

# Benefits Service

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# Inspection

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Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council

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February 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 The Benefits Service (the Service) at Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council (the Council) is 'good' with 'promising' prospects for improvement.
- 2 Over the last three years the Service has undergone many changes as part of a transformation project. This resulted in the creation of new teams and a stronger emphasis on customer focus by becoming part of the Customer and Communications Service. All of the changes have contributed to significantly improved processing times, better customer engagement and a good understanding of what is required to continue improving the Service.
- 3 Performance across most areas of the Service has improved. New claims and changes of circumstances are processed faster than ever before - shortening the time taken to make a decision and pay those eligible for benefit. Accuracy was a weakness but has improved and is now adequate.
- 4 The Service has started to consult and engage with service users. This is at an early stage but is already helping the Service to be more responsive to customers needs. There are good relationships with internal and external partners, with regular liaison. Partners include the local Citizens Advice Bureau, Registered Social Landlords, Department for Work and Pensions, Pension Service and the Council's Adult and Advice Services. Recent benefit take up work, by the Council and with partners, is targeted and effective. Currently there are no benefits service standards so customers do not know what level of service they can expect to receive.
- 5 Access to the Service is fair. Strengths include good coverage across the borough with seven area offices, a telephone service which extends into evenings and weekend, online claiming and fast tracking of new claims and changes. However there are some weaknesses including the lack of clarity around the current cost of calling the Service, limited information on the Council's website and the availability of benefits information in the municipal office.
- 6 There have been no equalities impact assessments carried out within the Service and the availability of information in other formats and languages is not effectively promoted. There are actions in the service improvement plan to improve the approach to equalities and diversity and progress is already being made.
- 7 Fraud and error is tackled well. There is good fraud awareness, referrals are of good quality and investigations are well managed. Appeals are dealt with promptly.
- 8 Customers find the majority of staff to be knowledgeable, friendly and helpful. Customer satisfaction is high. The 2008 annual benefits customer satisfaction survey found 85 per cent of customers were either happy or very happy with the service they had received.
- 9 The Service currently delivers satisfactory value for money. This has improved and continues to do so. The Service has a good understanding of its costs and how it compares with others. Overpayment recovery is good. The Service uses outsourcing and works in partnership to reduce costs.

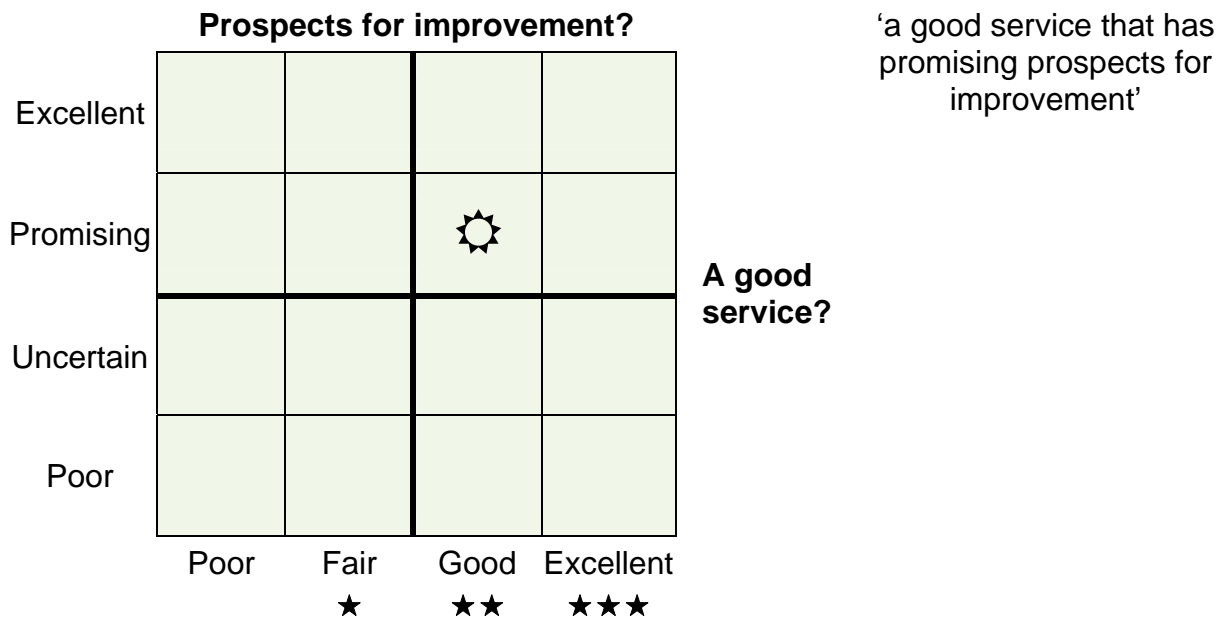
## Summary

- 10 There is a comprehensive improvement plan for the Service which is being monitored. Leadership is strong and there is a robust framework for monitoring and challenging performance. However, some key aspects of the Service are not monitored. Good forward planning ensures the Service has the resources, skills and capabilities required to deliver its service priorities. Individual performance management within the Service is not embedded. This has recently been introduced although the Service has still to finalise some of the arrangements.

# Scoring the Service

11 We have assessed Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council as providing a 'good', two-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

12 The Service is a good, two star service because:

- there are a range of ways to access the Service including seven area offices, a telephone service which is available during evenings and weekends and claims can be submitted online;
- new claims and changes in circumstance are processed promptly;
- community engagement work is driven by good intelligence and community profile information;
- benefit take up work is targeted and effective;
- there are good relationships with a range of internal and external partners;
- it operates a multi benefits approach so that customers claiming housing and council tax benefit can have their eligibility for free school meals established at the same time;

<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

- fraud is effectively prevented and detected;
- overpayments are reducing as a result of identifying and prioritising processing of changes that could lead to overpayments;
- it delivers satisfactory value for money with a good understanding of costs; and
- there is high customer satisfaction.

### 13 However, there are weaknesses including:

- no benefits specific service standards;
- costs of telephoning the Service are a barrier for some customers;
- the Service is not well advertised in the municipal office and leaflets are not readily available;
- limited information about the Benefits Service on the Council's website; and
- no equalities impact assessments have been carried out and the availability of information in other languages or formats is not promoted.

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

- it has taken fundamental steps to change, including a restructure and creation of new teams devoted to customer engagement and continuous improvement;
- changes already implemented have had a positive impact on customers, such as the fast tracking scheme and better working with the Contact Centre and Customer Services;
- there have been sustained and significant performance improvements across the Service, particularly the processing times for new claims and changes of circumstances;
- there is a robust framework for monitoring and challenging performance;
- leadership is strong and the Service is considered a priority for the community;
- there is formal monitoring of a comprehensive improvement plan for the Service;
- there is a good attitude and approach to learning from a range of sources including staff, customers, peers and the inspection process itself; and
- good forward planning helps to ensure that the Service has access to the resources, skills and capabilities needed to deliver its priorities.

### 15 However there are some barriers to improvement.

- The arrangements for individual performance management and how poor performance will be tackled are yet to be finalised or formally defined.
- The performance scorecard for the Service is not fully effective as some key aspects of the Service are not included.

# Recommendations

- 16 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 the Council shares the findings of this report with its partners and customers; and takes action to address all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

## Recommendation

**R1** Improve the accessibility of the Service within the community and raise the profile across the Council by:

- distributing and promoting up-to-date and accessible information about the Service through all routes, including online access;
- exploring and implementing good practice in relation to customer telephone help lines;
- getting assurance that the information is being used to good effect;
- using equality impact assessments to ensure that the specific needs of the community are addressed; and
- sharing learning and good practice with the rest of the Council.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the community will have better access to information about the Service and about their potential entitlement to benefit;
- assurance for the Service and the Council that the information it provides is responsive and relevant to the changing needs of the community; and
- improved outcomes for users of other council services.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by May 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 individual performance management in the Service by:

- finalising and formally setting out performance management arrangements; and
- communicating the arrangements, ensuring that all staff and managers fully understand their roles and responsibilities.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- greater ownership of performance and understanding about how individual performance contributes to the overall aims of the Service and the corporate priorities;
- a solid basis for dealing with poor performance; and
- improvements to the level of service that customers receive.

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

### Recommendation

**R3** Improve the effectiveness of reporting and monitoring of performance by:

- ensuring the service scorecard includes all key aspects of service delivery, including performance against service standards;
- including benchmarking information in performance reporting to senior officers and Councillors;
- setting out the longer term aims for the Service with clear milestones, timescales and responsibilities against which performance and progress can be measured; and
- regularly publishing performance information, including performance against service standards, which can be accessed by the public, service users, Councillors and internal and external stakeholders.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- greater clarity for both internal and external customers about how the Service is performing compared to how it should be performing;
- more outcome focused and effective scrutiny and challenge of the Service;
- better understanding about the level and quality of service that customers receive; and
- improved outcomes for customers resulting from a stronger focus on achieving aims and service standards.

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

- 17 We would like to thank the staff of Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: on site w/c 16 November 2009.

# Report

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## Context

### The locality

- 18** The borough of Rochdale is one of ten metropolitan districts in Greater Manchester. About 206,000 people live in 90,362 households in the borough, mainly in and around Rochdale town centre and the surrounding townships of Pennines, Middleton and Heywood. Each of these towns has a distinct identity. Although it is close to Manchester city centre, two thirds of the borough is open countryside - more than any other borough in Greater Manchester.
- 19** According to the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) Rochdale is the 25th most deprived borough in England (out of 354 in 2007). The number of residents affected by low household income and poor health increased between 2004 and 2007. Nearly a third of Rochdale residents live in areas regarded as among the most deprived in England - and of these, nearly half are below the age of 30.
- 20** Rochdale's population is becoming more diverse. Currently the majority of the borough's people, 86 per cent, have a white ethnic background. People with a Pakistani background make up the largest minority ethnic group with nearly 7.7 per cent. The proportion of people from black and ethnic minority groups is expected to increase to 20 per cent by 2021.
- 21** Unemployment has risen sharply in recent months and currently stands at 8.5 per cent. 6.0 per cent of the resident working age population in Rochdale are claiming Job Seekers Allowance (JSA), compared with 4.7 per cent regionally and 4.1 per cent nationally (October 2009). The proportion of the working age population claiming employment and support allowance and incapacity benefits is 11.2 per cent (May 2009). This is higher than the national (7.1 per cent) and regional (9.3 per cent) averages. The housing and council tax benefit caseload increased by 7.7 per cent between November 2008 and August 2009.
- 22** A smaller proportion of Rochdale residents are qualified to NVQ level 3 or 4 than the rest of the North West or Britain. Some 25,200 (19.9 per cent) of the working age population, have no qualifications compared with 14.7 per cent in the North West and 12.4 per cent in Britain.
- 23** According to the 2009 Place Survey Rochdale was below average for its CIPFA nearest neighbour group for the following indicators.

  - Percentage of residents who say they have been treated with respect and consideration by their local public services in the last year.
  - Percentage of residents who say they are 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the area as a place to live.
  - Percentage of residents who believe people from different backgrounds get on well together in their local area.

It was above average for the following indicators.

- Percentage of residents undertaking civic participation over the last year.
- Percentage of residents who took part in formal volunteering at least once a month over the last year.

## The Council

- 24** There was no overall change in political control of the Council following the May 2008 local elections. The Liberal Democrats remain in control of Rochdale with 32 seats, Labour have 18 seats, Conservatives have 8 seats and Independents hold 2 seats.
- 25** The Executive Leadership Team of the Council comprises the Chief Executive and five Executive Directors who are each responsible for a portfolio of services.
- 26** The priorities for Rochdale are set out in Pride of Place – the Community Strategy for the Borough and Aiming High – the Council's Corporate Plan. The five priorities are:
- Increasing Jobs and Prosperity
  - Making Sure Every Child Matters
  - Improving Community Safety
  - Creating a Cleaner, Greener Environment
  - Improving Health and Wellbeing.
- 27** Pride of Place features the townships of Heywood, Middleton, Pennines and Rochdale. Each has its own characteristics, vision and priorities which contribute to the delivery of the overall priorities contained in this strategy.
- 28** Rochdale MBC is performing adequately overall according to the 2009 organisational assessment carried out by the Audit Commission. This organisational assessment combines information and scores on two issues - how good services are (the 'managing performance' assessment) and how the organisation is using its resources (the 'use of resources' assessment). The Council is performing adequately for both managing performance and use of resources.

## The Council's Benefits Service

- 29** 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.
- 30** From 1 April 2008, the Audit Commission became responsible for benefits inspections, following the transfer of powers from the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate.

## Report

- 31** 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) 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.
- 32** Our responsibility to provide assurance (to government, councils, taxpayers and benefit customers) means that we will consider inspection where there is a current or future risk to the Service and its customers. In the case of Rochdale Council, the reasons for commissioning the inspection were:
- customers were experiencing delays in most areas of benefits administration;
  - concerns around the quality of data and accuracy of processing; and
  - controls in the housing benefit system were not considered robust.
- 33** The key objectives of this inspection were:
- to assess the effectiveness of Rochdale Benefits Service in meeting the needs of the vulnerable people it serves; and
  - to provide assurance to the DWP and other stakeholders regarding the quality of service provision.
- 34** Benefits administration is now part of the Customer and Communications Service, created in April 2009. The Benefits Service employs 41.5 full-time equivalent staff and has a gross revenue budget of £2.82 million for 2009/10. The Benefits Service receives DWP administration subsidy of £2.2 million and the balance is met by the Council.
- 35** The Service pays out around £81 million in benefits per year to:
- 26,420 people claiming CTB; and
  - 21,560 people claiming HB, of which 9,560 are tenants of the local authority, 5,180 are tenants of registered social landlords (RSLs) and 6,820 are tenants of private landlords.

Of the total caseload of around 27,150 people, 18,200 are of working age and 8,950 are of pension age.

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# How good is the Benefits Service?

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## What has the Service aimed to achieve?

36 The Benefits Service links to the corporate priorities as follows.

### **Increasing Jobs and Prosperity**

**We will remove barriers to work by ensuring processes are fast, accurate and efficient. By promoting the take-up of benefits and entitlements we contribute to increased prosperity.**

### **Every Child Matters**

**We will deliver a quality service to people who need financial help through free school meals, and clothing vouchers. By reducing financial hardship we can help children participate fully in educational opportunities.**

### **Improving Health and Well Being**

**We play our part in improving the health and well being of the community by maximising each person's entitlement to benefits and therefore income.**

37 The vision for the Benefits Service is:

**Putting customers first by striving to get it right, on time, first time, providing value and as much choice as we can in a fair and accessible way.**

38 The Revenues and Benefits Service has combined aims. They are:

- ensuring access to Council administered benefits;
- actively promoting take-up of the different types of benefit available; and
- collecting monies due to the Council within an anti-poverty framework which always takes into account the ability to pay.

## How good is the Benefits Service?

The objectives are to:

- maximise income and cash flow to fund essential council services by continually increasing collection levels;
- ensure that customers owing money to the council know they will have to pay their debts, how they can be paid, and how they can receive help and assistance to pay them;
- to help reduce poverty through maximising the amount of benefits we can pay, to regularly promote the availability of benefits and to deal with applications promptly and accurately;
- minimise the level of fraud and error within the benefits system; and
- develop a motivated, well trained and empowered workforce.

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

39 The assessment was based on the following key issues.

- Access, customer care, user and community focus.
- Diversity.
- Service outcomes for users and the community.

### Access, customer care, user and community focus

- 40 The Council has customer focus and customer satisfaction at the heart of planned improvements for the Benefit Service. Following a recent restructure within the Council, the Service now sits within the new Customer and Communications Service. The overall aim of the restructure was to deliver high customer and citizen satisfaction.
- 41 The Service is starting to consider the needs of service users and use them to shape service delivery. Service users and other local groups were consulted on the redesign of the benefits claim form. The Service has listened to customers and made changes to existing services as a result of the 2008 annual customer survey. For example, it added extra council tax payment dates and placed the 2009 survey on the Council's website. Confidentiality screens have also been installed in all offices following comments about lack of privacy. Taking account of the views of service users and the wider community ensures that services cater for the specific needs of local people.
- 42 There has been effective engagement with service users and local residents. Officers have met with service users to get their views about the services they receive. Service users involved in these meetings told us they felt listened to and valued. The Council also has good information about areas in the community where deprivation levels are high, but take up of benefits is low. The Service has recently carried out a postal survey of 3,700 households in these areas to learn why they do not claim benefit. Although these arrangements are new, regular and planned engagement and consultation will ensure that local people become better informed and involved in helping to improve services.

- 43 The Service uses effective methods to promote take up of benefits, including some original approaches. In October 2009 benefit rules changed to disregard child benefit as income and increase the amount of capital pensioners could have and still claim. In response, adverts went out on the local radio station, messages were put on the payslips of part-time council workers and posters were sent to the local pensioner association, residents association and local hairdressers. Staff go out into the community to give benefits advice and information. The Service has visited children's centres, residents in sheltered accommodation and local mosques. It has held surgeries and roadshows in local shopping centres to promote the benefits scheme and engage with local people. Promoting the scheme and engaging with the community broadens information and access for local people to the Service.
- 44 Benefit take up work is delivering good outcomes. Although a formal take up strategy is not yet in place, the Service has undertaken targeted work to engage with harder to reach groups. This has led to greater take up.
- The Service worked with the Council's Advice Service and the Pension and Disability Carers Service (PDCS) to promote take up of attendance allowance, disability living allowance and carer's allowance. Staff provided advice at events and forums including; the mobile advice centre, the Equalities Listening Event, community centres, Town Square Shopping Centre, Methodist Church, Mosque, lunch clubs, Sure Start Centres, after-school clubs and a mother and toddler group. The disability take up project will increase benefit payments to new and existing claimants by £170,000 each year.
  - A separate project with the Pension Service has seen £21,000 in backdated benefits awarded and an additional £93,600 each year awarded in current benefit.
  - Although not a specific take up campaign, the survey of households not currently claiming any benefits, prompted 15 households to successfully claim for housing and council tax benefit.
  - Formal protocols are in place with 'Stepping Stones' a project that works with vulnerable adults. Staff from the Benefits Service signpost customers that could be referred to the project, in confidence. In return Stepping Stones staff signpost their clients to the Benefits Service for help with council tax and rent. Working with partners ensures that local people have access to more effective joined up services.
  - Publicity campaigns undertaken at a local shopping centre, community centre and Masonic hall will generate £36,400 a year in new and increased benefit awards.

Effective take-up campaigns help more local people become aware of benefits they may be entitled to, which can increase their income and bring extra money into the local economy<sup>1</sup>.

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

## How good is the Benefits Service?

- 45 Staff in the Service have a strong customer focus but the quality of advice can be inconsistent. Service users we spoke with told us that staff they deal with are friendly and helpful. However, they also told us that the quality of advice they received depended on which member of staff they spoke to. Our own reality checking also found inconsistencies in the information we were given. For example on separate occasions contact centre staff gave contradictory information about how long it would take to process a claim - ranging from three to eight weeks. Inconsistent advice can lead to confusion and unnecessary anxiety for customers who may have to contact the Service again to get the correct information.
- 46 Access to the Service is fair. The following strengths were identified.
- There are seven customer service centres across the borough where customers get advice about claiming housing benefits and can also submit claims. The offices are all open Monday to Friday.
  - Customers are signposted to other benefits they may be eligible for, which helps to maximise their income.
  - Customers can use an online tool on the Council's website to check their entitlement to benefit and then make a claim online. This new route has been implemented successfully and the Service has seen a steady increase in claims from customers using this method. Customers can also assess their entitlement to other benefits including Income Support, Pension Credit and Tax Credits.
  - The Council is responsive to changing levels of demands. Waiting times have been identified as an issue in the municipal building. Customers are waiting on average 20 minutes to see an advisor. Measures introduced to deal with this include; opening more counters at peak times, having part-time staff that just cover lunchtimes and directing users to a member of staff where there is a pre-arranged appointment to provide evidence. This should help to reduce the waiting times at offices.
  - Access to telephone support is good. Customers can speak to an advisor and get information about the Service and their claim from 8am to 8pm Monday to Friday and 9am to 1pm on Saturday. This helps in-work customers access information about claiming benefits at times convenient for them.
  - The claim form allows customers to claim extra help that they could be entitled to. The form includes an opportunity for customers to claim free school meals at the same time as their benefit claim. This encourages increased take up of free school meals which provides help for families on low incomes.
  - The Service has introduced fast tracking for new claims and changes in circumstances for customers able to provide the information immediately in support of their claim.

### 47 However, there are some weaker areas.

- Costs of telephoning the Service are unclear and are a barrier for some customers. Customers that we spoke to told us they would rather visit an office and wait to see an advisor than potentially incur high costs through telephoning the Service. Because of the broad range of packages and call prices, the cost of the call can be unclear at the outset and can leave vulnerable customers unaware of the actual cost of calling the Service.
- The Service is not promoting the option of fast tracking for customers who want to report a change in circumstance. The Council's website still advises customers to write in or phone the Service.
- Availability of leaflets and posters giving advice and information is mixed. Area offices provide a better range of leaflets than the main municipal offices. This means some users of the municipal office may unnecessarily be seeing an advisor for information which could be provided in a leaflet.
- The appeals process is publicised as a three stage process. Customers are told they can only appeal after a request for an explanation has been made. This is incorrect as an appeal can be made without having first requested an explanation or for the decision to be looked at again (known as a reconsideration). This could prevent some customers from properly understanding their rights and delay their appeals.
- The Council's website provides limited information for potential claimants. The website does not provide downloadable claim forms, so customers have to telephone or email the Service to be sent one if they do not want to claim online or in person. Until very recently there was no publicity about the availability of home visits. This is still not being promoted well enough on the benefit pages for example the page which explains how to claim benefits does not include home visits as an option. This may inconvenience customers who find it difficult to visit an office.
- The website is not easy to use. As part of its work to understand the Place Survey 2008 results, the Council found that many customers find it difficult to navigate the site. This means that customers may find it difficult to find the information they are looking for online and then have to contact the Council by telephone or in person.
- There is a lack of clarity among the Service and front-line staff about the impact of Local Housing Allowance rate changes. Stakeholders and private landlords tell us this is starting to have a significant impact however the Service was not aware of this.
- The separate guidance on how to complete the claim form is not always provided when claim forms are issued. Through mystery shopping we found the guidance sheet was missing from a form sent through the post by the Service and from a form issued at a customer service office. The absence of the guidance form could make the form difficult for some customers to complete and result in them having to contact the Service again for extra help.

## How good is the Benefits Service?

- 48 The Service proactively calls customers to speed up the time taken to deal with a claim or change in circumstance. Staff telephone customers during the day, evening and at weekends to talk through the information needed to process the claim or change. Staff can arrange for customers to see a member of staff at the customer service centre, with all their information, so they can avoid waiting. By being proactive about getting information quickly the Service is speeding up the time it takes to deal with claims and changes of circumstances, leading to quicker decisions for customers.
- 49 The Service does not routinely check system produced letters sent to customers. The benefits computer system identifies cases where a dependant child will reach the age of 16 or 18 or where customers reach pensionable age as these may have an impact on the amount of benefit currently paid. Automatically produced letters are sent to these customers but are not cross-checked with the current claim. By not checking the appropriateness of these letters, the Service risks creating unnecessary anxiety or queries from customers who may have already reported changes and are waiting for a decision.
- 50 The Benefits Service has no specific service standards in place for customers. For example there are no standards for how long an appeal will take to be dealt with. The Service is currently carrying out consultation with service users for new service specific standards but there are no existing arrangements in place for users. The Service also does not publish information about current benefits performance. Benefit customers are not aware of what level or standard of service they should expect from the Benefits Service at this time.
- 51 Basic customer service standards are in place and there is good information about how well Customer Services perform. Customer service standards are available on the website however they only apply to customers visiting the offices in person. They do not apply to contact by email, telephone or post. The Council is developing a new customer charter which will include the benefit specific service standards. For customers that do visit the council offices there is prominent information about performance, how complaints about Customer Services have been dealt with and the costs of running Customer Services. This information tells visitors to the office how well the Council is meeting its customer service standards and what service they can expect at that office.
- 52 The Council has a good complaints policy which it complies with. The complaints procedure has three stages with the final stage being an independent internal review of the complaint. During 2008/09, 98 per cent of customer complaints were resolved at the first stage which is within ten days. This means that most customers who make a complaint get a speedy satisfactory response.

- 53** There are good relationships with internal and external stakeholders and liaison is regular and planned. The Benefits Service meets with a wide range of internal departments such as Adult Services, Advice Service, Customer Services and the Contact Centre. The Service also meets with external partners such as RSLs, DWP, Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) and the Pension Service. There are named contacts within the Service for dealing with issues and staff react quickly to prioritise cases if needed. The Service provides training to its stakeholders around changes to legislation that will have an impact on customers. Benefits staff work with staff from Rochdale Boroughwide Housing (RBH); providing advice on the mobile advice centre, surgeries for tenants held at housing offices and attending the tenant's conference to give information and advice about services. Working with internal and external stakeholders provides the Service with opportunities to improve through feedback and suggestions, as well as improving the quality of help and advice given to current and potential claimants.
- 54** There are some inconsistencies in the type of information the Benefits Service shares with the Contact Centre and Customer Services. The Contact Centre receives more information about current work levels and updates on fraud referrals. Customer Service staff do not receive this information. This would help them give more accurate information to customers and increase motivation to report frauds.

### Diversity

- 55** The Benefits Service does not carry out equalities impact assessments against its policies and decisions. This means that it does not know if its policies and procedures are fair and ensure equal access to services for staff, service users and the wider community. The Service is aware of this weakness and has specific actions in the service improvement plan to improve the approach to equalities and diversity, including using equalities impact assessments effectively. Progress has already been made against the improvement actions for example working with a group of vulnerable service users to redesign the claim form and using demographic information to better understand why people do not claim benefits.
- 56** The Service is not proactive enough at promoting the availability of information in other formats and languages. The current benefits claim form does not include any information about whether the form is available in different languages or formats. Information in other formats and languages can be provided and some leaflets say this, however there is no advertising of this in customer service centres or on the website. Customers who would benefit from this may be unaware that it exists and they can ask for it, and so the claim process may be harder than it needs to be for them.
- 57** Front-line staff awareness of how to identify and help customers with different needs is limited. There is awareness of the other language facilities available but less about how to help with literacy difficulties or assessing whether particular ways of contacting people are appropriate given their circumstances. This could mean that customers are not always dealt with in the way that is most appropriate for them.

## How good is the Benefits Service?

- 58** The Council is not making best use of funding to support vulnerable people in the community. The Benefits Service did not spend its full allocation of discretionary housing payment (DHP) in 2007/08 and just failed to spend its allocation in 2008/09. Front-line staff, benefit assessors and stakeholders are aware of the fund but there is little information about the scheme for people who do not directly engage with staff. The Service does not provide updates to staff or stakeholders about the balance of the fund and there is no commitment to provide any extra funding. This may mean that some people in need of extra help do not know it is available and may be missing out on help with their rent and council tax.
- 59** The Council has equality and diversity policies in place that meet minimum legislative requirements. The Council's 'No Matter Who' policy sets out the Council's vision for equality and diversity for its staff and the wider community. Having policies in place that embrace equalities and diversity within the organisation helps the Council to deliver fair and equitable services.
- 60** The Council is performing well against its internal targets for Equalities and Diversity. It is meeting its targets to maintain levels of staff from a BME background or with a disability. It is also on track to support staff with caring responsibilities, by extending its home-working pilot. Meeting targets for equalities and diversity helps staff and the wider community regard the Council as a fair employer and provider of services.

### Service outcomes for users and the community

- 61** New claims and changes of circumstances are processed quickly. The Benefits Service has exceeded its National Indicator (NI181) target of 17 days for 2008/09 by processing new claims and change events on average, in 12.9 days. Year to date performance provided by the Service, from April 2009 to October 2009 shows it is taking an average of 9.5 days to process new claims and change events. This can be split out as 17.8 days for new claims and 7.3 days for changes. Processing new claims and changes of circumstances promptly ensures that customers receive a quicker decision on their claim leading to faster payments.
- 62** Accuracy has been a weakness but the Service has taken steps to address this through the introduction of the Continuous Improvement Team. They are responsible for quality checking and training which means that issues identified through work checking can be effectively dealt with. In 2008/09 internal accuracy checks showed 90 per cent of claims were correctly paid. In 2009/10 checking of claims was expanded to include more areas and current performance is 89 per cent. Improvements in accuracy are also demonstrated by the lower levels of local authority error overpayments. Accuracy checking identifies non financial errors too, which is important as this can also impact on the customer and reduce avoidable contact.
- 63** The Service is performing well in dealing with appeals. During 2008/09 the appeals team dealt with 77 per cent of appeals within four weeks and 97 per cent within three months. Current performance for 2009/10 is 100 per cent within four weeks. The Tribunals Service is experiencing delays in dealing with cases submitted to them. The Service advises customers of this and keeps them updated. The team contacts other services to place a hold on any debt recovery action while a customer is waiting to hear the outcome of their appeal. All of this contributes towards a good service for the customer and helps them to plan suitably to lessen the disruption caused by a delay.

- 64 Overpayments are effectively minimised. The Service is processing changes in circumstance promptly. In addition when the Service identifies or is notified of a change, they prioritise those that could lead to an overpayment and process those first. As a result overpayments to customers are reducing.
- 65 The Fraud Team performs well at tackling fraud and error. There are good examples of this including:
- collecting detailed information about performance and monitoring the effectiveness of referrals it receives;
  - successfully tackling more complex cases. In 2008/09 the team prioritised investigations of living together and non-residency cases and achieved 86 sanctions and prosecutions against a target of 85;
  - introducing a flexible and responsive prosecutions policy. Restrictive limits that were preventing prosecutions on some cases of serious fraud, as overpayments were below set limits, were removed;
  - publicising successful prosecutions in the local media;
  - monitoring the accuracy and quality of fraud referrals received from benefits staff and having mechanisms to provide feedback to staff when issues arise;
  - delivering fraud awareness training to front-line Council and RSL staff. Training is provided to any service or organisation that requests it. Members have also received fraud awareness training;
  - pro-actively using Housing Benefit Matching Service (HBMS) referrals and achieving good outcomes from these. In 2008/09 the Fraud Team received 102 referrals through HBMS; 64 achieved a positive outcome (either a proven fraud or incorrect benefit identified) and there were 28 sanctions as a result; and
  - following up housing benefit matches from the recent National Fraud Initiative (NFI) exercise leading to savings so far of £7,000. Progress with non housing benefit matches has been slow but this will be addressed through moving responsibility for the exercise to Internal Audit.

Ensuring that fraud and error is minimised through good fraud awareness, high quality referrals, robust polices and well managed investigations, will help the Service to prevent and detect fraud. This will reduce the burden on the public purse.

- 66 The Benefits Service is contributing to wider community priorities to improve outcomes for local people. The Service set up a joint visiting team with the Pension Service to provide a joined up approach to welfare benefits and increase the income of older people in the community. The Service is also making a positive contribution to reducing fuel poverty in the community. The Service took part in the Warm Front fuel poverty campaign; as a result 88 people benefited from extra help to keep warm. Joint working with internal and external partners ensures that local people get access to a wider range of information, advice and help that could improve the quality of their lives.

## How good is the Benefits Service?

- 67** The Service has responded well to the recession, by providing extra help and assistance to local people, such as:
- attending benefit take up events;
  - publicising the benefits scheme through the 'Beat the Crunch' campaign;
  - joint work with Citizens Advice Bureau and the Council's Advice Service to provide benefit and debt advice; and
  - offering more payment dates for people who pay their council tax by direct debit.

Being proactive and making sure that information and advice about the benefits scheme is available helps local people affected by the recession access additional help and advice.

- 68** Customer satisfaction with the Benefits Service is high. The 2008 annual benefits customer satisfaction survey found that 85 per cent of customers were either happy or very happy with the service they received. The survey was a postal survey of 3,305 people who contacted the Service either by phone, email, website, post or in person between October 2008 and November 2008. They received 424 responses which gave them a good insight into customers' views of the service they received.
- 69** Customers visiting the customer service centres experience good quality facilities. We found customer service staff to be courteous, polite and helpful. The waiting areas had comfortable seating, children's toys and toilets where space allowed. The offices could all be accessed by those in wheelchairs. A comfortable and welcoming environment helps to ease anxiety and to help customers feel valued.

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## Is the Service delivering value for money?

- 70** The Service currently delivers satisfactory value for money. Local taxpayers contribute 28 per cent towards the cost of running the Service, which is below the average of 39 per cent across all councils. The cost per claim is below the average for a comparative group of similar councils. This has been achieved alongside high customer satisfaction and prompt processing times.
- 71** The Service has a good understanding of its costs and benchmarks itself against others to understand how it compares to others. It engages regularly in local benchmarking. From this the Service knows that it has high recharges compared to the other authorities it benchmarks with. The Service has the second highest costs in the group but has the second fastest performance for NI 181. The Service also has one of the highest number of cases to staff ratio within the benchmarking group. The Service uses this benchmarking as a tool to better understand its costs. It also recognises and understands that costs can be difficult to compare as it is not always comparing like with like.
- 72** Benchmarking is used to improve the Service. It regularly attends local benchmarking meetings. This helps to build good links with the other authorities and the Service regularly takes away learning from these groups. Examples include; picking up good practice for fraud prosecution files, improving use of the mobile advice centre, development of a quality checking database and introducing ways to improve sickness absence in the Service.

- 73** The Service is proactive at collecting overpayments and uses various recovery methods. They use deductions from DWP benefits, blameless tenant recovery, debt-collection agencies, tracing using IT systems and general management of invoices. The Service has also used benchmarking information to improve recovery of overpayments. Through learning from benchmarking the Service has made better use of County Courts and attachment of earnings. Proactive recovery work increases the likelihood of recovering the debt.
- 74** The Service is effective at recovering overpayments. In 2008/09 the rate of recovery was 85 per cent. This was an improvement from 76 per cent in 2007/08 which was already better than average. Performance during 2009/10 remains good. The Service has good information about the age and profile of debt and recovery action against older debt is satisfactory. Recovering outstanding debts reduces the cost of running the Service to the local taxpayer.
- 75** Management arrangements for the completion of the subsidy claim form are not effective. Historically, the audit of the claim has identified errors and required extended testing. The 2008/09 claim also needed extra testing, which led to the claim being qualified. Although the claim is monitored regularly to check the local authority error levels, there is no accuracy checking of the spreadsheet cells to make sure the claim is being compiled correctly. The errors identified this year have now been amended by the Council but means they will lose £258,000 subsidy.
- 76** The Service makes the most of opportunities to procure goods and services from, and jointly with, partners. There are good examples of the Service working with other authorities, which has helped to reduce costs.
- Database support delivered by another authority generates an annual saving of £70,000.
  - Joint leaflets and posters that provide people with information and advice about the benefits scheme have been produced and distributed at access points within the community.
  - Procurement of a benefits training package that will be delivered across participating authorities reducing internal need for training staff.
  - Joint procurement of a customer survey that can be used by authorities in Greater Manchester and Lancashire.
  - Sharing the cost of recruiting apprentices with another authority. The other authority manages the process so the Council only have to interview the shortlisted candidates.
  - Using staff from another authority to process work to reduce a backlog, at reduced cost to the Service compared with using agency staff or a private firm.
  - Sharing the costs of the purchase of an off-the-shelf systems specification from an external company with other local authorities looking to buy a new IT system.
  - Referring cases to the Prosecution File Unit, managed by another authority as well as making use of the DWP's legal service department, SOLP, to reduce overall costs of prosecution of fraud cases.

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

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

- 77 Since 2007, the Service has successfully delivered a change project, the 'Transformation Programme'. Working with the Council's strategic business partner, the Service identified what would be required to 'transform' the Service and has made substantial progress in delivering this. Some fundamental changes were necessary.
- A restructure of the Benefits Service which now forms part of the new Customer and Communications Service, along with both the Contact Centre and Customer Services. This has led to better integration of the Service with the rest of the Council and as a result customers are receiving a better service. For example there is now an arrangement between the Contact Centre and the Benefits Service for benefits staff to answer telephone calls on busy days. In return the Contact Centre telephone customers in the evening to encourage them to provide evidence. It was quicker and easier to reach this agreement because of the restructure. It means that customers are less likely to experience a long wait to speak to somebody, even on busy days, and they are reminded to bring in evidence. Another example is better liaison between the Service and front-line staff who are now able to do more for customers. They can suspend payments if appropriate and give wider information to customers. They feel this allows them to provide a better service to customers and resolve their queries more thoroughly.
  - Reorganising existing teams to organise work and duties more effectively. The Benefits Service now includes two new teams - the Community Engagement Team and the Continuous Improvement Team. This shows a clear commitment to customer focus and improvement. Although new, the Community Engagement Team has increased the impact of community engagement work with more successful take up activity. Similarly, the Continuous Improvement Team has made a positive difference through staff suggestion sessions, introducing individual performance management and increasing the use and effectiveness of accuracy checking.

The current structure is interim and will be finalised next year. The interim status has allowed the Service to see what works and to keep those arrangements that prove to be effective.

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

- 78** The Service has effectively introduced changes to working practices which have contributed to improved performance.
- In August 2008 the Service introduced a fast tracking scheme which promises to process new claims within three days if visitors to the office provide all the required evidence. Customer service staff are also able to tell customers when their first payment will be made. The scheme has been well received and is popular with customers. The Service is performing well against its promise with the average time taken to process fast track claims for October 2009 being 1.71 days. This means that customers using this route get significantly quicker decisions about their benefit entitlement.
  - The fast tracking scheme was extended to processing changes in circumstances in August 2009. The average processing time in August 2009 was 2.98 days and improved to 1.98 days during September 2009. The availability of this service has yet to be widely promoted but early indications are that it will be successful. Customers using this route are less likely to accrue overpayments as their changes are processed faster, which may in turn give them more confidence to take up temporary work.
  - Improvements in the way that work is prioritised and allocated. Daily work is allocated to the main team based on priority and latest information. If not all work is progressed that day it goes into a 'backlog' tray where work is also prioritised but the oldest work first. This helps to ensure that all work progresses in a timely way.
- 79** The Service has a strong track record at delivering improvements. It can demonstrate sustained and significant improvements in key performance indicators over the last three years (see Table 1 below). Crucially, customers are more satisfied with the service they receive. The 2007/08 benefits customer survey found 85 per cent of customers were either happy (45 per cent) or very happy (40 per cent) with the service they had received. In 2008/09 customer satisfaction overall remained high at 85 per cent but with more people saying they were very happy with the service they received, up 10 per cent to 50 per cent.

**Table 1 Local Performance Indicators**

### Track record of performance

Local performance indicator	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	April to October 2009
Average time taken to process new claims (days)	52.4	31.41	21.75	17.75
Average time take to process a change in circumstance (days)	22	12.39	9.67	7.32
Percentage of recoverable overpayments recovered	55%	76%	85%	75%
Percentage of appeals submitted to the Tribunals Service within four weeks/ three months	68.6%/ 91.86%	92.75%/ 100%	77%/ 97%	100%/ 100%
Percentage of fraud investigations resulting in a positive outcome - either a proven fraud or incorrect benefit identified.	24%	33%	44%	51%

Source: Audit Commission and Rochdale MBC

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

80 Value for money of the Service has improved. It has achieved this in several ways.

- The Transformation Programme is expected to achieve net savings of £166,000 over the five year project period to 2011/12. Yearly savings of £303,000 are expected to continue beyond this.
- Reducing sickness levels in the Service from 13.38 days in 2006/07 to 10.83 days in 2007/08 and down further to 8.9 days in 2008/09. This has resulted from new approaches such as prize draws for 100 per cent attendance, free staff medicals and flu jabs and paying for use of medical consultants to speed up treatment times and get staff back to work quicker.
- Outsourcing of scanning and indexing of documents received in the post. The arrangement is working effectively and saves £33,000 a year.
- Prioritising and processing changes in circumstances quicker has allowed the Service to keep within local authority error overpayment thresholds for the last two years. As a result they have received full subsidy available for this totalling £524,000.

These efficiencies have been delivered whilst continuing to improve performance across the Service. Better performance coupled with cost savings represents an improvement in value for money.

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## How well does the Service manage performance?

- 81 The corporate performance management framework is well designed to ensure that all plans are coordinated and aligned. The local area agreement (LAA) aligns fully with the Sustainable Community Strategy (Pride of Place), as does the Corporate Plan - Aiming High. Service performance measures link clearly to the Councils' priorities, set out in the corporate plan. The strategic plans, including the medium term financial strategy, are updated at the same time, every three years. The next revision is due at the start of 2010/11. This means that the current Benefits Service Plan, and the targets within it are short-term, and will be refreshed in March 2010. Alignment of plans helps the Council and partners to work towards the same goals and to agree the resources needed to deliver them.
- 82 The Service has a comprehensive improvement plan. Following the restructure and new leadership, the Service has produced a detailed improvement plan which the Improvement Board formally monitors. The plan covers key areas which need strengthening such as benefits take up work, working with customers, knowing your community, equalities and diversity and performance management. Responsibility for tasks is assigned and there are target dates for completion. The plan only covers the period to March 2010, although this will align with the coming three year service planning exercise and any improvement plans required following the inspection.

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

- 83** Leadership of the Service is strong. Senior officers and Councillors regard the Service as an essential and priority service for the community. The two portfolio holders for the Service have a lot of involvement with the Service and meet regularly with senior officers. They provide both challenge and support, which helps to drive improvement. Difficult decisions have been made which have helped the Service to improve such as outsourcing scanning and indexing and service restructuring. This sends a clear message to the rest of the Council, the community and stakeholders that the delivery of this service is taken seriously.
- 84** There is a robust framework for monitoring and challenging performance. Service scorecards were introduced during 2009. They are informed by service plans and each service uses them to set local performance measures and monitor performance against them. The Performance Board agree and review all service scorecards. On an exception basis, the Board flags up issues to the Performance Scrutiny Committee for it to review in more detail. Through this approach the Benefits Service has been asked to attend the Performance Scrutiny Committee several times over the last three years to explain its performance. This scrutiny helps to ensure that managers are identifying and addressing problem areas in the Service.
- 85** The Benefits Service Plan and associated scorecard are not currently as effective as they could be to inform performance monitoring.
- Some key aspects of the Service do not feature on the scorecard or service plans and are not monitored. For example time taken to deal with appeals and reconsiderations, and fast tracking and non fast tracking performance. Consequently, the Service may not identify deteriorating or poor performance in these areas.
  - Responsibility for delivering performance measures is not assigned and there is no clear link between the objectives for the Service and the activity/performance measure.
  - There is no reporting of local benchmarking information. The scorecard does not show how the Service performance compares with other councils either through local or national benchmarking exercises. This information, where available, would help officers and councillors to improve their understanding of performance.
- 86** The Service effectively manages performance of outsourced aspects of the Service. There is regular liaison and communication with the provider of the scanning and indexing service. There have been no performance related issues with the contract and there has been no negative impact on service users as a result of outsourcing this part of the Service.
- 87** The Service has a considered approach to target setting. While most of the targets set are stretching and challenging in order to drive improvement, there is evidence that thought is applied as to whether higher targets are always appropriate. Fraud sanction targets are lower than previous years to allow the team to focus on more complex frauds such as 'living together' cases. Managers recognise that this change in approach will have an impact on the number of sanctions they are able to achieve.

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

- 88 Individual performance management within the Service is not embedded and current arrangements to tackle poor performance are weak. The Continuous Improvement Team has recently introduced performance targets for individuals and is reviewing performance against them. However, disciplinary procedures have not been updated to reflect these new arrangements. This may undermine any attempts to tackle individual poor performance. The arrangements are still under review and the Service is aware of the need to finalise and formally define the approach. A well established approach to performance management where everyone understands their roles and responsibilities would support a culture of continuous improvement and allow poor performance to be tackled more effectively.
- 89 The Service has a proactive approach to learning and is responsive to feedback from all sources.
- The Continuous Improvement Team introduced staff suggestion sessions to identify operational improvements. The suggestions have either been carried out or, if not, explained why. This approach provides staff with the confidence to draw attention to weaknesses and will help them to create a better service for users.
  - Customer feedback from the annual satisfaction survey is used improve the Service. One example is that customers now receive an acknowledgement letter to confirm the Service has received their claim. Obtaining customer feedback and acting on it supports continuous improvement.
  - The Service takes advantage of opportunities to learn and work with other local authorities. Across Greater Manchester there is a strong, well-established network of authorities, known as AGMA (Association of Greater Manchester Authorities). Cross authority professional groups meet regularly to share learning, good practice and create opportunities to work jointly. Rochdale actively participates in these groups and the Benefits Service gains from these arrangements. There are many examples of joint working including; close working with other local authorities to procure a new HB system, sending fraud case files to another authority to learn good practice and joint training packages.
  - The Service works with internal and external stakeholders. For example it has worked with the Supporting People service to understand how engagement with users can be strengthened and is working with RSLs to engage with their tenant forums.
  - The Service has been very responsive throughout the inspection. During the on-site week officers were very interested in the issues identified by the inspectors and are already taking action to address them. This open and receptive attitude will help the Service to continue driving improvement.

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### Does the Service have the capacity to improve?

- 90 Forward planning is good. This helps to equip the Service with the resources, skills and capabilities required to deliver its service priorities. There are several examples which demonstrate this.
- In the run up to the Transformation Programme permanent staff were not recruited to fill vacancies as the project was expected to deliver efficiencies. This meant the Service did not have to go down the usually expensive and disruptive route of making people redundant. Funding was set aside for temporary staff to cover this period. As the Service has become more efficient the reliance on temporary staff has lessened and continues to do so.
  - Resources are routinely evaluated to ensure they are appropriate. Monitoring of work outstanding alongside processing performance is used to inform staffing levels.
  - Staff are supported in developing skills for the future. Several staff from the Benefits Service have attended the corporate Enterprising Leadership Programme. This should help to provide the internal capacity needed to take the Service forward and drive improvement.
  - The Service is taking on and training staff using apprenticeships and graduates. This is looking to the future and should help to alleviate the impact of any retirements coming up.
  - The Service has the ability to continue to cope with the increased demand as a result of the recession. It has a strong customer focus, prompt processing and no backlogs of work. It monitors work levels daily and is able to react quickly to changing demand.
  - The Service is preparing well for a new HB system. It is working closely with other local authorities throughout the procurement of a new system. This will allow knowledge and learning to be shared, and put them in a good position to maximise any opportunities for joint working with those authorities who select the same system. They have also learnt from a previous system implementation and will put significant efforts into cleansing the data before transfer to ensure a smooth migration.
- 91 The Service is making good use of modern developments in information and communication technology. The Service introduced an online claim form in February 2009 and has since received over 1,000 claims. There has been limited promotion of this so far because the Service wanted to make sure it was working effectively. The availability of this route increases the access channels for customers and saves time transferring information from a claim form. It also reduces the number of claims where there is no entitlement to benefit as only customers with eligibility for benefit can then progress to submit the claim electronically. Eligibility is established through the completion of a trial calculation online.

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

- 92 The Service is encouraging staff to take more responsibility for their own and service performance. The introduction of individual performance management allows staff to take more ownership of their performance and to understand better their contribution to overall service performance. Managers and senior officers now involve staff much more and consult them on service delivery for example the staff suggestion sessions and using processing staff to test new HB systems. This will help to motivate staff as they feel their views and contributions are valued.
- 93 Good mechanisms are in place to assess staff skills to ensure they are appropriate and support service delivery effectively. Staff training needs are identified through one to one meetings, analysis of quality checking and appeals, and updates/changes to regulations. Training needs are assessed for their priority, cost and anticipated outcome. After training, staff and managers review its effectiveness. Thorough assessment and evaluation of training provides greater confidence that officers have the right skills to undertake their roles effectively.
- 94 The Service seeks internal and external investment in order to deliver improvement. The Transformation Project was implemented with initial costs to the Council but is expected to deliver a net saving. External funding has also been used to introduce the online claim form and the electronic document management system. At a time of constricting resources across local government this approach to seeking out and maximising investment should help the Service to continue improving.

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