

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

The real litmus test of customer service is how we deal with complaints. I am pleased to see that we have made further improvements in this area during 2005/06 and we have put in place arrangements to improve things even further.

During the year, the Agency launched its "Outreach" programme. This service has established extensive links with the voluntary sector, MP constituency offices and other public representatives. A vital part of the Outreach work is that of face-to-face contact with our customers, in particular in complaint resolution and in providing accessibility to our clients and their representatives. Late last year we centralised our complaints into one command and increased staffing levels. These staff not only respond to the complaint, but also contact the customer and bring the case up to date. There is still work to be done, and we remain committed to improving our service. We regard the work of the Independent Case Examiner as a valuable tool in achieving this objective, thereby allowing us to fulfil our core purpose of making a difference to children whose parents live apart.

Independent Case Examiner's Comments

The objective for Government Agencies should be to make year on year improvements in service delivery. However, as services develop, they face new challenges in matching customer experience with expectations.

The relatively small number of complaints referred to my office by customers of the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency shows that it normally responds to complaints referred to me in a facilitative manner.

The Agency, though much criticised in the media, has taken steps in Northern Ireland to improve the way it deals with customer concerns and puts considerable resource towards this effort.

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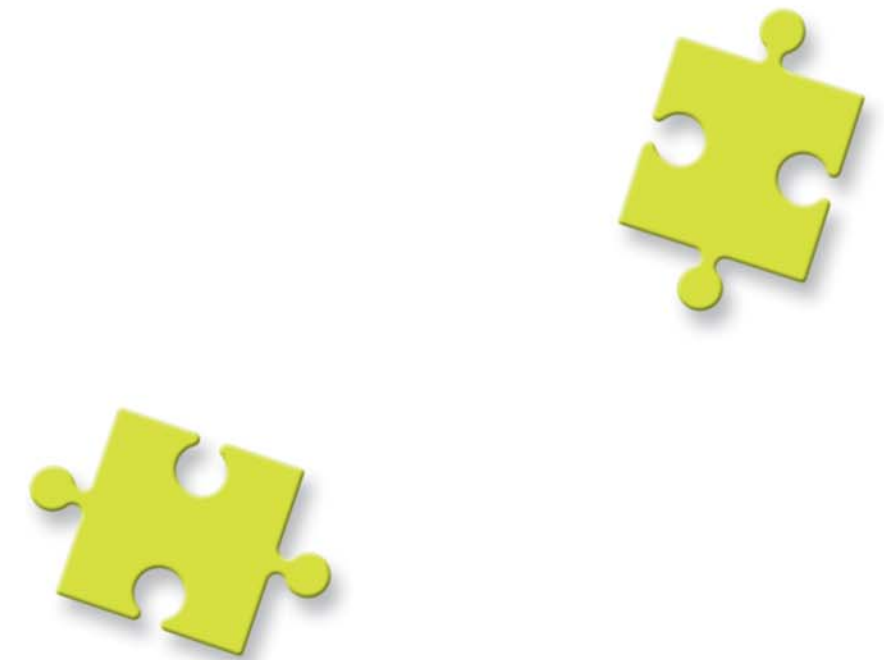
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ISBN 1-84695-224-7
ISBN 978-1-84695-224-1

Headline Summary

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



Judging the issues without taking sides



CMS 89746

CUSTOMER SERVICE EXCELLENCE

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

The Independent Case Examiner's Office

ICE is an independent complaint review and resolution service, freely available to customers of the Northern Ireland 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 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.

Complaint referrals

During the 2005/2006 business year we received 70 complaint referrals about the Agency, 30 of which were accepted for investigation.

Total cases cleared

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

Service Standards

Our leaflet *"The Independent Case Examiner - Our Service and Standards"* sets out our service standards. 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 Northern Ireland Child Support Agency was 15.44 weeks.

What we found

Many of the complaints we investigate are made up of more than one allegation of maladministration about different issues. Investigation reports present the Case Examiner's findings in respect of each element

| Cases Cleared | 2005/06 |
|--|---------|
| Cases brought forward at beginning of year | 8 |
| Received | 70 |
| Total | 78 |
| Not accepted for investigation | 41 |
| Cleared by resolution | 20 |
| Cleared by investigation report | 5 |
| Complaint withdrawn by complainant | 2 |
| Total | 68 |
| Cases carried forward at 31.03.2006 | 10 |

of the complaint. During the year, the 25 complaints cleared by resolution or investigation contained 58 elements, 41 of which were resolved, 7 were upheld, 8 were not upheld and 2 were justified.

For many parents, dealing with the Agency comes at a traumatic time in their lives, so it is particularly important that the Agency acts efficiently and effectively to avoid adding to their worries. Failing to respond to telephone calls or letters, or issuing duplicate requests for information that has already been provided, can cause unnecessary inconvenience and frustration for parents. Failing to make contact with non-resident parents, unreasonable delays in determining or revising liability and accounting or procedural errors can have more serious consequences.

Whilst we acknowledge that the Agency is able to deal with many applications in good time and achieve a regular flow of maintenance, clearly that is not the experience of people who refer complaints to the Independent Case Examiner. Our Annual Report highlights some of the difficulties faced by parents and the impact this can have on them and their children.

Delays in completing reviews

Any delays in completing a review of the assessment can have serious consequences. It can diminish a non-resident parent's confidence that the liability is a fair reflection of their circumstances and can result in the accrual of arrears through no fault of their own. In turn, this may affect their willingness to co-operate with the Agency. It can also mean that the parent with care's payment expectations are based on an incorrect picture of maintenance or arrears due to them, or that they are losing out on additional maintenance whilst waiting for the Agency to take account of a reported change in the non-resident parent's circumstances. In cases where it is attempting to enforce maintenance payments, it can slow down or stop the Agency from taking further action if calculations are not up to date. All these circumstances are likely to generate complaints.

Voluntary payments

Under new rules, customers have the right of appeal to an independent Appeal Tribunal against the Agency's decisions concerning the acceptance of voluntary payments. It was a matter of some concern to find that the Agency's staff did not generally know about this right and that customers were not routinely told about it. Whilst the Case Examiner cannot alter Agency decisions about voluntary payments, we can look to see whether the Agency followed its procedures correctly, and took into account all available evidence in reaching this decision.

Deduction from earnings orders

During the year some referrals to ICE concerned complaints that the Agency had failed to secure payments within reasonable timescales. Whilst the Agency is usually quick to advise a reluctant non-resident parent about its powers, its warnings will not be taken seriously if it does not follow them through promptly. Indeed, having said it will impose deductions from the non-resident parent's wages, this can also be seen as an idle threat if the Agency then enters into lengthy negotiations regarding the rate of repayment of any arrears, or simply allows matters to drag on. During all of this time, further arrears will be building up and children will not be getting the financial help they are entitled to.

Non-compliance has always been a problem for the Agency and it is perhaps inevitable that there will always be a small number of non-resident parents who deliberately evade their responsibilities. The Case Examiner continues to stress that effective communication coupled with determined and timely follow up action is key to securing compliance.

Complaint handling by the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency

We resolved 20 of the complaint referrals and only five required an investigation report. The high percentage of complaints that were resolved this year suggests that this Agency could do more to address complaints before customers approach ICE. Nevertheless, resolution represents a better potential outcome for both complainant and Agency as it encourages the restoration of an ongoing relationship. We would like to acknowledge the help and co-operation that we receive from the Agency's staff in achieving successful resolutions.

A positive response to a complaint can have the effect of turning a complaint into a compliment. Where there has been maladministration, an organisation should acknowledge this and offer appropriate redress as early as possible. If it does not do so, it risks exacerbating the problem and this usually leads to an escalation of the complaint. The Independent Case Examiner is pleased to report that this Agency continues to respond positively to recommendations that she makes, both to provide redress for individuals and looking to service improvements.