

DRAFT



DERBY CITY COUNCIL

COMMUNITY COMMISSION 31 March 2008

Report of the Assistant Director Customer Services

Housing and Council Tax Benefit Service Performance

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.1 That the Commission consider the improved performance of the Housing and Council Tax Benefit Service as at 17 March 2008.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 2.1 This report updates the Community Commission about improvements in Housing and Council Tax Benefit performance in the following areas:
- BVPI 78a and 78b - time taken to process new claims and changes
 - BVPI 79a - percentage of cases for which calculation of benefit was correct
 - BVPI 79b(iii) - Percentage of overpayments written off during the period

Reports on these areas of performance were submitted to the Community Commission on of 23 July 2007, 1 October 2007 and 14 January 2008. Additionally, performance in these areas has been the called in for Performance Surgeries held on 15 November 2007 and 21 February 2008.

BVPI 78a & b - time taken to process new claims and changes

- 2.2 The improvement strategy continues to deliver sustained improvements in claims processing. Claims continue to be processed or the customer is asked to provide information required to process the claim within 3 to 4 days of the claim or change being received. The Customer Services Management Team has a performance management framework that proactively manages performance in this area.
- The average days to process during 2006/07 = 58 days.

- Q1 2007/08 average improved by 10 days to 48.69 days
- Q2 2007/08 average improved to 44.16 days
- Q3 2007/08 (some data still required) average improved to 36.35 days
- Q3 2007/08 discrete performance is 27.4 days, which is within the 30 day national standard for processing new claims.

2.3 Customer Services is undertaking a service improvement programme that has an underlying theme of 'getting it right first time' in revenues and benefits. One of the key elements of the benefits project within the programme will be improving the number of claims we can process first time. We will continue to engage stakeholders to help us meet the challenge of improving the claims verification process and meeting benefit performance targets and customer service levels.

BVPI 79a - percentage of cases for which calculation of benefit was correct

2.4 The table below shows that Performance has worsened in Quarter 3. We identified 8 errors in the 125 cases checked. As a result of this the target for 2007-08 has been amended to 96%.

Q2 06/07	96.8
Q3 06/07	94.4
Q4 06/07	98.4
Q1 07/08	96
Q2 07/08	97.6
Q3 07/08	93.6

The benefit scheme is very complex with a high scope for error. There are also interdependencies with Council Tax and discrepancies between the two systems also count as errors. Benefit legislation is regularly changed and there is often little time for training and consolidation.

Although 8 cases were identified as error, in some of the cases the financial impact was very low. The following issues were identified:

- In two of the cases benefit started from the wrong date but the rate of Housing Benefit was correct.
- In two cases the Council Tax Benefit was correct but was not consistent with the Council Tax records. For the purpose of this indicator these must be classed as errors.
- In one case income was calculated over 364 days instead of 365 days for a self-employed claim
- Two cases were non-dependent deductions that were incorrectly calculated
- In one case tax credits were not used to calculate the claim - although they were not declared on the application form, a bank statement with the claim revealed they were in payment, so this classed as error

- 2.5 We continue to monitor the quality of our work closely and will be working with staff to improve the accuracy rate. We check between 4% and 10% of all Housing and Council Tax Benefit assessments daily. These checks are carried out before the notification letters are issued to the customers. All payments and letters due are stopped and the claim is corrected. This means that the customer is not aware that an error has been made.

All quality checks where errors are found are passed back through the team leader to the member of staff who made the error. The team leader will go through the error with the member of staff who will correct the error themselves. We keep records of the types of errors made. We use these records to help monitor trends and provide data to help with training and guidance to staff.

- 2.6 Accuracy of benefit claims is incorporated into the 'getting it right first time' project in benefits. Another project under the heading 'Developing Employees' will look into how we can get the best from our staff and improve the quality of our work.

We need to continue to give support and training to our staff. The information gained from our quality checks is crucial to this. We are currently undertaking training needs assessments and from this will be developing individual training plans. Once the major changes being introduced to Housing Benefit next year have been implemented we will introduce 1 to 1 training sessions, which we have found to be effective

BVPI 79b(iii) - Percentage of overpayments written off during the period

- 2.7 The table below shows performance improvements have been sustained during quarters 2 and 3 2007/08. The comprehensive review of benefit overpayments processes has been undertaken to improve performance across all overpayments BVPIs. The following changes had a significant impact:

- Reducing the 'automatic' write-off threshold from £300 to £50
- Improving processes with Derby Homes on recovery from rent accounts

	Actual	Cumulative
Q1 06/07	2.11	2.11
Q2 06/07	1.65	3.35
Q3 06/07	2.45	4.94
Q4 06/07	2.48	6.45
Q1 07/08	5.78	5.78
Q2 07/08	1.2	6.27
Q3 07/08	0.83	6.36

- 2.8 The following recommendations from the review of processes have been accepted and work is underway to implement them:
- Employ an external debt recovery agency for debt that we are unable to recover using our recovery options, procurement is underway for this service
 - The return of old un-actioned debts from the Legal team and commence Court action through the Overpayments team. A review of processes with the legal team has been undertaken and an options paper for increased Court costs is being prepared.

Changes 2008/09

- 3.0 Best Value Performance Indicators for benefits have been completely scrapped and replaced by the following two new indicators:
- The right time indicator, which will measure average processing times for new claims and change events
 - The right benefit indicator, which will measure all changes to entitlement that the Council processes, so it will include increases as well as decreases to benefit entitlement.

This gives the benefits some freedom to change the focus of service delivery from BVPIs to delivering a more customer focussed approach to service delivery.

Derby has volunteered to be a pilot site for the Audit Commission's new approach to benefits service inspections. The approach places greater emphasis on outcomes and contributions to area-based priorities such as tackling poverty and inequality, and reducing unemployment. It focuses on the perspective of citizens and service users, with less emphasis on processes. This presents an early opportunity to understand how service delivery can be influenced by the new standards.

At a local level we will continue to manage performance indicators in key area of service delivery.

IMPLICATIONS

Financial

None arising from this report

Legal

The Council has a statutory duty to provide a Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Service under the provisions of the Social Security Act 1986.

Personnel

None arising from this report.

Equalities Impact

Our benefits take up strategy is aimed at encouraging all low income households to apply for housing and council tax benefits with specific targeting of pensioners, low earners and black and minority ethnic communities.

Corporate Priorities

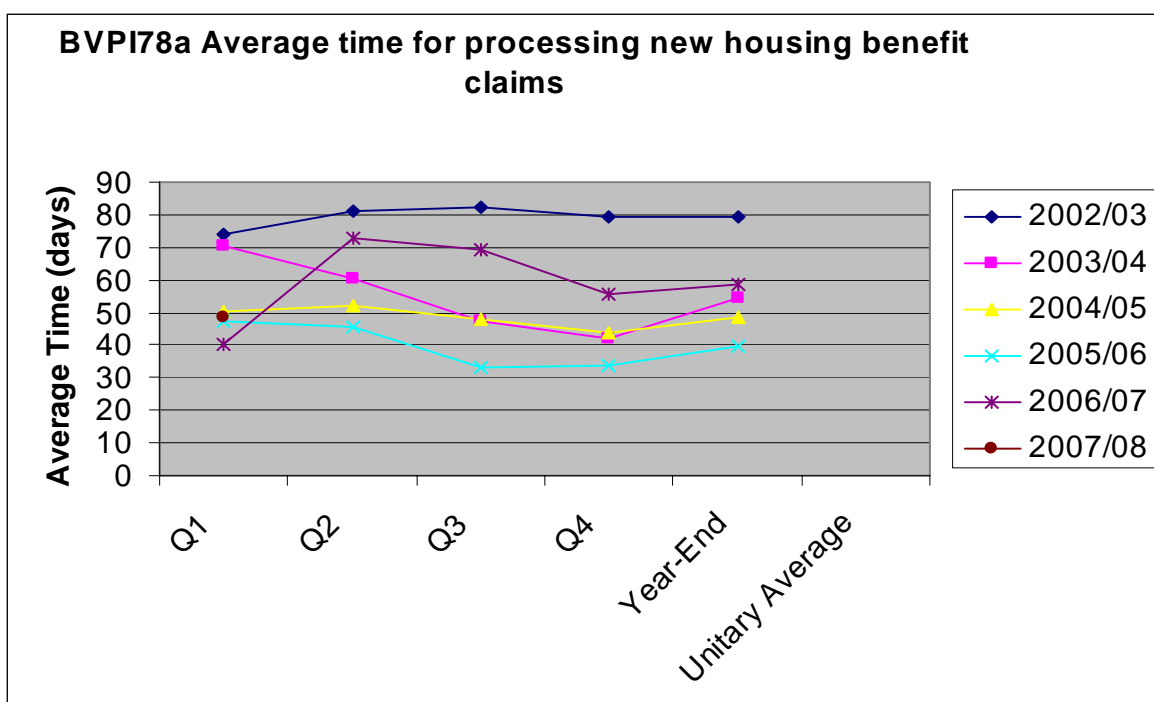
The Council's Corporate Plan 2007-2010 recognises the importance of a high performing and quality Benefits Service in helping meet its priorities of "giving you excellent services and value for money". This report identifies the actions we are taking in the Benefits Service to help achieve this priority.

For more information contact:	Mark Holmes 01332 255742 e-mail mark.holmes@derby.gov.uk
Background papers:	Appendix 1 – Implications
List of appendices:	Appendix 2 - BVPI 78a performance Appendix 3 – BVPI 78b performance

Appendix 2

BVPI 78a average time taken to process new claims

Comparative Data	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Year-End
2002/03	74.28	81.08	82.08	79.12	79.25
2003/04	70.31	60.11	47.13	42.06	54.52
2004/05	50.16	51.9	47.72	43.7	48.56
2005/06	47.25	45.42	32.87	33.52	39.59
2006/07	40.33	72.69	69.03	55.94	58.35
2007/08	48.69	42.77	38.76		



Appendix 3

BVPI78b Average time to process changes of circumstances

Comparative Data	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Year-End
2002/03	23.26	14.92	25.67	25.36	21.23
2003/04	21.9	12.36	15.37	9.32	14.12
2004/05	11.31	7.7	11.99	12.23	10.2
2005/06	17.96	16.34	13.58	11	14.6
2006/07	13.62	22.95	22.83	15.31	18.28
2007/08	18.42	19.39	19.04		

