



Open Lines

No. 11

**Letters sent to Members of Parliament in July 1992
by Government executive agencies
in reply to Parliamentary Questions**

with an introduction by

Paul Flynn MP

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August 1992

Introduction

by Paul Flynn, M.P.

With this issue, OPEN LINES ceases publication. It is appropriate, therefore, to take this opportunity of thanking all those who have contributed to its success; for it has, indeed, been successful, not only in restoring to the public domain a large amount of information which would otherwise have been virtually inaccessible, but also in helping to persuade those responsible that this information should in future be published in Hansard, as it always was in the past.

Those to whom thanks are due include the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust Ltd. whose grant covered most of the cost of issues 3-11; my research assistant, Tony Lynes, who combined the roles of typist, editor, publisher and distributor; members of both his family and mine who stuffed envelopes without pay;

Chris Sear and the staff of the Official Publications Library at the House of Commons who assiduously chased up missing letters from chief executives; Roger Ayres of A Print, Newport, Gwent, who printed each issue with amazing speed and efficiency; Bryan McAllister whose cartoon enlivens the cover of this issue; and, not least, my Parliamentary colleagues who provided constant encouragement and support and refused to allow the Government to continue to use the 'Next Steps' agencies as a means of undermining the constitutional role of Parliamentary Questions.

August 1992

Paul Flynn, M.P.
House of Commons

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Editorial note

As in previous issues, only letters from agencies in the fields of social security and employment are reproduced in the following pages. Those from other agencies, or excluded because they are concerned only with individuals' benefit entitlements, are listed in the Appendix.

In every case, unless otherwise stated, the main body of the letter and any attached tables are reproduced in full, only the formal opening and closing paragraphs being omitted.

An index to the 11 issues of OPEN LINES is published separately.

BENEFITS AGENCY

Cold weather payments

Mr Robert Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many households in Coventry, North-East qualify for payments under the cold weather payments scheme.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 2 July 1992:

Coventry North East constituency is served by the Coventry District Office. It is not possible to give an exact figure of the number of customers that would qualify for a Cold Weather Payment except at disproportionate cost. However, based on figures for those claiming Income Support in November 1991 it was estimated that approximately 18,700 customers claiming in the Coventry District may have qualified for a Cold Weather Payment had their area triggered.

Similar questions were asked by a number of other Members, who received similar replies from Mr Bichard. These are summarised below. In some cases the numbers qualifying include people living outside the constituency but within the area served by the office(s).

Date July	Member	Constituency	Office(s) *	Approx. no. qualifying
6	John Battle	Leeds West	Leeds North & Leeds South (D)	31,000
7	Dennis Canavan	Falkirk West	Forth Valley (D)	10,700
2	Harry Cohen	Leyton	Leytonstone & Stratford (B)	16,000
6	Maria Fyfe	Glasgow, Maryhill	Glasgow City & Springburn (D)	20,000
7	Norman Godman	Greenock & Port Glasgow	Clyde Coast & Cowal (D)	7,400
16	Roger Godsiff	Birmingham, Small Heath	Birmingham Chamberlain, Heartlands, North West & South West (D)	56,600
2	Eric Illsley	Barnsley	Barnsley East & West (B)	8,900
15	Adam Ingram	East Kilbride	East Kilbride (B)	2,600
8	Liz Lynne	Rochdale	Rochdale (B)	6,100
2	John McAllion	Dundee East	Dundee East (B)	5,100
6	Ian McCartney	Makerfield	Wigan & Leigh (D)	12,800
6	Gordon McMaster	Paisley South	Renfrew (D)	9,900
1	Alf Morris	Manchester, Wythenshawe	Wythenshawe (B)	6,000
2	Mike O'Brien	N Warwickshire	Nuneaton (B)	5,900
2	Peter Pike	Burnley	Burnley (D)	10,000
7	Joan Ruddock	Lewisham, Deptford	Lewisham & Brixton (D) & Crystal Palace (B)	29,800
9	Alex Salmond	Banff & Buchan	Inverness & Peterhead (B)	7,100
7	Gerry Steinberg	City of Durham	Durham (B)	3,000
8	Mike Watson	Glasgow Central	Glasgow City, Glasgow East, Laurieston & Springburn (D)	49,200

* D = District office B = Branch office

Business plan

Mr Robert Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many copies of the Benefits Agency business plan have been produced and circulated; and at what cost.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 2 July 1992:

Ten thousand (10,000) copies of the Business Plan have been produced with 6,000 circulated to date, at a cost of £26,000.

War pensioners

Mr Graham Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list all the countries where United Kingdom war pensioners are currently receiving a United Kingdom war pension or war widow's pension, showing separately the countries of the former Soviet Union and showing for each country the number of war pensioners.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 6 July 1992:

The Annex attached shows the number of war disablement pensioners, war widows and dependants who were receiving payment in other countries at the end of June 1992. It is not possible to show separate figures for each group.

There are three persons receiving pension in Russia; none in other countries of the former Soviet Union.

Annex

Country	Number	Country	Number
Andorra	6	Malta	246
Antilles	5	Mexico	6
Argentina	109	Middle East	11
Australia	6,606	Miscellaneous EEC	10
Austria	13	Miscellaneous other *	126
Bahamas	3	Monaco	3
Barbados	2	Namibia (SW Africa)	3
Belgium	59	Netherlands	39
Bermuda	5	New Zealand	1,215
Brazil	11	Nicaragua	5
British Virgin Islands	1	Nigeria	7
Canada	3,432	Norway	35
Cayman Islands	1	Oman	2
Chile	8	Portugal	26
Cuba	1	Puerto Rico	1
Cyprus	38	Qatar	1
Czechoslovakia	4	Republic of Sanaa	1
Denmark	53	Russia	3
Egypt	12	St Helena	2
Finland	1	St Lucia	2
France	244	Seychelles	1
French Guiana	1	Singapore	2
Germany (West)	273	Somalia	13
Ghana	1	South African Republic	790
Gibraltar	7	Spain	239
Greece	13	Swaziland	2
Guyana	2	Sweden	8
Hong Kong	13	Switzerland	40
Iceland	1	Tahiti & French Polynesia	1
India	33	Thailand	3
Indonesia	3	Trinidad	6
Irish Republic	1,483	Turkey	2
Israel	70	United Arab Emirates	4
Italy	79	United States of America	1,211
Jamaica	1	Uruguay	3
Kenya	19	Venezuela	3
Luxembourg	3	Yugoslavia	4
Malawi	1	Zambia	5
Malaysia	2	Zimbabwe	66

* "Miscellaneous Other" does not include any countries of the former Soviet Union.

Citizens charter

Mr Tony Banks: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what progress has been made on the application of the citizens charter to the operation of the Benefits Agency.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 8 July 1992:

One of the themes of the Citizen's Charter, which is reflected in our own Customer Charter, is that improvements in efficiency will lead to a better quality service. Our Customer Charter

contains national targets for the main benefit services. District offices will have equivalent local targets displayed in each outlet and published in local customer charter standard statements. All districts will have these by January 1993. The Annual Report for 1991-92, the Agency's first year, will show how the Agency has performed against its national targets and will be published in the autumn.

We have also set out our commitment to listen to our customers. The "Have Your Say" leaflet provides a simple and effective method for customers to say what they think of the service they receive. Correspondence addressed to the Customer Service Manager - one has been appointed in each District - will receive a reply within 7 days. Customer questionnaires are being produced to improve the way customer enquiries are handled by post, telephone and personal call at the office.

The report of the 1991 National Customer Survey, covering customer opinions on a range of service issues, was published on 19 June. The findings will be of great importance when planning services.

We know that many customers are dissatisfied with the conditions in public waiting areas. The Customer Charter gives an undertaking to arrange a private interview on request. Public areas of offices are being upgraded as funds allow, and customer views will be sought when plans are being made. Customers views are also being sought on opening hours and office locations.

We are encouraging openness and accountability. The Agency is implementing a policy of staff giving their name and for staff dealing with customers face to face to wear name badges. 12,800 badges have been ordered to date. Local consultation with unions and individual staff is taking place, and all staff should be wearing badges within 2 to 3 months.

Customer care training was introduced in August 1991. All Districts have a customer care training package which is being extensively used and which is being evaluated.

The Agency has been looking at how to make its services more accessible to those people with special needs, such as ethnic minorities and people with disabilities. For example, some leaflets are now available in seven languages. A further four languages will be used in some cases. We are also working closely with the Royal National Institutes for the Blind and the Deaf. The Benefit Enquiry Line has been set up to take claims for disability benefits over the telephone.

I hope you will agree that this represents very real progress towards achieving the aims set out in the Citizen's Charter - to treat customers courteously, to provide information about the benefits available to them and to handle their business promptly and efficiently. We do still have a long way to go, but by focusing on customers and continually seeking to simplify procedures I am confident that we can in time bring our standards up to those of the best.

Social fund loan repayments

Mr John Battle: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what percentage of income support recipients are now having deductions made from benefit as a result of paying back social fund loans (a) nationally, (b) regionally and (c) for each local benefits agency district.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 6 July 1992: Such information as is available as to the number of persons making repayments to the Social Fund includes a number of people making repayments who are not in receipt of Income Support. On this basis the national total of persons making

repayments was 594,642 as at 31 May 1992.

Information concerning numbers of Income Support recipients making repayments nationally, regionally or locally can only be obtained at a disproportionate cost.

Benefits service targets

Mr Hugh Bayley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what national targets for benefits services have been published since July; and what reports have been published by the Benefits Agency on how it performed against these targets.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 14 July 1992: Performance targets for benefit services are set each year and cover a wide range of issues including accuracy and the time taken to clear claims. Targets for 1992-93 were given on 10 March 1992 in answer to a Parliamentary Question from Jim Lester MP, Official Report, Volume 205, Columns 516 to 520. These were later published in the Benefits Agency's Business Plan for 1992-93; distributed to all Members in late June. No additional targets have been set or published since July.

At the end of each financial year the Agency will publish an Annual Report and Account detailing how the Agency has performed against its targets during that period. No report is due to be published on how the Agency has performed against its targets in 1992-93 until July/August 1993; the Annual Report on performance against targets for 1991-92 will be published later this year, in October.

Office opening hours

Mr Hugh Bayley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what percentage of benefits offices have adopted more flexible opening hours since July 1991.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 14 July 1992: Managers are encouraged to experiment with opening hours to provide a service more closely matched to customer needs. Like many high street stores and banks, almost all offices now open half an hour later one morning a week for staff training purposes. This provides an opportunity for staff to be brought up to date on issues at the same time, without interruptions from telephones and callers. I must stress that this half hour is used for training and communication, not as a closed period to catch up with work. Offices can stay open an extra half hour to compensate if that is what customers need. What is paramount is that service levels are not compromised, and I wrote to Managers last year expressly on this point.

A number of offices have taken local initiatives on late closing, for example to coincide with late night shopping. I hope we will be able to achieve this in the future in a large number of our districts as customer needs lead us. No comprehensive figures are currently available for this.

Attendance allowance and disability living allowance

Mr Richard Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the average length of time taken to consider applications for (a) attendance allowance and (b) disability living allowance; and what are the target times laid down by his Department.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 2 July 1992: [This letter is not reproduced here, since it adds nothing to the information given in letters replying to a number of questions on the same subject in June 1992, published in OPEN LINES No. 10.]

Newcastle offices

Mr Stephen Byers: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if he will provide an access road into his Department's new complex on Whitley Road, Benton, Newcastle from either Coach Lane or the coast road, Newcastle;

(2) what consultations took place with North Tyneside council concerning the siting of his Department's new complex on Whitley Road, Benton, Newcastle;

(3) what surveys were carried out into the traffic volume implications of the development of his Department's new complex at Whitley Road, Benton, Newcastle;

(4) what consideration was given to the safety of children attending St Bartholomew's primary school, Benton when the decision was made to site his Department's new complex at Whitley Road, Benton, Newcastle.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 6 July 1992:

I will answer each of your points in turn.

Provision of access road

Newcastle City Council Development Control Sub Committee are not prepared to allow either pedestrian or vehicular access to the Whitley Road complex from Coach Lane for two main reasons. Firstly there is a residential area in close proximity at Vicars Green and secondly Coach Lane has a blind bend to the right of the proposed access road which represented an unacceptable risk to road safety.

Access from the Coast Road was not feasible from the outset because of the distance (in excess of 1 mile) over land not owned by or available to DSS.

Site access was therefore restricted to that available from Whitley Road (A191) and as such came within the jurisdiction of North Tyneside Local Authority (NTLA). From the outset, North Shields Engineering Department (which is within the North Tyneside area) stated that there would be no objection to forming an access to the site from Whitley Road, but specified that the new access should be approximately 100 yards to the west of the existing T-junction with Station Road. DSS therefore agreed to fund a new junction, incorporating new traffic lights and islands completely in accordance with the wishes of NTLA's specifications.

Consultation with North Tyneside Council on siting of complex
North Tyneside Council have been fully involved and consulted since the feasibility study was commissioned. They did originally raise some queries with the Department of Environment and a Public Inquiry was called. However, prior to the Inquiry the North Tyneside Council withdrew any objections they had.

Surveys concerning traffic volume implications and safety of children attending St. Bartholomew's School

A firm of consultant engineers specialising in traffic matters were commissioned by DSS to advise on highway and traffic matters associated with the development.

The net result of the assessments made was that nominal increases in traffic could be expected at the junctions of Whitley Road with Station Road and Front Street with Coach Lane, but the increases at either of these junctions are less than the reduction at Four Lane Ends junction. In addition, evaluation demonstrated that the nominal increases would be absorbed by the substantial levels of spare capacity which already exists at each of these junctions.

I understand that St. Bartholomew's School was represented at the Public Inquiry and all the points raised were taken into account by the Independent Inquiry Inspector, appointed by

the Department of Environment.

After consideration of all the evidence, the Inspector found in favour of the development.

Hardship payments

Mr Jim Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many applications for special hardship payments to 16 and 17-year-olds have been made at each benefit office in Tyne and Wear in each year since the general right to benefit was withdrawn; and how many of these applications were successful.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 7 July 1992:

The complete range of information requested is not available except at disproportionate cost. This is because statistics prior to 1989 have now been destroyed. The attached table details the requested information since April 1989. This information has been supplied by the Severe Hardship Unit.

Severe hardship applications

April 1989 - March 1990

<i>District Office</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Successful</i>
Newcastle	532	380
North Durham	174	104
North Tyneside	57	23
South Tyneside	327	244
Wearside	129	76

April 1990 - March 1991

<i>District Office</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Successful</i>
Newcastle	764	570
North Durham	216	139
North Tyneside	108	66
South Tyneside	564	462
Wearside	253	161

April 1991 - March 1992

<i>District Office</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Successful</i>
Newcastle	935	777
North Durham	372	261
North Tyneside	307	234
South Tyneside	843	712
Wearside	434	355

Social fund loans to young people

Mr Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the administrative cost of making and recovering a social fund loan to a young person whose need for income support has been accepted by the hardship unit; and what would be the administrative cost of arranging for income support to be paid immediately in these circumstances.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 6 July 1992:

The estimated cost of making and recovering a Social Fund Crisis Loan to a young person whose need for Income Support has been accepted by the Hardship Unit is £28.66.

Income Support for people under pension age is paid in arrears. This is in line with the way wages and other benefits are paid. Payments in advance would not therefore be possible.

Disability living allowance

Mr Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many applications for the disability living allowance have been received by his Department to date; and if he will provide a breakdown by (a) the number and percentage of these that resulted in an award, (b) the number and percentage of these that were refused broken down by grounds of refusal and (c) the number and percentage of these that are awaiting a decision.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 13 July 1992:
I should explain that there are two categories of claims to DLA. Firstly there are applications from people who were not already in receipt of Attendance Allowance or Mobility Allowance when DLA was introduced. Secondly there are applications from people who were in receipt of one of these benefits but who may be entitled to an additional amount under the DLA entitlement rules. These latter applications are known as "top-up" claims.

The number of new DLA claims received to the end of June 1992 was nearly 200,000. To date, almost 44,000 (22%) resulted in an award of DLA. The number of top-up claims received to the end of June was more than 170,000 and, to date, over 37,000 of these have resulted in awards.

I am not yet in a position to provide the additional information you requested about the numbers and percentages of cases which (a) have been refused, and (b) are awaiting decision. I hope to be able to supply you with this information shortly and will of course be writing to you again.

Letter to Mr Paul Flynn from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 17 July 1992:

When I wrote to you on 13 July 1992 in reply to your recent Parliamentary Question I was not in a position to provide you with information about the number of Disability Living Allowance (DLA) cases (a) which had been refused and (b) which were awaiting decision.

I am pleased to say that this information is now available and the position at the end of June is as shown in the attached Annex.

Annex

New claims

Total refusals	31,000 representing 16% of all claims
Medical grounds	24,000 representing 12% of all claims
Lay grounds - age	7,000 representing 4% of all claims
Outstanding claims	125,000 representing 62% of all claims

Top-up claims

Total refusals	5,000 representing 3% of all claims
Medical grounds	5,000 representing 3% of all claims
Others: Total	4,000 * representing 2% of all claims
Outstanding claims	124,000 representing 73% of all claims

* This includes claims that have been (a) withdrawn, (b) defective and (c) otherwise disposed of - this term is used for miscellaneous cases which do not fit into other categories, for example where a customer has requested payment of one of the component parts on DLA which they are already receiving.

Mr Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many requests for reviews of disability living allowance have been received by his Department breaking these down by (a) numbers seeking a review of a decision to refuse benefit and (b) numbers seeking a review of the rate of benefit awarded; and if he will provide a breakdown of this total by (i) successful reviews, (ii) unsuccessful reviews and (iii) reviews not yet decided.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 13 July 1992:

Up to the 30 June 1992 a total of 2,110 applications for review of an award of DLA had been received and a total of 92 decisions had been made. 1,595 applications were received in the month of June itself.

I should explain that the statistical information available does not record whether the review is against a refusal of benefit because of a failure to satisfy the relevant disability criteria or against the rate of benefit awarded. Such information could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Of the 92 reviews determined five resulted in an increase in the amount of benefit payable; 57 resulted in the original award being maintained and one resulted in a reduction in benefit. The remaining 29 reviews relate to cases where benefit was not awarded because the customers failed to satisfy non-disability questions such as age and residence in Great Britain for example. Of these 29 reviews four original decisions were upheld and 25 overturned and therefore considered as successful although no information is held as to whether or not the disability criteria were subsequently satisfied in these cases and benefit awarded.

Mr Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many claims for disability living allowance included a report by an examining medical practitioner; and if he will break this down by (a) the number and percentage of successful claims, (b) the number and percentage of unsuccessful claims and (c) the number and percentage of cases where the claimant had already completed the self-assessment application form.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 13 July 1992:

The information requested is as follows:-

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Awards</i>	<i>Rejections</i>
<i>New claims</i>			
Number of claims			
with EMP evidence	9,114	5,764	3,350
Percentages		63%	37%
<i>Top-up claims</i>			
Number of claims			
with EMP evidence	6,817	6,061	756
Percentages		89%	11%

You also asked for information about the number and percentage of cases where a self-assessment application form had been completed. This information is not routinely collected and can only be provided at disproportionate cost. However, the number of new claims decided purely on the statement of disability is as follows:-

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Awards</i>	<i>Rejections</i>
<i>New claims</i>			
Statement of disability evidence	33,706	23,472	10,234
Percentages		70%	30%

You also asked for information about the number and percentage of cases where the customer had already completed the self-assessment application form. This information is also not routinely collected and could only be provided at disproportionate cost. However, the number of top-up claims which have been decided purely on the statement of disability is as follows:-

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Awards</i>	<i>Rejections</i>
<i>Top-up claims</i>			
Statement of disability evidence	34,129	30,208	3,921
Percentages		89%	11%

Mr Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is his Department's policy regarding the notification of income support, housing benefit and community charge departments when someone is awarded the disability living allowance; and whether such notification distinguishes between the mobility and care component and the rate of these components, respectively.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 13 July 1992:
All awards of DLA are notified to the Agency's District Offices who will check whether Income Support is in payment, and if so, will consider whether any increase by way of disability premium

is appropriate. These notifications indicate the period of the award and the rate of each component awarded.

As regards Housing Benefit and the Community Charge, the Benefits Agency does not notify local authorities of DLA awards. However, information notes issued to DLA beneficiaries does indicate that help may be available from the local council with paying rent in the form of Housing Benefit. Customers are advised to contact their local council for more information. The information notes also indicate that they may be able to get help towards paying the community charge and to contact the local council for more information.

Notifications issued to people awarded DLA show the period of the award and the rate of each component.

I should explain that although the front information page in DLA order books does not currently contain a full breakdown of the rates of each component awarded, a full breakdown will be included in order books from October 1992.

Mr Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people claiming the disability living allowance had help completing their claim forms either (a) from the telephone claims completion service of a regional disability benefits centre or (b) from his Department's visiting service.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 13 July 1992: Since the launch of the benefit on 3 February until 3 July, approximately 50,000 claims have been completed with the assistance of telephone calls and over 800 visits have been made by the Forms Completion Service staff in the Disability Benefit Centres.

Disability working allowance

Mr Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many applications for the disability working allowance have been received by his Department to date; and if he will provide a breakdown by (a) the number and percentage of these that resulted in an award, (b) the number and percentage of these that were refused and (c) the number and percentage of these that are awaiting a decision;

(2) if he will provide a breakdown by number and percentage of the total number of claims for disability working allowance received by his Department that were refused on the grounds that (a) the claimant was not in remunerative work, (b) the claimant's income was above the limit, (c) the claimant was not in receipt of a qualifying benefit, (d) the claimant was receiving family credit, (e) the joint income of the claimant and his or her partner exceeded the limit, (f) the claimant was working less than 16 hours a week or (g) for other reasons.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 13 July 1992 [see also Mr Bichard's letter of 27 July, below, correcting the percentages in the first paragraph]:

Up to and including 3 July 1992, 13,813 claims for DWA have been received. Only 1,128, representing 8% of all claims which have been decided, have been successful. However, 11,640, representing 84% of all claims which have been decided have been unsuccessful. There are 1,045 claims, representing 8% of total claims received, still awaiting a decision. The qualifying conditions for the benefit are set out fully in the claim pack and other publicity materials. The Department has commissioned research to find out why such a large proportion of claims are from people who clearly do not meet these conditions.

Of the DWA claims which have been unsuccessful 6,989, 60% were unsuccessful because either the customer was not working at the date DWA was claimed or was not working 16

hours a week or more. It is not possible to separate this figure into each category. Of the total unsuccessful claims 1,046, 9% were refused on the grounds that income was above the limit. This figure includes single persons, lone parents and couples. The number that were not in receipt of a qualifying benefit totals 2,975, 26%. Those already in receipt of Family Credit when claiming DWA were 262, 2%. There were 368 other unsuccessful DWA claims for other reasons.

Letter to Mr Paul Flynn from Mr M Bichard, 27 July 1992: I wrote to you on 13 July about Disability Working Allowance (DWA).

I am sorry that the percentages quoted in the second paragraph [the first paragraph quoted above] of my letter about the number of DWA claims decided which had been successful or unsuccessful, were incorrect. The percentages were based on the total number of claims received by 3 July 1992 (13,813), which included 1,045 (8%) still awaiting a decision, rather than the number of claims decided by 3 July (12,768). Of course the correct information is that 1,128 claims, representing 9% of all claims decided by 3 July have been successful, while 11,640 claims, representing 91% of all those decided, have been unsuccessful. I hope this clarifies the position.

Elderly people

Mr Mike Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what representations he has received on the effects on elderly people receiving income support of the recent letter circulated by the Benefits Agency saying that they will lose their support grant if they fail to give their consent to the agency's requirements; and if he will make a statement.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 15 July 1992: I assume that the letter to which you referred is the form MI12 used prior to the current arrangements to ensure the correct payment of mortgage interest with Income Support. No representations have been received concerning the elderly and the procedures regarding this form.

From the customer's point of view and in the interests of the correct use of public funds, it is incumbent on the Agency to ensure that the right level of benefit is in payment and that this is related to the correct information. For this reason, reviews are carried out periodically and, where questions concerning entitlement or payment arise, the Secretary of State may suspend payment (wholly or in part) until these are resolved.

Such action is not taken lightly and, for example in a case involving mortgage interest, would be effected only when continued payment in full could give rise to an overpayment.

Against this background, the then form MI12 was issued to obtain details of mortgage interest outstanding to facilitate the correct assessment of Income Support. New arrangements (introduced on 25 May 1992 under the Social Security Mortgage Interest Payments Act and Claims and Payments Regulations) now provide for the information to be obtained directly from mortgage lenders rather than customers and for payments to be made directly to the lenders. There is, however, a minority of cases in which lenders are not included in the new arrangements and in these it will be for the customers to provide the required information to the Agency and to repay the lender as before.

Disability living allowance

Letter to Mr Neil Gerrard from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 9 July 1992:

I wrote to you on 24 June [*OPEN LINES* No. 10, page 7] in reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions to the Secretary of State for Social Security concerning Disability Living Allowance (DLA).

I am sorry that incorrect information was provided about the number of appeals to Disability Appeal Tribunals (DATs) which have been registered. Although the Agency's statistics showed that 12 cases had been registered by 31 May 1992 there had in fact been no such appeals registered. The 12 cases recorded related to appeals to Medical Appeal Tribunals, not DATs and, due to incorrect recording these appeared in the statistics. Action is currently being taken to ensure the statistics are amended and that further errors do not occur.

Attendance allowance

Sir John Hannam: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what is the date of the longest outstanding new claim for attendance allowance;

(2) how many new claims for attendance allowance, made before April 1992, are outstanding; and when it is expected that they will be decided;

(3) how many applications for review of attendance allowance, made before April 1992, are outstanding; and what is the date of the longest outstanding application for review.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 8 July 1992:

I should explain that on 6 April 1992, all outstanding claims to Mobility Allowance (MobA) and AA (for those aged under 65) fell to be dealt with under the new Disability Living Allowance (DLA) rules. AA claims for people over 65 with care or attendance needs continued to be treated as claims to AA. With this in mind, I have provided a picture of outstanding cases for both AA and DLA.

The Benefits Agency introduced a standard performance measure across benefits some time ago. This is expressed in terms of clearance targets. For AA, the current clearance target is for 60% of claims to be cleared within 35 days and for DLA 60% in 30 days.

Taking new claims first, we always knew that a major effort would be required to get the new arrangements up and running. Indeed the success of the advertising campaign and other policy initiatives surrounding the launch of the new disability benefits has attracted a much larger number of applications in the early stages than was expected. This has resulted in higher than normal numbers of outstanding claims at the Disability Benefit Centres. At the end of June, these totals stood at around 153,000 AA claims and 125,000 DLA claims.

Turning now to reviews, approximately 16,000 outstanding AA reviews from people under 65 were transferred to the Disability Living Allowance Unit (DLAU). However, I should explain that statistics within the DLAU include former MobA cases and new work received since 6 April. Information about those AA cases received before April which are still outstanding is not available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. The Attendance Allowance Unit currently has 11,265 reviews which were received prior to April from people over the age of 65.

Information about the longest outstanding claims is not available in the format you have requested and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost, but it is clear from the number of outstanding applications, both for new claims and review applications, that a significant proportion have been awaiting a decision for longer than our target clearance times.

I can assure you that firm actions are being taken to reduce the backlog and to significantly improve clearance times. In total, some 2,000 staff have been trained to deal with the new benefits

at Blackpool and the 10 Disability Benefit Centres around the country and you will have seen from the letter I sent to all Members on 6 July that extra staff have now been deployed and overtime is also being worked to a considerable extent. We are also reviewing our working practices to ensure the most efficient and effective procedures are in place, consistent with our customer's needs. These measures are already beginning to bear fruit with new claims being cleared at a rate of around 6,200 a week, and "top-up" claims at 5,400 per week, as opposed to the equivalent figures for last month, which were 4,200 and 3,300 respectively. As I have made clear, however, I am by no means complacent about the length of time our customers are having to wait for their claims to be determined and I am personally monitoring the situation very closely.

Disability working allowance

Sir John Hannam: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many applications for disability working allowance have been received; how this compares with the anticipated take up; what is the success rate; and how long it is taking for new claims to be decided.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 8 July 1992:

Up to and including 30 June 1992, just over 13,500 claims for DWA had been received. Only about 9% of all claims which have been decided have been successful. The qualifying conditions for the benefit are set out fully in the claim pack and other publicity materials. The Department has commissioned research to find out why such a large proportion of claims are from people who clearly do not meet these conditions.

When DWA was being developed estimates had to be made of the number of people who might claim. However, as Ministers made clear at the time, these were inevitably speculative. They also made it clear that it would take some time for the case load to reach the projected level of 50,000 recipients.

The average time taken to decide new claims in June 1992 was 3.7 days for customers who had recently taken up employment, 5.9 days for employed customers and 10.3 days for self employed customers.

Turner Village Hospital

Mr David Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps he has taken to satisfy himself that income support payments made towards the cost of residential care provided by the Ling Trust in Essex for former residents of Turner Village mental handicap hospital were made in accordance with regulations allowing such payments to be made only in circumstances where the care provider is independent of a health authority.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 10 July 1992:

A number of customers have moved from Turner Village Mental Handicap Hospital and are receiving the appropriate level of Income Support. The Adjudication Officer has assessed those claims in accordance with the regulations, based on information supplied on the individual claim forms.

So far as we are aware Ling Trust is independent of the Health Authority. However, should you have information to suggest otherwise, which can be forwarded to me, I would be happy to look at the relevant claims again to see if the new information affects the benefit in payment.

If it is an individual case which is causing you concern, please let me know and I will be happy to look into it.

A copy of this letter is being sent to Iain Sproat MP and Bernard Jenkin MP whose constituencies contain Ling Trust properties.

Disability living allowance

Mrs Helen Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what is the target maximum time within which a claim for disability living allowance should be processed; (2) what is the average length of time taken by the Benefits Agency to process a claim for disability living allowance; (3) what compensation can be claimed by applicants for disability living allowance, where the processing of (a) their claim or (b) successful appeal against a decision by the Benefits Agency on their claim has taken an excessive period of time.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 2 July 1992:

[Parts of this letter are omitted, since they repeat information given in letters replying to a number of questions on the same subject in June 1992, published in OPEN LINES No. 10.]

Compensation is only payable where, because of a clear and unambiguous Departmental error, benefit has been delayed unduly. Departmental error will not normally be accepted where the machinery for dealing with claims or adjudication was working correctly.

I am personally monitoring the situation very closely and I can assure you that active steps are being taken to ensure that people do not wait longer than absolutely necessary for decision on their claim. Benefits Agency staff are taking positive action to minimise delays and to ensure that claims and appeals are processed effectively and as quickly as possible. All awards will be fully backdated as appropriate so there is no question of any customer losing money.

Disability allowances: Wales

Mr Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many applications have been submitted to date for (a) disability working allowance and (b) disability living allowance from claimants in Wales; and, of these claims, how many have been refused since the introduction of the allowances.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 13 July 1992:

For DLA, I should explain that there are two categories of claims. Firstly there are applications from people who were not already in receipt of Attendance Allowance or Mobility Allowance when DLA was introduced. Secondly there are applications from people who were in receipt of one of these benefits but who may be entitled to an additional amount under the DLA entitlement rules. These latter applications are known as "top-up" claims.

New claims for DLA are administered by ten Disability Benefit Centres (DBC) around the country. These centres service large areas which include conurbations and normally it is not possible to provide information for a specific area. During the first few months of live running, new claims were dealt with at the location where they were initially received, whether or not the customer lived in the "catchment area" for that centre. However it was considered that claims could be administered more efficiently by the DBC which deals with the area in which the customer resides and recently, procedures for dealing with new claims have been amended in order that all future claims will be dealt with in this way.

The DBC in Cardiff only administers claims for customers who live in Wales. Initially Cardiff DBC may have processed a small number of claims from people outside Wales, and similarly claims from Wales may have been dealt with elsewhere. It is not possible to identify how many of these claims have been processed at another DBC but in the five months since the launch of the benefit Cardiff has received over 16,000 claims for

DLA of which some 2,400 were not entitled to the benefit.

All "top-up" claims are administered by our Claims Conversion Unit based at Preston. The information on numbers of "top-up" claims received from people in Wales is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

For DWA the information you have requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. This is because DWA claims are administered centrally by the DWA Unit at Preston. In order to identify those claims from people living in Wales it would be necessary to initiate a clerical search of all DWA claims received so far.

Disability living allowance

Mr Archie Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the current situation governing arrangements for processing claims for disability living allowance.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 6 July 1992:

[Parts of this letter are omitted, since they repeat information given in letters replying to a number of questions on the same subject in June 1992, published in OPEN LINES No. 10.]

In the first five months of live operation nearly 200,000 new claims were registered and approaching 44,000 awards made. Over the same period over 170,000 "top-up" claims were also registered.

..... We have approaching 280,000 new claims for DLA and Attendance Allowance being processed in the Disability Benefit Centres and over 120,000 "top-up" claims at Blackpool.

There has been a continued acceleration in the clearance rates, which is shown by the average weekly clearance rates for new claims of approaching 6,200 in June compared with 2,900 in March. "Top-up" claims were cleared at an average weekly rate of nearly 5,400 which is significantly higher than the average weekly clearance rate in May. We expect this trend to continue as a result of the increasing expertise of the staff involved and the other measures we have taken. But as I explained in my earlier letter to you of 16 June, I am by no means complacent about the number of applications still to be processed and we are currently looking at still further ways of clearing the backlog even more quickly.

I also mentioned in my earlier letter to you the Central Enquiry Handling Service we have installed at Blackpool to provide easier telephone access for our customers. I do accept, however, that there are real difficulties, in view of the increasing number of calls, in getting through the main switchboard. We are currently urgently reviewing the problems of access by telephone and hope to see real improvements in the near future.

Mr Archie Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the average time for dealing with new claims for disability living allowance; how many claims are currently being processed; how many are waiting to be processed; and how long he estimates it will take for the current claims to be cleared.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 6 July 1992:

[Parts of this letter are omitted, since they repeat information given in letters replying to a number of questions on the same subject in June 1992, published in OPEN LINES No. 10.]

At 1 June, there were some 114,000 new claims to DLA outstanding, with a further 137,000 "top-up" claims outstanding.

..... it is not possible to say precisely how long it will take for current claims to be cleared

Social fund: North Tees district

Mr Peter Mandelson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many grants and awards have been refused to applicants as a result of the £4,000 underpayment of social fund moneys to the North Tees district social fund which was a product of a computer error; and if he will instruct social fund officers to reconsider these refusals in the light of these budget errors.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 9 July 1992:

The grants allocation for North Tees District was recently increased by £4,454. This represents a change of around 1% and did not result in any alteration to local guidance on the level of priority being met. No grants have been refused as a result of the error made in the incorrect initial allocation.

Income support: severe hardship

Mr Henry McLeish: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many young people received severe hardship benefit in each of the standard regions, including Scotland and in total, in each month since January 1991.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 6 July 1992:

The complete range of information requested is only available at disproportionate cost. This is because statistics relating to severe hardship show the number of applications rather than the number of individuals who have claimed.

The relevant figures giving the number of successful applications are in the Appendix attached.

Appendix: Successful hardship applications

Month	Scotland	North East	North West	Midlands	Wales & S West	London North	London South	National total
Jan 91	742	511	331	240	236	255	225	2,540
Feb 91	787	525	313	285	283	279	239	2,711
Mar 91	786	520	343	262	308	284	296	2,799
Apr 91	812	454	320	254	318	271	290	2,719
May 91	1,054	622	419	367	393	341	391	3,587
Jun 91	960	608	441	379	417	352	333	3,490
Jul 91	1,014	793	543	554	587	477	508	4,476
Aug 91	1,064	775	477	536	510	428	452	4,242
Sep 91	927	738	517	547	558	475	539	4,301
Oct 91	1,106	812	555	550	549	509	532	4,613
Nov 91	940	757	515	558	591	451	505	4,317
Dec 91	791	584	406	468	446	365	382	3,442
Jan 92	1,386	1,204	918	980	883	725	812	6,908
Feb 92	1,337	985	790	879	780	675	741	6,187
Mar 92	1,363	1,008	934	876	814	736	818	6,549
Apr 92	1,669	1,020	918	888	848	730	708	6,781
May 92	1,552	983	942	909	784	698	749	6,617

Disability benefit claims: processing times

Letter to Mr Alf Morris from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 9 July 1992:

I wrote to you on 12 May [*OPEN LINES* No. 9, pages 1-2] in reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions

Unfortunately, the figures showing the number of AA claims made were incomplete. This was due to the fact that the number of claims under the Special Rules provisions were omitted from the figures provided.

The first quarter of this year has in fact seen an increase in the number of AA claims made of some 54,000, which represents an increase of 41% over the same period last year.

Disability benefits: reviews

Mr John Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what current delays there are in requests for reviews of attendance allowance, mobility allowance and disability allowance; and what the position was 12 months ago.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 2 July 1992:

It may be helpful if I explain a little about the changes which took place following the introduction of DLA, and its new adjudication structure from 6 April 1992. At that date, all outstanding AA reviews and MobA appeals fell to be dealt with under the new adjudication structure. Generally speaking this meant that cases previously for determination by medical adjudicating authorities - the Attendance Allowance Board, MobA Medical Boards, and Medical Appeal Tribunals - were transferred to lay adjudicating authorities for determination.

I mention this by way of explanation that it is not possible to

make a direct comparison between current performance and that which obtained 12 months ago.

Perhaps I can now turn to the three specific benefits for which you seek comparative information.

On Mobility Allowance, those awards which were subject to review were very few in number, and related only to awards where an improvement in the customer's medical condition was reported. Statistics relating to this small number of cases were not maintained. However, the MobA clearance times relating to appeals to a Medical Board - equivalent to a review under the new adjudication structure applying to DLA - averaged 53 working days in May 1991. Since MobA (and its adjudication structure) ceased to exist on 6 April 1992, there is no comparable current performance data.

On AA there are currently 31,000 review requests outstanding, compared with 28,000 a year ago. However, the former figure relates to the revised AA scheme - that is persons aged over 65, whereas the figure of 28,000 included people under 65 also. I should mention that during 1991/92, intake increased by 26% compared with 1990/91.

On DLA, which was introduced on 6 April, there is obviously no historical data. Moreover, the number of reviews applications received so far is less than 1,000 and hence too low for meaningful information on clearance times.

As I have already indicated, the introduction of DLA meant that all outstanding appeals and reviews in respect of MobA customers, and those AA customers under 65 were transferred to the DLA unit for processing. This involved some 26,000 cases at various stages of adjudication. In addition, reviews and appeals against old MobA and AA decisions have been received

at the rate of about 2,500 a week since 6 April.

With such a large transfer of work to a completely new adjudication system, it is perhaps not surprising that some pre 6 April 1992 cases are still being processed. However, I am by no means complacent about this, and I can assure you that we are taking urgent action to review our procedures and we have taken on extra staff to expedite clearance of these outstanding reviews and appeals.

Port Talbot office

Mr John Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will quantify the savings arising from the transfer of processing staff from his Port Talbot office to Bridgend for each of the next three years.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 14 July 1992: The organisational restructuring of the Ogwr Afan Nedd District of the Benefits Agency will secure more economic processing of benefit claims and will allow for the surrender of surplus accommodation. The process of reorganising the District is expected to take two years but the timing of the various changes has still to be finalised. In addition, the District's resources for the next three years have not yet been determined, so it has not been possible to quantify the savings as you requested.

Concentration of resources on two sites and consequent reductions in administration costs will allow deployment of additional staff to provide improved advice and information services for the customers of the District.

Full implementation will see significant increases in the number of staff engaged on delivering direct customer services at Neath and Bridgend, putting the level of service in those offices on a par with that now provided at Port Talbot.

Additionally, the opportunity will be taken to extend direct customer services into those more remote areas of the District which have, traditionally, proved difficult to serve.

The purpose of the exercise is to secure a more efficient use of resources available. Savings achieved will be reinvested to improve customer services across the District as a whole.

Retired people: Waveney

Mr David Porter: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment his Department has made of the findings of the 1991 census by the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys into the numbers of retired people in Waveney and their proportion to the total population of Waveney compared with 1981; and what changes he expects to make in delivery of his Department's service as a consequence.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 6 July 1992: The BA uses a work measurement system designed to match staffing resources to requirements. One of the factors used in distributing the amount of staffing resources needed to carry out the work of the BA is socio-economic data obtained from the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS).

It has not yet been possible to carry out any analysis of the information collected during the 1991 Census as the data so far available from OPCS is insufficient for the Benefits Agency's needs and we are currently using up-dated 1981 Census information. As soon as sufficient 1991 Census data becomes available a detailed analysis will be undertaken and the results of this analysis will be taken into account in determining future staffing resources.

Until this analysis has been completed it is not possible to say whether the 1991 census data will provide information which

suggests that the BA needs to change its present arrangements for the provision of services to its customers who are retired.

Post Office payments

Mr William Powell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is his latest estimate of the number of persons receiving payment of child benefit through the Post Office.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 14 July 1992: On 24 June 1992, the number of people receiving Child Benefit through order books payable at the Post Office was about 5.4 million, based on a 5% sample of Child Benefit computer records.

Mr William Powell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is his latest estimate of the number of pensioners receiving their pensions through the Post Office.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 14 July 1992: The full information you requested is not readily available centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

However, figures are available to show the number of customers in receipt of Retirement Pension or Widow's Benefit paid weekly by order book through the Post Office. The latest available figures show that, in December 1991, 6,463,075 beneficiaries were paid in this way.

This figure does not include pensioners who were in receipt of Income Support in addition to their Retirement Pension or Widow's Benefit. It is known that, in May 1992, 1,480,809 people aged over 60 were in receipt of Income Support and paid by order book through the Post Office. However, the number of pensioners included in this figure is not readily available.

Disability benefits: reviews

Ms Dawn Primarolo: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what is the Government's target for the length of time to process reviews of claims for (a) mobility allowance, (b) attendance allowance, (c) attendance allowance on grounds of terminal illness, (d) disability living allowance and (e) disability living allowance including a claim for the highest rate of care component on grounds of terminal illness; and if he will make a statement;

(2) if sufficient officers have been employed during the last six months to handle reviews of claims for attendance allowance in order to meet the Government's targets for processing reviews; and if he will make a statement.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 3 July 1992: It may be helpful if I begin by explaining a little about the changes which took place following the introduction of DLA, and its new adjudication structure, from 6 April 1992. At that date, all outstanding AA and MobA reviews fell to be dealt with under the new adjudication structure. AA Reviews in respect of people under 65 and all outstanding MobA cases were transferred to the DLA Unit, as any awards spanning 6 April would automatically become payments of DLA at that time. Cases in respect of people aged 65 or over were retained within the AA Unit for processing.

Targets for the processing of reviews of claims to MobA are no longer appropriate, as I have outlined above, the benefit - and its adjudication structure - ceased to exist from 6 April. For reviews of AA, the Benefits Agency's targets are to clear 60% of cases in 61 days and 95% in 81 days. For DLA the comparable figures are 60% in 55 days and 95% in 75 days. There are no specific published target times for dealing with applications for

review made under the Special Provisions for the terminally ill. These cases are however afforded the highest priority at all stages of processing.

You also asked whether the number of officers employed during the last six months was sufficient to handle reviews of claims within the Government's target times. In the months prior to April, the AA Unit was heavily involved in the transition of work to the DLA Unit. This involved the development of new procedures and subsequent training of staff. I should also mention that during 1991/92, intake of reviews increased by 26% compared with the previous year. This coupled with the changes which have taken place, have represented a significant challenge to the AA Unit.

From April 1992, the new targets shown above, became effective. In April and May I am happy to say the Unit exceeded its targets, with 81% and 78% of cases being cleared within the prescribed 61 days. However, I believe it is still too early to draw any meaningful conclusions from these statistics, and some levelling of performance is to be expected over the coming months as older cases are cleared through the system.

Some 26,000 cases at various stages of adjudication were transferred to the DLA Unit at 6 April. On the AA Unit, there are currently around 31,000 reviews outstanding for people aged over 65. With such a large transfer of work to a completely new adjudication system, I am sure you will appreciate that there will inevitably be some administrative problems in the early stages until staff become more familiar with the new criteria and working practices. Under the circumstances therefore, some cases are taking longer to process than we would have liked.

I can assure you that active steps are being taken to reduce the backlog and to significantly improve clearance times. Extra staff are now being deployed and overtime is being worked to a considerable extent. We are also reviewing our working practices, to ensure the most efficient and effective procedures are in place consistent with our customers needs. I am personally monitoring the situation very closely.

Compensation for delay

Ms Dawn Primarolo: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what rights to compensation or redress do claimants have whose claims or review applications have not been processed within the Government's target periods.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 8 July 1992:

Compensation is only payable where, because of a clear and unambiguous Departmental error, benefit has been delayed unduly. Departmental error will not normally be accepted where the machinery for dealing with claims or adjudication was working correctly. No one will lose benefit because of any delay.

Leeds benefit offices

Mr Martin Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he has yet received a report from the chief executive of the Benefits Agency, into his fact-finding tour of Leeds benefit offices; if a copy of the report will be placed in the Library; and if he will make a statement.

Letter from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 9 July 1992:

As part of my programme of visiting staff throughout the Benefits Agency I visited Leeds Disability Benefits Centre on 29 May. Each year I would expect to visit some 30 to 40 sites covering the range of activities, to see the agency in operation, to hear from staff of the initiatives that have been taken in their

work areas, to hear their concerns, and to seek their views on the way in which I want to see the agency develop. The visit to this office was reported on the BBC2 'Money Programme' broadcast on Sunday 21 June.

The Leeds Disability Benefits Centre has been set up relatively recently, to manage the initial processing of the new disability benefits, Disability Living Allowance and Disability Working Allowance. My visit gave me the opportunity to see at first hand the overwhelming response to the publicity campaign that had accompanied the introduction of the benefits and to gain staff opinions about some of the new methods of working that we were using.

As with any of my visits I met members of the management team and a substantial number of other staff, both medical and lay staff, either individually or in groups. I was impressed by their commitment to give a good service to our customers but also recognised their inevitable frustration that the extremely high levels of take-up were preventing them giving as speedy a service as either they or I would have ideally liked.

I was able to encourage them with a number of steps which were about to be taken to hasten the clearance of the backlog of claims and was able to sound out the feasibility of some operational improvements which had been suggested elsewhere. Based on their comments I was better informed to consider the introduction of further measures to enable the agency to overcome the initial peak of claims - an initial peak which although larger in size than anticipated had always been an expected feature of the introduction of two new benefits without recourse to phasing.

No formal report is made to the Secretary of State about any of my field visits. Information about the targets set by the Secretary of State are contained in our Business Plan, a copy of which I sent to all Members recently. The Agency's performance against the 1991-92 Secretary of State targets will be set out in our Annual report to be published later this year.

Disability living allowance

Letter to Mr Iain Sproat from Mr M Bichard, Chief Executive, 15 July 1992:

I understand you recently contacted the office of the Minister of State for Social Security and Disabled People concerning my reply, dated 18 June 1992, to your Parliamentary Question asking what steps are being taken to improve the speed and efficiency of dealing with claims for, and appeals against decisions on, Disability Living Allowances. [*See OPEN LINES No. 10, page 13.*]

I have to say at the outset that it certainly was not my intention to misrepresent in any way the existing situation concerning the build up of claims for Disability Living Allowance (DLA) and if a wrong impression has been given then I am indeed sorry.

I had hoped that the references in my letter to the very large number of claims received, the ensuing backlog and the deployment of extra staff and overtime would have made clear the considerable difficulties to be overcome and my personal commitment to achieving speedy solutions.

I regret to say however that incorrect information was provided about the number of appeals to Disability Appeal Tribunals (DATs) which have been registered. Although the Agency's statistics showed that there had been only a small number of appeals registered during the first 4 months there had in fact been no such appeals. The small number recorded related to appeals to Medical Appeal Tribunals rather than DATs and, due to incorrect recording these appeared in the statistics. Action is

EMPLOYMENT SERVICE

One-stop offices

Mr Hugh Bayley: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment what percentage of the population was served by an Employment Service one-stop shop; and what percentage was served by separate employment and benefit offices at 1 April.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 14 July 1992: We are working progressively to bring Jobcentre and Benefit Office services together under one roof. This network will provide a new and improved one-stop service offering the full range of ES services to help people back to work. It is expected that this will be completed by the mid 1990s when there will be a network of some 1,100-1,200 offices.

By 1 April 1992 we had opened 666 of these new style Jobcentres. Although we cannot say what percentage of the national population they serve we do know that they provide an integrated service to some 56% of our unemployed clients. The remaining 44% are served by our separate networks of benefit offices and Jobcentres.

List of services

Mr Hugh Bayley: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment what proportion of Employment Service local offices displayed an up-to-date list of all services offered by their office on 1 April.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 14 July 1992: As part of the Jobseeker's Charter, which was introduced nationally in January 1992, we have reviewed the clarity and availability of information on client services. Since February 1992 all my local offices have displayed a poster and "menu board" setting out the full range of our services available locally. These services include help with getting a job and preparing for work, as well as the payment of unemployment benefit. Additionally, the leaflet "Just the Job" is freely available in all our offices and provides more detailed information on our programmes and services.

Freephone services

Mr Hugh Bayley: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment what percentage of local offices offered freephone services for job seekers on 1 April.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 14 July 1992: Unfortunately I am unable to answer your question fully since we do not hold information centrally on the extent to which our offices provide freephone facilities to jobseekers.

However, my local managers are responsible for developing appropriate services to meet local needs and some have introduced freephone facilities. In the more rural areas, for example, some Jobcentres provide a 0800 Freephone number which allows jobseekers who have difficulty visiting the office, to get up to date information about job vacancies and benefit matters. In addition, all our Jobclubs provide their members access to telephones free of charge so that they can contact employers about vacancies.

Disabled people: Chesham and Amersham

Mrs Cheryl Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment what is the total number of registered disabled people in the Chesham and Amersham constituency for the most recent date for which figures are available.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 6 July 1992: The total number of people registered as disabled, in Chesham and Amersham, under the Disabled Persons (Employment) Act 1944, as at 17 April 1992, was 601. The statistics are collected according to Employment Service local office boundaries which may not coincide exactly with constituency boundaries.

The term "registered disabled people" applies to those who have chosen to register under the Disabled Persons (Employment) Act 1944. People with disabilities are encouraged to register under the Act but registration is voluntary and the total number of people with disabilities who choose to register as such is steadily decreasing. The number of registered disabled people is therefore not an accurate indication of all people with disabilities.

Stourbridge jobcentre

Mr Warren Hawksley: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment (1) when her Department first considered building a new jobcentre and benefits office in Coventry Street, Stourbridge; when it was decided not to go ahead with the scheme; what was the estimate of the cost of the scheme; how much had been spent by her Department and the Property Services Agency in preparing the scheme; and what was the proposed date of opening of the centre;

(2) when her Department considered building a new jobcentre and benefits office at Scotland House, Stourbridge; how much it will cost; how much area it will take up; and when it will be ready to open.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 14 July 1992: A development on the Coventry Street site was first considered in July 1989. However, in March 1991 the space requirement increased whereupon the developer *said that he could* provide the extra accommodation needed to bring the usable area up to the necessary 12,348 sq ft by converting to office use part of the scheme originally intended for retail. The total proposed rental was £152,500 pa. This, however, was based on a greatly reduced net area when it transpired, as late as December 1991, that the developer could provide no more than 10,750 sq ft. Costs of approximately £22,000 had by this stage been incurred by the Employment Service and Property Holdings. It had been hoped that the new Jobcentre would open to the public in Spring 1993.

When it became clear, after further discussions with the developer, that a building of 12,348 sq ft could not be developed on the site other options were considered including Scotland House, a recently vacated Crown building. In April 1992 it was decided to proceed with redevelopment of Scotland House which will provide 15,500 sq ft, and thus accommodate not only all the Department's requirements, but also a small Benefits Agency office. As this project is still subject to negotiation the costs are commercial in confidence at this stage. However, it is already clear that the project will be significantly cheaper to the taxpayer than Coventry Street. It is expected to open in Spring 1994.

renewal contracts the aim is to establish individually tailored programmes that concentrate on the interventions necessary to get a person back to work. These could range from a few days to several weeks in length. This sort of timescale ensures that a clear focus is kept on the principal objective of preparing people for the final stages of entering work or taking up vocational training.

Regional offices

Mr Alan Milburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment if she will provide a table of expenditure showing the cost of running each regional office of the Employment Service aggregated by region, with Greater London shown as a separate region and excluding the funding programmes operated by the offices for each year from 1987-88 (a) at current prices and (b) at 1987-88 prices.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 7 July 1992: The enclosed table of expenditure shows the administrative cost of running each Employment Service region for each year from 1988/89 to 1991/92. The figures are shown (a) at current prices (ie the prices at the time) and (b) at 1988/89 prices.

It is not possible to identify separately the costs of running each regional office, except at disproportionate cost. The figures, therefore show the cost of running each region as a whole (including Employment Service area and local offices) for the years in question. The figures exclude the funding of programmes operated by the regions.

Figures for 1987/88 are not available as the Employment Service was not set up until October 1987. We are also unable to show Greater London figures separately.

Spend at current prices (£x millions)

Region	1988/89	1989/90	1990/91	1991/92
Northern	30.7	32.6	36.9	42.7
Yorks & Humber	42.5	45.1	50.4	61.3
East Mids & Eastern	40.0	41.0	47.7	60.9
London & Southeast	135.2	141.0	163.7	224.3
South West	33.2	34.8	39.5	55.3
Office for Wales	25.9	27.0	32.3	38.9
West Midlands	44.3	46.5	53.2	67.7
North West	65.4	67.5	76.2	91.3
Office for Scotland	56.2	60.0	68.8	77.5
Total	473.4	495.5	568.7	719.9

Converted to 1988/89 prices (£x millions)

Region	1988/89	1989/90	1990/91	1991/92
Northern	30.7	30.6	32.0	34.6
Yorks & Humber	42.5	42.3	43.7	49.7
East Mids & Eastern	40.0	38.5	41.4	49.4
London & Southeast	135.2	132.3	142.0	181.8
South West	33.2	32.7	34.3	44.8
Office for Wales	25.9	25.3	28.0	31.5
West Midlands	44.3	43.6	46.1	54.9
North West	65.4	63.3	66.1	74.0
Office for Scotland	56.2	56.3	59.7	62.8
Total	473.4	464.9	493.3	583.5

Wages Council minimum

Mr Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment whether jobcentres accept vacancies from employers where the wages offered fall below the relevant Wages Council minimum.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 14 July 1992: My offices have comprehensive guidance on the action to take when handling vacancies covered by Wages Council Orders.

These instructions include the requirement that they will refuse to accept vacancies if the employer is not prepared to pay the appropriate Wages Council Minimum Rates where applicable.

Fact-finding visits

Mr Martin Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment if she will list for the last 12 months, the fact finding visits the chief executive of the Employment Agency has made; what were his findings; if she will place a copy of his findings in the Library; and if she will make a statement.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 8 July 1992: I see it as an important part of my job to visit the different parts of the Employment Service and to keep in touch with developments in the Agency at all levels. Since 1 July 1991, I have made more than 20 such visits, which have taken in offices at regional, area and local level.

I also make a point of maintaining close contact with related organisations, including those outside government, to ensure that I know about their plans and to exchange ideas on policy and programmes. This liaison has involved attendance at a number of conferences in this country and abroad.

As to the findings of such visits much will depend on the type of visit. Some are recorded in internal meeting notes or conference reports whilst for others there may be no formal notes at all. However you may have one particular visit or conference in mind. Please let me know, if this is the case, and I will do my best to answer any queries.

Travel to Interview scheme

Mr Michael Stephen: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment whether she will abolish the upper salary limit for the travel to interview scheme.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 1 July 1992: It may be helpful if I explain the background to the scheme. TIS was introduced in 1986 to help with travel costs for unemployed people to attend job interviews beyond daily travelling distance of their home area, thus widening the applicants' jobsearch, improving their chances of obtaining work and encouraging labour mobility. During 1991/92 the scheme helped 31,000 applicants at a cost of some £950,000. A few basic conditions must be met before assistance can be granted, to ensure that the limited funds available are concentrated on those unemployed people in most need. A leaflet outlining the scope of the scheme is enclosed.

In supporting such extra interview activity, it is necessary to exclude people who are more likely to accept mobility as a career requirement, and especially where employers may be more generally prepared to offer assistance. The upper salary limit rule exists for these reasons. The limit was increased substantially on 2 January 1992 from £16,500 to £25,000 and the new limit now encompasses approximately 90% of all salaries and will therefore significantly increase the number of people we can help.

You may be interested to know that TIS is currently under review. Some changes to the eligibility rules may result, and this particular issue will be seriously considered.

Jobseeker's Charter

Mr Roy Thomason: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment if she will make a statement on the working of the Jobseeker's Charter.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 7 July 1992:

We published our Jobseeker's Charter on 18 December 1991, and the agreed standards of service and performance targets are now displayed and applied in each of our 1,350 local offices. A copy of the Jobseeker's Charter is enclosed.

The basic standards which we apply are that our people will be polite and considerate in all dealings with clients, will provide the information our clients need, and will identify themselves by giving their name when answering the telephone and wearing name badges when dealing with the public.

Our displayed targets relate to four main areas:

- the number of people we aim to help back to work locally;
- the time our clients can expect to wait to be seen (the national target is within 10 minutes);
- the time we take to answer the phone (the national target is within 30 seconds); and
- the accurate and timely payment of benefits.

As well as displaying our standards of service and targets prominently, we publish a range of leaflets and posters in English, Welsh and up to 12 ethnic minority languages. The main Jobseeker's Charter leaflet has also been produced in large print and braille versions.

A key feature of the Charter initiative is seeking clients' views and adapting public services to better meet their needs. The Employment Service has for some years conducted a national customer satisfaction survey which provides independent assessment of our services. The findings of this survey are published in our Annual Report. Following publication of the Jobseeker's Charter, we are introducing annual customer satisfaction surveys in each of our local offices so that we can ensure that we are responsive to client needs in each of our outlets.

In addition to seeking general views on our services, the Employment Service has introduced an easy to use procedure for clients to make specific comments or complaints. A leaflet, "Help Us To Get It Right", explaining how to go about making these comments, either orally or in writing, is available in all our local offices. A copy of this leaflet is also enclosed. If clients are dissatisfied, the names and addresses of local and area managers are clearly displayed in local offices. Where issues cannot be resolved locally, complainants are given my name and address and invited to write to me.

Counselling and rehabilitation contracts

Mr Peter Thurnham: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment if she will publish the list of external organisations providing counselling and rehabilitation services under contract to her Department with an indication of the amount of work carried out by each organisation.

Letter from Mr J W Cooper, Director of Field Services, 8 July 1992:

I can tell you that the Employment Service holds about 300 contracts with a variety of providers such as voluntary bodies, local authorities other providers *[sic]*. The number is constantly changing as some contracts expire and new ones are awarded. However I am arranging for an up to date list of organisations with whom we have current contracts to be drawn up and I will forward it to you in the next few days.

Rehabilitation

Mr Dafydd Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment how funding will be allocated to placing, assessment and counselling teams to enable them to purchase such assessment and rehabilitation

services as are needed by people with severe disabilities requiring specialist provision.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 8 July 1992: The Employment Service's policy is to locate control of budgets at the local level consistent with their proper management. This best ensures that they are used efficiently and effectively to meet local customers' needs.

In 1992/93 budgets for assessment and rehabilitation were allocated to Employment Service Regional Directors in England and to the Employment Service Directors for Scotland and Wales taking account of their view of need in each region and of what they could achieve. It was for them to decide how far they should be further devolved to Placing, Assessment and Counselling Teams (PACTs), taking account of progress made in establishing teams in their Regions. In the case of some facilities providing specialist rehabilitation the Region in which the facility was located was allocated a budget to manage on behalf of the whole of Great Britain.

In 1993/94 it is our intention that Field Directors will control the budgets for all assessment and rehabilitation and will be responsible for ensuring that value for money is secured. It is envisaged that in general they will further devolve budgets and responsibility to PACTs. The extent to which that further devolvement takes place in respect of people with severe disabilities, requiring specialist provision, will need to be considered in relation to specific cases.

Mr Dafydd Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment what was the average total cost per week for each client attending an employment rehabilitation course at a Government-run employment rehabilitation centre in (a) 1990-91 and (b) 1991-92.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 8 July 1992: We are not able to provide details of average total costs per week for each client attending an employment rehabilitation course as information is not collected in that form.

However, I can tell you that the number of courses which have been directly provided by the Employment Rehabilitation Service (ERS) through its Employment Rehabilitation Centres and Asset Centres, was as follows:

Courses	1990/91	1991/92
Employment Assessment	25,585	25,000
Employment Rehabilitation	9,884	7,780

Expenditure

Expenditure on these courses (excluding Rehabilitation Allowances paid directly to clients, fees paid to agency providers with whom the ERS has contracted and the costs of running the Head Office of the ERS), was:

	1990/91	1991/92
	£15,039,872	£15,295,403

All courses provided through the ERS (which ceased to operate as a centrally managed and reserved service on 31 March 1992) have been tailored to meet individual needs and are of variable length, ranging from less than one full day to several weeks. There is no optimum course length although it is unusual for courses to exceed 13 weeks.

Courses of employment assessment and employment rehabilitation in ERCs for clients with disabilities have been counted separately, but it is not possible to differentiate between the costs of these services, as many of the expenses in terms of staff salaries, premises and equipment have been commonly shared.

Mr Dafydd Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment (1) what criteria will be used to establish which agencies can provide rehabilitation of a suitable quality for people with disabilities after April 1993; and if she will make a statement; (2) what steps she is taking to establish quality standards for providers of rehabilitation training to people with severe visual impairments; and what consultation she is having for this purpose.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 8 July 1992:

The following are the main tests we shall apply in assessing the quality of rehabilitation provided by agents including rehabilitation for people with severe visual impairments:

First, in line with Citizen's Charter principles, services need the capacity to offer choice to our clients and respond flexibly to their individual needs as expressed in personal action plans agreed between clients and Employment Service advisers. The level of measured client satisfaction with rehabilitation courses will be a key test.

Secondly, accessibility to an appropriate range of clients. We want to ensure that the programme in any locality is as accessible to as wide a range of people as possible, including those who have special need. This does not mean that every provider must be able to deal with all clients but the range of providers must be such that the test stated above is met.

Thirdly, success in achieving placement into work, or, for those who need them, on to training courses. The acid test of quality is whether successful outcomes are achieved.

By April 1993 we shall bring in competitive tendering for all rehabilitation contracts. To be successful in the tendering process, agents will be expected to provide details of how they intend to meet the criteria set out in the preceding paragraphs. We will develop later this year a specification of the requirements of the programme and a structured questionnaire about providers' facilities which will enable agents to consider how their proposals might meet the needs of the rehabilitation programmes.

The Employment Service has consulted the National Advisory Council for the Employment of Disabled People on the main tests and further consultation will take place as ideas are developed further. The Employment Service has also had approaches from and discussions with a number of organisations representing people with visual impairments about rehabilitation services, and these are being taken into account in the thinking described above.

Mr Dafydd Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment what quality standards have been developed for monitoring the use of outside agencies for the assessment, counselling and rehabilitation of disabled workers; which interested organisations have been consulted on this matter; and will such standards be made available to the House.

Letter from Mr J W Cooper, Director of Field Services, 9 July 1992:

When monitoring agencies, the Employment Service looks at their capacity to offer choices to clients and respond flexibly to their individual needs; to deal with an appropriate range of clients, taking account of the role expected of them in the local system of provision; and to achieve successful outcomes - placing into work or for those who need them, training courses. This approach will be strengthened as competitive tendering is introduced from April 1993, with customer satisfaction measures being introduced to help us improve standards.

The Employment Service will develop later this year a specification of the requirements of the programme and a structured questionnaire about providers' facilities. The

specification will outline the various components of the interventions which may be needed to prepare someone for work or training. The questionnaire will enable agencies to consider how their facilities match the needs of the rehabilitation programmes. When the standards have been developed they will be made available to the House.

The Employment Service has consulted the National Advisory Council for the Employment of Disabled People about the approach to quality in employment rehabilitation and further consultation will take place as it is further developed. The Employment Service has also had approaches from and discussions with a number of organisations, including those representing people with visual impairments about rehabilitation services and is taking these into account.

Staff training

Mr Dafydd Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment what plans there are for improving the training of non-specialist staff in her Department, with particular reference to training involving the disability organisations.

Letter from Mr J W Cooper, Director of Field Services, 9 July 1992:

Last year, when the then Secretary of State announced the changes to the way in which the Employment Service organises its disability services, it was also announced that support for non-specialist Employment Service personnel would be improved. Since then a number of initiatives have been put in place which strengthen both specialist and non-specialist training.

Employment Service local personnel have received an information pack explaining what the changes in the disability service mean for them, clarifying their new roles and the training and development which will be required. For non-specialists, a training pack on disability has been issued to regional and area training managers to help with the training of personnel new to the Employment Service. In addition, Placing, Assessment and Counselling Teams (PACTs) are increasingly providing training to local office personnel and raising their awareness of disability matters at briefing meetings.

There will be a continuing role for both PACTs and the new regional Ability Development Centres (ADCs) in assessing and meeting the ongoing needs of non-specialist personnel. At present, disability organisations are not normally involved in this training but it is clearly an option which the Employment Service would wish to consider. We believe there may be local expertise available which would enhance the effectiveness of our services to people with disabilities.

We have taken the opportunity provided by the changes in disability services to redesign the training programme for specialist disability. In the part of the training programme dealing with disability knowledge we draw on disability organisations to deliver specialist input and we plan that this will continue.

Appendix

Other letters written to M.P.s by chief executives in July 1992

Member	Agency	Subject
Mr Hugh Bayley	Driving Standards Agency	Waiting time for driving test
Mr Menzies Campbell	Defence Research Agency	Vehicles Electronic Research Defence Initiative
Mr Harry Cohen	Chemical & Biological Defence Establishment	Scientific procedures carried out on animals
Mr Jim Cousins	Defence Research Agency	Participation of staff in Link or EC research programmes
Mr Tam Dalyell	Chemical & Biological Defence Establishment	Site of special scientific interest: Porton Down
Mr Ken Livingstone	Chemical & Biological Defence Establishment	Research funded by US Department of Defense Research into CR
Mr David Marshall	Benefits Agency	Constituency case
Mr Martin Redmond	Civil Service College	Stolen table
	Chemical & Biological Defence Establishment	Chief executive's fact-finding visits Scientific papers published
	Defence Research Agency	Chief executive's fact-finding visits Staffing levels
	UK Passport Agency	Passport application forms
Mr John Spellar	UK Passport Agency	Percentage of population holding a British passport
Mr Anthony Steen	Benefits Agency	Constituency cases (2 letters)

Open Lines

No. 11

*Letters sent to Members of Parliament in July 1992
by Government executive agencies
in reply to Parliamentary Questions*

*with an introduction by
Paul Flynn MP*

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