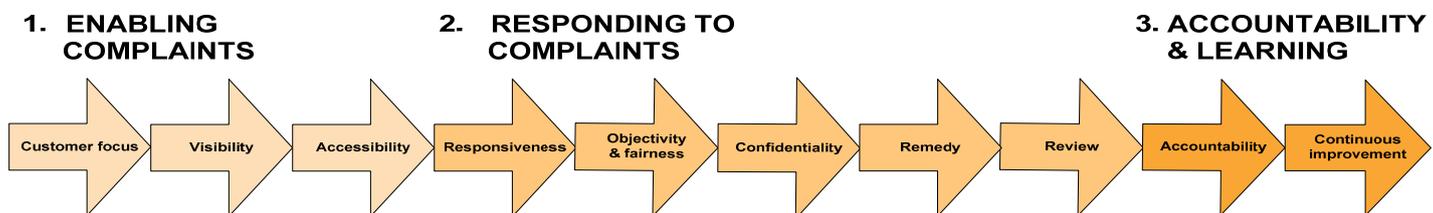


### Introduction

In November 2009, the Ombudsman's office surveyed all organisations within its jurisdiction to examine complaint handling by Western Australian state and local government organisations. This was the third such survey conducted by our office, the last being in 2001. The 2009-10 survey was structured according to a series of complaint handling principles, against which participants were asked to assess themselves. These principles are based on, and are consistent with, the *Public Sector Commissioner's Circular 2009 - 27 on Complaints Management* and the Australian Standard (AS ISO 10002-2006: *Customer Satisfaction - Guidelines for Complaints Handling in Organisations*). Survey responses confirmed that the vast majority of respondents consider these principles to be relevant to their organisation.

The principles for complaint handling can be broken into three stages:



Of the 308 state government agencies and local governments surveyed, a high response rate of 72 per cent was achieved. This consisted of responses from 84 per cent of state government agencies (covering 99 per cent of FTE) and 59 per cent of local governments (covering 81 per cent of FTE).

### Key messages

- Western Australian state and local government organisations:
  - take complaint handling seriously;
  - largely have appropriate practices in place to handle complaints; and
  - are generally doing a good job of handling complaints.
- Opportunities for the improvement of complaint handling practices have been identified.
- The findings of the survey support the view that effective and efficient implementation of the complaint handling principles can be achieved through a 'fit for purpose' complaint handling system. This is a system that varies to fit an organisation's circumstances and is proportionate to the number and type of complaints it receives.

### Key findings

- 78 per cent of respondents reported receiving complaints in 2008-09, while 22 per cent of respondents reported receiving 0 complaints in the same period. More specifically:
  - 31 per cent of respondents reported receiving 1-10 complaints;
  - 30 per cent reported receiving 11-100 complaints;
  - 14 per cent reported receiving 101-1000 complaints; and
  - 3 per cent reported receiving more than 1000 complaints.

## Enabling complaints

- Basic arrangements that enable people to make complaints were commonplace with 70 per cent of respondents reporting they prominently display contact details for making complaints and accept complaints by letter, email and telephone. However, almost one-third of respondents reported that they did not have all of these basic arrangements. There is also limited tailoring of complaint handling processes to suit customer demographics. These two areas present opportunities for improvement, so that the basic arrangements for visible and accessible complaints channels become universal.

## Responding to complaints

- Once complaints have been made, survey respondents - particularly larger organisations that received the most complaints - generally reported arrangements to ensure that complaints are dealt with in a prompt, objective and confidential manner. However, the survey results point to some opportunities for improvement, specifically, setting timelines for handling complaints and meeting them, the management of unreasonable complainants and connecting complaints processes to legislated whistleblower and anti-corruption processes.
- Effectively responding to complaints also involves providing appropriate remedies when complaints are sustained and avenues for review and/or appeal. Four out of five respondents reported providing some form of remedy when complaints were sustained and advising complainants about their right to seek external review and/or appeal. While these results are positive, they also represent opportunities for improvement.

## Accountability and learning

- Most respondents reported having arrangements to ensure that they are recording and analysing complaints. A number of organisations, however, did not report having mechanisms to use the lessons learnt from a complaint to assist organisational development. This represents an opportunity for improvement.
- Larger organisations and those reporting higher numbers of complaints were more likely to report that they had put into action all of the complaint handling principles covered by the survey. State government departments, which are subject to the *Public Sector Commissioner's Circular 2009 - 27 on Complaints Management*, more frequently reported having a comprehensive complaint handling system which put all of the principles into action.

## Assisting organisations improve their complaint handling

- The Ombudsman's office currently undertakes a number of activities to assist agencies with their complaint handling. Following the opportunities for improvement identified through the survey, where appropriate, we will also assist agencies to:
  - Develop the basic arrangements that enable customers to complain;
  - Tailor complaint handling practices to suit customer demographics;
  - Set target timelines for complaint handling and meet them as well as manage unreasonable complainants;
  - Better connect complaint handling and existing whistleblower and anti-corruption processes;
  - Inform complainants about their rights to external review mechanisms; and
  - Develop greater connection between receiving complaints and learning from complaints.

A comprehensive report on the survey results, *2009-10 Survey of Complaint Handling Practices in the Western Australian State and Local Government Sectors*, is available at <http://www.ombudsman.wa.gov.au/complainthandlingsurvey> or by telephoning Ms Belinda West on 9220 7555.

### Ombudsman Western Australia