



# Case Studies in Complaint Management

## January 2014

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**Case Studies**

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# 1 Executive Summary

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- 1.1 In February 2011, the Aircraft Noise Ombudsman's (ANO) office undertook a comprehensive review of Airservices Australia's (Airservices) handling of aircraft noise complaints. The 18 recommendations were accepted and implemented over the next two years. These actions have seen some significant changes and improvements in Airservices' handling of complaints, and this further review of complaint management was undertaken to build on this progress.
- 1.2 Complaints to the ANO were a primary source of information for the first report. However, only a small number of complainants to Airservices pursue their complaint further with the ANO. For this reason, we structured the terms of reference for this review around analysing a select sample of complaints that had not resulted in the complainant contacting the ANO.
- 1.3 Unfortunately the original scope of analysing 50 case studies had to be reduced. Airservices identified that sourcing copies of correspondence and other information relating to the complaints was exceedingly difficult as there was no consistent filing or record management system in place for correspondence. As a result, the resource effort required to locate the information requested was significantly higher than anticipated and no assurance could be given that the information collated would be complete and/or accurate. Consequently, the ANO halted the request after information had been provided for 22 complaints and undertook the review on the basis of these complaints only.
- 1.4 This report makes six recommendations aimed at improving Airservices' management of complaints across a range of issues. It seeks
  - reform in complaint record management
  - better alignment of, and quality assurance in systems, processes and practices
  - improved information provision and reporting based on complaint data.
- 1.5 As the focus of this review was to seek opportunities for improvement, there is criticism of Airservices' complaint management throughout the report, however, there are also examples of effective complaint management practices. Airservices has made significant improvements in complaint management in the last three years and we see this report as another opportunity to build on the work already undertaken. Airservices' response to each recommendation is recorded in the body of this report at the end of each section.



Ron Brent  
Aircraft Noise Ombudsman  
7 January 2014

## 2 Introduction

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### Context

- 2.1 One of the objectives of the Aircraft Noise Ombudsman (ANO) is to review the handling of aircraft noise complaints or enquiries made to Airservices Australia (Airservices). In February 2011, the ANO's office released its first report into Airservices' complaint handling practices and processes. Airservices completed all recommendations from that report by January 2013. Complaints to the ANO were a primary source of information for that report. However, only a small number of complainants to Airservices pursue their complaint with the ANO. The ANO decided that it would be valuable to consider whether there were lessons in the complaints that Airservices handles and that do not result in escalation to the ANO.

### Objective

- 2.2 The objective of this review is to identify any lessons learnt, or opportunities for improvement, through an analysis of a select sample of complaints that have not resulted in the complainant contacting the ANO. The Terms of Reference that were published in December 2012 and are available at **Attachment 1**.
- 2.3 As the focus of this review was to seek opportunities for improvement, the content may appear overly critical of Airservices' complaint management practices. There is criticism throughout the report, but there were also many examples of effective complaint management practices. Airservices has made significant improvements in complaint management in the last three years and we see this report as another opportunity to build on the work already undertaken. Indeed, it is worth noting that as we identified issues in the research for this review, Airservices commenced addressing some of the more serious issues (which will, in effect, pre-empt some of our recommendations). Airservices is to be commended on this level of responsiveness.

### Methodology

- 2.4 The ANO initially identified 50 complaints managed by Airservices' Noise Complaints and Information Service (NCIS) which had not at the time resulted in the complainant contacting the ANO. Complaints were only selected if the complainant had contacted the NCIS at least once during 2013. Complaints were also deliberately selected to ensure the sample covered a range of airports, operators and issues such as:
- Relating to different types of airport (e.g., major, regional, general aviation, and uncontrolled airports)
  - Relating to different types of aircraft operations (e.g., large jets, small jets, general aviation, light aircraft, helicopters, etc)
  - Involving persistent complainant behaviour
  - Involving out of jurisdiction complaints.
- Simple complaints (e.g. a single phone call) were excluded.

- 2.5 A high level review of the NCIS records as held in the NCIS complaints database was conducted for an initial 50 complaints. Further information was then sought on these complaints (e.g. copies of correspondence, clarification of what was meant by the notes made in the database).
- 2.6 Airservices identified that sourcing copies of correspondence and other information relating to the complaints was exceedingly difficult as there was no consistent filing or record management system in place for correspondence. As a result, the resource effort required to locate the information requested was significantly higher than anticipated and no assurance could be provided that the information collated would be complete and/or accurate. Consequently, the ANO reviewers halted the request after information had been provided for 22 complaints and undertook the review on the basis of these complaints only.
- 2.7 The review assessed Airservices' handling of the complaints against NCIS procedures and best practice for complaint management (as defined in the Australian Standard ISO 10002 and Commonwealth Ombudsman Better Practice Guides<sup>1</sup>).

### Report purpose and structure

- 2.8 This report outlines the findings of our review and makes recommendations to improve Airservices' aircraft noise complaint handling. It is structured around the five areas of focus defined in the Terms of Reference:
- Timeliness of responses
  - Clarity and appropriateness of information provided
  - Compliance with procedures and policy
  - Professionalism in the response
  - Consistency of information provided
  - Application of processes to manage difficult complainant behaviour
- 2.9 A summary of the recommendations is available at **Attachment 2**.

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<sup>1</sup> See – Australian Standard <http://www.saiglobal.com/PDFTemp/Previews/OSH/AS/AS10000/10000/10002-2006.pdf>  
Commonwealth Ombudsman guide <http://www.ombudsman.gov.au/docs/better-practice-guides/onlineBetterPracticeGuide.pdf>

## 3 Timeliness of responses

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### Acknowledgement of contact

3.1 Airservices acknowledges contact from complainants in a number of ways, depending on the method of complaint submission:

- WebTrak and online form submissions where an email address has been supplied receive an auto-generated email response when NCIS staff enter the contact as a new case in the complaints database. Where an email address has not been supplied, an acknowledgement of the contact is provided when they are contacted by phone, mail or fax, depending on what contact information is supplied.
- Email complaints are acknowledged when added as a new case, which triggers the sending of an auto-generated email response.
- Phone calls taken live are acknowledged in real time.
- Voice messages left by phone are entered as a new case in the complaints database and when a callback is made the original contact is acknowledged. (When no callback is requested, no acknowledgement of the contact is given, although the contact is recorded in the NCIS database.)
- Fax and mail complaints are acknowledged by return fax/letter, if a response is requested.

3.2 The timeliness of acknowledgement depends to a degree on the lodgement method, but generally acknowledgements are provided within 5 working days, and usually less than 3 working days. In cases where a complainant does not provide an email address, acknowledgement does not occur until a written response or telephone call is made. This can be a number of days after the complaint was received.

3.3 There were some periods of time where the auto-generated email response was not functioning properly, which caused concern to some complainants, according to advice from Airservices. The ANO sought clarification of the wording on the online form that reads:

*“When your submission has been registered in the Aircraft Noise database by NCIS staff, and if you have provided an e-mail address, you will receive an automatically generated e-mail that provides you with the reference number of your submission. Each submission is allocated a reference number. This is automatic – you don’t have to ask for a response to make this occur.”*

Airservices advised:

*“The script stems from the Unit being overloaded with requests for reference numbers. Some clients believe a reference number indicates that their complaint has been registered in the NCIS database. An omission of a reference number is therefore understood by clients as the Unit not registering their complaint. This is not the process. The particular wording you refer to in your question was created by NCIS as an effort to make the process clearer to complainants... A submission means every correctly submitted online complaint contact.”*

- 3.4 The Manager of the NCIS has advised that she has recognised problems with the current approach and now has some staff grouping multiple lodgements made on one day into a single case reference. However, this is inconsistently applied at the moment.

### **C** Should I quote my reference number?

**A** A complainant emailed Airservices on 9 March and received an auto-generated response advising the reference number xxx389.

**S** On 18 March the complainant replied to the auto-response email to say “Further to the above complaint, ...” and received an auto-generated response advising the reference number xxx074.

**E** On 20 March Airservices emailed a detailed response to the complainant that began: “Thank you for your noise complaints of 9 and 18 March 2013 which have been recorded in our database and allocated reference numbers xxx389 and xxx074.”

**S** The complainant responded on the same day (20 March) seeking clarification of a number of aspects of the detailed response and received an auto-generated response advising the reference number xxx348.

**T** On 9 April Airservices replied “Thank you for your response of 20 March, 2013 which has been recorded in our database and allocated reference number xxx348. Please refer to my previous correspondence... You are welcome to lodge as many complaints as you like.”

**U** The complainant replied on the same day expressing frustration at there being no resolution and asking “Please advise if I must use the reference number xxx348 in future”. On 10 April the complainant received an auto-generated response advising the reference number xxx770, at which time Airservices created a new client record in the database with this reply as the first and only contact (despite the email starting with the sentence “Thanks for your reply”).

**D** Airservices responded on 23 April: “Each case lodged receives a new case number. Therefore you do not need to quote the same reference number each time.” Unfortunately it seems that even at this point the client records were not consolidated.

**Y**

**1**

3.5 There are several deficiencies with the existing system:

- There is inconsistency when acknowledging contact.
- Complainants are not clear what the reference number means and some, if not most, consider that the acknowledgement represents a new complaint lodgement. This has led to some thinking that, if they lodge many contacts on the same issue, many complaints will be registered and that this will drive action on resolving their issue.
- There is no consistency for when a contact is lodged for every flight of concern, compared with one contact listing every flight of concern. For example, a resident in Perth lodges regular contacts summarising the disruptive planes from the previous period: "I have three complaints for aircraft this morning. The times are 0005, 0125 and 0500."
- There is some manual processing work involved in lodging every contact as a separate case and then generating and sending new numbers for every contact.
- When Airservices implements a management plan for unreasonable complainant behaviour, the sending of auto-generated responses may not be consistent with the plan. If, for example, as part of the management plan Airservices has advised the complainant that Airservices may not respond to a contact if no new issues are raised, it is then inconsistent to actually respond.

### Responses timing

- 3.6 Airservices has a standard target response time of 21 days following the sending of an acknowledgement. Although there was a period when this response time was exceeded (during a backlog while Airservices was transitioning to their new database) Airservices generally managed this well through communications with complainants, however there were some exceptions.

- 3.7 Often responses are sent in a matter of days, which seems to make a difference to the information flow with complainants and ultimately leads to a better resolution of the issues. The case study below shows this in practice.

## **C** Chase us and we will respond

**A** 12 January - Mr H phoned Airservices and left a voice message about flights over his area.

**S** 3 February - Mr H called again and left a further message.

**E** 4 February - An auto-response was emailed to Mr H, advising that he could expect to hear back in 21 days if he requested a response.

**S** 11 February - Airservices called Mr H and discussed his concerns, offering to send him some information about recent flight activity displayed on a map.

**T** 23 February - Mr H rang and left a message asking for a call back and stating that someone was going to send an email, but that no information had been received.

**U** 28 February - An auto-response was emailed to Mr H, advising that he could expect to hear back in 21 days if he requested a response.

**D** 14 March - Mr H rang and spoke to a complaint specialist who advised that there was currently a backlog but that someone would get back to him shortly. Within minutes the complaint specialist who originally spoke to Mr H on 11 February called him back and within the hour had sent an email with all the details promised.

**Y**  
**2** Post script:

The email response sent to Mr H on 11 February did not acknowledge the delay between the complaint being raised and the response (39 days) or apologise for the delay. While an apology may have been given in the telephone conversation, it would have been appropriate to reiterate it in the written correspondence.

- 3.8 Understandably, there will be times where a 21 day turn-around period cannot be met, or a complaint is inadvertently overlooked. Even in the above case study, a later series of emails resulted in some confusion on whether or not a response had been provided. Commendably, when an email was sent, it included the text "Please accept my apology for this late response if a response has not already been sent". This helped in maintaining a positive relationship between the resident and Airservices.

- 3.9 Unfortunately there are also instances of poor response timeliness as the case study below shows.

## Excessive Responses

- 3.10 A NSW resident near Gold Coast airport, having received numerous individual flight tracks from Airservices, submitted an enquiry on 8 February 2013 requesting flight tracks for 16 different flights. On 2 March, a further email was sent from the resident asking when she would receive a reply. A further email was sent from the resident on 10 March, again asking when a reply would be provided.
- 3.11 On 11 March, Airservices sent a series of flight tracks (without any acknowledgement of the delay) to the resident advising “If you have any further noise complaints please do not hesitate to contact [us] again”.
- 3.12 On 19 March, the resident again contacted Airservices requesting a further eleven flight tracks. These were provided to the resident within two weeks.
- 3.13 It is questionable whether the provision of so many tracks is of value to the resident or a good use of resources by Airservices. There comes a time where the resident should be advised of the availability of WebTrak and/or advised that the provision of more tracks is of limited value.

### **Recommendation 1:** Airservices should:

- a. amend its contact acknowledgement and reference numbering system. Complainants should not be notified of a new reference number for each and every contact made. Complainants advised that responses will not be made on a particular issue, should not be responded to on that issue. Airservices should clarify what the reference number provided to complainants actually means
- b. acknowledge the lack of timeliness, apologise and provide a brief explanation for the delay where service delivery standards are not met
- c. be mindful of balancing the resource burden with the value to the complainant when considering the provision of ongoing information, particularly if similar information has already been provided. Procedures or guidelines should be established to assist staff with making these decisions.

### **Airservices has agreed to:**

- Cease the use of auto-generated reference numbers;
- Improve guidance for complaint handlers, which include the seven stages of complaint handling — acknowledgment, assessment, planning, investigation, response, review, and consideration of systemic issues;
- Introduce an improved training program and quality scorecard to improve complaint handling performance; and
- Improve procedures and training for managing unreasonable complainant behaviour.

## 4 Clarity and appropriateness of information provided

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### Complaint reporting

- 4.1 Airservices uses complaint data not only to identify potential noise improvement opportunities, but also to share the information with airport operators and other stakeholders so that they are informed of the issues of concern to neighbouring communities. The NCIS provides regular reports to many airports throughout Australia on a routine basis, and complainants are often advised that their complaint has been passed on to relevant authorities.
- 4.2 The accuracy of the reports provided to airports is dependent upon complaints being correctly entered into Airservices' complaints database. In our analysis, we reviewed a case from a Ms A of Hervey Bay, who had contacted NCIS three times between January and March 2013. When we checked the report to Hervey Bay airport stakeholders only two records were included in the quarterly report to the operators of Hervey Bay airport. The error was due to one contact being incorrectly allocated the airport of 'QLD' instead of Hervey Bay.
- 4.3 Further analysis revealed two additional contacts from another complainant in the January to March 2013 timeframe that had not been correctly allocated to Hervey Bay. This means that the report provided to the airport management suggested that a total of three contacts had been made during this period when in fact there were at least six contacts registered.
- 4.4 Repetition of the error in the small sample that we reviewed showed complaints for other airports that should clearly have been recorded to the relevant airport rather than the generic 'QLD' category. This indicates that this was not an isolated error, but rather a more systemic issue.
- 4.5 Understandably, a number of residents ask what happens to their complaints. Airservices often responds by telling residents that their complaint is passed on to the relevant airport authority. For example one response reads "your comments have been noted and your complaint will be forwarded to Moorabbin Airport's consultative committee in our monthly report." Another reads "your complaint has been recorded in our database and will be sent to Bankstown airport in our monthly report." The reality is that the report to the airport is a brief summary listing date, time, suburb and a tick-box indicating the nature of the complaint. See the following table – monthly Bankstown Airport report for June 2013.

**Table 1 – Bankstown Airport report June 2013**

Date	Date of Concern	Time of Concern	Case Number	Client Number	Call Type	Contact Type	Client Suburb	Client State	Airport	Circuit Training	Helicopter	Increased Frequency Of Air Traffic	Night Operation	Other	Positive Comment	Propeller Aircraft
1/06/2013	1/06/2013	02:53	495189	48548	Complaint	Phone	Panania	NSW	Bankstown	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
7/06/2013	6/06/2013	19:30	495324	48611	Complaint	Phone	Revesby	NSW	Bankstown	1	0	0	0	1	1	0
14/06/2013	14/06/2013	19:00	495722	48788	Complaint	Phone	Georges Hall	NSW	Bankstown	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
21/06/2013	21/06/2013	14:30	495931	48906	Complaint	Phone	Ruse	NSW	Bankstown	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
30/06/2013	-	-	496844	514	Complaint	Phone	Georges Hall	NSW	Bankstown	1	0	0	0	0	0	0

4.6 It is unlikely that this information is sufficient for an airport management team or consultative committee to determine if there is any opportunity to improve noise outcomes on the basis of such general feedback.

4.7 We know that complainants often go to great lengths to give as much detail as they can because they believe it will be passed on. For example, a complaint that read:

“Prop on front, full blue underbelly... Went from NW circling to go back to airport...” is translated into a tick-box response under the heading ‘propeller aircraft’. It is questionable whether there is any value at all in advising an airport operator that at 2.58 pm on 23 February, someone from a particular suburb complained about propeller aircraft. Yet if the full complaint is passed on (appropriately de-identified for privacy reasons), it may be possible that the Airport operator could identify the aircraft operator and find out a little more about the reasons for the activity and consider whether there might be ways of reducing the noise impacts.

## Technical jargon

- 4.8 A Sydney resident contacted Airservices for the first time in November 2012. In December, a short response was provided indicating that additional information would be provided post Christmas. In early January, a further response was provided which included the text:

“This recommendation was addressed through the publication of the RWY 16R DEENA RNAV SID which includes design parameters to minimise proximity to Cronulla on departure”

The response also provided a web address where information published for pilots about the DEENA SID could be accessed.

- 4.9 To translate: RWY 16R refers to the western of the two parallel runways at Sydney Airport when used by aircraft arriving or departing heading south. A SID is a “Standard Instrument Departure”, which in simple language is a defined set of instructions for aircraft to follow when departing in a certain direction, in this case via the navigational waypoint named “DEENA”. It might include a compass bearing for the aircraft to head on, minimum or maximum altitudes to be achieved by designated points and instructions on when certain turns can be made (either in relation to fixed waypoints and/or when the aircraft reaches a certain altitude).

- 4.10 The response did not include any advice on the use of the DEENA SID (which applies to Jet aircraft only). This resulted in further questions from the resident requiring additional resources to respond. In addition, it is questionable as to the value of providing residents with links to technical pilot documents that do not depict coastlines or any other geographical features.

- 4.11 Subsequently, following a number of follow up questions from the resident, the complaint was referred to a senior investigator. There followed a number of comprehensive, well composed and non-technical exchanges with the client. In addition, an offer was also made for the client to discuss the issue in greater detail with a senior investigator by phone.

- 4.12 Correspondence from the client indicates that the ‘plain English’ response and personal attention from the senior investigator was greatly appreciated, and included comments such as:

*“Thanks for your offer to have a chat...”*

*“Thanks again for your response”*

*“I appreciate the verbose nature of your response – it definitely helps me understand”*

- 4.13 The advantage in handling complaints in a more personal, plain English manner is evident in one of the final comments from the client:

*“In any case, hopefully I will get used to the aircraft noise”.*

This acknowledges that in many cases the best that can be provided to complainants is a clear explanation for why change is not possible, so that the complainants can decide on how they wish to manage the noise issues they are experiencing.

## Inadequate responses

- 4.14 A complainant from Canberra first emailed Airservices on 26 February 2013 concerned about aircraft now flying directly over his home where he had lived for eight years. On 7 March, he again emailed Airservices expressing disappointment that he had not had a response and requesting to be contacted. On 8 March he contacted Airservices by telephone which resulted in an email response on 20 March.
- 4.15 The email to the resident was brief, advising that the “new (sic) Smart Tracking route and the visual approach path intersect in the vicinity of your Home. The Smart Tracking procedures were introduced at Canberra on 13.02.2013”.
- 4.16 According to Airservices’ website, Smart Tracking has been in place since 2006 as an ongoing trial. While the trial may have been formalised as a permanent procedure in February 2013, even Airservices’ information on their website states “In the first year, there will be no change from current business as usual.”
- 4.17 The advice provided to this resident was inadequate, misleading and failed to respond to the issues raised. Not surprisingly, this has resulted in further contact from the resident.

### **C** Go and talk to someone else

**A** A Cairns resident contacted Airservices in November 2012 questioning why a certain aircraft did not use the full length of the runway for departure. A response was provided advising that full length departures are not mandatory, however the resident “may wish to contact the Cairns Environmental Consultative Committee [if he] would like a change in procedures to be considered”. This is inappropriate advice as it is Airservices’ responsibility to consider and pursue noise improvement opportunities as and when they are identified.

**S** Not surprisingly, the resident was dissatisfied with the response and requested that the matter be further investigated, suggesting that “ATC [Air Traffic Control – an Airservices’ function]... must always manage the aircrafts proper departure taking into account all matters of safety...”

**T** The second response from Airservices suggested, amongst other things, that the resident may also “wish to contact CASA [Civil Aviation Safety Authority]”. This referral is also inappropriate, as the resident was referring to ATC safety considerations, a matter for Airservices.

**U** The response did not appease the resident, resulting in a subsequent email criticising Airservices for referring him to other departments, rather than “making representation as a proper and whole of government response”. In this regard, we agree with the resident’s view.

**D** The third response from Airservices once again referred the resident to the Consultative Committee “should [he] wish the instruction to be amended”, and also, for the second time, suggested he contact CASA.

**Recommendation 2:** Airservices should:

- a. as far as practicable, assign complaints to an airport, rather than a generic category
- b. provide reports to airports that provide sufficient detail to help identify meaningful issues and avenues for potential improvements
- c. be clear to complainants about what is, and is not, provided to airports about their complaint
- d. ensure that information provided to complainants is accurate and does not potentially misrepresent the situation, or contradict other information published by Airservices on their website
- e. consider opportunities to take the lead in consulting various stakeholders as part of the process to identify noise improvement outcomes, rather than refer complainants to those stakeholders with the expectation that the complainant will manage that consultation process.

**Airservices has agreed to:**

- Continue to work with airports to ensure appropriate information is provided to airports;
- Develop new templates and review of current responses to ensure clear expectations are communicated to complainants;
- Continue to review Airservices website on a quarterly basis to ensure its accuracy;
- Continue to develop information and briefing packs for complaint handling staff; and
- Continue to lead on cross industry noise improvement initiatives.

## 5 Compliance with procedures and policy

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### Referrals to MPs

- 5.1 In 2010, following concerns raised by the Board and the ANO, Airservices instructed staff to no longer refer complainants to Members of Parliament (MPs) or to federal or state ministers. The instruction was reinforced in September 2011 following a number of breaches, with senior managers clearly explaining why Airservices, in their role as the Government agency accountable for managing noise complaints, should not be providing advice to complainants about pursuing political matters.
- 5.2 While residents are fully entitled to contact their political representatives at any time, the concern here is about the appropriateness of Airservices staff directly referring a complainant to an MP or Minister. In the same way that it would not be appropriate for Airservices to offer a complainant advice about a medical or legal matter (even in the context of aircraft noise), it is also not appropriate or necessary for Airservices to advise on political matters.
- 5.3 If an individual wishes to pursue a political option, that should be their choice, with Airservices neither discouraging nor encouraging them. It should be noted that very few aircraft noise issues raised by complainants are matters that MPs or ministers can manage, control or change directly. Therefore referrals to MPs or ministers may create false expectations.
- 5.4 For complainants dissatisfied with Airservices' response, the appropriate point for escalation of the matter is the ANO. For complainants that have no possible resolution to their aircraft noise issues, the response to a question on other options should be an honest statement that there are none.
- 5.5 In March 2013, a Melbourne complainant rang the NCIS concerned about helicopters flying in the vicinity of the Melbourne Cricket Ground. The note added to the file by the NCIS operator reads, in part, "Federal MP – prompted her to say this". This raised the concern that NCIS operators may be trying to circumvent the clear instruction not to refer residents to MPs.
- 5.6 As part of this review, the ANO asked Airservices "What is meant by 'prompted to say Federal Minister'? Airservices' response suggested that NCIS operators had ongoing concerns about how to handle persistent complainant requests for other avenues. This indicates that there is still a poor understanding by some staff of the reasons why Airservices should not be providing specific advice about pursuing political matters and that some staff have not understood the distinction between advising a complainant that an issue is a matter of Government policy and providing advice on how best to pursue a political matter.

- 5.7 NCIS staff seem comfortable advising complainants who raise health concerns that these are medical issues and that the NCIS cannot provide advice on how to deal with them, but are perhaps less comfortable handling political concerns in a similar fashion. Scripts should help the NCIS staff to explain to complainants that they cannot provide advice on political matters. A detailed explanation to staff of the reasoning behind this approach should improve commitment and adherence to this approach.
- 5.8 In September 2011 Airservices management had asked staff to develop clear, consistent messages and scripts for handling situations that had previously led to referrals. It is not clear whether these scripts have remained available to staff or if they are serving the purpose effectively. It is also not clear, from the limited analysis that the ANO has undertaken in this review, whether or not the above example is a one-off error or indicative of more widely held concerns and therefore a systemic issue. The ANO will investigate this matter further and determine if the office should recommend any further action.

### Referrals to other authorities

- 5.9 On 10 April 2013, an Adelaide resident contacted Airservices suggesting that CASA conduct a survey and investigation into circuit operations at Parafield Airport.
- 5.10 On 16 April, the resident left an abusive message for NCIS staff, referring to them in very obscene language. This resulted in a call to the resident from the NCIS manager (appropriate under the circumstances) to warn the resident that such behaviour would not be tolerated. During the call the resident displayed confronting behaviour including rudeness, aggression, threats, harassment and the use of offensive and vulgar language. The call was followed by an appropriate and well constructed formal letter to the resident dated 19 April advising that NCIS will not respond to any further messages where disrespectful behaviour is displayed.
- 5.11 On 17 April, Airservices forwarded the original complaint to CASA, without the Airservices response or any reference to the events described above, asking whether CASA would accept the case. Thirty minutes later, CASA responded advising that they would accept the case.
- 5.12 It would have been useful for CASA to understand the nature of the interaction with the complainant before taking on the case. While it is important to respect the constraints of privacy legislation when passing information to another agency, any agreement from a complainant to pass over the complaint would include implicit agreement to include such information as is required to manage the complaint effectively. Details of difficult conduct, important to ensure effective communication with a complainant, are information included in such implicit agreement. Further, where a serious threat is involved there is explicit authority in the Information Privacy Principles to pass on such information<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Privacy Act 1988, Part III, Division 2, Information Privacy Principle 11 (1) (a) – note a similar provision is included in the new Australian Privacy Principle 6, which will apply from 12 March 2014 when changes introduced by the *Privacy Amendment (Enhancing Privacy Protection) Act 2012* commence.

## When is a response required?

- 5.13 In February 2013, a Queensland resident submitted a complaint for the first time concerned about a helicopter flying overhead around midnight for an extended period with its search light illuminated. The resident included the text “Someone please look into this”.
- 5.14 It is our understanding that the web based form used to have a tick-box item for ‘would you like a response’ however this was removed some time ago. The auto response sent after the complaint is submitted still includes text “If you have requested a response, we will contact you within 21 days of the receipt of your submission”. The issue is that a complainant does not know that they may have to specifically request a response until after they have submitted their complaint.
- 5.15 In July 2013, some five months after the complaint was issued, our office enquired as to what action had been taken with this particular complaint. Without further prompting, the NCIS tried to then contact the resident, leaving a voice message on her telephone.
- 5.16 Although the automatic acknowledgement receipt states that “if you have requested a response, we will contact you within 21 days of the receipt of your submission”, it is open to interpretation what a resident might consider constitutes requesting a response. It is also not received until after the submission has been made. There is no clarity about this requirement provided before the complaint is submitted. The ANO considers that most people lodging a complaint do so with the expectation of receiving a response.

### **Recommendation 3:** Aircservices should:

- a. develop and implement processes to ensure all appropriate information about complainants is passed to other authorities when undertaking a transfer of a complaint
- b. clarify when a response will be provided. Information linked to the complaint form should explain that a response will be provided where specifically requested, where a question has been asked or where a response can provide useful and relevant information. The exception to this rule should be when a complainant has explicitly requested no response or when a complainant has been advised previously that the particular issue has been dealt with to finality.

### **Aircservices has agreed to:**

- Continue to improve the processes through which the NCIS transfers cases to an appropriate authority where appropriate;
- Amend the on-line form to clarify when a response will be provided;
- Ensure that the default position, regardless of how the information is conveyed, is to respond; and
- Acknowledge every complaint formally.

## 6 Professionalism in the response

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### Records management

- 6.1 When the ANO requested information for this Review, it was noted that Airservices did not have a reliable records management system that supported the complaint handlers in managing complaints. There is no single repository of records relating to each complainant. To trace the correspondence on a single complainant, staff needed to check personal email accounts, a number of drives, systems and paper files. Electronic records that were extracted from the various filing systems could not always display images included in emails sent to complainants. Airservices could not confirm that the information provided was a complete and accurate record of its interactions with the complainant.
- 6.2 This situation came to light because of the resources being allocated to respond to our request. The lack of rigour around data management has serious implications for effective complaint handling. It is also unlikely to comply with record keeping and archiving requirements.
- 6.3 In summary, Airservices' record management for complaints does not support complaint handlers to provide a professional response to complaints.

### Salutations and sign-off style

- 6.4 Airservices' responses to complainants do not demonstrate a consistent style in the use of salutations, introductory texts and signing off in correspondence. For example, from the cases reviewed, complainants have been addressed in the following styles:
- Dear Mr/Mrs/Ms <surname>
  - Mr/Mrs/Ms <surname>
  - Good morning
  - Dear <first name>
  - Good afternoon <first name>
  - Hi <first name>
- 6.5 In one case, three of the above were used in addressing the one complainant over several weeks, which does not present a consistent image or tone in communications from the organisation.

- 6.6 Following whatever mode of addressing the complainant, there is no obvious consistency in the language used to introduce the correspondence. For example, from the cases reviewed, complaint responses start in the following ways:
- Thank you for your noise complaint of XX date which has been recorded in our database and allocated reference number X.
  - Your complaints have been registered and have the following reference numbers: ...
  - Your complaint has the reference number X.
  - I am responding to your Noise Complaint placed via email on XX date. This complaint has been assigned the Reference Number X.
  - Thank you for your email to Airservices Noise Complaints and Information Service regarding XXX.
  - Thank you for your aircraft noise complaint lodged via the internet on XX date, it has been lodged in our database and allocated reference number X. It will be sent to XX Airport in our monthly report for review by their Consultative Committee.
- 6.7 For sign-offs, there is also a lack of consistency, with examples from the cases reviewed being:
- I trust this information is of assistance. Regards, <first name of complaint handler>
  - I trust this information is of assistance. Yours Sincerely <first name of complaint handler>
  - I hope that this information is of assistance. Please contact us again should you require further information or to lodge additional complaints. Regards, <first name of complaint handler>
  - I trust this information is of assistance and remain available to provide further detail on these issues should you require. Please contact the Noise Complaints and Information Services on 1800 802 584 should you wish to make further enquiries.
  - Regards, <first name of complaint handler>
  - If you have any further noise complaints or enquiries, please do not hesitate to contact us again. Kind regards, <first name of complaint handler>
- 6.8 It is worth considering the value of maintaining a consistent style when dealing with complainants. This should always start as a formal style.
- 6.9 It can be appropriate to tailor individual responses, such as moving to use of the complainant's first name, and a more informal greeting. This should only occur when initiated by the complainant and they are clearly comfortable with this approach.
- 6.10 Once the issue/s associated with a complaint have been adequately dealt with, there is little value for the complainant, or Airservices, for ongoing instances to be reported. In these cases, the closing paragraph should not encourage further contact for the same event.

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**Why didn't you call?**

An Adelaide resident submitted a complaint on 6 February 2013 seeking information about aircraft noise as she wanted to know the potential impact on prospective buyers of her home. She signed off with the comment "Look forward to discussing this with you".

On 11 March (almost five weeks after the complaint was submitted), Airservices attempted to telephone the resident, however the mobile number would "not receive a call from [NCIS] service". Despite the resident providing a full postal address, no letter was sent to the resident.

A similar scenario occurred for a Perth resident. Airservices attempted to send an email in July 2013 in response to a complaint and the email was returned with an 'undeliverable' message. Airservices attempted on two further occasions on the same day with the same result. Despite Airservices holding a postal address, mobile contact number and work contact number, no attempts were made to contact the resident to confirm the email address or to advise that a substantial six page response had been prepared.

The resident subsequently contacted the ANO office complaining about the lack of response from Airservices. We were able to identify that the Airservices database had the incorrect email address for the resident and informed Airservices of the correct address. Although we advised Airservices of the correct address on 18 July, it was not until 12 August that Airservices sent the response to the resident's correct email address.

**Recommendation 4:** Airservices should:

- a. store all correspondence relating to a complaint in a single repository, accessible to all complaint handlers and, to the extent practicable, accessible through the relevant NCMS database record
- b. ensure complaint records are managed in compliance with the National Archives Act 1983 as well as relevant Australian Standards and Australian Government recommended practices.
- c. standardise the salutations, introductory text and sign-off styles used for correspondence with complaints
- d. carefully consider the expectations created by encouraging further contact and only do so when appropriate
- e. use other means to contact clients whenever details have been provided and the primary means of contact fails.

**Airservices has agreed to:**

- Ensure that all correspondence relating to a complaint is stored in a single repository and complaint records are managed in compliance with the National Archives Act 1983 as well as relevant Australian Standards and Australian Government recommended practices;
- Implement templates to standardise the salutations, introductory text and sign-off styles used for correspondence with complaints;
- Continue to carefully consider whether further contact is appropriate and ensure that the NCIS Manager is directly involved in unreasonable behaviour reviews and follow up action; and
- Continue to use multiple means to contact clients when the primary means fails.

## 7 Consistency of information provided

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### The best use of good information

- 7.1 This review has identified a number of cases where residents have been provided with substantial information that was very well constructed. There is an opportunity for Airservices to benefit from the work undertaken and to reduce the resource requirement when certain issues arise again. Examples are provided in the following paragraphs.
- 7.2 Two different Sydney residents contacted Airservices complaining about poor television reception when aircraft were flying overhead. A comprehensive response was provided, with supporting diagrams, which explained a phenomenon known as 'multipath interference'. This is where a television aerial picks up a signal simultaneously, although out of sync, from the TV station broadcasting point and also a reflection from the aircraft. The response went on to explain the common causes and potential solutions.
- 7.3 In the limited number of cases reviewed as part of this report, at least one other resident raised the issue of television reception. More recently (September 2013) two residents at a Gold Coast CACG meeting also complained about television interference when aircraft flew overhead. A fact sheet on the issue would be of benefit for other residents that experience the same problem.
- 7.4 A Sydney resident living to the north of the harbour complained about low flying helicopters in the area and the regular flight path they seemed to take. A comprehensive response was provided explaining the helicopter transit lanes developed for the area and the height restrictions within these lanes. The response was appreciated by the resident who wrote "thank you very much for your comprehensive reply".
- 7.5 The area to the north of Sydney harbour is a busy air traffic region with both helicopter and fixed wing aircraft operating. Transit lanes and procedures have been developed for aircraft operating in the area and are published in pilot documentation. There would be benefit for other north shore residents if Airservices produced a factsheet (or similar), including maps, to show the established routes and procedures for the area.
- 7.6 There will, at times, be issues that might arise more than once but do not justify a fact sheet or brochure. Issues that are researched by the NCIS for a case that may be of value to other complainants should be readily accessible to all NCIS staff. Such a resource should be vetted by management before it is used more broadly.
- 7.7 A Melbourne resident, on behalf of his local community, contacted Airservices asking about the availability of interpreter services for making aircraft noise complaints. He indicated that his local area was one of the highest multi-cultural communities in Australia with a total of 79 languages spoken.

7.8 Commendably, Airservices investigated the issue and identified the Telephone Interpreting Service (TIS) to be the appropriate body for assisting non-English speaking residents. Unfortunately, despite the extensive information conveyed internally between Airservices staff, the resident received only one sentence in response:

*“Should a client require interpreter assistance we can use the National Telephone Interpreter Service.”*

7.9 Subsequently, Airservices published comprehensive information on their website about accessing interpreter services, which is very pleasing. While this case is indicative of Airservices’ attention to identifying common issues and improving public information, the other examples above, identified from the limited number of cases considered by this review, suggest that there is an opportunity to do more in this area.

**Recommendation 5:** Airservices should routinely analyse complaints to identify common issues not yet addressed by the current suite of fact sheets and develop fact sheets or standard responses for residents raising the same issues.

**Airservices has agreed to:**

- Continue to regularly review ‘hot’ topics of complaints and develop factsheets for use in future responses.

## 8 Application of processes to manage difficult complainant behaviour

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- 8.1 The *Aircraft Noise Enquiries/Complaints Guide – Principles, Protocols and Procedures*<sup>3</sup> (“Guide”) documents Airservices’ processes to manage difficult complainant behaviour in section 5.2. The section reads:

*“An NCIS team member may identify a particular complainant’s behaviour as being unreasonable as set out in the NCIS Guidance Protocols for Managing Unreasonable Behaviour... they should bring this to the attention of the Senior Complaints Specialist or Investigators”*

The document then describes the responsibilities of the Senior Complaints Specialists of Investigators in determining whether or not

*“they should refer the case to the NCIS Manager with a rationale on why the case is recommended for formal restriction... The rationale document will also be saved in the NCMS [Airservices’ complaints database]”*

- 8.2 If a formal restriction process is to be pursued, the Guide stipulates that
- “If the NCIS Manager agrees that restriction is warranted, they shall draft correspondence advising the complainant that only new issues will be responded to and setting out relevant matters such as issues raised by the complainant and responses provided.”*

- 8.3 Only one of the cases reviewed as part of this report had employed a formal management strategy to deal with unreasonable complainant behaviour. This was discussed in paragraphs 5.9-5.11. In this case the Manager of the NCIS wrote to the complainant outlining the unreasonable behaviour and the management strategy for future contact. While the letter was appropriate and well constructed, there was no record of any rationale document recorded in the NCMS.

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<sup>3</sup> Version 6, effective 11 October 2013

## Applying a 'formal restriction' process

- 8.4 The ANO recognises that there will be a limited number of cases where ongoing dialogue with a resident is of no further value. This is applicable when, for example, a resident persistently raises the same issue despite having been provided with an appropriate response from Airservices.
- 8.5 One Brisbane resident, whose file has been marked as "New issues only... only new issues will get a response" seemed quite surprised when in March 2013, after only four contacts in the preceding four months, he was advised that he had to email his enquiry to receive a response. Where a management plan is initiated, the resident must be given a clear explanation of what they can expect from future contacts with Airservices.
- 8.6 In April, a series of six emails was exchanged between Airservices and the resident. One email to the resident, in response to his specific questions, advised "Airservices attends the Brisbane CACG (Community Aviation Consultation Group) and will always answer questions about how and why approaches are utilised... Your enquiries will need to be addressed through Brisbane Airport who may be contacted at..."
- 8.7 It is inappropriate to refer a resident, asking questions about Airservices' Air Traffic Control procedures, to the CACG. It is Airservices' role to respond to the resident or, if 'formal restriction' procedures have been implemented and conveyed to the resident, to not respond at all.
- 8.8 In the limited sample of cases reviewed for this report, there were several that the ANO considers warranted implementation of a 'formal restriction' management strategy. In such cases there was evidence of the complainant lodging numerous contacts on the same issue, often using the exact same text in email or online submissions, over an extended period. However, Airservices continues to send auto-response emails advising that if no response is requested they will not reply and then either marks the contact as No Response Required or continues to provide the requested track plots.
- 8.9 One aspect in the management of difficult behaviour is that difficult contact does not necessarily mean a complaint is without merit. It is important to ensure that action responds to the behaviour but does not exclude contact on legitimate (new) issues. Therefore, even where the behaviour has been subject to 'formal restriction', and the particular issue has been concluded, this should not prevent the complainant from raising new issues, if they behave reasonably. This would seem to be the practice, however not how the guide is written.

**Recommendation 6:** Airservices should:

- a. establish clear protocols for when residents are to be referred directly to an external authority
- b. review its Guide and Protocols documents and current practices to ensure that documented procedures for managing unreasonable complainant behaviour are followed in practice, including consistent and timely application of management plans for persistent complainants, and ensuring that it is cases of unreasonable behaviour that are subject to a 'formal restriction' not complainants
- c. check compliance with its Guide and Protocols in an internal audit/review process for complaint management.

**Airservices has agreed to:**

- Continue to improve the process by which the NCIS transfers cases to an appropriate authority where appropriate
- review its Guide and Protocols documents and current practices to ensure that documented procedures for managing unreasonable complainant behaviour are followed in practice
- check compliance with its Guide and Protocols in an internal audit/review process for complaint management.

## 9 Conclusion

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- 9.1 This report makes six recommendations aimed at improving Airservices' management of complaints across a range of issues. The recommendations seek
- reform in complaint record management
  - better alignment of and quality assurance in systems, processes and practices
  - improved information provision and reporting based on complaint data.
- 9.2 It should be noted that a number of the recommendations are interlinked and relate to similar parts of the complaint handling process. For example, recommendations 2(e), 3(a), and 6(a) relate to considerations for managing complaints that may involve consultation with or referral (either directly or indirectly) to other agencies or stakeholders. While related, we have kept the recommendations separate to reflect the different sources of concern that led to each recommendation. Each separate concern merits a specific response even though in practice those responses may be combined.
- 9.3 Airservices has made significant improvements in complaint management in the last three years and we see this report as another opportunity to build on the work already undertaken. Airservices' response to each of the recommendations is recorded in the body of this report at the end of each section.

## Attachment 1 Terms of Reference

<p><b>Context</b></p>	<p>One of the objectives of the ANO is to review the handling of aircraft noise complaints or enquiries to Airservices.</p> <p>In February 2011, the ANO's office released its first report into Airservices' complaint handling practices and processes. Airservices proposes to have all recommendations from this report actioned by December 2012. Complaints to the ANO were a primary source of information for this report. Only a small number of complainants to Airservices pursue their complaint with the ANO.</p>
<p><b>Review Objectives</b></p>	<p>The objective of this review is to identify any lessons learnt, or opportunities for improvement, through an analysis of a select sample of complaints that have not resulted in the complainant contacting the ANO.</p>
<p><b>Review Scope</b></p>	<p>The review will identify 50 complaints managed by the NCIS which have not resulted in the complainant contacting the ANO. Complaints will be selected from the period after 1 January 2013, as Airservices will have finalised the actions from the ANO review of 2011 by this time.</p> <p>Simple complaints (e.g. a single phone call) will be excluded. Initially, more than 50 complaints will be considered and then 50 selected for detailed review.</p> <p>From the 50 complaints, the NCIS responses (as recorded in the NCMS database) will be reviewed and assessed against NCIS procedures and best practice for complaint management. Lessons learnt, and opportunities for improvement, will be documented with formal recommendations if required.</p> <p>Specifically, the review will consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Timeliness of responses</li> <li>• Clarity and appropriateness of information provided</li> <li>• Compliance with procedures and policy</li> <li>• Professionalism in the response</li> <li>• Consistency of information provided</li> <li>• Application of processes to manage difficult complainant behaviour</li> </ul> <p>Input sources for the review will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NCMS database records</li> <li>• Correspondence to and from the complainant</li> <li>• Review of audio communications with the complainant</li> <li>• Follow up actions, where appropriate, taken by Airservices to pursue noise improvement opportunities.</li> </ul> <p>The review will not identify individual complaint handlers, but rather assess the overall management of complaints.</p>

## Attachment 2 Summary of Recommendations

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The following table lists the recommendations made in this review. The ANO office will report on progress against the recommendations identified above through regular quarterly reports, published on the ANO website.

Recommendations arising from this review
<p><b>Recommendation 1:</b> Airservices should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. amend its contact acknowledgement and reference numbering system. Complainants should not be notified of a new reference number for each and every contact made. Complainants advised that responses will not be made on a particular issue, should not be responded to on that issue. Airservices should clarify what the reference number provided to complainants actually means</li><li>b. acknowledge the lack of timeliness, apologise and provide a brief explanation for the delay where service delivery standards are not met</li><li>c. be mindful of balancing the resource burden with the value to the complainant when considering the provision of ongoing information, particularly if similar information has already been provided. Procedures or guidelines should be established to assist staff with making these decisions.</li></ul>
<p><b>Recommendation 2:</b> Airservices should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. as far as practicable, assign complaints to an airport, rather than a generic category</li><li>b. provide reports to airports that provide sufficient detail to help identify meaningful issues and avenues for potential improvements</li><li>c. be clear to complainants about what is, and is not, provided to airports about their complaint</li><li>d. ensure that information provided to complainants is accurate and does not potentially misrepresent the situation, or contradict other information published by Airservices on their website</li><li>e. consider opportunities to take the lead in consulting various stakeholders as part of the process to identify noise improvement outcomes, rather than refer complainants to those stakeholders with the expectation that the complainant will manage that consultation process.</li></ul>
<p><b>Recommendation 3:</b> Airservices should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. develop and implement processes to ensure all appropriate information about complainants is passed to other authorities when undertaking a transfer of a complaint</li><li>b. clarify when a response will be provided. Information linked to the complaint form should explain that a response will be provided where specifically requested, where a question has been asked or where a response can provide useful and relevant information. The exception to this rule should be when a complainant has explicitly requested no response or when a complainant has been advised previously that the particular issue has been dealt with to finality.</li></ul>

## Recommendations arising from this review

### **Recommendation 4:** Airservices should:

- a. store all correspondence relating to a complaint in a single repository, accessible to all complaint handlers and, to the extent practicable, accessible through the relevant NCMS database record
- b. ensure complaint records are managed in compliance with the National Archives Act 1983 as well as relevant Australian Standards and Australian Government recommended practices.
- c. standardise the salutations, introductory text and sign-off styles used for correspondence with complaints
- d. carefully consider the expectations created by encouraging further contact and only do so when appropriate
- e. use other means to contact clients whenever details have been provided and the primary means of contact fails.

**Recommendation 5:** Airservices should routinely analyse complaints to identify common issues not yet addressed by the current suite of fact sheets and develop fact sheets or standard responses for residents raising the same issues.

### **Recommendation 6:** Airservices should:

- a. establish clear protocols for when residents are to be referred directly to an external authority
- b. review its Guide and Protocols documents and current practices to ensure that documented procedures for managing unreasonable complainant behaviour are followed in practice, including consistent and timely application of management plans for persistent complainants, and ensuring that it is cases of unreasonable behaviour that are subject to 'formal restriction' not complainants
- c. check compliance with its Guide and Protocols in an internal audit/review process for complaint management.