

# REVENUES AND BENEFITS, CUSTOMER SERVICES AND TRANSACTION CENTRE



## Service Update September 2012

In February 2012 a Task and Finish Group was established to review the impact of the restructure in Revenues and Benefits, Customer services, and Transaction Centre (previously Incomes and Creditors). The aim of the group was to ensure that staff and customers were not negatively impacted following the restructure.

The panel recognised the difficulties associated with the restructure process, but were pleased with the majority of its findings. As part of the review 12 recommendations were identified which were deemed to offer suggested improvements to further benefit the services areas, improve staff morale and increase customer satisfaction.

Part one of this report provides an update on the 12 key recommendations and part two provides a more detailed update on the performance of the Revenues and Benefits Service.

## PART ONE

### 12 Key Recommendations

#### **R1 – Arrange the next stage of staff engagement workshops to follow through suggestions and recommendations raised by staff at the initial workshops.**

Staff workshops have been undertaken and key ideas have been taken forward. Within Revenues and Benefits this resulted in setting up a focus group of staff to review the front counter and trial different ways of responding to customer demand to improve the customer experience. The outcome has been to provide a filter queue on reception with experienced staff dealing with quicker queries and more complex cases being directed to the cubicles. A further review will be undertaken by the focus group in October.

#### **R2 – Interview feedback is provided as a matter of urgency to all applicants successful or unsuccessful during the recruitment process.**

All staff have received feedback around the assessment process and further support has been given where necessary on key competency areas.

#### **R3 – Interim survey is conducted with all staff in May 2012, six months after the implementation of the new structure and the results of which are shared with the Support Service and Overview and Scrutiny Panel.**

Due to a significant increase in work demand along with trialling new ways of working, this survey has been put back until October 2012. Discussions have taken place with staff regarding this change in timing.

**R4 – A dedicated cross-department training resource be established to help deliver a service function that has a more effective and consistent role in dealing with training requirements, interpreting and dealing with legislation changes and monitoring quality assurance.**

Training in the Transaction Centre and Customer Services has been completed as part of the post restructure changes. Changes in legislation and quality assurance are primarily key to Revenues and Benefits as part of the DWP requirements. Initial training post restructure has centred around new staff and is part of an on-going 12 month programme being delivered by technical experts. A recent review of training has been undertaken to look at the changes required as part of Welfare Reform and on-going service improvements. Consideration is currently being given to the creation of a temporary training officer post.

A Subsidy Officer post was built into the Revenues and Benefits structure to focus on quality assurance. Temporary posts have been set up to support the Subsidy Officer in the development and implementation of a robust quality assurance programme and are closely aligned to interpreting and delivering the legislation changes, and providing training and support to staff.

**R5 - Undertake a review of role profiles for Grade D and E posts to ensure that clear differentials are contained within the role profiles to bring clarity and alleviate confusion and friction between staff.**

Following the restructure, consultation was undertaken with staff to consider grading differentials around varying tasks. Follow up work was undertaken to review this and ensure differentials were implemented.

A technical expert training programme was drawn up to ensure that Grade E roles undertook tasks appropriate for the grade and help to cement the changes. This has included dealing with complaints, trialling key changes, technical changes and IT updates. A training programme has been developed with learning and development on coaching and mentoring which is due to be delivered to all technical experts throughout October.

**R6 – Undertake a review of the flexible working policy within affected departments**

A review of the flexible working policy was undertaken post restructure across the three areas. Staff were given opportunities to increase or decrease hours, and/or change working days. Consideration was given to improving response to business need especially in Revenues and benefits where it had been a particular problem, whilst also giving consideration to work life balance of staff were possible.

Limitations in term time working have allowed for greater consistency in service delivery allowing for a much more stable service in Revenues and Benefits and less pressure on staff remaining during holiday periods. The removal of term time working at team leader level has also resulted in staff being better supported by a more consistent management team.

**R7 A single, central customer services location to be developed as part of the Corporate Accommodation Strategy to meet the needs of our customer base and allow for flexibility within disciplines.**

Awaiting update on the Civic Centre and any potential move to an alternative location. Longer term a more comprehensive customer service delivery model will be developed as part of the community hub proposal within Customer Services Libraries whereby service delivery for a range of services will be included (also to include self-serve options and partnerships).

**R8 – Uniforms for customer facing staff at First Stop should be incorporated into the role as soon as practicable and that consideration should be given to all back office staff having to dress to an appropriate standard.**

All first stop staff in customer services have uniforms and this has proved positive with both customers and staff. Scoping is now underway to extend this to Revenues and Benefits staff as part of new ways of working.

**R9 - Consideration should be given to all establishing a staff reward scheme which would improve staff morale and encourage staff to promote service improvement ideas that could develop future service delivery.**

A major 'staff award' event was facilitated on the Hoe in September 2012 to give recognition in areas such as team working, participation and leadership. A corporate staff reward scheme is being considered and led through the Assistant Director for Human Resources.

**R10 – Strategic Manager (Revenues and Benefits) role to be re-evaluated through job evaluation process in an attempt to ensure fairness is established in the grading of strategic manager positions.**

The Management of Finance, Efficiencies, Technology and Assets will reviewed and restructured using a corporate framework to incorporate factors such as spans of control, number of layers etc. This was due to commence in September 2012 but has been delayed due to capacity in HR. The role of the Strategic Manager, (Revenues and Benefits) will be reviewed and re-evaluated as part of this restructure.

**R11 – Given the concerns identified with the call management in the Proof of Concept Team, the Health and Adult Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Panel add this issue to its work programme and request an update at a future meeting from the Cabinet Member for Health and Adult Care.**

Over the last three months significant improvements have been made to allow workflow from the Contact Centre into the Proof of Concept Team. Staff from Adult Social Care and Customer Services are working together to ensure all opportunities to improve performance and prevent failure demand are taken.

Telephone answer rates have improved to 96% with 88% answered within 30 seconds, abandoned rates stand at 4%.

**R12 – Review and extension to the Customer Services department operating hours to deal with general public enquiries between the hours of 8am and 8pm Monday to Friday and 8am – 5pm on Saturday.**

This is now incorporated within the 100 pledges and the latest update is as below:

**Provide access to council services at more suitable times - DS**

**Cabinet Lead:** Deputy Leader, Councillor Peter Smith

**Lead:** Dave Saunders

**'Quick Win' descriptions:** (Whether key early action or whole thing)

On-going dialogue with customers through regular focus groups to assess desire and potential volumes to increase opening hours (not an early win), potential for quick win Q3/2012 with online portal (via PCC website) to access services that have moved onto Microsoft Dynamics e.g. Waste, Highways and Corporate feedback plus Revenues & Benefits online portal (longer term additional services will also be offered as part of Transformation/Modernisation plan) this will provide 24/7 access and may negate the need to extend existing opening hours as customers can self-serve in the most cost effective way.

**Timeline:**

Online portal available Q3 2012, assessment and viability of extending opening hours based on customer feedback will be incorporated within transformation programme with aim to report to cabinet by Q1 2013 for decision to be made.

## **PART TWO**

### **Revenues and Benefits Performance Update**

#### **Introduction**

This is an update report to Cabinet on the progress in performance of the Revenues and Benefits service. This service area has gone through significant change through a total review of their systems, processes and structures, culminating in a new staff structure being implemented in November 2011.

Prior to the restructure, the service benchmarked as being high cost and poor performance. Specific concern was focussed on the time taken to process new benefit claims which for the last few financial years have been averaging at 30 days.

The restructure was based on rationalising management and retaining as many front line processing staff as possible. Alongside the restructure, the service adopted a comprehensive improvement plan detailing how the service could deliver improvements to customers with significantly less resources.

#### **Successes**

- Processing times for new claims has reduced from 30 to 23. This is against a national trend of increases due to increased service demand and policy changes. PCC performance is now **equal to the average national processing times** (compared to bottom quartile as at the end of last financial year).
- The staff cost of this service is now top quartile in terms of efficiency (CIPFA benchmarking 2012) compared to previous performance of bottom quartile. Cases dealt with by FTE is above average.
- The service now operates with a nil backlog system with the backlog of daily work in Housing Benefit cleared during May 2012. The service has previously operated a backlog system for many years.
- Staff focus groups ensure that staff suggestions are listened to, tested and implemented. For example, the introduction of a filter queue has resulted in a more effective response to customer demand.
- We have developed and implemented a performance management system to provide staff across the department with clear measures for work clearance, quality and processing times. This was launched in line with the appraisal system.
- DWP feedback has recognised that our processes are in line with the top performing authorities.
- Customer feedback continues to recognise the improvements made to our service both in terms of processing times and services access.
- Introduction of quarterly staff briefings and monthly communication briefs ensure staff are involved in and kept up to date with key activities.
- Proactive recovery has assisted in breaking the cycle of debt for customers who would normally end up with the bailiff. Telephoning customers in the evening as well as during the day has continued to improve collection, and reduce the number of summonses issued, making recovery more efficient and cost effective.

- Outreach work with customers and welfare agencies has helped improve understanding of benefits, and the changes through welfare reform and helped to increase take-up.

### **Current Challenges**

- ATLAS files from the DWP could not be downloaded for 6 weeks and resulted in a backlog of changes. This has affected processing times for changes in circumstances. A small team has been set up to tackle this work as a priority.
- ATLAS work has impacted on our overall ability to clear work in a timely way. Files of changes are on average 200 per day, but can be as much as 500. This is a national issue with processing times for 'changes in circumstances' significantly increasing, (in the short term), across the vast majority of authorities.
- Take-up campaigns will continue to impact on resources and will need to be managed to avoid peaks at critical times. The Housing Benefit caseload continues to increase at 31,015 cases.
- Welfare Reform has increased the demand for advice and requires constant changes to processes. This will continue as more changes are implemented.
- Revenues and Benefits resources have been prioritised to launch the pan-Devon consultation in respect of the localised Council Tax Support scheme. This requires a replacement for the existing, national Council Tax Benefit scheme to be fully implemented by April 2013.
- Term time working patterns has had a small adverse impact on July / August processing times.

### **Staff Attendance**

Extensive work has been undertaken with HR and managers to improve the way absence is managed within the service area.

- Training has been given to team leaders and process and guidance has been developed and implemented to allow more timely and consistent responses.
- Monthly meetings with HR have allowed team leaders to discuss difficult cases and learn from experience
- Monthly review meetings are undertaken by managers to ensure continued review of cases and continued focus on reducing absence
- Hearings have been undertaken by the Strategic Manager to ensure consistency in decision making and appropriate weight given to cases.

Absence has improved considerably within the service area over the last 6 months.

## On the Horizon

- The introduction of self service has been delayed due to results from initial testing, but 'go live' is imminent. Self service will mean that customers for Council Tax, Housing Benefits and Business Rates will be able to sign up to a number of benefits:
  - E-billing for Council Tax and Business Rates
  - E-notification for Housing and Council Tax Benefit
  - Direct Debit sign up
  - Housing Benefit claim progress for customers and landlords
  
- Risk Based Verification – will reduce the need to evidence low risk cases and allow for the continued improvement in processing times both for Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit and through the implementation of Council Tax Support. Resources can be redirected to the implementation of Welfare Reform.
- Risk Based Recovery – will allow for better targeting of recovery action. This will be important with the introduction of Council Tax Support.
- Continued focus on generic training to allow for greater flexibility of resource to respond to continuous changes in legislation, practice and service demand.
- Further training on telephone and negotiation techniques to maximise in year collection and allow staff to better work with customers to improve payments. This will be especially important as we go move into the new Council Tax Support scheme.

## Performance

### Housing Benefit

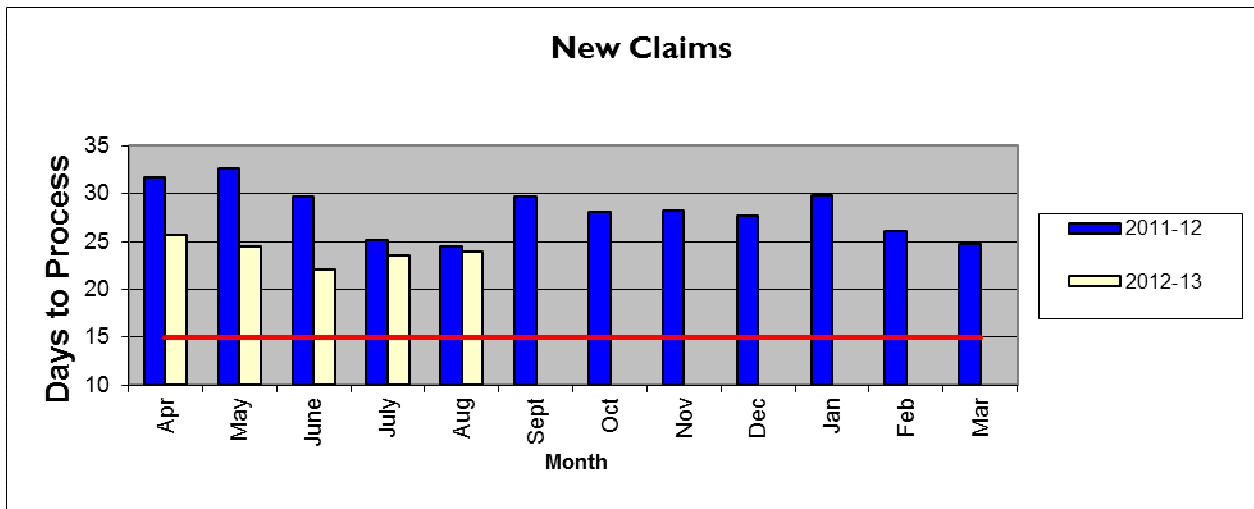
#### New Claims - August

##### Target 15 days

The average time to process new claims in August 2012. ■

A total of **1389 new claims** were processed (July 1434)

- 50.10% were processed within 15 days of receipt (July 49.02%).
- 38.63% were processed within 7 days of all information being received (July 38.63%)
- 86.75% were processed within 15 days of receipt of all the information. (July 86.68%)



	<u>Apr</u>	<u>May</u>	<u>Jun</u>	<u>Jul</u>	<u>Aug</u>	<u>Sept</u>	<u>Oct</u>	<u>Nov</u>	<u>Dec</u>	<u>Jan</u>	<u>Feb</u>	<u>Mar</u>
<b>2011</b>	<b>31.74</b>	<b>32.70</b>	<b>29.74</b>	<b>25.19</b>	<b>24.47</b>	<b>29.70</b>	<b>28.13</b>	<b>27.71</b>	<b>27.71</b>	<b>29.77</b>	<b>26.05</b>	<b>24.68</b>
<b>2012</b>	<b>25.62</b>	<b>24.49</b>	<b>22.09</b>	<b>23.54</b>	<b>23.05</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>18</b>



#### Forecast Processing Times

New claims have been impacted by term time working and the peak holiday period over July/August. This is likely to have a slight impact in September and it is expected that processing times will continue to reduce after this. Overall this area is significantly better compared with 2011 12 (and prior year) performance and is now performing at national average.

#### Change Events - August

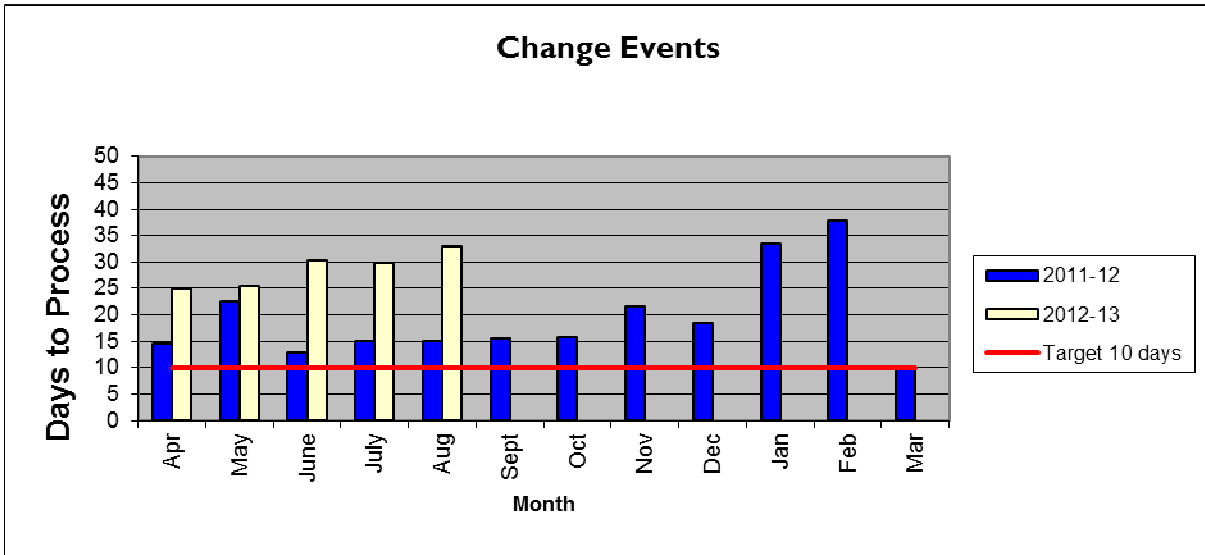
##### Target 10 days

The average time to process change events in August 33.08 days (July 29.73). ■

A total of **6520 change events** were processed (July 8152)

- 43.92% were processed within 10 days of the notified date (July 45.53%)
- 26.80% were processed on the day they were notified. (July 25.29%)



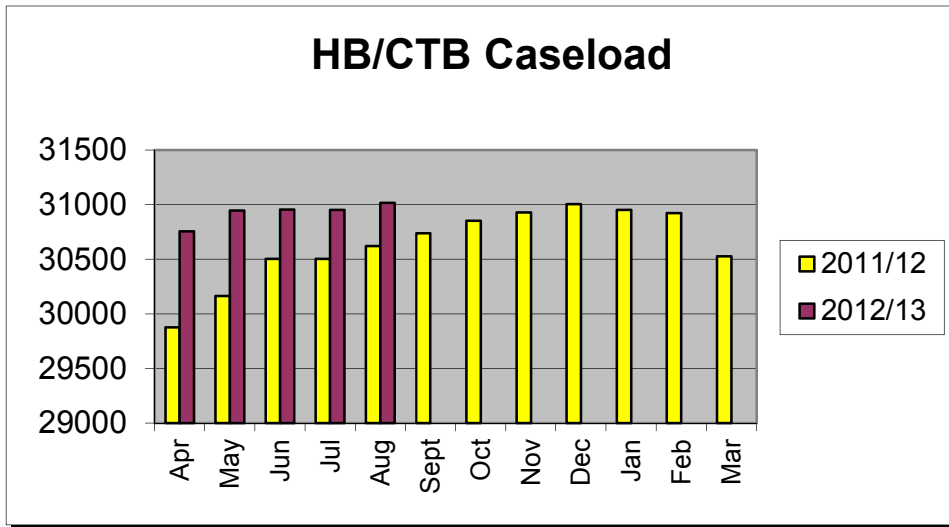


	<u>Apr</u>	<u>May</u>	<u>Jun</u>	<u>Jul</u>	<u>Aug</u>	<u>Sept</u>	<u>Oct</u>	<u>Nov</u>	<u>Dec</u>	<u>Jan</u>	<u>Feb</u>	<u>Mar</u>
<b>2011</b>	14.58	22.57	12.94	12.12	15.15	15.62	15.73	18.34	18.34	33.36	37.82	25
<b>2012</b>	25.05	25.41	30.23	29.73	33.08	<b>33</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>15</b>

 **Forecast Processing Times**

Change of circumstances performance increased in August, with the days increasing to 33.08. This is a result of a targeted effort clearing ATLAS files received from the DWP. This work has become a concern across many authorities due to the volumes of work received each day, and we have introduced plans to manage this. It is envisaged that it will be 6-8 weeks before we start to see a real decrease in the processing days for change of circumstances.

**Number of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit claimants**



	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
2011/12	29879	30165	30505	30504	30621	30737	30853	30929	31004	30952	30923	30528
2012/13	30754	30945	30953	30952	31015							

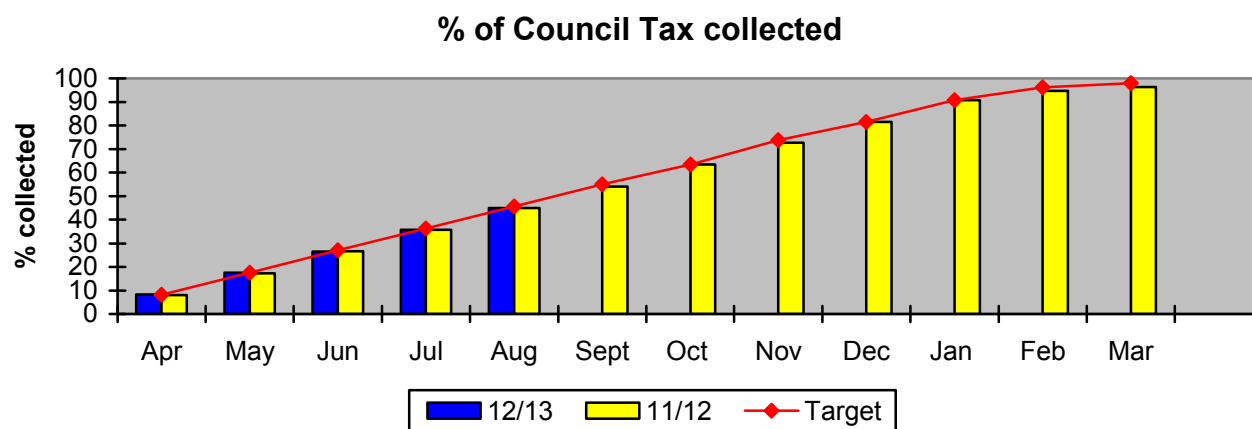
## Income Collection Rates

### Council Tax

- Net Collectable Debt 2012/13 £93,686m
- Collection Target 2012/13 98.00%

 Monthly Target = 45.57%  
 Collection Rate = 44.95%

	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
<b>12/13</b>	8.25	17.53	26.53	35.70	44.95	54.06	63.38	72.72	81.68	90.91	94.93	96.6%
<b>11/12</b>	8.07	17.31	26.62	35.61	44.85	54.04	63.34	72.60	81.54	90.71	94.68	96.30
<b>Target</b>	8.22	17.61	27.06	36.19	45.57	54.90	63.34	73.74	81.54	90.71	96.24	98.00



Council Tax collection rates have continued to improve at 44.95% for August against a collection rate of 44.85% for the same point last year. This is slightly under target of 45.57%.

The percentage of payers who pay by DD has increased to 66.44% from 60.34% at the same point last year. The Valuations Team is working on the valuation schedules and work levels in Council Tax continue to be in a good position. Proactive work is ongoing around the summons run and our 'gone away' accounts are being targeted to ensure prompt and accurate billing.

### National Non Domestic Rates

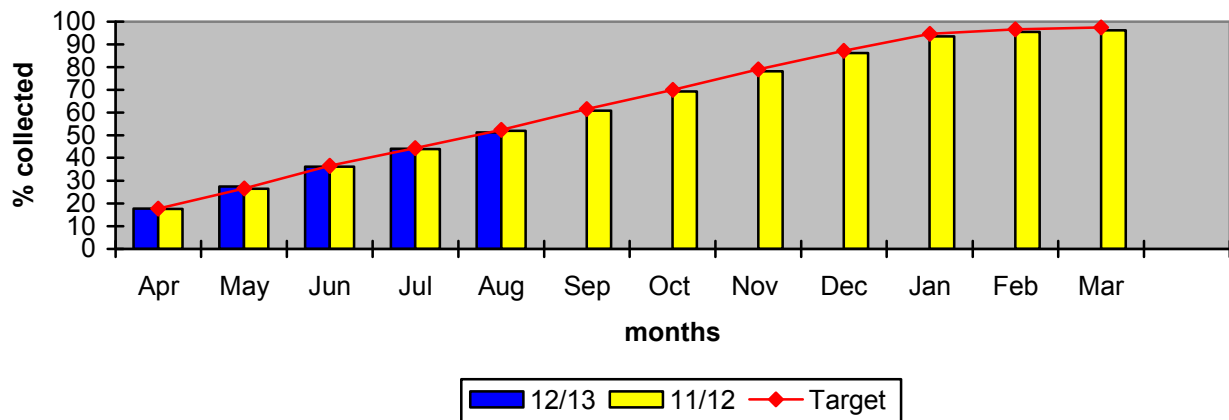
- Net Collectable Debt 2012/13 £88,215m
- Collection Target 2012/13 97.50%



Monthly Target = 52.28%  
Collection Rate = 51.20%

	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
<b>12/13</b>	17.82	27.46	36.11	43.95	51.20	<b>60.31</b>	<b>68.85</b>	<b>77.92</b>	<b>86.13</b>	<b>95.42</b>	<b>95.75</b>	<b>96.63</b>
<b>11/12</b>	17.63	26.48	36.17	43.80	51.84	60.85	69.23	78.14	86.19	93.52	95.49	96.21
<b>Target</b>	17.74	26.69	36.48	44.22	52.28	61.47	69.97	78.98	87.13	94.57	96.64	97.50

**% of NNDR collected**



Business Rates collection has shown a slight drop at 51.20% for August, against 51.84% for the same point last year. However we have identified a number of unallocated payments which will have impacted on this.

We are also experiencing difficulties with landlords refusing to take back leases on empty properties which is affecting the collection of empty properties rates.

The NDR and Valuation team are continuing to bring the schedules up to date and have been managing large increase in archive re-bandings. Current working practices are being regularly reviewed to ensure on-going improvement in collection and more alignment with council tax processes recovery. Proactive work continues around reminder and summons runs and we are confident collection will improve during the remainder of the year.