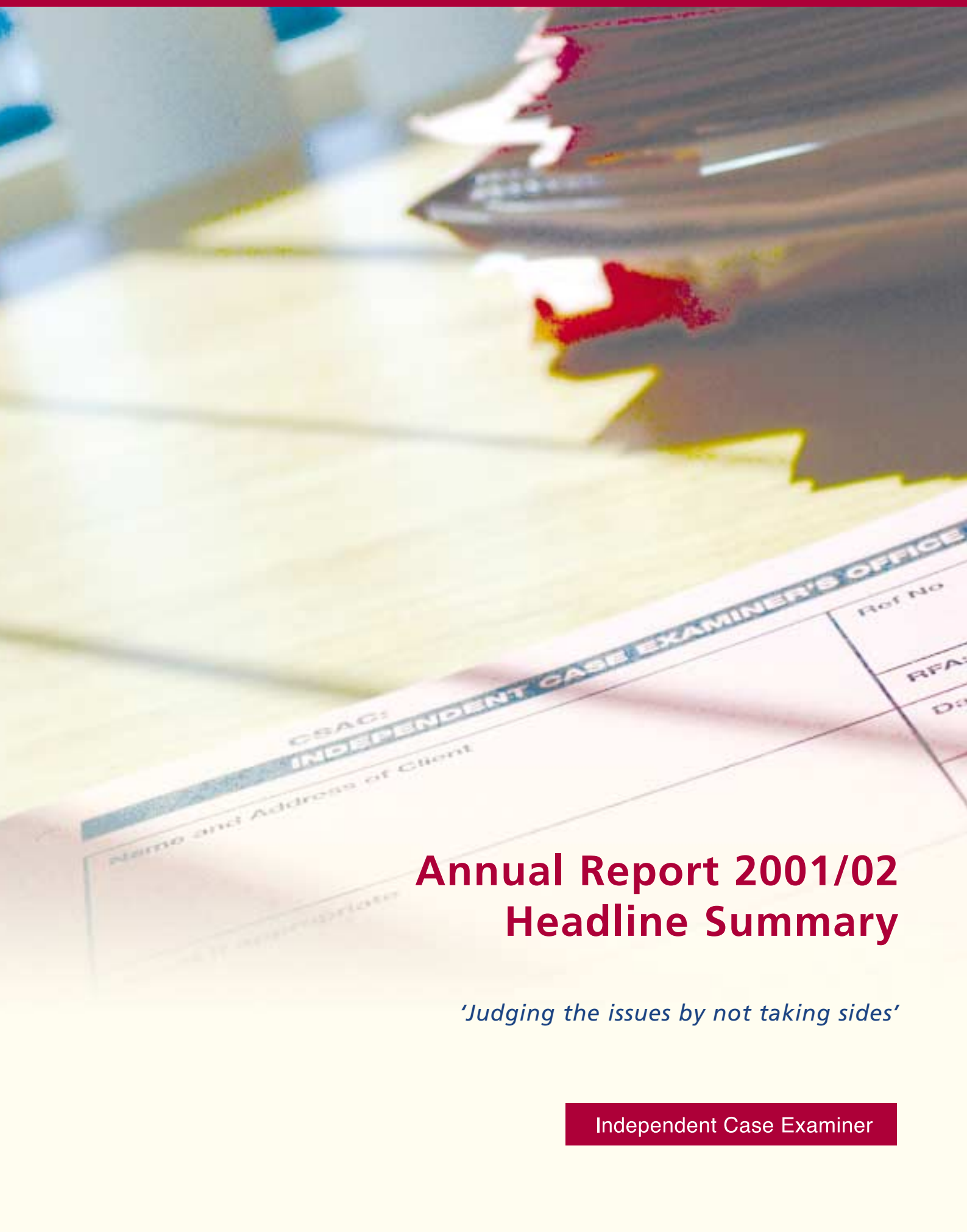


We are committed to providing the best possible service to our clients



Annual Report 2001/02 Headline Summary

'Judging the issues by not taking sides'

Independent Case Examiner



Annual Report 2001/02 Headline Summary

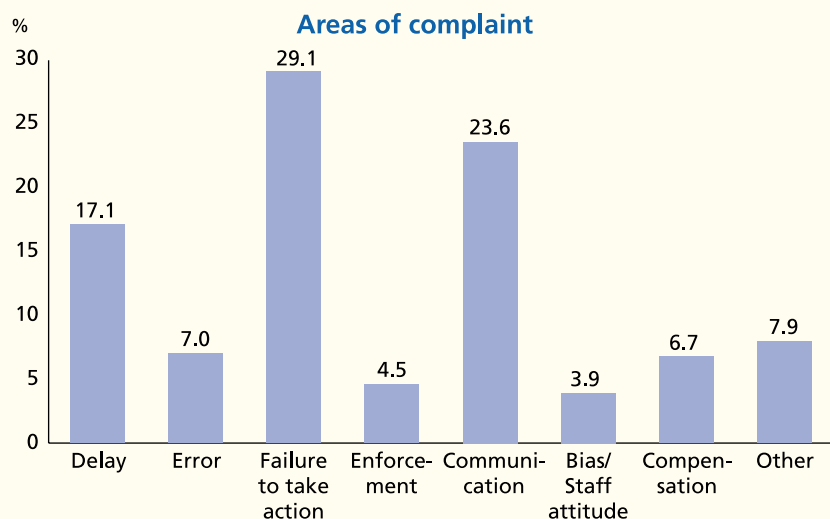
Jodi Berg –
The Independent Case Examiner

The Independent Case Examiner: Provides a free and impartial complaints review and resolution service for clients of the Child Support Agency (CSA), who having exhausted the CSA's internal complaints procedure, remain dissatisfied with the response and/or redress provided by the CSA.

Complaints process: Once someone complains to the Independent Case Examiner (ICE) consideration is given to whether there is scope for resolution without the need for investigation. In the event that this cannot be achieved to the satisfaction of the client, an investigation will be undertaken. Where appropriate, recommendations will be made to CSA about putting matters right. ICE can also make systemic recommendations, by highlighting areas for improvement in CSA's operational processes and procedures. In this way we can have a real impact on the experience of users in the future.

Complaint referrals: In the 2001/02 business year, ICE recorded the receipt of 1,498 complaint referrals, 772 of which were accepted for investigation, an increase of approximately 2.5 per cent on the previous year.

Areas of complaint: As in previous years, the complaints received focused on three recurring themes: delay; communications; and mistakes, in particular, failure to take action.



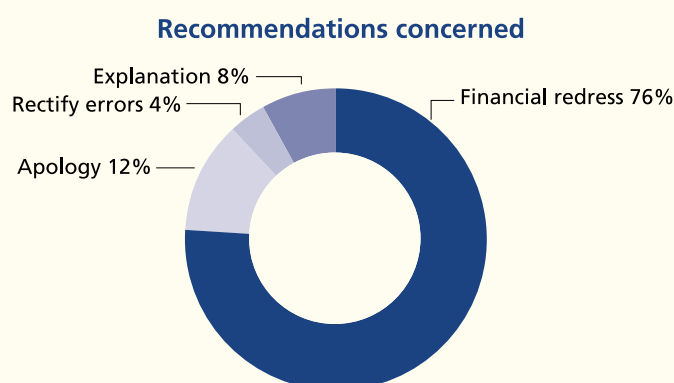
Total cases cleared: During the reporting year 637 cases were cleared either by resolution or investigation, an increase of 7 per cent on the previous year. 424 cases (67 per cent) were resolved to the clients' satisfaction and 213 (33 per cent) resulted in investigation reports. In the previous reporting year, we resolved 52 per cent of cases.

The report highlights the fact that in this reporting year a greater number of complaints were resolved, thereby offering a speedier outcome for the client. However, ICE remains disappointed by the number of complaints reaching ICE, that could have been resolved within CSA's own complaints handling procedure. The report acknowledges and welcomes CSA's commitment to significantly reducing the percentage of such cases in the coming year. It will be introducing a revised complaints handling procedure aimed at achieving this.

The ICE target for clearing cases: Is within an average of 34 weeks. Having fallen short of this in the previous year, the target was achieved during 2001/02. This was primarily as a result of organisational changes, which significantly reduced the time between the acceptance of a complaint and the start of action.

Findings: ICE continues to fully or partially uphold the vast majority of the cases investigated (88 per cent). From this year, a complaint will not be upheld, if at the time of acceptance, it has been fully addressed by CSA and appropriate redress has been provided, offered or instigated. The report suggests that the evidence from complaints referred to ICE is that there has been a failure in CSA's complaints handling procedures to meet the needs of clients. ICE has recommended that CSA takes urgent steps to address this problem.

Redress: The redress ICE achieves for its clients can take many forms, including an explanation of what has happened and why; an apology; compensation for actual financial loss; and, where appropriate, consolatory payments in recognition of service failures. Details of the range and type of recommendations we made during the reporting year are outlined below.



Financial redress: During the reporting year, ICE representations to CSA on behalf of clients resulted in the award of significant amounts of financial redress. These included:

- *consolatory payments* totalling **£101,506**;
- *financial loss payments* totalling **£114,235**;
- collection of maintenance arrears amounting to **£120,259** was *deferred or suspended*;
- *advance payments* totalling **£214,221**;
- *refunds of maintenance* totalling **£35,570**;
- *interest* totalling **£23,576**, to reflect loss of the use of monies (in respect of advance payments and refunds).

Key issues: The key issues to emerge from this year's report relate to CSA failings in respect of its communications with clients, enforcement procedures and its complaints handling. Many of the concerns identified relate to the way in which CSA communicates with its customers, both in the way in which clients' expectations are managed and the failures on the part of CSA to honour commitments. The report illustrates the importance of effective case handling and case progression, particularly in the context of enforcement, noting that this need will not diminish with the introduction of the Child Support Reforms. Nor will the requirement for CSA to provide the clear and well publicised framework within which client complaints are handled.

In conclusion the Independent Case Examiner says: I will be looking to see an increase in the number of complaints CSA resolves prior to the involvement of my office, and an indication that clients are routinely advised about how they can take matters further, if they are not satisfied with CSA's response to their complaint. My report suggests that if CSA takes the opportunity to enhance the quality of its communications and interactions with its clients, there can be a real improvement in customer satisfaction and confidence.

Copies of the Annual Report can be obtained from:

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Copies can also be obtained from our website at:

www.ind-case-exam.org.uk

This summary is also available in: Braille, audio, Welsh

The Child Support Agency's Chief Executive Mr Doug Smith says: I'm delighted to have worked closely with Jodi Berg since her appointment as Independent Case Examiner in August 2001. This has been a mutually supportive relationship with CSA working hard with her team to reduce the backlog of outstanding complaints and her team providing invaluable advice to CSA on how it might best improve the way it handles complaints.

In the last year CSA has made some significant steps forward in improving its service to our clients.

These improvements are just part of a comprehensive modernisation programme in which CSA is engaged. It is uppermost in our minds that as we go through this we must maintain the day-to-day service to clients. Where we fail we apologise, we agree how to resolve things for the future and, where appropriate we compensate. But for an increasing number of our clients our improvements are forestalling complaints – and this is how it should be.

Against that background we are working closely with Jodi Berg to significantly reduce the number of complaints referred to her office where she finds that CSA has not done enough either to apologise, to offer compensation and redress, or to resolve the position for the future. I am personally committed to improving the standard of service that people receive from CSA and alongside that to improve the efficiency of the way we handle complaints. I'm grateful to Jodi for giving me the opportunity to include this short statement in her report.