

Contents

Abbreviations	2
Foreword by Anne Parker	3
1. The Independent Case Examiner	6
2. The Child Support Agency	12
2.1 Levels of complaints	12
2.2 Our findings	16
2.2.1 Delay	19
2.2.2 Communication	20
2.2.3 Error	21
2.2.4 Chief Executive replies	22
2.2.5 Discretionary decision making	24
2.2.6 Interim Maintenance Assessments	24
2.2.7 Departures	26
2.2.8 Enforcement	28
2.2.9 Accounts statements	29
2.2.10 Paternity	31
2.2.11 Decision Making and Appeals process	31
2.2.12 Agency bias	32
2.3 Analysis of complaints by Business Units	33
2.4 Areas for improvement	36
2.5 Redress	42
2.6 Working with the Agency and external organisations	53
2.7 Child Support Reform	56
2.8 The Northern Ireland Child Support Agency	62
3. The Northern Ireland Social Security Agency	64
4. ICE performance	70
5. The Independent Case Examiner's conclusions	84
Annex A – Statistical data	90
Annex B – Business Unit findings	96
Annex C – Issues from our client forums	98
Annex D – The Independent Case Examiner's office – organisation chart	102 103

Abbreviations

BU	Business Unit (Child Support Centre)
CAB	Citizens Advice Bureau
CE	Chief Executive
CSA	Child Support Agency
CSR	Child Support Reform
DEO	Deduction from Earnings Order
DMA	Decision Making and Appeals process
DSS	Department of Social Security
ICE	Independent Case Examiner
IMA	Interim Maintenance Assessment
MA	Maintenance Assessment
NICSA	Northern Ireland Child Support Agency
NRP	Non Resident Parent
NSS	National Service Statement
PACTS	Productivity, Accuracy, Compliance, Timeliness, Service
PWC	Parent With Care
SLA	Service Level Agreement
SSA	[Northern Ireland] Social Security Agency



Foreword by Anne Parker

In this my final year as the Independent Case Examiner for the Child Support Agency, I look forward to handing over an effective organisation that is valued by clients, their representatives, the Agency and influential external observers, to a new ICE.

Over the past four years my office has developed and delivered a service that is unique in the Department of Social Security (DSS). The Ombudsman, the Department and Agency recognised the need for ICE and together we have built something of which we can all be proud.

I have been privileged to be supported by staff and managers who want to do the best for their clients. My office has:

- established a reputation for fairness and professionalism;
- gained support for our role from the Cabinet Office review of Ombudsmen; and
- developed a confidence that we can influence the Agency to bring about benefits for specific clients and systemic improvements to benefit a much wider group.

The report is, however, the first to incorporate my findings as Independent Case Examiner for the Northern Ireland Social Security Agency (SSA). This work has been successfully integrated into my office with effect from April 2000 and is reported at Chapter 3.

During the past four years the Child Support Agency has demonstrated a growing commitment to acknowledging complaints, seeking to resolve them, and in the past year in particular, informing clients about the service which I offer.

This has led to an increasing number of complaints to my service. I do not see this as a criticism of the Agency's service, rather as a reflection of an improving complaints handling system. It signifies a willingness on the part of the Agency

to recognise the problems its customers can experience and to inform them about my service. It may also reflect a growing confidence on the part of the customers that their complaints will be properly addressed. Indeed, I expect the trend to continue as the Agency embarks upon the major task of preparing cases for transfer to the new system.

The high proportion of complaints, which we received this year about the Eastern Business Unit, illustrates this. This Unit has made major inroads into a backlog of old cases which has inevitably led to more complaints, as long dormant cases are brought up to date. This programme is rolling out across all the Agency's Centres. Furthermore, as the Reforms are introduced I anticipate a considerable increase in complaints. Many of these complaints will be about the legislation itself and about the transfer timetable for existing cases. There will be winners and losers in the new scheme. The former will be anxious to make the transition as soon as possible; the latter will want time to adjust.

However, I also expect an improved service to continue to generate complaints as customer expectations rise. The Australian Child Support scheme has many features in common with the Child Support Reforms. It nevertheless receives complaints about delay, enforcement, assessment and the quality of advice. The significant difference is that complaints are less intractable and chronic and therefore easier to address.

Last year I expressed concern that energy would be diverted into introducing the new scheme at a cost to the present scheme. I have been pleased to see that despite this pressure the Agency has taken vigorous action to address issues raised in my previous reports. Thus this year, I have received less complaints about accounts explanations and paternity disputes. Furthermore, document retention has not featured as an issue in the more recent cases I have seen. While there are inevitable strains on the system I have been pleased to see organisational and cultural changes being introduced during the transition which will stand the Agency and its customers in good stead. I have also had to recognise that it will be increasingly difficult to make sensible changes to the old system as the Reforms draw closer.

The Agency has been quick to recognise that without the tools to do the growing job my service to our clients will suffer. I am therefore, grateful for the investment they have made in increasing the staffing levels in my office and in improving our technology. This investment should enable my successor to enhance the service we offer to our clients and greatly improve our capacity to analyse the messages for the Agency, which our caseload identifies.

The Agency's willingness to identify complaints and to signpost my service is welcomed. Nevertheless, feedback from client forums, meetings with stakeholders and our client satisfaction surveys suggest that Agency customer awareness of my service remains too low. My office will continue to reach out to our potential clients to ensure that they can take advantage of the service if they so wish.

The service and the value of ICE needs even wider promotion within the Agency, to help improve staff and managers understanding of the potential value of the insights my office can provide.

Although I have reported upon improved complaints handling and some improvements in service delivery, many of my clients continue to experience examples of poor case handling, which cause them immense frustration and considerable inconvenience. I believe that the Agency is now much more alert to the problems of its customers and much more determined to put them right. My review of progress and problems is set out in the conclusion to this report.

My service and the services of the Agencies whose work I examine, face a period of considerable change.

I extend my best wishes to my successor, the Agencies and the staff, as they face these challenges.

I also extend my grateful thanks to the staff who have served my clients and me so well over the past four years.

Above all else, I express my sincerest hopes that the customers of the Agencies and my clients will see sustained improvements in the services, which they receive.



Anne Parker
CBE BA DSA