

INTRODUCTION

The Benefits Agency was created to improve both the administrative efficiency of the benefits system and the quality of service provided to the Agency's customers. The provision of information and advice is an important means of achieving both these objectives.

The information role of both the Benefits Agency and its local offices should be seen in a wider context. People turn to a broad range of sources to obtain information and advice about their claims for social security benefits. In addition to the local offices of the Benefits Agency itself, there are about 2,000 formal advice centres handling, between them, between 3 and 4 million social security enquiries a year. There are also many thousands of informal advisers who provide claimants with information and help on social security matters in the course of their work. These informal advisers include social services and health care professionals as well as a wide range of other individuals whose work brings them into contact with claimants.

To achieve its stated aim of 'improved advice and information for the public', the Benefits Agency is seeking to clarify both the information and advice role of its local offices and its role in supporting other information and advice agencies. As a first step the Agency commissioned the Policy Studies Institute to carry out exploratory research. This has been based on desk research, identifying, analysing and distilling the findings of about 150 previous research studies which have covered:

- u the information needs and information seeking patterns of social security claimants;
- u the social security work carried out by both independent advice agencies and local authority welfare rights teams and
- u the information and advice role of local offices of the Benefits Agency.

Detailed reviews have been prepared for each study and these are contained in Part Three of the report.

In addition to the desk research, depth interviews were carried out in the local Benefits Agency office and all the formal advice agencies in a town in the South West of England (which we shall call Maintown). These explored the nature of the social security information and advice work undertaken by each organisation and their working relationships one with another. This has been presented as a case study in Part Two of the report.

Since the research was undertaken the Benefits Agency has introduced changes aimed at improving services to claimants, including the commitment to a one-stop service involving the provision of cross-benefit advice. These changes are still in their early stages and have yet to be fully evaluated.