

2008 - 2011

# IRS Corporate Plan



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*irs*

Independent Review Service  
for the Social Fund

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## About the IRS

The IRS provides the independent grievance process, by means of a review, for applicants who are dissatisfied with the decision made at the Department for Work and Pensions on their applications to the discretionary part of the Social Fund.

The Social Fund has been in existence since 1988. This is a scheme of one-off payments of grants and loans intended to meet the needs of the poorest in society. As the IRS operates the grievance process for the Social Fund, we are well placed to monitor the effectiveness of the scheme.

The head of the IRS is the Social Fund Commissioner who is appointed by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. The Commissioner's duties include:

- Appointing Social Fund Inspectors, who conduct the reviews, and other staff;
- Monitoring the standards of Inspectors' decisions;
- Giving advice as he thinks fit to improve the standards of Inspectors' decisions;
- Arranging training as he thinks fit for Inspectors;
- Reporting annually in writing to the Secretary of State on the standards of Inspectors' decisions.

This Corporate Plan sets out the IRS strategic aims and objectives for the next three years.

## Foreword by the Social Fund Commissioner, Sir Richard Tilt

I am pleased to present the Corporate Plan of the Independent Review Service for the period April 2008 to March 2011. This includes the three-year strategy of the IRS, its customer service standards and a detailed one-year work programme.



In 2007/08 the IRS received a lower review workload than expected for the year. We believe this was linked to a backlog of work at Jobcentre Plus resulting from a significant upsurge in applications for crisis loans. This led to delays for customers on both initial and review decisions. Jobcentre Plus has now put in place contingency procedures to ease this backlog. I hope that this will lead to a reduction in delays, a better service for customers and the appropriate workload for the IRS in 2008/09. The IRS will be monitoring this situation closely and has plans in place to deal with this work, including receipt of outstanding reviews.

In April 2007 Social Fund regulations were amended to state that IRS review requests must be sent to the IRS. Previously, the customer had a choice of sending their review to the IRS or to Jobcentre Plus. This change led to an increase in requests sent directly to the IRS, but there are still a large number sent to Jobcentre Plus. There were also delays in Jobcentre Plus sending the correct case papers to us which in turn delayed the commencement of Inspectors' reviews. Given these delays, the IRS began to acknowledge receipt of direct applications for an Inspector's review in December 2007. In 2008/09 we plan to further revise our direct application IT system process and will review the IRS leaflet sent with the Jobcentre Plus review decision. The IRS will also work with Jobcentre Plus on the necessary improvement to services.

The IRS has always been committed to ensuring that customer data is held safely and securely. This is important given the nature of the information provided by Social Fund customers and the trust they place in us when supplying it. In light of the recent losses of customer data by public bodies and the public concern this raised, the IRS and an auditing firm conducted a review of IRS procedures to ensure that they are made as robust as possible. We will continue this programme of work in 2008/09.

In 2008/09 we will continue to provide extra help and support to Jobcentre Plus with its training requirements, its quality assurance process and the final stages of its centralisation programme including the workings of its operating model for the Social Fund. The last two years have been a period of extensive change for Jobcentre Plus and they have relied heavily on the help and support we provide. We will increase this support in 2008/09. This extra investment is crucial given the extensive changes being made and the importance of establishing best practice in each centralised site. The standard of casework seen by the IRS shows that there are improvements to be made in Social Fund operations. Our proven expertise in the Social Fund will guide this help and support.

During 2007/08 we worked with The Pension Service to undertake a pilot to provide tailored information for pensioners whose take up of Social Fund help is traditionally low. In 2008/09 we will work with The Pension Service to evaluate this pilot and agree appropriate next steps. It is important that pensioners, and other vulnerable groups, are

aware of the help that can be given from the Social Fund and can apply for a payment easily. The IRS will also be holding conferences, meetings and workshops with welfare rights groups to aid their understanding of the Social Fund. This will also give them a forum for reporting issues and concerns they have with the operation of the Social Fund. In 2008/09 we have a number of tasks planned to ensure that customers, their representatives and other interested parties are kept informed about the Social Fund scheme and the service they can expect.

This year as in previous years, my staff and managers have an extensive work programme to deliver which includes improvements to services. In the past they have always managed to achieve what was required and I am confident that they will do so again with the right help and support.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard Tilt". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'R' and a long, sweeping tail for the 'T'.

Sir Richard Tilt  
Social Fund Commissioner

# Business Purpose, Objectives and Values

## Business Purpose

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

## Business Objectives

- 1 Deliver impartial decisions to published standards.
- 2 Make continuous improvements in the standard of our work and in doing so, seek and take into account the views of our users.
- 3 Provide advice and information to the public, their advisers and staff of the Department for Work and Pensions about the Social Fund, the role and work of the IRS and the right of applicants to seek an independent Social Fund review.
- 4 Help the Jobcentre Plus to improve the standard of decision-making, and customer service including customer access through regular feedback, training and advice. Assist, as appropriate, their centralisation programme and the operation and monitoring of the Social Fund.
- 5 Provide advice and information to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and his officials on Social Fund policy and potential changes or reform.
- 6 Contribute to research to help improve the operation and development of the Social Fund and its role in wider government objectives.
- 7 Employ our business resources in a way that maximises economy, efficiency and effectiveness and delivers savings where achievable.

## Business Values

Our business values, which we set out below, are the foundation of our approach to work. These values will guide staff in the delivery of their work and will help to recognise the contribution they make. We will:

- provide an open and accessible service to all customers;
- treat all customers, users and colleagues with respect and courtesy;
- respect and accept the differences of others and work together as an organisation to build a diverse workforce;
- work to improve standards for all customers of the Social Fund;
- promote easy access for customers and potential customers of the fund;
- be open to learning in our work and use this to make improvements to the service we give;
- provide a value for money service seeking improvements in the efficiency of our work;
- deliver the best service for the customer and balance fairly the needs of our staff.

# Three-Year Work Programme

## Review

- Deliver the review at the earliest opportunity and within the published customer service and quality standards.
- Manage and monitor the quality of Social Fund Inspectors' decisions and the service standards to ensure all are met.
- Report to the Secretary of State annually on the standards of Inspectors' decisions.
- Operate an independent review process that applicants can access quickly and easily.
- Develop and implement a communication strategy and structure that will enable customers to interact fully with the review process in the manner best suited to their needs.
- Continue to monitor and manage the IRS direct application process to ensure it is straightforward and quick to use and papers are submitted by Jobcentre Plus promptly.
- Work in ways that enable people to understand and participate in their review.
- Undertake equality monitoring of applicants to the IRS to ensure there is equality of treatment and outcome.
- Handle complaints about decisions and service fairly and impartially and resolve them quickly.
- Maintain and improve standards and service by giving appropriate advice and assistance to Inspectors and other decision makers that reflects all legislative and operational changes.
- Monitor and manage IRS case and system processes and practices to ensure that customer information is secure and confidential.
- Monitor workloads and explore the reasons for variation and fluctuation.
- Develop and implement plans to deliver a high quality service during periods of higher workloads.

## Developing and improving standards

- Respond and adapt to any proposed changes to Social Fund legislation and anticipate and prepare for probable developments.
- Conduct customer research and seek the views of our users to shape our business and improve standards.

- Use the findings of our customer research to shape the letters, decisions and leaflets sent to customers.
- Continue to streamline and monitor the IRS decision making process, including the statement of Issues, to make it easier for customers to understand and participate in their reviews.
- Review existing customer service including customer access and quality standards once a year and seek improvements to standards.
- Develop and issue Social Fund Commissioner's advice to Inspectors to improve the standards of their decisions.
- Achieve continuous improvement in the quality standard of Inspectors' decisions by training and personal accountability.
- Develop and deliver high quality training to ensure that all IRS staff have up-to-date knowledge, expertise and awareness to do their jobs well, including any required SFI accreditation programme.
- Continuously review the way the IRS manages, monitors and improves quality.
- Use the feedback from our Independent External Complaints Panel to drive quality improvements and a high standard of customer service.
- Monitor developments in Human Rights case law, assess its relevance to the Social Fund and make changes where appropriate.
- Keep abreast of developments in social welfare relevant to the Social Fund and provide suitable advice to staff

## **Awareness**

- Deliver workshops and other help and support to both the Department for Work and Pensions and applicants' representatives to improve their knowledge of the Social Fund.
- Share relevant information with interested parties, recognising the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act and the Data Protection Act.
- Continue to explore and develop cost-effective ways of raising awareness of the Social Fund for all applicants; in particular groups, such as pensioners, who are under-represented.
- Improve local and national knowledge of the Social Fund and its operation, the right to an Independent Review and direct applications to the IRS.
- Promote the IRS grievance resolution model in areas where it would add value and help to improve customer service.

## **Social Fund Operations**

- Use information from the cases we review to feedback to the Department for Work and Pensions to help them achieve improvements in decision-making and service standards for customers.
- Use our expertise to assist and advise Jobcentre Plus on the most effective way to implement and monitor their national programme of centralisation, contact centres and the operation of the Social Fund including end to end processes.
- Work with Jobcentre Plus to provide the necessary programme of training and support for Social Fund staff, including managers, in its centralised offices and contact centres.
- Work with Jobcentre Plus to improve the standards of decision-making and service their customers receive, delivering assistance and advice as appropriate.
- Help departmental officials with the continuous improvement of Social Fund application forms and processes including any necessary quality assurance for new and existing DWP products.
- Work with Jobcentre Plus to implement their quality assurance framework, including setting out the role and responsibilities of the IRS in relation to skills transfer and external accreditation.

## **Social Fund Policy**

- Based on experience obtained from Social Fund reviews, offer advice to the Secretary of State, Ministers and officials of the Department for Work and Pensions on the operation and development of the Social Fund and proposed legislative changes including the proposed reform of the Social Fund.
- Promote the simplification and modernisation of the Social Fund to ensure it delivers a quick, effective and proportionate service
- Work with and offer commentary and advice to the Minister and departmental officials about on-going routine and minor changes to the Social Fund.

## **Research**

- Undertake internal research that will help inform casework and issues relevant to the Social Fund.
- Take forward, as appropriate, Joseph Rowntree Foundation's paper on proposed changes to the Social Fund.
- Work with the Department for Work and Pensions and other organisations on research and analysis to inform decisions on the role and operation of the Social Fund.

- Use the findings from research to promote best practice and improvements in performance and service throughout the administration of the Social Fund.

## **Resources**

- Manage our budgets efficiently and effectively whilst maintaining a sound financial regime with appropriate controls and financial arrangements in line with Government Accounting principles.
- Regularly review our capacity, productivity standards for all staff and forecast workloads to match demand and achieve best value from our resources.
- Embed risk management at the IRS to reduce or eliminate risks that could otherwise hinder operational or financial performance.
- Continue to manage and monitor the IRS Case Management System to ensure it delivers what is required both now and in the future, including any appropriate enhancements.
- Control and monitor changes to the IRS IT system to obtain best value for money and to deliver an improved service to customers.
- Take all necessary steps to protect and keep safe IRS electronic data and communications.
- Monitor the IRS telephone system to ensure it delivers a good quality service to our customers and make improvements where needed.
- Manage our recruitment and selection procedures carefully to ensure we get the best people for the job.
- Continue to seek a diverse workforce, which reflects the general population.
- Provide a diverse range of training and development that prepares staff to meet today's and future business needs.
- Manage attendance to achieve an absence rate of no more than 3%.
- Find ways of improving standards and services whilst maintaining a work life balance strategy which takes into account the needs of staff.
- Maintain and foster positive employee relations, including consultation with staff on all key projects and developments, in order to ensure the effective delivery of IRS business.
- Improve the standards of IRS service and its policies through identifying best practice in other organisations.
- Review the IRS structure to ensure that it works in the most effective and efficient manner.

- Keep up to date with changes to case law on Human Resources and adopt best practice.
- Develop and implement Human Resources policies and performance management to foster an environment of personal responsibility, high standards and business focus.
- Promote health awareness amongst staff to contribute to staff having active and fulfilling lives at work and at home.
- Monitor the Resource Management System to ensure it delivers an appropriate system for the IRS; make alternative arrangements if required.
- Manage and monitor IRS accommodation requirements including the services provided under the Trillium contract and make plans for future years.

# IRS Contribution to Government Aims and Objectives

The government has set out its aims and objectives for the delivery of public service. The IRS seeks to make a positive contribution through its work in delivering the independent review for the discretionary Social Fund. The relevant aims and objectives are set out below in box A, and the IRS contribution is set out in box B.

## **A: Government Aims and Objectives**

1. Halve the number of children in poverty by 2010-2011, on the way to eradicating child poverty by 2020.
2. Tackle poverty and promote greater independence and wellbeing in later life.
3. Improve the health and well being of children and young people
4. Improve children and young people's safety
5. Increase the number of children and young people on the path to success
6. Increase the proportion of socially excluded adults in settled accommodation and employment, education and training.
7. Address the disadvantage that individuals experience because of their gender, race, disability, age, sexual orientation, religion or belief

## **B: IRS contribution**

1. To deliver an independent, high quality and responsive review to applicants who are not satisfied with the decision made by the Department for Work and Pensions. Use the powers conferred to change decisions where applicants have been given an incorrect decision.
2. To raise awareness of the help that can be given from the Social Fund and the role of the IRS in relation to the Social Fund review process. To work with The Pension Service to increase awareness of the Social Fund amongst pensioners.
3. To provide regular reports and feedback to the Department for Work and Pensions to improve the standards of service and advice given to all applicants and potential applicants to the Social Fund.
4. Use the evidence obtained from the review to inform policy and research on the Social Fund.

5. Use the IT case management system to provide a more reliable and responsive IT service to our customers and make changes where required.
6. Enable applicants to choose how they want to engage with the review, whether this is by telephone, e-mail or in writing. Use a free phone service so as not to disadvantage applicants who need to telephone the IRS. Monitor the telephone service provided by the IRS.
7. Through our public information plan give wider access to people who find it difficult to engage with the review because of disabilities or language problems. Undertake equality monitoring of applicants to the IRS to ensure there is equality of treatment and outcome.
8. To achieve a reduction in sick absence to 3% by the end of 2008/09.
9. To recruit in a way that better achieves a representative workforce in relation to age, gender, race and disability.

These are the main ways in which we will aim to improve public service in relation to the Social Fund. In addition, our demanding targets and work programme will underpin the delivery of the government's priorities.

# Customer Service Standards 2008/09

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 cases within 12 working days of receipt of the papers. Standard cases are all applications to the IRS, excluding express and complex cases. They form the majority of the work of the IRS.

### Express Cases

We will make a decision on 90% 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 90% of complex cases within 23 working days of receipt of the papers. These are applications that need extensive enquiries or investigation or where the nature of the case is exceptionally complex.

# Customer Service Standards 2008/09

We aim to deliver a high quality decision at the earliest opportunity. In order to deliver the overall standards, the following internal targets will guide our work.

## Administration

- Direct applications with the required identifying details will be registered, acknowledged and papers requested on the day they are received.
- Cases will be fully registered on the day they are received.
- Cases will be allocated and passed to the 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 by close of business on the day they are received.
- Telephone responses to papers or to requests for further information will be recorded and passed to a decision maker by the morning of day 2 at the latest.

## Decision Making

- The relevant papers and Social Fund Inspector's preliminary summary of the case will be sent to the applicant within 3 working days of receipt of the papers.
- Exceptionally, when the decision is indisputable, it will be issued within 3 working days of receipt of the papers.

## Enquiries and Complaints

- Enquiries and complaints will be acknowledged on the day they are received.
- A full response, or update as appropriate, will be sent to the applicant within 8 working days.
- A decision will be made on standard cases within 15 working days. Standard cases are all applications, excluding express cases and complex cases. They form the majority of the work of the Customer Service Team.
- A decision 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.
- A decision will be made on complex cases within 30 working days. These are applications that need extensive enquiries or investigation or where the nature of the case is exceptionally complex.

## **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.

# IRS 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 Secretary of State'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.
- In the most cost effective way, delivering value for money.