

Significant Issues and Trends

A number of current and emerging trends impacting on the Ombudsman's office were outlined in the 2007-08 budget papers. In this section of the report, information is provided which describes the approach taken by the office to address these challenges and a range of other operational initiatives for the next reporting period.

Informal Resolution

As part of reviewing and refining operational processes and management systems to improve the efficiency, timeliness and quality of the office's complaint handling, greater emphasis was placed on dealing with more simple complaints through informal mechanisms, where appropriate.

This approach often eliminates the need for formal investigations, enabling the office to focus more resources on dealing with complex matters and systemic issues. Informal resolution has benefits for a wide variety of public authorities as it eliminates the need for them to produce lengthy reports. The net outcome is resource savings across the public sector. There is also a benefit for complainants through speedy resolution of simple matters.

Increasing Complexity

While there has been increased early and informal resolution in a number of cases, there has also been a marked increase in the complexity of matters investigated by the Ombudsman's office in recent years. Increased complexity of investigations places greater resource demands on the office and makes it more difficult to finalise complaints in a timely and effective manner.

The new screening procedures introduced under the new structure in March 2008 result in complex matters being identified upfront, allowing appropriate resources to be assigned at an early stage. Staff have access to a checklist to make an assessment of complexity which assists in the case allocation process. The new complaints management system introduced in April 2008 assists the office to monitor complex cases more closely to improve management of such matters.

Systemic Focus

A key function of the Ombudsman is to improve public administration. To provide this service to the Western Australian Parliament and Western Australians, there is a need to focus resources on activities which will have a benefit across the public sector. This means that, in addition to resolving complaints for the individual complainant, the Ombudsman's office has an increasing focus on working proactively with the public authorities to improve public administration. Initiatives include undertaking major investigations of systemic issues, developing resource materials for use by public authorities and providing support to them on best practice administration and complaints management.

A new Administrative Improvement Team was established during the year which will be responsible for leading, developing and implementing strategies to improve public administration across the public sector, including responsibility for major investigations. The establishment of this

unit will enable the office to continue to take a proactive role in addressing systemic problems and promoting good administrative practices across the public sector.

Improving Accessibility

During the year, the office began a project to redesign its website to make its services more accessible to customers. This will include improving the online complaint services to make it easier for people wishing to lodge a complaint about a public authority to access information. The redesigned website will also enable easier access to publications. This project will continue in 2008-09, with the redesigned website to go live by the end of 2008.

Over recent years, the office has identified an ongoing need for its services to be accessible to all citizens, particularly Indigenous and regional Western Australians. Analysis of complaint trends in 2007 indicated that Indigenous and regional Western Australians were under-utilising the Ombudsman's services.

During a strategic planning exercise in 2007, staff identified that Indigenous people and regional Western Australians are significant consumers of services from a range of local government, health and other State Government services, particularly in remote and rural communities. Staff recognised the need to strive to be more responsive and accessible to these people.

Approved funding for the transfer of the child death review function to the Ombudsman includes provision for an Indigenous Liaison Officer to work in the proposed child death review unit.

The office will continue to take a proactive approach to identify strategies to raise its awareness amongst Indigenous people and regional Western Australians.