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| Standard 4: Feedback and complaints |
| Social Services Standards |
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# Social Services Standard 4

**Feedback and complaints – Service users are supported to provide feedback, complaints or concerns about service safety.**

The *Social Services Regulation Act 2021* and the *Social Services Regulations 2023* created a new regulatory framework for social services in Victoria. This framework puts the protection and safety of social services users at the centre of social services delivery.

The Social Services Regulator will replace the current Human Services Regulator. The Social Services Regulator aims to strengthen protections for social services users to safeguard people from harm, abuse and neglect. Core objectives include:

* protecting the rights of service users
* supporting safe and effective social services delivery.
* minimising the risk of avoidable harm in service delivery.

To help achieve these aims, there are six Social Services Standards that all registered social services providers must meet:

* Standard 1: Safe service delivery
* Standard 2: Service user agency and dignity
* Standard 3: Safe service environments
* Standard 4: Feedback and complaints
* Standard 5: Accountable organisational governance
* Standard 6: Safe workforce.

# Standard 4 – feedback and complaints

Service users have the right to raise concerns and make complaints about the care and services they receive from a social services provider.

The safety of service users and protecting their rights, agency and dignity are at the centre of the *Social Services Regulation Act 2021 and the Social Services Regulations 2023*.

Service users must be able to raise concerns about their services without being punished for doing so. The core requirements of Standard 4 are providing:

* a safe environment
* clear processes
* effective systems for safely raising concerns without facing retribution.

Providers also need to adopt a continuous improvement approach. You should regularly review feedback and complaints data to identify potential systemic issues impacting safe service delivery.

## What this Standard will ask you to demonstrate

An organisational culture that supports and facilitates feedback, where complaints are taken seriously and prompt action taken, is critical towards achieving this Standard.

The **outcomes** Standard 4 aims to achieve are:

* service users **understand complaint handling processes**
* service users are **supported** to provide **feedback, complaints or concerns** on service safety and quality
* service users are **protected from reprisal** when providing feedback, complaints or concerns about service safety and quality
* service user feedback, complaints or concerns are **promptly acknowledged and dealt with.**

# How to meet Standard 4

Service requirements outline actions for social services providers to demonstrate they are meeting a Standard.

To meet the Standard, you must meet **all** of the Standard’s service requirements[[1]](#footnote-1).

The requirements often guide providers to build on existing frameworks.

Many social services providers may already have well-developed policies and procedures on feedback and complaints. For Standard 4 the service requirements focus on:

* service users’ understanding of feedback and complaints processes
* services users feeling safe to take part
* having effective mechanisms to capture feedback and complaints
* service users’ concerns are promptly and effectively dealt with.

For ease, the service requirements for Standard 4 are detailed in **Appendix 1: Service requirements for Standard 4**. Appendix 1 also includes more information on:

* suggested actions
* useful documents
* indicators of success.

## Getting ready

Before checking your readiness to meet Standard 4, you may find it useful to gather these documents:

* current processes on how you receive feedback from service users
* documentation on how you respond to feedback, complaints and concerns
* risk frameworks and complaint resolution processes
* dispute management options.

Here are some starting points to assess your readiness to meet Standard 4 service requirements:

### Feedback from service users[[2]](#footnote-2)

* Process for staff to regularly seek feedback from service users or their support people.
* Evidence showing that leaders promote an organisational culture where service user feedback and complaints are taken seriously.
* Records showing that service user feedback is captured and addressed.

### Systems and processes[[3]](#footnote-3)

* Leaders committed to transparent and accessible complaints handling systems for service users to use.
* Service users informed of their right to make a complaint or raise a concern, including the option to raise issues externally (such as with the Social Services Regulator).
* Staff training and support to investigate, respond to, resolve and report complaints and concerns raised by service users.

### Response to feedback, complaints and concerns[[4]](#footnote-4)

* Accessible policies and processes on how to respond to complaints confidentially and appropriately.
* Staff meet timeliness requirements for responding to and fixing complaints or concerns raised.
* Policies outline protections for service users that ban reprisals for making a complaint.

### Dispute management[[5]](#footnote-5)

* Service users receive information on the different dispute resolution options available if they make a complaint and how to access them.
* Staff training to build capability in complaints handling and dispute resolution.

## How the Standards relate to the old Human Services Standards

During their preparation, some social services providers may be reviewing policies and procedures that are in line with the Human Services Standards.

Standard 4 is broadly in line with the old participation standard (see **Table 1**).

Under Standard 4, service users must be supported to share feedback, make a complaint or raise concerns about the safety of their services.

Some providers may already have a complaints management policy that meets Standard 4’s service requirements. Standard 4:

* builds on the participation standard by setting specific and more detailed requirements for seeking and responding to feedback and complaints
* has more detail on what is needed for feedback and complaints
* builds greater consistency in feedback and complaint processes across the sector.

Table 1: Social Services Standards and Human Services Standards

| Standard | Social Services Standards | Human Services Standards |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 1 | **Safe service delivery**: Social services are to be safely delivered based on assessed needs | **Empowerment**: People's rights are promoted and upheld |
| 2 | **Service user agency and dignity**: Social services are to be person-centred and respect and uphold service user rights and agency | **Access and engagement**: People's right to access transparent, equitable and integrated services is promoted and upheld |
| 3 | **Safe service environment**: Social Services are to be provided in a safe, secure and fit-for-purpose environment | **Wellbeing**: People's right to wellbeing and safety is promoted and upheld |
| 4 | **Feedback and complaints**: Service users are to be supported to provide feedback, complaints or concerns about service safety | **Participation**: People's right to choice, decision making and to actively participate as a valued member of their chosen effectively community is promoted and upheld |
| 5 | **Accountable organisational governance**: Effective governance and organisational systems are to support safe delivery of social services | **Governance and management**: Organisations must be effectively governed and managed at all times |
| 6 | **Safe workforce**: Social services are to be delivered by a workforce that has the knowledge, capability and support to deliver safe social services with care and skill | - |

## Track ongoing compliance with Standard 4

Regularly review your policies and procedures to track your performance against Standard 4.

Positive indicators may include:

* confirmation that service users and their support people have received information on how to provide feedback on service safety or to make a complaint
* data from staff surveys showing staff feel they can effectively get and respond to complaints and feedback about service safety
* examples of a continuous improvement approach where you have used insights from feedback or complaints to address issues and identify causes or failures
* feedback on how responsive you are to feedback and complaints.

# Appendix 1: Service requirements for Standard 4

Feedback

### Service requirement (clause 28)

A registered social service provider must seek feedback, in accordance with any guidelines issued under section 18 of the Act, from service users or the service users’ support persons about service safety.

### Actions, useful documents and success indicators

Table 2: Feedback

| Actions | Documents and other evidence | Indicators of success |
| --- | --- | --- |
| * Leaders create a culture where feedback and complaints are taken seriously * Staff regularly seek feedback from service users or the service users' support people about service safety | * Accessible policies and processes for seeking feedback from service users or their support people about service safety * Information for service users about how to make a complaint, give feedback or raise concerns about service safety * Records of service user feedback on service safety | * Service users and their support people get information on how to give feedback on service safety * Service users and their support people understand the feedback process * Service users and their support people are given the opportunity to give feedback on service safety |

Systems and processes

### Service requirement (clause 29)

1. A registered social service provider must implement and maintain systems and processes:
   1. to support service users and their support persons to give feedback, make a complaint or raise a concern about the safety of a social service
   2. to investigate, respond to and resolve any feedback given, complaint made or concern raised by service users and their support persons about the safety of a social service
   3. to report on
   4. any feedback given, complaint made or concern raised by service users and their support persons about the safety of a social service
   5. the registered social service provider's response to, or resolution of, the feedback, complaint or concern.
2. A registered social service provider must inform service users about their right:
   1. to raise matters of social service safety with the Regulator for the purpose of monitoring and enforcing compliance with the Social Services Standards
   2. to make a complaint about the safety of a social service to any other entity.

### Actions, useful documents and success indicators

Table 3: Systems and processes

| Actions | Documents and other evidence | Indicators of success |
| --- | --- | --- |
| * Leaders set up and maintain complaints handling systems and processes that are transparent and accessible to all service users * Staff give service users practical help (including providing relevant information) to make a complaint, provide feedback or raise concerns about service safety * Staff receive information, education or training on complaints handling * Leaders and staff investigate, respond to, fix and report on any feedback, complaint or concern shared by service users or their support people * Staff inform service users of the right to give feedback and make complaints, including to raise matters with external bodies like the Social Services Regulator | * Accessible feedback, complaints or concerns handling policies and processes * Evidence of a complaints management system, including records of implementation and review * Records of staff information, education or training on complaints handling * Evidence of reporting on feedback, complaints or concerns shared * Information for service users on their right to raise matters about service safety with the Social Services Regulator * Information for service users on their right to make a complaint about the safety of a social service to other bodies | * Social service providers create a culture where service users feel encouraged and supported to share feedback or make a complaint * Service users receive accessible information about how to share feedback, make complaints or raise concerns about service safety * Staff effectively receive and respond to feedback, complaints and concerns about service safety |

Response to feedback, complaints and concerns

### Service requirement (clause 30)

1. A registered social service provider must acknowledge and respond to feedback, complaints or concerns of service users and the service users’ support persons in a way that –
   1. is confidential
   2. appropriate and accessible to service users
   3. is without reprisal to the service user or support person
   4. meets timeframes agreed with the service user or support person.
2. A registered social service provider must use the feedback, complaints and concerns of service users and support persons to inform continuous improvements to safe social service design and delivery.

### Actions, useful documents and success indicators

Table 4: Response to feedback, complaints and concerns

| Actions | Documents and other evidence | Indicators of success |
| --- | --- | --- |
| * Leaders and staff acknowledge and respond to feedback, complaints and concerns in a confidential, appropriate and accessible way * Staff meet any timeframes agreed with the service user about the feedback, complaint or concern, or tell them if the timeframe will not be met * Leaders and staff analyse feedback and complaints to identify causes and any systemic failures * All feedback, complaints and concerns about service safety are recorded, including any action taken | * Accessible feedback, complaints or concerns handling policies and processes, including statements on confidentiality and no reprisals * Evidence of a complaints management system, including records of implementation and review * Code of conduct that clearly describes appropriate and inappropriate behaviour * Disciplinary policies that support the provider to act when a complaint is raised * Privacy policy or similar that outlines how confidential information will be handled * Records of feedback, complaints and concerns about social service safety * Evidence of analysis of feedback and complaints to inform continuous improvement * Evidence of improvements made due to feedback, complaints or concerns raised | * Staff are responsive to feedback and complaints and show they understand the complaints handling system * Social service providers respond appropriately to feedback and complaints, including keeping service users informed of progress * Social service providers continuously improve service delivery by learning from feedback, complaints and safety concerns raised |

Dispute management

### Service requirement (clause 31)

If requested, a registered social service provider must assist service users and the service users’ support persons to access services to manage and resolve disputes between the service users and the registered social service provider about the delivery of social services, whether or not the dispute management services are delivered by the registered social service provider or another provider.

### Actions, useful documents and success indicators

Table 5: Dispute management

| Actions | Documents and other evidence | Indicators of success |
| --- | --- | --- |
| * Staff give service users accessible information on dispute resolution * Staff help service users access dispute resolution services, if requested * Staff receive information, education or training on complaints handling and dispute resolution | * Information for service users and their support people on how to access dispute resolution services * Policies and processes that outline how conflicts between the provider and service user will be resolved * Records of staff information, education and training on complaints handling and dispute resolution | * Service users are supported to access dispute resolution services when requested * Staff can effectively support service users to access dispute resolution services |

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| To receive this document in another format, email the [Social Services Regulator](mailto:enquiries@ssr.vic.gov.au) [enquiries@ssr.vic.gov.au](mailto:enquiries@ssr.vic.gov.au)  Authorised and published by the Victorian Government, 1 Treasury Place, Melbourne.  © State of Victoria, Australia, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, April 2024.  This guidance is general in nature and the list of compliance indicators is not exhaustive. Some social service providers may adopt a different approach to complying with the Standards. If so, they may be asked to demonstrate how their approach complies with the service requirements and achieves the outcomes of the Standards.  This information sheet provides a brief overview of the feedback and complaints standard. It helps social service providers meet the service requirements of this Standard by identifying actions, documents and other evidence.  In this document, ‘leaders’ means individuals who are responsible for decision making or people management in a social service provider, including but not limited to ‘key personnel’.[[6]](#footnote-6) ‘Staff’ has the same meaning as ‘service worker’[[7]](#footnote-7) and includes volunteers. ‘Aboriginal’ refers to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. ‘Indigenous’ or ‘Koori/Koorie’ is retained when part of the title of a report, program or quotation.  ISBN/ISSN 978-1-76130-494-1 (online/PDF/Word) or (print)  Available at [Social Services Regulator’s Social Services Standards webpage](https://www.vic.gov.au/social-services-regulator-social-services-standards) https://www.vic.gov.au/social-services-regulator-social-services-standards |

1. The service requirements are outlined in Schedule 1 of the *Social Services Regulations 2023*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See **Service requirement (clause 28)** in Appendix 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See **Service requirement (clause 29)** in Appendix 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See **Service requirement (clause 30)** in Appendix 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See **Service requirement (clause 31)** in Appendix 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. ‘Key personnel’ is defined in the Social Services Regulations 2023 and includes a member of the group of people responsible for the executive decisions of the social service provider as well as other prescribed roles. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. ‘Service worker’ is defined in the Regulations as an individual employed or engaged by a social service provider to deliver a social service, including as a volunteer. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)