



Social Security Advisory Committee

First annual stakeholder seminar – Summary of content and proposed action plan

Background to the seminar

The aim of the seminar was to seek the views of key stakeholders on the UK Government's current social security and social welfare agenda. The Committee also planned to use the occasion to promote awareness and understanding of the role and remit of SSAC, and to receive feedback on the Committee's work and performance. The event coincided with the publication of the SSAC 2005/06 annual report (<http://www.ssac.org.uk/pdf/reports/19thReportFinal.pdf>).

The seminar took place on the 2 November 2006 in Central London. The morning session comprised presentations on the Committee from the Chairman, Sir Richard Tilt and the Secretary, Gill Saunders. These were followed by four keynote speakers who provided their views on 'what matters now in social security and social welfare'. The keynote speakers were Chris Pond, Chief Executive of One Parent Families, Stewart Wright, Legal Officer with Child Poverty Action Group, Sally West, Policy Manager at Age Concern and Janet Walker, Emeritus Professor of Family Policy, University of Newcastle and member of SSAC. In the afternoon, attendees discussed the issues raised during group discussion and James Plaskitt MP, DWP Parliamentary Under Secretary, gave the closing speech.

This paper provides a summary of the presentations from the four keynote speakers, feedback from the afternoon discussions and SSAC's action plan, setting out ways to improve SSAC's effectiveness, work effectively with existing (and new) stakeholders and further raise the profile of the Committee and its work.

Section 1 – Keynote speakers (summary of key issues)

This section summarises the key points made by the keynote speakers during the morning session.¹

Chris Pond – Chief Executive, One Parent Families

The focus of Chris Pond's presentation was on the issues of child poverty and complexity in the benefits system. He highlighted the links between the child poverty target and the lone parent 70 per cent employment target. To reach the lone parent employment target, we need to achieve as much in the next four years as we have achieved in the last eight years (this means an extra 30,000 lone parents into work). Even if the 70 per cent lone parent employment target is met, the child poverty target will still not be met. In fact it would need 86 percent of lone parents in work to halve child poverty. However, it is not just about job entry alone, it is also about job retention and we need to reduce the exit rate from work. Tied in with this is the need to take the lessons about what works from NDLP and apply them to other people (e.g. working couples with children). Helping people in couples to stay in work will help reduce child poverty in the long run.

Chris Pond also suggested that there is a need to look at the complexity of the benefits system. There is an opportunity to extend financial inclusion, not only by managing finances but also by improving access to services and credit at affordable rates. For example, there is a real opportunity to use reform of the Social Fund to extend affordable credit and he suggested that it could develop into a system similar to the one for student loans. Both reform of the CSA and HB reform offer opportunities to reduce complexity and lift children out of poverty.

Stewart Wright – Child Poverty Action Group

Stewart Wright began by highlighting the issue of the erosion of a 'rights'-based culture. He suggested that the 'rights and responsibilities' agenda (as currently designed) is penalising the poor. In terms of substantive rights the significant move to the use of conditionality in benefit receipt has not always been backed up by evidence that conditionality is necessary. So in effect, it is about penalising the poor by treating them differently. This is largely true for the proposed HB sanctions for anti-social behaviour, as they will be applied to one section of society and so discriminate against tenants and the poor. The growth of discretion (for example, the Adviser Discretion Fund and discretionary Housing Payments) also helps to erode the rights-based culture.

In terms of procedural rights, Stewart Wright suggested that a number of changes have helped to make accessing services and advice more difficult. Within DWP and its agencies, there has been a loss of face-to-face interaction and a loss of staff to talk to. Phone claims were introduced into Jobcentre Plus without proper piloting and without appropriate consideration for disabled people. A possible way

¹ Please note that the opinions of the keynote speakers do not necessarily represent those of SSAC.

to overcome the complexity associated with procedural rights would be to move to non-means tested benefits (for example, 'Citizens Allowances'), although this would cost more than the current system.

Stewart Wright also raised the issue of accountability and highlighted the fact that at the micro-level, people are frequently unable to contact their own Jobcentre Plus/HMRC office. At the macro-level there has been a move away from accountability at a statutory level. He used the example of the Memorandum of Understanding between SSAC and HMRC that means that scrutiny of some benefits, such as Guardian's Allowance, is no longer in the public domain. He concluded that SSAC's remit should be extended to cover benefits, regardless of the department that delivers them.

Sally West – Age Concern

Sally West began her presentation with an overview of pension reform, including the moves to increase the State Pension age, introduce a new system of personal accounts and provide better pension coverage for women and carers. She then moved on to consider some of the key issues for both SSAC and lobby groups, such as the need to contribute to the debate about private as well as state pensions and the need to consider who will provide advice about opting-out of personal accounts. A wide variety of organisations are doing work on pensions, as it is not just current pensioners that are of concern but also future pensioners.

Sally West's presentation then moved to consider the issue of benefit take-up. The take-up of Pension Credit and Council Tax Benefit has increased but the target of three million households receiving Pension Credit by 2006 was not met. While it is important that DWP has a target on Pension Credit take-up, it should not just be a DWP priority. Others, such as health service staff/community groups, are often in contact with the 'hard to reach' and should therefore also be involved. The situation with regard to benefits and pensions may become more complex (in spite of the simplification agenda). Questions around how and when to draw a pension, whether to release equity etc. mean that there are issues around how to provide appropriate advice and support to allow people to make informed choices.

Janet Walker – SSAC Member

Janet Walker began her presentation by pointing out that as a member of SSAC she brings her own perspective to the work of the Committee. She also highlighted the ambitious programme of change and reform within DWP (for example, staff reductions, changing technology) and the impact that it has had on staff, customers and SSAC's work. She moved on to set out her five key areas of personal interest: health, work and well being amongst individuals and families; the effectiveness and fairness of benefit sanctions; complexity in the benefit system; the three Rs – Rights, Responsibilities and Respect; and whether the government is achieving its aim of evidence-based policy making.

Her presentation then moved on to consider how SSAC's role and remit has expanded since it was first set up in 1980. The Committee's work involves: understanding the changing dynamics of service delivery (seeing the big picture), detailed attention to each component part and scrutiny of regulations, general advisory activities, scrutiny of information products and participating in visits, meetings and presentations. In addition, the Committee now also has an important role in considering equality and diversity issues in proposed regulations. The presentation concluded with a consideration of how to maximise SSAC's effectiveness. Janet Walker suggested that the Committee might need to consider whether it would be beneficial to be more selective in the issues it focuses on. This is not a preferred

solution but a matter for discussion, particularly with respect to the Committee's role re the information strategy and products, for example. What remains very important is that SSAC maintains its independence as a statutory advisory body and also listens carefully to stakeholders.

Section 2 – Key issues raised during the afternoon group discussions

During the afternoon session attendees had the opportunity to consider some of the issues raised during the morning session and to consider a number of questions about the role and remit of SSAC. The groups were facilitated by Members of SSAC. The action plan sets out the more detailed suggestions from the discussions, while below we summarise the more general points about how SSAC currently works and how it could increase its effectiveness.

Current role and remit of SSAC

Overall, attendees felt that SSAC has credibility and that is helpful to have the Committee focus on social security issues as a whole, rather than looking at one particular issue or group of claimants. The breadth of expertise amongst Committee members is a good thing and the Committee has a good track record of being critical when necessary. The feedback from the discussions suggested that the scrutiny of legislation is the most effective part of SSAC's activities but that it should do more to draw together the themes and issues of concern, especially where these are not part of formal consultation (for example, benefit sanctions or conditionality).

Several groups highlighted their perception that SSAC still needs to do more to raise awareness of its work and to encourage stakeholders to read its annual report and visit the SSAC website. There is a need to reach out to a wider audience beyond established stakeholders and to find better ways of communicating with stakeholders. It was also suggested that SSAC is insufficiently known by, and has insufficient communication with, the research community and that more presentations to SSAC by researchers would be helpful.

There was a feeling that SSAC's advice may not have such a high profile as in the past and that this reflects the changing political climate. The Committee should try to work to address this, while maintaining its impartiality.

Some attendees felt that Committee's scrutiny of information products is very useful while others felt that is not a good use of SSAC's limited resources (at least as it works at present). The visits to operational sites are very important (even pressure groups do not always manage this).

Increasing SSAC's effectiveness

A key theme that emerged was that SSAC could be more proactive in working with others, for example by using items of specific business to proactively join broader policy debates. It is very important to keep the focus on the core business of the scrutiny of regulations. SSAC is not a lobby group but it should try and get its work more widely disseminated. Overall, attendees felt that the Committee's respect and expertise are probably more important than a high public profile.

Attendees suggested that SSAC is most effective in the scrutiny of regulations where it does not ask for formal referral, but that, increasingly, its reports following referral are having much less of an effect. One suggestion was that where SSAC's views following referral are not accepted by the Secretary of State, the Committee should carry out a limited consultation about 12-18 months after the regulations come into force to see if its concerns were justified. If they were, there was a strong feeling that SSAC should issue a press notice to say so or at the very least include a summary of its findings in its annual report.

Several academics said they would be happy to contribute informally to debates where they hold specific expertise and research knowledge.

Some attendees expressed the opinion that SSAC should challenge the limits on its remit, noting that the Memorandum of Understanding with HMRC presented particular issues and difficulties in relation to its function in respect of a substantial slice of social welfare policy.²

Section 3, sets out more detailed proposals to increase SSAC's effectiveness, improve its engagement with stakeholders and raise awareness of its activities.

² Under the terms of the Memorandum of Understanding, the Committee provides specific advice to Treasury Ministers and the HMRC on proposals for regulations relating to: Child and Working Tax Credits, National Insurance contributions (so far as they affect entitlement to contributory benefits), Child Benefit and Guardian's Allowance. The Committee also provides advice on draft information products on request and may offer advice to Treasury Ministers on policy matters and public information strategies in relation to tax credits, Child Benefit or Guardian's Allowance on request, or where they feel it appropriate. The Committee's advice is provided in confidence.

Section 3 – SSAC action plan

Increase SSAC effectiveness – proposals	Recommendation and action taken
Undertake targeted informal consultation with stakeholders to assess the impact of regulations that were introduced following formal referral, and check whether concerns were justified (12-18 months after introduction). If they were, produce a paper for publication accompanied by a press release	This will be piloted and the results should be published in the annual report
Boost early engagement with DWP policy making and strengthen input at senior operational level	This is an ongoing activity - the secretariat will step up efforts to identify issues and engage with officials at an early stage of policy development
Work with stakeholders to provide a quick response to emerging issues, for example, the welfare reform agenda	The secretariat will undertake more systematic information gathering and work more closely with stakeholders
Strengthen relationship with the Select Committee	The secretariat will strengthen links with their counterparts in the Select Committee. A joint lunch has been arranged for February 2007
Strengthen relationship and communication with politicians – especially in terms of disseminating its advice	The secretariat will be contacting opposition spokesmen and proposing a mailing list for other members (including Work and Pensions Committee members) interested in social security issues
When investigating an issue as part of the general advisory function – contact stakeholders to provide evidence from their local office and grass-roots work	This is already done on an informal/ad-hoc basis, but could be stepped up quite easily

Engagement with stakeholders – proposals	Recommendation and action taken
Visit local stakeholders (for example, CAB) when on visits to gain broader perspective of issues	Proceed immediately to include stakeholder offices/staff in operational site visits (when possible)
Use electronic newsletters and mailing lists, more posting on the website (for example, agendas and minutes) to keep in touch and put out alerts on developing business	Proceed immediately – the secretariat will work on mailing lists and using Rightsnet and NAWRA/SSC ‘cascades’ more effectively
Reach out beyond the obvious stakeholder community	The secretariat to commence work with current stakeholders to identify other stakeholders (especially for consultations that require specialist knowledge and focus)
Hold ‘out of town’ events for stakeholders	Pilot this by adding stakeholder visits to the current programme
Hold a regular annual ‘open’ meeting	External stakeholders to be invited to attend regular monthly SSAC meetings
Raise awareness of SSAC activities – proposals	Recommendation and action taken
Publish more details of work and activities on SSAC website, for example, agenda for monthly meetings and minutes	Proceed, commencing with clearances via DWP Sponsor Team
Members to give more external presentations – to be more visible	Members have agreed to undertake presentations when possible
Publish regular newsletter/forward look for wide distribution	Proceed immediately
Foster closer links with social policy research community	Proceed and commence with update of mailing and consultation lists