

Summary of Key Issues to Committee for Social Development

Introduction

Citizens Advice is the largest advice charity in Northern Ireland working against poverty, meeting the information and advice needs of some 279,000 people per year.

This Citizens Advice briefing paper is based on the significant interface which we have built up with the Social Security Agency over the past 20 years. This is reflected in the fact that some 60% of enquiries to CAB offices concern social security, and the fact that for the past few years we have delivered benefit take up contracts on behalf of the Social Security Agency.

Main Concerns

- Citizens Advice understands the rationale of changing the balance of service delivery to telephony and appointment based systems within Jobs and Benefits and Social Security Offices.

However, the SSA itself has identified a number of vulnerable client groups whose access to services may be disadvantaged by the proposed changes.

We would seek assurances that clients can still receive face to face advice when needed, and that there will not be a consequent overspill of SSA customers into local CAB offices.

- Frontline staff may require further training to enable them to advise holistically across the full range of social security benefits;
- We recommend that the Agency engage with Citizens Advice in order to monitor any displacement of workload onto the CAB network;
- The Agency should reaffirm and publicise a Customer Service Statement
- The Agency should review the impact of the Strategy six months after implementation.

Citizens Advice welcomes an efficient service for people who need financial support because they cannot work or who are trying to move into work. We appreciate and understand the necessity for the changes to how services are delivered through the Jobs and Benefits and Social Security Office Network.

Citizens Advice understands the growing awareness that the telephone is becoming the first choice of means by which many people contact their local Government Office. We therefore understand the rationale behind the triage based service available from local Jobs and Benefits and Social Security Offices, provided that staff are properly trained, and that it does not impede customer access to the advice and information which they need.

The Agency should however take account of the experience of Jobcentre Plus in Great Britain, this failed to meet the needs of people who, for whatever reason, are unable to use the phone. This would include people who :-

- Have physical and mental health problems;
- Are homeless;
- Are hospital inpatients;
- Need access to a confidential phone line e.g. Prisoners on remand.

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Telephony

There are other ongoing concerns with phone access:-

- Mobile phones
- Language
- Mental health problems
- Literacy
- Getting through promptly

Retention of face to face advice

Agency Staff also need to be readily available to deal with unforeseen emergencies such as crisis loans, it is imperative that there are enough staff qualified to process crisis loans in each of the 35 offices.

Conclusion

Citizens Advice would also like to raise the issue that the Strategic Business Review will have a huge effect on the work of the Social Security Agency not only to the new structures but the administration and IT systems. The Social Security system has gone through enormous changes since 2003 and this has had a huge impact also on the CAB network with increased training, the need for more advisers and the increased demand on our services due to the complexity of the changes. The reduction of frontline staff will inevitably impact on Citizens Advice and it is therefore important for the Agency to monitor this, and the impact on other voluntary organisations.

We recommend therefore, that the Agency evaluates the impact of the Review 6 months after implementation.

Cases

A Craigavon client accrued £90 on mobile phone call charges attempting to get through to Employment and Support Allowance branch. This was due to the fact that he did not have access to a landline telephone. Because different networks vary with 0845 numbers the client was not aware of the accrual of costs until he received his bill. There is no available Northern Ireland telephone number for members of the public contacting ESA.

A client applied for JSA and was awaiting his decision. The client had no other income and when an application was made for a Crisis Loan he was informed that there would be a four week delay before decision would be made.

A client made a fresh claim for income support at her local Jobs and Benefits Office. She was not informed about the facility for claiming child tax credit and the fast track process and when she finally put the claim in herself, there was a delay in client receiving her tax credits when she should have had them six weeks earlier.