

NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE COUNCIL

**HOUSING AND STRATEGIC PLANNING
CABINET MEMBER**

BENEFITS SECTION – BENEFITS IMPROVEMENT ACTION PLAN

1. OBJECT AND KEY POINTS IN THIS REPORT

- 1.1 To inform the Cabinet Member of the changes to the audit inspection process for benefits, and to note actions needed to meet the new Key Lines of Enquiry.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 2.1 Prior to 1 April 2008 inspection of Benefits services was the responsibility of the Benefits Fraud Inspectorate (BFI). Inspections were undertaken based on various factors including performance and costs. Many benefits services were inspected and reports were produced.
- 2.2 North Lincolnshire Council never received an inspection by the BFI, however performance of the service was subject to an annual assessment, which was submitted to the BFI and was considered as an important part of the council's overall Comprehensive Performance Assessment. The service has consistently scored the maximum score of 4 (excellent).
- 2.3 From 1 April 2008, the BFI was abolished and responsibility for benefits inspection was transferred to the Audit Commission. From 1 April 2009 benefits is no longer considered a major part of the new Comprehensive Area Assessment.
- 2.4 The audit commission has said that they will inspect the benefits service of approximately 35 councils each year. Choice for inspection will be based on a number of factors including
- Performance
 - Accuracy of Subsidy claim
 - Data quality
 - Caseload
 - Spend
 - Performance on fraud

- Local Knowledge of auditors and other intelligence

If we are to be inspected we will expect to have three months notice.

2.5 In assessing a benefits service the audit commission have established a set of Key Lines of Enquiry (KLOEs). These are based around two judgements:

- How good is the service?
- What are the prospects for improvement?

2.6 Experience from pilot sites and from councils inspected since 1 April 2008 show that the inspection is a far harder test than previous assessment for CPA and that most councils are not scoring as highly as previously.

2.7 In order to make the judgements there are six key questions;

- What has the service aimed to achieve?
- Is the service meeting the needs of the community and users?
- Is the service delivering value for money?
- What is the service track record in delivering improvement?
- How well does the service manage performance?
- Does the service have the capacity to improve?

2.8 Behind each question is a large number of KLOEs, which the audit commission will consider in order to make their judgement. These are split between expectations at level 2 (Fair) and Level 3 (good)

We will get three months notice of any impending inspection. This would not be sufficient notice for us to be in a position to answer all of the KLOEs and show that we are meeting all of the requirements. It is possible that the service and ultimately the council would not be reflected well in the outcome of the inspection. We have therefore undertaken a basic self-assessment, which has identified our areas capable of improvement. These are mainly focussed on understanding who our customers and potential customers are, where they are, what their needs are, and ensuring that the service is delivering these needs. We also recognise the need to do more work on showing that we provide value for money when compared to other councils.

Based on this self-assessment we have produced an action plan containing 45 items, which is attached at Appendix 1.

2.9 In order to progress this action plan it has been recognised that we need some additional resource, particularly to identify where we are not providing enough advice and encouraging take up of benefits in areas of the council that need it. We are to receive some grant from the Department for Work and pensions and it has been decided to use

some of this grant to fund an additional Service Development Officer specifically to work on these areas of the service,

3. OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

3.1 The Cabinet Member is asked to note the contents of this report and to approve the proposed action plan at Appendix 1 .

4. ANALYSIS OF OPTIONS

4.1 Option 1 – approve the action plan and ensure that the benefits service is ready in the event of an inspection by the Audit Commission. This is the recommended option.

4.2 Option 2 – Do nothing and risk the service receiving a poor result in the event of an inspection.

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

5.1 Financial

The additional administration subsidy of £114,615 is a one off payment from the DWP to be paid in 2009-10. The Service Director Finance has authorised by delegated decision record that part of this funding is used to finance a temporary one year post in the finance service development team specifically to work on customer consultation and take up.

5.1 Staffing

The additional staffing requirements have been authorised by decision record and recruitment processes are currently underway.

5.2 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 addition income in the Local Economy, thus helping with the general economic situation.

7. OUTCOMES OF CONSULTATION

7.1 The staff in the Benefits service have been consulted and are happy with the proposals for allocation of the additional grant.

7.2 This report has been circulated to the relevant trade unions for information.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 That the Housing and Strategic Planning Cabinet Member notes the contents of this report, approves the action plan and endorses the efforts being made in the benefits service to meet the increasing demands on the service.

8.2 That a quarterly progress report on the action plan be submitted to the Cabinet Member.

SERVICE DIRECTOR FINANCE

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Date: 30 March 2009

Background Papers used in the preparation of this report

Audit Commission – Benefits Service Inspections published 1.4.08
DWP HB/CTB Circular S2/2009
Inspection reports from pilots and other inspected councils
Notes from various seminars/meetings

BENEFITS KLOE's ACTION PLAN 2009				APPENDIX 1		
Action No.	KLOE No.	To achieve level:	Action	Target date	Responsibility	Update (incl. date)
1	2.1	3	Analyse complaints and ensure that they are used to positively change the service			
2	2.1and 2.2	2	Develop use of GIS system and Mosaic profiling software to provide detailed information about our customers , where they are and their nature.			
3	2.1	2	use info at action 3 to develop a clear consultation strategy to find out what people want and need from the service.			
4	2.1	3	Develop a strategic action plan to address putting the needs of the customer at centre of our service			
5	2.1	3	Monitor types of enquiries by phone and at local link to try to reduce avoidable contact (NI14)			
6	2.1	3	Ensure training action plan in place for all front line staff who provide benefits advice			
7	2.2	3	Develop and implement a strategy for improving take up of benefits targeted to those most in need			
8	2.2	3	Update and relaunch the "payment promise" process			
9	2.2	3	Carry out feedback exercise on application forms and claim process to find out what the customers experience in claiming is really like.			
10	2.2	2	Carry out feedback exercise on quality of letters sent out to ensure they are understandable.			
11	2.2	2	make use of data from NI14 to improve letters			
12	2.2	2	Set up a strategy for working with partners and internally to provide access to money advice			
13	2.2	3	Update the consultation strategy and ensure customer satisfaction surveys are undertaken.			

'Going forward together'

Action No.	KLOE No.	To achieve level:	Action	Target date	Responsibility	Update (incl. date)
14	2.2 and 5.1.2	3	Improve relationships with the voluntary sector, welfare agencies etc to ensure more effective collaborative working on take up and new claims, and ensure their views are taken into account for service aims and objectives			
15	2.3	3	Determine strategy for involving customers in setting standards and PIs and publicise performance			
16	2.4	2	Update and implement the consultation strategy and use feedback to improve the service.			
17	2.4	3	Develop communication strategy for direct magazine articles			
18	2.5	2	Identify local communities and relevant bodies. Determine reasons for hard to reach groups and set up strategic plan to address these issues			
19	2.5	2	Ensure all staff work in accordance with human rights legislation,			
20	2.5	3	Understand the diversity of our customers and tailor the service accordingly.			
21	2.5	2	Check level of awareness of DHP amongst the front line staff.			
22	2.5	3	Check with procurement manager whether we meet level 3 on monitoring of diversity in contracts.			
23	2.5	2	Check the legal requirements for benefits to promote good race relations.			
24	2.5	2	Consider how we can improve public access to the service through the use of new technology.			
25	2.6	2	Check Disability Act access with local links			
26	2.6	2	Check whether refresher training on Appointees is needed and implement if necessary.			
27	2.6	2	Check circular G24 and change procedure for interim payments if necessary			

'Going forward together'

Action No.	KLOE No.	To achieve level:	Action	Target date	Responsibility	Update (incl. date)
28	2.7	3	Action needed to show that the benefits service is addressing and having a positive impact on relevant Local Area Agreement themes.			
27	2.7	3	Check external involvement in NI 180 action plan.			
28	2.7	2	Check that we comply with DWP action plan on fraud			
29	2.8	2	Set up customer satisfaction surveys to determine levels of satisfaction with all areas of the service.			
30	3.1	3	Develop benchmarking information to understand the differences, provide better documentation and make better use of data to improve the service.			
31	3.2	3	Consider how we can work with partners to obtain external funds for the benefits service			
32	3.2	3	Ensure that the scope for improving cost-effectiveness is kept under review and scrutiny and innovative approaches are used where appropriate. There are clear policies and effective processes for reviewing and improving value for money.			
33	3.2	3	Ensure management arrangements for value for money including subsidy arrangements are regularly monitored and managed, and can show benefits in terms of costs to the service and outcomes for customers.			
34	4.3	2	Set up charts to measure trends and provide evidence of main PIs for last three years.			
35	4.4	2	Set up analysis of key costs over last three years compared to performance levels to determine value for money trend			
36	4.4	3	Ensure that we can evidence that vfm is embedded in all decision making			
37	4.4	3	Introduce performance targets across the service to improve outputs and thus increase vfm			

'Going forward together'

Action No.	KLOE No.	To achieve level:	Action	Target date	Responsibility	Update (incl. date)
38	5.1.1 and 5.1.2	3	use results from action 2 & 3 to Identify and develop longer term sustainable outcomes for the future of the service for next 5-10 years including outcomes and targets based on the needs of service users. Ensure there are clear visions and aims for short , medium and long term .			
39	5.2.1	2	Work with Human Resources to actively identify and eliminate any discrimination in the workforce and use this information to promote sustainable communities.			
40	5.2.2	3	Check evidence of scrutiny of performance data			
41	5.2.2	3	Obtain and examine place survey results to determine if any actions for benefits needed.			
42	5.2.4	3	Provide opportunities for people who use the organisation's services, staff, partners, contractors and other stakeholders, to influence how performance is measured, monitored and reported, and what standards and targets are set.			
43	6.1	3	Check member protocols etc			
44	6.2	3	use available benchmarking data to conduct an exercise to determine relative levels of turnover and of staff sickness.			
45	6.4	2	Look for opportunities for external funds from RIEP and other sources to support benefits in its development areas.			