

Benefits

Service

Inspection

Daventry District 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 The benefits service (the service) at Daventry is 'fair' and has 'promising' prospects for improvement.
- 2 The service is beginning to listen to local people and has made positive changes to improve services to meet customer needs. Recent surveys show that customers are satisfied with the service and the Council checks the standard of service it gives in a number of ways including the use of mystery shoppers.
- 3 Outcomes for customers are mostly positive. People who make a claim for benefit have it dealt with in a reasonable time, and the time taken to deal with changes to their claim is good. Also, most people who challenge a decision have it looked at again in good time. However, accuracy of assessments is below the service target, and performance on recovering taxpayers' money from people who have been overpaid is poor.
- 4 Access to the service is good. People who visit the Council are dealt with quickly as are those who telephone or email. A One Stop Shop in Daventry and outreach offices in local information centres offer access across the district, including some which extend their opening outside normal office hours. By working with local landlords and welfare advice groups the service has been able to offer more opportunities for customers wanting to get help and advice.
- 5 Customer service is good. Corporate Customer Services has been awarded the government's Customer Service Excellence standard. This is a recognition of the friendly and professional manner in which frontline staff deal with customers. There is positive feedback from customers of the service. Staff work with partners, such as landlords and advice workers, and other services to help and support customers. Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs)¹ are used well to help those who are most vulnerable, such as people threatened with homelessness, but support is not targeted as effectively as it could be.
- 6 There is a positive approach to improving benefit take-up but this is still developing. The service is well publicised and there have been several take-up initiatives and events. However, the success of these initiatives is not known because they are not systematically evaluated. A more targeted approach is developing with the use of 'Mosaic' demographic profiling data which helps the Council to focus on groups of vulnerable people who could benefit from the service. However, partnership working locally with other agencies is under developed which means that the service may be missing opportunities to ensure vulnerable people have access to support other than housing benefit.

¹ Discretionary Housing Payments are payments made at the discretion of the Council, subject to an annual cash limit set by central government, in cases where the Council considers that additional help with housing costs is needed by vulnerable customers.

Summary

- 7 The standard of written information for customers is inconsistent. The benefit application form is designed to help the customer complete it. There is a good range of information leaflets that are clear and easy to read. Many are also available in other languages. However, some customers find the benefit award letters complex and confusing. Service standards in place are adequately publicised. While they give customers an insight into what service they can expect, some lack clarity and it would be difficult for a customer to understand exactly what service they can expect.
- 8 The service provides overall good value for money to local taxpayers. It is maximising the money it gets through government subsidy¹. The Council has looked at the way it delivers the service to produce savings in areas such as management and ICT costs. It also has effective arrangements in place for tackling benefit fraud, which is helping to keep the amount of overpaid benefit down. Although the cost of counter-fraud work is high compared to other councils, the service is aware of this and has already undertaken taken steps to identify ways of reducing costs. It has also started to focus on improving the management of overpayment recovery.
- 9 Leadership of the service is strong and is helping to drive improvements. Officers and councillors have a clear view of what needs to be done to improve the service. There has been investment in a One Stop Shop and there is continuing investment in ICT to provide better internet access for customers. Difficult decisions have been made to deliver a restructured front and back office service, and sound corporate systems are in place to support and monitor service improvement. The Council has an open approach to look at different options for delivery of its services, but progress in considering shared service options with potential partners has been slow. Managers are supported by committed and motivated staff who have benefited from training and development.
- 10 The service has a good track record of delivering improvements over the past three years. It is achieving most of its targets. Improvements in access and service delivery have been recognised and welcomed by partners¹¹, customers and staff. There are some good plans in place to improve service to all the Council's customers. In particular, a new website is being developed which will make it easier to find information about the service in localities within the district. However, it is not always fully clear from the Council's plans when customers will see improvements or what the measureable benefits will be for customers.

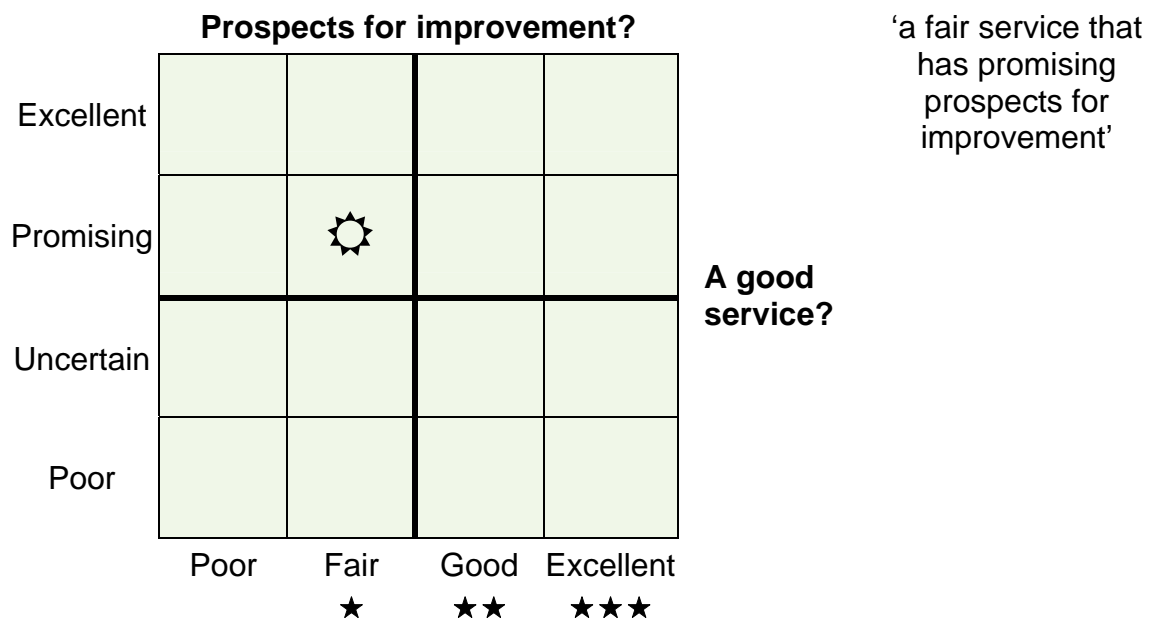
¹ Councils receive subsidy from DWP for most of the benefit expenditure they incur providing they comply with regulations. However, in areas of expenditure where authorities have most scope to monitor and control costs, lower rates apply. The system for claiming this money is the subsidy claim form. This claim form has to be certified by external auditors to ensure it has been completed correctly and that only eligible expenditure is included.

¹¹ Service partners include The Pension Service, Citizen Advice (CAB) Bureau, Jobcentre Plus and the Housing Options Team

Scoring the service

- 11 We have assessed Daventry District Council as providing a 'fair' one-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

- 12 The service is a fair, one-star service because:

- it listens and responds to the needs of customers;
- there are good relationships with local landlords, voluntary organisations and advice workers which helps customers obtain benefits more easily;
- it has staff across the Council that work well together to provide a seamless service to customers;
- staff are delivering good customer care;
- there is good access to the service through a One Stop Shop, outreach offices in local libraries and a prompt telephone service;
- forms are designed with the needs of customers in mind and information leaflets are clear and easy to understand;
- it deals with new claims and changes in circumstance promptly;

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

- it takes benefit fraud seriously and has an effective counter-fraud service with a good rate of successful prosecutions;
- there are high levels of satisfaction from customers; and
- it provides reasonable value for money for local taxpayers.

However, there are some weaknesses including:

- poor performance on the recovery of overpaid benefit which means taxpayers' money is being lost;
- benefit take-up that is not adequately addressed because there is no clear understanding of why people do not claim benefits or how successful its take-up initiatives are;
- some customer standards that are not designed to help customers understand what level of service they can expect;
- DHPs that are not targeted to provide help where it is most needed; and
- too many errors in benefit calculations.

13 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- leadership for the service is strong, senior officers and councillors have a clear view of what needs to be done to improve the service;
- the Council's strategic framework for delivering improvement is well developed and there is a good performance management framework in place;
- there is a well resourced plan to improve the service, in particular access through the internet;
- it has a good track record of improvements over the last three years and improvements are recognised by partners and customers;
- difficult decisions are being made to deliver improvements, such as the restructure of the revenues and benefits teams;
- there is ongoing investment in ICT to deliver service improvements; and
- staff motivation and morale is good and investment in training and development is approached in a structured way.

However:

- there is slow progress in looking at alternative ways of delivering the service, in particular sharing back office functions with other councils;
- service plans do not always focus on improvements for customers;
- relationships at a local level have not been fully developed with partner government agencies; and
- initiatives, such as those aimed at improving benefit take-up, are not systematically evaluated.

Recommendations

- 14 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 Deliver quicker and more accurate payments to customers by:

- being more consistent in the support given to customers who must provide extra information so it is received quickly;
- improving the time taken to deal with new claims to that of the best Council's the service benchmarks with;
- evaluating the outcomes from cases reviewed to ensure the focus of reviews is on cases that present the greatest risk;
- improving the accuracy of work processed; and
- ensuring outcomes from checking and audit lead to a review of practices and training for staff.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- new customers will receive their benefit quickly and lessen the risk of financial hardship;
- benefit will be paid correctly and errors will be minimised; and
- staff training will focus where it matters to ensure customers get the right benefit.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low 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 one and 5 per cent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

Recommendations

Recommendation

R2 Improve the customer focus and delivery of the service by:

- developing improvement plans that have clear outcomes for customers;
- reviewing service standards through consultation with partners, customers and councillors to make sure that they closely reflect the needs of customers;
- monitoring performance against service standards and frequently report the results to senior managers and councillors and then publicising the results to customers;
- working more closely with local partners, such as Jobcentre Plus, the Pension service and welfare advice agencies, to develop joint initiatives for improving access for customers; and
- targeting support through DHPs to those who are most in need.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- to ensure improvements are what customers want and need;
- to clarify customer expectations of what service levels are provided; and
- to provide more effective service delivery for the customer and Council.

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

Recommendation

R3 The Council should strengthen its performance management arrangements for the service by:

- improving the way it monitors and manages overpayments;
- systematically evaluating the outcomes from benefit take-up initiatives and developing an understanding why people do and do not claim benefits;
- using demographic data more extensively to inform both the options available for customers to access the service and benefit take-up initiatives;
- ensuring its plans are focused on improvements for customers; and
- making sure all of its targets for the service are challenging but achievable.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a reduction in the level of overpayments;
- customers that are hard to reach or who have specific needs will know that their requirements are considered and met;
- take-up activities will be more focused and have greater success of increasing income levels in the poorest parts of the community; and
- improvement plans that are focused on the benefits for customers that have clear targets aimed to deliver improvement.

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

Recommendation

R4 Improve value for money for taxpayers by:

- improving the management and control of overpayment recovery;
- adopting a firm approach to recovering overpaid benefit from debtors who are able to pay; and
- making progress with considerations of alternative ways of delivering the service, such as greater joint working or shared services.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased income for the Council; and
- a reduction in costs to local taxpayers.

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

Report

Context

The locality

- 15 Daventry is a district council in Northamptonshire in the East Midlands. It is a fairly large rural district covering an area of 257 square miles in the south-west of Northamptonshire. The area is home to 32,500 households across the district's 23 parishes. The major centre is the town of Daventry, which has 10,500 households. To address the need for affordable housing within the next five years the district will see an extra 10,000 houses being built, 35 per cent of which will be for social housing.
- 16 At 79,700 people the district has one of the smallest populations in the county - after Corby it has the second smallest population - most of whom live among the district's 78 villages. Predictions are that the population will grow twice as fast as other areas. There are more young people in Daventry compared to most other places and most people are of white British origin. However, according to 2007 estimated statistics, the BME population has doubled since the 2001 Census.
- 17 The economy of Daventry is largely business services (which includes estate agents, rental, legal and accounting services) accounting for 33 per cent of all businesses, with the wholesale and retail trade account for 19 per cent of all businesses. There are a few areas that have been recognised as relatively deprived locally and nationally, and have been a focus of partnership and agency activity.
- 18 The district is in the 25 per cent least deprived areas in the country and is ranked 292 out of 354 where 1 is the most deprived. About 15 per cent of households in the district receive a combination of housing and council tax benefit. Based on February 2009 data, around 7.8 per cent (3,880 people) of the local population are in receipt of out of work benefits. The regional average is 12.6 per cent.
- 19 The Place Survey 2008/09 indicates that 83 per cent of residents are generally satisfied with the local area (NI 5), placing Daventry above average nationally. The issues they see as in most need of improvement include activities for teenagers and cultural facilities. At 80 per cent, the number of residents that believe people from different backgrounds get on well together in their local area (NI 1) is higher than the national average. Also 64 per cent feel they belong to their neighbourhood (NI 2), placing Daventry well above average nationally.
- 20 Crime levels are comparatively low, but some types of crime are on the increase such as burglary and acts of serious violence.
- 21 The average house price in Daventry in 2008 was £238,871 and had been increasing since 2004. House prices are consistently slightly higher than the national average. The number of vacant dwellings in the area is relatively low and decreasing. The number of homeless households for each 1,000 households has decreased slightly and is below average.

- 22 A higher than average proportion of residents are economically active in Daventry, and earnings are considerably higher than regional and national average. As at April 2010 the number of Job Seekers Allowance claimants was lower than the regional and national average.
- 23 The proportion of pupils in Daventry achieving five or more GCSE grades A*-C is higher than the county average, and the district has the highest percentage achieving any passes.
- 24 The health profile for Daventry (2009) shows people in the area are generally healthier than the England average. However, Daventry is ranked significantly worse than average for smoking in pregnancy, breastfeeding initiation, physically active children, and road injuries and deaths.

The Council

- 25 Daventry District Council has 38 elected councillors and the Conservatives are in charge. Local election results 2009 were as follows.

Table 1 Local election results 2009

Political party	Number of councillors
Conservative	35
Labour	1
Liberal Democrat	2
Green	0
Others	0

- 26 In 2008, the Council replaced the Head of Paid Service with a Managing Director, a position held by the corporate executive directors on a 12 monthly rotating basis.
- 27 The Council does not have its own housing stock. In November 2007 Daventry & District Housing Association (DDH) was formed after tenants voted to transfer their homes to a new housing association.

The Council's Benefits Service

- 28 Both housing benefit and council tax benefit 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 the Council has a responsibility to pay the right benefit to the right person at the right time.
- 29 The service is managed within the Council's Finance Directorate and is the responsibility of the Corporate Manager for Finance. It employs 16 full-time equivalent staff.

Report

- 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 Daventry District Council, the reasons for commissioning the inspection were:
- auditor concerns about the accuracy of performance data in 2007/08; and
 - customers were not receiving a consistently quick or accurate service.
- 31** The key objectives of this inspection were:
- to assess the effectiveness of Daventry's Benefits Service in meeting the needs of the vulnerable people it serves;
 - to assess the effectiveness of its improvement plans; and
 - to provide assurance to the DWP and other stakeholders about the quality of service provision.
- 32** The cost of the service is met partially by the DWP through an administration grant. In 2008/09, the cost of the service was £0.62 million of which 35.8 per cent was met by local taxpayers. The service is responsible for administering a revenue budget in excess of £13.7 million. The most significant elements of this budget are the income generated from the DWP and the expenditure incurred in paying out housing benefit and council tax benefit. Currently the service awards payments of £10.49 million in housing benefit and £3.2 million in council tax benefit to customers in the district, who are on low incomes, to help meet their rental and council tax liabilities.
- 33** In January 2010, 4410 households were in receipt of Council Tax Benefit, and of these 3,190 also received housing benefit. Housing benefit claimant levels rose by 14 per cent from 3,060 in November 2008 to 3490 in January 2010. About 2,640 registered providers of social housing (RPSH)¹ tenants claimed benefit and a further 820 tenants of private landlords. It is therefore important the Council administer and pay benefits quickly and accurately.

¹ From 1 April 2010 the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008 was amended to introduce the term 'registered provider of social housing'. This term replaces – in England only – the term 'registered social landlord' (RSL) which currently describes bodies that are registered with the Tenancy Services Authority. RSLs are required to be non-profit making bodies. The 2008 Act permits profit-making bodies to register with the TSA as well, hence the need to introduce the new term 'registered provider of social housing'.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

34 The service mission is:

to provide an efficient, cost effective and customer friendly Benefits Service that supports the Council's vision and aims and subscribes to its core values.

It aims to deliver a value for money service of high quality, maximising access methods and offering services in the way customers and potential customers have identified as meeting their needs.

35 To deliver this there is a service plan for 2009-2010 with key objectives to:

- pay our customers the right benefit and at the right time;
- resolve basic customer queries at first point of contact in 80 per cent of cases;
- treat our customers fairly, regardless of gender, race, disability, age, sexual orientation, religion or belief;
- complement Jobcentre Plus measures of maximising employment opportunity for all;
- increase housing and council tax benefit take-up for working age and elderly claimants;
- deliver a high quality service efficiently;
- target benefit fraud to keep it out of the system;
- acknowledge letters and complaints within five working days;
- reply to emails in full within 30 working days (acknowledge within one day); and
- attend to 95 per cent of customers visiting the offices within ten minutes.

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

36 The Council is at an early stage of developing its view of what customers want from its services. It has coordinated a Regional Improvement and Efficiencies Partnership (RIEP) funding bid across Northamptonshire for gathering demographic data that includes information on how customers prefer to access services. This data will inform the roll out of e-access for customers across several services including the Benefits Service.

How good is the service?

- 37** The service listens and responds effectively to the needs of customers. It listens to what customers say in several ways including face-to-face contact at open days, customer surveys, complaints and appeals. It has conducted some targeted surveys, for example people over 50. It uses an electronic system to gather the views of people who have visited the One Stop Shop. There are some good small-scale examples of how it uses feedback from customers to inform service design. Improvements have been made to the layout of the One Stop Shop reception area. Two service desks have been provided to deal specifically with benefit customers. The number of trained benefit staff in the One Stop Shop has been increased to provide a more prompt service. Water-coolers have been provided because of feedback to improve the comfort of customers.
- 38** There is good liaison with some partners but its focus is not always on supporting customers. Although Service Level Agreements are in place with the main agencies, such as Jobcentre Plus and the Pension Service, these do not always translate in to actions that support local people to access benefits. Arrangements with local landlords are more supportive of customers. For example, training has been given to staff at DDH and some letting agents to help tenants complete benefit application forms. Working more closely with partners presents opportunities to deliver real improvements for customers.
- 39** The service is developing a good relationship with local landlords, voluntary organisations and advice workers. It:
- set up a Housing Benefit Forum to raise awareness of how the benefit scheme works and to discuss up-to-date issues; and
 - delivers training and advice sessions on topics such as claim form completion, evidence requirements and when benefit will be considered for payment direct to a landlord.

Some landlords find the Housing Benefit Forum useful. Working closely with local landlords and advice workers makes it easier for tenants to claim benefits and reduces the potential of them falling in to rent arrears.

- 40** Staff across the Council work well together to provide a seamless service. Revenues and benefits teams work well together. They share private interview facilities and call on each another to provide help to customers. Revenues staff have access to benefit information through computer systems that enables them to provide advice and answer enquiries about benefit entitlement. Staff from both teams work together to provide information to customers at open days. The Housing Options team provides support to those threatened with homelessness to access benefits and DHPs. By working well with other parts of the Council, the service is able to provide a better service to customers.

- 41 Staff attitude to customer care is good. Feedback from customers and partners show that they appreciate the professional manner in which staff approach their work. All staff have a copy of the corporate Customer Service Handbook that sets out the standards expected of staff when dealing with customers at the office, over the telephone, in writing or at a home visit. Frontline staff show a good awareness of diversity issues. For example, all staff have completed disability awareness training. The Council tests the quality of its customer care through a programme of mystery shopping and direct feedback from service customers. Mystery shopping is undertaken in partnership with three neighbouring councils. In March 2010, mystery shoppers scored their satisfaction with the service at 93 per cent being good or excellent. An improvement on the 81 per cent scored in the previous quarter. Partners, such as landlords and welfare rights advisers, are positive about the way in which service staff deal with their enquiries. Good customer care helps remove barriers to claiming benefit by making customers feel that they are valued.
- 42 Customers have a good range of choices for accessing the service. By working with partners the Council has developed an effective network of access points across the district for its services. A partnership arrangement with Northamptonshire Libraries means benefit advice is available through four Information Centres, of which two offer a Saturday morning service. Some local landlords support new tenants by providing advice and help with applying for benefits. The One Stop Shop at Daventry is open Monday to Thursday 8.30am to 5.00pm and Friday 8.30am to 4.30pm. Customers can also get benefit advice at the Abbey advice centre in Daventry which is open Monday to Friday 9.00am to 8.00pm and Saturday 9.00am to 6.00pm. By offering a choice of locations and opening times more people, in particular those who work, can access the service with ease and in person.
- 43 Customers contacting the service by telephone and email get a reasonable level of service. Emails are answered within 24 hours, which is helping some landlords to get information quickly to support and advise their tenants. There is a single 'Golden Telephone' number for all services which operates six days a week. Service records show that during the first eight months of 2009/10 calls were answered in an average of 18 seconds. Until March 2010 all calls went direct to the benefits assessment team, but a new telephony system is now in place and calls are directed through the call centre. Indications are that calls are being answered more quickly but it is too early to say how, or if, service quality has improved. Work is now underway to train call centre staff to handle customer benefit enquiries. Customers, landlords and partners, commented positively on the speed and the manner in which calls are handled.

How good is the service?

- 44 Access to the service through the internet is adequate. The service webpage is easy to understand and follow. Information is available about the benefit scheme and service. Customers can download a benefit application form but cannot make an application online or download information leaflets. An easy to use online benefit calculator is available so customers can see if they are likely to be entitled to benefits including housing benefit, council tax benefit, income support, pension credit and tax credits. Links signpost customers to other websites, such as DWP and DirectGov but there is no encouragement or explanation about why customers should consider visiting these websites. For example, customers visiting the DirectGov website will find a Benefit Adviser webpage where they can check on potential entitlement to more than 25 benefits and get an estimate of the benefits, tax credits or pension that they may be entitled to.
- 45 The service is developing a positive approach to raising awareness of how benefits can help people. It has a sound benefit take-up strategy in place which recognises some of the barriers to claiming benefits, but the service has a limited understanding of the reasons why local people do not claim benefits. In line with the strategy the service makes good use of publicity material to promote benefit take-up. For example:
- full-page adverts are included in the *Daventry Town Crier*, a half-yearly magazine delivered free to all households in Daventry by the Town Council;
 - in the spring of 2009 a special credit crunch edition of the Council's quarterly magazine *Daventry Calling* was used to tell people about benefits. This was issued to households district-wide;
 - the Primary Care Trust leaflet - *Health and Wellbeing in Daventry* - is used to advertise the service. The leaflet is sent to all households and distributed through NHS outlets such as health centres and clinics;
 - articles in the local press cover subjects like changes in the way child benefit and savings affect housing benefit, and promotion of benefits to help with rent and council tax; and
 - leaflets are available through the One Stop Shop, outreach offices and libraries. They include one specifically targeting people who work that includes a simple guide to the level of income that working people can have but still possibly qualify for benefit.

By having a broad approach to publicising benefits the service is making information available to a wider audience encouraging more people to apply for benefits. Increasing benefit take-up helps individuals and supports the local economy¹.

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.

46 It is not clear how effective the Council's efforts to improve benefit take-up are. The service does not systematically measure the outcomes from its efforts. Several take-up initiatives have taken place but it is not known how many people claimed benefit as a result of them:

- annual council tax bills include an information leaflet that contains advice about council tax benefit and how to make a claim;
- involvement in road shows across the district; and
- targeted mailshots. Two examples are to customers who may have entitlement to attendance allowance and people in areas where benefit take-up is low.

Providing information when council tax bills change reminds customers of the help that they can get if bills have increased. Because the outcomes from these efforts have not been measured, the service doesn't know if work is being focused in the right areas.

47 The Council has started to deliver some new ways to improve benefits take-up. It has bought the latest demographic profiling software in partnership with other Northamptonshire councils. Demographic data has been used to identify and target about 880 addresses where occupants may have entitlement to unclaimed benefits. Early outcomes are positive with 15 successful claims made, but this is a recent initiative and the final outcome is not known.

48 The Council is providing sound advice for those affected by the recession. For example, a five-page article in 'Daventry Calling' was delivered to all households in the district. It covers a number of topics in a clear format, such as support on claiming benefit, dealing with mortgage difficulties and general debt management advice. Frontline staff provide support by signposting and referring customers with money problems to the Welfare Rights Service where debt advice is given. Information is also available on the Council's website where there is a link to *Turn2us*, a charity that helps people access money that is available to them. By providing information in a number of ways and in a clear and straightforward manner, people are more likely to seek support and advice.

49 The Council works effectively with agencies to help people affected by the recession but outcomes for customers are not always clear. About 140 people attended a drop in event - Find your way back to work - organised jointly with Jobcentre Plus. Advice was available about what support people could get to help them back to work. Current job vacancies and training opportunities were promoted. In addition advice was available about benefits for those who had recently become unemployed.

50 Forms are designed with customers needs in mind. The standard benefit application form follows good practice in its design. It helps customers by:

- signposting them through sections of the form, and telling them where they can get help completing the form if needed;
- providing information in plain language and advice to those who do not read English or who are visually impaired;
- including a separate leaflet with guidance notes;

How good is the service?

- providing a detachable form for reporting changes; and
- telling customers what is meant by a change in circumstance, why it is important to report changes and what may happen if a change is not reported.

Well designed forms make completion easier and help customers to access benefits they are entitled to.

- 51** Information leaflets are clear and easy to understand. A good selection of leaflets is available for customers covering a number of benefit related topics. They are written in plain language that is easy to understand and some bear the Crystal Mark for clarity. The *Focus on Benefit Fraud* leaflet tells people what fraud is and what it means to the local community. It explains how local people and staff can help to combat benefit fraud. However, it is important that leaflets are kept up to date. A leaflet targeting working age customers contained out-of-date information. Providing people with clear information means that they are more likely to understand and respond correctly. But out-of-date information may lead to some customers not making claims to benefit and create extra work for staff dealing with avoidable enquiries.
- 52** Housing benefit letters comply with legal requirements but some customers find them confusing. For example, letters to landlords include a section about the recovery of overpayments even where there is no overpayment. Customers of the Housing Option team often find letters from the service daunting because of the amount of information included. Local landlords also find that some tenants have difficulties understanding letters for the same reason. Their experience is that occasionally a tenant will not act on a letter leading to benefit stopping. The lack of clarity in letters leads to confusion and loss of benefits for vulnerable people.
- 53** Published customer service standards do not help customers to fully understand the level of service they can expect. A set of standards is in place and publicised through a leaflet *Customer Promise 2009/2010* and posters in the One Stop Shop. But service customers had no direct involvement in the design of service standards. Some of the standards are clear and easy for customers to understand, such as answering letters and complaints within five days and seeing customers at the office within ten minutes of arrival. But the service standard of 11 days to deal with a claim is misleading and can raise false expectations amongst customers. Benefit claims are being dealt with in an average of 22 days and changes in just below six days. It is important that service standards are easy to understand and meet customer expectations. Confusing information will lead to unnecessary enquiries from customers.

- 54 DHPs are managed effectively but the Council could do more to help those most in need. The DWP allocates funds each year and councils have the discretion to top up¹ the funds using their own resources to a specified limit. Although the Council has topped up the DHP budget, this has been demand-led rather than because of a formal decision about how much it wants to spend to help vulnerable people. In 2008/09 the Council topped up the DHP fund by £1,880 to £3,857 and in 2009/10 by £1,328 to £7,257. Individual applications are decided on their own merits and partners are satisfied that most applications they support are granted.
- 55 Not enough is being done to raise awareness of DHP. Partners, such as landlords, welfare advisers and the Housing Option Team, are aware of the DHP scheme and do provide support to customers that need help. But there is no targeted advice for people who do not have the support of agencies. This means the service cannot be confident that it is using DHPs effectively to help vulnerable people who are most in need.

Diversity

- 56 The Council is meeting basic requirements for equality and diversity. It has achieved level two of the former Equality Standard for Local Government, but from April 2010 it considers that it is at the 'Achieving' level of the new Equality Framework, but this is still subject to formal verification. In November 2008 it undertook an Equality Impact Assessment on its benefits claims process and identified some areas to improve access which have since been delivered. For example, signposting in the One Stop Shop, publicising the translation service more widely and diversity awareness training for staff.
- 57 The Council has satisfactory arrangements in place to support customers with special needs to have fair and equal access to services. For example:
- the One Stop Shop is at ground floor level offering good access for wheelchair users;
 - service desks are at a height suitable for wheelchair users;
 - documents can be produced in Braille on request;
 - hearing loops are available;
 - home visits are advertised for vulnerable people;
 - information leaflets are available in a wide range of languages on request, but cannot be downloaded from the Councils' website; and
 - there is access to professional interpretation services although the demand is very low. In addition, Polish speaking staff employed in the service can be called on to translate for customers if needed.

Frontline staff displayed a good understanding of what support they can access to help customers.

¹ DHP payments are made at the discretion of the Council, up to an annual cash limit set by central government, in cases where the Council considers that additional help with housing costs is needed by vulnerable customers. The amount that a Council receives is based on what it spent in previous years but is subject to an overall cash limit of £50m nationally. If a Council does not spend its full allocation it will receive less the following year. Details of how money is allocated is included in a DWP subsidy circular – S1/2009

How good is the service?

58 There are some sound arrangements in place to support vulnerable people:

- the service works closely with the Housing Option team to support those threatened with homelessness;
- Housing Options runs a rent deposit scheme that encourages local landlords to take tenants who are on housing benefit;
- a Safeguards Policy helps vulnerable people to manage their housing benefit, and, if appropriate, benefit is paid direct to a landlord; and
- DHPs can offer support to overcome short-term financial difficulties.

These arrangements help people to keep their home and reduce the risk of homelessness.

User experience and satisfaction

59 Customer service is good. In April 2010 the corporate Customer Services was judged to have achieved the government's Customer Service Excellence standard.

60 Facilities for customers at the One Stop Shop are of a good standard. Ample car parking is provided with bays for disabled drivers. The environment is welcoming and there is free internet access, toilets, young children play area and good access for the disabled. Signs tell customers that private interview rooms are available. The layout of the main area means that customers being interviewed have adequate privacy. A good range of information leaflets and posters are on display and flat screen broadcasts provide information about services including benefits.

61 Service customers are satisfied with the service they received. Since 2008 there have been several user surveys. In addition there is an ongoing electronic satisfaction survey of customers who have used the One Stop Shop.

- In September 2008 landlords commented positively about the frontline staff and there was a 100 per cent satisfaction with the service received.
- Customer overall satisfaction in a 2009 survey was 100 per cent with 92 per cent of customers being very satisfied with the advice they were given.
- A survey of One Stop Shop customers in February 2010 found that 94 per cent of people were satisfied with the service received.

62 Our findings from interviews with customers, landlords and partners reflect a high level of satisfaction.

- Customers interviewed said that staff are polite, knowledgeable and professional. They found access to the service to be good and that it was easy to contact by telephone. Customers visiting the office said that delays are minimal and they were seen promptly.
- Landlords and partners have experienced a significant change in the service they get. Claims are dealt with quickly and there is a good working relationship between them and the service.

Service outcomes

- 63** Unaudited data provided by the Council shows performance against the 'Right time' indicator NI 181 was 8.25 days for 2009/10. DWP has published comparative data for the first six months of 2009/10 that shows this as being among the best 25 per cent of English councils. The service also measures the average number of days to deal with new claims and change in circumstances separately. This helps to give a clearer picture about the service customers get.
- 64** Customers have new claims dealt with promptly, but the service is falling short of its own target. In 2009/10 the service set a target for processing new claims in an average of 20 days. Council data shows that it achieved an average of 22 days for the year. It also shows that performance was getting better as the year moved on. Published DWP data for the first six months of 2009/10 shows that performance was below the average for English councils for the first three months. However, it improved to above average during the second three month period. Prompt payment of benefit is important to customers. It helps them manage their money and avoid falling in to rent and council tax arrears.
- 65** Overall the service is maintaining its performance and has responded well to rising workloads. Over the period November 2008 to January 2010, the numbers of people claiming benefit increased by 14 per cent to 3,490 without a build up of backlogs. Staff first look at claims within three working days of receiving them. This means that prompt action is being taken to gather any extra information that is needed. By responding quickly to customers they know what they must do to help the service make a decision on their claim and pay any benefit.
- 66** There are sound systems in place for making sure people get the right benefit. The service:
- makes sure that claims start off correctly by training both Service and DDH staff on verification procedures and requirements;
 - widely promotes the need for customers to report changes through:
 - its benefit application form which includes a detachable form for reporting changes and a leaflet and guidance notes;
 - benefit award letters explaining what changes need to be reported and why; and
 - posters and adverts in the press telling people of the importance of reporting changes;
 - undertakes data matching exercises with partners such as the DWP;
 - uses its ICT system to control cases and share information between some services. For example, sharing information with the Revenues team helps keep benefits right and ensures people get council tax discounts they are entitled to; and
 - runs a programme of reviewing claims based on the risk of an unreported change happening. However there is no ongoing evaluation of this programme to assess whether the right people are being targeted.

How good is the service?

Through its approach the service identified 29 changes for each 1,000 cases in 2008/09. This compares well with the benchmarking group average of 27.9 changes for each 1,000 cases. Proactively supporting customers to keep their benefit right means that customers will avoid hardship caused through underpayments of benefit, and the recovery of overpaid benefit.

- 67 Sound arrangements are in place for ensuring accurate calculation and payments of benefit. A least 4 per cent of claims are checked daily. The service targets claims that are most likely to go wrong for checking and work completed by less experienced staff have more work checked than experienced staff. Staff receive feedback about errors found and findings help inform future training. By focusing checking in high-risk areas errors are more likely to be found, helping to reduce the amount of wrongly paid benefit and reducing the cost to local taxpayers.
- 68 The service is sensitive to the difficulties customers face. Those who have difficulty repaying an overpayment have their financial affairs reviewed to arrive at a realistic level of weekly repayment. They are also advised where to get help and advice about managing debt. Write-off of a debt is considered for those who cannot pay. During 2008/09, 5.2 per cent of outstanding debt was written off. This is above the average for the benchmark group. By exercising its discretion on how or whether to recover overpayments, the Council is able to support the most vulnerable people in the community.
- 69 The counter-fraud team performs well at tackling fraud and error. For example:
- there is a satisfactory counter-fraud strategy and prosecution policy in place which investigators comply with;
 - investigators are well trained and familiar with relevant legislation, such as the Police and Criminal Evidence and the Human Rights Acts;
 - the threat from benefit fraud is well publicised. Adverts and articles are placed in the local press and a leaflets and posters are on display in reception areas;
 - fraud awareness training is delivered to staff and councillors. Investigators attend service meetings to provide feedback to staff;
 - there are good arrangements in place for reporting suspected fraud, including a hotline answered by trained staff so that those reporting a suspicion can have some assurance of confidentiality;
 - it has a process of assessing the quality of referrals so that it tackles those allegations that are likely to be successful investigations;
 - investigators work well with partners undertaking joint investigations with Jobcentre Plus investigators;
 - the number of successful sanctions applied in 2009/10 was 36 against a challenging target of 50. Although performance is below target it is an improvement on 2008/09 when performance was above the CIPFA benchmark group average; and
 - the quality of investigation work is good. Most cases prosecuted result in a guilty verdict. This included two investigations cases involving local public figures that were successfully prosecuted.

Having an effective counter-fraud team demonstrates the seriousness in which the Council treats benefit fraud. By having high quality referrals and well managed investigations efforts are focused to deter, prevent and detect fraud. This reduces the burden on local taxpayers.

- 70** Customers under investigation are treated with dignity and respect. Facilities for conducting interviews are reasonable. They are away from the main public waiting area and there is access to the interview room by lift for those customers with walking difficulties. The room is bright and airy, and a water cooler provides drinks.
- 71** Customers who ask for a decision on their claim to be looked at again (reconsideration), or who appeal a decision, receive a prompt service. The service has a four-week target for dealing with reconsiderations and three-month target for appeals. Records show that during 11 months of 2009/10 reconsiderations were dealt with in an average of 17 days. Overall 84 per cent were inside the target. All appeal cases were sent to the Tribunal Service in 28 days or less which is well within the service target. It is important that vulnerable customers have a speedy outcome of their claim to help them manage their affairs.
- 72** Customers are generally satisfied with the decisions on their claims. The number of requests for a decision to be reconsidered is low with 118 requests received during first 11 months of 2009/10. Those who do ask for their claim to be looked at again get a full written explanation of the decision whether or not it is changed. Overall 90 per cent of decisions remain unchanged and less than 7 per cent of those go on to appeal. By providing a clear and detailed explanation of often complex decisions, customers are better placed to decide whether to appeal a decision.
- 73** There are good arrangements in place for handling complaints. The corporate complaints policy aims to ensure that the complaints procedure is easy to follow, responsive and that the Council learns so that it reduces the causes for complaint. There are clear lines of responsibility and target times for dealing with complaints. Acknowledgements are sent within five days then a full answer within ten days. All frontline staff have received training in applying the policy.
- 74** Levels of complaints are low but the service deals quickly with dissatisfied customers when they arise. It has a more challenging target than the corporate policy, and aims to deal with complaints within five working days. During 2009/10, the level of formal complaint was low with only four complaints received. All were dealt with within five working days. By dealing with customer dissatisfaction promptly the service shows that it takes customer concerns seriously.

How good is the service?

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 75** The Council provides overall good value for money from its benefits service on behalf of local council taxpayers. It maximises government subsidy that it receives for housing benefit payments made. In 2008/09 it received back 98.5 per cent of the money it paid out compared to the national average for all councils of 98 per cent. The cost to local taxpayers of running the service is lower than other councils, with 65 per cent of the cost met through the DWP administration grant. The level of benefit that was overpaid because of delay or error by the Council was below thresholds set by the government which meant that the Council was fully reimbursed for that money. Managing subsidy effectively reduces the need for the Council to make up the difference from its own funds.
- 76** The Council has a good understanding of the cost of running its benefits service and how they compare to similar authorities. It is an active member of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) and as a result undertakes annual benchmarking of the service.
- 77** The cost of running the service, which mostly consists of staff costs is comparatively low. CIPFA benchmarking for 2009 indicates that Daventry's staff costs are lower than most other councils in its benchmark group when weighted for caseload in the following areas:
- customer reception staff;
 - processing staff;
 - overpayments staff;
 - staff who visit people at their homes;
 - training and quality assurance staff costs;
 - appeals staff costs; and
 - subsidy control.

The only benchmarked area where the Council's costs are comparatively high is staff costs associated with fraud investigations. Although the number of staff employed in counter-fraud work is less than two, the small caseload of referrals means that Daventry's cost per case investigated is still higher than other councils.

- 78** Overall outcomes in relation to the cost of the service are mixed. The Council is now processing applications at a speed slightly better than the CIPFA benchmark group average. However, there are aspects of the service which are not value for money. The percentage of overpayments recovered is lower than most councils in its benchmark group and the amount of overpayment written off is comparatively high. This means that taxpayers' money is being lost to individuals who are not entitled to the benefits.

- 79** Overpayment recovery performance is poor. During 2008/09, the service recovered 41.2 per cent of overpaid benefit raised during the year. This is well below the benchmark group average of 72.2 per cent. There has been minimal improvement to 45.3 per cent recovery during 2009/10. Outstanding overpayment debt rose from £431,964 at 31 March 2009 to £479,637 at 31 March 2010.
- 80** The management of overpayments is weak. The Corporate Debt Policy gives a commitment to take firm enforcement action where someone has the ability to pay. The approach to recovery is set out in an overpayment policy but it is not being fully followed. For example, all available means of recovery are not being considered such as court action to enforce repayment of debts or recovering on behalf of other councils. However, the service does use debt collection agencies to recovery some hard to collect debts. There has been a lack of focus on effective management of the recovery of overpaid benefit, but the service restructure in March 2010 is now addressing this through more direct management. Failure to manage overpayments effectively means that local taxpayers must meet the cost of uncollected debts. It also sends the wrong message to debtors about how serious the Council is at recovering taxpayers' money.
- 81** The Council is beginning to gain a much greater understanding the costs of the different methods customers can use to access the service. It has found that face to face costs are approximately £7 per transaction; telephone £4; and the Internet £1. The Council has invested in e-forms to further support electronic service access with a view to reducing costs and avoidable face to face or telephone contact.
- 82** The Council is offering good opportunities for its customers to access the service even though its staff costs are comparatively low. There is a One Stop Shop at the main offices and a network of five access points through libraries in the district.
- 83** The Council has made a number of recent improvements to value for money within customer services and benefits. In 2009/10 it restructured the Revenue and Benefits Service resulting in one manager instead of two. It also merged the cash office into the customer services One Stop Shop resulting in an overall savings on wages and salaries of approximately £115,000 per annum. The early indications are that customer services and benefits performance have improved since these new arrangements were put in place.
- 84** Corporately, processes for delivering efficiency savings are developing well. The Council has an 'Efficiency Matrix' which clearly identifies all areas to make efficiencies and has clear expected outcomes and when they should be delivered. This helped the Council deliver its efficiency targets in 2009/10 and it now plans to save 15 per cent of its revenue budget in 2010/11.
- 85** Some corporate procurement initiatives have had an impact on the cost of delivering the service. For example, in 2009 it undertook an options appraisal for its ICT function which was delivered by an external contractor. As a result the service was brought in-house leading to £25,000 worth of savings in 2009/10 with estimated savings of £84,000 per year projected thereafter. ICT is an important function and significant cost for the service. Similarly it is starting to make savings on insurance as a result of a procurement exercise recently undertaken through the Welland partnership procurement unit.

How good is the service?

- 86 Progress towards delivering shared services with other authorities is slow. There are potentially a number of efficiencies that could be made by working with other councils. Such opportunities were identified in a best value review of the fraud investigation function. For example shared officers could potentially yield savings and enable a more resilient service by having a larger pool of people working in this area. However, although the Council takes a positive view of shared services it has been unable to secure any significant outcomes or efficiencies.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 87** The service has significantly improved over the last three years. From a service that was performing poorly it now has performance levels similar to, or above the CIPFA benchmark group average in key areas such as processing times for new applications and changes of circumstances.
- 88** To deliver this, the Council has made some significant changes to the way it delivers the service. It has developed a network of outreach locations in partnership with Northamptonshire libraries and merged its frontline services in the main Council reception to create a One Stop Shop. More recently it has taken measures to merge the service with its revenues function and made a difficult decision to reduce the number of managers from two to one. This is enabling it to put more resources into parts of the service that customers experience such as reception and telephone services.
- 89** Improvements to the service are well recognised by stakeholders. Customers, RPSHs and representatives of the voluntary sector that we spoke to during the inspection were very positive about the service. Their perceptions are that the service has improved for customers. Similarly, frontline staff such as customer advisors and the benefits assessment team we spoke to felt the service is much better now than a few years ago.
- 90** Customers have seen improvements to the service. The Council has significantly reduced waiting times in its customer services centre. A survey conducted in February 2010 showed that 92 per cent of customers waited less than ten minutes - nearly half the average time it took in the previous year. The Benefits' reception has been integrated with the One Stop Shop which means that queuing has been reduced because there are more staff able to take initial enquiries. The reception area has been improved and there is now a private room available for those that want it. The time taken to answer telephones is starting to improve. The Council's focus on the service is benefiting customers.
- 91** The Council is mostly improving against national and local performance indicators. The table below shows the Council's performance over the last three years using Audit Commission data for 2007/08 and the Council's own un-audited data for 2008/09 and 2009/10.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

Table 2 Benefits Performance Indicators

Track record of improvement

Performance Indicator	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	Direction of Travel
NI 181 - average time taken to process new claims and changes (days)	n/a	10.5	8.25	Improving
Average time taken to process new claims (days)	25	23	21.86	Improving
Average time taken to process changes in circumstance (days)	9	5.55	3.68	Improving

Source: Audit Commission, CIPFA and un-audited Daventry DC Data

- 92** Most indicators that relate to the customer's experience are improving well. Performance against the 'Right time' indicator¹ (NI 181) is 8.25 days for 2009/10, over two days faster than in 2008/09. Similarly the time taken to deal with new applications in 2009/10 was 21 days, down from 25 days from 2007/08. The average time taken to deal with changes in circumstance has fallen from nine days in 2007/08 to less than four days in 2009/10. Customers in Daventry are receiving an increasingly prompt service which reflects their eligibility for Housing Benefit.
- 93** The Council's approach to tackling fraud is improving. In 2009/10 the number of referrals to the fraud team was 164 compared to 125 the previous year. The number of fraud investigations for each 1,000 caseload increased from 38 in 2008/09 to 44 in 2009/10. This has contributed to a small rise in the number of the number of successful sanctions and prosecutions completed. Effectively tackling fraud helps ensure that taxpayers' money spent on housing benefit only goes to those who are entitled to it.
- 94** Some important aspects of the service are not improving quickly enough. Un-audited data for 2009/10 indicates that the level of overpayments outstanding is at £479,637 an increase of £47,673 on the previous year. Failure to recovery monies owed to the Council takes funds away from hard pressed services paid for by taxpayers.
- 95** Accuracy of benefit claims processing is not improving. Currently about three per cent of benefit claims are not worked out correctly and there has been little change over the last three years. This causes unnecessary delays and cost.

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

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 96 Value for money in the service is starting to improve. 2008/09 CIPFA benchmarking data indicates that the comparative cost has fallen in recent years and performance in terms of speed of processing has improved. The Council has made a number of improvements within its existing revenue budget such as the new One Stop Shop, improved telephone answering arrangements and outreach centres in libraries where people can access the service. The Council has identified the comparative costs of various access channels and is starting to make forms available through the Council's website which has the lowest cost per transaction. Overall the service has improved without any significant additional revenue contribution

How well does the service manage performance?

- 97 The Council's strategic framework for delivering improvement is well developed corporately. The Local Area Agreements and Sustainable Communities Strategy link into the Corporate Plan. This is then underpinned by service plans and individual performance targets for managers and staff.
- 98 The service has clear links to broader corporate objectives. It functions under the 'Healthy, Safe and Strong' objective of the Corporate Plan. One of the themes under this objective is to ensure vulnerable people and communities are given the support they need. This is reflected in one of the service's main objectives - to increase the take-up of housing benefit amongst people of working age and the elderly. However, the service is not a priority area for improvement within the Corporate Plan.
- 99 The Council has a good performance management framework. Performance reports for finance, performance indicators and projects are collected monthly. The reports are then subject to performance clinics with heads of service. Where there are exceptions these are fed through to portfolio holders and Scrutiny. Persistent underperformance is quickly identified and action plans generated for corrective actions. A full performance report is made to council quarterly. This has been enhanced for 2010/11 by reducing the tolerance threshold. Last year a 10 per cent variance was not considered significant but this year it has been lowered to 5 per cent.
- 100 The Council has implemented good mechanisms to ensure its staff understand the organisation's priorities and objectives. The Council communicates with staff on changes within the organisation through the *Council Courier* internal newsletter, team briefs and team open days, all designed to encourage feedback and suggestions. During the inspection we found that staff interviewed had a very good understanding of both service and corporate performance issues and what they need to do to help improve performance. This is important for an organisation that wants to ensure its plans are delivered.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 101** Specific service plans for benefits are developing but are not fully focused on outcomes. The Customer Services (Benefits) service plan 2009/12 does contain targets for improving all local and national performance indicators. The targets are challenging and based on striving towards the performance levels of the best councils nationally. The service plan also contains an appropriate risk register. It includes solid performance monitoring arrangements to ensure the service is on track to achieve targets. However the plan has some weaknesses. The measure of success for increasing benefit take-up is the overall increase in applications. However this could be as a result of the recession as opposed to the Council reaching those people who are eligible but do not apply for benefits. There are also no specific targets for customer satisfaction. Required actions to deliver targets in the plan are not always explicit. For example, the plan does not give a clear indication as to what the Council intend to do to increase benefit take-up. Overall the service plan sets out clear goals for the service but there is room for improvement in specifying how those goals will be achieved.
- 102** The Council also has a well resourced project plan for the service but it is not always clear when customers will see improvements. It does contain some customer facing initiatives such as the planned website upgrade, customer forums, planned improvements to the One Stop Shop and mobile facilities. However most of the projects are about internal processes and installing the necessary capacity. It is not fully clear from the plan when customers will see improvements.
- 103** The Council has a well developed Customer Service Plan which includes improving access to its services by using a web mapping tool. This will enable customers to enter their address or council tax number and bring up services local to them. For example benefits customers will automatically be signposted to their nearest outreach centre. The system will enable much better access to a benefits calculator, other advice such as that provided by Jobcentre Plus and to download application forms. There is also a mechanism for capturing and responding to queries via the Customer Relationship Management System (CRM). Benefits customers are expected to be able to fully access these services in 2010/11. However, the Customer Services Plan is written from a technical viewpoint, focusing on the required actions to install the necessary ICT infrastructure. It is not fully clear exactly what improvements there will be for customers or when.
- 104** The service met most of its targets in 2009/10 including:
- answering telephone calls in five rings;
 - providing easily accessible interview rooms;
 - ensuring 95 per cent of customers who visit offices are seen in 20 minutes;
 - providing home visits for the vulnerable people; and
 - dealing with claims and changes within 10.5 days.

However, the service failed to achieve its target to reply letters within five working.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 105** The Council has some good ways of capturing customer feedback. This includes a mystery shopper delivered by partnership arrangements with neighbouring districts, the 'Standpoint' machine in reception where customers can immediately register feedback about their experience, exit interviews, customer surveys and a People's Panel. This enables the Council to keep in touch with its performance from the point of view of customers.
- 106** Performance monitoring of telephone calls is new but developing well. The Council only recently has the capacity to track calls through its CRM system. However they are now able to track the performance of individual advisors and assessment staff. It also tracks when customers reach their desired member of staff as opposed to when the answering machine first picks up a call before it is re-directed. It will take time for this to be fully integrated into the performance management system.
- 107** The service is learning from the experience of others. It has employed an external project manager to develop and deliver improvements to the service infrastructure. Over the past two years a range of building blocks have been delivered, which include policies and procedures for staff, supported by a training specifications for staff in a modular format.
- 108** The service learns from its own experience and takes action. The Council lost two complex benefit appeals. Following this it has visited other councils and as a result introduced more robust procedures for gathering and recording evidence. The service is beginning to benefit from the experience of other Councils.
- 109** The service has responded positively to review. A mini best value review of the counter-fraud team resulted in an improvement plan. As a result action has been taken to improve processes and reduce costs. For example, fraud awareness training has been included in all staff training plans; and investigators have been trained in advocacy so that they can present cases in court, where a guilty plea has been made, reducing the cost of prosecuting cases. However this is recent.
- 110** Leadership for the service is strong. Senior officers supported by councillors have a clear vision of what is needed to improve the service. During the inspection we found that staff and partners have a high level of confidence in the management of the service and feel that it is and will continue to improve.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 111** The use of ICT in the service is developing at a fast pace and starting to transform the way the Council interacts with existing and potential customers. There are a number of key initiatives which provide opportunities to improve the service including:
- the web mapping tool which currently being introduced and will enable the Council to tailor information to the needs of customers and allow them to find local services more easily;
 - an online access system for Housing Association landlords, which will allow them to check up-to-date payment details and the current benefit entitlement of their tenants. It will also allow them 24-hour access to download their payment schedules and notifications;

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- a recently introduced CRM system which is enabling the Council to track enquiries from the first point of contact and help deliver the Council's customer promises for service and response; and
 - the use of the 'Mosaic' profiling tool which has enabled the Council to get an accurate profile of its current housing benefit customers. This has identified similar households in the district currently not claiming benefits. The Council have already used this to target a take-up campaign to approximately 880 households.
- 112** At corporate level human resource planning is developing. Training is commissioned from information picked up from appraisals and evaluated. It also includes councillors. There is an improved appraisal toolkit for appraisals commencing from April 2010 and a recently introduced programme of 360 degree appraisals for managers. Staff turnover is low as are sickness levels in the service. However, a strategic approach to workforce planning is still being finalised - scheduled for completion by the end of spring 2010.
- 113** Staff in the service are well motivated, capable and have good customer care skills. The training needs of staff working in the service are well identified and acted upon. There is a training programme for all new frontline staff such as assessors and customer advisors. Each member of staff has a training folder and additional training needs are identified and acted on from one-to-one meetings and biannual appraisals. For example, staff received training on outreach activities and disability awareness. These are important elements required to move the service forward.
- 114** The service has been very active in training over the last year. This includes training to challenge existing ways of delivering the services with a view to making them more efficient and better for customers. They have also delivered training specific to benefits for staff in the One Stop Shops on issues such as how to deal with a change of circumstances enquiry. Staff interviewed during the inspection were positive about the training opportunities given to them and felt the issues brought up in their appraisals had been acted on. This has been delivered in the face of reduced training budgets by sharing training with other Councils.
- 115** The Council is open to delivering services in different ways but shared services are not well developed. Corporately the Council seeks the most efficient ways to deliver its services and as a result has a mixed economy. For example the housing stock has been transferred to a Housing Association, leisure facilities are managed by a trust and other services such as ICT have recently been brought back in-house following an options appraisal. The service is run in-house as its costs are comparatively low and the Council is focused on improving its performance. However, there are potential opportunities for sharing and gaining efficiencies from number of back office functions such as legal services to support fraud investigations, payroll and ICT which are not being exploited.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 116** The service works well with key partners who are mostly positive about their relationship with the Council. Numerous examples exist of good partnership working including:
- working with RPSH partners to provide a better service for those tenants who struggle to pay their rent. Housing associations' are able to help them access housing benefits quickly due to their effective communication channels with council benefits staff;
 - a successful partnership with Northamptonshire County Council enabling the Council to run access points in local libraries;
 - undertaking joint investigations with Jobcentre Plus on cases of potential fraud - this has resulted in a number of successful prosecutions; and
 - training for staff employed by DDH on the receipt and verification of housing benefit claims. Some training has also been provided to letting agents in the private sector.
- 117** The service has not effectively developed its relationships with some partners. Working arrangements are not fully developed with the local Pension Service. This means the service has not explored the possibility of working with the local Pension Service to deliver improvements for customers in areas like benefit take-up. The Council does not always evaluate the effectiveness of its numerous partnerships which means there is a risk that staff resources needed to service partnerships may not always deliver tangible improvements for customers.
- 118** The Council has used additional external funding for the service. It has used its DWP funding to develop access for customers. The additional administration grant allocated by the DWP to help deal with the recession has been used to help fund improved internet access so that customers will be able to use the internet to communicate with the service more effectively on issues such as reporting changes. Working with partners in Northamptonshire, the Council was successful in securing funding for the Mosaic profiling tool. Additional funding helps the Council fund new projects at a time when its own budgets are under pressure.
- 119** The Council has some good plans to improve capacity through its Benefits project plan but processes for delivering projects are not embedded. Within its project plan there are initiatives towards improving training, achieving 'Investors In People', updating operational manuals as well as improving access to services. Good progress is being made to deliver these plans. The Revenues and Benefits Service conforms to the British Standard Institute quality assurance system. This means that management systems are in the main, solid. However, the project management process is not fully embedded. For example, we found that some projects currently being worked on did not have an appropriate Project Initiation Document. It is important that the objectives and expected outcomes of any project are clear and appropriately signed off.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

120 The Council faces some financial uncertainties and risks. It needs to make 15 per cent savings over the next year and is likely to be drawing on reserves in the next three years. The Council has taken steps to deliver this through its Efficiency Matrix, a clearly defined plan to deliver efficiencies supported by the establishment of a Councillor led Business Transformation Panel. The panel will look to see how the Council finances can be restructured over the coming years to achieve savings and ensure achievement of efficiency targets.

The Audit Commission

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