

Ombudsman's Report

It gives me great pleasure to present the 2010-11 Annual Report of the Western Australian Ombudsman. The Ombudsman's principal functions are:

- To investigate and resolve complaints about the administration of the responsibilities of public authorities;
- Building on the knowledge gained from the investigation and resolution of complaints, undertake a range of activities to improve public administration over time; and
- To review certain child deaths.



The Ombudsman also undertakes a number of other important functions including telecommunications interception inspections, reviewing appeals by overseas students, investigating public interest disclosures and delivering services to the Indian Ocean Territories. Finally, the Ombudsman also concurrently holds the role of Energy Ombudsman and State Records Commissioner.

Resolving complaints is the core function of the Ombudsman. A key objective over the last five years has been to improve the quality, timeliness and efficiency of our complaint handling and we have introduced a range of strategies to achieve this objective. These strategies have led to an 84 percent reduction of open complaints older than six months over the last five years. We have also achieved a 96 percent reduction in open complaints older than twelve months, with only two complaints older than twelve months as at 30 June 2011. In doing so, the cost of finalising allegations has reduced for the third consecutive year.

Early resolution of complaints is good for complainants, public authorities and taxpayers. Our continued strong emphasis on early resolution of complaints has resulted in four out of five complaints received by us being finalised within three months, and many much earlier than this.

Building on the knowledge gained from the investigation and resolution of complaints, this year we undertook several activities designed to improve public administration, including publication of guidelines, workshops, training and capacity building. We also undertook investigations based on the patterns, trends and themes that arose from the resolution of individual complaints, referred to as own motion investigations. Own motion investigations are evidence-based and are designed to lead to recommendations for administrative improvement which are practical, proportionate, well-targeted (including consideration of unintended consequences) and cost-beneficial. This year we issued a major report arising from an own motion investigation titled *The Management of Personal Information – Good Practice and Opportunities for Improvement*. The report identified many good practices in the three State Government agencies who participated in the investigation. The report also identified opportunities for improvement. In light of agreed good practice principles, combined with the good practices and opportunities for improvement observed during the investigation, we developed a self-assessment checklist that can be used to assist all State Government agencies consider their management of personal information.

On 30 June 2009 the Ombudsman commenced a critical new function to review certain child deaths. We have undertaken a significant level of work in relation to this function this year, including reviewing child deaths, identifying patterns and trends arising from these reviews and, learning from these reviews, seeking to improve the administration of the responsibilities of the Department for Child Protection and other relevant public authorities to prevent or reduce child deaths. We are undertaking two major own motion investigations into issues identified arising from our reviews. These own motion investigations are examining planning for children in the care of the Department for Child Protection and infant deaths. Reflecting the additional knowledge that we have gained in the second year of the operation of this most important of functions, we have significantly expanded the information about child death reviews in this report.

A key theme that regularly arises across each of our functions is the critically important nature of effective collaboration and cooperation between public authorities. While it will often be appropriate, or indeed required, that there is a 'lead' agency responsible for service delivery, many government services are best delivered where there is both a clear respect for, commitment to, and delivery on, effective cooperation between agencies with shared public interest objectives.

In a particularly busy and productive year, I take this opportunity to thank each member of my staff for their contribution to our work. The achievements of our office are as a direct result of a very hard-working, committed and skilled team. They are also a result of our strong collaborative work with a range of other public sector agencies, including with fellow members of the Integrity Coordinating Group, namely the Public Sector Commissioner, the Auditor General, the Information Commissioner and the Corruption and Crime Commissioner.

Western Australians should expect the office of the Ombudsman to provide independent and impartial resolution of their complaints in a timely, effective and efficient manner. Moreover, Western Australians should expect my office to ensure that the laws of the Parliament are being administered correctly, and in doing so, contribute to the maintenance of government hallmarked by integrity, accountability, responsiveness and respect for the rule of law. I am confident that we have met these expectations this year.



Chris Field
Western Australian Ombudsman