HOUSING BENEFIT PERFORMANCE STANDARDS

1 SUMMARY

1.1 Members to consider the report of the Head of Revenue and Housing Management on the progress towards meeting the Housing Benefit Performance Standards (HBPS) which were adopted in June 2002.

2 PERFORMANCE STANDARDS

2.1 The HBPS were designed to:

- Give a comprehensive picture of what constitutes effective benefit administration, broken down into seven key functional areas.

- Be a clear strategic and operational framework for assessing the performance of each local authority.

- Be an aid to identifying local priorities for action and planning for continuous improvement.

- Improve accountability for around £14billion of public funds.

- Act as a measurement for the Best Value Review process and for Comprehensive Performance Assessment.

2.2 Members adopted the HBPS in June 2002 and agreed to review progress on a six-monthly basis on a June/December cycle. Since the last report presented to members in December 2003 the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) have updated and revised the existing standards again and have introduced some new standards. This new set of standards changed the scoring mechanism and how standards could be achieved. It has therefore been necessary to undertake another review of those standards already met, to ensure that they were still being achieved. The amendments had the effect of reducing the number of standards from 654 to 562. However to reduce the standards the DWP have condensed most of the questions removed into some of the questions that remain. Additionally, the First Secretary announced at the IRRV Conference in October that it is the Government's intention to radically review the Standards for April 2005 which may see them reducing to just 100 in number.

2.3 On 1st June 2004 the DWP issued a Third Amendment to the Standards introducing yet further changes to the original seven key functional areas and introducing certain targets. The original areas are:

- Strategic Management.

- Customer Services.

- Processing of Claims.

- Overpayments.

- Working with Landlords.

- Internal Security.

- Counter Fraud.

2.4   The high level Benefits Service Improvement Plan sets out aims to fully achieve the standards over a five-year period provided resources were available and subject to any further amendments.

3   SELF-ASSESSMENT

3.1   The Head of Service, Revenue and Benefit Manager and senior team members have undertaken a further review against these revised standards to identify areas of most significant weakness. This assessment has been made against the June amendments. (See Appendix 1)

3.2   Those standards that have not been met are in the following areas:

Strategic Management	-	8 standards
Customer Services	-	3 standards
Processing of claims	-	3 standards
Overpayments	-	2 standards

3.3   Members will see that the key area to address is 'Strategic Management'.

4   COMPREHENSIVE PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT

4.1   Members will be aware of our assessment (see Appendix 3) under the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) process and clearly Revenues and Benefits is one area that we will need to look at in terms of capacity building and partnership working.

4.2   In terms of detailed specific issues relating to the service, the key points have been picked up in the Benefits Service Improvement Plan and the self-assessment matrix.

5   SELF-ASSESSMENT MATRIX

5.1   The attached matrix (Appendix 2) sets out areas of weakness, which need to be addressed. The index number shown refers to the individual standard.

Where index numbers are missing e.g. 2.1 to 2.8 then these standards are either met or need only minor attention.

5.2 The Strategic Management Module is an important area within the overall framework, so it is important that these shortcomings are addressed. They can be generally summed-up as revolving around:

- More transparent linkages to the Corporate Policy Objectives (attention to Operational Plan).

- Poor links with stakeholders (this is solvable with resources).

- Poor definitions of Members, Corporate Directors and individual officers roles (solvable by attending to Operational Plan/assigning resources).

5.3 The self-assessment matrix goes on to examine some of the other modules where needs for improvement have been identified which are linked to the wider aspects of delivering the Benefit Service. These include:

- The need to fully achieve delivery of Disability Discrimination Act recommendations.

- The need to fully achieve delivery of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act

- Recruitment, retention and reward.

- More work to be undertaken on developing our Social Inclusion Policy.

6   STANDARDS DEVELOPMENT AND CAPACITY

6.1 Good progress is being made since adoption in June 2002 but this pace has slowed considerably in the last 12 months due to the following events:

- Merger of Revenues and Benefits team (this is a long-term project which initially slowed down development of standards because of cross-training).

- Removal of Benefit periods and regulations that came with it

- Implementation of pension credits on 1 October 2003.

- Difficulty in recruiting people with the right aptitudes for these very important roles (however the section should be fully staffed by December 2004).

6.2 The Council has to submit regular data to DWP to report progress towards the standards. The up-to-date position is reproduced as Appendix 1. The First Secretary for Work and Pensions writes to the Leader of the Council, on a quarterly basis setting out Rochford's performance against the Best Value Performance Indicators and the national average. These are set out below for

the first quarter of 2004/05 (latest audited statistics). The recruitment of new staff and their bedding-in over the period, together with associated training, means that we have been unable to maintain both speed and accuracy.

Indicator	Last Year's Performance	Last Year's Quartile	First quarter performance
Average number of calendar days to process a new claim	39.55	3rd	58.33
Average number of calendar days to process a change of circumstances	13.19	3rd	44.30
Accuracy of processing	97.4	2nd	99.2
Percentage of new claims determined within 14 days of receipt of all information	67%	Bottom	37%
Percentage of new rent allowance claims where the first payment is made on time or within 14 days	78%	3rd	57%

7 THE WAY FORWARD

7.1 Identified weaknesses in the Strategic Management Module and other modules are set out on Appendix 2. These are areas of **most significant weakness**. Other areas exist, but these are generally contained in otherwise strong area. See "New claims - speed of processing" in Processing of Claims Module, for example.

7.2 Appendix 2 is supplemental to the overall action plan, which spans five years. It lists weaknesses, identifies actions required and suggests a timescale to meet the standards. The capacity to achieve improvements is limited within the Council's own resources and, like many other Councils, there will be a need to resort to employing external consultants. It is therefore proposed that the Committee make a bid for £25,000 in the 2005/6 budget process.

8 RISK IMPLICATIONS

8.1 **Operational and Information Risk**

The Council needs to ensure the effectiveness of its Operational Plan to deal with peaks and troughs of work and to ensure correct information is being used to calculate benefit entitlement.

8.2 **Reputation Risk**

Reputation damage could be sustained if the Council fail to score well in any future CPA review and are seen to be slow or inaccurate in processing claims

for those who number the poorest in our community. This was highlighted as a key area by the CPA inspection team.

9   RECOMMENDATION

9.1   It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES**:

(1)   To note the progress in meeting the Standards.

(2)   To endorse the identified weaknesses and the action required to meet standards.

(3)   To bid for £25,000 to be included in the 2005/06 Draft Budget for service improvement in the Strategic Management area and to improve Performance. (HRHM)

S J Clarkson

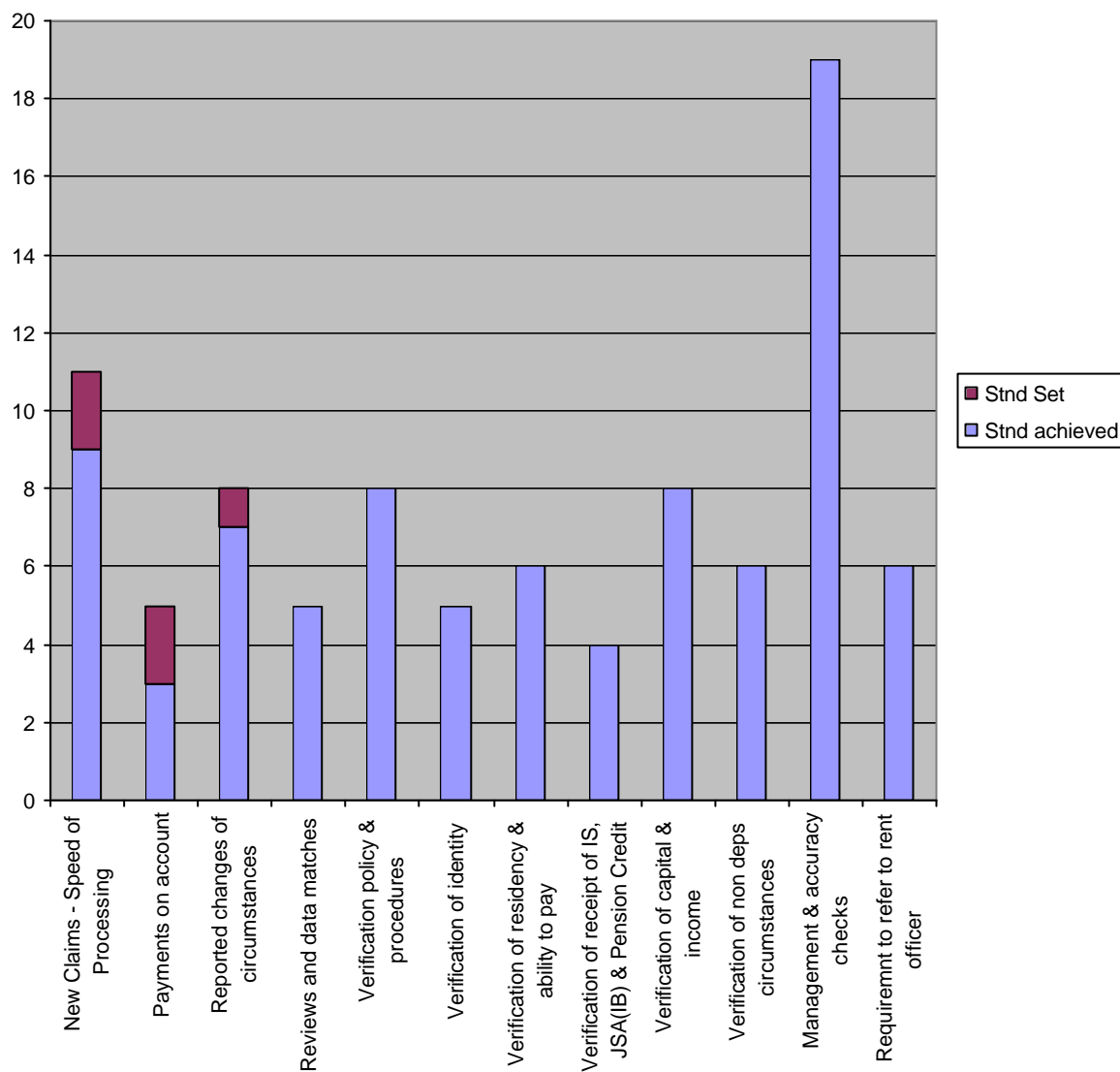Head of Revenue and Housing Management

Background Papers:

Housing Benefit Performance Standards (Amendment 2)
DWP letter 6 October 2003 (Audited Performance)

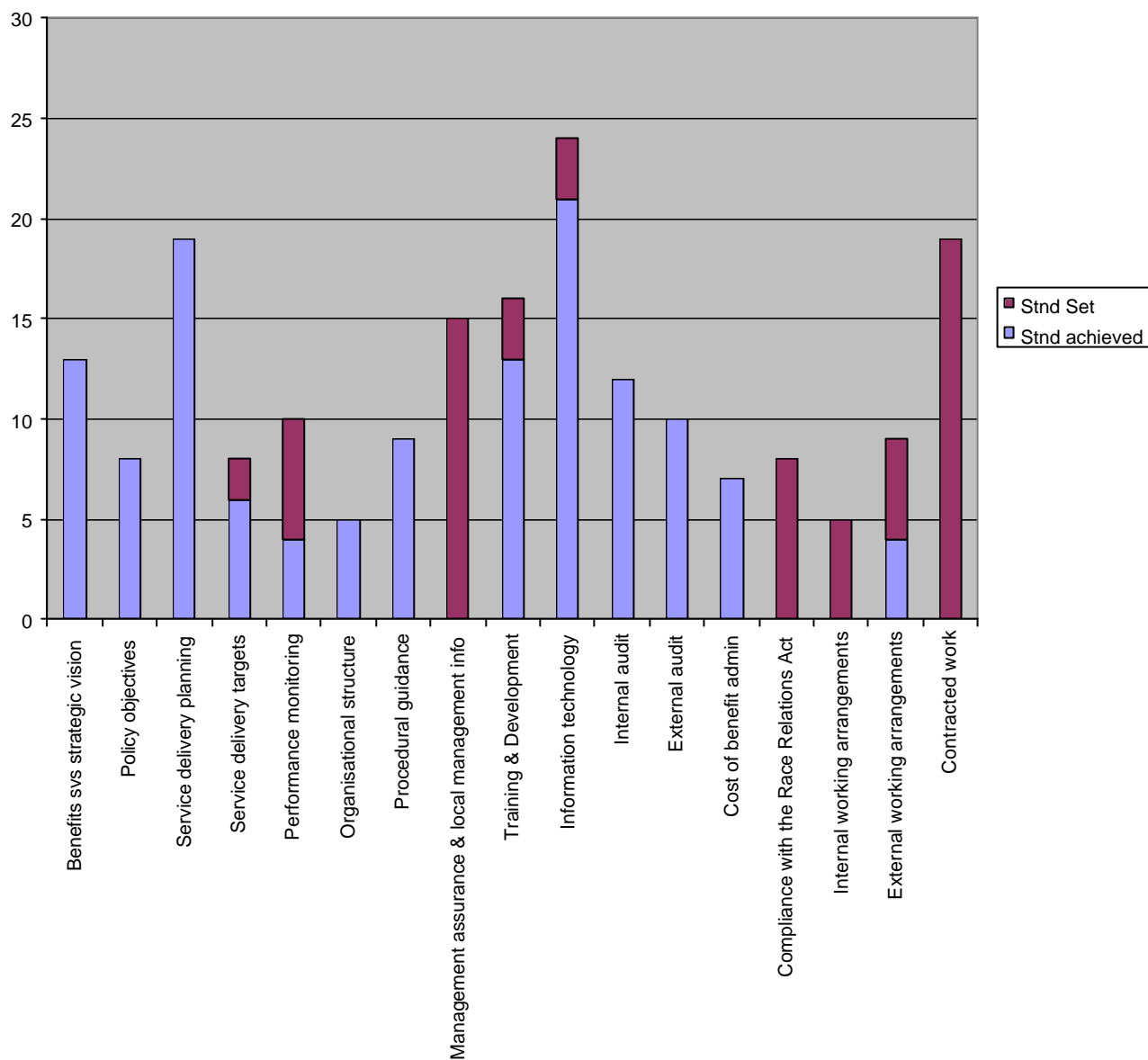For further information please contact Steve Clarkson on:-

Tel:-   01702 318005
E-Mail:-   steve.clarkson@rochford.gov.uk
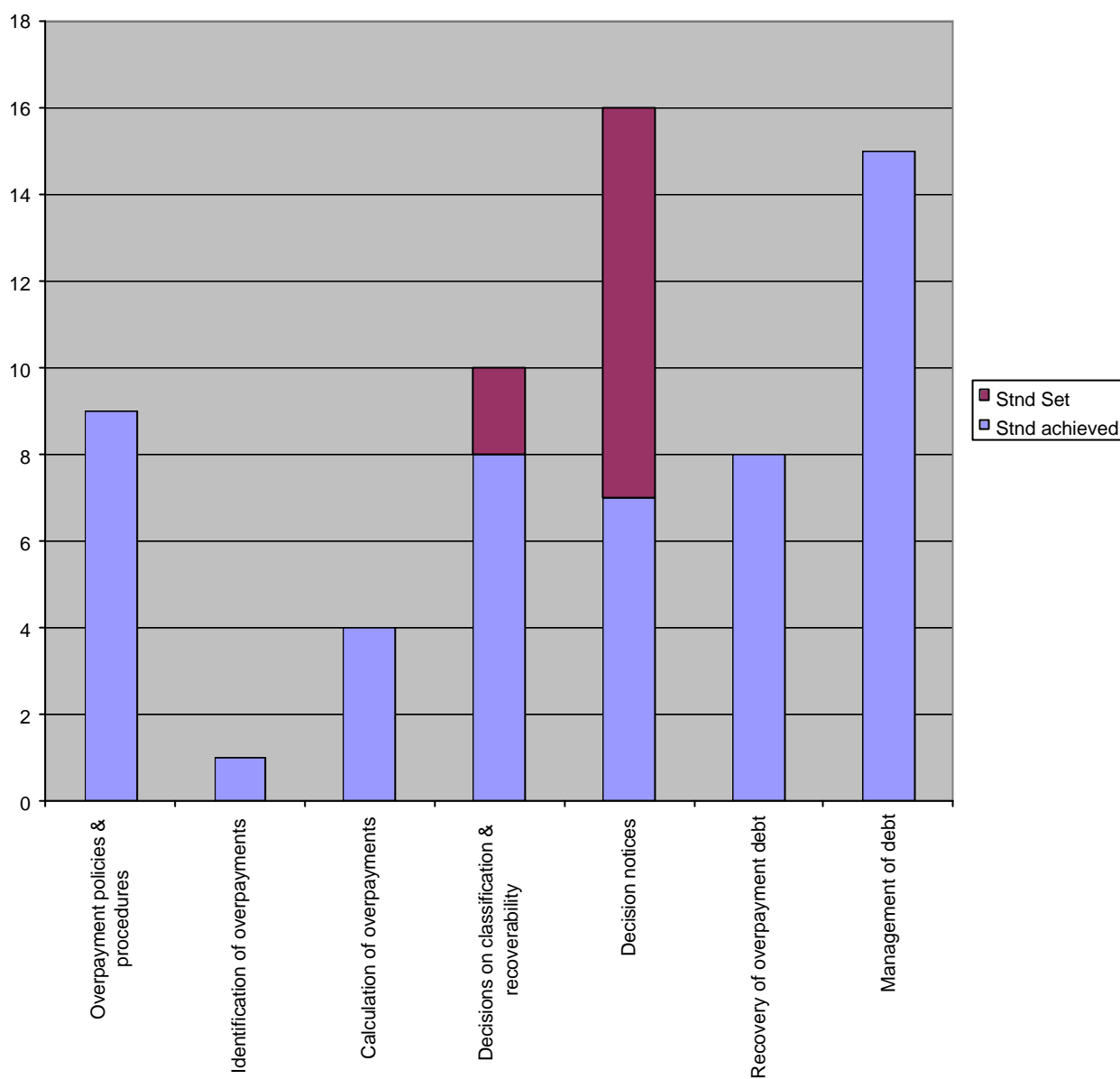
APPENDIX 1

Performance Standards - Processing Of Claims

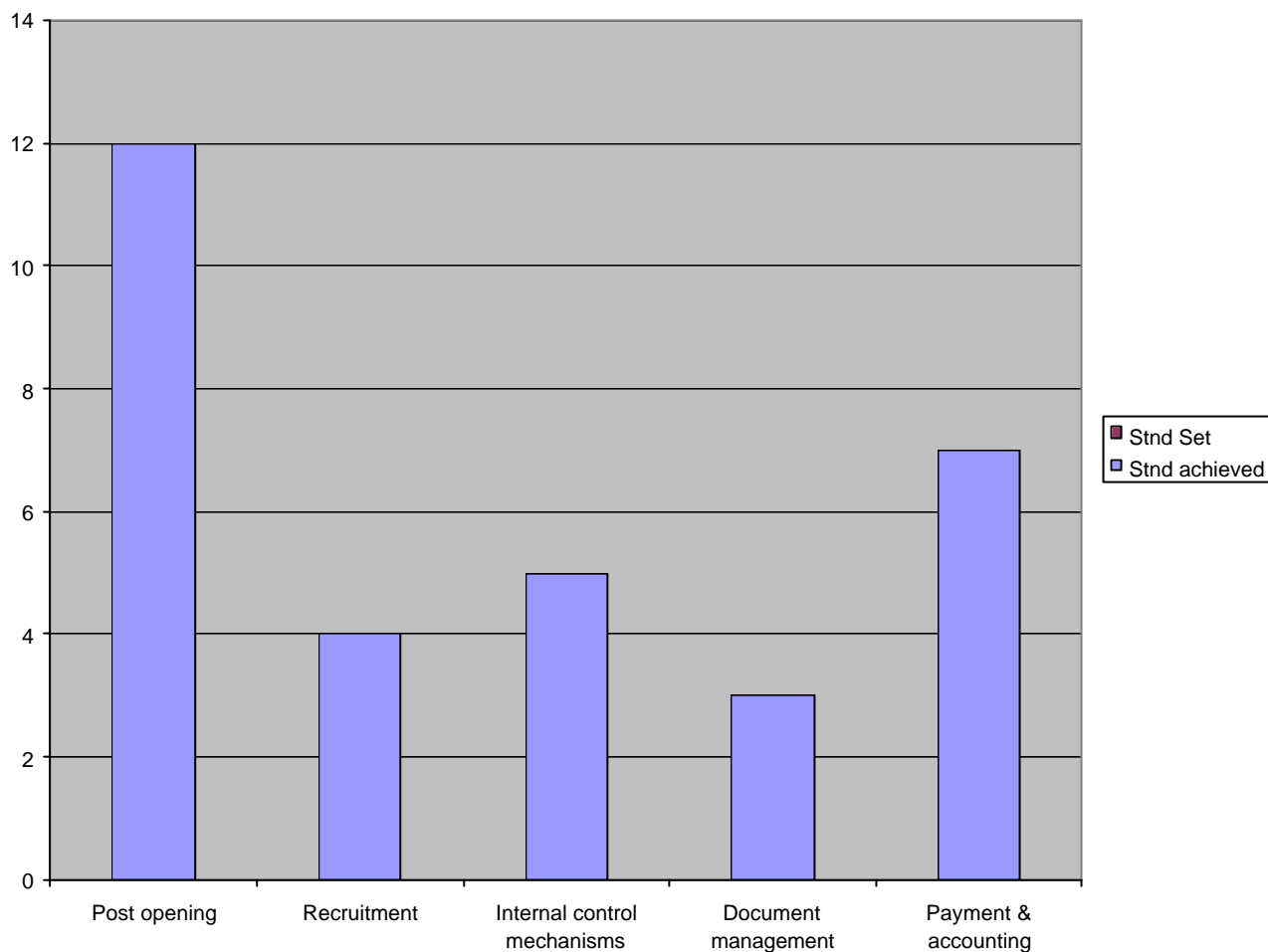**Performance Standards - Strategic Management**
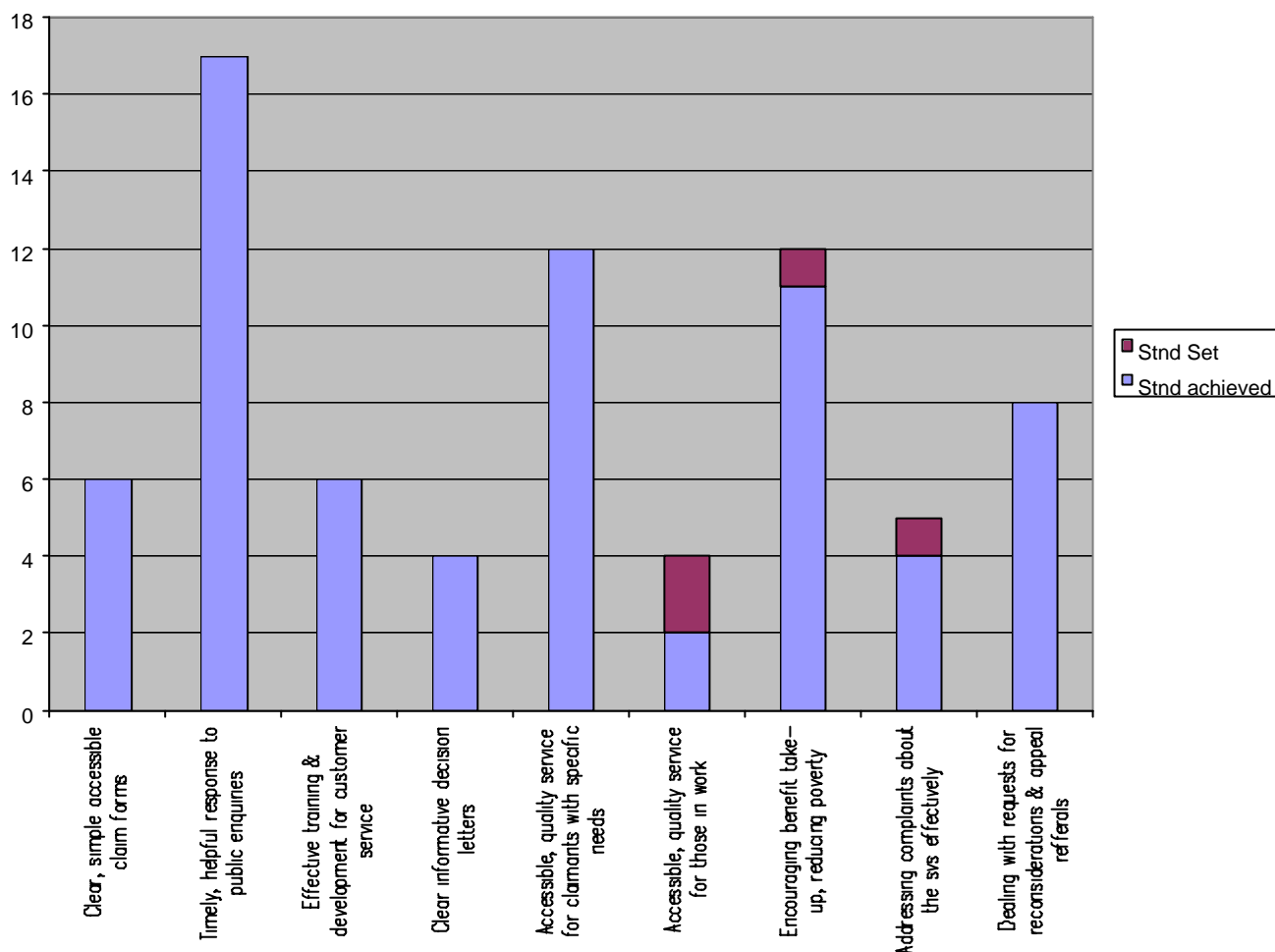
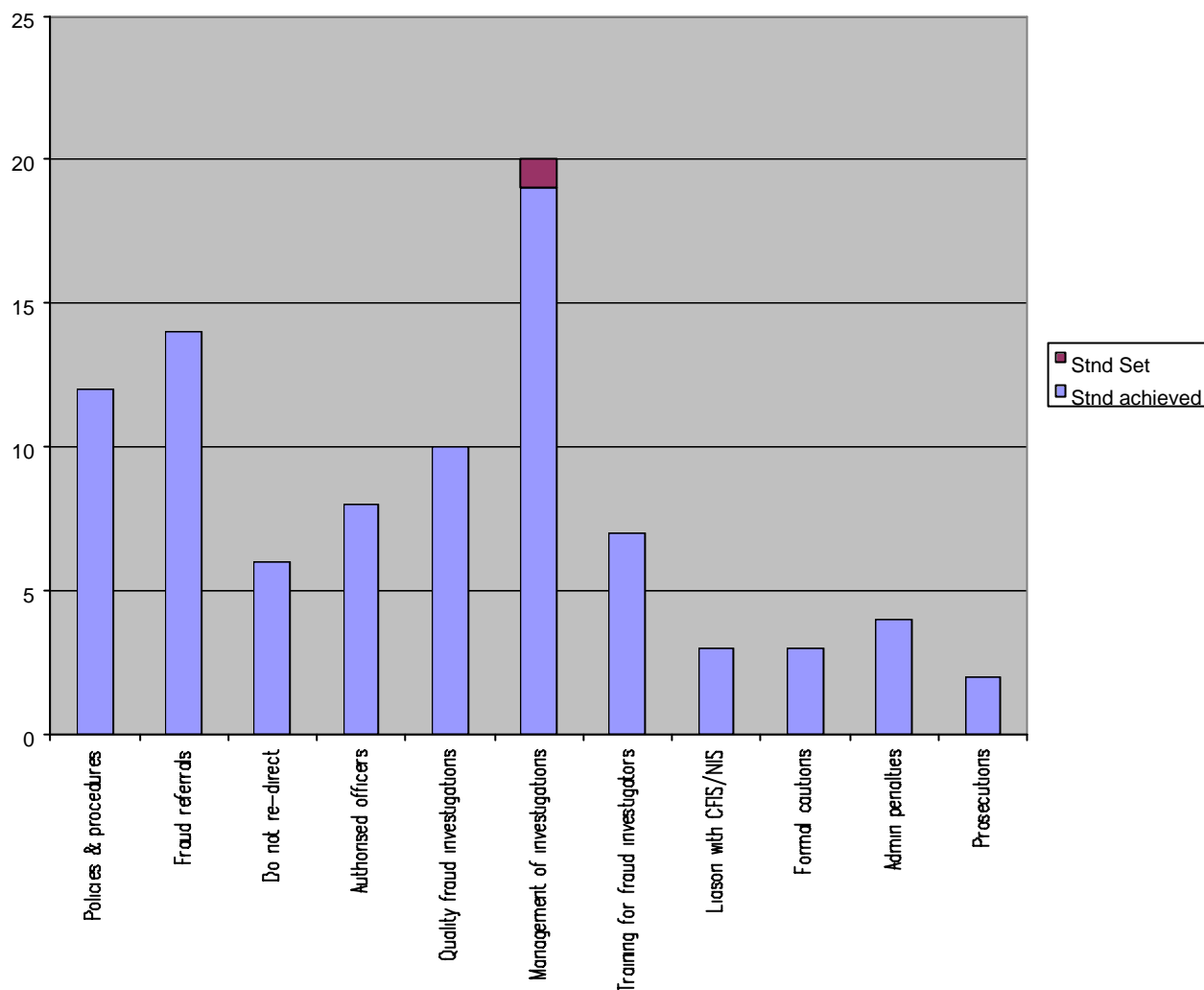**Performance Standards - Overpayments**

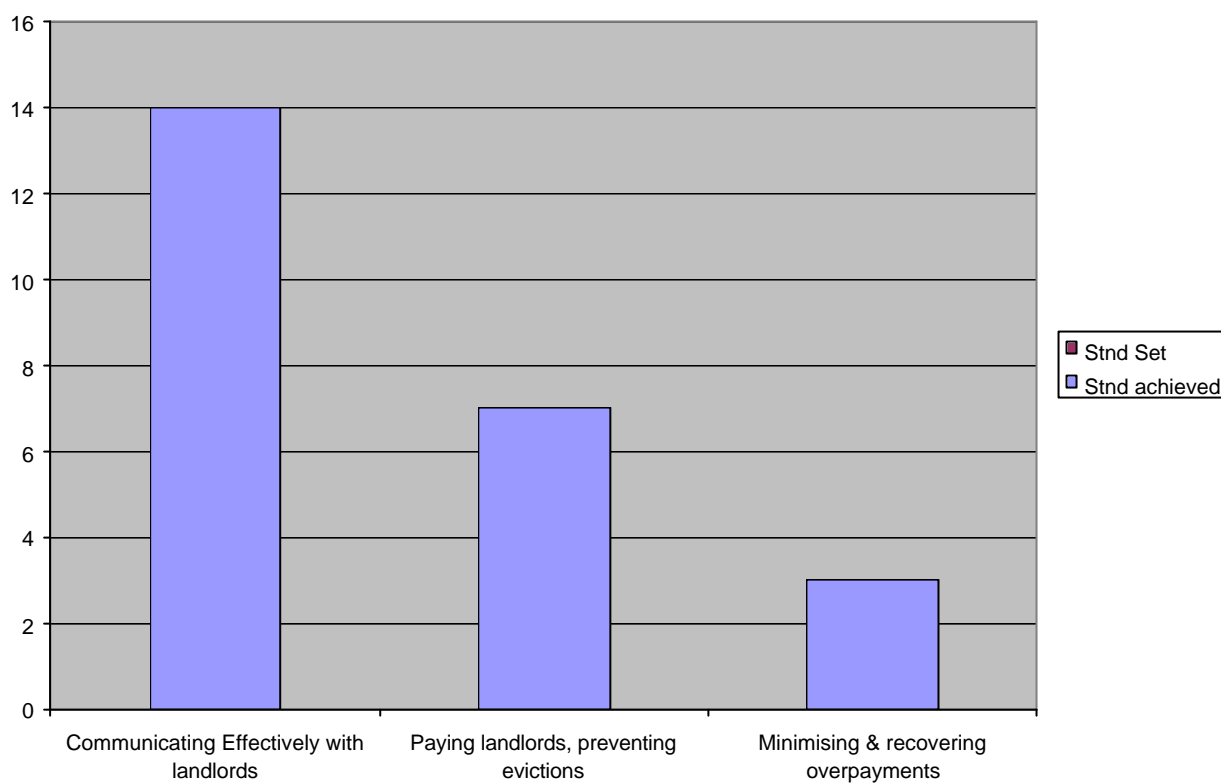**Performance Standards - Internal Security**

Performance Standards - Customer Services

Performance Standards - Counter Fraud

Performance Standards - Working With Landlords

<div align="right">**APPENDIX 2**</div>

IDENTIFIED WEAKNESSES IN STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT MODULE

	STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT	ACTION REQUIRED	COMMENT/TIMESCALE
2.31	***Service delivery targets*** Are the targets reflected in : a) The Benefits Service work programmes, and b) Individual work objectives	To be published on notice boards and PDR schemes PDR Scheme	December 2004 December 2004
2.37	***Performance monitoring*** Does the LA use the management information on performance to provide reports to members and interested third parties to underpin: a) The Benefit Service strategic vision statement? b) Policy objectives, and c) The documented delivery plans?	Revenue and Benefit team to work closely with Overview and Scrutiny Committee to endorse a raft of performance targets for the service.	There are problems associated with "interested third parties" as we do not have user groups. We could circulate performance information to RSLs and major landlords but we wonder what involvement this would generate. Once these documents, statements and plans are in place we could start to roll this standard out. (Nov 2004)

	STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT	ACTION REQUIRED	COMMENT/TIMESCALE
2.38	a) Are these reports provided at agreed intervals? b) Does the LA monitor performance against other service delivery targets included in the Performance Standards and/or set locally?	As 2.37 above	As 2.37 above However, at present, a good level of monitoring is undertaken through the QPR mechanism
2.39	Are managers aware of the ongoing levels of performance in their own areas of responsibility?	Through section head meetings and PDR's	August 2004
2.57	***Management assurance*** Does the LA use the internal HB and CTB management information system to inform decision making: a) Formally and in a structured way, for example as standing agenda items? b) In a timely way, for example with reports at pre-set intervals? c) To predict trends and patterns? d) To identify risks e) To establish low areas of take up f) To establish procedural weaknesses g) To adjust work priorities and/or resource allocations h) To monitor for any backlogs occurring and identifies steps to reduce them i) To assist continuous improvement in HB and CTB administration, and j) To identify the causes of deviations from plans and targets?	Monitoring arrangements to be clearly identified in Operational Plan.	

	STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT	ACTION REQUIRED	COMMENT/TIMESCALE
2.63	Does the LA draw on intelligence from other parts of the organisation to supplement the internal HB and CTB management information on risks to the business and trends?	Long term development of electronic links with other Council Departments	This will have to be explored as part of the future IEG Strategy
2.64	Have members, senior officers and managers determined their management information needs and do they review at regular intervals?	Will be looking corporately at a new Performance Management System as part of the overall CPA Improvement Plan	Audit and Process Review Manager progressing this initiative with new system planned to be fully operational by the start of 2006/7 budget setting process
2.69	***Training and development*** Does the training programme include a formal mechanism for evaluating the training provided?	Career grade matrix used for this purpose	Completed August 2004
2.70	If so, does the LA use this mechanism review and revise the training strategy and programme?	Incorporated as part of the PDR exercise	Bi-annual review

	STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT	ACTION REQUIRED	COMMENT/TIMESCALE

2.90	***Information Technology***
	
	Do documented IT fallback and recovery plans:
	
	   a) Exist for all aspects of the Benefit Service IT facilities?
	   b) Which are tested at regular intervals?
	   c) The test outcomes used to refine and improve the plans?
		This needs to be incorporated within the Corporate Contingency Planning process	Contingency Plan work in hand. To be finalised by July / August 2005

2.119	***Compliance with the Race Relations Act***
	
	Does the LA comply with the statutory obligations of the RR(A)A by:
	
	   a) Monitoring existing policies for impact on race equality?
	   b) Assessing and consulting on the impact of proposed policies on race equality, and
	   c) Publish results of assessments, consultation and monitoring of policies?
		This needs to be developed corporately. Some basic work done but this will be a key area of Corporate Policy Development over the next 12 months	Corporate Framework updated and monitoring regime to be in place by June 2005.

	STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT	ACTION REQUIRED	COMMENT/TIMESCALE
2.120	Does the LA have an RES:: a) Which is actively communicated to employees, and b) Which is supported by a timetabled, three year action plan?	See 2.119 above	See 2.119 above
2.121	Does the LA provide general training to all HB/CTB employees on their responsibilities within the RR(A)A?	Equality Training now in place as part of Corporate raining programme	
2.122	Does the LA provide cultural awareness for all employees aimed at promoting racial equality?	See 2.121 above	
2.123	Does the LA conduct an annual review of all facilities provided for claimants of key ethnic minority groups in the area?	This will be picked up under 2.119	
2.126	***Internal working arrangements*** Does the LA define the roles of those elsewhere in the organisation who are involved in any way with HB or CTB administration?	Overview and Scrutiny Committee Guidance and Involvement required to develop this area	Policies and Practices to be explored with new "Benefits Champion"
2.127	Does the LA specify the formal responsibilities of those elsewhere in the organisation who are involved in any way in HB or CTB administration?	See 2.126 above	December 2005
2.128	Does the LA specify the internal communications channels that are to be used between all these parties within the LA organisation?	See 2.126 above	December 2005
2.129	Does the LA monitor and regularly review the effectiveness of these arrangements for co-operation and liaison?	See 2.126 above	December 2005

	STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT	ACTION REQUIRED	COMMENT/TIMESCALE
2.130	If so, does the LA publish the results of the monitoring & reviews?	See 2.126 above	December 2005
2.133	***External Working Arrangements*** Does the LA have compliant SLA's or business partnership agreements with the following: d) Debt management	Processes now all under the Head of Revenue and Housing Management, so SLA unnecessary	Corporate Debt Policy agreed but practices and procedures behind this policy still to be developed March 2005
2.136	Has the LA formalised (ie documented and agreed its working relationships with other bodies when an SLA would not be appropriate? (if so please list)	Relationships to be established with external organisation by Project Officer and agreements to be made example landlords forum	March 2005
2.137	If so, does the LA monitor performance against these formalised agreements at least annually and take corrective action as indicated by this monitoring?		March 2005
2.138	Does the LA maintain regular documented contacts with other external organizations where formal agreements may not have been established?		March 2005

IDENTIFIED WEAKNESSES IN CUSTOMER SERVICES MODULE

	CUSTOMER SERVICES	ACTION REQUIRED	COMMENT TIMESCALE
3.34	***Accessible, quality service for claimants with specific needs*** Does the LA: b) have effective arrangements to secure an interpreter within three working days or access a telephone interpreting service, for customers who need an interpreter and cannot readily provide an adult interpreter themselves	Will be picked-up within the updating of the Council's Communications and Consultation Strategy	MARCH 2005

3.38	***Accessible quality service for those in work***
	
	Has the LA:
	
	  a) assessed the service needs of its in-work customers, including telephone enquiries and personal callers providing verification in support of their claim
	
	  b) provide a service that it considers meets these needs
		Survey of in work claimants needed	As a minimum the Council ought to undertake a survey to assess demand of out of hours contact. External Contractors are now able to provide a creditable service in this area.
			Question on this topic to be included in the next Housing Benefit Service Standards Survey.
			
			Looking at working in Partnership with other local authorities under CPA Improvement arrangements and Capita PLC to deal with calls outside of normal working hours including Saturday's. (March 2005)

IDENTIFIED WEAKNESSES IN PROCESSING OF CLAIMS MODULE

		PROCESSING OF CLAIMS	ACTION REQUIRED	COMMENT/TIMESCALE
4.1		***New claims – speed of processing*** a) Does the LA decide 90% of claims within 14 calendar days of receiving all information? b) Is the average time to complete the processing of claims 36 days or less?	New staff now in post and undergoing training	New staff expected to be fully productive by July 2005
4.8		***Payment on account*** Where a payment on account has been made using an indicative rent level does the LA make a full decision on the claim on receipt of a Rent Officer determination within two days of receipt?	As above	July 2005

	PROCESSING OF CLAIMS	**ACTION REQUIRED**	**COMMENT/TIMESCALE**
4.27	***Verification of identity*** Does the LA: a) comply with sections 1(1A) & 1(1B) SSAA 1992 for HB and CTB claims in all cases? Yes/No b) if the LA is using Secretary of State's assurance that Section 1(1A) and 1 (1B) has been satisfied for a Pension Credit claim or CMS claim, there is a clear audit trail including one of the following: CMS notification from Jobcentre Plus, AIF from the Pension Service, ETD notification of a Pension Credit award, or clerical notification relating to Pension Credit award from the Pension Service Yes/No c) show through its management and accuracy checks (see para 4.110) et seq) that it is satisfied that the customer is eligible to receive HB or CTB before making a decision or a claim?	Policies, practices and procedures to be developed for all these areas	Programmed to be completed by July 2005 when all staff should be fully trained.

IDENTIFIED WEAKNESSES IN OVERPAYMENTS MODULE

	OVERPAYMENTS	**ACTION REQUIRED**	**COMMENT/TIMESCALE**
8.13	***Decisions on classification and recoverability*** Does the LA record on all relevant clerical documents and electronic files: b) the reason for the overpayment? c) the decision on recoverability and exercise of discretion and the reasons for it?	Procedural notes on these issues being finalised	Completed in August 2004
8.15	***Decision notices*** Do decision notices comply fully with the requirements of Schedule 6 of the Housing Benefit (General) Regulations, and parallel CTB Regulations and include: a) the right to seek a full written statement of reasons? b) a revision of the decision?	Final stages of developing amendments to notifications	Completed in August 2004