



Correspondence handling

Providing excellent customer service to the public is central to the Commissioner's approach and has been since 2012. The Office of Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner (OPFCC) is built around public service, with the office being restructured in the transition from Police Authority to OPCC and then OPFCC to ensure the public are at the heart of the work undertaken by the Commissioner. Most directly, this is provided by the full-time caseworker and engagement roles, as well as policy and scrutiny officers whose work is also focused on improving outcomes for the public.

The caseworker's core role is to handle the majority of correspondence within the OPFCC, and this report explains how it is managed, the service we provide to the public and how the Commissioner has sought to improve this over the last twelve months in particular. This follows a number of complaints from members of the public concerning the delays in responses, which the Commissioner considers to be totally unacceptable.

Casework – overview and processes

The OPFCC receives approximately 100 pieces of correspondence a month across all forms of media – letter, email, social media, telephone and in person. This requires a range of responses, with some being able to be resolved almost immediately, and others potentially involving extensive liaison with the police and/or other partners. Some cases are extremely complex and can continue for years. Many require a level of personal support, which can be very time consuming, including regular meetings with the constituent. Liaising with wider partners to resolve enquiries and complaints can be challenging and take many weeks, seeking the correct and full information required by the constituent. In many of these cases, mental health is a factor, making the cases more complex and time-consuming still.

In contrast to other Commissioner's that often pass on much correspondence to Professional Standards Departments for processing, in North Yorkshire, the Commissioner has always felt strongly that the public contact her with a legitimate expectation that she will make representations on their behalf. This interaction is central to how our Commissioner approaches her role, not least in providing essential information about how the public feel about policing and community safety in North Yorkshire and York, but also levels of confidence in the police, satisfaction and their performance. In addition, information directly from the public is extremely helpful in holding the Chief Constable to account and has directly led to a number of projects undertaken by the Commissioner, including:

- The recent neighbourhood policing survey, which was initiated in response to concerning feedback from York residents about the resourcing and visibility of policing in the city centre and surrounding communities

- Reforming the police complaints system to embed a customer service, improve how the system works in a more timely manner for all involved, and ensure there is greater independence in the complaints handling process
- A review and challenge about how stalking and harassment is handled by North Yorkshire Police, which led to a project looking at how the service to victims could be improved
- The Commissioner 'slong-running campaign for a change in the law that would grant anonymity for 'revenge porn' (or image-based sexual abuse) victims

Until last year, correspondence worked well, governed by a clear step by step process.

Step 1: All correspondence designated as 'casework' was logged by the Caseworker onto the casework database, which was introduced to the OPFCC in 2014.

Step 2: All correspondence was acknowledged within two working days.

Step 3: Depending on the nature of the correspondence, partners were engaged, normally North Yorkshire Police (NYP), and a further letter was sent to the constituent once information from NYP was received.

Step 4: The cycle would then continue, should the matter not have been resolved to the constituent's satisfaction.

All these steps were recorded on the database, as are emails, telephone calls etc.

Our commitment to the public is for all correspondence to be responded to fully within ten days. Whilst this is met in the majority of cases, it is not always possible given the Commissioner's regular reliance on others to provide information.

Audit and process

During the summer of 2017, complaints began to be received from members of the public about missing correspondence or a lack of response. Gradually it became evident that these were not a 'one off', with the public experiencing delays in getting a full response to their letters or receiving no acknowledgement at all. As a consequence, towards the end of 2017, the OPFCC undertook an audit of correspondence in order to understand the scale of any problems. Once this was established, the Commissioner asked for a notice to be put onto the website, on the correspondence webpage, to let the public know some delays had been uncovered and to get in touch should they have any concerns.

The audit identified that a number of letters and emails had been either not been responded to at all or had fallen out-with the correspondence process and received no response further to the initial acknowledgement. Some of those were hand-delivered letters.

The Commissioner instructed the office to immediately respond to those letters and emails, apologise to the relevant people, review the process and implement the necessary changes to ensure nothing similar could happen again.

The findings of the audit were disappointing. Exposed were some staffing and process challenges, compounded by serious line management issues, the full extent of which only became apparent later in the year following changes within the OPFCC. As a consequence of a new management approach, new processes were designed and implemented in order to limit the possibility of

anything similar happening again. This involved moving the recording and acknowledging of correspondence into a new administrative role, ensuring greater efficiency and effectiveness. The process is also now more stringent, leaving no room for new correspondence be inaccurately logged. Separating the acknowledgement from the case progression has been key in recording the correspondence more accurately.

The process also requires all those involved in correspondence handling to use the database more frequently, and as the primary work platform. As well as using the database, a separate back-up spreadsheet was maintained in the short term to ensure correspondence was recorded properly. A new performance management process was implemented also.

However, notwithstanding the audit, the Commissioner continued to receive concerns from different members of the public some months later, all from the same time-period. It is encouraging though these more recent complaints originated *before* the new process and performance framework were introduced, and we have had no complaints regarding failure or delays to response following the implementation of the new system.

We now believe that all historic correspondence that did not receive a response at the time has been responded to and resolved. The Commissioner was extremely disappointed to let the public down in this way and has taken all steps necessary to resolve these issues as quickly as possible, and overseen improvements in the process to make sure this is prevented from happening again. No further complaints have been received that would imply there are deficiencies in the process, albeit there are the occasional expressions of dissatisfaction with inevitable delays when trying to coordinate responses from multiple partners, or if the Commissioner isn't able to take the action individuals would want.

Latterly, a new casework database has been implemented in the OPFCC, which whilst still very new, is proving very valuable. It allows casework to be better monitored and managed, as well as automating some parts of the casework process. Not only does this provide better audit opportunities, but also makes the process quicker and more reliable. Cases which have had no action taken on them for a set period of time automatically flag up as needing further work doing, even if this is a simple letter to the constituent to explain there is no update on their case.

It is worth noting that the Caseworker will deal with at least 1,200 cases per year and keeping each of those within agreed timescales is very challenging. The occasional failure is to be somewhat expected, although everything is done to keep this to an absolute minimum.

Future

The Commissioner is committed to providing the best possible service to the public. New processes and the investment in IT systems should ensure letters can no longer go without a response and lengthy gaps between elements of the casework process will be minimised. It is inevitable however that some cases will take time given their complexity, and occasionally people may feel dissatisfied with the service. The Commissioner remains committed to respond fully to all new cases within 10 working days. The significant improvement in the caseworker's line management will also ensure work is proactively overseen and mean no concerns go unaddressed.

Finally, the process and resources of the OPFCC will be reviewed as part of the Transform 2020 work, alongside the introduction of the new dedicated complaints team. This means it is likely that the casework processes will change again. It is expected that the new team will deal with the majority of cases that currently sit with the caseworker, whose role may well change accordingly.

Cases will not disappear entirely however as the Commissioner still receives large amounts of correspondence about the her own views on matters, or on issues not directly relating to policing e.g. Brexit, austerity, transparency etc.