

Benefits

Service

Inspection

West Berkshire 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 at West Berkshire Council is fair, with uncertain prospects for improvement. The time taken to process benefit claims and accuracy have improved significantly since 2006, due to senior officer leadership and committed staff. The Service is easily accessible for most through a range of locations and websites. However access can be difficult by phone, customer care is inconsistent and advice is not always accurate.
- 2 The Service works well with partners like Sovereign Housing Association and homeless hostels to improve service delivery and make claiming Housing Benefit easier. Also, Benefits staff, Welfare Benefits Officers and the Gypsy and Traveller Liaison Officer help vulnerable people to get money advice and information on other benefits. Use of Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP¹) to prevent homelessness is maximised.
- 3 However, the Service does not meet the specific needs of all of its customers, partners and the community. Customers wait too long to have appeals and reconsiderations dealt with which results in financial uncertainty for those concerned. The Service could do more through targeted take-up action to encourage customers to claim benefits. Take-up campaigns are not evaluated for impact. Some correspondence from the Council is difficult to understand and the Service does not always do enough to help customers to provide all the information necessary to complete their claims.
- 4 Monitoring and evaluation of the value for money of the Benefits Service is weak. The understanding of costs for the Customer Services element of the Service is limited which means that while benchmarking information shows the Service is low cost, costs could be under estimated. However, there are examples of decisions taken to improve value for money such as closure of some Community Information Centres, decrease in Calcot office's opening hours and the increase in electronic payments.
- 5 The Service has successfully tackled some key priorities but the track record of improvement is mixed. The Customer Services Department was created with a clear customer focus and access points are provided across West Berkshire. However, significant improvements in the time taken to process benefit applications and accuracy are not matched by the planned responsiveness to claimants. The Service knows it must do more to understand the views of service users to inform its future plans.

¹ Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) can be paid when the Council considers that a customer is facing hardship needs extra help with their rent and/or Council Tax. The amount awarded is at the discretions of the Council, but can not be more than the claimant's eligible rent or Council Tax liability. These payments are not part of the Housing and Council Tax Benefit scheme. There are cash limits to the payments any Council can make each year.

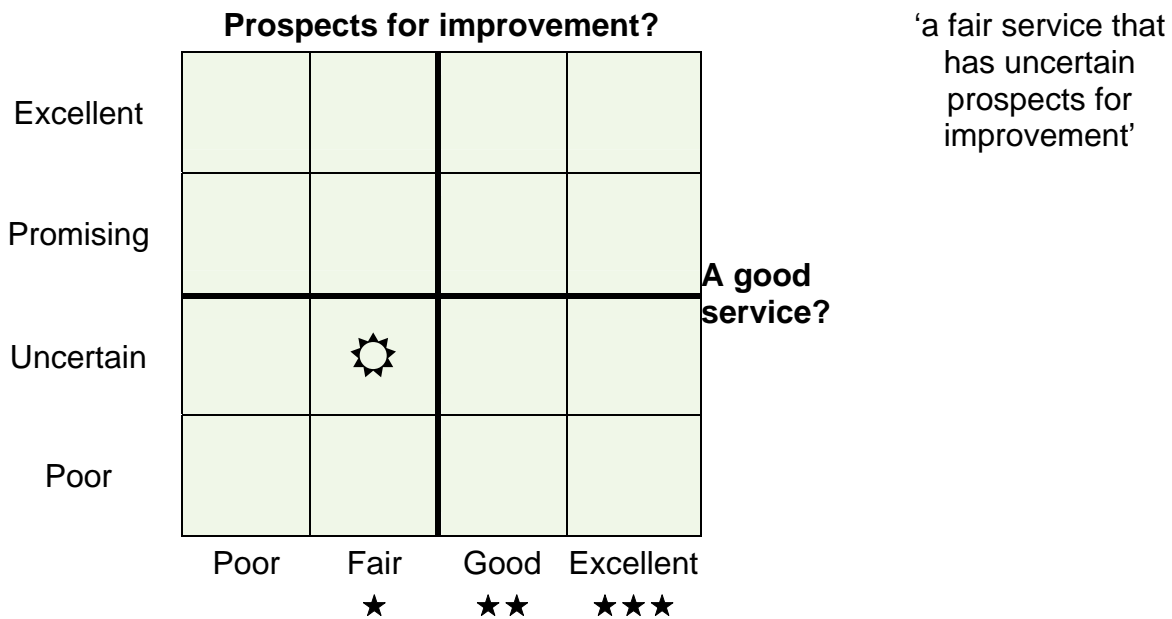
Summary

- 6 The Benefits Service's aims are short term with no clear medium or longer term outcomes. For example, it is not clear how it contributes to wider community aims such as reducing poverty. The Benefits Service and Customer Services plans and improvement measures are not aligned. While the Service is self-aware and uses learning, this is not carried out consistently. There are, however, a number of complementary mechanisms to keep focus on priority areas, such as the Scrutiny process.
- 7 Workforce plans ensure the right staff are in the right place at the right time, but they are short term and do not involve partners. The Service does not draw on Council or partnership resources to effectively communicate with diverse communities. It makes effective use of ICT and relationships with partners are positive. Nevertheless future opportunities to work with strategic partners have yet to be fully explored.

Scoring the service

- 8 We have assessed West Berkshire Council as providing a fair, one-star service that has uncertain prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 9 The Service is a fair, one star service because:
- it pays benefit and deals with changes in circumstances quickly;
 - it pays benefit accurately;
 - the Service is easily accessible to customers at various locations and through websites;
 - it is working well with partners such as Sovereign Housing and homeless hostels to improve service delivery;
 - Customer Services and Benefits work well together to deliver a seamless Benefits Service;
 - it is reactive to the needs of individual vulnerable groups and takes appropriate action to ensure the Service is accessible to them;

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.

Scoring the service

- the Council provides effective help to vulnerable people to signpost them to other benefits and advice agencies;
- Discretionary Housing Payments are used effectively; and
- subsidy is maximised and local authority error overpayments reduced.

10 However, it has some weaknesses. These include:

- insufficient understanding of how the Service is meeting the diverse needs of customers;
- the Service can be difficult to access by telephone and customers can receive inconsistent levels of customer care and quality of advice;
- customers wait too long for reconsiderations to be dealt with and for appeals to be submitted to the Tribunals Service;
- lack of a formal take-up strategy to encourage customers to claim benefits and a lack of evaluation of effectiveness of take-up initiatives;
- insufficient focus on counter fraud outcomes; and
- the Service does not fully understand its costs.

11 The Service has uncertain prospects for improvement because:

- it has aims which focus on the short term with a lack of clear outcomes for the medium to longer term;
- its role in delivering wider community outcomes is not well understood;
- performance management is not fully effective;
- the Service does not know how satisfaction/profile of users has changed over time;
- performance improvement has not been sustained across the Service;
- there is a lack of robust analysis of the cost of the Service to show improving VFM;
- workforce planning is short term and does not involve partners;
- it does not make full use of available communication channels to reach minority groups;
- learning is not carried out consistently; and
- opportunities to work with strategic partners in the future have yet to be fully explored.

12 Strengths include:

- active senior officer leadership and committed Benefits staff;
- a positive record of change to improve the experience for benefit claimants;
- significant improvement in time taken to process benefit applications and accuracy;
- complementary mechanisms are used to keep focus on priority areas; and
- effective use of ICT to improve performance.

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 Provide a better service to benefits customers by:

- understanding the diverse needs of existing and potential customers and stakeholders;
- seeking their views on the Service and addressing the needs identified;
- working with partners to target take-up more effectively and record outcomes;
- improving access to the Service, for example by:
 - reviewing signage in the Customer Services Centre;
 - monitoring responses to telephone calls and quality of advice given and addressing any issues;
 - reviewing information on the website, in leaflets and correspondence to ensure it is written in a way that customers understand; and
 - analysing the reasons for incomplete and unsuccessful claims and taking actions to address these to make it easier for customers to supply necessary information;
- improving the management and monitoring of appeals and reconsiderations;
- improving value for money, for example by:
 - improving the management and monitoring of overpayment recovery to ensure effectiveness of recovery methods used;
 - develop a detailed understanding of the costs of the Service including Customer Services costs; and
 - maximise opportunities to engage with benchmarking clubs and other local authorities to identify opportunities for learning.

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.

Recommendations

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- making the Service more accessible to all its customers;
- increased customer satisfaction;
- a better understanding of customers views so the Service can better meet their needs; and
- better value for money.

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

Recommendation

R2 Tackle benefit fraud more effectively by:

- delivering wider, regular fraud awareness programmes across the Council and stakeholders;
- setting and delivering against suitable performance targets based on caseload and national priorities; and
- providing resources to match the fraud risks of the local area.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- public reassurance of a robust approach to investigating and detecting benefit fraud;
- potential fraudsters are deterred;
- protection of the public purse; and
- improved value for money by eliminating fraud from the system.

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

Recommendation

R3 Improve performance management in the Service:

- develop clear Service outcomes for the medium to longer term - undertake in partnership with internal and external partners; and service users;
- strengthen workforce plans so that they support the above medium to long term plans;
- ensure individual plans are well aligned to strategic objectives;
- consider inclusion of broader performance measures;
- introduce systematic evaluation of initiatives as part of service planning; and
- make effective use of existing corporate communication and consultation channels to inform these plans.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- better use of shared resources with partners;
- clarity regarding priorities and outcomes expected from the Service and individual contribution to these;
- be better able to show impact of the Service through evaluation; and
- deliver efficiency through the use of existing corporate communication and consultation channels.

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

Report

Context

The locality

- 14 West Berkshire is a Unitary Authority located in Berkshire. It covers an area of 272 square miles, is classified as 'significant rural' with three main settlements in Newbury, Hungerford and Thatcham. The largest urban area in the district is Newbury/Thatcham where a third of West Berkshire residents live. West Berkshire has a population of 152,800.
- 15 The Area is ranked 330 out of 354 in the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), where one is the most deprived. Since 2004, West Berkshire has become relatively less deprived, previously being ranked at 329. Despite its overall affluence and prosperity, there are pockets of deprivation – notably in some of the urban areas and some of the more isolated rural communities.
- 16 The population is predominantly white, accounting for 94.5 per cent of the population, a figure above the regional and national average. Five and a half per cent of the population are from Black and Minority Ethnic communities. With the expansion of the European Union in 2007, the number of migrant workers in the district has increased.
- 17 In comparison with the South East region, West Berkshire has a low proportion of working aged residents claiming benefits. Overall, 8.7 per cent of working age residents claim benefits which is considerably below the regional (11.3 per cent) and national (15.7 per cent) average. In November 2009, 2,230 people claimed Job Seekers Allowance, which is 2.4 per cent of the working age population, below the regional (3.0 per cent) and national (4.1 per cent) average.
- 18 The level of working age population claiming Employment Support Allowance is 3.4 per cent which is above the regional and the national average. Just over 1 per cent of the working age population claim lone parent benefits which is also above both the regional and national averages.
- 19 According to the 2008/09 Place Survey, 85 per cent of residents in West Berkshire are very or fairly satisfied with the area in which they live, above the national average of 80 per cent.

The Council

- 20 West Berkshire Council has 52 elected Councillors representing 30 Wards. The Leader of the Council is the Conservative group Leader. The political composition is as follows: Conservative 36 seats and Liberal Democrat 16. The Council currently operates a Leader and Executive structure.

- 21 In the recent 2009 Comprehensive Area Assessment, West Berkshire Council achieved overall scores of 3 out of 4 for both managing performance and use of resources. This translates as 'an organisation that exceeds minimum requirements, performing well'.
- 22 The Council Plan identifies five overarching objectives for West Berkshire Council:
- maintaining economic prosperity, whilst at the same time retaining an attractive environment;
 - helping everyone to lead an independent and healthy life;
 - supporting children, young people and their families to lead better lives;
 - listening to and supporting local communities to make their area a better place to live and work; and
 - becoming a more efficient and effective council.

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.
- 24 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 West Berkshire Council, the reasons for commissioning the inspection were:
- the average speed of processing new claims deteriorated during 2008/09 compared to 2007/08 and has been below average year on year since 2004/05;
 - the speed with which the service deals with appeals is comparatively low and deteriorated between 2007/08 and 2008/09;
 - the data quality audit completed in 2008 found that the accuracy of performance reported for both the speed of processing new claims and changes in circumstances could not be verified due to errors in the sample; and
 - performance around prevention and detection of fraud and overpayment management has historically been within the worst quartile with little evidence of stepped and sustainable improvement.
- 25 The Benefits Service is part of the Benefits and Exchequer Service which is part of the Chief Executive's Directorate. Since June 2006 the Service has been provided by an in-house team, prior to that time the Benefits Service was one of a number of services that were outsourced. As part of this return in-house, a review of the Senior Management Arrangements was undertaken and the Benefits Service moved in to a new service grouping under a new Head of Service. As part of this review a Customer Services department was also established with its own Head of Service.

Report

- 26** The Benefits Service employs 22.98 Full Time Equivalents and in 2008/09 the Service has reported costs of £905,000 and received DWP Administration subsidy of £909,000.
- 27** The Service pays out around £35 million in benefits per year to:
- 7,985 people claiming CTB; and
 - 7,113 people claiming HB, of which 13 are tenants of the local authority, 5,289 are tenants of registered social landlords and 1,811 are tenants of private landlords.
- 28** Of the total caseload of around 8,920 people, 4,920 are of working age and 4,000 are of pension age.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 29** There are no direct aims for the Benefits Service in the Community Strategy, Corporate Plan or LAA. However, the Service sees itself as contributing to the corporate objectives as follows.
- Excellent Performance Management – as part of our drive for continuous improvement in services we will aim to achieve all of the improvement targets set for 2009/10.
 - Value for Money – we need to ensure that all of our key services represent value for money in terms of cost and performance. The annual benchmarking exercise undertaken via the CIPFA Benchmarking Clubs will be used to provide the relevant evidence. Where we identify that VFM is not being delivered appropriate action will be taken.
 - Putting Customer First – we need to improve access to our services and simplify procedures that impact on customers wherever possible. (C/Tax - Paperless DD etc.)
 - Including Everyone - we have an important role to play in ensuring the availability of Council Tax & Housing Benefits is effectively promoted, particularly to those on low income.
- 30** The overall aims of Benefits and Exchequer Services expressed in the 2009/10 Service Plan are:
- to provide all our customers with an economic, effective and efficient service;
 - to continually monitor and develop our systems and procedures to ensure they remain aligned to customer needs;
 - to seek continuous improvement through the setting of stretching performance targets; and
 - to develop staff through investment in all forms of learning and development opportunity.
- 31** The key priorities for the Benefits Service are:
- correct amounts in respect of Benefits and allowances are loaded into SX3;
 - procedures in place to comply with and monitor performance against DWP target for reductions in Benefit;
 - assessment and notification of Benefit entitlement is within 10 working days of the receipt of all information reasonably required to determine the claim, wherever practicable;
 - appropriate procedures, training and resources in place to prevent Benefit being obtained by fraudulent means;

How good is the service?

- subsidy returns and performance reports submitted to DWP within prescribed time-scales; and
- comply with new regulations governing the calculation and payment of Housing Benefit to tenants living in private rented accommodation.

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

Access, customer care, user and community focus

- 32** The Service cannot be sure it is delivering what users want and need. There has not been regular engagement with the community and so, within the Service, there is only a basic understanding of the needs of local people and whether the Service meets these needs. The Council has a good understanding of the demographics of the community and how this affects demand for future services but this information is not used to plan the delivery of the Benefits Service. Understanding the needs of the community means the Service can be certain it is designed to meet those needs.
- 33** Customer care provided by frontline staff is inconsistent. Customers who visit the office receive good customer care. However, mystery shopping and feedback from customers reveals that when customers telephone the Service they sometimes find it difficult to speak to someone who can help them with their query and on occasions customers receive the wrong advice. For example, advised to look for a three bedroom house when only a two bedroom house would be covered by housing benefit. This is made worse because the Service does not monitor satisfaction with advice given.
- 34** Customer access to the Service is good. There are some positive aspects of access to the Service.
- The Service is accessible from offices across the district. The area is mainly rural and to address this Customer Services run Community Information Centres. They go out to places across the district and provide help and advice on issues including Benefits.
 - The office at Calcot provides extended opening hours. The office is in a local supermarket and as well as opening on weekdays, opens on Saturday mornings.
 - A visiting service provides help for elderly, disabled and other vulnerable customers to complete their claim. Also, the visiting officers can go out to customers who are unable to get to any of the district offices.
 - There are public information kiosks in Council buildings, the West Berkshire Community Hospital and Newbury College.

- The Council is part of the 'All U Need 2 Know' project provided through the West Berkshire Partnership¹. This is a website where advice on all types of benefit and money advice is available. The website directs customers to the relevant council website.
- Customers do not experience long waits at the counter. Feedback from customers shows that, on the whole, waiting times are not excessive.
- The Service responds quickly and effectively to emails.
- In a survey in 2008, a high percentage of customers (98 per cent) said that they found it easy to contact the Council.
- Only 3.6 per cent of calls to Customer Services were abandoned in 2008/09.

35 However, there are areas where access to the Service is difficult.

- Signage is inadequate in the reception area, for example there are no signs to say that private interview rooms are available if wanted.
- Access to the Service by telephone can be difficult. Customers reported long waits on the telephone and difficulty getting through. Only 54 per cent of calls to Housing Benefits were answered in 30 seconds in 2008/09.
- Contact details, opening hours and the visiting service for vulnerable customers are not adequately publicised on the Council website.
- Benefits leaflets are not always clearly visible, can be difficult for customers to understand and the language used does not always encourage customers to ask for help.

36 The Service tells customers what standard of service they can expect to receive but not how it is performing against those standards. Customer Service and Benefits have set clear standards and these are available on the website and in leaflets. However, the Council did not ask customers for their views when setting the standards. Although the website shows current processing times the Council does not publicise its performance against all the standards. Customers do not know whether the Council is meeting its standards.

37 The Service is not encouraging people to claim all the benefits they are entitled to. The Benefits Service has carried out some take-up work in the form of advertising in leaflets and text on Council Tax bills but there is no formal take-up strategy or action plan. The Council held a series of recession roadshows aimed at raising awareness of benefits and staff from the Benefits Service attended. However, the Service has not evaluated the effectiveness of any of the activity aimed at increasing benefit take-up. The lack of targeted take-up work means the Service is not doing all it can to support the local economy and reduce poverty for those most in need.

¹ The West Berkshire Partnership - also known as the Local Strategic Partnership - was formed in 2002 and published the first Community Strategy - A Better Future for All - in early 2003. It has since then been refreshed on an annual basis to track Progress against community priorities, ensuring it remains up to date and relevant to the changing needs of the district.

How good is the service?

- 38** The Council is good at identifying customers who need money advice and helps them to get it. The Visiting Officers signpost vulnerable customers to money advice and refer customers to the Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB) if they are having difficulty in paying back overpayments. Visiting Officers also advise on other benefits where appropriate. They have received training in other welfare benefits which helps them to recognise potential entitlement and signpost customers to advice. Having an awareness of other benefits and knowing where to direct customers to, can have a positive impact on the financial well-being of customers.
- 39** The benefit application form is clear. The Service uses the standard benefit claim form and the form provides guidance next to the areas to fill in. Details of where to get extra help and Customer Service opening times are included. A checklist shows what proof is acceptable for each section. If the form is clear and offers help to customers when completing the form it is more likely the customer will provide all the information when claiming.
- 40** However, the Service does not know why some customers do not provide all the information necessary to decide their claim. The Service reported receiving 5,544 new claims during 2008/09 of which 15.72 per cent did not complete because the customer did not supply all the information necessary and 15.05 per cent were unsuccessful. This means the Service did not pay around 30 per cent of new claims received and processed. The Service does not analyse the reasons for incomplete and unsuccessful claims. This means that they could be wasting time dealing with claims that do not result in benefit awards. Analysis could show ways in which communication could improve and more be done to help customers provide all the information necessary.
- 41** Some customers find it difficult to supply all the information necessary to complete their claim. Customers say the Service asks them to provide documents more than once as information sometimes goes missing, these are the findings from our reality checks and focus groups. Staff believe this may be due to incorrect indexing. If it is not easy for customers to provide the correct information this can lead to delays in processing times.
- 42** Customers find some correspondence difficult to understand. The Service sends a leaflet with benefit notification letters which provides clear explanatory notes and a fuller explanation of terms used. Benefit notification letters include the minimum amount of information needed with more of the legislative detail included in the leaflet. The Service has taken a number of actions to improve the clarity of notification letters while still including information required by law. Despite this, customers still find the letters difficult to understand. They also find correspondence asking for more information difficult to understand. If the Service gives customers clear information on the outcomes of their claim or information needed to complete their claim they are less likely to need to contact the Council further for fuller explanations.

- 43 The Service has effective relationships with local partners. It is making best use of partners such as Sovereign Housing to verify documents submitted by customers. The Service provides specific contact points for registered social landlords and the Citizens Advice Bureau so they can resolve issues with their customers speedily. The Service works closely with homeless hostels and as a result has changed procedures for issuing hostel benefit notification letters and developed a shortened version of the benefit claim form for use by hostels. This simplifies the claims process for the vulnerable customers that they have as residents. Because of liaison arrangements with JobCentre Plus the Service has designed a claim form specifically for completion at the Job Centre during a lone parents return to work interview. This allows the customer to report the change quickly and eases the transition to work. Working closely with partners is enabling communication to resolve issues resulting in a better service to customers.
- 44 However, the Service is missing opportunities to use feedback from customers and stakeholders to improve the Service. There are only basic mechanisms in place to gain customers' and stakeholders' views such as the feedback, complaints and compliments process. However there is little evidence that the Service routinely uses this information to improve the service provided. The Council holds a regular landlord forum but the Service has not effectively used this as a means to engage and consult with landlords. Landlords are not regularly told about changes to the Service or performance. Effective communication, consultation and engagement would allow the Service to identify areas to focus on to improve in the future.

Diversity

- 45 The Service does not know if it meets the needs of all potentially vulnerable groups. The Service has not identified all of its hard to reach groups and so has not engaged with those communities. While the Service is reactive to some individual groups needs, a lack of consultation with customers and voluntary groups means the Service cannot be certain it is meeting the needs of all. Equality Impact Assessments are not fully effective. The Service has not consulted with users when completing them and has not assessed policies and procedures. Although equalities is an agenda item at all management meetings, there are seldom any issues raised. The Service does not carry out any diversity monitoring to ensure diverse groups are accessing the Service. The Service does not know whether it is providing equal access.

How good is the service?

- 46 However, the Council has responded well to some individual and community needs and is taking action to ensure equal access to the Service for some vulnerable groups. The Council has a Gypsy and Traveller Liaison Officer who helps members of the community claim benefits and explains benefits matters to those who have difficulties with reading. The Service held an event for the Ghurkha community to encourage them to claim and provide help with claim forms. The Welfare Benefits Officers help vulnerable customers complete their application forms and provide necessary proof. They also provide customers with help on other benefits. Overpayment recovery takes account of individual circumstances and is fair. The Council offices are accessible for users with disabilities. Information and application forms are available in large print on request and the Council offers translation through Language Line. The website has adjustable fonts but it is not compatible with software that allows the content of the website to be spoken. The Council has therefore taken action to ensure equal access for some customers.
- 47 The Council effectively uses Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) and its direct payment policy to help vulnerable people and prevent homelessness. The Service has a clear and inclusive DHP policy in place, making awards to those who are in need. The policy and an application form are available on the Council website. Housing manages the scheme to ensure that those people who are at risk of homelessness apply for DHP. The Council has spent up to its limit in each year and the amount granted by the Department for Work and Pensions has increased. A comprehensive direct payment policy is in place for private tenants claiming Local Housing Allowance (LHA) which explains when the Service can pay direct to the landlord. Paying direct to the landlord can protect the customer's tenancy where there is likelihood that the customer may not pay the rent. Help for vulnerable people can prevent financial hardship and homelessness.
- 48 Staff and councillors have a basic understanding of the Council's equalities, diversity and key legal responsibilities. But the Council's approach to delivering equalities training has been slow. Staff are receiving training or scheduled to receive it in the next few weeks. This is the first time the Council has ensured that everyone has received training. Equalities training is held each year for councillors and 26 per cent of Councillors attended the most recent session. Awareness of diversity and equality issues ensures that staff and councillors consider equal access implications in their daily work and the service they provide.

Service outcomes

- 49 Council departments work together effectively to deliver a joined up Benefits Service to the customer. The Berkshire Improvement and Efficiency Partnership recognised the strength of the working arrangements between the Benefits Service and Customer Services. The Council undertook a peer review for a neighbouring Council that was struggling to achieve the same joint working. Working closely together enables the Service to provide a more seamless service to the customer.

- 50** Benefit customers in West Berkshire have their claims dealt with quickly. Performance in 2009/10 in West Berkshire is 20.09 days (to 15 January 2010) for new claims and 8.09 days (to 13th November 2009ⁱ) for changes in circumstances. This is better than the average performance for councils in 2007/08ⁱⁱ of 25 days for new claims and nine days for changes in circumstances. The Service has achieved this performance despite an increase in caseload of 6.8 per cent over the last two years. However in 2008/09 new claims were processed in 28.38 days which is slower than the average in 2007/08. Change of circumstances were dealt with in 7.69 days which is quicker than the average in 2007/08. The Council's calculation of its performance against the 'Right time'ⁱⁱⁱ national indicator (NI181) is 12.04 days as at 13 November 2009. Because of difficulties nationally in extracting data from councils' IT systems, comparative data is not available. But the Service's performance is better than its target of 15.7 days. Dealing with claims and changes in circumstances quickly, reduces the likelihood of customers suffering financial hardship and incorrect benefit payments.
- 51** The Service actions new claims promptly. It indexes claims within 24 hours of receipt and all new claims are looked at by the following Wednesday at the latest. This is because the Service holds a 'new claims day' each Wednesday where everyone assesses new claims. The Service had 14 claims (7.69 per cent) of its outstanding claims that had been outstanding for over 50 days. All of these were waiting for further information from the customer. Low levels of work outstanding means that customers are more likely to have their claims or changes dealt with quickly.
- 52** The Service has taken satisfactory measures to identify undeclared changes in circumstances. The Service includes publicity on application forms and notification letters and carries out targeted intervention visits. This helps to reduce fraud and error in the system.
- 53** Benefit is paid accurately. In 2008/09, 99.51 per cent of decisions checked were correct. The Service carries out checks to identify incorrect payments including random sampling, targeted checking of specific issues and targeted checking of new entrants' work. Following previous problems with data quality the Service has carried out more training to improve accuracy further. Wrong payments can lead to overpayments or underpayments and customers can experience financial hardship.
- 54** The Council does not separately measure performance for the percentage of recoverable overpayments recovered or set specific targets for overpayments. This is because the Service transfers overpayments to sundry debtors unless recovering from continuing Housing Benefit. The Council monitors these as part of the total sundry debtors. The Service cannot evaluate the effectiveness of its recovery policies and procedures without monitoring recovery percentages.

ⁱ Due to an IT fault this is that latest date that data is currently available for.

ⁱⁱ 2007/08 is the last year that comparative data is available for.

ⁱⁱⁱ This measures the average processing times for new claims and change events.

How good is the service?

- 55** Customers wait too long to have their appeals and reconsiderations dealt with. Customers can ask for a reconsideration of their claim if they believe the assessment does not accurately reflect their personal circumstances. Local authorities and the DWP recognise a benchmark of four weeks as a reasonable time for dealing with this work. West Berkshire has only dealt with 87.5 per cent of all reconsiderations received in 2009/10 in four weeks. The Service has only sent 50 per cent of appeals to the tribunal within four weeks and 80 per cent within three months. The Service does prioritise those appeals and reconsiderations where the customer is likely to experience hardship but if there are lengthy delays when dealing with appeals and reconsideration customers can experience financial uncertainty or hardship which could have a serious impact on their lives.
- 56** The Council has an insufficient focus on reducing benefit fraud. The Service has satisfactory arrangements for preventing and detecting benefit fraud. There are robust procedures for checking evidence and a clear benefits fraud prosecution policy in place. It gives guidelines for employees to consider in administering prosecutions and guides employees on offering administration penalties. But the Council has limited resources dedicated to counter fraud work and so has achieved limited outcomes. The Fraud Team has delivered fraud awareness training to some staff but this is not regular or delivered more widely to councillors, partners and staff in other departments. A better councillor awareness of fraud could improve the direction of the Service and help it to be more effective in reducing fraud and error.

User experience and satisfaction

- 57** The Service does not know if customers are satisfied with the service provided. Historically customer satisfaction has been poor. Overall 67 per cent of customers were satisfied with the Service as measured by the Best Value Customer Satisfaction survey in 2006/07. This is the last time that this survey was conducted. In 2008 the Council surveyed 850 people to assess the quality of their contact with the Customer Services. The response was positive: 98 per cent found it was easy to contact the Council; 97 per cent found opening hours convenient and 99 per cent found locations convenient. The Service is therefore not sure it is fully meeting customer need.
- 58** The Service does not systematically measure customer satisfaction. No mechanisms are in place to seek the views of customers on their various interactions with the Service. Regular testing of customer opinions enables the Service to respond swiftly and effectively with remedial action, that customers would recognise as seeking to address something that had been a negative issue for them.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 59** Overall the Service cannot show that it is providing good value for money (VFM). The Service is a member of a benchmarking club and this shows that costs are low when compared to similar authorities. However, performance has been low in some areas and the Service does not fully understand all its costs. The Council has a separate budget for Customer Services and does not recharge to individual service areas. The Service provides an estimate of the cost for benchmarking but does not base this on detailed analysis of the transactions dealt with by Customer Services. Understanding costs can enable the Council to make effective comparisons with other Councils. Comparisons could be flawed if the Service does not understand its costs.
- 60** The impact of benchmarking is limited. Despite completing the benchmarking yearly, there are few examples of using learning to improve the Service. The Service benchmarked its fraud resources against similar authorities and so secured an extra administration post. Cost and performance are compared through benchmarking to confirm that West Berkshire is delivering benefits for a reasonable cost but no detailed analysis of the information provided is obvious. Benchmarking can identify areas of best practice so the Council can implement these and improve the Service further.
- 61** The Council actively pursues the recovery of overpayment. The Service is taking suitable action to reduce overpayments by prioritising work that will cause an overpayment and regularly reminding customers of changes to report. However the Service does not adequately encourage customers to provide details to calculate underlying entitlementⁱ on leaflets and letters. The Council is using all available methods of recovery and considers which method is the most suitable method on a case by case basis. It evaluates the cost-effectiveness of different ways of recovery and has a member of staff in the fraud team who traces people who owe money to the Council. The Service considers the individual claimant's income and expenses when setting up arrangements to pay and signposts the customer to money advice where suitable. Considering all choices when recovering overpayments ensures the Council is managing the process to ensure value for money.
- 62** The Service has assurance that information used to complete its subsidy claimⁱⁱ is accurate. The Service has completed regular checks of the claim. Regular checks for accuracy mean that the Service can identify problems at an early stage to address training needs and change working practices.

ⁱ Amount of benefit a person would have been entitled to had benefit been assessed on their correct circumstances at the time.

ⁱⁱ Local authorities complete a claim for Housing Benefit Subsidy from the government. Subsidy is paid by central government to contribute towards the amounts that local authorities pay out as Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit.

How good is the service?

- 63** There are some good examples of the Service achieving better value for money. The Service has successfully encouraged more customers to accept payment by the Banks Automated Clearing Service (BACS), which is cheaper than payment by cheque. The Service makes a high percentage of payments, 95 per cent, electronically which is helping the Service to reduce its costs. In addition, the Council has commenced a review of access points for the Service to ensure they are providing value for money. This identified some Community Information Centres where there are few visitors and so the Council has closed these. A review of opening hours at the Calcot centre resulted in a reduction in opening hours because longer opening times did not represent value for money. The Council continuously reviews value for money to make the service offered to customers more efficient, effective and economical.
- 64** The Service has maximised subsidy received for local authority (LA) errors. The number of local authority errors for 2008/09 was within DWP thresholds, thus remaining eligible for full subsidy in this area. The Service is on track to receive full subsidy in 2009/10 also. Minimising LA error has resulted in more income for the Council and so improved value for money.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 65** The Benefits Service has a positive record of change to improve the experience for benefit customers. Outsourcing the Service and then bringing it back in-house are key examples of this, where it was identified that the outsourced contract was not meeting customer needs. The Council has created a Customer Services Department with a clear focus on the customer. It has improved access at its main reception in Newbury including: queue management, more seating and a children's play area. For those people who live in the more rural areas of West Berkshire, Benefits advice and assistance is made available through a variety of channels. The Service has redesigned application forms for hostels and lone parents through JobCentre Plus to make it easier for people to apply for benefits or report a change. The Benefits Team focus on processing only new claims every Wednesday and this has helped to improve processing times. Relationships between customer service staff and the benefits staff are good. Although customer care needs to be improved in some areas such as the way the Service engages and communicates with customers.
- 66** Performance measures show there has been significant improvement in the time taken to process benefit applications. The time taken to process benefit applications in 2009/10 shows a marked improvement compared with 2006/07 when performance was in the worst 25 per cent of councils. Accuracy has also improved over time. This means faster processing but also quality processing.
- 67** Improved performance has not been sustained across the Service and it does not know if it is meeting need. In 2008/09, a combination of increased applications, because of the recession, and high staff turnover resulted in worse performance. Time taken to send appeals to Tribunal has been variable. The percentage of successful fraud investigations, while increasing, remain low. Customer Services has missed targets to answer calls quickly, time taken to queue and query resolution is taking longer than planned. There have, however, been fewer abandoned calls. Most recent customer satisfaction data (2006/07) shows satisfaction has improved but remains in the worst 25 per cent of councils. The Service does not have a robust way of monitoring satisfaction levels or know the profile of who is using the Service to better assess the impact of change.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

Table 1 Performance Indicators

Local Performance Indicator	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	January 2010
Average time taken to process new claims (days)	55	26.7	28.4	20.1
Average time taken to process a change in circumstance (days)	36	9.4	7.7	8.1
Accuracy of processing	96	97.7	99.5	
Reconsiderations within four weeks		79.2	86	87.5
Percentage of appeals submitted to the Tribunals Service within four weeks/ three months	5.1 12.8	50 75	14.4 44.1	50 80

- 68 The Service is not able to show it has improved Value For Money (VFM) over time. This is because it does not have a clear understanding of its total costs, in particular those apportioned to Customer Services. Officers and councillors do show a focus on VFM in decision making, for example, VFM has been taken in to account when evaluating and implementing the a new training system; and more recently the evaluation of an e-benefits product. A review of Community Information Centres is underway and has already resulted in the closure of two. The Service has kept within local authority error overpayment thresholds and has thus achieved full subsidy between 2005/06 and 2007/08. It continues to make an ongoing investment into Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) and allocation has increased year on year since 2005/06. However, the Service has not analysed reasons why claims received are defective or unsuccessful and not processed in to payment. A clear understanding of its costs will allow a more accurate comparison over time and help drive efficiencies.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 69** The Benefits Service has aims which focus on the short term with a lack of clear outcomes for the medium to longer term. These aims address the historic weaknesses in the Service and have focused on changes to improve processing times. There is a mixed understanding among the portfolio holder and members of the Service management team about the role of the Service in delivering wider community outcomes. While some joint initiatives do take place, this understanding is hindered by a lack of clear links in the service plan to wider strategic agendas such as the West Berkshire Sustainable Community Strategy. This broader view is short term also because future service demands have yet to be forecast. The Council is therefore not maximising the potential of the Service to use resources to best effect across partner agencies. For example, in addressing access and social inclusion; poverty and the economy; health and wellbeing, and fraud and community safety.
- 70** Performance management is not fully effective. Individual work plans are not well aligned to Service and corporate objectives. This can mean that staff are not always clear how their role contributes to strategic aims. While most staff have received an annual appraisal, use of 1:1s to assess performance between appraisals is mixed. In contrast, performance reporting is good, with effective use made of performance indicators and regular reporting of the Service's performance at all levels within the Council. Councillors and officers challenge variations in performance and action is taken as a result. Performance measures could be broadened as these do not monitor, for example, the: profile of claimants; impact of take up campaigns; fraud or satisfaction levels. Benefits and Customer Services do not jointly agree performance measures or align service plans and the format of these differ. However, a Service Level Agreement exists which is subject to annual review. The Service recognises there is more to do to develop robust arrangements to gather feedback from service users and staff in order to inform robust future service planning.
- 71** Complementary mechanisms are used to keep focus on priority areas. The Scrutiny process has helped to make benefit application forms easier to understand and has highlighted the plight of customers as part of its work on flooding and the recession. The Transformation and Efficiency board keeps a strategic focus on VFM using CIPFA benchmarking data and the Audit Commission's VFM profile. However this is not fully effective because the Service has not clearly identified its overall costs. Financial management is good (Use of Resources assessment 2009). The Service has been protected from dis-investment over the last three years because it is deemed to be a key frontline service performing at low cost in comparison to others.
- 72** The Service benefits from active senior officer leadership. Feedback from interviews shows the leadership of the Service has had a clear focus on improving processing times of new claims and accuracy and this has been achieved. While only half of Benefits and Exchequer staff believe senior management provides leadership based on a recent employee attitude survey, this is much higher than other councils. Management has given the Service a clearer sense of direction while ensuring staff remain committed.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

73 The Service is self-aware and uses learning but this is not carried out consistently. A high-level of self-awareness is reflected in the Service's self-assessment. There are some positive examples of the Service learning from others. For example, it carried out a peer review for a neighbouring authority based on the strength of benefits relationship with Customer Services. When setting up the Customer Services Department in 2006, the Council applied learning from the private sector. However, using feedback from customers, staff and partners to inform service standards and targets is a recognised area for improvement. Initiatives are not always evaluated, for example, analysis of complaints, take-up campaigns and why claims are defective or unsuccessful. Learning can be more reactive rather than a systematic process to deliver opportunities for improvements.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

74 Benefits staff are enthusiastic and committed. Our reality checks confirm this picture. A recent employee survey found staff morale to be good and better than other councils. The Service benefits from well-planned training and development which is evaluated. Staff are supported to achieve qualifications such as the Institute of Revenues Rating and Valuation qualification and joint training is also provided, for example, Local Housing Allowance with the Citizens Advice Bureaux and appeals tribunal training with a neighbouring authority. Sickness absence is managed well and stands at seven days. The Service makes good use of return to work interviews and regular management reports, although stretched targets may not be met due to long-term sickness. Relationships among staff, managers and councillors are positive and productive.

75 While the Service does carry out workforce planning, it is short term and does not involve partners. The Service has identified short-term workforce issues and is taking action to address these. For example, use of temporary staff to help manage high caseloads. But it has not set out in detail medium to long term workforce plans. Internal and external partners are not involved in workforce planning and so opportunities for joint activities are not fully considered.

76 The Service does not make full use of available communication channels to reach minority groups. It has carried out an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) but it is not effective because there has been no service user input. The Service does not have a good understanding of the diversity of its service users. There are examples of the Service working with hard to reach communities such as the Ghurka community with positive results. But opportunities remain to make better use of existing corporate communication channels.

77 The Service makes effective use of ICT to improve its performance. It is using ICT to check overall benefits performance and individual staff performance. The claim processing system is key to meeting its core objectives. Document Image Processing is however not being used to good effect because indexing is not consistently correct. ICT is being developed to enable more home working and this has already resulted in increased productivity. The Service has strengthened ICT links with the largest Registered Social Landlord so applications can be processed faster. The Service is exploring new developments in ICT to improve access.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 78 Relationships with partners are positive but there are opportunities to work with strategic partners which have yet to be fully explored. The Council is clearly receptive to providing services in a different way as the Service has, in the past, been outsourced. The Service works well with internal partners such as housing, the Welfare Benefits Team and Customer Services on initiatives such as the recession roadshows. It has joined in the 'All u need to know' website as part of the work of the Health and Well-being partnership. Relationships with external partners are good, for example, debt referrals through Citizens Advice Bureaux but the impact of some partnerships such as with landlords is limited. Given that capacity is stretched – opportunities to work, for example, with neighbouring authorities who are facing similar issues, have yet to be fully explored. Staff capacity is also not being fully utilised because not all priorities are mainstreamed. For example, staff in community safety and those working with young people could work more closely with the Benefits Service to enhance capacity.

The Audit Commission

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