

aiac

**Association of Independent Advice
Centres (NI)**

Social Policy Briefing

1 June 2001

Impact of welfare reform and modernisation

- **Private sector involvement in the services provided by the Social Security Agency**

As you may be aware, the Social Security Agency has signed a ten-year partnership contract with the private sector, with the aim of delivering a more efficient service to benefit claimants.

This partnership is with a private sector consortium called EISIS which is made up of Electronic Data Systems (EDS) and PricewaterhouseCoopers.

The modernisation process will initially involve Attendance Allowance, Disability Living Allowance and Invalid Care Allowance. There will be a phased implementation of this modernisation process, with plans to begin with Attendance Allowance in October 2001 and adopting full implementation with all three benefits by February 2002.

However, what impact will this process of modernisation have on benefit claimants?

The answer is that there is potential for considerable impact. Already electronic claim forms are being devised for all three benefits. It is envisaged that Social Security Agency staff will be based within a centralised 'call centre' with the ability to complete claimants' benefit forms over the telephone.

Where written correspondence is received from the claimant and indeed their doctor, this information will be scanned into electronic form. It is envisaged that this is the beginning of a process which will result in all claimant details being held in electronic form.

The central premise for the Social Security Agency embracing this private sector partnership is to improve the quality of decision making, to improve turnaround times and to improve efficiency. AIAC acknowledges that improved turnaround times would certainly be to the advantage of claimants. However we remain to be convinced that this initiative will result in claimants experiencing an improved standard of service and an improved standard of decision making. Technological improvements must have the interests of claimants at heart, and we would have a number of concerns around the following:

1. Completion of forms over the telephone

Many people are reluctant to discuss any matters of importance over the telephone. This situation is magnified for people with disabilities such as arthritis which would mean the person enduring pain even lifting the telephone never mind speaking on the telephone for the 1 – 3 hours necessary to complete forms. It would certainly be inappropriate to attempt to cover such a detailed process with someone with learning difficulties or mental health problems. Indeed it might be entirely inappropriate to ask some of the questions which require to be asked such as assistance with toilet needs, incontinence or assistance with putting on under garments.

The Social Security Agency itself has recently published two Reports which demonstrate clearly the preferences claimants have in relation to assistance with benefit forms. Also the Public Accounts Committee has made recommendations on this issue:

(i) Periodic Review Process Evaluation Report (January 2001)

This process involved contacting 1,200 randomly selected customers, who had decisions on the award of DLA given between April 1992 and March 1994. Customers who were selected for the process were required to complete an enquiry form, detailing their current care and mobility needs. The enquiry form was completed either by the client themselves or at a home visit by Agency staff.

The Evaluation Report states:

“Half of those customers selected for the periodic enquiry process received a home visit ... Although no savings were achieved from the programme of visits, results from the customer survey indicated that a number of customers preferred this method of contact. In view of this it has been decided that home visits will continue to play a role in subsequent phases of the programme albeit on a smaller scale and more responsive to the needs of the customer e.g. priority given to visually impaired customers etc.”

(ii) New Claims Trial Evaluation Report (January 2001)

This document presented the evaluation findings for the New Claims Trial. This initiative involved Social Security Agency staff offering to visit customers to help them complete the Disability Living Allowance (DLA) claim form.

320 randomly selected applicants for Disability Living Allowance (DLA) were given the option of having a home visit to help with the completion of the claim form. Of the 320 selected, 148 made claims to DLA with 27 requesting help from Agency staff to assist with the completion of the claim form. Out of a further 21, who contacted the Benefit Enquiry Line looking for assistance, 19 accepted a home visit to assist with the completion of their claim form.

The Evaluation Report states:

“7.2 Main points arising from the customer survey

Customers opinion on the choice of a visit.

All the customers considered that

- *the visit was more beneficial than having to complete the form themselves and they preferred to be visited in their own home rather than completing the form themselves or over the phone.*

(iii) Public Accounts Committee Recommendation

That the Social Security Agency will “*set in place a rolling programme of visits to customers over a number of years*”.

In summary, AIAC has a number of concerns regarding any move towards the completion of forms over the telephone. We do not feel that it is appropriate for many claimants to be required to complete applications or give information over the telephone. This is borne out by the Social Security Agency’s own Reports and therefore there should be clear choices laid before claimants: with the option of simply forwarding the forms to the claimant, arranging a home visit or going ahead with a telephone interview.

If the Agency is going to pursue the idea of call centres and conducting telephone interviews there should be adequate training of staff involved in this service. Training should include dealing with clients over the telephone, cross benefit training with the staff being able to advise across all benefits. This is particularly important with regards to Disability Living Allowance and Attendance Allowance as the award of these benefits can have a significant positive impact on other benefits such as Income Support.

AIAC offer on the job National Vocational Qualification training and we would ask the Agency to seriously consider adopting this or similar training for all relevant staff.

It remains to be seen whether or not the call centre idea will work if applied to Social Security Agency benefits. It may be appropriate to use this method of service, for example with car insurance, where the caller is simply asked factual information about their address and car etc. However, the kind of information being asked for within the context of Disability Living Allowance and Attendance Allowance is completely different. Most people are reluctant to speak about the full extent of their health problems, especially where this concerns personal bodily functions, even in a face to face interview. An interview conducted over the telephone might be more likely to miss out on key information, particularly as the person does not have sight of the caller and cannot actually see the extent of the disability.

Other issues such as the cost of these telephone calls, the issue of keeping someone on the telephone for an unacceptable length of time and the issue of adding additional information at a later stage all require examination.

Completion of forms over the telephone may reduce turnaround times and increase efficiency within the Agency, but will this be at the expense of quality decision-making and result in more eligible claimants being disallowed entitlement to benefit? Clearly this may result in eligible claimants not pursuing their claims, and more appeals which in the long run will reduce any savings made and delays as claimants await their appeals.

2. Transfer of information into electronic form

The private sector involvement will see the widespread introduction of electronic data manipulation. As noted above there will be provision for the completion of forms over the telephone, but in addition:

- Where claimants complete their forms manually, these forms will be scanned into electronic form;
- Where additional medical information is sought for example from a doctor, this will be electronically scanned into the claimant's file;
- Decisions made by Agency staff will be recorded electronically in the claimant's file;

Generally more business will be done through electronic means.

AIAC would urge that this process be properly thought through. We are all aware that no matter how robust a computer system is, there is always the possibility that something can go wrong. There should be safeguards in place to ensure that should the computer system 'crash', then claimants will not be disadvantaged in any way. We are aware that at present paperwork and forms can go missing but if the Agency move towards doing most of its business in electronic form, there will be less tangible hard evidence available and therefore it may be difficult for a claimant to prove that a claim was made or a letter was sent.

The IT partner in this initiative Electronic Data Systems (EDS) are already involved in modernising service delivery within the Benefits Agency, the Employment Service, the Inland Revenue and the Passport Office. In some cases, serious flaws have come to light in terms of the robustness of their systems and assurances would have to be sought on the systems being developed for the Social Security Agency.

Greater use of data in electronic form brings with it other concerns. There are Data Protection issues around who can have access to this information. Will all Agency staff throughout the Agency network have access to very personal details held on individual claimants? Will life insurance companies for example be able to tap into the system and carry out a health check on a potential client? Will the system be able to scan hand-written information accurately? Will the system have direct access to a claimant's medical records held in a surgery or in hospital? What right of access will a claimant/their adviser have to this information?

We need to know that there are robust monitoring and evaluation systems in place to ensure that this modernisation process runs smoothly and any problems can be identified and solved as quickly as possible. There may be merit in an independent monitoring body (with representatives from various sectors including the advice sector) being set up to advise on the impact of the process.

These are all major issues which need to be addressed.

3. Ensuring that the needs of claimants are central to the process

It is understandable that the Social Security Agency should seek to make greater use of technological developments in order to improve their service and make their service more efficient. However the needs of claimants should be central to this process. They should be given the choice as to how they want to proceed with their claim. Even though the Agency may prefer claimants to fill in forms over the telephone, their own Reports have highlighted that claimants do not like this method of service.

The Social Security Agency's own Customer Charter states 'if you are not able to call in to one of our offices, phone us and we may be able to arrange to visit you at your home'. It is also policy that if a customer calls into a local Social Security Office they will be given assistance with the completion of all benefit claim forms.

Where claimants do wish to have their forms completed over the telephone the Agency should ensure that their staff are adequately trained to conduct these types of interview over the telephone, that they have a broad knowledge across all benefits, that staff are polite and courteous, sensitive to the needs of callers, are clear when asking questions and read the claim form back to them at the end of the interview. Claimants should be able to stop the process at any time if they are uncomfortable with the interview over the telephone.

The issue where the award of DLA/AA/ICA would lead to Income Support becoming payable will have to be addressed. The SSA adviser will have to carry out a 'better off' calculation and assist the client to make a claim to Income Support in order to protect backdating rights.

It is envisaged that these forms, completed over the telephone, will be forwarded to the client to sign. AIAC believe that the entire form must be sent to the client, not just those pages completed during the telephone conversation. On reading through the entire form, the client may recognise other information which would need to be provided in order that the correct decision can be made on the application.

4. Publicity in relation to this modernisation process

The Agency as a public body should be accountable ultimately to the public. Every single person in the community is affected by the Social Security Agency at one time or another, for example through Child Benefit or Retirement Pension.

This modernisation process is one of the most significant developments in relation to benefits delivery since the formation of the Welfare State in 1948. It is therefore essential that everyone is aware of the scale of this modernisation process, and this includes public representatives, advice workers and particularly Agency staff at all levels.

AIAC would therefore like more information on how the Social Security Agency will publicise these developments.

Contact information on this briefing:

**Bob Stronge (Director)
Kevin Higgins (Membership Support Worker)
Association of Independent Advice Centres
303 Ormeau Road
Belfast
BT7 3GG
Tel: 028 9064 5919
Fax: 028 9049 2313
Email: bob@aiac.net
kevin@aiac.net
Website: www.aiac.net**

AIAC Mission Statement

AIAC is a voluntary organisation for the independent advice sector in Northern Ireland, representing and giving voice to it's members aspirations to deliver effective and holistic, community or issue-based advice through the provision of services, support and development opportunities.

Values

As a membership organisation, our values are embedded in promoting the application of creative community development approaches to advice giving, which place people and communities at the centre of the process and involves them in finding solutions and making informed choices.

AIAC believes in

Quality advice which is delivered free.

Advice services which are impartial and non-judgemental and respect the individuals dignity.

Advice which is wholly confidential, and accountable to the public.

Independent advice, which is free from statutory or private control and is both non-party political and non-sectarian in nature.

Advice services which are aimed specifically towards overcoming social exclusion.

Offering people choice through the provision of flexible, accessible advice services.

Social Policy Briefing

END