



# *Open Lines*

**No. 5**

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

**with an introduction by  
Paul Flynn MP**

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

**January 1992**

# Introduction

by Paul Flynn, M.P.

This issue of OPEN LINES, covering the month of December 1991, brings to 164 the total number of replies to parliamentary questions, in the form of letters from government agencies, which have been made available in this way to interested organisations and individuals in the past six months.

Less than two years ago, all these questions would have been answered by Ministers and the answers would have been published in Hansard. Now, without OPEN LINES, a great deal of information about public services of major importance to every citizen of the United Kingdom would be available only to those with the time and patience to search through a pile of copies of letters deposited in the House of Commons Library.

The Government has at last accepted in principle the need to publish these letters, probably as a supplement to Hansard - but not in Hansard itself, which would imply acceptance of the principle of ministerial responsibility for the actions of government officials.

That principle, however inconvenient, lies at the heart of our system of parliamentary democracy. The extent to which it has been undermined was shown by a recent written answer to a parliamentary question, which revealed that, with the launching of the Central Statistical Office as an executive agency on 19 November, the number of agencies had risen to 57, covering almost 40 per cent of the civil service, with more to come (Hansard, 2 December 1991, column 28). Ministers, therefore, are now refusing to answer for the actions of nearly half the civil service.

As well as being wrong in principle, the current arrangements are chaotic in practice. If an M.P. asks for statistical information, e.g. about social security benefits or contributions, it is a matter of luck whether s/he gets an answer from a Minister or a letter from an agency. When Nicholas Brown tabled two questions about the numbers of national insurance contributors, the figures for Great Britain were given by the Minister and published in Hansard (16.12.91, column 86); but the information for Northern Ireland came in the form of a letter from the Social Security Agency (see pages 8-9 of this issue of OPEN LINES). A series of questions by John McAllion about Treasury, Defence, Health and Agriculture agencies were referred to the agencies' chief executives for reply (see Appendix on page 12), while identical questions relating to the Welsh and Scottish agencies were answered by Ministers (Hansard, 13.12.91, columns 570-572, and 19.12.91, columns 296-298).

Such inconsistencies merely confirm the lack of any principle underlying this erosion of the rights of Members of Parliament and their constituents. It is totally unacceptable that Ministers should draw arbitrary lines between those activities of their Departments for which they are prepared to answer to Parliament and those for which they are not. No arrangement for publishing letters from agency officials can alter that fundamental fact.

Paul Flynn, M.P.  
House of Commons

January 1992

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## Editorial note

This is the third issue of *OPEN LINES* for which generous financial support has been received from the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust.

As in previous issues, the letters reproduced are those from executive agencies in the social security and employment fields. There were 33 of these in the month of December 1991. Letters on other subjects are listed in the Appendix.

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

# BENEFITS AGENCY

## Carer's premium

**Mr Graham Allen:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security whether details of the carer's premium have now been entered onto the mainframe computer system; and whether this information is available to all his Department's officers who consider income support claims.

**Letter from Mrs Ann Robinson, Director of Policy and Planning, 9 December 1991:**

It was not possible to enhance the ISCS to include the automatic award of the Carer Premium when the premium was introduced in October 1990. Factors such as the number of cases affected, the administrative savings and the clerical work involved, contribute to decisions on the relative priorities of enhancements to ISCS. However, the automatic award of the Carer Premium is included in the schedule of enhancements planned for 1992/93.

At present, staff are instructed to add the Carer Premium as a clerical component to the computer assessment and it is paid as part of benefit entitlement by the computer system.

## Invalid care allowance unit

**Mr Graham Allen:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he expects the invalid care allowance unit to become fully computerised; and when this is due to be linked to the disability benefits computer system.

**Letter from Mrs Ann Robinson, Director of Policy and Planning, 10 December 1991:**

With the successful completion of the computerisation of the major benefit systems, Income Support and Retirement Pensions, consideration is now being given to the computerisation of other areas of the Agency's responsibilities.

At this stage, computerisation of Invalid Care Allowance has been provisionally programmed for 1996/97, either following on or as part of the Incapacity Benefits Computer System which, after full development work and testing, is scheduled for introduction that year. There are currently no plans to link it to the disability benefits computer system.

## Caller office: Market Harborough

**Sir John Farr:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will establish a caller office in Market Harborough, to serve Market Harborough and the surrounding rural area.

**Letter from Mr David Riggs, Finance Director, 5 December 1991:**

Market Harborough had a full time Social Security Caller Office until 1971 when opening was limited to three days a week. This Caller Office was closed some 10 years ago.

Recent customer surveys have revealed a need for local provision of advice and information and as a result the District has arranged for an Information Officer to attend a local "volunteers bureau" in the Market Harborough Library on the first Friday of every month. The Officer also provides an Advice Desk in the Library on market days (Tuesday and Friday), from 10am to noon and 2pm to 4pm.

The presence of a Benefits Agency representative in the area is being well publicised. Initially, this service will operate for six months and will continue subject to demand.

The District Office is currently involved in developing its

future strategy and the provision of a Caller Office in Market Harborough will be carefully considered.

## Compensation recovery unit

**Mr Eric Illsley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what are (a) the total running costs to date of the compensation recovery unit, (b) the original projected costs of the compensation recovery unit each year, (c) the total amount of money recovered by the compensation recovery unit to date and (d) the total amount of money the compensation recovery unit was projected to recover each year:

(2) if he will state the total cost of appeals under the compensation recovery scheme administered by the compensation recovery unit; and whether any assistance is made available to appellants under the compensation recovery scheme:

(3) how many appeals have been lodged against certificates of total benefit issued by the compensation recovery unit, what is the total number of staff employed by the compensation recovery unit, what is the number of compensation claims registered with the compensation recovery unit to date; and what is the projected number of claims to be registered with the compensation recovery unit annually.

**Letter from Mr David Riggs, Finance Director, 11 December 1991:**

The total running costs of the Compensation Recovery Unit from its inception in April 1990, to 31 October 1991 have been just over £3.5m. This includes the costs of setting up the organisation, manpower costs and all ancillary charges. Original estimates of the running costs were almost £2.1m annually.

To date the total sum recouped by the Unit has exceeded £17.8m. Touche Ross (Management Consultants), who carried out research on behalf of DSS in 1987, had great difficulty in estimating the value of recoverable benefits because none of this information was available from published sources. To provide for a wide margin of error the consultants estimated that the annual sum which might be recovered once the Compensation Recovery Scheme was fully established was in the range £37m to £84m. From this, they selected a figure of £57m based on a small sum payment limit of £1,500 below which compensation awards would be exempt from recoupment. After taking into account representations from the private sector the small payment limit was set at a higher figure, £2,500. The estimate was also made on the basis that costs, including solicitors fees and damage to property, would fall to be considered as part of a compensation award for recoupment purposes. This, also, changed before the Scheme started.

At 22 November 1991, 74 appeals had been lodged against Certificates of Total Benefit paid. The total cost of processing this number of appeals is estimated to be £5,750, which excludes the cost of the Independent Tribunal Service. Assistance available to appellants under the Scheme is the same as that which is available under the Social Security Acts.

The total number of staff at present employed by the Compensation Recovery Unit is 136. Since April 1990, to 22 November 1991, 249,624 claims have been registered with the Unit. The latest projected annual number of claims is 141,355.

## Citizens charter

**Mr Archy Kirkwood:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what specific redress will be available to claimants who are in receipt of benefits from local offices as a result of the citizens charter.

**Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 2 December 1991:**

As the White Paper makes clear, redress covers a number of issues, including "... getting the fault put right, the system corrected, or better information provided."

A number of measures have already been introduced, including the appointment of Customer Service Managers in each District Office who can offer help and advice where a customer feels they have received poor service. Our leaflet "Have Your Say" also offers our customers information about how they can complain about poor service or suggest an improvement. I hope to publish the Benefits Agency Customer Charter in the near future.

There are also existing arrangements to make special payments in exceptional circumstances if customers suffer actual financial loss, or if benefit is delayed unduly, solely as a result of official error.

#### Local benefit office staffing

**Mr Archy Kirkwood:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) whether he will review staffing levels in local benefit offices; what steps he proposes to increase the staff available; and if he will make a statement;

(2) whether he will review the criteria to determine the number of staff required to cope with the workload in local benefit offices; and what steps he proposes to take to relieve the build-up of work being undertaken by existing staff in local benefit offices.

**Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 2 December 1991:**

The Benefits Agency uses a work measurement system designed to match resources to requirements. Staffing is based on workload which District Offices record each month and resource managers take account of revised workload forecasts when reviewing District Office staffing levels. Workloads are monitored continually and if there is a significant change which might result in a deterioration in the service provided we would consider seeking additional resources.

In August 1991 we obtained and distributed additional resources for District Offices as workloads had increased above the 1991/1992 forecasts. This has improved the position for the current year. We are currently considering the resources which will be needed for 1992/93 and in doing so will be taking the increased workloads into account.

The method which the Benefits Agency uses to distribute staffing resources to District Offices is currently under review and we are consulting all District Managers about proposals to improve the arrangement. We hope that this will result in a better fit at District level between the work to be done and the resources

available to do it, and that it will enable the Agency to continue to improve the service it gives to its customers.

#### Fraud staff

**Mr Henry McLeish:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many staff were involved in fraud investigation, inspection and enforcement in each section and each region for each kind of post during each month since September 1990; and what are the proposed changes to such staffing levels in each section and in each region for each type of post.

**Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 5 December 1991:**

At that time [September 1990] the Department's anti-fraud effort was contained within a regional organisation and sited in local offices. However, in January 1991 we implemented the recommendation of a Fraud Efficiency Scrutiny to re-organise fraud work under discrete line management, separate from the benefits delivery service.

The information you request is shown in the attached tables, 1 to 5. Details of the numbers of staff engaged on anti-fraud duties are collected in the form of the number of days spent on this type of work.

**Table 1** - shows staffing levels between September 1990 and December 1990 by region, month and the two kinds of post used in fraud investigation.

**Tables 2 to 4** - show the national picture in England, Scotland and Wales, split into territories and the areas which they cover, from January 1991 until October 1991, the last date for which information is available.

**Table 5** - shows staffing levels on inspection and enforcement work. This information has been provided by the Chief Executive of the Contributions Agency.

The 1992/93 complement will not be finalised until February 1992.

**Table 1: Posts used September-December 1990**

		Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
North-East	Fraud Officer	198	228	210	155
	Special Investigator	112	133	130	98
Midlands	Fraud Officer	184	229	223	169
	Special Investigator	106	125	130	92
London North	Fraud Officer	226	280	244	193
	Special Investigator	61	70	73	53
London South	Fraud Officer	179	217	211	153
	Special Investigator	51	62	59	41
Wales and SW	Fraud Officer	149	180	176	128
	Special Investigator	104	121	121	91
North-West	Fraud Officer	183	200	198	150
	Special Investigator	68	86	87	60
Scotland	Fraud Officer	119	133	137	105
	Special Investigator	52	76	75	54

**Table 2: Posts used January-October 1991: Southern Territory**

Area Director	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct
AD1	Fraud Officer	100	99	99	101	99	78	106	91	102
	Special Investigator	34	28	25	27	28	33	33	29	44
AD2	Fraud Officer	123	85	82	76	88	88	108	84	110
	Special Investigator	26	26	29	30	34	29	38	33	40
AD3	Fraud Officer	84	86	93	86	111	102	114	102	126
	Special Investigator	23	17	19	20	27	24	27	24	31
AD4	Fraud Officer	89	88	86	81	82	73	87	76	99
	Special Investigator	82	80	78	76	81	71	77	67	87
AD5	Fraud Officer	98	81	91	105	103	102	115	104	131
	Special Investigator	23	22	21	24	23	23	26	24	36
AD6	Fraud Officer	105	98	79	98	96	90	109	84	109
	Special Investigator	38	29	44	33	37	29	33	29	39
AD7	Fraud Officer	99	80	79	88	81	67	75	58	77
	Special Investigator	50	45	44	48	46	43	54	48	58

**Table 3: Posts used January-October 1991: Wales & Central Territory**

Area Director	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct
AD1 Fraud Officer	73	63	71	69	67	63	76	62	72	78
Special Investigator	70	61	64	72	62	71	78	56	69	78
AD2 Fraud Officer	78	68	71	76	79	78	87	72	80	82
Special Investigator	61	57	52	58	58	57	64	57	62	71
AD3 Fraud Officer	78	70	73	78	76	72	84	73	81	89
Special Investigator	84	77	78	75	71	67	82	64	80	95
AD4 Fraud Officer	80	68	76	83	87	84	98	81	83	95
Special Investigator	92	80	85	89	83	87	96	82	97	101
AD5 Fraud Officer	76	66	63	86	85	82	88	76	86	96
Special Investigator	40	33	34	34	33	37	42	30	33	43
AD6 Fraud Officer	71	67	67	66	59	54	63	51	55	60
Special Investigator	52	47	47	47	47	47	63	47	52	62
AD7 Fraud Officer	89	91	81	75	72	69	66	65	66	77
Special Investigator	40	31	32	53	55	50	49	49	52	64

**Table 4: Posts used January-October 1991: Scotland & Northern Territory**

Area Director	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct
AD1 Fraud Officer	122	113	103	93	90	99	106	88	108	117
Special Investigator	83	68	66	64	59	56	59	56	65	76
AD2 Fraud Officer	76	69	79	83	79	89	97	81	95	104
Special Investigator	31	31	30	31	31	28	32	23	30	35
AD3 Fraud Officer	86	80	78	72	73	67	73	64	69	81
Special Investigator	49	44	42	49	48	49	53	37	45	52
AD4 Fraud Officer	42	44	36	47	45	45	45	44	38	52
Special Investigator	42	45	45	45	44	41	34	41	41	49
AD5 Fraud Officer	55	59	58	43	48	39	41	44	48	56
Special Investigator	50	51	45	52	49	44	39	43	46	53
AD6 Fraud Officer	57	61	64	53	57	53	50	52	54	57
Special Investigator	46	48	42	42	43	43	40	40	41	45

**Table 5: Contributions Agency Field Operations Inspectorate staff in post (including Inspection and Enforcement duties)**

	Sector 1	Sector 2	Sector 3	Total
1 September 1990	415	438	502	1,350
1 October 1990	421	450	522	1,393
1 November 1990	416	467	545	1,427
1 December 1990	423	493	554	1,469
1 January 1991	420	495	556	1,471
1 February 1991	418	489	559	1,465
1 March 1991	423	543	556	1,521
1 April 1991	415	520	555	1,490
1 May 1991	414	529	547	1,490
1 June 1991	410	531	544	1,485
1 July 1991	410	533	545	1,488
1 August 1991	430	550	568	1,549
1 September 1991	458	579	594	1,631
1 October 1991	475	598	616	1,689
1 November 1991	480	588	609	1,677
1 April 1992	Not yet allocated			1,728

**Operation Scotcheck**

**Mr Henry McLeish:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many operations similar to Operation Scotcheck carried out on 13 November in Scotland have taken place in England and Wales; and if he has any plans to carry out operations similar to Operation Scotcheck in England and Wales; (2) if he will make a statement on Operation Scotcheck carried out in Scotland on 13 November; if he will list the number of officers involved from each Department of Social Security district office in Scotland; what part was played in the operation by the Department of Social Security fraud section; what information was supplied by drivers stopped during the operation; how many of the drivers were interviewed by Department of Social Security staff on (a) 13 November and (b) subsequently; and what use was made of information supplied by the drivers.

**Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 5 December 1991:**

As I expect you are aware, Operation Scotcheck was an exercise mounted by the Traffic Divisions of several Scottish police forces on 13 November 1991 to check the road-worthiness of commercial vehicles. At the invitation of the police, Benefits Agency fraud staff took the opportunity to make enquiries of the drivers and other occupants of the vehicles stopped, for the purpose of identifying possible benefit fraud. Such enquiries are routinely conducted under the terms of Section 58 of the Social Security Act 1986. The information obtained was then checked against records of Social Security claims to ensure that those questioned were not working whilst in receipt of benefit.

Turning to your specific questions about the exercise, a total of six Benefits Agency fraud staff (two each from the Inverness, Stirling and Aberdeen South Sector Fraud offices) took part. Their involvement was confined to asking the vehicle occupants for their name, date of birth, address, National Insurance number and employer details. The Benefits Agency staff played no other part in the exercise and made their enquiries independently of the police and other agencies who were present. No information was exchanged with any of these agencies. The information obtained by Benefits Agency staff was voluntarily given and no complaints were made at the time by members of the public.

There were 93 members of the public (drivers and passengers) interviewed by Benefits Agency staff on 13 November at the Aberdeen site, 110 at Inverness and 92 at Stirling. To date, two further interviews have been conducted and fraud enquiries are continuing in several other cases which may lead to additional interviews.

Benefits Agency fraud staff have not participated in any police exercises in England and Wales similar to Operation Scotcheck, and there are no current plans to do so.

### Social fund loans

**Mr Michael Meacher:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answers of 18 November, *Official Report*, column 81, and 5 November, *Official Report*, column 92, if he will make inquiries to ascertain the number of districts currently paying social fund loans only where there is considered to be serious risk to health and safety.

**Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 3 December 1991:**

Enquiries have been made of all Benefits Agency districts and there are none currently paying loans only where there is considered to be serious risk to health or safety.

### Claim forms

**Mr Michael Meacher:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will give the number of pages and questions on each claim form referred to in the answer on 7 February 1991, *Official Report*, column 246-47.

**Letter from Mr David Riggs, Finance Director, 5 December 1991:**

I shall list the benefits and forms in the same order as they were shown in the answer of 7 February 1991 to which you refer.

	No. of pages	No. of questions
Attendance Allowance		
Claim Pack DS2	12	36
Invalid Care Allowance		
Claim Pack DS700	22	70
Mobility Allowance		
NI211	2	27
Social Fund		
SF100	8	44
SF200	8	60
SF300	11	104
SF400	8	74
Sickness/Invalidity Benefit		
SC1	7	71
Child Benefit		
CH2 (REV)	4	15
CH12	2	6
Family Credit		
Claim Pack FC1	12	186
Income Support		
A1	21	69
A1 (Student)	15	31
B1	20	56
B1 (SL)	4	5
B71D	19	52
SP1	20	282
Maternity Allowance/ Statutory Maternity Pay		
MA1	12	81
One Parent Benefit		
CH11	4	31
Guardians Allowance		
BG1	4	16
Industrial Death Benefit		
BW1	16	44
Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit		
BI100A	4	10
BI100 (OA)	8	33
BI100B	4	17
BI100P	4	19
BI100 (PN)	4	15
Retirement Pension		
BR1	12	20

No. of pages No. of questions

Severe Disablement Allowance		
SDA1	4	26
Statutory Sick Pay		
SSP6 (Rev)	2	3
War Pensions		
MPB214	14	46
MPC3	4	9
MPB476	4	12
Widows Benefit/ Widowed Mothers Allowance		
BW1	16	44
Agency Form (NHS)		
AG1	20	164
War Widows/Dependents Benefit		
MPB501	7	15
MPB504	3	8
MPB510	1	3
MPB541	4	11
MPB502G	4	4
MPC60	2	7

I feel that I should point out that in many cases whole sections of a form will not apply to each person who is making the claim and in practice the task of completing the form will be easier than might first appear. A review of all forms and leaflets used within the Benefits Agency is currently underway.

As you may know, the responsibility for form AG1 now rests with the Department of Health. I understand that the AG1 is being examined as part of the review of the administration of the NHS low income scheme, announced on 22 May 1991.

### Strategic planning guide

**Letter to Mr Michael Meacher from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 11 December 1991:**

Ann Robinson wrote to you on 12 June [see *OPEN LINES* No. 1, p. 5] in response to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Social Security concerning the Benefits Agency's Planning Guide. At that stage we promised to contact you when the Guide was finalised.

I am sorry that I have not responded sooner but I was anxious to ensure that you received a final version that incorporated comments and points of clarification we received following the distribution of an initial draft to Managers in the Agency.

I am enclosing a copy for your information. I am also sending a copy of the Benefits Agency's Strategic Steer which should be read in conjunction with the Guide. As Ann pointed out, the Guide is essentially an internal management document and we would not normally expect to publish it more widely. However since I am following up on a previous response to a Parliamentary Question, I assume you would want me to place a copy of this letter and the planning guidance in the library and the Public Information Office and I have arranged for this to be done.

### Office closures

**Mr Michael Meacher:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 18 November, *Official Report*, column 84, and the Benefits Agency's subsequent letter [see *OPEN LINES* No. 4, page 4], if he will ask the district managers to provide information on the number, and the periods in which, benefit offices were closed to the public during official opening hours in the current year, giving the reasons for each closure.

[Miss Ann Widdecombe replied to this question as follows:

"Provision of local services is a matter for Mr Michael Bichard, the chief executive of the Benefits Agency. I understand from him

that district managers are encouraged to tailor their services to the needs of the local community.

*"The range of public caller facilities now offered by the Benefits Agency is too diverse to allow meaningful comparisons between offices or to justify collection of detailed information centrally. Information about the withdrawal of these facilities could be obtained from district managers only at disproportionate cost. Mr Bichard will write to the hon. Member ..."* ]

**Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 12 December 1991:**

You recently asked the Secretary of State if he would contact my District Managers for details of Benefit Office closures in the current year. As explained by the Minister in her reply, there are no plans to obtain such information because such an exercise would involve disproportionate cost for the purposes of your question. However, I felt that I should write to reassure you about my own interest in the levels of service provided for our customers.

As you are aware, Customer Service has been at the forefront in our planning and has been a key consideration in tailoring local services to local needs. Responsibility for deciding the most suitable form of local service lies with my District Managers but inevitably, they may on occasion face difficulties in maintaining usual levels of service. At such times they have delegated authority to take whatever action they consider appropriate to ensure that the majority of customers continue to receive the best possible service. But what is paramount is that overall service levels are not compromised. For example, should some staff be unable to get into the office because of severe weather or temporary transport difficulties, I have made it clear that I would expect local management to keep the office open with those staff who were able to report for duty. I would like to assure you that disrupting advertised services is not in keeping with our concept of good customer service.

As David Riggs explained in his letter to you of 18 November, on occasion there are legitimate reasons for closing an office. I would mention in particular staff training. Where the Manager considers that overall customer service could be improved by a customer care training session at which all relevant staff can take part, the office may, after local consultation, open half an hour later than normal on one day a week. But I must stress that it remains the Agency's policy to otherwise maintain full opening hours.

Nevertheless, District Managers may exceptionally be faced with the possible temporary closure of caller services for the public. Because Managers have been encouraged to develop local services specifically to meet the needs of the local community, the nature of services available direct to the public is quite diverse. Whilst regrettable, the decision to temporarily suspend such a service may be the only way of ensuring a reasonable standard of service for a much wider range of customers.

Because of this diversity in the way services are delivered, I would see little advantage in collecting information centrally on the suspension of such services.

However, my Managers do not work in isolation. When faced with the prospect of withdrawing a customer caller facility as a prolonged response to local difficulties, I would expect them to consult with their Area Director and together work to overcome the immediate problem.

Should an individual office face risk of closure repeatedly or if a particular closure looks to be of long duration, the relevant Territorial Director would then become involved in resolving the situation. I meet with all Territorial Directors regularly and

therefore maintain a direct interest in such matters.

There is, however, one important exception to this general approach. Where an office faces the prospect of closure because of industrial action, I have asked my Managers to report the circumstances to me as well as through the normal line management chain. I am sorry that this was not made clear in the earlier correspondence, but can now confirm that 23 offices were closed due to industrial action this year of which 18 were in respect of one day or less. We have, in fact, also received at the centre a handful of notifications of closures under other circumstances, but as these are so few and almost certainly do not represent the full national picture, I have not included details of them.

May I take this opportunity to apologise for this oversight in answering previous enquiries.

#### **Income support: computerisation**

**Mr Michael Meacher:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what representations he has received following the computerisation of claims for income support; what information he has on the error rate in computerised assessments and on the number of checks by supervisors of the assessments of claims; and if he will make a statement.

**Letter from Mrs Ann Robinson, Director of Policy and Planning, 16 December 1991:**

The last Social Security office started to use the Income Support Computer System (ISCS) in August 1991. Both during and after implementation various comments were received, from a variety of sources, on the performance of the ISCS. Any faults are investigated and corrected as soon as possible. Improvements to the computer system are continually being carried out based upon these representations.

The Benefits Support Branch (Income Support) continually conducts evaluation and quality visits to numerous offices. The view emanating from these visits is that the computer system has been generally well received by both staff and customers.

The "error rate" is derived from a random selection of 2% of all IS payments made. Since the introduction of IS in April 1988 the error rate has gradually fallen from nearly 12%. With the introduction of the ISCS in March 1989 the rate has continued to fall consistently to the present level of approximately 5%.

In addition to this check, there are various other checks that are performed. The nature and frequency of this checking is largely determined by local management and is dependent on local operational requirements. Precise details are not available except at disproportionate cost.

#### **Social fund**

**Mr Bill Michie:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many claimants applied for grants or loans under the social fund during the financial year 1990-91 in each of the benefit offices dealing with the Sheffield, Heeley constituency; 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 months of 1991-92.

**Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 3 December 1991:**

The statistical information you request is attached at Annex A. The information does not give the number of applicants applying because it is not collected. Applicants can make more than one application during any statistical period. I have therefore provided figures of the number of applications.

The Sheffield Heeley constituency is served solely by the Benefits Agency's Sheffield West District. This District covers an area which was administered, prior to April 1991, by two former Departmental offices; Sheffield North West and Sheffield South West.

**Annex A: Sheffield West District, April 1990-June 1991 (the former Departmental local offices of Sheffield North West and Sheffield South West)**

		1990/91	April 91	May 91	June 91
Nos. of applications	BL*	9,399	847	763	858
	CCG	5,094	607	596	563
	CL	5,493	508	512	472
Average award (£)	BL	201.01	210.44	202.78	200.13
	CCG	307.54	270.90	289.86	321.10
	CL	50.59	50.45	52.84	49.97
Nos. of applications refused **	BL	3,136	262	249	298
	CCG	3,123	328	348	412
	CL	814	110	114	79
<b>Reasons for refusal ***</b>					
Savings over £500	BL	1	1	0	0
	CCG	8	1	0	1
	CL	0	0	0	0
Not receiving IS****	BL	380	32	26	42
	CCG	0	0	0	0
	CL	0	0	0	0
Not receiving IS for 26 weeks	BL	879	79	66	70
	CCG	0	0	0	0
	CL	0	0	0	0
IS entitlement unlikely	BL	0	0	0	0
	CCG	334	23	25	40
	CL	0	0	0	0
Excluded item(s)	BL	108	13	3	9
	CCG	65	10	7	8
	CL	23	1	1	0
Excluded applicant	BL	3	0	0	1
	CCG	5	3	1	0
	CL	2	0	1	0
Applied for less than £30	BL	40	2	5	3
	CCG	28	2	1	3
	CL	0	0	0	0
Adjusted amount less than £30	BL	71	1	3	4
	CCG	6	1	0	1
	CL	0	0	0	0
Total debt over £1,000	BL	6	0	0	1
	CCG	0	0	0	0
	CL	3	0	0	0
Previous application for item	BL	237	11	11	17
	CCG	140	9	9	30
	CL	86	14	6	16
No serious risk	BL	0	0	0	0
	CCG	0	0	0	0
	CL	420	52	65	36
Inability to repay	BL	369	14	21	27
	CCG	0	0	0	0
	CL	142	24	20	15
Help available elsewhere	BL	13	2	3	1
	CCG	31	3	0	3
	CL	40	8	17	2
Insufficient priority	BL	811	87	90	105
	CCG	494	56	32	58
	CL	2	0	0	0
Alternative available	BL	5	3	0	0
	CCG	7	0	0	0
	CL	17	0	0	0
Loan refused, CCG awarded	BL	288	26	28	29
	CCG	0	0	0	0
	CL	3	0	0	0

		1990/91	April 91	May 91	June 91
Enough money for crisis	BL	0	0	0	0
	CCG	0	0	0	0
	CL	8	0	0	0
Direction 4 not satisfied	BL	0	0	0	0
	CCG	1,878	225	266	262
	CL	0	0	0	0
Savings over £1,000 (aged 60 or over)	BL	0	0	0	0
	CCG	1	0	0	0
	CL	0	0	0	0
Other reason	BL	127	6	8	7
	CCG	202	10	7	20
	CL	126	16	5	12

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

\*\* The "Numbers of applications refused" figure can be less than the total of the figures given under "Reasons for refusal" because the decision not to make an award may have more than one reason.

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

\*\*\*\* IS = Income Support.

**Translation and interpretation**

**Ms Joan Walley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will provide translation and interpretation facilities in local offices to meet the needs of the ethnic minorities communities.

**Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 17 December 1991:**

The Benefits Agency is committed to the provision of a service which is more accessible to, and meets the needs of its customers. As part of their regular service planning, District Managers consult with their local communities in order to provide a more responsive service.

The need for translation and interpretation facilities varies widely from district to district and it is important that our response is equally flexible and appropriate. Some districts do now employ interpreters where the need exists and many maintain lists of volunteer staff who speak foreign languages.

One of the Agency's District Offices has produced, in conjunction with the Local Authority and CAB, a cassette tape in five ethnic minorities languages. A group of local offices are currently piloting "Language Line", a telephone interpreting service. In addition a Language Allowance is paid to any of our staff who use their interpreting skills for 25% or more of their working time.

**Simplification of claim procedures**

**Mr Dafydd Wigley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will issue guidelines to local benefit offices to simplify procedures for claiming benefits, especially for individuals over the age of 60 years who are claiming benefits for the first time.

**Letter from Mrs Ann Robinson, Director of Policy and Planning, 16 December 1991:**

The Benefits Agency is committed to improving the quality of service provided to all of its customers and this is part of a continuing task for management and operational staff in general. As part of this, we are always anxious to improve procedures for customers where possible, and indeed have a rolling programme for the revision of claim forms to ensure that they help customers to provide the information necessary in as simple and straightforward a way as possible. We are also keen to improve our procedures: while, at present, there are no separate specific plans



to issue new guidance on procedures for dealing with those over 60 years, I can assure you that the matter will be considered within the general on-going operations work to which I have referred.

You will also wish to note that the Agency provides extensive publicity and information on the Social Security system. In particular, it produces a comprehensive range of leaflets covering all benefits and pensions and their relevance to customer groups. Customers who are approaching retirement age are also issued with an information package four months prior to retirement and this includes a claim form along with details of the rate of their Retirement Pension. Information for customers over age 60 who are not retiring is included in the leaflets to which I have referred. These, along with any other advice which might be required, are freely available from the Agency's local offices where staff are always ready to help.

Your question led me to wonder if you had a particular concern about a specific aspect of our forms or procedures. If so, I would be very glad to follow it up and see if it is something we could address. Please do not hesitate to write to me if you have such a concern.

#### Local offices: regrading

**Mr Brian Wilson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proposals are being considered for the regrading of the DSS offices covering Cunninghame, North constituency.

**Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 20 December 1991:**

Cunninghame North is served by three District Offices, namely Renfrew (covering the area known as the Garnock Valley), Clyde Coast and Cowal, and Irvine and Kilmarnock. Each District Manager has considered the service they provide as part of a strategic plan following a consultative process involving staff and local organisations. Suggestions have been made that the options for developing our service could include the transfer of the Garnock Valley from Renfrew to Irvine and Kilmarnock District.

The Renfrew District as a whole is covered by the offices at Paisley and Johnstone, together with a caller office at Kilbirnie. The Garnock Valley comprises the towns of Beith, Kilbirnie and Dalry. A service planning exercise established that most residents in the Garnock Valley considered Irvine to be their commercial centre rather than Paisley. Associated services such as health, housing and social work are also administered from an Ayrshire base, whereas similar services for the rest of the Renfrew district are administered by either Strathclyde Regional or Renfrew District Council offices in Paisley.

In view of this, it was felt that any customer outlet in the Garnock Valley should be administered by Irvine District. No final decision would be made until the Irvine district service plan was available. The transfer of responsibility would, in any event, only take place if it could be shown that the level of service to customers in the area was at least as good as, if not better than under the old arrangement.

The Irvine service plan is now available and it provides a commitment to maintain the level of service currently provided to customers in the Garnock Valley. No decision has yet been made as to the timing of the transfer. Movement of work to Irvine can be accommodated within existing premises and would not involve compulsory staff movement.

Customer Service remains first among the core values of the Benefits Agency. The guiding principle here is that work will never be transferred if the level of service to our customers is adversely affected.

## CONTRIBUTIONS AGENCY

#### Caerphilly office

**Mr Ron Davies:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make it his policy to retain a presence on behalf of the Contributions Agency at the Caerphilly office of his Department.

**Letter from Miss Ann Chant, Chief Executive, 12 December 1991:**

The Contributions Agency has recently reviewed the effectiveness of its activities in local offices of the Department with the aim of combining the best use of resources with a service that meets both customer and business needs.

The customers of the Agency consist of employers, the self-employed and individual contributors. An analysis of customer traffic at these offices indicated that the provision of a dedicated Contributions Agency presence at every outlet is not the most effective means of service delivery and in many cases is unnecessary on a full time basis. Employers and the self-employed rarely conduct their business with the Agency by calling at the Department's offices whilst contributors do so in relatively small numbers.

In Caerphilly local office the proposal is that the Department will continue to provide a service on behalf of the Contributions Agency. In addition, customers will be able to make appointments for interviews with Contributions Agency staff and the office will continue to be used as a base for inspectors visiting customers. A free telephone link is also to be installed to provide immediate, direct contact with Contributions Agency staff.

## SOCIAL SECURITY AGENCY (NORTHERN IRELAND)

#### Contributions

**Mr Nicholas Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will estimate for 1991-92 the numbers paying national insurance contributions in Northern Ireland, distinguishing (a) between the different classes of contribution and (b) between employees and employers.\*

**Letter from Mr Alec Wylie, Chief Executive, 13 December 1991:**

I attach the information you have requested on the estimate for 1991-92 of the numbers paying national insurance contributions in Northern Ireland, distinguishing between the different classes of contribution.

I am sorry that I cannot give you separate information on employers and employees. Employers are a mixture of Class 1 and Class 2 and not all Class 2 are self-employed with employees and it would take a large amount of work at disproportionate cost to separate the data.

### 1991/92 estimates of people paying national insurance contributions

Class 1 standard rate contracted in	272,000
Class 1 standard rate contracted out	213,000
Class 1 standard rate mixed contracted in/out	35,000
Class 1 reduced rate	11,000
Class 1 mixed standard/reduced rate (married women's election)	100
Class 2	65,000
Mixed class 1/2 (those liable for both classes)	5,000
Class 3	1,300
Total all classes	<u>602,400</u>

*\*Note: Mr Nicholas Brown asked the Secretary of State for Social Security a similar question about numbers of contributors in Great Britain. The question was not referred to an executive agency but was answered by a Minister, Mr Michael Jack, on 16 December 1991 (Hansard, column 86).*

### Social fund loans

**Mr James Kilfedder:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many persons have been granted loans from the social fund; what was the total amount paid out during the last financial year; and what was the comparable amount in previous years.

**Letter from Mr C Thompson, Director of Local Operations, 10 December 1991:**

Details, by month, of the number of Social Fund applications, and the amount paid during the last financial year and previous years are available in the Library.

### Income support: homeless persons

**Mr James Kilfedder:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many homeless are in receipt of income support in Northern Ireland.

**Letter from Mr C Thompson, Director of Local Operations, 10 December 1991:**

No records are held centrally on the numbers of homeless persons in Northern Ireland receiving Income Support and it would therefore be necessary to examine every Income Support record throughout the 35 Social Security Offices.

This information could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. I am sorry I cannot be more helpful on this occasion.

### Family credit: single parents

**Mr James Kilfedder:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many single parents are in receipt of family credit in the Province.

**Letter from Mr Alec Wylie, Chief Executive, 12 December 1991:**

As regards the information requested, 4,304 single parents were getting Family Credit at 29 November 1991.

### One-parent families

**Mr Eddie McGrady:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many one-parent families were registered for benefit at each of the Social Security Offices in South Down in each year since 1985.

**Letter from Mr P B Gray, Director of Planning and Support, 5 December 1991:**

No details are available on the numbers of one parent families registered for Unemployment Benefit. However I can give you an indication of the numbers of one parent families in receipt of Supplementary Benefit, and its replacement Income Support, on the basis of quarterly counts of those claiming the benefit. For Income Support there may be a small number of one parent families in receipt of a Disability Premium who were included in an overall count of claimants in receipt of this premium. It is not possible to identify these.

Details of counts for the relevant quarter ending dates are shown in the table below.

Quarter ended	Bally-nahinch	Banbridge	Downpatrick	Kilkeel	Newcastle	Newry
19.11.85	90	235	229	73	96	492
18.11.86	93	286	266	83	103	542
17.11.87	112	284	289	93	112	546
31.8.88	133	312	326	104	127	656
31.8.89	167	303	353	99	148	730
31.8.90	179	382	398	120	161	934
31.8.91	173	426	431	104	203	1,052

### Social fund

**Mr Eddie McGrady:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many people received (a) crisis loans, (b) budgeting loans and (c) community care grants in each year since 1 April 1988 to 31 March 1991 and 1 April 1991 to 31 October 1991; what amounts were paid out at each social security office in South Down; and how many were refused and for what amount.

**Letter from Mr P B Gray, Director of Planning and Support, 5 December 1991:**

Information about the number of crisis loans, budgeting loans, community care grants processed each month, the number awarded and the amounts paid for each Social Security Office in South Down is available in the Library. The number of applications and amounts refused can be derived from these figures.

### Co-ordination with Housing Executive

**Mr Eddie McGrady:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will co-ordinate the activities of the Social Security Agency and the Housing Executive in order that they use their computerised systems to synchronise all transactions relating to housing benefit changes, benefit deductions, payment of rent from such deductions, and rent statements to tenants.

**Letter from Mr Alec Wylie, Chief Executive, 18 December 1991:**

Thank you for this suggestion. It is one of which we are aware. Unfortunately, this is not possible at present because synchronisation of this sort is dependent on the compatibility of the computer systems.

During next year, I will be examining in more detail how closer links generally can be made with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. However, I would foresee that synchronisation of the computer systems will be some years away.

# EMPLOYMENT SERVICE

## Disability symbol

**Mr David Bellotti:** To ask the Secretary of State for Employment if he will publish a list of companies which have given firm commitments to the Employment Service's disability symbol for employers; and how long a company can express a firm commitment without actually using the symbol, and still remain on the list.

**Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 16 December 1991:**

Since the Symbol initiative was launched by the Secretary of State in October 1990, many employers have registered, with local Disablement Advisory Service (DAS) teams or our Major Organisations Development Unit, a firm commitment to use the symbol. At present we do not maintain a single central list of such companies, though the case for doing so is being considered as part of the review of steps which might be taken to strengthen the Symbol initiative which was announced by the Secretary of State in September of this year.

There is no specific time limit within which companies registering a commitment must use the symbol in order to remain on local lists. DAS staff take great care in explaining to employers who want to use the symbol what exactly is involved and the implications of meeting the criteria for their organisation.

It is clearly right that employers displaying the symbol should be satisfied that their practices meet the standards which use of the symbol implies. The length of time needed to achieve these standards will depend on the current situation in the company and the complexity of its organisation. The Employment Service's local DAS teams are available to assist with any problems a committed employer may have in wanting to become a symbol user.

## Job club entrants and leavers: north west region

**Mr Ronnie Fearn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Employment how many job club entrants and leavers there were in the north-west between January and September 1991.

**Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 9 December 1991:**

In the North West region between January and September 1991 there were 20,501 entrants into Jobclubs. 19,499 people left Jobclubs in the same period, of those 8,976 went into jobs and 2,192 went into other positive outcomes such as training or further education.

## Bridging allowances: north west region

**Mr Ronnie Fearn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Employment how many young people in the north-west region have had their entitlement to bridging allowances terminated.

**Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 9 December 1991:**

Information about the numbers of terminations of bridging allowances in the North West region is provided in the attached table. Figures are provided from January 1989 to November 1991 as no dates were specified in the Question.

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

## Numbers of all terminations of bridging allowance, North-West region, January 1989 - November 1991

	1989	1990	1991
January	1,495	701	799
February	1,526	1,129	1,079
March	1,567	1,272	1,758
April	1,962	1,673	1,526
May	1,382	1,214	1,523
June	1,180	1,364	1,630
July	1,343	1,012	1,224
August	1,133	1,031	1,126
September	1,344	1,302	1,532
October	1,076	1,080	1,059
November	843	877	1,234
December	1,057	1,169	

## Restart interviews: north west region

**Mr Ronnie Fearn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Employment how many people from the north-west region attended restart interviews between January and June 1991.

**Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 9 December 1991:**

The Restart programme is part of a coherent system of help and advice we offer to longer term unemployed people in getting them back to work as soon as possible. Restart aims to overcome the disadvantages longer term unemployed people face by equipping them to compete more effectively in the job market, encouraging them to be more active in looking for work and ensuring they know about and get their fair share of the employment and training opportunities available.

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 between January and June 1991 in the North West Region was 187,466.

## Unemployment benefit (disqualification)

**Mr Paul Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Employment how many unemployed people were disqualified for unemployment benefit under each paragraph of section 20(1) of the Social Security Act 1975 in the area covered by the Newport, Gwent, unemployment benefit office, in the latest month for which information can be obtained; in how many cases disqualification was imposed for the maximum period of 26 weeks; and whether he will arrange for records of the lengths of disqualifications to be kept on a routine basis in future.

**Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 17 December 1991:**

You may recall I wrote to you earlier this year, on 21 October, in response to a similar question, and said I would write again when information for the quarter ending in September 1991 became available. Unfortunately the statistics concerning adjudication officer's decisions - which are currently published by the Department of Social Security - are still unavailable, but I understand these will shortly be published.

However, I am afraid that, as before, the information available will not be in the exact form you have requested. Adjudication statistics are only tabulated for each Employment Service region

every quarter; and consequently I will only be able to let you have figures for Wales as a whole.

No records are kept of the lengths of disqualifications imposed under section 20 of the Social Security Act 1975. There are no plans to introduce a system for keeping such records because it is felt that to do so would serve no useful purpose and the resource cost would be significant.

#### LGV licence holders

**Mr Max Madden:** To ask the Secretary of State for Employment whether drivers who hold an LGV licence, who do not take the medical examination required once drivers reach the age of 46 years or to renew their licence, are deemed to be unavailable for work.

**Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 2 December 1991:**

The receipt of unemployment benefit, National Insurance contribution credits and income support when unemployed is conditional upon a person being available for and actively seeking employment. This means that the individual must be available to start work immediately (or at twenty four hours notice for those with caring responsibilities); must not place such restrictions on the work they are willing to do as to leave them with no real prospect of finding a job; and must take those steps, each week, that offer them the best prospects of obtaining work.

Social Security legislation provides that a newly unemployed person may restrict their jobsearch to their usual occupation and accustomed rate of pay for a permitted period of up to thirteen weeks. The length of the permitted period is only decided by the independent adjudicating authorities when the person has actually refused an offer of a job and the claim has therefore been referred to them for a decision on benefit entitlement.

Whilst a person can be deemed to be available for employment in certain circumstances, they cannot be deemed to be unavailable. Drivers above the age of 45 who are required to hold an LGV licence, but who do not take the medical examinations as required by current regulations, or who choose not to renew their licence, cannot therefore be deemed to be unavailable for work. Whether or not they can be regarded as satisfying the availability condition will depend on their individual circumstances.

Clearly if they were required to hold an LGV licence in their normal occupation they would be unable to carry on in that occupation and would therefore be required to consider alternative employment. This would be discussed with either a New Client Adviser if they were newly unemployed or a Claimant Adviser if they had been unemployed for some time.

If following an advisory interview there was a doubt as to their availability their claim would be referred to an independent Adjudication Officer for a decision on entitlement to benefit.

#### Benefit fraud

**Mr Henry McLeish:** To ask the Prime Minister how many joint initiatives have been mounted by the Department of Employment and the Benefits Agency on benefit fraud protection under the terms of the liaison agreement; and if he will make a statement concerning the exchange of any information between Departments obtained from such initiatives.

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

Both ES and BA are determined to develop and maintain an effective and professional investigative force capable of making a positive impact on Social Security fraud. We have conducted

169 joint exercises since the revised Liaison Agreement came into effect on 1 April 1991, focusing on a wide range of industries and occupations - recent examples being the clothing and leisure industries and market traders.

Respective teams are required to keep each other fully in touch over plans and operations and to work in real and genuine partnership.

ES acts as an agent for the Department of Social Security in the payment of unemployment benefits. Accordingly, information acquired in the course of social security administration may be passed freely between ES and BA. Information is not passed to other government departments unless it is required in the exercise of a statutory function or for the safeguarding of public funds.

#### Unemployment benefit

**Mr Andrew Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Employment

(1) what is the average length of time taken from the date of suspension of unemployment benefit and the reduction of income support until a decision is made by the adjudication officer to allow or disallow the claim; and, of the number of claims suspended, how many have now been decided upon;

(2) what statistics are compiled by local unemployment benefit offices concerning claimants whose benefit is suspended, when a doubt arises as to the circumstances under which their last job ended;

(3) how many claims for unemployment benefit made in the Oxford area in October 1991 were suspended on the grounds that the claimant may have left his or her job voluntarily or may have been dismissed for misconduct; and what proportion of the total fresh claims this number represents;

(4) what specific guidance and procedural instructions are given to staff in local unemployment benefit offices, to decide which claims for unemployment benefit and income support should be suspended on the grounds that the claimant may have left his job voluntarily or may have been dismissed for misconduct, and those which should not; and if he will make this information available publicly.

**Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 2 December 1991:**

Unfortunately, the information you have asked for in the first three questions is not collected. Suspension of benefit is a procedure operated by my local offices when there is a doubt about a person's entitlement to benefit. Most, but not all, suspensions will result in a referral to an adjudication officer for a decision. I am unable to give you any information about the number of claims suspended, the average length of suspensions, or the number of referrals made to the adjudication authorities because no separate record of these are kept. However, the Department of Social Security publish quarterly reports on the volumes of adjudicated decisions, which are placed in the Library of the House. At the time of writing, this information is only available up to and including March 1991.

When a person first claims unemployment benefit they are asked on their claim form UB461 why their job ended. If their reply indicates that they might either have left their employment voluntarily or have been dismissed through their own misconduct, local office instructions require their benefit payments to be withheld pending enquiries of their former employer. If the employer's replies confirm that the claimant's unemployment was voluntary, instructions require the case to be referred for decision by an independent adjudication officer who may direct

further enquiries to the employer and/or the claimant before arriving at a decision.

All claimants who have their benefit payments withheld are issued with a letter (UB48) and leaflet (EBL48) advising them of the reasons. They are also given a leaflet UBL18 which sets out the conditions they must satisfy before benefit can be paid. A more general leaflet (NI12) entitled "Unemployment benefit",

is freely available at all Employment Service and Benefits Agency offices, as well as most Post Offices. This explains all the conditions for the receipt of unemployment benefit. Beyond this no further publicity is presently envisaged but any claimant needing more information is encouraged to seek clarification from my local office people.

## Appendix

### Other letters written to M.P.s by chief executives in December 1991

Member	Agency	Subject
Mr David Clark	Intervention Board	Fruit and vegetables withdrawn from UK market
Mr Paul Flynn	Her Majesty's Stationery Office	Packaging of parcels
Mr John Marshall	Civil Service College	Cost effectiveness
Mr John McAllion	Central Office of Information, Central Statistical Office, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, Royal Mint, and Valuation Office	(1) Alternative working patterns (2) Appointments from private sector (3) Annual report (4) Group bonus scheme (5) New facilities for staff (6) Staff numbers (7) Cost of launch of agency (8) Chief executive's first degree
Mr John McAllion	8 Ministry of Defence agencies	(1) and (4)-(8) as above
Mr John McAllion	NHS Estates and Medicines Control Agency	(1)-(7) as above
Mr John McAllion	Central Veterinary Laboratory, Intervention Board and Veterinary Medicines Directorate	(1)-(6) and (8) as above
Mr Henry McLeish	Radiocommunications Agency	Operation Scotcheck
Mr Martin O'Neill	Hydrographic Office Defence Support Agency	(1) Income from chart sales (2) Metrification of maritime charts
Mr Peter Thurnham	Civil Service College	(1) Annual cost (2) Relocation