

Public statement – Complaint Handling in Australian Public Service Agencies

The past few years show the critical role the Australian Public Service (APS) plays in supporting the community through a pandemic. APS agencies need to deliver high quality programs and services to the Australian community in a way that is fair, transparent, timely, respectful and effective. Key to this is confidence and trust in public administration.

In April 2021, the Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman (the Office) invited a broad selection of APS agencies to participate in a voluntary survey about how they handle complaints. The survey aims to establish a baseline for how the APS handles complaints from members of the community.

The survey focused on three key areas common in strong complaint handling services – good governance, effective data capture and reporting, and ongoing improvement.

This statement outlines the Office’s analysis of the survey responses and identifies opportunities to improve complaint handling across the APS.

Survey Results

The maturity levels of complaint handling vary across the APS agencies which responded to the survey. Applying the Office’s model which captures 5 levels of complaint handling maturity, more than half of agencies report characteristics of a basic or delivering complaint handling system (level 2 or 3), while only 3 agencies report qualities consistent with a superior complaint handling system (level 5).

Complaints provide a wealth of data that can be analysed to identify program weakness, systemic administration issues and opportunities to improve business practices. The most variability between agencies is in how they collect, record, analyse, report, and use complaint data. The quality of data management is influenced by whether the agency has a centralised complaint handling unit, the sophistication of their complaint handling electronic systems, and the level of detail recorded.

Survey responses indicated that information about how to make a complaint is often only found on an agency’s website and is not included in other formats such as brochures or on other organisations’ websites. Customer feedback about complaint handling could also be better captured and analysed, with few agencies conducting customer satisfaction surveys on how complaints are managed.

Opportunities

These findings provide a baseline measure for the way complaints are managed in APS agencies, along with identifying opportunities to strengthen complaint handling systems across the APS.

APS agencies can improve their complaint handling systems by focusing on data management, ensuring complaint data forms part of strategic decision making, undertaking customer satisfaction surveys, and sharing information about their complaints services in more formats across different channels to improve accessibility.

The Office is keen to help agencies improve their complaints handling by providing education and training, continuing the work of the Complaint Assurance Program, and publishing resources on our [website](#).