

18 May 2010

Benefits Audit Report

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL BENEFITS SERVICE  
AUDIT COMMISSION REPORT**

Epping Forest District Council is defending its Benefits Service following the publication of the Audit Commission's report after its inspection earlier this year. The Commission reported that the Benefits Service at Epping Forest District Council is *'poor and has uncertain prospects for improvement'*.

Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Finance and Economic Development Councillor Chris Whitbread said: "I am very disappointed with the conclusions of this report. I know that all Benefits staff work extremely hard in difficult circumstances to make sure Benefits applications are processed accurately and as quickly as is possible. The Audit Commission has stated that frontline staff also provide very good customer care to all our claimants."

Councillor Whitbread went on to say: "Over the last 18 months or so, as a direct result of the Credit Crunch, workload has significantly increased with many more people coming to us to claim benefits. Many of these people have not had to do so before and therefore needed much more support."

He continued: "The Council had to replace its benefit processing system during 2008/09 as the system in use had become obsolete. This involved the transfer of data between systems and resulted in processing systems not being available for six weeks. Once again, this has meant further delays."

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The performance on new claim processing highlighted in the report was for 2008/09 and at an average of 47 days this was too slow. However, the Council has been actively working to reduce the waiting time for new claimants. The average performance for 2009/10 was 33 days, with the average in the final quarter being 28 days, and the Council is striving to reduce this further. Whilst the Audit Commission admits that customers reporting a change in circumstances experienced an improvement in performance little credit has been given for the improvement on new claims.

The Council was already working on improvements to the service, with a re-structure having been approved by Cabinet in July 2009. This restructure provided additional resources and enhanced the customer contact arrangements, which are praised in the report. It is accepted that more work could be done on increasing take up and there are some valid recommendations. The Benefits Service already had plans in place to address most of the issues raised and has produced a detailed response to each recommendation. For example, it will be advertising in local publications including the Council's publication The Forester the availability of Benefits to those who may be unaware of what they could claim. However, some of the issues raised, such as criticism of the Reception facilities at the Civic Offices in Epping and opening hours of the service, will have to be dealt with corporately. Last month Cabinet approved the refurbishment of the Limes Farm Hall and it is planned to improve access to Council Services by locating Benefits and Housing staff on this site.

Councillor Whitbread concluded: "We have taken on board the comments made by the Commission and I am confident that by the time we receive our next inspection, we will have improved. I would like to take this opportunity to express my thanks to all Benefits staff for their dedication and hard work."

**ENDS**

(XXX words)

**Notes to Editors**

The full report can be seen at [www.audit-commission.gov.uk](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk)