

Social Security Agency

Annual Report on Decision Making and Financial Accuracy

1 January - 31 December 2015



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**Social Security Agency
Annual Report on Decision Making
and Financial Accuracy**

The Social Security Agency is an Executive Agency within the Department for Social Development. The Report is laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly under Article 76 of the Social Security (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 by the Department for Communities

23 November 2016

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Foreword by the Standards Committee Chairperson

Introduction

The Northern Ireland Joint Standards Committee for Northern Ireland was established in 1999. Appendix 1 of this report sets out the background to the creation of the Committee. In brief, the Social Security (Northern Ireland) Order of 1998 transferred responsibility for monitoring the standard of decisions against which there is a right of appeal from the Chief Adjudication Officer to the Department. These responsibilities were then delegated to the Chief Executives of the Social Security Agency (the Agency) and the Child Support Agency which subsequently became the Child Maintenance Service (CMS) and is now a Division within the Department for Social Development. These changes replicated developments in GB where concerns relating to the credibility of these new arrangements had been raised. To allay these the Westminster government provided undertakings that additional measures would be taken to inject an independent element into the oversight of the quality of decision making with regard to social security and child support. In Northern Ireland the result was the creation of the Joint Standards Committee with an independent chair and two other independent members. The full membership of the Committee is set out on page 13.

Appendix 1 also sets out the main functions of the Committee. In summary, the Committee has three core responsibilities. Firstly, we are required to provide assurances, and report on, the standard of decision making in the Agency and CMS. Secondly, we are required to provide

assurances that the arrangements in place to monitor decision making are robust and conducive to continuous improvement. Thirdly, we have the tasks of identifying areas of weakness and making recommendations to address these. With regard to the Agency, I am pleased to report that decision making is, generally, of a high standard. I can also provide assurance that the machinery in place to monitor decision making is working well. I would wish to commend the staff of the Standards Assurance Unit for the quality of their work and the contribution they make to the high standard of decision making achieved by the Agency's decision makers. I can also confirm, from my discussions with staff across the Agency, that there is an ongoing process of feedback to promote continuous improvement.

The work of the Committee in 2015

As the minutes of our meetings indicate, 2015 was a busy year for the Committee. As required by our terms of reference, four full Committee meetings were held with the main business being to review the quarterly reports on the standard of decision making presented by the Standards Assurance Unit for the Agency and the Case Monitoring Team for CMS. Additionally, there was a programme of meetings to review specific areas of work across the Agency and we had extremely helpful discussions with staff in the Disability and Carers Service, Employment and Support Allowance, the Pensions Centre, Decision Making Services, the Northern Region and the Holywood Road Jobs and Benefits Office. As usual, we were impressed by the expertise and

commitment of staff who were delivering a service of a high standard despite the context of uncertainty in which they were working.

The pressure to make savings on staff, the outworkings of the Voluntary Exit Scheme and the confusion surrounding welfare reform were obvious sources of strain but considerable effort was being made to prevent any adverse effect on the service being provided. Our sense was that staff were coping well but we do have a concern in relation to Decision Making Services (DMS). Alongside the highly specialised legal work undertaken by DMS, the staff have a core role in training which we have encouraged and supported over the years. Sound training is the foundation of good decision making and we were dismayed to learn that the pressures on DMS are such that the training function may have to be severely curtailed. We would view such a development with concern and would urge steps be taken to prevent any significant decline in the service currently provided.

Finally, we have also had additional meetings with staff to discuss particular issues, such as overpayments, and engaged with those outside the Agency who can contribute to our understanding of the quality of the service provided. Thus, I met with the newly appointed President of the Appeals Service and we had our annual meeting with the Northern Ireland Audit Office the work of which is supportive of the assurances given above with regard to the effectiveness of the arrangements within the Agency to monitor

the standard of decision making. I should also mention the very positive feedback - particularly with regard to ESA - that we received from our annual meeting with representatives of the voluntary advice sector.

Monitoring performance

As Part 2 of the report indicates, the performance of decision makers within the Agency is monitored using two yardsticks: the quality of decision making and financial accuracy. Put simply, random samples of cases are drawn from the live load with the focus being on the six main benefits. Cases where the most recent decision was made in the twelve months preceding the selected week are identified and these are assessed against four criteria: sufficiency of evidence, determination of questions, findings of fact and correct application of the law. This gives us the standard of decision making accuracy. With regard to financial accuracy, the samples from the live load are used to determine the percentage of benefit expenditure that is correctly disbursed.

A number of observations can be made on this methodology. First, with the agreement of the Committee the standard of decision making for five minor benefits is no longer assessed. This decision was taken in consequence of the pressure on SAU. The Committee would not, however, wish to see any further contraction in the monitoring of the quality of decisions. Secondly, in the main body of the report, and in line with previously established procedures in GB, a decision

making error is recorded only where there is a financial consequence. For the sake of completeness, Appendix 2 of the report provides information on all errors. Thirdly, a difficulty with this methodology is that it can generate very small numbers of cases for particular benefits. The Committee does, however, have the option of requesting special exercises be conducted if there is concern that the sample generated does not present an accurate picture of the quality of decision making and this provides a safety net which we have used in the past. The recording of additional errors and this safety net means that we are confident that the methodology used to assess the quality of decision making is fit for purpose.

The standard of decision making in 2015

Part 3 of the report summarises the performance of the Agency with regard to decision making accuracy. The table on page 20 indicates that decision makers hit and, indeed, exceeded the benchmarks set for five of the six benefits reported on. The following pages demonstrate the consistently high standards of decision making with regard to these benefits achieved over the past three years. On the face of it, the only poor performer is State Pension Credit where, as the table on page 26 indicates, performance has dropped from 97% in 2013 to 93% in 2015. It should be noted, however, that this is in consequence of a change in the methodology, noted in my report last year, whereby errors are now reported if the

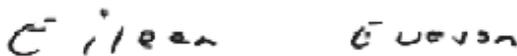
financial consequence of error is less than 50p. I understand that if these errors had not been included the accuracy rate for State Pension Credit would have been 97%. Taking all of this together, this is a very satisfactory performance. In fact, when account is taken of the appalling complexity of the legislation governing these benefits (see Appendix 4) which decision makers must apply correctly, this is a very creditable set of results.

Part 4 of the Report deals with financial accuracy and demonstrates that the Agency has been very successful in ensuring that the very considerable sums spent on the core benefits are properly and correctly disbursed. The targets set were exceeded for four benefits and the two narrow misses were within the upper confidence levels. Further understanding of these figures is provided in Appendix 7. This shows that total expenditure on these benefits was £4.5 billion. The estimated value of monetary error was £31.4 million but of this £13.6 million consisted of underpayments. In sum, and contrary to public perceptions, the loss to the public purse as a result of overpayments was 0.4% of total expenditure. This is a very good performance.

Supplementary issues

Part 5 of the Report presents data on performance with regard to overpayments and appeals submissions. With regard to overpayments, the decision making standard achieved of 78% is, frankly, lamentable. Across the year, however, we have had

discussions with staff on the steps being taken to address this major area of weakness which has been of concern for some time. The management of overpayments has now been reorganised and the key sources of error have been identified and targeted for improvement. I would therefore hope to see some betterment over the coming twelve months. It should also be noted that the financial accuracy of overpayments decisions is now being monitored. This is a welcome development. There is clearly room for improvement in the standard achieved (92%) but this new measure indicates that the poor standard of decision making accuracy does not have the financial consequence that might have been expected. Turning to the quality of appeal submissions, the table on page 32 indicates that only six errors were detected giving an accuracy standard of 97% which is very good indeed. Finally, from the perspective of claimants, it is important that decisions are correct and delivered in a timely fashion. Appendix 3 presents data on clearance times and indicates that, by and large, the Agency is meeting the targets set. The one exception here relates to ESA appeals and the particular circumstances which I noted in my foreword last year. Taking these into account, this is a very good performance.



**CHAIRPERSON OF THE
STANDARDS COMMITTEE**

Conclusion

I am pleased to be able to present a positive overview of decision making by the Agency for 2015. I am also very aware of the effort that will be required to maintain the standard of performance achieved. Major changes lie ahead. In May 2016 the Agency will cease to exist and become part of the new Department for Communities. Additionally, the impasse on welfare reform has now, happily, been resolved but, in consequence, staff will have to manage the implementation of the substantial programme of change triggered by the Welfare Reform (NI) Order 2015 and the report of the Welfare Reform Mitigations Working Group which set out measures to mitigate the effect of the Order on the most vulnerable in our society. I am confident that staff will rise to these challenges and the Committee will seek to play a supportive role in all of this. In conclusion, I would wish to thank my colleagues on the Committee for the contribution they make to our work. I am particularly grateful to our two independent members, Kevin Higgins and Laura McPolin, and our secretary Clare Cull for their support and assistance.

Introduction by the Chief Executive



I am pleased to introduce the Social Security Agency's 17th Annual Report on Decision Making and Financial Accuracy prepared for the Joint Standards Committee (the Standards Committee).

This report focuses on two main areas; the level of Decision Making Accuracy in social security benefits and the level of Financial Accuracy. The purpose is to establish if the decisions to award claims to benefit are correct and also to provide robust estimates of the percentage of benefit expenditure which is paid correctly. Accuracy underpins the Agency's key business plan commitment to ensure that customers are receiving the right benefit at the right time.

It is pleasing to note that decision making standards have continued to remain at a high level during this year, with 5 of the 6 benefits measured exceeding their benchmark target.

Financial accuracy results have also remained very high during 2015 with all of the 6 main benefits meeting their financial accuracy target either fully, or within their upper confidence level. Disability Living Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance, Jobseekers Allowance and State Pension actually exceeded their targets with Income Support and State Pension Credit meeting within upper confidence levels.

The Agency has also remained focused on the issue of performance in decision making accuracy for overpayments. The main key

sources of error have been identified and actions are on-going to help improve future results for overpayment decision making. In 2015 a new financial accuracy methodology was developed to put into context the financial consequences of decision making errors.

I would like to thank staff for all their continued dedication and hard work throughout this extremely busy year for the Agency. The excellent results outlined in this report clearly demonstrate that Agency staff have the commitment and ability to deliver a first class customer service and are resilient and capable in a climate of wide ranging change in the benefit system.

In 2016, the Agency will be dissolved and incorporated within the Department for Communities, with staff continuing to face many new and demanding challenges. I am confident that our staff will continue to provide a high quality and professional service to all our customers. The Agency has provided a much needed service to some of the most vulnerable people in Northern Ireland for nearly 25 years, and with the introduction of the Department for Communities we will not only continue to maintain the services we have always provided, but will now be in a position to also provide additional support. I am proud

to have been Chief Executive of this organisation and thank all the staff for their contribution in making the Agency the success that it was.

I would like to pass on my sincere appreciation and thanks to Professor Eileen Evason, Laura McPolin and Kevin Higgins in the Joint Standards Committee. The important role of the Committee in providing independent

scrutiny and assurance to me on the standards of decision making and making recommendations for improvement, where necessary, is highly valued by myself and the senior management team of the Department.

Finally, I would also take the opportunity to thank staff involved in the preparation of this report.



CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Social Security Agency

Part 1

Background

Background

The Chief Executive of the Social Security Agency (the Agency) is responsible for monitoring and reporting on decision making standards. He also reports on the financial accuracy of payments for Disability Living Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance, Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance, State Pension, State Pension Credit and Social Fund. The standard of financial accuracy for these benefits along with Attendance Allowance, Bereavement Benefit, Carer's Allowance, Incapacity Benefit, Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit, Maternity Allowance and Widows Benefit is also shown in the Social Security Agency's Annual Report and Accounts.

In 1999, a Northern Ireland Joint Standards Committee (the Standards Committee) for the Social Security and Child Support Agencies was set up to oversee monitoring arrangements and report on performance. From 1 April 2008 the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency became a division within the Department for Social Development called the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Division and was later renamed Child Maintenance Service from 1 April 2013. The Standards Committee is responsible for the following:

- assuring the Chief Executive of the Agency and Director of Child Maintenance Service

that the Agency and Child Maintenance Service are-

- (a) monitoring their decision making procedures effectively;
- (b) applying the relevant legislation properly; and
- (c) monitoring and reporting on their performance;
- identifying common trends in the quality of the Agency's and Child Maintenance Service's decision making and highlighting those areas where they need to improve;
- making specific recommendations on any area the Standards Committee considers appropriate;
- assuring the Chief Executive and Director that the Agency and Child Maintenance Service have procedures in place to get feedback from their monitoring results so that they can keep improving;
- reporting to the Chief Executive and Director on the decision making process and, where necessary, recommending changes to it; and
- reporting on how well the Agency and Child Maintenance Service have improved their performance

THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE MEMBERS ARE:

Eileen Evason (CBE) Chair	Emeritus Professor in Social Administration, University of Ulster
Kevin Higgins Independent Member	Head of Policy, Advice NI
Laura McPolin Independent Member	Barrister, Civil and Family Law
John McKervill	Director of Pensions, Disability and Corporate Services, Social Security Agency
Conrad McConnell	Assistant Director Benefit Security, Social Security Agency
Eileen Donnelly	Performance and Planning, Child Maintenance Service
Lacey Walker	Head of Audit, Department for Social Development

Appendix 1 sets out the terms of reference for the Standards Committee.



SOCIAL
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Social Security Agency

Part 2

Measurement and Sampling methodology

Measurement and Sampling Methodology

The Social Security Agency's Annual Report on Decision Making and Financial Accuracy for the period 1 January to 31 December 2015 (the Report) summarises the monitoring results for standards of decision making and financial accuracy within the Social Security Agency for 2015. Measurement of decision making and financial accuracy in the Agency is carried out by Standards Assurance Unit. Decision making and financial accuracy checks are carried out using the one common random sample of cases for each benefit.

Until 31 December 2014 a reduced sample of cases that had a decision made less than a year before the selected week were checked for decision making but from 1 January 2015 all cases that have had a decision made less than a year before the selected week are checked and recorded to measure the standard of decision making.

Monitoring

Standards Assurance Unit completes the following checks on a case in the common sample:

- **Decision Making** - The monitor checks if a decision has been made on the case within the last 12 months and if so, the case is used to measure the standard of decision making. The purpose of this check is to establish if the actual decision awarding a new claim to benefit or changing the rate of benefit in payment is correct. A decision making error is only recorded where the incorrect decision also results in the payment being incorrect. The standard

of decision making is expressed as a percentage. It is important to note that when Standards Assurance Unit reports on the standard of decision making it is only on decisions made by offices within the last 12 months so that the quality of current decision making can be assessed. It does not cover the full live load. Until 31 March 2002 the decision making and official error standards were checked in different ways but with effect from May 2002 the checks were brought into line with each other and a decision making error will only be reported if a payment error also exists. The errors which would have previously been reported as full decision making errors are noted as Additional Errors and shown in Appendix 2 to the Report. For revision and supersession decisions, the check is based on the last business event.

The decision making check continues to examine the 4 main areas as follows:

- **evidence** - is there enough evidence on which to base a decision?
- **determination of questions** - have all relevant questions been decided?
- **findings of fact** - have the correct facts been found from the evidence available at the time of the decision?
- **interpretation and application of the law** - has statute law and case law (previous commissioner/court decisions) been correctly interpreted and applied?

In addition to the 4 main areas, the effect of evidence received since the date of the last

decision is also considered, where this would have caused a revision or supersession of the award.

- **Financial Accuracy** - The financial accuracy standard represents the estimate of the percentage of the benefit expenditure that is paid correctly. Financial accuracy is measured by considering the monetary value of each error, either overpayment or underpayment, identified during the official error check. The monetary value of each error identified is passed to Analytical Services Unit who extrapolate the figures to estimate the likely level of financial error in the live load for the benefit concerned.

All errors identified in the decision making and financial accuracy checks, including errors which do not cause a payment error, are

reported back to operational managers and staff for the purpose of continuous improvement and to enable them to take corrective action. A further analysis of the financial accuracy results can be found in Part 4 of this report.

Clearance Times

Appendix 3 sets out the Agency's standard in achieving clearance time benchmarks across the social security benefits.

Legislation Extract

Appendix 4 sets out an extract from the Income Support (General) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1987 (legislation governing "persons from abroad" for the purposes of Income Support) to illustrate the complexity of the law.

Sample Size and Selection

Random Sample, Confidence Level and Confidence Intervals

On a monthly basis, statisticians provide Standards Assurance Unit with a random sample of cases from across each benefit live load. This means that the sample can contain a range of cases from the oldest in the live run to the most recent. This is necessary to meet Northern Ireland Audit Office requirements to reflect the full live load. The samples provided for each benefit aim to ensure that the results of the financial accuracy exercise are to a confidence interval of no more than +/- 1% for all benefits and the results of the decision

making exercise expected to achieve a confidence interval of no more than +/- 5% for all benefits.

The financial accuracy (percentage of annual benefit expenditure paid correctly) of a social security benefit is estimated from random samples selected throughout the year.

The overall sample size required to measure financial accuracy is based on a confidence level, a confidence interval and an estimate of the financial accuracy in the benefit population. Using the weekly monetary

amounts paid in error, benefit expenditure and the appropriate statistical formula, the sample size required to measure financial accuracy in 2015, at the 95% confidence level, was calculated for each benefit.

The process was repeated for decision making to calculate the sample size required to measure decision making in 2015 at the 95% confidence level and an expected confidence interval of no more than 5% for each benefit.

Stratification

The financial accuracy of each social security benefit was estimated from stratified random samples of benefit cases selected throughout the year. Stratification serves to ensure that the sample is distributed over the sample in the same way as the overall benefit population. The sample therefore better reflects the population than it would have been likely to if it were selected entirely at random. For this reason, stratification acts to increase the precision of the estimates.

For example, Jobseeker's Allowance and Income Support, the total benefit population was sub-divided by benefit processing centre.

The benefit population within each benefit processing centre was further sub-divided by client group. A sample of cases was then selected randomly from each client group. Cases for each benefit were randomly selected on a monthly basis.

Variability and Sample Size

The variability in the attribute being measured within the population is an important factor in determining the sample size required. The more variability in the population, the larger the sample size required to achieve a given confidence interval.

For example, the sample size needed to measure financial accuracy to a given confidence interval would depend on the proportion of cases paid correctly. If over 90% of cases were paid correctly, this indicates that the variability in the population is low i.e. a large majority of cases are paid correctly. However, if 50% of cases were paid incorrectly, this indicates a high level of variability in the population. This greater level of variability means that a larger sample size would be needed to achieve a given confidence interval.

Social Security Agency

Part 3

Results - Decision Making

Results - Decision Making

The table below sets out the standard achieved against the decision making benchmarks for social security benefits. These results are also shown in the graph in Appendix 5 to the Report with comparison to last year's result.

Appendix 6 to the Report details the type of decision making errors made under the 5 main headings.

*Benefit	Total Cases Monitored	Number of Incorrect Cases	Error Rate	Decision Making Standards	Decision Making Benchmarks	Variance
Disability Living Allowance	61	0	0%	100%	98%	2%
Employment and Support Allowance	594	19	3%	97%	95%	2%
Income Support	308	9	3%	97%	95%	2%
Jobseeker's Allowance	576	12	2%	98%	95%	3%
State Pension	28	0	0%	100%	97%	3%
State Pension Credit	376	28	7%	93%	95%	-2%

* From 2015 SAU ceased the decision making check on Attendance Allowance, Bereavement Benefit, Carer's Allowance, Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit and Maternity Allowance.

The results from the table above show that:-

- 5 of the 6 decision making benchmarks have been achieved, with all of the 5 exceeding their benchmark.

Additional Errors

Appendix 2 details the impact on the overall decision making standard if additional errors were included for all benefits. The additional errors are extremely important for the purposes of correct decision making and are given the same profile as full decision making errors for the purposes of continuous improvement.

Decision Making Performance

This part of the Report details the standard of decision making for Disability Living Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance, Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance, State Pension and State Pension Credit.

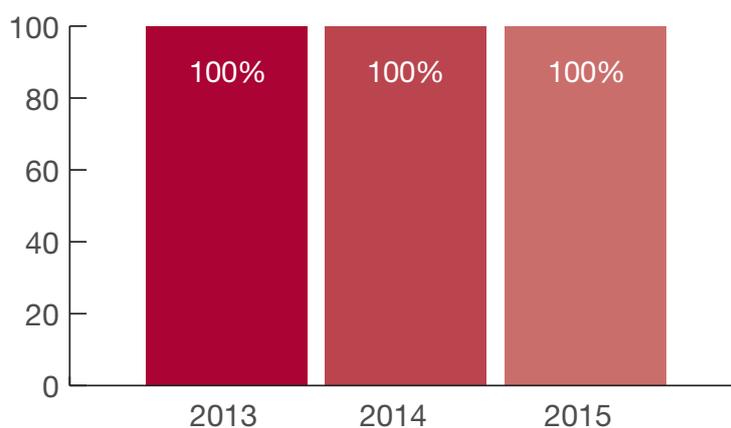
Disability Living Allowance Decision Making

To find out the standard of decision making, 61 cases were examined and all cases (100%) were correct. The decision making standard was 2 percentage points above the benchmark of 98%. The table on the following page shows the breakdown of performance under each type of decision monitored.

DLA Type of Decision	Total Cases Checked	Number of Cases Incorrect	Error Rate	Percentage of Decisions Correct	Confidence Interval
Claims	49	0	0%	100%	
Reconsiderations	3	0	0%	100%	
Revisions	1	0	0%	100%	
Supersessions	8	0	0%	100%	
Overall Performance	61	0	0%	100%	N/A

The chart below compares decision making standard over the last 3 years.

DLA Standards of Decision Making



Employment and Support Allowance Decision Making

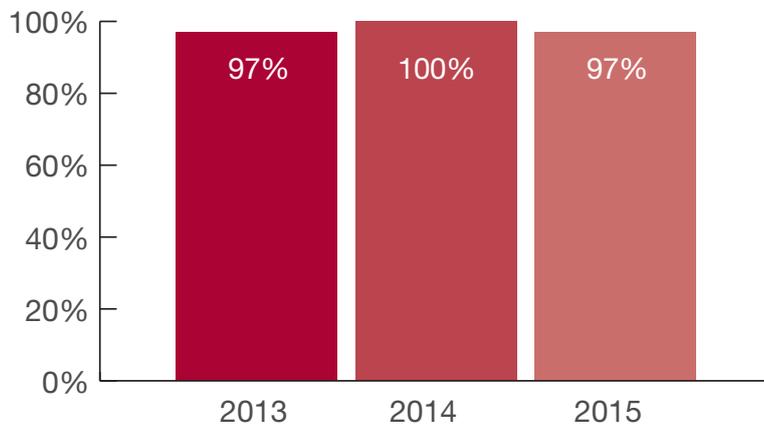
To find out the standard of decision making, 594 cases were examined and 575 cases (97%) were correct. The decision making standard

was 2 percentage points above the benchmark of 95%. The table below shows the breakdown of performance under each type of decision monitored.

ESA Type of Decision	Total Cases Checked	Number of Cases Incorrect	Error Rate	Percentage of Decisions Correct	Confidence Interval
Claims	64	0	0%	100%	
IB-IS Reassessment	54	0	0%	100%	
Reconsiderations	3	0	0%	100%	
Revisions	3	0	0%	100%	
Supersessions	469	19	4%	96%	
Uprating	1	0	0%	100%	
Overall Performance	594	19	3%	97%	+/- 1.4%

The chart below compares decision making standard over the last 3 years.

ESA Standards of Decision Making



The main area of error was findings of fact 17 errors (89%). The main types of error within findings of fact related to income taken into

account incorrectly (8 errors) and rate of award being incorrect (5 errors).

Income Support Decision Making

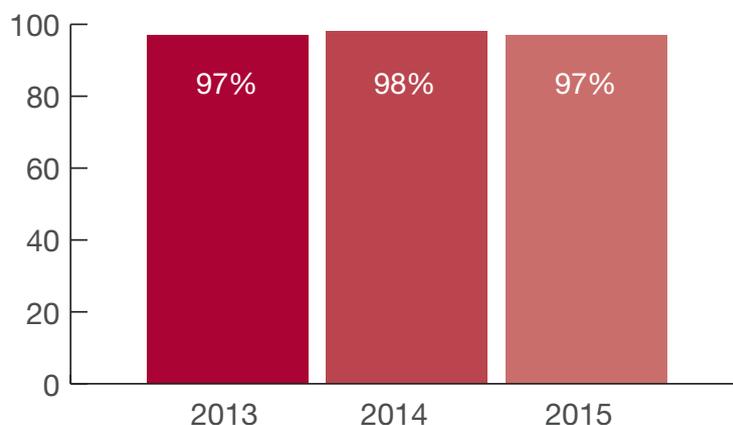
To find out the standard of decision making, 308 cases were examined and 299 cases (97%) were correct. The decision making standard was 2 percentage points above the benchmark

of 95%. The table below shows the breakdown of performance under each type of decision monitored

IS Type of Decision	Total Cases Checked	Number of Cases Incorrect	Error Rate	Percentage of Decisions Correct	Confidence Interval
Claims	124	1	1%	99%	
Revisions	21	2	10%	90%	
Supersessions	162	5	3%	97%	
Uprating	1	1	100%	0%	
Overall Performance	308	9	3%	97%	+/- 1.9%

The chart below compares decision making standard over the last 3 years.

IS Standards of Decision Making



The main area of error was findings of fact 5 errors (56%). The main type of error within

findings of fact related to income taken into account incorrectly (4 errors).

Jobseeker's Allowance Decision Making

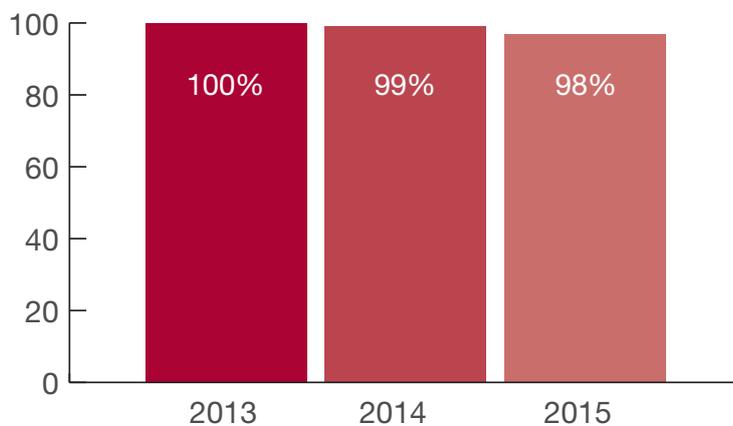
To find out the standard of decision making, 576 cases were examined and 564 cases (98%) were correct. The decision making standard

was 3 percentage points above the benchmark of 95%. The table below shows the breakdown of performance under each type of decision monitored.

JSA Type of Decision	Total Cases Checked	Number of Cases Incorrect	Error Rate	Percentage of Decisions Correct	Confidence Interval
Claims	473	5	1%	99%	
Reconsiderations	2	0	0%	100%	
Revisions	10	2	20%	80%	
Supersessions	91	5	5%	95%	
Overall Performance	576	12	2%	98%	+/- 1.1%

The chart below compares decision making standard over the last 3 years.

JSA Standards of Decision Making



The main area of error was findings of fact 8 errors (67%). The main types of error within findings of fact related to conditions of

entitlement, income taken into account incorrectly and mortgage & housing costs (2 errors each).

State Pension Decision Making

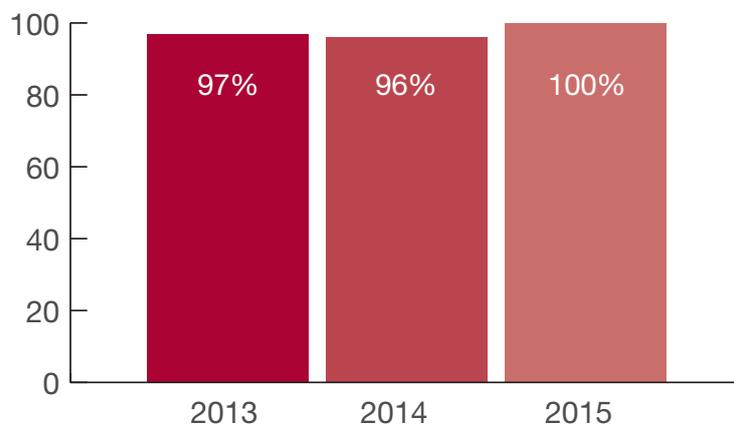
To find out the standard of decision making, 28 cases were examined and all cases (100%) were correct. The decision making standard

was 3 percentage points above the benchmark of 97%. The table below shows the breakdown of performance under each type of decision monitored.

SP Type of Decision	Total Cases Checked	Number of Cases Incorrect	Error Rate	Percentage of Decisions Correct	Confidence Interval
Claims	15	0	0%	100%	
Revisions	7	0	0%	100%	
Supersessions	6	0	0%	100%	
Overall Performance	28	0	0%	100%	N/A

The chart below compares decision making standard over the last 3 years.

SP Standards of Decision Making



State Pension Credit Decision Making

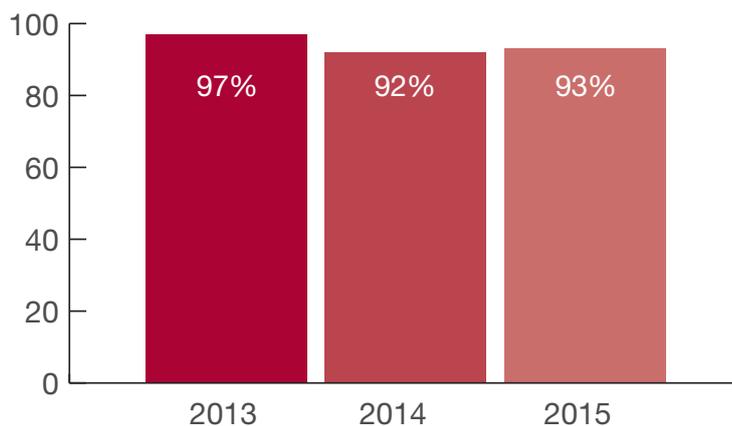
To find out the standard of decision making, 376 cases were examined and 348 cases (93%) were correct. The decision making standard

was 2 percentage points below the benchmark of 95%. The table below shows the breakdown of performance under each type of decision monitored.

SPC Type of Decision	Total Cases Checked	Number of Cases Incorrect	Error Rate	Percentage of Decisions Correct	Confidence Interval
Claims	137	10	7%	93%	
Revisions	10	0	0%	100%	
Supersessions	229	18	8%	92%	
Overall Performance	376	28	7%	93%	+/- 2.4%

The chart below compares decision making standard over the last 3 years.

SPC Standards of Decision Making



The main areas of error were evidence 12 errors (43%) and findings of fact 12 errors (43%). The main types of error within evidence related to income taken into account incorrectly (5 errors)

and capital (4 errors). The main types of error within findings of fact also related to income taken into account incorrectly (6 errors) and capital (4 errors).

Social Security Agency

Part 4

Results - Financial Accuracy

Results - Financial Accuracy

Financial Accuracy is the estimate of the percentage of the benefit paid correctly. From April 2003 financial accuracy targets (the targets for 2015 are shown in brackets) were introduced for Disability Living Allowance (99%), Income Support (99%) and Jobseeker's Allowance (99%). From April 2004 financial accuracy for State Pension (99%) and State Pension Credit (98%) was introduced and from

April 2010 financial accuracy for Employment and Support Allowance (98%) was also introduced. The table below shows the 2015 end of year performance against target for all the benefits and also a comparison with the 2014 end of year results. Appendix 7 details the estimated levels of financial error (Monetary Value of Error) for each of the 6 main benefits.

*Benefit	2015 Target	2015 Financial Accuracy Results	2014 Financial Accuracy Results
Main Benefit			
Disability Living Allowance	99%	99.8%	99.7%
Employment and Support Allowance	98%	98.4%	97.0%
Income Support	99%	98.3%	98.9%
Jobseeker's Allowance	99%	99.1%	98.9%
State Pension	99%	99.7%	99.8%
State Pension Credit	98%	97.6%	98.1%
Other Benefits			
#Social Fund	No Target Set	99.2%	98.6%

* From 2015 SAU ceased the financial accuracy check on Attendance Allowance, Bereavement Benefit, Carers Allowance, Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit and Maternity Allowance.

SF includes the discretionary aspects only i.e. Budgeting Loans, Community Care Grants and Crisis Loans. Due to the nature of its sampling methodology, the period for Social Fund is one month in arrears i.e. December 2014 to November 2015.

The results from the table overleaf show that

- Of the 6 main benefits DLA, ESA, JSA and SP exceeded their targets.
- IS with a result of 98.3% met its target of 99% within the upper confidence level of 99.2%.
- SPC with a result of 97.6% met its target of 98% within the upper confidence level of 98.4%.

Analysis of the data used to calculate Financial Accuracy for 2015

The table below shows the number of cases used to calculate the 2015 Financial Accuracy results.

*Benefit	January - December 2015	
	Total Cases Checked	Total Cases in Error
Disability Living Allowance	744	3
Employment and Support Allowance	1344	80
Income Support	864	41
Jobseeker's Allowance	864	20
State Pension	456	38
State Pension Credit	1008	136
#Social Fund	864	36

* From 2015 SAU ceased the financial accuracy check on Attendance Allowance, Bereavement Benefit, Carers Allowance, Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit and Maternity Allowance.

SF includes the discretionary aspects only i.e. Budgeting Loans, Community Care Grants and Crisis Loans. Due to the nature of its sampling methodology, the period for Social Fund is one month in arrears i.e. December 2014 to November 2015



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Social Security Agency

Part 5

Results - Overpayments and Appeals

Results - Overpayments and Appeals

Overpayment Decisions

A total of 384 cases were examined and 83 errors were raised resulting in an overall standard of 78%. The main area of error was findings of fact, which accounted for 64 errors (77%). The main type of error within findings of fact related to the amount of the recoverable

overpayment being incorrect (49 errors).

In 2015 a new financial accuracy methodology was developed to put into context the financial consequences of decision making errors in relation to overpayment monitoring. The 2015 result is shown in the table below.

Year	Total Cases Monitored	Number of Errors	Decision Making Standards	Financial Accuracy Standard
2015	384	83	78%	92%
2014	384	74	81%	N/A
2013	384	44	89%	N/A

Appeal Submissions

A total of 215 cases were examined and 6 errors were raised resulting in an overall standard of 97%. The main types of error related to the submission defending an incorrect decision and failure to include all evidence relating to the decision under appeal (2 errors each).

Year	Total Cases Monitored	Number of Errors	Error Rate	Decision Making Standards
2015	215	6	3%	97%
2014	334	17	5%	95%
2013	366	17	5%	95%

Social Security Agency

Part 6

**Social Security Agency
Strategy to Reduce Error
in Decision Making and
Financial Accuracy**

Social Security Agency Strategy to Reduce Error in Decision Making and Financial Accuracy

The Agency's Fraud and Error Reduction Board steers the Agency strategic approach to reducing error in the social security benefit system. This Board, on which a number of senior Agency officials sit, helps ensure a collaborative approach in securing high accuracy levels across the benefit system.

The Agency's official error strategy is based around four key principles:

- **PREVENTION** - prevent new error entering the system;
- **DETECTION** – target and identify error that has already entered the system;
- **CORRECTION** – correct all error detected; and
- **LEARNING** – educate and learn from error detected to reduce the likelihood of recurrence

Prevention of error is fundamental to the success of the strategy. Preventing error entering the benefit system impacts on the amount of money lost through overpayment of benefit and minimises the risk of underpayment of benefit to customers.

The need for a strategic approach is emphasised by the scale of transactions handled by the Agency. In 2015 around £5.08bn was paid out in benefits. Staff handled 477,000 new claims as well as taking action on some 658,000 changes of

circumstances notified by customers.

This large volume of activity has the potential to allow a significant amount of error into the benefit system.

Standards Assurance Unit

However, prevention on its own is not enough. To maintain accuracy we need to detect and correct error that is already in the system. The Agency's Standards Assurance Unit undertakes random sample monitoring of live benefit cases and produces detailed information about the estimated level of error and error trends. Standards Assurance Unit data is analysed by Analytical Services Unit (ASU) statisticians and this information is used, by Benefit Security Division and business managers, as well as the independent Joint Standards Committee, to direct a broad range of prevention and detection activities.

The Agency works very closely with ASU, not only in developing risk models, but also specific scans targeting known areas of weakness, for example Severe Disability Premium cases for State Pension Credit.

Official Error

The latest overall figures across all social security benefits administered by the Social Security Agency show an overall reduction in losses through official error overpayments - down from 0.8% of benefit expenditure in 2003-04 to 0.36% in 2015. The Agency

remains committed to doing all it can to reduce staff error and has a wide range of control mechanisms built into its system of benefit administration to ensure high levels of financial accuracy. These include extensive training and consolidation of training as well as a programme of regular checks and controls to prevent potential incorrectness and measure and report on Agency performance within this area.

Error Reduction Division Activity

During 2015-16 the Agency's Error Reduction Division continued to direct dedicated resources within benefit offices to identify and correct error. This resourcing funds specialist teams across the Agency to perform checks on cases which, through statistical analysis are deemed to be at greatest risk of error. It also funds activity to remove anomalies identified by matching data from various information systems. Resources are allocated to each benefit based on the level of risk, and within each benefit all cases are targeted further using risk based selection models. This approach ensures maximum impact from targeted error reduction activity.

During 2015-16, error reduction activity carried out by benefit areas amounted to 76,184 checks or case reviews, which led to the adjustment of benefit in 10,683 cases, with a total monetary value of £26 million. This total included just over £11 million of adjustments to payments where customers were entitled to additional benefits.

Following a successful outcome of the checking review in State Pension Credit and Employment Support Allowance, the Fraud and Error Reduction Board (FERB) approved a similar exercise in Income Support and Jobseekers Allowance, to ensure that accuracy checking is providing optimum results in reducing official error. The review focussed on the type of checking conducted and the availability and use of management information. Changes following the review allow for better analysis of checking and help to capture enhanced detail on error types and individual errors.

FERB also requested a review of the overpayment checking process. The purpose of this exercise was to develop an overpayment checking strategy to ensure accuracy in the process and uniformity across the Department. The review established that the current checks are effective in identifying errors in the overpayments process. The review also identified some weaknesses around operational processes, which have been reported to operational Senior Managers to take forward as part of their Accuracy improvement Plans.

Implementation of the Agency's fraud and error strategy

Throughout 2015-16 the Agency continued to work towards the planned implementation of the Welfare Reform Programme as agreed under the Fresh Start Agreement. Enhancements to the Agency's counter fraud and customer error initiatives included the



continued working with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to utilise earnings and non state pension information via Her Majesty Revenue and Custom's Real Time Information system. Alongside the current range of activities, the new measures will ensure that the newly created Department for

Communities maintains a strong focus on addressing benefit losses and underpayments, with the aim of maintaining or further improving, the current low levels of fraud and customer error in Northern Ireland.

Glossary

Attribute	<p>An attribute is a characteristic of the case being examined. The characteristic may refer to the category a case belongs to or a numerical measure. For decision making the attribute is whether the case is correct or incorrect. For financial accuracy the attribute is the amount of money paid in error.</p>
Benchmarks	<p>Benchmarks are standards set by senior management against which performance can be measured.</p>
Clearance Times	<p>The Average Actual Clearance Time measures how quickly we process claims to the main benefits. It measures the average number of working days we take to process claims to benefit. The purpose of this target is to make sure that our customers' new claims to benefit are processed in a reasonable length of time.</p> <p>The end of year level of performance against target is calculated by dividing the total cumulative number of days taken to process all claims by the total number of new claims actually processed.</p>
Confidence Intervals	<p>The confidence interval gives an indication of the degree of uncertainty surrounding the estimate obtained from the sample, by giving a range that the true value is likely to be within. The quoted confidence intervals are based on a 95% confidence level, which means that we are 95% confident that the true value will lie within the specified range.</p>

Decision Making	Decision making is carried out on behalf of the Department by decision makers. The decision maker must make a decision by considering all the evidence, establishing the facts and applying the law, including any relevant case law, in each case. Where legislation specifies or implies discretion, the decision maker's judgement must be reasonable and made on balance of probabilities with unbiased discretion. The decision making standard represents the percentage of cases in the sample found to be correct when checked by Standards Assurance Unit
Financial Accuracy	The financial accuracy standard represents the estimate of the percentage of the benefit expenditure which is paid correctly.
Standards Assurance Unit	Standards Assurance Unit is part of the Pensions Disability and Corporate Services Directorate within the Social Security Agency. Standards Assurance Unit provides a reliable and independent measure of decision making, financial accuracy and customer fraud and customer error against benchmarks and targets and assists operational staff in the drive to improve accuracy in benefit administration.
Targets	Targets are attainable goals set by senior management for staff to achieve within an agreed timetable or to a set standard.
Variability	The variability within a population refers to the percentage of the population with/without the attribute or the range of values in the attribute being measured. The more varied the population the larger the sample size required to achieve a given confidence interval.

Social Security Benefits

Main Benefits	
DLA	Disability Living Allowance
ESA	Employment and Support Allowance
IS	Income Support
JSA	Jobseeker's Allowance
SP	State Pension
SPC	State Pension Credit
Other Benefits	
SF	Social Fund

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Terms of Reference for the Standards Committee

1. The Social Security (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 removed the distinction between adjudication decisions made by adjudication officers and departmental decisions and introduced single status decision makers.
This removed the statutory requirement for a Chief Adjudication Officer and by default, his responsibility for reporting on the standard of adjudication.
2. In addition to being responsible for the delivery of the decision-making process and the standard of decisions made, the Department was made responsible for reporting on the standard of decisions against which there is a right of appeal. These responsibilities were delegated to the Chief Executives of the Social Security Agency (Agency) and the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency. From 1 April 2008 the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency became a division within the Department for Social Development called the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Division and was later renamed Child Maintenance Service from 1 April 2013.
3. The responsibility for reporting on standards requires the Chief Executive of the Agency and Director of Child Maintenance Service to have monitoring programmes in place to determine the standards which are to be reported. It has been recognised however, that to enhance this programme and its credibility and transparency with the public, some independent oversight of the arrangements is necessary. Accordingly a Joint (Northern Ireland) Standards Committee has been appointed with an independent chairperson, together with two other independent members, and having terms of reference agreed by the Chief Executive and Director.
4. The Standards Committee will have an advisory rather than executive role. Its objectives will be to;
 - provide assurance to the Chief Executive and Director that effective decision making monitoring procedures are in place to confirm legislation is properly applied and to monitor and report performance against quality targets;
 - identify common trends relating to the quality of the Agency's and Child Maintenance Service's decision making and to highlight those areas where improvement is needed;
 - make specific recommendations on any area considered appropriate;
 - provide assurance to the Chief Executive and Director that mechanisms are in place to feed back monitoring results to the Agency and Child Maintenance Service to enable continuous improvement;

- report to the Chief Executive and Director on the operation of the decision-making process and where necessary to make recommendations for changes to it. The Chief Executive and Director should be free to meet informally and discuss issues that may arise during the year;
 - provide the Chief Executive and Director with an annual assurance in the form of reports on the quality of decision making in the Agency and Child Maintenance Service and such other reports as the Chief Executive, Director or the Standards Committee consider appropriate.
5. Standards Committee meetings will be held 4 times yearly to coincide with the monitoring programmes and minutes will be taken and agreed by Committee members.
 6. An agenda will be prepared in advance of each meeting and circulated to Committee members for consideration.

Appendix 2

2015 Decision making additional errors

Benefit	Total Cases Monitored	No of Cases Incorrect	No of Additional Decision Making Errors	Total no of Errors	DM Benchmark	"DM Standard % Achieved"	"DM Standard % Achieved if Additional errors were included"
Disability Living Allowance	61	0	0	0	98%	100%	100%
Employment and Support Allowance	594	19	0	19	95%	97%	97%
Income Support	308	9	13	22	95%	97%	93%
Jobseeker's Allowance	576	12	15	27	95%	98%	95%
State Pension	28	0	0	0	97%	100%	100%
State Pension Credit	376	28	12	40	95%	93%	89%

Clearance Times

Benefit	Target 2015/16	YEAR TO DATE PERFORMANCE AT March 2016	VARIANCE AGAINST TARGET March 2016
AA (Claims)	25 days (PM)	22	+3
AA (Special Rules)	4 days (PM)	2	+2
AA (Appeals)	35 days (PM)	27	+8
DLA (Claims)	35 days (BS)	34	+1
DLA (Special Rules)	4 days (PM)	3	+1
DLA (Appeals)	35 days (PM)	26	+9
ESA (Claims)	14 days (BS)	13	+1
ESA (Changes)	4 days (PM)	3	+1
ESA (Appeals)	45 days (PM)	52	-7
IIB (Claims)	55 days (PM)	64	- 9
IIB (Appeals)	90% in 90 days	88%	- 2%
CA (Claims)	21 days (PM)	18	+3
IS (Claims)	8 days (BS)	7	+1
IS (Changes)	4 days (PM)	3	+1
IS/JSA/SF (Appeals)	40 days (PM)	22	+18
JSA (Claims)	11 days (BS)	10	+1
JSA (Changes)	4 days (PM)	3	+1
State Pension (Claims)	7 days (BS)	5	+2
State Pension Credit (Claims)	9 days (BS)	6	+3
State Pension Credit (Changes)	5 days (PM)	3	+2
IS/JSA Overpayment Processing	15 days (PM)	12	+3
Budgeting Loans	4 days (PM)	3	+1
Community Care Grants	12 days (PM)	7	+5
Crisis Loans	2 days (PM)	1	+1
Funeral Payments	11 days (PM)	7	+4
Sure Start Maternity Grants	5 days (PM)	3	+2
Social Fund Reviews	10 days (PM)	5	+5

Clearance times are reported in Actual
Average Clearance Times for 2015 / 2016

Key to Targets

PM = Performance Measures

BS = Balanced Scorecard Targets

Extract from Income Support (General) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1987

(Legislation governing “persons from abroad” for the purposes of Income Support)

“Special cases: supplemental—persons from abroad

21AA. - (1) "Person from abroad" means, subject to the following provisions of this regulation, a claimant who is not habitually resident in the United Kingdom, the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man or the Republic of Ireland.

(2) No claimant shall be treated as habitually resident in the United Kingdom, the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man or the Republic of Ireland unless he has a right to reside in (as the case may be) the United Kingdom, the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man or the Republic of Ireland other than a right to reside which falls within paragraph (3).

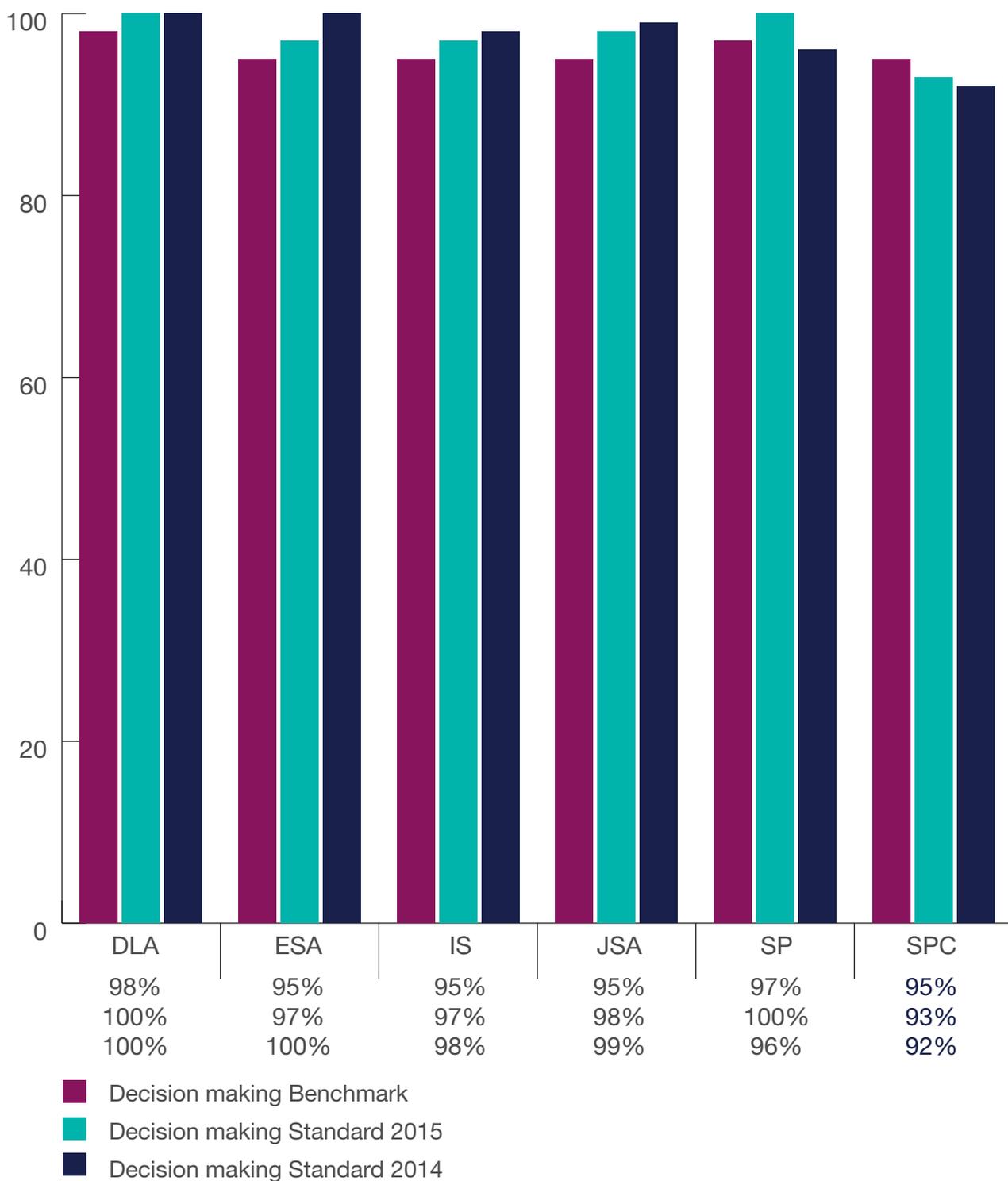
(3) A right to reside falls within this paragraph if it is one which exists by virtue of, or in accordance with, one or more of the following-

- (a) regulation 13 of the Immigration (European Economic Area) Regulations 2006 (c);
- (b) regulation 14 of those Regulations, but only in a case where the right exists under that regulation because the claimant is-

- (i) a jobseeker for the purpose of the definition of "qualified person" in regulation 6(1) of those Regulations, or
- (ii) a family member (within the meaning of regulation 7 of those Regulations) of such a jobseeker;
- (bb) regulation 15A(1) of those Regulations, but only in a case where the right exists under that regulation because the claimant satisfies the criteria in regulation 5A(4A) of those Regulations;
- (c) Article 6 of Council Directive No. 2004/38/EC (a);
- (d) Article 39 of the Treaty establishing the European Community (in a case where the claimant is a person seeking work in the United Kingdom, the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man or the Republic of Ireland): or
- (e) Article 20 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (in a case where the right to reside arises because a British citizen would otherwise be deprived of the genuine enjoyment of the substance of their rights as a European Union citizen).

- (4) A claimant is not a person from abroad if he is-
- (za) a qualified person for the purposes of regulation 6 of the Immigration (European Economic Area) Regulations 2006(2) as a worker or a self-employed person;
 - (zb) a family member of a person referred to in sub-paragraph (za) within the meaning of regulation 7(1)(a), (b) or (c) of those Regulations;
 - (zc) a person who has a right to reside permanently in the United Kingdom by virtue of regulation 15(1)(c), (d) or (e) of those Regulations;
 - (g) a refugee within the definition in Article 1 of the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees done at Geneva on 28th July 1951(b), as extended by Article 1(2) of the Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees done at New York on 31st January 1967(c);
 - (h) a person who has been granted leave or who is deemed to have been granted leave outside the rules made under section 3(2) of the Immigration Act 1971 where that leave is-
 - (i) discretionary leave to enter or remain in the United Kingdom;
 - (ii) leave to remain under the Destitution Domestic Violence concession, or
 - (iii) leave deemed to have been granted by virtue of regulation 3 of the Displaced Persons (Temporary Protection) Regulations 2005;
 - (hh) a person who has humanitarian protection granted under those rules;
 - (i) a person who is not a person subject to immigration control within the meaning of section 115(9) of the Immigration and Asylum Act and who is in the United Kingdom as a result of his deportation, expulsion or other removal by compulsion of law from another country to the United Kingdom;

Decision making standards verses benchmarks: 2014 and 2015



2015 Type of decision making errors

Benefit	Decision making Comment Rate %	Evidence		Determination of Questions		Findings of Fact		Interpretation and Application of the Law		Evidence Received After Date of Decision - Not Actioned			
		Number of Errors	Percentage of Overall Errors	Number of Errors	Percentage of Overall Errors	Number of Errors	Percentage of Overall Errors	Number of Errors	Percentage of Overall Errors	Number of Errors	Percentage of Overall Errors		
Employment and Support Allowance	3%	2	11%			17	89%					19	
Income Support	3%	2	22%			5	56%	2	22%			9	
Jobseeker's Allowance	2%	3	25%	1	8%	8	67%					12	
State Pension Credit	7%	12	43%	1	4%	12	43%	3	11%			28	

Appendix 6

Estimated Monetary Value of Error Information 2015 for Disability Living Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance, Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance, State Pension and State Pension Credit

Benefit	Estimated Annual Monetary Value of Error	Overpayments	Underpayments	Total Expenditure	Estimated Financial Error Rate
Disability Living Allowance	£1,698,225	£1,294,980	£403,245	£989,773,652	0.2%
Employment and Support Allowance	£12,769,281	£7,224,184	£5,545,098	£796,194,114	1.6%
Income Support	£2,680,065	£1,533,956	£1,146,109	£161,596,096	1.7%
Jobseeker's Allowance *	£1,361,621	£510,445	£851,176	£152,014,282	0.9%
State Pension	£5,917,154	£3,464,933	£2,452,221	£2,122,961,315	0.3%
State Pension Credit	£6,988,142	£3,716,745	£3,271,397	£289,462,889	2.4%

* includes training monies



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