




Speech By
Jason Hunt

MEMBER FOR CALOUNDRA

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LEGAL AFFAIRS AND SAFETY COMMITTEE

Report, Motion to Take Note

 **Mr HUNT** (Caloundra—ALP) (3.45 pm): I rise to comment on report No. 17 of the Legal Affairs and Safety Committee titled *Oversight of the Office of the Queensland Ombudsman*. The Legal Affairs and Safety Committee has oversight responsibilities for the office of the Queensland Ombudsman conferring functions on the committee including to monitor and review performance, to report to the Legislative Assembly and to examine each annual report of the office of the Queensland Ombudsman.

The committee examined the Queensland Ombudsman's 2019-20 annual report, which was tabled on 24 September 2020. The annual report provided important information on the work done by the office over that period. It is no surprise to anyone here that the office of the Queensland Ombudsman was established to investigate the administrative actions of Queensland government agencies. The majority of investigations arise from complaints received.

The office received over 10,000 contacts, of which 7,207 were treated as complaints, over 2,600 matters were outside jurisdiction and over 1,100 were fully investigated. The annual report noted that well over 16,000 people were directed to the online complaint form. Eighty-five per cent of complaints were finalised within 10 days of receipt and 94 per cent were finalised within 30 days.

It is also worth noting that during 2019-20 the office published two major reports: *The Forensic Disability Service report: An investigation into the detention of people at the Forensic Disability Service*; and *Management of child safety complaints—second report: An investigation into the management of child safety complaints within the Department of Child Safety, Youth and Women*.

Clearly COVID had an effect as there was a slight drop-off in the number of requests for services in 2019-20. Although the requests are starting to return to normal levels, they are nonetheless slightly sporadic it seems. However, since March 2020 complaints about Queensland Health have increased as a result of COVID related complaints principally around issues relating to quarantine.

COVID also had a particular impact on the management of prisons. Visits were suspended and so a program of virtual visits was implemented and was largely a successful initiative. As an aside, I would note that the importation of drugs into correctional centres was largely curtailed during this same period. This also is not surprising because drugs come into correctional centres largely through visits and are smuggled in in a dizzying variety of ways. During this period when visits were suspended and went completely online, the importation of drugs into the correctional centres severely dropped off which led to spikes in violence within the centres as the availability of drugs became less and less.

Sadly, COVID also impacted on the delivery of training services provided by the Ombudsman in early 2020 but, just as it did with contact with detention centres, the Ombudsman's office regrouped and developed a virtual training and webinar program which is now being adopted as standard practice in many agencies. PID training, required by changes to the public interest disclosure standards of 2019, was also redeveloped and again, not surprisingly, we find that the processes required were disrupted by COVID and led to yet another successful live and online training package being delivered.

It is important too that we recognise the stresses and strains the staff of the Ombudsman's office have been under during this reporting period. It is not uncommon for these staff to have to deliver bad news or redirect inquiries, and this will not always end well or be received well by clients. It is very credible that the client satisfaction survey currently sits at 64 per cent, given the role and function of the office and the fact that the office is required to tell clients that their complaint simply has no foundation or that the respondent has no case to answer. This can be a bitter pill to swallow for some people, and the Office of the Ombudsman can be rightly proud of the level of satisfaction they have recorded.

Like the chair, I would like to acknowledge the contribution of Ombudsman Phil Clarke, who retired as the Queensland Ombudsman on 9 July 2020 after almost a decade in the job. In 2019 the budget for the office was just under \$10 million; actual expenses were \$337,000 under budget. The unused appropriation is to be repaid in 2020-21. I commend the report to the House.