

## Becoming our best selves

Written by Emily O'Reilly on 16 October 2019 in Opinion  
Opinion

The EU administration can be a role model for the whole of the EU, believes Emily O'Reilly.



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How do you make a small EU office with a major treaty mandate visible and relevant to 500 million EU citizens?

The 'small office' is that of the European Ombudsman - created through the 1993 Maastricht Treaty and the 'big Treaty mandate' - to serve as the complaint-handling watchdog over the entire EU administration, from powerhouses such as the European Commission and the European Central Bank (ECB) to the multiple agencies that regulate everything from our medicines to our food.

We apply the law and the principles of good administration, seeking a just outcome for citizens that are often overwhelmed by the power and distance of the EU administration, providing a way to bridge

that gap.

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When Parliament elected me to face that challenge in my first five-year mandate I had made my strategy clear and my aim a simple one – to give real meaning to the citizens' fundamental right to good administration by making the office much more effective.

I knew the office well. As the Irish Ombudsman for ten years I had been part of a network of member state Ombudsmen chaired by the European Ombudsman. I knew the office's strengths but also, crucially, its potential.

I had seen, for example, how a single complaint from a bereaved parent about accessing the clinical trial results of a potent drug had led in time to transformational change in the European Medicines Agency.

I wanted to harness that transformational potential of the office to bring about even greater benefits for citizens whose quality of life is increasingly affected by the choices and actions of the EU administration.

“I have seen what can be achieved through a strategy that puts citizens and their rights at the front and centre of everything the office does - and by making sure that the EU administration does exactly the same”

I worked on several fronts. We overhauled our work practices and speeded up the handling of complaints.

We introduced a 'Fast Track' procedure for time sensitive access to documents cases and we broadened our social media and communications base to attract attention to our service.

I also intensified my collaboration with the European Parliament, attending more than 50 hearings before a range of committees and holding over 120 bilateral meetings with MEPs over the last five years.

The office reached out to civil society, to businesses, to academics and media influencers and used our mandated power to investigate systemic issues, offering advice and suggestions for improvements.

And the strategy is working. The number of complaints within the mandate increased by 18 per cent last year and continuing its rise.

More and more citizens, civil society organisations, businesses and parliamentarians are turning to us for help with everything from accessing documents, disputes over grants and tenders, fair procedures in competition investigations, breaches of the Charter of Fundamental Rights and simple failures to communicate and explain.

Our work has also expanded and intensified in agencies and bodies such as the ECB, the European Investment Bank and the Eurogroup, as citizen awareness of their vital roles grew in the wake of the financial crisis.

The Parliament has consistently praised our achievements and has been an engaged and collaborative ally.

The Commission has also welcomed our input and we in turn have applauded the often unseen and unsung work of the EU administration through an awards scheme for excellence.

“My inspiration is my belief that the EU administration can be a role model for the whole of the EU”

We have dealt with thousands of individual citizen complaints and made the process much more efficient.

In addition, we have analysed how laws are developed when EU Member States come together in Brussels through the Council, and recommended more accountability to citizens by making the work more transparent when appropriate - a recommendation supported by Parliament in January 2019.

We have also boosted transparency of the Eurogroup meetings so that citizens are much more aware of its decision making and helped the ECB to improve its policy on stakeholder meetings.

As well as having an influence on the strengthening of the Commissioners' Code of Conduct, we have increased the transparency of EU lobbying, ensured that the EU border agency, Frontex, has a complaints mechanism, we have helped the transparency of the Brexit negotiations and convinced the European External Action Service, with the help of Parliament, to pay its over 800 trainees in EEAS delegations across the globe.

I have visited over 20 Member States and expanded the practical role of the Ombudsman Network by working with colleagues on investigations relevant at both Member State and EU level.

My inspiration is my belief that the EU administration can be a role model for the whole of the EU.

As my first mandate ends and I move to seek another, I believe that I have given concrete reality to what I pledged to do as I took my oath of office before the European Court of Justice, to help the EU institutions, agencies and bodies to be their own best selves.

I have seen what can be achieved through a strategy that puts citizens and their rights at the front and centre of everything the office does - and by making sure that the EU administration does exactly the same

### **About the author**

Emily O'Reilly is standing for a second term in office as European Ombudsman

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