

Putting things 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. These fall within five main categories: apology; assurance; explanation; putting matters right; and financial redress. We made 3363 recommendations during the reporting year.

Financial redress

This is certainly not the only solution when things go wrong; indeed, prompt recognition and rectification of service failure on the part of the Agency, together with an apology, can resolve problems without the need for financial redress. However, this remains a significant aspect of our work.

The Agency is expected to make decisions based on guidance given to it by the Department for Work and Pensions. The Independent Case Examiner uses the same guidance in formulating her recommendations, to ensure that the Agency considers all the relevant facts in making its decision. During the reporting year, our intervention resulted in significant sums of money being paid to individual complainants including consolatory payments of over £65,000 and payments in respect of financial loss in excess of £310,000.

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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Our Annual Report is also available in Braille or Audio version on request.

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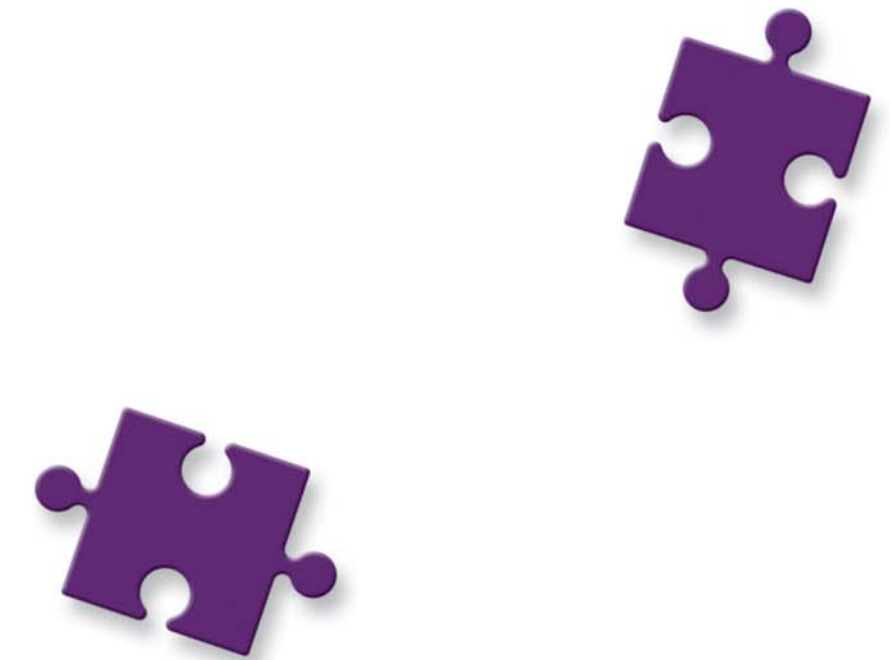
In responding to the Independent Case Examiner's Annual Report for 2005/06, the Agency's Chief Executive, Stephen Geraghty, and his executive team welcomed the comments made about improvements made during the year and acknowledged the value of the work of the ICE office in responding to clients of the Agency who have complaints that have not been resolved internally.

Today the Agency has a virtually new top leadership team which has been coming together over the last few months to implement the Operational Improvement Plan announced by the Secretary of State in February 2006. A key focus is on streamlining processes for clients, focussing on their requirements for a better service and on making more difference for more children. The process for handling complaints and getting resolution for clients is a key part of the operational changes, and the design for a new approach is under development. The Agency is keen to learn from experiences and insights in order to help deliver a better service for clients at all stages in their interface with the Agency and its people.

The Agency recognises the challenges it faces but firmly believes that the focus on client service and outcomes is clearly right for its delivery of child support maintenance.

Headline Summary

Independent Case Examiner for the Child Support Agency
Annual Report 2005/2006



Judging the issues without taking sides



ICE
Independent
Case Examiner

The Independent Case Examiner's Office

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

What we do

Before a complaint can be referred to ICE, we expect the Child Support Agency to have had an opportunity to look into matters itself. Once we have accepted a referral, we initially try and resolve matters between the Agency and customer, as this generally represents a quicker and more satisfactory result for everyone concerned. If we are unable to resolve matters, we undertake whatever further investigation is required to reach a view on what has happened and prepare a report of our findings for the complainant and the Agency. 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.

Standards of Service

Our service standards are set out in our leaflet "The Independent Case Examiner's Office – Our Service and Standards", which we send to people when we acknowledge receipt of their referral. 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 for complaints about the Child Support Agency was under 23 weeks.

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:

Referrals to me reflect on the problems that can be encountered at all stages of the Agency's processes, from the maintenance application, through to the collection and distribution of payments and beyond. The issue of enforcement remains a significant feature of these complaints.

The Agency has no holistic solution to the myriad of IT problems it continues to experience, particularly in those cases where information is pulled across from the old system into the new. In cases I see, this has never worked effectively and, consequently, the numbers of cases that have to be handled clerically is growing ever larger. This can cause significant further problems for Agency customers.

Regrettably, no date for conversion of old scheme cases to new legislation has yet been announced, and so the Agency continues to run the two legislative schemes in parallel, to the detriment of the large proportion of families whose cases are dealt with under legislation that was recognised as inadequate years ago.

Although I remain deeply concerned about the Agency's IT problems, I am equally concerned that the Agency's basic administration has not been up to the task. Too often the experiences of parents who complain to me are of an Agency in which one hand does not know what the other is doing, and there is no discernable effort to place the needs of their children first. Until the Agency establishes sound fundamental administration processes, poor customer service will continue to be an underlying theme of complaints referred to me.

With this in mind, I welcomed the performance and management review carried out by the Agency's Chief Executive Stephen Geraghty. The published outcome of this review described a new approach to service delivery and set a timetable for conversion of cases to be dealt with under the 2003 legislation. More recently, the Secretary of State announced a policy and Agency redesign to be carried out this year by Sir David Henshaw, alongside a further injection of funding to enable the Agency to make some urgent improvements. It seems that this important area of public service is at last getting the attention that it deserves and this is good news for the parents and children that this Agency serves.

Complaint referrals

During the 2005/2006 business year we received 3117 complaint referrals about the Agency, 1348 of which were accepted for investigation. This represents nearly a 5% increase in referrals and an increase of over 7% in accepted cases in 2004/2005.

Of the 1348 complaint referrals we accepted for investigation, 782 related to "old scheme" cases.

Case clearances

The table opposite shows the number of cases cleared during the reporting year.

What we found

Our findings in respect of cases we could not resolve by agreement are detailed opposite. In cases where 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 subsequently to try to put things right. If the Agency has fully addressed the complaint and appropriate redress has been provided, offered or instigated prior to referral to ICE, the complaint is not upheld. In the reporting year nearly 85% of cases were fully or partially upheld.

Elements of complaint

Most of the cases we accept for review comprise a number of elements of complaint. Each represents a separate issue raised by a complainant. Our investigation reports record the findings on each element of the complaint. During the reporting year, the 1169 cases we cleared by resolution and investigation included 2759 elements of complaint. 1467 of these elements were resolved by agreement and 5 were outside our jurisdiction. In the reporting year 67% of elements of complaint were upheld.

Subject of complaint

We recorded details of the subject of complaint in respect of all 2759 complaint elements at case clearance, details of which are outlined opposite.

Type of Cases Cleared	2004/05	2005/06	Approx % Change
Not accepted for action	1716	1769	3%
Resolved to client's satisfaction	603	714	18%
Cleared by investigation	478	455	-5%
Withdrawn	111	138	24%
Total cleared	2908	3076	6%
Cases outstanding at end of year	562	604	7%

Investigation report cases	2005/06	
Findings	No. of cases	%
Fully upheld	190	42%
Partially upheld	196	43%
Not upheld	69	15%
Total	455	100%

Investigated complaint elements (all cases)	2005/06	
	No. of cases	%
Upheld	856	67%
Not upheld	431	33%
Total	1287	100%

Subject of Complaint

