

# Supplementary Committee Agenda



## ***Finance and Performance Management Scrutiny Panel Thursday, 9th September, 2010***

**Place:** Committee Room 1, Civic Offices, High Street, Epping

**Room:** Committee Room 1

**Time:** 7.00 pm

**Committee Secretary:** A Hendry - The Office of the Chief Executive  
Tel: 01992 564246 Email: ahendry@eppingforestdc.gov.uk

---

### **10. AUDIT COMMISSION BENEFITS INSPECTION (Pages 3 - 18)**

(Director of Finance and ICT) Reports Attached.

This page is intentionally left blank

## **Report to Finance & Performance Management Scrutiny Panel**

**Date of meeting: 9 September  
2010**



**Portfolio: Finance and Economic Development**

**Subject: Benefit Service – Improvement Plans**

**Responsible Officer: J. Twinn (01992–564215)**

**Democratic Services Officer: A. Hendry (01992–564246)**

---

### **Recommendations/Decisions Required:**

**To note the progress to date against the Post Inspection Action Plan**

### **Executive Summary:**

The Audit Commission carried out an inspection of the Authority's Benefit Service in January 2010 on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions. The inspection report was issued in May and presented to the Audit and Governance Committee on 21 June 2010.

Following the inspection, a Post Inspection Action Plan was drawn up to address the recommendations in the report. This report is presented to the Scrutiny Panel to allow progress against the Action Plan to be monitored.

### **Reason for Proposed Decision:**

The report is being made to comply with a request from the Scrutiny Panel.

### **Other Options for Action:**

There are no other options.

### **Report:**

1. The Post Inspection Action Plan was developed following the inspection and addresses the criticisms and recommendations of the Audit Commission. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is also monitoring progress against the Action Plan and their Head of Performance wrote to the Council in July stating "I was pleased to see that the Council is taking action in respect of all the risks identified in the report, and that performance against the Right Time indicator has improved". This letter went on to confirm that no further action was being recommended to the Secretary of State.
2. However, an additional Action Plan was requested to address specific concerns about

Right Benefit. The Right Benefit Action Plan was submitted to the DWP in August and the Head of Performance has responded stating "I was pleased to see that Epping Forest is taking positive action to improve its Right Benefit performance. The Right Benefit plan includes many of the elements we would recommend".

3. Both the Post Inspection Action Plan and the Right Benefit Action Plan are included with this report and the Post Inspection Action Plan has been updated to show the position as at 31 August 2010.
4. A major criticism in the inspection report was the length of time taken to process new benefit applications which is recorded as 47 days in their report. The main reason for this poor performance was the conversion of the Revenues and Benefits IT system. However, performance has improved significantly since this time and for the first quarter of 2010/11, new claims were being assessed in an average of 29.45 days over the quarter. In the first eight weeks of quarter two, processing times for those eight weeks had decreased to 20.89 days, despite an increase in post received of 34% compared with the same period in 2009/10. This improvement is expected to continue and the performance target for 2010/11 of 25 days should therefore be met.
5. Another criticism was the length of time taken to submit appeals to the Tribunal Service. When a claimant appeals against a decision made by the Authority, and it is considered that original decision should be upheld, an appeal submission has to be prepared and sent to the Tribunal Service for them to hold an independent hearing. The appeal submissions can be very detailed and are time consuming to prepare. We have therefore looked at the feasibility of sending less detailed submissions in order to speed up the process without omitting information that was key to the original decision making progress. A target has been set of two months to submit the appeal to the Tribunal Service, which allows for further information to be requested and provided. Since April 2010, this target has been met with submissions taking an average of 40 days to prepare and submit. However, the Tribunal Service currently has a backlog of appeals awaiting a hearing and some of our appeals have taken nearly a year for a hearing to be arranged.
6. The Inspectors also considered that not enough was being done to detect and prevent benefit fraud. Although they acknowledged that the quality of work was of a high standard, their criticism was that not enough cases were being investigated. This point was acknowledged as the Investigation Team has experienced recruitment and retention problems for a few years and has had either vacant posts for some time or less experienced officers who require training to become fully effective. From August 2010 the team is fully staffed and is making progress. An improvement should therefore be seen in quarter 3.

#### **Resource Implications:**

There are no resource implications from this report.

#### **Legal and Governance Implications:**

Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit are administered in accordance with the Social Security Administration Act 1992, the Housing Benefit Regulations 2006 and the Council Tax Benefit Regulations 2006.

#### **Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:**

There are no safer, cleaner, greener implications.

**Consultation Undertaken:**

The DWP have been involved in assessing the Council's Action Plans and some comments from their letters have been included in the report.

**Background Papers:**

Performance monitoring data and DWP returns are retained in the Benefits Division.

**Impact Assessments:**

There are no equalities or risk management impacts as this report is only an update report on Action Plans.

This page is intentionally left blank

## Epping Forest District Council: Benefits Inspection Post-Inspection Action Plan

R1	Deliver quicker and more accurate payments to customers				
	Action:	Responsibility:	Deadline Date:	Notes:	Date Completed:
Page 7	<p>Investigate and analyse reasons for delays in the provision of supporting information /documentation. Put service improvements in place to reduce delays where possible</p> <p>Investigate alternative methods of reminding customers to provide information eg using text messaging, emailing.</p>	Benefits Manager	September 2010	<p>Reasons for delays have been analysed and service improvements have been put in place. Further guidance has been issued to speed up the decision making process</p> <p>Discussions to take place with ICT re setting up text messaging. Outcomes from the Customer Satisfaction Survey showed that emailing was not a popular method of communication.</p>	Analysis completed June 2010 but monitoring remains an ongoing process
	<p>Continue to set targets for Benefit staff for benefit processing times and other performance targets. Review performance targets on a quarterly basis.</p> <p>Identify best practice from other Authorities to reduce processing times</p>	Assistant Director – Benefits Benefits Manager Investigation & Intervention Manager Senior Benefit Officers	<p>April 2010</p> <p>September 2010</p>	Targets set as part of the PDR process	April 2010
c	Investigate the cost implications of placing advertisements in the local press to raise awareness of the importance of reporting changes in circumstances	Assistant Director – Benefits Benefits Manager	September 2010	Much work is already undertaken in this area targeted specifically at benefit claimants. An article will be placed in each edition of the Forester. The cost implications of placing	

	Recommend the identification of high risk cases within existing caseload and carry out a review of entitlement	Investigation & Interventions Manager	March 2010	advertisements in the local press will be assessed for value for money. High risk cases have been identified and full reviews are being carried out.	March 2010 and ongoing
d	Increase the amount of accuracy checking and recording being carried out by the Senior Benefit Officers. Ensure that the checking is formally recorded and a target of 5-10% to be set.	Senior Benefit Officers	March 2010	Increased checking is being carried out and formally recorded. A target of a minimum of 5% has been set	March 2010 and ongoing
<b>R2</b>	<b>Improve the customer focus and delivery of the service</b>				
Page 8	Action:	Responsibility:	Deadline Date:	Notes:	Date Completed:
	Customer satisfaction survey to be undertaken to obtain customers general view of the current service provided. Surveys to be sent with new year notification letters	Assistant Director – Benefits Benefits Manager Investigation & Intervention Manager Senior Benefit Officer – System Administration	March 2010	1000 surveys dispatched with pre-paid reply envelopes in early March 2010	March 2010
	General customer satisfaction survey to be scheduled annually with new year notification letters		Annually from March 2011		
	Develop customer satisfaction survey specifically for website to identify improvements that can be made to the benefit website pages		May 2010	Survey complete and tested, should be live on website during September.	
Develop customer satisfaction survey specifically for Visiting Officers to identify any improvements that can be made whilst officers carry out home visits	May 2010		Survey developed and issued when visits carried out	May 2010	



b	Formalise arrangements with existing and potential stakeholders to obtain their views on the service. The requirement for a formal landlord forum to be assessed.	Benefits Manager	September 2010	Liasion meetings that currently take place with JCP & CAB are being formalised. PS meetings have always been formalised.	
c/d/e	In consultation with partners and service users, develop and publish service standards to clearly publicise what can be expected of the Benefits Service. Outcomes to be reported to interested parties  Assess whether appeal submissions can be less detailed in order to speed up the appeal process and allow more challenging service standards to be set.	Assistant Director – Benefits Benefits Manager Investigation & Intervention Manager Senior Appeal and Overpayment Officer	September 2010  June 2010	Other Essex Authorities to be surveyed on service standards through the Essex Benefit Managers Group.  Shortened appeal submissions have been submitted to The Tribunal Service. The success of less detailed reports can only be assessed when the hearings take place. This will not be for some time as The Tribunal Service currently have a backlog and are taking up to a year to arrange a hearing.	May 2010
f	See 5a				
g	Assess customer demand for extended office opening hours.	Corporate Directors Assistant Director – Benefits Benefits Manager	April 2010	100% of the respondents to the March 2010 customer satisfaction survey have indicated that they are satisfied with the current telephone and reception opening hours. 0% indicated that they would like extended opening hours. No further action to be taken on this issue at this time although customers will be surveyed again in the future.	April 2010

	<p>Benefit staff to be located at the new Limes Farm area office when completed.</p> <p>Assess the requirement for Benefit staff to be located in the south of the District to enable easier public access. Identify potential premises that could be used. To be involved in working parties for the Debden Broadway redevelopment if a need for an area office, or relocation of the service, is identified.</p> <p>Subject to possible service relocation, redesign of existing reception area in the Civic Offices</p> <p>Clear signposting in the reception area for customers who speak no English. Access to interpreting service to be maintained.</p> <p>Investigate the possibility of introducing e-claims</p>		<p>Summer 2011</p> <p>March 2011</p> <p>March 2011</p> <p>April 2010</p> <p>March 2011</p>	<p>Officers of the Benefits Service are involved in the working group for the redevelopment of the Limes Farm Office</p> <p>There are corporate plans to create a one stop service in Debden Broadway. Officers of the Benefits Service are involved in the working group for the redevelopment.</p> <p>Architects have been appointed to provide options as part of a feasibility study to refurbish the existing reception area. Initial meetings with the architects have taken place</p> <p>Information leaflets and posters in the reception area</p> <p>Exploratory discussions with providers have taken place. Demonstrations to take place</p>	<p>April 2010</p>
<b>R3</b>	<b>Improve value for money</b>				
	<b>Action:</b>	<b>Responsibility:</b>	<b>Deadline Date:</b>	<b>Notes:</b>	<b>Date Completed:</b>
a/b/c	Continue with benchmarking of performance & cost data via both the Cipfa benchmarking club and the Essex Benefit Managers	Director of Finance Assistant Director – Benefits Benefit Manager Investigation & Intervention	December 2010	2009/10 cipfa Benchmarking data has been submitted but the results will not be available until Autumn 2010	

	<p>Group. Identify specific areas of high cost/poor performance and learn from best practice to achieve improvements</p> <p>Regular reporting to the Finance &amp; Performance Management Scrutiny Panel</p>	Manager	June 2010 & December 2010	The June meeting of the Panel was before the Audit and Governance Committee had received the inspection report. Therefore, it was necessary to delay the Action Plan monitoring report to September.	September 2010
<b>R4</b>	<b>Increase income levels of the poorest parts of the community</b>				
	Action:	Responsibility:	Deadline Date:	Notes:	Date Completed:

a/b	<p>Consult with other Authorities to ascertain best practice. Develop a take up strategy for the maximisation of benefits. Involve partners in the development of the strategy</p> <p>Utilise existing ward data and Mosaic tool to identify potential areas of deprivation and target those areas for the take up of benefits</p> <p>Obtain a quotation from Capita for their CTB take up campaign and assess whether it represents value for money.</p> <p>Continue to identify potential partners for participation in any take up event opportunities in the local area and identify measures of effectiveness for each event.</p> <p>Publicise the Benefit scheme in every edition of The Forester</p>	Assistant Director – Benefits Benefit Manager	<p>September 2010</p> <p>September 2010</p> <p>April 2010</p> <p>September 2010</p> <p>April 2010</p>	<p>The Benefits Division has volunteered to trial a take-up project utilising the services of mosaic</p> <p>Quote obtained from Capita. but the quote in the region of £40,000 does not appear to represent value for money</p> <p>Posters have already been distributed to leisure centres, health centres and libraries. Officers of the Benefits Service will be participating in the Disability Awareness Day in December 2010. There have been limited opportunities to work in partnership for take up events in 2010</p> <p>Arrangements have been made for an article to be regularly published in future editions of The Forester to advertise take up and the importance of reporting changes in circumstances</p>	<p>Posters etc distributed April/June. Identification of event opportunities will remain as an ongoing task</p> <p>April 2010</p>
-----	---	--	---	--	---

R5	Improve the effectiveness of performance management and service planning				
	Action:	Responsibility:	Deadline Date:	Notes:	Date Completed:
a	Review the establishment of the Benefits Division and report to Members on performance and any proposed changes to the establishment	Director of Finance Assistant Director – Benefits	October 2010	When Cabinet approved the restructure in July 2009, an update report was requested within 18 months.	
b	See 3a/b/c				
c	<p>Performance statistics to continue to be updated on a weekly basis, ensuring that all staff are aware of ongoing performance. Monthly Academy performance and <a href="mailto:information@work">information@work</a> statistics to also be provided and discussed between Senior Officers and their staff with a view to improving performance.</p> <p>Use performance data to identify any training need.</p>	Benefits Manager Senior Benefit Officers Training Officer	<p>May 2010</p> <p>September 2010</p>	<p>Staff have been reminded of the availability of performance data and where that data is held. Data is updated on a weekly basis</p> <p>Performance data used in the PDR process to identify training needs. Monitoring takes place on a regular basis to identify training needs that may arise during the year.</p>	May 2010 but ongoing monitoring
d	Investigate and analyse reasons for avoidable contact. Put service improvements in place to reduce avoidable contact where possible	Benefits Manager Senior Benefit Officer – System Administration	September 2010	Continue with the work that has already been started looking at causes of avoidable contact and potential solutions. Action Plan has been developed to secure improvements	June 2010 and ongoing

R6	Protect taxpayers money and improve the effectiveness of counter fraud work				
	Action:	Responsibility:	Deadline Date:	Notes:	Date Completed:
a	<p>In consultation with partners, develop and publish a service specific counter-fraud strategy.</p> <p>Fraud awareness training to be delivered to staff. Raise awareness of benefit fraud with partners and service users.</p>	Investigation & Intervention Manager	<p>September 2010</p> <p>December 2010</p>		
b	Continue to apply sanctions consistently and in line with fraud prosecution policy.	Investigation & Intervention Manager	March 2010	The recent additional resource on the team has meant that a greater number of investigations can be undertaken and the number of sanctions can be increased	March 2010 and ongoing
Page 14	<p>Identify potential obstacles to the recruitment of Investigation Officers and seek to overcome those obstacles to attract experienced candidates.</p> <p>To assess performance against targets and evaluate resources quarterly</p>	Assistant Director – Benefits Investigation & Interventions Manager Human Resources	<p>April 2010</p> <p>December 2010</p>	Following previous unsuccessful recruitment exercises, one Investigation Officer commenced employment in February 2010 and a further Officer in August 2010. Fraud specific publications and websites have been identified for a wider audience when advertising. The issue will be reviewed further should another vacancy arise.	April 2010

## Epping Forest District Council: Right Benefit Action Plan

	Action:	Responsibility:	Deadline Date:	Notes:	Date Completed:
1	<p>Target for 2010/11 for Right Benefit</p> <p>990 changes per 1000 caseload Changes (total) - 9200 Interventions - 2400</p> <p>Target for 2011/12 for Right Benefit</p> <p>1020 changes per 1000 caseload Changes (total) - 9740 Interventions - 2400</p>	<p>Investigation &amp; Intervention Manager</p> <p>Benefit Manager</p>	<p>31/3/2011</p> <p>31/3/2012</p>		
2	<p>Target for Intervention team in 2010/11 and 2011/12 to carry out interventions in a %age of risk groups</p> <p>RG1 - 100% at least once a year RG2 - 100% at least once a year RG3 - 60% RG4 - 30% RG5 - 15% RG6 - 5%</p>	<p>Investigation &amp; Intervention Manager</p>			
3	<p>Set up and test loading the High Risk list into Academy</p>	<p>Senior Benefit Officer – System Admin &amp; Training</p>	<p>30/9/10</p>		
4	<p>Load the High Risk list into the live Academy system on a monthly basis</p>	<p>Senior Benefit Officer – System Admin &amp; Training</p>	<p>From October 2010</p>		
5	<p>Interventions team to target cases in the higher risk groups identified in the High Risk list</p>	<p>Senior Benefit Officer - Interventions</p>	<p>From October 2010</p>		

6	Intervention team Officers to continue with the recording of intervention outcomes	Senior Benefit Officer - Interventions	Ongoing		
7	Visits and Postal checks to continue as proactive activities	Senior Benefit Officer - Interventions	Ongoing		
8	CIS prompts to continue to be used in cases where no ETD would be issued as a proactive activity	Senior Benefit Officer - Interventions	Ongoing		
9	All HMO's to be visited at least twice a year	Senior Benefit Officer - Interventions	6 monthly exercise from October 2010		
10	Advertising the necessity to report changes in circumstances in the Council's free newspaper delivered to all households.	Benefit Manager	Quarterly when The Forester is published		
11	Investigate whether more use can be made of the website for easier reporting of changes in circumstances.	Senior Benefit Officer – System Admin & Training	December 2010		
12	Continue with the policy of enclosing change in circumstance forms with all benefit notification letters, including information in the council tax booklets with all council tax bills and information on rent letters from the Housing Service	Benefit Manager	Ongoing		
13	Continue with use of the Academy diary which currently produces an average of 40 records per week, the significant birthday report (average 30 records per week), and the council tax liability change reports (average 70 records per week)	Benefit Manager	Ongoing		



14	Carry out refresher training for Housing staff emphasising again the need for changes in circumstances to be reported.	Benefit Training Officer	December 2010		
15	Establish monitoring information that can be obtained from Academy. Monitor targets against performance on a monthly basis and address any shortfalls as they occur.	Investigation & Intervention Manager  Benefit Manager	From October 2010		

This page is intentionally left blank