

QUICK TIPS

ON COMPLAINT HANDLING FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS



OMBUDSPERSON
BRITISH COLUMBIA

Given the important role municipal governments play in the daily lives of people, it is no surprise that they receive continual feedback from the public they serve. While some of these interactions with the public are very positive, a diverse range of complaints are raised about local governments—from how development decisions are made and communicated, to the conduct of local government staff or officials. Responding to and working to resolve these complaints efficiently and effectively is imperative to help maintain public trust.

This quick reference guide provides some key tips on complaint handling that are drawn from the Ombudsperson's [Complaint Handling Guide: Setting up Effective Complaint Resolution Systems in Public Organizations](#).

WHAT IS A COMPLAINT?

The Office of the Ombudsperson broadly defines a complaint as: *An expression of dissatisfaction made to or about a public organization about some aspect of its programs, services or people where a response is explicitly or implicitly expected.* In the local government context, it is important to distinguish between a bylaw complaint and other complaints about the way their services are being delivered to the public. Most local governments have established processes for responding to bylaw complaints—enforcing bylaws and responding to bylaw complaints is a central part of a local government's role. However, it is also in the best interests of all local governments to have an effective system in place to handle general complaints and concerns from the public apart from bylaw complaints.

WHY DOES GOOD COMPLAINT HANDLING MATTER?

- Strengthens relationships between local government and the community it serves
- Repairs weaknesses or gaps in service delivery
- Saves staff time and resources by preventing escalation to higher levels
- Complaints serve as a free form of feedback from the public, and are best viewed by local government leaders as opportunities for continuous improvement

TOP FIVE COMPLAINT HANDLING TIPS FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

1. Develop a complaints policy

A complaint handling policy should generally outline how an organization receives, records, investigates, resolves and reports out on complaint outcomes. This policy should be available to the public – on your local government's website, in your written correspondence to service users, and outlined in other information such as your organization's brochures and promotional material. This policy should be distinct from how your local government responds to bylaw complaints. People need to know how your organization handles general complaints, and who is an appropriate staff member to contact in order to submit a complaint about local government decisions or services.

2. Put processes in place that give effect to the policy

In addition to a complaint handling policy, local governments also need to provide guidance on the specific steps that are required to give effect to the policy. A good complaint procedure will outline:

- clear details on how complaints can be made to the local government (e.g., in writing, verbally, by email, anonymously)
- responsibilities for recording, investigating and resolving complaints
- time frames for resolution, including service standards for responding to urgent and priority complaints
- processes for responding to serious issues raised by the complainant (e.g., criminal matters, risk to health and safety for the person, community or environment)
- how complaints and complaint outcomes will be tracked and recorded to ensure continuous improvement

This complaints process should be accessible, easy to use, and have a variety of contact options for submitting a complaint. It is good practice to have a central point of contact for complaints about other local government matters not relating to bylaw complaints. Complaints may be forwarded to individual departments from that initial point of contact, but the goal should be to make it easy for people to contact you with their concerns.

3. Support and train staff to respond effectively to complaints

Frontline staff should be equipped with the skills and confidence they need to resolve complaints early. In order to do this, it is important that staff are supported by an organizational culture where leaders value and welcome complaints as a source of feedback from service users and an opportunity to learn. Staff also should have adequate training in conflict resolution and effective communication. Frontline staff also need to clearly understand the organization's complaints policy and procedures in order to properly assess, respond to, and resolve complaints effectively.

4. Provide information to help manage expectations

When individuals have realistic expectations about what to expect when they bring forward a complaint, they are more likely to view the complaint handling process as fair and reasonable. To manage expectations, individuals should be told:

- who will handle their complaint
- whether or not certain issues will be addressed (and why)
- the possible outcomes of the complaints process
- what level of involvement is expected of them
- the approximate timelines to expect throughout the process (such as when they will next be contacted with an update)

5. Seek early resolution

Acknowledging and resolving complaints as soon as possible after they are received will satisfy those who bring forward their concerns and can help avoid unnecessary escalation of complaints.

EFFECTIVE WAYS TO RESOLVE COMPLAINTS ABOUT LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

- **Provide a better explanation.** Individuals are more likely to accept a decision if they can understand how it was made. Providing better reasons for the decision in an understandable way that explains how the decision was reached, which rules were applied, and what information was considered, can help to resolve a complaint.
- **Reconsider the original decision made or action taken.** Taking steps to understand how the initial decision was made, and reevaluating it in the context of the rules that apply and the facts considered, can ensure the original decision or action was reasonable and fair. If this review determines that the original decision was unfair, unreasonable, or wrong in the circumstances, local governments have an opportunity to make it right.
- **Apologize.** Oftentimes, a simple and genuine apology provided at the right time can deescalate situations and repair the harm that was caused. Providing an apology also demonstrates integrity on the part of a public organization and contributes to positive relationships between a local government and the community it serves.

If complaints cannot be resolved at the local government level, staff should inform individuals of their right to raise their concerns 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.

A CASE SUMMARY: SORTING THE TRASH

Here is a brief summary of a complaint we investigated where the issue had not been resolved at the local government level. This case highlights the importance of providing a clear and timely response to an individual's concerns, and how having an effective complaints process can assist local governments to resolve issues effectively at the point they are received.

Aaron noticed that his garbage and green waste had not been collected on his scheduled collection date. He called his local government and was told it would be picked up soon. His green waste was collected a couple of days later but his garbage didn't get collected until a month later. In the meantime, he had to get rid of his excess garbage at his own expense. When Aaron contacted the city to find out why his garbage had not been collected, the city did not give him an explanation.

Aaron contacted the Office of the Ombudsperson for help. We investigated and found out that there had been equipment issues that delayed the garbage and green bin collection. The investigation also found that when Aaron called the city, service requests were created for both his garbage and green bin to be collected, however once his green bin was collected, both service requests were closed without Aaron being notified. We also found that the city had failed to escalate Aaron's subsequent calls to the appropriate department and that staff had not provided Aaron with an explanation for the delay.

As a result of our investigation, the city reviewed its complaint handling process to ensure that complaint files are reviewed more carefully. The city also committed to taking steps to ensure its staff accurately advise callers about the steps they can take in relation to their complaint. In addition, the city agreed to write to Aaron to provide him with the reasons for the delay in his garbage collection and an explanation of the steps that were taken to ensure requests like his are properly dealt with in the future.

THE OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSPERSON'S CONSULTATION AND TRAINING TEAM CAN HELP!

What do we do?

We create publications and educational resources, including:

- [Complaint Handling Guide: Setting up Effective Complaint Resolution Systems in Public Organizations](#)
- [Bylaw Enforcement: Best Practices Guide for Local Governments](#)
- [Open Meetings: Best Practices Guide for Local Governments](#)

These guides are all available for download from our website www.bcombudsperson.ca.

We consult with public organizations regarding fairness

- We consult with public sector staff who want our advice on policy and program development, emerging fairness concerns, and ways to set up and manage effective complaint handling systems.

We facilitate fairness workshops

- The Consultation and Training Team facilitates Fairness in Practice workshops for those who want to learn more about administrative fairness. We can tailor the content to the specific interests and concerns of an organization and its staff upon request.

We deliver educational webinars and online training

- All of our webinars are available online at <https://bcombudsperson.ca/fairness-education-resources/online-training-and-webinars/>
- We offer a free, self-paced 1-hour online administrative fairness training course, Fairness 101. It provides participants with an overview of the principles of administrative fairness and how to recognize and apply these principles in their work. For more information or to register visit <https://learn.bcombudsperson.ca/>.

The Office of the Ombudsperson is an oversight office, independent of government, that investigates complaints about administrative unfairness and makes recommendations for system-wide improvements. The office also offers advice and investigates allegations of serious wrongdoing from BC public servants. Our Consultation and Training Team offers educational webinars, training workshops and individual consultation with public organizations to support fairness and continuous improvement across the public sector. For more information, please contact us at consult@bcombudsperson.ca.

