

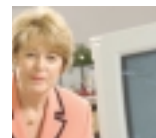
Independent Case Examiner
For the Child Support Agency

Annual Report
2002/03

Headline Summary

Judging the issues by
not taking sides

The Independent Case Examiner: Provides a free impartial complaints review and resolution service for clients of the Child Support Agency, who remain dissatisfied with the final response or redress provided by the Agency.



Complaints process: When someone complains to the Independent Case Examiner we try to resolve matters without the need for investigation. If this cannot be achieved, an investigation will be undertaken. Where appropriate, recommendations will be made to the Child Support Agency about putting matters right. The Independent Case Examiner can also make systemic recommendations, highlighting areas for improvement. In this way complaint review can have a positive impact on the experience of users in the future.

Complaint referrals: In the 2002/2003 business year, the Independent Case Examiner's Office received 1,419 complaint referrals, 702 of which were accepted for investigation, a decrease of approximately 5% on the previous year.

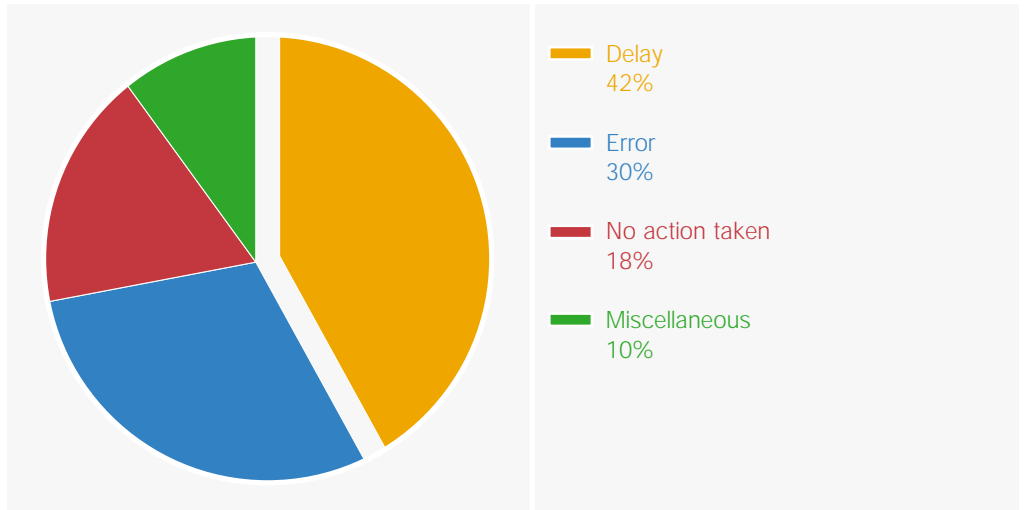
Total cases cleared: The table below shows the number of cases cleared during the reporting year.

Total Cases Cleared	2001/2002	2002/2003	% Change
Cleared at gateways	726	717	-1%
Cleared by resolution report	424 (67%)	409 (51%)	-3.5%
Cleared by investigation report	213 (33%)	390 (49%)	+83%
Withdrawn	45	81	+80%
Total cleared	682	880	+29%
Outstanding at end of year	618	441	-29%

Target for clearing cases: The Independent Case Examiner's office aims to clear cases within an average of 34 weeks. Despite significant improvement in our performance, we failed to achieve this target, with cases taking an average of 39.37 weeks to clear. The short-term decline in average clearance times is the result of our determination to clear older cases. However, very many cases were cleared in record turnaround times, particularly where we were able to achieve satisfactory resolution. The Independent Case Examiner is confident that, this year will see an end to anyone waiting longer than is absolutely necessary for a thorough investigation of their complaint.

Elements of complaint: The majority of complaints accepted for investigation comprise a number of allegations of maladministration, which often pertain to entirely different issues or events. This year, for the first time, the Independent Case Examiner's Office has presented information on the number of individual allegations of maladministration made in each case cleared. The 799 cases cleared by resolution and investigation during the reporting year contained 1,976 elements of complaint, of which 741 were resolved and 19 were outside the jurisdiction of the office.

Areas of complaint: Details of the subject of complaint, in respect of the 1,976 complaint elements, recorded at case clearance, are detailed below:

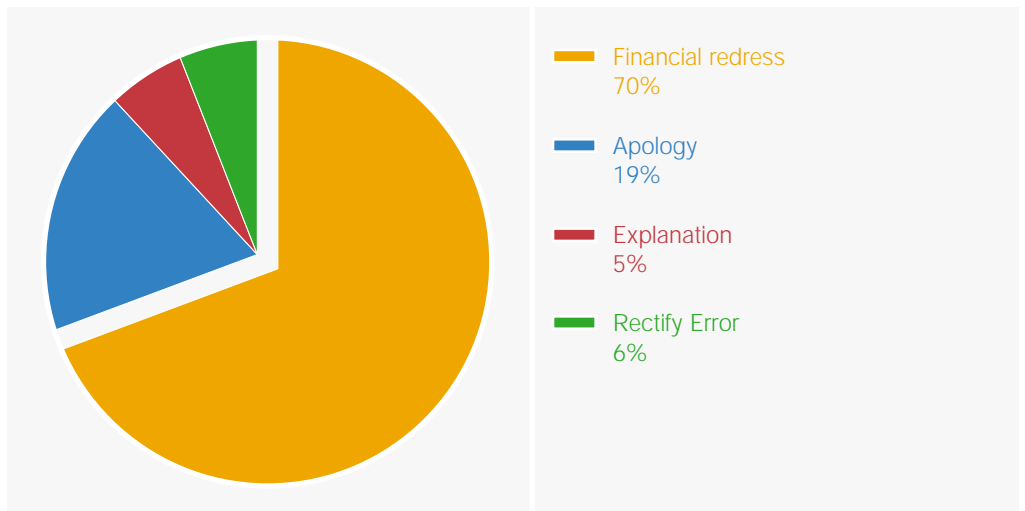


Findings: In the cases we were able to resolve, between September 2002 and April 2003, we found that corrective action or financial redress was necessary in only 37.5% of cases. The remaining 62.5% required little action to put things right, such as an apology or explanation.

The Independent Case Examiner's Office will not uphold a complaint if at the time of acceptance, it has been fully addressed by the Child Support Agency and appropriate redress had been provided, offered or instigated. The 390 cases we investigated contained 1,216 elements of complaint, 691 (57%) of which were upheld and 525 (43%) were not upheld.

Redress: The redress the Independent Case Examiner's Office achieves for its clients can take many forms, including an explanation of what has happened and why; an apology; compensation for actual financial loss; and, where appropriate, consolatory payments in recognition of service failures.

Details of the range and type of recommendations made, in respect of those cases investigated during the reporting year, are outlined below.



Financial redress: As in previous years, following their complaint to the Independent Case Examiner, clients received significant amounts of financial redress. These included:

- Consolatory payments totalling £59,118;
- Financial loss payments totalling £158,130;
- Collection of maintenance arrears amounting to £77,837 was deferred or suspended;
- Advance payments totalling £121,634;
- Refunds of maintenance totalling £40,369;
- Interest totalling £30,369, to reflect loss of the use of monies (in respect of advance payments and refunds).

Key issues: The main focus of this years' Annual Report is the Agency's complaints handling procedure. The report highlights concerns regarding the clarity and accessibility of this essential aspect of customer service. It acknowledges the work being undertaken by the Agency in its attempts to develop a uniform response to complaints, which clearly defines and explains at every stage of the process, how a client can escalate their concerns. There is some way to go before this is achieved.

The report also explores some areas in which the Agency's failure to effectively manage cases can impede the successful assessment and collection of regular child maintenance. It outlines the progress that has been made by the Agency in response to recommendations made by the Independent Case Examiner, for example the introduction of revised debt enforcement procedures.

The report comments on the implementation of the Child Support Reforms and the cases relating to this that we received last year.

Case Examples: The Report also gives anonymised examples of cases referred to the Independent Case Examiner's office last year.

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
This summary is also available in braille, audio and welsh.