

Localism may actually reduce citizen voice because information on citizen redress is either not collected or ignored

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Citizen redress is essential for any government committed to administering accountable and efficient public sector services. However, as [Jane Tinkler](#) argues, the introduction of more complex provider networks in the Big Society threatens the already unrecognised potential of citizen voice in providing a system of checks and balances.



There is one discussion point on the government's localism agenda (as we must now refer to the ill-fated 'Big Society' initiative) that is seemingly conspicuous by its absence: that of complaints in particular and citizen redress more generally. This may be something to do with the topic itself, the British are stereotypically not complainers as shown through our 'mustn't grumble' spirit. It is also not true. Complaint numbers in many sectors are increasing as last year's [energy complaints figures show](#). [Npower](#) was found to be the worst offender with 18.45 complaints per 1,000 customers, which was a 10 per cent increase on complaints number from the previous year.

Vital redress information is often not collected in the public sector

But this growth in complaints is just as important in the public sector because of the changes that are being proposed by the government on how services will be delivered. When your benefit or health care treatment is provided for you by a large government organisation, the situation is relatively easy to assess. The responsibility for providing the service rests with the organisation that does so and if something goes wrong with that service, the citizen knows exactly who they can complaint to when trying to get it put right.

As more services are provided by alternate providers, whatever their legal status (social enterprise, private sector company, mutual), this link between responsibility and provider will separate. The wisdom of redress experts generally holds that corrections should be made as close to the original decision as possible, that way complaints can be used as free information from which the organisation learns. That is fine, but in order for redress information to be most useful it also needs to be collated in order to give a sense of how localised services are being delivered. To do this information on these hyper local complaints need to be collected and scrutinised.

However, research that we conducted on complaints to English local authorities found that in many councils, information on complaints about services that had been contracted out were not collected or kept. So a key quality indicator of local services such as providing housing, repairs, social care home visits or refuse collection was not available to the council that was paying another organisation to provide them. This needs to be factored into any planning regarding the opening up of service provision. There needs to be some oversight by government bodies who will still, after all, be responsible for providing the service and accountable for the spending they make on it.

The [Parliamentary Ombudsman](#) provides helpful guidance on creating and running a complaints process. But she is unable to compel government organisations to collect this information. Whereas for example, [Ofgem](#) has the power to force companies to report to it on the number of complaints that it receives. There is no one place that citizens can go to look at number of complaints that have been received by their local authority let alone information on how many of these complaints were resolved. In the financial services sector, the Financial Services Authority forces companies to

collect the information and collate the number of complaints being received by banks and on particular financial services as well as [publishes it](#) so that consumers can use this information when deciding where to take their business.

In our research we have asked major government departments how many complaints they receive each year and on what topics, using Freedom of Information requests. The majority have told us that the time taken to collate this information would be over the allotted £600 limit, which seems to suggest redress information is not routinely collected and available.

Alternatively redress information is collected but not used

There is then the particularly public sector issue of collecting information that might be useful, sometimes multiple times, but still not making use of it. We found that in some of the major health ‘[service delivery disasters](#)’ of the last few years, the NHS bodies involved had all the information they needed to see that something was going wrong. In the case of the *c difficile* outbreak in [Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust](#) in 2007, complaints had been received from patients and their families that this hospital inquired infection was present, but no one was looking at this information in a systematic way. As the Trust was trying to obtain Foundation status, it was instead focusing on moving the complaints quickly through the system to get them resolved without looking across the broad range of complaints and seeing many were about a single issue.

Citizen redress is not given the importance by senior civil servants and officials that it should be. A report by the [National Audit Office](#) back in 2005 estimated that that nearly 1.4 million cases are received through redress systems in central government annually and are processed by over 9,300 staff and at an annual cost of at least £510 million. Looking at more recent figures for [numbers of appeals](#) we can see nearly 200,000 appeals against Department for Work and Pensions decisions, over 120,000 against the UK Border Agency and 85,000 school admissions appeals in England. The number of administrative justice tribunal cases at more than 800,000, is nearly four times as many as the 223,000 criminal trials and 63,000 civil justice hearings.

Would it make a difference if government departments were fined as energy suppliers are? Npower and British Gas were fined £2 million and £2.5 million respectively last year after it was found they did not put adequate processes in place to deal with complainants. Currently the Parliamentary Ombudsman powers are nearer to ‘name and shame’ than hitting departments where it hurts. Citizens also cannot choose to take their business elsewhere for many major public sector services. Additionally, in this ‘bonfire of the quangos’ period, many organisations that speak on behalf of citizens and the administrative justice system itself are being abolished. Both [Consumer Focus](#) and the [Administrative Justice and Tribunals Council](#) are due to be wound up and are not yet sure where their responsibilities will be transferred to.

Citizen redress is a vital check and balance to the responsibilities of government bodies to provide quality services to all users. It needs to be given much more attention in the major changes being proposed at all levels of government than it currently is.

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