



NSW Ombudsman

Complaint Handling Systems Survey 2007 Report

Departments and Authorities

December 2007



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Chapter 1. Executive Summary

In the period June to August 2007 the NSW Ombudsman 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 government departments and public authorities.

Agencies 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.

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

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

The following are some of the highlights from the survey:

1.1 Complaint handling systems

There has been a notable reduction in the number of agencies with documented complaint handling policies since 1999, as well as a reduction in the number of agencies which have clearly understood procedures for handling complaints.

While larger agencies are more likely to have documented policies for complaint handling than small agencies, overall 79% of respondent agencies said they have a documented complaint handling policy compared to 91.6% of agencies in 1999. 75% of agencies reported having a clearly understood procedure for people to make complaints, compared to 82.4% in 1999.

There has also been a marked fall in the number of agencies with customer service/guarantee of service policies since 1999. In 1999 80.7% of agencies reported having a guarantee of service policy compared to 66% now.

These reductions are concerning. An effective complaints handling system is an essential part of providing quality service; it is important that agencies pay adequate attention to this aspect of their operations.

1.2 System and staff management

While few agencies have a statement of support from their CEO for their complaint handling system, there is significant practical support from management with a large percentage of complaint handling systems being the responsibility of a senior manager.

There has been a marked increase in the provision of information about internal and external avenues of review since 1999, suggesting complaint handling systems are becoming more sophisticated with more than one tier of review.

Few agencies include performance indicators for complaint handling in staff position descriptions.

1.3 Advice to customers/clients

While a large percentage of agencies state they tell customers how to make a complaint, it is unclear how many do this in practice, with few agencies indicating they have a comprehensive range of ways of telling people how to complain. Even the most comprehensive complaints policy will be ineffective if members of the public are not made aware they can complain.

Only 9% of agencies produce complaint information in community languages, compared to 18.5% in 1999. Given the culturally diverse population of NSW this is a cause for concern.

Agencies provide a range of ways in which to make a complaint with increasing use of email and web pages being added to the more traditional means.

1.4 Dealing with complaints

Complaints are dealt with by a varying range of staff in different agencies. Large agencies are more likely to have designated complaints officers than smaller agencies. There is little change from the previous survey and it is likely to be a reflection of larger agencies' additional resources and more complex structures.

1.5 Recording complaints

A high percentage of agencies record complaints, although there has been a decrease since previous surveys in the number which record oral complaints.

The ability to track individual cases as well as classify and report on aggregate data is tied to the size of the agency. Large agencies are more likely to have this functionality in their recording systems than smaller agencies.

1.6 Performance standards for dealing with complaints

There has been an increase in the number of agencies which have performance standards for how they deal with complaints. This is linked to the size of an agency, with larger agencies being more likely to have performance standards in place.

1.7 Analysis and feedback

Overall only 57% of agencies said they analyse complaints in any systemic way. There is a strong correlation between the size of the agency and the likelihood they analyse complaints.

While agencies reported complaint numbers and issues tend to feature in internal reports, compliance with performance indicators and the identification of outcomes, recommendations to prevent or limit recurrences and service improvements made as a result of complaints are less likely to feature in management reports.

The survey results indicate there is considerable room for improvement in the use of complaint information for enhancements in service delivery and planning in agencies. There is still very limited use of complaints data despite the many positive benefits it can bring to an organisation, not least in generating strategies and recommendations for prevention of recurrences of the same problems in the future.

A number of agencies advised when returning the survey that as part of the introduction of electronic document management systems they are in the process of improving, or introducing for the first time, systems to analyse complaint information and use that information in planning. It will be interesting to see the impact of these new technological changes on complaint handling systems.

1.8 External reporting

Few agencies report externally on the complaints they receive, despite the requirements of the Annual Report regulations that agencies must publish information about complaints they have received in their annual reports.

As in 1999, a surprising number of agencies said they can't determine how many complaints they receive in a given year despite having said they record the number of complaints and suggestions they receive.

1.9 Training

The level of training in complaint handling provided to staff in small and medium size agencies remains concerningly small. Skill development and guidance in complaint handling is essential for a policy or procedure on complaint handling to be put into practice effectively.

1.10 Customers satisfaction

There is a strong correlation between the size of an agency and the likelihood it conducts customer satisfaction surveys. Large agencies are more likely to do this than smaller agencies.

1.11 Evaluation of effectiveness

Very few agencies evaluate the effectiveness of their complaint handling system. This is similar to the situation in 1999.

1.12 Compliance with the Australian Standard on complaint handling

The Australian Standard on complaint handling has been updated since 1999. Few agencies evaluate their own compliance with the standard. Our own assessment suggests the same rate of compliance as in 1999 — 10%.

1.13 Overall

The decrease in the number of agencies with guarantees of service and documented complaint handling policies is concerning. However, the survey results also suggest there has been an increase in the sophistication of individual complaint handling systems. This is indicated in particular by the increase in the use of internal reviews and an increase in the level of information provided about external avenues of review, as well as the increased number of agencies which have performance standards for how they deal with complaints.

The survey results indicate there is still much room for improvement in agencies' use of complaint information. The results suggest many agencies are diligent about dealing with individual complaints but are failing to benefit from 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

We suggest agencies 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 well it is put into practice.

Chapter 2. Methodology

We asked 235 NSW government agencies to participate in the survey. 143 completed surveys were returned. A further 39 agencies contacted us to explain why they would not be returning the survey. Reasons given included:

- The agency believed they are too small to need a complaint handling system;
- The agency does not have contact with the public;
- The agency is very new and only just developing policies and procedures;
- The agency believed its complaint handling system is too complex to answer the survey questions but provided documentation about the system;
- The agency is part of a larger department and the parent department was replying on behalf of its constituent parts (27 agencies).

In addition, seven surveys were returned too late to be included in the analysis.

2.1 Big departments

We sent the survey to an expansive group of agencies, being aware that the growing trend for a smaller number of bigger departments has in some instances brought together business units with disparate functions into a single department. We wanted to make sure that if business units have their own complaint handling systems we captured information about them, as well as the system the 'parent' department has in place.

Responses in this regard varied. Some big departments responded in a single survey on behalf of all or most of their constituent business units advising a common complaint handling system was used. In other cases each business unit returned a survey to reflect the various tailored complaints handling systems in place; other departments provided an amalgamated response dealing with the main features common to a number of different systems across the department.

2.2 Participation rate

Overall, 80% of the agencies which were sent surveys either returned a survey or contacted us to explain why they would not be responding. Information about 72% of those surveyed has been included in this analysis (143 surveys representing information about 170 agencies).

2.3 Self assessment

The survey was completed on a self-assessment basis. While agencies 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.

2.4 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. The information collected has been used to build a picture of the current state of complaint handling throughout the state and local government sector in NSW. 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.

2.5 Size of agency

We divided departments and authorities into four groups based on their size for the purposes of analysing the survey results. We understand there is no uniform system across NSW government for categorising agencies by size. We therefore identified the following groupings as appropriate for our purposes:

Small	employ 100 or less staff
Medium	employ 101–400 staff
Large	employ 401–2000 staff
Very large	employ more than 2000 staff

Of those agencies which completed the survey:

45% (65 agencies) are small

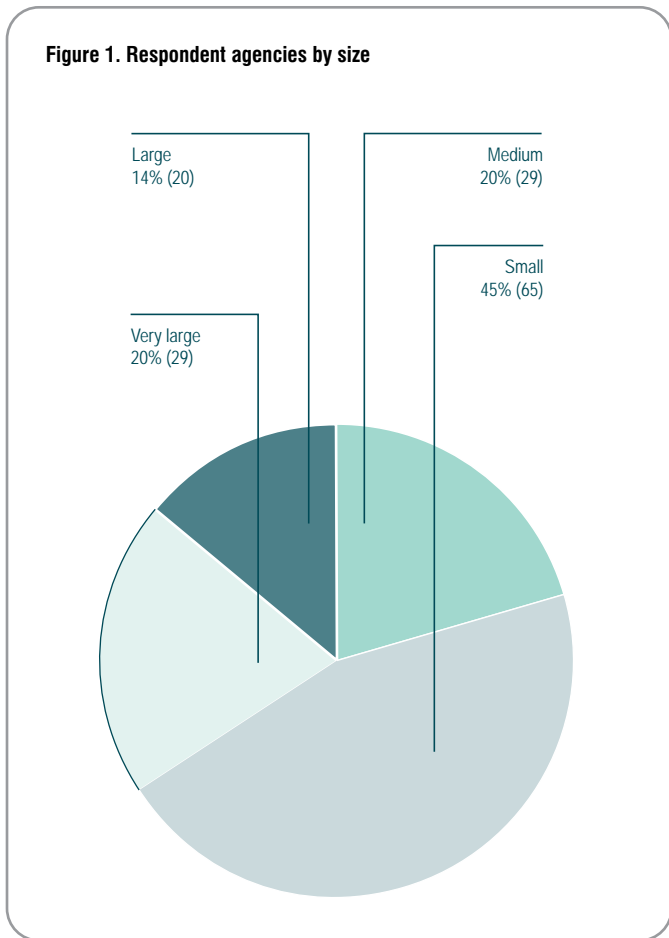
20 % (29 agencies) are medium size

14% (20 agencies) are large

20 % (29 agencies) are very large

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

Where significant, the impact of the size of the organisation on the results of particular questions is indicated in the report.



Chapter 3. Results and analysis

3.1 Complaint handling system

Customer service or guarantee of service policy/program

Overall 66 % of agencies said they have a customer service or guarantee of service policy. This is a marked decrease since 1999 when 80.7% reported having a guarantee of service policy. Only 62 % of small agencies have a guarantee of service, 72% of medium size agencies, 75% of large agencies and 63 % of very large agencies (figure 2).

Priority 8 of the NSW Government State Plan *Increased customer satisfaction with Government Services* commits the government to:

- Updating guarantee of service documents to reflect results of customer satisfaction surveys and NSW Ombudsman guidelines;
- Ensuring each agency has a guarantee of service displayed in a public place.

The State Plan also talks about consideration being given to incorporating minimum standards of service delivery in guarantees of service which will progressively include a guarantee that the first person a customer talks to will resolve their request or take it up on their behalf.

The government's requirement that agencies have a guarantee of service is longstanding. *Premier's Memorandum 95-29* which was published in August 1995 requires all NSW government agencies to adopt guarantees of service and complaints policies.

Complaint handling policies

A complaint handling system is an organised way for an agency to respond to, record, report and use complaints to improve service to its customers. Such a system should include procedures for customers to make complaints and guidelines for staff to resolve complaints. It should also provide information to managers and staff that can assist them to prevent customer dissatisfaction in the future.

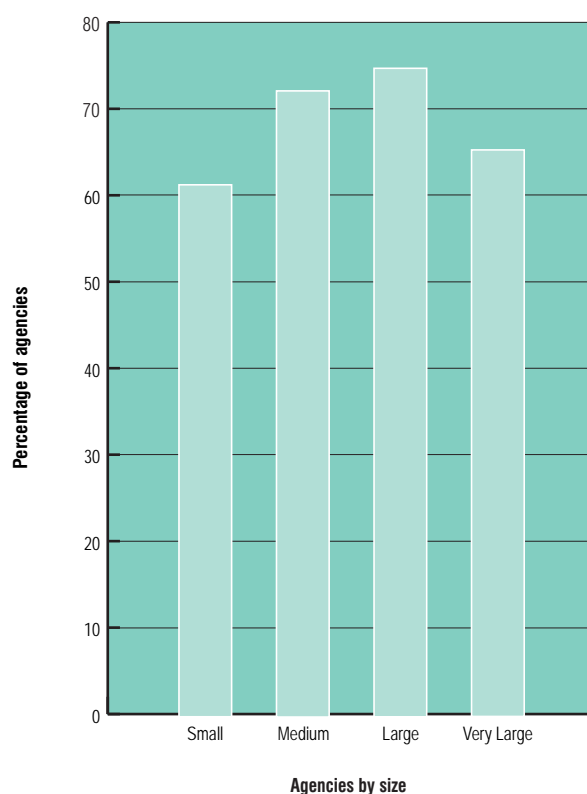
An effective complaints handling system is an essential part of providing quality service. It is a measure of customer and client satisfaction. It provides positive feedback about aspects of the service that work well, and is a useful source of information for improvement.

An effective complaints system will benefit the agency in four important ways by:

- Creating a second chance to provide service and satisfaction to dissatisfied customers
- Identifying areas that need improvement
- Providing opportunities to strengthen public support for the agency, and
- Assisting in planning and allocation of resources.¹

Over all, 79% of agencies have a documented policy (question 6) with some correlation by size. 68% of small agencies said they have a documented policy, 79% of medium agencies, 95% of large agencies and 93% of very large agencies. These differences are illustrated in figure 3 overleaf.

Figure 2. Agencies by size with a customer or guarantee of service policy



The overall figure is a notable decrease since 1999, when 91.6% of agencies said they had a documented complaint policy.

Agreed basic policies and procedures that are easy to understand and explain assist staff in resolving, conciliating and investigating complaints from the simple to the complex. They should always be written down. A model policy should address the following:

- reasons for the policy eg benefits to customers and staff
- the aims and objectives of the system
- definition of a complaint
- who is responsible for taking, recording, resolving and analysing complaints
- how complaints may be lodged
- outline a three tier structure for handling complaints
- guiding principles eg.
 - customer focus — customers are valuable and the heart of our business
 - complaints are an opportunity, not a nuisance
 - customers will be helped and supported to make complaints
 - redress will be provided for justified complaints
- resources required
- confidentiality of complaint information and safeguards against victimisation/retribution
- reporting obligations
 - how and when the system is to be reviewed.

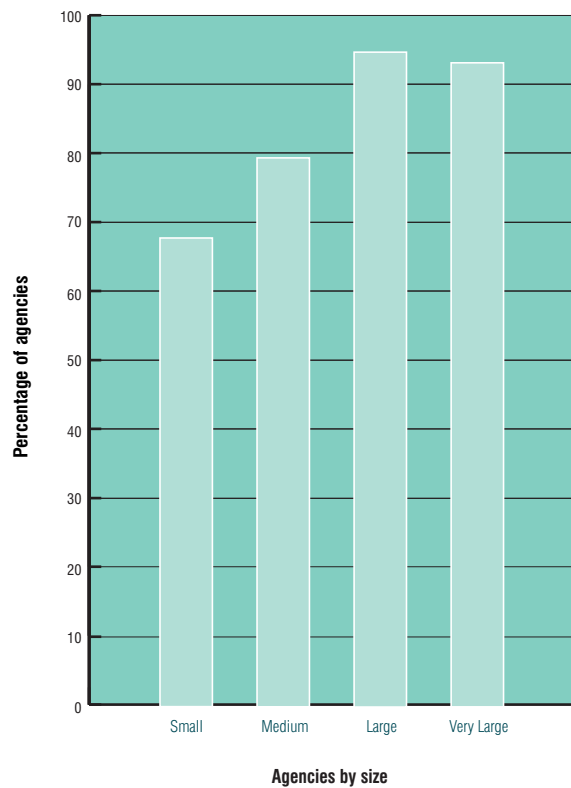
And procedures should contain:

- how customer feedback will be sought
- what complaints are accepted: verbal, written, anonymous
- who is responsible for taking the complaint, and at what point the complaint is referred on
- how complaints and outcomes will be recorded
- timeframes for resolution and other performance standards
- guidance on what happens if these are not met (there may be different turnaround times and priorities for urgent and complex complaints)
- acceptable forms of redress including delegation levels
- review mechanisms if complainant not satisfied
- what complaint analysis is to be done and how it is reported.²

Review of complaint handling policy

55% of agencies said they review their complaint handling policy every two years. There was a marked disparity between different size agencies in answering this question. Less than half of small agencies reviewed their policy (only 43%) compared to 69% of the very large agencies.

Figure 3. Agencies with a documented complaints handling policy



One of the guiding principles in the *Australian Standard for customer satisfaction — guidelines for complaints handling in organisations (AS ISO 10002 – 2006)* is:

4.10 The continual improvement of the complaints handling process and the quality of products should be a permanent objective of an organisation.

Agencies need to know if their complaints-handling system is working effectively and if it is achieving the outcomes agencies need. In order to ensure complaints handling systems are operating well, agencies should look at three areas when reviewing their systems:

- 1) Evaluate policy, procedures and guidelines — are they visible and accessible, is it consistent with strategic goals, are complaints-handling responsibilities clearly outlined?
- 2) Evaluate the system itself — are all complaints captured, is the software appropriate, are timelines clear and monitored, is there a clear classification system, are trends evident?
- 3) Consult stakeholders — staff, customers and complainants.³

Is the complaint handling policy written in plain English?

Overall 79% of agencies said their complaint handling policy is written in plain English (question 8). 66% of small agencies said their policies are in plain English, rising to 95% of large agencies and 93% of very large agencies.

7.1 of the *Australian Standard for customer satisfaction — guidelines for complaints handling in organisations (AS ISO 10002 — 2006)* states:

Information concerning the complaints-handling process, such as brochures, pamphlets or electronic-based information should be made readily available to customers, complainants and other interested parties. Such information should be provided in clear language and, so far as is reasonable, in formats accessible to all, so that no complainants are disadvantaged.

Features of complaint handling system

Table 1. Summary of main features or complaint handling system

Question		Yes
Q9a	Caters for complaints from the public	87%
Q9b	Caters for complaints from internal customers or other public sector bodies you service	79%
Q9c	A clearly understood procedure for people to make complaints or suggestions for improvement	75%
Q9d	A statement of who is responsible for dealing with complaints	78%
Q9e	Procedures for conciliating and investigating complaints depending on their seriousness and complexity	76%
Q9f	A system for keeping the complainant informed of what is happening	71%
Q9g	A system for recording complaints/suggestions and outcomes	79%
Q9h	Procedures for protecting confidentiality of complainant details	76%
Q9i	A comprehensive definition of a complaint to guide staff on when to use the complaint handling procedures.	60%

Definition of a complaint

Overall, only 60% of the agencies that responded said they have a comprehensive definition of a complaint. In particular, only 40% of the small agencies said they have a definition. Bigger agencies are much more likely to have a definition — 93% of very large agencies said they have one.

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 policy.

Who is responsible for dealing with complaints?

78% of agencies said they have a statement of who is responsible for dealing with complaints. It is important a 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. More information on this topic can be found in the *NSW Ombudsman Complaint Handler's Toolkit 2nd Ed 2004*.

Assessment and investigation

How a complaint is assessed and acted on is also central to good complaints management. No matter how well other aspects of complaints management — good visibility and accessibility, reasonable timeframes, clear communication, timely feedback etc — are functioning, if a complaint is poorly assessed or poorly acted on (i.e. investigated) the system will have no credibility.⁴

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 out how investigations and conciliations are to be conducted by an agency.

Overall 75% of agencies said they have a clearly understood procedure for people to make complaints or suggestions for improvement, and 76% of agencies said they have procedures for conciliating and investigating complaints depending on their seriousness and complexity.

Keeping complainants informed

71% of respondent agencies said they have a system for keeping the complainant informed of what is happening. This is a decrease since previous surveys when 80% (in 1994) and 78.2% (in 1999) of agencies said they had such a system.

The *Australian Standard (AS ISO 10002 – 2006)* requires that receipt of each complaint should be acknowledged immediately and complaints should be addressed promptly in accordance with their urgency. Complainants should be treated courteously and be kept informed of the progress of their complaint through the complaints-handling process (4.4).

Recording complaints

Overall 79% of agencies said they have a system for recording complaints/suggestions and outcomes. It is recommended that an effective complaints management database 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.⁵

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 generally need separate forms or data entry screens to log key elements of this information plus the oral complaints made.⁶

Procedures for protecting the confidentiality of complainant details

The *Australian Standard (AS ISO 10002 – 2006)* requires that personally identifiable information concerning the complainant should be available where needed, but only for the purposes of addressing the complaint with the organisation and should be actively protected from disclosure, unless the customer or complainant expressly consents to its disclosure (4.7). 76% of agencies said they have procedures for protecting confidentiality of complainant details.

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.

Table 2. Comparison with previous surveys

Question		1994	1999	2007
Q3	Customer service or guarantee of service policy or program	90%	80.7%	66%
Q6	Documented complaint policy	N/A	91.6%	79%
Q9c	A clearly understood procedure for people to make complaints	82%	82.4%	75%
Q9d	A statement of who is responsible for dealing with complaints	84%	75.6%	78%
Q9e	Procedures for conciliating and investigating complaints depending on their seriousness and complexity	73.5%	77.3%	76%
Q9f	A system for keeping the complainant informed about what is happening with their complaint	80%	78.2%	71%
Q9g	A system for recording complaints and suggestions	78%	81.5%	79%
Q9h	Procedures for protecting confidentiality of complainant details	73.5%	73.1%	76%

As can be seen, there appears to have been a marked decrease in the number of agencies which have a customer service/guarantee of service policy or a documented complaint handling policy in recent years.

3.2 System and staff management

Support for complaint handling system from senior management

Only 35% of small agencies and 45% medium size agencies said a published statement from their CEO supports their complaint handling system. In contrast 65% of large agencies and 83% of very large agencies said they have such a statement.

However, 85% of respondents said that a senior manager is responsible for the effective operation of the complaint handling system.

Successful complaint handling systems are not only built on good policies and procedures. They also require positive attitudes to welcoming feedback and solving problems. There needs to be efficient and fair resolution of complaints by staff at all levels of the organisation, starting with the CEO.

5.1 of the Australian Standard (AS ISO 10002 – 2006) states:

The organisation should be actively committed to effective and efficient complaints handling. It is particularly important that this is shown by, and promoted from, the organisation's top management.

All staff

76% of agencies said all staff are told about the requirements of the complaint handling policy (questions 12) although only 31% of agencies said complaint handling responsibilities including performance indicators were contained in staff position descriptions (question 13).

The Australian Standard (AS ISO 10002 – 2006) states:

6.2 Objectives

Top management should ensure that the complaints-handling objectives are established for relevant functions and levels within the organisation. These objectives should be measurable and consistent with the complaints handling policy. These objectives should be set at regular intervals as detailed performance criteria.

While 82% of agencies said front line staff (eg receptionist, counter staff) have specific instructions on how to handle/refer complaints (question 14), only 26% of small agencies said they have a complaint handling instruction manual for staff (question 17). This increased to 52% of medium size agencies, 70% for large agencies and 79% for very large agencies.

Internal and external review

The NSW Ombudsman recommends a complaint handling system has at least three tiers. The first tier involves registration and attempted resolution by frontline staff. Frontline staff responsible for trying to resolve grievances should be given training in customer contact and communication skills. An understanding of alternative dispute resolution approaches is also helpful. We also recommend regular refresher training for frontline staff.

The second-tier involves review or investigation of the complaint by an identified complaints officer or by someone who is more senior, and the results of the review reported to the customer. If the customer remains dissatisfied, alternative options may be available to achieve a settlement, such as conciliation, mediation or further direct negotiations. If the complaint cannot be resolved within the agency, the complainant should be referred to an external body, such as the NSW Ombudsman, an alternative dispute resolution service, or as a last resort, any legal remedy.

The Australian Standard (AS ISO 10002 – 2006) provides:

If the complainant rejects the proposed decision or action, then the complaint should remain open. This should be recorded and the complainant should be informed of alternative forms of internal and external recourse available (7.9).

Internal review

80% of agencies said their complaint handling system contains a mechanism for an internal review by a more senior officer if the complainant is dissatisfied with the initial response to their complaint (question 15).

External review

Overall 76% of agencies said they inform complainants of any external appeal rights, 71% inform complainants about other review bodies and 66% inform complainants about the Ombudsman (question 16). The accompanying figure shows the information given about avenues of external review by agencies according to their size:

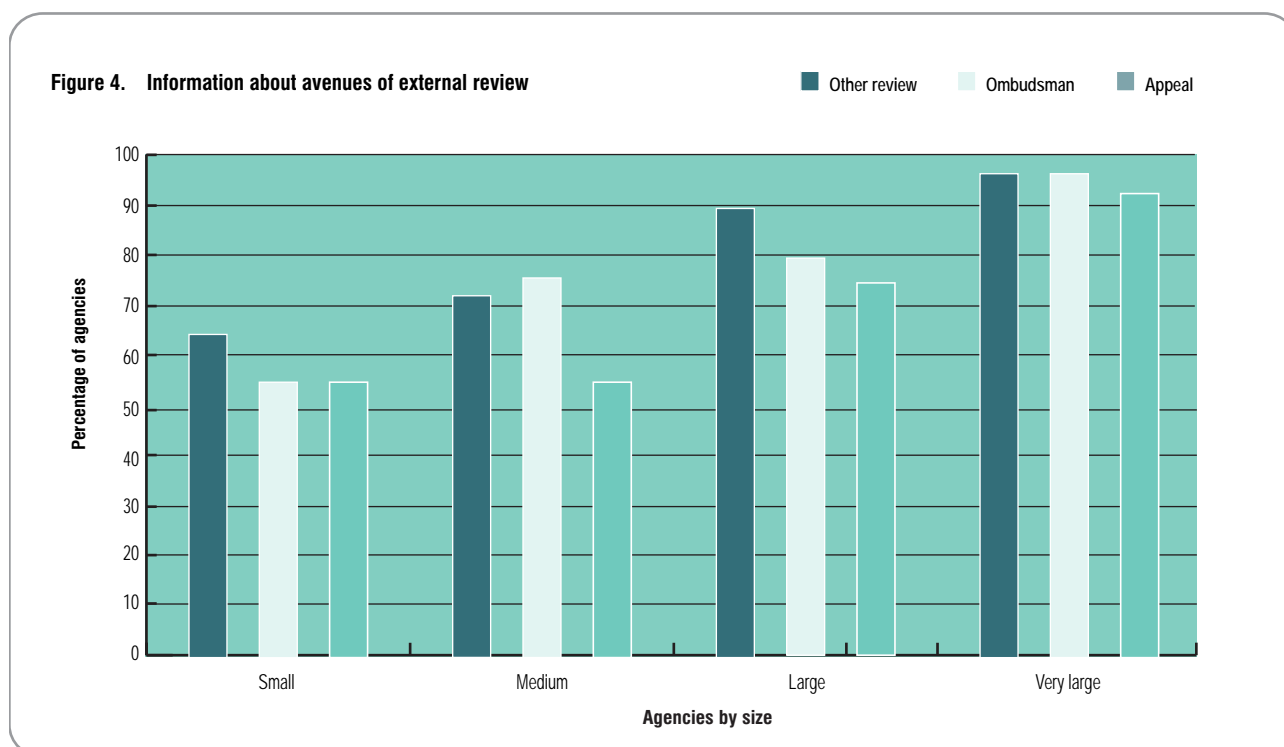


Table 3. Comparison with previous surveys

Question	1994	1999	2007
Q16			
Do you inform complainants about other external avenues to pursue their complaints if they remain dissatisfied?			
(a) appeal rights (if any)	31%	46.2%	76%
(b) Other review bodies	18%	47.9%	71%
(c) Ombudsman	14%	37%	66%
Q17			
Do you have a complaint handling instructions manual for staff?	39%	48.7%	48%

As shown above, there has been a marked increase in information being provided about external avenues of review since the previous surveys were conducted. This combined with the information that 80% of agencies state their complaints handling systems include a mechanism for an internal review by a more senior officer suggests there has been considerable movement to the three tier approach to complaint handling as encouraged by the NSW Ombudsman and the Australian standard on complaint handling.

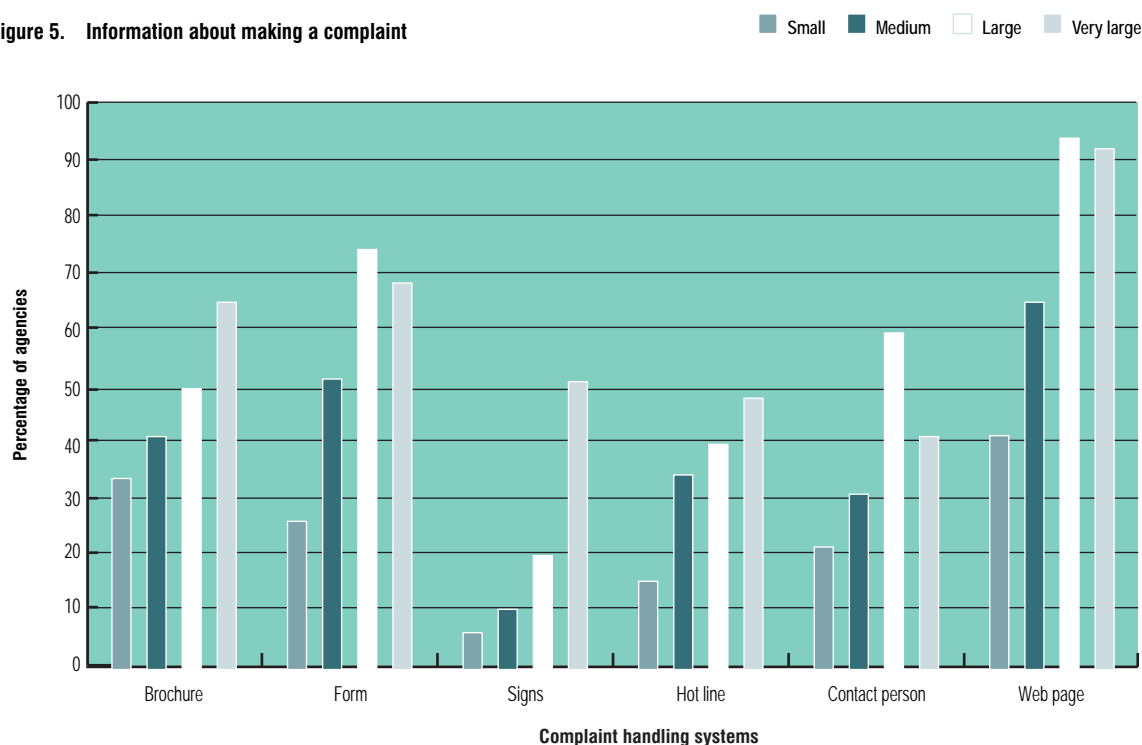
3.3 Advice to customers/clients

Advice to customers about how to make a complaint

83% of agencies said they tell customers how to make a complaint or suggestion; 72% of small agencies, 83% of medium size agencies, 100% of large agencies and 93% of very large agencies.

Agencies were then asked how they did this — by brochure, feedback/complaint form, signs in public areas, advertised hot line to call, published name of a contact person for complaints or inquiries and/or information on the agency's web page. It is unclear how a significant number of agencies are telling people how to complain. As illustrated in figure 5, few agencies said they have a range of comprehensive methods of giving out information about making a complaint. While the increasing use of web pages to provide information is welcome, it is important that this is not the sole way of disseminating information. Clearly not all customers will have access to a computer.

Figure 5. Information about making a complaint



Complaint information in community languages

Only 9% of agencies said their complaint information is available in community languages; 3% of both small and medium agencies, 10% of large agencies, 28% of very large agencies. Given the culturally diverse nature of the population of NSW this is very concerning. It is important a complaints system is available and accessible to all customers and language barriers can be a significant impediment to making a complaint.

Ways of making a complaint

The vast majority of agencies accept complaints made in a variety of ways — in writing, email, fax, telephone and in person and, to a lesser extent, via their web page.

Assistance with making complaints

85% of agencies said customers are provided with assistance to make complaints where needed.

Figure 6. Ways of making a complaint

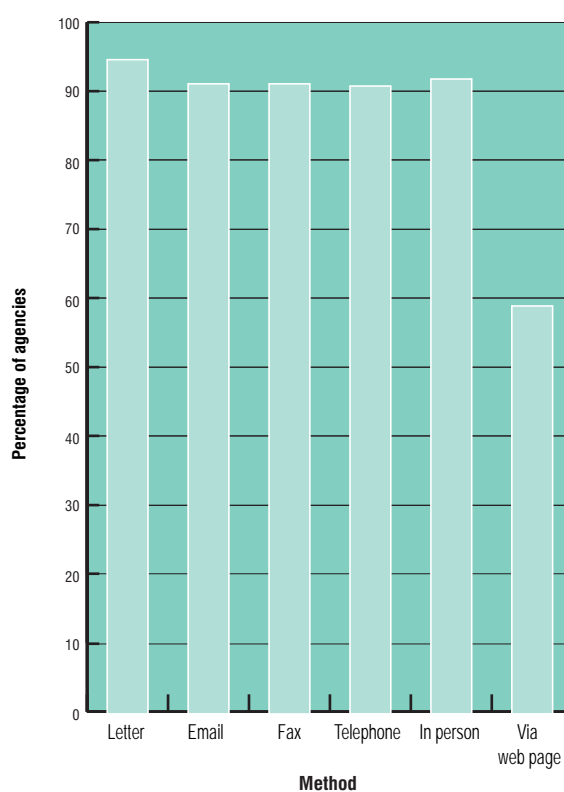


Table 4. Comparison with previous surveys

Question	1994	1999	2007
Q18a Are customers told how to make a complaint? How:	92%	86.6%	83%
Q18b(i) Information brochure	82%	64.7%	44%
Q18b(ii) Feedback/complaint form	24.5%	43.7%	47%
Q18b(iii) Signs in public areas	12%	27.7%	18%
Q18b(iv) Hot line	29%	30.3%	29%
Q18b(v) Published name of contact person for complaints	67%	44.5%	33%
Q18b(vi) Information on web page	N/A	33.6%	64%
Q19 Is complaint information available in community languages?	14%	18.5%	9%

The results indicate that the use of information brochures to publicise complaint systems and the identification of contact people for making complaints has dropped over time, as has the use of signs and publicity about the complaint mechanisms in community languages. Only the use of web pages for publicity about making complaints has risen noticeably since 1999.

3.4 Dealing with complaints

The NSW Ombudsman recommends that a complaint handling system should provide at least three tiers of review and that responsibility for dealing with complaints at each tier is defined. It may be the responsibility of all staff to

deal with first tier complaints, or perhaps a specific officer may be designated in a larger agency or even specific officers in each branch/unit in a very large or geographically diverse agency. Wherever the responsibility lies, each staff member should be clear about their role is in dealing with a complaint. All staff should know who to refer complaints to if they are not authorised to deal with themselves. Second tier complaints should usually be dealt with by more senior staff. Management should assign specific responsibilities to staff, using position descriptions and mission statements.

Agencies were asked who is authorised to deal with complaints in their agency — front line staff, designated complaints officers, CEO/line managers, all staff and/or no one is specially authorised (questions 22 a-e). A range of responses were received which are illustrated below. Perhaps not surprisingly, larger agencies are more likely to have designated complaints officers authorised to deal with complaints. This is likely to be a reflection of their additional resources and more complex structures.

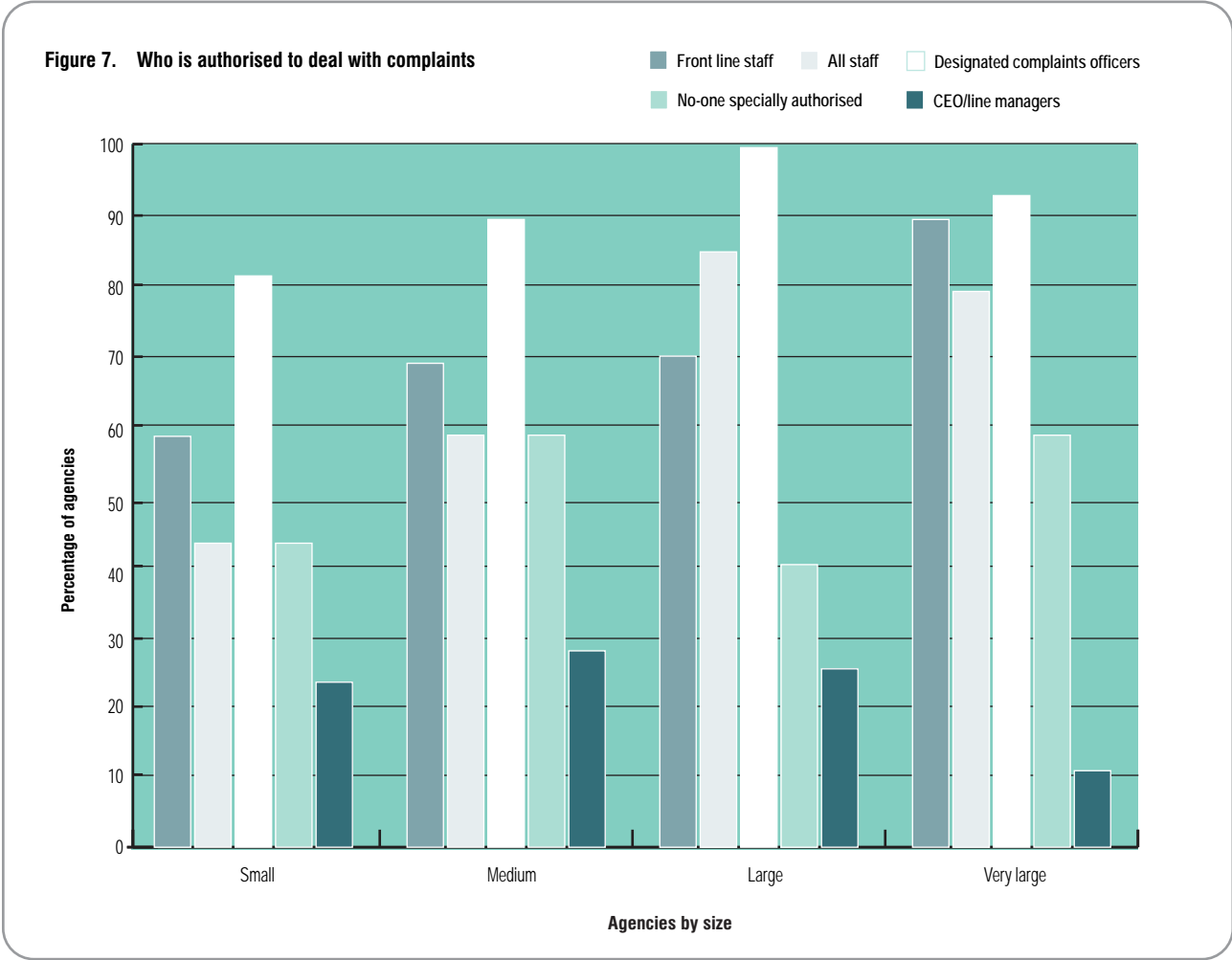


Table 5. Comparison with previous surveys

Question	1994	1999	2007
Who is authorised to deal with complaints in your organisation?			
Q22a Contact or front line staff	67%	68.9%	69%
Q22b Designated complaints officers	55%	60.5%	59%
Q22c CEO or line managers	91%	87.4%	88%
Q22d All staff	N/A	39.5%	49%
Q22e No one specially authorised	12%	16%	22%

3.5 Recording complaints

The *Australian Standard (AS ISO 10002 – 2006)* states that an agency should establish and implement procedures for recording complaints and responses and for using these records and managing them, while protecting any personal information and ensuring the confidentiality of complainants (8.1).

Recording complaints is an important prerequisite to being able to analyse and evaluate complaints which is discussed below. There is a tendency in many agencies to deal with complaints on an individual basis when a particular grievance is made and addressed. If information on complaints is captured and then classified and analysed, systemic and recurring problems can be more easily identified and rectified. Recording of complaints is an essential first step in this process.

83% of agencies said they record complaints in a system. 66% record inquiries/suggestions and /or commendations and 68% record oral and other non written complaints.

In terms of what is recorded, 84% of agencies said they record the issues complained about and 88% said they record the outcomes and responses to complaints.

63% said the recording system allows the agency to track individual cases and classify and report on aggregate data. Only 48% of small agencies said their systems had this functionality compared, to 90% of the systems in very large agencies (questions 23 a-c, 24 and 25).

Table 6. Comparison with previous surveys

Question		1994	1999	2007
Q23	Are complaints recorded in any system?	78%	86.6%	83%
Q23b	Do you record oral or other non written complaints?	59%	77.3%	68%
Q23c	Do you include inquiries/suggestions and/or commendations in your records?	61%	73.9%	66%
Q25	Are outcomes and responses to complaints recorded?	80%	82.4%	88%

3.6 Performance standards

Standards for how complaints are dealt with

The more promptly a grievance can be resolved, the more likely it is that the customer will be satisfied and think highly of the agency.⁷

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% 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 hours⁸

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 the reverse.

Overall 76% of agencies said they have performance standards for how complaints are dealt with (question 26). However, small agencies are significantly less likely to have performance standards in place — only 58% said they have such performance standards compared to 79% of medium size agencies, 90% of large agencies and 100% of very large agencies.

Table 7. Performance standards

Performance standard	Small	Medium	Large	Very large agency
Acknowledgement of receipt of a complaint within a certain time	52%	69%	90%	97%
Completion/resolution within a certain time	49%	69%	85%	97%
A system for keeping complainants informed of what is happening with their complaint within a certain time	45%	59%	90%	86%
A system for checking that a complaint has been dealt with and acted upon	57%	76%	95%	97%
A system for checking that underlying problems have been identified and acted upon.	51%	59%	90%	83%

Table 8. Comparison with previous surveys

Question	1994	1999	2007
Q26 Do you have standards in place for the way in which complaints are dealt with?	67%	67.2%	75.5%
Standards in place:			
Q26a Acknowledgement of receipt of complaint within a certain time	84%	64.7%	70%
Q26b Completion/resolution within a certain time	76%	59.7%	68%
Q26c A system for keeping complainants informed of what is happening with in a certain time	76%	61.3%	62%
Q26d A system for checking a complaint had been dealt with and acted upon	80%	65.5%	74%

3.7 Analysis and feedback

The *Australian Standard (AS ISO 10002 – 2006)* requires that 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 (8.2).

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 is essential to using complaints to improve service. Even anonymous complaints can inform systemic problems.

The following practice tip is from our *Complaint Handler's Toolkit* (1.9.1):

Use complaint data to identify opportunities for system improvements

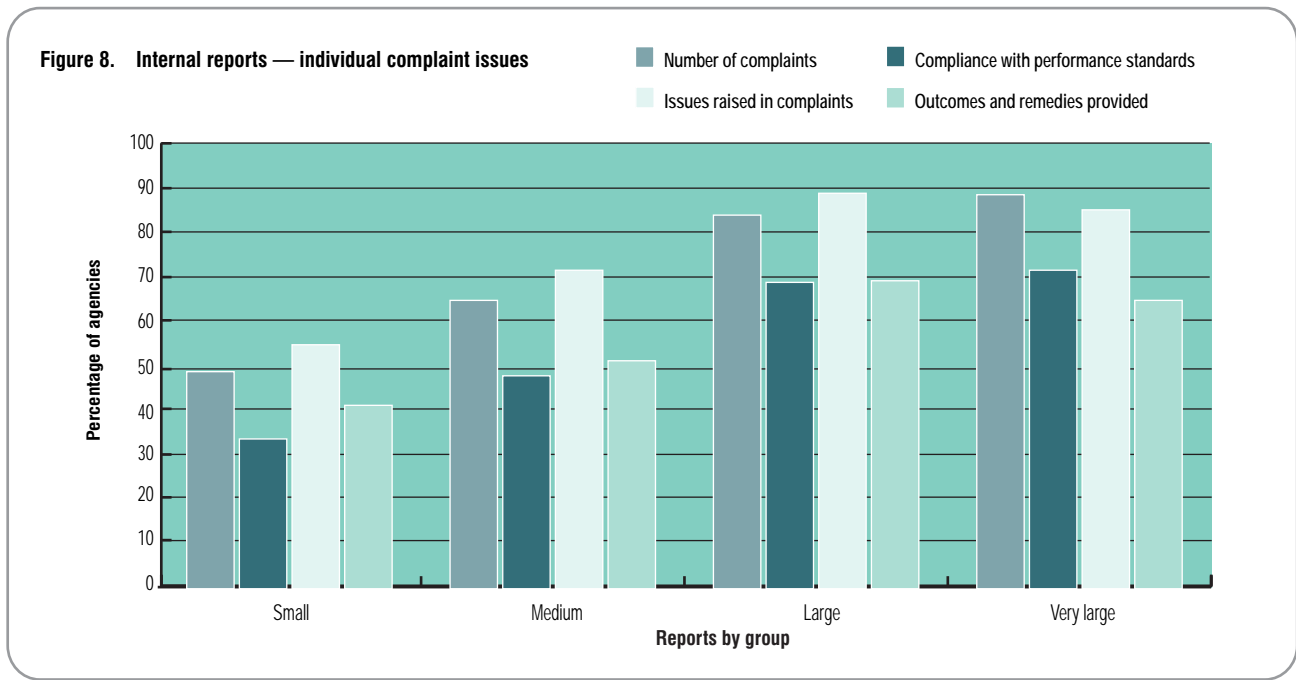
- Are all complaints, including oral ones, recorded comprehensively?
- Is this collected data analysed on a regular basis?
- Are root causes of complaints identified and addressed?
- Does management receive and consider this analysis on a regular basis?
- Is there a widespread exchange of information within the agency eg
 - complaint register
 - analysis reports
 - management reports
 - solution reports?

Despite all of the benefits to be gained from complaint information, only 57% of agencies said they analyse complaints in any systematic way (question 27).

There was a strong correlation between size of agency and the likelihood they analyse complaints. Only 32% of small agencies said they analyse complaints, 66% of medium size agencies, 80% of large agencies and 86% of very large agencies.

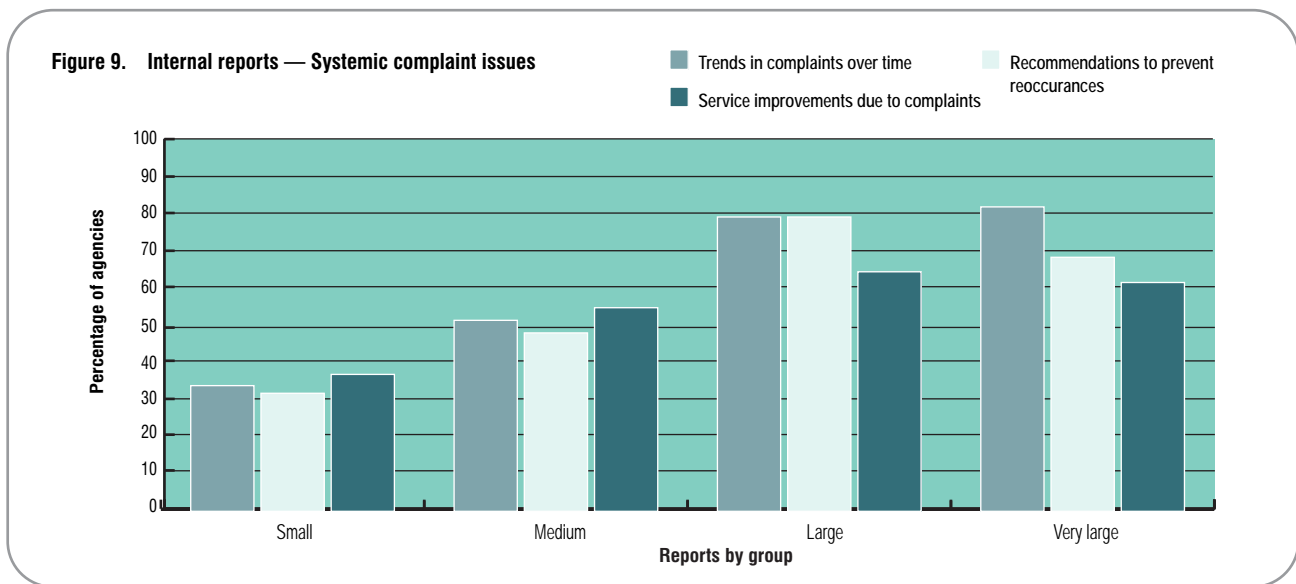
Agencies were also asked what their internal reports addressed:

- Numbers of complaints/suggestions
- Compliance with performance standards
- Issues raised in complaints
- Outcomes and remedies provided (questions 28 a, b,c and e)



And:

- Trends in complaints over time
- Recommendations and strategies to prevent or limit recurrences
- Service improvements made due to complaints data (questions 28d,f and g)



While complaint numbers and issues tend to be featured in the reports of the majority of agencies, compliance with performance indicators and the identification of outcomes, recommendations to prevent or limit recurrences and service improvements made as a result of complaints are less likely to feature in management reports.

Who gets complaint analysis reports

CEOs and senior managers are the most likely to get complaint analysis reports in all agencies, with 65% of the larger agencies also giving reports to designated complaint handling staff. Few agencies give reports to all staff.

Feedback to relevant areas of management and operations

If complaints are to be used to prevent problems recurring, a complaint handling system needs to provide a process of feedback to relevant areas of an agency's management and operations about problems and trends identified from complaints so they can be incorporated into planning activities.

There was a correlation between the likelihood of an agency's complaint handling system including such a process and the size of the agency. Only 40% of small agencies said their complaint handling system provided such a process compared to 66% of medium size agencies, 80% of large agencies and 69% of very large agencies. It is disappointing that more agencies are not getting the most from complaints by feeding information back into their planning and operational activities.

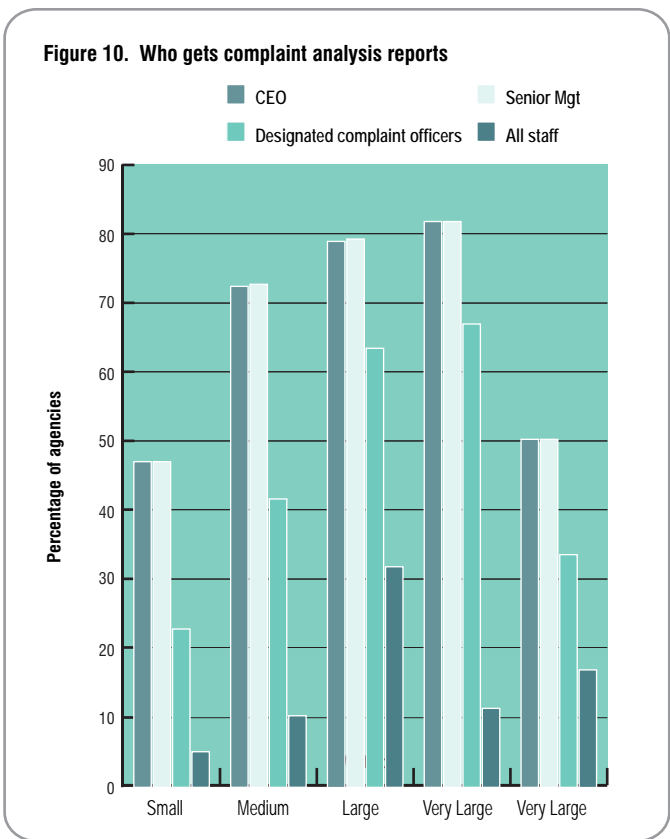


Table 9. Comparison with previous surveys

Question	1994	1999	2007
Q27	41%	61.3%	57%
Do internal reports on complaints address:			
Q28a	57%	63%	66%
Q28b	35%	37.8%	50%
Q28c	57%	72.3%	70%
Q28f	43%	64.7%	50%

3.8 External reporting

There has been a marked improvement since 1994 in the number of agencies which expose their complaint handling to external scrutiny by including information about external avenues of review in their handling systems (question 16).

However, only 37% of agencies said they make any reports about complaints/suggestions they have received public and only 52% said they reported on complaints in their annual report (question 31).

Schedule 1 of the *Annual Reports (Departments) Regulation 2005* and the *Annual Reports (Statutory Authorities) Regulation 2005* state that agencies must publish in their Annual Reports "the extent and main features of consumer complaints, indicating any services improved or changed as a result of complaints or consumer suggestions made".

30% of agencies could not determine how many complaints they had received in financial year 2006–2007. This is somewhat surprising as 83% of agencies said they recorded complaints in a system, 88% said they record outcomes and responses to complaints (question 23) and 67% said they have internal reports which address number of complaints and suggestions (question 28b). Clearly the ability to know how many complaints are received is a prerequisite to using complaint information including monitoring trends and patterns from year to year and across different sectors of an agency.

Table 10. Comparison with previous surveys

Question		1994	1999	2007
Q31a	Do you make any reports about complaints/suggestions received by your organisation public	N/A	33.6%	37%
Q31b	Do you report on complaints/suggestions in your annual report	N/A	52.1%	52%

3.9 Training

Staff who are responsible for trying to resolve grievances should be given training in complaint handling, customer contact and communication skills. An understanding of alternative dispute techniques is also helpful, with refresher training offered periodically.

While good processes and procedures are essential in a robust complaint handling system, skillful and committed staff with a positive approach to complaints are essential to the success or otherwise of its operation in practice. Training in relevant skills should therefore be seen as a necessity.

Figure 11. Training in complaint handling



Large and very large agencies are very likely to provide training to a variety of their staff. Contact or frontline staff are given training in 85% of large agencies with line managers, CEOs or senior staff and designated complaint handlers being trained in 75% of large agencies. 90% of very large agencies provide training to designated complaints officers, with about 80% of such agencies training line managers, CEOs and/or senior staff and 83% training contact or frontline staff (questions 32 a- e).

Training in small and medium agencies is not as extensive, although 62% of medium size agencies said they train contact or front line staff and over half give training to line managers and CEOs.

Of the agencies which said they have designated complaints officers (question 22b), 72% said they provide them with training.

Table 11. Comparison with previous surveys

Question		1994	1999	2007
	Do staff receive any training in complaint handling or dispute resolution:			
Q32a	Contact or frontline staff	N/A	68.1%	59%
Q32b	Line managers	N/A	59.7%	52%
Q32c	CEO or senior staff	N/A	43.7%	52%
Q32d	Designated complaints officers	N/A	42%	47%
Q32e	All staff	N/A	26.1%	31%

3.10 Customer satisfaction

There was a strong correlation between agency size and the likelihood they conduct research into customer satisfaction (question 33). Only 46% of small agencies said they conduct such research, rising to 83% for medium agencies, then 80% for large agencies and 72% for very large agencies. Of those which said they conduct research, 44% said they make the results of these surveys public, an increase since our previous survey in 1999.

Table 12. Comparison with previous surveys

Question		1994	1999	2007
Q33	Do you conduct any research into customer/client expectations and/or satisfaction	61%	66.4%	64%
Q34	If so, are the results of these surveys made public	18%	31.1%	44%

3.11 Evaluation of effectiveness

The *Australian Standard (AS ISO 10002 – 2006)* requires at 8.5:

The organisation should regularly perform or provide for audits in order to evaluate the performance of the complaints handling process. The audit should provide information on:

- *process conformity in complaints handling procedures, and*
- *process suitability to achieve complaints handling objectives.*

And at 8.6:

- *Top management of the organisation should review the complaints handling process on a regular basis in order:*
- *To ensure its continuing suitability, adequacy, effectiveness and efficiency*
- *To identify and address instances of nonconformity with health, safety, environmental, customer, regulatory and other legal requirements*
- *To identify and correct product deficiencies*
- *To identify and correct process deficiencies*
- *To assess opportunities for improvement and the need for changes to the complaints handling process and products offered*
- *To evaluate potential changes to the complaints handling policy and objectives.*

Only 26% of agencies said they have evaluated the effectiveness of their complaints system as a management tool (question 35). Small agencies are less likely to have carried out an evaluation (only 20%) compared to 24% of medium agencies, 25% of large agencies and 41% of very large agencies.

Very few agencies said they have conducted an audit of their complaint handling system's compliance with the Australian Standard (question 36). 15% of agencies overall said they have conducted an audit, ranging from 9% of small agencies to 28% of very large agencies. A number of very large agencies said that, as part of the oversight regime of their agency, their complaint handling system is subject to auditing for compliance against the standard by the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART).

Table 13. Comparison with previous surveys

Question		1994	1999	2007
Q35	Have you evaluated the effectiveness of your complaint handling system as a management tool	16.3%	26.1%	15%

3.12 Compliance with the Australian Standard AS ISO 10002-2006 Customer satisfaction — Guidelines for complaint handling in organisations

The objective of the standard is to:

provide guidance on complaints handling related to products within an organisation, including planning, design, operation, maintenance and improvement.⁹

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 agency 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.

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 accessibility

- 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 (Note: the ability to submit a complaint via a web page (question 20f) was not included as a criteria, this requiring a level of technological sophistication which would be an unreasonable requirement for all but the largest agencies).

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 Do you advertise other external avenues to deal with complaints? (part a &/or b &/or c)

Confidentiality

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

Customer focused approach

- Q32a 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 improvement¹⁰

- 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 14 agencies claimed they met all of the above criteria:

- Charles Sturt University
- CountryEnergy
- First State Super
- Motor Accidents Authority
- NSW Health
- NSW Lotteries
- NSW Police Force
- North Coast Area Health Service
- Office of Industrial Relations
- Public Trustee
- RailCorp
- Tow Truck Authority of NSW
- University of Sydney
- University of Western Sydney

2 (14%) of these are small agencies, 4 (29%) medium size, 1 (7%) large, and 7 (50%) very large.

Table 14. The areas of greatest difficulty for agencies in meeting the above criteria were:

Criteria	% of agencies which did not satisfy the criteria
Evaluation of the effectiveness of the complaint handling system as a management tool	69%
Analysis of complaints in a systematic way	38%
Review of complaint handling policy at least every two years	38%
Provision of training in complaint handling to contact or frontline staff	35%
Process of feedback to relevant areas of management and operations so problems and trends identified from complaints can be incorporated into planning activities	29%
Standards in place for how complaints are dealt with	29%

Table 15. Comparison with previous surveys

1994	1999	2007
N/A	12 out of 119 state agencies met the criteria for compliance with the Australian Standard for complaint handling in place at that time (AS4269-1995) TOTAL: 10%	14 out of 143 state agencies met the criteria for compliance with the Australian Standard (AS ISO 10002-2006) TOTAL: 10%

While many complaint handling systems include processes for receiving and processing individual complaints, these results suggest there is still much room for improvement in how agencies then use complaint information. It seems many agencies 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.

Endnotes

- ¹ NSW Ombudsman Complaint Handler's Toolkit 2004 2nd edition.
- ² NSW Ombudsman Complaint Handler's Toolkit 2004 2nd edition.
- ³ Queensland Ombudsman's Fact Sheet Effective Complaints Management No 9 Monitoring Effectiveness 2006.
- ⁴ Queensland Ombudsman's Fact Sheet Effective Complaints Management No 7 Assessment and Action 2006.
- ⁵ Queensland Ombudsman's Fact Sheet Effective Complaints Management No 10 Resources 2006.
- ⁶ NSW Ombudsman Complaint Handler's Toolkit 2004 2nd edition.
- ⁷ Consumer Complaint Behaviour in Australia: Report 1, American Express-Society of Consumer Affairs professional 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).
- ⁸ Citizens First Summary Report, Canadian Centre for Management Development 1998.
- ⁹ Preface to Australian Standard (AS ISO 10002-2006).
- ¹⁰ The standard contains an additional Guiding Principle that access to the complaint handling system should be free. All state government agencies complaint handling systems have been assumed to comply with this principle.

Chapter 4. Appendices

4.1 List of respondent departments and authorities

Small (employ 100 or less staff)

Arts NSW
Banana Industry Committee
Border Rivers — Gwydir Catchment Management Authority
Central West Catchment Management Authority
Chiropractors Registration Board
Coal Compensation Board
Dams Safety Committee
Dental Technicians Registration Boards
Department of Aboriginal Affairs
Department of Local Government
Electoral Commission NSW
First State Super
Game Council NSW
Greyhound and Harness Racing Regulatory Authority
Growth Centres Commission
Hawkesbury Nepean Catchment Management Authority
Housing Appeals Committee
Hunter-Central Rivers Catchment Management Authority
Joint Committee of Necropolis Trustees
Judicial Commission of New South Wales
Lachlan Catchment Management Authority
Lord Howe Island Board
Lower Murray Darling Catchment Management Authority
Mine Subsidence Board
Murrumbidgee Catchment Management Authority
Namoi Catchment Management Authority
Natural Resources Commission
New South Wales Medical Board
Northern Rivers Catchment Management Authority
NSW Aboriginal Justice Advisory Council
NSW Architects Registration Board
NSW Commission for Children and Young People
NSW Film and Television Office

NSW Institute of Psychiatry
NSW Law Reform Commission
NSW Physiotherapists Board
NSW Rural Assistance Authority
NSW Vocational Education and Training Accreditation Board
Office for Children — Children's Guardian
Office of Community Housing
Office of the Legal Services Commissioner
Office of the Valuer General
Office of Transport Safety Investigations
Optical Dispensers Licensing Board
Optometrist Registration Board
Osteopaths Registration Board
Podiatrists Registration Board
Port Kembla Port Corporation
Privacy NSW
Professional Standards Council
Psychologists Registration Board
Rice Marketing Board
Riverina Citrus
SAS Trustee Corporation
Serious Offenders Review Council
Southern Rivers Catchment Management Authority
State Contracts Control Board
State Fleet
Sydney 2009 World Masters Games Organising Committee
Sydney Cricket and Sports Ground Trust
Tow Truck Authority of NSW
Veterinary Practitioners Board of NSW
Western Catchment Management Authority
Wine Grapes Marketing Board
Workers Compensation Dust Diseases Board of NSW

Medium (employ 101–400 staff)

Art Gallery of NSW
Botanic Gardens Trust
Energy Industries Superannuation Scheme
Eraring Energy
Heathquest

Historic Houses Trust
Hunter Water
LandCom
Local Government Superannuation Scheme
Motor Accidents Authority
NSW Adult Migrant English Service
NSW Government Architects Office
NSW Lotteries
NSW Maritime
NSW Rural Fire Service
NSW Sport & Recreation
NSW Treasury
NSW Water Solutions
Office of Industrial Relations
Powerhouse Museum
Public Trustee
State Emergency Service
State Library
State Water
Sydney Catchment Authority
Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority
Sydney Olympic Park
Transport Infrastructure Development Corporation
WSN Environmental Solutions

Large (employ 401–2000 staff)

Charles Sturt University
Delta Electricity
Department of Lands
Department of Premier and Cabinet
Department of State and Regional Development
Dept of Ageing Disability and Homecare
Legal Aid Commission
Macquarie University
Office of Fair Trading
Office of Public Works and Services — Project Management
Office of State Revenue
Office of the Board of Studies
Pillar

Southern Cross University
Sydney Opera House
Transgrid
University of Wollongong
University of New England
WorkCover
Zoological Parks Board of NSW

Very large (employ more than 2000 staff)

Ambulance Service of NSW
Attorney General's
CountryEnergy
Department of Community Services
Department of Corrective Services
Department of Education and Training
Department of Environment and Climate Change
Department of Housing
Energy Australia
Greater Southern Area Health Service
Greater Western Area Health Service
Home Care Service
Hunter New England Area Health Service
Integral Energy
New South Wales Fire Brigades
North Coast Area Health Service
Northern Sydney Central Coast Area Health Service
NSW Department of Primary Industries
NSW Health
NSW Police Force
Railcorp
Roads & Traffic Authority — Ministerial
RTA — Licensing Registration and Freight Directorate
South Eastern Sydney Illawarra Area Health Service
Sydney South West Area Health Service
Sydney Water
University of Newcastle
University of Sydney
University of Western Sydney

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

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.

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