



OFFICE OF THE SOCIAL FUND
COMMISSIONER
FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

FINAL ANNUAL REPORT
1st April to 31st December 2016

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Foreword



Dear Minister

I present my final report as Interim Social Fund Commissioner, covering the period April – December 2016. The Social Fund was abolished in November 2016 as part of the implementation of Welfare Reform.

In my Foreword last year I acknowledged the sterling work of both staff and Commissioners who have served the Office since 1988.

I commend my outgoing team for their commitment to duty and their dedication to upholding the highest quality of service delivery throughout the period.

Through our Independent Review process my team has conducted 1,366 reviews during the period. This has ensured that Social Fund has responded to the needs of the most vulnerable across Northern Ireland, during a time of change.

I can report that the Reviews undertaken by Inspectors have been to a very high standard and I set out details in this Report. I am also pleased to highlight that our Customer Satisfaction ratings have been good, as set out in the latter section of this Report.

It has been a period of significant change during which my team has concentrated on delivering an independent, quality service to our customer base, whilst also bringing the Office to closure.

We have maintained very constructive working relations across the Department and take this opportunity to wish our colleagues in Discretionary Support every success in the roll out of new service.

It has been an honour to make some small contribution as Commissioner.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Walter Rader". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Walter Rader OBE MA Dip YCS
Interim Social Fund Commissioner

Work activity

From April to Dec 16

- Social Fund Inspectors (SFIs) delivered 1366 decisions.
- Inspectors changed 24.7 % of Community Care Grant decisions and made 195 awards resulting in a spend of £102,193.28 from the CCG budget.
- Inspectors changed 9.2% of Crisis Loan decisions and made 51 awards resulting in a spend of £12,278.89 from the loans budget.
- Inspectors upheld 100% of Budgeting Loan (BL) decisions.
- OSFC provided feedback to the Department about the findings in each of the cases which an Inspector reviewed.
- OSFC provided quarterly Statistics Reports on decision making in each of the Department's Social Fund district areas.

From April to Dec 16, 18% of the decisions reviewed by Inspectors were substituted, resulting in:

- 195 Community Care Grant awards at an average of £524.07 per award;
- 51 Crisis Loan awards at an average of £240.76 per award

The Standard of Social Fund Inspectors' Decisions

- I have examined 83 cases (equivalent to 6.1% of the cases registered in April to December 2016).
- In 100% of the cases the outcome was correct.
- 32 cases were examined following the Inspector's review, due to requests for a further review. Of these, 9 were re-opened and changed.

The Standard of Administration

- Inspectors cleared 100% of standard CCG and 100% of CL cases within the 12 day target.
- 100% of standard BL cases within the 5 day target.
- 100% of complex cases were cleared within the 21 day target
- 100% of routine express crisis loan cases within the 24 hour target.

From April to Dec 16, the average time taken by Inspectors to complete independent reviews was:

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

Resources

Excluding the Social Fund Commissioner's salary, travel and subsistence costs, OSFC spent £188,435.00 in total during the year giving a cost per decision of £137.95.

Customer Experience and Perceptions

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.

Complaints

During this reporting period OSFC received 2 complaints about our service. The Office Manager responded to the complaint, providing an explanation of the decision taken by the Inspector. This figure does not include requests to have an Inspector's decision looked at again

Timeliness

During the reporting period, Inspectors continued to make decisions on urgent crisis loans within the 1 working day target.

The percentage of case papers received during the year by OSFC from the Agency, within the 4 working day target, was 96.3%. The timeliness in receiving case papers is important as a customer's independent review application cannot commence until the case papers are received within OSFC. Our targets for casework completion times

begin at the point when the case papers are received.

Perceptions

During the period 1 April 2016 to 31 December 2016 a total of 121 questionnaires were issued to a random selection of OSFC customers in respect of reviews that were undertaken.

A total of 26 replies were received (21.5% of the sample). A summary of the responses is set out in Customer Survey results on page 8.

Standard of Administration and Social Fund Inspectors' Decisions

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

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.

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, or through direct dialogue.

Although there is statutory provision to seek judicial review through the High Court, in practice the Inspector's review tends to provide the final resolution for applicants to the Social Fund. It is vital, therefore, that Inspectors deliver high standards and that our monitoring processes are robust.

In addition to Social Fund law, Inspectors' decisions must comply with general legal principles - such as burden of proof, standards of proof, and natural justice. All those who use the service of the OSFC have a right to know the reasons why the Inspector reached the decision that they did in their case. In order to ensure this, the Inspectors decisions must be presented in plain language. To this end, I also assess the clarity of explanation - in order to ensure it respects the applicant's level of understanding and avoids jargon.

My aim for the reporting period was to read 5% of total caseload of grants, Crisis Loans and Budgeting Loans, selected at random. My total case reading for the year was 6.1 % cases of cases registered from April to December 2016.

Reviews of Inspectors' Decisions

"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.

When a request for a review of an Inspector's decision is received, it is passed to a different Inspector for reconsideration.

During this report period we received 32 requests for reviews of Inspector's decisions from customers or their representatives. As in previous years, the reason for most requests was either disagreeing with the amount of the award made by the

Inspector, or the refusal of an award by the Inspector. In the majority of these cases we considered that the Inspector's decision was legally sound.

Source	Reviews of Inspectors’ Decision	Number reopened	Number changed
Customer	32	8	8
Customer’s Representative	3	1	1
Internal Checks	0	0	0
Total	32	9	9

Resources

Business Operating Costs	£1,144.00
Salaries	£187, 291.00
Total	£188,435.00
Cost per decision	£137.95

Inspectors completed 1366 decisions, giving a unit cost of £137.95 per decision. It should be noted that this ‘cost per decision’ figure is gross including all other non-review or decision making activity carried out by OSFC staff, e.g., providing information relevant to the reform of the discretionary Social Fund in Northern Ireland, attending various meetings with the Social Fund Commissioner, together with providing training to new Inspectors.

As Commissioner I have scrutinised our use of resources and the implementation of processes, in order to ensure that our productivity and objectivity have not been compromised.

Customer survey results

The following is a summary of responses received.

Q1. – How did you find out about the OSFC?

Source	Number	Percentage
JBO	19	73.1
Advice Worker	4	15.4
Internet	2	7.7
Unanswered	1	3.9

Q2. - Was it easy to apply for a review at the Office of the Social Fund Commissioner?

Response	Number	Percentage
Yes	23	88.5
No	2	7.7
Unanswered	1	3.8

Q3. – Did you have a representative?

Response	Number	Percentage
Yes	3	11.5
No	22	84.6
Unanswered	1	3.9

Q4. - Did you find the questions asked by the Inspector on the forms easy to understand?

Response	Number	Percentage
Yes	17	65.4
No	5	19.2
N/A	2	7.7
Unanswered	2	7.7

Q5. - Did you find the papers issued to you from the Inspector useful?

Response	Number	Percentage
Yes	17	65.4
No	5	19.2
N/A	2	7.7
Unanswered	2	7.7

Q6. – Would you have preferred the Inspector to have telephoned you to gather information rather than send out papers?

Response	Number	Percentage
Yes	11	42.3
No	10	38.5
N/A	1	3.8
Unanswered	4	15.4

Q7 - Were the reasons for the Social Fund Inspectors decision easy to follow?

Response	Number	Percentage
Yes	16	61.5
No	7	27
Unanswered	3	11.5

Q8 - Do you feel the Inspectors review was independent?

Response	Number	Percentage
Yes	20	76.9
No	3	11.5
Unanswered	3	11.5

