

Western Australian Ombudsman

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Complaint handling workshops and publications helping public authorities

During 2010, the office has been delivering workshops on complaint handling to State Government agencies, local governments and universities.

The complaint handling workshops are targeted at people responsible for handling complaints, but also at managers and decision makers who are responsible for implementing and maintaining complaint handling systems.

The workshops are tailored to the organisation by using case studies and practical exercises within the relevant field. Where appropriate, the workshops include regional perspectives for staff working in regional areas or dealing with regional clients.

The workshops cover topics including effective complaint handling systems, complaint investigation and resolution and managing unreasonable complainant conduct.



Hazel MacKenzie, Central Great Southern Health Service, Sarah Cowie, Director Research and Projects, Ombudsman Western Australia and Juan Clark, Central Great Southern Health Service – Population Health participating in a workshop as part of a regional visit to Albany.

Director, Research and Projects, Sarah Cowie said that people attend the sessions because they are committed to improving their services to the community.

“While most public authorities have good complaint handling processes in place, we have found that they want to attend the workshops to learn how to make their systems more efficient and effective. In particular they want to strengthen their processes for responding to complaints, which ultimately leads to better service delivery and outcomes for the Western Australian community,” she said.

To further assist public authorities, the Ombudsman also provides a comprehensive suite of guidelines and a checklist on complaint handling. The guidelines have recently been updated to build in the findings of the Ombudsman’s [2009-10 Survey of Complaint Handling Practices in the Western Australian State and Local Government Sectors](#), which was released in June 2010. The workshops have also been updated in light of the survey findings.

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Message from the Ombudsman

This edition, our cover story features the work we have been doing to help public authorities to improve their complaint handling systems and processes building on our recent survey and report on complaint handling. Our workshops and publications help public authorities deliver better customer service and resolve disputes quickly and efficiently.

We also have a new *Hints and Tips* section which provides useful snapshots of information on topics like complaint handling and decision making for public authorities. This will be an ongoing series throughout our 2011 newsletters.

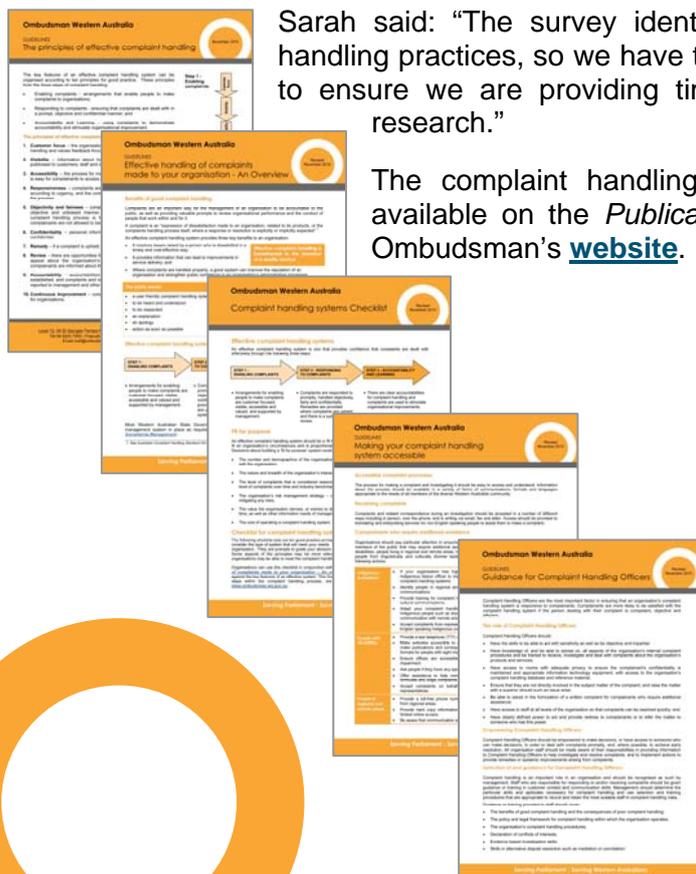
You can also read about our performance for 2009-10. Our ongoing program of work to improve the quality and timeliness of complaint handling has seen us exceed our performance targets again this year. We have also released an important administrative improvement report during the year and undertaken our first year of operation of the child death review function.

With Christmas fast approaching, I would like to take this opportunity to wish you and your families a prosperous, happy and safe festive season.

Chris Field



Complaint handling workshops and publications helping public authorities (continued)



Sarah said: “The survey identified some opportunities for improvement of complaint handling practices, so we have taken the opportunity to add to, and revise, our guidelines to ensure we are providing timely and accurate advice to the sector based on our research.”

The complaint handling guidelines and checklist (as shown to the left) are available on the *Publications > Guidelines and Information Sheets* page of the Ombudsman’s [website](#).



Lisa Webb, Ombudsman WA’s Publications Manager and Mary White, Assistant Ombudsman, Strategic Services review the office’s complaint handling publications.

Our performance and achievements

Our performance and achievements for the year include:

- 8,123 contacts were made to the office, including 6,114 enquiries and 2,009 complaints.
- Timely complaint handling was achieved with 82% of allegations finalised within 3 months and 99% of allegations finalised within 12 months.
- 45% of investigated complaints were resolved by early resolution.
- We have recorded a significant reduction in aged cases over the last five years with the average age of open complaints decreasing by 64%, open complaints more than 12 months old decreasing by 90% and those more than 6 months old decreasing by 63%.
- Indigenous Western Australians have significantly improved access to the services of our office through the appointment of a Principal Indigenous Liaison Officer and outreach work with Indigenous communities.
- We published a major report analysing a survey of complaint handling systems in Western Australian public authorities which showed that:
 - Public authorities take complaint handling seriously, largely have appropriate practices in place to handle complaints, and are generally doing a good job of handling complaints;
 - There are opportunities for improvement of complaint handling practices; and
 - Effective and efficient implementation of complaint handling principles can be achieved through a 'fit for purpose' system (that is a system tailored to the size, scope and nature of an organisation).
- We commenced a review of how public authorities manage personal information.
- Our new child death review function was implemented. Of the 76 child death notifications received during the 2009-10 year, 63% were finalised. Of the 73 child death cases transferred to the Ombudsman at the commencement of the function on 30 June 2009, 92% were finalised.
- We established strong working relationships with stakeholders of our child death review function including appointing a Child Death Review Advisory Panel and building networks with relevant public authorities.
- The Regional Awareness and Accessibility Program visits continued to be a successful initiative in 2009-10, with three visits undertaken during the year.
- We launched our new website with dedicated pages to assist public authorities and the community.



Contact can be made with the Ombudsman's office in a number of ways.

Accountability agencies visit Albany



The accountability agencies spoke to government agencies from the Great Southern Region.

The Western Australian Ombudsman visited Albany in the Great Southern Region between 17 and 19 November as part of the Ombudsman's Regional Awareness and Accessibility Program. Joining the Ombudsman on the visit was the Information Commissioner and senior staff from the Office of Health Review and the Commonwealth Ombudsman's office.

During the visit, a seminar for Federal, State and local government staff was held along with additional workshops on effective complaint handling and good administrative decision making practices. The sessions gave regionally-based government workers an opportunity to update their skills while providing the accountability agencies with valuable feedback on issues facing government service providers in the region.

A session about the role of the accountability agencies was also held for local community groups. This session communicated the accountability agencies' complaint handling roles and processes to community and advocacy groups who often assist their clients in making a complaint.

Complaint clinics gave local people the opportunity to speak with staff from the accountability agencies about issues they had with Federal, State and local government that they had been unable to resolve.

Ombudsman, Chris Field said that this interaction with the community was a valuable part of the visit.

"The advantage of having all the accountability agencies in Albany at one time means that there is a 'one-stop-shop' for the local community to have their complaints heard. Often, the agencies are able to help on the spot," he said.

In addition, the office's Principal Indigenous Liaison Officer met with Indigenous government employees and members of the Indigenous community from the region. The meetings were well attended by participants who appreciated the opportunity to learn about the agencies and have their issues heard.

"It is important to us that we engage with many different groups in the community on our regional visits to get a full understanding and appreciation of the issues in the region," Mr Field said.



Staff from the accountability agencies talk to community organisations from the Great Southern Region.

Case Study

Complaint resolved after regional visit

A complainant contacted the Ombudsman during a regional visit regarding theft of his property. The complaint involved the actions of several public authorities following the theft.

The complainant told us that he had reported the theft to police. While police had initially informed him that there was little chance his property would be returned, the item was recovered the following day. A second public authority was informed that the property had been found, and a recovery notice was then sent to the complainant, but the residential address was incorrect. The complainant did not receive the recovery notice and, eight days later, the property was transferred to the local government. The local government also tried to contact the complainant to advise they had his property, but again, notification was sent to the incorrect address. Having not heard from the complainant, the local government sold his property some months later.

With no word from any public authority, the complainant assumed that his property was never recovered. He made an insurance claim, and subsequently replaced the item. However, he was still out-of-pocket. Six months later, he received a renewal notice for the recovered (but now sold) property from another public authority, which is when he realised something was wrong. He then contacted us.

In investigating the details of the case, we uncovered that in some regional towns, mail is not delivered to individual residential addresses, only to postal addresses. All public authorities in this case should have been aware of these limitations in this regional town, but did not take the necessary measures to contact the complainant in the circumstances. We concluded that two of the public authorities involved should bear some responsibility for failing to ensure the complainant's property was returned. Both authorities accepted this and each made a 50% act of grace contribution to compensate the man for his financial loss. Both authorities have also taken steps to prevent similar issues occurring again.

Translated information sheets now available

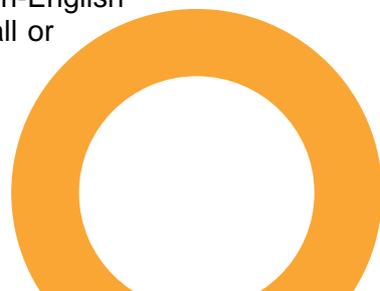
Did you know that the Ombudsman's information sheet on *How to complain to the Ombudsman* is available in 15 different community languages?



If your agency or organisation regularly deals with people who speak a language other than English, and you need to advise them on how to make a complaint to the Ombudsman's office, our free, translated information sheets are available. Simply download them from the *Community Languages* page on our website www.ombudsman.wa.gov.au/Languages/Languages. Quicklinks to the translated information are also available on the homepage of the Ombudsman's website.

We also provide:

- Translations in other languages as required; and
- Interpreters on request to non-English speaking people when they call or visit our office.



This is the first in our *Hints and Tips* series focusing on the three key steps that cover the 10 good practice principles for effective complaint handling in public sector agencies and local government. The three steps are:

Step 1: Enabling complaints

Step 2: Responding to complaints

Step 3: Accountability and learning

The principles and tips for step 1 are featured here and tips for steps 2 and 3 will be featured in upcoming editions.

Hints and Tips

Step 1: Enabling people to make a complaint

An effective complaint handling system enables people to make complaints. Arrangements for enabling people to make complaints need to be customer focused, visible and accessible. These are the first three principles of the 10 good practice principles for effective complaint handling. Helpful tips in these areas are shown below.

Customer Focus

PRINCIPLE:

The organisation is committed to effective complaint handling and values feedback through complaints.

- Ensure customer service standards and complaint handling practices are valued, supported and followed by management.
- Be open to feedback from customers, including through complaints.
- Communicate the benefits of complaints to staff.

Visibility

PRINCIPLE:

Information about how and where to complain is well publicised to customers, staff and other interested parties.

- Display contact details and information on how to make a complaint in places readily available to customers.
- Ensure front-line staff are aware of the organisation's complaint handling process and contact details for the complaints officer.
- Provide information on any external appeals process to customers.

Accessibility

PRINCIPLE:

The process for making a complaint and investigating it should be easy for customers to access and understand.

- Accept complaints in a variety of ways including verbally and in writing and through a variety of entry points (for example complaints could be accepted through a website).
- Make the complaint process accessible and easy to use for all members of the community including people from a diverse range of backgrounds.

Ombudsman Western Australia

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