

Independent Case Examiner for the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency

Annual Report
2003/04

Headline Summary

Judging the issues by
not taking sides



“Thank you for your comprehensive letter upholding my complaints against the service I received from the CSA. I can confirm that I have received an apology from a Senior Manager from the Agency, I have received £50 as compensatory payment towards communication costs and the CSA enforcements branch are now dealing with arrears of £415.64.”

NICSA Complainant

The Independent Case Examiner’s Office: We provide a free, impartial complaint review and resolution service to customers of the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency. Our service is independent of the Agency. It is available to those customers who are dissatisfied with the Agency’s response to their complaint or the redress provided.

Complaints Process: When someone complains to the Independent Case Examiner, we try to resolve matters as quickly as possible by helping the complainant and the Agency reach an agreement. If this cannot be achieved, an investigation will be undertaken. This may lead us to make recommendations to the Child Support Agency about putting matters right. The Independent Case Examiner may also recommend changes to Agency systems and procedures which will result in improvements to their customer service. In this way complaint review can have a positive impact on the experience of Agency customers in the future.

Complaint referrals: During the 2003/2004 business year we received 40 complaint referrals, 17 of which were accepted for investigation.

Elements of a complaint: Most complaints comprise a number of allegations of maladministration, which often relate to different issues or events. To reflect this, investigation reports present our findings in respect of each element of the client’s complaint. This gives a more informative view of how the Agency dealt with the different issues. On average, there were 2.5 different points of complaint in each case we resolved or investigated during the year.

Subject of complaints: The most common service area causing complaints during 2003/2004 related to the calculation of the maintenance assessment.

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

Total Cases Cleared	2002/2003	2003/2004
Not accepted for action	10	23
Cleared by resolution	3	6
Cleared by investigation report	17	4
Withdrawn	1	2
Total cleared	31	35
Outstanding at year end	6	11

Target for clearing cases: Our aim is to clear cases “within an average of 34 weeks”. During 2002/2003, the average time it took us to clear complaints about this Agency was 39 weeks. This year, we dramatically reduced our clearance time to an average of 15.96 weeks. This was an excellent achievement which would not have been possible without the active co-operation of Agency staff in the ICE Liaison Team and Resolution Team.

Findings: The Independent Case Examiner will not uphold a complaint, if at the time of acceptance the Child Support Agency has done all that it can to resolve it.

During the reporting year, the 10 cases we cleared contained 25 elements of complaint, 11 of which were resolved, 8 of which were upheld, and 6 of which were not upheld.

We fully upheld 1 of the cases we investigated, partially upheld 2 cases and did not uphold the other.

Redress: If we identify that the standard of service experienced by the client fell below that to which they were entitled, we ask the Agency to provide redress. This can take many forms, including an apology, an explanation of what has happened and why, consolatory payments in recognition of service failures and, where appropriate, compensation for actual financial loss. Financial redress is not the only solution when things go wrong and prompt recognition and rectification of service failures can prevent the need for financial redress. That said, the Independent Case Examiner does regularly recommend the consideration of financial redress. Details of the payments made by the Agency in response to our recommendations are listed below:

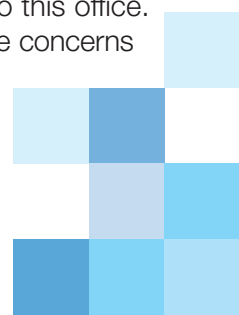
2003/04	£
Consolatory	1,500.00
Financial loss	7,253.35
Total	8,753.35

Complaint handling: In the cases we investigate, we routinely comment on the Agency's handling of the complaints. If this has fallen short of the required standard, the Independent Case Examiner asks the Agency to recognise this by offering an apology. Where its response was so poor as to amount to maladministration, she will recommend consideration of a consolatory payment.

It is important that the Agency has a structured approach to complaints handling, with the emphasis on resolving complaints to the customer's satisfaction at the earliest opportunity. Our Annual Report provides anonymised examples of cases in which we have commented on the Agency's handling of complaints.

How we resolved cases: In previous Annual Reports, the Independent Case Examiner welcomed the Agency's introduction of resolution planning. We achieved success in resolving 6 of the 10 cases we cleared, which demonstrates that more could be done to secure this result within the Agency's internal complaints procedures.

In the past, we have warned against the development of a culture whereby complaints are only taken seriously once they have been referred to this office. The complaints we resolve without the need for full investigation raise concerns about the effectiveness of the Agency's resolution process.



In the majority of cases, the customer's priority is to ensure that the Agency puts matters right. It is disappointing that the Agency did not resolve these cases by establishing exactly what action customers required to achieve this, thereby avoiding the need to involve this office. In some cases, customers have been entitled to consolatory payments or financial redress in acknowledgement of identified maladministration. It is of concern when the Agency does not identify that this is appropriate.

Over the next business year, we will be looking for evidence that the Agency is taking every opportunity to resolve complaints internally. With the exception of those customers who require validation of the information provided by the Agency from an independent body, most cases are amenable to resolution within the Agency's complaints process.

Overview of the Agency: During the business year we received 5 cases which included complaints about the Child Support Reforms. Of these, 3 were accepted for investigation.

It is inevitable that the implementation of the Child Support Reforms will give rise to novel complaints, some of which will not have been anticipated. In such cases, a measure of the Agency's success will be the speed with which it seeks to address new problems that arise and the reasonableness of its response in terms of considering and providing appropriate redress. Additionally, we will be looking for evidence that the Agency is providing clear and timely guidance to its complaint handlers, to help them deal with complaints arising from known service failures or system problems.

Copies of the Independent Case Examiner's 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**



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