



Independent Complaints Reviewer to The National Archives

Annual Report 2003-2004 Seeking a fair resolution

About the Independent Complaints Reviewer

Jodi Berg was appointed as Independent Complaints Reviewer (the ICR) for The National Archives in 2000. She is also ICR for Land Registry, the Charity Commission and the Housing Corporation and Independent Case Examiner for the Child Support Agency. She is a solicitor with extensive management experience in both the private and public sectors and is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators.

Foreword

I am pleased to present my annual report as Independent Complaints Reviewer for The National Archives. Public bodies rarely attract praise for their commitment to customer service. There are, however, exceptions to the rule and The National Archives is one organisation that can be singled out in this way. My report demonstrates why this is so.

The ICR service

My office is available to anyone who is unhappy with the service they have received from The National Archives and does not feel that it has given a satisfactory response to their complaints. I can look into the way the Agency has acted, criticise poor service and recommend action to put matters right or provide reasonable redress. I can also recommend changes to procedures in order to raise the standard of service given to others in the future.

I am assisted in this task by a dedicated team of people who are committed to high and continuously improving standards. The service is entirely free of charge to complainants.

My office is managerially independent of The National Archives, and my Investigations Officers are bound by the dual principles of confidentiality and impartiality.

I am unable to investigate complaints if The National Archives has not been given the opportunity to deal with the matter first or if it is referred more than six months after the

Agency has given its final response. I am also unable to look into matters that are the subject of legal proceedings, matters of law or Government policy or complaints that have been or are being investigated by the Parliamentary Ombudsman

The process

This office accepts complaints by post, e-mail, fax or telephone. In most cases, people will be asked to complete a referral form which explains the reasons for their complaint and what they would like The National Archives to do to resolve the problem.

If the matter has not yet been fully considered by The National Archives, we will refer it to the Agency on behalf of the complainant. Once a complaint is accepted, we establish whether there is any possibility of resolving matters by agreement between the complainant and The National Archives. This may involve suggesting ways of dealing with matters that have not been considered earlier or explaining why certain action cannot be taken.

If we cannot achieve resolution through conciliation, we agree a short summary of the points of complaint with the complainant, which will form the terms of reference for our investigation. A copy of the summary is sent to The National Archives and we ask to see any relevant documentation which will assist the investigation. I may also choose to interview members of staff or the complainant.

Once the investigation is completed, I issue a report of my

findings to the complainant and The National Archives. The report will contain a summary of the events, an explanation of the ICR's conclusions in respect of each point of complaint and any recommendations that I consider appropriate. Recommendations can include further explanation of its actions on The National Archives' part, an apology, specific action or the award of limited compensation. I can also make systemic recommendations arising from the lessons learned from complaints.

The National Archives is committed to implementing my recommendations. However, should the Agency decide that it cannot do so, it has to explain the reasons for this in writing. The National Archives has accepted all of my recommendations to date. Finally, the complainant is always informed of their right to ask their MP to refer their complaint to the Parliamentary Ombudsman, if they remain dissatisfied and wish to pursue the matter further. No one has chosen to do this.

The year

In previous years, I have received a consistently small number of formal complaints about The National Archives. In 2002-03 I received only 10 complaint referrals, but only 1 complaint was subjected to review whilst 2 others were resolved by mediation. 2003-04 was exceptionally quiet and no formal complaint referrals were received at all.

Although we were able to offer advice and assistance to help some people take their complaints forward, in the event the National

Archives was able to resolve all of these without people finding it necessary to ask me to become involved at a later stage.

This success needs to be set against the backdrop of a busy year for the Agency, in which there were:

- 281,906 reader visits
- 81,782 telephone calls
- 46,508 written enquiries
- 51 recorded complaints

It is clear from the feedback that The National Archives receives from its customers that people feel that it provides a very good service and few complaints arise. However, even when this is taken into account, it is noteworthy that so few complaints were recorded by the Agency itself. Complaints dealt with by the Agency last year concerned a number of concerns which we have seen before. These included complaints about the cost of photocopying and the attitude of staff when enforcing the Agency's rules for readers, both naturally contentious issues. A few complaints were also received from disappointed readers who had turned up to the Agency's site at Kew only to find it closed for stocktaking. We took the opportunity to raise this on a visit to Kew, and we were satisfied with the steps that had been taken to publicise this short period of closure.

I take a keen interest in ensuring that The National Archives properly records all of the complaints that it receives and signposts people to my office where appropriate. Both I and other members of my team have visited the Agency's sites at Kew and the Family Records Centre on

several occasions this year, and we have seen that information about how to complain or comment on the service provided is prominently displayed and easily available to customers in the public areas. In addition, information on how to complain is available on The National Archives' website.

We have also been pleased to contribute to staff training and awareness on customer service and complaints handling in the course of the year. Given all of this activity, I am satisfied that The National Archives has a properly accessible complaints procedure and that it has taken all necessary steps to ensure that both customers and Agency staff are aware of how to take things forward if people are unhappy.

In addition, my office is in regular touch with The National Archives' Public Services Development Unit, which provides me with information about the range of the complaints that the Agency has handled and the steps that it takes to achieve resolution. In short, it is a tribute to The National Archives and its staff that so few complaints arise and a tribute to the rigour of its internal complaints procedure that all of these were resolved without recourse to independent review in 2003-2004.

Having said this, the low number of recorded complaints against the overall volume of business is mirrored by the low numbers of recorded compliments reflecting the regard in which The National Archives' customers hold the Agency. 245 compliments were recorded in 2003-2004. I am

informed that the Public Services Development Unit is working on improving the level of this feedback. I welcome this and will monitor the outcome of this effort in the coming year.

I shall also be monitoring the situation with regard to the second phase of implementation of the Freedom of Information provisions in January 2005. I am aware that this places new responsibilities on The National Archives which will have a major impact on its public services.

Last year, I reported on a case where difficulties had arisen because of the shared service responsibilities at the Family Records Centre and the confusion about to which organisation a complaint should be made. I commented that attention should be given to working towards clarifying the situation and ensuring that the high quality of response to complaints is maintained. I am pleased to report that in response to my comments, the published guidance for customers on complaints about the Family Records Centre has been clarified and revised.

I welcome comments on my report. Further information can be obtained from:

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