

Complaint Handling Officers are the most important factor in ensuring that an organisation's complaint handling system is responsive to complainants. Complainants are more likely to be satisfied with the complaint handling system if the person dealing with their complaint is competent, objective and efficient.

## The role of Complaint Handling Officers

Complaint Handling Officers should:

- Have the skills to be able to act with sensitivity as well as be objective and impartial;
- Have knowledge of, and be able to advise on, all aspects of the organisation's internal complaint procedures and be trained to receive, investigate and deal with complaints about the organisation's products and services;
- Have access to rooms with adequate privacy to ensure the complainant's confidentiality is maintained and appropriate information technology equipment, with access to the organisation's complaint handling database and reference material;
- Ensure that they are not directly involved in the subject matter of the complaint, and raise the matter with a superior should such an issue arise;
- Be able to assist in the formulation of a written complaint for complainants who require additional assistance;
- Have access to staff at all levels of the organisation so that complaints can be resolved quickly; and
- Have clearly defined power to act and provide redress to complainants or to refer the matter to someone who has this power.

## Empowering Complaint Handling Officers

Complaint Handling Officers should be empowered to make decisions, or have access to someone who can make decisions, in order to deal with complaints promptly, and, where possible, to achieve early resolution. All organisation staff should be made aware of their responsibilities in providing information to Complaint Handling Officers to help investigate and resolve complaints, and to implement actions to provide remedies or systemic improvements arising from complaints.

## Selection of and guidance for Complaint Handling Officers

Complaint handling is an important role in an organisation and should be recognised as such by management. Staff who are responsible for responding to and/or resolving complaints should be given guidance or training in customer contact and communication skills. Management should determine the particular skills and aptitudes necessary for complaint handling and use selection and training procedures that are appropriate to recruit and retain the most suitable staff in complaint handling roles.

Guidance or training provided to staff should cover:

- The benefits of good complaint handling and the consequences of poor complaint handling;
- The policy and legal framework for complaint handling within which the organisation operates;
- The organisation's complaint handling procedures;
- Declaration of conflicts of interests;
- Evidence based investigation skills;
- Skills in alternative dispute resolution such as mediation or conciliation;
- Interpersonal skills, such as listening, questioning skills and conflict management;

- Communication skills for dealing with unreasonable complainant conduct or the unreasonable conduct of the person who is the subject of the complaint; and
- The organisation's record keeping plan, policies and procedures.

### Delivering an effective complaint management system

Complaint Handling Officers play a key role in ensuring that an organisation's complaint management system meets the key features required to make the system effective.

Complaint Handling Officers should apply the ten key principles for effective complaint handling when managing complaints. Effective complaint handlers should:

- Take a customer focused approach to handling complaints;
- Ensure that information about how and where to complain is kept up to date and available at all service delivery points;
- Ensure that the process for making complaints is easy to access and understand, particularly for members of the public that may require additional assistance or different approaches such as people with disabilities, people living in regional and remote areas, Indigenous Australians, children and young people, and people from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds;
- Acknowledge complaints in a timely manner, address complaints promptly and according to the order of urgency and keep the complainant informed throughout the process;
  - Manage the complainant's expectations by explaining the complaint handling process, what the organisation can and cannot do, the timeframes for dealing with the complaint and when they might expect a response;
- Deal with complaints in an equitable, objective and fair manner;
  - Declare any actual or potential conflicts of interest;
  - Clarify the key issues of the complaint with the complainant;
  - Act with courtesy, showing empathy and understanding but do not take sides;
  - Consult people within the organisation who have expertise relevant to the issue;
  - Ensure the principles of procedural fairness are maintained by providing the affected parties with an opportunity to give their side of the story and to comment on any adverse views;
  - Act without bias, reach conclusions and form views on the facts of the case, taking into account matters that are relevant and not those that are irrelevant;
  - Give reasons for any decisions made, any changes that have resulted from the complaint and details of any remedy;
- Keep personal information relating to complaints confidential;
- Ensure remedies are provided where appropriate;
  - Where possible, consider the use of alternative dispute resolution methods to resolve complaints at the earliest opportunity;
- Ensure complainants are informed of independent internal and external review or appeal processes;
- Ensure responses and outcomes of complaints are recorded, filed and reported to management and monitor implementation of remedies and actions to improve practices; and
- Analyse complaints to identify recurring themes and trends and report these to management to assist with organisational continuous improvement programs.

The Ombudsman WA publications [\*The principles of effective complaint handling\*](#), [\*Effective handling of complaints made to your organisation - An Overview\*](#), [\*Making your complaint handling system accessible\*](#) and [\*Complaint handling system Checklist\*](#) provide additional advice to assist Complaint Handling Officers.

## Dealing with unreasonable complainant conduct

Most complainants act responsibly. However, some complainants are difficult to satisfy and occasionally the conduct of some complainants can be challenging because of:

- unreasonable persistence;
- unreasonable demands;
- unreasonable lack of cooperation;
- unreasonable arguments; or
- unreasonable behaviour.

In these circumstances, special measures to deal with this conduct may be required. It is important to remember that, even where a person's conduct may be unreasonable, they may have a valid complaint and their complaint should be handled appropriately.

Fair consideration must be given to the complaint while ensuring that there is not undue use of resources to investigate and resolve the complaint.

For more information on managing unreasonable complainant conduct, see the Ombudsman WA Guidelines on [Dealing with unreasonable complainant conduct](#).

## Resources

### Other Ombudsman Western Australia Publications

The following Ombudsman WA guidelines provide further details that may be useful in the development of complaint handling systems and for staff involved in handling complaints:

- [Effective handling of complaints made to your organisation – An Overview](#)
- [Complaint handling systems Checklist](#)
- [Making your complaint handling system accessible](#)
- [The principles of effective complaint handling](#)
- [Investigation of complaints](#)
- [Conducting administrative investigations](#)
- [Procedural fairness](#)
- [Dealing with unreasonable complainant conduct](#)
- [Remedies and redress](#)
- [Good record keeping](#)

## Acknowledgement

Ombudsman Western Australia wishes to thank the NSW Ombudsman for use of their publication *Effective Complaint Handling, June 2004* in the development of these guidelines.



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