

DRAFT NEWS RELEASE

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Maladministration Complaints against Government Departments/Agencies up by 34% with Health and Social Care Sector up by 22%

- ***Health and Social Care, Housing and Planning Remain Key Areas of Complaint According to NI Ombudsman Annual Report***

Complaints about maladministration in Northern Ireland's health and social care sector have increased by 22%, representing almost 40% of the total received by the office, according to the latest annual report from Northern Ireland Ombudsman Tom Frawley. Meanwhile in the role of Assembly Ombudsman, which covers complaints against government departments and their statutory agencies there was also a notable increase of 34% from 174 last year to 233 complaints this year. The report, which was laid before the Assembly yesterday (1st July) noted a small increase of 4% in the total number of written complaints received by the office in the 2012/2013 period.

Within the remit of Assembly Ombudsman, issues relating to the planning process continued to be the largest area of complaints with an increase of 10 to 53 being received in 2012/2013. A notable case against the Planning Service around Cavanacaw Goldmine resulted in three pay-outs by the Department of the Environment of £10,000 to complainants and widespread media attention.

In his report, the Ombudsman notes that interestingly the number of complaints outside of his jurisdiction which came through the office fell significantly by 35% this year, pointing to an increasing public awareness of the office's jurisdiction and role as well as improved signposting from other bodies.

Commenting on his Annual Report Dr. Frawley said "Whilst the number of overall complaints has increased slightly, it's encouraging to see misdirected complaints to the office decreasing allowing for greater efficiency and service. The ongoing pressures facing some sectors including health and social care are evident in the notable increase in complaints this year. Particularly stark is the increase in the number of complaints centred on complaint handling within this sector pointing to a need for bodies to consider complaints against joint providers in a co-ordinated way and for clear explanations to be provided to the complainant as early in the process as possible."

Within his role as Commissioner for Complaints (excluding Health and Social Care), the Ombudsman recorded an overall fall in the level of complaints from 189 to 182. However, continuing a trend from last year's annual report, the number of complaints against Registered Housing Associations and the Housing Executive increased by 45% and 28% respectively.

Commenting on these figures Dr Frawley said, “The complaints received against these bodies are diverse and wide ranging taking in maintenance, anti-social behaviour, and housing allocations; however overall they show an increasing dissatisfaction across the sector indicating continuing pressure on the provision of public services struggling against an increasing demand for social housing. That this is happening at potentially a time of significant organisational change in this sector, is something that warrants particular attention”.

As well as outlining the key statistics about complaints and how they have been handled, including a list of key recommendations in reported and settled cases, the Annual Report includes selected anonymised case summaries to aid learning and disseminate best practice across all bodies in jurisdiction. Notable cases in the 2012/2013 Annual Report include the Cavanacaw Goldmine case against the Planning Service; a complex report on the failings by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to properly fulfil its registration functions impacting on the re-registration of the failed Presbyterian Mutual Society; and a clinical care failing against the Belfast and South Eastern Health Trusts in relation to diagnosis and follow up care.

A copy of the Annual Report can be found online at www.ni-ombudsman.org.uk/publications.aspx

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Notes to Editor

- The title of Northern Ireland Ombudsman is the popular name for two offices – The Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, currently held by Dr Tom Frawley.
- Split across three reporting areas the Annual Report reflects the dual role of the NI Ombudsman Office, and examines the complaints and relevant handling of each. It firstly outlines complaints made to the NI Assembly Ombudsman which covers complaints against the various government Departments and their agencies as well as Cross-Border bodies. Under The NI Commissioner for Complaints role it examines complaints made against virtually all other NI public sector bodies other than Departments and their direct agencies. Due to the high nature of complaints about Health & Social Care matters under this jurisdiction, this is reported separately so as not to unduly skew the reporting.
- The Ombudsman is independent from all public bodies and deals with complaints from people who claim to have suffered injustice because of maladministration by government departments and agencies and a wide range of other public bodies in Northern Ireland. The full list of bodies is available on www.ni-ombudsman.org.uk
- The term ‘maladministration’ is not defined in the legislation but is generally taken to mean poor administration or the wrong application of rules.