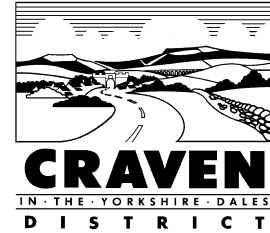


Select Committee Report

Revenues and Benefits Performance



Report to Policy Committee 13th September 2016

Introduction

Concerned at the decline in the performance of the Council's Revenues and Benefits Department in the processing of housing benefits applications during the course of 2015-16, the Leader of Council and Lead Member asked the Select Committee to examine reasons behind that decline and identify any action that may be required to address the situation. Select Committee met to conduct that examination on Wednesday 20th July 2016.

Background Papers

Copies of a briefing note summarising the primary functions of the Revenues and Benefits Service, together with performance data for the period 2013/14 to 2016/17 (Quarter One) had been circulated.

Findings

The Committee's meeting was attended by the Corporate Head of Business Support and the Interim Revenues and Benefits Manager. The Lead Member for Internal Services had also been invited but unfortunately was not able to attend due to a prior commitment.

As at June 2015 applications dating back to November 2014 had been outstanding. In summary, the chain of events through 2014/15 and into 2015/16 resulting in the poor level of performance in the determination of new benefit claims and changes in circumstances included

- What appeared to have been a lack of direct management of the workload from Quarter 3 of 2014/15 when the Benefits Team Leader had left the authority.
- Loss of the Revenues and Benefits Manager in April 2015 had compounded the emerging problem with a two month period where there had been no direct management of the Benefits Service.
- Agency staff had not been managed in such a way as to maximise productivity.
- All April rent increases had been input as normal but at the expense of processing incoming claims.
- Uncertainty regarding the proposed move towards a strategic partnership for the delivery of the revenues and benefits service, combined with impending changes in

the benefits system had made it difficult to recruit permanent staff to vacant benefits posts.

To address the situation an interim arrangement had been entered into with Bradford Metropolitan District Council (MDC) which secured the services of the Interim Revenues and Benefits Manager, which in turn had resulted in

- Management of agency staff in such a way as to maximise productivity.
- Cessation of the use of agency staff and introduction of better value for money arrangements with other local authorities, namely Selby and Bradford.
- Introduction of structured workload management with monitoring documentation.
- The introduction of two full time staff from Bradford MDC for a period of eight weeks had finally brought the work position up to date by 1st April 2016.

During the course of the discussion with the Corporate Head of Business Support and the Interim Revenues and Benefits Manager, Members' heard that

- a. Revenue collection remained strong and was again on track with a performance expected to place the authority in the upper quartile nationally.
- b. Universal credit would go live on 26th October 2016 and would ultimately have a significant impact on the Department's workload. However, until all outstanding issues were resolved those of pensionable age would not be dealt with under universal credit. Two thirds of the caseload in Craven involved persons of pensionable age, it could therefore be a number of years, before the full impact took effect.
- c. The downturn in performance and the related chain of events had demonstrated that resilience had become an issue for the Department, as part of the wider Council requirement to reduce expenditure a number of posts had been stripped out of the Benefits Team in anticipation of changes to be made in the benefits system nationally. Unfortunately implementation of those expected changes in benefits legislation had been delayed, the loss of senior officers had then compounded the problem.
- d. Resilience was an issue for many small authorities, structures and procedures represented a means by which it could be mitigated. There were potentially other services within the Council which could find themselves in a similar position to that which had occurred in the revenues and benefits service.
- e. The service now planned for changes known to be coming forward, regular team meetings were being held, performance was monitored and the position from month to month was known.
- f. Changes in respect of business rates would be a significant issue for the Council. A succession plan was not currently in place to cover the role of Business Rates Officer, cover was needed for this position.
- g. Looking to the future legislative changes were creating opportunities for combined working the following options were being explored:-

- Formalising arrangements with Bradford Metropolitan District Council (MDC).
- Creating pilots with Bradford MDC to enhance collection of business rates.
- Informal discussions with other potential local authority partners so as not to commit the Council to just one local authority.

h. Implementation of Universal Credit may create an opportunity to simplify the Council Tax Reduction Scheme.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Committee was pleased to be able to conclude that poor performance levels experienced by the Benefits Service in 2014/15 and 2015/16 have been addressed and that arrangements and procedures are now in place which seek to ensure a good level of performance is maintained in the determination of housing benefit applications. Having been advised of the reasons and chain of events which resulted in the situation in which the Benefits Service found itself the following recommendations are made

1. That the Chief Executive and Lead Members are advised of this Committee's view that, to avoid a repeat of the scenario experienced by the revenues and benefits service, all departments need a critical assessment of their vulnerability and resilience to loss of key staff and difficulties with recruitment of experienced personnel.
2. The Authority needs to ensure that succession planning is in place across all departments and that steps are taken to put in place procedures, systems and best practice to mitigate difficulties that may exist with recruitment and also succession planning by reason of the size of the Authority.
3. A formal agreement needs to be put in place as a matter of priority with a partner authority to ensure resilience for the revenues and benefits service and also ensure the Council is well positioned to manage implementation of the changes to the business rates regime.
4. In the event of a devolved area / authority being established, and bearing in mind that revenues and benefits services would appear to have potential as a service which could be centralised, in considering agreement of a partnership arrangement due consideration should be given to the partnership arrangement referred to at (3) above being with an authority within the devolved area of which this Council would wish to be a part.

That in addition to the above recommendations, six monthly monitoring reports on sickness absence, vacant positions and any arrangements in place to cover those vacancies through use of contractors / consultants should be presented to this Committee.

Councillor David Staveley
Chairman of Select Committee