

**1. Introduction**

- 1.1 2014/15 was a challenging year due to a significant number of IT projects that needed to be implemented for revenues and benefits through the year. In addition, there was significant staff turnover (11/64) resulting from improved management of staff and performance monitoring.
- 1.2 All the vacancies were filled during the year with a mixture of “inexperienced” and “experienced” staff. This meant that as well as providing training and support for the existing staff, a lot of time and resources were also spent on bringing new staff on and up to speed with WBC processes.
- 1.3 The third challenge through the year, was to review work practices across all areas of the business and to deal with underlying and structural failures in the service, which have constrained progress over the last few years.

**2. Headlines performance stats**

- 2.1 The volume of work outstanding on both revenues and benefits have been stabilised and decreased by over 50% through the year. At the same time, work on “maintenance” of accounts, reviews etc, has been re-introduced as “business as usual”. More effort has been targeted at reducing processing delays, which then reduces complaints, appeals, phone calls and unnecessary customer contact.
- 2.2 In all four key performance areas shown in the tables below, the service met its’ target for the year. The in-year collection rates for both council tax and business rates being the best for over 6 years.

<b>WATFORD</b>	<b>Target</b>	<b>Year</b>
Council Tax collection	95.5%	96.20%
Business rates Collection	97.3%	97.70%

**2.3**

**Revenues**

- 2.4 Within the Hertfordshire benchmarking group, Watford went from 13<sup>th</sup> highest council tax collection to 8<sup>th</sup> in 2014/5. For Business Rates the ranking improved from 10<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> highest

**2.5 Housing Benefit**

- 2.6 The number of new claims that were processed has been falling steadily over the last 3 years as shown below, however the make-up of the caseload has become more complex with more people claiming whilst working part time :

<b>WATFORD</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Average per month</b>
Total new claims 2012/13	2,404	200
Total new claims 2013/14	2,452	204
Total new claims 2014/15	2,065	172

- 2.7 The number of changes in circumstances that have been processed has significantly increased for the same period, as the backlogs have been cleared and reviews and other intervention work is being undertaken. This has included the introduction of new data-matching exercises with HM Revenues and Customs which began in October 2014.

<b>WATFORD</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Average per month</b>
Total changes 2012/13	10,345	862
Total changes 2013/14	18,234	1,520
Total changes 2014/15	20,416	1,701

- 2.8 The table below shows the annual performance for processing new claims and changes in circumstances :

<b>WATFORD</b>	<b>Target</b>	<b>Year</b>
Housing Benefit New claims processing times	22 days	18.64 days
Housing Benefit Change of Circumstances processing times	15 days	13.66 days

### 3.0 Other Improvements

- 3.1 There have been substantial other improvements made to the service that all contribute to the improved performance and these include :

- All staff having an appraisal and set clear work objectives linked to the service plan
- Updating all forms, leaflets and letter templates to make them clearer and simpler to understand
- Prioritising work that creates customer contact – refunds, deaths and moves and changes
- Getting Academy reports to work
- Redesigning the benefit claim form
- Updating the website with information and leaflets
- Introducing refunds for council tax, twice weekly
- Having weekly performance dashboards for all service areas
- Liaison meetings with the CAB, WCHT and Housing
- Introducing wall boards to manage customer phone contact

#### **4.0 Building on the progress made to date**

4.1 Whilst substantial progress has been made to stabilise the service, fix the underlying system issues and re-engineer processes, the 2015/16 financial year will remain equally challenging. Welfare reform is likely to have an impact on the department due to

- Reducing the benefit cap from £26,000 to £23,000 per year
- Roll out of Universal Credit in November 2015 in Watford

4.2 In addition, we have identified a number of distinct IT projects including that will require implementation including :

- re-launch of self service for customers and landlord
- “trusted third party access” for the CAB
- on line benefits claim form (BECS)
- Academy planning module for Inspectors
- AUDDIS for automated direct debits
- Upgrade to Anite Document Management System
- VOA interface / integration

4.3 The service is extremely reliant on IT to not only manage and process claims, but for managing the paperwork. In order to deliver our aims and objectives for 2015/16 we have identified the following other challenges :

- IT upgrades and hardware road map modernisation agenda
- Stable IT platform
- Government legislative changes
- Economic environment and caseload profile changes
- Effective management of staff and staff performance
- Introduction of a Business Improvement District in WBC