



Open Lines

No. 9

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

**with an introduction by
Paul Flynn MP**

Edited and published by Tony Lynes, 92 Grove Park, London SE5 8LE

June 1992

Introduction

by Paul Flynn, M.P.

In the eighth issue of OPEN LINES, published before the General Election, I wrote: "It is an affront to the democratic process that publication of information of this kind should have to be undertaken by a private individual subsidised by a public-spirited foundation. The newly elected House of Commons should insist on urgent action to bring this shameful situation to an end."

As this ninth issue goes to press, the following Early Day Motion has been signed by over 140 Members of Parliament and more names are being added daily:

"That this House deplores the denial of public access to a large amount of information of public interest supplied in letters from Next Steps agencies to honourable Members in reply to Parliamentary Questions; notes that such information would in the past have been given by Ministers in written answers published in the Official Report, and is now available only in the monthly booklet Open Lines, published with the financial support of the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust; and calls for urgent

action to ensure that this information, whether supplied by Ministers or by agencies, is in future published in the Official Report and not in a separate publication, whether official or not."

The simplest way of meeting this demand would be a return to the traditional practice of Ministers themselves replying to questions about public services for which they are responsible. The replies would then automatically appear in the Official Report (Hansard), and the principle of ministerial accountability to Parliament would be reaffirmed. If the Government refuses to accept this solution, the only satisfactory alternative is the publication of the agencies' letters in Hansard.

Above all, whatever is to be done, it should be done soon. It will be even more shameful if OPEN LINES is still being published when Parliament resumes after the summer recess.

Paul Flynn, M.P.
House of Commons

June 1992

Contents

	<i>Page</i>
Benefits Agency	1
Employment Service	3
Appendix: other letters written by chief executives in May 1992	5

Editorial note

The previous issue of OPEN LINES contained letters sent to M.P.s in March 1992. Because of the General Election, none were sent in April. This issue contains 12 letters sent in May - fewer than usual because Parliament was sitting during only part of the month.

As in past issues, only letters from agencies in the social security and employment fields are reproduced; others are listed in the Appendix.

In every case, the main body of the letter and any attached tables are reproduced in full, only the formal opening and closing paragraphs being omitted. Where errors were found in the tables, the agency has been asked to send corrected figures to the Member concerned and to the House of Commons Library. The tables published in the following pages show the corrected figures.

BENEFITS AGENCY

Disability living allowance claim form

Mr Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make it his policy to ensure that Department of Social Security visiting officers will always be made available to disability living allowance applicants who require assistance with completing a self-assessment claim form and that claimants who cannot complete a form without such assistance will not be required to undergo medical examination solely on the grounds that a visiting officer is not available.

Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 12 May 1992:

If I may first of all give some general information about the DLA claim pack and the variety of arrangements that have been introduced to help customers claim DLA. One of the major principles underpinning the new benefit is that claims will, wherever possible, be decided on the basis of self-assessment, rather than relying on routine medical examinations. This means that there is a much greater emphasis on what disabled people, and where appropriate, their carers, have to say about the practical everyday effects of their condition. This is a move which has been widely welcomed by disabled people, their representatives and organisations.

In order to collect all the information necessary for the Adjudication Officer (AO) to reach an informed decision, it necessarily means an extensive claim pack. However, we have tried to make the claim pack as user friendly as possible, for example, by the use of large print and clear layout. We have also sought the help of disabled people themselves as well as the advice of relevant organisations.

We do, of course, recognise that some people will have difficulty in tackling the form. That is why we have made arrangements to make the claims process as easy as possible. Special provisions have been introduced whereby customers are given six weeks to fill in the form without losing benefit. This should ensure that customers are given sufficient time to work through the form, get help or obtain additional evidence if necessary.

The Agency can offer telephone help to people filling in the form through the Benefit Enquiry Line - the freeline service which also offers advice on the whole range of benefits.

In District Offices, staff will be on hand to provide individual and local assistance to customers in completing the form.

Visiting officers will indeed be available to call on customers to help with the claim pack and I can confirm that we have no intention of using doctors rather than visiting officers. However, exceptionally there may be some cases where the customer feels unable to fill in the claim form and it appears that the case is of such a complex nature that a report by an examining doctor will be required by the AO to determine the claim. In these instances, arrangements would be made for a doctor to call rather than a visiting officer.

Vibration white finger

Mr John Hutton: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what percentage disability was awarded for each person granted disablement benefit as a consequence of vibration white finger during the last 12-month period for which statistics are available.

Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 21 May 1992:

The attached table gives the latest information which is available.

Table

The table below shows the number of initial assessments of disablement for vibration white finger which were made in the period 2 April 1990 to 30 March 1991 and which resulted in the award of Industrial Injuries Disablement Pension.

Percentage assessment	Number of initial awards
14-24	31
25-34	1
35-44	1
45-54	1
55-64	0
65-74	1
75-84	1
85-94	0
95-100	0

Notes

1. For Industrial Injuries Disablement Pension to be payable for vibration white finger, disablement must be assessed at 14% or more.
2. In addition to the awards shown above, a number of assessments below 14% may have resulted in payment of a pension through aggregation with assessments for other diseases or accidents.
3. Industrial Injuries Disablement Gratuities were abolished on 1 October 1986 but claims could be made until 12 February 1990 in certain circumstances. Information on the number of gratuities paid is not available.

Disability benefit claims: processing times

Mr Alf Morris: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what is the Government's target for the average length of time to process 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 adjudication officers have been employed during the last three months to handle claims for attendance allowance in order to meet the Government's targets for speed of processing of claims; and if he will make a statement.

Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 12 May 1992:

There have been major changes in both workload and working arrangements that have occurred on AA [Attendance Allowance] this year. Since February the introduction of DLA [Disability Living Allowance] for people disabled before age 65 (AA continues for people disabled after age 65), coupled with the different claims and adjudication arrangements which underpin the new benefit, has meant dealing with claims made under the old scheme and processing the new style claims at the same time.

The first quarter of this year has also seen a significant increase in the number of claims made. AA claims have risen by some 50,000, which represents an increase of 44% over the same period last year. During February DLA claims intake was steady but increased significantly throughout March. The total claims received for this period was just over 88,000. There is clearly a head of work to be processed but on the information available at present we are confident that there are sufficient AOs [Adjudication Officers] in place to meet our targets.

The administration of a new benefit as well as the maintenance of the old ones is a challenging task for the Agency. I am sure you

will appreciate that that will inevitably lead to some administrative problems in the early stages until staff become more familiar with the new criteria and working practices. Add to this, the extraordinarily high but rewarding level of interest that has been shown in the benefits, prompted by a major publicity campaign and the surge of claims that has resulted, we naturally faced early problems. It is not therefore surprising that in January and February we were not able to meet the targets set for the delivery of AA, although, in March we did successfully meet them. Whilst the performance has not been as good as we would have hoped, this is, I believe, a consequence of the immense task of introducing radically different but much improved procedures. That said, we are committed to ensuring that people do not wait longer than absolutely necessary for a decision on their claim and Benefits Agency staff are taking positive action to minimise delays as they are identified and to ensure that claims are processed effectively and as quickly as possible.

You asked for details of the various targets for processing claims to Mob A [Mobility Allowance], AA and DLA and these are in the attached annex.

Annex: Clearance times

1991/92

Mobility Allowance	37 days
Attendance Allowance	70% in 50 days, 95% in 90 days
Attendance Allowance (Special Rules)	80% in 10 days, 90% in 15 days

1992/93

Attendance Allowance (65+)	60% in 35 days, 95% in 60 days
Attendance Allowance (Special Rules 65+)	80% in 10 days, 90% in 15 days
Disabled Living Allowance	60% in 30 days, 95% in 55 days
Disabled Living Allowance (Special Rules)	80% in 10 days, 90% in 15 days

Income support: hardship claims

Ms Clare Short: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list for each region and for Great Britain as a whole for each quarter since September 1991 how many income

support and unemployment benefit claimants have (i) successfully and (ii) unsuccessfully claimed income support under the hardship rules, showing those whose claim was in doubt due to (a) not actively seeking work, (b) refusing suitable employment, and (c) availability for work.

Letter from Mr Michael Richard, Chief Executive, 21 May 1992:

The information has been taken from the Benefits Agency Management Information Statistics and is attached at Annexes A and B. The number of customers who have successfully or unsuccessfully applied for a hardship payment because they have refused suitable employment are included in the number of customers whose claim is in doubt because of their availability for employment. I regret it is not possible to break this figure down.

The figures are based on the Benefits Agency's Territorial structure.

Annex A: Availability for work - hardship applications

		Dec. 91	Mar. 92
Scotland & Northern	A	212	208
	R	102	50
Wales & Central	A	90	118
	R	110	112
Southern	A	269	373
	R	97	98
National totals	A	571	699
	R	309	260

A = Awarded

R = Refused

Annex B: Actively seeking work - hardship applications

		Dec. 91	Mar. 92
Scotland & Northern	A	60	25
	R	56	133
Wales & Central	A	40	56
	R	59	56
Southern	A	93	144
	R	59	30
National totals	A	193	225
	R	174	219

A = Awarded

R = Refused

EMPLOYMENT SERVICE

Unemployment benefit suspension: Rawtenstall

Ms Janet Anderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment how many claimants were suspended from unemployment benefit at the Rawtenstall Unemployment Benefit office in each year since 1987; and what percentage of claimants this represented each year.

Letter from Mr J Turner, Deputy Chief Executive, 15 May 1992:

Unfortunately, we do not collect information about the number of claimants suspended and consequently I am unable to provide the details you requested or to indicate the percentage of claimants this represents each year.

Suspensions generally result in reference to adjudication officers for decisions. Information about adjudication officers' decisions is collected on a regional basis and is summarised quarterly. A copy of each summary is placed in the Library of the House.

Unemployment benefit disqualification

Mr Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment how many unemployed people were disqualified for unemployment benefit under each paragraph of section 20(1) of the Social Security Act 1975 in the area covered by the Newport, Gwent, unemployment benefit office, in the latest month for which information can be obtained from the office; in how many cases disqualification was imposed for the maximum period of 26 weeks; and what is the estimated cost of obtaining this information.

Letter from Mr A G Johnson, Director of Finance and Resources, 11 May 1992:

You may recall that Mike Fogden wrote to you earlier this year, on 30 January, in response to a similar question and provided figures for the quarter ending 30 September 1991. The analysis for the quarter ending 31 December 1991 has not yet been published, but I will write to you again when it is available.

However, I am afraid that, as before, the information available will not be in the exact form that you have requested. Adjudication statistics are only tabulated for each Employment Service region every quarter; and consequently I will only be able to let you have figures for Wales as a whole.

No records are kept of the length of disqualification periods imposed under Section 20(1) of the Social Security Act 1975. I am unable to give exact details of the cost of collecting this information. However, the computer programming and staff time required to produce this data could not be justified by the limited use to which it could be put by the Employment Service.

Actively seeking work (*House of Lords question*)

Earl Russell asked Her Majesty's Government whether they have any evidence on the cost of actively seeking work.

Letter from Mr A G Johnson, Director of Finance and Resources, 13 May 1992:

There is no mechanism for measuring the cost to claimants of actively seeking work. The cost of applying the actively seeking work condition in relation to unemployment benefit claims is

included in the general cost of administering claims and is not separately identifiable.

Early retirement (*House of Lords question*)

Earl Russell asked Her Majesty's Government whether they can give figures for the number of people under pensionable age who have taken early retirement (other than for reasons of ill-health) and are not actively seeking work.

Letter from Mr A G Johnson, Director of Finance and Resources, 13 May 1992:

The Employment Service does not have any information, from which reliable statistics could be produced, about people under pensionable age who have taken early retirement but are no longer participating in the labour market and are not, therefore, actively seeking work.

Restart interviewees

Ms Clare Short: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment how many restart interviewees fell within the guarantee group and how many fell within the aim group, for the latest available period for Great Britain and for each region; how many of each of those groups were submitted or placed in (a) employment training, (b) enterprise allowance scheme, (c) job club, (d) job interview guarantee or (e) employment action; and how many such claimants were not made an offer of help, showing whether it was because (i) they were already on or about to start on a scheme, (ii) they were about to leave the unemployment register, (iii) an offer could not be made because there was no appropriate scheme place available or (iv) an offer could not be made due to the claimants' attitude or behaviour or severity of their problem.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 19 May 1992: Statistics about contacts with people in the Guarantee and Aim groups are collected monthly from a sample of 82 of my local offices. This sample gives a representative picture of our performance on a national basis. The latest available performance information, for the period April 1991 to March 1992, is in the attached annex.

The Guarantee and Aim undertaking is that an appropriate offer will be made to a client who is within either group from among the following programmes: Employment, Training, Enterprise Allowance Scheme, Employment Action, Jobclub or Job Interview Guarantee. The purpose of this offer is to improve the client's opportunity to return to work as quickly as possible. If the adviser and the client do not believe that one of these programmes best meets the client's needs then referral would be made to a job or other more suitable programme.

People in the Guarantee and Aim groups are identified and interviewed as part of the Restart process in all my local offices. This provides a coherent system of help and advice to unemployed people through face to face advisory interviews and access to jobs and programmes. As well as the programmes offered to clients in the Guarantee and Aim groups we have developed others to meet the specific needs of clients. For example, for longer term unemployed people who need to review their situation and plan their way back to work we have Restart Courses. For other unemployed people, who wish to improve their job hunting techniques, we have developed jobsearch seminars. This framework of advisory and programme support enables us to provide effective help in getting people back to work. In the operational year 1991/92 advisers placed just over 24,000 longer term unemployed people into jobs and 401,000 on programmes.

Annex: Aim and Guarantee undertakings - national cumulative performance, April 1991 to March 1992

	Guarantee group	Aim group
a. Numbers interviewed (estimated)	413,000	374,000
b. % of those interviewed who were made an offer of a place on ET, EAS, EA, in a Jobclub or on one of the JIG options	80%	54%
c. % of those interviewed who were made a more suitable alternative offer	17%	43%
d. People submitted or placed on a programme (expressed as a percentage of numbers interviewed)		
ET	22%	14%
EAS	4%	2%
Jobclub	18%	9%
JIG	5%	2%
EA	2%	2%
Total	51%	29%
e. No offer made (expressed as a percentage of numbers interviewed)		
on or about to start a menu item	3%	3%
about to leave the register	6%	3%
unable to make an offer (most appropriate menu option not available)	3%	3%
unable to make an offer (due to claimants' attitude/behaviour or the severity of their problem)	3%	8.5%

Earnings rules: trainees

Ms Clare Short: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment if non-employed employment training trainees who receive part-time earnings, who were solely in receipt of unemployment benefit before receiving their training allowance, are subject to the earnings rules for unemployment benefit; and if she will make a statement.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 19 May 1992: The rate of training allowance is governed by the principle that a trainee should be £10 per week better off than they would have been had they remained unemployed. If a client had been in receipt of unemployment benefit (UB) before training, they would receive training allowance equivalent to the UB rate plus a £10 premium. This allowance is not subject to the earning rules for UB.

Not actively seeking work or refusing suitable employment

Ms Clare Short: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment how many claimants in each quarter since March 1991 for each region and for Great Britain as a whole have (a) been issued with warning letters for not actively seeking work, (b) had their claim referred to an adjudication officer for not actively seeking work, (c) had their claims allowed or disallowed for not actively seeking work, (d) had their claim referred to an adjudication officer for refusing suitable employment and (e) how many of those in (d) have had their benefit disqualified or not disqualified.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 19 May 1992: Unfortunately, the information you have asked for is not available in the precise form requested. Statistical information is not kept on the number of referrals to the adjudication authorities. At the time of writing, statistics about decisions are available up to and including September 1991. Information covering the quarter ending December 1991 will be published shortly.

The statistical tables enclosed give the number of adjudication decisions on unemployment benefit claims which have been allowed or disallowed as a result of the actively seeking

employment condition, and the refusal of employment condition for the quarter ended June 1991 and the quarter ended September 1991.

Actively seeking employment

	Warning letters	Allowed	Disallowed
<i>Quarter ending 30 June 1991</i>			
London & South Eastern	1,484	182	128
East Midlands	337	29	16
South West	371	51	32
West Midlands	561	45	39
Yorkshire & Humberside	403	298	97
North West	1,123	103	125
Northern	365	209	69
Wales	309	36	36
Scotland	1,022	512	124
Great Britain	5,975	1,465	666
<i>Quarter ending 30 September 1991</i>			
London & South Eastern	1,830	250	130
East Midlands	272	32	11
South West	276	55	27
West Midlands	707	51	55
Yorkshire & Humberside	394	438	109
North West	1,061	116	148
Northern	697	211	99
Wales	185	35	33
Scotland	1,134	403	151
Great Britain	6,556	1,591	763

Refusal of employment

	Allowed	Disallowed
<i>Quarter ending 30 June 1991</i>		
London & South Eastern	117	120
East Midlands	72	20
South West	35	22
West Midlands	42	31
Yorkshire & Humberside	44	27
North West	52	68
Northern	29	3
Wales	18	18
Scotland	40	26
Great Britain	449	335
<i>Quarter ending 30 September 1991</i>		
London & South Eastern	117	138
East Midlands	46	25
South West	25	4
West Midlands	34	21
Yorkshire & Humberside	46	34
North West	52	55
Northern	25	18
Wales	12	16
Scotland	39	32
Great Britain	396	343

Extended child benefit and bridging allowance

Ms Clare Short: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment if she will list by region and for Great Britain as a whole, shown separately for males and females, how many 16 and 17-year-olds were in receipt of extended child benefit, how many were in receipt of bridging allowance for each month since September 1991 and how many young people in each region and in Great Britain exhausted their entitlement to youth training bridging allowance; and if she will make a statement.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 19 May 1992: The information you have requested is provided in the attached

tables. The period covered by Extended Child Benefit for applicants leaving education during the Summer term of 1991 ends on 5 January 1992. This explains the fall in the number of applicants between December and January. Unfortunately, a breakdown of the figures for extended child benefit by region and sex are not available.

Terminations of bridging allowance may occur for a number

of reasons, for example, a young person may no longer qualify for bridging allowance if they find a Youth Training place or a job; their eight week entitlement is exhausted; or if they are sick.

The figures that are collected each month show only the total number of terminations of bridging allowance in that period. There is no further breakdown of the figures to give particular reasons as to why the claims to bridging allowance have ceased.

Numbers of males and females in receipt of bridging allowance - by ES region, September 1991 - April 1992

		Northern	Yorks & Humberside	East Mids & Eastern	London & South East	South West	Wales	West Mids	North West	Scotland	Total
Sep 91	M	385	704	701	1,704	462	415	811	1,169	918	7,269
	F	259	404	478	1,163	316	198	477	663	552	4,510
Oct 91	M	374	592	599	1,475	442	382	713	996	789	6,362
	F	192	317	364	1,040	270	180	396	540	483	3,782
Nov 91	M	300	575	600	1,434	480	386	614	981	652	6,022
	F	174	290	367	892	268	178	361	475	447	3,452
Dec 91	M	267	489	636	1,413	474	321	603	986	646	5,835
	F	143	288	358	773	290	171	316	486	442	3,267
Jan 92	M	350	499	655	1,333	515	353	610	986	692	5,993
	F	199	331	423	776	300	224	353	603	470	3,679
Feb 92	M	481	768	994	2,180	726	550	1,086	1,375	1,003	9,163
	F	349	480	639	1,335	451	321	581	880	696	5,732
Mar 92	M	597	827	974	2,185	698	551	1,093	1,399	1,037	9,361
	F	333	496	596	1,251	429	288	574	827	649	5,443
Apr 92	M	542	791	935	1,851	594	476	958	1,252	986	8,385
	F	279	438	593	1,045	362	248	540	746	586	4,837

Numbers of terminations of bridging allowance - by ES region, September 1991 - April 1992

	Northern	Yorks & Humberside	East Mids & Eastern	London & South East	South West	Wales	West Mids	North West	Scotland	Total
Sep 91	644	1,005	1,090	2,002	702	564	1,058	1,532	1,400	9,997
Oct 91	439	703	720	1,542	440	381	731	1,059	903	6,918
Nov 91	466	698	748	1,669	507	427	812	1,234	1,022	7,583
Dec 91	313	572	568	1,284	430	354	565	889	666	5,641
Jan 92	241	440	519	1,020	415	289	500	727	625	4,776
Feb 92	474	746	854	1,597	647	481	799	1,269	963	7,830
Mar 92	514	760	941	1,759	617	519	936	1,283	1,019	8,348
Apr 92	566	825	919	1,929	692	514	978	1,346	1,046	8,815

Numbers in receipt of extended child benefit, September 1991 - March 1992

Month	Weekly average per month
September 1991	25,269
October 1991	26,006
November 1991	25,243
December 1991	24,576
January 1992	1,510
February 1992	2,563
March 1992	3,131

NB: Figures are not available by region or broken down by sex.

Appendix

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

Member	Agency	Subject
Mr Paul Flynn	Defence Research Agency	Liquid crystal displays
Mr John Home Robertson	Defence Research Agency	Levels of staffing
Mr Ken Livingstone	Chemical & Biological Defence Establishment	Scientific papers published
Mr Martin O'Neill	Defence Research Agency	Electro-magnetic propulsion