Embracing Complaints and Building Trust

Effective Complaint Handling
in the public sector

From this guide you will:

- Learn how complaints can be used to benefit organisations and citizens.

- Understand how technology can help achieve customer service goals.

- Form a complaint management action plan.

Contents

Introduction

Effective complaint handling puts the citizen first and builds trust.

How well complaints are handled can be a key determinant of quality in public services.

According to a Digital Trends report, citizens who rate public services as poor state the main reasons for this as slow processes and phone call waiting times. As technology advances and citizen expectations for communication and service accessibility rise in line with services they encounter in the private sector – such as with digital banking services – public bodies need to evolve to mirror this consumer shift or risk being left behind.

According to a report by the National Audit Office consumers are less likely to complain about a public service than a private service – almost half of users who experience problems do not complain, with the main reason being that they don't think it is worth the effort (35%).

Sir Amyas Morse, Head of the National Audit Office stated "Many users have problems with public services, and serious detriment can and does occur. If government took the power of redress to improve public services seriously, it would recognize that the present system is incoherent and dissatisfying to users and would show urgency in reforming and rationalising the system."

Utilising digital tools to improve complaints management can be the first step in a broader service improvement plan aimed at delivering better services to citizens. Any investment in complaints management platforms needs to be spent wisely, with accessibility and usability at the fore, as well as an efficient resolution.

Embracing complaints to build trust

"Use complaints as a catalyst for service improvements"

No operation can deliver fault free services all the time, however hard they may try. The true test is how authorities deal with these challenges and respond to complaints.

Authorities traditionally maintain complaints procedures to ensure compliance with pre-existing rules and regulations, however it can be so much more. Migrating towards a system where complaints are used to implement business change should be welcomed in order to ensure organisations remain open to rethinking approaches to services and systems in place.

Whilst no organisation wants to actively invite complaints, those that are received should be welcomed as future learning points.

Welcome Complaints

It might sound slightly contradictory, but by welcoming complaints you gain valuable insight into your organisation and how it is perceived by the public. Bear in mind that for every complaint received there will be citizens who felt the same grievance, however chose not to get in touch – actively encouraging complaints through ease of access and process will help more citizens in the long run.

Analyse Your Complaints

As well as dealing with complaints in a timely manner, all complaints should be analysed in order to attempt to spot any trends that appear. Using a complaint management platform will allow you to filter by complaint type or any other custom field you desire. Through analysis you will gain actionable insights such as a common theme where remedial action can be taken.

Work towards resolution

Receiving a complaint is a way to engage directly with citizens. Through interaction and resolution you can take an initially negative experience and turn it in to a positive by taking on board the complaint and informing the citizen of remedial action taken, or further feedback if applicable.

The key to using complaints received to future proof your organisation for the long term benefit is having a system in place that lends itself to two-way communication, is accessible, transparent and delivers a clear outcome that can be communicated to the complainant.

Trust in your organisation and service can be built through continued good complaints management practice that not only delivers results or feedback to citizens, but when the complaints received are analysed and when necessary, real actionable insights can be achieved.

Seven steps to effective complaint handling

Today, effective complaints management is the perfect combination of people, processes and technology.
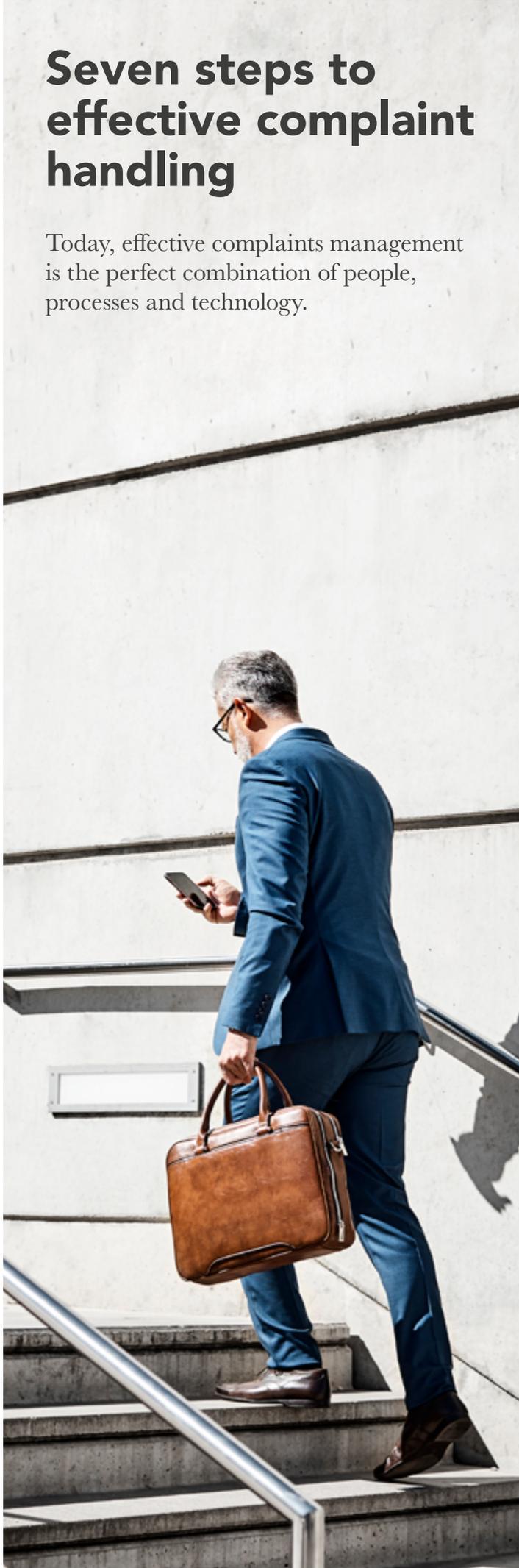
01 Create the right culture for your complaint handlers

Encourage your employees to embrace complaints as opportunities to help citizens and gain valuable insights into the services you provide. You are also developing a chance to turn a citizen's negative experience in to a positive one through effective resolution.

02 Make it easy to complain

Utilising technology to construct an accessible route for complaining will minimise further frustration for citizens, whilst further delivering a positive experience from the beginning of the complaints process.

03 Provide knowledge and answers as quickly as possible

Allied to making it easier for citizens to contact an organisation and raise a complaint, consider giving them access to common complaints and how they are handled or being addressed.

04 Communicate clearly and often

Transparency and communication is critical in order to deliver a positive complaints experience. Regular updates regarding the stage of complaint and the next steps allow citizens to develop a realistic time frame for resolution. Utilise technology to schedule automatic updates and/or requests for further information.

05 Invest in the right complaint management solution

For public sector organisations and larger companies who naturally receive a larger volume of complaints, engaging with a provider with experience and know-how of developing effective complaints management systems can save money and time. The right provider can back up promises with client case studies, accreditations as well as market-leading software that will capture, manage and record every stage of the complaints process.

06 Get to the root of the problem

Good complaint handling should always pinpoint the exact cause of the complaint. Root Cause Analysis is the only way to ensure the problem does not reoccur and that repetitive complaints are resolved as a priority.

07 Learn from mistakes

Spotting trends within complaints presents an opportunity – backed up by data – to make a change somewhere within your organisation. Further still, being able to communicate with citizens that their complaint led to any changes can boost trust in your organisation by providing tangible evidence that the complaints process works and is effective in resolving an issue permanently, leading an all-round better service and view of the organisation.

Using technology to handle complaints

Access, Automate, Assign, Monitor, Update and Communicate

Finance, time and risk remain the most common obstacles when developing digital transformation strategies within the public sector. Investing in a complaints management system can save time and money in the long run and by utilising a COTS (commercial off the shelf) platform you mitigate much of the risk.

An effective complaint management solution will allow authorities to capture, manage and track complaints from initial contact through to resolution, via any channel in your organisation, whether call centre, branch or online.

Complaint platforms provide accountability throughout the complaint journey, enabling organisations to remain compliant, and can be customised to handle the complaint processes of a range of regulated organisations.

In Practice:

01 **Access**
Access via a secure platform and manage permissions to further boost security and confidentiality.

02 **Automate**
Set workflows to trigger automatic emails or messages when set criteria have been met. Automation moves the complaints process forward by alerting team members when the next stage requires action, or set reminders after a period of inactivity.

03 **Assign**
Assign complaints to members of your team.

04 **Monitor**
Monitor the progress of a complaint via a simple to follow workflow checklist.

05 **Collaborate**
Simplify collaboration on support issues across an organisation, share documents and schedule activities to improve customer communication.

06 **Communicate**
Communicate with your team to build and share a centralised directory of company know how, best practices and solutions to provide a consistent customer.

Challenges

A new solution was required to replace a legacy complaint management system using both paper and a Microsoft Access database.

Core client requirements included complaint management via an internal workflow system that was adept at managing permissions, had functionality to view and add comments, insert files to existing cases, field customisation for data entry as well as displaying clearly the status of each complaint. Staff needed functionality to assign cases as well as gain access to specific documents on case files. On top of this the client required an efficient reporting mechanism for submitting reports that allowed for measurement against key performance indicators.

Solution

Equiniti ICS developed a comprehensive case management solution leveraging the power of Dynamics 365 cloud based customer service portal. This online platform permitted members of the public to lodge their grievance, check progress and receive regular updates via the online portal or email.

Workflow were developed to simplify processes that allowed for the automation of tasks such as document and email generation, approval cycles, automatic uploads to from Dynamics 365 to SharePoint Online and various other key performance indicators.

Result

Equiniti ICS delivered a custom-built complaint management platform written within the confines of Microsoft code, allowing for the flexibility of the prerequisites to be linked into a fully functional Dynamics 365 solution from Microsoft with improved functionality, where members of the public could submit complaints with ease and be led through a transparent process to resolution.

Key Benefits to Client:

- Creation of complaints via publicly available online portal
- Complainants can monitor and receive updates of their complaints via online portal
- Online portal customised with clients corporate brand and colour
- Online portal has drastically reduced complaints via letter
- Elimination of all paper based complaint case documents
- Automation of tasks such as document and email generation
- Simplification of case lifecycle
- Easy to use end-to-end user interface

Case Study

Equiniti ICS partnered with a UK Investigative office to develop a complaints management system, enabling for the efficient management of complaints from receipt through to resolution and reporting.
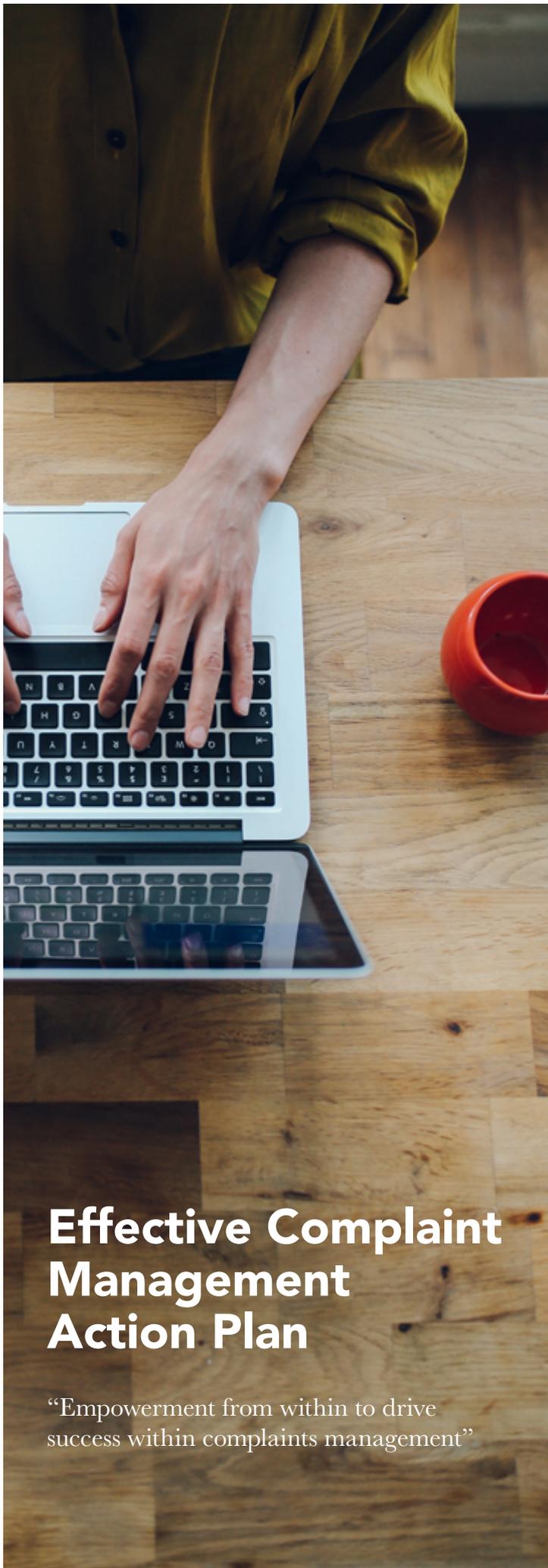
Effective Complaint Management Action Plan

"Empowerment from within to drive success within complaints management"

Get Citizen – Centric

1. **Expert employees –** make the initial point of contact your primary focus and equip staff with specialist knowledge and decision making powers. The idea here is to avoid a culture of 'it's a legitimate complaint, let's escalate it' as this could frustrate the citizen further by increasing the number of steps they have to go through/the people they liaise with, snowballing the issue.

   Look at how you can enhance the approach of frontline staff to citizens to resolve issues more effectively. What insight do they have? Do they know not just their history but their preferences? Is there an opportunity to turn the complaint into a positive experience?

2. **Customise care –** Actively promote access channels and feedback to keep on top of issues and make citizens feel valued. Feedback can act as a precursor, flagging issues that could lead to complaints.

   Build a 360° view of the citizen to personalise response. Don't be tempted to continually inform them of the progress of the complaint using standard channels; instead ask them how they would like to be informed ie over email, phone or post and schedule responses, preferably via the same agent.

3. **Tools –** Deploy a complaints management solution that can support complaints from a variety of channels to futureproof against change. Look for a low-impact solution that is quick to deploy and can integrate with existing systems ie CRM and ERP to maximise the information resource you hold.

4. **Management oversight –** gain buy-in from senior management into the transformation process and use MI to provide the strategic insight needed to achieve continuous improvement.

Streamline Workflow

1. **Data capture –** understand the type of complaints being received, along with the volume and frequency of these. Real-time tracking that scales, can provide the business with the capacity to handle these.

2. **Customise workflows –** seek to accommodate multiple workflows and use automated routing to allow numerous complaints to be handled simultaneously to enable cases to be resolved more quickly.

3. **Auditable and answerable –** Be on the front foot with an ability to provide answers and insight into complaints. Legislative and industry regulations are tightening (e.g. GDPR), meaning the burden of proof regarding response to complaints, is falling to the provider. If you have the data to hand, it's easier to provide an answer!

4. **Data that delivers insight –** Analyse complaint data and carry out Root Cause Analysis to identify and act on the cause of complaints to enact permanent solutions.

   Reducing inefficiency in the complaints management process is a driver to transformation. By focusing on a curated customer response, integrating resources and automating workflow processing it's possible to create a compliant complaints process that addresses customer issues more efficiently.

Conclusion

Complaint management requires respect, sensitivity and promptness from start to finish, and with complaints coming in from every direction, the solution is in having an effective complaint management process in place.

At its most basic, this should include providing a timely acknowledgement of the issue, a process towards achieving a satisfactory resolution, and a final outcome that benefits both the organisation and the citizen.

The benefits of having an effective complaint management process in place far outweigh any time and costs involved in set up and implementation of the system. Not only will organisations provide a consistent and transparent method for handling with complaints, a by-product of this is the ability to use complaints as a tool for business improvement and innovation whilst in turn building trust with the public they serve.

Equiniti ICS develop
innovative case and document
management platforms that
support organisations on their
journey to digital excellence
in the UK and Ireland private
and public sectors.

Part of the Equiniti group and
based in Belfast, we've been
delivering IT Solutions for
over 50 years and help our
clients reduce costs, deliver
value and drive efficiencies
across their organisations.

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