She decides to put her concerns in writing, but after waiting for a response to her letter for weeks, she reaches boiling point.

Jane calls her local paper, which is very interested in her problems. She talks to a journalist about how your agency is inaccessible and not very customer-friendly.

Her problems appear on the front page of the newspaper, which is read by hundreds of thousands of citizens, including the agency's Minister.

So why are visibility and access important elements of an effective complaints management system?

Because if you don't take steps to ensure your customers can easily find out where and how to provide you with their views, they will probably look for alternative ways to complain.

Create confidence in your complaints management system

Being open and transparent about your complaints management processes lets everyone see you are an accountable agency and instils confidence in your complaints management system. You could consider reporting on your system in your annual report.

Publicising options for review, including external review, will increase confidence and customer satisfaction.

Ensure your staff are well equipped to advise clients on how to lodge a complaint and help members of the community who may need assistance, such as those with a disability or language problem.

Fact Sheet 4 in this series, *Communication*, provides advice on how you can make it easier for customers to understand your complaints process.

Welcome complaints

Complainants need to have confidence that:

- ✓ their complaint will be readily received
- ✓ they will be treated with dignity and respect
- ✓ their issues will be taken seriously and actively reviewed
- ✓ they will receive a meaningful response.

Useful tip

Make sure you also inform your staff about how to lodge a complaint by having information available on your intranet. This will enable them to provide assistance to customers without having to transfer them to another section.

Improving visibility and accessibility

On 21 October 2005 Territory Housing launched a new appeals mechanism which was intended to provide existing and potential Territory Housing clients with a more independent and accountable appeals process.

The Appeals Mechanism is a free service with three levels of appeal, the third level being an independent Board. People who live in or who are waiting for Territory Housing accommodation can appeal against decisions made by the Department. A Client Relations Officer was appointed to assist clients, including arranging for an interpreter at no cost for people who have difficulty understanding English.

Brochures and complaint forms are available at all regional offices and the website also explains the Appeals mechanism to ensure that all clients are made aware of the service. A toll free number is available to enable clients to lodge their appeal by telephone.

The experience of the Ombudsman's Office is that the Territory Housing Appeals Mechanism appears to be successful, with very few complainants returning to our Office after being referred to the Client Services Manager for the appropriate region.

Visibility – the 'where' of complaints management systems

The essence of visibility is ensuring your customers know where to take their complaints.

Your communication staff will be able to advise you on the most appropriate way to ensure adequate visibility of your system.

Promotion methods may include:

- displaying posters and brochures at customer service contact points
- promoting special complaint hotlines or toll-free service numbers on stationery, leaflets and advertising
- having a designated complaints section on your website with a link from the home page
- providing information in written communications, such as letters, contracts, tender documents, account statements and annual reports
- liaison with special needs groups to inform customers of any special arrangements to accommodate their needs.

All staff, but especially frontline staff, should also be able to help customers with information about options for lodging a complaint.

Access – the 'how' of complaints management systems

Effective complaints management systems provide information for customers about how to make a complaint should they be unhappy with any aspect of an agency's service.

While individual systems may differ, common characteristics of accessible complaints management systems include:

- readily accessible information in plain English and other languages for customers on how, when, where and to whom to make complaints
- prominently displayed and circulated information about the complaints process at service delivery points
- simple, flexible and accessible arrangements for customers to lodge complaints
- special arrangements for people with disabilities or special needs, such as a telephone teletypewriter (TTY) facility for hearing-impaired complainants.

Complaints about the decisions or actions of those within your agency can seem like a burden at times, but with the right commitment of staff, your complaints management system can lead to better performance and service for the community.

Useful tip

Increasing the volume, depth and diversity of customer feedback can deliver organisational learning opportunities.