Odour Complaints

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| [**Good Practice Guide Introduction**](http://casahome.org/CurrentInitiatives/GoodPracticesGuideforOdourManagementinAlberta/GoodPracticesGuideIntroduction.aspx) | [**Understanding Odour**](http://casahome.org/CurrentInitiatives/GoodPracticesGuideforOdourManagementinAlberta/UnderstandingOdour.aspx) | [**Odour Prevention and Mitigation**](http://casahome.org/CurrentInitiatives/GoodPracticesGuideforOdourManagementinAlberta/OdourPreventionandMitigation.aspx) | [**Odour Assessment**](http://casahome.org/CurrentInitiatives/GoodPracticesGuideforOdourManagementinAlberta/OdourAssessments.aspx) | [**Odour Management**](http://casahome.org/CurrentInitiatives/GoodPracticesGuideforOdourManagementinAlberta/OdourManagement.aspx) | [**Odour Complaints**](http://casahome.org/CurrentInitiatives/GoodPracticesGuideforOdourManagementinAlberta/OdourComplaints.aspx) |

ABOUT THIS SECTION

This section is intended to provide guidance and advice related to odour complaint management. It outlines the factors that should be considered when developing processes for handling complaints, managing the relationship with the caller and gathering necessary information for an investigation. Please note, this section is not a field manual for odour investigations.

The examples and references to legislation and provincial agencies in this section are based on Alberta. Other jurisdictions may customize legislation, agencies and other information as appropriate.

The information in this section was summarized from this report, which includes more detailed information and all references cited:

* [***Odour Complaints in Your Area: A Guide for Developing an Odour Complaint Process***](http://casahome.org/Portals/0/documents/Odour%20Management/Consultant%20Reports/Odour%20Complaints%20in%20Your%20Area%20Booklet%20_APR2015_Final.pdf?timestamp=1446504788724)

ODOUR COMPLAINTS IN YOUR AREA: A GUIDE FOR DEVELOPING AN ODOUR COMPLAINT PROCESS

Receiving, understanding and effectively addressing odour complaints is a very important part of odour management, and it includes managing the public’s expectations about odours. There are several factors that need to be considered in developing processes for handling the complaints, managing the relationship with callers and gathering necessary information for complaint follow-up.

* [**Preparing for Odour Complaints**](http://casahome.org/CurrentInitiatives/GoodPracticesGuideforOdourManagementinAlberta/OdourComplaints.aspx#PreparingOdourComplaints)
* [**Handling an Odour Complaint Call**](http://casahome.org/CurrentInitiatives/GoodPracticesGuideforOdourManagementinAlberta/OdourComplaints.aspx#HandlingCall)
* [**Completing The Odour Complaint Form**](http://casahome.org/CurrentInitiatives/GoodPracticesGuideforOdourManagementinAlberta/OdourComplaints.aspx#ComplaintForm)
* [**Initial Response to Odour Complaints**](http://casahome.org/CurrentInitiatives/GoodPracticesGuideforOdourManagementinAlberta/OdourComplaints.aspx#InnitialResponse)
* [**Investigation Response to Odour Complaints**](http://casahome.org/CurrentInitiatives/GoodPracticesGuideforOdourManagementinAlberta/OdourComplaints.aspx#InvestigationResponse)
* [**Reference Guide: Odour Complaint Decision Tree and Call Log**](http://casahome.org/CurrentInitiatives/GoodPracticesGuideforOdourManagementinAlberta/OdourComplaints.aspx#ReferenceGuide)
* [**Sample Handout: Information for the Community**](http://casahome.org/CurrentInitiatives/GoodPracticesGuideforOdourManagementinAlberta/OdourComplaints.aspx#SampleHandout)

PREPARING FOR ODOUR COMPLAINTS

If an organizations operations or activities may result in odour complaints, there is a lot that can be done to begin managing the public’s expectations about odours before an odour complaint is received.

Public Communication

Giving the public information about odour management and the odour complaint process can go a long way to managing public expectations about odours and what can be done to address them.

An organization can:

* Provide a way for the public to access general information about odours and odour management, such as a web page or phone line
* Explain how and where the public can report an odour
* Be open and transparent about the complaint process
* Provide current information to the public, if there are known odour concerns, and if the information is appropriate to be shared. Let the public know the issue has been reported and what steps are being taken to address it
* Ensure the organization has a policy that clearly states what employees can and cannot say
* If needed, provide the caller with the phone number to the government’s Coordination and Information Centre (CIC): 1-800-222-6514. One of the CIC’s many roles is to serve as a contact point for spills and complaints, including odour complaints, for Alberta Environment and Parks and the Alberta Energy Regulator

Sample information is provided in [**Reporting Odours in Your Community**](http://casahome.org/Portals/0/DMX/OMT%20GPG/CASA_GPG_webversion_SampleHandout.pdf?timestamp=1444239405478) (PDF) and [**Reporting Odours in Your Community**](http://casahome.org/Portals/0/DMX/OMT%20GPG/CASA_GPG_webversion_SampleHandout.docx) (Word).

Media Relations

Create a media relations strategy well before it is needed. In the event of a widespread or potentially harmful odour, there may be media inquiries. Ensure employees know the policy on speaking to media and who is authorized to do so.

Training

Organizations should have odour investigation processes in place that meet their needs. This may include special training for investigators and for the employees receiving complaints from the public.

Training for the employees who take calls from members of the public, can help them establish a constructive dialogue and manage expectations of callers who have odour complaints.

They should know how to:

* Stay calm when interacting with an upset caller
* Be able to listen without interrupting
* Complete the Odour Complaint Form
* Answer questions about why information on the form is needed
* Explain the next steps in the process
* Understand the boundaries about what they may and may not say to a caller. It is important not to speculate about the source of an odour
* Stay up to date with current odour concerns so they can inform callers, if that is appropriate

Legislation

Before collecting information, review the legislation and regulations pertaining to your industry as well as legislation and regulations about the collection, use and disclosure of personal information. Put policies in place for the storage and retention of records and ensure your employees understand their responsibilities under all legislation that may apply to your organization.

Coordinating with Local Agencies/Organizations

Responding to an odour complaint will mean different things to different organizations depending on the nature and status of local industries and activities and if the setting is rural or urban. It may be necessary to coordinate an investigation and response with other organizations and/or provincial agencies. It is important to do some initial work to determine:

* When the organization will be responsible for investigating the complaint.
* Under what circumstances the investigation will be passed to another organization or how the work involved in the investigation will be shared.
* Who is to call the complainant back within the specified timelines, especially if the complainant did not give permission to share their contact information.

Understanding these factors will help organizations develop a seamless and transparent response process for callers with odour complaints.

[**Back to Top of Page**](http://casahome.org/CurrentInitiatives/GoodPracticesGuideforOdourManagementinAlberta/OdourComplaints.aspx)

HANDLING AN ODOUR COMPLAINT CALL

Effectively interacting with callers and getting relevant information is an important part of the odour investigation process.

If organizations receive odour complaint calls, but are not always responsible for investigating, they may find it valuable to follow a referral process (see below, Referring the Caller to Another Organization).

Organizations should be aware of local industries and natural or seasonal occurrences that may contribute to the volume and types of complaints. Organizations should work with local partners to create a list of potential odour sources/activities along with the types of odours commonly associated with these sources and/or activities. This way, when a caller makes an odour complaint it can be dealt with more effectively.

Communicating with Callers

One important aspect of dealing with odour complaints is to ensure the caller feels they are being listened to and are not being dismissed.

* Thank them for calling
* Collect the relevant details
* Listen to them without interrupting
* Tell them what the next step is or refer them to the appropriate organization
* Let them know when they may receive follow-up information, if appropriate

In that initial conversation it is important to gather the information outlined on the Odour Complaint Form, even if the caller believes they know where the odour is coming from. It will help determine if they are correct.

If this is one of several complaints about the same odour, collect the information anyway, as it may help pinpoint the source if it is unknown. Let the caller know that the organization is aware of the situation and provide the current status, if information is available and if it is appropriate to do so.

Remember that all complaints are valid. The caller felt it was important enough to take the time to make a complaint.  It may seem urgent to them even if it does not require an urgent response (see Triaging the Complaint).

Repeat Complainants

A person may call repeatedly about the same odour.

* Ask whether the odour is the same intensity as previously reported or if it is worse
* Let them know the current status of the investigation (if the information is available and it is appropriate)
* Assure them that the information was passed on to the appropriate group or person
* Let them know that some odour complaints take time to investigate
* Ask if they would like a follow-up call when more information is available

It is possible that repeat callers may be frustrated and use abusive or inappropriate language on the call. Organizations should develop a policy on managing abusive callers and ensure employees know how to manage these calls.

An organization may receive multiple calls from different people about the same odour. This may influence the investigation of the complaint (see Multiple Complaints).

Emergency or Health Concerns

If at any point during the conversation the caller indicates the odour is causing health problems, advise them to call:

* Their family doctor.
* Health Link Alberta (811).
* 911 (for emergencies only).

If it is an emergency, have them hang up and seek medical attention. They can call back after the emergency is dealt with.

There may be signs that the caller’s health is being impacted even if they have not specifically said so. For example, their voice, behaviour or speech may be affected. While organizations do not want to put themselves in the position of asking health questions, they may wish to suggest the caller contact their doctor if they are feeling unwell.

If at any point during the conversation it is suspected natural gas may be the problem (rotten egg odour), advise the caller to leave the area immediately and then call 911.

Referring the Caller to Another Organization

Organizations may not be responsible for investigating particular types of odour complaints. In these cases, referring the caller to the appropriate organization or agency may help reduce the caller’s frustration by reducing the number of times they need to repeat information.

The [**Odour Complaint Decision Tree and corresponding call log**](http://casahome.org/CurrentInitiatives/GoodPracticesGuideforOdourManagementinAlberta/OdourComplaints.aspx#ReferenceGuide) are tools to help determine if the caller is reporting the odour to the correct organization and, if not, to redirect them appropriately. This is a high-level process that should be customized, as appropriate.

Customizing the Odour Complaint Form

The [**Odour Complaint Form**](http://casahome.org/Portals/0/DMX/OMT%20GPG/CASA_GPG_webversion_ComplaintForm.pdf?timestamp=1444240264013) captures information commonly needed to investigate an odour complaint. Depending on the organization or industry, organizations may wish to customize the form to better meet their needs or record keeping requirements. In particular, ensure any legal language is specific to the organization and industry.

* [**Odour Complaint Form**](http://casahome.org/Portals/0/DMX/OMT%20GPG/CASA_GPG_webversion_ComplaintForm.docx) (Word Document)

Completing the Odour Complaint Form

Explain to the caller that the questions being asked are necessary to investigate their complaint. Gather as much information as the caller is able to provide.

If the caller is not cooperating or answering the questions, do not speculate. Simply collect any information given.

[**Back to Top of Page**](http://casahome.org/CurrentInitiatives/GoodPracticesGuideforOdourManagementinAlberta/OdourComplaints.aspx)

COMPLETING THE ODOUR COMPLAINT FORM

|  |
| --- |
| The [**Odour Complaint Form**](http://casahome.org/Portals/0/DMX/OMT%20GPG/CASA_GPG_webversion_ComplaintForm.pdf?timestamp=1444240264013) collects information that will help with investigation of an odour:   * Caller information * Odour description * Frequency and duration * Intensity * Weather conditions * Alleged source of the odour * Odour reported before * Additional comments or information * Action taken |

CALLER INFORMATION

Ask for the caller’s name and phone number.

* The decision to collect an email address is up to each individual organization. It is generally not needed unless the organization intends to respond in writing
* Explain that the information will be used to follow up with additional questions, if needed, as the complaint is investigated
* Callers may choose to remain anonymous
* If they choose to remain anonymous, explain that they still need to identify the general location where they smelled the odour. For example, if they are in a city, what neighbourhood? If they are rural, what town or part of the county/municipality?
* If they choose to remain anonymous, advise that they may not be able to receive follow-up information about their complaint
* It is important to have a system in place to track complaints, such as reference numbers. If the organization uses reference numbers to track complaints, the number can be provided to callers so they can call in for an update

Callers may ask how the organization will use their name and number. Assure them that the collection, use and disclosure of personal information is in accordance with privacy legislation.

ODOUR DESCRIPTION

Give the caller the opportunity to describe the odour in their own words before offering a list of words for them to choose from. Phrases such as “It’s kind of like…” may indicate the caller is a little unsure and it may be helpful to offer them some comparison words to help narrow down the odour.

A wide range of odours have been included on the form. Organizations may choose to customize this list based on their location or industry. For example, use bold font for the most commonly reported odours.

Script: *Please describe the odour. What does it smell like?*(Check all described by caller)

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Chemical** | **Earthy** | **Fruity** | **Offensive** | **Floral** |
|  Acidic   Bleach   Glue   Mothballs   Nail polish   Paint-like   Petroleum/ gasoline   Plastic   Rubbery   Solvent   Tar   Turpentine   Vinegar   Varnish |  Grassy   Hay   Musty   Mouldy   Mushroom   Peat-like   Pine   Swampy   Woody   Yeast |  Citrus  Fermented   Fruity   Over ripened fruit |  Garbage  Garlic/onion   Rancid   Sour milk   Sweet & sour   Rotten eggs   Rotting meat   Rotting vegetables   Skunk   Urine   Vinegar   Vomit   Yeast |  Flowers   Fragrant   Herbal   Perfume   Spicy |
|  | | | | |
| **Smoky** | **Medicinal** | **Fecal** | **Putrid** | **Fishy** |
|  Burnt plastic/rubber   Coffee-like   Exhaust   Grass smoke   Wood smoke |  Alcohol   Ammonia   Menthol   Urine   Vinegar |  Manure   Septic   Sewer |  Burning carcasses   Dead animal   Decay   Rotting |  Dead fish   Perm solution |
|  | | | | |
|  **Other** (describe): | | | | |

FREQUENCY AND DURATION

Callers may be reporting an odour upon first experiencing it or it may have been a problem for a while.

The Odour Complaint Form will collect information on:

* When the caller first experienced the odour
* Whether it is constant or comes and goes
* What time of day it is noticeable

This information is important as it may help narrow down the source by matching odour occurrence to specific activities in industry or the community.

INTENSITY

Use the following categories to help the caller describe the intensity. Read all the options to the caller.

Script: *I’m going to give you three options to help determine the strength of the odour. Please choose the one that best describes your experience.*(Check one)

  Faint: The odour is barely detectable: you need to stand still and inhale while facing into the wind to notice it.

  Moderate: The odour is easily detected while walking and breathing normally but it is not overpowering.

  Strong: The odour is penetrating; you can’t get away from it and it can easily be detected at all times.

WEATHER CONDITIONS

Weather conditions can affect odour dispersion and intensity. Knowing the conditions can help in the investigation of an odour complaint.

Ask the caller about their local weather at the time they noticed the odour (which may also be at the same time as the call).

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **General conditions**   Dry   Rainy   Foggy   Snowy | **Cloud cover**   Clear   Light clouds   Scattered clouds   Overcast | **Wind speed**   None/light   Steady   Strong   Gusting | **Wind direction**  Which direction is the wind coming from? |

ALLEGED SOURCE OF THE ODOUR

The caller may know or suspect they know the source of the odour. It is still important to collect the information on the Odour Complaint Form to help confirm the source and determine the extent of the problem.

Inform the caller that they may also report the odour directly to the organization involved, and provide them with the name and contact information (if available) of the correct person or agency to call. Explain that many organizations prefer to receive this information directly so that they can act more quickly to address the situation.

ODOUR REPORTED BEFORE

Ask if they have reported the odour before and if so, to whom. This may help to coordinate with another agency who may already have started an investigation into the odour.

If they have reported the odour before, ask if they have a tracking or reference number to help locate the previous complaint information.

SUBTITLE H: ADDITIONAL COMMENTS OR INFORMATION

Ask the caller if there is any other information they would like to add. Don’t ask leading questions about any specific topic as this may create unrealistic expectations about what can or cannot be addressed. However, sometimes additional information offered by the caller may be helpful to the investigation.

Possible information to capture would include:

* Offensiveness: The caller may use words about how unpleasant the odour is (not to be confused with the description of the odour).
* Extent: How widespread is the odour? For example, is it only noticeable when near the alleged source?
* Health concerns: The caller may mention the odour is causing them to feel ill. Don’t ask any health questions. Advise them to call their family doctor, Health Link Alberta (811) or 911 (for emergencies only), as appropriate. Suggest they use the [**Symptom and Odour Tracking Tool**](http://casahome.org/Portals/0/documents/Odour%20Management/Consultant%20Reports/Symptom%20and%20Odour%20Tracking%20Tool_final_for%20use%20in%20final%20report.pdf?timestamp=1436890152243) to record information.
* Caller’s expectations: The caller may state what their desired outcome is. Simply make note of this but do not promise any particular result.

FOLLOW-UP

If the caller provided their contact information:

* Ask if they would like to receive a follow-up call to let them know the status of their complaint or what steps were taken.
* If the organization is comfortable with providing responses in writing, offer them an option to receive follow-up by email or mail. If this option is offered, ensure there is a place on the form to collect this information.

Develop policies and procedures for handling follow-up. Here are some things to consider:

* Who will call the complainant back and in what timeframe?
* Will follow-up be provided in writing or only by phone?
* Will the complainant be provided with a reference number or phone number if they want to check on the status of their complaint?
* What mechanism will be used to track complaints if the complainant calls to check on the status of the investigation?
* How will the complaint information be filed and stored so it can be accessed as needed?

ACTION TAKEN

For the purposes of accountability and record keeping, it is important to record what action was taken as a result of the call.

If the organization uses reference numbers to track complaints, record the number here. If appropriate, provide this number to the caller. This may reassure the caller that their complaint has been documented, and it gives them a way to follow up on their complaint if they do not want to leave a phone number.

Sharing Personal Information

Organizations have a responsibility to ensure the collection, use and disclosure of personal information is in accordance with privacy legislation.

* Ask the caller if their contact information can be shared with the person who will be investigating the complaint. If the organization is required to report to another agency, ask if the contact information can be passed on to investigators from another agency if it is required.
* If they do not give permission to share their contact information, let them know the complaint information will still be given to the appropriate person. This may or may not affect their ability to receive a follow-up call if they request one.
* Be prepared to answer questions about which agency will receive their personal information.

The Odour Complaint Form can be customized to specifically name the legislation that each organization must follow (e.g., *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, *Personal Information Protection Act*). In Alberta, for example, more information is available from the [**Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner of Alberta**](http://www.oipc.ab.ca/pages/home/default.aspx).

Ending the Call

Thank the caller for reporting the odour.

Let the caller know that some odour complaints take time to investigate.

Let the caller know what the next step will be, such as forwarding the information to an investigator or contacting another agency.

If they would like a follow-up call, let them know when they should expect to hear something about the status of their complaint (see [**Initial Response to Odour Complaints**](http://casahome.org/CurrentInitiatives/GoodPracticesGuideforOdourManagementinAlberta/OdourComplaints.aspx#InnitialResponse)).

Triaging the Complaint

Once an odour complaint has been made, the person who logged the complaint must decide how it should move forward to ensure an appropriate level of response. For example, should someone be called in on the weekend or at 3 a.m. or is it fine to wait for normal business hours?

To help guide these decisions, develop a matrix or flowchart. For example, a Level 1 event might be investigated through normal workplace activity, a Level 2 event might require some additional resources or quicker action, and a Level 3 event would require immediate action.

If proceeding with this type of model, determine what circumstances trigger a move from a Level 1 complaint to Level 2 or Level 3. Triggers might include:

* Multiple calls about the same odour
* Reports of health concerns
* An unusual odour that cannot be attributed to normal local activity
* Environmental concerns
* Detection of odours that could signal a serious or dangerous situation
* The time the odour was noticed. (Did it happen a week ago or is it happening now?)
* Access to the alleged source

Be aware of any special protocols for certain types of odours or odours detected in specific locations.

Multiple Complaints

Organizations may receive multiple complaints about the same odour. In addition to being a factor in triaging the call, multiple complaints can provide other data that may be helpful in the investigation.

* Multiple calls from various locations can help determine the geographic extent of the problem. This may also help determine the source
* Organizations can compare the data collected from the calls to identify patterns, such as the time of day the odour was noticed

If it is allowed within your communication policies, you can collect the data and let callers know the organization is aware of the situation and is already investigating.

[**Back to Top of Page**](http://casahome.org/CurrentInitiatives/GoodPracticesGuideforOdourManagementinAlberta/OdourComplaints.aspx)

INITIAL RESPONSE TO ODOUR COMPLAINTS

Initial response refers to the first contact back to the complainant after they have made an odour complaint. The initial response is not intended to provide the complainant with an answer or results of an odour investigation. It is a touch point to let them know the status of their complaint and what the next steps are.

In cases where the caller has chosen to remain anonymous or does not wish to receive a follow-up call, the initial response is the call when they make the complaint.

Providing an initial response helps the complainant feel they have been heard and that the organization is taking their complaint seriously.

Develop a Framework for Handling the Initial Response

It is important to develop a protocol for an organization’s initial response. Here are some factors to consider**:**

* Within what time frames will an initial response be provided? A good practice followed by many organizations is to provide an initial response within 24 hours and no later than 48 hours.
* Who will call the complainant back? Consider situations where the complainant has not allowed their contact information to be shared with anyone but the person who took the initial call.
* What training will be provided to employees who answer calls from the public? What information do they need to provide as an initial response if it is required of them?
* If employees are expected to answer questions from the public, how will they be kept updated about the progress of an investigation? What limits are placed on the information they are allowed to share?
* What if the investigation activities cannot be completed or are delayed? How will the complainant be informed about this situation?
* What broader communication channels are in place to address a situation where multiple complaints about the same odour are coming in?

[**Back to Top of Page**](http://casahome.org/CurrentInitiatives/GoodPracticesGuideforOdourManagementinAlberta/OdourComplaints.aspx)

INVESTIGATION RESPONSE TO ODOUR COMPLAINTS

This investigation response section focuses on good practices for investigating complaints. This is not a “how to” or field manual for investigating odours, but rather an overview of factors to consider in developing an investigation process.

Updating the Complainant

Keeping someone updated about the status of their complaint sounds simple, but there are many factors to consider.

If the complainant has requested a follow-up call, ensure they get one within the timelines given during the initial response. Other questions an organization needs to ask include:

* If the investigation is long and complex, how often will the complainant be contacted?
* If the organization is investigating with another agency or has passed on the information, who ensures follow-up is done?
* Who is authorized to speak to the complainant?
* What are the limits on the information that can be shared?

At a minimum, if a follow-up is requested, the complainant should be contacted at the conclusion of the investigation or if safety concerns delay the investigation or prevent it altogether. Follow up with the complainant even if there is no new information.

Safety Concerns

The safety of investigators is a primary consideration in an odour investigation plan. Policies and procedures related to working alone, managing confrontation, equipment and vehicle safety, and other workplace situations will enhance on-the-job safety.

A number of factors could prevent or delay an odour investigation, such as weather, wildfires, confrontational/dangerous people or animals, dangerous substances or inaccessible physical locations. Develop strategies to help investigators mitigate these risks.

In these cases, it is also important to let the complainant know if the investigation will be delayed.

Alternative Data Sources

The information gathered on the [**Odour Complaint Form**](http://casahome.org/Portals/0/DMX/OMT%20GPG/CASA_GPG_webversion_ComplaintForm.pdf?timestamp=1444240264013) (also available as a [**Word Document**](http://casahome.org/Portals/0/DMX/OMT%20GPG/CASA_GPG_webversion_ComplaintForm.docx)) provides a place to start the investigation. However, it is possible that not all information will be provided or the complainant may be mistaken about some information. This happens because most people are not trained in odour detection and investigation.

It is important to be aware of the alternative data sources in the area. Here are some of the common sources to become familiar with:

* Where is the nearest meteorological station?
* Is there access to specialized monitoring equipment?
* What are the local industries and which of their activities can cause odour?
* Is there access to historical investigative reports?
* What local or seasonal events trigger odour?

Each of these sources can provide valuable information; however, they are merely tools that should be combined with an investigator’s experience and knowledge to reach a conclusion about the source of an odour.

Records Management

Every organization should have a records management policy to guide decision about what records should be kept, how they should be stored and protected, and how long they should be retained.

Certain records are subject to provincial and/or federal legislation and this varies by industry. An organization’s records management policy should take those legal requirements into consideration and employees should be informed of their responsibilities.

Specific policies are needed to protect personal information as part of a record storage and archiving system.

Keep records readily available until they are no longer needed (for example, the complaint investigation is concluded).

Consider implementing a system to collect and record complaints data for trending and analysis purposes.

Conclusion

Developing and implementing an odour complaint process can help an organization manage complaints efficiently. Providing training to staff and managing calls from the public in a respectful and knowledgeable way can enhance an organization’s reputation. Ensuring compliance with all relevant legislation can minimize legal situations. If an odour complaint process is not in place, the time to develop one is now.

[**Back to Top of Page**](http://casahome.org/CurrentInitiatives/GoodPracticesGuideforOdourManagementinAlberta/OdourComplaints.aspx)

REFERENCE GUIDE: ODOUR COMPLAINT DECISION TREE AND CALL LOG

About the Odour Complaint Decision Tree and Odour Complaint Call Log

The [**Odour Complaint Decision Tree**](http://casahome.org/Portals/0/DMX/OMT%20GPG/CASA_GPG_webversion_DecisionTree.pdf?timestamp=1444240468226) outlines a referral process that is intended to help organizations collect information about odour complaints received by phone and determine the next steps to be taken.

The [**decision tree**](http://casahome.org/Portals/0/DMX/OMT%20GPG/CASA_GPG_webversion_DecisionTree.pdf?timestamp=1444240468226) and corresponding [**call log**](http://casahome.org/Portals/0/DMX/OMT%20GPG/CASA_GPG_webversion_CallLog.pdf?timestamp=1444240529494) are tools to help determine if the caller is reporting the odour to the correct organization and, if not, to redirect them appropriately. This is a high-level process that should be customized, as appropriate. Each organization may have its own procedures to follow if an odour is reported and if it is their responsibility to investigate.

***These tools are not intended to collect the comprehensive information required to conduct an odour investigation. They simply help to direct the caller to the correct organization for their complaint.***

Communicating with Callers

One important aspect of dealing with odour complaints is to ensure the caller feels they are listened to and are not being dismissed.

* Thank them for calling
* Collect the relevant details
* Listen to them without interrupting
* Tell them what the next step is or refer them to the appropriate organization

In that initial conversation it is important to gather the information outlined on the**Odour Complaint Call Log** (see sample [**PDF version**](http://casahome.org/Portals/0/DMX/OMT%20GPG/CASA_GPG_webversion_CallLog.pdf?timestamp=1444240529494) and [**Word version**](http://casahome.org/Portals/0/DMX/OMT%20GPG/CASA_GPG_webversion_CallLog.docx)), even if the caller believes they know where the odour is coming from. It will help determine if they are correct.

If this is one of several complaints about the same odour, collect the information anyway as it may help pinpoint the source if it is unknown. Let the caller know that the organization is aware of the situation and tell them the current status, if that information is available and if it is appropriate to do so.

Repeat complainants

The same person may call repeatedly about the same odour.

* Ask as to whether the odour is the same intensity as previously reported or if it is worse
* Let them know the current status of the investigation (if the information is available and it is appropriate to do so)
* Assure them that the information was passed on to the appropriate people
* Let them know that some odour complaints take time to investigate

It is possible that callers may be frustrated and use abusive or inappropriate language on the call. Ensure employees are aware of the organizations policies on managing abusive callers.

**Using the Decision Tree**

The Odour Complaint Decision Tree is a high-level process. Organizations should take the time to customize this tool to suit their needs.

An odour complaint will mean different things to different organizations depending on factors such as local industries and activities and if the location is rural or urban.

* Organizations using this odour identification process will need to be aware of the local industries and natural or seasonal occurrences that may affect the volume and types of complaints. Please work with local partners to create a list of potential odour sources and activities along with the types of odours commonly associated with these sources and activities. This will make it easier to direct a caller with and odour complaint.
* For industry-specific organizations, this decision tree and call log may be simplified to include odour information relevant to each organization. If an organization refers specific types of odours to different areas within the organization, it may be useful to include a flowchart that describes where these complaints are to be directed.
* Recognize which calls about odours that are not due to the operation. The decision tree may be used to redirect these calls.
* Some organizations, such as municipalities, may have several possible sources for an odour.

Example 1

The following example shows how a rural municipal office might customize the decision tree based on the industries in the area.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Manure Odours**  *Possible sources*:   * ABC Plant * XYZ Ranch   *Contact*:   * ABC Plant:  000-000-0000 * XYZ Ranch: 000-000-0000 * NRCB: 1-866-383-6722 | **Rotten Odours**  *Possible sources*:   * Sour oil and gas company ABC   *Contact*:   * Company ABC: 000-000-0000 * AER: 1-800-222-6514 | **Odour**  *Possible sources*:  *Contact*: | **Odour**  *Possible sources*:  *Contact*: |

|  |
| --- |
|  |

Example 2

The following example shows one way the decision tree could be customized for use within an organization. If a caller reports one of these four odours, the organization begins an investigation within its own operation before referring the caller to another agency.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Really Bad Smell (skunk): Methyl Mercaptans**  *Possible sources*:   * Stripper gas system * LVHC un-scrubbed NCGs * Chip bin * Foul condensate release * Turpentine release | **Rotten Egg Smell: H2S**  *Possible sources*:   * Kiln * Recovery boilers * Acid cleaning | **Rotten Vegetables: Dimethyl disulphide**  *Possible sources*:   * Scrubber LVHC vents * Chip bin vent * DNCG vent * Condensates or biodegradation in ponds | **Rotten cabbage: Dimethyl sulphide**  *Possible sources*:   * Scrubber LVHC NCG vent * Chip bin vent * Dilute NCGs vent * Condensates or biodegradation in ponds |

Completing the Odour Complaint Call Log

Explain to the caller that you will be asking a couple of questions to help better direct follow-up on their call.

Caller name and phone number

Asking for the caller’s name and number is optional, and may be collected on the call log if an organization plans to follow up on the complaint. Ifa caller is simply going to be given the phone number for another agency, it may not be necessary to collect this information.

If this information is collected, ensure its collection, use and disclosure complies with the **appropriate privacy legislation**.

Identifying the location

Ask for the location where the caller noticed the odour. For example, if they are in a city, what neighbourhood? If they are rural, what town or part of the county/municipality?

Describing the odour

Give the caller the opportunity to describe the odour in their own words before offering a list of words for them to choose from. Phrases such as “It’s kind of like…” may indicate the caller is a little unsure and it may be helpful to offer them some comparison words to help narrow down the odour.

A wide range of odours have been included on the form. Organizations may choose to customize this list based on their location or industry. For example, use bold font for the most commonly reported odours.

Script: *Please describe the odour. What does it smell like?*(Check all described by caller)

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Chemical** | **Earthy** | **Fruity** | **Offensive** | **Floral** |
|  Acidic   Bleach   Glue   Mothballs   Nail polish   Paint-like   Petroleum/ gasoline   Plastic   Rubbery   Solvent   Tar   Turpentine   Vinegar   Varnish |  Grassy   Hay   Musty   Mouldy  Mushroom   Peat-like   Pine   Swampy   Woody   Yeast |  Citrus  Fermented   Fruity   Over ripened fruit |  Garbage  Garlic/onion   Rancid   Sour milk   Sweet & sour   Rotten eggs   Rotting meat   Rotting vegetables   Skunk   Urine   Vinegar   Vomit   Yeast |  Flowers   Fragrant   Herbal   Perfume   Spicy |
|  | | | | |
| **Smoky** | **Medicinal** | **Fecal** | **Putrid** | **Fishy** |
|  Burnt plastic/rubber   Coffee-like   Exhaust   Grass smoke   Wood smoke |  Alcohol   Ammonia   Menthol   Urine   Vinegar |  Manure   Septic   Sewer |  Burning carcasses   Dead animal   Decay   Rotting |  Dead fish   Perm solution |
|  | | | | |
|  **Other** (describe): | | | | |

Source of the odour

The caller may know where the odour is coming from, such as a specific plant or a particular lake.

Ask if they have contacted any other organizations about this odour.

If they have not, let them know they can report the odour directly to the organization, and provide them with the name and contact information (if available). Explain that many organizations prefer to receive this information directly so that they can act more quickly to address the situation.

Next Steps

If they don’t wish to contact the organization directly, or if they have already reported the odour to the organization and they do not seem satisfied with the response, give them the number to the appropriate government agency.

If the organization receiving the call is responsible for addressing the odour complaint, tell the caller the report will be forwarded to the appropriate investigator.

If the caller is being referred to another organization, provide the name and number of the appropriate organization based on the information collected on the [**Odour Complaint Call Log**](http://casahome.org/Portals/0/DMX/OMT%20GPG/CASA_GPG_webversion_CallLog.pdf?timestamp=1444240529494) (also available as a[**Word Document**](http://casahome.org/Portals/0/DMX/OMT%20GPG/CASA_GPG_webversion_CallLog.docx)).

If it is not clear who should handle the investigation, provide the number for Alberta Environment and Parks (1-800-222-6514).

Explain to the caller that they may be asked some of the same questions again. The organization to which they are being referred will have their own methods for collecting data.

The caller may mention the odour is causing them to feel ill. Don’t ask any health questions. Advise them to call their family doctor, Health Link Alberta (811) or 911 (for emergencies only), as appropriate. Suggest they use the Symptom and Odour Tracking Tool to record information.

Closing the Loop

Thank the caller for reporting the odour.

Let them know that some odour complaints take time to investigate.

[**Back to Top of Page**](http://casahome.org/CurrentInitiatives/GoodPracticesGuideforOdourManagementinAlberta/OdourComplaints.aspx)

SAMPLE HANDOUT: INFORMATION FOR THE COMMUNITY

Organizations may wish to provide some general information to the public about reporting odours. A [**generic public information sheet**](http://casahome.org/Portals/0/DMX/OMT%20GPG/CASA_GPG_webversion_SampleHandout.pdf?timestamp=1444240626531) (also available as a [**Word Document**](http://casahome.org/Portals/0/DMX/OMT%20GPG/CASA_GPG_webversion_SampleHandout.docx)) has been provided.

The information can be used on websites, in a community newsletter, as a handout or in any other way you connect with the public in the area. The information can be customized by adding local phone numbers or information about where people can get updates if there is a major incident (if this is relevant to the industry or area).

[**Download the PDF information sheet**](http://casahome.org/Portals/0/DMX/OMT%20GPG/CASA_GPG_webversion_SampleHandout.pdf?timestamp=1444240626531)

[**Download the customizable Word Document Public Information Handout**](http://casahome.org/Portals/0/DMX/OMT%20GPG/CASA_GPG_webversion_SampleHandout.docx)

[**Back to Top of Page**](http://casahome.org/CurrentInitiatives/GoodPracticesGuideforOdourManagementinAlberta/OdourComplaints.aspx)