

Ombudsman Communiqué

Roundtable with Community Service Peak Bodies on 30 October 2024

The Commonwealth Ombudsman, Iain Anderson, met with national community service peak bodies at a roundtable he hosted on 30 October 2024.

The roundtable provided a forum to raise and discuss insights into emerging issues, provide perspectives and share knowledge, for all participants.

The meeting was attended by six national organisations that provide assistance for members of the community, including advocacy, advice, and practical assistance for day-to-day needs.

The organisations which attended were the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), Economic Justice Australia, Women's Legal Services Australia, the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA), St Vincent de Paul and the Brotherhood of St Laurence.

The Ombudsman welcomed participants, conveying his commitment to engaging with civil society organisations and emphasising the importance of coming together to share insights and perspectives.

The Ombudsman and participants discussed a broad range of issues relating to myGov, the Child Support Scheme, Workforce Australia, the recommendations of the Royal Commission into the Robodebt scheme, income management, detention issues and private health insurance.

The discussion also highlighted the need to increase awareness of the Ombudsman's role and services.

There was general agreement from participants that many of the organisations' clients were not aware that they could take a complaint to the Ombudsman and/or did not have the capability to lodge a complaint.

Discussion points included difficulties community service organisations faced in meeting the requests for help from members of the public, the lack of general awareness in the community of the Ombudsman's office, role and services, and the personal capacity difficulties of some clients in making a complaint to the Ombudsman.

Those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds could also encounter difficulties in raising issues and making a complaint, with language issues compounded by a lack of knowledge and understanding of their rights.

Together, these can present barriers for potential complainants, with some organisations saying that they felt it could lead to under-reporting of issues with government agencies.

There was interest and discussion around the Ombudsman's capacity to initiate, review, investigate and report on areas of interest.

The Ombudsman stated that his office did keep track of the trends in complaints and could also look at Commonwealth agencies' policies and schemes for insights into systemic causes.

There was also discussion on how individuals achieve remedies for situations where an agency was found to have made a mistake.

In relation to those situations, the Ombudsman stated that the onus was on the agency to correct this, and the Ombudsman does give this advice to agencies.

Where an issue has been investigated if the recommendations of the Office are not accepted by an agency, the Ombudsman can table these in parliament and/or make the agency's refusal public.

Going forward, the Ombudsman encouraged the peak bodies to reach out to the Office about any issues or areas of concern.

The Ombudsman plans to hold further roundtables this year and the next with civil society organisations.

For more information about the Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman, visit ombudsman.gov.au.