

Report to: Overview and Scrutiny
Date of meeting: 28th November 2013
Report of: Director of Finance
Title: Revenues and Benefits Update

1.0 SUMMARY

1.1 This report provides an update on the revenues and benefits service and current performance of the benefits service.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 The report is noted and members invited to comment on its contents

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3.0 INTRODUCTION

3.1 The following report outlines the current performance of the Watford Borough Council benefits service. It also provides an update on the Revenues and Benefits service.

4.0 BENEFIT PROCESSING TIMES

4.1 The current benefits processing times are shown in the table below.

Month	Target	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct
Combined Speed		89.95	56.83	42.20	27.57	22.53	20.15	14.54
New Claims	22	25.43	19.35	19.49	14.47	14.15	20.34	16.55
Changes	15	102.71	64.17	45.65	29.28	24.05	20.12	14.13

This shows an improvement in the year for both new claims and changes in circumstances.

New claims have seen a significant improvement since the beginning of the year, although this increased slightly in September. This increase is due to a swapping of resources onto the processing of changes in circumstances.

Processing of Changes in Circumstances has also improved significantly since the beginning of the year.

Both of these indicators are below the target for processing times, however, it is anticipated that these may rise slightly over the next month or so as some of the older cases are closed down. This will increase the average times. The oldest date for new claims in the system is now the 30th September 2013 (as at 18th November 2013).

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 now 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 essentially 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.

5.0 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 Council was 68.81%. 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.

The current rates for collection of Housing Benefit Overpayments are 66.06% for the current year – against a target of 60% and 21.85%, against a target of 5% for all years. This indicates that Watford is expecting another good year for recovery of the overpayments.

- 5.2 "The Council 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 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"

6.0 STAFFING

- 6.1 The Head of Revenues and Benefits left the Council at the end of September 2013. Since this time we have been running without a Head of Service. We are looking to replace the Head of Service role on a temporary basis until the end of March.

We are undertaking interviews in the week commencing 14th October 2013 and so will be able to update Budget Panel at the meeting following the conclusion of these interviews.

We have also appointed an Interim Revenues Manager who will be starting with us on the 2nd December 2013..

During this time we will look at the resourcing requirements for the service, based on current caseload levels and performance targets.

7.0 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.

We have already started this process and are currently providing training on a new version of the Academy system and we will go live with the new system shortly. We are

also looking at a range of other improvements which we are implementing as we agree solutions. Many of these improvements are small improvements in a part of a process and these changes are being implemented as we go along. Examples of these smaller improvements include changing how emails are dealt with, considering whether tasks need to be completed, correcting issues with the system and implementing new recovery methods for those who owe the Council money. All of these will improve the efficiency of the service.

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