



Information Sheet:

Guidelines for handling complaints about mental health services

Providing access to a transparent complaint handling process and managing complaints in an efficient and positive manner is an essential part of delivering an effective mental health service. Implementing best practice processes for handling complaints can help service providers:

- Improve the quality of care being delivered.
- Gain insights into the needs and wants of consumers.
- Address minor issues before they become complaints.
- Build positive relationships with consumers and their families, friends and representatives.

Implementing a complaints process

Mental health service providers are required under the *Mental Health Act 2014* to implement their own complaints process for investigating any complaint made about the provision of a mental health service. This is further supported in Principle 13 of the Charter of Mental Health Care Principles which provides:

A mental health service must provide, and clearly explain, information about legal rights, including those relating to representation, advocacy, complaints procedures, services and access to personal information, in a way that will help people experiencing mental illness to understand, obtain assistance and uphold their rights.

An effective complaint handling system within a mental health service:

- Allows issues to be dealt with quickly and effectively.
- Can enhance the ongoing relationship between the service provider and the individual and their support person.
- Contributes to continuous improvement in the service.

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.

AS/NZS 10002:2014 Australian/New Zealand Standard
– Guidelines for complaint management in organisations

A positive approach to complaint handling

Service providers need to ensure they establish arrangements that assist and support individuals and their personal support people to make complaints. The organisational culture of a service provider plays an important role in the complaints management process.

An effective complaint management process requires staff throughout the organisation to be committed to fair, effective, and efficient complaints management. It requires an organisational culture that respects and values the rights and views individuals.

The organisation must be open to, and encourage feedback on a continuous basis, which can assist in the prevention or prompt resolution of complaints. By dealing with complaints directly, facilitating the making of complaints and encouraging ongoing feedback from consumers, service providers will not only improve public confidence in their services but reduce the chance of the matter unnecessarily escalating (internally and/or externally) and taking up disproportionate amounts of resources.

Responsibilities for complaint handling

The commitment to implementing an effective complaint handling process needs to be made throughout the organisation:

- Head of the organisation - Promote a culture that values complaints and their effective resolution.
- Manager responsible for complaint management - Establish and manage the complaint management system.
- Staff whose duties include complaint management - Demonstrate exemplary complaint management practices.
- All staff - Understand and comply with the organisation's complaint management practices.



Three Step Process for resolution of complaints

The process of **Receive**, **Resolve**, and **Reform** enables organisations to manage complaints in a professional, impartial, confidential and efficient manner with quality outcomes and encompass the principles in *AS/NZS 10002:2014*.

RECEIVE

Receiving complaints – by having arrangements that assist and support individuals to make complaints to mental health service providers that encompass the enabling complaints principles:

Visible and transparent	Ensuring that information about how and where a complaint may be made to or about the organisation is well-publicised.
People Focus	Adopting a people-focused and proactive approach to seeking and receiving feedback and complaints, and demonstrate a strong commitment to addressing any issues raised within a reasonable timeframe.
Accessible	Ensuring that the complaint management system is accessible to everyone, particularly people who might require assistance.
No detriment	Taking all reasonable steps to ensure that complainants are not adversely affected because of a complaint made by them or on their behalf.
No charge	A complainant should not be charged a fee to complain.

RESOLVE

Resolving complaints – by ensuring that complaints are dealt with in a prompt, objective and confidential manner encompassing the principles for managing complaints and the parties of a complaint:

Acknowledge	Promptly acknowledge, assess and prioritise complaints. Actively manage the expectations of complainants.
Objectivity and fairness	Managing each complaint in an objective and unbiased manner.
Equity	Address complaints in an equitable manner in accordance with the organisation's complaint management policy.
Privacy and disclosure	Personally identifiable information about any individual should only be disclosed or used in compliance with all relevant legislative requirements and ethical obligations when managing a complaint.
Communication	Provide explanations for policies, procedures and decisions in its communication with complainants and staff, particularly frontline staff and staff handling complaints in order to minimise complaints and facilitate early resolution.
Conduct of parties	Implement policies or guidelines that make clear the behaviour expected of both staff and complainants.
Work health and safety	Have practices in place to ensure the health and safety of their staff involved in complaint management.
Complaint involving multiple parties	Where a complaint involves multiple areas within an organisation, communication with the complainant should be coordinated between the areas involved.
Empowerment of staff	Ensuring that staff are properly empowered to implement its complaint management process as relevant to their role.

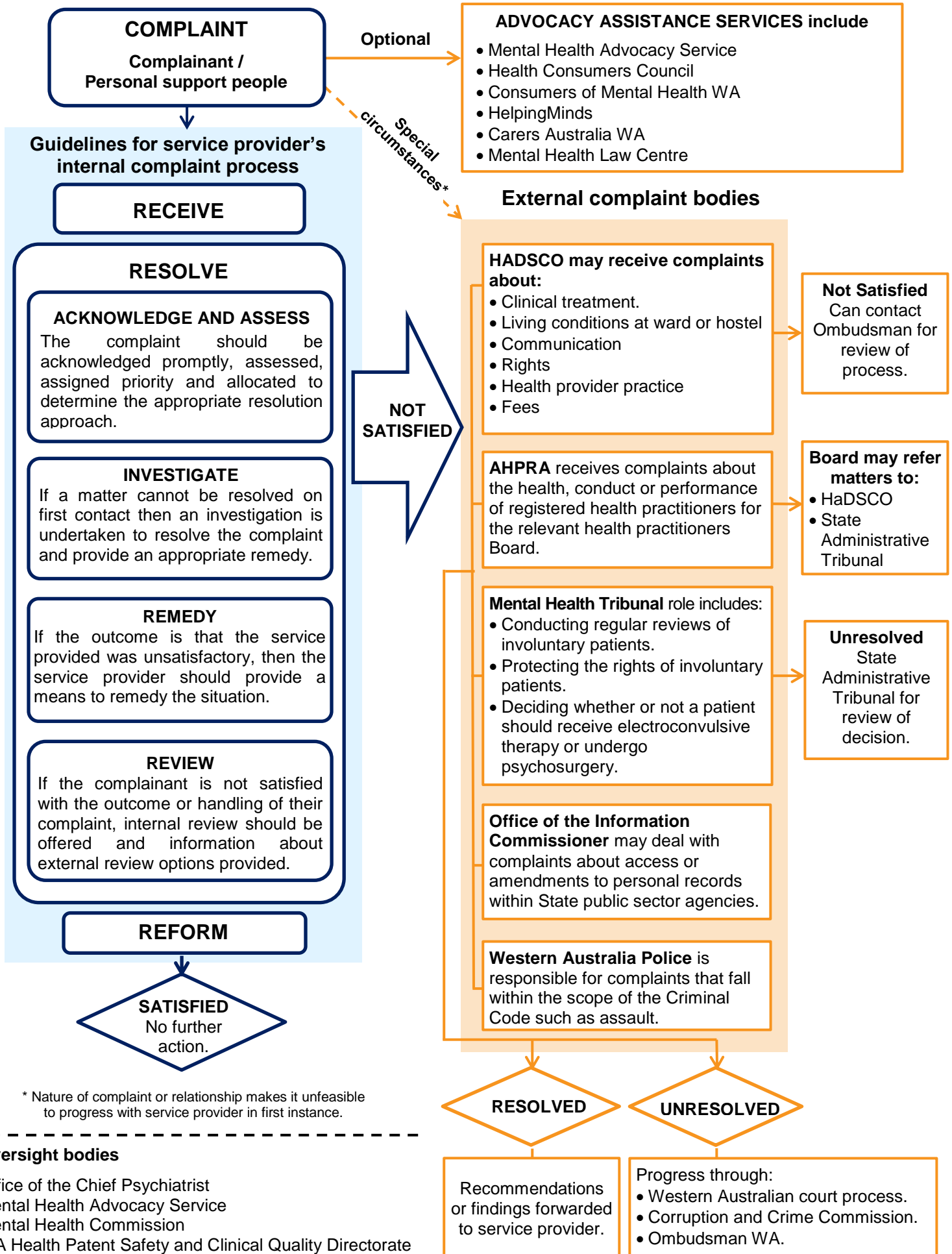
REFORM

Reform within the organisation by encompassing the principles of accountability, learning and prevention:

Prevention of ongoing disputes	Developing and implementing systems that minimise the possibility of complaints escalating into ongoing disputes.
Continuous Improvement	Responding to and learning from complaints should be an essential part of a service provider's commitment to continual quality improvement.
Accountability	Ensuring that accountability for the operation of its complaint management system is clear.



Mental Health Complaint Process





Learning throughout the process

Regularly reviewing the complaint management process is important in determining its efficiency and effectiveness. A continuous improvement approach to complaints encourages service providers to:

- Seek regular, feedback from consumers and their carers about the quality of service received.
- Use a collaborative approach with complainants to find timely resolutions to complaints through open communication and transparent processes.
- Learn from complaints by considering these in the development of risk management, service delivery and staff development systems.

Compliments and feedback can help identify what is being done right, and provide a balance to complaints. Compliments help staff feel motivated, rewarded and valued and can provide the opportunity for celebration.

This process of review will support a service provider in ensuring it has in place a fit for purpose complaint management system. That is, one that is varied to fit the service provider's circumstances and is proportionate to the number and type of complaints it receives.

Using the Guidelines and supporting documents

The Guidelines aim to provide practical, succinct and easy to understand information for service providers and include the following support documentation in the form of templates, strategies and forms which are found in the Guidelines Appendices:

- Complaints handling and compliments policy and procedure
- Complaints and compliment support statement
- Complaints and compliments trifold brochure
- Complaints and compliments form
- Letter acknowledging a complaint
- Communication skills
- Challenging complainant conduct
- Early resolution form
- Letter confirming a complaint has been completed
- Individual complaint tracker form
- Organisational complaints register
- Plan for continuous improvement

The Guidelines and supporting documentation can be found at www.hadsco.wa.gov.au

Contact HaDSCO for more information

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