



## THE INFORMATION ROLE OF LOCAL BENEFITS OFFICES

Throughout the 1980s, there was a continuing official concern about information and advice on social security. This included communications strategies, covering general information and publicity about benefits, as well as the provision of oral information about entitlement and benefit claims through local offices.

In 1980 the DHSS identified information and advice as areas for service improvement in their *Social Security Operational Strategy*. An *Advice and Information Sub-group* felt that the quality of service in these areas had fallen. It showed that, far from viewing the DHSS as an information resource, many clients considered it as a source of problems.

In 1983 a working party was established to review local office structures in the light of users and their needs. One of its sub-groups focused particularly on information and advice. This found considerable public demand for face-to-face information and general guidance on benefits, and argued that meeting this need could be cost-effective if it reduced the numbers of ineligible claims for benefit arising from local authority benefit take-up campaigns. The cost-effectiveness argument was taken up in a report looking at the role of public caller offices. This showed that local offices faced greater workloads than they would have done if they had provided more information and guidance to claimants (Earley 1987).

A 1988 National Audit Office report investigated the quality of service offered to the public at local offices. It commented that, while the Department was 'committed to the provision of comprehensive, accurate and comprehensible information about benefit entitlement', there was still dissatisfaction with the service provided at many local offices (Gallup 1987, National Audit Office 1988).

Scrutiny of local offices was also being carried out by outside bodies. In the early 1980s, the Policy Studies Institute found only one aspect of the service provided by the DHSS which occasioned widespread criticism, and that was the amount of advice and information provided concerning entitlement of benefits (Berthoud 1984). Despite attempts by the Department to encourage more emphasis on the information role of local offices, a number of recent studies have shown that this remains a shortcoming of the service provided. In some instances this extended to a belief that information on eligibility was being deliberately withheld from claimants (BJM 1991, Craig Ross and Dawson 1990b, Dawson, Buckland and Gilbert 1990, Cooper 1985, Hedges 1988, Howe 1985).

### Information and advice work in local offices

In the past, the official view of the role of local offices has tended to be very cautious. It has stressed that social security staff could offer information and guidance, but would be treading dangerous ground if they became involved in advising claimants.

Local claimants, however, have tended to see local benefit offices as places where benefit claims are administered or processed, rather than as sources of information or advice. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that where information *was* sought from local offices it was primarily about either eligibility for a particular benefit or the claim process (Briggs and Rees 1980, Cooper 1985, New Product Research and Development 1991). Over half of people calling at local offices about supplementary benefit were claimants seeking general information about their benefit or details of their benefit award (National Audit Office 1991). The *National Customer Survey* showed that a half of Income Support claimants had got information about eligibility from either local DSS or local unemployment benefit offices (DSS 1990b). Most of this basic information work was carried out by reception staff who dealt directly with the public, but requests for more detailed information were, generally, referred to Benefit Advisers. These referrals mostly related to non-payment of benefits (DSS 1990a).

In the main, then, most of the information work in local offices tended to be passive in nature; it relied on claimants and potential claimants wanting to find the information for themselves and, even then, tended to involve them being given 'a sheaf of leaflets' rather than personalised oral information. Interviews with claimants were used mainly to collect information, not to impart it (BJM 1991, Cooper 1985, Howe 1985).

There have been some welcome developments in the information and advice giving role of local benefits offices and the 1988 *Handbook of Good Practice* outlined outreach initiatives tried by some local offices (DSS 1988). But all the evidence suggested that there was widespread variability in the service provided: variability between local offices; between individual staff members within local offices, and between different groups of claimants.

The National Audit Office discovered that local offices' interpretation of their information and publicity roles varied considerably. One Scottish regional office had run take-up campaigns since 1983, a practice which seemed to 'go beyond the Department's stated aims'. Others, however, had restricted their role to liaison with outside statutory and voluntary agencies. In 1988, only 60 per cent of local offices had appointed an information officer. Overall, the NAO found little evidence of the Department attempting to monitor the effectiveness of their information provision (National Audit Office 1988).

Two earlier studies had also identified variations between offices in the information given in interviews. A study of social security offices in Northern Ireland found that official policy, regarding provision of leaflets, information on benefits and entitlement and explanation of appeal rights, was not implemented at local office level. None of the interviews met all aspects of the policy and in more than half of cases no information was given at all (Howe 1985). Half of supplementary benefit offices surveyed in the second study contained limited or inadequate information display facilities. Oral explanations on benefit entitlement varied considerably in extent, tone and quality not only from office to office but also from one staff member to another within offices (Cooper 1985).

Of equal concern was the evidence that the information given to claimants and potential claimants varied from one group to another. Lone parents, young people, people who were unemployed and social fund applicants have consistently been found to receive little information (DSS 1990b, Gallup 1987, National Audit Office 1988, Hedges 1988).

A number of studies have identified a belief among claimants that information about entitlement was deliberately withheld by staff in social security offices (BJM 1991, Cragg Ross and Dawson 1990b, Hedges 1988). Attitudes to providing information were found to be strongly affected by staff's beliefs that some claimants already knew too much, and that while some claimants were 'deserving' or 'genuinely needy' others were not (Berthoud 1984, Cooper 1985, Dawson Buckland and Gilbert 1990, Howe 1985).

Our own case study, in one local office in 1992, showed that considerable effort had been put into liaising with other advice agencies and that this had been generally welcomed. However, it was clear that the provision of information and guidance for callers to the local office was not well developed. It was not an accepted part of the duties of the reception staff, with the result that some did very little while others fitted in what they could but with no training or general support.

### **Factors which have hindered developments**

A certain amount of variation between local offices was only to be expected. Local offices serve different clients with different information needs and the nature of the information and advice work undertaken should clearly reflect those needs. But the fact that some offices have been found to provide little information to callers; that there were variations between officers and differences in the way groups of clients were treated were of more concern. It was important, therefore, to review some of the factors that have hindered the development of information services.

As we have seen, staff attitudes seemed to play an important part. Many staff simply did not see the provision of information and advice as a part of their job. The *Advice and Information Sub-group* of the DHSS team looking at operational strategy concluded, in 1981, that there was a need to encourage a different attitude to the job of giving information. It was felt that staff needed to be trained to regard the task of giving information to the public as an important element of their work and not as an interruption to it.

Yet, several years later, interviewing officers still did not give leaflets to claimants because of lack of pressure from supervisors for them to do so. There was a general view among officers that it was not their role to explain the supplementary benefit scheme in detail (Cooper 1985, Howe 1985).

There was also evidence suggesting that information was not given because staff over-estimated the knowledge claimants had about their entitlements (Berthoud 1984, Howe 1985).

Finally pressures on staff time frequently meant that where corners had to be cut, information provision was seen as dispensable. Local office interviewers found they often had insufficient time to explain even the minimum amount about the social security system. If they spent time giving information and guidance to callers, colleagues accused them of not pulling their weight (Berthoud 1984, Howe 1985, Shaw Porter 1990).

It was apparent in our case study that the underlying reason for Benefits Agency staff not providing information to claimants was a general lack of commitment to this aspect of the work. Some staff were committed to doing more but it was left to individual initiative. As a consequence staff lacked both the training and the time required to do the job properly. The problem was compounded by a split of the office into sections dealing with means-tested benefits and contributory benefits. This made it difficult for most staff to offer information and guidance across the whole range of benefits.

## **Summary**

The last decade has been marked by a continuing official concern about the information and advice role of local benefits offices. Yet there has been surprisingly little research into the exact nature of the work actually undertaken, and most of that was undertaken almost ten years ago. Such evidence as exists, suggested that local offices were seen as having a role providing general information and publicity about benefits, as well as oral information and guidance to the public about eligibility and the claim process.

However, the development of more than passive information services has not been universal. Widespread variations have been identified between different offices, different officers within offices and different groups of claimants. Staff attitudes and pressures of work accounted for many of these differences.