

Serving our customers

5: Client services



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Providing client services is a priority for staff members, from left, Diane Sargent, Maree Daley and Michelle Gould.



This section of the report looks at the work of six client service business centres.

These business centres derive much of their budget from fees charged to their clients and, in some instances, compete with the private sector for business. They offer quality registry and legal services at minimum cost to the community, while providing protective services for vulnerable clients. They also provide quality control on entry to the legal profession.

These agencies retain a high degree of independence but operate within the Department. Through service level agreements the Department provides these agencies with corporate services.

Serving our customers

The Department provides a wide range of services, to support members of the community with practical legal assistance and to provide quality control on entry to the legal profession. Services range from looking after peoples' rights, to helping with Wills and processing registrations for births, deaths, marriages, adoptions and changes of name.

Each year the NSW Registry of Births Deaths & Marriages (the Registry) coordinates approximately 200,000 **new registrations**. It also protects the recorded details of everyone in NSW. During the year it processed over half a million applications for certificates.

In 2006–07 the new *BDMcall* telephone centre was in its first year of operation and assisted over 350,000 people. Customer surveys indicate that 93 per cent of people were highly satisfied with the service.

The Registry's national **Certificate Validation Service** (CVS) validated 450,000 birth, death, marriage and change of name certificates. The incidence of false birth certificates was reduced to only 0.008 per cent in 2006–07.



Valentine's arrow strikes again

On Valentine's Day a record 26 couples were married at the Registry of Births Deaths & Marriages' Sydney registry, plus three at its Newcastle and Wollongong registries.

The day attracted media interest with channels Ten, Seven, Nine and ABC sending camera crews.

One couple even had their wedding vows broadcast live on radio.

Making weddings happen are (back row) Marianne Lea, Chris Watterson, Stan Barakat, Peter Relph (front row) Shella Cabusas, Sherry Mao, Mynda Braganza, Lourdes Cabusas

Joint Commonwealth and state initiatives were put in place to improve identity security, **combat identity crime** and protect the identities of Australians from being used for illegal purposes. The new National Identity Security Strategy (NISS) and the National Document Verification Service (DVS) will together allow authorised government agencies to check documents issued by the Commonwealth and documents issued by states (such as birth certificates and drivers licences). In 2006, the Registry participated in the national pilot of the DVS, to be implemented by 2010.



This year the Public Trustee NSW helped people make 11,513 Wills, dealt with 1,807 new estates, 857 new trusts and 99 powers of attorney. The total value of this new business was \$590.9 million. It was successful in **achieving service level targets** by administering 83 per cent of estates within seven months with an average time achieved of 5.42 months.

In 2006–07 the Crown Solicitor was instructed in 3,500 new matters. An externally conducted survey of Crown Solicitor's Office (CSO) clients found a significant majority rated its overall performance and its technical expertise as excellent. The survey also found that clients believe the CSO provides high or extremely high value for money. An internally conducted client satisfaction survey found the client satisfaction rate with the CSO's service at 4.2 out of 5 (84 per cent).

Improving customer service

The Department has a policy of continually **monitoring and improving services** to customers. In particular it has established processes to ensure that enquiries are dealt with promptly, efficiently and to the satisfaction of our customers.

Enquiries have doubled at the Office of the Public Guardian (OPG) over the past year, with the most common questions being about Enduring Guardianship and the Guardianship Tribunal. Similarly, online the most frequently downloaded items were the publication, *Enduring Guardianship in NSW: Your way to plan ahead* and the enduring guardianship *Forms of appointment*.

The process for explaining Enduring Guardianship needs to be carefully tailored for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. Taking information out into all communities is paying off. Evidence that the Department is meeting a continuing need for **tailored information** comes from positive feedback about this year's OPG education campaign. OPG plans to target Italian and Greek communities at free information sessions to migrant health workers and CALD peak groups in Liverpool, Marrickville, Manly, St George, Botany Bay and Leichhardt.

In 2006–07 the OPG received 39 compliments and only 22 complaints from clients and stakeholders. The complaints represented a 67.6 per cent decrease over the previous financial year and 100 per cent of these were resolved, compared with just 55 per cent in 2005–06.

Clear communication is crucial in explaining complex decisions about financial estate management. The Office of the Protective Commissioner (OPC) improved its structure in 2006 to ensure clients deal with **specialists in** disabilities, asset management, budgeting, individual planning and Commonwealth income support benefits. The switchboard now directs queries to specialists so the service is no longer dependent on the availability of an individual staff member.



32 Life Pieces art exhibition

An art show, 32 Life Pieces, was held at Parliament House in 2007 to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the *Guardianship Act 1987*, with the theme 'Tell us about yourself; tell us about your life'. Over 80 artists with a diverse range of disabilities and life circumstances told their stories.

The exhibition showed what is possible when people with disabilities are given the opportunity to develop their talents and to make choices about self expression. The event was so successful that another art show is planned for 2009.

The exhibition's official opening at Parliament House attracted 150 people.





Children benefit from Good Will Week

As part of *Good Will Week 2006* the Public Trustee NSW presented an \$11,000 cheque to The Children's Charity Variety, which assists Australia's sick, disadvantaged and special needs children.

The cheque represented \$1 from every Will made by Public Trustee NSW for the previous 12 months.

The Public Trustee's annual *Good Will Week* campaign aims to educate people about the importance of having a professionally drafted and current Will.

From left, Maria Venuti, Glenn Wheeler, Chris McMillan, Peter Whitehead and Barbara Miller

Clients who are used to dealing with one person have indicated they are reluctant to talk with different liaison staff, who may not know their personal circumstances. This may account for client complaints increasing under the new system. Most complaints were resolved, once it was explained to clients that the new system means most **issues are handled immediately** and by specialists. The previous system of leaving messages often caused significant delays.

Protecting people's rights

The Department protects the rights of more than 12,000 people under **guardianship or financial management**, who have disabilities that affect their capacity to make decisions. This work is carried out through the Office of the Protective Commissioner (OPC) and the Office of the Public Guardian (OPG).

These offices continue to work closely together.

OPC has focussed particularly on assisting clients with the recent changes in **superannuation law**. These new laws ensure that over the long term, clients with substantial assets will pay no income tax or capital gains tax on the funds in allocated pension.

The Crown Solicitor's Office (CSO) also works to protect clients' rights in its roles of advising, assisting, representing and acting for the government and its agencies. In acting for the state it assists government clients to serve the public interest. For example, the Crown Solicitor has represented the Department of Community Services in numerous cases before the courts to protect children who are at risk of abuse or neglect.

The Crown Solicitor **assists the Coroner** in inquests into unexplained deaths. Inquests involving the CSO have led to criminal charges being laid in relation to certain deaths and have also resulted in safety reforms being put in place as a result of these inquests.

The Crown Solicitor has also acted for the Attorney General in applications for the continuing detention or supervision of serious sex offenders under the *Crimes (Serious Sex Offenders) Act 2006*.

Accredited professionals are essential for a just and safe society. The Legal Profession Admission Board assesses and accredits academic and practical **training courses** in law, provided by universities and colleges. It also registers and assesses students for a Diploma in Law, which offers an accessible and affordable pathway into the profession. This year the Board promoted its course at the University of Sydney and the College of Law.



Future plans

Plans are underway for the NSW Registry of Births Deaths & Marriages to acquire a core **information technology** system called *LifeLink*. It is a next generation online customer service and registration system. The 'person-centric' core operating system is a significant advance over current technology, and means customers can have their queries answered more promptly and holistically.

The Registry is also offering new commemorative certificates, with expanded channels for distribution and additional options for marriage ceremonies. These improvements are expected to **improve profitability** by \$7 million over the next three years.

The Legal Profession Admission Board is also planning to implement a new **student record system** by late 2007. Investment in these new technologies will reduce costs and improve services.

Restructuring has been completed at five of the 19 Public Trustee branches and will continue over the next financial year. The aim is to create a work environment for professional service, targeting increased client conversion and efficiencies to reduce service delivery costs.

The Office of the Protective Commissioner (OPC) intends to provide a **proactive and planned service** in the direct management of estates and to develop resources and technology to better educate, inform and interact with private managers. Central to its future plans are programs to better explain OPC's role, manage expectations and develop referral pathways to other agencies and support services.

Part of this new service will involve a new fee structure for private management work. Approximately \$1.5 million in costs each year is not recovered from people using the service and is subsidised by OPC. The new system will ensure the **recovery of costs** to reflect user-pays principles, with a set fee for core functions, such as issuing directions and authorities, examining accounts and endorsing contracts.

A proposed restructuring of the Office of the Public Guardian would result in a re-organisation of resources and enable the creation of **new positions and responsibilities**. The OPG will also consider a Community Guardianship Program in NSW to enhance the timeliness and quality of support provided to its clients.

OPG's **new marketing strategy** will focus on exploring and testing new ways to educate the community and provide information about enduring guardianship.

The Crown Solicitor's Office (CSO) is responding to increased competition from private law firms for untied government agency work, by looking at ways to improve productivity and promote its expertise. To recruit and retain **the best and brightest** lawyers, the CSO is promoting the key benefits of working within a public sector structure. These include the interesting and challenging work that serves the public interest, family-friendly work practices that promote real work-life balance, a work culture that fosters teamwork, co-operation and career development, and an ethical working environment.

In 2006–07 the CSO won the NSW Law Society's *Equal Employment Opportunity Award* for large firms.

Overview of business centres in this chapter

Crown Solicitor's Office

The Crown Solicitor's Office (CSO) employs 330 staff, and has 10 legal practice groups that provide legal services to government agencies on a commercial basis.

The CSO performs both tied (core) and untied (non-core) legal services for the NSW Government and its agencies. The CSO must be engaged by government agencies to perform core legal services.



These include matters that:

- have implications for the government beyond an individual Minister's portfolio
- involve constitutional powers and privileges of the state and/or the Commonwealth
- are fundamental to the responsibilities of the government
- fall within the Attorney General's area of responsibility.

The CSO can compete for other legal work required by government departments and agencies that is considered to be 'non-core'.

Legal Profession Admission Board

The role of the LPAB is to impose quality control on entry to the legal profession. The Board is also responsible for the assessment and accreditation of academic and practical training courses in law, provided by universities and colleges. In conjunction with the Law Extension Committee, the Board offers an alternative legal qualification, registering and examining students-at-law for the Board's Diploma in Law course.

It deals with:

- regulating the admission of lawyers and the appointment of public notaries
- maintaining the Rolls of Lawyers and Public Notaries
- issuing certificates relating to the Rolls
- assisting the Supreme Court in conducting admission ceremonies
- communicating with other admitting, regulatory and educational authorities with a view to promoting the long-term effectiveness of the Board's work.

Office of the Public Guardian and Office of the Protective Commissioner

The Office of the Public Guardian (OPG) and the Office of the Protective Commissioner (OPC) are located within the Attorney General's Department and are administratively responsible to the Director General. The Protective Commissioner is also the Public Guardian.

The NSW Public Guardian is appointed by the Guardianship Tribunal to make lifestyle decisions on behalf of a person who has a disability and who is unable to make such decisions themselves.

The vision of the Public Guardian is to operate in a society in which people with impaired decision-making abilities are included and accepted as valued members and their human rights recognised. OPG provides equitable access to services through service delivery at a regional and community level. The OPG shares its experiences and knowledge of guardianship with private guardians and enduring guardians (guardians appointed directly by the person) through the Private Guardian Support Unit (PGSU), and with members of the community through community education and its information service.

The Office of the Protective Commissioner makes substitute financial management decisions for people with disabilities that affect their ability to make their own financial decisions, who are subject to a financial management order.

More details are available in the OPC and OPG Annual Reports.

Visit: www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/opg or www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/opc

Public Trustee NSW

Public Trustee NSW (PTNSW) aims to provide a competitive trustee service for people, government and organisations wishing to employ an executor, trustee, manager, agent or attorney.

PTNSW operates from 19 locations in metropolitan and regional NSW and through an agency network at Local Courts across the state.

More details are available in the Public Trustee's Annual Report.

Visit: www.pt.nsw.gov.au

NSW Registry of Births Deaths & Marriages

The Registry holds the records of all births, deaths and marriages occurring in NSW and provides data for planning and research. The Registry also records changes of name, adoptions, and changes of sex. The Registry provides certificates and information services that enable citizens of NSW to exercise their legal rights and meet their responsibilities.

