

Ombudsman services in Australia

Fair, independent, impartial and free

What is an Ombudsman?

An Ombudsman takes complaints from citizens or consumers about agencies, departments or providers. An Ombudsman will investigate those complaints and reach a resolution that is fair to both sides.

A free service for consumers

An Ombudsman is free for consumers, fair and independent. You don't need a lawyer to make a complaint to an Ombudsman.

An Ombudsman works for a fair and reasonable solution and is not 'on the side of' either the consumer or the organisation the complaint is about.

An Ombudsman generally has a responsibility to help improve service and administration in the organisations about which they take complaints, especially where a complaint indicates there is a more general problem.

History

The first Ombudsman was an official appointed by government or parliament to investigate and address complaints by individual citizens against government and government agencies. The first Ombudsman was appointed in Sweden in 1809.

The word ombudsman is a Swedish word meaning representative. It is not gender specific and so can refer to either a man or a woman.

The first Australian Ombudsman was established in 1971 in Western Australia, followed by South Australia in 1972 and Victoria in 1973.

The first Commonwealth Ombudsman was appointed in 1977.

Types of Ombudsmen

A parliamentary Ombudsman

A parliamentary Ombudsman is appointed and funded by government. Their role is to investigate complaints against Government agencies, and to produce reports and make recommendations aimed at improving public administration.

There is a parliamentary Ombudsman for each Australian State and Territory, as well as a Commonwealth Ombudsman.

Governments have also appointed other Ombudsmen or commissioners with a more specific mandate (for example, to consider complaints about lawyers, health services or police). These offices can be combined with the parliamentary Ombudsman or separate.

An industry-based Ombudsman

Generally the providers in a particular industry (for example telecommunications, energy and water, financial services, insurance, public transport) are required to be members of an independent dispute resolution scheme. The industry then sets up and funds an Ombudsman scheme.

A Board or Council with representatives of both industry and consumers as well as an independent Chair, is responsible for the operation of an industry-based Ombudsman.

The Board or Council appoints the Ombudsman. Government or an independent regulator may be involved by approving the scheme and ensuring that it complies with certain standards. Sometimes a Government Ombudsman is also an industry Ombudsman.

An industry-based Ombudsman typically charges each member according to the number and/or the complexity of complaints it receives about the company.

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How do you make a complaint?

All Ombudsman services will generally ask you try to resolve your complaint with the organisation or provider before they will take on the issue.

Most industry-based Ombudsman services take complaints by phone, letter, fax, email or online.

Sometimes you will be asked to submit your complaint in writing (primarily for a government Ombudsman). If you have difficulties doing this, they can help to make a written complaint.

Refer to higher level

After taking your complaint, an Ombudsman may refer you back to the organisation you are complaining about, especially if you have had only limited contact with them.

You may be referred to a complaints specialist or senior officer in the agency.

Complaint investigation

If you are not able to resolve your complaint directly with the agency, the Ombudsman may investigate your complaint.

The Ombudsman will contact the organisation, outline your complaint and ask the organisation to respond and make suggestions for resolving the matter. With the help of an Ombudsman staff member, you and the organisation will work towards a resolution of the complaint.

Most complaints are resolved within 2 to 4 weeks, however a complex matter may take some months to resolve.

Complaint resolution

If it is not possible to negotiate a resolution, a parliamentary Ombudsman can make a recommendation for resolution to the agency. An industry Ombudsman can make a decision or determination that is binding on the member of the scheme, but not on the complainant. However, the vast majority of matters are negotiated.

Where to make a complaint about...

Communications

Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman ☎ 1800 062 058

Postal Industry Ombudsman ☎ 1300 362 072

Electricity, gas and water

Energy and Water Ombudsman (Victoria) ☎ 1800 500 509

Energy & Water Ombudsman NSW ☎ 1800 246 545

Energy Industry Ombudsman of South Australia ☎ 1800 665 565

Energy Ombudsman Western Australia ☎ 1800 754 004

Energy Ombudsman Tasmania ☎ 1800 001 170

Energy Ombudsman Queensland ☎ 1800 662 837

Financial services (banking, brokers, credit, insurance, superannuation)

Financial Ombudsman Service ☎ 1300 78 08 08

(includes Banking and Financial Services Ombudsman, Credit Ombudsman Service, Credit Union Dispute Resolution Centre, Financial Co-operative Dispute Resolution Scheme, Financial Industry Complaints Service, Insurance Brokers Disputes Limited, Insurance Ombudsman Service, Superannuation Complaints Tribunal)

Government departments and agencies

Commonwealth Ombudsman ☎ 1300 362 072

State and Territory Ombudsman services

- New South Wales ☎ (02) 9286 1000 or (outside Sydney) ☎ 1800 451 524
- Northern Territory ☎ 1800 806 380
- South Australia ☎ 1800 182 150
- Tasmania ☎ 1800 001 170
- Victoria ☎ 1800 806 314
- Western Australia ☎ 1800 117 000
- Queensland ☎ (07) 3005 7000 or (outside Brisbane) ☎ 1800 068 908

Public transport

Public Transport Ombudsman Victoria ☎ 1800 466 865