



Speech By  
**Sandy Bolton**


**MEMBER FOR NOOSA**

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Record of Proceedings, 1 December 2022

## **LEGAL AFFAIRS AND SAFETY COMMITTEE**

### **Report, Motion to Take Note**

 **Ms BOLTON** (Noosa—Ind) (3.22 pm): I rise to address the Legal Affairs and Safety Committee report No. 35 on the oversight of the Office of the Queensland Ombudsman, which was established in 1974 to investigate the administrative actions of Queensland government agencies, local councils and universities. The majority of investigations arise from complaints received from Queenslanders, with the Ombudsman also conducting its own-initiative investigations.

The Office of the Queensland Ombudsman strives to be an agent of positive change for fair and accountable public administration in Queensland. They do this in three ways: by investigating administrative actions; by helping agencies to improve their administrative practices through information, training and advice; and by overseeing the system of public interest disclosures. This role is crucially important, as most Queenslanders' experience of government will be the day-to-day interactions they have with the Public Service and government agencies. That experience will colour their entire view of government, meaning the Ombudsman's role is vital in ensuring those interactions are timely, effective and high quality.

As we have heard, the Ombudsman received 10,000 contacts and 6,000 complaints and, of those, over 1,000 were referred for investigation. From that, 180 recommendations were made to public sector agencies, 100 regarding individual cases and 80 on systematic issues, with 99 per cent of them accepted.

With the Ombudsman Act passed in 2001, 2021-22 represents the 20th anniversary of the Ombudsman undertaking their improvement function. In recognition, the Ombudsman undertook a review of 20 years of files on ways for the Public Service to improve, and this has been welcomed. They found as the most common causes of issues—and associated insights—were: first, comprehensively polices must address all relevant operational issues; second, performance information needs to be meaningful and utilised; third, good information and records management is fundamental; fourth, you need the right staff with the right knowledge and skills; and, fifth, good communication with stakeholders, clients and other agencies is vital. These may appear straightforward; however, as found, they are difficult to get right. Pursuing strategies such as providing reasons for decisions, using human-centred design and improving governance arrangements are key.

The Ombudsman also receive complaints about their own services ranging from poor customer service to inaccurate information, unfair treatment or tone. In the hearing the committee was told that last year five of these complaints were substantiated. From this, the issue arises of how these complaints are dealt with. None of the five substantiated cases involved the Ombudsman himself. However, the Ombudsman relayed how such complaints could be dealt with.

In the first instance, if it were a complaint that involved allegations of corruption then it would be appropriate to be referred to the Crime and Corruption Commission. If it were a minor matter and the Deputy Ombudsman had no conflict of interest, it would be referred there. For serious issues, or where

the Deputy Ombudsman has a conflict, they should be referred to an independent assessor. The Ombudsman stated that he would be happy if those cases were reported to the Legal Affairs and Safety Committee. At this time the committee does not have the power or capabilities to refer to an independent assessor or investigate themselves; hence, the importance of reviewing the committee system.

The Coaldrake report has recommended that the committees of parliament play a significant role in setting the budget and appointing personnel for the organisations for which they have oversight. I believe this issue of complaints review needs also to be incorporated into the role of the committee and should be considered as part of the government's response to the Coaldrake review.

Finally, I would like to thank our chair, the member for Toohey, Peter Russo; fellow committee members; and our secretariat staff for their work on this report. In addition, I thank the Office of the Queensland Ombudsman for the work undertaken every day in extenuating times including, as we heard, when their office was flooded. I commend the report to the House.