

Annual Report of the Independent Complaint Reviewer 2018-2019

Jodi Berg OBE is the Independent Complaints Reviewer for the Youth Justice Agency.

Introduction by Jodi Berg OBE

This year I was reappointed as ICR for the Youth Justice Agency following an open recruitment process. I am pleased to be able to continue my role, particularly at a time of change for the Agency as it moves towards a more integrated approach for the provision of services for young people.

As ICR I provide fair and impartial investigation of complaints made about YJA by people who are unhappy with the Agency's own response to them. This is designed to provide closure for the both the complainant and the Agency and to encourage lessons to be learned from any problems that have arisen in the Agency's provision of service. I also keep an overview of the way in which the YJA manages complaints to ensure that this meets appropriate standards.

This year I have carried out an independent review of only one complaint. In this case I found that some of the issues raised with me were justified and I made recommendations to the Agency as to how it could improve its service. I am pleased to record that YJA accepted my recommendations and has taken steps to implement them. YJA has also taken on board the recommendations made in last year's annual report and moved forward to ensure that complaints and compliments are properly recorded across the Agency and that qualitative information is provided for the Board.

Each year I visit the Agency in order to carry out a review of the effectiveness of its complaint systems. I meet with the Agency's Chief Executive and senior staff members and carry out on-site inspections of complaint documentation and handling at Agency facilities, in particular at the Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre, where I speak to staff and young people about service provision and complaints handling. I am satisfied from my inspection that complaints are appropriately recorded and dealt with in line with the Agency's policy and procedures.

On my recent visit to Woodlands I was able to attend a Youth Forum meeting. At the Forum representatives of the young people detained at the JJC are able to raise and share views about Agency services and make suggestions for improvement. The meeting is chaired by one of the young people and the atmosphere is cordial and encouraging. It is a good example of how young people's views can be aired without acrimony and how management seeks to respond positively to their needs. Another example of good practice has been the introduction at the JJC of a post box arrangement, so that young people can raise complaints or comments without hindrance or anxiety.

As always, this year the Agency recorded receipt of very few complaints. Most of these arose in the JJC and reflected, in the main, day to day problems experienced by young people in a custodial setting. I am satisfied that all concerns are treated seriously by staff, who are usually able to resolve complaints with the young person concerned without the need for further intervention.

This year the Department of Justice has issued helpful new policy and guidance on complaints handling to be implemented across its agencies. Regrettably, whilst this recognizes the role of the ombudsman in respect of N.I. Prison Services, it does not identify similar needs of young people in custody, currently satisfied by the ICR service. I understand that the Agency is in discussion with Departmental officials to have this anomaly rectified. With this exception, I can confirm that I am satisfied that internal processes within the Agency meet the Department's policy requirements and standards.

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 they can make a referral to the ICR. My review will establish whether the YJA has met reasonable standards of service. Where problems have arisen, I can recommend action to put things right or to improve future service. 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

The ICR service works to high standards recommended by the Ombudsman Association. 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

Numbers of young people in custody in Northern Ireland are reducing. This reflects a growing understanding that custody should be reserved for those cases where no other course of action is possible. The Agency is working closely with health, social service, education and training partners to develop a holistic approach to its service provision, and the reducing number of young people in custody is offering opportunities for service development to manage the corresponding increasing complexity of needs of young people.

During the reporting year, the Agency recorded 23 internal complaints. Of these 18 were resolved at stage 1 of the process ("talk to a member of staff"), 4 at stage 2 ("complain to a senior manager") and 1 was referred to the ICR office. As always, most complaints (21) were made about Custodial Services.

Complaints made at Woodlands included a concern about alleged use of racist language, about the sanction applied for aggressive behavior, about perceived unequal treatment, and about a complaint made verbally to a staff member not being passed forward. All these complaints were resolved amicably either by explanation or by action on the part of the Agency, for example by introducing the postbox system so that all complaints were received by a senior manager. At the end of the year one complaint is ongoing and I will monitor the outcome of this going forward.

I was pleased to note that in response to a previous recommendation, the Agency introduced its new complaints summary form which is completed by Directors and this gives the Board greater insight into complaints and compliments received and lessons learned. In addition, at Woodlands action has been taken to ensure that complaint resolution is signed off by the young person concerned in order to document their satisfaction with the outcome achieved.

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.

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