



## PRINTED INFORMATION

The evidence on the use of leaflets and other printed information was contradictory. Evaluation of a campaign to publicise council tenants' right to buy their council homes demonstrated their importance. Leaflets were the most frequently mentioned aspect of the campaign and led to higher levels of knowledge than either press or television advertising (RSGB 1985).

On the other hand, leaflets were not the preferred means of getting information, nor have they been found to be widely used (Briggs and Rees 1980, Cragg Ross and Dawson 1990a, Epstein 1981, Hedges and Ritchie 1988, MIL 1986, MORI 1985).

Part of the problem has related to the design and complex language of official leaflets, although it must be acknowledged that there have been considerable improvements in both areas in recent years. Earlier DHSS leaflets were a uniform design with standard blue covers; each one covering a different benefit. This was identified as an important reason why few people had seen, still less used, them (Epstein 1981, Warder and England 1980). More recently leaflets have been designed for use by particular target groups, such as retired people or low-income families, and cover the range of benefits applicable to them. This has clearly improved their impact (Hedges 1988, MIL 1986, PPCR 1990b).

Other studies have shown that people *expected* official leaflets to be both uninteresting and difficult to read. And where they could not understand a leaflet they treated it as unimportant or irrelevant (Hedges and Ritchie 1988, MIL 1986, Warder and England 1980). Furthermore, functional literacy skills are still far from universal. The National Audit Office found that a third of claimants had difficulty using social security leaflets, possibly because of basic problems with numeracy and literacy. A quarter of people who were long-term unemployed lacked these basic skills. It was findings such as these which led the National Audit Office to comment that:

There must be concern as to whether the DHSS is right to place such heavy reliance on reaching potential claimants through written communication (National Audit Office 1988).

This echoes a view expressed by the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts who were 'concerned that the DHSS may be placing too much reliance on written communications' (Committee of Public Accounts 1988).

Another important consideration is the way in which leaflets were used when they *were* read. Here the evidence was fairly clear. Most people used leaflets as a general guide to their likely eligibility. They tended to scan the contents and headings, and followed this with quick and selective reading. A few people used leaflets as 'ammunition in their dealings with the DSS' and some took them home to consider in greater depth (BMRB 1985, Campbell and Keegan 1990a, Cragg Ross and Dawson 1990b, PPCR 1990b).

Finally there is the question of leaflet distribution and display. Several studies have pointed to inadequacies in both these areas. People were not very aware of leaflet displays at DHSS offices; few were aware of library displays or would consider going there (Hedges 1988). It seems that the distribution, as well as the content, of leaflets has to be targeted on the intended audience. Indiscriminate publicity was liable to be inefficient and may even have done more harm than good if it fostered misconceptions about eligibility (Cragg Ross and Dawson 1990b, Craig 1991, Epstein 1981, Hedges 1988, Hedges and Ritchie 1988, MORI 1985, Newman and others 1983).

The conclusion must be that leaflets have a useful role to play in alerting potential claimants to benefits for which they may be eligible. They should be general guides to entitlement that are addressed to particular target groups: much the sort of leaflets the Benefits Agency currently provides. Moreover, they need to be presented 'at the point of sale' if they are to well used. But they should not be the only, or even the main, way of publicising benefits. And they will not find widespread use either by people wanting to confirm their eligibility for a particular benefit or by those needing help once a claim has been made. For these people personalised information and guidance by word of mouth is clearly preferred.

As we shall see later, leaflets are also given to claimants by formal and informal advisers to reinforce information and advice given orally.