

**BODY:** Cabinet

**DATE:** 14<sup>th</sup> July 2010

**SUBJECT:** Benefits Service Improvement Plan

**REPORT OF:** Head of Revenues, Benefits and Customer Contact Centre

**Ward(s):** All

**Purpose:** To update Cabinet on progress against the current Service Improvement Plan and on a revised Service Improvement Plan to be put in place as a result of the Audit Commission's Health-check of the Benefits service carried out in March 2010.

**Contact:** Mr B McCafferty, Head of Revenues, Benefits and Customer Contact Centre, Telephone: (01323) 415171.

**Recommendation:** Members are asked to note progress against the 2009/10 Service Improvement Plan and comment on the Draft Service Improvement Plan 2010/11.

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## **1.0 Introduction**

- 1.1 The Audit Commission carried out an inspection of the Benefits Service in 2008 and assessed the service as a 'poor', no-star service that had 'uncertain' prospects for improvement.
- 1.2 As a result of the 'Poor' assessment, the Commission are highly likely to re-inspect the service within 24 months of the last inspection report, that is, by 1 April 2011.

## **2.0 Direction of travel required**

- 2.1 The inspection report noted specific need for improvement in the following areas
- Ensuring speedy and accurate payment of benefits
  - Adopting a strategic approach to increasing benefit take-up
  - Developing customer service standards and raising awareness of them
  - Improving accessibility of the service
  - Improving awareness and delivery of value for money
- 2.2 Following the inspection, an Improvement Plan 2009/10 (attached as Appendix 1) was developed. Of the 32 actions identified in the

plan 18 have been completed in full; 12 have some form of action outstanding and two have had no action taken on them.

2.3 Cabinet are asked to note the actions completed and the improved performance in respect of processing new claims for benefit.

	2008/09	2009/10
Average days to process new claims	23.51	18.72
Average number of days to process changes in circumstances	18.70	14.65

### **3.0 Audit Commission Housing Benefit Improvement Review**

3.1 The Audit Commission were commissioned to carry out a health-check review on the Benefits service, which they did in March 2010, and published their report in June 2010. It should be noted that the review report does not contain a scored assessment of the service, is an internal document and, unlike the Inspection report of March 2009, is not available to the public.

3.2 The report identified key strengths and gaps within the Service and highlighted a number of challenges that the Service should consider as headline areas for further improvement.

3.3 The headline areas for improvement were seen as:

- Having a stronger vision to assist the Council in taking a longer term approach to the service
- Developing a business plan which is clear and purposeful, and builds on the leadership it has developed
- Focus on need and the impact the service has on local people
- Emphasising the customer focus of the service
- Empowering service staff
- A focus on improvement which is shared by all
- Value for money as a routine focus of management of the service

3.4 In addition to the review, we acquired, at no cost, a two-day consultation exercise with the Department for Work and Pensions 'Lean Systems' team. They provided some useful insight on how we could stream-line some of our process to make them more efficient.

### **4.0 The Way Forward**

4.1 The new vision for the Service is to **'Pay the Right Benefit to the Right People at the Right Time, in the Right Way and at the Right Cost'**. This vision, and the new Service Improvement plan 2010/11 (attached as appendix 2), encompasses those areas for improvement noted at the last inspection, as well as picking up on the challenges identified in the Audit Commission Improvement

Review. Below the service improvement plan for 2010 / 11 a series of sub team plans are being developed by service managers which identify in detail key SMART actions required to deliver headline improvements.

- 4.2 Work is already underway on some of the key actions within the plan. Specifically, a Revenues and Benefits Customer Charter has been developed, which contains service standards (copy attached as Appendix 3). The Charter is on the Council website and leaflets and posters have been produced.
- 4.3 In addition, a Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Take-Up Strategy has been produced, which aims to raise awareness of the benefits scheme and ensure that those people who are entitled to benefit actually claim it. As well as increasing take-up, it is worth noting that for every £1 increase in benefits paid through take-up work, 77 pence is spent in the local economy. Both of these actions address specific areas for improvement noted at the last inspection.
- 4.4 Officers from both Revenues and Benefits have paid visits to councils that perform well in specific areas, for example the Revenues Manager and overpayment officers have visited Tunbridge Wells and several officers visited Shepway Council, who were finalist last year in the Institute of Revenues Rating and Valuation Most Improved Benefits Team of the Year award. Useful ideas and initiatives were gleaned from these visits and further trips are planned.

## **5.0 The National Picture**

- 5.1 Nationally, the future for all welfare benefits, including Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, is likely to change dramatically and the service are paying close attention to what the coalition government are saying. Of particular interest is a report produced by The Centre for Social Justice entitled 'Dynamic Benefits'. The Chairman at the time the report was produced was Iain Duncan Smith MP, who is now the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. Hence this report is likely to provide a blueprint for the welfare state in the coming years.
- 5.2 The service will play close attention to the messages coming out of the coalition government and respond accordingly.

## **6.0 Consultations**

- 6.1 The service recognises the importance of consultation with our customers in helping to shape the service to meet their needs and intends to carry out consultation on several actions within the Improvement Plan, for example, Customer Charter and the Take-Up Plan.

## **7.0 Resource Implications**

7.1 No additional resources are required at present.

## **8.0 Anti-Poverty**

8.1 The service plays a major role in addressing poverty within the Borough. An effective and efficient benefits service can provide the means that allows residents a better quality of life by being able to meet their housing costs and is an important additional income on top of other state benefits or to those in low-paid employment.

## **9.0 Conclusion**

9.1 Whilst performance has improved more needs to be done and the pace of change quickened. The revised Service Improvement Plan, along with a willingness to learn from the best, provides the foundation to secure a better outcome for our customers and more favourable assessment in any future inspection of the service.

**Contact officer:  
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The Background Papers used in compiling this report were as follows:

- Audit Commission – Benefit Service Inspection report produced in March 2009
- Audit Commission – Housing Benefit Improvement Review (Report of Advice and Assistance Work) – June 2010
- DWP Lean 'Health Check report

These can be obtained from Bill McCafferty, Head of Revenues, Benefits and Customer Contact Centre  
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