



Independent
Case Examiner

Independent Case Examiner
For the Child Support Agency
Annual Report 2004/05
Headline Summary

Judging the issues
without taking sides

The Independent Case Examiner's Office:

We provide a free, independent complaint review and resolution service to customers of the Child Support Agency who are dissatisfied with the Agency's response to their complaint and/or the redress they have been given.

What we do: People should give the Child Support Agency a chance to resolve their complaint before turning to this office. When we accept a complaint for action, we will initially try and resolve matters through negotiation between the Agency and the client, as this generally represents a quicker and more satisfactory result for everyone concerned. If this cannot be achieved, we will conduct an investigation. This may result in recommendations to the Agency on what action needs to be taken to put matters right. The Independent Case Examiner can also recommend changes to procedures, and thereby help the Agency to improve the service it provides.

Service Standards: Our service standards are set out in our leaflet "The Independent Case Examiner – Our Service and Standards", copies can be obtained from the ICE office or by visiting our website (contact details are provided at the back of this document.) Our target for clearing cases accepted for action is within an average of 34 weeks. We are pleased to report that our average clearance time fell from 31.87 weeks in 2003/2004, to 22.15 weeks in 2004/2005.

Key issues: This year's Annual Report focuses on the service provided by the Agency from the customers' perspective, examining how service failure can have an adverse effect on parents and their children. It includes anonymised examples of cases, which have been dealt with by the Independent Case Examiner's Office during the reporting year.

The Independent Case Examiner says: This has been a stormy year for the Child Support Agency. It has long been accepted that the old child support scheme needed revision. Too often the combination of complex legislation and poor administrative process left people dissatisfied. The introduction

of the Child Support Reforms promised much. Simpler legislation, slick processes and customer focussed services. Whilst there have been achievements, the problems faced by the Agency have been of such magnitude that two years after the introduction of the Reforms there is still no published date for the conversion of old scheme cases onto new rules.

Although I acknowledge the many difficulties encountered with its new computer system, in my view the Agency has not done enough to place parents at the heart of its activities. Consequently, in cases administered under both the old and new schemes, many customers have faced similar problems of delay, negligence and poor process. Against this backdrop, unsurprisingly referrals to my office continued to rise for the second year in a row, to just under 3,000. In about half of the cases we accepted, we were able to negotiate a satisfactory settlement and I am grateful to the Agency staff who facilitated this. In cases where this was not possible, I upheld the great majority of complaints.

The recent appointment of a new Chief Executive, Stephen Geraghty, to lead a revised senior management team presents an opportunity for the Agency to reconsider its strategy for the future delivery of service. My early discussions with him and his colleagues are encouraging and their recognition of the challenge ahead gives cause for optimism. The ICE office is committed to continuing a constructive dialogue with the Agency for the benefit of the parents and children we both serve.

Complaint referrals: During the reporting year we received 2,973 complaint referrals 1,257 of which were accepted for action. This represents a 38% increase on the 2,150 referrals received and a 36% increase in the 924 referrals accepted for action in 2003/2004.

Of the 1,257 cases we accepted for action, 840 related to "old scheme" cases and 417 related to issues associated with the Child Support Reforms.

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

Type of case clearance	2003/2004	2004/2005	% Change
Not accepted for action	1,226	1,716	+39%
Resolved to clients satisfaction	370	603	+63%
Cleared by Investigation	436	478	+10%
Withdrawn	72	111	+54%
Total cleared	2,104	2,908	+38%
Cases outstanding at end of year	496	562	+13%

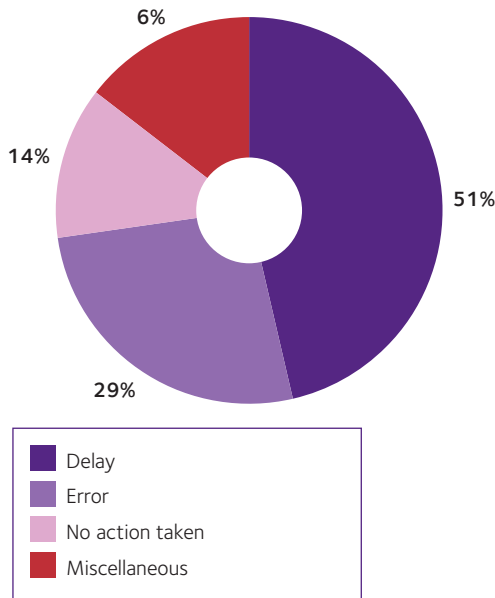
What we found: Our findings in respect of cases we could not resolve by agreement are detailed on the right. In those cases were we find that the Agency has failed to provide an acceptable standard of service, in determining whether to uphold a complaint, we consider what action the Agency has taken to put things right. If it has fully addressed the complaint and appropriate redress has been provided, offered or instigated prior to referral to ICE, we do not uphold the complaint.

Investigation report cases	2004/2005	
Findings	No of cases	%
Fully upheld	183	38
Partially upheld	241	51
Not upheld	54	11
Total	478	100

Elements of complaint: Most of the cases we accept for investigation comprise a number of elements of complaint. Our investigation reports record our findings on each element of the complaint. During the reporting year the 1,081 cases cleared by resolution and investigation included 3,212 elements of complaint. 1,569 of these elements were resolved by agreement and 16 were outside our jurisdiction. The table to the right shows the outcome of our investigation into the remaining 1,627 elements of complaint.

Investigated complaint elements (all cases)	2004/2005
Upheld	1,118 (69%)
Not upheld	509 (31%)
Total	1,627 (100%)

Subject of complaint: We recorded details of the subject of complaint, in respect of all 3,212 complaint elements at case clearance, details of which are outlined below.



Putting matters right: We have an important role in helping people to secure redress if we find that the service provided to them fell below a reasonable standard. We do this by making recommendations to the Agency. We made 2,925 recommendations during the reporting year. These recommendations fell into 5 main categories: financial redress 54%; apologies 21%; explanations 11%; assurances 7%; and putting matters right 7%.

Financial redress: is certainly not the only solution when things go wrong, indeed prompt recognition and rectification of service failure on the part of the Agency can prevent the need for financial redress. However, helping people to secure appropriate financial redress is a significant aspect of our work.

We are unable to direct the Agency as to how much money should be awarded, although we can comment on whether it has had regard to all the relevant facts in determining this. For this reason our reports highlight all the relevant facts that the Agency should take into account in making its decision. During the reporting year, our intervention resulted in significant awards for individual complainants, amounting to more than £530,330.

In response to the Independent Case Examiner's Report, Stephen Geraghty, Chief Executive of the Child Support Agency says: I welcome the recommendations that the Independent Case Examiner makes and acknowledge the areas highlighted in the report where we need to make improvements.

Since my appointment as the new chief executive of the Child Support Agency on the 4th April 2005, I have met with many people and organisations who are vital to the future success of the Agency, including a useful and informative meeting with the Independent Case Examiner. It is clear that the Agency is still facing significant challenges since the introduction of child support reforms in March 2003. It is disappointing that the number of complaints from clients has increased over the past year and that the number subsequently upheld by the Independent Case Examiner has similarly increased.

The Agency's senior management team is working to develop a new strategy, which will help address the problems this report highlights. Our strategy will have our clients at the heart of it, focusing on their needs, and will set out how we will be able to provide them with a quality, sensitive and efficient service. Neither I, nor any of my colleagues at the Agency, underestimate the challenges we face to deliver an excellent child support service, but I am confident that with the right strategy, the right client focus, and the right operational processes and management, we can provide speedier resolutions to client issues and an overall reduction in the numbers of complaints our clients need to make in the first instance

If you would like to complain to the Independent Case Examiner or require additional copies of our Annual Report please contact:

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Copies can also be obtained from our website at www.ind-case-exam.org.uk. Our Annual Report is also available in Braille or Audio Version.