

Annual Report of the Independent Complaint Reviewers 2017-2018

Jodi Berg OBE and Elizabeth Derrington are the Independent Complaints Reviewers for the Youth Justice Agency and other public bodies. Both are experienced complaint adjudicators and have backgrounds as solicitors and mediators.

Introduction by Jodi Berg OBE

I am pleased to present this annual report. 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 YJA's important work with young people, it is essential that when people are unhappy with the way they have been treated and the response to their complaint, that they can ask someone independent to give an impartial opinion of what happened. I 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 make for service improvements. Internal complaints systems are well documented and accessible to young people or to others who wish to complain. YJA has an open and facilitative approach to complaints and to learning from them. I carry out an annual review of complaints systems to ensure that they are working effectively. My visits to YJA's head office, its community-based offices and the Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre enable me to examine documentation and speak to staff about how quickly they recognize and deal with complaints.

This year I visited the YJA head office and Woodlands JJC. I thank the staff for their time and courtesy, and for the open way they respond to my review. I also met with the Chief Executive, who leads from the front by showing commitment to responding well to complaints and to learning from them.

The views expressed to me about the arrangements at the JJC by young people I met there were mostly positive, with some complaints about meal choices and staff arrangements that are perhaps to be expected. No more troubling concerns were raised. I was also very pleased to meet with some parents of young people who had spent time in Woodlands. They were very complimentary about the care and conditions provided by the JJC and I am grateful to them for spending the time to tell me about their experiences of the way that the Agency had dealt with their children. They were particularly pleased with the way that the Agency seeks to involve parents in discussions about their children, and stressed how their children had responded positively to the regime at the JJC which gave structure to their day and provided a facilitative and motivational approach to their care.

As always, this year the Agency recorded receipt of very few complaints, but those that were made almost without exception arose in the JJC and reflected, in the main, day to day problems experienced by young people regarding their food, their activities and their general living arrangements. I am satisfied that all concerns are treated seriously by staff, who are usually able to resolve complaints amicably with the young person concerned. Indeed, this year as last, there have been no referrals to my office. In the coming year the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman will be carrying out research on complaints handling in the public sector. I am satisfied that YJA's procedures, including the provision of independent review, are an example of good practice.

Jodi Berg OBE

The ICR Service

The ICR service is free to people with cause to complain about the service given by the YJA. Once the YJA has had the chance to respond to their concerns, if they remain unhappy then the final step in the Agency's complaints procedure is a referral to the ICR. We can carry out an investigation of complaints and consider whether the YJA has met reasonable standards of service. Where problems have arisen, we can recommend action to put things right or to improve the future quality of service. Our leaflet *Seeking a Fair Resolution* which says more about our service is available on our website at www.icrev.org.uk or from the YJA.

We treat everyone with 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 any third party. 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 to anyone else, including the person making the complaint. Requests for data or information must be made direct to the YJA.

The reporting year

Last year over 139 young people in Northern Ireland were involved with Custodial Services and a total of 7,935 days of custody were provided by the Juvenile Justice Centre (JJC). There were over 1500 young people referred to YJA in the year. Given this considerable workload, it is perhaps surprising that so few complaints are recorded across the Agency. During the reporting year, the Agency recorded 17 internal complaints. Of these 6 were resolved at stage 1 of the process ("talk to a member of staff") and 11 at stage 2 ("complain to a senior manager"). No complaints progressed to the final internal Director stage (step 3) and no complaints were made to the ICR office (step 4). As always, most complaints (16) were made about Custodial Services.

Complaints made at Woodlands included a concern about education provision, about a search, about having to get up at 8am on a non-school day, about someone else getting better treatment, and about not being listened to by a staff member. All complaints were resolved amicably. Of more concern were complaints raised not about YJA itself but about treatment of young people before arrival at Woodlands or in one case about a paramilitary threat in the community. These are sensitive issues which the YJA takes forward with the Police or other agencies involved.

Last year I noted that whilst considerable care and attention is given by YJA staff in community offices to settling concerns raised in a satisfactory way, it was regrettable that most issues are settled without being recorded and the learning points flowing from them reaching the Board. So, I was pleased to see that YJA has developed plans for introducing a new and more structured method of feedback for the coming year. A new complaints summary form to be completed by Directors will be used to inform senior managers and the Board about issues arising around the Agency. I hope that Directors will also take the opportunity to commend members of their teams who have 'gone the extra mile' to resolve contentious issues. I look forward to monitoring the form's implementation and effectiveness as the year progresses.

Recommendations

- Recommendations I recommend that local managers and staff should be fully trained to understand the purpose of the new complaints summary form, and the importance of providing the information necessary for its implementation.
- I commend the fact that young people are asked to sign their agreement to the written complaint issue discussed with staff members. I recommend that they should also be asked to sign the agreed resolution of their complaint alongside the member of staff reaching the settlement or ask that it be taken forward.
- The Youth Forum held at Woodlands provides a good opportunity for young people to raise issues of general interest to house residents. House representatives at the Forum I attended expressed a wish to be able to engage with YJA staff in weekly house meetings at which young people could express any concerns that had arisen. I am aware that this was a regular feature of house life in past years and I recommend that the JJC should consider its reintroduction.

Finally...

I record my thanks to the Agency Board, its Head of Communications and senior managers for their support for the ICR role. I look forward to working with the YJA in the coming year.

Contact the ICR team

Contact us at: e-mail: enquiries@icrev.org.uk

Telephone: 020 7930 0749 website: www.icrev.org.uk

Please note: People who remain unhappy 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