

# Benefits

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# Service

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# Inspection

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Erewash Borough Council

May 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 web site at [www.audit-commission.gov.uk](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk).

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

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# Summary

- 1 Erewash Borough Council is responsible for managing Housing Benefit and Council Tax benefit for the government. These are national welfare benefits with complex legal rules setting out how this must be done. When people apply for benefit, the Council has to assess who has a right to receive what benefits and to make sure that it is protecting taxpayers from fraud and errors. Currently, the Benefits Service awards payments of £18 million in Housing Benefit and over £7 million in Council Tax Benefit to customers in the Erewash area who are on low incomes.
- 2 The Benefits Service (the Service) in Erewash is fair. The average speed of processing claims has been consistently improving from 2005/06 to 2008/09. And this performance has continued, despite rising workloads because of the recession. Customers can access a two-day processing service as an incentive to encourage them to provide their claim and supporting evidence quickly. But not enough is happening to detect fraud and make sure that benefit remains correct, once payments begin. Internal and external relationships are developing to support those claiming benefits.
- 3 Customers can access the Service with ease and opening hours go some way to meeting the needs of those who cannot make contact during normal business hours. Some partners are supporting the service through verification of claims, and are beginning to influence change within the Service. Staff have a good customer service ethos with most having formal customer service qualifications. There are strong and effective links between staff in the front and back office parts of the Service, delivering a more seamless service for customers.
- 4 The Service is not meeting its overall aim of paying the right benefit to the right person at the right time. While claims processing times are around average compared to other councils, accuracy levels are still below target. The Service is not doing all it can to detect fraud or to identify unreported changes in customers circumstances, that affect their right to benefit. For example, there is no review of cases based on the risk of change occurring, and no systematic review of the potential amount of fraud and error in the caseload. This means the Council cannot have assurance that people are getting the right benefit.
- 5 The Service provides adequate value for money. Claims processing performance is about average and processing costs are average compared to other comparable councils. However, there is a high level of user satisfaction with the Service.
- 6 The prospects for improvement of the Service are promising. The Service has a track record of delivering change, including the implementation of a new benefits computer system and a new document management system. It has also introduced a number of improvements in customer access including upgraded reception areas. These initiatives have been implemented in a planned and well managed way and are helping to improve services to customers.

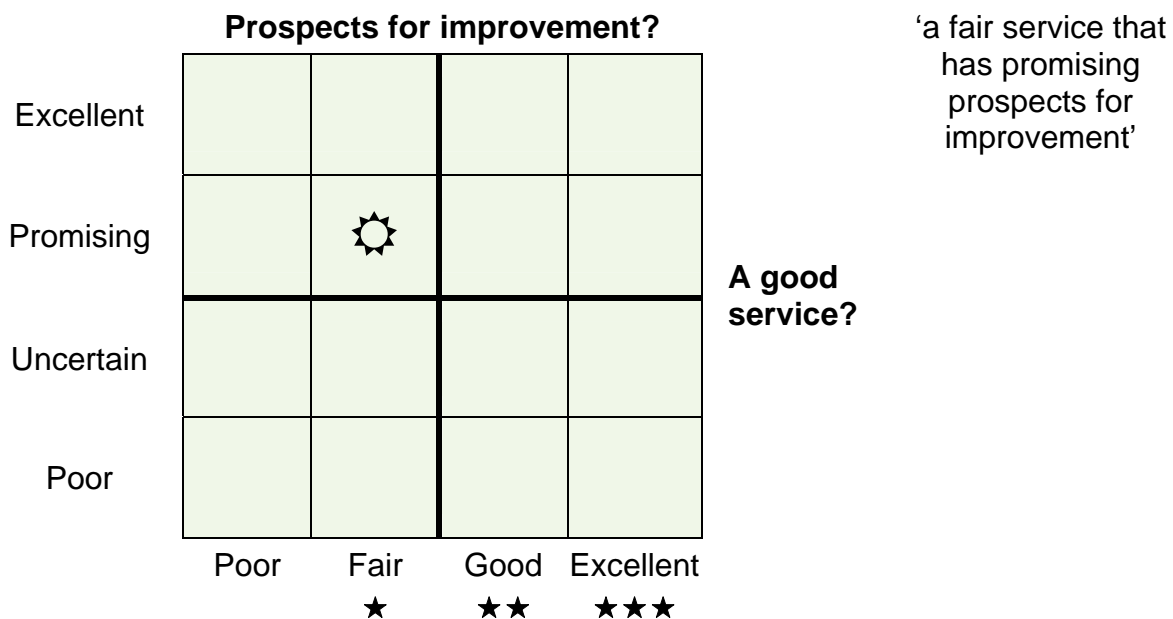
## Summary

- 7 Performance in processing new benefits claims and changes in circumstances is improving, although accuracy levels are not. However, value for money of the Service is improving as processing costs per head of population are decreasing at the same time as the number of claims that the Service has to process is increasing.
- 8 Leadership within the Service is effective and the Council is willing to learn from both customers and also other councils. Managers have made some challenging decisions in the past to invest in customer reception areas and to secure investment to deliver ICT developments. The Service has enough capacity to deliver improvement through continuing investment in ICT, better training for staff and the development of middle managers. Further capacity has been created by a successful focus on strengthening partnership working. Better and more productive relationships with partners are providing opportunities to improve the quality and efficiency of the Service.
- 9 Improvement and project plans have been in place over the last few years and have been successful in implementing changes to the Service. But the current service plan expires at the end of March 2010 and the Council does not yet have a new longer term plan, with clearly explained aims and objectives, supported by clear priorities and SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, resourced and time-based) targets. Without this, the Council cannot fully assure itself that the improvements it has made in the past will continue to be sustained into the future.

# Scoring the service

- 10 We have assessed Erewash Borough 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 chart<sup>1</sup>



Source: Audit Commission

- 11 The Service is fair, one-star service because:

- it tells customers what level of service they can expect;
- it provides ease of access to the Service including working effectively with partners to achieve this;
- it listens to its customers and takes action based on this to improve the Service;
- it communicates effectively with partners and is responsive to their needs;
- it has shown improving claim processing times and offers a fast track claim service;
- Discretionary housing payments (DHP)<sup>11</sup> are managed well to support those most vulnerable in the community;
- it delivers adequate value for money;

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> 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

## Scoring the service

- there is a strong emphasis on customer care and staff are trained accordingly; and
- customers surveyed are satisfied with the Service.

### 12 However, there are weaknesses including:

- customers wait too long for reconsiderations to be dealt with and for appeals to be submitted to the Tribunals Service;
- not enough is being done to make sure the right people get the right benefit;
  - the approach to identifying unreported changes in circumstance is not based on risk;
  - counter-fraud activity has not been reviewed to reflect the potential risk to fraud;
  - fraud awareness initiatives are relatively low profile; and
- accuracy levels of claims processing are below target.

### 13 The Service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- there is a track record of implementing both improvements to customer services and new computer systems to help improve value for money;
- management and staff at service level are enthusiastic and committed and are willing to learn from both customers and other councils;
- additional investment in training is being made to add capacity;
- further investment is being made in ICT to increase efficiency; and
- improved partnership working is adding capacity.

However, there are areas for improvement:

- improvement aspirations are not supported by a formal longer term plan;
- performance targets are not always challenging or prioritised; and
- there is no structured and planned approach to improving value for money.

# 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 costs<sup>1</sup> 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** The Council should agree an improvement plan to address the weaknesses identified in this inspection report which should:
- clearly defines the longer term vision, aims, objectives and priorities for the Service;
  - sets out specific short, medium and long-term actions for the improvement of the Service;
  - identifies accountable staff and clear timescales for delivery; and
  - has robust arrangements for monitoring at senior management and political levels.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a clear vision for the Service going forward;
- improved use of the resources available;
- improved ability to measure success and address potential failures more speedily; and
- greater visibility of improvements delivered for officers and councillors.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. The improvement plan should be developed by 31 July 2010.

<sup>1</sup> 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 the Service delivered to customers by:

- dealing with requests for reconsideration and appeals promptly;
- developing more challenging service standards through consultation with key partners including customers, partners and councillors;
- monitoring performance against the Service standards and report the results to customers, senior managers and councillors; and
- ensure that sufficient resource is allocated to deliver the improvements.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- potentially vulnerable people will have less uncertainty about their entitlements to benefit; and
- a more challenging environment for the Service that will provide greater impetus for ongoing improvements that service users will benefit from.

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

### Recommendation

**R3** Ensure that the Service delivers against its aim of paying the right benefit to the right person by:

- assessing the level of risk to fraud and ensuring that there is sufficient resources to detect and investigate any fraud;
- having in place a high profile fraud awareness strategy that reflects the Council's low tolerance to fraud and encourages staff, customers, partners and councillors to refer suspicions to the Council;
- introduce a risk based approach to reviewing claims so that unreported changes are identified as soon as possible; and
- improving the accuracy of benefit payments.

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; and
- residents will have confidence that the Council is tackling fraud and making the community a safer place.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by 31 October 2010.

### Recommendation

- R4** Develop and consistently apply a structured process for evaluating the impact of:
- new initiatives;
  - changes to processes and procedures; and
  - additional investment in the Service.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- to ensure that objectives and intended benefits have been achieved;
- to demonstrate that efficiency and effectiveness are improving; and
- to demonstrate that improved value for money is being delivered for potential reinvestment in the Service.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by 31 October 2010.

# Report

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## Context

### The locality

- 15 Erewash is located in Derbyshire in the East Midlands, between the cities of Derby and Nottingham. It has a population of 111,250 living either in the two major towns of Long Eaton and Ilkeston, or in rural and semi-rural villages. The two main towns and the rural parish areas each comprise one third of the Borough's population.
- 16 Historically, the economy in Erewash was built upon coal mining, iron working, textiles and railways. Manufacturing still accounts for more than 23.4 per cent of jobs in the area, making the area more vulnerable to the impacts of the recession. Some areas of north and central Ilkeston, Kirk Hallam and Long Eaton are ranked amongst the 20 per cent most deprived communities in England.
- 17 Erewash has a predominantly white population with the majority of people being classified as White British (96.6 per cent). When combined with the other white categorisations, the total white population of the borough is 98.1 per cent. This compares with the proportion for the Region of 98.5 per cent and all of England at 90.9 per cent. The black and minority ethnic (BME) and mixed ethnic people represent 1.9 per cent of the Borough's population. The distribution of BME residents varies significantly across the Borough.
- 18 Current unemployment figures show an increase of 4.64 per cent (143 people) over the last three months and an increase of 75 per cent (1,384 people) more than those recorded 12 months previously. The 2008 gross weekly median earnings for Erewash Citizens is £477.60, which is above the average for both Derbyshire and the East Midlands (National Average - £479.30).
- 19 As at September 2009, 4.7 per cent of the Borough's working population was receiving Job Seekers Allowance, this is above the average for the region (4.1 per cent) and England as a whole (4.2 per cent). Also, 6.1 per cent of the working population was in receipt of incapacity benefits, which is slightly lower than the regional average 6.5 per cent. Twenty four per cent of the population has poor literacy skills and 25 per cent have poor numeracy skills.
- 20 The average cost of a home in Erewash is £129,482, higher than the average for Derbyshire, but much lower than the East Midlands average of £164,886. Over the last year, prices have dropped by 10 per cent - this is smaller than the average 14.8 per cent decrease across the county. 110 new affordable homes were provided in 2007/08 out of the total across Derbyshire of 560.
- 21 The Audit Commission's most recent Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) in 2008 gave Erewash Borough Council a rating of 'Fair'.

## The Council

- 22** The Council is in the overall control of the Conservative party who hold 57 per cent of the seats. There are 51 elected Councillors representing 22 wards with 28 Conservative, 19 Labour, 2 Liberal-Democrat and 2 Independent Councillors. It has a leader and cabinet system of governance.
- 23** The Council is responsible for a wide range of facilities and services, many of which are delivered in-house. The Council no longer has its own housing stock, which was transferred to Three Valleys Housing Association in 2002.
- 24** A management restructuring of the Council's staff was undertaken in March 2009.

## The Council's Benefits service

- 25** 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 a council has a responsibility to pay the right benefit to the right person at the right time.
- 26** Erewash Borough Council administers its own Benefits Service, with 18 staff being directly employed to provide the Service. The Service is responsible for administering a revenue budget in excess of £25 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 Benefits Service awards payments of £18 million in Housing Benefit and over £7 million in Council Tax Benefit to customers in the Erewash area, who are on low incomes, to help meet their rental and Council Tax liabilities.
- 27** The Service is managed within the Council's Resources Directorate and is the responsibility of the Exchequer Services Manager. The Service expects to be dealing with nearly 11,000 cases during the current year. Comparative information shows that the Service is being provided at a lower than average cost in relation to other councils.
- 28** From 1 April 2008, the Audit Commission became responsible for benefits service inspections, following the transfer of powers from the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate.
- 29** The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 sets out the framework for giving local people and local communities more influence and power to improve their lives. Councils must therefore provide a service that meets ever changing customer and legislative requirements including:
- reporting on the Department of Communities and Local Government National Indicators (NIs) with effect from 1 April 2008; and
  - contributing to the delivery of other national, regional and local priorities aimed at reducing poverty and addressing social and economic inequity, including targets within the Local Area Agreement.

## 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. With Erewash Borough Council the reasons for commissioning the inspection were:

- poor performance in relation to Best Value Performance Indicators; and
- unsatisfactory quality of data.

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# How good is the service?

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## What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 31 The Derbyshire countywide Local Strategic Partnership sets out its priorities for 2009-2014 as:
- to improve opportunities for employment, skills and housing;
  - to reduce crime, the fear of crime and improve our living environment; and
  - to encourage healthy and active lifestyles for all.
- 32 The Erewash Local Strategic Partnership vision is:
- Erewash aims to become a vibrant and prosperous borough, where an excellent quality of life is enjoyed by everyone**
- 33 The Erewash Local Strategic Partnership has 18 objectives in its Sustainable Community Strategy that contribute to Derbyshire countywide Local Strategic Partnership priorities, These include:
- reduce barriers to employment and the unemployment rate;
  - reduce poverty through increased benefit take-up and help people into work;
  - facilitate new and improved housing to meet the needs of our residents; and
  - reduce the fear of crime and perceptions of anti-social behaviour.
- 34 Erewash's Corporate Plan sets out its 5 aims and 22 objectives. The aims are:
- making Erewash a good place for all to live life to the full;
  - making Erewash Safer and cleaner;
  - excellent Customer focused Services;
  - planning for a Brighter Future; and
  - Erewash ..... A well run Council.
- 35 Service aims are narrow in the way that they contribute to corporate, regional or national priorities. Corporate aims and priorities are not fully linked to the Service and the Service has not explained in its Service Unit Plan 2009/10 how it contributes to the overall corporate aims and objectives.
- 36 The Benefits Service Plan links to the corporate priority of 'Excellent Customer focused Services' through its key objective to process New Claims and Change of Circumstances in a timely manner. It does not directly link to any other corporate objectives, such as 'Assist in reducing the levels of crime' under the aim of Making Erewash Safer and Cleaner.

## How good is the service?

37 The Benefits service's stated mission is to:

**Pay the right Benefit, at the right time, to the right people.**

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

- 38 The Service is responding to the needs of local people. It has acted on surveys of customer experience of the Customer Service Centres, to improve the opening times and offer an appointment and drop in service. It has also responded positively to change working practices as a direct result of complaints. The appointment and drop service has been available since March 2009 at the Customer Service Centres at Ilkeston and Long Eaton town halls. Appointments are available from 8.30am to 10.30am from Monday to Friday.
- 39 The Service listens to its customers. There are regular surveys to gather customer views and to help evaluate service improvements. Since April 2008 customer surveys have covered interview facilities, telephone service and home visiting service. Views on areas such as access to interview facilities and the impact of the hand delivery of benefit award letters have been sought. Outcomes from customer feedback and complaints are publicised on the Service webpage under 'You said. We did'. The Service is also in the early stages of engaging with Three Valleys Housing's customer group to seek the views of customers directly.
- 40 There are good engagements with local partners which are still developing. Formal Service Level Agreements are in place with partners, such as Registered Social Landlords (RSLs), Jobcentre Plus, Housing Options and the Pension Service. Regular meetings take place with partners, such as the CAB. Staff attend the Erewash Housing and Homeless Forum which provides access to several other agencies, and they attend the Landlords Forum which is run jointly with Amber Valley BC. There are several examples of how effective dialogue with partners has improved access to the service for vulnerable people, including verification of claims and access to DHP for those threatened with homelessness. On a day-to-day basis partners can access the Service through a named contact or email. Local landlords find email access to be very helpful. However, there are opportunities to develop the support and relationship with partners further in such areas as increased benefit take-up.
- 41 Through working with partners the Service has become more accessible to a wider range of people. Staff employed by three of the RSLs and the Housing Options team are trained to receive and verify benefit claims on behalf of the Service. Claims that are fully verified can then access a fast track processing service. The Housing Options team in particular welcome this arrangement because clients are able to secure a tenancy in the knowledge that benefit will be paid quickly.

- 42 Most customers can access the service with ease. Personal callers can visit either of the two Customer Service Centres, where extended hours are offered from 8.30 am to 5.00 pm Monday to Thursday and 8.30am to 4.30 pm Friday. The main RSLs and Housing Option team support their own customers in making benefit applications. The Service offers customers a choice of an office appointment or a telephone claim service. The telephone claim service has been offered on a trial basis to customers making a new claim appointment. About ten per cent of customers have chosen this service and it is now being rolled out to all customers. Home welfare visits are offered to customers that cannot call at the office. Further developments to improve access to the Service include an outreach service in the Sandiacre area that has been agreed in partnership with Sure Start.
- 43 Telephone and email customers get a mixed level of service. Partners and customers consider the response to email enquiries to be excellent. Replies are made within 24 hours and often in a matter of hours. This was confirmed by our mystery shopping where a detailed and accurate response was received within 24 hours. The telephone service is available until 8.00 pm Monday to Friday and 9.30 to 4.30 Saturday. The Customer Service Centre handles most calls to the Council. Out of hours support is provided by 'Call Derbyshire' from 6.00 pm to 8.00 pm and on Saturdays. Calls are answered by the Customer Service Centre quickly after a brief recorded message. Performance monitoring shows that 80per cent of calls are answered within 20 seconds. This is a slight improvement on 2008/09 when 76 per cent were answered within 20 seconds. Most people are put through with fewer than 5 per cent abandoning their call. Benefit enquires are not dealt with at the first point of contact but put through to the Service. Our mystery shopping confirmed that calls are answered by the Service promptly by a benefit assessment officer who also gives their name. Advice is accurate and given in a professional manner. The out-of-hours service adds little value as customer service advisors are not skilled to deal with benefit enquiries. Callers are sign-posted back to the Council's website or advised to ring the Service during normal office hours. This makes access to the service more difficult for customers who cannot make contact within normal office hours, such as those who are working.
- 44 Customers service advisers and assessment team staff work well together to provide good customer care. Joint training sessions ensure that knowledge levels and understanding are maintained. Most staff possess a level 3 NVQ in customer care and are trained to advise customers on benefit related matters, including the completion of benefit application forms. Home visiting officers receive and verify claims on behalf of the Pensions Service, and provide advice on other welfare benefits such as Disability Living Allowance (DLA). People who have claimed benefits for the first time receive a follow up home visit where their entitlement is explained and they are given an information pack on other services and benefits that are available. Other people making a new claim are telephoned and advised of the outcome of their claim in addition to receiving an award letter through the post or by email. Partners, such as landlords and welfare rights advisors, are positive about the professionalism demonstrated by officers dealing with enquires in person and over the telephone.

## How good is the service?

- 45 Benefit take-up activity is adequate but outcomes are unclear. A benefit take-up strategy and action plan are in place. Leaflets promoting benefits are made available through doctors and dentist surgeries, libraries, post offices and leisure centres. A number of positive activities to promote benefit take-up have been undertaken. For example:
- providing a 'one stop shop' style service at tenant forums and meetings run by Three Valleys Housing Association;
  - inclusion of advice about claiming Council Tax Benefit with the annual Council Tax leaflet;
  - visiting officers identifying potential entitlements to other benefits such as pension credit;
  - identifying and writing direct to people who are most likely to benefit from a DHP; and
  - publicising changes in rules in the local press, such as the change that allows Child Benefit to be ignored when working out what benefits people are entitled to.
- 46 Use of demographic data to inform take-up activity is a new and emerging development for the Service. Even so it has been used to identify the need for an outreach service in the Sandiacre area. However, the Service does not evaluate the effectiveness of its activities so it cannot be sure that it is targeting the right people, or what success it is having. This is something it has recognised and it has appointed an officer who will have a key role in managing future benefit take-up initiatives. The lack of measured outcomes means the Service does not know whether it is targeting its limited resources to best effect.
- 47 Benefit application forms are only adequate. Customer surveys have highlighted that some people find the form difficult to complete. A shortened application form has been introduced for customers of the Housing Options team, which makes access to claiming benefit more straightforward. The standard application form has some positive features, including information about why it is necessary to provide supporting evidence, and what happens after an application has been received. But there are some inaccuracies as to who qualifies for the backdating of a claim, and there is no advice for people who do not read English. By not considering the potential needs of all groups in the community some will find the form difficult to understand and complete and may not claim benefit to which they could be entitled.
- 48 There are some weaknesses in the design of other forms used by customers. Forms such as the DHP application form and the appeal form have not been formally approved for readability. The DHP application form contains a badly worded statement that the customer must read and acknowledge their understanding by signing. Poorly worded forms lead to confusion and risk the customer not reporting changes in circumstance.

- 49** Housing Benefit award letters are unclear. While they comply with Housing Benefit regulations they are difficult to interpret, even by professional partners. This leads to more requests for clarification from customers. The Service recognises this and is preparing a review of the letters. Meanwhile the Service either telephones or visits customers to explain the outcome of a claim, the content of the award letter, their rights to seek a review and their responsibility to report changes. This initiative has been welcomed by users of the Service.
- 50** Adequate information leaflets are available to customers. Although information is presented appropriately for those who can read English, it is not the case for other groups within the community. There is an inconsistent approach to providing information in other languages and formats. Some, but not all, leaflets bear the Crystal Mark as a sign of clarity of content. Weaknesses in the design of leaflets will leave some customers being unable to obtain the information they need.
- 51** Online electronic access to the Service is satisfactory. The Service has a webpage that is easy to follow and understand. It provides advice about Housing and Council Tax Benefits and includes a benefit calculator so customers can see if they are likely to qualify. Customers can also download advice leaflets. Access to partner websites, such as CAB and Derby Housing Aid are provided, and also links to the DirectGov website where a 'Benefit Advisor' section is located. However, there is no encouragement or explanation about why customers should consider visiting these websites. For example, customers visiting the Benefit Adviser website can be assessed online for entitlement to several social security benefits.
- 52** Service standards are well publicised. There is a corporate Customer Charter and a Customer Care policy that sets out the Council's approach. Customers can access information about service standards for the Customer Service Centre, assessment team and counter-fraud team through the Service webpage. Those calling at the Customer Service Centres will find customer standards leaflets on display, and information about performance being broadcast on large monitors. There are posters advertising the fast track 'Two day promise' for customers making a new claim. However, there is no information displayed about how long a customer will wait to be seen. By raising awareness of the standards of service customers can expect, they are better able to measure and comment on the level of service they receive.
- 53** Customers and users have not informed the development of service standards. Service standards for claims processing reflect historic national standards and have not been updated to be more representative of improved performance. There is a gap between actual performance and the standards that customers are led to expect, meaning that current publicised service standards do not reflect the improvements made in recent years. For example, the service standard for new claims is 30 days but performance is closer to 25 days. More challenging formal Service standards will raise customer expectation and provide the added drive for further improvement.

## How good is the service?

- 54 The Council has given a commitment to a range of actions to support those affected by the recession. It has worked with its partners to make sure that people know how to get support on money, debt and housing. The Council has also funded a full-time support officer at the local CAB to provide advice. A specific website 'Beat the Crunch' has been created where users can get advice on a range of matters. In recognition of falling stocks and shares values, the Service has taken action to identify those customers who have seen the value of their investments fall and award extra help where it can.
- 55 The Service has coped well with rising claim numbers. Even though the number of people claiming benefits has risen by 14 per cent to 10,616 between July 2008 and October 2009, there has been no noticeable decline in service. Extra funding from the DWP has been used to employ two temporary staff.
- 56 DHPs are managed well to help those most in need. Each year funds are granted by the DWP. Councils have the discretion to top up the funds using their own resources to a specified limit. In 2008/09, the Council topped up the DHP fund by the maximum amount allowed to give a budget of £60,944. At the end of the year it had successfully spent all but £18.89 of the available budget. It has allocated a maximum budget of £63,488 for 2009/10 and anticipates that it will spend the vast majority supporting vulnerable people.
- 57 Counter-fraud work is adequately publicised with users and staff alike. The Council's website includes information about counter-fraud work and customers can get information about how to report a suspected fraud. Cases that are successfully prosecuted are publicised in the local press. By raising awareness of its counter-fraud work the public will have confidence about efforts to protect taxpayers' money.
- 58 The Service has not responded proportionately to an increased risk of fraud. There has been no assessment of the potentially increased risk of fraud created by rising numbers of people claiming benefit. Fraud investigator targets for 2009/10 remain unchanged and there are no plans to review the resource of the investigation team. The existing Fraud Manager position has remained vacant for some time with no final decision about the future of that post being made. Without a considered and proportionate response to the potential threat from fraudulent activity, the Council cannot have assurance that it is protecting taxpayers' money from fraudsters.

## Diversity

- 59 The Council is meeting basic requirements for equality and diversity. It has achieved level 2 of the former Equality Standard for Local Government and is working towards achieving the 'Developing' level of the new Equality Framework. During 2008/09, the Service conducted an equalities impact assessment and as a result produced the Benefits Equality Commitments Action Plan. Through the plan it is working with partners to identify hard to reach groups within the community. Several initiatives have taken place, such as, joining the Three Valleys Housing roadshows and engaging with Sure Start to develop an outreach service. Effective equality impact assessments are aimed at providing Councils with assurance that the needs of all groups are being considered and met.

- 60 The Council has adequate arrangements in place to support people who do not speak English. The demand for interpretation services is very low but Language Line is available for those whose first language is not English. Leaflets provide signposting advice in other languages. However, some customers may have difficulty with the benefit application form as there is no signposting included. Similarly, the website provides advice on the translation service available but only in English.
- 61 The Council makes adequate provision for disabled people to access the Service. Reception areas are compliant with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act and the Council offers facilities such as hearing induction loops. Documents are available in Braille on request, and officers who can use sign language can be called upon when needed. The Council's website includes facilities to help visually impaired users.
- 62 The Council has some good arrangements in place for supporting vulnerable people:
- people who cannot come to the office are visited at home to help with completion of claims for benefits, pension credit, attendance allowance and DLA;
  - Housing Options operate a Rent Deposit Scheme that encourages landlords to take tenants that rely on Housing Benefit; and
  - there is a sound Safeguards policy in place to support vulnerable people to manage their Housing Benefit and, where appropriate, to make payments direct to the landlord.
- 63 DHP are being awarded in line with the Council's policy. It is the Council's goal to support vulnerable people, and in particular those who face the threat of homelessness or who are under 25. The availability of DHP is understood by staff and partners who actively promote its availability. Through close links with the Housing Options team DHP is helping people to secure tenancies and avoid homelessness. Customers that have a shortfall between the rent they pay and the LHA that they are entitled to, are told of the availability of DHP in their benefit award letters. By proactively promoting DHP the Council is able to help those who are the most vulnerable in the community.

### Service outcomes

- 64 Performance against the 'Right time' indicator NI 181 was 13.5 days at 31 March 2009. DWP are unable to publish any comparative data for 2008/09 due to difficulties with extracting the data from Council ICT systems. This is a national issue. Councils are responsible for setting their own targets. Therefore the Service has decided to measure its claims processing performance against the average number of days to process new claims and the average days taken to process changes in circumstances.

## How good is the service?

- 65 The Service is providing an adequate claims processing service. In 2008/09 it set itself a target for processing new claims in an average of 25 days and exceeded this by processing claims in an average of 23.5 days. It is not possible to formally compare national performance for 2008/09 due to a lack of comparable data because of a change in what DWP require councils to report. However, the Service does benchmark itself against 149 other councils and this shows that the Service performed better than the group average of 24.7 days. The Service aims to improve on this performance and had set a target of 23 days for 2009/10. Part of its strategy for achieving this is to encourage customers to provide evidence in support of a claim at the outset. In return the Service offers a 'Two day promise' to fast track and decide a claim within two days. Since its introduction in April 2009 about ten per cent of customers have taken advantage of the promise. There has been no analysis of the impact of the promise, or how many claims have actually been decided in two days. But improving processing times overall show that other customers are not receiving a poorer service because of this initiative.
- 66 Customers who report a change in circumstance receive an adequate service. The Service target for dealing with a change in circumstance in 2008/09 was an average of 9 days but it processed changes in an average of 9.7 days. As with new claims there is no national comparable data available, but this performance compares favourably with the benchmark group average of 9.8 days.
- 67 Service outcomes are being maintained. Unaudited data for 2009/10 indicates that claims processing performance is likely to be around that for 2008/09. This is not in line with the targets that the Service set for 2009/10 but there has been a substantial increase in claims activity due to the increased numbers of people claiming benefit. The Service has taken a considered approach to the increased workloads and employed two additional staff on a temporary basis and is using overtime to manage the peaks and troughs in workloads.
- 68 The accuracy of claims processing remains relatively low, compared to the Council's own target. The Service set a standard of 99 per cent accuracy for 2008/09 but only achieved 98.2 per cent. There is no comparable data for that year against which to assess performance, but historically accuracy has been low compared with other councils. Some progress has been made against its 2007/08 performance of 97 per cent. This improvement will have been partially achieved by a renewed emphasis on claims checking and training that staff receive. Quality checks are undertaken of all staff, with the percentage of checks increasing for individuals depending on experience and the level of errors being found. Outcomes from quality checking are fed back to assessors weekly, and a summary of the team outcomes is also circulated. Intelligence from the quality checking informs areas for future training and reduces the number of wrong payments to customers.

- 69** Customers who ask for a decision on their claims to be looked at again (reconsiderations) or who appeal against a decision face lengthy delays. Just over half (57 per cent) of customers that asked for a decision to be reconsidered during 2008/09 had this done within 4 weeks. Although this is an improvement on the previous year it falls well short of the average performance of 77.8 per cent for the benchmark group. Customers who then go on to ask for a decision to be considered by the Tribunals Service face further delays. Records for 2009/10 show that customers are waiting on average 170 days. The Service is aware of this problem and has been dealing with underlying issues of the quality of decision making. There has been retraining for officers making initial decisions and for customer service staff who provide advice. A statement of reasons is now provided to customers so they can better understand past decisions. Delays in dealing with reconsiderations and appeals leave vulnerable customers in uncertainty and potential hardship.
- 70** The Service has effective arrangements to help prevent evictions. It works with the Housing Options team to ensure that entitlements are quickly assessed and where possible DHP are awarded. Three Valleys Housing Association has customised access to ICT records so it can see the status of outstanding benefit applications in rent arrears cases. Through the Safeguards Policy landlords can trigger consideration of payments direct after four weeks rent arrears have accrued rather than waiting the statutory eight weeks. Customers who seek advice because they have a notice seeking possession or eviction, have their claim dealt with as a priority. Having sound arrangements in place helps relieve hardship experienced by the most vulnerable and supports the Council's aims of reducing homelessness.
- 71** Claims are verified adequately before benefit is paid. All staff involved in the verification of benefit claims are fully trained. This includes customer service staff and staff employed by partners undertaking verification. A clear and comprehensive guide is available for staff about completing a benefit claim form and what supporting evidence is required. Advice is included in the claim for customers completing their own claim form and a separate leaflet is also available. Verifying claims fully at first point of contact enables claims to be dealt with under the "Two day promise" and helps prevent fraud entering the system.
- 72** The Service is not doing enough to identify unreported changes of circumstances. Customers are advised of the need to report changes at the outset of a claim and in benefit award letters. Staff use diary dates to review cases where there is a predictable change. But there is no strategy for identifying cases that are at most risk from change, which are most likely to go unreported. Without an effective strategy for detecting unreported changes the Service does not know whether it continues to pay the right benefit to the right people.
- 73** Overpayment recovery during 2008/09 has been good. The amount of overpaid benefit recovered as a percentage of overpayments raised during the year increased to 84 per cent from 62.2 per cent in the previous year. This compares well with other councils performance.

## How good is the service?

- 74** A balanced approach is taken to overpayment recovery. Customers who have difficulty repaying debts have their financial affairs reviewed to arrive at a realistic level of repayment. Those who have no prospects of repaying an overpayment may have a debt considered for write off. By having a flexible approach the Service is avoiding unnecessary hardship to those who are most vulnerable.
- 75** Efforts to raise fraud awareness are limited. Counter-fraud officers attend the monthly staff meeting and take the opportunity to raise awareness and provide feedback. Cases that have been prosecuted are reported in the local press and on the Council's website. The Service relies on national publicity campaigns to raise awareness of the threat of fraud. There is no specific fraud awareness training for Councillors, other services or partner organisations. The outcome is that the overall number of referrals is only about half of the level of similar councils meaning some fraudsters are not being detected.
- 76** Arrangements for focusing fraud prevention activity are adequate:
- a customised referral form is in place, and investigators support staff to enable the form to be completed well;
  - Housing Benefit Matching Service and National Fraud Initiative data match scans are sifted before referral to investigators. This leaves investigators free to concentrate on investigative activities;
  - referrals are scored on a risk matrix so that investigation work is carried out on cases that are most likely to result in a proven fraud; and
  - all other cases are passed to the visiting team so they can review those claims.
- 77** The Service is generally successful in investigating benefit fraud. In 2008/09, it applied 54 sanctions (a formal caution, administrative penalty or prosecution) against persons committing benefit fraud, which is slightly above the average for the benchmarking group of 149 councils. It works well with DWP investigators undertaking joint investigations and prosecutions. It has also been part of multi-agency activities with the police and the Environment Agency to combat crime in the district. By working with partners and prosecuting fraudsters the Service is helping to make the community a safer place and protecting taxpayers' money.

## User experience and satisfaction

- 78** Customer satisfaction is good. Recently the Council has undertaken targeted surveys to gauge how customers view the Service. In March 2008 a survey of the telephone service showed that 87.4 per cent of customers said they were happy with the service. They were positive about the politeness and friendliness of the staff. But just over one in eight were disappointed with the delay in getting through on the telephone. In February 2009 90 per cent of customers who had experienced a new claim home visit appreciated the service, welcoming the hand delivery of award letters and finding the information packs useful. The last major survey covering quality of the Service was the Best Value Customer Survey in 2006/07. This showed overall satisfaction levels were above average across all areas and had also improved when compared with the same survey undertaken in 2004.

- 79** Facilities for customers visiting the Service are good. The main reception areas at Ilkeston and Long Eaton have been redesigned and refurbished providing a welcoming and comfortable environment. Customers are greeted as they enter the reception area where brief enquires are dealt with and others signposted to a customer service officer. The areas are well signposted and a basic manual queue management system is in place temporarily while an electronic system is installed. In 2008/09, 93 per cent of customers were seen within the service target of 85 per cent within 30 minutes. Appointments can be made from 8.30am to 10.30 am and through the drop in service there is some flexibility to offer fixed appoints after 10.30. All interviews are conducted in private interview rooms. Having good facilities helps lessen the stress and anxiety some customers feel when dealing with large organisations.

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### Is the service delivering value for money?

- 80** The Service is delivering adequate value for money. Comparisons with the Council's CIPFA nearest neighbour comparison group show that in 2008/09, the Service's administration costs were slightly higher than the average, during which service outcomes were adequate – as highlighted in paragraphs 62 to 75 above. This reflects the Council's own analysis of value for money in its 2009/10 Service Plan. However, benchmarking data for 2008/09 compiled by the Council shows the cost of the Service is about 20 per cent below the average cost for the its own benchmarking group, but performance is around average. Staffing cost comparisons in this group, in particular, compare very favourably. Although the Service employs fewer fraud investigators than other councils the outcomes in terms of numbers of sanctions applied is higher than the average. This means that investigators are delivering more with fewer resources.
- 81** Opportunities for sharing resources with partners have not been fully considered. There are some good operational practices in place, such as verification of claims by partners which ease the workload on the Service, and joint investigations and prosecutions with DWP investigators reducing the cost of prosecuting cases. However, there has been a delay in making a final decision about the option of a joint counter-fraud service with a neighbouring council resulting in the Fraud Manager position being vacant for some time.
- 82** There is a sound awareness of the overall cost to the Council of administering payments of benefit. Most benefit expenditure is reimbursed by the government through a direct subsidy. The Council has influenced the level of contribution it is left to make from its own funds by reducing areas of spending that do not get fully reimbursed. This has been done by reducing the amount of overpaid benefit due to official error, and a move away from higher cost bed and breakfast accommodation for homeless people which has reduced Housing Benefit levels. The Council funded 4.93 per cent of the benefit bill in 2008/09 compared with 5.45 per cent 2007/08 saving Council Tax payers money. By reducing costs of benefit expenditure more money is available for other services that the Council provides.

## How good is the service?

- 83** There is no systematic evaluation of whether activities deliver value for money. For example, the training plan does not give clear details of the cost of training, what the objective of the training is, or how its effectiveness will be determined. Similarly there has been no evaluation of take-up activities. Without this information the Council is unable to prove whether the most cost-effective methods have been used and that desired outcomes have been delivered.
- 84** Changes have been introduced that are more cost-effective. Customers are invited to have benefit notification letters sent by email rather than post. A successful drive to encourage customers to opt for payments by BACs has resulted in 93 per cent of benefit payments being made by this method. These initiatives are more efficient, secure and save administration and postage costs.
- 85** The management of overpayments has improved following an Internal Audit report. Debts are now controlled more easily by using new ICT, and responsibility for recovery rests with the assessment teams. At the end of 2008/09 £817,668 was owed in outstanding overpayments. By the end of October 2009 this had risen to £846,994. Monthly monitoring and reporting of outstanding debts enables cases to be targeted for action. Overpayments that are difficult to recover are being referred to a debt collecting agent on a trial basis. Eighty four per cent of overpayments raised during 2008/09 were recovered.
- 86** Write off procedures for debts that cannot be recovered are being used effectively. Before the introduction of the new ICT system debts on the old system had not been managed effectively by using write off. The Service has been reviewing older debts which have been reduced by about £134,000. This has resulted in a clearer focus on recovery of debts that offer greater prospects for successful recovery.

# What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

## What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 87 The Council has been comparatively slow in delivering improvements overall. The CPA carried out by the Audit Commission in 2008 rated the Council as 'fair', compared to a rating of 'weak' in 2004.
- 88 Historically the Service has a mixed track record of delivering improvements; however following the implementation of changes introduced by the service manager and substantial investments in technology, a trend of improvement has been initiated in some key areas.
- New claims processing performance has improved from 40.1 days in 2005/06 to 23.34 days in 2008/09.
  - Speed in dealing with changes of circumstances has improved from 12.8 days in 2005/06 to 9.68 days in 2008/09, but the proportion of claims processed accurately has not been consistently improving.

**Table 1 Table 1 Performance Indicators**

Mixed performance is shown against the key indicators of service delivery

Best Value Performance indicator	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Average time taken to make a full decision on new claims. (days)	40.1	29.6	26.6	23.34
Average time taken to make a full decision on a change of circumstances. (days)	12.8	7.4	10.9	9.68
Claims processed correctly (percentage)	99.2	98.2	97.42	98.2
Overpayments recovered as a percentage of the total of overpayment debt	30.32	40.38	48.93	37.0

Source: Audit Commission and Erewash BC

- 89 A sustained focus has been applied to improve the time taken to process new claims for benefit. This has been maintained despite a substantial increase in claims during the economic recession. On average customers are receiving their benefit more quickly than they did in previous years, reducing the potential for financial hardship to arise.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 90 The introduction of a 'Two day promise' has improved outcomes for some customers. Those who are able to provide all necessary information when initially submitting their claim are dealt with swiftly and customers are appreciative of this opportunity. Improved average processing times for all customers demonstrates the success of this initiative.
- 91 Technology has been used effectively to improve the service. A new benefits computer system and document management systems have been successfully implemented during 2007/08 to increase efficiency and quality assurance. Further enhancements are being progressively added to these systems, to deliver extra capabilities. The original system implementation caused an understandable but negative impact on the speed of service delivery during parts of that year.
- 92 Performance in addressing fraud and potential fraud has not shown systematic improvement in proportion to the increase in claims. Targets for sanctions are based proportionally on the number of people claiming benefit; however, there has been no review undertaken to consider how the number of sanctions will be increased to achieve targets.
- 93 The Service has not delivered improvement in dealing with appeals in a timely manner, with some customers having to wait several months to hear of the outcome. Arrangements and processes for dealing with appeals have now been changed, although sustained improvement in outcomes still cannot be demonstrated.
- 94 Changes have been implemented to improve the quality of data and management information collected by the Service. The Council's Auditors have assessed that the arrangements for ensuring data is accurate and robust have improved from the previous year. Accurate data enables managers and members to make better informed decisions when planning improvement for the service.
- 95 The accuracy of processing claims correctly has fluctuated over recent years. Performance has fallen below the average of other councils, with a particular deterioration during the year that the new systems were implemented. Recalculating claims through previous inaccuracy results in unnecessary costs.
- 96 The approach to dealing with customers who visit in person has been refined and improved. Appointments are available at specific times, based on identified customer preferences, and reception areas have been dramatically improved. Also changes to working practices in this area have notably improved the customer experience. Face-to-face customers are dealt with by Customer Advisers, who are fully trained in Benefits procedures and can deal with all enquiries at the first point of contact. There has been a significantly stronger focus given to increasing the training provided for all staff. High-quality customer service lessens the potential stress for people dealing with difficult circumstances.
- 97 Outcomes for first time users of the service have been notably improved. Benefit notification letters are hand delivered by staff from the service, who are then able to discuss any concerns and queries that customers may have. Feedback from new customers shows that almost all of them considered this to be a highly valued approach.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 98 The Service can demonstrate that it is improving the delivery of value for money over time. Administration costs per head of population are decreasing at the same time that the volume of claims that the Service is processing is increasing. Improved quality control processes have sought to reduce unnecessary costs caused by errors, although there are still issues around the overall levels of accuracy. However, there is no structured and planned approach to delivering future improvement in terms of value for money. While the Service clearly does give due regard to improving efficiency when reviewing its processes, there are not specific plans or formal targets for delivering financial savings. A lack of formal plans and targets make it difficult for members and senior managers to understand easily whether the service is improving efficiency.

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### How well does the service manage performance?

- 99 Leadership within the Service is enthusiastic and committed. Strong and productive relationships have been developed with staff and partners which is helping to establish a culture of improvement. Managers are active in improving fair access to the service. Staff are representative of the community they serve and demonstrate a good understanding of customers needs.
- 100 Robust and challenging decisions have been made in some areas, such as the substantial investment to improve customer reception facilities and improve access through new technology, despite financial challenges presented by the economic recession. Greater commitment has been made to training staff, including those working for partners who are engaged in verifying claims. A notable range of initiatives have been implemented across the service. These are set out in the Housing and Council Tax Benefits Initiatives Roadmap 2006/09, which relates activities to specific aims and objectives and forms the basis of an overall project plan. However, some key decisions, such as whether to progress the proposed joint approach to fraud with a neighbouring council, have been deferred. Failure to address key decisions creates uncertainty and can reduce effectiveness accordingly.
- 101 Senior managers and councillors show a clear understanding of their role in managing the performance of the service and demonstrate a clear and consistent support for and commitment to the service, in terms of day-to-day activity. Regular and appropriate performance monitoring information is provided, including specific briefings for councillors. But clear direction in terms of broader aims and objectives is not being provided and it cannot be clearly seen what changes have been made as a result of intervention.
- 102 Performance management of the Service is co-ordinated well with the customer services function in most key areas. Performance monitoring reports include key information and feedback about the quality of service, alongside statistical information, but budgetary information is not yet incorporated into this process. Face-to-face customers contact the service through the two main reception areas and there is a strong and seamless link with the back office roles. Contact through correspondence and electronic mail is dealt with efficiently in accordance with service standards, but telephone enquiries can lead to a more variable response, owing to the use of an answer phone.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 103** Although there is a current service plan in place, this expired in March 2010 and the Service has not developed a clear longer term view of what it wants to achieve, including its post April 2010 medium and longer term aims, aspirations and priorities. The Service Plan identifies potential weaknesses and challenges and suitably reflects them in its current aims, which are appropriately directed at improving outcomes for customers. It is unclear to what extent the plan has been informed by the views and needs of customers and partners to ensure that their priorities have been considered. There is a limited link between the Benefits Service and how it contributes to delivering the Council's broader corporate priorities beyond this. Similarly, related national and regional priorities are not effectively addressed. The Service's 2006/09 Roadmap is not sufficiently robust or detailed to be the basis for a future medium term improvement plan. A lack of a longer term plan reduces the Service's ability to contribute to the strategic objectives of local and sub-regional partners, such as reducing worklessness.
- 104** Targets have been set for performance against a range of local and national indicators, but there is scope for some to be more challenging and they are not directly informed by consultation with customers and partners. There are not clearly defined milestones in place to enable adequate scrutiny of the progress towards objectives. This makes it more difficult for members and senior managers to see whether targets are likely to be met, or to intervene where necessary in a timely manner. Also, clearly defined and measurable targets have not been formally set for delivering improved value for money. Therefore the Service cannot easily demonstrate that it is systematically improving efficiency. However, major projects undertaken within the service do have explicit and suitable arrangements for measuring and determining the benefits and efficiencies realised.
- 105** The Service displays a strong willingness to learn from others as well as its own experiences. Partners confirm that their feedback is regularly sought and taken account of. The Council has an effective system in place for using compliments, comments and complaints positively. Customers confirm that both the Service and members respond well to their feedback. Learning from other councils has been used effectively to review the approach taken to dealing with appeals. But it is unclear how staff are able to influence the development of the Service or have input into the service planning process. The Service also benchmarks itself against a wide range of peers through CIPFA, although it is not yet systematically using this information to support its own improvement. It has itself established a substantial benchmarking club of comparable councils. In the absence of national comparative performance information being available for NIs, it is able to use this to help understand its performance compared to the councils it benchmarks with. Comparison with others enables a greater understanding of potential opportunities to deliver sustainable improvement.

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## Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 106** The Service has the people, skills and capability to deliver improvements based on its current knowledge. A lack of clear priorities and plans for the medium term mean that it cannot be entirely confident that this position will be preserved. Robust future plans enable resource requirements to be forecast effectively and for contingency arrangements to be developed.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 107** Councillors are clearly supportive of the service; however it is unclear whether sufficiently robust challenge is being applied to drive forward improvement. The senior managers have weekly meetings with the Portfolio Holder, to discuss current and emerging issues. Active and effective member engagement is important in ensuring that the service has sufficient resources to deliver its objectives and meet its commitments.
- 108** Staff, in both the front office and back office functions, demonstrate a high level of commitment to improving the service. They are very positive in respect of the increased quality and quantity of training provided, although they acknowledge that they are not systematically involved in the development of service plans. Fully engaging all staff in the development of future plans adds capacity, by ensuring that they assume ownership of and responsibility for delivering the plans.
- 109** The Service is progressively using ICT to enhance quality and efficiency. An electronic claim form will shortly be introduced, to reduce time and effort consumed by paper based systems. Facilities for customers and partners to check the progress of claims through secure online access will reduce the number of direct enquiries and add further capacity to deal with priority tasks. A key project to fully integrate the benefits system into the corporate Customer Relationship Management system will improve the quality of service significantly for those choosing the telephone to access the service.
- 110** Appropriate financial arrangements are in place to deliver improvement. Budgets within the service are appropriately monitored and managed. The Council has an overall medium term financial plan in place, but as the formal plans for the Service are limited, it cannot be assured that resources will be sufficient to deliver the necessary improvements to the Service.
- 111** The Council has in place appropriate human resources mechanisms to support the needs of the service. Individual staff development is managed through the corporate Employee Performance Development Review system. Comprehensive training and development plans are in place for the service and take account of feedback from customers and partners. All staff have access to NVQ training and many have already achieved accreditations. The Council is in the process of relaunching its middle management development programme to add capacity at that level. Training provided is systematically evaluated to measure its effectiveness and revised accordingly. Staff sickness levels are modest and not reducing capacity. Similar there is a low turnover of staff within the service. Peaks in demand for services have been effectively managed by an appropriate use of overtime and agency staff.
- 112** Key procurement activity by the service is adequately managed. Business cases are developed for key projects. External project management support is used to mitigate risks and post project reviews assess whether the intended benefits have been delivered. However, not all investments or changes to processes and procedures are formally evaluated, to determine the impact on customers and in improving efficiency.
- 113** The Service has a clear track record in acquiring investment. Following historic difficulties, financial support of £700,000 was provided by DWP, in addition to Council funding, to purchase the ICT systems which were implemented during 2007/08. Efficiencies have been realised from this and reinvested in the service.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 114** The Council has continued to ensure that it offers consistent financial support to the delivery of the service and its customers, whilst maintaining service costs at below the average for comparable councils. New reception areas have been provided, incorporating a range of modern technology. Home visits for first time customers and the forthcoming outreach work in Sandiacre with SureStart are further good examples of the commitment to investing in improvement.
- 115** Additional capacity to improve is being provided through better partnership working. Significant effort has been successfully applied in developing and strengthening relationships with a range of partners from the public, private and voluntary sectors. Service Level Agreements are in place with Housing Associations to ensure accountability and all partners from all sectors readily acknowledge the positive and productive relationships they now have with the Service.

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