



NSW Ombudsman

Complaint Handling Systems Survey 2007 Report

Councils

December 2007



Complaint Handling Systems
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Chapter 1. Executive Summary

In the period June to August 2007 the NSW Ombudsman's Office conducted a survey of complaint handling systems across all NSW government departments and public authorities, including local councils. This is the report of the results from local councils.

Councils were asked to complete a questionnaire and also to provide copies of documents about their complaints handling system. The survey was completed on a self-assessment basis with no independent verification of the responses. We asked 152 NSW councils to participate in the survey. One hundred and twenty nine completed surveys were returned, however, four were returned after the due date, so the analysis comprises the responses of 125 councils.

The survey has allowed us to draw a high level picture of the current situation concerning complaint handling across councils in NSW, including some analysis of the similarities and differences between different size councils.

We conducted similar surveys in 1994 and 1999 and have therefore been able to provide some general comparison of changes since those earlier surveys.

The following are some of the highlights from the survey:

1.1 Complaint handling systems

Most of the 125 councils reported that their complaint handling policies and procedures were documented, with approximately 90% of councils reporting their complaint handling policies were written in plain English and 83% of councils reporting their procedures were clear and easy to understand.

1.2 System and staff management

Approximately 86% of councils reported having a senior manager responsible for the effective management of their complaint handling system.

However, very few councils reported including complaint-handling responsibilities, including performance indicators, in staff position descriptions, with only 15% of councils reported having such responsibilities included in position descriptions.

1.3 Advice to customers/clients

Most councils (88%) surveyed reported using a variety of methods to advise customers how to make a complaint or suggestion, compared with 72% of councils who reported doing this in the 1999 survey. However, only 4.8% of councils reported publishing information on how to make a complaint in languages other than English and only 2.4% of councils with more than 300 staff reported publishing complaint information in community languages.

1.4 Dealing with complaints

Councils were more likely to authorise the General Manager or line managers to deal with complaints (98%) or frontline staff (85%). Only 17% of councils reported not authorising anyone in particular to deal with complaints.

1.5 Recording complaints

Approximately 96% of councils surveyed reported that they recorded complaints in some kind of system. In 1999 92.9% of councils reported recording complaint data in a system. Eighty-two per cent of councils reported they recorded oral or other non-written complaints. In 1999 approximately 80% of councils reported recording oral complaints.

1.6 Performance standards for dealing with complaints

Approximately 75% of councils surveyed reported having standards in place dealing with how complaints should be handled. This compares favourably to the 1999 survey result, where only 54.5% of councils reported having standards in place.

1.7 Analysis and feedback

Only 41% of the councils surveyed reported analysing complaints data in a systematic way and only 29.6% of councils surveyed advised they prepare internal reports concerning compliance with performance standards, only 36% advised they prepare internal reports regarding trends in complaints over time and only 47% advised they prepare internal reports regarding outcomes and remedies provided. Only 38.4% of councils advised they prepare internal reports with strategies or recommendations to limit recurrences of complaints, compared with 43.5% of councils who said they prepared such reports in 1999.

1.8 External reporting

Only 19% of councils surveyed reported that they make complaints data public and only 18% of councils reported they include data about complaints in their Annual Reports. In 1999, 30.5% of councils advised they made reports on complaints data public and 20.8% of councils advised they reported on complaints in their Annual Reports.

1.9 Training

Councils were most likely to provide training in complaint handling/dispute resolution to their frontline staff, however, were less likely to provide this kind of training to all staff, with 25% of councils reporting they had provided this kind of training to all staff.

1.10 Customer satisfaction

Of the 77 councils surveyed that reported conducting research into customer expectations and satisfaction, 65 councils (or 84%) advised that they made this research public.

1.11 Evaluation of effectiveness

Only 16% of councils surveyed reported they evaluated the effectiveness of their complaint handling system as a management tool. In 1999 22.7% of councils reported they evaluate the effectiveness of their complaint handling systems as a management tool.

Only 5.6% of councils surveyed reported they had conducted an audit of their complaint handling systems' compliance with the *Australian Standard AS ISO 10002-2006 Customer satisfaction — Guidelines for complaint handling in organisations*.

1.12 Compliance with the Australian Standard on complaint handling

The Australian Standard on complaint handling has been updated since 1999. Few councils evaluate their own compliance with the standard. Out of the 125 councils that responded to the survey, five (4%) claimed to have complied with the Australian Standard.

1.13 Overall

Generally, councils performed well against the basic requirements to have in place a documented complaint handling policy and to have in place a system designed to properly record complaints.

However, councils have room for improvement in complaint data analysis, evaluating the effectiveness of their complaint handling systems and in the provision of training to all staff in complaint handling. The results suggest many councils are diligent about dealing with individual complaints but are failing to benefit from the opportunity presented by the information that can be gathered from complaints to make systems changes and prevent further recurrences of the same problems.

The *NSW Ombudsman's Complaint Handler's Toolkit 2004 2nd Edition* contains our guidelines on the major aspects of complaint handling. The Toolkit provides practical advice on establishing and administering a complaints system, on dealing with difficult complainants, on investigating and mediating complaints and providing redress where appropriate. It includes advice about using complaints as a planning tool and a checklist for agencies to use to see how well their complaint handling system measures up to best practice standards.

Drawing from the Toolkit, the Ombudsman's expectations of the essential elements of a complaint handling system can be summarised as follows:

- A documented complaint handling policy. This should include a clearly understood definition of a complaint (as opposed to a request for service or information request, or the lodgement of an appeal in accordance with a standard procedure or policy).
- A user-friendly procedure for lodging complaints which is both visible and easily accessed by the public.
- A simple-to-understand process for handling a complaint. Experience from successful complaint handling agencies suggests a tiered approach is most effective:

First tier — Registration and attempted resolution by frontline staff.

Second tier — If a customer is still dissatisfied, his or her complaint is reviewed or investigated by an identified complaints officer or simply by someone who is more senior and the results of the review reported to the customer.

Third tier — If the complaint cannot be resolved within the agency, the complainant is referred to an outside agency such as the Ombudsman, or to some alternative dispute resolution procedure or, as a last resort, any legal remedy.

- Clear definitions of who is responsible for dealing with complaints at each tier. All staff must know who to refer complaints to if they cannot handle them themselves.
- Procedures for resolving or conciliating and investigating complaints depending on their seriousness and complexity.
- A system for recording, logging, tracking and analysing complaints data.
- A process of feedback to relevant areas of management and operations so that problems and trends identified from complaints can be incorporated into planning activities.
- Evaluation of the effectiveness of the complaint handling system as a management tool periodically.

1.14 Conclusion

The findings of this survey would appear to accord with the Department of Local Government's experience of complaints systems examined under the Promoting Better Practice review program. The program has resulted in completed reviews at approximately 55 councils and examines a range of characteristics of complaints handling systems. Key issues identified included:

- Problems with a lack of separation of complaints from general service requests;
- Limited evidence that councils report on complaints data to management and to council; and
- Limited evidence that councils analyse and act on trends in complaints data.

The Department of Local Government intends to re-issue its Complaints Management Practice Note in the next few months, which will be a joint publication with the NSW Ombudsman.

We suggest councils use this survey report as a prompt to look at how well their complaint handling system is operating. This should include consideration of the adequacy of written procedures as well as what is happening in practice in their organisation. A thoughtful and well-written policy is an essential underpinning for any complaint handling system. However, the effectiveness of the complaint handling system will be determined by how it is put into practice.

Chapter 2. Methodology

We asked 152 NSW councils to participate in the survey. 129 completed surveys were returned, however, four were returned after the due date, so the analysis comprises the responses of 125 councils.

2.1 Participation rate

Overall, 85 per cent of councils returned the surveys. Information about approximately 82 per cent has been included in this analysis.

2.2 Self assessment

The survey was completed on a self-assessment basis. While councils were asked to provide copies of various documents concerning their complaint handling system, no independent verification of the systems has been conducted at this stage.

2.3 History

We last conducted a comprehensive survey of complaint handling systems across NSW government departments and public authorities, including local councils, in 1999. We did an earlier survey in 1994. We use the information collected to build a picture of the current state of complaint handling throughout the state and local government sector in NSW. Pleasingly the response rate to this 2007 survey is similar to that in 1999. Separate reports of the survey have been prepared for government departments and local councils.

2.4 Size of councils

Councils were divided into the following four groups for the purposes of analysing the survey results:

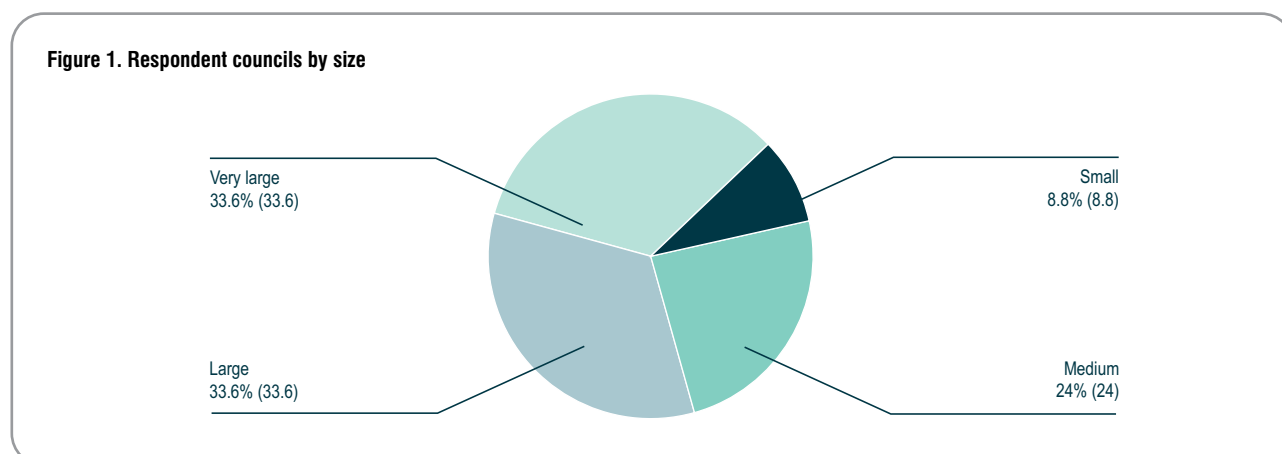
Small	employ 61 or less staff
Medium	employ 61–120 staff
Large	employ 121–300 staff
Very large	employ more than 300 staff

Of those councils which completed the survey:

9% (11 councils)	are small
24% (30 councils)	are medium size
34% (42 councils)	are large
34% (42 councils)	are very large

Percentages have been rounded up or down to the nearest whole number.

The following figure shows the breakdown of the councils that responded to the survey by size.



Chapter 3. Results and Analysis

3.1 Complaint handling system

Customer service or guarantee of service policy or program (Question 3)

Approximately 67% of the councils surveyed had a customer service or guarantee of service policy or program. The guarantee of service should list the services provided, the standard of service the customer might typically expect, access times and locations and how to go about making suggestions and complaints. Larger councils were more likely to have a guarantee of service, with 79% of very large and 69% of large councils stating they had a guarantee of service. A little over half of the small (45%) and medium sized councils (57%) said they had guarantees of service in place. In 1999, only 35.7% of councils had guarantees of service.

Complaint handling policies (Questions 4 and 5)

Of those councils that have customer service policies or guarantees of service (84 councils or 67% of the total), 65 councils (77%) said they encompass complaint handling. Eighty-nine per cent of all councils said they have a separate policy or system for complaint handling.

Most medium councils (93%), large councils (90%) and very large councils (93%) reported that their complaint handling policies and procedures were documented, with 73% of small councils reporting that their policies and procedures were documented. In 1999, 73.4% of councils surveyed had formal policies, 20.8% had informal policies and 5.8% had no policies at all.

Regular review of complaint handling policies (Question 7)

Approximately 58% of councils reported that they review their complaint handling policies at least every two years. Interestingly, medium sized councils were most likely to have reviewed their policies regularly (68%), followed by very large councils (62%), large councils (50%) and small councils (45%).

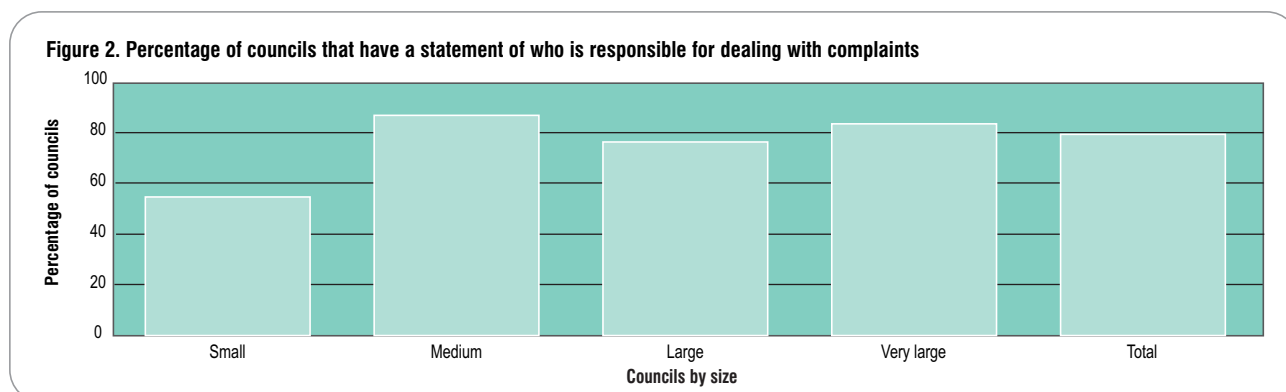
Clearly understood procedures written in Plain English (Question 8)

Complaint handling policies and procedures should be clear and easy to understand for council customers and council staff. The NSW Ombudsman¹ says agreed basic policies and procedures that are easy to understand and explain will assist staff in resolving, conciliating and investigating complaints from the simple to the complex. They should always be written down in plain English.

Approximately 90% of councils reported their complaint handling policies were written in plain English and 83% of councils reported their procedures were clear and easy to understand. In 1999, 74% of councils reported they had a clearly understood complaint handling procedure in place.

Statement of who is responsible for dealing with complaints (Question 9d)

The following figure shows the percentage of councils by size that have a statement in place which clearly states who within the council is responsible for dealing with complaints.

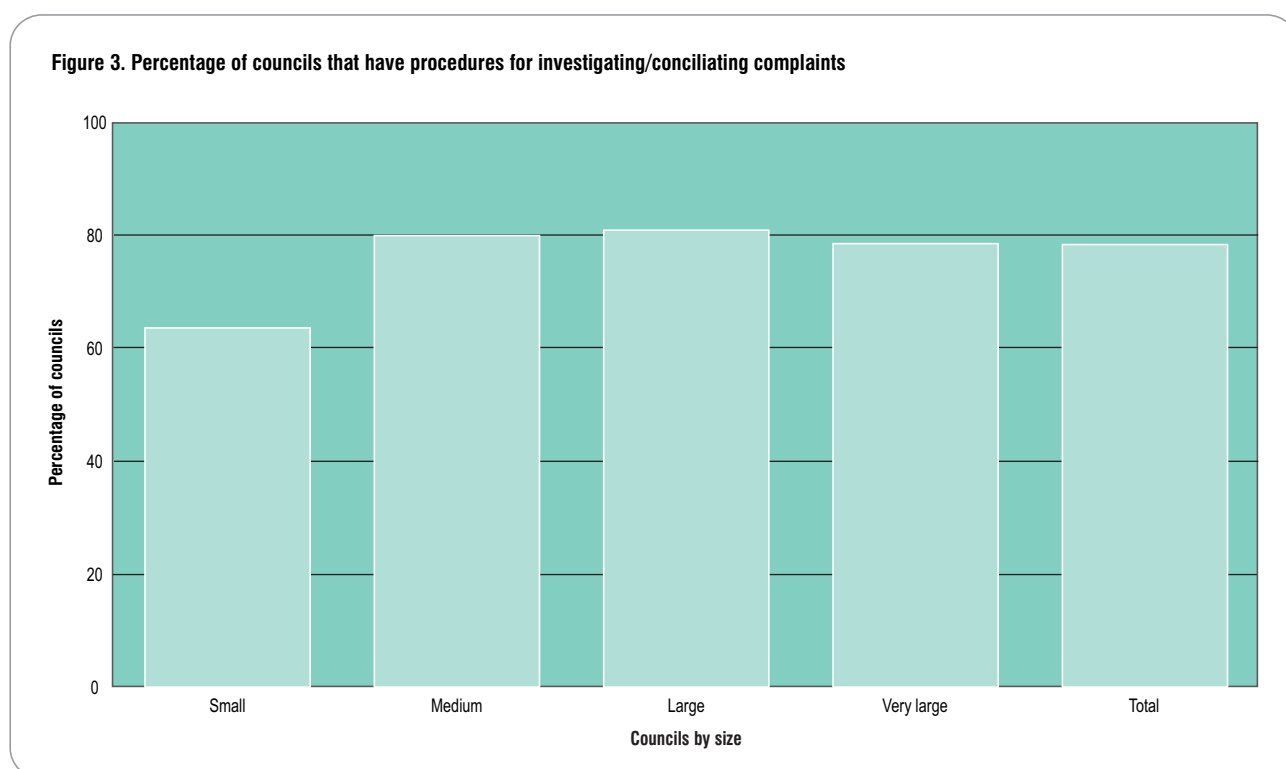


Approximately 79% of councils advised their complaint handling procedures incorporated a statement about who is responsible for dealing with complaints. The NSW Ombudsman² says it is imperative that the complaint handling system defines who is responsible for dealing with complaints at each tier. It may be the responsibility of all staff to deal with first-tier complaints, or perhaps a special officer in a public sector agency, or a special officer in each section or branch should be designated. Wherever the responsibility lies, each person must be clear about what their role and duty is in dealing with a complaint. All staff must know who to refer complaints to if they cannot handle them themselves. Usually more senior staff should deal with second-tier complaints.

Medium sized councils (87%) and very large councils (83%) were most likely to have procedures which state who is responsible for dealing with complaints, followed by large councils (76%) and small councils were less likely to have such a statement (56%). In 1999, approximately 65% of councils had a statement stating who is responsible for dealing with complaints.

Procedures for investigating and/or conciliating complaints depending on their complexity or seriousness (Question 9e)

The following figure shows the percentage of councils by size that reported having in place procedures for investigating and/or conciliating complaints depending on the complaint's complexity or seriousness.



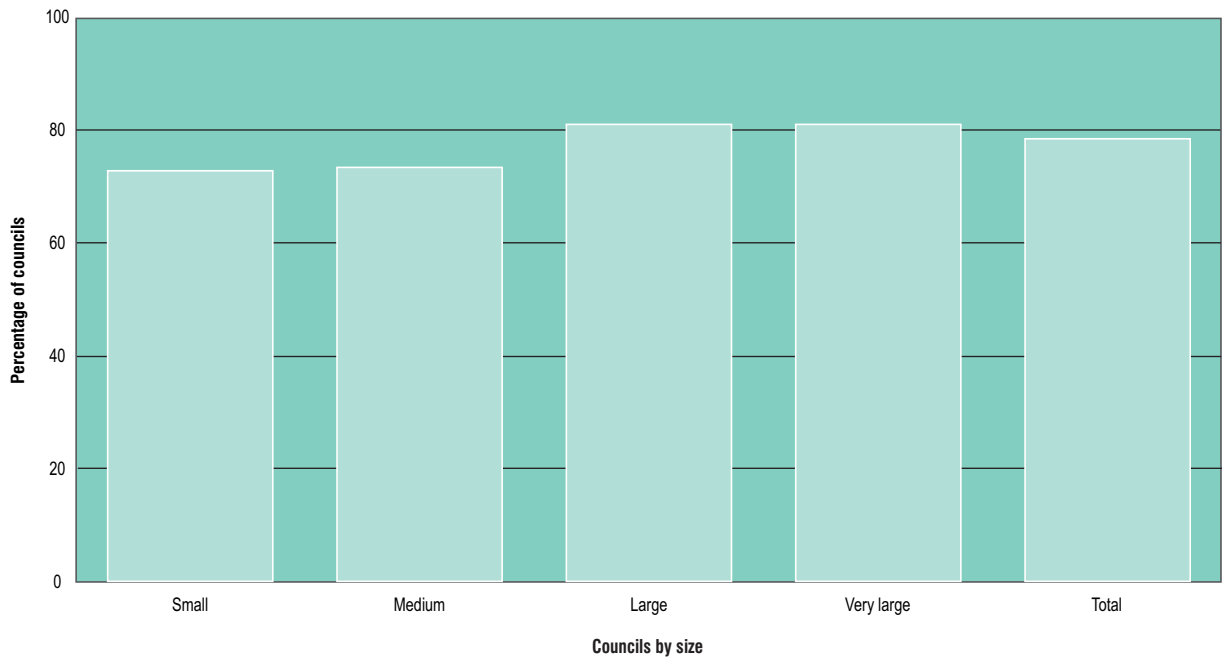
Approximately 78% of councils reported they had procedures in place for the investigation and/or conciliation of complaints if warranted. Medium sized councils (80%), large councils (81%) and very large councils (79%) were more likely to have such procedures in place, with small councils (64%) less likely. In 1999, approximately 71% of councils reported having procedures based on the complexity and seriousness of complaints in place.

Identifying the nature of the complaint will assist in determining how the matter should be dealt with. Not every complaint will require an investigation. Many concerns raised by complaints can be resolved at an informal level or through conciliation. If complaints are to be investigated or conciliated, procedures should be in place setting how investigations and conciliations are to be conducted by an agency. The NSW Ombudsman³ has guidelines that can assist agencies in establishing procedures for investigations and conciliations.

Keeping complainants informed about the progress of their complaints (Question 9f)

The following figure shows the percentage of councils by size that reported they had a system in place to keep complainants informed about the progress of their complaints.

Figure 4. Percentage of councils that have a system for informing complainant of progress

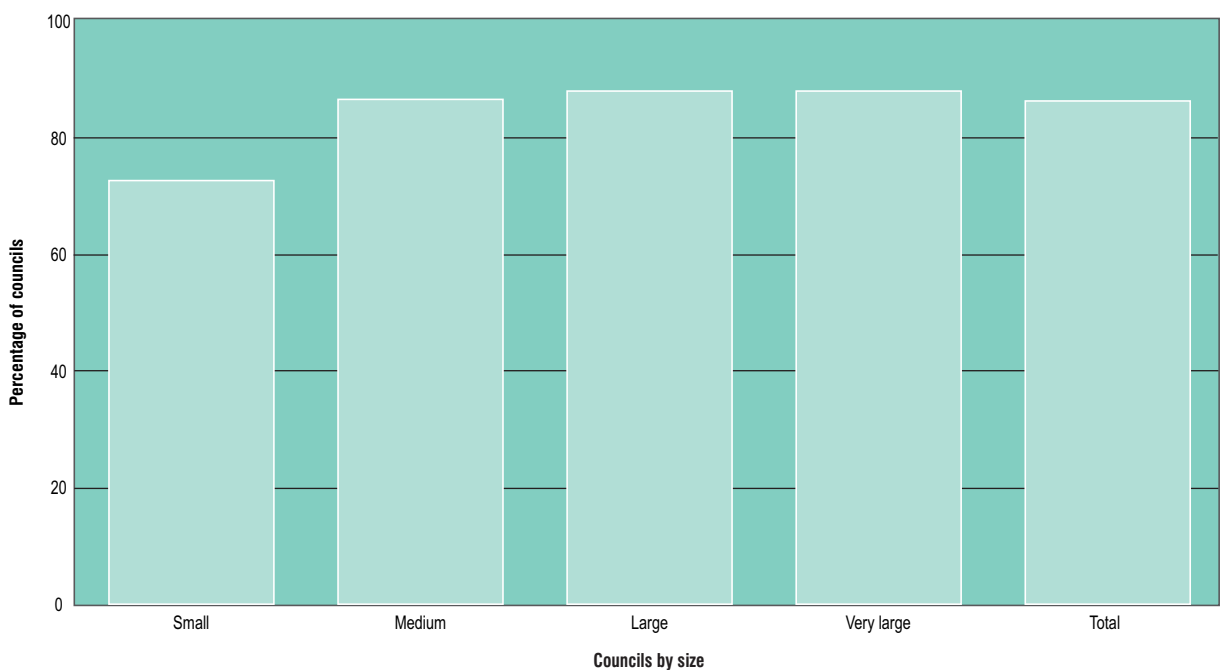


Approximately 78% of councils reported they had a system in place for keeping complainants informed about the progress of their complaints. This compares with 71% of councils that reported having a similar system in place in 1999.

System for recording complaints (Question 9g)

The following figure shows the percentage of councils by size that reported they had a system in place for recording complaints, suggestions and outcomes.

Figure 5. Percentage of councils that have a system for recording complaints, suggestions and outcomes

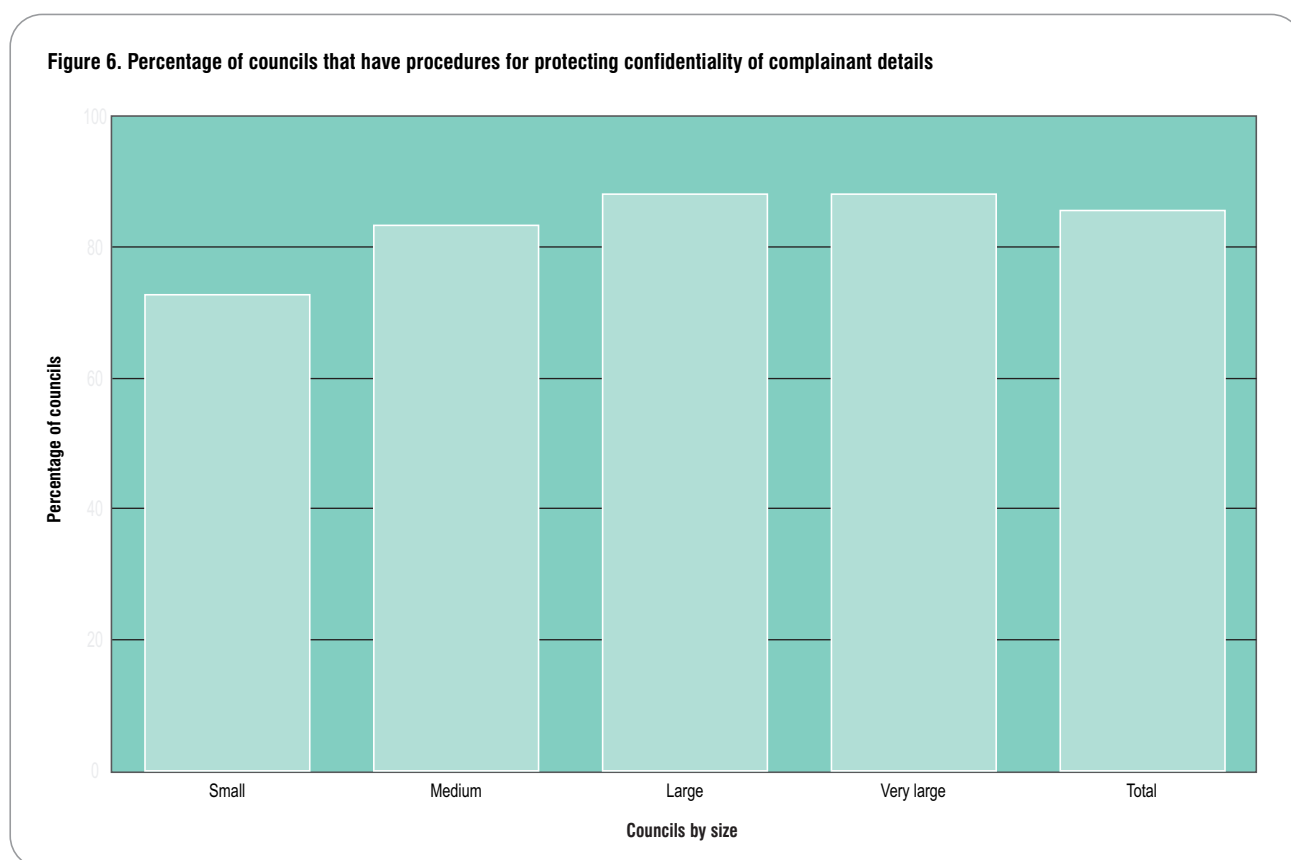


Approximately 86% of councils have a system in place to record complaints received. An effective complaints management data-base should be both a case management system (so the progress of a complaint investigation can be recorded and tracked) and a reporting tool (so aggregate data can be analysed for timeframes, trends, outcomes, systemic issues etc). Systems should allow complaints information, such as the type and subject of complaints, to be recorded and analysed and findings given to management to allow strategic decisions to be made.⁴

Medium sized councils (87%), large councils (88%) and very large councils (88%) mostly reported they had a system in place to record complaints received, with 73% of small councils reporting they had such a system. In 1999, approximately 83% of councils reported having a system in place to record complaints received.

Procedures to protect the confidentiality of complainant details (Question 9h)

The following figure shows the percentage of councils by size that have procedures in place for protecting the confidentiality of complainant details.



Approximately 86% of councils reported having in place procedures designed to protect the confidentiality of complainant details. Personally identifiable information concerning the complainant should be available where needed, but only for the purposes of addressing the complaint with the organization and should be actively protected from disclosure, unless the customer or complainant expressly consents to its disclosure.⁵

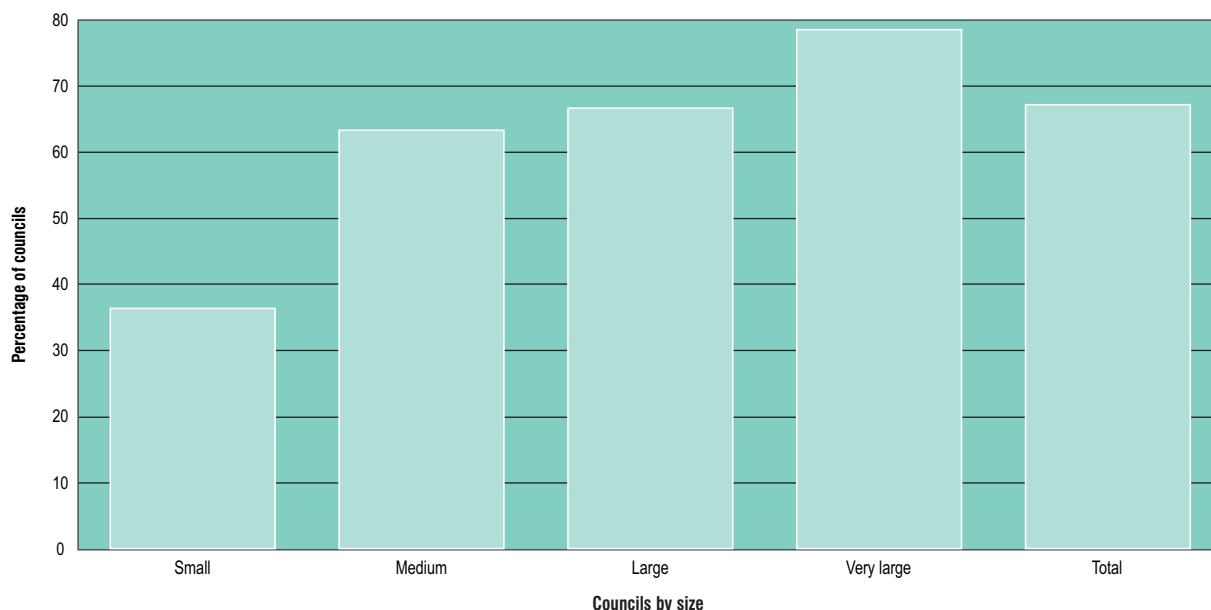
However it is important to note that any statements about affording a complainant confidentiality must be made subject to the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act 1989. The FOI Act gives a right of access to documents held by government agencies subject only to the exemptions from release in the Act.

Procedures for protecting the confidentiality of complainant details were consistent across councils, with 73% of small councils, 83% of medium councils, 88% of large councils and 88% of very large councils reporting they had such procedures in place.

Comprehensive definition of complaint (Question 9i)

The following figure shows the percentage of councils by size that have in place a comprehensive definition of a complaint to guide staff.

Figure 7. Percentage of councils that have a comprehensive definition of a complaint to guide staff



If a complaints system is to be a means of gaining insight into customer’s levels of satisfaction with services so that they can be improved, a fairly wide definition of “complaint” is needed, for example:

An expression of dissatisfaction with the agency’s policies, procedures, charges, employees, agents, quality of service or goods sold or provided.

It can be helpful to define what will not be registered as a complaint, for example:

- a request for services
- a request for information or explanation of policies and procedures
- the lodging of an appeal in accordance with a standard procedure or policy⁶.

It is particularly important for councils to have a clear definition of what constitutes a complaint, as councils that do not distinguish complaints from other requests, such as requests for service, are unable to systematically analyse complaint data.

Only 67% of councils reported having a comprehensive definition of a complaint to guide staff. The larger the council, the more likely it is to have articulated a definition of a complaint, 79% of very large councils, 67% of large councils and 63% of medium sized councils reported having such a definition in place. Only 36% of small councils reported having in place a definition of complaint to guide staff.

Table 1. Elements of councils’ complaint handling systems compared with previous surveys

		1994	1999	2007
Q3	Customer service or guarantee of service policy or program	15.6	35.7	67.2
Q4	Guarantee of service encompasses complaint handling	12.2	30.5	52.0
Q5	Separate policy or system for complaint handling	40.9	64.3	88.8
Q6	Documented complaint handling policy	N/A	73.4	90.4
Q7	Review of complaints handling policy at least every two years	N/A	N/A	57.6
Q8	Complaints handling policy written in plain English	N/A	N/A	89.6
Q9c	Clearly understood processes for making complaints	35.7	74.0	83.2

		1994	1999	2007
Q9d	Statement outlining who is responsible for dealing with complaints	29.0	64.9	79.2
Q9e	Procedures for investigating or conciliating complaints depending on seriousness	37	70.8	78.4
Q9f	System for keeping complainants informed about what is happening with their complaint	43	71.4	78.4
Q9g	System for recording complaints and suggestions	44	82.5	86.4
Q9h	Procedures for protecting the confidentiality of complainant details	N/A	N/A	85.6
Q9i	Comprehensive definition of a complaint to guide staff	N/A	N/A	67.2

3.2 System and Staff Management

Published statements from the General Manager supporting the complaint handling system (Question 10)

Successful complaint systems are imbued with positive attitudes to welcoming feedback and solving people's problems. There needs to be a commitment to efficient and fair resolution of complaint by people at all levels within councils, starting with the General Manager.⁷ A published statement from the General Manager supporting the council's complaint handling system is one way of achieving this.

Approximately 42% of councils surveyed had in place a statement from the General Manager supporting councils' complaint handling systems. The result was consistent across councils of all sizes, with the smaller councils slightly outperforming the larger councils. Fifty-five per cent of small councils had a statement in place, 43% of medium councils, 40% of large councils and 38% of very large councils had statements in place.

Senior Manager responsible for the effective operation of the complaint handling system (Question 11)

The senior manager responsible for the effective operation of the complaint handling system should be responsible for:

- establishing a process of performance monitoring, evaluation and reporting;
- reporting to top management on the existing process and recommendations for improvement; and
- maintaining the effective operation of the process including recruitment and training of appropriate personnel, technology requirements, documentation, and setting and meeting time limits.⁸

Approximately 86% of councils reported having a senior manager responsible for the effective management of the complaint handling system. The larger the council, the more likely it was to have such a manager in place, although the smaller councils also performed well against this criterion. Eighty-two per cent of small councils, 83% of medium sized councils, 83% of large councils and 90% of very large councils reported having a senior manager responsible for complaint handling.

Communicating the requirements of the complaint handling policy to all staff (Question 12)

All staff, regardless of whether or not they are responsible for handling complaints, should be aware of the complaint handling policy and its requirements. A customer should be able to approach anyone employed by a council for advice about how to lodge a complaint. Ideally, the staff member should either be able to deal with the complaint, or refer it to someone who can.

Approximately 78% of councils surveyed reported they did communicate the requirements of the complaint handling policy to all staff. Larger councils were more likely to do this with 86% of very large councils, 79% of large councils and 77% of medium sized councils reporting they communicated the policy to all staff. Councils with less than 61

staff were less likely, with only 44% of small councils reporting they had met this requirement. In 1999, only 57.8% of councils reported they communicated the requirements of the complaint handling policy to all staff.

Inclusion of complaint handling responsibilities in staff position descriptions (Question 13)

Management should assign specific accountabilities to staff, using job statements and team mission statements. Management must determine the particular skills and aptitudes necessary for frontline staff, and use selection and training procedures that are appropriate to recruit and retain the most suitable staff.⁹

Very few councils reported including complaint-handling responsibilities, including performance indicators, in staff position descriptions, only 15% of councils reported having such responsibilities included in position descriptions. None of the small councils reported meeting this criterion and only 17% of medium sized councils, 17% of large councils and 17% of very large councils met the criterion.

Instructions for front line staff on how to handle/refer complaints (Question 14)

It is imperative that the system clearly defines who is responsible for dealing with complaints at each tier. It may be the responsibility of frontline staff to deal with first-tier complaints. Wherever the responsibility lies, each person must be clear about what their role and duty is in dealing with a complaint. All staff must know who to refer complainants to if they cannot handle them themselves. Usually more senior staff should deal with second-tier complaints.¹⁰

Approximately 89% of councils reported that frontline staff had been instructed on how to handle or refer complaints. The scores were high across all council groups with 82% of small councils, 87% of medium sized councils, 93% of large councils and 88% of very large councils reporting that frontline staff had such instructions. In 1999, 90.3% of councils reported having such instructions in place.

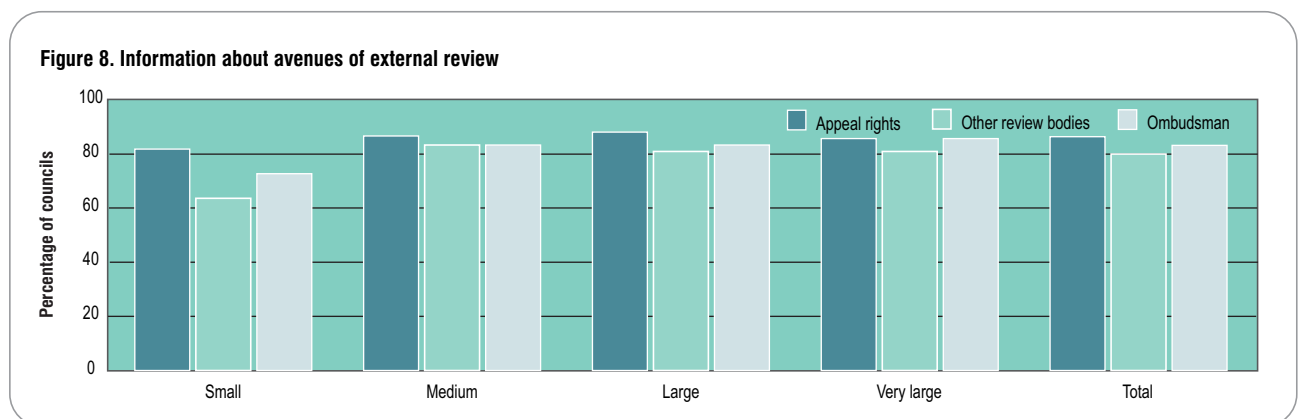
Internal review by a more senior officer if complainant is dissatisfied (Question 15)

If a customer is dissatisfied following the registration and attempted resolution of the complaint by frontline staff, his or her complaint should be reviewed or investigated by an identified complaints officer or simply by someone who is more senior and the results of the review reported to the customer.¹¹

Approximately 88% of councils reported having an internal review option for complainants that are dissatisfied with how council dealt with the initial complaint. This option is offered across councils of all sizes, with 82% of small councils, 87% of medium sized councils, 79% of large councils and 100% of very large councils offering this option.

Informing complainants of external avenues of appeal (Questions 16a, 16b and 16c)

Internal review, conciliation and investigation of complaints do not always result in resolution. When the complaint is serious or the complainant's demands will continue to impact on the time and resources of staff, recourse to external sources of review is appropriate. This can take a number of forms, including alternate dispute resolution, referral to an external investigation agency or other appeal mechanisms.¹²



Very large, large and medium sized councils consistently reported that they advised complainants about their external review options. Small councils were less likely to provide this advice. In the 1999 survey only around 35% of councils reported advising complainants about their external review options.

Complaint handling instructions manual for staff (Question 17)

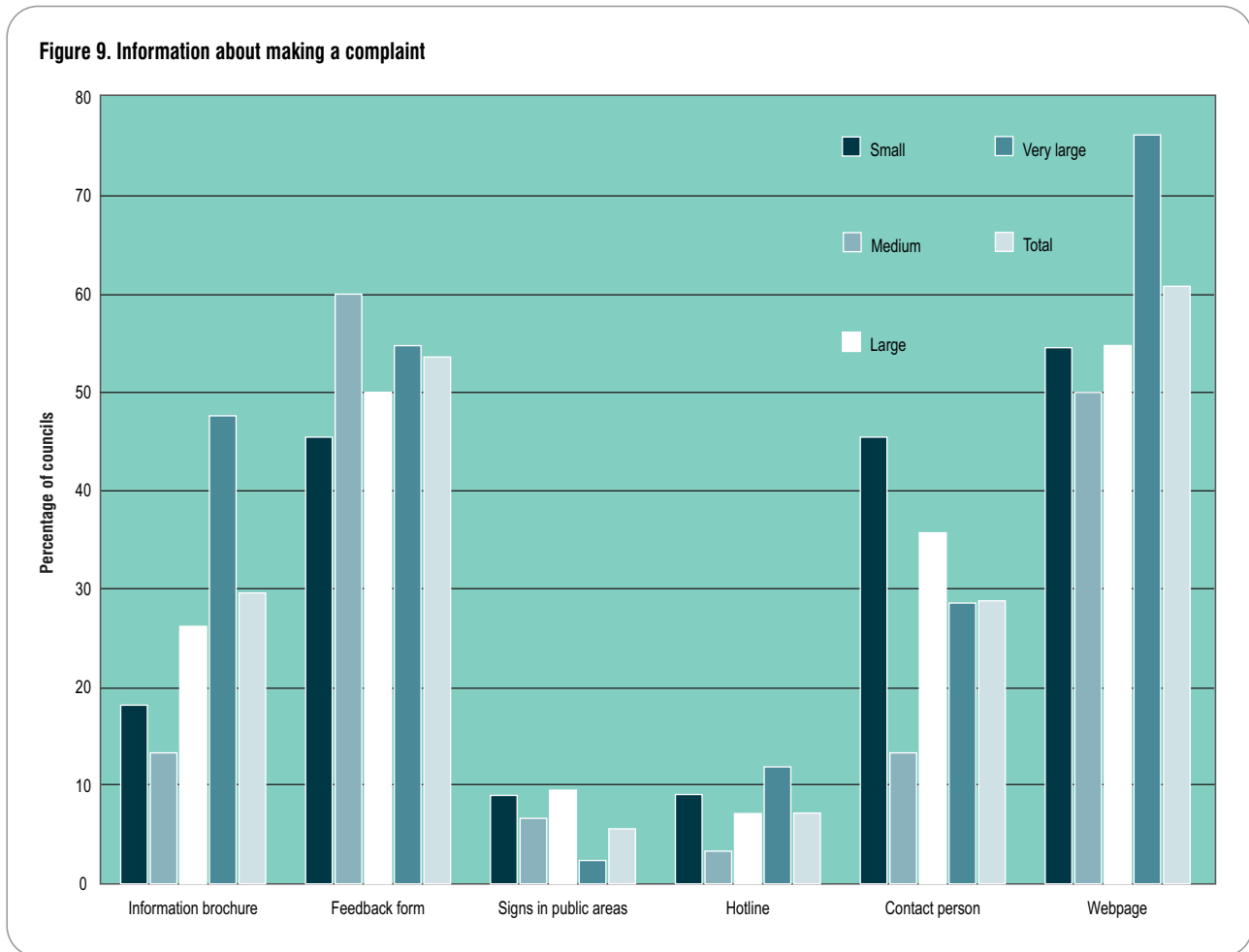
A detailed complaint handling procedures manual including sections on effective complaint handling, dealing with difficult complainants, investigating complaints, mediation and conciliation and options for redress can be a great resource for staff tasked with resolving complaints.

Only 32% of councils reported having a complaint handling instructions manual for staff, compared with 39.6% of councils who reported having such a manual in 1999. Larger councils were more likely to have a manual for staff, with 40% of very large councils, 31% of large councils, 30% of medium sized councils and only 9% of small councils reporting having one.

3.3 Advice to Customers/Clients

Advice to customers about how to make a complaint or suggestion (Question 18a)

Most councils (88%) surveyed reported using a variety of methods to advise customers how to make a complaint or suggestion.



Provision of complaints information in community languages (Question 19)

Complaint handling systems need to be accessible to all members of the community, however, a lack of confidence or competence in written or spoken English may make complaining difficult. If relevant to the customer base, councils should consider publishing complaint forms and brochures in languages other than English.¹³

Only 4.8% of councils reported publishing information on how to make a complaint in languages other than English and only 2.4% of councils with more than 300 staff reported publishing complaint information in community languages. Given very large councils usually serve large, urban populations, it is disappointing to note that only one very large council out of 42 publish information brochures about how to make a complaint in community languages.

Table 2. Ways councils advise customers/clients about making a complaint compared with previous surveys

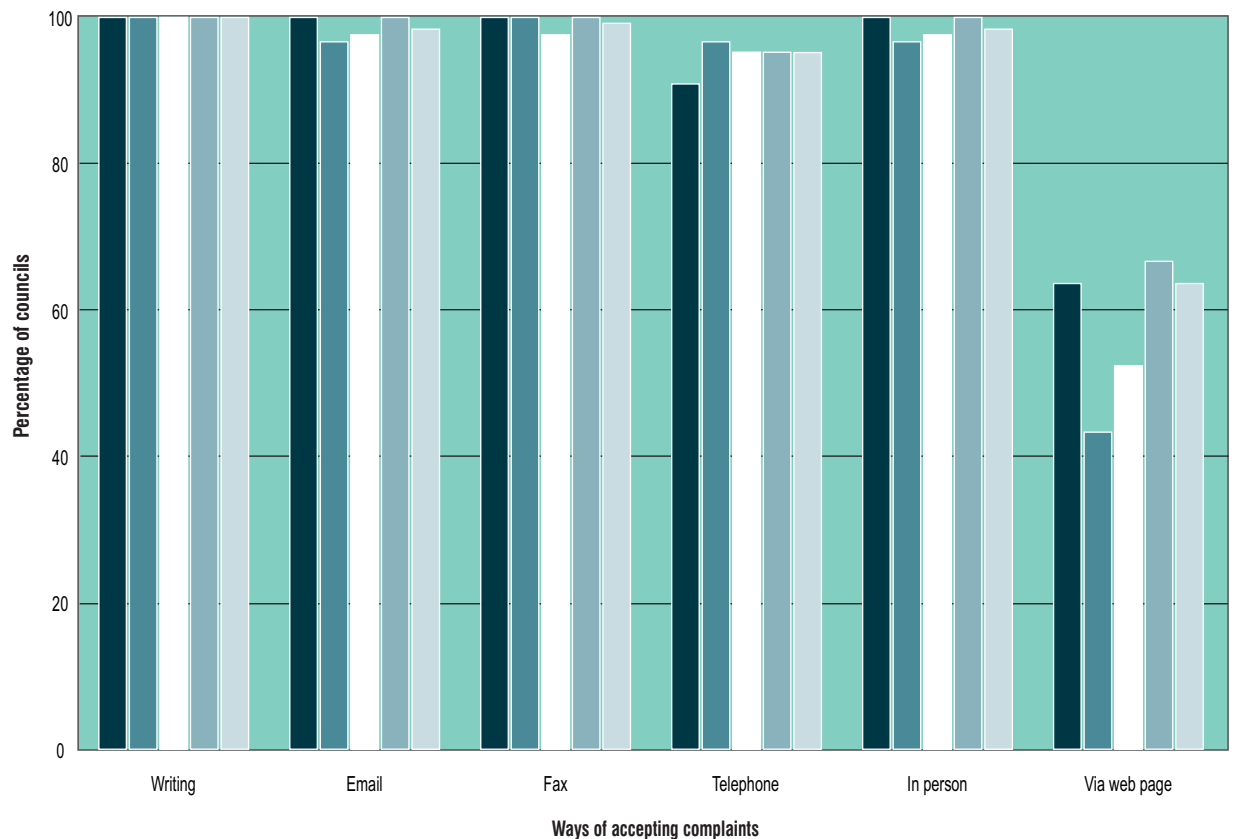
		1994	1999	2007
Q18a	Customers are told how to make a complaint	57.0	72.1	88.0
	How customers are told how to make a complaint			
Q18b(i)	Information brochures	16.0	20.8	29.6
Q18b(ii)	Feedback/complaint form	14.0	51.3	53.6
Q18b(iii)	Signs in public areas	7.8	5.8	5.6
Q18b(iv)	Advertised "hotline" to call	7.8	6.5	7.2
Q18b(v)	Published name of contact person for complaints or inquiries	28.0	35.1	28.8
Q18b(vi)	Information on web page	N/A	10.4	60.8
Q19	Complaint handling information available in community languages	5.0	5.2	4.8

Apart from the significant increase in the use of the internet to publicise councils' complaint system, and a small increase in the use of information brochures, there does not appear to have been much change since previous surveys in the methods councils use to inform their customers how to make a complaint.

Ways of accepting complaints (Question 20)

The following figure outlines the different ways councils accept complaints. All councils accept complaints in writing, and most accept complaints by email, fax, by telephone and in person. Only 56% of councils reported that they accept complaints via their webpage.

Figure 10. How councils accept complaints



Provision of assistance to customers in making complaints (Question 21)

"I want to be put through to the right person immediately. The right person would not be surly or defensive. They would ask, "what is the problem you are experiencing?" It is very important that they have the right attitude, that they are receptive, that they are not dismissive when you explain the problem. They should actually try to help you clarify what your problem is. Is it procedure or policy? They should help you to work out the focus. Then they will tell you they will look into it and will let you know what they will do and when they will get back to you. A request for your complaint to be put in writing is a fair indication that they are trying to prevent complaints and are not interested in them." Complainant¹⁴

Assistance should be provided to help customers formulate and lodge complaints where necessary. If complainants are unable to write a complaint, they should be able to lodge it by telephone or face to face. Staff should be trained in identifying and accepting oral complaints.¹⁵

Approximately 94% of councils surveyed reported that council staff provide assistance to customers that want to make a complaint. All small councils advised staff provide this assistance and at least 90% of medium, large and very large councils reported they provided assistance to customers making complaints.

3.4 Dealing with Complaints

Only 49% of councils surveyed reported authorising all staff to deal with complaints. Councils were more likely to authorise the General Manager or line managers to deal with complaints (98%) or frontline staff (85%). Approximately 54% of councils reported authorising designated complaints officers to deal with complaints. Only 17% of councils reported not authorising anyone in particular to deal with complaints.

Figure 11. Staff authorised to deal with complaints

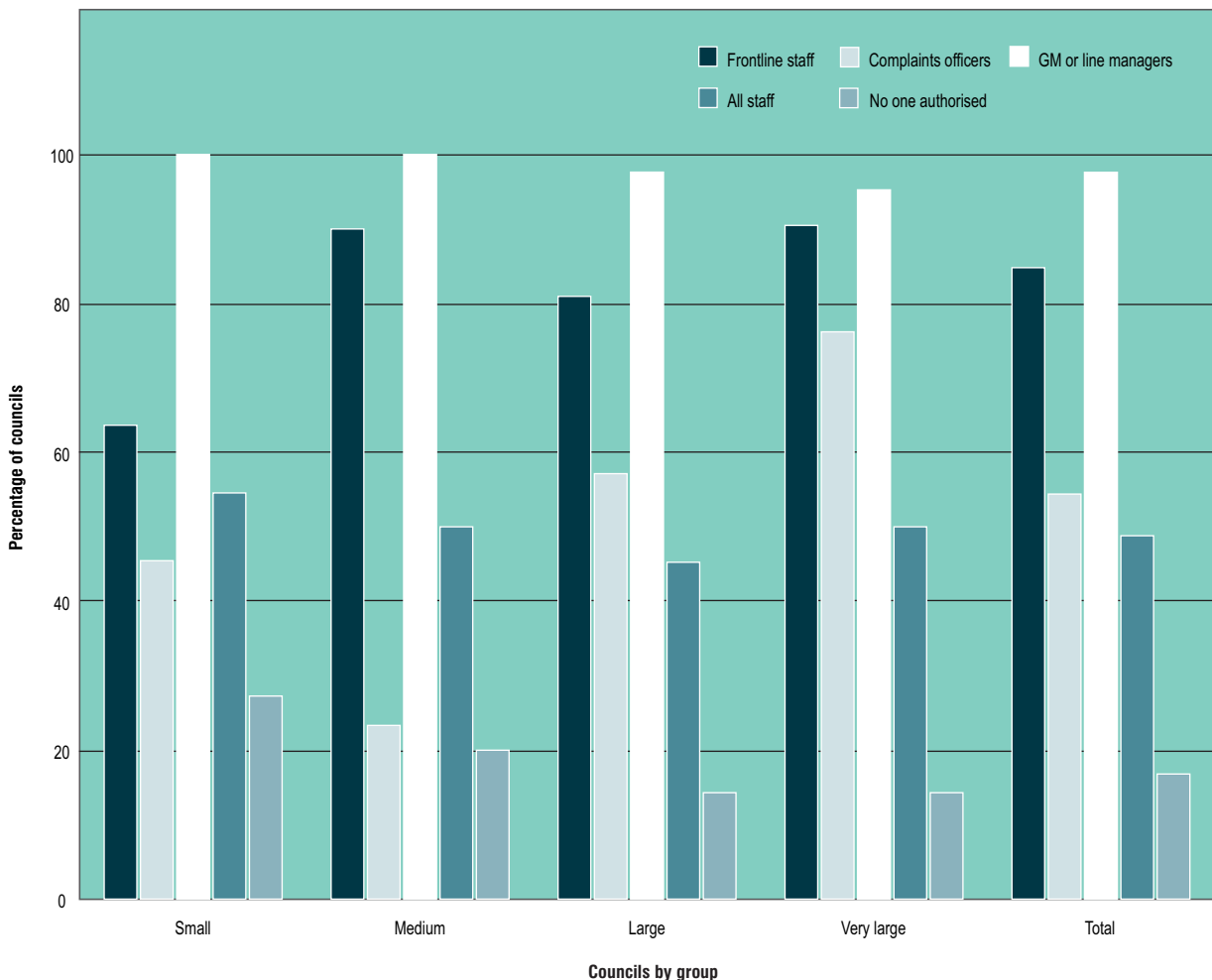


Table 3. Council staff authorised to deal with complaints compared with previous surveys

	Staff authorised to deal with complaints	1994	1999	2007
22(a)	Contact or frontline staff	66	75.3	84.8
22(b)	Designated complaint officers	20	38.3	54.4
22(c)	General Manager or line managers	88	88.3	97.6
22(d)	All staff	N/A	49.4	48.8
22(e)	No one especially authorised	29	22.1	16.8

Since 1999, there appears to have been a growth in councils identifying or employing designated complaints officers.

3.5 Recording

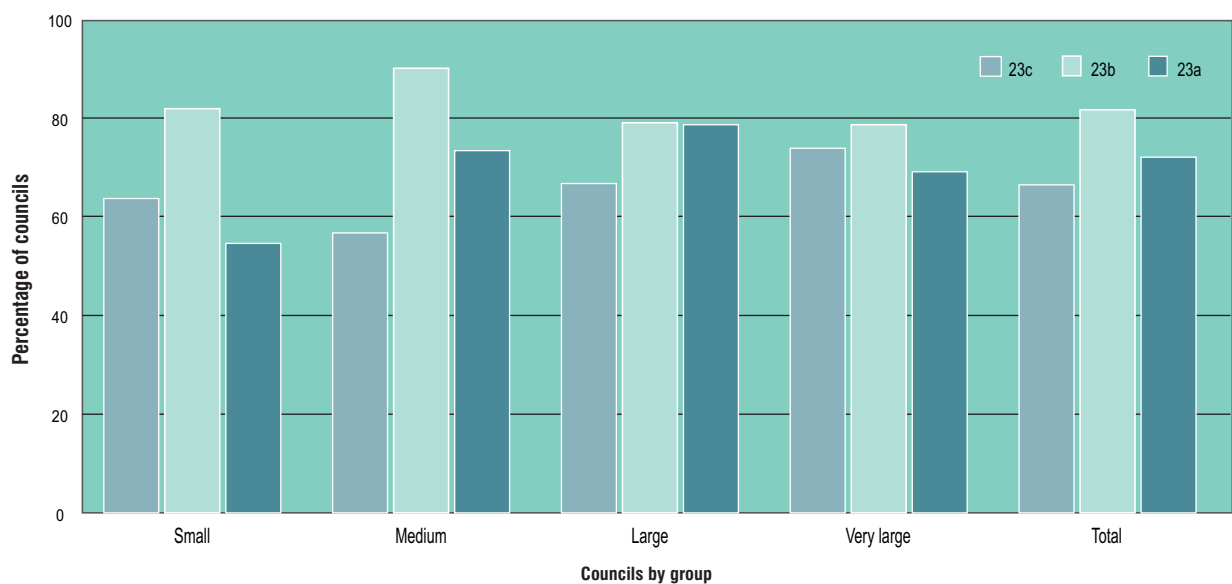
Recording complaints in a system (Question 23)

An effective complaints management data-base should be both a case management system (so the progress of a complaint investigation can be recorded and tracked) and a reporting tool (so aggregate data can be analysed for timeframes, trends, outcomes, systemic issues etc). Systems should allow complaints information, such as the type and subject of complaints, to be recorded and analysed and findings given to management to allow strategic decisions to be made.¹⁶

If complaint information is to be used to identify defects in service provision and to identify where customer expectations are not consistent with the standard of service being provided, the subject matter of complaints needs to be recorded accurately. Some agencies use complaint forms to make it easy for customers to lodge feedback. However, to enable proper tracking and analysis, agencies need to separate forms or data entry screens to log key elements of this information plus the oral complaints made.¹⁷

Approximately 96% of councils surveyed reported that they recorded complaints in some kind of system.

Figure 12. Complaint data recording systems



23a — Recording system allows councils to track individual cases and classify and report on aggregate data (66% of total councils surveyed)

23b — Recording system includes oral or other non-written complaints (82% of total councils surveyed)

23c — Recording system includes inquiries, suggestions and commendations (72% of total surveyed)

Approximately 66% of councils surveyed reported their recording system allows them not only to track individual cases but also to classify and report on aggregate data. Eighty-two per cent of councils reported they record oral and non-written complaints in their system and 72% of councils advised they recorded inquiries, suggestions and commendations in their complaint data systems. In 1999 approximately 80% of councils reported recording oral complaints and 70% of councils reported recording inquiries, suggestions and commendations.

Recording issues complained about (Question 24)

A high percentage of councils (90%) reported that they record the specific issues mentioned in complaints. Larger councils were more likely to record specific issues with 93% of very large councils, 88% of large councils and 93% of medium sized councils meeting this criterion. Eighty-two per cent of small councils recorded specific issues raised in complaints.

Recording outcomes and responses to complaints (Question 25)

Approximately 94% of councils recorded outcomes and responses to complaints in their complaint data systems, compared with 90% of councils who reported recording outcomes in the 1999 survey.

Again, the larger councils were more likely to record outcomes and responses, with 95% of very large councils, 98% of large councils and 97% of medium sized councils reporting they recorded outcomes. Only 73% of small councils reported they recorded outcome and responses to complaints.

Table 4. Elements of councils' recording systems compared with previous surveys

		1994	1999	2007
23	Are complaints recorded in any system	78.0	92.9	96.0
23(a)	Recording system allows councils to track individual cases and classify and report on aggregate data	N/A	N/A	66.4
23(b)	Oral and other non-written complaints are recorded	69.0	79.9	81.6
23 (c)	Inquiries, suggestions and commendations are recorded	50.0	70.1	72.0
24	Issues raised in complaints recorded	N/A	N/A	90.4
25	Outcomes and responses to complaints are recorded	77.0	90.3	94.4

Generally, the recording of complaint information by councils was consistent with findings in previous surveys and there does not appear to be any significant changes in the sophistication of complaint recording.

3.6 Performance Standards

Standards for the way in which complaints are dealt with (Question 26)

The NSW Ombudsman says the more promptly the grievance can be resolved, the more likely it is that the customer will be satisfied and think highly of the agency.¹⁸ Complainants expect their complaints to be resolved immediately by the first person they talk to.¹⁹

We also need to be aware that the complainant's perception of a satisfactory response time will be heavily influenced by their expectations which we need to manage. One of the largest surveys of citizen expectations about government services was conducted in Canada in 1998. The service standards for routine transactions that over 90 per cent of people expected were as follows:

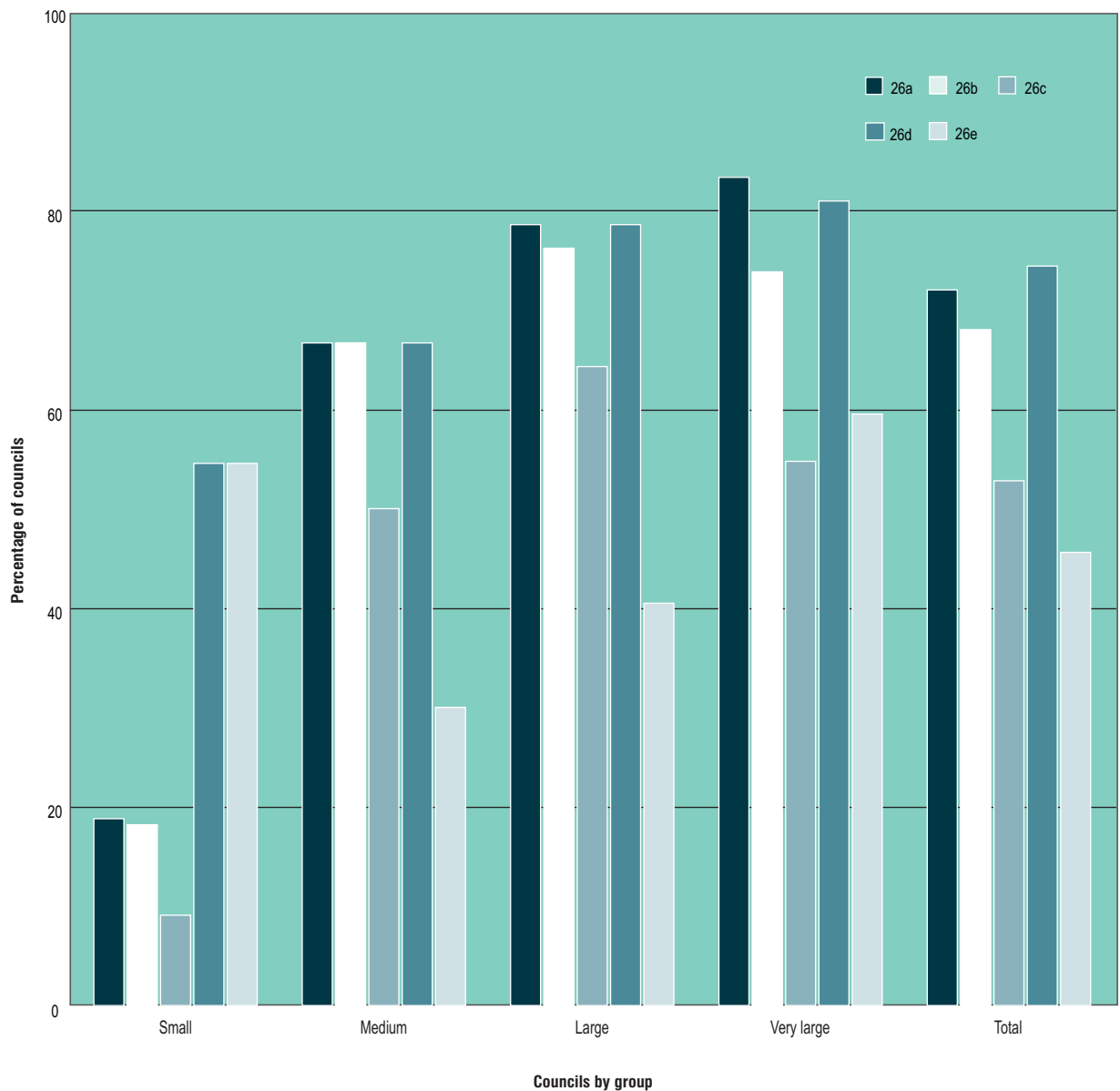
- Acceptable time to wait for telephone to be answered: 30 seconds
- Maximum number of people you should have to deal with: Two
- Acceptable time to wait for return call after leaving a voice mail message left by 10am: Four hours
- Acceptable maximum time to wait in a queue for counter service: Five minutes
- Acceptable time to wait for a reply to a mailed letter: Two weeks
- Acceptable time to reply to an email sent by 10am: Four hours²⁰

It is therefore extremely important to give realistic timeframes for inquiries and responses and to follow up with progress reports if there are any delays. Promises must be realistic and always followed through. People would rather

be told a realistic timeframe within which their complaint will be dealt with, than be given a promise which may not be fulfilled. It's better to under promise and over deliver than to be caught doing the reverse.²¹

Approximately 75% of councils surveyed reported having standards in place dealing with how complaints should be handled. This compares favourably to the 1999 survey result, where only 54.5% of councils reported having standards in place. Larger councils are more likely to have standards in place, with 88% of very large councils, 79% of large councils and 70% of medium sized councils reporting they met this criterion. Only 27% of small councils reported having complaint handling standards in place.

Figure 13. Complaint handling performance standards in place



- 26a — Acknowledgement of receipt of complaint within a certain time (72% of total councils surveyed)**
- 26b — Completion/resolution of complaint within a certain time (68% of total councils surveyed)**
- 26c — System for keeping complainant informed about progress of the complaint (53% of total councils surveyed)**
- 26d — System for checking complaint has been dealt with and acted upon (74% of total councils surveyed)**
- 26e — System for checking that underlying problems have been identified and acted upon (46% of total councils surveyed)**

Over 70% of larger councils (very large and large) reported having a system in place for checking a complaint has been dealt with and acted upon, and over 50% of the smaller councils (medium and small) reported having such a system in place. Interestingly, over 50% of small councils and 60% of very large councils reported having systems to check that underlying problems have been identified and acted upon, whereas medium to large councils were less likely to have such a system in place, just over 40% of large councils and only 30% of medium sized councils did. With respect to acknowledging receipt of complaints, resolving complaints within a certain timeframe and keeping complainants informed, small councils lagged well behind the very large, large and medium sized councils.

Table 5. Performance standards in place compared with previous surveys

		1994	1999	2007
Q26	Standards in place for the way complaints are handled	24.0	54.5	75.2
	Standards in place:			
Q26(a)	Acknowledgement of receipt of complaint within a certain time	43.5	58.4	72.0
Q26(b)	Completion/resolution of complaint within a certain time	37.0	50.6	68.0
Q26(c)	System for keeping complainant informed about progress of the complaint	37.0	50.0	52.8
Q26(d)	System for checking a complaint has been dealt with and acted upon	53.0	66.2	74.4
Q26(e)	System for checking that underlying problems have been identified and acted upon	N/A	N/A	45.6

Since our last survey in 1999, a significantly greater number of councils appear to have introduced performance standards into their complaint system, particularly standards relating to acknowledging complaints and completing or resolving complaints within a certain time.

3.7 Analysis and Feedback

Analysis of complaints in a systematic way (Question 27)

All complaints should be classified and then analysed to identify systematic, recurring and single incident problems and trends, and to help eliminate the underlying causes of complaints.²²

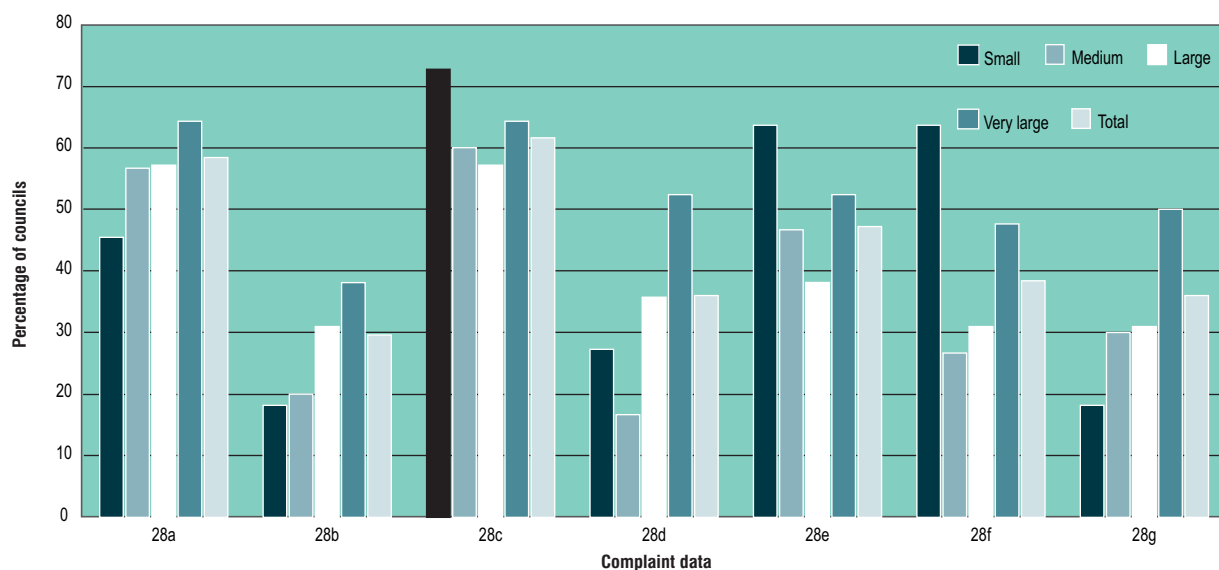
Complaint data can be recognised as a useful form of customer satisfaction research. If information on complaints raised with an agency is captured, classified and analysed, systemic and recurring problems will be more easily identified and rectified.²³

The key to gaining business improvement from a complaints management system lies in having a systematic and reliable approach to recording complaints and their outcomes in sufficient detail to allow analysis of where and why complaints are being made.²⁴

Only 41% of the councils surveyed reported analysing complaints data in a systematic way. Only 9% of small councils reported that they analysed complaint data, 43% of medium sized councils, 33% of large councils and 55% of very large councils reported meeting this criterion. In 1999, approximately 44% of councils reported that they analysed complaint data.

However, given that 58% of councils report on numbers of complaints received, 62% of councils analyse issues raised in complaints and 47% report on outcomes of complaints and remedies provided, it would appear councils are actually undertaking more analysis of complaint data than they indicated when asked if they were analysing data in a systematic way.

Figure 14. Complaints data reported by councils



28a — Numbers of complaints/suggestions (58% of total councils surveyed)

28b — Compliance with performance standards (30% of total councils surveyed)

28c — Issues raised in complaints (62% of total councils surveyed)

28d — Trends in complaints over time (36% of total councils surveyed)

28e — Outcomes and remedies provided (47% of total councils surveyed)

28f — Recommendations/strategies to prevent or limit recurrences (38% of total councils surveyed)

28g — Service improvements due to complaints data (36% of total councils surveyed)

Over 50% of councils in all groups advised they analysed and reported on the issues raised in complaints and over 40% of councils in all groups advised they collected information about the numbers of complaints or suggestions they had received. Interestingly, small councils were more likely to analyse issues raised in complaints (73%), and were more likely to report on recommendations or strategies to prevent or limit recurrences of complaints (64%) than the larger councils.

Only 29.6% of councils surveyed advised they prepare internal reports concerning compliance with performance standards, only 36% advised they prepare internal reports regarding trends in complaints over time and only 47% advised they prepare internal reports regarding outcomes and remedies provided. Only 38.4% of councils advised they prepare internal reports with strategies or recommendations to limit recurrences of complaints, compared with 43.5% of councils who said they prepared such reports in 1999.

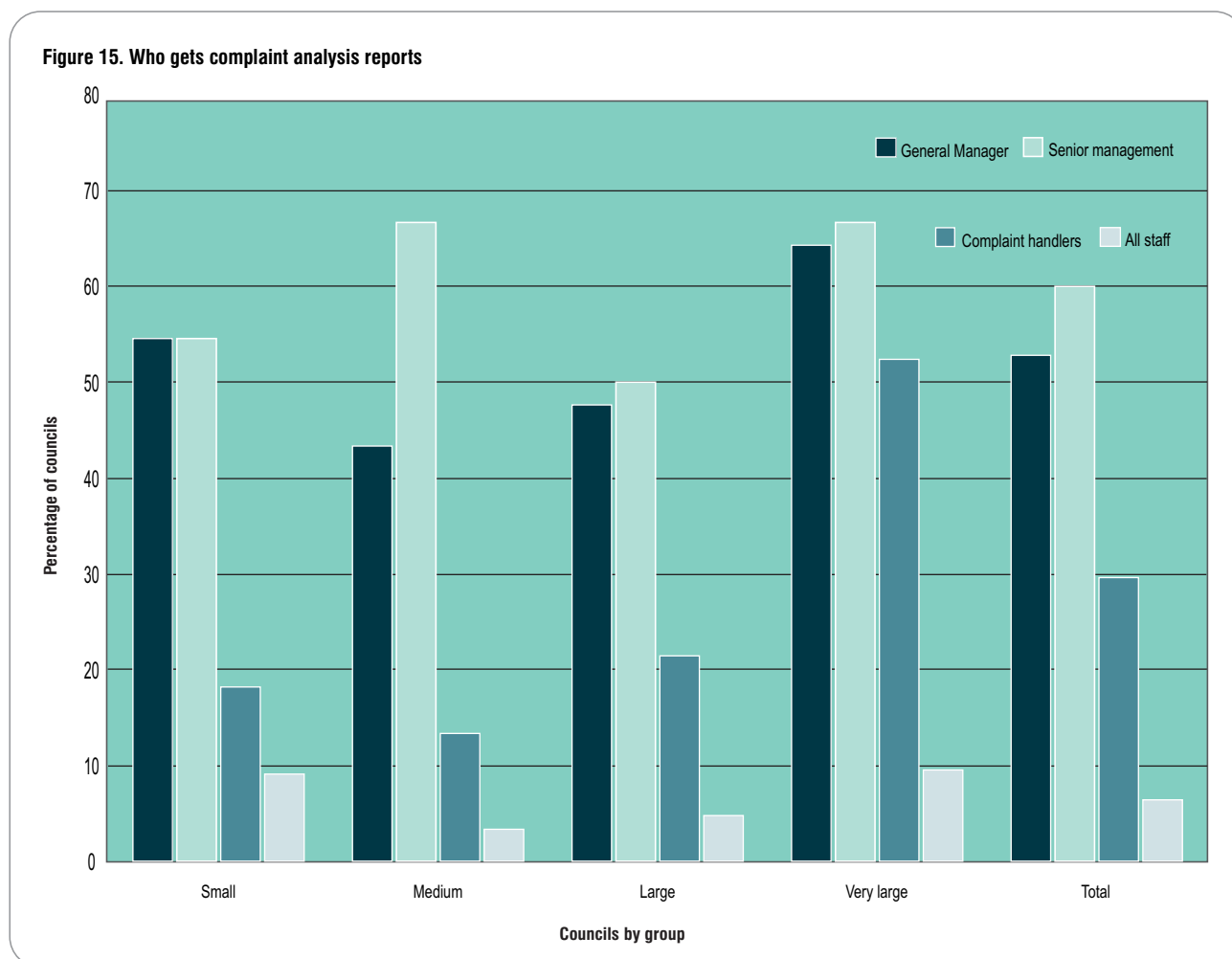
Table 6. Analysis and feedback of complaint data compared with previous surveys

		1994	1999	2007
Q27	Are complaints analysed in any systematic way	8.7	44.2	40.8
	Do internal reports on complaints address the following:			
Q28a	Numbers of complaints/suggestions	30.0	56.5	58.4
Q28b	Compliance with performance standards	15.0	29.2	29.6
Q28c	Issues raised in complaints	30.0	60.4	61.6
Q28d	Trends in complaints over time	N/A	N/A	36.0
Q28e	Outcomes and remedies provided	N/A	N/A	47.2
Q28f	Recommendations/strategies to limit recurrences	23.0	43.5	38.4

These results were largely consistent with what was found in our 1999 survey which indicates that the sophistication with which councils analyse complaint data has not significantly increased in recent years.

Complaint analysis reports (Questions 29a – d)

The following figure indicates who in councils receives complaint analysis reports.



Senior management are most likely to receive complaint analysis reports in all councils, followed by the General Manager. Over 50% of very large councils with more than 300 staff provide complaint analysis reports to designated complaint handlers but smaller councils (small, medium and large) are less likely to do so. Fewer than 10% of councils provide complaint analysis reports to all staff.

Feedback to relevant areas of management (Question 30)

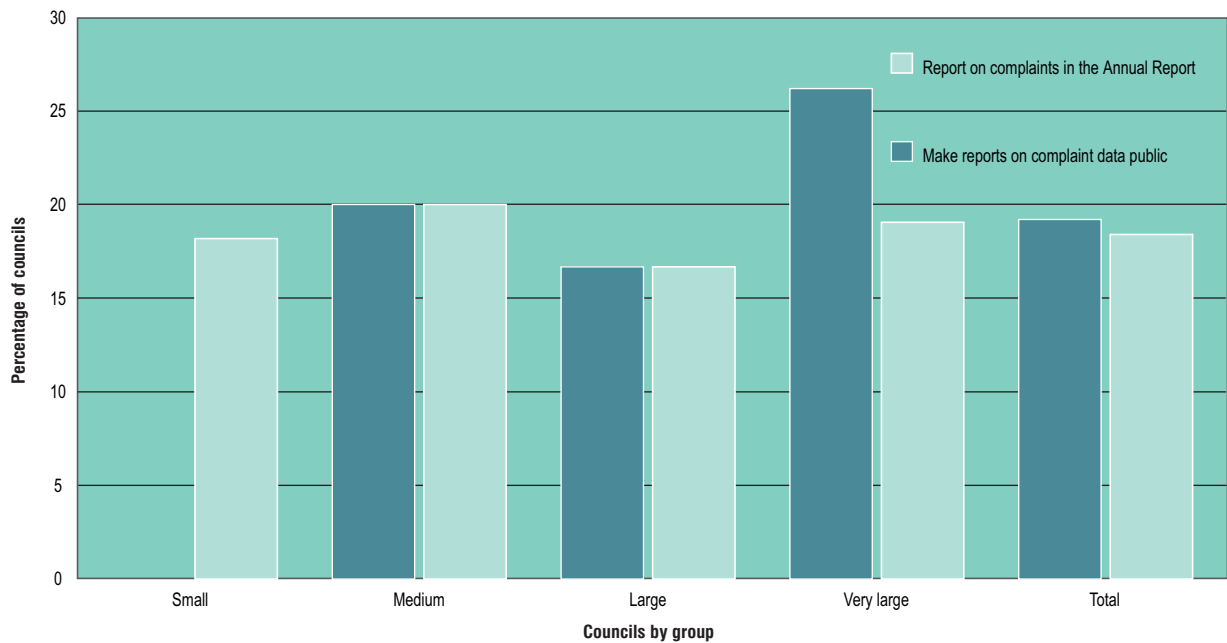
If a complaint handling system provides for a process of feedback to relevant areas of a council's management or operations, problems and trends identified from complaints can be incorporated into planning activities.

Approximately 43% of councils surveyed reported that they feed complaints data back to areas of management to inform planning activities. Interestingly, 55% of small councils advised they did this, whereas the medium sized councils (30%) and large councils (33%) were less likely to do so. Sixty per cent of very large councils reported feeding complaints data back to relevant areas of management.

3.8 External Reporting

The following figure indicates the percentage of councils by size that advised they make reports on complaint data public or reported on complaints in their Annual Reports.

Figure 16. External reporting of complaints data



Only 19% of councils surveyed reported that they make complaints data public and only 18% of councils reported they include data about complaints in their Annual Reports. Very large councils were more likely to make reports on complaints data public, with approximately 26% doing so. No small councils reported making complaint data public, although around 18% of small councils said they report on complaints in their Annual Reports.

In 1999, 30.5% of councils advised they made reports on complaints data public and 20.8% of councils advised they reported on complaints in their Annual Reports.

Table 7. Numbers of complaints received by councils in the 2006-2007 financial year (Question 31c)

	0-100	101-200	201-300	301-400	401-500	>500	Can't Determine
Small	5	0	0	0	0	1	5
Medium	9	0	1	0	0	0	20
Large	5	4	0	0	0	1	32
Very large	13	2	0	0	0	0	27

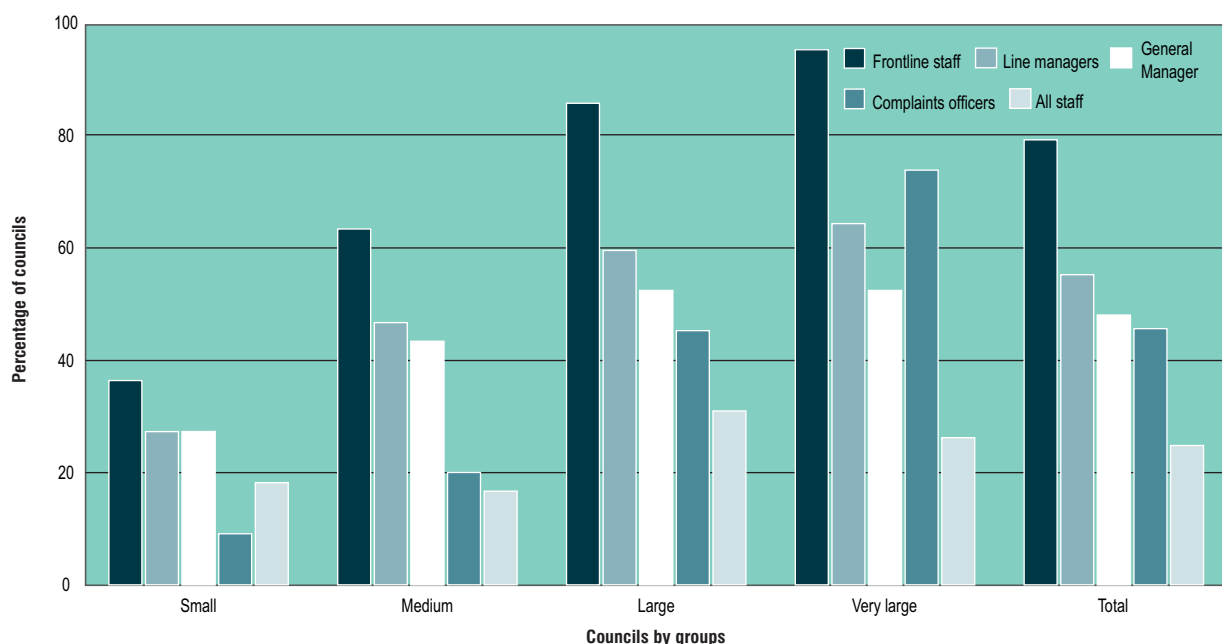
While 58% of councils surveyed answered “yes” when asked if they collected and reported data relating to numbers of complaints received (Question 28a), when asked how many complaints they received in the 2006-2007 financial year, 84 out of the 125 councils surveyed (or 67.2%) advised they couldn’t determine the number of complaints they had received. Therefore, only 41 councils or 32.8% could easily access information about complaint numbers when responding to the survey.

3.9 Training

Ongoing training helps to demonstrate management’s support for the value of the challenging role of complaints handling. It suggests staff get access to training in complaints management, as well as time management, dispute resolution, analytical thinking, customer relations, handling difficult people and stress management.²⁵

The following figure outlines the staff in councils most likely to receive training in complaint handling and/or dispute resolution.

Figure 17. Training in complaint handling/dispute resolution provided by councils



Councils were most likely to provide training in complaint handling/dispute resolution to their frontline staff with 95% of very large councils, 86% of large councils, 63% of medium councils and 36% of small councils doing this. Very large councils were more likely to provide training to designated complaint handlers (74%), probably because large councils were more likely to employ designated complaint handlers. Around 48% of councils provided training in complaint handling/dispute resolution to General Managers and line managers. Councils were less likely to provide this kind of training to all staff, with 25% of councils reporting they had provided this kind of training to all staff.

Table 8. Council staff provided with training in complaint handling/dispute resolution compared with previous surveys

	Training provided in complaint handling/dispute resolution	1994	1999	2007
32(a)	Contact or frontline staff	56	69.5	79.2
32(b)	Line managers	42	52.6	55.2
32(c)	General Manager or senior staff	37	50.6	48.0
32(d)	Designated complaints officers	16	29.9	45.6
32(e)	All staff	15	15.6	24.8

3.10 Customer Satisfaction

Research into customer/client expectations and satisfaction (Question 33)

Agencies should survey a representative sample of complainants each year to determine their satisfaction with the complaints process as this will inform performance information included in annual reports. It would also demonstrate an agency's commitment to service improvement.²⁶

Approximately 62% of councils surveyed reported that they conducted research into customer expectations and satisfaction. The larger the council, the more likely it was to have conducted such research. Twenty-seven per cent of small councils, 47% of medium councils, 62% of large councils and 81% of very large councils reported conducting research into customer expectations and satisfaction.

Of the 77 councils surveyed that reported conducting research into customer expectations and satisfaction, 65 councils (or 84%) advised that they made this research public.

In 1999, 48.7% of councils reported they conducted research into customer expectations and satisfaction, and of those, 35.1% made the research public.

3.11 Evaluation of Effectiveness

Evaluation effectiveness (Question 35)

Only 16% of councils surveyed reported they evaluated the effectiveness of their complaint handling system as a management tool. Larger councils were slightly more likely to do this, with 29% of very large councils, 14% of large councils and 7% of medium councils advising they conducted evaluations. No small councils reported undertaking any evaluation of their complaint handling systems. In 1999 22.7% of councils reported they evaluated the effectiveness of their complaint handling systems as a management tool.

Audit against the Australian Standard

Only 5.6% of councils surveyed reported they had conducted an audit of their complaint handling systems' compliance with the *Australian Standard AS ISO 10002-2006 Customer satisfaction – Guidelines for complaint handling in organisations*. No small or medium sized councils had conducted such an audit and only 5% of large councils and 12% of very large councils had done so.

3.12 Compliance with the Australian Standard

The objective of the standard is to:

provide guidance on complaints handling related to products within an organisation, including planning, design, operation, maintenance and improvement²⁷.

It contains guiding principles and a complaint handling framework, information about planning and design as well as the operation and maintenance of a complaint handling system. It is a matter for each council to use the standard's principals to develop a system appropriate to its own particular circumstances and customers based on the key elements of the standard. A small council servicing a small rural community will have in place a different complaint handling system to a large council servicing a large, diverse, urban community.

For the purposes of this survey, 23 of the questions were designated as indicators of whether an agency's complaint handling system conforms to the standard. Clearly our conclusions are limited by the parameters of the survey – a self assessment questionnaire without independent verification of the responses. A comprehensive audit would be necessary to form a definitive conclusion as to whether a complaints system complied with the standard but this assessment of the survey data is presented as a useful indicator.

The key criteria of the standard were identified and tested in the following questions; the topic areas reflect the Guiding Principles of the standard:

Visibility and access

- Q5 Does your organisation have a separate policy or system for complaint handling?
- Q18a Are customers told how to make a complaint/suggestion?
- Q20 (a)-(e) flexibility in ways of making a complaint

Responsiveness

- Q14 Do front line staff have specific instructions on how to handle/refer complaints?
- Q26 Do you have any standards in place for the way in which complaints are dealt with?

Objectivity

- Q15 Does your complaint handling system contain a mechanism for an internal review by a more senior officer if the complainant is dissatisfied with the initial response to their complaint?
- Q16 (a-c) Do you advertise other external avenues to deal with complaints?

Confidentiality

- Q9 (h) Do your complaint handling system have procedures for protecting confidentiality of complainant details.

Customer focused approach

- Q32 (a) Do staff receive training in complaint handling or dispute resolution?
- Q9 (f) Does your complaint handling system have a system for keeping the complainant informed of what is happening?

Accountability

- Q11 Is a senior manager responsible for the effective operation of the complaint handling system?
- Q9 (d) Does your complaint handling system include a statement of who is responsible for dealing with complaints?

Continual improvement

- Q23 Are complaints recorded in any system?
- Q27 Are complaints analysed in any systemic way?
- Q30 Does the complaint handling system provide for feedback to relevant areas of management and operations so that the problems and trends identified from complaints can be incorporated into planning activities.
- Q7 Is the complaint handling policy reviewed at least every two years?
- Q35 Have you evaluated the effectiveness of your complaint handling system as a management tool?

The following five councils claimed to have met these criteria. Out of the 125 councils that responded to the survey, 4% indicated they complied with the Australian Standard as it is defined above.

- Gosford City Council
- Holroyd City Council
- Rockdale City Council
- Lake Macquarie City Council
- Baulkham Hills Shire Council

All of these councils were categorised as very large and employed over 300 staff.

Table 9. Numbers of councils surveyed that *did not* meet the key criteria as designated by the Australian Standard

Question	Criteria	Numbers	% of total
5	Separate policy or system for complaint handling	14	11.2
7	Complaint handling policy reviewed at least every two years	52	41.6
9d	Statement of who is responsible for dealing with complaints	25	20.0
9f	System for keeping the complainant informed of what is happening	27	21.6
9h	Procedures for protecting confidentiality of complainant details	18	14.4
11	Senior manager responsible for the effective operation of the complaint handling system	16	12.8
14	Front line staff have specific instructions on how to handle/refer complaints	12	9.6
15	Mechanism for an internal review by a more senior officer if the complainant is dissatisfied with the initial response to their complaint	15	12.0
16a-c	Advertise other external avenues to deal with complaints	8	6.4
18a	Customers told how to make a complaint/suggestion	14	11.2
20a	Customers able to make complaints in writing	0	0
20b	Customers able to make complaints by email	2	1.6
20c	Customers able to make complaints by fax	1	0.8

20d	Customers able to make complaints by telephone	5	4.0
20e	Customers able to make complaints in person	2	1.6
23	Complaints recorded in a system	5	4.0
26	Standards in place for the way in which complaints are dealt with	30	24.0
27	Complaints analysed in a systematic way	71	56.8
30	System provides for feedback to relevant areas of management and operations so that the problems and trends identified from complaints can be incorporated into planning activities	63	50.4
32a	Staff receive training in complaint handling or dispute resolution	24	19.2
35	Evaluation the effectiveness of complaint handling system as a management tool	102	81.6

The greatest impediments to councils meeting the Australian Standard appear to be failure to evaluate the effectiveness of the complaint handling system as a management tool (81.6% of councils did not meet this criterion), failure to analyse complaints in a systematic way (56.8% of councils did not meet this criterion), failure of the system to provide feedback to relevant areas of management and operations so problems and trends identified from complaints can be incorporated into planning activities (50.4% of councils did not meet this criterion) and failure to review complaint handling systems at least every two years (41.6% of councils did not meet this criterion).

Endnotes

- ¹ NSW Ombudsman, The Complaint Handler's Toolkit, 2nd Edition, June 2004, p13.
- ² NSW Ombudsman, The Complaint Handler's Toolkit, 2nd Edition, June 2004, p10.
- ³ NSW Ombudsman, The Complaint Handler's Toolkit, 2nd Edition, June 2004, p73 and p217.
- ⁴ Queensland Ombudsman, Effective Complaints Management Fact Sheet No.10 Resources, 2006.
- ⁵ *Australian Standard AS ISO 10002-2006 Customer satisfaction – Guidelines for complaint handling in organisations.*
- ⁶ NSW Ombudsman, The Complaint Handler's Toolkit, 2nd Edition, June 2004, p8.
- ⁷ NSW Ombudsman, The Complaint Handler's Toolkit, 2nd Edition, June 2004, p10.
- ⁸ *Australian Standard AS ISO 10002-2006 Customer satisfaction – Guidelines for complaint handling in organisations.*
- ⁹ NSW Ombudsman, The Complaint Handler's Toolkit, 2nd Edition, June 2004, p10.
- ¹⁰ NSW Ombudsman, The Complaint Handler's Toolkit, 2nd Edition, June 2004, p10.
- ¹¹ NSW Ombudsman, The Complaint Handler's Toolkit, 2nd Edition, June 2004, p9.
- ¹² NSW Ombudsman, The Complaint Handler's Toolkit, 2nd Edition, June 2004, p24.
- ¹³ NSW Ombudsman, The Complaint Handler's Toolkit, 2nd Edition, June 2004, p9.
- ¹⁴ NSW Ombudsman, The Complaint Handler's Toolkit, 2nd Edition, June 2004, p17.
- ¹⁵ NSW Ombudsman, The Complaint Handler's Toolkit, 2nd Edition, June 2004, p9.
- ¹⁶ Queensland Ombudsman, Effective Complaints Management Fact Sheet No.10 Resources, 2006.
- ¹⁷ NSW Ombudsman, The Complaint Handler's Toolkit, 2nd Edition, June 2004, p10.
- ¹⁸ Consumer Complaint Behaviour in Australia: Report 1, American Express-Society of Consumer Affairs Professionals in Business Australia (SOCAP) 1995 pg 14. The positive relationship between speed of response and satisfaction has also been supported by findings of similar research conducted in worldwide industry specific studies by Technical Assistance Research Programs (TARP).
- ¹⁹ NSW Ombudsman, The Complaint Handler's Toolkit, 2nd Edition, June 2004, p12.
- ²⁰ Citizens First Summary Report, Canadian Centre for Management Development, 1998.
- ²¹ NSW Ombudsman, The Complaint Handler's Toolkit, 2nd Edition, June 2004, p12.
- ²² *Australian Standard AS ISO 10002-2006 Customer satisfaction – Guidelines for complaint handling in organisations.*
- ²³ NSW Ombudsman, The Complaint Handler's Toolkit, 2nd Edition, June 2004, p 26.
- ²⁴ Queensland Ombudsman, Effective Complaints Management Fact Sheet No.13 Business Improvement, 2006.
- ²⁵ Queensland Ombudsman, Effective Complaints Management Fact Sheet No.11 Personnel and Training, 2006.
- ²⁶ Guidance to Good Practice in the Western Australian Public Sector Guidelines, 2004.
- ²⁷ Preface to Australian Standard (AS ISO 10002-2006).

Chapter 4. Appendices

4.1 List of Respondent Councils

Small (employ 61 or less staff)

Balranald Shire Council
Boorowa Council
Conargo Shire Council
Gundagai Shire Council
Guyra Shire Council
Harden Shire Council
Hunter's Hill Council
Jerilderie Shire Council
Lockhart Shire Council
Murrumbidgee Shire Council
The Council of the Shire of Brewarrina

Medium (employ 61 – 120 staff)

Bellingen Shire Council
Berrigan Shire Council
Blayney Shire Council
Bogan Shire Council
Bombala Council
Bourke Shire Council
Coolamon Shire Council
Cootamundra Shire Council
Corowa Shire Council
Deniliquin Council
Dungog Shire Council
Forbes Shire Council
Gloucester Shire Council
Junee Shire Council
Kyogle Council
Lane Cove Council
Narrandera Shire Council
Narromine Shire Council
Oberon Council
Palerang Council
Shire of Walgett
Temora Shire Council
Tenterfield Shire Council
Tumbarumba Shire Council
Wakool Shire Council
Walcha Council
Warren Shire Council
Weddin Shire Council
Wentworth Shire Council
Young Shire Council

Large (employ 121 – 300 staff)

Armidale Dumaresq Council
Ashfield Municipal Council
Auburn Council
Ballina Shire Council
Bega Valley Shire Council
Bland Shire Council
Burwood Council
Byron Shire Council
Cabonne Council
Camden Shire Council
Cessnock City Council
City of Canada Bay Council
City of Queanbeyan
Cobar Shire Council
Cowra Shire Council
Dubbo City Council
Gilgandra Shire Council
Glen Innes Severn Council
Goulburn Mulwaree Council
Greater Hume Shire Council
Greater Taree City Council
Griffith City Council
Gunnedah Shire Council
Hawkesbury City Council
Inverell Shire Council
Kogarah Council
Lithgow City Council
Liverpool Plains Shire Council
Mid- Western Regional Council
Mosman Municipal Council
Nambucca Shire Council
Narrabri Shire Council
Parkes Shire Council
Richmond Valley Council
Singleton Council
Snowy River Shire Council
Tumut Shire Council
Upper Hunter Shire Council
Upper Lachlan Shire Council
Wellington Council
Wollondilly Shire Council
Yass Valley Council

Very large (employ more than 300 staff)

Albury City Council
Bankstown City Council
Bathurst Regional Council
Baulkham Hills Shire Council
Blacktown City Council
Blue Mountains City Council
Campbelltown City Council
Canterbury City Council
City of Botany Bay
City of Sydney
Clarence Valley Council
Coffs Harbour City Council
Fairfield City Council
Gosford City Council
Great Lakes Council
Holroyd City Council
Hornsby Shire Council
Hurstville City Council
Kempsey Shire Council
Kiama Municipal Council
Kur-ring-gai Council
Lake Macquarie City Council
Leichhardt Council
Lismore City Council
Manly Council
North Sydney Council
Orange City Council
Parramatta City Council
Penrith City Council
Pittwater Council
Port Macquarie-Hastings Council
Port Stephens Council
Randwick City Council
Rockdale City Council
Shoalhaven City Council
Tweed Shire Council
Warringah Council
Waverley Council
Willoughby City Council
Wingecarribee Shire Council
Woollahra Municipal Council
Wyong Shire Council

4.2 Survey



Complaint Handling Systems Survey June 2007

Please answer every question by ticking the appropriate box and/or providing details on separate pages where necessary:

Your organisation

1 How many employees are in your organisation?

2 Does your organisation have branch or regional offices?

Yes No

Complaint handling system

3 Do you have a customer service or guarantee of service policy/program?

Yes No

4 Does it encompass complaint handling?

Yes No

5 Does your organisation have a separate policy (or system) for complaint handling?

Yes No

6 Is the complaint handling policy documented?

Yes No

7 Is the complaint handling policy reviewed at least every two years?

Yes No

8 Is the complaint handling policy written in plain English?

Yes No

9 Does your complaint handling system have any of the following features?

(a) Caters for complaints from the public

Yes No

(b) Caters for complaints from internal customers or other public sector bodies you service

Yes No

(c) A clearly understood procedure for people to make complaints or suggestions for improvement

Yes No

(d) A statement of who is responsible for dealing with complaints

Yes No

(e) Procedures for conciliating and investigating complaints depending on their seriousness and complexity

Yes No

(f) A system for keeping the complainant informed of what is happening

Yes No

(g) A system for recording complaints/suggestions and outcomes

Yes No

(h) Procedures for protecting confidentiality of complainant details

Yes No

(i) A comprehensive definition of a complaint to guide staff on when to use the complaint handling procedures

Yes No

System and staff management

10 Is your complaint handling system supported by published statements from the CEO/GM ?

Yes No

11 Is a senior manager responsible for the effective operation of the complaint handling system?

Yes No

12 Are the requirements of the complaint handling policy communicated to all staff?

Yes No

13 Are complaint handling responsibilities, including performance indicators, contained in staff position descriptions?

Yes No

14 Do front line staff (eg receptionist, counter staff) have specific instructions on how to handle/refer complaints?

Yes No

15 Does your complaint handling system contain a mechanism for an internal review by a more senior officer if the complainant is dissatisfied with the initial response to their complaint?

Yes No

16 Do you inform complainants of other external avenues to pursue their complaints if dissatisfied?

(a) Appeal rights (if any)

Yes No

(b) Other review bodies

Yes No

(c) Ombudsman

Yes No

17 Do you have a complaint handling instructions manual for staff?

Yes No

Advice to customers/clients

18 (a) Are customers told how to make a complaint/suggestion?

Yes No

(b) How?

(i) Information brochure

Yes No

(ii) Feedback/complaint form

Yes No

(iii) Signs in public areas

Yes No

(iv) Advertised "hotline" to call

Yes No

(v) Published name of contact person for complaints or inquiries

Yes No

(vi) Information on web page

Yes No

19 Is complaint handling information available in community languages?

Yes No

20 Are customers able to make complaints:

- (a) in writing
- | | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | No |
|-----|----|
- (b) by email
- | | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | No |
|-----|----|
- (c) by fax
- | | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | No |
|-----|----|
- (d) by telephone
- | | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | No |
|-----|----|
- (e) in person
- | | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | No |
|-----|----|
- (f) via your web page
- | | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | No |
|-----|----|

21 Are customers provided with assistance to make complaints where needed?

- | | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | No |
|-----|----|

Dealing with complaints

22 Who is authorised to deal with complaints in your organisation?

- (a) Contact or frontline staff
- | | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | No |
|-----|----|
- (b) Designated complaints officer(s)
- | | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | No |
|-----|----|
- (c) CEO/GM or line managers
- | | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | No |
|-----|----|
- (d) All staff
- | | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | No |
|-----|----|
- (e) No-one specially authorised
- | | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | No |
|-----|----|

Recording

23 Are complaints recorded in any system?

- | | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | No |
|-----|----|

(a) Does your recording system allow you to track individual cases and classify and report on aggregate data?

- | | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | No |
|-----|----|

(b) Do you record oral or other non written complaints?

- | | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | No |
|-----|----|

(c) Do you include inquiries/suggestions and/or commendations in your records?

- | | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | No |
|-----|----|

24 Do you record the issues complained about?

- | | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | No |
|-----|----|

25 Are outcomes and responses to complaints recorded?

- | | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | No |
|-----|----|

Performance standards

26 Do you have any standards in place for the way in which complaints are dealt with?

- | | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | No |
|-----|----|

What do they cover?

(a) Acknowledgement of receipt within a certain time

- | | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | No |
|-----|----|

(b) Completion/resolution within a certain time

- | | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | No |
|-----|----|

(c) A system of keeping complainants informed of what is happening with their complaint within a certain time

- | | |
|-----|----|
| Yes | No |
|-----|----|

(d) A system for checking that a complaint has been dealt with and acted upon

Yes No

(e) A system for checking that underlying problems have been identified and acted upon

Yes No

Analysis and feedback

27 Are complaints analysed in any systematic way?

Yes No

28 Do your internal reports on complaints address any of the following:

(a) Numbers of complaints/suggestions?

Yes No

(b) Compliance with performance standards?

Yes No

(c) Issues raised in complaints?

Yes No

(d) Trends in complaints over time?

Yes No

(e) Outcomes and remedies provided?

Yes No

(f) Recommendations/strategies to prevent or limit recurrences?

Yes No

(g) Service improvements made due to complaints data?

Yes No

29 Who gets complaint analysis reports?

(a) CEO/GM

Yes No

(b) Senior Management

Yes No

(c) Designated complaint handlers

Yes No

(d) All staff

Yes No

30 Does your complaint handling system have a process of feedback to relevant areas of management and operations so that problems and trends identified from complaints can be incorporated into planning activities?

Yes No

External reporting

31

(a) Do you make any reports about complaints/suggestions received by your organisation public?

Yes No

(b) Do you report on complaints/suggestions in your Annual Report?

Yes No

(c) How many complaints did your organisation receive about itself in the 2006-2007 financial year?

Number _____

Cannot determine

Training

32 Do staff receive any training in complaint handling or dispute resolution?

(a) Contact or frontline staff

Yes No

(b) Line managers

Yes No

(c) CEO/General Manager or senior staff

Yes No

(d) Designated complaints officer

Yes No

(e) All staff

Yes No

Customer satisfaction

33 Do you conduct any research into customer/client expectations and/or satisfaction?

Yes No

34 If so, are the results of these surveys made public?

Yes No

Evaluation effectiveness

35 Have you evaluated the effectiveness of your complaint handling system as a management tool?

Yes No

36 Have you conducted an audit of your complaint handling system's compliance with *Australian Standard AS ISO 10002-2006 Customer satisfaction – Guidelines for complaint handling in organisations*?

Yes No

Please send the completed form by Friday 20 July 2007 to:

**Complaint Survey
Office of the Ombudsman
Level 24
580 George Street
Sydney NSW 2000**

Further information:

Your name:

Title:

Organisation:

Phone No:

Email:

Address:

.....

.....

Please don't forget to include copies of the following documents along with the survey form:

- **Your customer service or Guarantee of Service policy (including any brochures or leaflets on this)**
- **Your complaint policy (including any brochures or leaflets on this) or a description of your complaint system if you do not have a written policy**
- **Your complaint form if you use one**
- **Your staff instruction manual or details of your procedures for dealing with complaints**
- **An example of any internal management report that analyses or reports complaint information**
- **An example of the documentation you provide to relevant areas of management and operations so that problems and trends identified in complaints can be incorporated into planning activities**
- **Any evaluation of your complaint system**
- **Any audit of your complaint handling system's compliance with *Australian Standard AS ISO 10002-2006 Customer satisfaction – Guidelines for complaint handling in organisations***

**Thank you for participating
in this survey**

4.3 Useful Resources on Complaint Handling

Apologies: A practical guide, NSW Ombudsman, May 2007

Better Service and Communication Guidelines for Local Government, NSW Ombudsman, June 2000

Council Fact Sheets, NSW Ombudsman

In particular:

- Fact Sheet 5: Apologies by Councils

Dealing with Difficult Complainants, NSW Ombudsman, June 2004

Effective Complaint Handling, NSW Ombudsman, June 2000

Public Sector Agencies Fact Sheets A – Z, NSW Ombudsman

In particular:

- Fact Sheet 1: Apologies
- Fact Sheet 2: Bad Faith, Bias and Breach of Duty

- Fact Sheet 6: Frankness and Candour
- Fact Sheet 8: Handling Complaints
- Fact Sheet 9: Investigation of complaints
- Fact Sheet 14: Natural Justice/Procedural Fairness
- Fact Sheet 17: Quality Customer Service
- Fact Sheet 18: Reasons for Decisions
- Fact Sheet 20: Transparency and Accountability
- Fact Sheet 21: Useful Tips
- Fact Sheet 22: Very Difficult Complainants
- Fact Sheet 24: Expectations in Service Provision

Investigating Complaints, A manual for investigators, NSW Ombudsman, June 2000

Options for Redress – Guidelines for redress for detriment arising out of maladministration, NSW Ombudsman, March 2003

The Complaint Handler's Toolkit, (2nd edition), NSW Ombudsman, June 2004

Workshops on complaint handling provided by NSW Ombudsman

- Complaint Handling for Frontline Staff
- Dealing With Unreasonable Complainant Conduct
- Art of Negotiation

Further information about the NSW Ombudsman's publications and workshops is available on its website at www.ombo.nsw.gov.au.

NSW Ombudsman

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