

# COMMONWEALTH OMBUDSMAN INSIGHTS

## Multi-agency service delivery – complaint handling and communication

Many government services involve multiple agencies working together to administer or deliver programs or services to the Australian community. Some agencies administer programs or deliver payments on behalf of other agencies, some agencies rely on information shared between them to deliver services and others work alongside each other in public settings. In our experience, it is not uncommon for people to experience difficulties when trying to resolve complaints where multiple agencies are involved in delivering a service.

This edition of *Insights* provides guidance and observations for agencies involved in multi-agency service delivery on complaint handling, communication and responding when things go wrong.

## What should agencies do?

Agencies involved in multi-agency service delivery should carefully consider how they will manage complaints and communication. Preparation in these areas can help agencies proactively respond to issues that may arise.

### Complaints

#### Consider integrated complaint handling

Complaint handling processes should be seamless and clearly guide customers to understand where they should direct their complaint and which agency is responsible for resolving it. Every effort should be made to ensure complaints don't fall between the cracks and customers are not directed back and forth because no one agency takes responsibility.

There are many complaint handling models available including:

- ✓ **A joint agency complaint handling unit** where staff are authorised to resolve complaint matters on behalf of all agencies involved.
- ✓ **A central point of contact for all complaints** such as a central phone number, email or web address.
- ✓ **Agencies separately manage complaints about their own functions** with clear parameters about which complaints belong with each agency.

#### Be alert for complaints

As staff receive contact about services that relate to multi-agency service delivery, they should consider whether these contacts should be categorised as complaints or could lead to complaints. Staff should look out for systemic issues related to multi-agency service delivery and be encouraged and supported to escalate concerns where repeated contacts raise the same questions or issues.

#### Aim for early resolution

Agencies should adopt a process that allows complaints or enquiries to be triaged early and effectively. Resolving complaints or enquiries as early as possible with practical solutions or better explanations can help all agencies involved rebuild trust with customers where this has been eroded due to problems or issues.

## Interagency protocols for complaints

Agencies delivering services jointly should consider developing an interagency protocol on complaints. At a minimum, protocols should include the following elements:



The public expects government agencies to act in a coordinated manner especially when issues or complaints arise. Case study 1 below highlights the importance of good communication and complaints management where multiple agencies are involved.

### Case Study 1

We received a complaint from someone who changed their family name. They successfully updated their new family name with the Australian Taxation Office (ATO). After updating their family name with the ATO, they had problems accessing Centrelink's online services through myGov.

The person expected that updating their family name with the ATO meant their new family name would be automatically updated in myGov and with other government agencies. They enquired with Services Australia, which manages myGov, about the difficulties they were experiencing.

They complained to the ATO which could not assist with a resolution. The person made further complaints over many months to Services Australia about the difficulties and provided evidence that they successfully updated their family name with the ATO. Despite multiple contacts to the ATO and Services Australia to fix the problem, this person was unable to resolve their complaint.

Services Australia confirmed the only option for this person was to create a new myGov account using their new family name. This person feared that all their information and letters already stored in myGov would then be lost.

As part of our investigation, we reviewed the letters this person received from Services Australia about the issues they experienced and spoke directly to Services Australia about their complaint.

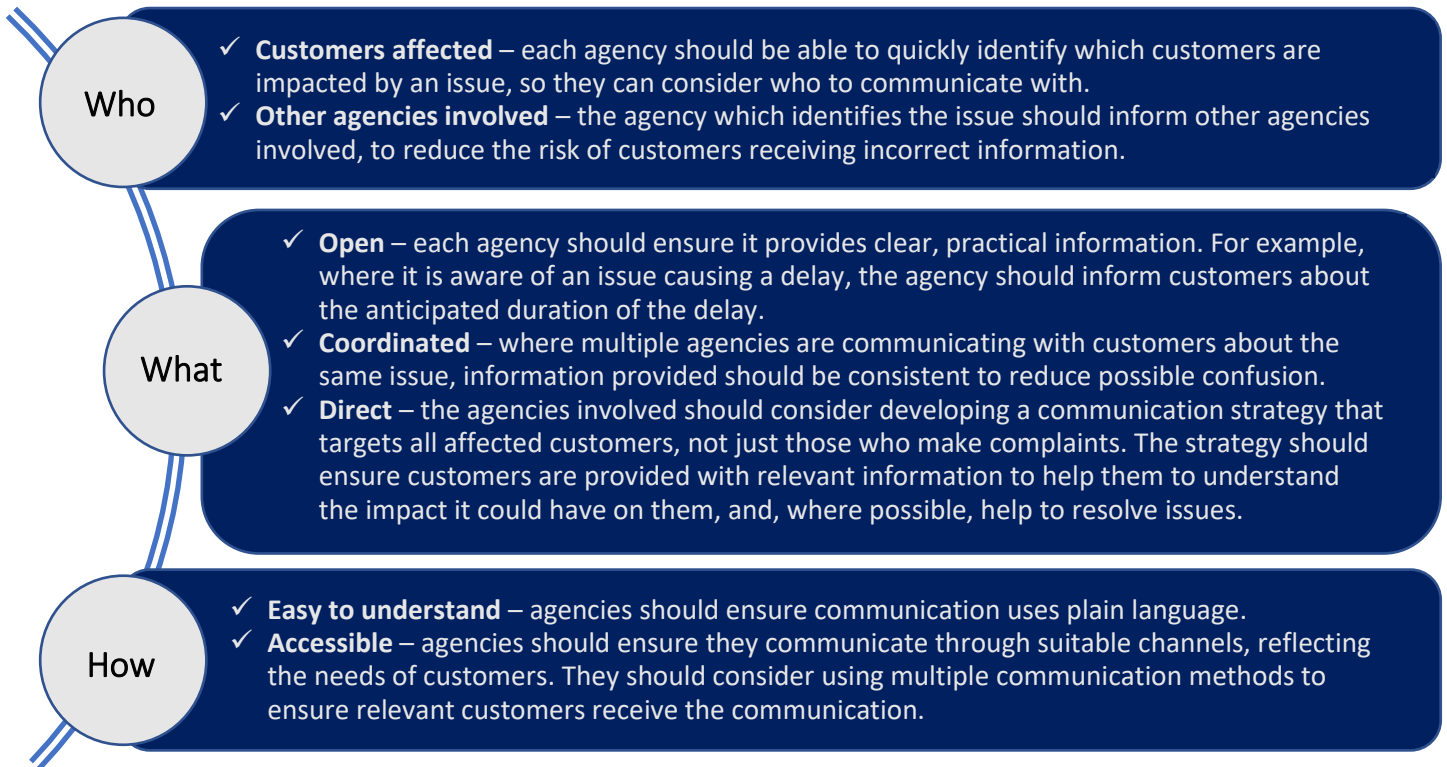
We identified some issues with how Services Australia handled this person's complaint, including that they should have been given a better explanation of how to delete and set up a new myGov account and assured that the information in their original account would not be lost.

The Ombudsman suggested Services Australia consider working with other government agencies involved to improve the integration of complaint handling processes for people who experience problems involving myGov.

Services Australia said the Ombudsman's feedback will assist it in informing enhancement of service delivery for its customers.

## Communication

Where issues arise in multi-agency service delivery, this can cause confusion and frustration for customers. Effective communication can help customers to better understand what they can expect and when. This can help to reduce the need for customers to make complaints and rebuild lost trust. Each agency's approach to communicating with customers should address who needs information, what needs to be communicated and how the information is shared.



Case study 2 below highlights the importance of effective communication between agencies to manage the impacts where there are delays with information being shared between two agencies.

### Case Study 2

We received a complaint from someone who was notified of a student loan they believed they did not owe. The Ombudsman reviewed this person's information and recommended to the former Department of Education, Skills and Employment (the Department) that this person's student loan be re-credited. The Department considered our recommendation to re-credit and agreed to it.

The re-credit had not occurred within the expected timeframe, so the Ombudsman investigated the delay. We learned the delay resulted from a systems issue between the Department and the ATO. There was a defect in a new system and the Department's loan re-credit data was not being successfully transferred to the ATO, meaning the ATO could not refund the loan amount and fees. This person ultimately waited over 7 months for their debt to be re-credited.

The agencies involved did not have a fully integrated complaint system, so this person experienced difficulty in resolving their complaint. While the Department put general information on its website about the delay, we identified that the Department did not proactively communicate with everyone affected and the information it published on its website was too general and not regularly updated.

## Responding when things go wrong

### Owning what went wrong

An organisation that values openness and accountability should be willing to admit to, and address, its errors. Publicly owning what went wrong or apologising is not a sign of agency weakness - it is a sign of agency strength and maturity. The Ombudsman's fact sheet: '[How to deliver an effective apology](#)', provides general guidance on how to respond when things go wrong.

*"The wise strategy is to anticipate that things will go wrong, and that people will be unhappy and will complain. Take their feedback seriously. Have a clearly defined procedure that enables people to complain. Make sure that senior officers have visibility of what people are saying. Have an open and inquiring mind to the criticisms that come through the door. Above all, accept that we can learn from mistakes and build stronger systems."<sup>1</sup>*

## Resources

### Commonwealth Ombudsman

The Ombudsman's website provides useful resources on managing complaints. We have previously published reports on:

- [Lessons in good complaint handling](#)
- [Better Practice Guide to Complaint Handling](#)
- [Preventing and managing administrative delay](#)
- [How to deliver an effective apology](#)

## Contact us



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<sup>1</sup> McMillan, John, "Better Government: Learning from Mistakes" [2018] AIAAdminLawF 23; (2018) 93 AIAL Forum 63