

**ENVIRONMENT CULTURE AND COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL
18 DECEMBER 2008**

**BENEFIT SERVICE BENCHMARKING AND MOCK INSPECTION AND IMPROVEMENT
PLAN**

(Director of Environment, Culture and Communities)

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This report provides members with the result of a benchmarking exercise that the Benefit Service took part in to compare performance and cost as well as a mock inspection of the benefit service against the new Audit Commission inspection regime for the benefit service. Following recommendation from the mock inspection an improvement plan has been developed which members are asked to consider.

2 SUGGESTED ACTION

- 2.1 Members are asked to note that Bracknell Forest Benefit Service performance against CPA performance grade in 2007/8 is benchmarked as above average.
- 2.2. Members are asked to note that the Benefit Service cost per weighted caseload is calculated at £ 70.92 which is £ 8.08 per case below average.
- 2.3 Members are asked to note that the mock inspection results indicate that the current Benefit Service would score fair with promising prospects for improvement.
- 2.4. Members are asked to consider the improvement plan for the Benefit Service as at appendix C.
- 2.5. Members are asked to agree to establish a working party to monitor the implementation of the improvement plan.

3 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 3.1 The Benefit Service achieved a score of 4 under the Benefit and Fraud Inspection (BFI) score in 2006 against the DWP performance standards. This contributed to the Council's overall CPA score of 4.
- 3.2. The BFI inspection regime has now been replaced with a harder test administered by the Audit Commission. This new regime has been tested against 9 authorities. One of those Authorities scored 4 under the old regime but achieved one star under the harder test.
- 3.3. In preparation for the new harder test a benchmarking exercise has been undertaken followed by a mock inspection.

4. BENCHMARKING

- 4.1. Bracknell Forest has participated in a CIPFA benchmarking study against 18 other Councils. The comparator Councils were selected on the basis of like case load (DWP grouping) geography and similar operating systems in terms of ICT.
- 4.2. Appendix A contains the summary of the benchmarking exercise. Firstly, there is a scatter graph which plots the position of Bracknell forest benefits service against others in terms of cost per weighted case and also performance. There is only one other Council that can demonstrate comparable performance at the same level of cost Bracknell Forest performance against the un-rounded performance standards grade is 3.9 out of 4 compared to the average of the benchmarked authorities of 3.36.
- 4.3. The benchmarking also identified the direction of travel of the service over the last two years. The second sheet of Appendix A contains a comparison of performance across a range of performance indicators compared against the average in 2006/7 and 2007/8. The scatter graphs show that in 2007/8 the Benefit Service in Bracknell Forest performed the average performance in all bar one indicator. The only indicator where performance was below average was new claims decided in 14 days where the performance over the two years had declined from 89% of all claims being decided in 14 days to 85% decided in 14 days in 2007/8.

5. MOCK INSPECTION

- 5.1. An independent company was commissioned to undertake a mock inspection of the benefit service against the new Audit Commission key lines of enquiry for Benefit Services. A full copy of the report is included at Appendix B.
- 5.2. The assessment was that under the new regime the Bracknell Forest Benefit Service would currently score 2.41 out of 4 for how good the service is and 2.44 out of 4 for the prospects for improvement. This would equate to a fair and promising prospects for improvement score.
- 5.3. The mock inspection concluded that the service had the following strengths and weaknesses:
 - 5.3.1 Strengths:
 - Strong history of delivering customer care to required specifications
 - Improvement in customer's satisfaction of the quality of the service
 - The service's track record in delivering improvement
 - Value for money through income maximisation through overpayment recovery
 - Strong history of improving performance indicators
 - 5.3.2 Weaknesses:
 - Customer focus needs to be realigned with Audit Commission model
 - Demographic sectoring of customers and staff
 - Designing the service based on customer needs
 - Evidence of the commitment of leadership to the management and monitoring of the service
 - Long-term planning (as defined by the Audit Commission)
- 5.4. Accordingly the report made 6 recommendations as follows:
 1. The service needs to consider building the service around customer needs;

2. The service should consider a centralised library of procedures, training notes, policies, minutes etc., together with assigning the responsibility for the maintenance of such a library;
 3. The service should work with other services to be clear on its links with the Local Area Agreement;
 4. The service should consider better ways to benchmark in VFM areas. The service should identify VFM indicators and encourage benchmarking group members to adopt the measures;
 5. The service has difficulty in demonstrating the recognition of the effectiveness of councillors in managing the service;
 6. The service should ensure its defective claim analysis produces positive service outcomes for the customer.
- 5.5 In response to the recommendations an improvement plan has been drafted which is included in this report at appendix C. The improvement plan is short term taking the service to March 2009. The Benefit Service will have three months notice of an inspection and so it is important to make progress and then review the improvement plan and establish a plan for the next financial year. Members are asked to consider the plan. At March the plan will be reviewed and a new improvement plan for the next financial year established.
- 5.6 It is recommended that a working party of members is formed to monitor and steer the improvement plan.

Background Papers

Benefit administration benchmarking club 2008 CIPFA
Benefits KLOE report - Meritec October 2008

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