

# Benefits

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# Service

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# Inspection

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Gravesham Borough Council

January 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](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 Gravesham Council's Benefits Service (the Service) provides a service rated as 'fair' with 'promising' prospects for improvement.
- 2 New claims and changes in circumstances are processed quickly. A robust and consistent approach is reducing fraud and sanctions are pursued against perpetrators. The Service is making effective use of Discretionary Housing Payments. Income through subsidy is managed. Financial loss because of Council error and delay in processing benefit claims is minimised.
- 3 The Service is using the feedback it gathers and is more responsive to the needs of its users. Value for money is improving. The Council's own review has delivered improvements in outcomes for customers and savings are reinvested into the Service. Partnership working is delivering efficiencies and the Council continues to identify further opportunities for increased joint working.
- 4 However, there remain areas where performance is still weak. The accuracy of claims processing remains poor. Customers who appeal against decisions are receiving an inadequate service. The Service is not effectively maximising the take-up of benefits and information provided to customers is not always easy for all to understand. Opening times are limited and do not offer enough choice to users. The quality and consistency of responses to complaints are poor. Signposting for customers who do not have English as their first language is inconsistent.
- 5 The overall prospects for improvement within the Service are promising. The Council demonstrates effective leadership. Councillors and senior officers communicate well on operational matters. Councillors have a clear view of how the Benefits Service is performing and actively shape the Service. The Medium Term Financial Strategy provides capacity for improvements in the Service. Improved outcomes are being delivered because of the Value for Money review of the Benefits Service and savings are reinvested in the Service.
- 6 A corporate culture of openness to change and improvement exists. The Council is a learning organisation and uses best practice effectively. Changes to the Service are leading to improved outcomes for customers. The Service has increased its capacity to deal with rising demand. Good staff management processes are in place. There is a good staff development policy which tackles both skills training and management development. Management capacity is increasing, business continuity and resource issues are improving. Staff morale is high and staff absences are managed well despite the many changes in recent years.

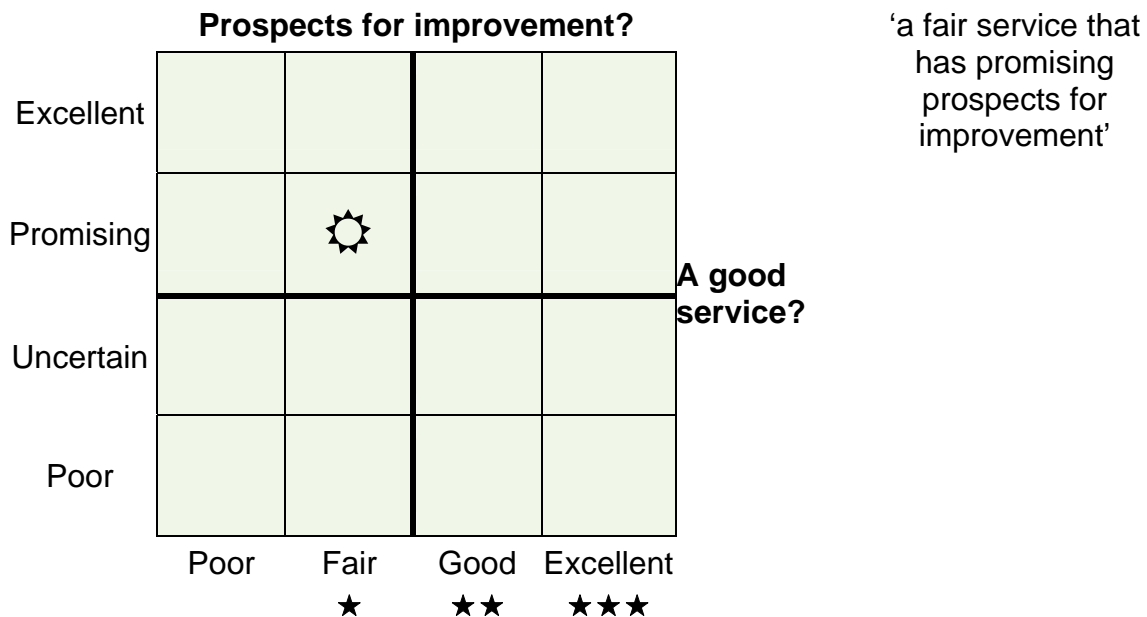
## Summary

- 7 Performance is getting better and the speed of change, which was slow, is now improving. The Council is developing its understanding of its new communities. Although relationships with established communities are good, some problems remain when engaging with young people and pensioners. Not enough is done to engage with users in the initial shaping of services and the Council is not maximising all its opportunities to work with partners. Stakeholders regard the Council as good to work with but there are few partnerships with voluntary sector organisations or Registered Social Landlords.

# Scoring the Service

- 8 We have assessed Gravesham 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

- 9 The Service is one-star/fair service because:

- it is processing new claims and changes in circumstances quickly;
- arrangements for detecting fraud are good, and are effectively protecting the public purse;
- discretionary housing payments are used effectively;
- the Service is using feedback from customers to improve its service; and
- subsidy is maximised and local authority error overpayments are reduced.

- 10 However:

- the accuracy of assessments is poor;
- help for vulnerable members of the community is inconsistent;
- there is not enough engagement with stakeholders and users;

<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.

## Scoring the Service

- opening times limit access to the Service;
- customers that appeal face delays in having their claim reviewed;
- responses to complaints are sometimes poor and monitoring is weak; and
- signposting of help for vulnerable customers is inconsistent.

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

- changes, such as the fast tracking scheme, have made a positive impact for customers;
- it successfully delivers improvements in new claims and change of circumstance processing;
- there is good leadership from officers and councillors;
- its performance management is improving; and
- capacity within the Service has improved.

### 12 However:

- partnership opportunities are not maximised;
- improvement in the time taken to process appeals and the accuracy of claims has been slow; and
- its understanding of all of its communities is not fully developed.

# Recommendations

- 13** 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** Continue to develop a Service which better meets the needs of all customers by:
- understanding the diverse needs of existing and potential customers;
  - using this understanding to shape the Service to meet these needs;
  - working with partners to target take up activity more effectively; and
  - consider appropriate forums for engaging with stakeholders.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- an improved understanding of customers;
- a Service designed around the needs of customers; and
- a better understanding of where to target service improvements to increase customer satisfaction.

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

## Recommendation

- R2** Improve access to the Service by:
- ensuring opening times for all service points and access routes are appropriate for customers and are well publicised;
  - reintroducing signposting to alternative languages on outgoing correspondence;
  - making sure that customers are aware that alternative formats of leaflets and information are available;
  - clearly advertising facilities, such as language line;
  - maximising the number of customers using fast track; and
  - providing equal levels of service to those not able to use the fast track route.

<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

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- giving customers greater flexibility and choice of how, when and where they can access the Service;
- better understanding for Customers of the information, advice and assistance they can access; and
- fair and equal access for all.

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

### Recommendation

**R3** Improve the Service delivered to customers by:

- identifying and implementing corrective action to address weaknesses in accuracy and quality;
- improving the management and monitoring of appeals processing;
- review the complaints process to ensure consistency and quality of responses;
- review current private tenant payment cycles to minimise the gap between processing and payment; and
- use partners to verify and complete claims for customers.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved accuracy of payments to customers;
- reduced delays in time taken to deal with appeals;
- better quality of responses to customer complaints; and
- faster processing and payments of new claims and changes of circumstances.

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

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# Report

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## Context

### The locality

- 14** Gravesham is a mainly urban district in North West Kent. It has a population of 98,800, with 79 per cent of the population living in the main towns of Gravesend and Northfleet. The Borough has a population density three times higher than the national average. The north of the district is within the Thames Gateway growth area resulting in significant investment in homes and jobs. There are fewer full-time jobs in Gravesham than on average in the rest of the South East. The economy is more reliant on part-time working in the construction, catering and service sectors. At £503 a week, the average full-time adult wages in Gravesham are below the average for the South East at £523 a week.
- 15** Gravesham is ranked 142 out of 354 on the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD)<sup>1</sup> and the situation has worsened since 2004. Men in the more deprived areas live on average six years less than those in the wealthier parts of Gravesham. The difference for women is five years. Compared to the Borough's more affluent neighbours in the South East, there are more job seekers, people claiming incapacity benefit, more carers and lone parents. Four per cent of residents claim Job Seekers Allowance compared to the average of 2.8 per cent for the South East. Six per cent claim incapacity benefits of some kind, compared to a South East regional average of 4.7 per cent. 1.3 per cent claim Carer's Allowance (South East average is 0.8 per cent) and 2 per cent are lone parents (South East average is 1.5 per cent). In total, over 13 per cent of the working age population claim benefits, which is above the regional average.
- 16** Over 16 per cent of the population are from black and minority ethnic communities, which is three times higher than the English average. Many of the minority population are from Asian or Asian British communities but the Borough also has the largest concentration of Eastern European migrant workers in Kent.
- 17** About a third of the local residents feel the Council is providing value for money, which is about average for the South East and England. Gravesham has the second highest satisfaction levels in Kent, with just under a half (49.8 per cent) of local residents satisfied with how the Council is run.<sup>2</sup>

### The Council

- 18** Gravesham Borough Council is one of 12 District councils in Kent. It has 44 elected councillors, representing 18 wards. The political structure of the Council changed with the Council elections of 2007. There are 27 Conservatives and 17 Labour party Councillors. A Cabinet system is in operation, with the Portfolio Holder for Transformation overseeing the Benefits Service.

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<sup>1</sup> Where 1 is the most deprived, IMD 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Place Survey 2009

## Report

**19** Gravesham is assessed as performing adequately in the 2009 Organisational Assessment. Its Use of Resources score was two (out of four) demonstrating adequate performance. The Managing Performance score was also two (out of four). Recent inspections carried out by the Audit Commission at Gravesham Borough Council include:

- Regeneration 2009 (good service, uncertain prospects for improvement);
- Community Safety 2008 (good service, promising prospects for improvement);
- Cleanliness and Waste 2007 (good service, promising prospects for improvement); and
- Landlord Services (fair service, promising prospects for improvement).

### The Council's Benefits Service

**20** Housing Benefit (HB) and Council Tax Benefit (CTB) are national welfare benefits administered by the Council on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). A complex legal framework is in place to define who is entitled to benefit and to reduce fraud and error in the system. The Benefits Service within a Council has a responsibility to pay the right benefit to the right person at the right time.

**21** From 1 April 2008, the Audit Commission became responsible for benefits inspections, following the transfer of powers from the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate.

**22** 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 for Communities and Local Government National Indicators (NIs) 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 inequality, including targets within the Local Area Agreement.

**23** Our responsibility to provide assurance (to government, Council, taxpayers and Benefit Service customers) means that we will consider inspection where there is a current or future risk to the Service and its customers. For Gravesham Borough Council, the reasons for commissioning the inspection were:

- speed and accuracy of processing in 2007/08 were within the bottom 25 per cent of councils. Service had not recovered to the levels achieved before the new processing system was implemented;
- performance against National Indicator 180, the right benefit measure, has been below average when compared to services with a similar caseload;
- Discretionary Housing Payment funding for the most vulnerable customers has fluctuated year on year since 2005/06, leading to a 32 per cent reduction in funds;

- changes in the IT system had not demonstrated value for money and improved outcomes; and
- reservations against key benefit service performance indicators resulted in continued concerns over the quality of reported performance data.

24 The key objectives of this inspection were:

- to assess the effectiveness of Gravesham's Benefits Service in meeting the needs of the vulnerable people it serves;
- to verify the Service is delivering value for money in terms of timeliness and quality of service; and
- to provide assurance to the DWP and other stakeholders about the quality of service provision.

25 The Service in Gravesham pays out around £31.9 million in benefits a year to:

- 8,315<sup>1</sup> people claiming CTB; and
- 6,725 people claiming HB of which 1,302 are tenants of Registered Social Landlords and 1,525 are tenants of private landlords. Of the total caseload of approximately 8,948, 3,951 are of pension age and 4,997 are of working age.

26 The Service is part of the Transformation and Finance Directorate with 26.4 full-time equivalent staff. The cost of running the Service in 2008/09 is £1.7 million of which £820,440 is funded through a grant from DWP and the balance is met by the Council.

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<sup>1</sup> Figures provided by the Council at the time of the inspection (Sept 2009)

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# How good is the Service?

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## What has the Service aimed to achieve?

- 27** The Council and other key agencies in Kent view benefits as a priority. The local area agreement, Kent Agreement 2 (KA2), sets out the priorities for the area agreed between central government and the key public sector agencies that deliver services in Kent. These are: Economic Success; Learning for Everyone; Improving Health, Care and Well-being; Environmental Excellence; Stronger and Safer Communities; Enjoying Life; Keeping Kent Moving; and High-Quality Homes. KA2 has selected National Indicator (NI) 152 reducing the number of people on out of work benefits to measure progress in benefits claims.
- 28** Gravesham and Dartford share a Sustainable Communities Strategy (SCS). The overall vision is to see both districts as 'Places of Choice to Live, Work and Enjoy'. The actions agreed by the Dartford and Gravesham Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) are set out under five themes: Economic Development; Health and Well-being; Safer Communities; Environment and Transport; Housing and Stronger Communities. The two Boroughs have a strong regeneration agenda linked to the Thames Gateway Regeneration Plan. The Strategy recognises the need to ensure the stability of new and existing communities but makes no direct link with benefits performance in the area.
- 29** The Council's Corporate Plan 2008-2011 contains the action to 'improve the quality, accessibility and efficiency of the Revenues and Benefits Service to customers through partnership working'. The action falls under the Council's transformation goal which seeks to turn the Council into an economically sound organisation that consistently delivers excellent and accessible services that provide value for money. The key performance indicators selected for the transformation goal are: NI 14 reducing avoidable contact and NI 179 increasing value for money. However, NI 152, which is the Kent Agreement 2 performance indicator for benefits, is not in the plan.
- 30** The Benefits Service Business Plan describes the purpose of the Service to:
- provide benefits for those who are eligible;
  - to prevent, detect, investigate and deter fraud; and
  - to improve the quality, accessibility and efficiency of the Revenues and Benefits Service to customers through partnership working.

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**Benefits Service: Is the Service meeting the needs of the local community and users?**

**Access and customer care**

- 31** There are clear customer service standards. The 'Benefits - Our Service To You' statement clearly outlines what customers can expect from the Council. There are clear links between the benefits statement and the Council's Customer Access Strategy. The customer service standards are available in leaflet form, on the Council's website and displayed on a plasma screen in the Council's reception area. The website and plasma screen also report performance against these standards. By having clear and well publicised standards, customers can understand the service they should expect to receive from the Benefits Service.
- 32** Some customers are receiving a faster service. A 'fast track' process for Benefit claims is improving the speed of processing for both new claims and changes of circumstances. This guarantees that complete claims (those which include all the required information and documentation) are processed within 48 hours. The fast track service has an appointment based approach to dealing with claims. Customers have a named benefits assessor who will deal with their claim form. The fast track service is meeting its targets to process claims within 48 hours and around 40 per cent of claims are processed through this route. Customers using the fast track are receiving benefits faster.
- 33** Customers not accessing the fast track route do not receive the same level of service. Monitoring information is kept for all claims processed through fast track. However, no comparative information is available for customers not using this route. The Council cannot provide assurance that all customers receive a similar standard of service. Customers who are unable or choose not to access the Service through the fast track are waiting longer for their claims.
- 34** Publicity to promote the fast track service is effective. The Council's 'Our Borough' magazine contains information on the fast track route. There are posters providing contact information and explaining to customers how to access the fast track service in Council buildings, local libraries, the Citizens Advice Bureau and the Gr@nd drop-in centre. The publicity highlights the need to bring all the information and evidence to the fast track appointment. Increasing access to faster processing routes reduces the number of customers experiencing delays in receiving benefits.
- 35** Opening times are limited and do not offer flexibility to users. The Service is open Monday to Friday, from 9am to 5pm for telephone callers and 9am to 4.30pm for face-to-face visitors to the Civic Centre. However, each area housing office has different opening times. During our inspection one of the area offices had been closed for several weeks because of a lack of Housing Service staff. No alternative access was publicised for customers needing to contact the Benefits Service. Inflexible opening hours make it difficult for customers who work, or who wish to contact the Service outside normal office hours.

## How good is the Service?

- 36** Some customers visiting the Council are waiting too long to be seen. The published average waiting time for customers at the Civic Centre for 2009 is 13 minutes against the Council's own target of 15 minutes. However, average waiting times exceeded this target for 15 out of 20 working days in September 2009. More than 50 per cent of customers waited for more than 15 minutes on 16 out of the 20 days. The maximum wait exceeded one hour for seven out of those 20 days. Long waiting times are frustrating for customers.
- 37** Customers are waiting too long to have their telephone calls answered. During June 2009, 22 per cent of calls made to the Benefits Service were abandoned. A further 5 per cent of calls received a busy or engaged tone. Many callers have to make repeated attempts to contact the Council to get a resolution for their queries. The Service has recognised this issue and has implemented a more flexible approach to resourcing this area of the Service. Long telephone waiting times contribute to poor customer care levels.
- 38** Email enquiries get a quick answer. Emails are answered on the day of receipt. Emails receive appropriate responses and offer additional assistance as required. A named contact is available if more information is required. Customers are able to use alternative methods to contact the Service and are receiving a quick response to email enquiries.
- 39** Access to information about the Benefits Service on the Council's website is good. A quick link is available on the home page. A wide range of forms and leaflets is available to view and download. These include the benefits application form and the change of circumstances form. The information is presented well and is easy to follow. This has improved customers access to benefits information.
- 40** Access to benefits information away from the council offices is inconsistent. The availability and visibility of leaflets and information varies among the sites. Leaflets and fast track posters are on display at the library but the presentation is poor. Not all the available leaflets are on display and it is unclear if information is available to people for whom English is not their first language. Leaflets are displayed clearly at the Gr@nd, which is a facility for young people to access advice and support. The national leaflets poster offering information in other languages was visible. The area housing offices have a wide range of leaflets but some are out-of-date and carry inaccurate information. Posters are displayed but information on alternative formats is not readily available. Customers are unable to have consistent access to current information, advice and assistance away from the Civic Centre offices.

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## User and community focus

- 41** The Service is responsive to user needs. It has improved its response to customer feedback. Fast track users, visitors to the Service and telephone callers have commented on satisfaction levels and suggested improvements. Topics covered included opening hours, staff attitudes, wait times and the quality of forms and letters. The Service is using the feedback it gathers to review processes and become more responsive to the needs of its users. The active participation of users is improving the level of services.

- 42 Community focus is good. The Service is engaging with vulnerable groups, such as those with learning disabilities, to test how easy forms and other material sent to customers are to use. Other agencies and councils provide feedback on form design and help to develop additional supporting documentation for customers. The Service is creating a users' group to advise on the way the services should develop. Good community focus ensures the needs of local residents are considered when making decisions.
- 43 Engagement with key stakeholders is inconsistent. Internal Service Level Arrangements are in place both with the Council's Housing and Homelessness teams. These provide a means for effectively managing and monitoring the quality of service for these users. However, no similar arrangements are in place with Registered Social Landlords. Engagement with these key stakeholders is not systematic. Their views are not used to tailor the Service to customers needs. Effective engagement with all stakeholders ensures that customers receive a more uniform service.
- 44 Notification letters are difficult to understand. Information captured by the benefits system, such as ethnic origin, is not used to tailor responses to customers. The standard notification letters meet complex legal requirements but are not easy to understand. The Service has recognised the problem and produced a leaflet to help customers find the key information on the notification letters. Further guidance is available to customers on how to appeal and report changes in their circumstances. Ensuring customers clearly understand the documentation they receive lessens unnecessary queries and provides the customer with the correct information to make appropriate decisions.
- 45 The Service is not ensuring that new housing benefit customers receive their first payment quickly. No facility exists for daily payment runs to pay new private benefit claims. First payments are processed weekly and some customers can wait up to 10 days from the assessment to receive payment. This delay could affect the customer's ability to pay their rent on time.

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### Diversity

- 46 Equalities Impact Assessments are good. These were completed for the processing, fraud and overpayment elements of the Service. Action plans are in place to address identified weaknesses. For example, the Service has identified some groups, such as people who are housebound, who cannot use the fast track service in its current format. The Council is investing in technology to allow assessments to be carried out in customer's homes. The service to vulnerable customers is improving as a result.
- 47 The Council engages well with its established communities. It has a good dialogue with many of the communities which have been in Gravesham for several generations. This includes for example, positive working relationships with the Sikh community and the three traveller communities, where work has been ongoing to develop community projects for young people. The effective engagement work is strengthening local community cohesion.

## How good is the Service?

- 48 Knowledge of Gravesham's new communities is developing. The Council is building relationships with people from the newly arrived Eastern European communities, many of whom speak little or no English. The Service has recently engaged with Kent County Council (KCC) to increase engagement with ethnic and minority groups, in particular Roma Slovaks. Early discussions to capture intelligence and identify access routes to this group are taking place. KCC staff have seen some success in making contact through the children from these communities that attend local schools. Understanding these new communities enables the Council to provide the services they need.
- 49 The Service listens well to the views of its hard to reach and vulnerable customers. It has created the vulnerable clients forum to improve engagement with internal and external stakeholders who help vulnerable customers. Staff from the Service are also active members of the Dartford and Gravesham Area Advice Forum and the Housing Services Landlord Forum as well as members of the Kent Benefits Partnership which is promoting take-up of benefits across the county. Working with partners allows the Service to gain access to vulnerable customers who would otherwise be hard to reach.
- 50 The Service is working to keep vulnerable people warm in their homes. A campaign run by the Council and its partners is referring over 100 households receiving Housing and council tax benefits to Warmfront to improve the heating and insulation in their homes. Vulnerable households are warmer and have lower energy bills as a result of the campaign.
- 51 There are good facilities catering to the needs of vulnerable people. Support is available for those who are visually impaired. A signing service is available and the Council offers information in Braille, on audio tape and in large print formats. Information about altering the size of the text on the Council's website is available for those who are visually impaired. Translation services are clearly signposted on the website and the home page provides a range of language options, providing contact details of the Council. The available languages include Bengali, Chinese, Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu. Hearing loops and language line services are available at the Civic Centre reception. The Council also uses its own staff and Medway Community Interpreters for translation services. The variety of facilities means that vulnerable people are able to get the support they need to access the Service.
- 52 Publicity for support services is inadequate. The language line is not advertised in the Council offices. Publicity leaflets contain a statement on how to get large print copies, but there is no mention of translation services, interpreters, sign language, or other alternative formats. The Council is not clearly signposting help aimed at customers for whom English is not their first language. A language leaflet was included with all outgoing correspondence, but this was withdrawn about six months ago, following a review of the main languages in the Borough. This leaflet is still being updated. Vulnerable customers may not be aware the support available to help them access the Service.

- 53** Take-up activity is not systematic. The Service has not worked to identify areas of its own population where claims are not being made. It relies on the Kent Benefits Partnership (KBP) to carry out take-up activities. Outcomes from the KBP activity are limited. The Kent wide take-up strategy outlines how the work of the KBP is measured across Kent but the Council's own strategy does not clearly state how the effectiveness of local take-up work will be measured. By not having a more systematic approach to benefit take-up, the Service cannot be sure that it is helping those who are disadvantaged. Poor take-up means that money coming in to the local economy is not maximised.
- 54** The Service is making effective use of Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP). The Appeals and Complaints Officer regularly monitors expenditure and decides how remaining funds should be spent to meet the needs of the more vulnerable. The fund is currently used to target single older people. The Service does not routinely plan to increase the expenditure above the grant received from government, although extra funding was made available in 2008/09, when the grant had been spent. Effective management and use of DHP ensures the Service is able to target those customers that are potentially more vulnerable and in need of additional support.
- 55** There are clear signposts to debt advice. The Council recognises the importance of helping local people during the recession. The 'Turn to Us' campaign offers support to those suffering economic hardship. The campaign encourages people to contact the Council for advice if they are getting into financial difficulty. There is an arrangement in place with the local Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) and informal arrangements with other agencies offering debt advice. Ensuring customers receive appropriate advice when experiencing debt problems can prevent unnecessary hardship.

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### Service Outcomes

- 56** The speed of processing new claims is good. During 2009/10, new claims were processed in an average of 19 days to the end of September 2009 (unaudited). This is a significant improvement on the average of 29 days (unaudited) in 2008/09 and the 30 days it took in 2007/08. Performance in 2007/08 was among the worst nationally, the average time for all councils during that year was 24 days. It is not possible to compare national performance for 2008/09 or 2009/10 because of the change to the new National Indicator set. Performance has improved in Gravesham during 2009/10 and current performance is likely to have placed the Council well above average had comparisons been possible. Customers making new claims are receiving benefit payments faster.
- 57** The Council's new fast track delivers improved processing times. The Service recognised that processing times needed improvement. It introduced the fast track claims process and telephone calls to customers to chase up missing information. The Service began to improve performance in the second half of 2008/09. Fast track claims are now processed in an average of 8.5 days. Customers who supply all the required evidence at the first appointment (38 per cent of claims) have their claims processed in an average of 1.3 days. Fast track customers are receiving their benefit significantly faster as a result.

## How good is the Service?

- 58** The Service is effectively identifying undeclared changes of circumstances. Measures such as publicity, intervention campaigns and targeted visits are in place. The Council's intervention team have an agreed schedule of campaigns to use data to identify cases which potentially have an unreported change. These include using the DWP risk notifications and systems queries to look at areas such as private pension increases, wages and salaries, tax credits and non-dependants. Information is provided with letters, on posters and display boards in the offices, and in person at the enquiry counter. The Council's performance in the current year against national indicator NI180 (all changes in entitlement within the year) is above average when compared to similar councils. These activities help to reduce fraud and error in the system.
- 59** The Council is exceeding its own targets for performance against the 'Right time' indicator NI 181<sup>1</sup>. Councils are responsible for setting their own targets. Gravesham set itself a target of 15 days for 2008/09, and 10.5 days for 2009/10. The Council achieved 14.8 days as at 31 March 2009. During the first quarter of 2009/10 performance was 6.7 days. The Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) are unable to publish any comparative data for 2008/09 because of difficulties with extracting the data from the Council IT systems. This is a national issue. The Council is ensuring that customers are receiving their Benefits quicker.
- 60** Arrangements to detect and deter fraud are good. During 2008/09 the Council achieved seven sanctions (prosecutions, administrative penalties or cautions issued) for every 1,000 cases which is likely to be well above average, although comparative data is unavailable. This is an improvement on the previous year when the investigations team achieved five sanctions, which was below average when compared nationally. The Council reports its successful prosecutions in the local press and on its website. It reports on the value of the fraud and penalties imposed. Each press release includes comments from the Councillor responsible for the Benefits Service, to reinforce the Council's commitment to tackling fraud. The Service has relaunched its fraud awareness programme delivering appropriate training across key parts of the Council. Officers have detailed guidance for selecting the appropriate action following a successful investigation. The policy does not use financial value as its main criteria for prosecutions. The aim is to prosecute as a deterrent to others as well as punishing those who defraud the benefits system. Individual circumstances and the public interest of taking action are considered for all cases. Fraud is being effectively prevented and deterred.
- 61** Changes of circumstances are dealt with promptly. The Council is processing changes in an average of five days. This is a significant improvement from the ten days it took in 2008/09. The Service processed changes in 12 days during 2007/08 which was below average when compared to other councils (national average 9.2 days). The Service identifies changes of circumstances information from customers and stakeholders and prioritises this work so it is processed quickly. The effective processing of changes of circumstances helps to prevent benefit paid to customers who are not entitled to receive it.

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<sup>1</sup> This measures the average processing times for new claims and change events.

- 62** There are good external arrangements to detect and deter fraud. The Council's fraud team is working successfully with partners to prevent fraud and other illegal activity. The Council has entered into agreements with the UK Border Agency and the NHS South Coast Fraud Team through a Memorandum of Understanding to work closely together in jointly addressing criminal activity in the area. Tackling fraud jointly acts as a greater deterrent to those looking to take advantage of the benefits system.
- 63** The accuracy of claims processing remains poor. Only 92 per cent of claims are correct. Between 2005/06 and 2007/08, accuracy was within the bottom 25 per cent of councils nationally. The accuracy checking procedure does not effectively use a risk based approach to identify cases for checking. The procedure concentrates checks on new members of staff or those who have made errors in the past. The Council does not identify the types of claim most likely to have errors and prioritise these for checking. This approach is not delivering improvements in the levels of accuracy. The Service changed its accuracy checking procedures as a result and data quality work is improving in 2009. Inaccurate processing of claims can lead to customers not receiving the benefit to which they are entitled, causing them unnecessary hardship.
- 64** Overpayment collection is weak. In 2008/09, the Service recovered almost 25 per cent (unaudited figure) of the total overpayment debt for all years. The amount recovered is equivalent to 62 per cent (unaudited figure) of the value of overpayments identified in 2008/09. These figures are in line with performance in 2007/08 when the Council was among the worst performing nationally. Failure to collect outstanding debt increases the financial burden on the taxpayer.
- 65** Appeals performance is inadequate. The Service does not have effective information to monitor performance against the time taken to deal with appeals. It stopped reporting appeals performance in April 2008 following the abolition of the performance standards. It reintroduced monitoring in April 2009 after delays occurred in this area. The lack of performance information means the Service cannot be assured that appeals are actioned promptly. The Council is unable to review and improve performance in this area. Customers that appeal face delays in having their claim reviewed.

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### User experience and satisfaction

- 66** The Council's main reception facilities are good. The area is clean and inviting and is clearly signposted for users. Reception staff are polite and welcoming. Access for people with a disability is good. Although there is no disabled parking at the Civic Centre, it is available at a Council owned car park close to the building. Facilities for wheelchairs are in place, as are hearing loops for those with a hearing impairment. Sufficient seating is provided and private interview rooms are available. The range of information is good, access to the Council website and direct dial telephones is available near the 'Meet and Greet' desk. Customers feel welcomed and facilities are in place to allow good access.

## How good is the Service?

- 67** Satisfaction levels are good. Customers asked to comment on the fast track service rated it as good or excellent. Levels of satisfaction with the customer service reception are good. Most of those asked either agreed or strongly agreed that the reception areas are good, wait times are acceptable and staff are helpful and treat people with respect. However, stakeholders report that telephone waiting times are too long, it is difficult to contact specific case officers and letters to customers are unclear. Ensuring that good levels of service are experienced across all aspects of the Service increases customer satisfaction.
- 68** The quality of responses to complaints is inconsistent. A sample of complaints to the Service reviewed during our inspection showed that the standard of responses is unsatisfactory. Standard paragraphs explaining the next stage of the complaints process are missing and explanations are inconsistent. Although the Council has an adequate corporate complaints procedure in place, it does not have a review mechanism to provide assurance on the quality and consistency of responses sent to customers. The Council's complaints leaflet does not clearly express the corporate standards for response times. Inadequate responses to complaints lead to increased dissatisfaction with the Council.
- 69** Circulation of benefits information is inconsistent. Updates circulated to customers and landlords are irregular. The 'Benefits Newsletter' is circulated to Finance and IT, but not to parts of the Housing Service which plays a role in advising customers about benefits. Circulation of information to external stakeholders is not systematic. Although some distribution takes place through the Vulnerable Groups Forum, there are no regular updates of information on changes to benefits regulations. Stakeholders are unable to provide up-to-date and appropriate advice and assistance to customers.

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## Is the Service delivering value for money?

- 70** The Value for Money delivered by the Service has improved. When compared, with other Kent authorities, costs are above average. Performance was behind others until 2009/10, when performance improved. The Audit Commission Value for Money Profile shows a similar picture. The Council's Value for Money review of the Service has been used as a mechanism to deliver better value to residents. The review was completed in March 2009 and focussed on improving claims processing. A detailed action plan is in place and it is delivering significant improvements to processing times. The Service has identified savings of £38,000 or 1.8 full-time equivalent staff, which is being reinvested in the Service to improve performance. Letter enveloping duties previously completed by assessment staff are now done by another part of the Council. This frees up resources to create the fast track process and to reduce the number of unnecessary contacts. A better and faster service is being provided without increasing costs.

- 71** Benchmarking information is used to assess service performance. The Council routinely compares itself with neighbouring boroughs. The Service is a member of the Kent Benefits Managers Group who regularly compare performance, cost data and best practice. It also uses Audit Commission and other external data to understand how it compares with others, both nationally against similar councils and locally against other councils in Kent. The comparison allows the Council to judge if the Service it is providing to local residents is delivering value for money.
- 72** The Council is effectively using government funding allocated in 2009/10 to improve value for money. Additional DWP funding to assist with the impact of recession is used to develop and train staff to increase long-term capacity. Additional off-site processing resource is also used to manage the increases in demand. Performance levels in a number of areas are improving as a result, despite the 6.6 per cent increase in caseload between November 2008 to May 2009. Customers now experience improved service levels despite increases in workloads.
- 73** Partnership working delivers improved value for money in tackling fraud. The Council shares its fraud investigations manager with Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council. This partnership is delivering both financial savings of £27,000 a year and shared best practice across the two councils. The fraud team provided resilience work for Dartford Borough Council delivering additional income to the Council without a reduction in the sanctions delivered locally. Partnership working is delivering a better value service for the Council.
- 74** The Service has improved performance in preventing overpayments resulting from delay and error. These local authority error overpayments attract a DWP subsidy up to predefined levels. Where the level of local authority overpayments exceeds these thresholds, councils lose direct subsidy. The levels of this type of overpayment were kept well below the permitted threshold in 2008/09. This is in marked contrast to 2005/06 when the Council lost approximately £136,000 in subsidy. The Council lost a further £227,000 in 2006/07 because of excessive delays in processing changes. The improved performance means that more customers are receiving the correct payments and the burden on the taxpayer is reduced.
- 75** Effective arrangements are in place to monitor and manage the process for claiming back benefit expenditure from government. The Service systematically reviews expenditure and works to maximise income to the Council. A robust reconciliation and review process is in place to monitor subsidy expenditure and to identify risks within the claim. Prompt action is taken to manage uncashed cheques and identify customers who may no longer be entitled to benefit. The Council also invests in external support and scrutiny to maximise income through subsidy. The Council is maximising its subsidy income and reducing costs to taxpayers.

## How good is the Service?

- 76** The recovery of overpayments is improving. A backlog of cases waiting for court action accumulated due to delays in the recruitment of a court officer. The Council now has a dedicated court officer and there is a clear picture of the value and management stage of outstanding overpayments. The Council uses a good range of recovery methods including deductions from continuing benefit, blameless tenant recovery from private landlords and court action. The Council subscribes to a data exchange system to help trace debtors who have moved out of the area. The levels of overpayment waiting court action are reducing. The improved collection of overpayments contributes to the Council's financial stability.
- 77** The Service has been slow to identify debts that are no longer recoverable. The Council did not have a true understanding of its collectable debt levels until 2008/09. The levels of write off had been low (below 0.5 per cent of debt) until that year. An exercise carried out in 2008/09 wrote off over 7 per cent of this debt. Effective identification and management of debt reduces the burden on local tax payers.

# What are the prospects for improvement to the Service?

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

78 Some aspects of the Service have improved. There are significant improvements in the speed of processing new claims and changes in circumstances. Fraud sanctions have improved since 2006/07. However, accuracy of assessments and appeals processing has remained poor. This means that customers are receiving notifications faster but cannot be certain that their claims are accurate, or rely on a rapid resolution if they decide to appeal.

**Table 1 Local Performance Indicators**

Track record of improvement

Local performance indicator	2006/07 <sup>1</sup>	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10 to date
Average time taken to process new claims (days)	50.2	30.4 <sup>2</sup>	28.7	18.6
Average time taken to process changes in circumstances (days)	33.7	11.6 <sup>3</sup>	10.5	4.6
Fraud Sanctions per 1,000 of caseload	1.79	4.82	6.52	n/a
Accuracy (percentage correct)	89.0	95.4	88.7	92.2

Source: Audit Commission and Gravesham BC

79 The Service's track record of working with other departments within the Council has improved. The Service and the Homelessness team are ensuring the quick processing of claims from those who have or may become homeless. This has contributed to a significant drop in the number of households in temporary accommodation. The number of households in temporary accommodation now stands at 15. Faster processing of benefit claims has also encouraged more private landlords to make properties available. Benefits information and claim forms are sent out with tenancy sign up packs. Housing staff are trained to assist customers with claim forms, provide leaflets and publicity material, and promote the fast track service. Improved working across services within the Council contributes to better access to housing.

<sup>1</sup> The Service implemented a new processing system during this period and had a significant period of downtime.

<sup>2</sup> This indicator was qualified.

<sup>3</sup> This indicator was qualified.

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

- 80** The Benefits Service is improving its focus on delivering Value for Money. The recent internal Value for Money review has led to improvements in outcomes and new ways of working. These include fast track processing, increased training and development to improve skills and knowledge across the Service, and a commitment to challenge costs and performance. More widely the Council has created an 'Invest to Save' fund to allow services to deliver further efficiencies through new ways of working. The Benefits Service will have access to the fund in line with other departments in the Council. Improved outcomes for customers have been achieved without additional costs to taxpayers.
- 81** New technology is improving the Service. During 2006/07, the Council implemented new assessment and document management systems. While recovery from these changes was slow, speed of processing has improved significantly. The Council has learned from this experience and is using the knowledge gained to manage the e-Benefits implementation. This enables online and paperless claims to be processed. One of the benefits of the new system is that it will improve access for those who are unable to come into Council offices by allowing officers to take claims assessments to customer's homes. Good use of technology is providing further improvements for vulnerable customers.

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## How well does the Service manage performance?

- 82** Performance management has improved. The Council has a clear vision for the Service which is stretching and aspires to make real changes for local people. The vision is to improve the quality, accessibility and efficiency of the Service. The Council's aim is to reduce new claims processing times to 20 days by 30 June 2009 and 17 days by 31 December 2009. The Service is on track to meet these targets with processing time for new claims taking 19 days (unaudited) at the time of inspection. Feedback from customers and stakeholders indicates that a faster service is being delivered.
- 83** Effective leadership is demonstrated by the Council. Councillors and senior officers communicate well on operational matters. A corporate culture of openness to change and improvement exists. The Portfolio Holder, the Chair of Overview and Scrutiny, and the Chair of the Policy Oversight Committee have an active involvement in managing the Service. Issues of concern are discussed, with councillors taking an active role in shaping policies for the benefit of residents and customers. Senior managers provide direction and challenge to the Service and regularly review progress against plans. Effective leadership ensures the Service focuses on delivering a quality service to local residents.

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

- 84** Good integration exists between the Corporate Plan, the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and the Benefits Service Plan. These form the structure for managing improvements to the Service. Improving the quality, accessibility and efficiency of the Revenues and Benefits Service is a corporate priority for the Council under the Transformation Agenda. Links between the Corporate Plan and wider community priorities are less clear. The Corporate Plan shows how the Service will contribute towards delivering the objectives within the local area agreement (LAA). However, NI 152 reducing working age people on out of work benefits, which is in KA2, is not included in the Corporate Plan. Good linkages between corporate strategies provide a clear sense of direction and a framework for delivering and monitoring improvements.
- 85** The Council has a clear method for prioritising services for improvement. The Council has developed a programme of Value for Money reviews which prioritises services assessed as high cost and low performance. The reviews have delivered improvements to several services and the planned programme of improvements has enabled the Council to deliver better outcomes for customers. The Benefits Service was the third within the Council to undertake a Value for Money review. The review did not take account of the impact of rising workloads in its original scoping but this has not affected the improvements delivered by the Service. The Council's approach has delivered improvements for local people at a time of rising demand.
- 86** The culture of openness to change and improvement is good. The Council is a learning organisation and approaches other organisations to identify good practice. The Value for Money review included discussions with Maidstone Borough Council and other neighbouring councils to compare levels of service and costs. The Council has applied the lessons from this exercise to its own Service. Processing times for new claims and changes of circumstance have improved as a result. Learning from good practice has enabled the Council to improve its service to customers.
- 87** The Benefits Service manages its staff well. The Council's Performance Management Framework supports improvements to Service delivery. The Service has low short-term sickness rates, although long-term sickness has risen this year. Staff management and appraisals are carried out. A competency based appraisal process has been introduced for managers and is being developed for non-managerial staff. Staff turnover within the Benefits Service is well below the corporate average. Effective management means the Service is maximising its staffing capacity for the delivery of services.
- 88** The Council is developing a more detailed understanding of its community. The Council is implementing the MOSAIC profiling tool, which will collect information about its customers and the wider community. This will enable the Council to target services and resources more effectively. Better information about the specific profiles of its local communities ensures the Council delivers services to people that are most in need.
- 89** Data quality has improved. The Council had its performance indicator data qualified in 2007/08 due to the number of errors identified during spot check testing. Data quality work improved in 2008/09 and the current error rate for 2009/10 is 7 per cent. A good range of performance management information is collected and regular progress reporting takes place at all levels of the Service. Performance is reported daily and weekly at operational levels. Councillors and senior officers receive monthly reports. All levels of the organisation have a clear picture of how the Service is performing.

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

90 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is providing effective challenge to services. A review published in March 2008 reported that:

- pensioners found the Council too impersonal and the target group ignored generalised mailshots sent by the Council;
- young people found the Council slow to react and unsupportive of young people's issues including housing; and
- there was a lack of translators and written information for people from the most recent eight countries to join the European Union.

Poor customer experiences led to customers seeking assistance from other agencies where these exist. Where facilities do not exist, such as for people from Eastern Europe, users were making do with limited written information. As these users do not have access appropriate communication channels, the Service is working with partners to identify ways to improve engagement. Better information for young people is now provided at the Gr@nd drop-in centre. The Council is working with stakeholders such as Age Concern to improve information for older customers. It is working with the CAB to provide translators for customers from Eastern Europe who may have Russian as a second language. Effective oversight is challenging the Service to ensure that it serves all sections of the community.

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## Does the Service have the capacity to improve?

- 91 The Council has the capacity to improve. It is effectively using additional DWP funding to invest in staff development and training to increase long-term capacity. It has also secured extra off-site processing resource to manage the increases in demand while more staff are trained to process claims. The Service is improving the management of its work across both processing and customer facing roles. It has embarked on a training and development programme to increase the assessment skills of its customer services and interventions officers. Increasing skills across the workforce increases the Service's capacity to manage and respond to changing demands.
- 92 Management capacity has improved. The 'Managers of Tomorrow' programme trains potential senior management candidates. The first intake of these managers developed and implemented a number of specific improvement projects within the Council. The success of the first programme has led the Council to run the programme again. A second group of managers and potential leaders of the future will enter the programme in October 2009. The increased management capacity is providing a wider pool of management skills across the organisation.
- 93 Staff morale is high. Staff are motivated and demonstrate a high-level of commitment to their roles. For example, some staff personally subscribe to external information resources to ensure that they keep up-to-date with developments in their field of responsibility. Staff ownership of services means that personal pride is taken in the effective delivery of services to the public.

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

- 94 The Council has a good corporate training programme. Compulsory training is delivered on equalities, disability awareness, and safeguarding vulnerable people. Funding is set aside for elective courses to improve skills and develop management. A staff handbook was launched to coincide with the new revamped induction programme delivered during the summer of 2009. A programme of induction refreshers is planned for existing employees once all the recruits have completed their induction. The training programme ensures that all staff have an equal awareness of the Council, its Vision and the role it plays within the community.
- 95 Training is delivering capacity for improvement. A training skills matrix ensures that staff are appropriately trained and equipped with the necessary skills to undertake their roles. The Council is undertaking joint training activities in partnership with Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council to update systems knowledge, reduce costs and increase skill levels. Well trained and knowledgeable staff ensure that service users receive speedy and accurate payments of benefit.
- 96 Adequate financial capacity exists to deliver improvements. Current improvements in the Service, such as e-Benefits, have already been already funded. Sufficient surpluses have been accumulated by the Council to create an 'Invest to Save' fund to provide financial capacity for future improvements. The fund will be used on a competitive bidding basis to invest in projects that will improve services to customers and deliver savings. Gravesham faces ongoing financial pressures but is working with partners identify joint working opportunities and deliver savings. Having sufficient financial capacity provides the Council with the resources to address potential barriers to improvements.
- 97 There are some good partnerships in place. The partnership with Tonbridge and Malling BC has delivered improvements to fraud arrangements. The community safety partnership and the planning partnership are working well. A joined up approach to benefit take-up with the Kent Benefits Partnership (KBP) also exists. However, successes from KBP take-up work are limited. The Council is reliant on KBP to promote benefits take-up but opportunities to target Gravesham's residents are not maximised. Effective partnerships allow the Council to deliver a more effective range of services to a wider variety of customers.
- 98 The Service is exploring other opportunities for partnership working. It is discussing shared working for appeals and overpayment recovery with Tonbridge and Malling BC. The aim is to identify opportunities for joint working to build additional capacity and resilience in these areas. Council is increasing its capacity to detect and deter fraud through enhanced working arrangements with the DWP. By April 2010 the Council and the DWP will work together under the 'One Team' approach to tackle fraud in the area. Three DWP staff will work jointly with Council staff from to investigate fraud across the wider range of welfare benefits. Increased resources and effective partnership working will deliver a strategic approach to investigation. The Council and its partners are actively improving their capacity to deliver services to residents.

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

- 99** The Council is investing effectively to improve outcomes for customers. The initial difficulties with the benefits processing system and the document management system have been overcome. The Civic Centre has been redeveloped and provides an improved customer experience. New services have been introduced such as the 'Meet and Greet' reception service. Staff accommodation has been improved. The Service is investing in technology to allow homeworking to provide greater flexibility to its workforce. Further improvements such as an automated telephone answering system, e-Benefits and e-Copy (a facility to allow electronic transfer of documents) are planned. The investments are contributing to an improved staff and customer experience of the Service.
- 100** The Council is improving its focus on accuracy. An internal audit review of the assessments team took place in June 2009. The review found the accuracy of processed claims was poor when compared with other local councils. The review identified that while accuracy checks are undertaken, the volume of cases being checked and the frequency of checks is sporadic. The Service is addressing poor accuracy performance by employing a dedicated officer to complete accuracy checking across the Service. Ensuring that claims are processed accurately means that customers receive the correct benefit and overpayments are minimised.
- 101** The contribution of the voluntary sector and Registered Social Landlords is under developed. A good working relationship with the Citizens Advice Bureau exists but there is a limited understanding of the wider role which voluntary sector partners can play. For example, increasing the number of complete forms is an objective for the Service. However, little is done to train partners to help customers to complete application forms. There is limited feedback on efforts and no incentive to encourage partners to ensure that forms reach the Council properly filled out with a complete set of required documents. Other opportunities to improve the service provided to customers include the automation of annual rent increases for Registered Social Landlord tenants and promoting the fast track service to users. Closer working between stakeholders and the Council allows partners to achieve their common aim of ensuring that customers receive the right benefit more quickly.

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# The Audit Commission

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