

# Commonwealth Ombudsman Insights— Effective communication with the public

Welcome to the first edition of *Commonwealth Ombudsman Insights*, where we share examples of best practice and our learnings from the range of work we conduct.

This edition of *Commonwealth Ombudsman Insights* focuses on the importance of effective communication when dealing with members of the public, whether they are seeking advice, accessing services or making a complaint.

We use examples of good and poor communication we have seen in complaints made to our Office, own motion investigations and collaboration with the agencies we work with. We also outline when communication most commonly occurs between agencies and members of the public, and some tips for communicating good and bad news.

## Why effective communication is important

High quality communication establishes trust between a person and the agency they are dealing with – it improves customer satisfaction. It can also reduce the number of complaints an agency receives because people have a clear understanding of what is happening each time they engage with the agency.

If an agency communicates poorly there is a risk that people won't trust an agency's actions or decisions. Poor communication and a lack of trust can lead to an increase in the number of complaints made about an agency, and complaints escalating to senior levels of management.

### Defining good communication and poor communication

Good communication is:

- Timely—it is delivered at a time that is relevant
- Easy to understand—it uses plain language
- Accessible—it is available through an appropriate channel, taking into consideration the communication needs of the recipient.

Poor communication is:

- Lacking in relevance—it does not include useful information or is not available at an appropriate time
- Difficult to engage with—relevant information cannot be easily accessed
- Difficult to understand—is poorly delivered, or uses complex language.

## Common points of communication between the public and agencies

Communication between agencies and the public can be grouped into specific categories, which require different communication techniques, strategies and engagement. For example, responding to a simple request for a document or form requires different communication methods than when responding to a complaint.

Below are some of the common categories of communication and what constitutes good communication for each.

**Initial contact**—Information should be readily available for people who want to engage with an agency. Information can be available on the agency’s website, by contacting the agency by telephone or email, or by visiting a public service centre. This information should let people know what they need to do to receive the agency’s services or benefits and should aim to manage expectations.

**Requesting or applying for services**—Agencies will often be required to test the eligibility of people seeking services. Any criteria should be clearly communicated. Information should also explain what people need to provide as part of any application, what the process involves, how long it might take for a decision to be made and what to expect from the agency once a decision has been made.

**Approving requests**—When an agency decides that a person is eligible to receive the service they have applied for, the person should be informed of that decision quickly, with details of what the service is and how it will be provided to them, along with any ongoing requirements to provide additional information to maintain access to the service.

**Denying requests**—If an agency decides that the person is not eligible to receive the service they have applied for, the person should be given information about why the decision was made and what their options are to have the decision reviewed if they think it is wrong.

**Complaints**—Agencies should have an easily accessible, clear description about how a complaint can be made, and how the complaint will be handled.

## Examples of poor communication

### Explaining the effect of actions

Agencies need to clearly communicate to people how their actions may make them ineligible for the service they wish to access.

#### Case study 1

We received a complaint from Monica\*, who applied to work for a large agency. The application process involved taking an entrance exam, however Monica was excluded from the application process after failing the exam three times.

During our investigation, we found that Monica failed her initial attempt of the entrance exam and was told she could not take the exam for a certain period of time. However, Monica took the exam during that period of time and the result of the exam was not considered. At the conclusion of the exclusion period Monica again attempted the exam and failed.

Monica later sought to attempt the exam again and was informed by the agency that their policy was the exam could only be attempted three times, therefore she was ineligible to sit the exam. Monica stated this was the first time she was told about this policy.

We accepted the agency had sound reasons to restrict the number of exam attempts to three and that Monica should not be allowed to sit the exam again. However, the agency agreed to provide clearer information to future applicants so they are aware of the three attempt rule, to stop similar situations happening again.

\* All names have been changed.

## Providing complete information

Agencies should make sure that the information contained in application forms enables a person to make informed choices about actions they will take, including the impact of their actions or decisions.

### Case study 2

We received a complaint from Van\*, who was seeking a benefit from a medium-sized agency. Van completed an application and paid an application fee. The application form indicated that this fee would be later refunded by the agency. When Van sought a refund from the agency, he was told that he did not meet the criteria for refund.

Van complained to us about this decision, as the refund criteria was not contained in the application form.

As a result of our investigation, the agency refunded Van's application cost and updated the application form and the agency website with information clearly explaining the refund criteria.

## Examples of good communication

### Proactive communication with vulnerable clients

While the case studies above illustrate communication problems, through our work we have also seen examples for good communication, particularly relating to proactive communication.

Agencies should take a flexible approach to communication, particularly when communicating with vulnerable people. This may mean having the information available in different languages, different formats and taking the time to talk to people, to answer questions and clarify misunderstandings.

### Case study 3

In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, a service delivery agency proactively contacted all of its vulnerable clients by telephone, to explain changes to how they would be delivering services, check on the welfare of the individual clients, and to ask clients if they had any questions or concerns.

We consider that the agency's proactive communication established trust with their clients during what is a difficult and uncertain time, helped provide services and information to people who needed it most, and likely reduced the volume of complaints the agency would have otherwise received.

## Explaining complex legislation

Many services provided by agencies are governed by complex legislation or regulation. While the rules created may be clear to those working in the agency or with experience in interpreting legal documents, most people accessing services will not have experience in interpreting this type of information.

Good communication involves providing access to plain language information from the first time a person engages with an agency.

### Case study 4

An agency responsible for registering people to work in specialist roles is subject to complex legislation and rules that change regularly.

The agency maintains a website containing up to date, thorough and easy to read explanations of the requirements for registration. This enables people who are seeking to become registered, to work through a plain language set of requirements which might otherwise only be found in the more difficult to understand legislation and rules.

## Delivering the news—good or bad

When delivering information, positive or negative, it is important that information is relevant and provided in language that the target audience understands.

Correspondence advising of a decision should:

- Explain the decision in plain language
  - *'Your application was approved'*
- Explain why the decision was made in plain language
  - *'Because you have been assessed as eligible'*
- Explain in plain language what was considered
  - *'I considered the application form and the other documents you gave us'*
- Explain in plain language any conditions that might apply
  - *'If your circumstances change you must tell us within 14 days'*

Delivering 'bad news' or negative outcomes requires careful thought, particularly when communicating to vulnerable people. The suggested format above can be used. We suggest including the decision or outcome early in the correspondence, followed by information about what was considered and why the decision was made, including the logic or reasoning behind the decision.

Regardless of whether the communication involves good or bad news, the decision should be in plain language, with legalistic or medico-legal information available as an attachment if that is appropriate.

Any correspondence should clearly outline what a person can do if they disagree with the decision, such as seeking a reconsideration or review of the decision, along with the process and timeframes for doing so.

## Resources and reports

Our [website](#) is a good place to access resources relating to better practice complaint handling and we encourage agencies to engage further with us so we can provide detailed, agency-specific advice about effective communication.

[Lessons in good complaint handling](#)

[Better Practice Guide to Complaint Handling](#)

We have also published reports that include communication issues.

[Did They Do What They Said They Would? Reviewing our recommendations](#)

[Administration of National Disability Insurance Scheme \(NDIS\) funded assistive technology](#)

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More information is available at [ombudsman.gov.au](http://ombudsman.gov.au).