

Benefits service

inspection

Wiltshire Council

The Audit Commission is an independent watchdog, driving economy, efficiency and effectiveness in local public services to deliver better outcomes for everyone.

Our work across local government, health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services means that we have a unique perspective. We promote value for money for taxpayers, auditing the £200 billion spent by 11,000 local public bodies.

As a force for improvement, we work in partnership to assess local public services and make practical recommendations for promoting a better quality of life for local people.

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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 KLOE 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 (the Service) provided to customers by Wiltshire Council is 'fair' with 'promising' prospects for improvement.
- 2 The Council is a new unitary authority which came into being on 1 April 2009. It has an emerging track record of improving the Benefits Service. It has worked hard to successfully merge four different benefits services into one without a noticeable disruption to the service for customers. Since then the Service has continued to improve but there is still work to do on processes and systems to ensure it does not continue to operate as four districts.
- 3 Benefit claims are processed quickly. Customers receive accurate payments through rigorous checking procedures. The Service has not yet routinely measured customer satisfaction but customers we spoke to were satisfied with the service they receive.
- 4 The Council is beginning to design the Service to meet customer needs and has made changes such as the introduction of an appointment system. But there are still differences in the service provided at different hubs.ⁱ Facilities at some customer contact centres are inadequate and some hubs are more difficult to access. The Council has not agreed and published service standards so customers do not know what level of service to expect.
- 5 The Service has good relationships with stakeholders and partnership working has improved access for customers. But the Service does not routinely seek the views of customers or stakeholders to develop the Service. It could also make more use of partners to receive claims from their tenants or customers.
- 6 The Service's approach to promoting and increasing the take-up of benefit is still developing. There is a take-up strategy which it has shared with stakeholders. But there is no monitoring of any take-up work that has been done to see how successful it is.
- 7 The Service has responded well to individual and community needs of diverse groups. Staff receive online and regular training to ensure that they are able to deliver a service that meets the needs of all customers. But there is a lack of a strategic focus on equalities and diversity. The Service has not yet completed equality impact assessments (EIA) to help identify weaknesses and make improvements.

ⁱ the Benefits Service is currently delivered from the four former district council offices, which the Council refers to as 'hubs', in the South, East, and North and West of the County

8 The Service provides value for money. Its costs are low compared to its caseload and it is delivering benefits to customers at no cost to local council tax payers. It costs less to run the Service than the grant it receives from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The Service has managed to reduce its costs to meet corporate savings targets but the way it routinely monitors and evaluates value for money could be better. It has limited data to help it to understand how good performance levels are in relation to the cost profiles of different elements of service. Levels of outstanding overpayments have increased but new procedures have been introduced and are beginning to make a difference.

9 The Council has an emerging track record of delivering improvement. The Service is turning poor performance around and is improving consistency across its area hubs. The speed of processing new claims has improved throughout 2009/10 and is better than the national average. The Service is adequately tackling fraud. Prosecutions for people who commit fraud doubled in 2009/10, though from a low base. But the Service is still running as four districts in terms of processing and some opportunities for quick wins have been missed.

10 The Service is tackling the main cause of inconsistency by implementing a single IT system for revenues and benefits to replace a range of different, incompatible systems inherited from the previous districts. Additional investments in IT by the Council are aimed at improving reliability and enabling mobile working to improve customer access.

11 The Service is effective at managing performance. It has clear aims and priorities in its Service Plan and there is good leadership, both political and managerial. There is a robust performance management framework that translates service aims into individual work plans that are monitored and progressed at regular team and one to one meetings. However, there is scope for improvement. There is limited involvement of frontline staff and stakeholders in service planning. The Service has not developed effective ways of managing value for money. Target setting and performance measurement are underdeveloped in a number of areas and monitoring of customer contact performance is inadequate.

12 Staff are committed, with good skills and experience. They have demonstrated resilience during a time of significant change but remain enthusiastic about the challenges ahead and their involvement in systems reviews. Capacity is being improved by recruiting additional staff, which will enable the Service to cope with an increasing workload. Changes are being made to the way the fraud investigation team operates in order to improve fraud detection.

13 There are some weaknesses that are limiting improvement in the Service. Scrutiny of the Service is underdeveloped and councillors have limited detailed knowledge of benefits. The Service is not maximising the contribution that partners can make towards improvement. It has not fully expressed links with regional and national priorities and is therefore not using its potential to contribute to wider aims.

Scoring the service

14 We assessed Wiltshire Council as providing a 'fair', one-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**ⁱ



Source: Audit Commission

15 The Service is a fair, one star service because it has the following strengths.

- New claims are processed quickly.
- The quality of customer care is good.
- The cost of the Service is low.
- The Service is being designed to meet customers' needs.
- It is taking action to ensure customers provide all the information needed to complete claims quickly.
- It has taken some action to increase benefit take-up.
- Customers receive accurate payments through rigorous checking procedures.
- The Service takes appropriate action to minimise incorrect payments through regular intervention.
- Joint working with some stakeholders has improved access.

16 However there are some weaknesses.

- Some customers find it difficult to access the Service face-to-face.
- The Service is not equally accessible from all the hubs.
- Facilities at some customer contact centres are inadequate.

ⁱ 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

- There are no customer standards in place.
- The Service does not have a clear understanding of customer satisfaction or outcomes from take-up work.
- It takes too long to deal with complaints.
- The Service has not routinely engaged with customers and stakeholders.
- The Service has not completed equality impact assessments to ensure it is equally accessible to all customers.
- Overpayment debt is increasing.
- Benchmarking to compare costs and performance is underdeveloped.

17 The Service has promising prospects for improvement because it has the following strengths.

- A clear vision, aims and priorities have been established – the Service is aiming to improve the right things.
- There is good political and managerial leadership.
- A single ICT system for revenues and benefits is being implemented.
- The Council is investing in other ICT solutions.
- The Service has an emerging track record of improvement.
- It has a robust framework for performance management.
- It takes appropriate action to address poor performance.
- It is good at learning from other organisations.
- The Council is showing commitment by providing extra staff resources.
- Staff are committed and enthusiastic, with good skills and experience.
- It is strengthening its focus on tackling benefit fraud.
- It is using a proven system of service reviews to improve service delivery and involve staff and customers.
- It is effectively managing risk.

18 However, there remain some issues that need to be addressed:

- Scrutiny of the service is underdeveloped.
- There is limited involvement of frontline staff and stakeholders in service planning.
- The Service is not fully contributing to regional and national priorities.
- It has not developed effective ways of routinely monitoring value for money.
- Performance measures and target setting are underdeveloped.
- Monitoring of customer contact performance is inadequate.
- The Service is not maximising the contribution that partners can make towards improvement.

Recommendations

19 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 costsⁱ 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 the service provided to benefits customers by:

- developing ways of engaging with service users to understand their diverse needs;
- developing challenging service standards which are relevant to customer's needs including timescales for dealing with customer complaints;
- completing and publishing equality impact assessments for the Benefits Service and taking necessary action;
- reviewing facilities and opening hours at customer contact centres to ensure that they meet the needs of customers;
- improving the information available to publicise assistance for those for whom English is not their first language;
- ensuring that benefits information is easily available and understandable on the Council website;
- developing a shortened claim form and including contact details and help available in forms and leaflets; and
- working with partners to enable them to accept and verify claims and evidence.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the development of a service that meets the needs of customers;
- improved standard of service to customers;
- reduction in unnecessary customer contact; and
- a clear understanding for customers of what should be expected and what is being achieved by the Service.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by July 2011.

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

Recommendation

- R2** Strengthen performance management and planning by:
- drawing up detailed action plans to maximise the capability of the new ICT systems for revenues and benefits and mobile working;
 - adopting a consistent approach to measuring customer satisfaction and obtaining their views on the service;
 - monitoring performance against customer standards and reporting results;
 - measuring outcomes from take-up work against set targets;
 - developing an effective approach for regular monitoring, evaluation and delivery of value for money;
 - involving frontline staff and stakeholders in service planning; and
 - developing meaningful local performance measures and setting clear performance targets to support all of the aims of the Service.
-

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- decision makers will have a clearer picture of all aspects of the Service and be able to identify weaknesses more quickly;
- greater accountability to local people and stakeholders; and
- future plans will be clearer and more effective.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by July 2011.

Recommendation

- R3** Strengthen councillor and key stakeholder support for the Service by:
- providing an effective challenge by councillors through scrutiny of the Service;
 - delivering benefits awareness training to all councillors; and
 - delivering fraud awareness training to all councillors and key stakeholders.
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The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- greater accountability and an improved focus on improving the service customers receive; and
- stronger focus on fraud detection and reduction.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by July 2011.

Recommendation

R4 Improve approach to achieving value for money and understanding service costs by:

- undertaking robust benchmarking with the best and established similar organisations (not just new unitary Councils);
 - develop a continual process of measuring costs and performance against set targets;
 - taking steps to reduce the amount of overpayment debt; and
 - monitoring the age and profile of outstanding overpayments.
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The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a better understanding and identification of areas where the service can be provided more effectively and efficiently;
- a service providing a greater value for money for its customers and the Council;
- targeting of overpayment debt to reduce amount outstanding; and
- an increased knowledge base from which to drive future service improvements.