

SQS 15

Each service user and staff member is free to raise and have addressed, without fear of retribution, any complaints he or she may have regarding the agency or the service unit.

- 15.1 The service unit has policy and procedures in relation to handling complaints and they are accessible to service users, staff or other interested parties.
- 15.2 The service unit's procedures for handling complaints:
 - include timeframes within which action will be taken in response to any complaints raised,
 - identify necessary staff actions and specify who will be responsible for dealing with the complaints, and
 - indicate how/when feedback will be provided to the service users.
- 15.3 Service users are informed of their rights to, and procedures involved in, raising complaints and having these addressed.
- 15.4 The service unit encourages and provides opportunities for service users to discuss service delivery issues and to freely raise any concerns they may have.
- 15.5 Any complaints raised and actions taken to resolve complaints are documented.

A. INTRODUCTION TO SQS 15 - COMPLAINTS

Given the highly sensitive and personal nature of social welfare services, it is inevitable that, from time to time, complaints or grievances will arise, even in organisations that are performing very well.

Therefore, an important aspect of quality service management is having an effective approach to complaints handling.

SQS 15 addresses this issue by seeking to ensure that:

- all service units recognise the right of service users to make a complaint;
- all service users and staff are free to raise complaints without fear of retribution; and
- any complaints raised are actively addressed by the service units.

The philosophy underpinning SQS 15 is that the receipt of a complaint should be seen as an opportunity to review service delivery processes and strive for continuous improvement in service management rather than as a negative or threatening event.

Effective communication processes are generally the best tool for:

- avoiding giving rise to a complaint;
- avoiding escalation of the seriousness of any complaints that do arise; and
- resolving any complaints.

The criteria for meeting SQS 15 generally relate to ensuring that effective communication processes are in place.

B. ESSENTIAL REQUIREMENTS FOR MEETING SQS 15

In order to meet SQS 15, your service unit will need to:

- have a written policy stating its general approach to receiving and handling complaints;
- have written procedures for handling complaints which specify:
 - timeframes for responding to any complaints;
 - who will be responsible for handling any complaints (e.g. the service unit manager); and
 - the mechanism(s) which will be used for providing feedback to any person who lodges a complaint indicating how / when feedback will be provided;
- have a mechanism for informing service users of their rights to raise complaints and the complaint procedures;

- encourage and support service users to freely raise issues and concerns, and inform them that they will not be disadvantaged for doing so, and their concerns will be treated with respect and as confidential;
- have a complaint register or other mechanism for recording any complaints received, actions taken to resolve each complaint and the outcomes of each complaint; and
- ensure that complaint policy and procedures are followed, and are accessible to service users, staff and other interested parties.

C. RESOURCES TO ASSIST YOUR SERVICE UNIT TO MEET SQS 15

This manual contains the following documentation:

- a sample complaint policy; and
- sample complaint procedures.

The documentation is intended to cover all of the essential documentary requirements of SQS 15 and may be used by your service unit:

- as a reference document or checking point when reviewing your service unit's existing complaint policy and procedures for coverage of essential requirements; or
- as a basis for developing your own tailored complaint policy and procedures; or
- as a model which may be adopted by your service unit if you do not currently have a complaint policy or procedures or you wish to replace your existing documents.

The sample complaint policy and procedures have been designed to be applicable in all service types across the sector. However, any service unit which wishes to adopt them may wish to consider adding any of your service specific material to reflect particular needs.

Sample complaint policy for all service types

COMPLAINT POLICY FOR [INSERT NAME OF SERVICE]

1. Purpose

The purpose of this policy and the associated procedures is twofold:

- (i) to advise service users, their families and staff about their right to make a complaint and about what actions the service unit will take to address any complaint received; and
- (ii) to provide guidance to any staff member who receives a complaint as to the steps that they should take to handle that complaint effectively.

2. Philosophy

Any service user, his/her family or member of staff who is dissatisfied with any aspect of the service delivered by [insert service unit name], (including the standard of service delivered, service policies, procedures, decisions, or the actions or attitude of any staff member), is encouraged to raise their complaint with the service unit.

Any person who makes a complaint will be dealt with fairly and without prejudice.

[Insert service unit name] will actively examine any complaint received with an open mind and with the intention of resolving the complaint.

[Insert service unit name] views the complaint procedures as a positive mechanism for reviewing service activities and identifying ways to enhance service delivery procedures.

3. Confidentiality

No information in relation to a complaint will be released to any person without the consent of the complainant.

Sample complaint procedures for all service types

PROCEDURES FOR HANDLING COMPLAINTS FOR [INSERT NAME OF SERVICE UNIT]

Steps to be taken to Address Complaints

1. Any staff member who receives a complaint, whether verbal or in writing, about [insert service unit name], should refer the complaint to the [identify and insert the appropriate senior staff position, e.g. Service Unit Manager or other supervisor] immediately (normally within 24 hours of receiving the complaint).
2. The [insert Service Unit Manager or other person identified, as above] should seek to discuss the matter with the complainant in person to seek to resolve the issue at the earliest opportunity (normally within 48 hours of receiving the complaint).
3. If the matter cannot be resolved through discussion, the [Service Unit Manager etc.] should inform the complainant of the proposed actions that they will take to address the issue and indicate a timeframe within which they will report the outcomes of these actions back to the complainant. (Normally, a response should be provided to the complainant in writing within 10 working days.)
4. When addressing a complaint, whether substantiated or not, [service unit name] will consider whether the matter indicates an opportunity to modify or enhance procedures or communication practices to ensure that similar concerns or problems do not arise in future. This approach should assist in achieving early and satisfactory resolution of complaints in most cases.
5. If, the complainant remains dissatisfied after receipt of advice from the [Service Unit Manager], the [Service Unit Manager] should refer the complainant to [identify and insert the most appropriate more senior authority, e.g. Service Coordinator, Agency Head, Board Member or external complaint body].

Attitude to Receiving Complaints

6. Any staff member who receives a complaint about the service should receive the complaint in an open and courteous manner, even if the complaint seems unjustified or frivolous.
7. Any staff member, who receives a complaint should inform the complainant of the action that they propose to take (normally, referral to the Service Unit Manager), and of the timeframe within which the complainant can expect to receive an initial response (normally, being contacted by the Service Unit Manager).
8. All verbal and written communication to service users, their family members or other persons making a complaint should be in clear, simple language, avoiding the use of jargon or abbreviations.

Documenting Complaints

9. Any staff member receiving an initial complaint should record the nature of the complaint, date of complaint received and action taken (for example, referral to Service Unit Manager) in the Complaint Register.
10. The Service Unit Manager should record the outcomes of the complaint in the Complaint Register.
11. Copies of correspondence and any other documents relating to the complaint should be kept on the Complaint File.

Confidentiality

12. In taking actions to examine and resolve a complaint all staff should:
 - as a general principle, only disclose details of the complaint to any person if necessary to address the complaint; and
 - specifically respect any confidentiality concerns expressed by the complainant.
13. The Complaint Register and Complaint File should be maintained by the [Service Unit Manager] and copies of complaints related documents should only be placed on the files of individual service users or staff members if deemed necessary by the [Service Unit Manager].

Keeping Staff Members and Service Users & their Families Informed about [Service Unit Name] Complaint Policy and Procedures

14. [Service Unit Name] will provide to all new staff members and service users and their families a copy of the Complaint Policy and Procedures.
15. The [Service Unit Manger] will provide a summary report on the general nature and number of complaints received and actions taken to resolve complaints and enhance service delivery in/to [identify and insert an appropriate channel of communication, for example, Annual Report, Newsletter, Annual General Meeting].

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