

Report to Audit and Governance Committee



**Epping Forest
District Council**

Report reference: AGC-021-2010/11
Date of meeting: 15 November 2010

Portfolio: Finance and Economic Development

Subject: Benefit Service – Improvement Plan

Responsible Officer: Janet Twinn (01992 564215).

Democratic Services Officer: Gary Woodhall (01992 564470)

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) 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 Audit & Governance Committee to allow progress against the Action Plan to be monitored.

There is no significant slippage in the Action Plan and this is reflected in the significant improvement in performance in claim processing.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

The report is being made to comply with a request from the Audit and Governance Committee.

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 October 2010.

4. A major criticism in the inspection report was the length of time taken to process new benefit applications, which was recorded as 47 days in the 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. In the first quarter of 2010/11, new claims were being assessed in an average of 29.45 days and, by the end of the second quarter, this had reduced to an average of 19.94 days. The improvement in performance has continued in October with new claims being assessed in 18.79 days, despite an increase in post received of 34% compared with the same period in 2009/10. Average times for processing change events have also improved since 2009/10 although this was not an area of concern for the Inspectors. The improvements are expected to continue and the Performance targets for 2010/11 should therefore be met. An update on the average weekly processing times for both new claims and change events is also included with this report.

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 have experienced recruitment and retention problems for a few years and have 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.