

# Benefits Service Inspection

Shropshire Council

**The Audit Commission is an independent watchdog, driving economy, efficiency and effectiveness in local public services to deliver better outcomes for everyone.**

**Our work across local government, health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services means that we have a unique perspective. We promote value for money for taxpayers, auditing the £200 billion spent by 11,000 local public bodies.**

**As a force for improvement, we work in partnership to assess local public services and make practical recommendations for promoting a better quality of life for local people.**

# Contents

<b>Service inspections .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Summary.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Scoring the service .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Recommendations .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Report .....</b>	<b>12</b>
Context .....	12
<b>How good is the service?.....</b>	<b>14</b>
What has the service aimed to achieve? .....	14
Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?.....	16
Is the service delivering value for money?.....	24
<b>What are the prospects for improvement to the service?.....</b>	<b>26</b>
What is the service track record in delivering improvement?.....	26
How well does the service manage performance? .....	28
Does the service have the capacity to improve? .....	31

# Service inspections

This inspection has been carried out by the Audit Commission under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 and is in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles. These principles embody the objectives of our Strategic Plan and Strategic Regulation. They also reflect the principles from The Government's Policy on Inspection of Public Services (July 2003). Audit Commission service inspections should:

- focus on public service outcomes from a user perspective;
- act as a catalyst to help inspected bodies improve their performance;
- concentrate inspection work where it will have most impact, so that it is proportionate and based on an assessment of risk;
- be based on a rigorous assessment of costs and benefits, with a concern for achieving value for money both by the inspected organisation and within the inspection regime itself;
- be, and be seen to be, independent of the inspected organisation;
- report in public, using impartial evidence to inform the public about the performance of public services so as to enhance accountability;
- involve collaborative working with other inspectorates and external review agencies to achieve greater coordination and a more holistic approach to the assessment of performance by audited and inspected bodies;
- share learning to create a common understanding of performance that encourages rigorous self assessment and better understanding of their performance by inspected organisations;
- be carried out objectively by skilled and experienced people to high standards and using relevant evidence, transparent criteria, and open review processes; and
- enable continuous learning so that inspections can become increasingly effective and efficient.

We assess services using published key lines of enquiry (KLOE) to inform our judgements. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's web site at [www.audit-commission.gov.uk](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk).

This report is issued in accordance with the Audit Commission's duty under Section 13 of the 1999 Act.

## **Inspection of Housing and Council Tax Benefit services**

Housing Benefit (HB) and Council Tax Benefit (CTB) are national welfare benefits administered by the Council for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). A complex legal framework is in place to define who is entitled to benefit and to reduce fraud and error in the system. The benefits service within a council has a responsibility to pay the right benefit to the right person at the right time.

Our responsibility to provide assurance (to government, councils, taxpayers and benefit customers) means that we will consider inspection where there is a current or future risk to the service and its customers. Shropshire Council is one of nine new unitary councils which replaced 44 councils from 1 April 2009. This has meant merging many services of the former councils. For housing and council tax benefit services, this presents a particular challenge given the number of people relying on the service and the large amounts of public money involved. The Commission, in consultation with DWP, has undertaken to inspect the merged benefit service of each of the new councils during 2010/11.

The key objectives of this inspection were;

- to assess the effectiveness of Shropshire Council's Benefits Service in meeting the needs of the vulnerable people it serves, and contributing to the Council's wider corporate objectives; and
- to provide assurance to the DWP and other stakeholders about the quality of service provision.

# Summary

## **The Benefits Service (the Service) provided to customers by Shropshire Council is 'fair' with 'promising' prospects for improvement.**

**1** The Council is a new unitary authority that came into being on 1 April 2009. The transition to a unitary council has been managed well both corporately and at a service level. Benefit IT systems are now integrated in the Service and procedures have been standardised. There have been some work backlogs particularly around claim processing. Dealing with these challenges has dominated the first year of the new combined service. The Service has delivered on most of its promises in the first year of being a unitary council – particularly in terms of consistent service quality, improved advice and successfully promoting the take up of benefits for older people.

**2** During the period of transition the Service has been successful in avoiding causing hardship or eviction for residents and has received good feedback from customers. But, its focus on the advantages of redesigning the service for long term good has meant that it has taken too long to pay people benefits - on average 46 days for new claims in 2009/10. Early signs suggest the Service has turned the corner on this key issue and is processing new claims in 27 days in June 2010. For changes in customer's circumstances, in 2009/10 it took an average of 12 days to process the amendment, well below the Service's challenging target of five days. It also takes too long to deal with appeals.

**3** The Council is proactive and successful in promoting take-up of welfare benefits. To increase take-up, the benefits visiting team merged with the corporate welfare and income team to create a visiting service that gives customers a full range of advice and support on getting the benefits they are entitled to. The Service works well with its partners and stakeholders to help vulnerable people to get money advice and information on other benefits, providing an excellent service particularly for older people. The goal is to give a full benefits check for all customers. In 2009/10 the team brought in £2.4 million extra benefit to residents of Shropshire. However, it has not been helping as many vulnerable people as it could through the Discretionary Housing Payments scheme (DHP).

**4** The Council offers a wide range of face to face offices with flexible opening times. A new office has been opened to respond to need in the relatively deprived town of Market Drayton. The quality of benefit advice is now consistent across the county. The Service has a good range of leaflets and information available to customers. Its website is clear and easy to use. Access to the Service for people with specific needs, for instance the hard

of hearing, is satisfactory. The quality of customer care for visitors to the offices is satisfactory but the Service has only limited customer service standards in place. The visiting service on offer is very good.

**5** However, for telephone callers the service quality is inconsistent. Telephone access is variable. There is a high rate of abandoned calls. Benefit award letters while legally correct use too much jargon and are difficult to understand, resulting in unnecessary contact from customers. The Council recognises there is more to do to improve customer service overall and the Benefits Service. Investment in information technology is improving how the Service is delivered.

**6** Staff have a positive approach to customer care and are knowledgeable about benefits. The Service has a strongly motivated and committed group of managers and staff focused on providing a good service to customers. There has been a positive change in performance culture with improved target setting and an emphasis on individual targets.

**7** There has been some good focus on equality and diversity issues within the Service. Staff are well trained to deal with equality and diversity issues though there have been no equality impact assessments (EIA) carried out on the benefits service. The Service has satisfactory, risk based arrangements in place for managing and dealing with benefit fraud. There are satisfactory arrangements in place for increasing the awareness of benefit fraud and helping people to report suspected fraud. Performance in achieving sanctions and prosecutions of those suspected of fraud, has been effective following a slow start on the move to the new council.

**8** The Service is making good progress in providing value for money to its customers. The new service delivery arrangements have saved £781,000 in the first year.

**9** The Council has done well on delivering the promises made in the first year of the new council - improved advice and take up. But the service is only now developing a track record of delivering improvement in processing times. Five different services have been merged into one successfully. The speed of processing new claims and reported changes has improved in 2010/11 and is now consistent across the County.

**10** Performance is managed well at individual, team and service level. Service objectives are clear and link in well with other corporate and partnership plans. Business plans have SMARTi targets. The Service has a clear view on its priorities and is planning for future changes. Improved information is available on customer needs and the Service is investing successfully in ways to improve.

**i** Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time Framed.

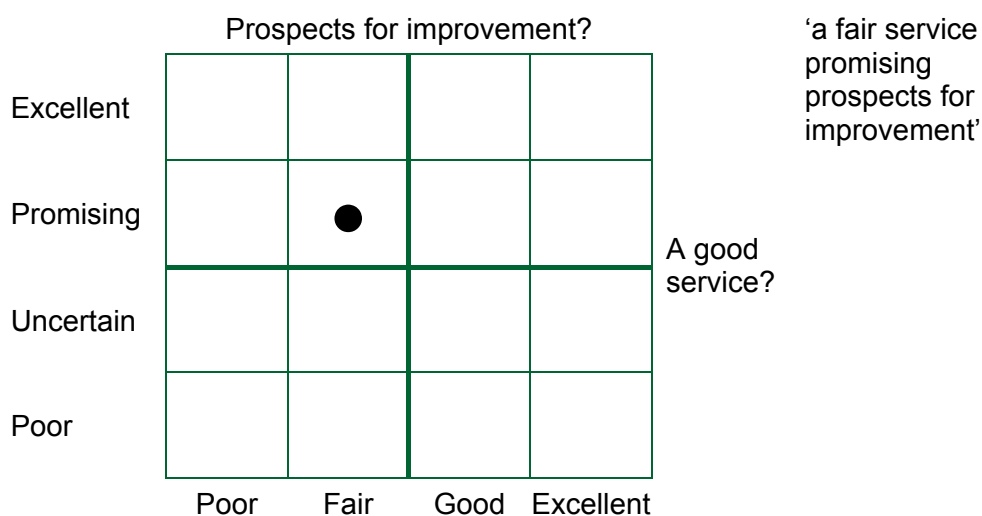
**11** Political and managerial leadership is good. There is effective leadership at both service and corporate level which is prepared to take difficult decisions. Senior managers have had a positive impact on the Service, both in raising expectations, improving performance and in starting to change the organisational culture of benefits. This is recognised by councillors, staff and partners. Councillor and staff training is good.



## Scoring the service

**12** We have assessed Shropshire Council as providing a 'fair', one-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1: **Scoring chart**<sup>i</sup>



Source: Audit Commission

**13** The Service is a fair, one star service because:

- Customer access to offices across the County is good and has improved, with a new office in Market Drayton
- Customer care is a priority and is provided by front line staff who are knowledgeable about benefits and have a positive approach
- Stakeholders are satisfied with recent improvements to the service
- Very good work has been done in making sure local people are getting the benefits they are entitled to
- The Service is developing its understanding of customer needs and responding to those needs.
- Accuracy is improving - the checking of claims is now more robust with early signs that this is starting to improve the accuracy of decisions for customers.

**i** The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

- The Service is taking adequate steps to prevent fraud and is effective at investigating potential fraud.
- The Service is working effectively to minimise overpayments and recovery of overpayments is improving.

But there are some weaknesses for example:

- The Service has, until recently, been slow at dealing with new claims, changes of circumstances and appeals.
- Customers are waiting too long to have their telephone calls answered.
- Benefit award letters are difficult to understand, leading to avoidable repeat contact by customers.
- The Service has not been helping as many vulnerable people as it could through the extra funding available as part of the Discretionary Housing Payment scheme.

14 The Service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- Five different services have been effectively merged into one to provide a consistent service.
- There is an emerging track record of improving performance and a backlog of work has been cleared
- There is effective leadership at both Service and corporate level which is prepared to take difficult decisions.
- It has a clear view on its priorities and is planning for future changes. Improved information is available on customer needs and the Service is investing successfully in ways to improve.
- Performance management arrangements are comprehensive.
- Effective investment has been made in new technology and there is a successful track record of completing a major IT project

However, there are some weaknesses:

- The Service has not effectively monitored how easy it is for customers to contact them in person
- The benefits IT system does not always produce reliable information.

# Recommendations

**15** To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the Council. In addition, we identify the approximate costs<sup>i</sup> and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends the Council should do the following.

## Recommendation

**R1** Improve the service delivered to customers by:

- publicising more effectively service standards that will allow customers to understand what they can expect when they get in touch with the Service;
- involving customers and partners in setting the standards;
- better analysing the service received by customers, for instance waiting times; and
- reporting performance against those standards to customers and partners, making clear to customers the service offered at different times.

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The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a better knowledge for customers about what they can expect to receive from the Service; and
- customers will be better able to hold the Service to account if performance does not match the standards that have been set.

Implementing this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by 31 March 2011.

**i** Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

## Recommendation

- R2** Improve access to the Service and make sure the Service is meeting the needs of all of its customers by:
- processing new claims and changes of circumstance consistently quickly;
  - providing a phone service which is responsive to customer demand;
  - improving the quality of benefit award letters
  - managing and promoting Discretionary Housing Payments more effectively;
  - analysing satisfaction with the Service of diverse groups, including undertaking equality impact assessments of the Service including telephone and other ways of contacting the Council and ensuring a focus on diverse groups in the new benefit take-up strategy and plan; and
  - completing Equality Impact Assessments for policies and procedures.

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The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- shorter waiting times;
- clearer advice; and
- increased customer satisfaction.
- increased assurance that all local people can access the Service easily and receive the same quality of service;
- the Service will be able to adapt to take account of all the needs of its local community; and
- ensure the Service is complying with equality legislation.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by 31 March 2011.

## Recommendation

- R3** Improve value for money by:
- evaluating the efficiency and effectiveness of the Service through better benchmarking;
    - reviewing the pace of implementing systems changes to improve efficiency and customer experience
    - review opportunities for collaboration and sharing services with other councils; and
    - further reducing benefits overpaid.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased financial resources for the Council; and
- more confidence in how well the Service is performing.

Implementing this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by 31 March 2011.

## Recommendation

**R4** Reduce benefit fraud and error by:

- developing an improved understanding of the fraud risks of the local area;
- ensuring the resource allocated to investigate fraud is effectively targeted and maximises the benefits from having an electronic case management system;
- agreeing challenging targets for the Benefits service to prevent, detect and prosecute benefit fraud;
- undertaking appropriate pro-active counter-fraud drives identified following analysis of caseload and local risk; and
- improving the accuracy of benefit payments.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- public reassurance that there is a robust approach to detecting and investigating benefit fraud;
- potential fraudsters are deterred;
- protection of public money; and
- reducing the unnecessary cost of inaccurate payments to the Council.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by 31 March 2011.

# Report

## Context

### The locality

**16** Shropshire is a large rural area in the West Midlands, bordering Wales to the west. It is one of the most rural and sparsely populated counties in England with a significantly lower population density compared regionally and nationally. Shropshire county and its districts were replaced by a unitary authority on 1 April 2009.

**17** The County has no cities, but 22 towns. The sizeable towns include Shrewsbury, Oswestry, Ludlow, Bridgnorth and Market Drayton. Most of the other settlements can be classed as villages or small towns. The area has a population of about 290,900 with population estimated to grow faster than the regional average up to 2020. 100,000 live in the county town of Shrewsbury. 1 in 4 of the population are over 65 years old. Since 1991 the number of people of retirement age has increased by 64.1 per cent. The area has a relatively older age demographic than the regional and national average, and a smaller black and minority ethnic community.

**18** The population is distributed widely and sparsely across a large geographical area with many small settlements, this makes delivering services effectively and efficiently more difficult. The larger towns are primarily concentrated in a central belt that roughly follows the A5/M54 roadway.

**19** Shropshire is relatively affluent, with low levels of unemployment and relatively high qualifications and skills levels. However, the average wage is lower than the regional and national average. A high proportion of employment is within the public administration, education and health sectors, and tourism related employment is also high compared to regional and national averages. The economy has traditionally been dominated by agriculture due to its rural location. However, in more recent years it has become more service orientated.

**20** Housing is relatively affordable compared to the national average, although prices are higher than the West Midlands average. Residents of Shropshire are generally healthier than the England average. However, road injuries and deaths and childhood obesity at reception age are worse than the England average.

**21** The percentage of working age population at 58.2 per cent is lower than the West Midlands (60.9 per cent) and GB (62 per cent). In May 2010 there were 4,699 people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance - this was 2.8 per cent of the working age population and is lower than the West Midlands (5 per cent) and GB (3.9 per cent) average. The percentage of part-time workers

at 33.4 per cent is higher than the West Midlands average of 30.6 per cent and the GB average of 31.2 per cent.

**22** The proposal to create a Shropshire unitary council, covering the area of the existing non-metropolitan county, was supported by the government and 1 April 2009 was set as the date for the reorganisation to take place. The new unitary council was established in April 2009. The new unitary council divides the county into three areas, each with its own area committee - North, Central and South. It has 28 Local Joint Committees with local budgets where members of the public can get involved in local democracy.

**23** The first elections to Shropshire Council took place on the 4 June 2009, with the former Shropshire County Council being the continuing council and its councillors became the first members of the new Shropshire Council on 1 April 2009. Shropshire Council has 74 councillors. There are 53 Conservative councillors, 12 Liberal Democrats, 7 Labour, and 2 Independent.

### **The Council's Benefits service**

**24** The Benefits service within Exchequer Services provides Housing Benefit - rent allowances to private sector tenants and rent rebates to public sector tenants. Council Tax Benefit is provided to both rented and owner-occupier accommodation. Exchequer services is part of the Council's Resources Directorate. The Benefits service sees itself as an agent for change developing new opportunities and implementing amendments to legislation or adopting new procedures for service enhancement.

**25** The cost of running the service in 2009/10 was £1.7 million, well within the DWP administration grant of £2.2 million. The balance of funding has been invested in improving the corporate IT infrastructure for the future to ensure greater resilience for the service when coping with future changes in demand. The number of people claiming HB has increased by 12 per cent between March 2009 and March 2010. In the same period the number of people claiming CTB has increased by 9.4 per cent. About 18.4 per cent of households receive some support with housing costs from the Service. The Benefits service in the Council pays out around £80 million a year to:

- 23,634 people claiming CTB;
- 14,257 people claiming rent allowance of whom 8,817 are tenants of registered providers and 5,440 are tenants of private landlords; and
- 2,797 people claiming rent rebate.

Of the total caseload of 24,997, 52.77 per cent of people are of pension age and 47.23 per cent are working age. Sixty three people work in the Council's Benefits service - this includes staff who visit clients in their home, as well as staff who assess and process claims.

# How good is the service?

## What has the service aimed to achieve?

**26** As part of reorganising the way local services are delivered, Shropshire Council took over the functions of Shropshire County Council and five district councils from 1 April 2009. The new Council is committed to delivering on promises made in the business case for the merger:

- Strong visible leadership
- Strong voice for Shropshire
- Local voice for Shropshire
- Improved service delivery
- Better access
- Improved procurement
- Financial savings

This merger has saved local taxpayers over £10m. The merger of the five benefit services saved £781,000 in direct costs to housing benefit.

**27** The Council has four overarching corporate aims:

- To give children and young people the best opportunities today and for the future;
- To improve the health and well-being of Shropshire's residents;
- To ensure safe and strong communities for everyone in the county; and
- To build sustainable communities for local people to live and work in Shropshire.

The Council corporate plan sets out priorities under each of these aims. Under the Health and Well-Being aim, there is a priority to: "Maximise vulnerable and older peoples income and increase take-up of benefits". The corporate plan identifies one specific action for meeting its priority around benefits take-up. It says "we will work closely with vulnerable people to identify ways in which they can maximise their income through signposting them to the correct agencies".

**28** The Council has worked well to maintain focus on its priorities. It understands well the link between its benefits service and its work to deliver its wider priorities around reducing homelessness, reducing worklessness, maximising benefit, supporting vulnerable people and financial inclusion.

**29** A key aim and first priority of the new benefits service was to work from one benefits IT system and one electronic document management system and to provide a consistent service across the area. The Service completed the change to the new benefits IT system and electronic document management system before creating the new unitary council. However, to achieve this, the five district councils had two months when there was no IT system on which to process claims. This resulted in a backlog of work and a decline in performance. It took until the end of January 2010 to clear that



and a smaller backlog from November 2009. The Service has worked without any significant backlogs since then.

**30** The 2009 corporate plan sets out the key indicators and targets the Council will use to check progress against its priorities. For its priority to "Maximise vulnerable and older peoples income and increase take-up of benefits" the indicators relate to increasing the number of people claiming HB and CTB, attendance allowance, carers allowance and disability living allowance. There is also an indicator for increasing the benefits for older service users, in line with the forecast increase in population - from £1.12m to £1.16m in 2009/10, £1.19m in 2010/11 and £1.23m in 2011/12. A new, transitional corporate plan for 2010 keeps the objective about take-up for older people.

**31** The corporate plan includes an improvement plan for increasing take-up of eligible benefits. Planned actions in 2009/10 were: hold road shows and awareness events, maintaining up-to-date and quality-assured records, work with the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) to help hard to reach groups, monitor debt levels closely and distinguish those that are asset rich but cash poor. For 2010/11 and 2011/12 the plan is to review progress and take further actions as appropriate.

**32** The Service has set out a clear, high level statement of its vision and objectives. The vision is to address social exclusion through its work, and make a full contribution to social and economic welfare "through initiatives and imaginative use of resources and continually exploring new opportunities". The service aims are:

- Deliver a service that is customer focused, modern and efficient;
- Deliver a quality service to all that is fast and accurate;
- Actively promote all types of benefit;
- Be accessible to everyone in the community by promoting the service and developing links with suitable stakeholders and partners;
- Achieve continuous improvements in processing benefit claims and making payments to our stakeholders;
- Achieve high standards of accuracy and detect, investigate and deter fraud and error by identifying areas of risk and taking appropriate action to reduce those risks and sanction appropriate fraudsters;
- Develop the service with other organisations; and,
- Achieve performance within the top 10 per cent of all councils.

**33** The Resources Service Plan for 2009/10 states the objective for the Benefits service is to undertake all elements of benefit calculation in a timely manner to achieve the best of the previous five district and borough councils - change of circumstances within five days, new claims processed within 19 days.

## Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?

**34** There are some positive examples of where the Service has responded to customers' needs. The Service knows that local people still want face-to-face contact through local offices. Given the large size of the area and its scattered population this presents particular challenges. Face-to-face services are provided through the original district locations at Bridgnorth, Ludlow, Oswestry, Shrewsbury (though this office has moved from the Guildhall to Shire hall) and Wem. There is also a new location in Market Drayton where there is high deprivation and poor transport links to other offices. The Service has made sure that it has a good team of visiting officers who will help older and vulnerable people living in rural and remote areas get the help they need. Visiting officers will assist in the completion of claim forms and collect evidence from customers. Designing the Service to take account of customer's needs is making it easier for customers to get the help they need, in a way that suits them.

**35** The Service is developing its understanding of customer needs. It is not yet using information on who is and is not claiming benefit to shape service delivery though corporately this is happening. Until recently there has not been regular engagement by the Service with the community. However, it is now beginning to listen to local people and this is resulting in some changes that are starting to improve service delivery. Since May 2010 it has been asking customers visiting its offices and those visited by visiting officers their views of the Service. The Service has started to use these views to shape the service. For example, visiting officers now leave receipts with customers confirming what information has been taken away and what information is still needed. It has also started to be more proactive in telephoning customers rather than by letter to more clearly explain what information is needed. By listening to what customers have said service delivery is being reshaped to address the needs and concerns of customers.

**36** Front-line staff are knowledgeable about benefits. Experienced benefits officers respond to face-to-face queries at six offices (Bridgnorth, Ludlow, Market Drayton, Oswestry, Shrewsbury and Wem) and to telephone queries. This means customers can have complex benefit queries resolved quickly. It has also allowed the Service to introduce "fast track" claim processing in these offices. Claims are processed within 48 hours if customers provide all the information needed. This service is new and has not yet been widely advertised. In the first month (June 2010) 59 customers benefited from this service.

**37** Access to the Service has improved with forming the new council. The Council has a corporate customer service centre which deals with telephone queries and face-to-face queries that are dealt with at 17 locations (including six offices with experienced benefits staff). The customer service staff respond to general benefit queries but their main source of support is the Service's internet pages. This means customers can get basic advice and help at more locations throughout the area. When customer service

staff cannot deal with the query the customer then contacts the Service direct. Although this can mean customers having to make contact more than once, the Service is working with the customer service centre to address this. A pilot arrangement is being tested at the Ludlow office with customer service staff being given more benefits training. Accurate responses to queries help customers to provide the information needed more quickly and reduce the number of times they have to contact the Service.

**38** Opening times offer flexibility for customers. Face-to-face contact with the Service is available at six access points which are open 8.45 am to 5.00 pm Monday to Friday. In addition basic support and advice is available from corporate customer service centres which increases access for customers. The Service's phone lines are open 8.45 am to 5.00 pm Monday to Friday and there is some out of hours access by phone as customer service centres are open:

- 8.00 am to 8.00 pm Monday and Thursday,
- 8.00 am to 6.00 pm Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday and
- 9.00 am to 1.00 pm on Saturday.

Although customer service centre staff cannot answer the full range of questions they can deal with some basic queries and take messages and get someone from the Service to call the customer back at a convenient time.

**39** The Service does not have a clear picture of how long customers wait to be seen when visiting its offices. It does not know if it is meeting its target for customers to be seen within 10 minutes of their arrival by a person competent to deal with basic queries. The Service feels that queues are not a problem and so it has not invested in a queue management system. If customer service staff see a queue building they phone benefit managers to get extra staff to deal with customers. Our mystery shopping identified one office which was busy and customers had to identify for themselves their place in the queue. There were no queues at any of the other offices. However, not all offices had toilets available for the public. There is limited privacy at some offices. Although there are private interview rooms they may not be available at a particular time. The Service is not easily able to analyse their customers experience in accessing the Service and react accordingly when customer's may be experiencing problems.

**40** Staff have a positive approach to customer care and managers consistently promote a customer focus. The Service took part in a pilot satisfaction survey with ten other councils and it compares favourably particularly for the attitude, politeness and helpfulness of staff. Our own mystery shopping showed that customers are dealt with in a friendly and helpful way. The Service has identified and corrected anomalies in the advice given by the different sites and customers now receive more consistent advice across the County. This is important as staff from a different office to that which gave the advice may process the claims. Consistent advice ensures customers know what is expected of them.

**41** Customers are waiting too long to have their telephone calls answered. Until the end of September 2009 most calls were answered within 15 seconds and rates of abandoned calls on the Service's phones were low. Response times have been slower since then following a decision to focus resources on processing claims to clear the backlog. The result has improved processing times but telephone response times have worsened as has the rate of abandoned calls. The most recent figures for April 2010 to early July 2010 show a worse service as, on average 1 in 5 calls to the Service were abandoned. In the same period the average time to answer a call was 52 seconds. There has not been any publicity to customers on how long it takes to process claims to try to reduce the number of people calling to chase the progress of claims. However, feedback from stakeholders and customers shows they are happy the overall service is improving. Failing to respond to enquiries quickly can deter people from claiming or providing information about changes in their circumstances. Customers unable to get through will become frustrated and may have to travel to a customer access point to seek the help they need.

**42** Customer access to the Service through its website is improving. Information is easy to find and accurate. Customers can appeal, apply for DHP, report fraud and changes in circumstances online. There is a claim form online but the customer has to download and print this then send it through the post. The Service is developing an online claim form. Access by this route is cost effective and helps provide out of hours support for customers or potential customers of the Service who have access to the internet.

**43** Basic customer service standards are in place. For example, targets are published to answer calls within five rings, to see customers within ten minutes of arrival at offices, reply to correspondence with 15 days and email within one day. However, the Service doesn't let customers know how well it is performing against the standards. There are no standards that let customers know how quickly their claims will be dealt with. This means that customers will not be clear about the level of service they can expect, or be able to hold the Service to account when things are below standard.

**44** The Council is proactive and successful in promoting take-up of welfare benefits. To increase the take-up of benefits, the benefits visiting team merged with the corporate welfare and income team to create a visiting service that gives customers a full range of advice and support on accessing benefits. The welfare and income team assesses customers, mainly elderly people, who receive care in their own homes or residential homes. They also complete a benefits check for all types of benefits. It works as part of a Maximising Benefits Partnership, which includes Citizens Advice Service, A4U, Age Concern, Pension Service and Jobcentre Plus. The team undertakes visits for the Service, including intervention work. The team has approval from the DWP enabling them to receive benefit applications. The goal is to give a full benefits check for all customers. In 2009/10 the team helped residents of Shropshire receive £2.4 million extra income through benefit. Over £200,000 of this was Housing and Council

Tax Benefit. Encouraging people to claim benefits they are entitled to, brings much needed help to vulnerable people and at the same time supports the local economy<sup>i</sup>.

**45** Benefit award letters are difficult to understand. Although they include information the law requires this is not always clearly explained. The Service has recognised its letters are sometimes poor and accepts customers' criticisms they can seem repetitive and complicated and has included improvements to letters a priority in its action plan. Confusing information leads to unnecessary enquiries, and adds unnecessary stress to people claiming benefit.

**46** Analysis of complaints is starting to shape the Service. Customers can complete a complaint form online and there is good information on the Council's website and at offices about how to make a complaint. However, the Service complaints and appeals procedure requires customers to put complaints in writing. The benefit regulations state appeals have to be in writing but the corporate complaints procedure allows for complaints to be made in various ways. The Service is using complaints to identify where procedures or processes may not have worked for customers and then feedback to staff to ensure people are aware of where things have gone wrong. Having a suitable complaints system in place allows the Service to identify where things may be going wrong.

## **Diversity**

**47** Within the Service there is generally a good understanding of equalities, diversity and human rights responsibilities and duties. The Council is at the 'achieving' level for the Equality Framework for local government. A clear corporate commitment to equalities and diversity is set out within the Council's single equality scheme. Staff in the Service have had good equality and diversity training under the new Council. There is an equality champion within the Service. Despite these strengths, some fundamental things have not been done, there have been no equality impact assessments (EIA)<sup>ii</sup> carried out on the Service during the run up to forming the new Council or in the first year of operation. By not carrying out impact assessments, the Service cannot be sure it is meeting the needs of all of its communities.

**i** 'The Money Trail, published by the New Economic Foundation, estimates that for every £1 increase in benefits paid through take-up work 77 pence is spent in the local economy.

**ii** An equality impact assessment (EIA) is a tool for identifying the potential impact of a council's policies, services and functions on its residents and staff. It can help staff provide and deliver excellent services to residents by making sure that these reflect the needs of the community. By carrying out EIAs, a council may also ensure that the service it provides fulfil the requirements of anti-discrimination and equalities legislation.

**48** There are good arrangements in place for people with specific needs. All the offices are clean and welcoming with automatic opening front doors. Telephone translation services are available though not often needed. The claim form is clear. It is well laid out so customers know when they need to provide evidence and what is acceptable. It is available in Braille, large print and audiotape and in four different languages. Customers can use it to claim free school meals as well as HB and CTB. A good range of leaflets is available, and although these are not generally available in other languages staff access general benefit information leaflets on a national website if needed. Support for those with special needs removes potential barriers to claiming.

**49** The Service uses Discretionary Housing Payment scheme (DHP)<sup>i</sup> to help those in need but has not been helping as many vulnerable people as it could through the extra funding available. Landlords are aware of the DHP fund. Staff are aware of DHP and promote it to customers they deal with but it is not proactively publicised more generally. The Service is developing publicity material for promoting use of DHP and developing a more joined up approach to DHP with the Council's homelessness team. Between April 2009 and end of June 2010 the Service received 356 applications for DHP. Of these it paid 159 with 40 more waiting for a decision. In 2009/10 it paid £38,645. As the Service did not spend its full grant of £52,415 in 2009/10 its share for 2010/11 reduced to £50,567. Its DHP policy includes a review process if customers are not satisfied. By not having spent the fund fully, the Service is missing an opportunity to increase the help to those people most in need.

**50** The Service successfully supports the Council in its aim of preventing homelessness. Its direct payment policy, in place for tenants claiming local housing allowance<sup>ii</sup>, covers circumstances in which the Service will pay landlords rather than tenants. The Council provided Shropshire Housing Alliance, a voluntary organisation supporting people in housing need, with £30,000 to help those at risk of homelessness. The Service has an arrangement with Shropshire Housing Alliance to fast-track and agree LHA payments direct to landlords for the most vulnerable. Good joint working with Housing during the transition to a unitary council, where potential hardship cases were prioritised, meant that no-one was made homeless as a result. Help for vulnerable customers can prevent financial hardship and ensure housing costs are met thus preventing homelessness.

**i** The purpose of DHP is to provide extra financial support to the most vulnerable customers receiving HB and CTB where the benefit they get does not meet the full cost of their rent or council tax. Each year, the DWP allocates funds according to the spending in previous years. Councils are able to top up the fund to a maximum set by DWP using their own budget at their discretion.

**ii** The local housing allowance (LHA) scheme was introduced nationally on 7 April 2008 for new claims made on or after that date and for people who move home on or after that date. It applies only to people renting from private landlords.



## Service outcomes for users and the community

**51** Benefits customers wait too long for decisions on their claims. National comparative data for the 'Right time'<sup>1</sup> indicator NI181 is limited to the first three-quarters of 2009/10. The Council's performance, is in the worst 25 per cent of councils for all three quarters. The Service reports the average for all of 2009/10 as 15 days. Delays in processing claims creates avoidable hardship for vulnerable people.

**52** For paying new claims the Service compares poorly to other councils nationally. The Service's performance in the first nine months of 2009/10 was in the worst 25 per cent of councils nationally for each of the three-quarters. Performance for all of 2009/10 was 46 days well below its target of 19 days. The average for the first three months of 2010/11 is 37 days, much improved from the same period in 2009/10 and for June 2010 performance was 27 days. Delays in dealing with new claims lead to confusion for customers, especially those claiming for the first time. And delays will increase the number of queries from customers and therefore will mean more work for the Service.

**53** The Service is slow in dealing with changes in circumstances. Its performance indicators for 2009/10 show it took an average of 12 days to process changes well below its challenging target of 5 days. Its performance was in the worst 25 per cent of councils nationally for the first nine months of 2009/10. The prompt processing of changes of circumstances is as important as the prompt payment of new claims. It can help smooth the transition back into work for customers starting work and reduce overpayments.

**54** Accuracy is improving and the checking of claims is robust with signs that this is starting to improve the accuracy of decisions for customers. Prior to the merger the five districts did not have quality assurance teams. Staff with other duties undertook the work as time allowed. The Service has created a specific team to ensure regular and consistent quality assurance. Quality assurance has been developing since September 2009. Before that the team were involved in ensuring data accuracy following the conversion to the new benefits IT system. Claims are systematically checked for accuracy based on the risk of mistakes being made, with a higher percentage of checks for those staff identified as having problems from the four per cent check of all assessments. New starters have 100 per cent of their work checked. These arrangements should give the Service a good idea of the areas of weakness and where to target training but it is too early to say how well this is working. The quality assurance team check the accuracy of the whole claim not just the accuracy of recent amendments. This identifies historical as well as current errors and so does not give a clear picture of trend or accuracy of current work. Around 80 per cent of claims are accurately calculated. Accurate payments help prevent over and underpayments of benefit. By making sure that benefit is worked out correctly fewer overpayments are made because of official error. Also, the

**i** This measures the average processing times for new claims and change events.

cost to local taxpayers is reduced because the Service can claim full government subsidy on those overpayments.

**55** Customers who appeal wait too long for a decision. In 2009/10 the Service sent only 20 appeals to the Tribunals Service. Only 40 per cent were sent within four weeks. In 2009/10 due to the focus on the processing backlog, it took on average 68 days to send an appeal to the Tribunals Service. Customers can suffer lengthy delays to learn the outcome of their cases, leaving people in financial uncertainty for too long. The Service creates barriers for those wishing to appeal as it manages appeals as a three-stage process. However, customers can use any of the options without first having to go through an earlier stage. This can increase the time before customers have their cases reviewed by the Tribunals Service if this is what they want to happen.

**56** The Service is taking adequate steps to prevent fraud. It complies with good practice in verifying the evidence that customers must provide when they make a claim. All benefits staff are trained to verify documents. The claim form clearly tells customers what evidence they need to provide to be able to claim. It reviews cases either by visit or by post, based on the risk of there being under or overpayments of benefit. This helps ensure customers receive the correct benefit entitlement.

**57** The Service has good arrangements in place for managing and dealing with benefit fraud. The sanctions and prosecutions policy in place is clear. This allows each case to be dealt with on its own merits, considering customers' particular circumstances. The Service has introduced a sifting process for fraud referral identifying risk. Prior to the merger of the districts all referrals were investigated. Once fully developed this should mean that only those most likely to result in a positive outcome are investigated. Investigators are qualified to 'Professionalism in Investigations' standards. The quality of investigations is good and all cases going to court result in a successful prosecution.

**58** There are satisfactory arrangements in place for increasing the awareness of benefit fraud and helping people to report suspected fraud. For example:

- successful prosecutions are publicised on the Council website and in the local press;
- the public can report suspected fraud online, by email, direct to the fraud team telephone number or by using the free national benefit fraud hotline;
- benefits processing staff and some other Council staff and councillors have had recent fraud awareness training, and
- benefits staff receive feedback on whether a referral is to be investigated.

Increasing awareness of fraud encourages people to report suspicions and helps to prevent fraud getting into the benefit system.



**59** The Service has improved its effectiveness at investigating potential fraud over the first year of the new Council. Significant development and integration of systems took place during the year. Because of this, during 2009/10 the Service only achieved 63 sanctions against its target of 130. However, the fraud team of the new Council only became fully effective in the second half of the year. This is because of fraud work in the districts being wound down before forming the new Council. It took time to consolidate procedures and develop benefit fraud prosecutions skills in the new Council's legal team. An electronic fraud case management system was also put in place. In the first three months of 2010/11 30 sanctions have been administered with a further 59 either awaiting authorisation or for court dates. Dealing effectively with fraudulent claims helps to protect taxpayers' money.

**60** There remain areas of fraud work that are not yet fully developed. For example:

- although potentially fraudulent claims identified through the Housing Benefit Matching Service data match scans<sup>i</sup> were dealt with other queries from the scan were not dealt with quickly until recently;
- some claims are suspended for too long while enquiries about the claim are ongoing; and
- there are no proactive fraud drives based on risk and analysis of caseloads.

Effective counter-fraud activity gives assurance to councillors and taxpayers that potential fraudsters are being stopped from committing fraud.

**61** The Council has managed the change to one single benefit service well. A significant amount of work went into planning and doing this, and the new ICT system was in place from February 2009. The Council's goal was to make the necessary changes early, to give a solid foundation on which to build the new Service. Corporately, and within the benefits service, the transition to unitary status was managed very well. During the transition to the new unitary council, the Service has successfully delivered on several promises made. These were to address the differential performance and policies in the previous districts and provide a consistent service and improved HB advice, to make savings from the revenues and benefits services in the transition to a unitary authority and a specific priority here to maximise income for vulnerable and older people and increase take-up of benefits. Benefits service performance suffered in 2009/10 because of the major IT system and organisational change alongside an increase in caseload because of the economic conditions.

**i** The Housing Benefit Matching Service is run by the DWP. It is the computerised comparison of two or more sets of records which relate to the same person. It is primarily used as a method of combating fraud.

## Is the service delivering value for money?

**62** The Service has made a good start to providing value for money to its customers. It has:

- delivered £781,000 direct housing benefit savings in its first year, this includes successfully merging five benefit IT databases from two different suppliers into one from a third supplier saving £138,000;
- low costs when the overall cost of the Service is compared with the amount received from the DWP. For 2009/10 it cost £1.7 million to run the Service and it received £2.2 million from DWP this means that council taxpayers do not contribute towards the cost of running the Service. This compares well with other councils which in 2008/09 on average contributed 45 per cent to the cost of running their benefit services. The balance of funding has been invested in improving the corporate IT infrastructure for the future to ensure greater resilience for the Service when coping with future changes in demand; and
- started to explore benchmarking against other councils. It has compared its staffing levels with 16 other unitary councils and has more customers for each staff member than 13 of them. It is trying to compare its costs and performance with the other new unitary councils but without much success though the amount of benchmarking data from other unitary councils is increasing.

In the current economic environment it is essential that services are efficient, economical and effective.

**63** The Service has improved its effectiveness at recovering overpaid benefit over the first year of the new Council. At the five districts overpayment debt was recorded on various systems including some paper records. Because of this it was not possible to transfer the information to the new benefits IT system automatically. It took several months to enter manually all the debt to the new benefits IT system. As the debt was transferred, it was re-invoiced and once all the debt was transferred the recovery cycle started. So far debtors have had two reminders. The Service is now targeting its top 2.5 per cent of highest value debts. These debts account for a third of the total invoiced debt. It is also looking at its oldest debts. Two thirds of its debt dates from before November 2008.

**64** The Service has created a recovery timetable for its newly created debts which should mean these are chased quickly. The Service has identified the debt as at the end of March 2010 was £2.2 million. The Service has extended the use of 'blameless tenant' recovery<sup>i</sup>. All overpayments to large landlords are now recovered this way. The new debt raised between the end of March 2010 to the end of June 2010 was £1.1 million and the amount recovered was £0.8 million which equates to 24 per cent of all the debt. Comprehensive debt monitoring helps the

- i** Recovery from HB paid to a landlord/agent for another tenant, when the landlord has been classed as responsible for repayment of a debt (sometimes known as 'Blameless Tenant' recovery)

Service increase the money it is collecting. Recovering outstanding debts reduces the cost of running the Service to the local taxpayer.

**65** The Service is working effectively to minimise overpayments. Despite having a backlog of work for much of 2009/10 the Service effectively prioritised changes likely to result in too much benefit being paid. As a result, for 2009/10 overpayments because of council error or delay are lower than the threshold set by the DWP so maximum subsidy has been claimed. This represents a good improvement since 2008/09 when Shropshire's five districts did not receive any subsidy incentive for overpayments created because of council error and delay. This was because of errors on accounts identified during the change-over to the new IT system. Good management arrangements ensure the Council does not lose income to which it is entitled.

**66** Management arrangements for subsidy claims are effective. For most of the payments made to customers, councils receive repayment from DWP, providing they comply with the regulations. In 2009/10 the Council's subsidy claim is £80 million. The Council claims this money by completing a subsidy claim form and sending it to DWP. Part of the assurance process that surrounds this work is that external auditors have to certify this claim form to confirm its correct completion. It was a challenging process for the 2008/09 claim given the merger of five IT systems to one and DWP's requirement that five claims had to be submitted. Critically, the auditors have not qualified the claim and there were minimal changes needed. The Service's good management of its subsidy claims removes uncertainty of funding from the DWP for a significant amount of spending.

# What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

## What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

**67** The Council has managed the change to one single benefit service well. The Council decided to set up a single database for providing benefits and revenues services for the start of the new unitary council. A significant amount of work went into planning and doing this, and the new system was in place from February 2009. In addition, the Council was creating a new benefits service from the previous five district council services. The Council's goal was to make the necessary changes at an early stage, to have a solid foundation on which to build the new Service. Corporately, and within the benefits service, the transition to unitary status was managed very well.

**68** During the transition to the new unitary council, the Service has successfully delivered on several promises made. These were to address the differential performance and policies in the previous districts and provide a consistent service and improved HB advice, to make savings from the revenues and benefits services in the transition to a unitary authority and a specific priority here to maximise income for vulnerable and older people and increase take-up of benefits.

**69** Benefits service performance suffered in 2009/10 because of the major IT system and organisational change alongside an increase in caseload because of the economic conditions. Shropshire is the only new unitary council to have moved to one benefits IT system. Performance improved throughout the first year and continues to do so. Table 1 shows performance in each quarter in 2009/10. In the first quarter of 2010/11 performance for new claims improved and was 37 days compared to 52 in the same period in 2009/10. In June 2010, new claims were being processed in 27 days on average.

Table 1: **Claims processing performance**

Performance measure	April 2009 - June 2009	July 2009 - September 2009	October 2009 - December 2009 <sup>xi</sup>	January 2010 - March 2010
NI 181 - average time to process new claims and changes (days)	25	24	19	5
Average time to process new claims	52	45	43	42
Average time to process change of circumstances (days)	22	19	14	3 <sup>xii</sup>

*Shropshire Council and DWP published data*

**70** A significant backlog of work caused by the system downtime during the change-over to one benefits IT system has been cleared. This has removed the negative impact an outstanding backlog has on new claims and reported changes action and helped to reduce the overpayments. The correct rate of benefit can be paid more quickly.

**71** The Service has effectively addressed the differential performance and policies in the previous districts. It took the best practice in procedures and policies from the districts, and applied these across the Service as a whole. This took a while to bed down, and there were occasions when some customers received inconsistent advice. But the Service has worked hard to correct this and, as a result, customers and landlords now get a much more consistent level of service, regardless of which office they contact and the accuracy of claims is improving. A new team was established to manage overpayments, and overpayment management is improving. In addition, the Service has developed a recovery timetable for its newly created debts.

**xi** DWP data for this quarter. DWP have adjusted the published 'right time' indicator performance information to exclude new claims and changes of circumstance which are recorded as having taken more than 12 months to process. This represents around 0.1 per cent of all cases. DWP have evidence most of these cases have software or input errors and therefore should not be included. DWPs quality assurance exercise for this indicator has been developed in accordance with the principles and protocols developed by the United Kingdom Statistics Authority.

**xii** Because of a large volume of changes which can be processed quickly at the end of the year performance in the fourth quarter of the year will be skewed and look much better than previous quarters. This is the case for all councils.

**72** Access to the benefits service has improved. Another benefits office was opened in Market Drayton in 2009, as this market town had not previously been served by a customer service point. Corporate customer service centre staff can provide basic advice and assistance at a wider range of outlets and for increased hours. The benefits welfare team and the income and welfare team were merged, to provide a visiting service that gives customers a full range of advice and support on accessing benefits.

**73** Fraud outcomes are improving. In the first quarter of 2010/11, 30 sanctions have been administered with a further 59 either awaiting authorisation or for court dates. This compares with 63 sanctions during 2009/10. This has been underpinned by more robust antifraud processes and staff training.

**74** The Service works closely and effectively with other services and agencies to promote welfare benefit take-up, to help residents receive income which they are entitled to. One of the Council's aims is to build sustainable communities in Shropshire, and it has a specific priority here to maximise income for vulnerable and older people and increase take-up of benefits. The Council exceeded its target for increasing take up in 2009/10, helping people to claim a total of £2.4 million extra benefits. Because most benefit money is spent within the local community, this in turn helps to support local shops and businesses.

**75** The Council is improving value for money in the Service and made £0.78 million savings in the transition to a unitary authority, through reducing the number of managers and procuring a single database. Corporately, it made savings of £10.8 million from the transition, with a further £4.1 million from service transformation in 2010/11. In addition, the benefits service is being delivered within the administration grant provided by the DWP.

**76** The Service managed the subsidy claim for 2008/09 well. The move to the new benefits IT system was in two phases. As DWP required subsidy claims from each of the five former councils the first phase was a transfer to five separate databases on the new benefits IT system. This caused some instability with the system which had a negative impact on processing times but helped secure the funding from DWP for the expenditure incurred in 2008/09. In November 2009 once the subsidy claims were signed off with clean audit opinions the five databases were merged into one.

**77** The Council manages its resources well, and Shropshire County Council had a strong track record of improvement - it was assessed under CPA as Improving Well in terms of direction of travel in 2008, and Improving Strongly for the previous three years.

## **How well does the service manage performance?**

**78** The Service has a clear strategic direction for what it wants to achieve. The Service aims to perform in line with the best performance from the previous Shropshire districts. Its Service plan for 2010/11 sets targets for processing new claims within 19 days, and changes of circumstances within

five days. In setting up the new Service in 2009, the Council took best practice from the previous districts and applied this across the Service as a whole. It is constantly refining its processes and monitoring the impact of changes. The sustainability of planned improvements has been carefully considered.

**79** The Service is very well led, and it has a strong learning culture. The work trays are effectively rotated between the area offices every eight weeks, and learning logs are routinely completed on handover so the learning can be shared. This has improved processing times. Internal communications are very good, with regular team meetings and with all minutes shared on the intranet. Staff and stakeholders are very positive about how open and responsive managers are to new ideas and to making improvements. The Service uses customer complaints to make improvements to processing times.

**80** Performance management arrangements are good. Managers and team leaders have good access to performance information, for example on abandoned telephone calls, processing times, and accuracy. The Service actively manages performance, shifting resources as required in response to changes in demand. Performance is also monitored and challenged at regular Service and Directorate management teams. The Service has a quality assurance team which checks samples of claims for quality and accuracy, and staff under-performance is actively addressed. The Council has a well-developed appraisal system, and staff are clear about their personal targets. Business plans have SMART<sup>xiii</sup> targets. The Service has made good progress with implementing its 2009/10 action plan, much of which has focused on getting the infrastructure in place for the new Service, such as policies, service level agreements, and staff training. Although the benefits IT system does not always produce reliable information, managers are quick to spot this and report it to the supplier so problems can be addressed quickly.

**81** There is potential for improvement in the way performance is managed. Key gaps for the Service include a lack of information on how easily customers can access the Service face to face. For instance, the Service does not have a clear picture of how long customers wait to be seen when visiting its offices. It thus does not know if it is meeting its target for customers to be seen within 10 minutes. The Service is therefore only starting to have a better understanding of whether customers are satisfied with the service they get. The Service started to send out customer questionnaires in May 2010 with claim notification letters, and visiting staff leave questionnaires with customers. Some are also being handed out at the enquiry counters. Initial responses from customers are largely positive. Where information is gathered, it is not broken down by diversity strand to understand whether performance is different for some groups. By not breaking information down by diversity strand, the Service cannot identify barriers to access or groups with lower levels of satisfaction.

**xiii** Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time Framed.



**82** Corporately, the Council manages its performance well. Councillors and senior officers focus on corporate priorities, and the key performance indicators associated with these. Arrangements to ensure data quality are good. The performance management framework used by the Council is that of the former County Council. The County Council had a track record of delivering generally good and excellent services, and of successfully focusing on improvement where service had been less good.

**83** Proposals to improve value for money in the Service are developing, although the Service already manages well within tight spending controls. It has low costs when the overall cost of the Service is compared with the amount received from the DWP. The former County Council, which accounted for 80 per cent of the new Council, managed its resources well. It had an excellent record of achieving efficiencies, and financial planning and management are robust.

**84** The Service is developing its approach to learn from others. It visited a neighbouring council when it was developing its quality assurance team. New staff have brought in new ideas from other councils. A major IT development, its e-capture project which will allow information on claim forms to be captured electronically to speed up processing, came from sharing experiences with another council. The Service has sought benchmarking information from other unitary councils, with limited success, and it is planning to develop value for money indicators for benchmarking. It is acutely aware that resources will tighten further in the future, given the state of public finances. It plans to join the CIPFA benchmarking club. By looking at what is working well elsewhere, the Service is ensuring decisions are well informed and based on reliable evidence.

**85** The Service is investing in ways to improve the service - for instance in extending opportunities to access the service or to access it electronically. Progress with implementing e-enabled benefit services has been slower than planned, but the impact of setting up the benefits IT system for the new unitary council meant that these projects had to be put back. Revised plans are now in place, and the Council is confident that these are realistic. E-capture is on track to be ready by the end of July 2010. The next step is to implement e-services. This will enable a range of benefits services to be delivered online, for example customers will be able to submit their benefits claim online. The computer hardware for this is due to be installed in early August 2010. The Council will then be working with the software supplier to implement the new systems. It anticipates that some e-services will be up and running by December 2010, with the ability to apply for benefits on-line being up and running by March 2011. This increases access and speeds up processing times at the same time as providing the potential to reduce costs.

**86** The Council is improving what it offers to customers to improve access. In recognition of the difficulty and expense for customers reliant on public transport the Council is developing a Telly Talk network. Sending officers to rural areas can be costly in travel time and inefficient. Many customers like face-to-face contact even though many issues can be dealt with over the



phone. Telly Talk uses a network of webcams located in village halls, community centres and other convenient places. Other service providers use the Telly Talk facilities. In Shropshire they are used by two housing associations, Citizen's Advice, Age Concern and A4U (disability support) as well as the Council. The Service is keen to tap into its potential to support more customers.

## Does the service have the capacity to improve?

**87** Leadership at both Service and Directorate levels is strong. Managers consistently promote a customer focus. Team Leaders are empowered to show initiative and take responsibility. Staff are enthusiastic and motivated, and are committed to giving the best possible service to their customers. Turnover of staff is very low. This strong leadership has been key to successfully establishing and developing the new Service.

**88** The Service has invested well in staff training and development. Staff were trained on the new benefits IT system in 2008, before its implementation. They have continued to receive good support and training from the Service's Performance and Development officer appointed in 2009. They are kept up-to-date with new legislative developments and can draw on a range of guidance notes to help ensure quality and consistency. Some staff have been supported to undertake training for professional qualifications, and managers are currently looking at developing more advanced in-house training. New starters are supported through a 'buddy' scheme which works well. Work is underway to build on these investments by developing a more systematic and structured training strategy for the Service. Staff are properly supported to help them deliver a good quality of service.

**89** The Service manages its staff effectively. Contracts are flexible, allowing staff to work at different locations if required, and to suit personal circumstances such as part-time working and child-care commitments. This allows the Service to better manage changes in demand, and gives staff a better work-life balance. Sickness absence in the Service is actively managed, and absence has reduced in 2010. The Council is exploring ways of working more flexibly, such as mobile and home working, as part of its corporate transformation programme, although this is at a very early stage. The Council managed its transition to unitary status very well, and this experience stands it in good stead as it embarks on its transformation programme.

**90** The Council has also invested in training and developing its new councillors, following elections to the new Council in 2009. Detailed training and development plans for all councillors are in place, to support them in making strategic decisions for Shropshire. The Council has recently approved a reorganisation of the Scrutiny Committees, to align them more closely with Shropshire's Sustainable Community Strategy. Councillors received a report in December 2009 on progress against the benefits service plan and are planning to scrutinise access to the benefits service, particularly for more isolated customers.

**91** The Service has demonstrated its ability to manage effectively major IT projects. Although 2009/10 has been a very challenging year, the Service has its new benefits IT system in place and this provides a solid platform on which to build. Much work was undertaken in 2009/10 to cleanse data, manage the closedown of old databases, and deliver system upgrades. Effective systems support is now in place, through appointing a Database Administrator in December 2009, and procurement of additional systems support from an external company which provides further flexibility and resilience. In addition, the corporate Information and Communications Technology team provide hardware and project management support. The computer hardware for e-services in revenues and benefits has been ordered and is expected to be up and running in early August 2010.

**92** The Council manages its resources well. It has an excellent record of achieving efficiencies, and financial planning and management are robust. Asset management is good, and the Council works well with partner organisations to improve service delivery. The Benefits Service has been run within the administration grant it receives from the DWP. Some of the training for benefits staff is delivered in partnership with Telford and Wrekin Council, which makes more efficient use of the training budget. The Service has also played an active role in Shropshire's Maximising Benefits Partnership, which is a multi-agency group that has helped residents to claim additional benefits to which they are entitled. The Service also works well with internal partners, such as the Council's housing Service, and this results in better service for customers, for example in preventing homelessness.

**93** There are some weaknesses in capacity that have impacted upon the Service in the first year of the new council. Telephone response times have been slower since September 2009. This is because the Service decided to focus its resources on processing claims. Processing times have improved but telephone response times have worsened as has the rate of abandoned calls. The Service has thus not yet ensured it has the capacity to cover all elements of public need satisfactorily.

**94** The Council is embarking on a major transformation programme to further improve its efficiency. The key focus of this programme will be on delivering locality working. It has several themes including customer access, inclusion and value for money. The Service is fully engaged in this programme, which is at an early stage.

**95** The Council has a robust approach to procurement, with clear procedures that focus not just on cost, but also on a thorough needs analysis, robust business cases, and longer-term sustainability. The Council has a strong approach to involving local people, stakeholders and staff in commissioning and procurement decisions. Staff in the Benefits Service were actively involved in choosing the new benefits system. The decision on which system to procure was also informed by its capacity to support future e-enablement.

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