

On August 1, 2022 Alexander Oerke was appointed as the first Ombudsman for complaints against the administration and the police of Berlin. After his first year in office, he is giving a short report.

Building up a completely new agency from scratch so to speak was the biggest challenge. Rooms, technical equipment and, most important, skilled personnel had to be acquired. That this process moved rather smoothly was only possible by the help of other departments and agencies who generously gave their support.

Making the public aware of the Ombudsman's office, his tasks and responsibilities was and is highly important. By and by more and more citizens make use of their right to bring their grievances before the Ombudsman. In 2023 we received already more than 230 complaints.

Grievances are quite diverse. They concern for example, problems with the registry office, the naturalization services, the granting of financial benefits (basic income support and housing subsidies) and the work of the public order offices. In many cases citizens complain about authorities not being available to them or not responding to their requests. These people quite rightly feel they are not taken seriously, and so they are losing confidence in the state. That is the reason why it is so important to me and my employees to contact the relevant authorities as unbureaucratically and as quickly as possible to get problems solved swiftly.

Unfortunately, the general tendency seems to be that in many areas administrative procedures are getting more laboriously and official acts and services more time consuming. The fulfilment of public duties has also become more complex. At the same time, the public sector is faced with the problem of finding sufficient suitable personnel. Therefore, it is important to have a critical look at customary working methods and attitudes. Critical inquiries by the Ombudsman can help in this process. That is why I encourage every citizen to inform me about problems encountered when dealing with the administration.

A well-functioning administration strengthens trust in the community and in democracy as a whole. This trust is even more important in the relationship between citizens and the police. People in the city of Berlin must be able to trust their police. And the police, in return, is depending on this trust in order to do their job well. That is why it is so important that misdemeanour by police officers should be addressed and discussed openly. Fortunately, Berlin's police leadership generally shares this opinion. However, while examining police matters I often experience limitations as I am denied access to important files when criminal investigations are under way.

I am aware that not every administrative office is happy when questions are asked or an official statement is requested by the Ombudsman. Who likes to listen to criticism anyway? For this reason, in particular, I would like to inform the employees in the Berlin administration that I understand when a faster way of dealing with a matter is hindered by staff shortages. I am therefore holding discussions with the district mayors and other heads of the Berlin administration to promote good cooperation. I think we all have a common goal, namely that the people of Berlin should be content with their public services and should feel that their problems and concerns are in good hands. And I hope that more employees in the public sector will receive an email like the one we received from a complainant saying:

"I would like to thank you very sincerely; your great commitment has borne fruit. I am so thrilled that I am toying with the idea of contacting you in another matter."

Alexander Oerke
Ombudsman of Berlin (Germany)