

**Office of the Social  
Fund Commissioner**

**Corporate  
Plan**

**2008 – 2011**

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## About the OSFC

The OSFC based in Belfast provides the independent grievance process, by means of a review, for Northern Ireland applicants who are dissatisfied with the decision made at the Jobs and Benefits Office on their applications to the discretionary part of the Social Fund.

The Social Fund has been in existence since 1988. This is a scheme of payments of loans and grants intended to meet the needs of the poorest in society. The OSFC, by virtue of its casework and database, is well placed to monitor the effectiveness of the Social Fund in meeting its objectives.

The head of the OSFC is the Social Fund Commissioner who is appointed by the Department for Social Development (the Department) in NI and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in GB. The Commissioner's duties include:

- Appointing Social Fund Inspectors, who conduct the reviews, and other staff;
- Monitoring the standards of Inspectors' decisions;
- Giving advice as he thinks fit to improve the standards of Inspectors' decisions;
- Arranging training as he thinks fit for Inspectors;
- Reporting annually in writing to the Department on the standards of Inspectors' decisions.

This Corporate Plan sets out the strategic aims and objectives of the OSFC for the next three years.

## **Foreword by the Social Fund Commissioner, Sir Richard Tilt**

I am pleased to present the Corporate Plan of the Office of the Social Fund Commissioner for the period April 2008 to March 2011. This includes the three-year strategy of the OSFC, its customer service standards and a detailed one-year work programme.

In April 2007 Social Fund regulations were amended to state that OSFC review requests must be sent to the IRS. Previously, the customer had a choice of sending their review to the OSFC or to the Social Security Office (SSO) or the Jobs and Benefits Office (JBO). This change led to an increase in requests sent directly to the OSFC, but there are still a significant number sent to SSO/JBO directly. On occasion, there were also delays in some SSO/JBOs sending the correct case papers to us which in turn delayed the commencement of Inspectors' reviews. In 2008/09 it is planned to review the OSFC leaflet sent with SSO/JBO review decision. The OSFC will also work with the SSO/JBOs on any necessary improvement to services.

The OSFC has always been committed to ensuring that customer data is held safely and securely. This is important given the nature of the information provided by Social Fund customers and the trust they place in us when supplying it. In light of the recent losses of customer data by public bodies and the public concern this raised, the OSFC is reviewing its procedures to ensure that they are made as robust as possible. We will continue this programme of work in 2008/09.

In 2008/09 we will continue to provide extra help and support to the SSA with its training requirements, its quality assurance process and its modernisation programme. We will increase this support in 2008/09. This extra investment is crucial given the extensive changes being made and the importance of establishing best practice in each site. The standard of casework seen by the OSFC shows that there are improvements to be made in Social Fund operations. Our proven expertise in the Social Fund will guide this help and support.

During 2007/08 the Independent Review Service (IRS) in GB (which carries the same function as OSFC) worked with the Pension Service to undertake a pilot to provide tailored information for pensioners whose take up of Social Fund help is traditionally low. In 2008/09 we will evaluate this pilot and consider what steps are appropriate in Northern Ireland as a result. It is important that pensioners, and other vulnerable groups, are aware of the help that can be given from the Social Fund and can apply for a payment easily. The OSFC will also be holding meetings and workshops with welfare rights groups to aid their understanding of the Social Fund. This will also give them a forum for reporting issues and concerns they have with the operation of the Social Fund. In 2008/09 we have a number of tasks planned to ensure that customers, their representatives and other interested parties are kept informed about the Social Fund scheme and the service they can expect.

This year as in previous years, my staff and manager have an extensive work programme to deliver which includes improvements to services. In the past they have always managed to achieve what was required and I am confident that they will do so again with the right help and support.

## **Business Purpose, Objectives and Values**

### **Business Purpose**

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

### **Business Objectives**

- 1 Deliver impartial decisions to published standards.
- 2 Make continuous improvements in the standard of our work and in doing so, seek and take into account the views of our users.
- 3 Provide advice and information to the public, their advisers and staff of the Social Security Agency (SSA) about the Social Fund, the role and work of the OSFC and the right of applicants to seek an independent Social Fund review.
- 4 Help the SSOs and JBOs to improve the standard of decision-making, and customer service including customer access through regular feedback, training and advice. Assist, as appropriate, their centralisation programme and the operation and monitoring of the Social Fund.
- 5 Provide advice and information to the Minister for Social Development and the Department on Social Fund policy and potential changes or reform.
- 6 Contribute to research to help improve the operation and development of the Social Fund and its role in wider government objectives.
- 7 Employ our business resources in a way that maximises economy, efficiency and effectiveness and delivers savings where achievable.

### **Business Values**

Our business values, which we set out below, are the foundation of our approach to work. These values will guide staff in the delivery of their work and will help them to recognise the contribution they make. We will:

- provide an open and accessible service to all customers;
- treat all customers, users and colleagues with respect and courtesy;
- respect and accept the differences of others;
- work to improve standards for all customers of the Social Fund;
- promote easy access for customers and potential customers of the fund;
- be open to learning in our work and use this to make improvements to the service we give;
- provide a value for money service seeking improvements in the efficiency of our work;
- deliver the best service for the customer and balance fairly the needs of our staff.

## **Three-Year Work Programme**

### **Review**

- Deliver the review at the earliest opportunity and within the published customer service and quality standards.
- Manage and monitor the quality of Social Fund Inspectors' decisions and the service standards to ensure all are met.
- Report to the Minister for Social Development annually on the standards of Inspectors' decisions.
- Operate an independent review process that applicants can access quickly and easily.
- Develop and implement a communication strategy and structure that will enable customers to interact fully with the review process in the manner best suited to their needs.
- Continue to monitor and manage the OSFC direct application process to ensure it is straightforward and quick to use and papers are submitted by SSO/JBOs promptly.
- Work in ways that enable people to understand and participate in their review.
- Undertake equality monitoring of applicants to the OSFC to ensure there is equality of treatment and outcome.
- Handle complaints about decisions and service fairly and impartially and resolve them quickly.
- Maintain and improve standards and service by giving appropriate advice and assistance to Inspectors and other decision makers that reflects all legislative and operational changes.
- Monitor and manage OSFC case and system processes and practices to ensure that customer information is secure and confidential.
- Monitor workloads and explore the reasons for variation and fluctuation.
- Develop and implement plans to deliver a high quality service during periods of higher workloads.

### **Developing and improving standards**

- Respond and adapt to any proposed changes to Social Fund legislation and anticipate and prepare for probable developments.
- Conduct customer research on at least 120 applicant and seek the views of our users to shape our business and improve standards.
- Use the findings of our customer research to shape the letters, decisions and leaflets sent to customers.

- Continue to streamline and monitor the OSFC decision making process, including the Statement of Issues, to make it easier for customers to understand and participate in their reviews.
- Review existing customer service including customer access and quality standards once a year and seek improvements to standards.
- Contribute to the development of Social Fund Commissioner's advice to Inspectors to improve the standards of their decisions.
- Achieve continuous improvement in the quality standard of Inspectors' decisions by training and personal accountability.
- Continue to monitor 4 cases per week through the Commissioner's and Office Manager's case reading and 3 cases per month through Peer Case Reading.
- Develop and deliver high quality training to ensure that all OSFC staff have up-to-date knowledge, expertise and awareness to do their jobs well, including any required SFI accreditation programme.
- Continuously review the way the OSFC manages, monitors and improves quality.
- Monitor developments in Human Rights case law, assess its relevance to the Social Fund and make changes where appropriate.
- Keep abreast of developments in social welfare relevant to the Social Fund and provide suitable advice to staff.

### **Awareness**

- Deliver at least 8 workshops per year and other help and support to both the SSA and applicants' representatives to improve their knowledge of the Social Fund.
- Share relevant information with interested parties, recognising the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act and the Data Protection Act.
- Continue to explore and develop cost-effective ways of raising awareness of the Social Fund for all applicants; in particular groups, such as pensioners, who are under-represented.
- Improve local knowledge of the Social Fund and its operation, the right to an Independent Review and direct applications to the OSFC.

### **Social Fund Operations**

- Use information from the cases we review to feedback to the SSO/JBOs to help them achieve improvements in decision-making and service standards for customers.
- Carry out at least 4 best practice forums with District Social Fund staff with a view to achieving improvements in decision making and service standards for customers.
- Use our expertise to assist and advise SSO/JBOs on the most effective way to implement their reform programme.

- Work with SSO/JBOs to provide the necessary programme of training and support for Social Fund staff, including managers.
- Work with SSO/JBOs to improve the standards of decision-making and service their customers receive, delivering assistance and advice as appropriate.
- Help departmental officials with the continuous improvement of Social Fund application forms and processes including any necessary quality assurance for new and existing Departmental products.
- Work with SSO/JBOs to implement their quality assurance framework, including setting out the role and responsibilities of the OSFC in relation to skills transfer and external accreditation.

### **Social Fund Policy**

- Based on experience obtained from Social Fund reviews, offer advice to the Minister for Social Development and her Department on the operation and development of the Social Fund and proposed legislative changes including the proposed reform of the Social Fund.
- Promote the simplification and modernisation of the Social Fund to ensure it delivers a quick, effective and proportionate service
- Work with and offer commentary and advice to the Minister and departmental officials about on-going routine and minor changes to the Social Fund.

### **Research**

- Undertake internal research that will help inform casework and issues relevant to the Social Fund.
- Work with the Department and other organisations on research and analysis to inform decisions on the role and operation of the Social Fund.
- Use the findings from research to promote best practice and improvements in performance and service throughout the administration of the Social Fund.

### **Resources**

- Manage our budgets efficiently and effectively whilst maintaining a sound financial regime with appropriate controls and financial arrangements in line with Government Accounting principles.
- Regularly review our capacity, productivity standards for all staff and forecast workloads to match demand and achieve best value from our resources.
- Embed risk management at the OSFC to reduce or eliminate risks that could otherwise hinder operational or financial performance.
- Take all necessary steps to protect and keep safe OSFC electronic data and communications.

- Provide a diverse range of training and development that prepares staff to meet today's and future business needs.
- Find ways of improving standards and services whilst maintaining a work life balance strategy which takes into account the needs of staff.
- Maintain and foster positive employee relations, including consultation with staff on all key projects and developments, in order to ensure the effective delivery of OSFC business.
- Improve the standards of OSFC service and its policies through identifying best practice in other organisations.
- Review the OSFC structure to ensure that it works in the most effective and efficient manner.
- Keep up to date with changes to case law on Human Resources and adopt best practice.
- Manage and monitor OSFC accommodation requirements.

## **OSFC Contribution to Government Aims and Objectives**

The government has set out its aims and objectives for the delivery of public service. The OSFC seeks to make a positive contribution through its work in delivering the independent review for the discretionary social fund. The relevant aims and objectives are set out below in box A, and the OSFC contribution is set out in box B.

### **A: Government Aims and Objectives**

1. Drive a programme across Government to reduce poverty and address inequality and disadvantage.
2. Take forward action to provide for measurable reductions in the levels of poverty and particularly child poverty.
3. Ensuring that, by 2013, anyone with a mental health problem or learning disability is promptly and suitably treated in the community and no-one remains unnecessarily in hospital.
4. Improve the quality and the cost-effectiveness of public services to include delivery of the wider public sector reform programme and efficiency savings and outworking of decisions on the RPA.
5. Work towards the elimination of child poverty in Northern Ireland by 2020 and reducing child poverty by 50% by 2010.
6. Work towards the elimination of severe child poverty by 2012
7. By December 2008 to have implemented a new operating model for delivery of social fund.
8. By December 2010 to have implemented a new operating model for delivery of services to Pensioners.
9. Speedier access to Mental Health and Learning Disability community services, and fewer long stay patients in Mental Health and Learning Disability hospitals.
10. By 2011, ensure a 10% reduction in admissions to mental health hospitals.
11. By 2011, ensure a 10% reduction in the number of long-stay patients in mental health hospitals, and a 25% reduction in the number of such patients in learning disability institutions.
12. During each of the three years 2008 – 2011 maintain assistance to enable 12,000 residents to remain in their own homes.
13. By 2013, helping people with chronic illnesses to live more active lives and reducing unplanned hospital admissions for such patients by 50%.

## **B: OSFC contribution**

1. To deliver an independent, high quality and responsive review to applicants who are not satisfied with the decision made by the SSO/JBOs. Use the powers conferred to change decisions where applicants have been given an incorrect decision.
2. To raise awareness of the help that can be given from the social fund and the role of the OSFC in relation to the social fund review process. To work with the Department to increase awareness of the social fund amongst pensioners.
3. To provide regular reports and feedback to the Department to improve the standards of service and advice given to all applicants and potential applicants to the social fund.
4. Use the evidence obtained from the review to inform policy and research on the social fund.
5. Enable applicants to choose how they want to engage with the review, whether this is by telephone, e-mail or in writing. Use a free phone service so as not to disadvantage applicants who need to telephone the OSFC.
6. Through our public information plan give wider access to people who find it difficult to engage with the review because of disabilities or language problems. Undertake equality monitoring of applicants to the OSFC to ensure there is equality of treatment and outcome.

These are the main ways in which we will aim to improve public service in relation to the social fund. In addition, our demanding targets and work programme will underpin the delivery of the government's priorities.

## Review

<b>Key Task</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Timescale</b>	<b>Accountability process</b>	<b>Link to business objectives</b>
Deliver decisions to the published standards on all requests for a review. (Expected work load c. 1000 decisions)	Office Manager/ Inspectors	Throughout the year	Report to Social Fund Commissioner Annual Report	1
Set down and agree with SSO/JBOs appropriate arrangements for contact points to enable Inspectors to obtain information required for the review	Admin Team	Ongoing	Report to Office Manager	1, 2 and 4
Throughout the year monitor our work to ensure we deliver the review at the earliest opportunity appropriate for each case and to the published quality standards.	Office Manager	Throughout the year	Team Reports Annual Report	1
Take account of the IRS review of the way performance against earliest opportunity and of the standards required is measured.	Office Manager	By 30 September 2008	Report to Social Fund Commissioner	1 and 2
Monitor and manage the OSFC direct application process to ensure it is straightforward and quick to use and papers are submitted by SSO/JBOs promptly. Undertake the following tasks: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take steps to develop relationships with SSO/JBOs to improve the direct application process between the OSFC and SSO/JBOs , including the receipt of all necessary case papers.</li> <li>• Monitor requests for OSFC reviews which are sent to SSO/JBOs instead of directly to the OSFC; make any necessary improvements.</li> </ul>	Office Manager	To agreed timetable  Ongoing	Report to Social Fund Commissioner	1, 2 and 7
Undertake a review of the overall performance of the Department in sending case papers.	Admin Team	To agreed programme	Report to Office Manager	1, 2 and 7
Continue to monitor and evaluate the freepost service to ensure it is operating effectively.	Admin Team	Ongoing	Report to Office Manager	1,2 and 7

Take account of IRS review into why Inspectors make Third Party enquiries and circulate any subsequent advice on how best to make them including any rules relating to disclosure of evidence.	Office Manager	By 31 October 2008	Report to Social Fund Commissioner	1 and 2
Operate the review in a way that gives access for people who find it difficult to engage with the review because of disabilities, language or literacy problems.	Inspectors	Ongoing	Report to Social Fund Commissioner Annual Report	1
Help people, whose first language is not English to understand and participate in their reviews through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effective and prompt written translation services; and</li> <li>• The appropriate use of the translation service for telephone users.</li> </ul> Provide appropriate training for staff.	Office Manager/ Inspectors	Ongoing	Report to Social Fund Commissioner Annual Report	1 and 7
Handle complaints and enquiries consistently, impartially and to the published standards.	Office Manager	Throughout the year	Report to the Social Fund Commissioner via the Standards Conference. Annual Report	1
Monitor and analyse our customer base by ethnicity, age, gender and other criteria where appropriate. Use the results to identify trends and issues emerging and report on any further action required.	Inspectors	Ongoing	Report to Social Fund Commissioner	1 and 2
Discharge the Social Fund Commissioner's statutory duty to monitor the standards of Inspectors' decisions by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selecting a representative sample of the case work (in all relevant areas) (at least 4 cases per week);</li> <li>• Assessing each case consistently against the agreed standards;</li> <li>• Analysing outcomes with a view to making improvements and feeding into the Annual Report to the Department.</li> </ul>	Social Fund Commissioner Office Manager	Throughout the year	Case Reading Reports  Standards Conference  Annual Report	1 and 2

<p>Produce an Annual Report for the Department, which reports on the standards of Social Fund Inspectors' decisions. The Report will also account for the organisation's performance against objectives and include commentary on the administration of the Social Fund based on casework experience.</p> <p>Publish the Annual Report to inform interested parties and account publicly for the work of the OSFC.</p>	<p>Social Fund Commissioner/ Office Manager/ Inspectors</p>	<p>July 2007</p> <p>By 31 October 2008</p>	<p>Annual Report</p>	<p>1 and 5</p>
<p>Monitor Social Fund activity to understand the likely patterns of future workload for the OSFC.</p>	<p>Office Manager</p>	<p>To agreed programme</p>	<p>Report to Social Fund Commissioner</p>	<p>2 and 7</p>
<p>Monitor Independent Review Service (IRS) work and evaluate changes made to their Customer Service Team policy, procedure or practice, taking account of the views of users where appropriate, to ensure that any changes made deliver the required outcomes. In particular, look at:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customer Service Team processes and communications;</li> <li>• Approach to the review of Inspectors' decisions under section 38(5);</li> <li>• Work undertaken on budgeting loans and statements</li> </ul> <p>On the basis of the findings, plan for and carry out further revisions as appropriate.</p>	<p>Office Manager</p>	<p>By 31 December 2008</p>	<p>Report to Social Fund Commissioner</p> <p>Annual Report</p> <p>Quality Forum</p>	<p>1 and 2</p>

### Developing and improving standards

<b>Key task</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Timescale</b>	<b>Accountability process</b>	<b>Link to business objectives</b>
<p>At least once a year review:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ All published quality and service standards and;</li> <li>○ Productivity targets throughout the OSFC</li> </ul> <p>Seek improvements where possible. Balance fairly the needs of staff and those of the business.</p>	Office Manager	By 31 January 2009	Business Planning process	2 and 7
Continue to monitor and give feedback through Peer Case Reading on 3 cases per month.	Social Fund Commissioner/ Office Manager	Ongoing	Annual Report	2 and 7
Monitor express case activity and develop strategies to deal with any problems found. Look at any target implications as appropriate.	Office Manager	Ongoing	Report to Social Fund Commissioner	2 and 7
Hold regular quality training sessions for decision makers and in particular focus on the learning points raised by the case reading and complaints.	Office Manager/ Inspectors	To agreed timetable	Report to Social Fund Commissioner	2
<p>Find ways of capturing the views and opinions of our users through formal and informal channels. In order to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Find out what people think of our service</li> <li>• Help us make improvements</li> </ul> <p>To achieve this we will:</p> <p>Conduct customer surveys throughout the year of 5% (or at least 120 applicants) of our direct customers who received a grant or loan decision. Analyse the findings of the survey, making appropriate recommendations for improvement.</p> <p>Conduct qualitative research by telephone, as appropriate,</p>	Inspectors Admin Team	Quarterly and by 31 March 2009	Quarterly Survey reports to the Social Fund Commissioner and Annual Report	2
Conduct qualitative research by telephone, as appropriate,	Inspectors	Quarterly and by 31	Survey reports	2



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feedback results to the Standards Conference, staff and the External Complaints Panel as appropriate.</li> </ul>	Office Manager	As appropriate	Standards Conference Annual Report	2 and 1
<p>Review the way we deliver our core business to identify areas for improvement. In particular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continue to review the decisions issued to OSFC customers; including looking at their clarity, focus and use of Plain English.</li> <li>Ensure this approach is recognised by the teams who scrutinise decisions.</li> <li>Continue to review the Statement of Issues and associated papers, conduct appropriate customer consultation and ensure that any revisions are implemented and evaluated.</li> <li>Continue to review Inspectors' letters to ensure that they meet the needs of their recipients. In particular, look at the Outside Jurisdiction letters sent to customers.</li> <li>Review letters and processes to ensure applicants are kept informed of the timescales that apply in their individual case.</li> </ul>	Office Manager/ Inspectors  Office Manager  Office Manager  Office Manager  Office Manager	To agreed programme	Report to Social Fund Commissioner	2 and 1
<p>Monitor IRS research and development to improve the standards of decision making as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Contribute to the development or revision of Commissioner's Advice and Support Notes (as agreed at the Quality Forum)</li> </ul>	Office Manager	Throughout the year	Report to Social Fund Commissioner via Quality Forum	2

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attend Quality Forums, as required, to discuss and agree new Commissioner's Advice or changes to existing Advice.</li> <li>Review and agree any changes to Commissioner's Advice following receipt of counsel's opinion on relevant issues such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Jurisdiction of items</li> <li>Daily travel/living expenses</li> </ul> </li> <li>Past expenses</li> </ul>		<p>As required throughout the year</p> <p>To agreed plan</p>		
<p>Continue to improve standards, particularly in the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rules of evidence</li> <li>Identifying crucial issues</li> <li>Direction 1 to SFIs/ Inspectors</li> <li>Budgets</li> </ul> <p>Achievements will be measured through case reading, case examinations and the analysis of complaints and enquiries.</p> <p>Implement any changes required and monitor their impact.</p> <p>Look at ways to widen the involvement of staff in initiatives to improve the standards of decisions.</p>	Office Manager	<p>Throughout the year</p> <p>To agreed timetable</p> <p>Throughout the year</p> <p>Throughout the year</p>	<p>Report to The Social Fund Commissioner Annual Report</p> <p>Report to The Social Fund Commissioner</p> <p>Report to Office Manager</p> <p>Report to The Social Fund Commissioner</p>	<p>2</p> <p>2 and 1</p> <p>2 and 1</p> <p>2 and 1</p>
<p>With IRS develop and deliver a general training programme to improve the standards of decision-making and the expertise of decision-makers as the issues are identified</p> <p>With IRS develop and deliver a training programme for individual members of staff as required.</p> <p>Undertake a training and induction programme for new members of staff.</p>	<p>Office Manager/ Inspectors</p> <p>Inspectors</p> <p>Office Manager</p>	<p>Ongoing</p> <p>To agreed plan</p> <p>To agreed plan</p>	<p>Report to The Social Fund Commissioner / Office Manager</p> <p>Report to Office Manager</p> <p>Report to The Social Fund Commissioner</p>	<p>2</p> <p>2</p> <p>2</p>

Provide appropriate OSFC staff with a range of tailored awareness sessions that develop and improve their knowledge of issues that are relevant to OSFC customers.	Inspectors	To agreed programme	Report to Office Manager	2
Use master class sessions to help Inspectors tackle common issues and problems, with the aim of sharing best practice and consistently achieving the highest standards.	Office Manager	To agreed programme	Report to The Social Fund Commissioner	2 and 7
Manage and monitor training and development investment to ensure value for money is being achieved.	Inspectors	Quarterly Annual	Report to Office Manager	2 and 7
Develop an awareness programme for all front line staff who have direct contact with customers and other staff, as appropriate, to ensure they have the skills and knowledge to deliver the full range of their roles.	Inspectors	To agreed programme	Report to Office Manager	2 and 3
Keep abreast of changes in the following areas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provision of help and support from other government agencies.</li> <li>• Provision of help and support from voluntary organisations.</li> <li>• Changes in other legal frameworks which impact on the review.</li> </ul>	Office Manager/ Inspectors	To agreed programme	Report to Social Fund Commissioner	2, 3 and 5
Following IRS work, provide advice and other support appropriate to the Northern Ireland situation to Inspectors on the availability of community equipment and the impact this has on Social Fund decision making.  Monitor this to ensure it deliver the required standard of decision making.	Office Manager	To agreed programme	Report to Social Fund Commissioner	2 and 1
Develop an information pack on other organisations to be used by decision makers to sign-post where other help is available. Ensure that information in this pack is kept up to date.	Office Manager/ Inspectors	Ongoing	Report to Management Team	2

With IRS monitor developments in Human Rights case law, assess its relevance to the Social Fund and make changes where appropriate.	Office Manager/ Inspectors	Throughout the year	Report to Social Fund Commissioner Quality Forum Report Annual Report	2
Monitor changes to the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Social Fund Loans budget, including relevant legislative changes</li> <li>• The set up, distribution and allocation of the Community Care Grant budgets.</li> </ul> Prepare staff, provide feedback and take other action as appropriate.	Office Manager/ Admin Team	To agreed timetable	Report to Social Fund Commissioner	2, 4 and 5
Protect the security and confidentiality of all data held by OSFC and continue the review of OSFC security of information undertaking the following work: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Act on recommendations for improvements made by auditors.</li> <li>• Document policies and processes for all key areas including IT. In particular look at the following areas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ OSFC Home Working policy</li> <li>○ IT system security including passwords and encryption.</li> <li>○ Security of customer and staff data.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Monitor the revised processes.</li> <li>• Review, with SSO/JBOs , the type of information sent in the Social Fund case papers. Ensure this only includes what is necessary for decision making.</li> </ul>	Office Manager/ Admin Team	To agreed timetable	Report to Social Fund Commissioner	2 and 1
Monitor the way the OSFC analyses complaints to ensure it delivers what is required.	Office Manager	By 31 January 2009	Report to Social Fund Commissioner	2 and 1
Plan for changes to the crisis loan regulations to allow reviews by telephone.	Office Manager	By 31 October 2008	Report to Social Fund Commissioner	2, 1 and 7

**Awareness**

<b>Key task</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Timescale</b>	<b>Accountability process</b>	<b>Link to business objectives</b>
<p>Improve front-line advice and decision-making through a structured programme including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At least 8 Tailored and general workshops per year (particularly re-establishing workshops for Welfare Rights Organisations)</li> <li>• Conference style, regionally based workshops</li> <li>• Development and distribution of self instruction packages, including packages tailored to particular groups</li> <li>• Distribution of OSFC publications to a range of public bodies and advisor organisations across Northern Ireland</li> <li>• Sharing information through the OSFC Website and OSFC Journal and Digest</li> <li>• Attendance at relevant National Conferences</li> <li>• Providing details of OSFC services in external publications, radio broadcasts, external web links and focus groups (as appropriate).</li> </ul>	<p>Inspectors</p>	<p>Throughout the year</p>	<p>Annual Report/ Report to Office Manager</p>	<p>3</p>

<p>Aim to deliver workshops and self instruction packages to a minimum of 8 groups in the following two areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Raising awareness-</b> Front-line SSO/JBOs, Pension Service staff and generalist advisors and representatives.</li> <li>• <b>Technical Training -</b> Decision Makers, Reviewing Officers, experienced representatives, advisors, quality checkers and SSO/JBOs managers.</li> </ul> <p>Aim to deliver a balanced programme of training, including workshops, to achieve the most effective business outcomes.</p>	Inspectors	To agreed programme	Annual Report/ Office Manager	3
<p>Work with the Department to raise awareness of the Social Fund among pensioners. To achieve this undertake the following as appropriate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluate the results of the Gateshead pilot;</li> <li>• Ensure the benefits of the Gateshead pilot are widely publicised.</li> </ul>	Office Manager/ Inspectors	To agreed programme	Report to Social Fund Commissioner	3
<p>Continue to develop new ways of raising awareness and improving decision-making and advice. Look in particular at awareness requirements of vulnerable groups.</p>	Inspectors	On-going throughout the year	Report to Office Manager	3 and 4
<p>Evaluate the impact and cost of all interventions, training and learning. As necessary, amend the materials, publications or approaches.</p>	Inspectors	By 31 March 2009	Report to Office Manager	3, 4 and 7
<p>Look at the long term feasibility of setting up and delivering skills transfer to SSO/JBOs on basic Social Fund training. Consider alongside this the requirements for a moderating role by the OSFC.</p>	Social Fund Commissioner/ Office Manager	To agreed timetable	Report to Social Fund Commissioner	3, 4 and 7

<p>Build and maintain relationships with interested parties in order to share experience, information and ideas about the social fund and related matters.</p> <p>Follow up any issues that arise from these meetings.</p>	<p>Social Fund Commissioner/ Office Manager</p>	<p>Throughout the year</p>	<p>Annual Report</p>	<p>3</p>
<p>Manage and monitor the OSFC leaflet programme to provide effective public information for customers and others within designated resources.</p> <p>Review key publications and leaflets to ensure that they are marketed correctly and have the appropriate focus including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Considering feedback on other publications and leaflets as required.</li> <li>• Ensuring that customers are aware that a Social Fund review request can be made directly to the OSFC.</li> </ul>	<p>Inspectors/ Admin Team</p> <p>Inspectors/ Admin Team</p>	<p>Throughout the year</p> <p>Throughout the year</p>	<p>Reports to Manager and Social Fund Commissioner</p> <p>Reports to Manager and Social Fund Commissioner</p>	<p>3 and 7</p> <p>3 and 7</p>

## Social Fund Operations

<b>Key task</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Timescale</b>	<b>Accountability Process</b>	<b>Link to business objectives</b>
<p>Work closely with the SSA to develop implementation plans for their modernisation programme. This work will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing the SSA with help and support on their social fund programme plans</li> <li>• Providing help and support and feedback as required.</li> <li>• Keeping abreast of the modernisation programme; providing feedback and adapting advice and support as required.</li> </ul>	Social Fund Commissioner/ Office Manager	To agreed programme	Report to Social Fund Commissioner  Annual Report	4
Monitor contingency plans used by SSO/JBOs for workflow management. Give feedback on concerns or issues that arise, including customer service.	Social Fund Commissioner/ Office Manager	Ongoing	Report to Social Fund Commissioner Annual Report	4
Carry out at least 4 best practice forums with District Social Fund staff with a view to achieving improvements in decision making and service standards for customers.	Inspectors	Ongoing	Report to Office Manager	4

<p>Undertake case examinations on decision-making in Districts to identify Social Fund training needs for individuals and groups of staff. Take into account the needs of under performing districts when prioritising help and support.</p> <p>Based on this provide a programme of training and support for SSO/JBO offices. Include training and support for the following groups:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managers</li> <li>• Quality checkers/mentors</li> <li>• Review Officers / Decision Makers and</li> <li>• Other relevant groups</li> </ul> <p>Manage and monitor this work to ensure it delivers what is required.</p> <p>Evaluate the effectiveness of training and support via case examinations and OSFC review outcomes.</p>	<p>Office Manager/ Inspectors</p>	<p>To agreed programme</p>	<p>Annual Report Report to Office Manager</p>	<p>4 and 7</p>
<p>Monitor the work of IRS with Jobcentre Plus to develop an appropriate and effective quality assurance regime for social fund decision-making. This will include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing a template against which social fund decisions will be measured.</li> <li>• Training quality checkers so that they can focus the checking on the appropriate issues.</li> <li>• Training line managers so that they can be part of the quality assurance process.</li> <li>• Agreeing the right process for the validation of quality checkers' findings, identifying improvements where required.</li> </ul>	<p>Office Manager/ Inspectors</p>	<p>To agreed programme</p>	<p>Report to Social Fund Commissioner</p>	<p>4 and 7</p>
<p>Support contact centres in the roll out of the pilot on end to end Crisis Loan decision making.</p>	<p>Inspectors</p>	<p>To agreed programme</p>	<p>Annual Report</p>	<p>4</p>

Continue to work with SSO/JBOs to develop high quality training materials, enabling them to support the necessary improvement in the standard of Social Fund decision-making in SSO/JBOs. Offer other help, as appropriate, to support this work.	Inspectors	To agreed programme	Annual Report	4
Monitor IRS work with Jobcentre Plus to develop an appropriate and effective quality assurance regime for Social Fund decision-making.	Office Manager/ Inspectors	To agreed programme	Report to Social Fund Commissioner	4 and 7
<p>Maintain a continuous dialogue with Departmental officials on issues arising from our operational experience, our internal and other research in order to contribute to developments and improvements in policy, administrative and operational areas. In order to achieve this the Social Fund Commissioner will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have regular meetings as appropriate with the Minister and senior Departmental, SSO/JBOs and Pension Service officials.</li> <li>• Liaise with the Department, SSO/JBOs and Pension Service to resolve issues meeting as appropriate.</li> <li>• Work with SSO/JBOs to improve the standard of evidence gathering, particularly for crisis loan telephone applications.</li> <li>• Monitor the ability of applicants to apply directly to the OSFC for a review. Provide feedback to SSO/JBOs and take action as appropriate. Review to ensure this works as required.</li> <li>• Monitor the telephone service provided by SSO/JBOs for crisis loans and Social Fund enquiry lines. Provide feedback as appropriate.</li> </ul>	<p>Social Fund Commissioner/ Office Manager</p> <p>Office Manager</p> <p>Social Fund Commissioner/ Office Manager</p> <p>Office Manager/ Inspectors</p> <p>Office Manager</p>	<p>Throughout the year</p> <p>Throughout the year</p> <p>Throughout the year</p> <p>Throughout the year</p> <p>Throughout the year</p>	<p>Annual Report</p> <p>Report to Social Fund Commissioner</p> <p>Report to Social Fund Commissioner Annual Report</p> <p>Report to Social Fund Commissioner</p> <p>Report to Social Fund Commissioner</p>	<p>4</p> <p>4</p> <p>4</p> <p>4</p> <p>4</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitor the effectiveness of reviews including the interviews at SSO/JBOs . Feedback issues which arise including details of any action needed to improve standards.</li> <li>• Continue to monitor and feedback on the Community Care Grant application form, particularly in relation to improving the process of gathering evidence.</li> <li>• Analyse findings from our research and report to the Minister and her officials on issues arising from this and from our operational experience.</li> <li>• As necessary, provide reports on problems with access to the Social Fund at SSO/JBOs identified from analysis and feedback. Follow up with reports to the Chief Executive of the SSA.</li> <li>• Continue to develop the content and structure of the quarterly and annual feedback reports to SSO/JBOs . Adapt the annual meetings with SSO/JBOs managers to reflect any revised operational arrangements and most effective outcomes.</li> <li>• Report back on the performance of SSO/JBOs through the following reports: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Quarterly District Information Packs;</li> <li>❖ An annual report to each Region.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>Copy these reports as appropriate.</p>	<p>Office Manager</p> <p>Office Manager</p> <p>Office Manager</p> <p>Office Manager</p> <p>Social Fund Commissioner/ Office Manager</p> <p>Social Fund Commissioner/ Office Manager</p>	<p>To agreed programme</p> <p>Throughout the year</p> <p>Throughout the year</p> <p>Quarterly As required</p> <p>To agreed programme</p> <p>Quarterly Annually</p>	<p>Report to Social Fund Commissioner</p> <p>Report to Social Fund Commissioner</p> <p>Annual Report Business Team Report</p> <p>Report to Social Fund Commissioner</p> <p>Annual Report Business Team Report</p> <p>Annual Report Business Team Report</p>	<p>4</p> <p>4</p> <p>4 and 5</p> <p>4</p> <p>4</p> <p>4</p>
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meet the relevant managers in SSO/JBOs once a year to report on regional, district and national achievements, to help them to improve operational performance. Undertake other meetings as appropriate.</li> </ul>	<p>Social Fund Commissioner/ Office Manager</p>	<p>By 31 March 2009</p>	<p>Annual Report Business Team Report</p>	<p>4</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to hold meetings with a range of welfare rights groups, representatives and advocacy organisation to mirror SSO/JBOs regional programme of meetings.</li> </ul>	<p>Social Fund Commissioner/ Office Manager</p>	<p>By 31 March 2009</p>	<p>Annual Report Business Team Report</p>	<p>4</p>

## Social Fund Policy

Key task	Responsibility	Timescale	Accountability Process	Link to business objectives
<p>Based on experience obtained from Social Fund reviews, offer advice to the Minister for Social Development and the Department on the future operation and development of the Social Fund, including any proposed legislative changes. This includes the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contribute, as appropriate, to any proposed reform of the Social Fund.</li> <li>• Comment on prospective changes to policy, law, directions, guidance and operational procedures.</li> <li>• If required, contribute to the case for allowing all crisis loan review requests to be made by telephone.</li> <li>• As necessary, work with Departmental officials on the feasibility of crisis loan review applications by telephone</li> <li>• Promote simplification and modernisation of the Social Fund to ensure it delivers a quick, effective and proportionate service. Including the potential for removing the Social Fund internal review.</li> <li>• Provide feedback to the Department’s Network Support Branch on areas of the Social Fund Guide which need improvement.</li> <li>• Contribute to SSO/JBOs review of Social Fund Computer System produced letters.</li> </ul>	<p>Social Fund Commissioner/ Office Manager</p>	<p>To agreed timescale</p> <p>Ongoing</p> <p>Ongoing</p> <p>Ongoing</p> <p>Ongoing</p> <p>To agreed programme</p> <p>Ongoing</p>	<p>Report to Social Fund Commissioner</p>	<p>5</p>

## Research

<b>Key task</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Timescale</b>	<b>Accountability process</b>	<b>Link to business objectives</b>
Contribute to IRS research, as appropriate, to inform evidence based policy- making.	Office Manager	As agreed	Report to Social Fund Commissioner Annual Report	6
Work with interested parties, as appropriate, to conduct research and share with them the findings from our internal research.	Office Manager	As agreed	Report to Social Fund Commissioner Annual Report	6

## Resources

<b>Key task</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Timescale</b>	<b>Accountability process</b>	<b>Link to business objectives</b>
<p>Manage and monitor expenditure so that OSFC business objectives are delivered within agreed allocation funding levels. In particular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plan expenditure, as appropriate, throughout the financial year</li> <li>• Ensure that resources are used in a way that maximises economy, efficiency and effectiveness.</li> <li>• Plan for future years of the Spending Review.</li> </ul>	Office Manager/ Inspectors	Ongoing		7
Undertake a review of the cost and proportion of overheads to products delivered by the OSFC and relevant teams. Ensure that overheads deliver value for money and seek improvements where appropriate.	Office Manager/ Inspectors	Ongoing	Report to Social Fund Commissioner	7
<p>Review, revise and monitor workloads, grading and resources to ensure that they match the work required. Manage productivity targets to ensure value for money is obtained. In particular examine the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The changes relating to Direct Applications to the OSFC</li> <li>• Customer contact by telephone</li> <li>• The cost of quality and the return on investment</li> <li>• The development of enhancements to the Case Management System</li> </ul>	Office Manager	Ongoing	Accountability / Spending Review Management Team report	7
<p>Deliver the agreed productivity targets and continue to maximise productivity in light of efficiencies that can be achieved via processes or change to structure or organisation.</p> <p>Productivity targets from 01.04.08:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social Fund Inspectors - 520 decisions per annum.(Based on full time post)</li> </ul>	Office Manager/ Inspectors	Ongoing	Report to Office Manager	7 and 1

Evaluate policies, projects, process changes and operational performance to identify risks and ensure appropriate action is taken.	Office Manager	Ongoing	Management Team Reports	7
Undertake three annual assessments of risks facing the OSFC and use action plans to manage and control risks identified.		Three times annually	Report to Social Fund Commissioner	7
Review and keep contingency plans up to date to ensure effective business delivery.	Office Manager	Ongoing	Management Team meetings	7 and 1
Have in place adequate and appropriate business continuity plans.	Office Manager	Ongoing	Risk Analysis Report	7 and 1
Review these plans annually to ensure they cover the main risk areas to the infrastructure of the business.		By 31 January 2009	Management Team Report	7 and 1
Keep under review the organisational structure, teams and roles to ensure OSFC business is being delivered in the most effective way.	Office Manager	Throughout the year	Report to Social Fund Commissioner	7 and 1
Maintain effective links with IRS by sharing best practice, resources and skills.	Office Manager	Throughout the year	Report to Social Fund Commissioner	7
Ensure the current workforce remains effective and efficient by encouraging self-awareness, career planning and development.	Office Manager	Ongoing	Report to Social Fund Commissioner	7
Continue to develop greater flexibility within the staff on teams responsible for the review, quality and customer contact to ensure that they can undertake different work as required and can adapt to the changing needs of the business. Ensure their customer contact expertise is retained.	Office Manager	Ongoing	Report to Social Fund Commissioner	7
Where appropriate, recruit new staff to the numbers and grade agreed by the Social Fund Commissioner.	Office Manager	To agreed timetable	Report to Social Fund Commissioner	7
Draw the training and development plan from the Corporate Plan to support the effective delivery of business objectives. Evaluate the training provided and	Inspectors	Ongoing	Report to Office Manager	7 and 2

seek improvements where required.				
Complete the development and build of a new web-based OSFC internet to the agreed specification. Consult with users during this process as appropriate. Train staff on the revised internet.	Inspectors/ Admin Team	To agreed programme	Report to Office Manager	7
Work with the Department and Valuation and Lands Agency to secure appropriate accommodation for OSFC for beyond the end of the current lease.	Office Manager/ Inspectors	By 31 March 2009	Report to Social Fund Commissioner	7
Look at ways for the OSFC to reduce its carbon footprint and become a more environmentally friendly organisation. In particular look at measures to reduce travel outside the OSFC.	Office Manager	By 31 March 2009	Report to Social Fund Commissioner	7
Apply findings contained in the Investors in People Post Recognition Review report to OSFC working practices.	Office Manager	By September 2008	Report to Social Fund Commissioner	7 and 2

## **Customer Service Standards 2008/09**

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 of receipt of the papers. Standard cases are all applications to the OSFC, excluding express and complex cases. They form the majority of the work of the OSFC.

#### **Express Cases**

We will make a decision on 90% of express cases within 24 hours of receipt of the papers. 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 23 working days of receipt of the papers. These are applications that need extensive enquiries or investigation or where the nature of the case is exceptionally complex.

## Customer Service Standards 2008/09

We aim to deliver a high quality decision at the earliest opportunity. In order to deliver the overall standards, the following internal targets will guide our work.

### Administration

- Direct applications with the required identifying details will be registered, acknowledged and papers requested on the day they are received.
- Cases will be fully registered on the day they are received.
- Cases will be allocated and passed to the Inspector by the morning of day 2.
- Written responses to papers or to requests for further information will be recorded and passed to a decision maker by close of business on the day they are received.
- Telephone responses to papers or to requests for further information will be recorded and passed to a decision maker by the morning of day 2 at the latest.

### Decision Making

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

### 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 cases within 15 working days. Standard cases are all applications, excluding express cases and complex cases.
- 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.
- A decision will be made on complex cases within 30 working days. These are applications that need extensive enquiries or investigation or where the nature of the case is exceptionally complex.

### Telephone Service

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

## **OSFC Quality Standards for the Review**

We will deliver Inspectors' reviews that are independent, impartial, fair and legally sound. In each case we will work to increase the applicant's 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 Secretary of State'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 the relevant Commissioner's Advice to Inspectors.

In doing this we will deliver the review:

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