

## Ombudsman's office meeting the challenge

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The Office of Ombudsman has told Parliament that it has made significant progress in effectively managing its work to make sure people are treated fairly in New Zealand.

More funding has enabled the Office to appoint extra staff this year, and that combined with efficiency gains has meant it is in better shape to deal with an increasing workload, which has doubled over the past 10 years.

The Ombudsman's Annual Report shows the Office dealt with the second largest number of complaints ever over the past year. Chief Ombudsman Dame Beverley Wakem says more than 11,000 complaints were received in 2013 – 2014 and while the Office is still working on meeting its own timeliness targets, the complaint backlog has been reduced.

“Overall, we ended the year in much better shape than we started completing 19% more work than the average amount completed each year over the past 10 years.”

She says the Office has seen a significant impact on good government arising from its work this year.

“We have achieved remedies for the benefit of public administration in 91 cases, almost three times more than the previous year. Significant changes brought about by our interventions include improved resourcing and processes to help the Earthquake Commission to effectively manage the large volume of requests arising from the Canterbury earthquake.”

Dame Beverley says not all complaints require formal investigation. Following a receipt of a number of complaints, she decided to undertake a systemic investigation into the processing of temporary visa “partnership” applications by Immigration New Zealand. These involved people in India making applications to reunite with their partners already in New Zealand on student and work visas.

She says the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment itself undertook to review the issue, concluding there were deficiencies in the India branches' assessments.

As a result, 1,155 affected complainants and other potentially affected people had their applications reassessed, 258 had their applications approved and 676 applicants got a refund of their visa application fee.

Branch practices were also changed, staff training provided and new guidance issued.

“Given the outcome of the Ministry’s review, the Office of the Ombudsman decided that an investigation was no longer necessary.”

As well as helping improve public administration overall, the Chief Ombudsman says the Office also achieved remedies for the benefit of individuals in 919 cases. These remedies included changed decisions, reasons or explanations, financial remedies and apologies.

The Chief Ombudsman says half the complaints under the Ombudsmen Act were made against central government departments.

“The agencies generating significant numbers of complaints tend to be the ones that interact with and impact on large numbers of people such as the Department of Corrections, the Earthquake Commission, Immigration New Zealand, the Ministry of Social Development and the Inland Revenue Department.”

Dame Beverley says the Office continues to receive a high number of official information complaints with people making good use of their rights to request information under the Official Information Act and the Local Government Official Information and Meeting Act, and to complain to the Ombudsman if they are dissatisfied.

Ends

The full report is available at [www.ombudsman.parliament.nz](http://www.ombudsman.parliament.nz)

For further information, contact Chief Ombudsman Dame Beverley Wakem on (04) 473 9533 or 0800 802 602.