

Benefits

Service

Inspection

Leicester City Council

May 2009



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Service Inspections

This inspection has been carried out by the Audit Commission under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 and is in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles. These principles embody the objectives of our Strategic Plan and Strategic Regulation. They also reflect the principles from *The Government's Policy on Inspection of Public Services (July 2003)*. Audit Commission service inspections should:

- focus on public service outcomes from a user perspective;
- act as a catalyst to help inspected bodies improve their performance;
- concentrate inspection work where it will have most impact, so that it is proportionate and based on an assessment of risk;
- be based on a rigorous assessment of costs and benefits, with a concern for achieving value for money both by the inspected organisation and within the inspection regime itself;
- be, and be seen to be, independent of the inspected organisation;
- report in public, using impartial evidence to inform the public about the performance of public services so as to enhance accountability;
- involve collaborative working with other inspectorates and external review agencies to achieve greater coordination and a more holistic approach to the assessment of performance by audited and inspected bodies;
- share learning to create a common understanding of performance that encourages rigorous self assessment and better understanding of their performance by inspected organisations;
- be carried out objectively by skilled and experienced people to high standards and using relevant evidence, transparent criteria, and open review processes; and
- enable continuous learning so that inspections can become increasingly effective and efficient.

We assess services using published key lines of enquiry (KLOE) to inform our judgements. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's web site at www.audit-commission.gov.uk.

This report is issued in accordance with the Audit Commission's duty under Section 13 of the 1999 Act.

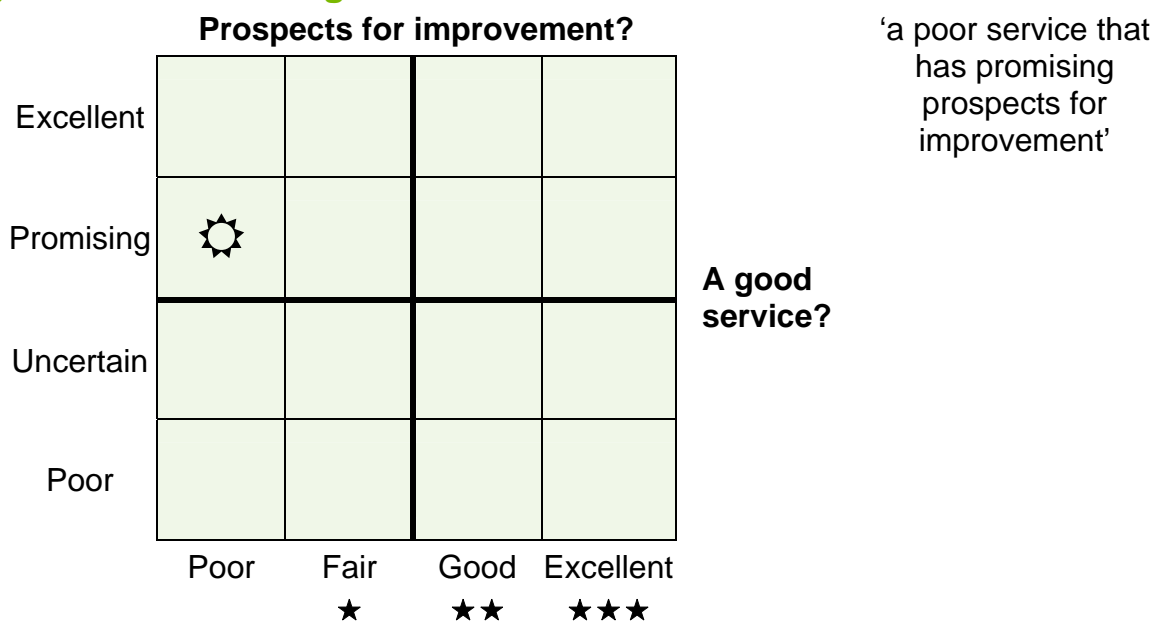
Summary

- 1 The Benefits Service (the Service) in Leicester is poor but has promising prospects for improvement. The Service is generally accessible for customers but some aspects of access are inadequate. Opening times are inconsistent and limited and waiting times can be unreasonably long. The Service encourages customers to provide their claim and supporting evidence quickly with an appointments system and by processing within 24 hours. The Service has made it easier for customers to report changes in their circumstances with shortened claim forms. It has had some success in improving the take up of benefits. Communication and consultation with customers is improving. Partnership working is good.
- 2 The Service is failing to deliver its core business. The average time taken to process new claims and changes in circumstances is too long. In 2008/09 up to February 2009 new claims took an average of 37.5 days to process. A third of the new claims outstanding on 1st March 2009 had been outstanding for more than 50 days. These delays may place customers in arrears with their rent and Council Tax and contribute to financial hardship. The average time taken to process changes in circumstances in 2008/09 up to February 2009 was 17.7 days. This means that claimants may be receiving too much or too little benefit until the claim is adjusted and can face financial hardship when overpayments are recovered.
- 3 Customers are not always receiving an accurate decision on their claim. The Service is taking too long to deal with appeals.
- 4 Although it has improved in the last year, performance has been poor over recent years and remains in the worst quartile for English councils. In 2003/04, the Service's processing performance of new claims was over 100 days. It had a backlog of over 23,000 unprocessed benefits claims as a result of ICT failure. In 2005 performance dropped again as a result of further ICT failures. During the last three to four years the Service began to take the right steps to deliver an improved service. Improvements included the replacement of ICT; improved customer service and facilities; improved approaches to staff performance management; and the relocation of the Service to refurbished, modern offices.
- 5 The capacity to improve and deliver a better quality service is promising. Senior managers have critical experience of improving and running an effective housing service. Staff for the new posts in the restructured service are either in training or in post. Front line staff have a positive approach to customer care. They are knowledgeable, experienced and take responsibility for the resolution of claims and enquiries. The Service is responsive to changing local needs. It is increasing its take-up work in response to the local effects of the economic downturn and ensuring that customers have access to targeted advice.
- 6 Leadership and management of the Service are good. Councillors and senior managers are committed to improving the Service. The Service recognises many of its weaknesses and has plans in place to address them to ensure continual improvement for customers in the future. The Service has a clear long term vision with achievable short and medium term objectives. Plans are resourced and supported by councillors.

Scoring the service

7 We have assessed Leicester City Council as providing a 'poor' zero-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

8 The Service is a poor, zero star service because:

- some aspects of customer access are inadequate;
- opening times are inconsistent and limited;
- waiting times can be unreasonably long;
- customer satisfaction is low;
- it is failing to deliver its core business:
 - in 2008/09 up to February it is taking an average of 37.5 days to process new claims and a third of the new claims outstanding on 1st March 2009 had been outstanding for more than 50 days;
 - in 2008/09 up to February it is taking an average of 17.7 days to process changes in circumstances. This means that claimants may be receiving too much or too little benefit until the claim is adjusted and can face financial hardship when overpayments are recovered; and

¹ The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

- too many customers do not receive an accurate decision on their claims; and
- it loses significant income for the Council as a result of local authority error;
- it has not used its full subsidy allocation for discretionary housing payments;
- data quality is inconsistent.

9 The Service also has some strengths:

- its work on improving benefits take up is targeted and successful;
- local authority tenants can access the Service through their local neighbourhood office; and
- effective engagement with stakeholders and partners

10 The Service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- it recognises many of its weaknesses and has plans in place to address them to ensure continual improvement for customers in the future;
- Councillors and senior managers are committed to improving the Service;
- leadership and management of the Service are good;
- front line staff are positive, knowledgeable, experienced; and
- the Service is responsive to changing local needs.

11 However:

- challenge by Councillors is weak; and
- Councillors do not ensure that they have the training necessary to be fully informed about all aspects of the Service.

Recommendations

12 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the Council. In addition, we identify the approximate costs¹ and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the Council should do the following.

Recommendation

R1 Improve access to the Service by:

- ensuring opening times for all service points and access routes are appropriate for customers and are well publicised
- ensuring that take up campaigns are effectively targeted using information on communities available to the Council, and recording the impact of this activity to inform future campaigns;
- expanding the membership of the Benefits Community Group to ensure it is reflective of the diverse community and including other methods of consultation in addition to day time meetings to allow more people to contribute;
- improving the telephone service to meet the Council's corporate customer care standards;
- providing local access to an equivalent of the 24 hour new claim assessment service for those customers who do not/can not currently do so;
- consulting customers to refine the appointment service at Wellington House to reduce waiting times, repeat visits and turnaways; and
- delivering a response to the need for an out of hours service identified in customer surveys.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- giving customers greater flexibility and choice of how, when and where they can access the service
- consistency in the level of service being offered to ensure fair and equal access for all users
- greater choice for service users given the option to attend a local office rather than the busy city centre office
- service users in financial hardship whilst waiting for a claim to be processed do not have to wait for a long time for their first payment
- better understanding for the Service of the information, advice and assistance it needs to provide to all its service users.

¹ Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by December 2009.

Recommendation

R2 Ensure that customers receive the right benefit at the right time and reduce fraud by:

- developing stretching targets for service delivery in consultation with customers and stakeholders to improve the speed of processing in line with the best performing councils;
- increasing the use of pre-payment quality checking and analysing the results to inform individual and team training requirements;
- prioritising the assessment of fraud cases to ensure the Service can apply the prompt and appropriate use of sanctions;
- analysing unsuccessful or defective claims for benefit and taking action to reduce the level;
- ensuring registered social landlord (RSL) staff are trained to undertake verification of claims and documents; and
- exploring how partners, for example Housing Options staff, could have more access to systems to assist faster claims completion.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- better trained and more knowledgeable staff, confidently and accurately processing claims and changes of circumstances;
- providing appropriate training, information and access to key stakeholders will enable staff to give appropriate advice and assistance which will speed up the claims process for customers;
- customers receiving the right benefit at the right time

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented during April - December 2009 and then continuing.

Recommendation

R3 Improve value for money by:

- keeping under review workforce capacity requirements and the use of off-site resilience to ensure the best use of resources in the light of changing customer demand; and
- using benchmarking information and examples of best practice to identify and explore alternative ways of delivering the Service.

Recommendations

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved value for money; and
- better understanding of the relative position of the Service against best performing services

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by April 2010.

Recommendation

R4 Minimise subsidy loss by:

- reducing the amount of overpayments caused by local authority error and delay
- effectively monitoring, prioritising and progressing work; and
- agreeing an effective approach to data quality with the external auditor.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved value for money; and
- consistent data quality.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by March 2010.

Recommendation

R5 Strengthen performance management by:

- using data effectively to focus on improvement;
- more active portfolio holder/councillor/scrutiny involvement and challenge, particularly where service standards are consistently not being achieved; and
- ensuring that the current review of councillor responsibilities provides sufficient leadership by elected member champions for failing services.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- greater clarity for both internal and external customers on what the Service should be delivering;
- the Council will know how well it is doing at corporate and service levels;
- improved outcomes for users with a stronger focus on achieving service standards and performance targets; and
- more effective challenge of performance by Councillors which can help drive improvement.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by October 2009

13 The Audit Commission will, as part of its work with the Council:

- monitor and assess progress on implementing the five recommendations; and
- follow up the Service's implementation of its business and improvement planning.

Report

Context

The locality

- 14** Leicester City covers an area of approximately 72 square km and is a unitary authority situated within the centre of Leicestershire in the East Midlands. The City is ranked 20 out of 149 county and unitary authorities for deprivation in 2007, which makes Leicester more deprived than in 2004, when it ranked 29 (where a rank of 1 is most deprived). Its highest levels of deprivation are across the west side of the city. Unlike other cities there is little correlation between ethnicity and deprivation. Compared to other cities in England there is a high proportion of people in Leicester with no qualifications and a high proportion with both low literacy and low numeracy skills.
- 15** In 2006/07, 65 per cent of Leicester residents were very or fairly satisfied with their local area as a place to live, placing the authority in the lowest quartile nationally. Priorities for improvement (in order of priority) have been identified as the level of crime, clean streets, and the level of traffic congestion.
- 16** Leicester has a large, culturally diverse population whose profile is continually changing. In 2007, 60 per cent of the population was white of which 57 per cent were English. The 40 per cent of the population which has an ethnic minority background is predominantly Asian/Asian-British at 28 per cent. Other ethnic minority populations such as Black/Black British, Mixed, and Chinese and other ethnic groups are also higher than regional and national averages. Compared to a national average of nine per cent, 23 per cent of the population was born outside the UK.
- 17** According to mid-2007 population estimates, Leicester City has a population of 292,600. Over the last twenty years this has only increased by 3.8 per cent, considerably less than the average population change of 12.1 per cent for the East Midlands as a whole. The largest increase over this period has been in the working age population, with the proportion of older people declining by 16.2 per cent. The population is younger than average, 35.5 years compared to 38.7 years nationally.
- 18** People who are economically active account for 74 per cent of the Leicester population, with 65.5 per cent in employment, which is lower than regional and national averages. Consequently, the rate of unemployment is almost double the average for the East Midlands, 10.3 per cent compared to 5.4 per cent respectively (July 2007 – June 2008). The average gross weekly pay for Leicester employees is £373.80, compared to a regional average of £449.60 (2008). The majority of people in Leicester are employed in the public administration, education and health sector, which is also higher than regional and national averages.

- 19** A relatively high percentage of the working age population in Leicester at 4.8 per cent are job seekers allowance claimants (December 2008). This compares to the regional and national averages of 2.9 per cent and 3 per cent respectively. According to the Department for Work and Pensions, other key benefits with a high percentage of claimants (higher than regional and national averages) include incapacity benefits, lone parents, carers, and others on income related benefits.
- 20** In 2007/08, 203 households were accepted as priority homeless, less than the previous year but in the highest 25 per cent of all single tier and district councils. However, only 0.5 per cent of homelessness acceptances were repeat applications during the same period, which is better than the national median.
- 21** The average cost of a home in Leicester is £141,364, which is the lowest of its neighbouring authorities and is lower than the East Midlands average of £166,338. Over the last year prices have dropped by 4.2 per cent, compared to an average decrease for the region of 3.2 per cent. During 2007/08, 237 affordable dwellings were completed or acquired, higher than the national average of 136.
- 22** Health in the area is generally significantly worse than the England average as measured by the majority of health indicators. The most notable are people diagnosed with diabetes, early deaths from heart disease and stroke, and new cases of tuberculosis. Children's tooth decay, teenage pregnancy, and hospital stays related to alcohol are also worse in Leicester than the England average. Only rates of statutory homelessness, road injuries and deaths are significantly better than the England average.

The Council

- 23** The Council has 54 Councillors representing 22 wards. It was returned to overall Labour control following a brief period in which the Council was under Liberal Democrat/ Conservative control. Overall, there are 37 Labour Councillors, 8 Conservative Councillors, 6 Liberal Democrat Councillors, 2 Green Councillors, and 1 Independent Councillor. The Council operates the Cabinet and Leader model of Governance.
- 24** The Council recently appointed a new Chief Executive and is currently appointing a new management team after a period of interim management arrangements. The Council is implementing a transformation programme to ensure that it has sufficient capacity to be able to deliver its priorities. It has changed the senior management structure so that strategic directors have responsibility for delivering priorities in the sustainable community strategy (SCS) rather than departmental responsibilities. The alignment with SCS priorities are planned to be mirrored in Cabinet responsibilities.
- 25** The Council has four departments - Adults and Housing, Children and Young People's Services, Regeneration and Culture, and Resources. Each department is responsible for specific areas of the Council's service delivery. The Council employs around 15,000 staff from a wide range of professions including casual and temporary staff.
- 26** The latest Comprehensive Performance Assessment in 2008 rated Leicester City Council as improving adequately, demonstrating a 2 star overall performance. For Benefits, the Council received an overall score of 2 (under the performance standards formerly set by the DWP).

The Council's benefits service

- 27** Housing Benefit (HB) and Council Tax Benefit (CTB) are national welfare benefits administered by the Council on behalf of the DWP. A complex legal framework is in place to define who is entitled to benefit and to reduce fraud and error in the system. The benefits service within a council has a responsibility to pay the right benefit to the right person at the right time.
- 28** From 1 April 2008, the Audit Commission became responsible for benefits inspections, following the transfer of powers from the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate.
- 29** The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 sets out the framework for giving local people and local communities more influence and power to improve their lives. Councils must therefore provide a service that meets ever changing customer and legislative requirements including:
- reporting on the Department of Communities and Local Government National Indicators (NIs) with effect from 1 April 2008; and
 - contributing to the delivery of other national, regional and local priorities aimed at reducing poverty and addressing social and economic inequity, including targets within the Local Area Agreement.
- 30** Our responsibility to provide assurance (to Government, councils, taxpayers and benefit customers) means that we will consider inspection where there is a current or future risk to the service and its customers. In the case of Leicester City Council, the reasons for commissioning the inspection were:
- although performance in speed of processing both new claims and changes in circumstances improved in 2007/08, customers are waiting on average for more than a month for their benefit to be decided and paid;
 - performance in accuracy of processing is weak;
 - continued loss of subsidy payments since 2004/05;
 - discretionary housing payment funding has fallen; and
 - customer satisfaction with the service is weak (2006/07 survey) and a significant number of complaints have been resolved by the Local Government Ombudsman.
- 31** In 2003/04, the Service's processing performance of new claims was over 100 days. It had a backlog of over 23,000 unprocessed benefits claims as a result of ICT failure while developing an integrated electronic documenting management system (EDMS). Interviewing facilities for customers were inadequate. Staff had a poor working environment and morale was low. During 2004 the benefits service merged with the revenues service, which was located in a different building. The Council then began again to try to improve the Service.

32 The key objectives of this inspection were to;

- assess the effectiveness of Leicester City Council's benefits service in meeting the needs of the vulnerable people it serves, and contributing to the Council's wider corporate objectives;
- encourage improvement; and
- to provide assurance to the DWP and other stakeholders regarding the quality of service provision.

33 The Service in 2008/09 pays out around £120 million per year to:

- 9,524 people claiming CTB;
- 15,231 people claiming a rent rebate; and
- 13,741 people claiming rent allowance, of which 6,995 are tenants of registered social housing and 6,746, are tenants of private landlords.

Of the total caseload of 38,496, 15,328 people are of pension age and 23,168 are working age.

34 The Service is run in-house as part of the Adults and Housing Directorate with 131 FTE staff. The cost of running the Service in 2007/08 is £5.6 million, of which £3.2 million is funded by DWP and the balance is met by the Council.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

35 The aim of the Service in the revenues and benefits service plan 2008/11 is:

- to provide an efficient and effective benefits service to the citizens of Leicester, by the timely and accurate payment of housing benefits, whilst preventing fraud and error.

36 The main activities of the Service are to:

- process housing/council tax benefit new claims;
- amend claims due to changes of circumstances and cancellations;
- recover overpayment;
- investigate and prosecute fraudulent housing benefit claims; and
- encourage the take up of benefits.

37 The Service links into a number of the corporate objectives from the Council's current corporate plan for 2006 to 2008 which set out the Council's vision 'To make Leicester more attractive for our diverse communities to live, work and invest in':

- to build on Leicester's history of including people from all backgrounds in a cohesive community free to pursue peace and prosperity;
- to support children and parents, especially protecting the most vulnerable children;
- to help people with disabilities and the growing number of older people to experience more independence;
- to promote prosperity and new jobs, while safeguarding people's health and development interests; and
- to invest in continuous improvement in a well managed organisation.

38 With its partners, the current administration has developed a new 25-year vision for the city, 'One Leicester', which is the basis of its new sustainable community strategy (SCS). The overarching aim of the 25-year vision is for Leicester to become the UK's most sustainable city. It has three key themes: people, place and prosperity. The local area agreement (LAA) is the delivery plan for the first three years of the SCS. It includes improvement targets for national indicators 152 and 153: working age people on out of work benefits and working age people claiming out of work benefits in the worst performing neighbourhoods. The Council is revising its corporate plan and medium term financial strategy to align them with the new focus. At the time of our inspection the corporate plan had not been finalised.

- 39** The 'One Leicester' strategy aims to improve the quality of life in Leicester over the next 25 years and has seven priorities:
- investing in our children;
 - planning for people not cars;
 - reducing our carbon footprint;
 - creating thriving, safe communities;
 - improving wellbeing and health;
 - talking up Leicester; and
 - investing in skills and enterprise.
- 40** The Service has already explored its strategic fit within the new 'One Leicester' strategy. It understands clearly that it has a key role in supporting the 'One Leicester' theme of prosperity. The Service aims to deliver on the 'One Leicester' priorities of:
- investing in our children;
 - creating thriving, safe communities;
 - improving wellbeing and health; and
 - investing in skills and enterprise.
- 41** The Service is an important contributor to ensuring no one is trapped by poverty. Key business plans are ready to be implemented following the finalising of the corporate plan. The Service plans to maximise benefit take-up by:
- undertaking targeted benefit take-up work;
 - working with key partners to maximise all benefits;
 - promoting in-work benefits; and
 - improving access to the Service by increasing ways to claim benefit and making the experience easy and hassle free.

Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?

- 42** The Service is responsive to changing local needs. It is increasing its take-up work in response to the local effects of the economic downturn. Initiatives include an advertisement in the Council's bi-monthly magazine, 'Leicester Link', and information on council employees' payslips and bank cash point receipts. It has attended job clubs at local firms with JobCentre Plus to offer advice to residents at risk of redundancy. It is too early to say how successful these initiatives have been, but the Service is helping local people who may not have knowledge of the benefits system to get access to targeted advice.

How good is the service?

- 43** Front line staff have a positive approach to customer care. Staff are knowledgeable, experienced and take responsibility for the resolution of claims and enquiries. This was confirmed by the customers we spoke to, who thought staff were approachable, skilled and knowledgeable and were confident that their claim would be dealt with efficiently. Service users are given appropriate advice and assistance and receive a good outcome when contacting the Service.
- 44** Some aspects of access to the Service are inadequate. The main benefits reception is in a city centre location with good access by public transport. Customers can also obtain basic advice and help with benefit claims from fourteen neighbourhood housing offices around the city. The Service offers home visits to the elderly, people with disabilities and people with language difficulties. However, opening times are inconsistent and limited. Different neighbourhood offices have different opening hours but this is not publicised on the claim form or the Council's website, which may result in customers having a wasted trip. The Service's opening hours vary to allow time for staff training and meetings. On Monday, Tuesday and Thursday it is open 8.45 am to 4.30 pm. On Wednesday, the Service does not open until 11.00 am and on Friday it closes at 4.00 pm. Information is available on the Council's website and customers can download and print off a range of forms. However, forms cannot be completed and submitted online. Customers who telephone the Service have to wait an average of eleven minutes to speak to an advisor and are charged for the call. Forty-five per cent of calls to the Service are abandoned. The Service recently introduced a call back facility, where customers can choose to leave a message and a member of staff will call them back, but it is too early to say what improvement this will bring. This means some customers, particularly those who work, may find it difficult to access the Service.
- 45** Facilities at the main benefits reception at Wellington House do not fully meet customers' needs. Customers (and staff) who are unable to climb the steps to the entrance have to ring a bell for assistance to use a lift. Even though the building complies with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) requirements, this means that some people are not easily able to access the building. Adequate seating is available plus some play equipment for children, but there are no toilet facilities. There is a lack of privacy for customers. At the reception desk and interview booths others waiting to be seen can overhear the details of customers' conversations with staff. The Council does not own the building and so the scope for making adaptations is limited.
- 46** Waiting times can be unreasonably long. The Service is meeting its target to see customers within ten minutes of their appointment time, but recorded waiting times are underestimated as they do not include the time the customer spends queuing for an appointment or ticket. Although customers with an appointment are seen promptly, those who choose to wait to be seen can have to wait for up to an hour.

- 47** The Service proactively encourages customers to provide their claim and supporting evidence quickly. It offers an appointment based new claim assessment service for personal customers at its Wellington House office. Where a customer provides all the information and evidence to support their new claim, the Service guarantees to process the claim within 24 hours. Customers are encouraged to attend the office in the morning, when they are given an appointment for later that day. However, appointments are limited, so customers may have to return on another day. The 24 hour guarantee is not available at any other offices. Customers who are able to access this facility receive a very good service, but it is not easily accessible to all.
- 48** The Service has made it easier for customers to report changes in their circumstances. There are shortened forms available for customers who have moved address or had a change in their circumstances, so customers are only asked for the information that is relevant to their change. It has also developed a specific claim form for people in hostel accommodation, to ensure their claims can be dealt with as quickly as possible. This makes the claims process more straightforward for customers.
- 49** Notification letters meet statutory requirements but are not customer friendly or sufficiently tailored to ensure that the information is relevant to the claim. For example, the cancellation letter refers to how to reduce any potential overpayment, even if the customer has not been overpaid. Although the Service has a range of related information leaflets, they are not included as standard with notification letters. This could lead to unnecessary queries.
- 50** The Service is not making full use of the information available to it to improve customer service. The Service does not analyse how many claims for benefit are unsuccessful or defective or the reasons why. This could help to ensure that customers receive the right help and advice at their first point of contact with the Service.
- 51** The Service is working well with partners to help customers to access the service. The visiting team works with other agencies such as the Pension, Disability and Carers Service and Welfare Rights to ensure that customers who need a home visit are seen promptly. The three agencies provide awareness training to help identify potential entitlement to other benefits and signpost customers to relevant services.
- 52** The Service has had some success in encouraging people to claim benefits they may be entitled to. In 2008/09 to date 217 new claims have been generated as a result of take-up campaigns run by the Service, which led to approximately £110,000 additional housing and council tax benefit being paid. Campaigns are sometimes successfully targeted on under represented groups within the community, for example the Service ran a benefit awareness poster campaign in Polish, Somali and Punjabi and has used a local Punjabi radio station to promote take-up. The Service is working with the Pension, Disability and Carers Service to promote the take-up of benefits to older people. It uses Pension Service information to target take-up work and refers customers with potential entitlement to Pension Credit and other welfare benefits. The two Services have carried out joint publicity in local publications. Future plans for take up campaigns are prioritised to target under-represented groups, socially excluded groups and the city's most deprived neighbourhoods. Campaigns which are targeted and tailored to the profile of local communities stand more chance of success.

How good is the service?

- 53** Local authority tenants receive a good service. The Income Management Team have received training from benefits staff to enable them to process new claims, verify documents and provide benefits advice and assistance to tenants. This means that tenants can access the Service through their local neighbourhood office rather than having to go to the main office in the city centre.
- 54** The Service is not making full use of opportunities to work with the Council's Housing Options Team and Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) to improve accessibility for private tenants. Housing Options staff have limited access to systems and RSLs are not yet trained to undertake verification of claims and documents. The Service is missing opportunities to provide a more effective service for these particular tenants.
- 55** Consultation with service users is developing. The Service has established a Benefits Community Group who has been asked to provide feedback on information produced by the Service, including the website, leaflets, letters and forms. Although this is a newly formed group, consulting service users will help the Service to better cater for the needs of its customers.
- 56** The Service engages well with key stakeholders. There are bi-monthly meetings with key stakeholders such as the Pension, Disability and Carers Service and Welfare Rights to discuss current issues. There are quarterly liaison meetings with social housing providers where performance, changes in legislation and procedures are discussed. The Service has responded to feedback to improve the service it gives to its stakeholders, for example by providing a dedicated telephone line for enquiries and changing its payment dates. The Service produces a quarterly 'Liaison Newsletter', which provides stakeholders with a round-up of relevant changes in legislation and procedures. Regular and effective engagement with stakeholders helps to resolve any issues or problems promptly as they arise.
- 57** The Service communicates well with private landlords through the landlords' forum. In addition to communicating key messages, such as the introduction of Local Housing Allowance, the forums also cover a range of relevant topics. Recent examples include energy performance certificates and rent deposit guarantee schemes. Representatives from other service areas such as Trading Standards and Housing Options, and partner organisations such as the Rent Service and HMP Resettlement Team are in attendance. As a result, forums are well attended. Good communication with private landlords promotes confidence in the Service and breaks down barriers to benefit claimants being able to access privately rented accommodation.
- 58** Service standards are underdeveloped. The recently formed Benefits Community Group were consulted to find out what is important to them when making a claim or notifying a change and if proposed service standards cover the right areas, but were not involved in setting the standards. Customers now know what level of service they can expect from the Council as the standards are now published, but they do not necessarily reflect user needs. If customers were better engaged the Service could concentrate on improving the things that are most important to its users.

59 The Council has appropriate corporate complaint procedures. Complaints, comments and compliments can be made on-line, by phone, in writing or in person. The Council has appropriate targets for dealing with complaints and an internal review procedure. Customers are advised of their right to complain to the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) if still dissatisfied with the Council's response. Benefit related complaints to the LGO reduced to 11 in 2007/08 compared to 25 in 2006/07. As a result of customer feedback, the Service has strengthened specific procedures which help to improve the service for all customers. Recent examples include all valuable documents received through the post now being returned by recorded delivery, and information on how to book an appointment being made available on the website.

Diversity

- 60** The Council has a well established approach to equality and diversity. It was externally assessed at level four of the equality standard for local government in April 2008 putting it in the best seven per cent of councils nationally. The Service has carried out equality impact assessments on a number of service areas and actions have included cultural awareness training for staff; targeted take-up campaigns and subsequent monitoring to identify their effectiveness; more promotional information for difficult to reach groups and ensuring that all information is available in large print. Effective equality impact assessments have helped the Service to shape its services around customers needs.
- 61** Access to translation services is good. The Service has a rota of staff who speak various community languages and staff also have access to telephone translation services. This helps the Service to be more accessible to all of its customers.
- 62** The Service actively promotes Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP). The Service has promoted the availability of DHP to advice agencies through its benefits newsletter and engaged with Welfare Rights to identify and remove any barriers to claiming. It has carried out awareness sessions with the Income Management Team, Pension, Disability and Carers Service and Housing Options to help promote take-up of the scheme. This helps to ensure that information about DHPs is available to those claimants most likely to be in need of help. However, the Service does not make full use of its DHP allocation to help customers. The Council receives a subsidy allocation from the DWP, and can choose to top this up. The Council has decided not to spend more than the subsidy allocated, but in 2007/08 only spent 98 per cent of this amount. As the Service has not used its full subsidy allocation for DHPs, the amount allocated to the Council in future years will be reduced.
- 63** The Service works effectively with partners to support vulnerable customers. It has dedicated liaison officers who deal with claims from tenants in hostel accommodation, bail hostels and supported accommodation. The Service meets with designated support workers regularly to resolve any problems and ensure claims are dealt with promptly.

How good is the service?

64 Equality monitoring data for benefit claimants is not being used effectively. The Service does not yet have a complete picture of its customers' ethnic background. Where data is well established, such as age, it has not been analysed or used to inform future service provision. Some information on individuals with specific access requirements is captured on the Service's database, but it is not clear how this information is then used to tailor the service to meet that customer's specific needs or extrapolated to inform overall service improvement.

Service outcomes

65 The Service is failing to meet its aim to make timely payments of benefit. In 2007/08, the average time taken to process a new claim was 31.8 days, which is in the worst performing 25 per cent of councils nationally. In 2008/09, the average time taken up to February 2009 has deteriorated to 37.5 days. A third of the new claims outstanding on 1st March 2009 had been outstanding for more than 50 days. The number of new claims received has increased by over a third compared to the previous year. While the current economic situation places the Service in a challenging position, customers need a reasonable service at all times, and they may need even more attention to their difficulties. These delays will place customers in arrears with their rent and council tax and may discourage people from taking jobs, especially temporary work, if they think there will be a long delay when reapplying for benefit.

66 The Service is taking too long to process changes in circumstances. In 2007/08, the average time taken was 16.5 days, which is in the worst performing 25 per cent of councils nationally. In 2008/09, the average time taken to February 2009 is 17.7 days. This means that claimants may be receiving too much or too little benefit until the claim is adjusted and can face financial hardship when overpayments are recovered. This can also serve as a barrier for people returning to work because they are concerned about how long it will take to calculate their new entitlement.

67 Customers are not always receiving an accurate decision on their claim. In a random sample of 500 cases tested in 2007/08, 93.6 per cent were paid the correct amount of benefit. This performance is in the worst 25 per cent of councils nationally. Monitoring for the period August 2008 to January 2009 showed that, on average, 89 per cent of claims checked were correct, although these checks are targeted on new staff and those where quality issues have been identified so that work is focused where it will have the most impact.

68 The Service is taking too long to deal with appeals. The Service carries out a comprehensive reconsideration of a claim before submitting the case to an appeal tribunal. This helps to ensure any mistakes are corrected without the customer having to go to a tribunal, but it means that some customers are having to wait too long to have their appeal heard by an independent party. In 2007/08, 47 per cent of appeals took longer than four weeks to be submitted to the Appeals Service, nine per cent took longer than three months. This means that if the Council has made a wrong decision, the customer has to wait longer to receive the correct benefit they are entitled to.

- 69** The Service has effective arrangements to prevent evictions or Council Tax recovery action taking place where a benefit claim is outstanding. Where a customer has received a notice seeking possession or eviction notice, their claim is dealt with as a priority case by a dedicated team. The Service suspends Council Tax recovery action where work is outstanding on an associated benefit claim. This prevents customers being subject to court action and additional fees and charges due to benefit delays.
- 70** Claims are adequately verified before benefit is paid. The Service has produced a clear and comprehensive guide for staff to ensure claims are supported by appropriate evidence and are adequately verified. This helps to prevent fraud and error from entering the Benefits system.
- 71** The Service is successfully identifying undeclared changes of circumstances. Also its performance against national indicator NI180 (all changes in entitlement within the year) is above average when compared to similar councils. The Service carries out a range of measures such as publicity, postal review forms and targeted visits. Information is given in letters, on posters and display boards in the offices and in person at the enquiry counter. This helps to reduce fraud and error in the system.
- 72** The Service is successful in the prevention and detection of benefit fraud. In 2007/08, it applied 288 sanctions (a formal caution, administrative penalty or prosecution) against persons committing benefit fraud. This performance is in the best 25 per cent of councils nationally. However, when the Service is experiencing peaks in workloads it can take some time for fraudulent overpayments to be assessed, up to three months. If a case takes too long, the Council is not able to submit the case for prosecution, which means customers who have committed benefit fraud may not receive the appropriate sanction. The Service proactively encourages fraud referrals by publicising its benefit claim hotline in the local newspaper and on city buses. There are posters on display in council reception points and in libraries and the Council seeks to ensure that successful prosecutions are reported in the local press. The Investigations Team provide fraud awareness training to staff within the Service and to other relevant departments, and provide feedback on the outcome of referrals. This raises awareness and encourages staff and the public to report potential fraudsters.
- 73** Councillors have not received appropriate fraud awareness training. The Service offered to deliver training to councillors, but this was declined. Councillors may not have a full appreciation of the work the Investigations Team carry out and how their role can contribute.
- 74** The Service is successfully working in partnership with the DWP to investigate potential benefit fraud. It has conducted 153 joint investigations in 2008/09 to date. A joined-up approach makes best use of the resources available to each organisation to prevent, detect and prosecute benefit fraud.

How good is the service?

- 75** Customers have varying degrees of satisfaction with the service they are receiving. Customers we spoke to told us that improvements have been made but they were still not satisfied with the delays contacting the Service by telephone or the waiting times at the office. The Service conducted its own survey of 240 customers who visited Wellington House in the summer of 2008 and found high levels of satisfaction with benefit officers. The last national benefits survey was conducted in 2006/07, when overall satisfaction with the Service was 74 per cent, compared to a national average of 77 per cent.
- 76** The Service is listening to customers. It has improved its counter service as a result of the customer survey and now offers pre-booked appointments and separate desks dealing with new claims and changes in circumstances.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 77** The Service does not provide adequate value for money (VFM). When compared with similar councils, the cost of the Service per head of population is above average but performance in the core area of speed of processing new claims and changes in circumstances is in the worst 25 per cent of Councils nationally. The Service does have a high comparative workload, but councils with a similar workload are delivering better performance at a lower cost.
- 78** Delays and errors in benefit processing are losing income for the Council. Councils receive full subsidy from the DWP on benefit which has been correctly paid. However, benefit that has been overpaid due to local authority (LA) error or delay is subject to subsidy penalties if it is above a fixed threshold. The Service has not received any subsidy payment against its LA error overpayments for the past four years, totalling over £6 million, because the amount is above the threshold. The Service expects to be above the LA error threshold in 2008/09, which means the Council is continuing to lose subsidy income at the cost of local council tax payers.
- 79** Overpayment recovery is effective. The amount of overpaid benefit recovered in 2007/08 was 80.7 per cent of the amount raised that year, which is above average performance. This represents 36.8 per cent of the overall overpaid debt outstanding. The Service has clear policies and procedures for the recovery of overpayments and uses the full range of recovery options available to it, including recovery through the county court. Underlying entitlement is routinely considered. The amount of overpaid debt raised and collected is monitored on a monthly basis. This includes an analysis of the age of the debt and is used to inform priorities for the overpayments team. Performance is reported to the Chief Financial Officer. The Service is gaining valuable income for the Council by its success at collecting money that it is owed.
- 80** The Service is taking action to minimise overpayments. It uses its document management system to identify and suspend cases which may result in reduced entitlement to benefit. It shares information from other departments within the Council where appropriate and future changes are noted and followed up. These actions are starting to reduce the amount of benefit which is overpaid.

- 81** The Service has reduced the cost of engaging temporary staff through effective procurement. It procured a framework agreement for off-site processing to increase resilience to deal with peaks in the workload, instead of using temporary agency staff. The Service estimates this will save around £100,000 in agency fees in 2008/09.
- 82** Administration of the subsidy claim is weak. Councils receive a subsidy payment for most of the benefit expenditure they incur providing they comply with the regulations. Subsidy is claimed from the DWP annually. The claim is certified by external auditors to the level of assurance required by the DWP. Certification work carried out on the claim 2006/07 and 2007/08 identified errors requiring additional testing and resulted in qualification. This result also reflects the lack of a corporate policy for and oversight of data quality and hinders the ability to manage robustly performance and the delivery of value for money. On a practical level there is a risk that the Service does not get the maximum subsidy to which it could be entitled. Incorrect classification of subsidy can lead to loss of income to the Council, higher audit fees and the cost of officers' time to check and correct cases.
- 83** The Service uses agency staff in a cost effective way and only when necessary. In the past the Service was very reliant on agency staff. This was a very expensive option but necessary at the time as the Service had a very high staff turnover. Since 2005 the Service has recruited and trained new staff in bulk. It has also evaluated the cost benefits of employing agency staff to carry out quality checking and subsidy audit work. This has enabled the Service to assess the effectiveness of improved quality checking in reducing the amount of overpaid benefit and incorrect subsidy classifications. This allows the Service to evaluate the potential for improving value for money without employing additional staff who may not be required in the longer term.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 84** From a very low base, the Service is beginning to improve. The customer's experience is better than it used to be but facilities are still poor. However, the customer is now more involved in improving the Service. Recent changes, and investment in different ways of working, new management systems and technology, and the move to a different building have yet to show their full potential.
- 85** The Service is improving the right things. It is able to identify clearly where it was failing and what changes it needed to make to improve service delivery. Service improvements prioritised during the last four years aimed at improving the customer's experience by an appointments system, the fast tracking of new claims, increasing use of specialist staff and the relocation of the Service to refurbished, modern offices with improved customer reception areas. Benefit officers replaced receptionist staff to improve the customer experience and to reduce the level of work being passed to the back office. Other investment included the replacement of ICT and improved approaches to staff performance management.
- 86** The Service uses customer feedback well to improve. For example improvements which came from customer survey suggestions are to be piloted in 2009/10. These include recruiting an experienced member of staff to meet and greet customers and a late opening one night a week to accommodate working people's needs. A panel of benefits customers is now involved in regular discussion of service issues and development such as service standards and performance. The group's suggestions for improvements in communication have been used to enhance performance.
- 87** The Service is self aware. It has identified service strengths and weaknesses and incorporated this into its service planning. Strengths include the use of home working leading to a more flexible service and greater retention of staff; dedicated, knowledgeable and experienced staff who are customer focused, use of on-line payments, a direct debit campaign and better phone service. The identified weaknesses include the need to improve accuracy and quality; restrictive opening hours; staff concerns about the level of changes; and overtime working becoming the norm as a result of changes such as the move to generic working. Service plans for 2009/10 have targeted actions to tackle these weaknesses.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 88** The Service has progressed from a very poor position to one that is beginning to show improvement. In 2003/04, the Service was not delivering the level of service needed by its vulnerable customers. Its processing performance of new claims was over 100 days. It had a backlog of over 23,000 unprocessed benefits claims as a result of ICT failure. Customer and staff facilities were poor. During 2004 the Service merged with the revenues service, which was located in a different building, and this increased its challenges. In 2005 performance dropped again as a result of further ICT failures. The Council implemented a new EDMS application in 2006. The speed of processing new claims has improved from 57.5 days in 2005/06, to 55 days in 2006/07, to 31.8 days in 2007/08 (qualified). The Service's own figures for February 2009 show new claims processing at 32 days, an improvement of 14 days on January's performance. The speed of processing changes in circumstances deteriorated from 21 days in 2005/06 to 54.5 days in 2006/07, but improved to 16.5 days in 2007/08 (qualified). The Service's own figures during February 2009 show speed of processing changes in circumstances at 16 days.
- 89** Value for money is improving. A framework agreement for temporary staff has resulted in savings as has an offsite resilience contract. The Service understands and is reducing its costs. It is a member of a benchmarking club, which provides detailed unit cost comparisons. It has used this benchmarking information to identify areas of service delivery which were comparatively high cost and used examples of best practice to reduce costs in these areas, for example, changes to staff training and recruitment. The Service has also calculated the cost of customer contacts by different access channels, and how these costs compare to national averages. It is now using this information as part of its customer access strategy to review its customer service provision.
- 90** The Service is working with partners to improve value for money. The Service delivered training to neighbouring councils on new benefits legislation, and used the income generated to improve its training facilities. The Council is providing fraud investigation resources and expertise to a neighbouring council, which is bringing revenue into the service.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 91** The Service has a clear long term vision with achievable short and medium term objectives. An improvement plan details clear activities to achieve this and clear links to the new performance framework and enhanced customer experience. Future plans, some corporate, include restructuring, home working, better use of ICT, effective use of framework agreements, efficiencies and better working practises, plans for further improvement while coping with the economic downturn and increasing numbers of new claims, as well as partnership arrangements. This places the Service well to cope with the future.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 92** The 'Right first time, on time, every time' ethos is informing its improvement planning well. However until the corporate planning process is in place the Service cannot implement its own service specific suite of plans within its business plan corresponding to the new corporate plan and the local area agreement. A new system for managing performance in its priority areas, based on outcomes for residents, gives the Cabinet greater oversight and challenge. Work currently at a corporate level on the strategic programmes aims to align the national indicators to Council priorities and mean that future reporting of the Service can be aligned to 'One Leicester' priorities. Several plans are being updated to tackle different aspects of the Service's performance for example for take-up; overpayments; and a staff performance improvement plan.
- 93** The Service has identified clearly where it can contribute to corporate objectives. For example the Employment and Skills Routeway is part of the working neighbourhoods' programme, to support individuals to move from out of work benefits to sustainable employment. The Service has identified the need for greater access, knowledge and integration for residents seeking to undertake education, employment or training. As part of this service improvement task group, the barriers to in-work benefits will be examined and improvement to remove these developed in the context of the whole approach to tackling worklessness in the city. All these plans come together in preparing for the 2009/10 business plan.
- 94** Management of the Service is good. The Head of Service manages the overall control of the current business plan with each senior manager taking a key strategic lead for elements of the service plans. Management of the plans is primarily through the senior management team weekly meetings following a monthly schedule of planning meetings and performance management. Additionally supervision and one to one meetings with the Head of Service are used as management tools to monitor progression of the plans and are used to update the business plan. Away days (twice a year or as required) are used effectively to formulate strategic activity and planning. Each manager has specific responsibility for the 25 or more separate work streams for the Service.
- 95** The Service has strong leadership. Planning for the new national approach to a customer focused assessment regime began in early 2008. Members of the senior management team focused on how the Service needed to plan for the replacement of performance indicators and standards with a reduced set of national indicators. An analysis of the Service led to a review of its structure, a more co-ordinated management of change in ICT; change in staff and customer accommodation; and changes to the recruitment, training and performance management of staff. As a result of these initiatives staff retention rates and productivity have increased.
- 96** Corporate plans for the strategic future of customer access are ambitious. They include for example a new telephony system and multiple complaints are being responded to in one letter. Future plans include at home access to services through the television, and a new customer service centre in a more central building is planned for 2011. Access to the Benefits Service is planned to be included in this new customer service centre in the city centre's former post office building which the Council purchased in 2008 and is now refurbishing.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 97** The Service's future planning for the new statutory duty to involve is robust. Following corporate directors board approval on 27 January 2009, a project board of service directors has been set up to ensure that the Council is ready to meet the duty to involve legislation. A project team was subsequently set up by the Board. This is charged with the task of finding out about the current arrangements and practices used within departments to inform, consult and involve with local people and representatives of local people about their services. The Service is represented on the board by the Adults and Housing directorate and is fully involved. This should ensure that processes are in place to ensure that the whole Council is able to meet the requirements of the duty to involve methodically and consistently.
- 98** Day to day performance management is good. Systems in place for previous requirements are being replaced gradually. A new reporting tool came on-line in January 2009 to replace the previous management information tool. An improved performance management system for lead councillors in Cabinet is being rolled out. It is planned to use this to challenge corporate directors more effectively.
- 99** The Council has appropriate corporate complaint procedures. Complaints, comments and compliments can be made on-line, by phone, in writing or in person. The complaint is acknowledged within 24 hours followed by a written reply within ten working days, either responding to the complaint or advising the complainant that their complaint is being investigated and when they can expect a response. The complainant may request an internal review of their complaint by a different senior manager and should receive a response within 20 working days. Complainants are advised of their right to complain to the LGO if still dissatisfied with the Council's response. Complaints are logged and recorded by gender, ethnicity where given and result at both stages. The Service has a checklist to record the reason for the complaint and action taken. This prompts the user to record any service improvements made as a result of complaints. As a result of complaints and feedback the Service has strengthened specific procedures which help to improve the service for all customers. Recent examples include all valuable documents received through the post now being returned by recorded delivery, and information on how to book an appointment being made available on the website.
- 100** The Service's data quality is not consistent. The Council's overall management arrangements for ensuring data quality are effective but it does not have an overall data quality policy in place. The Service is working to correct errors identified in the 2007/08 benefits subsidy claim in their work for the 2008/09 claim. (Mandatory audit of performance indicators (PIs) and of the new claims and changes in circumstances found some not to be fairly stated .) The PIs were qualified in both 2006/07 and 2007/08 BVPI 78a and 78b (speed of processing new claims and changes in circumstances) were qualified in 2007/08. Performance indicator BV79a (accuracy of processing housing benefit claims) was qualified during 2006/07 . Accountability for the Service and decision making may suffer as this means that customers, councillors and partners do not have a clear picture of how the service is performing.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 101** The Service has a good understanding of how local factors affect performance. It benchmarks its performance against councils with similar deprivation levels. It is a member of a benchmarking club, which provides it with cost comparisons. On gross cost per weighted caseload, and net cost (after administration subsidy payable by the DWP) per weighted caseload, the Council is slightly below the club average. The Council is also below the club average on gross cost per weighted transaction.
- 102** The Service does not have a strategic approach to VfM. An ambitious approach to planning for VfM is in development. This covers full costings for all aspects of the service, analysis of benchmarked costs to identify good practice to investigate further, alternative service delivery models, public private partnerships, shared services, and making best use of other internal resources. The aim is for this to be in place by July 2009.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 103** The Service now has the people, skills and capability it needs to deliver its priorities. The two Service Directors with responsibility for the Service have critical experience of improving and running an effective housing service. The Head of Service is recently confirmed in post providing stability and continuity. Staff for the new posts in the restructured service are either in training or in posts. This provides resource, challenge and focus for sustaining recent changes and improvements.
- 104** Councillors do not provide adequate challenge for the service at a strategic level. They are fully supportive of the Service and are effective in dealing with individual constituents and their claims. They visibly support the efforts of the Service, visit the offices and do tours of teams. Councillors ensured that resources for restructuring were made available to the Service. Scrutiny has not focused on the Service and questioned its poor performance. The responsibilities of councillors are however planned to change. The current recruitment of strategic directors who have responsibility for outcomes rather than for a directorate is planned to provide the model against which councillors will also work. The model means that the focus is on outcomes for vulnerable people rather than departmental performance.
- 105** The Council has a strategic approach to human resource planning. The Council has developed a Pay and Workforce Strategy and the Service has addressed capacity issues through recruitment, retention, training and development. The Service has developed a structured career path for new entrants. The competency framework sets out clear criteria for progression within the Service which staff will be assessed against. This ensures that new members of staff are meeting the Service's expectations on performance, and a fair and transparent route for progression helps to retain experienced staff.
- 106** Training is well planned, effective and valued by staff. Staff receive formal training, briefing notes, and attend regular team meetings. Quality monitoring is used to identify team and individual training needs. The Service has a six month rolling training plan which identifies the training required across the Service, the training provider, and the dates the training will be provided. This provides a comprehensive summary of both completed and planned training.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 107** The Service is adjusting its staffing resource jointly with the Revenues Service to ensure that the right people with the right skills are in place. The Service reviewed its staffing structure in 2008 and made a successful request for additional resources to deliver service improvements. Recruitment and training of new staff is currently underway. Training for generic staff allows progression from council tax work and on to benefits work. New starters begin training in April and the next six officers will move on to begin benefits training. The off site processing contract costing will cover any loss of work capacity within the revenues provision. The new recruits are due to start work at the beginning of June and staff currently in training will move onto live casework. The Service effectively uses forward planning to provide the capacity to improve.
- 108** Resources to deliver the Service are reviewed regularly. Additional resources for counter cover because of the increasing numbers of callers are planned. In addition the Service is piloting the use of an evidence only collection point for new claims as well as the existing four cubicles and the council tax cubicles when they are not busy.
- 109** The Service is responding well to increased demand by the local community. Caseloads are increasing due to the effects of the economic downturn. The Service received 35 per cent more new claims in the period January to December 2008 than in the previous year. In response, the Service is recruiting additional staff and has procured a framework agreement for off-site processing of claims. This places the Service in a better position to deal with the extra workload without deterioration in customer service.
- 110** The Service is now using technology well to improve service delivery. A joint and integrated ICT management system is now in place. Other Council departments for example the income management team have access to the system and can interrogate it to assess the status of a customer's claim during a customer enquiry. Future plans include the use of an open access module to enable other partners to access the system while talking to customers.
- 111** The Service is good at establishing links to contribute to improving the quality of life of its vulnerable customers. For example working with STAR (Supporting Tenants and Residents), a dedicated support service for all types of housing-related problems and issues specifically on claiming benefits and with the Housing Service's hostel team. Nominated officers and dedicated outreach officers work with the Housing Options Service and the Income Management team. The emphasis is on avoiding eviction and ensuring secure tenancies for both private and council tenants. As a result evictions are reduced and there is a low level of rent arrears, as well as a reduced workload.
- 112** The Service works well in partnership. It has direct liaison with DWP, Jobcentre Plus and the Pension Service. Since the beginning of January 2006, the Service has been jointly working with the Pension, Disability and Carers Service to maximise benefit take-up in both HB and CT and other welfare benefits to maximise benefit for all disadvantaged groups. However the joint visits finished when the Pension Service funding ceased. They continue to share data and have joint meetings to discuss service delivery.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 113** Partnership working is enhancing the Service's capacity to deliver. Named officers are key contacts for daily, weekly and quarterly liaison with for example income management and housing options staff, dealing with claims, rent arrears. Through the regular liaison groups with named officers, partners can fast track claims and get the outcomes they want. As a result of this way of working decision making can be more efficient.
- 114** The Service has effective plans to provide extra capacity to deliver service priorities. It has procured a framework agreement for off-site processing to provide resilience to cover peaks in workload and release capacity to deliver service. This is allowing the Service to call on additional resources to deal with peaks in the workload in a cost efficient manner.
- 115** Procurement decisions consider both cost and quality. The framework agreement for off-site processing was procured through ESPO (the Eastern Shires Purchasing Organisation) and requires high accuracy levels as well as consideration of volumes and cost. This results in improved value for money, as mistakes do not need to be corrected at a later date.

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For further information on the work of the Commission please contact:

Audit Commission, 1st Floor, Millbank Tower, Millbank, London SW1P 4HQ

Tel: 020 7828 1212 Fax: 020 7976 6187 Textphone (minicom): 020 7630 0421

www.audit-commission.gov.uk
