

The Social Fund Commissioner's Annual Report
2010/2011

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Foreword

I am pleased to present this Annual Report for the twelve months ended 31st March 2011, which covers my first complete year in office as Social Fund Commissioner.

Challenges presented by our increasing workloads mean that we have sought to achieve greater efficiencies without detriment to quality, in order to balance the needs of our customers and other stakeholders, such as the tax payer. Payments from the Social Fund are targeted at some of the poorest and most vulnerable of our fellow citizens. In this context it is vital that we deliver a high quality, speedy, proportionate and effective service. We have implemented radical changes in all our work processes to ensure we continue to do this. I was pleased to be invited to give a presentation at the Administrative Justice and Tribunals Council Annual Conference in November 2010 on the subject of innovatory approaches to dispute resolution.

The United Kingdom of today is a very different society from that of 1988 when the Social Fund first came into existence and a review was necessary in order to respond to contemporary issues affecting our disadvantaged customers.

The changes to the Social Fund, proposed in the Welfare Reform Bill 2011, should provide Ministers with an important opportunity to rethink the role, purpose and effectiveness of emergency financial support for hard pressed individuals and families, assuming the appropriate lessons are drawn from the current scheme. In my evidence to the Public Accounts Committee, which considered a National Audit Office report on community care grants, I drew attention to the continuing inequity of budget allocations between different regions and the implications of this for customers.

The Independent Review Service's position at the end of the review process provides unique insights into the needs of customers, which are gleaned from reviewing some five hundred thousand applications over two decades of Social Fund casework. Any new process for meeting the needs of these poor and vulnerable customers would benefit, in my view, from incorporation of some general principles. These should include allocation of funds between areas on the basis of need; high quality and timely responses to applications; provision of information about the other forms of support that may be available for people who apply; some overview of the system so that standards in decision making are maintained and to ensure consistency; and access to an independent grievance procedure to ensure decisions are fair and seen to be fair.

I was pleased to receive a number of visitors to our office during the past year including the Rt. Hon. Steve Webb MP, Minister for Pensions (who also has Ministerial responsibility for the Social Fund at the Department for Work and Pensions) and Richard Thomas CBE, who is the Chairman of the Administrative Justice and Tribunals Council. I was pleased to note that both of them were impressed with our customer focus and efficiency.

I conclude with my thanks to Pauline Adey and her colleagues in the Independent Review Service, for their commitment and achievements in continuing to provide a high quality service to our customers against a background of continuing resource pressures and uncertainty.

**Karamjit Singh CBE,
Social Fund Commissioner
for Great Britain**



Executive Summary

Delivering the Review

- In 2010/2011, our total workload was 53,626.
- Inspectors changed 41.6% of the decisions they reviewed.
- These changed decisions resulted in payments totalling £4,962,730 from the £141 million budget for grants and payments totalling £1,329,542 from the £690 million budget for loans.
- Inspectors cleared 99.2% of straightforward cases (which did not generate an enquiry or an enquiry that could be dealt with very quickly) within 12 days of receipt of the papers from Jobcentre Plus.
- Inspectors cleared 91.6% of those cases which needed more extensive enquiry/ investigation within 21 days of receipt of the papers from Jobcentre Plus.
- Inspectors cleared 92.4% of urgent cases (for living expenses or other needs where a very urgent decision was needed) within 24 hours of receipt of the papers from Jobcentre Plus.
- During 2010/2011 our unit cost was £86, down from £99 for the previous year. We calculate this to include all our direct costs of staff, non-manpower and capital expenditure; and to include our indirect costs of accommodation and related costs which are outsourced and paid for centrally.

The Standard of Social Fund Inspectors' Decisions

- We have adopted a new approach for the delivery of Inspectors' reviews, making greater use of the telephone to make necessary enquiries and using a shorter and more direct style of communicating the decision.
- Reading individual cases is the primary means by which we assess the standards of Inspectors' decisions. During the year 2,072 decisions (3.9% of our workload) were read by both Social Fund Commissioners, managers and Inspectors with lead responsibility for research and development. Case readers found that a high proportion of decisions (85.3%) met the quality standard.

Customer Experience

- We received 3,383 complaints about our decisions, which represented 6.3% of our workload. Errors led us to change the outcome in 167 cases which represented 4.9% of the complaints we received and 0.3% of our total workload.
- We received 134 complaints about our service and upheld 38 of them, which represented 0.1% of our workload.

External Relations

- We continue to feed back to Jobcentre Plus on findings and observations from our casework or to share information that can help to drive improvements in the standard of decision making or to inform operational or policy developments.
- The Social Fund Commissioner was invited to give a presentation at the Administrative Justice and Tribunals Council Annual Conference in November 2010 on the subject of innovatory approaches to dispute resolution.
- The Social Fund Commissioner met a range of stakeholders as listed in Appendix 8 and also chaired a number of workshops attended by welfare rights advisers.

Responding to Consultations and Inquiries

- The Social Fund Commissioner responded to three Department for Work and Pensions' consultations on welfare reform. His responses are summarised in this report and his full responses can be viewed at www.irs-review.org.uk
- The Social Fund Commissioner also submitted written evidence to the Public Administration Select Committee's inquiry into quangos. A copy of his written evidence was included in the Committee's final report, *Smaller Government: Shrinking the Quango State*, which is published on the Committee's web page of the UK Parliament at www.parliament.uk

About the Social Fund Commissioner and the IRS: what we do and how we do it

The Social Fund Commissioner heads the independent tier of review for the Social Fund, which was created in 1988. Based in Birmingham, this covers all parts of England, Scotland and Wales.

The Commissioner is appointed by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. The current Commissioner, Karamjit Singh CBE, has been in post since December 2009.

The Social Fund Commissioner's statutory duties are to:

- appoint Social Fund Inspectors and other staff;
- monitor the quality of Inspectors' decisions;
- arrange training for Inspectors;
- report annually in writing to the Secretary of State on the standard of reviews by Social Fund Inspectors.

The discretionary part of the Social Fund is a scheme of grant and interest free loan payments designed to help people on low income with costs that are difficult to meet from regular income. It is administered in Jobcentre Plus, an agency of the Department for Work and Pensions.

The independent review is delivered free of charge to the applicant, by highly trained Social Fund Inspectors. The role of Social Fund Inspector is a statutory one. The Independent Review Service (IRS) is the organisation within which Social Fund Inspectors and other staff carry out their responsibilities.

The IRS has focused on developing a reputation for expertise, efficiency and fairness. Our business aims and objectives are driven by a commitment to the provision of a high quality and accessible service to all Social Fund customers. Our specific aim and objectives, as set out in our current business plan, are outlined in more detail at Appendix 1 of this report.

Structure

Our organisational structure is built around two distinct areas of business:

- our core review work;
- utilising the unique insights derived from our casework to improve standards and inform policy developments.

Core Review Process

The review process requires the Inspector to establish the facts of the case, which may involve asking the applicant or their representative for relevant information. The Inspector then applies the law to the facts.

As a starting point, the Inspector must decide whether the decision under review is correct and reasonable in law. The next stage then requires the Inspector to look at the merits of the case and decide whether the decision made by Jobcentre Plus is a right one, taking account of any new evidence and relevant changes in circumstance.

The outcome of this process may result in the same decision as Jobcentre Plus, a different one, or – on very rare occasions – a decision to refer a case back to Jobcentre Plus for a fresh decision. The basic principle is that each individual case is decided on its own merits.

Inspectors have the power to review their own or another Inspector's decision to correct errors. The recourse available to the citizens who remain dissatisfied with an Inspector's decision is through an application for judicial review in the High Court.

Utilising Insight from Casework

Our unique position at the end of the review process means that we have a wealth of experience and expertise to share with practitioners and policy makers alike. Our nationwide overview of the Social Fund enables us to identify issues with significant relevance to those who use, or deliver, the Social Fund.

We use this valuable insight in a variety of ways, and through various liaison forums, to facilitate improvements in standards, raise awareness of the Social Fund, to inform policy developments and to feed into quality initiatives that Jobcentre Plus has in place.

Northern Ireland

The Social Fund Commissioner holds a separate statutory appointment as the head of the Office of the Social Fund Commissioner, based in Belfast, which deals with reviews in Northern Ireland. The Social Fund scheme in Northern Ireland is legally distinct from the scheme in Great Britain and is established under separate legal instruments. The office in Belfast is sponsored by the Department for Social Development. The Social Fund Commissioner provides an annual report to the Minister for Social Development, Northern Ireland Assembly.

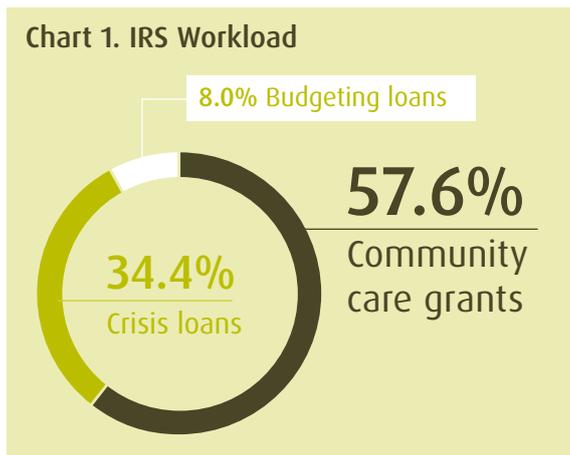
Delivering the Review

In recognition of the urgency of Social Fund applications, we set high standards for the delivery of the Inspector's review and aim to deliver the right outcomes as quickly as possible. To help us achieve this, our business processes are designed to ensure a simple customer journey and are proportionate.

In 2010/2011 the upward trend in workload continued. Our total workload was 53,626 completed decisions. This was a 7.4% increase on the previous year, and represents the highest total in casework since 1988 when the Social Fund was established. Graph 1 shows how our workload has increased since April 2008.

The discretionary Social Fund is made up of community care grants, budgeting loans and crisis loans. Chart 1 shows how our workload was broken down between these different types of application. Appendix 2 shows the breakdown of our workload by month. There are a number of Jobcentre Plus offices across the country that process Social Fund applications and our intake of work from each of these offices differs. Appendix 3 shows the breakdown of our workload by Jobcentre Plus Benefit Delivery Centre.

Social Fund Inspectors can only review applications which have already been subject to an internal review in Jobcentre Plus. Our workload is made up of those cases for which no payment or only a partial payment has been made following this internal review. During 2010/2011 Inspectors reviewed 24% of such applications compared to 22% during 2009/2010. The largest increase was for community care grants which make up the bulk of our work. Inspectors reviewed 28.5% of these compared to 25.5% for 2009/2010.



The Inspector can:

- confirm Jobcentre Plus' decision;
- change the outcome of the decision;
- exceptionally, refer the case back to Jobcentre Plus for further investigations and a new decision.

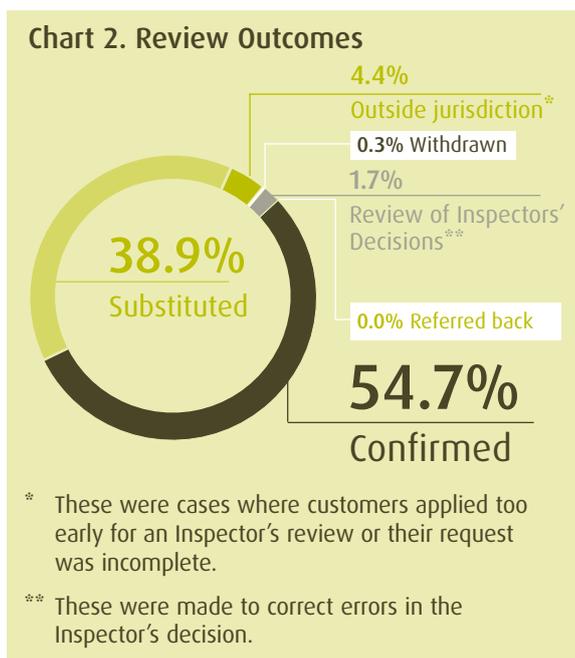
The Inspector will confirm a decision where the final outcome is right, whether or not there was an important error in the decision making process in Jobcentre Plus. The Inspector will change, or substitute, a decision where an important error led to the wrong outcome or where new evidence or a change in circumstances means the decision made by Jobcentre Plus is no longer a right one.

Chart 2 shows how our workload was broken down into overall outcomes.

The Commissioner has issued advice to Inspectors on what constitutes an important error. It is "...one on which the decision, at any stage in the process, turns and that leads to a different decision at that stage. In other words, an error at one of the key stages of the decision-making process, which knocks the decision "off-course" and makes the rationale for the decision incorrect." Inspectors identified important errors in 54.7% of the Jobcentre Plus decisions they reviewed.

Appendix 4 shows a breakdown of decision outcomes for community care grants, budgeting loans and crisis loans by Jobcentre Plus Benefit Delivery Centre.

Inspectors made payments totalling £4,962,730 from the £141 million budget for grants and payments totalling £1,329,542 from the £690 million budget for loans.



Completion Times

Our overall completion time are measured from the date we receive the papers from Jobcentre Plus. Table 1 below sets out our targets and our achievements.

Although we have two timescales for the completion of non-urgent cases, more than 96% of them fell within the shorter 12 working day timescale. Appendix 5 shows the breakdown of our achievements by month.

We are pleased to note that the time it takes Jobcentre Plus offices to send the papers to us is improving. By the final quarter of 2010/2011, we received 74% of cases within four days, with 3% taking over 10 days to arrive. But there are other issues relating to the documentation which we discuss later in the External Relations section of this report.

Table 1. Completion Times of Inspectors' Reviews

Action/Timescale	Target %	Achievement %
Straightforward/no enquiries: • completed within 12 working days of receipt of papers	95	99.2
Further investigation required: • completed within 21 working days of receipt of the papers	90	91.6
Urgent cases: • completed within 24 hours of receipt of the papers	90	92.4

The Cost of the Review

Cost is an essential element; it must be proportionate and provide best value for money for the taxpayer.

During 2010/2011, our unit cost was £86, which is lower than £99 for the previous year. We calculate this to include all our direct costs of staff, non-manpower and capital expenditure; and our indirect costs of accommodation and related costs which are outsourced and paid for centrally.

The Standard of Social Fund Inspectors' Decisions

The key aims underpinning our quality standards are to make decisions that are legally sound, accurate and explained clearly to our customers.

One of the Social Fund Commissioner's primary duties is to monitor the standard of Inspectors' decisions. He oversees the quality strategy which includes:

- reading cases to assess Inspectors' decisions against our quality standards;
- analysing the reasons for complaints and enquiries, and responses to our customer survey; and
- chairing forums which discuss quality and standards, identify scope for improvement and develop solutions to address those issues.

Principles of our approach

Last year we reported that we were trialling new, more flexible ways of conducting reviews. This year we evaluated progress, refined the approach where necessary and adopted a new way of conducting reviews as standard practice across the organisation.

The critical first stage in the process is for Inspectors to identify and understand, quickly and accurately, the crucial issues in the case. In cases where they do not need to make any enquiries, they make a decision straight away.

Sometimes Inspectors need to contact a customer before a sound decision can be made. This may be because important information is missing from the papers, or because important questions need to be asked on key points.

Where Inspectors must contact customers in order to resolve the case, they do this by telephone whenever they can. Using the telephone to make enquiries has proved to be the most effective method of gathering high quality information at the earliest opportunity. However, where telephone contact is impossible or unsuitable in a particular case, Inspectors send a letter which is focused on the key issues to be resolved. The guiding principle in selecting the method of contact is that it should best suit the customer's individual circumstances.

Alongside these changes, we have continued work to strengthen further the focus and clarity of Inspectors' letters and decisions. Inspectors aim to provide succinct explanations that help the customer to understand the reasons for the decision. A number of customers have told us that they prefer this shorter and more direct style of communicating the decision.

We will continue to keep our approach under review and to take account of customer feedback to ensure this delivers what is required.

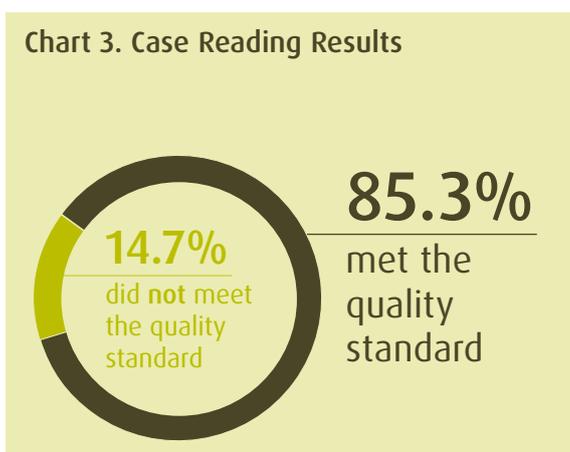
Case Study

Mr P has a prosthetic leg, hepatitis C and breathing difficulties. He has been homeless, in and out of prison, and is going through a drug rehabilitation programme. He has been drug-free for some months and regularly sees a specialist, GP and key worker. His request is for a grant to help set up the first new tenancy of his own.

Case Reading

Reading individual cases is the primary means by which we assess the standard of Inspectors' decisions. During the year 2,072 cases (3.9% of our workload) were read by the Social Fund Commissioner, senior managers and Inspectors with lead responsibility for research and development. Each case undergoes assessment against a series of tests relating to the legality and clarity of the decision. Case readers found that a high proportion of decisions (85.3%) met the quality standard. They found the outcome to be wrong in 7.5% of decisions. We changed the outcome of 109 decisions because of errors identified in case reading.

For those cases which did not meet the quality standard, the main issues identified related to information gathering, conclusions about whether a community care grant should be paid and typographical errors in award amounts. In response to this, we have organised workshops to address these internal quality issues and continue to evaluate their impact.



Support for the review

To support Inspectors with the interpretation and application of the law a large body of Social Fund Commissioner's Advice is available. This can be viewed at www.irs-review.org.uk and is updated as new advice becomes available.

The Commissioner issues new advice in response to changes the Department for Work and Pensions make to the Social Fund or to address issues which arise in our casework.

Case Study

Miss C is 24 years old. She suffers with paranoid schizophrenia, anxiety, depression, psychosis and epilepsy. She regularly sees a psychiatrist and a worker from the local mental health team, and is also following a resettlement plan with a registered charity. She is moving home due to harassment. Miss C applies for a grant to help with the cost of removals and items for her new property.

Customer Experience

The cases we see show the diversity of the people who apply to the Social Fund. This extends beyond ethnicity, age and gender to include other circumstances such as family composition, health, housing status, caring responsibilities, income and financial commitments. The case studies we have included throughout this report illustrate the diversity of our customers and their circumstances.

We are committed to operating a fair and open service to all our customers. We analyse information drawn from: our case work; our contact with customer representatives; and views expressed by customers in response to surveys in order to understand our customers' needs and ensure our service is accessible.

Our client base

We record information about gender and age on every case (Appendix 7 shows the results). As previously indicated, community care grants account for the majority of our work.

The results for 2010 are broadly similar to those of previous years. More men than women applied for an Inspector's review, but women had a higher success rate and received a higher average award. The largest proportion (48.7%) of our customers were aged between 25 and 44 years, with pensioners making up the lowest number of our service users (7.6%). It is perhaps not surprising that we receive significant numbers of applications from people between the ages of 25 and 44 years. These are people more likely to have families requiring support or to have caring responsibilities for elderly relatives.

The low take-up from those of pension age has been the pattern for a number of years. This was commented on most recently during the Public Accounts Committee's inquiry into Community Care Grants in November 2010.¹

Since 2003 we have issued a survey to all customers who apply for an Inspector's review asking for information about their ethnicity. Appendix 7 shows the results of the survey for 2010. The results show broad consistency in decision outcomes across different ethnic groups. However we recognise the response rate reflects a postal survey and the sample size is small in relation to the numbers of people who apply to the Social Fund. Nevertheless, this information provides important assurance about the openness and equality of the service we are delivering.

Case Study

Ms D is 37 years old. As a result of domestic violence, she had until recently lived in a Women's Aid refuge, where she received daily support and attended counselling sessions. She has depression and panic attacks. Her English is limited and she relies on her representative to translate for her. Ms D is staying with a relative while she awaits the outcome of her grant application for items to equip her new flat.

¹ Committee of Public Accounts Eleventh Report of Session 2010-11 *The Community Care Grant*.

During the summer 2010, we conducted a detailed analysis of 500 of our cases selected at random in order to highlight the experiences of our customers and to provide some context and depth to our statistical data. The results from this case examination show the diversity of individual life experiences highlighted by Social Fund casework and the range of help which is being requested. For example:

- more than two-thirds of the applications examined were from single people or families living with mental or physical health problems;
- 40% were from people needing to create or re-establish a home from scratch, with nearly 20% of all applications examined involving someone who has experienced a period of homelessness;
- one-third of the cases showed the customers were spending more than 10% of their weekly income on debt repayments;
- 14.8% involved people with two or more of the following social disadvantages: learning difficulties; physical or mental health problems; homelessness; drug or alcohol problems; ex-offenders; children leaving care, or where there are ongoing custody issues with an ex-partner;
- the average amount requested ranged from £34.60 to £15,080.

The full results of this analysis are available to read on our website (www.irs-review.org.uk).

Customer Feedback

We issue customer survey forms throughout the year asking for views about the quality and speed of service and decision making, our telephone service and the accessibility of the review. We use the results to gauge customer satisfaction with the service we provide and to give us a better understanding of the needs of our customers.

The results for 2010 show that 74.5% of respondents were content, overall, with the way the IRS dealt with their reviews.

In the Standards of Inspectors' Decisions section of this report, we set out the principles of our new approach to Inspectors' reviews. There is increased emphasis on using the telephone to gather information needed to resolve cases rather than writing a letter. We have also worked to strengthen the focus and clarity of Inspectors' letters and decisions. We were, therefore, pleased to see a very high level of satisfaction from customers about the manner in which we handled telephone calls and with the clarity of our written correspondence.

Case Study

Miss B is 20, has a baby daughter living with her and another daughter who is living with a relative. The daughter visits every weekend as part of a Social Services plan for the child to move back in with Miss B permanently. Miss B wants a grant for a cooker, washing machine, fridge, pans, seating, bed, child's bed, bedroom curtains, and carpets.

Complaints about Inspectors' Decisions

Customer complaints are dealt with by Social Fund Inspectors on our Customer Service Team who have the power to correct errors in decisions.

During 2010/2011, we received 3,383 complaints about decisions, which represented 6.3% of our workload. Errors led us to change the outcome in 167 cases which represented 4.9% of the complaints we received and 0.3% of our total workload.

We analyse all complaints in order to identify learning points and areas for improvement. Where we changed the outcome of decisions following a complaint, the most common reason related to the amount awarded.

For those who remain dissatisfied with the Inspector's decision at the end of this process, their recourse is by way of judicial review in the High Court. There have been 30 judicial reviews of Inspectors' decisions since 1988, and 27 of these were, unsurprisingly, during the first ten years of the Social Fund scheme. During 2010/2011, the High Court refused two people permission for judicial review on the grounds that the case was without merit or there was no arguable case.

Last year, we reported that the High Court dismissed an application for judicial review of an Inspector's decision [*R (on the Application of Tilianu) v Social Fund Inspector and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions* [2010] EWHC 213 (Admin)]. Following an appeal by Mr Tilianu, the Court of Appeal upheld the High Court's decision on 8 December 2010 [*R (on the application of Tilianu) v Secretary of State for Work and Pensions* [2010] EWCA Civ 1397].

Complaints about IRS Service

Our Customer Service Team also investigates and responds to complaints about our service. During 2010/2011, we received 134 complaints about our service and upheld 38 of them. Service complaints upheld represented 0.1% of our total workload. The main areas where errors occurred were in typing or recording details, and not returning documents which the customer wanted to receive back.

Case Study

Miss H applies for a grant for household items to equip a permanent tenancy. She is a lone parent with four children. The family has not moved but the equipment on loan to them from the local authority whilst the tenancy was a temporary one is due for return. Miss H has mental health problems and has received intensive support from an organisation who works with people who have been homeless.

Case Study

Ms N is 60 years old. Her health problems include lupus, bowel dysfunction and agoraphobia. She needs help from friends and neighbours with shopping. She applies for a grant to replace seating and a fridge-freezer because hers have broken.

IRS External Complaints Panel

We aim to provide a high quality service to everyone we deal with. In 2002 the IRS established an independent panel of people external to the IRS, in order to scrutinise how the Customer Service Team deal with complaints about Inspectors' decisions.

The panel's objectives are:

- to look at the impartiality, fairness, openness and clarity of IRS complaints processes and services;
- to provide an independent assurance to the Social Fund Commissioner on the effectiveness of IRS complaints handling; and
- to maintain transparency and openness in IRS internal arrangements for complaints handling.

During 2010/2011 the Panel met on three occasions and examined 60 complaints. Overall, it concluded that the standard of handling complaint work remained high; 96.5% of the complaints examined were found to have been handled effectively.

The panel's feedback provides a helpful external perspective on our work. Their comments contribute to the development and improvement of our processes and services. We thank them for their assistance in reinforcing the customer focus within our service delivery.

External Relations

The main groups we deal with in the course of our work are social fund customers, the organisations and individuals that support those customers, operational staff in Jobcentre Plus involved in delivering the Social Fund and Departmental officials with responsibility for related policy matters.

During 2010/2011, we evaluated our external work in light of the economic climate and maintained a strong focus on value for money.

A key aspect of our external work is to establish positive relationships which can further improve the service provided to Social Fund customers. In all of our external relationships, we consider it is vital that we uphold our reputation for independence, impartiality and our ability to balance objectivity and sensitivity. We approach these relationships in a manner that recognises the distinct roles and responsibilities of the different parties involved. As a forward-looking organisation, we believe it is important that we remain receptive to external issues, so that we are well placed to deal with emerging challenges.

During 2010/2011 we met with Ministers, the Chief Executive of Jobcentre Plus, a range of officials within the Department for Work and Pensions and the Jobcentre Plus, and a range of welfare rights and adviser organisations across Great Britain, to discuss key issues affecting the Social Fund.

The Department for Work and Pensions invited us to contribute to research they undertook in order to gain an understanding of the motivations and experiences of customers applying for community care grants.

We have a long standing agreement with the Department for Work and Pensions to feed information back to them, in order to help them improve standards and to inform their operational or policy developments. We analyse our casework to identify

emerging trends and opportunities for improvement. Effective communication and feedback between our respective organisations is important, so that it is possible to identify scope to realise cost savings by maximizing the number of decisions that are right first time and decreasing the rate of review requests.

Issues we have discussed with the Department include the need for timely provision of papers by Jobcentre Plus for independent reviews, the quality of decision making in Jobcentre Plus, in-year changes to social fund directions and regulations, plus a range of operational issues.

Jobcentre Plus is required to send all relevant case papers to the IRS for the Inspector to conduct the review. The papers that are particularly important for the Inspector are those containing direct evidence from the customer; these will include the application form, any supporting letters or records of phone calls and the letter requesting a review in Jobcentre Plus.

Where these papers are unavailable the Inspector has to reconstruct the evidence; this usually entails contacting the customer and asking basic questions about the application. This means that the Inspector may be asking for information that the customer has already provided. The customer may also have sent Jobcentre Plus letters from third parties such as doctors, consultants, landlords, support workers and the Inspector is unable to take account of these unless the customer is able to get a copy. Our concern about this is not only that it can delay decision making, but more importantly, it can affect customers who are asked to repeat information. The urgency of applications makes it important to avoid unnecessary delays or repetition of effort at the final review stage.

During 2010/2011 Jobcentre Plus was unable to provide us with some or all of the important papers in 24% of cases. We understand that the process for scanning all Social Fund documents onto Jobcentre Plus' computer system has now been introduced across the country. We look forward to anticipated improvements in the numbers of cases with complete documentation received by us.

The main types of errors Inspectors identified in the cases they reviewed, related to Jobcentre Plus not holding the right information and not trying to obtain it before making a decision. Inspectors also identified cases for which Jobcentre Plus did not provide all of the customers' papers. This can be a significant issue in those cases where Inspectors cannot see the actual decision which has been made by Jobcentre Plus staff.

During the course of our discussions with the Department for Work and Pensions, we have also drawn attention to feedback that we have received from welfare rights advisers. The most common issues raised by advisers are: the length of time customers have to wait to get an initial grant decision; poor standard letters, poor quality advice and difficulties accessing Jobcentre Plus' enquiry line. This information is anecdotal rather than statistically based, so we are unable to validate it. Nevertheless these are all genuinely held perceptions which can provide valuable insights into customer satisfaction. We have also received positive comments about the operation of the Social Fund, including the manner in which problems were sorted out and the level of service provided.

At stakeholder events with representatives and advisers, we offer practical support and information which is designed to give them a better understanding of the Social Fund and the role of the IRS. The intention behind these events is to increase the understanding and personal effectiveness of advisers and representatives when dealing with Social Fund applicants. Applications that are appropriately detailed, focused and complete should decrease the need to contact the customer, or representative, for missing information and should increase the prospect of the right decision being made first time in Jobcentre Plus.

During the year we focused on delivering larger and less frequent stakeholder events than in previous years, with the intention of capturing a larger audience on each occasion. Although we held fewer stakeholder events than previous years because of financial constraints, we achieved a creditable total of 2,331 attendees from 598 different organisations.

The Social Fund Commissioner attended a number of separate meetings with the heads of third sector organisations with an active and ongoing interest in the Social Fund. He was also invited to give a presentation at the Administrative Justice and Tribunals Council Annual Conference in November 2010 on the subject of innovative approaches to dispute resolution.

A full record of meetings the Commissioner attended can be found at Appendix 8.

Our Journal is available on our website and contains news items about the Social Fund. It also contains anonymous real life case studies, chosen to illustrate particular legal points and which bring a human dimension to the practical application of the law. Our website (www.irs-review.org.uk) includes a wide range of information and all of our publications, which users can download free of charge.

Responding to Consultations and Inquiries

21st Century Welfare

In July 2010 the Government published a consultation document to inform its thinking on reforms to the benefit and Tax Credit system. The Government has since introduced the Welfare Reform Bill 2011 to Parliament, which includes proposals to reform the Social Fund.

The Commissioner based his response to the consultation document on Social Fund customers' perspective and experience, drawing on the IRS' extensive casework and the findings of an analysis of 500 contemporary review applications.

In his comments the Commissioner stated that any restructuring of the welfare benefit system should aim to reduce complexity for the customer, increase efficiency in its operation, promote fairness in treatment and outcomes, reward positive activities and remove barriers for those who are capable of moving into work.

He welcomed the proposal to retain appropriate support for people in the most vulnerable circumstances, commenting that many Social Fund customers fall within that category. He suggested that retaining some form of independent overview would help to promote public confidence in locally based delivery arrangements.

The Commissioner observed that a more receptive welfare system should be capable of delivering a service that is forward looking, responsive to customer need, ensures an effective transition from welfare to work and supports those in most need, whilst also delivering better value for the taxpayer. His view was that effective targeting of support on the most vulnerable should continue to be an important element of a reformed welfare scheme.

White Paper, Universal Credit: Welfare that Works

Following on from its July 2010 consultation on welfare reform, the Government issued a White Paper in November 2010 which set out its reform proposals. The Parliamentary Select Committee for Work and Pensions held a short inquiry into those proposals and invited views on the proposals which required further development. The Commissioner's written evidence focused on the proposal to reform the Social Fund; by retaining some parts within the Universal Credit framework and devolving other aspects to Local Authorities in England and to the Devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales.

The Commissioner commented that IRS casework and research shows that a significant number of vulnerable people who apply to the Social Fund do not receive support from social workers or other professionals working in the welfare system. His view was that any reformed or replacement scheme must have clear, understandable criteria that are applied consistently, along with a fair and equitable distribution of resources. Some of the most vulnerable people were ill-equipped to seek out the level of support they need and any process for citizen redress within the context of a reformed welfare system should be simple and efficient, with few layers of bureaucracy.

Case Study

Mr K recently split from his partner who has care responsibility for their children. The eldest child has ADHD and Mr K has been advised by several professionals, including the child's GP, his head teacher and health visitor, that it would help the child if Mr K had more contact with his son. Mr K applied for a grant to furnish a new tenancy so that he could have his children to stay on a regular basis.

Public Administration Select Committee's Inquiry into Quangos

In October 2010 the Commissioner responded to the Select Committee's issues and questions paper: *Smaller Government: Shrinking the Quango State*. A copy of his written evidence is included in the Committee's fifth report of Session 2010/2011, which is published on the Committee's web page of the UK Parliament website at www.parliament.uk.

Amongst other issues, the Commissioner drew attention to value for money and performance considerations, which should, in his view, be included as part of any review of existing arrangements for arms length bodies.

Public Accounts Committee Report 2010-11: *The Community Care Grant*

The Public Accounts Committee examined the National Audit Office's report, *The Community Care Grant*², which looked into whether more value could be achieved from the community care grant. The Commissioner and Pauline Adey, Office Manager, IRS, gave oral evidence to the Committee on 3 November 2010: a transcript of which is included in the Committee's subsequent report (Eleventh Report of Session 2010-11). The Commissioner also provided written evidence, which is also set out in the Committee's report. Key themes identified included achieving fairness in the existing community care grant budget distribution and ensuring consistency in the standards of Jobcentre Plus' decision making.

Local support to replace Community Care Grants and Crisis Loans for living expenses

In February 2011 the Department for Work and Pensions published a call for evidence which set out the Government's proposals on local delivery of assistance to replace community care grants and crisis loans for general living expenses.

In his response the Commissioner drew on the collective experience and evidence from IRS casework, which provide considerable insight into the situations Social Fund customers face. We have reproduced overleaf the Commissioner's conclusions about the issues he believes must be addressed in the design and administration of new arrangements.

Case Study

Ms B is 62 years old and shares her home with her son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren. Ms B has mental health problems and incontinence. Her daughter-in-law is her fulltime carer and was recently diagnosed with anaemia. The application for a grant is to replace worn household items.

Case Study

Mr V is illiterate, deaf and has learning difficulties. He has been homeless for a year and a local housing association has helped him secure a new tenancy. His grant application is for items to furnish it.

² National Audit Office – Department for Work and Pensions *The Community Care Grant Report* HC286 Session 2010-2011.

Conclusions from the Social Fund Commissioner's Response to the Department for Work and Pensions' call for evidence: *Local Support to replace Community Care Grants and Crisis Loans for living expenses*

My response to this call for evidence has sought to identify a number of issues that I believe must be addressed if any locally based provision to support vulnerable people is to be effective in terms of delivery. Given the wider context of changes within our society since the Social Fund was established in 1988, I accept the arguments for ensuring greater responsiveness. But I believe it is important that the positive elements of the Social Fund scheme are not overlooked in setting up the new arrangements.

Any new locally based arrangements must be underpinned by principles such as the provision of high quality local support; transparency about the type of assistance which is available; clarity about the situations in which help can be given and who to approach; consistency of objectives in relation to delivering local support so there is actual and perceived fairness between different groups of citizens; and safeguards to protect the needs of vulnerable people. I believe it is possible to adopt these principles without compromising the ability of local authorities to respond to and provide for distinctive needs within their local communities.

Although I have focused on the role of local authorities throughout much of this response, I also believe that the third sector has a crucial role to play in any locally based provision.

I am aware of current Government consultations on plans to increase accountability in local auditing in local Government. The responses to that consultation may help to identify an appropriate model in relation to accountability for the new local support arrangements. An alternative approach would be to include an auditing or feedback function to local authorities within an overarching independent grievance process.

It is important that any decision making process seeks to get things right first time and that any review process is timely, efficient, customer focused and provides value for money.

I believe that the right to an independent grievance process should be an integral part of any decision making system that seeks to meet the needs of poor and vulnerable people. The process for redress within the context of any system should be simple and efficient, with as few layers of bureaucracy as possible. In order to promote public confidence, local decisions should be subject to independent scrutiny outside local authority structures and control, such as already happens with parking appeals. This would assure Ministers, as well as the public, that locally based decisions about support are credible and fair.

The Commissioner's full responses to all of the above consultations can be viewed at www.irs-review.org.uk.

Use of Resources

We are committed to maximising economy, efficiency and effectiveness, whilst balancing the needs of our customers, our staff and the taxpayer.

Budget

During 2010/2011, from our direct budget allocation of £5.151 million, we spent a total of £3.911 million, with an underspend of £1.240 million (24%). This was caused by the following:

- Our manpower expenditure was less than originally planned because of falling staff numbers and a civil service wide freeze on recruitment. We initially budgeted to have 120 staff in post but by the end of March 2010, we had only 98.17 in post.
- Our non manpower expenditure was also lower. This was due in part to changes we made to the Inspector's review process and our external work which meant we spent less money on costs such as printing, postage, and travel and subsistence. Other costs, including changes to our IT system were deferred until 2011/2012 or were less than anticipated: for example, legal charges.

Our budget for 2011/2012 is set at £3.766m as part of the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review 2010 settlement, based on an expected workload of 52,700. We have made a commitment to downsize our workforce and have identified changes in process and other efficiencies to manage the reduction in funding for the coming year.

Staff Costs

On 1 April 2010 we had 106.86 staff in post and this had reduced to 98.17 on 31 March 2011. These accounted for 85% of our direct budget expenditure.

Information Technology

In 2010/2011 we spent just over £289,000 on our IT systems, including the costs of our in-house IT team, external support and necessary hardware and software. We spent just under £113,000 on improvements to the IRS IT server network and our monitoring software.

Each year we undertake a review to decide what system changes and improvements are required for the next financial year. The emphasis for 2011/2012 will be consolidating the improvements made to our systems and network over the last few years.

Training and Support for Staff

Our staff are the key to our achievements and remain our most valuable resource.

During 2010/2011 we spent about £205,000 on training and developing our staff. This included key training for Social Fund Inspectors and other staff, essential security, equality and diversity training and a specialist course in Professional Development in Administrative Justice, which will lead to a certificate.

We consider all this training to be vital in ensuring our staff have the appropriate knowledge and skills for their roles and are equipped to deal with the challenges ahead. As staff numbers reduce, the challenge will be to maintain a high level of service with fewer resources. The adaptability and expertise of our staff will be essential in helping us rise to this challenge.

The IRS is pleased to have been recognised as an Investor in People since 1997. Our most recent re-assessment took place in November 2010.

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Appendix 1

IRS Aim, Values and Strategic Objectives 2011

Aim

The IRS aims to provide a high quality independent review that is expert, fair, adaptable and efficient.

Values

Our business values, which we set out below, are the foundation of our approach to work both as an organisation and as individuals working in the IRS.

Expert

We retain our expertise in the Social Fund and decision making:

- We set high standards for the delivery of the review.
- We are committed to developing our staff so they continue to deliver an excellent service.
- We share our case experience and knowledge with others to improve standards for all Social Fund customers so the right decisions are made first time.

Fair

We operate a fair and open service for everyone:

- We behave with integrity, treat all people with respect and courtesy, and appreciate the differences of others.
- We tailor our service so that it is accessible to all our customers.
- We aim to be clear and jargon-free in all of our communications.

Adaptable

We will deliver the necessary business transformation for the IRS:

- We will be receptive to the changing external environment including funding pressures.
- We will work with staff to shape our processes and approaches, taking into account the needs and views of our customers.
- We will learn from our experiences and feedback to drive continuous improvement.

Efficient

We use our staff and financial resources to secure maximum benefit for those who use our service and those who pay for it:

- We have simple, effective and proportionate business processes.
- We aim to deliver the right outcome as quickly as we can.
- We work in ways which motivate our staff and develop their capability and capacity to deliver a high performance.

Strategic Objectives

1. Provide an independent, high quality and accessible review that delivers the right outcome first time.
2. Use IRS knowledge and case experience to support improvements in Social Fund decision making and representation, and to inform Social Fund policy.
3. Focus business resources and support to deliver the required outcomes, including value for money for the taxpayer.

Appendix 2

IRS Review Workload by Month 2010/2011²

Month	Community Care Grants	Crisis Loans	Budgeting Loans	Total Workload
April	2,196	1,290	412	3,898
May	1,970	1,242	310	3,522
June	2,581	1,464	326	4,371
July	2,464	1,446	253	4,163
August	2,368	1,335	323	4,026
September	2,760	1,599	378	4,737
October	2,831	1,664	425	4,920
November	3,746	2,067	504	6,317
December	2,517	1,456	377	4,350
January	2,738	1,572	312	4,622
February	2,333	1,560	263	4,156
March	2,392	1,779	373	4,544
Total	30,896	18,474	4,256	53,626

² Workload comprises decisions on applications for an Inspector's review; applications for community care grants also considered for crisis loans, and vice versa; and reviews of Inspectors' decisions under section 38(5) of the Social Security Act, 1998.

Appendix 3

IRS Review Workload by Jobcentre Plus Benefit Delivery Centre 2010/2011³

Location	Community Care Grants	Crisis Loans	Budgeting Loans	Total Workload
Balham	4,818	2,469	554	7,841
Basildon	248	227	70	545
Belle Vale	1,599	1,215	273	3,087
Bradford	729	399	122	1,250
Bristol	2,588	880	167	3,635
Chesterfield	780	624	112	1,516
Chorlton	2,506	1,632	485	4,623
Ilford	1,164	710	130	2,004
Inverness	1,528	957	162	2,647
Llanelli	366	181	36	583
Milton Keynes	1,616	986	291	2,893
Newcastle	516	327	105	948
Newport	698	329	59	1,086
Norwich	1,046	723	147	1,916
Nottingham	780	529	79	1,388
Perry Barr	3,729	2,225	572	6,526
Sheffield	1,593	865	309	2,767
Springburn	3,615	2,228	430	6,273
Stockton	520	508	72	1,100
Sunderland	457	460	81	998
Total	30,896	18,474	4,256	53,626

³ Workload comprises decisions on applications for an Inspector's review; applications for community care grants also considered for crisis loans, and vice versa; and reviews of Inspectors' decisions under section 38(5) of the Social Security Act, 1998.

Appendix 4

Spread of Decision Types by Jobcentre Plus Benefit Delivery Centre 2010/2011⁴

Location	Community Care Grants – %			Crisis Loans – %			Budgeting Loans – %		
	Confirmation	Substitution	Refer Back	Confirmation	Substitution	Refer Back	Confirmation	Substitution	Refer Back
Balham	51.8	48.2	0.0	41.7	58.3	0.0	94.8	5.2	0.0
Basildon	64.2	35.8	0.0	65.9	34.1	0.0	92.1	7.9	0.0
Belle Vale	60.9	39.1	0.0	63.7	36.3	0.0	97.2	2.8	0.0
Bradford	66.3	33.7	0.0	55.6	44.4	0.0	96.2	3.8	0.0
Bristol	49.6	50.4	0.0	36.8	63.2	0.0	94.9	5.1	0.0
Chesterfield	61.1	38.9	0.0	53.2	46.8	0.0	96.9	3.1	0.0
Chorlton	57.0	43.0	0.0	53.8	46.2	0.0	94.9	5.1	0.0
Ilford	50.7	49.3	0.0	46.4	53.6	0.0	88.2	11.8	0.0
Inverness	57.6	42.4	0.0	58.0	42.0	0.0	93.2	6.8	0.0
Llanelli	60.5	39.5	0.0	45.0	55.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	0.0
Milton Keynes	64.0	36.0	0.0	60.7	39.3	0.0	95.3	4.7	0.0
Newcastle	67.3	32.7	0.0	51.4	48.6	0.0	93.7	6.3	0.0
Newport	54.1	45.9	0.0	46.5	53.5	0.0	93.9	6.1	0.0
Norwich	61.2	38.8	0.0	50.4	49.6	0.0	97.5	2.5	0.0
Nottingham	66.2	33.8	0.0	61.9	38.1	0.0	100.0	0.0	0.0
Perry Barr	59.0	41.0	0.0	46.3	53.7	0.0	95.7	4.3	0.0
Sheffield	65.9	34.1	0.0	49.6	50.4	0.0	96.8	3.2	0.0
Springburn	57.0	43.0	0.0	49.1	50.9	0.0	94.8	5.2	0.0
Stockton	66.9	33.1	0.0	70.9	29.1	0.0	100.0	0.0	0.0
Sunderland	61.9	38.1	0.0	66.1	33.9	0.0	98.7	1.3	0.0

⁴ When reviewing decisions, an Inspector has the power to: confirm Jobcentre Plus' decision; refer the case back to Jobcentre Plus for a fresh decision to be made; or substitute Jobcentre Plus' decision with one of his own.

Appendix 5

IRS Decision Completion Times by Month 2010/2011

Month	Community Care Grants % completed within		Crisis Loans % completed within		Budgeting Loans % completed within		Urgent cases % completed within 24 hours ⁷
	12 days ⁵	21 days ⁶	12 days ⁵	21 days ⁶	12 days ⁵	21 days ⁶	
April	97.0	83.5	100.0	93.3	97.6	-	89.5
May	98.4	93.3	98.6	95.0	98.7	83.3	88.8
June	99.5	93.0	99.1	86.7	100.0	-	90.8
July	99.6	91.8	100.0	100.0	100.0	66.7	90.6
August	99.0	93.1	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	89.2
September	99.7	97.4	100.0	100.0	99.7	100.0	92.5
October	99.8	92.1	100.0	50.0	100.0	100.0	95.2
November	98.1	91.3	99.5	100.0	99.8	100.0	94.5
December	99.2	89.3	99.0	100.0	99.7	100.0	95.2
January	99.6	91.8	100.0	80.0	100.0	100.0	94.4
February	99.6	95.7	99.8	100.0	100.0	100.0	93.3
March	99.6	88.9	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	93.6

⁵ Of those cases which required no enquiries or only straightforward enquiries, we aimed to complete 95% in 12 days.

⁶ For those cases requiring further investigation or complex enquiries, we aimed to complete 90% within 21 days.

⁷ We aimed to complete 90% of urgent cases within 24 hours.

Appendix 6

IRS Quality Standards for the Review 2011

We aim to deliver a high quality review service to our customers.

We will do our best for the users of our service within our available resources. We will:

- be accessible;
- make legally sound and accurate decisions;
- communicate in a straightforward way which can be easily understood; and
- be proportionate and timely.

Appendix 7

Diversity Monitoring Results 2010

Ethnic Group	Responses to survey	Represented cases (*)	Substituted cases (*)	Average award amount
White	4,965 (67.7%)	585 (11.8%)	2,692 (54.2%)	£288.69
Mixed	459 (6.3%)	44 (9.6%)	258 (56.2%)	£324.24
Asian or Asian British	673 (9.2%)	114 (16.9%)	368 (54.7%)	£349.58
Black or Black British	1,087 (14.8%)	265 (24.4%)	662 (60.9%)	£302.68
Chinese or other ethnic group	149 (2.0%)	34 (22.8%)	82 (55.0%)	£399.18

* Percentages relate to the number of responses to the survey

Gender	Applied for Inspectors' reviews	Represented Cases	Substituted cases	Average award amount
Male	22,502	4,101	10,621	£260.38
Female	22,254	3,612	10,290	£301.63

Age	Applied for Inspectors' reviews	Represented Cases	Substituted cases	Average award amount
16-24	8,702	1,489	3,988	£272.16
25-44	23,189	3,544	10,327	£286.80
45-59	12,072	1,961	5,043	£279.74
60+	3,613	719	1,553	£273.38

Appendix 8

Social Fund Commissioners' Meetings 2010/2011

Department for Work and Pensions

- Gill Aitken, Director General, DWP Legal Group
- Suzy Brain England OBE, Chairman, and Fiyaz Mughal, Committee member, DWP Standards Committee
- Martin Brown, Head of Products and Transformation Division, Jobcentre Plus
- Teresa Chammings, Benefit Delivery Manager, Jobcentre Plus, East of England
- Dilwyn Clements, Benefits Manager, Bill Pritchard Customer Services Director, Jobcentre Plus, Wales
- Val Gibson, Director of Benefits and Fraud Directorate, Jobcentre Plus
- Helen Goodman MP, Shadow Minister for Work and Pensions
- Rt Hon Chris Grayling MP, Minister of State for Employment
- Jeremy Groombridge CB, Director of Transformation and Product Management, Jobcentre Plus
- Ruth Owen CBE, Chief Operating Officer and Sheelagh Keyes, Customer Services Director, Jobcentre Plus
- Andrew Selous MP, Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions
- Darra Singh OBE, Chief Executive, Jobcentre Plus
- Philippa Stroud, Special Adviser at Department for Work and Pensions
- Carolyn Taylor, District Manager, Jobcentre Plus, Bedfordshire & Hertfordshire
- Rt Hon Steve Webb MP, Minister of State for Pensions
- Jean Wilson, Jobcentre Plus National Social Fund Manager

Adviser, Charitable and Voluntary Organisations

- Baljinder Bajwa, Senior Welfare Rights Officer, and colleagues from West Midlands Welfare Rights Adviser's Group
- Callum Chomczuk, Senior Policy & Parliamentary Officer, Age Scotland
- Joanna Elson, Chief Executive and Ian Witcombe, Deputy Chief Executive, Money Advice Trust
- Judith Ford, Senior Policy Advisor, (women's issues and benefits), Angela Hughes, Senior Policy Advisor, (housing and benefits), NACRO
- Alison Garnham, Chief Executive, Child Poverty Action Group
- Gillian Guy, Chief Executive and Lizzie Iron, Head of Welfare Policy, Citizens Advice
- Roger Harding, Head of Policy and Kate Webb, Senior Policy and Information Officer, Shelter
- Lady Gillian Keene, Trustee of Family Action and Helen Dent, Director, Family Action
- Linda Kelly, Chief Executive, Lloyds TSB Foundation for England and Wales
- Poverty Alliance Roundtable meeting, where attendees were: Maggie Kelly, Policy and Campaigns Officer, Poverty Alliance; Henri Krishna, Welfare Rights Officer, CPAG Scotland; Jim Lugton, Scottish Campaign on Welfare Reform
- John Kirby, Founder & International Director, Christians Against Poverty
- Helen Macfarlane, Director, The Butterfly Trust

Adviser, Charitable and Voluntary Organisations (continued)

- Charlie Macmillan, Director of Operations and Bobby Duffy, Director of Operations, Scottish Association of Mental Health
- Michelle Mitchell, Charity Director, Age UK
- Frances Moore, Chief Executive Officer, RL Glasspool Charity Trust
- Leslie Morphy, Chief Executive, CRISIS
- Faisal Rahman, Managing Director, Fair Finance
- Sandra Rosano, Advice Worker and Lynda McCran, Advice Worker, The Action Group
- Sam Royston, Policy and Campaigns Officer, Family Action
- Sam Seager, Manager and Frances Moore, Association of Charity Officers
- Henry Simmons, Chief Executive and colleagues, Alzheimer Scotland
- Vanessa Stanislas, Chief Executive, Disability Alliance
- The Trussell Trust, Coventry

Other meetings

- Jodi Berg, Independent Case Reviewer
- Judy Clements OBE, The Adjudicator, The Adjudicator's Office
- Tony Dolphin, Senior Economist and colleagues – Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr) Roundtable Group Optimal Design of Life Course Savings Accounts
- Phil Gibby, Director, and Andy Morrison, National Audit Office – Value for Money Audit
- Chris Goulden, Policy and Research Manager, Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Richard Henderson, Chair and Committee Members – Administrative Justice and Tribunals Council – Scottish Committee
- Lord Kirkwood of Kirkhope
- Dr Peter Kyle, Director of Strategy and Enterprise, Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations
- Jennie McShannon, Chief Executive, Federation of Irish Societies
- Nahid Majid OBE, Director of Programme Development, The Mayor's Fund for London
- Gavin Poole, Executive Director, Centre for Social Justice
- Caroline Sheppard, Chief Adjudicator for the Traffic Penalty Tribunal
- Richard Thomas CBE, Chairman, Administrative Justice and Tribunals Council

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