



**Local Authority Performance Division
Performance Development Team**

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Jackie,

Our recent discussion refers during which I offered my apology for not being able to attend the council's Executive meeting on 1 November. I do hope though that the following clearly illustrates the excellent progress we consider the Benefits service has made recently.

The aim of the assignment was to build on the success of the Benefits service by further improving customers' overall experience of the service by:

- considering the roles and responsibilities of customer service and assessment staff
- reviewing impact of the scanning and indexing processes
- gathering information from customers
- controlling and managing the workflow
- maximising the use of robust management information
- managing and preventing backlogs through the use of robust and quality management information.



This letter therefore also sets out the background to our involvement with the service and our view on the prospects for improvement following completion of this work.

You will be aware that our Minister James Plaskitt, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, had expressed his concern with the performance of the Benefits service. This was because before February 2007 the council was taking more than 48 days to process new claims. I think it is also fair to say that the performance of the service had been a concern to the Department well before February 2007. However, the council responded positively to a meeting held in March with Departmental colleagues and invited the Performance Development Team to work with your team.

At the time of the assignment the Benefits service was going through a significant period of change and improvements were being achieved. The reported levels of performance since April 2007 are though very encouraging and I think show the value of our partnership. I should like to thank you and your colleagues for your co-operation, hospitality and the integrity you have shown during the last few months.

Indeed I should like to highlight that it has been the hard work and commitment of your team that has brought about this change. Since March 2007, on a monthly basis, new claims have been processed in less than 36 days, and since July the council has taken, on average, less than 30 days, taking only 23 days in September. The council's performance in dealing with changes of circumstances also shows marked improvements. Since May 2007 the time taken to process changes of circumstances has significantly reduced with changes being processed in less than 10 days in September compared to 35 days in January 2007. This is evidence of real progress and excellent performance. But most of all I guess has helped to make a significant difference to the lives of those customers who rely on housing and council tax benefit.

I should also add that performance against these 2 Best Value Performance Indicators bodes well for the future. You will be aware that from April 2008 there will be a single indicator covering the speed of processing of housing and council tax benefits and it will comprise the current new claims and changes of circumstances indicator.

Having now completed the assignment I am therefore satisfied the right building blocks are in place to achieve further sustainable improvements and I therefore consider the prospects of the council's Benefits service continuing to improve are excellent.

Our assignment has confirmed the changes in the council's processes and procedures have helped to bring about the improved performance of the service. Clearly though there are a number of issues that still need to be addressed, but

we hope the findings from our assignment will assist you in your improvement planning and decision making processes. I am though confident that you will make the necessary changes to further improve the service. In particular, the work that is currently being undertaken to:

- introduce a customer “guarantee” so that decisions on benefit claims are made within one day of all information being provided by customers
- prepare staff to process general and routine benefit queries at the customer reception point
- maximise use of the document management system so that work is allocated electronically
- reduce the incidence of benefit overpayments

will all lead to a better, more efficient and effective service for customers.

I do though need to consider the performance of the service over the next six months to ensure the planned improvements to further enhance the customer experience are realised and sustained. I shall therefore be grateful if you will continue to submit the statistical returns to my colleagues on a monthly basis. We shall then in turn continue to keep our Minister informed of the council's progress.

Finally, I am more than happy to attend any future meetings to provide any additional evidence the council's Executive may require. As ever should you require further information or help please contact me.

Yours sincerely,

By e-mail

Jonathan Bottomer

c.c. Julie Higinbotham

