

The statistical summary of the number of cases dealt with by the Scheme in the year to 30 June 2003 shows that the number of new cases received declined by 13.3 per cent.

This reduction in the number of cases received is pleasing as it indicates that banks themselves are dealing more effectively with their customers and taking steps to avoid escalation of disputes which require assistance from our office.

Once again, the Scheme has this year contributed to policy development at an industry level. BFSO has been actively involved in the consultation process with the Australian Bankers' Association and other stakeholders regarding the implementation of the new Code of Banking Practice.

The Ombudsman's office held its fourth annual conference during the year for member banks. In excess of 140 delegates attended the conference, continuing a growing trend in the number of participants. During these two days, I, the staff of the office and guest speakers provided participants with up-to-date information about changes, trends and issues affecting the industry and dispute resolution in particular. Delegates participated in a number of case studies and discussed the various approaches of BFSO in resolving these matters.

For the second year running, an exchange of staff was organised with international dispute resolution services. This year, Diane Carmody, the General Manager of BFSO, spent time working in the Office of the Banking Adjudicator in South Africa. In exchange, BFSO welcomed Jacques Louwrens, an investigator with, and the company secretary of, the Banking Adjudicator's Office. Exchange programmes such these are of great value to our Scheme as they allow for the exchange of different ideas regarding dispute resolution and case management. They also allow for on-going working ties to be established between the schemes and for the continual flow of information and ideas.

During the year, the Scheme welcomed the appointment of Jillian Segal as Chairman of the Board. I would like to take this opportunity to recognise the outstanding contributions made by Ms Segal and other Board members who have provided me and the staff of the Scheme, with an exceptional level of support and encouragement over the year. As a result of that support, as well as the efforts of staff, we are able to maintain the high quality of the work done by the Scheme. We are also able to uphold the excellent reputation that the Ombudsman's office enjoys within the financial services industry and the broader community.

In August 2003, following extensive consultation and discussion throughout the year, the bank members of the Scheme agreed to admit non-banks to membership of the Scheme. They also agreed to a change of name from the Australian Banking Industry Ombudsman Limited to the Banking and Financial Services Ombudsman Limited. The renaming of the Scheme is an appropriate measure to reflect the broadening of the membership base.

This has been one of the most significant developments for the Scheme in the last 13 years and I am very pleased that these changes have occurred.

As a consequence of the change in name and broadening of the Scheme, at a planning day later this year, the staff will review and re-write the mission statement and values, so that they appropriately reflect the broadened nature of our work.

Support for these two important initiatives is evidence of the consumer groups and banks' trust of and commitment to the Scheme over the last 13 years. It is also evidence of the continued co-operation of the banks that are associated with the Ombudsman's office.

Over the last few years we have seen ourselves as an organisation not simply dealing with complaints, but as a cost-effective dispute resolution service for banks, their customers and the other schemes in the financial services sector.

It seems especially relevant for me to take this opportunity to thank the staff of the Ombudsman's office for a wonderful year of commitment and activity. Given the broadening of the role of the Scheme, the challenges that will be presented in the future will be very different from those faced by us in the past.



Colin Neave
Ombudsman

