



Summary of our report

Public sector accountability through raising concerns



The theme for our 2014/15 work programme was *Governance and accountability*. Our dedication to transparency and accountability helps to make our country's public sector management special.

Public sector accountability is built on principles of transparency, integrity, and fairness. Accountability is critical to the trust between an individual and the State. Being accountable means public entities taking responsibility for their actions, openly reporting on what they do, providing specific information when asked, welcoming scrutiny, and being responsive when challenged.

People seeking to resolve a matter important to them should first gather all relevant information, including the reasons for decisions made, then make their complaint or raise their concern directly with the relevant public entity. They should be able to do this easily and be heard by the public entity. If they remain dissatisfied, they can ask an independent organisation with the appropriate accountability function (an inquiry agency) to look into their concerns.

Our starting point for this report was to “map” the accountability functions in central government, including how organisations and their accountability functions fit together. This was challenging. We identified about 400 different ways in which people can make a complaint or raise a concern. As far as we know, no policy agency has ever assessed whether these individual arrangements add up to a system that is comprehensive and effective for the people it serves. Based on our experience of trying to find a source of help for people who contact our Office, we think that this would be a worthwhile exercise.

In this report, we discuss how easily people can make their complaints and raise their concerns through various channels and what we have learned about the strengths of, and challenges facing, six particular agencies with public sector accountability roles: the Health and Disability Commissioner, Human Rights Commission, Independent Police Conduct Authority, Office of the Children's Commissioner, Office of the Ombudsman, and Office of the Privacy Commissioner.

Overall, we consider that we deserve our country's relatively strong reputation for accountability and transparency. This is a tribute to the hard work and commitment of our politicians, public servants, the media, and the public. However, we cannot take our status for granted, and ongoing challenges remain.

Vital statistics:

- 31 pages
- Presented to Parliament on Thursday 10 March 2016
- Contact: reports@oag.govt.nz

Are there barriers to people making complaints or raising concerns?

In our view, making a complaint or raising a concern with a public entity can be difficult. If a person exhausts all of the entity's own complaint and review processes and remains dissatisfied, it can be difficult to work out where to go. People can become lost in a "black hole of bureaucracy".

One reason for this is that little or no easily accessible information explains the subsequent options. When information is available, it can sometimes be difficult to understand.

In our experience, it is becoming more common for people to be passionate and sometimes forceful when presenting their complaint or concern.

Although people usually prefer to be polite and reasonable, irritation is understandable when it is difficult and frustrating to access help. It can also take a toll on the staff who are dealing with frustrated members of the public.

How are the six agencies performing?

Despite the difficulties that some people have in accessing help, publicly available performance results suggest that the six agencies we looked at are finding smarter and more efficient ways to carry out their accountability roles.

Indicators reported by the six agencies show that they are largely meeting their performance targets for satisfying people who use their services and for completing their most urgent work in a timely way.

However, some inquiry agencies are coming under strain as matters become more challenging to deal with. For example, the six agencies are dealing with more complaints or concerns that involve more than one public entity. These matters can be difficult to deal with and take more time and resources to resolve.

Are there gaps or overlaps?

New Zealand's arrangements for making complaints and raising concerns are a complex web of accountability functions and agencies. Gaps, overlaps, and inefficiencies are more likely when these arrangements are not well connected.

In our view, these arrangements are not as well connected as they could be. Inquiry agencies work under different pieces of legislation and, because they need to protect people's privacy, there can be challenges to regularly working together.

However, some of the key inquiry agencies, including our Office, support the idea of collaborating with each other when this is lawful and appropriate.

We agree that improving connections between inquiry agencies is likely to improve the quality and timeliness of services and improve how public services are used.

We encourage all inquiry agencies to continue to collaborate and look for new ways to improve their connections with each other. In the end, improving these connections will make it easier for people to get the right help soon enough.