

## Part A

Report to: **Overview & Scrutiny Committee**

Date of meeting: 27 June 2013

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 if required

#### **Contact Officer:**

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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

It was reported at the Overview & Scrutiny Committee on 21 November 2012 that Watford Borough Council had a gross caseload of 12,718 claimants in receipt of Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax Benefit. This is now 12,938. It was also reported that to meet this, the Shared Service introduced a number of measures.

Those measures still remain in force but with the addition of:

- Regular notifications of Changes in Circumstances received from Department of Work & Pensions via the “ATLAS” network ensuring more awards are up to date.
- The transfer of focus in engaging temporary staff within the department as opposed to the use of off-site processing through the use of Liberata staff.

Whilst there is still work to do, the achievements so far have been well received, particularly by colleagues in Watford Community Housing Trust and other Social Housing Providers.

#### 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.

The Performance Indicators are gathered from data submitted to the Department of Work & Pensions in the form of the “Single Housing Benefit Extract” (SHBE)

Periods of peak activity would be expected over December and January due to the impact of the Christmas closedown and from April following the issue of Council Tax bills and notifications of rent increases.

The indicator for the average time since the November meeting, to process a new claim is shown below:

Month	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May
Days	21.06	26.07	26.12	23.21	25.34	25.43	19.35
HB awards	198	144	228	237	168	223	243
CTB awards	184	137	183	223	162	106	0

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	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May
Days	6.32	13.46	9.81	9.46	11.34	13.56	11.28

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	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May
Days	20.58	19.08	29.29	39.09	13.95	102.71	64.17
HB awards	1382	607	790	1105	6468	1213	1241
CTB awards	729	389	597	894	1027	504	0

Explanation for the high figures for April and May is given in 3.3.1

### 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	5 Nov	10 Dec	14 Jan	11 Feb	11 Mar	8 Apr	13 May	10 Jun
Claims	90	116	158	143	142	229	174	143

Of the 143 claims outstanding as at 10 June, 68 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 or in-house staff across the Shared Service. A monthly summary is shown below:

Date	No. of Cases					
	SERCO		IN-HOUSE		TOTAL	
	Outstanding	Pending	Outstanding	Pending	Outstanding	Pending
05/04/2013	314	264	1969	302	2283	566
03/05/2013	369	294	1955	327	2324	621
07/06/2013	305	176	2305	318	2610	494
11/06/2013	323	168	2299	330	2622	498

Finally, a count is kept of all notifications received via "ATLAS". Dealing with the backlog of these cases contributed to the sharp increase in Performance Indicator shown above. However, this has been overcome

and as at 10 June, staff had dealt with 25,269 out of 26,721 notifications of changes through this process.

### **3.4 Other External Factors for Consideration**

3.4.1 At the same time as the above “business as usual”, the department has also had to implement the following:

- Local Council Tax Support Scheme to replace Council Tax Benefit with effect from 1 April 2013
- Implementation of the Social Sector Size Criteria (“Bedroom Tax”)
- Preparation for the Implementation of the Benefit Cap from 15 July 2013

Each of the above have placed pressures on the department in terms of consultation, implementing new legislation, engagement with social sector housing providers and advice agencies, as well as ensuring staff are trained and equipped to be able to continue with the good work.

## **4.0 IMPLICATIONS**

### **4.1 Financial**

4.1.1 Additional funding has been committed by the Joint Shared Service Committee to maintain the support provided by Serco and other temporary staff

### **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