

Western Australian Ombudsman

Edition 3 November 2008

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Improved structure and processes enhance our performance

The Ombudsman's office has recently released its 2007-08 Annual Report. The report sets out a year of very significant activity in this office. We have undertaken an organisational restructure and introduced a range of new complaint handling processes. A key focus of this work has been on ensuring that we are best placed to resolve complaints in the most efficient, timely and effective way possible.

We are therefore very pleased to report significant improvements in a range of our performance indicators:

- The average time to resolve matters has improved by 36% compared with last year.
- The number of matters finalised within 3 months has improved by 13% and the number of complaints on hand less than 3 months old has improved by 54%.
- Since March 2007, cases older than 12 months have been reduced by 66%.

For the first time, 100% of our recommendations for administrative improvement were accepted by agencies. Agencies also voluntarily made 22 administrative improvements.

Chris Field, Ombudsman, said that our performance over the past twelve months reflects the great dedication and skill of our staff team and the positive results from our organisational restructure and improvements to complaint-handling processes, "Importantly, we also have a strong forward program to continue these improvements with our key focus over the coming years being to further reduce the time taken to resolve complaints, eliminate aged complaints, reduce the cost of complaints handling and increase our accessibility and awareness, particularly to regional and Indigenous Western Australians."

For full details of the Ombudsman's Office's strategic outcomes in 2007-08, read the Ombudsman's Annual Report, available at www.ombudsman.wa.gov.au.

Message from the Ombudsman

Welcome to the third edition of our newsletter. In this edition, we take the opportunity to reflect on some of our key achievements, look ahead to the priorities and challenges of the future and give you an insight into the day to day work of our office. The achievements of the Ombudsman are the achievements of a dedicated staff team, who have achieved significant improvements in our service delivery as discussed in this edition's cover story and our recently released Annual Report.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Chris Field'. The signature is stylized and fluid.

Chris Field

Helpful Information

Assistance through referrals

A complaint can be made by any person (or group of people) or a company, partnership, association or club. When the Ombudsman receives an enquiry about an issue, an assessment is made as to whether:

- The complainant has tried to resolve the issue with the public authority concerned before contacting us;
- The complainant is personally affected by the issue; and
- The complaint is about the administrative practices of a Western Australian government department, statutory authority or local government, which includes prisons, schools, TAFE colleges, public universities, cities, towns and shires.

If the Ombudsman's office cannot handle the complaint because the enquiry fails to meet these criteria, an Enquiry Officer will try to assist by referring the complainant to the person or organisation who can help.

To assist in determining if the Ombudsman can assist with an enquiry, a series of information brochures and fact sheets are available on our website at www.ombudsman.wa.gov.au under 'Publications'.

2008 Integrity Coordinating Group Forum

Public authorities had a valuable insight into dealing with integrity issues, through the *Integrity Coordinating Group (ICG) Forum 2008 - Taking Action on Integrity Issues*, held at Government House Ballroom on 30 October.

The ICG was formed in 2005 to promote and strengthen integrity in WA public bodies. The ICG is comprised of the Ombudsman, the Corruption and Crime Commission, the Office of the Public Sector Standards Commissioner, and the Office of the Auditor General. Together the ICG agencies collaborate to support integrity in public bodies by encouraging coordinated research, evaluation and monitoring and fostering operational cooperation and consistency in communication and education.

The 2007 ICG Forum was an opportunity for the then four recently appointed ICG members to present, at a high level, their views on the work of their respective agencies and the role of the ICG. For the 2008 ICG Forum, it was decided, influenced by feedback to the 2007 Forum, to take a very practical approach, adopting hypothetical-style scenarios utilising professional actors. As the key messages discussed during the Forum are enduring, the Forum was recorded and the ICG will be producing a DVD. The DVD will also be an important mechanism to facilitate the ICG's shared commitment to communicating about integrity issues throughout the State.

Over 170 senior staff from State Government agencies, local governments and public universities attended the ICG Forum to hear the views of the integrity agencies on issues such as misuse of corporate credit cards, theft of government resources, inappropriate access and disclosure of confidential information and mismanagement of grievance processes.

Attendees received the ICG's latest information brochure *Taking Action on Integrity Issues*, giving guidance for managing integrity issues.

Feedback from attendees was extremely positive with 97 per cent saying that they were either very satisfied or satisfied with the overall quality of the event.

More information about the work of the ICG is available on the ICG website at www.opssc.wa.gov.au/icg.

The *Taking Action on Integrity Issues* brochure can be downloaded from the ICG website or received electronically or in hard copy by request to email icg@ombudsman.wa.gov.au.



Left to right: Auditor General Colin Murphy, Public Sector Standards Commissioner Dr Ruth Shean, Corruption and Crime Commissioner Len Roberts-Smith RFD QC and Ombudsman Chris Field. Photograph courtesy of Ron Olsen.

Case Study

Teacher seeks assistance with registration issue

A teacher wrote to the Ombudsman's office to complain about the problems they were experiencing in having their registration to teach processed. The complainant had paid their annual registration fees to the relevant agency by cheque, which the agency cashed several days later.

However, the agency did not process the transaction correctly and the complainant and their employer subsequently received reminder notices stating that the teacher was not registered to teach that year. The complainant contacted the agency and was asked to organise a cheque trace with their bank to prove that it had been cashed. The agency verbally acknowledged the complainant's teaching registration, but no further action was taken and the complainant remained dissatisfied.

The complainant contacted the Ombudsman's office seeking written confirmation of their registration and membership, reimbursement of the bank audit fees they incurred proving that the cheque had been cashed and an apology for the inconvenience.

An Enquiry Officer made informal enquiries with the agency, which looked into the matter. As a result of these enquiries, the agency advised the Enquiry Officer that it had sent the complainant their registration certificate and membership card and reimbursed the cost of the cheque trace. The agency also issued the complainant with a written apology.

This case highlights how our informal intervention is often able to resolve problems quickly.

Staff Profile

Kim Lazenby Assistant Ombudsman, Administrative Improvements

Following our whole of organisation review, the Ombudsman's office has launched a new focus on administrative improvements. In practice, this will mean identifying areas of public administration that are of particular concern or are common sources of complaints from the community, analysing the underlying causes of these problems and assisting agencies remedy them.

The new focus on administrative improvement has commenced with the appointment of Kim Lazenby as the new Assistant Ombudsman, Administrative Improvement.



Kim joins the office after nearly a decade of leading performance audits and evaluations, in areas as diverse as justice, social services, transport, infrastructure, and government business systems. Before moving into performance analysis, Kim had a decade of experience in line agencies, particularly in the employment, education and training arenas. Kim believes that the Ombudsman's office is in a unique position to hear about and understand the agency actions that are creating most concern in the community, "I will be leading the Administrative Improvement team in a series of new projects that focus on assisting agencies strengthen their administration of government policy."

Kim also noted "Everyone is affected by the decisions of government, but people living in regional and remote areas can be particularly reliant on efficient and effective public services. The office's administrative improvement work will reflect this, by examining issues raised by people throughout the State."

A day in the life of an Investigating Officer

Determining the outcome of complaints

Complaints are referred to an Investigating Officer after an initial response to an enquiry has been made. The complaint is assessed to establish if it is within the Ombudsman's jurisdiction, and if appropriate, it becomes a case. Investigating Officers in the Ombudsman's office investigate over 1,100 complaints each year. The Investigating Officer seeks to determine if the case raises issues with the administrative actions of the public authority that is the subject of the complaint.

In order to achieve this, an Investigating Officer will analyse and evaluate the information provided by the complainant. Complaints will generally be handled informally in the first instance to try and achieve an early resolution - an efficient, cost-effective and timely method. Informal resolution involves phoning or emailing a contact officer at the authority for information. If the complaint cannot be resolved informally, the Investigating Officer will write to the authority's CEO to advise them of the complaint and seek a response. Further investigative activities will depend on the type and complexity of the complaint.

Investigating Officers have excellent analytical and communications skills in order to investigate issues and obtain information.

When the Investigating Officer reaches a view about the facts of an investigation (where that is possible), a report will be prepared detailing the preliminary view and sent to the public authority and complainant. Investigating Officers observe an independent and impartial approach to the conduct

of investigations as well as observing procedural fairness at all times. Information obtained by Investigating Officers in an investigation is confidential. If the complaint is sustained, the Ombudsman may make recommendations to the

In 2007-08, 100% of recommendations for administrative improvements were accepted by public authorities.

public authority for action to remedy the situation.

This may include a review of the decision, changes to administrative practices and changes to policies. The Ombudsman places a strong emphasis on making practical recommendations about significant matters and does not make recommendations unless it is considered that the benefits of the recommendations outweigh the costs. In 2007-08, 100 per cent of recommendations made were accepted by public authorities.

Learn more about the Ombudsman's process for investigating complaints in our series of Fact Sheets available at www.ombudsman.wa.gov.au.

Farewell to our Deputy Ombudsman

We were particularly sad to say farewell recently to one of our key team members, Dr Heather Brown, who retired in August. Chris Field, Ombudsman observed "Heather served a number of agencies at a senior level during a distinguished career as a public servant. In the last three years, Heather has provided outstanding support as Deputy Ombudsman and played an integral role in our successful organisational restructure. Her intellect, integrity, depth of knowledge of the public sector, humility and humour will be missed by me and this office."

The office is currently recruiting a new Deputy Ombudsman who is expected to commence in early 2009. In the meantime, the functions of the Deputy Ombudsman are being undertaken by the Ombudsman, supported by the executive management team.

Give us your feedback

Our quarterly electronic newsletter is part of our commitment to keep you up-to-date on our activities, as well as giving details on how we resolve complaints that might involve you. Our key stakeholders include the Western Australian Parliament, Western Australian public sector agencies, local government, universities and the people of Western Australia. If you would like more information regarding any of our articles, or would like to provide feedback, you can contact us on mail@ombudsman.wa.gov.au.

Link us to your intranet

We like to spread the news about things that are important to our stakeholders, as well as make it easy for you to find out what we do. That's why we encourage Western Australian public sector agencies, local governments and universities to make this newsletter and our other publications available to their staff by either forwarding this PDF copy or posting it to their Intranet site. That way, public sector staff can view the newsletters when it's convenient and subscribe to our mailing list if they wish.



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