

# Benefits

---

# Service

---

# Inspection

---

Bracknell Forest Council

---

September 2010

---



---

# Contents

<b>Service inspections</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Summary</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Scoring the Service</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Report</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>How good is the Benefits Service?</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>What are the prospects for improvement to the Service?</b>	<b>21</b>

# Service inspections

This inspection has been carried out by the Audit Commission under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 and is in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles. These principles embody the objectives of our Strategic Plan and Strategic Regulation. They also reflect the principles from *The Government's Policy on Inspection of Public Services (July 2003)*. Audit Commission service inspections should:

- focus on public service outcomes from a user perspective;
- act as a catalyst to help inspected bodies improve their performance;
- concentrate inspection work where it will have most impact, so that it is proportionate and based on an assessment of risk;
- be based on a rigorous assessment of costs and benefits, with a concern for achieving value for money both by the inspected organisation and within the inspection regime itself;
- be, and be seen to be, independent of the inspected organisation;
- report in public, using impartial evidence to inform the public about the performance of public services so as to enhance accountability;
- involve collaborative working with other inspectorates and external review agencies to achieve greater coordination and a more holistic approach to the assessment of performance by audited and inspected bodies;
- share learning to create a common understanding of performance that encourages rigorous self assessment and better understanding of their performance by inspected organisations;
- be carried out objectively by skilled and experienced people to high standards and using relevant evidence, transparent criteria, and open review processes; and
- enable continuous learning so that inspections can become increasingly effective and efficient.

We assess services using published key lines of enquiry (KLOE) to inform our judgements. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website at [www.audit-commission.gov.uk](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk).

This report is issued in accordance with the Audit Commission's duty under section 13 of the 1999 Act.

---

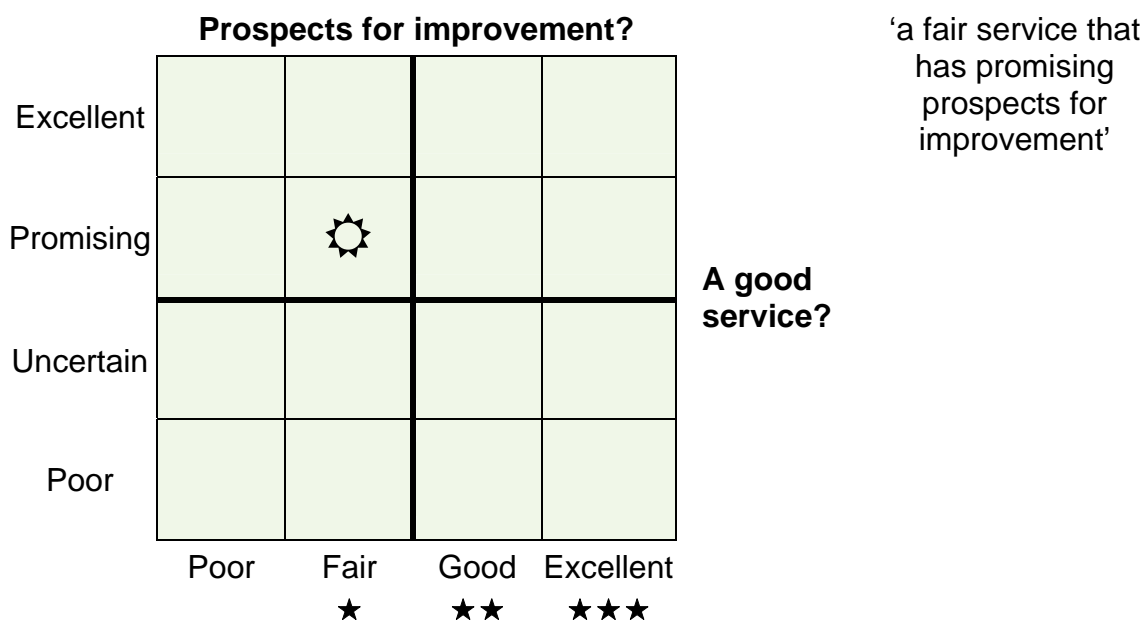
# Summary

- 1 The Benefits Service (the Service) at Bracknell Forest Council is fair with promising prospects for improvement.
- 2 The Service responds well to local need by helping people access money they are entitled to, by using Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) to help the most vulnerable; and seeking service users' views to make improvements. Policies and plans are shaped by local people's views but more use could be made of the views of internal and external partners.
- 3 Access to the Service is fair. There are no delays at Council offices, and response times for the phone have improved. Leaflets and forms are in offices but they don't all state if they are available in other languages or formats such as Braille. Information is now easier to find on the Council's website. Decision letters are poor – they are hard to read and understand – but the quality of customer care overall has improved over the last six months.
- 4 Decisions on new claims or changes to claims take too long, though they are improving and there is now a fast-track service for some claims. Preventing fraud and error is a high priority and a high level of sanctions is applied.
- 5 The Service takes appropriate steps to ensure that the money it pays out is based on accurate assessments. But too many reconsiderations and appeals are being revised which means that some users are not always getting the right decision on their claim, first time. The Service is also taking too long to submit appeals to the Tribunal Service.
- 6 Overpayments are not managed well and the level of debt is rising. Action is being taken but the Service does not know clearly how much of the total debt outstanding is fully recoverable.
- 7 The recent record on improvement is good including faster processing times, a fast-track system and take-up events for the most disadvantaged. But some of this is relatively recent with no sustained track record.
- 8 The Service is low cost and value for money is improving through benchmarking, and closely monitoring and reducing costs. Capacity is increasing through a new IT and telephone system and home working.
- 9 The prospects for improvement are promising because senior officers manage planning and performance effectively whilst communication and learning are good. There is a clear vision supported by objectives, though targets are not always SMART. Longer-term plans for the Service are not well documented, but strong officer and political leadership is effective. Complaints are dealt with appropriately, but the Service cannot show it is effectively learning from such feedback or from appeals.
- 10 Capacity is good. Outsourcing and home working give the Service flexibility, additional capacity and better productivity. Staff are well managed, team working is strong, and sickness rates are low. Procurement of the new IT system is well managed. Training is good and includes sharing with neighbouring authorities.

# Scoring the Service

11 We have assessed Bracknell Forest Council as providing a 'fair', one-star service that has 'promising' prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart<sup>i</sup>



Source: Audit Commission

12 The Service is a fair, one star service because:

- benefit take-up work is giving local people access to money they are entitled to;
- customers do not experience delays when visiting or contacting the Service;
- there is a wide range of leaflets and forms available to customers in the offices and on the website;
- high levels of sanctions, regular campaigns to remind customers to report changes and targeted staff training are helping to reduce fraud and error; and
- the views of service users are used to make changes and improvements that people want.

<sup>i</sup> The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

13 However it has some weaknesses. These include:

- benefit claims are not being dealt with as quickly as they could be;
- some people may not be getting the right decision on their claim first time as a high number of reconsiderations and appeals are being revised;
- letters are not easy to understand;
- not all leaflets contain details about how people with specific needs could have them in different formats; and
- management information about the level of overpayment debt is not effective.

14 The Service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- it has a good, recent track record in delivering sustainable improvements which are noticeable by users, partners and staff, such as better processing and waiting times;
- it provides improving value for money with relatively low and reducing costs;
- officer and political leadership of the service is strong, accompanied by empowered, well-trained staff with high satisfaction, good team-working and morale;
- it actively seeks best practice from others to implement in-house; and
- it has good capacity to improve, with investments in a new IT system, effective use of off-site staff and the roll-out of home working.

15 However there are some barriers to improvement. These are:

- some improvements have only been in place for about six months and do not have a sustained track record;
- the direction of travel of some performance indicators is mixed, with missed targets; and
- business plans do not clearly articulate longer term plans for the service, and not all actions have clear targets.

# Recommendations

- 16 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, Councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the Council. In addition, we identify the approximate costs<sup>i</sup> and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the Council should do the following.

### Recommendation

**R1** Provide a better service to customers by:

- ensuring that customers are aware that all leaflets and information about the Service are available in different formats and community languages;
- contacting customers that have complained for their suggestions on how the Service could be improved; and
- understanding the reasons for high numbers of revisions and using this to make changes within the Service.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- reducing the need for customers to make additional calls to resolve council tax queries;
- making the Service more accessible to people with specific needs;
- the views of customers are used to shape and design the delivery of the Service; and
- improving decision making to ensure benefit is paid correctly, first time.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. The implementation plan should be agreed by November 2010.

---

<sup>i</sup> Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

### Recommendation

**R2** Improve value for money by:

- understanding the profile of outstanding debt to target recovery action; and
- ensure that recovery action is taken against all overpayments identified as recoverable.

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- reduced level of overpayment debt owed to the Council.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by March 2011.

### Recommendation

**R3** Continue with plans to improve by:

- consulting consistently with stakeholders and internal and external partners on plans for future changes and improvements;
- ensuring there are SMART objectives for all actions in the Benefits business plan; and
- ensuring that potential risks that may arise from the new system implementation are well-mitigated.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved focus on the needs of service users;
- improved performance management;
- assurance that objectives will be delivered; and
- delivering the new system within time and on budget.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by November 2010.



# Report

---

## Context

### The locality

- 17 Bracknell Forest Council is a Unitary Authority located in Berkshire, around 30 miles from London. It has a population of 114,000.
- 18 The population is predominantly white British, which accounts for nearly 91 per cent of the population. Nine per cent of the population classify themselves as being from a Black and Minority Ethnic Group. Bracknell has low levels of deprivation and is ranked 320 out of 354 in the Index of Multiple Deprivation, where one is the most deprived. Eighty six percent of residents are satisfied with the area in which they live, which is above average.
- 19 The working age population is above average at 65 per cent. People of retirement age make up only 14 per cent of the population. Wages are above average at £567.30 per week. The majority of jobs are within the services industry such as finance, IT and other business activities.
- 20 Bracknell Forest has 8.9 per cent of working aged residents claiming benefits, which is below average. In March 2010, 1,970 people claimed Job Seekers Allowance, which is 2.7 per cent of the working aged population, lower than average. This is an increase of 13 per cent over the last 12 months - much higher than the average increases in the South East and England. Of the working age population, 3.4 per cent claim Employment Support Allowance and 1.2 per cent claim lone parent benefits, both of which are below average.
- 21 The average house price is £202,887, above the national average of £164,455. In terms of housing tenure, 73 per cent of households in Bracknell own their own home, 10 per cent rent from a private landlord, and 17 per cent rent from a housing association.

### The Council

- 22 Bracknell Forest has 42 Councillors representing 18 wards. The Council is controlled by the Conservatives, with a political make-up of 39 Conservatives and 3 Labour.
- 23 The 2009 Organisational Assessment found that overall, the Council performs well. The Council scored 3 out of 4 for managing performance and 2 out of 4 for use of resources.
- 24 The Council's vision is 'to make Bracknell Forest a place where all people can thrive; living, learning and working in a clean, safe and healthy environment'. It has six priorities which are:
  - A town centre fit for the 21st Century;
  - Protecting and enhancing our environment;

- Promoting health and achievement;
- Creating a borough where people are, and feel, safe;
- Value for money; and
- Sustain economic prosperity.

**25** In February 2008, the Council transferred its housing stock to Bracknell Forest Homes. They are a non-profit housing association who own and manage the 5,600 rented and 1,100 leasehold properties transferred.

### The Council's Benefits Service

**26** Housing Benefit (HB) and Council Tax Benefit (CTB) are national welfare benefits administered by the Council on behalf of the DWP. A complex legal framework is in place to define who is entitled to benefit and to reduce fraud and error in the system. The Benefits Service within a Council has a responsibility to pay the right benefit to the right person at the right time.

**27** Our responsibility to provide assurance (to government, Councils, taxpayers and benefit customers) means that we will consider inspection where there is a current or future risk to the service and its customers. In the case of the Bracknell Forest Council, the reasons for commissioning the inspection were:

- the average speed of processing was below average, when compared to others;
- signs of deterioration in performance in 2009;
- to ensure the service had prepared for the new IT system due in October 2010;
- a previous data quality audit in 2008 resulted in some reported performance information being reserved; and
- concerns that the Council was not fully exploiting the degree to which an effective Benefits service would support corporate objectives around social inclusion.

**28** The key objectives of this inspection were:

- to assess the effectiveness of Bracknell's Benefits Service in meeting the needs of the vulnerable people it serves, and contributing to the Council's wider corporate objectives; and
- to provide assurance to the DWP and other stakeholders regarding the quality of service provision.

**29** The Service is run in-house as part of the housing service within the Environment, Culture and Communities. It has 22.5 full time equivalent staff, with some benefits assessment and overpayments collection contracted out to a third party. In 2008/09, the Council's total administration spend was £1,444,000. The proportion of subsidy grant from DWP was £626,000 (44.6 per cent), with the remaining £778,000 met by tax payers (55.4 per cent). The subsidy grant claim for 2009/10 was £32,000,000.

**30** In 2009/10, the Bracknell Forest Benefits Service made £28,000 rent allowances and rent rebates and £21,799,000 mandatory rent allowance payments. Its caseload at March 2010 was 6,812, an increase of 13 per cent from the previous year.

# How good is the Benefits Service?

---

## What has the Service aimed to achieve?

- 31** The Service supports wider local area agreement priorities through its benefits work in helping vulnerable people achieve independent living and reducing the number of households in fuel poverty. This links to the Council's corporate priorities in:
- seeking to ensure that every resident feels included and able to access the service they need - by increasing access to service by electronic means;
  - limiting the impact of the recession - by promoting the take-up of benefits allowances and concessions; and
  - promoting independence and choice for vulnerable adults and older people.
- 32** To support the Council's corporate objectives and priorities, the Benefits Service vision is to 'ensure we pay the right benefit to the right person at the right time'. It aims to do this by:
- extending the benefits service;
  - providing the right service; and
  - providing the best service.
- 33** The benefits business plan sets out the actions required to meet these objectives in 2010/11.

---

## Is the Service meeting the needs of the local community and users?

### Access, customer care, user and community focus

- 34** The Service uses the views of customers to make changes that people want. A focus group made up of customers discusses changes and potential improvements they would like to see. Using feedback from this group the Service has redesigned the benefit claim form and made changes to the new benefit service standards such as introducing timescales for responding to emails. Responding to the specific needs of service users means that customers are more likely to get the Service they want and need.

- 35** The quality of customer care shown by frontline staff is fair. Customers and stakeholders told us that they have seen improvements over the last six months in the quality of care shown by staff. Our own reality checking found that staff dealing with benefit visitors and telephone callers were polite, knowledgeable and helpful. But both customers and stakeholders expressed concerns that some people still experienced mixed customer care when contacting the Service. Inconsistent customer care can deter customers from contacting the Service, which means they could miss out on information and advice to help them with their claim.
- 36** The Service uses good information about the community to target benefit take-up work effectively. Community profiling information is used to identify which groups in the community are potentially under claiming. Between February 2009 and March 2010, this information was used to target low-income families that resulted in extra annual awards of housing and council tax benefit totalling £18,396. The Service has also helped older people access benefits by referrals to the Pension Service resulting in £25,462 additional benefit during 2009/10. Using detailed community profiling information helps the Service to target take-up to people most in need.
- 37** The Service promotes and encourages benefit take-up and money advice at community events. Activities undertaken include; joint awareness and advice open days with partners such as Age Concern, the Pension Service and the Council's Supporting People team, surgeries held with registered housing providers Bracknell Forest Homes (BFH) and Southern Housing, and, a specific roadshow called 'benefits for you' held in the local shopping centre. Take-up work is evaluated for effectiveness and value for money. For example, outreach work was ended within Sandhurst Town Council building following consultation with the customer focus group. The decision was taken to stop this work and redirect resources elsewhere, because very few local people were using this service. During 2009/10, take-up resulted in extra annual awards of housing and council tax benefit of £63,130. An extra £5,245 was also awarded in backdated housing and council tax benefit during this time. Effective targeted take-up campaigns help local people most in need, access services and financial help they are entitled to, which boosts the wider local economy.<sup>i</sup>
- 38** Access to the Service is fair. The main strengths identified are as follows.
- Benefits visitors do not experience long waiting times when visiting the Council offices. From October 2009 to March 2010, the average time that benefit visitors had to wait was less than two and a half minutes. Our own reality checking found that customers were not experiencing any delays when waiting to see someone.
  - The main office for benefit visitors at Time Square is well located and within easy reach of the main shopping centre, bus station and local health centre. Office hours are well advertised and open during normal working hours. Disabled parking spaces are available outside the offices and access to the building is good for people that need extra help such as ramps and automatic doors. In the main reception area there is access available to the Council's website. Benefit visitors can also hand in information and get advice from the other Council office at Easthampstead House also located in the town centre.

---

<sup>i</sup> 'The Money Trail' published (in 2002) by the New Economics Foundation estimates that for every £1 increase in benefits paid through take up work, 77 pence is spent in the local economy.

## How good is the Benefits Service?

- Customers are routinely offered interviews with a dedicated member of staff in a private interview room and when possible, staff will also see customers who want to speak in private but have not booked an appointment.
  - Fast tracking of new claims is offered to customers. If customers supply all the information needed in support of their new claim, the Service guarantees to process their claim within 48 hours.
  - Frontline staff have access to staff within the Council to help with translation services. Over 30 members of staff are able to speak and/or read a wide variety of community languages. Some staff are also trained to interpret through sign language.
  - The benefit claim form is clear and easy to use and has recently been crystal marked. Guidance notes are available to help customers complete the form, and the form is available in other formats such as large print, easy read, audiotape, and other languages. Customers needing help are also advised to contact the Council. A checklist helps customers provide the information and evidence they need in support of their claim.
  - Staff are encouraged to refer customers with financial problems to the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) for money and debt advice, following staff training in debt awareness.
  - There is a good range of information available in leaflets and posters. Leaflets are widely available in the main reception as well as on the benefit pages of the Council's website.
- 39** The Service has recognised that access through some routes was weak and has addressed this. During the period April 2009 to September 2009, one in four callers that contacted the Service by phone could not get through to speak with someone. Following implementation of the new telephone system improvements in call answering have led to only 1 in 20 callers, from October 2009 to March 2010, hanging up before their call was answered. Our own reality checking found that calls were answered quickly. Getting quick and easy access to the Service by telephone means that people are able to get the information and advice they need about benefits, reducing the need for further unnecessary phone calls and visits to the offices.
- 40** Information about benefits is now easier to find on the Council's website. Results of mystery shopping carried out by the Service in 2009, found customers could not always find the information they needed on the website to answer their query. The website was reviewed and changed to make it easier for customers to navigate to benefits information. Our own reality checking found the website easy to use and information is accessible through text and audio. A wide range of leaflets and downloadable forms are available as well as a benefits calculator to help people work out potential entitlement to housing and council tax benefit. Improving web access helps people choosing this route, get to the right information and advice they need.

- 41 Some weaknesses exist that may make it difficult for customers with specific needs to get information they need. For example some leaflets do not include any information about whether they are available in different languages or in different formats for example in Braille or in large print. Some don't have contact details for hearing impaired people for example, minicom. This means that some customers may find it difficult to understand and provide the information needed to get the money they are entitled to.
- 42 Some service users and external stakeholders told us that system-produced decision letters are hard to read and difficult to understand. The Service has tried to make these letters easier to understand by sending an explanation leaflet with every letter to explain what various parts of the letter mean. The Service is implementing a new benefits operating system in the autumn of 2010 and hopes to address issues around quality of letters. But the poor quality of letters means that currently some people do not fully understand the outcome or status of their claim leading to unnecessary contact with the Service and other agencies, for help.
- 43 Customers are helped to provide information quickly to speed up the time taken to deal with their claim. Customers are contacted by phone within ten days of a claim being received, to discuss what further evidence is needed in support of their claim. If no response or information has been received within ten days, a further call is made to the customer. If information is still not received after 28 days from receipt of the claim, customers are contacted again before the claim is finally made defective. Managers monitor claims to make sure that contact is being made with customers to help them provide the information needed. Proactively helping customers to supply information in support of their claim helps to speed up the time taken by the Service to make a decision or payment to its customers.
- 44 The Service also works with partners to speed up the time taken to deal with claims. Partners such as registered housing providers, Look Ahead<sup>i</sup>, the Pension Service and private sector landlords have received benefits awareness training and information about how they can help their clients make a claim for benefit. In addition staff from BFH and the Pension Service are trained to verify documents and able to collect evidence and submit claims. This means that partners can provide more support and advice to their clients on supplying the right information and evidence to have their claim dealt with quickly. This offers tenants more choice about how they claim benefit as well as access to advice and information about the benefits scheme or their claim.
- 45 Service users know how long they can expect to wait, to be dealt with. New benefit service standards have been developed and were published in April 2010. Customers were consulted in the design of the standards. The standards set out clear targets for how customers will be dealt with depending on how they access the Service as well as how long they can expect to wait. These are well publicised in the Council offices as well as on the Council's website. A leaflet setting out these standards is also sent with every decision letter sent by the Service to ensure that customers know what the standards are. Clear and comprehensive standards ensure that customers know what level of service they can expect to receive.

---

<sup>i</sup> Look Ahead is an organisation that supports young, vulnerable adults

## How good is the Benefits Service?

- 46 The Service communicates and consults with its customers and the wider community. As well as regular liaison with the customer focus group, users are invited to take part in mystery shopping to give feedback to the Service. Draft service plans and policies are regularly published on the Council's website for consultation and people are encouraged to submit their comments. Some recent examples of these include the draft Benefits Service Business Plan for 2010/11, the draft discretionary housing payment (DHP) policy and the draft overpayments policy. Consulting and engaging with service users and non users helps the Service to use learning and feedback to make changes and improvements that users want and need.
- 47 The Service has good relationships with internal and external stakeholders, but their views are not always sought when improvements are being made to service delivery. Regular liaison takes place with a wide range of external partners such as registered providers, private sector landlords, DWP, Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) and the Pension Service. There is also regular liaison with colleagues from other parts of the organisation including Council Tax, Housing and Adult Social Services. The Service provides training, updates and information about the benefits scheme to help partners assist their clients with making a claim. But partner's views were not sought on the design of the benefit service standards which means that opportunities were missed to use the knowledge that partners have about their customers to design and deliver services based on an understanding of users need.

### Diversity

- 48 Some staff within the Service lack awareness of equalities and diversity. Some new starters within the last six months state that they have not received equalities and diversity training at their induction. However, the corporate induction, which all staff have attended, does include equality awareness training, and so the impact of this training is uncertain. Overall, this means that some staff are not fully aware of how they can ensure through their role, that customers receive fair and equal access to the Service.
- 49 Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) are used by the Council to help support vulnerable people in the community. During 2009/10, in line with the corporate priority to limit the impact of the recession on the local community, the Council has committed to providing additional funds on top of the annual grant to support local people and alleviate hardship. The Service paid out discretionary payments of £12,577 compared to the annual grant of £8,413. Providing additional funds on top of the annual grant ensures that more people can access these funds to relieve financial hardship.

### Service outcomes for users and the community

- 50** The Service has not met targets it set itself to reduce the time taken to deal with benefit claims. The Benefit Service Business plan for 2009/10 set a target to reduce the average processing time for new claims and change events (National Indicator 181) to less than 11 days by the end of March 2010. During 2009/10, the Service took on average 14.7 days. The DWP have recently published national performance statistics in respect of National Indicator 181<sup>i</sup>. The published data for the first two quarters of 2009/10 shows, this is below the average performance of 12 days when compared to other English Councils. Although the Service was not able to achieve its target by the end of March 2010, there have been recent improvements in the time taken to process new claims and change events. Over the last six months the Service is taking, on average, under 11 days to process these.
- 51** Benefit customers are waiting longer than necessary for their new claims and changes in circumstances to be dealt with. During 2009/10, the Service had a target to process new claims for benefit, on average, in under 22 days by March 2010. The Service took on average, 24.5 days. Compared with the published data from the DWP, this performance would place the Council below average performance of 22 days. During the same period it took on average 10.4 days to deal with a change of circumstance against a target of seven days. When compared with other English Councils this is also below average performance of nine days. Customers who make a new claim or who report a change are waiting too long for a payment or decision which could create unnecessary anxiety and hardship as well as act as a deterrent to people reporting a change in the future.
- 52** Satisfactory arrangements are in place to check the accuracy of benefit payments and claims. The Service carries out a minimum 8 per cent check of all claims dealt with by staff. For newer members of staff there are different arrangements and 100 per cent of their work is checked. During 2009/10, the Service achieved a financial accuracy rate of 92 per cent of claims checked. The Service also measures how many non-financial errors were made. When this is taken into account the Service achieved an overall accuracy rate of 91 per cent for 2009/10. The results of accuracy checking are fed back through to staff on a one-to-one basis which helps managers and staff identify the appropriate learning and development needs. Monitoring cases for error gives the Service a level of assurance that the money it pays out to customers is correct and any potential errors or mistakes are being mitigated.
- 53** A high number of claims are being revised which may mean that people are not always getting the right amount of money they are entitled to. During 2009/10 of the 71 appeals received by the Service, 74 per cent were revised and a new decision was made. In the same period, the Service received 145 reconsiderations and revised 48.3 per cent of these. Managers do not fully understand why higher numbers of appeals and reconsiderations have been revised when the claim has been looked at again and has not analysed what the reasons may be for this. This means the Service is missing opportunities to use this information to help staff make the right decision, first time, on claims they deal with.

---

<sup>i</sup> The Right Time Indicator (NI181) measures the average processing times for new claims and change events.



## How good is the Benefits Service?

- 54 Despite the high numbers of revisions, reconsiderations are dealt with promptly. During 2009/10, the Service dealt with 77 per cent of reconsiderations received, within 28 days, against a target of 65 per cent. Dealing with reconsiderations promptly means that the Service is reducing undue worry and anxiety as people wait for a decision to be made.
- 55 Customers that appeal the Council's decision on whether they will receive the benefits they claimed for experience delays. During 2009/10, only 25 per cent of appeals submitted to the Tribunals Service were submitted within four weeks against a target of 65 per cent. All of the appeals received by the Service were submitted to the Tribunal Service within three months. Delays in dealing with appeals, unduly increases the time that people have to wait to hear the outcome of an appeal.
- 56 The Service is effective in identifying unreported changes of circumstance that affect the amount of benefit people receive. Customers receive information about how to report a change when they receive their decision letters from the Service and publicity campaigns take place annually. The last campaign in December 2009, 'time to tell', resulted in 700 calls to the Service over two days from customers. Outcomes from campaigns are reported in the local borough newspaper to ensure that the community is aware of the impact of fraud and error. Risk based reviews and interventions activity take place on a regular basis. Targeted visits are carried out by the Service based on known risks, and there is an annual target to complete 550 visits annually, which is regularly achieved. During 2009/10, 22 per cent of these visits were referred to the Fraud Team of which 40 per cent received a sanction. Changes of circumstances which could result in benefit reducing are suspended by the Service and these claims prioritised, to prevent high levels of overpayments. Proactive work to identify unreported changes of circumstances helps the Service minimise overpayments and ensures that the right benefit is being paid.
- 57 There are effective measures in place to tackle fraud and error. These include:
- appropriate management arrangements in place to risk assess referrals. Risks ratings are reviewed annually based on outcomes achieved over the year and workloads are regularly monitored;
  - a flexible prosecutions policy which allows staff to take account of each individual case and any mitigating factors, to determine the appropriate sanction to apply;
  - management monitoring of the quality of fraud referrals received from all sources. Feedback is given where possible for example to benefits staff to help improve the accuracy and quality of future referrals;
  - regular fraud awareness training delivered to staff within the organisation. Staff within the Benefits Service, Customer Services, Council Tax team and partners such as Bracknell Forest Homes and the Pensions Service, have all received fraud awareness training in the last 12 months;
  - good level of publicity in the local press about successful prosecutions;
  - dedicated 'Cheat Chasers' telephone hotline which is clearly advertised on letters and information sent out from the Service;
  - appropriate use of National Fraud Incentive (NFI) data to investigate potential cases where there may be fraud/and or error;

- proactively dealing with Housing Benefits Matching Service (HBMS) data appropriately, which is sifted by the Fraud Team and cases where the team can undertake investigations are identified and dealt with; and
  - joint working with the DWP to investigate potentially fraudulent cases for benefit. In 2009/10 the Service identified 15 cases to work on a joint investigation with the DWP.
- 58** Outcomes from counter fraud work are good. In 2009/10, the Service achieved 64 sanctions against a target of 45. This equates to 9.82 sanctions per 1000 caseload which is above average when compared to the last set of published performance data in 2007/08 when the average nationally was 5.6 cases per 1000 caseload. Through counter fraud activity, the Service has identified £195,109.51 in overpayments attributable to fraud. Ensuring that fraud and error is minimised through effective management arrangements, good quality referrals, and high profile publicity means the Service is taking good steps to detect and prevent fraud which reduces the burden on the public purse.
- 59** The Benefits Service is contributing to the achievement of wider Council priorities to improve outcomes for local people. The Council has targets to reduce the number of households in fuel poverty, through take-up work, benefits staff promote energy efficiency and the availability of home energy grants when visiting benefit customers. In addition, staff from the Service attend Council-led energy efficiency events to promote the take-up of benefits and grants to reduce fuel poverty. In June 2010, referrals from the Service resulted in a spend of £40,000 for warm front grants. This shows the Service is making a positive contribution to reducing fuel poverty within the community.
- 60** Customer satisfaction with the Service is improving. Results from the 2009 customer survey found that 76.9 per cent of customers who responded rated the Service as good. This is an improvement from the last time this was reported in 2006/07, when satisfaction was rated as good by 71.2 per cent of customers. But the recent results did not meet the target that the Service set itself of 80 per cent. Service users and stakeholders told us although they recognised improvements have been made by the Service these have only been seen over the last six months. The Council's own mystery shopping in 2009 identified low satisfaction rates of 40 per cent with the telephone service. But steps have been taken to improve this with the implementation of a new telephone system. Actively seeking out the views of service users gives the Service a good overview of what customers think about the quality of service they receive.
- 61** Customers are happy with the facilities available to them when they visit the Council offices. From the 2009 customer survey, 97.3 per cent of respondents were satisfied with the reception area and agreed that it was clean and tidy. Clean and comfortable surroundings help visitors feel more welcomed and valued.

## How good is the Benefits Service?

### Is the Service delivering value for money?

- 62** The Service has a clear understanding of its costs and how these compare with others. The Council's Environment, Culture and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel set up a working group in 2009 to review the Housing Benefit Improvement Plan. As part of that review the Service was benchmarked against 18 other Councils and found the Service to be below average cost when compared to others. The Audit Commission's value for money profile that looks at costs from 2008/09 also shows the Service is below average cost when compared to other Councils with similar demographics and caseload.
- 63** Areas of higher spend are balanced with the need to meet service priorities. The Service has procured an off site processing contract for three years. The annual cost of this arrangement to the Service is more than it would pay for two full time equivalent posts locally. But current productivity from the contract is high with an accuracy rate of 99 per cent. This arrangement helps the Service build the additional capacity and resilience it needs to improve processing times despite an increasing benefits caseload (13 per cent in 2009/10). Careful consideration of costs helps the Service to ensure that areas where there is higher spend, delivers the desired improvements in performance and accuracy of benefit payments.
- 64** Areas of high cost have been identified and savings have been made. Benchmarking data has helped the Service to target higher cost areas. This has led to the use of offsite processing staff and introducing a home working pilot. This pilot cost £1,500 to set up, but it has improved productivity and is being extended. Other areas where savings have been achieved include joint training being delivered for staff from other Berkshire councils. In addition, despite a reduction of £53,000 in 2009/10 in the annual administration subsidy from Central Government this has been absorbed by restructuring the Service to remove the need for pre-assessment staff. These strategic decisions and actions demonstrate a clear focus on reducing costs and achieving better value for money.
- 65** Although Service costs are low, local residents make a higher than average contribution to the costs of running the Service, through the Council Tax. The Audit Commission's value for money profile shows that Bracknell's tax payers contributed over 55 per cent to the costs of running the Service in 2008/09 compared with the national average of 45 per cent.

- 66** Management of housing benefit overpayment debt is not effective and overpayment debt is rising. The Service does not have a clear understanding how much of its overpayment debt is recoverable. The outstanding debt is split and held on two different systems. Over £380,000 of pre-2005 debt is held on one system. The Service believes that 90 per cent of this debt may no longer be recoverable but plans to write these debts off, are not clear. The remaining debt sits on the current operating system. At the start of April 2009, £1.2 million was outstanding on the current operating system but the Service is unable to identify and report how much of this is being recovered through ongoing benefit entitlement or other methods of recovery. During the year resources were diverted away from collecting debt to review all the benefit debt outstanding, to determine how much is recoverable. This resulted in £137,598 of debt written off as it can no longer be recovered. This review is ongoing and due to be completed by October 2010. The total amount of overpayment debt is increasing. Debts stood at £1,585,983 (April 2009) an increase of 9.1 per cent on the previous year. During 2009/10, £838,205 of overpayments were identified but only £540,489 (64 per cent) was recovered. This is significantly below the Council's own target of 75 per cent. Prompt action to recover overpayments helps to reduce the costs of running services to local taxpayers.
- 67** Arrangements to recover benefit overpayments which have been identified as recoverable, are satisfactory. When overpayments are identified, customers are contacted to make arrangements to repay. The Service considers the ability of people to pay and offers opportunities for customers to repay in instalments. All available methods of recovery are considered such as recovery from ongoing benefit and blameless tenant recovery<sup>i</sup>. Where the Service is unable to put in place arrangements to recover an overpayment, this is passed to a collection agency. The agency uses various methods to recover including telephone contact, letters, text messages and home visits. Outsourcing elements of overpayment recovery offers the Service improved opportunities to reduce the level of debt it is owed.
- 68** Satisfactory arrangements are in place to manage and monitor benefit subsidy. The subsidy claim is monitored weekly. Variances are discussed with team leaders to highlight any issues or potential training needs for staff. Managers work with finance colleagues to manage the claim which includes building in forecasts over the year for any potential changes that may have an impact. Local authority error overpayments during 2009/10 did not exceed the lower threshold limit which means the Service will be able to claim 100 per cent subsidy against these overpayments. The 2008/09 claim was initially qualified by auditors but following additional information from the Service, the DWP have confirmed there will be no direct loss in payments. Effective management of the subsidy claim ensures that the Service is minimising potential loss in income.

---

<sup>i</sup> 'Blameless Tenant' is the process of recovering an HB overpayment made to a landlord or agent from HB paid directly to that landlord or agents in respect of a tenant whose benefit was not overpaid. The tenant whose HB is being deducted will be deemed to have paid their rent to the value of that recovery.

# What are the prospects for improvement to the Service?

## What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

69 The Service has a good, recent track record in delivering improvements. The Service has made significant improvements that have been experienced by users such as faster processing times, improved fraud detection and prevention, an improved telephone system and take-up events focussing on the most disadvantaged. A restructure, better value for money, use of better performance management information and off-site staff have also helped to improve the service in a sustainable way, despite an increase in caseload due to the recession. However, many of these improvements have only been in place for the last six months and so performance indicators have yet to show a sustained direction of travel.

**Table 1 Local Performance Indicators**

Track record of performance

Local performance indicator	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
National Indicator 181 (average days)		15.6	14.7
Average time taken to process new claims (days)	28.4	31.3	24.5
Average time taken to process a change in circumstance (days)	9	10.2	10.4

Source: Audit Commission/Bracknell Forest Council

70 The direction of travel of some key performance indicators is mixed, although there have been recent improvements in most areas. Performance over three years shows improvements in areas such as time to process claims and changes, avoidable contact rates, satisfaction rates and sanctions. The Service had poorer performance in many areas in 2008/09 and targets were missed in 2009/10. As at September 2009, it was performing below average for NI181 compared nationally. But satisfaction rates have increased from 71.2 per cent to 76.9 per cent and avoidable contact has reduced from 14 per cent to 11 per cent, meaning improved outcomes for customers. Also, although the 2009/10 result for NI181 was 14.7 days overall, performance improved steadily in the second half of the year, and has been within the 11 days target for the last three months. Fraud work remains good and new fast track times are also performing well with claims being processed within 48 hours. Recovery of overpayments has recently dropped due to a decision to focus on write-offs instead.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the Service?

- 71** The Service can show significant improvements experienced by users. Improvements include the fast track service, promotion of the take-up strategy and a new telephone handling system that has improved call waiting times. A successful 'Benefits For You' event was held in August 2009 which gave advice to residents. This promotion is helping support the Council's corporate priority to 'limit the impact of the recession'. Due to its success another one is being held this year. Many stakeholders have noticed the improvements in the service. They recognise the better communication and improved processing times. Users, for example, have commented on the improved, faster telephone service, quicker waiting times in reception and a better appointments system which saves queuing time. Although issues such as confusing letters, remain. By the end of June 2010, feedback from users will have led to reception improvements including lower desks for easier access, more computers, improved privacy areas and a scanner to copy residents' documents more quickly. The Service has used the good information it has about its local community to target more vulnerable residents as part of its take-up strategy. A restructure led to a new service development officer which enabled the take-up strategy to be implemented. The restructure also enabled new dedicated teams to process new claims and changes faster, despite an increased caseload. The Service recognises the need to improve entitlement letters further, and the new IT system in October will address this. These improvements are helping the Council meet its objectives.
- 72** The Service delivers improving value for money. It can demonstrate that it is identifying efficiencies by reducing its costs over time and that costs are relatively low. The impact of restructures, improved performance and increased case load showed the gross cost of processing a claim fell from £79.20 in 2008 to £67.20 in 2009, which is below the average of the Council's 18 other benchmarked authorities. The new flexible offsite processing contract has enabled additional support at competitive rates with an option to increase resources if necessary. Although the Council is paying 19 per cent more than it would for two posts, the offsite contractors have 99 per cent accuracy and 28 per cent better productivity.
- 73** The Service has identified areas of high cost and made savings as a result. It has targeted higher cost areas through its benchmarking and survey work. This has led to the use of offsite staff, joint training and a home working pilot. This pilot cost £1,500 of capital money to set up, but it has improved productivity and is being extended shortly. The Service is focussing on older debt work for recovery and write off. A £56,000 cut in the administrative grant was achieved by restructuring the Service to delete the pre-assessor posts. These strategic decisions and actions demonstrate a clear focus on value for money.
- 74** The Service has plans to save more money in future years. Future saving plans that have been secured include the investment in a new IT system, extending the agency staff contract and the purchase of the Mosaic database. For example, the cost of the Mosaic database has already been shared with other Council services such as the Leisure service and there are plans to extend this to other departments. This will reduce the burden on the service budget but help maintain service delivery.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the Service?

---

### How well does the service manage performance?

- 75** The aims of the Service are clear and challenging, with business plans supporting these aims for the forthcoming year. The Service has a clear vision for what it wants to achieve, and its objectives are addressing the right things to realise this. The 2010/11 business plan contains clear, challenging targets, such as achieving 960 fast track applications (compared with 400 last year) and 99 per cent accuracy rates. It also has a clear drive to engage further with harder to reach groups, increase take-up and improve fraud and error detection. These support corporate objectives. The 2009/10 business plan contained some challenging targets such as to achieve NI181 within 11 days by March 2010 and a five per cent increase in satisfaction which were both achieved. The benefits improvement plan, produced after the 2009/10 business plan as a result of a working group investigation of the Service, was also accomplished with actions delivered including expanding offsite processing, explaining technicalities better to customers, and pursuing best practice by visiting high performing Councils. Ongoing actions have been amalgamated into the new 2010/11 business plan. However, the plan is at a high level and not all actions have SMART targets, such as meeting efficiency targets or promoting community cohesion. Despite a robust annual business plan process, clear, documented longer term plans for the Service are not in place. Although there is a vision to be an excellent service, this has not yet been articulated other than in a report to explore shared services after the new IT system has been implemented. This means that stakeholders do not have a shared understanding of the longer term plans for the service.
- 76** Service plans link well to Local Area Agreements and corporate objectives. The benefits business plan for 2010/11 follows the corporate business planning system and links to three of the Council's three-year corporate objectives. The plan was consulted on with, for example, the benefits user group and staff, as well as being available on line for comment. This ensures plans are co-ordinated and deliverable. Key actions carried out to support corporate objectives include an action to 'maximise availability of benefits' which the Service has done. For example by December 2009, £51,890 additional benefits had been issued by proactive campaigns. A range of procedures are in place, up-to-date and have been consulted on, such as the new take-up strategy and Discretionary Housing Payment scheme. However, although the business plan states that it links to directorate service plan objectives, it is not clear which ones. Overall, the plans show how the Service contributes to the Council's wider aims.
- 77** The Service has effective leadership. Officer and political commitment to the Service is strong, with a highly-regarded head of service. Overview and Scrutiny Committee play an active role by providing independent challenge through a working group and in-house inspection. As a result of this working group, improvements such as explanation leaflets are now provided with letters including links to online information. Staff report of good team working, improved morale, and approachable senior staff. Councillors are very positive about the leadership of benefits senior staff, have a high level of involvement and view the Service as a priority in helping the Council achieve its objectives. The portfolio holder attends monthly meetings with service managers and provides a visible presence to staff. This leadership and commitment provides a culture within which the Service is supported to improve.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the Service?

- 78** Performance is managed well. This is demonstrated by recent improvements in performance, annual appraisals and targets for all staff, weekly performance meetings and monthly meetings with housing management and the portfolio holder. A quarterly performance monitoring report including finances is reported to the senior management team, Overview and Scrutiny Committee, all councillors and the executive. Councillors report that the level of information they receive enables them to ask questions and challenge areas where appropriate, such as via the recent working group. Quarterly performance is also posted on the website, sent to landlords, and available in reception. Arrangements are in place to report on performance against the new benefits standards from the end of June 2010. Staff are also managed effectively. Regular one to ones are held and work plans include performance targets and training. This means that staff are well-informed and engaged with the whole performance management process, although customer service staff would also welcome this weekly performance information. New quality monitoring reports are in place for individual assessors, including off-site staff. Issues raised in staff meetings such as the need for a weekly performance update and reception refurbishment have been addressed. Past issues with data quality have been improved by corporate training, a new performance management system and clearer ownership of data. Overall, this effective performance management ensures the Service is able to take appropriate action to ensure continuous improvement.
- 79** The Service understands the profile of its users. The Service's Equality Impact Assessment shows a good recognition of equality and diversity issues and good efforts are made to understand the make-up of benefit recipients. The Service is making use of the new Mosaic database which has led to a targeting of more deprived neighbourhoods and low income families, for example, by holding out of town surgeries. It has used this information to improve the service for harder to reach groups. It has produced leaflets in different languages, promoted the Service in school letters sent to parents, published a survey on community TV, held a Polish event day to offer housing and benefits advice, and promotes home visits for those unable to visit the Council. These actions help ensure that every resident is able to access the service they need.
- 80** Communication and learning within the Service is good overall. The Service actively seeks best practice from others to apply in-house. Staff have visited high-performing councils to gain an understanding of how they operate. As a result, this benchmarking has led to a staff restructure, the deletion of pre-assessment posts, and the roll-out of home working. This in turn has led to cost savings, improved performance, and the ability to deal with peaks and troughs in workload. Complaints are monitored and dealt with appropriately. Most staff view communications with other services as very good. However, the Service cannot demonstrate effective learning from its reconsiderations and appeals. Liaison with the revenue service remains an issue. Problems include the time taken to update council tax accounts, the revenue service's lack of awareness of some benefits service developments such as the restructure, and the Service's location in a separate building, meaning that complicated queries may result in telephone calls to the Council Tax department based in another office.



## What are the prospects for improvement to the Service?

---

### Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 81 The Service has good capacity to improve. It is investing well to deliver further sustainable improvements. The current IT system is due to be replaced in October 2010. The £650,000 capital investment in this new IT system will lead to online applications, improved letters and more efficient working. The Service is also investing in rolling out home working and expects to increase productivity by 10 per cent as well as freeing up office space and improving workforce planning. A new £10,000 telephone system has been in place for six months resulting in more effective call management. The system enables staff to listen into calls where necessary for training purposes and monitor the abandonment rate, waiting times and queue numbers. An £81,000 capital refurbishment of the reception area is due to be completed by the end of June 2010. Offsite staff also offer increased capacity. These are all longer term sustainable solutions, as well as early plans for the new IT system to enable potential shared services in the future.
- 82 Workforce and financial planning is adequate. Staff are well-managed, with low sickness and turnover rates. Morale and job satisfaction are high with improved career structures, the training of pre-assessors to become full assessors and a new development post enabling better outreach work, particularly to harder to reach groups. A workforce plan is in place which links to the corporate workforce plan. It includes actions such as exploring partnership working, a retraining scheme and increased opportunities for professional qualifications. It has led to the implementation of a three-year contract for outsourcing processing and the roll-out of a home working pilot which is being extended. Although some actions are SMART, such as details on outsourcing and home working, other actions such as improving skills gaps are not specific meaning it is unclear how the service intends exactly to increase skills. As part of its workforce planning, the Service has contracted out part of its work to an offsite processing company to process claims. This flexible arrangement offers the Service additional capacity, higher accuracy rates of 99 per cent and 28 per cent better productivity. Financially, the Service is well managed and has no planned budget cuts for this year. Procurement of the IT system has been evaluated effectively, with a detailed evaluation report submitted to the board for approval. This planning helps support future, longer-term sustainable improvement of the Service.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the Service?

- 83** Risk management is good. Risks are regularly reported to the overview and scrutiny committee and are on the corporate risk register to raise their profile. Major risks around the implementation of the new IT system have been mitigated well. For example, a £40,000 contingency budget is in place to ensure that data is accurate before input, staff were involved in evaluating the new system including site visits, and agency staff have been employed to cover those on secondment to the project. Training on the new IT system has been well-planned and is being overseen by corporate training staff to ensure the training meets its objectives. A 'train the trainer' scheme is also in place to provide local support. Experienced, Prince2 trained project management Council staff and from the IT supplier are on the project board. The project is on schedule and has good buy-in from staff and councillors. The revenues service, in a separate directorate, will also be using the new IT system, but it is unclear if the two services are in agreement as to how the new system should operate. Overall, the project is well-supported and managed and will help deliver efficiencies and improvements.
- 84** Training within the Service is good and meets the needs of staff. It is well-planned and effective, ranging from customer care, IT and the opportunity to study for NVQs. Professional training is provided where necessary and reasonable budgets are available, slightly above benchmark levels. Training for staff to prevent fraud and error has been particularly well planned. The different needs of staff have been taken into account and training is tailored to meet these needs. Fraud training is carried out annually, as well as via e-learning and is available to landlords, off-site staff and staff from other services. For example, staff from HR and Education have attended it. The Service has also efficiently shared training with neighbouring authorities. Training has been provided to allow pre-assessment officers to progress to full assessment officers which has improved their career path. Training is evaluated to ensure that it is effective, with results from training activities fed back and discussed with staff individually. Some staff have suggested more refresher training, for example, on the impact of recent legislative changes. And not all councillors have taken up the training available meaning they may not have up-to-date knowledge of the service. Overall, well-planned and delivered training is helping the Service ensure staff have the right skills and knowledge to undertake their roles effectively.
- 85** Partnership working is adequate. The Service is proactive in developing relations with neighbouring benefits services. For example, it co-ordinated a Berkshire-wide group of benefits services to identify joint working opportunities, such as the recent joint benefits training which reduced costs. It has also recently agreed a shared mystery shopping exercise to improve learning opportunities. A recent event was held in conjunction with other partners such as the NHS and Citizens Advice Bureau in the town centre to raise awareness of issues such as benefits and home insulation grants. This partnership working is making the Service more accessible to residents and helping limit the impact of the recession. However, plans to share services are only in their infancy.

---

# The Audit Commission

The Audit Commission is an independent watchdog, driving economy, efficiency and effectiveness in local public services to deliver better outcomes for everyone.

Our work across local government, health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services means that we have a unique perspective. We promote value for money for taxpayers, auditing the £200 billion spent by 11,000 local public bodies.

As a force for improvement, we work in partnership to assess local public services and make practical recommendations for promoting a better quality of life for local people.

---

## Copies of this report

If you require further copies of this report, or a copy in large print, in Braille, audio, or in a language other than English, please call 0844 798 7070.

© Audit Commission 2010

For further information on the work of the Commission please contact:

Audit Commission, 1st Floor, Millbank Tower, Millbank, London SW1P 4HQ

Tel: 0844 798 1212 Fax: 0844 798 2945 Textphone (minicom): 0844 798 2946

[www.audit-commission.gov.uk](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk)

---