

Report from OSSCSC User Group Meeting 23.11.04

(This document with the text of the two presentations can be found on the OSSCSC website Publications page.)

1. The OSSCSC Website

Commissioner Williams gave a presentation on the improvements which had been carried out to the OSSCSC website. The following action points emerged from the discussion that followed:

- (a) to replace the Welsh pages with updated and improved pages once Commissioners have finished an ongoing reconsideration of their procedures with regard to the Welsh Language Act;
- (b) in response to comments at the meeting, to investigate how far it is possible to put many more pre 1990 Commissioners' reported decisions on the official site;
- (c) to discuss other possible improvements and any useful coordination with those involved in other websites concerned with social security and allied topics.

2. The Tribunal Reform Programme

The Chief Commissioner, Judge Gary Hickinbottom, gave a presentation on the Tribunal Reform Programme. The following concerns emerged from the discussion that followed:

Independence

There was strong support for the transfer from sponsoring departments to the DCA

Resources

It was questioned whether the reforms would be cost-effective or a cost-cutting exercise. In particular, there was concern that information and communication technology should be properly planned and funded, in the light of recent experience. While the reforms were not dependent on ICT infrastructure, they would be greatly enhanced by good adequately funded systems. A clear idea of users' requirements and expectations was needed.

Representation

Attendees were concerned about access to advice and representation for appellants. Some attendees took the view that public funding should be available for all oral hearings. There was general support for the view that funding should be

available for test cases and that the process of applying should be quicker and easier. Attendees were encouraged to communicate their concerns to the [Fundamental Legal Aid Review](#).

Access to hearings

Where an oral hearing is fixed, important to encourage claimants to attend. Also, wider geographical spread of venues requested (including video-conferencing facilities) accessible by public transport

Alternative dispute resolution

Alternative methods of resolving disputes were supported in principle but some reservations were expressed about their appropriateness in benefit cases. There was criticism of reg. 30 Decisions and Appeals Regulations. (lapse of appeal if decision replaced by one even slightly more advantageous).

Structure

Horizontal v vertical structure – attendees stressed the importance of experience and expertise in specialist fields being retained and used.