



Open Lines

No. 8

Contents

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

with an introduction by

Paul Flynn MP

Editorial note

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April 1992

Introduction

by Paul Flynn, M.P.

OPEN LINES was first published by my research assistant, Tony Lynes, in July 1991. There have now been eight issues, each containing letters received by Members of Parliament in the previous month in reply to parliamentary questions.

The need for such a publication resulted from Ministers' refusal to reply to parliamentary questions on the work of the agencies set up since 1988 under the "Next Steps" initiative, which now run most of the services provided by government departments. Such questions are referred to the agencies concerned, and the answer takes the form of a letter from an official, usually the chief executive of the agency.

By the end of this month, 72 agencies will have been set up. In terms of public concern, reflected in the number of questions tabled by MPs, the most important of these are the Benefits Agency, which now administers the whole range of social security benefits other than for unemployed people, and the Employment Service which administers Jobcentres and unemployment benefits.

Whether an MP's question is answered by a Minister or by a senior official may seem unimportant, but the new arrangements mean that a great deal of information which used to appear in Hansard, in the form of written answers by Ministers, is no longer available in any official publication. Copies of the chief executives' letters are placed in the

House of Commons Library; but the Library is not open to the public. Without OPEN LINES, therefore, few people would ever see them.

Nearly a year has passed since the Select Committee on Procedure recommended that chief executives' replies to parliamentary questions should be published in Hansard. Five months ago the then Lord President, John MacGregor, announced the Government's acceptance of the principle of publication, leaving it to the Commons Administration Committee to consider the practicalities. Still nothing has been done.

The value of OPEN LINES has been acknowledged by many people, including the then Minister for the Civil Service, Tim Renton, who in a letter to me dated 14 February 1992 wrote "I applaud your enterprise in acting to meet the demand for such a publication", and the Campaign for Freedom of Information which in January conferred a Freedom of Information Award on Tony Lynes and myself. But it is an affront to the democratic process that publication of information of this kind should have to be undertaken by a private individual subsidised by a public-spirited foundation. The newly elected House of Commons should insist on urgent action to bring this shameful situation to an end.

Paul Flynn, M.P.
House of Commons

April 1992

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Editorial note

The first two issues of OPEN LINES were produced at Paul Flynn's expense. Since then, the cost has been met mainly by a generous grant from the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust.

The 28 letters reproduced in this issue are, as in previous issues, those from executive agencies in the social security and employment fields. Other letters of which copies are in the House of Commons Library, including two on social security matters relating to individual constituents of the Members concerned, 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

Social fund: Leeds (supplementary answer)

Mr John Battle: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people in the Leeds metropolitan district (a) applied for social fund (i) community care grants, (ii) budgeting loans and (iii) crisis loans and (b) received community care grants, budgeting loans and crisis loans, shown (1) numerically and (2) in real cash terms every year from 1987 to 1991, shown both in totals and by benefit office.

Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 9 March 1992:

I wrote to you on 28 February [see *Open Lines No.7, page 1, column 2*] in reply to your recent Parliamentary Question . . . concerning applications to the Social Fund in the Leeds Metropolitan area during the period from 1987 to 1991. I promised to supply information for 1989-90 when it was available.

The information you requested is attached at Annexes A, B and C. The information does not give the number of applicants 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.

Annex A: Leeds offices April 1989 - March 1990: applications made for Community Care Grants, Budgeting Loans and Crisis Loans

Office	1989-90
Community Care Grants	
Leeds North	2,339
Leeds North West	1,610
Leeds East	1,988
Leeds South	884
Leeds West	870
Budgeting Loans	
Leeds North	4,567
Leeds North West	3,354
Leeds East	5,211
Leeds South	2,272
Leeds West	2,682
Crisis Loans	
Leeds North	3,948
Leeds North West	3,236
Leeds East	2,027
Leeds South	1,175
Leeds West	932

Annex B: Leeds offices April 1989 - March 1990: numbers of awards made for Community Care Grants, Budgeting Loans and Crisis Loans

Office	1989-90
Community Care Grants	
Leeds North	981
Leeds North West	426
Leeds East	792
Leeds South	367
Leeds West	381
Budgeting Loans	
Leeds North	3,231
Leeds North West	1,972
Leeds East	3,214
Leeds South	1,337
Leeds West	1,590

Office	1989-90
Crisis Loans	
Leeds North	2,461
Leeds North West	2,819
Leeds East	1,807
Leeds South	1,062
Leeds West	961

Annex C: Leeds offices April 1989 - March 1990: value in real cash terms of Community Care Grants, Budgeting Loans and Crisis Loans awarded for the year

Office	Actual 1989-90 expenditure £	1991-92 value £
Community Care Grants		
Leeds North	288,940	335,397
Leeds North West	161,511	187,479
Leeds East	239,758	278,307
Leeds South	99,886	115,946
Leeds West	135,733	157,556
Budgeting Loans		
Leeds North	714,859	829,797
Leeds North West	405,127	470,265
Leeds East	619,599	719,221
Leeds South	233,420	270,950
Leeds West	325,034	377,294
Crisis Loans		
Leeds North	108,016	125,383
Leeds North West	95,908	111,328
Leeds East	67,634	78,508
Leeds South	41,844	48,571
Leeds West	34,353	39,876

Note: The Gross Domestic Product Deflator has been used to convert cash figures to real terms at 1991-92 values.

Social fund: York (supplementary answer)

Mr Richard Caborn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will (a) state how many applications for social fund loans from the York local office were refused on the grounds of inability to pay and (b) show this figure as a percentage of all applications for loans from the York local office in 1988-89, 1989-90, 1990-91 and so far in 1991-92.

Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 7 March 1992:

I wrote to you on 27 February [see *Open Lines No.7, page 2, columns 1-2*] in reply to your recent Parliamentary Question . . . concerning Social Fund loan applications to the York office during the period 1988-89 to 1991-92. I promised to supply information for 1988-89 and 1989-90 when it was available.

For 1988-89, refusals on the grounds of inability to repay totalled 24, which represents 0.7% of applications made. For 1989-90, 39 such refusals were made, representing 0.9% of applications.

Number of claimants: Tooting constituency

Mr Tom Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the number of claimants for each individual benefit at each of his Department's offices covering the Tooting constituency as of 31 January.

Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 9 March 1992:

The complete range of information requested is not available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. This is because the statistics on some benefits are not routinely collected on a local basis. To obtain the relevant information it would be

necessary to examine all claims made nationally for the individual benefit concerned. However, figures are available for the benefits listed below as at 30 November 1991. The District serving the Tooting constituency is the South West Thames District.

<i>Benefit</i>	<i>Number of recipients</i>
Income Support	48,777
Invalidity Benefit	2,688
Maternity Allowance	750
Severe Disablement Allowance	695
Sickness Benefit	2,089

This information has been obtained from the Management Information Statistics.

Number of claims: Wandsworth

Mr Tom Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what are the latest figures for the London borough of Wandsworth for the number of claims for (a) housing benefit, (b) income support and (c) family credit.

Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 9 March 1992:

The complete range of information you requested is not fully available except at disproportionate cost. This is because statistics of a local nature relating to Family Credit and Housing Benefit only show the number of recipients at a given point in time rather than the number of claims for a particular period.

Listed below is the latest available information for each benefit.

Housing benefit

The administration of Housing Benefit is a matter for Local Authorities. The latest available figures are from August 1991 and show the number of recipients rather than the number of claims. The figures quoted are for the London Borough of Wandsworth and have been obtained from the Housing Benefit Management Information System.

Number of recipients of Housing Benefit 24,773

Income support

The figures quoted are in respect of the Wandsworth Benefits Agency Office. This is because the Benefits Agency boundaries do not correspond with the London Borough of Wandsworth. These figures have been supplied by the Income Support Management Information System.

January 1992 704 claims received

Family credit

The latest available figures are for 21 February 1992 and show the number of recipients rather than the number of claims. This will exclude claims still awaiting a decision at that date. These figures are in respect of the Wandsworth Benefits Agency Office.

21 February 1992 283 recipients

Take-up campaign: Glasgow

Mrs Maria Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many benefit claimants in Glasgow have requested a review of their supplementary benefit entitlement under the regulation 72 take-up campaign; how many of these (a) have had their requests for review refused, (b) are pending and (c) have received payments; what is the total amount of back-dated benefit paid out to Glasgow claimants as at 31 January; and what was the average amount of such payments.

Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 2 March 1992:

The Glasgow area is covered by six Districts. The figures below represent details of all the Regulation 72 cases received in those Districts at 31 January 1992.

Requests for review received	33,958
Cases paid following review	1,367
Requests for review refused	9,122
Requests for review pending	23,469
Total amount of backdated benefit	£610,014.83
Average payment	£446.24

Number of claimants: Glasgow, Maryhill constituency

Mrs Maria Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the number of claimants for each individual benefit at each of his Department's offices serving the Glasgow, Maryhill constituency as at 30 December.

Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 2 March 1992:

The complete range of information requested cannot be obtained except at a disproportionate cost. This is because the statistics on some benefits are not routinely collected on a local basis. To obtain the relevant information it would be necessary to examine all claims made nationally for the individual benefit concerned. In addition, statistics relating to other benefits are collected from benefit offices on a quarterly basis.

In this instance the latest information available shows the number of recipients of each benefit as at 30 November 1991 for the two districts serving the Glasgow Maryhill constituency, Glasgow City and Glasgow Springburn & Cumbernauld. The figures are in the attached annex and have been obtained from local quarterly Management Information Statistics.

Annex: Customers at Glasgow City and Glasgow Springburn & Cumbernauld Districts claiming benefits as at 30 November 1991.

<i>Benefit</i>	<i>Glasgow City</i>	<i>Glasgow Springburn & Cumbernauld</i>
Income Support	19,675	23,465
Invalidity Benefit	5,438	9,596
Maternity Allowance	19	116
Severe Disablement Allowance	669	1,896
Sickness Benefit	2,675	3,423

Social fund: Glasgow, Maryhill constituency

Mrs Maria Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many applications to the social fund for (a) community care grants, (b) budgeting loans and (c) crisis loans were made by applicants at each of his Department's offices covering the Glasgow, Maryhill constituency between 1 July 1991 and 31 December; how many were successful; and how many were awarded to pensioners.

Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 2 March 1992:

The statistical information you request is in the attached Annex.

The figures relate to the Benefits Agency's Glasgow City District and Springburn & Cumbernauld District. Glasgow City District covers an area which was administered prior to April 1991 by the three former Departmental offices: Glasgow City, Glasgow Cranstonhill, and Glasgow Maryhill. Springburn and Cumbernauld District covers an area which was administered prior to April 1991 by the former Departmental offices: Glasgow Cumbernauld and Glasgow Springburn.

Annex: (1) Applications made at Glasgow City District and Springburn & Cumbernauld District for community care grants, budgeting loans and crisis loans for the period 1 July 1991 - 31 December 1991.

(2) The number of awards for community care grants, budgeting loans and crisis loans for the period 1 July 1991 - 31 December 1991.

(3) The number of awards to pensioners.

District	Community Care Grants	Budgeting Loans	Crisis Loans
Applications			
Glasgow City	4,145	5,595	3,786
Springburn and Cumbernauld	4,743	6,335	4,092
Awards			
Glasgow City	669	3,009	3,361
Springburn and Cumbernauld	991	2,998	3,252
Awards to pensioners*			
Glasgow City	235	229	43
Springburn and Cumbernauld	391	132	29

*These are applications from people who are 60 or over.

District business plans

Mr Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will publish the business plans for all Benefits Agency districts.

Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 10 March 1992:

I believe that the publication of both national and local Business Plans plays an important part in our greater and more open accountability to the public. Following the launch of the Benefits Agency in April 1991, every District published its own Business Plan detailing their local performance targets and key management actions for the year.

During 1991 each District carried out a "Service Planning" exercise in which they consulted widely with customers and local organisations and identified any special local needs. Each District will publish a Business Plan for 1992-93. It will give local performance targets and will include details of any initiatives that the District will take during the year to address the needs identified.

Failure to attend appointments

Mr Ian McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what warning is given to clients by Department of Social Security offices and benefit agencies about the consequences of failure to attend an appointment; and if he will make a statement.

Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 9 March 1992:

A customer who is required to attend for interview in a Benefits Agency office should be advised of the reason for the interview. These reasons may vary but generally interviews are only necessary to determine complex issues which could not be handled by post. Any warning given therefore would be based on failure to provide information necessary to award or review a person's entitlement to benefit.

It is normal practice for offices to make further enquiries if a customer fails to attend an appointment. Any customer failing to attend an office interview would be advised of the possible effect on their entitlement.

Benefit offices: social fund

Mr Michael Meacher: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security whether there is a full social fund section service in

every benefit office in every benefit agency district.

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

In order to improve the service to our customers some districts have centralised the processing of certain types of Social Fund applications. However, all offices are able to deal with any urgent applications as well as enquiries on any aspect of the Social Fund.

Kidderminster local office

Mr Michael Meacher: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the full cost of temporary accommodation with regard to the closure of the Kidderminster integrated local benefit office will be funded centrally; and if a new integrated local office will be established in Kidderminster.

Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 13 March 1992:

There is important maintenance work to be carried out on the Kidderminster Benefit Office premises, work which may necessitate the temporary or permanent closure of the building. The Benefits Agency jointly occupies Crown House with Inland Revenue who are major occupiers and closure would affect staff of both Departments.

Property Holdings, who are responsible for the maintenance of the premises, have been advised that the cladding of the building is a major task. A firm of consultants has been commissioned to consider all the options available and advise whether there is a case for a move to new accommodation rather than set up temporary accommodation whilst work is undertaken on the existing site.

I understand that Property Holdings will meet any costs arising from the move and that there will be at least eight months notice of a move to temporary or new accommodation.

If the Benefits Agency move out of Crown House, either on a permanent or a temporary basis, it will be on the understanding that the new accommodation will afford a full service to the public, including caller facilities, dealing with and offering advice on, the whole range of benefits.

Home visits

Mr Michael Meacher: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 9 March 1992, *Official Report*, column 423, what information he has concerning the number of home visits, including specialist visits, excluding those for the purpose of investigating fraud, that were made per 1,000 claimants in 1991-92.

Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 16 March 1992:

The complete information, in the form requested, is not available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. However, information showing the total number of effective Income Support and Social Fund visits between April 1991 and January 1992 is available and is in the attached annex. This information has been taken from the Agency's Management Information Statistics. It is not possible to identify those visits which were exclusively carried out for fraud investigation purposes.

The total number of effective visits as a ratio per 1,000 customers is not available. This is because national counts of Income Support customers are made at a given point in time rather than over a specific period.

Annex: Total number of effective Income Support/Social Fund visits carried out from April 1991 to January 1992.

	Total visits April 1991 - January 1992
New claims	52,265
Initial case checks	28,565
Subsequent case checks	67,508
Specialist visits	117,518 *
Other visits	178,753 *
Total number of effective visits	444,609

* These figures include visits carried out for the purpose of investigating possible fraud. It is not possible to break these figures down except at disproportionate cost.

Disability benefit inquiries

Mr Michael Meacher: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many inquiries were made through the benefit inquiry line by the end of February; and how many were concerned with (a) disability living allowance, (b) disability working allowance, (c) other disability benefits and (d) a combination of the above.

Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 16 March 1992:

The total number of enquiries made to the Benefit Enquiry Line by the end of February 1992 was 157,309. This included calls concerned with:

Disability Living Allowance	102,251 (65%)
Disability Working Allowance	7,865 (5%)
Other disability benefits	25,169 (16%)
All other enquiries	22,024 (14%)

Statistics are only kept on the major subject matter of the customer's enquiry. I am afraid I cannot therefore provide you with details of the number of calls involving a combination of subjects.

You may be interested to note that before the new disability benefits campaign, the proportionate breakdown of calls coming into the Benefit Enquiry Line was as follows:

Disability Living Allowance and Disability Working Allowance	8%
Other disability benefits	32%
All other enquiries	60%

Number of claims: Coventry and Warwickshire

Mr Dave Nellist: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what are the latest figures for Coventry and Warwickshire for the number of claims to (a) income support, (b) family credit and (c) housing benefit; and what were the figures one year ago.

Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 2 March 1992:

The complete range of information you requested is not fully available except at disproportionate cost. This is because statistics of a local nature relating to Family Credit and Housing Benefit only show the number of recipients at a given point in time rather than the number of claims for a particular period.

Listed below is the available information for each benefit.

Income Support

	January 1991*	January 1992
Coventry District	2,070	2,518
Warwickshire District	2,544	3,271
Monthly totals	4,624	5,789

The numbers quoted include both successful and unsuccessful claims and are for a calendar month.

* Editor's note: The figures in this column do not add up to the total.

Family Credit

	February 1991	February 1992
Coventry District	1,554	1,899
Warwickshire District	1,821	2,151
Totals	3,375	4,050

The figures quoted represent the number of awards in payment on a given date.

Housing benefit

Area	August 1990	August 1991
Coventry	22,992	23,202
Warwickshire	23,357	24,449
Totals	46,349	47,651

The administration of Housing Benefit is a matter for Local Authorities. The figures quoted have been obtained from the Housing Benefit Management Information System and relate to recipients rather than claimants. The following Local Authorities have been taken to represent Warwickshire: North Warwickshire, Nuneaton, Rugby, Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick.

Clearance time targets

Mr Nicol Stephen: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the target time scale for benefit claims to be dealt with in each region in Scotland.

Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 16 March 1992:

There are three Area Directorates in Scotland - Paisley and Glasgow; North, Central and West Scotland; and East of Scotland. A copy of the current targets for each of these Area Directorates is in the attached annex.

Annex: Clearance times - benefit claims.

	AD4	AD5	AD6
Social Fund			
Crisis Loans	1.0	1.0	1.0
Community Care Grants	6.9	7.0	7.0
Budgeting Loans	8.0	8.0	7.6
Income Support	3.0	3.0	3.0
Sickness/Invalidity Benefit	7.0	7.0	7.0
Retirement Pension	19.3	19.3	20.2

Notes

AD4 - Glasgow & Paisley

AD5 - North, Central & West Scotland

AD6 - East of Scotland

All figures relate to working days.

Helplines: Scotland

Mr Jim Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the location of his Department's helplines in Scotland and the number of lines available at each location.

Letter from Mr Michael Bichard, Chief Executive, 10 March 1992:

The Benefits Agency's Freeline centre in Edinburgh provides a service for the whole of Scotland. It currently has 12 lines.

The Housing Benefit Transitional Payment unit provides a national service from Glasgow. It has 5 lines.

The Disability Benefits Centre in Edinburgh provides an advice service for Disability Living Allowance and Disability Working Allowance customers throughout Scotland. A total of 12 lines are available for enquiries or for outgoing calls to follow up enquiries to the service.

I understand that Miss Ann Chant, Chief Executive of the Contributions Agency, is writing to you separately about the helplines provided by her Agency in Scotland. [See page 6, column 2]

CONTRIBUTIONS AGENCY

Work outstanding

Mr Michael Meacher: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many (a) posting query cases, (b) receivership cases and (c) refund requests are currently outstanding at Contributions Agency central operations in Newcastle; and when they will be cleared;

(2) what are the (a) benefit entitlement implications and (b) revenue implications of the current posting query and receivership cases backlog at Contributions Agency central operations in Newcastle.

Letter from Miss Ann Chant, Chief Executive, 17 March 1992:

The first part of your enquiry concerns posting query cases which we have to clear following receipt of some 45 million individual items about NICs during the financial year. Currently there are 745,504 query items outstanding from the end of year returns submitted by employers. By the end of April 1992 225,000 of these cases will be cleared, with the remainder being finished by the end of October 1992.

As far as insolvency files are concerned, the number presently on hand is 15,033. The time to handle each of these cases depends on a wide variety of factors but on average the amount of time taken between an insolvency file being raised and a claim being lodged is 12 months.

Turning to the number of refund requests outstanding, these currently total 55,954 and relate to cases where a formal application has been made or where the contributor has been contacted and is aware of entitlement to a refund. Over 90% will be cleared within 3 months which is our usual speed of clearance; the small residue of more complicated cases take longer because of the nature of the enquiries necessary to establish the amount to be refunded. But once a signed claim form has been received, payment is made in more than 90% of cases in 20 days or less. We will handle approximately 360,000 refund requests during the current year.

With regard to the impact on benefit claims, the overwhelming majority of benefit enquiries we receive are straightforward. We clear 1.4 million such enquiries each month within 3 days, either through the central computer system or by reference to clerical records. However, where a posting query is outstanding the timescale to clear it is affected by the need to complete enquiries which may take up to 3 weeks, or longer in a few cases (eg where there is a delay in employers responding to our enquiries). In these cases there is sometimes an impact on benefit entitlement. But contingency payment arrangements exist within the Department's Benefits Agency which enable benefit to be paid on an interim basis using alternative evidence of contributions paid.

As far as insolvency cases are concerned, only a very small proportion have an immediate impact on benefit claims. But in these cases also, there are contingency arrangements to preserve benefit entitlement to avoid delays in payment.

On your last point concerning the revenue implications for the posting queries, I can tell you that the estimate of NICs outstanding from the cases on hand is £2,669,760; we have collected £3,300,000 from these queries in the year to date.

The total NICs debt which may be involved in the receivership cases we currently have on hand is impossible to calculate

precisely as the amount outstanding varies considerably from case to case. But in the 1991/92 year to date, 19,017 claims have been lodged and payment of £14,267,503 has been received.

Helplines: Scotland

Mr James Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the location of his Department's helplines in Scotland and the number of lines available at each location.

Letter from Miss Ann Chant, Chief Executive, undated:

The Contributions Agency has only one helpline. This is the Social Security Advice Line for Employers (SSALE) which is located at the Glasgow (City) office of the Agency. It is a freephone service available to all employers in Scotland, England and Wales and it handles general enquiries from business on National Insurance Contributions, Statutory Sick Pay and Statutory Maternity Pay.

While the Advice Line has twelve lines available the aim is to have a minimum of eight lines in operation at any given time. Each operator handles about eighty calls daily. It has proved to be a very popular service for employers and because of its success there are plans to increase the number of available lines from April 1992.

Although SSALE is the only helpline in Scotland and is intended for use by employers, all customers can make telephone enquiries to any of the Agency's offices throughout Great Britain. They can also telephone the Agency's Central Operations at Newcastle on Tyne. These latter calls are charged at local rate. [See also page 5, column 2]

RESETTLEMENT AGENCY

Provision of hostels

Mr David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what discussions he has had with local authorities regarding the provision of hostels for the homeless to match the reduction of resettlement units; and if he will make a statement.

Letter from Mr Tony Ward, Chief Executive, 5 March 1992: In 1985 the government announced its intention to move away from the direct provision of resettlement units and to have these replaced with facilities run by voluntary organisations and local authorities. In all areas where this policy has been advanced local authorities have been involved in the discussions regarding replacement provision.

A comprehensive programme of consultation was undertaken in order to draw up a package of proposals in respect of each resettlement unit which was to be replaced. Review Teams were set up which comprised local people with an interest in and knowledge of the problems of the single homeless. The teams' findings formed the basis of the proposals that were put to Ministers who then have had to satisfy themselves that they would provide sufficient suitable replacement provision of the unit.

Transfer of resettlement units

Mr John Battle: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) under the revised strategy for the future of the resettlement units (a) to which voluntary agencies the resettlement units will be transferred, (b) what discussions have been held with voluntary

organisations, local authorities, and other interested parties concerning the proposal to transfer responsibility for the resettlement units, and (c) if it is intended to re-establish the regional review groups;

(2) following the transfer of the resettlement units to voluntary organisations, (a) if the planned closure of the units and the rehousing of residents to suitable accommodation will still take place, (b) if the voluntary organisations taking responsibility for the resettlement units will be able to use the proceeds from the sale of land and buildings arising from the closure programme to fund replacement beds and (c) if resources made available to voluntary organisations include an allowance for inflation for both capital and revenue costs.

Letter from Mr Tony Ward, Chief Executive, 5 March 1992:

In answer to the first [question], I can tell you,

(a) The Resettlement Agency has not yet identified which voluntary agencies the resettlement units will be transferred to. Appropriate voluntary agencies will be selected through a tendering process, on the basis of suitability of proposals as well as price offered,

(b) Informal discussions have been held with voluntary organisations, local authorities and other interested parties to establish the level of interest in and viability of the transfer strategy,

(c) The revised strategy will eliminate the need for regional review groups. These were created specifically to make proposals on the best replacement provision. Resettlement units in the London area have not been involved in the review group approach at all.

In answer to the second, I can tell you,

(a) where units are to be transferred to outside organisations we would not expect this to mean any disruption to existing residents. In the case of units which remain part of the traditional replacement programme, the Agency will continue to ensure the rehousing of residents to suitable accommodation,

(b) where voluntary organisations take over units they will be taken over in their entirety and there will be no replacement beds needed. Funds released from those RUs which are to be closed will be made available in full to alternative providers. Capital grants are made at prevailing prices but revenue grants are subject to an annual review.

SOCIAL SECURITY AGENCY (NORTHERN IRELAND)

Income support claimants

Mr John Hume: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many income support claimants there are at each social security office in Northern Ireland; and how many of these are in receipt of sickness benefit, invalidity benefit, unemployment benefit, or retirement pension.

Letter from Mr Alec Wylie, Chief Executive, 4 March 1992:

No details are available for the numbers of claimants in receipt of Sickness Benefit, Invalidity Benefit or Unemployment Benefit. However I can give you the number of Income Support claimants and the number receiving Retirement Pension on the basis of the quarterly count of the Income Support liveload at 30 November 1991.

The information is shown on the attached table.

District	Office	Total number of income support claimants	Number of claimants receiving retirement pension
Belfast North	Corporation St	12,915	2,945
	Shankill Rd	4,972	1,347
Belfast South & Down	Shaftesbury Sq	7,163	1,622
	Knockbreda	6,386	2,294
	Downpatrick	3,096	813
North West	Ballynahinch	1,737	697
	Londonderry	11,196	1,783
	Limavady	3,268	803
Laganbann	Lisnagelvin	6,070	1,355
	Lisburn	5,959	1,861
	Lurgan	5,188	1,336
North East	Portadown	4,128	1,415
	Coleraine	6,251	1,776
	Ballymoney	4,642	1,493
Central	Ballymena	6,322	2,004
	Magherafelt	4,955	1,766
	Cookstown	3,709	1,163
Mourne	Dungannon	5,992	1,926
	Armagh	5,067	1,597
	Newry	10,300	2,879
East	Kilkeel	1,607	530
	Newcastle	2,075	718
	Banbridge	3,612	1,224
Belfast West	Holywood Rd	9,240	2,836
	Bangor	5,118	1,666
	Newtownards	4,101	1,409
South East	Andersonstown	8,341	1,042
	Falls Rd	9,482	1,558
	Antrim	5,969	1,520
West	Newtownabbey	5,177	1,464
	Larne	3,026	861
	Carrickfergus	3,057	819
West	Enniskillen	5,980	1,895
	Strabane	8,499	3,360
	Strabane	6,281	1,652

Number of offices

Mr Michael Meacher: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many offices, providing public access for the purpose of claiming benefit, including unemployment benefit, were in operation on 1 April 1979, and at the latest available date.

Letter from Mr Alec Wylie, Chief Executive, 9 March 1992:

On 1st April 1979 there were 33 social security offices and 60 sub-offices spread throughout Northern Ireland providing public access for the purpose of claiming benefit, including Unemployment Benefit. In addition 3 central offices were available for people wishing to claim or make enquiries about Retirement and Widows Pension, Disability Benefits, Incapacity Benefits and Family Benefits.

Currently there are 35 social security offices, 60 sub-offices, and 2 central offices. The fewer number of central offices was the result of relocating work to the centre of Belfast to provide easier access and a better service to the public.

Home visits

Mr Michael Meacher: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many home visits, excluding specialist visits, including those for the purpose of investigating suspected fraud were made per 1,000 claimants in the latest available year; and how many were made in 1978-79.

Letter from Mr Alec Wylie, Chief Executive, 9 March 1992:
No information is available on the number of home visits made in 1978-79. During the period 1990-91 there were a total of 2,795 visits made and this represents 15 visits per 1,000 Income Support claimants.

EMPLOYMENT SERVICE

Criminal convictions

Mr Harry Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment what level and nature of criminal convictions over the past five years automatically debar an otherwise successful applicant from being offered a post in the Employment Service as an administrative officer.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 10 March 1992:

A criminal conviction is not, in itself, a bar to appointment in the Employment Service, but we have to satisfy ourselves that an applicant's character is such as to qualify them for a post with us.

There is not a definitive list of convictions which, of themselves, debar a person from appointment to the Employment Service. We weigh, very carefully, all the evidence we obtain on character and each case is considered individually on its merits. Where an offence has been committed, we take into account its nature and gravity, the number and frequency of offences, and any evidence which may be available as to rehabilitation. All these factors are considered against the particular type of post for which the applicant is applying.

Actively seeking work

Mr Bob Cryer: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment what instructions are issued to interviewing officers examining recipients of benefits on the basis of checking that they are actively seeking work; and whether a code of conduct is followed.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 10 March 1992:

It may be helpful if I explain that entitlement to benefit is reviewed as part of the advisory interviews carried out at regular intervals with unemployed people. The main purpose of these interviews is to encourage and support people in their efforts to find work. My advisers will offer help and advice on a range of employment and training opportunities and help the client draw up a Back to Work Plan.

They also have a duty to make sure that clients understand and continue to meet the conditions under which benefit and/or credits of National Insurance contributions are awarded. One of these conditions requires that people receiving benefits should actively seek work by taking, each week, those steps which offer the best prospects of finding a job. When they initially make a claim, clients are advised on the steps that could be considered reasonable, taking into account their individual circumstances. Jobsearch activity is then reviewed on a regular basis throughout the period of unemployment.

Clients whose jobsearch is considered insufficient to meet the actively seeking employment condition have the requirements explained to them. They are then issued with a letter, which explains the need to comply with regulations. This records those

steps the adviser believes are appropriate for the individual to take to get back to work. Clients are then given a reasonable period of time in which to demonstrate satisfactory jobsearch. Where, on further review, a client's jobsearch still appears to be insufficient to meet the actively seeking work condition, the doubt is referred to the independent adjudication authorities for a decision on entitlement to be made.

The role of advisers and their operating procedures are covered by guidance produced by my people who have a detailed knowledge of the regulation contained in the 1989 Social Security Act. This guidance covers the various steps they should consider to help unemployed people get back to work, or when referring doubtful cases to Adjudication Officer. The guidance incorporates many good practices and experiences which are, and have been used in my local offices. However, this guidance is not all encompassing. My managers and advisers have to take local factors into account which will differ from one office to another, for example, the prevailing conditions in the local labour market and the composition of the people registered as unemployed.

There is no separate code of conduct for advisers. However, the Jobseeker's Charter, which the Secretary of State announced on 17 December 1991, describes the standards of conduct and service that clients can expect in all their dealings with the Employment Service. It also explains how a client who is dissatisfied can make a complaint.

Burnley Jobcentre

Mr Peter Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment (1) what is the cost of the proposed removal of Burnley jobcentre; and what will happen to the existing furniture and equipment; (2) what representations and consultations he has received regarding the proposed removal of Burnley jobcentre; and if he will make a statement.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 11 March 1992:

In addition to the Jobcentre, my Unemployment Benefit Office in Finsley Gate will also be relocated to the new premises at the GUS Building in Burnley. The total cost of providing this new and improved integrated service is £465,000.

Most of the existing furniture and equipment will be refurbished for use in the new office or will be reallocated to replace obsolete items in neighbouring offices.

No representations have been received apart from your own letter of 28 February to the Secretary of State about the changes being made to my offices in Burnley. I will be replying separately to the points raised in that letter.

Where offices are moving within the immediate vicinity, we do not undertake a formal consultation process. The changes to our network in Burnley have however been well publicised. Posters announcing the move are currently on display in my Jobcentre, Unemployment Benefit Office and in the windows of the new premises. Letters, providing full details of the move, will also be issued to all clients on their last signing day before the move. Other local interested organisations and employers will also be informed. I understand that my Area Manager for Lancashire, Mr Shay O'Rourke, has also written to you to outline the changes being made.

I hope this explains the position, but if you have any further enquiries or wish to visit my new office please contact Shay O'Rourke who will be pleased to help you. His telephone number is 0772 722122.

Doncaster office

Mr Martin Redmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment when the unemployment office in Trafford Way, Doncaster, was first open for business; and when it received its official opening.

Letter from Mr J W Cooper, Director of Field Operations, 2 March 1992:

The Trafford Way office first opened for business as an Employment Exchange on 1 November 1936. Since that time it has been operating for the payment of unemployment benefit. In December 1989 Sir Norman Fowler announced plans to establish a network of Employment Service offices which will bring Jobcentres and Unemployment Benefit Offices together under one roof. The revised network will provide a new and improved one stop service to help people back to work. Since that time we have been reviewing our offices and are in the process of upgrading many to provide the full range of ES services.

The office in Trafford Way has recently undergone substantial refurbishment and from 20 January has provided an enhanced level of service. The official opening of the new style integrated office took place on 21 February and was performed by Reg Parr, our Regional Director for Yorkshire and Humberside.

I know that you have a standing invitation from Mike Elphinstone, our Area Manager for Wakefield, Barnsley and Doncaster, to visit any of the offices used by your constituents. If you would like to visit our Trafford Way office Mike Elphinstone will be pleased to organise this for you. His address is Employment Service, Exchange House, Queen Street, Wakefield, WF1 1JR.

Unemployed claimants under 18

Mr Gerry Steinberg: To ask the Secretary of State for Employment if, pursuant to his answer of 25 February, *Official Report*, column 452, he will give the names and addresses of the three unemployed claimants in the City of Durham under 18 years of age.

Letter from Mr M E G Fogden, Chief Executive, 10 March 1992:

As personal information about an unemployed client is confidential and can be disclosed only with the written consent of the individual, I have no discretion to provide you with the names and addresses requested. However, if you, as an MP, were acting specifically on behalf of an individual constituent who was an unemployed client, we would be able to provide you with information requested.

Appendix

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

Member	Agency	Subject
Mr George Foulkes	Defence Research Agency	Luce Bay Weapons Range: evening opening hours
Mr Eric Martlew	Maintenance Group, Defence Support Agency	Transfer of avionics repair work from RAF Carlisle to RAF Sealand
Mr Dave Nellist	Intervention Board	Intervention stocks stored in Coventry and the United Kingdom
Mr David Nicholson	Hydrographic Office, Defence Support Agency	Automation, running costs and income from sales
Mr Anthony Steen	Benefits Agency	Constituency case (attendance allowance)
Mr Peter Temple-Morris	Contributions Agency	Constituency case (refund of contributions)