

Effective Complaints Management

12: Reviewing Internal Systems

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.

Your complaints management system: a work in progress

Regular review of your complaints management system will ensure it is operating efficiently and effectively and is responsive to changing circumstances and needs.

A review of how the system is working will identify problems and the level of user satisfaction, and will provide information to help you improve the system.

The frequency and depth of review will depend upon the nature of your agency and the sophistication of your system. Agencies introducing a new complaints management system could opt for an annual review while those with more established processes might consider review at two-yearly intervals.

Essential elements for review

Ideally, reviews should include an audit of complaints files and a survey to determine user satisfaction – with outcomes and the complaints management process itself – and assess the usefulness and accuracy of reports on the system provided to management.

Reviews should do the following:

1. Evaluate policy, procedures and guidelines

- (a) Does your policy clearly articulate its scope and application (i.e. does it apply to all services you provide, temporary staff or people acting as an agent)?
- (b) Is your policy consistent with strategic goals (e.g. operational plans, performance standards, code of conduct)?
- (c) Is the internal reviewer clearly nominated?
- (d) Are terms of reference and responsibility for review of the system contained in the procedures?

- (e) Do the guidelines enable complaints to be categorised according to their seriousness?
- (f) Do guidelines identify how the system works, such as steps a complainant should follow through all phases of the complaints process and identify staff delegations?
- (g) Are policy and guidelines documents effectively disseminated to staff and made available to customers?

2. Review the system

- (a) Are all complaints captured on the database?
- (b) Is the software appropriate (e.g. does the database have a correspondence tracking system)?
- (c) Are timelines established for each stage of the complaints procedure (e.g. acknowledging complaint, replying to requests for information, final response)?
- (d) Have you developed a classification system to enable consistent recording and reporting (e.g. a keyword/activity/subject descriptor such as Public Health / Campaigns / Smoking)?
- (e) Are complaints analysed for identification and rectification of trends, systemic and recurring problems?
- (f) Does management receive and regularly review the complaints analysis?

Useful tip

Allow staff and customers to contribute to the improvement of your complaints system by actively seeking their feedback as part of your review process.

EFFECTIVE COMPLAINTS MANAGEMENT – REVIEWING INTERNAL SYSTEMS

The who, what, when, how and why of complaints management system review

- Who:** Your policy and procedures documents should outline who should conduct your review. The choice will be influenced by the size and nature of your agency. You may choose to assign responsibility to the officer who has ultimate responsibility to manage the complaints management system, a committee, your internal audit section or an independent reviewer.
- What:** Assess specific criteria that will improve your services (e.g. resources, training, technology, access).
- When:** Annually or at intervals that suit your needs. Remember that the resulting information will feed into your complaints management system and the business practices of your agency, helping you to improve your services.
- How:** Determine how you will consult staff, customers and complainants (e.g. formal surveys, interviews, consultations or meetings), review your database to determine if it meets your needs and analyse other elements of the system.
- Why:** Be serious about maintaining and assessing the effectiveness of your complaints handling system. The information gained from your review will help identify ways to improve service delivery, a crucial and ongoing strategy for dynamic organisations.

Useful tip

Remember to continually monitor your complaints handling process, the resources required and the data to be collected.

- (g) Do you record Ministerial correspondence relating to service delivery complaints?
- (h) Do you conduct spot audits of individual complaints and outcomes?

3. Survey staff, customers and complainants

- (a) Are relevant staff trained in the use of the recording and reporting system?
- (b) Are experienced staff consulted about the effectiveness of the complaints process?
- (c) Is complaints information shared widely within your agency (e.g. complaints register, analysis reports)?
- (d) Do staff have the opportunity to advise management what complainants say to them?
- (e) Do staff consider they have sufficient support to professionally fulfil their role (e.g. training, materials, supervision, psychological)?
- (f) Do you survey complainants shortly after finalising their complaints to determine their views on the process?
- (g) Do you understand why some customers do not lodge complaints, even if they have problems with services?
- (h) Do customers know how to complain?
- (i) Does your general client satisfaction survey seek views about the complaints process and outcomes?

Quality Assurance

Some safeguards can be built in to ensure quality in your complaints handling system. Depending on the nature of your business, you may need to engage an independent consultant or establish a committee to monitor and recommend required changes to the Chief Executive.

This will lead to improvements and promote important elements of your complaints process.

Making sure that your complaints staff are efficient and effective in gathering information and analysing data, identifying defective administration and finding ways of resolving complaints in a timely way are important safeguards. Perhaps one of the most important safeguards is to ensure that the outcomes of your complaints management system are fair and in the best interests of your agency and complainants.

Review follow-up

Your system review will probably produce a number of recommendations for change. Some will be implemented immediately, while others may be implemented to varying degrees over time or not at all.

Whoever has responsibility for your complaints management system should ensure that a timetable for implementation of recommendations is developed. This may involve negotiation, discussion and ongoing monitoring. All outcomes will depend, at least in part, on the openness of management and the agency's cultural orientation to client service improvement.

Whatever individual circumstances exist in your agency, it is essential that formal surveys as well as assessment of the adequacy of your database be conducted regularly. This means that complaints data is used in a systematic way, delivering a more cost-effective complaints management system. Otherwise, complaints that could be resolved locally may escalate, thereby creating unnecessary demands on senior personnel.

Report your results!

Maximise the benefit of your review by communicating the results to your staff and customers in your annual report or newsletters. Even if some of the results are less than positive, by keeping all stakeholders informed about service improvements that have stemmed from customer feedback, you will show your agency's commitment to continuous improvement.

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