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# Annual Report 2001/02 Headline Summary

*'Judging the issues by not taking sides'*

Independent Case Examiner

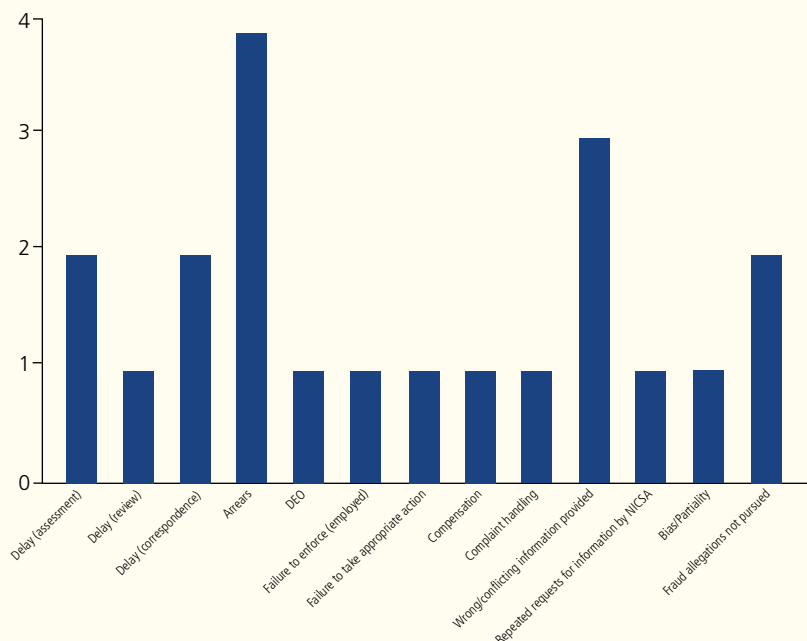
for the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency



# Annual Report 2001/02 Headline Summary

Jodi Berg –  
The Independent Case Examiner

- The Independent Case Examiner (ICE):** Provides a free and impartial complaints review and resolution service for customers of the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency, who remain dissatisfied with the response and/or redress provided by the Agency.
- Complaints Process:** Once a complaint has been accepted, consideration is given to whether there is scope for resolution without the need for investigation. In the event that this cannot be achieved to the satisfaction of the client, an investigation will be undertaken. Where appropriate, recommendations will be made to the Agency about putting matters right. The Independent Case Examiner can also make systemic recommendations, by highlighting areas for improvement in the Agency's operational processes and procedures. In this way we can have a positive impact on the experience of users in the future.
- Complaint referrals:** In the 2001/2002 business year, ICE received 22 complaints, 13 of which were accepted for investigation.
- Areas of complaint:** The most common areas of complaints referred during 2001/2002 involved: delay; arrears; and the provision of wrong/conflicting information.



**Total Cases Cleared:** During the reporting year 7 complaints about the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency were resolved. In contrast, we investigated only 2 complaints. This demonstrates the Agency's willingness to support our attempts to resolve complaints in a less protracted manner, thereby offering a speedier outcome for the client.

**The ICE target for clearing cases:** Is within an average of 34 weeks. During 2001/2002, the average time it took us to clear complaints about the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency was 33 weeks.

**Findings:** We were able to resolve a number of complaints without the necessity of engaging in a lengthy investigation. We commend the Agency's ICE Liaison Team for helping us to achieve this as it represents a speedier settlement for both the complainant and the Agency. However, the Independent Case Examiner remains disappointed that complaints that could have been resolved within the Agency's own complaint handling procedure continue to reach ICE. Agency customers rightly expect to have their concerns listened to and addressed by the Agency itself, without being put to the inconvenience of having to seek redress elsewhere. The Agency 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 the Agency in this process by providing it with more comprehensive data on our findings in respect of each element of a client's complaint. In addition, from this year a complaint will not now be upheld, if at the time of acceptance it has been fully addressed by the Agency and appropriate redress has been provided, offered or instigated.

**Redress:** The Independent Case Examiner is able to recommend that the Agency gives an apology, an explanation of what has happened or takes action to put matters right. In addition, where we establish that failures in service have amounted to maladministration, the Independent Case Examiner can ask the Agency to consider awarding the client financial redress. Special payments are governed by guidance produced by the Department for Social Development (formerly the Department of Health and Social Services). The Independent Case Examiner is not able to direct the Agency 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 the Agency has considered all the information available when reaching its decisions.

**Key Issues:** This office will continue to make every effort to facilitate the speedy resolution of complaints for the benefit of clients. It is also fair to point out that several complaints, which were referred back to the Agency to provide a final response, did not subsequently return to this office. This is encouraging and suggests that in these cases, the Agency took the opportunity to put matters right. We are also pleased to note that the Agency is currently developing procedures to respond appropriately to complaints made by telephone. The Independent Case Examiner

is concerned that these complaints are not currently given equal weight to those made in writing and, therefore, welcomes this initiative.

**In conclusion  
the Independent  
Case Examiner says:**

There is now a greater recognition on the part of the Agency of the importance of resolving customer complaints. This is reflected in its efforts to resolve those complaints which are referred to my office, and in its moves to make a similar resolution process an integral part of its own complaints handling procedure. In the coming year, we hope to see an improvement in the way in which the Agency responds to customer concerns and complaints, which should lead to their resolution within its own complaints handling procedure.

I am optimistic that if the Agency 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 customer satisfaction and confidence.

In response to the Independent Case Examiner's report, the Chief Executive of the Agency says:

The transparent and prompt resolution of complaints is a key aspect of good customer services and the provision of accessible and effective complaints processes is the sign of a mature organisation.

In all walks of life things go wrong. That is inevitable. The trick is to resolve issues quickly and to learn from our mistakes. That is why I regard the contribution of the Independent Case Examiner and her staff as vital to our business. In addition to helping resolve complaints she is a champion of best practice and we have learned a lot from her feedback.

Copies of the Annual Report can be obtained from:

The Office of the Independent Case Examiner  
PO BOX 1245  
Belfast  
BT2 7DF

Telephone: 0151 801 8800

Minicom: 0151 801 8888

Fax: 0151 801 8825

E-mail: ICE@ukgov.demon.co.uk

Copies can also be obtained from our website at [www.ind-case-exam.org.uk](http://www.ind-case-exam.org.uk)

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