

BRISTOL CITY COUNCIL

Scrutiny Committee

November 2015

Report of: Service Director, Integrated Customer Services

Title: Benefit Service

Ward: Citywide

Officer Presenting Report: Patsy Mellor, Service Director, ICS

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RECOMMENDATION

That the report be noted.

Summary

Position statement for Housing Benefits/Council Tax Reduction. Benefits current caseload is 45,362 (HB & HB/CTR – 37,391, CTR only – 7,971). The volume of work outstanding has been split between backlog and new work. The backlog amounts to 2,400 documents (new claims & changes), current work 2,900 and 2,500 in pending (awaiting further information).

The significant issues in the report are:

The Benefit Service backlog of work increased between April 2015 and July 2015. This report covers the reasons for the backlog, along with actions being taken to clear this, and ensure a similar situation does not arise

Policy

1. *Not applicable*

Consultation

2. **Internal**
Not applicable

3. External

Not applicable

Context

4. The Benefit Service currently has over 46,000 citizens of Bristol claiming Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax Reduction. Throughout the year the service processes over 9,000 new claims and 128,000 changes in circumstances.

5. The Benefit Service need a full time establishment of 85 processing officers in order to work on the volume of new claims/changes received, and over the past 12 months this has significantly reduced due to the high levels of vacancies, sickness absence, and maternity leave. (Between April 2014 and March 2015 the Benefit Service has been under staffed between 8 and 13 FTE every month).

6. Throughout 2014/15 the service lost the equivalent of 5 officers due to sickness absence every month, and in order to support the service agency officers were employed up to April 2014, prior to the corporate decision to stop employing agency staff.

7. Due to the complexity of Housing Benefit/Council Tax Reduction and associated training requirements it is not possible to fill vacancies as they arise. The initial training period is 13 weeks, although new entrants will not be fully operational until around 12 months.

8. The above has resulted in our overall processing times for new claims and changes failing to achieve agreed targets.

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10. Actions taken in order improve overall processing times.

11. Agency officers were reemployed from September 2014 to help reduce the backlog prior to the opening of the CSP at Temple Street. This was successful as is evident by the reduction in the 'end to end' processing times for New Claims from 62 to 37 days and changes by a third by the end of March 2015.

12. We continued to employ agency officers up to the end of March 2015 in order to keep the backlog to a manageable level, along with focusing on the large volume of 'year-end' work required.

13. Short to Mid Term Strategy

14. *In order to clear the amount of outstanding work which had increased since April 2014, due to the temporary loss of the agency officers and further vacancies within the service, the service focussed on 3 main areas:*

15. *Fill all vacant posts*

16. *Ensure no increase in the level of outstanding work, pending the new entrants finishing their training*

17. *Clear the any backlog within 2 months on the new entrants becoming fully operational*

18. *In order to achieve the following actions were taken:*

19. *Vacant post were advertised and filled, with new entrants starting in July 2015*

20. *Agency officers employed to cover vacant posts and avoid any further slippage until the new entrants had completed their training, and are fully operational*

21. *Backlog closely monitored to ensure no increase*

22. *Sickness review across the service, including disciplinary action taken where applicable*

23. *Full analysis was undertaken to confirm/establish the staffing requirements to prevent further slippage and accurately forecast the timescale for reducing/clearing the backlog*

24. *The target date for clearing the backlog needs to be realistic and achievable and has been set for December 2015. This has taken into account the following:*

25. *Training period for the new entrants*

26. *Ability to employ high quality agency officers to provide cover – due to the complex nature of the work it is not always possible to employ experienced agency officers*

27. *Increased leave due to the summer holidays*

28. *Permanent officers who do not work during the school holidays*

29. *Potential further vacancies*

30. *The current position shows that the backlog work (work received prior to*

21st September 2015) has reduced by 2,000 cases between 1st & 18th October 2015. Once the remaining cleared the focus will move on to clearing the new work received after this date.

31. Long Term Strategy

32. *The service recognises the need for a sustainable long term strategy, with the main focus being on solving the area which has the greatest impact – high level of vacancies.*

33. *The service cannot run effectively and to agreed service standards/targets if continually below establishment.*

34. *This has been addressed and the actions below are being currently underway*

35. *It has been agreed that we can increase our establishment by 10 Officers in order to achieve targets/performance standards, and reduce the reliance on agency officers. (The additional bank of processors will enable the service to run with the required full time establishment at all times providing cover in event of high levels of sickness absence, vacancies, etc).*

36. *With Universal Credit on the horizon the service will closely monitor officers leaving due concerns regarding the potential reduction in staffing requirements.*

37. *Recruitment is underway to cover existing vacancies and the above mentioned 10 officers over establishment*

38. *Target to have all new entrants trained and in place by 1st April 2016*

39. *Trail at Phoenix CSP in respect of online claiming (the withdrawal of paper HB application forms). This is in order to speed up the processing times as Risk Based Verification (RBV) is best used where there is no backlog and the citizen will then get an immediate response as to what evidence/information is required to support their claim*

40. *Increased resource allocation to the Quality Control team to improve/increase checking procedures – resulting in less potential rework*

41. *Up skilling and leadership development of team leaders*

42. *Trial structure in place with smaller processing teams, to improve overall control for the team leader*

43. *Implementation of final revised structure that will be determined by using factual data produced through the various proto-type trials applied for improved efficiency*

44. Further automated and integrated processes are currently being investigated for development

45. Along with the above, a number of stand-alone projects are also underway to help move the service towards a more digital approach. (Full on-line claiming, reduction in the volume of letters posted, etc)

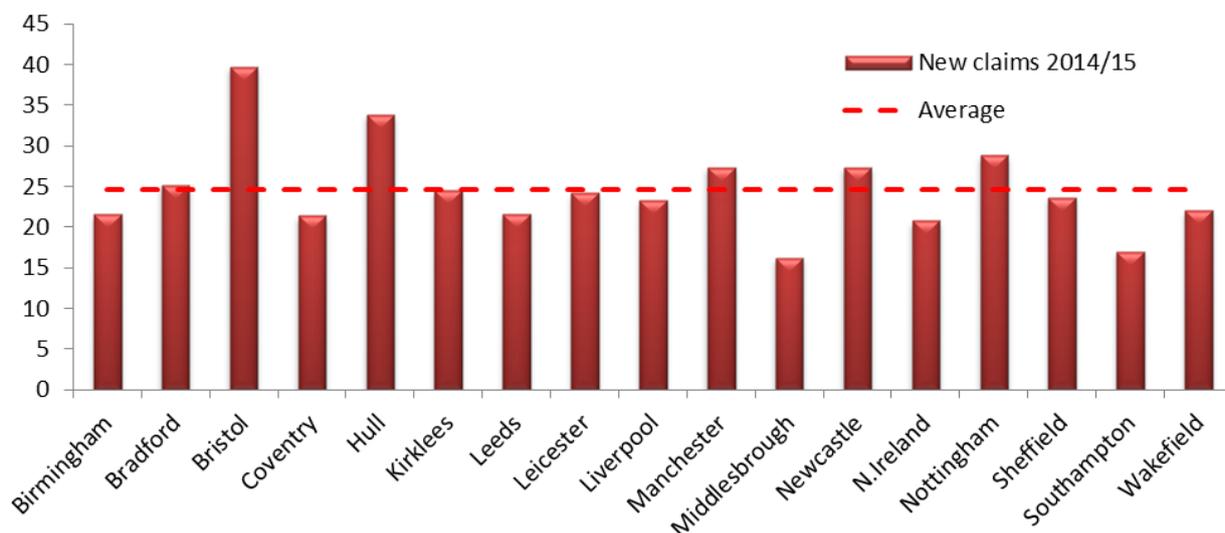
46. Cross training and up skilling within the CSC, to allow for more flexibility within this service area, overall improving the service to the citizen

47. Benchmarking with other Local Authorities

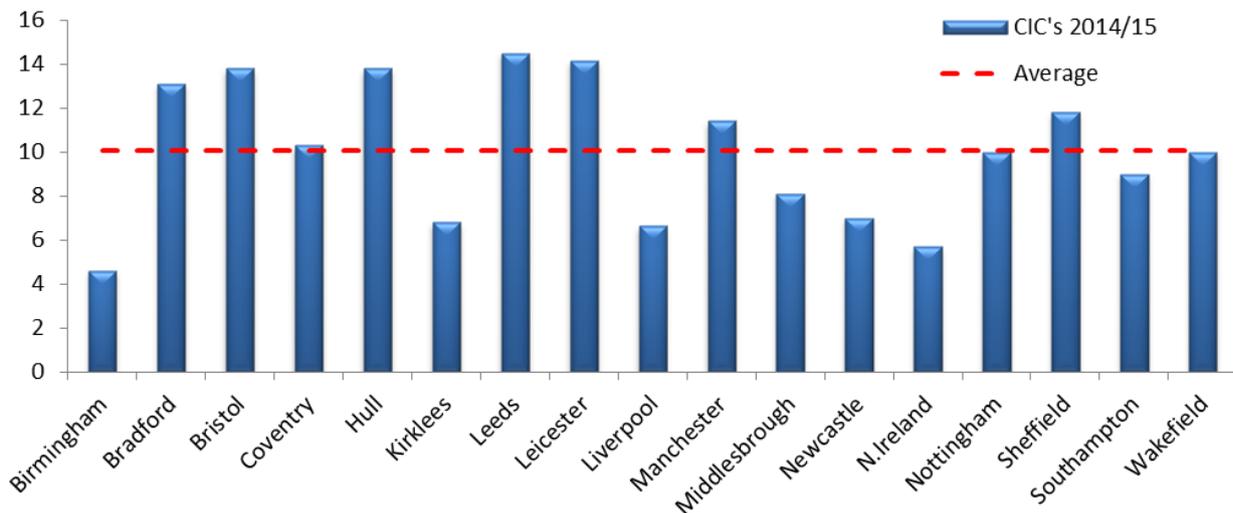
48. The National statistics for quarter 4 of 2014/15 show the average time taken to process HB New Claims as 22 days, and changes of circumstances at 5 days. This data includes all local authorities with within England, Wales and Scotland.

49. In order for a more accurate representation as to how we are performing we need to compare our performance against core cities, whose demographics are similar to Bristol's.

50. New Claims Processing Times (Days) 2014/15



51. Changes in Circumstances Processing Times (Days) 2014/15



Other Options Considered

52. *Not applicable*

Risk Assessment

53. *The clearance of the backlog will primarily provide financial support to some of Bristol's most vulnerable citizens. By taking this approach risks relating to potential homelessness loss of security of tenure and increased debts are mitigated.*

Public Sector Equality Duties

8a) Before making a decision, section 149 Equality Act 2010 requires that each decision-maker considers the need to promote equality for persons with the following "protected characteristics": age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation. Each decision-maker must, therefore, have due regard to the need to:

- i) Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct prohibited under the Equality Act 2010.
- ii) Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it. This involves having due regard, in particular, to the need to --
 - remove or minimise disadvantage suffered by persons who share a relevant protected characteristic;
 - take steps to meet the needs of persons who share a relevant protected characteristic that are different from the needs of people who do not share it (in relation to disabled people, this includes, in

particular, steps to take account of disabled persons' disabilities);

- encourage persons who share a protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity in which participation by such persons is disproportionately low.

- iii) Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it. This involves having due regard, in particular, to the need to –
 - tackle prejudice; and
 - promote understanding.

- 8b) Public sector equality duties are relevant to these proposals. In the broadest sense additional incomes and one off payments prevent on many occasions immediate crisis. By ensuring appropriate payments of benefits to those in need. This provides support not only for vulnerable citizens in terms of financial sustainability, but also contributes to improving the viability of local social economics.

Legal and Resource Implications

Legal

Not applicable

Financial

(a) Revenue

Agency staff funding approved by the Citizens Services Pay Panel (Funding from additional grants from the Department for Works and Pensions).

(b) Capital

Not applicable

Land

Not applicable

Personnel

Not applicable

Appendices:

None

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

Background Papers:

None