



# Independent Complaints Reviewer to The National Archives

## Summary of Annual Report 2002-2003

### Foreword

Mrs Jodi Berg, Independent Complaints Reviewer for the National Archives (the ICR), has published her third annual report.

She commented: *"As people become more assertive of their rights to prompt, efficient and courteous public services, public bodies face increasing scrutiny over the quality of service they provide. People who turn to my office do so because they want an unbiased but informed view of problems they have encountered. We are robust in our approach to this task and people can have confidence that we will deal with their complaints in a professional, open-minded and impartial manner."*

As ICR, Mrs Berg focuses upon the way in which The National Archives responds to complaints and the lessons that can be learned from them. The National Archives' customers rely on it to acknowledge their dissatisfaction, try to resolve matters and facilitate access to the ICR should the need arise. The ICR welcomed the fact that The National Archives continued to do this last year. She also commented that, with rare exceptions, the Agency offers a very good quality of service to its customers and handles complaints efficiently. Very few customers have found the need to access the ICR service.

### Cases received

Last year over 112,000 people visited National Archives sites and nearly 100,000 telephone calls were received. Increasingly, people are making use of Agency websites and over 30 million hits were recorded last year.

Despite the frequent use of its services, between 1 April 2002 and 31 March 2003, The National Archives recorded only 53 complaints. By any measure, this is an excellent achievement. During the reporting period, we received 10 complaint referrals. This continues the trend of the last two years, which also saw very low numbers of complaints referred to the ICR.

Only one complaint was formally reviewed by the ICR. Two were resolved by mediation and the customers' subsequent satisfaction with the Agency's response. Other cases did not proceed to review because complaints were resolved and/or complainants decided not to take matters forward.



The Independent Complaints reviewer, Jodi Berg

### Access to records

Mr A was researching military records from the Great War, which required him to access index cards from the Microfilm Reading Room at Kew. He needed to look through very large numbers of cards at frequent intervals during the course of a day's work. Mr A said that, initially, he had received permission to take out several cards at a time. However, he reported that this was then withdrawn. He was upset about the response he received when he sought to get this decision reversed. He asserted that the rules governing access to the cards should be changed.

Mr A complained to the ICR that the Agency had failed to properly address his complaint about these matters and that the responses that he received

from various officers had been dismissive and/or aggressive. He said that senior management had not shown themselves to be accountable for their decisions to a member of the public.

The ICR noted that initial and limited permission had been given to Mr A to access more than one card at a time. She regarded this as a flexible response to his particular needs. However, she considered that the Agency had sound reasons for limiting access to the cards, and it had acted in accordance with established procedures in later insisting that Mr A observed the rules for access. In her view, the Agency had made the decision clear to Mr A and had explained its reasons for it.

The ICR concluded that the Agency had looked into Mr A's complaints with vigour and objectivity. It had produced a

courteous and businesslike report. The ICR noted that the personal situation between Mr A and some officers had become highly charged. This had led to his complaint about staff behaviour and attitude. She noted that Mr A had also made some inappropriate personal remarks about some officers in his letters. She commented that public servants are entitled to the same degree of courtesy and respect as that expected by members of the public.

Finally, the ICR did not consider that senior management were not accountable. She found that the Agency's procedure had been properly observed and Mr A's complaint was escalated in an appropriate manner. External review had provided an independent opinion on his complaint. The complaint was not upheld.

## What we found

The ICR will not uphold a complaint if, at the time it is accepted for investigation, we find that the Agency has already fully addressed the complaint and appropriate redress has been provided, offered or instigated.

In the one complaint that we reviewed, three allegations of maladministration were made: two relating to complaints handling and one to discourtesy. None of these allegations were upheld.

This is very encouraging and demonstrated that a good quality of service is given to customers, even in what can be quite difficult circumstances.

Across our caseload, the majority of the complaints we accept for investigation comprise a number of allegations of maladministration, which often pertain to entirely different issues or events. We respond to and record each element of a customer's complaint.

## Complaint handling by The National Archives

The National Archives has developed feedback mechanisms for capturing customer comments, concerns and complaints. It records all complaints, including those made by telephone.

In response to an ICR recommendation, last year the Agency took steps to improve the information provided to the Management Board on customer feedback. This year, the Agency's Public Services Development Unit will take this

## Mediation through discussion

Mrs B contacted the ICR to complain that the Agency had published a book in which some of her work was reproduced without her permission. She had complained about this to the Agency, but considered that she had been "fobbed off". She said that all that she really wanted was an apology

and an acknowledgement of her contribution.

After discussion, it was agreed that the ICR would try to mediate with the Agency on Mrs B's behalf. The ICR contacted the Agency about Mrs B's concerns. The Agency agreed to invite Mrs B to enter into discussions to achieve an amicable resolution of her complaint.

further by including an analysis of specific comments and trends.

In cases we review, the ICR routinely comments on the quality of internal complaints handling. Where this falls short of the required standard, she can ask the Agency to acknowledge this by an apology or by awarding a consolatory payment.

The standard of complaint response was very good in the small number of cases that we saw last year. However, the Agency must take care to ensure that a similar quality of response is given to people, even where it works with other organisations to provide a service to the public, for example at the Family Records Centre.

The Agency's complaints policy and procedure is currently under revision. When this task is completed the Agency will publish new information for staff and undertake appropriate training. It will also be necessary to ensure that customers are fully aware of the new procedures by revising information leaflets and by continuing to offer on-line complaints access.

## The ICR Team

### ICR

Jodi Berg

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### Copies of the full text of the annual report can be obtained from:

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