

Benefits

Service

Inspection

Slough Borough Council

May 2010



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Service inspections

This inspection has been carried out by the Audit Commission under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 and is in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles. These principles embody the objectives of our Strategic Plan and Strategic Regulation. They also reflect the principles from *The Government's Policy on Inspection of Public Services (July 2003)*. Audit Commission service inspections should:

- focus on public service outcomes from a user perspective;
- act as a catalyst to help inspected bodies improve their performance;
- concentrate inspection work where it will have most impact, so that it is proportionate and based on an assessment of risk;
- be based on a rigorous assessment of costs and benefits, with a concern for achieving value for money both by the inspected organisation and within the inspection regime itself;
- be, and be seen to be, independent of the inspected organisation;
- report in public, using impartial evidence to inform the public about the performance of public services so as to enhance accountability;
- involve collaborative working with other inspectorates and external review agencies to achieve greater coordination and a more holistic approach to the assessment of performance by audited and inspected bodies;
- share learning to create a common understanding of performance that encourages rigorous self assessment and better understanding of their performance by inspected organisations;
- be carried out objectively by skilled and experienced people to high standards and using relevant evidence, transparent criteria, and open review processes; and
- enable continuous learning so that inspections can become increasingly effective and efficient.

We assess services using published key lines of enquiry (KLOE) to inform our judgements. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk.

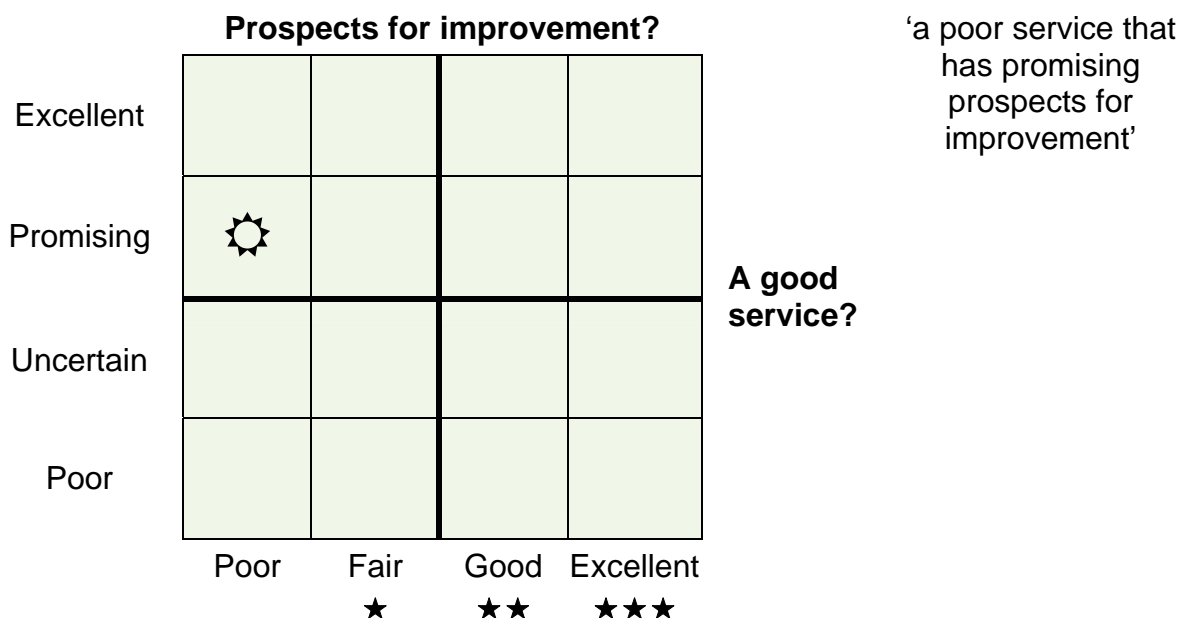
This report is issued in accordance with the Audit Commission's duty under section 13 of the 1999 Act.

Summary

- 1 The Benefits Service delivered by Slough Borough Council is poor with promising prospects for improvement. The Service is recovering from serious problems experienced a few years ago, in particular the length of time needed to decide claims, the accuracy of the assessments and poor customer service. Previous failings are being addressed, but more needs to be done to meet the needs of customers.
- 2 The Service delivered is poor. Access and customer service are significant concerns. Queuing times at Landmark Place are too long and telephone calls are not answered quickly. One in four telephone calls are abandoned and people are dissatisfied with waiting times. Advice is inconsistent and letters to claimants are poorly drafted and include spelling mistakes. Notification letters use too much jargon. The time taken to process new claims and change in circumstances is too long, but it is reducing. It is encouraging that this reduction is happening at a time when, due to the recession, demand is increasing. Some parts of the Service are good, such as having satellite offices and extended opening hours. This is an important issue and improvement in this area would help enhance the reputation of the Council and public service delivery.
- 3 The focus on customers is weak. The Service does not involve users or other groups and agencies when setting priorities for the Service or the standards to be met.
- 4 Not using the Discretionary Housing Payment funding effectively to support vulnerable people is a weakness. There is other good work to support and protect vulnerable people and community needs are understood, but this has not been used to develop a co-ordinated take-up campaign.
- 5 The Service is not delivering value for money. The overall cost of the Service is reducing but this is from being high compared with similar places, and the funding needed from local taxpayers is well above the average of all councils. However, it effectively collects overpayments and combats fraud well.
- 6 The prospects for improvement are promising. The Council is addressing the serious failings identified previously. There are significant improvements in the time needed to process new claims and change of circumstances, and accuracy has improved, albeit from a low base.
- 7 Further improvement is supported by impressive quality control systems recently introduced. The number of skilled staff is increasing and they are supported by a good approach to training which identifies and addresses skills gaps. A new approach to service planning and performance management maps out further improvement over the next three years.
- 8 The Council recognises there is more to do to improve customer service overall and the Benefits Service. Investment in information technology is changing how the Service is delivered. It is exploring how to improve value for money and has responded well to the increased demand arising from the recession. Further action required to support improved performance is the use of benchmarking and improvements in the way performance standards are agreed and reported.

Scoring the service

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

9 The Service is a poor zero star service because:

- people have to wait too long when contacting the Service;
- the approach to considering the needs of service users is inconsistent;
- the Discretionary Housing Payments budget to help vulnerable people is under used;
- the reasons for the high volume of defective claims are not understood, so it is unlikely that all customers receive the benefits they are entitled to;
- processing changes of circumstance takes too long;
- service users and other stakeholders are not involved in designing the Service or setting service standards; and
- appeals and reconsiderations take too long.

¹ The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

- 10 However there are some strengths. These include:
- effective collection of overpayments; and
 - an effective fraud service with high sanction levels and an equitable approach to fraud investigation.
- 11 The Service has promising prospects for improvement because:
- there is a track record of improvement for processing times and accuracy;
 - a strong focus on improvement is in place;
 - the service and performance management framework to drive improvement is clear;
 - the systems checking quality and timeliness of processing claims are good;
 - the approach to staff development is strong staff levels are increasing; and
 - investment in IT is building capacity.
- 12 However there are some weaknesses. These include:
- lack of clear service standards linked to targets; and
 - little benchmarking or learning from others.

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 costs¹ and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the Council should do the following.

Recommendation

R1 Improve access to the Service by:

- seeing people more quickly at Landmark Place by cutting queue times;
- answering telephone calls quicker;
- providing advice that is accurate and consistent; and
- making clear to customers the service offered at different times.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- shorter waiting times;
- more reliable advice; and
- increased customer satisfaction.

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

¹ Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

Recommendation

R2 Improve the Service delivered to customers by:

- processing new claims and changes of circumstance quickly;
- promoting Discretionary Housing Payments more effectively;
- processing appeals more quickly;
- considering requests for decisions to be reconsidered quickly; and
- reducing the high numbers of defective claims.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased customer satisfaction;
- more support for vulnerable people; and
- quicker resolution of decisions that need to be reconsidered.

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

Recommendation

R3 Deliver a service that meets customer needs by:

- involving service users and stakeholders in setting service standards;
- clearly publicising these standards so customers know what they can expect; and
- ensuring the standards are understood and delivered by frontline staff.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased customer satisfaction; and
- a better understanding for the Council of the views of customers to help decide the future of the service.

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

Recommendations

Recommendation

- R4** Adopt a co-ordinated and targeted approach to take-up campaigns to ensure people receive the money they are entitled to by:
- identifying the key groups of potential claimants;
 - agreeing with partners and other stakeholders when to run campaigns and how they will be delivered; and
 - identifying clear measures to assess achievement.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- better take up campaigns to help vulnerable people claim the benefits available to them; and
- more money spent in the local economy.

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

Recommendation

- R5** Improve performance management and service planning by:
- clarifying how outcomes are achieved;
 - identifying what the risks are more clearly;
 - ensuring the targets set reflect the standard of service wanted;
 - developing benchmarking and learning from others to help identify further improvements; and
 - ensuring the performance reports contain the key information needed to understand how well the Service is improving.

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- improved performance management that focuses on areas needing improvement.

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

Report

Context

The locality

- 14 Slough is a densely populated and compact town in Berkshire - 33 square kilometres in area. The M4 closely follows the southern boundary of the Borough and the M25 forms part of the eastern boundary. London is within easy reach and Heathrow airport is just across the eastern border.
- 15 Slough's population of 121,200 is diverse. Nearly 43 per cent are from black or minority ethnic (BME) communities. Over 50 different first languages are spoken. It has a high number of new arrivals and the Council is delivering services to a higher number of people than the official population figures suggest. However, although the Council's case is recognised, this has not yet led to a change in the funding received by the Borough. A particular factor is the high number of houses that are in multiple occupation – 3,500 currently. It is likely that the number of people living in such houses is under-reported.
- 16 The population profile is young with an above average number of people of working age. The number of people of pensionable age, at 13 per cent, is below the national average.
- 17 High levels of deprivation exist in three out of the 14 wards (Foxborough, Chalvey and Britwell). Slough ranks 115th out of 354 councils in terms of overall deprivation, where 1 is the most deprived. Life expectancy is up to three years lower than the regional average. At October 2009 the number of people claiming Job Seekers Allowance stood at 3,541, over double the number the previous year. The number of people claiming Housing and Council Tax Benefit in Slough increased by 9.52 per cent between November 2008 and May 2009 - significantly higher than the national average of 5.66 per cent.
- 18 A gap exists between the skills demanded by local employers and those available in the local workforce. Many skilled workers commute into the Borough to work in the national and international companies. However, many of its own residents, who are often less skilled, travel out of the Borough to work in places such as Heathrow. The average weekly wage of workers in Slough is £564 but the average wage of residents is £460. The number of people aged between 16 and 74 years old without a qualification at 28 per cent is above the average for the South East of 24 per cent. At 19 per cent, the number of people with a degree is below the South East average of 22 per cent.

Report

- 19 The Council and partners, including schools and businesses, are working hard to improve the skills and qualifications of local people. GCSE and 'A' level results are good and improving and increasing numbers of young people are going into higher education. The Green Flag included in the recent One Place area assessment for the work done to improve local skills recognises the contribution made by the Council to this work.

The Council

- 20 Slough Borough Council is one of six unitary authorities in Berkshire formed in 1998. The Council has 41 councillors representing 14 wards. The current administration is led by the Labour Group which has 22 members. There are 7 Conservatives and 12 councillors belong to the BILLD Group, which is a local coalition consisting of members of the Britwellian Residents Group, Independent Group, Liberals and Liberal Democrats. The Council operates a Leader and Cabinet system.
- 21 The Cabinet comprises the Leader and seven Commissioners. The Commissioner for Opportunity & Skills oversees housing benefits.
- 22 Excluding schools, the Council employs 1,749 staff and the total planned revenue expenditure for 2009/10 is £102.395 million.

The Council's benefits service

- 23 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. Responsibilities also include the collection of overpayments through appropriate recovery methods.
- 24 From 1 April 2008, the Audit Commission became responsible for benefits inspections, following the transfer of powers from the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate.
- 25 The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 sets out the framework for giving local people and local communities more influence and power to improve their lives. Councils must therefore provide a service that meets ever changing customer and legislative requirements including:
- reporting on the Department of Communities and Local Government National Indicators (NIs) with effect from 1 April 2008; and
 - contributing to the delivery of other national, regional and local priorities aimed at reducing poverty and addressing social and economic inequity, including targets within the Local Area Agreement.

- 26** 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 Slough Borough Council, the reasons for commissioning the inspection were:
- significant weaknesses were found when the Commission carried out work previously;
 - the average speed of processing new claims and changes in circumstances has historically been among the worst nationally;
 - the Service has a track record of low levels of accuracy; and
 - the capacity of the Service and the associated risk to both service delivery and subsidy recovery.
- 27** The key objectives of this inspection were:
- to assess the effectiveness of the Benefits Service in meeting the needs of the vulnerable people it serves, and contributing to the Council's wider corporate objectives; and
 - to provide assurance to the DWP and other stakeholders about the quality of service provision.
- 28** The Service in Slough pays out around £58.2 million a year (2008/09) to:
- 10,908 people claiming CTB; and
 - 5,328 people claiming Rent Allowance of which 1,999 are tenants of Registered Social Landlords and 3,090 are tenants of private landlords.
- 29** Of the total caseload of 12,816¹, 4,251 people are of pensionable age and 8,565 are working age. The Service has seen an above average increase of 15.75 per cent in its housing benefits caseload over the past 12 months. The increase in the South East was 11.93 per cent and 9.76 per cent nationally.
- 30** The Council delivers the Service as part of the Improvement and Development Directorate with 59.7 FTE (Full-time equivalent) staff. The Council's My Council customer service centre provides advice to claimants contacting the Council or visiting in person. The staff numbers above do not include the advisers at My Council. The benefits service cost includes a recharge from My Council of £1.5 million in 2009/10 to cover those costs. The cost of running the Service in 2008/09 was £3.79 million of which £1.29 million comes from the DWP and the balance (66 per cent) from local taxpayers. Estimates for 2009/10 show that costs are reducing and local taxpayers will contribute a smaller element of the overall cost.

¹ Figures provided by Slough Borough Council November 2009

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

31 The Sustainable Community Strategy, 'Proud to be Slough', adopted in 2008 covers the period to 2028. The overarching aim is that:

“People are proud to live in Slough where diversity is celebrated and where residents can enjoy fulfilling, prosperous and healthy lives”

32 There are five priority themes that support this aim:

- Cohesive Communities – celebrating diversity, enabling inclusion;
- Health and Well-Being – adding years to life and life to years;
- Safer Communities – being safe, feeling safe;
- Environment – a cleaner, greener place to live, work and play; and
- Economy and Skills – prosperity for all.

33 The community strategy does not refer to the Benefits Service directly. But the economy and skills theme includes targets to increase economic activity rates to 85 per cent by 2016 and have 95 per cent of working age adults with basic skills by 2020.

34 For the period 2008 to 2011, the Local Area Agreement (LAA) includes targets that support the longer term ones set out in the community strategy. These include improving skills in the local population and young people. No performance indicators about benefits are included in the LAA currently, but this is being considered.

35 In the summer of 2009 the Council adopted its Strategic Plan 2009–2011. This identifies five priority areas.

- Cohesive Communities – celebrating diversity.
- Health and Well Being – adding life to years and years to life.
- Community Safety – being safe, feeling safe.
- Cleaner, Greener Slough.
- Economy and Skills.

36 The overall actions for 2009/2010 include:

- review the way that we provide customer service and make improvements;
- set out clear expectations of what our customers can expect from us;

- improve the way that we deal with comments about our services and complaints; and
 - bring together the information we have about our customers and communities, such as consultation responses, complaints and statistical data, and use this to plan our services more effectively.
- 37** The Council has introduced a new service planning regime for 2009/10. The Benefits Service Plan for 2009/10 sets out 11 outcomes which include:
- improving speed of delivery of new claims and changes of circumstances;
 - improving capacity to carry out investigations for non-benefits work and generate income;
 - improving take up of benefits; and
 - Improving customer service and satisfaction.
- 38** The service plan includes targets for performance over the three years to 2011/12 that broadly demand a 10 per cent improvement year on year for processing. Also included are the recovery of overpaid benefits and number of sanctions applied to cases investigated. The 98 per cent accuracy of assessments level is the target for the next three years.
- 39** A more detailed service improvement plan for 2009/10 is in place which sets out detailed actions for the year and beyond. The investigation and overpayment unit has a business plan for 2009/10, and the overpayments team has its own plan – April 2008 to January 2010.

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

Access, customer care and user and community focus.

- 40** The focus on customers is weak. The Service does not involve users or all other groups and agencies when setting priorities for the Service or the standards to be met. The Council is consulting more with users and stakeholders but this focuses on day-to-day issues rather than to influence the design of the Service and setting standards. Meetings are held with the Slough Tenants Federation and Age Concern. A forum with private landlords and one with Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) meets twice a year. Views on their usefulness are mixed, but a service level agreement is available for RSLs. This includes the standards expected from the Service, such as the time to process new claims for their tenants. Discussions with registered social landlords when introducing the Local Housing Allowance resulted in the shortening of the time period before direct payments to the landlord were made. It is important to build on contact with both stakeholders and service users to help find out what the Service should be like as well as address immediate day-to-day issues.

How good is the service?

- 41 Customers are waiting too long to be seen by My Council at Landmark Place. In 2008/09 the average queuing time for all services at My Council was 50 minutes compared with the target of 30 minutes. Average waiting times have improved so far in 2009/10, but customers still queued for an average of 28 minutes in the first quarter of the year and 19 minutes between July and September 2009. However, one in four benefit customers still wait more than 30 minutes. The satisfaction survey carried out in September 2009 shows that 56 per cent of benefits customers feel that waiting times are too long. Long queuing times lead to dissatisfaction and damages the reputation of the Service.
- 42 Access to the Service using the telephone is poor. One in four calls are abandoned. It often takes a long time for calls to be answered. In 2008/09 the average waiting time was nearly six minutes. Between April and June 2009 this increased to seven minutes, although between July and September 2009 this had improved to less than five minutes. But these are average figures which mask the reality for many of having to wait much longer before they can speak to anyone. A call back service is available to customers telephoning My Council, but benefit customers are reluctant to use it. The Service is working with key stakeholders such as RSLs, private landlords and Shelter to improve access by offering direct contact with assessment team leaders rather than going through My Council, but this is not possible for customers. Telephone access for customers remains a problem and is damaging the reputation of the Service, despite statistics showing the seven-minute wait time target is being met.
- 43 The quality and accuracy of the advice given to customers is inconsistent. For example, sometimes a person calling on behalf of a customer can discuss the details of a case, but at other times they may be told this is not possible. Customer service advisers have access to a database of 'frequently asked questions'. This is useful, but there are times when the wrong advice is given or decisions made are inconsistent. However, advisers are committed to delivering good customer service. They are polite and try to be helpful when answering telephone calls or at the reception. Good personal contact is important to reassure customers, as is consistent advice.
- 44 Customers do not know what standard of service they can expect. No service standards are displayed or available at any of the My Council offices or on the Council's website. A Council standards document outlines the expected behaviours of its staff, but this is for internal use.
- 45 The standard and quality of correspondence is poor. Often letters are unclear, poorly written and include spelling mistakes. There is too much jargon and the letters are lengthy. This includes the notification letters recently reviewed by the Slough Tenants Federation. Reasons for not being entitled to a benefit are not always clear. These problems also affect some information provided. For example the application form available to download from the Council's website only mentions two of the offices where advice is available. It doesn't include the opening times on Monday at Landmark Place and contains a spelling mistake. This gives a poor impression of the Service; clear information well expressed is important for customers.

- 46 The Council offers a good choice of where people can contact the Service. As well as the main office - the My Council facility at Landmark Place - three other offices offer advice and receive claims. Of these, Britwell, is in one of the more deprived parts of Slough and where an assessor attends once a week who can process claims while customers wait. However, the areas in these three offices for benefits customers are not private and the space for waiting limited. Landmark Place is in the town centre. It is clean and welcoming and the facilities and layout good, although the lack of space for small children to play can be a problem when busy. The Service's recent customer satisfaction survey shows that 83 per cent of customers feel the benefits office is easy to get to. However, the advice leaflets available at Landmark Place are not all available at the outlying offices. Having a choice of offices to go to helps customers reach skilled benefits advisers and get advice, providing a better service for customers.
- 47 Extended opening times and telephones answered outside normal office hours make it easier for people to contact the Service. As well as normal office hours, Landmark Place is open until 6.30pm on Mondays and offers a limited reception service on Saturday mornings. Benefits customers can telephone between 8am and 7pm. Email access to My Council advisers is also available. The recent satisfaction survey suggests that 70 per cent are satisfied with the ways they can contact the Service. However, the Saturday morning service accepts claim forms but does not normally review new claims with customers. This range of opening hours and locations makes the Service more convenient for customers, easier to contact, and smoothes demand during office hours.
- 48 Information about benefits is easy to find on the Council's website. Explanatory information is available and the 'Frequently Asked Question' section provides simple advice on different issues. Most of the answers are good, but some need to be clearer. For example the question 'what happens if I receive too much benefit' explains to the customer that they should report changes of circumstances but not what happens when they have received an overpayment. Good use is made of links to other sites for more information such as DWP. However, the website doesn't include access to an online benefits calculator. A good website can help cut down on the number of calls people have to make in person or by telephone.
- 49 Access to welfare benefit and debt advice is good. The Council's Welfare Advice team is at the My Council main reception at Landmark Place. Customers get advice directly or are referred to the team by a customer service adviser or benefits assessor. Effective support and advice prevents unnecessary hardship and can prevent homelessness.
- 50 The Council manages complaints well but the quality of response is variable. The four-stage corporate complaints procedure is clear, and responses to complaints about the Benefits Service are timely, but do not always address or answer the issues raised. Sometimes the Council appears reluctant to accept responsibility for the problem. Complaints made over the telephone are not necessarily logged as a formal complaint, understating the volume of complaints received about the Service. By not logging all complaints, issues raised are not used for analysis. The analysis of complaints helps the Service make changes to address customers' concerns.

Diversity

- 51 The Council is not making best use of the funding available to support vulnerable people in the community. In our recent benefits recession survey (www.audit-commission/testingtimes) most councils stated they were receiving an increase in demand for Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP). At Slough the Service did not spend its full allocation of DHP^I in 2008/09. If the allocation for this financial year^{II} is not spent, the budget available to support local people could be cut for next year. Work to identify customers potentially eligible for this support is limited. In response to the concern that the allocation may not be spent fully in 2009/10 the Council is increasing its advertising. Posters and leaflets are on display in Council offices and at People First offices plus at another RSL. Also leaflets go out with reconsideration decisions. Effective management and use of DHP ensures the Service is able to target those customers that are potentially more vulnerable and in need of extra support.
- 52 The Council does not have a clear strategy for encouraging benefit take-up. It is not systematically targeting action to maximise the income of people in need of support. Like most local authorities the Council includes benefits information with the annual council tax bills. This has limited impact. The Service has organised take up campaigns in the recent past. Posters and leaflets advertised changes in legislation for pensioners and child benefit. Over 300 potential claimants are being contacted and visits arranged for pensioners where necessary. Campaigns have been organised to encourage the Polish and Somali communities to claim benefits, although with limited success. The Service recognises the need to do more outreach work and is committed to a minimum of two campaigns a year from now on. However, what the campaigns will do and how partners are involved so they are co-ordinated is not clear. Ensuring vulnerable people claim the benefits they are entitled to means they do not suffer unnecessary hardship and extra income is brought into the local community.^{III}
- 53 The Service has a good understanding of the profile of its customers, including ethnic background, but has been slow to use it. It has just started to use equality monitoring data about benefit claimants to help decide what take-up promotion should happen. It completed an equalities impact assessment against its DHP policy in January 2008 but subsequent action is not yet clear. Effective use of information about the community helps tailor the Service to meet customer needs.
- 54 The Council's approach to equality and diversity is good. It works hard to promote good community relationships and is good at looking at how it delivers its services and the potential impact on different communities. However, it is not as good at involving those communities in this process and communicating the results of equality impact assessments. The Council achieved level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government in March 2009. Staff and councillors have a good understanding of inequalities and are committed to address them.

^I Discretionary Housing Payments allow Councils to make additional payments to people who receive Housing and/or Council Tax Benefit and appear to need further help with their rent and/or Council Tax payments.

^{II} Councils are allowed to supplement the amount of grant made by government

^{III} '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.

- 55** Good support is available for vulnerable people. The clear policies and procedures help protect vulnerable people. Guidance is available to help staff decide when it would be suitable to pay benefit direct to landlords. The visiting officers, Welfare Benefits and the Financial Assessment and Benefits team (FAB), work together to provide visiting and financial assessments for vulnerable customers. Visits happen quickly and a translation service is offered. There is effective assessment of capacity to repay overpaid debt, and liaison with other departments and organisations such as Council Tax and People First to help manage all debts owed by the customer. However, joint working with the Pensions Service has been slow - quarterly meetings started only in January 2009. Pension Service staff have recently started to collect Housing and Council Tax information and claims during their visits. Clear guidance and close working with the various agencies is important to identify the needs of vulnerable people and address them.
- 56** The Council offers good translation services and has incorporated features on its website to improve access. Translation services are available at My Council, often from staff already working there. The fraud team's external translation service provides training for their staff to ensure interviews under caution are not compromised. The website does not offer translations on it directly, but does include information written in several of the languages most used in Slough. Website users can adapt the size of text to their needs. Software is available for a screen reader which allows the content to be heard rather than having to be read. In this way the Service is able to make direct contact with many of the diverse groups of people living in Slough.

Service outcomes

- 57** Satisfaction with the Service is poor. Results from the Council's satisfaction survey carried out in September 2009 show that 69 per cent of benefits customers who responded are satisfied with the service provided by staff in the benefits office. In 2006/07 satisfaction with the Service stood at 66 per cent which was the 15th worst level nationally. There are concerns about waiting times, the consistency of advice provided and the quality of letters. These results are similar to the concerns raised separately by customers and stakeholders spoken to as part of the inspection. While recent improvements in the Service are recognised, they are still not satisfied with the delays in contacting the Service by telephone or the waiting times at the office. Understanding and addressing customers' concerns prompts improvement to the outcomes for customers and their satisfaction with the Service.

How good is the service?

- 58** The Council takes too long to decide new claims. During 2008/09 it took an average of 27 days to process new claims. When compared to the last published comparable data (2007/08) this would have been below average. So far into 2009/10 the Service has improved its performance to 22 days, which is a satisfactory level. The recent improvements have been achieved when a significant rise in claims occurred caused by the current recession. It is not possible to compare national performance for 2008/09 because of a lack of comparable information. This is a national issue because of information technology problems following a change in the way the DWP required councils to report information. Customers are encouraged to supply evidence at the earliest opportunity and assessors now routinely telephone customers to ask them to provide outstanding evidence. The Council understands that further improvement is necessary as it is still behind the best performing councils.
- 59** The Service is slow to deal with changes of circumstances. In 2008/09 it took 11 days and this has continued into the first half of 2009/10. New verification procedures are now in place to speed up processing of changes and this is showing early signs of improvements. Since setting up these procedures changes are processed faster (average of 9.6 days). This follows a decision to prioritise new claims over changes in circumstances during the recession. The Service is taking satisfactory action - such as postal review forms and targeted visits - to identify those whose circumstances are likely to have changed. Processing changes in circumstances quickly is important as it helps avoid benefits being cancelled or the wrong amount of benefit received.
- 60** The performance level against the 'Right time'¹ indicator NI 181 is unclear. This is due to the lack of comparative information nationally. Although councils are responsible for setting their targets, Slough does not have a target in place. During 2009/10 the Council has reported average processing times of 15 days to 30 October 2009.
- 61** The Service does not understand why customers do not supply all the evidence in support of their claims. One in five claims are not assessed because the necessary evidence is not supplied. Analysis of these cases is limited and specific action is not in place to improve this. Better understanding the obstacles customers face will help the Council maximise the number of residents in receipt of benefits.
- 62** The Service takes too long to decide appeals and consider requests for a decision to be reconsidered. Although currently the Service is successful when cases are heard at Tribunal, winning 93 per cent of cases submitted. A benchmark of four weeks is a reasonable time for dealing with reconsiderations. Between April and November 2009, only 48 per cent of reconsiderations were considered within four weeks. A benchmark of three months is the maximum time for dealing with appeals. So far in 2009/10, 72 per cent of appeals are decided within this period. Only 4 per cent of appeals were processed within the more challenging benchmark of four weeks. Customers already experience significant delays in receiving a date for a hearing at tribunal. To address these delays the Service has recently recruited additional temporary support. The time taken by the Service to consider and forward cases to the tribunal service increases overall waiting times further. This results in uncertainty for long periods of time and potentially severe financial hardship for claimants, thus having a significant impact on their lives.

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

- 63** Accuracy levels are reasonable. The Service completes a quarterly accuracy check, and the method used is robust. In 2008/09 accuracy stood at 98.4 per cent. The two-stage risk analysis identifies suitable cases for review. Errors are identified and cases adjusted quickly. Accurate payments to customers minimises hardship and helps prevent overpayments.
- 64** The Council is good at tackling benefit fraud. Work deterring fraudulent activity and encouraging residents to report potential fraudulent cases is effective. Clear and effective policies are in place. Fraud awareness is promoted across the whole Council using training, posters, advertising the fraud hotline and using the local press and radio to report successful prosecutions. Councillors also receive training on fraud awareness. The Housing Benefit Matching Service (HBMS) information is used correctly. This action has resulted in the Service receiving 725 referrals and investigating 406 cases during 2008/09. Formal action was taken on 70 cases, including 24 prosecutions, 29 formal cautions and 17 administrative penalties. So far in 2009/10 the Service has taken formal action in 27 cases and has a further 31 cases awaiting decisions on what action to take. Although this is below the levels achieved in the previous year, levels of sanctions remain high. Effective fraud investigation prevents those not entitled to it receiving benefit and acts as a deterrent to others.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 65** The Service is not delivering value for money. In 2008/09 local taxpayers contributed 66 per cent towards the cost of running the Service - well above the average of 39 per cent across all councils. This is the tenth highest local taxpayer contribution nationally. The cost of each claim is also above the average for a comparable group of councils. Historically the Service is a high cost and poor performing one. However, the cost is lower now than in the past and performance has started to improve.
- 66** Partnership working with neighbouring authorities on benefits services is limited. For instance, opportunities are not taken to work more closely with other councils to set up joint posts where recruitment of experienced staff is difficult. Recently, though, costs of 'take-up' advertising were shared with The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead. Such initiatives can improve the service to customers as well as reduce the cost of the Service to local taxpayers.
- 67** The Service is managing the way it seeks to improve value for money well. It closely manages and checks spending as well as the income received through subsidy from government. Weekly reports identify variations or unusual entries to check. These review important parts of the claim such as payments made not refunded by government, levels of overpayments because of delay or error. Team leaders examine issues identified and discuss them with individuals or at team meetings. At the same time opportunities to streamline processes to save money are identified such as promoting home working and are encouraging BACS payments rather than using cheques. This ensures that value for money is constantly reviewed.

How good is the service?

- 68** The value of overpayments caused by local authority error has reduced. Local Authority error overpayments reduced to £188,275 in 2008/09 which was below the DWP lower threshold, making the Service eligible for full subsidy on these debts. This has resulted in the Service being eligible for increased levels of subsidy. This is an improvement on previous years when significant amounts of government subsidy were lost. For the three years from 2005/06 to 2007/08 the total impact on local taxpayers and the Council's budget was £1,062,006.
- 69** Overpayments recovery is good and outstanding debt is reducing. In the past management of debt has been weak. £2.4 million of overpayments was recovered during 2008/09 which reduced the amount outstanding from just over £7 million to about £5.4 million. The Service uses a wide range of recovery methods including deductions from ongoing benefit and blameless tenant recovery. The new financial investigation team also uses charging orders and the Proceeds of Crime Act to recover fraudulently gained overpayments. Individual circumstances and the ability to repay overpayments are considered. However, management reporting has identified a significant number of debts carried forward that are uncollectible which should have been written off. The Service has recognised this and has recently recruited additional people; £482,000 of debt has been passed for write off. Effective management and collection of debt owing to the Council reduces the financial burden on local taxpayers.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 70** The Council has a track record of improving the Service, albeit from a low base. Early in 2008 the Commission undertook a pilot inspection which identified many areas where the Service needed to improve. The Council is addressing most of the recommendations made. Not all the work is complete, but there is progress in key areas, including setting up the private landlord and RSL forums, and engaging with users through the tenants' forum. Some improvements, such as involving users in the design of the Service and setting standards, have yet to happen. The Council knows that it is important to improve the Service further and is taking action to do this through the service plan; progress is being made to meet the outcomes sought for this year. This ability to respond positively to recommendations is important if the Service is to improve in the future and provides confidence that it is able to do so.
- 71** Over the past three years the Council has improved the time taken to decide claims and increased accuracy significantly. It was among the worst performing councils in the country eg in 2004/05 the time taken to decide new claims was 69 days and for change of circumstances 31 days. The table below shows improvement continuing into the second quarter of 2009/10 for processing new claims. More needs to be done, but it is clear the Council is able to address poor performance.

Table 1 Performance against national averages

Best Value Performance Indicators ¹	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10 Q1	2009/10 Q2
BV78a - average no of days taken to make a full decision on new claims (national average - not available for 2008/09)	37.4 days (28.7)	27 days (24.7)	27 days	22 days	22 days
BV78b - average no of days taken to make a full decision on changes of circumstances (national average)	22.8 days (11)	14 days (9.1)	11 days	11.16 days	11 days
BV79a - accuracy of processing HB and CTB claims (national average)	96.4% (98.4%)	98% (98.6%)	98.4%	98%	Not available

¹ From 2008/09 BVPIs were replaced by Nis (National Indicators)

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 72** Other improvements are leading to better value for money, and better customer service. The increased use of BACs is reducing the number of cheques issued in a month. Action to address fraud is more effective, and subsidy loss has decreased over the past three years. The introduction of home working and changes to the way that letters are printed and sent is making savings. The overall cost of the Service at £3,039,450 for 2009/10 is lower than the previous year due to a cut in the recharge from My Council of more than £500,000. Improvements to managing overpayments, reducing error and tackling fraud have improved the Council's financial position. These measures show how the Council is addressing the need to provide value for money.
- 73** The time taken to see customers at My Council at Landmark Place and answer telephone calls has improved recently, but more improvement is needed. The queue times for all services (not just Benefits) reduced from an average of 50 minutes in 2008/09 to 28 minutes in Quarter 1 of 2009/10 and 19 minutes in Quarter 2, compared with an annual target of 30 minutes. For benefit telephone enquiries the average time to wait was 4.38 minutes in Quarter 2 of 2009/10 compared with the seven minutes wait in Quarter 1. The target time for telephone calls to be answered is seven minutes for 2009/10, the same as in 2008/09. That year the average time to answer was 5.43 minutes. In 2007/08 the time to answer was 5.33 minutes. Overall satisfaction with the first contact with My Council for all services has improved. It now stands at 81 per cent, an improvement on the previous rate of 64 per cent. The recent improvements mean the Council is now meeting its targets, although the negative perception of the time it takes to see an adviser or have a telephone call answered remains.
- 74** Progress to set up co-ordinated and effective take-up campaigns is slow. The Council has carried out three campaigns in the past year, none had been done previously. A minimum of two campaigns a year are planned, but what these will target is yet to be decided. The information needed to target the campaigns is being gathered, but a strategy to ensure that a co-ordinated approach is taken with other stakeholders is not in place. It is important to ensure that take-up campaigns are targeted at those most in need and that potential claimants understand what benefits they may qualify for.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 75** The Council is strengthening its focus on improvement to the Service and My Council. In August 2009 both the Service and My Council transferred to the Improvement and Development Directorate to strengthen the focus on the level of change needed for these services. In the summer of 2009 the Council agreed to set up a project to:
- improve customer satisfaction (through improving customer experiences);
 - improve staff attitudes and behaviours towards customers internally and externally;
 - identify opportunities for business design – for example not having to go to different offices;
 - recognise for internal and external groups/teams/individuals delivering customer excellence;

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- achieve recognition as providing excellent customer service (by agencies and our citizens); and
- Improve front facing processes that customers experience by reducing time taken and information asked for.

The project addresses the key weakness identified and is sponsored by the Chief Executive and Strategic Director of Improvement and Development.

- 76** The Council's new approach to service planning provides a clear basis for improvement. A set template is used that links the Service to delivery of the Council's strategic priorities. Relevant performance measures are included and targets set for the next three years. Each plan includes a value for money statement, a resources plan and risk assessment. The Service and My Council have produced service plans that follow this approach and have identified outcomes to be achieved for the year. These include improvement to customer contact and addressing the weaknesses experienced. Further work is needed to improve that the way outcomes are measured and the risk assessment is explained. This new approach to service planning has strengthened the Council's ability to improve services and ensures they are clearly linked to overall priorities.
- 77** Performance management within the Service is good. The service improvement plan lists the detailed actions needed and by when they will be done. Frequent reports check progress. The system used to track the performance of assessors is impressive. It provides team leaders and managers with clear caseload management information that quickly highlights any problems associated with accuracy and speed of processing. Staff welcome it as a fair means to ensure that good performance is recognised as well areas for improvement. It links to staff appraisals and means staff can see how their own objectives and training needs link to the Council's overall priorities. However, performance information from My Council needs to include the service standards for benefits claimants. Also the performance reports used outside the directorate do not include the key measures necessary to provide information on how well the Service is performing. This new approach to performance management helps the Service improve the speed of processing claims and accuracy, and points to other areas for improvement.
- 78** Limited use is made of benchmarking and learning from others. The Council recognises this is important and is starting to visit other authorities to learn how they deliver services such as to Cheltenham and the Anglian Partnership. The Council is a member of the CIPFA benchmarking club, but analysis of the information to highlight any areas for further work is not complete. The Council is now ready to apply a systematic approach to learning from others.
- 79** A clear vision is not in place that describes the quality of service desired. The priority up to now has been a 10 per cent improvement year on year for processing speeds. It is not clear whether the Council believes that an average waiting time of 30 minutes to be served at My Council represents good service. When agreeing this vision consultation involving both stakeholders and users is important to influence the desired standard of service that the vision represents.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 80** The Council's corporate capacity to support improvement is strong. The Improvement and Development Directorate has been set up to strengthen service planning and performance management. The Council has also introduced a Policy Prioritisation and Resources process which directs resources where they are most needed. This helps the Council use its finance and staffing effectively.
- 81** The Service's approach to staff development is strong. The newly appointed training officer has completed a skills audit and a training plan is in place using the findings from the audit. Linked to the appraisal system it picks up any issues identified from the quality management checks. The My Council advisers are subject to their own quality control measures and related training, but could now work more closely with the benefits team for staff development to ensure the necessary skills are available in both areas.
- 82** The Council's capacity to deliver the Service is increasing. This is partly due to DWP money to fund extra posts in the appeals, overpayments and visiting teams. An extra assessor and visiting officer have been recruited. The trainee scheme helps develop staff and the use of a linked grade scheme. Capacity is still an issue as the Council recently had to prioritise processing new claims over change of circumstances to respond to increased demand. However, by adopting the current approach to recruitment, the Service has cut back on the number of contractors used which is helping to reduce costs. It is important to have the right number of skilled staff in post for the Service to be delivered effectively.
- 83** The Service is successful in keeping skilled staff. It promotes home working to help keep staff as well as improve value for money. Already 13 members of staff are working from home or are about to. Expected savings on accommodation are between £60,000 and £80,000, but importantly this encourages experienced staff to stay with the Council. Staff are working from as faraway as Wales and Spain without any adverse effect on the Service.
- 84** Investment in IT is improving the Service. The caseload quality control system and control team banking system are good examples of this investment. A new fraud management system is also planned. By introducing better IT the Council is able to streamline how it works and improve quality control.
- 85** The Council is responding to the impact of the recession on Slough positively. Monthly, the Council's management team receives a recession watch report which includes benefit caseload data. The Service has responded to the increase in claimants by using funds available from DWP to increase capacity. It has also produced the Credit Crunch booklet to provide advice on housing, benefits, employment, debt counselling, education opportunities and volunteering. This helps the Council respond to extra demands placed on it as well as support the local community in difficult times.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 86 The Council is exploring how shared services could improve value for money. The Service is offering a financial investigative service to neighbouring authorities and other parts of the Council. It has widened the scope of its fraud investigations team to include financial and criminal investigations services. The Council has agreed a memorandum of understanding with North Hertfordshire and Hillingdon councils to provide these services for them on a commission or fee basis. Also, discussions are underway with Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire County Councils to create a joint venture company to provide common services. The Service is part of the proposal as an opportunity for income generation. Sharing services in this way offers the prospect of reduced duplication, economies of scale and efficiency savings.

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