

Executive Committee

No Specific Ward Relevance

18th November 2009

BENEFITS IMPROVEMENT PLAN – QUARTERLY MONITORING – JULY – SEPTEMBER 2009

(Report of the Head of Financial, Revenues and Benefits Services)

1. **Summary of Proposals**

To advise members on progress during the first quarter against the Benefits Service Improvement Plan and to identify any further action required to enable the successful delivery of the Plan.

2. **Recommendations**

The Committee is asked to **RESOLVE** that

1) **subject to any comments, the report be noted,**

3. **Financial, Legal, Policy, Risk and Sustainability Implications**

Financial

3.1 The financial implications are included in the report.

Legal

3.2 There are no specific legal imp

Policy

3.3 There are no specific policy implications

Risk

3.4 Without adequate performance monitoring arrangements there is a risk that the planned/required improvements in the Benefits Service will not be achieved. In addition without an effective recovery procedures for overallowed Housing Benefit the Council will forego the ability to pursue debt recovery procedures with a consequential loss of income to the Council.

Sustainability / Environmental

3.5 There are no specific sustainability / environmental / climate change implications.

Report

4. Background

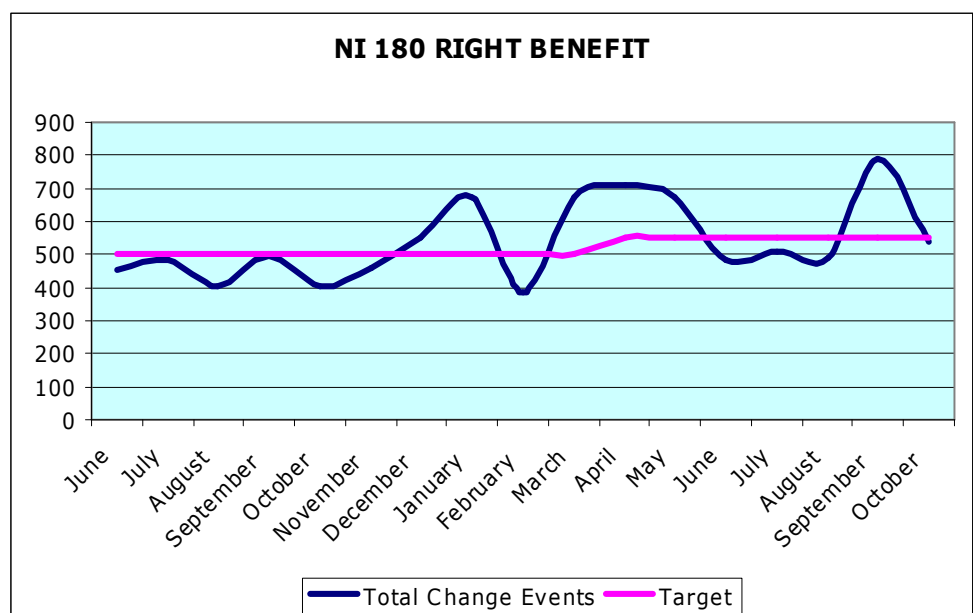
- 4.1 The Benefits Service Improvement Plan was developed in response to the Audit Commission Inspection in 2008/09.
- 4.2. Work is progressing towards the aims of the improvement plan. The Performance Development Team (PDT) from the Department for Work and Pensions has been working with the Benefits Service to help implement the recommendations from the Audit Commission inspection. In particular they are looking at helping to improve overpayment recovery, devise a Take Up Strategy, improve access to the service and performance management.

5. Key Issues

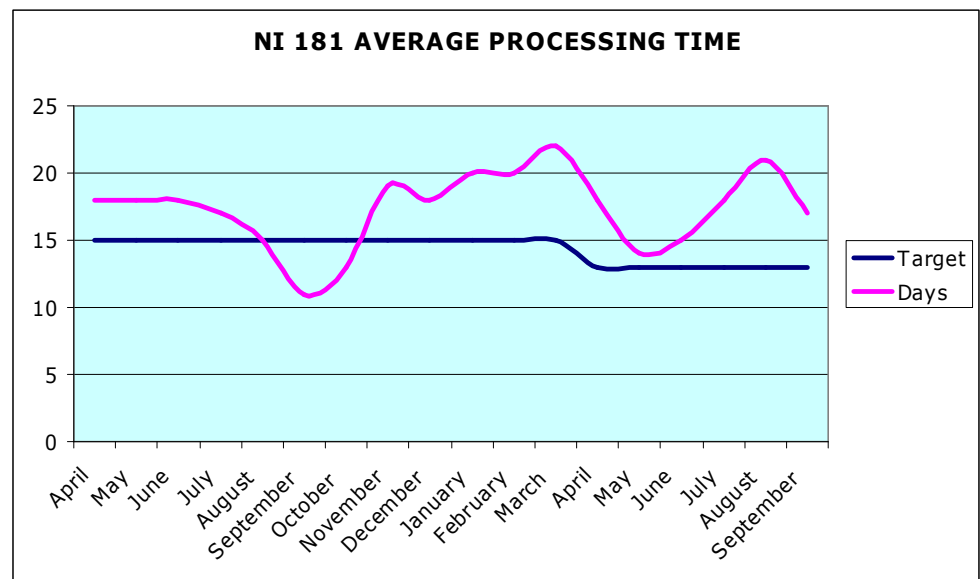
Claims Performance

- 5.1. There are two national Indicators for the Benefits Service.

NI 180 Right Benefit – this measures the number of change events identified and actioned – a target of identifying 550 changes each month has been set and the service is set to meet this target.



NI 181 Right Time – this is a measure of the average number of days taken to process new claims and changes in circumstances. An average of 13 days was set as a target and this has proved difficult to achieve. Claim numbers remained high and performance dipped over the holiday period. The average processing time for claims during the quarter was 18 days.



5.2. Local Indicator

Additionally the percentage of new claims where a decision is made within 14 days is also monitored. A target of 80% has been set for the current year and the average performance for the second quarter was 85%.

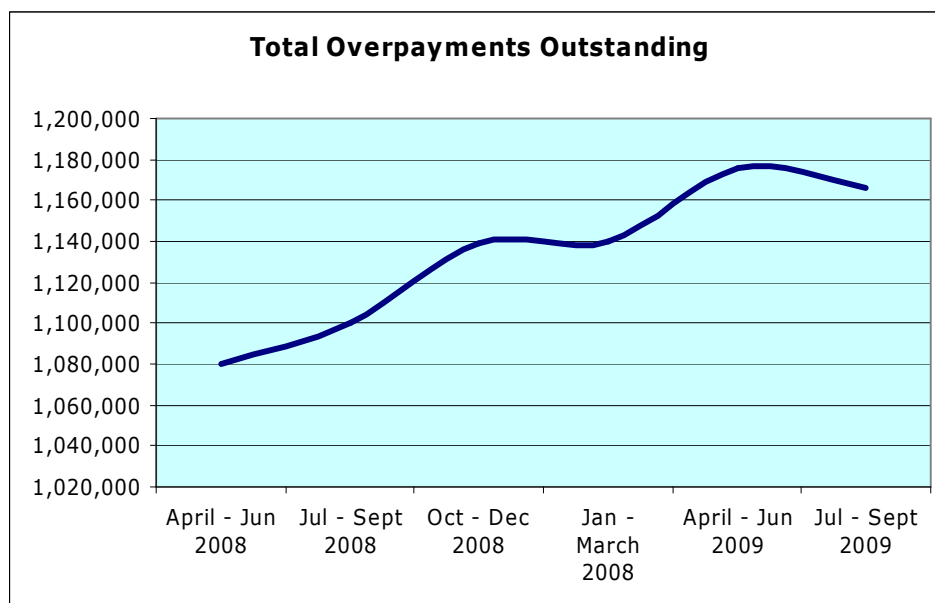
5.3. Case-load and Claims received

The number of claims being received continued its recent downwards trend despite a small increase in September. The live case-load has levelled off and peaked at 7821 claims – an increase of more than 1000 compared to twelve months ago. This increased work load has impacted on the Services performance and in particular the number of changes being made to claims has increased as claimants move in and out of temporary work. A total of 6736 claims (new claims and changes to existing claims) were assessed during the quarter and 46% of these claims were assessed within 7 days. 5% of the claims took longer than 50 days to assess, this is usually because we have been waiting for information but occasionally the processing software reports an incorrect date which inflates the number of days taken. The day count starts when the claim is requested or the change reported.

Overpayment Recovery

- 5.4 The total amount of outstanding overpaid Housing Benefit at the start of the second quarter showed a reduction compared to the start of the previous quarter at £1,166,218. However an additional £181,661 in overpaid Housing Benefit was identified and £119,320 recovered during the quarter. A total of £76,047 was recovered from ongoing Housing Benefit and a further £43,273 via the Income recovery

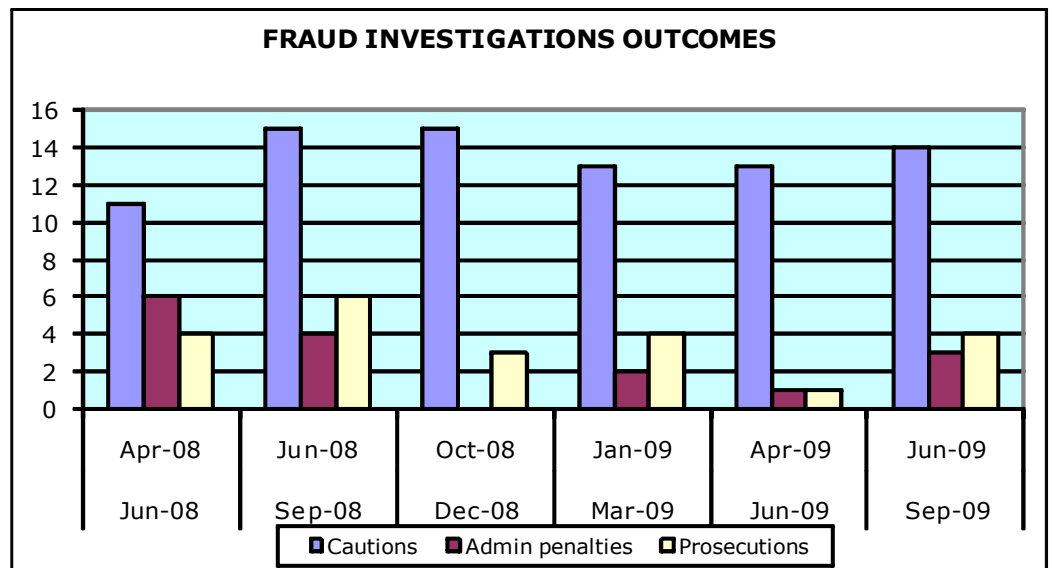
Team. Overpayments of £10,679 were written off in the quarter. Following Executive approval a Job Description and Person Specification have been written for the new Overpayment recovery post and interviews are planned for the week commencing the 30th November 2009 with an aim to transfer the agreed debts from the Income Recovery Team in January 2010.



- 5.5. Local Authority Error overpayments continue to remain below the financial threshold and remain on target to receive 100% subsidy again. At the end of September 2009 overpayments totalling £32,679 had been identified as being caused by Local Authority Error – this is only 0.20% of qualifying expenditure (these are payments for which 100% subsidy is received) – the threshold to receive 100% subsidy is 0.48%. Total gross expenditure on Benefit payments at the end of September was £17,653,940 and the total qualifying expenditure as £16,533,841.

Benefits investigations

- 5.6. The Investigations Team continued to perform well and issued 14 sanctions, 3 Administrative Penalties and 4 prosecutions. Additionally the Verification Officers carried out 305 home visits which led to 30 claims having their benefit increased and 102 claims having their benefit decreased.



Appeals

- 5.7 There has been an increase in the number of appeals received. In order to improve the turnaround time for Appeals and to cope with the increased volume an additional officer has been undertaking appeals work. This has allowed new appeals to be looked at earlier and enabled the Appeals Officer to concentrate on submissions to the tribunal. The One Stop Shop have also been given additional guidance on the process to help to correctly identify formal appeals rather than including all requests that we look again at claim decisions as appeals – this has helped reduce the number of appeals.

Take-Up Strategy

- 5.8. A draft Take-Up strategy has been prepared to help local people maximise their income. Consultation is taking place with stakeholders such as the Job Centre Plus, Age Concern and Citizens Advice Bureau. The DWP Performance Development Team is continuing to assist the Benefits Service on this strategy. The recent Child Benefit disregard and pensioner capital threshold increase have been promoted and several community events have been attended to offer advice to local people.

Improvement Plan

- 5.9. The latest position regarding the Benefits Improvement Plan has been included at Appendix 1.

6. Other Implications

Asset Management - None

Community Safety - None

Human Resources - None

Social Exclusion - None

7. Lessons Learnt

7.1 The Performance Development Team are as useful source of learning for the Benefits Service.

8. Background Papers

Audit Commission inspection report.

9. Consultation

This report has been prepared in consultation with relevant Borough Council Officers

10. Author of Report

The author of this report is Teresa Kristunas (Head of Financial, Revenues and Benefits Services), who can be contacted on extension 3295 (e-mail: teresa.kristunas@redditchbc.gov.uk) for more information.

11. Appendices

Appendix 1 – Position Statement – Benefits Service Improvement Plan April – June 2009