

Cabinet Member (Strategic Finance and Resources)

1 December 2014

Name of Cabinet Member:

Cabinet Member (Strategic Finance and Resources) – Councillor Gannon

Director Approving Submission of the report:

Executive Director Resources

Ward(s) affected:

All

Title:

Performance within the Benefits Service for the period 1 April 2014 – 30 September 2014

Is this a key decision?

No. Although the matter within the Report can affect all wards in the City, it is not anticipated that the impact will be significant and it is therefore not deemed to be a key decision.

Executive Summary:

The purpose of this report is to update the Cabinet Member (Strategic Finance and Resources) on performance and developments within the benefits service during the financial year 2014/15. The benefits service in Coventry administers more than £160 million (paying Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support) to more than 38,700 households. The service processed the average new claim for benefit in 23.5 days and processed the average notification of a change in circumstances in 13.9 days.

Recommendations:

The Cabinet Member is requested to:

- 1) Endorse the performance of the benefits service for the period 1 April 2014 to 30 September 2014.
- 2) Agree to receive a further report at the first meeting of the 2015/16 municipal calendar to provide an update for the financial year 2014 -15.

List of Appendices included:

None

Other useful background papers:

None

Has it or will it be considered by Scrutiny?

No

Has it, or will it be considered by any other Council Committee, Advisory Panel or other body?

No

Will this report go to Council?

No

Report title:

Performance within the Benefits Service for the period April 2014 – September 2014.

1 Context (or background)

1.1 Coventry benefits service administers more than £131 million in housing benefit (HB) and £30 million for council tax support (CTS) payments each year to more than 38,000 Coventry households. The Service also administers discretionary funds – discretionary housing payments (DHPs) and Community Support Grants (CSGs). These funds provide additional support to particularly vulnerable people.

2 Summary of Performance

2.1 During the period 1 April 2014 to 30 September 2014 the benefits service has processed new HB/CTS claims in an average of 23.5 calendar days. This is just above the operational target of 23 days – and an improvement of 1.3 days when compared to the same period last year (when the year-end figure met the target of 23 days).

2.2 The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has published the latest comparative data on benefit processing performance as National Statistics for the first quarter of 2014/15. This shows the national average for new claims to be 24 days. Comparison with other West Midland unitary councils is not available for 2014/15. The position for the whole of 2013/14 for Housing Benefit only, showed:

Council	Number of days to process new claims
Dudley	16
Wolverhampton	19
Coventry	22
Birmingham	23
Sandwell	24
Solihull	27
Walsall	32

Fig 1: New claims comparison 2013/14 – source DWP

2.3 This performance has been achieved through maintaining focus on new claims and staff taking ‘ownership’ of the outcomes for customers (eg by encouraging interviews and following up with phone calls). On line claiming has continued to assist the improvement in processing times. Processing times are continuing to improve and the year-end figure is expected to be well within the 23 day target. Comparisons with previous year’s performance in Coventry for the same period shows consistent progress year on year:

Year	Days to process
2011/12	30.2
2012/13	27.2
2013/14	24.8
2014/15	23.5

Coventry City Council April – September performance for new claims – 2011/12 to 2014/15

- 2.4 The average time to process a change in circumstance (for HB and CTS claims) in the first six months of 2014/15 was 13.9 days. Whilst this is above the operational target for the year of 12.5 days it is nearly six days better than the same period last year. The year-end total in 2013/14 was 14.8 days (for Housing Benefit 12.2 days – the DWP reported indicator). Performance continues to improve and the Service expects the year-end performance to be within the operational target of 12.5 days.
- 2.5 Our performance at this stage of the year compared to previous years shows an encouraging trend:

Year	Days to process
2011/12	19.4
2012/13	23.4
2013/14	19.7
2014/15	13.9

Days to process changes in circumstances – April to September 2011/12 to 2014/15.
Source, Coventry CC

- 2.6 Comparative performance for the first six months of 2014/15 is not yet available. For some contextual information our performance when compared with other West Midland councils for the whole of 2013/14 was:

Birmingham	6
Sandwell	7
Walsall	8
Solihull	9
Wolverhampton	12
Coventry	13
Dudley	14

Fig 2 – Average days to process change in circumstances (Housing Benefit only) 2013/14 – source DWP

- 2.7 Recent changes in management have led to changes in processes and our overall work position has made an excellent improvement. The oldest work has moved forward from around two months old to less than seven days. This will continue to ensure the change in circumstance performance indicator improves. This position is also meaning less overpayments were caused by delays – classified as ‘Local Authority Error’. This can lead to a significant loss of subsidy paid to the Council from DWP. The Service is currently on track to receive maximum subsidy with LA error overpayments £215,000 compared with £273,000 at the same stage last year (we achieved full subsidy, subject to audit). This area is closely monitored by the Service.

3 Customer Service

- 3.1 The Service has been heavily involved in the way it interacts with customers as part of the ‘Kickstart’ programme. Following a successful trial it has now rolled out an ‘appointment only’ service for people who claim housing benefit and council tax support. This will mean an improved service for those customers who require help

with their claims. Staff will prepare for the appointment and understand the nature of the enquiry in advance. It will mean that the longer waiting times previously experienced will be removed and customers only need to visit for as long as is necessary to resolve their enquiry.

- 3.2 As part of the council's strategy to be 'digital by default' wherever possible Benefits staff are also asking customers if they can send in information via email to save them time and money. Customers who have a smart phone are also being encouraged to take a picture of the evidence that they have been asked for to support their claim. This means that we can speed up the process of dealing with claims and also saves the Council money.

4 Discretionary Housing Payments

- 4.1 Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) are used to help people in difficult circumstances with their housing costs. The DHP policy was approved by Cabinet in March 2013. The Welfare Reforms introduced from April 2013 continue to impact on this area of work.
- 4.2 In the first six months of 2014/15 the Service received 1,475 applications. The number of applications in 2013/14 for the same period was 1,541. At the end of September 2014 £320,776 had been allocated out of the total budget available for this year of £811,865. This compares with £159,620 being spent at the same time last year. The Service has engaged with stakeholders and has taken a targeted approach to the allocation of awards. The number of applications for a 'bond' to enable customers to move to affordable accommodation has increased from 94 at the end of September 2013 to 248 at the end of September 2014.

5 Community Support Grants

- 5.1 The Community Support Grant (CSG) scheme is in its second year. The CSG fund is currently used to give emergency help to the most vulnerable people in the city – many of which have already faced benefit cuts etc, including those under the threat of homelessness or domestic abuse. Through liaison at a local level with other areas of the Council – including Housing and Children's Services, and organisations such as Coventry Law Centre and CAB the Service targets support where it is most needed.
- 5.2 The Council is responsible for administering the £1,195,847 annual grant for these awards. In the first six months of 2014/15, the Service received 1,986 applications, of which 1,078 were successful. The number of applications in 2013/14 for the same period was 1,962, of which 940 were successful. The Service received 5187 telephone calls in respect of CSG applications compared with 4144 by the end of September 2013.
- 5.3 At the end of September 2014, £351,120 had been allocated out of the total budget available for this year. This compares with £169,173 being allocated out of the budget at the same time last year. The Service has put in place a responsive process and has worked hard with partners to ensure money is targeted on individual needs. Improved engagement with support agencies has meant that the Service has seen an increase in the number of support grants for this half year.

5.4 The Government is currently conducting a consultation exercise on the future funding arrangements for 'Local Welfare Schemes' (CSGs in Coventry). Depending on the outcome of the consultation, a decision is likely to be needed from councillors regarding the future of the scheme in Coventry.

6 Partnership working

6.1 The Service has continued to be a key contributor to effective partnership working. A strategic partnership 'working together' group has continued to develop and has been meeting monthly for well over a year to coordinate our efforts. Partners include: Coventry City Council, Whitefriars, Midland Heart, Job Centre Plus, Coventry Law Centre, and Citizens Advice Bureau. Close working in the partnership has helped to limit the impact of welfare reforms and benefit reductions.

7 Results of consultation undertaken

7.1 No consultation has been undertaken.

8 Timetable for implementing this decision

8.1 Not applicable.

9 Comments Executive Director, Resources

9.1 The Administration of HB/CTB is being delivered within the current budgetary provision. The achievement of 100% subsidy on LA error overpayments will continue to be monitored closely in 2014/15.

9.2 There are no legal implications arising from this report.

10 Other implications

None

10.1 How will this contribute to achievement of the Council's key objectives / corporate priorities (corporate plan/scorecard) / organisational blueprint / LAA (or Coventry SCS)?

The effective administration of HB/CTB impacts on a range of agendas and supports the Council's vision and objectives for jobs and growth, supporting young people and protecting vulnerable residents.

10.2 How is risk being managed?

Risks relating to fraud/corruption and the HB subsidy threshold's impact on the general fund revenue account are managed through the corporate risk register. The challenges of the significant welfare reforms are also included on the register.

10.3 What is the impact on the organisation?

Welfare reform is having a significant impact on the organisation (as outlined in the report) as staff deal with the increasing volume and complexity of enquiries to the service.

10.4 Equalities / EIA

No equality impact assessment has been carried out as the recommendations do not constitute a change in service or policy

10.5 Implications for (or impact on) the environment

None

10.6 Implications for partner organisations?

The effective administration of HB/CTB is in the interests of a number of partner organisations, including local social landlords, and the benefits service works closely with those organisations.

Report author(s):

Tim Savill

Name and job title:

Head of Revenues and Benefits

Directorate:

Finance and Legal Services

Tel and email contact:

024 7683 2607

Tim.savill@coventry.gov.uk

Contributor/approver name	Title	Directorate or organisation	Date doc sent out	Date response received or approved
Contributors:				
Barry Hastie	Assistant Director	Resources	12/11/14	
Hugh Peacocke	Governance Services Officer	Resources	12/11/14	

Names of approvers: (officers and members)				
Finance: Rachael Sugars	Finance Manager	Resources	12/11/14	
Legal: Carol Bradford	Solicitor, Place and Regulatory Team	Resources	12/11/14	18/11/14
Human Resources: Neelesh Sutaria	HR Manager	Resources	12/11/14	
Director: Chris West		Resources	12/11/14	
Members: Councillor Gannon	Cabinet Member		13/11/14	

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