



**Auditor General**

Western Australia



**Righting the Wrongs:  
Complaints Management  
in the Western Australian  
Public Sector**

Report No. 9  
October 2001



## Auditor General

Western Australia

THE SPEAKER  
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

THE PRESIDENT  
LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

### **PERFORMANCE EXAMINATION: Righting the Wrongs - Complaints Management in the Western Australian Public Sector**

This report has been prepared consequent to an examination conducted under section 80 of the *Financial Administration and Audit Act 1985* for submission to Parliament under the provisions of section 95 of the Act.

Performance examinations are an integral part of the overall Performance Auditing program and seek to provide Parliament with assessments of the effectiveness and efficiency of public sector programs and activities thereby identifying opportunities for improved performance.

The information provided through this approach will, I am sure, assist Parliament in better evaluating agency performance and enhance Parliamentary decision-making to the benefit of all Western Australians.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K O O'NEIL'.

K O O'NEIL  
ACTING AUDITOR GENERAL

October 17, 2001

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# 1 Executive Summary

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Public sector agencies in Western countries are increasingly placing a greater emphasis on government services becoming more customer-orientated, focusing on the quality of service delivery and being responsive to customer feedback.

Customer feedback is part of the Western Australian Government's customer focus strategy launched in 1994. Under this strategy, public sector agencies are required to develop Customer Service Charters and support these with processes and procedures, including avenues for customer feedback such as complaints.

A complaints management system is an organised way of responding to, recording, reporting and using complaints to improve services to customers. There is no single system that would suit the requirements of all agencies. Agencies need to assess their individual needs and tailor their system to the needs of their customers.

A survey, conducted in 1999, by the Western Australian Parliamentary Commissioner for Administrative Investigations (the Ombudsman) showed that out of 86 State agencies and 49 local government authorities that responded, 22 per cent did not publicise their complaints management system and only one third of them appeared to be benefiting from complaints feedback in a systematic way.

The Ombudsman is currently completing a second survey. As many public sector complaint handling systems are in the early stages of development and need improvement, the Ombudsman has signalled that he intends to include the handling of complaints as one of the aspects of administrative practice reviewed during his investigations of complaints. Where an agency is found to have either inadequate or no complaints handling procedures and this contributed to an unresolved problem, the Ombudsman intends to recommend that appropriate policies be developed.

A quality complaints management system should have two primary objectives:

- 1 ***the effective management of individual complaints*** – to ensure that all complaints are effectively resolved in a consistent and just manner; and
- 2 ***the facilitation of service improvements*** – to ensure that the information gathered via complaints is being utilised for service improvements, particularly systemic improvements to prevent recurring complaints.

Effectively managing individual complaints alone, without the extra effort of service improvements, is very much a 'band aid' treatment of a symptom without addressing the root cause of the problem or service deficiency. Sometimes however, it is not possible to address the cause of the problem, and agencies may then need to manage customers' expectations as an alternative to help reduce complaints.

Furthermore, the performance of a complaints management system needs to be regularly reviewed to ensure that the system is operating in an efficient and effective manner.

## Overall Findings and Conclusions

This report evaluates the complaints management systems at six public sector agencies and focuses on general complaints from the public regarding aspects of services provided by the agency. An assessment was made as to the level of achievement against the essential elements of the Australian Standard on Complaints Handling, AS 4269-1995 (the Standard). A rating of satisfactory was given to agencies that met the requirements of the element of the Standard<sup>1</sup>.

Figure 1 gives an overview of the ratings for the two primary objectives of a complaints management system.

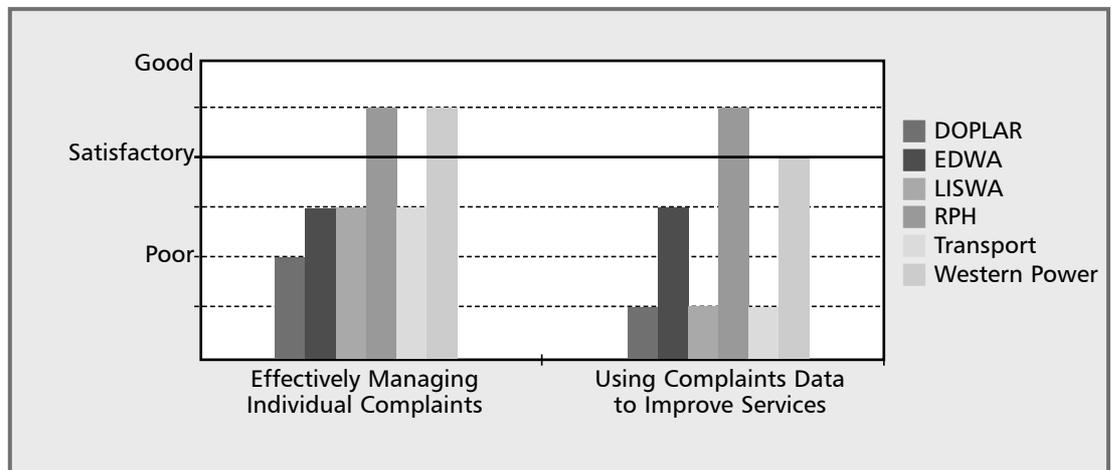


Figure 1: Overall performance of agencies<sup>2</sup>.

*Only RPH and Western Power were able to demonstrate a satisfactory level of overall performance.*

Source: OAG

Of the six agencies evaluated only RPH and Western Power were able to demonstrate a satisfactory level of performance in effectively managing individual complaints and using complaints data to improve services.

### **The effective management of individual complaints requires . . .**

#### ***. . . agency commitment to resolving individual complaints . . .***

EDWA, RPH and Western Power all demonstrated a satisfactory level in relation to the Standard element of *Commitment* to properly resolving individual complaints. However, none of the six agencies examined were providing sufficient *Resources* to support the complaints management function. In particular, there was a lack of regular staff training in complaints handling. Several of the agencies also did not have an adequate recording system for complaints data.

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A for a list of the essential elements and Figure 3 for a model of an effective complaints management system.

<sup>2</sup> For the full names of the selected agencies and audit scope see page 14-15.

## 1 Executive Summary

### ***. . . handling individual complaints well . . .***

The Standard's essential elements for the proper handling of individual complaints are: *Fairness*; *Responsiveness*; and the provision of reasonable *Remedies*. RPH and Western Power performed satisfactorily against the Standards for *Fairness*, *Responsiveness* and *Remedies*. The remaining agencies did not satisfy the Standard for *Responsiveness*, however, they did offer complainants reasonable *Remedies*<sup>3</sup>.

It was noted that the public might not generally be aware of their appeal rights, such as the right to appeal to the Ombudsman. Agencies could distribute such information via pamphlets and in response to individual complaints.

### ***. . . and monitoring the handling of individual complaints.***

It is important to monitor the way individual complaints are handled. To do this agencies need to set targets, monitor progress and regularly report on performance. Only RPH and Western Power were able to satisfy the Standard for *Accountability*. The other four agencies performed poorly in this area.

### **The use of complaints data to improve services requires. . .**

#### ***. . . agency commitment to the continuous improvement of services . . .***

RPH and Western Power both displayed a satisfactory degree of *Commitment* and an adequate allocation of *Resources* to facilitate the continuous improvement of agency services. The four remaining agencies all failed to provide adequate *Resources* to support service improvement initiatives.

#### ***. . . actively encouraging customers to lodge complaints . . .***

Agencies that encourage complaints will have a ready source of feedback that can be used to facilitate improvements to their services. Agencies can encourage complaints by having a highly visible and easily accessible process for making complaints and by assisting individuals to lodge their complaints.

RPH was the only agency to fulfil the *Visibility*, *Access* and *Assistance* elements of the Standard. While EDWA and Western Power fulfilled the requirements for *Access* they failed on *Visibility* and *Assistance*. The other three agencies performed poorly in all three areas.

#### ***. . . and collecting and analysing complaints data to identify service improvement opportunities.***

Agencies should look to systematically record customer complaints and then analyse this data to identify systemic and recurring problems. By identifying any systemic and/or recurring problems, agencies can then focus their service improvement efforts on the areas of greatest need.

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<sup>3</sup> DOPLAR was excluded from this part of the audit, as there were an insufficient number of complaints to enable analysis.

RPH was the only agency to satisfy the *Data Collection* and *Systemic and Recurring Problems* elements of the Standard. Western Power fulfilled the requirements for *Systemic and Recurring Problems* only whilst the remaining four agencies failed on both counts.

Only RPH and Western Power were able to demonstrate that their systematic approach to the use of complaints had led directly to improved services.

### **Reviewing their complaints management system.**

None of the agencies properly reviewed their complaints management system<sup>4</sup>. Whilst all agencies reviewed their policies and procedures, all of the reviews undertaken lacked an audit of individual complaints files; sufficient surveys of staff, consumers, or complainants; or an assessment of the adequacy of their database.

Since the audit, all agencies have initiated processes to review their systems and progress on identified issues.

Although only six agencies were selected, similar problems and experiences are likely to be present across other public sector agencies and the findings of this report should also be of value to other agencies in reviewing and improving their complaints management systems. Well-managed complaints handling can lead to improved services and more cost-effective systems.

## Summary of Recommendations

**Major recommendations made in the report are that agencies need to:**

- **demonstrate they are able to manage individual complaints efficiently and effectively, for example, by applying the essential elements of the Australian Standard on Complaints Handling.**
- **appropriately resource the complaints management function, particularly by establishing and maintaining an adequate complaints recording system and ensuring staff are trained in complaints management.**
- **demonstrate accountability for their handling of complaints by setting target timelines, monitoring progress and regularly reporting on outcomes.**
- **actively encourage communication of complaints by providing a highly visible and easily accessible process for making complaints and by assisting individuals to lodge complaints.**
- **invest appropriate resources in staff time and systems for analysing whole of agency complaints data in order to identify possible service improvements.**

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<sup>4</sup> Not applicable for Western Power as its complaints system is new and has yet to be reviewed.

## 1 Executive Summary

- **periodically review their complaints management system with a view to improving services by:**
  - seeking out feedback from clients and staff surveys, focus groups, etc;**
  - reviewing complaints policies;**
  - reviewing samples of finalised complaints to determine how effectively they were handled;**
  - assessing the adequacy of data gathered within the complaints recording system; and**
  - evaluating how effectively complaints data is used to improve services.**

# 2 Introduction

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Over the past five to ten years public sector agencies in Western countries have placed an increased emphasis on government services becoming more customer-orientated, focusing on the quality of service delivery and being responsive to customer feedback<sup>5</sup>.

Being responsive to customer feedback is part of the Western Australian Government's public sector customer focus strategy launched in 1994. The primary aim of the strategy was to ensure that the public sector continuously improves service delivery, and provides value for money service for the Western Australian community.

Under this strategy, agencies are required to develop Customer Service Charters and support these with agency processes and procedures, especially in the areas of complaints handling; staff training; reporting and reviewing standards. The Charters are to include avenues for providing customer feedback, including complaints<sup>6</sup>.

Some common approaches to obtaining customer feedback include:

- **Customer surveys** – Rigorous surveys are particularly appropriate when precise and unbiased information is required to support major management decisions<sup>7</sup>.
- **Suggestion boxes** – These provide a non-threatening way for customers to express their preferences and make suggestions.
- **Focus groups** – Focus groups are used to get direct reactions from customers on goods and services offered and to provide an opportunity for consumers to speak. They are especially useful in identifying needs and assessing issues relating to the introduction of a service.
- **Customer complaints** – Formal systems are established to record customer complaints and seek to address complaints as they arise, in addition to identifying any common or recurring patterns over time.

Complaints are expressions of dissatisfaction made by consumers and as such form a major source of the public's perception of services received from a government agency.

Public sector agencies that aspire to good quality service and continuous service improvement need to know when they are failing some of their customers so that they can properly address their concerns and make improvements for all customers.

Public sector agencies need to effectively manage complaints so as to:

- achieve the effective resolution of a consumer's complaint;
- utilise the information gathered to facilitate service improvements; and
- demonstrate public accountability for performance.

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<sup>5</sup> OECD (1995), *Governance in Transition, Public Management Reforms in OECD Countries*, OECD, Paris.  
OECD (1996), *Responsive Government: Service Quality Initiatives*, OECD, Paris.

<sup>6</sup> Customer Service Charter Guide, Ministry of the Premier and Cabinet attached to Premier's Circular No.2/2000, Perth, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> The increasing use of customer surveys by Western Australian public sector agencies, and the rigour of these surveys, was appraised in the performance report *Listen and Learn: Using customer surveys to report performance in the Western Australian public sector* (report No. 5, Office of the Auditor General - June 1998).

## 2 Introduction

Proactive and good complaints management develops trust between an agency and its clients and not only helps to increase confidence in the public sector but also confirms the effectiveness of its service delivery strategies.

In 1999, the Western Australian Parliamentary Commissioner for Administrative Investigations (the Ombudsman) surveyed the complaints handling systems of 99 State agencies and 50 large local government authorities. Responses were received from 86 State agencies and 49 local governments. Of these, 75 per cent of State agencies and 50 per cent of local governments stated they had formal policies and procedures to deal with individual complaints. However, 22 per cent of respondents did not publicise their complaints management system and only one third of them appeared to be benefiting from complaints feedback in a systematic way<sup>8</sup>. The findings of this report support the trends found in the survey results.

The Ombudsman is currently completing a second survey. As many public sector complaint handling systems are in the early stages of development and need improvement, the Ombudsman has signalled that he intends to include the handling of complaints as one of the aspects of administrative practice reviewed during his investigations of complaints. Where an agency is found to have either inadequate or no complaints handling procedures and this contributed to an unresolved problem, the Ombudsman intends to recommend that appropriate policies be developed.

Some recent events have also highlighted the need for effective complaints management systems in Western Australian public sector agencies. For example, the recent Gunning Committee Inquiry has attributed the cause of the high profile finance broking scandal in Western Australia as being, in part, due to unsatisfactory complaints handling and a lack of examination of industry trends from complaints<sup>9</sup>.

In addition to agency level complaints management, the significance of complaints management for the public sector is being recognised as a whole-of-government concern. One of the reforms recommended by the Machinery of Government Taskforce in May 2001 dealt with the issue of complaints management. The concern brought to its attention is that members of the public who wish to query or complain about the actions of a public sector agency do not have a single point to access the complaints system. The Taskforce's Report recommended examination of the feasibility of amalgamation or co-location of public sector accountability agencies to achieve enhanced service delivery and effectiveness<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Parliamentary Commissioner for Administrative Investigations, *Report on a Survey of Complaint Handling in the Western Australia Public Sector*, Perth, 1999, page 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Gunning Committee Inquiry into the Finance Brokers Supervisory Board*, Perth, 2000, page 293.

<sup>10</sup> The Machinery of Government Taskforce, *Government Structures for Better Results: The Report of the Taskforce Established to Review the Machinery of Western Australia's Government*, Perth, June 2001, page 77.

## Effective Complaints Management Systems

A complaints management system is an organised way of responding to, recording, reporting and using complaints to improve services to customers. It includes procedures for customers to make complaints, guidelines for staff to resolve complaints and to assist them in preventing customer dissatisfaction in the future.

There is no single system that would suit the requirements of all agencies. Agencies will need to assess their individual needs and tailor their system to the needs of their customers. Complaints management systems will differ between different agencies depending on many factors such as: size; extent of contact with the general public; the level of devolution of an agency's structure; and available resources.

A quality complaints management system should have two primary objectives:

- 1 ***the effective management of individual complaints*** – to ensure that all complaints are effectively resolved in a consistent and just manner; and
- 2 ***the facilitation of service improvements*** – to ensure that the information gathered via complaints is being utilised for service improvements, particularly systemic improvements to prevent recurring complaints.

Effectively managing individual complaints alone, without the extra effort of service improvements, is very much a 'band aid' treatment of a symptom without addressing the root cause of the problem or service deficiency. An agency could be constantly 'treating' or handling the complaints instead of addressing the cause of the problem and preventing future recurrences.

Hence, to complete the process and be wholly effective, the agency should use the information collected from complaints to initiate service improvements. The effectiveness of those service improvements will be reflected in part by whether they have resulted in a reduction in the number of complaints relating to the area of service provision that the initiatives address.

Sometimes however, it is not possible to address the cause of the problem, and agencies may then need to manage customers' expectations as an alternative to help reduce complaints.

## 2 Introduction

Figure 2 demonstrates the importance of ‘treating’ and ‘preventing’ complaints for effective complaints management.

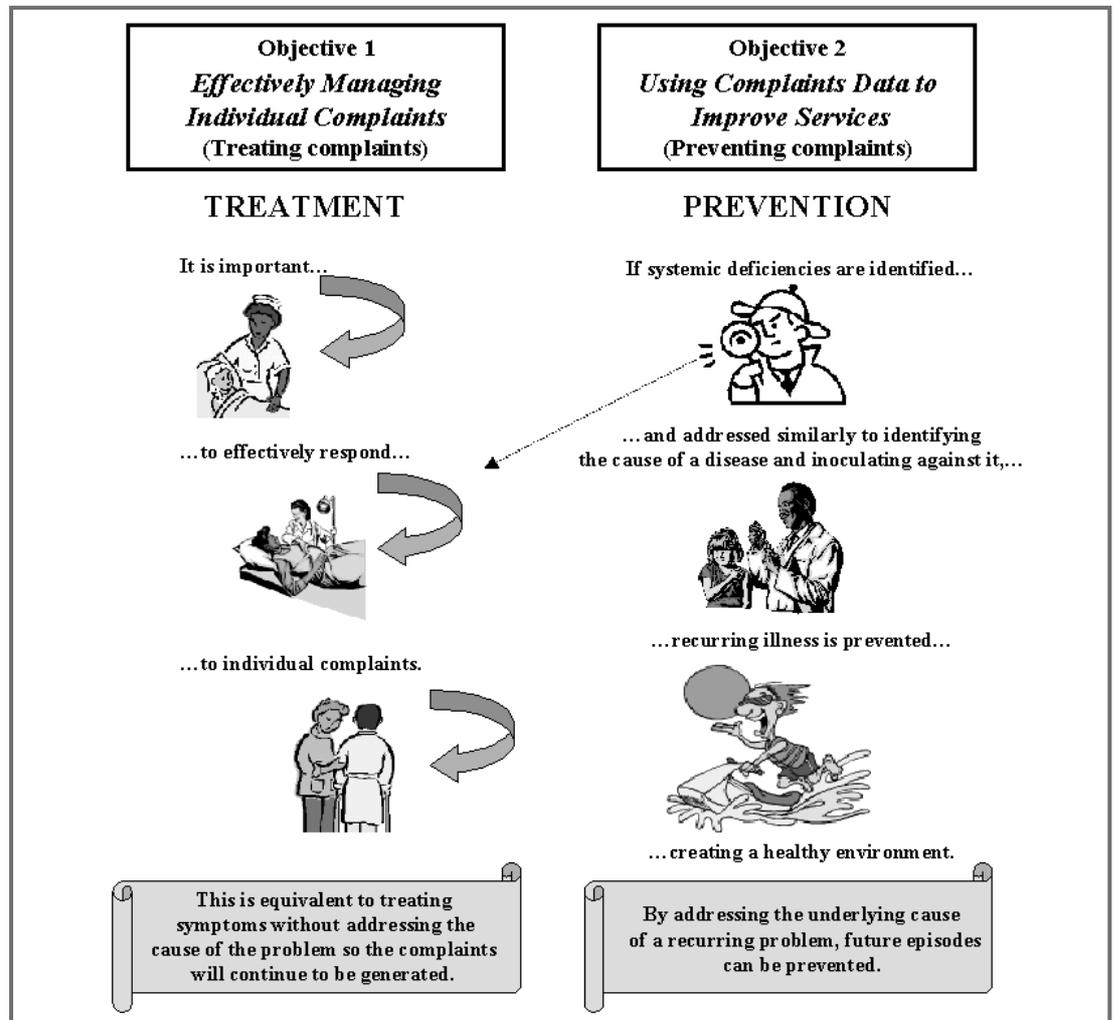


Figure 2: The importance of ‘treating’ and ‘preventing’ complaints.

*The treatment of symptoms without addressing the cause of the problem will result in the problem recurring. It is important to address the underlying cause to prevent future episodes.*

Source: OAG

The Australian Standard on Complaints Handling, AS 4269-1995 (the Standard), is a key standard in this area. It sets out the essential elements of a good complaints management system from inception to satisfaction or final determination and provides guidelines for the implementation of the necessary process. The essential elements<sup>11</sup> of the Standard are listed in Appendix A.

<sup>11</sup> This report only focuses on the essential elements of the Standard. For further details it is necessary to refer to the full text of the Standard as issued by Standards Australia.

The model in Figure 3 shows the building blocks for effective complaints management and incorporates the essential elements of the Standard<sup>12</sup>.

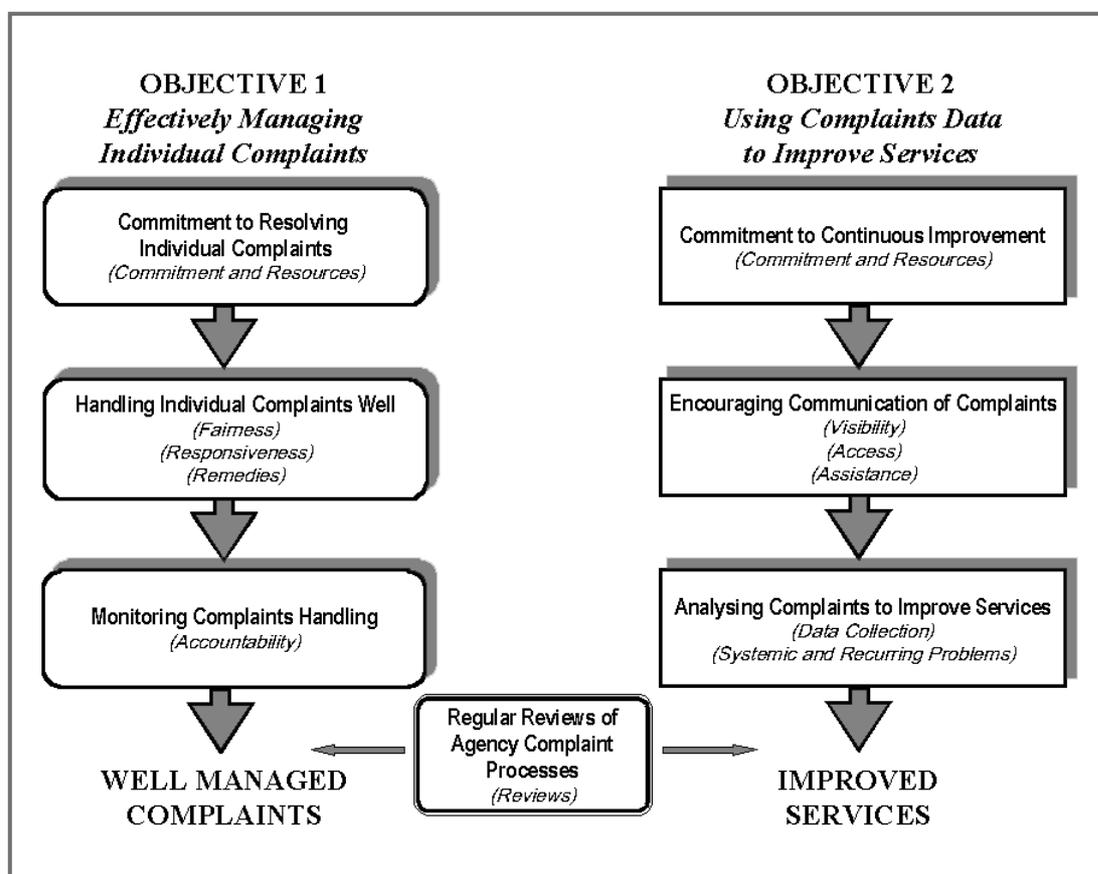


Figure 3: Model of an effective complaints management system.

Complaints management systems should aim to effectively manage individual complaints and to use complaints to improve services. The essential elements of a complaints management system, as per the Standard, are shown in brackets<sup>13</sup>.

Source: OAG

The first objective, *effectively managing individual complaints*, involves:

- agency, Chief Executive Officer and staff commitment in terms of time and resources, to the fair and just treatment of all complaints;
- proper handling of individual complaints; and
- monitoring of complaints handling to ensure fairness, consistency and timely responses.

<sup>12</sup> Model developed by the Office of the Auditor General. The model incorporates the essential elements of the Australian Standard on Complaints Handling (AS 4269-1995). It is consistent with best practice guidelines developed by the NSW Ombudsman's Office; the Commonwealth Ombudsman's Office; and the UK 'Service First' initiative.

<sup>13</sup> The essential element of *Charges* is not included in this model as it is not generally applicable in the public sector.

## 2 Introduction

The second objective, *using complaints data to improve services*, involves:

- commitment in terms of time, resources, and support by all relevant staff of an agency to the aims of this objective;
- encouraging the communication of complaints via well publicised, highly visible and easily accessible complaints mechanisms; and
- systematic collection and analysis of complaints information to identify possible service improvements.

Furthermore, the performance of a complaints management system needs to be regularly reviewed to ensure that the system is operating in an efficient and effective manner.

## Examination Focus and Approach

The aims of the performance examination were to:

- assess the quality of complaints management systems at selected agencies against the Standard;
- identify common issues and challenges faced by agencies in managing complaints; and
- highlight service improvements made through the analysis of complaints data.

The examination focused on general complaints from the public regarding aspects of services provided by the agency and excludes complaints regarding sexual and physical assault; human resource and equal opportunity issues; and corrupt or criminal activity. Such issues and related complaints are usually dealt with under specific legislation and well-established policies and guidelines. Ministerial correspondence (Ministerials) on complaints is similarly dealt with by well-established policies and therefore was not examined.

Six agencies were purposefully selected to provide a reasonable cross-section of the public sector: large versus small budgets; service delivery versus advisory function; and various sectors of the public service. Preference was given to agencies with a high degree of service provision to the general public.

Although only six agencies were selected, similar problems and experiences are likely to be present across other public sector agencies and the findings of this report should also be of value to other agencies in reviewing and improving their complaints management systems.

The six agencies selected are:

- Department of Education (formerly EDWA)<sup>14</sup>
- Department of Transport (Licensing Division only)

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<sup>14</sup> The findings for EDWA are based on audits conducted at six schools over two districts. These are not representative of each school in the system but are, nonetheless, of relevance to every school.

- Department of Consumer and Employment Protection (the former Department of Productivity and Labour Relations only [DOPLAR]<sup>15</sup>)
- Department of Culture and the Arts (LISWA only)
- Royal Perth Hospital (RPH)
- Western Power (Network Services Division only)

Each agency was evaluated against the essential elements of the Standard (Appendix A) as depicted in the model shown in Figure 3. A judgment was made as to the level of achievement against the Standard. The ratings used are:

- **Poor** – the agency undertook some of the required activities but failed to meet the requirements of the respective element of the Standard;
- **Satisfactory** – the agency met the requirements of the element of the Standard; and
- **Good** – the agency showed a level of performance that was substantially more than required to meet the element of the Standard.

The examination methodology also includes:

- reviewing policies, procedures and the actual handling of complaints at individual agencies;
- interviews with key agency staff, including frontline staff and designated complaints managers;
- substantial liaison with the Ombudsman; and
- reviewing relevant literature and best practice guidelines, such as those developed by the NSW Ombudsman's Office<sup>16</sup>; the Commonwealth Ombudsman's Office<sup>17</sup>; and the UK Service First Initiative<sup>18</sup>.

Arising from this work a summary of key agency responsibilities for managing complaints was developed and is listed in Appendix C.

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<sup>15</sup> The findings of this report should not be taken to reflect in any way on the operations of the Labour Relations Division of the Department of Consumer and Employment Protection in how it deals with employment related complaints concerning other organisations, as distinct from dealing with complaints about the Department's services.

<sup>16</sup> NSW Ombudsman (1995), *Effective Complaint Handling Guidelines*, Sydney, 1995.

<sup>17</sup> Commonwealth Ombudsman (1997), *A Good Practice Guide for Effective Complaint Handling*, Canberra, 1997.

<sup>18</sup> Cabinet Office, Service First Unit, *How to Deal with Complaints*, United Kingdom, 1998.

# 3 Effectively Managing Individual Complaints

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- *Of the six agencies examined only RPH and Western Power demonstrated a satisfactory level of overall performance in meeting the objective of effectively managing individual complaints.*
- *EDWA, RPH and Western Power all demonstrated a satisfactory level of ‘Commitment’ to resolving individual complaints. However, none of the six agencies examined were providing sufficient ‘Resources’ to support the complaints management function. In particular, there was a lack of regular staff training in complaints handling. Several of the agencies also did not have an adequate recording system for complaints data.*
- *RPH and Western Power performed satisfactorily against the Standards for ‘Fairness’, ‘Responsiveness’ and ‘Remedies’. The remaining agencies did not satisfy the Standard for ‘Responsiveness’, however, they did offer complainants reasonable ‘Remedies’<sup>19</sup>.*
- *Only RPH and Western Power were able to satisfy the Standard for ‘Accountability’. The other four agencies performed poorly in this area.*
- *None of the agencies met the ‘Review’ element of the Standard. Whilst all agencies reviewed their policies and procedures, none of the reviews included an audit of individual complaints files<sup>20</sup>.*

## Background

The first objective of an effective complaints management system is the effective management of individual complaints (see Figure 3). This requires:

- agency commitment to resolving individual complaints (applicable essential elements of the Standard are *Commitment* and *Resources*);
- handling individual complaints well (essential elements are *Fairness*, *Responsiveness* and *Remedies*);
- monitoring agency performance in complaints handling (essential element is *Accountability*); and
- reviewing, on a regular basis, the agency’s systems and processes for the management of individual complaints to ensure that they are operating in an efficient and effective manner (essential element is *Reviews*).

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<sup>19</sup> DOPLAR was excluded from this part of the audit, as there were an insufficient number of complaints to enable analysis.

<sup>20</sup> Not applicable for Western Power as its complaints system is new and has yet to be reviewed.

# Commitment to Resolving Individual Complaints

## Agency responsibilities

Agency commitment needs to be demonstrated at, and promoted from, the highest levels of the organisation. This requires Chief Executive Officer support for the development, implementation and overall running of a complaints management system. Commitment is also demonstrated by ready access to all levels of management to facilitate the resolution of complaints.

Well-documented and up-to-date policies and procedures have to be in place in order to avoid the inconsistent treatment of complaints and to reduce the incidence of complaints escalating unnecessarily. Such policies and procedures should be based on the Standard and generally accepted principles of complaints handling for public sector agencies.

The policies should also clearly define what is a complaint. The definition of a complaint will allow an agency to separate complaints from other forms of communication with the public, such as enquiries and requests for information. The Standard defines a complaint as “any expression of dissatisfaction with a product or service offered or provided”. The UK ‘*Service First*’ definition is “any expression of dissatisfaction that needs a response”. The definition of a complaint should be customised to suit the specification of an agency.

Agencies need to provide their staff with adequate resources for complaints handling, especially training in their agency’s complaints procedures. In addition, an agency needs to ensure that staff have sufficient delegated authority in order to manage complaints.

Each agency will need to decide on the level of funding required to establish, advertise and maintain an effective and appropriate complaints management system. The cost of a complaints management system should be weighed against the costs of not handling complaints effectively and of failing to use complaints data to improve services.

This investment in a complaints management system needs to be tailored to the size and needs of an agency and may include:

- the establishment of a dedicated complaints unit supported by designated and appropriately skilled complaints handling staff;
- the provision of regular training in an agency’s complaints procedures and in dealing with complainants; and
- the allocation of resources to support the management of complaints (eg. relevant computer software).

### 3 Effectively Managing Individual Complaints

#### Findings

The findings for the six agencies against the Standard's essential elements of *Commitment* and *Resources* are shown in Figure 4.

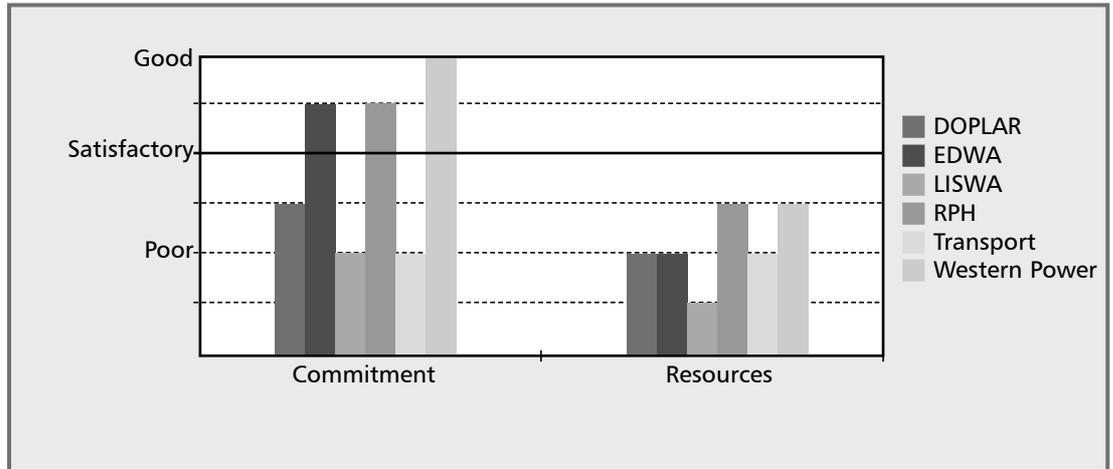


Figure 4: Commitment and Resources to resolve individual complaints.

*Levels of agency 'Commitment' were found to be highly variable. None of the six agencies examined were providing adequate 'Resources' to support the complaints management function.*

Source: OAG

#### Commitment

The three agencies that demonstrated greater levels of *Commitment* (EDWA, RPH, Western Power) all had good policies and procedures in place. Their commitment was also shown by:

- a high level of Chief Executive Officer support;
- empowered frontline staff; and
- easy staff access to supervisors and managers when the need arose.

For example, at schools visited (EDWA) frontline staff indicated strong commitment by principals in resolving complaints. Furthermore, frontline staff felt well supported by principals and deputy principals when dealing with complaints.

In contrast, the poorly performing agencies did not have complaints handling policies in place (LISWA, Transport) or had policies that were not fully implemented (DOPLAR). DOPLAR's policies are based on the Standard but had some of the essential elements missing.

## Resources

None of the agencies satisfied the Standard for *Resources*. All six failed to provide adequate training on a regular basis in complaints handling to their staff. For example, at RPH, there were no formal complaints handling training programs. Whilst the hospital did run courses with customer service themes that included an element of complaints handling, none were specifically on how to handle complaints at RPH. This resulted in some staff not being aware of how to properly apply RPH's complaints handling policies and procedures.

One agency indicated that there has been no need to train staff, as there have been no or very few complaints received. This could be a fallacy. The low number of complaints can actually be due to untrained staff not being aware of agency policies and procedures and thus not accepting, handling or documenting complaints properly. When staff lack the skills to help resolve complaints, customers have little confidence in the agency's processes and may instead escalate issues directly to the Minister or Ombudsman.

RPH and Western Power performed better than the other four agencies due to the presence of a dedicated complaints unit and/or officer and by having standard systems in place for the recording of complaints.

An adequate recording system of complaints was missing at DOPLAR, EDWA, LISWA and Transport. For agencies that have significant contact with the public, as these do, the absence of a recording system is a concern.

The recording systems at both DOPLAR and LISWA extended no further than placing complaints and responses to those complaints on general files. This has resulted in complaints being filed in a disjointed manner and out of chronological order. EDWA has no set processes for the recording or filing of complaints. Each school determines its own processes at the discretion of the principal.

In the case of Transport's licensing centres, complaints are manually recorded in a logbook. Despite the number of transactions at these centres, the number of complaints is suspiciously low. According to its logbook East Perth Licensing Centre had 32 082 transactions but only one complaint in May. It is an unrealistic expectation in these Centres to have frontline staff who are under pressure most of the day to log complaints each time they are made. One approach to easing this pressure is to provide complaint forms and information in public areas on how to submit a complaint at Licensing Centres.

## Handling Individual Complaints Well

### Agency responsibilities

The Standard's essential elements for the proper handling of individual complaints are: *Fairness*; *Responsiveness*; and the provision of reasonable *Remedies*.

*Fairness* in dealing with a complaint includes:

- following an agency's complaints handling guidelines;
- treating complaints seriously and in a manner that ensures confidentiality of the complainant and affected agency staff;
- advising the complainant of the agency's complaints handling process and any avenues for further review, such as their right to lodge a complaint with the Ombudsman;
- ensuring the independence of the investigator of the complaint; and
- adequately informing the complainant of the decision made and the reasons for the decision.

*Fairness* is further enhanced by having an adequate recording procedure for complaints that facilitates the independent review of the way a complaint was dealt with.

An agency demonstrates *Responsiveness* to complaints received by:

- setting reasonable target timelines for each stage of the complaints management process;
- informing complainants when the process has commenced and what the expected duration may be; and
- keeping complainants informed of any delays.

Finally, the *Remedies* extended to complainants should be fair and reasonable; address all aspects of the complaint; and whenever possible, be based on the complainant's desired outcomes. One principle is to return the complainant to the position they would have been in had the event complained about not occurred.

At times a legitimate reason can exist for an agency not meeting the complainant's desired outcomes. For example, the requirement to incorporate photographs in new driver's licences or those that are being renewed, has resulted in many complaints to Transport. Since this is a legislative requirement, Transport is not in a position to meet the complainant's desired outcome of issuing a licence with no photograph.

Agencies also need to consider whether remedies should be offered to others in similar circumstances as the complainant but who had not formally complained.

## Findings

The findings for the agencies against the Standard’s essential elements of *Fairness*, *Responsiveness* and *Remedies* are shown in Figure 5. The findings in this section are primarily based on a review of a purposefully selected sample of complaints. The findings do not preclude a small proportion of complaints falling outside the general thrust of the findings at each agency.

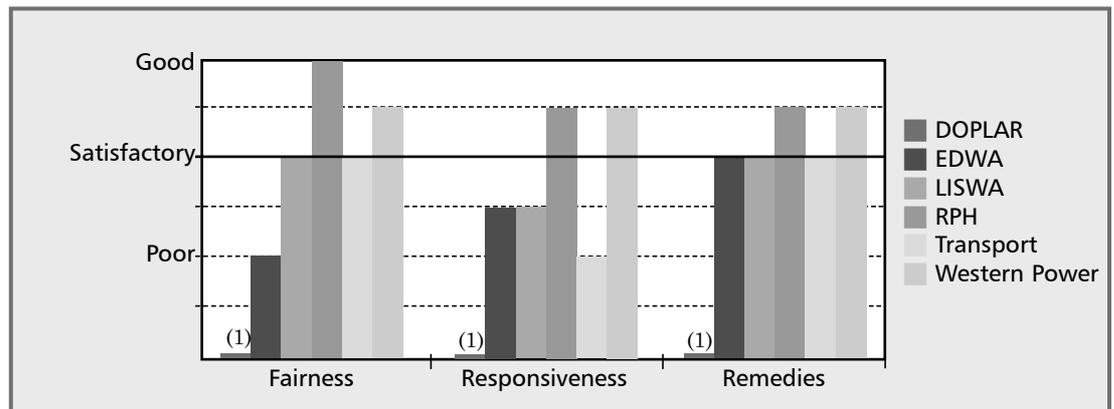


Figure 5: Fairness, Responsiveness, and Remedies.

*RPH and Western Power performed satisfactorily against all three essential elements. Of the remaining agencies most satisfied the Standard for ‘Fairness’ and ‘Remedies’.*

*(1) DOPLAR was excluded from this part of the audit, as there were an insufficient number of complaints to enable analysis.*

Source: OAG

## Fairness

Except for EDWA, all agencies met or exceeded the Standard for *Fairness*. EDWA failed to meet this level due to complaints being recorded on student files at some schools. All teachers have access to these files and this compromises complainant confidentiality. Confidentiality is of great importance because of the fear of retribution, particularly in a school environment where there is a long and on-going relationship between teachers and students, and where students can be in a vulnerable position. Such confidentiality concerns could seriously discourage the lodgement of complaints.

RPH and Western Power performed well against this element of the Standard. One of the reasons that both agencies exceeded the Standard was that both conducted, when warranted, follow-up phone calls to complainants after a formal response was made. This allows for timely feedback of the experiences of complainants regarding the agency’s handling of their complaint. Collection of complainant experiences can reveal whether the complaint was treated seriously; the complainant was kept well informed; and the complainant understands the reasons for the decision made.

### 3 Effectively Managing Individual Complaints

The documentation of written responses to complaints was handled satisfactorily at LISWA. However, the documentation for some verbal responses was incomplete.

It was noted that the public might not generally be aware of their appeal rights, such as the right to appeal to the Ombudsman. The Ombudsman; the Office of Health Review; the Commissioner for Public Sector Standards; the Information Commissioner; and the Commissioner for Equal Opportunity, amongst others, play an important role as a completely independent step in the public sector complaints system.

In their correspondence with complainants, none of the agencies (including DOPLAR) provided information on alternative and independent avenues of appeal. Agencies should consider giving complainants information about the role of these external reviewers and how to complain to them. These are statutory offices and the right to lodge a complaint with any of them is set out in legislation. Agencies could distribute such information via pamphlets and in response to individual complaints.

#### Responsiveness

In order to meet the acceptable level of *Responsiveness* an agency needs to set target response timelines and consistently comply with these targets. Both RPH and Western Power have set clear timelines and file audits showed a high degree of compliance with their targets.

In the case of Western Power, the target response times are five days to acknowledge written complaints and 14 days to respond to them. File audits of 16 written complaints showed that the majority were acknowledged on the same day the complaint was received and over 80 per cent were responded to within 14 working days.

Agencies that do not set clear timelines rely heavily on the dedication and availability of individual staff to respond to complaints in a prompt manner. Such agencies are in danger of having protracted response times. For instance, file audits at Transport showed that written complaints are not acknowledged when received and that several complaints at Transport took seven weeks or more to be responded to.

EDWA did not meet this essential element in relation to the setting of target timelines. However, evidence of responsiveness in schools was high, with same day response by phone to most complaints and prompt organisation of meetings with parents to resolve issues. In addition, these were followed up with formal written responses where required and again this was timely.

Similarly, LISWA did not have written target timelines for responding to complaints. However, an audit of complaints showed that most were responded to in a timely manner.

## Remedies

Of the 124 complaints reviewed by Audit, all the agencies appeared to have extended reasonable remedies to complainants. This is not to say that complainants were always satisfied with the remedies but only that the agency's responses appeared to be reasonable given the circumstances.

Whenever possible, remedies should be based on the complainant's desired outcomes. However, whilst some agencies attempt to collect this information most complainants do not indicate their desired outcomes. For example, less than half of the 20 complaints examined at RPH had this component filled in by the complainants.

Agencies should also consider the feasibility of extending remedies to non-complainants in similar circumstances to those who actually complained.

### **Example - RPH**

In response to a complaint about the height of the grab rails in RPH's bathrooms, the hospital conducted a full audit of all their grab rails with the assistance of an Occupational Therapist, then adjusted the rails accordingly.

The hospital recognised that numerous other patients were affected by this situation, but had not lodged complaints. RPH's actions extended similar remedies to non-complainants as to complainants.

## Monitoring Complaints Handling

### Agency responsibilities

To ensure that all complaints are treated fairly, properly and in a consistent manner it is important that an agency effectively monitors the handling of individual complaints. This also establishes and reinforces a necessary level of agency accountability for complaints handling.

The essential element of *Accountability* is reflected by:

- each level in the agency accepting responsibility for effective complaints handling;
- the setting of complaints handling targets;
- the monitoring of progress of each complaint against standards and guidelines; and
- regular reporting to senior managers on the operation of the complaints handling system against documented performance standards, targets, and objectives.

### 3 Effectively Managing Individual Complaints

Agencies should also consider publishing complaints information, such as:

- the number of resolved or outstanding complaints by category, including an analysis explaining the complaints figures;
- an overview of the outcomes of resolved complaints;
- performance against targets (eg. timelines);
- comparisons against prior periods;
- the percentage of complainants satisfied with the complaints process; and
- the percentage of complainants satisfied with the outcome of their complaint.

Publishing complaints information in an agency’s Annual Report shows that the agency is taking complaints seriously and by implication that it is worth making a complaint. It also allows an agency to publicly demonstrate that it has made service improvements as a result of complaints. Furthermore, by reporting complaints information an agency is reporting against its commitments made in its Customer Service Charter regarding the handling of complaints.

#### Findings

The findings for the six agencies against the Standard of *Accountability* are shown in Figure 6.

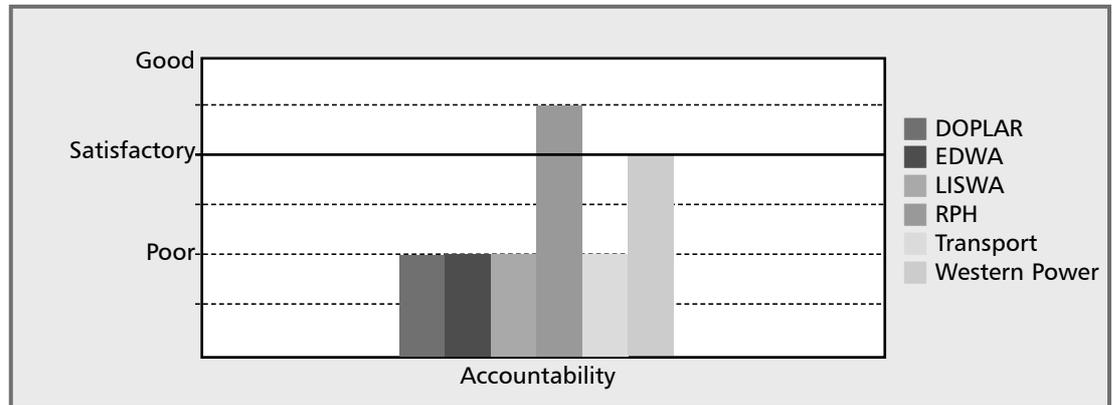


Figure 6: Accountability.

*RPH and Western Power were the only agencies able to satisfy the Standard for ‘Accountability’. The remaining agencies performed poorly in this area.*

Source: OAG

Two agencies (RPH, Western Power) reached the acceptable level for *Accountability*. Both agencies set targets; monitored progress against those targets; and produced regular summary reports of complaints. For example, Western Power has set a target response time of 30 seconds for call centre enquiries and complaints and five days for acknowledging letters. Records show that 72 per cent of calls and 97 per cent of letters have met established targets.

The remaining agencies displayed an ad hoc approach to the setting of targets and monitoring. In the case of Transport, haphazard-monitoring practices can be attributed to undocumented monitoring procedures and the lack of staff training in these informal procedures. The audit of 18 written complaints at Transport discovered four unanswered complaints. One of these complaints dated back to February 2000. The usual practice relating to letters directly addressed to the Licensing Division is for Records to place them on file and pass the file with the folio marked on the cover to the Executive Director's Personal Assistant. The letters not responded to were on file but not folioed and passed on to the Personal Assistant. Transport has acknowledged that due process is not followed when there are new staff members who have not been trained in established but non-documented procedures.

## Reviewing Agency Processes for Managing Individual Complaints

### Agency responsibilities

Agencies need to regularly review their systems and processes for the management of individual complaints to ensure that they are operating in an efficient and effective manner (the Standard's essential element is *Reviews*).

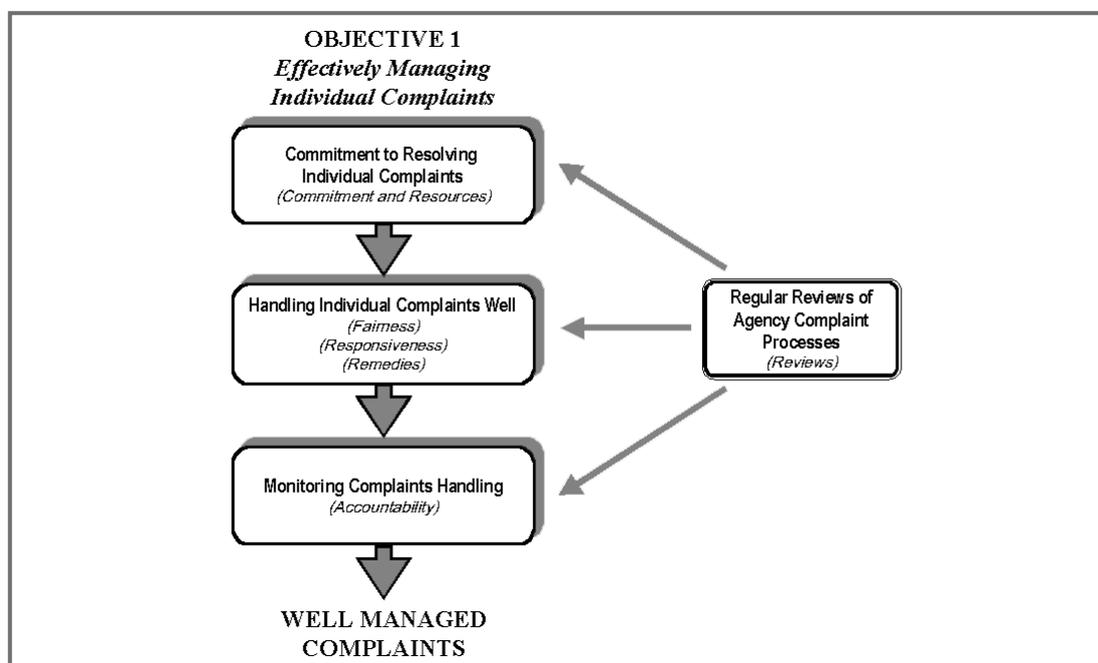


Figure 7: Reviewing the system for the management of individual complaints.

*An agency should review its systems for the management of individual complaints on a regular basis, to ensure that they are operating efficiently and effectively.*

Source: OAG

### 3 Effectively Managing Individual Complaints

Reviews should include:

- evaluation of policies and procedures;
- audits of individual complaint files and checks on the accuracy of management reports; and
- surveys of staff, consumers and complainants.

Surveys allow an agency to gain information about how its complaints management system is actually working. Each group will give a different perspective:

- staff can tell of their experiences with the agency's complaints process and what complainants say to them;
- consumers, through agency customer surveys, can comment on their experiences with the agency's complaints management system when they have lodged a complaint and allow an agency to determine why some consumers do not lodge complaints even though they have had problems with the service. They can also show if consumers are using the formal processes and if all complaints are being recorded; and
- complainants, or a sample, could be contacted by the agency fairly soon after the close of the complaint, to determine if the complainants were satisfied with the process and outcome.

The Standard states that a complaints management system should be reviewed regularly but it does not explicitly specify the frequency of reviews. Instead it suggests that the depth and frequency is dependent upon the nature of the organisation and its policy. However, as a minimum, it would be reasonable to expect that a complaints management system that has been in place for over two years should be reviewed.

In addition to conducting reviews, agencies can also use forums and focus groups to gauge experiences and exchange information on trends or best practice ideas. This can assist in the improvement of their complaints system.

One such forum is the WA Public Sector Complaints Handling Forum which was established in March 2000 by the WA Ombudsman's Office. The Ombudsman is continuing to coordinate this Forum with the assistance of a planning committee. The Forum has arranged several information sharing events relating to complaints handling.

#### Findings

The findings against the *Review* element of the Standard were based on whether the six agencies had actually reviewed their systems and whether the review scope, to some extent, included policies, surveys, and audits of files. The findings are shown in Figure 8.

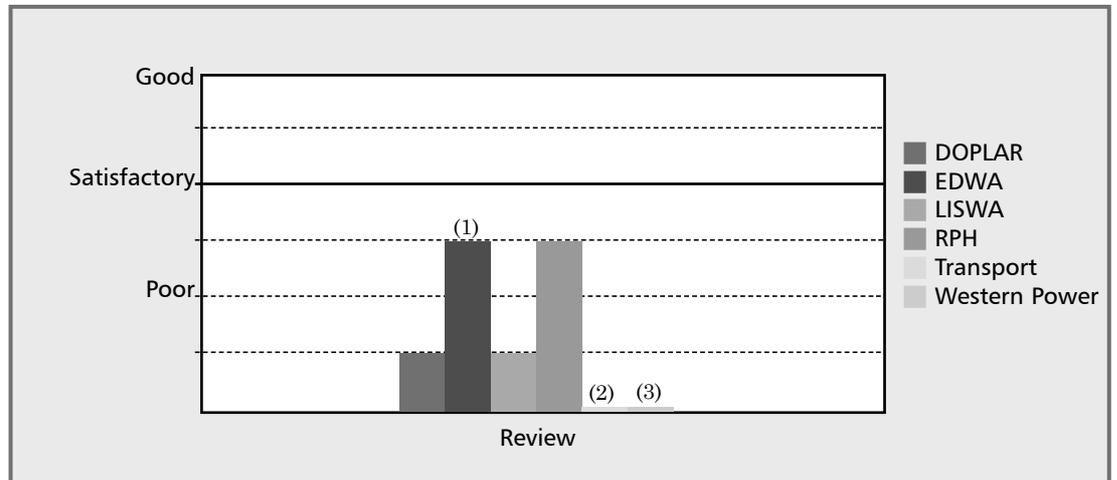


Figure 8: Review the system for the effective management of individual complaints.

*None of the agencies met the 'Review' element of the Standard.*

*(1) The review was conducted centrally by EDWA head office.*

*(2) Transport commenced a review in November 2000 but has yet to complete it.*

*(3) 'Review' element is not applicable as Western Power's new complaints system was only implemented in April 2000.*

Source: OAG

None of the agencies met the *Review* element of the Standard. Whilst all agencies reviewed their policies and procedures none of the reviews undertaken included an audit of individual complaints files. Only EDWA and RPH conducted any form of staff, consumer or complainant surveys. For example, RPH regularly measures complainants' satisfaction with the way their complaint was handled.

Furthermore, the level of implementation of review recommendations varied between the agencies. RPH implemented most of their recommendations. EDWA's recommendations were implemented to varying degrees at the schools visited. This is in part due to the recommendations having only recently been distributed so most schools had not implemented these when the audit was conducted. There was only minimal implementation of review recommendations at LISWA and DOPLAR.

### 3 Effectively Managing Individual Complaints

## Summary

The overall performance of the six agencies against the objective of effectively managing individual complaints is shown in Figure 9.

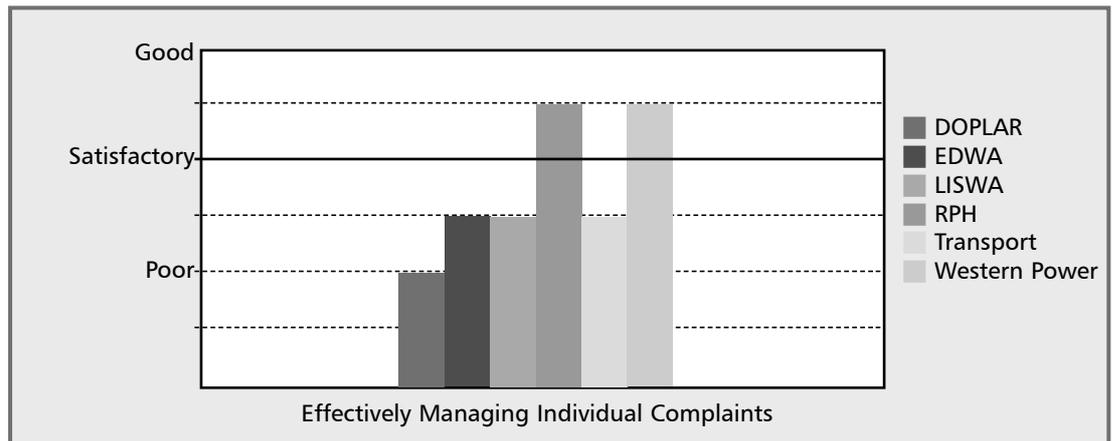


Figure 9: Overall performance for managing individual complaints.

*Both RPH and Western Power were able to demonstrate a satisfactory level of overall performance in the management of individual complaints.*

Source: OAG

Only two out of the six agencies (RPH and Western Power) displayed a satisfactory level of overall performance. In general, most agencies performed reasonably well at addressing individual complaints (*Fairness, Responsiveness, Remedies*) but did not do as well in terms of *Commitment, Resources, Accountability and Review*.

A critical factor contributing to achieving success in managing individual complaints gleaned from staff interviews, is their attitude or perception of complaints which have been influenced by some common misunderstandings such as:

■ **Complaints are bad.**

**Fact.** Complaints provide feedback about a product or a service experience. Complaints information can help an agency to improve its services and maintain customers' confidence and loyalty.

■ **A low number of complaints or no complaints means an agency is doing well.**

**Fact.** There will always be a certain number of complaints no matter how good an agency is. A low rate of complaints can also indicate that customers either do not know how to complain or fear retribution or that an agency is not managing complaints properly by not capturing information.

A list of further misunderstandings encountered during the examination are listed in Appendix B.

## Work in Progress

As the audit progressed, agencies reported to the audit team on actions underway and planned. It is too early in their implementation to evaluate these for this report.

In November 2000, Transport recognised the need for a review of its complaints process and undertook to conduct a review in 2001. The Director General has established a working party to facilitate the development of a best practice complaints management system. The intention is to pilot the system in the Transport Licensing Division.

Similarly, LISWA has recognised a need to improve its complaints process. LISWA has identified improvements to their system which have been approved by its Strategic Management Team and are being proceeded with.

Since the audit, DOPLAR has taken extensive steps to enhance its complaints management process. These include:

- developing a complaint form;
- implementing a workflow sheet to track and monitor complaints;
- initiating the use of a spreadsheet to record complaints investigations; and
- updating its internet site to give a fuller description of its complaints process, including listing telephone and e-mail points of contact.

EDWA has recently commenced work to identify current best practice in Complaints Management. EDWA anticipates that through that process the issues it has to manage will be addressed. It is exploring the potential for establishment of a specialised team to deal with complaint investigations and is considering suitable mechanisms that could be put in place without impinging on workload in schools and districts.

## Recommendations

- **Agencies need to:**
  - **demonstrate they are able to manage individual complaints efficiently and effectively, for example, by applying the essential elements of the Australian Standard on Complaints Handling.**
  - **appropriately resource the complaints management function, particularly by establishing and maintaining an adequate complaints recording system and ensuring staff are trained in complaints management.**
  - **demonstrate accountability for their handling of complaints by setting target timelines, monitoring progress and regularly reporting on outcomes.**

### 3 Effectively Managing Individual Complaints

- as part of a periodic review of their complaints management system, gather information, by such means as conducting surveys and interviews of staff and consumers and audits of individual complaints files.
- inform complainants of independent avenues of appeal.
- DOPLAR, EDWA, LISWA and Transport need to develop a more efficient and effective complaints management system for the management of individual complaints.
- EDWA needs to improve confidentiality of complaints at schools.

# 4 Using Complaints Data to Improve Services

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- *Of the six agencies examined only RPH and Western Power were able to demonstrate the effective use of complaints to improve services.*
- *RPH and Western Power both displayed a satisfactory degree of ‘Commitment’ and an adequate allocation of ‘Resources’ to facilitate the continuous improvement of agency services. The four remaining agencies all failed to provide adequate ‘Resources’ to support service improvement initiatives.*
- *RPH was the only agency to fulfil the ‘Visibility’, ‘Access’ and ‘Assistance’ elements of the Standard designed to encourage customers to lodge complaints. While EDWA and Western Power fulfilled the requirements for ‘Access’ they failed on ‘Visibility’ and ‘Assistance’. EDWA has recently commenced initiatives to improve ‘Visibility’. The other three agencies performed poorly in all three areas.*
- *RPH was the only agency to satisfy the ‘Data Collection’ and ‘Systemic and Recurring Problems’ elements of the Standard. Western Power fulfilled the requirements for ‘Systemic and Recurring Problems’ only whilst the remaining four agencies failed on both counts.*
- *Only RPH and Western Power were able to demonstrate that their systematic approach to the use of complaints had led directly to improved services.*
- *None of the agencies met the ‘Review’ element of the Standard. Whilst all agencies reviewed their policies and procedures the reviews undertaken lacked either some formal surveys or an assessment of the adequacy of their database<sup>21</sup>.*

## Background

The second objective of an effective complaints management system is to use complaints data to improve agency services (see Figure 3). This requires:

- agency commitment to the continuous improvement of agency services (essential elements of the Standard are *Commitment* and *Resources*);
- actively encouraging customers to lodge complaints (essential elements are *Visibility*, *Access* and *Assistance*);
- collecting and analysing complaints data to identify service improvement opportunities (essential elements are *Data Collection*, and *Systemic and Recurring Problems*); and
- reviewing agency processes to ensure that complaints data is being used in a systematic manner to drive service improvements (essential element is *Review*).

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<sup>21</sup> Not applicable for Western Power as its complaints system is new and has yet to be reviewed.

## Commitment to Continuous Improvement

### Agency responsibilities

Using complaints data to facilitate the continuous improvement of agency services requires the support and commitment of senior managers within the agency, particularly the Chief Executive Officer. Agency commitment to the use of complaints to drive service improvements is reflected in:

- an organisational culture that regards complaints as opportunities to improve services rather than as opportunities to blame staff;
- the development of up-to-date and documented policies and procedures for using complaints data to improve services;
- the allocation of adequate resources to the task of collating and analysing complaints data; and
- ready access to all levels of management to facilitate the resolution of systemic problems.

### Findings

The findings for the six agencies against the Standard's elements of *Commitment* and *Resources* are shown in Figure 10. EDWA's performance against these two elements has been assessed at the school level. While EDWA's central office is responsible for establishing overall policies for complaints management, the actual resourcing and implementation of these policies is a matter for individual schools to determine.

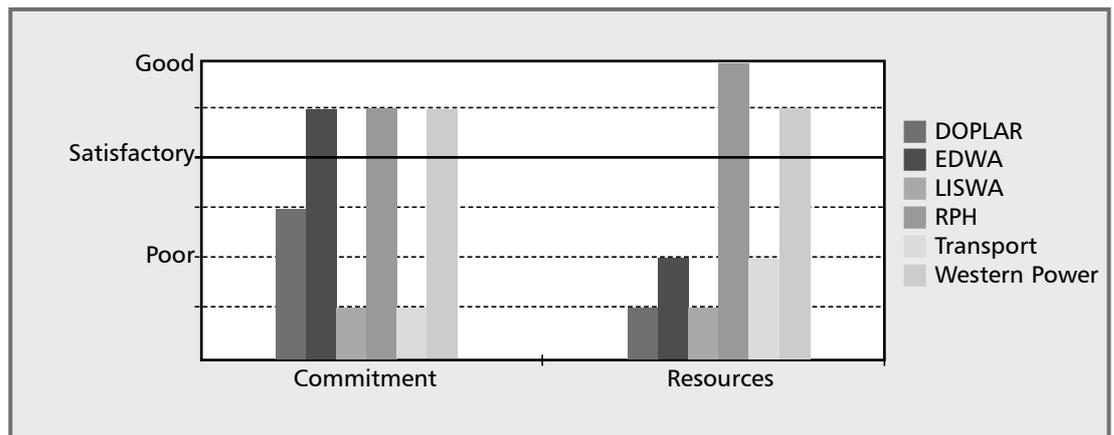


Figure 10: Commitment and Resources to continuous improvement.

*Levels of agency 'Commitment' and 'Resources' were highly variable. Only RPH and Western Power performed satisfactorily against both elements of the Standard, while LISWA's performance was consistently low.*

Source: OAG

## Commitment

Of the six agencies examined, three (EDWA, RPH, and Western Power) displayed a more than satisfactory level of *Commitment*. These agencies demonstrated their commitment by having:

- clear up-to-date guidelines, policies and procedures on the use of complaints to improve services;
- non-restrictive definitions as to what constitutes a complaint (eg. verbal complaints are recorded);
- systems whereby unresolved complaints can easily be referred to supervisors and managers; and
- agency cultures and practices that make it easy for customers to lodge complaints.

The above elements were absent at Transport and LISWA. For instance, both these agencies lacked clear guidelines, policies and procedures on the use of complaints to improve services and broad definitions on what constitutes a complaint. Both agencies thus failed to demonstrate an adequate level of commitment to the endorsement of complaints as a management information tool. Whilst DOPLAR has developed a range of suitable policies and procedures for complaints management, these policies have yet to be fully implemented.

No agency explicitly stated in their guidelines, policies and procedures that staff would not be blamed for customer complaints<sup>22</sup>. Interviews with frontline staff confirmed that such a 'no blame' culture or mindset had yet to be embraced by all layers of management. For example, at one agency, frontline staff indicated that complaints were viewed in a negative light, hence, staff did not actively encourage customers to lodge complaints. Staff at another agency felt that whilst support from upper management is generally good, there is little support from their immediate supervisors.

## Resources

Allocation of *Resources* to the task of using complaints to identify deficiencies in service delivery was not a priority in four of the six agencies examined. Only RPH and Western Power had allocated appreciable resources (in terms of staffing, systems and time) to this function.

RPH has a Customer Service Unit, a computerised 'complaints' database and dedicated staff for complaints management processes. Similarly, Western Power has a Customer Call Centre, a computerised 'complaints' database and staff with responsibility for collating and analysing complaints data. At the time of the examination, Transport, LISWA, DOPLAR and EDWA had not devoted sufficient resources to the collation and analysis of complaints.

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<sup>22</sup> Whilst EDWA's Complaints Policy and Procedures does refer to 'learning rather than attributing blame' the issue is not explicitly stated as a key principle underlying its complaints policy but rather as 'useful information for staff'.

# Encouraging Communication of Complaints

## Agency responsibilities

Agencies that encourage communication of complaints will have a ready source of feedback that can be used to facilitate improvements to their services. Agencies can encourage communication of complaints by having a highly visible and easily accessible process for making complaints and by assisting individuals to lodge their complaints.

Most customers are unaware of where or how to complain. A highly visible complaints system is one that is widely publicised both internally and externally, and promoted in a way that encourages complaints. Systems can be promoted via customer service charters, telephone directory listings, leaflets, posters, newsletters, booklets, and the Internet. In today's technological climate, an obvious strategy is for agencies to consider publishing their complaints procedures on the Internet so that their customers may easily find out how to lodge a complaint and how it will be dealt with. Similarly, a phone directory listing of a direct line to an agency's complaints service is a strong message that complaints are welcomed and are taken seriously.

Complaint forms clearly displayed at points of service delivery - where customers are most likely to need them - also help to encourage complaints. It is expected that the total number of complaints received will initially increase as *Visibility* improves.

An accessible complaints system minimises any barriers to lodging a complaint. Accessible systems provide clear and easily understood information on how, when, where and to whom to complain. This information should be prominently displayed and circulated at the point of service delivery. By accepting complaints in a variety of formats (including letters, e-mails, phone calls, the use of interpreter services and Telephone Typewriter [TTY] services for the deaf), agencies help to promote easy *Access*.

*Assistance* can be provided to complainants in one of two ways. The first involves agency staff helping complainants to lodge complaints (provide information and/or filling in complaint forms/write letters etc., especially for complainants with disability, literacy or language problems). The second can be in the form of clear guidelines and explanations on how best to express and lodge a particular complaint. For example, a well structured complaint form assists complainants to clearly express all elements of their complaint, in particular, the remedy sought. Such assistance ensures that the complaint is made in a way that it can be effectively dealt with by the complaints management system.

## Findings

The findings for the six agencies against the Standard's elements of *Visibility*, *Access* and *Assistance* are shown in Figure 11.

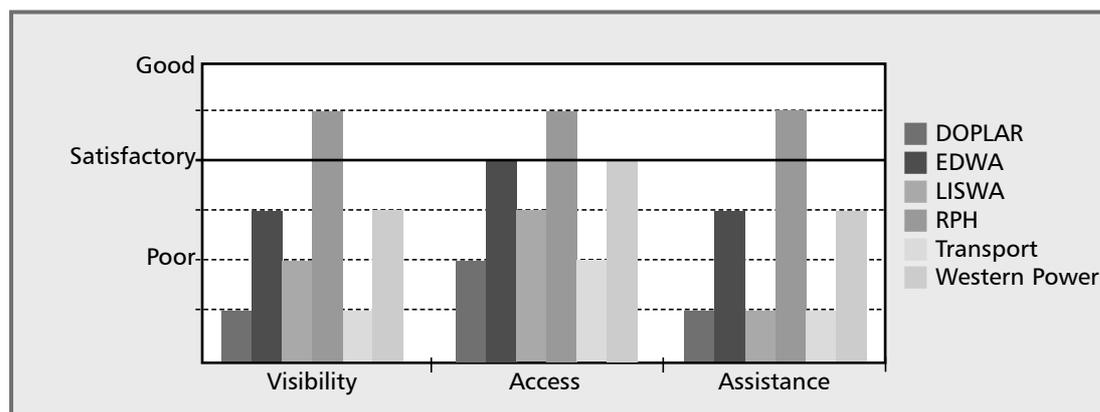


Figure 11: Encouraging communication of complaints.

*RPH was the only agency able to satisfy all three elements of the Standard. EDWA and Western Power fulfilled the requirements for 'Access' only, while the remaining agencies performed poorly in all three areas.*

Source: OAG

## Visibility

RPH was the only agency able to satisfy the *Visibility* element of the Standard. RPH has a Customer Service Unit located in a high traffic area (on the ground floor near one of the main entrances) within the Hospital and there is big, bold signage advertising 'Complaints'. In contrast to other agencies that use the term 'feedback' to encompass complaints, RPH refers explicitly to complaints in its literature (brochures, leaflets, pamphlets) and on its website. In addition, RPH's 'customer service' telephone number in the White Pages directory has captured some complaints.

Four agencies (DOPLAR, LISWA, Transport and Western Power) avoided references to complaints in favour of using the term 'feedback'. The use of 'feedback' to denote complaints may detract from the visibility of a complaints lodgement process.

Furthermore, at DOPLAR, LISWA and Transport there is no active promotion of complaints as a service improvement mechanism.

Even though EDWA did refer to complaints in their guidelines, policies and procedures, there was no evidence that complaint lodgement was actively promoted at the school or district levels. However, EDWA has recently produced and is currently distributing new posters and brochures to schools and parents. It is anticipated that this initiative will significantly improve the visibility of the EDWA complaints management system.

## 4 Using Complaints Data to Improve Services

### Access

Three agencies (EDWA, RPH and Western Power) satisfied the *Access* element of the Standard. There were a number of ways in which the public could lodge complaints at these agencies. Complaints were accepted whether they were in writing, by phone, in person or by e-mail.

These agencies also attempted to provide easy access to people from a non-English speaking background or people with disabilities. For example, whilst Western Power does not have specific formal services for people from minority groups it has attempted to meet their needs. Brochures in Chinese were piloted but were abandoned due to low demand. The Government interpreter services are made available to customers on the basis of need. Newsletters are available in large print and TTY services are available for deaf customers.

As such, making a complaint was easier at these agencies than at DOPLAR, LISWA or Transport, where explicit information was not provided on how, when, where and to whom to complain. However, LISWA did roster senior staff on evenings and weekends to address any possible complaints.

### Assistance

RPH was the only agency to satisfy the *Assistance* element of the Standard. Unlike the other agencies, RPH has a well-structured complaint form that assists the customer to clearly state the nature of the complaint and the desired action. A structured complaint form assists customers with the framing of complaints and ensures that the required data is collected in a uniform format. This facilitates data analysis.

An open-ended complaint form on the other hand provides little assistance in the framing of complaints and results in unstructured data that cannot easily be used to identify deficiencies in existing practices. Open-ended complaint forms are used by LISWA.

DOPLAR and Transport do not have a complaint form at all. It is unrealistic and lacking in customer focus for Transport not to have a complaint form in view of its many customers and high volume of transactions. Interestingly, most operational units do carry 'Exceptional Service Recognition' cards for customers to complete for service excellence.

There was no consistency in the level and nature of assistance provided to complainants by EDWA. The quality of the assistance provided depended heavily on the individual teachers and principals in the various schools visited. Explanations on how to lodge complaints were typically provided only after first contact with the complainant.

## Analysing Complaints to Improve Services

### Agency responsibilities

Agencies should look to systematically record customer complaints and then analyse this data to identify systemic and recurring problems. By identifying any systemic and/or recurring problems, agencies can then focus their service improvement efforts on the areas of greatest need.

In order to meet the *Data Collection* element of the Standard, agencies require a methodical approach to recording complaints. Such an approach should capture whole of agency data at a level of detail sufficient to allow analysis.

To ensure the capture of whole of agency data and reduce the risk of “hidden” complaints, agencies should record both formal and informal complaints. Ministerial correspondence (Ministerials) relating to service delivery complaints should also be recorded as they are another valuable source of information.

The importance of recording all complaints should be emphasised to staff through regular reminders (eg. via posters, training courses and articles in newsletters). Agencies can encourage compliance by streamlining the complaints recording process so that staff can perform this function simply and quickly.

Whilst the capture of data from different sources (verbal complaints, written complaints, Ministerials etc) is important, it is equally critical that the data recorded contains useful information. Although the level of detail should be tailored to an agency’s needs, it should as a minimum, include:

- complainant information – name, address, phone (if possible);
- date when the complaint was received;
- details of the complaint;
- what remedy the person would like; and
- action taken.

To get the most out of complaints, the Standard requires agencies to identify and rectify *Systemic and Recurring Problems*. Identification of systemic problems requires a systematic approach to the analysis and evaluation of complaints data. Such an approach will allow agencies to recognise repetitive complaints/patterns and assess whether remedial action is warranted. The speed and ease with which information can be found and analysed is expedited by a computerised system. A computerised spreadsheet is usually sufficient for most agencies.

To clearly demonstrate the value of complaints, an agency should regularly report internally and externally, on service improvements originating from complaints.

## 4 Using Complaints Data to Improve Services

### Findings

The findings for the six agencies examined for the Standards of *Data Collection* and *Systemic and Recurring Problems* are shown in Figure 12. As EDWA's central office has devolved responsibility for complaints management to individual schools, complaints data is collected at the school and district office levels only. EDWA does not centrally collate and analyse complaints data on a statewide basis with a view to identifying systemic issues and problems. This is a major shortcoming in EDWA's devolved approach to complaints management. The following rating is based on data at school level only.

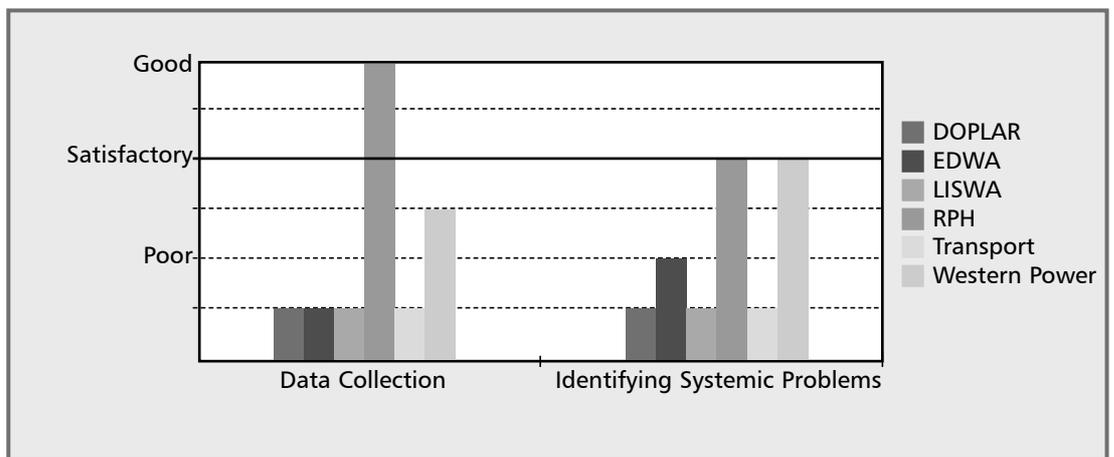


Figure 12: Data collection and identifying systemic and recurring problems.

*RPH* was able to satisfy both elements of the Standard whilst *Western Power* was only able to meet the requirements for 'Identifying Systemic Problems'. The remaining four agencies are failing to systematically identify opportunities to improve their services.

Source: OAG

### Data Collection

Only one agency (*RPH*) satisfied the *Data Collection* element of the Standard. *RPH*'s database comprised whole of agency complaints data for both the Wellington Street and Shenton Park campuses. Ministerials, and complaints from the Office of Health Review and the Ombudsman were also included. *RPH*'s use of categories and sub-categories helped to identify issues. The structured complaint forms captured the essential ingredients needed to facilitate systemic analysis and improvements.

*DOPLAR*'s extremely low number of complaints suggests that complaints were not well captured. *EDWA* had no set process for recording or filing complaints and relied on the commitment of school principals. At *LISWA*, only written complaints are recorded and these are filed in a manner that does not allow for easy nor adequate analysis. The examination found that the unstructured recording of complaints at *Transport* resulted in four complaints out of the 18 complaints audited not being responded to.

Western Power did not fully collect its complaints data and as such systemic analysis was limited. The review of files showed that while there is considerable coordination and monitoring of written complaints, it happens to a lesser degree with verbal complaints. This is acknowledged by Western Power, which intends to focus on this area for improvement.

The table below clearly demonstrates the effectiveness of the different data collection systems of each agency. The systems employed by RPH and Western Power have facilitated the collation of complaints (see Table 1).

	2001 <sup>(1)</sup>	2000	1999	1998	Comments
DOPLAR	7	5	1	1	Low complaint numbers may be due to a lack of capturing of complaints.
EDWA					Not available, as complaints are lodged at schools, district offices, and central office.
LISWA					Not systematically counted.
RPH	388	837	640		1998 data cannot be verified as the database was changed.
Transport					A formal count of complaints is not in place within the Licensing Division.
Western Power	386	435			New System. Statistics for Network Services Division only. <sup>(2)</sup>

Table 1: Number of complaints collected by each agency.

*The data collection systems vary in effectiveness across the agencies, with RPH and Western Power having adequate systems in place.*

*(1) 2001 figures are for six months only (January to June).*

*(2) Western Power figures for January 2000 to June 2000 are for the metropolitan area only.*

Source: DOPLAR; EDWA; LISWA; RPH; Transport; Western Power.

## Systemic and Recurring Problems

Agencies are required to identify and rectify *Systemic and Recurring Problems* in order to meet the Standard.

RPH and Western Power were the only two agencies that satisfied the *Systemic and Recurring Problems* element of the Standard. Using a systematic approach, both agencies analysed complaints data, identified systemic problems, implemented improvements and reported them.

## 4 Using Complaints Data to Improve Services

The remaining agencies had ad hoc procedures in place. For example, at some of the schools visited the service improvements made relied on the judgement of the principal involved rather than on the adoption of a systematic and comprehensive approach.

Ad hoc complaints tracking means that it is not possible to run management reports or analyse data for the purpose of identifying systemic problems. The management reports of some of the less well-developed agencies simply provided information on the number of complaints and not on their nature or possible implications.

When there is no database for recording complaints, there is no systemic analysis of complaints data and only the most obvious complaints appear to lead to service improvements. For example, at Transport the absence of a database makes it impossible to run management reports and analyse trends. Transport has suggested that the development, installation and use of a new computer system (TRELLIS) will effectively address this area.

The important linkages between complaint analysis, the identification of systemic problems, and rectification of service deficiencies were highlighted when agencies were asked to demonstrate how they had used complaints data to make service improvements. Of the agencies examined, only RPH and Western Power were able to satisfy audit that their systematic approach to the analysis of complaints and the identification of systemic problems had led to improvements in service delivery.

### **Examples of service improvements made due to complaints**

#### **Example One - RPH**

In response to several complaints on the long waiting times for discharge medication, RPH identified reasons for the delays (such as incorrect script procedures and courier service delays) and sought to address these problems. As a result of the complaints, a satellite pharmacy was established on the eighth floor and reminders of protocol for prescribing discharge medication were sent to all doctors via monthly newsletters. There have been no more complaints on discharge medication waiting times since these measures were put into place (February 2001).

#### **Example Two - RPH**

In response to mix-ups regarding hospital appointments during school holidays, current calendars with school holiday dates highlighted were provided to clerical staff. This measure was implemented in July 2000 and reviewed in March 2001.

**Example Three - RPH**

There are numerous complaints lodged by patients staying in the hospital in relation to lost property. RPH has developed new procedures to ensure proper tagging and secure storage of property in a central safe. These procedures are soon to be implemented and it is anticipated that they will significantly reduce the number of complaints.

**Example Four - Western Power**

A Community Liaison Officer was appointed because of the number of general complaints Western Power received in relation to the retrospective underground power lines program. These were primarily associated with landscaping issues and the location of equipment. The number of complaints on these issues decreased significantly as a result of this measure. Since this appointment, minor complaints have decreased by 35 per cent in the period between January and June 2001.

**Example Five - Western Power**

When complaints on power quality increased, Western Power appointed two additional technicians to clear the backlog in requests for improvements in power quality. As a result, the number of complaints on power quality has fallen.

**Example Six - Western Power**

Western Power regularly sends out standard letters to house owners advising them of their responsibilities, such as the need to cut down trees that may interfere with power lines. There were some complaints on the arrogant tone of these letters. Western Power is revising its letters to make them more 'user friendly'.

**Example Seven - Western Power**

Western Power has become proactive about informing clients regarding a particular service that may be a potential source of complaints. This allows Western Power to manage clients' expectations. For example, when underground power lines are to be installed in a particular area, a newsletter which informs clients of the underground power program and the possible disruption to power is circulated.

## Reviewing Agency Processes for Improving Services

### Agency responsibilities

Agencies need to review their performance with respect to ‘Commitment to Continuous Improvement’, ‘Encouraging Communication of Complaints’ and ‘Analysing Complaints to Improve Services’ (the essential element in the Standard is *Reviews*).

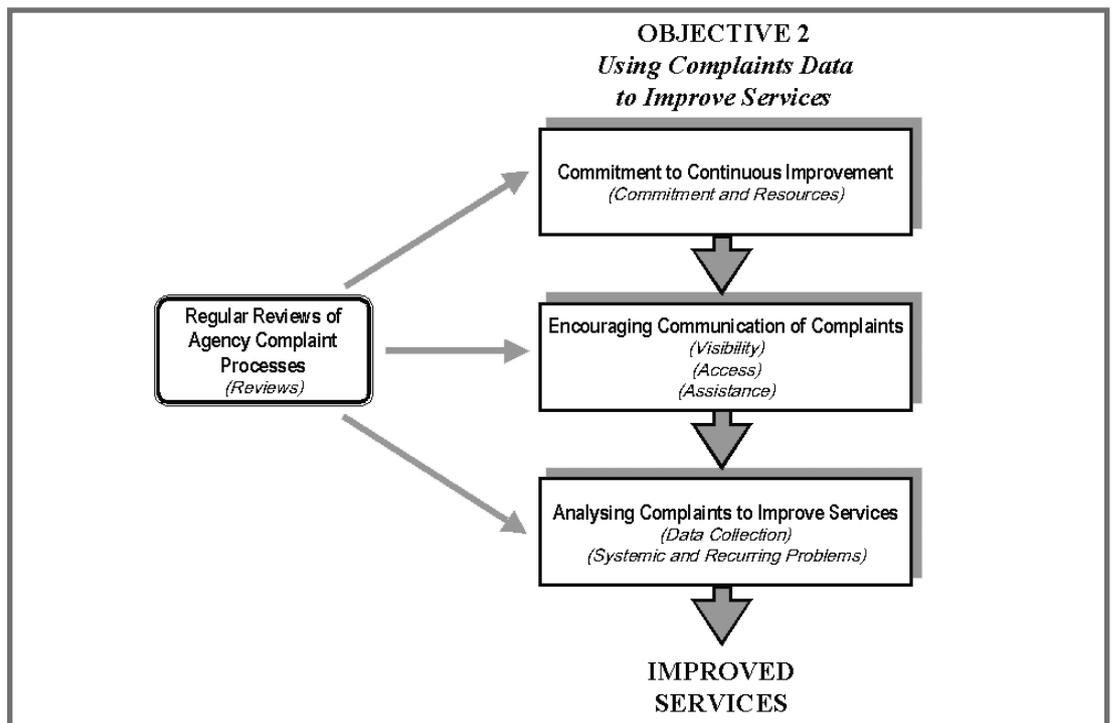


Figure 13: Reviewing the system for using complaints to improve services.

*An agency should review on a regular basis, its systems for the use of complaints data to improve agency services to ensure that they are operating efficiently and effectively.*

Source: OAG

Reviews should include:

- an evaluation of policies and procedures;
- surveys of staff, consumers and complainants; and
- an evaluation of whether or not the complaint databases and analysis methods used provide a useful tool for management to improve services.

As with the review frequency for objective one, the effective management of individual complaints, it is suggested that a complaints management system that has been in place for over two years should be reviewed.

## Findings

The findings against the *Review* element of the Standard were based on whether the agencies had reviewed their systems for using complaints data to drive service improvements and whether the review scope included policies, surveys and databases.

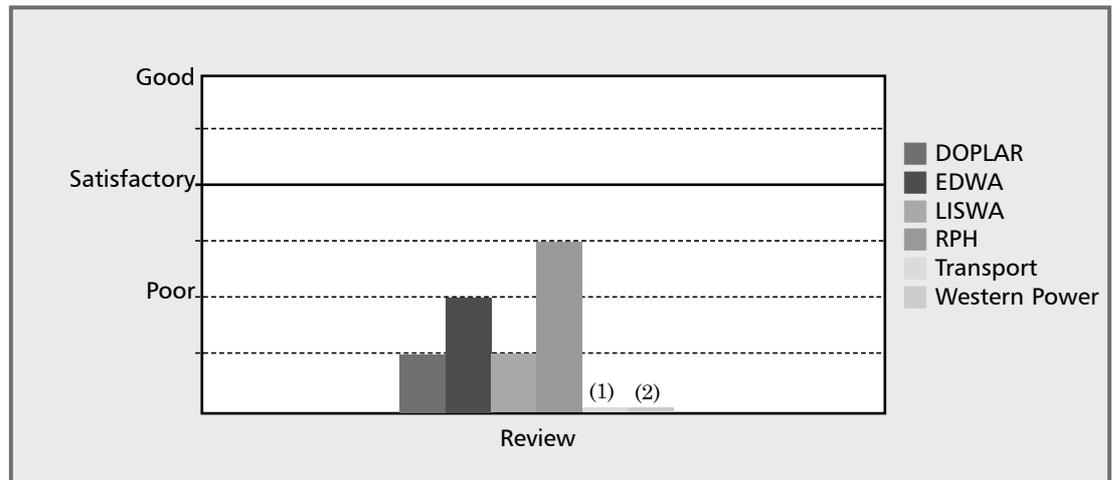


Figure 14: Review.

*None of the agencies met the 'Review' element of the Standard.*

*(1) Transport commenced a review in November 2000 but has yet to complete it.*

*(2) 'Review' element is not applicable as Western Power's new complaints system was only implemented in April 2000.*

Source: OAG

To satisfy the *Review* element of the Standard, an agency should:

- evaluate its policies, procedures and guidelines;
- formally survey or interview complainants, frontline staff and consumers; and
- assess the adequacy of its complaints databases.

As the scope of the reviews undertaken by the agencies examined failed to adequately address the above areas, none of them met the *Review* element of the Standard. For example, EDWA failed to assess the adequacy of its complaints databases, whilst RPH, DOPLAR and LISWA failed to survey complainants, consumers, and/or formally consult with frontline staff.

Furthermore, the level of implementation of review recommendations varied between the agencies. There was only minimal implementation of review recommendations at LISWA and DOPLAR.

## Summary

Most agencies are still grappling with the use of complaints to drive service improvements. Only two out of the six agencies, namely, RPH and Western Power, achieved an acceptable level of performance for the objective of using complaints data to improve services.

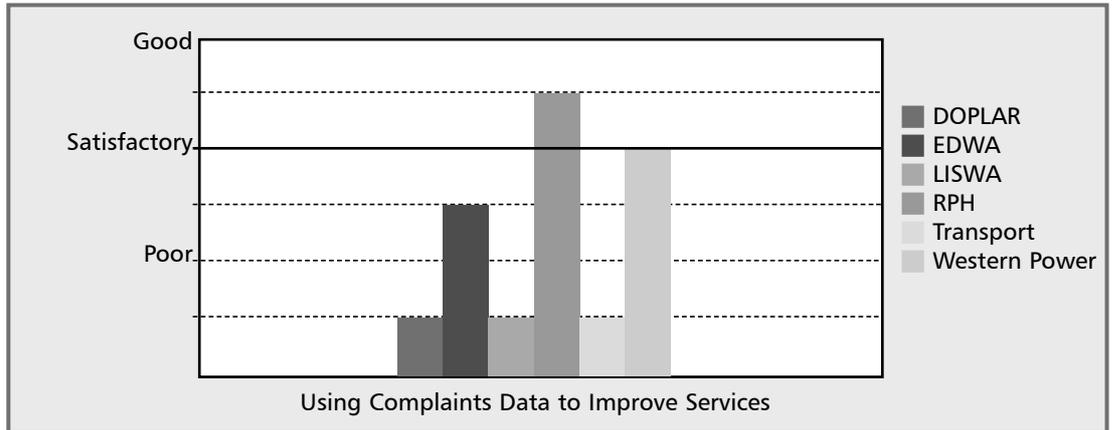


Figure 15: Overall performance of agencies for using complaints data to improve services.

*Of the six agencies, only RPH and Western Power were able to demonstrate a satisfactory level of overall performance for using complaints to improve services.*

Source: OAG

A critical factor impacting on successfully achieving Objective Two gathered from staff interviews is the lack of a modern understanding of complaints. For example:

■ ***We don't encourage complaints. The fewer complaints, the better.***

**Fact.** Complaints have to be 'welcomed' before they can be prevented. By openly seeking feedback, the resulting increase in complaints is a good sign that the public is aware the agency takes complaints seriously. If complaints data is used to address systemic problems, the rise in complaints numbers is usually short term, with the figures reflecting the prevention of repeat complaints.

When agencies advise complainants of their review rights there may be more complaints to appeal bodies but a good internal complaints management system ensures that they are only the complaints which need an external review.

■ ***We should not publish complaints statistics because it will publicise our problems and give a wrong image of the agency.***

**Fact.** Reporting complaints and the improvements the agency has made in response to them enhances an agency's accountability and helps to publicise that it is listening to its customers.

A list of further misunderstandings encountered during the examination are listed in Appendix B.

## Recommendations

- **Agencies need to:**
  - **actively encourage communication of complaints by providing a highly visible and easily accessible process for making complaints and by assisting individuals to lodge complaints.**
  - **invest appropriate resources in staff time and systems for collecting, collating and analysing whole of agency complaints data in order to identify possible service improvements.**
  - **periodically review their complaints management system with a view to improving services by: reviewing complaints policies; assessing the adequacy of data gathered within the complaints recording system; and evaluating how effective the use of complaints data to improve services has been.**
- **To better capture complaints, Transport, LISWA, DOPLAR, Western Power and EDWA need to improve the documentation of oral complaints.**
- **EDWA, DOPLAR, LISWA and Transport need to invest adequate resources in staff time and database systems and actively promote complaints in order to drive service improvements.**

## Essential Elements Of Effective Complaints Handling

Appendix A has not been reproduced in the electronic version of this report for copyright reasons. For further information regarding the Essential Elements of Effective Complaints Handling, contact Standards Australia International Limited via their website [www.standards.com.au](http://www.standards.com.au) or their Customer Service Centre, GPO Box 5240, Sydney NSW 2001.

## Common Issues

Inappropriate practices were in part based on misunderstanding of the principles underpinning complaints management. Findings from interviews indicated there were a number of issues that needed clarification.

■ ***If we don't accept complaints, we won't have to respond to criticisms.***

**Fact.** People are now more aware of their rights and of public sector responsibilities. Not having a system will not prevent complaints.

People can go to higher authorities or to the media resulting in adverse media, loss of public support, funding or jobs.

■ ***We have a low number of complaints, so there is no need for staff training on complaints handling.***

**Fact.** Customer research shows that people who have had a complaint resolved to their satisfaction are more loyal than those who have never complained. Training staff in complaints handling is therefore a worthwhile investment for any organisation.

Typical complainants will tell eight to ten people about their complaint but one in ten complainants will tell 20 people. An agency can be damaged by a small number of complaints.

■ ***It costs money to have a complaints management system and we don't get anything worthwhile back.***

**Fact.** An agency has to weigh the cost of a complaints management system against the cost of not handling complaints properly and not improving services using complaints data.

Complaints which consume lots of staff time may reduce an agency's capacity to use its resources effectively. Costs can rise sharply as complaints go higher up the agency such as escalation to senior staff, Ministers and Ombudsman; or to long-running complex disputes and adverse media profile.

■ ***We know what needs to be done. We don't need to get information from complaints. They are always negative.***

**Fact.** Complaint form another source of evidence regarding information already known by management and can be used to substantiate an agency's claim to funding for research, policies or programs.

■ ***The government is giving this service free so people should be grateful and not complain.***

**Fact.** The consumer is a taxpayer who has a right to complain and to have the complaint handled respectfully even if it is not possible to give the outcome being sought.

■ ***As long as the complaints are resolved, we need not bother with tracking, documenting, analysing or reporting them.***

**Fact.** Just handling the individual complaints wastes the opportunities for making systemic service improvements and may prevent serious problems and deficiency gaps being addressed.

As part of making a complaint, most complainants want assurance that the same thing will not happen to other people.

- ***If we tell staff they will not be blamed, they will do what they like and someone has to be responsible.***

**Fact.** Traditionally staff deal with complaints negatively or with hostility. A ‘no blame culture’ emphasises the learning and improvement opportunities, not on who made the mistake, and will encourage staff to support the complaints process as part of service quality. In exceptional cases, a complaint may lead to counselling or even disciplinary action, but staff will generally feel supported and be encouraged to learn from the experience and develop better understanding.

- ***If we request complaints to be made in writing, it will formalise the process and we have better control over the whole process.***

**Fact.** Many letters of complaint do not give all the information needed to understand and resolve the customer’s problem. Insisting on written complaints tends to indicate to customers that an agency may be trying to prevent complaints and are not really interested in them. Customers may also feel intimidated and not take any further action.

## Managing Complaints: Summary of Key Agency Responsibilities

### Effectively Managing Individual Complaints

#### Commitment

- Demonstrated at, and promoted from, the highest level.
- Sufficient delegated authority – empowering staff to resolve complaints.
- Access to all levels in agency as necessary to solve complaints.
- Documented and up-to-date policies and procedures based on AS 4269-1995.

#### Resources

- Appropriately skilled complaints handling staff.
- Easily accessible procedure manuals.
- Provision of training in complaints process and in dealing with complainants.
- Investment of resources to support the management of complaints.

#### Fairness

- Adequate recording system that allows for independent review.
- Guidelines have been followed and complaints are treated seriously.
- Complainant is informed of complaint handling process.
- Complainant is informed of avenues for further review (eg. the Ombudsman).
- Informed of decision and reason for decision.
- Confidentiality.

#### Responsiveness

- Reasonable target timelines for all stages of a complaint
- Complainant told how long it will take and kept informed of progress

#### Remedies

- Fair and reasonable remedies that address all aspects of the complaint.
- Issues are followed up where appropriate.
- Should remedies be offered to others in similar circumstances?

#### Accountability

- Each level in the agency accepting responsibility for complaints handling.
- Setting of complaints handling system performance targets.
- Performance monitoring and evaluation.
- Appropriate reporting on the operation of the complaints handling system against documented performance standards/targets/objectives.
- Regular independent auditing of the complaints handling process.

#### Review the system for the handling of individual complaints

- Review on a regular basis the system for handling individual complaints.

## Using Complaints Data to Improve Services

### Commitment

- CEO support for using complaints data for service improvements.
- Well documented policies for using complaints for service improvements.
- ‘No Blame’ complaints culture that encourages the collection of complaints.
- Allow for non-written complaints – ie. no “needs to be in writing.”
- Access to all levels in agency as necessary to solve systemic problems.

### Resources

- Dedicated staff and appropriate central database of complaints.
- Time and Resources to develop and coordinate system.

### Visibility

- System publicised in a way that encourages complaints.
- Promoted, as widely as possible, internally and externally.
- Promotion methods are tailored to customers.

### Access

- Ready access to information on how, when, where and to whom to complain (eg. prominently displayed and circulated at the point(s) of service delivery).
- Simple and accessible arrangements for lodging complaints.
- Specific needs customers – eg. those from a non-English speaking background or those with a physical disability etc.

### Assistance

- Ensures the complaint is made in a way that it can be effectively dealt with by the complaints management system.

### *Data Collection*

- A recording system that captures and records whole of agency data.
- Use of categories to allow analysis.
- Enough detail is collated to allow analyses of services provided.

### Systemic and Recurring Problems

- Systematic and periodic analysis and evaluation of complaints data collected.
- Identification of repetitive complaints and their causes.
- Evaluate whether remedial action is warranted.
- Report on service improvements initiated due to complaints data.

### Review the system for using complaints data to improve services

- Review on a regular basis the system for using complaints to improve services.

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