

Part A

Report to: **Overview & Scrutiny Committee**

Date of meeting: 21 November 2012

Report of: Head of Revenues & Benefits

Title: Benefits Department Update

1.0 **SUMMARY**

1.1 This report explains the improvement in Performance Indicators for the Benefits Service and explains the background to the statistics.

2.0 **RECOMMENDATION**

2.1 The report is noted

2.2 That a further update is provided in 6 months' time on progress

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Report Approved by:

David Gardner, Director for Corporate Resources & Governance, Three Rivers District Council, Lead Director for Revenues & Benefits Shared Service

Bernard Clarke, Strategic Finance Director, Watford Borough Council

3.0 **DETAILED PROPOSAL**

3.1 **Management / Monitoring**

Watford Borough Council has a gross caseload of 12,718 claimants in receipt of Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax Benefit. This is an increase of 581 over the past twelve months or 975 since September 2009.

To meet this increase in workload, the Shared Service has implemented the following procedures:

- “Triage”. New claims to Housing Benefit are seen by Customer Service Centre staff who offer assistance to claimants in completing the application form and ensuring that all required information is provided in support of the application. This ensures a greater number of claims can be assessed without the need to chase for further information, an action that adds delay to the processing times. The average time taken to process a new claim under these arrangements was 6.0 days in October.
- WCHT “Triage”. Housing Officers at WCHT are replicating the process above when signing on new tenants so that Housing Benefit awards are not delayed.
- Cases that have not been assessed are regularly monitored and assessors are notified when trigger points are reached, i.e. all supporting information being received or a deadline for providing information has passed, so that a decision is made without further delay.
- Claimants that we have requested further information from are now contacted by phone to chase up the provision of information which has resulted in the claim being processed sooner.
- We have engaged additional external resources through Serco and Liberata to assist in reducing the volume of work created by changes in circumstances and their productivity is monitored daily supported by regular weekly teleconferences with both organisations
- Staff are all allocated individual targets for dealing with claims and correspondence as part of the Appraisal Process and this is reviewed through regular 1-2-1 meetings.

3.2 Performance Indicators

3.2.1 The speed of processing new claims for Benefit is based on the time taken from the date that the claim form is received to the date that the decision to award benefit is made. This is complicated by the fact that if additional information is required the claimant has one calendar month to provide the information.

We have attempted to overcome this by the actions quoted above.

The indicator for the average time to process a new claim is shown below:

Month	April	May	June	July	August	Sept	Oct
Days	39.92	46.04	42.95	37.42	35.06	29.50	28.81

A further indicator requested by Overview & Scrutiny Committee was the average time taken from the provision of all information to the day a decision is made:

Month	April	May	June	July	August	Sept	Oct
Days	20.54	22.34	20.70	18.51	15.44	12.50	10.63

The final indicator is the average time taken to complete a change in circumstances. Again this is taken from the date the change is notified until the date the change is completed and the decision made.

Month	April	May	June	July	August	Sept	Oct
Days	36.98	34.43	35.49	34.17	36.39	35.35	27.93

3.3 Other Management Data

3.3.1 To monitor the outstanding workload, a weekly count of new claims is conducted. This has shown an improvement in the number of new claims outstanding and mirrors the reduction in the average time to process new claims.

Date	2 Apr	7 May	4 Jun	2 Jul	6 Aug	17 Sep	1 Oct	5 Nov
Claims	295	321	324	309	186	124	132	90

Of the 90 claims outstanding as at 5 November, 78 were awaiting further information from claimants.

A daily count of changes is also conducted that monitors the volume of outstanding pieces of work as a consequence of a change in circumstances. This reports on the work outstanding and held by either Serco, Liberata or in-house staff. A weekly summary is shown below

W/C	Serco		Liberata		In-House		Total	
	O/S	Pending	O/S	Pending	O/S	Pending	O/S	Pending
01/10/12	1093	327	0	0	2340	298	3433	625
08/10/12	774	374	1941	2	600	313	3315	689
15/10/12	1991	377	850	5	516	315	3357	697
22/10/12	1746	378	642	28	898	300	3286	706
29/10/12	1478	337	742	61	640	396	2860	794
05/11/12	1094	318	521	96	855	337	2470	751

3.4 Future Activity

3.4.1 To provide more access channels to claimants so that they can resolve basic queries and enable assessment staff to focus on assessment work, we have commenced the implementation of a number of self-service and other options.

These are:

- Self-Service facilities available for Benefit Claimants, Landlords as well as Council Taxpayers and Business Ratepayers

With the following to be implemented by the end of the Financial Year

- E-billing and e-notifications
- Integration of Academy Revenues & Benefits and Lagan Customer Relationship Management to enable more queries to be handled by CSC staff
- E-Claim facility
- Total Mobile Solution to enable more assessment work to be done in claimants' homes.

4.0 IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Financial

4.1.1 Additional funding to cover the cost of the external resource provided by Serco and Liberata as approved by the Joint Shared Services Committee on 24 September 2012

4.1.2 A Growth bid to allow for Budget provision for continued use of these resources, as required, will be requested from the Joint Committee on 19 November 2012

4.2 Legal Issues

4.2.1 None

4.3 Equalities

4.3.1 None

4.4 Potential Risks

4.4.1 There are no risks associated with this report.

4.5 Staffing & Accommodation

There are no staffing or accommodation implications arising out of this report

Appendices

None

Background papers

None