

## Update: Housing and Council Tax Benefit Service Performance Management

### 1. Background

- 1.1 The Commission noted the performance of the Housing and Council Tax Benefit Service as at 17 March 2008 at the meeting held on 31 March 2008.
- 1.2 Benefits performance was considered to be stable and the benefits manager was asked to report to the autumn Commission meeting rather than the meeting scheduled for June 2008.
- 1.3 The Benefits Service has experienced some depletion of benefit assessing resources during recent months which impacts on ability to clear incoming work. This report is to update the Community Commission on steps the Benefits Service is taking to minimise those impacts.
- 1.4 This report sets out how the Benefits Service will:
  - Allocate resources and prioritise work to give you assurance that customers claiming housing benefit will continue to have their new claims processed quickly and efficiently
  - Prioritise changes in circumstances so that overpayments are minimised and housing benefit subsidy is maximised
  - Bring processing resources up to an optimum level.

### 2. Supporting information

- 2.1 The table below shows average volumes of claims processing work and staffing levels required to clear the work.

Work Type & priority	Average weekly receipts	Add back pending items	Processing time required (mins)	Processing resource required(fte)
New claims (1)	263	421	11361.6	6.4
Changes (2)	1006	1006	19114	10.7
Residual work (3)	1029	1217	20689	11.7
Totals	2298	2638	51164.6	28.8

2.2 The full time establishment of benefit assessors in the Benefits Service is 29 FTE posts. Currently there are 3 vacancies. Of the remaining 26 FTE posts:

- 2 FTEs allocated to our technical benefits team to undertake crucial work on benefits subsidy
- 1.5 FTEs allocated to free school meals administration
- 1 FTE long term sick

2.3 This leaves 21.5 FTEs available to process claims of which 3.5 are recent recruits and are not fully trained so are currently only processing simple claim changes. This leaves a residual core of 18 processors who have the skills to process the full range of claims.

### **3. Workload priorities within current resources**

3.1 The highest priority (1) has been given to new claims and 6.4 staff have been allocated to this work. To manage new claims efficiently this work will be broken down as follows:

- Claims that can be processed 1<sup>st</sup> time without the need to seek further information
- Claims that will be processed within the statutory time limit within which customers can submit verification i.e. 31 days
- Claims that are likely to lead to some challenge i.e. a revision or appeal if they are defected
- Claims that require dedicated customer support work or are likely to be defected.

3.2 Benefit changes that potentially cause overpayments and therefore impact benefit subsidy are the next highest priority (2) and 10.7 staff have been assigned to this work to ensure they are cleared.

3.3 By classifying and monitoring our new claims in this way we will be able to use our resources more effectively. We will identify the number of claim types in each group and allocate resources accordingly. Each new claim type will have trigger dates for action by the assessment officer. The triggers will be monitored by team leaders who will alert managers if they are exceeded and further resource is required.

3.4 Residual work - anything that is not a benefit change or new claim - will be given final priority (3). This is because work items with this classification generally do not affect the rate of benefit paid to customers. 8.2 staff will process this work and the work items will be prioritised by the section team leaders.

- 3.5 It is likely that this area of work will fall into backlog until the service can replenish and train its staff. An action plan will be formulated to clear this backlog.

#### **4. Addressing the shortfall in establishment**

- 4.1 The Benefit Service will utilise the skills of other teams across Customer Services to bolster resources in the short term. Three staff from Derby Direct assisted with the new claims process for a six week period. This brought the number of FTEs processing claims up to 24.5 and cleared all outstanding new claims.
- 4.2 We filled the vacancies in January 2008 by seconding and training 3.5 staff from our clerical administration team into claims processing. We backfilled behind these with NVQ young people, trained and familiarised them within the customer services section, to then deploy them according to suitability as vacancies arise. The NVQ staff will take on the easier benefit processing work freeing up the fully trained staff and secondees to deal with the more complicated work items. Additional staff turnover has led to an additional 3.5 fully trained staff members leaving the benefit processing team in February and March 2008. We plan to move the NVQ staff into the benefit processing team to replace those. They will be replaced with new NVQ posts.

#### **5. Future developments**

- 5.1 The Customer Services Improvement Programme is refining its approach to claims processing to improve our customer's experience of our service so we can reduce the time taken to process claims and improve value for money.
- 5.2 For example, we will work closely with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to improve claims administration by identifying and eliminating inefficiency or duplication within the claims process. A joint operational board will provide a strategic steer and monitor any agreed working practices via a service level agreement.
- 5.3 We are also working up plans to utilise 'Government Connect' – a centrally supported service enabling secured sharing of information between Local Authorities and other government departments. This supports interagency verification of claims and sharing of information and customers will not be inconvenienced by being asked to provide data more than once. We are also looking into how information provided by the DWP to notify benefit changes can be electronically uploaded into

our benefits processing software, thus reducing the time taken to process benefit changes.

- 5.4 Recent changes to Housing and Council Tax Benefit regulations now permit us to receive claims and changes of circumstance by telephone and we have initiated a project to introduce this for our customers. Whilst this does mean we will have software costs to find the evidence is that telephone claims dramatically improves turn around time. The software enables completion of a benefits application during a telephone interview. The data is captured in Academy where a dummy claim is set up in a holding area. The customer is told what verification they need to provide and an appointment is made for 2/3 days later. During that appointment the customer's claim is calculated and they are provided with a notification of their benefit entitlement.
- 5.5 This process will mean that the number of new claims that can be processed 1<sup>st</sup> time without repeat requests for information will be significantly increased and the customer's experience of claiming benefit will be enhanced. Customers will not need to phone Derby Direct to chase claims or query information. The number of decisions that get challenged and appeals will also reduce as customers have the opportunity to seek clarification about their entitlement at the appointment. Customers will be more directly involved in the assessment of their entitlement so it is likely that there will be less fraud and error entering the benefit system.

## **6. Recommendations**

- 6.1 To approve the workload priorities and plans for resource allocation.
- 6.2 To note the planned initiatives for improvements to the Benefits Service.

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Appendix 1 - Implications

<b>IMPLICATIONS</b>
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**1. Financial**

None arising from this report

**2. 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.

**3. Personnel**

None arising from this report.

**4. 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.

**5. Corporate Priorities**

The Council's Corporate Plan 2008-2011 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.