

Western Australian Ombudsman

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Ombudsman improving information and access for Indigenous communities

The Ombudsman's office has implemented a number of initiatives to help Indigenous Western Australians use our services.



Historically, Indigenous Western Australians have been an under-represented group in terms of complaints made to the Ombudsman. Ensuring that Indigenous Western Australians have fair access to the Ombudsman to resolve their issues is a high priority for the office.

A major component of the office's activities in this regard has been the Regional Awareness and Accessibility Program. The Program, designed to enhance awareness of, and access to, the Ombudsman's office for regional Western Australians and Indigenous Western Australians is now in its second year. The Program, undertaken in conjunction with other accountability agencies in Western Australia, has seen the office visit Indigenous communities in Kalgoorlie, Geraldton, Mandurah and Broome. The office has also visited Bidyadanga and will, later this month, visit the Pilbara. Work will commence shortly on improving awareness of, and access to, the Ombudsman for Indigenous Western Australians living

in the metropolitan area.

Another initiative is the establishment of an Indigenous Liaison Officer position in our office, aimed at helping to strengthen the links with the Western Australian Indigenous community.

Ombudsman Chris Field said that programs such as the Regional Awareness and Accessibility Program, the establishment of an Indigenous Liaison Officer position, work being carried out by the Child Death Review Team and new 'plain English' information products (shown here) were important for improving awareness among the Indigenous community.

"We encourage Indigenous Western Australians to make contact with us if they are having problems they haven't been able to fix with Government agencies. We can assist people, where it is appropriate, to put their complaint in writing if needed," Mr Field said.

The office's new 'plain English' posters, brochures and information sheets are available to download from www.ombudsman.wa.gov.au/CPS_Info/CPS_Info or on request by emailing mail@ombudsman.wa.gov.au



Message from the Ombudsman

In this issue of the *Ombudsman Western Australia Newsletter*, I am very pleased to highlight the work we are undertaking to improve awareness of, and access to, the services that the Ombudsman provides.

Over the past 12 months, we have placed a particular emphasis on improving the way we communicate with certain groups in the community who have been historically under-represented in terms of complaints to our office – Indigenous Western Australians and those living in regional Western Australia. We have undertaken a range of initiatives to engage with these groups, and ensure they have access to our services. You can read about our programs and new products in this edition.

One of our key initiatives is the Regional Awareness and Accessibility Program. As part of this Program we have just returned from a visit to Broome, where we also attended the North West Expo. As occurred in 2009, I am also very pleased that a number of complaints handling and accountability agencies have joined us again in 2010 as part of this Program.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Chris Field'.

Chris Field

Ombudsman provides tools and guidance to support Government complaints policy

In February, a whole-of-Government complaints management policy was issued by the Public Sector Commissioner through Circular [2009-27: Complaints Management](#). This policy applies to all public sector agencies and promotes effective complaints management across the sector. The Circular advises that agencies must:

- Have an appropriate complaints management system in place;
- Provide an easy-to-follow link about how to make a complaint from the homepage of its website; and
- Inform its clients that they can contact an external party, like the Ombudsman, if they are still dissatisfied with a decision or action after going through an internal complaints process.

Under the Circular, the Ombudsman has responsibility for providing tools and guidance to assist agencies with their internal complaint handling role. Ombudsman Chris Field said that the office has a comprehensive range of materials outlining good complaint handling and decision making practices.

“Our website has a range of [guidelines](#) and [content](#) to assist agencies to ensure they are meeting their requirement to have an appropriate and effective complaint management system in place. Agencies can also contact my office directly if they require further assistance,” Mr Field said.

Agencies may be familiar with the whole-of-Government website www.complaints.wa.gov.au. While this site is still available, reference on how to make a complaint about a State Government agency now refers back to the Ombudsman’s site.

How the Energy Ombudsman handles complaints

Since 2004, the Western Australian Ombudsman has also held the role of Energy Ombudsman Western Australia. The Energy Ombudsman deals with complaints about Western Australian electricity and gas providers.

The Energy Ombudsman can receive, investigate and facilitate the resolution of complaints from customers about their energy provider. As with most Ombudsman schemes, the complainant must first try to resolve the problem with the provider directly. If this is not successful, the Energy Ombudsman may be able to help.

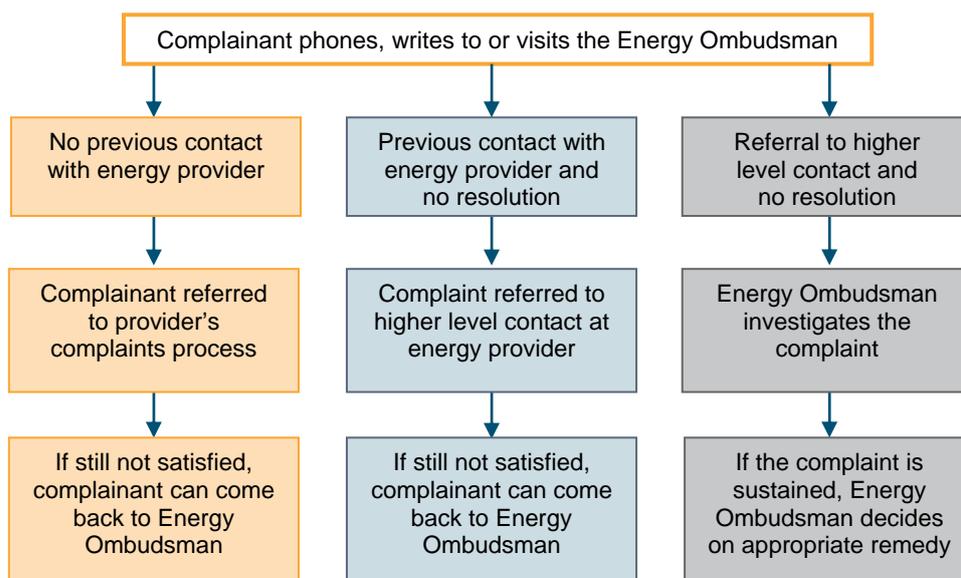
When handling complaints from the public, the Energy Ombudsman considers what is fair and reasonable in the circumstances, while taking into account good industry practice and relevant law.

The Energy Ombudsman resolves complaints in a very timely and effective way. In 2008/09, the Energy Ombudsman resolved 96 per cent of electricity complaints and 98 per cent of gas complaints within 10 days.

Handling energy complaints

Complaints to the Energy Ombudsman about energy providers are handled in three stages.

- First, the complainant is referred to the provider's complaint process to see if the matter can be resolved.
- If the complainant does not consider the matter to be resolved, they can come back to the Energy Ombudsman. The Energy Ombudsman refers these complaints to higher level contacts at the energy providers. This provides a second opportunity to resolve the matter.
- If the complainant still believes the matter is not resolved, they can come back to the Energy Ombudsman who will investigate, and where the complaint is substantiated, facilitate an appropriate remedy between the provider and the complainant.



Energy Ombudsman Contacts

Phone: (08) 9220 7588 | Freecall: 1800 754 004 | www.ombudsman.wa.gov.au/energy

Ombudsman's office visits Broome

The Western Australian Ombudsman's Regional Awareness and Accessibility Program visited Broome from 3 to 5 May 2010. The office commenced the successful program in 2009 visiting the Goldfields/Esperance, Mid West and Peel regions. As with the 2009 visits, the Ombudsman's office was joined on the Broome visit by the Office of the Information Commissioner, the Office of Health Review, the Commonwealth Ombudsman's office and the Office of the Public Sector Standards Commissioner. We were also very pleased on this visit to be joined by the Public Sector Commission.

Activities undertaken on the visit included seminars and meetings for State Government departments and local governments, community groups and Indigenous groups. Members of the community who had a complaint about a public authority that they had been unable to resolve with the agency had the opportunity to speak face-to-face with staff from the accountability agencies about their issues.

Ombudsman Chris Field said that the Program offered a valuable opportunity for the agencies involved to learn about the unique issues facing regional and Indigenous Western Australians. As valuable as this learning is, first and foremost the visits are designed to assist people living in regional Western Australia.



Deidre Govindan, Ombudsman WA talks with Martin Cuthbert, Kerry Fisher and Michelle Scally from the Shire of Derby-West Kimberley.

"Feedback from Broome and the three previous visits has shown that people have welcomed our agencies coming to them and found the seminars and meetings interesting, informative and helpful," Mr Field said.

As an additional component to the visit, the Western Australian and Commonwealth Ombudsman's offices and the Office of Health Review participated in the North West Expo on 1 and 2 May.

Case Study

Ombudsman suggests guidance material to improve student appeal process

One of the many functions of the Ombudsman is to deal with appeals from overseas students studying in Australia.

During recent enquiries into a complaint made about an education provider's appeal process, it came to light that the student was asked to appear before a review panel. This step in the appeals process was intended to provide the student an additional chance to have their case heard. However, it seemed that the student was asked to appear without sufficient advice or information about the panel process.

As a result of our suggestions, the institution agreed to provide students with clear and concise guidance material, to ensure that students are told about the role and make-up of the panel, how it fits into the overall appeals process, and what was expected of them. This improvement has further complemented the institution's appeals process.

The institution also voluntarily undertook to clarify and update its procedures in relation to disciplinary issues and agreed to incorporate this information into the relevant manual when it was next revised.

Ombudsmen reaching out to university students

Our office and the Commonwealth Ombudsman have collaborated to create a new product for students to improve awareness of the services each agency provides. A bookmark, containing helpful information about both agencies, was distributed to students through bookshops and faculties at the five major Western Australian universities during 2010 Orientation Weeks.

Ombudsman Chris Field said that it was beneficial for students to have a product which they could use, which explained the roles of the respective offices and listed important contact details.

“Young people and students are consumers of government services and often need our help to resolve their issues. The bookmark can be kept and our details are always close at hand,” Mr Field said.

The office also deals with appeals from overseas students studying in Western Australia. “We’ve added a message to the bookmark about our overseas students appeals function to let students know that our office deals with this important issue,” Mr Field said.



Speaking to public sector graduates



Kylie Maj, Ombudsman Western Australia and Simone Spencer, Department of Treasury and Finance.

Principal Project and Analysis Officer, Kylie Maj, spoke to the 2009 graduating class of the Public Sector Graduate Development Program at a function late last year. Kylie was invited to speak to the group about her career in the public sector, as she graduated from the Program in 2004.

The session titled *Public Sector in Focus – Career Opportunities and Challenges* was aimed at giving graduates a better understanding of the range of career opportunities available in the public sector, and an opportunity to hear from Program alumni who now have successful government careers. Fellow graduate Simone Spencer from the Department of Treasury and Finance also spoke.

Kylie said she hoped that the graduates had found the variety in the program as interesting as she had. “Being able to experience different areas of working in government before applying for permanent jobs is beneficial, as you get a sense of what you do and don’t enjoy. Moving around during the program also forces you out of your comfort zone. While this is scary, it gives you the confidence you need,” Kylie said.

Another key point of Kylie’s speech was the importance of working with mentors and maintaining networks after the program. “Those people are valuable sources of advice and inspiration as they have generally been in the business for a long time,” Kylie said.

Kylie also spoke about the public sector’s flexible work arrangements which have allowed her to take maternity leave to have her first child. She said she looks forward to resuming her career with the Ombudsman’s office when she returns to work.



Staff Profile

Corporate Executive

In 2007, the office undertook a major organisational review that included the establishment of distinct operational teams and the creation of Assistant Ombudsman positions to lead these teams. The restructure was principally designed to:

- Increase the timeliness and quality of complaint handling;
- Enhance the contribution of the office to improving public administration over time; and
- Improve the efficiency and effectiveness of whole-of-office operations.

With the new structure also came an increased focus on improving the strategic direction and corporate governance of the office. Accordingly, the Corporate Executive was established in 2008.

The Corporate Executive is comprised of six members: the Ombudsman, Deputy Ombudsman and the four Assistant Ombudsman: Assistant Ombudsman Complaint Resolution; Assistant Ombudsman Administrative Improvement; Assistant Ombudsman Child Death Reviews; and Assistant Ombudsman Strategic Services.

The role of the Corporate Executive is to:

- Set and monitor the strategic direction and corporate policies of the office;
- Monitor performance and set priorities and targets for future performance;
- Provide leadership to staff and model the office's values;
- Ensure compliance with relevant legislation as well as external and internal policies and guidelines; and
- Monitor and discuss emerging issues of relevance to the work of the Ombudsman.



Back row, L-R: Mary White, Assistant Ombudsman Strategic Services; Chris Field, Ombudsman; Kim Lazenby, Assistant Ombudsman Administrative Improvement; and Peter Wilkins, Deputy Ombudsman.
Front row: Andrew Harvey, Assistant Ombudsman Complaint Resolution; and Julie Roberts, Assistant Ombudsman Child Death Reviews.

Ombudsman Western Australia

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