



Ombudsman Tasmania

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CALL FOR URGENT IMPLEMENTATION OF RIGHT TO INFORMATION SYSTEM IMPROVEMENTS

Tasmanian Ombudsman Richard Connock has called on the State Government to urgently address issues in the Right to Information (RTI) scheme that have significant impact on people being able to access their own information, particularly from the Department for Education, Children and Young People and the Department of Health.

"Delays and backlogs remain the significant issue in the Right to Information scheme and in external review requests and enquiries to my office," he said upon the release of the [Ombudsman Tasmania 2023-24 Annual Report](#) today.

"Tasmanians want, and deserve, an accountable and open government and a seeming lack of motivation to improve the RTI system is hindering that being achieved."

"I urge the Tasmanian Government to ensure the recommendations of the *Commission of Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Institutional Settings* regarding improving RTI are fully implemented as soon as possible."

Mr Connock said the historical backlog of external review applications awaiting finalisation remained a barrier to timely review and detrimentally impacted the RTI scheme.

"I acknowledge and again express my regret in relation to this," he said. "My office has, however, made substantial progress to clear this backlog over the 2023-24 period, and delays have been markedly reduced."

"Open external reviews are at their lowest numbers since the 2018-19 financial year and average days open fell by 49% over the past financial year, which illustrates a major reduction in delays to applicants."

Mr Connock said the issue of limited training opportunities for RTI decision makers, particularly new delegates, remained ongoing.

"Unfortunately, the rollout of training for delegates planned by the Right to Information Uplift Project run by the Department of Premier and Cabinet has not occurred in the 2023-24 financial year," he said. "I sought additional funding to expand my ability to conduct training and to respond to the Commission of Inquiry's recommendations, but to date a response has not been provided."

"I have continued to run a limited training program and provide guidance in an ad hoc fashion, while dedicating the majority of my limited resources to the reduction of the backlog in external review requests."

Mr Connock said his Office continued to receive complaints from people who had been on the waiting list for social housing for extended periods, and were either homeless or at risk of homelessness.

"This has been an ongoing issue now for a number of years and is a result of a limited pool of social housing stock," he said. "People come to the Ombudsman as a last resort hoping that we can assist but, unfortunately, if there are no houses available and proper processes have been followed, we are unable to help."

"Our staff hear some tragic stories from people who are desperate to have stable accommodation and we have to explain that the assistance we can offer is often limited to checking that proper processes are being followed."

State Government departments - in particular Justice and Education, Children and Young People - continue to be the subject of the highest number of complaints to the Ombudsman.

Mr Connock said while the overall number of complaints and enquiries relating to State Government departments had decreased from 2022-23, they still made up more than 50% of the complaints made to his office.

"Ombudsman Tasmania has an important role to play in ensuring the administrative actions of Tasmanian public authorities are lawful, reasonable and fair," he said. "It is vital that Tasmanians continue to have an independent voice that can work with all parties in an impartial and objective way to resolve complaints and address systematic problems in order to improve the quality and standard of Tasmanian public administration."

"The fact that my office received almost 700 complaints in the reporting period indicates that the work of my dedicated team continues to be of significant value to the Tasmanian public."

Mr Connock said a number of permanent and fixed term positions that had been filled in 2023-24 led to an increase in the Office's capacity to address complaints and enquiries.

"Suffice to say, the additional staff have made a significant difference to the way we do our work and have made it possible to do a little more than our core work," he said.

"It is pleasing to know that, upon my retirement in the coming year, this office and its related functions are in a good position to be able to support the transition to a new Ombudsman."

Mr Connock said the number of complaints from young people detained at Ashley Youth Detention Centre (AYDC) over the last two years had increased significantly, likely due to the publicity caused by the Commission of Inquiry and greater awareness by young people in detention of the complaint options available.

"In the two years prior to 2022-23 complaints from AYDC were in single figures but in 2022-23 there were 42 and in 2023-24 there were 45," he said.

"The subject matter covered a number of issues such as use of force, being locked in rooms for extended periods, centre rules and interactions with staff members."

"It is heartening that young people are making use of the office to raise concerns about their time in AYDC and we hope to maintain their awareness of the office with regular visits to AYDC by Ombudsman team members."

Mr Connock said complaints from people in custody continued to be one of the Office's key areas.

"The Tasmania Prison Service has continued to have challenges with optimum staffing levels and, consequently, the office has received a large number of complaints about lockdowns due to staffing shortages," he said. "There is little that our Office can do about lockdowns other than comment in a publication such as this on how unacceptable extended lockdowns are and note the detrimental effect they have on people in custody."

"As well as adversely affecting the mental wellbeing of people in custody, extended and repeated lockdowns have a negative impact on access to education, therapeutic and medical appointments and physical exercise. It is essential to address the issue of ongoing lockdowns."

Inquiries: Paula Catchpole 0472 832 514. Please note the Ombudsman is unable to make further comment other than what is in this release and the annual report.