



Osfc

OFFICE OF THE SOCIAL FUND
COMMISSIONER
FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

ANNUAL REPORT

2012-2013





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COMMISSIONER
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You can download this publication from www.osfci.org.uk

ISBN: 9780337099052

Printed in the UK for The Stationery Office Limited
on behalf of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office

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Foreword



Dear Minister,

I am pleased to present my fourth Annual Report to you since my appointment as the Social Fund Commissioner for Northern Ireland. I report on the achievements of my staff during the year ending March 2013.

The calls on our service to provide an independent review have again increased during the past year. We have continued to resolve cases quickly and effectively within challenging timescales; maintained high quality standards in our decisions; and as our customer survey demonstrates we have retained high levels of satisfaction on the part of customers and those acting for them. Whilst our primary responsibility is to ensure that we deliver a high quality service to a poor and vulnerable section of the community we are conscious of our accountability to the taxpayer in terms of securing value for money. I am pleased to report that our unit cost per decision during this past year was £158, a reduction from £174 during the previous year, which we achieved without any decline in the quality of our decision making or service to the public.

The Welfare Reform Bill which was introduced to the Northern Ireland Assembly and is undergoing consideration will abolish the discretionary Social Fund and my office thus bringing an end to the independent review process. However this also provides an opportunity to have a Northern Ireland approach in this policy area for the first time and I was pleased to note the consultations which have taken place in relation to the proposed scheme. I believe that the experience and insights gained from our casework, which span more than two decades, represent a valuable legacy from which key principles can be drawn to underpin any successor arrangements. An effective, independent grievance mechanism should be a necessary component and it is pleasing to see that this has been recognised. The transition to new provision in Northern Ireland needs to occur in as seamless a way as possible, because the types of need for our poorest and most vulnerable citizens which is currently met by the discretionary Social Fund will not disappear.

I would like to express my appreciation to all staff in the office. Our achievements throughout the year represent a highly commendable performance by them, during what has been a continuing period of uncertainty. Throughout my time as Social Fund Commissioner, I have been encouraged by their constructive approach, positive attitude and hard work, in meeting challenges as they emerge. I am confident that we will continue to meet our commitments to customers and to taxpayers for our remaining time in operation.

Yours sincerely

Karamjit Singh CBE
Social Fund Commissioner for Northern Ireland

Executive Summary

Work Activity 2012/13

- Social Fund Inspectors (“Inspectors” or “SFIs”) delivered 2,367 decisions.
- Overall Inspectors changed 33.3% of the decisions made by Reviewing Officers in the Social Security Agency (“the Agency” or “SSA”).
- Inspectors changed 38.0% of Community Care Grant (“Grant” or “CCG”) decisions and made 414 awards resulting in a spend of £188,381.58 from the CCG budget.
- Inspectors changed 28.2% of Crisis Loan (“CL”) decisions and made 226 awards resulting in a spend of £40,380.65 from the loans budget.
- Inspectors changed 6.0% of Budgeting Loan (“BL”) decisions and made 3 awards resulting in a spend of £1,655 from the loans budget.
- The Office of the Social Fund Commissioner (“OSFC”) delivered 4 workshops to 48 people.
- OSFC provided feedback to the Agency about the findings in each case an Inspector reviewed.
- OSFC provided quarterly Statistics Reports on decision making in each of the Agency’s Social Fund district areas.
- I met with stakeholders with an interest in the Social Fund during the year.

In 2012/13, 33.3% of the decisions reviewed by Inspectors were substituted, resulting in:

- 414 Community Care Grant awards at an average of £455.03 per award;
- 226 Crisis Loan awards at an average of £178.68 per award; and
- 3 Budgeting Loan awards at an average of £555 per award.

The Standard of Social Fund Inspectors’ Decisions

- Case readers examined 87 cases (equivalent to 5.3% of the cases registered in 12/13). 92% of these cases were found to be correct.
- 76 requests for further reviews of Inspectors’ decisions were received. Of these, 33 cases were reopened and 23 were changed.

The Standard of Administration

- Inspectors cleared 100% of standard CCG cases within the 12 day target, 99.9% of standard CL cases within the 12 day target and 100% of standard BL cases within the 5 day target.
- 100% of complex cases were cleared within the 21 day target and 100% of express crisis loan cases within the 24 hour target.
- Standard and complex cases are defined in the OSFC Customer Targets for 2012/13 at Appendix 4.

In 2012/13, the average time taken by Inspectors to complete independent reviews was:

- less than 1 working day for an urgent crisis loan;
- 1.4 working days for a Budgeting Loan; and
- 7.1 working days for a Community Care Grant.

Resources

Excluding the Social Fund Commissioner's costs, OSFC spent £373,543 during the year giving a cost per decision of £157.81. The cost per decision figure does not only reflect the review and decision making process but also includes important training and social fund policy work undertaken by the Commissioner and OSFC staff.

About the OSFC

Our core business is to deliver independent reviews of discretionary Social Fund decisions made in the Agency. We also share information and expertise with those who have an interest in the discretionary Social Fund and the independent review. We participate in social policy research that contributes to wider debates about the Social Fund and related issues.

The Social Fund

The Social Fund was introduced in 1988 and comprises two distinct parts; one regulated and the other discretionary. The Social Fund Commissioner and Social Fund Inspectors are concerned solely with the discretionary part of the Social Fund. This is a scheme of payments, by grant or interest free loan.

The Social Fund Commissioner

The Social Fund Commissioner is appointed by the Department for Social Development ("the Department"). The Commissioner has a statutory duty to:

- appoint Social Fund Inspectors and other staff;
- monitor the quality of Inspectors' decisions and give advice, as he thinks fit, to improve the standard of their decisions;
- arrange appropriate training for Inspectors; and
- report annually, in writing, to the Department on the standard of Inspectors' reviews.

Grant payments are intended to help meet a need for community care. The prime objectives of grants are to:

- help people to establish themselves in the community;
- help people remain in the community;
- help with the care of a prisoner or young offender on release or temporary licence;
- ease exceptional pressures on families;
- help people setting up home as a part of a planned resettlement programme; and
- assist with certain travel costs.

Crisis Loans are interest free and are intended to help meet an immediate short term need either in an emergency or as the consequence of a disaster, whereby the provision of that help is the only means of avoiding serious damage or serious risk to health or safety.

Budgeting Loans are interest free and are intended to help meet certain intermittent expenses which can be difficult to budget for, e.g.:

- furniture and household equipment;
- clothing and footwear;
- rent in advance;
- travelling expenses;
- expenses associated with seeking or re-entering work.

Social Fund Inspectors

Inspectors can only review decisions that have already been reviewed internally within the Agency, providing that an appropriate application has been made. The Inspector has the authority to:

- confirm the decision under review;
- substitute the decision of the Reviewing Officer; or
- refer the case back to the Reviewing Officer to make a fresh decision.

Our organisational structure and functions are explained further in Appendix I.

Of the 225 cases examined in OSFC's August 2011 report "*Experiences of Social Fund Customers in Northern Ireland*":

- 43.6% of cases involved moving home.
- 20.9% involved somebody who presented themselves as 'homeless'.
- 4.9% involved a customer leaving prison.
- 5.8% applied for help to provide the facilities to get access to their children or to have their children back to live with them.

Customer Experience

Customer Survey

From 1 April 2012 to 31 August 2012 OSFC surveyed 134 applicants and received 33 responses (24.6%). As in previous years, half of the survey forms issued were sent to those who had received an extra award following the independent review, and half were sent to customers who received no additional award at that stage. The survey helps us to monitor the satisfaction levels with our service and to identify areas where we could make improvements. This year's survey indicated:

- 91% found it easy to apply for an independent review;
- 36% had a representative assisting them in their application;
- 88% indicated that their call to OSFC was answered promptly and efficiently;
- 86% found the questions asked by the Inspector easy to follow;
- 86% found the reasons for the Inspector's decision easy to follow;
- 83% felt the Inspector's review was independent; and
- 86% would use the OSFC again.

The 2012 Customer Survey indicated continuing high satisfaction rates with the service provided by OSFC.

Complaints

During 2012/13 OSFC received five complaints about our customer service. The Office Manager responded to each of the complaints within the OSFC customer service target (see Appendix 4), offering further explanations on decisions taken by Inspectors and if appropriate, arranging for further independent reviews to be carried out by a different Inspector. This does not include requests to have an Inspector's decision looked at again – statistics on such cases are shown on page 13.

Our Vision

To deliver independent reviews of discretionary Social Fund decisions providing a high quality and accessible service to all.

Our Values

- Be open and accessible to our customers.
- Treat all with respect and courtesy.
- Work for continuous improvement in our standards and the service we provide.
- Promote easy access to the Fund.
- Provide value for money.

Delivering the Review

Inspectors made 2,367 decisions during 2012/13. The overall number of decisions made by OSFC this year increased by 8.0%, compared to 2011/12. Chart 1 illustrates the demand for independent Social Fund reviews over the past 3 years, which shows a modest increase year on year.

Chart 1 – Decisions by Application Type

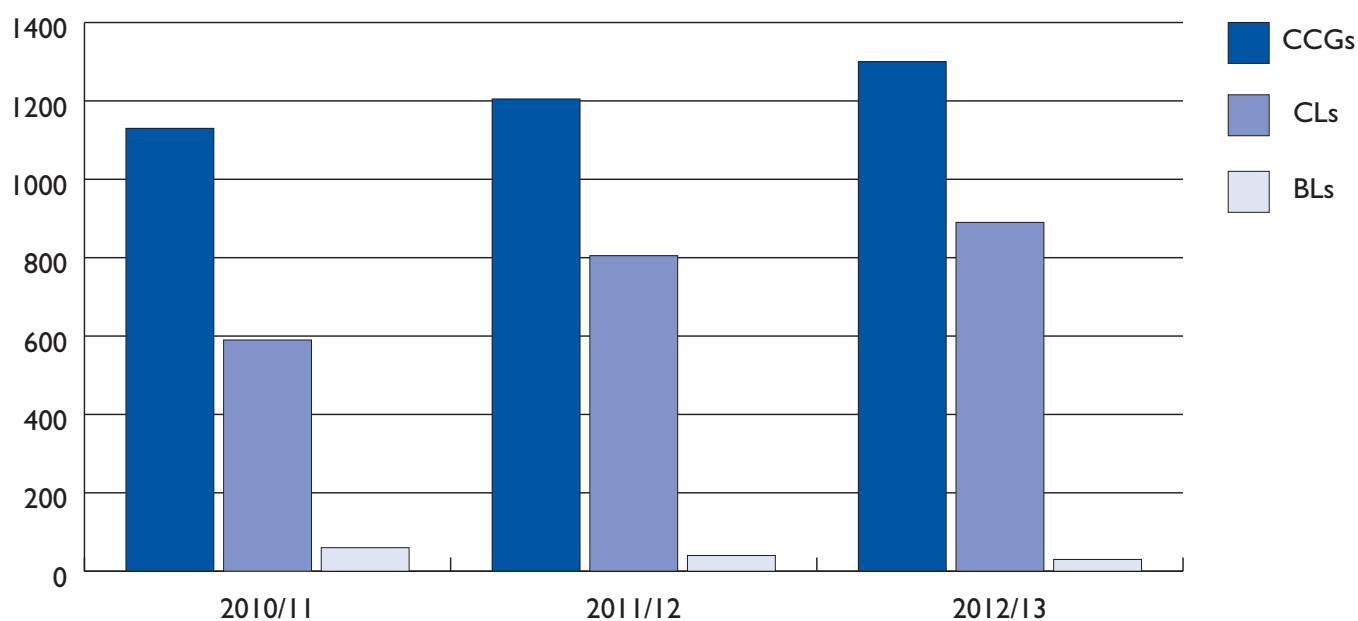
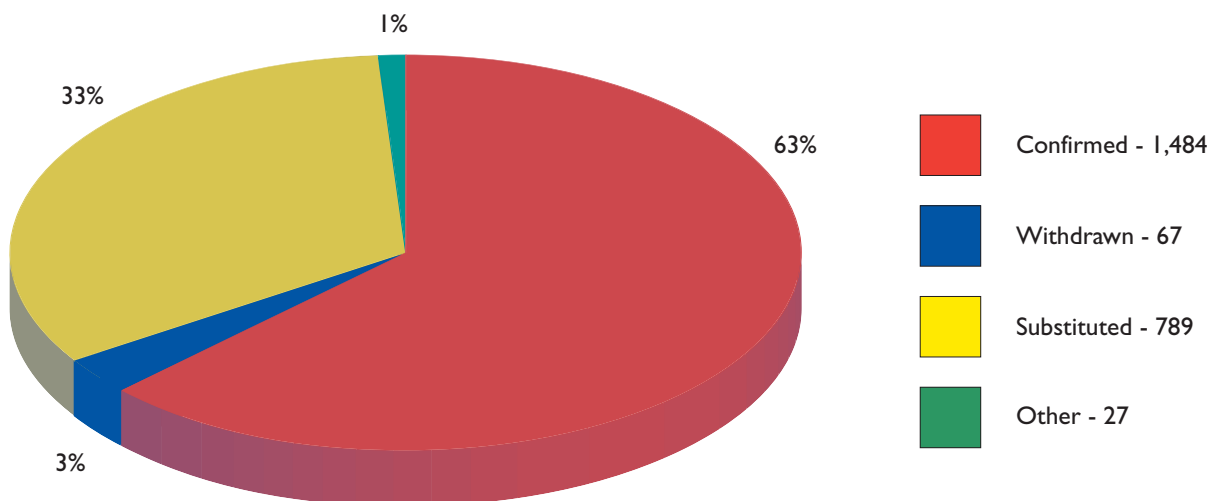


Table 1 shows the number of awards made by Inspectors this year and the average amount of awards.

Table 1 – Analysis of Awards 2012/13

Application Type	Total Scheme Expenditure	Number of awards by Inspectors	Total amount awarded by Inspectors	Average amount awarded by Inspectors
CCG	£13,451,903	414	£188,381.58	£455.03
CL	£14,514,851	226	£40,380.65	£178.68
BL	£52,325,905	3	£1,655.00	£555.00

Chart 2 shows the outcome of Inspectors' decisions across the three types of applications that make up the discretionary Social Fund.



Overall, Inspectors found important errors in 25.5% of the Agency decisions they reviewed. The error rate for substituted decisions was 50.8% and the error rate for confirmed decisions was 13.7%. Appendix 2 shows a breakdown of the spread of decisions by month, District area and type.

Community Care Grants

Community care grants again accounted for the largest proportion of our work (57.5%). Inspectors delivered 1,362 decisions of this type. Table 2 below shows the number of requests for review of grant decisions made by the Agency during 2012/13.

Table 2: Analysis of Community Care Grant activity 2012/13

1. Initial Applications to the Agency	44,950
2. Initial Refusals by the Agency	23,902
3. Applications for Reviewing Officer review	9,371
4. Applications unchanged on review	5,042
5. Applications changed on review but not wholly in the applicant's favour	3,929
6. Applications for independent review received in OSFC	1,373
7. Number of grant awards made by Inspectors	414
8. Average amount of grant award	£455.03

There were 1,373 applications for independent reviews of grant cases reviewed in the Agency which were received in OSFC. This represents only 15.3% of the 8,971 cases which could in theory have been independently reviewed, that is those which were either unchanged or not wholly changed in the applicant's favour by the Reviewing Officer.

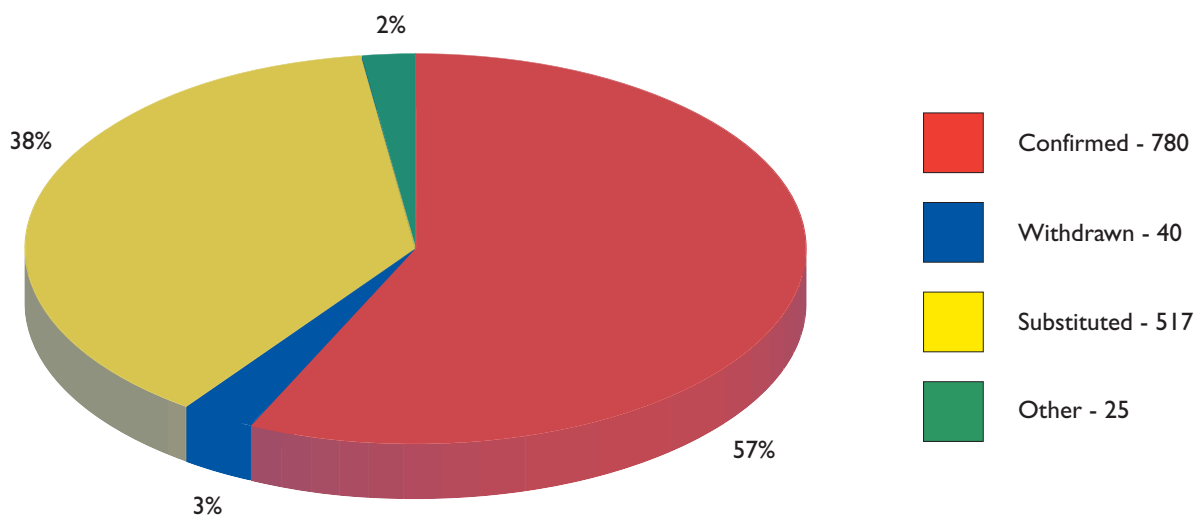
This emphasises the importance of making applicants aware of the role of the OSFC and also of making our service accessible. This is underlined by the fact that 38% of the Agency's grant decisions reviewed by Inspectors were substituted (Chart 3 below refers).

Of the 225 cases examined in OSFC's "Experiences of Social Fund Customers in Northern Ireland" report:

- 81.3% involved an application for multiple household items.
- 31.1% involved a customer requesting items sufficient to set up home from scratch (bed, seating, cooker).
- 28.0% included an application for clothing.

Decision Outcomes

Chart 3 shows the outcomes of Inspectors' reviews on CCG decisions.



Crisis Loans

Crisis loans accounted for 40.3% of our workload this year. Table 3 below shows the number of requests for review of Crisis Loan decisions made by the Agency during 2012/13.

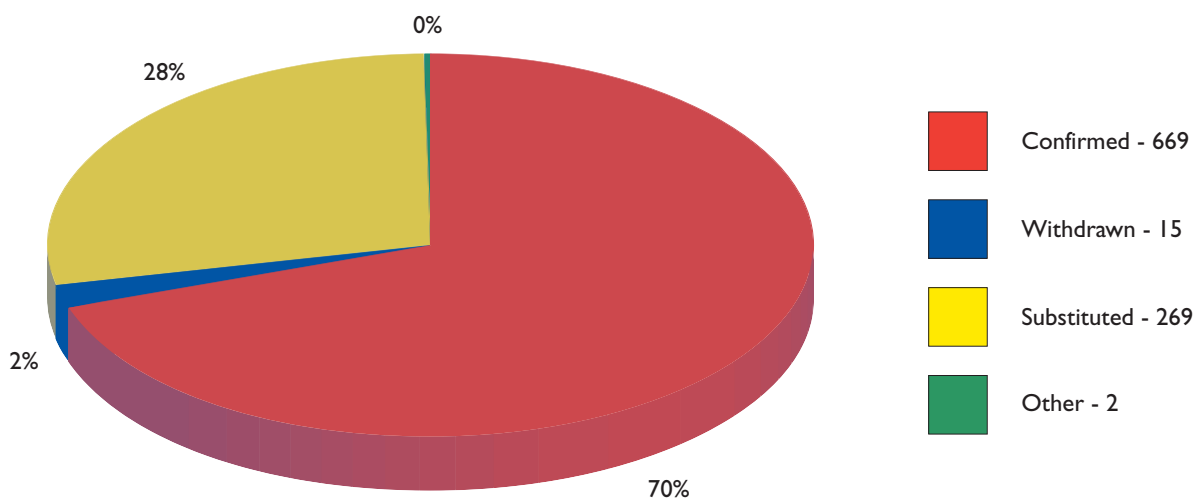
Table 3: Analysis of Crisis Loan activity 2012/13

1. Initial Applications to the Agency	140,336
2. Initial Refusals by the Agency	31,542
3. Applications for Reviewing Officer review	3,389
4. Applications unchanged on review	2,267
5. Applications changed on review but not wholly in the applicant's favour	716
6. Applications for independent review received in OSFC	219
7. Number of crisis loan awards made by Inspectors	226
8. Average amount of crisis loan award	£178.68

There were 219 applications for independent reviews of Crisis Loan cases reviewed in the Agency were received in OSFC. This represents 7.3% of the 2,983 cases which in theory could have been considered further at the independent review stage, that is those which were either unchanged or not wholly changed in the applicant's favour by the Reviewing Officer.

Decision Outcomes

Chart 4 shows the outcome of Inspectors' crisis loan decisions.



Budgeting Loans

Reviews

Budgeting loans accounted for 2.1% of our workload this year. Inspectors delivered 50 decisions of this type. Table 4 below shows the number of requests for review of Budgeting Loan decisions made by the Agency during 2012/13.

Table 4: Analysis of Budgeting Loan activity 2012/13

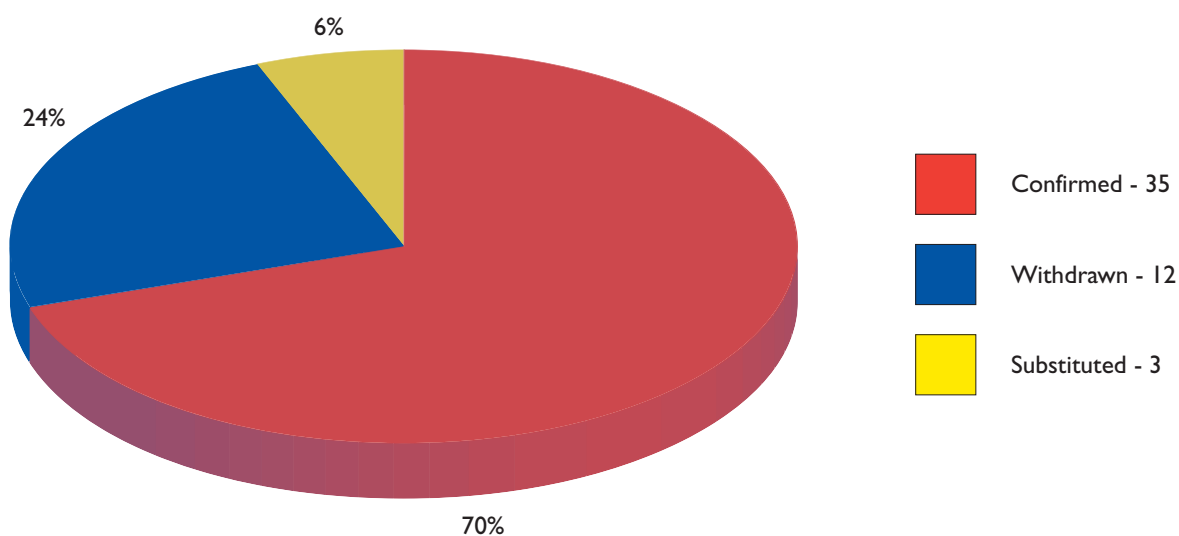
1. Initial Applications to the Agency	162,413
2. Initial Refusals by the Agency	32,948
3. Applications for Reviewing Officer review	2,157
4. Applications unchanged on review	1,087
5. Applications changed on review but not wholly in the applicant's favour	790
6. Applications for independent review received in OSFC	50
7. Number of budgeting loan awards made by Inspectors	3
8. Average amount of budgeting loan award	£555.00

There were 50 applications for independent reviews by the OSFC of Budgeting Loan cases that had previously been reviewed in the Agency. This represents only 2.7% of the 1,877 cases in theory which could have been independently reviewed, that is those which were either unchanged or not wholly changed in the applicant's favour by the Reviewing Officer.

Of the 225 cases examined in OSFC's "Experiences of Social Fund Customers in Northern Ireland" report 49.3% had a Social Fund debt of more than £1000.

Decision Outcomes

Chart 5 shows the outcome of Inspectors' Budgeting Loan decisions.



Standard of Administration and Social Fund Inspectors' Decisions

The Commissioner has a statutory duty to monitor the quality of Inspectors' decisions and to give them advice and assistance to improve the standard of their reviews.

Article 37(5) of the Social Security (Northern Ireland) Order 1998.

Case Reading

Case reading is the primary means by which I assess the standards of Inspectors' decisions and using a template to ensure consistency, my findings are fed back to individual Inspectors by the Office Manager.

Although there is provision to seek judicial review through the High Court, in practice the Inspector's review provides the final resolution for applicants to the Social Fund. It is vital, therefore, that Inspectors deliver high standards and our monitoring processes are robust. The overall quality standards required are set out in detail in Appendix 5.

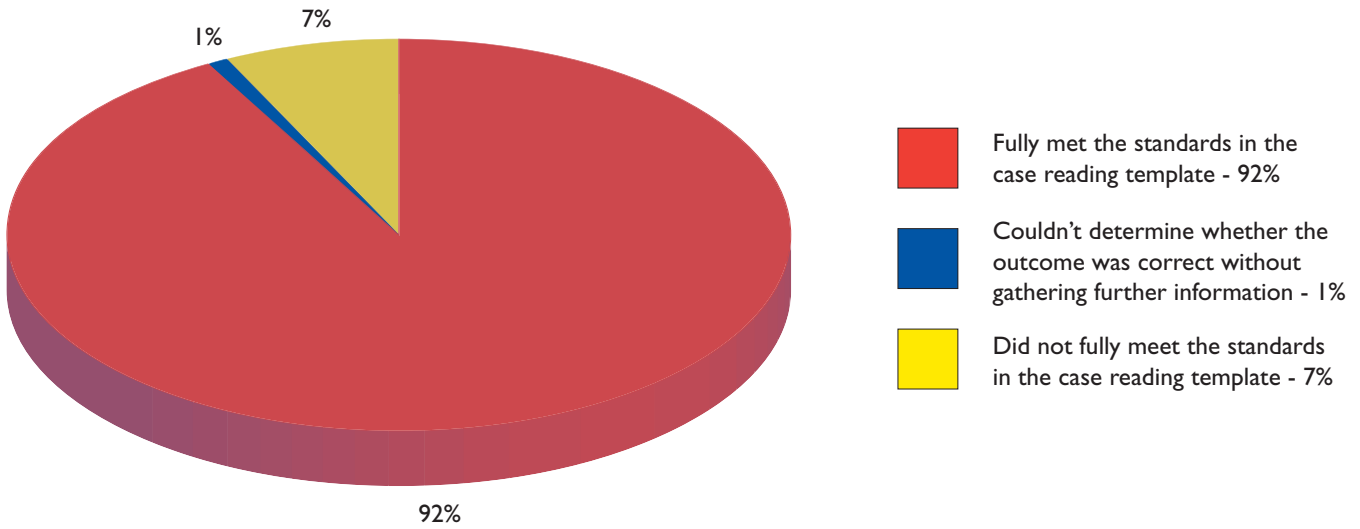
In addition to Social Fund law, Inspectors' decisions must comply with general legal principles, such as burdens and standards of proof, and natural justice. The people who use our service have a right to know the reasons for the Inspector's decision and in order to ensure this, they must be presented in plain language. Our case readers, therefore, also assess the clarity of explanation in order to ensure it respects the applicant's level of understanding and avoids jargon.

Our aim for 2012/13 was to read 5% of our total workload, selected at random. Our total case reading for the year was 87 cases (5.3% of cases registered in 2012/13). Chart 6 shows the results. 92% of cases were correct, in 1% the case reader could not tell from the papers whether the outcome was right or wrong and 7% were found to be incorrect.

Of the 225 cases examined in OSFC's "*Experiences of Social Fund Customers in Northern Ireland*" report:

- 47.1% recorded evidence of mental and physical health problems.
- 10.2% involved an ongoing problem with alcohol and 4.4% had ongoing problems with drugs. 2.7% involved someone experiencing ongoing problems with both drugs and alcohol.

Chart 6 - Case Reading Results



Reviews of Inspectors' Decisions

When a request for a review of an Inspector's decision is received it is examined thoroughly before being passed to a different Inspector for reconsideration.

During 2012/13 we received 70 requests for reviews of Inspector's decisions from customers or their representatives. As in previous years, most requests were about the amount of, or refusal of, an award. In the majority of these cases we considered that the Inspector's decision was legally sound. A further 6 cases were identified through our own internal case reading.

"A social fund inspector may review a determination under paragraph (3) made by himself or some other social fund inspector". Article 38(5) of the Social Security (Northern Ireland) Order 1998.

Table 5 – Requests for Reviews of Inspectors' decisions 2012/13

Source	Number received	Number reopened	Number changed
Customer	66	28	16
Representative	4	2	2
Internal Checks	6	3	5
Total	76	33	23

In 2012/13 Inspectors aimed to clear reviews of Inspectors' decisions within 12 working days, and within 21 days in more complex cases. Of these 76 cases, 70 (92.1%) were cleared in 12 days and 6 (7.9%) in 13 to 21 days. No cases exceeded the 21 day target.

Completion Times

We recognise the importance of completing reviews as quickly as possible since the people who use our service generally have urgent needs and already have two decisions on their application made by the Agency. Nevertheless the Inspector has a duty to ensure natural justice is served. In order to do this, before he makes a decision he normally telephones the applicant or sends out a copy of the key papers, sets out the facts and issues to be decided, invites the applicant to comment on these, and asks any relevant questions.

We issued letters and made telephone inquiries seeking further information in 1,215 cases before proceeding with a decision, to which there were 1,095 responses (90.1%). This part of the process is included in the overall clearance times.

65.8% of these customers responded using our Freephone service. This reduces the time taken to reach a decision and enables the customer (or their representative) to provide greater detail when responding to the Inspector's questions.

Of the 225 cases examined in OSFC's *"Experiences of Social Fund Customers in Northern Ireland"* report:

- 51.1% involved requests for replacement items, where the customer was already living in the property but wanted help to replace items due to wear, tear or other damage.
- 18.2% of cases involved customers who had applied for the same item within the previous 12 months.

Table 6 illustrates the number of decisions of each type and the proportion of our workload this represents, together with our time targets and achievements for each decision type. Appendix 3 shows the breakdown of our decision completion times by month.

Table 6 – Inspectors’ Decisions –% of decision types and targets

Decision type/Timescale	No. of decisions	% of decision workload	Target%	Achieved%
Community Care Grants: No enquiries/ straightforward enquiries (to be completed within 12 days of receipt)	1,246	52.6%	95%	100%
Community Care Grants: Further investigation /complex enquiries (to be completed within 21 days of receipt)	116	4.9%	100%	100%
Budgeting Loans: No enquiries/ straightforward enquiries (to be completed within 5 days of receipt)	49	2.1%	95%	100%
Budgeting Loans: Further investigation /complex enquiries (to be completed within 21 days of receipt)	1	0.0%	100%	100%
Crisis Loans for items (to be completed within 12 days of receipt, or within 21 days requiring further investigation /complex enquiries)	784	33.1%	95%	99.9%
Crisis Loans incorporating a request for living expenses (to be completed within 24 hours)	171	7.2%	95%	100%

The Agency have a target for providing case papers within 4 working days of a request from OSFC and their performance over the last 3 years is set out in Table 7 below.

Table 7 – Provision of CCG and BL case papers

District Area	% of CCG and BL case papers received within 4 working days		
	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
South	95%	96%	99%
Belfast West and Lisburn	93%	96%	96%
West	92%	88%	93%
North	78%	90%	92%
East Down	75%	85%	80%
Belfast North and East Antrim	79%	69%	67%
Total	87%	87%	88%

Building Relationships

Feeding Back on Standards and Policy

The OSFC works with the Department of Social Development in order to improve the standard of first line decision making, by providing feedback on each case we review. We also provide regular feedback via quarterly statistics reports which give detailed information for each of the Social Security Agency's Social Fund district areas and Northern Ireland as a whole about performance and operational issues drawn from all the cases that Inspectors reviewed.

During 2012/13 the most common problems identified in these reports included:

- failing to ask crucial questions where more information was needed; and
- failing to apply the correct priority to an item in an application, or irrelevant factors were taken into account, or relevant factors were not taken into account in arriving at the decision.

Improving Knowledge

One of our key objectives is to use our expertise and experience in order to provide advice to applicants, their representatives and advisers, and the Agency's staff about the Social Fund and the role of OSFC. We did this by delivering training and information about the Social Fund to various audiences.

"The presenting staff were very approachable and knowledgeable. It was very informative and relevant to our advice work." **Stepping Stone Project attendee**

"Everything very useful – good examples provided."
Stepping Stone Project attendee

"Excellent workshop, glad I came!" **LITE Project attendee**

"As a new worker with service users applying for social fund this was an excellent workshop to attend." **LITE Project attendee**

"That it was informal and we were able to ask questions throughout." **LITE Project attendee**

Examples of leaflets and information packs include:

- "The Social Fund – A Basic Overview"
- "Evidence in the Social Fund Context"
- "The Social Fund for JBO/SSO staff"

The OSFC has undertaken various activities to help improve the standards of decision making, improve the knowledge of advisers and raise awareness amongst those at whom the Social Fund is aimed. During 2012/13, we:

- made a range of OSFC and IRS publications available via our website;
- held a Best Practice Forum with Agency staff to discuss case issues and disseminate any learning points on cases to Social Fund staff in the Agency; and
- delivered 4 external focus training workshops to 48 people from 4 stakeholder organisations. Feedback questionnaires were completed at each workshop and a breakdown of responses is shown in Table 8 below.

Table 8 – Overview Workshop Evaluation Responses

How useful did you find the workshop as a whole in providing you with an understanding of the discretionary Social Fund?	Not Very Useful	Quite Useful	Useful	Very Useful
	0	2	3	32

What did you think of:	Poor	ok	Good	V Good	Excellent
Presentation	0	0	3	9	25
Slides	0	0	3	10	24
Written materials/handouts	0	0	4	5	28
Case Study examples/Discussion	0	1	4	11	21

	Too short	Just Right	Too Long
Length of workshop	1	33	3

The organisations which received OSFC training in 2012/13 were:

- Dove House, Londonderry;
- Stepping Stone Project;
- LITE Project, Dungannon; and
- South Belfast Resource Centre.

“Excellent delivery.” Dove House attendee

“There should be more workshops like this!” Dove House attendee

“Very comprehensive.” South Belfast Resource Centre attendee

“Enjoyable, friendly, informative”. South Belfast Resource Centre attendee

Investing in Staff and Training

Advice to Inspectors

Social Fund Commissioner's Advice and Support Notes are made available to assist Inspector's with the interpretation and application of the law. These documents are reviewed and updated in response to changes made to the Social Fund scheme or to address issues which arise in casework. All the Commissioner's advice to Inspectors is accessible via the OSFC website.

Training

In addition, OSFC staff also attended various training courses to assist them with their other roles in the office.

We continued with the provision of awareness sessions from outside organisations as an aspect of improving the knowledge of Inspectors. These are designed to provide an awareness of the wider issues facing some applicants to the Social Fund. In 2012/13 staff received a talk from a representative of the Belfast Health and Social Services trust on social work.

OSFC had a total of 9 staff in post on 31 March 2012, in addition to the Social Fund Commissioner. In line with the OSFC commitment to deliver high standards to applicants £2,050 (0.5%) of OSFC's spend in 2012/13 was on the training and development of staff. This includes the direct costs of providing the training (excluding training provided centrally through HR Connect) and the cost of staff time. Approximately 11 mandays were spent on training and development activities.

The training included the following: Managing Customer Expectations course; First Aid refresher course; Fire safety awareness and a presentation from a Social Worker.

Investor in People

OSFC has been recognised as an Investor in People since November 1998. On 29th November 2010 we achieved IiP re-accreditation for a further 3 years. We continued to develop staff through regular and relevant training, which was provided both internally and externally.

Resources

Table 9 – OSFC Expenditure in 2012/2013

Business Operating Costs	£58,690.27
Salaries	£314,852.72
Total ²	£373,542.99
Cost per decision	£157.81

²The total excludes a separate budget of £30,000 for the Social Fund Commissioner's travel, subsistence costs and remuneration. During the year covered by this Annual Report the sum of c. £29,000 was paid to the Department for Work and Pensions in respect of the Commissioner's 4 days per month spent on Northern Ireland Social Fund issues. This sum covers remuneration and employer related costs.

Inspectors completed 2,367 decisions, giving a unit cost of £157.81 per decision. The cost per decision figure also includes other non-review or decision making activity carried out by OSFC staff, such as the provision of training workshops, providing information relevant to the reform of the discretionary Social Fund in Northern Ireland and attending various meetings with the Social Fund Commissioner.

Sick Absence

The sick absence rate in OSFC during the 12 month period 2012/13 was c. 2.5%.

Risk Assessment

OSFC continues its commitment to improving its risk management. Central to this commitment is a detailed Risk Register and Business Continuity Plan. These are reviewed regularly and discussed at team meetings. Quarterly reports and stewardship statements are made to DSD's Departmental Management Board. A series of internal controls are also in place.

Security

OSFC took steps to minimize the amount of sensitive customer information it holds by safely disposing of sensitive data which was no longer required for business purposes, in line with our Document Retention and Destruction Schedule. We continue to seek improvements to our Certificate of Assurance processes to help ensure we keep retained customer and staff information secure.

Section 75 Statutory Equality Duty

The OSFC's Equality Scheme was drawn up in accordance with Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 which deals with the promotion of equality of opportunity and good relations. The Scheme can be viewed on the OSFC website.

Disability Action Plan

Correspondence from OSFC includes a Minicom number for the hard of hearing and leaflets can be provided in different formats such as Braille.

I am also committed to complying with the duties imposed by the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. In accordance with this the OSFC has in place a Disability Action Plan.

We provide some information in other languages, including:

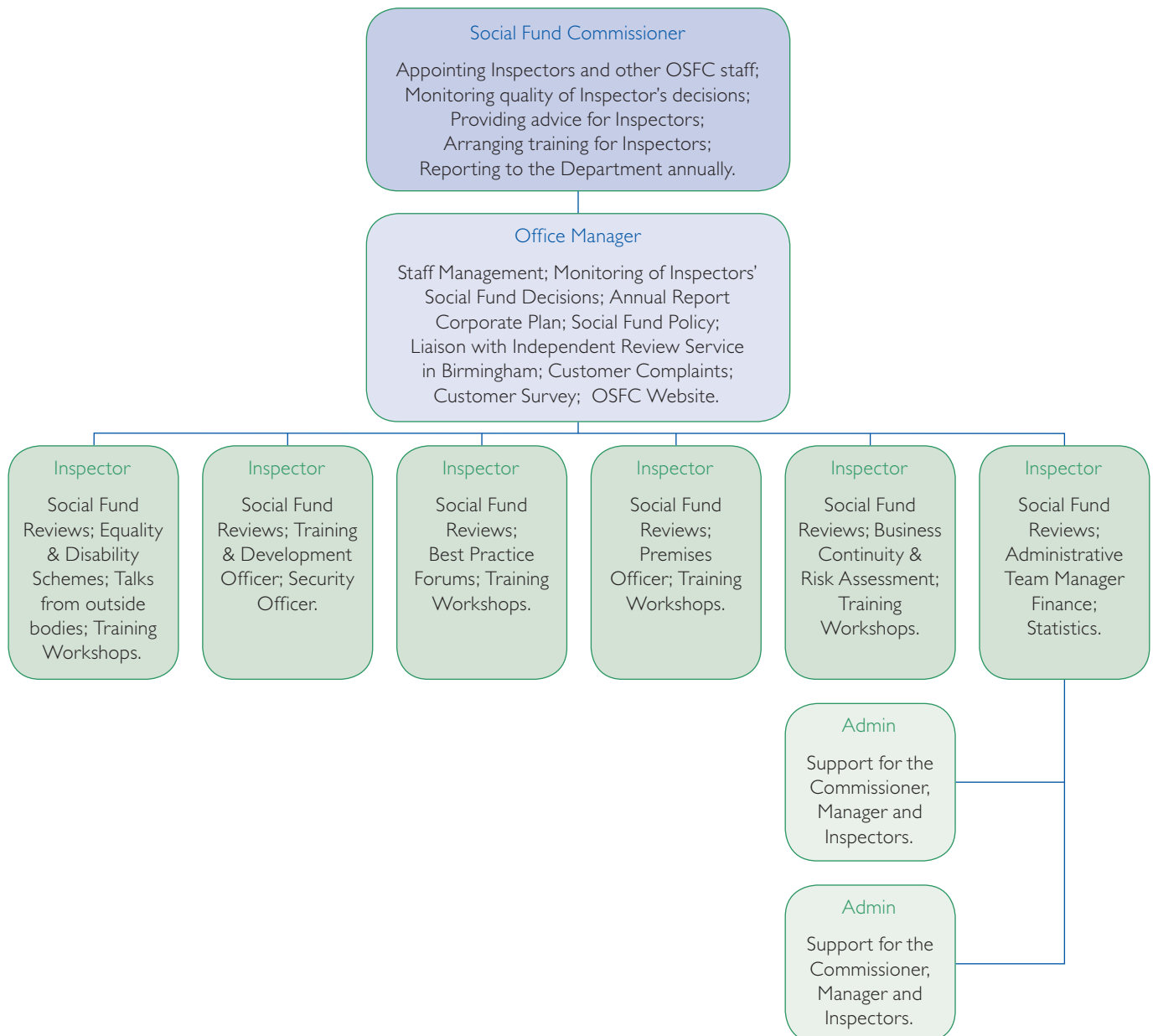
- Arabic
- Chinese
- Latvian
- Lithuanian
- Polish
- Spanish
- Portuguese

Appendix I - Organisational Structure

There are two distinct strands to our work.

- The first relates to delivery of the independent review.
- The second draws on OSFC expertise and data to:
 - feed back to the Agency on operational and policy matters;
 - to provide training and advice to those actively involved in the Social Fund; and
 - to provide general information to the public.

Our organisational structure is designed around these strands and the following organisational chart demonstrates some of the work that we do.



Appendix 2(a) – OSFC Decisions by Month

Month	Community Care Grants	Crisis Loans	Budgeting Loans	Total Workload
April	89	66	6	161
May	94	74	7	175
June	118	87	3	208
July	136	87	1	224
August	116	76	7	199
September	111	84	2	197
October	149	109	4	262
November	131	90	3	224
December	106	74	5	185
January	111	76	3	190
February	103	73	5	181
March	98	59	4	161
Total	1,362	955	50	2,367

Appendix 2(b) – OSFC Decisions by District Area

District Area	Community Care Grants	Crisis Loans	Budgeting Loans	Total Workload
Belfast North and East Antrim	216	152	4	372
Belfast West and Lisburn	201	214	12	427
East Down	240	179	9	428
North	181	95	16	292
South	280	182	4	466
West	244	133	5	382
Total	1,362	955	50	2,367

¹ Workload comprises decisions on applications for an Inspector's review; applications for community care grants also considered for crisis loans and vice versa; but excludes reviews of Inspectors' decisions under Article 38(5) of the Social Security (NI) Order 1998 and withdrawn cases.

Appendix 2(c) – OSFC Spread of Decision Types by District Area

District Area	Community Care Grants - %			Crisis Loans - %			Budgeting Loans - %		
	Conf-irmed	Subst-ituted	Other ²	Conf-irmed	Subst-ituted	Other ²	Conf-irmed	Subst-ituted	Other ²
Belfast North and East Antrim	54.6%	39.4%	6.0%	66.4%	31.6%	2.0%	75.0%	0.0%	25.0%
Belfast West and Lisburn	53.7%	40.8%	5.5%	65.0%	31.3%	3.7%	83.3%	8.3%	8.3%
East Down	53.8%	40.8%	5.4%	74.9%	24.0%	1.1%	66.7%	11.1%	22.2%
North	63.5%	32.6%	3.9%	80.0%	20.0%	0.0%	68.8%	6.3%	25.0%
South	65.4%	31.8%	2.9%	70.9%	28.6%	0.5%	50.0%	0.0%	50.0%
West	52.0%	42.6%	5.3%	67.7%	30.1%	2.3%	60.0%	0.0%	40.0%
Total	57.3%	38.0%	4.8%	70.1%	28.2%	1.8%	70.0%	6.0%	24.0%

² Other includes review applications that were not made in the correct time, form or manner; withdrawn review requests; applications which were outside the jurisdiction of OSFC; and cases which were referred back to the Social Security Agency for further action.

Appendix 3 – OSFC Decision Completion Times by Month

Month	Community Care Grants		Crisis Loans		Budgeting Loans	
	% completed within		% completed within		% completed within	
	12 days ²⁰	21 days ²¹	24 Hours ²² Living expenses	12 days ²⁰ Items	5 days ²⁰	21 days ²¹
April	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
May	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
June	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
July	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
August	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
September	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
October	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
November	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
December	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
January	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
February	100%	100%	100%	98.1%	100%	100%
March	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Average	100%	100%	100%	99.9%	100%	100%

²⁰ Of those cases, which required no enquiries or straightforward enquiries, we aimed to complete 95% in 12 days (or 5 days for BLs).

²¹ For those cases requiring further investigation or complex enquiries, we aimed to complete 100% within 21 days.

²² We aim to complete 95% of express cases within 24 hours.

Appendix 4 - OSFC Customer Targets 2012/13

We aim to deliver a high quality decision at the earliest opportunity. Our staff will deliver the following customer service standards:

Overall Customer Service Standards

Standard cases

We will make a decision on 95% of standard CCG and CL cases within 12 working days and standard BL cases within 5 working days. Standard cases are all applications to the OSFC, excluding express and complex cases. They form the majority of the work of OSFC.

Express cases

We will make a decision on 95% of express cases within 24 hours of receipt of the papers. Express cases are applications for living expenses or other needs where a very urgent decision is required.

Complex cases

We will make a decision on 100% of complex cases within 21 days. Complex cases are those that warrant extensive enquiry or investigation or where the nature of the case is exceptionally complex.

Administration

In order to deliver the overall standards the following internal targets will guide our work:

- Papers for direct applications will be requested on the day they are received.
- We will work towards obtaining 95% of direct application papers within 4 days.
- Applicants will be informed when their papers remain outstanding from the SSA for more than 10 days.
- Cases will be fully registered on the day they are received.
- Cases will be allocated and passed to the relevant Inspector by the morning of day 2.
- Written responses to papers or to requests for further information will be recorded and passed to a decision maker on the day they are received.

Decision Making

- Any necessary enquiries of the applicant, whether in writing by issuing a full statement or a letter, or by telephone, will be made within 3 working days of receipt of the papers.

- Where no further enquiries are necessary in order to reach a sound decision, it will be issued within 3 working days of receipt of the papers.
- No more than 10% of cases will fall into the Complex Case category.

Enquiries and complaints

- A full response or update as appropriate will be sent to the applicant within 12 working days of the receipt of an enquiry or complaint.
- Where a response has not been made by day 12, it should be sent on all cases within 21 working days.
- A response will be made on express cases within 24 hours. Express cases are applications for living expenses or other needs where a very urgent decision is required.

Telephone Service

A telephone service will be provided for customers, at a free phone call rate, between 9.00 am and 4.30 pm, Monday to Friday. An answering service will be available at all other times.

Appendix 5 - OSFC Quality Standards for the Review

We will deliver Inspectors' reviews that are independent, impartial, fair and legally sound. In each case we will work to increase the applicant's ability to understand and participate fully and effectively in their review.

To achieve this, the review will meet the following quality standards.

Before the decision is made the Inspector will:

- Examine thoroughly all the evidence presented to decide the key issues, establish the relevant facts and identify all necessary enquiries.
- Ask the right questions, in the right way, to enable all the relevant facts to be established.
- Deliver the information to the applicant in such a way that clarifies the key issues the Inspector has to decide, the facts he already knows about those issues and the information he still needs.

In making the decision the Inspector will:

- Take full account of the relevant information provided in the case and reflect that in the decision.
- Correctly interpret and apply the law, including the Department's directions.
- Ensure the rules of natural justice are met: that the applicant knows the case he must answer and has been given a fair opportunity to put his own case; and that there has been no bias.
- Reach an outcome that is reasonable and is right in all the circumstances of the case.
- Tailor each letter and decision to the case ensuring, in particular, that the applicant's level of understanding is respected.
- Explain the law clearly, in a way the applicant can understand, avoiding legal terminology wherever possible.
- Apply the relevant Commissioner's Advice to Inspectors.

In doing this we will deliver the review:

- Promptly and within published Customer Service Standards.

Appendix 6 - The Statutory Framework

The Social Fund

The Social Fund was introduced in 1988 and comprises two distinct parts; one regulated and the other discretionary. The Social Fund Commissioner and Social Fund Inspectors are concerned solely with the discretionary part of the Fund. This is a scheme of payments, by grant or interest free loan, to meet the needs, other than those covered by the regulated Fund, of the poorest and most vulnerable in society. The Commissioner and Inspectors have no involvement in the regulated part of the Fund, which allows for payments for funeral and maternity expenses, periods of cold weather and winter fuel.

The Social Security (Northern Ireland) Order 1998
The Social Security Contributions and Benefits (Northern Ireland) Act 1992
The Social Security Administration (Northern Ireland) Act 1992

The Social Fund Commissioner

The Social Fund Commissioner is appointed by the Department. The Commissioner has a duty to:

- appoint Social Fund Inspectors and other staff;
- monitor the quality of Inspectors' decisions and give advice, as he thinks fit, to improve the standard of their decisions;
- arrange appropriate training for Inspectors; and
- report annually, in writing, to the Department on the standard of Inspectors' reviews.

Article 37 of the Social Security (Northern Ireland) Order 1998

Social Fund Inspectors

Social Fund Inspectors provide the independent grievance process, by means of a review, for applicants who are dissatisfied with the Agency's decisions on their applications to the discretionary Social Fund.

Jurisdiction

Inspectors can only review decisions that have already been reviewed by the Agency, providing that an application for review has been made in the time, form and manner prescribed in regulations. Applications for an Inspector's review must be made directly to the OSFC within 28 days of the date of issue of the Agency's review decision.

The Social Fund (Application for Review) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1988

Nature of the Review

The review is conducted in two stages in accordance with directions issued by the Department. At the first stage, the Inspector considers whether the Reviewing Officer has:

- interpreted and applied the law correctly, which includes taking into account all relevant considerations and not taking account of irrelevant considerations;
- acted fairly and exercised his discretion reasonably; and
- observed the principles of natural justice.

If the decision has been reached correctly, applying the tests of the first stage of the review, the Inspector conducts a second stage which:

- considers the merits of the case;
- decides whether the decision was a right one in the circumstances; and
- takes account of relevant changes in circumstances and new evidence.

Depending on the outcome of the second stage, the Inspector exercises the appropriate power on review – see below.

Where the decision has not been reached correctly, applying the tests of the first stage, the second stage does not take place. Instead, the Inspector exercises the appropriate power on review.

Powers on Review

On review, the Inspector has the power to:

- confirm the Reviewing Officer's decision;
- refer the case back to the Reviewing Officer to make a fresh decision; or
- make any decision the Reviewing Officer could have made (these are referred to as substituted decisions).

Reviews of Inspectors' Decisions

The Inspector has a discretionary power to review his own or another Inspector's decision. Inspectors generally use this power to correct a decision that was wrong in law or fact, or where new relevant evidence has come to light. There is no statutory right to this type of review. This is a matter for the discretion of the Inspector, who must decide whether to conduct a review of the earlier decision. Where the Inspector conducts such a review, the outcome may or may not change. The only recourse from an Inspector's decision is to the High Court on judicial review.

Article 38(3), Social Security (Northern Ireland) Order 1998

The Department's Directions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 to Inspectors.

Article 38(4) of the Social Security (Northern Ireland) Order 1998.

Article 38(5) of the Social Security (Northern Ireland) Order 1998.



Published by Authority of the Northern Ireland Assembly,
Belfast: The Stationery Office

and available from:

Online

www.tsoshop.co.uk

Mail, Telephone, Fax & E-mail

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ISBN 978-0-337-09905-2



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