

Social Security Advisory Committee

FOURTEENTH REPORT April 2000 – March 2001

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Foreword

- 1 This Report covers the work of the Committee up to the end of April 2001. We normally publish our annual stewardship report towards the end of April. However, with a General Election imminent, we decided to defer publication until after it had been held.
- 2 This report is rather longer than those of the last few years, reflecting a busy period for the Committee. The most significant increase in our workload followed our acceptance of the Secretary of State's invitation to take on a new role, advising on the Department's information strategy. We also took up his invitation to advise on other issues, in particular the inherited SERPS problem. We welcomed Ministers' willingness to draw on the Committee's expertise in this new way.
- 3 Our new role in relation to the Department's information strategy has a number of aspects, and we faced a steep learning curve in the first year. We are grateful to the officials who have helped us to develop new ways of working that will enable us to fulfil the new remit. We will shortly complete our report to the Secretary of State on our first year's work.
- 4 Our work has expanded against a background of profound and far-reaching change in the way the Department of Social Security (DSS) and its partner Departments and agencies - the Department for Education and Employment, the Employment Service and the Inland Revenue - organise and deliver their services. The Department of Social Security's "Focus on Delivery" initiative was announced as we went to press last year. We have observed its impact on the Department at both local level, and within the headquarters organisation, with great interest. Our report this year concludes as the plans for new services for working age and over pension age customers - the Pensions Service and Jobcentre Plus - are being announced.
- 5 This, the Committee's twentieth year, has been particularly busy and eventful. However, my colleagues and I have paused to look back over the changes to both social security policy and operations that have taken place since the Committee was set up in 1980, and we would make two observations.
- 6 First, customer services - delivered from poor quality premises, and supported by antiquated IT systems and other technology - have fallen far behind those offered and available elsewhere, especially in the private sector. We welcome the priority that is now being given to rectifying this. In an era of rising public expectations it is important that the necessary momentum is maintained.

- 7 Second, benefits and tax credits are legally and administratively extremely complex - more so today, perhaps, than they were when the Committee started its work. This complexity can all too easily obscure the underlying logic of the benefits system from which its credibility with the public is derived; and an attempt to achieve precisely targeted benefits may simply create new discontents amongst those just outside the target area. Furthermore, self-evidently, a more complex system increases the practical problems of training and delivery. Wholesale simplification of the benefits, while a desirable goal, is likely to remain an unattainable ideal; but if the current incremental approach to the system is not to become unmanageable, every opportunity to reduce the current complexity should be taken.
- 8 From the outset, we have welcomed the broad thrust of Welfare Reform, and the new emphasis on transforming services. However, it is evident that these are enormous undertakings, and that it will take time to see results. In some areas - for example, developing a work-focused service for people of working age who are sick and/or disabled - we would not expect rapid progress. We would anticipate that substantial investment, for what may initially be limited returns, will be called for if such a service is to gain the confidence of customers, and credible, sustainable results. We will follow developments with interest, and we particularly look forward to visiting the Pathfinder offices later in 2001.
- 9 As always we are enormously grateful to officials who respond to our queries with unfailing courtesy, and to the staff of the offices that we visit for accepting the additional burden that this entails. However, we owe a particular debt of gratitude to the Secretariat, who have faced an unprecedentedly challenging year with great enthusiasm and innovation. They play an absolutely essential role in the work of the Committee.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T Boyd-Carpenter', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Thomas Boyd-Carpenter