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AIRCRAFT NOISE OMBUDSMAN

Review of Defence's Aircraft Noise Complaints Management System

November 2016

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1 Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Aircraft Noise Ombudsman (ANO) elected to conduct a review of the Department of Defence's (Defence's) Aircraft Noise Complaints Management System (complaints management system).
- 1.2 The Terms of Reference for the Review are available **Attachment 1**.
- 1.3 Through the conduct of the review we found that Defence has established a noise complaints management system that incorporates a toll-free number, website information, documented procedures and staff to respond to complainants. Telephone complaints and enquiries directed to the relevant Defence base are generally responded to promptly with action taken on occasions to address the issues raised.
- 1.4 Complaints received via email or post, or those not readily related to Air Force Base, can be prone to slow response times or ineffective management of issues.
- 1.5 This report makes seven recommendations aimed at improving Defence's aircraft noise complaints management. **Attachment 2** provides a summary of the recommendations and suggestions.
- 1.6 The key areas for improvement include:
 - Defence to use complaint data to identify and pursue noise improvement opportunities, enhance public consultation and improve information provision.
 - Defence to improve public information about the complaints process.
 - Defence to review and improve web based information on aircraft noise.
 - Defence to improve complaint management processes for written responses to residents.
 - Defence to share data, experience and learnings across bases to maximise noise improvement opportunities and enhance complaint management across Defence.
- 1.7 Defence has welcomed and supported the conduct of the review. The organisation has provided access to data and personnel without hesitation. This reflects the strong commitment in Defence to manage aircraft noise issues and to consider and respond to residents raising noise related concerns.
- 1.8 In conclusion, the ANO considers Defence is responsive to residents' concerns about aircraft noise, open to new ideas and willing to make changes to improve its complaints management processes.



Ron Brent

Aircraft Noise Ombudsman
15 November 2016

2 Introduction

Objective

- 2.1 The objective of this review is to assess the effectiveness of Defence's handling of complaints relating to aircraft noise, and to recommend improvements where appropriate.
- 2.2 This will include benchmarking against the requirements for 'Operation of the Complaint Management System' set out in Chapter 8 of the Australian/New Zealand Standard 10002:2014 "Guidelines for complaint management in organizations" (the Standard).
- 2.3 The Terms of Reference for the review are available at **Attachment 1**.

Report purpose and structure

- 2.4 This report sets out the ANO's assessment of Defence's complaints management system and processes against the benchmark of the Standard.
- 2.5 Having specifically focused on the key elements of good complaint handling as defined in Chapter 8 of the Standard, 'Operation of the Complaint Management System', this report is structured around these elements. Each chapter addresses one element, including recommendations when considered appropriate.

Methodology

- 2.6 In conducting the review, the ANO undertook various activities to independently assess Defence's complaints management systems and processes. These included:
 - A desktop review: including documentation supplied by Defence and publicly available material on the Defence and other websites
 - Site visits: to RAAF Bases Amberley, Edinburgh and Townsville as well as Air Force Headquarters (Canberra). The site visits included interviews with key Defence personnel as well as reviewing on site procedures and other relevant documentation
 - Reviewing complaints to the ANO: specifically analysing the complaints handling experience for complainants
 - Undertaking some independent testing of Defence's complaints response systems: for example, calling the Defence 1300 public contact number and following through the complaint thread.
- 2.7 The ANO has assessed Defence's complaints management system holistically with a view to identifying opportunities for improvement.

3 Communication

- 3.1 The Standard sets out the complaint management information that should be readily available to the public. This includes a complaints management policy and clear information about the complaints process.
- 3.2 The primary access point for information about Defence's aircraft noise complaint management is its webpage. An internet search on 'Defence aircraft noise' brings up the primary Defence webpage relating to aircraft noise matters - <http://www.defence.gov.au/aircraftnoise/>. Additionally, the ANO is aware that printed documents, public consultation forums and public affairs strategies are also used by Defence to increase public awareness of the aircraft noise complaints system.
- 3.3 The front page of the Defence aircraft noise webpage is well set out, contains pertinent information on military flying operations and how Defence manages its aircraft noise impacts. The page has a series of 'tabs' at the top of the page, including a 'Contact us' hyperlink, and a panel that sets out the Aircraft Noise Strategy.

Complaint management policy

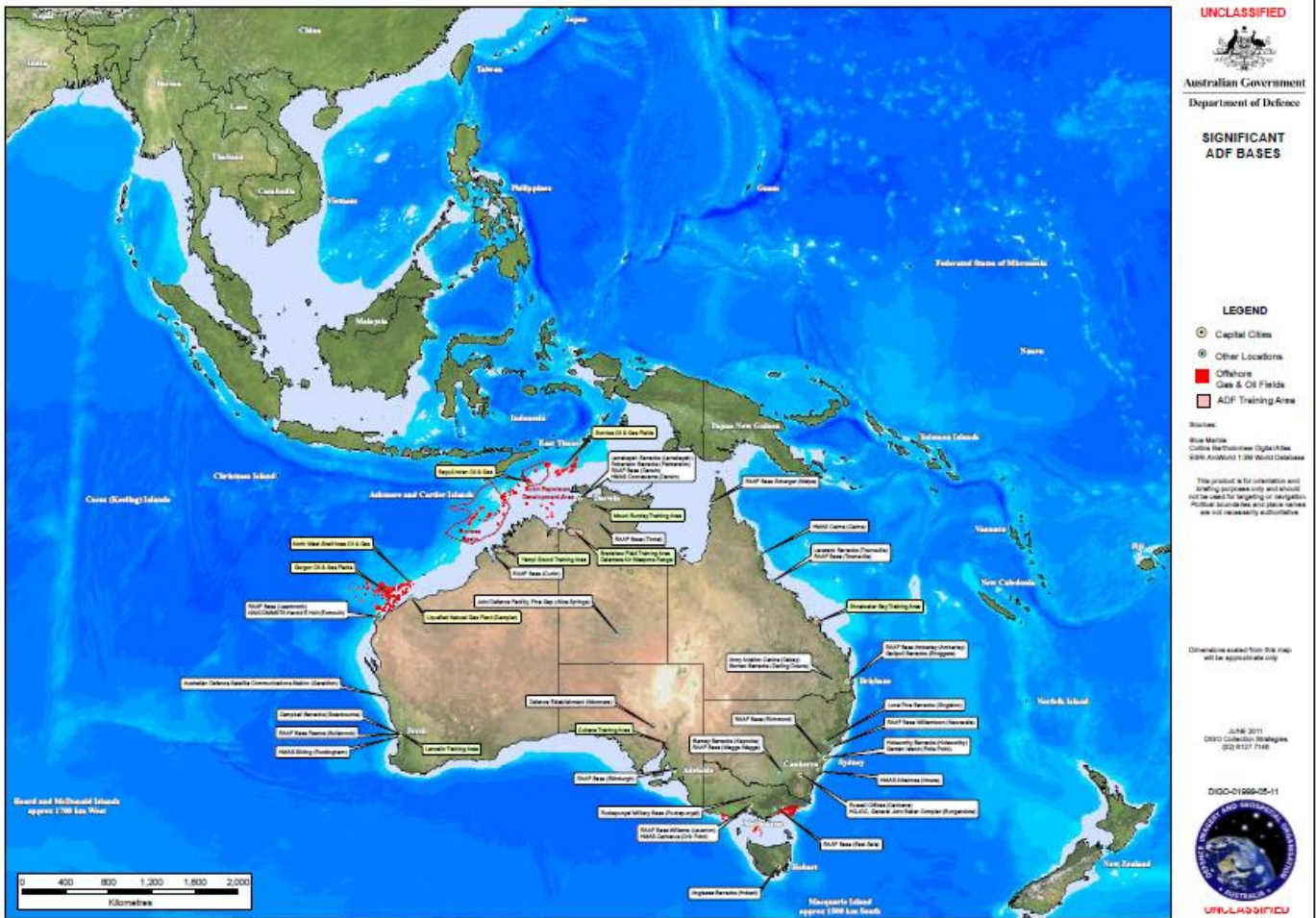
- 3.4 The Aircraft Noise Strategy sets out Defence's commitment to managing aircraft noise complaints effectively. A copy of the relevant page is included at **Attachment 3**. The ANO considers that this sets out the organisation's complaint management policy as required under the Standard, and notes that this document meets the Standard's accessibility requirements (8.1 (a)-(c)).

Complaint management process

- 3.5 The Standard also defines the sort of information about the complaint process that should be available to the community. It lists 10 aspects of the complaint management process that should be publicly accessible. The ANO has assessed Defence's performance against each of these in the table below and makes further comments and recommendations following the table.

Information	Available?	Comment
Where complaints can be made	Yes	Could be clearer, see paragraphs 3.6-3.7
How complaints can be made	Yes	Could be expanded, see paragraphs 3.8-3.9
When complaints can be made	Yes	See paragraph 3.10
When acknowledgement of complaints can be expected	No	Not provided, see paragraph 3.10
What information should be provided by the complainant	Yes	See paragraph 3.11 re inclusion of link to Defence Privacy statement
The process for handling complaints	Yes	Could be expanded, see paragraphs 3.12-3.13
Time periods associated with various stages of the complaint process	No	See paragraph 3.14
Where appropriate, possible options for redress	Yes	Could be expanded, see paragraph 3.15
The complainant's options for review, internally and externally	No – internally Yes – externally	See paragraph 3.16
How the complainant can obtain feedback on the status of their complaint	No	See paragraph 3.16

3.6 A resident can readily navigate to the 'Contact us' tab of the Defence aircraft noise webpage which details information on how to make a noise complaint or enquiry. This page provides the 1300 DEFENCE number (1300 333 362) and advises the resident to ask the operator to be connected to their nearest base. A link to a map is provided. Unfortunately the scale of the map and the content is not considered suitable for the purpose of assisting residents in locating their nearest base (see map below).



3.7 Defence should provide more useful information on its website to assist residents in identifying their nearest base.

3.8 Defence's Aircraft Noise contacts page also indicates that complaints may alternatively be made by post. A number of recorded messages for local bases provide a postal address too. However, during this review, the ANO was unable to source any base addresses from the Defence Aircraft Noise webpages. It is also difficult to determine from a broader search of the internet what the most appropriate address is for postal complaints. Defence should update its Aircraft Noise webpages to include the appropriate postal addresses for each RAAF base that residents can use to submit a complaint by mail.

3.9 Currently, there is no method available for residents who wish to lodge a complaint electronically by either email or a web based form. Defence has previously committed to establishing an online complaints form and the ANO remains strongly supportive of such.

- 3.10 The 'Contact Us' page indicated no time constraints on when complaints can be made, and is clear that a complainant calling by phone may reach a voice message service in the first place. It explains why and that the complainant will be called back, although there is no timeframe indicated for when this can be expected. There is also no indication of how or when acknowledgement of a postal complaint will be provided. Defence should clarify when and how complaints received by leaving a telephone message or by post will be acknowledged.
- 3.11 The 'Contact us' webpage helpfully outlines the information that a complainant should provide about their complaint. The Standard includes a reminder that when collecting personal information, it is appropriate to provide information about the organisation's privacy statement. The Defence Privacy Statement is available elsewhere on the broader Defence website: <http://www.defence.gov.au/ComplaintResolution/privacy.asp> Inclusion of a link from the Complaints page would be helpful and appropriate.
- 3.12 Defence includes a single sentence on the 'Contact us' page about what will happen with a complaint or enquiry:
- If you make an enquiry, your enquiry will be recorded and an investigation will be commenced to determine if it was an Air Force aircraft, and then to determine if Air Force was operating within relevant procedures and guidelines.*
- 3.13 Defence should consider referring to Defence rather than Air Force specifically, given that the other Services (Army and Navy) also engage in aircraft activity that may prompt enquiries or complaints from the public and should be responded to according to an agreed organisation-wide methodology.
- 3.14 Of more significance, however, is the narrow focus of investigation on only compliance that is implied in the above statement. Certainly compliance is a consideration, however, beyond this, Defence should seek and pursue any practical and reasonable noise improvement opportunities that arise from considering the noise complaint or enquiries received. Furthermore, even when no changes to the flying activity can be implemented to improve the noise outcome, the complaint may identify opportunities for improved community engagement and public information to improve community understanding and manage expectations about Defence flying operations.
- 3.15 In conducting this review, the ANO noted some examples of noise improvements having been implemented by Defence in response to complaints. Making such achievements more visible publicly and being explicit about the complaints process encompassing more than compliance checking can enhance public confidence in the complaints process.

Recommendation 1: Defence should expand the focus of complaint investigation beyond compliance checking to also identify and pursue opportunities for noise improvements, improved community engagement and better public information.

- 3.16 Besides the sentence on the 'Contact us' page quoted in paragraph 3.12 above, there is no outline of the complaints process that is publicly available. The timeline for the various stages of the complaint process is not stated publicly, although internal procedures do stipulate certain timeframes to be met.
- 3.17 The Standard identifies that possible options for redress should be made accessible to potential complainants, where appropriate. Defence may be able to include some examples of changes that have been adopted in response to complaints to provide insight into the sorts of redress that are available. The ANO is aware that in some locations there has been financial redress for injured livestock, areas have been designated as noise-sensitive locations in pilot documentation and apologies and explanations are also routinely provided.

3.18 Commendably, the 'Contact us' page also contains information about the ANO, should a resident wish to escalate the matter beyond Defence. However, there is no explicit advice about how a complainant can seek internal review of the response they received on a complaint. There is also no guidance provided about how a complainant can follow up on progress with their complaint. These details could be added to improve clarity on the complaints process.

Recommendation 2: To help in managing complainant expectations, Defence should improve the public information about the complaints process to address the information requirements outlined in the Standard and as identified within the report.

Public information

3.19 In addition to the above, the 'Contact us' page has a paragraph relating to community consultation. This paragraph concludes with the words 'Opportunities to be involved will be notified through this website', however there is no further information on where in Defence's extensive website such information may be obtained. (Refer to recommendation 3 below relating to general website improvement opportunities).

3.20 Finally, the 'Contact us' page contains an 'Exercise and Training Area' section with links to Air Force and Army training activities. Unfortunately, when reviewing this website on 28 July, the Army training activity link was incorrectly redirected to the Air Force activity page. Further, the Air Force page does not appear to be regularly updated or comprehensive, with major exercises (e.g. Pitch Black and Wallaby 2016) not listed.

3.21 The ANO found generally that the Defence Aircraft Noise webpages could be better presented and maintained. Issues identified include:

- numerous broken links or links to old versions of documents
- pages that did not provide relevant information appropriate to the title
- the same information repeated on numerous pages
- the most recent reports and minutes not yet published, even though the reporting periods or meetings are long past

Recommendation 3: Defence should review the Defence Aircraft Noise web information and, taking account of comments in this report, make improvements to information provision, presentation and functionality.

4 Providing support

- 4.1 The Standard provides guidance on accessibility aimed at encouraging people *to voice their concerns about an organization's product, system or services*¹. The Standard goes on to say that an organisation *should also strive to communicate how such feedback is used to improve their product, system or services*.
- 4.2 The Standard also states that Organizations should be flexible when dealing with complaints and ensure that their complaint management system is accessible to everyone, particularly people who may require assistance.
- 4.3 Commendably, the Defence website contains extensive information on accessibility for the website material². This includes:
- Information for adjusting font sizes
 - How to use the website without a mouse
 - Assistance for the deaf
 - Information on the use of the screen reader functionality
- 4.4 Flexibility in the Standard is defined as the provision of allowing multiple means for a resident to submit a complaint, which may include options such as in person, over the telephone, via social media or in writing (email, fax, letter or electronically). These methods are discussed below.
- 4.5 Due to the nature of the operations, there is a limited need for the receipt of complaints in person, however it is an option in some circumstances. For example, residents involved in the various Defence bases' Community Consultation meetings have the opportunity to raise aircraft noise issues at the meeting and have the matter dealt with through that process.
- 4.6 Telephone complaints are supported by the provision of a 1300 National number as well as a number of bases having local telephone numbers (many of which are toll free). Operators on the 1300 number have managed calls from deaf callers previously through TTY (text telephone) or similar services.

¹ AS/NZS 10002:2014 Appendix B Section B1

² See - <http://www.defence.gov.au/Accessibility.asp>

5 Early resolution

- 5.1 The Standard recognises that best practice for complaint management incorporates early resolution of complaints. Preferably, matters should be resolved at the first point of contact.
- 5.2 Record keeping for complaint management varied from one Defence base to another. In one case, the dates for return calls to residents was generally recorded and indicated a prompt (often within 24 hours) response time. Interviews with staff at the Defence bases suggested that responses are routinely provided in a timely fashion.
- 5.3 In contrast, when residents have pursued complaints in a written form, it appears that they may more commonly experience extended delays in receiving a response that addresses their concerns (see case study below).

C Patience is a virtue...

A Ms T contacted our office on 4 December 2014. After an initial review of the case, we responded to Ms T that it was appropriate for Defence to consider the matter in the first instance, and offered to pass her complaint on to them. The complaint was referred to Defence on 14 December.

S On 27 January, Ms T advised that she had not had a response from Defence. The following day we were advised that Ms T was on a priority list and would receive a response by 10 February.

E Our office pursued the matter early in February and we were advised that the draft response had been passed from one Defence officer to another, who in turn passed it to a third officer for review.

S We followed the matter up again on 24 February. We were again assured that "Defence are progressing this matter with priority" however it required technical review and clearance by the Deputy Chief of Air Force (DCAF).

T On 3 March, the ANO office was advised that the letter had been sent to the DCAF for sign-off, however two weeks later, we were advised the response had been sent back from DCAF requesting changes and was referred to yet another Defence officer for amendment.

U Finally, on 29 March, three and a half months after receiving the complaint, Defence sent a response to Ms T. The letter was only two pages long.

- 5.4 The ANO considers that delays in providing responses in writing reflect a requirement for greater level of internal review and approval for a written response. The same complaint made by telephone will be responded to directly by the nominated officer at the Base, without any prior approvals or review.

5.5 Introduction of an online complaint submission process is likely to lead to more written complaints. Defence should consider the need for training and support materials (such as standard texts, fact sheets, etc) to support timely written responses.

Recommendation 4: To support the timely release of written responses, Defence should:

- a) document the procedures to be followed in the event of written complaints (whether received through post, email or an online form), ensuring such procedures incorporate a timely acknowledgement of the complaint
- b) streamline any necessary review and approval processes for written responses to complaints
- c) consider the provision of training and support material for staff that will be responding to complaints, in particular via email following the introduction of electronic complaint submission.

C A S E S T U D Y 2

Maybe it's an IT issue?

Ms H from Canberra was disturbed in her sleep by an aircraft flying in circles over the Canberra suburbs in the early hours of the morning. On calling Airservices Australia, she was advised that there were no civilian aircraft flying and that it was probably a Defence aircraft.

Ms H called the Defence 1300 number and was asked to identify her nearest base. While Canberra airport was once an RAAF facility (RAAF Base Fairbairn) it was decommissioned in 2003.

It seems that the lack of a nearby base created some difficulty for the Defence switch operator who did not know where to transfer the call. In a first attempt, Ms H was transferred to a hang-up number. In the second attempt, the operator put her through to an IT Defence employee working in offices located at the airport.

Not being satisfied with her experience in dealing with Defence, Ms H contacted our office to have her complaint managed.

6 Receipt of complaint

- 6.1 The Standard recommends certain information be recorded for complaints unless the matter is resolved by frontline staff. In addition to assigning a unique identifier, the Standard suggests the record include:
- The complainant's contact information
 - Issues raised by the complainant
 - The outcome sought by the complainant
 - Any other information required to properly respond to the matter
 - Any support requirements needed by the complainant.
- 6.2 During the course of this review, a number of sample records were provided by Defence for analysis. While there did not appear to be a 'unique identifier' assigned to each case, the small number of complaints, and the data recorded, provided sufficient opportunity to clearly identify each individual complaint. As such, the lack of a 'unique identifier' is not considered to be of any significance.
- 6.3 National Defence instructions, local Base procedures and documentation processes (e.g. spreadsheets, Defence 'Record of Aircraft Noise Complaint' form, etc.) all support the collation of relevant complaint data.
- 6.4 **Complainant's contact information** – All records assessed generally included contact information where available, whether in the form of a telephone number or postal address. A number of complainants did not leave contact information. This could have been an oversight of the complainant or they may have wished to remain anonymous.
- 6.5 **Issues raised by the complainant** – All records assessed generally included a commentary on the nature of the complaint. The level of detail recorded was considered to be appropriate.
- 6.6 **The outcome sought by the complainant** – In the majority of cases, Defence is recording the outcomes sought by residents. Outcomes sought range from a return telephone call to provide greater information or explanation for an event, through procedural changes to reduce noise impacts, to wholesale changes such as ceasing to operate certain aircraft types or restricting certain exercises or training activities. Commendably, many of the responses to complainants focussed on the outcomes sought.
- 6.7 **Any other information required to properly respond to the matter** – Based on the sampling of complaint data from a number of Defence bases, Defence is obtaining and recording sufficient data to respond to complainants appropriately.
- 6.8 **Any support requirements needed by the complainant** – Data sampling did not identify any complainants with special support requirements. As such, this aspect of complaint management has not been assessed as part of this review.
- 6.9 While each of these aspects has been generally well handled by the Defence bases reviewed, there does seem to be an issue when the complaint cannot be readily identified as related to an appropriate base (see Case Study 2 on previous page). This issue is discussed further in section 11, with Recommendation 7 seeking further consideration by Defence of improving management of complaints not readily ascribed to a Defence base.

7 Tracking of complaint

- 7.1 The Standard recommends that an organisation should track the progress of each complaint until its finalisation. In addition, an up-to-date status of each complaint should be maintained.
- 7.2 At the Bases reviewed, Defence has internal procedures and established systems for recording and tracking complaints. Sampling of complaint registers maintained at a base level often contained missing information including:
- date that the matter was referred to another Defence unit
 - dates where unsuccessful return calls were made
 - details of actions taken by other units
 - whether the issue was considered finalised, and if so, on what date
 - whether there were opportunities for noise improvements and whether or not they were considered, evaluated and/or implemented
 - any outcomes from Defence headquarters once the official complaint form (known as an OA039) had been submitted.

Recommendation 5: Defence should adhere to its existing requirements for complaint recording and tracking.

C A S E S T U D Y 3

Air Force asks guests to hush

In conducting this review, the Aircraft Noise Ombudsman visited the Townsville Defence Base to provide compliant management training to relevant staff and to also investigate the complaints management systems applied at the Base.

One resident had raised concerns about the visiting United States forces and the noise generated by their fast jet operations.

The issue was considered by the Base's Executive Officer (XO). Opportunities for noise improvement were considered, including the 'fly neighbourly' procedures already adopted by Australian Defence pilots. As a result of discussions initiated by the XO, the US pilots amended their procedures to minimise the use of after-burner and increase their rate of climb to gain higher altitude over residents' homes, thereby reducing the amount of noise.

It is commendable to see Defence reacting positively to an issue raised by a resident and actively engaging operators other than their own to minimise the impact of aircraft noise.

8 Acknowledgement of complaint

- 8.1 The Standard recommends that each complaint is acknowledged promptly and consideration given to the means of communicating with a complainant.
- 8.2 Due to the lack of being able to submit a complaint electronically, the majority of complaints are received by telephone. When a resident experiences a significant aircraft noise event, they are often seeking a quick method to express their level of concern, and the telephone offers such level of service.
- 8.3 Data sampling and interviews suggest that telephone complaints are acknowledged promptly, either immediately or, when answering machines are used, generally within one working day. There were occasions where a resident claimed not to have received a call back, however this could have been due to a misunderstanding about whether or not such a call was required.
- 8.4 Complaints received by post are much less frequent. A lack of response dates made it difficult to determine if such complaints were acknowledged promptly. Written procedures are silent on the process for managing postal complaints. Recommendation 4 (a) includes clarifying procedures for managing written complaints.

9 Managing the complaint

- 9.1 The Standard recommends a four stage process in the management of complaints. Those are:
- Initial assessment of the complaint
 - Considering the complaint
 - Addressing the complaint and
 - Communicating with the complainant
- 9.2 **Initial assessment of the complaint** – The majority of Defence related noise complaints are managed by the Air Base Command Posts (ABCPs) at the major Defence establishments. An officer at the ABCP (or other unit where ABCPs are not established) gathers the complaint information from the resident and fills in the designated Defence form (OA39).
- 9.3 **Considering the complaint** – Once the initial information is obtained from a resident, an appropriate Defence officer considers the complaint to ascertain what action (if any) is required. In some cases, there will be enough information obtained for the resident to be contacted and the matter dealt with.
- 9.4 **Addressing the complaint** – From enquiries made at a number of bases during the conduct of this review, it seems common practice for the relevant officer reviewing the complaint in the first instance to refer the matter to the appropriate squadron or operational unit whenever further information is required. This approach can help in ensuring that the complaint is addressed appropriately and maximises the identification of noise improvement opportunities where available, provided that this is a deliberate consideration on top of any compliance checking that may be done. As per Recommendation 1, consideration should also be given to any community engagement or public information improvements that would assist in improving community understanding and potentially reducing complaints or enquiries about aircraft noise in the future. At this time the OA39 form and base-level complaint registers do not specifically facilitate recording such considerations (see Recommendation 6 (b) on next page).
- 9.5 **Communicating with the complainant** – The vast majority of complaints are managed by telephone. This seems appropriate given that the primary method of submitting a complaint is also via telephone. However, when an electronic method of complaint submission is introduced, Defence will need to be able to accommodate email responses. This may require appropriate training in what will be a new means of communicating with residents.

10 Closing the complaint and monitoring implementation of recommendations/remedies

- 10.1 The Standard suggests that in closing a complaint, an organisation should record:
- Steps taken to address the complaint
 - The outcome of the complaint
 - Any undertakings or follow up action required.
- 10.2 Local bases tend to maintain complaint records using a locally developed system (often, an excel spreadsheet). Sampling suggests that a closing (or finalised) date is often not recorded. In addition, bases are required to complete a 'Record of Aircraft Noise Complaint' form (OA39) however the form does not have any provision for a closing date or allow for ongoing tracking of follow up action that may be needed in response to finalising the complaint.
- 10.3 **Steps taken to address the complaint** – Localised recording systems include provision for 'action notes', 'outcome' or similar titles to record steps taken to address a complaint. Again, not all complaints have entries in these sections. The OA39 does include a mandatory field for 'result of investigation'. This could be expanded or additional fields incorporated to allow for explicit recording of considerations given to noise improvement opportunities, community engagement improvements and public information improvements that arise from aircraft noise complaints.
- 10.4 **The outcome of the complaint** – Localised recording systems do not always include information about the outcome of a complaint. The OA39 does include a mandatory field for 'details of explanation to complainant and any response'. The title of this section suggests that an explanation will always be provided to a complainant about the result of the complaint investigation and that the complainant's response to the explanation should be recorded. The ANO endorses this and encourages greater detail be included in this section and routine review by a senior base management or central complaint handling manager. This can enable consideration of lessons learnt in complaint handling and enable any training needs to be identified.
- 10.5 **Any undertakings or follow up action required** – Neither the localised recording systems or the OA39 form lend themselves to the recording of undertakings or follow up action. The system seems focussed on the response to the complainant without offering the opportunity for more systemic noise improvement opportunities.
- 10.6 The Standard recommends that there should be systems or processes in place to ensure implementation of outcomes are properly modified and reported to the complaints manager, or senior management, or both.

Recommendation 6: Defence should update its localised recording systems and the OA39 form as appropriate to incorporate:

- a) Closing date
- b) A place to record consideration of noise improvement opportunities, community engagement improvements and public information improvements
- c) Undertakings or follow up action required (including who is accountable for delivery).
- d) A mechanism for tracking any undertakings or follow up actions through to completion.

11 Matters not directly covered by the Standard

- 11.1 During the course of this review the ANO has noted the benefits of the decentralised handling of aircraft noise complaints. Dealing with complaints at the appropriate Defence base allows prompt action, knowledgeable responses and the establishment of a rapport between those making the complaint and local Defence force members familiar with the operations.
- 11.2 Nonetheless some challenges do arise with such a system. The issues are highlighted in the case study below and also Case Study 2, where the relevant base could not be readily identified. This highlights the need for a system to cater for complaints or enquiries where the current processes are ineffective.
- 11.3 There are also challenges in collecting nationally consistent data from aircraft noise complaints. Such data could be used to share experience and learnings between bases to maximise noise improvement opportunities and enhance complaint management.

Recommendation 7: Defence should:

- a) ensure that complaints not readily ascribed to a base are managed as effectively as other complaints
- b) share data, experience and learnings across bases to maximise noise improvement opportunities and enhance complaint management across Defence.

C A S E S T U D Y 4

“Your call is important to us...”

Following a report of the difficulty one resident had in making a complaint, our office tested the system to witness firsthand the complaint submission process.

We called the Defence 1300 number listed as the primary means for registering a complaint. The operator asked what type of aircraft we had experienced and where the aircraft had departed from. We said that we suspected it was a military fast jet and as we were based in Canberra, it may have come from there. The switchboard operator put the call on hold twice while trying to identify who we should be put through to.

The call was then transferred to RAAF Base Williamtown, and after a lengthy message, we were able to select option 1 for noise complaint. This resulted in another lengthy message which concluded by asking if we were familiar with the Base noise management policy (if yes, we were instructed to press 1) otherwise we were told to hold the line.

After holding on the line we were then transferred to a message suggesting the best way to make a complaint was by mail and a name and address for sending a letter were provided, however too quickly to actually write down. Alternatively, we were given the option to press 1 and leave a message.

We tried on two occasions to press 1, however both times we received a response saying ‘sorry I didn’t hear your instruction’. We waited on the line and the call automatically transferred to another message.

This new message advised us that we had connected to the Williamtown voice mail system and we should enter our extension number and password. As we didn’t have an extension number, and we certainly did not have a password, we chose to wait.

The line then disconnected.

12 Conclusion

12.1 Defence has a de-centralised base-level complaint response system that, at least at the Air Force bases assessed during this review, is generally effective in responding to community concerns about aircraft noise. Improvements identified relate largely to:

- Expanding the focus of complaint investigation beyond compliance checking to also identify and pursue opportunities for noise improvements, improved community engagement and better public information
- Providing greater clarity about the complaint process on the website and generally improving the presentation and relevance of aircraft noise information on the website
- Revisiting processes for receiving and responding to written complaints and those not readily ascribed to a base, with particular consideration to ensuring timely acknowledgement and response
- Considering the need for more training and support materials for those responding to complaints, particularly in writing
- Ensuring undertakings or follow up actions arising from complaints are tracked through to completion
- Sharing data, experience and learnings to maximise noise improvement opportunities and enhance complaint management across Defence.

Attachment 1 Terms of Reference

Review Objectives	<p>To review the effectiveness of Defence’s handling of complaints relating to aircraft noise, and to recommend improvements where appropriate.</p> <p>This will include benchmarking against the requirements for ‘Operation of the Complaint Management System’ set out in Chapter 8 of the Australian /New Zealand Standard 10002:2014 “Guidelines for complaint management in organizations” (the Standard).</p>	
Review Scope	<p>The review will assess Defence’s management of aircraft noise complaints against the Standard’s guidance for ‘Operation of the Complaint Management System’, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication: public information about Defence’s aircraft noise complaints process • Providing support: provision of support and practical assistance to people to make an aircraft noise complaint, if required • Early resolution: enabling resolution at first point of contact, where possible • Receipt of complaint: including recording complaint details and supporting information • Tracking of complaint: including regular updates to complainant • Acknowledgement of complaint: including timeliness and communication medium • Managing the complaint: from initial assessment through to resolution • Closing the complaint, review and record keeping • Monitoring implementation of recommendations/remedies <p>Additionally, other relevant aspects of the Standard may be referenced, for example the three level model of complaint handling outlined in Appendix H.</p> <p>The review is expected to include site visits to Air Force Headquarters, Headquarters Air Command and other sites as required, to interview and consult with relevant stakeholders and key personnel.</p> <p>A report will be prepared on the findings and submitted to the Chief of Air Force. It will include recommendations for improvements in aircraft noise complaints management where relevant.</p>	
Report issue	Draft: August 2016	Final: October 2016

Attachment 2 Recommendations

The following table lists the recommendations made in this review.

Recommendations arising from this review	
Recommendation 1:	page 5: Defence should expand the focus of complaint investigation beyond compliance checking to also identify and pursue opportunities for noise improvements, improved community engagement and better public information.
Recommendation 2:	page 6: To help in managing complainant expectations, Defence should improve the public information about the complaints process to address the information requirements outlined in the Standard and as identified within the report.
Recommendation 3:	page 6: Defence should review the Defence Aircraft Noise web information and, taking account of comments in this report, make improvements to information provision, presentation and functionality.
Recommendation 4:	page 7: To support the timely release of written responses, Defence should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) document the procedures to be followed in the event of written complaints (whether received through post, email or an online form), ensuring such procedures incorporate a timely acknowledgement of the complaint b) streamline any necessary review and approval processes for written responses to complaints c) consider the provision of training and support material for staff that will be responding to complaints, in particular via email following the introduction of electronic complaint submission.
Recommendation 5:	page 11: Defence should adhere to its existing requirements for complaint recording and tracking.
Recommendation 6:	page 14: Defence should update its localised recording systems and the OA39 form as appropriate to incorporate: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Closing date b) A place to record consideration of noise improvement opportunities, community engagement improvements and public information improvements c) Undertakings or follow up action required (including who is accountable for delivery). d) A mechanism for tracking any undertakings or follow up actions through to completion.
Recommendation 7:	page 15: Defence should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) ensure that complaints not readily ascribed to a base are managed as effectively as other complaints b) share data, experience and learnings across bases to maximise noise improvement opportunities and enhance complaint management across Defence.

Attachment 3 Defence's Aircraft Noise Complaints Management Policy

Goals and Commitments

Objective 3. Manage noise complaints effectively.

To achieve this Air Force will:

- **Manage noise complaints to provide an appropriate and timely response.** DACAUST will manage the noise complaint handling system. It will respond to complaints, enquiries and suggestions for change to resolve matters in a fair and timely manner. It is anticipated, that an effective noise complaint handling system combined with other goals in this strategy will reduce the number of noise complaints.
- **Provide adequate training and instruction to staff who manage aircraft noise complaints.** DACAUST will ensure that staff who are involved in the receipt and management of noise complaints receive adequate training to handle the complaints appropriately.
- **Share information about exercises and non-routine flying activities with the Airservices Australia National Complaint and Information Service.** SCA-CAF will establish procedures with Airservices Australia National Complaint and Information Service (NCIS) to ensure they have access to advance information about exercises and non-routine activities so they can address and direct queries and complaints from the public. This allows NCIS to respond to military related noise complaints without delay.
- **Continue participation in the Government Aviation Complaint Handling Forum.** DGCP representation at the Government Aviation Complaint Handling Forum will permit access to initiatives on complaint handling and aircraft noise management that represents industry best practice.
- **Establish a Memorandum of Understanding with the Aircraft Noise Ombudsman.** DCAF will seek to replace the current Memorandum of Understanding with the Commonwealth Ombudsman with a new Memorandum of Understanding with the Aircraft Noise Ombudsman. This will provide more subject-focused oversight of the Air Force aircraft noise management system.



Extract from Aircraft Noise Management Strategy, page 6:

<http://www.defence.gov.au/AircraftNoise/ Master/Docs/Default/Aircraft%20Noise%20Mangement%20Strategy.pdf>.