

Subject:
Learning from benefits inspections

Status: For Publication

Report to: Audit Committee

Date: 4th December 2008

Report of:

Head of Customer Services and & ICT

Portfolio

Holder: Customer Services

Key Decision: No

Forward Plan General Exception Special Urgency

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 The Audit Commission became responsible for the inspection of housing and council tax benefit services with effect from the 1st April 2008.
- 1.2 The Audit Commission publication “Learning from benefits inspections” aims to highlight some of the most interesting approaches in identifying how this important service can be delivered to the highest standard and promote a better quality of life for local people. An effective and efficient Benefits service can enable fairer access to decent homes and be an access to better health. It has a positive impact on the economic well-being of the community and supports the authority’s strategic direction by addressing poverty, deprivation, homelessness and unemployment and therefore feeds directly into our corporate priorities.

2. CORPORATE PRIORITIES

- 2.1 The matters discussed in this report impact directly on the following corporate priorities and associated corporate objective.
- Delivering Quality Services to Customers (Customers, Improvement)
 - Delivering Regeneration across the Borough (Economy, Housing)
 - Promoting Rossendale as a cracking place to live and visit (Economy)
 - Improving health and well being across the Borough (Health, Housing)
 - Well Managed Council (Improvement, Community Network)

3. RISK ASSESSMENT IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 There are no specific risk issues for members to consider arising from this report.

4. BACKGROUND AND OPTIONS

- 4.1 During 2007, nine councils volunteered to participate in pilot inspections by the Audit Commission to help test the new inspection regime and methodology. The pilot inspections highlighted many positive examples of good practice and different approaches that councils can adopt and undertake to deliver this key customer service.
- 4.2 The Audit Commission has identified nine areas of the benefits service delivery which it considers should be a priority commitment for Local Authorities to focus upon. These are as follows: benefits take up, working with customers, knowing your community, overpayments, preventing fraud, claims processing, performance management, investing in staff and value for money.
- 4.3 The findings from the pilot inspections are presented in a variety of ways and the case studies throughout the document illustrate key points and demonstrate that a process of improvement can be achieved. Rossendale Borough Council is committed to delivering quality services to our customers and our service provider Capita has undertaken to fulfill this commitment by demonstrating continuous service improvement.
- 4.4 As previously stated, all the councils that participated in the pilot inspection process were volunteers. However, the Audit Commission has stated that future inspections will take place where authorities are already underperforming, or show a risk that they may do so.
- 4.5 The Service Assurance Team continuously measures and monitors the benefits service targets agreed within the service contract between Rossendale Borough Council and Capita. Therefore any risk of imminent inspection is highly unlikely as failure in service levels can be identified at an early stage by the Service Assurance Team and addressed through the Service Assurance process of operations. Although it should be noted that a number of authorities subsequently chosen for inspection are working in partnership with a 3rd party provider, so this could also suggest that the possibility of Rossendale being selected for inspection may be slightly increased.
- 4.6 The Service Assurance Team and Capita have agreed to undertake a project of self inspection which will be independently assessed by the services of Meritech. This assessment will highlight any deficiencies and give opportunity to rectify any problem areas.

COMMENTS FROM STATUTORY OFFICERS:

5. SECTION 151 OFFICER

- 5.1 Approval of the recommendation demonstrates the Councils continued development of best working practice and the delivery of value for money services.

6. MONITORING OFFICER

- 6.1 No legal implications arise from this report.

7. HEAD OF PEOPLE AND ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (ON BEHALF OF THE HEAD OF PAID SERVICE)

- 7.1 No Human Resources implications and no equalities impact assessment required.

8. CONCLUSIONS.

- 8.1 The new Audit Commission inspection regime is primarily focused upon customer satisfaction and understanding the needs and requirements of the local community. The recommendations contained within the publication can be utilised as a tool for service improvement. The document provides a framework within which the council can work in order to deliver its objectives.

9. RECOMMENDATION(S)

- 9.1 That the Audit Committee endorse the Audit Commission's proposals and use of good practice contained in "learning from benefits inspections" for service improvement. This will support the existing framework and programme of work already carried out by Capita to provide service improvement.

10. CONSULTATION CARRIED OUT

- 10.1 None

11. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

Is an Equality Impact Assessment required No

Is an Equality Impact Assessment attached No

12. BIODIVERSITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

Is a Biodiversity Impact Assessment required No

Is a Biodiversity Impact Assessment attached No

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Background Papers	
Document	Place of Inspection
Learning from benefits inspections- attached	Audit Commission