

Making a complaint to a State Government agency

Talk to the agency involved first

All public sector agencies should have complaint handling procedures. As a general rule, you should make your complaint directly to the agency involved to give them the opportunity to address your concerns. As well as helping resolve your complaint, bringing the matter to their attention may result in changes to their policies or procedures that will benefit other community members.

Letter or telephone call?

A telephone call may be sufficient and quicker if you are complaining about an issue that is relatively simple or easily resolved. Phoning before writing may also help clarify an agency's complaint handling procedures.

We suggest you follow these steps:

- before calling, make notes about what you would like to discuss. You can use these notes to keep track of the points you make during your phone call;
- find out the name of the person who answers your call and their position in the agency;
- tell the person about your concerns, making it clear that you are seeking a resolution to your concerns and not simply providing feedback;
- ask if the person you are speaking to can help. If they can't, ask if there is someone else you can contact;
- note the time and date of the conversation and what was discussed;
- if an agreement is reached to resolve your complaint ask the person to write to you confirming this or write to the person yourself confirming your understanding of what was agreed; and
- if the person is unable to resolve your concerns ask them who you can address a written complaint to.

Even if you feel upset, stay calm and polite throughout the conversation. Staff of the agency you are dealing with should respond in a similar manner, treating you with courtesy and respect.

A written complaint is usually best if your complaint is more complex. However a phone call before you write may clarify some of the issues or help you understand the agency's complaint handling procedures. For example, some complaints may require a special form or a statutory declaration.

Putting your complaint in writing

If you decide to write, send your letter to the agency's complaint handling officer. Make it clear in your letter that you are seeking a resolution of your concerns and not simply providing feedback.

Your letter should be clear and to the point. Summarise in a couple of sentences exactly what your complaint is about. Stick to the facts and don't go into excessive detail. Your letter should include:

- relevant dates, places and times;
- a description of the incident or problem;
- details of any phone conversations and meetings;
- any explanations you think are important; and
- copies of relevant documents.

If you have difficulty expressing yourself, ask for help from relatives, friends or a community organisation. The [WA Council of Social Services](#) can put you in touch with someone.

At the end of your letter state what action you think should be taken to resolve your problem. This might be an apology, an explanation of what happened or something else to put the matter right. Make sure your desired outcome is reasonable. If your request is realistic and within the power of the person you are writing to, your complaint is more likely to be resolved.

Ask for an acknowledgement

Always ask to have your letter or phone call acknowledged in writing. Ask for an estimate of how long it will take to deal with your complaint. If there is a degree of urgency involved, let the agency know and explain why.

Keep records

It is important you keep copies of all the letters you send and receive as well as details of all telephone calls. You may need to provide evidence of your dealings with the agency, particularly if you decide to refer the matter to another complaint handling body.

Follow up on your complaint

If nothing happens, call the agency to check on the progress of your complaint. Make it clear to the person you speak to that you would like your complaint resolved.

If the agency cannot resolve your concerns, ask if there is someone you can complain to next. This might be someone higher in the agency or an outside organisation or individual, such as your local Member of Parliament, the responsible Minister or another complaint handling or appeal body.

What to do if unsuccessful

If your complaint is not properly resolved or not dealt with in a reasonable time, and the agency has not referred you to another appropriate complaint or review body, you may choose to take it to the Ombudsman. The names and addresses of other bodies that deal with complaints about government agencies are listed on the Ombudsman's website at www.ombudsman.wa.gov.au.

Acknowledgement

Information from the [New South Wales Ombudsman](#), [Queensland Ombudsman](#), [Commonwealth Ombudsman](#) and the [Parliamentary and Health Services Ombudsman \(United Kingdom\)](#) were used as a guide in preparing these guidelines.



Ombudsman Western Australia

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