

Organisational capability - Complaints & Investigations



complaints +
investigations

Key functions

The Complaints and Investigations Unit is a highly responsive team that monitors, investigates and seeks to resolve complaints about services provided to children and young people by government and non-government agencies. The Unit's other key function is to advocate on behalf of children and young people, ensuring their needs are represented and considered.

Given the legislative function of the Unit, matters managed are extremely varied and complex. Officers engage with adults and children in highly sensitive and sometimes stressful situations

concerning the health, safety and wellbeing of children and young people. To do this, staff have a well-developed practice framework which is based on clear child protection principles and have superior conflict resolution and assessment skills. The Unit has developed efficient work practices to ensure responses to concerns and complaints and resolutions with service providers are reached in a timely way.

Highlights

The Complaints and Investigations Unit had a perfect record in meeting performance targets regarding response to complaints in the 2002-03 financial year:

- follow up on complaints resolution in 28 days 100%
- assessments completed in 28 days 100%

Developmental work on the Complaints and Investigations Unit's new database for managing client records and data was initiated within the financial year, with the system expected to be completed and functional early in the 2003-04 financial year. The system will further enhance the ability of the Unit to monitor individual cases and general trends.

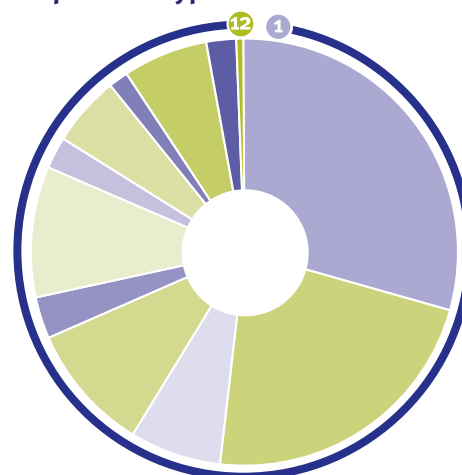
Outcomes and achievements

The Complaints and Investigations Unit received a total of 2,704 complaint enquiries in the 2002-03 financial year. Of the 2,596 calls and 108 email enquiries received, 330 cases were formally progressed through correspondence with relevant service providers.

There was a marginal decline (2.9%) in the number of telephone calls received last financial year (2,676). In every case, the Complaints and Investigations Unit staff provided information and advice to help resolve callers' concerns, and those concerns were followed up within 28 days. Fifty-six per cent of calls were from outside Brisbane.

Approximately 87% of all calls are managed through initial conflict management, counselling and referral advice. When callers remain dissatisfied and have engaged internal grievance mechanisms, the Commission intervenes to seek further resolution.

Total number of telephone enquiries by complainant type



- 1 Mother 29%
- 2 Father 22%
- 3 Young person 7%
- 4 Grandparent 10%
- 5 Relative 3%
- 6 Foster carer 10%
- 7 Teacher 3%
- 8 Community member 5%
- 9 Government agency 2%
- 10 Non-government agency 6%
- 11 Other 2%
- 12 Anon 1%

Formal correspondence to resolve a complaint by service provider or relevant authority (more than one authority may be notified)

Service provider	% 2002-03
Department of Families	43.0
Queensland Police Service	55.0
Non-government organisation	22.43
Crime and Misconduct Commission	9.70
Education Queensland	2.1
Queensland Health	0.6
Ombudsman	0.6
Disability Services Queensland	1.2
Australian Federal Police	1.2
Other	4.24

In responding to complaints, Complaints and Investigations Officers provide advice to try to resolve problems at the local level and encourage callers to use the service provider's existing complaints mechanisms. In most instances, this initial referral, advice and immediate management of the concerns defuses the situation and allows matters to be resolved without formal intervention.

The following table indicates that of the matters formally progressed by the Commission, the majority of cases are resolved satisfactorily and positive outcomes achieved.

Case Outcomes	%
Satisfactory result from formal referral and response from agency	44.8
Satisfactory result from referral to alternative complaint mechanism	27.0
Complaint resolved through other means	15.0
Not progressed as subject to legal or administrative investigation	8.6
Insufficient detail to progress case	3.9
Frivolous or vexatious allegations	0.7
Total	100.0

Nature of enquiries

The majority of enquiries to the Complaints and Investigations Unit related to services provided to children subject to child protection intervention. These enquiries included concerns relating to the actual services provided; decisions about placement and contact and reviewable decisions, including placement moves.

A large percentage of enquiries related to children at possible risk of harm or subjected to a criminal offence. These matters were immediately referred to the relevant agencies for investigation, ie. Department of Families and the Queensland Police Service.

Other enquiries were about broader advocacy issues such as accommodation, disability, financial matters and education. In the first instance, Complaints and Investigations Unit staff encouraged complainants to make use of agencies' internal complaints and grievance mechanisms. In cases where the matter remained unresolved it was dealt with under the Commission's legislation and progressed until a satisfactory resolution or outcome was achieved.

The Unit also advocated and acted on issues with a broader, systemic focus. This allowed the Commission to actively engage in community and social reform, highlighting the needs of children and young people and promoting their rights and interests.

The expanding nature of the Commission's work required the Unit to develop a protocol with the Employment Screening Services Unit (ESSU), under which matters can be investigated where there are concerns about an applicant's suitability to work with children and young people. In these instances, the Unit works collaboratively with the Manager, ESSU to refer relevant matter to agencies, such as the Queensland Police Service, the Australian Federal Police or the Crime and Misconduct Commission for consideration.

Participation

The Complaints and Investigations Unit aims to develop community and government partnerships and work proactively toward improved complaints management. One way this is achieved is through participation and attendance at various workshops, forums and conferences. The Unit has always maintained strong links with peak agencies, foster care services and other interest groups such as grandparents' groups and youth forums. Strong links have also been developed with lead government agencies. For example, the Unit represents the Commission on the child death review subcommittee of the Coordinating Committee on Child Abuse and contributes to Family Services Officer training.

Outlook

In 2003-04 the Unit will focus on finalising and operationalising the new data management system.

The Unit aims to continue streamlining practices and case management frameworks to ensure consistency and responsiveness to issues raised by children and young people. In addition, streamlining communication between the Complaints and Investigations Unit and the Community Visitor program will ensure issues are adequately captured and resolved.

The Unit also hopes to engage directly with children and young people more often to progress issues.



Case study

In the 2002-03 year, the Commission's Complaints and Investigations Unit was contacted by a 17-year-old girl with concerns about the lack of support she was getting from a government service provider in helping her transition from living in care to independent living.

Her concerns included the fact that she was not being told about options to help her plan her future living arrangements, even though the placement she was in was only short term. She had a history of abuse, and there was no one in her family she could turn to for help. As a result, she felt isolated and uncertain about her future.

In response, the Commission contacted the service provider to clarify the girl's status with the agency, and the nature of services and support she was being offered.

The girl was consulted about the Commission's actions at each step, providing feedback on correspondence before it was forwarded to the service provider on her behalf to ensure it accurately reflected the issues she was facing.

The service provider assured the Commission that the level of casework services and support were adequate, and said the girl was taking part in identifying and planning for her needs.

Despite these assurances, the girl told the Commission she still felt unsupported and

unable to adequately plan for her future. The Commission followed up with the service provider again, advocating on her behalf, and seeking additional advice about the specific services being offered.

A strong caseplan was delivered, with the girl feeling included and consulted as a key decision maker. Her placement and transitional needs were met.

As a result of the Commission's advocacy, the girl remained in her preferred placement, with ongoing youth worker support and access to support. In addition, a financial package was developed in consultation with the girl to assist in her transition to adulthood.

The Commission also helped to negotiate a positive, meaningful relationship between the girl and the service provider to ensure her immediate and ongoing needs were considered. Her perceptions of the service provider changed, and, as a result she worked more cooperatively with support staff.

She also talked to the Commission about her experiences in long term alternative care, and said she wanted to share what she had learned by telling her story to other young people in care, perhaps influencing and connecting with them. The Commission helped her connect with a service which was keen to help – and she is still passionately 'telling her story' today.