

## **SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**REPORT TO:** Neighbourhood and Community Services Scrutiny Panel  
**DATE:** 24<sup>th</sup> October 2011

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**WARD(S):** All

### **PART I** **FOR COMMENT AND CONSIDERATION**

#### **RESPONSE TO THE FINDINGS OF THE 2010 AUDIT COMMISSION INSPECTION INTO HOUSING BENEFIT SERVICES**

##### **1 Purpose of Report**

To advise the Panel on the progress made against the recommendations contained in the Audit Commission Inspection report of May 2010

##### **2 Recommendation(s)**

The Panel is requested to note, and comment on, the steps taken to improve the delivery of services to its customers.

##### **3 Community Strategy Priorities**

The improvements made to the Benefits Service link to the effective and efficient running of the Council, as well as supporting some of the more vulnerable members of the community by improving access to, and understanding of, the services available to them. This work therefore supports and contributes to the following priorities:-

- Celebrating Diversity, Enabling Inclusion
- Prosperity for All.

##### **4 Other Implications**

###### **(a) Financial**

There are no financial implications.

###### **(b) Human Rights Act and Other Legal Implications**

There are no Human Rights or Legal implications.

##### **5 Progress**

- 5.1 As a result of this inspection, a series of actions were identified by the Housing Benefit and Customer Services' teams to improve the end-to-end customer experience when claiming Housing Benefits.

- 5.2 During 2010/11 the Benefit Service had a presence at the Britwell Local Access Point to deal with Benefit-related enquiries.
- 5.3 In 2010, a 3-month pilot exercise was run whereby a team of Housing Benefit officers were relocated within the Customer Service Centre to support front-line colleagues in dealing with more complex customer issues, thereby enabling the resolution of more customer queries at the first point of contact. Due to the success of this operation, the pilot was extended for a further 3-month period.
- 5.4 In parallel to this as part of the Customer Focus Programme, a review of the existing My Council arrangements led to a fundamental and strategic change from the previous “generalist” approach where all Customer Service Advisers were trained in all service areas, to the creation of “specialist” service hubs, where advisers would receive additional in-depth training in a specific service area.
- 5.5 The key objectives of the Customer Focus Programme are to:-
- Improve customer satisfaction with access to our services
  - Increase the resolution of customers needs with one visit or call
  - Improve the quality of response across all access channels
  - Simplify access to services by streamlining the whole process from first contact to resolution - thereby reducing the need for multiple return contacts
  - Reduce failure demand by ensuring robust processes and accountability between front-line hubs and service areas, and clear ownership of complex cross-service enquiries
  - Improve access to consistent and high quality information
  - Increase access to “self-service” information and automate transactions where appropriate
  - Reduce costs through eliminating duplication.
- 5.6 By allowing Customer Service Advisers to specialise in a specific area, and allowing access to the back-office IT systems in order to obtain information, and where appropriate update customer details, they are able to resolve a greater number of calls at the first point of contact. This in turn removes the need to transfer the call and/or service request to the back office, professional staff, thus freeing them up to focus on the more complex queries that require their attention, and to deal with any processing back-logs.
- 5.7 The specialist Benefits Hub went live on 4<sup>th</sup> July 2011. The selected Customer Service Advisers underwent an intensive training programme spread over a 4-week period. Deputy Customer Service Managers also received training from the Housing Benefit team to enable them to advise and support their front-line staff.
- 5.8 Customer Service Advisors within the Benefits Specialist hub are allowed to carry out the following additional duties;
- Setting-up skeleton claims for new accounts.
  - Recording Changes of Circumstances directly into the system.
  - Suspending Claims
  - Enhanced access to DIP to complete processes, re-index, copy or move documents.

- 5.9 In addition, proper protocols for escalating claims and rectifying errors have been agreed with Housing Benefit Team Leaders and Assessment officers.
- 5.10 Details of actions taken in relation to the five specific Audit Commission recommendations are shown in the table below.

AC Recommendations	Action taken
<p><b>R1</b> R1 Improve access to the Service by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Seeing people more quickly at Landmark Place by cutting queue times;</li>   <li>● Answering telephone calls quicker;</li>   <li>● Providing advice that is accurate and consistent;</li>   <li>● Making clear to customers the service offered at different times;</li> </ul>	<p>The fast track system has been improved to allow claimants to submit documents without being issued a ticket. This allows us to see housing benefit claimants more rapidly. We also now have a designated queue for housing benefit customers only with in-depth queries.</p> <p>The Housing Benefit hub was launched on 4<sup>th</sup> July 2011. We have dedicated advisors who now deal with housing benefit queries. This allows us to respond to housing benefit related queries more speedily. The advisors have realistic targets to meet where their interaction, wrap times and average number of customers served per hour are constantly measured. This enables us to identify any training needs and when addressed it allows us to deliver the service in a more concise and thorough manner. Since establishing the hub, and completing the customer service adviser training, we have managed to reduce the average call waiting time by 9 minutes.</p> <p>Advisors now have enhanced knowledge and access level to allow them to provide accurate advice and assistance to housing benefit customers. Having gone through thorough training with the housing benefit training officer the advisors are now at a stage where they can pre-assess claims and with sound product knowledge we are in a better position to provide reliable and consistent advice to benefit claimants.</p> <p>Our opening times are advertised clearly on site (landmark place), Slough Borough Council's website, as well as other council buildings. Customers are fully informed, with appropriate advertising, on Saturdays we only offer reception service to our housing benefit customers. In addition to this our Christmas/Easter/Bank Holidays opening times are advertised well in advance.</p>

**R2** Improve the Service delivered to customers by:

- Processing new claims and changes of circumstance quickly

- Performance and caseload is monitored weekly
- Caseload is at a record level for SBC and has risen by 19% over the last 18 months

NB: It should be noted that national performance statistics published by the Department for Work and Pensions showed that during the period of the inspection Housing Benefit applications were, in fact, being processed faster than the national average. The AC declined to revise their opinion despite this fact.

Processing of Housing Benefit claims

	At Inspection (no of days)	Current performance (no of days)
New claims	24	17
Change of circumstances	16	9
Combined	N/A	10

- Promoting Discretionary Housing Payments more effectively;

- Extra DHP panels have been scheduled – now two-weekly
- Further publicity and extra posters at main CSC and all satellite sites. All decision letters now have ‘strap lines’ with DHP information on.
- The DHP budget was used in its entirety (we actually overspent) for 2010/2011. We are on target to spend the whole amount again for 2011/2012, although some money has to be kept back for the last quarter of the year to allow for the end of LHA transitional protection when we anticipate heavy demand for assistance.
- DHP awareness briefings are held regularly with both back office and front-line staff
- A poster, newspaper and leaflet campaign is scheduled to increase public awareness around DHPs

- Processing appeals more quickly

- An additional appeals officer has been appointed to improve the processing times
- The Appeals Team meet every two weeks to update their Recovery Action Plan, when all outstanding work is looked at and prioritised
- The number of appeals now processed within three months is currently 91% and in one month 42%
- There is a six-month waiting time at the Tribunal Service to hear any appeal submissions

	At inspection	Current performance
Appeals referred to Tribunal within 1 month	35%	42%
Appeals referred to Tribunal within 3 months	83%	91%

It should be noted that the Benefits service is successful in 93% of appeals against a national average of 63%, demonstrating our decisions (and reconsiderations where required) are more accurate, thus resulting in far fewer customers having to await the outcome of an appeal to receive their entitlement.

- Considering requests for decisions to be reconsidered quickly

- Three year targets set: 2010/11 - 66 %, 2011/12 – 68 % 2012/13 – 70 % within 4 weeks (based on former CPA figures as there are no other standards or targets to benchmark against.) Reports are run every week to monitor the progress.
- There is a procedure in place to escalate these requests in order to safeguard vulnerable customers

- Reducing the high numbers of defective claims

- For the month of May 2010, there were 14 defective claims out of 663. These were investigated individually in order to analyse any trends e.g. language barriers. None were identified. Personal visits to customers may be carried out depending on the analysis. Sample checking is now a monthly requirement in our Service Improvement Plan.
- For the month of August 2011, 54 claims out of 663 processed were made defective – less than 10%. We have to allow one month for customers to re-submit information. Experience shows that many of the 54 will be put into payment.

**R3** Deliver a service that meets customer needs by:

- Involving service users and stakeholders in setting service standards
- Clearly publicising these standards so customers know what they can expect
- Ensuring the standards are understood and delivered by front-line staff.

- Landlords and RSL's are regularly briefed and consulted and the management team considers their proposals. An example of a suggestion adopted is that direct email access has now been made available to LL's and RSLs. They have also been consulted on layout of and information available on the SBC website and provide structured feedback on service improvements. The service also meets with organisations such as CAB, Age Concern Tenants and Residents Association and Housing Associations to get views and feedback on service delivery..
- Landlords advised us that it would be helpful if our schedule despatch system was improved. These views were taken on board and a new system was purchased and installed in June 2011. Landlords can now also view their outstanding invoices as well as their schedules, electronically
- New customer service 'pledges' devised for processing new claims in five working days where all information has been received, plus processing applications for payments of benefit by BACS within two working days. Posters are on display at the main CSC and all satellite sites.
- Customer service standards are published in The Customer Service Charter (attached at Appendix A ) is available on our website: [www.slough.gov.uk](http://www.slough.gov.uk). The charter is further promoted through posters displayed at the following locations: Landmark Place, Cippenham and Langley Libraries and at Britwell office.
- The standards are incorporated into the My Council induction for new starters
- Refresher sessions are undertaken to ensure all staff are fully aware of the agreed standards, in addition to discussions held within 1:1's and Appraisal reviews.
- Regular communication is sent out to Customer Service Advisers via My Council communication officers
- Regular quality monitoring is undertaken, ensuring staff meet the expected standards

<p><b>R4</b> Adopt a co-ordinated and targeted approach to take-up campaigns to ensure people receive the money they are entitled to by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Identifying the key groups of potential claimants;</li><li>• Agreeing with partners and other stakeholders when to run campaigns and how they will be delivered; and</li><li>• Identifying clear measures to assess achievement</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Despite pressures on the service including reduced staffing levels and an increase in caseload of 19% over the last 18 months, the service is continuing to encourage take-up of DHPs alongside an annual benefit take-up campaign.</li><li>• A DHP take-up campaign was initiated after consultation with colleagues in Housing.</li><li>• Measured by the number of DHP applications received.</li></ul>
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<p><b>R5</b> Improve performance management and service planning by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarifying how outcomes are achieved</li> <li>• Identifying what the risks are more clearly</li> <li>• Ensuring the targets set reflect the standard of service wanted</li> <li>• Developing benchmarking and learning from others to help identify further improvements</li> <li>• Ensuring the performance reports contain the key information needed to understand how well the Service is improving.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work is managed and monitored on a daily basis</li> <li>• All our performance reporting tools are risk-based – as they were at the time of the Inspection and there was no criticism of this by the AC</li> <li>• Targets have been set and form part of our Service Improvement plan. These targets are based on prior year trend analysis and the current economic situation.</li> <li>• This facility has been withdrawn for 2011/2012 as there is no corporate funding available</li> <li>• Quarterly meetings now held with neighbouring LA's to benchmark and share good practice</li> <li>• A recent exercise was undertaken to promote assessment officers to more senior levels. Information provided by these performance reports was crucial during the selection process</li> </ul>
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## **6 Challenges to Date**

- Looking to improve service delivery against a backdrop of increased numbers of customers with fewer resources.
- Keeping staff motivated and reassured at a time when the service is soon to be externalised.

## **7 Assistance from Members**

None at this point in time.

## **8 Conclusion**

Significant progress has been made against all Audit Commission recommendations.

## **9 Background Papers**

Audit Commission – Slough Borough Council Benefits Service Inspection, May 2010

## **10 Appendices**

Appendix A – Customer Service Charter