

We are committed to providing the best possible service to our clients.



Annual Report 2001/02

'Judging the issues by not taking sides'

Independent Case Examiner



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Annex A The Independent Case Examiner's Office:
Organisation Chart

Annex B Life cycle of a complaint in ICE

Abbreviations

CSA Child Support Agency

CSR Child Support Reforms

EMP Examining Medical Practitioner

ICE Independent Case Examiner

IT Information Technology

NICSA Northern Ireland Child Support Agency

SSA Social Security Agency



Foreword

Jodi Berg

Jodi Berg, a solicitor with extensive management experience, was appointed as the Independent Case Examiner in August 2001. She investigates complaints made about the work of the Child Support Agency and the Social Security Agency.

Mrs Berg is also the Independent Complaints Reviewer for the Land Registry, the Charity Commission, the Public Record Office and the Housing Corporation.

The Independent Case Examiner is not part of the management of either the Child Support Agency or the Social Security Agency. The Independent Case Examiner's service is free.

I am pleased to present my first report as the Independent Case Examiner (ICE) for the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency and the Social Security Agency. I have also been appointed to act as ICE for the Child Support Agency (Great Britain). I was appointed for an initial period of six months, which was subsequently extended to a year to allow time to consider the scope of the role and make a permanent appointment. First and foremost I must pay unreserved tribute to my predecessor, Anne Parker, for her invaluable contribution to the development of the role of ICE. Anne established the ethos of the office and can be thanked for the high regard in which it is held. I hope to be able to build upon her success to ensure that ICE is ready and able to meet the needs of today and the challenges of tomorrow.

My office provides a fair and impartial service for the investigation of complaints made about the Agencies. The establishment of an independent complaint review service is a significant step towards meeting the high expectations that people rightly have of all public bodies. It recognises the importance of ensuring public confidence in the way that Agencies carry out their important roles and demonstrates their wish to be held accountable to the public in a very direct way.

My role is to consider specific complaints and, where appropriate, to make recommendations, aimed both at putting matters right for the individual customer and at seeking to improve the quality of Agency service to others in the future. People who turn to my office do so because they want someone who 'has no axe to grind' to provide an unbiased but informed view of problems they have encountered. I am determined that people can be sure that my office will be both thorough and robust in its approach to this task.



*Jodi Berg and ICE Case Director
Phil Latus*

Since my appointment, I have visited Northern Ireland a number of times to meet with front-line staff and their managers. I was especially pleased to visit ONE, a ground-breaking multi-agency centre. I have been greatly impressed by the obvious commitment of Agency staff to meeting high standards of customer service. There is general approval of the role that ICE can play in resolving complaints and providing feedback to the Agencies from a client perspective. However, it is essential that everyone knows enough about the service to be able to help clients who wish to complain to us. It is also vital that they understand their own internal procedures and feel confident about helping clients to contact the appropriate person when the need arises.

My visits have provided an opportunity for staff to meet me informally and to raise any questions or concerns they might have. It is important that everyone has confidence in the fairness and impartiality of the independent process if people are to respond to complaints in a candid and positive manner. I hope that my visits have helped to explain my role more clearly and to allay anxieties or misunderstandings. Staff in the Agencies have also expressed their wish that their customers understand their situation, which is not always easy. I will be referring to this later in my report.

My meetings with members of the senior management teams of each Agency have been positive and constructive. I pay tribute to them for their clear commitment to the principle of independent review and for their determination to work in an open and co-operative manner with my office. It is particularly encouraging that they are keen to learn from the ICE process and to use the information derived from complaints to inform management decisions.

Both Agencies are facing a period of substantial change and reorganisation over the next year. The Child Support Agency, in particular, will be introducing the Child Support Reforms which are aimed at simplifying and clarifying the rules and procedures which govern its work, in order to facilitate a speedy turnaround from maintenance application to receipt of the first payment. The Child Support Agency has pledged to help people to understand what it does and how it does it in a much more direct way than was ever possible under the 'old' rules.

On occasions every organisation faces criticism and complaints. The true measure of its commitment to customer service is demonstrated by the transparent and client-friendly procedures that underpin its response.

It is clear from the complaints referred to my office, that members of the public can have unrealistic expectations of each of these Agencies. As a consequence, people can quite easily be surprised or disappointed with the service they receive. Recently, both Agencies have been reviewing their internal complaints procedures to ensure that they meet the needs of their clients and complement the independent process. For the Child Support Agency, the aim is to offer a more structured response to complaints than in the past; for the Social Security Agency it is to ensure that its procedures continue to meet the highest standards demanded of public bodies. My hope is that changes will be introduced to make a positive difference to the experience of complainants and that, over the course of the next year, complainants will begin to feel the benefits of clarity and efficiency that the revised procedures can offer.

This report describes the range of complaints referred to ICE last year and what we have learned about the Agencies from them. It highlights the redress that we have been able to achieve on behalf of our clients. It also outlines how we at ICE have developed our own systems to enable us to improve upon the high quality of service for which ICE is known. We strive for excellence and leave no stone unturned in our efforts on behalf of clients and the Agencies.

Being the Independent Case Examiner is both a challenge and a privilege. Once again this year, the value that we place on our staff has been recognised by re-accreditation for the prestigious Investors in People award. This does credit to everyone at ICE and I congratulate the team on this excellent achievement. I also thank every member of the team for their welcome and ongoing support during a time of substantial change for the office. As we enter a new year, the ICE team looks forward to being of service to the people of Northern Ireland for the future.



Jodi Berg and the Northern Ireland Investigation Team

The Independent Case Examiner

The Independent Case Examiner's Office investigates complaints from clients of the Child Support Agency (Great Britain), the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency and the Northern Ireland Social Security Agency. This report focuses on the service provided to those clients of the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency and the Northern Ireland Social Security Agency who complained to the Independent Case Examiner. We have produced a separate report, which concentrates on the service provided to clients of the Child Support Agency (Great Britain). Copies can be obtained by contacting our office at the address shown below:

The Independent Case Examiner's Office
PO Box 1245
Belfast
BT2 7DF
Telephone: 0845 606 0777

Copies can also be obtained from our website at www.ind-case-exam.org.uk

1.1 Independence

We provide a free and impartial complaints review service, which aims to resolve complaints for individual Agency clients and to make a difference to future service, by recommending change and improvement. The Independent Case Examiner's Office is managerially independent from both Agencies. It is located in Liverpool.

Our service is available to clients who, having exhausted the internal complaints procedure, remain dissatisfied with the response and/or redress provided. Whilst we can investigate complaints about maladministration, we are not able to investigate complaints or disputes on matters of law. Nor are we able to investigate complaints that have been, or are in the process of being, investigated by the Assembly Ombudsman.



ICE Senior Management Team

When a case is accepted for review, we establish whether there is scope for resolving the complaint, as this can provide a faster and more immediate response for the client. In the event that this cannot be achieved to the satisfaction of the client, an investigation will be undertaken and, if necessary, recommendations will be made to the appropriate Agency about putting matters right.

Recommendations can include:

- an apology;
- an explanation; and
- compensation.

The Independent Case Examiner can also make systemic recommendations, with a view to improving an Agency's operational processes and procedures, to either enhance its ability to secure maintenance payments for the benefit of children, or to make payments to benefit recipients, in a timely, efficient and effective manner.

1.2 Accountability **Service standards:** This year saw the launch of our first Office Charter, which sets out our service standards and target response times, in respect of six stated areas of business. Our performance is outlined in the table below:

Table 1

Target	Office performance	NI Cases
Acknowledge letters asking ICE to investigate complaints within two working days of receipt	100%	100%
Respond to client correspondence within ten working days of receipt	97%	100%
Respond to telephone calls within seven rings	91%	100%
Complete 90% of our gateway checks – from receipt of complaint to formal acceptance or rejection of complaint – within ten days	91%	97.5%
Remind clients of their right to approach the Ombudsman, as appropriate: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ if their case remains uncleared at 26 weeks; or ■ if they are dissatisfied with the outcome of our investigation, when their case is closed 	83%	83%
Clear cases accepted for investigation within an average of 34 weeks (average clearance time shown)	32.28 weeks	25.9 weeks



Measurement of our performance was made easier by the introduction of our new management information system during the year. This year we are reviewing our charter in order to reflect changes in our business processes and to set revised, more challenging service standards.

Customer satisfaction: We are committed to providing our clients with a first class service, both in terms of quality and response times. We welcome and actively encourage comment about our



service from our clients through customer satisfaction surveys. The valuable feedback we receive is analysed and, where possible, acted upon. We are also planning a meeting with client focus groups in the coming year.

During the reporting year we issued satisfaction questionnaires to most clients whose cases had been accepted for investigation. Across the work of the office, we had a response rate of 58.6 per cent, an increase on the previous year. Again, results are analysed to identify areas where improvement is needed.

The tables below offer a summary of the feedback we received. Our aim is to improve the level of client satisfaction year on year. It is pleasing to note that in this reporting year, we achieved an overall increase in client satisfaction. Details of some of the most significant improvements are outlined below.

Table 2

Rising satisfaction levels		Performance	
Aspect of service	2000/01	2001/02	
Satisfaction regarding our independence	68%	74%	
Overall satisfaction with our service	71%	83%	
Clarity of complaint acceptance criteria	82%	92%	
Provision of sound telephone advice	84%	89%	
Treating clients fairly	71%	81%	

Whilst this is good news for the quality of our service, we appreciate there is no room for complacency, particularly given the clear scope for improvement, as illustrated by our performance against certain Charter standards.

"The thoroughness with which you have undertaken your investigation and all the attention to detail which you have given during your telephone conversations and your correspondence has been much appreciated."

Extract from letter of thanks to ICE.

Reducing satisfaction levels		Performance	
Aspect of service	2000/01	2001/02	
Correspondence received as promised	91%	87%	

Complaints about our service or findings: In this reporting year, we introduced a revised system for dealing with complaints about our service. We record any expression of dissatisfaction, whether



about our findings or the standard of service we have provided, as an internal complaint, regardless of whether the dissatisfaction was expressed by telephone or in writing. This accords with best practice in complaints handling.

As anticipated, we have recorded a significant increase in the number of internal complaints, across our service in 2001/02. We welcome this as an opportunity to learn from our clients what issues are of concern to them. Of the complaints we received, 91.8 per cent were acknowledged within two working days, and 96.9 per cent received a full or holding reply within ten working days.

The majority of people who complain about our service express dissatisfaction with our decision. However, regrettably, another of the issues highlighted by complaints we received this year, including one from a client of the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency, was delay. We acknowledged to those clients that this is a matter of concern to us. We apologised for any delays encountered and are working hard to ensure that there will be no cause for similar complaints in the coming year. In addition, all complaints from clients in Northern Ireland are now allocated to dedicated investigation officers on receipt. We are confident that this will have a significant impact on the speed at which we deal with referrals.

Our quarterly analysis of the complaints we receive also allows us to identify and learn from our mistakes or failings, and rectify any shortcomings in procedures. As this report is written, there is clear evidence that these efforts are paying dividends.

If, having exhausted our internal complaints procedure, clients in Northern Ireland remain dissatisfied with the service we have provided to them, they can raise their concerns with the Permanent Secretary of the Department for Social Development. During the reporting period, none of our clients have complained to the Permanent Secretary.

If the client's complaint concerns the outcome of our investigation into their case, after exhausting our internal complaints procedure, it is open to them to ask a Member of the Legislative Assembly to raise their concerns with the Assembly Ombudsman. During this reporting period, the Ombudsman accepted one complaint, which we had previously investigated, for investigation.

"Greater publicity for ICE is essential. The service was truly excellent, more than one person dealt with my case, and I was amazed by their ready grasp of complex facts and situations. The outcome was rather more favourable than I had expected."

Complainant.

1.3 Making a difference to the service clients receive



We perform an essential function in securing redress for individual clients. We also play a fundamental role in highlighting systemic weaknesses, or failings, with a view to encouraging improvement in the Agencies' operational processes and procedures. This second, but not secondary role, is achieved through:

- systemic recommendations that have their origins in issues highlighted as a result of a particular case;
- visits to offices in both Agencies to meet with staff and senior managers;
- participation in and contribution to initiatives in the Child Support Agency, such as its Complaints Improvement Programme, and its Customer Material Testing Workshops; and
- attendance at Child Support Agency Board meetings.

Since her appointment in August 2001, the Independent Case Examiner has been looking for both Agencies to demonstrate their ability to learn from the issues highlighted by our reports. In this way, the experiences of individual clients, can be used to inform management decisions. This is essential if clients are to feel that taking the time and trouble to complain has made a difference.

The Child Support Agency has recently carried out a review of its complaints handling and has introduced new measures to identify and analyse the complaints it receives. The establishment during the year of the new role of Senior Resolution Manager, tasked with facilitating the resolution of high profile complaints, is also a welcome development. In addition, staff involved in complaints handling attended a two-day training course on complaint resolution.

Turning to the Social Security Agency, we have seen that in response to one of the complaints we received, the Agency has revised its procedures for obtaining information from employers when dealing with allegations of fraud. In several other cases, the Agency also revised its instructions for staff dealing with claims and/or appeals.

"Nothing has changed since the report was issued. CSA still get things wrong, and maintenance is still not collected."

Complainant.

1.4 Listening to and learning from customers

One of the key tasks of the Independent Case Examiner is to hold the Agencies to account for the quality of their complaints handling. Following her appointment in August 2001, the Independent Case Examiner indicated that she would be taking a close interest in the way in which the Agencies handle complaints, prior to them being accepted for investigation by this office. We shall be looking for



assurance that the lessons learned in this way are shared and acted upon to improve the service their clients receive.

The ability of an organisation to recognise and to learn from its mistakes is paramount, if it is to improve the quality of service it delivers to its clients. Complaints are not a nuisance; they are a valuable source of customer feedback, which provide a wealth of information for any organisation prepared to look critically at its services in the context of what its clients have to say.

If procedures are developed to ensure that the information derived from complaints is used to improve customer service, there is no more effective means of responding to client needs. There is also no more effective way of demonstrating to staff the value senior managers place on customer service.

In any public body, every officer receiving a complaint from a client, whether oral or written, has a responsibility to do their utmost to resolve matters immediately or as soon as they can. The ability to identify and offer redress in a timely and appropriate manner is a key component of the effective handling of clients' complaints.

Inevitably, however, resolution is not always going to be possible and staff must be encouraged to respond positively in these situations. Good customer service demands that complaints are dealt with in a timely way and moved on to the next stage of review if resolution cannot be achieved. It is also particularly important to capture the management information that flows from client complaints, but this can only happen if the details are recorded and reported.

The Cabinet Office 'Service First' guidance on '*How to deal with complaints*' offers public bodies clear guidance in this important area of client care. It requires that procedures be written in clear language and are simple and straightforward to operate. It makes it clear that information provided for the public, and instructions for staff, need to include all the stages of investigation and review, and to set out clearly at what point a complaint should go to the next stage.

The cases which we accept for investigation represent only a small percentage of each Agency's overall caseload and, in many respects, they are some of their most complex and contentious cases. Nevertheless, they provide a valuable insight into the way in which the Agencies conduct business and, in particular, into the operational effectiveness of their complaints handling procedures.



The Northern Ireland Child Support Agency

The Northern Ireland Child Support Agency (NICSA) is an executive agency of the Department for Social Development. It has responsibility for administering the 1991 and 1995 Child Support (NI) Orders. Its business is to arrange and collect, where applicable, child maintenance on behalf of children whose parents live apart.

To deliver its service to the people of Northern Ireland, it employs 412 staff in either its Belfast Headquarters (Belfast (NI) Centre), or in its field offices across Northern Ireland.

In addition, the NICSA has a partnership with the Child Support Agency of Great Britain, under which it administers the same service to clients in Yorkshire and the Midlands. This report focuses on the service provided to clients in Northern Ireland.

2.1 Raising awareness

In past annual reports, we have highlighted how this office has sought to raise awareness about our service. We welcomed NICSA's undertaking to 'signpost' its clients to this office and have monitored its performance in this area during this reporting year. We are pleased to report that only one of the cases accepted for review had not been appropriately 'signposted' to this office. This demonstrates that NICSA is honouring its undertaking.

The small percentage of complaints we have received from clients of NICSA, and the fall in the number of complaints we received during the 2001/02 business year, also suggests that NICSA is providing a satisfactory response to many of the complaints it receives.

During the year, the Independent Case Examiner (ICE) and our Case Director visited NICSA business units and field sites and had the opportunity to speak to front-line staff about providing services to parents. The overwhelming impression gained is that people realise how important it is to do a good job and to facilitate the flow of



money to support children. However, they have found the constraints of the legislation and IT system to be as much of a barrier to them, as it is to the users of the services. In addition, they face mounting demands on their time in respect of meeting challenging production targets. They said that:

"CSA has done the best job possible given the circumstances."

"Some clients seem to think that theirs is the only case we have to deal with – we wish that were so and we could provide the service they want."

"The existing formula is so complex as to be almost unworkable."

There is a real sense of excitement about the Child Support Reforms and a genuine desire to use the opportunities provided by the Reforms to raise standards and to increase levels of client satisfaction.

2.2 Complaints received

NICSA's caseload on 31 March 2002 was 35,819 cases. Between 1 April 2001 and 31 March 2002 NICSA received 429 complaints, 183 of which were addressed to its Chief Executive.

During 2001/02, we received 22 complaints about NICSA. This represents a decrease in referrals from 31 in the previous year and reverses the previous trend. The number received represents only 0.06 per cent of the Belfast (NI) Centre's live load. By any measure, this is a very small percentage and it contrasts favourably with the numbers of referrals received in respect of other Agency business units. This business unit has the lowest referral rate to ICE by a considerable margin and this speaks well for the service NICSA generally offers Northern Ireland clients.

"I have written to the Chief Executive.... the reply I got did not explain anything."

Complainant.

We were unable to accept nine of the complaints referred during the year for investigation because the complainant had yet to exhaust NICSA's internal complaints process, namely to have received a reply from or on behalf of NICSA's Chief Executive in the preceding six months.

When we refuse a complaint because the client has not exhausted NICSA's internal complaints procedure, we refer their letter of complaint to NICSA for reply. If, after six weeks, NICSA has not responded to the client we will accept the complaint for investigation without further reference to NICSA. There were no cases accepted under this criterion during the year.

**Table 3**

NICSA cases received	
Cases brought forward at 31.3.2001	8
Received during 2001/02	22
Total	30
Not accepted: Not appropriate to this office	0
Not accepted: Not dealt with at NICSA Chief Executive level	9
Cleared by resolution	7
Cleared by investigation report	2
Complaint withdrawn by client	0
Total cleared	9
Cases carried forward at 31.3.2002	12

The following table shows the percentage of men and women for the cases that we accepted for investigation during the year, and the percentage of those that are the parent with care, and non-resident parent.

Table 4

Gender	Parent with care	Non-resident parent
Female	31%	0%
Male	0%	69%

2.3 Areas of complaint

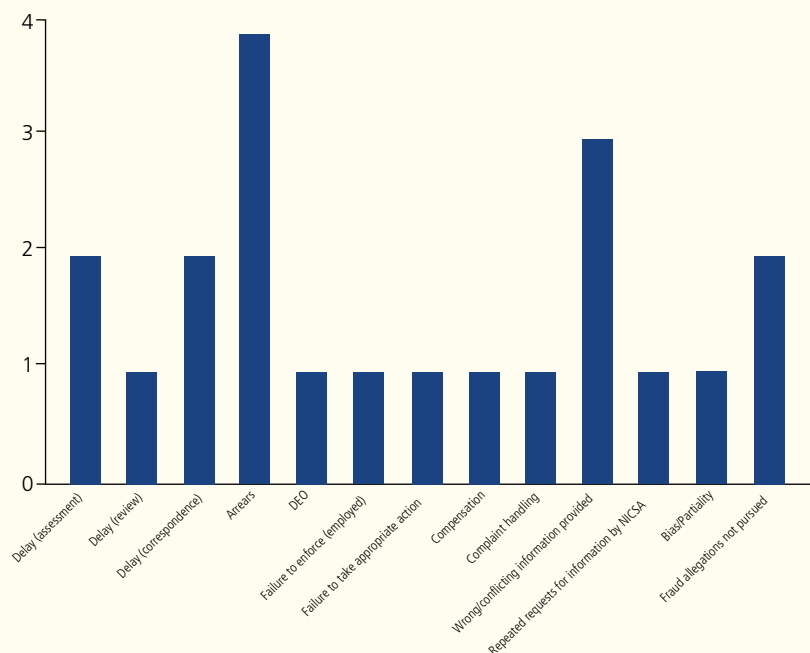
The number of cases accepted for investigation does not represent the full extent of complaints we actually investigated. This is because many complaints are made up of several allegations of maladministration, which may pertain to entirely different issues or events. During the coming year, we will be seeking to more accurately quantify the actual number of complaints we investigate rather than the number of cases we accepted.



The most common areas of complaints we received during 2001/02 involved:

- delay;
- arrears; and
- the provision of wrong/conflicting information.

Graph illustrating areas of complaint



2.4 Case completion

By far the swiftest method of settling a complaint is through the process of negotiation and resolution, which we described earlier in this report. This will always be our first approach. Nevertheless, there are a number of cases which do not lend themselves to be dealt with in this way. This might be, for example, because of the complexity of the issues involved or because the client is dissatisfied with the steps offered by NICSAs to put things right. If we establish that there is no opportunity to resolve the complaint, an investigation is undertaken.

During 2001/02, seven complaints about NICSAs were resolved. Resolution is achieved through negotiation with a NICSAs team known as the ICE Liaison Team. We are grateful to this team for their efforts to provide appropriate redress for NICSAs clients. In contrast, we investigated only two complaints, although several cases were carried forward into the current year. This demonstrates



NICSA's willingness to support our attempts to resolve complaints in a less protracted manner. We comment further on the value of seeking resolution at the earliest possible opportunity in Section 2.7.

Table 5: Comparison of resolution and investigation clearances

	1999/2000	2000/01	2001/02
Total cleared	6	3	9
Cleared by resolution	6	1	7
Cleared by investigation report	0	2	2

Our aim is to clear cases 'within an average of 34 weeks'. During 2001/02 the average time it took us to clear complaints about NICSA was 33 weeks.

2.5 What we found

Although it generally represents a speedier outcome for the client when we resolve a case, NICSA clients rightly expect to have their concerns listened to and addressed by NICSA itself, without being put to the inconvenience of having to seek redress elsewhere.

NICSA is committed to significantly reducing the percentage of these cases in the coming year. As we write this report, it is taking steps to introduce new procedures aimed at achieving this objective. In the coming business year, we will be able to assist NICSA in this process by providing it with more comprehensive data on our findings in respect of each element of a client's complaint.

Table 6: Findings

Investigation report cases	2001/02
Fully upheld	1
Partially upheld	1
Not upheld	0
Total	2

We have recently changed the way in which we describe our findings. A complaint will not now be upheld, if at the time of acceptance, it has been fully addressed by NICSA and appropriate redress has been provided, offered or instigated.

2.6 Redress The subject of financial redress has featured in some of the cases we have received. Where we establish that failures in service have amounted to maladministration, we may, if we consider it appropriate, ask NICSA to consider awarding the client a special payment. Special payments are governed by guidance produced by the Department for Social Development (formerly the Department of Health and Social Services). It is not within ICE's jurisdiction to direct NICSA as to the amount it should award a client, however, we can investigate complaints about the way requests for compensation have been handled and whether NICSA has considered all the information available when reaching its decisions.



Table 7: Redress

Special payments	
2001/02	Total
Consolatory	£750
Financial loss – costs	£5
Refund of maintenance	£1,974.32
Total	£2,729.32

2.7 Complaint handling by the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency

Of the nine NICSA cases that we cleared during the year, seven were resolved. We welcome efforts made by NICSA and commend its ICE Liaison Team for resolving client's complaints after they have been accepted for investigation by this office. However, NICSA's failure to resolve complaints before the client feels the need to contact this office is regrettable. It must guard against the development of a culture whereby clients' complaints are only taken seriously once they have progressed as far as this office. NICSA's objective must be to resolve problems as soon as possible and as close to the original point of contact as possible.



This office will continue to make every effort to facilitate the speedy resolution of complaints for the benefit of clients. We welcome NICSAs recognition that this must be seen, in the main, as a failure on the part of its internal complaints procedure. However, it is fair to point out that several complaints which were referred back to NICSAs, because a response from or on behalf of the Chief Executive had not been issued, did not subsequently return to this office. This is encouraging and suggests that in these cases, NICSAs did take the opportunity to put matters right.

In response to the interest that the Independent Case Examiner has taken in complaint handling, NICSAs has recently established mechanisms to ensure that lessons are learned from complaints. A monthly Complaints Analysis Report is prepared and this has proved a useful means of encouraging ownership of complaints. NICSAs is continuing its efforts to establish a 'no-blame' culture so that staff will feel confident in recording and reporting complaints.

Complaints handling teams comprised of experienced staff have now been set up with the task of providing a focused and personal service.

In addition, NICSAs is currently seeking to address the issue of how it provides timely and appropriate redress, through the introduction of its complaints improvement programme. Its intended purpose is to satisfactorily resolve clients' complaints, thus preventing the escalation of the complaint. The introduction of resolution planning, very much in line with that which we have been operating for some considerable time, should enable NICSAs to focus on means of redress which have often been left unexplored until referral to ICE. As part of this process, rather than a target for responding to complaints within a specified timescale, NICSAs now has an operational business target for resolving clients' complaints within 20 days of receipt. Underpinning this in NICSAs is an internal target to agree a resolution plan with the client or fully resolve the complaint within 15 working days. We welcome this emphasis on identifying tangible means of providing clients with timely redress.



The new programme must also include scope to progress the complaint to the next level if resolution proves ineffective, and clients should be clearly signposted as to how to progress their complaint if they remain dissatisfied.

Although most people complain by telephone and rightly expect their complaints to be given equal weight to those made in writing, NICSA does not currently collect details of the number of complaints that are made by telephone. An insistence that complaints are committed to paper often means that those who do not feel able to do this for a variety of reasons, can be severely disadvantaged. It also means that NICSA loses the opportunity to learn, from significant groups of customers, what problems they face in dealing with NICSA and how services can be improved to meet their needs.

It is not easy to complain to a public body. Many people are unwilling to do so and can be easily put off if procedures are lengthy and complex. As a consequence, it is often the case that those who manage to pursue their complaints through the review procedures and eventually to this office are determined, articulate and well educated. We are concerned to ensure that all those with cause for complaint are treated fairly, but are pleased to note that NICSA is currently developing procedures in relation to complaints made by telephone. ICE welcomes NICSA's future commitment to respond positively to client comments and complaints, regardless of how they are made.

If the information generated as a result of our investigations is to be used to full effect by NICSA, there is a need to ensure that it can be sensibly compared to the information NICSA collects about the complaints it receives. Currently, we record details of the trends and details of the complaint following investigation, since the client's original complaint may not clarify all of the issues. NICSA records details of the original written complaint, but not emerging issues. We know from experience that there can be a significant difference between the two. This issue will form part of our ongoing discussions with NICSA regarding its development of complaints handling and supporting information systems.



Incorrect information provided: Of all the complaints we receive, few are likely to cause such anger and frustration as those which allege that a client is given incorrect information by NICSA staff. One such case last year has led to refresher training being provided for NICSA staff. It came to light that advice previously given in relation to a client's eligibility for deferred debt was incorrect. We criticised NICSA for its handling of this matter and for providing both the client and this office with incorrect information. In addition, it was particularly regrettable that this oversight did not come to light until NICSA's Area Director became involved.

This complaint pointed to a lack of understanding of deferred debt issues within NICSA. As a result, appropriate refresher training for staff was arranged as a matter of urgency. It was pleasing to see that NICSA wrote to the client apologising for the errors that had occurred and as a consequence, he was awarded a consolatory payment of £250 in recognition of the inconvenience caused to him by the Agency's handling of this issue.

2.8 Child Support Reforms (CSR)

Despite recently announced delays, the Child Support Agency is planning to introduce the Child Support Reforms (CSR) as soon as the technology allows. The intention of CSR is to put children's needs first, in the provision of a streamlined, client-friendly service. One of its key features is the introduction of a revised method of calculating the maintenance assessment. A non-resident parent's liability will be assessed by applying a set percentage to their net income, based on the number of children involved. The assessment of existing cases, in accordance with the revised maintenance formula, may be phased in over a period of time.

Whilst the changes to the maintenance formula have been broadly welcomed, some people will have to pay more, others will receive less. In our last Annual Report we highlighted our fear that if NICSA did not introduce effective mechanisms for notifying clients of the changes in advance of their implementation and for dealing with complaints or queries that arise as a result of change to an individual's case, this could have a profound impact upon the operational effectiveness of NICSA's business. We are pleased to report that NICSA has made strenuous efforts to achieve these objectives.



There is no doubt that NICSA has a significant task ahead of it, as it prepares to transfer the existing caseload to the new assessment formula. Its success in managing this process will be a matter on which we will want to comment in due course. NICSA needs to ensure that the benefits of delivering CSR are not overshadowed by the potential pitfalls of the transitional process.

From the client's point of view, such benefits are likely to include reduced waiting times as a result of a simplified assessment process, which requires far less information to inform the calculation of an assessment. This will be coupled with a clearer understanding of the basis for the calculation and potentially a reduction in the demand for reviews, which can lead to delays in the enforcement process. Given that delay is one of the most common areas of complaint, this presents an opportunity for NICSA to reduce the number of complaints about this.

Whilst the new scheme will provide the basis for improvement it will not address many of the problems illustrated by the complaints reaching this office, without a real emphasis being placed on customer service.

New scheme: The primary aim of the new scheme is to facilitate the prompt and regular flow of maintenance to the children involved. In order to achieve this goal the whole process will be much simpler and significantly fewer pieces of information will be required to establish a maintenance assessment. Evidence from complaints suggests that many delays and errors are a direct result of the difficulties associated with collecting and updating the 100 or more facts currently required. The new scheme is expected to be both faster and less prone to error. The complexity of the current scheme has also given rise to complaints borne of a lack of understanding on the part of clients, their representatives and NICSA staff. A more transparent, less complex scheme has the potential to benefit everyone involved.



New organisational structure: Hitherto NICSA has organised its work in a series of specialist groups, each handling a part of the process. As a result, clients have experienced real problems when responsibility is transferred from one group to the next. As part of the implementation of the CSR, NICSA has developed a team approach to service delivery. The simpler scheme will allow NICSA to train its staff to undertake a wider range of duties thus reducing the occasions when responsibility needs to be transferred to specialist officers. In addition, in response to previous ICE reports, NICSA has introduced front-line staff dedicated to responding to complaints.

Handling exceptions: Whilst it is to be hoped that the new system will meet the needs of most clients, there are always exceptions to the rule. Many such problems are found in cases where unco-operative non-resident parents intentionally make it difficult for NICSA to establish a confident maintenance assessment or to enforce compliance. Complaints we see reflect delays, a lack of direction and a reluctance to take action in accordance with NICSA guidance. The new IT provides management information, which will enable NICSA to deal with such cases in a focused and proactive manner.

Variations: The Variations scheme is being introduced as part of the Child Support Reforms and replaces the existing Departures scheme. Under the current scheme, an application for Departure cannot be accepted until a maintenance assessment is notified and in force. In contrast, applications for Variations can be accepted before the maintenance calculation process has been completed. However, circumstances giving rise to a Variation are more limited than those relating to Departures and, for example, do not include housing or travel to work costs. Nevertheless, people who can benefit from a Variation will need to know about this, if NICSA is not to face future challenges and regular maintenance is not to be put at risk.

NICSA expects clients to provide sufficient information, either on the phone or in writing, to alert staff to the facts that might make a variation appropriate. It is important that this happens in every appropriate case and this issue has been raised with NICSA.



Although not specifically referred to on the new forms, there will be an explanatory leaflet about variations. As we understand it, the leaflet about Variations will not be issued unsolicited to all clients as it will not be relevant in the majority of cases, although variations will be mentioned in leaflets that are issued to accompany the application and enquiry forms. Once the Child Support Reforms are introduced we will monitor our complaints referrals in order to ensure that clients do not encounter problems in this important area.

Ongoing challenges: Previous reports by ICE have emphasised that CSR is not a panacea for all of the problems clients have endured over the past nine years. There are aspects of NICSAs service that will not be improved by the CSR. Better case management and the use of other legislative changes have the potential to have a beneficial effect on these matters, but we suspect that they will be a feature of complaints even after CSR is fully implemented.

One of the major areas of concern remains that of enforcement. We continue to deal with cases where CSA has appeared to be either unwilling or unable to achieve the flow of maintenance from the non-resident parent to the parent with care for a period of months and sometimes years. However, CSA does now have the means to secure 'compliance' much more readily than in the past.

NICSAs should explain to people that this can be a somewhat protracted procedure, particularly where a non-resident parent places obstacles in the way of enabling NICSAs to collect maintenance for their children. But it should also outline the means at its disposal for enforcing compliance and show itself willing to employ these tools in a timely manner. At the very least, this may change the perception that some people have that they can 'get away with it'.

In our last report the Independent Case Examiner raised the concerns about the cessation of the deferred debt scheme. Until 31 March 2002 the scheme enabled NICSAs not to pursue the collection of arrears which had arisen as a result of its own maladministration. However, it remains important to treat such cases as exceptions, not to deliver large unannounced bills to non-resident parents and to find ways of helping parents pay and receive appropriate and ongoing maintenance for their children.



We are pleased to report that NICSA is taking active steps to address these issues.

We will continue to monitor trends in order to focus NICSA's efforts to improve its service on the identified needs of clients.

ICE and CSR: We are hopeful that clients of NICSA will see an improvement and that they will experience a faster, more accurate, more transparent service. If this is the case, expectations will rise and what is perceived to be a greatly improved service by today's standard will soon become the norm. Experience from other organisations suggests that complaints will still emerge and a proportion of these will require investigation by an independent review service.

During the preparation for CSR, NICSA has to undertake a considerable amount of work to ensure that cases can be transferred to the new system and scheme. In doing so it will raise issues with clients who may wish to challenge its actions.

There will be other clients who are concerned about the personal impact of the CSR and want to resist the imposition of the new assessment. Such clients may also choose to pursue complaints about current and/or past issues. We anticipate that a significant number of complaints will concern issues that relate to legislation and will be outside the remit of ICE.

We have been working with NICSA to identify how the implementation of the reforms is likely to impact upon our service. The latest information we have is that we can expect a significant rise in complaints reaching ICE during the implementation of the CSR. We are preparing our organisation to respond to this situation by recruiting and training staff and adjusting our own structures to accommodate the work.

2.9 Digest of casework This is an overview of some of the cases that we dealt with during the reporting year. Each summary concentrates on the central issues rather than the whole complaint and outcome.

Mr A, a non-resident parent, complained that his allegations that the parent with care was living in England were not handled correctly. He also complained about harassment, discrimination and disclosure and said that NICSA had made unnecessary requests for information about his housing costs. In addition, he said that the arrears figure he had been given was incorrect.

The complaint was partially upheld. Our investigation found that NICSA did not investigate the client's allegations properly and that requests for further information about his housing costs were unnecessary as NICSA already held the information. We asked NICSA to consider the award of a consolatory payment for gross inconvenience. There was no evidence of harassment, discrimination or evidence disclosure and these complaints were not upheld. A definitive accounts statement was issued once the outstanding reviews were completed.



Mr B complained that NICSA delayed in completing an initial maintenance assessment. As a result of this, arrears accrued. The client requested deferred debt but it took NICSA six months to advise that it was not prepared to defer (choose not to collect) any arrears.

The client also complained that he was not advised for six months that the parent with care had applied for a departure from the maintenance formula and it was only then that he was informed that his liability had increased. This assessment was backdated, resulting in the accrual of further arrears. In addition, he said that several other departure assessments were made, which resulted in increases to maintenance liability and outstanding arrears. Overall, he complained that his dealings with NICSA had caused considerable distress to him and his family.

Our investigation revealed that the client had accrued arrears due to NICSA delay in completing the initial maintenance assessment on the case. NICSA accepted that it had initially given incorrect information in respect of this issue. The client had paid the arrears in full, however, since the overall delay in completing the assessment was less than 26 weeks, debt deferment was not an available means of providing redress.

We asked NICSA to consider awarding a consolatory payment in respect of arrears which accrued from several delayed assessments. On completion of our investigation, it transpired that the client had in fact been overcharged. His arrears were subsequently cancelled and he received a refund of £545. Further reassessments were then completed which were backdated. This again resulted in the client accruing arrears, although these were deferred. We asked NICSA to consider awarding a consolatory payment for inconvenience.

It was particularly disappointing that, during the course of this investigation, incorrect information was provided by NICSA and we experienced difficulties in securing agreement from the Centre to arrange a home visit to the client.

Mr C, a non-resident parent, complained that NICSA calculated his arrears incorrectly and subsequently collected the arrears at an incorrect rate. He also said that NICSA's actions had caused him to take sick leave from work and to consult a psychiatrist.

We found that the client had been paying regular maintenance plus arrears under a deduction from earnings order. When NICSA carried out a review, his liability reduced, but NICSA did not send a revised deduction from earnings order to his employer. It seemed to the client that the weekly arrears amount had increased, although this was not the case. Following the referral of his complaint to ICE, we found that NICSA had given him conflicting information about his arrears. In response to our investigation, NICSA sent a revised deduction from earnings order to the client's employer and also sent the client an account breakdown. As a result of our representations NICSA also awarded the client a consolatory payment of £150.



Mr D said he advised NICSA of a change in the parent with care's circumstances in September 1997. He complained that it failed to implement this until recently. As a result, he had overpaid by over £2,000, which NICSA proposed to refund by reducing his future maintenance payments. He said this was unacceptable as it would take over two and a half years and advised that he had asked for an interview to discuss his case, but was told that he could not have one.

The client also complained that the Chief Executive advised him in a letter that his application for a departure would be processed as a matter of priority, but he was then told that a review requested by the parent with care had to be dealt with first. In addition, he said that he had asked NICSA to investigate the parent with care's trust fund, but had yet to receive a response about this.

In order to resolve the complaint, NICSA refunded the overpayment, arranged an interview for the client and processed the departure application. NICSA explained that it is standard procedure to clear any outstanding reviews before considering a departure application. The parent with care was also asked for further information about her trust fund and the client was awarded a consolatory payment of £250 for gross inconvenience.

Mr E complained that NICSA had retained an overpayment of £194 and, although NICSA did not agree this figure, it failed to provide him with an explanation as to why its calculations differed. He also complained that his income had reduced substantially and that he was concerned about the length of time NICSA may take to implement the revision. Finally, he said that NICSA's actions had caused him stress.

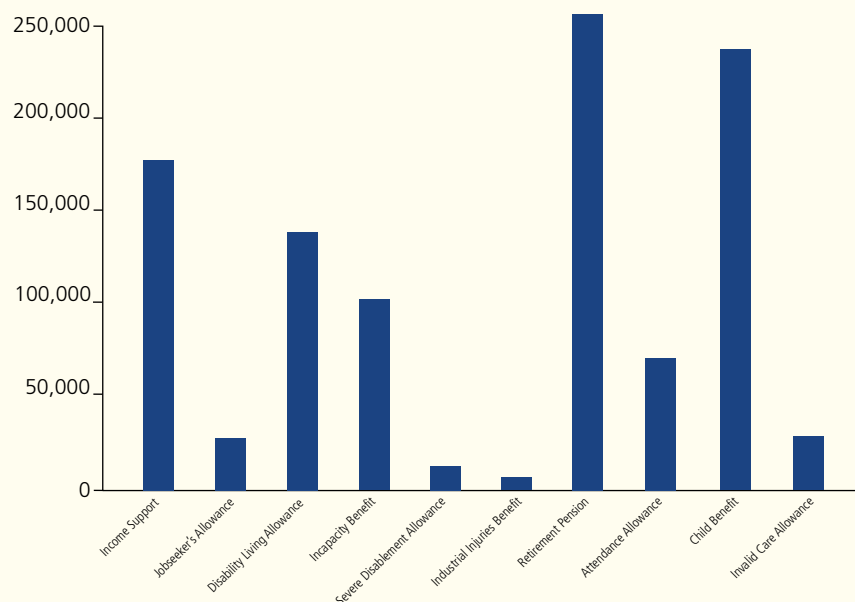
The client's complaint was resolved. NICSA completed a review of his case, which brought about a reduction in his assessment. It advised that it had made an error in calculating the overpayment figure. The client was advised of this and it was agreed that future maintenance payments would be reduced in order to repay the overpayment. NICSA apologised to the client for the errors and issued a consolatory payment of £50.



The Northern Ireland Social Security Agency

Since 1 April 2000, the Independent Case Examiner (ICE) has investigated complaints about the Northern Ireland Social Security Agency (SSA), an executive agency of the Department for Social Development. The SSA was established on 1 July 1991. Its main business is to assess and pay the full range of social security benefits and to give advice, information and assistance to approximately 650,000 clients and potential clients in Northern Ireland. The SSA is the first benefit agency in the UK to introduce an independent complaint review service for the benefit of its clients.

Benefits dealt with by the Northern Ireland SSA and live loads at March 2002





3.1 Raising awareness

"Very interesting and informative."

Member of SSA staff who attended presentation about role of ICE.

Benefit	Live load at March 2002
Income Support	176,918
Jobseeker's Allowance	37,480
Disability Living Allowance	145,604
Incapacity Benefit	104,759
Severe Disablement Allowance	15,395
Industrial Injuries Benefit	10,753
Retirement Pension	256,880
Attendance Allowance	73,202
Child Benefit	228,450
Invalid Care Allowance	37,535

The SSA has been providing information about ICE in its responses to complainants from the Chief Executive since the establishment of the scheme. During the first year, we received 15 complaints about SSA and this has increased to 19 in the second year. All of these SSA clients had been 'signposted' to ICE. By any reckoning, this relates to a tiny proportion of SSA's business and a small proportion of complaints received from its clients, most of which are resolved by the SSA without the need for referral to ICE.

We try in various ways to raise awareness about our service, so that it can be accessed easily by all those who may need it. During the year, representatives from this office delivered several presentations about the role of ICE to SSA staff from both the central benefit branches and social security offices.

In addition, the Independent Case Examiner and our Case Director met staff and managers from across the business and visited one of the field offices to meet the front-line staff there. They saw at first-hand the SSA's arrangements for receiving and handling complaints and the pride its staff take in seeking to resolve the issues raised. Speaking to clients and representatives from the voluntary organisations in the field, they were told that SSA staff are helpful and courteous and that they offer a professional service.



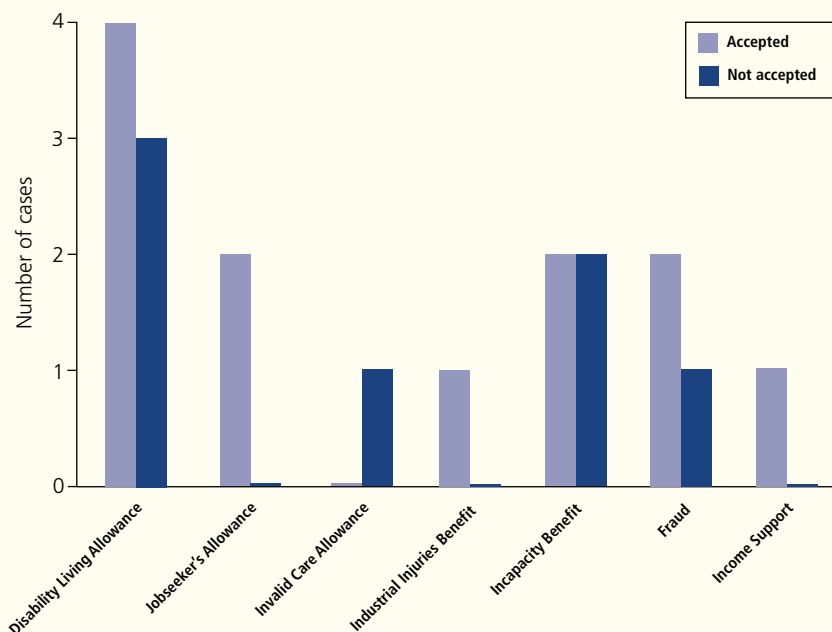
The cases reaching this office provide an insight into the actions taken by the SSA to respond to complaints. They demonstrate that the structured process described in SSA literature, which informs clients about how to complain, is being followed. Clients' complaints are recognised early on, they are addressed and people are informed about our service.

This year we will seek to find other ways of providing information about our service to a wide range of clients and stakeholder groups. In particular, we will be arranging a meeting for stakeholders of the Northern Ireland agencies, to share information about ICE and to ensure that we continue to meet the needs of agency clients.

3.2 Complaints received

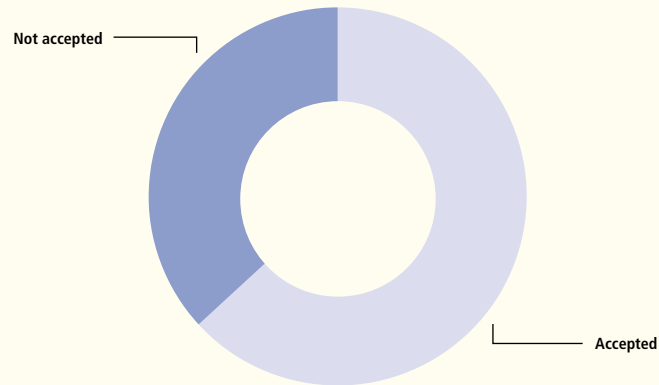
In the 2001/02 business year we received 19 complaints, 12 of which were accepted for investigation (compared with 15 and 9 respectively in the 2000/01 business year).

Graph showing complaints received/accepted for investigation by benefit or area of complaint





Pie chart of complaints accepted/not accepted for investigation



The SSA received 1,055 complaints in its Districts/Divisions and a further 347 complaints were made to its Chief Executive in the 2001/02 business year. The 12 complaints accepted for investigation by this office represent only 0.85 per cent of the total number of complaints received by the SSA. As these figures show, complaints to this office are exceptional.

Of the 7 cases that we were unable to accept for investigation:

- 4 were not appropriate to this office, because they concerned social security legislation;
- 1 was not accepted because it concerned the medical opinion of one of the SSA's Examining Medical Practitioners. Although we can investigate the actions of Examining Medical Practitioners, we cannot comment on their medical opinion;
- 1 concerned the Appeals Service which is independent of the SSA; and
- 1 was a case where the complainant had yet to exhaust the SSA's internal complaints process, namely to have received a reply, from or on behalf of, the SSA's Chief Executive in the preceding 12 months*. This complaint was referred back to the SSA and the client did not subsequently return to our office. This suggests that the SSA took the opportunity to put matters right.

*Clients should note that they should now complain to ICE within 6 months of receiving a response from SSA's Chief Executive.



In the event that we are unable to accept a complaint for investigation, because the client has not exhausted the internal complaints procedures, we forward their correspondence to the SSA for reply. In doing so, we give the SSA six weeks in which to respond. If the SSA fails to provide the client with a response within the specified period, we will accept the complaint for investigation without further reference to the SSA. We have yet to accept a case for investigation under this criterion.

3.3 Areas of complaint

The number of cases accepted for investigation does not represent the full extent of complaints we actually investigated. This is because many complaints are made up of several allegations of maladministration, which may pertain to entirely different issues or events. During the coming year, we will be seeking to more accurately quantify the actual number of complaints we investigate rather than the number of cases we accepted.

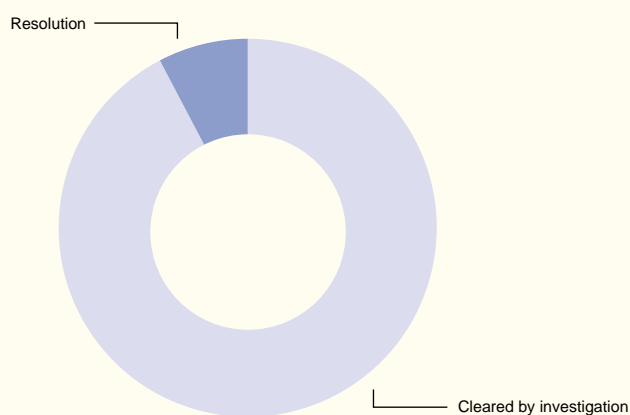
Although there was a range of complaints, the most common areas were:

- complaint handling;
- wrong/conflicting information provided; and
- staff attitude.

Table 8: Total cases cleared

	2000/01	2001/02
Cases brought forward from previous year	0	5
Total received	15	19
Not accepted for investigation	6	7
Cleared by resolution	1	1
Cleared by investigation report	3	12
Number outstanding at the year end	5	4

Pie chart illustrating cases cleared by investigation report as opposed to resolution in 2001/02



Our target for clearing cases is within an average of 34 weeks. We are pleased to report that during the 2001/02 business year, our average clearance time for complaints received from clients of the SSA was 21 weeks. This cannot be achieved without the active co-operation of the SSA and we are pleased to acknowledge this proactive response to our investigations.

3.5 What we found This year as last, we have continued to fully or partially uphold a significant proportion of the complaints we investigate, as illustrated in the table below. This is disappointing for the SSA and its clients. It should be noted, however, that in some cases, only minor elements of the complaint were upheld.

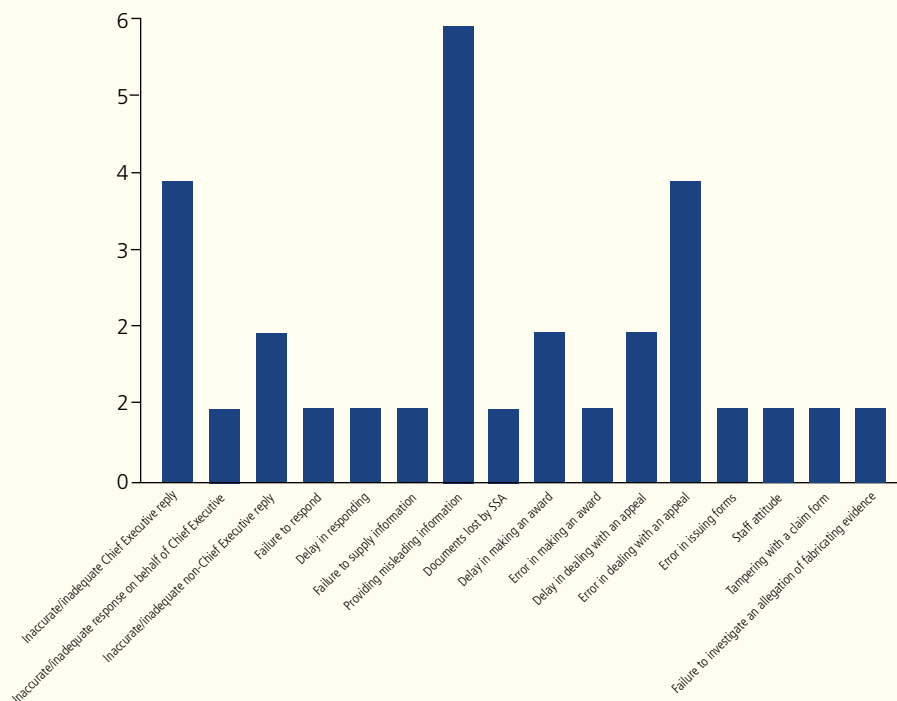
Table 9

Investigation report cases				
Findings	2000/01		2001/02	
	No. of cases	%	No. of cases	%
Fully upheld	–	–	3	25
Partially upheld	2	67	7	58
Not upheld	1	33	2	17
Total	3	100	12	100



Many of the elements of complaints that we upheld concerned communication problems and, in particular, we found that SSA had provided misleading information and that several inaccurate responses from the SSA's District/Divisional Managers and from or on behalf of its Chief Executive had been issued. Although many of the cases we investigated concerned complex issues and some clients had received several responses from the Chief Executive, we consider that it is vital that the SSA provides its clients with accurate information. We are pleased to note, however, that the SSA's Customer Services Unit has proposed to monitor the standard of certain responses issued by the District/Divisional Managers and the information provided by the District/Divisional Support Units. We also found in several investigations that there were errors and delays in dealing with appeals.

Graph illustrating our findings



During the coming year, we will be collecting data on our findings in respect of each element of a client's complaint. We have recently changed the way in which we describe our findings. A complaint will not now be upheld, if at the time of acceptance, it has been fully addressed by the SSA and appropriate redress has been provided, offered or instigated.



Jodi Berg in discussion with ICE staff

3.6 Redress If we find that the SSA has not handled a case appropriately, such that maladministration has occurred, we may ask it to issue an apology and/or financial redress to the client. Whilst we are unable to direct the SSA as to the amount of compensation a client should receive, given that such payments are made in accordance with guidance produced by the Department for Social Development (formerly the Department of Health and Social Services), we are able to consider whether, in awarding compensation, the SSA has had regard to all the relevant facts. During the business year 2001/02, we asked the SSA to consider awarding consolatory payments to five of its clients who had complained to us. We are pleased to report that the SSA subsequently awarded payments to all five clients totalling some £1,225.

3.7 Complaint handling by the Northern Ireland Social Security Agency

The fact that the SSA records all complaints demonstrates its commitment to taking account of feedback from its clients. The complaints we have received from its clients are, in the main, exceptional cases and have concerned some rather complicated and sensitive issues. Some have required in-depth investigations that have taken several months to complete. In a number of cases, the main elements of the complaint were not upheld. We have also seen cases in which it is apparent that the SSA has tried to resolve matters before the client has complained to us. We consider that, in some instances, our investigations provide reassurance for SSA staff that they have done as much as possible to resolve the complaint.

We were also pleased to see in one case that two of SSA's Managers visited a client on two separate occasions, in order to try to resolve a complaint; and in another, an officer from the Customer Services Unit met a client on several occasions in order to discuss his complaint. This demonstrates the strong customer service ethic of the SSA.

That said, we should also point out that the SSA does not always get it right. In one case that we investigated, there were mistakes and delays on the case, even after the client had complained to the highest levels of the SSA's management structure. Our investigation also showed that incorrect information about an appeal had been included in letters to the client from both the Divisional Manager and the Chief Executive. In another case, although most of the complaints were not upheld, we identified that it had taken the



3.9 Digest of casework This is an overview of some of the cases that we dealt with during the reporting year. Each summary concentrates on the central issues rather than the whole complaint and outcome.

The crux of Mr F's complaint was that an officer had tampered with his claim for Jobseeker's Allowance. He also complained about SSA's handling of his complaint and said that SSA had not provided him with adequate advice.

During our investigation, we found that an officer had added the date of claim to the client's Jobseeker's Allowance claim form without consent. Consequently, at our request, SSA issued a consolatory payment amounting to £100. Although we found that the client had not been provided with adequate advice, complaints about SSA's handling of the complaint were not upheld as SSA had sought to resolve matters prior to referral to ICE.

Mrs G's father complained on her behalf and said that there were excessive delays in dealing with her claim for Disability Living Allowance. He said that her request for a reassessment by an Examining Medical Practitioner (EMP) was refused without any explanation being given for this, and that the alternative action taken by SSA did not sufficiently clarify her disability. He also complained that a notification clearly showed that the decision maker did not take account of letters submitted by his daughter and, that an appeal submission contained unwarranted and inappropriate statements which impugned her character. He subsequently sent a further letter in which he stated that her renewal claim forms had been ignored and then lost.

The complaint that there were delays in dealing with his daughter's claim was upheld, although SSA had already explained to him why her request for a reassessment by an EMP was not granted. SSA was criticised for its failure to notify Mrs G of all the evidence used when making the decision on her claim and for losing the renewal claim forms. It accepted a systemic recommendation that it remove the line of argument made in appeal submissions, which the client considered to impugn his daughter's character, and it also agreed to consider a consolatory payment, with £200 subsequently being awarded.



Mr H complained that an EMP asked inappropriate questions during an examination and that, although the EMP had read reports that clearly stated that the client had been a member of the security forces, he subsequently stated that he was not aware of this. He also said that comments on the EMP's report insinuated that he had been working; that the report was not properly documented; and that responses from SSA about his complaints were inadequate.

There was no evidence that the EMP had asked inappropriate questions and the complaint that the EMP had said that he was not aware that the client was a member of the security forces was not upheld. Although it was considered that the report had been documented correctly, the comments highlighted by *Mr H* were deemed to be inappropriate. We also concluded that one of the responses from SSA merited criticism and, as a result of our investigation, *Mr H* received a consolatory payment of £350.

Mr I complained on behalf of his wife about a fraud investigation. SSA was investigating an allegation that a client was working in his wife's business whilst claiming benefit and *Mr I* complained that an officer telephoned her and threatened to report her to the Inland Revenue if she did not provide information. He said that the Inland Revenue subsequently investigated his wife's business and that SSA's actions had caused his wife stress.

There was no evidence that the officer was threatening during the telephone conversation, although SSA has now changed its procedures. Unless an employer offers to provide information over the telephone, officers are now advised to arrange visits to employers. However, we considered that the officer should not have referred to the Inland Revenue during the conversation, although the Inland Revenue categorically stated that its investigation was not instigated because of contact from SSA. *Mr I* also stated that he had observed someone, who he knew to be working, receiving a payment in a social security office from a member of his or her own family. We considered that there was insufficient information for SSA to instigate an investigation about this and advised the client to provide further information. SSA's Chief Executive's apology was considered to be sufficient redress for the comment about the Inland Revenue and any stress caused by this. Accordingly, the complaint was not upheld.

Mrs J complained that SSA mishandled her claim for Disability Living Allowance and her subsequent appeal, and that her complaints about these issues were not dealt with properly. During our investigation, we found that there had been delays in dealing with her claim and that erroneous decisions had been made. In addition, we identified that responses from both the Divisional Manager and the Chief Executive contained incorrect information about her appeal. The complaint was fully upheld and a consolatory payment of £250 was subsequently issued.



Concluding remarks from the Independent Case Examiner

This reporting year has been one in which my office has experienced considerable change, both in terms of personnel and procedures, coupled with the introduction of a new database. We will be looking to build on these changes in the coming year, to improve the quality of service we provide to our clients.

In terms of the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency's (NICSA) performance, it has been a period in which we have observed a greater recognition on the part of NICSA of the importance of resolving client complaints, both in terms of those complaints which are referred to my office, and in terms of its moves to make the resolution process an integral part of its own complaints handling procedure. In the coming year, we shall be looking to see improvements in the number of complaints NICSA resolves within the confines of its own complaints handling procedure.

I am optimistic that if NICSA takes the opportunity to enhance the quality of its communications and interactions with its clients, particularly in managing expectations and honouring commitments, much could be done to improve client satisfaction and confidence. Indeed, the importance of ensuring effective communications with clients takes on even greater significance with the impending introduction of the Child Support Reforms.

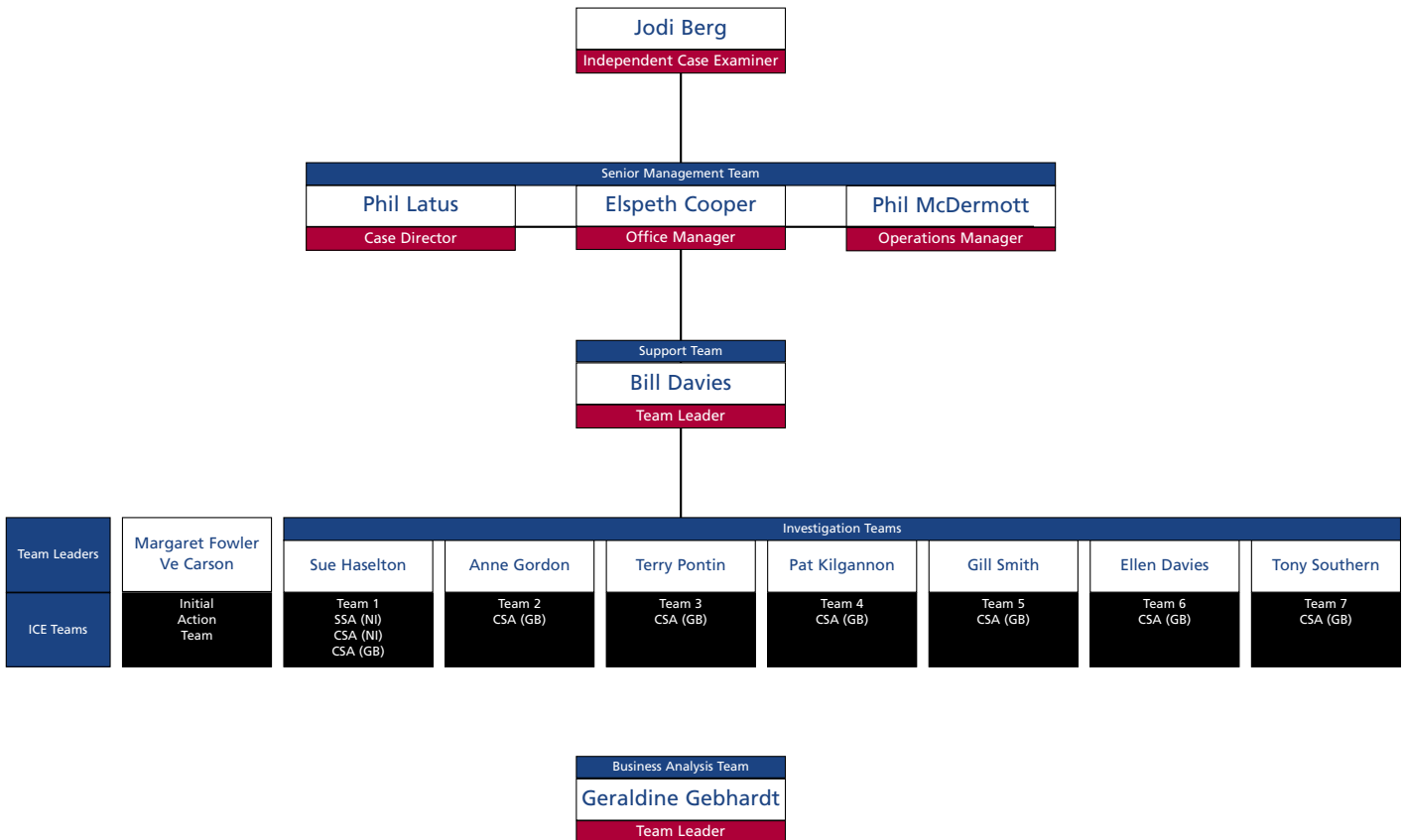
Turning to the Northern Ireland Social Security Agency (SSA), the fact that it clears so many of the complaints it receives before they reach my office and that only minor elements of some of the complaints that we did receive were upheld, shows the effectiveness of its complaints handling procedures. By providing the SSA with data on our findings in respect of each element of a client's complaint in the coming business year, we may also be able to assist SSA in identifying ways to resolve specific customer concerns.



From the evidence I have seen, there is certainly a strong desire on the part of staff in both agencies to provide a high quality customer service. During the forthcoming year, we shall be looking to see that the significant investment NICSA is making in staff training provides a boost to staff confidence and client satisfaction.

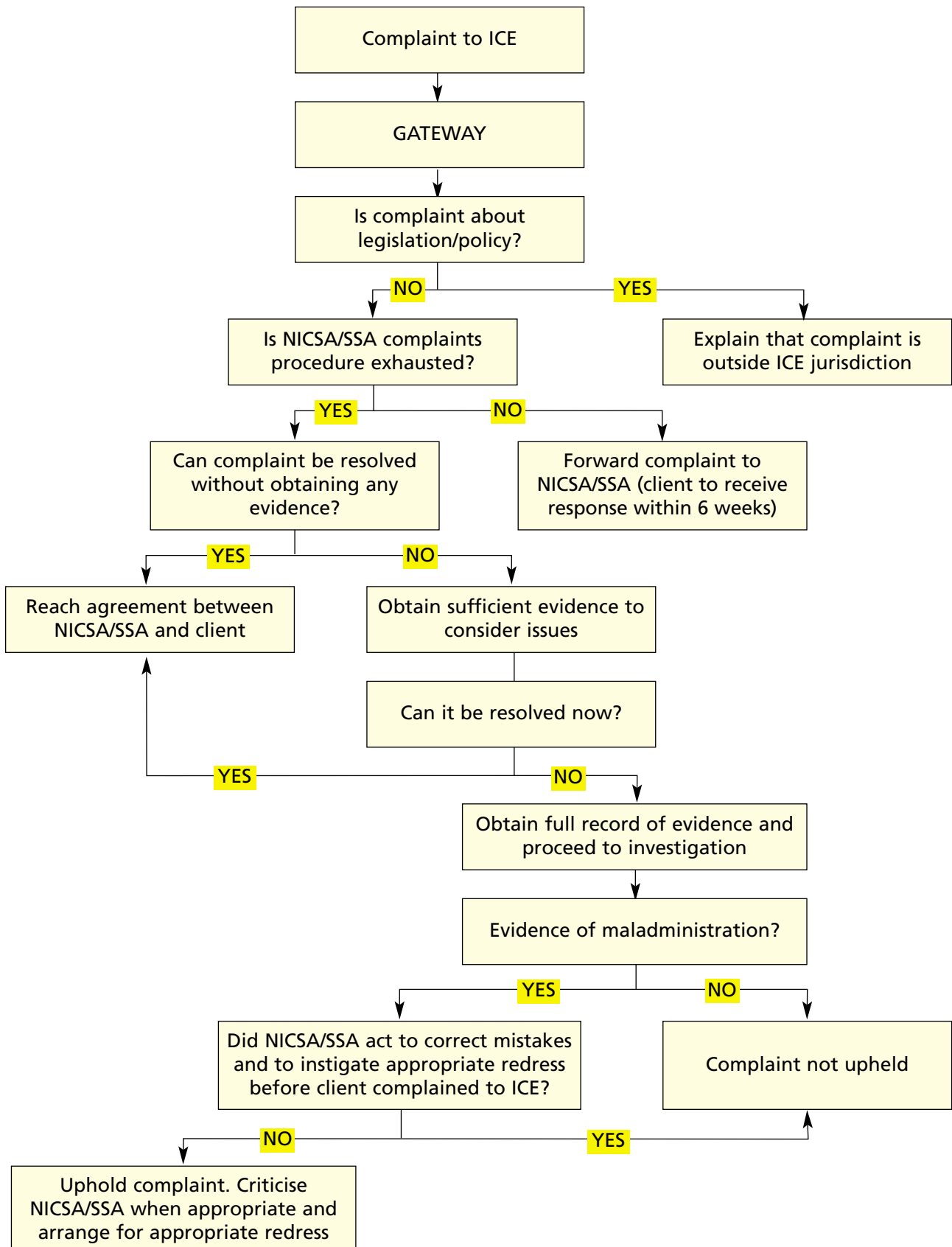
As far as this office is concerned, we will continue our programme of case handling improvement, to ensure that the quality of our service is second-to-none.

Annex A: The Independent Case Examiner's Office: Organisation Chart



Left to right: Pat Kilgannon, Elspeth Cooper, Sue Haselton, Anne Gordon, Gill Smith, Bill Davies, Phil McDermott, Ellen Davies, Geraldine Gebhardt, Margaret Fowler, Terry Pontin, Ve Carson

Annex B: Life cycle of a complaint in the Independent Case Examiner's Office



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'Judging the issues by not taking sides'