

Highest ever number of complaints for Ombudsman

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For the second year in a row, the Office of the Ombudsman is reporting an unprecedented increase in demand for its services.

In its annual report to Parliament for the year ending 30 June 2013, the Office says it received and completed the highest ever number of complaints and other contacts about state sector agencies.

Chief Ombudsman Dame Beverley Wakem says the Office completed more than 13,000 pieces of work and provided advice and assistance in over four thousand cases. Just over 1,000 complaints were investigated.

“We identified administrative deficiency in a fifth of the complaints investigated and made recommendations in 16 cases. We also obtained remedies for the benefit of individuals in 1,430 cases.”

She says the Office works hard to make a difference to the lives of New Zealanders and to help state sector agencies improve their services. The growth in demand is an indication of the continuing need for this service.

The Office of the Ombudsman’s work during the period included significant increases in official information complaints as well as contacts and complaints relating to the Earthquake Commission (EQC).

Dame Beverley says despite the rise in volume, the Office has worked effectively. Changes have been made in the way the Office works to address the workload and it achieved a 30 percent increase in overall work completed despite a 29 percent increase in work coming in.

“We are now able to more easily move staff resources to where they are needed and we have set up formal early assistance and early resolution processes within dedicated teams to get through more work.”

Dame Beverley says a welcome increase in the budget for the Office means that more investigating staff will also be appointed to progress the growing number of complaints.

In all, the Office received 13,684 complaints and other contacts, a workload increase of 29 percent. It received 838 complaints and other contacts about the EQC – nearly double the number in 2011-2012 and eleven times more than they received in 2010-2011.

“We now have a designated contact person at the EQC to seek early resolution of complaints as well as regular reporting and discussions. In addition, we are undertaking with the Privacy Commissioner a systemic review of EQC’s process for handling information requests,” says Dame Beverley.

“The aim is to identify if there are improvements EQC can make to assist in the release of information critical to homeowners’ decision making around repairs to their damaged properties. This report will be published in late 2013.”

The Office says that official information complaints increased overall by 92% this year. There was a significant increase in delay complaints, continuing a worrying trend from the previous year.

“The Office will be including the issue of timeliness in its upcoming wider administrative improvement investigation into how official information requests are being handled in selected government departments,” says Dame Beverley. “This will include an examination of policies and practices which may be impeding processing of these requests.”

However, she says, she is pleased to report that an impact measure that looks at the quality of the public service’s administration and decision-making shows these are improving.

Dame Beverley says the office is also pleased that a nationwide public awareness survey during the year showed that more than seven out of 10 people had heard of the Ombudsman – up three percent from last year.

For more information contact: Dame Beverley Wakem 0800 802 602.

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