

# **DWP**

## **Inspection Report**

for

**Watford Borough Council's and  
Three Rivers District Council's  
Revenues and Benefits Shared  
Service**

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>BACKGROUND.....</b>	<b>4</b>
ORGANISATION .....	5
INSPECTION METHODOLOGY .....	5
<b>FINDINGS.....</b>	<b>5</b>
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS .....	5
FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS .....	6
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS .....</b>	<b>17</b>

# INTRODUCTION

**1.1** Section 139A of the Social Security Administration Act 1992 sets out the legislative framework for this inspection. It provides that:

*The Secretary of State may authorise persons to consider and report to him on the administration by authorities of housing benefit (HB) and council tax benefit (CTB).*

**1.2** This report assesses Watford Borough Council's and Three Rivers District Council's Revenues and Benefits Shared Service (the Shared Service) arrangements for processing new claims and changes of circumstances for HB/CTB. We limited the scope of this inspection to those areas of work that have a direct impact on the Shared Service's new claims and changes of circumstances processing performance.

**1.3** DWP officials first met with managers from the Shared Service in February 2011 to discuss performance and levels of outstanding work. The Department for Work and Pensions' (DWP) Consultancy Support and Challenge Team (CSCT) was invited to undertake a 'health check' of the Shared Service in July 2011. Following this work the CSCT offered to assist the Shared Service with implementing the recommendations. The Shared Service declined the offer, expressing a wish to continue with its own plans to contract an external supplier to assist with off-site processing to reduce the backlog of work. Although this was a positive step, the CSCT advised that it felt that a more radical plan was needed to make the necessary changes to improve and sustain performance.

**1.4** DWP continued to monitor progress and performance since the first meeting with the Shared Service in February 2011. Watford Borough Council and Three Rivers Council were selected for an inspection because, following the implementation of the Shared Service, the new claims and change of circumstances processing times showed significant delays and the latest published figures (Q3 2011/12) showed no improvement.

**1.5** Three Rivers District Council's performance was good until it abruptly declined in Q1 of 2010/11, following the merger in December 2009. Although performance has fluctuated slightly since, by Q3 of 2011/12 the average time taken to process new claims had risen to 42 days and changes of circumstances were taking, on average, 52 days to process.

**1.6** Watford Borough Council's performance has historically been worse than Three Rivers. The council was, at times, unable to produce data to confirm actual performance times. In Q1 2010/11 it was taking an average of 40 days to process new claims and 34 days to process changes of circumstances. By Q3 of 2011/12 performance had fallen to an average of 45 days to process new claims and 52 days to process changes of circumstances. The Shared Service has continued to

record separate performance figures for each council since it merged in December 2009. Figure 1 below sets out both councils' performance since 2006.

<b>Fig.1: In-month processing times for new claims and changes of circumstances (days)</b>				
	<b>Three Rivers</b>		<b>Watford</b>	
	<b>New Claims</b>	<b>Changes</b>	<b>New Claims</b>	<b>Changes</b>
2006/07	21	7	30	8
2007/08	21	6	30	11
2008/09	No data	No data	No data	No data
2009/10 Q1	17	6	Not known	No known
2009/10 Q2	16	7	58	31
2009/10 Q3	17	10	Not known	Not known
2009/10 Q4	26	5*	Not known	Not known
2010/11 Q1	43	27	40	34
2010/11 Q2	32	36	30	29
2010/11 Q3	37	33	32	38
2010/11 Q4	38	9 *	36	13
2011/12 Q1	49	38	44	40
2011/12 Q2	42	49	42	44
2011/12 Q3	42	52	45	52

Source: Shared Service

\*Performance improved for quarter4 due to the inclusion of rent increases

## BACKGROUND

**2.1** Three Rivers District Council is located in south-west Hertfordshire, covering an area of 88.8 square kilometres, a mixture of rural, suburban and urban environments. It has a population of around 88,000.

**2.2** There is a high proportion of older residents, with 21% aged 60 or over. About 13% of the population belong to ethnic minority groups. Unemployment is below the national average, although it has increased as a result of the recession. Three Rivers ranks low on the deprivation scale, although there are pockets of higher deprivation.

**2.3** Housing in Three Rivers is predominantly owner occupied (77%), higher than the national average. Council housing stock was transferred to a housing association in 2008. Social housing now makes up about 16% of households. There is a small private rental sector which covers 6% of households.

**2.4** Watford Borough Council serves a compact, predominantly urban area of 21 square kilometres, situated in Hertfordshire, near to the northern fringes of London and immediately east of Three Rivers. The population is around 80,000.

**2.5** 21% of the population belong to ethnic minority groups. The average age of Watford's residents is about 37 years. The proportion of people over retirement age is lower than the national average. Watford ranks relatively low on the deprivation scale, with lower than average unemployment, although there are some areas where deprivation is high.

**2.6** About 80% of Watford's households are owner occupied, with around 16% in social housing and 10% in private rental accommodation. Watford transferred its housing stock to a housing association in 2007.

## Organisation

**2.7** Three Rivers and Watford Councils entered into a Shared Service of Revenues and Benefits in December 2009. This is one of four Shared Services within Three Rivers and Watford Councils, including Finance, HR and ICT. Two of these, namely Finance and Revenues & Benefits, report to the Corporate Director of Resources & Governance at Three Rivers. The other two report to the Executive Director of Resources at Watford.

**2.8** A Joint Shared Services Committee oversees all the Shared Services including Revenues & Benefits. This is made up of three Members of each authority with the chair alternating.

## Inspection methodology

**2.9** Two Authorised Officers from the DWP undertook the on-site work for this inspection between 5-7 March 2012. Work to establish the effectiveness of the Shared Service's performance included:

- interviewing staff and managers
- observing processes and procedures
- analysing management information
- examining policies and procedures
- sampling a small number of new claims and changes of circumstances decisions

# FINDINGS

## Summary of main findings

**3.1** The Shared Service has made improvements in the speed of processing both new claims and changes of circumstances since the CSCT's health check in the summer of 2011, most noticeably in the month of February 2012. Work has been sent to an external supplier to process off-site to help reduce the backlog.

Outstanding workloads have reduced to more manageable levels and some excellent work has been done to bring the staff from two very different local authorities into one integrated group.

**3.2** Process improvements and considerable work to align the different IT systems, previously used by each council, have resulted in more unified working practices, better customer services, more manageable workloads and morale has greatly improved amongst staff. Allocating dedicated staff to new claims, along with introducing a fast-track new claims process has had a positive effect on processing times and outstanding work.

**3.3** However, further work needs to be done to continue and sustain these improvements. Improved management information must be developed to assist with accurately identifying the current work position, desired future position and plans to tackle the gap. This will allow the Shared Service to maintain a firmer grip on the management and flow of work and more accurately plan and cost the extent of continued recovery in order to achieve a steady state with an agreed head of work.

**3.4** We found that despite receiving Automatic Transfer to Local Authority Systems (ATLAS) notifications from the Department since July 2011 none of these had been actioned. This may result in a considerable amount of additional work which, without careful planning, could detrimentally affect the Shared Service's recovery. As well as the operational impact of not actioning this work both councils may lose subsidy as a result of delaying the correction of notified changes resulting in overpayments.

**3.5** The Shared Service is currently considering setting targets for staff and key work objectives and appraisals have been reintroduced after not being carried out for a considerable period. This will help staff to recognise what they need to achieve and further integrate them into the Shared Service.

**3.6** The introduction of e-claiming is planned for the end of April 2012. Very sensibly, the Shared Service has decided to implement a 'low key' start to impact the changes on the service and iron out any unforeseen problems before a major launch. However, there is still work to be done to design back office processes that will need to be amended to make best use of this new initiative. In addition, some automation of processes has been planned and implemented but there is more scope to further automate processes to maximise efficiency and increase productivity.

## Findings and conclusions

### **Managing workloads and performance**

**3.7** The Shared Service has made some progress since the CSCT 'health check' in the summer of 2011. However, improvements only started to show in local, unpublished, processing times in February 2012. Speed of processing

performance for new claims has improved from an average of 42 days for Three Rivers and 40 days for Watford in August 2011 to a locally reported figure of 27 and 33 days respectively for February 2012. Similarly, speed of processing for changes of circumstances has improved from an average of 50 days for Three Rivers and 48 days for Watford in August 2011 to a reported 28 and 27 days, as set out in Figures 2 and 3 below.

<b>Fig.2: In-month processing times for new claims (days)</b>		
<b>In-month performance</b>	<b>Three Rivers</b>	<b>Watford</b>
August 2011	42	40
September 2011	54	42
October 2011	44	45
November 2011	43	44
December 2011	34	42
January 2012	41	40
February 2012	27*	33*

Source: Shared Service \* (February figures were calculated locally and not cleared by DWP)

<b>Fig.3: In-month processing times for changes of circumstances (days)</b>		
<b>In-month performance</b>	<b>Three Rivers</b>	<b>Watford</b>
August 2011	50	48
September 2011	53	41
October 2011	47	49
November 2011	49	49
December 2011	62	57
January 2012	39	42
February 2012	28*	27*

Source: Shared Service \* (February figures were calculated locally and not cleared by DWP)

**3.8** The number of outstanding new claims has also significantly reduced over this period (see Figure 4). This was due to the introduction of dedicated Benefits Assessors for new claims processing, the implementation of a triage system and a fast-tracking process for new claims received by Customer Services.

<b>Fig.4: Monthly outstanding new claims</b>			
<b>Month</b>	<b>Three Rivers</b>	<b>Watford</b>	<b>Total</b>
August 2011	134	295	429
September 2011	195	351	546
October 2011	181	376	557
November 2011	169	301	470
December 2011	134	196	330
January 2012	95	228	323
February 2012	72	181	253

Source: Shared Service

**3.9** In order to reduce the volume of outstanding changes of circumstances and other non-new claims work items, the Shared Service contracted an external supplier to assist with the off-site processing of this work. This external supplier was sent 3,156 items of work to process at the end of November 2011 and a further 3,000 items at the beginning of January 2012.



**We recommend tighter control of the contract to ensure that work is actioned in line with the original agreement. This should involve negotiating and closely monitoring specific timelines and milestones for completion of the work allocated.**

**3.11** The Shared Service currently monitors outstanding work, other than new claims, by counting the number of individual documents received. As a result, it is not possible to identify the precise number of changes of circumstances received or to accurately assess progress against the number of changes of circumstances outstanding. In addition, the Shared Service has not been able to identify the number of individual cases to which these documents correspond.

**3.12** The Shared Service has recently purchased additional functionality to its document imaging system that enables data on the number of individual documents to be shown as the corresponding number of individual cases. This means that if there are a number of documents relating to a customer they will only be counted once.

**3.13** This is a positive step towards better management information. However, the way documents are currently scanned into the document imaging system



does not allow for the identification of the volume of actual changes of circumstances.

**We recommend the Shared Service amends the indexing of documents to create a change of circumstances category. This will allow better identification of outstanding changes of circumstances.**

**3.14** In order to sustain the current performance improvements the Shared Service needs to undertake a more detailed and comprehensive capacity plan. This should include accurate information relating to the:

- number of new claims received (including seasonal fluctuations)
- number of changes of circumstances received (by type and volumes that can be processed through automated processes)
- number of staff available to process work (factoring in historical seasonal peaks and troughs)
- known additional work to factor into workloads, including:
  - outstanding ATLAS notifications
  - ongoing ATLAS notifications
  - interventions and other review work
  - Benefit Cap work
- current staff productivity levels (how many new claims and changes are processed on average by each individual).

**3.15** This information will allow the Shared Service to identify if there is a gap between what is currently received, including known additional work, and the current staff capacity to process work.

**3.16** Using the Shared Service's current methodology for counting the total outstanding work items, the number of individual documents remaining with the Shared Service for on-site processing, excluding the items passed to the external supplier, has gradually reduced from 2,800 in December 2012 to around 2,000 items at the time of the inspection.

**3.17** The Shared Service has recently calculated that a manageable head of work amounts to around 1,000 documents outstanding. It has sought and secured permission from Members to continue to engage the services of its current external supplier to process work off-site whenever the levels of outstanding work exceed this 1,000 document threshold. No additional budget has been allocated for this and current thinking is that any additional costs will be met from existing budget allocations.

**3.18** While this trigger is a good planning tool, the basis for calculating outstanding work could be more accurate and should include all work

outstanding, specifically ATLAS work. Including this additional work makes it seem unlikely that costs could be met from existing budgets.

**Therefore, we recommend that a capacity plan is urgently constructed including all known future work to identify the actual cost of recovery and that Members should be made aware of the actual costs of sustaining improvements.**

## **ATLAS notifications**

**3.19** ATLAS enables the automatic transfer of award data for a range of DWP benefits and HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) Tax Credits direct to local authorities. Information is transferred where there is a new award or a change of award and the DWP/HMRC customer is in receipt of HB/CTB. ATLAS delivers electronic files to local authorities in a format capable of being loaded directly into their processing systems. Receiving information automatically significantly reduces HB/CTB overpayments and underpayments, in particular where the customer fails to notify the local authority of the claim or change, or provides the information late.

**3.20** ATLAS phase 1 went live in July 2011 for all local authorities with transfer award and termination information for HMRC Tax Credits. Phase 2 went live in January and February 2012 and extended ATLAS to include notifications of new claims, changes and terminations of certain DWP Benefits.

**3.21** Current legislation and guidance relating to how local authorities review existing HB/CTB awards on receipt of new information has not changed following the implementation of ATLAS. If the local authority has received sufficient information to review the existing award or process a change of circumstances and fails to process that information before the customer's next payday, any resulting overpayment will be classified as Local Authority (LA) official error or administrative delay (depending on whether the overpayment arose because of a delay and whether that delay was caused by a mistake). The normal subsidy rules will apply. This means that unless local authorities keep these types of overpayments to a minimum, they could face reductions in the amount of subsidy they can claim.

**3.22** We found that the Shared Service had not actioned any ATLAS notifications despite receiving and downloading them since July 2011. Implementation funding was provided by DWP and it was expected that all local authorities would take immediate action to process these notifications.

**3.23** As this work remains outstanding it is essential that the effort to process this work is quantified and plans are put in place to deal with it as soon as possible. Not all the ATLAS files back to July 2011 had been retained. From those that were, there were 2,398 ATLAS notifications outstanding. As this work may involve considerable resources to clear it will be necessary to revise capacity management plans and costs. This may also have an adverse impact on

the councils' subsidy claims. The impact of revising these cases may be eased due to the fact that the Shared Service undertakes a 6-monthly income check. A sample needs to be taken to accurately quantify the effort needed to resolve this issue.

**We recommend the Shared Service quantifies outstanding ATLAS work and immediately implements plans to clear all the outstanding notifications and introduce standardised work processes, ensuring prompt action on all future notifications. This will avoid further overpayment of benefit and reduce any subsidy losses.**

**3.24** The Shared Service advised us that its LA error overpayments are already over the upper threshold for subsidy purposes for 2011/12. Figure 5 below sets out the estimated year end position for 2011/12. This does not include the impact of outstanding ATLAS notifications which may impact on its 2012/13 subsidy claim.

<b>Fig.5: Estimated LA error figures for 2011/12</b>		
	<b>Three Rivers</b>	<b>Watford</b>
Estimated total expenditure attracting full subsidy (£)	27,468,284.15	38,968,891.19
Lower Threshold (£)	131,847.76	187,050.68
Upper threshold (£)	148,328.73	210,432.01
LA Error overpayments (£)	205,409.10	386,552.28
Amount over threshold (£)	57,080.37	176,120.27

Source: Shared Service

## **Scanning and indexing**

**3.25** The Shared Service operates one dedicated Scanning and Indexing team responsible for scanning and indexing most of the revenues and benefits documentation received by the councils.

**3.26** It is important to move documents quickly through this process. Documents should be scanned and indexed on the same day they are received, as delays detrimentally affect processing times. At the time of the inspection this was not happening and scanning and indexing was taking two working days. Performance should be monitored and delays should be investigated and corrective action taken as quickly as possible.

**3.27** Existing procedures did not include prioritisation of fast-track claims within the scanning and indexing process. To maximise the benefits from the fast-track process prioritisation of this work needs to be in place.

**3.28** Customer service staff triaging customers did not have access to scanners, although Benefit Assessors allocated to the counter to deal with more in-depth benefits enquiries did have access. However, additional scanners were on order which will allow work to be scanned at the earliest opportunity, making the process more efficient.

**3.29** There was some confusion over scanning of documents received at the Housing Office in South Oxhey. The Scanning and Indexing team sometimes wait for the hard copies to arrive before indexing cases. This needs to be investigated further to ensure that work scanned at South Oxhey is indexed straight away by the Scanning and Indexing team.

**3.30** Some good work has been undertaken to improve scanning and indexing but efficiency was still compromised by the failure to maximise opportunities to automate standard work processes. The Shared Service has partially automated the receipt of electronic transfer of data (ETDs) from the DWP but has access to an ETD Manager tool that can automate some ETD processing. This tool has not yet been implemented. In addition, the Shared Service does not currently make use of bar coding. There was also confusion over the correct process for transferring e-mail correspondence into the document imaging system, involving manually printing e-mails before scanning them.

**3.31** A corporate review of scanning and indexing was planned.

**We recommend this review should include automating processes, addressing any confusion over post received from South Oxhey, prioritising fast-track claims and introducing trigger points to investigate delays.**

### **Efficient processes**

**3.32** A number of process improvements have been introduced by the Shared Service in order to improve the customer experience and create greater efficiency. For example, allocating specific members of staff to deal with new claims and allocating a benefits officer to reception to offer specialist benefits advice.

**3.33** In addition, a triage process was introduced at both Three Rivers and Watford customer reception points. This involves customer service staff checking new claim forms for accuracy and advising customers of any missing information. Forms that are thought to be complete and ready for processing are then fast-tracked for an assessment decision.

**3.34** This initiative can help to speed up the request for further information and enable quicker processing of cases that contain all the required information. It also allows the Benefit Assessors allocated to face-to-face duties, on rotation, to do less routine work and more processing, increasing productivity and resulting in improved processing times.

**3.35** Fast-track cases have a target of 15 days to decide the claim. This was originally set to ensure that the Shared Service could always meet the demand. Other local authorities running fast-track systems typically promise to decide claims within 48 hours or less. This quick turnaround creates a compelling incentive for the customer to provide all the information at the point of making the claim, or very quickly after any omissions have been identified. As the Shared Service is now processing fast-track cases within a few days this offers the opportunity to provide a better incentive to customers to supply the required information quickly.

**We recommend the Shared Service reduces the 15 day target for fast-track claims to, at most, 7 days in order to encourage further take up and make the most of this initiative.**

**3.36** Any system that introduces handoffs to another member of staff also introduces a risk of mistakes, errors and rework. To get the best from the triage and fast-track initiatives it is necessary to ensure that as much error and waste as possible is eradicated from the process. The Shared Service has initiated some assurance work already by analysing the number of fast-track cases in pending. As a fast-track case should have all information supplied and be ready to assess there should not be a necessity for these cases to be pended.

**We recommend that this type of assurance and analysis be routinely carried out on triage and fast-track cases and any errors in information given or collected by customer service staff be fed back to improve their understanding of HB/CTB and thereby reduce any waste through rework.**

**3.37** In order to reduce the number of handoffs and, subsequently, the likelihood of errors and rework

**We recommend that assessors allocated to the counter action all work taken in from customers they see each day. In addition to reducing rework this will improve efficiency, speed up processes and reduce the occurrence of customers revisiting numerous times to resolve their queries.**

## **Quality assurance**

**3.38** We examined the quality assurance mechanisms in place to ensure that claims and changes are accurate. We found that the methods to check and feedback errors were good, with training needs identified and provided when required. This included, as a minimum, a 10% check of cases processed by the external supplier.

**3.39** Checks also included, where appropriate, a check that procedures were followed. For example, if an assessor failed to telephone a customer for information when a telephone number had been supplied, but had instead written

out, possibly delaying resolution of the query. Feeding back these types of errors will help to maintain a standardised process and increase efficiency.

**3.40** As mentioned earlier in the report, routine checks need to be in place to analyse the effectiveness of the triage system and encourage continuous improvement.

### **Continuing to develop the Shared Service identity**

**3.41** Much has been done to merge two separate teams into one Shared Service, including resolving some challenging IT problems. Staff showed a great deal of motivation and interest in doing a good job and providing good customer service. New on-line procedures have recently been issued to staff which will help ensure that standardised processes are followed. These should be updated when new initiatives or changes are introduced.

**3.42** Prior to the establishment of the Shared Service both local authorities operated independent sets of forms and documentation. Under the Shared Service arrangements there has been some consolidation of forms, sensibly taking the best from each. However, there are still two separate claim forms (although very similar) and two sets of independent stationery to ensure customers of each local authority area only receive correspondence containing the respective local authority identifier and branding.

**3.43** The content of the web sites for each local authority are out of date, include inaccurate information and out of date forms. We were told that the Shared Service was in the process of updating each one.

**3.44** The Shared Service is currently considering setting productivity targets for staff. Key work objectives and appraisals have been reintroduced after not being carried out for a considerable period. Staff should be made aware of what is expected of them through introducing SMART key work objectives. This can only be done when targets have been agreed. The Shared Service is collecting data to identify current average productivity rates. This together with information from the capacity plan will give a good indication of the level of productivity needed to keep on top of incoming workloads.

**3.45** There are various methods of setting productivity targets ranging from counting every action an assessor undertakes, with complex weightings, to purely counting the main aspects of work, deciding new claims and changes. The former system of counting everything consumes lots of resources in setting up and maintaining. The latter, more straightforward system relies on the fact that all staff at various times will deal with their share of difficult cases.

**3.46** Accuracy as well as speed and volumes should always be included to obtain a more rounded view of performance. Results from any target system should be treated as the first stage of a discussion between the staff member and



the line manager and should help form one-to-one reviews and appraisals, identifying achievements and training needs.

**We recommend key targets should be as straightforward as possible and only count volumes, speed and accuracy of decisions on new claims and changes.**

## **E-claiming**

**3.47** The Shared Service is planning to introduce e-claiming at the end of April 2012. It has decided, very sensibly, to implement a 'low key' start to impact the changes on the service and iron out any unforeseen problems before a major launch. E-claiming will involve customers being able to complete an application for HB/CTB on-line. Once the application form is completed the customer will be able to view and print, or opt for the Shared Service to send, a list of the evidence required to support the claim and a declaration statement for signing. The Shared Service will then have to arrange to obtain a signature from the customer. Once all the required evidence is gathered and a signed declaration received the case details will be uploaded into the processing IT system for assessment.

**3.48** Although training is in place for the IT elements of e-claiming, back office processes have yet to be fully explored. This is essential to get staff buy-in and to get the best out of the new electronic process. Local authorities failing to recognise the need to map new processes for e-claims have found ad hoc procedures developing which do not necessarily maximise the benefits expected from introducing e-claim initiatives. The types of issues to consider include:

- how will e-claims be received in the back office and who will action them?
- When and how will customers be asked to provide any missing information? (e-mail, phone, letter)
- how will signatures be obtained for the claim forms? (appointments, ad hoc)
- who will be assisting customers to fill in e-claims at reception? (is there capacity?)
- are there mechanisms in place to share ideas and good practice amongst staff to ensure standardisation?

**We recommend the Shared Service considers the impact of e-claiming on the back office processes, mapping out and standardising the new process.**

## **Automating processes**

**3.49** The most efficient processes are those that minimise input time. The Shared Service has introduced and also developed plans to extend a number of

excellent initiatives to automate processes. Automation can also offer the opportunity to greatly extend existing capacity and close any gap between existing productivity and the overall level of processing required. Initiatives that the Shared Service is already using or considering include:

- Scanning and Indexing – Evidence supplied by customers is currently photocopied by customer services staff before being passed for scanning and indexing. New scanners should enable these staff to directly scan all post into the document imaging system. We have also commented at paragraph 3.13 on the importance of correctly identifying types of post through the indexing process and the need to consider bar-coding on all suitable correspondence.
- ETD process – notifications are currently auto-loaded and matched to existing case records by national insurance numbers where a match exists. The Shared Service also has access to an ETD Manager tool that enables some degree of auto ETD processing, but has yet to implement this functionality.
- ATLAS – The Shared Service is yet to fully test and implement the available IT functionality for loading and processing ATLAS notifications.
- Registered Providers/Housing Association rent information - Historically the Shared Service has received very little electronic rent information, limited to some annual increases from its major social landlords, using VICTER. However, an additional benefits IT system tool had been purchased to facilitate the setting up of both daily and annual electronic interfaces with agreeable social landlords. There was a positive response at the initial meetings regarding the implementation of these arrangements.
- DWP Local Authority Input Documents (LAIDs) and Local Authority Customer Information forms (LACIs) – Although the Shared Service has access to appropriate tools to enable the downloading of these forms into its document imaging system, we were advised that unresolved IT issues had prevented this from happening for some months.
- E-mail – there is some confusion over the correct process for transferring e-mail correspondence into the document imaging system with some e-mails being manually printed and scanned.
- E-Claims – The Shared Service plans to introduce self-service e-claiming from April 2012. Subject to satisfactory testing and operational changes this offers the opportunity to download claim information into the benefits IT system without the need to key data. In time it could offer partners, such as large social landlords, the flexibility to assist customers to claim this way as an alternative to paper-based forms. There were no plans to extend this to include e-reporting of changes of circumstances.



**We recommend the Shared Service pursues and extends, where possible, its plans to automate processes to reduce processing and handling time and increase efficiency.**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**4.1** In reaching our recommendations we have considered the potential impact. The following table lists the recommendations we have made in this report in order of high, medium and low priority.

Recommendations		
High Priority		
We recommend that the Shared Service:		Paragraph number
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>quantifies outstanding ATLAS work and immediately implements plans to clear all the outstanding notifications and introduce standardised work processes, ensuring prompt action on all future notifications. This will avoid further overpayment of benefit and reduce any subsidy losses.</li> </ul>	3.23
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>urgently constructs a capacity plan that includes all known future work to identify the actual cost of recovery and that Members should be made aware of the actual costs of sustaining improvements.</li> </ul>	3.18
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>amends the indexing of documents to create a change of circumstances category to better identify outstanding changes of circumstances.</li> </ul>	3.13
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>pursues and extends, where possible, its plans to automate processes to reduce processing and handling time and increase efficiency.</li> </ul>	3.49
Medium Priority		
We recommend that the Shared Service:		Paragraph number
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>maintains tighter control of the contract to ensure that work is actioned in line with the original agreement. This should involve negotiating and closely monitoring specific timelines and milestones for completion of the</li> </ul>	3.10

	<b>work allocated.</b>	
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ensures the planned corporate review of scanning and indexing should include automating processes, addressing any confusion over post received from South Oxhey, prioritising fast-track claims and introducing trigger points to investigate delays.</li> </ul>	3.31
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>reduces the 15 day target for fast-track claims to, at most, 7 days in order to encourage further take up and make the most of this initiative.</li> </ul>	3.35
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>routinely analyses errors in information given or collected by customer services' staff relating to triage and fast-track claims. Feedback loops should be formally introduced to improve customer services staff's knowledge of HB/CTB and to reduce waste through rework.</li> </ul>	3.36
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ensures the assessors covering the counter action all work taken in from customers they see each day. This will reduce rework, improve efficiency, speed up processes and reduce the occurrence of customers revisiting numerous times to resolve their queries.</li> </ul>	3.37
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>introduces key targets that are as straightforward as possible and only include volumes, speed and accuracy of decisions on new claims and changes.</li> </ul>	3.46
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>considers the impact of e-claiming on the back office processes, mapping out and standardising the new process.</li> </ul>	3.48