



House of Commons

Committee of Public Accounts

**Department for Work
and Pensions: Using
leaflets to
communicate with the
public about services
and entitlements**

Seventh Report of Session 2006–07

*Report, together with formal minutes, oral and
written evidence*

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The Committee of Public Accounts

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Angela Browning MP (*Conservative, Tiverton and Honiton*)
Mr Alistair Carmichael MP (*Liberal Democrat, Orkney and Shetland*)
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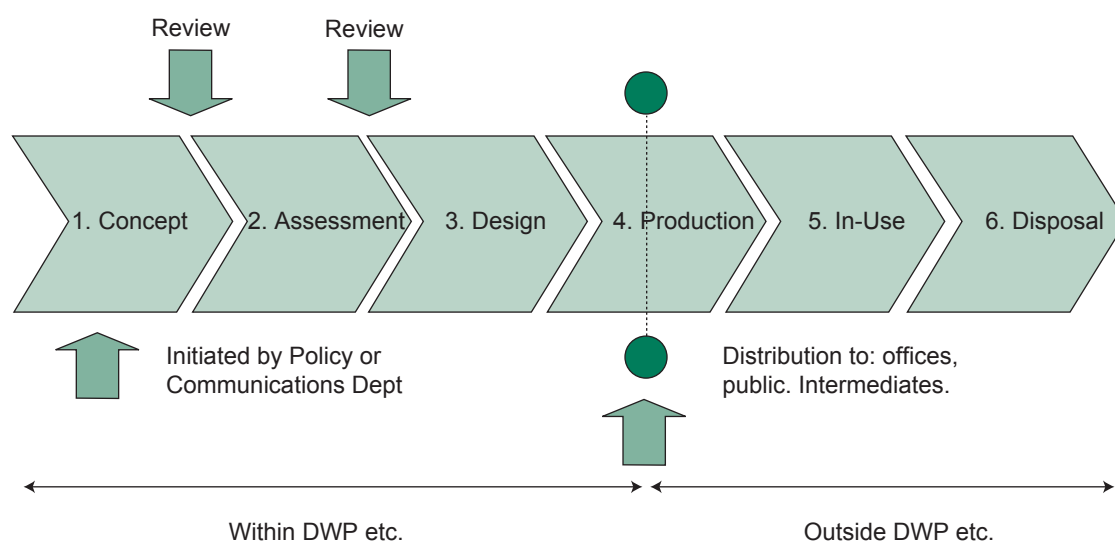
Summary

Information about services and benefits provided by the Department for Work and Pensions must be accurate so that members of the public can rely on it to make informed choices about their lives. Communicating clearly with its customers can be a challenge for the Department. On the one hand, it must provide information that is complete and accurate, but on the other, it must make the information concise and comprehensible to people with very different reading abilities. Despite increased use of new technology, including via the internet and contact centres, traditional means of communication—in particular, leaflets—remain essential. The Department has reduced the number it publishes from 245 in April 2005 to 178 in June 2006 and has committed itself to an overall reduction of 100.

Figure 1 summarises the life-cycle for leaflet production. The Department manages risks at each stage. The risk of issuing inaccurate or out of date information is significant for both the Department and for individuals and can lead to:

- citizens not claiming something to which they may be entitled;
- additional administrative costs where customers make inappropriate claims;
- increased likelihood of misunderstandings, leading to errors in payments; and poor value for money.

Figure 1: Leaflet life-cycle



Responsibility for providing information to the public is dispersed within the Department, with no individual having responsibility for the entire process. Until recently, over 1,000 staff had some responsibility for communications work and the relevant budgets were fragmented, making it difficult to align resources with strategic communication priorities. As a result, there is likely to be duplicated effort. The Department is unable to determine the exact cost of producing leaflets, which is estimated at £31 million in 2004-05. The production costs per thousand leaflets have fallen to an average of £250 for English products and £1,516 for those in Welsh although

the Department's cost data remains weak and incomplete. Ensuring information is up to date and accurate is not straightforward, and the Department has in the past failed to manage this risk. The Department could not rule out an Inherited SERPS-type problem occurring in the future and keeping leaflets up to date remains a constant challenge as the laws and regulations governing benefits and work programmes change frequently. Around 40% of the 27 different leaflets collected by the National Audit Office across the country were out of date. The Department aims to check all its leaflets twice a year for accuracy but the review process in place takes between 12 and 16 weeks and only 8 out of 20 leaflets examined had been reviewed as expected.

Many of the Department's leaflets use language that requires above average literacy levels to understand them. All thirteen of the key leaflets tested required a reading age higher than the national average and eight required a reading age equivalent to five years of secondary schooling. Leaflets could be improved if some simple design practices were adopted in all leaflets, including: contents pages, making titles clearer and making front covers relate clearly to the content. Despite the volume of leaflets printed each year, the Department does not regularly assess customers' use of leaflets or whether information is in accessible formats.

Overall, only 50% of the Department's offices were able to provide the leaflets required, and leaflets were rarely stocked at the external sites visited by the National Audit Office. Those aimed at pensioners and disabled people were most difficult to obtain. There has been no agreed view in the Department of what leaflets should be available locally, and there is a complicated supply chain and no single ordering point. The Department is letting a single supply contract by Autumn 2006 which it hopes will simplify the supply chain.

As a direct result of the C&AG's Report¹ the Department has taken a number of positive steps to improve the accuracy and availability of leaflets but there is still a long way to go before the Department manages its communication activity effectively and efficiently. On the basis of a Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, the Committee took evidence from the Department for Work and Pensions on three issues: managing the process for producing accurate leaflets; accessibility of information for a diverse range of customers; and making information available to the public.

¹ C&AG's Report, *Department for Work and Pensions: Using leaflets to communicate with the public about services and entitlements*, HC (2005-06) 797.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. **The Department has reduced its total number of published leaflets from 245 to 178 and is committed to making an overall reduction of 100.** To facilitate further decreases and maintain a low number as it develops new policies, the Department should:
 - seek to update information in existing leaflets wherever possible, rather than issue new ones;
 - establish a programme to amalgamate existing leaflets for each customer group;
 - identify through customer research how best to communicate new information to each individual client group before deciding whether a leaflet is appropriate; and
 - use the independent Social Security Advisory Committee as a barrier to the proliferation of leaflets by submitting all new products to the Committee with a justification for their need.
2. **Only 8 out of 20 leaflets examined had undergone the six-monthly reviews for accuracy to which the Department committed itself and around 40% of the 27 different leaflets collected by the National Audit Office across the country were out of date.** The reduction in the number of leaflets offers the opportunity to improve the effectiveness of these reviews. The Department should streamline the process, targeting the highest risk leaflets such as those with the most complex and frequently altered information. It should also extend the computerised 'content management system' used by The Pension Service across the whole organisation and allocate responsibility for managing the accuracy of specific facts and pieces of information wherever they appear, rather than monitoring information on a leaflet by leaflet basis.
3. **The Department is unable to determine the exact cost of producing leaflets, which has been estimated at £31 million in 2004-05.** The Department should develop a means of calculating the full costs of managing, producing and printing leaflets in order to inform decisions and developments such as changes to information management processes and the new print and distribution system.
4. **All 13 of the Department's key leaflets tested by the National Audit Office required a reading age higher than the national average, and eight required a reading age equivalent to five years of secondary schooling.** The Department is testing all new leaflets on customers, but also needs to revise previously published literature which remains in use. It should work through the existing leaflets, using simple tests such as those undertaken for the Comptroller and Auditor General's Report, until all have been tested using customers and also received a Plain English Campaign Crystal Mark.
5. **Leaflets are not easily accessible to groups such as those with disabilities or non-English speakers.** Whilst information in languages other than English or in Braille, large print or audio format can be ordered from the Department, this service is not

well publicised to customers or staff. The Department should research the needs of those groups not catered for by standard leaflets in order to determine how to give consistent messages, accessible to all, about where to obtain its services. In addition, the Department should require all offices to make physical access to leaflets easy for those with disabilities, which was not the case in nearly a quarter of places visited.

6. **Copies of four core departmental leaflets examined were available at only 11% of the non-departmental locations such as libraries and Citizens' Advice offices visited by the National Audit Office.** It is unrealistic to expect external organisations to hold copies of all the Department's leaflets, but key information-providing organisations such as Citizen's Advice need to be able to provide core information to the Department's customers. One option would be to produce a single leaflet of basic information that is unlikely to change for non-Departmental locations to stock and which contains directions on where to obtain more detailed information. This would reduce the need for constant updates and expensive distribution systems.

1 Managing the process for producing accurate leaflets

1. The Department for Work and Pensions provides services to nearly 30 million customers. In making its customers aware of their entitlements and responsibilities, it must provide accurate and timely information.² Despite increased use of new technology, including contact centres and the internet, the Department relies heavily on written communication, in particular leaflets. Customers must be able to rely on this material to make informed choices about their lives. Conveying often complex and changing information is a constant challenge for the Department.³ The laws and regulations governing work programmes and benefits change frequently, so that information must be updated regularly.

2. In April 2005, the Department had 245 separate leaflets on services and entitlements in use. At our hearing it advised us that the figure was then 178 and said it was committed to a reduction of 100.⁴ The Department said it was considering the need for each and every leaflet and in the future would produce more material about particular circumstances (for example, “Are you looking for work?” or “Have you had an accident?”) rather than specific benefits, which would further help to reduce the number.⁵

3. Putting incomplete or inaccurate information in the public domain is a significant risk for the Department and its customers, and this risk is now recognised in the risk management arrangements of the Department and its agencies. Customer errors—mistakes made with no fraudulent intent—cost the Department around £800 million a year, about one third of the estimated £2.5 billion lost in fraud and error annually. One way to try and reduce this loss is to help customers understand their rights and responsibilities.⁶ The greater the clarity of its communication, the less likely it is that customers will unwittingly make mistakes in applying for benefits.⁷

4. The Committee previously reported in 2000 and 2003 on the accuracy of the Department’s leaflets in relation to the Inherited State Earnings-Related Pension Scheme (SERPS) problem, when the Department’s failure to update a pensions leaflet lost the Government an estimated £8 billion in future savings. The Department believes the checks it has in place following the Committee’s previous report should minimise the risk of a reoccurrence.⁸ The National Audit Office found, however, that the intended twice-yearly checks for accuracy were not always happening: there was no central monitoring of leaflet

2 C&AG’s Report, *Department for Work and Pensions: Using leaflets to communicate with the public about services and entitlements*, HC (2005-06) 797.

3 Qq 14-15

4 Qq 2-4, 60, 65; C&AG’s Report, Figure 5

5 Q 65

6 Q 55; C&AG’s Report, paras 4-6 and Box 1, page 3

7 Q 40

8 Qq 10-11

reviews, so that the Department could not easily identify which ones had not been checked; and that the current process relied on individual leaflet managers being able to identify the right member of staff to check information. Reviews can take between 12-16 weeks to complete. Thus, where they are undertaken twice a year, leaflets may be under review for more than six months a year.⁹

5. Responsibility for assuring the information in leaflets has been fragmented, increasing the likelihood of inaccurate information slipping through the review process.¹⁰ The Department is now moving away from monitoring the accuracy of individual leaflets to managing individual pieces of information such as benefit rates.¹¹ Specific policy officials are thus responsible for ensuring that the information relating to their area of policy is correct everywhere that it appears. Using a computerised “content management” system, the Department can locate and update it where necessary, without the need for manual checks of each leaflet.¹² This system is already in place in The Pension Service and the Department expects to extend it across the whole organisation by the end of the year.¹³

6. Responsibility for producing, managing and distributing leaflets has, until recently, been very dispersed throughout the Department, with no ownership over the entire life-cycle for leaflets and no clear chain of command. This has made something that should be relatively simple into something very complicated.¹⁴ Although a single communications network will not be in place until 2008, the Director of Communications now sits on the Departmental board¹⁵ and heads of individual Agency communication teams work directly to him.

7. In response to the Comptroller and Auditor General’s Report, the Department has appointed a Head of Customer Information Products to oversee the production, quality and standards of the Department’s leaflets. In the past, policy teams have decided whether a new leaflet is required, what it should say and how it should be presented. Under the new arrangements, policy officials will draft the leaflet content, but it will be for the Communications Directorate to make sure it is written, released and issued in a way which meets Departmental standards and is accessible, understandable and available to customers.¹⁶

8. The number of staff involved in communications activity across the Department has been reduced since the start of the year from over 1,000 to around 700, of whom 300 are in the central communications directorate.¹⁷ This figure includes many people who maintain websites, work with the press, or are handling marketing campaigns and internal communications. The precise number of staff working on leaflets is difficult to assess, as it is often a very small part of an individual’s job. However, the Department estimate that it is

9 C&AG’s Report, paras 2.6-2.17; Q 67

10 C&AG’s Report, para 2.12 and Box 5

11 Q 50

12 Q 66

13 Qq 67-68

14 Qq 1, 47; C&AG’s Report, para 1.17

15 Qq 63, 71

16 Qq 47, 62-64

17 Qq 37, 38, 45

equivalent to approximately 31 full time staff.¹⁸ In the past, many staff have not been experienced communication professionals. The Department has sought to increase the professionalism of those in communication roles, in particular, by recruiting to new government communications network standards. It has also increased the number of staff from outside the Department, and all staff within the Communications Directorate now have previous relevant experience.¹⁹

9. The Department's printing and distribution systems, inherited from both the former Department of Social Security and Employment Service, are complex. One consequence is that it has struggled to offer a flexible service to customers wanting different quantities of leaflets, at times setting minimum order quantities at 50.²⁰ Although the Department has existed since 2001, it will not replace inherited arrangements until later this year, when it expects to contract with a single provider, or network of providers, for all its print and distribution services. The new contract is expected to provide a range of benefits, such as better management information and stock control.²¹ Progress has been made in rationalising printing, as well as closing surplus distribution centres, resulting in savings of about £0.5 million.²²

10. At the time of the Comptroller and Auditor General's Report, the Department published around 24 million leaflets a year at a cost, including printing and distribution, of £10.3 million. The Department has now reduced the total number of leaflets produced. In 2005-06, it printed 13 million leaflets at a cost of £6.6 million.²³ The Department has reduced the average cost of leaflets in English from £385 per thousand to £250.²⁴ It costs more to produce leaflets in Welsh—£1,516 per thousand (previously £1,580)²⁵—due to the lack of economies of scale, extra size of the products and the additional translation and set-up costs.²⁶ The Department will soon let a new contract to streamline its print and distribution arrangements, which it expects will reduce the total costs of producing leaflets further.

18 Q 46

19 Qq 48, 49, 71

20 C&AG's Report, paras 3.31-3.38 and Figure 16, page 43; Q91

21 Q 91

22 Qq 12, 91-93

23 Q 39

24 Qq 98, 99; Ev 15. The figures for costs have been revised by the Department for Work and Pensions since the Committee hearing in June 2006.

25 Q 101, Ev 15

26 Qq 100, 101, Ev 16

2 Accessibility of information for a diverse range of customers

11. For leaflets to be of value, it is essential that the information they contain can be understood by customers with a wide range of levels of education. However, in the absence of simple design measures such as contents pages and clear layouts, information in the Department's leaflets is often difficult for readers to use. In addition, all 13 of the commonly available leaflets tested by the National Audit Office required a reading age higher than the national average and eight required a reading age equivalent to, or higher than, a 16 year old partly because the Department needs to use words such as 'disability' or 'incapacity'.²⁷ The Department accepted that explaining difficult information in easy terms was a considerable challenge. To improve readability, it is now seeking 'Crystal Mark' status from the Plain English Campaign for all its leaflets. At present, 81 out of the current 178 leaflets (46%) have a Crystal Mark.²⁸

12. The Department has issued design standards for external communications, but in the past did not monitor whether they had been adhered to consistently. As a result, the National Audit Office found cases of leaflets which, for example, lacked contents pages and with misleading titles. Nor were leaflets routinely tested with customers before launch.

13. Instead, the Department relied on feedback forms, but these might not capture the views of customers with low literacy levels or who had had problems obtaining the leaflets in the first place.²⁹ In future it will test all leaflets on a sample of customers before they are issued. More of the Department's recent leaflets contain elements of best practice in design and all leaflets of 12 or more pages must now have a contents page. The new Head of Customer Information Products is responsible for ensuring that these standards are adhered to across the Department.³⁰

14. Making information accessible is not helped by the way in which services and initiatives are named. The customers who tested leaflets for the National Audit Office were sometimes misled by their names. There are 14 ways of describing a payment, and individual products can be confusing. For example, many pensioners were confused by the term 'Minimum Income Guarantee' whilst its replacement, the 'Pension Credit' is not a credit in the way that is commonly understood by the word.³¹

15. The Department intends to change its approach to leaflets, moving from product-based material (for example, about specific benefits such as Jobseeker's Allowance) to producing information focusing on 'life events' (such as bereavement or looking for work).³² This new approach should mean fewer leaflets, and will be accompanied by better

27 C&AG's Report, paras 2.23 to 2.30

28 Q 6-7

29 C&AG's Report, paras 2.26, 2.34-35; Q13

30 Qq 8-9, 13, 103

31 C&AG's Report, para 2.24; Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, *Dealing with the complexity of the benefits system*, HC (2005-06) 592; Committee of Public Accounts, Twelfth Report of Session 2002-03, *Tackling pensioner poverty: Encouraging take-up of entitlements*, HC 565.

32 Qq 64, 65

signposting to other sources of information, including the internet and personal advisors. It is not yet clear whether the Department will extend this approach to all customers, but the new Jobcentre Plus leaflets are structured in this way for customers of working age. The Department is also trying to move from a position where every new initiative requires a leaflet to one where decisions about leaflets are part of a wider assessment of what information the Department needs to communicate to citizens and how best to do it.³³

16. People with certain disabilities have particular problems accessing information. For example, at 22% of the 100 sites visited by the National Audit Office it would have been difficult for customers in a wheelchair to access leaflets easily. Customers can order Braille, large print and audio versions of leaflets, but the Department recognises that it will often need to provide other forms of help and support.³⁴

17. Information in languages other than English is also not always available in Departmental offices. Only 30% of offices visited had leaflets on display in languages other than English. Leaflets are routinely translated into 11 different languages, with three in audio versions only which are considered most helpful to the relevant communities.³⁵ The Department assesses the need for translations on the basis of the numbers requested and does not provide routine translations for immigrants from the European Union accession countries, most of whom are assumed to have a good command of English. The Department is able to translate leaflets on demand, and local offices have access to translator services, but customers need to know this service exists in order to use it. In addition, translated versions will reproduce the weaknesses of English-language leaflets.³⁶ Given that the Department is unable to determine how many of its customers are immigrants, there is a risk that the needs of these groups are not being adequately met.

33 C&AG's Report, Box 8

34 Qq 57-58

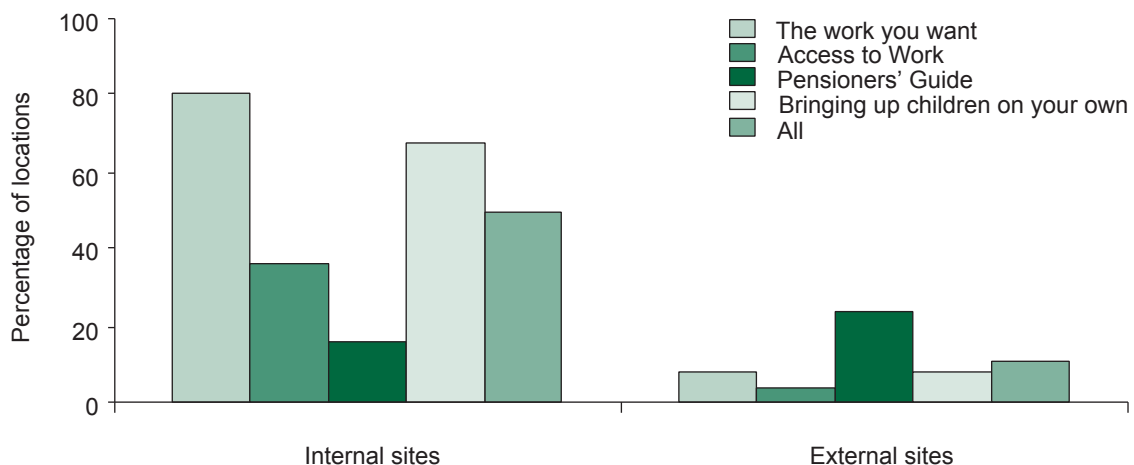
35 C&AG's Report, para 2.31; Qq 16-23, 97. The languages are Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, French, Gujarati, Polish, Punjabi, Somali, Sylheti, Tamil and Urdu.

36 Qq 16-22, 94-96

3 Making information available to the public

18. Customers can obtain leaflets from Departmental offices, although the number of sites—currently around 1,000—has reduced since 2001 when the Department was created and the majority cater for customers of working age.³⁷ The Department relies on individual offices to identify and order the leaflets that they make available to customers locally, described as a ‘pull approach’. This approach has led to some problems with availability, both in departmental and non-departmental offices (Figure 2). For example, copies of the four core departmental leaflets required were only available at 11% of the external sites visited by the National Audit Office where it was specifically sought.³⁸

Figure 2: Availability of core leaflets in locations visited by the National Audit Office



19. The private sector tends to rely more on a “push” approach to send material out to branches from a central point, with clear directions on what should be made available and when. The Department is moving closer to this approach. When new products are issued, local offices will be sent copies, told what to do with old material (including whether it must be destroyed or can be used to exhaustion), and with some indication of the importance of the product. The Department is unlikely to move to a push approach completely, however, as it needs to retain flexibility to respond to locally identified demand. The planned single print and distribution system, due to be let in Autumn 2006,

37 C&AG's Report, para 3.2

38 C&AG's Report, para 3.4

will hold details of use by each office and will enable the Department to make more intelligent use of a push approach.³⁹

20. Where leaflets are not readily available, customers rely on local staff to provide the information they require. However, they are often unable to assist customers, sometimes redirecting them to places that do not stock leaflets or incorrectly advising them that the leaflets are no longer available. Better customer service more generally would go a long way towards helping customers obtain and understand information on entitlements at local offices, and staff need good quality guidance and training so they are able to respond to requests for information. A range of improvements have now been put in place to help meet the needs of customers.⁴⁰ Regular reviews and mystery shopping exercises are to be carried out at least every six months to test the availability of leaflets at local offices. The Department hopes these improvements will minimise the occasions when it fails its customers, although accepts that failures to meet customer needs will still happen at times.⁴¹

21. A number of steps have been taken to improve local offices' ability to obtain leaflets. All Jobcentre Plus offices have now been provided with clear instructions on what information they are required to stock and how to maintain it. Information for pensioners and disabled people has been difficult to obtain from Jobcentre Plus offices, which have now been instructed to carry 92 specific leaflets on a range of subjects for different customer groups, including basic pension information.⁴² A complete list of all the Department's leaflets is now available to staff, and where copies of leaflets cannot be downloaded from the internet there is now a single telephone number from which copies can be obtained.

22. Until April 2004, many of the Department's leaflets were available at Post Offices. This arrangement has expired but the Department has not found a suitable alternative.⁴³ Although the Department has increased the variety of subjects covered by leaflets at its network of around 800 Jobcentre Plus offices, there remains a gap in the coverage and availability of leaflets beyond Departmental sites. It is now arranging with Citizens Advice to provide access to all its leaflets, but given the number of out of date leaflets the Department has in its own offices, and the lack of control the Department has over external sites, keeping stocks of leaflets at these sites remain up to date will be a challenge.⁴⁴

23. It is important that the stock of leaflets is up to date wherever they are made available to the public and that these are checked rigorously and continuously. Around 40% of the 27 different leaflets that the National Audit Office collected were out of date, in some cases by several years.⁴⁵ Analysis to determine whether any relationship existed between those areas worst served by the Department and offices in the poorest areas⁴⁶ using the Index of

39 Qq 72, 73

40 Qq 41-44, 69-70, 88; C&AG's Report, Box 10

41 Qq 56, 84-86

42 Qq 36, 56

43 C&AG's Report, para 3.24

44 Qq 89, 90

45 C&AG's Report, paras 3.9-3.13

46 Qq 83-87

Multiple Deprivation established no significant link.⁴⁷ The Department does not expect that the leaflets it stocks will ever be 100% up to date and does not have such a target, considering that to set one of less than 100% would suggest that it was acceptable for some leaflets to be out of date.⁴⁸

24. Direct action by The Pension Service Chief Executive to tackle the problem of out of date leaflets in The Pension Service reduced the percentage stocked at Pension Centres from 60% to 10%. Such positive results should not depend on the intervention of such a senior official, although the Department suggested that at times it was right for senior staff to give impetus to tackling a particular problem. The new role of Head of Customer Information will provide the link between policy teams and print and distribution teams to make sure that the work undertaken in one area triggers appropriate action in another area.⁴⁹

25. Increasingly, the Department's customers use the internet to obtain information. Amongst pensioners, for example, there has been more use electronic forms of contact than the Department expected,⁵⁰ though it accepts the internet will never be suitable for all customers. It is currently considering whether leaflets aimed at those customers more likely to use the internet (for example, advisors accessing technical guides) need to be printed at all, but is unlikely to move away completely from printed leaflets.⁵¹ For those customers who can and want to access services on-line, almost all of the Department's leaflets are now available electronically. Staff can also access and print them at local offices and though the Department does not wish to burden busy front line staff printing leaflets, more use will be made of these facilities to meet demand for one off, low demand leaflets.⁵² Jobcentre Plus has touch-screen technology for customers to access and print job vacancy information at local offices, but they are unable to print leaflets from these points. The Department has not ruled out this facility for the future and will continue to monitor capacity locally as technology advances.⁵³

47 Regression modelling was used to determine any link between out of date leaflets and deprivation, based on visits to 100 Departmental sites. For both 'core' and 'all' leaflets the relationship between the Index of Multiple Deprivation and the proportion of leaflets out of date was not significant.

48 Qq 77, 87

49 Q 47, 54

50 Q 76, 81-82

51 Qq 51-53, 69, 70, 74, 75

52 Qq 78, 81, 82

53 Qq 79, 80

Formal minutes

MONDAY 4 DECEMBER 2006

Members present:

	Mr Edward Leigh, in the Chair
Mr Richard Bacon	Helen Goodman
Mr David Curry	Mr Sadiq Khan
Mr Ian Davidson	Mr Austin Mitchell
Mr Philip Dunne	Mr Alan Williams

Oral evidence

Sir John Bourn KCB, Comptroller and Auditor General, was in attendance.

Ms Paula Diggle, Treasury Officer of Accounts, was in attendance.

The Comptroller and Auditor General's Report on A foot on the ladder: Low cost home ownership (HC 1048, Session 2005-06) was considered.

Mr Peter Housden, Permanent Secretary, Department for Communities and Local Government, Mr Jon Rouse, Chief Executive, Housing Corporation and Mr David Corner, Director, National Audit Office, gave oral evidence (HC 134-i).

The witnesses withdrew.

Draft Reports

A draft Report (Department for Work and Pensions: Using leaflets to communicate with the public about services and entitlements), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 25 read and agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations read and agreed to.

Summary read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Seventh Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned until Wednesday 6 December at 3.30 pm.]

List of witnesses

Wednesday 7 June 2007

Mr Leigh Lewis, CB, Permanent Secretary, **Mr Simon MacDowall**, Communications Director, Department for Work and Pensions, **Mr Matthew Nicholas**, Acting Director for External Relations and Communications, Jobcentre Plus and **Mr Jeremy Lonsdale**, Director, National Audit Office.

Ev 1

List of written evidence

Department for Work and Pensions

Ev 15

List of Reports from the Committee of Public Accounts Session 2006–07

First Report	Tsunami: Provision of support for humanitarian assistance	HC 25
Second Report	Improving literacy and numeracy in schools (Northern Ireland)	HC 108
Third Report	Collections Management in the National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland	HC 109
Fourth Report	Gas distribution networks: Ofgem's role in their sale, restructuring and future regulation	HC 110
Fifth Report	Postcomm and the quality of mail services	HC 111
Sixth Report	Gaining and retaining a job: the Department for Work and Pensions support for disabled people into work	HC 112
Seventh Report	Department for Work and Pensions: Using leaflets to communicate with the public about services and entitlements	HC 133

Oral evidence

Taken before the Committee of Public Accounts

on Wednesday 7 June 2006

Members present:

Mr Edward Leigh, in the Chair

Annette Brooke
Mr David Curry
Mr Ian Davidson
Helen Goodman

Mr Sadiq Khan
Sarah McCarthy-Fry
Mr Austin Mitchell
Mr Alan Williams

Sir John Bourn KCB, Comptroller and Auditor General, National Audit Office, was in attendance and gave oral evidence.

Mr Marius Gallaher, Alternate Treasury Office of Accounts, HM Treasury, gave evidence.

REPORT BY THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL USING LEAFLETS TO COMMUNICATE WITH THE PUBLIC ABOUT SERVICES AND ENTITLEMENTS (HC 797)

Witnesses: **Mr Leigh Lewis**, CB, Permanent Secretary, **Mr Simon MacDowall**, Communications Director, Department for Work and Pensions, **Mr Matthew Nicholas**, Acting Director for External Relations and Communications, Jobcentre Plus and **Mr Jeremy Lonsdale**, Director, National Audit Office, gave evidence.

Q1 Chairman: Good afternoon. Welcome to the Committee of Public Accounts where today we are considering the Comptroller and Auditor General's Report, *Department for Work and Pensions: Using leaflets to communicate with the public about services and entitlements*. We welcome back to our Committee Leigh Lewis who is Permanent Secretary at the Department for Work and Pensions and Simon MacDowall, the director of communications, and Mr Matthew Nicholas, who is the acting director for external relations and communications at Jobcentre Plus. You are all very welcome. Shall we start by looking, please, at page 19, paragraph 1.17 which under a heading tells us that responsibility for providing information to the public is very dispersed with no ownership over the entire life cycle. Mr Lewis, why do you make something as simple as publishing leaflets so complicated?

Mr Lewis: Thank you for your welcome. We have moved on a long way from that in the sense that there is now a very clear accountability within the department for the over-arching production of our leaflets and communications. Simon MacDowall now has that very clear and direct responsibility. I would like also to say to the Committee, in response in part to the NAO's Report, that we have also appointed, working directly to Simon MacDowall, a Head of Customer Information Products who is going to be responsible for overseeing the end to end production, quality and standards of the department's leaflets. The situation as portrayed in the NAO Report was entirely accurate when it was written. It has changed substantially since.

Q2 Chairman: Then you will be able to give incredibly positive responses to all my questions and we can all go home very quickly. Can we look, please, at figure five on page 16? Why do you need

245 leaflets and when are you going to reduce them?

Mr Lewis: I hope you will see this as a sign of progress because we have sought really to look at this Report in great detail. We have already reduced that number of leaflets. Today it stands at 178, which is still a lot of leaflets and we would like to get it down somewhere closer to the 100 mark. We are now looking pretty ruthlessly at the need for each and every leaflet.

Q3 Chairman: When I was discussing with the NAO earlier, I said I would ask you for a commitment to get rid of 100 so you are going to do that easily, are you not?

Mr Lewis: I would very much hope, given that we have come down already by something like 70, we can achieve a reduction of 100.

Q4 Chairman: You know the Revenue have done that, have they not? They have got rid of 100.

Mr Lewis: I did not know that but that will be an added spur.

Q5 Chairman: They are part of the same government so it would be nice to talk to them and find out what they have done.

Mr Lewis: We do talk a lot to the Revenue.

Q6 Chairman: Would you look at page 31? Let us talk about the intelligibility of these leaflets. Paragraph 2.30 has this wonderful phrase: "Using a simple readability test, SMOG (Simple Measure of Gobbledygook), we found that none of the leaflets tested were likely to be accessible to those with low literacy levels." How can you expect your customers to understand leaflets that require an education above the national average?

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Mr Lewis: This is a really serious issue for us. Can I say what we have done and what we are doing? First of all, we are making it an absolute standard now that we are going to submit all of our customer leaflets for accreditation by the Plain English Campaign to seek the Crystal Mark status. Of that 178 that we have today, 81 of those leaflets—that is 46%—now have Crystal Mark accreditation. That is about 90% more than had it two years ago so we are well on the way. I have set my department the challenge that every single one of our leaflets should have Crystal Mark accreditation. There is a bit of a debate also with the Plain English Campaign about the SMOG test on gobbledegook.

Q7 Chairman: Tell us about it.

Mr Lewis: The Plain English Campaign have said—and I am quoting from some of their words—“Our view is that the systems are mathematical and, although they can be useful as a guide, they do not guarantee that a document is clear. You cannot give a document a score for plain English. Either it is crystal clear or it is not.” That is the Plain English Campaign view and we are setting our benchmark as the plain English Crystal Mark, as the gold standard, and we are seeking to achieve that now in every case.

Q8 Chairman: Looking now at testing this with the public, if you turn over the page and look at paragraph 2.34, “The Department does not regularly evaluate the use of leaflets by customers to test the accessibility of the information . . .”. Why do you not do this? Why do you not test all your leaflets with your customers before you issue them?

Mr Lewis: I hope this does not seem as if it is going to become simply repetitive. We are going to do that. We are now committing ourselves that we are going to test all of our new leaflets with a sample of our customers before we issue them. We have made some progress already and a number of our leaflets, many more than previously, have a tear off slip which allows people to tell us what they think.

Q9 Chairman: I have been told about that. What is the point of that when many of your people have difficulty reading the leaflets in the first place and have low literacy levels? You are asking them to send back a tear off slip which they probably will not read.

Mr Lewis: I agree. That is one thing that we have done. We have had some quite positive reactions to that but it is not in any way sufficient, which is why we are going to do what this Report recommends. We are going in future to seek to test all of our leaflets with a sample of our customers before they are issued.

Q10 Chairman: I wish all the other Permanent Secretaries were as positive as you are about these Reports. Please look at page 17, box three. This is an important question. Can you guarantee to this Committee that there is not another SERPS disaster lurking out there with one of your leaflets?

Mr Lewis: I am afraid I cannot guarantee it because in the world in which we live it is impossible for me to use the word “guarantee”.

Q11 Chairman: Do you think there is?

Mr Lewis: No, I do not think there is. That is because, not least guided by this Committee and its predecessors, this department and its predecessor departments put in a range of checks, much more rigorous and robust ones than were in place previously, following the whole SERPS set of events. We have now what is called an accuracy of information project which ensures that every single leaflet has to go through a process of approval before it is signed off. It has to have an owner within the Senior Civil Service. It has to go through a process of approvals involving lawyers as well as key policy officials. We also have asked the Social Security Advisory Committee as a result of the SERPS events to play a role and they routinely look not at all of our leaflets but at a significant number.

Q12 Chairman: That leads us to figure 16 on page 43: “Ordering and supply chain . . .”. Have you seen this figure? Obviously you have. It is staggeringly complicated. Why can you not simplify the supply chain for producing leaflets? Can you make any sense of this figure?

Mr Lewis: Like all of these, it looks probably slightly worse in this sense than it is. Nevertheless, the DWP when it came into existence did inherit a set of distribution and supply arrangements from its predecessor organisations. We have already done a number of things. We have already, for example, transferred almost all of our printing contracts to Print Direct. This year we will be saving about £500,000 as a result of that and other changes, including shutting some of our own distribution and printing centres. Much more importantly, we are quite close to letting a single contract for the printing and distribution of all of our leaflets. We are now at the final stages of that competition and we hope to select and appoint a provider in the autumn.

Q13 Chairman: Would you look at paragraph 2.24 on page 29? “The design and layout of some leaflets does not follow best practice standards.” These are simple things. A contents page is not always used. Titles of leaflets do not always make clear what is inside. Why do your leaflets not conform to best practice and design?

Mr Lewis: More and more of them do and it is worth saying that the NAO Report says that many of the leaflets examined as part of our review displayed elements of widely recognised best practice. I have circulated some examples of our recent leaflets which might be of value. Some of our most recent leaflets are genuinely excellent in terms of their presentation and content. They have contents pages and so on. The challenge now for us is to extend that good practice universally and again we are going to, as a standard now, ensure that all leaflets of 12 pages or more have a contents page.

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Q14 Chairman: Lastly, may I sum it up in this way? I hope you can reply positively because I have asked this question before and I will keep asking it of you. In Third World countries you are not told what you are entitled to. In this country you are, but half the people apparently do not understand the leaflets that you are producing. To be fair to you, your systems are so complex, so Byzantine in their means testing, that they are difficult and many of your own staff have difficulty understanding them. We have now had this system for the best part of 60 years in this country. What are you personally going to do as the Permanent Secretary in the department to simplify the whole system so that it can be readily understood? I am sure if we look now at the sharp end of it these days none of us would have any difficulty and nor would any of your customers have any difficulty in understanding it. That is right, is it not, so what are you personally going to do to simplify the whole system?

Mr Lewis: I hope I can answer your question by using the past tense as well as the future tense. That was my first hearing before this Committee on the assumption of my role as permanent secretary. One of the things I told the Committee that I would be doing but which is now a reality was to set up a Benefit Simplification Unit within the department. That unit now exists. It is in place.

Q15 Chairman: What has it done so far?

Mr Lewis: It has begun to do a number of things. It has produced a benefit simplification guide for staff throughout the department setting out how we should seek to make our benefits simpler. I have set it a challenge by the end of this calendar year of having produced some measurable, clear simplifications. This is tough. We have a very, very complex benefit system as we know. The NAO Report on that said that there was no magic wand to wave. In some ways, it was a question of “chipping away”—their words—at this system but I am pretty determined that we are going to “chip away” pretty energetically. I want one test of this role for however long I am in it to be “do I leave a benefit system which is simpler on the day I leave than the one I found when I arrived?”

Q16 Mr Khan: Can I firstly apologise to the panel for coming in slightly late? Sir John, I have not read this as thoroughly as I should have done. Can you point out to me where the Report from the NAO deals with leaflets in languages other than English?

Mr Lewis: It does in a number of places.

Q17 Mr Khan: Maybe Mr Lewis can give the reference for the places where they are referred to, or Mr MacDowall?

Mr MacDowall: Would you like to know what we do in foreign languages within the department?

Mr Nicholas: Page 16 talks about accessibility.

Q18 Mr Khan: Tell us what you do for people whose first language is not English.

Mr MacDowall: We routinely produce leaflets in 11 languages which are known to us as languages that there is a high demand for. Where there is information that, say, somebody is coming into the Jobcentre looking for information in another language, we will either as a first port of call use translation services—

Q19 Mr Khan: Does one need to have a GCSE in those 11 other languages to understand them or are they simpler than the English versions?

Mr MacDowall: Where we translate them, they will work off the language level of the English version. The English version will be translated so, going back to what we were saying earlier, if we are achieving the high standards of plain English, which we are not universally yet, we need to be much better at the process.

Q20 Mr Khan: It is fair to say that the failure of the leaflets that are in English is compounded in the languages that are not English.

Mr MacDowall: If the leaflet itself is not good in English, it is not going to be better in another language. If the language is good in the original English, then the translation will—

Q21 Mr Khan: We can have no greater confidence that the languages in the other 11 are any better in quality than the English ones.

Mr MacDowall: They will be of the same standards as the English ones and some of them, by the way, we will do in audio versions if it is appropriate.

Q22 Mr Khan: Sir John, did the NAO look at the quality of those leaflets to see if they were as bad as, worse or better than the English ones?

Sir John Bourn: If they are direct translations they will be the same level of quality. In that sense of course they will be less valuable than they could be and ought to be.

Q23 Mr Khan: In Tooting, I have more than 10,000 pensioners. Just under 4,000 are receiving Tax Credits. My concern is that there is a huge number entitled to benefits who are not receiving them. Some of them are people whose ethnic origin is different to English. I am not convinced that there are enough steps being taken by your department to reach those people. Is the concern that I have fair?

Mr Lewis: It is a very fair concern but it is one which we really are seeking to address in two senses, in terms of Pension Credit generally, leaving aside people’s backgrounds. There is a huge amount of effort to try and ensure the take-up of Pension Credit is as high as it possibly can be. In terms of languages, I do not any more than Mr MacDowall want to pretend to you that it is perfect but we are putting in a huge degree of effort, probably more than any comparable organisation I am aware of, to have our material available in 11 languages routinely. We will also, unless it is so uneconomic as to make it simply impossible, seek on request to translate into other languages as well.

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Q24 Mr Khan: You referred to the work you do with the Revenue. Do you do much work with Defra?

Mr Lewis: No, I am not aware that we do work with Defra in this respect.

Q25 Mr Khan: Defra run a scheme with a company called Eager which helps pensioners who wish to have insulation in their homes and provides a grant towards having insulation in their homes. I recently organised a session for pensioners in Tooting with the huge assistance of Eager and Defra. I rang The Pension Service and they came along and had a stall. The number of pensioners who appreciated the advice they received and never knew they were entitled to benefits was surprising to me. I accept your point that where people approach The Pension Service with particular needs you have a decent service. My concern is what you are doing to reach those people.

Mr Lewis: First of all, spurred by your question, I will go back and see if we can learn more. Secondly, The Pension Service does now operate vastly more frequently in partnership with other organisations than ever it did. It operates joint operations with local authorities in an increasing number of areas. It works very closely with organisations like Age Concern. It takes its services out to local pension information services.

Q26 Mr Khan: I am pleased you have read my script because you obviously know the train of thought I have. To give you an example, if you are a pensioner in Tooting, you may be interested to know about Pension Credits, your baby. Which department is winter fuel payments?

Mr Lewis: Us.

Q27 Mr Khan: Council tax benefits?

Mr Lewis: Not directly us.

Q28 Mr Khan: Free off-peak bus travel?

Mr Lewis: That would be the local authority.

Q29 Mr Khan: Free TV licences?

Mr Lewis: Not us.

Q30 Mr Khan: Who is it?

Mr MacDowall: This is why we produce something like the pensioners' guide which joins up all of these things and signposts people.

Q31 Mr Khan: The pensioners' guide deals with things like free TV licences?

Mr MacDowall: Yes. It takes a whole range of government services.

Q32 Mr Khan: Free eye tests? You do not know?

Mr Lewis: We are hugely proud of the pension guide.

Q33 Mr Khan: How many pages is that?

Mr Lewis: It must run to about 50 plus but it has been given the Crystal Mark. It has been seen as one of the very best products we produce. It has been

commended for joining up for pensioners the whole range of provision. It is absolutely not limited to the provision operated by this department.

Q34 Mr Khan: Discounted driving licences?

Mr Lewis: All of these things.

Q35 Mr Khan: I have managed to do all of these things on an A4 page with my photograph looking quite handsome on the front and a phone number. If you are a pensioner, you may not have the basic language skills in English, let alone if your mother tongue is different. Do you think that a document of more than 50 pages is the best way of communicating with those people?

Mr Lewis: It is not our only way. We are in danger almost of violently agreeing. I absolutely agree that we should not operate in departmental silos. We have customers and those pensioners who are our customers are not terribly interested in which department administers different things. They want to feel that they can get a joined up, one stop service. Increasingly that is what we are seeking to give them, not just through our leaflets but also through the way that The Pension Service is operating on the ground with partners.

Q36 Mr Khan: Do you accept the criticism in the NAO Report that the leaflets aimed at pensioners and disabled people were the most difficult to obtain?

Mr Lewis: I certainly do not quarrel with the facts stated in the NAO Report. We issued 1.8 million pensioners' guides last year. It goes routinely, for example, to every new recipient as he or she reaches state pension age. Again, we go to very considerable lengths, including leaflets in some doctors' waiting rooms, to get information out. This Report found that the availability of leaflets for pensioners in our Jobcentre Plus offices was very hit and miss. We have now taken a very clear decision that every single one of our Jobcentre Plus offices—that is some 800 nation wide—will now stock a basic leaflet on Pension Credit.

Q37 Mr Khan: Can I ask you about the number of staff who work in this field? How many staff are employed doing this communication work?

Mr MacDowall: The total number of people now doing communications work of any kind throughout the entire department is at the moment around 711, down from the 1,000 that it was. All of the bits, Jobcentre Plus, The Pension Service, the centre for communications activity, we are making sure are much more coherent, with higher professionalism and reduced numbers.

Q38 Mr Khan: How many work in the Communications Directorate?

Mr MacDowall: Just over 300 right now within the Communications Directorate. A lot of those are working on websites, for example, with probably the largest number in our e-communications teams.

Q39 Mr Khan: What is the cost of leaflets?

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Mr MacDowall: The cost of leaflets has dropped. At the time of the Report we had 24 million leaflets at a cost, for printing and distribution, of £10.3 million. We are now down to 13 million leaflets last year at a cost of £6.6 million. We have also dropped the cost per leaflet through improved processes. We are now at a cost of leaflets of £223 per thousand in English and £483 per thousand in Welsh, which is a reduction from last year.¹

Mr Khan: Thank you for your direct answers.

Q40 Helen Goodman: I am sorry I was late. The first section of the Report is on managing risks. We have previously talked to you and asked you about the level of fraud and error in the department. I wonder whether you are able to attribute any particular value or proportion of the fraud and error in the department to the inaccuracies in information that people are given.

Mr Lewis: No, I cannot do that precisely but we do know that, of the total fraud and error within the department, it splits around a third, a third, a third in very broad brush terms between fraud—that is where we believe that people are deliberately seeking to defraud us—official error—which is where we make mistakes, our staff make the mistakes, and therefore benefit ends up being paid wrongly as a result—and customer error, where our customers make mistakes but with no fraudulent intent. It is that third element, clearly, which is the one which most directly relates to this because the greater the clarity we can give to our customers the less likely it is that they are going unwittingly to make mistakes.

Q41 Helen Goodman: I must admit I was rather concerned by boxes 10, 14 and 15. These are the ones with the mystery shopping experiences. For example, when people went in to one Jobcentre and asked for a leaflet another member of staff was sent to find it but had not returned after 40 minutes. I am sorry to say this seems strangely familiar. I wonder what training you give to your staff in terms of the leaflets and communicating with the general public.

Mr Lewis: In a moment I am going to ask Matthew Nicholas from Jobcentre Plus, because these are the offices we are talking about, to say in a little more detail what we have done. In the light of this Report, we have taken a very, very great deal of action to ensure that Jobcentre Plus offices now have a very clear understanding of the leaflets that they are meant to have and very clear guidance and instruction about keeping those leaflets up to date and available. That has been raised very substantially up the priority order.

¹ *Note by witness:* In responding to this question, Mr MacDowall provided figures of £223 per thousand for leaflets in English and £483 per thousand for leaflets in Welsh. In fact these figures referred only to the set of leaflets produced by Jobcentre Plus. I apologise for the fact that we inadvertently misled the Committee in this respect. The correct figures for all of the leaflets produced for the whole of DWP, including Jobcentre Plus, are £250 per thousand for leaflets in English and £1,516 per thousand for leaflets in Welsh.

Mr Nicholas: When the National Audit Office did the work we were at an early stage of having clear standards for displaying leaflets. Since then, we have gone back to check every one of our offices, not just the ones that the NAO visited, to make sure that a full set of leaflets is there and on display. We have extended that list to some of the key leaflets for people interested in pensions, for example, and we are going to review that at least every six months to make sure that clarity is there. We are reissuing those standards this month again to explain to our staff what they should do when a customer comes in and asks for information. That is what our mystery shopping is also testing.

Q42 Helen Goodman: Do you really think that sending out essential guidance is the way to get staff to behave differently? Some of these issues are about their behaviour. I am interested in the training.

Mr Nicholas: I do not have the details with me on the specific training we give to our front line staff but handling customers is a key part of that. If you wish, I could let the Committee know the details of the training. Systems do play a part because people need to be clear about the expectations in their job. The instructions on which they work are important alongside training.²

Q43 Helen Goodman: Would you agree with me that this needs to be ongoing because obviously you are restructuring; you are having new literature?

Mr Nicholas: Absolutely.

Mr MacDowall: We continue our own programme of mystery shopping to ensure that things are either happening or not happening so that we can take corrective action where necessary.

Q44 Helen Goodman: Paragraph 3.19 revealed that at the time the Report was written you did not have a central list of the leaflets available for all staff. Do you have that?

Mr MacDowall: We have that now, yes.

Q45 Helen Goodman: I was somewhat taken aback by the answer you gave to Mr Khan that you have 300 staff working on these leaflets.

Mr MacDowall: No, not working on leaflets; in total communications activity of any kind, including building our websites, working with the press, running marketing campaigns. It is the totality of people doing internal communications within the department.

Q46 Helen Goodman: How many people do you have doing leaflets and the associated bits as well?

Mr MacDowall: I do not have a number for exactly how many work on leaflets. It probably would be difficult because not everybody would necessarily

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have that as their only job. Some people would do it partly and other people would be doing it full time. I could get an approximation.³

Mr Lewis: There is not just a single number here because an awful lot of our staff have a role in leaflets. The policy owner of a leaflet has to approve it and make sure it is well written, but that would only be a part of his or her job.

Q47 Helen Goodman: I appreciate that. It was quite clear from the Report that in The Pension Service, where the Chief Executive had taken a very championing role, that did make a significant difference. Taking a championing role is one thing; at what grade is the person leading the work on this in the department?

Mr MacDowall: There is myself and the senior Civil Service but I have also just appointed somebody at grade six level, which is the highest below that as Head of Customer Information Products, who will have a liaison role to make sure the whole end to end process works properly because you have people from print and distribution on one side, policy people, people in the individual agencies. What we have not had up to now is a really clear oversight from concept through to delivery. That person is working directly to me with a small team in the centre as well to ensure coherence.

Q48 Helen Goodman: How many of the people who work in your team have some experience in communications?

Mr MacDowall: Virtually all of my team are experienced in communications.

Q49 Helen Goodman: Outside the department?

Mr MacDowall: Yes.

Q50 Helen Goodman: One of the problems with things being out of date is it would appear that people with policy ownership are not really seeing through what needs to be done in order for people to be able to claim benefits. I wonder if you can just describe for us the relationships you have with people working on policy so that we do not have the situation described here of leaflets not being available.

Mr MacDowall: It has been problematic and the NAO pointed this out. We are moving away from managing the product to managing chunks of information. If, for example, you are the policy official in charge of state pensions, you will be responsible for that bit of information to be correct. We are bringing in a web content management system so this can be updated once and, for example, state pension information appears in 13 different

products. One of the issues is that you have to go through everything manually and the likelihood of something slipping through gaps is quite high. This has already started in The Pension Service and we hope this will be across the department and all our products and services by the end of this year.

Q51 Helen Goodman: I wonder if you could also describe where you are going in terms of how you relate hard copies to the availability for people in offices to download stuff on the web as needed. Can you just say something about that?

Mr MacDowall: Yes. We are looking at a slightly different approach to what we have done in the past. What we know from our customers is that people would prefer to have information that goes around their own life circumstances and life events. If you are thinking about retiring, the pensioners' guide would be useful as opposed to a whole suite of information based on a single product the department produces. The department's needs are not the customers' needs. We are part way through a review of leaflets as to the content and this is where Leigh is able to be reasonably confident we can reduce numbers. As we move to this life cycle approach, we can have fewer products but they are covering a range of signposting issues. You can take specific benefit information, put those online where they can be updated quickly and staff can have access in technical manuals but we do not need to put this out to the public. There is a balance to be struck and we have to go through it quite carefully to be sure that we are not taking information away from the public that they might need. We have to look at it in some detail but heading down that route, together with the web content management system, gives me the confidence that a year from now we will have a much more streamlined, more customer focused suite of products with greater assurance that the accuracy is in there and a better system of updating.

Q52 Helen Goodman: Would it be possible as well for your staff to have access to the web and to give web downloads to people if that is what they could cope with?

Mr MacDowall: Yes, of course.

Q53 Helen Goodman: Would it also be possible for the public?

Mr MacDowall: Yes, and with many of our products that can happen right now.

Mr Lewis: They are very, very largely there already. Indeed, in preparing for this I have gone through my own department's website because I wanted to see how easy it was to pull up our leaflets. Almost all of our leaflets are on the website now so this is not tomorrow; this is now. There is just a very small number which, for various technical reasons, are not but the vast majority are on our website. They are very easy to call up and to print off as well.

Q54 Chairman: The reference Helen Goodman gave to The Pension Service Chief Executive intervening in a matter is contained in paragraph 3.13 on page

³ *Note by witness:* The precise figures for the number of staff working on leaflets can only be approximated because, at the moment, leaflets only form a small part of the overall work of a number of individuals and only one person currently works on them full time. Our estimate, based on the average amount of time taken at each stage of the leaflet production cycle, would be that it is approximately the equivalent of 31 full time staff. This figure includes all DWP staff time but does not include the time taken by our printers or distributors.

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38 and it does beg the question as to why a Chief Executive at that high level would have to involve himself in stopping inaccurate leaflets being sent out.

Mr Lewis: It is a good question. There are times when this kind of question crosses my desk on many issues on many days, where you do need to give an impetus to an issue from a very senior leadership position, to make sure that amongst the many other issues people are dealing with this one is seen as really important and really mattering. You talked to me earlier on about the benefit simplification set of issues and I have sought to do just that in that respect.

Q55 Annette Brooke: I would like to tackle things that have gone wrong in the past perhaps because of the leaflets not being there at the time. I have a particular case that has failed an Ombudsman case because the leaflet has been produced with incorrect procedures. They should have been gone through and they were not. Surely, as we go back in time, if these leaflets really were not available to somebody like a married woman who has taken time off work and has not done everything properly, it is quite possible she might not ever have seen the right leaflet with this past record, is it not?

Mr Lewis: That must be so. We cannot say with any certainty, going back years into the past, that every leaflet should have been available in one of our offices or in a location. That is simply not something that we are able to know. Intuitively what you say must be the case. There must be some instances where a leaflet might have been available and was not, but we are in the realms of almost the unknowable in terms of any quantification of this.

Q56 Annette Brooke: I ask the question because of the scale of the problem that has been unveiled. I would accept your answer if I had not read this Report and seen how many leaflets were not available to the public which then forms a full circle as to the minimisation of risk. I am not sure that you have tackled that and whether you now have a full proactive programme in place.

Mr Lewis: We absolutely have. In response to this Report and my own probing of it, we now have that as a major risk not just on the department's risk register but on the risk registers of each one of its businesses. Looking forward, we have now taken some very major and tough steps to ensure that there is a full range of our leaflets and we have now instructed that every one of our Jobcentre Plus offices will have 92 leaflets. It is very precise which they are. That may change over time but those leaflets are on display.⁴ The Chief Operating Officer of Jobcentre Plus has written twice to his field directors and he has sought and received a personal assurance from each and every one of them that those leaflets are now on available in every one of

their offices. Going forward, I think we can have a great deal more confidence than we can looking backwards.

Q57 Annette Brooke: I would like to ask a question about access for the disabled. We have a leaflet which takes you up to 16. How does the department communicate after the age of 16 when the 16th birthday is reached?

Mr Lewis: The leaflet that I think you have there was one that I sent round as an example of the before and after. This one is the "before" and the other one which I put in the pack was the "after", which is I think a serious advance. The simple answer to your question is that this leaflet in its current version is not directed so much at the child but at the parents. It is about a family which may have a child under 16 years of age who is severely disabled so, in that sense, it is directed at adults. To the extent that of course children grow and become adults, then we have a further suite of products for them as adults in their own right in relation to benefits such as Attendance Allowance, Carers' Allowance and so on. Remember also that we are talking about leaflets but we are a people business. Out there we have over 100,000 staff and the one thing that is consistent is that, although those staff do not get it right every day, overwhelmingly they see their job as helping our customers and trying to ensure that they can make their way through the system and do get what they are entitled to.

Mr Nicholas: Every one of our offices will have the disability allowance leaflets for adults as well.

Q58 Annette Brooke: I was just asking about the continuity of your communication because there is sometimes a gap there. If I could stray slightly from the printed leaflet, you may be aware that I have had a recent case concerning pre-lingering deafness which is leading to a whole host of new procedures and communication. Whilst that particular issue is now being tackled very vigorously, it does strike me that there must be many other disabilities, other than pre-lingering deafness, where people will have difficulty with the written word for one reason or another. Are you doing a total audit across a whole range of disabilities where there would be difficulty in accessing the information?

Mr Lewis: I cannot give you an absolute assurance that we are doing quite what you ask but I can assure you that we go to great lengths through our Disability and Carers' Service to try and ensure that we do recognise the fact that many of our customers, by definition, have difficulty with coping with some methods of communication. We seek to ensure that, where that is the case, we offer them help and support. We are a huge organisation. You asked me a question not a million miles from this at my last appearance before the Committee. It is hard to say that on every single day we offer a perfect service for every single one of our customers but we do not simply rely on leaflets to try and ensure that we convey real meaning and that people are able to communicate with us.

⁴ *Note by witness:* The use of the words "on display" was inaccurate, for which I apologise. All the leaflets concerned have now to be available in every Jobcentre Plus but not necessarily on display.

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Mr MacDowall: Our customers can order Braille, large print and audio along the same lines.

Annette Brooke: My question really was that, with the case I had, there was proof that you had trained your staff in sign language but, when the question was asked how many times were they asked to interpret, it was more or less zero. It proves the monitoring point and communication.

Q59 Mr Mitchell: I am not very good at leaflets. I have the old Trotskyite belief that 5,000 words on one side of quarto will produce a load of leaflets but I cannot see why a big department like yours gets into such a mess. Is there no unified chain of command? You say you have one now. Is there one mind at the top through which all leaflets have to pass, someone who vets, authenticates and updates them?

Mr Lewis: You will probably think it is very churlish of me. I am just going to take up one point in what you said before I try and give you a proper answer to a very good question. I do not think we are in a mess and I do not think we were in a mess. I do not think we were doing everything perfectly but this is a Report which said, even at the time when it was written—

Q60 Mr Mitchell: 245 pamphlets is a hell of a lot.

Mr Lewis: Yes, and it was too many but remember we are in a hugely complex business. We deal with tens of millions of people in almost every circumstance that human life is capable of having every day of the week. We are not a simple, one product, one customer business.

Q61 Mr Mitchell: If your policy is clear it is possible to set it out clearly and tell people what they are entitled to. That is not too difficult.

Mr Lewis: No, you are absolutely right. That is where we absolutely agree. That is why we are seeking to ensure that what we deliver is as simple and clear as possible and that the way in which we describe and communicate it is. Just to be clear, as we have said, it was right when this Report was written that we did not have on this issue as clear a chain of control as we should have had. We now have it. It starts with me.

Q62 Mr Mitchell: Are all pamphlets passed through one mind at the top?

Mr Lewis: No, not literally, because that would have me trying to read every one of them.

Q63 Mr Mitchell: Not necessarily you.

Mr Lewis: No, but what we do have is a very clear chain of responsibility now which starts with me, because I am responsible for making sure there is a system which is working effectively. Simon MacDowall has direct personal accountability to me for that leaflet chain and we have appointed now what we are calling a Head of Customer Information Products to ensure that this system works in an end to end way and is not left as simply a bit part of lots of other functions.

Q64 Mr Mitchell: What is the genesis? A new benefit comes along where you encounter a problem. Who decides whether to put out a pamphlet?

Mr Lewis: In the first instance, in the case of a new benefit, it will be the policy team who have been responsible for advising and supporting ministers in the introduction of that benefit, although it will be self-evident of course that if there is a new benefit we are going to need a new leaflet. It will be the responsibility of that policy owner to ensure that that leaflet is written but it then becomes the responsibility of Mr MacDowall to ensure that it is written, released, issued in a way which meets our standards and is accessible, understandable and gets to our customers.

Mr MacDowall: If we are changing the way we do leaflets there is probably, not necessarily a given, that we would have a leaflet for every new product the department designs. When there is a change in policy or rates, we will be looking at how we then change things that will affect people's circumstances. Right now, because our product suite is based around a whole series of individual benefits or individual parts of benefits, it does mean that the process is fragmented. If I am going to be looking, I say, "What does the customer need? What does the customer research say? What are the key points in people's lives when they need packages of information?" Then I can commission the policy officials in different areas to bring together that information and make sure that it goes out. Part of having the end to end oversight of it is one aspect but changing the way we provide information in exactly the same way that Directgov, the government website, does will make that whole process much easier than the fragmentation. I am not, for example, right now going to be able to ensure the social security agreement between the United Kingdom and Turkey leaflet but we would need to question are things like that necessary to have in a printed form all over the place. Are these better on the web and ought we to be concentrating on a different kind of form of things that we use as a print product?

Q65 Mr Mitchell: You mentioned that you are now working with modules of information for which one person is responsible, which are then assembled. That, I take it, is for the generic things, pensioners and young persons' disability living allowance. It is not for the specific ones on one benefit?

Mr MacDowall: That is right. We are looking seriously at how many we need on one benefit. I suspect we probably need far fewer than we have right now and we are looking at the degree to which they can be online. Most of our print products in the future, I would argue, are more likely to be around, "Are you looking for work? Have you had an accident? Are you thinking of retiring or saving for retirement?" and so on.

Mr Lewis: It is a good example that Mr MacDowall uses. We have a leaflet. One of the 178 is our social security agreement between the United Kingdom and Turkey. For a tiny fraction of our population this is an important leaflet because they will stand to benefit from that agreement and need to know about

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it, but it must be a minute proportion of the British population who would have any interest in that subject. What we want is to see if we can find a better way of trying to ensure that we communicate that to that tiny fraction of people who want and will need to know about it, rather than having yet another leaflet.

Q66 Mr Mitchell: The Report also found that there was a problem ensuring that up to date information is still accurate. What has been done about that? Who now checks regularly? Is that your job as well?

Mr MacDowall: It is my job and the job of the central teams in each of the agencies which will be enhanced by the web communications and management system. We have talked about where we can do these automatically. Where one piece of information changes—say, a change to the state pension—you can through one electronic interaction automatically update everything as opposed to having to go through all sorts of manual checks. Yes, it has been far too fragmented in the past. We still do need to leave the individual agencies to have the responsibility to talk to their customers but they are also building central teams. Some exist already in Jobcentre Plus. The heads of those teams also have a direct line reporting into me as well as their Chief Executive so we can have a far greater cohesion, not just for leaflets but for our whole communication strategy to the public.

Q67 Mr Mitchell: Everything is now regularly reviewed and updated?

Mr MacDowall: Yes, and it is done on a basis of risk because things that do not change very often do not need to be reviewed as often. Jobcentre Plus has pioneered how, looking at where there is specific benefit information, it needs to be reviewed on a regular basis if benefits change, but those things where a change is less likely you do not necessarily have to review.

Mr Lewis: There is a slight risk that we are giving the Committee the impression that we can now guarantee perfection. As the very first paragraph of this Report says—

Q68 Mr Mitchell: If you did, we would be very cynical about it.

Mr Lewis: Indeed. The first paragraph of this Report says that we deal with 30 million customers. We deal with them through nearly 1,000 retail outlets. We deal with a vast array of people's needs. Just as no retail supermarket can ever ensure that there is not a cheese sandwich beyond its sell by date in one of its stores, I do not think we will ever get to the point where I could say to this Committee, "We will deliver perfection." What I think we can say is, in the light of this Report, we have taken a whole series of measures which I think will mean that we will get it right in every sense vastly more frequently than we did in the past.

Q69 Mr Mitchell: There was also a mention in the Report which I have come across from time to time where people are asking for a leaflet on this, that or

the other and staff have not been able to find it. They go away hunting for it and eventually disappear. That is a not uncommon problem still. Why cannot the leaflets all be kept on the web so if a question comes up people can just run it off?

Mr Lewis: As I said before, almost all of them are on the web now.

Q70 Mr Mitchell: If I go into Grimsby and ask for an abstruse pamphlet on the agreement with Turkey or wherever, that could be run off?

Mr Lewis: It should be accessible to that office either from the web or through a single phone number which they will have which will enable them to get it. You probably are giving us about the toughest challenge there: going into Grimsby and asking for the leaflet on the social security agreement with Turkey. Probably, if you do that tomorrow and I do not go and forewarn them desperately after this hearing, we may fail on that one but it is probably one of the most difficult of the challenges.

Q71 Mr Mitchell: Why is it going to take until 2008 to reorganise the communications activity into one single network?

Mr Lewis: We have done it better.

Mr MacDowall: It does exist as a single network but there is still room for improvement. What I am doing, as I said earlier on, is bringing all of the communication activity that goes on in the agency so that it is streamlined back in, so that they are working to a single strategy. The heads of communications and the agencies work for me. This is in place now. We have also taken quite large steps to reduce the numbers because, to be honest, we had quite a lot of talented amateurs but the level of professionalism was not as high, so I am making sure that all people going into communications jobs are recruited to the new government communications network standards. We have increased that by 18% and we have reduced it by about 300 in total. However, I think there is still much more that we can do. While the structures are in place, as someone said earlier, some of the behaviours are not in place. There is an event that I am going to late this evening and tomorrow with large numbers of my staff to make sure they really understand what we are trying to do: to get them through case studies but get it into their thinking because you can have a structure but until people are behaving in the way you need that is why I think it will take time to go further and there is still more to do. I would not say everything is complete but the structures are there and the processes are there. It is starting to work much more effectively than it was in the past. It is less fragmented.

Q72 Sarah McCarthy-Fry: Can I refer you to figure four on page nine which compares the private sector management of leaflets and the departmental management of leaflets? In paragraph 21 it contrasts a pull approach with a push approach. There seems to be an implied criticism that, because you have a pull approach instead of a push approach, somehow that is wrong. Do you think a push approach would

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work? My head is saying if you are just pushing leaflets out without getting the feedback for whether people read them, it could be wasteful. What is your view on that?

Mr Lewis: We have paused long and hard over this. Elements of a push approach are right because I think we have been too reliant in the past on individual offices to say, “Can I have some of these leaflets?”, if you see what I mean. That I think has led, quite clearly as the Report says, to leaflets which we would want to be available in all of our offices not being available. We are going to move to essentially a push driven approach which is, when new products come out—this is already the case in Jobcentre Plus—we will send them out. We will say what they need to do with the previous product, whether it needs to be wasted or whether it can be used to exhaustion, and we will give some idea of the importance of it. I think we also need to flex because our offices are different. As Mr Khan said earlier on, for example, many of our offices have differing populations. For one office it would make no sense whatsoever to have material available in a given language. For another it absolutely would so I think we have to leave enough flex in the system for people to say, “Here in this location we need X and Y.”

Q73 Sarah McCarthy-Fry: Would your IT systems be able to cope with getting feedback from each of your agencies as to how many of each leaflet they use, feeding that in like a stock demand system so that you know where to push, or do you not have a sophisticated enough stock control system to do that?

Mr Lewis: I have to say that unless I am corrected by one of my colleagues to my left or right I do not think we have a system at the moment which is as sophisticated as that. We may in the future but I do not think we have one at the moment.

Mr MacDowall: It is our intent, through the new print ordering and distribution system, going out with the single contract as mentioned earlier. One of the things that we are wanting to build into that contract is the capacity to do exactly that so that we could have a sensible push when we need to, as for example we have around some of the pensions leaflets, but we could take that kind of information and put it in. We are looking at the degree to which that can be built into the contract. Right now we could not do it because it is too fragmented, but we will be able to move much closer to that sort of management information from the autumn once the contract is made.

Q74 Sarah McCarthy-Fry: On page three in paragraph six, “. . . the internet will not always be a suitable alternative for all of the Department’s customers”, which is one of the reasons for having all these leaflets. I am going to take advantage of this opportunity of having you here because it is a question I asked the DWP Minister. There was a consultation process going on through the DWP about pensions but the only way you can respond is via the internet. Given that you accept it is not a

suitable alternative for all the department’s customers, why are you only offering the internet as a way of responding to that?

Mr Lewis: I am in a slight difficulty because I do not quite know what the Minister said in response.

Q75 Sarah McCarthy-Fry: The Minister did not give me a straight answer.

Mr Lewis: Let me tell you about one thing, because I was part of it, that we did do in the run up to the publication recently of the Pensions White Paper, which we are enormously proud of as a department. We are entitled to be proud of some things. We held what we called a National Pensions Day on which we invited to, I think, seven locations around the UK a selection of people drawn randomly from the population. It was all on one day and at each of those venues there was a process of going through the main proposals in the Turner Commission Report and seeking responses to them with some facilitation. It was enormously successful and welcomed by participants. Its conclusions are reflected in the White Paper and I think this was a real example of government not just sitting there in an old-fashioned way thinking, “Write to us if you have anything to say.” We went out. I went personally and hosted the one in Newcastle Upon Tyne. We went out actively to seek input and views from the population.

Mr MacDowall: Incidentally, we did several of those leading up to that in the whole year running up. We held across the country consultations with people drawn from across the community. It was not the only way but it is a useful way and people are turning more and more to the internet. What we do know is that 60% of our customers say they would consider using the internet to interact with us, as their means of dealing with us. 74% of our customers have at some point accessed the internet so it is growing. We are not at a point yet—it probably never would be appropriate—where we can say we could move away totally from print, but the capacity to use the internet to provide information is obviously growing.

Q76 Sarah McCarthy-Fry: You would agree that for pensioners it is probably less?

Mr MacDowall: Interestingly, it is not. The percentages are roughly about the same.

Mr Lewis: It is interesting that the Chief Executive of The Pension Services, Alexis Cleveland, presented at a conference that took place yesterday on public service reform and one of the things she said was that, when The Pension Service on its creation about three or four years ago went out and asked pensioners how they would like to communicate with it, almost universally they said, “Not on the internet, thank you very much” but the world is moving for everyone of every age. They now have some of their services on the net and their use by their customers is increasing very fast. I think it is never going to be a universal medium but it is not just people of the age of my children who are using the internet.

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Q77 Sarah McCarthy-Fry: Let me move on to out-of-date stocks. I do recognise and the Report recognises the improvement since 2003–04, when I think I am right that 60% of the leaflets were out-of-date at that time on the survey that was done. In 2005 10% were out-of-date, which says that 90% were up-to-date. Do you have a target percentage of how many of them should be up-to-date? Is your target 100% or do you have an acceptable margin of error?

Mr Lewis: No, I do not have an acceptable margin of error. I do not have a target of 100% because in truth we will never achieve that. We would never ever get to a point where every leaflet on every table at every one of our locations is up-to-date, but I have an aspiration that it should be 100% because unless you set an aspiration at the very highest level, then you are never going to get as near to it as you possibly can. Whether we should actually set a target in this area, I am a bit doubtful about because as soon as I set a target, leave aside the fact that we probably have too many targets anyway in the Department, the moment you set a target of, say, 92% or 94% you are almost saying that it is acceptable for 3% or 6% or whatever it is to be out-of-date. I would rather have an aspiration that our leaflets are up-to-date always and get to it as closely as we can than to set a target. But that is something I would like to reflect on.

Q78 Sarah McCarthy-Fry: Finally again on up-to-date leaflets, obviously if you had no printed material but everything was kept on computer so when somebody came in it was centrally updated and you could print off, which is obviously what this is, you would not have a worry about it being up-to-date, however, if that is the nice glossily printed one and that is the printed off one I think we would all agree that that one is probably nicer than that one. What is the trade-off?

Mr Lewis: It is not just that that is a trade-off, that the printed one can be better and easier and feel comfortable, but actually the NAO Report says we should consider using more local printing in our offices, and we will. It is important to say that our offices inevitably are busy places and they have an awful lot of customers to see and to help on every given day. I honestly do not think it is going to be realistic to turn them into mini printing factories. To go back to Mr Mitchell's question, it may be exactly right, because it would be so rare, that the person who wants the copy of the leaflet on our agreement with Turkey that is the one we should print off because that would be once in a blue moon, but for our common leaflets which are needed day-by-day, I do not think we would in the foreseeable future have the capacity to be printing them off time and time again, and, as you say, the quality would not be as good anyway.

Mr MacDowall: It can be more expensive because when you are doing a bulk leaflet in large numbers it is minuscule costs whereas the actual printing costs, especially printing in colour on a per page basis, can be very expensive.

Q79 Sarah McCarthy-Fry: Do you have touch screens in Jobcentres so people can access on-line leaflets while they are there?

Mr Nicholas: They would not be able to print a leaflet off from the job points in our offices but we do have ways of signposting which leaflets are available. It does not have the facility to print off.

Q80 Sarah McCarthy-Fry: In my local healthy living centre there is a touch screen where people can go in and get health information and print off what they see on the screen.

Mr Lewis: This may come, you know. When you go into one of our Jobcentre Plus offices now, that era of little cards on boards has gone forever. We have touch screen terminals in terms of people finding jobs, which are a great success story, and you can print out details of the job that you would like to apply for or you are interested in, so we certainly have touch screen technology in our offices and whether at some point in the future we might be able to extend it in the way you want is something we will go on looking at.

Chairman: Thank you very much. Ian Davidson?

Q81 Mr Davidson: Can I just pick up the point you made about public service and the speech that was made and so on. If I understood you correctly, the head of The Pension Service was saying that when pensioners were consulted about whether or not they wanted to use the Internet, they said overwhelmingly no, they did not, but then the Department went ahead and used it anyway.

Mr Lewis: Actually what the Chief Executive was saying was that overwhelmingly we responded to what our customers told us and she described yesterday how The Pension Service had radically changed its services to deal with pensioners in the way that they wanted to deal with it. I think what she was saying was "hasn't a lot changed however in the last three to four years" because when the Pension Service did, rather tentatively and without much by way of publicity, just put a few of its services on the web, they have been very surprised by the increasing level of usage. I think the point she was making was that the stereotype that might have been true three or four years ago is no longer true.

Q82 Mr Davidson: That is fair but the pensioners when consulted and asked said they did not want it on the Internet, but the man in Whitehall knows best and just did it anyway, and now lots of them are using it, thereby demonstrating that the man in Whitehall did know best!

Mr Lewis: I am not sure if that is a compliment or not! In one sense, what we did not do was say, "Hey, we are consulting people", and then ignoring them; quite the reverse. We sought very much to structure the service around what pensioners told us they did want but to try and be innovative.

Q83 Mr Davidson: I do understand that. I am just slightly cynical about some of the consultations because you did also mention the Pensions Day, and I think it is fair to say that while the pensioners were

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perhaps drawn “at random”, it was also a completely “random” selection of New Labour MPs, and a “random” selection of television crews and journalists that were invited along as well, so you did not get a meaningful response out of that but, anyway, I digress. Could I turn to paragraph 3.9 and could I ask the NAO about this. 60% of the 27 different leaflets we collected were the most recent versions, 40% were out-of-date, and others demonstrated they were out-of-date as well. Was there any correlation between the difficulty of the areas involved, the poverty of the areas involved and the leaflets being out of date? Were the poorest areas getting the worst services?

Mr Lonsdale: I honestly cannot say. We do not have that degree of analysis here, but we could look back at the work that was done to see if there is a correlation.

Q84 Mr Davidson: I think that would be helpful because it was certainly my impression that in some of the offices in poorer areas the services, such as the display of leaflets and the like, are less good perhaps, because the staff are frenetically working on other things and they are understaffed and so on, but I think you can understand why I think that is unacceptable?

Mr Lewis: I certainly can but just to give you something completely unscientific and utterly unstructured, a sample of one, I went on Friday of last week (because I try to spend at least one day a week out of the office seeing something of my Department on the ground) to the Jobcentre Plus office in Handsworth in inner city Birmingham and was hugely impressed, perhaps because I was going (there is always that) but nevertheless the way that the office was and the availability, and I did look specifically at leaflets, was great.

Q85 Mr Davidson: Did they know you were coming?

Mr Lewis: Yes, of course they did.

Q86 Mr Davidson: So the hall was whitewashed, was it? It is a bit like the Queen visiting places and believing that everywhere smells of fresh paint.

Mr Lewis: I know and of course that is the case. Having said that, when you have done this as often as I have you get a sense of what is really going on underneath.

Mr MacDowall: I can assure you that in every office now consistently our aim is to get the same service, the same leaflets, the same display, be that in Glasgow or—

Q87 Mr Davidson: I understand the nature of the aspiration but what I am just seeking to clarify is whether or not that was actually the case and whether or not those in the poorest areas were getting the worst service, which would not surprise me but would disappoint me. Can I just seek clarification as well on the percentages of leaflets that were out-of-date, which is paragraph 15 and 3.10, where it varies from 81% being out-of-date to 23% in financial help if you are looking for work and so on. I can see how some of that does not matter all

that much if it is just a question of the amounts involved but obviously it does matter a great deal if the policy has changed. Do you have any knowledge as to which it was in these circumstances because one is obviously much more serious than the other?

Mr Lewis: I do not think we do have that detail, although we have obtained from the NAO a list of all the 100 offices they surveyed and we have gone back specifically to every one of those to seek assurance that they are now delivering the leaflets, they are now displaying the leaflets and they are the up-to-date leaflets. At the risk of sounding as if I am resorting to sophistry, you can sometimes question what does “out-of-date” mean, for example in this serious sense; sometimes when a new leaflet comes out, it is better produced and it is more attractive but actually the old one remains accurate, and therefore in the interests of economy we do tell our offices to use old stocks to exhaustion. If it has changed we do not.

Q88 Mr Davidson: I can understand that. The other end of that that does worry me is in box 10, the examples from Jobcentres, where somebody who sought a leaflet was told that they could not have one because they were all on display because that does display a certain attitude of mind, does it not, we run the leaflet distribution in order to have leaflet distribution perfect rather than give them to people? It is a bit like being in teaching and everything is fine if it were not for the children.

Mr Lewis: Again Mr Nicholas may want to comment. This goes to the heart of what our staff are there to do, and our staff are there to serve the customers and not to run our organisation for neatness and for our own benefit. Overwhelmingly, the staff I meet when I go out do believe that. They really do believe that they are there to serve the customers, but in an organisation as large as ours—

Q89 Mr Davidson: I do accept that and I think that is fair and many of your staff work very well in very difficult circumstances, but nonetheless that is not always the case. Can I just clarify paragraph 3.24 where it says that until April 2004, you had a contract with the Post Office to hold and display a number of its leaflets and forms but you do not have that any more. What have you got to substitute?

Mr Lewis: We do not have a substitute contract for that. That contract came to an end for various reasons and so our leaflets are not on display normally now at post offices. What we seek to do is to make them widely available therefore through our own offices and through, as we talked about, the web and through other third parties. Again Mr Nicholas may want to say something. We are introducing some arrangements with the Citizens Advice Bureau to seek to ensure that they have access to our leaflets as well, but we no longer have an arrangement with the Post Office.

Chairman: I am sorry, there is a division and we will have to stop for about eight minutes while we vote. I do apologise.

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The Committee suspended from 4.41 pm to 4.47 pm for a division in the House.

Chairman: Mr Davidson?

Q90 Mr Davidson: Could I follow that up by saying do you believe that the unparalleled network of the Post Office is sufficiently replicated by the framework that you have got? The framework that you have got, it seems to me from what you are saying there, is a bit patchy in places. It depends whether you have got a CAB or whether or not you have got something else and the Post Office did have quite a widespread network and also a high usage.

Mr Lewis: Essentially these are quite difficult judgments and choices to make. We do have still, of course, a very, very large network of our own. We have the largest network of government offices in the country, over 800 Jobcentre Plus offices, and we are living in a world where, as we have said, there is ever more access to other mediums as well. One of the difficulties—and this is no criticism of the Post Office at all, absolutely none—is we have talked about how hard it can be to keep material up-to-date in your own delivery system when in a sense at least everyone works for you. It is even more difficult if you are trying to ensure that material is out there, it is the right material, it is up-to-date in networks which you do not have any serious control over, so we did not continue that arrangement with the Post Office. I think that does place an obligation on us to ensure that our leaflets are as widely available as we can possibly make them.

Q91 Mr Davidson: In that context, I wonder if I could just pick up the issue of leaflet GL23 with which no doubt you are intensely familiar. The Ladymuir Advice and Information Centre wanted to get additional copies of that in something like the middle of April. It is a leaflet which has to do with benefit rates, as I understand it. They wanted to get copies of that leaflet last year at the beginning of April and were told that it was not available because it was not going to be printed until after the election. I wrote to the Department on 20 May and got a reply back from you on 31 August, which is a fair period, telling me that in fact it had been printed within a week of the election, but when Ladymuir Advice Centre had actually phoned the Department on 16 May they were told that it was not going to be printed until June or July and then they were told that they could only have 50 of them (when they did not want as many as that) and if 50 was not acceptable they could go to the nearest Jobcentre which was three miles away and two bus rides. You can see why in those circumstances people have the attitude that perhaps you are not as outward looking as you might be. What lessons do you draw from all of that?

Mr Lewis: The first truthful lesson is I do not know anything about that particular episode, although if you would like me to I will certainly look back on it. It sounds to me an episode where we did not do terribly well and did not serve our customer very well in that instance. As I have said before, in an organisation as big as ours we will fail at times and

where we fail we need to learn from it and try and put it right. What I would hope is that we will not continue failing in that way and that that experience will not be repeated.

Q92 Mr Davidson: There are a number of different elements to that. One of them that concerned me particularly was the fact that you were not willing to provide copies of leaflets because there was an election on. People did not stop needing to have access to benefits information because there was an election, and while Mr Mitchell might very well believe that 20,000 words on one side of A4 is a good way to win elections, my majority has always gone up, so I understand the merits of having things short and sharp. Denying people access to that information on the basis there is an election does not seem to be me to be reasonable.

Mr Lewis: And on the face of it nor to me, although I know nothing about this particular case and indeed I was not in the Department then. There is a convention, as one knows, and it is a very, very well-established convention that once an election has been called obviously government does not launch any new initiatives but the ordinary administration of government on a day-to-day basis continues, and that is the normal principle to which we operate.

Q93 Mr Davidson: I was not looking for 20,000 of these in order that I could distribute them. It was an advice centre in my constituency that was looking for them. Perhaps you could look at that question of the election. The other element of policy there is this suggestion that you do not give people less than 50 and you suggest to them that they get a bus ride in circumstances where none of the staff have cars, it was three miles and two bus rides away. You can understand why they are a bit aggrieved in those circumstances.

Mr Lewis: This is something we have struggled with. We would like to get, as part of having a new provider and operating in a more sophisticated way, better at it. There are good reasons, of course, for putting minimum order quantities into a system as large as ours. We have 800 front-facing outlets and, as you can probably imagine, to send stocks in literally ones and twos is not ever going to be a particularly cost-effective or sensible way of doing it. However, like everyone else, we can be too rigid about these things and too inflexible. I personally want to look at whether we can get more flexible in this respect

Q94 Mr Davidson: A final point I want to ask, you have mentioned already about languages. Can I ask whether or not you are now producing leaflets in the languages of the accession countries in order that new migrants can claim benefits and if so on what scale?

Mr Lewis: Mr MacDowall said that we have 11 languages and under the Department's current language standard—and we keep this under review—which we routinely translate into, and one of those is Polish so we have one of the languages.

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Q95 Mr Davidson: Has that always been Polish?

Mr Lewis: I do not know how long that goes back.

Mr MacDowall: It has been for quite a long time and the reason for that is there are a lot of Polish pensioners retired here from the War. What we do in assessing the languages is we look on the need for those particular languages and at the level that we have not the only accession language is Polish at the moment. You have got to bear in mind that most of the people who are coming over from the accession countries to work here are perfectly capable in English and the need for a lot of these languages right now is not that great, but we constantly assess it and we assess it on the basis of what is being requested and the numbers. Most of them are not Eastern European.

Q96 Mr Davidson: Can I just pursue that. How can you assess whether or not it is necessary, say, for East European migrants when having asked the Department how many East European migrants are claiming benefits you cannot tell me?

Mr Lewis: We have of course good anecdotal evidence from our local managers, who tend to know their own localities well, and they will not be slow to let their more senior managers know if they think there is an unmet need in that case. Just to add again something which I mentioned just very briefly earlier on, unless the request is a completely extraordinary one, we will provide material on request specifically if we are asked, so if a particular customer asks us for a leaflet in a particular language, as I say, unless that seems completely cost-ineffective to do we will try and provide that.

Mr Nicholas: Our advisers have access to an interpretation service so faced with a customer from an accession state who could not communicate effectively with us in English, they would be able to have a three-way conversation and we would bring an interpreter to that.

Chairman: Lastly, Alan Williams?

Q97 Mr Williams: I have no managerial questions that have not been covered, it is literally following on Ian's point for some factual information.; could we have a list of the 11 languages?

Mr Lewis: I can read them out now if you would like. It will only take me one second to do it: Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, French, Gujarati, Polish, Punjabi, Somali, Sylheti, Tamil and Urdu.

Mr MacDowall: For three of those we do just in audio versions because they are communities who normally would use them in an oral sense rather than paper.

Q98 Mr Williams: That is helpful to have on record. I note in paragraph 7—although the figures were adjusted in your oral evidence—that on average leaflets cost £385 per 1,000 for the English version and £1,580, an extra £1,200 per 1,000 for the Welsh version, so an English leaflet costs 38p and a Welsh leaflet costs £1.58.⁵ That seems to me an extraordinary difference.

Mr Lewis: Both of those figures have come down, as Mr MacDowall said, but I think they simply reflect inevitably print sizes and extra costs.

Q99 Mr Williams: What have they come down to?

Mr MacDowall: They have come down now per 1,000 the figure for English is £223 and for Welsh is £483.

Q100 Mr Williams: That is a remarkable reduction. How have you been able to achieve such a dramatic change in relation to that?⁶

Mr MacDowall: Through improvement in the print contracts and distribution. We mentioned earlier going to print direct, which basically means somebody can order in and they will be printed within five days and shipped out, which reduces the number of leaflets that we are warehousing. We have reduced the total number of leaflets we are putting out as well so we have started to streamline the process. We can bring these figures down further when we bring in the new contract next year and we streamline it even more. Obviously the cost for Welsh will be higher. It is not only translation costs but you have got a volume, if you are producing less leaflets the cost per individual leaflet will be higher. It goes back to the question about if you print it off in the offices it will be more expensive, but the totality of those costs I believe will reduce even further when we streamline the processes, mostly around printing and distribution.

Q101 Mr Williams: I do not want to waste the time of the Committee. You can let us written information on this. There must be a range inevitably varying in value. Could you let us have as much information as is practicable about the relationship between Welsh cost and the variability. Do you have any noticeable higher error rates as far as the linguistic leaflets are concerned, Welsh and others?⁷

Mr Lewis: I have absolutely no knowledge of that, I am afraid. I have certainly heard and seen nothing to suggest that we do but I am not sighted on that question, so let us look at that as well.

Mr Williams: Thank you.

Chairman: Thank you for promising that note. We do ask now that permanent secretaries sign off these because you may have read in the press that we have had had a few problems with this. I think Helen Goodman has a supplementary question.

Q102 Helen Goodman: Mr MacDowall, before you did this job I see that you were the spokesman for the UN mission to disarm the "Contras" in Honduras and Nicaragua and then you were the official spokesman in Sarajevo at the time of the first NATO air strikes. How would you say that the challenges of this job compared with the challenges of those?

Mr MacDowall: This is a lot tougher!

⁵ Ev 15

⁶ Ev 15

⁷ Ev 16

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Helen Goodman: Thank you.

Q103 Mr Mitchell: I just wanted to ask how you market test them in the sense that we use endless focus groups when we try out policy. Do you have a panel of varying degrees of literacy, varying degrees of blindness, pensioners and so on and so forth? Are they tested on a section of the market?

Mr MacDowall: Yes, some are now, and we are going to extend that to all of them. We do it exactly as you describe and will get a third party or an outside company to arrange it for us according to tried and tested research methods.

Chairman: Thank you, gentlemen; thank you, Mr Lewis, for your characteristically clear and positive answers, for which we are very grateful.

 Supplementary memorandum submitted by the Department for Work and Pensions

Question 42 (Helen Goodman): Training given to front line staff on handling customers

Jobcentre Plus staff who work as receptionists, floor managers, personal advisers and first contact officers are provided with learning and development, which commences on induction, to ensure they can professionally manage customer enquiries and meet our customers' diverse expectations and needs.

A standard Jobcentre Plus learning package for customer facing roles informs line managers and individual members of staff of the essential learning required. Key elements of this learning include essential knowledge on communication skills; dealing with customer enquiries and complaints; signposting customers to additional help and support; equal opportunities and diverse learning and dealing with potential difficult situations.

Line managers play an important role in ensuring individual needs are identified and appropriate learning given. A set of benchmarks has been developed against which line managers can measure and assess how their people deal with customer interactions; building staff performance and ensuring a consistent quality of service for the customer.

Information regarding the introduction of the new services and leaflets are communicated to staff during local office communication meetings. Specific learning and launch events are provided for all staff when a new service or a significant change is introduced.

Question 98 (Mr Alan Williams): Average cost of Welsh language leaflet production

It is a legal requirement that DWP leaflets are available in both English and Welsh formats. Welsh leaflets are usually bi-lingual, eg are produced with both English and Welsh text so that are double the size of English-only versions. The price differences are accounted for by economies in scale; leaflet usage differs greatly between England and Wales with Welsh usage remaining low whilst English usages are high. It therefore follows that the greater the print run the cheaper the unit cost of a product and the shorter the print run the higher the unit cost. Bearing in mind that initial set up charges for all leaflets are high this compounds the higher costs for the Welsh leaflets.

The average print value per 1000 of all English leaflets in the third tier of Jobcentre Plus' Working Age leaflet suite is £1791.10. If we divide this figure by 37 (the number of difference types of English language leaflets in the suite) we get an average print cost of £48.41, plus the design cost of £175, which equates to £223.41 per 1,000.

The average print value per 1,000 of Welsh leaflets in the Jobcentre Plus leaflet suite is £11,397.40. If we divide this figure by 37 (the number of different types of Welsh leaflets in the suite) we get an average print cost of £308.04, plus the design element of £175, which equates to £483.04 per 1,000.

Contractual spend for Welsh translation in 2004–05 was approximately £60,000 and in 2005–06 was approximately £70,000. This excludes the cost of proof-reading.

The ethnic translation for the recent 37 Jobcentre Plus ethnic versions of tier 3 products was approximately £33,930. There was no typesetting or printing involved as the final product was produced only in electronic formats to be printed off at Local Offices or via the Internet.

As part of the negotiations with the two remaining bidders for the print and distribution procurement exercise we are testing the print market to seek cost reductions, efficiencies and innovation within DWP's print supply chain for the provision of leaflets and other core business print products.

Question 100 (Mr Alan Williams): What is the reduction in the number of leaflets

The annual volumes of leaflets have reduced from 24 million leaflets in 2004–05 down to 13 million leaflets in 2005–06 (12.3 million English versions and approximately 700,000 Welsh versions).

Leaflets have been produced using existing DWP print, design and translation contracts and this has maximised use of the contracts and ensured a competitive cost. We have also reduced off contract spend which has brought further efficiencies. New design and translation contracts have been used for the new Jobcentre Plus Tier 3 products and rationalisation of all leaflets by DWP marketing and communications has reduced the total number of leaflets down to just 175.

Question 101 (Mr Alan Williams): Are there higher error rates as far as the linguistic leaflets are concerned

We do not have specific information on error rates for ethnic and Welsh language versions. As with English leaflets, when mistakes are identified the contracted printed/translator will amend the text for future editions and, if necessary, withdraw existing versions of the leaflet and issue new ones. Existing DWP contracts have robust procedures for suppliers to proof-read all translations and ensure that scripts are back-translated into English prior to printing. Current contracts require accuracy and quality of the translations to be 100%. It is envisaged that the new business print and distribution contractor will be able to capture more specific information on other language error rates in future.

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