

Benefit Service Inspection – Wiltshire Council

Purpose of Report

1. As part of a targeted inspection programme of newly created unitary authorities the audit commission carried out an in depth inspection of the Councils benefit service, which began in Spring 2010 with the submission of a self assessment. Throughout the summer offices were visited by members of the inspection team who also carried out a number of ‘secret shopper’ enquires by telephone and in writing prior to their main inspection in November. The purpose of this report is to apprise members of the audit commissions key findings and recommendations within their inspection report, and to present a service improvement plan which translates these recommendations into actions.

Background

2. The Housing Benefit and Council Tax benefit scheme provides a financial lifeline to low income households with their housing costs, and is available to working age and pension age people as well as those in work and those seeking work.
3. The scheme was independently delivered by each of the former district councils prior to the creation of a single council for Wiltshire. The merger of these services has realised the need for a complete staffing restructure including the harmonisation of job roles and descriptions. Throughout this significant period of change and transition staff maintained high levels of performance and at the same time remained focus on delivering high standards of customer care.
4. Currently over 30,000 low income households across Wiltshire rely on support from housing benefit and/or council tax, at an annual cost of over £130 million. The overall focus of the service has been to support the community by working with other departments and agencies to reduce poverty, homelessness, debt and to promote financial inclusion. Key areas of work include:

- Ensuring the prompt and accurate payment of Housing Benefit/Local Housing Allowance
 - Ensuring the prompt and accurate award of Council Tax Benefit
 - Providing help and support to customers making claims from first point of contact to conclusion
 - Dealing with changes in customers ' circumstances
 - Maximising benefit take up
 - Preventing and detecting benefit fraud
5. One of the main barriers faced in terms of delivering a seamless and consistent service has been the requirement to operate the same bespoke and very different I.T. operating systems used by the former district councils prior to reorganisation. However, a major project is in progress to deliver a single I.T. solution which is on schedule to be implemented in 2011. Operation of a single I.T. system will deliver significant savings and further enhance service delivery from both a customer and an operational point of view.

Scope of inspection

6. The audit commission inspection of the benefit service focused on key lines of enquiry (KLOE) and was followed up with an on site inspection, the key lines of enquiry centred around four specific themes these were:
- How good is the service?
 - Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?
 - Is the service delivering value for money?
 - What are the prospects for improvement to the service?
7. During the on site inspection the audit commission carried out in depth interviews with key officers and members, as well as holding a series of focus groups made up of stakeholders and customers. Customers who had recently applied for benefit were contacted and questioned about their experiences. In February 2011 the commission published its report on the service. Essentially, audit commission reports carry two judgments, the first consider how good the service is and the second considers what the prospects for improvement are. Wiltshire received a 'fair' rating with 'promising' prospect for improvement, this assessment compared favourably with other unitaries inspected at the same time and was considerably better than Central Bedford, whose report was published a matter of weeks before Wiltshire's. Despite Cornwall receiving the same score, some weeks later, they were criticised for delays in processing claims, changes of circumstances and dealing with appeals.

Summary of findings and recommendations

8. The Audit Commissions overall view was that as a new unitary the council had an emerging track record of improving the benefit service and had worked

hard to successfully merge four different benefit services into one without any noticeable disruption to the service for customers. They went on to say that 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 i.e. within the administration grant provided by Department for Work and Pensions.

9. The report highlighted the fact that although the service does not routinely measure customer satisfaction and this would need to be addressed within any subsequent improvement plan, all of the customers they had spoken to were satisfied with the service they received. High levels of customer satisfaction by those the commissioned talked to was reinforced by the fact that claims are processed quickly (well above national average) and that customers receive accurate payments. Furthermore, the commission were satisfied that the council was truly beginning to design the service to meet customer needs and that this was supported through excellent relationships with stakeholders and partners.
10. The Commission did identify some inconsistencies in practices across hubs but felt that the service was tackling the main cause of inconsistency by implementing a single I.T. solution.
11. Other key areas recommended for further development included:
 - Strengthening stakeholder and members support for the service
 - Adopting a consistent approach to measuring customer satisfaction levels
 - Taking steps to reduce overpayment debt
 - A clearer understanding of customer needs in respect of facilities and opening hours at customer contact centres.
12. Other areas requiring further development that were identified through the inspection process were translated into four key recommendations and these have been incorporated into an action plan. The action plan is contained as an appendix to this document.
13. Overall the commission believed the service was effective at managing performance and had clear aims and priorities in its service plan which was supported through good leadership both political and managerial. Furthermore, staff were praised for their commitment, enthusiasm, good skills and resilience which had been clearly demonstrated during a time of significant change.
14. Progress against this plan is being monitored by the Head of Revenues and Benefits as part of the ongoing improvement of this service. To date a number of actions as set out at Appendix A have been implemented. A number are due for completion in the Summer and a small number relate to changes to be introduced through the implementation of the new single system at the end of the year. In addition to that since the Inspection the Government has

announced proposals to change the way revenues and benefits are run in its Welfare Reform plans. At the moment no further guidance has been forthcoming and officers continue to assess any changes against this action plan. Whilst the Audit Commission will not be following this plan up we are aware that the Department for Works and Pensions will wish to see how we have actioned recommendations, as we expect will our external auditors. This check will form another part of monitoring.

Proposals

15. The report is for noting.

MICHAEL HUDSON
Interim Chief Finance Officer