



## Advice NI response to

### 'Maximising Incomes and Outcomes' A 3 Year Plan For Improving The Uptake Of Benefits

February 2013

#### Background

Advice NI is a membership organisation that exists to provide leadership, representation and support for independent advice organisations to facilitate the delivery of high quality, sustainable advice services. Advice NI exists to provide its members with the capacity and tools to ensure effective advice services delivery. This includes: advice and information management systems, funding and planning, quality assurance support, NVQs in advice and guidance, social policy co-ordination and ICT development.

Membership of Advice NI is normally for organisations that provide significant advice and information services to the public. Advice NI has over 65 member organisations operating throughout Northern Ireland and providing information and advocacy services to over 125,000 people each year dealing with almost 270,000 enquiries on an extensive range of matters including: social security, housing, debt, consumer and employment issues. For further information, please visit [www.adviceni.net](http://www.adviceni.net).

Advice NI's latest annual statistics (2012) reflect the growing demand upon advice services, some keynote information includes:

- 269,034 enquiries dealt with by Advice NI members;
- 1,892 appeal cases represented by Advice NI advisers (29% increase in comparison to 2011 figures);

- Debt Action NI (a primarily face to face debt advice service funded by DETI); Advice NI secured the sole DETI contract for debt advice in Northern Ireland and for the period 1 August 2012 – 31 December 2012 the service has helped nearly 2,957 clients deal with over £53 million in debt;
- Advice NI secured the SSA Benefit Uptake Programme contract 2011/12 (25,000 people targeted) and achieved record breaking results in terms of benefit uptake generated (£7.17 million);
- Advice NI regained the contract for the SSA Benefit Uptake Programme 2012/13 and we aim to build on the results achieved in 2011/12;
- Advice NI secured funding from the SSA Innovation Fund in 2012 for 2 projects aimed at assisting benefit uptake amongst young people (to help them secure their income and allow them to think about improving their employability) and those in employment (aimed at assisting the low paid and those in part-time work to maximise their income and stay in employment);

## **Comments**

Advice NI welcomes the continued commitment of the Department and the Social Security Agency to the important issue of maximising incomes. Advice NI also welcomes the opportunity to have been involved in benefit uptake activity (via the procurement process) and we believe that independent advice sector involvement has demonstrated added value and effective partnership working between the VCS and the public sector in the shape of Benefit Entitlement Unit of the Social Security Agency. Advice NI advocates that this activity continues: (1) so that people receive their full benefit entitlements; and (2) as people's circumstances change over time, they continue to receive their full benefit entitlement.

We note and welcome the broader definition of maximising incomes as opposed to maximising benefits which we believe will help to 'future proof' strategic thinking in the context of welfare reform when Universal Credit will become applicable to those both in and out of work. We believe the range of passported supports and their eligibility criteria could also become incorporated. Welfare reform will continue to dominate thinking now and for years to come: Advice NI believes that this plan, as a living document, could help

address the needs of people who will require assistance to access and maximise their entitlements (i) within the existing system; (ii) as people transfer to the new reformed system and (iii) within the new reformed system.

Advice NI believes that this consultation in relation to “Maximising Incomes” perhaps provides an opportunity and a vehicle to pull the various additional advice needs associated with welfare reform together and enables the Department to address these needs in a comprehensive fashion.

We agree that in a time of recession, rising cost of living, uncertainty surrounding social security reform and perceived cuts to the social security budget, it is vital that low income households receive all the help and support to which they are entitled.

The challenge is to build on and improve on the record breaking results achieved in 2011/12. There are undoubtedly opportunities for all stakeholders to do more to help those in need, to do more to tackle poverty and disadvantage and we hope that the consultation exercise will provide the platform for this debate.

Finally in terms of introductory remarks, we would refer to comments made in our Briefing Paper dated April 2012 which has been included as an appendix to this document.

**1. Do you believe that the Department should continue to invest in proactive approaches to encouraging benefit uptake?**

Yes. It is clear from the income generated in 2011/12 and in previous years that specific, targeted benefit uptake activity has resulted in substantial additional income being generated for low income households across Northern Ireland. Advice NI believes that it is vitally important that this uptake activity continues given the outcomes achieved for people most at risk of poverty and disadvantage in Northern Ireland.

In terms of areas worthy of further consideration, we would make the following suggestions.

Building on the theme of maximising incomes, we have seen a number of examples where clients may have been getting a certain amount of benefit but after our engagement the amount of benefit has been increased. For example a premium within State Pension Credit may have been identified which was previously omitted, or the rate of Disability Living Allowance / Attendance Allowance may have been increased from the previous lower rate. This can require significant work in terms of drawing up a supersession letter, perhaps needing to complete additional forms, perhaps needing to garner additional medical evidence, perhaps ultimately taking a case to appeal in order to secure the higher rate of benefit.

The amounts of money can be substantial for the individual concerned, for example an incorrectly omitted Severe Disability Premium within State Pension Credit amounts to £58.20 per week. The difference between low rate and high rate Attendance Allowance amounts to £25.60. And where benefit secured at appeal, there can be substantial lump sums payable in terms of awards being backdated.

We would ask the Department to consider how this important aspect of benefit maximisation work can be better facilitated.

Similarly in terms of future proofing strategic thinking in the context of welfare reform, income maximisation and uptake may increasingly involve challenging Social Security Agency decisions (in particular in the context of DLA reassessment to PIP and continuing Incapacity Benefit reassessment to ESA). Again this work has substantial monetary impact but it does require considerable workload in terms of the advice support required. Again we would ask the Department to consider how this important aspect of benefit maximisation work can be better supported.

We believe that greater partnership working and innovative methodologies can reap rewards in terms of reaching those people most in need. Whilst the Targeted Exercises have a proven track record of success, we welcome the establishment of the Innovation Fund in 2012 and believe that the Fund should be sustained so as to help develop new ways of working and getting services to those people most at risk of poverty and disadvantage.

**2. Do you agree that people in all circumstances (in and out of work) are in scope for improved awareness and information with higher investment and priority being given to those groups identified as needing more direct intervention in order to take up benefits they are entitled to?**

**3. Do you agree that referral to a wider range of services and supports should be a key part of benefit uptake programmes?**

Advice NI has consistently highlighted a range of suggestions in relation to benefit uptake and we are pleased that the Agency has moved on many of these suggestions including:

- Broadening out the scope of the programme to include maximising access to a range of other benefits, services and supports;
- Taking a longer term approach, spreading the programme and associated workload over a longer period;
- Developing good partnership working and communication arrangements between advice sector and the Agency in order to provide excellent customer service to clients (for example with the advent of payment modernisation and payment of benefit directly into bank accounts, there is often the need to check the benefit in payment where the client is uncertain about the amount and make-up of their current awards);
- Exploring other innovative approaches where clients choose not to come forward under the targeted benefit uptake programme;
- Running strong marketing campaigns in order to 'lay the ground' for the work, highlight the importance of uptake activity and to encourage people to come forward and claim their rightful entitlements;

Some areas requiring further consideration include:

- (i) Where targeted clients 'spread the word' and encourage non-targeted clients to use the 'Targeted Exercises' service. Advice NI continue to provide a service to all who

make contact with the service, and we would ask how this 'non targeted' work could be better facilitated within the scope of the scope of the targeted programme;

- (ii) We believe that some more work may need to be carried out in terms of defining, validating and verifying the non-social security benefit related work. For example systems may have to be established with those bodies responsible for administering those non-SSA related (passport) benefits, services and supports;
- (iii) Given the nature of the programme and the profile of the client group involved, very often face to face support is required and often this is needed in the clients' own home. Advice NI would ask the Department to consider how this important aspect of service provision (namely travel costs for home visits) can be better supported. With reference to welfare reform the direction of travel for delivery of services by the Social Security Agency appears to be moving from face-to-face to telephony and ultimately to online provision. For some clients this may feel like access is becoming more and more remote; it is important, particularly for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, that services and help is accessible;
- (iv) As highlighted above in Q1, clients may have been getting a certain amount of benefit but after our engagement the amount of benefit has been increased (which can mean assisting clients with supersession requests and ultimately appeal representation). Advice NI would ask the Department to consider how this important aspect of service provision can be better supported within the context of the 3 year plan and the programmes that flow from the plan.

**4. Do you agree with the vision and aims of the strategy?**

**5. Do you believe that the 6 strategic priorities are right? Are there others that you would have expected to see?**

Yes, the vision is challenging in terms of trying to ensure that every individual and household is receiving all their entitlements.

In terms of the key principles and priorities we believe that “independence” could usefully be added, in recognition that people may very often feel unable to access services provided directly by Government. The Social Security Agency already recognises that the CVS has a key role to play in ensuring that the ‘Maximising Incomes’ vision is realised, and “independence” is a key unique selling point that the CVS can bring to assist in ensuring the vision becomes reality. An example of the strength of the independent approach is the ability of CVS advisers to help claimants challenge benefit decisions (whether via reconsideration or appeal); something which Social Security Agency staff simply could not do (namely help a claimant to challenge a decision of a colleague within the Agency).

As highlighted above, welfare reform will continue to dominant thinking now and for years to come. It is perhaps surprising that welfare reform does not get a specific mention as undoubtedly many claimants will require help for example with the Universal Credit online application process; with Personal Independence Payment applications; and with access to the new Discretionary Support service.

In response to a previous consultation in relation to Discretionary Support, Advice NI has said:

*“The DSD consultation document suggests (and Advice NI agrees) that advice services have a key role to play in terms of providing information & advice and helping people maximise entitlements & improve their financial capability. Furthermore advice services might even have a role in terms of verification / validation, with a view to streamlining the process and maximising access to the discretionary support. However given the pressures already facing advice services as highlighted above, Advice NI believes that consideration should be given to tailoring (and resourcing) dedicated advice provision towards clients who seek help from any Discretionary Support Scheme and are then referred on for advice and assistance. This would be consistent for example with the approach taken to meeting PfG Benefit Uptake commitments where specific resources are made available to conduct specific uptake activity.”*

Advice NI believes that this consultation in relation to “Maximising Incomes” perhaps provides an opportunity and a vehicle to pull the various additional advice needs associated

with welfare reform together and enable the Department to address these needs in a comprehensive fashion.

**6. Do you agree that the main barriers to benefit uptake are listed? Are there other factors that may have a bearing on decisions about having an entitlement check or making a claim?**

In addition to the range of barriers identified, in terms of looking forward, as highlighted above the direction of travel associated with welfare reform in terms of delivery of services by the Social Security Agency appears to be moving from face-to-face to telephony and ultimately to online provision. The risk associated with this business model is that access to services becomes an issue. For example, in 2009 Advice NI highlighted the following in response to the Agency's Strategic Business Review consultation:

*"... We would agree that there is a real need for an efficient and effective Social Security Agency service, meeting the needs of those most in need. Record numbers of people are expected to become unemployed and so reliant upon Agency services. Advice NI's latest membership figures highlight a 6% increase in money/debt enquiries, with continued high numbers of social security related enquiries. In terms of these proposals, Advice NI would be concerned that for people who are or will become reliant on social security benefits – there is a risk that the proposals (telephony and face to face service by appointment only) may not actually improve services: and indeed may result in a poorer service, causing stress, confusion and ultimately hardship for vulnerable low income households ..."*

*"... Advice NI would have reservations regarding the introduction of the new telephony services. The new telephony services being put into place are untried and untested and potentially could lead to greater stress and frustration for the public. Ultimately the consultation document talks about delivering a better service for customers: we would be concerned that in actual fact telephony could become a barrier for the most vulnerable within our community ..."*

*" ... Advice NI would point to the following which highlights experiences in GB:*



*“In their report - 'Telephony in DWP and its agencies: Call costs and equality of customer access' – the Social Security Advisory Committee says that whilst the modernisation of the Department's services has undoubtedly worked well for many, there is evidence that in moving to telephony-based services the Department has effectively transferred some of its costs to the claimant, and that in terms of access, the poorer and more disadvantaged the claimant, the greater the potential barriers they will face.”*

*“The Committee also reports that it has observed a number of other barriers to access presented by telephony - such as language and cultural issues, mental health and other problems linked to a range of disabilities - to which reliable, alternative access solutions have yet to be established.” The issue of call charges is not fully explained in the document and Advice NI believes that more information is required in respect of charges for calls, including issues such as charges in respect of a claim to benefit (in effect a charge for claiming a benefit); calls from mobile phones; and readiness of staff to call people back ...”*

In summary, Advice NI believes that with welfare reform and service delivery changes there is undoubtedly the risk that there will be a knock-on impact in terms of barriers to benefit uptake.

**7 In addition to those better targeting commitments set out are there others that you believe should be considered by the Department?**

Advice NI acknowledges and welcomes the commitment shown by the Social Security Agency to benefit uptake. The range of approaches outlined in the document are testament to this commitment.

The success of the direct targeting approach in 2011/12 warrants particular mention, with record breaking results achieved by the independent advice sector organisation (Advice NI). We agree that this approach should be continued, and as the provider for 2012/13 and potentially beyond, Advice NI will be striving to do even better in terms of maximising access to the service, maximising uptake in terms of numbers of people claiming benefit and the amount of benefit being claimed.

In terms of the future, Advice NI agrees that there is always room for improvement and some ideas are highlighted in Appendix 1. In addition, welfare reform will place an onus on the Agency to deliver Universal Credit to a section of the population previously for the most part excluded from Agency services – namely those people in employment. Currently these people would engage with HMRC in terms of claiming tax credits.

Advice NI has a 'Tax and Benefits Service' funded by HMRC which helps people with issues such as working tax credit, child tax credit, childcare issues, PAYE and self-assessment issues. The service is particularly interested in helping those people potentially most in need for example migrant workers with little or no English; people with disabilities in supported employment; lone parents. We were also able to secure funding from the Innovation Fund to deliver an 'In-work: Top Up Your Income Service' aimed at reaching low paid employees; the self employed; those with fluctuating hours and work patterns; those moving in and out of work for example due to illness or for family reasons. We believe there is merit in exploring the learning from these services in terms of providing what the client needs – as opposed to what the system wants to give them – in terms of those in work clients entitled to an income top-up.

We know that Universal Credit is meant to have real time linkages with HMRC but obviously (i) any new system may be subject to problems; (ii) there will be risks where the employer does not / is unable to provide the necessary information to HMRC in real time; and (iii) there may be issues in terms of the online route to access Universal Credit. We believe there is merit in reviewing the needs of the 'in work' population insofar as they may require support to access Universal Credit and receive their entitlements in a timely fashion.

Advice NI also delivered a 'Young People' service funded by the Innovation Fund aimed at disadvantaged and vulnerable young people aged 16 – 30 not in education, training or employment (NEETs). This service was delivered in partnership with Include Youth and others which enabled their service users (for example care leavers & school age mothers) to have access to the advice service to help them maximise their rights and entitlements. The service did reach the most hard to reach young people and we believe there is merit in exploring the learning from this service in terms of providing a service to vulnerable young people.

**8. In addition to those access and delivery commitments set out are there other improvements that you believe should be explored by the Department?**

In addition to the commitments to improving access and delivery – Advice NI believes that there is an opportunity to improve on the issues of access and delivery. In our report *'The big idea: putting people first'*<sup>1</sup> a range of recommendations were made including:

1. The SSA, NIHE and indeed all public sector frontline service providers consider undertaking demand analysis work, thereby accessing and utilising client information in terms of the nature of demand hitting their frontline services;
2. The Advice NI systems thinking project be enabled to continue and complete the remaining stages of 'check', 'redesign' and 'roll in' with a view to establishing an evidential basis for the widespread adoption of a systems thinking approach to service delivery in Northern Ireland;

Fundamentally the adoption of a systems thinking approach and a move to measuring end-to-end times (the period from date of claim to the date a decision is made) would provide a basis for establishing a clearer picture in terms of how well the system responds to customer demand and perhaps square the current circle of targets apparently being met vs client difficulties with the system.

**9. What additional steps do you believe the Department could take to ensure that, at critical points of change in people's lives, they are aware of their entitlements to benefits, services and supports?**

**10. How do you believe the Department could improve uptake of benefits through enhanced partnerships working with community level organisations?**

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<http://www.adviceni.net/publications/PDF/Systems%20Thinking%20Report%20the%20big%20idea%20March%202011.pdf>

Advice NI agrees that opportunities must be maximised (i) by the Social Security Agency; (ii) across other government agencies; (ii) and by external agencies to improve the uptake of benefits. Other examples of relevant key life events that might usefully warrant attention in relation to benefit uptake opportunities include: marriage or relationship breakdown / commencement; children and / or adults leaving / starting education; starting / ending caring responsibilities; change to housing status.

In terms of maximising Social Security Agency contact, we believe that perhaps more could be done at the following key points of interaction:

- Award of disability benefits (for example Disability Living Allowance or Attendance Allowance) and potential entitlement to additional premiums within other benefits;
- Award of contribution based working age benefits (for example contribution based ESA or contribution based JSA) and potential entitlement to means tested benefits, in particular help with claimant's housing costs;
- Award of state retirement pension and potential entitlement to means tested state pension credit;

We believe there would be merit in systematically offering a Benefit Entitlement Check at the above stages, at least on a pilot basis to ascertain the additional uptake of benefits that might be achieved. Other examples are contained in Appendix 1.

In terms of maximising contact with other government agencies, Advice NI believes that there is potential to do more around Free School Meals (FSM). In 2008 Advice NI was involved in a pilot piece of work with the Western Education & Library Board on the issue of FSM. At that time it was estimated that as many as 8,000 children across N Ireland were missing out on this entitlement, which could amount to as much as **£50 per month for each child**, where the parent failed to come forward to apply for their entitlement to Free School Meals. The approach involved targeting low income families who were unaware of the potential entitlement or indeed the value of claiming entitlement to Free School Meals and the Annual School Uniform Allowance. An advertising campaign was conducted between WELB and Advice NI with a focus on increasing the uptake of FSM and social security benefits.

**11. How do you believe the Department could improve uptake of benefits through innovation?**

The above example highlights where partnership working across all service providers can reap dividends. In particular we believe there is merit in exploring further the merits of working with churches and faith-based organisations in targeting people with potential unclaimed entitlement to benefits. We recognise that Northern Ireland continues to have a strong 'church-going' tradition and that local churches and other faith based organisations have a sustained track record in serving their local communities. We believe more could be done to harness the potential of working in partnership with these organisations.

In terms of technological innovation, Advice NI has just launched a project aimed at opening up the digital world of the internet to isolated older people living in sheltered housing, residential and nursing care homes across Northern Ireland. Crucially the approach will involve recruiting older volunteers to become 'Internet Champions' who visit Fold sheltered housing schemes and private care homes, and run classes teaching older people living there basic computer skills including how to get online. This will be combined with experienced advisers providing information and benefits advice. We would be keen to explore where this approach could be replicated (combining face to face support with technological innovation) with other client groups across Northern Ireland.

**12. Are there additional targets that you would like to propose?**

Dependent upon the Agency's response to the issues highlighted in this paper, we believe that additional targets may well present themselves.

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Advice NI Briefing Paper (April 2012)**

#### **Benefit Uptake Strategic Issues**

Advice NI welcomes the opportunity to input into the Social Security Agency (SSA) strategic review of benefit uptake activities. By way of background Advice NI is aware of the initiatives undertaken by SSA to promote uptake including: the Benefit Uptake Programme; the Innovation Fund projects; the 'Make the Call' campaign; the work of SSA Outreach Advisers.

This year (2011/12) Advice NI has been successful in securing contracts aimed at maximising benefit uptake with regard to the Benefit Uptake Programme and two Innovation Fund projects. Additionally Advice NI members are involved in assisting people maximise their entitlements through various other initiatives including local Council-funded advice work and work resourced through other funding sources.

Based on the track record of Advice NI and member organisations in the field of benefit uptake, the following represent a summary of the main issues from our perspective.

1. **Need:** we believe that the results of activity initiated by SSA (for example the Benefit Uptake Programme) clearly evidences the need for benefit uptake activity to continue and indeed be developed. We believe that welfare reform will undoubtedly drive up demand, as people struggle to come to terms with the benefits system during and post welfare reform;
2. **Welfare reform:** an example of downstream consequences of welfare reform can clearly be seen in relation to Disability Living Allowance (DLA) / Personal Independence Payment (PIP) reform. We understand that when this exercise gets underway there will be 1,000 claimants contacted per week, with a 4 week turnaround for return of completed application forms. We envisage that this will put massive pressure on the independent advice sector as claimants seek assistance with

their forms. Therefore we believe that welfare reform will generate specific additional enquiries, which very clearly fit with benefit uptake as these enquiries will be from people seeking to secure entitlement to PIP. We believe that the strategic review of benefit uptake provides an opportunity for the Department (and in particular the Social Security Agency) to consider the wider implications of welfare reform on clients and on the advice sector;

3. Need: more work is needed in terms of independent research into the need for benefit uptake activity (including the impact of welfare reform on benefit uptake activity) in order that a case can be made for sustaining and increasing the resources deployed towards this important work;
4. Independence: we believe that there remains a reticence among many (in particular older people) to explore potential benefit entitlement directly with the SSA due to a fear that any current entitlement may be jeopardised or they may be doing something wrong. For this reason it is essential that the independent advice sector continues to be deployed as a service provider as part of the SSA's range of benefit uptake initiatives. The potential role of the independent advice sector is discussed further below;
5. Independence: increasingly the SSA is taking a high profile stance in terms of fraud & error and protecting the public purse. For example the 'News Releases' section of the SSA website contains numerous examples of named individuals convicted of benefit fraud. Whilst the SSA is perfectly entitled to pursue this course of action, we believe that it is virtually impossible for the SSA to also be seen as the 'champion' for people in terms of encouraging and securing potential additional benefit entitlement. For example, if the Minister is seen in the media one week with a message declaring that his/her Department must ensure that people are not getting benefits they are not entitled to; then the next week encouraging people to go ahead and apply for benefit that they potentially might be entitled to – this is obviously a mixed message. Therefore in terms of potential delivery models we believe that there are actually 4 alternatives (i) hybrid; (ii) in-house; (iii) do nothing; (iv) external. We believe that the SSA and the independent advice sector will always be involved in benefit uptake activity to some extent, so the hybrid model would seem to be the better option, with perhaps enhanced responsibility for the



independent advice sector as the 'champion' for benefit uptake with potential involvement in the activities listed below;

6. Extent to which SSA can 'champion' benefit uptake: reflecting on benefit uptake as a process which can stretch from application form to appeal tribunal, there would appear to be a point in the process after which the SSA cannot continue to 'champion' the rights of claimant in terms of entitlement to benefit. We believe that the SSA needs to reflect on this point, and acknowledge that in terms of their specific internal uptake activity, it may not simply be sufficient to refer cases and additional workload on to advice agencies (for example where the initial application for benefit is refused) given the pressures and increasing workloads already facing the advice sector through welfare reform, the recession, increasing indebtedness and increasing costs of living;
7. Maximising opportunities: SSA could make better use of information in order to maximise the opportunities to pursue benefit uptake. For example where a claimant secures Employment & Support Allowance entitlement by scoring 15 points or more, but Disability Living Allowance is not in payment, we believe that ESA entitlement clearly points to potential DLA entitlement and so a DLA claim should be encouraged. It is interesting to note that in the reverse scenario, when ESA is taken from a client, notification of the removal of ESA is sent to DLA (if DLA is in payment). Equally we believe that the SSA invites claims for State Retirement Pension but that there is not necessarily a benefit assessment carried out to ascertain if Pension Credit might be payable, this is another area where more could be done to ensure people are not missing out on their full entitlements. Another point, it is noteworthy the number of single men still in receipt of Incapacity Benefit / contribution based ESA long after their eligible claim date for Pension Credit. More often than not, these single men are better-off financially claiming Pension Credit. A final idea would be in respect of successful claims for Attendance Allowance which could trigger entitlement to Severe Disability Premiums within Pension Credit payable at £58.20 per week. We believe that a benefit assessment at this point would help ensure that people are not missing out on their full entitlements. Whilst additional benefit cannot be guaranteed in all cases, these are a number of ideas worthy of further exploration. They have the merit of being timely in terms of ensuring that the

- claimant gets the right benefit at the right time, can be delivered on an on-going, year-round basis and the independent advice sector could be involved in delivery;
8. Longer term approach: Advice NI has consistently argued for a longer term approach to delivering benefit uptake. In terms of the annual Benefit Uptake Programme, 'cramming' the activity into a relatively short window in our view is not the most effective way to deliver benefit uptake, rather ongoing activity conducted in a less hectic fashion allows better planning and ensures that high quality delivery can be sustained, aided by the recruitment and retention of staff dedicated towards this work. The activities listed in Point 7 are examples of potential ongoing uptake activity, which could supplement the traditional Benefit Uptake Programme;
  9. Assessing effectiveness: we believe that in order that there is a level playing field for assessing effectiveness, all benefit uptake initiatives should be assessed consistently. For example in terms of the current Benefit Uptake Programme the focus should be on the number of people who come forward for assessment; the number of claims lodged and the number of verified successful claims. We believe this formula can be replicated across all activities and so can lead to informed decisions in terms of what constitutes effective uptake activity;
  10. Effectiveness: we believe that benefit uptake is a serious issue with life changing consequences when additional benefit entitlement can be secured. For this reason SSA should ensure that decisions made in relation to service provision (in particular choices regarding third party providers) are clearly based on proven ability to provide the most effective results; any deviation will not do justice to the importance of the work or to the people who could potentially benefit from benefit uptake activity;
  11. Operational issues: we believe that the Programme has highlighted a number of operational issues which should be considered within any strategic review. These include for example the need for recognition of the work involved: where a benefit is already in payment but is increased as a result of adviser intervention (eg Severe Disability Premium added to an existing Pension Credit award); help with a review of benefit (for example to get an Attendance Allowance award increased); time needed to ascertain what benefits are in payment due to client confusion and fact that benefits are paid into bank accounts; the non-benefit workload generated by

targeted clients; the workload generated by non-targeted clients who become aware of the service through 'word of mouth' or other means; the need to stick to a realistic timetable in order that the Programme can be delivered in a way that maximises effectiveness; the additional costs incurred in respect of home visits as a result of the rising fuel prices (very often more than 1 home visit is required in order to do follow up work, for example if an Attendance Allowance application is successful).

Advice NI would also like to take this opportunity to highlight the increasing pressures facing advisers in terms of representing social security benefit appellants at appeal tribunals. Appeal representation offers another opportunity to increase the benefit income of social security agency claimants. The latest information from The Appeals Service indicates that Advice NI represented at a record high 1,467 hearings in 2011, with a success rate of 34%, bench-marked against 31% in terms of all cases where the appellant had representation; and less than 20% where the appellant was unrepresented. Feedback from clients, advisers and The Appeals Service suggests that increasingly hearings are being adjourned to allow unrepresented appellants the opportunity to obtain representation. Advice NI believes that the pressures facing advisers in terms of appeal representation will undoubtedly continue to grow as welfare cuts and reform take effect (for example we are already seeing increased need for representation re ESA and this trend will undoubtedly continue with DLA reform). We would call for a strategic review of the issue of tribunal representation to ensure that Social Security Agency claimants have proper access to justice in terms of securing their proper social security benefit entitlement. Advice NI understands that this is a cross Departmental issue, but nonetheless we would wish to raise this issue in the context of the current strategic review of benefit uptake, and will also raise this issue with DSD and DoJ.