

Opening statement to workshop on complaint handling in Australian airports

Welcome to our workshop on Complaint Handling in Australian airports. I see this workshop as the first step in a journey that we will take together towards a seamless, visible, accessible, interactive and streamlined complaints system in Australian airports. I am delighted that you could attend today. Your agency's commitment to this workshop is evidence that there is a sound working relationship between our offices and that all of us are committed to nurturing a high standard of government service delivery to the public.

This workshop provides the first opportunity to discuss and progress the concerns raised by the Issues Paper that I sent to agencies in November last year. While we have only limited time today and therefore our discussion of each issue will be brief, this workshop provides the opportunity to canvass your initial views and to seek your agreement on how we might work together to pursue these issues further.

Our interest in these matters first arose when we noted a number of complaints where the officer complained about and the agency that employed them could not be identified. Concerned that this represented a gap in the accountability systems in airports, we decided to conduct some preliminary research about the airport environment, and the complaint systems available within that environment. The Issues Paper was the result of that preliminary research.

As you may know, Ombudsman institutions have now been established for some thirty years in Australia, handling complaints against every tier of government - State, Territory and local. The number of complaints handled each year is an impressive total. The Commonwealth Ombudsman, for example received around 18,000 complaints in 2004-05. Across Australia, the public sector Ombudsmen receive in excess of 60,000 complaints each year against governments. The complaints we receive range from the simple to the complex, across all the activities of government - a letter that can't be understood, a benefit wrongly withheld, a contract given to the wrong person, a visa denied, lost records, alleged corruption, and delay are some examples. This experience engenders an expertise in complaint handling and in assessing complaint-handling systems, and lends itself to the consideration of the issues we are here to discuss today.

The overall effectiveness of complaint processes is an issue that is close to our hearts. The notion is now embedded in Australia that people have a right to complain against government, without hindrance or reprisal, and to have their complaint resolved on its merits according to the applicable rules and the evidence. Where an agency has such a complaint handling process that it is well publicised, this office is less likely to receive complaints about that agency. Complaints are directed to the agency in the first instance and are therefore resolved in a relatively timely and cost effective manner. Two further bonuses are that the agency's relationship with the 'client' is improved and the complaint provides the learning that can be incorporated into the agency's systems through continuous improvement.

In business and public service it is important to grasp that problems can and will often occur in every system. The failure to detect and deal with problems can have quite dramatic consequences. Single problems in a system, if not detected or resolved properly, can threaten

public confidence in other parts of the system. This is a dominant theme in work currently being undertaken by my own office in two areas that have received public notoriety, immigration detention and military justice.

The dramatic consequences of failing to identify issues is confirmed by consumer research showing that it is more profitable for a business to keep and deal with its dissatisfied customers, than to have them take their dissatisfaction elsewhere. A study by British Airways quantified that lesson, by estimating that the revenue cost when a dissatisfied consumer approached the customer service department was \$131; by contrast, the estimated revenue loss when no complaint was lodged and business was taken elsewhere was \$1184. This lesson applies equally to government agencies, where dealing with a complaint in a professional and courteous manner at the outset can prevent prolonged, entrenched correspondence with the complainant later on. Drawing attention to system problems at an early stage can avert costly and damaging mistakes and disputes.

I realise that real-time complaint handling can be a challenge in the airport environment. Agencies are often dealing with large numbers of passengers at one time. The nature of the airport environment is transitory and passengers may be experiencing a number of stressors when interacting with staff from various agencies. This may lead to the complainant misidentifying or failing to identify the person they are complaining about. In addition, the physical design of the airport does not lend itself to a centralised complaint handling area that would encourage real-time handling of complaints. However, I am sure that if we work together we can find suitable remedies in these unique circumstances.

We want this project to move forward collaboratively. We want to help each department assess its own strengths and weaknesses and identify areas where there is room to improve. We want you to provide your ideas about how your individual agency can enhance the profile of its complaints process in airports and how agencies might work together seamlessly. We want this group, as a whole, to decide the most appropriate way to move forward. This office, in its role as facilitator, will issue a report on the issues identified at the mid-point of the project and then.

Once again, I welcome you to our workshop and I encourage you to share your ideas and concerns in a frank and honest manner.

I will now hand over to Ms Vicki Brown, Senior Assistant Ombudsman, Law Enforcement and Postal, who will quickly run us through the structure of the workshop and the proposed outcomes for today's workshop.