

Report of the Independent Complaint Reviewers for 2013-2014



Jodi Berg OBE and Elizabeth Derrington are the Independent Complaints Reviewers for the Youth Justice Agency and other public bodies. Both have backgrounds as solicitors and mediators and Jodi Berg is Chair of the Administrative Justice Forum.

Introduction by Jodi Berg

We are pleased to present this report, which describes the ICR role and provides an overview of the Youth Justice Agency's response to customer service from the perspective of complainants.

Our role is to provide a fair and independent service for the investigation of complaints made about YJA by people who are unhappy with the Agency's own response to them. Given the Agency's important role in working with young people who may be both challenging and vulnerable, it is important that, if necessary, complaints can be made to someone independent who can take a fresh and impartial view of matters. We also keep an overview of the way in which the YJA manages complaints to ensure that this meets appropriate standards.

I am pleased to record that YJA takes complaints seriously and takes on board recommendations that we have made for systemic improvement. As a consequence, I can report that YJA complaints systems are well documented and accessible to young people or to others who wish to complain. I note that the NI Criminal Justice Inspectorate recently looked at complaint handling across the NI Criminal Justice System and found the YJA's handling of complaints to be: "*carried out effectively and efficiently*". The YJA is to be congratulated for this and we look forward to continuing to work with the Agency in maintaining its open and facilitative approach to complaints and to learning from them. To this end we will be visiting the Agency early in the coming year to carry out a system review. This will also enable us to benchmark its systems against other public bodies we have worked with, a recommendation made by the NI Criminal Justice Inspectorate.

The ICR service

The ICR service is free to complainants. People can contact us by phone, email or in writing. We also have video links with the Agency so that young people can speak to us in person, even if we cannot immediately meet them. Once we have ascertained what the complaint is about, we see whether it is amenable to settlement by agreement. Where this is not possible, we will carry out a thorough review of the issues and consider whether the YJA has met reasonable standards of service. Where appropriate, we can recommend action to put things right for the person concerned or to improve the future quality of service. We also take an ongoing interest in the way in which the YJA itself responds to customer feedback and complaints and seeks to learn from them.

ICR standards

People who complain to the ICR's office can expect to be treated with:

◆ Respect ◆ Courtesy ◆ Honesty ◆ Objectivity ◆ Flexibility ◆ Plain Language

We treat people as individuals and take their concerns seriously. We tailor our service to meet people's legitimate needs.

Again this year I am pleased to record that the ICR Office was successful in retaining the BSI award for the quality of our Complaint Management System.

Facts and figures

Statistics show that last year 211 young people in Northern Ireland were involved with Custodial Services and a total of 10,467 days of custody were provided by the Juvenile Justice Centre (JJC). There were 1039 young people involved with Youth Justice Services. Given this considerable workload, it is perhaps surprising that in 2013-14 only 16 complaints were made to the Agency. Based on our past experience, we expect the Agency to resolve most complaints internally and, indeed, this year we received no complaint referrals.

The Agency has an internal complaints process, with step 1 being "talk to a member of staff", step 2 "complain to a senior manager" and step 3, referral to chief executive. Of the 16 complaints received, 3 were resolved at Step 1 and 10 at Step 2. Others remain ongoing at the time this report. Unsurprisingly, most complaints arise within the Juvenile Justice Centre where the potential for dissatisfaction is naturally higher than in other parts of the Agency's service. The Agency maintains a complaints monitoring form which records the detail of complaints and lessons learned and quarterly reports are provided for the Board which include statistical and qualitative information.

This year complaints received included a complaint about the provision of healthcare, restrictions placed on a young person and inappropriate behavior on the part of staff. We noted that in the case of more serious allegations, appropriate child protection referrals were made. The Agency is also willing to meet with complainants face to face and discuss matters in order to try and reach a resolution.

Each year we follow up on recommendations made in previous reports to see whether they have been implemented. In last year's annual report we recommended: *that the Agency ensures that local managers and staff are fully trained to understand and implement complaint procedures*. In response, the Agency has confirmed that formal refresher training on our Complaints Procedures is being planned to take place in the next few months, once complaint recording documentation has been updated. I am also pleased to note that the Agency is creating an online central register of complaints, which will obviate the need for monthly returns. I commend this sensible innovation and look forward to seeing this system in operation on my next visit.

Finally...

I record my thanks to the YJA's Board and Executive Team for their continuing interest in and commitment to the principles of independent complaint review. Complainants who are not happy with an ICR decision have the right to refer their concerns to the Northern Ireland Ombudsman. More information about the Ombudsman can be found at: www.ni-ombudsman.org.uk

Details of the ICR service are explained in our leaflet *Seeking a Fair Resolution* available from our website at www.icrev.org.uk.

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