

Meeting:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Date:	24 th November 2004
Subject:	Scrutiny Review Of Housing Benefits Administration
Responsible Officer:	Director of Business Services
Contact Officer:	Michael Carney
Portfolio Holder:	Cllr Sanjay Dighe
Key Decision:	No
Status:	Part I (NB: Appendix 1 is in Part II on the grounds that it contains Confidential Information - information given to the Council by a Government Department on terms which forbid its disclosure. The appendix will therefore be circulated separately to Members of the Committee only).

Section 1: Summary

Decision Required

That the response of officers to the recommendations be noted and approved.

Reason for report

This is a follow up report to the Scrutiny Review of Housing Benefits Administration.

Benefits

The benefits arising from the decision are continued improvements to service delivery, better use of council resources and improved Corporate Performance Assessment.

Cost of Proposals

There are no costs associated with this report.

Risks

There are no risks associated with this report.

Implications if recommendations rejected

Not applicable.

Section 2: Report

Brief History

This Committee considered the report of the review of the Housing Benefit Administration at its meeting of February 3rd and resolved to endorse the report, maintain a watching brief on performance through “traffic light “ indicators and refer the report and recommendations to the Portfolio Holder for consideration.

This report has been prepared following consideration by the Portfolio Holder and the response of officers to the recommendations contained in the report.

It should also be noted that a further inspection has been undertaken by the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate in September of this year .A draft report is expected shortly and shall be circulated separately to members of this committee only. This “draft” report will however be embargoed until it is formally published in January 2005 at which time it will be included as a future agenda item for consideration by this committee.

The review of Housing Benefit Administration included a number of recommendations and these are listed below together with the comments of the Service Manager.

Recommendation 1

“That greater clarity in the guidance concerning the identification and management of vulnerable claimants be considered”.

The present criteria and guidance for identifying Vulnerable Claimants is:

Age- over 75

Disabled

Having a disabled partner or other member of family

Serious health issues

Personal Identification through home visit or personal call to the office.

When dealing with claims from vulnerable claimants the claim is marked urgent with reasons stated as to why the claimant is considered to be vulnerable. Where further information is required to assess a claim from a "vulnerable" claimant and there is no information available on a person who is acting on the claimant's behalf, home visits are arranged to obtain the information.

The creation of a corporate Financial Assessment Team and the sharing of information has enabled the identification and consequently the management of vulnerable claimants to be much clearer. The creation of a joint visiting team with the Pension Service and establishment of a Welfare Benefits Team in Business Connections will enable further improvements in both the identification and management of vulnerable claimants.

Recommendation 2:

"That additional measures of performance associated with the level of service given to vulnerable persons be evolved by the Housing Benefit Service and reported to members as part of the traffic light system".

This information will be included in reports to members as part of the Performance Indicators established to measure the success of the implementation of a Welfare Benefits Team and Joint Visiting Team with The Pension Service

Recommendation 3:

"That the Performance measures associated with Harrow's Housing Benefit Service be monitored by Overview and Scrutiny and form a regular part of the Information Circular for Overview and Scrutiny for the next 12 months".

This recommendation recognises the importance of members with regards to the Administration of Housing Benefits and regular monitoring reports have been included as a regular part of the Information Circular for overview and Scrutiny r throughout 2004/5.

Recommendation 4

"That the Performance evaluation report contains a very brief summary of key issues facing the department, together with anticipated future key issues where these are probable".

This recommendation also recognises the important role of members have with regard to the administration of Housing Benefits and the relevant issues will be included in the performance evaluation report.

Recommendation 5

“That every action plan must include a mechanism to trigger an exception report if problems addressed by the action plan recur in the future and that this exception report should go to members for problems that carry significant risk”.

The 2004/5 Service plan includes key performance indicators that will act as “triggers” if there is any recurrence of the problems addressed by the action plan. These performance indicators will be reported as part of the Performance evaluation report.

Recommendation 6

Critical Risks

“That action plans identify significant risks as part of the action plan, whether these are identified by external agency or not.

That a method to quantify each critical risk is identified in the action plan

That targets be set to identify when the objectives of the plan have been met, insofar they concern critical risks, or when such risks require further management”.

These recommendations have been included in the action plan with regard to the recommendations contained in the BFI report

Recommendation7

“That consideration be given to a lunchtime seminar on the lessons from Project Phoenix. Such a seminar might be of interest to any manager contemplating using the Harrow SIP. It is suggested that this seminar might incorporate a contribution from the Fujitsu consultant”.

The Housing Benefit Service is now recognised in Harrow as a service that was previously low performing to one that is now High Performing and delivering the level of service that our residents deserve. There are a number of lessons that can be shared with other Service Managers who wish to transform their service and the Housing Benefit Service is presently participating in an exercise with the Work Foundation for our experience to be shared in this way. The format is presently being worked on but could include participation in “performance management” workshops and/ or lunchtime seminars for managers.

Consultation

Service Managers have been involved in the preparation of this report.

Financial Implications

There are no financial implications associated with this report.

Legal Implications

There are no legal implications associated with this report.

Equalities Impact

1 in five households in Harrow are recipients of the Housing and Council Tax Benefits Service and any underperformance impacts directly on our most vulnerable residents.

Section 3: Supporting Information/Background Documents

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Draft Benefit Fraud Inspectorate Report (to follow under separate cover to Members of the Committee only)

Other background papers that are available on request:

Report to and Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 3 February 2004