



Annex C

Issues from our clients forums

Issue	Comment/action taken
<p>1. Restructuring the client forum – at the first client forum held in London a suggestion was made to restructure future events to have syndicate groups.</p>	<p>This suggestion was taken on board and the second forum was reorganised to great effect.</p>
<p>2. ICE powers –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • it was suggested that ICE needed greater power to impose solutions rather than make recommendations. • it was also felt that ICE should remain involved in the case until the final recommendation had been implemented. • Clients also wanted ICE to be able to influence future CSA policy. 	<p>The Agency's reluctance, or failure on occasions, to implement ICE recommendations can have a negative effect on clients perceptions of the value of ICE. ICE has introduced a process to clearly describe what action is expected of the Agency and developed a case specific implementation plan. This will be provided to clients to make sure they are clear about what to expect in response to their complaint and the way forward.</p> <p>In addition we have agreed that if the implementation plan is not honoured, clients will be provided with a clear route back to ICE and we will take the matter up on their behalf. The ICE has a number of avenues open by which she is able to influence Agency policy. As well as regular dialogue with the CSA Board she is afforded the opportunity of expressing her informed opinion to Ministers and Senior Departmental Managers. Mrs Parker's annual report, together with other single issue representations are other means by which she has been able to influence the Agency.</p>

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<p>3. Face to face interviews – some clients said that they would have preferred the opportunity to discuss their complaint with the Investigating Officer on a face to face basis.</p>	<p>This would have considerable implications for resources of ICE. ICE has less than 40 investigation officers serving the whole of the UK. If we were to provide a face to face interview for every client it would have a marked impact on our case handling times and lead to an overall deterioration in the service we are able to provide. However, it was agreed that in certain circumstances a face to face interview may be appropriate and that this might be achieved using video conferencing links rather than asking staff or clients to travel long distances.</p>
<p>4. Misdirection by CSA – clients reported that Agency staff had given incorrect/incomplete advice about the role/processes of ICE.</p>	<p>Following the meeting ICE have asked the Agency to conduct a survey of staff perceptions and understanding of the role of ICE to determine whether there is an additional training requirement. The Agency initially agreed but withdrew the service to divert staff to concentrate on the Reforms Programme. The Case Examiner will discuss the need to improve staff knowledge of the internal and external complaint handling process in her annual report.</p>
<p>5. ICE discretion – there was a concern that ICE sifting procedures might be too prescriptive and that clients may be prevented from accessing the service if they could not get a response from the Agency Chief Executive.</p>	<p>ICE introduced a procedure which enables complaints to be accepted if the Chief Executives response is not forthcoming six weeks after the initial request that ICE take on the case. The Case Examiner also has discretion to take on exceptional cases that might not have satisfied the usual sifting criteria. It was agreed that there is merit in refreshing the memory of ICE staff to ensure that discretion is used.</p>
<p>6. Agency staff attitude/disciplinary issues – concerns were expressed that ICE does not address complaints about individual named officers.</p>	<p>When ICE investigates a case where the complaint involves a member of staff additional information is required to inform the investigation. ICE calls for details of the disciplinary procedures that have been carried out. Although the exact details can not be divulged to the client due to confidentiality and we can not comment on any penalty imposed, we can comment if the correct procedures were not followed.</p>
<p>7. Lack of publicity re ICE – we discussed how clients learned of ICE and what could be done to raise awareness.</p>	<p>We have followed up this issue by requesting additional resources to fund a new post with specific responsibility for the promotion of ICE services. We have also responded to the suggestion that ICE could exhibit/present at the CAB national conference. We are also monitoring our recent agreement with the Agency that ALL responses to complaints, from the Chief Executive, will contain information which signpost clients to ICE if they wish to pursue their complaint further.</p>

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8. Delays in completing ICE investigations – clients wanted a more speedy service from ICE.	During the year we lost a number of experienced investigations officers, which had an effect on clearance times. We have recruited several new members to replace the staff lost. We have also been successful in seeking extra funding and are already recruiting the additional staff. It takes time to train people to undertake investigative work but we are already able to see improvements.
9. Problems continue when case is being investigated.	In view of the feedback from the forum we are starting to monitor such problems and will raise the matter with the Agency as soon as we have some facts.
10. ICE for DSS – clients said that they felt that a service such as ICE should be in place to other DSS customers.	The wider deployment of an independent complaint service within the wider DSS has been discussed with senior managers.
11. 'Resolution' approach – there is a need to ensure that clients fully appreciate how ICE will conduct the examination of their complaint and that there are no misunderstandings about whether the issues have/have not been resolved.	Not all cases have a full report, there is now more emphasis on reaching a resolution. Clients should be kept informed at all stages and before a case is classed as resolved they will be asked to confirm that they are indeed satisfied with the outcome.
12. The lack of regular updates to clients by the ICE office.	This has also been highlighted in the recently introduced ICE quality control process, which is undertaken by the Team Leader when checking a case prior to closure. Action has been taken to ensure that this essential link between clients and ICE Investigation Officers is afforded a high priority.
13. The need for longer office hours – clients asked if ICE could offer telephone access outside normal business hours as those in full time work can be unwilling or unable to use the phone in work for such personal calls.	We will include details of our office hours in future reprints of our introductory leaflet and will highlight times in the letter issued when an investigation officer is assigned to a case. We are also currently investigating a 'whole time answering service' which takes calls out of office hours and passes on messages the next day.
14. Impartiality – this was seen by clients to be paramount and we were urged to take care to ensure that our position was always made very clear.	ICE shares this view and we are very careful to remind staff and managers that impartiality must be maintained at all times. It is sometimes difficult to convince clients of this but we recognise that it is an important factor in their perception of the value of ICE.

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<p>15. The ICE annual report – there were differing views on the presentation of the ICE annual report. Initial impressions were that the annual report could be quite off-putting, due to its length. Generally it was felt that a shorter, client-focused summary would be useful, with signposting to the larger report if additional information was required.</p>	<p>The compromise reached is that we will produce a client-focused summary of the report and enclose a copy of it in our initial letter responding to the request that we investigate a complaint.</p>
<p>16. Direct access to the Child Support Computer System (CSCS) – it was suggested that ICE might provide an enhanced service if it had access to the CSCS.</p>	<p>We have reflected on this point and concluded that the potential benefits would be outweighed as ICE staff would need additional skills in navigating the computer system and need to be kept up to date on new system amendments. We believe that we can achieve as fast a service by requiring the Agency to produce the necessary evidence for us. Our investigations also require considerable, none computer, paper evidence so access to CSCS would not necessarily help the overall process of evidence gathering.</p>
<p>17. Postal delays – it was mentioned that there had been a problem with post apparently delayed getting to ICE.</p>	<p>In response to this suggestion we conducted a trial to assess whether there are weaknesses in the post handling processes. The exercise showed that all mail sent via the internal courier arrives the next day and the majority of the external mail arrives the next day with the occasional problem where some pieces arrive a day later. No pieces of post went missing during the exercise. Problems were encountered with the Northern Ireland post box and action was taken to correct the situation. We plan to repeat the exercise on a regular basis.</p>
<p>18. Customer Satisfaction Survey – not all of the clients had been asked to provide a response to the survey.</p>	<p>The Customer Satisfaction Survey is supposed to be sent to every client, once their case has been completed. Evidence from the client forums suggests that this has not happened in the past but arrangements have been put in place to ensure that this does happen in the future.</p>
<p>19. Complaint fatigue – there was a view that clients may not pursue their complaints past a certain stage because they do not have the energy to carry it further.</p>	<p>The Agency has already agreed to look into this question but, following the forum it was felt that we should monitor this and consider canvassing clients whose complaints are rejected at our sifting stage and who do not return to ICE. We are taking steps to implement this as soon as possible.</p>
<p>20. Non-resident parent bias – clients suggested that the Agency demonstrated a bias against non-resident parents.</p>	<p>We have regard to this in the cases we examine and the instructions and guidance issued to staff in the Agency. If there is evidence we will raise the matter with the Agency. We have, however, not found such a bias on any of the cases we have investigated. ICE Team Leaders discussed the matter with ICE staff to assess whether there is an issue within our own office. We were reassured not to find any such problems.</p>