

Reducing sludge in complaint-handling

Published 2026





Behavioural Insights in Action

Reducing sludge in complaint-handling

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This guide was created by the NSW Behavioural Insights Unit, with assistance from NSW Government partners.

If you have comments, questions, or feedback on the guides get in touch with us at sludge@customerservice.nsw.gov.au

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Introduction

Removing sludge from complaint-handling processes



Why do people make complaints?

People primarily make complaints to address a specific issue, but behavioural science suggests that this is often accompanied by other motivations, for example:

- to be heard after having a negative experience
- to regain a sense of justice when they've experienced a problem or felt they weren't treated fairly
- to resolve an issue that they couldn't resolve with other support channels.

Complaints are an essential part of public service. Complaints provide a channel for people to raise concerns, resolve issues and provide feedback on government services. When we have effective complaint-handling practices, it helps us deliver better, fairer and more inclusive government services.

The NSW Ombudsman outlines 6 principles for effective complaint-handling:¹

1. Respectful treatment
2. Information and accessibility
3. Communication
4. Taking ownership
5. Timeliness
6. Transparency

Understanding how people behave, make decisions and navigate systems can help us turn these principles into a better experience for people who use public services and for people working in public services.

Note: This guide uses the single word 'customer' to refer to the diverse range of people and labels used to refer to users of government services.



'Sludge' refers to the unnecessary frictions and obstacles that make it harder to engage with processes and systems.

In complaint-handling, sludge could include complex forms, long wait times, or confusing language. It can lead to:

- reduced customer satisfaction
- increased customer effort and administrative burden
- increased staff effort in handling complaints
- reduced accessibility for certain customer groups
- psychological costs for customers, especially where the complaint or service is sensitive
- increases or decreases in complaint numbers
- increased distress for customers
- loss of trust and perceived fairness
- delays in complaint resolution
- lost opportunities to improve a service.

This guide provides behavioural science informed advice and techniques to reduce common sources of sludge in complaint-handling processes. Use this guide in conjunction with advice from the NSW Ombudsman and other sources.

While complaint-handling processes differ from service to service, most share a similar journey from complaint to resolution².

We break the complaint-handling process into 5 key stages that are convenient for introducing techniques for reducing common sources of sludge. The techniques are informed by:

- academic research on complaint-handling
- principles of behavioural science and customer experience
- our experience conducting sludge audits of complaint-handling processes in NSW Government.

Have you reduced sludge in your complaint-handling process?

We want to hear from you!

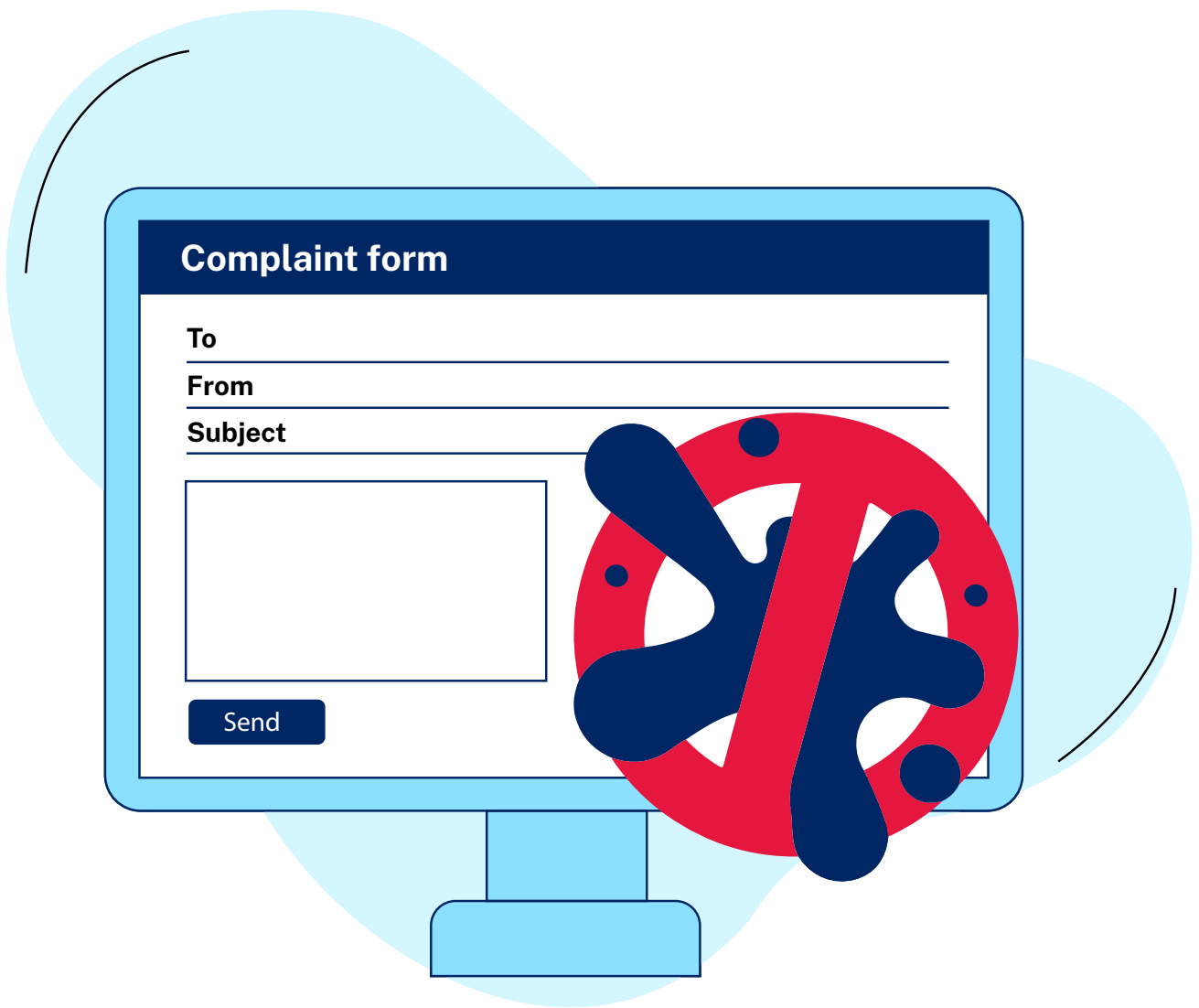
Email our team:

sludge@customerservice.nsw.gov.au



Stage	How to reduce sludge and improve experience
1 Accessing and lodging a complaint	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide multiple, visible channels for customer complaints • Frame complaints as helpful, and encourage complaints • Tell customers what they will need before they start the process • Make complaint forms and complaint collection easy to use • Use external user testers
2 Triaging and assigning a complaint	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask customers what resolution they want • Empower staff to resolve complaints
3 Processing and progress updates through complaint-handling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively communicate possible outcomes • Increase operational transparency • Provide realistic timeframes
4 Resolution and outcome communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apologise for difficult experiences • Advise customers when their matter has been closed or resolved • Use plain-English when communicating complaint outcomes • Provide options for escalation or review
5 Post-resolution feedback and improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show customers how their complaints are used • Collect and use data to inform continuous improvement • Conduct sludge audits

1. Accessing and lodging complaints



Provide multiple, visible channels for customer complaints



What sludge does this address?

Limited channels for engagement

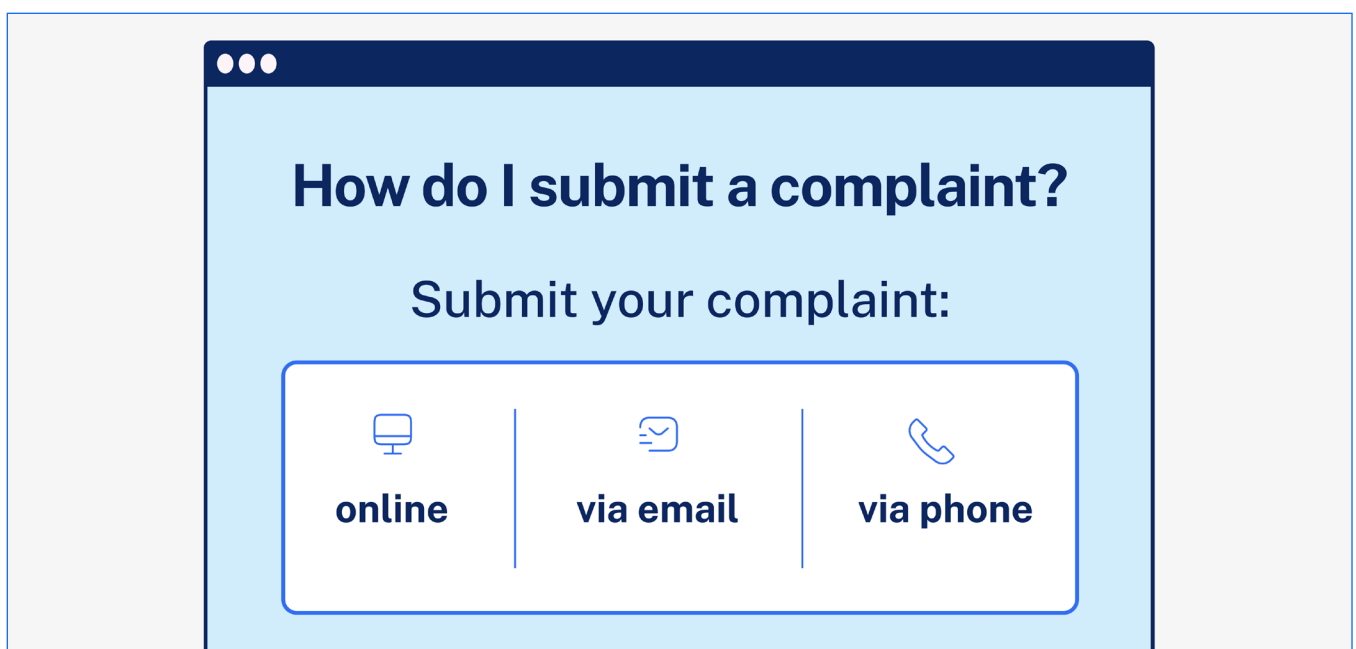
Hidden channels to make complaints

Make it easy for customers to find and use different complaint channels to reduce any initial friction to start to make a complaint.

This means more equitable entry to complaints. Demonstrating a genuine desire for feedback also signals openness and transparency which can build trust and encourage engagement.

Follow these tips:

- Tell customers they can choose their preferred channel. Examples of channels:
 - Digital channels: website forms, live chat, email.
 - Ensure online forms are mobile and computer friendly.
 - Verbal channels: telephone or in person.
 - Written channels: postal mail or in-person submissions.
- Make the complaint channels visible.
 - Make the online complaint form link easy to find. Place the link in a prominent position on the home page or another intuitive page.
 - Use visual icons beside complaint options to make them easy to find.
 - Make visual elements accessible by including captions, labels and/or alternative text.
- Offer in-language guidance on the complaints process where possible.



Frame complaints as helpful, and encourage complaints



What sludge does this address?

Complaint resolution appears unlikely or negative

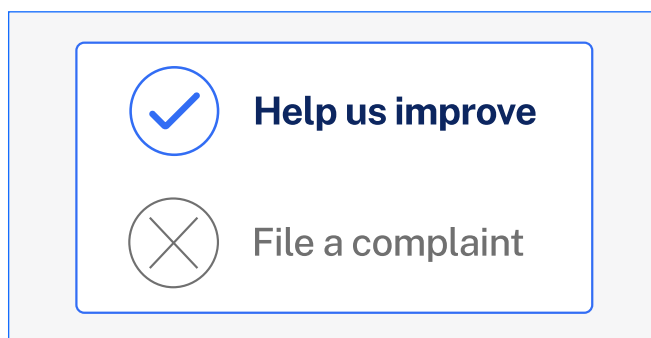
Hidden channels to make complaints

Publicly express the value of complaints as a form of feedback so customers know their voice will be heard and used to improve the process.³

This positive and welcome frame also signals that the organisation values transparency and customer voice.

Follow these tips:

- Reframe complaints as feedback (which might include complaints, compliments, and ideas).
- Link customer complaints with a positive outcome. For example, by saying “Your feedback helps us improve.”
- Avoid overly negative and formal language that might imply conflict.
- Leverage positive social norms to encourage people to make helpful complaints. For example, by saying “Many customers share feedback – it’s how we learn.”
- Emphasise that complaints will be treated with fairness and respect. For example, by saying “We’ll listen carefully and keep you informed every step of the way.”
- Include statement reassuring customers that no detrimental action will result from making a complaint.



Social norms

Social norms are the informal rules that define acceptable and appropriate actions within groups and therefore shape human behaviour. Referencing social norms can help normalise behaviours.⁴

Tell customers what they will need before they start the process



What sludge does this address?

Complaint resolution appears unlikely or negative

Hidden channels to make complaints

Provide customers with a clear list of information they will need before starting a complaint so they're prepared and can move through the process without gathering more information.

This can prevent customer and staff effort caused by incomplete submissions or unexpected requirements, reducing the need for staff to follow up and saving customer time. Be conscious of how much information you are requesting from customers upfront. Requesting too much may be a barrier to them initiating a complaint to begin with.

Follow these tips:

- Tell customers how long it will take to complete the form.
- Use a checklist to clearly communicate what customers will need to provide during the process.
- Use visual cues like icons to symbolise the type of information that a customer has to prepare. For example, by including a card icon alongside instruction "You will need your Driver Licence."
- Frame preparation positively. For example, by saying "Including these details will help us resolve your complaint faster."

A rectangular box with a light gray background and a blue border. Inside the box, there is a white rounded rectangle containing a checklist. The checklist has three items, each preceded by a blue circle with a white checkmark: "Your name", "Date of service", and "Evidence to support claim".

- ✓ Your name
- ✓ Date of service
- ✓ Evidence to support claim

Make complaint forms and complaint collection easy to use



What sludge does this address?

Complaint forms are lengthy and time consuming

Slow triage process

Keep the form as short and relevant as possible to make it feel more approachable. The key is to capture enough information to get started, simplify decision-making, and reduce cognitive load for the customer.

Removing unnecessary questions should reduce the need for customers to share sensitive information upfront. This is particularly important where customers may be experiencing distress or their complaint is of a sensitive nature.

Follow these tips:

- Remove unnecessary questions from the complaint form.
 - Identify and include only essential information needed to get the process started or triage the complaint. For example, this could include only name, contact details, what happened and how to contact them.
 - Remove questions that ask for information you won't use.
- Use drop-down menus and multiple choice where appropriate.
 - Limit the length of lists to reduce decision fatigue for customers.
 - Provide examples of what details or evidence customers should provide.
 - Create clear complaint categories and tag these in your system. For example, 'Delayed Service' or 'Staff Conduct'.
 - Apply conditional logic in forms so that form questions and requests for customer information are specific to the type of complaint.
 - Use categories to automate triage.

Make a complaint

Name

Phone number

✗ Date of Birth

Tell us what happened

✗ Your membership number

Submit

What's your feedback about? ▾

Application form

Inspection

Staff support

Other

- Check adherence to Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, particularly for customers with a disability.
- Read the guide on [Reducing sludge in forms](#) for more tips.⁵



Removing unnecessary questions from complaint forms does not mean completely removing free text. Provide opportunities for customers to use their own words to share their experience.

Case study

TAFE NSW

TAFE NSW updated their online complaints form to provide customers with options for what the complaint was about. This enabled 25% of complaints to be automatically triaged to the right team for handling, speeding up the process for customers and staff.

What would you like to tell us about?

- Learning experience**
In person or online classes, learning materials, timetables and results, course delivery, teachers, or technology
- Student services**
Enrolment, fees, Student Hub, Aboriginal support, disability support, counselling, library, withdrawal, refund, or certificates
- Campus experience**
Staff or student behaviour on campus, Wi-Fi, building, carparks, or other infrastructure
- Information**
Policies and procedures, finding or accessing accurate information, or TAFE NSW website
- Other**

Use external user testers



What sludge does this address?

Limited channels for engagement

Hidden channels to make complaints

Complaint forms are lengthy and time consuming

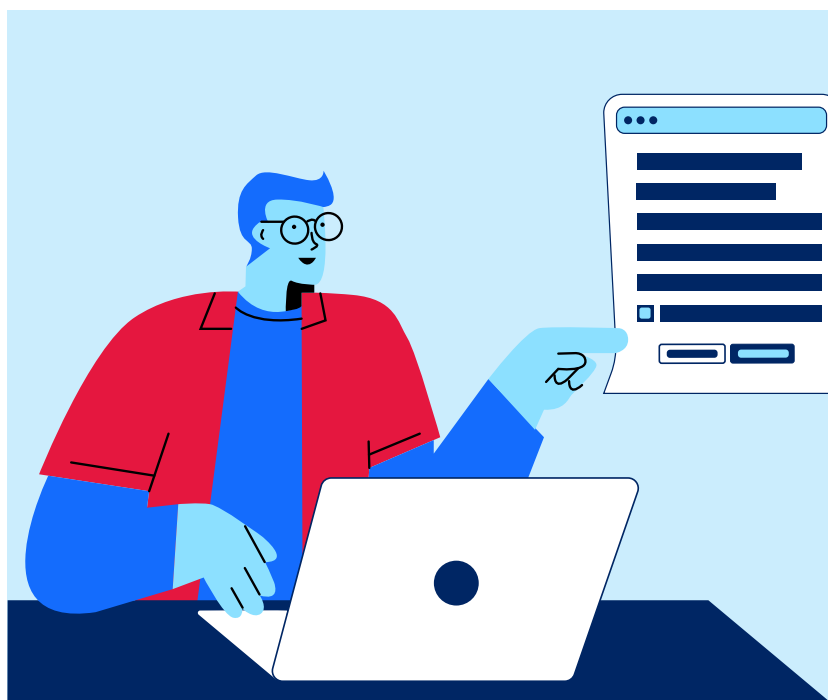
Ask external user testers to try lodging a test complaint to help uncover barriers that staff may overlook.

These testers can provide real-time feedback on confusing language, unclear steps, or psychological costs that might prevent customers from completing the process. This helps design a system with the end user in mind, rather than operational convenience. It also helps validate whether the process is truly accessible and empathetic.

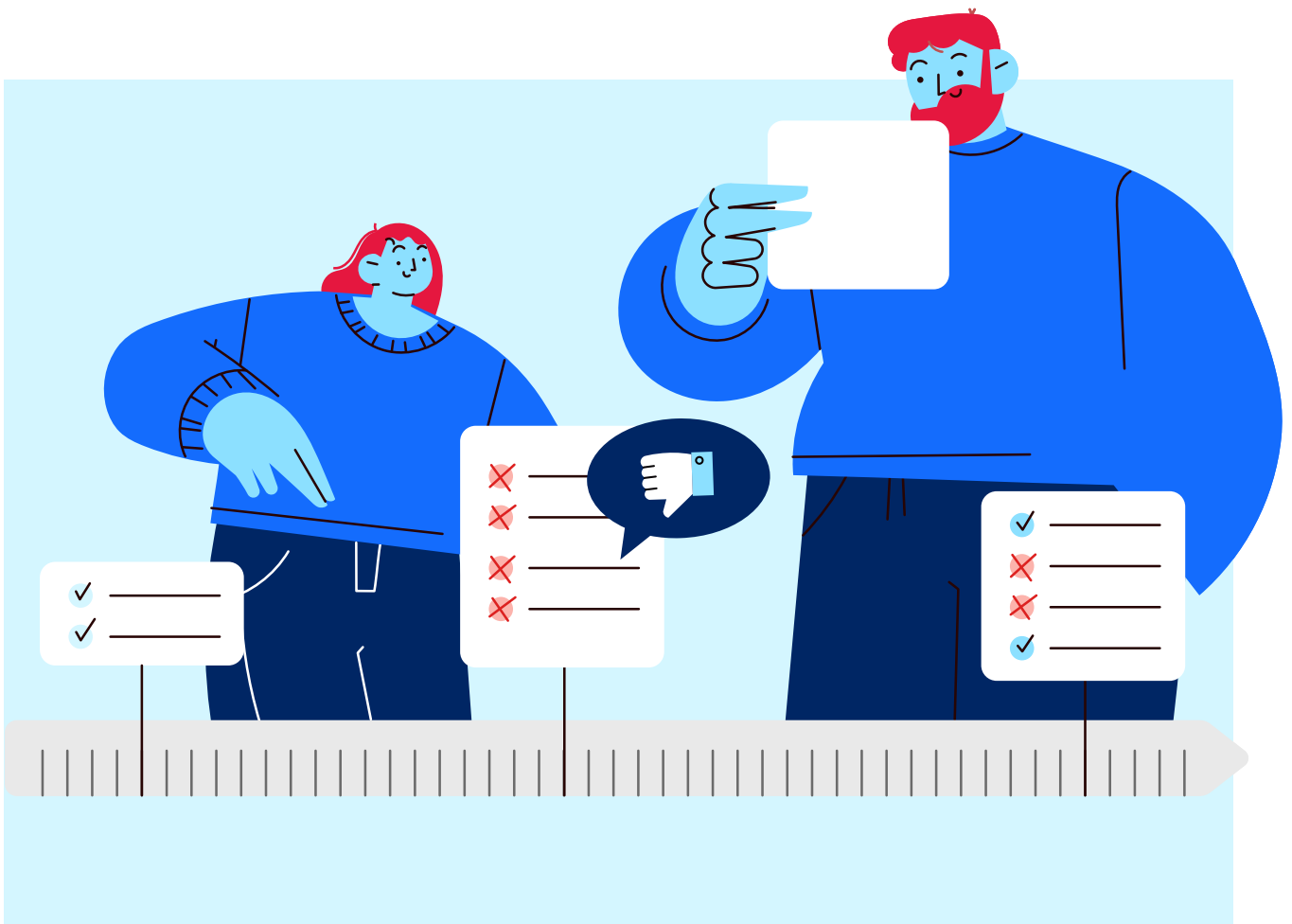
Follow these tips:

After lodging a test complaint, ask user testers questions such as:

- How easy was it to find the complaint form?
- Before starting, did you understand what information you would need to provide?
- How easy or difficult was it to complete the complaint form?
- What would you change to make the process easier or clearer?



2. Triaging and assigning complaints



Ask customers what resolution they want



What sludge does this address?

Limited or no opportunity for customers to state their desired outcome

Ask customers what outcome they are seeking when they lodge their complaint to clarify expectations.

This helps staff understand customer needs and offers an early opportunity to manage customers' expectations. Knowing a customer's preferred outcome might also reduce time for triage and resolution.

Follow these tips:

- Keep the desired outcome as a note on the complaint throughout the process, so staff keep this top of mind.
- Include a question that explicitly asks customers to state their desired outcome. For example, by asking "What would you like us to do in response to your complaint?"
- Provide selectable options for desired outcomes to help customers understand their needs. Some customers may want to select more than one option.

Please select the resolution you are hoping for:

- Apology
- Explanation
- Corrective action
- Organisational change
- Refund
- Other



Customers may become anchored to outcome options that you provide, so be careful not to include any options that are rarely possible.⁶

Empower staff to resolve complaints



What sludge does this address?

Slow triage process

Customers need to repeat their story

Limited status updates

Where possible, allocate each complaint to a staff member and enable them to resolve common complaints immediately.

This reduces wait times for customers, gives staff a sense of ownership, and reduces unnecessary follow-ups for common issues. This can also reduce the risk of staff losing complaints due to a diffusion of responsibility.

Follow these tips:

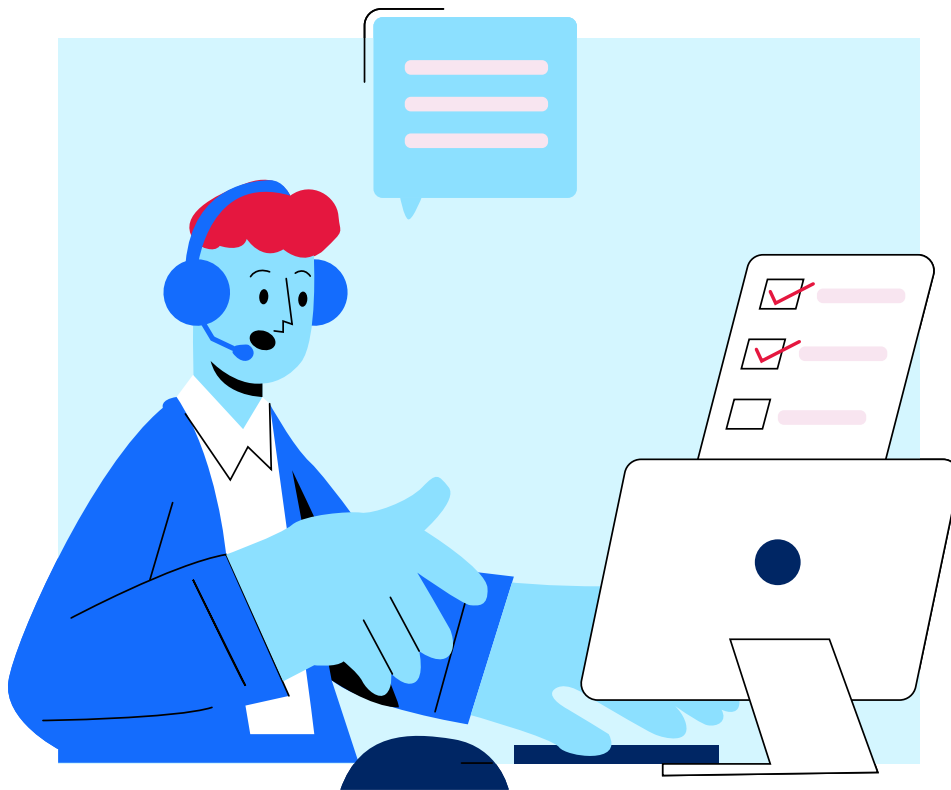
- Consider whether assigning a dedicated point of contact for each complaint would be appropriate.
 - Share contact details (direct or shared inbox/ phone) with customers to make the complaints system more accessible.
 - Inform customers when their case is being handed over to a new staff member.
 - Provide more personalised contact – like an introductory call to the customer – to reduce the emotional burden for complex and sensitive complaints.
 - Eliminate non-essential complaint handovers.
 - When the dedicated contact is unavailable, acknowledge this and ask the customer if they'd like to proceed or wait until the main contact is available. Ensure staff follow standard operating procedures and keep case notes so all staff and support customers with minimal disruption.
- List common complaints that complaint-handling staff can independently resolve now.
 - Assign corresponding resolutions that don't require further investigation or approval.
 - Clarify escalation pathways when a standard resolution is rejected by the customer or deemed inappropriate by a staff member.
 - Use service data and complaint data to continuously update understanding of common complaints and resolution strategies.

Lorem ipsum dolor sit
From: complaints@company.com
To: You

Steve will be handling your complaint

Contact **complaints@company.com** when you need to reach Steve.

Complaint	Action
1. Lorem ipsum dolor sit	• Lorem ipsum dolor sit
2. Lorem ipsum dolor sit	• Lorem ipsum dolor sit
3. Lorem ipsum dolor sit	• Lorem ipsum dolor sit
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Human interaction in complaint-handling processes

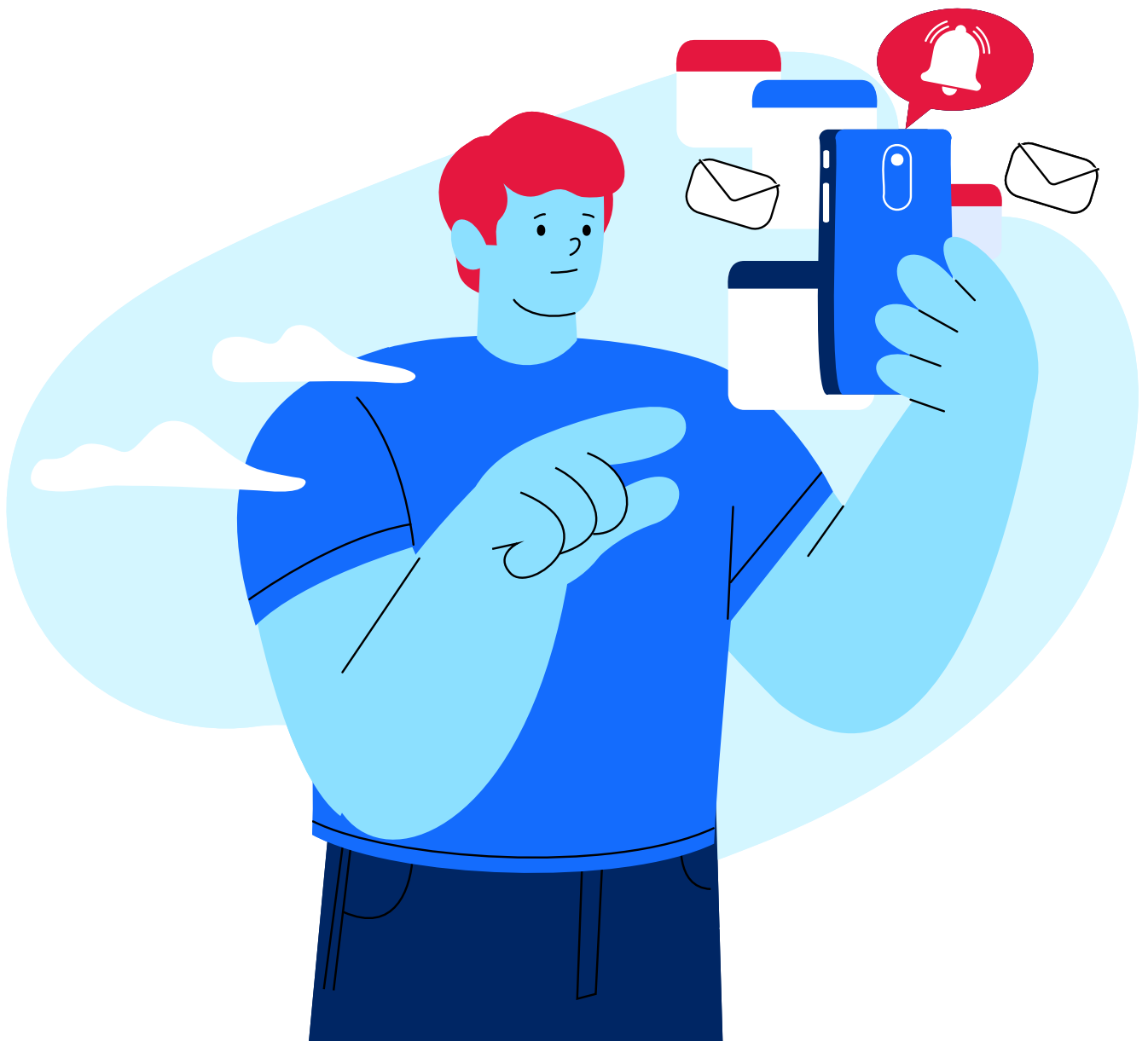
Including personalised human interaction in the complaint-handling process gives customers a better perception of justice and leads to more satisfaction with the resolution process.⁷

Case study

NSW Registry of Births, Deaths & Marriages

When undertaking a sludge audit on their complaint-handling processes, the Registry found complaints were being unnecessarily passed through multiple teams and platforms, leading to duplicative efforts and contradictory information. The team implemented significant improvements to expedite customer response times, enhance case triaging, and consolidate CRM systems.

3. Processing and progress updates through complaint-handling



Actively communicate possible outcomes



What sludge does this address?

Limited or no expectation setting

Proactively outline what outcomes are possible to increase transparency and respect the customer's time.

Setting clear expectations reduces customer uncertainty. It enables customers to make informed decisions about how they want to proceed and reduces the frequency of unmet or unrealised expectations.

Follow these tips:

- Include an outcome menu that lists possible outcomes, including an 'Other' option.
- Be transparent about limitations of the complaint process. For example, by explicitly stating what outcomes cannot be reached and why, and which outcomes are more or less likely.
- Include examples of complaints you receive and what the typical outcomes are.
- Encourage all complaints to ensure customers don't feel discouraged if their desired outcome isn't on the outcome menu.



Uncertainty aversion

Uncertainty aversion is the discomfort or reluctance people feel when faced with unpredictable situations or outcomes. This can lead customers to make choices that feel safer or more familiar – like avoiding lodging a complaint altogether – even if those choices aren't objectively better.⁸

Increase operational transparency



What sludge does this address?

Limited or no expectation setting

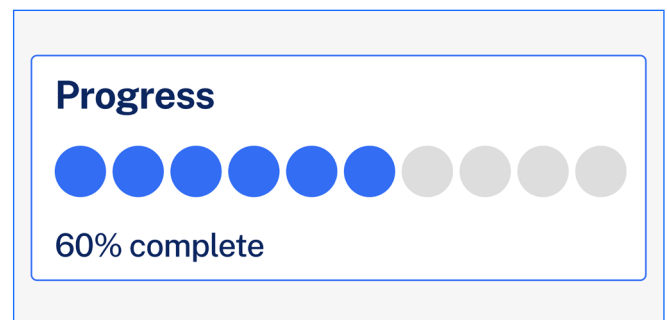
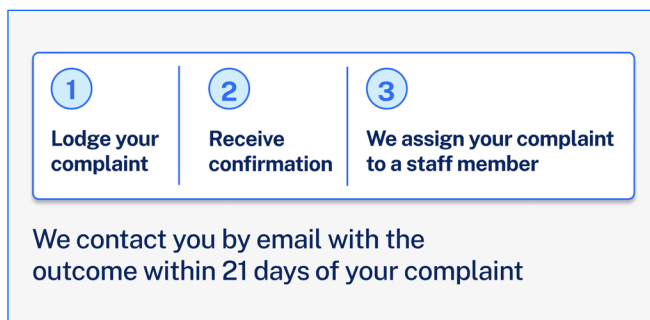
Limited status updates

Use operational transparency to build trust with customers by demystifying internal procedures and reducing uncertainty.

Time estimates and status updates help customers manage their expectations and anticipate next steps. They can also reduce frustration caused by perceived delays.⁹ This is particularly important during longer or more complex complaint journeys.

Follow these tips:

- Include an overview of the complaint-handling process
 - Make this visible before the customer lodges a complaint and at key milestones throughout the process.
 - Include clear behavioural steps with corresponding timeframes.
- Regularly update customers on the status of their complaint.
 - Automate messages where possible.
 - Use goal gradients to help customers see their progress.
 - Provide a digital tracker where possible.



Operational transparency

Operational transparency is showing the customer what work is happening behind the scenes during a process, transaction, or operation. Operational transparency has been shown in different contexts to:¹⁰

- reduce enquiries and follow-ups
- increase willingness to wait
- increase engagement with a service
- increase customer satisfaction and trust
- reduced likelihood of rude or uncivil behaviour towards service staff.

Provide realistic timeframes



What sludge does this address?

Long or unknown wait times

Limited or no expectation setting

Communicate timeframes for each stage of the complaint process.

Timeframes help customers manage their expectations and reduce the risk of disappointment. Overpromising and underdelivering can damage trust, while honest estimates build credibility. Review timeframes regularly to ensure accuracy.

Follow these tips:

- Use continuous data monitoring to understand average wait times and ensure timeframe estimates remain accurate and responsive.
- Monitor patterns and trends to improve forecasting and resource planning for complaint-handling. This will ensure that you can manage spikes in complaint volume and meet response time targets.



Choosing response timeframes to communicate

Acceptable response timeframes are context specific and mode specific. When you are setting timeframes and evaluating your response times, consider these factors:¹¹

- Urgency of the complaint.
- Seriousness of the complaint.
- Vulnerability of the customer.
- Complexity of the complaint.
- Financial loss of the customer.

4. Resolution and outcome communication



Apologise for difficult experiences



What sludge does this address?

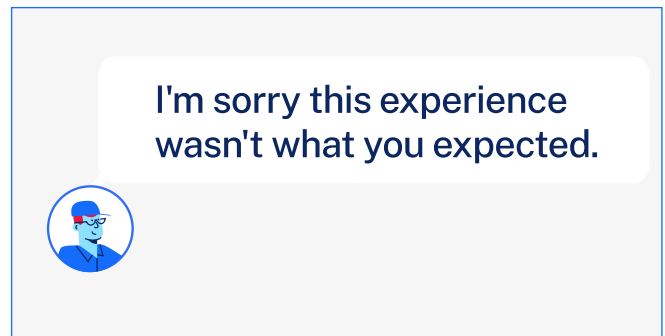
Lack of empathy in outcome delivery

Offer an apology to the customer for what they have experienced.

An apology can significantly improve perceptions of fairness and care, even when there is no resolution or the service was not entirely at fault.¹²

Follow these tips:

- Use active voice and keep apologies personal.
- Update existing communication templates to include apologies.
- Have standard operating procedures to support customer service staff to provide apologies on behalf of the organisation.
- Have leaders model these apologies to reduce the stigma around apologising for someone's experience and to encourage staff to do the same.



Case study

NSW Early Learning Commission

A sludge audit completed by the NSW Early Learning Commission found that delivering a clear, comprehensive, transparent outcome letter to customers and acknowledging negative experiences led to fewer requests for internal complaint reviews.

Advise customers when their matter has been closed or resolved



What sludge does this address?

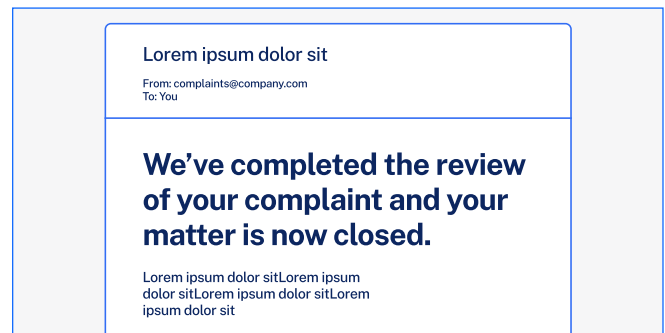
Complaint outcomes are not communicated clearly

Explicitly notify the customer when you are closing your action on their issue, even where there has been no change to the customer's situation or resolution.

This can reduce customer uncertainty and follow-up.

Follow these tips:

- Send the customer an outcome notification that explicitly states the case will be closed.
- Advise why you've determined that the complaint can be closed to demonstrate procedural fairness.



Case study

Revenue NSW

Revenue NSW completed a sludge audit and found that customers thought their complaint was still being handled when staff had marked it as resolved or completed. To address this, Revenue NSW developed best practice guidance for complaint-handling staff that includes instruction for closing the loop with customers. Complaint-handlers are advised to clearly state that the complaint has been finalised and offer customers the opportunity to contact the complaint-handler if they have further questions.

Use plain-English when communicating complaint outcomes



What sludge does this address?

Complaint outcomes are not communicated clearly

Use plain English in complaint outcome correspondence.

When customers perceive the organisation is speaking to them clearly and respectfully, they are more likely to be satisfied with the experience.¹³

Follow these tips:

- Write and speak with everyday words and avoid jargon.
- Use active voice.



We passed this onto the team that can help you with the next steps



This matter has been escalated to the relevant department for further action.

Provide options for escalation or review



What sludge does this address?

Complaint outcomes are not communicated clearly

Provide customers with clear and accessible options if they are dissatisfied with the outcome of their complaint.

Providing these options when communicating the outcome reinforces procedural fairness and signals that the organisation is accountable. It can also improve customer satisfaction with the process and reduce the additional burden of re-establishing contact with a new complaint or enquiry.

Follow these tips:

- Communicate options available to customers who are dissatisfied with the outcome of their complaint. This will depend on your service and the complaint.

If you are dissatisfied with the outcome of your complaint, you can:

- ✓ request an internal review
- ✓ contact the NSW Ombudsman
- ✓ seek assistance from other regulators
- ✓ pursue an external review or tribunal.

5. Post-resolution feedback and improvement



Show customers how their complaints are used



What sludge does this address?

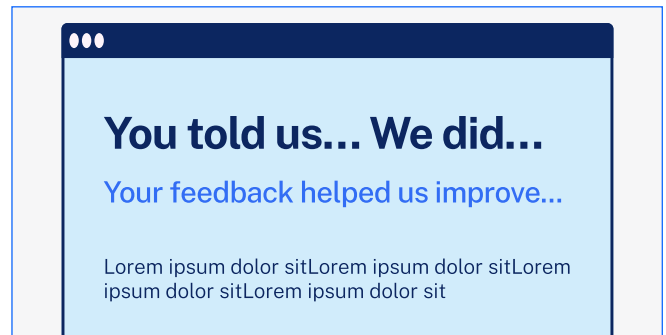
Lack of feedback loops

Demonstrate how complaints contribute to service improvements to reinforce the value of customer feedback and encourage future engagement.

This encourages more people to provide constructive, genuine feedback, as well as demonstrating a commitment to listening and delivering better services.

Follow these tips:

- Record what you do in response to complaints, including changes you make in response to recurring complaints and complaint themes.
- Share stories of how customer complaints have driven positive changes within the organisation. Sharing builds trust with customers, shows them that their voice matters, and encourages more feedback.



Case study

Revenue NSW

Revenue NSW combines multiple sources of data to identify patterns and understand what drives complaints. This includes survey data (from their customer experience survey, post-call survey and post-complaint survey), complaints and operational data, and other subject-specific insights (e.g. system issues, website updates, resourcing issues). As an example of how this is used, Revenue NSW observed that complaint numbers spiked following a relative surge in the number of fines issues in a period. Understanding the cause and when complaint numbers are likely to increase provides an opportunity to better plan and increase resourcing where possible.

Collect and use data to inform continuous improvement



What sludge does this address?

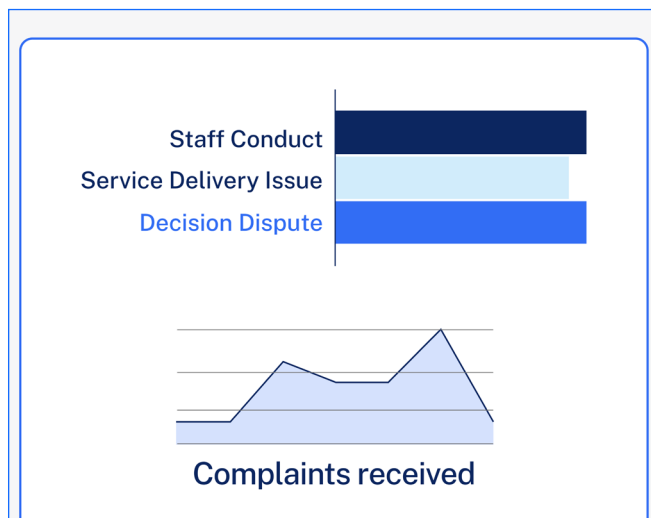
Sludge is hidden by a lack of complaint data

Use a consistent and structured system to capture and analyse different sources of complaint data to help make evidence-based improvements.

Surveys can help uncover the sludge in customer experience and psychological costs that operational metrics might miss – such as resolution time or wait time.

Follow these tips:

- Capture and report quantitative data. Use dynamic dashboards and regular reporting to analyse trends and patterns.
- Use post-resolution feedback surveys.
- Use free text analysis to understand what customers are telling you. Analyse open-ended responses using natural language processing or thematic coding to identify patterns and systemic problems in customer experience.



Feedback survey

1. Were you informed about what outcomes were possible?
2. Did you receive updates about the progress of your complaint?
3. Would you feel confident making a complaint again in the future?

Complete sludge audits

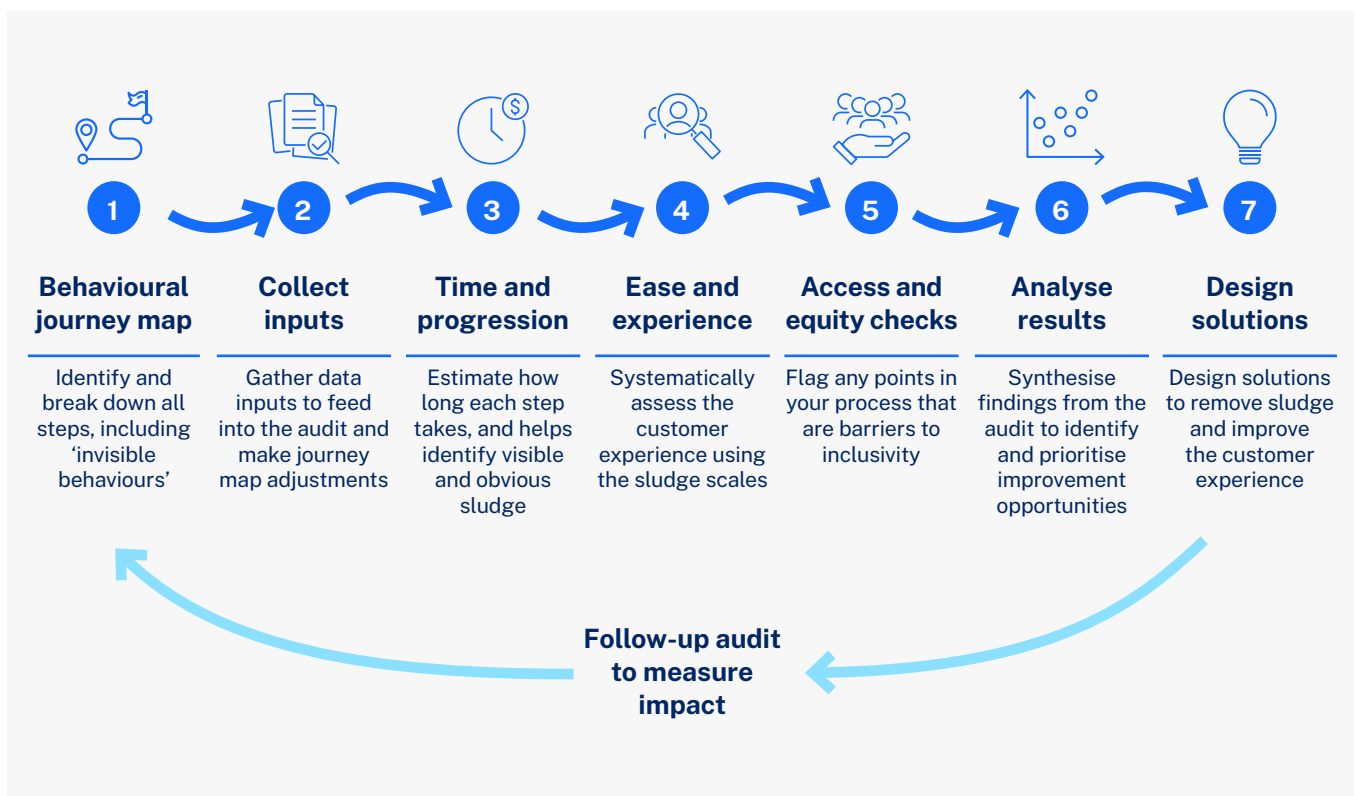
 What sludge does this address?

Sludge is hidden by a lack of complaint data

Conduct sludge audits to prevent and reduce the causes of complaints using the [NSW Sludge Audit Method](#). Sludge audits help you identify and measure unnecessary customer and staff frictions in your complaint-handling process.

If you're unsure about where to start with sludge reduction, a sludge audit is a good way to help you prioritise and focus your sludge reduction efforts.

There are 7 steps involved in conducting a sludge audit:



Follow these tips:

- Contact sludge@customerservice.nsw.gov.au if you want to learn more or get support to complete a sludge audit.
- Ask about the 'Complaint-handling process' template to help you get started
- Use Sludge Finder Mini as a first step to find sludge, it's available on the [Sludge Toolkit](#)

Common sources of sludge in complaint-handling processes

Stage	Sludge	NSW Ombudsman Principle
1 Accessing and lodging complaints	Limited channels for engagement	Information and accessibility
	Hidden channels to make complaints	Information and accessibility
	Complaint resolution appears unlikely or negative	Respectful treatment
	Complaint forms are lengthy and time-consuming	Information and accessibility Respectful treatment
2 Triaging and assigning complaints	Limited or no opportunity for customers to state their desired outcome	Respectful treatment
	Slow triage process	Transparency Timeliness Take Ownership
	Customers need to repeat their story	Take Ownership Respectful treatment
3 Processing and progress updates through complaint-handling	Limited or no expectation setting with the customer	Communication
	Limited or no status updates	Respectful treatment Communication
	Long or unknown wait times	Timeliness Communication
4 Resolution and outcome communication	Lack of empathy in outcome delivery	Respectful treatment Communication
	Complaint outcomes are not communicated clearly	Respectful treatment Communication
5 Post-resolution feedback and improvement	Lack of feedback loops	Transparency Communication
	Sludge is hidden by a lack of complaint data	Transparency Communication

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