



Chapter 5

The Independent Case Examiner's conclusions

My fourth and final report as Independent Case Examiner affords the opportunity to reflect on past achievements and to identify future challenges.

Impact

My office has undoubtedly made a major impact on the services which my actual and potential clients receive. The profile of complaints handling within the Child Support Agency has been raised significantly and the Agency's performance in this area has improved markedly over the past four years.

Clients whose complaints were routinely ignored four years ago can now be confident that they will be acknowledged, that the Agency's response will be more effective and if they remain dissatisfied they can now be assured that they will be directed to my independent service.

Customer service

Those clients who find their way to my service find their cases thoroughly and effectively investigated and proper redress provided. Once a case has been put right the Agency will need to improve its capacity to keep it right and success here will be shown by a reduction in the number of complainants who return to my service. The analysis of their individual problems has led to procedural and systemic changes which are of benefit to all of the Agency's customers, and have made a modest contribution to the Child Support Reforms.

The Northern Ireland Social Security Agency have welcomed the addition of an independent element to their already well developed internal complaints service and are making good use of it.

The clients who use my service expressed increasing satisfaction year on year with the service they receive. In particular they appreciate the courteous and efficient personal service they receive from my investigating officers. The feedback we have received this year has been enhanced by the establishment of customer service forums, which are proving to be an even more effective way of learning about how to improve our service. I am most grateful to the clients who gave so generously of their time and hope they will find that the responses set in Annex C of the report shows how we valued and have acted upon the information they gave us.

Some levels of satisfaction dropped this year, perhaps unsurprisingly given the delay which some of my clients experienced as a result of the build-up of outstanding work from last year. The consequent imbalances between cases settled by resolution and those settled by full report, have had the effect of producing an atypical picture of Agency performance. This is because a large proportion of the cases handled last year represented more intractable problems. I am confident that the reduction of our old caseload and the provision of additional resources to handle the increasing demand for my service, should lead to both an improved service for my clients and a more representative reflection of Agency performance in the coming year. I am most grateful to the Agency for their readiness to make this additional investment in my service.

Agency performance

There is good news about improvements in the Agency's service over the past four years, which are addressing some of the problems, which have caused clients to use my service in the past. There is no doubt that the growing use of direct contact with clients, with the accompanying improvement in the capacity for handling calls, has helped to reduce the immense frustrations and frequent misunderstandings

caused by the largely paper driven service which I found on my appointment. There is evidence that the introduction of the streamlined and more responsive decision-making and appeals process is reducing the misery caused by the old and often delayed review system. The action taken by the Agency to respond to concerns raised in my previous reports has resulted in less complaints about accounts explanations and paternity disputes. Document retention has not featured as an issue in cases which I have seen recently. Apart from recognising complaints and responding to them (albeit not as efficiently as they might), there is welcome evidence that the Agency is more actively employing the range of redress open to it.

I have been particularly pleased to see the improvements, which have been made over the past four years to the DSS compensation scheme, to take account of the particular needs of the customers of the CSA. The introduction of advance payments of debt owed to parents with care caused by Agency maladministration, and the introduction of the deferred debt scheme which is designed to respond to Agency delay in the collection of child maintenance and to secure future compliance, have provided helpful redress for the Agency's customers. The desirability of extending the scheme to cover the areas of the Agency's work was described in last year's report and it is pleasing to see that during this year the scheme has been further extended. Of course as a complaints handler I see the very real difficulties which maladministration can cause, and I am sure that my successor will continue to press for further improvements. I have been particularly anxious to alert the Agency to the need to review the range of remedies available to the customers who will be affected by the transition to the new child support systems, and I am sure that this issue will feature in future reports.

The Agency is increasingly focused on sharing and standardising best practice across its Business Units. I hope that the analysis of comparative performance, which appears for the first time in this annual report, will be of help in informing this process.

Sadly, as the case illustrations demonstrate, there is also bad news. In making ready for the introduction of the new reforms the Agency is vigorously updating its caseload. This is bringing forward many cases which have lain dormant and is revealing some aspects of the old scheme, which cause much heartache. To diminish the problems which this may cause a number of simplified processes and some early legislative changes have been introduced. The complexities inherent in the old scheme remain and I am particularly concerned to monitor the impact of these processes on the customers of the Agency.

A new computer system is being introduced to support the Agency in the delivery of a simpler, more customer-focused service. The Agency is also introducing new working practices which will provide a less fragmented service. Both offer real benefits to customers, but the preparation of the staff, the organisation and the working environment is inevitably creating considerable disruption for the current business and drawing experienced staff away from casework. Whilst I welcome the investment in the future, I also recognise the challenge facing operational managers to deliver an acceptable service during such an immense period of change. A major recruitment programme which brings new and enthusiastic staff to the Agency, who will be grafted on to the old system, will bring its own challenges.

I am encouraged by the potential of the new technology and I am greatly impressed by the determination shown by staff and managers in the Agency to use the transitional period and the transitional arrangements to improve the existing service, whilst preparing for the new system.

The Child Support Reforms

The Reforms themselves will introduce a much simplified and much more understandable assessment system. This should eliminate the many examples of maladministration which I see, which are rooted in the complexities of the old system and its inflexible and often insensitive technology. The consequent procedural problems and inaccuracies in the assessment process which went on to adversely affect every subsequent stage in the process from the setting up of accounts, to reviews, debt management and enforcement of non compliance, caused frustration, gross inconvenience and distress to many of the Agency's customers. Whilst the much more straightforward assessment process will undoubtedly yield a much improved service, the Agency will need to work hard to improve performance in the areas of maintaining compliance. It has been disappointing that the improvement anticipated in my last annual report in achieving compliance amongst the self-employed, has yet to be seen.

It is encouraging to see that the Agency is testing a new performance management system (PACTS) and I look forward to the day when the Agency will be able to say with confidence to my successor that the findings shown in the ICE report are atypical of the Agency's performance and that they are not the tip of a problematic iceberg.

I am concerned that the undoubted improvements which will be yielded by the introduction of the Reforms should not be masked by the complaints which will flow from the introduction of the new scheme. There will be winners and losers from the changes. The winners will undoubtedly be frustrated as their cases wait to

be transferred to the new scheme and many may have to wait again as their assessments are adjusted over a period of years. There will also be anxiety on the part of the losers as their maintenance falls or their liability rises. However carefully publicised, there will be some customers whose expectations are raised unrealistically. This will add to complaint levels but should not be seen as an indication that the Reforms are failing. I also anticipate that improved service levels will generate increasing customer confidence and raised expectation of Agency performance. Furthermore, the complaints should be more easily addressed under the new less complex scheme. I hope that reports such as this will be able to show the real effects of the changes on customer service.





Forward look

My office and the Agency face a period of transition and major challenge. In my service this will be marked by the appointment of a new Independent Case Examiner and a service facing increased demand.

The Agency faces the challenge of maintaining and improving the quality of its complaint handling service as well as the core services which it offers, in a time of great turbulence.

I extend my thanks to all the staff with whom I have worked in the Agency. The quality and commitment of Agency staff I meet gives me hope that they will rise to the challenges.

My own staff have shown a commitment to deliver an efficient and effective service which judges the issues without taking sides. My successor will, I know, be delighted by the support they find in the ICE team.

Above all I express my good wishes and hopes for a better future to all the clients I have sought to serve. Their fortitude in the face of immense difficulties, and the patience and courtesy which so many of them have shown at the end of what for most has been a long and difficult road, has been a source of inspiration to me. I wish them all well.