

THREE RIVERS & WATFORD SHARED SERVICES JOINT COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting: 18 November 2013

| PART A | AGENDA ITEM |
|--------|-------------|
| | 10 |

Title: Revenue and Benefits Update

Report of: Jane Walker, Benefits Manager

1. SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report provides an update on the Revenues and Benefits Service and current performance of the Benefits Service.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That the report be noted and Members be invited to comment on its contents.

Contact Officer:

For further information on this report please contact Jane Walker, Benefits Manager, telephone 01923 278272, email jane.walker@watford.gov.uk

3. INTRODUCTION

- 3.1 The following report outlines the current performance of the Watford Borough Council & Three Rivers District Council Revenues and Benefits shared service.

4. BENEFIT PROCESSING TIMES

- 4.1 There has been significant progress in the speed of processing new claims during the last month. This has allowed us to put some additional resources into the processing of changes in circumstances so that we can achieve improved performance over the medium term. Whilst the improvements are to be welcomed, we are now in a position to undertake a further forensic examination of our outstanding work. In some cases, the delays to the processing of new claims/change in circumstances are simply down to the complexity of the claim or we are awaiting further information from the customer. This could result in our performance dropping in the short term but we are closely monitoring these and looking at the underlying times for the new cases.

The current benefits processing times are shown in the table below:

Performance Data - TRDC
(Source SHEBE)

| Month | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec | Jan | Feb | Mar |
|-----------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Combined Speed | 20.79 | 16.94 | 21.99 | 22.00 | 22.27 | 23.53 | 14.08 | | | | | |
| New Claims | 27.45 | 19.88 | 18.49 | 17.32 | 20.31 | 17.09 | 17.94 | | | | | |
| Changes | 19.46 | 16.50 | 22.55 | 22.55 | 20.27 | 24.26 | 13.55 | | | | | |

Performance Data - WB
(Source SHEBE)

| Month | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec | Jan | Feb | Mar |
|-----------------------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Combined Speed | 89.95 | 56.83 | 42.20 | 27.57 | 22.53 | 20.15 | 14.54 | | | | | |
| New Claims | 25.43 | 19.35 | 19.49 | 14.47 | 14.15 | 20.34 | 16.55 | | | | | |
| Changes | 102.71 | 64.17 | 45.65 | 29.28 | 24.05 | 20.12 | 14.13 | | | | | |

- 4.2 One of the large factors in the historically high claims processing times has been the ATLAS system, and the number of items outstanding which still needed to be processed.

The Benefits team has completed all of the outstanding work and is now only having to manage the workload coming through ATLAS on a daily basis. Whilst the amount of data being received on a daily basis will vary, the team have now completed the backlog work and this will mean that changes are more up to date.

There is still some improvements to flow through the processing statistics, following the improvement in the ATLAS backlog and we should see these working their way through over the next couple of months.

5. HOUSING BENEFIT OVERPAYMENT RECOVERY

- 5.1 Housing Benefit overpayments are inevitable when dealing with housing benefit claims. The Council can reclaim grant on an element of this, in the form of Housing Subsidy. In addition the Council is able to recover the full amount of the overpayment from the claimant.

In 2012/13 the Housing benefit overpayment recovery rate achieved by the Councils was 68.81% for WBC and 62.58% for TRDC. A comparison of this in relation to other Hertfordshire Councils' can be seen in Appendix 1. This shows that not only has Watford's recovery rate increased by 12% since 2011/12 but that it is also the second best in Hertfordshire. Three Rivers has shown a larger increase in recovery rates of 17%.

The current rates for collection of Housing Benefit Overpayments as at the end of September 2013 are 66.06% for the current year for Watford and 80% for Three Rivers – against a target of 60%. This indicates that both authorities are expecting another good year for recovery of the overpayments.

- 5.2 The Revenues Service is also looking at ways in which we can improve the recovery rates, both for this year, and overpayments raised in previous years. We are now able to undertake an Attachment of Earnings order on those claimants who are now in PAYE employment. This is a new enforcement tool granted to us by the DWP. So we will be progressing this and looking at historic cases where we now have employment details.

We also hope to have LoCTA, a tracing tool, on a free trial for 3 months which we can use to obtain employment details.

We are also looking at placing Charging Orders on properties, where the claimant is a lease or freeholder of the property. We would look into this if we have a high value debt that needs to be repaid. We will be testing this shortly.

6. STAFFING

- 6.1 An Interim Head of Service has now been appointed. Robert Della-Sala joined the Team on 21 October 2013. Robert is undertaking a root and branch review of all areas of Revenues and Benefits, to ensure that the service is stabilised and that any structural issues that are undermining performance of the service are identified and a plan put in place to consolidate and improve upon what is already in place.

We are undertaking interviews in week commencing 11 November for an Interim Revenues Manager.

7. SERVICE IMPROVEMENTS

- 7.1 We are currently looking at ways in which we can improve the service delivery for both Revenues and Benefits. We will consider a range of solutions which improve efficiency and improve the service delivery to our customers.

Training on the new version of the Academy system has taken place and we have gone live with the new system. We have though experienced performance issues with the new system in terms of its speed and these issues have been reported to Capita and are being investigated.

A health check of our Document Image Processing system has also taken place and a comprehensive report has been supplied. We are now forming an action plan from this report to include an upgrade to the system and training on new functionality of the system which will ensure we are using the system in the most efficient way.

We are also working with the Customer Services Centre to look at how we can improve the service to our customers.

Alongside this we are also starting to develop a more robust performance management system, which will provide information which will help the service to identify

Appendix 1

Comparison of Watford with other Hertfordshire Councils

| 2011/12 | | | | | | | | | | |
|------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|--------------|------------|-----------------|
| LA | Broxbourne | Dacorum | East Herts | Hertsmere | NorthHerts | St Albans | Stevenage | Three Rivers | Watford | Welwyn Hatfield |
| HB Caseload | 5932 | 9285 | 6247 | 6127 | 8097 | 5949 | 7592 | 4523 | 6300 | 7637 |
| Speed - New | 25 | 24 | 35 | n/a | 19 | 30 | 28 | 38 | 35 | 16 |
| Speed - Changes | 9 | 12 | 6 | n/a | 6 | n/a | 9 | 27 | 30 | 4 |
| HB O/P Raised | £1,788,000 | £2,691,000 | £1,231,000 | £1,770,000 | £1,512,000 | £1,335,000 | £1,628,000 | £1,560,000 | £2,975,000 | £1,598,000 |
| HB O/P Recovered | £1,242,000 | £1,667,000 | £1,003,000 | £1,168,000 | £1,094,000 | £798,000 | £1,328,000 | £711,000 | £1,690,000 | £1,072,000 |
| % Collected | 69.46% | 61.95% | 81.48% | 65.99% | 72.35% | 59.78% | 81.57% | 45.58% | 56.81% | 67.08% |

| 2012/13 | | | | | | | | | | |
|------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|--------------|------------|-----------------|
| LA | Broxbourne | Dacorum | East Herts | Hertsmere | NorthHerts | St Albans | Stevenage | Three Rivers | Watford | Welwyn Hatfield |
| HB Caseload | 5985 | 9338 | 6487 | 6282 | 8119 | 5997 | 7758 | 4598 | 6505 | 7817 |
| Speed - New | 23 | 32 | 36 | 20 | 19 | 34 | 39 | 26 | 25 | 17 |
| Speed - Changes | 7 | 9 | 18 | 10 | 5 | n/a | 45 | 38 | 34 | 8 |
| HB O/P Raised | £2,088,000 | £2,585,000 | £1,783,000 | £2,787,000 | £1,699,000 | £2,518,000 | £2,156,000 | £1,606,246 | £3,083,400 | £1,680,000 |
| HB O/P Recovered | £1,620,000 | £1,695,000 | £1,207,000 | £1,631,000 | £1,122,000 | £1,314,000 | £1,242,000 | £1,005,139 | £2,121,794 | £978,000 |
| % Collected | 77.59% | 65.57% | 67.69% | 58.52% | 66.04% | 52.18% | 57.61% | 62.58% | 68.81% | 58.21% |