

NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE COUNCIL

**HOUSING AND STRATEGIC PLANNING
CABINET MEMBER**

BENEFITS SECTION – QUARTERLY PERFORMANCE UPDATE

1. OBJECT AND KEY POINTS IN THIS REPORT

- 1.1 To inform the cabinet member of the current performance of the benefits service and action being taken on the Key Lines of Enquiry action plan.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 2.1 The current economic situation is continuing to have an impact in the local area. Recent figures from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) for North Lincolnshire show that the number of claimants for job seekers allowance (JSA) increased by 24.3% in the period January 2009 to January 2010, with a 4.8% increase from December 2009 to January 2010.
- 2.2 Since April 2008 the overall benefits caseload has continually increased and the difference is now an increase of over 2100 claimants or 14.82%. It has and continues to increase at a faster rate for working age people than for pensioners as shown below. In the autumn of 2009 it was felt that the increase in claims was beginning to tail off but this is not now the case as in the last 3 months from December to February 2010 there has been an increase of 221 claimants.

	Working age	Pensioners	All
Cases at 15.3.08	6339	8004	14,343
Cases at 15.2.10	8204	8265	16,469
Increase Nos	1865	261	2,126
Increase %	29.42%	3.26%	14.82%

Some of this latter increase is attributed to the change in legislation regarding child benefit income for which a detailed take up campaign was undertaken. Since the campaign began in late October 2009, 33 additional families are now in receipt of Housing and/or Council Tax Benefit

Approximately, £1240 per week is being paid in Housing and Council Tax Benefit to these families, if these benefits continue to be paid over a complete year this will equate to £64,480 which would not have been payable if we had not done this campaign.

- 2.3 Two national Indicators, NI180 (Right benefits) and NI181 (right time) currently judge the performance of the benefits service. However confirmation has been received from the CLG that from 1 April 2010 NI180 is to be deleted as it is “no longer relevant or needed”

Despite the increase in workload, performance in benefits has over the year remained consistently in accordance with last year's out turn and provisional year-end figures for 2009/10 indicate that this has now improved.

In 2008/09 the average time for processing new claims was 24.41 and for 2009-10 this is 23.21 days. Similarly the time taken to process changes is improved from 10.61 days in 2008/9 to a provisional 9.79 days in 2009/10.

This performance improvement has been maintained despite issues with the speed of the IT systems as reported last quarter, and also changes in legislation and other developments.

We continue to monitor these figures on a weekly basis to ensure tight control on performance and obviously this approach has helped and will continue.

In respect of NI 181 which combines performance on new claims and change events it has been difficult to compare our performance with other councils due to the lack of reliable data. However on 31 March 2010 the DWP has produced official figures for Quarter 1 and Quarter 2 of 2009/10. This shows that for both quarters the average performance based on 80% of all councils was 14 days. Our performance for quarter 1 was 15 days and for quarter 2 was 16 days so we are very slightly below average. However as we improved in the latter part of the year it is expected that we will be above average when the full year figures are produced.

- 2.4 Current developments which have or will further improve performance include:

This year for the first time the annual benefit notifications were posted in the same envelope as the council tax bills. This saved postage and envelopes and has also led to fewer enquiries than normal.

The Council has been accepted as an early adopter of the DWP “Tell us Once” project. Whilst this is being led by the Registrar's service the benefits service will be heavily involved in implementation and it should

improve the speed at which we can process changes related to bereavement.

Proposals that are being developed for changing the way we work with local link should also improve future performance.

2.5 Key Lines of Enquiry action plan

As reported in April 2009 if we were to be inspected by the Audit Commission we would have to show that we meet certain Key Lines of Enquiry (KLOEs)

The action plan for implementing this was approved at a previous meeting and is now held in full on the councils Performance management System. Work continues within the Finance Service Development Team in relation to these actions in particular as follows:

Benefit recipients are to be consulted during May/June re the benefit application process and preferred methods of contact. A Consultation questionnaire has been drafted. A Research Brief will be completed and the full exercise co-ordinated with Community, Planning and Resources Service..

The Benefit Consultation Strategy is being updated.

With effect from 1st July 2010 an additional KLOE is being introduced that says there must be evidence that Benefit take-up is co-ordinated and targeted at people most likely to be entitled, and supports plans to reduce poverty in the community. We have already started doing this in recent targeted take-up campaign as shown above but need to do more. A new Benefit Take-up strategy is therefore being produced which will incorporate this new requirement.

Staff in Local Taxation and Benefits are also heavily involved in council wide groups aimed at reducing poverty, including child poverty strategy, community engagement and the Debt and Housing Advice Network. .

3. OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

- 3.1 There are no decision options to be considered but the Cabinet Member is asked to note the contents of this report.

4. ANALYSIS OF OPTIONS

- 4.1 None to be considered

5. **RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (FINANCIAL, STAFFING, PROPERTY, IT)**

5.1 **Financial** – None

5.2 **Staffing** – None

5.3 **Other** - There are no IT or property implications

6. **OTHER IMPLICATIONS (STATUTORY, ENVIRONMENTAL, DIVERSITY, SECTION 17 - CRIME AND DISORDER, RISK AND OTHER)**

6.1 The council has a statutory duty to provide benefits service and in order to meet that duty we need to ensure that the service has adequate resources.

6.2 By ensuring that the right people get the right benefits as quickly as possible the council is ensuring that there is additional income in the local economy, thus helping with the general economic situation.

7. **OUTCOMES OF CONSULTATION**

Report for information only. No consultation needed.

8. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

8.1 That the Housing and Strategic Planning cabinet member notes the contents of this report and endorses the continuing efforts being made in the benefits service to meet the increasing demands on the service.

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Background Papers used in the preparation of this report None