

Social Security Agency's Chief Executive's Comments

The findings of the report are a fair and accurate reflection of the cases handled during the year and the conclusions and findings reached were in proportion to the issues raised.

The report reflects the Agency's continued commitment to learn from the complaints we receive, as is clearly shown by the reduction in the number of complaints investigated this year.

The Agency continues to place particular importance on all opportunities to improve the service we provide, gained through the impartial and constructive feedback which you and your staff continue to provide.

Independent Case Examiner's Comments

The independent review of complaints can make a contribution to the improvement of service delivery by giving well-earned recognition to good practice and identifying where concerns of customers are justified. It can also demonstrate from the evidence of complaints why, in some instances, an Agency is unable to provide the quality of service that people are entitled to. Based upon this, recommendations can be made to an Agency that it reviews its practice and procedure to take account of the needs of its customers.

The small number of complaints referred to my office by customers of the Social Security Agency shows that it is intent on providing its customers with a high quality of service and responding to complaints that arise in a facilitative manner.

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

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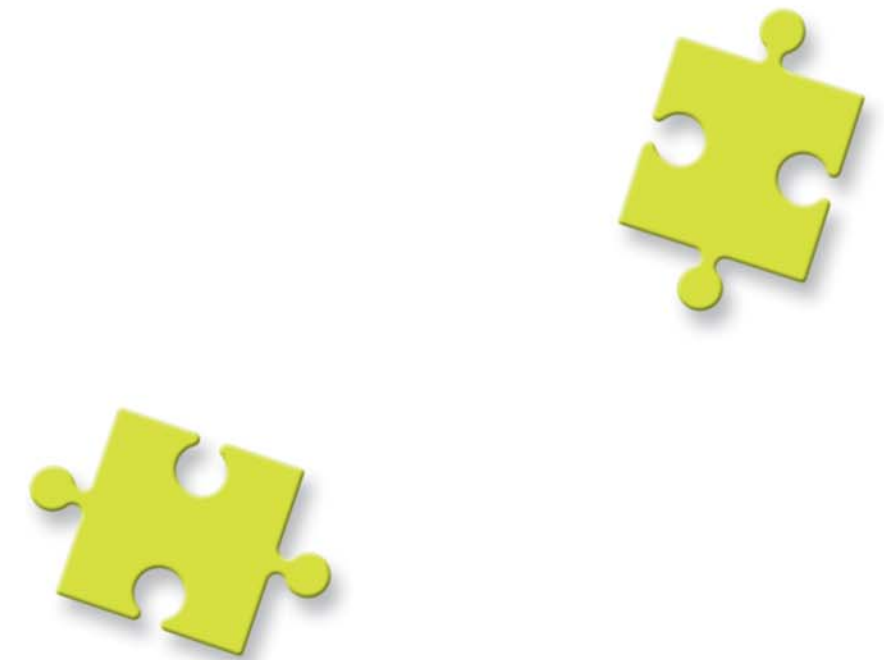
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Our Annual Report is also available in Braille or Audio version on request.

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Headline Summary

Independent Case Examiner for the Social Security Agency
Annual Report 2005/2006



Judging the issues without taking sides



CMS 89746

CUSTOMER SERVICE EXCELLENCE

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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 Social Security 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 21 complaint referrals about the Agency, 14 of which were accepted for investigation. We were unable to accept seven of the cases for investigation because the complainant had not yet received a reply from or on behalf of the Agency's Chief Executive in the preceding six months. We have had fewer referrals from SSA customers this year and fewer cases have been accepted for investigation compared to last year. The 14 complaints accepted for investigation by this office represent only 1.3% of the total number of complaints recorded by the Agency.

Total cases cleared

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

Type of case clearance	2005/06
Cases brought forward from previous year	1
Received	21
Total	22
Not accepted for investigation	7
Failed to respond to enquiries	0
Cleared by resolution	4
Cleared by investigation report	8
Number outstanding at the year end	3

Service Standards

Our leaflet *"The Independent Case Examiner for the Social Security Agency - 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 Social Security Agency was 9.95 weeks.

The most common complaints issues we considered during 2005/2006 concerned dissatisfaction with:

- the failure to supply information
- delay/error in a payment
- compensation and,
- delay in awarding benefit

Putting matters right

When we identify Agency maladministration, we consider if the Agency has provided redress. This should be proportionate to the problem we have identified. If it has failed to do so, the Independent Case Examiner may make recommendations to the Agency. These recommendations fall into five main categories: apology, explanation, assurance, putting matters right and financial redress.

Complaint handling by the Social Security Agency

The cases referred by customers of the SSA demonstrate that when complaints arise, it takes steps to try and put things right and to offer redress that is proportionate to the mistakes it has made. In most cases, this action is successful in bringing matters to a close. As a result, it is the more serious or complex issues that cannot be resolved without independent arbitration that are referred to ICE.

There were no major trends or themes in these cases during the reporting year, although some areas for improvement were identified.

The majority of complaints we receive include several allegations of maladministration. In common with all organisations, on occasion mistakes are made by the Agency or it fails to handle matters properly. Indeed, 13 of the 32 elements of complaint we considered this year were originally justified. However, the Agency had acknowledged the complaints and, where necessary, had considered financial redress under the Department for Social Development's guidance, before customers complained to ICE. This is evidence of the effectiveness of the Agency's complaint handling and, as a consequence, the Case Examiner only upheld four elements of complaint.

Although the overall percentage of complaints that were either upheld or resolved by ICE increased this year, the low volumes are such that no conclusions can be drawn from this. However, it is significant that most of the complaints that were upheld related to the handling of the complaint itself rather than the central initial issue.

Response to ICE recommendations

The ability to make systemic recommendations is a key part of the role of the Independent Case Examiner. These recommendations enable the Agency to learn from complaints referred to ICE and take steps to improve its service for the future, thereby deterring complaints of a similar nature recurring.

For example, following her investigation of one case, the Case Examiner wrote to the Agency to recommend that it consider identifying a time target for the consideration of compensatory and consolatory payments. In response, the Agency advised that it was carrying out a review of the processes involved.

In respect of complaints that the Case Examiner upheld, the Agency invariably provided a prompt and positive response to the recommendations she made. Its managers were also keen to identify the learning issues from our reports in order to improve the service it provides to its customers.

Staff from the Agency continued to be helpful and co-operative during the year in response to our requests for information and to our representations on behalf of complainants.