Report to: Outsourced Services Scrutiny Panel
Date: 23rd September 2014
Report of: Head of Revenues and Benefits

Revenues and Benefits Update - Watford

1. Background

2. Overview and Scrutiny have been closely monitoring the work of the revenues and benefits section for some time. This is because there used to be issues regarding both the management of the service and also the level of service it provided to residents.

3. At previous meetings of OSC, the then interim Head of Service (now permanent) outlined the systematic approach that was being taken to understand the underlying causes of some of the problems that were being experienced within the service. Members were anxious that any improvements were both sustainable and would lead to a consistent level of service.

Recommendation:

That the report be noted.

4. Actions since previous meeting

5. The table below provides Members with an array of initiatives that have been either completed, or are currently in progress. It is not exhaustive.

Action	Importance	Outcome
The benefit system (Academy) was unstable and operating from the wrong version	Significant downtime reduced productive time and was demoralising to staff	Academy was upgraded to the correct version prior to year end; functionality that had not worked was fixed (in most cases) and service has been stabilised
The benefit system (Academy) was slow and report production slow or in some cases reports could not be generated	Slow systems and lack of reporting resulted in lack of management information as well as reduced productivity	Prior to year end, work was undertaken to reduce the database size by archiving old data. Reports that were taking up to 6 hours to run now take a 1/3rd of the time. Reports that had not worked now work.
New claims received in the CSC	Risk of delays in processing new claims and receiving multiple letters asking for missing information	In January a fast track process was implemented. Claim forms that are received at the CSC are checked with the customer present. Where information is missing customers are given an opportunity to bring back the information within 24 hours and cases are assessed the same day. This face to face contact has been welcomed by residents and makes the process faster and more accurate. We have offered to train WCHT staff to undertake

		these checks for their new sign ups so as to improve the service further. WCHT have had staffing issues so that training is yet to take place.
New claims received by post or electronically	Risk of delays in processing new claims and receiving multiple letters asking for missing information	Since July, we have been telephoning customers advising them their claim form is incomplete and what information to either bring in or post. Instead of sending reminder letters out after 30 days, we are sending them out after 14 days and a further reminder at 30 days.
Letters	Feedback from multiple stakeholders was sought about the quality of the letters being sent out	An exercise to review over 120 letters was completed in July. Every letter has been changed. CSC staff and Cllr Watkin were asked to quality assure the revised letters and further changes were made as a result. Feedback to date has been positive.
Entitlement letters	The entitlement letters are complex and technical and difficult to understand. This leads to footfall and telephone enquiries.	The project to review these letters has been started – it is extremely complex and has required external consultancy support. It will take between 6-8 weeks to complete
Changes in circumstances - Atlas	Not processing changes in a timely fashion could lead to overpayments being created	ATLAS files are downloaded DAILY and we have automated 40-50% of the changes into

		the Academy system so that many changes are done on the same day without staff interaction. We are up to date on these. The only time we have not been was due to a DWP National technical problem.
Change in circumstances – significant dates	Dealing with future KNOWN changes reduces overpayments and gives residents ample time to provide evidence	This report had previously NOT been used. Over 3000 entries were cleared in March 2014. Since March the report is run monthly and letters have been sent out in September for changes due in October. Where responses are not received by the change date, benefits are suspended to prevent future overpayments.
Staff training	It is important that staff are able to undertake a full range of duties to maximise flexibility	Staff have received a number of formal training sessions delivered by external trainers. A training plan is almost complete and will run from September to September. Staff are being given feedback on the quality of their work and are being given extra mentoring where required. All staff had appraisals completed by the end of June and have SMART objectives linked to performance.
Performance Management	Staff must have a clear understanding of what	Management dashboards have been

	they are achieving and what their expected performance should be	in operation since March which are completed weekly. These dashboards look at volumes and trends and are early indicators of potential problems. Performance Indicators are shared with all staff and other departments and external stakeholders and displayed throughout the office. Performance is also discussed at bi-monthly meetings with the entire staff.
Working with stakeholders	Working in partnership with stakeholders is important in identifying problems and working on solutions	The Head of Service has 6-weekly meetings with the CAB and WCHT and quarterly meetings with the CSC and Housing. Information and issues are shared in an open environment and the "culture of blame" has been replaced with a "culture of mutual understanding".
Telephone contact	Risk of long waiting times for residents	This is an ongoing issue which is being examined with the CSC. An additional member of staff (temp) who is cross trained in both revenues and benefits has been working within the CSC. We are evaluating the impact of this flexibility as well as reviewing the phone scripts used by staff and the current IVR options.

6. On-going Issues

7. The recent downtime arising from the virus infection that was experienced in August has had an impact on the work volumes. Prior to this issue, performance was stable and confidence was building. The change of circumstances PI is slightly inflated due to a national download issue the DWP had between 9/6/14 and 24/6. This means that over 500 cases were delayed by 15 days which has impacted on this PI. As this error was not the fault of the Council, those cases will be treated as having been received on 25/6 and not 9/6. Once the cases have been cleansed this will feed through to the PI.

   August 2014
   New Claims =   21.41 days (target 22 days)
   Changes   =   19.88 days (target 15 days)

   Year -to-Date
   New Claims =   19.87 days (target 22 days)
   Changes   =   16.78 days (target 15 days)

8. There are a number of IT projects that have yet to be started and include

   - Stabilising the self-service portal for landlords
   - Upgrading the portal to give more functionality for residents
   - Giving CAB 3rd party trusted access
   - Introducing the on-line benefit claim form (easier to complete)

9. Conclusion

10. The service has had a sustained period of improvement and change. The next phase is to continue to build resilience and to add value to what we do. This includes further improvements in our customer service and customer care, streamlining processes and embedding a proactive culture throughout the department.

11. There are still a number of risks that are outside of the control of the service – these include

   - IT – infrastructure and support
   - Changes to government policy
   - New initiatives – e.g. live updates from HMRC that start in October 2014

12. We fully acknowledge and recognise that there needs to be further improvements. We have a roadmap which is borne of the desire to not just "fix" what is broken but to "fix them for good."

13. Legal issues (Monitoring Officer)

The Head of Democracy and Governance comments that there are no legal implications in this report.