

Audit Commission – Summary of Findings from Inspection of the Benefit Service

- 1 Thurrock Council's benefits service (the service) is fair with promising prospects for improvement. People now get a prompt decision on their claims but this was not the case in 2008/09. In 2008/09 customers waited an average of 29 days for new claims to be processed. This reduced in 2009/10 to 21 days. Customers whose circumstances changed waited 13 days in 2008/09. In 2009/10 this reduced to eight days. However, those who appeal wait too long for a response.
- 2 The service provides good access for customers through Council offices and its telephone contact centre. There is out of hours access at two local housing offices which are open on Saturday morning. Phone lines are open 8.00am to 6.00pm Monday to Friday. This is helpful to people who may be working and wanting help or advice with their claim or to enquire about claiming benefit. Staff have a positive approach to customer care.
- 3 The service has effective measures in place to support the most financially vulnerable. It does this through use of the discretionary housing payments fund, its direct payment policy for private tenants claiming local housing allowance and close working with the Council's homelessness team.
- 4 Service standards are not communicated to customers. The service has limited engagement with customers to enable it to understand fully whether it is meeting their needs. It also has limited understanding of what access customers want. It has not done enough to encourage residents to claim the benefits they may be entitled to. The service has recently developed a take-up strategy and is starting to be more proactive in encouraging customers to claim benefit.
- 5 The Council has a lack of focus on investigating potential fraud. A lack of strategic direction over a long period has limited the investigation team's ability to be fully effective. Despite this the team has continued to work well and produce results.
- 6 Although the service to customers and customer satisfaction have improved since the start of the contract the Council does not know if the service is delivering value for money. The benefits service is one of a number of services delivered by the Council's strategic partner and the cost of the contract is not split between the different services. However, the Council is now working closely with its partner to develop an improved understanding of the cost of the service and to compare those costs with benefit services. Its investigation service does not provide value for money because of the reliance over a long period on agency staff. The service is not yet maximising recovery of overpayments or income from subsidy.
- 7 The Council is committed to closing the gap in performance with higher performing benefits services. The track record on delivering to customers is fair and improving. Signs that the earlier positive trends had levelled off in 2008/09 have been addressed by improvements including a restructure to make the service more customer facing. As a result the pace of improvements in performance has picked up.

- 8** Improvement planning is more robust. The Council has now invested in client management processes which improve the working relationship with its partner and ensure the contract works better at all levels. The aim is to improve both outcomes for customers and value for money. Existing strengths in performance monitoring are being added to, so that the service will develop more ambitious but still realistic targets. The service does not learn enough from high performing councils. But it is building a better understanding of local need, to improve take-up and access.

- 9** The service day-to-day operations are well run. Staff are generally motivated, knowledgeable and well trained. The service recognises that overpayment recovery needs to improve and it is reviewing its policies and procedures. Generally the current contractual arrangements should be able to deliver further improvements. However, the Council has not yet decided how it wants to deliver its counter-fraud service.