

20 July 2026

Ombudsman Statement – Managing Complaints

An update from the Ombudsman about the management of complaints at the Office.

Managing complaints is our core business and I am focussed on improving our complaint handling performance.

When people contact my Office with a complaint they can expect to feel heard, receive an explanation on the action we have taken, or not taken, and why.

Sometimes people tell us that they expected more from us, and that they do not understand our role.

Understanding our role – complaints management

Every complaint to the Office is important, however the way that we manage each complaint is different based on the individual circumstances.

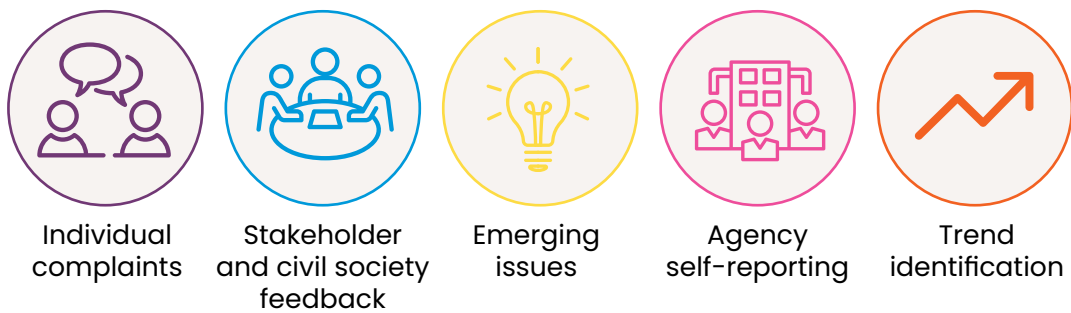
My team assess every complaint we receive.

For complaints within our jurisdiction, officers decide what action is warranted when they assess the circumstances. You can read more below about our individual complaints management.

My team also identifies issues that require consideration at a system level.

We want to highlight where there is unfair, unlawful or wrong behaviour or process by agencies and influence agencies to do better. Our tools and powers work together so that we maximise our impact in improving the practices of agencies we oversight.

Our Complaints ecosystem



Individual complaint handling

Every complaint matters, but the action that we take on every complaint will depend on the circumstances.

Assess



Refer



Inquire



Resolve



Investigate



Conciliate



Systemic complaint handling

How we tackle bigger issues or problems using methods beyond our treatment of one complaint.



Own motion investigations



Reports



Agency engagement



Monitoring



Complaint investigation outcomes

Outcomes



Comments, recommendations and suggestions



Apologies



Issues resolved



Process improvements



Public reports



Private reports



Recommendation monitoring

Influencing systemic improvement in public administration in Australia by calling out unfair, unjust or unlawful outcomes by agencies we oversight.

Individual complaints management

We assess every complaint that we receive. When we do so we consider the individual issues.

The way that we manage each complaint depends on a range of factors. We do not formally investigate all complaints that we receive.

We operate under the Ombudsman Act which gives discretion to staff to determine how to manage complaints.

There are a number of factors that we think about when we determine how a complaint is best managed.

They include but are not limited to:

- Has the complainant already engaged with the agency to resolve their complaint?
- Can we transfer (with the complainants agreement) this complaint to the agency to allow them to consider and resolve the issue faster?
- Is there an indication in the complaint of a procedural failure, improper conduct or that something has gone wrong when the agency took action?
- Does the complaint raise a substantial issue or does the problem have a minor impact on the individual or outcome only?
- What can we achieve when we progress the complaint?
- Has the Office already considered this issue?

These factors are applied flexibly to the assessment of complaints.

The circumstances of every complaint are assessed by a staff member at the Office to determine how it should be handled.

Sometimes we publish reports or case studies about individual complaints. You can read examples of how we manage complaints and the outcomes that we have reached on our [Case Study page on our website](#).



Systemic complaints management

We also look at complaints in a systemic way. This means that we tackle the whole process or problem, rather than one individual complaint.

We do this in a number of ways. The most common is by undertaking Own Motion Investigations (OMIs) when I decide to commence an investigation without it necessarily being based on a single complaint.

OMIs can look at individual circumstances, but they usually look at big programs of work by agencies. In this way, they have the potential to help a larger number of people

OMIs usually result in a report and my making of recommendations that I share with the public. You can read our OMIs and recommendations via [our publications page](#).

We make recommendations about the way agencies make decisions, how they communicate, how they manage issues of lawfulness and sometimes we will recommend an apology or action to fix something that has gone wrong.

There are other ways that we influence improvement. In addition to OMIs, we:

- Engage with agencies and/ or make inquiries to better understand a process or practice and provide feedback to influence improvement.
- We publish submissions, public statements and reports, including to Parliamentary Committees to share observations from our complaint analysis, promote best practice or outline concerns.
- After we publish reports, we monitor the progress that agencies make to implement the recommendations and suggestions I make.

In deciding on what systemic issues we should investigate or take action on I consider a range of factors including:

- What the aggregated data from our individual complaints is telling us. All individual complaints contribute to our trend data.
- Stakeholder feedback and media monitor for emerging issues.
- Sometimes the agencies contact me to advise that something went wrong.

Iain Anderson

Commonwealth Ombudsman

