

2009 - 2012

# 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.

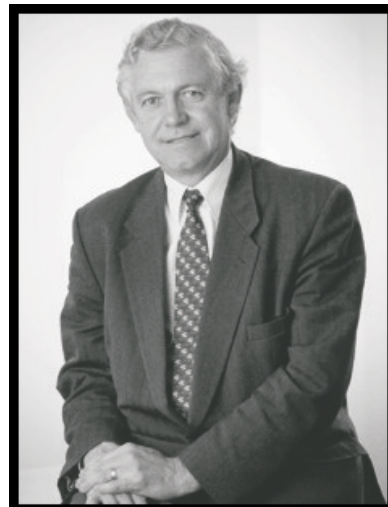
The head of the IRS is the Social Fund Commissioner who is appointed by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. The Commissioner's duties include:

- 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 2009 to March 2012. This includes the IRS three-year strategy, its customer service standards and a comprehensive one-year work programme.



In 2008/09 the IRS received a higher review workload than forecast. As a result we used contingency plans to cope with the intake received. Next year, IRS workloads are predicted to be even higher and may exceed those in any of the last ten years. Economic uncertainty may also place additional demands on the Social Fund, as the pool of eligible people grows. The extent of those demands will be influenced by how long the down-turn lasts and its intensity. Our workloads have already risen even before the newly unemployed have come within the ambit of the Social Fund. My priorities are to continue to deliver high quality, proportionate reviews, promptly to our vulnerable client base. This calls for adequate staffing and other resources, for which I look to the Department for Work and Pensions. Together with sound management and commitment from my own staff; on which I rely.

In the course of our work, the IRS handles sensitive and confidential information for every one of our customers. They rely on us to keep it safe and we must ensure this faith is well deserved. Last year I called for an independent audit on the security of data and followed this up with a network vulnerability assessment. This helpful scrutiny is guiding our efforts to assure the security of the data we process or hold. In the coming year our plans include: achieving certification for the Cabinet Office recommended ISO on Information Security; adopting a higher security standard for the receipt and return of papers to Jobcentre Plus; and, a range of smaller internal measures to reduce the security risks. The additional costs incurred as a result of these necessary initiatives are documented and will be accounted for.

By virtue of the work we do, the IRS has acquired particular expertise in the discretionary Social Fund. We are also ideally placed to observe its operation across Great Britain. We harness all of this to help improve standards in Jobcentre Plus as well as increasing the knowledge and awareness of advisers and advocates. During the last few years our help and support to Jobcentre Plus has increased while they experienced a period of extensive change. It included support with more basic training and initiatives to improve decision making and introduce a new Quality Assurance Framework for the Social Fund. The latter with IRS help is now in place and should enable Jobcentre Plus to operate the higher standard quality checking regime which is needed. We will work in 2009/10 with them to finalize such changes and embed the Quality Assurance Framework. As their expertise grows and improvements are delivered, I hope that with our support, Jobcentre Plus will be equipped to provide its own Social Fund training. It is essential for Jobcentre Plus and the IRS that we return to a more appropriate level of help and support. In

2009/10 the IRS must be able to prioritize resources for the review and this may limit the extent we can provide help and support to other organisations including Jobcentre Plus.

In the last two years the IRS has experienced problems with Jobcentre Plus being unable to provide Social Fund papers relating to review requests. This is linked sometimes to storage and retrieval problems and others to cases where papers cannot be found. While some improvements were made in 2008/09, the standard of case papers still causes the IRS concern. Where papers are not available or are incomplete, this places extra pressures and frustrations on both the customer and the Inspector as basic evidence about the case is missing and must be requested again. We are committed to working with Jobcentre Plus to ensure further improvements are made.

The Government has signalled its intention to reform the Social Fund, both in the short and longer term. I have provided information, ideas and commentary on the shape of the proposed changes. I believe it is important that the Social Fund can continue to provide help to the most vulnerable people in a proportionate way, while minimizing the administrative burden. In shaping the reforms it remains important to retain the features of the scheme which continue to focus help on the most needy and help to support the broader Government objectives. It is also vital to retain the independent scrutiny provided by the IRS of decisions, whether they are made in Jobcentre Plus or via contractual arrangements by a third party. The review has credibility and is a very cost effective way of dealing fairly with the grievances of citizens.

The proposed reforms together with the expectation of higher workloads indicate a challenging couple of years ahead. It is vital that we remain focused on the needs of those we serve to ensure the fund is adequately resourced, properly administered and has the appropriate safeguards by way of review.

Richard Tux

# **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 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 delivery 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;
- take all necessary steps to protect and keep secure information and data provided for our work
- 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.
- Ensure that customers can 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.
- Monitor the IRS decision making process, including the statement of Issues, to ensure that customers can understand and participate in their review.
- 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 the 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 delivery and operation of the Social Fund.
- 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 and evaluate 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 research to help inform casework and issues relevant to the Social Fund including its role and operation.
- 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.
- Conduct 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 on IRS networks.
- Ensure that IRS IT systems are accredited to the appropriate standard and are audited against these standards.
- 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.

<b>A: Government Aims and Objectives</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Halve the number of children in poverty by 2010-2011, on the way to eradicating child poverty by 2020.</li><li>2. Tackle poverty and promote greater independence and wellbeing in later life.</li><li>3. Improve the health and well being of children and young people</li><li>4. Improve children and young people’s safety</li><li>5. Increase the number of children and young people on the path to success</li><li>6. Increase the proportion of socially excluded adults in settled accommodation and employment, education and training.</li><li>7. Address the disadvantage that individuals experience because of their gender, race, disability, age, sexual orientation, religion or belief</li></ol>

<b>B: IRS contribution</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>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.</li><li>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.</li></ol>

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 reliable and responsive IT service to 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. Manage sick absence to maintain an absence level of no more than 3% in 2009/10.
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 2009/10

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 21 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 2009/10

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.
- Work towards obtaining 80% of direct application papers within 4 days.
- 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.
- Work towards achieving no more than 10% of cases in the Complex Case category.

## 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 25 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.