

Meeting:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Date:	31 <sup>st</sup> January 2005
Subject:	Report of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate on the Administration of Housing Benefits
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 of the agenda on the grounds that it contains Confidential Information – information given to the Council by a Government Department on terms which forbid its disclosure).

## **Section 1: Summary**

### **Decision Required**

That the report of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate be considered.

### **Reason for report**

This is a follow up Inspection to that undertaken in 2003, the findings of which are reported to the Secretary of State.

### **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**

### **2.1 Brief History**

This is the third report of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate on the HB and CTB administration in Harrow. The first report was in September 2000 and the second report was published in August 2003. In this latter report the BFI highlighted concerns over Harrow's ability to implement the recommendations contained in the first report and deliver the improvements contained in our response to the Secretary of State.

Whilst from October 2003 we were reporting monthly on our improvements to the Department of Work and Pensions, it was necessary to satisfy the concerns of the BFI who, although part of the same Department, have a separate reporting mechanism to the Secretary of State and as a consequence they were invited to undertake a third Inspection.

This Inspection was undertaken in September/October 2004 and their report is attached for members to consider.

As Members will appreciate, the report follows an established format used in the presentation of all BFI reports and at times there may be difficulty in following the thread of the report. This has been caused largely by the findings of the third Inspection in that Harrow has implemented all previous relevant recommendations and that it not only satisfies the requirements of the Performance Standards but in a number of areas Harrow is recognised as applying best practice. The report format used by the BFI is geared towards Inspections where the Performance Standards are not satisfied and recommendations for improvement are required.

Unique therefore for a BFI report it contains no recommendations and consequently there is no action plan for members to consider.

Following the Inspection we were informed by the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate that as part of the Corporate Performance Assessment process Harrow's Housing Benefit Service has been assessed as a "good" service. This is the highest assessment given to a London Authority Housing Benefit Service and one shared by only a few authorities in the

country. Harrow can therefore be proud that it now provides the best Housing and Council Tax Benefit Service in London.

We have also been asked by the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate if we will become a reference site for them and this has commenced with the Director of Business Services sharing a Platform at a National Benefits Conference with the BFI Director Chris Bull on "The path to improvement". Future joint work could include a "best practice" Inspection as together with those areas highlighted in the report they are also impressed with the joined up work we are undertaking with the DWP, the Pension Service, RSLs and the Voluntary Agencies and the use we are making of technology such as wireless technology and mobile working in making our service more accessible.

The DWP already use Harrow as a reference site for other Local Authorities and since the improvement in performance has been publicised through performance indicators we have hosted over eight such visits. As a consequence of the publication of the BFI Report, our CPA assessment and our acceptance to be a reference site, we anticipate increased interest from other authorities.

Whilst we are pleased that the BFI reports acknowledges the improvement in our service we are not complacent, and although since August 2003 the caseload has increased from 12,800 to over 15,500 (1 in 5 households in Harrow), we know we have to sustain the improvements in service delivery to these residents and make the service more accessible to reach residents who have previously been "hard to reach".

### 2.3 Consultation

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

### 2.4 Financial Implications

There are no financial implications associated with this report.

### 2.5 Legal Implications

There are no legal implications associated with this report.

### 2.6 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:

Benefit Fraud Inspectorate Report

Other background papers that are available on request:

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

Report to and Minutes of Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 24 November 2004