



**COMMUNITY COMMISSION**  
**20 JANUARY 2009**

## **Report of the Assistant Director of Customer Services**

### **Progress following the Audit Commission's Inspection Of The Benefits Service**

#### **Introduction**

- 1.1 This report updates the Commission on progress in service delivery for Housing and Council Tax Benefit following an Audit Commission inspection in February 2008 and their subsequent recommendations.

#### **Background**

- 2.1 During 2007/08 Derby's Benefits Service volunteered to be a pilot site for the Audit Commission's new approach to Benefits Service inspections. The new approach places greater emphasis on the role of the Benefits Service in contributions and outcomes to area-based priorities such as tackling poverty and inequality, and reducing unemployment. It focused on the perspective of citizens and service users, with less emphasis on processes.
- 2.2 It is recognised that this is a harder test than the Comprehensive Performance Assessment. We believed that being a pilot site presented an opportunity to understand how service delivery could be influenced by the new standards and to make sure any recommendations in their report influenced our own Customer Service Improvement Programme.
- 2.3 The Inspectors were with Derby for a week in February 2008 where they interviewed key staff, stakeholders and the Member portfolio holder for Benefits.

#### **Inspection Outcome**

- 3.1 The Inspector's report concluded that: against the new approach the Benefits Service was poor but had promising prospects for improvement. Their report highlighted some areas where we fall short of the new standards and made the following five broad recommendations that we focused our action planning upon:
- Agree a shared vision of what an excellent benefits service for the people of Derby will be and how this will be achieved:
  - Strengthen customer focus and reduce the time it takes to process claims
  - Improve the take up of benefits
  - Improve the capacity of the Benefits Service

- Improve the benefit service's understanding and delivery of value for money
- 3.2 The Inspectors judged that the service has promising prospects for improvement; it recognised the improvements made in claims processing during 2007/08 and highlighted the following areas where service delivery is strong:
- Appeals
  - Visiting services
  - Counter fraud
  - Performance management and leadership
  - Liaison with ethnic groups
  - Discretionary hardship fund allocation
  - Customer Service training
- 3.3 The “promising” judgement for our prospects for improvement is a result of support and leadership for our Customer Services Improvement Programme. The Inspectors could see evidence that the plans we have for the service provided a strong platform to deliver improvements.

<b>Post Inspection Action Plan</b>
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- 4.1 Customer Services are undertaking a Service Improvement Programme which has been influenced by the recommendations in the Audit Commission report.
- 4.2 Appendix 2 shows the action plan developed following the report to ensure that the recommendations suggested are delivered. Those recommendations have actions that are embedded into projects within the Customer Service Improvement Programme.
- 4.3 In line with the Audit Commissions recommendations the following significant progress has been made to implement service improvements for our customers:
- Consulted customers to get their perspective on what they value about service delivery and designed processes around those expectations
  - Developed a vision for service delivery
  - Scoped and introduced easements around verifying claims that make it easier for customers to claim
  - Redesigned our processes to make them flexible, efficient, value for money and customer focused
  - Piloted then mainstreamed a new way of dealing with disagreements against our Benefit and Council Tax decisions. This ensures where possible that customers receive decisions on the day they access the service or within a week if the disagreement is by post to us.
  - Contact customers proactively to help them verify their claims, where appropriate Visiting Officers are used to help vulnerable customers
  - Started a 2<sup>nd</sup> pilot on changes of address, which focuses on a ‘tell us once’ approach. This ensures that customers tell us once about their move and all the information required to process Benefit and Council Tax is gathered. This delivers a cross-service approach to changes in customer's circumstances.

- Procured software that will enable us to assist customers make their their claims, then electronically process them. The project to deploy the software is underway
- Procured software that enables changes of address for Council Tax customers to be processed via an electronic form, which automatically processes that change in our core council tax system. This also enables us, with the customer's permission, to share information with other services.
- Piloted then mainstreamed alternative options of contacting customers in the Council Tax, Business Rates and Benefit overpayment recovery process. Instead of issuing a paper reminder we can choose to email, telephone or text customers to remind them to pay. This delivers better value for money and has increased the numbers of customers who pay at reminder stage.
- Implemented a second payment run for Housing Benefit to ensure customers receive their entitlements quicker.

<b>Recommendations</b>
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5.0 To note the report.

<b>IMPLICATIONS</b>
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**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.

