

PLYMOUTH CITY COUNCIL

Subject: Revenues and Benefits Performance Update

Committee: Cabinet

Date: 15 January 2013

Cabinet Member: Councillor Lowry

CMT Member: Adam Broome (Director for Corporate Services)

Author: Martine Collins, Strategic Manager Revenues and Benefits

Contact: Tel: 01752 304118
email: martine.collins@plymouth.gov.uk

Ref:

Key Decision: No

Part: I

Purpose of the report:

To provide Cabinet with an update on the performance of the Revenues and Benefits service.

Corporate Plan 2012-2015:

The Revenues and Benefits service significantly contributes to the Inequalities Agenda ensuring that the most vulnerable residents of Plymouth receive the appropriate benefit entitlement. Also strong links into Value for Communities.

Implications for Medium Term Financial Plan and Resource Implications: Including finance, human, IT and land

The Revenues and Benefits service undertook a major restructure in 2011/12 which reduced overall service expenditure by c.£1m and fundamentally changed working practices. The Council administers housing benefit subsidy of c.£100m per annum.

Other Implications: e.g. Child Poverty, Community Safety, Health and Safety, Risk Management and Equality, Diversity and Community Cohesion:

- An effective Revenues and Benefits service helps address inequalities through ensuring that vulnerable residents receive appropriate benefit entitlement.
 - The service undertakes annual benefit take up campaigns which are targeted to areas of greatest need.
-

Recommendations & Reasons for recommended action:

Cabinet are asked to note the progress made by the service since the implementation of a new structure in November 2011.

Alternative options considered and reasons for recommended action:

None

Background papers:

Quarterly Performance and Finance Reports

Numerous background papers in relation to the Revenues and Benefits and Customer Service restructure

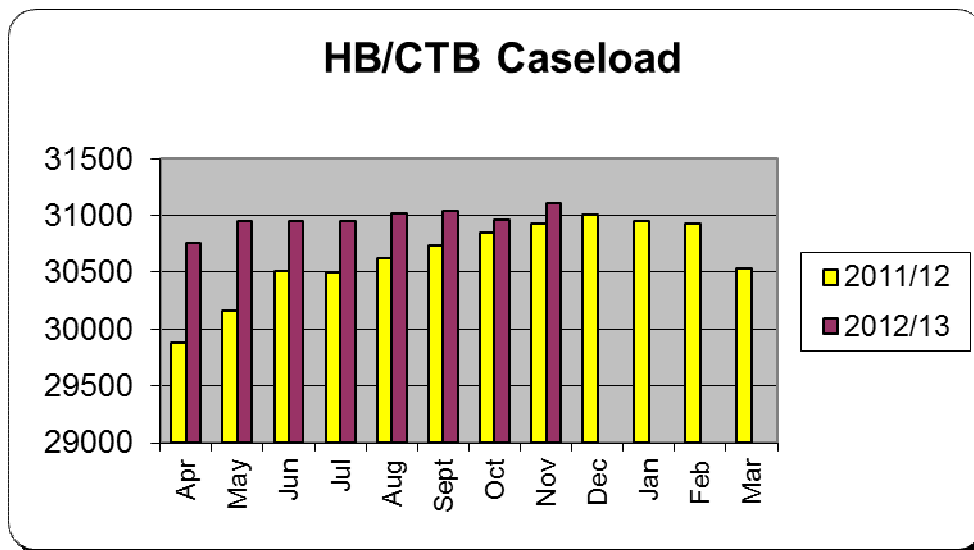
Report by the Overview and Scrutiny Task and Finish Group regarding restructure

Sign off:

Fin	CorpsF FC1213 002/CDR/13.12.12	Leg	TH0069	HR		Corp Prop		IT		Strat Proc	
Originating SMT Member: Malcolm Coe											
Have you consulted the Cabinet Member(s) named on the report? Yes											

Housing Benefit


Number of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit claimants

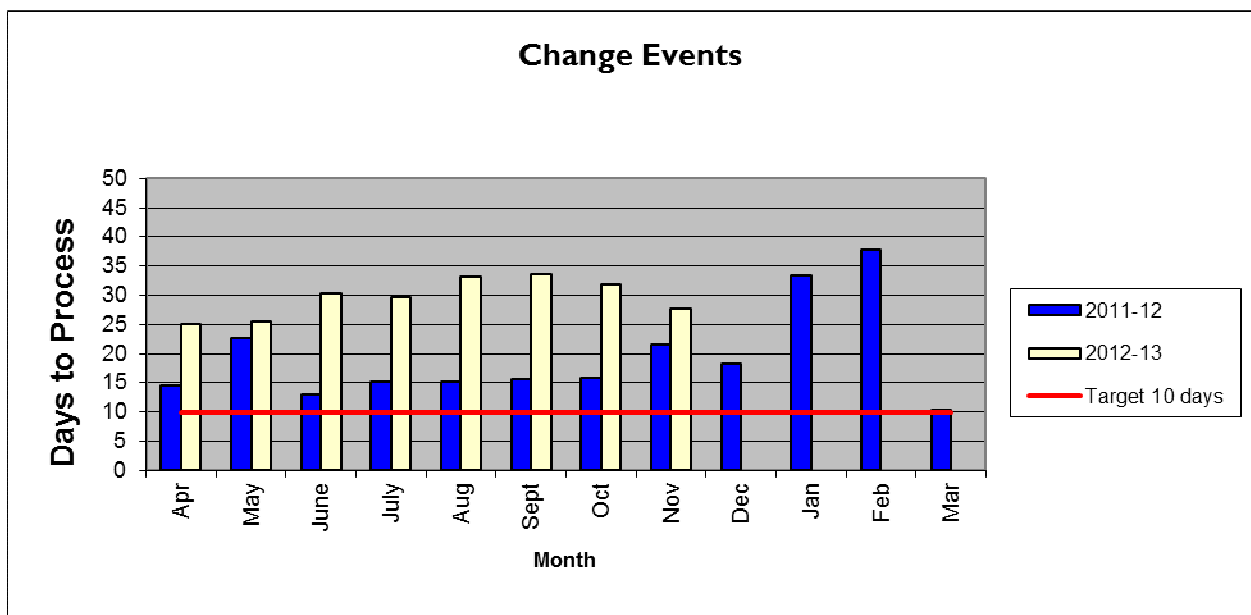


	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
2012/13	30754	30945	30953	30952	31015	31040	30,982	31,108				
2011/12	29879	30165	30505	30504	30621	30737	30853	30929	31004	30952	30923	30528

The number of people in receipt of Housing and Council Tax Benefit increased during November by 0.41%. The average caseload per Plymouth City Council FTE staff member is more than 1,000 which is above average compared with other Councils.

Change Events

 **Target 10 days – November 27.69 days**



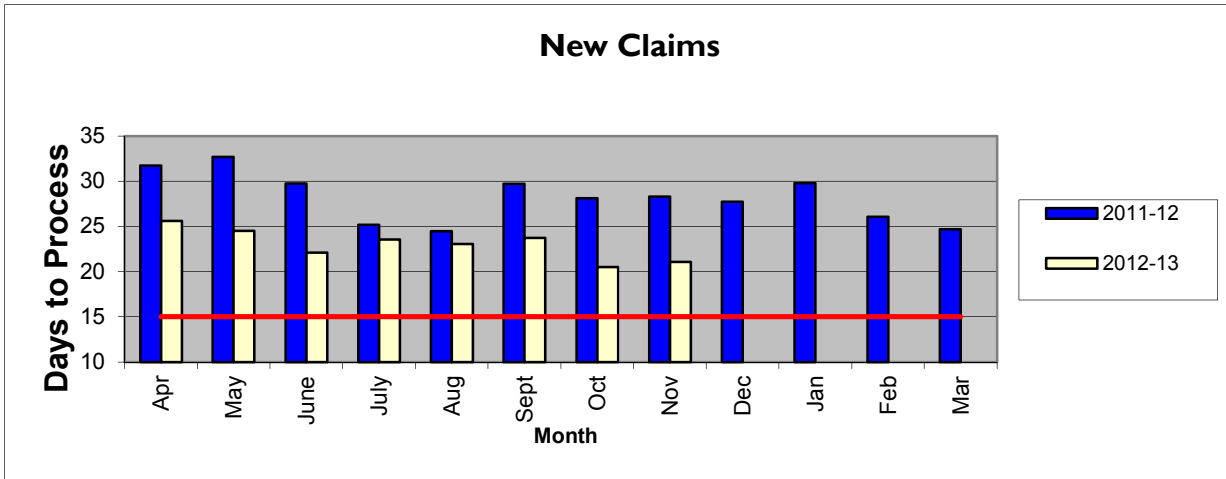
	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
2012	25.05	25.41	30.23	29.73	33.08	33.86	31.89	27.69	24	22	19	15
2011	14.58	22.57	12.94	12.12	15.15	15.62	15.73	18.34	18.34	33.36	37.82	25

Forecast Processing Times

November saw a significant drop in the number of days to process changes as the outstanding ATLAS work continues to be cleared and we anticipate being up to date with this work by Christmas. This is a considerable achievement given the national problems with ATLAS where some councils are seeing backlogs of up to 10,000 pieces of work and delays of 8 –10 weeks.

Processing of New Claims

Target 15 days – November 21.07 days



	<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>
2012	25.62	24.49	22.09	23.54	23.05	23.73	20.51	21.07	20	22	20	18
2011	31.74	32.70	29.74	25.19	24.47	29.70	28.13	27.71	27.71	29.77	26.05	24.68

Forecast Processing Times

During November we continued to maintain our position at 21.07 days and remain ahead of the all Council average of 24 days. This is a major step forward compared to the historical, (bottom quartile), performance of 30 plus days that we were achieving prior to the restructure.

We are currently trialling a different way of working with customers for new claims, which aims to address customer wait times in the Civic, whilst also improving processing times. We are 2 weeks into the trial and this is proving to be very successful.

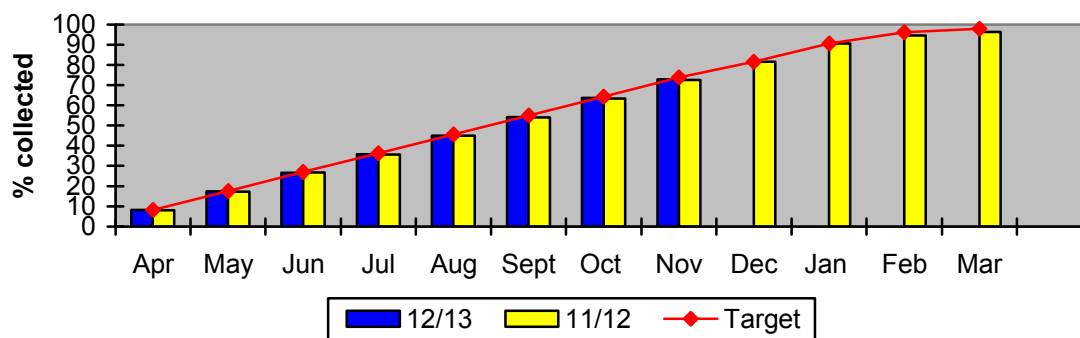
Collection Rates

Council Tax

- Net Collectable Debt 2012/13 £93,653m
 - Collection Target 2012/13 98.00%
- Monthly Target = 73.74% £68,925m
 Collection Rate = 72.87% £68,112m

	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
12/13 (%)	8.25	17.53	26.53	35.70	44.95	54.07	63.60	72.87	81.68	90.91	94.93	96.6%
11/12 (%)	8.07	17.31	26.62	35.61	44.85	54.04	63.34	72.60	81.54	90.71	94.68	96.30
Target (%)	8.22	17.61	27.06	36.19	45.57	54.90	64.34	73.74	81.54	90.71	96.24	98.00

% of Council Tax collected



Council Tax collection has continued to improve at 72.87% for November against a collection of 72.60% for the same point last year. However, we are short of the in-year collection target that we have set.

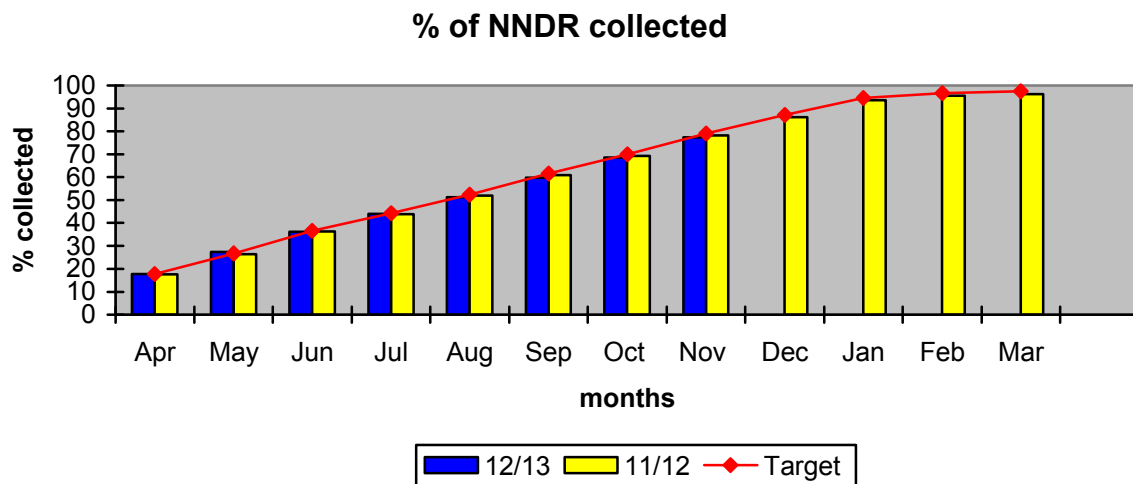
We continue to telephone customers falling into arrears to promote payment and avoid recovery action. This is reducing the number of summons being issued and securing payments which would otherwise go through the recovery cycle.

National Non Domestic Rates

- Net Collectable Debt 2012/13 £88,024m
 - Collection Target 2012/13 96.90%
- Monthly Target = 78.66% £68,860m
 Collection Rate = 77.41% £67,764m

	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
12/13 (%)	17.82	27.46	36.11	43.95	51.20	59.66	68.48	77.41	86.13	95.42	95.75	96.63
11/12 (%)	17.63	26.48	36.17	43.80	51.84	60.85	69.23	78.14	86.19	93.52	95.49	96.21
Target (%)	17.74	26.69	36.48	44.22	52.28	61.31	69.73	78.66	86.73	94.09	96.08	96.90

NOTE: Target of 96.90% is a revision from 97.50% after taking into account the business rates deferral scheme where businesses can defer payment of their rates for 2 years.



Collection of business rates is under target by 0.73% against the same point last year; however this position has improved on September where collection was 1.21% below the same point last year.

Proactive recovery work and a revised recovery timetable have meant that we are able to target outstanding rates more effectively.

Many authorities are seeing a reduction in the collection of business rates as the economic climate continues to be a challenge, but we continue to focus on proactive recovery to improve the situation.

On The Horizon

In preparation for the changes being brought about through Welfare Reform we have identified the priority areas against which the department will need to respond. A more detailed plan is in place and the following details the key areas and the preparations that are in place to respond.

<p>Introduction of Social Fund</p>	<p>Ongoing – 31 March 2013 1 April 2013 – go live</p>	<p>Funding is available to support the implementation and administration of the scheme. We will be creating a team to administer all discretionary funds, including Social Fund, Discretionary Housing Payments and Council Tax Support Exceptional Hardship Fund. This will ensure consistency and customer access to the correct fund, whilst also allowing for robust reporting and monitoring of the impact on customers. This team will also provide advice and support to customers and liaise with welfare groups.</p> <p>We are currently working on the details of the scheme and Plymouth is ahead of many authorities in the development of a scheme</p>
------------------------------------	---	---

Council Tax Support	Jan - 31 March 1 April 2013 – go live	<p>Customers to be written to w/c 14 January to advise of changes and how they will impact on them.</p> <p>Jan-March – proactive telephoning to customers to engage early and consider how we can support them to become payers before they get into a recovery situation as some will never have had to pay Council tax previously.</p> <p>We are looking to introduce a number of options – 12 monthly and also weekly instalments.</p> <p>Staff administering CTS will be trained in making arrangements and giving advice and signposting. This will allow for a holistic approach for customer.</p> <p>We are preparing to update all Council tax benefit letters and documents to reflect the changes</p>
Under Occupancy	Jan-March 1 April 2013 – go live	Working with Social Landlords on data sharing to prepare for the identification of under-occupied properties. Letters were issued to all affected customers and we are now updating our IT systems to reflect customer circumstances
Self Service	Internal go live End Nov External Go –live – Jan 13	The introduction of Self service will allow customers to view their housing benefit, council tax and business rates accounts online. They will also be able to notify us of a change in address and sign up to e-billing, and direct debit. Publicity is planned for the new year and staff will be actively promoting the service. Self Service will give customers 24/7 access to Revenues and Benefits whilst also reducing the number of simple enquiries that are currently responded to by officers. This will free up capacity to deal with welfare reform and those customers who will require more support.
Risk Based Verification	Go Live Jan 13	Currently housing benefit and council tax benefit require a high degree of verification of evidence in support of a claim. This is a significant cause of delay and is administratively resource intensive. We have registered with the DWP to introduce risk based verification which allows us to scale back these checks on low risk cases.

		This will make claims easier for customers and will create capacity for staff to respond to Welfare reforms. This will also help reduce wait times for face to face customers as claims will be processed more quickly.
ATLAS	ongoing	The DWP ATLAS's system means that every change a customer undergoes is now reported to the authority through the DWP's IT system. Nationally this is a problem for many authorities due to the significant increases in work. Plymouth had experienced IT problems which caused a backlog of work of some 8 weeks over Aug/Sept. This is being addressed and by mid- January we will be up to date with this work.
Wait Times	ongoing	<p>We are actively looking at how we can make improvements to our wait times on the counter and the telephones. During 2012 this has been affected by the restructure and the high degree of training that has been required by new staff to enable them to be competent in these areas. The restructure replaced 30% of staff who required training, putting pressure on experienced resource.</p> <p>We are trialing an appointment system for all new claims on the counter and this is proving to be successful. This provides a more professional service for the customer and also allows us to better manage customer expectation and footfall. The next stage is to roll this out to the telephone system. This will reduce wait times for customers.</p>
Council Tax Technical Reforms	Dec-March2013	We are preparing general letters to advise customers that their second homes, major works and empty and unfurnished exemptions will be changing from April 2013. Information will also shortly be available on the website to reflect the changes. These will be issued to all existing and new customers.
Recovery of Council Tax and Business Rates	ongoing	Recovery work is more challenging in the current economic climate and will continue to be so with the introduction of council tax support. A group of staff have had training in negotiation skills and building

		relationships with customers. We are now transferring this training into working practices and are reviewing our approach to recovery in light of the changing shape of the customer. We will continue to be proactive, telephoning customers early to avoid recovery action where possible.
--	--	--