

Baffling and outdated benefits leaflets cost government £800m

Agencies

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The government is wasting £800m a year through errors relating to benefit payments, MPs have warned.

The public accounts committee report blamed government leaflets that were "too difficult to understand" for fuelling the number of errors and denying vulnerable people their benefit entitlements.

Key leaflets published by the Department of Work and Pensions required a reading age above the national average to be understood, MPs said, citing as an example the fact that 14 different terms were used to describe the word "payment".

The report warned that giving the public incomplete, inaccurate or out-of-date information led to more customer errors, which currently cost the department around £800m a year.

"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," said the report.

"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."

Just 81 of the current 178 leaflets have gained the Plain English Campaign's Crystal Mark for comprehensibility, while around 40% of leaflets collected for the committee from DWP offices across the country were out of date, and only half of the outlets were able to provide the leaflets requested.

The report noted that the DWP was unable to rule out a repeat of a previous problem with an outdated pensions leaflet, which cost the government an estimated £8bn in future savings.

However, the report welcomed the DWP's success in cutting its total number of leaflets from 245 in 2005 to 178 last year, with the eventual goal of reducing them to 145.

Edward Leigh, the committee's chairman, said that every departmental desk should bear the slogan: "Write so you can be understood."

He added: "The DWP's key leaflets can be understood only by those with a reading age above the national average.

"Most demanded a reading age equivalent to five years of secondary schooling.

"I welcome the fact that the department is now testing all its new leaflets for intelligibility using actual customers, but it should work through its existing leaflets to make sure that they also are intelligible to the people they are designed to reach."

Government departments appeared ready "at the drop of a hat" to add to the "torrent of printed information" pouring out of Whitehall, said Mr Leigh. To prevent further "leaflet creep", he said the DWP should update existing leaflets rather than issuing new ones, amalgamate leaflets where possible, and only issue new ones when it was sure a leaflet was really the best way of getting new information across.

"Where leaflets contain information which is inaccurate, out-of-date or impossible to understand, then the consequences can be serious indeed," said Mr Leigh.

"Vulnerable citizens are misled about their entitlements, administrative errors are multiplied and, in some cases, vast sums of money squandered."

A spokesman for the DWP said: "We welcome the fact that the report acknowledges the improvements we have already made such as reducing the number of leaflets we produce and submitting them all for the Crystal Mark.

"We have a duty to communicate with all our customers to make sure they are aware of their benefit entitlements, which is why we have undertaken a fundamental review of all our leaflets with the aim of producing a new, streamlined set.

"The leaflets will all be tested with customers and submitted for the Crystal Mark before they are published."