



Australian Customs Service Complaints and Compliments Management System

Policy

Foreword by the CEO

Complaints and compliments from customers or clients are the most immediate and effective forms of feedback an organisation can get about how it is seen to be performing.

In 1998, we established a national system for collecting and dealing with this feedback.

This is part of our commitment to continuously improving our service to industry and the community.

Customs deals with a wide range of people and organisations across Australia and overseas. The Complaints and Compliments Management System (CCMS) ensures that we handle all complaints and compliments in a consistent way and that all are analysed and followed through. If it seems that there is a problem with our procedures or facilities, rather than an isolated incident, we can see this and act to change the way we do business.

Customs has a service charter that sets out our commitment to service standards and turnaround times for business and travellers. We measure our performance regularly against those standards. The CCMS is another source of information about how well we are performing.

The value of the information depends on your support for the system. If our clients are reluctant to use it or don't know it exists, we will not get the benefit of their feedback. Areas that deserve a pat on the back may miss out and problems may be overlooked. I urge all staff who have regular public contact to market the CCMS to our clients and reassure them that their feedback will be dealt with in a fair and professional way.

These are important guidelines covering the use of the CCMS. All staff should read them. Specifically, they cover:

- roles and responsibilities;
- dealing with complaints and compliments; and
- issues in the complaint management process.

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Chief Executive Officer

May 2001

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1. Our Role

“Customs role at the border is to, in real time:

- *regulate trade and travel,*
- *collect revenue owed to Government, and*
- *enforce relevant Australian Government laws.”*

Customs is committed to providing a high quality service to clients and articulates this pledge through its, Corporate Plan and Client Service Charter.

There is also a need for Customs to be client focussed and proactive in service provision and process improvement. One mechanism that will facilitate the achievement of this objective is an effective Complaints and Compliments Management System (CCMS).

The CCMS provides the opportunity to:

- increase our understanding of clients' needs and expectations;
- increase clients' understanding of our role;
- identify business improvements;
- gain greater co-operation and improve communication with our clients;
- increase public support for the organisation;
- prevent complaints escalating into major disputes; and
- provide data to assist in organisational performance measurement and reporting to Government.

2. Purpose of this document

This document provides the policy for the internal management of complaints and compliments received in relation to the services provided by Customs.

It may be read in conjunction with the CCMS Guidelines which include details for the receipt, registration, resolution and reporting of complaints and compliments.

3. Purpose of the CCMS

The CCMS aims to achieve the following standards as described in AS 4269-1995:

- increase the level of client satisfaction with the delivery of products and services and enhance the consumer/provider relationship;
- recognise, promote and protect consumers' rights, including the right to comment and complain;
- provide an efficient, fair and accessible mechanism for dealing with consumer complaints;
- provide information to clients on the complaints management process for the services and products of the organisation; and
- monitor complaints in an endeavour to improve the quality of products and services.

The purpose of the CCMS is to capture, analyse and report on data relating to complaints and compliments. The national system enables Customs to identify opportunities for the continuous improvement of our processes and services based on client feedback.

Opportunities for improvement identified through analysis of data obtained through the CCMS drive improvement activities both regionally and nationally and data obtained is used to meet government reporting requirements.

Through the CCMS we are able to:

- increase the number of people who tell us when they are either satisfied or dissatisfied with the service we provide;
- provide timely and appropriate responses to clients;
- monitor client satisfaction and confidence with Customs services;
- recognise and acknowledge the efforts of staff when clients compliment them on the service they have provided; and
- use the information from complaints and compliments to improve our service quality.

To achieve these objectives, we need to:

- ensure that the CCMS is easily accessible, well-publicised and simple to use. We also need to recognise and address barriers which impede access to the CCMS;
- provide some form of redress, where appropriate. This might include one or a combination of the following:
 - an explanation (for example, legislative requirement, legitimate reason for delay);
 - try to ensure the same mistake will not recur;
 - details of corrective action;
 - an apology; and
 - compensation if appropriate.
- record and analyse information about the comments we receive to identify emerging trends and systemic problems;
- identify and implement corrective action to improve our services;
- adhere to standards detailed in the guidelines; and
- provide feedback to individual staff and/or teams in recognition of a job well done.

4. Scope and Boundaries

The Complaints and Compliments Management System Covers ...

The CCMS is intended to provide **external** clients with a means to complain about or compliment us on our decisions, procedures, products or services.

Clients include:

- the Australian community;
- Government;
- Industry;
- Travellers; and
- other Government agencies.

The Complaints and Compliments Management System Does Not Cover ...

Complaints made by Customs employees

The CCMS does not respond to complaints made by Customs employees that relate to work, working conditions or conditions of service. The Public Service Act 1999 gives Customs employees the right to seek a review of actions to be taken in respect of their employment. The procedures are available from regional Human Resource Management areas.

Complaints about other agencies or organisations

Complainants are referred to the appropriate agency if their complaint does not refer to Customs, although the initial data is included on the database to determine how often people mistake Customs for another Government agency.

Allegations of criminal conduct against Customs officers

Complaints alleging criminal conduct against a Customs officer should be referred to the Regional/National Manager (RD/NM) in the first instance. The RD/NM may then refer the complaint for investigation to the Internal Affairs Unit.

Customs decisions where a review or appeal mechanism already exists

Many decisions Customs makes are subject to review or appeal by the *Administrative Decisions (Judicial Review) Act 1997* (ADJR) or the *Administrative Appeals Tribunal* (AAT). The CCMS does not replace these existing mechanisms.

5. Definitions

To ensure the information collected about complaints and compliments is as useful as possible, the information is recorded in accordance with a set of definitions. The definitions, at Appendix 1, are used throughout this policy and the CCMS Guidelines.

6. Australian Standard of Effective Complaints Handling

The CCMS is aligned with the 13 essential elements identified in Australian Standard® Complaints Handling (AS 4269-1995). These are:

- Commitment
 - At all levels;
 - Respond positively to allow staff and consumers to contribute to service improvement;
 - Right of consumer to complain (solicit feedback);
 - Provision of staff training;
 - Adoption and dissemination of documented policies and procedures;
 - Policies have organisational priority and are adequately and appropriately researched;

- Fairness – to both complainant and organisation or person who is the subject;
- Resources – are adequate with sufficient delegated authority;
- Visibility – advertise to consumers and staff and publicise clients’ right to complain;
- Access – available to all and details how to make and resolve complaint(s) in plain language;
- Assistance – for formulation and lodgement;
- Responsiveness – within target limits;
- Charges – no charge subject to statutory requirements;
- Remedies – handling process must determine and implement remedies reflecting fairness and reasonableness in the circumstances, legal obligations and good industry practice;
- Data collection – records complaints/compliments and their outcomes for analysis and reporting;
- Systemic and recurring problems – data evaluation will determine causes of complaints and identify the need for remedial action;
- Accountability – all staff have a responsibility for effective complaints handling;
- Reviews – process reviewed regularly to ensure efficient delivery of effective outcomes.

Further explanation of these elements is provided in the CCMS Guidelines.

7. Our Standards

Our clients have a right to know what they can expect from Customs when they offer feedback. The following standards of behaviour and timeliness provide clients with a means to assess our commitment and performance. These standards are published in the Customs Client Service Charter and on the Internet.

Complaints and Compliments Standards

Customs recognises clients' right to comment. We aim to investigate complaints effectively and promptly. At all times we will be honest and fair in our dealings with clients and ask them, in return, to do the same for us. We will:

- treat clients with tact, courtesy and fairness at all times;
- treat clients’ comments confidentially;
- not discriminate against clients for any reason;
- acknowledge receipt of each complaint within five working days;
- issue a full response to each complaint within 15 working days of receipt. If this is not possible, advise the client when a reply can be expected; and
- publish statistical information about the complaints and compliments we receive and performance against our standards in the Quarterly National Reports.

8. Complaints

People complain because they are dissatisfied with some aspect of the service they receive from Customs. This dissatisfaction may relate to a number of things like:

- a decision Customs has made;
- the quality of service they have received;
- a Customs officer's conduct;
- the standard of our facilities;
- delays in service; or
- the clients' lack of understanding of our role and function.

It is important that we look at complaints from the point of view of the client. We need to understand, from the clients' perspective that there is a problem and see what we can do about it - even if all we can do is provide a clear explanation of Customs requirements or apologise for any misunderstanding.

Research and experience have shown that the quicker an agency responds to the concerns raised by a complainant, the more likely it is that the complaint will be satisfactorily resolved. This is important in terms of the ongoing relationship with the client. A client whose concerns have been addressed quickly and effectively is likely to think more of Customs and its service. In contrast, any future contact with a dissatisfied client is likely to be difficult. Dissatisfied clients are also inclined to tell others of their experiences, which may impact on Customs reputation and credibility. In addition, complaints that cannot be resolved early generate a significant additional workload for the organisation in terms of investigation and response.

The complaints and compliments database records details about complaints. Clients are acknowledged for their comments and information about complaints is included in our reports.

9. Compliments

There are many instances where we are complimented on the services we provide. These occasions highlight where we have met or exceeded the expectations of our clients. Compliments provide a very clear indication of what clients' value about Customs and the work we do. Information about the compliments that we receive often goes unrecognised because, unlike complaints, compliments require little action on our part. Recording information about the compliments that we receive serves four purposes. It:

- indicates which aspects of our service clients value;
- helps Customs to build a balanced picture of how our service impacts on our clients;
- gives Customs the chance to share and reinforce among managers and staff examples of good practice in client service; and
- helps to build morale and provide due recognition for a job well done.

The complaints and compliments database records details about compliments. Comments from clients are acknowledged and information about compliments are included in our reports.

When Customs receives a compliment, we will:

- record the details of the compliment;
- contact the client and thank them for their comments; and
- send the information to the officer/s involved, and their line management.

10. The Complaints and Compliments Database

The CCMS is supported by a database to ensure clients' comments are captured for analysis purposes and ultimately, for process improvement. To ensure time standards are achieved, the database also monitors complaints to determine length of time taken to provide a full response to the client. The database is a useful tool, capable of producing a variety of customised reports to meet Agency and government reporting requirements. The types of statistics recorded by the database includes:

- source of complaint (ie via brochure, Freecall 1800 number, email, etc);
- call type (complaint or compliment);
- type of issue/s raised (from the client's perspective);
- where comment originates (i.e. which work area);
- to whom case was referred (where appropriate);
- tracking of investigation and response; and
- date case finalised.

Security

While Customs staff have access to a template through the Complaints and Compliments icon (on the desktop) to report complaints and compliments received, access to the database itself is restricted to Complaints and Compliments Co-ordinators in each region, the National Co-ordinator and the Director, Corporate Planning. The database operates over multiple sites which allows national synchronisation and transparency of the CCMS and high level data security is used to ensure access is limited to those authorised. Co-ordinators are able to compare clients' comments, both within a region and across regions, to help identify opportunities for process improvement. In responding to clients' comments, greater consistency is achieved by analysing similar cases and how they were handled.

Privacy

With consideration to the privacy principles, officer's names are not held on the database. If a complaint alleges inappropriate behaviour of an officer, the matter is dealt with by the investigating officer and the officer's supervisor, where appropriate. Investigations of complaints are aligned with the privacy principles in ensuring fairness and transparency of the process. Further, only those involved in the case need to have access to information and any documents relating to complaints are stored appropriately.

11. Roles and Responsibilities

Regional Co-ordinators

Each region has a Co-ordinator who has an important role in ensuring that the CCMS is both efficient and effective. Some regions also have additional coordinators at airports. Functions performed by Co-ordinators include:

- encouraging client feedback through a variety of marketing strategies;
- providing training, advice and support to staff involved in complaints management;
- monitoring comments to ensure time standards for responses are met;
- recording, monitoring and analysing information about complaints and compliments;
- reporting to both managers and staff on complaints and compliments;
- identifying regional trends and systemic issues;
- making recommendations on process improvements; and
- organising succession planning.

National Co-ordinator

The National Co-ordinator is responsible for the overall effectiveness of the CCMS and ensures consistency of the system across the regions. Functions performed by the National Co-ordinator include:

- co-ordination and administration of marketing material;
- administration of the 1800 number and Internet emails for referral of cases to relevant regions;
- liaison with Regional Co-ordinators to ensure consistency of practice;
- provision of advice and support to Regional Co-ordinators;
- provision of national reports to management;
- analysis and identification of national trends and systemic issues;
- recommendations on process improvements;
- User Acceptance Testing (UAT); and
- compilation of statistics on complaints and compliments to meet annual reporting requirements.

12. The Complaint Management Process Levels

Officers should attempt to resolve all complaints as they occur. This allows staff the opportunity to take ownership and control of issues arising in their work area. It also increases the likelihood that the client will be satisfied with the outcome of their complaint.

As shown at Appendix 2, the complaints and compliments management process consists of three levels. Wherever possible, these levels should be followed in sequence. It is recognised however, that the client may prefer to enter the system at the second or third level (for example, when a client writes directly to the RD or relevant NM).

Complainants should be encouraged to seek satisfaction through CCMS to resolve their complaint before accessing other mechanisms such as the Commonwealth Ombudsman, the Minister for Justice and Customs, or other Federal or State Members of Parliament.

A summary of the three levels is as follows:

Workplace

Most complaints will be made to officers in the workplace. Where appropriate, these complaints are best handled by the officer and/or the supervisor as they are best placed to understand the problem, identify a solution and manage the ongoing relationship with the client. All staff have access to the Complaints and Compliments icon where they record details of a complaint or compliment and send it to their Regional Co-ordinator for further action.

Regional Manager/National Manager

If the complaint remains unresolved or is of a serious nature, it should be referred to the Regional Manager/National Manager, through the Regional Co-ordinator. This ensures the complaint is recorded on the database and gives the RM or equivalent a further opportunity to resolve the complaint within the work area.

Regional / National Director

If a complainant remains dissatisfied, the complaint should be referred to the RD or ND, through the Regional Co-ordinator. The RD/ND may nominate an independent officer to investigate the complaint. The independent officer will re-examine the issue/s, perform a mediation role and report and make recommendations to the RD/ND.

13. Other Complaint Mechanisms

The complainant should be encouraged to use the CCMS to resolve the complaint. However, at any time, the complainant has the right to access other mechanisms. Some examples of options for review include:

- ***The Commonwealth Ombudsman***

On receipt of a complaint, the Commonwealth Ombudsman will urge a complainant to review and utilise internal mechanisms with Customs, prior to involving the Ombudsman.

The Commonwealth Ombudsman has wide powers to conduct independent, informal, private and free investigation of issues between a complainant and Customs.

After a full investigation, the Commonwealth Ombudsman can make recommendations to Customs on appropriate action, including that Customs reconsider or explain a decision or pay compensation.

- ***The Minister***

A complainant may choose to take their complaint to either their Federal or State Member of Parliament or directly to the Minister responsible for Customs.

14. Business Improvement

Regional Co-ordinators and the National Co-ordinator play an important role in analysing trends and systemic issues and reporting these to managers. Business improvements resulting from the CCMS are to be published in reports, awareness bulletins and other articles, as appropriate.

In reporting business improvements, Co-ordinators will consider and are to advise the National Coordinator on broader implications, such as national application of the improvement/s. Reports may include recommendations for improvement. Co-ordinators should encourage managers to further discuss the recommendations, as more detail may be required in terms of data and analysis of trends.

15. Dispute Resolution

To prevent complaints from escalating into a major dispute, officers should:

- listen carefully to the client's concerns;
- acknowledge their comments;
- empathise; and
- offer an explanation or a solution.

In dealing with the specific aspects of the complaint, the officer should:

- ask necessary questions in a polite and even-handed manner, to seek the most detailed response;
- paraphrase the client's issue/s to confirm mutual understanding;
- agree on a solution, where possible; and
- take action on the agreed solution.

If the client remains dissatisfied, the officer should refer the matter to their supervisor or RM/NM.

In investigating the complaint, the supervisor should aim for:

- an early resolution of the issue;
- ensure communication is accurate;
- use the least interventionist process as is necessary;
- keep it simple;
- ensure access to documentation and information;
- ensure cost efficiency;
- ensure fairness and reasonableness in addressing the complaint; and
- promote the CCMS.

16. Training and Awareness

Regional Directors/National Managers are to ensure that all officers dealing with complaints and compliments have sufficient skills to deal with a variety of situations.

Regional Co-ordinators are to undertake specific training in operating the CCMS database and provide appropriate advice and information to RD/NM's as required.

17. Evaluation and Review

If the CCMS is to be effective it must meet the needs of Customs clients and the agency itself.

The CCMS will be reviewed regularly to monitor its effectiveness. The satisfaction levels of staff will be measured, through workplace visits, to ensure the process continues to meet both client and agency needs.

The way the data is collected, how it is used and the outcomes that result, will be assessed to ensure the process is accessible and the information collected contributes to continuous improvement.

Note: Amendments to the CCMS Guidelines which were made in July 2006 were grammatical changes, not policy changes, and were approved by Director Corporate Planning

18. Further Reading

AS 4269-1995 Australian Standard® Complaints Handling

Serves as a reference document on current best practice.

Standards Australia
1 The Crescent Homebush NSW 2140.
Telephone 1300 654 646
Internet: <http://www.standards.com.au>

“A Good Practice Guide For Effective Complaint Handling”

Produced by the Commonwealth Ombudsman’s Office, this guide uses the Information Privacy Principles to identify the essential elements of effective complaint handling.

Commonwealth Ombudsman
1 Farrell Place (GPO Box 442) Canberra City ACT 2601.
Telephone 1300 362 072
Internet: <http://www.comb.gov.au>

“Ombudsman’s Effective Complaint Handling Guidelines” (1995)

Produced by the Office of the NSW Ombudsman, this guide offers a clear explanation of a 3-tiered approach to complaint handling.

Office of the NSW Ombudsman
Level 3, 580 George Street Sydney NSW 2000.
Telephone (02) 9286 1000 or 1800 451 524 (outside Sydney Metropolitan area)
Internet: <http://www.nswombudsman.nsw.gov.au>

Information Privacy Principles

Contained in the Privacy Act, these 11 Principles are a useful reference in the collecting, storing and accessing of personal information.

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (Federal)
Level 8, 133 Castlereagh Street Sydney NSW 2000.
Telephone 1300 363 992
Internet: <http://www.privacy.gov.au>

Appendices:

- 1. Definitions**
- 2. Complaint Management Process**

Definitions

Complainant

The person or party who makes a complaint is called a complainant. It may be the person or organisation directly involved or someone who is acting on their behalf.

Complaint

Any expression of dissatisfaction with a Customs decision, procedure, product or service.

Compliment

Any expression of satisfaction with a Customs decision, procedure, product or service.

Criminal Conduct

Any breach of Commonwealth or State laws relevant to the conduct in question.

Dispute

A pursued unsatisfied complaint.

Fairness

Free from bias, dishonesty, or injustice.

Grievance

A real or imagined cause for complaint.

Organisation

A company, firm, enterprise or association, or part thereof, whether incorporated or not, public or private, that has its own function(s) and administration.

Privacy

Privacy, in the context of this policy, is extended to both the complainant and employees of Customs. Discussion between Customs employees, regarding complaints, should be restricted to a 'need to know' basis.

All records, documentation and files about complaints should be marked In-Confidence and stored appropriately.

Provider

An organisation or sole trader providing a product or a service to a consumer.

Quality

The totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bears on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs.

Systemic problem

Is caused by failures in the product or service design, delivery systems or organisational policies or procedures.

Vexatious Complaint

A complaint which lacks sufficient grounds for action and seeks only to annoy Customs officers or the Agency. A vexatious complaint may involve one or repeated contacts on the same issue/s.

Complaint Management Process



