

29 November 2018

PRESS RELEASE

New schools remit contributes to rise in complaints to Ombudsman

A report released today has revealed that enquiries to the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman increased by **37%** in the last year. Out of the **4,987** calls and enquiries received by the Office in 2017-18 (compared to 3,385 the previous year), a total of **665** were forwarded for further investigation (up **23%** from 2016-17).

The Ombudsman's report shows that the significant increase in enquiries is in large part explained by a widening of the Office's remit to include complaints about the actions of the Board of Governors of all publicly funded schools in Northern Ireland.

"The extension of my Office's remit means that I can now look at allegations of maladministration about all levels of education in Northern Ireland, from nursery schools to universities," said Ombudsman Marie Anderson.

"However, although schools are a significant new jurisdiction, the health and social care sector continues to attract the largest number of complaints to my Office. As Ombudsman I investigate not only complaints of maladministration in this area, but also of failings in professional judgment of health and social care professionals."

The report reveals that of the complaints investigated during 2017-18:

- 42% were about health and social care matters
- 15% were about government departments and agencies
- 15% were about education
- 11% were about local councils
- 8% were about housing

In addition to the rise in complaints, Mrs Anderson also pointed to a number of other significant developments for her Office during 2017-18. These include publication of the Ombudsman's investigation reports for the first time, and engagement work with stakeholders to prepare for new complaints handling procedures in Northern Ireland.

Preparations also continued on the Ombudsman's 'own initiative' power, which will allow investigations to be carried out into potential systemic maladministration in the public sector.

"The power to publish my investigation reports allows me to demonstrate to the public the value of making complaints. Together with the case summaries included in this report they also enable me to

highlight both poor and good administrative practice and to provide learning to public service providers,” said Mrs Anderson.

“My Office’s engagement during 2017-18 with public bodies, regulators and other key stakeholders has also helped them to understand more about the ‘own initiative’ power and our role as a complaints standards authority. We look forward to building on this important work throughout the rest of the year,” she added.

A copy of the Ombudsman’s Report for 2017-18 is attached.

Notes:

The Public Services Ombudsman can independently investigate complaints about public service providers. Before a complaint can be assessed, it must normally have gone through the public body’s own internal complaints process.

The Ombudsman seeks to resolve disputes at the earliest opportunity, either through settlements or other alternative action. Examples of settlements contained in the Report include:

College waives course fees following Ombudsman intervention

Department agrees not to pursue overpayment of income support

Where an early resolution cannot be achieved the complaint is forwarded to the Investigations Team. The Report contains a number of case summaries of significant Ombudsman investigations, including:

Council’s process for tender of legal services characterised by ‘avoidable delay, inaction and miscommunication’

Concerns over funding for care home places in Northern Ireland

Ombudsman finds lack of patient consent before surgery ‘a human rights issue’

For enquiries please contact Andrew Ruston at andrew.ruston@nipso.org.uk or 02890 897796

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