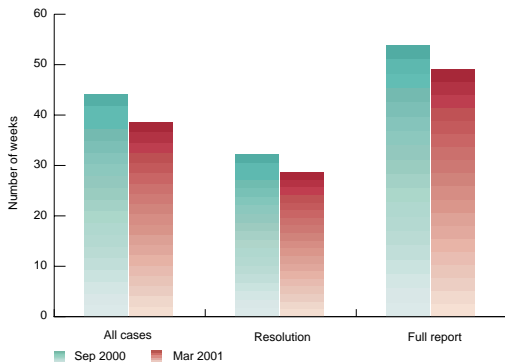


Average clearance times 2000/01											
Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
41.1	44.8	46.8	46.2	44.4	39.1	39.9	32.8	31.5	34.7	32.2	32.5

## Resolution and full report times

The following graph describes the marked difference in the time it takes to clear cases using the resolution and the full report approach. (Tables 9a and 9b at Annex A provides further details.)

### Average weekly age of cases at closure



## Investigative capacity

A high staff turnover and an increasing caseload has meant that we needed to undertake regular training and recruitment programmes, but inexperience impacts on productivity. In September the CSA responded positively to a request from the Independent Case Examiner for additional investigative resources. We were authorised to take on an additional five Investigation Officers. In February the Agency authorised a further increase to enable us to recruit 13 more Investigation Officers to address the significant rise in intake and to facilitate a reduction in clearance times. It will be some months before all the new staff are trained and in place, but as their experience grows the service we are able to offer our clients will improve still further.

## Service Level Agreement

We reported last year that we had negotiated a Service Level Agreement with the CSA. It details the services the CSA will provide for ICE and those we will provide for CSA. It describes the time it should take to deliver each aspect of the service and regular monitoring will provide a clear indication of which elements need to improve to enable us to offer a more efficient service for our clients. The 2000/01 business year has been a shadow year for the initiative. The Agency's and our own performance in this area will be reported in the Independent Case Examiner's next report.

## Unit costs

Using the same simple method this year as last (running costs divided by number of cases cleared), the cost of investigating a case this year was £1,976, which shows an increase of £411 from £1,565 last year. (Table 10 at Annex A refers to total costs.)

The rise in costs is directly attributable to the increase in the number of cases requiring a full report.

## ICE database

Our current database was developed before we began operations in 1997. Whilst our working practices have evolved, the database has remained static and therefore no longer fulfils our needs. We established specific requirements for a more responsive and sophisticated system and were pleased when our business case gained Departmental approval in February 2001. The new database will allow us to collect, collate, analyse and report details of our investigations and findings more efficiently. We will be able to provide a faster, targeted service for our clients, Ministers, the Department, Stakeholders, and the Agencies. We expect to be using the new system from July 2001.

## ICE customer satisfaction

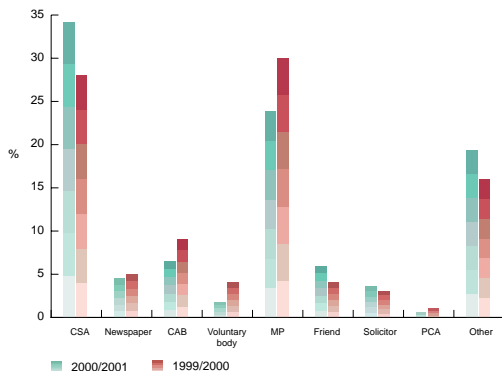
We have continued to issue a satisfaction questionnaire to all our clients, whether or not we have been able to investigate their complaint. We have analysed the results and taken action on the areas where the need for improvement was indicated. All of the comments we received have been reviewed, and we have sought to identify and address any case specific or office-wide issue.

We currently have a response rate of 55 per cent, an increase of 5 per cent from the survey conducted in 1999/2000.

## Learning about ICE

We asked clients how they learned of the services provided by the Independent Case Examiner. The chart illustrates their response (see also Table 11 at Annex A).

### Where did you find out about the Independent Case Examiner?



We have already commented on how this might be improved if more clients were informed of our services by the Agency concerned.

## Levels of satisfaction

The following tables offer a summary of the feedback on the services we provide. Whilst our aim is to improve the level of client satisfaction each year the feedback suggests that this has not happened in all of the areas surveyed.

Rising satisfaction levels	Performance	
	1999/2000	2000/01
Aspect of service		
Provision of sound telephone advice	80%	84%
Overall satisfaction with telephone service	87%	90%
Kept informed of progress	74%	79%
Case handled confidentially	86%	90%
Overall satisfaction	69%	71%

We are pleased that clients have recognised improvements in these areas but there is more we can do to raise standards still further.

Reducing satisfaction levels	Performance	
	1999/2000	2000/01
Clarity of letters	93%	90%
Promises honoured (correspondence)	93%	91%
Satisfied regarding independence of ICE	72%	68%
Treated fairly	74%	71%
Investigation was thorough and fair	72%	71%

Any perceived reduction in the quality of the services we provide is a matter of concern to the Independent Case Examiner and her staff. We will address each of the above areas during the 2001/02 year to assess what needs to be done to improve levels of satisfaction with our service.

The following comments were received from clients who were pleased with our standard of service.

*"Brilliant, first class service. Thanks."*

*"Very efficient service, I have nothing but praise."*

*"Excellent service all round."*

*"This is the second time I have had to contact yourselves over the CSA and both times you have sorted things out promptly. Thank you."*

Perhaps because we are an independent service and will not criticise the Agency unless we are satisfied it is warranted, there will always be clients who are disappointed with the outcome of our investigation. However, all negative comments are reviewed to check that the client is dissatisfied with the outcome and not with the way in which their case was administered by this office. The following comments are from clients who are less satisfied with our service.

*"Have more power over the CSA (and more quickly) to keep their inept methods under control."*

*"Make it 'actually' independent with the power to change."*

*"I feel that you relied too much on what the CSA's point of view was."*

*"I feel any recommendation made by the Independent Case Examiner for compensation should be adhered to and not at the discretion of the CSA."*

## Client forum

Whilst the customer satisfaction surveys were a valuable source of information, we identified that the questions posed could limit the response we received and direct contact would allow our customers the opportunity to air their views more freely. In last year's report we made a commitment to establish direct contact links with our clients. We are pleased to report that we were successful in achieving this.

During 2000/01 we held three client forums, two in the London area and one in York.

The clients who attended gave up their own time and travelled some distance. We are most grateful to them since we found the forums to be extremely helpful. We have analysed the feedback and used it to enhance our service in some key areas.

We welcomed the opportunity to discuss our draft Customer Charter and to obtain feedback on the content and presentation of the annual report. We also asked questions about our processes. We received very useful feedback which has helped us to redraft our Charter and which has influenced this year's annual report. We are also amending some of our procedures. Details of the issues raised and the action we have taken are shown in the Annex C.

We were pleased to be told by clients who attended the forums that the service we offer is both valued and essential. Nevertheless, we recognise that there are things that can be improved and are using their feedback to identify which aspects matter most. We look forward to using future client forums to identify ways in which we will be able to further enhance our service.

Some comments we received from attendees are quoted below.

*"I think I would have travelled almost anywhere to have had the opportunity to discuss the issues surrounding my case to prevent the same thing happening to someone else."*

*"The forum was very professionally handled especially with the clients representing both factions i.e. parents with care and non resident parents. Both sides were listened to with equal consideration to their complaints which certainly made a refreshing change."*

## Complaints about ICE

Written complaints about the service provided by this office are logged, the reason for the complaint recorded, and the complaint monitored to ensure that clients receive a full response within 10 days.

In January 2001, we revised our complaint handling procedures. We use a definition of a complaint that accords with the one used in the British Standard for Complaints Handling, namely:

*A complaint is: any expression of dissatisfaction with the service provided by the Independent Case Examiner's office, received by any method (post, e-mail, telephone, questionnaire response etc), whether justified or not.*

An essential element of complaints handling is to ensure that complaints are used to improve the service provided. Therefore, we shall be undertaking a quarterly analysis of the data we gather which will be used to identify trends and areas of complaint that may require specific attention. We anticipate that the revised complaints handling procedures will lead to an increase in the number of complaints we record.

During the year

- 15 internal complaints were received.
- Two-thirds of complaints were from a non-resident parent; the remaining third were received from parents with care.
- 14 of the 15 complaints received were received direct from the client; the remaining one was received from a representative.
- In the early part of the year the majority of complaints were about delay in completing an investigation. Towards the end of the year the balance changed and just over half of the complaints focused on the outcome of the resolution or investigation process, and a quarter referred to delay. The remainder commented on correspondence received and questioned ICE independence.

Our new complaints handling system will provide more detailed information about the types of complaints we received and our responses.

## ICE and the Parliamentary Ombudsman

All closure letters and reports from the Independent Case Examiner's office advise clients how to approach the Parliamentary Ombudsman if they are dissatisfied with the outcome of our investigation. (Clients, who live in Northern Ireland, are signposted to the Assembly Ombudsman.) Our Charter, which will be published later this year, will advise clients that if they are unhappy with our service and dissatisfied with the way we have handled their complaint, they have the right to ask their Member of Parliament to refer their complaint about our service to the Parliamentary Ombudsman. (Clients who live in Northern Ireland will be signposted to contact the Permanent Secretary of the Department for Social Development.) Additionally, the Ombudsman has agreed to consider referrals from MPs on behalf of their constituents in any cases in which our investigation may be unduly delayed. Clients whose complaints have been with us for more than 26 weeks are routinely advised of their right to approach the Ombudsman via their MPs, however, we do emphasise that this option remains open after our work is completed. It is our hope that clients choose to allow us to continue with our investigation.

This year we also implemented new arrangements to help us learn how we might improve our service by using the Ombudsman's reports. It was agreed that in the event that the Parliamentary Ombudsman undertakes an investigation into a case that has previously been investigated by the ICE, a copy of his report would be sent to us for information. This process allows us to identify opportunities to review our service and actions. We are grateful to the Parliamentary Ombudsman for his co-operation.

This year the Ombudsman investigated two cases that had been handled by the Independent Case Examiner. The first was a complaint about the time we had taken to handle a case, the way we had handled it, the quality of the response and the way the office had dealt with our client's compensation claim following the complaint. The complaints were not upheld, however, shortcomings in our procedures were highlighted which led to improvements.

The second case was a complaint about the Agency, which had already been investigated by the Independent Case Examiner. The Ombudsman upheld the case, but also found that this office had inappropriately raised the clients expectations of redress by failing to explain in sufficient detail the nature of the remedy available and the potential impact on the arrears outstanding, which reduced when the Agency brought the case up to date.

Both of these investigations caused us to revisit and amend some of our procedures.

The Independent Case Examiner values the learning which can be obtained from such objective scrutiny of her work and the confidence which access to the Ombudsman service can give to her clients.

