

CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Committee Report

Public

Date of Meeting: 28 July 2005

Title: BEST VALUE REVIEW OF REVENUES AND BENEFITS
SERVICES

Report of: Head of Revenues and Benefits Services

Report reference: RB5/05

Summary:

As set out in the scope and work plan agreed by O & S on 1 April 2004, Members are requested to scrutinise investigations undertaken, findings and proposed action (and timetable) to improve service delivery in the following areas.

- | | | |
|------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|
| i) | Absence Monitoring | Paper 1 |
| ii) | IT/IS Initiative supporting the Unit | Paper 2 |
| iii) | HB/CTB Performance Standards, 3rd Review | Paper 3 |
| iv) | Performance comparisons before and after review | Paper 4 |
| v) | Improving forms, publicity and written
Correspondence update | Paper 5 |
| vi) | Progressing Corporate Agenda and Championing
External Opportunities | Paper 6 |

Recommendations:

The Committee is asked to scrutinise the investigations, findings and proposed actions as set out in Papers 1 to 6 of the report and the Action Plan detailed in Appendix A.

Contact Officer: Peter B Mason

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CARLISLE CITY COUNCIL

To: Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny
Committee

RB 5/05

Date: 28 July 2005

BEST VALUE REVIEW OF REVENUES AND BENEFITS SERVICES

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This report updates Members on work undertaken in progressing the Best Value Review of Revenues and Benefits Services in the period 1 October 2004 – 30 June 2005.
- 1.2 The aim of the review being to turn a 'good' performing Revenues and Benefits Service into an excellent service. It will be measured by effectiveness and efficiency of service delivery and taking account of customer satisfaction and its contribution to the broader aims of the Council.
- 1.3 As set out in the scope and work plan agreed by O & S on 1 April 2004, Members are requested to scrutinise investigations undertaken, findings and proposed action (and timetable) to improve service delivery in the following areas.

i)	Absence Monitoring	Paper 1
ii)	IT/IS Initiatives supporting the Unit	Paper 2
iii)	HB/CTB Performance Standards 3 rd review	Paper 3
iv)	Performance comparisons before and after review	Paper 4
v)	Improving forms, publicity and written correspondence update	Paper 5
vi)	Progressing Corporate Agenda and Championing External Opportunities	Paper 6
- 1.4 Individual presentations will be given on each of the papers.
- 1.5 At the 8th September meeting of this Committee the final report on the Best Value Review will be presented for scrutiny. The only issues yet to be covered (as set out in the original workplan) are the following external challenges to the Council:-
 - i) Gershon/Joint Provision of services, and competition from outsourcing suppliers.
 - ii) Impact on customers of the closure of local post offices.

2. BEST VALUE REVIEW ACTION PLAN

- 2.1 The Action Plan detailed at Appendix A has been updated to include required actions to progress service improvements as set out in Papers 1 – 6.
- 2.2 The Action Plan has also been updated to advise on progress on actions as agreed by O & S Committee on 1 April 2004 and 25 November 2005.
- 2.3 The Action Plan as a working document is being updated on a daily basis in response to any progress made on the Best Value agenda for service improvement.

3. SCRUTINY

The Committee is asked to scrutinise the investigations, findings and proposed actions as set out in Papers 1 to 6 of the report and the Action Plan detailed in Appendix A.

Peter B Mason
HEAD OF REVENUES AND BENEFITS SERVICES

Contact Name: Peter B Mason

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Revenues & Benefits
Carlisle
28 October 2004
PM/EL/RB7-04

REVENUES AND BENEFITS SERVICES
BEST VALUE REVIEW

Absence Monitoring

Prepared by Peter B Mason CPFA
Head of Revenues & Benefits Services

1) **Introduction**

- 1.1 Sickness absence within the Revenues and Benefits Unit is an area of poor performance identified as needing to be investigated as part of the review.
- 1.2 The unit has always recognised that it has a sickness absence problem and has been very proactive in following enhanced absence monitoring and control procedures developed by Personnel over the last 5 years i.e.
 - (i) All unit staff are subject to a back to work interview where a sickness declaration proforma is completed on their return after sickness absence.
 - (ii) Absence support meetings are held with staff that meet absence trigger points ie when pattern of absence causes concern eg 4 periods of sickness within the year. Action agreed to reduce sickness absence is recorded and closely monitored.
 - (iii) Regular home visits are made to staff on long term sickness absence.
- 1.3 The unit has developed a sickness absence database to monitor sickness absence closely rather than wait for quarterly reports produced corporately.
- 1.4 Sickness absence levels are reported as a standing item at unit management meetings and circulated to staff (including comments indicating management disappointment that sickness levels remain a concern.)
- 1.5 Nevertheless overall sickness absence within the unit remains above acceptable levels and within the third quartile nationally.

1.6 The aim of the review of absence monitoring within the unit is to:-

- Benchmark sickness levels in Revenues and Benefits against other Authorities in our benchmark group.
- Research what policies (if any) other Authorities with low sickness levels have in place to control absence better.
- Analyse sickness levels of unit staff over the longer term (one on anonymous basis) to see what issues/trends become apparent.
- Make suggestions to better control absence with the view of improving sickness absence performance to top quartile nationally i.e. under 9 days average sickness levels across the unit.

2)

Current Sickness Levels Within the Unit

2.1 In 2004/05 the units 62.5 (WTE) staff took a total of 700.5 days sick leave or an average of 11.2 days per staff member (source BU12 performance data). This compared to corporate sickness performance of 12.87 days per person.

2.2 Nationally in Local Government the average sickness per member of staff is 10.42 days and quartile targets (2003/04) are:-

Top Quartile	8.93
Middle Quartile	10.30
Bottom Quartile	11.82

2.3 Based on 2003/04 quartiles the unit's sickness levels at 11.2 are third quartile and corporately at 12.87 are still bottom quartile.

2.4 To achieve top quartile the unit will need to reduce sickness levels by an average of 2.5 days per person. It should be noted that the Executive group, Finance, Legal and Democratic Services, Member Support and Employee services and Planning are already achieving top quartile absence control performance. In the circumstances meeting top quartile in Revenues and Benefits services should be achievable providing more effective absence control measures are introduced.

2.5 Unfortunately the situation is complicated by the impact of long term sickness (particularly on small units) on performance. A member of staff is deemed to be on long term sickness absence when they have been off for more than 4 weeks. In Revenues and Benefits 438 days absence 63% was long term and 262 (37%) was short term.

- 2.6 It is a very long term process to either rehabilitate staff off due to serious sickness/medical problems or invoke early retirement on health grounds.
- 2.7 Most absence reduction measures followed can only tackle short term absence.

3. **Comparisons with Benchmark Authorities.**

- 3.1 Noted at Appendix 1 is comparative sickness levels for Revenues and Benefits units in Carlisle's benchmark group (where they have responded). Benchmarking results highlight:-
 - (i) Carlisle's poor sickness levels in Revenues and Benefits when compared to like authorities i.e. average for all of 8.9 days against 11.2 days for Carlisle. However no breakdown was available between short and long term sickness.
 - (ii) Authorities with very low sickness levels that Carlisle could contact to ascertain whether any particularly effective practices are in place to control absence (initial contact suggests that Carlisle's absence control policies are more robust than most!).
- 3.2 Benchmarking also dispels some of the job related myths put forward as to why sickness levels are worse in Revenues and particularly Benefits e.g. more stressful job, open plan, face to face contact with the public etc. The average for the Revenues and Benefits benchmarked is 8.9 days (just top quartile) with Carlisle's at 11.2 days being third quartile. However again it should be noted that only Carlisle and Wyre Forest reported significant long term sickness problems.

4. **Sickness Trends**

- 4.1 On an anonymous basis sickness records of all current staff that have worked in Revenues and Benefits for at least 4 years have been analysed.
- 4.2 The results are very informative (see attached spread sheet and charts) - Appendix 2
 - (i) 74% of staff (93% in Revenues and 63% in Benefits) meet national top quartile performance, and 5 staff have had no sick leave in last 4 years.
 - (ii) In the main staff (but not all) with poor sickness records have regular sickness absence on a year by year basis.
 - (iii) The sickness problem is restricted to the Benefits section ie average sickness Revenues 2.1 days per member of staff average for benefits 10.2 days per member of staff. 29% of Benefits staff (6 staff)

have had unacceptable levels of sickness absence based on last few years.

5. **Initiatives to improve sickness absence control**

5.1 As detailed in 4 of the reports sickness absence is only a problem in the Benefits section. In the circumstances initiatives to reduce sickness absence have been targeted at this part of the unit.

5.2 The following initiatives are being progressed and included in the Best Value action plan to enable progress to be monitored.

(i) **Occupational Health Pilot Scheme**

The Benefits Section is one of three sections chosen to take part in an occupational health pilot scheme. The other sections are the Grounds and Highways Sections within Commercial and Technical Services Business Unit and offer a good mix of work, working patterns and occupational health requirements across the Council. The total number of employees involved in the pilot is approximately 135 and the aim is to try to determine whether or not this type of proactive intervention improves attendance levels and is cost effective.

The pilot is part of an 'Improving Attendance Action Plan' agreed by the Council and discussed at both Corporate Joint Consultative (CJC) and local Joint Consultative meetings. It is intended the scheme will commence shortly and run for four months and cover three aspects:

- **Short term absences** – reporting sickness absence to an occupational health nurse who will be available out-of-hours and be able to offer helpful medical advice.
- **General health screening** – confidential and voluntary screening designed to detect potential health issues in the early stages and to offer any relevant vaccinations.
- **Specific occupational related screening** – specific to the actual work undertaken and part of health and safety risk assessments e.g. eye tests.

(ii) **Homeworking Pilot Scheme**

Partial funding has been secured from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to introduce a pilot home-working scheme into

benefits. One of the key drivers behind the initiative is the Employment Rights Act 1996 as amended by the Employment Act 2002: giving eligible employees the right to request a flexible working pattern. In addition, part of the business case justification for the scheme is to:

- Improve staff retention and aid recruitment through offering more flexible working patterns in order to aid work/life balance;
- Increase flexibility in order to accommodate peaks and troughs in workloads; and
- Reduce overall levels of sickness absence

Current funding allows for 12 volunteer employees to trial homeworking across three different homeworking patterns:

- **Home time** – working solely from home and only reporting into the office for specific training or meeting requirements
- **Mobile** – downloading daily work schedules at home, using ‘real time’ technology in customers’ homes and uploading the results at the end of the working day.
- **Ad hoc** – working from home or in the office as the type of work requires.

The pilot will operate between July and September 2005 and the realisation of potential business benefits will determine the expansion of the pilot across the Business Unit and corporately.

Experience from other Councils operating home-working schemes suggest that sickness absence can be reduced by up to 75%.

5.3 Vetting short term sickness trends of job applicants

More contentions is a suggestion that short term sickness absence is taken into account when appointing staff to vacant positions in the unit i.e. in responding to evidence that many staff with poor short term sickness records have continuous sickness issues over the longer term. As a matter of course applicants would be advised that long term sickness trends would be taken into account on making appointments.

5.4 This suggestion is being investigated corporately in liaison with Personnel as any initiative in this respect will be introduced corporately.

5.5 It should be noted that job applicants subject to DDA requirements will not be vetted under this initiative (see

revised reference performa) such applicants already being subject to a medical report.

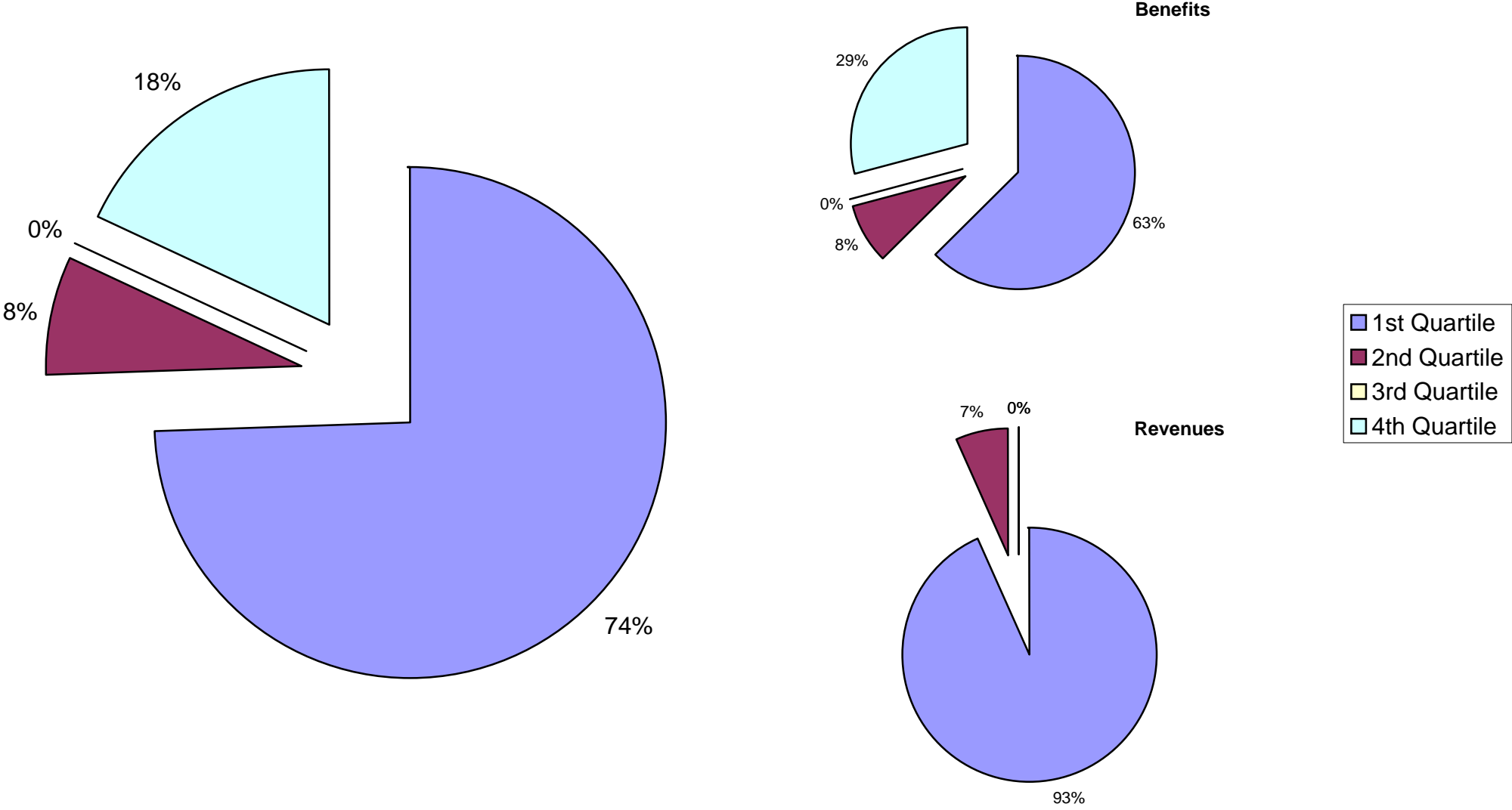
- 5.6 The Personnel Manager has updated the reference performa to request employers to provide better information on sickness absence of candidates for posts with the City Council. (See extract appendix 3)

6. **Recommendation**

- 6.1 Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to scrutinise initiatives to be introduced with the aim of reducing sickness absence levels within Revenues and Benefits by an average of at least 2.5 days per member of staff in achieving top quartile performance in sickness absence.
- 6.2 Note action plan targets that will be monitored and any progress reported to members.
- 6.3 Note that this report detailing initiatives to be progressed in targeting reduced sickness absence will be discussed with the Unions at the next CJC.

[illegible]

Average Days Sickness For Staff



1. Please state how long you have known the applicant and in what capacity.

2. Employment Details

Post held by Applicant _____

Date of commencement _____

Date of Leaving _____

Reason for leaving (if known)

Final salary _ _____

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
Timekeeping	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
* Sickness / absence record	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Disciplinary record	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Would you re-employ him / her?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>		No <input type="checkbox"/>	

* If possible please indicate the number of days sickness & number of occasions absence over last two years.

Please disregard any absences connected with any disability or maternity if relevant.

PAPER 2

REVENUES AND BENEFITS SERVICES BEST VALUE REVIEW

ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE

IT/IS Initiatives Supporting the Unit

Prepared by Peter B Mason
Head of Revenues and Benefits Services

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 To achieve excellence in Revenues and Benefits Services the Unit must embrace the latest IT/IS technology.
- 1.2 It is only by being pro-active in taking advantage of hardware, software and operating system enhancements that the Unit can deliver year on year efficiencies whilst at the same time improving service to the public.
- 1.3 This report provides details on current IT/IS initiatives being progressed by the Unit in liaison with Customer and Information Services as part of the Best Value Review.

2. IT/IS Projects being progressed during the Best Value Review

- 2.1 Noted at Appendix 1 are the 25 initiatives currently being progressed. They include the following initiatives that will improve service to the public.
 - i) Payment of Housing Benefit by BACS
This will allow the Council to automatically credit claimants (and landlords) bank accounts avoiding claimants the inconvenience of having to bank cheques.
 - ii) Electronic Benefit Claim form
When implemented this will enable claimants to access claim forms on-line reducing the amount of time between claiming and determination of housing benefit. Eventually other Revenues and Benefit forms will also be accessible on-line including
 - change of address
 - single person discount
 - empty exemption
 - uninhabitable exemption
 - student discount
 - disabled band reduction

- iii) Pro-Print
This software will allow the Council to personalise letters to customers. One of the main complaints of customers on satisfaction surveys is the complicated and non-customer friendly nature of documentation sent out on Revenues and Benefit matters.
- iv) Homeworking
Homeworking pilot covered elsewhere in agenda.
- v) Barcodes
The introduction of barcodes to customer reply documents will automate scanning processes and streamline workflow practices again improving speed of service to customers.
- vi) Enhanced Sundry Debtors System
Significant staff resources were targeted at introducing much enhanced sundry debtors software which went live in November 2004. Advantages of the new software to the customer include:-
 - i) more and clearer information concerning service provided detailed on invoice
 - ii) copy invoice automatically sent with reminder
 - iii) can now pay accounts electronically via telephone on line, etc.

A big advantage of the enhanced system in the context of the Review is that performance management information can now be accessed from the system. Performance targets have now been set and will be monitored on a quarterly basis.

- 2.2 All the above IT initiatives being progressed to improve the service to customers (which should result in improved customer satisfaction) have been included on the Best Value Review Action Plan to enable progress to be monitored.

3. Reliability of IT

- 3.1 An area of risk identified in the Best Value Review workplan is the reliance of the Unit on IT's Applications and Information Manager for support, expertise and most important trouble shooting i.e. availability, upgrades, new software implementation etc.
- 3.2 The Unit is completely reliant on Revenues and Benefits computer systems to administer services. If systems go down up to 75 staff become non-productive until systems are back up.
- 3.3 The risk to the Unit occurs when the Applications and Information Manager is not available due to holiday, being off site etc. The risk is reduced by the Manager being in contact with the office by modem link

but there have still times where system down time has caused significant disruption due to lack of experienced IT support.

- 3.4 The Applications and Information Manager has advised that during the financial year 2004/05 to date a considerable amount of skill transfer has taken place. This has been due to
- i) the introduction of Capita/Direct which is from the same supplier as the core Revenues and Benefits systems.
 - ii) As a result of the flood requiring Revenues and Benefits systems to be rebuilt from scratch by implementing a real disaster recovery initiation IT support staff have learnt of great deal.
- 3.5 It is anticipated that shared knowledge will be further enhanced as the Council moves forward with the Capita CRM/Direct over the coming years as the Authority exploits the links with Revenues and Benefits systems.
- 3.6 Revenues and Benefits IT has also been much more liable since the temporary relocation to Kingmoor Park with more stable software and operating systems.
- 3.7 There is still areas of risk of downtime due to areas of expertise still held only by the Applications and Information Manager i.e.
- i) New release/upgrades installations (Academy and Images).
 - ii) Copy live data to test.
 - iii) BI Query upgrades.
 - iv) End of year support (however can be planned in advance etc).
- 3.8 These critical areas of support where skills transfer is still required will be included for monitoring purposes in the Best Value Review Action Plan.

4. Way Forward

- 4.1 Members are asked to scrutinise IT/IS initiatives being progressed as part of the review particularly enhancements that will benefit the Unit's customers.
- 4.2 Members are asked to note the progress being made in transferring skills knowledge in critical areas of IT support. Also areas where skills transfer is still required and monitoring arrangements put in place to track progress.

- 4.3 Members are asked to note that the IT/IS initiatives noted in the report will be included in the Best Value Review Action Plan and progress will be reported for scrutiny to future meetings.

Revenues & Benefits

Carlisle

4 July 2005

PM/EL/Paper 1 IT-IS Initiatives Supporting the Unit

IT/IS Projects being progressed during the Best Value Review

VICTER – Electronic Interface System (EIS) to exchange information electronically between Housing Benefits and The Rent Service. Installed June 2005 and testing to continue, throughout June and July, before going 'live'. When VICTER and Academy have a 'live' interface, it would be ideal if there was a link to IMAGES so the documents would automatically import into the DIP system and become work items for Assessment Staff. VICTER software lost in the flood (held on desk top PC)

Corporate Sickness Absence Database - A new database has been created to record information required under the reporting requirements of the new Management Attendance (sickness absence) policy. CIS has created the database and procedures and training have been undertaken to familiarise Managers with the system.

Payment of Housing Benefit by Bank Automated Credit Services (BACS) – In line with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), to meet BVPI 157 (electronic government targets) and to prepare for implementation of the Local Housing Allowance, Housing Benefit payments by cheque need to be replaced, by BACS payments, before 1 October 2005.

Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) Database – The recent Internal Audit of housing and Council Tax Benefit recommends a register of 'houses in multiple occupation' be created as a control to ensure the number of claims, at any given time, do not exceed rooms available and are not duplicating rooms. No progress yet made on this initiative due to competing priorities in respect of recovering from the flood.

Anite's 'Campaign Manager' – This additional module was purchased and implemented as part of the Benefits Document Image Processing (DIP) system. The module allows certain mail categories (e.g. new claims) to be given priority when staff request the next piece of outstanding mail to allocate to their in-tray. The operating system is still under evaluation.

Benefit Cheque reconciliation – set up an interface to return cheque reconciliation data into Academy benefits to improve customer service

LLPG Integration – Phase 1 to populate Revenues & Benefits systems with Unique Property Reference Number

Phase 2 – To investigate a direct link between the LLPG and Revenues & Benefits systems to automate the pick up of address data. This initiative will dovetail in with the Corporate LLPG initiative.

Flat Screen Monitors – Some of the existing PC monitors, within Benefits have been replaced on health and safety grounds (i.e. those in the immediate vicinity of the Electromagnetic Field within the Benefits Office) due to flickering. Others are flickering, to varying degrees, due to the operation of the humidifier and air conditioning units. A replacement programme of flat

screen monitors would resolve the problem as they are not susceptible to screen flicker. Due to the flood the Unit was able to replace all VDUs with flat screen technology.

Electronic Interface System with RAT (remote access terminal to DWP information) – The facility may be available to send and receive RAT requests electronically to avoid manual printing. Initiative still in planning stage.

Anite's 'Off-Line Scanning' Module – Allows single photographs to be scanned as multiple images within 1 document (.tiff). This module is relatively new so costs and advantages/disadvantages are still to be assessed.

Anite's 'ETD' (electronic transfer download) Module – Allows RAT ETD downloads to be automatically imported and indexed into IMAGES. Costs and advantages are not cost effective with current quantity of ETD download documents but, when the 'Extended Access' Facility is rolled out nationally, this decision should be reconsidered.

Academy's Electronic Benefit Claim Form – This functionality is free to Academy sites as a successful national Performance Standards Funding Bid. There will need to be co-ordination between the corporate web design and Academy Benefits software and Customer Contact Centre operating systems.

Academy's 'Skillwise' Benefits Training Module – More functionality for Academy sites as a successful national Performance Standards Funding Bid. Trains new users on the Academy software using three stages of training: 'how', 'show me' and 'test me'.

Capita's Benefits Procedure Manual - A successful national Performance Standards Funding Bid to allow Academy sites to take full advantage of Capita's electronic Benefits procedure manuals. The initial 8 modules are currently being evaluated.

Pro-Print – Software that allows word functionality and professional design to be applied to Academy Benefit templates (letters and forms). Also allows personalisation dependent on common circumstances e.g. specific additional paragraphs for Pensioners. The software is due to be tested in the live environment in October 2005.

Homeworking Pilot – This project which has substantial IT implications is progressing well and the Council's first home workers should be in operation by the end of July 2005.

Fraud Referral Sifting Mechanism – To comply with the DWP/BFI HB/CTB Performance Standards a fraud referral sifting mechanism has to be developed to score fraud referrals, based on individual claimant circumstances to prioritise investigations. This will be based on intelligence gathered through data analysis of existing proven fraud caseloads.

Local Housing Allowance Pilot – Additional Academy software will be required to implement the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) and may well be

linked to the introduction to make Housing Benefit payments via BACS. Implementation of LHA would have been 1st April 2005 (if Carlisle was chosen as a pathfinder authority) or 1st April 2006 if not. Unfortunately Carlisle was not chosen to be a pathfinder authority.

Windows software

Currently Windows 97

We need a corporate plan to move to a later version

Images scanner replacement

Current scanners are October 1999. Replaced as part of flood recovery arrangements.

Printer replacement program

Most of the printers in the department are 4 plus year old. Again replaced as part of flood recovery arrangements.

Barcodes – Introduce the use of barcode to customer reply portion of benefit related documents to automate the scanning process.

Enhanced Sundry Debtors Software

After adhering to an extensive implementation plan/in liaison with CIS and Finance the Unit introduced enhanced Sundry Debtors software in November 2001.

Advantages of New System for the Council:-

- Searches are easier and quicker for staff and customers (including amount search for easier identification of unallocated payments)
- All transactions (invoices/periodics/payments) are amalgamated for each debtor (recovery made easier)
- Clearer reports for service provider
- System information can be easily exported to word or excel
- Instalments are easier to manage (and can be paid by Direct Debit)

For the Customer

- Enquiries are quicker due to searches and amalgamated info
- Clearer information with more detail on invoices
- Copy invoice automatically sent with reminder (if first lost)
- Can now pay by telephone

Revenues & Benefits

Carlisle

30 June 2005

PM/EL/Appendix 1 Best Value Review IT IS Initiatives Supporting the Unit

Paper 3

REVENUES AND BENEFITS SERVICES.

BEST VALUE REVIEW

ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE

Housing Benefit/Council Tax

Performance Standards (3rd Review)

1) Introduction

1.1 In the Best Value Review progress reports considered by members on 3 August and 25th November 2004 the role of the performance standards in improving Housing Benefits administration was explained. The standards providing a strict framework for service delivery designed to assist the Council:-

- i) Analyse risks in its benefits processes and counter-fraud activity.
- ii) Set standards of what makes up effective and secure Housing Benefit delivery.
- iii) Identify what needs to be achieved to deliver an effective service that meets wider strategy objectives and strengthens accountability.
- iv) Benchmark performance to identify areas of administration where improvements may need to be made.

1.2 The reports informed members of the exercise undertaken to benchmark Carlisle's Housing Benefits service against the standards. Also, where standards were not being met the action taken or to be taken in an effort to meet 85% of the standards by 1 April 2005.

2) Revised Standards

2.1 The original purpose of this report was to update members on standards achieved since November 2004.

2.2 However in the meantime, in line with Governments revised policy of targeting inspections and support at poorly performing Authorities, the Audit Commission/BFI have completely rewritten the Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Performance Standards (HB and CTB)

2.3 The Council now has to undertake a self assessment against the new standards and produce evidence where standards are being met and

improvement proposals where they are not. Initially this self assessment had to be completed and reported by the 30th June 2005 (to feed into the Council's 2007 CPA assessment). This self assessment has since been postponed for non unitary Councils.

- 2.4 The new Performance Standards cover the full picture of what makes up effective and secure delivery of Benefit. They allow inspectors and auditors under the CPA process to assess whether the Council provides a modern, efficient, effective, secure and customer-focused HB and CTB service that it is continuously seeking to improve. The new standards are divided into 4 themes:-

- i) **Claims administration** – claims processing, quality and reducing error and overpayments.
- ii) **Security** – security of administration, counter-fraud activities and sanctions.
- iii) **User Focus** – take-up, customer service and appeals and complaints.
- iii) **Resource management** – Strategic management, value for money and assurance.

Detailed at Appendix 1 are the aspects of Benefits administration that fall into each of these categories.

2.5 **Performance Measures**

There are 19 performance measures (up from 10 under the old standards). These are volume-based and the council is required to provide data quarterly to the DWP. The 19 performance measures are detailed at appendix 2.

2.6 **Key Enablers**

There are 65 enablers that set out a strategy, policy, procedure/practice that the council should have in place (see appendix 3). The council is required to undertake an annual self-assessment against these enablers and submit the data to the DWP electronically.

- 2.7 The council can determine its overall score against the standards, ie excellent, good, fair and poor by comparing the total score from its performance against the performance measures and its self assessment against the enablers.

2.8 **Overall Score**

This overall score will form the basis of the council's CPA assessment for benefits services (once the evidence to support the assessment has been externally audited) that will feed into the Council's over CPA assessment.

2.9 How the Performance Standards will be used to inform on efficiency of Housing Benefits Administration

The performance standards have a number of purposes. They include

- **Members** – the highest point of accountability within the council. The standards will help them maintain corporate governance over HB and CTB administration and counter-fraud activity.
- **Chief Executives and senior officers** – responsible for informing Members of Performance on HB and CTB administration. The use of the Standards will provide the means of monitoring Performance and reporting on it.
- **Benefit and Counter-fraud Managers** - the Standards provide a framework for measuring performance and ensuring an effective and secure service that meets the requirements of Members, senior managers, customers and landlords.
- **Benefit and Counter-fraud staff** – the standards provide reference material, including good practices, and offer them help to ensure an effective and secure service that meets the requirements of Members and senior managers.
- **Internal Auditors** – can help the council by using the Standards to do an independent assessment of the Benefits Service.
- **External Auditors** – as a point of reference when planning an audit of the Benefits Service
- **Customers** – the Standards will improve understanding of the quality of service they can expect
- **Other stakeholders including Government** – the Standards will help the council to provide the assurance that the interests of other stakeholders are being considered.

3.0 Council's current assessment as at 30th June 2005

3.1 As detailed on appendix 3 the Council's current self-assessment is as follows

Overall performance score	4 (Excellent)
Overall enablers score	3 (Good)
Overall score	4 (Excellent)

4.1 Had the Council's assessment for CPA purposes been undertaken based on the 1st quartile 2005/06 position (as had originally been planned), the Housing Benefits administration status would have been excellent (subject to Audit).

4.2 However the formal assessment is now more likely to be based on 30th June 2006 status. In encouraging year on year improvements in performance measures will to be more challenging in 2006/07. Without the council improving Housing Benefits Performance in line with higher

Performance Standards its assessment will reduce from excellent to good.

4.3 **Measures being progressed to improve Performance**

The following initiatives are being progressed to improve performance further.

i) **Rent allowance paid within 7 days of decision (PM4)**

An initiative is being put in place to improve Performance (currently bottom quartile) is liaison with CIS i.e. benefit cheques despatched more often.

ii) **Accuracy**

Funded by DWP Standards Fund grant an Accuracy Officer has been appointed on a year pilot to ascertain how accuracy of assessment (currently 3rd quartile) can be improved.

iii) **Counter Fraud**

Funded from increase DWP rewards grant on additional Fraud Investigations Officer to be appointed on a 6 months pilot (WEF October 2005) to ascertain whether Fraud detection deterrence performance can be improved (not benchmarked in 2005/06 but will be in 2006/07).

4.4 **Measures to meet further key enablers**

The following initiatives are being progressed to meet further key enablers

i) **Introduction of Payment of Housing Benefit by BACS**
(See paper 2 IT initiatives)

ii) **Pre Benefit determination despatch accuracy checks.**

In an effort to improve accuracy of assessment and meet key enabler, staff resources (costs met by DWP grant) are to be targeted in checking 4% of determinations before despatch to the claimant on a pilot basis. This should give Benefits Management better information to improve overall accuracy of Benefit Assessment.

5.0 **Revenues i.e. Council Tax, NNDR, Debtors and Income Management**

5.1 Under the performance standards only Benefits is assessed. However the disciplines, policies, working practices and procedures followed in Benefits are mirrored across the whole unit.

- 5.2 In the circumstances should performance standards eventually be introduced covering Council Tax, NNDR etc. the Council's administration in this respect would likely to be scored in the good to excellent range.
- 6.0 Recommendations
- 6.1 Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to
- i. Note that the Council's Benefits service is rated excellent under the revised HB and CTB performance standards as at 30th June 2005.
 - ii. Scrutinise the actions to be taken in an attempt to maintain the Council's Benefits Services excellent rating in 2006/7 when Performance Standards will be more challenging.
 - iii. Note that the Council's CPA rating for Benefits Services is likely to be based on the June 2006 assessment against HB and CTB Performance Standards.

What the Performance Standards cover and Why

1.0 Claims Administration – claims processing, quality and reducing error and overpayments. Does the LA

- meet the standard performance required on processing all types of claim?
- Monitor the impact of efforts to process claims and changes of circumstances and amend its approach in the light of the results?
- Have a claim form that meets the standard set by the DWP series of HCTB claim forms?
- Act to avoid overpayments occurring?
- Minimise repossessions by maintaining effective working arrangements with public and private sector landlords?
- Check the quality and accuracy of claims and take steps to reduce error?
- Manage the calculation, classification and recovery of debt effectively?

2.0 Security – security of administration, counter-fraud activities and sanctions. Does the LA

- Verify claims to standard?
- Minimise the risk of fraud and error?
- Operate working practices designed to ensure all referrals reach the most logical outcome, such as no further action, administrative penalty, prosecution?
- Manage and train sufficient employees to meet the demands of countering the particular risk of fraud it faces?
- Use all appropriate methods to detect fraud?

3.0 User focus – take-up, customer service and appeals and complaints. Does the LA

- have a written strategy to encourage take-up?
- Hold recent evidence of how well it meets the needs of all those eligible to claim HB and CTB, or with a legitimate interest in a claim?
- Monitor its service to customers and amend its approach in the light of results?

4.0 Resource management – strategic management, value for money and assurance. Does the LA

- set targets, and have plans and monitoring arrangements in place to achieve these targets?
- Provide for a skilled and competent workforce?
- Achieve value for money?
- Have systems in place to prevent internal fraud?

Performance Measures

Claims Administration Performance Measure Score 3

Claims Processing Performance Measure Score

PM5	Performance Indicator for average speed of processing changes of circumstances (Standard 9 days – 9 is a working assumption pending a clearer picture of the impact of abolition of benefit periods)	3
PM6	Performance Indicator for accuracy – percentage of cases for which the calculation of the amount of benefit due is correct (Standard 98%)	2

Overpayments

PM7	Performance Indicator for the amount of HB overpayments recovered during the period as a percentage of the total amount of HB overpayments identified during the period.	74%	Not scored this year
PM8	Performance Indicator for the amount of HB overpayments recovered during the period as a percentage of total amount of HB overpayment debt outstanding at the start of the period plus amount of HB overpayments identified during the period.	12%	
PM9	Performance Indicator for the amount of HB overpayments written off during the period as a percentage of total amounts of HB overpayment debt outstanding at the start of the period plus amount of HB overpayments identified during the period.	0%	

Security Performance Measure Score 4

Security of administration Performance Measure Score

PM10	Number of interventions where review action commenced in the last quarter	4
PM11	Percentage of data-matches resolved within 2 months (Standard 100%)	4

PM12	Number of claimants visited (Standard is the published annual visits target for reviews for the year – see <i>HB/CTB circular A34/2004</i>)	4
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Counter-fraud activities & Sanctions

PM13	Number of fraud referrals per 1,000 caseload	155	Not scored this year
PM14	Performance Indicator: Number of fraud investigators employed per 1,000 caseload	2	
PM15	Performance Indicator: Number of fraud investigations per 1,000 caseload	142	
PM16	Performance Indicator: Number of successful sanctions per 1,000 caseload	10	

User focus Performance Measure Score 4

Appeals and complaints

PM17	Percentage of applications for reconsideration/revision actioned and notified within 4 weeks (Standard 65%)	4
PM18	Percentage of appeals submitted to the Appeals Service in 4 weeks (Standard 65%)	4
PM19	Percentage of appeals submitted to the Appeals Service (including those in PM18) in 3 months (Standard 95%)	4

Enablers

Claims administration 43.75% achieved Enabler Score 2

Claims processing		Achieved
Workload management		
E1	Information is held at team or section level about the volume of work received, work actioned and work outstanding each month, if not more frequently. Trends and patterns in workloads are monitored and work priorities and resources are adjusted to prevent and/or manage down backlogs.	Yes
E2	The LA has clear systems, that it can demonstrate are working, to act on information received from Jobcentre Plus to make extended payments and to prioritise the re-assessment of those who get a job.	Progressing
Gathering information		
E3	The need for information from the customer and third parties such as landlords is identified within 7 days of receipt of the claim or notification of change of circumstances with action taken to obtain it. There are routine, rapid arrangements for providing a certificate of earnings form for the employer to complete, allowing the change of circumstances or new claim to be processed rapidly, with safeguards to prevent fraud.	Progressing
E4	The LA sends reminders or makes other contact with the customer, before the expiry of the four 4 week or 1 month period within which the customer has been asked to supply further information or evidence.	Yes
E5	The LA has systems in place to prioritise action on changes of circumstances that lead to a reduction in, or a cessation of, benefit to minimise the occurrence of overpayments.	Progressing
E6	The LA claim form(s) meets the relevant requirements as set out in the DWP series of HCTB1 claim forms and the standard application form used by all tenants contains consent wording to allow the sharing of information on the progress of the claim with the landlord in direct payment cases. Note: This phrase is likely to be removed as the Local Housing Allowance is rolled out.	Yes
Working effectively with landlords to minimise repossessions		
E7	The LA uses a form of consent, which is specific about what the landlord can be told; and the LA accepts clear self-standing requests signed by the customer for a landlord or representative to make enquiries on the customer's behalf.	Yes

E8	The LA communicates effectively with landlords by providing clear practical advice on the operation of HB. Landlords, including the LA landlord, are actively encouraged to contact the housing benefit section before taking enforcement action for collection of rent arrears when the arrears are due to a delay in the payment of HB.	Progressing
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Quality and reducing error

Quality checks		
E9	<p>Fully trained staff operate a risk assessment based and auditable checking regime to check for error in the system. The regime includes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the statistical accuracy checks for the correct number of cases required by the Performance Indicator sampling and checking methodology, in accordance with <i>HB/CTB Circulars S1/2000 and S5/2000</i> a minimum 4% sample across a range of decisions on new claims, changes of circumstance amendments and overpayment calculations before a payment or decision notice is issued. New claims within the 4% sample attract a full check. For changes of circumstances within the 4% sample, the check covers the last user action or is a full check, if on the basis of risk the LA decides it is necessary. <p>Using quality checks to improve performance and reduce error</p>	To begin 1/8/05
E10	In tandem with its targeted review activity, the LA analyses the results of all management and accuracy checks across the full range of its benefits activities, including fraud detection, and uses its findings to identify the overall level of error in its caseload, inform training plans and the appraisal process and deliver continuous improvement in its performance and service delivery,	Progressing

Overpayments

Managing debt		
E11	There are documented overpayments policies and procedures used and adhered to by the relevant staff to ensure that overpayments are brought to account, are under appropriate financial control, and there is an audit trail for all decisions on recoverability and classification.	Progressing
E12	Debts are only written off, by an authorised officer, in accordance with the LA's corporate or Benefit Service's write-off policies after all avenues of recovery, which the LA considers appropriate, have been considered.	Yes
E13	The final overpaid amount, taking into account any underlying entitlement to benefit and unpaid or returned cheques is calculated, on average, within a period of 14 days following the date that the LA receives sufficient information.	Progressing

Achieved

Recovery		
E14	There are targets for the recovery of new and old debt and the LA monitors performance against them.	Yes
E15	Records of outstanding overpayments are kept when benefit is no longer in payment, in the event of future benefit award, or other change of circumstances, enabling recovery in the future.	Yes
E16	The LA has in place a collection and monitoring policy and systems in place to monitor the recovery of administrative penalties.	Progressing

Security 52.38% achieved Enabler Score 3

Security of administration

Compliance with the Verification Framework (VF) or to equivalent Standard		
E17	The LA ensures a person making a claim or notifying a change of circumstance furnishes all the certificates, documents, information and other evidence in its original form to support the claim as they may reasonably require, to the standard of VF.	Yes
E18	All employees responsible for receiving and verifying documents are trained on the latest evidence requirements; including identifying false documents and following up discrepancies, and apply this in order to comply with the relevant legislation.	Yes
Compliance with data integrity, as per <i>HB/CTB Circular F10/2004</i>.		
E19	The LA provides data (the Housing Benefit Matching Service (HBMS) extract) in 'loadable' state for all 12 months on specified dates, ensuring the accuracy of customer NINOs recorded on their benefit systems: 98% to match with DWP records. All incidents rated 1 & 2 by HBMS to be resolved within a maximum of 3 months unless otherwise agreed with HBMS.	Yes

Counter-fraud activities

Fraud referrals		
E20	The LA publicises guidance on making a referral to all employees working for the LA. It provides fraud awareness sessions at induction and supports this with an ongoing programme of fraud awareness to employees who are involved in HB/CTB benefit administration, housing and Council Tax collection, external employees to whom such work is outsourced and any employees working for a Registered Social Landlord who are involved in the verification of HB/CTB claims.	Progressing
E21	The LA provides a publicised dedicated telephone service (or National Benefit Fraud Hotline), that is staffed during office hours, for the public or employees to report suspicions. An answer phone service is available outside of working hours.	Yes
Risk profiling referrals		
E22	Referrals are risk assessed, with priority given to medium to high risk cases, with the results of investigations informing regular review of the risk assessment process.	Progressing
E23	In relevant cases the LA gathers intelligence through a discrete intelligence function within the LA or through National Anti-Fraud Network (NAFN), London Team Against Fraud (LTAF) or through the DWP Intelligence structure.	Yes
Action on referrals		
E24	The LA sifts referrals within an average of 10 working days* of receipt and uses a management information system to track all fraud referrals that are allocated to a named investigator and the progress made on them. *This excludes bulk data referrals such as the National Fraud Initiative and HBMS data-matches. These types of bulk-referrals should be managed and sifted as a source of potential investigation cases.	Progressing
E25	The LA starts investigations within an average of 10 working days of referrals being sifted.	Progressing
Fraud Investigators code of conduct		
E26	The LA complies with the appropriate legislation and ensures that its fraud investigation officers understand that, under section 67(9) of the Police And Criminal Evidence (PACE) Act 1984, they are persons charged with the investigation of crime and are, therefore, subject to the same restraints as the police, especially those contained in PACE, and in Scotland adhere to the test of fairness.	Yes
E27	The LA maintains a separate fraud file with restricted access for all investigations, and such records as are needed for the purposes of disclosure, under Criminal Procedure and Investigations Act 1996, Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000, or Regulation of Investigatory Powers (Scotland) Act 2000 and Data Protection are kept in accordance with PACE.	Yes

E28	Fraud investigators keep a proper record of what they do for their own personal use so that it can, if necessary, be used as an aide memoire when giving evidence.	Yes
E29	Interviews are conducted under caution in accordance with PACE or the test of fairness (Scotland) where there are reasonable grounds based on known facts or information, which are relevant to the offence.	Yes
The LA fraud policy		
E30	There is a member approved anti-fraud policy supported by a fraud business plan against which the progress, outcome and quality of investigations are monitored.	Yes
E31	The LA makes all appointments of authorised officers in accordance with the law and monitors the use of these powers or uses a centralised intelligence resource such as NAFN or a DWP Operational Intelligence Unit or in conjunction with neighbouring LAs.	Progressing
E32	The LA has chosen to use and operates the “do not re-direct” (DNR) scheme in accordance with the legislation and procedural guidance, see <i>HB/CTB Circular F7/2004</i> .	Yes
E33	The LA has signed, and adheres to, the Fraud Partnership Agreement with CFIS at Operational Board level and has underpinned this with locally agreed service standards with the CFIS Sector, which meet at least the minimum requirements set out in the Partnership Agreement.	Progressing
E34	The LA has in place systems to ensure that only lawful requests are sent to DWP for Inland Revenue information.	Progressing

Sanctions

A balanced sanctions policy		
E35	The LA provides clear guidelines to staff to consider and administer the appropriate sanctions and ensures they are applied strictly in accordance with the law.	Progressing
E36	The LA always checks the DWP’s database and Police National Computer or SOL P (as per <i>HB/CTB Circular F4/2002</i>) for previous benefit fraud sanctions and convictions before issuing a caution or penalty. Where a caution or penalty is given the LA records the penalty details clearly, including sending notification for recording on the DWP database, to ensure further attempts to defraud by the same person are considered for prosecution as a first option.	Yes
E37	If a caution or penalty is refused, the LA ensures all cases are referred for prosecution	Yes

User focus 50.00% achieved Enabler Score 2

Take-up

Achieved

E38	The LA has a written strategy or plan, covering issues of customer service, availability of help and advice and access, to encourage take-up of HB/CTB that goes beyond the first step of raising awareness, and works in partnership with other stakeholders, such as The Pension Service, LA Welfare Rights Services, CAB and voluntary groups, to ensure that eligible customers are enabled to make successful claims.	Progressing
E39	The LA carries out targeted campaigns on under-claiming sections of the community, ensuring that assistance is given to eligible customers to make a claim and evaluates the results. The LA does this in conjunction with other stakeholders where this will add value.	Yes

Customer Service

Accessibility		
E40	<p>The LA regularly reviews the service it provides taking account of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • customers' and their representatives' views • the locality • availability of transport • its obligations under the Race Relation Acts (1976 and 2000) • its obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) <p>to ensure it best meets customer needs. Customers can contact staff in the LA, by whatever suitable means (such as face to face, by telephone, correspondence, video conference) for a minimum average of 36 hours a week except during public holidays.</p>	Progressing
E41	Decisions on claims are notified promptly to customers and, if relevant, third parties and are written concisely, with the reader in mind and in the right tone. Letters state the decision clearly, do not contain jargon and explain technical terms such as 'non-dependant.' Overpayment decisions are notified to the person(s) affected within 14 days of the final calculation.	Progressing

Dealing with enquiries		
E42	Staff have been set and are achieving targets, which as a minimum reflect corporate customer service targets for dealing with enquiries made by telephone, in person, by letter or e-mail and the LA monitors performance against the targets.	Progressing
E43	The LA provides an over-the-counter service for customers presenting completed claim forms and evidence and verifies them to the standard of the VF, so that customers can avoid sending in key documents.	Yes
Partnership working		
E44	Local Service Level Agreements (SLAs), which meet the minimum requirements of any relevant national model SLA, or Partnership agreements are in place with organisations connected with benefits' delivery. These will include Jobcentre Plus, The Pension Service, the Rent Service, the Appeals Service and DWP debt management. If a national model SLA exists, this should be adopted as the minimum requirement.	Progressing
E45	The LA monitors and reviews all its SLAs in accordance with the arrangements set out in each SLA, with action taken to improve effectiveness and security as indicated by the monitoring report.	Yes
E46	The LA maintains regular contact, supported by formalised and documented working arrangements if considered appropriate, with other organisations, for example Registered Social Landlords, advice agencies, police, Crown Prosecution Service or Procurator Fiscal in Scotland.	Progressing

Appeals and complaints

Appeals		
E47	Nominated skilled individuals are responsible for handling, disputes, requests for reconsideration and appeals referrals, ensuring they are correct in law and representing the LA case at tribunal hearings.	Yes
E48	Decisions from appeals tribunals are implemented as soon as practicable – the LA seeks to complete this action within 4 calendar weeks.	Yes
Complaints		
E49	There are clear procedures and the LA sets targets, which as a minimum match corporate targets for dealing with complaints. Customers are advised how they can make a complaint. Complaints are identified, registered, their progress monitored and effective remedial action is taken to address the causes of complaints.	Yes

Resource management 87.50% achieved Enabler Score 4

Strategic management

Achieved

Managing the Benefits Service		
E50	The LA sets targets that are comprehensive in scope, include the statutory Performance Indicators, are stretching and provide a baseline of current performance.	Yes
E51	There are arrangements in place to monitor the delivery of plans and targets on a quarterly basis (including, where appropriate, resources to monitor outsourced elements in line with contracts) to inform senior officers and Members.	Progressing
E52	The LA has documented arrangements to manage risks to the service provision to ensure business continuity during change programmes and emergencies.	Yes
Monitoring performance		
E53	The LA provides accurate and timely MIS data, HBMS data, quarterly performance measure data and annual self-assessment returns against the Performance Standards.	Yes
E54	The LA identifies where statutory Performance Indicator targets and Standards for performance measures are not being achieved and establishes the reasons so that corrective action can be implemented for the future.	Yes
Providing for a skilled and competent workforce		
E55	There are up-to-date documented recruitment, induction, training, codes of conduct including pre-appointment checks and declaration of interest protocols, appraisal, retention and diversity strategies, whether corporate or specific to the Benefits Service.	Yes
E56	The LA provides a structured training programme underpinned with training material that recognises the different skills bases, competencies and professional qualifications needed by benefit processors, overpayment recovery officers, customer facing employees, fraud investigators, supervisors and managers.	Yes

Value for money

Achieving value for money		
E57	The LA operates a costing structure that provides an assessment of the Service's overall cost, including counter fraud work, and shows the relationship between cost and the level of service provided. Costs are monitored, reviewed and adjusted in the light of potential over or under spends or efficiency objectives and there is an audit trail on the costs and adjustments.	Yes

E58	The LA considers joint procurement and joint working with other LA's and internal and external partners to obtain efficiency and economic benefits. IT systems	Yes
E59	The IT systems support all aspects of paying and accounting for benefit, including counter fraud and debt recovery, and interface effectively with other relevant council IT systems. They provide accurate management and statistical information and enable production of ad hoc management information and exception reports.	Yes
E60	The LA manages and monitors the contract arrangements with its IT providers to ensure compliance with agreed and documented performance standards in the provision of the service.	Progressing

Assurance

Internal control mechanisms		
E61	There are IT security and testing protocols and processes, including a secure user environment through password controlled access, to ensure that users only have the appropriate access to IT systems.	Yes
E62	The LA has secure post opening procedures with all relevant items dealt with to VF standards or their equivalent, with protocols and processes for the secure control of case documents, cheques, receipts, automated payments and other valuable items including their return to the customer where appropriate.	Yes
E63	The LA carries out a check, which includes a sample case check, on its quarterly performance measure data to validate user input before submitting it to DWP.	Yes
Secure administration		
E64	There is a risk based Internal Audit programme to examine the Service's working practices and IT functionality for compliance with documented procedural guidance and legislative requirements.	Yes
E65	The LA implements agreed recommendations from internal and external audit and inspection reports.	Yes

Overall Performance Measure Score **4**

Overall Enabler Score **3**

Overall Score

4

4 Excellent

3 Good

2 Meeting minimum requirements

1 Not meeting minimum requirements

Paper 4

Best Value Review

REVENUES AND BENEFIT SERVICES

Performance Comparisons **Before and After Review**

Prepared by Peter B Mason CPFA
 Head of Revenues & Benefits Service

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The desired outcome of a successful Best Value Service Review is improved service to the customer whilst maintaining/improving efficiency.
- 1.2 As areas of service provision have been investigated and improvements agreed, action plan outcomes to deliver the required improvements have been progressed i.e. the unit has not waited for the review to be completed to deliver service improvement initiatives.
- 1.3 To measure the impact of service improvements made as part of the review performance against Best Value and local indicators has been compared before the review was undertaken in 2003/04 and during the review in 2004/05.
- 1.4 Year on year comparisons will be made in 2005/06 and 2006/07 as further action plan target outcomes are delivered.
- 1.5 It should be noted that the unit had already made steady overall progress in performance (as evidenced to members) over the previous 5 years to 2003/04 so the unit were not starting from a low performance base when conducting the service review. i.e. it achieved a good overall CPA rating for its services before the review commencement.
- 1.6 It should also be noted that year end performance figures would have been even better if staff resources hadn't needed to be transferred to flood recovery work.

2. Analysis of Comparative year end Performance

- 2.1 Noted at appendix 1 are detailed bar charts indicating 2004/05 performance compared to 2003/04 performance.
- 2.2 The bar charts indicate that significant improvements in performance have been made in most areas where the initial best value review assessment work plan suggested improvements needed to be made.

(i) **Benefit Turnaround Times**

The number of days taken to process claims has almost halved ie new claims reduced from 50 days to 27 days and change of circumstances from 20 days to 10 days.

This improvement has been achieved by:-

- A complete overhaul of workflow processes.
- The introduction of trainee benefit officers ie when experienced benefit assessment officers leave or get promoted fully trained officers can be recruited in their place (it takes up to 2 years to fully train an assessment officer)

(ii) **Customer Contact 'One Stop' Reception**

The number of customers seen within 15 minutes has increased from 76% in 2003/04 (already top quartile) to 80% for benefits queries and 90% for Revenues queries (Council Tax Business Rates etc). This improvement has been achieved by:-

- Introduction of customer contact trainees (benefits)
- More flexible staffing contracts ie more part time working at peak times.
- Transfer of Revenue enquiries and staff resources to Customer Contact Centre ie 2 team leaders, 5 Customer Services Advisors and a cashier.

Note turnaround times recorded and calculated for the period up to January 7th 2005 when Customer Contact Centre was flooded.

(iii) **Telephone Contact**

By far the biggest improvement in performance has been in the telephone enquiry service an area of particular poor service addressed by the review.

In 2003/04 80% of customers contacting the Council on Revenues and Benefits matters got the engaged tone. However, in 2004/05 the situation was transformed with 56% of Revenues customers and 77% of benefits customers getting through within 18 seconds (and more getting engaged tone). This was achieved by:-

- (i) Introducing the VIP call management system, this allowed customers that didn't get through within 18 seconds to leave a message ie no customers were getting engaged tone, or advising them how long they were likely to wait.

- Transfer of Revenues telephone enquiries (and staff resources) to the Customer Contact Centre.
- Introducing trainee Customer Contact assistants into benefits.
- Introducing of more flexible part time contracts to address work peaks.

(iv) **Appeals Administration**

Again the average turnaround time to review benefit decisions on appeal has halved from 40 days in 2003/04 to 20 days in 2004/05. This improvement has been achieved by:-

- Complete overhaul of Appeals process.
- Improved liaison with advice agencies.
- Introduction of simple appeals forms.
- Reduction in the number of appeals as claims actioned quicker.

(v) **Overpayments Recovery**

The only indicator where performance has deteriorated (except cash collection due to the flood) is in overpayment recovery ie from 54% in 2003/04 to 46% in 2004/05. This is due to a change in housing benefits regulations for pensioners with the introduction of pension credits and 3 year entitlement reviews. Now very few pensioners incur benefit overpayments (traditionally easy to recover via ongoing benefit entitlement). Most overpayments are now difficult to recover fraudulent overpayments (many for overpayments of well over £1,000.00).

The DWP has reviewed Best Value definitions for 2005/06 to reflect the changes and bench marking and, revised targets for overpayment recovery is an ongoing best value review action plan issue to be addressed. (see action plan appendix A)

3.0 **Recommendations**

3.1 Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to:-

- Scrutinise the impact of service improvements made during the review to date on Best Value and local indicators.
- Note that year on year comparisons will be made in 2005/06 and 2006/07 as further action plan target outcomes are delivered.

Revenues & Benefits

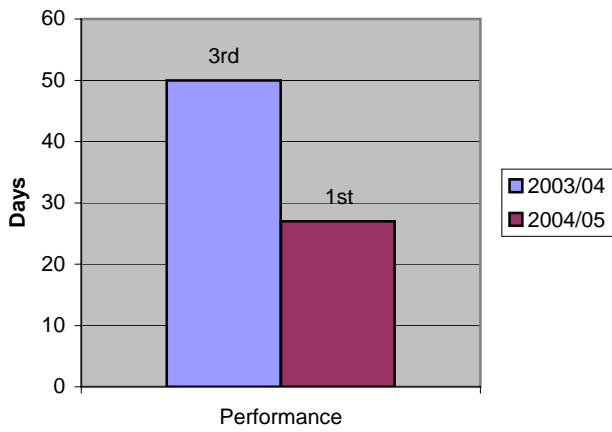
Carlisle

17 May 2005

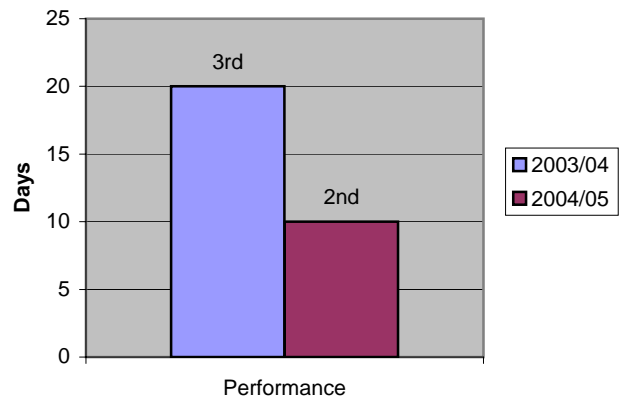
PM/JB/Performance Comparisons/Before and After Review

Best Value Review - Revenues and Benefits Services
Appendix 1 - Performance Comparisons

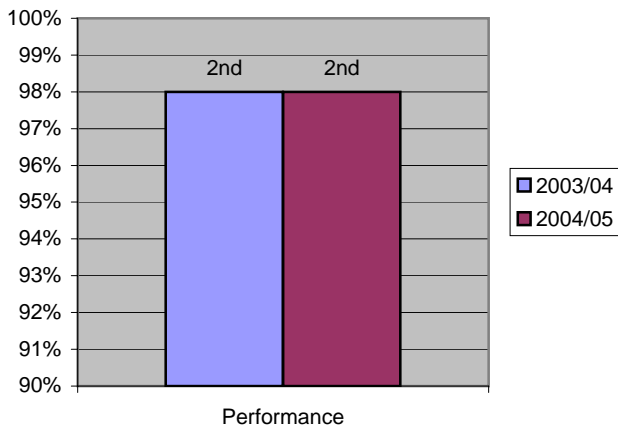
1 - New Claims Turn around time



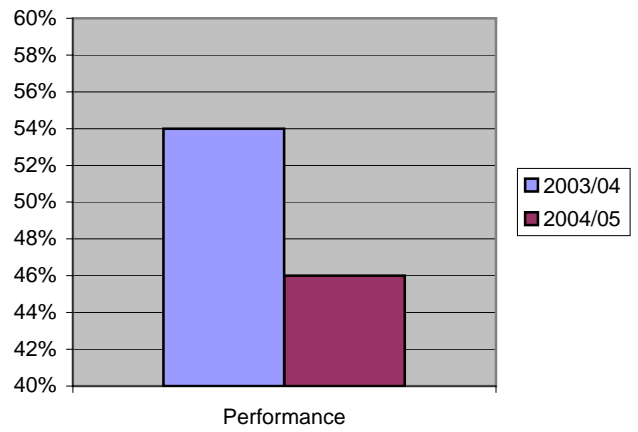
2 - Change of Circumstances Turn Around Time



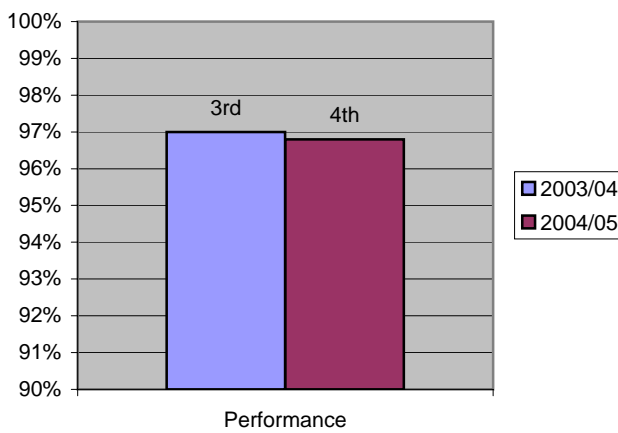
3 - Benefits Accuracy



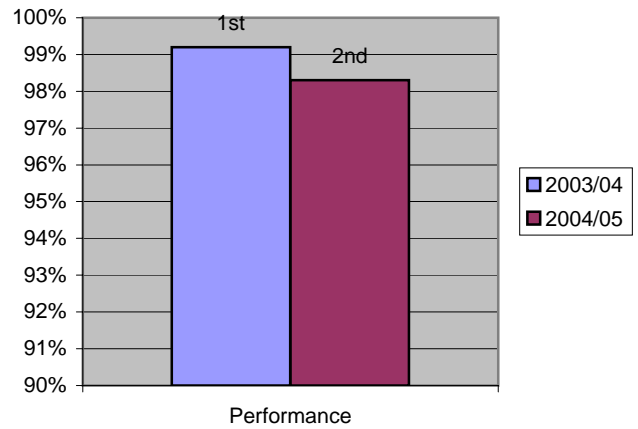
4 - Overpayment Recovery



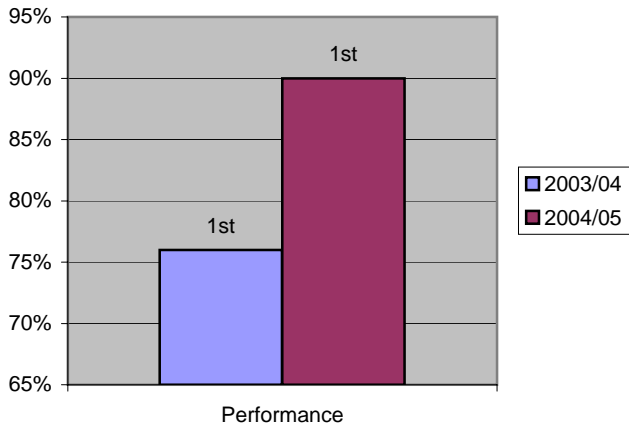
5 - Council Tax Collection



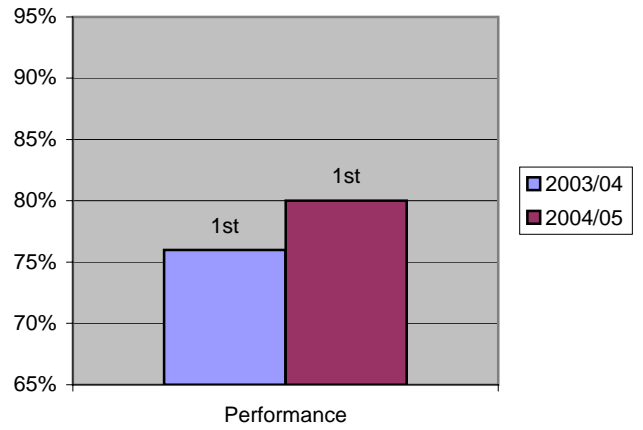
6 - NNDR Collection



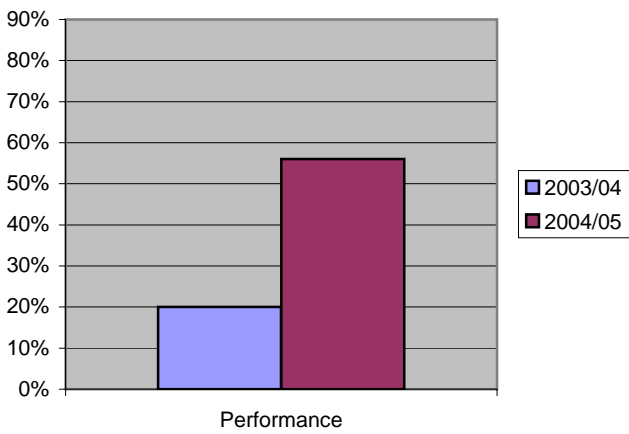
7 - Revenues Customers seen within 15 minutes



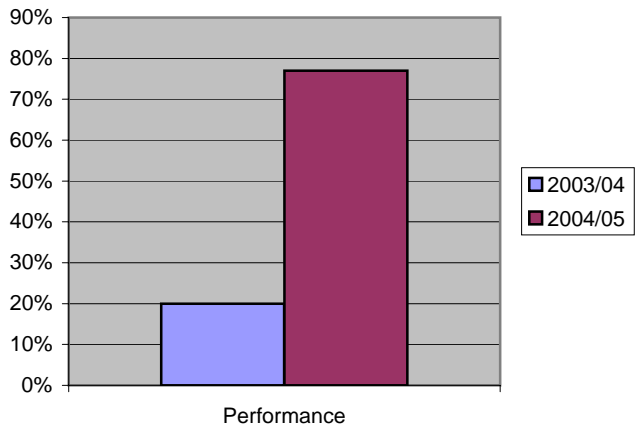
8 - Benefits Customers seen within 15 minutes



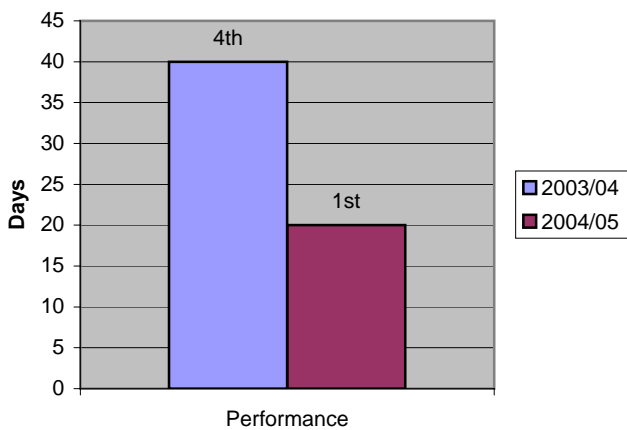
9 - Revenues Calls answers within 18 Seconds



10 - Benefits Calls answered within 18 Seconds



11 - Appeals Administration Turn Around Time



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REVENUES AND BENEFIT SERVICES
BEST VALUE REVIEW

ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE

Update on Improving Forms Publicity and Written Correspondence

Prepared by Elaine Turner IRRV DMS ACFM
Benefits Manager

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The previous report on forms, publicity and correspondence, presented to Corporate Resources, Overview and Scrutiny on 25th November 2004, summarised the actions required into six recommendations.

1.2 An update on those recommendations, including progress to date, follows.

2 UPDATE ON THE RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 Arrange for consultation with welfare agencies on draft Council Tax and Housing Benefit information leaflets then test out customer satisfaction levels before mass production.

2.1.1 The Section consulted with the following organisations but feedback was very poor:

- Carlisle Citizen's Advice Bureau
- Age Concern
- Carlisle Advice and Advocacy Service
- Disability Association for Carlisle and Eden
- A registered social landlord

2.1.2 The range of 13 leaflets (including the appeals leaflet) has been through the corporate Communications process and one sample leaflet amended and approved by the Plain English campaign. The remaining leaflets were amended in line with the same standards and all covers created by a professional design company. Leaflets are colour coded into four themes.

2.1.3 Supplies of 500 of each leaflet will be ordered shortly to test the customers' reactions. Bulk orders will be placed when further feedback is known and storage facilities allow.

2.2 Arrange for DWP and Pension Service Leaflets to be available within the Customer Contact Centre in a variety of different languages and formats e.g. large print.

2.2.1 A full list of Department for Work and Pension leaflets has been obtained and ordering routines tested. However, quantities of supplies cannot be ordered until Benefits return to the Civic Centre and regain some storage facilities. Similarly, stocks may depend on the space available within the temporary Customer Contact Centre.

2.3 Redesign two versions (working and non-working age) of the current Housing and Council Tax Benefit claim form, based on the Department for Work and Pension's (DWP) national model forms, when current stocks are depleted.

2.3.1 The joint Housing and Council Tax Benefit claim form has been redesigned using the Department for Work and Pension's (DWP) model form yet incorporating additional information required under the Verification Framework.

2.3.2 The first form is based on a model national form and is designed for applications from persons of working age. This form has been produced and is currently in use.

2.3.3 The second form is also based on a model national form and is designed for applications from persons of pensionable age. The artwork for this form is ready but production is currently on hold. Carlisle has been chosen, as one of a group of 13 local authorities, nationally, to participate in a pilot Council Tax Benefit take-up campaign. The pilot (11th July to 4th September 2005) uses a shortened (3-page) claim form to cover mainstream circumstances. Supplementary forms are used for less common circumstances e.g. rental liability, household dependants or resident children.

2.3.4 Although this shortened form cannot currently be used by local authorities, it is hoped the success of the pilot will persuade the Minister to authorise its general use by local authorities in preference to the national model form.

2.4 Redesign the benefit determinations and notification letters, based on good practice examples and using ProPrint functionality, for consultation with welfare agencies before final production.

2.4.1 The original ProPrint training and installation, scheduled for early February 2005, was cancelled due to the floods. New dates were negotiated and

training went ahead on 28th to 30th June 2005. New Benefits letter templates and landlord payment schedules have been drafted and will be tested in approximately 3-4 weeks: to coincide with an Academy software release containing template enhancements as part of their national improvement project.

2.5 Roll out ProPrint into Revenues when Benefit implementation is complete.

2.5.1 Formscape is a piece of software that allows a greater range of print facilities than the base templating software may provide. It is currently in use within the authority and used by the following Services:

- Electoral Registration
- Car Parking
- Payroll
- Debtors

2.5.2 The corporate licence for 'Formscope' is not going to be renewed. However, ProPrint has an inherent corporate licence and can be used to provide the same functionality currently required by the services under Formscope.

2.5.3 The unit intends to offer ProPrint to the other services, on a marginal cost only basis, as soon as implementation within Benefits is complete. No timetable has been agreed at present.

2.6 Timetable improvements to Benefit and Revenues templates to provide additional information based on personal circumstances.

2.6.1 A further development within the ProPrint project will be to tailor communications to target individual customers or customer groups whose information needs may differ from the standard documentation. For example:

- Clarify the different notification of change in circumstances requirements for persons of pensionable or working age;
- Promote Discretionary Housing Payments where rent restrictions apply;
- Explain special provisions for overlapping Benefit where a claimant enters a care home and is responsible for charges in the care home yet has unavoidable liability in relation to ending the tenancy on their previous home.
- Highlight where claims have been decided as 'non-qualifying', based on adverse inference, where there has been a valid claim but a failure to provide all the required evidence.

3 RECOMMENDATION

- 3.1 The Corporate Resources, Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to scrutinise the progress on improving forms, publicity and written correspondence as part of the Revenues and Benefit Services Best Value Review aim of achieving excellence in the service provision.

Report to Corporate Resources

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

28th July 2005

Best Value Review

Revenues and Benefit Services

Achieving Excellence

Progressing Corporate Agenda and

Championing External Opportunities

1.0 Introduction

1.1 The aim of this paper is to summarise the Corporate and External issues (to the Council) that will support the Unit's aims to maintain excellent service provision.

1.2 Several papers/reports detailing how the Best Value Review has been proactive in meeting the corporate agenda of improving the service to customers have already been scrutinised by members (or Officers Working Group). These include

- e-government
- Review of front office (Customer Contract Centre) and back Office resources (including unit middle management review)
- Home-working
- Sickness monitoring
- Contributing to housing needs analysis and strategy

1.3 This paper discusses briefly the Corporate and external challenges that must be taken into account in promoting the Best Value Review's aim of achieving/maintaining excellence in providing Revenues and Benefits Services. The issues covered are:-

- (i) Being proactive in helping to deliver the Council's two main priorities
- (ii) Responding to the Government's Welfare and Funding Agenda.
- (iii) Responding to the Government's Council Tax and Business Rates changes.

2.0 Responding to the challenge of supporting the Council's main priorities.

2.1 Learning City

The Unit's policy of developing its own staff promotes the 'learning city' priority. Members will recall, from earlier Best Value Review papers, that the

unit used to experience significant resource problems due to staff turnover. i.e. it can take up to two years to train up to Revenues Tax Assessor or Benefits Assessment Officer before they are fully productive (approximately one year for Customer Contact Centre Adviser).

2.2 When the unit was restructured in meeting early challenges for the Best Value Review some junior/and Customer Adviser posts were re-designated to training posts. The amended unit structure now has:-

- 2 trainee Revenues Officer posts
- 3 Trainee Benefit Officer posts
- 2 Customer Service Trainees (1 year fixed term contracts funded by DWP grant)

2.3 All the unit's staff are actively encouraged to study the Institute of Revenues, Rating and Valuation Professional or Technical exams and management qualifications for team leaders and above.

2.4 Overall the unit develops its own staff to the level that it is no longer reliant on external recruitment for any post within the unit other than trainee posts.

2.5 The only drawback to the unit's professional and technical training programme is that it is required to send its staff 85 miles to Preston on day release. Corporately very few of our professional and technical staff can train locally.

2.6 If under the 'learning city' initiative a training supplier could be persuaded to provide such training in the Carlisle area this would be of sufficient assistance to the Council.

3.0 **Green, Clean and Safe**

3.1 The obvious link is that high Council Tax collection rates releases income to target at priority services.

3.2 Effective benefit fraud prevention and deterrence, helps facilitate a safe environment. There is a correlation between high levels of Benefit Fraud and criminal activity. As members will be aware from previous Best Value Review reports the Council follows a very robust Benefits Counter Fraud Strategy and Sanctions policy.

3.3 The main contribution that Revenues and Benefits can make in supporting the Council's priorities is to maintain excellent service provision. If a high profile service like Benefits is meeting Customers requirements and performing well the Council's intellectual capacity can be better focused at Council priorities.

External challenges facing the Unit.

4.0 The Non-Domestic Rating Small Business Rate Relief

4.1 The 'Small Business Rate Relief' scheme was introduced on the 1 April 2005 to ease the burden of non-domestic rates on ratepayers fulfilling certain criteria and eligibility conditions.

4.2 The relief, which is mandatory, is available at 50% for ratepayers occupying single properties with a rateable value up to £5,000. The relief decreases in percentage terms of a sliding scale until it is 0% at £10,000 rateable value.

4.3 The hereditament must be within the thresholds above and must meet the following criteria on the 1 April of the relevant chargeable year.

The relief is only available to ratepayers who either occupy only one property or occupy one main property and other additional properties with rateable values of less than £2,200 which in total do not exceed £15,000. Relief is applied to one property only and is calculated for each chargeable day for which it remains eligible.

4.4 An issue that will result in significant administration is that ratepayers must apply for the relief each year. Applications are accepted up to six months before the start or six months after the chargeable year concerned.

4.5 The scheme is funded through a supplement on the bills of all businesses not eligible for the relief. This supplement is built into the standard non-domestic rating multiplier of 42.2p. However ratepayers of eligible business properties with rateable values between £10,000 and £15,000 do not have to contribute towards the relief and their bills are calculated using the lower small business non-domestic rating multiplier of 41.5p.

4.6 After interrogating business rate records for likely qualifiers under the scheme approximately 1000 application forms were issued along with current year rate bills to potential qualifiers. 499 applications have been received to date. Further requests for application forms are received daily.

4.7 The scheme has resulted in a significant impact on the workload on the non-domestic rating team who have managed to absorb the increase within the team, unlike similar historic cities who have been required to target additional resources to deal with application administration.

4.8 The effect of the scheme is ongoing as each day every movement on the NNDR database has to be considered for potential qualification, invitation, relevant research, authorisation and processing.

- 4.9 The longer term impact of the Small business Rate Relief on business rates administration will be closely monitored over the medium to long term.

5.0 **Government Welfare Agenda**

5.1 **Customer Management System**

The Council is a leading player locally in the implementation of the Job Centre Plus (with the other welfare bodies) Customer Management System (CMS). CMS is an integrated, interactive, electronic information gathering process for working age customers. Customers will make a telephone claim to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) for new and repeat claims for 'Primary Benefits'. Details will also be taken to support any claim for an 'Associated Benefit'.

Information will be gathered for the primary and secondary benefits using 'intelligent' scripted questions. Local authorities will then accept the majority of information obtained by DWP staff, collect any additional evidence or information required and adapt processes to reduce duplication for the customer. The proposed outcome is to significantly simplify the claims process for potential claimants to all benefits thereby increasing customer satisfaction.

5.2 **Local Housing Allowance (LHA)**

The Local Housing Allowance (LHA) replaces individual rent officer referrals, establishes the Eligible Rent (based on broad areas and properly size criteria) and publicises the allowances. It is designed to create:-

- Fairness – Pays the same amount to tenants with similar circumstances living in same area.
- Choice – Tenants can trade quality for cost i.e. they can decide to take cheaper accommodation and pocket the difference between Housing Benefit (based on LHA) and actual rent to spend on whatever they want.
- Transparency – There is advance knowledge of the amount to be paid and no longer any need for Pre-tenancy determinations.
- Responsibility – Encourage direct involvement in budgeting and payment of rent.
- Increased work incentives – This is due to the certainty of in work benefit.
- Simplicity – No complex rent restrictions or individual referrals.

The Council was unsuccessful in applying to be an LHA pathfinder authority in June 2004 but there is a PSA target that requires national

rollout to be achieved by March 2008 and Authorities are required to prepare for a phased rollout following evaluation of the pathfinder authorities in March 2006. Being proactive in planning for this role out has been included in the Best Value Review Action Plan.

6.0 **Benefit Fraud Strategy**

- 6.1 The Queen's speech provided powers for local authorities to investigate and prosecute fraud against DWP administered benefits alongside Housing and Council Tax Benefit.

This is part of the drive to reduce Fraud and Error within Housing Benefit as part of a PSA target. More information is required before the Council can assess the implications of this initiative.

7.0 **Benefit Take Up**

- 7.1 The Cumbrian authorities (excluding Barrow) have secured some Performance Standards Funding (PSF) monies and are committed to a joint take-up campaign to reach vulnerable and 'hard to reach' persons who might be entitled to Housing or Council Tax Benefit. The project will also provide advice on potential entitlements to DWP administered Benefits. The aim of this initiative is to further increase take-up by Carlisle pensioners of Council and Housing Benefits. The Council achieved a 9.7% increase in take-up by this hard to reach group in 2004/05.

8.0 **Council Tax April 2007 Banding Revaluation**

- 8.1 As the ODPM has yet to advise on the effect and impact of the 2007 Council Tax banding revaluation of Carlisle Council Tax payers i.e.
- number of bands
 - Property value in each band
 - Any regional variances to be introduced or variances between owned and rented properties
 - Any transitional arrangements

It is not possible to address this major issue with significant resource implications as part of the Best Value Review. This issue will be included in the action plan to be progressed when more information is available.

9.0 **Recommendations**

- 9.1 Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny committee is asked to scrutinise corporate and external challenges being taken into account in promoting the Best Value Review's aim of achieving excellence in Revenues and Benefits Services.

Revenues and Benefits

Carlisle

5 July 2005

PM/EL/the non domestic rating small business rate relief 040705

Revenues & Benefits Best Value Action Plan

Appendix A

Meeting Housing & Council Tax Benefit Performance Standards

Performance Measures

Claims Administration

	Performance Standard Score currently not at required standard	Action required	Responsible Officer	Date to Attain
PM4	Percentage of rent allowance claims paid on time or within 7 days of decision being made	Planned to introduce another cheque run so two runs done per week but now discovered that software hasn't been updated yet to record this statistic correctly due to late notification from DWP. Scheduled for Release 38	JB	Oct 2005

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Enablers

Claims Processing

	Performance Standard Score currently not at required standard	Action required	Responsible Officer	Date to Attain
E2	The LA has clear systems, that it can demonstrate are working, to act on information received from Jobcentre Plus to make extended payments and to prioritise the reassessment of those who get a job.	Indexers/Scanners to pull relevant cases for prompt action.	ND	Under investigation
E3	The need for information from the customer and third parties such as landlords is identified within 7 days of receipt of the claim or notification of change of circumstances with action taken to obtain it. There are routine, rapid arrangements for providing a certificate of earnings form for the employer to complete, allowing the change of circumstances or new claim to be processed rapidly, with safeguards to prevent fraud.	New Mail to be checked after 5 days if no action been taken. Work will be allocated to AO's to write out for information. Part time AO's will need to have trays checked to ensure mail is actioned.	NP	Under investigation
E5	The LA has systems in place to prioritise action on change of circumstances that lead to a reduction in, or a cessation of, benefit to minimise the occurrence of overpayments.	<p>Either</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. change of circs to be coded on DOCREF 2 as o/p or 2. two doc types to indicate potential increases or decreases in Benefit. <p>TL's to discuss and propose procedures for compliance.</p>	<p>ND</p> <p>JB (DIP Codes)</p>	Under investigation

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	Performance Standard Score currently not at required standard	Action required	Responsible Officer	Date to Attain
E8	The LA communicates effectively with landlords by providing clear practical advice on the operation of HB. Landlords are actively encouraged to contact the Housing Benefit section before taking enforcement action for collection of rent arrears when the arrears are due to a delay in the payment of HB.	Information in Landlord leaflets, on the Council's web site and in the Landlord /Tenant information pack. To attend future Landlord Forum. Receive Section 35 (2) requests from CHA already. Manual version to be drafted and included in the landlord/tenant pack use wording from E8 to ensure landlords only request information when appropriate and ensure they quote Section 35 (2) re the data protection act relating to enforcement action.	DB	Oct 2005
E9	<u>Quality checks</u> Fully trained staff operate a risk assessment based and auditable checking regime to check for error in the system. The regime includes 1. the statistical accuracy checks for the correct number of cases required by the Performance Indicator sampling and checking methodology, in accordance with <i>HB/CTB Circulars S1/2000 and S5/2000</i> a minimum 4% sample across a range of decisions on new claims, changes of circumstance amendments and overpayment calculations before a payment or decision notice is issued. New claims within the 4% sample attract a full check. For changes of circumstances within the 4% sample, the check covers the last user action or is a full check, if on the basis of risk the LA decides it is necessary.	Accuracy officer if bid successful on 11/4/05 otherwise Team Leaders will need to be responsible. Stats 128 records.	TL's	Oct 2005

Revenues & Benefits Best Value Action Plan

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	Performance Standard Score currently not at required standard	Action required.	Responsible Officer	Date to Attain
E10	<p>Using quality checks to improve performance and reduce error</p> <p>In tandem with its targeted review activity, the LA analyses the results of all management and accuracy checks across the full range of its benefits activities, including fraud detection, and uses its findings to identify the overall level of error in its caseload, inform training plans and the appraisal process and deliver continuous improvement in its performance and service delivery,</p>	Evidence to be collated by NP for AO's and ET for Fraud.	NP ET	April 2006
E13	The final overpaid amount, taking into account any underlying entitlement to benefit and unpaid or returned cheques is calculated, on average, within a period of 14 days following the date that the LA receives sufficient information.		ND/JC	To be evidenced
E16	The LA has in place a collection and monitoring policy and systems in place to monitor the recovery of administrative penalties.	Run BI Query report to identify all ad pens and payment progress.	JC	Oct 2005
E20	<p><u>Fraud referrals</u></p> <p>The LA publicises guidance on making a referral to all employees working for the LA. It provides fraud awareness sessions at induction and supports this with an ongoing programme of fraud awareness to employees who are involved in HB/CTB benefit administration, housing and Council Tax collection, external employees to whom such work is outsourced and any employees working for a Registered Social Landlord who are involved in the verification of HB/CTB claims.</p>	Alan to be asked to design leaflet for induction pack and to be sent to all current staff with their payslips.	PT/DB	To be investigated

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	Performance Standard Score currently not at required standard	Action required.	Responsible Officer	Date to Attain
E24	<p><u>Action on referrals</u></p> <p>The LA sifts referrals within an average of 10 working days* of receipt and uses a management information system to track all fraud referrals that are allocated to a named investigator and the progress made on them.</p> <p>*This excludes bulk data referrals such as the National Fraud Initiative and HBMS data-matches. These types of bulk-referrals should be managed and sifted as a source of potential investigation cases.</p>	Incase provides management tool to track cases and stages of investigation by Investigations officer. Fraud referral sifting mechanism to be designed.	ET	Actioned
E25	The LA starts investigations within an average of 10 working days of referrals being sifted.	Management report to be designed to demonstrate and also review performance over last quarter.	ET	Actioned
E31	The LA makes all appointments of authorised officers in accordance with the law and monitors the use of these powers or uses a centralised intelligence resource such as NAFN or a DWP Operational Intelligence Unit or in conjunction with neighbouring LAs	Fraud management checks to include cases where authorised officer powers are used so management checks can confirm appropriate use.	ET	Actioned
E34	The LA has in place systems to ensure that only lawful requests are sent to DWP for Inland Revenue information.	Management checks to be initiated.	ET	Actioned
E35	<p><u>A balanced sanctions policy</u></p> <p>The LA provides clear guidelines to staff to consider and administer the appropriate sanctions and ensures they are applied strictly in accordance with the law.</p>	Sanction policy and procedures need updated to identify refused ad pens and cautions.	ET	Dec 2005

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	Performance Standard Score currently not at required standard	Action required.	Responsible Officer	Date to Attain
E38	The LA has a written strategy or plan, covering issues of customer service, availability of help and advice and access, to encourage take-up of HB/CTB that goes beyond the first step of raising awareness, and works in partnership with other stakeholders, such as The Pension Service, LA Welfare Rights Services, CAB and voluntary groups, to ensure that eligible customers are enabled to make successful claims.	Part of joint bid with other Cumbrian district authorities to Performance Standard Fund	ET	March 2006
E40	<p><u>Accessibility</u></p> <p>The LA regularly reviews the service it provides taking account of</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. customers' and their representatives' views 3. the locality 4. availability of transport 5. its obligations under the Race Relation Acts (1976 and 2000) 6. its obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) <p>to ensure it best meets customer needs. Customers can contact staff in the LA, by whatever suitable means (such as face to face, by telephone, correspondence, video conference) for a minimum average of 36 hours a week except during public holidays.</p>	<p>To include Customer Satisfaction survey results.</p> <p>Sample of intervention visits to be contacted by phone to ascertain satisfaction with staff performance.</p> <p>To contact Karen Hook and Margaret Easton re RRA and DDR requirements in role of Tsar/Champion for the unit.</p>	<p>DB</p> <p>JC</p> <p>PM</p>	Under investigation

Revenues & Benefits Best Value Action Plan

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	Performance Standard Score currently not at required standard	Action required.	Responsible Officer	Date to Attain
E42	<p><u>Dealing with enquiries</u></p> <p>Staff have been set and are achieving targets, which as a minimum reflect corporate customer service targets for dealing with enquiries made by telephone, in person, by letter or e-mail and the LA monitors performance against the targets.</p>	<p>Customer Services</p> <p>Queuematic stats to be reinstated after floods. Corporate stats to be set with BB.</p> <p>Benefits</p> <p>Staff targets to be set by ND/NP with weekly reports to AO's. Lead NP</p>	<p>DB</p> <p>NP</p>	Awaiting updated telephony software
E44	<p><u>Partnership working</u></p> <p>Local Service Level Agreements (SLAs), which meet the minimum requirements of any relevant national model SLA, or Partnership agreements are in place with organisations connected with benefits' delivery. These will include Jobcentre Plus, The Pension Service, the Rent Service, the Appeals Service and DWP debt management. If a national model SLA exists, this should be adopted as the minimum requirement.</p>	<p>No SLA with DWP Debt Management as no contact names can be provided by DWP. To raise as urgent item at next JCT liaison meeting.</p>	ET	Actioned
E46	<p>The LA maintains regular contact, supported by formalised and documented working arrangements if considered appropriate, with other organisations, for example Registered Social Landlords, advice agencies, police, Crown Prosecution Service or Procurator Fiscal in Scotland.</p>	<p>RSL's roll out beyond just CHA. Advice agencies are not set up, agreement with BAS to be drafted.</p> <p>Maureen to draft SLA for BAS, CAB and Law Centre and to include reference to representing (or not) claimants under investigation.</p>	<p>ET</p> <p>MS</p>	To be investigated
E51	<p>There are arrangements in place to monitor the delivery of plans and targets on a quarterly basis (including, where appropriate, resources to monitor outsourced elements in line with contracts) to inform senior officers and Members.</p>			Actioned

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	Performance Standard Score currently not at required standard	Action required.	Responsible Officer	Date to Attain
E60	The LA manages and monitors the contract arrangements with its IT providers to ensure compliance with agreed and documented performance standards in the provision of the service.	SLA re Home Working with IT. General SLA to be drafted. Agreement re production of Benefit Cheques.	ET	To be investigated

Revenues & Benefits Best Value Action Plan

Appendix A

Benefit Appeals

	Best Value Requirements	Action required	Responsible Officer	Date to Attain
46	Investigate in consultation with the advice agencies measures to improve turnaround times for Benefits appeals from the current performance of 40 days down to 20 days.	<p>Target current assessment officer resources at appeals preparation work.</p> <p>Streamline and standardise appeal forms and documentation. (Draft leaflet and form discussed with BAS and Age Concern 9.7.04)</p> <p>Look to be more pro active in referring claimants wanting to appeal benefit decisions to the Benefit Advice Service and other advice agencies.</p>	<p>ET</p> <p>MS</p> <p>MS</p>	<p>Actioned</p> <p>Achieved Sep 2004</p> <p>Actioned</p>

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Staff Security (Lone Workers)

	Best Value Requirements	Action required	Responsible Officer	Date to Attain
47	All external visiting officers to be issued with personal hard copies of appropriate documentation.	After document has been finalised by Head of MS&ES and Health & Safety Officer	ET	To be investigated
48	A formalised procedure is required for reporting potentially violent people and incidents that meets the Data Protection regulations.	To be documented. Draft procedure in place with Customer services pending bigger review by ET.	JCC	Actioned
49	Reporting procedures need reviewed, formalised and standardised across the Business unit and the authority. Procedure to include out of office hours working.	In consultation with external visiting officers	ET	Under investigation
50	Risk assessments required for: 1. General observations and doorstep enquires 2. Joint operations 3. Interviews under caution 4. Attendance at Magistrates or Crown Court 5. Home Visits 6. Use of surveillance vehicles.	To be drafted	ET/PM	Drafts lost in the flood.

Revenues & Benefits Best Value Action Plan

Appendix A

Managing Backlogs

51	Performance management is now a core part of Benefits management and staff are embracing their individual targets, notified through their annual appraisal process and providing good customer service. Future action is required to manage risk in respect of triggers where current intervention plans are not appropriate.	In relation to availability of IT systems and managed down time. Delayed due to implementation of Customer service centre.	ET	Actioned
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Telephone Service to the Public

52	More resources are required to man the phones at busy times of the day i.e. mornings and lunchtimes.	Due to staff turnover recruitment for staff to cover busier times have been recruited.	PM	Actioned
53	The Customer Services Team is frequently running at 25% below optimum productive staffing levels due to staff turnover.	Customer Services trainees appointed to provide trained staff for vacancies as and when they arise.	PM	Actioned
54	Callers frequently get an engaged tone when telephoning at busy times.	A new telephone system has been introduced so that customers can leave a message and allows better call management routines.	PM	Actioned
55	Ascertain satisfaction with the improved telephone service.	Customers to be surveyed using the BV80 questionnaire format.	PM	To be investigated

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Initiatives to Maintain /Continually Improve Revenue Collection Rates

56	Reviewing the effectiveness of all recovery stages and putting more emphasis on the more effective recovery methods.	Revenues Manager continues to review effectiveness of the current recovery methods.	MW	Ongoing
57	Reviewing further service level agreements and improving monitoring procedures relating to external Bailiff work.	Regular meetings held both with the local bailiff representative and the head office in Rossendale.	MW	Ongoing
58	Utilising the services of specialised tracing agents (NAFN).	Pilot commenced October 2004 (early results not encouraging.)	AK	Pilot Oct 04 to Mar 05
59	Pilot again telephone recovery practices. Pilots tried under Community Charge and in the early 1990's proved resource intensive and ineffective.	Pilot commenced November 2004. (early results suggest that only 30% of debtors can be contacted by phone.)	AK	Pilot Nov 04 to Mar 05

Revenues & Benefits Best Value Action Plan

Appendix A

Improve Forms, Publicity and Written Correspondence

60	Arrange for consultation with welfare agencies on draft Council Tax and Housing Benefit Information Leaflets, then test out customer satisfaction levels before mass production.	Meet with Carlisle and District CAB and Age Concern to discuss content and suggested improvements for leaflets. Arrange Customer Satisfaction sheets to be included within leaflets when made available to Customer Contact Centre.	ET	Actioned
61	Arrange for DWP and Pension Service leaflets to be available within Customer Contact Centre. This will include a selection written in the different languages.	Order initial supplies and investigate display options available within the Customer Contact Centre.	JC	To be investigated
62	Redesign two versions (working and non-working age) of the current Housing and Council Tax Benefit claim form, based on the DWP national model forms, when current stocks are depleted.	Arrange an alert when current stocks of claim forms fall to below 10,000.	JC	Actioned
63	Redesign the benefit determinations and notification letters, based on good practice examples, and using ProPrint functionality, for consultation with welfare agencies before final production.	Based on outcome of the Performance Standard bid and commitment of IT resources.	ET	Oct 2005
64	Roll out ProPrint into Revenues when Benefit implementation is complete.	Dependant on completion of '63' above.	MW	No timetable available yet.
65	Timetable improvements to Benefits and Revenues templates to provide additional information based on personal circumstances.	Dependant on completion of '63' above.	ET/JC	Mar 2006

Actions required to Progress a Homeworking Pilot within Benefits

66	More formal expressions of interest need to be sought from Benefits staff to assess support for the introduction of a pilot scheme.	To e-mail staff and gauge support through the use of voting buttons.	ET	Actioned
67	Subject to support from the Portfolio Holder, Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Executive Management Group and, most importantly, Benefits staff, a draft bid to be prepared based on other Council's experiences and giving indicative costing for the scheme.	Self explanatory	ET	Actioned
68	Subject to '4.2' above, a Project Manager (likely to be the Benefits Manager) will be appointed to progress this initiative.	Dependant on the completion of '67' above.	PM	Actioned

Revenues & Benefits Best Value Action Plan

Appendix A

IT enhancements within Benefits

69	Payment of Housing Benefit by BACS	Housing Benefit payments to be made direct to claimants bank accounts to save raising cheques and claimants having to bank them.	JB	Apr 2006
70	Electronic Benefit Claim form		ET	Dec 2006
	Introduction of other electronic forms		ST	
71	Use of Proprint		JC/EY	Oct 2005
72	Introduction of bar codes on customer documentation	Proprint can be used to bar code documents produced from Academy. To investigate the possibility of introducing bar codes on Images via the bar code font.	JC/EY	Apr 2006
73	Skills transfer required from Applications and Information Manager to ensure lack of down time with Computer Services.		PM/JN	Ongoing

Other Initiatives

74	To review Overpayment targets in line with DWP guidelines.		JC	Dec 2005
75	Preparation for Local Housing Allowance being introduced in Benefits		ET	Mar 2008
76	Resource implications of Council Tax Banding revaluation		MW	Apr 2006