



Chapter 1

The Independent Case Examiner

Anne Parker is the Independent Case Examiner for the Child Support Agency (CSA) and the Northern Ireland Social Security Agency (SSA).

What the Independent Case Examiner does

The Independent Case Examiner acts as an independent referee, for customers of the CSA or the SSA who feel that they have been treated unfairly and who are unhappy with the way either Agency has responded to a complaint. Once the Agency's internal complaints procedures have been exhausted, the Independent Case Examiner considers both sides of the complaint, and if necessary, makes recommendations about putting matters right.

- The Independent Case Examiner is not part of the CSA or the SSA.
- The services are provided free of charge.

Complaints the Independent Case Examiner deals with

The Independent Case Examiner looks at complaints about maladministration. For instance:

- long delays;
- mistakes; and
- staff being impolite.

Clients are advised that they must continue to conduct their business through the respective Agency, as the Independent Case Examiner is unable to take over the management of individual cases.

Complaints the Independent Case Examiner will not deal with

The Independent Case Examiner will not normally look at complaints if more than six months have passed since a customer of the Child Support Agency has received a reply from, or on behalf of the Agency's Chief Executive. For complaints about the Social Security Agency, no more than 12 months should have passed.

The Independent Case Examiner's remit does not extend to investigating complaints or disputes on matters of law. These are dealt with through the Independent Appeals Service. Nor does it extend to investigating complaints that have been or are in the process of being investigated by the Parliamentary Ombudsman (Child Support Agency), or the Assembly Ombudsman (Social Security Agency).

Advising people how to take complaints further

The Cabinet Office has developed good practice guidelines for complaints handling as part of its *Service First* initiative. One recommendation is that clients should always be told what to do next if they are not satisfied with the response to their complaints. In other words, there should be a clear signpost to inform clients of the next stage in the complaints process.

Last year the Independent Case Examiner said in her report that examination of letters from the Child Support Agency's Chief Executive showed that such advice was included in less than 30 per cent of responses to complaints. As the letter from the Chief Executive is usually the last stage in the Agency's own complaints procedure, it is essential that people are told of the further options which are available.

It is equally important to advise potential clients of the time limits for complaining to the Independent Case Examiner, since failure to advise potential clients about time limits could result in the loss of the opportunity to complain to the Independent Case Examiner. The CSA agreed to our suggestion that directions to



the Independent Case Examiner should be included in all Chief Executive replies and that there should be a clear reference to the time limits involved. A similar undertaking was given about letters issued by Centre Managers on behalf of the Chief Executive. We have been monitoring the Agency's performance in this area and after a slow start, there has been a steady improvement. In the period January to March 2001, our monitoring results showed that 80 per cent of cases now include a signpost to our office. One hundred per cent adherence to this initiative can be achieved and Senior Managers have agreed to take action to ensure this happens in appropriate cases. The CSA Chief Executive has also recently expressed the view that this principle needs to be extended to all levels of complaints handling. The Independent Case Examiner would welcome such a change. We have commented in previous reports on the relatively small proportion of clients who approach the Independent Case Examiner having been advised of the service by CSA. The initiative to signpost clients to the Independent Case Examiner has helped to improve the situation as this year 35 per cent (27 per cent in 1999/2000) of our clients learned of our service from the CSA.

All clients who complained about the Social Security Agency had heard about the service provided from the Agency itself.

How we handle complaints

■ The service we offer

This year we have consulted on our first Customer Charter and we expect to publish it during the first half of 2001/02. The Charter sets out, for the benefit of clients, details of how we investigate complaints, and the standards of service they can expect to receive from us. Copies of our Charter will be issued to clients, when we acknowledge acceptance of their complaint.

Our Charter will also invite clients to let us know if they are dissatisfied with any aspect of the service that we provided. Any such expressions of dissatisfaction will be dealt with in accordance with our revised complaints handling procedures.



■ Service standards

We aim to provide the following standard of service:

Service area	Target
Acknowledge letters asking us to investigate a complaint.	Within 2 working days of receipt.
Respond to clients correspondence (in full or by way of a holding reply).	Within 10 working days of receipt.
Respond to telephone calls.	Within 7 rings.
Formally accept or reject requests that we investigate a complaint.	90% within 10 working days of receipt.
Complete action on cases accepted for investigation.	Within an average of 34 weeks.
Remind clients of their right to approach the Parliamentary or Assembly Ombudsman if they are dissatisfied with our service or the outcome of our investigation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 26 weeks after receipt, if the case remains uncleared; and • when a case is closed.

We will report on our performance delivering the Charter Standards, in future annual reports.

■ Quality of service

We aim to:

- resolve complaints quickly, and to the client's satisfaction, where appropriate without a lengthy investigation;
- where resolution is not appropriate, thoroughly investigate the complaint and seek redress; and
- keep clients regularly updated on the investigation of the complaint, either by telephone or in writing.

■ **Client satisfaction**

We aim to achieve client satisfaction by:

- providing a service which is impartial and independent of the Child Support Agency and the Northern Ireland Social Security Agency;
- keeping clients informed about the progress of their case;
- providing a helpful and efficient telephone service;
- ensuring written communications to clients are clear and easy to understand;
- treating clients fairly; and
- ensuring any investigation is thorough, and our findings are fair.

We report on the levels of client satisfaction, in respect of these key areas, in our annual report. This year our performance is described in Chapter 4. We aim to improve the levels of client satisfaction, year on year.

