



Independent
Case Examiner

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

Judging the issues
without taking sides

The Independent Case Examiner's Office:

ICE is a free, independent complaint review and resolution service for customers of the Child Support Agency who are dissatisfied with the Agency's response to their complaints.

What we do: People should give the Child Support Agency a chance to resolve their complaint before turning to ICE. When we accept a complaint we initially try to settle matters through negotiation between the Agency and its customer, as this generally provides a quicker and more satisfactory result for everyone concerned. If this cannot be achieved, we investigate what happened. This may result in recommendations to the Agency about what it should do to put things right. The Independent Case Examiner can also recommend changes to procedures, thereby helping the Agency to identify improvements to its service.

The Independent Case Examiner says:

"The Northern Ireland Child Support Agency has faced a year of considerable challenge. The acknowledged deficiencies in its new computer system have meant that two years after the introduction of the Child

Support Reforms, the Agency has yet to move across the majority of clients whose applications were handled under the old legislation. This is a real disappointment.

The Agency has faced more complaints about its service this year than in any year since my office was established and, in turn, more complaints were referred to me. Across the UK, the offices of the Child Support Agency have struggled to respond adequately to customers. However, the Northern Ireland Agency has continued to lead the way in providing people with the best service possible in difficult circumstances. Its response to complaints is on the whole focussed and timely. In cases I investigate, the Agency takes a constructive approach to my recommendations."

Complaint referrals: During the 2004/2005 business year we received 55 complaint referrals about the Agency and accepted 28 for investigation.

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

Cases Cleared	2003/04	2004/05
Cases brought forward at beginning of year	6	11
Received	40	55
Total	46	66
Not accepted for investigation	23	27
Cleared by resolution	6	15
Cleared by investigation report	4	13
Complaint withdrawn by client	2	5
Total	35	60
Number outstanding at year end	11	6

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 summary). Our target is to clear cases accepted for action within an average of 34 weeks. We are pleased to report that our average clearance time for complaints about the Child Support Agency was 22.42 weeks.

What we found: Where we identify maladministration on the part of the Agency, in considering whether to uphold a complaint we take into account what the Agency has done to try and put things right. If the Agency has fully addressed the complaint, and appropriate redress has been provided, offered or instigated, we do not uphold the complaint.

Most complaints are made up of a number of allegations of maladministration about different issues, which we separate into elements. There were on average 3 elements of complaint in each case that we resolved or investigated about the Agency during the year. Our investigation reports record our findings in relation to each element of a complaint.

During the reporting year, the 28 cases we cleared by resolution or investigation contained 77 elements of complaint, 37 of which were resolved, 16 were upheld and 24 were not upheld.

Putting matters right: We play an important role in helping people secure redress in cases where we find that the service provided to them fell below the required standard. We do this by making recommendations to the Agency. These recommendations fall within 5 main categories: apology, assurance, explanation, putting matters right and financial redress.

Agency standards: In past years, we were able to identify whether the Agency had acted in accordance with its published service standards. This year, the Agency has not been able to articulate what standards of service it will offer and, consequently, there is no clear way of knowing what it regards as good or poor service.

As a result, parents have no idea how long it will take to complete key tasks, and staff have no framework within which customers' expectations can be managed. This is unsatisfactory. In the absence of clear standards, we judge the Agency's actions against previous targets and generally accepted good administrative practice.

Old scheme cases: 45 (82%) of the complaint referrals we received related to cases dealt with under the legislation applicable before March 2003, 20 of which were accepted for action. The Agency has a clear responsibility to manage these cases in a way that supports the flow of maintenance between parents and to respond proactively to problems that threaten its disruption.

There is currently no published timetable for the conversion of these cases to the new maintenance scheme.

New scheme cases: 10 (18%) of the complaint referrals we received related to applications dealt with under the reformed Child Support scheme, 8 of which were accepted for action. These cases have highlighted problems with the Agency's new computer system. We acknowledge the difficulties that this presents for Agency staff, however in this situation the Agency has an added responsibility to its customers to put in place robust administrative systems to support its casework.

Unfortunately, the Agency has been unable to meet the demand placed upon it in terms of the large number of cases that have encountered technical problems. As a result, backlogs have arisen which cause further delays. In some cases, the Agency decides to handle matters clerically. Once this decision has been taken, the Agency has an obligation to act in a timely way to progress matters.

Enforcement: In previous Annual Reports, we have highlighted the difficulties encountered by the Agency in enforcing the payment of maintenance from some non-resident parents.

The need for continued improvement in this important area of work has not been diminished by the introduction of the Child Support Reforms. We continue to urge the Agency to engage in early dialogue with both parents, so that no one is in any doubt about what action can and will be taken in the event that maintenance is not paid.

**Northern Ireland Child Support Agency's
Chief Executive's Comments:**

"This report covers my first full year as Chief Executive. In that time, I have seen at first hand the best and the worst of our Agency's interaction with customers. It is very clear to me that there is far more good service provided by my staff than there is bad. Yet I know and accept that it is bad service which

leads to complaints and adverse comment. I fully agree with the Independent Case Examiner that the real litmus test of customer service is how we deal with complaints. Although I see clear evidence of us getting better at this, there is more to be done and we, as an organisation, are committed to improving even more. The work and reports of the Independent Case Examiner are invaluable in helping us right wrongs in specific cases and applying the lessons more generally. I am very grateful for what she does to help the Northern Ireland Agency in our drive to continuously improve our service to customers, thus making a difference to the lives of children whose parents live apart."

Copies of the Independent Case Examiner's Annual Report can be obtained from:

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