



Insights paper

# Removing barriers to government services: How to improve service delivery

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# Introduction

Interacting with government agencies can be confusing and time-consuming at the best of times. When people are experiencing hardship, or when their circumstances don't 'fit' the agency's assumptions, this experience can become more difficult and even traumatic.

Failing to put people first when designing government services can mean the very people who most need those services are prevented from accessing them. This paper provides insights for agencies based on complaints we've heard about people not getting the help they need.

## What have we seen?

In recent years, we've seen agencies take meaningful steps to develop internal guidance to anticipate factors that may affect a person's engagement with an agency. For example: financial hardship, domestic violence, cultural or language barriers, rural or remote location, neurodiversity, disability or living in detention.

Despite this, we continue to receive complaints telling us that, in practice, there's still room to improve.

### Case study

A customer attended an agency office shortly after having throat surgery. As they were unable to speak, they typed notes on their mobile phone to communicate with staff. In response to one of their questions, staff advised the customer that they would need to call the phone hotline. The customer explained this would not be possible as they could not speak, but staff told them there was no other option.

The customer made a complaint to our Office. We transferred their complaint to the agency, along with information about the customer's requirement to be contacted in writing. However, the agency called their phone multiple times over the span of two months. The agency did not identify and respond to the customer's needs, even after they were made clear by the customer and our Office.

We asked the agency how it generally supports people who are unable to speak. The agency provided us with an overview of the guidance available for staff to support customers unable to






communicate verbally. The agency also flagged that its website provides information for customers on how they can contact the agency using either Teletypewriter (TTY) or National Relay Service (NRS).

The agency apologised to the customer, as its staff had not followed its procedures for assisting customers unable to speak.

Members of the community are not all the same. Agencies should provide different ways for people to access their services, reflecting the fact that different people may need different forms of assistance to do so. Although it is sensible for agencies to design their service delivery models to maximise efficiency, we often hear complaints that agencies prioritise operational factors at the expense of service delivery quality.

## What can be improved?

Our experience shows there are 3 key lessons agencies can learn to improve service delivery to all members of the community:

 <p><b>Anticipate barriers to access</b></p>	 <p><b>Empower frontline staff</b></p>	 <p><b>Maintain good systems</b></p>
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# 1. Anticipate barriers to access

A person unable to speak cannot use an agency's telephone hotline. Someone experiencing homelessness will not have a fixed address to receive mail and may not be able to make electronic payments. Not all customers will have access to the internet or a mobile phone, or equipment such as a printer or home computer. A person may, when asked to provide information relevant to the agency, need to recount facts that are distressing and upsetting for them to recall, hindering their ability to do so.

Each of these scenarios feature a potential challenge for standard agency processes. An agency must anticipate and address these challenges if its service delivery is to be effective.

## Case study

An example of intentional service delivery design that anticipates barriers to access is a regular 'quiet hour'.

Access Canberra provides a range of government services to people and businesses in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). It runs a regular 'quiet hour' at chosen shopfronts to support neurodiverse customers. During that time their service centres will have dim lighting, music turned down and mobile phones on silent mode.

Access Canberra promotes this initiative on their website and on social media.

Additionally, Access Canberra staff wear badges indicating they have been trained to support people with a hidden disability, and if they speak any languages other than English.

Drawing from their experience of customer service and known 'pressure points' for customers, agencies should anticipate potential barriers to their services and design their systems to be accessible. Ideally, agencies should be alert to opportunities for co-design and testing with the intended users of the service.

Here's a few things to consider to improve access to services.

## Agency shopfronts

- When designing or upgrading agency shopfronts, agencies should consider key location factors such as proximity to public transport and disability permit parking spaces.
- Agency shopfronts should be compliant with all physical accessibility standards, which may extend beyond the minimum required by [the Disability \(Access to Premises – Buildings\) Standards 2010 \[PDF 1.69MB\]](#)
- Clear signage within the shopfront should tell people the types of supports available to them, such as interpreter services or social workers.

## Modes of service delivery

- Don't assume that everyone can or will engage the service in the same way.
- Consider how people with low digital literacy, or lack of access to technology (for example, not having a computer or printer at home) will experience the service. This includes people without access to electronic forms of payment.
- Create multiple channels for people to engage – this could include email, web forms, phone or post.
- Signpost translation services where available.
- Signpost support available for customers with low literacy levels.

## Digital Services

- Test the website's compatibility with screen readers. Images should be accompanied by alternative text which concisely describes the image.
- Ensure your agency website is consistent with the [Digital Service Standard \[PDF 530KB\]](#).

## Communicate clearly

- Communicate to the public using plain language.
- Break down complex processes into smaller steps, especially at stages that have been identified by customers as confusing.
- Avoid jargon and complex legislative references. Be clear about what you require from people in order to support them effectively.

## Give reasons for decisions

When an agency makes a decision that affects a person, the agency must provide the clear and easily understandable reasons for that decision to the person affected. The agency should also provide information about the decision review options available. This ensures consistent and transparent decision-making and contributes towards agency accountability.

### Case study

A complainant living in an immigration detention facility told us that their request for a special purpose visit (SPV) to open a bank account was repeatedly denied by an agency without explanation.

When the complainant followed up their request, they were told the amount of money they planned to deposit was too small, even though we found that it met the bank's requirement for an opening deposit. The agency also told the complainant they did not have sufficient reason to open a bank account, even after they clearly explained their reasons to the agency in a letter. The complainant told us:

***"I have met every requirement they have asked of me and they keep just finding new reasons and dragging it out... they are more than aware of my situation"***

The complainant lodged multiple complaints with the agency but received no formal follow up and no action was taken.

When we contacted the agency, they initially advised the reason the complainant had not been supported to visit a bank branch was due to their lack of identification documents. However, we confirmed that the complainant was able to provide the required identification documents.

The agency then advised the reason it denied the request was due to concerns the complainant may commit fraud. This was not the reason that had been given to the complainant. The agency did not provide us with reasons for the decision in writing. After we asked the agency to show us the source of its power to make determinations on suspected fraud, the agency informed us the request had been granted and they had conducted a review of their SPV request and complaint system.

This case study highlights the importance of clearly communicating reasons for decisions and keeping good records about decisions. Providing clear reasons for decisions and accurately recording the basis for decisions ensures accountability by confirming that agency staff follow policy and act within the scope of the agency's power.

For more information on the importance of giving reasons for decisions, see our [Ten Principles for Good Administration \[PDF 50KB\]](#) fact sheet.

## 2. Empower frontline staff

Policies and procedures designed to improve accessibility will only help the public if staff follow them. Although agencies generally have policies and procedures to cater to relevant individual circumstances, this guidance is not always followed. This can occur due to lack of staff familiarity with relevant procedures or through deliberate staff decisions to deviate from the procedure, even where these policies and procedures are directly relevant.

Agencies must provide training and resources to their frontline staff so they have the relevant expertise and the confidence to identify where someone requires additional support. Agency staff must be equipped to give advice that is correct and appropriate to someone's situation.

### **Provide staff with appropriate training and resources**

Agencies should support their staff by providing training that empowers staff to respond to a range of customer needs beyond a 'one size fits all' approach. For example, agencies can provide trauma-informed approach training or disability awareness training to equip staff with the skills and knowledge required to help people. Agencies can also ensure that staff undertake cultural competency and awareness training.

Agencies should support staff through the provision of user-friendly resources and standard operating procedures (SOPs) to support them in their day-to-day tasks, including internal guidance on referral procedures.



Case study

A disability support worker contacted us to make a complaint on behalf of someone serving a prison sentence. The worker expressed concern that NDIA staff had incorrectly advised them that people could not gain access to NDIS support while incarcerated.

We investigated the complaint and confirmed that NDIA staff had given incorrect advice to the support worker, noting that incarcerated people are not excluded from the Scheme. We also found that agency staff failed to follow relevant operational guidelines, which should have prompted them to identify the incarcerated person as 'a person with urgent circumstances' and expedite their application.

## Encourage staff to seek advice and raise concerns

Managers should encourage frontline staff to identify and report instances where guidance provided by policies and procedures is insufficient in an operational setting. Feedback from frontline staff should be formally captured and reviewed to inform the agency's continuous improvement.

Staff working in new or immature schemes should be particularly alert to the increased risk of error this can bring in service delivery contexts.

## Acknowledge and learn from mistakes

A good accessible complaint handling mechanism actively seeks to reduce access barriers in both design and delivery. A responsive complaint handling mechanism is one that can react quickly and positively to meet the needs of its users, adapt within changing operating environments and continuously improve how an agency conducts its business.

Agencies should be alive to feedback regarding processes and systems that don't work as well as intended. Be prepared to update policies and procedures in response to feedback. Additionally, be willing to apologise and make good on errors.

## Monitor and review complaints

Sometimes the practical application of a policy has unintended consequences which can create inequitable access or outcomes. It is also possible that procedures are not being followed by staff. Often, the people best placed to highlight issues and suggest improvements with access to government services are the people using it. Complaints

are a valuable source of information enabling agencies to check for warning signs of bigger problems. Agencies should regularly monitor and review complaints from the public to measure their ability to effectively provide for the people they serve.

Agencies should ensure their complaint mechanisms are accessible and responsive.

For more information on how complaints can be used to improve government administration, see our [Better Practice Complaint Handling Guide \[PDF 650 KB\]](#).

### 3. Maintain good systems

Agencies should proactively maintain good systems to protect against avoidable problems in service delivery. Undertrained staff, incomplete records, incorrect decisions and errors in correspondence are all examples of problems that can be avoided through prior planning and appropriate allocation of resources.

#### Use Quality Assurance (QA) processes

Senior managers should use QA processes to check that agency staff are appropriately following the relevant policies and procedures, especially where this guidance relates to risk indicators and factors that may impact a person's ability to engage with the agency.

#### Keep good records

It can be distressing when someone is required to tell their story multiple times to different staff. Wherever possible, don't ask questions more than once – instead, ask the right questions the first time and take good notes.

Records which are complete and visible to officers who need them decrease the likelihood that a person will be asked to reshare their story, or that crucial aspects of their story will be ignored when a decision is made that affects them.

#### Case study

A complainant told us they were forced to board a plane while in custody of a government detention facility, even though the agency had previously been notified of their severe fear of flying. When we asked the agency why this had happened, they advised us that they had no

knowledge of the complainant's fear of flying, and that a service provider had assessed the complainant as fit to fly prior to the incident.

The complainant gave us records which showed the agency had been notified of the phobia prior to the incident. When we raised this with the agency, they told us that while this information was provided to one service provider, that service provider did not share this information with the other relevant service provider. The agency told us that if the service provider had been notified of the complainant's fear of flying, it would have provided additional support.

One month later, the complainant was transported via plane again. No additional support was provided by the agency or the service provider. When we asked the agency why this had occurred again, they told us that while the information was in the complainant's record, it had been overlooked by staff during the fit to travel assessment.

It is vital that agencies maintain accurate and comprehensive records. Inaccurate records can have far-reaching and detrimental consequences for customers, especially those who are at risk due to their circumstances.

Best practice record-keeping ensures that relevant information is accessible to decision-makers, including outsourced providers where required.

Best practice also involves operational staff checking records to see if individual customers have specific needs, not just assuming all customers are identical.

## Outsourced providers and contractors

If oversights or communication breakdowns occur within a service provider contracted to deliver agency functions, the agency retains ultimate responsibility for the way a function is discharged on its behalf.

Agencies should monitor how the service provider handles and responds to complaints.

For more information on the obligations on agencies and their outsourced service providers, see our [Complaint Handling in Relation to Outsourcing Factsheet \[PDF 58.1KB\]](#).

For more information visit [ombudsman.gov.au](https://www.ombudsman.gov.au)

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Commonwealth Ombudsman

Level 5, 14 Childers Street

Canberra ACT 2600

Tel: 1300 362 072

Email: [ombudsman@ombudsman.gov.au](mailto:ombudsman@ombudsman.gov.au)