



OsfC

OFFICE OF THE SOCIAL FUND
COMMISSIONER
FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

ANNUAL REPORT
2009-2010



INVESTORS
IN PEOPLE



OFFICE OF THE SOCIAL FUND
COMMISSIONER
FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

ANNUAL REPORT

2009-2010



© Crown Copyright 2010

The text in this document (excluding the Royal Arms and other departmental or agency logos) may be reproduced free of charge in any format or medium providing it is reproduced accurately and not used in a misleading context. The material must be acknowledged as Crown copyright and the title of the document specified.

Where we have identified any third party copyright material you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

For any other use of this material please write to Office of Public Sector Information, Information Policy Team, Kew, Richmond, Surrey TW9 4DU or e-mail: licensing@opsi.gsi.gov.uk

Contents

	Page
Foreword	4
Executive Summary	5
About the OSFC	6
Customer Experience	7
Delivering the Review	8-11
Standard of Administration and Social Fund Inspectors' Decisions	12-14
Issues Raised with the Social Security Agency	15-16
Building Relationships	17-19
Investing in Staff and Training	20
Resources	21-22
Appendix 1 – Organisational Structure	23
Appendix 2(a) – OSFC Decisions by Month	24
Appendix 2(b) – OSFC Decisions by District	24
Appendix 2(c) – OSFC Spread of Decision Types by District	25
Appendix 3 – OSFC Decision Completion Times by Month	26
Appendix 4 – Social Fund Self Instruction Packs	27
Appendix 5 – OSFC Customer Targets 2009/10	28-29
Appendix 6 – OSFC Quality Standards for the Review	30
Appendix 7 – Social Fund Commissioner's Meetings	31
Appendix 8 – The Statutory Framework	32-33
Charts	
Chart 1 - Decisions by Application Type	8
Chart 2 - Outcome of Inspectors' Decisions - all application types	8
Chart 3 - Community Care Grant Decision Outcomes	9
Chart 4 - Crisis Loan Decision Outcomes	10
Chart 5 - Budgeting Loan Decision Outcomes	11
Chart 6 - Case Reading Results	13
Tables	
Table 1 – Analysis of Awards 2009/10	8
Table 2 – Analysis of Community Care Grant activity 2009/10	9
Table 3 – Analysis of Crisis Loan activity 2009/10	10
Table 4 – Analysis of Budgeting Loan activity 2009/10	11
Table 5 – Requests for Reviews of Inspectors' decisions 2009/10	13
Table 6 – Inspectors' Decisions - % of decision types and targets	14
Table 7 – Provision of CCG and BL case papers	16
Table 8 – OSFC Budget allocation and expenditure	21

Foreword



I am pleased to present this Annual Report for the 12 months ended 31 March 2010, which is my first report as Social Fund Commissioner. I would like to pay tribute to the commitment of my predecessor, Sir Richard Tilt, and his contribution to the development of Office of the Social Fund Commissioner.

I have conducted a programme of introductory meetings during the first few months following my appointment in December 2009, and I continue to meet a wide range of stakeholders.

Payments from the Social Fund are targeted at some of the poorest and most vulnerable of our fellow citizens, who suffer multiple disadvantages. The United Kingdom of today is a very different society from that of 1988, when the Social Fund first came into existence. The Department for Work and Pensions' recent consultation, Social Fund Reform: debt, credit and low-income households (March 2010), provided a welcome and timely opportunity to reflect on the challenges of modernising and simplifying the Social Fund scheme

in Great Britain. I believe there are distinct implications for Northern Ireland and any policy initiatives need to be sensitive to this. The Minister for Social Development, (currently Alex Atwood MLA) is responsible for the Social Fund in Northern Ireland and I look forward to engaging with him and his officials in looking for opportunities to improve the delivery of the Social Fund in Northern Ireland that may come about following the DWP consultation.

We have continued to focus on making decisions as efficiently as we can, whilst seeking to maintain our reputation for quality and impartiality. We have continued to scrutinise our use of resources and our case processes with a critical eye; in order to ensure that our productivity and objectivity are not compromised.

The issues at the forefront of my mind, as Social Fund Commissioner are:

- the extent to which we add value to the simplicity, quality and purpose of the citizen's journey through the Social Fund decision making process;
- the extent to which the customer is at the centre of our concerns;
- how we make best use of our unique insights, gleaned from over two decades of casework experience, to benefit Social Fund customers;
- how we ensure that performance standards in our casework are maintained and improved; and
- the extent to which our service provides value for money for the taxpayer.

The Social Security Agency continues to face significant challenges in improving the standard of Social Fund decision making. Enhancing the quality of decision making at the first point of contact with the citizen is an area where I believe we can make a positive contribution by sharing our insights.

I conclude with my thanks to staff at all levels within the Office of the Social Fund Commissioner for their commitment and achievements during a year in which we have experienced a 29% increase in our workload.

Karamjit Singh CBE
Social Fund Commissioner
for Northern Ireland

Executive Summary

Work Activity 2009/10

- Social Fund Inspectors (“Inspectors” or “SFIs”) delivered 2,034 decisions.
- Overall Inspectors changed 40% of the decisions made by Reviewing Officers in the Social Security Agency (“the Agency” or “SSA”).
- Inspectors changed 44% of Community Care Grant (“Grant” or “CCG”) decisions and made 482 awards resulting in a spend of £206,415.34 from the CCG budget.
- Inspectors changed 36% of Crisis Loan (“CL”) decisions and made 254 awards resulting in a spend of £53,567.29 from the loans budget.
- Inspectors changed 8% of Budgeting Loan (“BL”) decisions and made 6 awards resulting in a spend of £2,261.54 from the loans budget.
- The Office of the Social Fund Commissioner (“OSFC”) delivered 9 workshops to 86 people; 1 Quality Assurance Framework (“QAF”) training session to 7 Agency staff; and 2 QAF feedback sessions.
- OSFC provided feedback to the Agency about the findings in each case an Inspector reviewed.
- OSFC provided quarterly Statistics Reports on decision making in each of the Agency’s 6 Social Fund districts.
- My predecessor and I met with people from a range of organisations with an interest in the Social Fund.

In 2009/10 40% of the decisions reviewed by Inspectors were substituted, resulting in:

- 482 Grants awards at an average of £428.25 per award;
- 254 Crisis Loan awards at an average of £210.89 per award; and
- 6 Budgeting Loan awards at an average of £376.92 per award.

The Standard of Social Fund Inspectors’ Decisions

- Case readers examined 141 cases (equivalent to 9% of the cases registered in 09/10). 88% of the decisions were found to be correct.
- 81 requests for further reviews of Inspectors’ decisions were received. Of these 30 cases were reopened of which 27 were changed.

The Standard of Administration

- Inspectors cleared 99.9% of routine cases within the 12 day target, 92% of complex cases within the 21 day target and 100% of express crisis loan cases within the 24 hour target.

Resources

OSFC spent £416,543 giving a cost per decision of £204.79, down from £232.02 for the previous year, despite an additional c. £30,000 spent to refit and move to new premises. The cost per decision figure does not reflect the important training and social fund policy work undertaken by the Commissioner and OSFC staff.

About the OSFC

Our core business is to deliver independent reviews of discretionary Social Fund decisions made in the Agency. We also share information and expertise with those who have an interest in the discretionary Social Fund and the independent review. We participate in social policy research that contributes to the wider debate about the Social Fund and related issues.

The Social Fund

The Social Fund was introduced in 1988 and comprises two distinct parts; one regulated and the other discretionary. The Social Fund Commissioner and Social Fund Inspectors are concerned solely with the discretionary part of the Social Fund. This is a scheme of payments, by grant or interest free loan.

The Social Fund Commissioner

The Social Fund Commissioner is appointed by the Department for Social Development (“the Department”). The Commissioner has a duty to:

- appoint Social Fund Inspectors and other staff;
- monitor the quality of Inspectors’ decisions and give advice, as he thinks fit, to improve the standard of their decisions;
- arrange appropriate training for Inspectors; and
- report annually, in writing, to the Department on the standard of Inspectors’ reviews.

Social Fund Inspectors

Inspectors can only review decisions that have already been reviewed in the Agency, providing that an appropriate application for review has been made. The Inspector has the authority to:-

- confirm the decision under review;
- substitute the decision of the Reviewing Officer; or
- refer the case back to the Reviewing Officer to make a fresh decision.

Our organisational structure and functions are explained further in Appendix I.

Our Vision

To deliver independent reviews of discretionary Social Fund decisions providing a high quality and accessible service to all.

Our Values

- Be open and accessible to our customers.
- Treat all with respect and courtesy.
- Work for continuous improvement in our standards and the service we provide.
- Promote easy access to the Fund.
- Provide value for money.

Customer Experience

Customer Survey

During the period 2009/10 OSFC surveyed 120 applicants and received 38 responses (32%). The survey enables us to monitor the satisfaction levels with our service and to identify areas where we could make improvements. Of those who responded:

- 89% indicated that their call to OSFC was answered promptly and effectively;
- 95% found it easy to apply for a review;
- 87% found the information sent in advance of the review helped them to understand the issues in their cases;
- 84% found the Inspector's decision easy to follow; and
- 76% said they would use the OSFC again, while 6% did not answer the question.

This represents a continuing high level of satisfaction amongst our customers, which we will endeavour to maintain.

Complaints

During 2009/10 OSFC received 2 complaints. The first concerned the accuracy of information provided in a telephone call which was relied upon in an Inspector's decision. The second related to the terminology used in an Inspector's decision letter. Both complaints were investigated by my Office Manager who responded in writing to each customer. In the first case, it was noted that the Inspector had agreed the record of the telephone call with customer at the end of the call and offered to include a copy of it with their decision. In the second case, it was noted the terminology used by the Inspector was consistent with the language recommended in training material on the Social Fund. My Office Manager apologised to both customers concerned for any misunderstanding in their cases and arranged for different Inspectors to review each case again.

Appendix 5 contains details of OSFC customer service targets.

Case example

Mr M is a 60 year old single man who is in receipt of Pension Credit and DLA. He has osteoarthritis affecting many of his joints, problems with his left ankle and hearing loss. His niece is his main carer and she lives 8 miles away. She provides a great deal of support despite having health problems herself.

Mr M was initially refused a grant, but on review the Agency's Reviewing Officer offered him a crisis loan for some household items.

Mr M requested an independent review by a Social Fund Inspector. Based on the information provided during the Inspector's review, the Inspector decided that Mr M was part of a family facing exceptional pressure. The Inspector converted the crisis loan into a grant and increased the award amount for one of the items. In total Mr M was awarded a grant of £720.

Time taken for review: 11 working days.

Delivering the Review

Inspectors made 2,034 decisions during 2009/10. The overall number of decisions made by OSFC this year increased by 29%, compared to 2008/09. Chart 1 illustrates the increasing demand for independent Social Fund reviews over the last 3 years.

Chart 1 – Decisions by Application Type

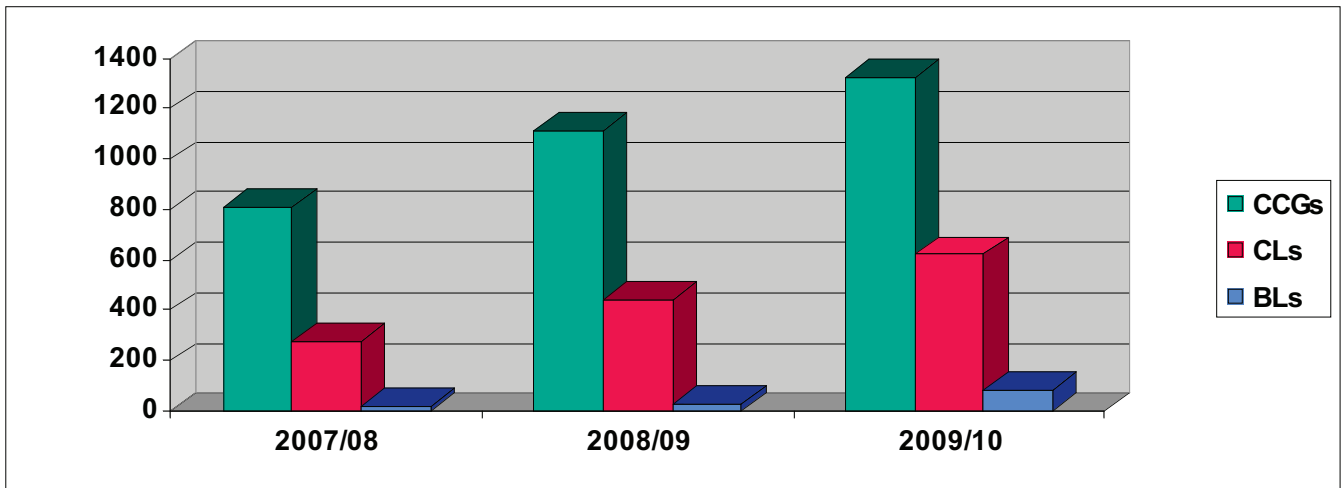
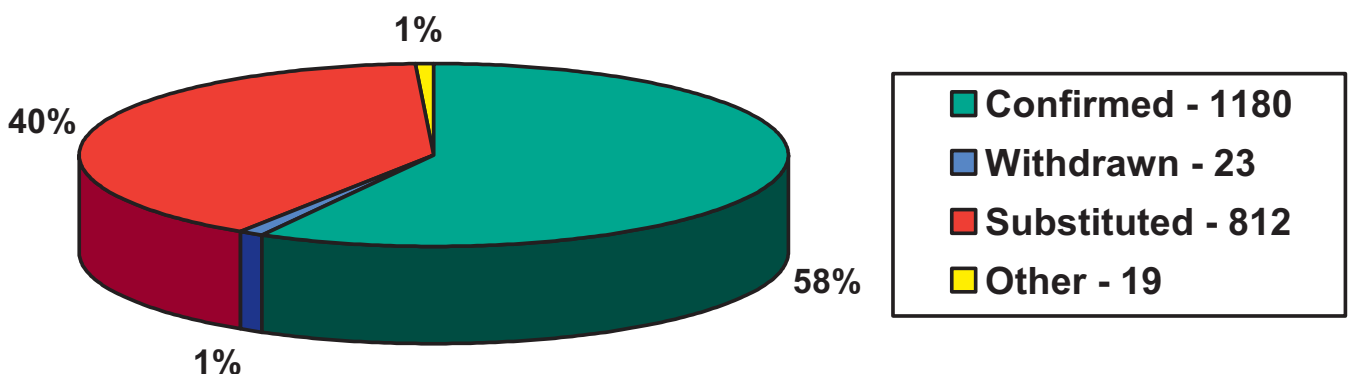


Table 1 shows the number of awards made by Inspectors this year and the average amount of awards.

Application Type	Budget	Number of awards	Total amount awarded by SFIs	Average amount of award
CCG	£13,680,000	482	£206,415.34	£428.25
CL	£60,250,000	254	£53,567.29	£210.89
BL		6	£2,261.54	£376.92

Chart 2 shows the outcome of Inspectors' decisions across all types of applications.



Overall, Inspectors found important errors in 25% of the Agency decisions they reviewed. The error rate for substituted decisions was 51% and the error rate for confirmed decisions was 8%. Appendix 2 shows a breakdown of the spread of decisions by month, District and type.

Community Care Grants

Community care grants again accounted for the largest proportion of our work (65%). Inspectors delivered 1,326 decisions of this type. Table 2 below shows the number of requests for review of grant decisions made by the Agency during 2009/10.

Table 2: Analysis of Community Care Grant activity 2009/10

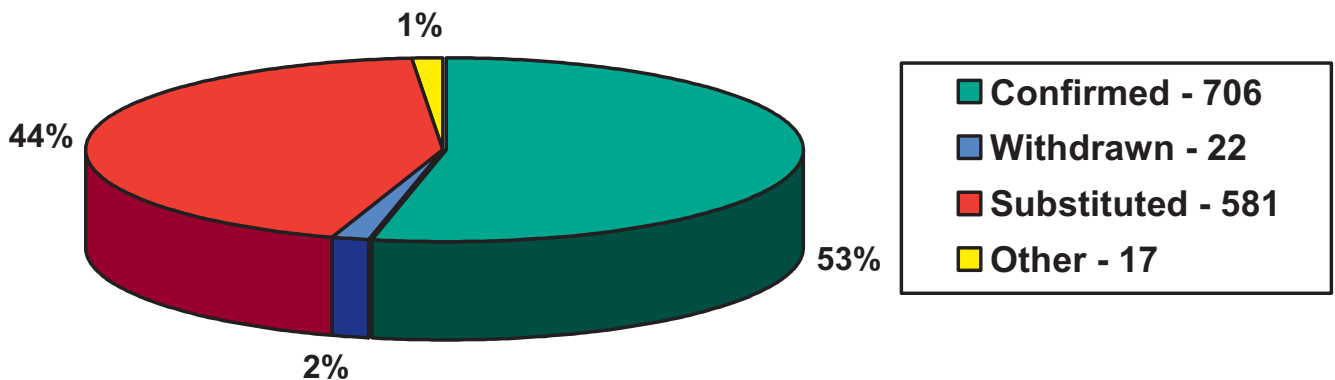
1. Initial Applications to the Agency	48,916
2. Initial Refusals by the Agency	23,983
3. Applications for Reviewing Officer review	10,369
4. Applications unchanged or not wholly changed on review in the applicant's favour	10,030
5. OSFC Reviews	1,326
6. Number of grant awards made by Inspectors	482
7. Average amount of grant award	£428.25

Only 1,326 requests for a review of grant decisions made in the Agency were received in OSFC. This represents only 13% of the 10,030 cases (which could have been independently reviewed), that is those which were either unchanged or not wholly changed in the applicant's favour by the Reviewing Officer.

This emphasises the importance of making applicants aware of the role of the OSFC and also of making our service accessible. This is underlined by the fact that 44% of the Agency's grant decisions reviewed by Inspectors were substituted (Chart 3 below refers).

Decision Outcomes

Chart 3 shows the outcomes of Inspectors' reviews on CCG decisions.



Crisis Loans

Crisis loans accounted for 31% of our workload this year. Table 3 below shows the number of requests for review of Crisis Loan decisions made by the Agency during 2009/10.

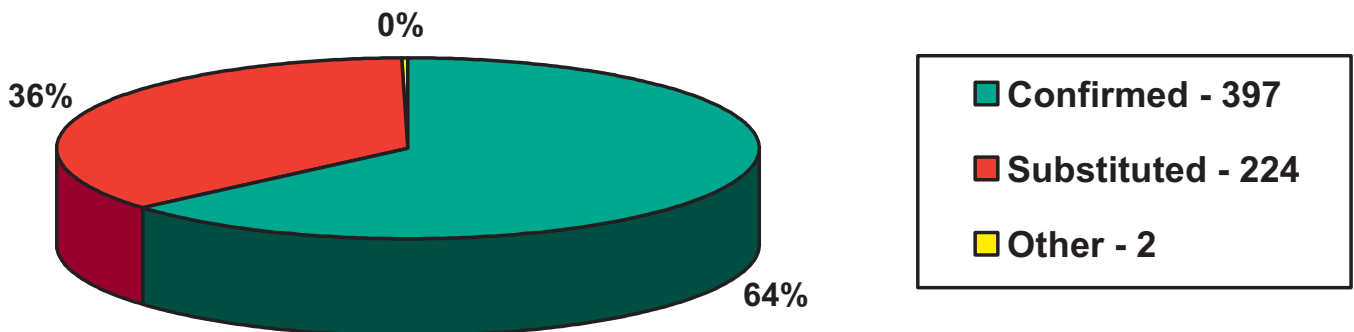
Table 3: Analysis of Crisis Loan activity 2009/10

1. Initial Applications to the Agency	154,594
2. Initial Refusals by the Agency	35,414
3. Applications for Reviewing Officer review	2,971
4. Applications unchanged or not wholly changed on review in the applicant's favour	2,694
5. OSFC Reviews	623
6. Number of crisis loan awards made by Inspectors	254
7. Average amount of crisis loan award	£210.89

Only 623 requests for a review of CL decisions made in the Agency were received in OSFC. This represents only 23% of the 2,694 cases (which could have been independently reviewed), that is those which were either unchanged or not wholly changed in the applicant's favour by the Reviewing Officer.

Decision Outcomes

Chart 4 shows the outcome of Inspectors' crisis loan decisions.



Budgeting Loans

Reviews

Budgeting loans accounted for 4% of our workload this year. Inspectors delivered 85 reviews of this type. Table 4 below shows the number of requests for review of Budgeting Loan decisions made by the Agency during 2009/10.

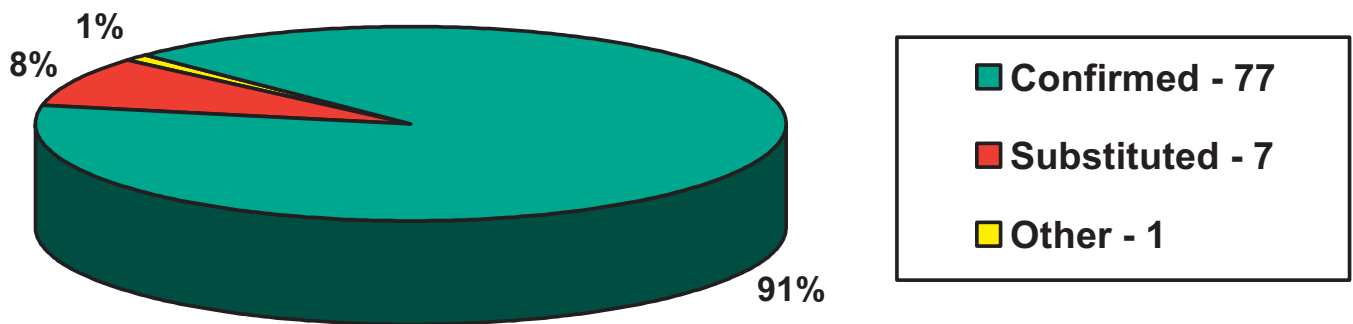
Table 4: Analysis of Budgeting Loan activity 2009/10

1. Initial Applications to the Agency	144,222
2. Initial Refusals by the Agency	38,161
3. Applications for Reviewing Officer review	1,826
4. Applications unchanged or not wholly changed on review in the applicant's favour	1,722
5. OSFC Reviews	85
6. Number of budgeting loan awards made by Inspectors	6
7. Average amount of budgeting loan award	£376.92

Only 85 requests for a review of BL decisions made in the Agency were received in OSFC. This represents only 4.9% of the 1,722 cases (which could have been independently reviewed), that is those which were either unchanged or not wholly changed in the applicant's favour by the Reviewing Officer.

Decision Outcomes

Chart 5 shows the outcome of Inspectors' budgeting loan decisions.



Standard of Administration and Social Fund Inspectors' Decisions

Article 37(5) of the Social Security (Northern Ireland) Order 1998

The Commissioner has a statutory duty to monitor the quality of Inspectors' decisions and to give them advice and assistance to improve the standard of their reviews.

Case Reading

Case reading is the primary means by which I assess the standards of Inspectors' decisions.

Although the provision to seek judicial review through the High Court exists, in practice, the Inspector's review provides the final resolution for applicants to the Social Fund. It is vital, therefore, that Inspectors deliver high standards and our monitoring processes are robust. The overall quality standards required are set out in detail in Appendix 6.

As well as Social Fund law, Inspectors' decisions must comply with general legal principles, such as burdens and standards of proof, and natural justice. The people who use our service have a right to know the reasons for the Inspector's decision and in order to ensure this, they must be presented in plain language. Our case readers, therefore, also assess the clarity of explanation to ensure it respects the applicant's level of understanding and avoids jargon.

Our aim for 2009/10 was to read 5% of our total workload, selected at random.

Our total case reading for the year was 141 cases (9% of cases registered in 2009/10), of which my predecessor and I read 60. Chart 6 shows the results. 88% of cases were correct, in 1% the case reader could not tell from the papers whether the outcome was right or wrong and 11% were found to be incorrect.

Case Example

Mr R was a single man with several health problems including depression and a social phobia. He had regular support from his Mental Health Social Worker and a Community Psychiatric Nurse. He was in receipt of Income Support and was therefore eligible for a community care grant.

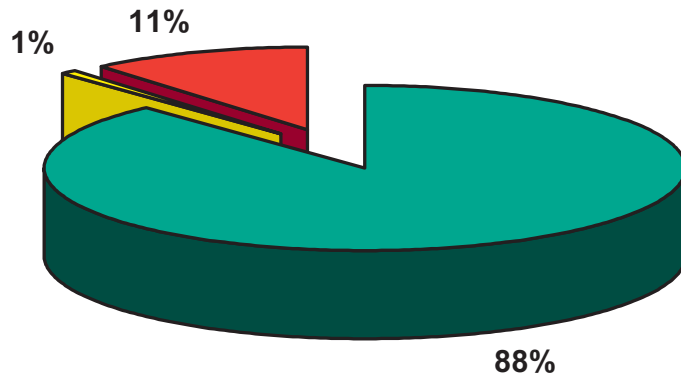
He had left his family home and stayed in a supported hostel for a period of 6 months and was declared homeless by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. His support worker helped him get set up in a new home as part of a planned resettlement programme following a period in which he had had an unsettled way of life.

He was initially refused a grant and on review this decision was upheld by the Agency. With the help of his support worker he requested an independent review by a Social Fund Inspector.

The information provided enabled the Inspector to change the Agency's decision. The Inspector made a grant award for several urgent household items.

Time taken for Inspector's review: 10 working days.

Chart 6 - Case Reading Results



■ Fully met the standards in the case reading template	87.9%
■ Could not determine whether the outcome was correct	1.4%
■ Did not fully meet the standards in the case reading template	10.6%

Reviews of Inspectors' Decisions

"A social fund inspector may review a determination under paragraph (3) made by himself or some other social fund inspector". Article 38(5) of the Social Security (Northern Ireland) Order 1998.

When a request for a review of an Inspector's decision is received it is examined thoroughly before being passed to a different Inspector for reconsideration.

During 2009/10 we received 81 requests for reviews of Inspector's decisions. As in previous years, most requests were about the amount of, or refusal of, an award. In the

majority of these cases the Inspector's decision had been reached properly and was legally sound. A further 22 cases were identified through our internal case reading.

Source	Number received	Number reopened	Number changed
Customer	61	21	20
Representative	19	8	6
SSA	1	1	1
Internal Checks	22	19	16
Total	103	49	43

In 2009/10 Inspectors aimed to clear reviews of Inspectors' decisions within 15 working days, and within 25 days in more complex cases. Of these 103 cases, 83 (81%) were cleared in 15 days and 17 (16%) in 25 days or under.

3 cases (3%) exceeded the 25 day target. 2 of these were due to exceptional difficulties encountered when trying to contact customers and 1 was due to a late reply being received from the customer.

Completion Times

We recognise the need to complete reviews as quickly as possible since the people who use our service are generally in urgent need and have already had two decisions on their application made by the Agency. Nevertheless the Inspector has a duty to ensure natural justice is served. In order to do this, before he makes a decision he sends the applicant a copy of the key papers, sets out the facts and issues to be decided, invites the applicant to comment on these, and asks any relevant questions.

We issued 1,317 letters seeking further information before proceeding with a decision, to which there were 1,123 responses (85%). This part of the process is included in the overall clearance times.

40% of customers responded using our Freephone service. This reduces the time taken to reach a decision and enables the customer (or their representative) to provide greater detail when responding to the Inspector's questions.

Table 6 illustrates the number of decisions of each type and the proportion of our workload this represents, together with our targets and achievements for each decision type. Appendix 3 shows the breakdown of our decision completion times by month.

Case Example

Mr K was a single man with several disabilities who was in receipt of Income Support (including a Severe Disability Premium) and Disability Living Allowance.

His main carer had to leave the area due to work commitments and was unable to provide him with the same level of care. At the same time there was a deterioration in Mr K's health and he gained significant weight as he was relying on takeaway food because his cooker had broken.

He was initially refused a grant, however on review the Agency's Reviewing Officer offered him a crisis loan. With the assistance of a representative, Mr K requested an independent review by a Social Fund Inspector.

On the basis of the information provided, the Inspector decided there was a risk of Mr K entering care and that he could be considered for a grant. The Inspector converted the crisis loan award into a grant and made an additional grant award for other urgent household items.

Despite detailed investigations being required, the Inspector was able to clear the case within 9 working days of receiving the review request.

Table 6 – Inspectors' Decisions – % of decision types and targets

Decision type/Timescale	No. of decisions	% of decision workload	Target %	Achieved %
Community Care Grants: No enquiries/straightforward enquiries (to be completed within 12 days of receipt)	1,189	58%	95%	99.9%
Community Care Grants: Further investigation /complex enquiries (to be completed within 21 days of receipt)	137	7%	90%	92%
Budgeting Loans: No enquiries/straightforward enquiries (to be completed within 12 days of receipt)	85	4%	95%	100%
Crisis Loan cases for items (to be completed within 12 days of receipt)	529	26%	95%	100%
Crisis Loan cases for living expenses (to be completed within 24 hours)	94	5%	95%	100%

Issues Raised with the Social Security Agency

The Social Fund Commissioner's 2008/09 report raised a number of issues for the Agency's consideration. I have set these out below together with the Agency's response and the current position based on our experience. I am grateful to its consideration of the issues.

Issues for Consideration raised in 2008/09

Discretionary Social Fund Budgets

"It is essential that the Department takes action to secure an appropriate increase in the Community Care Grant budgets so that all high priority needs can be met across Northern Ireland in the challenging year ahead." (Social Fund Commissioner's Report 2008/09)

The Agency's Response

"In 2006/07 the Northern Ireland Community Care Grant Budget was increased to £13.62m, and in common with Great Britain, Northern Ireland has maintained its Community Care Grant Budget at the 2006/07 level. In recognition of the demand on the NI Discretionary Social Fund resulting from the economic downturn, HM Treasury allocated an additional £3.048m in 2009/10 and £3.538m for 2010/11, specifying that all of this additional funding was to be added only to the Loans element of the Budget. The Department will seek to maintain parity in future years in relation to the overall budget provision."

OSFC Position

The decision to increase funding in the Northern Ireland loans budget in 2009/10 and 2010/11 is welcomed. However, it was noted that at times during 2009/10 the Community Care Grant budget was not able to meet all the high priority needs which had been identified by Social Fund Officers and Inspectors.

Timely provision of Case Papers

"The performance of Districts when providing case papers to OSFC within 4 days on average ranges from a low of 62% to a high of 94%. I would request that the Agency works to improve on the current performance in this area." (Social Fund Commissioner's Report 2008/09)

The Agency's Response

"The Agency has comprehensive guidance in place setting out the procedures for sending papers to the Office of the Social Fund Commissioner. Staff have been reminded of the importance and the need for urgency in despatching papers to the Commissioner's Office"

OSFC Position

I would like to thank the Agency for its helpful response on this issue. It is pleasing to note that, on average, there has been an improvement in receiving papers from the Agency. However, there still remains some room for improvement and so I would ask that the Agency continues to seek improvements in this area.

Table 7 – Provision of CCG and BL case papers		
District	% of CCG and BL case papers received within 4 working days	
	2008/09	2009/10
Belfast North and East Antrim	70%	74%
Belfast West and Lisburn	86%	81%
East Down	62%	78%
North	93%	89%
South	94%	94%
West	90%	93%
Total	83%	86%

Building Relationships

Feeding Back on Standards and Policy

The OSFC works with the Department to improve the standard of first line decision making, by providing feedback on each case we review. We also provide regular feedback via quarterly statistics reports which give detailed information for each of the Agency's 6 Social Fund districts and Northern Ireland as a whole about performance and operational issues drawn from all the cases that Inspectors reviewed.

During 2009/10 the most common problems identified in these reports included:

- failure to consider a community care grant on a crisis loan application (or vice versa) as provided for by Direction 49; and
- failure to ask social fund applicants appropriate questions concerning crucial issues in order to fill gaps in the case evidence before proceeding with their decision (referred to as an "inquisitorial role" flaw).

My predecessor and I have had a number of meetings with the Department, the Agency and various welfare rights organisations during the year. A full list of these meetings are held at Appendix 7.

Improving Knowledge

One of our key objectives is to use our expertise and experience to provide advice to applicants, and their advisers and the Agency's staff about the Social Fund and the role of OSFC. We mainly do this by delivering training and information about the Social Fund. Social Fund information packs (detailed in Appendix 4) and leaflets can be accessed and downloaded from the OSFC website.

Examples of leaflets and information packs include:

- "The Social Fund – A Basis Overview"
- "Evidence in the Social Fund Context"
- "The Social Fund for JBO/SSO staff"

The OSFC has undertaken various activities to help improve the standards of decision making, improve the knowledge of advisers and raise awareness amongst those at whom the Social Fund is aimed. During 2009/10, we:

- Delivered 9 workshops to 86 people including welfare rights organisations and the Agency's staff;
- met a range of people with an interest in the Social Fund and wider social policy issues;
- held three Best Practice Forums with Agency staff to discuss case issues and disseminate any learning points to Social Fund staff in the Agency.

Quality Assurance Framework

The aim of the Quality Assurance Framework ("QAF") is to provide an approach to quality assurance that involves all decision makers and their managers in the Agency. It includes a thorough and reasoned check of the standard of decision making within the Social Fund section. The support the QAF provides, along with sound training and ongoing development for all staff involved, helps to improve the standard of Social Fund decision making for the customer. It also helps to ensure value for money by delivering

the right decision at the first opportunity. This is particularly important given the high number of initial Social Fund decisions which are overturned both by the Reviewing Officer within the Agency and the Inspector as a result of the independent review.

Following the successful introduction of the QAF in Jobcentre Plus in GB, the Agency agreed that a pilot training course for QAF checkers would be delivered in Northern Ireland with the assistance of OSFC. OSFC trained 7 checkers in the Agency and followed the training up with a validation exercise to measure the effectiveness of the newly trained QAF checkers. The pilot was completed in South District and Omagh Jobs and Benefits Office Social Fund sections in March 2010. Subsequently, OSFC reported back to the Agency to allow them to consider the roll out of QAF to all Social Fund Districts in Northern Ireland.


External Focus

OSFC publications are made available on our website at www.osfni.org.uk.

osf c Office of the Social Fund Commissioner


>> Home
[Home](#) / [Contact Us](#) / [Site Map](#) / [Feedback](#)

[About OSFC](#)




Our Service
 Organisation chart
 Enquiries, comments or complaints

[Publications & Communications](#)




Advice and guidance
 Corporate publications
 Freedom of information
 Section 75 consultations

[Asking for a review](#)



Asking for a review
 FAQs about Social Fund
 Translation services

[Workshop & Training](#)



Workshops and training
 Online booking form

nidirect
 government services

We also offer practical and informative advice about the Social Fund procedures and the independent review process for applicants, their representatives and the Agency. We have a dedicated team of Inspectors who deliver training on request.

We offer a range of training workshops and, if you are interested in a particular Social Fund subject, we can normally tailor a presentation to meet your needs. We use practical examples and discussion to enable advisors to help their clients effectively. Feedback on workshops has been very positive and it underlines the importance of this area of work.

The training is:

- free of charge;
- delivered at a venue of your choice;
- designed for a minimum of 6 people;
- can be designed to last either a half, or a full day;
- participative; and
- designed to meet a range of needs.

"I enjoyed the workshop and feel it would encourage me to advise clients to challenge decisions more often."

Member of Antrim CAB on 13/01/10.

Organisations which have received training in 09/10 include:

- East Belfast Independent Advice Centre;
- Magherafelt District Advice Service;
- Help the Aged;
- Antrim CAB;
- Disability Action;
- Kilcooley Residents Association; and
- 37 Social Fund Staff.

"Gave a good understanding of the role of OSFC and the different aspect of the Fund/Loans."

Member of Disability Action on 04/11/09.

Investing in Staff and Training

Advice to Inspectors

This year I introduced new advice on Daily Living Expenses for Inspectors. I also reviewed and revised my existing advice to Inspectors on the circumstances in which a decision is to be reviewed (Direction 31), repeat applications (Direction 7), Housing Costs (General), and Direction 4(a)(v).

All the Commissioner's advice to Inspectors is accessible via the OSFC website.

- Go to www.osfci.org.uk
- Click on "About OSFC"
- Click on "Useful Links"
- Click on "Commissioner's Advice to Inspectors" (site will open as a separate window)
- Click on the topic required from the list provided

Training

Three new Social Fund Inspectors were recruited in March 2009 and subsequently completed their five week training programme in the Independent Review Service ("IRS") office in Birmingham. They then underwent a period of consolidation with an experienced Inspector in OSFC. In addition, OSFC staff also attended various other training courses to assist them with their other roles in the office.

We continued with the provision of awareness sessions from outside organisations as an aspect of improving the knowledge of Inspectors. These are designed to provide an awareness of the wider issues facing some applicants to the Social Fund. These sessions were delivered by staff from the following organisations:

- Northern Ireland Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder support centre;
- Northern Ireland Housing Executive; and
- Occupational Services.

OSFC had 10 staff in post on 31 March 2010. In line with the OSFC commitment to deliver high standards to applicants £6,124 (1.5%) of our total spend in 2009/10 was on the training and development of staff. This includes the direct costs of providing the training and the cost of staff time. A total of 32 mandays were spent on training and development activities.

Inspectors also attended in-house training in relation to crisis loans for living expenses, a budgeting loan refresher session and Social Fund refresher training called "Heart of the Matter" delivered by staff from IRS.

Investor in People

OSFC has been recognised as an Investor in People since November 1998. Re-accreditation is due in December 2010 and preparations are well under way for this review. We continue to develop staff through regular and relevant training, provided both internally and externally.

Resources

Table 8 – OSFC Budget allocation and expenditure				
	2008/2009		2009/2010	
	Budget Allocation	Total Spend	Budget Allocation	Total Spend
Business Operating Costs (GAE)	103,000	81,854	70,000	69,971
Accommodation (premises move) ¹	-	-	30,000	30,105
Salaries ²	294,319	284,744	323,900	316,467
Total	397,319	366,598	423,900	416,543
Cost per decision	£232.02		£204.79	

¹ OSFC received a one off budget allocation of £30,000 to facilitate a move to new premises.

² The salary spend this year was £31,723 more than in 2008/09, due to an increase in our compliment of Inspectors.

Inspectors completed 2,034 decisions, giving a unit cost of £204.79 per decision. Excluding the cost of the premises move the unit cost per decision was £190.00. The cost per decision figure does not take account of the important other work carried out by OSFC staff, such as the provision of training workshops, delivering the QAF training and various meetings with the Social Fund Commissioner.

Sick Absence

The sick absence rate in OSFC for the period 2009/10 was 1.2%.

Risk Assessment

OSFC has made identifying and managing risks which would adversely affect the organisations ability to achieve its objectives an integral part of the organisation's operations. To facilitate this process a detailed Risk Register and Business Continuity Plan have been developed and are regularly reviewed.

Security

Security and compliance with data protection in the public sector have been in the spotlight recently. To ensure that our office and procedures continue to stand up to high security standards, we have undertaken a full review of our procedures and practices and implemented improvements where necessary.

Section 75 Statutory Equality Duty

The OSFC's Equality Scheme was drawn up in accordance with Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 which deals with the promotion of equality of opportunity and good relations. The scheme can be viewed on the OSFC website.

We provide some information in other languages, including:-

- Arabic
- Chinese
- Latvian
- Lithuanian
- Polish
- Spanish
- Portuguese

Correspondence from OSFC includes a Minicom number for the hard of hearing and leaflets can be provided in different formats such as Braille.

Disability Action Plan

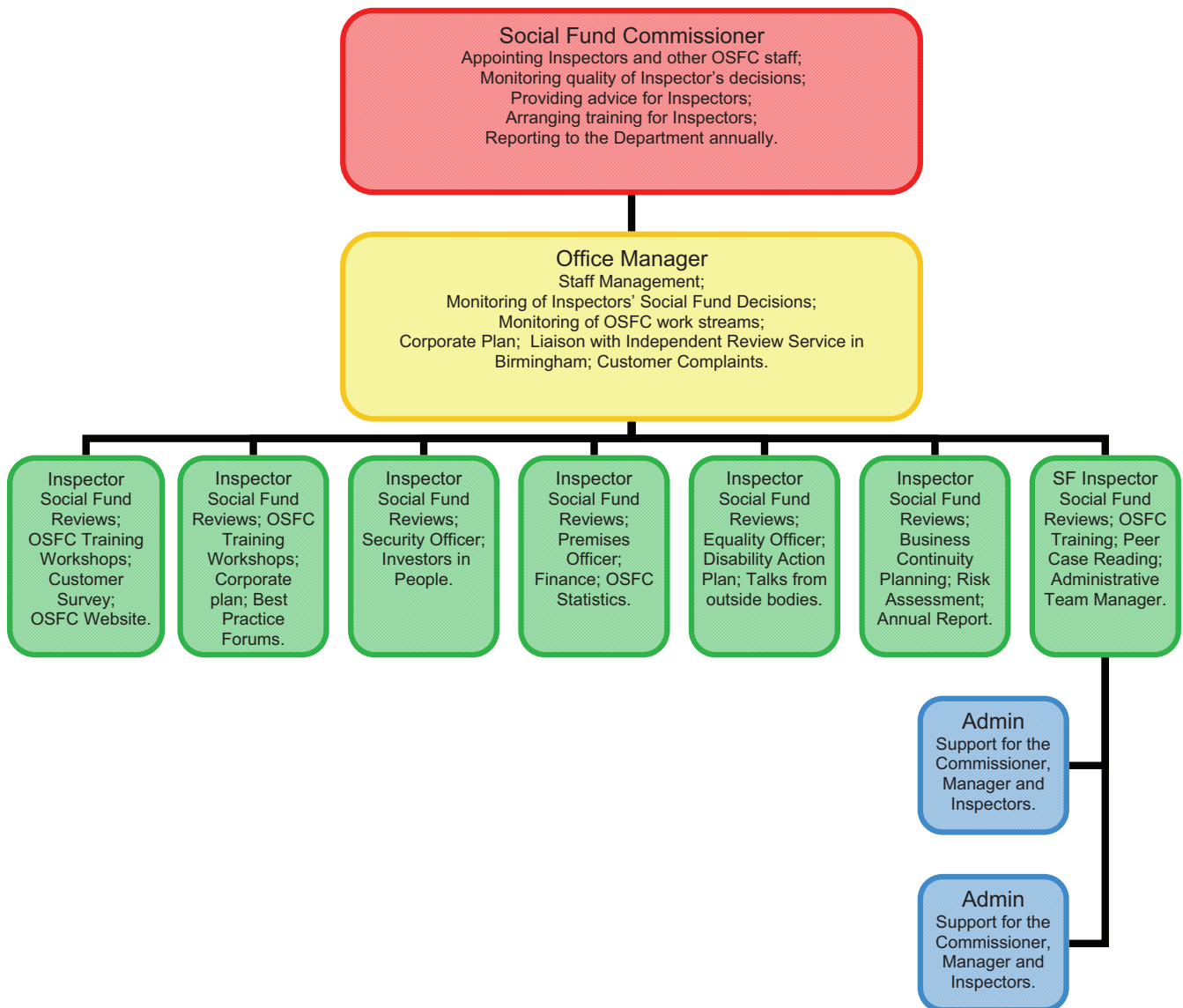
I am also committed to complying with the duties imposed by the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. In accordance with this the OSFC has drawn up a Disability Action Plan that details how we will fulfil our duties up to 2012.

Appendix I - Organisational Structure

There are two distinct strands to our work.

- The first relates to delivery of the independent review.
- The second draws on OSFC expertise and data to:
 - feed back to the Agency on operational and policy matters;
 - to provide training and advice to those actively involved in the Social Fund; and
 - to provide general information to the public.

Our organisational structure is designed around these strands and the following organisational chart demonstrates some of the work that we do.



Appendix 2(a) – OSFC Decisions by Month

Month	Community Care Grants	Crisis Loans	Budgeting Loans	Total Workload
April	100	45	5	150
May	83	36	7	126
June	107	35	9	151
July	114	50	5	169
August	121	43	9	173
September	104	49	4	157
October	135	47	7	189
November	120	70	9	199
December	113	56	11	180
January	97	58	5	160
February	109	68	4	181
March	123	66	10	199
Total	1326	623	85	2034

Appendix 2(b) – OSFC Decisions by District

District	Community Care Grants	Crisis Loans	Budgeting Loans	Total Workload
Belfast North and East Antrim	181	72	6	259
Belfast West and Lisburn	201	117	15	333
East Down	228	121	13	362
North	211	76	18	305
South	307	155	20	482
West	198	82	13	293
Total	1326	623	85	2034

¹ Workload comprises decisions on applications for an Inspector's review; applications for community care grants also considered for crisis loans and vice versa; but excludes reviews of Inspectors' decisions under Article 38(5) of the Social Security (NI) Order 1998 and withdrawn cases.

Appendix 2(c) – OSFC Spread of Decision Types by District

Location	Community Care Grants - %			Crisis Loans - %			Budgeting Loans - %		
	Confirmed	Substituted	Referred Back	Confirmed	Substituted	Referred Back	Confirmed	Substituted	Referred Back
Belfast North and East Antrim	43.1%	53.6%	0.6%	59.7%	40.3%	0%	100%	0%	0%
Belfast West and Lisburn	51.7%	45.3%	1.0%	75.2%	23.9%	0%	80.0%	20.0%	0%
East Down	54.8%	40.4%	0.9%	62.8%	36.4%	0.8%	92.3%	7.7%	0%
North	53.6%	44.1%	0.5%	65.8%	34.2%	0%	100%	0%	0%
South	59.9%	37.5%	0%	52.9%	47.1%	0%	90.0%	10.0%	0%
West	51.5%	47.0%	0%	70.7%	29.3%	0%	84.6%	15.4%	0%
Total	53.2%	43.8%	0.5%	63.7%	36.0%	0.2%	90.6%	8.2%	0%

Appendix 3 – OSFC Decision Completion Times by Month

Month	Community Care Grants		Crisis Loans		Budgeting Loans	
	% completed within		% completed within		% completed within	
	12 days ²⁰	21 days ²¹	24 Hours ²²	12 days ²⁰	12 days ²⁰	21 days ²¹
April	100%	76%	100%	100%	100%	-
May	100%	81%	100%	100%	100%	-
June	99%	90%	100%	100%	100%	-
July	100%	92%	100%	100%	100%	-
August	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	-
September	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	-
October	99%	100%	100%	100%	100%	-
November	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	-
December	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	-
January	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	-
February	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	-
March	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	-
Average	99.9%	92%	100%	100%	100%	-

²⁰ Of those cases, which required no enquiries or straightforward enquiries, we aimed to complete 95% in 12 days.

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

²² We aim to complete 95% of express cases within 24 hours.

Appendix 4 – Social Fund Self Instruction Packs

The documents listed below can be accessed online at www.osfcni.org.uk.

The Social Fund ‘A Basic Overview’

A general guide to the Social Fund, covering the key features of the scheme.

Community Care Grants

A technical pack providing a thorough working guide to community care grants. Specifically designed for staff with responsibility for the Social Fund and organisations that advise or assist applicants.

Crisis Loans

A technical pack providing a thorough working guide to crisis loans. Specifically designed for staff with responsibility for the Social Fund and organisations that advise or assist applicants.

Budgeting Loans

A brief summary of the changes to the budgeting loan scheme from 3 April 2006.

Evidence in the Social Fund Context

This is intended to provide the user with a thorough, but not overly technical, guide to competent handling of evidence in the context of Social Fund applications.

The Social Fund for JBO/SSO staff

This pack is designed for SSA staff in local offices who may be required to advise and assist customers, but who are not involved in Social Fund decision-making. It gives an overview of the conditions for payments and advice about the information customers should give to support their applications.

The Social Fund for Pension Service staff

Designed for staff in The Pension Service who may be required to advise and assist customers. It gives an overview of the conditions for payments and advice about the information customers should give to support their applications.

Decision Making and Reviews

This is a ‘how-to’ guide to making and reviewing decisions. It focuses on the processes by which decisions are made rather than the technical aspects of the various types of Social Fund payments. Primarily aimed at Decision Makers and Reviewing Officers, it may also be useful to advisers.

IRS Self Instruction Pack - Decision Making: The Inquisitorial Role

This pack is designed to help decision makers understand their role in gathering evidence, with pointers about when additional information is necessary and how best to go about collecting it.

Appendix 5 - OSFC Customer Targets 2009/10

We aim to deliver a high quality decision at the earliest opportunity. Our staff will deliver the following customer service standards:

Overall Customer Service Standards

Standard cases

- We will make a decision on 95% of standard cases within 12 working days. Standard cases are all applications to the OSFC, excluding express and complex cases. They form the majority of the work of OSFC.

Express cases

- We will make a decision on 95% of express cases within 24 hours. Express cases are applications for living expenses or other needs where a very urgent decision is required.

Complex cases

- We will make a decision on 90% of complex cases within 21 days. Complex cases are those that warrant extensive enquiry or investigation or where the nature of the case is exceptionally complex.

Administration

In order to deliver the overall standards the following internal targets will guide our work:

- Direct applications with the required identifying details will be registered and papers requested on the day they are received.
- Cases will be registered on the day they are received.
- Cases will be allocated and passed to the Inspector by the morning of day 2.
- Responses to papers or to requests for further information will be recorded and passed to an Inspector by close of business on the day they are received.

Decision Making

- The relevant papers and the Social Fund Inspector's preliminary summary of the case will be sent to the applicant within 3 working days.
- Exceptionally, when the decision is indisputable, it will be issued within three working days.

Enquiries and complaints

- Enquiries and complaints will be acknowledged on the day they are received.
- A full response, or update as appropriate, will be sent to the applicant within 8 working days.
- A decision will be made on standard complaint cases within 15 working days. Standard complaint cases are all applications, excluding express and complex cases.

- A decision will be made on complex cases within 25 working days. These are applications that warrant extensive enquiry or investigation or where the nature of the case is exceptionally complex.
- A decision will be made on express cases within 24 hours. Express cases are applications for living expenses or other needs where a very urgent decision is required.

Telephone Service

- A telephone service will be provided for customers, on a Freephone line, between 9.00am and 4.30pm, Monday to Friday. An answering service will be available at all other times.

Appendix 6 - OSFC Quality Standards for the Review

OSFC will deliver Inspectors' reviews that are independent, impartial, fair and legally sound. In each case we will work to increase our applicants' ability to understand and participate fully and effectively in their review.

To achieve this, the review will meet the following quality standards:

before the decision is made the Inspector will:

- Examine thoroughly all the evidence presented to decide the key issues, establish the relevant facts and identify all necessary enquiries.
- Ask the right questions, in the right way, to enable all the relevant facts to be established.
- Deliver the information to the applicant in such a way that clarifies the key issues the Inspector has to decide, the facts he already knows about those issues and the information he still needs.

in making the decision the Inspector will:

- Take full account of the relevant information provided in the case and reflect that in the decision.
- Correctly interpret and apply the law, including the Department's directions.
- Ensure the rules of natural justice are met: that the applicant knows the case he must answer and has been given a fair opportunity to put his own case; and that there has been no bias.
- Reach an outcome that is reasonable and is right in all the circumstances of the case.
- Tailor each letter and decision to the case ensuring, in particular, that the applicant's level of understanding is respected.
- Explain the law clearly, in a way the applicant can understand, avoiding legal terminology wherever possible.
- Apply any relevant Commissioner's Advice to Inspectors.

in doing this OSFC will deliver the review:

- Promptly and within published Customer Service Standards.
- In the most cost effective way, delivering value for money.

Appendix 7 – Social Fund Commissioner’s Meetings

Will Haire, Permanent Secretary, DSD (March 2010)

Alan Shannon, Permanent Secretary, DSD (November 2009)

Bryan Davis, Chief Executive SSA

Social Fund Managers and Staff in North District

Social Fund Managers and Staff in South District

Social Fund Managers and Staff in West District

Social Fund Managers and Staff in Belfast West and Lisburn District

Social Fund Managers and Staff in Belfast North and East Antrim District

Social Fund Managers and Staff in East Down District

Antrim Citizens Advice Bureau

HOPE Organisation, Antrim

East Belfast Independent Advice Centre

Omagh Community House

Newington Day Centre, Omagh

Homeless Support Team, Belfast

Kilcooley Tenant Support Project, Bangor

Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO)

Appendix 8 - The Statutory Framework

The Social Fund

The Social Fund was introduced in 1988 and comprises two distinct parts; one regulated and the other discretionary. The Social Fund Commissioner and Social Fund Inspectors are concerned solely with the discretionary part of the Fund. This is a scheme of payments, by grant or interest free loan, to meet the needs, other than those covered by the regulated Fund, of the poorest and most vulnerable in society. The Commissioner and Inspectors have no involvement in the regulated part of the Fund, which allows for payments for funeral and maternity expenses, periods of cold weather and winter fuel.

The Social Security (Northern Ireland) Order 1998
The Social Security Contributions and Benefits (Northern Ireland) Act 1992
The Social Security Administration (Northern Ireland) Act 1992

The Social Fund Commissioner

The Social Fund Commissioner is appointed by the Department. The Commissioner has a duty to:

Article 37 of the Social Security (Northern Ireland) Order 1998

- appoint Social Fund Inspectors and other staff;
- monitor the quality of Inspectors' decisions and give advice, as he thinks fit, to improve the standard of their decisions;
- arrange appropriate training for Inspectors; and
- report annually, in writing, to the Department on the standard of Inspectors' reviews.

Social Fund Inspectors

Social Fund Inspectors provide the independent grievance process, by means of a review, for applicants who are dissatisfied with the Agency's decisions on their applications to the discretionary Social Fund.

Jurisdiction

Inspectors can only review decisions that have already been reviewed by the Agency, providing that an application for review has been made in the time, form and manner prescribed in regulations. Applications for an Inspector's review must be made directly to the OSFC within 28 days of the date of issue of the Agency's review decision.

Article 38(3), Social Security (Northern Ireland) Order 1998

The Social Fund (Application for Review) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1988

Nature of the Review

The review is conducted in two stages in accordance with directions issued by the Department. At the first stage, the Inspector considers whether the Reviewing Officer has:

- interpreted and applied the law correctly, which includes taking into account all relevant considerations and not taking account of irrelevant considerations;
- acted fairly and exercised his discretion reasonably; and
- observed the principles of natural justice.

The Department's Directions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 to Inspectors

If the decision has been reached correctly, applying the tests of the first stage of the review, the Inspector conducts a second stage which:

- considers the merits of the case;
- decides whether the decision was a right one in the circumstances; and
- takes account of relevant changes in circumstances and new evidence.

Depending on the outcome of the second stage, the Inspector exercises the appropriate power on review – see below.

Where the decision has not been reached correctly, applying the tests of the first stage, the second stage does not take place. Instead, the Inspector exercises the appropriate power on review.

Powers on Review

On review, the Inspector has the power to:

- confirm the Reviewing Officer's decision;
- refer the case back to the Reviewing Officer to make a fresh decision; or
- make any decision the Reviewing Officer could have made (these are referred to as substituted decisions).

Article 38(4) of the Social Security (Northern Ireland) Order 1998.

Reviews of Inspectors' Decisions

Article 38(5) of the Social Security (Northern Ireland) Order 1998.

The Inspector has a discretionary power to review his own or another Inspector's decision. Inspectors generally use this power to correct a decision that was wrong in law or fact, or where new relevant evidence has come to light. There is no statutory right to this type of review. This is a matter for the discretion of the Inspector, who must decide whether to conduct a review of the earlier decision. Where the Inspector conducts such a review, the outcome may or may not change. The only recourse from an Inspector's decision is to the High Court on judicial review.



information & publishing solutions

Published by TSO (The Stationery Office) and available from:

Online

www.tsoshop.co.uk

Mail, Telephone, Fax & E-mail

TSO

PO Box 29, Norwich NR3 1GN

Telephone orders/General enquiries: 0870 600 5522

Fax orders: 0870 600 5533

E-mail: customer.services@tso.co.uk

Textphone: 0870 240 3701

TSO@Blackwell and other Accredited Agents

Customers can also order publications from:

TSO Ireland

16 Arthur Street, Belfast BT1 4GD

Tel 028 9023 8451 Fax 028 9023 5401

ISBN 978-0-337-09548-1



9 780337 095481