

Benefits

Service

Inspection

Bristol City Council

July 2010



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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 website 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 Bristol City Council's benefits service is poor with uncertain prospects for improvement. People wait too long for their benefit claims to be decided and for changes in their circumstances to be processed. The service does not deal with requests for reviews or process appeals quickly enough. Its approach to checking the accuracy of the way it processes claims is inconsistent. And its efforts to deter fraud and error in its caseload are not systematic. Its collection of overpaid benefits is poor with levels of debt owed to the Council increasing. Poor levels of service pose a risk to the most vulnerable people of eviction and high levels of stress.
- 2 It is not always easy for people to deal with the service. They find some of the letters it sends hard to understand. Information about claiming benefit is available online but leaflets are not readily available. Claims can be made in person at various good quality Customer Service Points across the city or by telephone to the Customer Service Centre. But waiting times for telephone callers are increasing, as is the number of calls that are abandoned. Staff support people well when making claims and are knowledgeable and helpful.
- 3 Customers and partners are insufficiently involved in planning and delivering improvement, such as shaping the ways customers can claim. The service has limited knowledge of its customers to inform planning. Work to increase the take-up of benefit by those who may be entitled is at early stages of development. It promotes fraud awareness and its successful prosecutions of benefits fraud effectively.
- 4 There is no track record of successfully tackling weaknesses to improve the service to customers. Processing times have been significantly below that of the best performing councils for some time. Some early signs of improvement have been secured through customers having the opportunity to make a claim by telephone, but this is very recent. However, the service has reduced the amount of benefit it overpays because of its own error. As a result it has been able to claim the maximum amount of government subsidy it is eligible for, an improvement secured over the last two years.
- 5 The Council is clear about its own role in supporting vulnerable people. But it has yet to establish an explicit strategic direction for the service to define its contribution to local priorities. A performance culture is developing with a more effective focus on staff development and performance. But improvement plans have not been comprehensive. Improvement targets are not in place to focus on increasing the service's effectiveness and securing better value for money.

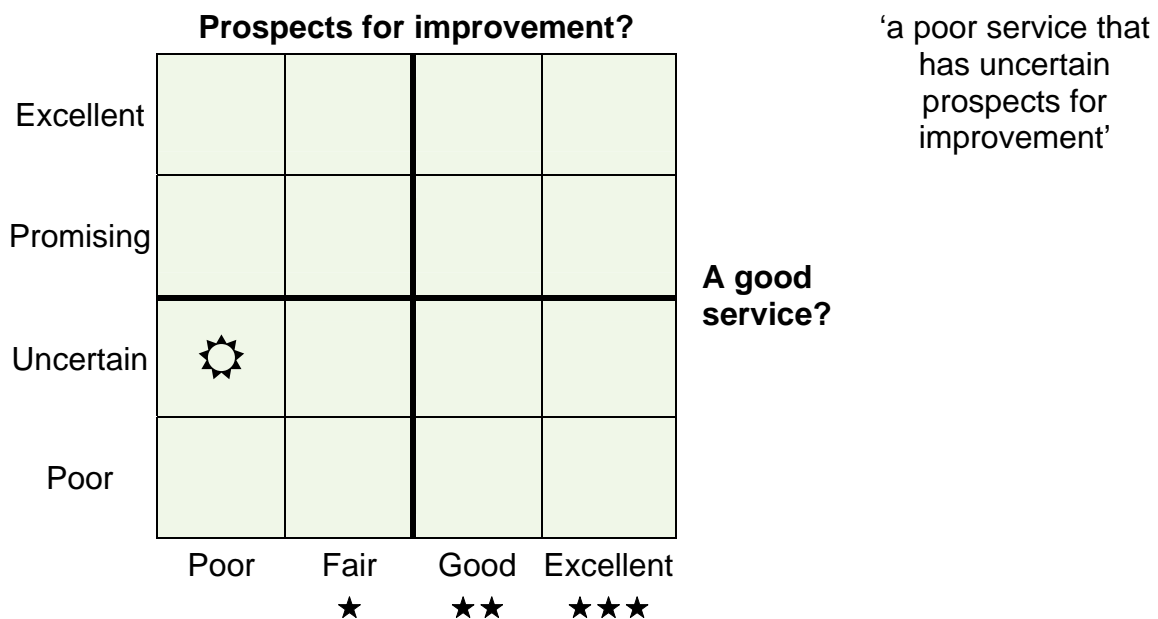
Summary

- 6 Managers and staff are committed to improvement. Following a review of working practices the service prioritised improving processing times and introduced telephone claiming. At the same time it completed a major office move successfully. These changes need time to embed but are beginning to deliver some improvement and provide greater opportunities for working with others. The Council expects the service to play a key role in its strategy for modernising access to services. And an ambitious agenda for improvement has been set increasing the use of digital technology. While this offers a better service for those who are able to use it, it does not offer an acceptable solution for the most vulnerable customers. Workforce planning is underdeveloped in some areas so the service is unclear if it has the right number of staff or staff with the right knowledge and skills to sustain improvement.

Scoring the service

- 7 We have assessed Bristol City Council as providing a 'poor', no-star service that has uncertain 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, no-star service because:
- customers wait too long for a decision on their new benefit claim;
 - customers' changes in circumstances take too long to process;
 - collecting overpaid benefits is poor with levels of debt owed to the Council increasing;
 - decisions on appeals or requests for reviews are too slow;
 - accuracy checking and efforts to deter fraud and error are not systematic;
 - customers, staff and partners are not engaged enough in service design and planning;
 - understanding of customer and local needs is not comprehensive;
 - its approach to increasing the take-up of benefits by those who may be entitled is underdeveloped;

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.

Scoring the service

- written communication can be difficult for customers to understand;
- telephone access to the service is unsatisfactory with waiting times for calls to be answered increasing and high rates of abandoned calls; and
- it does not achieve value for money as service costs have increased but not delivered sustained improvements.

9 However, it has some strengths, including:

- good access to making a claim through access points across the city;
- customer care is consistent and to a high standard;
- there is good access to interpretation and translation services when making a claim; and
- it is good at promoting fraud awareness and its successful prosecutions.

10 The service has uncertain prospects for improvement because:

- it lacks a track record of improving processing times;
- a strong sense of strategic direction is missing on how the service can contribute to local priorities;
- improvement plans have not been comprehensive;
- it is not maximising opportunities to identify training and development needs; and
- workforce planning is underdeveloped.

11 However, it has some strengths, including:

- managers and staff are able and committed to change and improvement;
- changed working practices are securing efficiencies and showing early signs of improvement;
- tackling poor performance and reduced overpayments so maximising its subsidy claim; and
- a performance culture is developing.

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 the quality of the service delivered to customers by:

- developing a detailed understanding of the reasons for delays in processing to reduce unnecessary delays;
- using this understanding to deal with new claims and change events efficiently and effectively;
- being more supportive towards customers who need to provide extra information so that it is received quickly;
- analysing defective and unsuccessful claims to identify patterns and take appropriate action; and
- ensuring appropriate resources are available to implement improvements.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- reduced processing times for customers so minimising hardship and distress; and
- improved value for money through the delivery of improved performance.

Implementing this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by December 2010.

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.

Recommendations

Recommendation

- R2** Improve access to the service for local people who are, or may be, entitled to claims benefits by:
- developing a more comprehensive approach to consulting with customers to understand their needs better;
 - working more closely with Registered Social Landlords (RSLs), advice agencies and others to share data on local communities;
 - using this customer and local socio-economic information to design a service based on local needs and views;
 - reducing telephone waiting times and providing a balance of ways for people to make a claim appropriate to their needs;
 - carrying out properly resourced and evaluated take-up campaigns that are aimed at under claiming communities and integrated into improvement plans;
 - promoting and processing faster Discretionary Housing Payments; and
 - working with partners and customers to ensure clear Plain English written communication.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased customer satisfaction;
- better targeting of resources and maximising the entitlement of benefits to vulnerable people through removing barriers to claiming;
- potential reduced demand on homelessness budgets through better support for those at risk of losing their own home; and
- improved value for money through reducing demand from avoidable contact with the service.

Implementing this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by March 2011.

Recommendation

R3 Provide effective leadership for the service by:

- clarifying the contribution it can make to local and corporate priorities to inform service planning;
- developing a more outcome focused approach to target setting, supported by clear descriptions of specific actions and milestones to be achieved;
- developing and implementing a service plan setting out clear aims and objectives for the service and actions describing how it will meet them; and
- developing the role of councillors in managing performance to enable them to contribute fully to improving the service and provide effective challenge.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a clear strategic direction for the service;
- using the service's understanding of local needs to target service improvement; and
- being better able to measure success and take early action to tackle weaknesses.

Implementing this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by March 2011.

Recommendation

R4 Reduce benefit fraud and errors in payments by:

- assessing the level of risk to fraud and ensuring that there is sufficient resources to detect and investigate suspected fraud;
- introducing a risk based approach to reviewing claims so that unreported changes are identified as soon as possible; and
- using all information available to understand levels of error within the caseload and to better inform training and development.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- customers will be better supported in reporting changes, ensuring that they get the right benefit and reducing the unnecessary cost of inaccurate payments to the Council;
- fraud and error is identified and effectively tackled; and
- increased value for money by paying the right benefits and reducing overpayments.

Implementing this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by December 2010.

Recommendations

Recommendation

- R5** Improve the way it manages and seeks to improve value for money in the service by:
- implementing a more consistent approach to measuring a wider range of performance;
 - evaluating the outcomes delivered from investments in the service and using these to inform future investment;
 - using benchmarking data and comparisons with the best performing benefits services in other places to probe costs of the specific parts of the service and take action;
 - improving the collection of overpayment debt and improve procedures for its recovery, monitoring and management;
 - reviewing the effectiveness of debt recovery agencies; and
 - managing the write off of old and uncollectable debt.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improvements in the service's value for money and a greater focus on cost, performance and satisfaction;
- increased income to the Council through reducing the debt owed to it by vulnerable people; and
- a clear understanding of the benefits of investments in the service.

Implementing this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by March 2011.

Report

Context

The locality

- 13 Bristol is the largest city in the south-west of England with over 421,300 residents (ONS mid year population estimates 2008). It covers an area of 110 square kilometres. It is densely populated with nearly 35 people to each square kilometre, compared with the average for the south-west of just over two people to each square kilometre.
- 14 The city combines areas of vibrancy and affluence with areas of poverty and deprivation, where some residents do not share in the city's prosperity. It is ranked 64 out of 354 in the Index of Multiple Deprivation, where one is the most deprived^I. Since 2004, the area has become relatively more deprived. Bristol has 39 Super Output Areas (SOAs) ranked in the 10 per cent most deprived nationally. Four SOAs are ranked in the least deprived 10 per cent nationally.
- 15 The population predominantly classifies itself as White British, accounting for 88 per cent of the resident population. This is below the national and regional averages. Just over 11 per cent of the population is from Black and Asian Minority Ethnic communities (BAME) and these communities are growing. About 4 per cent of the population considers itself White Other and this may reflect levels of migrant workers attracted to the city.
- 16 In comparison with the south-west region, Bristol has a larger proportion of working age residents claiming benefits. Overall, almost 16 per cent of residents of working age claim benefits. This is above the regional average of 13.2 per cent and the national average of 15.7 per cent. In January 2010, 11,172 people claimed Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), almost 4 per cent of Bristol's working age population. This is higher than the regional average of 2.9 per cent but below the national average of 4.1 per cent. Of the working age population, 7.6 per cent claims Employment Support Allowance (ESA), which is below the regional and national average. The working age population claiming lone parent benefits stands at 2.2 per cent, which is higher than the regional and national averages^{II}.
- 17 Bristol is an expensive place to live. The average house price is £166,483^{III}, which is above the national average. Since 2007/08, the affordability of housing in the city has been decreasing. On average residents living in the city earn £475.50 a week. This is above the regional average, but below the national average. Most jobs are within the lower paid services industry and only a third of employment is in the finance and IT sectors, attracting better wages. Unemployment rates are currently about 5 per cent. Accessing good quality affordable housing is a challenge for some residents.

^I Indices of Deprivation 2007

^{II} NOMIS

^{III} Land Registry, House Price Index December 2009

Report

The Council

- 18 Bristol City Council is a unitary council. The Council is made up of 70 councillors representing 35 wards. It is currently Liberal Democrat controlled. The Liberal Democrat group has 38 seats, the Conservative group has 17 seats, the Labour group has 14 and there is one Green party councillor.
- 19 The Council has adopted the Cabinet style of governance. At the time of the inspection the Cabinet was made up of seven councillors from the Liberal Democrat group with the Cabinet Member for Housing and Service Improvement having the benefits service within his portfolio. Since the election in May 2010 the Cabinet now consists of eight councillors and the new Cabinet Member for Strategic Housing and Regeneration has the benefits service within his portfolio. The Cabinet is held to account by the Resources Scrutiny Commission.
- 20 The Council employs 20,000 staff. It is managed by a chief executive, deputy chief executive and seven strategic directors. The net revenue budget for 2009/10 is £361.5 million.
- 21 The Council is a key member of the Bristol Partnership, the area's local strategic partnership of public services. This has adopted the 20:20 plan, a Sustainable Community Strategy for the area. The aims for the strategy are to reduce health and wealth inequality; raising the aspirations of our children, young people and families; making our prosperity sustainable; and a city of strong and safe communities. The Partnership has also entered into a Local Area Agreement (LAA) with central government which includes two targets related to people reliant on benefits. It aims to reduce the number of people claiming out of work benefits across the city and specifically living in the most deprived neighbourhoods.
- 22 The Council has a Corporate Plan for 2008/11, which is due to be refreshed later in 2010. Its priorities include 'making a difference' which looks to provide efficient and responsive services through improving access, developing its workforce and communicating better with local people and partners. Other aims also include tackling levels of affordable housing, skilling people and transport.
- 23 As part of the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) for 2009, Bristol City Council scored as 'performing well, exceeding minimum requirements'. It scored 2 out of 4 for its use of resources, and 3 out of 4 for managing performance.

The Council's benefits service

- 24 Housing Benefit (HB) and Council Tax Benefit (CTB) are national welfare benefits administered by the Council on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions (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.
- 25 From 1 April 2008, the Audit Commission became responsible for benefits inspections, following the transfer of powers from the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate.

- 26** 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.
- 27** 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 Bristol City Council, the reasons for commissioning the inspection were:
- poor historical performance in relation to performance indicators; and
 - lack of evidence to support improving accessibility to the Benefits service for customers.
- 28** The key objectives of this inspection were:
- to assess the effectiveness of Bristol's benefits service in meeting the needs of the vulnerable people it serves, and contributing to the Council's wider corporate objectives; and
 - to provide assurance to the DWP and other stakeholders regarding the quality of service provision.
- 29** The service in Bristol pays out around £200 million a year to:
- 43,286 people claiming CTB; and
 - 19,601 people claiming Rent Allowance of which 7,882 are tenants of Registered Social Housing and 11,719 are tenants of private landlords. The Council tenant HB caseload is 19,319.
- People claiming benefit rose 11.4 per cent from December 2008 to December 2009 due to the impact of the recession.
- Of the total caseload of 49,057 at March 2010, 17,767 people are of pension age and 31,290 are working age.
- 30** The service administers housing benefits, council tax benefit, second adult rebate and discretionary housing payments. It delivers all the back office processing functions, some customer facing services and manages the recovery of overpaid benefit. The Council's Integrated Customer Service team has provided frontline services since November 2009.

Report

- 31 The service is run in-house as part of the Strategic Housing Service within the Neighbourhoods Division. It has 181 staff. Eleven of these work within the Fraud Investigations team as part of the Council's Internal audit service located within the Resources Division. And 45 staff are Customer Services staff. The cost of running the service in 2009/10 was £7.8 million. Of this £4 million was funded by DWP, £600,000 was from an additional grant to help manage the impact of the recession, and the balance was met by the Council. The contribution the taxpayer in Bristol makes has reduced to £1.7 million for 2009/10.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

32 There are no explicit aims for the service in the Sustainable Community Strategy or Corporate Plan. However, the service is covered through two Corporate Plan aims. The first is 'our city: making a difference'. This aim sets out how the Council intends to prioritise providing 'efficient, responsive services'. It will deliver this priority by:

- improving the efficiency through commissioning;
- increasing customer and resident satisfaction with our services; improving access to our services;
- developing our workforce; and
- communicating better.

The second relevant aim is 'our city: ambitious together'. This aim prioritises 'increasing job opportunities in disadvantaged neighbourhoods', focusing on helping to reduce the number of residents claiming benefits.

33 The overall vision for the benefits service is expressed in the Service Development Plan 2009/12. This is:

- to deliver an excellent, secure, cost-effective benefits service to the people of Bristol by paying the right amount of benefit to the right person, at the right time.

34 The service aims are to:

- provide a service that is accessible to all;
- help to safeguard public funds from fraud and error;
- receive claims and promote the take up of benefit;
- assess Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit claims;
- administer appeals, complaints and enquiries;
- assess requests for Local Housing Allowance safeguard;
- reduce overpayments;
- consult with customers, partners and stakeholders on the aims, objectives and relative priorities;
- advertise and promote the service to encourage benefit 'take-up' levels;
- seek to modernise the service to help improve both the performance quality of the service provided.

How good is the service?

35 Service priorities for 2009/10 are to:

- improve performance;
- manage resources during the recession; and
- review and improve processes.

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

User and community focus

- 36 The service is developing a better understanding of customers and local needs. Its understanding of the local community is growing and it is beginning to use detailed demographic data to inform service planning. A customer satisfaction survey in January 2010 has given the service an up-to-date understanding of customer views which can be used in service planning. It intends to use the findings from the survey to carry out more research. However, at the moment the Council cannot be confident that service design meets diverse and complex needs in the best way. For example, results of its 2010 survey suggest that most customers prefer face-to-face or the telephone when contacting the service with only 3 per cent preferring email or online access. This is a significant challenge for the Council as its aim is to increase the number of online transactions.
- 37 Customer involvement in service design is limited. Consultation with customers and stakeholders has resulted in changes being made to some overpayment letters with the aim of making them clearer for customers. They have also been engaged in developing telephone claiming. Regular meetings take place with some stakeholders including landlords, but these meetings focus more on day-to-day issues than shaping the future of the service. Engaging customers and stakeholders is key in helping the Council deliver its aim to change the ways in which customers access the service. Having a clear understanding of the needs of customers allows the service to design its approach to address these needs.

Access

- 38** Telephone access to the service is unsatisfactory. Benefit telephone lines are open from 8.00am to 8.00pm. This offers greater opportunities for customers to contact the service and provides flexibility for customers who are unable to contact the service during normal office hours. But during 2009/10, nearly one in five (19 per cent) calls were abandoned. The service has only answered 66 per cent of calls within the Council's own 50-second target. The number of calls to the call centre has been increasing as has the time customers wait to get through. This is increasing the number of repeat calls and the number of customers visiting access points, especially Phoenix Court in the city centre. Waiting times on the telephone are increasing. In February 2010, customers waited just under two minutes for general enquiries but by early March this had risen to almost four minutes. In February, they were waiting about a minute and a half for new claims enquiries, but by early March this had risen to over five and a half minutes. Advice agencies and other partners consider that telephone access to the service is a frustration for customers and some stakeholders were unaware of arrangements in place to make it easier for them to contact the service.
- 39** Suitable space to complete a claim in private is poor. Customers can access service at seven Customer Service Points (CSPs), predominately within the areas of greatest need. But telephones for customers at the city centre CSP are in the middle of the customer access point and so are not private. Screens giving access to the Council website are just behind these telephones and customers are able to walk behind them. Announcements to customers queuing with other enquiries also make it difficult to hear. A lack of privacy in the CSPs may deter people from making a claim.
- 40** Access to leaflets and claim forms is limited. Claim forms are no longer routinely available to customers following the greater emphasis on telephone claims. Forms for claimants or landlords on housing and council tax benefits can be downloaded from the Council's website or staff will print a copy for a customer if asked. The service does not routinely produce printed leaflets explaining the benefits system, although a full range of information is available to download from the Council's website and can be printed by customers or staff when requested. Making information available to customers in various formats allows customers to choose their preferred way in which to access benefits information.
- 41** Some stakeholders find benefit letters difficult to understand. Customers and agencies such as the Citizens Advice Bureau and Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) report that customers they work with find entitlement letters and letters asking for more information too complex. In the most recent customer satisfaction survey 60 per cent of respondents reported finding the letters easy to understand. Clear and informative letters prevent the customer having to contact the service for more information and to report any errors.

How good is the service?

- 42 Opportunities to access the service in person are good. A good range of access points for customers are located across the city. The CSPs are open from 8.30am to 5.00pm with four of them open at 10.30am on Wednesdays to allow for staff training. Seventy-nine per cent of customers are seen within 15 minutes of arriving. CSP opening times are reducing with the Knowle and Bedminster offices now open only three days a week. This is part of the corporate approach to modernising access to services. Most access centres meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act except for the office in Knowle. The Council is considering if it should upgrade this office to meet these requirements or to open a new access point in the area. Offering customers good access to the service in different locations, especially where need is greatest, reduces the need for customers to travel.
- 43 Work with partners has improved access to the service. The Council has approved some RSLs to collect and verify claims for housing benefit at their offices. Clear guidance and controls are in place as well as suitable support for the RSL staff. This provides alternative access routes to the service and helps RSLs lessen delays in payments for its residents.
- 44 Access to information and benefits services electronically is good. Information on the website is clear and written in an easy to understand style. Information is tailored to meet the needs of different readers, such as a landlord or a claimant. A mixture of practical and more complex advice is available. Specific guides, such as 'A guide to Local Housing Allowance' can be downloaded to aid reading. Several online features are included. The online services section provides choices to: pay for it; apply for it; report it; and find out about. Online housing benefit repayment forms are available with clear instructions for users.

Customer care

- 45 Customer service standards are not challenging. They explain what customers should expect when using the service, but do not stretch the service to deliver performance in line with the best performing councils. Standards for updating claims within 14 days of receiving notification of a change and passing appeals to the tribunal service within 90 days do not compare well with the performance of some of the best performing councils nationally based on the latest published data. The standards also state that when a customer writes to the service, it will 'aim to get back to you as soon as possible'. This does not give any indication to the customer when they are likely to receive a response. Performance for the previous month against standards is reported on the Council's website.
- 46 Complaints are managed reasonably well. Responses to complaints are timely but the quality of responses is variable. Sometimes letters contain quite negative language, have too much technical content and the response to complaint is often unclear. However, other responses deal far more positively with the customer. Some letters use non-technical language, focus on answering the detail of the complaint and accept responsibility when appropriate. Providing clear and suitable responses to customer complaints lessens confusion and the likelihood of complaints escalating.

- 47 Customers receive a high standard of service from staff at CSPs and through the Customer Service Centre (CSC). Staff are knowledgeable and provide clear and detailed responses to queries. Customers are happy with the service they receive from staff. Customers feel staff tackle enquiries sensitively and positively. CSP staff write statements for customers when necessary checking their understanding before having it signed. Staff ensure customers know what the next steps will be and any information the customer needs to provide.

Diversity

- 48 Customers wait too long for decisions on Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) and it is unclear if people most in need are benefiting from it. Decisions are taking an average of 52 days. This significantly exceeds the service's own target of 14 days and action is being taken to improve this. The service does not publicise DHP well and so it cannot be confident that it is awarding DHP to people most in need. It does use all of this funding available to support vulnerable people. An extra £10,000 funding from within the Neighbourhoods division is added to its DHP budget to prevent homelessness within the city. Ensuring that DHP funding is reaching the most vulnerable helps prevent hardship and potential homelessness.
- 49 The service's approach to increasing take-up is under-developed with a lack of resourced action plans in place. Its Take-up Strategy 2009/12 contains some demographic data for the area as well as a forecast of where sections of the community are under claiming. This information informs the priority areas for take-up initiatives. For example, demographic data is beginning to be used to inform its take-up activity in three of the most deprived areas of the city but progress has been slow. The key areas identified are working age claimants for Housing Benefit and pension age customers under claiming Council Tax Benefit (CTB). The service does not systematically work with stakeholders, such as Council Tax to promote take-up of CTB.
- 50 Outcomes from recent take-up campaigns are limited. The service promoted recent legislative changes on child benefit payments by writing to families potentially entitled to benefit and advertising in schools. As a result an extra 108 families are now receiving benefit. But it is unable to quantify the outcomes achieved from a publicity campaign to encourage pensioner take-up following legislative changes. The service produced publicity material and worked with Bristol Older People's Forum to publish a newsletter article. Ensuring vulnerable people are aware of and claim the benefits they are entitled to means they do not suffer unnecessary hardship and extra income is brought into the local community.¹

¹ 'The Money Trail' published by the New Economics Foundation estimates that for every £1 increase in benefits paid through take up work, 77 pence is spent in the local economy.

How good is the service?

- 51 The service lacks a clear understanding of why customers are not providing evidence in support of claims. During 2008/09, customers did not supply all the evidence required in 13 per cent of claims received. In addition 31 per cent of claims received were unsuccessful. The service has not completed any analysis of these claims. To reduce the number of claims that are defective, staff are asked to telephone customers to gather evidence but is not clear if this is always happening. Without understanding the issues customers face in making claims the service cannot remove barriers to claiming and ensure vulnerable customers receive the income they should.
- 52 Some areas of the service have been slow to carry out equalities impact assessments. Assessments have only recently been completed in the processing and assessment part of the service which have been screened by corporate staff. Senior managers have yet to sign off the full assessment. Some weaknesses, such as the need to widen engagement, and more analysis of engagement and take-up exercises to ensure inequalities do not exist, have been identified but so far actions have not been taken to tackle these. However, the BFI Team has had assessments in place since December 2008 for both the Fraud Policy Statement and Prosecutions Policy. A further assessment of the risk scoring system used for fraud referrals was completed in 2009.
- 53 Waiting times for a home visit are increasing. The service currently has a limited resource available to complete home visits, and waiting times have increased from two to five days. It carries out home visits to help the most vulnerable people to complete claim forms using new technologies and collect the evidence in support of claims and change events. Staff assess the vulnerability of customers when deciding if a home visit is suitable. Making visits to those who need them within an acceptable timescale is important in ensuring vulnerable customers do not experience unnecessary delays in claims.
- 54 The service is not working effectively in partnership to deliver improved services to older people. It has a good relationship with the Pension Service. But it has not examined options for joint working with it and it is unclear how the service signposts customers to the Pension Service. Increasing the take-up of benefits by older people helps reduce the risk of hardship.
- 55 Access to translation and interpretation services is good. The service uses the 'Big Word' translation service to complete interviews with customers whose first language is not English. Shared headsets are available at CSP's immediately to access interpretation services. Customers are able to ask for correspondence in alternative formats, such as Braille and large print.
- 56 Innovative options are available for people with hearing difficulties. A videoconferencing link to a signing service is available at the Phoenix Court CSP which allows customers to have a three-way conversation with a benefits adviser, if they wish. The Council's website has some notable features. On the benefits service web-page a link to British Sign Language services provides several videos in sign language for users with hearing difficulties. Topics include attendance allowance, help with disability living allowance forms and claiming housing and council tax benefits.

- 57** The service works well with partners to prevent homelessness in the city. The service has 1.5 FTE benefit officers working within the Council's Housing Solutions team with costs for these staff shared. The arrangement works well. Housing staff are able to resolve complex claims quickly and efficiently. Customers who may become homeless are more likely to keep their homes and reduce the need for the Council to house them. However, it is unclear if the funding to continue this arrangement is secure. Vulnerability case conferences with benefits, housing and council tax staff and support workers work well. In a recent case a home visit by a visiting benefit officer helped a customer claim benefits when previously they had been unwilling to fill in a claim form on their own. Ensuring vulnerable customers have access to suitable advice and support can prevent customers losing their home and lessen the financial burden on local taxpayers of temporary accommodation.
- 58** The Council has worked well to manage the negative impact of the recession on its most vulnerable communities. As part of the budget for 2009/10 an additional £310,000 of Local Authority Business Growth Incentive (LAGBI) funding provided 15 additional staff to improve HB claims processing. In addition the service is co-ordinating housing and council tax benefits advice with Jobcentre Plus to offer advice to customers who may be suffering redundancy. The service has visited and provided advice to staff at some businesses that are making employees redundant. These included large companies where members of staff provided guidance and support for those who may need to claim benefits soon. Ensuring residents clearly understand the benefits available to them helps reduce the impact of redundancy on individuals and families.
- 59** The Council systematically assesses the ability of individuals to pay when recovering overpayments. It will accept variable payment plans that enable customers to repay overpayments at a level that will not cause them hardship. Customers complete an income and expenditure form so suitable payment arrangements can be made and where fitting will be signposted to debt counselling support.
- 60** Good arrangements help to ensure that customers who are suspected of having committed fraud understand their rights. Leaflets and guidance are available to customers before and after interviews under caution. The service considers the personal circumstances of those cases considered for prosecution to ensure vulnerable people are not disadvantaged. Circumstances include the age, mental and physical state, family circumstances, and discrimination of an ethnic, political or religious nature. Customers' rights are respected and they are helped to understand the potential implications.

Service outcomes

- 61** Customers wait too long for a decision on their benefit claim. During 2009/10, the service has taken an average of 36 days to process claims and this is no improvement on the previous year. The number of people claiming benefit rose by 11.4 per cent between December 2008 and December 2009 and this has put pressure on the services and its ability to process claims faster. Since setting up the telephone claiming process, processing times have improved slightly to 32 days in February 2010. While this is a slight improvement, customers are still facing long delays that will lead to rent arrears and potential evictions.
- 62** Performance in processing changes in circumstances is slow, leading to delays in customers receiving the correct benefit. Overall in 2009/10, the service processed changes in circumstances in 13.6 days. But in December 2009 changes took 21 days, in January 2010 - 24 days and in February 2010 changes averaged 27 days. Delays in processing changes in circumstances mean that customers are not getting the right benefit at the right time. This acts as a disincentive to report changes that may affect the level benefit they receive, and can lead to over or under payments of benefits.
- 63** Performance against the 'Right time'¹ indicator NI 181 is below average. Using the latest comparative information nationally, the best performing councils processed new claims and change events in 14 days during April to June 2009 and July to September 2009. The service achieved 15 days and 21 days for the same periods. For all of 2009/10 (to February 2010) the Council has reported that it is processing new claims and change events in an average of 17.2 days. Councils are responsible for setting their own targets, and Bristol has set itself an unchallenging one of 20 days.
- 64** The Council's approach to ensuring accuracy of its processing is weak. The standard accuracy checking procedure requires limited checking, with a minimum of 85 checks for each assessor a year (an average of seven a month). Because few resources are available to complete accuracy checking this target has reduced in 2009/10 to 60 checks for the year for most staff. Targeted checks of some areas, such as changes in legislation and extra checks on individuals can be asked for if resources allow. The procedure does not make it clear if these targeted checks are in addition to the minimum checking levels. Errors and issues identified in other ways do not routinely inform training or target checking at areas of risk. For example, 47 per cent of cases passed to the escalations team by customer services are processing errors and significant numbers of appeals result in recalculations because of an error. Without a systematic analysis of the information available the service does not have a clear understanding of the accuracy of its processing.

¹ Measures the average processing times for new claims and change events.

- 65 Too long is taken to decide requests for reviews or appeals on its decisions. The average time taken to deal with a request for a review is 90 days. Plans are now in place to tackle this. Appeals cases for submission to the Tribunal Service are taking an average of 185 days. Since September 2009 additional staff have been assigned to deal with these areas of work. This has led to a reduction in the number of reviews awaiting decisions but the number of appeals awaiting submission has increased. Delays in dealing with requests for reviews and appeals results in long periods of uncertainty and potentially severe financial hardship for claimants, so having a significant impact on their lives.
- 66 Data matches identified through the Housing Benefit Matching Service are not managed effectively. The Council is failing to process and return data matches quickly. Following a decision by the service in 2008/09 to no longer prioritise these matches a significant backlog of more than 800 cases built up. Although most have now been processed a small number remain outstanding.
- 67 Customers are not highly satisfied with the service. In the customer satisfaction survey completed in January 2010, 73 per cent of respondents stated they were either very satisfied or satisfied with overall service with 13 per cent stating they were unsatisfied or very unsatisfied. This is an increase in levels of satisfaction with the service from the previous survey completed in 2006/07 when 62 per cent of respondents were satisfied with the service. Sixty-one per cent of customers find the letters the service sends easy to understand and 56 per cent felt the time taken to process claims was good or very good. The service deals with the most vulnerable people living in the city on issues which directly affect the quality of their lives. Ensuring customers are well satisfied with the quality of the service is essential to ensuring the Council is meeting their needs.
- 68 Performance against the service's own standards is inconsistent. There are six standards in place and the service is meeting three of them. These include changes of circumstance processed changes within 14 days, decisions on new claims within seven days of receiving all the documents needed and customers seen within 15 minutes at a CSP. Performance is significantly below the Council's standards for calls answered within 50 seconds, accuracy levels and the submission of appeals to the Tribunal Service.
- 69 There are more opportunities for customers to claim benefit. In December 2009 the service introduced telephone claims. Customers call the service and when they get through the operator calls them back to complete the claim and saves the customer the cost of a long call. At the end of the call customers are asked for evidence to support their claim. During March 2010 customers who made a telephone claim had it processed in under 17 days. This is significantly faster than claims made through other routes. Without improving processing times for customers who are unable or choose not use the Council's telephone claim service there is the danger of a two-tier service and vulnerable customers being disadvantaged.

How good is the service?

- 70** The service is not effectively deterring fraud and error within its caseload. It does not routinely complete risk reviews or visits to identify unreported changes or cases at risk of receiving the wrong benefit. The staff previously undertaking this work have been reassigned to deal with increased workloads. The service highlights predictable changes but is not always tackling these in a timely fashion. By not identifying unreported changes the service fails to prevent overpayments of benefit.
- 71** Performance in delivering sanctions and prosecutions is poor. It is achieving fraud sanctions in line with its own targets. But this performance is below the levels achieved historically by better performing councils and was among the lowest when compared with its preferred core cities benchmarking group. During 2009/10, the service completed 180 formal sanctions against its target of 165. Although, when comparing the number of sanctions achieved by each investigator the Council performs well in comparison to the other core cities. During 2009/10, £1.32 million in overpaid benefits (including DWP benefits) has been raised because of fraud investigations. Investigations have also prevented housing and council tax benefits to the value of £9,497 a week being paid. Without a considered and proportionate response to the potential threat from fraud, the Council cannot have assurance that it is protecting taxpayers' money from fraudsters.
- 72** The Council has robust and effective prosecution policies in place. The Council's benefits policy statement clearly sets out its commitment to preventing and detecting fraud. The statement outlines the use of formal sanctions for those caught and to publish suitable cases to send a clear message to residents that fraud will not be tolerated. The service works well in partnership with other agencies to tackle fraud. Work includes joint investigations with the local Police and DWP.
- 73** The Fraud team effectively promotes its antifraud message. The service publicises successful prosecutions and publicises its fraud hotline using a wide range of publications and methods, these include press releases following committee reports, radio interviews and adverts in housing magazines, local papers and TV interviews.
- 74** The Council actively promotes fraud awareness. During 2008/09 the service delivered four fraud awareness sessions and an online training package and a promotional video was available. The training is available to any staff dealing with benefits customers. During the year almost 300 staff including customer services staff, local tax staff, RSL and the education welfare team attended sessions. Advertising in internal and external publications including joint activities with neighbouring authorities is effectively used to deter fraud and promoting the benefit fraud hotline.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 75** The service is not delivering value for money. The percentage of costs of the service born by local taxpayers is slightly better than the national average. In 2007/08 the percentage of service costs funded by local residents was 36.9 per cent against a national average of 36.1 per cent. This increased slightly in 2008/09 when the percentage funded by local residents increased to 38.5 per cent against a national average of 45 per cent. The cost of the benefit service per head of the population is increasing year-on-year. The Audit Commission's value for money profile shows the cost per head of population of the service has increased from £16.96 per head in 2005/06 to £17.55 in 2008/09. These costs are fourth highest of the Council's 16 nearest statistical neighbours. But the Council's own benchmarking shows that it is the lowest cost service when compared with the other core cities. However, increased costs have not resulted in sustained improvements in the service. Performance in processing new claims, change events and appeals remains poor.
- 76** Investment in the service is not evaluated. It cannot measure the improvements achieved from £310,000 LAGBI funding in 2009/10. Equally the service is unable to quantify the outcomes achieved from the extra funding provided by the DWP to help councils to cope with the increasing demands of the recession. The service experienced an 11.4 per cent increase in caseload from December 2008 to December 2009. Current capacity within the service sets overpayment collection targets and not levels of collectable debt. The service has not evaluated the benefits of investing more staff in this area to increase collection and reduce debts going unpaid. Without a clear understanding of the value of investing in the service it cannot evaluate the success of its improvement projects.
- 77** Overpayment collection is poor. Although the service is exceeding its own collection targets, outstanding debt continues to rise. During 2009/10, the service has collected £1.57 million against its target of £1.47 million. Total debt at invoice stage now stands at £7.4 million and £3.8 million is in recovery from customer's current benefit. The service recognises that debt is more difficult to recover the longer it is outstanding. But action is not currently being taken on a significant number of debts. Increasing the recovery of debt reduces the financial burden on local taxpayers.
- 78** Debt is not managed effectively. The service does not routinely assess its outstanding debt and write off uncollectable debt. The last write off exercise was four years ago and a significant number of debts are uncollectable but remain outstanding.
- 79** Appropriate methods are used to recover overpayments. The service collects overpayments through current benefit payments, invoices and arrangements, county court judgements, blameless tenant recovery and by referral to debt-collection agencies. However, it has not recently tested the effectiveness of its debt-collection agency to ensure it is delivering value for money and delivering an effective level of performance. The service is trialling an online court referral package to improve the speed cases reach court and deliver savings on legal costs.

How good is the service?

- 80** Powers are used effectively to recover fraudulently gained overpayments. The Fraud team has been using the Proceeds of Crime Act (POCA) to recover debts and costs. Although, initially completed by Police investigators the service has now appointed its own financial investigator. During 2008/09, POCA awards totalled £55,910. Further payments of over £60,000 are due for payment shortly. By using all the powers available to it the service is ensuring that fraudsters do not profit from their crimes.
- 81** Benchmarking is not routinely used to improve the service to customers. The Council contributes to several benchmarking groups to compare costs and performance against other authorities. Comparisons include the full range of benefits performance measures as well as staff costs, subsidy, absence and overall service costs, but learning from this is not used to deliver improved outcomes. Some managers within the service have used the benchmarking clubs to make informal contact with other councils to discuss performance and service improvements.
- 82** Successful action has minimised Local Authority (LA) error overpayments. Councils receive a subsidy from the DWP for most of the benefit they pay out, providing that it was paid in accordance with the benefit regulations. However, if the total amount of benefit overpaid due to LA error is above a fixed amount, the Council will receive either a lower rate of subsidy, or no subsidy at all on the amount it has overpaid. The service exceeded the DWP upper threshold for LA error overpayments in 2007/08 resulting in it being ineligible to claim subsidy of £845,000. The service took effective steps to minimise LA error overpayments and in 2008/09 was below the lower threshold allowing it to claim the maximum subsidy in this area. During the current year the service has continued to reduce the levels of LA error and is on course to receive full subsidy again.
- 83** Value for money has improved through improvements to the service's scanning and indexing contract. It has saved £120,000 a year. The service has reduced the number of documents handled by its offsite supplier and processing times are faster from an average of five days to less than one day. This reduces the time taken for documents to be available to frontline staff for processing. Plans are in place to move the remaining part of this service in-house and to keep the supplier on a 'call-off' arrangement to provide resilience.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

84 The Council lacks a track record of significantly improving its benefits service for customers. Historically people have waited too long for their claim to be dealt with. The last nationally available comparative performance information on the time taken to process new claims and changes in circumstances is from 2007/08. This information shows that nationally, on average people waited 25 days to have their new claim processed and nine days to have a change in their circumstances processed. From the table below it is clear that in 2007/08 people claiming housing benefit in Bristol were receiving a much poorer service than the national average. In Bristol in 2007/08 people waited over 30 days to have a new claim processed and almost 24 days to have a change of circumstances processed. Since then less time has been taken to process change events but a worse service has been delivered for processing new claims.

Table 1 Performance Indicators

Track record of improvement

Local performance indicator	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10 (February 2010)
Average time taken to process new claims (in days)	32	30.1	35	36
Average time take to process changes in circumstances (in days)	23.7	23.7	14	14
Fraud sanctions per 1,000 caseload	3.26	3.82	3.62	n/a
Accuracy (percentage correct)	98.4%	99.2%	97%	95.2%

Source: Audit Commission and Bristol City Council

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 85** Some people still wait too long for their claim to be processed. Table 1 shows the Council's own performance over the last four years for processing new claims and changes in circumstances. During 2009/10 the number of enquiries and claims increased by 11.4 per cent. This may have contributed to the speed of processing new claims not improving but the time taken to process changes in circumstances has improved. The latest available comparative national data from NI 181 - the Right Time indicator - for the first six months of 2009/10 shows that overall the service's performance was still below the national average. Its most recent performance information is slightly more positive showing improvement in processing new claims. In February 2010 data shows that processing times for new claims fell to 32.4 days in that month. As take up of the new telephone claiming system increases, faster processing times are being secured. Data from May indicates that the improvement is continuing from a low base.
- 86** There is no overall improvement in the accuracy of processing claims. In 2007/08 the national average was 98.6 per cent of claims were processed accurately, Bristol performed slightly better than this average. The best performers achieving almost 100 per cent. The table above shows the Council's worsening performance in ensuring that claims are processed accurately. Although during 2009/10 the service has recruited a number of trainees who have taken time to consolidate their training. This is important to reduce the number of local authority error overpayments and to minimise the risk of hardship to vulnerable people.
- 87** There is no track record of reducing the debt owed to the Council or collecting overpayments. There is no routine assessment of outstanding debt and process to write off uncollectable debt. The outstanding debt continues to rise. During 2009/10 the service has collected £1.57 million against its target of £1.47 million of sundry debts. But total debt at invoice stage now stands at £7.4 million and £3.8 million is in recovery from customer's current benefit. As a result the Council is not taking enough action to reduce the financial burden on local taxpayers.
- 88** Progress in reducing overpayments as a result of delay or error (LA error) has improved. In 2007/08, the Council exceeded the DWP upper threshold for LA error overpayments resulting in the service being ineligible to claim subsidy of about £845,000. However, effective action was taken to tackle this and in 2008/09 the level of LA error was below the lower threshold allowing the Council to claim maximum subsidy increasing the Council's income and avoiding the loss in the previous year. During 2009/10 the service has continued to reduce the levels of LA error and is on course to receive full subsidy.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 89** The Council recognises the need for change and improvement and is investing in this. In recent months it carried out a significant review of the service that has resulted in changes in working practices. Through internal and external challenge the first phase of a Business Processing Review in late 2009 examined the different ways the service worked to deal with benefit claims and changes of circumstances. It prioritised improving new claims processing times and introduced telephone claiming early in 2010, aimed at improving efficiency and customers' experiences of the service. This approach needs time to embed but is showing the early indications of faster processing times and customers now have better access to making claims.
- 90** Commitment is strong to tackling weaknesses. Previously there was an insufficient focus on improving the service customers receive through a lack of clear leadership. Little was done to develop a performance culture within the service. This is changing. Service directors and managers are developing a more outward facing service. Partners acknowledge and welcome this. The service is now aware of the greater and sustained improvement that is needed in other aspects of the service. Through a second phase of the Business Processing Review it has plans to tackle overpayment collection and to change the way reviews of claims are processed. The Council is ambitious for improving the service which is to play a key role in the corporate approach to business transformation and modernising access to services. There are opportunities to engage all staff more in contributing to developing the service's contribution. But a stronger performance culture and desire to deliver improved outcomes is developing.
- 91** Learning is driving some improvement. The service uses learning from other Councils and external challenge well and actively seeks out better performance from which it can learn. Staff visit other councils and as a result changes have been made to working practices, such as making changes to the document management system to allow greater automation and free up staff time. However there is little learning from local intelligence collected through its complaints monitoring. Customer data is not yet driving improvement.
- 92** The review of staff performance is improving with a greater emphasis on staff development. Managers and team leaders having access to better and more detailed information. Monthly one-to-one discussions between managers and staff are carried out and fed into the annual Performance Management Development Scheme review. Performance is reviewed against the previous year's objectives with new objectives set and training and development needs assessed.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 93** There is no overall sense of strategic direction for the service. Its vision has been in place for some time but is not specific to meeting the needs of the diverse vulnerable communities in Bristol or on how the service contributes to local and corporate objectives. The Council is clear about the service's role in modernising access to services and also its own role in supporting vulnerable communities with its partners. But it has yet to define and agree the benefits service's role in this, so transforming it fully into a service focused on customers' needs and views. Involving key partners, customers and local residents in discussions on this is not planned. Without a clear direction it is difficult for the service to prioritise its efforts to securing improvements and supporting the most vulnerable communities in the area.
- 94** The Council's improvement plans for the service have not been comprehensive or based on outcome focused aims. The Service Delivery Plan 2009/12 did not set out clear actions which were needed to achieve better outcomes. Few measurable targets existed to monitor progress. The plan focused too much on improving processes without detailing the outcomes sought, and on vague actions which were not supported by outcome or value for money focused targets. There has been little evaluation of progress in the service's contribution to wider local, regional and national priorities and only some engagement with key stakeholders, such as from the advice sector, customer focus groups and RSLs, in its development. However, the Council is taking the opportunity to develop a new Service Delivery Plan for 2010/11 incorporating the initial findings of this inspection and so tackle weaknesses.
- 95** Team action plans are also under-developed. Their content is basic, describing routine actions and activities rather than focusing on prioritised areas for improvement, with specific deliverable outcomes, milestones and measurable targets. Staff have had some engagement in their development. In addition, good work was carried out last year to get staff to identify potential priorities for the service to tackle weaknesses through staff away-days but the outcomes from this have not yet been followed up. Without strong service planning setting out responsibilities, targets, timescales and resources, it is difficult for the service to manage improvement well.
- 96** Target setting is weak and not linked to the performance achieved by better performing councils. Traditionally some staff have had limited engagement in setting improvement targets, although they will have a key role in delivering them. Financial targets for the collection of overpayments are set outside the service and those for fraud are not based on a clear understanding of need. There is no involvement of customers or partners in target setting. This limits the ability of the service to ensure its targets are stretching and achievable.
- 97** Councillors have a limited role in driving improvement. The Council does not make full use of its scrutiny functions to design improvement plans for the service. The Resources Scrutiny Commission routinely reviews performance on the accuracy and speed of processing. Poor performance is discussed but it is unclear what action is taken as a result. Councillors do not receive robust analysis of initiatives to improve take-up or on the service's contribution to managing the negative impacts of the recession on its most vulnerable residents. As a result they have insufficient understanding of service quality or the value for money being delivered. This limits the challenge to the service on how effectively it contributes to local priorities and hinders a clear sense of strategic direction for the service.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 98** Performance monitoring has been focused too narrowly, restricting the service's ability to target improvement action effectively. The scope of routine monitoring and reporting to Councillors covers only some aspects of the service's work, mainly on processing claims. Performance against customer standards is not included and neither is performance on take-up and the level and recovery of overpayments. Accuracy of processing is also not monitored rigorously. However, some monitoring arrangements are improving. A new detailed monthly performance pack, introduced in February, assesses the service's performance in all areas of its activity and service managers are now using this to review performance and plan change. But currently the Council does not have a complete view of the performance and its contribution to priorities.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 99** The Council is taking positive steps to improve the service over the longer term and build its capacity. It is modernising how local people access Council services. This is through its Customer Service Centre (CSC) offering better telephone access, its Customer Service Points (CSPs) located across the city and through greater use of digital technology. As part of its Customer Excellence Programme the Council included the service as one of the early projects. This provided greater telephone access for customers making a benefit enquiry or claim through the CSC, and face to face access to the service at the CSPs. The Council's overall aim is to gradually move most customers from face-to-face contact to using the telephone or other forms of self service. This could offer more efficient services for those who are able to make use of the telephone or new technologies and the service has carried out its own review of this. The Council recognise that this is not an adequate solution to meeting the often complex and diverse needs of many customers claiming benefit. There is more to do to involve partners and local people in designing an appropriate balance of options.
- 100** Investment in significant change in the service has secured service improvements and contributions to efficiency savings. The recent office relocation from many different locations across the city to Somerfield House to the south of the city centre will deliver £1.2 million savings in 2011/12, halving accommodation costs. The service is now located in the same building as local taxation services and the CSC, leading to good links and greater joint working. At the same time it has implemented smarter working. This has led to a 40 per cent reduction in office space through desk sharing, remote and mobile working. Efficiency savings of £250,000 have been identified for 2010/11. The Council can demonstrate its ability to reduce costs and improve opportunities for joint working.
- 101** Managers and staff have responded positively to the need for change and are knowledgeable and capable. In recent months the service has dealt with major change. It completed a major office relocation to time and on budget while also introducing new ways of working. There is work to do to repair reduced staff morale linked to the office relocation and changing work practices. Having an able workforce means the service is better placed to deliver improved outcomes.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 102** Workforce planning in some areas is underdeveloped. There has been some assessment of staffing levels and skills needed to deliver the service but to date this has not delivered the required outcomes. The frontline capacity of the service has been enhanced to allow more initial enquiries to be dealt with through the CSC and the CSPs. Additional funding from the Department of Work and Pensions has been added to the service's budget to pay for extra staff to deal with the increased demand for services linked to the impact of the recession. The service coped with the 11.4 per cent increase in new claims (between December 2008 and December 2009) and processing times have begun to improve. However, funding for extra staff is very short-term and ends soon, and the service has a large backlog of outstanding work which has yet to be quantified or prioritised. The capacity to deliver home visits to benefits claimants is very limited and the impact on other work from providing additional resources for this is unknown. It is unclear whether the service can sustain the improvements which have started to be realised and what the pace of future improvement will be.
- 103** Opportunities to identify training and development needs are being missed. At present different strands of training and coaching are delivered and are based on an analysis of individuals and business needs. But learning from that and from all reviews of performance is not brought together to plan future training programmes. An extensive programme of induction training for new staff has been delivered to CSC and CSP staff who now deal with the initial enquiries customers make. Good fraud training is provided and there are dedicated good quality facilities available. Most staff are satisfied with the training they receive but there is more to do to improve how training is evaluated. Staff with appropriate skills and knowledge are more confident to help deliver service improvements.
- 104** The Council is not maximising the use of new technologies to secure efficiencies. Changes to the way customers' documents are scanned has led to faster turn round times and reduced costs. Most of this work is now carried out in-house rather than through an external contract. New hand-held computers enable staff carrying out benefits home visits to submit claims immediately. However, systems are not used to provide regular housekeeping reports on outstanding work and there is more to do to streamline management reports. Key stakeholders are not involved when commissioning ICT developments to explore potential take-up and cost benefit analysis. Once a contract has been let there is no systematic approach to testing cost and quality.

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