

To: Housing Panel
Date: 4th November 2013
Report of: Head of Customer Services
Title of Report: Benefit Performance

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Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of report: To provide an update on the performance of the Benefits Service.

Executive lead member: Councillor Susan Brown

Recommendation(s): The Committee is recommended to:

1. Note the performance of the Benefits team, the work being undertaken to improve performance, and the challenges around delivering the Benefits Service.

Appendices:

Appendix 1 – New Claims Processing Performance 2012/13 and 2013/14

Appendix 2 – Change of Circumstances Processing Performance 2012/13 and 2013/14

Introduction

- 1. The purpose of this report is to set out the performance of the Benefits Team in Customer Services, who are responsible for processing applications for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction Scheme. It also sets out the improvement programme which is being put in place.
- 2. In order to provide some context, the report details comparable performance in other authorities and challenges being faced.

Current Performance

- 3. The performance target for processing new claims is 14 days and 10 days for changes in circumstance. These targets were set following a consultation exercise carried out in 2010. The target for new claims is particularly stretching.
- 4. The chart at Appendix 1 shows monthly performance for 2012/13 and 2013/14 for processing new claims up to September 2013. The trend is one of gradual improvement. The cumulative year to date position at 30th September 2013 is 22.55 days compared to 22.87 days as at 30th September 2012 and 26.65 days as at the 31st March 2013.
- 5. The chart at Appendix 2 shows monthly performance for 2012/13 and for 2013/14 for processing changes in circumstance up to September 2013. Again the trend shows gradual improvement. The cumulative year to date position at 30th September 2013 is 11.70 days compared to 12.09 days as at 30th Sept 2012, and 12.35 days as at 31st March 2013.
- 6. The CIPFA Benefits Administration Benchmarking Club report for 2013 shows the following:

Indicator	Oxford Result 2012/13	Benchmark Average 2012/13	Current Performance Year to date at 30.09.13
New claims	26.65	23.9	22.55
Change of circumstances	12.35	10.4	11.7

7. The oldest piece of work in the Benefits Section that has not been allocated for assessment is 2nd October 2013. Additionally, each week more claims are being processed than received. When a claim is received, if we do not have all the evidence required to process the claim we contact the claimant and the legislation allows the customer up to 30 days to provide this information. However, the processing times for claims start from the time the application is received, and thus processing times for claims can be severely affected if the additional information is not returned promptly. There are other older items of work pending, for example cases passed to the Fraud Team for further investigation.
8. So far in 2013/14 an average of 4,700 change events have been received each month. The 2012/13 average was 4,300. So in real terms not only is performance better, but it is better with a higher volume of work to process too.
9. From April 2013 to date we have dealt with 32 appeals and 308 reconsiderations. Our decision making is robust; we have only lost four cases at appeal in the last 30 months.
10. Collection of overpaid housing benefit as at 30th September 2013 stands at 85.21% compared to a target of 82%. Efficient recovery of overpaid housing benefit contributes positively to the local cost of housing benefit.
11. Awards of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit are claimed back from central government via subsidy arrangements. The Department of Work & Pensions (DWP) audits all Local Authorities to ensure benefit is being paid correctly, and that the maximum amount of subsidy can be paid. In 2011/12 the loss was £800 against a claim for approximately £70 million. The 2012/13 subsidy claim is currently being reviewed by the auditors, and the results of their work will be known by the end of November 2013. Current indications for 2013/14 show that we are still in the maximum subsidy bracket. This improvement has been achieved by focussing on the quality of work, and the elimination of error. Regular 10% quality checks on all work are undertaken each month.

Challenges

18. A significant impact on work has been caused by the DWP's ATLAS project which began 2 years ago. ATLAS stands for the Automated Transfers to Local Authority Systems. This involves the transfer of data in relation to changes to Welfare Benefits claimed from DWP, and Tax Credits claimed from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. This has resulted in a substantial increase in workload. Although some of these notifications were already being received in a different format, the old information is still being received in the same way which adds to the time taken to process work. On average we receive about 700 notifications a week, which requires two full time equivalents (FTE) per day to deal with this workload.
19. In addition changes as a result of the Government's Welfare Reform agenda have been administered by the Benefits Team, including the removal of the spare room subsidy (bedroom tax) in April 2013 and the introduction of the Benefit Cap in July 2013.

Service Improvements

20. The overall improvement in performance so far this year has been due to a number of service improvements including the following:
- →Automation of ATLAS information received from DWP, averaging 75% of all items received;
 - New claims and change of circumstances administration moved into a single team, to build resilience and capacity;
 - Change in working procedures for Benefit Assessors to telephone customers for additional benefit claim information rather than write, and to accept statements over the telephone; and
 - Change in strategy to work allocation to ensure backlog of work cleared and maintained.
21. Other work in progress to continue to improve the processing times and efficiency of the service include:
- The introduction of individual performance targets for Benefit Assessors from 4th November 2013.
 - The introduction of an electronic benefit claim form that will enable claimants to claim on-line, and increase capacity within the team to focus on assessing and deciding a case rather than data entry. This is planned to go-live by the end of December 2013;
 - The introduction of self-service, encouraging customers to look at their own account, and even elect to receive electronic benefit notifications. This is planned to go-live by the end of December 2013;
 - As from week commencing 21st October 2013, the Benefits Team will be telephoning customers to progress outstanding evidence to try and speed up the receipt of information and improve our speed of processing performance.
 - Re-tendering of overflow resilience contract for processing of claims; and
 - Better annual leave management throughout the year, so that September 2014 does not suffer as this year.

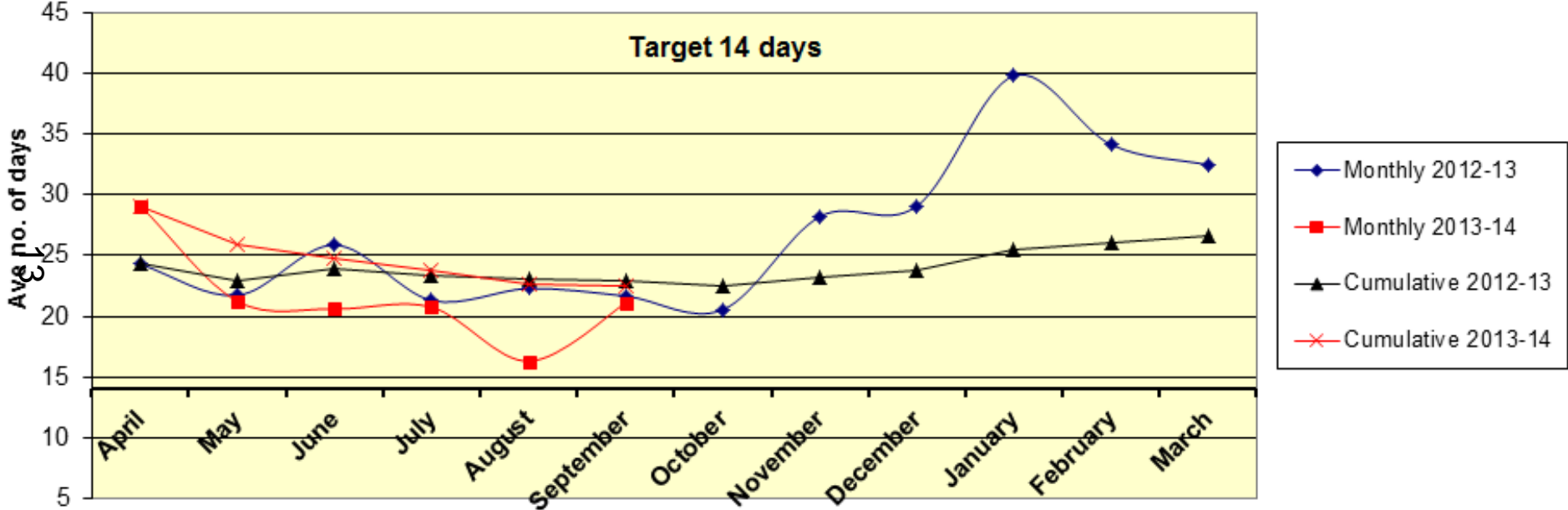
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Appendix 1 New Claims Processing Performance 2012/13 and 2013/14

New Applications 2012-13 and 2013-14



Change of Circumstances Processing Performance 2012/13 and 2013/14

part Area

Change Events 2012-13 and 2013-14

