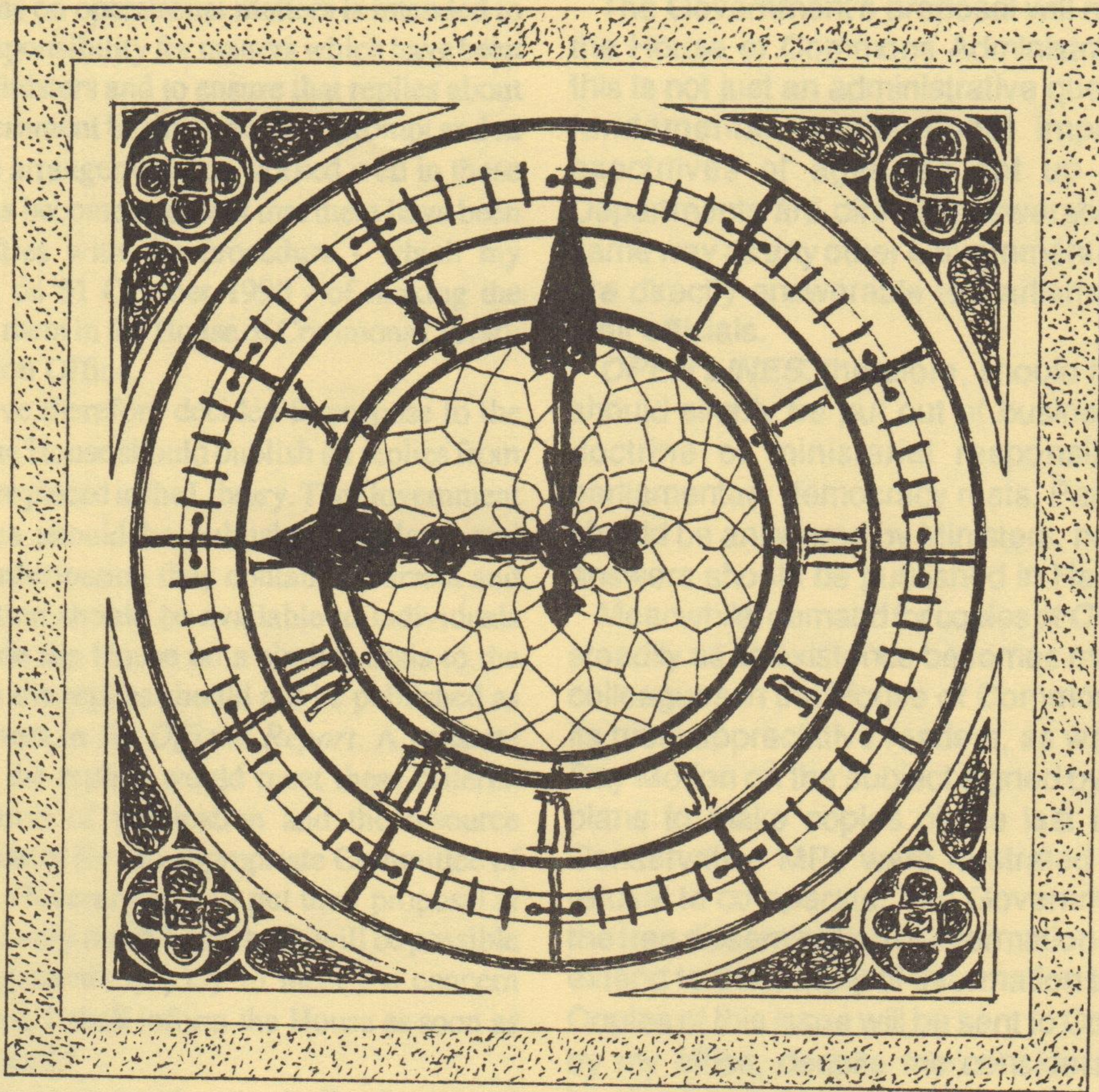


Open Lines



Issue No 4

**Letters sent to Members of Parliament
in November 1991 by Government
executive agencies in reply to
Parliamentary Questions**

With an introduction by
Paul Flynn MP

DECEMBER 1991

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

Introduction

by Paul Flynn, M.P.

Nationalisation of **OPEN LINES** is now official Government policy. It was announced by the Lord President, Mr John MacGregor, in a written answer on November 27 (*Hansard*, columns 558-9) :

"The arrangement whereby chief executives reply direct by letter to written questions on operational matters is intended to recognise their direct responsibility for matters which have been delegated to them by Ministers and to ensure that replies about the carrying out of Government business are full, prompt and as helpful as possible. The arrangement has worked well in those respects. However, it has become apparent that there have been some practical difficulties with the procedure - which my predecessor announced on 31 October 1990 - of making the letters public by placing them in the House of Commons Library and its Public Information Office.

"The Government have therefore decided to propose to the House authorities that the House should publish all replies from chief executives which are placed in the Library. The Government consider that the replies should be published regularly and frequently, so that the information they contain is current and useful; that the publication should be available to individuals and organisations outside the House on a similar basis to the *Official Report*; but that the replies should not be published as ministerial written answers in the *Official Report*. A separate weekly publication for the replies would meet these criteria, although the precise form of publication and the resource implications will be a matter for the appropriate Committee of the House, to which the Government will put their proposal at the earliest opportunity. I very much hope that it will be possible to introduce new arrangements quickly to meet the concern which has been expressed. I shall inform the House as soon as a decision has been reached."

This is good news - but not good enough. Publication of information supplied in reply to parliamentary questions is the responsibility of either the Government or the House of Commons. Recognition of that principle is welcome. But why is a separate publication needed? What is wrong with

Editorial note

We are grateful for the continued support of the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, which has made it possible to continue publishing **OPEN LINES** pending decisions on other means of publishing these letters.

This issue includes nearly all the letters sent to M.P.s in November 1991 by chief executives and their deputies in reply to parliamentary questions. *In every case, unless otherwise stated, the main body of the letter and any*

the Official Report (*Hansard*)? That is where this information would have been published in the past. All that has changed is that Ministers no longer want to accept direct responsibility for services administered by their Departments.

The Government's proposal will now be considered by the House of Commons Administration Committee. But this is not just an administrative question: it is a matter of fundamental constitutional importance. The chief executives of agencies set up within Government Departments are directly answerable to Ministers, in the same way as any other Government official. And Ministers are directly answerable to Parliament for the actions of their officials.

OPEN LINES, therefore, should not be nationalised; it should simply be put out of business by a return to the doctrine of ministerial responsibility on which our parliamentary democracy rests. Parliamentary questions should be answered by Ministers, not by officials, and the answers should be published in *Hansard*.

Meanwhile, demand for copies of **OPEN LINES** is growing steadily as its existence becomes more widely known. My colleagues in the House of Commons have been among its most appreciative readers, as was shown by an Early Day Motion on the subject signed by 68 Members. Sadly, plans to make copies of the last issue available to all Conservative MPs were frustrated by the Chief Whip's refusal to co-operate. The Government's commitment to the free dissemination of information does not, apparently, extend to the supply of information to its own supporters. Copies of this issue will be sent to Conservative Members by my office, despite the considerable amount of work involved, in the hope that they will ensure that alternative arrangements are made for them to receive any future issues.

Paul Flynn, M.P.

December 1991

House of Commons

attached tables are reproduced in full, only the formal opening and closing paragraphs being omitted. The only letter omitted entirely is one from the Benefits Agency to Mr Michael Meacher MP on delays in paying benefits to an individual constituent. Two lengthy appendices to a letter from the Resettlement Agency to Mr Dave Nellist MP have also been omitted (see page 9, column 2).

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BENEFITS AGENCY

Open-plan offices

Mr Graham Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proposals his Department has to study the effects of a system of open-plan offices and facilities along the lines of those introduced by the Employment Service and if he will make a statement.

Letter from Mrs Ann Robinson, Director of Policy and Planning, 8 November 1991:

I understand, and in the customer service context, have a good deal of sympathy with movement towards the open-plan concept. However, whilst we are watching developments in the Employment Service with interest, we do not have a general intention to introduce open-plan reception facilities in our offices at the present time. It is for District Managers, in consultation with customers and staff, to determine what is right in their particular circumstances.

We are continuing to improve our offices in line with customer preferences and produce a 'Design Guide' to help District Managers plan improvements to office facilities.

Social fund information

Mr Graham Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make it his policy to collect information at district office level on (a) the number of applications made for the various components of the social fund, (b) the number refused and accepted, (c) the grounds for refusal and (d) the numbers of loans recovered.

Letter from Mrs Ann Robinson, Director of Policy and Planning, 8 November 1991:

The statistical information you specify in your question is currently collected at District level.

Child benefit: administrative costs

Mr Graham Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what administrative costs are expected as a result of the introduction of a higher amount of child benefit for the oldest child.

Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 12 November 1991:

The total administrative cost of the April '91 introduction was approximately £210,000. In addition to the ITSA costs of changing the Child Benefit computer program and costs within the Child Benefit Centre (CBC), this figure includes the cost of adjustments made to Retirement Pension (RP), Widow's Benefit (WB) and Guardian's Allowance (GA), to take account of the increased rate for the eldest eligible child.

Poll tax deductions: Nottingham

Mr Graham Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the total amount of poll tax collected in 1990-91 from direct deductions in benefit from offices covering the Nottingham, North constituency; and if he will make a statement.

Letter from Mr David Riggs, Finance Director, 28 November 1991:

There are two District Offices covering the Nottingham North constituency; East Nottinghamshire and West Nottinghamshire. Since Parliamentary constituencies do not correspond to areas

covered by Benefits Agency offices, the figures quoted will overlap with neighbouring constituencies.

The figures for 1990/91 are as follows:-

East Nottinghamshire District Office	£467.40
West Nottinghamshire District Office	NIL

I should point out that Direct Payments from Income Support for arrears of Community Charge can only be made where the Local Authority has obtained a court order or summary warrant for the recovery of the debt.

Disablement benefit

Dr Norman Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, further to his answer to the hon. Member for Greenock and Port Glasgow, *Official Report*, 18 November, column 7, (a) how many of the 1,367 claims for disablement benefit were successful, (b) how many went to appeal at a tribunal, (c) what was the average amount paid out to successful claimants, (d) what was the total amount paid out in respect of these claims and (e) how many are awaiting hearings at appeal tribunals.

[This question refers to claims received in Greenock and Port Glasgow resulting from a take-up campaign.]

Letter from Mr David Riggs, Finance Director, 28 November 1991:

Of the 1,367 claims to Disablement Benefit, 67 were successful. Information available so far shows that the number which went to appeal was in the region of 100; the average amount paid to successful customers was £950; and the total amount paid out on those claims is £63,650. There are currently 57 cases awaiting hearings at appeal tribunals.

Benefits office, Neath

Mr Peter Hain: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the proposal to close the Neath branch of the Benefits Agency.

Letter from Mr David Riggs, Finance Director, 22 November 1991:

I can confirm that arrangements exist for consultation to take place between Mr Bichard and the Secretary of State over any proposals to close offices or to re-organise in such a way that staff or public are significantly affected.

The District Manager has put forward certain recommendations which may affect service provision in his District.

At this stage Mr Bichard has not had the opportunity to consider the recommendations, and therefore no decision has been made.

Once the matter has been fully considered and decisions have been arrived at, Mr Bichard will write to you further.

Service targets: Wales

Mr Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what are the current targets for his Department's offices in Wales for meeting (a) delivery and (b) accuracy of benefits administered.

Letter from Mr David Riggs, Finance Director, 22 November 1991:

The whole of Wales is covered by one Area Directorate - the "Wales Area Directorate". Within this Directorate there are eleven Districts. Each District has produced a Business Plan which includes the performance targets for 1991/92. A copy of the targets for each District are given in the annex to this letter.

Annex

	Gwynedd- igion	Mid Wales & Maelor	Cynon, Merthyr*	South Glamorgan	Swansea	West Wales	N. Wales Coast	Ogwr, Afan Nedd	Taff Rhondda	S. Gwent & Islwyn	N. Gwent & Brecon
Clearance times											
Appeals	24.7	24.4	23.2	21.0	25.0	20.0	26.0	25.0	25.7	25.0	23.0
Social Fund											
Crisis Loans	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.1	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0
Community Care Grants	4.6	4.7	5.1	5.1	5.1	4.5	4.9	5.7	6.0	5.1	5.6
Budgeting Loans	4.3	4.8	5.0	5.0	5.0	4.3	4.9	5.0	6.0	4.5	5.4
Income support											
Claims	3.4	3.6	2.9	3.9	3.5	3.6	3.2	3.5	3.5	3.9	3.7
Assessment Review	1.5	1.7	1.3	1.8	1.4	1.4	1.3	1.5	1.7	1.4	1.5
Sickness/ Invalidity Benefit											
Claims	6.7	6.6	6.6	6.9	6.2	6.2	6.4	6.7	7.0	6.6	6.6
Retirement Pension											
Claims	20.2	17.6	18.8	23.2	21.0	20.0	19.0	20.0	21.3	20.2	18.9
Load**	12.4	11.8	11.3	11.9	11.2	12.5	11.3	10.0	12.4	12.0	13.2
Accuracy rates											
Income Support Short Term Benefit	95.0%	95.5%	94.0%	92.2%	95.5%	93.2%	94.0%	94.0%	93.3%	93.5%	93.5%
	97.5%	97.4%	97.0%	96.7%	96.5%	97.7%	97.5%	97.0%	97.2%	96.6%	97.2%

* The full name of the District "Cynon, Merthyr" is: "Cynon, Merthyr & Rhymney Valley".

** Load includes any claim taken from files to answer a query after a final award has been made.

Income support: hardship payments

Mr Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many income support and unemployment benefit claimants have (a) successfully and (b) unsuccessfully claimed income support under the hardship rule during each quarter from October 1989 onwards in Wales; and how many such claims were in doubt due to (i) not actively seeking work, (ii) refusing suitable employment and (iii) availability for work.

Letter from Mr David Riggs, Finance Director, 25 November 1991:

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

Annex A: Successful/unsuccessful hardship claims - Wales December 1989 to September 1991

	1		2	
	Awarded	Refused	Awarded	Refused
Dec 89	39	16	8	4
Mar 90	55	14	10	2
Jun 90	65	6	19	9
Sept 90	47	14	8	3
Dec 90	23	2	3	2
Mar 91	64	8	2	3
Jun 91	14	4	9	1
Sept 91	13	6	5	2
Total	320	70	64	26

Note

Figures in column 1 refer to those applying for hardship payments due to doubt over availability for employment.

Figures in column 2 refer to those applying for hardship payments due to doubt over the "actively seeking work" criteria.

Child benefit: administrative cost

Mr Michael Meacher: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the additional administrative cost of (a)

introducing a two-tier child benefit in April 1991 and (b) making a half year increase in child benefit in October; and what was the yearly cost difference between paying a flat rate child benefit to every child and a two-tier benefit.

Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 5 November 1991:

I have detailed below the additional administration costs of introducing a two rate Child Benefit. In addition to the ITSA costs of changing the Child Benefit computer program and costs within the Child Benefit Centre (CBC) adjustments were necessary to Income Support (IS), Retirement Pension (RP), Widow's Benefit (WB) and Guardians Allowance (GA) to take account of the increased rate of Child Benefit for the first child. The costs involved are as follows:-

	£ millions
April '91 Uprating	2.96
Oct '91 Uprating	4.95
Additional yearly cost	7.91

Further letter from Mr Michael Bichard, 8 November 1991:

I wrote to you on 5 November ...

Unfortunately the figure which I provided for the April 1991 Uprating included the gross costs for all the Income Support action involved in making adjustments on account of the increase in Child Benefit at April 1991. I should have made it clear that this Income Support expenditure would have been incurred anyway even if there had been a straightforward uprating of Child Benefit.

The additional cost attributable solely to the introduction of a two rate Child Benefit at April 1991 was in fact £210,000. The October costs remain at £4.95 million and the additional yearly costs are reduced to around £5.2 million instead of the £7.91 million quoted.

Office closures

Mr Michael Meacher to ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 5 November, *Official Report*, column 90, what information is available concerning the closure of benefit claim offices during official opening hours; and what procedures or regulations govern closure during official opening hours and what discretion is left to the local managers.

[In reply to a question by Mr Meacher asking "how many benefit claim offices were closed to the public at any time during the past year during official opening hours because they were becoming overcrowded or because staff were over-pressed; which offices closed; and for how many days", Miss Ann Widdecombe wrote: "I understand from Mr Michael Bichard, the chief executive of the Benefits Agency, that the information could be obtained only at disproportionate cost." (Hansard, 5 November 1991, written answers, column 90)]

Letter from Mr David Riggs, Finance Director, 18 November 1991:

Information on premature closure of public access in Agency offices is not held centrally, but district managers will be able to provide details for their own particular areas of responsibility.

Communications with customers are an essential part of Agency business, and they rightly expect to be able to get in touch with the office dealing with their affairs without undue delay or difficulty (by telephone, letter, or calling at the office). But, inevitably, there are exceptional occasions, perhaps during industrial action, when it is not possible to keep the office open and maintain acceptable levels of caller service, public comfort and safety. We have made it plain, however, that closure on a regular basis is not acceptable.

The Agency has not taken a rigid line on "opening hours" and temporary closures. The final decision on what will constitute an office's "normal" public opening hours is one for the district manager, but we expect it to be taken only after careful consideration, and in the light of "traditional" opening hours (9.30 to 3.30), customers' expressed preferences, and any other relevant factors (including the views of area, territorial and central service colleagues). The key factor (and "core value") is "customer service" and that must be the benchmark for every decision.

In fact, there are many legitimate reasons - all falling within the "customer service" ambit - why an office changes its opening hours, permanently or short-term: for example, to fit transport patterns, or to facilitate staff training. And there may be occasions when accommodation, staffing, heating or other factors force management to open late, or close prematurely. It remains the Agency's policy to maintain published opening hours whenever possible.

Income support: hardship payments

Mr Dave Nellist: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security for each quarter since October 1989, how many income support and unemployment benefit claimants in Coventry have (a) successfully and (b) unsuccessfully claimed income support under the hardship rules, showing those whose claim was in doubt due to (i) not actively seeking work, (ii) refusing suitable employment and (iii) availability for work.

Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, 18 November 1991:

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

Annex A: Successful/unsuccessful hardship claims - Coventry December 1989 to September 1991

	1		2	
	Awarded	Refused	Awarded	Refused
Dec 89	0	0	1	0
Mar 90	0	0	11	0
Jun 90	0	0	0	0
Sept 90	0	0	1	1
Dec 90	0	0	2	0
Mar 91	0	0	0	0
Jun 91	0	0	0	0
Sept 91	0	0	0	0
Total	0	0	15	1

Note

Figures in column 1 refer to those applying for hardship payments due to doubt over availability for employment.

Figures in column 2 refer to those applying for hardship payments due to doubt over the "actively seeking work" criteria.

Social Fund

Mr Dave Nellist: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many claimants applied for grants or loans under the social fund during the 1990-91 financial year in Coventry; how many were turned down and for what reason; what was the average size of the grant, crisis loan or budgetary loan in the year; and if he will provide comparable figures for the first three and six months of 1991-92.

Letter from Mr David Riggs, Finance Director, 18 November 1991:

The statistical information you request is attached at Annexes A and B. Coventry is served solely by the Benefits Agency's Coventry District. This District covers an area which was administered, prior to April 1991, by two former Departmental offices: Coventry East and Coventry West.

Annex A: Coventry District, April-June 1991 (the former Departmental local offices of Coventry East and Coventry West for 1990/91)

		1990/91	April 91	May 91	June 91
Nos. of applications	BL*	8,638	826	794	715
	CCG	4,320	535	552	466
	CL	5,608	537	591	535
Average award (£)	BL	212.52	222.44	212.00	218.21
	CCG	322.84	296.00	342.24	281.13
	CL	50.71	55.64	56.24	56.59
Reason for refusal **					
Savings over £500	BL	1	0	0	0
	CCG	9	0	0	0
	CL	0	0	0	0
Not receiving IS ***	BL	287	38	26	36
	CCG	0	0	0	0
	CL	0	0	0	0
Not receiving IS for 26 weeks	BL	860	102	74	98
	CCG	0	0	0	0
	CL	0	0	0	0
IS entitlement unlikely	BL	0	0	0	0
	CCG	253	27	26	25
	CL	0	0	0	0
Excluded item(s)	BL	171	13	13	8
	CCG	128	15	18	11
	CL	10	2	1	3
Excluded applicant	BL	1	0	0	0
	CCG	1	1	0	0
	CL	2	1	0	0

		1990/91								
		April 91	May 91	June 91	July 91	August 91	September 91			
Applied for less than £30	BL	43	11	4	4	Not receiving IS for 26 weeks	BL	65	76	63
	CCG	19	4	3	3		CCG	0	0	0
	CL	0	0	0	0		CL	0	0	0
Adjusted amount less than £30	BL	78	6	8	5	IS entitlement unlikely	BL	0	0	0
	CCG	16	4	1	2		CCG	29	26	29
	CL	0	0	0	0		CL	0	0	0
Total debt over £1,000	BL	6	1	1	1	Excluded item(s)	BL	8	12	16
	CCG	0	0	0	0		CCG	19	24	18
	CL	4	0	0	0		CL	1	4	0
Previous application for item	BL	171	16	13	17	Excluded applicant	BL	0	0	0
	CCG	137	22	16	12		CCG	2	0	1
	CL	27	5	5	1		CL	0	0	0
No serious risk	BL	0	0	0	0	Applied for less than £30	BL	2	5	3
	CCG	0	0	0	0		CCG	2	1	3
	CL	460	40	34	23		CL	0	0	0
Inability to repay	BL	165	17	15	21	Adjusted amount less than £30	BL	10	4	1
	CCG	0	0	0	0		CCG	3	1	1
	CL	102	9	9	12		CL	0	0	0
Help available elsewhere	BL	16	1	2	0	Total debt over £1,000	BL	0	0	0
	CCG	15	0	0	3		CCG	2	0	0
	CL	32	2	2	1		CL	0	0	1
Insufficient priority	BL	972	113	93	103	Previous application for item	BL	9	5	4
	CCG	304	41	39	37		CCG	10	14	12
	CL	3	1	2	0		CL	3	2	3
Alternative available	BL	3	0	1	0	No serious risk	BL	0	0	0
	CCG	1	0	1	0		CCG	0	0	0
	CL	13	0	1	0		CL	33	26	29
Loan refused, CCG paid	BL	196	22	18	23	Inability to repay	BL	13	15	25
	CCG	0	0	0	0		CCG	0	0	0
	CL	1	0	0	0		CL	9	17	12
Enough money for crisis	BL	0	0	0	0	Help available elsewhere	BL	2	0	1
	CCG	0	0	0	0		CCG	0	0	2
	CL	23	1	0	2		CL	1	2	5
Direction 4 not satisfied	BL	0	0	0	0	Insufficient priority	BL	81	91	111
	CCG	1,800	276	277	295		CCG	38	31	52
	CL	0	0	0	0		CL	1	1	1
Savings over £1,000 (aged 60 or over)	BL	1	0	0	0	Alternative available	BL	2	3	0
	CCG	7	1	2	0		CCG	0	1	1
	CL	0	0	0	0		CL	0	0	2
Other reason	BL	246	15	6	13	Loan refused, CCG paid	BL	22	20	31
	CCG	132	4	5	5		CCG	0	0	0
	CL	63	15	13	18		CL	1	1	0

* BL = Budgeting Loan. CCG = Community Care Grant. CL = Crisis Loan.

** The definitions for "reason for refusal" are necessarily brief. Please consult the Social Fund Manual for a more comprehensive explanation of the decision making process.

*** IS = Income Support.

Annex B: Coventry District, July-September 1991

		July 91	August 91	September 91
Nos. of applications	BL*	736	633	864
	CCG	527	426	591
	CL	668	571	576
Average award (£)	BL	220.59	216.46	200.08
	CCG	359.91	309.22	351.59
	CL	62.03	58.47	58.07

Reason for refusal **

Savings over £500	BL	0	0	0
	CCG	0	0	1
	CL	0	0	0
Not receiving IS ***	BL	39	37	39
	CCG	0	0	0
	CL	0	0	0

Enough money for crisis	BL	0	0	0
	CCG	0	0	0
	CL	0	0	1
Direction 4 not satisfied	BL	0	0	0
	CCG	219	269	280
	CL	0	0	0
Savings over £1,000 (aged 60 or over)	BL	0	0	0
	CCG	0	0	0
	CL	0	0	0
Other reason	BL	8	13	14
	CCG	9	9	2
	CL	28	33	21

* BL = Budgeting Loan. CCG = Community Care Grant. CL = Crisis Loan.

** The definitions for "reason for refusal" are necessarily brief. Please consult the Social Fund Manual for a more comprehensive explanation of the decision making process.

*** IS = Income Support.

Doncaster offices: staff

Mr Dave Nellist: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many (a) permanent and (b) temporary staff were employed in each category in his Coventry offices on 1 January 1991, 1 May 1991 and at the latest convenient date; and if he will make a statement.

Letter from Mr David Riggs, Finance Director, 18 November 1991:

The number of staff employed in each of the Coventry offices on 1 January 1991 is shown at Appendix A.

The number of staff employed in the District Office on 1 May 1991 is shown at Appendix B.

The current staffing position at the Coventry District Office is shown at Appendix C.

Appendix A

Number of staff - Coventry East - 1 January 1991

	Permanent	Temporary
Grade 7	1	
Senior Executive Officer	1	
Higher Executive Officer	9	
Local Officer 1	47.5	2
Administrative Officer	86	4
Administrative Assistant	12.5	12
Others	8	1
Total	165	19

Number of staff - Coventry West - 1 January 1991

	Permanent	Temporary
Grade 7	1	
Senior Executive Officer	1	
Higher Executive Officer	6.5	
Local Officer 1	34.5	
Administrative Officer	57	2
Administrative Assistant	19	11
Others	7	
Total	126	13

Appendix B

Number of staff in the Coventry District as at 1 May 1991

	Permanent	Temporary
Grade 7	2	
Senior Executive Officer	2	
Higher Executive Officer	10.5	
Local Officer 1	76.5	1
Administrative Officer	136	
Administrative Assistant	37	4
Others	18	
Total	282	5

Appendix C

Number of staff in the Coventry District as at 1 November 1991

	Permanent	Temporary
Grade 7	1	
Senior Executive Officer	2	
Higher Executive Officer	12.5	
Local Officer 1	71	
Administrative Officer	136.5	
Administrative Assistant	36	2
Others	14.5	
Total	273.5	2

Coventry Area: Targets

Mr Dave Nellist: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what are the current targets for his Department's offices in Coventry for meeting (a) delivery and (b) accuracy for benefits administered.

Letter from Mr David Riggs, Finance Director, 18 November 1991:

The area in question is covered by Coventry District. The performance targets for 1991/92 have been published in the Coventry District Business Plan. Since this was published, three of the targets have been tightened following consultation with the Area Director. A copy of the targets are given in the annex to this letter.

Annex

Clearance times

Appeals	25.0 days
Social Fund	
Crisis Loans	1.0 day
Community Care Grants	7.0 days
Budgeting Loans	7.0 days
Income support	
Claims	3.9 days
Assessment Reviews	2.0 days
Sickness/Invalidity Benefit	
Claims	11.0 days
Retirement Pension	
Claims	22.0 days
Load*	12.0 days

*Load includes any claim taken from files to answer a query after a final award has been made.

Accuracy rates

Income Support Accuracy	93.0%
Short Term Benefit Accuracy	95.0%

Improving services: Coventry

Mr Dave Nellist: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what action he is taking to improve the services his Department offers for people in Coventry; and if he will make a statement.

Letter from Mr David Riggs, Finance Director, 18 November 1991:

Since the launch of the Benefits Agency in April, District Managers have been drawing up their business plans for future development in their District. As part of this process, managers have been consulting widely within the local community to establish the needs of the public, to enable them to provide the service the customers want from their local office.

In Coventry District, a Customer Service manager and support team have organised a full programme of liaison meetings as well as presentations with a particular emphasis on disadvantaged groups. A more personal service to customers is being developed including new complaints procedures, which provide, when appropriate, direct access to the manager.

A new training programme has been undertaken to improve customer care skills. It has been provided for staff with direct contact with the public, including telephonists. Specialists have been appointed to deal with complex areas of work to ensure that the correct procedures are followed without undue delay.

A local office guide has been produced and distributed within the city and senior management are taking a high profile in meetings with local outside organisations. Service and strategic plans have been drawn up and are in operation, reflecting the long term objectives for the District. These include rationalisation of the office estate, improved awareness training and staff development. A new office is being built, due for completion in late 1992 which will house staff currently based at the Gosford Street and Apollo House sites. This rationalisation will offer an opportunity to provide a much improved service to customers.

Family credit: Coventry

Mr Dave Nellist: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people in Coventry are currently receiving family credit; and what were the figures six and twelve months ago.

Letter from Mr David Riggs, Finance Director, 18 November 1991:

The number of families receiving Family Credit, who were living in the areas covered by the Benefits Agency offices in Coventry at the time their award was made, is as follows:

31 October 1991	1,805
19 April 1991	1,689
2 November 1990	1,521

These figures represent the number of awards in payment on each of the given dates. They do not include those who had claimed by a given date but whose claim had yet to be decided.

Hardship claims (amended figures)

Ms Claire Short: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment for each region and for Great Britain as a whole for each quarter since October 1989, how many income support and unemployment benefit claimants have (a) successfully and (b) unsuccessfully claimed income support under the hardship rules, showing those whose claim was in doubt due to (i) not actively seeking work, (ii) refusing suitable employment and (iii) availability for work.

Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 18 November 1991:

Ann Robinson wrote to you on 25 October in reply to your recent Parliamentary Question . . .

Unfortunately the figures provided were transcribed incorrectly and relate to a month instead of a quarter. Attached, at Annexes A and B are the correct figures.

[The letter from Ms Robinson of 25 October, published on page 6 of *Open Lines* No. 3, said:

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

"Figures prior to April 1991 are based on the Department's former Regional Organisation. Figures from April 1991 are based on the Benefits Agency's new Territorial structure."

Annex A - Actively seeking work

Successful/unsuccessful hardship claims from December 1989 to September 1991

		12/89	3/90	6/90	9/90	12/90	3/91
North East	A	12	23	22	22	23	10
	R	5	7	14	4	13	2
Midlands	A	18	19	15	12	4	7
	R	9	9	9	4	7	5
London	A	51	75	49	32	21	31
	R	3	12	10	17	4	3
London	A	25	23	24	22	7	3
	R	17	4	22	2	14	4
Wales & South West	A	20	37	28	23	10	8
	R	13	12	19	8	3	8
North West	A	9	9	10	14	31	39

		8	7	7	15	23	20
		12/89	3/90	6/90	9/90	12/90	3/91
Scotland	A	48	24	11	10	42	62
	R	26	10	13	5	9	18
National	A	183	210	159	135	138	160
	R	81	61	94	55	73	60
Southern	A						67
	R						20
Wales & Central England	A						31
	R						23
Scotland & N England	A						111
	R						57
National	A						209
	R						100

A = Awarded R = Refused

Annex B - Availability for work

Successful/unsuccessful hardship claims from December 1989 to September 1991

		12/89	3/90	6/90	9/90	12/90	3/91	6/91	9/91
North East	A	78	90	105	44	40	23		
	R	41	26	42	45	23	12		
Midlands	A	45	38	54	27	36	25		
	R	31	46	23	25	15	13		
London	A	334	204	166	130	83	54		
	R	36	46	23	27	12	14		
London	A	137	94	48	49	26	61		
	R	47	22	7	6	12	26		
Wales & South West	A	105	118	136	103	56	81		
	R	88	85	63	62	42	39		
North West	A	50	57	58	111	80	56		
	R	40	30	28	161	138	108		
Scotland	A	48	70	47	67	30	30		
	R	27	54	25	38	33	28		
National	A	797	671	614	531	351	330		
	R	310	282	226	364	275	240		
Southern	A							254	210
	R							59	86
Wales & Central England	A							85	76
	R							133	135
Scotland & N England	A							89	158
	R							67	111
National	A							428	444
	R							259	332

A = Awarded R = Refused

CONTRIBUTIONS AGENCY

Contribution deficiency notices

Mr Graham Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many individuals his Department were unable to trace to tell them they could make up their contributions to claim a full pension.

Letter from Miss Ann Chant, Chief Executive, 12 November 1991:

In the 89/90 year, which is the latest year for which figures are available, the Department was unable to issue 770,000 deficiency notices because the address of the individuals held was known to be out of date.

Deficiency notices may be issued at any time during the

RESETTLEMENT AGENCY

contribution life of an individual. It is not possible to know at any given time, what the significance is of one year's deficiency. For instance, if there is only one year where there is a deficiency, it is unlikely that it would have any effect upon pension entitlement.

The issue of deficiency notices is a service provided by the Agency for two reasons. Firstly, it gives the individual details of the voluntary contributions they could pay to make that year count for retirement pension purposes should they wish to do so. Secondly, it gives them the opportunity to tell the Agency if our records are inaccurate.

Unpaid contributions

Mr Gerald Bowden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will investigate the case of Mr Derek Merralls of 48 Worlingham Road, London; and if he will review his Department's policy with regard to the payment of unemployment benefit to employees from whom national insurance payments have been deducted by an employer but not paid into the national insurance fund by an employer.

Letter from Mr G Bertram, Deputy Chief Executive, 8 November 1991:

On 8 September 1991 the Department's office in Peckham received a request from the local Unemployment Benefit Office (UBO) to investigate the apparent deficiency in Mr Merralls' contribution record. Enquiries revealed that his employer, Partitioning Component Supplies, went into receivership on 11 March 1991. Additionally, whilst National Insurance contributions had been properly deducted from his remuneration, the end of year deduction document submitted by the employer did not contain sufficient identity details to allow the Department to post the contributions paid to Mr Merralls' account.

On 25 September 1991 action was taken to correct Mr Merralls' National Insurance account and the local UBO were advised of the true position. I understand that Mr Merrall was paid arrears of Unemployment Benefit amounting to £1224.45 by the local UBO in week commencing 21 October 1991.

The successful outcome of Mr Merralls' case is an example of the Department's policy working in practice. I have taken the opportunity, therefore, to set out below the line which is followed in these circumstances.

Employees' Class 1 National Insurance contributions are usually collected by the Inland Revenue's PAYE arrangements, the bulk of which are paid into the National Insurance Fund. Employees' contributions which have been collected are recorded after the end of the tax year on the person's National Insurance account, which is held centrally at Longbenton, Newcastle upon Tyne. If insufficient contributions are recorded there for that year, the person is informed and irregularities can then come to light. Failure on the part of the employer to pay over contributions can also be discovered when a claim to benefit fails, as happened in Mr Merralls' case.

All cases where contributions have not been recorded on the person's account are investigated urgently. Contributions will usually be treated as if they had been paid, so that entitlement to benefit is not affected. Action is then brought against the employer to recover the arrears.

Finally, action is now being taken by the Department's Insolvency Section to investigate and pursue any unpaid contributions due from the employer.

Resettlement unit closures

Mr John Battle: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many resettlement units outside London have been closed since 1987; and whether dates have been set for closing the remaining units;

(2) what funding is being made available for resettlement unit replacement bed spaces; and what allowance for inflation is given for both revenue and capital costs;

(3) what consultation is taking place with housing organisations, local authorities and residents regarding the planned closure of resettlement units outside London;

(4) when it is expected the Leeds resettlement unit will close; and whether the planned number of replacement bed spaces will cater for the same number of beds as in the existing resettlement unit;

(5) if he will ensure that proceeds of the sale of land and buildings in the resettlement unit closure programme will be used to fund replacement beds.

Letter from Mr Tony Ward, Chief Executive, 25 November 1991: Firstly, you asked how many resettlement units outside London have been closed since 1987; and whether dates have been set for closing the remaining units.

Since 1987, only one unit has been closed. This was at Brighton on 31 March 1991. A further unit, Fazakerly (Liverpool) was due to close on 31 March 1991. However, as its immediate replacement which was being built on the same site by Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council and capital funded by the Agency was not ready as planned, the local authority agreed to run the old unit as their own until such time as the new one opens. This is imminent.

Dates have been set to close four more units. The units at Alvaston (Derby), Winterbourne (Bristol), Plawsworth (Durham) and Walkden (Manchester) will close by 31 March 1992, by which time alternative provision will be available. No dates have been set for closing the remaining units although I am planning to announce a further four by the end of March 1992.

Secondly, you asked what funding is being made available for resettlement unit replacement bed spaces; and what allowance for inflation is given for both revenue and capital costs. The amount of funding made available for replacement beds is dependent on the circumstances of individual schemes. However, for revenue grants, we generally plan to make grants to alternative providers of at least the net cost of the resettlement unit they are to replace. In the current financial year, £9.048m has been made available to the Agency for both capital and revenue grants to replacement providers. For 1989-90 and again in 1990-91 I was able to increase all revenue grants by 7%. A figure for 1992-93 has not as yet been set, but for planning purposes, organisations can expect something in the region of 5%.

Inflationary increases as such for capital are not made. Instead each scheme is considered on its merit and in the light of prevailing conditions.

Thirdly, you asked what consultation is taking place with housing associations, local authorities and residents regarding the planned closure of resettlement units outside London.

The Agency has a continuous dialogue with those in the field

of resettlement provision including housing associations and local authorities. We are particularly mindful of the needs of residents in closing units and especially those who may have been living in them for some time. Each resident is dealt with and counselled on an individual basis and we try to ensure that alternative accommodation is available.

Fourthly, you asked when it is expected the Leeds Resettlement Unit will close; and whether the planned number of replacement bed spaces will cater for the same number of beds as in the existing resettlement unit.

As I have already said, the closure of a further four units will be announced in March. It is unlikely that Leeds will be one of them, and at the moment no date has been fixed. At that time any replacement provision will cater for at least the same number of beds. In fact, our experience of replacement schemes is that they are generally able to provide more beds than in the old resettlement unit.

Finally, you asked if the Secretary of State will ensure that proceeds of the sale of land and buildings in the resettlement unit closure programme will be used to fund replacement beds.

In his evidence to the Social Services Committee in 1985, Mr John Major the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department of Health and Social Security said that the capital proceeds from the disposal of the resettlement units would not be redirected into resettlement provision. The position has not changed and any capital receipts will accrue to the Treasury.

It might seem that this deprives the programme of funds which could be used to make non recurring grants (capital) to alternative providers. However, this is not the full story. Whilst all the resettlement units (except two properties in London which are leased and the one at Brighton which is now closed) are owned by the Government the Agency actually has to pay an annual sum for them to the Department of Environment (Property Holdings). This sum is the equivalent of the potential rental income for the properties. It is however retained by the Agency on a continuing basis even after the units are closed.

Replacement providers, having been capital funded by the Agency, are of course owner occupiers and as such have no need for the equivalent rental charge which the Agency retains. This apparent extra money in lieu of the capital receipts enables the Agency to use it initially for capital grants, but ultimately for revenue grants. It is partially through this measure that additional beds over and above those in the resettlement units can be funded.

If you require further information perhaps you would let me know.

I enclose a copy of our 1990-91 Annual report which gives more details of the work we are doing.*

* Copies of the annual report can be obtained from the Resettlement Agency, Euston Tower, London NW1 3DN.

Resettlement unit closures

Mr Dave Nellist: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement about the closure programme of resettlement units; what alternatives are in place; and what assessment he has made of the number of people who may be made homeless as a result of these changes.

[Answers to the first and third parts of this question are in Hansard, 20 November 1991, written answers, column 202]

Mr Dave Nellist: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if he will list the membership of the regional review teams set up to produce and evaluate alternatives to resettlement units; and the dates each review team met; and what plans there are for future meetings;

(2) if he will list the membership of the national advisory steering group set up to advise on proposed replacements to resettlement units; the dates it met; and what plans there are for future meetings.

Letter from Mr Tony Ward, Chief Executive, 20 November 1991:

A list of the bodies with review team representatives is Appendix A to this letter. The dates of meetings held and plans for future meetings is at Appendix B [Appendices A and B are not reproduced below].

A list of the National Advisory Steering Group is at Appendix C and the dates of meeting are included in Appendix D.

Announcements on the future closures of Resettlement Units will be made when the Secretary of State is satisfied that sufficient replacement facilities have been provided, attached at Appendix E is a list of replacement beds already operational. From this you will see that there has been a considerable increase in available beds for the Single Homeless providing a much broader spread of service to meet the varied needs of our client group with a much higher standard of accommodation than is provided in existing Resettlement Units.

Appendix C

List of non DSS Advisory Steering Group members

A representative from:

- Western Area Review Team
- Northern Review Team
- Home Office
- Scotland Review Team
- National Union of Civil and Public Servants
- Housing Corporation
- National Federation of Housing Associations
- Association of Chief Officers of Probation
- Single Homelessness in London
- Civil and Public Servants Association
- Southern Group Review Teams
- National Council for Voluntary Organisations
- Association of County Councils
- National Association of Health Authorities
- Eastern Area Review Team
- Wales Review Team
- Institute of Housing
- Housing Campaign for Single People
- Association of Metropolitan Authorities
- Association of District Councils

Appendix D

Resettlement Agency Advisory Steering Group

Dates of meetings:

19.2.87	16.2.88	7.6.89
12.5.87	5.5.88	10.10.89
23.9.87	8.9.88	4.4.90
3.12.87	8.12.88	

Future meetings will be set up if the Agency desires further advice.

Appendix E

	No. of beds
Peasholme Centre, York	18
Stockton Churches Mission	4
North Tyneside (Womens Hostel)	21
Hull Direct Access for Single Homeless	31
Wigan and Leigh	5
Smithfield Project	12
Bury Young Single Homeless	7
Second Base Nottingham	9
Macedon Trust Nottingham	17

	No. of beds
Walbrook HA Derby	10
North Staffs	27
Cardiff City Council	20
Family Housing Association	6
SWFA	7
SASH & Family Housing Association	12
Carmarthen Care Soc. & Gwalia	8
Ammanford & Gwalia Housing Society	6
Shaw Housing Assoc./NASH	12
	8
Brighton Housing Dept.	20
Brighton Housing Trust	18
Brighton YMCA	30
Stonham A	8
St Petros	5
Havant H.A.	14
Society of St James	25
Bournemouth Churches	14
Barnabas H.A.	9
Taunton Association	8
Stonham H.A.	6
Plymouth H.A.	31
UKHT	20
Total	448

SOCIAL SECURITY AGENCY (NORTHERN IRELAND)

Benefit recipients: numbers

Mr Harry Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will give the latest available figures for the number of people on (a) income support, (b) family credit and (c) disability benefit and the equivalent for 1979.

Letter from Mr A Wylie, Chief Executive, 5 November 1991: You asked for statistical information on the number of people receiving Income Support, Family Credit and "Disability Benefit", however as there is no actual Disability Benefit I have included information on the two main benefits for disabled people - Attendance Allowance and Mobility Allowance.

Benefit	Latest figures	1979
Income Support	201,265	129,239*
Family Credit	15,112	7,726*
Attendance Allowance	38,686	15,037
Mobility Allowance	16,219	4,419

*Income Support and Family Credit were introduced in April 1988. Prior to this payments were made under the former Supplementary Benefit and Family Income Supplement schemes respectively, equivalent amounts for these are shown above.

Benefit advisers

Mr Clifford Forsythe: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list by local office the number of DSS benefit advisers appointed since the new DSS Benefits Agency was set up.

Letter from Mr C Thompson, Director of Local Operations, 6 November 1991:

No benefit advisers have been appointed since the Agency was set up on 1 July 1991. However, there were 75 Client Advisers, 39 Assistant Client Advisers and 32 Information and Advice Officers allocated to 35 Social Security offices when the Agency was set up. The break-down by Social Security office is shown on the attached page.

Number of CAs and I & A Officers prior to Agency set-up

Social Security Offices	Client Advisers	Assistant Client Advisers	Information and Advice Officers
Andersonstown	2.5	1.5	1
Antrim	2.5	1	1
Armagh	2	1	1
Ballymena	2.5	1.5	1
Ballymoney	1.5	1	1
Ballynahinch	1	0.5	-
Banbridge	1.5	1	1
Bangor	2.5	1.5	1
Carrickfergus	1.5	1	1
Coleraine	2.5	1.5	1
Cookstown	1.5	1	-
Corporation St	3.5	1.5	1
Downpatrick	1.5	1	1
Dungannon	2	1	1
Enniskillen	2.5	1	1
Falls	2.5	1	1
Hollywood Road	3.5	1.5	1
Kilkeel	0.5	0.5	1
Knockbreda	2.5	1.5	-
Larne	1.5	1	1
Limavady	1.5	0.5	1
Lisburn	3	1.5	1
Londonderry	5	2.5	1
Lurgan	2.5	1	1
Magherafelt	2	1	1
Newcastle	1	0.5	1
Newry	3.5	2	1
Newtownabbey	2.5	1.5	1
Newtownards	2	1	1
Omagh	2	1	1
Portadown	2	1	1
Shaftesbury Sq	3	1.5	2
Shankill	2	1	1
Strabane	2	1	1
Total	75.5	39.5	32

Unemployed claimants

Ms Clare Short: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many unemployed claimants have, since April 1990 (a) been issued with warning letters for not actively seeking work, (b) had their claim referred to an adjudicating 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 adjudicating officer for refusing suitable employment and (e) how many of those in (d) have had their benefit (i) disqualified or (ii) not disqualified.

Letter from Mr P B Gray, Director of Planning and Support, 22 November 1991:

No information is available on the number of warning letters issued to unemployed claimants for not actively seeking work. The information on claims referred to Adjudication Officers for not actively seeking work or for refusing employment is not held centrally and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Income support: persons aged 16 and 17

Ms Clare Short: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many persons aged 16 and 17 years, respectively, for each month since October 1989 have made applications for income support on grounds of extreme hardship; how many have been (a) granted or (b) refused; what is the best estimate he has of the number of persons aged 16 and 17 years, respectively, in that period who had been granted income support on the grounds of being within an exempted category; and if he will make a statement.

Letter from Mr P B Gray, Director of Planning and Support, 26 November 1991:

The information requested is shown in the table below.

Month	1989			1990			1991		
	GR	REF	EX	GR	REF	EX	GR	REF	EX
Jan	-	-	-	4	Nil	28	6	1	24
Feb	-	-	-	10	4	29	6	Nil	17
Mar	-	-	-	2	1	17	13	2	25
April	-	-	-	6	Nil	11	7	Nil	15
May	-	-	-	6	2	13	4	1	10
June	-	-	-	5	Nil	5	6	Nil	5
July	-	-	-	2	1	9	8	1	12
Aug	-	-	-	5	1	19	4	Nil	13
Sept	-	-	-	2	1	14	2	1	18
Oct	6	Nil	34	4	2	18	7	2	19
Nov	9	1	12	6	1	20	-	-	-
Dec	3	Nil	17	6	Nil	13	-	-	-

Key: GR: Granted REF: Refused EX: Exempted category

Child benefit and bridging allowance

Ms Clare Short: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many persons aged 16 and 17 years, respectively, were in receipt of extended child benefit; how many were in receipt of bridging allowance for each month since September 1989; how many young people exhausted their entitlement to either extended child benefit or the eight weeks bridging allowance; and if he will make a statement.

[Information on the bridging allowance was given in a written answer published in Hansard, 28 November 1991, columns 610-611.]

Letter from Mr A Wylie, Chief Executive, 27 November 1991:

As regards the information on extended Child Benefit this unfortunately is not available separately for 16 and 17 year olds. The average number of children for whom extended Child Benefit was in payment each month since September 1989 was:

Month	1989	1990	1991
January	-	5	5
February	-	14	12
March	-	16	16
April	-	8	28
May	-	83	59
June	-	103	58
July	-	46	12
August	-	0	0
September	133	26	6
October	293	24	82
November	235	11	-
December	208	8	-

The numbers of children who exhausted their entitlement to the extended Child Benefit each month are only available from December 1989 as follows:

Month	1989	1990	1991
January	-	21	19
February	-	0	15
March	-	6	9
April	-	16	39
May	-	69	22
June	-	18	23
July	-	0	17
August	-	10	9
September	-	90	53
October	-	0	33
November	-	37	-
December	21	20	-

EMPLOYMENT SERVICE

Open-plan offices

Mr Graham Allen: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment what assessment his Department has conducted of the success of open-plan Employment Service offices and the response of the staff and public; and if he will make a statement.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 7 November 1991:

Our aim in bringing jobcentre activities and benefit payments work together into new one-stop offices operating from under a single roof, is to provide a better service for unemployed people to help them back to work. An open plan environment is a key design feature of these new integrated offices. This is, of course, not new as Jobcentres have operated in this way for over 18 years and for the last 4 years we have been progressively developing Benefit Offices along similar lines.

Our experience has been that screens and counters can themselves create a barrier which hinders good communications and can alienate our customers; indeed the presence of screens and counters can provoke confrontation in offices. Our standard is therefore for open plan to apply. Experience of developing open plan in benefit offices and in our newly integrated offices (now over 500 in total) has demonstrated that, as with Jobcentres, it provides the right professional environment in which to deliver our services. Recent Customer Satisfaction Surveys and the widely expressed views of our staff have confirmed that open plan is proving popular with both them and our clients. Through our regular surveys of customers we will continue to monitor progress.

Job vacancy advertisements

Mr David Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment if he will issue notices at all jobcentres warning people of the potential costs of responding to advertisements from purported employers offering vacancies through 0898 telephone numbers.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 21 November 1991:

We have already taken steps to try to ensure that the people who use our Jobcentres are not faced with the additional costs of using 0898 numbers when applying for jobs. My Jobcentres are instructed to discourage employers from using 0898 numbers

when notifying vacancies and we will not normally accept a vacancy if the only way of contacting the employer is through an 0898 number.

The more general issue raised in your question about how to alert jobseekers to the potential additional costs of using these numbers is, I believe, better addressed by clear information about costs in the job advertisement itself. I understand that the industry has a Code of Practice covering this particular issue.

Students (summer jobs)

Mr Archy Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment if he will review the progress made by students who applied for temporary jobs during the long university summer vacation compared to non-student applicants for summer jobs.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 14 November 1991:

I am sorry but I am unable to provide the information you request. My Jobcentres are not required to keep records of job applications for temporary jobs from jobseekers, whether students or otherwise, in a form which would provide the comparison you are seeking.

Mr Archy Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment whether students applying for summer jobs in the long recess are treated by jobcentres differently from non-student applicants.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 14 November 1991:

The Government has specifically asked the Employment Service to give priority to helping those most disadvantaged in the labour market, especially long-term unemployed people, people with disabilities and those living in deprived inner city areas.

This said, most people looking for work through my Jobcentres use the jobs display service which is available to every jobseeker irrespective of their occupational background or type of job sought. Those temporary jobs notified to my offices which are suitable for students are displayed in this manner and whilst we do not keep records of the number of students helped, we would expect to place many in vacation jobs.

Rehabilitation courses

Mr Ron Leighton: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment how many people are undergoing a course of rehabilitation (i) at employment rehabilitation centres and (ii) with outside agencies funded by the Employment Service; and what is the average weekly cost of these courses.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 12 November 1991:

Employment rehabilitation is one of the services for people with disabilities offered by the Employment Service's Employment Rehabilitation Service (ERS). In line with the Government's intentions set out in the Consultative Document "Employment and Training for People with Disabilities" rehabilitation is increasingly being provided through agents (voluntary bodies and others) rather than directly by the Service's own Employment Rehabilitation Centres (ERCs). This is improving the accessibility of rehabilitation on a local basis and ensuring full use of the specialist skills and knowledge of outside organisations, particularly in relation to specific disabilities such as mental illness, mental health and sensory disabilities.

We do not collect information about the number of people undergoing rehabilitation at any one time. However I can tell you that between April 1990 and March 1991 9,884 people attended rehabilitation courses at ERCs, and 2,369 people attend courses run by outside agents. [The comparable figures for April to September this year are 4,264 and 1,813 respectively.]

The costs of rehabilitation courses run by ERCs which also, of course, run assessment courses are not accounted for separately from the total expenditure on salaries and running costs. The weekly fee paid to agents varies according to the nature of the course, geographical location etc. The length of courses also varies because of the need to tailor courses to suit the need of individual clients. It is not possible therefore to provide figures for average weekly costs. However you may find it useful to know that in 1990/91 total expenditure by ERS on assessment and rehabilitation was £21m and the total cost of fees paid to rehabilitation agents was £2m.

Office staff

Mr Ron Leighton: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment how many staff were employed in (i) jobcentres and (ii) unemployment benefit offices in each of the past 10 years.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 12 November 1991:

Comparable information is only available from 1988, since the Employment Service was established. For example before this time, the staff in jobcentres included staff for initiatives like the Community programme, whilst the staff in unemployment benefit offices included staff for items of work currently undertaken in Employment Service Area Offices. In addition as the services of jobcentres and unemployment benefit offices are being progressively integrated, and there are now over 500 integrated Employment Service Jobcentres, it is not possible to provide the information in the form asked. The table below lists the number of annual staff units deployed on job placement and benefit payment work, by operational year (April to March) from April 1989 to March 1992.

Year	Annual staff units	
	Job placement work	Benefit payment work
1988/89 (estimate)	7,300	20,500
1989/90	7,625	18,080
1990/91	7,320	18,070
1991/92 (forecast)	7,400	22,600

Note: These figures exclude counsellors and certain other categories of staff.

Unemployed people: skills

Mr Ron Leighton: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment what plans he has to analyse the skills of those registering as unemployed and available for work.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 12 November 1991:

We recognise the importance of information about the skills of unemployed people. It may be helpful if I explain what we do currently to obtain information about their skills. The majority of newly unemployed people who make a claim to benefit are interviewed by a New Client Adviser who will offer practical help and advice about getting back to work. Before taking a claim to benefit we ask people to complete and sign their claim form (UB671) which identifies the client's skills, qualifications,

previous employment history and the time which has elapsed since the client was last in employment. This enables the New Client Adviser to analyse the client's position in the local labour market and produce a "Back to Work Plan". The "Back to Work Plan" is a short written record agreed between adviser and client which is tailored to suit the needs of the individual and the steps they need to take to get back to work. These plans are reviewed at every advisory interview on the basis of further analysis of any changes in their circumstances.

The information on their skills given by clients as part of the initial claims process, and subsequent advisory interviews under the Restart Programme, are also used by Regional Employment Intelligence Units to undertake analyses of client characteristics. Many of these analyses are carried out for Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) to improve their understanding of their labour markets. As an example, I enclose a copy of a recent report for AZTEC, the TEC for London and South East Region.*

You may also wish to know that the National Unemployment Benefit Payments Computer System which we will be developing over the next three years, will further improve our understanding of the skills held by unemployed people. It will do this through holding details, by Standard Occupation Classification, of each client's usual occupation and of the occupation they are seeking.

* A copy of this unpublished report can be seen in the House of Commons Library.

Computerisation

Mr Ron Leighton: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment what plans he has to computerise the matching of claimant details with job vacancy details.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 12 November 1991:

We have a major study underway into the provision of a computerised system to support our business functions. This has already identified the need for a system to help my people in Jobcentres match clients with jobs and vice versa.

Our current thinking is that the system should allow Jobcentres to search through vacancy and other opportunities, for example training places, on behalf of individual jobseekers to identify jobs which seem suitable.

This specific issue is of course only one part of a much larger IT system we are developing for Jobcentres. On current plans it would begin to be installed in our local offices at the beginning of 1994.

Claimant adviser interviews

Mr Ron Leighton: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment what was the average duration of claimant adviser interviews 12 months ago; and what it is now.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 12 November 1991:

Claimant Advisers have an important role in getting unemployed people back to work as soon as possible. As part of our continuing efforts to target help more effectively on a client's return to work, we have introduced a series of advisory interviews within a comprehensive framework. This allows my Claimant Advisers to provide more coherent advice to those people who most need it, while continuing to offer regular contact to those who remain unemployed. These interviews are tailored to suit the needs of each individual client and allow us to monitor and follow up their progress for as long as they remain unemployed.

During their interviews, advisers may offer advice on jobsearch, employment prospects, training programmes and alternative benefits as well as sending clients for job interviews. The length of time spent on each of these topics during the interview will vary according to the client's needs and circumstances. Some clients require little help from us because of their level of skills and motivation while others face particular difficulties. Advisers are therefore encouraged to spend the time necessary with a client to allow discussion of these issues and to agree what steps need to be taken to help them back to work. For these reasons it is not possible to provide an average time for interviews either now or 12 months ago.

Integrated offices

Mr Ron Leighton: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment how many of the new integrated offices are located in what were previously unemployment benefit office premises; and what percentage this is of the newly converted offices.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 12 November 1991:

The integration programme will establish a network of offices which bring together jobcentres and benefit offices under one roof. This network provides a new and improved one-stop service offering the full range of ES services to help people back to work. We are charged with providing a comprehensive, good quality service to all our clients while, at the same time, maximising the resources at our disposal. It is therefore important to make the best use of the existing estate. Most new Jobcentres will be based in existing premises; however where there is nothing suitable within the estate new property may be acquired. Our new Jobcentres are all located in the "world of work" though not necessarily in the High Street.

The latest figures, up to the end of September 1991, show that there are 503 offices where we are now offering an integrated service. These can be broken down as follows to show the previous usage of the building:

- 196 (39%) located in ex unemployment benefit offices
- 166 (33%) located in ex co-located offices (where the unemployment benefit office and jobcentre were housed in the same building but managed separately)
- 108 (21%) located in ex jobcentres
- 33 (7%) are newly acquired sites.

Commission-only jobs

Mr Henry McLeish: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment what was the total number and percentage of commission-only jobs available at job centres on the most recent date for which information is available; if he will outline the procedures for clients viewing commission-only jobs; and if he will list the occupations likely to be offered on a commission-only basis.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 5 November 1991:

I am sorry that I am unable to answer your question in full as Jobcentres do not keep records of the number of commission only jobs they handle, nor of the occupations of such jobs. It is fair to say however that most commission only vacancies we handle are in sales related occupations.

You also asked about our procedures for clients to view commission only vacancies. Jobcentres display these jobs alongside other types of vacancies on their display boards or,

with the employer's agreement, in special books or folders if display board space is limited.

Unemployment benefit staff ratio

Mr Henry McLeish: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment what was (a) the number of benefit staff units dealing with unemployment benefit claims in each of the

Employment Service administrative regions, (b) the number of unemployed people claiming benefit in each of the administrative regions as at 1 March 1990, September 1990 and September 1991.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 5 November 1991:

I attach a table giving the relevant information.

Administrative region	March 1990			September 1990			September 1991		
	Staff	Unemp: number	Ratio	Staff	Unemp: number	Ratio	Staff	Unemp: number	Ratio
Northern	1,320	.115	1:87	1,360	.116	1:85	1,410	.135	1:96
Yorks & Humberside	1,920	.164	1:85	1,890	.169	1:89	2,230	.223	1:100
East Mids & Eastern	1,500	.140	1:93	1,530	.145	1:95	2,050	.218	1:106
London & South East	4,020	.356	1:89	4,120	.400	1:97	6,630	.719	1:108
South West	1,140	.099	1:86	1,190	.101	1:85	1,820	.177	1:97
Office for Wales	1,010	.090	1:89	1,030	.093	1:90	1,200	.121	1:101
West Midlands	1,780	.155	1:87	1,630	.165	1:101	2,430	.249	1:102
North West	2,600	.254	1:98	2,650	.258	1:97	3,030	.325	1:107
Office for Scotland	2,330	.215	1:92	2,360	.209	1:89	2,420	.223	1:92
Total	17,260	1.588	1:90	17,760	1.656	1:93	23,220	2.390	1:103

Notes

(i) The regions are the Employment Service Administrative regions.

(ii) Staff Units are the number of staff unit months used during the months of March 1990, September 1990 and September 1991. The figures include a small element for the payment of Training Allowances.

(iii) The numbers of unemployed people are shown in millions. The figures are rounded and so the total may vary slightly from that published in the DE Gazette.

Travel to interview scheme

Mr Roger Moate: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment if he will make a statement on the working of the travel to interview scheme for people seeking employment; how many people have received help with travel costs in each of the past four years; what is the average amount paid; and what help residents in the Faversham constituency may receive for travel to London for job interviews.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 15 November 1991:

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. A few basic conditions must be met before assistance can be granted, this is 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.*

One of the main conditions of the Scheme is that the job on offer must be beyond daily travelling distance of the applicant's home area, thereby encouraging people to attend for interviews they might otherwise not be willing to consider. As public transport and travel to work patterns vary so much from one area of the country to another, I am sure you will agree that it would be unfair to impose standard limits for jobcentres throughout the country to work to. Local jobcentre managers therefore are authorised to decide what is, for their area, "within daily travelling distance", working to broad guidelines supplied by our Head Office.

I have attached a table which shows the number of applicants assisted through the Scheme and the average amount paid for each journey. We recognise that applications to the Scheme are

declining, and for this reason, a review is currently in progress. The aim of the review will be to identify ways of helping a greater number of unemployed people in their search for work whilst maintaining the principle that the Scheme should be used to encourage journeys which would otherwise not take place. The present upper salary limit of £16,500 is receiving particular attention.

My Field Operations Manager for the East Kent area, Mr David Ticehurst, advises me that many people in the Faversham area do qualify for help through TIS when attending interviews in London. There are 3 broad categories:-

- people living outside of central Faversham travelling to London, central or otherwise
- people living in central Faversham travelling to an interview beyond the centre of London
- people living in central Faversham travelling to central London

Only people in the last category do not normally qualify for help, because such interviews are considered to fall within normal daily travelling distance. However, my people locally do attempt to be as flexible as possible, and will take full account of distances and journey times in each case.

In addition, the Government does recognise that people with disabilities experience additional difficulties in finding a job. For this reason, special arrangements exist for these applicants whereby fares to interview with a prospective employer can be paid if the individual concerned is not eligible for assistance under TIS. This is appropriate when the individual is considered by the jobcentre to be disabled within the meaning of Section 1 of the Disabled Persons (Employment) Act 1944. Provided that the interview was arranged by the jobcentre, travel expenses, and, where appropriate, subsistence allowances can be paid in respect of the person attending the interview if the employer is not prepared to pay. This extra help is available for interviews both locally or at a distance.

* Copies of the leaflet can be obtained from Jobcentres.

Travel to Interview Scheme

Numbers assisted by year and average cost

Date	Assisted	Average cost
1987/88	34,136	£28
1988/89	32,833	£28
1989/90	25,736	£27
1990/91	22,112	£23

Restart interviews

Mr Dave Nellist: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment (1) how many people in Coventry have attended a restart interview since 1 April; what were the results of those interviews; and if he will make a statement;

(2) how many people in Coventry have attended a restart interview since 1 April 1991; how many of those interviewed then (a) started work, (b) began training under employment training, (c) started in a jobclub, (d) started a restart course or (e) attended an enterprise allowance scheme awareness day; and if he will make a statement.

Letter from Mr J W Cooper, Director of Field Operations, 18 November 1991:

It is not possible to provide you with the number of people who have attended Restart interviews as some people will attend more than one. However, the number of Restart interviews conducted by Claimant Advisers is available which, along with the other information you asked for, is given in the attached annex. As you will appreciate, these figures reflect only the direct results of Restart. We do not know how many people subsequently take up a job or a place on an employment or training programme as a result of the guidance given to them at their interview.

The Restart programme should not be seen as a placing programme, but as part of a coherent system of help and advice which we offer to longer term unemployed people. This process continues to be developed. We now have in place the additional help for people who do not find work within thirteen weeks of becoming unemployed which was announced by the Secretary of State in March 1991. The majority of clients are now interviewed by a Claimant Adviser when they cross the thirteen week threshold of unemployment to review their Back to Work Plan and to see what further support and guidance they would benefit from.

We have also put in place three new programmes to help people get back to work. These are a Job Referral Service to match people against vacancies; Jobsearch Seminars to help improve jobsearch techniques and Job Review Workshops to help those who wish to change their career and reassess the opportunities available to them within the jobs market.

Restart Interviews: April 1991 - September 1991 Coventry (City)

Total number of Restart interviews	8617
Started work	91
Begun training on Employment Training	287
Started in a Jobclub	385
Started a Restart Course	861
Agreed to attend an Enterprise Allowance Scheme Awareness Day	206

Job clubs

Mr Dave Nellist: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment how many people in Coventry in the last 12 months since April 1990, and the six months since April 1991 have joined job clubs;

how many have left; how many leavers got jobs; how many entered another positive outcome; if he will publish that information broken down by the ethnic origin and by gender; and what are the comparable figures for the west midlands region as a whole..

Letter from Mr J W Cooper, Director of Field Operations, 18 November 1991:

Unfortunately, I am unable to provide you with precisely the information you ask, but similar information, on the ethnic background and male/female characteristics of Jobclub leavers, is collected on a quarterly sample basis of leavers. The local information covers the Coventry and Warwickshire area as a whole and is not, I am afraid, available for Coventry alone. It is broken down by gender and ethnic origin, and has been arrived at by using the results of the quarterly surveys carried out during the periods.

The tables attached show estimated performance from 1 April 1990 to 31 March 1991 and from 1 April to 27 September 1991, both in Coventry/Warwickshire and for the West Midlands region as a whole.

Table A

Jobclub leavers information by ethnic group and male/female characteristic: 1.4.90 to 31.3.91

	Leavers into jobs	Leavers into other positive outcomes	Total leavers
<i>West Midlands</i>			
White	11,289	5,831	1,668
Black/Afro Caribbean	1,103	516	247
Indian/Pakistani, Bangladesh, Sri Lankan	1,523	516	494
None of the above	0	0	0
Preferred not to say	158	39	0
Total	14,073	6,902	2,409
Male	9,925	4,919	1,668
Female	4,148	1,983	741
Total	14,073	6,902	2,409
<i>Coventry & Warks</i>			
White	1,806	1,050	319
Black/Afro Caribbean	81	28	14
Indian/Pakistani, Bangladesh, Sri Lankan	297	100	55
None of the above	13	0	0
Preferred not to say	27	0	0
Total	2,224	1,178	388
Male	1,725	923	319
Female	499	255	69
Total	2,224	1,178	388

Table B

Jobclub leavers information by ethnic group and male/female characteristic: 1.4.91 to 27.9.91

	Leavers into jobs	Leavers into other positive outcomes	Total leavers
<i>West Midlands</i>			
White	6,283	3,006	765
Black/Afro Caribbean	513	169	105
Indian/Pakistani, Bangladesh, Sri Lankan	971	423	316
None of the above	69	48	13
Preferred not to say	56	24	26
Total	7,892	3,670	1,225

	<i>Leavers into jobs</i>	<i>Leavers into other positive outcomes</i>	<i>Total leavers</i>
Male	5,936	2,656	962
Female	1,956	1,014	263
Total	7,892	3,670	1,225
<i>Coventry & Warks</i>			
White	1,111	609	160
Black/Afro Caribbean	62	15	9
Indian/Pakistani, Bangladesh, Sri Lankan	74	15	28
None of the above	13	0	9
Preferred not to say	37	14	19
Total	1,297	653	225
Male	1,025	511	185
Female	272	142	40
Total	1,297	653	225

Disablement resettlement officers

Ms Clare Short: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment how many people have been on the caseloads of disablement resettlement officers in Great Britain and each standard region in each month since September 1990; how many interviews disablement resettlement officers have carried out in each of those months; what information he has on the outcomes of those interviews; and if he will make a statement.

Letter from Mr MEG Fogden, Chief Executive, 26 November 1991:

I attach 3 tables giving statistical information on the caseloads of my DROs. Table 1 shows, for each region, information about how many people have been on the caseloads of DROs in the quarters ending October 1990, January 1991 and April 1991, which is the latest date for which the information you ask is available.

Unfortunately, I am unable to provide you with the information you ask about how many interviews DROs have carried out since September 1990. This is because we do not record the number of interviews conducted by DROs, however, Table 2 shows the number of people with disabilities who have been placed into jobs by DROs in the quarters quoted above.

Help for people with disabilities is also available through the mainstream Jobcentre services. Table 3 shows the number of people with disabilities placed into jobs by mainstream services in the quarters quoted above. These are additional to people placed into jobs by DROs.

You may be interested to know that in April 1991, the Secretary of State announced the intention that the Employment Service would set up new integrated teams over the next year, which will combine the work of the Disablement Resettlement Officers, the Disablement Advisory Service and the assessment role currently undertaken by the Employment Rehabilitation Service. The teams will provide a more consistent, coherent and higher quality service focused on clients' needs. Training will be enhanced to assist both specialist and non-specialist personnel in providing appropriate help to people with disabilities.

Table 1: Number of people on DRO caseloads

<i>Region</i>	<i>Q/E October 1990</i>	<i>Q/E January 1991</i>	<i>Q/E April 1991</i>
Northern	1,618	1,349	1,470
Yorkshire and Humberside	2,040	1,845	2,243
East Midlands and Eastern	1,645	1,633	1,823
London and South East	4,914	4,584	5,493
South West	1,667	1,580	1,767
Wales	1,358	1,213	1,422
West Midlands	1,756	1,609	1,956
North West	3,328	3,016	3,534
Scotland	2,430	2,101	2,511
GB Total	20,756	18,930	22,219

Table 2: Number of disabled people placed into jobs by DROs

<i>Region</i>	<i>Q/E October 1990</i>	<i>Q/E January 1991</i>	<i>Q/E April 1991</i>
Northern	383	261	276
Yorkshire and Humberside	435	342	419
East Midlands and Eastern	421	345	278
London and South East	1,223	1,139	1,142
South West	391	316	345
Wales	317	275	252
West Midlands	393	279	318
North West	996	768	893
Scotland	548	494	532
GB Total	5,107	4,219	4,455

Table 3: Number of disabled people placed into jobs by mainstream services

<i>Region</i>	<i>Q/E October 1990</i>	<i>Q/E January 1991</i>	<i>Q/E April 1991</i>
Northern	221	225	209
Yorkshire and Humberside	180	162	169
East Midlands and Eastern	297	227	156
London and South East	684	765	573
South West	188	133	94
Wales	592	586	473
West Midlands	196	167	162
North West	9948	785	685
Scotland	811	661	653
GB Total	4,117	3,711	3,174