

## AUDIT COMMISSION BENEFITS SERVICE INSPECTION

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**Summary:** To present the Audit Commission's findings from the Benefits Service Inspection and the Council's action plan in response to the recommendations.

**Recommendation:** That Members consider the findings of the Audit Commission report and note the Council's action plan to deliver improvements.

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The inspection was carried out by the Audit Commission under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 and reflects the principles from the Government's Policy on Inspection of Public Services (July 2003). The inspection was designed to:-

- Focus on public service outcomes from a user perspective;
- Help the inspected body improve their performance;
- Be proportionate to the risk;
- Achieve value for money;
- Be independent of the inspected organisation;
- Inform the public about the performance of public services; and
- Share learning to give a better understanding of performance and encourage rigorous self-assessment.

1.2 The service was assessed against the Key Lines of Enquiry (KLOEs) for assessing performance of the Benefits service. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's web site.

### 2.0 KEY FINDINGS

2.1 The Executive Summary from the Report extracts the key messages and recommendations:-

#### Findings

2.1.1 The Benefits Service at Copeland Borough Council is providing a service rated as "fair" with "uncertain" prospects for improvement. "Fair" because it has some strengths but also weaknesses (detailed below). "Uncertain" prospects because the Service has not been able to achieve improvements across the full range of the Service, the plans for the shared service were still at an early stage and the Council's governance and performance management systems were in need of improvement.

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- 2.1.2 Copeland is delivering a service that is good in some areas: including speed of processing new claims and changes in circumstances and making it easy for customers to get in touch. However, there are weaknesses – especially in the time taken to deal with appeals and reconsiderations (customer request to have their claim looked at again) and in engaging with local people and maximising the take-up of Housing and Council Tax Benefit in the district.
- 2.1.3 Performance across some key areas of the Service has improved but there are still important areas that are underperforming. Processing times continue to improve strongly (Average of 28.1 days in 2007/08. As at end of September 2009, Average of 18.5 days to process a new claim). However, at the time of the inspection, no appeals had been sent to the Tribunals Service in 2009/10 within the target of 4 weeks and 20% were still waiting to be sent after 3 months.
- 2.1.4 The Service is not doing enough to make sure that people are claiming Housing and Council Tax benefit if they are entitled to it. There is no take-up strategy. The Council cannot demonstrate the effectiveness of its joint work with other benefits services across Cumbria.
- 2.1.5 There is only limited engagement and consultation with customers. A small number have been surveyed on their experience of using the Service overall and a larger more regular survey has been carried out to measure customer satisfaction when dealing with the Service face to face or by telephone. However, there is no regular user group and there are no clear measurable service standards in place. There was a lack of leaflets giving advice and information in the local offices.
- 2.1.6 Access to the service is good. Three offices across the district help people with their claims and provide information and advice. Waiting times are minimal both in person and on the telephone. There is a low rate of abandoned telephone calls.
- 2.1.7 The Service has good arrangements in place for dealing with fraud and error. It deals efficiently with data matches through the Housing Benefit Matching Service and is effectively minimising and managing overpayments.
- 2.1.8 The future plans for the shared service are based on a sound business case and option appraisal. The proposal includes sound financial and workforce plans.
- 2.1.9 There are, however, limitations in the way the Council operates which will make the achievement of improvement more difficult and which lead to uncertainty about future prospects. Governance and performance management arrangements, under the 2009/10 agreement with Carlisle City Council, were weak and the track record in

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delivery of value for money has been limited. In addition, the Service lacks clear information on the needs of its community on which to base its performance planning. However, the partnership working to develop and run the new shared service is increasing the capacity and resilience of the Benefits Service.

- 2.1.10 The Council has some capacity to drive the improvements through. Although, as in any small organisation undergoing significant change, the challenges are great. Good use is being made of external expertise to support the development of the shared service.

### **Recommendations**

- 2.2 The report offers practical recommendations for improvement. These, together with Management's response, are shown in the detailed Action Plan at Appendix A. These actions will be recorded on the Covalent performance system and implementation will be monitored.

## **3.0 CONCLUSION**

- 3.1 The Audit Commission report concludes that, although many improvements have been made to service delivery – particularly in respect of claim processing time, the Benefits Service is "fair" with "uncertain" prospects of improvement.
- 3.2 The recommendations made by the Audit Commission, and Management actions detailed in the Action Plan at Appendix A, will assist the Council in delivering continuous improvement.

## **4. RECOMMENDATION**

- 4.1 It is recommended that Members consider the findings of the Audit Commission report and note the Council's action plan to deliver improvements.

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

**List of Background Documents:** Audit Commission Benefits Service Inspection Report

**Officers Consulted:** Corporate Team

**AUDIT COMMISSION BENEFITS SERVICE INSPECTION  
COPELAND BOROUGH COUNCIL – DETAILED ACTION PLAN**

**APPENDIX A**

Recommendation	Action Required	Action Taken	Target Date	Responsibility	Resources
<p><b>R1</b> Increase the take up of benefit to which local people are entitled through;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• developing a Housing and Council Tax Benefit take up strategy to include dates and activity of take up work;</li> <li>• gaining an understanding of who may not be claiming and areas of under claiming by using demographic information;</li> <li>• assigning responsibility within the Service for maximising take-up;</li> <li>• developing measures to monitor the effectiveness of take up work; and</li> <li>• identifying and implementing opportunities for increasing benefit take-up through joint working with other public sector and voluntary organisations.</li> </ul> <p>Agreed Completion Date: <b>August 2010</b> Priority: <b>High</b></p>	Devise HB/CTB Take-up strategy for Shared Service encompassing requirements specific to Copeland.		31 May 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.		10 June 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.		18 June 2010	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager, Benefits Team Leaders
	Consider any relevant implications affecting ability to claim, arising from data identified during previous consultation exercises.		30 June 2010	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager
	Approach relevant agencies and partners identified to establish and agree opportunities for joint take-up activity.		30 June 2010	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager
	Implement relevant strategy elements identified through an appropriate take-up campaign, including targeted mail shots and publicity activity.		30 June 2010	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager

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Recommendation	Action Required	Action Taken	Target Date	Responsibility	Resources
	Evaluate effectiveness of take-up activity by measuring caseload volume change and impact on levels of expenditure		31 August 2010 and quarterly thereafter	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager
<b>R2</b>	Design the Service to better meet customer needs by; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>developing service standards that clearly set out what customers can expect including in current areas of weaknesses such as appeals and payment accuracy;</li> <li>developing a consultation and communication plan for service users;</li> <li>making use of user groups for regular consultation;</li> <li>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;</li> <li>analysing the results of surveys and making changes to the Service where necessary to address areas of customer concern;</li> <li>improving the range and availability of leaflets and promoting their availability in other languages and formats; and</li> <li>improving the clarity of benefit notifications for customers.</li> </ul>	Aims and targets included within Service Plan 2010/13	30 April 2010	Partnership Manager	Joint Operational Board, service data
	Identify appropriate groups and consider relevant forums to consider and review service standards		31 May 2010	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager
	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		30 June 2010	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager
	Review current leaflets provided to consider overall requirements for the Shared Service		30 June 2010	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager, Alignment Work Package
	Identify alternative language requirements to meet known customer needs and demographics		10 July 2010	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager
	Clarity of notifications will be reviewed by the Alignment work Package to improve clarity and provide consistency across the Shared Service		31 July 2010	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager, Alignment Work Package

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Recommendation	Action Required	Action Taken	Target Date	Responsibility	Resources
Agreed Completion Date: August 2010 and ongoing Priority: High	Development of a consultation and communication plan will be determined based on understanding of service user needs  Devise and implement revised leaflets for Shared Service		30 August 2010  30 August 2010	Partnership Manager  Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager  Benefits Manager
<b>R3</b> by;	Improve value for money (VFM)  * 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.	Obtain benchmarking data to evaluate and compare against other joint services and relevant Authorities  Identify other appropriate benchmarking groups for data comparison  Compare performance data and costs identified for each Partner Council within the Shared Service to benchmark Copeland costs  Identify provisions and requirements within standing orders to determine write off limits for Copeland  Compare write-off provision limits for Partner Council's and determine appropriate de-minimums level to consider if automatic write off can be	30 June 2010  30 June 2010  31 July 2100  30 August 2010  30 September 2010	Partnership Manager  Partnership Manager  Partnership Manager  Partnership Manager  Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager, Performance Manager  Benefits Manager, Performance Manager  Benefits Manager, Performance Manager  Benefits Manager, Performance Manager  Benefits Manager, Performance Manager, Finance Dept  Benefits Manager, Performance Manager, Finance Dept
Agreed Completion Date: <b>September 2010</b> Priority: High					

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Recommendation	Action Required	Action Taken	Target Date	Responsibility	Resources
	applied				
	Obtain approval for automatic write-offs if deemed to be appropriate		30 September 2010	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager, Performance Manager, Sec. 151 Officer
<b>R4</b> Improve service planning and management by : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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;</li> <li>• developing improved performance management and governance arrangements to support the client side/commissioning arrangements</li> <li>• setting challenging targets for all key areas of the Service; and</li> <li>• ensuring performance is reported regularly to senior management and councillors.</li> </ul>	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	30 April 2010	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager
	Agree reporting of performance to Strategic Board and Joint Operational Board		30 May 2010	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager
	Identify improvements from existing consultation data		31 May 2010	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager
Agreed Completion Date: <b>June 2010</b> Priority: <b>High</b>	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		30 June 2010	Partnership Manager	Benefits Manager

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Recommendation	Action Required	Action Taken	Target Date	Responsibility	Resources
<p>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:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• contracting and client management;</li> <li>• performance management and governance; and</li> <li>• partnership working.</li> </ul> <p>Agreed Completion Date: From April 2010 Priority: High</p>	<p>such as Mosaic</p> <p>Establish record of lessons learned through the implementation of the Revenues &amp; Benefits Shared Service</p> <p>Provide a paper for the Copeland Corporate Management Team to enable lessons learnt within Revenues &amp; Benefits to be shared as deemed as appropriate within the Authority</p>	<p>Agreed that an update report of Shared Service implementation will be provided to the Shadow Strategic Board on 28<sup>th</sup> May 2010 and recording process commenced</p>	<p>30<sup>th</sup> April 2010</p> <p>31<sup>st</sup> July 2010</p>	<p>Partnership Manager</p> <p>Partnership Manager</p>	<p>Partnership Manager</p> <p>Agreed through Joint Operational Board</p>