

Report to	-	Cabinet
Date	-	2 July 2018
Report of the	-	Executive Director
Subject	-	Housing Benefit - Service Issues and Proposals for Improvement

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The Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 11 June 2018, considered a report on the Housing Benefit - Service Issues and Proposals for Improvement. The recommendation and minute arising is reproduced below.

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**Recommendation:** It be **RESOLVED:** That:

- 1) high level timetable and key workstreams shown at Appendix 1 to the report be approved;
  - 2) Council engage a suitably experienced Project Manager to be funded from the Medium Term Financial Strategy Reserve; and
  - 3) governance and reporting arrangements outlined in the report be approved.
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**OSC18/07. HOUSING BENEFIT – SERVICE ISSUES AND PROPOSALS FOR IMPROVEMENT**

The Committee received the report of the Executive Director detailing the processing times for housing benefits, which had been picked up through the performance reports as an area of concern. The Assistant Director Resources explained that processing times were in the bottom quartile of local authority performance and, within this quartile, were also towards the bottom.

It was recognised that the quality of the work carried out by the team appeared to be consistently good, a view supported by the positive outcome from recent housing benefit subsidy audits. It was therefore important to understand what had happened to the service in recent years and the reasons why improvements to processing times had yet to be achieved.

Members were referred to the table of results in the report that showed the relative performance for the two main processes concerning housing benefit new claims and dealing with changes in circumstances. The results showed that Rother's performance had been consistent for new claims but in excess of the national average. For the processing of changes in circumstances, the Council's performance had deteriorated and the report examined the reasons for this.

It was explained to Members that the budgeted Full Time Equivalents (FTEs) of the service was reasonable, however the actual deployed

FTE in the benefits team had consistently been lower than budgeted due to a number of reasons, including long term sickness and maternity leave. Reduced staffing was the biggest factor affecting processing times and the Capita Resilience Contract had been put in place to address this, by providing additional support to the service by processing work offsite. However, difficulties had been experienced as Capita had had to deploy staff on other contracts. Therefore, partner councils who offer resilient support were being explored to help reduce the backlog of work. The volume of work had increased year-on-year and with the impact of the introduction of the Universal Credit, processing times per officer per day equated to a need for an additional 3 to 3.5 FTEs required to manage the additional workload.

The introduction of the Document Image Processing system (DIP) had made a significant difference to the management and efficiency of information relating to claims. In addition, the introduction of the proposed Council Tax Reduction Scheme would reduce the complexity of the claims process, which would in turn improve performance.

Members noted the immediate, short and medium term actions to be focused on. Training would continue to be delivered for the new trainee staff.

In the medium term, the Council would be able to eliminate reliance on paper within the office through the new DIP/Workflow system and focus on establishing a new Performance Management framework. A Lean review and Demand Management review was expected to start from October 2018 and the online service, which would form part of the outcome of both pieces of work, would be important for users and support agencies.

In addition, learning from high performing councils would be beneficial in order to look at how processes were being undertaken differently. Research appeared to show that the front end processes of those high performing councils were very different to this Council.

The Assistant Director Resources advised that the Council was aiming to achieve the district average; to be within the top performing councils, additional investment would be required.

To support the Revenues and Benefits Manager it was proposed that a project manager with a relevant background in Housing Benefit was appointed. In addition an Officer Board would be established which would meet quarterly to monitor progress against the key actions/milestones and provide regular updates to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

After some discussion, the following points were noted:

- A high percentage of claims had not been dealt with initially, due to further information required from applicants. An accurate figure could not be provided, but the Revenues and Benefits Manager confirmed that many applicants had to be written to following receipt of their claim. The acceptance of electronic correspondence had started to speed up the process.

- The initial contact with applicants would need to be proactive, before claims were submitted and different methods of communication should be considered, such as emails and texts.
- Consideration would need to be given to the timing of the Lean review and Demand Management review, so as to not coincide with the full implementation of the new electronic system.
- The DIP system would release administration time which could be directed to providing more proactive support for applicants with their claims.
- Progress to be reported quarterly with a major review in six months, unless the Officer Board felt an extra report was necessary.
- The morale and motivation of officers had been affected with little “light at the end of the tunnel”. The proposals within the report would seek to address this.

(Overview and Scrutiny Committee Agenda Item 5.2).

Malcolm Johnston  
Executive Director