

**Report to the Finance and
Performance Management Cabinet
Committee**



**Epping Forest
District Council**

Report reference: FPM-015-2009/10

**Date of meeting: 23 November
2009**

Portfolio: Finance & Economic Development

Subject: Update on Performance of Benefit Claim Processing

Responsible Officer: Janet Twinn (01992 564215).

Democratic Services Officer: Gary Woodhall (01992 564470).

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) That the current performance of Benefit claim processing be noted; and**
- (2) That the service is due to undergo an inspection by the Audit Commission be noted.**

Executive Summary:

The report sets out the current performance levels for the processing of new benefit claims and change events for existing benefit claims and advises of a forthcoming inspection by the Audit Commission.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

To keep Members informed of the current performance levels and workload issues.

Other Options for Action:

Currently Members are only being asked to note current performance and workload issues.

Report:

1. The average time taken to process Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit claims has increased during the last couple of years. This has primarily been due to the conversion of the IT system, which diverted resources away from the processing of claims, and also meant that in December 2008/January 2009 there was a period of 6 weeks when no claim processing work could be done at all. The Audit Commission became concerned at the processing times and, in January 2009, began arranging monthly meetings over a six month period. An action plan was produced and targets were set and achieved. In July 2009, the Cabinet approved a restructure of the Benefits Division and new posts were created to help with the recent increase in the number of new claims received.

2. At the meeting on 15 June 2009, the Finance & Performance Cabinet Committee were

updated on the performance of benefit claim processing and the purpose of this report is to give a further update of the current position. Appendix A shows the monthly performance of benefit claim processing since January 2009. The effect of the conversion of the IT system can be clearly seen but there was a steady improvement up until June 2009. Performance declined from June for two main reasons. Firstly, four permanent members of staff resigned for various reasons, and resignations were also received from three very good agency members of staff that had been employed to help clear the backlog of work. These vacancies, and the fact that July/August/September are very popular months for staff to take annual leave, meant that performance declined during the summer months. However, more agency staff have been employed and both the processing times and the number of claims processed have started to improve again, particularly towards the end of October. Another reason that contributed to the decline in the performance was that the section was restructured in July. Whilst it is anticipated that the change will have long term gains, in the short term, performance was affected whilst the assessment staff adapted to their new roles. It should also be noted that the caseload has continued to rise and is currently at a higher level than it has previously been in the last two decades, and in addition, the number of items of post received each week continue to be generally 200-300 items more each week than the numbers received for the comparative weeks last year.

3. A recruitment exercise has been undertaken to recruit to 8 vacancies in the section. Job offers have been made and accepted for the posts of Investigation Officer, Visiting Officer, Senior System Administration Officer and Overpayment Officer. Currently, we are waiting for references, medical approval etc, but it is not expected that they will be able to start their employment until after Christmas. The response for the fixed term contract post of a Benefit Officer was disappointing, although two applicants with suitable experience were offered the post. However, both applicants have declined the job offer, one specifically because it is a fixed term contract. Further options are currently being considered for this post. It was hoped that the post of System Administration Officer would be determined as a Grade 6 following a job evaluation, but unfortunately, it was determined that it should be a Grade 5. Again the response was disappointing, with no applicants having any relevant experience and therefore, if an appointment is made, there will be a significant training requirement. Interviews are ongoing for this post as well as the two Benefit Assistant posts.

4. Although we had met the agreed targets with the Audit Commission, we have received notification from the Audit Commission that the Benefits Service will be undergoing an inspection by them in the week commencing 26 January 2010. An initial meeting has been arranged with them regarding the inspection on 24 November 2009 and a self assessment has to be completed before the inspection. Benefit inspections used to be carried out by the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate and were first introduced in the mid 1990's. The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate has since been incorporated into the Audit Commission and it is now their responsibility for carrying out inspections. The Benefits Service of the Authority has not previously undergone any such inspection.

Resource Implications:

Within existing resources.

Legal and Governance Implications:

No specific implications.

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

No specific implications.

Consultation Undertaken:

None.

Background Papers:

Report to Finance & Performance Management Cabinet Committee 15 June 2009.

Impact Assessments:

Risk Management

The decision to note current performance and workload issues has no Risk Management impacts.

Equality and Diversity:

Did the initial assessment of the proposals contained in this report for relevance to the Council's general equality duties, reveal any potentially adverse equality implications? No

Where equality implications were identified through the initial assessment process, has a formal Equality Impact Assessment been undertaken? No

What equality implications were identified through the Equality Impact Assessment process?
The decision to note current performance and workload issues has no Equality & Diversity impact.

How have the equality implications identified through the Equality Impact Assessment been addressed in this report in order to avoid discrimination against any particular group?

Benefit processing times								
Month	Caseload	New claims actioned in month	New claims average time (days)	New claims average time (cumulative)	Change events actioned in month	Change events average time (days)	Change events average time (cumulative)	Number of post items received
January 09	8677	314	98.04	46.85	448	26.87	12.96	5758
February 09	8646	549	57.59	48.33	19410	2.02	5.80	6457
March 09	8875	948	42.03	47.12	2371	9.26	6.05	10083
April 09	8917	592	36.55	36.55	1481	12.92	12.92	6694
May 09	8913	393	30.58	34.17	1291	11.53	12.27	6560
June 09	9002	376	32.49	33.71	1252	9.44	11.39	7545
July 09	8964	462	34.31	33.86	1354	11.06	11.31	5733
August 09	9067	401	39.76	34.92	5000	3.58	7.58	6489
September 09	8861	529	38.47	35.61	1380	13.68	8.30	5547
October 09	9109	507	36.92	35.81	2682	12.17	8.15	6437