

Independent Complaint Reviewer Annual Report 2015-2016

Jodi Berg OBE and Elizabeth Derrington are the Independent Complaints Reviewers (ICR) for the Youth Justice Agency and other organisations. Both have backgrounds as solicitors and mediators and are experts in the field of complaint investigation and settlement. The ICR leaflet *Seeking a Fair Resolution* is available on our website at www.icrev.org.uk or from the Youth Justice Agency.

The role of the ICR

The ICR service is free to people unhappy with the answers they have received to their complaints from the Youth Justice Agency. The Agency has a 4 stage complaints procedure - step 1 "talk to a member of staff"; step 2 "complain to a senior manager"; step 3 referral to a Director and step 4 referral to the ICR office. If the Agency cannot settle a complaint itself, people can turn to the ICR for an independent and impartial consideration of whether or not the Agency has behaved appropriately in how it dealt with things. If a complaint is justified, we can recommend that the Agency apologise or make improvements to its service. People 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. We also monitor the operation of the Agency's internal complaint process

Introduction by Jodi Berg OBE

I am pleased to present our annual report. Overall, we are satisfied that the Agency has dealt with complaints well during the year. This opinion was supported during the year by the Internal Audit Review of Youth Justice Agency complaints undertaken by the Department of Justice, which gave the Agency a rating of 'substantial', meaning that it found a robust system of governance, risk management and control which should ensure that objectives are fully achieved. We congratulate the Agency on this achievement.

During my visit to the Agency in April 2016, I was able to visit a community office at Banbridge and the Woodlands JJC. As always, I was impressed by the commitment of staff to the young people and families they serve and to the community as a whole. Young people at Woodlands have regular access to a representative from the organisation 'Voice of Young People in Care', who also helps to organise the internal youth Forum, enabling their concerns to be raised in an informal and non-contentious setting. I welcome this, given that raising a complaint formally can be a daunting prospect for a young person.

My meeting with the Chief Executive was positive and constructive and underlined that Agency's support for quality complaints handling and customer service as it strives to achieve greater multi-disciplinary and cross-Agency care for the vulnerable young people entering the youth justice system. More emphasis is being placed on early intervention and this appears to be showing benefits in terms of reducing numbers of young people within the system.

Against this backdrop, very few formal complaints are made against the Agency, so it is difficult to ascribe any trends or themes to the kinds of problems that do arise, which tend to reflect one off situations and problems. However, our role enables us to consider how both formal and informal complaints and concerns are dealt with by the Agency, allowing lessons to be learned where necessary. This report highlights some of the areas in which the Agency can make improvements in the coming year.

The reporting year

During the year, the Agency recorded only 5 formal complaints. Of these 3 were resolved by the Agency to everyone's satisfaction, and 2 remained outstanding at the end of the year. This very small number of complaints demonstrates that most people are satisfied with the service given by the Agency, and this is also reflected within its customer satisfaction statistics. No complaints were referred to the ICR Office.

Complaints made included one from a parent who was concerned that staff had disclosed their child's conviction to a third party. This was resolved by an explanation that disclosure was a requirement of the application for a training course the young person was hoping to do. In another a young person at the Woodlands Juvenile Justice

Centre wanted to keep a TV in his room, which was settled by giving an explanation of why this was not possible at that time. A more serious complaint at Woodlands about an alleged threat of harm made to a young person by another resident was settled when staff took early action to place them in separate accommodation in order to protect both residents. 2 complaints remained outstanding at year end, one from a solicitor regarding communication with them about the date of a youth conference and the other involved an allegation of injury to a young person which is currently subject to Police investigation and so on hold until the outcome is known. We will follow these complaints up during the coming year to monitor how the Agency identifies whether there are any lessons that can be learned.

We are pleased to note that in line with recommendations made in earlier ICR reports, the Agency reviewed and updated its complaint policy and new information leaflets have been issued to reflect the changes made. We also note the Internal Audit Review recommendation that staff should receive up to date training on complaint handling.

Recommendation We support the Review recommendation for staff training which is particularly important in the coming year given the updating of the complaints policy to underpin the need to capture qualitative information from complaints and concerns that are raised and to ensure that the Board is aware of them.

In our last annual report I noted that issues within informal concerns raised by young people are not fed through to the Management Board, and the regular report to the Board concentrates on matters that are dealt with through the formal complaints procedure. This does not afford the Board a realistic picture of either the frequency of young people's concerns about Agency services, or the types of issues they raise.

Recommendation I recommend that a regular report of youth Forum issues of concern to young people should be provided to the Complaints Officer, together with a brief report of the content of informal concerns raised with the Woodlands staff team. I further recommend that a summary of such issues raised with community teams should be submitted to the Complaints Officer. I do not expect these reports to record each and every matter raised, however I would hope that an appreciation of the regularity of concerns and types of issues is included, highlighting any particular matter that had potential to be raised as a serious formal complaint if not resolved. Once collated, an analysis of this information should be added to quarterly Board reports. This will allow the Board the opportunity to identify trends and learning points. It will also enable the Board to recognise more fully the excellent role that Agency staff play in resolving such issues informally.

More positively, I was reassured to note that in line with a previous recommendation, time in local team meetings is given to sharing issues of concern raised by young people and their families and that both staff and managers are keen to use this discussion to identify where improvements or changes can be made.

I recognise that the Youth Justice Agency continues to be a leader in its commitment to the quality of complaint handling and I commend it for this. Finally, I record our thanks to the Agency Board and the Complaints Officer for their support for the ICR role. I look forward to working with the Agency in the coming year.

Contact the ICR team

We treat everyone with courtesy, fairness and sensitivity, understanding how difficult it can be to complain about people in positions of authority. We work to high standards recommended by the Ombudsman Association. We respect the privacy of complainants and do not publish information about them or their case, or discuss individual complaints with anyone else. We are able to see all of the Agency's files and information in order to investigate a complaint but have no authority to release any of this information to anyone else, including the person making the complaint. Requests for data or information must be made direct to the Agency.

Contact us at: e-mail: enquiries@icrev.org.uk telephone: 020 7930 0749 website: www.icrev.org.uk