

Agenda Item No. 8

Title: **Housing and Council Tax benefits take-up**

Portfolio Holder: **Cllr Roy While**

Reporting Officer: **Shirley Sanchez, Revenues and Benefit Manager**

Key Decision: **No**

Purpose

To inform Cabinet of:

- the impact of the road shows, other benefits take up work and the economic climate;
- case load, staffing and performance at the end of the last financial year.

Background

In recent years West Wiltshire District Council has worked closely with the Department for Works and Pensions, The Pensions Service and Job Centre Plus to identify customers that would qualify for help with their rent and or Council Tax. That work has been successful in bringing those groups of customers into Housing and Council Tax benefits entitlement.

A 'flier' advising customers how to get help with their Council Tax was also produced in July 2008 and is sent with every final notice and summon for late or missed payments of Council Tax. The 'flier' advises a customer to contact the Council so that we can seek to help them in these difficult times.

West Wiltshire District Council's officers have also worked closely with our social housing providers to encourage take up at the start of a tenancy and where rent arrears may be attributable to financial difficulties. However, the Council's officers were concerned that there were potential customers, that were not being picked up by the work with the DWP, Pensions Service or Job Centre Plus and social housing providers, that were managing to pay their Council Tax and therefore not receiving a copy of the 'flier' sent with notices regarding late or missed payments.

Given the concerns, West Wiltshire District Council's Revenues and Benefits team agreed that further promotion of the benefits schemes was needed and arranged road shows to make information available, to the general public in supermarkets around the district. During the latter part of 2008 road shows offering advice in respect of Housing and Council Tax benefit, Council Tax exemptions and discounts were delivered around the district. The Council is grateful to those supermarkets that were able to provide space for the road shows and to the press and various radio stations that advertised this

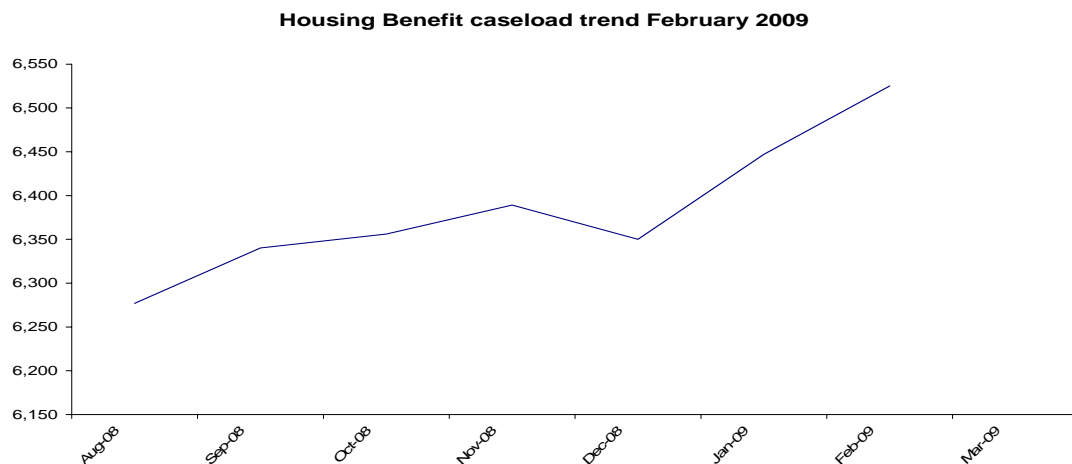
initiative. A wide variety of customers from across Wiltshire, along with some customers from outside the district, dropped in to speak with the officers and were genuinely pleased that the Council took the initiative to target take up in this way.

Key issues

- Housing and Council Tax benefits caseload
- Staffing and performance in the benefits teams.

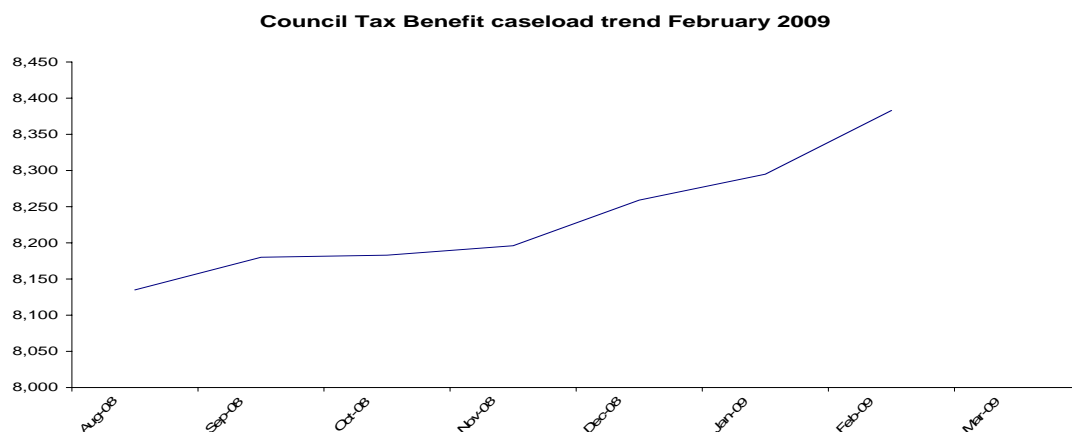
Housing and Council Tax benefits case load

Table 1. below shows the number of households in receipt of Housing Benefit since August 2008.



The Housing benefits caseload has increased by 4 percent since August 2008. A further 248 households are now receiving help with their rent liability.

Table 2. below show the number of households in receipt of Council Tax benefit since August 2008.

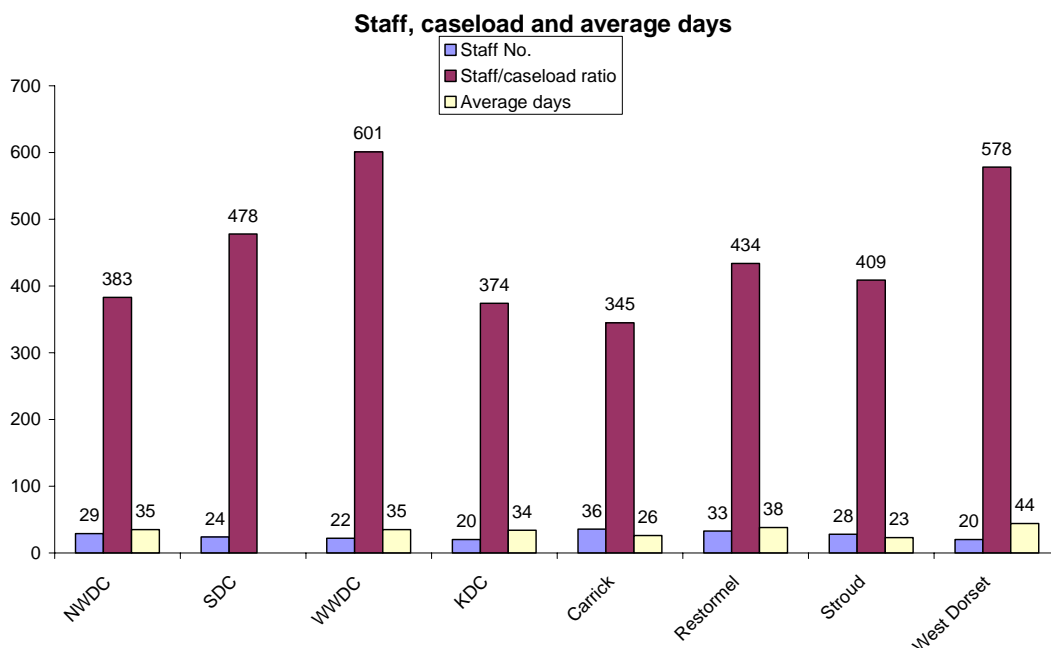


The Council Tax benefits caseload has increased by 3 percent since August 2008. A further 248 households are now receiving help with their council tax liability.

Staffing levels in the benefits teams

The significant increase in caseload has put pressure on service delivery. In the latter part of 2008 the time taken to determine claims started to increase. The service was not able to deal with applications and correspondence as quickly as we would have liked. Staff have taken a 'lean' approach to reviewing systems and procedures to help manage the staffing and caseload levels.

The following chart shows the staff/caseload ratios and average processing times in Wiltshire District Council and other Councils in south west England, with caseloads between 11k and 14k, as at 31 March 2008.



Source DWP web.

'Lean systems thinking' review

West Wiltshire District Council's Revenues and Benefits team has also undertaken a 'lean system thinking' review of service delivery. At the end of March 2008 the average days to determine a claim was 35 days. Indicative figures reflect that between April and December 2008 West Wiltshire District Council's benefits staff processed claims in an average of 12 days. The 2008/09 budgeted benefits structure included 4 vacant posts. Given the improved performance outcomes achieved by the review, those posts were held vacant. However, the success of the take up initiatives and current economic climate has put pressure on service delivery. To deal with this and eliminate future use of agency staff, the vacant posts were filled during February 2009. Training plans have been agreed with each new member of staff based on the individual development needs. Procedures, legislation and IT training is progressing well.

Effects on strategies and codes

There are no effects on strategies or codes.

Risk Management Implications

The additional caseload and staffing does not affect risk management in the service.

Financial Implications

There are no financial implications for the appointment of the 4 posts as this has been managed within the existing Revenues and Benefits budget.

The cost of administering Housing and Council Tax benefits is calculated taking into account the caseload, tenure type and complexity of the applications. The increased caseload will be reflected in the 2010/11 benefits administration subsidy calculation.

Central Government has recognised that the economic downturn is putting pressure on benefits services and additional one-off benefits administration subsidy of £221,000 has been granted to Wiltshire Council for the year 2009/10.

Legal and Human Rights Implications

There are no legal or human rights implications.

Next steps

Caseload, staffing and performance monitoring will continue and the impact will be reported.

Recommendation

That the report is noted.