

# Benefits

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# Service

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# Re-inspection

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South Staffordshire Council

March 2010



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# Service Inspections

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

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

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

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

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# Summary

- 1 The Benefits Service (the Service) in South Staffordshire is good. There is a strong and effective working relationship between the front facing customer service and back office processing service. Staff are well trained and support each other to provide a seamless service to the customer. Good progress has been made in providing a speedy and responsive service. Processing times of new claims and change in circumstances have improved despite rising workloads. New claim processing times have fallen from 32 days in 2007/08 to 18 in 2008/09.
- 2 Engagement with users and partners, such as Registered Social Landlords (RSLs), Jobcentre Plus, Housing Services, HealthNet, Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), Age Concern and the Pension Service, has improved and continues to develop. Partners are beginning to influence the shape of the Service and good joint working initiatives are taking place. There is improving and effective benefit take-up and joint working to support vulnerable communities. Service users are regularly surveyed and asked for their views. As a result a limited outreach service is offered at Womborne Leisure Centre and options to extend outreach services further are being considered with partners. Demographic data is beginning to be used to inform decisions but this is at an early stage and there is scope to develop this further.
- 3 Access to the Service is improving and some of the geographical challenges are being overcome. Some tenants make a claim through their landlord, whilst others can get support through welfare agencies and partnerships such as the CAB, Age Concern and HealthNet. Those who cannot call at an office can make a claim using an on-line claim form or ask for a home visit. Customers who are working and cannot access the Service during normal office hours can visit or telephone until 8:00pm on a Tuesday and on a Saturday morning until 1:00pm. The telephone service has delivered good improvement but there is still more progress to be made. Calls are answered in an average of 35 seconds and the number of people who give up on their call has reduced to 3.5 per cent from 20 per cent in 2007/08.
- 4 The Service uses a risk-based approach to accuracy which means that resources and effort can be focused on where there is the highest risk. Claims that are most at risk to a change not being reported promptly are reviewed more frequently, and counter-fraud work is targeted. This has resulted in the amount of benefit being overpaid reducing significantly, and the successful prosecution of fraudsters.
- 5 Overall the Service is achieving value for money. Although the cost of the Service is high in comparison to other councils it performs well in several areas. Claim processing, overpayment recovery and fraud investigation all perform better than similar councils the Service compares itself with. Improvements in the way it helps customers get the right benefit have contributed to big reductions in the amount of benefit that is overpaid. A more robust approach to managing and monitoring the money it claims through government subsidy has reduced the financial burden on council tax payers.

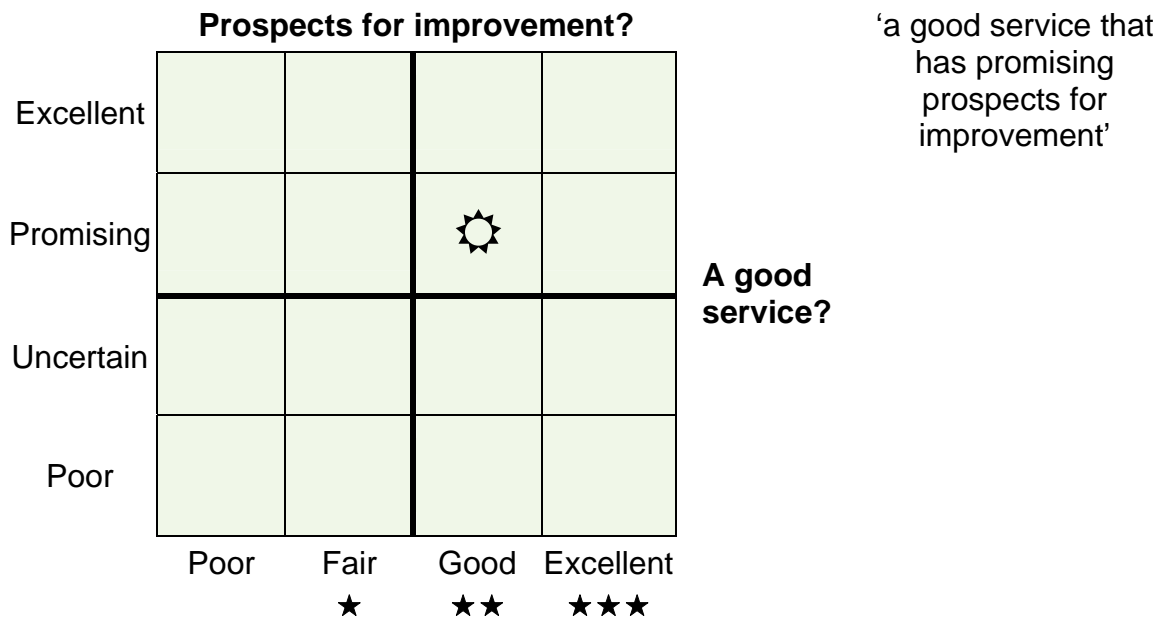
## Summary

- 6 Prospects for improvement are promising. Political and managerial leadership is good and is driving improvements in the Service. The Council has a track record of implementing changes which bring about real improvements to its customers. The Service has shown significant improvement over the last three years, and in particular since it was last inspected in 2008. Improvement planning overall is sound in the short term but lacks a longer term vision. The Service recognised its weaknesses from the previous inspection, and has turned around its performance. It continues to sustain improvement despite an increasing caseload.
- 7 Performance management arrangements are good within the Service. Clear aims and plans are in place to direct the Service over the next year. However, a longer term view of the shape of the service and the actions needed to maintain improvement beyond that is lacking.
- 8 The Service faces a major challenge in having to replace its claims processing system. However, it has worked well with other Councils to issue a tender for a new system. Specialist project management skills have been brought in to reduce risk and capacity within the service is being built up to cope with any difficulties.

# Scoring the service

- 9 We have assessed South Staffordshire 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

- 10 The Service is a good, two star service because:

- it tells customers what level of service they can expect and publishes its performance results so they can see how the Service is delivering. There are no backlogs of work and customers get a prompt service in all areas including processing claims and changes, reconsiderations and appeals;
- most customers can access the Service with ease and it is developing to provide customers with more options to access the Service including improved on-line access. Facilities at the main office are of a high standard;
- it listens to and communicates well with its users and partners, responding positively to their needs;
- staff are well trained and have a strong focus on customer care;

<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

- it is effective in protecting council tax payers' money. Counter-fraud work is well managed and overpayment management has been strengthened. It successfully recovers overpaid benefit;
- Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs)<sup>1</sup> are used well to support vulnerable people;
- it provides good value for money and in particular makes sure that it claims the maximum amount it can through government subsidy; and
- customers' surveyed are very satisfied with the service they receive.

11 However, there are some areas which require improvement. These include:

- partners are not fully engaged with the Service at a more strategic level;
- the use of demographic data has not been fully developed to further inform service access options and benefit take-up initiatives;
- benefit take-up initiatives are not systematically evaluated;
- standards for answering customer telephone calls are not being met;
- customers have not been surveyed about all aspects of front-line service delivery; and
- equality impact assessments (EIAs) are undertaken but their effectiveness is not always obvious.

12 The Service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- it has a good track record of implementing changes that delivered significant improvement for customers including major improvement in processing new claims and changes in circumstances; managing overpayments and the subsidy claim;
- performance management is effective and accountability for managing the service is clear;
- there is good political and managerial leadership of the Service; and
- it has knowledgeable and highly committed operational staff willing to work flexibly across different teams to ensure work is turned around quickly.

13 However, there are some areas which require improvement. These include:

- the development of a clear longer term vision;
- a systematic approach to the evaluation of outcomes;
- partners involvement in the formation of service plans; and
- customer service standards are not in sufficient detail to specifically monitor the Service.

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

# Recommendations

- 14 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the Council. In addition, we identify the approximate costs<sup>1</sup> and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the Council should do the following.

## Recommendation

**R1** Improve customer access to the Service by:

- meeting and exceeding the service standard for answering telephone calls;
- systematically evaluating the outcomes from benefit take-up initiatives and developing an understanding why people do and do not claim benefits; and
- undertaking EIAs that address the needs of all users and are clearly effective.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- telephone customers will receive an improved service in line with stated service standards and the number of people that abandon their call will reduce further;
- customers that are hard to reach or who have specific needs will know that their requirements are being considered and met; and
- improved customer satisfaction.

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

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

## Recommendations

### Recommendation

**R2** To ensure that the design of the Service meets users needs by:

- encouraging partners to take a more strategic view of the service so that their views can help shape the way it is delivered;
- using demographic data more extensively to inform service access options and benefit take-up initiatives; and
- making greater use of customer surveys to gather user views.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the service design will be influenced by the experience and needs of users and partners;
- improvements will be made in the areas that matter most to people; and
- access for hard to reach communities will be improved.

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

### Recommendation

**R3** Further develop Service Planning by:

- clearly articulating a longer term vision for the service;
- considering the needs of diverse groups;
- involving partners in service planning; and
- embedding the evaluation of initiatives against expected benefits and outcomes.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the Service will have a longer term goal to support its drive for continuous improvement;
- capacity will be focused effectively at the most vulnerable in the community; and
- service planning will be strengthened by incorporating the views and concerns of partners which in turn will ensure their commitment to support the delivery of the service's ambition.

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

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# Report

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## Context

### The locality

- 15 South Staffordshire is a rural district bordering the north-western edge of the West Midlands conurbation. It is an attractive area covering 407 hectares, 80 per cent of which is classified as green belt, with 19 conservation areas. There are 27 parishes and no large towns, but several diverse settlements which range in size from hamlets to large villages of over 13,000 residents. There are good transport links provided by the M54, the M6 and rail links to the West Midlands, Telford and Stafford.
- 16 According to mid-2008 estimates the population is about 106,400, living in approximately 43,000 households. The population is predicted to decline slightly over the next ten years, especially the under 50s as the older population becomes a higher proportion with the over 70's predicted to have the greatest growth of all age groups by 2020. Around 4.5 per cent of the population is from a black and minority ethnic (BME) background which is low compared to the regional and national average.
- 17 The District is largely affluent and the least deprived in the county. It is ranked 269th overall out of 354 areas nationally (where 354 is the least deprived). The proportion of people that are economically active is higher than the national average at 86.4 per cent, with 3.5 per cent of the population claiming Jobseekers Allowance. Average weekly earnings (2006) are £467, higher than both the regional and national averages of £430 and £459 respectively. The average house price is higher than the regional average and national average at £223,400 (2008). A relatively low percentage of the population live in low income households, 8.1 per cent compared to the regional and national average of 12 per cent. The impact of the recession has been a 12 per cent increase in the caseload between June 2008 and October 2009.

### The Council

- 18 The Conservative party is in overall control of the Council holding 86 per cent of the seats. There are 49 elected councillors representing 27 wards with 42 Conservative, one Labour, one Liberal Democrat and five independent councillors.
- 19 The Council has a Chairman and Vice-Chairman who are elected every year, plus a Leader who acts as the political head of the Council. Five Deputy Leaders are also elected and have a specific area of responsibility (Portfolio Holders).
- 20 The Council no longer owns or manages its own housing stock, which was transferred to South Staffordshire Housing Association in April 1997.

### The Council's Benefits Service

- 21** Both Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit are national welfare benefits administered by the Council on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). A complex legal framework is in place to define who is entitled to benefit and to reduce fraud and error in the system. The Benefits Service within a council has a responsibility to pay the right benefit to the right person at the right time.
- South Staffordshire Council administers its own Benefits Service, with 26.28 full time equivalent staff being directly employed to provide the Service. The cost of the Service is met partially by the DWP through an administration grant. In 2008/09 the cost of the Service was £1.4 million of which 54 per cent was met by local tax payers. The Service is responsible for administering a revenue budget in excess of £22m. The most significant elements of this budget are the income generated from the DWP and the expenditure incurred in paying out housing benefit and council tax benefit. Currently the Service awards payments of £15.7m in housing benefit and over £6.3m in council tax benefit to customers in the South Staffordshire area, who are on low incomes, to help meet their rental and council tax liabilities. During 2008/09 the Service paid a mix of housing benefit and council tax benefit to an average of 7,554 people. Of these 3,960 were tenants of RSLs:
    - 891 were tenants of private landlords; and
    - the remaining 2703 were mostly owner-occupiers.
- 22** The Service is managed within the Council's Direct Services Directorate and is the responsibility of the Direct Services Director. The Service expects to be dealing with about 7,700 cases during the current year. Comparative information shows that the Service is being provided at a higher than average cost in relation to other councils.
- 23** From 1 April 2008, the Audit Commission became responsible for benefits service inspections, following the transfer of powers from the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate.
- 24** 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 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 (LAA).
- 25** 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. The reason for commissioning the inspection was as a follow up to a previous inspection in 2008 when the Council was rated as Poor with Promising prospects for improvement.

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# How good is the service?

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## What has the service aimed to achieve?

26 The Service has a clear short-term vision to

**Deliver right service at right time that meets customers' needs.**

This is underpinned by six aims which are to:

- provide a high quality, customer focused service that pays the right benefits, discounts and relief to the right people at the right time;
- collect Council Tax, Business Rates and Housing Benefits Overpayments effectively, maximising income to the Council and minimising the customer's level of debt as appropriate;
- provide value for money for customers and taxpayers by focusing our services around customers needs;
- ensure that the service we deliver meets the needs of customers and partners by undertaking regular liaison and consultation;
- reduce fraud and error in the system by increasing the number of customers who understand what is expected from them, and what they can expect from us; and
- have well-trained and knowledgeable staff, able to provide an efficient and professional service to the Council and its customers.

27 South Staffordshire's corporate vision is:

**As a well managed Council, we will strive to make South Staffordshire a safe and healthy place to live, with prosperous villages and thriving communities where everyone can develop their abilities to the full and pass on to future generations a better environment.**

To deliver this, the Council has five aims and objectives:

- to be a Council which protects and enhances South Staffordshire's distinctive environment;
- to be a healthy and safe District in which to live, work and visit;
- to be a District of thriving and sustainable communities;
- to be a District recognised for strong community leadership and partnership working; and
- to be a well managed Council.

## How good is the service?

- 28** The Sustainable Community Strategy 2008 - 2020 sets out a vision for the District which corresponds with the Council's vision. The Council and its partners aim to deliver this vision through six themes which focus on:
- housing;
  - economic vibrancy;
  - environmental quality;
  - community safety;
  - health and well-being; and
  - children and young people.
- 29** The Council, in partnership with other councils in Staffordshire and other public and voluntary bodies in the area, aims to deliver shared objectives expressed in the LAA. The Service is aiming to contribute to wider community outcomes such as increasing Staffordshire people's quality of life, by improving the service it provides locally and increasing the economic prosperity, by specifically supporting the reduction of crime, supporting people back into work and reducing homelessness.

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

- 30** In 2008, we found there were more weaknesses than strengths in this area. The Service recognised many of its weaknesses and had put in place plans to address them to ensure continual improvements for customers in the future.
- 31** The Service is working with internal partners to develop a better understanding of the needs of customers. At a corporate level data profiles have been developed in conjunction with partners around five localities. Partners agreed to break down their own data into localities to inform five Locality Profiles. Through this work priority areas for development of services have been identified. Locality Profiles helped inform options for outreach surgeries in partnership with Housing Services, and an outreach office is now open at Womborne Leisure Centre for two hours each Thursday. Other locations are now under consideration.
- 32** Arrangements for consulting, engaging and communicating with users are good. Consultation on internet access and fraud awareness was undertaken through the corporate residents' panel, South Staffordshire Viewpoint. In addition the Service undertakes a monthly customer survey to get views on matters such as preferred method of contacting the Service. Customers have said that they would like to be able to access the Service from local points in the community. The Service is now in discussion with the Children and Young Persons group, about providing outreach services in Community and Children Centres at Perton and Bilbrook. Customers have said that because of the rural nature of the area most prefer to contact the service by telephone. As a result the Service was the first to transfer to the contact management centre in January 2008. By listening to what customers say the Service can then meet their expectations.

- 33** The Service makes good use of feedback it receives. It analyses customer complaints, appeals and informal feedback. This has led to many minor improvements. For example, in information that it provides to customers. Customers who are using the PDSA Petsaid hospital are provided with proof of benefit entitlement so they can use that service. Also a leaflet is now available for people who rent a property from a close relative that explains complex rules about entitlement to benefit in plain language.
- 34** There are good arrangements in place for consulting, engaging and communicating with partners. The Service has a communication plan that sets out clearly who it needs to communicate with, the purpose and frequency. Regular liaison meetings take place with external partners such as RSLs, CAB, Jobcentre Plus and Age Concern. In addition, a senior manager attends the private sector landlords' forum to provide information and answer questions local landlords have. Partners are positive about the approach and openness of the Service. They have been consulted on the Service Plan, joint initiatives for benefit take-up and staff training in areas like debt awareness and DHPs. At an operational level communication is effective in helping partners support and advise customers. However, partners do not yet fully engage with the Service at a more strategic level, meaning their influence on shaping the service delivery is limited. Good working relationships with other agencies mean the Service is in a stronger position to help those most at risk.
- 35** The Service works jointly with partners to support the most vulnerable in the community. Case conferences with partners and customers enables the Service to contribute more effectively to resolving complex personal problems. For example, a customer in need of re-housing on medical grounds found that personal financial problems prevented an offer of a more suitable home. By working with the customer, landlord, Housing Services and support worker several actions were taken including rescheduling debts to the Council and providing extra financial help through DHP.
- 36** The Service works well with internal partners. It works closely with Housing Services to deliver an outreach service, and has joint liaison meetings with Housing Services and common external partners. Back office processing staff have good working arrangements in place with the front office customer service team. They keep each other up to date on issues that affect the service, for example the time it takes to process work. Technical training is provided for customer service staff so that they can deal more efficiently with customers, and there is support through ongoing job shadowing of each others jobs. By working closely together and understanding each others roles customers get a more cohesive and seamless service.

## How good is the service?

**37** Staff look for ways to improve the service that customers receive. The Service has invested in a series of workshops to develop 'lean' thinking. The aim was to encourage staff to look at the service delivery and what improvements could be made that would benefit customers. As part of a culture of continuous improvement suggestions are encouraged on ways the service can be improved. For example, staff suggested an appointments system to provide customers with support in making claims. Evaluation of the appointment system through a sample of claims received in July 2009 and a sample received in July 2008 showed that the:

- time taken to process claims reduced by an average of 13 days; and
- number of customers that provided all the information first time increased from 60 per cent to 95 per cent.

By supporting customers effectively delays are minimised and customers get their benefit promptly.

**38** The Service communicates regularly with users. The twice yearly Review magazine is used well to publicise Service performance, raise fraud awareness, encourage benefit take-up and ask for customer views. Articles feature in the Housing Services bi-monthly newsletter for local landlords. Topics have included information about the advantages of the on-line benefit calculator and application form. This is welcomed by Housing Services as it is seen to encourage landlords to make their properties available to customers who rely on benefits. There is also a good range of benefit information leaflets that bear the crystal mark for clarity.

**39** Access to the Service is adequately publicised. A leaflet is available explaining how to contact the Service. This includes access to offices (including Womborne), home visits, telephone numbers and email details. Many of the locally produced leaflets, such as 'reporting a change' provide advice on opening times and how to contact the Service. Information is also available through the Council's website about office location, opening times and closure due to public holidays.

**40** Customer access to the Service is mixed but continues to develop. The main Office at Codsall has a central location within a wide geographic spread. Customers that rely on public transport have poor access from some parts of the district. Personal callers can be seen at the main offices between 8:45am and 5:00pm each working day, with extended hours on a Tuesdays to 8:00pm and on Saturdays between 9:30am and 1:00pm. A drop in service operates but customers can book an appointment in advance for help with making an application for benefit. The Service has worked well with partners to extend access. An outreach service is offered at Womborne for two hours each Thursday. RSLs and the Homeless Service team are trained to take and verify benefit applications for their customers. Home welfare visits are available for people who cannot come in to an office. Advice about possible benefit entitlement and support with completing claims is given at local CAB and Aged Concern offices. The Service continues to work with its partners to develop opportunities for other outreach services.

- 41 Facilities at the main office are of a high standard. There is ample car parking, and convenient parking bays for disabled drivers. The Solutions contact centre is on the ground floor and accessed through automated sliding doors. The environment is welcoming with good facilities such as a cafeteria, internet access, toilets, baby changing-room, young children play area and low counters for wheelchair users. Private interview rooms are available on request but there are no signs advertising this. The layout of the main area means that customers being interviewed have adequate privacy. There is a good range of information on display including benefit advice leaflets and screens that display information about services including benefits.
- 42 Access to the Service through the internet is good. The Service webpage is easy to understand and follow. Customers can find a range of information about the benefit scheme and Service. There are links to other websites such as DWP and DirectGov. Leaflets can be viewed and printed in a range of languages. Customers can complete an on-line benefit calculator to see if they are likely to be entitled to housing benefit, council tax benefit, income support, pension credit and tax credits. They can then go on to make an on-line application for housing and council tax benefit. This means that customers know immediately whether they will be entitled to benefit.
- 43 More customers are making successful claims to benefit. In 2007/08 just under 20 per cent of customer claims were unsuccessful because of the lack of supporting information or because income and savings were too high. Although during 2008/09 the number of new claims increased by 50 per cent, the number of unsuccessful claims fell to 12 per cent. This trend has continued in to 2009/10 with unsuccessful claims falling to less than 8 per cent of claims received. The on-line calculator has contributed to this success. During 2008/09 2,978 on-line calculations were done with 80 per cent showing a possible entitlement to benefit. Of the 3147 actual claims made during that year about five per cent were made using the on-line claim form. This has increased to 18 per cent during the first six months of 2009/10. Reducing the number of unsuccessful claims means the Service can concentrate its efforts on helping those people most in need.
- 44 Customers telephoning the Council receive a responsive service. The telephone Contact Centre offers the same opening times as the main office at Codsall. After a brief telephone message calls are directed to staff trained to deal with benefit enquiries. The aim is to deal with customers at the first point of contact. Calls are passed automatically to back office assessment officers when Contact Centre staff are busy. This reduces the delay customers experience in having enquiries dealt with. Our mystery shopping confirmed that calls are answered quickly, and partners said that they have seen a good improvement in the telephone service over the past two years.
- 45 The Service has a sound strategy in place for improving benefit take-up but there is more work to do to deliver that strategy. An action plan outlines the activities and actions being taken. For example, working with partners on joint initiatives, publicising benefits and targeting client groups that would get extra money from positive changes to the benefit scheme. It has begun to use demographic data available through the Localities Profiles but this still needs to be developed further. Evaluation of the impact of initiatives is not yet systematic, and there is limited understanding of what prompts people to claim benefit.

## How good is the service?

- 46 The Service is beginning to improve benefit take-up. It works with partners as well as undertaking its own targeted initiatives. Examples are:
- targeted take-up at a local caravan park produced five new claims of which three were successful;
  - targeting existing customers who had not told the Council they received Attendance Allowance or Disability Living Allowance. This resulted in 46 people being entitled to extra benefit;
  - Sloppy Slipper joint event with Social Services, the Fire and Rescue Service, Environmental Health, Health and Wellbeing, aimed at reducing falls in the home due to wearing old slippers;
  - joint adverts with neighbouring councils in magazines, such as Retired, to target those over 60;
  - widely publicising the availability of extra benefit because of changes in the way child benefit is used when working out benefit entitlement;
  - reminding people who receive court summons for non payment of council tax of what help is available and raising awareness of the benefit calculator; and
  - take-up awareness talks with partners, community groups and local parish councillors.

The Service does not know how successful its take-up efforts are in creating extra income for vulnerable people. Some events are worthwhile as they raise the Service profile with partners and potential users. Although extra benefit is paid it does not know how much is created through take-up activities. Increasing take-up of benefit helps individuals and supports the local economy<sup>1</sup>, and understanding the success of activities enables them be focused in the right way.

- 47 Service standards are appropriate and well publicised. Customers are reminded in the Council's newsletter, Review, of the aims of the Service and the standards that can be expected. The Benefit Service and Solutions webpage say clearly what standards of performance customers can expect. Users can view details of service targets and performance indicators. Details are updated each month so users can see how well the Service is doing in areas like processing times for claims and appeals, overpayment recovery, fraud investigation and accuracy. By publicising standards and performance the Service helps customers to have a more informed view about how well it is doing.
- 48 The Council is committed to helping those affected by the recession. It has in place a 21 point action plan and is working with partners to provide support to meet housing need, household incomes and businesses. Users can access information through the Councils website.

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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.

- 49 The Service has responded well to the impact of increased demand because of the recession. The speed at which claims are being processed is still improving even though there has been a 12 per cent increase in the number of people claiming benefit. Numbers of customers telephoning the Service and calling at the office have risen significantly but telephone answering times and waiting time at Solutions have been maintained. The volume of enquiries from customers by telephone was up by 14 per cent to 7819 for the six month period to 30 September 2009 compared with the same period the previous year. Personal callers at the office increased over the same period by 31 per cent to 2694. Providing a consistent level of service means that customers know what they can expect, and have confidence in what will be delivered.
- 50 DHPs are being well managed to help those who are most vulnerable. Councils have the discretion to top up funds using their own resources by up to two and half times the government allocation. Part way through 2008/09 the Council topped up the DHP budget by £5,000 to £18,106 to help the higher numbers of people facing hardship. The budget for 2009/10 was increased to the maximum allowed of £33,003. Although there was a slow start spending the extra money during 2008/09, by raising awareness of DHP the Service spent £25,588 of its 2009/10 budget by 30 November 2009. It is committed to spending £29,372 by February 2010, and is confident that the full budget will be used to help vulnerable people.
- 51 Benefit award letters are difficult to understand and the Service is aware of this. The specification for its replacement ICT system includes the need for flexibility in the wording of letters. Although the benefit award letters comply with benefit laws the information can be difficult to understand. Action is being taken to help people better understand letters. For example, overpayment letters have an explanatory leaflet included and in complicated cases a second letter of explanation may be included. Records kept by the Customer Service Manager show that a significant number of enquiries are from customers who have not understood a letter. Partners are not experiencing high levels of enquiries from their customers, which suggests that the Service is resolving matters once a customer makes contact, However, not enough is being done to help customers understand letters in the first instance. Poor quality letters create unnecessary work for the Service and for customers as well as leading to confusion.
- 52 Overpayment policies take in to account the needs of those most vulnerable in the community. Key staff have been trained in negotiation skills and debt awareness making them more understanding and responsive to difficulties people face in paying debts. The Council has a fair debt policy in place that recognises the need to collect monies owed to the Council whilst also considering the circumstances of individual debtors. Staff dealing with recovery have flexibility on the amount of repayments by instalment, and have discretion to write-off debts in certain circumstances. Customers who have difficulty paying debts are referred to the CAB for debt advice. By having trained staff in place, the Service can help those who face difficulty but at the same time ensure that the Council recovers money that it is owed.

## How good is the service?

- 53** Counter-fraud activity is well publicised. The Service shares publicity material provided by the DWP, such as posters and leaflets, across the community through places like post offices. The counter-fraud team hotline is publicised in posters and leaflets and on the side of refuse vehicles. The Council publicises successful prosecution cases in the local press and on its website. During 2008/09, 24 per cent of referrals to the counter-fraud team came from the public. By raising fraud awareness in the community the public has greater confidence about efforts made to safeguard tax payers money.
- 54** Counter-fraud work is well managed. As well as publicising fraud in the community, awareness is maintained amongst staff and partners through regular fraud awareness training. All staff receive fraud awareness training which is reinforced by investigators regularly attending team meetings and providing feedback of outcomes. Analysis of referrals show who is reporting fraud which helps to assess the success of awareness activities. The focus of investigations is on those cases that are most likely to result in a proven fraud, meaning resources are used to best effect. Levels and types of referrals are monitored for any change because of rising numbers of people claiming benefit.

### Diversity

- 55** In 2008, we found slightly more strengths than weaknesses in this area. There had been slow progress in delivering the Council's equality and diversity agenda but a detailed action plan was in place. The Service had a mix of strengths and weaknesses.
- 56** The Council is only meeting basic requirements for equality and diversity. It has achieved level 2 of the old Equality Standard for Local Government and has plans in place to move on to the new Equality Framework. There is a low BME population but an ever increasing elderly population across the district. During 2008/09 the Service conducted EIAs on several projects and policies, including its new housing benefit overpayment plan, to see if they treated all sections of society fairly. The assessment looked to ensure that no groups in the community would be disadvantaged and identified support for elderly and disabled people through home visiting.
- 57** The Service undertakes EIAs but their effectiveness is not always obvious. EIAs are an essential part of the service challenge and are undertaken on all relevant actions within the service plan. But it is not clear what weaknesses have been identified, and what the Service is planning to do to improve things. Human Resources set in place more training to improve the Council's approach to equality and diversity and to focus on outcomes.
- 58** The Council has satisfactory arrangements in place to support users with special needs to have fair and equal access. For example:
- the main reception, Solutions and private interview rooms offer good access for wheelchair users;
  - hearing loops are advertised and available;
  - home visits are available;

- the demand for interpretation services is very low but translation services are available for those whose first language is not English, however, this is not publicised in the reception area;
- information leaflets are available in other languages on request and can be viewed and printed from the Council's website;
- documents are available in large print, Braille and audio format on request; and
- software is available on the Service website to help the visually impaired along with general advice for improve accessibility.

Front-line staff have a good awareness of what is available to customers and are alert and responsive to the needs of customers.

**59** Staff have a sound awareness of the needs of diverse communities. All staff receive compulsory corporate diversity and equality awareness training. Front-line staff are aware of what extra help is available for vulnerable people:

- there is support for people seeking or trying to keep a home through the Rent Deposit Scheme, Loan Scheme<sup>1</sup> and DHPs;
- staff work with HealthNet support workers so that vulnerable people, such as those with drug and alcohol problems, can access benefits; and
- staff signpost people to the CAB for help and advice with debt problems.

There are positive examples of the Service working with partners to help reschedule debts, such as overpayments, and provide support to individuals though DHP.

**60** DHPs are well used to support vulnerable people. The availability of DHPs is widely understood by staff and partners. Partners have welcomed the extra money that is available and actively promoted the scheme. People faced with the threat of homelessness are getting extra help because of the involvement of partners like the Housing Services team. DHP is targeted to help customers who have lost housing benefit because Local Housing Allowance rates reduced after a review by the Valuation Office Agency.

### Service outcomes

- 61** In 2008, we found more weaknesses than strengths. Customers faced delays in claims processing, handling of appeals and poor management of overpayments.
- 62** Workloads are well managed. Managers monitor outstanding work to make sure that it is dealt with quickly. New claims are progressed within two working days and other work within seven days. Changes in circumstance get priority so that customers are not over or under paid benefit. Customer service staff are kept up to date with the work position so that they can advise customers about when they will hear from the Service, for example, the outcome of a claim or a reply to a letter. By managing work well the service can meet customer expectations and avoid unnecessary contact from customers checking progress.

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<sup>1</sup> Residents who have lost their jobs or had their working hours cut because of the recession can apply to the Council for a zero per cent interest-free loan of up to £5,000 to help pay their housing costs and stay in their homes.

## How good is the service?

**63** Performance against the 'Right Time' indicator NI 181 was 8.26 days during 2008/09, well ahead of its target of 13 days. The Service benchmarks performance with 142 other councils, and this compares well with the benchmarking group average of 13.1 days. DWP are unable to publish any comparative data for 2008/09 due to difficulties with extracting data from councils IT systems - this is a national issue. Councils are responsible for setting targets to measure performance. In the area of claims processing the Service has decided to measure its performance against the average number of days to process new claims and average days to process change in circumstances.

**64** Customers are having their claims processed promptly. The Service set a target of 30 days for processing claims during 2008/09 and 20 days for 2009/10. It has performed well during a time when the number of people claiming benefit has risen because of the impact of the recession. New claims were processed in an average of 18.31 days during 2008/09 and 17 days between April and November 2009. Changes in the way that DWP report performance means that it is not possible to formally compare national performance for 2008/09 onwards. However, benchmarking shows that the Service compares well with other councils in the benchmarking group which averaged 24.7 days for 2008/09. Success in processing is a result of a number of improvements, such as:

- saving time by reducing in the number of unsuccessful claims freeing staff to concentrate on other work;
- having an on-line claim form that is linked with a benefit entitlement calculator;
- offering new claims appointments and supporting customers to provide additional information quickly;
- processing straightforward changes at the point of contact; and
- having well trained customer service staff who are able to deal effectively with benefit customers.

Processing claims without delay enables customers to organise their finances and avoid falling in to rent arrears and debt.

**65** Customers reporting changes in circumstance receive a timely service. The time taken to process changes in circumstance during 2008/09 averaged 6.97 days, well ahead of the service target of 10 days and the benchmark group average of 9.8 days. This performance is being maintained during 2009/10 and the Service expects a further improvement by March 2010. By processing changes in circumstance quickly customers get the right benefit avoiding under and overpayments.

- 66 There are adequate arrangements in place to identify unreported changes. The Service uses a number of methods to identify changes:
- staff check with customers where a change in circumstance can reasonably be predicted;
  - the ICT system reports when key life events occur, such as age changes, that affect benefit entitlement;
  - data matching with partners, such as DWP; and
  - a systematic review of claims that have a high risk of a change going unreported.
- 67 The Service makes sure that people get the right benefit. At each contact with a customer staff check if a change has taken place in the person's circumstances. A change of circumstances form is issued with all benefit award letters, and the need to report changes is publicised in the Council's Review magazine. Analysis of the volumes of reported changes show that more changes are being reported in successive years. For example, the number increased by 10 per cent during 2008/09 and 8 per cent in the first six months of 2009/10.
- 68 Claims are being adequately verified. All staff that verify claims have been trained. This includes partners' staff that receive and verify claims for their customers. Written guidance has been provided to all staff and partners. The quality of verification is monitored through systematic checking of a sample of claims. The claim form includes advice for customers about what supporting evidence must be provided. Staff conducting new claims interviews, including visiting officers, use a verification sheet to record what information the customer needs to provide.
- 69 The Service has sound arrangements in place to pay the correct benefit. The DWP no longer gathers information from councils on the accuracy of benefit payments and councils are free to have checking procedures that best meet local circumstances. This means that there is no comparative data on accuracy at a national level, and benchmarking data has little value because of differing checking practices. The Service checks a minimum 4 per cent of claims processed, and up to 100 per cent of the work of less experienced staff. Claims are also targeted based on the risk of errors arising, for example more complex claims, claims that feature in specific parts of the subsidy claim or where a benefit payment is more than £1,000. Check officers look at accuracy of payments and to see that staff have followed procedures, for example keeping good quality case notes. Outcomes from checking are fed back to individuals and in to training plans. Having robust checking arrangements provides the Council with assurance that claims are being handled correctly and payments of benefit are correct.

## How good is the service?

- 70** The service to customers who ask for a decision on their claim to be looked at again (reconsiderations) or who appeal against a decision is improving. During 2008/09 there were significant delays in dealing with reconsiderations and appeals. Customers waited on average 17 days to have a claim reconsidered and 110 days to have an appeal considered and referred to the Tribunals Service. This has improved significantly and during the first six months of 2009/10 reconsiderations were dealt with in an average of 10 days and appeals 13 days. Dealing with reconsiderations and appeals quickly mean that customers are not left with uncertainty about benefit entitlements for lengthy periods.
- 71** Overpayment recovery has been improved and the Service now performs well. It measures how much benefit it recovers against the value of overpayments created in the year. During 2008/09 the Service recovery rate was 100 per cent which is better than the benchmark group average of 71.5 per cent. Effective recovery of overpayments reduces the burden on council tax payers.
- 72** The Service has sound arrangements in place for dealing with suspected and proven benefit fraud:
- it has a flexible prosecution policy that allows for decisions to be made based on the facts of the case and the circumstances of the offender;
  - investigators are professionally trained and treat suspected offenders with respect;
  - analysis of referrals and outcomes of investigations provide a good understanding of the effectiveness of activities;
  - investigators work jointly with partners, and in particular DWP investigators;
  - data matches, such as those identified through the National Fraud Initiative, are dealt with promptly; and
  - successful prosecutions are publicised in the local press and on the Council's website.
- 73** The Service is effective at investigating allegations of fraud. During 2008/09 it administered 24 formal cautions, seven administrative penalties and six prosecutions. This is above the average of the members of the benchmarking club. Un-audited data for the first four months of 2009/10 indicates an improvement in this performance with 13 formal cautions, six administrative penalties and seven prosecutions. An effective approach to benefit fraud sends a clear message to the community that the Council is serious in its attempts to protect taxpayers' money.

### User experience and satisfaction

- 74** In 2008, we found that satisfaction with the Service was mixed.
- 75** Good progress has been made with raising customer satisfaction levels. The last major survey covering the quality of the Service was a Best Value Customer Survey in 2006/07. Whilst the Council attracted one of the highest overall resident satisfaction ratings nationally, the Service fell below the national average of 78 per cent. The Service now undertakes regular surveys to judge satisfaction and obtain feedback. Customers:
- calling at the office were surveyed in April 2009. The overall satisfaction with the service received, location of office and opening times was 100 per cent of customers satisfied or very satisfied;
  - are surveyed each month about how they made contact with the Service, the level of service received and any suggestions for improvements. 96 per cent of customers are satisfied or very satisfied; and
  - investigated for fraud are asked to comment on their experience and the way investigators conducted themselves. This was introduced in June 2009 and of 22 customers surveyed all responded positively to questions with 100 per cent being very satisfied overall.

Our findings from interviews with customers and partners reflect this high level of satisfaction. However, customers have not been asked their views about all parts of the Service, for example home visiting. By listening to customers the Service is better placed to understand the effectiveness of the service customers receive, and to respond positively to any concerns.

- 76** Staff have a strong focus on the quality of service provided to customers. Customer service staff receive training on benefits matters in addition to customer service skills. The Service aims to resolve enquiries and dissatisfaction at the first point of contact and as a result there is a very low level of complaint. Partners have commented positively on staff and their willingness to help, and cited cases where they have referred customers to the Service who have been dealt with quickly and professionally.

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### Is the service delivering value for money?

- 77** In 2008, we found that the Service was not effective in delivering value for money.
- 78** Overall the Service provides reasonable value for money. It benchmarks with other services and has a good understanding of its costs. Strong controls have enabled the Service to maximise income through government subsidy and to recover overpaid benefit.

## How good is the service?

- 79** Service delivery provides adequate value for money. Benchmarking data shows that the costs of the Service are high compared with other councils, but it also shows that performance is better than other councils. Staffing costs are around average, but costs for corporate services such as the Contact Centre and ICT recharges are higher than other councils. This position is understood well by the Service. For example, recharges for the Customer Contact Centre are being reviewed as other services begin to use it which will have a positive impact on the Service contribution and overall cost.
- 80** There is a good awareness of costs. A Service Challenge is in place which focuses on reducing costs. Managers are required to robustly consider budgets and proposed capital and revenue expenditure before approval. As part of the 2009/10 budget process the Service identified savings of around £30,000. Actions are being taken to reduce administrative costs, for example, there is an ongoing take-up initiative to encourage customers to receive benefit payments by BACs with around 70 per cent of customers opting for this. Annual up-rating letters have been outsourced for enveloping with the cost being offset by saving of staff time.
- 81** There are good arrangements in place for managing the government benefit subsidy claim. Monthly monitoring checks are undertaken on all parts of the claim. Areas of expenditure which are more at risk from error are subject to sample checking. Improvements in service delivery and stronger control of the subsidy claim have reduced a loss of direct subsidy. For example, losses due to overpaid benefit of £526,718 in 2007/08 have been reduced to £230,201 in 2008/09. In 2008/09 the Council funded 3.08 per cent of the benefit bill compared with the national average of 4.31 per cent. By taking positive steps the Service has reduced the burden on council tax payers by almost £300,000.
- 82** The Council seeks to achieve value for money through its procurement process. The procurement process was subject to a best value review which resulted in a fundamental reconsideration of policy and strategies. The outcome was the procurement strategy was assessed as good. A further independent review noted that the award of a contract to provide hardware and software for the Service achieved the best product at the best price.
- 83** The Service works in partnership to reduce costs. For example it worked with other councils to:
- find a replacement benefit processing IT system. Several councils are working together to ease the process of procuring a new system. A common Specification of Requirements has been developed along with a common project plan. The potential for sharing resources, such as training, back-filling staffing resources and any other areas that will reduce the impact of the change of system on the service are under discussion;
  - jointly produce leaflets, such as those used in benefit take-up campaigns; and
  - deliver joint training and undertake recruitment exercises.

By working in partnership the Service can take advantage of shared savings.

- 84 Technology is being using to help reduce administrative costs. Benefit award letters are enveloped with a copy recorded to the Document Managed System automatically, reducing administrative costs. An on-line benefit entitlement calculator and claim form has been introduced. Customers can check for themselves whether they will be entitled to benefits and can then make an application without having to contact the service direct. The number of people making a claim using the on-line form has gradually increased since its introduction, with 20 per cent of claims being made on-line during August to October 2009. This means that staff time is being saved because fewer claims are received from people that are not entitled. Evaluation has found that expected savings of £14,000 have been achieved.
- 85 Overpayments management has improved significantly. The Service has taken positive action:
- management responsibility for debt recovery is now within the Service;
  - debts are managed within one main system with the exception of some older debts held on a sundry debtor system;
  - debt management reports are produced to monitor and support recovery action;
  - more debts are being considered for write off within the Council's policy;
  - difficult to collect debts are being referred to debt collection agencies on a trial basis; and
  - overpayment prevention activities, such as educating customers to report changes, issuing change in circumstances forms with determination letters and diary dating for future changes, have reduced the amount of benefit overpaid because of customer and Council error from £767,546 in 2007/08 to £429,676 in 2008/09.

Improved management has resulted in the overpayment debt owed to the Council reducing by 18 per cent from £1 million at 1 April 2008 to £0.83 million at 31 March 2009, helping further minimise loss of council tax payers money

# What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

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

**86** The Service has had a good track record of improvement. The Service's improvement activity in recent years has been effective in delivering the improvements required. Performance against a range of benefits indicators show that the Service is now amongst the best performing councils in the benchmarking group. Significant improvements have been made to the processing of new claims and changes in circumstances. More recently, the implementation of 'Lean' thinking methodology continues to inform better ways of doing things. Processing times continue to reduce despite increasing caseloads. It has also improved its performance in reducing the level of overpayments and has increased the amount it gives to vulnerable people through DHPs. It has also delivered improvements that address the recommendations made in 2008 by:

- improving the way overpayments are managed and collected;
- engaging with and involving customers and partners;
- introducing a one-stop shop approach to dealing with customers; and
- ensuring staff training needs are met so they can deliver a quality service.

There is still work to be done, for example strengthening of partner involvement, but the Service is well placed to continue improving.

**87** The Council can demonstrate a track record of effective overpayment management. With the support of the DWP Performance Development Team in 2008, the management of overpayments has been restructured into one department. The Service now has a clear focus on collecting and managing outstanding overpayment debt. It produces routine management information that analyses the age and profile of debt recovery. As a result, in 2008/09 the service recovered as much debt as the value of new debt raised in that year. Value for money is being improved.

**88** The Council has a good record in delivering corporate projects which have improved service outcomes. The Council manages projects effectively and has developed strategies to deliver continuous improvement. For example, it is successfully implementing a customer relationship management (CRM) system. Benefits was the first service to move into the system. Some benefit staff transferred over bringing expert benefits knowledge and customer focus together. Although not quite meeting the targets set for call handling, they are well on their way and high levels of satisfaction from customers are noted.

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

- 89 The Service has made effective use of resources and outcomes represent value for money. In 2008/09, it made efficiency savings of £407k of which £196k related to productivity gains from better trained staff and good team working, and £211k due to subsidy gains. And is continuing to improve the level of payments made by BACs which only started in April 2008 and is now at 70 per cent. While this level is below what the best performing councils are achieving it is starting to catch up.

**Table 1 Best value performance indicators**

The Service has shown significant improvement in performance against its two key indicators since 2006/07

Best value performance indicators	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Average time taken to make a full decision on new claims	75 days	32 days	18 days
Average time taken to make a full decision on a change of circumstances	23 days	13 days	7 days

Source: South Staffordshire District Council

## How well does the service manage performance?

- 90 The Service has a clear short-term vision to 'Deliver right service at right time that meets customers' needs'. This is underpinned by six aims which are to:
- provide a high quality, customer focused service that pays the right benefits, discounts and relief to the right people at the right time;
  - collect Council Tax, Business Rates and Housing Benefits Overpayments effectively, maximising income to the Council and minimising the customer's level of debt as appropriate;
  - provide value for money for customers and taxpayers by focusing our services around customers needs;
  - ensure that the service we deliver meets the needs of customers and partners by undertaking regular liaison and consultation;
  - reduce fraud and error in the system by increasing the number of customers who understand what is expected from them, and what they can expect from us; and
  - have well-trained and knowledgeable staff, able to provide an efficient and professional service to the Council and its customers.

The Service can show the links between corporate aims through to service and individual plans, objectives, standards, priorities and targets so that individuals know what is expected of them and how their work contributes to the overall aims.

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

- 91 Service plans are clearly defined with short-term targets for improvement which are specific and time-bound targets however these do not extend beyond a year. While the Service liaises well with partners on operational matters, they are not explicitly involved in shaping service planning. The service is involved in the Housing, Economic Vibrancy and Health and Well Being strands of the South Staffordshire Local Strategic Partnerships. This has helped to strengthen the working partnerships with internal and external organisations to the benefit of mutual customers. This is raising the profile of the Service and the Service is closely involved with some new partnership activity in areas like the Jigerty Estate in Wombourne. This work is contributing to the improved outcomes measured specifically through three key national indicators. However, the evaluation of the impact of this work has yet to be fully demonstrated.
- 92 The Council has a three year Corporate Improvement Plan 2008 to 2011 which includes the Service as one of its three priorities. Key areas that this focuses on are;
- residents and partners feel more informed about the work of the Council and thus more able to become involved;
  - customer focused services; services are designed to ensure they meet the needs of residents and partners in the most efficient manner possible; and
  - customers are treated with a high level of respect and to a high standard.
- 93 While there are mechanisms and timescales in place for monitoring this, target outcomes are not measurable. The Service is clearly contributing to the delivery of these key corporate objectives as measured by customer surveys and an increasing emphasis on locality working. Positive feedback from external partners also demonstrates this. The Council recognises that the planned development of a strategy to fully implement the legislation around the 'Duty to Involve' will strengthen this
- 94 The longer term vision for the Service is not clearly articulated. However, Service Plans look ahead over the medium term specifying key actions such as system changes, investment in capacity building and updates to legislation. A wider vision for the Service is implicit in the Local Area Delivery Plans through the Service's contributions to maximising the income of older people; improving the access to services and jobs; and working together with partners to reduce and prevent homelessness. The Council recognises that clear ambitions are important to ensure the Service is well placed for future improvement onto the next level.
- 95 The Service manages performance well. Various reports are used for monitoring performance. These range from high level service updates to detailed reports based primarily on the new national indicators and other statistics such as overpayments. Budget monitoring is also in place. Scrutiny has been used effectively to drive improvement when the Service was poor but now performance levels are good it has only been used once recently to consider the tender for the new system. Measures of customer service standards are in place for the CRM but at present it is not in sufficient detail to specifically monitor performance of the Benefits Service. The Council has few benefits complaints and these are used to improve the Service. Generally, the Council has a good understanding of the overall performance of the Service.

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

- 96 Performance management at an operational level is strong with good communication. Daily meetings are held with staff to review workload, performance levels and resourcing. These provide opportunities for learning and ensure resources are targeted to priorities. Weekly meetings are held with front-line services such as customer services so that call handlers are able to share an up-to-date picture of waiting times with customers. This manages customer expectations and means that underperformance is quickly addressed.
- 97 The Service has invested in a learning culture that is supporting continuous improvement. All staff have recently had training in the lean thinking approach to business improvement. Suggestions from staff are well received and acted upon where beneficial. For example, benefit information was recently sent out with South Staffordshire Council Staff payslips as a result of a staff suggestion. Also, the appointment system which was developed through ideas from staff ensures that the service is more accessible.
- 98 The Service is planning to improve value for money. The Council recognises that such things as robust EIAs and the effective implementation of the benefit's take-up strategy will help. Medium term financial planning identifies potential funding issues in 2011/12 but recognises that the continuous approach to capacity building ensure the Service is well placed for making further productivity gains.

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## Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 99 The capacity of the Service to deliver continuous improvement is good. Progress is being made with the increasing customer focus to service delivery. Face to face contact is encouraged with the Solutions layout recently altered to improve customer privacy. Telephone calls are well managed through the CRM system which is staffed by knowledgeable operators although service targets of answering calls within 30 seconds are not quite being met. Home visits are readily available to more vulnerable claimants and those who find it difficult to travel. Staffing is sufficient and flexible with a good skills mix so that backlogs are being reduced. Resilience is being built up in key areas, for example, through job shadowing and cross training. Sickness levels are low. Therefore the Service is well placed to sustain improvement.
- 100 The Service has absorbed the recent increase in workloads as a result of the recession while maintaining its improvement of processing times with no additional staff. Additional funding provided by the DWP has been used effectively to prepare the Service for increased demand this year. The Service has seen a steady increase in case load from 6892 cases in June 2008 to 7698 cases in October 2009, representing almost a 12 per cent increase. At the time of inspection outstanding workloads were low with all work being progressed within seven days and new claims within two days. This provides confidence that the Council will be able to manage future increases in workload.

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

- 101** Leadership of the Service is good. There is good management at a number of levels in the Service and clear accountability for delivering improvements. Benefits expertise and skills at management level is strong. Political direction and challenge to the Service is good. The good track record of improvement over the last three years means that while limited scrutiny is currently being undertaken, leaders clearly articulate their drive for improvement.
- 102** Partnership working to support the delivery of the Service is working well. Key partners are engaged through regular liaison meetings. For example, local RSL staff have been trained to verify claims and use the on-line claim form and calculator. This improves access to vulnerable people and gives confidence to both tenants and landlords that benefits will be paid on a timely basis. The CAB is well informed and lets its customers know that home visits are available and easy to organise. The Council has a four year service level agreement with the CAB. It is monitored at a senior level and regular reports show the proportion of housing benefits and council tax benefits enquiries dealt with. In the first two quarters of 2009/10 this amounted to 290 representing 28 per cent of all enquiries. However, the quality of the service is not evaluated and the proportion of benefits taken up is not measured. The value for money from this service is therefore not fully understood.
- 103** The Service is facing a significant challenge in the next few months as the software used to process claims is becoming obsolete. Along with a number of other services across the country it has jointly tendered for a new system. The consortium has enabled an initial saving through the amalgamation of funds from each council to support each other in reaching the Issue of Tender stage. A high level project board and specialist expertise has been brought in to manage the project and its implementation. Lessons have been learnt from the failures suffered in the last system change and the Service is planning well to ensure a smooth transfer.
- 104** Workforce planning is good at a service level but a medium term workforce plan for the Council as a whole has yet to be updated. In the last year, career grading has been introduced for processing staff to encourage the development of technical knowledge and improve staff retention. The establishment has been increased to improve capacity with the support of a clear business case. Staff are closely involved in any changes. Any proposals are discussed and suggestions from staff taken on board. Staff and managers are developed and trained within a competency framework. Benefits team-leaders have been included in the frontline manager development programme. This leadership training started with senior managers and has been cascaded down through the Council. It enables team-leaders to learn from things like 360 degree reporting. While investment is being made in the development of staff, the Council is aware that funding from the Comprehensive Spending Review in 2011 will put pressure on services. Therefore it is investing now to strengthen its workforce. A fresh medium term workforce plan is an essential priority for the Council.

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

- 105** Training is good and this is supported through the effective use of IT. An online training system is used to identify training needs and benchmark knowledge levels within the Service and with other councils that use the same product. A training needs analysis is undertaken annually to inform the well managed training plans. External qualifications are encouraged and there are currently three staff working towards the IRRV<sup>1</sup> and customer care qualifications. These will join the high proportion of staff with external qualifications. Currently NVQs are not offered. Staff have a mixture of technical and personal development training which contributes to a growing confidence within the Benefits team.
- 106** The Direct Services restructure has produced better outcomes for users. Customer services have been merged with the Revenue and Benefits service. This has resulted in effective liaison between customer services and the Benefits Service which contributed to the successful focus on benefits customers with the CRM system. Weekly meetings are held between the two services to ensure that customers are informed of important messages such as up-to-date times for processing claims.

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<sup>1</sup> The Institute of Revenues, Rating and Valuation (IRRV) qualifications are generally recognised as the benchmark against which professional competence in benefits is measured.

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# The Audit Commission

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