

REDDITCH BOROUGH COUNCIL

**EXECUTIVE
COMMITTEE**

2nd December 2010

**BENEFITS IMPROVEMENT PLAN – QUARTERLY MONITORING JULY TO
SEPTEMBER 2010**

Relevant Portfolio Holder	Councillor Braley, Portfolio Holder for Corporate Management
Relevant Head of Service	Teresa Kristunas, Head of Finance and Resources
Non-Key Decision	

1. SUMMARY OF PROPOSALS

The report advises Members on the performance of the Benefits Service during the third quarter and to provide an update on progress against the Benefits Service Improvement Plan.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

**The Committee is asked to RESOLVE that
subject to any comments, the report be noted.**

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Benefits Service Improvement Plan was developed in response to the Audit Commission Inspection in February 2009.
- 3.2 Work is progressing towards the aims of the improvement plan. The service was re-inspected in October 2010 and the new findings from the Audit Commission will be known in November 2010 and published early January 2011.

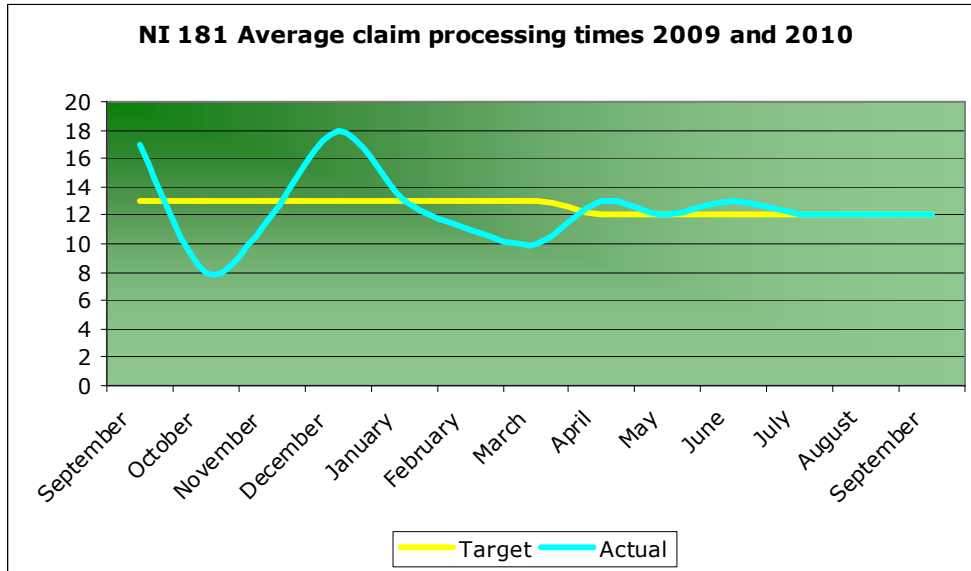
4. KEY ISSUES

- 4.1 Claims Performance
There is one national Indicator for the Benefits Service, NI181 which measures the average time taken to process new claims and change events for Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax Benefit claims. The target average of 12 days has been met with new claims taking on average 18 days to process and change events taking 11 days on average.

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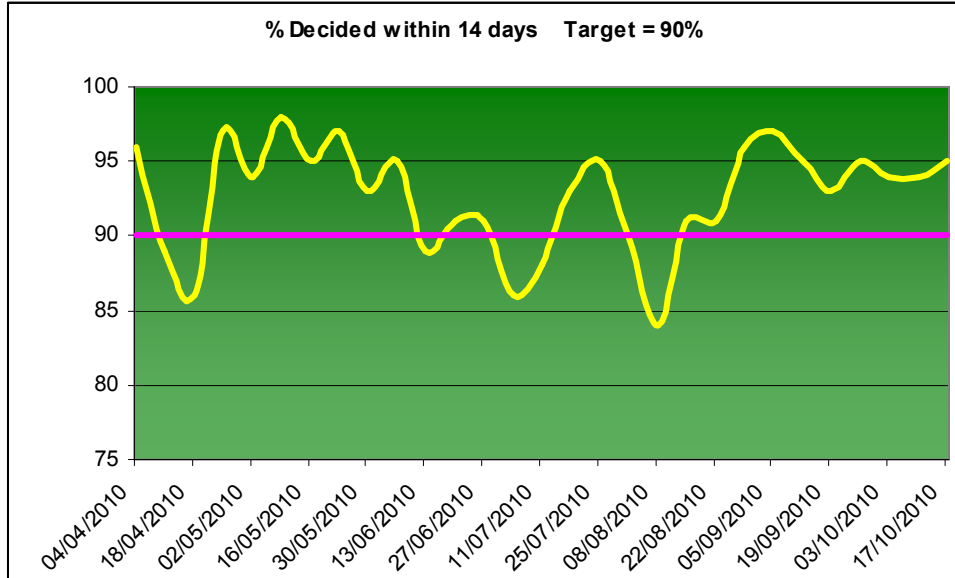


4.2 The table below gives some context to these figures, the most recent national data available is the average for the 2009/10 year and as can be seen new claims are being processed considerably faster than the national average. Change events are lagging behind the national trend but the national figures include a lot of system based work in the final quarter which are not part of the indicator but have reduced the national average.

Average processing times

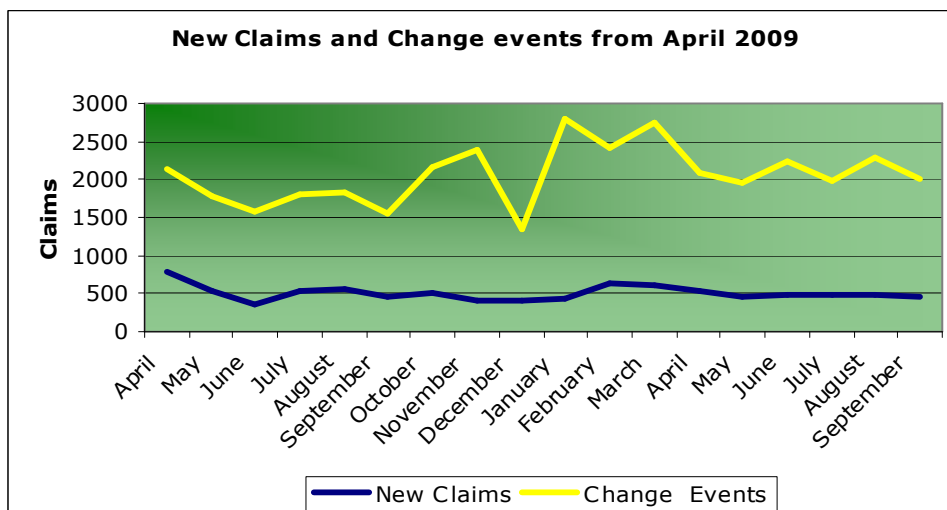
	National Average 2009/10	RBC Quarter 2 2010/11
Combined	11	12
New claims	25	18
Change Events within 14 days	25	11

4.3 A locally reported performance measure is the percentage of claims decided within 14 days of being able to make a decision on the claim. A target of 90% has been set for the current year and the average for the second quarter was 92%.



4.4 Case-load and Claims received

The number of claims received increased in the quarter with 1146 claim forms being received compared with 1029 in the previous quarter. The caseload also increased slightly to 8169 up from 8132 at the end of the previous quarter. A total of 6202 change events were worked on in the quarter compared to 6282 in the previous quarter. 1387 new claims were decided compared to 1463 previously.



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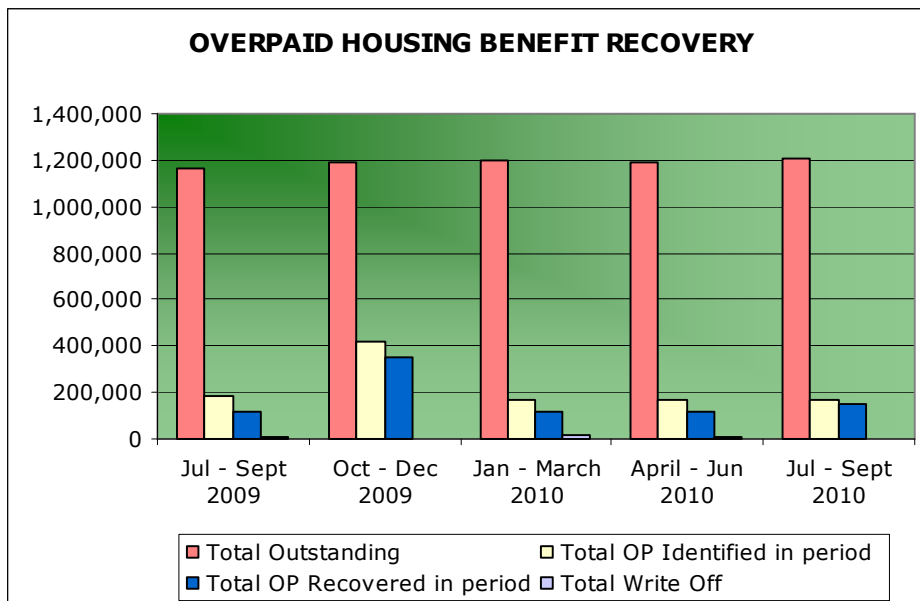
4.5 New ways of working

Over the summer the Benefits Services changed how outstanding work was distributed. Rather than some of the team work on new claims in date order and some work on change events in date order the caseload has been divided into work areas based on surname. This has enabled documents in the services electronic document management system to be coded so that they are sent directly to the relevant Officer as soon as they are scanned.

4.6 A new performance management framework has also been introduced where staff have a target number of claims to process. Rather than having a target for new claims and a target for changes the target can be achieved by processing either claim type – a new claim is weighted at 1.5 and changes at 0.3 to reflect the extra work normally required to process a new claim. The target of 5 per day is based on completed claims only to reward getting it right first time. The framework will be extended in the new year to include an accuracy weighting.

4.7 Overpayment recovery

The amount of outstanding overpaid Housing Benefit was £1,206,271 at the beginning of the quarter. New overpayments totalling £165,374 were identified and £154,838 was recovered in the quarter. This meant that an amount equal to 94% of the debt identified in the quarter was recovered or 11% of the total debt outstanding at the start of the quarter.

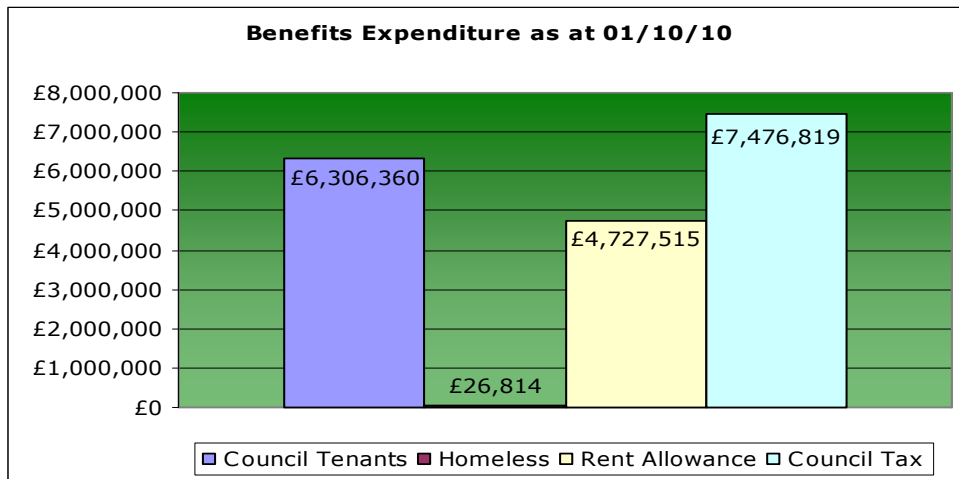


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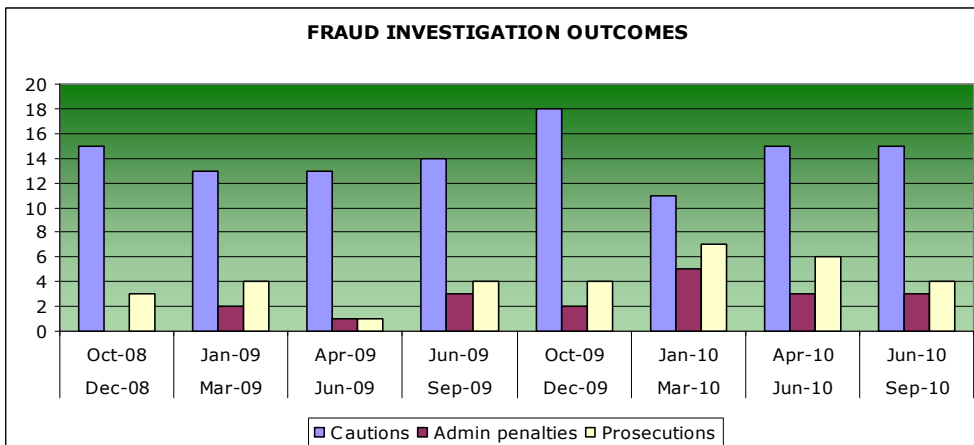
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- 4.8 The service also monitors that the level of overpayments caused by Local Authority Error remains below the threshold. Only £28,533 or 0.16% of qualifying expenditure has been treated as Local Authority error.
- 4.9 Local Authorities receive a grant to cover all overpayments attributed to Local Authority delay or error as long as the total does not exceed 0.48% of qualifying expenditure (qualifying expenditure in this case being expenditure which attracts 100% subsidy).
- 4.10 Total expenditure on Benefit payments at the end of quarter was £18,537,508. Expenditure for the same period last year was £17,653,940.



- 4.11. Counter Fraud work
In the quarter 372 cases where fraud was suspected were referred to the Investigations team, and 15 Cautions and 3 Administration penalties were issued. 1 case was identified as being suitable for prosecution and 4 cases were successfully prosecuted.



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4.12 Accuracy

A system generated 4% sample of work processed is undertaken to help ensure that the correct decision is being made. The current accuracy figure is for 99.84%. The check requires another Officer to verify that the claim has been set up correctly. Further quality checks are undertaken by home visits three months after a new claim has been put into payment (apart from Pension Credit claims).

Improvement plan

4.13 The majority of the improvement plan has been completed or there are plans in place to complete the improvement. Following the October 2010 re-inspection further recommendations are expected which can be used to develop the service. The original inspection set out four main recommendations covering; improved management and collection of overpaid Housing Benefit, adopting a Take-Up strategy, making the service more accessible and setting challenging service standards and performance targets.

4.14 The overpayment recovery process has been mapped, a new Overpayments Officer appointed and aged debt reports are regularly run and monitored. This has led to improved overpayment recovery.

4.15 A Take-Up strategy has been created to help local people maximise their income. Consultation has taken place with stakeholders such as the Job Centre Plus, Age Concern and Citizens Advice Bureau. Various activities and events are scheduled to promote take-up. More than £100,000 extra income has been obtained for local people in the last nine months.

4.16 Service users have been asked their views on aspects of service provision and the service is working closer with voluntary and community organisations.

4.17 The web site has been updated and made more relevant with electronic forms for new claims as well as changes. Work has been done with the Customer Service staff to promote the Quick Response process where claims can be dealt with within two working days. Closer working with landlords including successful trial for a landlord to gather evidence for claims.

4.18 Detailed Service standards set, monitored and reported to customers. Regular performance reporting to Councillors and Senior Officers and improved performance management of processing staff.

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4.19 The final position regarding the Benefits Improvement Plan has been included at Appendix 1.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no specific financial implications.

6. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no specific legal implications.

7. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

There are no specific policy implications

8. COUNCIL OBJECTIVES

Enterprising Community
Safe
Well Managed Organisation

**9. RISK MANAGEMENT INCLUDING HEALTH & SAFETY
CONSIDERATIONS**

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 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.

10. CUSTOMER IMPLICATIONS

None specific.

11. EQUALITIES AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

None Specific.

**12. VALUE FOR MONEY IMPLICATIONS, PROCUREMENT AND ASSET
MANAGEMENT**

None Specific.

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13. CLIMATE CHANGE, CARBON IMPLICATIONS AND BIODIVERSITY

None Specific.

14. HUMAN RESOURCES IMPLICATIONS

None specific.

15. GOVERNANCE/PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

None specific.

**16. COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS INCLUDING SECTION 17 OF
CRIME AND DISORDER ACT 1998**

None specific.

17. HEALTH INEQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

None specific.

18. LESSONS LEARNT

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

19. COMMUNITY AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

None Specific.

20. OTHERS CONSULTED ON THE REPORT

Portfolio Holder	YES
Chief Executive	YES
Executive Director (S151 Officer)	Yes
Executive Director – Leisure, Cultural, Environmental and Community Services	Yes
Executive Director – Planning & Regeneration, Regulatory and Housing Services	Yes

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Director of Policy, Performance and Partnerships	Yes
Head of Service	Yes
Head of Resources	Yes
Head of Legal, Equalities & Democratic Services	Yes
Corporate Procurement Team	N/A

21. WARDS AFFECTED

No Specific Ward Relevance.

22. APPENDICES

Appendix 1 - Position Statement – Benefits Service Improvement Plan as at September 2010.

23. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Audit Commission inspection report.

AUTHOR OF REPORT

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