

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN LOCAL OFFICES AND ADVICE CENTRES

There were two main strands to the views of the Benefits Agency and the DHSS/DSS about the relationship between their local offices and other social security advisers. On the one hand there has been a long-standing concern that advice centres have usurped the Department's information and advice role; on the other a desire for friendly collaboration and close liaison with them. It was often recognised that any fault probably lay with the Department itself for not recognising and responding to claimants' information needs.

Early concerns about the extent to which other agencies were becoming involved in advising social security claimants were voiced in the reports of the *Social Security Operational Strategy* and its *Information and Advice Sub-group* during the early 1980s. It was felt that the Department had failed to meet the need for information and advice and, as a consequence, others had stepped in to fill the gap. There was, however, concern that the Department should provide support to advice agencies to ensure that they gave sound and accurate information which would not contribute to public misunderstanding about the social security system. What was envisaged was a well-informed independent advice network that would complement the service given by local social security offices.

By the second half of the 1980s attitudes to advice agencies had clearly become coloured by the aggressive take-up campaigns organised by local authority welfare rights officers. There was clear concern that such campaigns, and by implication ill-informed advice work generally, had resulted in large increases in workloads within local offices. What made matters worse was that many of the claims stimulated turned out to be from people who were not eligible for benefit. As a consequence, in 1988, DHSS officials made known to Ministers their concern at having lost the initiative on advice and information to outside bodies, a matter they were looking to put right (National Audit Office 1988).

At the same time, there have been repeated calls for closer liaison with advice agencies and the 1988 *Good Practice Handbook* notes that greater emphasis had been placed on liaison with citizens advice bureaux, welfare rights officers and social services departments (DSS 1988). The scrutiny team report, which advised Ministers to establish the Benefits Agency, noted that there was wide variability between local offices. While many offices were deploying imaginative techniques for liaising with local communities, the team noted that 'many offices still do virtually no work of this kind' (Moodie and others 1988). The National Audit Office, reporting in the same year, reached a similar conclusion. Moreover, it noted that the Department's stated policy of 'friendly collaboration' with outside advisers did not appear to be operating successfully. This was illustrated by the fact that outside bodies went ahead with take-up campaigns despite local and regional office advice on their timing (National Audit Office 1988).

So we had a desire to effect closer liaison and friendly collaboration with advice centres who were resented for having taken away from the Department one of its rightful roles. At best these two attitudes appear contradictory.

From the advice centres' point of view, there was mistrust of the Department and its motives. As we have seen, many advisers were inclined to the view that local office staff deliberately withheld information about entitlement from claimants in order to reduce the number of claims made. However, many advice workers would have welcomed local social security offices improving their information services; not just better liaison between their organisations but better provision of information and guidance to both actual and potential claimants (Moodie 1988, National Audit Office 1988).

There was, it seemed, a legacy of mistrust between social security officials and those who worked in independent advice centres. However, as the case study showed, there was sufficient goodwill on both sides to improve things in the future. Much of the emphasis, so far, has been placed on liaison, with customer services staff of the Benefits Agency taking the lead. This has been welcomed by local advice workers, but they remained concerned that claimants visiting local offices did not get the information and guidance they needed.

For a real working relationship to develop in the future, there needs to be a much clearer understanding of the aims, strengths, weaknesses and actual work of the different agencies. All the evidence seems to indicate that their roles are most likely to be complementary.