

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



## Annual Report 2001/02 Headline Summary

*'Judging the issues by not taking sides'*

Independent Case Examiner

for the Social Security Agency



# Annual Report 2001/02 Headline Summary

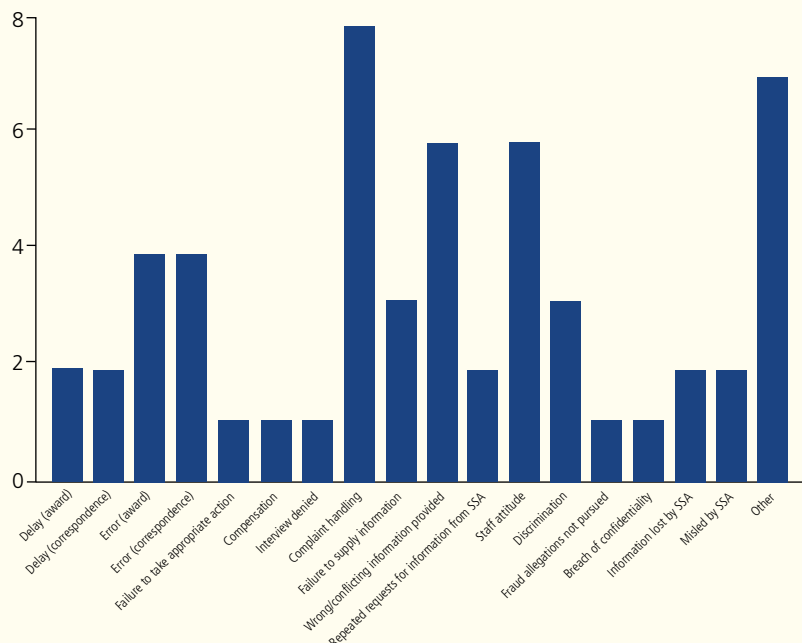
Jodi Berg –  
The Independent Case Examiner

**The Independent Case Examiner (ICE):** Provides a free and impartial complaints review and resolution service for customers of the Social Security 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 19 complaints, 12 of which were accepted for investigation.

**Areas of complaint:** The most common areas of complaints referred during 2001/2002 involved: complaint handling; the provision of wrong/conflicting information; and, staff attitude.



**Total Cases Cleared:** During the reporting year only one complaint about the Social Security Agency was cleared by resolution. In most cases, the Agency has tried to put matters right, before the client complained to us. The small number of complaints referred to us by the Agency's clients tend to require detailed investigation. We are pleased to report that all but the very small number of cases referred to ICE, are resolved within the Agency's own complaints procedures.

**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 Social Security Agency was 21 weeks.

**Findings:** This year as last, we have continued to fully or partially uphold a significant proportion of the complaints we investigate. Although this is disappointing for the Agency and its customers, it should be noted that in some cases, only minor elements of the complaint were upheld. Many of the elements of complaints that we upheld concerned communication problems. In particular, we found that the Agency had issued a number of inaccurate responses from District/Divisional Managers and from or on behalf of its Chief Executive. Although the cases we investigated generally concerned complex issues and the Agency had tried to resolve matters, it is vital that the Agency provides clients with accurate information. We are pleased to note however that the Agency's Customer Services Unit has proposed to monitor the standard of 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/or delays in dealing with appeals.

During the coming year, we will be providing information about our findings in respect of each element of a client's complaint. From this year a complaint will not 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:** Where we establish that failures in service have amounted to maladministration, 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, if appropriate, she may recommend that the Agency considers awarding the client financial redress. We are unable to direct the Agency as to the amount of compensation a client should receive (payments are made in accordance with guidance produced by the Department for Social Development, formerly the Department of Health and Social Services). However, we are able to consider whether, in taking this decision, the Agency has had regard to all the relevant facts. During the business year 2001/2002, we asked the Agency to consider awarding consolatory payments to 5 of its clients who had complained to us. We are pleased to report that the Agency subsequently awarded payments to all 5 clients totalling some £1225.

**Key Issues:** The fact that the Social Security Agency records all complaints demonstrates its commitment to taking account of feedback from its customers. 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 Agency has tried to resolve matters before the client has complained to us. We consider that, in addition to assuring complainants that proper action has been taken, our investigations provide reassurance for Agency staff that they have done as much as possible to resolve the complaint.

In the cases we investigated during the year, the Agency adhered to its internal complaints handling procedures and its responses invariably signposted to the next level of the process. In response to an ICE recommendation, it also agreed to reword its "Making a Complaint" leaflet to ensure that it was in line with its internal procedures. Given the nature of its work and the potential for complaints, the Social Security Agency can be regarded as a model for the way in which similar organisations should respond to complaints.

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

The fact that the Social Security Agency clears so many of the complaints it receives before they reach ICE and that only minor elements of some of the complaints that we did receive were upheld, shows the effectiveness of its complaint handling procedures. By providing the Agency 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 the Agency in identifying ways to resolve individual complaints. From the evidence I have seen, there is a strong desire on the part of staff to provide a high quality customer service.

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

As Chief Executive of the Social Security Agency I value very much the role of the Independent Case Examiner, which is such an important one for our customers. I welcome the endorsement in her report of the effectiveness of our internal complaints handling procedures and the strong customer service ethos she has seen our staff display. I look forward to working with the ICE office to further improve our complaint procedure and complaint handling.

Copies of the Annual Report can be obtained from:

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

Telephone calls can also be made at local call rate on: 0845 606 077

This report is also available, on request, in Braille or audio version.