



Better practice guide to complaints handling in aged care services

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Australian Government
Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission

Engage
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Your rights-respecting approach to complaints and feedback handling may differ from the outlined stages. Similar principles should ensure quality service and continuous improvement. Not all complaints can be resolved at the service level and may need to be referred to the Commission.

The rights-based approach to complaints handling has been introduced with the commencement of the Aged Care Act 2024. This resource provides general guidance only. It's your responsibility to know your obligations and legal responsibilities under the Aged Care Act 2024 and Aged Care Rules 2025.

Introduction

Better practice complaints handling

The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety made recommendations about the rights of older people to voice their opinions and make complaints. It also made recommendations about the need for providers to improve their complaints management systems. These recommendations informed the *Aged Care Act 2024* (Aged Care Act) and the Aged Care Rules 2025 (Aged Care Rules).

The Aged Care Rules converts better practice into provider obligations. Providers must meet these obligations to make sure their complaint handling complies and follows better practice.

This guide is for registered providers. A registered provider receives Australian Government funding to provide residential or home-based aged care services.

This guide explains provider obligations. It promotes openness and best practice in handling complaints.

A provider's complaints and feedback management system must:

- resolve issues raised in complaints quickly, effectively and appropriately
- be open about how they investigate and resolve complaints
- deal with the causes of concerns raised in a complaint
- protect whistleblowers from reprisal (punishment or retaliation)
- support continuous improvement of services for older people.

Complaints and feedback give providers an opportunity to improve the quality of care for older people.



Rights and responsibilities

Rights and obligations of providers

The *Aged Care Act 2024* (Act) and the Aged Care Rules describe the obligations and responsibilities of registered providers (providers) when providing aged care services. These apply from 1 November 2025, with the start of the Aged Care Act. Providers need to read and understand their obligations.

Other laws that apply to handling complaints and feedback in aged care include:

- Aged Care Transitional Rules 2025
- *Regulatory Powers (Standard Provisions) Act 2014*
- *Privacy Act 1988*.

You can find out more about the legislation and policies that relate to complaints on the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission (Commission) [website](#).

Older people's rights

The Aged Care Act includes a [Statement of Rights](#), which lists the rights of older people when they use aged care services. These rights put older people and their needs at the centre of aged care.

The Statement of Rights includes that every older person has the right to:

- independence, autonomy, empowerment and freedom of choice
- equitable access (equal and fair access)
- quality and safe aged care services
- respect for their privacy and information
- person-centred communication and the ability to raise issues without reprisal (retaliation)
- advocates, significant persons and social connections.

Providers must support these rights.

A positive approach

Complaints help improve the quality of aged care

Aged care services must have a complaints and feedback management system that is clear, open and easy to use. Effective processes for handling complaints can help providers:

- identify issues and gaps in care
- improve the quality of their care
- understand older people's needs and wants
- address issues before they become complaints
- build trust and positive relationships with older people and their supporters.

We encourage people to raise a complaint directly with providers if they can. This is often the easiest and quickest way to address a complaint. If someone isn't able or doesn't feel comfortable doing this, they can make their complaint to us at any time.

A complaints culture

A healthy workplace culture is important to being able to effectively handle complaints.

Complaints provide opportunities for your service to learn and improve. A continuous improvement approach to complaints:

- encourages feedback from older people and their supporters about the quality of services
- works with people who make a complaint to find solutions
- learns from complaints and considers them when developing risk management, service delivery and staff development systems.

Complaints and feedback management system

The Aged Care Act and Aged Care Rules require providers to have a system to manage complaints and feedback.

The complaints and feedback management system refers to the processes and policies used to manage complaints and feedback.

A complaints and feedback management system must:

- be available to anyone who wants to make a complaint or give feedback
- follow best practice
- meet legal obligations
- help and encourage older people to make complaints and give feedback.

Providers must use complaints to address issues. They must make sure that management and workers have the knowledge and skills to handle complaints and address the issues raised.

Making complaints easy

An effective complaints and feedback management system is easy for older people to use. It makes sure that everyone:

- knows they have a right to complain
- understands how to complain.

Better practice complaints handling gives people different ways to make a complaint, such as:

- a suggestions box
- online and paper forms that are easy to find and use
- the option to make an anonymous complaint
- an internal review system
- senior staff available to hear complaints
- regular meetings with older person and anyone that supports their decision making
- regular reminders that the provider values feedback.

To support people to make complaints, providers can:

- train workers to be proactive in listening to possible and actual complaints
- provide contacts to advocacy and interpreter services
- provide information in plain, friendly and community language.

Complaints handling policies and procedures

An effective complaints and feedback management system includes written policies and procedures.

Complaints policy

Providers must have a complaints policy. You must keep the policy up to date and review it regularly.

The policy must explain:

- how your complaints and feedback management system works
- how someone can make or withdraw a complaint or feedback
- how someone can make a complaint anonymously
- what a person can expect when they make a complaint
- how you will involve the person who makes the complaint in the complaint process
- the roles and responsibilities of workers and responsible persons
- when and how to make a complaint or give feedback to the Complaints Commissioner
- how you won't victimise (treat differently) a person who makes a complaint when they make a complaint
- when you need to keep information confidential and where the law allows you to share it
- how [procedural fairness](#) works when handling a complaint or feedback
- how to use [open disclosure](#) (see [page 15](#)) and restorative practices (see [page 17](#)).

The provider must:

- give a copy of the policy to the older people they care for and anyone else who asks
- give a copy of the policy to your aged care workers and responsible persons, and make sure they understand and comply with it
- provide training to workers about how the complaints and feedback management system works
- promote how to make a complaint, the complaints policy and give contact details on posters, publications and websites

Better practice guide to complaints handling in aged care services

- provide the policy in different languages or formats if needed to help people make a complaint or give feedback
- ask for feedback as part of ongoing activities and conversations.

Providers should encourage and support older people and their supporters to raise concerns with:

- any aged care worker at any time
- a nominated worker who handles complaints when the complaint can't be resolved immediately
- the Complaints Commissioner.

Complaints procedures

Procedures and processes should support your policy. They explain how to apply the policy to your organisation or service.

An effective procedures document explains:

- how your complaints and feedback management system works
- how it supports the policy
- what to do when handling a complaint
- timeframes for resolving complaints
- definitions
- how to apply the policy (using examples)
- processes and tools such as forms and tracking tools
- who is responsible for each part of the process
- the internal review process
- when and how to evaluate the policy and procedures.

Writing your policy and procedures

When you write policy and procedures for your service, consider:

- talking with older people, their supporters, aged care workers and others connected to your service. This can help you create policies and procedures that support older people's values and needs
- hosting workshops to involve aged care workers. You're more likely to meet your obligations if your workers feel ownership of the policy and its procedures.

Timeframe for resolving complaints

Providers must resolve each issue in a complaint as soon as possible. Addressing complaints quickly can help reduce the risk of complaints about how you handled the complaint.

Explain the timeframes in your complaints policy and procedures.

When you receive a complaint:

- estimate a realistic timeframe for resolving it
- share the timeframe with the person who made the complaint.

You can resolve some complaints on the spot or within 24 hours. Others are more complex or serious and can take longer to investigate and resolve.



Managing complaints and feedback

– Aged Care Act requirements

Under section 165(1)(a) of the Aged Care Act providers must: *implement and maintain a complaints and feedback management system in accordance with any requirements prescribed by the rules* [Aged Care Rules].

Complaints and feedback management systems must:

- receive complaints
- acknowledge complaints
- record and assess complaints
- respond to and report on complaints.

They must also securely store information about complaints and feedback.

Providers must follow best practice to support older people to make complaints.

The system must be documented and allow for:

- procedural fairness
- open disclosure (see [page 15](#))
- people to use advocates
- access to support (including advocacy and language services) for people who make a complaint and those affected by an issue raised in a complaint
- anonymous complaints
- the person making the complaint to be involved in resolving the complaint
- keeping information confidential
- prioritising restorative practices (see [page 17](#))
- withdrawing a complaint
- referrals, in line with Australian, state or territory laws
- regular reviews (at least once a year).

To find out more about the requirements for a provider's complaints and feedback management system, see [section 165–15 of the Aged Care Rules](#).



Questions for providers

- How do you handle the initial stages of complaints?
 - How do you receive complaints?
 - How do you acknowledge complaints?
 - How do you record complaints?
- How do you manage the follow-up and reporting of complaints?
 - How do you assess complaints?
 - How do you respond to complaints?
 - How do you report on complaints?
- How do you make sure everyone knows that they have the right to give feedback or make a complaint?
- How do you promote the complaint handling process?
- How do you make sure everyone knows how to use advocacy and complaint agencies outside of your organisation? Advocacy networks such as Older Person's Advocacy Network (OPAN)
- How do you promote advocacy services?
- Do you provide information about complaints and feedback in plain language? Plain language or plain English is writing that is direct and easy to understand.
- Does your information need to be available in other languages based on the people who will read it?
- Is the content in a format that people can easily understand?
- How do you support diverse and vulnerable groups to give feedback and make complaints about their care and services?
- Do your workers know how to access translation services and other communication and hearing support services to help older people give feedback and make complaints?

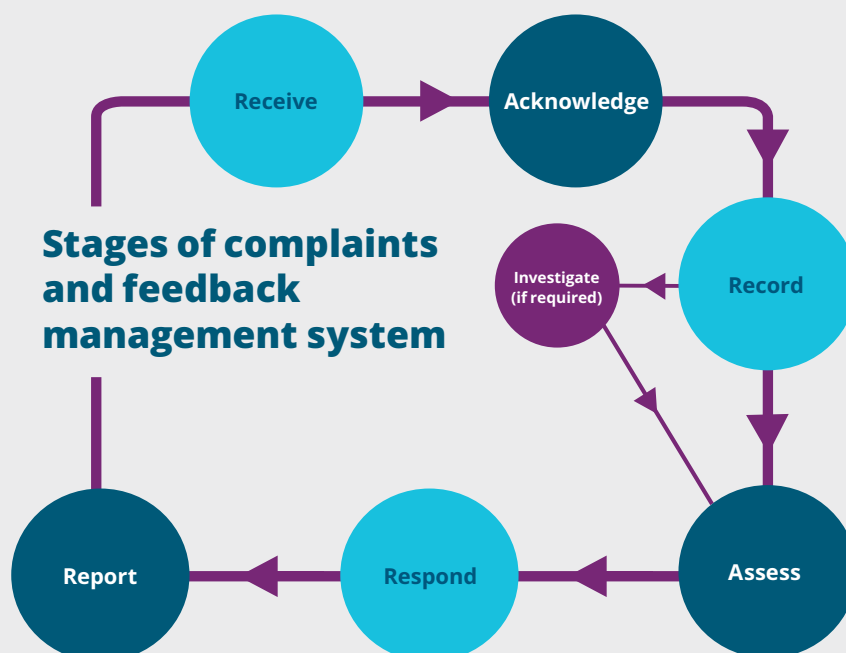
The stages of complaints and feedback management system

An effective complaints and feedback management system is fair, easy to use, responsive and efficient. It supports providers to continuously improve the services they deliver.

The aim is for older people, their supporters and aged care workers to have confidence in your complaints and feedback management system.

A complaints and feedback management system must have these steps:

1. **Receive** all complaints and support people to make complaints.
2. **Acknowledge** all complaints quickly.
3. **Record** and securely store the details of all complaints and related information.
4. **Assess** the complaint:
 - a) understand the facts and the outcomes people want
 - b) give it priority
 - c) start planning about how to resolve it.
5. **Respond** to the complaint using a resolution process that gives the person who made the complaint a clear decision and improves the care or fixes the issues.
6. **Report** on your complaints and feedback management system and its outcomes.



1. Receive

You must have processes for older people, their supporters and advocates to make complaints about your services. These processes must:

- offer support, including translation services, to anyone who wants to make a complaint
- respect and support the confidentiality of people making complaints
- manage personal information in line with your information management obligations
- allow a person who makes a complaint to withdraw it, in writing or by talking to you.

Your staff must understand their roles and responsibilities when receiving complaints.

Case study – Beryl

Receive

Beryl is a resident at Sunny Care Residential Aged Care. She spends her afternoons in the lounge room with other residents. Beryl fell in the lounge room this afternoon. The registered nurse on duty assessed her. Beryl has no injuries. She was monitored for 24 hours after the fall.

Beryl's son, Craig, told the nurse on duty that this is the second time she has fallen this year and it's unacceptable. He said his mother has had issues with her walker and is now nervous to use it. He wants to make a formal complaint in writing. The nurse on duty explains how Craig can make a complaint.

2. Acknowledge

You must acknowledge a complaint as soon as possible or within 3 to 5 days. This shows the person who made the complaint that you will treat them with respect. It's an important way to manage expectations.

This acknowledgement can include recognising that something has gone wrong that has harmed or could have harmed an older person and that it has been brought to the provider's attention.

You don't always have to acknowledge a complaint in writing. If a person makes a complaint by phone and it can't be resolved immediately, you can:

- tell them how you will handle the complaint
- ask them how often they want to be contacted about the complaint
- document all phone calls.

A complaint made by letter can also be resolved quickly. Sometimes you can acknowledge and resolve it at the same time.

Case study – Beryl

Acknowledge

The nurse on duty tells Craig that she will escalate his complaint to the manager. She explains that the service will investigate the incident and his concerns and will get back to him within 24 hours. The nurse explains that the service needs to work out what they can deal with immediately and what may need more time.

The nurse tells Craig that she will log his concern on their internal complaints register and follow up. She then sums up their discussion and tells Craig she will send him an email with the next steps in the complaints process.

Open disclosure

Providers must use open disclosure when handling complaints.

Open disclosure is a discussion you have with an older person and their supporter or representative. It happens when something goes wrong that has harmed or could have harmed the older person.

Open disclosure involves:

- talking with the older person when things go wrong
- listening to the older person's experiences (what happened and how it affects them)
- acknowledging what went wrong and apologising
- finding out and explaining what happened
- explaining what the provider will do to stop it from happening again.

Open disclosure can:

- build relationships and trust
- support learning and service improvement in partnership with older people
- improve public trust by being open when something has gone wrong.

The Aged Care Rules and Outcome 2.6a of the Aged Care Quality Standards (Quality Standards) explain that a provider's complaints and feedback management system must make sure they use open disclosure when they respond to complaints and negative feedback. This outcome is for providers registered in categories 4, 5 or 6.

If something goes wrong at a service, the Commission will look at how providers have used open disclosure. This includes checking for proof that their communication is open, honest and timely.

Open disclosure can include giving an apology or expressing regret. All Australian jurisdictions have laws that protect statements of apology or regret. As part of your best practice complaints handling, it is important to understand your state or territories' legal protections for giving an apology or expressing regret.

You can find out more about open disclosure in the [Aged Care Open Disclosure Framework and Guidance](#).

Case study – Beryl

Open disclosure

The Director of Nursing, Xiang, receives Craig's complaint. Xiang looks at Beryl's records to understand her care needs. She checks the incident report and the assessment that happened after she fell. Xiang then visits Beryl to talk through the complaint. Xiang asks Beryl if she has time and wants to talk about what happened in the lounge room. Beryl says yes.

Xiang explains that she knows that Beryl had a fall and that her son is concerned about the way the service handled it. She tells Beryl that she has a right to feel safe and she apologises to her for what happened. Xiang asks Beryl what happened and how she is feeling now.

Beryl explains that she wanted to get her cardigan from her room so she tried to get out of the armchair. She says that she leant over to reach for her walker and fell while trying to steady herself.

Xiang thanks Beryl for explaining. She tells Beryl that she understands that would have been frightening for her and she apologises again.

Xiang asks Beryl what she would like to happen now. Beryl says she wants to feel steadier on her feet through new equipment or extra help from staff.

Xiang thanks Beryl for her suggestion. She says that there may be more the service can do to restore Beryl's trust and prevent the issue from happening again. She tells Beryl that she will investigate it and get back to her. Xiang asks Beryl if she wants her son to get all this information as well. Beryl confirms she wants the service to share the information with Craig. She also confirms that he is her supporter.

Restorative outcomes

A restorative outcome is an action the provider takes to restore a person's trust and confidence in the quality and safety of their services. Trust is an important part of the relationship between the older person and the provider. It's essential to an older person's experience of quality care.

You must make restorative outcomes a priority in your complaints and feedback management system. Restorative outcomes are important in rights-based complaints handling. A rights-based complaints handling ensures that older people and their supporters can raise concerns about potential breaches of their rights, such as the right to dignity, privacy, and quality care. The system should be accessible, confidential, prompt, and fair, encouraging individuals to come forward with their concerns. If a provider fails to address a complaint or a breach of rights, we will take action.

Restorative outcomes can include:

- an apology
- agreeing that you will communicate better with the person and their supporters
- fixing the problem
- discussing things with the person who made the complaint and keeping them informed
- paying back any unlawful fees and charges
- training staff to improve their skills
- improving services for older people.

Case study – Beryl

Restorative outcomes

Director of Nursing, Xiang, asked Beryl how she wanted to go ahead with the complaint and how the service could restore her trust and stop the incident from happening again. They talked through Beryl's concerns and what she wants to happen. Xiang then explained to her what had happened in relation to her fall.

Xiang looked through the incident reports. She spoke to staff, discussing what happened, why it happened and what she did to minimise the risk of it happening again. Xiang reminded staff that Beryl needs assistance, following her care plan.

Xiang used open disclosure to find a restorative outcome and build Beryl's trust.

3. Record

It's important to carefully record and securely store all information relating to complaints in your complaints and feedback management system. This means logging formal complaints and capturing comments, suggestions, problems and compliments.

By recording all feedback, you create a complete record that can help improve care and lead to higher satisfaction for older people.

The first step in dealing with a complaint is to review it. Take the time to understand what the issue is and why it matters. When you have a clear understanding, describe the complaint and write down all relevant details. This will help you address the issue.

You must also:

- securely store information relating to complaints and feedback
- handle personal information and data in line with your legal obligations
(For example: Your legal obligations under the Privacy Act.)



Case study – Beryl

Record

After talking with Beryl, Xiang documents all their conversations on the complaints and feedback management system. Xiang stamps the time and date of the information.



4. Assess

Complaints can be very different. You can resolve some quickly by communicating openly or apologising. Some aren't clear, so you need to gather more information. For more complex complaints you may need to investigate the underlying issues that caused the complaint or refer to other providers or practitioners.

Understanding what the person who made the complaint expects is key to managing a complaint well. Ask them what would resolve the complaint for them.

Some problems might not be easy to resolve. The person who made the complaint may want an outcome that is unreasonable. Explain to them why an outcome isn't possible and offer an alternative solution, if you can.

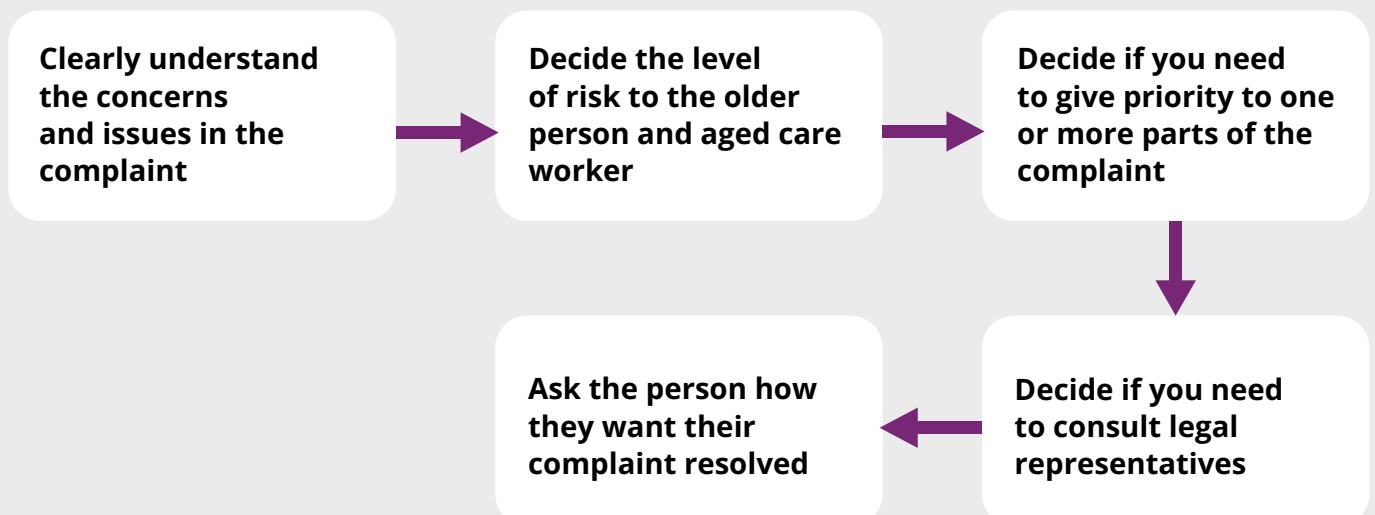
Often the person who made the complaint wants a simple outcome, such as an apology or a change in services. Some want to raise awareness of a problem or make sure that other people don't find themselves in the same situation.

Some complaints are straightforward with low risk to the older person. They can be resolved in your first contact or discussion with them or by meeting with the person who made the complaint. Ask them what they need to fix the problem and talk about options. The person making the complaint can also offer solutions that the provider might accept.

Aged care workers should:

- have the authority to resolve simple complaints
- escalate complaints that pose risks or need more investigation.

Assessing a complaint



Case study – Beryl

Assess

Clearly understand the concerns and issues in the complaint

Director of Nursing, Xiang, calls Craig soon after speaking with his mother Beryl. Xiang explains that she visited Beryl and they talked about the incident. Xiang tells Craig that she apologised and is committed to restore Beryl's trust and make sure the incident doesn't happen again.

Xiang explains that she knows that Beryl is her own decision maker and wants to go ahead with the complaint. As Craig is Beryl's supporter, he will receive all updates and documents.

Xiang also wants to hear from Craig, to make sure she has all the information and understands all the issues. Craig explains that Beryl may not have mentioned the issues with the brakes on her walker. The brake hasn't always locked so the walker is stable for Beryl to stand up with.

Craig also told Xiang that his mother has said on a few occasions that she felt dizzy and lightheaded. He is concerned that Beryl hasn't raised this with the service. He thinks this could have been part of the reason she fell.

Decide the level of risk

Given the high level of risk of the faulty walker, the service immediately takes the walker for repair and gives Beryl another walker.

As Beryl told Craig she has felt dizzy and lightheaded, she has an increased risk of falling. The service books Beryl in for an urgent review with the GP. This will include a medication review and complete a post-fall FRAT Falls Risk Assessment Tool.

Prioritise

The provider does the immediate actions of removing the walker and booking Beryl in for a GP review.

Next steps include:

- discussing equipment testing and reporting with staff at the next stand-up meeting
- sending a follow up email to all staff about equipment testing and reporting
- finding training for all staff.

Ask the person how they want their complaint resolved

Xiang asked Beryl what outcome she wants. Xiang used open disclosure and restorative outcomes to discuss the issues openly and restore Beryl's trust and confidence in her care.

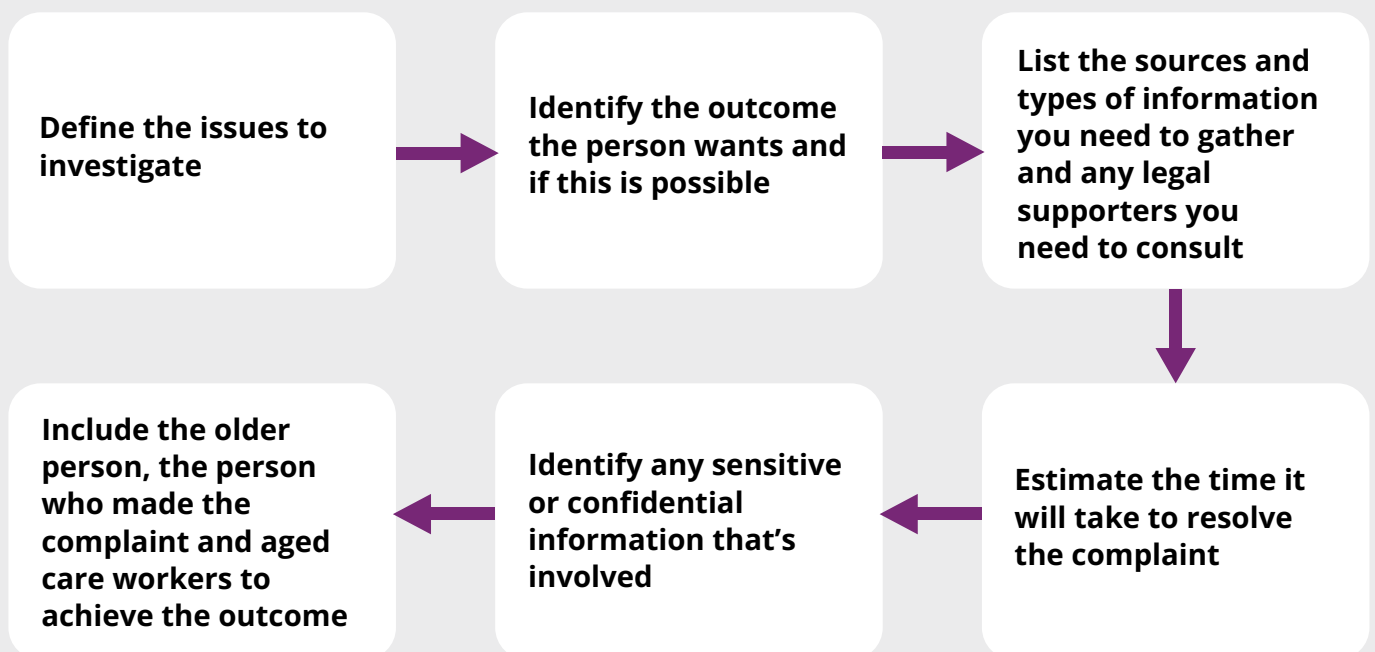
Planning

To work out how to resolve a complaint, it can be useful to create a plan.

The amount of detail in your plan should match how complex and serious the issues are that you're trying to resolve.

A written plan will focus attention and make sure you don't miss any important issues. It's important to be flexible and adjust the plan as circumstances change and new information is available.

The plan should:



Case study – Beryl

Planning

Xiang creates a plan before the investigation. It includes these steps:

Define the issues to investigate

1. Beryl's faulty equipment – it needs to be reported and fixed.
2. The change in Beryl's clinical presentation – the report of dizziness and light-headedness.
3. Beryl's second fall in 12 months.

Identify the outcome

1. Discuss with Beryl what outcome she want – and if it is achievable.

Make sure to discuss with Beryl if her desired outcome isn't achievable what else could be offered.

List the sources and types of information and people to consult

1. Consider what information is needed to confirm what happened – interview carers, review Beryl's clinical notes and care plan, discussion with Beryl for her perspective.
2. Consider who may need to be informed – is there a legal decision maker, supporter or next of kin to notify e.g. Craig.
3. Once identified, keep them updated throughout the complaint, even if the update is 'we are still waiting for information/ equipment/training/etc

Estimate the time

1. Beryl's current walker is removed immediately and she is given a replacement
2. Review of clinical presentation will take 48 hours.

The investigation should take 5 days, however a satisfactory clinical review may take longer.

Include the older person, the person who made the complaint and aged care workers to achieve the outcome

1. Xiang visits Beryl to explain next steps and confirm that she wants her son Craig involved. Xiang contacts Craig to tell him these steps.
2. Discussion with nurse.

Investigation

An investigation gathers information about the causes of the complaint. This can help you identify solutions to minimise or prevent the risk of an incident happening again. Not all complaints need a formal investigation.

You can use root cause analysis to identify the underlying causes of an incident. This involves asking 3 questions:

- What is the problem?
- Why did it happen?
- What can you do to stop it from happening again?

You should follow these principles of investigation:

- Impartiality – approach each complaint with an open mind so your findings aren't biased. This helps make sure your investigation is fair.
- Confidentiality – investigate complaints in private. Respect the confidentiality of the older person and the person who made the complaint. Follow [whistleblower protections](#). Only share information on a 'need to know' basis and in line with the Aged Care Act and Aged Care Rules.
- Transparency – tell the person who made the complaint and the older person about the steps in the complaints process. Give them a chance to take part. Contact everyone involved in the complaint regularly to keep them up to date about progress.
- Timeliness – investigate promptly. Keep written records of information you collect or findings you make. Securely store this information.
- Procedural Fairness – giving the parties to the complaint (including the person who made the complaint, the older person, the worker if one is involved) an opportunity to share their point of view, and comment on information or claims from other sources.

It's principle to:

- ask the person who made the complaint to give you any documents they have about it
- tell the person who made a complaint that it isn't always possible to resolve complaints. Sometimes you need to consider alternatives, such as conciliation, mediation or external complaints options. Conciliation and mediation relates to a process to help address concerns and resolve complaint between older people, their supporters and providers to reach an agreement.

You can use an external expert investigator when dealing with serious incidents.

5. Respond

When you make a decision about the complaint, you must communicate it using the principles of procedural fairness. This means communicating clearly to the person who made the complaint and to others, such as the older person and legal representatives.

You can provide this information:

- by talking with the person who made the complaint
- in writing if the matter is more serious, complex or disputed. Let them know you'll send them a more detailed written explanation.

Think about apologising to the person who made the complaint and the older person. An apology can help reach a successful outcome. It shows you have empathy. Apologising when things go wrong is a key part of open disclosure. Even if it's not clear that you have done something wrong, you can still say sorry. This can be a positive for your relationship with the person who made the complaint.

When you apologise:

- explain the action you plan to take to reassure and satisfy the person who made the complaint
- tell them the service will make sure that the cause of the complaint won't happen again.

All Australian jurisdictions have laws that protect statements of apology or regret.

To find out more about the legal aspects of apologising or expressing regret, contact your state or territory authority.

Case study – Beryl

Respond

Xiang apologises to Beryl for what happened and for Beryl not feeling safe to discuss her concerns with the service. Xiang reminds Beryl that she has the right to make complaints and to feel safe at the service. Xiang tells Beryl that the service will work to fix the issue, restore her trust and prevent any issue from happening again.

Initially Xiang and the workers involved in the investigation:

- tell care staff about the incident and Beryl's dizziness to make sure they monitor her
- review medication and decide if it needs a GP referral
- check the walker for faults and remove if faults are found – and offer interim replacement if safe

- inform Beryl and Craig the provider commits to preventing this issue from reoccurring. This can include:
 - reassuring Beryl that they have removed the walker and that she has another walker to use in the meantime that doesn't have faults
 - discussing with her that you strongly encourage her to talk to staff if she's having dizziness again and that a GP will be assessing her very soon.

Xiang keeps Beryl and Craig up to date throughout the investigation. When there was a delay in getting a new walker, Xiang told them why – they're waiting on an occupational therapist to see Beryl to make sure they give her the right walker.

The service after investigating:

- arrange a medication review with a GP
- update Beryl's medication and clinical documents based on the GP's recommendations
- replace her faulty walker with the new one (if arrived)
- tell staff about the updates in Beryl's situation Organise training/ communication for the staff in incident management and how to recognise, record and update faulty equipment.

Follow up

It's good practice to ask the person who made the complaint for feedback on how you handled and resolved the complaint. You can do this when you respond to their complaint.

If they're not happy with the outcome, consider other options, such as:

- undertaking an internal review by another aged care workers who wasn't involved in the complaint to see if it could have been managed better
- mediation of an unresolved dispute between you and the person who made the complaint. A mediator can help clarify matters, give an unbiased view and offer solutions
- external complaints options, such as [Older Persons Advocacy Network](#) (OPAN).

If you don't accept a person's claim, you should note this, explain why and tell them about other ways they can make a complaint.

Case study – Beryl

Follow up

Xiang asks Beryl and Craig for feedback on the complaints process.

6. Report

All complaints and comments can help you identify where you can improve.

Compliments and feedback can help identify what you're doing right and provide a balance to complaints. Compliments help aged care workers feel motivated, rewarded and valued and can provide a reason to celebrate.

You should record all complaints, comments, suggestions, problems and compliments. You can use:

- manual systems with template forms and tracking tools
- standard spreadsheet or word processing software
- off-the-shelf complaints software
- management software
- a database customised for your service.

With these tools, you can track feedback, complaints and compliments. You can also analyse trends as part of continuous improvement. For example, you can create regular reports aged care workers and management can review. They can do this to identify what the service is doing well and where it can improve (see the 'Analysing Trends' section on [page 41](#)). Whichever system you use, make sure you train staff to use it and they use it consistently.



Responding to complaints

– Aged Care Act requirements

Section 165(1)(b) of the Aged Care Act and the Aged Care Rules require providers to: *manage complaints and feedback in accordance with that system [provider's complaints and feedback management system] and any other requirements prescribed by the rules.*

You should have, and use, a best practice system for managing and resolving complaints.

You must resolve complaints in a way that is appropriate, person-centred and addresses the issues raised in the complaint as soon as possible.

You must take reasonable steps to tell the person who made the complaint and the older person affected about the outcomes of the complaint (except for complaints made anonymously).



Questions for providers

- What systems do you have to make sure you follow up complaints and take appropriate action?
- When things go wrong, how do you understand what happened?
- How do you involve older people in resolving the complaint?
- How can older people add to information about a negative event, help review the incident and find solutions?
- When things go wrong, are there clear responsibilities for communicating with older people and their supporters so they can understand what happened?
- What have you done to encourage and support a culture of learning from mistakes?
- What have you done to make and continue the changes made to care and services from lessons you've learned?
- How do you use advice from advocates and community representatives to understand the best way to resolve a complaint for an older person?

Aged care workers

Aged care workers must understand and comply with their role in receiving, acknowledging, recording, assessing, responding to and reporting on complaints and feedback. They should be trained and ready to manage and respond to a complaint. This helps make the complaints and feedback management system more effective and efficient.

To make sure that aged care workers understand your complaints and feedback management system, you must:

- provide and keep up-to-date documents about the complaints and feedback management system
- provide regular training on the system and how it works
- make sure that aged care workers comply with the complaints and feedback management system.

To find out more about the requirements for aged care workers, see section 165 of the Aged Care Rules.

Complaints handling skills

Providers can choose to create a complaints officer role.

Complaints handling staff need a range of skills, including:

- interpersonal communication
- active listening and reflective listening
- conflict resolution and negotiation
- consulting with people who make complaints and older people
- quality improvement
- policy development.

If you're not able to recruit specific complaints handling staff, you can support staff who're involved in complaints handling. You can improve their understanding and ability to deal with complaints.

For example, you can:

- have an orientation program for new staff that includes complaints management training. You could do this with other services to share costs
- invite guest speakers with expertise, such as advocates, to your service
- discuss complaints case studies and have communication exercises at team meetings
- discuss issues in your news, newsletters and industry publications
- have a buddy system to help new or existing staff learn new skills

- have a mentoring program where senior staff coach other staff
- host network meetings and service visits to share ideas with other providers
- have 'eat and learn' lunches and afternoon teas to provide food and short training sessions for staff.

Open, regular communication

Aged care workers who are good communicators and show empathy are a valuable resource. Good communication can help you resolve complaints quickly and in proportion to the risk to older people.

People communicate in different ways. Positive language, including body language, can help you work with the person who made the complaint to resolve it.

Effective communication skills for complaints handling include:

- **Active listening** – Focusing on the person, without interrupting, helps you understand the issues and their feelings. It lets the person know that you have heard them. Confirming what you heard by retelling their information in your own words is a good way to show that you take them seriously. It can also help people feel validated and respected.
- **Tailoring language** – Personalising information to suit the person you're communicating with improves understanding. This is important if the person doesn't speak English as a first language or finds it difficult to understand the information you're discussing.
- **Body language** – Using non-verbal communication, such as expressions, movement, gestures and eye contact, can help you understand how a person feels and how they communicate. Most face-to-face communication happens through body language. Be aware of your body language when you talk with people. It affects how they respond to you. For example, crossing your arms across your body can show that you're not open to the other person's issue.
- **Managing stress** – Stress can hinder effective communication. It can prevent people from thinking clearly and lead to misunderstandings. Signs of stress include sweating, clenched hands, tense muscles and shallow breathing. You can respond to signs of stress in others by offering support or continuing the discussion later. Effective communicators also recognise stress in themselves and develop ways to deal with it.
- **Emotional awareness** – Emotions affect how people understand each other. A lack of awareness of your own or others' feelings can lead to misunderstanding, frustration and anger. You can reduce anxiety by validating people's concerns and committing to a timely resolution.
- **Patience** – It's important to give people enough time to express their concerns. Staying focused and not interrupting shows that you're open to listening and working towards a resolution. Communication lines can be broken when people feel rushed or misunderstood or when staff look like they want to get out of a conversation.

Training

The Aged Care Act and Aged Care Rules outline:

- how staff should do their job
- what they must know
- how they must behave.

You can help staff meet these expectations by providing communication and complaints handling training. Think about the costs of poor complaints handling by under-skilled staff, including:

- financial costs
- damage to service reputation
- poor publicity
- reduced staff morale.

Every service needs a strategy to help staff manage complaints effectively.

You should review your training strategy regularly to make sure it stays effective. Staff training is also an important part of risk management. An effective risk management program means being proactive in preventing complaints, problems and critical incidents.

Case study

Mrs S voices concern

Mr P has been a resident of a small residential aged care service for several years. A few weeks ago, unexpectedly, his condition worsened and he was rushed to hospital.

He's returned to the service and everyone's pleased to see he's back to his lovely, bubbly self.

One of the nursing staff, Mrs S, notices in Mr P's records that they gave him an incorrect medication just before his condition deteriorated. They gave him 15mg of Endone, which was meant for another resident.

As Mr P was on medication for pre-existing conditions, the Endone caused a negative reaction. Mr P was over-sedated and became unresponsive.

Mrs S is very concerned about the mistake and immediately raises it with her manager who escalates it to the provider complaints team and alerts their response team. The complaints officer tells Mr P's supporters what happened. They're distressed and angry. Remembering her training, the complaints officer remains calm, tries to understand their stress and empathises with them.

The service manager and the complaints officer apologise to Mr P and his supporters. They explain what happened, acknowledge what happened and explain what the services is doing to stop it from happening again.

The service holds a meeting for all nursing staff to discuss the administration of medication. They organise training and extra procedures to make sure this doesn't happen again.

Although Mr P and his supporters are upset, they appreciate that the service:

- acknowledged the mistake
- acted to prevent it from happening again
- apologised
- were open and honest throughout the whole process.



Protecting people who make complaints

– Aged Care Act requirements

Section 165 and Chapter 7, Part 5 of the Aged Care Act and the Aged Care Rules require providers to protect people who make a complaint.

Preventing victimisation and discrimination

Section 165(1)(c) requires providers to: *not victimise or discriminate against anyone for making a complaint or giving feedback.*

Providers have an obligation under the Aged Care Act to make sure that nobody is victimised. This includes aged care workers and responsible persons who share their concerns with you. You must comply with this obligation and make sure that others comply, including aged care workers, responsible persons and associated providers, such as subcontractors.

Whistleblower protections

Section 165(1) requires providers to:

(d) implement and maintain a whistleblower system, and maintain a whistleblower policy, in accordance with any requirements prescribed by the rules; and

(e) manage disclosures that qualify for protection under section 547 (whistleblower protections) in accordance with any requirements prescribed by the rules; and

(f) if a complaint or feedback is also a disclosure that qualifies for protection under section 547—manage that disclosure in accordance with any requirements prescribed by the rules.

Section 157 of the [Aged Care Act](#) explains when a disclosure about a provider, aged care worker or responsible person qualifies for whistleblower protections. It must be:

- made to an ‘eligible recipient’. You can find a list in the Aged Care Act and they include the Commission, a provider, a police officer
- provided spoken or in writing. You can make them anonymously or not.

The person making the disclosure must also have reason to suspect that the information shows that a provider or worker may have contravened (broken) a provision of the Aged Care Act.

Anyone, including aged care workers, older people and their supporters, can make a disclosure that qualifies for whistleblower protections under the Aged Care Act.

Better practice guide to complaints handling in aged care services

A person who makes a disclosure has the following rights and protections under the Aged Care Act:

- **Protection from retaliation** – The person making, or expected to make, a disclosure can't be:
 - dismissed or fired
 - harassed
 - discriminated against or treated differently
 - victimised or treated unfairly.
- **Immunity from consequences of disclosure** – People who make a disclosure can't:
 - be charged for civil, criminal or administrative liability (legal responsibility)
 - face disciplinary action
 - have any contractual or other remedy or right brought against them.

However, if the person who made the disclosure was also involved in the wrongdoing, they're not exempt (let off) from any legal action because of their disclosure. If someone makes a disclosure and is also part of a contract, the contract cannot be terminated just because that disclosure might be seen as breaking the contract.

- **Anonymity** – People who make disclosures can choose to:
 - be anonymous (not reveal their identity)
 - keep any other people named in the disclosure anonymous.
- **Confidentiality** – You must treat the person's identity as confidential. This applies even when the person doesn't choose to be anonymous. You can't share the person's identity or anything that can lead to revealing their identity, unless you're authorised to do so under the Aged Care Act.
- **Legal remedies** – If someone who's made a disclosure experiences or is threatened with harm or retaliation because of their disclosure, they can apply through the courts for:
 - compensation
 - injunctions
 - other legal remedies or actions.

Providers must have a whistleblower system that describes how you encourage, receive, manage and investigate disclosures that qualify for whistleblower protection. The system must support people to make disclosures without fear of negative consequences. The [Aged Care Rules](#) have more detail about these requirements.

Working with people who make complaints

When you work with a person who has made a complaint, it helps to create a positive, collaborative environment. Here are some tips.

Positive approaches

- Thank the person who made the complaint for bringing the problem to your attention. Tell them you welcome their complaint, you're happy to help and you want to fix the problem. Show you care.
- Be positive, professional and polite.
- Ask what they think will fix the problem and what outcome they want. They could have a solution and outcomes you've not thought of.
- Use empathy. Consider their point of view. How would you feel if you were in their position? Think about their feelings and emotions.
- If needed, ask them to stop any unreasonable behaviours. For example, offensive, abusive, threatening or aggressive behaviours.
- Make sure your complaints handling staff have good communication skills. Negative words, tone, body language and attitude can make an upset person angry. Your staff should be calm and in control of their feelings and temper.
- Consider the person's history with the service. What solutions and strategies have helped them in the past?
- Offer information to help them understand the situation.
- Apologise. You can say, 'I'm really sorry about...' without accepting blame or admitting fault. 'I don't know and I will find out', 'What do you think?' and 'Let's work together to resolve this problem'.
- Mirror their language (where it isn't abusive or threatening). This means describing the problem in the words they would use. This shows that you understand them and have empathy.
- Take notes. This shows you take the complaint seriously. Tell them you're taking notes to make sure that your records are correct.
- Use your notes to clarify issues and guide your questions. Notes are important documents for your complaints file. Read your notes back to the person to confirm that you understand their complaint.
- Respect their privacy and dignity. Before you raise their issue with others, ask them if they're happy for you to do so.

Better practice guide to complaints handling in aged care services

- Be flexible. Lack of flexibility can be frustrating. Treat each complaint as an individual case. Be prepared to handle exceptional and unusual cases with exceptional and unusual solutions.
- Be honest. Tell people what you can fix and what you can't fix and why.
- Don't make promises you can't deliver. Give realistic expectations about what you can do to address the problem.
- Look for common ground and shared interests. For example, 'I know we both want to sort this issue out to make sure your mum gets the best care'.
- Give the reason before you say 'no'. If you can't fix the problem in the way they want, tell them why. Let them know what they can do if they're not satisfied with the outcome. Give them information about your review processes and options for external review, including by the Commission.
- Be creative. Be imaginative. Create solutions that can work.
- Agree to trial the proposed solution for a period of time and then review how effective it is.
- Escalate the complaint to a more senior staff member where appropriate. This can show that the service takes their issue seriously.
- Bring in other people who're not so close to the issue to suggest possible solutions. They may be able to offer fresh ideas and solutions.
- Bring in an external, independent person, like an advocate or a professional mediator. They can be neutral and can offer fair solutions. This can help resolve an issue before it escalates.

Unhelpful approaches

- Avoiding or ignoring people who make a complaint
- Being defensive, negative or blaming others
- Making assumptions
- Passing people from one staff member to another
- Promising what you can't deliver
- Giving standard responses or standard solutions
- Fighting with or interrupting others
- Getting caught up in irrelevant detail
- Being unreasonable
- Accusing people or treating them poorly
- Overwhelming people with questions, paperwork or forms
- Grilling people or questioning their motives
- Not considering people's feelings
- Making excuses

- Arranging for staff to take over a meeting or cutting a meeting short
- Accepting abuse, threats or harassment – staff have rights too
- Taking complaints personally
- Talking in negative terms to other staff or older people about the person who made the complaint
- Believing that you can resolve all complaints to the satisfaction of the person who made the complaint

Dealing with unreasonable behaviour

Providers sometimes receive complaints from people who behave in ways that are challenging. For example, they may be aggressive, make threats, swear and use abusive language.

Providers and their staff don't have to accept abuse, threats or harassment. You have a right to be treated with respect in complaints handling. Consider including this right in your organisation's service charter and complaints handling policy.

Dealing with unreasonable behaviours can take up a lot of time, resources and energy. It can take resources away from dealing with other complaints.

Consider training your complaints staff to manage unreasonable behaviours.

Where there's unreasonable behaviour, tell staff to:

- think about the safety of people nearby
- redirect the person to focus on the issues
- remind the person that you're trying to find a solution and you're there to help
- arrange another time to speak with the person or ask them to write the issues down, if the conversation is becoming unproductive and stressful
- ask the person to stop the behaviour. Tell them they're being offensive, disrespectful or inappropriate
- tell the person you'll end the conversation and why. Then end it
- report all incidents of unreasonable behaviour to a manager as soon as possible
- ask the manager for advice on how best to manage the person
- tell other staff what to do with that person or behaviour, if it happens again.

Helping people make complaints

[Australian Government legislation for aged care](#) requires providers to make sure older people, their supporters and others:

- can access other ways to make a complaint outside of the provider
- know who they can complain to when the service is unable to resolve their complaint
- know who can support them when they make a complaint, such as advocacy services and the Commission
- can choose to make a complaint to the Commission if they don't feel comfortable making a complaint with the service.

Helping people with accessibility needs

Help with accessibility can include help with:

- reading, writing and communicating
- cultural and language differences
- physical, mental, cognitive and sensory abilities.

Some people may have difficulty making a complaint verbally or in writing. Staff must offer people help to communicate their concerns.

Translating and interpreting services

If English isn't the person's first language, you can use a supporter or professional translation service to help them through the complaints process.

Professional translating and interpreting services include:

- Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS National) **131 450**
- Aboriginal Interpreter Service (AIS) **1800 334 944**
- Aboriginal Interpreting Service WA **0439 943 612**

The National Relay Service (NRS) provides a free service to support conversations with people who're deaf or have a speech or hearing impairment. The NRS can support conversations over the internet using web browser technology (including on smartphones, PCs and tablet computers) and over the telephone.

- TTY users: phone **1800 555 677** then ask for our number **1800 951 822**
- Speak and Listen users: phone **1800 555 727** then ask for our number **1800 951 822**
- Internet relay users: connect to the National Relay Service and enter **1800 951 822**.

Advocacy services

Aged care advocacy services can help an older person or their supporter make a complaint. This includes people with mental or cognitive issues. Advocacy services are free and confidential.

Advocates provide support at any stage of the complaints process. They can stand beside an older person or work for them. They do this at the older person's direction and in a way that represents what the older person wants.

An advocate will always ask an older person for permission before they act.

An advocate can:

- support older people to make decisions that affect their quality of life
- provide information about older people's rights and responsibilities and discuss their options
- raise an issue with the provider or the Commission
- support older people at any stage of the complaints process.

It can be intimidating for people to complain to staff on their own. Remind them that they can have support to make a complaint. This can build their confidence and reduce anxiety. It can also help them feel that raising their concern is not a confrontation. When you can't resolve a complaint within the service, it can help to refer the person to an advocacy service or to the Commission.

[Older Persons Advocacy Network](#) (OPAN) supports older people and their supporters to work with aged care services to protect their rights. You can call OPAN on **1800 700 600**.

Case study

Auntie V gets help to eat well again

Auntie V is a 72-year-old woman of Chinese heritage, living in a small town. A local aged care service provider helps her with meals on wheels, laundry and house cleaning. Auntie V makes a weekly payment through a Centrepay deduction towards her meals on wheels. The meals are delivered to her Monday to Friday and are an essential part of her care and support.

Auntie V's nephew and his girlfriend have moved into town from another community and are staying with her while they look for work. The nephew sees Auntie V getting her daily meals on wheels and asks her how much she pays for this. Auntie V explains that she pays a contribution from her pension for the meals. Her nephew says she should stop paying, give him the money and he will shop for her and cook the meals instead. Auntie V likes her meals from the aged care service, but she agrees to stop her payment and gives her debit card to her nephew to do the shopping.

A few weeks go by and Auntie V's nephew hasn't been buying groceries or cooking meals for her. She asks for her debit card back, but he refuses to give it to her and then leaves town.

Meanwhile, the administration officer at the aged care service has notified the manager that Auntie V has cancelled her meals support. As Auntie V's English is limited, the service arranges a translator to help them discuss this with Auntie V.

The manager and a translator visit Auntie V. Auntie V explains the situation and asks for help so she can receive meals again. With the translator present, the manager and Auntie V can openly discuss her concerns and needs. This ensures that her worries are understood and adequately addressed.

The manager sees that Auntie V can be further supported by an aged care advocate. The manager discusses this with Auntie V and gets her permission to arrange an advocate.

Working all together, Auntie V:

- signs a new consent form to restart the payment deduction
- receives support to contact her bank to cancel her old card and apply for a new one
- is offered help if she would like to talk to the police about what her nephew has done.

Auntie V doesn't want to go to the police, but she does want support to speak with relatives in the community where her nephew lives. She wants to tell them what he did and ask them to stop him from visiting her.

The manager contacts Auntie V's relatives and organises a telephone supporter meeting from the service. Auntie V attends with her advocate and speaks to her relatives using the provider's phone. A translator is also there to support communication between Auntie V, her advocate and the service.

The manager updates the care and case management plan with Auntie V. They add a new goal and action under 'money management' about helping her when relatives come to visit. The manager lets Auntie V's regular carers know about the change in her care plan.

The manager checks that the service training plan includes training on elder abuse.

Continuous improvement and complaints

Continuous improvement is an essential part of an effective complaints and feedback management system. Complaints, feedback and investigations can highlight issues and problems and contribute to the continuous improvement of the aged care services. For example, a complaint can show a need to improve record keeping or provide better training for staff.

A provider must use feedback, complaints and investigations to help improve how they deliver care and services. You should always consider how you can improve when you finalise a complaint.

You should also provide timely feedback to the governing body, your workforce and the older person about complaints and the actions you take.

Reporting issues and trends

The provider, rather than complaints handling staff, is responsible for organisation-wide improvements. It's important to report complaint issues and trends to leaders in the organisation (decision-makers and senior staff) so they can analyse them and make improvements.

Recording complaints and reviewing them collectively with management and aged care workers can show patterns and trends in a service. It can provide opportunities to improve policies, procedures and systems. You can do this review regularly (for example monthly or quarterly) as part of your complaints and feedback management strategy.

You can report outcomes from the review to the governing body and aged care workers.

The governing body:

- sets the priorities for the organisation
- promotes a culture of safety and quality
- oversees how a provider manages complaints, feedback, investigations and incidents
- oversees the quality of care by aged care workers
- drives and monitors improvements to care and services
- talks and works with older people, supporters and aged care workers to understand the quality of care
- looks at data and information on care quality
- addresses issues they find during reviews.

It's also helpful to review how you manage complaints. When you're finalising a complaint, ask the people involved in the process how you could improve it. Ask for any other suggestions on how the process can be more effective and efficient. You can also ask for feedback months after you finalise a complaint. This allows time to pass so you can check if the issues in the original complaint have happened again.

Analysing trends

Looking for and understanding trends in complaints can help services identify:

- low and high-risk processes and practices
- areas that need organisation-wide solutions
- where the cause of a problem is
- opportunities to improve services
- what happened, why it happened and how to improve
- obligations that aren't being met.

It's important to record negative and positive comments. They give you an accurate picture of what's happening in your service. Software systems and simple tracking tools, such as a spreadsheet, can help you analyse large numbers of complaints.

Include a 'complaints and feedback' item for discussion in meetings. This can encourage staff to share observations and solutions and help analyse trends and patterns.

Regular team discussions about complaints also supports a blame-free, resolution-focused complaints culture.

Improving service quality

Complaints give you information about:

- your practices
- your mistakes
- what needs to improve.

Your leaders should understand continuous improvement processes. You can support them to complete training on continuous improvement practices.

To support improvements, you need to record, analyse and report on complaints statistics.

You should give reports about feedback, complaints and changes you make to processes and policies to people who made a complaint. Information about outcomes can create a sense of closure.

When staff and older people feel comfortable to make and discuss complaints, it sends a message that complaints are an important tool in improving the quality of your care and service.

Case study

Service A improves meal quality

Service A uses a complaints log to keep records of all the complaints it receives.

Staff use the log and analyse it each week. They then brief management on key findings and opportunities for improvement.

On a routine check of the complaints log, staff see that in the last week, 3 older people raised concerns about the quality of meals. Staff let management know and the service makes an action plan to address these concerns. The action plan includes:

- speaking to the older people who raised a concern
- asking mealtime staff to get feedback from other residents about the meal quality
- arranging for the staff rostered on at mealtimes during that week to ask for feedback about the quality of meals.

The service reviewed the feedback. It highlighted the need to provide more variety in meal options.

Management worked closely with the kitchen staff to:

- offer extra breakfast sides
- replace unpopular lunch and dinner meals
- rotate the dinner menus more often.

After they made the changes, staff continued to ask older people for feedback to adjust the kitchen service and make sure they were happy with the changes.

The service also asked the people who made complaints if their concerns were being addressed.

Overall, the people who made a complaint, and the service's older people were pleased with the improvements in their meals. The service will continue to monitor this closely as part of their commitment to improve the quality of care.

Quality Standards requirements

Provider must meet their obligations under the Aged Care Act and Aged Rules and must also meet the [Aged Care Quality Standards](#) (Quality Standards).

Providers registered in one of the following categories must meet the Quality Standards:

- personal and care support in the home or community (category 4)
- nursing and transition care (category 5)
- residential care (category 6).

Providers registered in categories 1 to 3 aren't required to comply with the Quality Standards.

Quality Standard Outcome 2.6a Complaints and feedback management for aged care workers and 2.6b Complaints and feedback management for individuals relate to complaints handling.

To comply with these, you must:

- make sure your complaints management system encourages and supports people to make complaints without fear of reprisal
- acknowledge complaints you receive and manage them in a clear, open and honest way
 - make sure your complaints management system encourages and supports people to make complaints without fear of reprisal
 - acknowledge complaints you receive and manage them in a clear, open and honest way.

Outcome 2.6a: Complaints and feedback management for aged care workers

The provider must encourage and support aged care workers to make complaints and give feedback about the provider's delivery of funded aged care services, without reprisal.

The provider must acknowledge and transparently manage all complaints and feedback and use complaints and feedback to contribute to the continuous improvement of aged care services.

Outcome 2.6b: Complaints and feedback management for individuals

The provider must encourage and support individuals and others to make complaints and give feedback about the provider's delivery of aged care services, without reprisal.

The provider must acknowledge and transparently manage all complaints and feedback and use complaints and feedback to contribute to the continuous improvement of aged care services.



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The Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission acknowledges the Traditional Owners of country throughout Australia, and their continuing connection to land, sea and community. We pay our respects to them and their cultures, and to Elders both past and present.

July 2025



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