

28th JUNE 2016

REPORT OF HEAD OF COMMUNITIES & NEIGHBOURHOODS

UPDATE ON BENEFIT PERFORMANCE

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To update the Committee on current benefit performance and measures that have been put in place to effectively manage performance in relation to benefit processing across the authority.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 **(a) Members note performance (Appendix A) and proposed actions to improve the benefit processing service.**

3.0 KEY ISSUES

- 3.1 The Governance Committee asked for a review into Housing Benefit processing and performance management due to continued difficulties with external audits of subsidy claims over the past 6 years. A report was taken to the Committee on 31st March 2015.
- 3.2. Since the report to the Governance Committee on 31st March 2015 the Subsidy claim for 2014/15 was signed off by External Audit and DWP. An improvement was seen on the number of errors identified and there was no real material impact on the amount of subsidy claimed. Local Authority error thresholds were not breached therefore the Council did not suffer any subsidy financial penalties for the second consecutive year.
- 3.3 All assessment staff underwent an intensive refresher legislative training programme between Feb 15 and November 15 of which, it is hoped, that a positive impact of the training will be reflected in the 2015/16 subsidy claim, which will be audited during July 2016. Work continues on reducing the number of repetitive error types around the more complex areas of benefits e.g. overpayment classification and earnings.
- 3.4 A full process review of new claims assessment was undertaken incorporating a new online/electronic new claims service (self serve and assisted) – these were implemented mid Feb 15. 99% of claims are now taken electronically of which 84% are being submitted as self serve.
- 3.5 A full process review of reporting a change of circumstances was undertaken incorporating a new online service for customers to report their changes, these were implemented in late November 15 as a soft launch. The new process has already bedded in well particularly with staff and although little promotional work has been undertaken 62% of reported changes reported via the new electronic service are being submitted as self serve.
- 3.6 A document upload function has been introduced on the Councils website to allow customers to provide supporting documents to assist their benefit claim. To date although most customers are using this to apply for housing benefit, there is still a significant amount of documents that customers are not uploading thus creating the need for Customer Services to contact customers to collect relevant information.
- 3.7 One area that remains a concern is the accuracy rates. These remain lower than expected and **Appendix A** outlines the current performance of the benefits service. Work

continues with service managers to implement performance management processes which will address areas of concern and poor performance within the processing teams.

3.8 The errors that have been identified to date relate to benefit processing. To help reduce the number of errors an external Benefits consultant was commissioned to review the entire quality assurance (QA) process. On the back of this a new performance framework and accuracy targets have been set for the benefit processors. This has been in effect since April 16.

3.9 An analysis of performance from all processing staff has taken place and new performance measures and reviews with individual staff have been put in place to help drive improvement and accuracy of processing claims. Several performance management initiatives are now well embedded as follows:

- The People team have weekly meetings with Customer Services where key performance and issues are discussed.
- The Benefits and Customer Services Team Leader meet fortnightly where all aspects of Benefit service delivery are discussed with a main focus on accuracy and performance improvements. During these meetings clear actions and expectations are set with defined timescales for achieving them.
- Performance statistics are produced in a timely manner on a monthly basis and discussed and reviewed at all levels.
- Outcomes from quality checks, audits, errors are analysed and fed into any training plans and/or reviews of processes and procedures.
- Monthly bulletins are issued to all processing staff with key messages, results and relevant important information.

4.0 **POLICY AND CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 The new performance framework, targets and performance management of staff will require management resource time in relation to having to closely monitor staff performance. Positively the new performance frameworks are showing improvements and should start to positively impact on future audits.

5.0 **FINANCIAL AND OTHER RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 With regards to recent Subsidy claims the position is much improved from previous years. Whilst improvements have been made we need to be cautious in relation to the 2015/16 external audit that will take place in relation to benefits during July 2016. The reason for this is due to the fact we are not yet achieving consistent enough accuracy performance from processing staff. This is being addressed through the training plans for staff.

6.0 **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS/POWERS**

6.1 There are no legal implications arising from this report

7.0 **COMMUNITY SAFETY**

7.1 There are no particular implications arising from this report.

8.0 **EQUALITIES**

8.1 There are no particular equalities issues arising as a result of this report.

9.0 RISKS

L I K E L I H O O D	A	Very High				
	B	High				
	C	Significant		2		
	D	Low			1	
	E	Very Low				
	F	Almost Impossible				
			Negligible 1	Marginal 2	Critical 3	Catastrophic 4

IMPACT

Risk No	Risk Description
1	Staff accuracy performance does not improve.
2	2015/16 External Audit will result in qualification

10.0 **CLIMATE CHANGE**

10.1 There are no particular implications arising from this report

11.0 **CONSULTATION**

11.1 Consultation has taken place with staff and managers within the Communities & Neighbourhoods Department and Central Services Department.

12.0 **WARDS AFFECTED**

12.1 All wards are affected

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Appendices: Appendix 1 – Performance Figures