

# **BEACON COUNCIL SCHEME 2003**

## **ROUND 5**

### **BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION THEME REPORT**

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## BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION THEME REPORT

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## Executive Summary

Housing Benefit (HB) and Council Tax Benefit (CTB) are income related benefits that help people on low income pay their rent and council tax – whether they are in or out of work. In its reform programme DWP has set out its objectives for HB and highlighted the part the benefit plays in improving housing and tackling poverty. The objectives are to:

- reduce the barriers to work;
- ensure that people on low incomes can afford a decent home which meets their needs;
- give tenants more choice;
- extend tenants' personal responsibilities for paying their rent;
- provide a better quicker service, based on simpler clearer rules;
- make fraud more difficult to commit.

The rules for HB and CTB are set down in legislation and are of necessity complex, but within the legal framework, LAs have considerable freedom to decide how they will administer the benefits.

In recent years DWP has done much to encourage and promote good practice and improvement. This includes:

- the publication in March 2002 of HB/CTB Performance Standards – providing LAs with a full picture of what is needed to deliver these benefit effectively and securely;
- providing additional funds to LAs to help them deliver improvements as well as direct help through its improvement teams (DWP's Help Team and BFI's Performance Improvement Action Teams)
- target setting and performance monitoring - through Best Value performance indicators (BVPIs) and quarterly monitoring arrangement.

All this, plus the Best Value (BV) programme and, more recently Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA), has helped underline to LA's the importance of their benefits service and the need for continuous improvement. But whilst some LAs provide a good benefits services, others do not.

Research has shown, amongst other things, that:

- claimants' consider good service amounts to accuracy and speed of processing claims and polite customer service;
- delays in the service can deter claimants from taking up work (because of the need to reclaim);
- HB and CTB are not stand-alone services – they require effective liaison with a range of other organisations.

In view of all this, the Beacon theme will be looking for excellence in benefits administration. But will also concentrate on the work councils have done in partnership with local agencies and other organisations and how all this is helping people meet their housing needs and supporting those moving into work or between jobs.

At a high level, we conclude that a beacon council will need to show that it:

- has a clear strategy for its benefits service and that this take account of the HB/CTB Performance Standards, including the extent to which it is performing at or above standard;
- is complying with its legal requirements (eg those concerned with the deciding and paying of claims within 14 days of all information being received), performing well against relevant BVPIs and also deals effectively and efficiently with rapid reclaims, extended payments and into work claims;
- is providing a quality customer service – to users and potential users covering such matters as service accessibility and availability, benefits awareness and take-up, clarity of forms and information;
- is working in partnership with other to deliver high levels of service – this can include landlords, other council departments, other organisations involved in benefits administration (eg Jobcentre plus, Pensions Service, Inland Revenue), voluntary organisations and other councils;
- has achieved success in the above areas without compromising the secure operation of the system, counter fraud work and overpayment recovery.

## LEGISLATION AND POLICY CONTEXT

### ***About Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit***

1. HB and CTB are income-related benefits that help people on low income pay their rent and council tax. The benefits can be awarded to claimants who are both in or out of work. Their availability as in-work benefits helps many people to take up work that they could not otherwise afford to consider. They also help provide financial stability for pensioners and people who are not able to work. The efficiency and effectiveness with which these benefits are delivered affect the quality of many people's lives. Slow administration can prevent people from taking up job offers or changing jobs due to concern that they will be without benefit while their claims are being processed or reassessed. In England in 2000/01 HB and CTB paid out exceeded £11.5 billion.

### ***The legislative framework***

2. Councils have statutory responsibility for delivering the HB and CTB schemes.
3. Provisions for HB and CTB are contained in the Social Security Contributions and Benefits Act 1992 and the Social Security Administration Act 1992, amongst others. In addition there are a range of regulations covering detailed aspects of the schemes. The relevant legislation is available from the HB web site at:  
  
[www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/regulations/index.htm](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/regulations/index.htm)
4. Further information on the schemes can be obtained from *A guide to Housing Benefit and Council Tax* and other documents available at [www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/manuals/htm](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/manuals/htm).
5. Although the rules in respect of HB and CTB are, of necessity, complex, LA's have considerable freedom and flexibility within the legal framework to decide how they will administered the benefits. This includes the freedom to decide whether to provide the service in house or through contractors (in whole or in part).

### ***Policy objectives and context***

6. The Government has clear objectives for HB and has embarked upon a programme of reform, as set out in *Building choice and responsibility: a radical agenda for Housing Benefit* published in the autumn of 2002. Councils have a key part to play in helping deliver the Government's objectives. The objectives are to:
  - (i) reduce the barriers to work;
  - (ii) ensure that people on low incomes can afford a decent home which meets their needs;
  - (iii) give tenants more choice;
  - (iv) extend tenants' personal responsibilities for paying their rent;
  - (v) provide a better quicker service, based on simpler clearer rules;
  - (vi) make fraud more difficult to commit.
7. The objectives above support the strategy of welfare reform and support the aims of ending child poverty, improving housing and tackling pensioner poverty. Objectives (i), (ii) and (v) are particularly relevant to the Beacon theme.

## NATIONAL TARGETS

8. There are a range of targets and standards set by DWP to help encourage the improvement of HB and CTB administration.

### ***Best Value Performance Indicators***

9. There are a number of Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs) for HB/CTB. For some of these national aspirational targets for 2006/07 have been set by DWP. Information on the BVPIs for benefits are available from the ODPM's web site at: [www.local-regions.odpm.gov.uk/bestvalue/indicators/pi2003-04/index.htm](http://www.local-regions.odpm.gov.uk/bestvalue/indicators/pi2003-04/index.htm)

10. The BVPIs are concerned with:
- (i) the speed of processing claims: average time for processing new claims (BV79a)
  - (ii) the speed of processing claims: average time for processing notifications of changes of circumstances (BV79b)
  - (iii) the speed of processing claims: percentage of renewal claims processed on time (BV79c)
  - (iv) the accuracy of processing: percentage for which the calculation of the amount of benefit due was correct on the basis of the information available for the decision for a sample of cases checked post-decision (BV79a)
  - (v) the accuracy of processing: percentage of recoverable overpayments (excluding CTB) that were recovered in the year
  - (vi) security (BV76) – the BVPI used up to 2002/03 is replaced with a new one for 2003/04
  - (vii) customer satisfaction (BV80) – measures the overall satisfaction of users with the service. A survey is carried out every three years. The last survey conducted in 2000/01 and a new one will be carried out in 2003/04.

### ***Legal requirements***

11. Legislation requires councils, where practicable, to decide upon claims within 14 days of all necessary information being received and in the case of new rent allowance claims for these to be paid within 14 days all necessary information being received. Moreover, in circumstances where a claimant through no fault of his own has been unable to provide information legislation provides for making of payments on account.
12. As part of its quarterly monitoring arrangements DWP collects data (un-audited) from LAs to gain an indication as to how each LA is doing against 14 day decision making and 14 day payments regulations. Quarterly performance statistics and other data (eg on caseloads) is at [www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/statistical/index.htm](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/statistical/index.htm)

### ***Performance Standards***

13. In March 2002 DWP published a set of HB/CTB Performance Standards. The performance standards are intended to provide LAs with:
- a comprehensive picture of what makes up effective and secure benefits administration
  - a clear strategic and operational framework for assessing performance.
14. The Performance Standards cover seven areas:
- (i) strategic management;
  - (ii) customer service;
  - (iii) processing claims;
  - (iv) working with landlords;
  - (v) internal security;
  - (vi) counter fraud;
  - (vii) overpayments.
15. LAs are expected to self assess against the Performance Standards and the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI), considers an authorities performance against Performance Standards when undertaking an inspection. For Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) of benefits where a LA has not performed a self-assessment, a questionnaire is used by BFI to identify whether the LA has in place or achieved a number of the key elements under each of the 7 Performance Standard headings.
16. The Performance Standards and the accompanying self-assessment pack are available at [www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/publications/perf-stands/parts/contents.htm](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/publications/perf-stands/parts/contents.htm). BFI methodology for CPA is outlined at [www.bfi.gov.uk/news\\_resources/cpa2.htm#bfi](http://www.bfi.gov.uk/news_resources/cpa2.htm#bfi).

## **THEME DEFINITION**

### ***Definition as published***

17. Effective and efficient administration of HB and CTB is a core task for councils and one that affects the quality of many people's lives. The theme will concentrate on the work councils have

done in partnership with local agencies and other organisations, which helps people meet their housing needs and also supports those moving into work or in between jobs.

18. The importance of this theme is underlined by the Government's HB reform programme that highlights HB's role in achieving wider government objectives such as improving housing, ending child poverty and tackling pensioner poverty. An important stage in the reform process is improving benefit administration. The theme clearly support the HB objectives of:

- reducing the barriers to work
- ensuring people on low incomes can afford a decent home
- providing a better quicker service.

### ***Changes since last Beacon exercise***

19. Since the last Beacon exercise for benefits administration DWP has done much to help LAs improve their HB and CTB services. Amongst other things it has set up a HB web site that provides a range of best practice material, guides and model documents. This site is at [www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit). It includes, amongst other things, the BFI model claim form, training plans and modules for benefits staff, the Verification Framework (DWP's preferred arrangements for checking and processing claims), IT framework and model HB/CTB processing system.

20. In addition, many LAs will by now have undertaken a BV review of their benefit service. BFI has continued to inspect benefit services and has also carried out a number of BV inspections. BFI reports are available from [www.bfi.gov.uk](http://www.bfi.gov.uk). Where a LA undertakes a BV review of its benefits service in conjunction with another other services the subsequent inspection are carried out by the Audit Commission and BFI. These reports are available from the Commission's web site. [www.audit-commission.gov.uk/press/product\\_list](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/press/product_list).

21. A DWP Help Team has been available to LAs since 2001. The Help Team is a partnership initiative providing direct support to LAs working to improve benefits administration. The Help Team has also produced a Help Team Toolkit – a CD-rom distributed to all LAs providing details of how to apply a number of performance improvement tools and techniques. BFI also have Performance Improvement Action Teams (PIATs). They offer expert advice and guidance to LAs on how to increase efficiency and achieve sustained improvement in HB and CTB delivery. Help from PIATs is currently available to LAs that have been inspected or undergone a CPA assessment by BFI.

22. DWP now undertakes regular surveys of LAs to obtain views and additional information on key topics. Reports on these Omnibus surveys are available from the following web address: [www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/ih-index.html](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/ih-index.html)

### ***Values principles and objectives supported by the theme***

23. This theme provides LAs with an opportunity to show they have used the wide range of tools available to them to deliver improvements but also what they are doing to build on all this to deliver excellence. Also, that they are delivering services that meet customer needs and the objectives of the HB reform programme.

24. Important elements in the theme are underlined by DWP Research Report No 97: *Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Delivery: Claimant Experiences*. It reports that for the study, participants considered that good service and efficiency were characterised by accuracy of the processing of their claims, speed of processing and polite customer service. Whilst respondents could not see any acceptable reason why they should have to choose between any of these features, when pressed most opted for accurate processing, a view that was underpinned by a fear of getting into rent arrears and debt. **[Add something from other ASD report]**

25. In delivering excellence in the areas highlighted by the theme, it is important that this is achieved without compromising the secure operation of the benefits system, counter fraud work and work to recover overpaid benefit.

26. Research and reports highlight some of the obstacles LAs face in delivering an excellent service and applying good practice. The benefits theme provides for LAs to show how they have overcome these difficulties.

## **OBSTACLES TO EXCELLENT PRACTICE**

27. Research reports and other publications have highlight some of the main obstacles LAs face in achieving excellence and they are referred to below.
28. In *Building choice and responsibility: a radical agenda for Housing Benefit* DWP acknowledges that HB is complex and difficult to administer and that as a result of this some LAs struggle to provide an efficient service to claimants. It states that “The outcome for some people is financial anxiety. For many more, delays act as a deterrent to getting a job because of the requirement to make a new claim on entering work”.
29. In *Housing benefit the national perspective* the Audit Commission states that “HB is not a stand-alone service – it requires effective liaison with others”. It states that “councils need to work with other organisations to help improve the service to individual claimants”. It also says that “where a council lacks capacity – in terms of IT, staffing and resources – they need to explore how other partners might help to develop the service as a whole through partnership with the private sector, and with other authorities”.
30. Benefits services can fail if a LA does not value the service or give it the attention it deserves. In *Learning from Inspection* the Audit Commission notes “the economy, geography and demography in which a local authority operates can make the benefits service easier to deliver well”. But it goes on to say that similar authorities offer very different standards of service for benefits and that those providing high quality services “tend to be those that value the benefits service, recognising its contribution to corporate objectives and giving it a high profile”.
31. A number of surveys and research reports have noted difficulties in the area of recruitment and retaining staff. *Housing Benefit – Performance Standards in Customer Service* notes amongst other things that staff continue to make up the bulk of HB administration costs, and retention of staff provides continuity of service and represents investment in the future. Issues include making the jobs attractive, providing development and progression opportunities, flexible working arrangements, reducing work pressures, training and computerisation of routine operations.
32. The AC has also set out the common features of good and poor performance and this is included in it Local Government national report *Patterns for improvement – Learning from Comprehensive performance assessment to achieve better public service*. Common features of poor performance are long delays in paying benefit, failure to manage workloads, not getting the information from claimants right first time and not joining up with others involved with benefits.
33. DWP research *Easing the transition to work – a qualitative evaluation of transitional support for clients returning to work* states that LA HB staff “did not see it as their responsibility to promote back-to work measures”. The issue of administering HB and CTB run-ons (available to claimants starting work) was also looked at by the research. It revealed that according to both LA staff and Benefits Agency staff the biggest problem with the delivery of HB run-on lay in the communication between the two agencies”. This highlights the need for good administration and liaison between LAs and other organisations involved in the process. With the creation and new structure of DWP and the introduction of new tax credits this means that LAs need to develop good links with Jobcentre Plus, the Pension service and the Inland Revenue, amongst others.

## **CURRENT PRACTICE: CHARACTERISTICS AND INDICATIONS OF EXCELLENT PRACTICE**

### **Overview**

34. In essence, for HB and CTB administration, excellent practise is that which delivers sustained high performance against key outputs such as speed and accuracy of claims processing and

providing relatively high levels of customer satisfaction whilst at the same time safeguarding against fraud. This is typified by good performance against BVPIs, compliance with legal requirements (such as making decision on claims within 14 day of all information being available) and meeting or exceeding the HB/CTB Performance Standards.

35. Beyond all this there is significant scope for LAs to develop their links and partnerships with local agencies and other organisations to further improve their benefit services, help people meet their housing needs and support those moving into work or between jobs.
36. DWP's efforts to encourage improvements have been outlined earlier in this report. We would expect LAs to be aware of the tools DWP has made available and to have used those relevant to it.

### **Trends and future direction**

37. The introduction of the Best Value programme and, more recently CPA, has increased many LAs' awareness of the importance of their benefits services and helped promote the principle of year on year improvement.
38. The objectives that underpin the HB reforms should act as further drivers for LAs to improve their benefit services. The reforms programme also increases the need for LAs to be geared up to deal with change. Recent restructuring within DWP and the increasing role for tax credits means that LAs are going through a turbulent period. The creation of Jobcentre Plus, The Pensions Service, the Debt Management Service and the Appeals Service, together with new tax credits administered by the Inland Revenue means that there are now several delivery partners that LAs will need to liaise with for the effective delivery of HB and CTB. And there is still a need for LAs to work with other bodies effectively, such as the Rent Service.
39. The option now exists for LAs that are operating the Verification Framework to involve registered social landlords in the process of taking and verifying benefit claims. This provides an example of the scope for LAs to work in partnership with other organisations.
40. All this suggests that in addition to having efficient and effective processes, a LA will need to have contingency plans in place. LAs will also need to ensure that they can recruit and retain good quality staff and provide training and development opportunities to help deliver an excellent service.

### **BVPIs**

41. The following table shows how top quartile LAs are performing in respect of key BVPIs by English LAs. Where applicable, it also states the DWP aspirational targets which have been set for a number of key Best Value performance indicators (BVPIs) relevant to the HB/CTB theme.

<b>Processing speed and accuracy</b>	Top quartile performance in England 2001/02	DWP aspirational targets for 2006/07
Average time for processing new claims	35 days	36 days
Average processing times for changes of circumstances	8 days	9 days
Percentage of renewal claims processed on time	82%	83%
Accuracy	98.4%	N/A

42. For the Overpayment BVPI top quartile performance by authorities in England represented 64% of recoverable debt (recorded since April 2000) being recovered. However, it should be noted that performance against this PI may reduce year on year if a high level of un-recovered debt is brought forward from previous year(s).
43. With regard to the Security BVPI, in 2001/02, most LAs were found to satisfy the requirements of this PI.

44. Under BVPI arrangements LAs are required to undertake a benefits user satisfaction survey every 3<sup>rd</sup> year. The last survey was undertaken in 2000/01. The next survey is due this year. The last survey showed that the majority of users were satisfied with the level of service and assistance provided by LAs – but results varied from LA to LA with London Boroughs typically having fewer satisfied customers. Across all LAs lower levels of satisfaction were logged against when users were asked about the length of time it took for a decision to be made on their benefits claim.
45. Further information on BVPIs is available from the ODPM web site. High level information from the BVPI customer survey 2000/01 is available from the Topline Report.

**Legal requirements - 14 day achievement**

46. As part of its quarterly monitoring arrangements DWP also considers performance against 14 day performance. The table below shows the top quartile performance for 2001/02 plus the top quartile performance for the first three quarters of 2002/03.

<b>New claims decided within 14 day - top quartile performance by English LAs in 2001/02</b>	2001/02	2002/03 quarter 1	2002/03 quarter 2	2002/03 quarter 3
14 day to decision	87%	90%	88%	84%
14 day to payment	83%	86%	84%	80%

**HB/CTB Performance Standards**

47. The BFI's benefits service assessment for single tier LAs under CPA was based on compliance/achievement against Performance Standards, taking account of BVPIs and the impact of other performance factors.
48. Where an authority achieved 80% success and above for the BFI CPA this translated to a top score of "4" for the Audit Commission's service scorecard. The BFI assessments for single tier LAs were carried out during 2002 and published in December of that year. As we are now a year on from their publication, we might expect LAs compliance with Performance Standards to be higher now than they were then.

**Other outcomes**

49. A Beacon Council should be able to demonstrate that it is doing well in respect of BVPIs, legal requirements and Performance Standards. But also that it is working in innovate ways with other organisations to meet its objectives – with a focus on helping people meet their housing costs and providing support to those moving into work or in between jobs.
50. As already mentioned, within the legislative framework, LAs have considerable scope to decide how they will administer their HB/CTB service and how it would best support the overall objectives of the council. A LA may have introduced a range of other indicators to help measure the performance of its service and enable early corrective action to be taken if performance starts to go off target.

**What a Beacon Council should be able to demonstrate**

51. We conclude that, at a high level, Beacon Council will:
- a) have a clear strategy for its HB/CTB service, backed up with policies, plans and comprehensive monitoring arrangements – The Strategic Management section of HB/CTB Performance Standards sets out the criteria for performing at or above standard here. The council will also have undertaken a full assessment of its performance against the HB/CTB Performance Standards and will be able to show that:
- it has used the self assessment findings, amongst other things, to inform its strategies and
  - has clear plans for, and is making progress in, delivering improvements where they are needed and in some areas may be performing above standard or have plans for doing so.

- b) process claims speedily and accurately - achieving consistently high performance against national PIs and 14 day measures, whilst verifying claims to a standard that at least matches DWP's Verification Framework. The Processing of Claims section of HB/CTB Performance Standards sets out the criteria for performing at or above standard here. But this is also an area where a council can demonstrate that it has good links and/or partnership arrangements in place (eg with Jobcentre Plus, Pension Service, private landlords and the Rent Service) to help it deliver excellent claims processing performance. There should also be evidence that it deals with rapid reclaims and extended payments effectively and efficiently, and that it operates special arrangements for identifying and fast-tracking in work claims.
- c) provide quality customer services – covering such matters as service availability and accessibility, benefit take-up, clarity of forms and advice provided by staff. The Customer Services section of HB/CTB Performance Standards sets out the criteria for performing at or above standard here. But a council must also be able to show that:
- high levels of customer satisfaction are achieved. Customer surveys can show levels of satisfaction and the authority should also be able to show how survey findings are used to review and develop the service. (NB all authorities were required to undertake a customer survey in 2000/01 to inform a Best Value PI and a repeat exercise is due to be undertaken in 2003/04)
  - works with other organisations to deliver its service, for example in such areas as encouraging awareness and take-up, maximising accessibility to the service, reducing barriers to work, supporting vulnerable people, tackling social exclusion.
- d) have established good working relationship with registered social landlords (RSLs), private landlords, its own Housing Department and its own Revenues Department for CTB and, possibly, overpayments recovery. The Working with Landlords section of HB/CTB Performance Standards sets out the criteria for performing at or above standard here. The council will work to ensure landlords understand their rights and responsibilities, information exchange arrangements will be effective and some RSLs may be collecting evidence on behalf of the council in support of claims.
- e) be able to show that the above have been achieved without compromising the secure operation of the system, counter fraud work and/or work to minimise and recover overpayment. Work in all these areas needs to be sound. The following sections in HB/CTB Performance Standards are relevant here:
- Internal Security
  - Counter-fraud
  - Overpayments.

52. Some suggestions for specific questions for LAs for the Benefits theme are presented at Appendix 2.

## REFERENCES

Document referred to in this theme report, together with notes on how they can be accessed.

Reference Document	Available from
<b>Documents that set out or refer to good practice:</b>	
A Guide to Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit	<a href="http://www.dwp.gov.uk/advisers/ifpa/techguides/rr2.pdf">www.dwp.gov.uk/advisers/ifpa/techguides/rr2.pdf</a>
HB/CTB Performance Standards (and Self Assessment Pack/Template) April 2002	<a href="http://www.dwp.gov.uk/bestprac/index.htm">www.dwp.gov.uk/bestprac/index.htm</a>
Verification Framework	<a href="http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/manuals/index.htm">www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/manuals/index.htm</a>
Best Value Performance Indicators 2000-2001 & 2001-2002	<a href="http://www.local-regions.odpm.gov.uk/bestvalue/indicators/pi2003-04/index.htm">www.local-regions.odpm.gov.uk/bestvalue/indicators/pi2003-04/index.htm</a>
Quarterly Performance Statistics	<a href="http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/statistical/index.htm">www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/statistical/index.htm</a>
BFI Model Claim Form & Design Advice	<a href="http://www.bfi.gov.uk/news_resources/claimform.htm">www.bfi.gov.uk/news_resources/claimform.htm</a>
Recommended Training Plan for New Entrants	<a href="http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/bestprac/index.htm">www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/bestprac/index.htm</a>
HB/CTB Training Modules	<a href="http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/bestprac/index.htm">www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/bestprac/index.htm</a>

RSL Involvement in the HB/CTB Verification Framework: Full Evaluation Report	<a href="http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/publications/2003.htm">www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/publications/2003.htm</a>
RSL VF Scheme Operation and Good Practice Manual	<a href="http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/manuals.htm">www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/manuals.htm</a>
DWP Framework & Model HB/CTB Processing System	<a href="http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/bestprac/index.htm">www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/bestprac/index.htm</a>
Building Choice and Responsibility: A Radical Agenda For Housing Benefit	<a href="http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/publications/2002.htm">www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/publications/2002.htm</a>
BFI Inspection and Best Value Reports Various Dates of publication	<a href="http://www.bfi.gov.uk/reports.htm">www.bfi.gov.uk/reports.htm</a>
Discretionary Housing Payments	<a href="http://www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/manuals/index.htm">www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/manuals/index.htm</a>
Housing benefit the national perspective 2002 Audit Commission	ISBN 1 86240 366 X <a href="http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports">www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports</a>
Housing Benefit Administration – Learning From Inspection 2001 Audit Commission	ISBN 1 86240 3198 <a href="http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports">www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports</a>
Patterns for improvement – learning from comprehensive performance assessment to achieve better public service 2003 Audit Commission	ISBN 1 86240 4364 <a href="http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports">www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports</a>
<b>Research Documents:</b>	
Housing Benefit – Performance Standards in Customer Service (Unpublished report) August 2002	Hard copy
Topline Report – The Benefits Survey 2000/2001	<a href="http://www.local-regions.odpm.gov.uk/bestvalue/indicators/usersurvey/04.htm">www.local-regions.odpm.gov.uk/bestvalue/indicators/usersurvey/04.htm</a>
Easing the transition into work – a qualitative evaluation of transitional support for clients returning to work	ISBN 1 84123 5075 hard copy
Housing Benefit & Council Tax Benefit Delivery: Claimant experiences Summary 1997	hard copy
Omnibus Surveys	<a href="http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/ih-index.html">www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/ih-index.html</a>

## Possible questions

1. Has the authority assessed itself against HB/CTB Performance Standards and used this amongst other things to set its strategy for improving its service? To what extent is the LA at or above standard?
2. Is the LA a top quartile performer in respect of:
  - BVPI for new claims
  - BVPI for changes of circumstances
  - BVPI for renewals
  - BVPI for accuracy
  - 14 day targets (used for quarterly monitoring)?
3. Has performance against these PIs been consistently good for the past 2 years?
4. What arrangements does the council have in place to set targets and monitor performance for speed and accuracy to ensure high performance is maintained across the and deliver continuous improvement?
5. Does the LA operate fully or partially the Verification Framework (VF), or arrangement for dealing with claims that are at least equal to VF?
6. How accessible is the service (including e-government access)? How does the council know that accessibility meets user and potential user needs? (This provides scope to show working with others, eg co-location with other services/external organisations & possible e-government access perhaps through National Project involvement.)
7. What does the council do to maximise awareness of their benefits service and take-up of HB/CTB, especially in hard to reach groups? How does it know its efforts are working? (This provides scope for a LA to demonstrate close working with other organisations, including voluntary organisations, citizens advice, housing, etc.)
8. What customer surveys has the service undertaken, how has it performed in these and what action has it taken in the light of survey findings to further improve? (Include arrangements for dealing with suggestions and complaints from the public and monitoring supersession of decisions and appeals work)
9. How effectively and efficiently does the council deal with rapid reclaims and extended payments? And does it operate any special procedures to identify and fast track in-work claims?
10. What evidence does the council have to show that its achievements in respect of the above have not been at the expense of internal security, countering fraud and recovering overpayments? What evidence does the council have that arrangements in these areas are effective?
11. To what extent does the benefits service feature in and support the LA's overall objectives, for example areas such as regeneration and social inclusion?
12. If not already covered above, what arrangements does the council have to work in partnership with other council services (eg with Housing, Revenues and Social Services Departments) to ensure claims are processed and maintained efficiently and effectively?
13. If not already covered above, what arrangements does the council have for working in partnership with other councils (eg developing leaflets, sharing training, assessing claims, call centres)?
14. If not already covered above, what arrangements does the council have for working in partnership with other external organisations (eg Jobcentre plus, Pensions Service, Inland Revenue, Landlords, Welfare Rights, CAB, Voluntary Organisation) to ensure that it provides an efficient and effective service that meets the needs of users/potential users?
15. How does the council know that it is providing its service economically? (This enables the council to show it is benchmarking against others.)
16. What use of IT has the council made (or is planning to make) to improve the efficiency, effectiveness and/or economy of the services and what evidence does it have that this has been (or will be) effective?
17. What arrangements does the council have for preventing backlogs of work building up. And what contingency plans do they have for dealing with any backlogs that might arise?
18. How does the council ensure it has the right staff in place (managerial, processing and specialists) to provide a quality service? (Covers recruitment, retention, training, development issues)

## **Appendix 3**

### **CONTACTS**

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