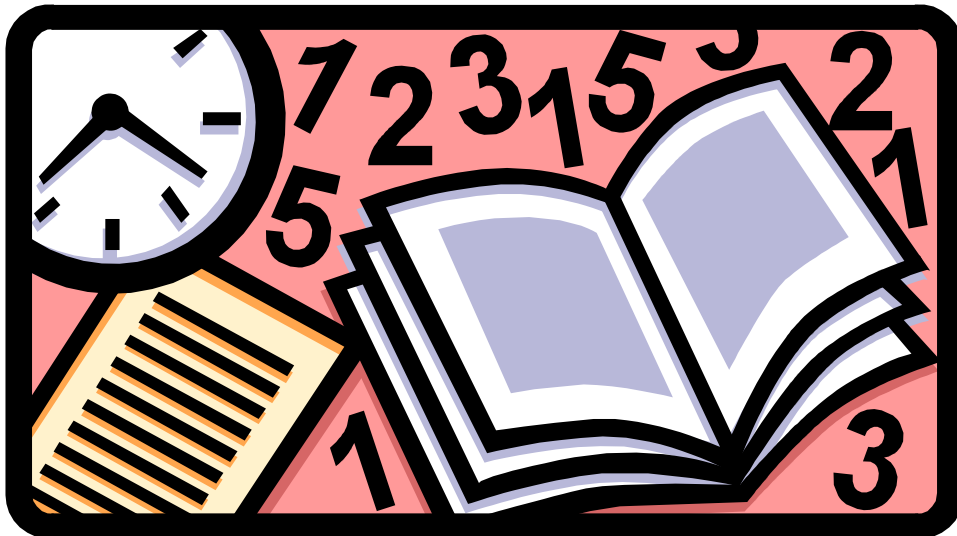


**Office of Social Security
and
Child Support Commissioners**



Annual Report 2002/03

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1. FOREWORD

Every year thousands of people have their cases dealt with by any number of Tribunals. The Office of Social Security and Child Support Commissioners (OSSCSC) is one of the appellate tribunals. It is part of the Court Service, which falls under the administration of the Department of Constitutional Affairs.

A team of administrative staff and legal officers support a team of Commissioners, who are special Judges appointed by the Queen. They are independent of, and no way connected to, the Department for Work and Pensions or any of its agencies (including the Child Support Agency), the board of the Inland Revenue or Local Authorities.

This is the first OSSCSC Annual Report, and it sets out the office's performance over the 2002-03 business year, our achievements and progress made, together with the aims and objectives for the coming year.

We hope you will find it useful and that it gives you an insight into the work that we do and the achievements that we are proud of.

2. INTRODUCTION

The Commissioners hear and determine appeals on point of law against decisions made by Appeal Service tribunals in Social Security, tax credit, Child Support and Housing and Council Tax Benefit cases. There are two permanent centres in London; one is situated at Harp House, Farringdon Street, EC4 and the other at Newspaper House, Great New Street, EC4. The other permanent centre is in Melville Street, Edinburgh.

As part of the welfare reforms after the Second World War Commissioners were established by statute. The National Insurance Commissioners became Social Security Commissioners in 1980 when their jurisdiction was extended to cover means tested benefits for the first time and In 1983 the Commissioners' Office (OSSC) became part of the Lord Chancellors Dept. In April 1993 existing Social Security Commissioners were appointed to decide child support appeals and became Child Support Commissioners as well and the office acquired its present name. More recently in July 2001 Commissioners assumed jurisdiction for housing benefit and council tax appeals and in April 2003 for new Inland Revenue tax credit cases.

Before appealing to the Commissioner an appellant must have leave to appeal. An application for leave must be made first to the Chairman of the Appeal Service tribunal who decided their appeal. If the chairman grants leave to appeal to the Commissioner the appellant may then appeal to the Commissioner. If the Chairman refuses leave to appeal (or rejects the application) then the appellant can renew the application for leave to appeal to the Commissioner. The time period for sending such applications or appeals to the Commissioner is one month after the Chairman has issued his decision. An application may be accepted after this time, if the Commissioner accepts that there is a special reason for doing so.

Appeal to the Commissioner must be made on a point of law. An appeal against the Commissioner's decision must also be on a point of law and should be made to the Court of Appeal or the Court of Session in Scotland.

The law governing the procedure on applications to the Commissioner for leave to appeal and appeals is set out in the Social Security Commissioners (Procedure) Regulations 1999 as amended, the Child Support Commissioners (Procedure) Regulations 1999 and the Social Security Commissioners (Procedure) (Tax Credits Appeals) Regulations 2002.

3. Standards of Service

We aim to achieve as high a level of service as possible. This means ensuring that we reach the standards and expectations set out in the Courts Charter.

These standards are as follows:

- ❖ Register applications and appeals within 5 working days of receiving them
- ❖ Reply to correspondence within 10 working days of receipt.
- ❖ Issue Commissioners decisions within 5 working days of receipt from the Commissioner
- ❖ Telephone to be answered weekdays between 9am – 5pm
- ❖ Telephones to be answered within 30 seconds

In addition to the above you can expect:

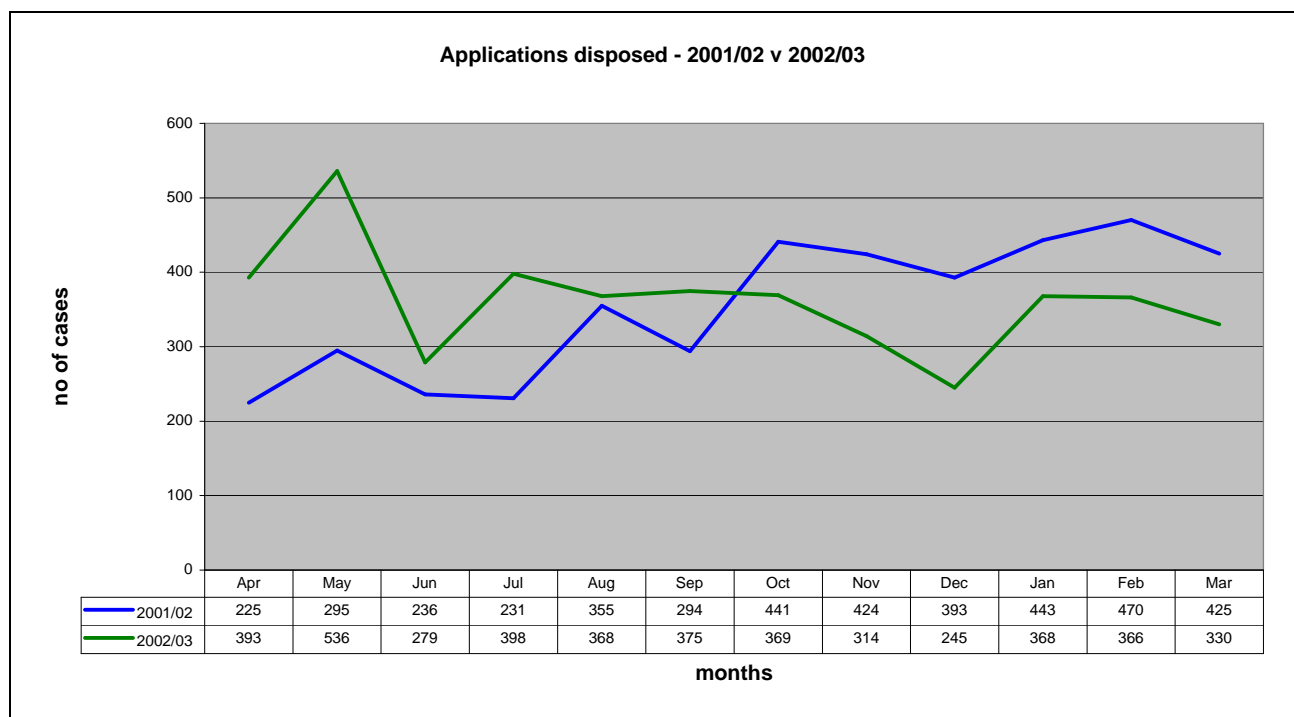
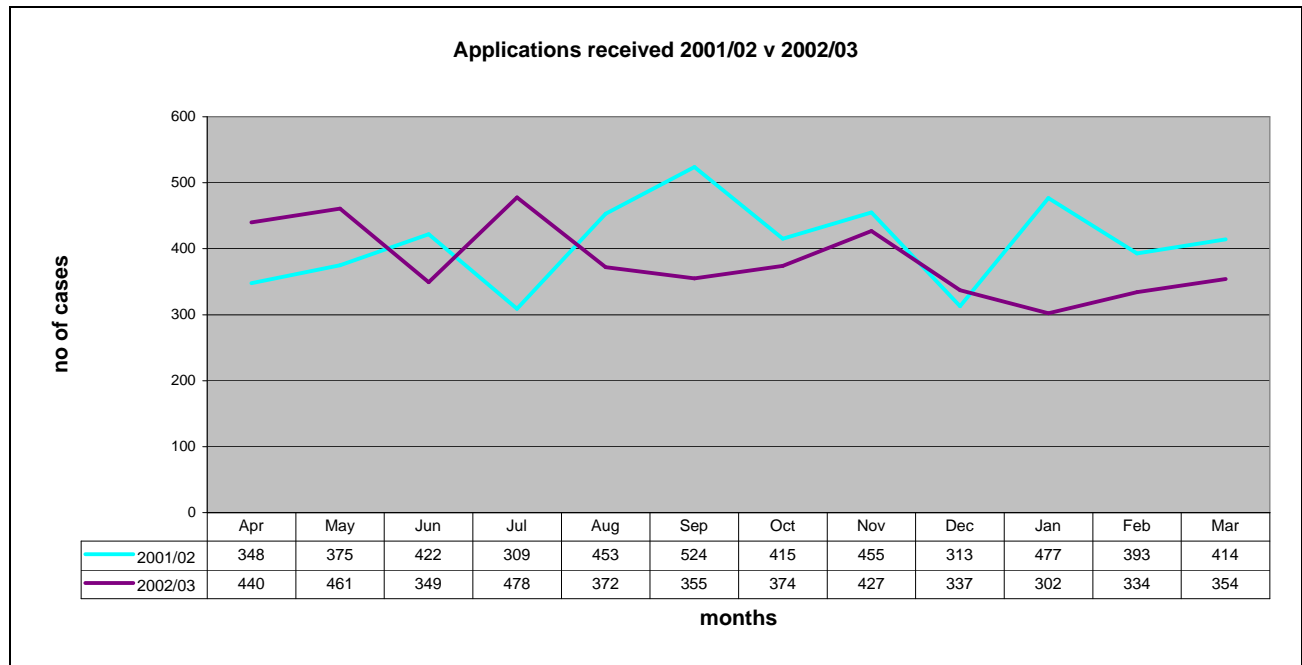
- ❖ All of your details and information will be dealt with in confidence.
- ❖ To be given the name of any member of staff that communicates with you
- ❖ We will call you back if necessary
- ❖ To receive assistance with travelling expenses to and from hearings
- ❖ A hearing to be arranged at a location convenient to you wherever possible, either face to face or by video conferencing.

If you feel that we have not given you a good standard of service please contact the Customer Service Manager or the Tribunal Manager.

4. Workload and Performance

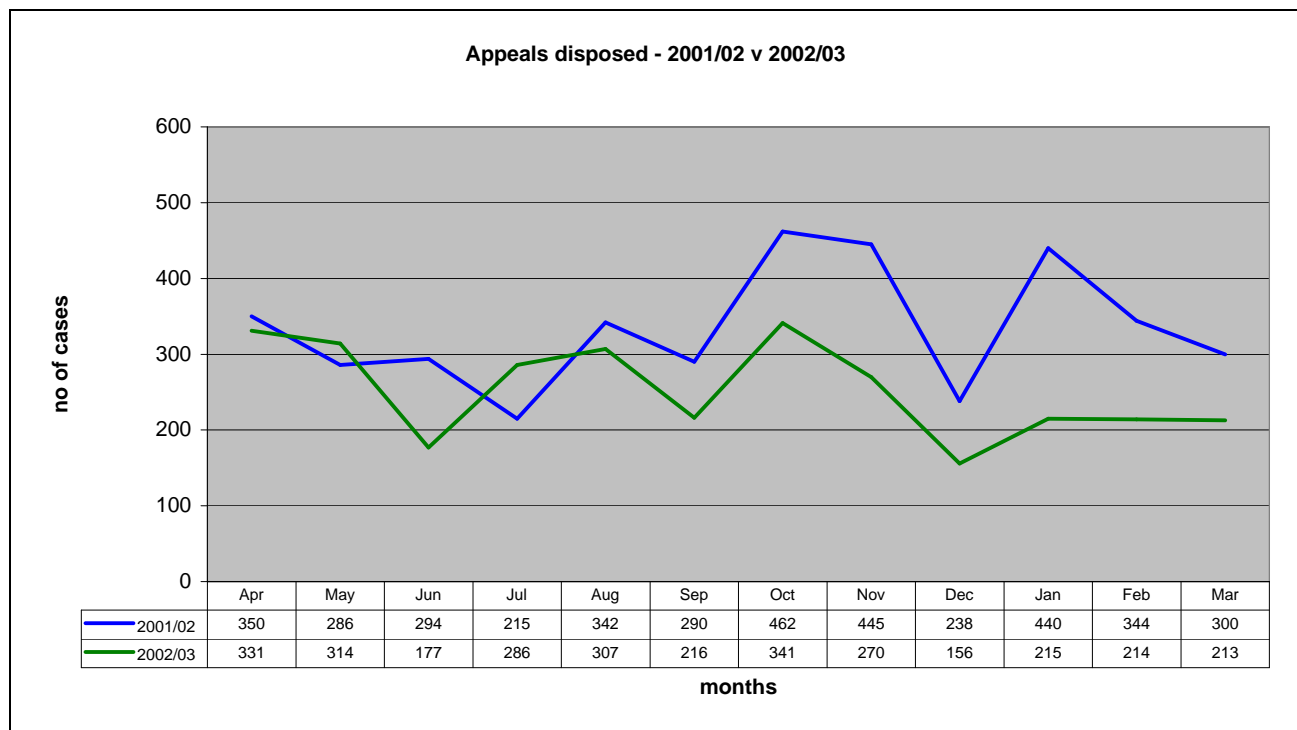
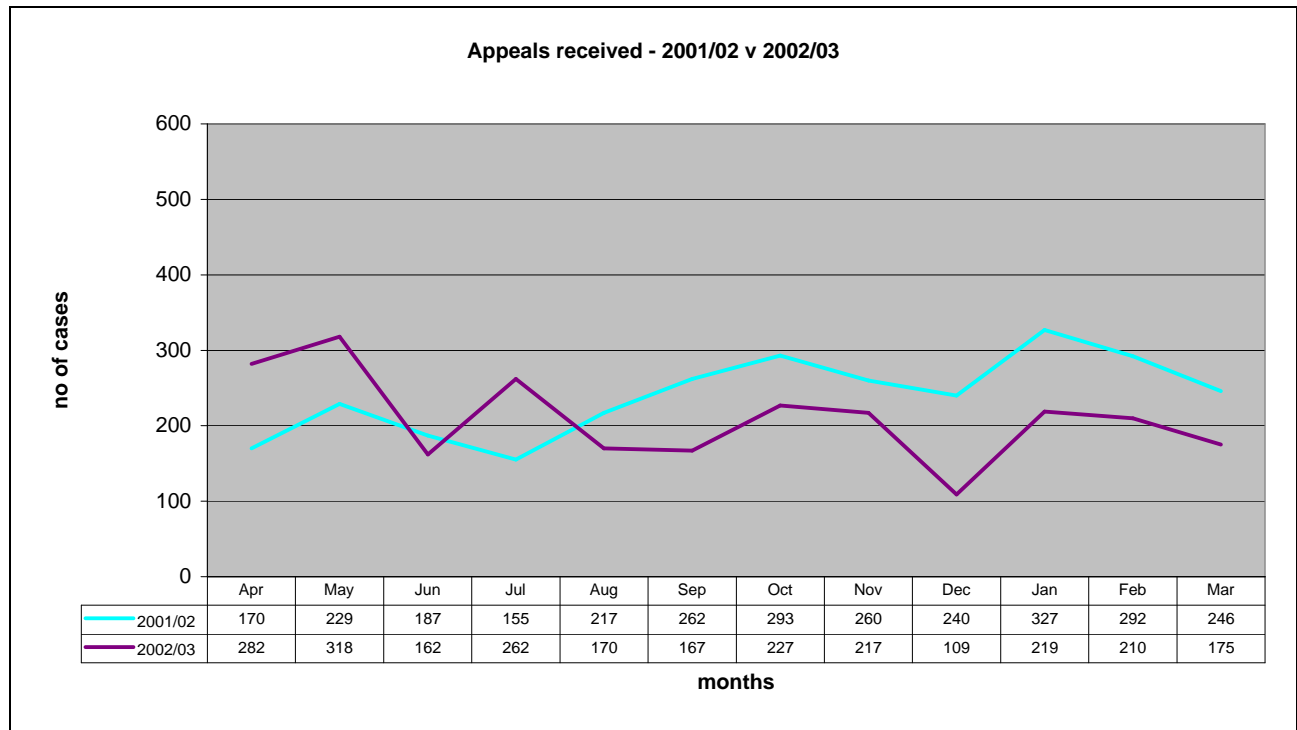
Applications

The number of applications received between April 2002 and March 2003 fell by 6.5% on the previous year, from 4898 to 4583. The number of applications disposed of on the other hand increased over the same period, from 4232 to 4341, a rise of 2.5%.



Appeals

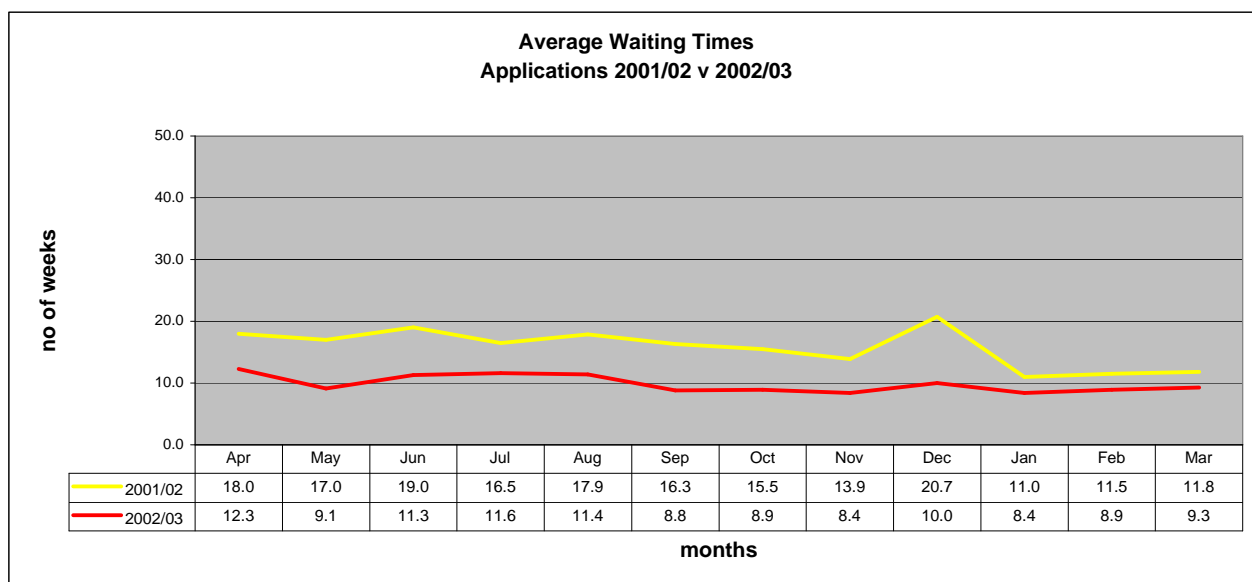
Both receipts and disposals fell between April 2002 and March 2003 compared to the previous financial year. Receipts fell from 2878 in 2001/02 to 2518 in 2002/03 and disposals from 4006 to 30.



Average Waiting Time

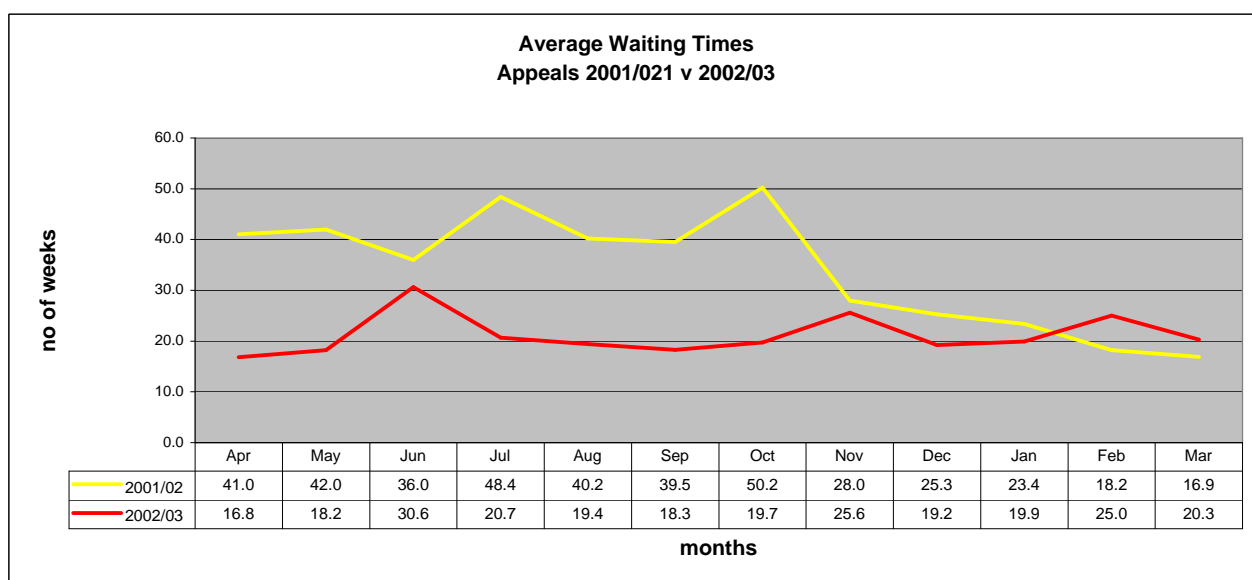
Applications

At the end of the 2002/03 business year the average waiting time from application to ruling was 9.3 weeks, an improvement of 2.5 weeks on the previous year. The waiting time did fall as low as 8.4 weeks in November 2002 and January 2003. The target for the 2003/03 financial year remains 10 weeks.



Appeals

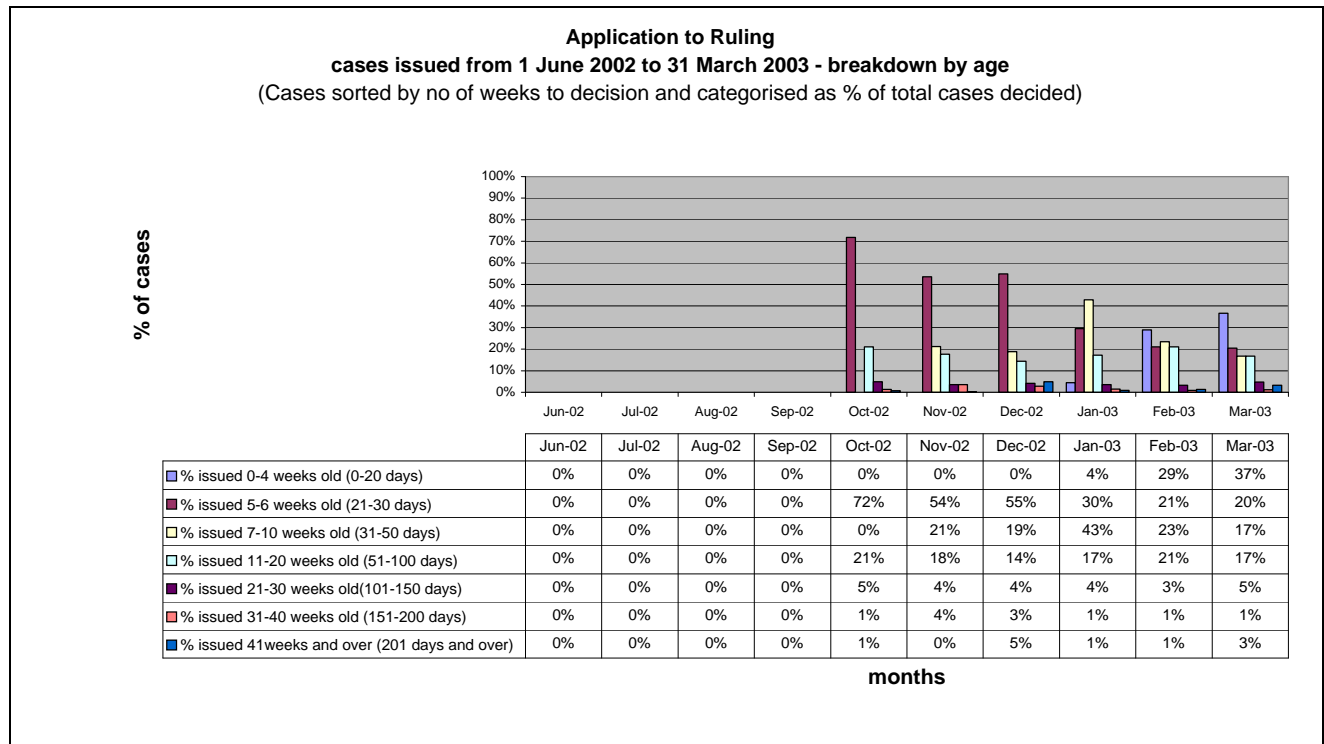
A significant improvement has been seen in the waiting times for appeals compared to the previous business year. In 2001/02 the waiting time was as high as 50.2 weeks, although significant improvements were made towards the end of the year. The average waiting time in 2002/03 fluctuated between 16.8 weeks at the start of the year, rising to 30.6 weeks in June 2002 and finally resting at 20.3 weeks at the end of March 2003. The target for the 2002/03 financial year was set at 26 weeks and this was comfortably achieved most of the year. For 2003/04 the target has been set at 20 weeks.



Percentage of Cases Disposed Of

Application to Ruling

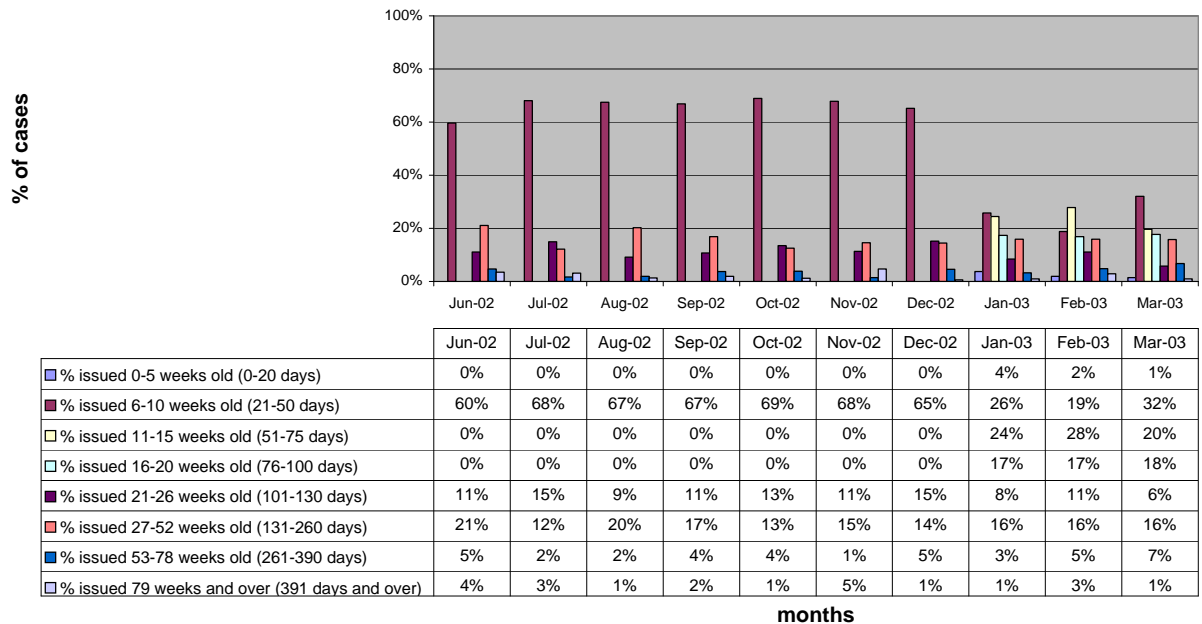
At the end of March 2003, the percentage of cases dealt with within 10 weeks was 74% against a target of 70%. For the 2003/04 financial year the target has been set at 75%.



Leave granted/new appeal to decision

At the end of March 2003 the percentage of cases dealt with within 20 weeks was 71% against a target of 70%. Only towards the end of the 2002/03 financial year was performance at this level and therefore the target for the 2003/04 financial year remains unchanged.

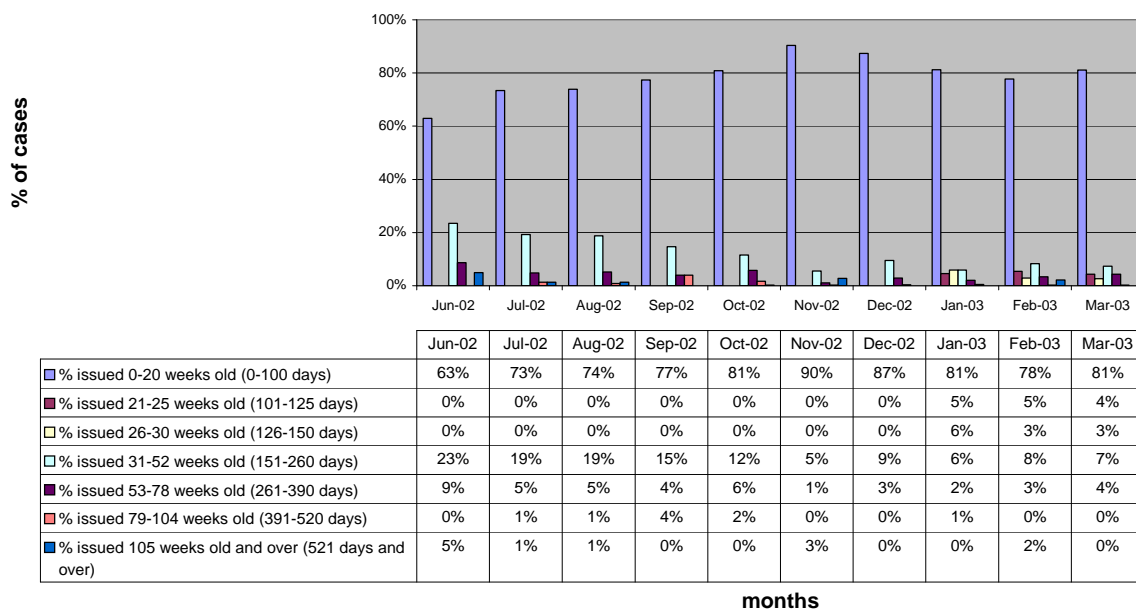
Leave Granted/New Appeals to Decision
cases issued from 1 June 2002 to 31 March 2003 - breakdown by age
 (Cases sorted by no of weeks to decision and categorised as % of total cases decided)



Total of all cases disposed

At the end of March 2003 the percentage of all cases dealt with within 30 weeks was 81% against a target of 70%. This target has been routinely met since July 2002 and therefore the target for the 2003/04 financial year has been set at 85%.

Total of All Cases Disposed Of
cases issued from 1 June 2002 to 31 March 2003 - breakdown by age
 (Cases sorted by no of weeks to decision and categorised as % of total cases decided)



5. Financial Performance

The 2002-2003 financial allocation provided OSSCSC with £3, 979, 841 to cover its business for the year. At the end of March 2003, 2% of the allocation remained unspent. Only the Administrative Costs budget came under pressure during the year, due to unexpected photocopier costs. This money was not required however, due to the surplus in the Salaries budget where staff savings were made following improvements to workload management and office procedures. The table below shows the breakdown of how the allocated funds were used.

Budget Head	Budget £'s	Expenditure £'s	Variance £'s	Variance %
Salaries*	1, 435, 745	1, 373, 043	62, 702	4
Administrative Costs**	237, 795	263, 285	-25,490	-11
Programme Costs***	2, 306, 301	2, 264, 254	42,047	2
Total	3, 979, 841	3, 900, 582	79,259	2

* Includes permanent and casual staff salaries, staff travel and subsistence, miscellaneous allowances, overtime and agency staff fees.

**Includes utility, telephone and reprographic charges, postage, stationery, miscellaneous office supplies and IT services.

***Includes Commissioners salaries, travel and subsistence, stationery and training, deputy Commissioners fees and appellants expenses.

As mentioned above, savings have been realised by reducing staffing levels through natural wastage because of improvements to the way the office now processes the work. This has also had a direct impact on the work of the Commissioners, which has allowed their numbers to fall also. In the last year therefore, savings of almost a quarter of a million pounds has been realised. The table below shows where the savings have been made.

Budget Head	Expenditure 2001-02 £'s	Expenditure 2002 -03 £'s	Variance £'s	Variance %
Salaries*	1, 478, 756	1, 373, 043	-105, 713	-7
Administrative Costs**	231, 045	263, 285	32, 240	14
Programme Costs***	2, 433, 102	2, 264, 254	-168, 848	-7
Total	4, 142, 903	3, 900, 582	-242, 321	6

* Includes permanent and casual staff salaries, staff travel and subsistence, miscellaneous allowances, overtime and agency staff fees.

**Includes utility, telephone and reprographic charges, postage, stationery, miscellaneous office supplies and IT services.

***Includes Commissioners salaries, travel and subsistence, stationery and training, deputy Commissioners fees and appellants expenses.

6. Achievements

Waiting times

In the last two years the waiting times for both applications for leave to appeal and appeals have reduced significantly. The introduction of Commissioner led case management, re-organisation of the office structure and the streamlining of office procedures, together with a reduction in receipts have all played their part in our success. We will continue to look for ways of making further improvements and the objectives set for the coming year demonstrate this.

The table below shows the waiting time figures for the last three years.

	2000-2001*	2001-2002*	2002-2003*
Application**	19.0	15.7	9.9
Appeal***	40.8	34.1	21.2

*waiting times shown in weeks

**from receipt of application to disposal of application, either being refused or granted

***from when an application is granted or upon direct receipt of an appeal

Charter Mark

In April we received notification of our successful application for Charter Mark accreditation, which is the national award for excellence in customer service. This again demonstrates the advances we have made in our commitment to provide the highest possible level of service to both our internal and external customers.

The OSSCSC Website

Since its launch in April 2002, the OSSCSC website has become both an integral and established part of our office. It has received positive comment from various local authorities; welfare rights groups, legal publications as well as individual users.

The site was set up initially as a small sub-section of the Court Service website in response to a recommendation made by a House of Commons Parliamentary Select Committee that all starred decisions (Commissioners decisions deciding points of law of general interest) should feature prominently on the site.

The website would soon become a major focal point of information for Welfare Rights Groups, Local Authorities, Legal Organisations and other government departments. The increased demand has seen the Tribunals Directorate provide funding to enable the site to be revamped in its entirety, and being given our own domain name www.ossccsc.gov.uk.

One of the most exciting features is the decisions database. As more and more Commissioner's decisions are uploaded onto the site, users are now able to download them, in their original word format, free of charge. This service is particularly useful for representatives, when compiling appeal submissions on behalf of their appellants.

In addition to our own website, by the end of August 2003, we will have seen the launch of the Pensions Appeal Tribunal, Lands Tribunal, Transport Tribunal and Finance & Tax Tribunal websites.

OSSCSC Database

It has been a busy 12 months with regard to the upgrade of our case management database (formerly known as ERIC (**E**very **R**ecord **I**s **C**asetracked), now OSSC 2000). The development of the new database began in April 2002, after a staff survey was undertaken and a wish list of requirements produced. One of the new features is an automated forms system allowing for case data to be imported into documents at a keystroke. Management and statistical information can also be downloaded providing greater control of the work, accurate and informative statistics and closer monitoring of office standards and targets.

Electronic Communication

This is also an area that has been developed further. We are now able to conduct oral hearings by way of video conference. Our users are able to contact us via our email address: OSSCSC@Courtservice.gsi.gov.uk. We also use email to request files from the Appeal Service, which has proved to be a quicker and more efficient way of working, and we have undergone a trial period of receiving submissions from ACI electronically, which has been successful. A further trial is planned before considering whether the office is ready to receive electronic submissions from ACI as part of its normal day to day business.

7. Objectives

Over the coming year the office will continue to look at ways of further improving the level of service provided to it's internal and external customers through greater provision of information, this report being one example, and further improvement in workload performance.

Some of the areas targeted are listed below, some have begun to be addressed in the last year, and for this reason the over-arching objective must be to maintain the current level of performance and review the areas listed below to help achieve this if not better it.

- ◇ Review of the office standards
- ◇ Review of staffing levels.
- ◇ Learning and Development Days for staff including talks from outside agencies and visits to those offices who have a direct impact on the day to day work of OSSCSC. The aim here is to equip staff with greater knowledge of our external colleagues practices and procedures and therefore improve the quality of the service provided.
- ◇ Management and Leadership Training Days.
- ◇ Further review of the office structure to see if further changes need to be considered to enhance our effectiveness.
- ◇ Review of the statistical information provided. Assess need against requirement and ensure accuracy.
- ◇ Review our Quality Control Processes.

8. Conclusion

In recent years the Office of Social Security and Child Support Commissioners has seen much change. We have come a long way since the Parliamentary Select Committee report of 2001, when performance was deemed to be at an unacceptable level. Two years later and we are exceeding the expectations and targets set following that report.

We can confidently say that OSSCSC is moving forward, with the current team continuing to bring about improvements and seek imaginative solutions to the challenges they face.

This first Annual Report is one way of promoting our success and showing what we have achieved in the last two years.

The future brings further plans for improvement, and I am confident that we will build on the foundations that have been laid. With this in mind, I am already looking forward to producing next year's report.

Lesley Armes
Tribunal Manager

9. Contact Details

OSSCSC addresses

**5th Floor
Newspaper House
8 – 16 Great New Street
London EC4A 3NN**

**Harp House
83 Farringdon Street
London
EC4A 4DH**

**Telephone 020 7353 5145
Fax 020 7936 2171**

**23 Melville Street
Edinburgh
Scotland
EH3 7PW**

Telephone 0131 225 2201

**Customer Service Manager
Paul Farren
020 7454 4223**

**Web Officer
Damien Abbott
020 7454 4203**

**Work Experience Co-ordinator
Darren Mathura
020 7454 4229**

**Office Managers
Alex Pether Clare Zubler
020 7454 4222 020 7454 4224**

**Tribunal Manager
Lesley Armes
020 7454 4227**