




Speech By
Laura Gerber

MEMBER FOR CURRUMBIN

Record of Proceedings, 1 December 2022

LEGAL AFFAIRS AND SAFETY COMMITTEE

Report, Motion to Take Note

 **Mrs GERBER** (Currumbin—LNP) (3.12 pm): The Legal Affairs and Safety Committee has oversight responsibilities for the Office of the Queensland Ombudsman, whereby we monitor and review the performance of the Office of the Ombudsman and examine their annual report. At the outset, I thank Queensland Ombudsman Mr Anthony Reilly, Deputy Ombudsman Ms Angela Pyke, Director of Corporate Services Ms Leanne Robertson, and Principal Adviser, Public Interest Disclosures Ms Louise Rosemann for appearing before us back in May and providing a public update as well as answering a range of questions from us. I did also want to thank our committee secretariat for all the hard work they do as well as the other committee members.

The Ombudsman plays a vital role in maintaining accountability throughout the Queensland government. The Queensland Ombudsman independently investigates complaints about the actions and decisions of state government departments and agencies, including state schools and TAFEs, local councils and public universities, and, importantly, is one of the few ways that Queenslanders can have government decisions reviewed.

Some 10,758 contacts were made to the Office of the Queensland Ombudsman for advice, assistance or complaint resolution, noting that 2,553 of these contacts were outside the jurisdiction of the Ombudsman and as such referred to the appropriate agency. Of the total contacts made, 7,051 were treated as complaints and 1,066 were investigated. These numbers show a trend consistent with those contacts made in the prior financial year. I note a significant increase however in the number of contacts determined to involve a human rights element. In 2021 there were 2,159 contacts. This is up 779 cases since last year. That is quite significant.

The Queensland Ombudsman's annual report also noted that there were 22 service delivery complaints and that the complaints ranged from poor customer service to inaccurate information, unfair treatment or tone. The report also noted that there were five matters that were substantiated. Throughout the committee process I asked the Ombudsman and the Deputy Ombudsman to expand on those complaints. Acknowledging that this makes up only 0.05 per cent of all contacts, I want to touch on what those complaints related to. There were three pertaining to poor customer service, and each of these complaints received an apology. Another pertained to unfair treatment due to a comment that could have been perceived as sarcastic, while the last one pertained to inaccurate information whereby irrelevant information was provided. It is also important to note that further questioning during the committee process determined that none of these complaints related to the Ombudsman directly.

I also turn to the Queensland Ombudsman's annual report which makes reference to the recent Coaldrake review report handed down, titled *Review of culture and accountability in the Queensland public sector*. The Coaldrake review undertook an examination of Queensland's integrity system and made a number of recommendations for improvement.

I will outline the recommendations that were of direct relevance to the Office of the Ombudsman. The Coaldrake review recommended establishing a single clearing house for complaints. It recommended reviewing public interest disclosure legislation. The Office of the Ombudsman has oversight over public interest disclosure legislation, also known as PID. It is recommended that the legislation be reviewed. The Coaldrake review also recommended enhancing the integrity bodies' independence by involvement of parliamentary committees in setting their budgets and contributing to key appointments.

On the Legal Affairs and Safety Committee we recently dealt with the legislation to establish the Inspector of Detention Services. Amongst the calls were for it to be independent and for the budget to be independently determined. The Coaldrake recommendation here aligns with some of the commentary that we have already heard in the committee through other processes.

Another recommendation in the Coaldrake review was providing the Ombudsman with the authority to investigate complaints against private organisations carrying out functions on behalf of the government. I look forward to seeing the state government work with the Queensland Ombudsman to implement these recommendations. To the credit of the Office of the Queensland Ombudsman, they have already implemented one of the Coaldrake reviews recommendations which was around their intake telephone messages. The Coaldrake review recommended that their intake telephone message—being the message service that customers get when they phone the Office of the Ombudsman—was longer than recommended in the review. The Office of the Queensland Ombudsman has reviewed that system and made those changes to their intake telephone system, which is commendable.

Lastly, I wanted to note that the Office of the Queensland Ombudsman suffered terribly during the February-March floods. They were flooded and many of the staff struggled and were unable to return to their premises for many months. I congratulate both the Ombudsman and the staff for working through that in the way they did and holding together the Office of the Ombudsman and still dealing with the workload during that time.