

NSW public sector complaint handling in 2025 – self-assessment and survey results

A special report under section 31 of the *Ombudsman Act 1974*



Pursuing fairness for
the people of NSW.

 **Ombudsman**
New South Wales

9 March 2026

The Hon Ben Franklin MLC
President
Legislative Council
Parliament House
SYDNEY NSW 2000

The Hon Greg Piper MP
Speaker
Legislative Assembly
Parliament House
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Mr President and Mr Speaker

Pursuant to section 31 of the *Ombudsman Act 1974*, I present a report titled *NSW public sector complaint handling in 2025 – self-assessment and survey results*.

I draw your attention to the provisions of section 31AA of the *Ombudsman Act 1974* in relation to the tabling of this report. I request that you make the report public forthwith.

Yours sincerely



Paul Miller
NSW Ombudsman



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Executive summary

Introduction

This report details the first review conducted under section 25A of the *Ombudsman Act 1974*, which provides for the Ombudsman to review the complaint handling systems of public authorities. The review is a high-level snapshot of the shape and maturity of complaint handling systems in NSW government agencies. This has been done through a self-assessment questionnaire, sent to NSW government principal departments, local councils, and universities in our jurisdiction (see Section 5.2). At the same time, we asked organisations to distribute a corresponding survey for completion by complaint handling staff.

We have used the Standards Australia *Guidelines for Complaint Management in Organizations*, and our *Effective Complaint Management Guidelines* as a benchmark for this review.

The report explores the results of our self-assessment review through the lens of the 6 principles for effective complaint management, a set of values we developed in collaboration with NSW government organisations.¹

All observations in this report are based on the responses provided to the NSW Ombudsman through the organisation self-assessment and the complaint handling staff survey. We have not conducted further testing or validation on the accuracy of responses provided.

Self-assessment results

201 organisations participated in the self-assessment in June and July 2025.²

Most organisations report having policies and procedures as part of their complaint management system. We have identified some areas for improvement aligned with 3 of the effective complaint management principles:

- **Information and accessibility:** There appear to be fewer ways organisations provide information about their complaint systems than there were in 2018. This is despite an increase in the number of people in Australia speaking a language other than English at home, or identifying as living with a disability. Providing multiple complaint channels and providing people with the help they need to complain is an essential part of an effective complaint handling system.
- **Taking ownership:** A relatively low number of organisations report providing complaint handling training to staff. A skilled and supported workforce is essential for an effective complaint management system and should be a priority for those organisations currently not providing training.
- **Transparency:** Although 85% of organisations report that they collect data on complaints, only 61% of organisations analyse the data and report it to their executive. If data is being collected but not analysed and reported on, organisations are missing out on the opportunity for data-driven service improvement.

Staff insights on complaint handling

While the self-assessment was conducted, we also asked organisations to distribute a complaint handling staff survey to those staff with complaint handling responsibilities within the organisation. 1,246 staff participated in the staff survey.

¹ See Section 1.3 for a list of the 6 principles for effective complaint handling.

² See Section 2 for an explanation of what organisations include.

We asked staff what is working well in their organisation, what their organisation does that is innovative, and whether there are any challenges to good complaint management.

Their responses suggested that:

- They saw good communication as a strength in their organisations' complaint handling.
- Staff value resources that help them with their complaint handling responsibilities such as good quality training, scripts to help with difficult conversations, and clear information about complaints on their websites.
- Some challenges are enduring (such as unreasonable complainant conduct), and others emerging (such as difficulties handling anonymous complaints).

Next steps

Given the scope and nature of this self-assessment, we are not making recommendations to individual agencies. Instead, we encourage organisations to review their systems with the results of the survey and self-assessment in mind.

We will be using the results of the self-assessment and survey to develop our forward program of targeted, risk-based complaint handling system reviews.

We will also be contacting certain organisations involved in the review to discuss their self-assessment responses in more detail.

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of the review

In August 2022, section 25A was added to the *Ombudsman Act 1974 (Ombudsman Act)*, giving us the power to review the complaint handling systems of public authorities.³ This report details the first review conducted under this new legislative function.

The review is a high-level snapshot of complaint handling systems in the NSW public sector. This has been done through a self-assessment questionnaire, sent to NSW government principal departments, with a request they distribute it to portfolio agencies in our jurisdiction (see Section 5.2). We also sent it to university vice chancellors and local council general managers. At the same time, we asked agencies to distribute a corresponding survey for voluntary completion by any staff involved in the complaint handling process.

We will use the information collected to inform future complaint handling system reviews as well as contacting some agencies directly to discuss their responses to the self-assessment.

1.2 Background to the complaint handling system review function

Since the 1990s, the Ombudsman's Office has periodically reviewed the complaint handling systems of various NSW government organisations. We performed this:

- in reviews about community service providers, under section 14 of the *Community Services (Complaints, Reviews and Monitoring) Act 1993 (CS CRAMA)*
- in reviews of public authorities under the Ombudsman Act, with their voluntary participation.

On 19 August 2022, the Ombudsman Act was amended, providing a clear legislative foundation for our office to review the complaint handling systems of NSW government organisations, examine public authorities' handling of complaints, and to report and make recommendations to the relevant minister and the authority.

Further detail on the history of this function is included at Section 5.3.

1.3 Effective complaint management systems

The NSW Ombudsman has spent 50 years supporting the public sector to manage complaints and to improve complaint management systems.

What is a complaint?

A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction made to or about an organisation, related to its products, services, staff or the handling of a complaint, where a response or resolution is explicitly or implicitly expected or legally required.⁴

³ Section 25A of the Ombudsman Act replicates a power the NSW Ombudsman already had under section 14 of the *Community Services (Complaints, Reviews and Monitoring) Act 1993* in respect of community service providers. In late 2022, the NSW Ombudsman commenced a review into the Department of Communities and Justice Complaint System in respect of its Aboriginal Child Protection function. This report was tabled in Parliament on 6 November 2024.

⁴ Standards Australia, Australian Standard AS 10002: 2022, *Guidelines for Complaint Management in Organizations (ISO 10002:2018, NEQ)*, (25 March 2022).

What are the principles for effective complaint management?

The 6 principles for effective complaint management were developed by the Ombudsman in collaboration with NSW Government organisations to ensure that they were practical and responsive to a range of organisational environments, as well as what complainants want.⁵ They are relevant for NSW Government departments, local councils and community service providers.

Figure 1: 6 principles for effective complaint management



Section 2 of this report explores the results of our self-assessment review through the lens of these 6 principles.

1.4 What this review tells us about complaint handling in the NSW public sector

Some key facts of this review are:

- 201 organisations submitted a self-assessment, including responses from portfolio agencies connected with all 12 principal Departments.
- 1,246 staff responded to our staff survey.
- Most public authorities report having both policy and procedures to assist staff with handling complaints. While we have identified some clear areas for future focus, most organisations appear to have acceptably mature policies and systems.
- We could not identify any areas where there has been significant change since our previous large scale system review, conducted in 2017-18 as part of the Complaint Handling Improvement Program (CHIP).⁶

⁵ NSW Ombudsman, Complaint handling improvement program – Commitments implementation review. (31 August 2018). <<https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/reports/report-to-parliament/complaint-handling-improvement-program-commitments-report>>

⁶ Ibid.

2. Self-assessment results

In June and July 2025, the NSW Ombudsman asked public authorities to take part in a self-assessment of their complaint handling systems under s25A of the Ombudsman Act.

The self-assessment was built to measure an organisation's alignment with the 6 principles of effective complaint management. For that reason, we have structured this section of the report to examine the results through each principle.

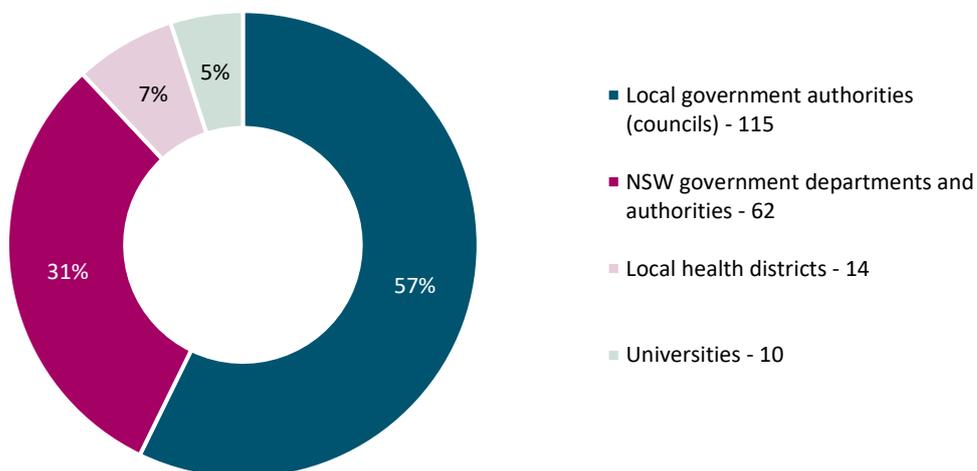
We end the section exploring comments organisations made in their self-assessment responses regarding systemic issues and good complaint handling.

Profile of participating organisations

201 organisations responded to the self-assessment questionnaire of 48 questions.⁷ Figure 2 shows a breakdown of the organisations that responded by organisation type.

When we started the self-assessment audit, we contacted the 12 Departments listed in Schedule 1 of the *Government Sector Employment Act 2013*. We asked each to provide us with a list of the organisations that form part of their portfolio and a contact point within each. This means that some of the organisations are not what would traditionally be considered an "agency", but they provided a separate response to those of the Departments they work within. These organisations are included in the "NSW government departments and authorities" category below.

Figure 2: Organisations that completed the self-assessment according to organisation type



Of these 201 organisations, 19 organisations (9%) reported not having a complaint handling policy – a mix of government departments and authorities and local councils. All of the universities and local health districts that responded said they have a complaint handling policy.

⁷ The questionnaire had a number of dependency questions; 48 was the maximum number of questions asked, however many organisations would have answered less than this number. See Appendix A for full questionnaire.

Part B of the NSW Ombudsman’s *Effective Complaint Management Guidelines* provides a step-by-step process for handling complaints.⁸ It steps through the process from recognising what is a complaint to finalising complaints and keeping detailed records. Figure 3 places some of the results of the self-assessment review alongside some of these key steps.

Figure 3: Steps in a complaint process



⁸ NSW Ombudsman, *Effective Complaint Management Guidelines*. (November 2024). <<https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/guidance-for-organisations/resources/effective-complaint-management-guide>>.

2.1 Principle 1 – Respectful treatment

The first principle, respectful treatment, means showing people that their competence, feelings, opinions and rights have value and will be taken seriously. Respect is primarily shown through giving attention, appropriate tone of voice, choice of words and body language.

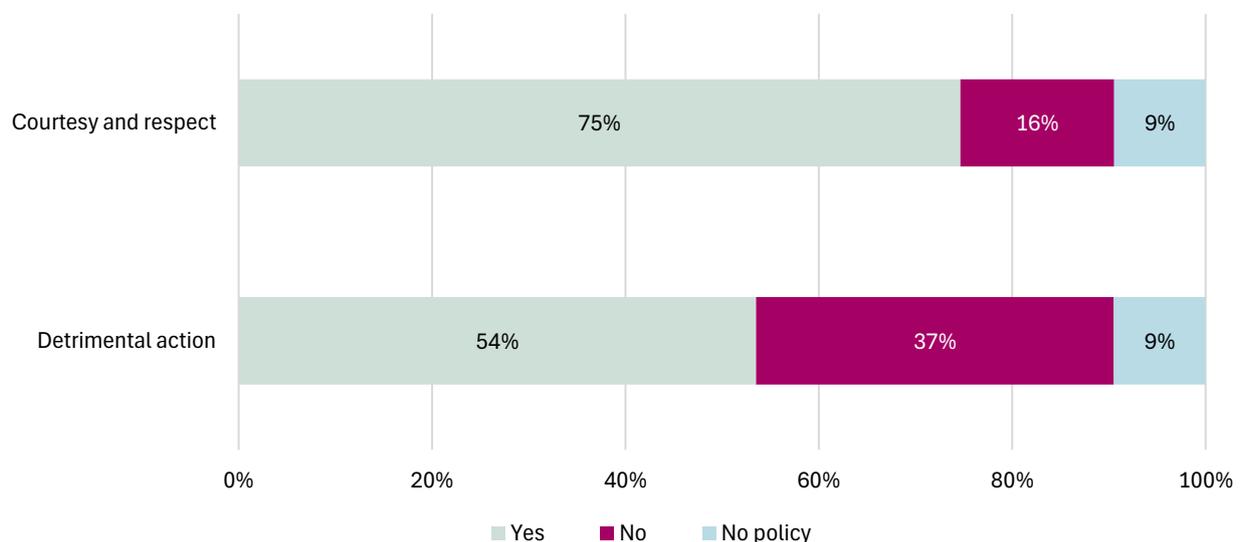
[Our] team talks about behaviour that has led to complaints - ie staff advised on how to interact with customers or to take care while driving training for staff involved in negative interactions with customers. — response from organisation self-assessment 2025

Results

Public officials should respect the pluralism and cultural diversity of our society and avoid any conduct that is unlawful or unfairly discriminatory. It is important for staff to appreciate differences, welcome learning from others and work to build relationships on mutual respect.⁹

75% of organisations that submitted a self-assessment report told us they have a statement in their complaint handling policy that staff must treat people making complaints with courtesy and respect. 54% reported their policy contains a statement that complainants will not be adversely affected because of a complaint they make (or is made on their behalf).

Figure 4: Complaint handling policies that contain explicit statements about courtesy and respect, and detrimental action

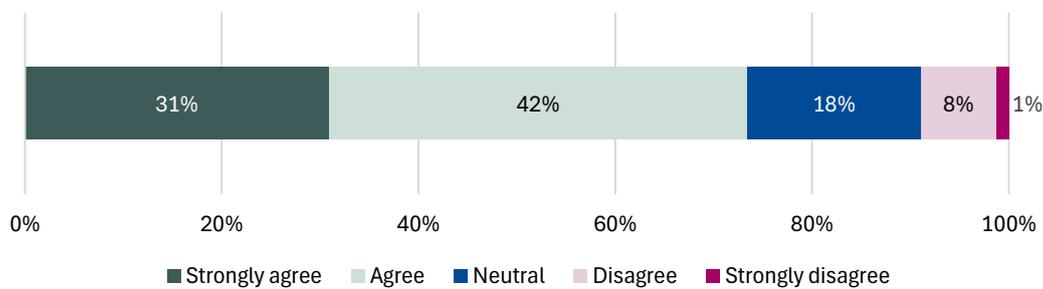


⁹ NSW Ombudsman, *Good conduct and administrative practice guideline*. (March 2017) p 38. <<https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/guidance-for-organisations/improving-public-administration/good-conduct-and-administrative-guidance>>.

Local health districts appear the most mature in embedding this principle, with all those that completed the assessment advising that their policy contained a statement about courtesy and respect. 71% of local health districts told us their policy also includes a statement that complainants will not be adversely affected because of a complaint they make.

In the complaint handling staff survey, staff were asked how much they agree with the statement 'I believe all staff treat complainants with respect and courtesy'. 74% that answered this question either agreed or strongly agreed.

Figure 5: Staff that report they treat all complainants with courtesy and respect



Analysis

There are limitations to using a self-assessment to measure how the principle of respectful treatment has been embedded in a system. That said, it appears there is an opportunity for the sector to increase its adoption of this principle, by ensuring their policies contain statements about:

- courtesy and respect
- protection from retribution.

The effect of having clear statements around these concepts is that complainants accessing the policy have immediate clarity on the level of courtesy and respect they can expect. This can build and restore trust and prevent unnecessary escalation of complaints.¹⁰ It also sends a clear message to complaint handling staff that respectful treatment is a primary responsibility for all staff under the policy.

¹⁰ NSW Ombudsman, Information sheet: 6 Principles for effective complaint management – Principle 1: Respectful treatment. (November 2024). <<https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/guidance-for-organisations/resources/6-principles-for-effective-complaint-management-principle-1-respectful-treatment>>.

The Ombudsman has a particular interest in ensuring people are not adversely affected for making a complaint. This can also be referred to as retribution or detrimental action. For example, in our 2024 Review of the DCJ Complaint System in respect of its Aboriginal Child Protection functions¹¹ we observed that the fear of, and experience of, retribution or detrimental action following a complaint is a significant issue that must be addressed.¹²

Complainants are protected from retribution under the Ombudsman Act 1974. It is an offence to take detrimental action against a person who has made (or is suspected to have made) a complaint or disclosure of information to the Ombudsman about serious maladministration: s31R(1)

¹¹ NSW Ombudsman, *Review of the DCJ Complaint System in respect of its Aboriginal Child Protection functions*. (6 November 2024). <<https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/reports/report-to-parliament/review-of-the-dcj-complaint-system-in-respect-of-its-aboriginal-child-protection-functions>>.

¹² Ibid p 6.

2.2 Principle 2 – Information and accessibility

Accessibility is the extent to which a service or program is available to as many people as possible, when they need it. An accessible organisation encourages people to voice their concerns about their services and programs, reassuring them they will not be disadvantaged or face detrimental action for lodging a complaint. They will also proactively assist people who need help to lodge a complaint.

In response to student feedback, we've taken steps to move closer towards a central portal for the submission for all student complaints. In addition to general student matters, complaints from Higher Degree Research students in relation to supervision, as well as students requesting a review of grade or academic decision, can be submitted via the one system and is accessible via the complaints management internet page.
— response from organisation self-assessment 2025

Results

Publicly available information

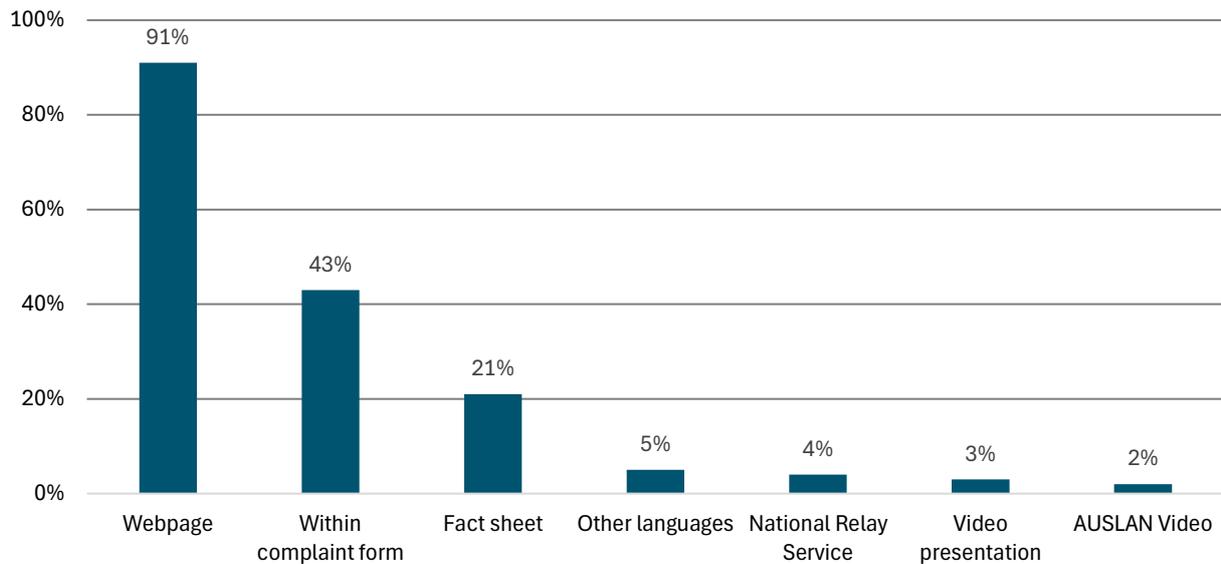
The Standards Australia guidelines¹³ and our *Effective Complaint Management Guidelines*¹⁴ discuss the importance of public information in good complaint handling systems. A system should provide clear, publicly available information about how to complain, as well as what types of support are available to assist a complainant.

The self-assessment highlighted that most organisations use their website to provide complaint information to members of the public. 91% of organisations told us they provide information about their complaints system to the public on their website and 43% provide information within a complaint form. Beyond this, there appears to be limited consistency in the ways organisations provide public information about their complaints systems.

¹³ Standards Australia (n 4).

¹⁴ NSW Ombudsman, *Effective Complaint Management Guidelines* (n 8) p 6.

Figure 6: How organisations provide information about complaints



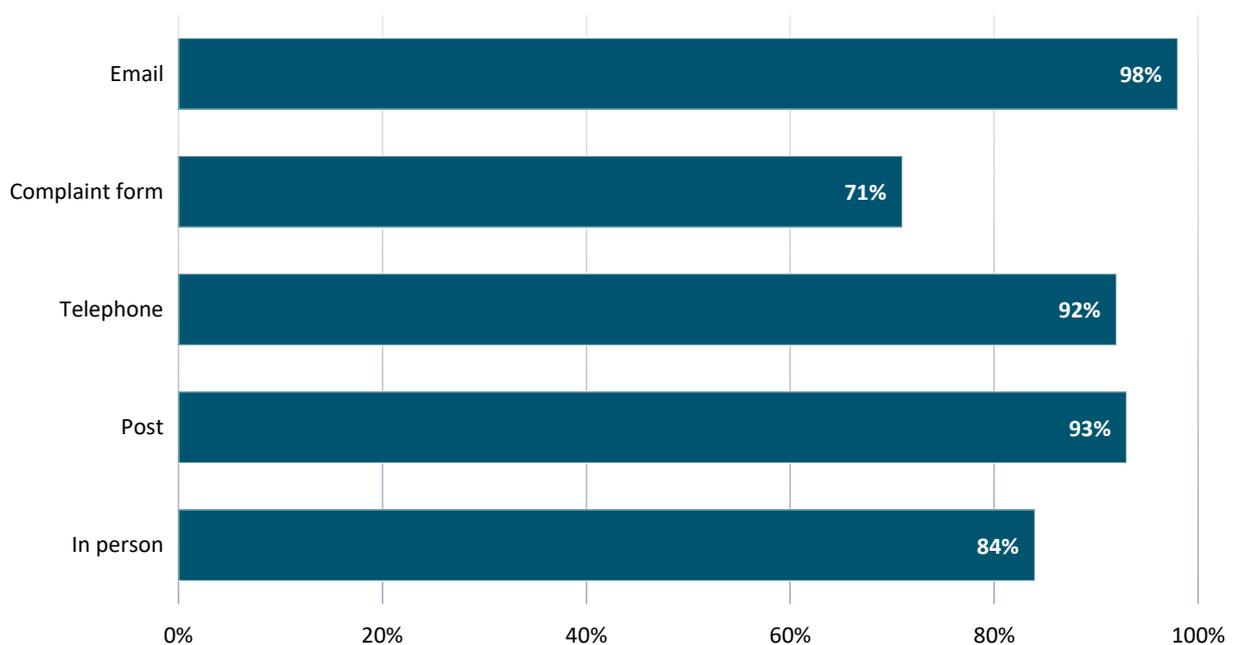
As shown in Figure 6 above, 5% of organisations in 2025 reported they are providing publicly available information in other languages. This has decreased from 37% reported during the Complaint Handling Improvement Program (CHIP) self-assessment in 2017.

Flexible and multiple complaint channels

To be comprehensively inclusive, an organisation should provide multiple and flexible methods for people to make a complaint.

The self-assessment showed most organisations have multiple methods to complain, with email being the method most available – 98% of organisations report complainants being able to lodge a complaint by email.

Figure 7: How organisations advised they accept complaints



Assistance in making a complaint

Being flexible in the channels available to make a complaint includes providing assistance for someone to lodge a complaint when they need it. Below shows the different assistance organisations told us they provide complainants.



* Some 'other' responses included referral to advocacy services to assist, assistance to complete online complaint forms, anonymous advice provided on the process, engaging an Aboriginal liaison officer.

Analysis

Overall, the most commonly reported way of providing information to complainants is through a webpage or in either an electronic or a paper complaint form.

Alternative methods to provide information on a complaint system appear to have decreased over time – with fewer organisations reporting using the National Relay Service, hard copy fact sheets or providing information in community languages than in 2017.¹⁵ This is despite an increase in the number of people in Australia speaking a language other than English at home,¹⁶ or identifying as living with a disability.¹⁷

Emerging technologies such as search engine translate functions could be a reason for a decline in use of some more traditional accessibility services, however unequal access to digital technologies is a continuing challenge in Australia,¹⁸ and increasing the number of complaint channels (including available assistance) is an important part an effective complaint handling system.¹⁹

¹⁵ NSW Ombudsman, *Complaint handling improvement program – Commitments implementation review*. (31 August 2018) pp 11-12. <<https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/reports/report-to-parliament/complaint-handling-improvement-program-commitments-report>>.

¹⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Cultural diversity: Census, 2021* (web page, accessed 30 January 2026). <<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/cultural-diversity-census/2021>>.

¹⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2022* (web page, accessed 30 January 2026). <<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/disability/disability-ageing-and-carers-australia-summary-findings/2022>>.

¹⁸ See Melbourne: ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology, and Telstra, *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide, 2025 Australian Digital Inclusion Index*. (2025). In particular, at p 11 'Around one in five Australians remain digitally excluded'. <https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/ADII-Report-2025_V6-Remediated.pdf>.

¹⁹ Diverse feedback methods were also recently identified as important in the context of customer feedback in: Department of Communities and Justice, *NSW Disability Inclusion Plan*. (December 2025) p 31. <<https://dcj.nsw.gov.au/documents/community-inclusion/disability-inclusion/nsw-disability-inclusion-plan/nsw-disability-inclusion-plan-2026%e2%80%932029.pdf>>.

The NSW Ombudsman funded a research project by the University of Newcastle, exploring the role of Generative Artificial Intelligence in enhancing the complaints process for consumers who speak English as a second language. See the [Utilising Generative AI for ESL Complaints Report](#) published on our website.²⁰

A note on the NSW Feedback Assist widget

In 2017, the then NSW Department of Finance, Services and Innovation, along with the then Customer Service Commission, commenced rollout of an embedded website application called Feedback Assist widget.²¹ The intent was to have an easily accessible, consistent way for customers to give feedback to the NSW public sector. At one point, it was mandatory for government websites to have Feedback Assist widget embedded; at its height, it was accessible from almost 200 NSW government websites.²²

Feedback Assist became optional for agencies to maintain on their websites from 2022. The widget and background supporting case management system was discontinued in the middle of 2025.

We encourage agencies to ensure there are alternate, accessible options for people to raise complaints, and there is no adverse impact to information and accessibility through the retirement of the widget.

²⁰ University of Newcastle, *Utilising Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) - to assist complainants who speak English as a Second Language*. (February 2025). <<https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/reports/research-report/utilising-generative-artificial-intelligence-genai-to-assist-complainants-who-speak-english-as-a-second-language>>.

²¹ Department of Finance, Services and Innovation, Annual report 2017/2018. (2018) p 9. <https://www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-02/dcs_dfsi_annual_report2017-18.pdf>.

²² Ibid p 30.

2.3 Principle 3 – Communication

Communicating well helps build a positive relationship between your organisation and people who may have concerns about your services or programs. Providing complainants with timely updates and clear explanations can increase their engagement and reduce any frustrations with the complaint process. Communicating unambiguously and respectfully about what can reasonably be achieved helps avoid complainant dissatisfaction arising from unmet expectations.

We have tightened processes where there may have been a weakness eg. when acknowledging the complaint we may need to call the person in addition to just sending a letter as the person does not have email. We have also added items to the Risk Register, improved letter templates to ensure latest and correct information, reminded staff to save all correspondence in the records management system.
— response from organisation self-assessment 2025

Results

Acknowledging complaints

Organisations appear to have significantly improved in acknowledging complaints since we last conducted a large-scale review of the sector:

- In 2025, 96% of organisations reported their complaints are now acknowledged as received.
- When we performed a 280 complaint case sample review in 2017, it was only 55%.²³

There are also indications that updates to complainants may have improved:

- In 2017, organisations reported that 21% of complainants received an update on the progress of their complaint.²⁴
- In our 2025 self-assessment, 61% of organisations told us that staff are instructed to provide complainants with updates about their complaint.

Although we cannot be certain that staff training and direction to update complainants is always translated into action, this result points towards positive improvement.

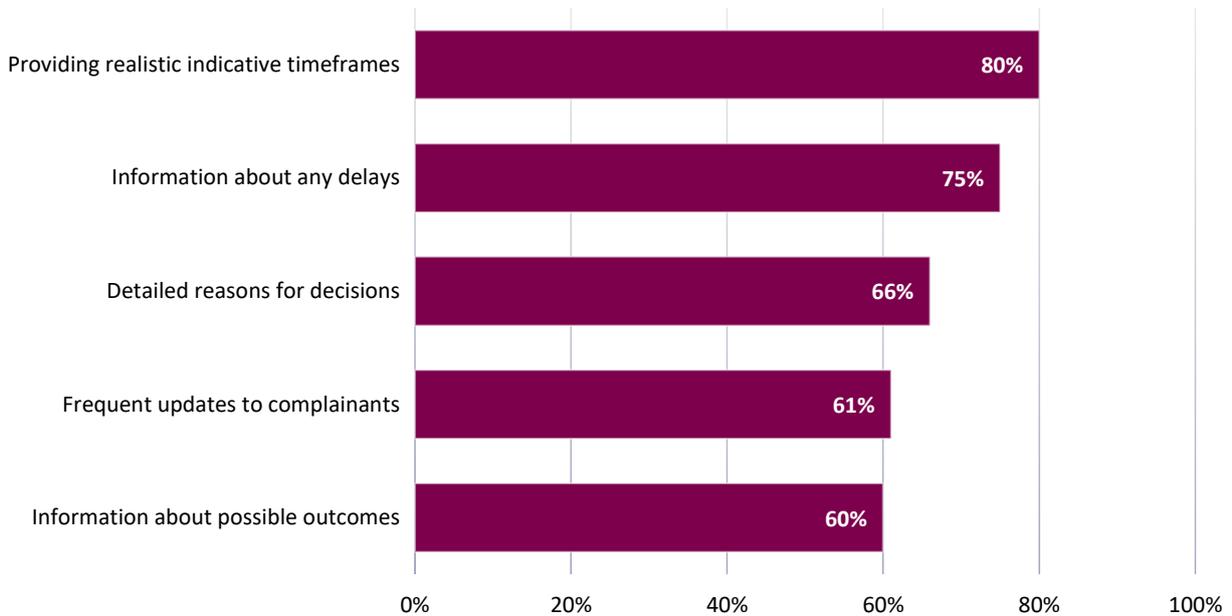
²³ NSW Ombudsman, *Complaint handling improvement program – Commitments implementation review* (n 15) p 14.
<<https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/reports/report-to-parliament/complaint-handling-improvement-program-commitments-report>>

²⁴ Ibid.

Communicating what to expect

78% of agencies that completed the assessment told us they instruct staff to use strategies to manage complainant expectations about the complaint process. Figure 8 below illustrates these specific strategies.

Figure 8: How organisations instruct staff to manage expectations



14 local health districts reported they instruct staff to use strategies to manage expectations. Of these local health districts, 93% responded they encourage staff to provide complainants with information about possible outcomes, give realistic timeframes and inform complainants of any delays.

Communicating outcomes

98% of organisations indicated they have the option to use email to notify complainants about the outcome of their complaint, followed by the telephone (65%) and post (64%). Communicating outcomes in person (38%) or through an online complaint platform (6%) are less common options.

When asked what information they include when providing an outcome to a complainant:



Analysis

Communication has always been a consistent issue raised in complaints to the Ombudsman.²⁵ Good communication is not just one of the principles to effective complaint handling, but a cornerstone of good public administration.²⁶

Our CHIP implementation review in 2018 identified that the areas of communication organisations most needed to develop included:

- managing complainants' expectations at the outset
- providing progress updates
- giving good quality reasons for decisions.²⁷

The 2025 self-assessment results show that across all cohorts, organisations advise they are instructing staff to manage complainants' expectations by providing realistic indicative timeframes (80%) and informing complainants about delays (75%). While these results are positive, there is room for improvement.

Two further areas for improvement in communication include encouraging more staff to inform complainants of the possible outcomes of their complaint, and providing detailed reasons for decision at the end of the complaint process (see Figure 8: How organisations instruct staff to manage expectations). Setting realistic expectations at the start of a complaint process and explaining why a decision has been reached can help people to accept an outcome and prevent unnecessary escalation.

We are pleased to see the large increase in complaint acknowledgement reported since our CHIP review in 2018. We encourage all organisations to continue to demonstrate good practice in this area.

²⁵ See NSW Ombudsman, *Casebook July 2024: Investigations and complaint-handling case studies*. (30 July 2024) p 27. <<https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/reports/report-to-parliament/casebook-july-2024-investigations-and-complaint-handling-case-studies>>; NSW Ombudsman, *Casebook January 2025: Investigations and complaint-handling case studies*. (30 January 2025) p 25. <<https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/reports/report-to-parliament/casebook-january-2025-investigations-and-complaint-handling-case-studies>>.

²⁶ NSW Ombudsman, *Good conduct and administrative practice guideline* (n 9) p 59.

²⁷ NSW Ombudsman, *Complaint handling improvement program – Commitments implementation review* (n 15).

2.4 Principle 4 – Taking ownership

People want a dedicated, easily contactable person or team to take ownership of their complaint. If they are transferred, put on hold or required to repeat details of their complaint, they may become frustrated or angry, and the complaint may escalate. Taking end-to-end ownership of the complaint provides consistency that helps build trust with the complainant. It can also provide increased job satisfaction for frontline staff.

Council has an Internal Ombudsman team, which combines an investigatory function with the capacity to identify system improvement opportunities within Council's governance framework ... The team uses insights from these matters to provide a proactive education service regarding continuous improvement in administrative processes, good governance and ethical decision-making across all Council services.
— response from organisation self-assessment 2025

Results

Dedicated complaint handling staff

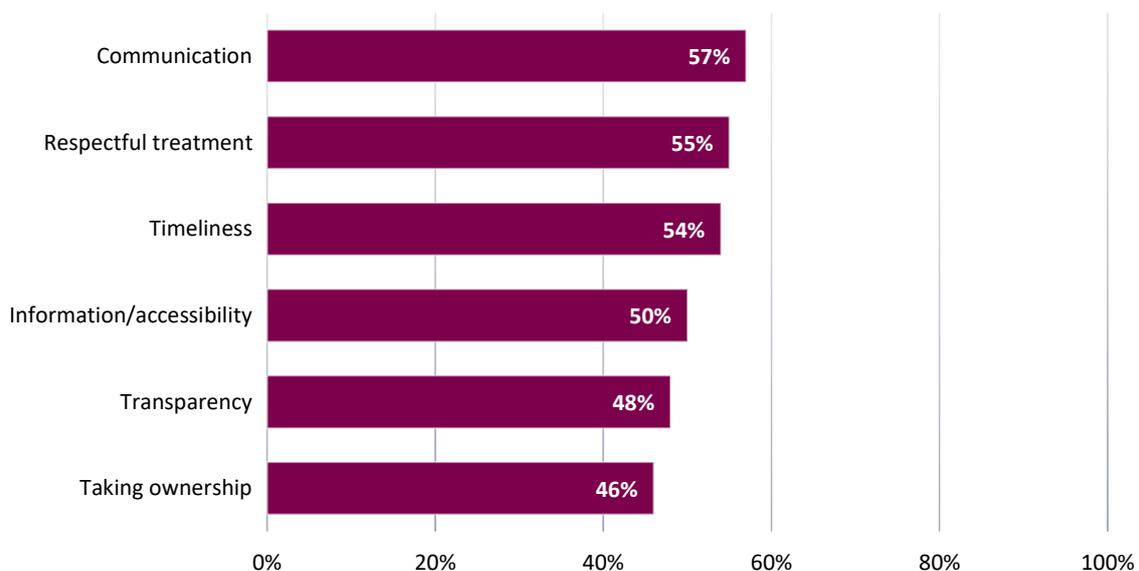
60% of organisations reported through their self-assessment that they have a dedicated complaint handling unit or dedicated complaint handling staff. This was:

- highest in universities (all universities have dedicated complaint handling staff)
- lowest in local government (50% of which have dedicated staff).

Adequate staff training

Taking ownership means staff with complaint handling responsibilities should be appropriately trained. 58% of organisations said they provide complaint handling training to staff.

Figure 9: Organisations that reference the 6 principles in complaint handling training



We had questions relating to training in both our 2017 staff survey and our 2025 staff survey.

- In 2017, 75% of staff agreed they had been given sufficient training in complaint handling.²⁸
- In 2025, 71% of staff agreed or strongly agreed that they had been provided sufficient training in complaint handling relevant to their role.

Analysis

NSW agencies have a wide range of statutory functions, different types of contact with the public, a breadth of services provided, and differing operational requirements. Having a dedicated complaint unit may not be realistic or appropriate for all organisations. That said, it is best practice for those complaints not resolved at the initial contact to be assigned to one person and their contact details provided to the complainant. The assigned case officer should be responsible for communicating with the complainant to provide updates, answer questions and explain the outcome of the complaint.²⁹

It is positive to see that the organisations providing training to staff believe they are providing comprehensive training that covers the 6 principles. However, the relatively low number of agencies reporting that they provide complaint handling training to staff indicates a clear area for improvement. A skilled and supported workforce is essential for an effective complaint management system and should be a priority for those organisations currently not providing training.

Taking ownership in its broadest definition means an organisation committing adequate resources – human, physical and financial – to their complaint handling system to ensure it is consistent and effective. We talk more about resourcing in Section 3.

²⁸ NSW Ombudsman, *Complaint handling improvement program – Commitments implementation review* (n 15) p 17. The agencies in scope for the CHIP implementation review included NSW government departments. It did not include local government authorities or universities, as the 2025 survey did.

²⁹ NSW Ombudsman, *Information sheet: 6 Principles for effective complaint management – Principle 4: Taking ownership*. (November 2024). <<https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/guidance-for-organisations/resources/6-principles-for-effective-complaint-management-principle-4-taking-ownership>>.

2.5 Principle 5 – Timeliness

A person is more likely to be satisfied with your complaint management process if their matter is managed and finalised quickly. They will be more likely to view your organisation positively, as being responsive and respectful of their time.

Results

For the purposes of this review, we looked at the following 3 components of timeliness:



In order to comprehensively embed the principle of timeliness, organisations need to establish reasonable timeframes for a complaint process, track whether those timeframes are being met, and report the outcome of that tracking to executive.

Have timeframes for managing a complaint

Of all organisations that completed the self-assessment, only 59% reported having a key performance indicator (KPI) for complaint timeframes. Universities were the only organisation type that all reported having KPI timeframes for complaints.

Record data on timeframes

The self-assessment asked organisations whether they collected data on the number of complaints finalised within a KPI. 42% of organisations indicated they collected data on the number of complaints they finalised within their KPI timeframe.

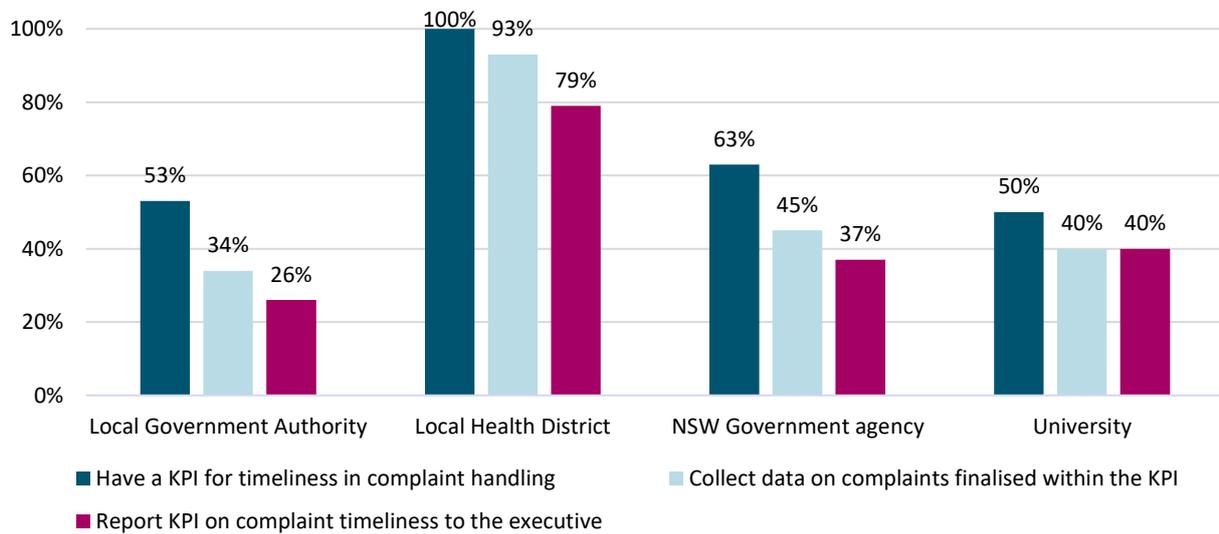
More than half of the organisations that responded having a KPI for finalising a complaint do not collect data to measure performance.

Report on the data

61% of organisations told us they report some form of complaint data to their executive, but only 34% of organisations report to their executive on complaints finalised within KPIs.

More observations on data collection and reporting are included in Section 2.6.

Figure 10: Organisations that have, record, and report on complaint timeliness KPIs



Analysis

It is important that senior management and executives receive reports about complaint trends and systemic issues. This allows for visibility over how well the system is working, and can lead to discussions around improvements. It can also help to foster an organisational culture that values complaints as a source of feedback on the organisation's performance.³⁰

The self-assessment results show organisations could better enhance services to the public by:

- having KPIs for timeliness built into their complaint handling policy
- collecting more data on these timeliness metrics, and
- analysing that data and reporting it to their executive.

Several key observations are that:

- 42% of organisations told us they are collecting data on how many complaints are finalised within a KPI
- 34% of organisations said they report on the number of complaints finalised within KPI to their executive.

Best practice would have a much higher percentage of organisations both recording and reporting on this KPI, as timeliness is a fundamental principle to effective complaint management.

³⁰ NSW Ombudsman, *Effective Complaint Management Guidelines* (n 8) p 33.

2.6 Principle 6 – Transparency

Transparency is about being open and accountable. A transparent complaint management system and processes will increase trust in your organisation. Recording and analysing data will enhance your organisation’s ability to manage complaints in a consistent, systematic and responsive manner. It will also assist to identify recurring issues and trends and what is needed to improve your operations and service delivery.

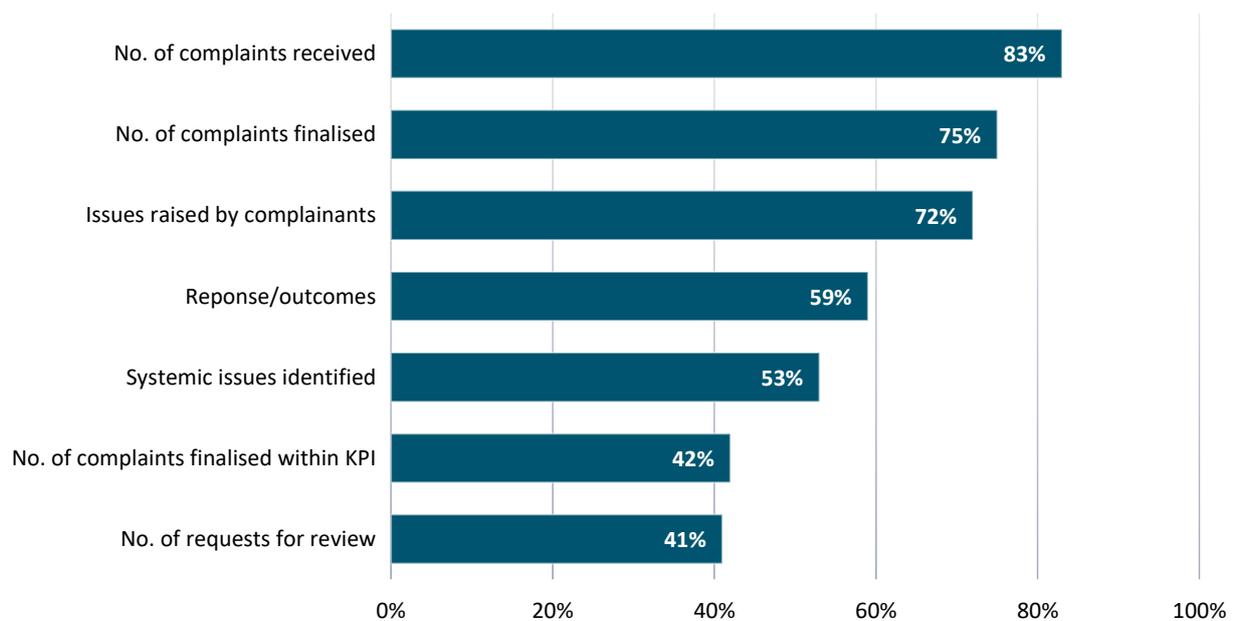
Council frequently analyses complaint data to find trends and opportunities for improvement, utilising complaints to actively identify and address systemic issues. Our services, systems, and complaint handling procedures are reviewed and improved with the help of this data, which is communicated to senior management. Feedback is welcomed from employees, and any changes brought about by complaints are put into place and closely watched to make sure they work. By incorporating these insights into our operations, we hope to continuously enhance Council operations and community service delivery.
— response from organisation self-assessment 2025

Results

85% of organisations told us they collect data on complaints they receive. This is compared to 89% of organisations involved in the 2017 CHIP implementation review recording information about complaints they receive.³¹ All local health districts and universities that submitted a self-assessment said they collect data on complaints.

When asked what they collect data on, the organisational responses varied, as seen in Figure 11 below.

Figure 11: Complaint handling data collected by organisations



³¹ NSW Ombudsman, *Complaint handling improvement program – Commitments implementation review* (n 15) p 21.

When asked if organisations analyse this collected data and report it to executive, 61% said they do. This includes 100% of universities. Only 50% of local government authorities advised they report data to their executive.

11% of the organisations that report on data told us the complaint data is provided to their audit and risk committee.

Analysis

Recording and analysing complaints data enhances an organisation's ability to manage complaints in a consistent, systematic and responsive manner. It also assists in identifying both emerging as well as recurring issues and trends and what is needed to improve operations and service delivery.³²

Although 85% of organisations reported they collect data on complaints, only 61% of organisations analyse the data and report it to their executive.

Although a dedicated data analytics resource to analyse complaint handling may not be feasible for all NSW government organisations, if data is being collected but not analysed and reported on, organisations are missing out on the opportunity for data-driven service improvement.

Only 11% of organisations advise they report complaint data to their audit and risk committees. Awareness of complaint numbers and trends at all stages in governance systems, including independent audit committees, will help to foster an organisational culture that values the insights and learning opportunities from complaints.

³² NSW Ombudsman, Information sheet: 6 Principles for Effective Complaint Management – Principle 6: Transparency (November 2024). <<https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/guidance-for-organisations/resources/6-principles-for-effective-complaint-management-principle-6-transparency>>.

2.7 How organisations act on systemic issues to embed the principles

As part of the self-assessment, we asked organisations whether they act on systemic issues that come to light because of customer complaints. Organisations shared with us how they act on systemic issues to bring service improvements to the community.

We asked organisations if they take action to address systemic issues highlighted by complaints.

71% advised that they act on systemic issues when highlighted by complaints. 90% of universities reported they act on systemic issues, which was the highest result from the different organisation types. The self-assessment results indicate that local governments appear least likely to act on systemic issues highlighted by complaints (63%).

We also asked organisations to tell us about some of the ways their organisation has acted on systemic issues highlighted by complaints. We analysed the free text responses to understand which principles for effective complaint management were being applied. This section discusses the prominent themes.

Acting to take ownership

58 organisation responses about how they act on systemic issues related to the principle of taking ownership. Responses discussing improvements relating to ownership included:

- regularly updating policies to align with best practice
- openly discussing complaints, complaint trends, and reasons for escalations
- making sure staff are adequately trained.

Training, review of internal policy and processes, team discussions.
— response from organisation self-assessment 2025

Introduction of new corporate request management system with enhanced ability to track, manage, respond to and report on customer requests, including complaints, due for launch Q1 2024/25. In addition to the above: An updated Feedback and Complaints Management Policy and supporting Procedure have been developed in alignment with NSW Ombudsman recommendations.
— response from organisation self-assessment 2025

We are circulating a weekly report around complaints (since early 2025) which includes a breakdown by sub-category of all complaints. This provides better insight into the key reasons why customers complain so that we can respond effectively. Overdue Responses are the consistent main reason why customers complain. This awareness has resulted in improved action by leaders and their teams to close off tasks within target date and report on complaint handling.
— response from organisation self-assessment 2025

It is encouraging that some organisations indicated they are responding to systemic issues with training and discussions about complaints.

Acting to improve communication

47 organisations made comments that related to the principle of communication when asked about responding to systemic issues. Local health districts seem particularly focussed on improving communication, with 43% of them mentioning communication when discussing how they act on systemic issues.

Process improvement has been implemented as a result of customer notification. Policy review and improvement based on consultation and customer notification. Increased resource allocation and focus on customer interactions (including timeliness, expectation management and updating).

— response from organisation self-assessment 2025

We theme complaints and escalate concerns ie. outpatient waiting list text messages, wait list management, discharge planning and other frequent service issues getting more than one complainant feedback we investigate.

— response from organisation self-assessment 2025

Council will take action on systemic issues such as improvements on reporting, issues raised and actions within available resources and the overall benefit to the community. We have improved reporting/response times, improved communications to the community through social media.

— response from organisation self-assessment 2025

Since introducing a complaint outcome template for complaint managers—a structured scaffold designed to ensure detailed and transparent communication—we have observed a gradual decrease in requests for internal reviews. This trend indicates that complainants are increasingly satisfied with how their concerns are being handled and the clarity of the responses they receive.

— response from organisation self-assessment 2025

These quotes from organisation responses suggest effective service improvements can flow from identifying systemic issues through complaints data. They also show that improvements do not have to be resource intensive – innovative templates for staff to use, increased use of social media to inform the community are several examples of enhancements that do not typically involve significant budget.

3. Staff insights on complaint handling in NSW government organisations

To complement the self-assessment, organisations were asked to distribute a complaint handling staff survey to those staff with complaint handling responsibilities in the organisation. 1,246 staff participated in the staff survey.

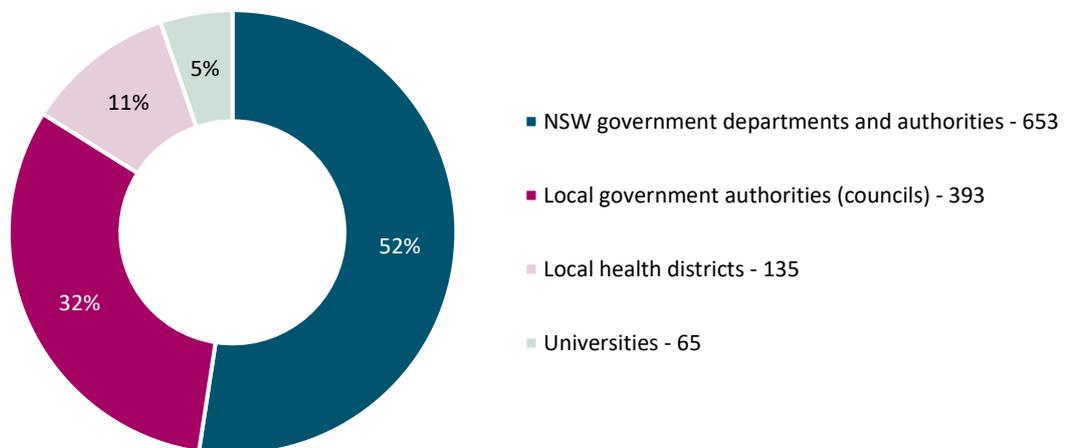
The staff survey, similar to the self-assessment, asked questions around the organisation’s alignment with the 6 principles of effective complaint management.

We also included more open-ended questions, so staff could give us detailed information about what is working well, what their organisation does that is innovative, and what are the challenges to good complaint management.

Profile of staff survey respondents

1,246 complaint handling staff responded to our voluntary complaint handling staff survey. Figure 12 shows the distribution of respondents by organisation type.

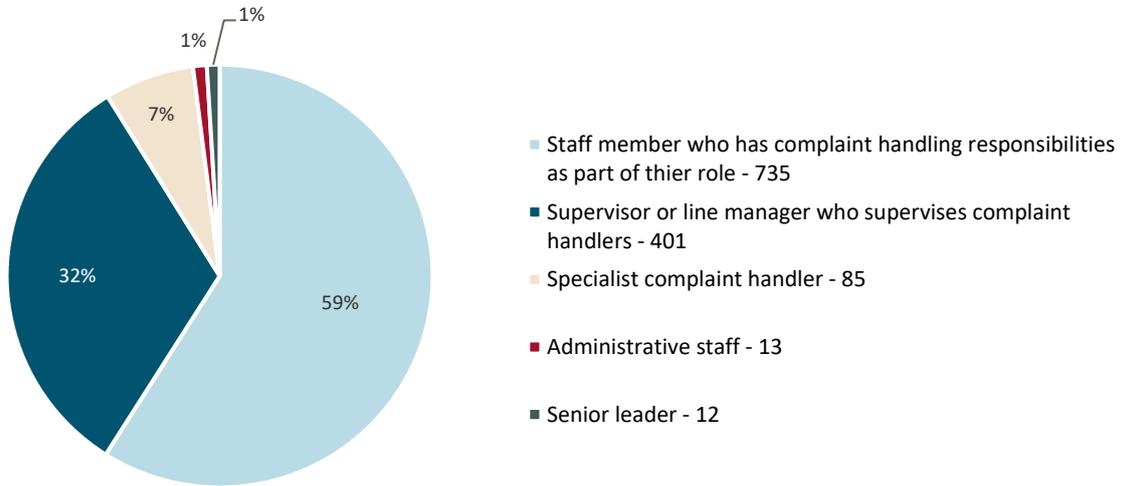
Figure 12: Respondents to complaint handling staff survey by organisation type



Staff of the Department of Education were the largest group, with 341 staff completing the survey.

Respondents fell into 5 categories of role within their organisation, with the largest number being staff members who have complaint handling as one part of a suite of role responsibilities.

Figure 13: Complaint handling staff survey respondents according to role category



3.1 What staff think their organisation does well

Good communication is the largest reported strength in organisational complaint handling

We asked complaint handling staff to tell us what they think their organisation does well in its complaint handling. We analysed the free text responses to this question to understand which principles for effective complaint management were being applied.

Table 1: Number of free text responses that related to each principle when staff answered, ‘What do you think your organisation does well in its complaint handling?’

Principle	Number of responses mentioning principle	
Communication	202	(16%)
Taking ownership	144	(12%)
Timeliness	141	(11%)
Respectful treatment	121	(10%)
Information and accessibility	73	(6%)
Transparency	62	(5%)

Staff consider communication a strength in their complaint handling

202 respondents mentioned communication as something their organisation did well. It was mentioned more than any other principle of effective complaint management. Of interest, many staff identified the need to communicate effectively internally as well as externally to handle complaints well.

[Agency] has a specialised complaint handling team who have strong written communication skills and a special interest in handling complaints. This means that complainants are more likely to receive thoughtful, individualised responses to their complaints.

— response from complaint handling staff survey 2025

Keep complainant informed, best practice is to provide verbal response followed up by plain English written response.

— response from complaint handling staff survey 2025

We have a concrete set of instructions and support systems in place at the school that has made a difference in handling complaints. It is making the communication to parents easier and the staff are more informed of their rights and responsibilities under the complaints handling policy of the [Agency].

— response from complaint handling staff survey 2025

Staff see the importance of owning a complaint

144 staff provided responses that related to the principle of taking ownership.

It is positive to see that staff view complaint ownership as a strength of their organisation; it is an important principle that helps build trust with complainants.³³

In particular, staff appear to value centralised and knowledgeable complaints teams. Here are some of the responses relating to ownership through specialist or centralised complaint handling:

Strong governance team that leads complaint resolution and is particularly professional and focused on not only customer solutions but also opportunities for system improvement (and follows through).

— response from complaint handling staff survey 2025

Council has clear and transparent approaches to complaint handling, with designated staff who are approachable and well-informed. Key staff responsible for managing complaints receive regular training to ensure best practice is followed. The Executive Team takes complaints very seriously and actively monitors trends and outcomes to drive continuous improvement across the organisation.

— response from complaint handling staff survey 2025

New approach to centralized responses to complaints - results in a standardized approach void of emotional reaction. Allows for ownership of errors and efficient processing of complaints.

— response from complaint handling staff survey 2025

Transparency is mentioned least by staff when discussing what their organisation does well

As discussed in Section 2.6, the principle of transparency is about being open and accountable by recording, analysing, and reporting on complaints data. In the staff survey, transparency came up as a theme in 62 responses relating to what their organisation does well. This is well below some of the other principles.

Given that:

- the theme of transparency came up least in these responses, compared with the other complaint handling principles, and
- only 45% of self-assessment respondents said their organisation reports complaint data to their senior executive.³⁴

Transparency is likely to be an area we will focus on in the future when conducting individual system reviews and an area where organisations can improve.

³³ NSW Ombudsman, *Information sheet: 6 Principles for effective complaint management – Principle 4: Taking ownership*. (November 2024). <<https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/guidance-for-organisations/resources/6-principles-for-effective-complaint-management-principle-4-taking-ownership>>.

³⁴ 61% of agencies told us they analyse complaint data and report it to their executive. When asked who received the analysis report, 45% told us their senior executive, followed by 20% senior leaders, 14% Board or elected council, 11% audit and risk committee, and 8% reports received by chief executive officer/operations officer.

3.2 Innovative strategies to complaint handling according to staff

Staff value tools to help them with their complaint handling responsibilities; innovation to them means things like good quality training, scripts to help with difficult conversations, and clear information about complaints on their websites.

When we asked staff to tell us about innovative strategies their organisation has for dealing with complaints, we anticipated a majority of responses would discuss emerging technologies.

While a small number of staff did mention generative artificial intelligence (AI) and sophisticated workflow and case management systems, far more discussed conventional tools they saw as innovative in their work. Below are some examples.

Innovations to increase accessibility of complaints systems

56 responses about innovative strategies described strategies relating to the theme of information and accessibility. Staff let us know about online portals and QR codes being used to help people make a complaint, and webpages and fact sheets that explain their processes to potential complainants.

Some common innovations mentioned by staff include:

Custom built complaints management platform

Using customer journey mapping/ patient stories

Tools such as letter templates and risk assessment matrices

Targeted advice from dedicated complaints specialists

Scripts/example cases

Triaging and initial assessment processes

Employing AI

Emphasising early and local resolution of issues

Regular training for staff

Data dashboards

Participation in the NSW Behavioural Insights Unit Sludge-a-thon or Sludge Audit³⁵ was another strategy that was mentioned.

³⁵ Department of Customer Service, Behavioural Insights Unit, Sludge Toolkit. (Web page, accessed 30 January 2026). <<https://www.nsw.gov.au/departments-and-agencies/behavioural-insights-unit/sludge-toolkit>>.

Innovations to help staff take ownership

In responding to our question regarding innovative strategies to improve complaint handling, many staff talked about taking ownership – through clear processes, training, and software solutions – that provide visibility over open complaints.

Wrap around support to Principals and Directors who are managing challenging behaviours and issues in complaints. Professional Learning opportunities for Principals and Directors in upskilling on such topics as: Facilitated Conversations[,] How to manage Anonymous Complaints[,] Managing a Complaint.
— response from complaint handling staff survey 2025

Implemented a Customer Request Management system. Managers of complaints are notified via our [Agency] system and the item doesn't go away until the complaint is resolved and closed. Feedback Policy is on a reoccurring review register.
— response from complaint handling staff survey 2025

Each complaint is assigned to a manager, ensuring continuity and a personalised experience throughout the process. This approach provides our customers with a direct point of contact, allowing them to feel heard and supported from start to finish.
— response from complaint handling staff survey 2025

Innovations to ensure respectful treatment

51 responses described strategies that relate to respectful treatment. These responses often discussed processes for complaint handlers to ensure that complainants are treated with respect and placing emphasis on customer experience.

... We have been trying to say 'sorry' more often which has led to less escalations where people are unhappy about the outcome.
— response from complaint handling staff survey 2025

We do try to build a relationship and personalise the conversation with empathy and honesty.
— response from complaint handling staff survey 2025

3.3 Obstacles to good complaint handling

Some obstacles to good complaint handling are enduring, and others emerging.

In the Ombudsman's 2018 review of the implementation of the Complaint Handling Improvement Program (CHIP) commitments, we reported the 4 largest obstacles to complaint handling as identified by staff surveyed:

- dealing with unreasonable conduct by complainants
- staffing and resource levels
- inconsistent application of procedures
- issues with technology.³⁶

Our 2025 staff survey has shown that some of these obstacles have proved persistent, and there are also new obstacles emerging for the sector.

Unreasonable conduct by complainants

In our 2025 staff survey, unreasonable conduct by complainants has again been reported as a significant obstacle to effective complaint handling (being mentioned in 62 responses). Our office has done a great deal of work in this area and recognise this as an ongoing challenge for public officials in NSW.³⁷

Resourcing

Resourcing, including staffing levels and staff training, have also proved a persistent obstacle to effective complaint handling.

Lack of resources ([eg] we have a very small team). At our current size, we're able to manage complaint handling well (mostly), but struggle to follow-up and make meaningful progress towards continuous improvement.

— response from complaint handling staff survey 2025

Consumer feedback staff are under-resourced that presents challenges when one or more team members wish to take leave. Time spent managing complaints far outweigh the FTEs allocated for consumer feedback staff.

— response from complaint handling staff survey 2025

We are fortunate to have experienced and skilled staff members on the frontline, we need to consider building in more training for our newer staff members, perhaps, making complaint handling compliance training as part of their role.

— response from complaint handling staff survey 2025

There needs to be ongoing training as new staff take on these roles and as the type of complaints change.

— response from complaint handling staff survey 2025

³⁶ NSW Ombudsman, *Complaint handling improvement program – Commitments implementation review* (n 15) p 6.

³⁷ NSW Ombudsman, *Managing unreasonable conduct by a complainant*. (2021). <<https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/guidance-for-organisations/resources/managing-unreasonable-conduct-by-a-complainant>>.

Our *Effective Complaint Management Guidelines* discuss the importance of providing staff adequate resources for effective complaint handling.³⁸ We recognise the diversity of functions throughout the sector means there is no one-size-fits-all approach to resourcing complaint handling. However, given this observation from the staff survey, we encourage organisations to evaluate their current resourcing to ensure they are appropriate.

Anonymous complaints

Multiple staff told us through the survey that complaints made anonymously could sometimes be a barrier to effective complaint management. This is an emerging issue that has not been prominent in our previous system review work.

Staff expressed that the ability of complainants to make anonymous complaints can be a barrier in several ways:

- it is stressful for the subject of the complaint, particularly when the level of detail in the complaint is not enough for the subject to be able to respond/be heard on the issue
- it is time consuming for complaint handlers, who often have difficulty investigating if they cannot speak to the complainant to clarify particulars
- bad faith complainants use anonymity to make vexatious complaints, or to bully and harass staff.

[Anonymous complaints are] highly stressful to those on the receiving end and there are no actions that can be taken to resolve the complaint when we don't know where it has come from.

— response from complaint handling staff survey 2025

We recognise there is tension between the need to assist people to make anonymous complaints if this is their preference – this is often a response to a fear of detrimental action – and the need for an organisation to have sufficient information to act on a complaint appropriately.³⁹

We will monitor this apparent emerging issue into the future.

³⁸ NSW Ombudsman, *Effective Complaint Management Guidelines* (n 8) p 32.

³⁹ NSW Ombudsman, *Effective Complaint Management Guidelines* (n 8).

Our Managing unreasonable conduct by a complainant manual (2021) has the following strategies to manage anonymous complainants who cannot be contacted or refuse to provide any identifying information when this is required to obtain more detail:

- Inform the person verbally and/or in writing that you/your organisation can not take their matter forward until all relevant information has been presented.
- Describe the types of information that they should provide – for example, copies of official documents, photographs, video footage or other materials that clearly show that the events or actions of concern occurred.
- Identify a time frame for the person to provide the requested information, informing them that after this time no further action will be taken on the matter or no additional information will be accepted in relation to the complaint before a decision is made – if it appears the information was intentionally withheld by the complainant.⁴⁰

Complaints received from Ministers and MPs

It is an important part of our democratic system that anyone can raise concerns with their local Member of Parliament or the responsible Minister. There were a number of responses from agencies and staff that highlighted the challenges responding when a Minister or Member of Parliament referred a complaint.

Some staff expressed concerns that complaints made via the responsible Minister or Member of Parliament can sometimes have an impact on a fair and equitable complaints process. One respondent to the staff survey explained the issue as follows:

Any time a customer raises a complaint through their local Minister, their issue is dealt with as a priority. Many times, these are not actual complaints but customers wanting their issue ... processed as a priority. These complainants are dealt with before people who are patiently waiting their time. Using their local Minister this way has become a learned behaviour in the community where 'the squeaky door gets oiled'. Ministers offices should not allow their constituents to use them this way, and in the process placing additional pressure on already stretched Departments.

— response from complaint handling staff survey 2025

Designing a clear complaint management policy and procedures can ensure consistency so complaints received through different channels are treated equitably.

⁴⁰ NSW Ombudsman, *Managing unreasonable conduct by a complainant* (n 37) p 46.

4. Next steps

Section 25A of the Ombudsman Act allows for the Ombudsman to report on issues and make recommendations relating to the complaint handling systems of public authorities.

Given the scope and nature of this self-assessment, we are not making recommendations to individual organisations. Instead, we encourage organisations to review their systems with the results of the survey and self-assessment in mind.

We will be using the results of the self-assessment and survey to develop our forward program of complaint handling system reviews – focusing on the opportunities for improvement identified through the results.

We will also be contacting certain organisations involved in the review to discuss their self-assessment responses in more detail. For example, we may contact organisations that indicated they do not have a complaint handling policy to further understand the reasoning behind this.

The NSW Ombudsman has also established the Complaint Handling Community of Practice (ComPrac), a new initiative designed to bring together professionals from across the public and private sectors who are passionate about improving complaint handling capabilities. We will use this forum to further share and discuss the results of this review.

5. Additional information

5.1 Glossary

Term	Definition
6 principles to effective complaint management	The 6 principles referred to throughout were originally ‘commitments’ and were developed by the NSW Ombudsman in collaboration with NSW government organisations. They are designed to be practical and responsive to a range of organisational environments, as well as what complainants want. They are equally relevant for NSW Government departments, local councils and community services providers. ⁴¹
CHIP	Complaint Handling Improvement Program. This was a collaborative program between the NSW Ombudsman, the office of the Customer Service Commissioner, the Department of Finance, Services and Innovation, and representatives from all ten of the departmental clusters. It ran from 2015 to approximately 2018.
Complaint management system or Complaint handling system	The framework an organisation has to respond to complaints from members of the public. A complaint handling system includes all aspects of the policies, procedures, practices, staff, hardware and software used to manage complaints. Both terms (complaint management system and complaint handling system) are used in best practice literature and legislation.
Organisation	A public authority or community service provider that the Ombudsman can review the complaint handling system of, under s25A of the <i>Ombudsman Act 1974</i> or s14 of the <i>Community Services (Complaints, Reviews and Monitoring) Act 1993</i> .
Public authority	As defined in the <i>Ombudsman Act 1974</i>
Self-assessment	A primarily quantitative questionnaire the NSW Ombudsman developed for NSW public authorities to self-report on their complaint handling system.
Staff survey	A primarily quantitative questionnaire the NSW Ombudsman developed for employees of NSW public authorities to provide insights on their perception of the complaint handling system their organisation has established.

⁴¹ NSW Ombudsman, *Effective Complaint Management Guidelines* (n 8) p 13.

5.2 Methodology

This review involved online questionnaires including a combination of closed and free text response questions.

Organisation self-assessment

The self-assessment comprised of questions relating to the 6 principles of commitments and the Standards Australia: Guidelines for complaint management in organisations 10002:2022. A copy of the self-assessment questions is included at Appendix A .

Complaint handling staff survey

The staff survey was distributed to complaint handling staff and/or managers of staff by the participating organisations. The staff survey was run in conjunction with the self-assessment to determine how the complaint handling policies are implemented in practice. A copy of the staff survey questions is included in Appendix B .

Distribution

The Ombudsman wrote to the heads of NSW principal departments in May 2025, introducing our new function under 25A of the Ombudsman Act, and requesting they nominate a senior executive contact to liaise with our team for this review. We similarly wrote to university vice chancellors and local council general managers. From there, we asked the nominated contacts to identify appropriate managers within their portfolio agencies for us to distribute the self-assessment and staff survey to.

We then invited those staff to information sessions where we discussed the purpose of the review and answered questions about the project and its purpose. The self-assessment and staff survey were open for 45 days between late June and early August 2025.

Limitations

Both the self-assessment and the staff survey are self-disclosing methods of providing information. As the primary purpose of this review was to gain a broad understanding of complaint handling in the sector, we have not performed independent assurance activities to verify the responses. We are, in good faith, relying on organisations to have provided us accurate information about their own systems.

We excluded the following oversight and integrity agencies from this review:

- Audit Office
- Crime Commission
- Electoral Commission
- Health Care Complaints Commission
- Independent Commission Against Corruption
- Information and Privacy Commission
- Inspector of the Independent Commission Against Corruption
- Inspector of the Law Enforcement Conduct Commission
- Judicial Commission
- Law Enforcement Conduct Commission
- Office of the Legal Services Commissioner
- Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services.

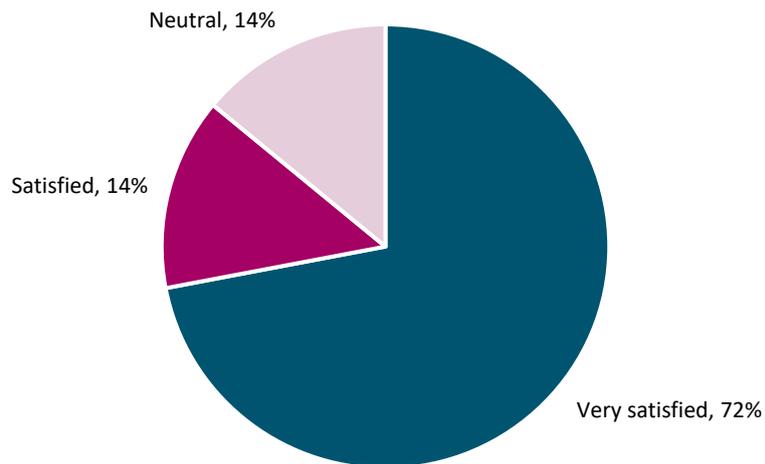
We will work with these agencies on other methods to assess their complaint handling systems.

Participating organisation feedback survey

We sent a feedback survey to organisations that participated in the self-assessment, to understand whether the review process had been satisfactory, and surrounding stakeholder engagement activities had been valuable.

22 organisations (11%) responded to our feedback survey. 86% were either satisfied or very satisfied with our process.

Figure 14: Organisation overall satisfaction with self-assessment review process



55% of feedback survey participants told us that our self-assessment had prompted them to review their policy.

The feedback survey also generated some insightful free text feedback that will be considered in our project debrief for continuous improvement purposes.

5.3 A history of system reviews by the Ombudsman

Voluntary participation in reviews

Since the 1990s, the NSW Ombudsman's Office has periodically reviewed the complaint handling systems of various NSW government organisations. One way we did this was to issue staff self-assessments and surveys about their organisation's complaint handling practices and procedures. These methods can provide quick, high-level understanding of any issues organisations face, as well as a picture of what is working well. Prior to the introduction of section 25A into the Ombudsman Act, participation in complaint handling reviews was voluntary.

We surveyed departments and authorities and also local councils about their complaint handling systems in 2007. The resulting reports are publicly available: [Complaint handling systems survey report 2007 Departments and authorities December 2007](#)⁴² and [Complaint handling systems survey report 2007 Councils December 2007](#)⁴³

From 1999 –2009, we also undertook what is colloquially known as 'mystery shopping'; making contact with public authorities posing as a customer to test their customer service standards, and then providing feedback of our experience.

The complaint handling improvement program

Between 2015 - 2018, the NSW Ombudsman's Office worked with the Department of Customer Service, along with other NSW government organisations, as part of the NSW Government Complaint Handling Improvement Program (CHIP).

In 2015 we conducted a series of self-assessments and surveys, asking organisations about their complaint handling practices. We used these responses to develop a whole-of-government framework based around 6 commitments to effective complaint handling. The commitments were designed to create a culture that values complaints and views them as opportunities to improve services, rather than seeing them as a negative reflection on organisations.

The 6 commitments (since reframed as the principles for effective complaint management) are:

1. Respectful treatment
2. Information and accessibility
3. Communication
4. Taking ownership
5. Timeliness
6. Transparency.

⁴² NSW Ombudsman, *Complaint handling systems survey 2007 report – Departments and authorities*. (December 2007). <<https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/reports/report-to-parliament/complaint-handling-systems-survey-reports>>.

⁴³ NSW Ombudsman, *Complaint handling systems survey 2007 report – Councils*. (December 2007). <<https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/reports/report-to-parliament/complaint-handling-systems-survey-reports>>.

In December 2016, the NSW Secretaries Board endorsed the principles, applying them across their departments.

To evaluate the principles' effectiveness, between 2017-2018 the NSW Ombudsman's Office reviewed the application of each of the 6 principles across the organisations who implemented them. We again surveyed organisations about their complaint handling procedures and compared the results against the 2015 CHIP survey.

The review demonstrated both positive progress in complaint handling practices, as well as areas for improvement. The results of the review were published in the *Complaint handling improvement program – Commitments implementation review: A Special Report to Parliament under section 31 of the Ombudsman Act 1974*⁴⁴ in August 2018.

Amendment to the Ombudsman Act

An outcome of the CHIP review was a proposal to amend the Ombudsman Act to include a function to review the complaint handling systems of NSW public authorities.

On 19 August 2022, the *Ombudsman Legislation Amendment Act 2022* amended the Ombudsman Act, providing a clear legislative foundation for our office to continue to monitor and evaluate the complaint handling systems of NSW government organisations, examine public authorities' handling of complaints, and to report and make recommendations to the relevant Minister and the agency.⁴⁵

The function is intended to allow the Ombudsman to assist agencies to improve complaint handling. It does not contain the same exclusions of public authorities or classes of conduct that limits the complaints jurisdiction of the Ombudsman under Schedule 1 of the Act. We can also use our coercive powers when conducting a review, however, we decided against using them in this case.

⁴⁴ NSW Ombudsman, *Complaint handling improvement program – Commitments implementation review* (n 15).

⁴⁵ This replicated section 14 of CS CRAMA.

Appendix A – Complaint handling self-assessment

Organisation Complaint Handling Self-Assessment Review

This self-assessment will assist the NSW Ombudsman to plan our reviews of complaint handling systems.

To complete the self-assessment, we recommend you have the following on hand:

- a copy of any guidance documents (policy, procedure, training materials) about complaint handling in your organisation
- any internal KPIs relating to complaint handling
- an up-to-date organisation structure or list of roles involved in the complaint handling system
- details of any internal reporting relating to complaint handling.

The assessment will take approximately 30 minutes to complete.

If you have any questions or require assistance, please contact the Complaint Handling System Reviews Team by email: systemreviews@ombo.nsw.gov.au

Profile questions

1.

Your job title:

Your email address:

2. Please select your organisation type

- NSW Government Department
- Local Government Authority
- Local Health District
- University

3. Please select your principal department

[Drop down list of principal departments]

4. Please write your agency name

[free text]

5. Please select your Council

[Drop down list of all councils in NSW]

6. Please select your Local Health District

[Drop down list of all districts in NSW]

7. Please select your University

[Drop down list of all universities in NSW]

8. This self-assessment was distributed with a staff survey

Please indicate how many staff in your organisation have received the staff survey to complete

[free text, numerical input only]

General complaint handling system

9. Does your organisation have a complaint handling policy?

- Yes
- No

10. Please attach a copy of your complaint handling policy

[Ability to attach policy]

11. Does your complaint handling policy contain definitions for:

(tick all that apply)

- a complaint
- feedback
- service request
- none of the above

12. Does your complaint handling policy list all the avenues that people can use to make a complaint?

- Yes
- No

13. Does your complaint handling policy describe what will be dealt with as a complaint?

- Yes
- No

14. Does your complaint handling policy describe what issues are not considered a complaint?

- Yes
- No

15. Does your complaint handling policy detail what assistance people can access to make a complaint if needed (for example, a translation service)?

- Yes
- No

16. Does your complaint handling policy detail responsibilities and delegated authority throughout the complaint process?

Yes

No

17. Does your complaint handling policy provide information on the levels of escalation?

Yes

No

18. Does your complaint handling policy contain privacy and confidentiality requirements?

Yes

No

19. Does your complaint handling policy contain information (or refer to a separate policy) about managing unreasonable conduct by complainants?

Yes

No

20. Does your complaint handling policy include procedural information for staff on:

(tick all that apply)

receiving complaints

recording complaints

assessing complaints

resolving complaints

investigating complaints

providing information to people about the progress and outcome of their complaints

none of the above

21. Does your complaint handling policy include timeframes for the complaint process?

Yes

No

22. Does your complaint handling system have three levels of escalation? (ie front line complaint resolution, internal escalation or internal review, external avenue of complaint)

Yes

No

23. Please provide details of the escalation as outlined in your policy:

[Free text]

Respectful treatment

24. Does your complaint handling policy clearly state that staff must treat people making complaints with courtesy and respect?

Yes

No

25. Does your complaint handling policy make an explicit statement that complainants will not be adversely affected because of a complaint they make (or is made on their behalf)?

Yes

No

Information and accessibility

26. How do you provide people with information about your complaints system?

(tick all that apply)

webpage

fact sheet (physical or digital)

within a complaint form

video presentation (eg on YouTube)

AUSLAN video presentation

other languages

none of the above

other: [Free text]

27. What methods are available to make a complaint?

(tick all that apply)

email

online complaint form

telephone

by post

in person

other: [Free text]

28. What assistance is available to people to submit their complaints:

(tick all that apply)

translation and/or interpreter service

National Relay Service

assistance to write a complaint

other: [Free text]



29. Do complainants receive acknowledgement when they submit their complaint?

- Yes
- No

30. How is it acknowledged?

(tick all that apply)

- email
- online complaint form
- telephone
- by post
- in person
- other: [Free text]

Good communication

31. Does your organisation provide a contact point for a complainant to contact once they submit a complaint?

- Yes
- No

32. Does your organisation instruct staff to use strategies to manage complainant expectations about the complaint process?

- Yes
- No

33. What information do you provide to staff about managing expectations about the process?

(tick all that apply)

- information about possible outcomes of complaints
- providing realistic indicative timeframes
- frequent updates to complainants
- information about any delays
- detailed reasons for decisions
- other: [Free text]

34. Does your organisation inform complainants if their complaint needs to be transferred to another staff member/team to progress?

- Yes
- No

35. How do you communicate the outcome of a complaint to complainants?

(tick all that apply)

- email
- online complaint form
- telephone
- by post
- in person
- other: [Free text]

36. Do you include the following information when communicating the outcome of a complaint to the complainant:

(tick all that apply)

- a summary of the complaint issue/s
- a description of action taken
- the reasons for any decision
- information about avenues of review/appeal
- none of the above

Taking ownership

37. Does your organisation have a dedicated complaint handling unit and/or complaint handling staff?

- Yes
- No

38. Do complaint handling staff in your organisation have the appropriate authority/ delegation to take action to resolve complaints?

- Yes
- No

39. Does your organisation provide training to staff on complaint handling?

- Yes
- No

40. Does the training cover:
(tick all that apply)
- respectful treatment
 - information and accessibility
 - communication
 - taking ownership
 - timeliness
 - transparency
 - none of the above

Timeliness

41. Does your organisation have key performance indicators for complaint timeframes?
- Yes
 - No

42. Are complainants advised of delays managing their complaint?
- Yes
 - No

Transparency

43. Does your organisation collect data on the following:
(tick all that apply)
- number of complaints received
 - number of complaints finalised
 - number of complaints finalised within KPIs
 - issues raised by complainants
 - response/outcomes
 - systemic issues identified
 - number of requests for review
 - none of the above

44. Does your organisation analyse complaint data and report it to your executive?
- Yes
 - No

45. What is reported?
(tick all that apply)
- number of complaints received
 - number of complaints finalised
 - number of complaints finalised within KPIs
 - issues raised by complainants
 - response/outcomes
 - systemic issues identified
 - number of requests for review
 - none of the above

46. Who received the report analysing the complaint data?
[Free text]

47. Does your organisation act on systemic issues highlighted by complaints?
- Yes
 - No

48. Please tell us about some of the ways your organisation has acted on systemic issues highlighted by complaints:
[Free text]

Thank you for taking the time to complete this assessment.
If you have any questions, please contact us:
systemreviews@ombo.nsw.gov.au

Appendix B – Complaint handling staff survey

Complaint Handling Systems Review Staff Survey

Purpose

This survey will provide the Ombudsman your view of complaint handling practices in your organisation or council. It will help to guide our work reviewing complaint handling systems, including finding examples of good practice and areas for improvement throughout the sector.

Who should complete the survey?

Anyone in your organisation who has at least some complaint handling responsibilities should answer this survey, such as:

- staff who have complaint handling responsibilities as part of their role
- specialist complaint handlers
- managers who handle escalated complaints and/or supervise staff with complaint handling responsibilities.

How long will it take?

The survey will take about 10 minutes to complete. If you can't complete it in one session you can save and exit at the bottom of the page.

What about my privacy?

Your response will be anonymous. The results will only be accessed by the NSW Ombudsman. Individual responses can't be traced back to an individual.

We do ask you for the name of the organisation or council and for some information about the position you hold. This is so we can group results for more meaningful analysis.

Any questions?

If you have any questions or need help when answering this survey, please contact us: systemreviews@ombo.nsw.gov.au or (02) 9286 1000.

Profile questions

1. Which category best describes your role

- Staff member who has complaint handling responsibilities as a part of their role
- Specialist complaint handler
- Supervisor or line manager who supervises complaint handlers (whether they be dedicated or as part of broader duties)
- Other

2. Please select your organisation type

- NSW Government Department
- Local Government Authority
- Local Health District
- University

3. Please select your principal department

[drop down list of principal departments]

4. Please write your agency name below

[free text]

5. Please select your Council

[Drop down list of all councils in NSW]

6. Please select your Local Health District

[Drop down list of all LHDs in NSW]

7. Please select your University

[Drop down list of all universities in NSW]

Complaint handling

8. I have a clear understanding of what is and is not considered a complaint in my organisation

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

9. I feel confident that I know what to do when I handle a complaint

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

10. My organisation has a complaint handling policy

- Yes
- No
- I don't know



11. I am aware of my responsibilities under my organisation's complaint handling policy

Strongly Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Neutral	<input type="checkbox"/>
Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Strongly Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>

12. I have used my organisation's complaint handling policy in the last 6 months

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

13. How did you use the complaint handling policy?
(tick all that apply)

Accessed	<input type="checkbox"/>
Applied	<input type="checkbox"/>
Read	<input type="checkbox"/>
Referred another person	<input type="checkbox"/>

Respectful treatment

14. I believe I always treat complainants with respect and courtesy

Strongly Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Neutral	<input type="checkbox"/>
Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Strongly Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>

15. I believe all staff treat complainants with respect and courtesy

Strongly Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Neutral	<input type="checkbox"/>
Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Strongly Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>

16. I believe the person I report to always treats complainants with respect and courtesy

Strongly Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Neutral	<input type="checkbox"/>
Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Strongly Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>

17. I have been provided with sufficient training in customer service

Strongly Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Neutral	<input type="checkbox"/>
Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Strongly Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>

18. Management recognises good complaint handling by staff

Strongly Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Neutral	<input type="checkbox"/>
Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Strongly Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>

Information and accessibility

19. Where possible, I assist people who may need it to make a complaint (this may be because of factors including age, language, identity, or disability)

Strongly Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Neutral	<input type="checkbox"/>
Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Strongly Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>

20. My organisation encourages customers to provide feedback or make a complaint, so that products and services can be improved

Strongly Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Neutral	<input type="checkbox"/>
Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Strongly Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>

Good communication

21. At the beginning of the complaint process, complainants are told what the next steps will be, including the timeframe to resolve the complaint

Strongly Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Agree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Neutral	<input type="checkbox"/>
Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Strongly Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/>



22. Complainants are provided with the expected timeframe to resolve their complaint

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Taking ownership

23. I have authority to resolve simple complaints

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

24. I have been provided with sufficient training in complaint management relevant to my role

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

25. I have been provided with sufficient training in responding to unreasonable conduct by complainants (such as threats or anger)

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

26. I feel management support staff through difficult interactions with complainants

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

27. One person and/or team is always responsible for managing an individual complaint from beginning to finalisation

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

28. Complainants are always informed if their complaint is transferred to another person or team

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

29. The contact details of the person and/or team responsible for handling a complaint are always provided to the complainant

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Timeliness

30. My work area monitors how long it takes to resolve complaints

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

31. A complainant is informed if there is any delay in dealing with their complaint

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

32. A complainant is told the reasons for the delay

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Transparency

33. My work area continually strives to improve services based on feedback from complainants

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

34. Insights learned from complaints are shared internally through the following:

(tick all that apply)

- Email
- Intranet
- Staff meeting
- Other

Concluding questions

35. Overall, the complaint handling system in my work area is effective

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

36. What do you think your organisation does well in its complaint handling?

[free text]

37. Has your organisation implemented any innovative strategies for dealing with complaints?

If so, what are they?

[free text]

38. Are there any obstacles to improving complaint handling in your organisation?

If so, what are they?

[free text]

Thank you for taking the time to answer this survey.

Your insights will be valuable to improving complaint handling across NSW Government agencies.

Pursuing fairness for the people of NSW.

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