

MEDIA RELEASE MEDIA RELEASE MEDIA RELEASE MEDIA RELEASE

Embargoed until 10:30am 22nd October 2008

NSW Ombudsman **Annual Report 2007-2008**

The need for open and transparent government

The NSW Ombudsman today tabled his Annual Report for 2007-2008.

“Decision making in government should not be closed off from the public” the Ombudsman, Bruce Barbour said. **“People have a right to know how and why government decisions are made.”**

In April, the Ombudsman instigated a wide ranging review of the NSW *Freedom of Information Act 1989*. **“The way government does business has changed markedly in 20 years, yet this Act has lurched from one piecemeal amendment to another. It is difficult to understand and difficult to use”** said the Ombudsman.

“Government agencies should make more information freely available” Mr Barbour said. **“Despite widespread improvements, the immediate reaction of many agencies is still to resist releasing information.”** Several of the case studies in this year’s report demonstrate the need for a change of attitude:

- A daughter wanted information about her elderly father’s treatment in hospital. Following our involvement, the Area Health Service released the information, apologised, and offered her an opportunity to meet with the chief executive to receive a personal apology (**case study 75**).
- A pensioners group attempted to obtain information from the RTA about a review of pensioner concessions. After our inquiries and several media articles, the RTA advised that no such review was being conducted, and released relevant documents (**case study 77**).

The need for a change in attitude is not limited to FOI. Many agencies have more work to do to improve their complaint handling practices. **“Agencies need to realise that a complaint is not a “black mark” against them, but an opportunity to identify problems, solve them, and improve their customer service”** the Ombudsman said.

We checked up on the complaint handling systems of 350 government agencies and local councils. **“Overall, the results were disappointing, given that**

improving customer service and complaint handling is a State Plan priority” Mr Barbour said. Our feedback identified the need for:

- more complaint information in community languages
- more strategic use of complaint information, and
- more staff training.

Issues of interest

Complaint handling survey		P8
Review of the FOI Act		P146
Access to hospital records	Case study 75	P151
Clarity on pensioner concessions	Case study 77	P152
Legal professional privilege		P151
FOI investigations		P152