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SECTION: NATIONAL NEWS POLITICS & POLICIES; Pg. 4

LENGTH: 468 words

HEADLINE: **Complaints** systems worthy of **complaint**, says NAO

BYLINE: By NICHOLAS TIMMINS

BODY:

Almost 15 years after John Major launched the Citizen's Charter to provide better redress when things go wrong, government **complaints** systems remain complex, slow and expensive, according to the **National Audit Office**.

That, at least, is the view of the public surveys the NAO conducted, and nothing in its study of the system, published yesterday, does much to contradict it.

Only a tiny proportion of the tens of millions of transactions the government had with citizens each year generated **complaints**, it said.

But the 1.4m that are known to be produced cost at least Pounds 510m a year to handle, employ 9,300 staff and generate at least another Pounds 198m in legal aid spending on appeals. They result in compensation payments of just Pounds 12.5m a year, however.

But even those figures did not give a true picture as half of all government agencies could not even say how many **complaints** they received in either of the past two years, the NAO said. And there were widely differing definitions of what was a **complaint** and what was an inquiry.

Complaints, however, accounted for 2 per cent of central government administrative costs - "a significant proportion", the NAO said. Even a marginal improvement in handling them - and particularly a reduction in appeals, which accounted for three-quarters of the cost - would produce millions of pounds in savings a year.

Apart from the National Health Service, which was largely outside the NAO's study, benefit payments generate most **complaints** with 143,000 in 2003-04, followed by tax and finance **complaints** at 116,000. But tax **complaints** top the league table of appeal costs caused at Pounds 103m, followed by Pounds 93m spent on dealing with immigration and visa appeals, and Pounds 87m on appeals against social security decisions.

Most government websites provide good information about how to make a **complaint**. But citizens face real difficulties in identifying who to talk to, and when the NAO undertook a "mystery shopping exercise" to launch **complaints** without using the website it found that some departments "impossible to reach by phone". That put the elderly and others who made limited use of the internet at a disadvantage.

About the only comfort for the government is that while focus groups reckoned supermarkets, some banks and companies were much better at dealing with **complaints**, travel companies, estate agents and IT suppliers were rated even worse.

Edward Leigh, Tory chairman of the Commons public accounts committee, said the system was chaotic, and that "putting right a government wrong too often descends into a nightmare of faceless bureaucracy".

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Sir John Bourn, head of the NAO, said: "Too many members of the public see the way government bodies handle **complaints** and appeals as being complex, slow-moving, expensive and time consuming."

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Story from BBC NEWS:

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Whitehall complaints cash fears

Millions of pounds could be saved if government departments tackled 1.4m annual complaints more efficiently, the National Audit Office says.

The spending watchdog said significant savings could be made if better mediation techniques were adopted.

Whitehall employs 9,300 people handling complaints and appeals costing £510m a year. £198m goes on legal aid, mainly for asylum and immigration appeals.

The biggest areas for complaints are health, social security and tax.

Slow-moving?

The NAO found that a complaint cost an average £155 to deal with and appeals £455.

Members of the public see current complaints procedures as "complex, slow-moving, expensive and time-consuming".

Procedures for redress vary widely from department to department.

The report by the NAO - which is entitled Citizen Redress - calls for the Department of Constitutional Affairs to take a leading role in considering methods of improving complaint procedures.

Public first?

It suggests the department should work with the Cabinet Office and ombudsmen to discover whether there should be a single point of contact to supply the public with impartial information on how to make a complaint.

"Too many members of the public see the way government bodies handle complaints as being complex, slow-moving, expensive and time-consuming," said Auditor General Sir John Bourn.

"Whitehall should convince the public that it is putting their needs and expectations first.

"Better information and greater clarity will not only make it easier for the citizens to get any errors or injustices put right, but should make it less likely that such errors are made in the first place - a better service for the public that brings significant efficiency savings."

The report found that a reduction of 5% of the costs of running complaints procedures would save taxpayers £25m a year.

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SECTION: U.K. 1st Edition; NEWS; Pg. 2

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HEADLINE: COMPLAINTS COST £ 510M

BODY:

MILLIONS of pounds could be saved by dealing with complaints more efficiently, the Government was advised yesterday.

The National Audit Office wants one point of contact for the public to reduce the average £ 155 cost of each complaint and £ 455 for an appeal.

Central government employs 9,300 staff to process complaints and appeals, at a cost of £ 510million a year.

A further £ 198million goes on legal aid for complainants, mainly in immigration and asylum appeals.

Most of the 1.4million complaints a year are over health, social security and tax but the process is "complex, slow-moving, expensive and time-consuming".

The NAO report, entitled **Citizen Redress**, calls for proactive mediation and dispute resolution at an early stage.

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SECTION: HOME NEWS

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HEADLINE: COMPLAINTS REFORM 'COULD SAVE GOVERNMENT MILLIONS'

BYLINE: Andrew Woodcock, PA Political Correspondent

BODY:

Press Association March 9, 2005, Wednesday

Government departments could save millions of pounds by dealing more efficiently with the 1.4 million complaints they receive each year, according to a report released today.

Central government employs 9,300 staff to process complaints and appeals, at a cost of £ 510 million a year, and a further £ 198 million is spent on legal aid for those making complaints - mainly in immigration and asylum appeals.

In its report, Whitehall spending watchdog the National Audit Office said that "significant" savings could be made by using pro-active mediation and other methods of dispute resolution to deal with complaints at an early stage.

And reforms could make the process of seeking redress less daunting for the public, who view current procedures as "complex, slow-moving, expensive and time-consuming".

Redress procedures vary widely across different Government departments, making it more difficult for them to compare performance, identify inefficiencies and reduce costs.

Complaints cost an average £ 155 to deal with and appeals £ 455. The biggest areas for complaints are health, social security and tax. Even a 5% reduction in costs would save the taxpayer £ 25 million a year, said the report, entitled **Citizen Redress**.

It called for the Department of Constitutional Affairs to take the lead in considering methods of improving complaints procedures, and to explore with the Cabinet Office and the ombudsmen whether a single point of contact should be created to supply the public with impartial information on how to make a complaint.

"Too many members of the public see the way government bodies handle complaints as being complex, slow-moving, expensive and time-consuming," said Auditor General Sir John Bourn.

"Whitehall should convince the public that it is putting their needs and expectations first.

"Better information and greater clarity will not only make it easier for the citizens to get any errors or injustices put right, but should make it less likely that such errors are made in the first place - a better service for the public that brings significant efficiency savings."

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March 09, 2005, Wednesday

SECTION: News; In Brief Pg. 010

LENGTH: 69 words

HEADLINE: pounds 510m spent on **complaints**

BODY:

Government departments could save millions of pounds by handling the 1.4 million **complaints** they receive every year more effectively, the **National Audit Office** said yesterday.

Whitehall departments spend pounds 510-million a year dealing with **complaints**, according to the report, which says that better information and

greater clarity would make it easier for people to get any errors or injustices put right.

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