



FAIRNESS FACTS

COMPLAINT HANDLING FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Local governments receive continuous feedback and complaints from people impacted by decisions and services. How local governments respond is key to maintaining public trust and providing services fairly.

What is a complaint?

The Office of the Ombudsperson defines a complaint as: An expression of dissatisfaction made to or about a public body about some aspect of its programs or services where a response is explicitly or implicitly expected.

Most complaints to local governments are about bylaw or service delivery. Responding to bylaw complaints and taking enforcement action is central to the role of a local government. While most local governments have established bylaw complaint processes, it is also important to have a general complaint process to handle complaints and concerns that are not related to bylaws.

Good complaint handling:

- strengthens relationships between the local government and the community
- repairs weaknesses or gaps in service delivery
- saves time and resources by preventing the escalation of a complaint
- serves as feedback from the public, and can be viewed by leaders and elected officials as opportunities for continuous improvement
- is accessible for everyone, including people living with a disability, and individuals who face barriers to receiving services

Complaint handling tips

Develop a complaint policy that guides staff on how to respond to a complaint about service delivery and other issues that is distinct from bylaw complaints. It is also useful to develop a process to address complaints about senior and elected officials and to make sure the person being complained about is not reviewing the complaint.

As part of the complaint handling policy, local governments should have a fair complaint process with guidance on how to make a complaint. A fair process will:

- provide clear details on how complaints can be made (e.g., in writing, verbally, by email, anonymously)
- empower frontline staff to respond to complaints within the scope of their roles
- explain who accepts, records, investigates, and resolves complaints
- establish time frames for resolution, including service standards for responding to urgent and priority complaints
- outline the steps for responding to serious complaints (e.g., criminal matters, risk to health and safety for the person, community or environment)
- detail how complaints and outcomes will be tracked and recorded to support continuous improvement

A good complaint process should be accessible, transparent and easy to use.

It is good practice to have a central point of contact to make it easy for people to contact staff with their concerns.

Develop a process for code of conduct

complaints about elected officials and make it publicly available. This lets the public know what type of complaints will be accepted, investigated and responded to.

Support and train staff to respond effectively to complaints. Conflict resolution and effective communication training will allow staff to respond to individuals displaying challenging behaviours. Frontline staff need to understand the complaints policy and procedures to properly assess, respond to and resolve complaints effectively.

Provide information to help manage

expectations about how a complaint will be addressed. People are more likely to view the complaint handling process as fair and reasonable if they are told:

- their complaint has been received (acknowledge receipt)
- who will handle their complaint
- whether certain issues will be addressed (provide reasons for this decision)
- possible outcomes
- what level of involvement is expected from the individual with a complaint
- approximate timelines
- how to check their complaint status (provide an email address or phone number)
- why a complaint will no longer be responded to (provide clear reasons)

Document all interactions and conversations to avoid misunderstandings, such as saving emails, creating and maintaining call logs and compiling information as the complaint is addressed. It is equally important to document the investigation as it unfolds.

Seek early resolution by acknowledging and resolving complaints as soon as possible. This can help to avoid unnecessary escalation.

Be an inclusive and equitable organization

that commits to ensuring diversity, equity and inclusion. Service users come from all walks of life and will have different and sometimes complex needs. All government organizations also have an obligation to work towards reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. Training on diversity, equity and inclusion, cultural safety, cultural humility, and trauma-informed approaches will empower staff to liaise respectfully with service users. This will also further the commitments made on equity, inclusion and reconciliation.

Effective ways to resolve complaints about local governments

- **Provide a thorough explanation.** People are more likely to accept a decision if they can understand how it was made. Reasons should include how a decision was made, what information was considered, and what policies, procedures, and rules were used.
- **Reconsider the original decision made or action taken.** It is possible that after reviewing the original decision, staff will find that a rule was applied improperly, information was not clearly communicated, or staff did not make reasonable accommodations for a person's unique needs. If the original decision was not fair, reconsidering the decision allows staff to correct the unfairness.
- **Apologize.** In the event of a mistake or unfairness, a simple and genuine apology can de-escalate tensions and repair any harm caused. Apologizing also demonstrates integrity and humility.

If a complaint cannot be resolved, staff should inform people of their right to raise it with the Office of the Ombudsperson. The Ombudsperson is an independent officer of the BC Legislature who impartially investigates complaints from the public to ensure people are treated fairly in the delivery of local and provincial public services.

Visit our [website](#) to learn more about complaint handling and best practices for local governments.

A Case Summary: Recycle that explanation

Marco made a complaint to the city because staff from a garbage company were parking their trucks in the middle of laneways while working. He believed this was against a bylaw, however Marco believed the city didn't take any enforcement action and wouldn't look at his photographic evidence of the bylaw violations.

What we did: In the city, public utility vehicles like garbage trucks are allowed to stop and park in laneways when they are working. But when Marco spoke to city staff, they didn't tell him this or explain why his complaint did not lead to enforcement. In addition, various types of evidence, including photographs, are allowed in bylaw dispute resolution proceedings. The city's decision to reject Marco's evidence was not in line with provincial legislation.

How we helped: As a result of our investigation, the city contacted Marco and explained why it did not act on his complaint. It told Marco how the bylaw applied to garbage trucks. It also told him it should have accepted his evidence.

Why it matters: Public bodies must ensure that their decisions are consistent with the law and provide clear responses to complaints and concerns, like those raised by Marco.

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