

AUDIT COMMISSION BENEFITS SERVICE INSPECTION

LEAD OFFICER: Joanne Wagstaffe, Director Resources & Transformation

REPORT AUTHOR: Jane Salt, Head of Customer Services

Summary: To present the updated action plan.

Recommendation: That Members consider the actions taken and some revised target dates on the action plan.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 At the August meeting of this Committee it was agreed that revised target dates for the Housing Benefits Inspection action plan should be agreed with the benefits shared services Partnership Manager, as the original dates had not been met and the delivery of the original dates was deemed to be unachievable. The attached plan provides these revised target dates.

1.2 In addition the attached plan provides details of some of the action taken to date.

2.0 ACTION PLAN

2.1 The main reason for the slippage to the original action plan is that the Partnership Manager has been involved in extended negotiations regarding the new shared service structure involving staff and Trades Unions. This has meant that he has not been able to complete the job matching process and the structure until 1 October 2010. More significantly this has resulted in no supporting management staff in place until that time.

2.2 Consequently the Partnership Manager has been the only person available to undertake any shared service activity, specifically the management of the implementation of the Academy Revenues and Benefits system at Allerdale. This implementation is now drawing to a close with a go live date confirmed as 29 November 2010.

2.3 This notwithstanding there are a number of actions that have been completed and these are reflected in the attached action plan.

2.4 Regular meetings between the Head of Customer Services and the Partnership Manager are taking place to ensure that the revised dates are achieved. In addition with a full management team in place to support the Partnership Manager we are confident that the revised dates for the remaining actions are achievable.

3.0 CONCLUSION

3.1 The revised action plan provides realistic dates for delivery of the required actions to introduce the recommendations by the Audit Commission.

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3.2 The Director will be receiving regular updates from the Partnership Manager to monitor the progress of the recommendations.

4. RECOMMENDATION

4.1 It is recommended that Members agree the contents of the revised action plan.

List of Appendices: Appendix A - Revised Benefits Inspection Action Plan

List of Background Documents: None

Copeland Borough Council – Detailed Action Plan

Recommendation	Action Required	Action Taken	Target Date	Responsibility	Resources
R1 Increase the take up of benefit to which local people are entitled through; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> developing a Housing and Council Tax Benefit take up strategy to include dates and activity of take up work; gaining an understanding of who may not be claiming and areas of under claiming by using demographic information; assigning responsibility within the Service for maximising take-up; developing measures to monitor the effectiveness of take up work; and identifying and implementing opportunities for increasing benefit take-up through joint working with other public sector and voluntary organisations. Agreed Completion Date: August 2010 Priority: High	Devise HB/CTB Take- up strategy for Shared Service encompassing requirements specific to Copeland.	Copeland draft Strategy out for consultation.	12 November 2010	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager, Communications team if required
	Identify relevant agencies and partner organisations to work with to maximise opportunities to increase benefit take-up.	In draft Strategy	12 November 2010	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager
	Attend Take-Up training for relevant staff in authority to highlight potential barriers, target areas and campaign methods for activities.	CPAG Take Up event attended by Service Partners in Penrith on 18 th June 2010	Completed	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager, Benefits Team Leaders
	Consider any relevant implications affecting ability to claim, arising from data identified during previous consultation exercises.	Insufficient data from previous consultation exercises. Therefore further surveys planned	Completed	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager
	Approach relevant agencies and partners identified to establish and agree opportunities for joint take-up activity.		30 November 2010	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager
	Implement relevant strategy elements identified through an appropriate take-up campaign, including targeted mail shots and publicity activity.		30 November 2010	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager
	Evaluate effectiveness of take-up activity by measuring caseload volume change and impact on levels of expenditure		31 Dec 2010 and quarterly thereafter	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager

Recommendation	Action Required	Action Taken	Target Date	Responsibility	Resources
<p>R2 Design the Service to better meet customer needs by;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> developing service standards that clearly set out what customers can expect including in current areas of weaknesses such as appeals and payment accuracy; developing a consultation and communication plan for service users; making use of user groups for regular consultation; strengthening current customer surveys to increase the number of people surveyed, the method of surveying and ensuring surveys cover all areas of the benefits service; analysing the results of surveys and making changes to the Service where necessary to address areas of customer concern; improving the range and availability of leaflets and promoting their availability in other languages and formats; and improving the clarity of benefit notifications for customers. <p>Agreed Completion Date: August 2010 and ongoing Priority: High</p>	<p>Develop service aims and targets within the Revenues & Benefits Shared Service - Service Plan 2010/2013</p>	<p>Aims and targets included within Service Plan 2010/13</p>	<p>Completed</p>	<p>Partnership Manager</p>	<p>Joint Operational Board, service data</p>
	<p>Identify appropriate groups and consider relevant forums to consider and review service standards</p>	<p>Strategic Board inclusive of Portfolio Holders and Copeland Executive used to review service standards and targets within Shared Service Business Plan. Publicised annually in Copeland Matters</p>	<p>Completed</p>	<p>Partnership Manager</p>	<p>Benefits Manager</p>
	<p>Use analysis of data from existing surveys to see how future surveys can be improved. Improvements identified will be included within survey activity to be carried out in 2010/11</p>	<p>Insufficient data from previous consultation exercises. Therefore further surveys planned</p>	<p>Completed</p>	<p>Partnership Manager</p>	<p>Benefits Manager</p>
	<p>Review current leaflets provided to consider overall requirements for the Shared Service</p>	<p>Identified as an Alignment action as the Shared Desk Top is established</p>	<p>30 December 2010</p>	<p>Partnership Manager</p>	<p>Benefits Manager, Alignment Work Package</p>
	<p>Identify alternative language requirements to meet known customer needs and demographics</p>	<p>CBC are members of language line. We offer translation in accordance with our Accessible Information Policy. Further analysis is being undertaken through Mosaic to identify ethnicity and region of birth and therefore possible requirements for translation.</p>	<p>12 November 2010</p>	<p>Partnership Manager</p>	<p>Benefits Manager</p>
	<p>Clarity of notifications will be reviewed by the Alignment Work Package to improve clarity and provide consistency across the Shared Service</p>	<p>Alignment work package now disbanded. Common format adopted for Shared Service as part of the Allerdale conversion. Combined notification are not possible until shared</p>	<p>Consistency exercise completed across all 3 LA's. March 2011</p>	<p>Partnership Manager</p>	<p>Benefits Manager, Alignment Work Package</p>

Recommendation	Action Required	Action Taken	Target Date	Responsibility	Resources
		desktop in 2011			
	Development of a consultation and communication plan will be determined based on understanding of service user needs	Draft plan being produced	12 November 2010	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager
	Devise and implement revised leaflets for Shared Service		31 January 2011	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager
R3 Improve value for money (VFM) by; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • benchmarking performance and costs against similar benefits services; • analysing results of benchmarking and addressing areas of underperformance or high spend; • ensuring shared management arrangements include performance and cost monitoring; and • considering automatically writing off overpayments where there is no potential for recovery through on going benefit and it would not be cost-effective to recover. Agreed Completion Date: September 2010 Priority: High	Obtain benchmarking data to evaluate and compare against other joint services and relevant Authorities	CIPFA Benchmarking exercise completed in June 2010. Data comparison to be determined, especially considering Councils with Shared Service provision	12 November 2010	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager, Performance Manager
	Identify other appropriate benchmarking groups for data comparison	CIPFA group already used. Consideration of relevant groups within Cumbria and existing practitioner groups for comparison	Completed	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager, Performance Manager
	Compare performance data and costs identified for each Partner Council within the Shared Service to benchmark Copeland costs	Performance data completed and compared for first half year. Still awaiting financial information to allow cost comparison.	12 November 2010	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager, Performance Manager
	Identify provisions and requirements within standing orders to determine write off limits for Copeland	Revised Financial Regulations for Copeland currently being drafted.	12 November 2010	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager, Performance Manager, Finance Dept

Recommendation	Action Required	Action Taken	Target Date	Responsibility	Resources
	Compare write- off provision limits for Partner Council's and determine appropriate de-minimums level to consider if automatic write off can be applied	Aligned to meet requirements of relevant Financial regulations and provisions determined by Sec. 151 Officer	30 November 2010	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager, Performance Manager, Finance Dept
	Obtain approval for automatic write-offs if deemed to be appropriate	Subject to new financial regulations being agreed/approved	31 December 2010	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager, Performance Manager, Sec. 151 Officer
R4 Improve service planning and management by : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • basing plans for improvement of the Service on a better understanding of the needs of the community and a clear definition of the outcomes and benefits required; • developing improved performance management and governance arrangements to support the client side/commissioning arrangements • setting challenging targets for all key areas of the Service; and • ensuring performance is reported regularly to senior management and councillors. Agreed Completion Date: June 2010 Priority: High	Include relevant performance measures within Shared Service - Service Plan 2010/13	Data for 2009/10 performance used to determine targets for subsequent years within Service Plan	Completed	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager
	Agree reporting of performance to Strategic Board and Joint Operational Board	Requirements specified within approved Service Plan and legal governance documentation. Update report to be provided to Strategic Board showing quarterly performance	Completed	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager
	Identify improvements from existing consultation data	Insufficient data from previous consultation exercises. Therefore further surveys planned	Completed	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager
	Community needs along with defined outcomes and benefits from improved service planning, will be based on survey information and data identified using demographic profiling tools such as Mosaic	Service Plan to be reviewed in Spring 2011	31 March 2011	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager
R5 Ensure transfer of learning from the implementation of the shared services programme to other Council activities and services. Specific areas where the benefits service changes can help drive improvement could include:	Establish record of lessons learned through the implementation of the Revenues & Benefits Shared Service	An update report of the Shared Service implementation was provided to the Shadow Strategic Board on 28 th May 2010. A further update	Completed 31 December 2010	Partnership Manager	Partnership Manager

Recommendation	Action Required	Action Taken	Target Date	Responsibility	Resources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • contracting and client management; • performance management and governance; and • partnership working. <p>Agreed Completion Date: From April 2010 Priority: High</p>		will be given at a future meeting of the Strategic Board			
	Provide a paper for the Copeland Corporate Management Team to enable lessons learnt within Revenues & Benefits to be shared as deemed as appropriate within the Authority	Paper to be drafted based on findings identified and provided for CMT	31 st December 2010	Partnership Manager	Agreed through Joint Operational Board