

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. However this is starting to reduce very slightly. 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 78.8% in the period September 2008 to September 2009, with a 2.2% fall from August 2009 to September 2009.
- 2.2 In the last 18 months the overall benefits caseload has increased by 12.47% but that for working age is increasing at a faster rate than for pensioners as shown below. In the last month from 15 September 2009 to 15 October 2009 the increase has been 41 claimants.

	Working age	Pensioners	All
Cases at 15.3.08	6339	8004	14,343
Cases at 15.10.09	7917	8215	16,132
Increase Nos	1578	211	1789
Increase %	24.89%	2.63%	12.47%

- 2.3 Two national Indicators, NI180 (Right benefits) and NI181 (right time) judge the performance of the benefits service.

Despite the increase in workload, performance in benefits has overall remained consistently in accordance with last year's out turn. In 2008-9 the average time for processing new claims was 24.41 and at the end of October 2009 the year to date figure is 24.44 days. Similarly the time taken to process changes remains good at 12.08 days at end October.

We continue to monitor these figures on a weekly basis to ensure tight control on performance. This identified that despite improvements earlier in the summer there was a slight fall in September due to a number of issues concerning recently which have been dealt with as follows

- Speed of system - this is the main reason for drop in performance. Since we introduced an upgrade of our IT system, the response times have been very slow. We are addressing this urgently with both the system suppliers and our own IT section.
- Introduction of in and out of work project - This has involved the manager and others working closely with DWP project manager to implement. Extensive training was needed resulting in less time for processing. This has recently had a successful live implementation and should improve customer service in future, although it is unlikely to impact on our performance as we will be processing the same amount of workload.
- In order to make the new assessors, more effective, more quickly than normal, they were taken out for some extensive training. This resulted in five assessors being out of the office and not processing for 10 days. They are now back and the short term impact on performance will give us long term productivity benefits.

2.4 However the workload has also continued to increase considerably in the customer services team particularly relating to benefits. The number of telephone calls in the period April 2009 to September 2009 has increased by over 2000(15.8%) compared to the same period in 2008. The problems with the speed of the system have also affected the telephone team so that it now takes longer to answer each call. The amount of incoming post has also increased by at least a third.

Due to this additional workload the performance on answering telephone calls offered has fallen in the above period from 85% in 2008 to 69% in 2009. This is being urgently addressed with the provision of additional resources.

There have also been two major changes in legislation affecting benefits from 2 November 2009, which have impacted on the workload.

The first is the disregard of child benefit as income for benefit purposes and the second is the increase of the capital limit for pensioners to £10,000. We have recalculated existing claims for both of these and undertaken a publicity campaign to encourage take up for those currently not claiming.

2.5 We are also continuing to;

- Maintain the pressure on performance management as per the action improvement plan.
- Monitor the situation very closely with consideration being given to moving resources from elsewhere in Local Taxation and Benefits into benefits assessments should the need occur.
- Have detailed discussions and liaison with the local link service, to examine processes, reduce “failure demand”, and improve the way we deal with new claims and changes in circumstance. This should further reduce the time taken to process these.

2.6 **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 draft action plan for implementing this was approved at a previous meeting. Some work has started within the Finance Service Development Team as follows:

- Increased networking with the voluntary sector to ensure benefits advice widely available.
- Involvement in the council's recession group, to ensure that the benefits service is linked strategically to financial inclusion and future child poverty strategy.
- A major take up campaign is underway regarding the recent changes to benefits concerning child benefit disregard.
- We are working on “Customer Insight” to gain an understanding of who our customers are, where they live etc so that we have information for targeted campaigns and consultation.
- A consultation questionnaire has been drafted.

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.

SERVICE DIRECTOR FINANCE

Pittwood House
Ashby Road
SCUNTHORPE
North Lincolnshire
DN16 1AB

Author: Mrs C A Johnson

Date: 11 November 2009

Background Papers used in the preparation of this report: None