Progressive organisations are aware of the benefits to be derived from effectively managing the complaints that will inevitably be made by its staff, customers, clients and the public generally, no matter how well those organisations may be run.

Properly handled, complaints can be an economical and effective way of improving public image, increasing client satisfaction and identifying and rectifying defective business processes. Badly handled, complaints can be an expensive exercise that reflects poorly on the organisation, drives customers away and reinforces defective business processes.

About these Fact Sheets
These Fact Sheets have been prepared to assist agencies to implement new or enhanced complaints management systems to meet the community’s expectation that agencies will be client-focused and responsive to feedback, particularly complaints. They are also designed to explain how agencies may derive the maximum benefits from investing in good internal complaints handling.

They incorporate the Ombudsman’s Office’s view of the key features of good complaints management, based on more than 30 years experience in handling complaints in the Queensland State and local government sectors, supplemented by the relevant Australian and international Standard on complaints handling and other authoritative sources.

The Fact Sheets, in particular Fact Sheets 5 to 9, also offer guidance in respect of the requirements of the Directive on Complaints Management Systems recently issued by Office of the Public Service Commissioner (OPSC) in Queensland.

Compliance with these Fact Sheets is not necessarily required in order to comply with the Directive. However agencies covered by the Directive may find the Fact Sheets and other complaints management materials published by the Ombudsman’s Office useful in meeting Directive requirements.

Although the Fact Sheets reflect the Directive requirements they are also an excellent guide for agencies not covered by the Public Service Act. We have not suggested a particular complaint management model or models because, given the widely differing sizes and functions of Queensland’s numerous public sector agencies, no one model will suit every agency. We have instead suggested principles which may assist agencies to devise models that suit their own individual needs.

There is some overlapping and cross referencing in the fact sheets. This is because complaints management principles themselves overlap – e.g. commitment and communication are important in many contexts.

Throughout the Fact Sheets we refer to ‘complainants’.
The Queensland Ombudsman's role

The Ombudsman investigates complaints about the administrative actions of Queensland public agencies, where it is alleged that those actions may involve maladministration (i.e. error or unfairness of some sort). We receive thousands of complaints each year.

We encourage people to make genuine attempts to resolve their problems with the agencies concerned before complaining to our Office. We may investigate subsequently if internal review fails — hence the importance of agencies having good quality internal complaints management systems.

Our investigations can lead to recommendations that the agency take some action, such as providing a remedy for the complainant or changing policies or procedures that have contributed to the problem.

Benefits to agencies

Effective complaints management systems:

- promote client satisfaction;
- improve agency image by showing the public that they are taken seriously;
- identify areas that need improvement;
- enable poor decisions to be rectified quickly and efficiently;
- save money by resolving problems internally, close to the source, without the need for resources to be devoted to review by external accountability bodies;
- save money by ensuring complaints are handled methodically and efficiently;
- prevent complaints from escalating, a situation that can be resource-intensive and lead to adverse publicity;
- reduce stress on staff by providing training and support to help deal with unhappy customers and a structured approach to resolving issues; and
- are fundamental to good administrative practice.

Can the Queensland Ombudsman help you?

We place a high priority on assisting public agencies to manage their internal complaints management systems. Please contact us if you think we can assist you with any aspect of complaints handling within your agency.

Of course, the best way to deal with complaints is to try to avoid them in the first place, principally by training your staff to make better decisions and to communicate better with the public.


The Western Australian Ombudsman has developed guidelines to assist public sector agencies in the conduct of administrative investigations. For further information visit: www.ombudsman.wa.gov.au/pdf/guidelines/PCAI_investigation_guidelines.pdf.

Some interesting facts on complaints

First, the bad news:

- only 5% of dissatisfied ‘customers’ complain to the organisation – the ‘tip of the iceberg’
- the remainder complain to 8-10 of their friends
- dissatisfied people tell twice as many people as satisfied ones
- most people have no idea who to complain to in an organisation

The good news however is:

- speedy responses to complaints can significantly increase customer loyalty
- customers who complain and are satisfied by the complaints process are more loyal than those who had no problem initially
- resolving complaints on first contact can cut handling costs in half
- a strong link exists between good complaints management processes and business improvement.

Source: Listening Post