



Annual Report 2006/2007

Independent Case Examiner for the Child Support Agency

Judging the issues without taking sides



ICE
Independent
Case Examiner

The Independent Case Examiner's Office

Our Mission

Judging the issues without taking sides.

Our Business Purpose

Our main business purpose is to act as an independent referee if clients feel that the Child Support Agency has not treated them fairly or has not dealt with complaints in a satisfactory manner.

Our Aim

To provide a free, effective and impartial complaints review and resolution service for Agency customers that makes a difference to the way in which the Agency discharges its public responsibilities.

Our Vision

To be a first rate service provided by professional staff.

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1. Foreword

I am pleased to present my annual report as Independent Case Examiner for the Child Support Agency.

The publication of this report coincides with the 10th anniversary of the ICE Office, which opened for business in April 1997. For any organisation reaching this important milestone, it is a time to take stock, looking back to the achievements of the past decade and setting new objectives for the future.

ICE has much to celebrate, as this report will demonstrate. From a shaky start, we moved forward to fulfil our vision of being a first rate service provided by professional staff. We have a reputation for fairness and impartiality in our decision-making, and we set and achieve challenging speed of service and accuracy targets.



It is against this backdrop that in recent years ICE has twice been awarded Charter Mark, as well as Investors in People awards, BSI and European Excellence standards. No wonder then that our customer surveys show very high levels of satisfaction with our process and the outcomes we achieve. Our internal survey tells us that we are an office dedicated to customer service, where our people derive satisfaction from a worthwhile job, well done.

This year we have handled more complaint referrals from Child Support Agency clients than ever before. In previous reports, I have pointed out many of the problems faced by its customers, as the Agency struggled to provide a reasonable standard of service against a background of poor process and IT failures.

In these circumstances, and following Sir David Henshaw's review, the Government's announcement of its proposals for future closure of the Agency was not surprising. However, it was perhaps somewhat ironic, as this year the Agency has begun to make real progress towards improving its service. The Operational Improvement Plan introduced by the current Chief Executive and his team has included significant changes to operational processes. From the perspective of complainants to ICE, there is a long way to go before the service could be described as administratively sound, and it may well be overtaken by events before that point is reached. However, the investment made by the Department for Work and Pensions in management, staff and process is taking the Agency further down the path towards it.

As Independent Case Examiner, I have been keen to support the Agency in its efforts to improve its customer experience, particularly in the area of our own work – its complaint handling. The review of the Agency's practice in this area has resulted in a welcome overhaul of the Agency's complaint handling, and the introduction of processes based on the ICE model, using similar management and data retention systems. I hope that, in the coming year, the new process will provide a better response for Agency

customers than has been possible in the past. In the meantime, our referrals continue to rise from people who, on the whole, do not receive the standard of service they are entitled to.

During my time as ICE, I have had the opportunity to meet regularly with Agency staff and managers. I am always impressed by the general motivation of people to do their best for customers, although sometimes they are thwarted in these efforts by factors outside of their personal control. I have enjoyed constructive relationships with successive Chief Executives and DWP senior managers, working with them in a collegiate way to improve understanding of the Agency's customer experience. I thank them all for their personal courtesy, and for their commitment to working collaboratively with the ICE Office. In particular, I wish to thank all the members of the Agency's internal complaints liaison teams, without whose efforts we would be unable to investigate or resolve complaints.

As we approach our 10th anniversary, I will be handing over to a new Case Examiner who will take on the challenges ahead. ICE faces an exciting future as, from the beginning of April 2007, the office will expand its remit to take on complaint referrals from all DWP customer-facing businesses. This decision recognises the value we can add in this important area. I wish the new Case Examiner well in what I know will continue to be an interesting and rewarding role.

I am grateful for the wonderful support ICE staff have given to me, for their willingness to take on new challenges, and for their care and conscientiousness on behalf of our customers. In particular, I thank my senior management Team, Phil Latus, Elspeth Cooper and Margaret Fowler, who spare no effort to achieve our goals and not settle for second best. Our journey together has been enjoyable, worthwhile and successful.

As I pass the management of the ICE Office back to the Department for Work and Pensions, it is in good shape to face the future from a sound base, confident of its role and ability to make a positive difference for complainants and for the Agency. ICE staff are enthusiastic about the future. My good wishes go with them all.

This report is being published earlier in the year than usual and relates to an 11-month period, because I will be leaving ICE at the end of March. Nevertheless, trends are clear. I hope that readers find the report interesting and, as always, the ICE Office will welcome any and all comments.

Jodi Berg
Independent Case Examiner

2. The ICE Office – Ten years of service

The Independent Case Examiner's Office opened for business ten years ago. Since then, ICE has developed into a modern independent complaint-handling organisation, which meets the highest standards. Today we respond to more complaints than ever before, meeting the needs of our clients through our understanding of:

- the most efficient ways of addressing complaints
- what clients expect from complaint review
- how to balance fairness against proportionality
- the value of a clear customer focus.

In this section, we review some significant milestones of the past ten years.

2.1 Why ICE was set up

The Government established the Child Support Agency in 1993 to assess, collect and enforce child maintenance payments from non-resident parents. The Agency was to replace court arrangements, which were seen as cumbersome and failing children and their parents. Unfortunately, from the start problems emerged. The legislation was overly complex and administrative systems lacked cohesion, with the result that many people experienced delays and significant backlogs of work developed.

This led many to complain, some seeking help from their Members of Parliament who referred an unprecedented number of cases to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration (now the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman). In response, the Ombudsman published two special reports dealing with maladministration by the Agency, in which he called for the Agency to improve the way it handled complaints. He recommended the introduction of an additional level of independent review, between the Chief Executive's response and the Ombudsman. The Government accepted this proposal and appointed the first Independent Case Examiner – Anne Parker – in December 1996.

2.2 The first years

The first months of business were slow as complaints trickled in; however this was not to last, and referrals increased gradually, until by October 1997 we were receiving more than 100 complaints a month. Under Anne Parker's leadership, during our first years ICE gained a reputation for independence and impartiality.

Initially our approach was to produce a detailed written report for each client, but we soon realised that many people considered it more important to have their complaints resolved quickly than to receive a comprehensive report. In March 1998, we introduced the concept of addressing a complaint by trying to agree a mutually acceptable solution to a client's concerns between them and the Agency. Whilst this helped to speed up the settlement of some complaints, others remained complex and time consuming to investigate. As referrals increased, we faced an increasing backlog of work. Average clearance times increased to nearly 40 weeks, and this rose to nearly 50 weeks in cases where conciliation was not possible.

The appointment of Jodi Berg as Independent Case Examiner in August 2001 with new responsibility for management of the ICE Office, provided fresh impetus to revisit the way we addressed complaints about the Agency and to speed up the service we provided to our clients. There was a root and branch review of process and products and we introduced an office charter, setting out clear information about our service standards and response times.

“The overall standard of service you have provided has been once again first class. Your involvement has had major problems acknowledged and sorted out much quicker than it would have been without your involvement. Thank you.”

Extract from ICE satisfaction survey

The recruitment of additional staff offered the opportunity to place greater emphasis on addressing complaints through conciliation. The introduction of a new computer database meant that we could track case progress more effectively, allowing greater managerial control of casework. Coupled with a strong customer focus, these measures led to marked improvements in our service. By October 2003, we were able to successfully apply for Charter Mark, the Government's national standard for excellence in customer service.

ICE has always been a good place to work and we have been accredited as Investors in People every year since December 1999.

2.3 Recent years

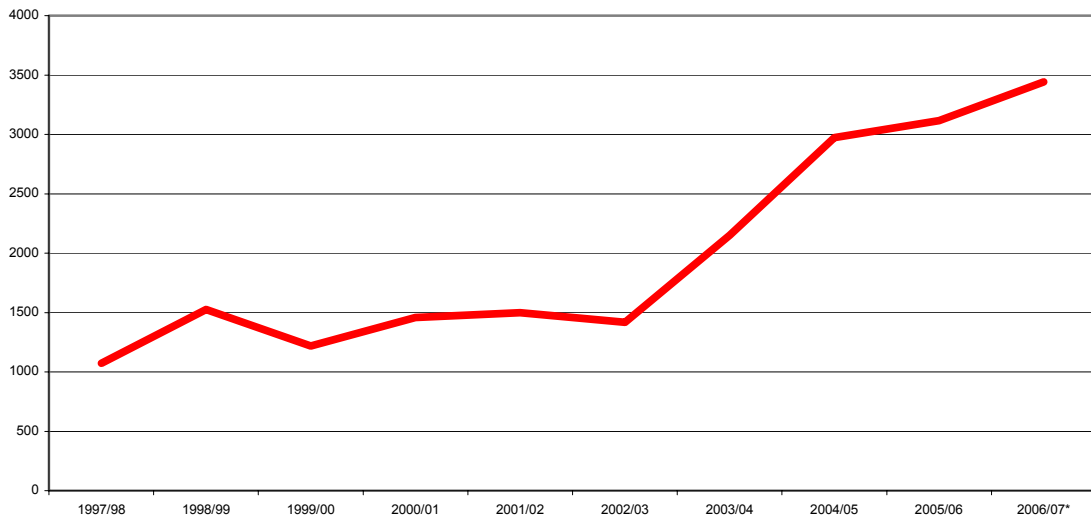
In March 2003, the Government introduced the new Child Support Reforms. The new arrangements included a simpler formula for calculating non-resident parents' liability for maintaining their children. The new rules were accompanied by the introduction of a new CSA computer system, CS2.

Within months, the ICE Office was receiving complaints from Agency clients about their new rules applications. However, we expected the increase in complaint referrals to be short-term as Agency staff got use to the new ways of working. Regrettably, this did not prove to be the case.

Since March 2003 there has been a rising trend in referrals to ICE that has required us to continue to evaluate what we do and how we do it, to ensure that we are able to meet the demand for our service appropriately. By the end of this reporting year, over 3,500 people will have sought our help. This is a challenge the ICE Office has met successfully.

The following graphs show referrals and clearance times for each year since 1997. (The figures for 2006/7 reflect an 11-month reporting period.) The graphs demonstrate the improved ICE service in recent years. Despite a rising caseload, average case clearance time has now reduced to nearly the same level as in 1997/8, when our intake was less than a third of what it is today.

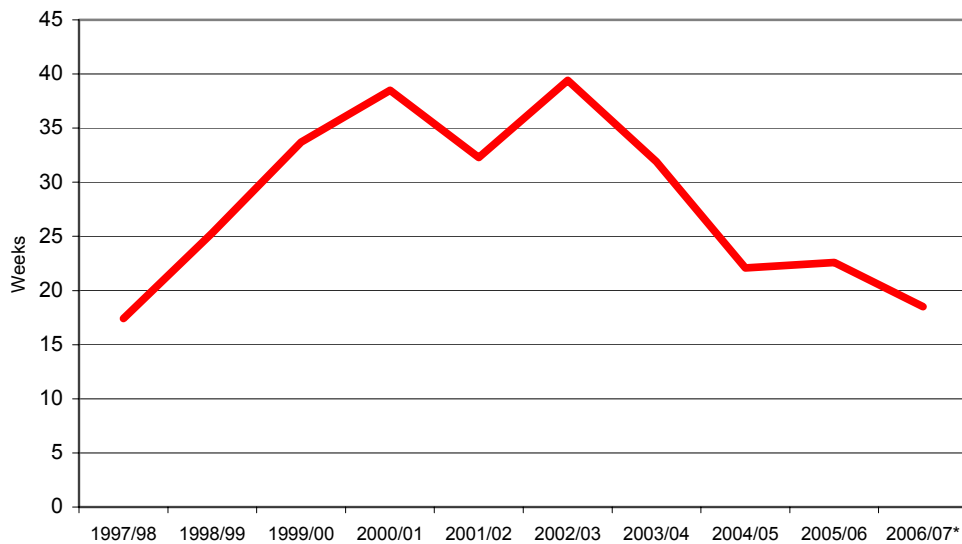
Complaints referrals



* For the period 1 April 2006 to 28 February 2007

(N.B. Since January 2006, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman has forwarded complaints about the CSA to ICE. In 2005/6, we received 24 such complaints. In 2006/7, there have been 105.)

Average Clearance Times



* For the period 1 April 2006 to 28 February 2007

We measure our service against independent standards and we have twice been awarded Charter Mark. In March 2005 we were awarded the British Standards Institute's Complaints Management Standard (CMSAS 86:2000), accrediting the way in which we deal with complaints about our service; and in May 2005, we achieved the

European Foundation for Quality Management's Committed to Excellence status, in recognition of our approach to prioritising and planning improvements.

In 2005, we outgrew our original office and relocated to our current accommodation in central Liverpool. Our staff are highly trained, and motivated to provide the best service they can and to meet new challenges.

2.4 The Northern Ireland Social Security Agency

The Social Security Agency in Northern Ireland decided at an early stage to adopt an independent tier in the handling of its complaints. The Independent Case Examiner was contracted to examine complaints about the Agency from April 2000. The volume of complaints referred about this Agency has been much smaller than for the Child Support Agency and a dedicated member of staff is seconded to ICE to focus on this area of work.

Our relationship with the Social Security Agency has been constructive and fruitful. In recent months, our experience of dealing with complaints about Social Security benefits has helped us to prepare for our new role in reviewing complaints about the wider Department for Work and Pensions.

2.5 The DWP Prototype

Between October 2005 and September 2006, the Independent Case Examiner was asked to introduce a prototype independent complaint review service for all Department for Work and Pensions customer-facing businesses. The evaluation of the prototype was carried out in subsequent months.

The prototype service was delivered successfully, without affecting the quality of our work for Child Support Agency clients. It achieved high levels of customer satisfaction across the wide range of cases referred to us. The ICE service will be introduced across all DWP businesses from April 2007.

2.6 Sharing good practice

The ICE Office is an associate corporate member of the British and Irish Ombudsman Association (BIOA). We are committed to BIOA principles of good complaint handling. We share information about the ways in which we have improved our own service and look for opportunities to learn from the experience and expertise of our colleagues in other ombudsman and independent complaint handling bodies. In this way, organisations in BIOA membership can seek to offer a better quality of service for complainants, as well as worthwhile outcomes for them and for the organisations whose complaints we review.

3. The ICE role

3.1 Clarity of purpose

The ICE role is to act as an impartial referee for people dissatisfied with the Child Support Agency's response to their complaint. Our job is to identify whether the Agency has administered a case properly or whether there have been shortcomings such as mistakes, delays, failure to follow procedures, unfairness or discourtesy. We take an unbiased view of the merits of each complaint issue raised by the client and seek a fair outcome.

There are certain complaints we cannot examine. In particular, we do not accept complaints that:

- the Agency itself has not considered;
- we receive more than six months after the Agency's final response;
- concern matters of law or Government policy;
- have been or are being investigated by the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman; or
- are the subject of legal proceedings; ICE cannot investigate disputes being considered by, for example, a Tribunal.

3.2 Helping complainants

We review information provided by both the client and the Agency and try to resolve matters through conciliation between them. Often this is achieved by the Agency's agreement to take action to address the complaint. We achieve this relatively speedy solution for people in the majority of cases we accept for action.

Inevitably, there are cases where this outcome is not possible and we need to obtain the Agency's papers, so that we can examine what has happened in more detail. Sometimes, this reveals additional information which points to ways of resolving the complaint. We take every opportunity to achieve this result.

Ultimately, where resolution attempts have failed, having examined all of the evidence we prepare a formal report into the issues the client has raised, which is reviewed and signed personally by the Independent Case Examiner or by the Case Director on her behalf. The report sets out the background to the complaint and gives reasons for our findings.

"ICE effectively communicated with CSA who would not communicate with me and moved my case forwards."

Extract from ICE satisfaction survey

Where we identify shortcomings in the service provided to a client, we make recommendations about what remedy the Agency should offer. Although, our recommendations are not legally binding, the Agency has agreed to implement them in all but exceptional circumstances.

3.3 ICE service standards

When we acknowledge receipt of a complaint referral, we send the client a copy of our leaflet “*Our Service and Standards*”. The leaflet explains how we deal with complaints and includes information about how long it will take us to do so. It also sets out how dissatisfied clients can complain about our service.

This year, we have once again improved our level of service, as demonstrated below.

Target	Performance 2005/06	Performance 2006/07*
Acknowledge complaints within 2 working days	99.6%	99.9%
Respond to client correspondence within 10 working days	99.1%	99.2%
Decide within 10 working days whether we can accept a complaint for consideration	99%	99.5%
Remind clients at case closure of their right to approach the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman	100%	100%
Clear cases accepted for action, within 34 weeks	22.6 wks	18.5 wks

* For the period 1 April 2006 to 28 February 2007

3.4 Helping the Agency

Our review of a client’s complaint about the Agency can highlight the reason why problems arose and identify a potential for other people to experience similar difficulties. We draw such systemic issues to the Agency’s attention, so that it can consider what it can do to improve its administrative procedures, or information. In this way, we assist the Agency to recognise process or customer service gaps and weaknesses and we monitor its response to this feedback.

In addition to raising systemic issues arising from individual cases, we also look to encourage good practice within the Agency. We have regular contact with the Agency at management and Board levels, including meetings between the Independent Case Examiner and the Agency’s Chief Executive, and middle management liaison. These are opportunities to discuss matters of mutual interest; to smooth out problem areas in the provision of our mutual service to complainants; and to raise with the Agency any systemic concerns that have come to our attention.

From time to time, the Agency also asks ICE to comment on staff guidance or public information, based on our customer service expertise and our experience of complaints. For example, in 2006/7, we were consulted by the Agency when it was preparing new guidance about advance payments of maintenance.

This year, the major area of involvement has been to offer comment on the Agency’s proposals for changing the way it handles client complaints. The Agency has used ICE processes as a model for the blueprint for its new internal complaint procedures. Further information about this can be found later in this report.

3.5 Case specific recommendations

When we identify maladministration for which the Agency has not provided proportionate redress, the Independent Case Examiner may make recommendations to the Agency about the steps it should take to put matters right. In some cases, she may also recommend that the Agency considers improvements to the service it provides. ICE recommendations can be grouped under five categories – apology, assurance, explanation, putting matters right and financial redress.

In most cases where we uphold a complaint, we make several recommendations to the Agency. Last year we made 3363 recommendations. This year the number has increased to 3391. Details are set out in the following table.

	2005/6	2006/7*
Financial redress	1801 (54%)	1560 (46%)
Apology	579 (17%)	579 (17%)
Explanation	418 (12%)	557 (16%)
Assurance	292 (9%)	475 (14%)
Putting matters right	273 (8%)	220 (6%)
Total	3363	3391

* For the period 1 April 2006 to 28 February 2007

It should be noted that these figures are in addition to those resulting from our conciliation process, when the Agency agrees to offer redress to resolve a complaint.

Financial redress

Financial redress is not the only way in which an organisation can address instances of maladministration. Nevertheless, as the above figures show, in practice it is a persuasive way of demonstrating that the Agency has acknowledged specific problems caused by its maladministration and the effect this has had on its client.

Any recompense of this nature has to come from public funds and the Treasury has issued guidance to Government Departments to ensure that it is only awarded in appropriate circumstances. The Department for Work and Pensions has also developed its own advice on this subject, entitled “Financial Redress for Maladministration”. All DWP Agency decisions on financial awards have to be made in accordance with this guidance, and our recommendations also conform with it.

During 2006/7 (for the period 1 April 2006 to 28 February 2007), our involvement led to considerable sums being awarded to complainants.

- consolatory payments totalling £69,555
- financial loss payments totalling £274,658
- refunds of maintenance totalling £21,703
- interest totalling £41,534 (this reflects the loss of the use of money subsequently awarded by way of advance payments, financial loss or refunds)
- other - £24,588.

In addition, the Agency agreed advance payments totalling £301,754.

(N.B. Where arrears result from Agency maladministration, in appropriate circumstances the parent with care can be offered an advance payment. A number of criteria have to be met, the most significant of which is that there must be a reasonable prospect of the Agency recovering the arrears from the non-resident parent.)

Other forms of redress

Complainants find it particularly frustrating if the Agency fails to acknowledge or apologise for its shortcomings. If our review leads us to uphold the complaint, we recommend that a senior manager write to the client to acknowledge our findings and to apologise for any maladministration identified. This can be a vital step in helping the client to achieve closure concerning an issue that may have caused long-term aggravation and anxiety.

When people complain that the Agency has failed to progress their case properly, they often want an assurance that corrective action will be taken. Where appropriate, we can recommend the Agency give such assurances or that it take corrective action within specified timescales. In some cases, we find that the Agency has acted appropriately, but has failed to explain things properly to its client. In this situation, we can recommend that it provides information or explains the situation, either in writing or at a face-to-face meeting.

Overall, our recommendations are of significant value to Agency clients. Because we monitor the implementation of each recommendation, clients can also be assured that matters will not be allowed to slip into the background. However, once recommendations have been implemented our role comes to an end and we are unable to take an ongoing interest in a client's case with the Agency.

3.6 Systemic case issues

ICE has a valuable role in raising systemic issues with the Child Support Agency. Our case reviews can throw light on shortcomings, which will continue to cause difficulties for clients if not addressed. By drawing these issues to the attention of the Agency, we encourage it to tackle problems that it may not have been aware of previously. ICE does not prescribe the solution to such problems, rather the Agency is expected to indicate what steps will be taken to improve its service.

During 2006/7, the Agency has been able to consider a series of improvements in response to the systemic issues we have raised.

We asked the Agency to consider rewording a form that is sent to the parties when an appeal is lodged. We asked whether it could include examples of the information that will be disclosed to the other party and which can be removed on request.

The Agency subsequently confirmed that revised notifications had been developed, within the Tribunal Service limitations.

We asked the Agency to consider improving the information contained in a standard leaflet about the imposition of a financial penalty if a non-resident parent pays maintenance late.

The Agency confirmed that late payment penalties are not imposed. All reference to them has been removed from its leaflets and letters.

Mr A complained about the way the Agency dealt with his earlier complaint concerning the behaviour of its appointed bailiff officer. Our review noted the lack of clear procedures for dealing with complaints about the actions of contractors. We asked the Agency to review the situation.

In response, the Agency has confirmed that clear procedures have now been developed.

Our examination of Mr B's complaint raised concerns that neither the Agency's staff nor its customers were fully informed about the question of voluntary payments being made pending the calculation of the liability for maintenance. Such arrangements needed to be agreed by the Agency in order for the payments to be offset against future arrears.

The Agency subsequently confirmed that it had issued fresh advice to its staff. It had also revised the information about voluntary payments in its various leaflets and letters.

The Agency has also agreed to take action in response to a number of other systemic issues raised by the Independent Case Examiner. We anticipate that it will address the following matters in the next few months:

- The introduction of a more customer-friendly account breakdown or synopsis.
- The provision of routine updates on the implementation of our recommendations, to MPs who have complained to the Independent Case Examiner.
- Arrangements for ensuring that staff who make decisions about financial redress take account of all the relevant documentation.

The Independent Case Examiner welcomes the Agency's helpful response to these and other recommendations. This demonstrates a commitment to improving its customers' experience.

3.7 ICE financial information

This office has always been managerially independent of the Child Support Agency in terms of its process. Since 2002, it has been funded via the Department for Work and Pensions.

The Department has agreed with the Independent Case Examiner that sufficient resources will be made available to enable ICE to offer a timely and efficient service and the Independent Case Examiner is accountable for providing value for money in the provision of the ICE service.

The following table shows our allocated budget for 2006/7 and our actual expenditure up to the end of February 2007. Our expenditure at the end of the financial year is expected to be at, or very close to, the allocated budget. This demonstrates sound financial planning and tight control of expenditure.

	Budget	YTD expenditure
Staffing	£2,612,888	£2,368,766
Non-staffing	£178,188	£170,829
Total	£2,791,076	£2,539,595

4. Casework statistics

The data and figures that follow are based on casework carried out in the 11-month period between 1 April 2006 and 28 February 2007. Comparisons are made with the full 12 months from 1 April 2005 to 31 March 2006.

4.1 Complaint referrals

Complaint referrals received and accepted for action during the year are outlined below.

	2005/2006	2006/2007*
Complaint referrals received	3117	3442
Complaints accepted for review	1348	1528

* For the period 1 April 2006 to 28 February 2007

(N.B. The above figures include 24 complaints received from the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman in 2005/6 and 105 in 2006/7.)

Despite the shorter period of this report, and the acceptance of cases from the Parliamentary Ombudsman, it is clear on a month-by-month comparison with the previous year that complaint referrals increased considerably. This has been particularly marked in the last few months. Indeed, in January 2007, we received over 425 complaints – a record intake for any month since ICE was established – and accepted almost 200 for consideration.

It is not easy at this stage to be definite about the reason for rising intake but several factors may be significant.

First and most positively, it may reflect an increased determination on the part of the Agency to address the issue of rising debt and enforce payments from unwilling parents. Agency action to recover arrears can be expected to cause an increase in complaint referrals from non-resident parents facing pressure to pay arrears.

There is also some indication that recent announcements about the closure of the Agency and the Government's decision to introduce the new Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission have also had an effect on our intake. Although the Government has made it clear that until C-MEC is in place the Agency will continue to process cases as usual clients have been prompted to refer their complaints to the Independent Case Examiner because of their concern that matters will not be sorted out before the closure of the Agency.

However, the most apparent reason for the increase in complaint referrals to ICE this year has been the difficulties the Agency has faced in setting up an efficient clerical case handling process for applications that cannot be progressed on its computer system. Further information about this can be found later in this report.

Complaints we were unable to accept: Of the 1914 complaints we were unable to accept for investigation:

- 29 concerned child support legislation or policy;
- 1696 had yet to receive a final response from or on behalf of the Agency's Chief Executive; and
- 189 people chose not to proceed with their complaints.

When we receive complaints before the Agency has had a full opportunity to address them, we ask the Agency to issue a final response to the complainant within six weeks. Although it might not be possible to complete all of the action necessary to put things right within this time, people are usually prepared to wait if they believe their concerns have been recognised and that acceptable solutions are on the way. In 2005/6, 42 people later returned to ICE because the Agency failed to respond to them within six weeks. In 2006/7, there were 25 such cases, a welcome reduction.

Despite the Agency's target of reducing the number of cases that bounce back to ICE for review, this year a considerable number of clients also returned because they were not satisfied with the final answer given on behalf of the Agency's Chief Executive. In 2005/6, there were 530 such cases. In the first 11 months of 2006/7, there were 672. This is a disappointing increase in an area where, at the start of the year, both the Agency and ICE had been looking for a reduction.

4.2 Case clearances

Our performance

Details of clearances are outlined below:

Type of case clearance	2005/2006	2006/2007*
Not accepted for action	1769	1875
Resolved to client's satisfaction	714	961
Cleared by full examination	455	283
Withdrawn	138	153
Total cleared	3076	3272
Cases outstanding	604	773

* For the period 1 April 2006 to 28 February 2007

Withdrawn cases

Complaints may be withdrawn for several reasons. For example, some clients decide to withdraw their complaint when we explain to them the need to appeal against decisions the Agency has made, or they choose to take another route to redress. From time to time people also withdraw their complaint because our explanations satisfy them that what has happened is appropriate. Other cases are happily withdrawn because the Agency has acted to address people's concerns.

Cases addressed through conciliation

We try to resolve complaints by agreement between the Agency and its client, as this generally represents a quicker and more satisfactory result for both. Details of the types of resolution actions available are outlined below.

	2005/6	2006/7*
Financial redress	582 (28%)	685 (25%)
Explanation	469 (22%)	617 (22%)
Apology	300 (14%)	442 (16%)
Assurance	261 (12%)	423 (15%)
Putting matters right	357 (17%)	360 (13%)
Information	147 (7%)	243 (9%)
Total	2116	2770

* For the period 1 April 2006 to 28 February 2007

The number of resolved complaints has increased significantly this year, from 714 to 961 by the end of February 2007. To some degree, this reflects a change in the way we approach the review of complaints, which encourages ICE investigation officers to look for opportunities to settle matters by agreement, even after a thorough investigation has started. This can happen when a review of the case papers, and subsequent dialogue with the Agency, prompts an agreement on action that resolves the complaint for the client. We have achieved notable success in addressing complaints in this way.

"I would particularly like to commend the resolution officer, for the help, advice and fantastic service she gave to me."

Extract from ICE satisfaction survey

4.3 What we found

Our findings in respect of those cases for which we issued investigation reports are set out below. If the Agency has fully addressed the complaint and provided, offered or instigated the appropriate redress before the referral to ICE, we do not uphold the complaint. The percentage of cases fully or partially upheld has remained disappointingly steady at well over 80% in the last few years. The Agency's new complaints procedure is aimed at resolving complaints internally and increasing the percentage of cases not upheld following investigation by ICE.

Full examination cases	2005/2006		2006/2007*	
Findings	No of cases	%	No of cases	%
Fully upheld	190	42	119	42
Partially upheld	196	43	117	41
Not upheld	69	15	47	17
Total	455	100	283	100

* For the period 1 April 2006 to 28 February 2007

Elements of complaint

In most cases, referred complaints include several issues that the client wishes ICE to address. We record separate findings for each individual element of the complaint. During the year, the 961 cases we cleared by conciliation and by full investigation included 2682 elements of complaint. Of these, 1877 elements were resolved by conciliation.

Findings for investigated elements were as follows:

	2005/2006		2006/2007*	
	No of elements	%	No of elements	%
Upheld	856	67	490	62
Not upheld	431	33	304	38
Total	1287	100	794	100

* For the period 1 April 2006 to 28 February 2007

Subjects of complaint:

We recorded details of the subject of complaint for each element of complaint whether resolved or investigated. This has shown:

Subject	2005/2006	2006/2007*
Delay	1119 (41%)	870 (32%)
Error	697 (25%)	743 (28%)
No action taken	597 (22%)	714 (27%)
Miscellaneous	346 (12%)	355 (13%)
Total	2759	2682

* For the period 1 April 2006 to 28 February 2007

5. Key complaint issues

In this section of the Report, we identify the main areas of concern identified by ICE this year. The information is based on the outcomes of complaints cleared between April 2006 and February 2007.

5.1 Delay

Since 1997, Agency delay has been a recurring factor in complaints referred to ICE. This trend has continued in the current year.

We have criticised the Agency for delay in various areas of its work. For example:

- ▶ completing the initial maintenance calculation;
- ▶ setting up accounts and calculating arrears;
- ▶ dealing with changes of circumstances;
- ▶ issuing a deduction from earnings order to collect maintenance payments;
- ▶ taking enforcement action to recover arrears.

This year, a number of the cases affected by delay have been maintained clerically, rather than on the computer system. Further information about this can be found later in this report.

Frustration caused by Agency delay can be exacerbated if a client often has to chase the Agency to check on the progress of their case. It can also have financial implications for either a non-resident parent or a parent with care. The following example is typical of cases where we find that delay has had a detrimental effect on parents and their children.

Very, very helpful and understanding – a lone voice of sanity.
Extract from ICE satisfaction survey

Mrs A complained that, following her application to the Agency in June 2001, it had only collected approximately £300, leaving arrears in excess of £13500.

We found that Mrs A's case was affected by Agency delay from the start. It took eight weeks to send a maintenance enquiry form to the non-resident parent. When he did not return it, the Agency delayed contacting him and by the time it did, he had left his job. Between September 2001 and January 2002, Mrs A told the Agency about his new employment, but it did not follow this up until February when it contacted the employer after he had been working there for three months. The Agency received a completed maintenance enquiry form in March and calculated his liability in May.

Although he made no payments, the Agency did not issue a deduction from earnings order until August. The employer was then declared bankrupt and the non-resident parent told the Agency he intended to become self-employed. No further contact was made with him until April 2003, when it established details of his new employer and

issued a deduction from earnings order. However, whenever he changed jobs, it took the Agency some months to catch up with events and impose new deduction orders.

By April 2005, the Agency had decided that Mrs A's case was suitable for enforcement. However, it delayed referring the case to the enforcement team until November, while it dealt with her application for a departure. Enforcement action was then not taken until March 2006 and this led to the granting of a liability order for over £13500 three months later. At the time of our report, the Agency was considering enforcing the liability order. In response to our recommendations, Mrs A received an apology, a consolatory payment of £155, compensation of £130 in respect of lost Child Maintenance Bonus (including interest) and £5 for her communication costs.

This case demonstrates how difficult it can be for the Agency to keep up with changes in people's lives, and why it is so important that it does not give the impression that it is not serious about expecting the non-resident parent to support his child, or not prepared to act to ensure this happens.

5.2 Error

Agency error has also figured consistently in complaints we have considered over the past ten years. This continues to be the case, and this year the Agency has been criticised for:

- ▶ errors in written and telephone communications;
- ▶ errors in preparing the initial maintenance liability;
- ▶ errors made when calculating arrears;
- ▶ errors with deduction from earnings orders.

The following case is a worrying example of clear error, which the Agency failed to correct as soon as the problem came to light.

Miss B complained that the Agency had sent her a maintenance enquiry form in 2005. It told her that she had been named as the father of three children. She contacted the Agency to explain that not only was she female, she had no children. Notwithstanding this, the Agency then contacted her employer to request details of her earnings so that it could calculate her liability for child maintenance, which it subsequently did. Miss B was highly embarrassed by the Agency's approach to her employer.

Despite engaging with the Agency through three stages of internal complaint review, matters were not resolved. Following our intervention, the Agency wrote to Miss B to apologise for its mistakes and wrote to her employer confirming it had made an error. The Agency also awarded her a payment of £150 for the gross embarrassment and inconvenience caused by its actions.

The Agency agreed to remove all record of Miss B from its computer system. A system fault then delayed the completion of this action for three months; however the Agency agreed to provide weekly updates until all action had been completed. Miss B confirmed that this action was sufficient to address her complaint satisfactorily.

There is a clear correlation between our findings concerning complaints about delay and those about error. Where clients experience difficulties with the Agency at an early stage, before the initial liability and the arrears are calculated, it can all too easily set the tone for a negative ongoing relationship where one problem seems to follow another.

5.3 Poor communication

It is true to say that many complaints have their roots in poor communication between the Agency and its clients. It is particularly important that parents know where they stand, and what action the Agency is intending to take in their case. Information should be easy to understand and consistent. People who complain to ICE often tell us that the letters they receive from the Agency are confusing, difficult to understand, or contradict what was said in previous letters. Similar problems arise concerning telephone conversations.

The following case is typical of this problem.

Ms C complained that the Agency had sent her contradictory correspondence regarding the amount of the non-resident parent's liability.

We found that over a seven-month period, the Agency had written to her on five separate occasions giving her conflicting information about the maintenance liability, about the amount of regular maintenance it intended to collect from the non-resident parent's employer, and about the rate of arrears it intended to collect. To make matters more confusing, it did not tell Ms C what the correct liability was.

In response to a letter of complaint from her about the confusing information she received, the Agency told her that the correct amount of regular maintenance was being paid, even though she had never been informed of the non-resident parent's liability.

Following ICE involvement, the Agency implemented a revision of the maintenance liability and told Ms C the correct figures both for the liability and for the amount to be deducted from the non-resident parent's wages. As a result of our investigation Ms C received an apology, a consolatory payment of £150 and £10 reimbursement of her communication costs.

In February 2006, the Agency published its Operational Improvement Plan, designed to stabilise and improve its performance. As part of this plan, the Agency is reviewing the standard of its written communications. It has already introduced some welcome changes and the Independent Case Examiner is hopeful that these and further initiatives will lead to an overall improvement in the standard of Agency communication.

5.4 Collection and enforcement

The Agency's primary role is to ensure that regular and appropriate maintenance flows between parents for the upkeep of their children. This means that there must be effective arrangements for collecting payments and robust procedures for dealing with non-compliance.

Inadequate collection and enforcement action has been a recurring problem raised in previous ICE Annual Reports. It is again this year. We have identified delays in taking early action to deal with non-payment and a failure to pass cases to the specialist enforcement team in a timely way, or to take urgent court action to establish liability. In

“In 12 years the Child Support Agency has neglected to bear its teeth let alone bark.”

Extract from letter of complaint

some cases, delays have been so protracted that debts for child maintenance have become time-barred for court action.

For most cases, where non-resident parents are employed, deduction from earnings orders can be an effective method of collecting payments from a non-resident parent who might otherwise be reluctant to meet their liabilities. An employer is legally required to operate a deduction order and failure to do so can lead to criminal proceedings against them. It is disappointing when this effective collection method is undermined by delay and error, as the following case demonstrates.

Mrs D complained that, despite the Agency imposing a deduction from earnings order, it had failed to collect regular maintenance or arrears for her.

We found that deduction orders had been issued in April, May, June and December 2004; however, the Agency failed to take action when it only received sporadic payments from the employer. A fresh order was issued in January 2005, but was not implemented because it was said that the non-resident parent had left his employment. However, subsequent enquiries showed that the company had been taken over and that the non-resident parent was still employed there. In April, having recalculated his liability, the Agency told the non-resident parent that a fresh deduction order had been sent to his new employer. This was incorrect.

It took a further three months for the Agency to approach the non-resident parent about his failure to make payments. In spite of his poor payment history, it agreed that he could pay by standing order. He failed to do so and it was only in August that the Agency successfully issued a deduction from earnings order once again.

Unfortunately, the employer failed to make payments promptly, but the Agency did not follow this up for four months after the order was issued. Even after contact with the employer, late payments continued and at the time of our review, there was no indication that the Agency had taken any further action to address this problem.

ICE found that if the Agency had kept in touch with the employer between 2004 and 2006, it could have quickly identified problems in implementing the deduction from earnings orders properly. Its failure to do so, or to follow up missing or late payments, allowed both the non-resident parent and his employer to avoid their legal responsibilities, to the detriment of the qualifying children. As a result of our investigation Mrs D received an apology, a consolatory payment of £55 and £10 reimbursement of her communication costs.

These cases are not easy to administer, and there is always a balance of fairness between the parents to be struck when considering enforcement action. There are times when enforcement action can be manifestly unfair to a non-resident parent, as demonstrated by the next case example.

Mr E complained that the Agency had obtained a liability order in January 2006, based on a punitive interim maintenance assessment. He said he had since provided the Agency with his income and other details; however, he was not confident that the Agency had recalculated the amount due for the period of the liability order.

It transpired that the liability order related to the period 2000 to 2001 and Mr E had actually provided his details to the Agency in 2000. The Agency could have obtained any missing information from HM Revenue and Customs, but did not do so. The Agency agreed with ICE that it could have converted the interim maintenance assessment in 2000, six years before it finally did so. Nevertheless, it had applied for and been granted a liability order in 2006, which it had passed to the bailiffs for recovery.

Following our intervention, the Agency converted the interim assessment and cancelled the bailiff action. It confirmed that the arrears for the period in question had been reduced by over £2000. We were able to resolve the complaint at this point.

5.5 Complaint handling and redress

The Independent Case Examiner takes a particular interest in the way the Child Support Agency handles complaints. If the Agency dealt with complaints effectively, referrals to ICE would be greatly reduced and we would have cause to uphold few of those we examined. The data provided earlier indicates that we are some way from that ideal situation.

We find that many complaints can be addressed comparatively easily, and it should not be necessary for ICE to be involved before the Agency provides apologies, explanations or information to complainants. Yet significant numbers of the complaints we resolve require little more than that. This year we have had occasion to criticise the Agency for the way it has dealt with the complaint in 84% of the cases we investigated.

The Agency should take the initiative to provide redress before people need to raise cases with independent bodies or with their MPs. Looking into this situation, between October and December 2006 we identified 101 cases where clients found it necessary to involve their MP to try to obtain satisfactory action.

A further particular problem to date has been the Agency's failure to identify the need for financial redress despite acknowledging its maladministration. During the year, we identified 618 cases where the question of financial loss or an advance payment of arrears arose. Disappointingly, over 80% of these had not been considered for financial redress when the Agency itself looked at the complaint. In many cases, our intervention led to the consideration of either a special payment or an advance payment.

Ms F complained that she made an application to the Agency in May 2005, but the non-resident parent's liability had not begun until December 2005. She said she had lost the opportunity to be paid maintenance for seven months.

We found that the Agency had lost Ms F's application form, but did not realise this until October. It then asked her to complete a duplicate form and did not contact the non-resident parent until December. Although it was aware of the problem that occurred, the Agency did not consider financial redress. We were able to resolve the complaint to

mutual satisfaction by arranging for the Agency to do so. Our intervention led to Ms F receiving a consolatory payment of £50, compensation of £2900 for financial loss and interest on this sum.

The Agency has confirmed that its policy is to consider financial redress at the earliest stage in its complaint handling process, and that it does not expect complaints to be escalated before doing so. The Independent Case Examiner welcomes the Agency's comprehensive review of complaint handling. It is to be hoped that the new arrangements will reduce the need for clients to approach their MPs or ICE, by ensuring that early consideration is given to appropriate financial and other redress. Further information about this can be found later in this report.

5.6 Computer problems

Computer faults have again been the root cause of many cases we have reviewed in the past year. We have found that the system problems have affected three main areas:

1. *Migration of existing cases from the old computer system to the new.* If a fresh application is received where the non-resident parent or the parent with care is already involved in another case, the existing linked case may need to be transferred to the new computer system. On migration, various system faults can arise. Cases are then delayed while these faults are examined and fixed. Further delay can result if the fault cannot be sorted out and it is necessary to refer the case for clerical action.
2. *New applications.* System faults can also sometimes occur when the Agency tries to process a new application without any links. Again some cases cannot be progressed at all because of the fault.
3. *Accounting issues.* The most common accounting fault in ICE referrals this year has been the failure to release payments to the parent with care that have been received from the non-resident parent.

"I felt let down by the CSA... I felt neither my own nor my children's welfare mattered – we just struggled and I felt we kept being further hit when down. I don't now – I have some restored faith... Thank you. Thank you."

Extract from ICE satisfaction survey

Mrs G's complaint was that the Agency had failed to deal with an application she had made in November 2004.

We found that the Agency had acted promptly in contacting the non-resident parent and obtaining his details. However, by the time he had returned his maintenance enquiry form in December, a system fault had arisen. The Agency could not progress the case and its technical team could not rectify the fault. A separate fault then arose within three weeks, which could also not be corrected.

Several attempts to move the case forward were unsuccessful, but it was not until April 2005 that the matter was escalated to a more senior level. At about that time, Mrs G made it clear to the Agency that she was experiencing financial hardship because of the delays. The Agency asked the non-resident parent to make voluntary payments to her while it was sorting out the problem, but he refused.

It was not until June that the Agency decided it would have to deal with her application clerically, rather than on its computer system. By that time, the non-resident parent was unemployed. It then took three months for the case to be passed to the Agency's clerical team. However, that team rejected the case three times between October and February, as further preliminary action was needed.

By the time we completed our examination of Mrs G's complaint in June 2006, the Agency had still not completed a maintenance calculation. As a result of our recommendations Mrs G received: an apology, a consolatory payment of £175 and £10 reimbursement of communication costs. The Agency also explained the actions it would take to establish the non-resident parent's address and secure regular payments of maintenance.

This case highlights a dilemma the Agency faces when a computer fault affects a case. Clerical processing is not an ideal solution, as control of the ongoing case may be more difficult if it is maintained clerically. There is no indication if or how such cases might be returned to the computer system. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Agency takes this action only where necessary. However, the Agency has to balance the benefits against the disadvantages before deciding to make a case clerical.

5.7 Clerical cases

The previous case example highlights that delays can continue once a case is passed to the clerical team. A constant theme of referrals this year has been problems associated with clerical processing.

The number of cases referred for clerical processing has grown rapidly. Initially, cases were handled by Business Units, but processing was then centralised at two locations. It quickly became apparent that staff at the clerical processing centres found it difficult to respond to ICE enquiries and recommendations. More recently, the Agency decided that case management of clerical cases will be undertaken by Vertex, an external contractor, and these cases were subsequently transferred to the new organisation in Bolton.

Following discussions at senior level, the Agency has changed the way it deals with clerical ICE cases, in order to provide a more speedy response for clients. The Independent Case Examiner acknowledges the positive difference that this has made, whilst retaining concerns about cases where problems persist.

Mr H complained to ICE in October 2006 that the Agency had failed to explain why it had not applied transitional phasing to his liability, or what it would do to correct the matter; that it failed to take account of all the payments he had made, or to explain its calculation of arrears; and that it failed to replace a deduction from earnings order with a standing order.

In mid-November, we sent a resolution proposal to the Agency and, in accordance with our Service Level Agreement, we asked for a reply within two weeks. Four weeks later, the Agency advised that it could not reply in full, as it had been unable to obtain the necessary information from the clerical team. Despite involving a senior Agency

manager, a response was not given until the end of January 2007, almost three months later.

Mr H immediately agreed with ICE that the Agency's replies were sufficient to resolve the issues he had raised.

5.8 Linked cases

This year we received a number of complaints about problems arising from the Agency's handling of linked cases, that is, where a parent is involved in more than one case with the Agency.

Often problems arise if the Agency delays in dealing with a second application. Legislation specifies that the liability in such cases cannot be backdated, whereas in other cases it is set from the date of initial contact with a non-resident parent. In these circumstances, any delay by the Agency in calculating the new liability will inevitably have serious financial implications for the parent with care, as arrears are not accruing in the intervening period.

"The officer responsible for my case was helpful, reliable and in my opinion a real asset to both the service and myself. She made a very difficult situation much better by her patience and professionalism."

Extract from ICE satisfaction survey

In some cases we have seen, a non-resident parent has made a commendable effort to pay appropriate maintenance to each of their children, in the knowledge that once liability is established for them all it will be split between them. However, until this happens, payment of the full amount is legally due to a parent with care for whom liability is already established. This is exemplified by the following illustration.

In September 2004, the Agency received an application from Miss J naming Mr A as the non-resident parent of two children. When it contacted him, he explained that he had other children and was making payments direct to the mothers of each of them. He now wanted to pay maintenance through the Agency for all the children.

The Agency took some preliminary action on the applications for the other children. However, in November it calculated Mr A's liability for Miss J's children, setting the effective date of liability from September. We found that the Agency could (and should) have calculated his liabilities for all his children at the same time. It was not until the following September – partly because of computer faults – that the Agency established Mr A's liability in the other two cases.

During the intervening period, Mr A had accrued a substantial liability in respect of Miss J's children. However, this took no account of his other children, for whom he had continued to make voluntary payments, whilst also making reduced payments to the Agency in respect of Miss J's children. These payments were based on his own, accurate, estimate of the liabilities the Agency would eventually calculate for each of the families.

Because he did not pay his full assessed liability to Miss J, arrears of almost £12500 accrued on her case. At the same time, voluntary payments for his other children were disregarded by the Agency and could not be deducted from any accrued arrears, since his liability in those cases did not begin until September 2005. These kinds of situations

create a dilemma for the Agency, which it has to address. In exceptional circumstances, it can choose not to collect arrears, and the Agency was asked to consider this in this case. In response, the Agency agreed to waive arrears of £7,350.

As a consequence of seeing a number of referrals raising complaints about this kind of situation, the Independent Case Examiner has raised this particular systemic issue with senior Agency and Department managers. It is hoped that the Agency will establish clear guidance for staff to respond to parents faced with this situation, offering advice on how non-resident parents should distribute maintenance between their children living with different parents with care, before liability is established on all cases.

6. Looking forward – The Independent Case Examiner's view

The Child Support Agency is in a period of transition. In response to Sir David Henshaw's Report published in July 2006, the Government has announced its intention to replace the Agency with a new Non-Departmental Public Body – the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission. While this will mean that the work of the Agency comes to an end, until C-MEC is in place the Agency will continue to have responsibility for dealing with new and existing applications for child maintenance.

The Agency's Operational Improvement Plan was introduced to improve its performance and will continue to be put into effect while the wider work to redesign future policy and delivery arrangements is undertaken. The aim of the plan is to improve service to customers and it has involved some significant changes in the way the Agency does business and in its organisation.

6.1 Complaint handling

The way an organisation handles complaints about its service is often an indication of its interest in customer service. Complaints can be seen as an unnecessary intrusion into the day-to-day business, or, in a more positive light, the organisation can learn from them and use them as a means of improving its service.

From the customer's point of view, it is important that an organisation deals with complaints effectively and promptly. Even if the final response does not provide the answer the customer wants, if the complaint has been taken seriously and dealt with professionally, the individual is more likely to accept a disappointing outcome.

During a wide-reaching review of current process, the Agency recognised that its procedures were overly bureaucratic, resource intensive and ineffective in achieving speedy resolution for clients. As part of its Operational Improvement Plan, the Agency is changing the way it handles complaints. A Complaints Resolution Team will be responsible for addressing complaints that cannot be sorted out by the team dealing with the case. The resolution team will aim to agree with the customer how the complaint can be addressed and will develop a resolution plan.

Customers who are not satisfied with the outcome will be able to escalate their complaint to a central Complaints Review Team. This team will take responsibility for all aspects of the complaint and for ensuring that any remedial action or redress is dealt with. Clients who remain dissatisfied will be able to refer their complaint to ICE. Liaison with ICE will then be arranged within the central team.

Helpfully, the Agency has reduced the complaint process to two internal steps from the previous three-step procedure. This will make it quicker for the client to move complaints forward and will mean they do not get lost between the review stages. Another important element of the revised arrangements will be a new management information system, which will assist the Agency in undertaking systematic performance and trend analysis. Caseworkers will be able to progress cases on the computer systems so there will be less hand-offs to other areas of the business, and that should prevent further delays in corrective action required on the complaint.

As Independent Case Examiner, I welcome the new arrangements. The Agency's new approach to complaint resolution is based loosely on the way ICE operates. It is particularly encouraging that the Agency has been ready to learn from our experience and to adopt our customer focused approach to complaint handling. We have also been pleased to offer input into staff training, re-design of forms and training materials for the new Complaints Review Team.

"I felt there was nowhere to turn and was upset and frustrated by the CSA, until contacting the Independent Case Examiner... Don't know what I would have done without you. Excellent."

Extract from ICE satisfaction survey

Nevertheless, there are risks associated with the new arrangements. The challenge for the Agency is to be able to forecast complaint volumes with a degree of accuracy and to ensure that both the Complaints Review and Resolution Teams are adequately staffed as the

Agency moves towards closure. Trend analysis by ICE can assist this effort.

6.2 Relationships with the private sector

Since its inception, the Agency has always had arrangements with private contractors to deal with some aspects of its work. For example, independent bailiff companies are contracted to enforce liability orders granted by the courts. The relationship with the private sector is set to expand over the next few years.

An example of this is the decision to engage a private company, Vertex, to handle clerical processing. I have met with Agency managers and managers of Vertex to discuss the handling of complaints by the Agency and its contractor. Assurances have been offered that urgent steps are being taken to establish appropriate complaint procedures that will address any problems in responding to ICE action, so that together we can work towards achieving satisfactory settlements for complainants.

The Agency is also engaging commercial debt collection firms, so that quicker and firmer steps are taken to recover some of the debt owed by non-resident parents. Use of credit reference agencies will also improve its ability to trace non-resident parents.

From an ICE perspective, it is important for the Agency to recognise that whatever outsourcing arrangements are made, it retains the primary responsibility for the quality of service received by the client. In response to my systemic recommendation, the Agency has developed clear procedures for dealing with complaints about private contractors. It is encouraging to see that these procedures include a degree of oversight by the Agency after the complaint has been passed to the contractor for action.

I am pleased to record that the Agency is committed to taking this responsibility seriously and to establishing appropriate arrangements for ensuring reasonable responses to communication and complaints.

6.3 Effective debt enforcement

In previous Annual Reports, I have noted the increasing emphasis that the Agency has placed on enforcement of payment of accrued debt. In recent years the Agency has

dedicated additional resources to specialist debt-enforcement teams, and amended its guidance in order to improve its overall approach to this important area of work.

This has resulted in a more effective use of its powers, with an increase in the number of liability orders, charging orders and committal sentences. The Henshaw Report recommended the consideration of additional enforcement powers for the Agency, such as the withdrawal of passports, or the imposition of curfews for non-resident parents who persistently refuse to meet their responsibilities in maintaining their children.

I welcome all proposals that will result in more effective enforcement. However, in my experience, it is in effective communication and case planning that the real difference lies. There is considerable scope for the Agency to become more efficient in its enforcement of debt now, by considering cases holistically and making better use of the powers it already has, rather than following a series of disjointed enforcement steps. Having said this, I am pleased to acknowledge that the Agency is making worthwhile changes that will assist its enforcement efforts in the future.

6.4 Systemic improvements

It is encouraging that the Agency makes use of systemic feedback provided by this office, and uses information arising from ICE reports to make unprompted systemic improvements. This year the Agency has introduced the following enhancements to its procedures as a means of improving the service it gives to its customers.

- In 2005/6, ICE dealt with a number of complaints that money was being incorrectly allocated between parents with care when a non-resident parent had a liability for more than one family. In response, the Agency introduced the procedure of immediate reimbursement to the parent who received no payment.
- From 23 October 2006, the Agency has amended deduction from earnings order notifications sent to non-resident parents. The notifications now explain that until the Agency receives the money from the employer, the non-resident parent remains liable.
- As well as its ongoing review of the content of letters and leaflets, the Agency will reduce the number of leaflets it uses from April 2007.
- The Agency has been working with key stakeholders to review its leaflets; also when developing training material for staff who handle complaints.
- Training is being developed for operational staff to improve the quality of telephone dealings with clients and to encourage greater use of the telephone.

These changes demonstrate the Agency's wish to improve its service to its customers. The ICE Office will continue to promote good administration wherever the need arises and to work in collaboration with all parts of the Agency and its partners to secure the best possible response for complainants.

If you would like to complain to the Independent Case Examiner, please contact:

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