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## **Introduction**

Housing and Council Tax Benefits (HB/CTB) are state welfare benefits administered by local authorities on behalf of central government through the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP). The national status of the benefits and the substantial level of central funding have led Government to develop procedures intended, as far as practicable, to achieve a common standard of service throughout the UK.

Local authorities are encouraged to adopt a modern performance management approach to administration of the benefits function. In part this is achieved through the regulatory regime, which places clear duties and responsibilities on councils, but the principal means of attaining national standardisation is through a set of centrally defined targets and measures. These targets, 'The Performance Standards', were first launched by DWP in 2002 and in creating a framework for HB/CTB they also provide a link to the overall performance of the authority through Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA).

There are nineteen (19) performance measures (PMs) and sixty-five (65) key enablers (Es). The Performance Measures are measurable outcomes on matters such as the speed and accuracy of processing, whereas the enablers are actions that an authority should take to achieve high performance, for example, by having the appropriate policies, resources, systems and procedures in place.

Authorities are required to compare their performance against the Performance Standards on a quarterly basis and to submit an annual self-assessment to the DWP. The closing date for shire districts to make their submissions for 2005 was set by DWP as 15<sup>th</sup> November 2005. Taken together the scores from the self-assessment process place authorities in one of the following 4 categories:

4	Excellent
3	Good
2	Meeting minimum requirements
1	Not meeting minimum requirements

### **Objective of the audit**

Any self-assessment procedure is inevitably open to question as to the accuracy and integrity of the information used to inform the process. The methods to be adopted and the evidence to be used in support are prescribed by the DWP in the Performance Standards Manual but this does leave open some question of interpretation. Rochford decided to make the exercise more robust and to provide a higher confidence level in the outcome by subjecting the November 2005 self-assessment to an independent audit by a freelance Benefits Consultant.

The terms of reference of the audit were to test Rochford's conclusions against the evidence supplied, test the validity of the evidence, and where any weaknesses were identified, to make recommendations.

### **Performance Standards**

The outcome reported for each of the 19 Performance Measures was tested against the management information supplied and calculated by the Academy Benefits IT systems. It is confirmed that the reported performance statistics are an accurate statement of the information provided by the system controls. The results are contained in the report of the Revenues and Benefits Manager on the 19 Performance Measures as submitted to DWP on 15<sup>th</sup> November 2005.

### **The Key Enablers**

The Enablers themselves are set out and are individually described in the Performance Standards Manual, together with the evidential requirements identified by DWP as necessary for an Enabler to be marked as being achieved and in place. Rochford is achieving a positive result in 51 of the 65 Enablers. Whilst this is above 75% and is sufficient to claim the 'Excellent' score assessment, it is only marginally within the top quartile range and does leave scope for further improvement.

The outcome for Rochford in respect of the individual Enablers is as follows:

ENABLERS	Evidence agreed
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### **Claims Processing**

E1	YES
E2	Confirmed - YES
E3	Confirmed - YES
E4	YES
E5	Confirmed - YES

E6	YES
E7	YES
E8	YES
E9	YES
E10	NO – Additional work needs to be done in order to apply information obtained from Quality Checks on a structured basis to improve performance and reduce error by management review of any procedural weaknesses identified and training.
E11	YES
E12	YES
E13	NO – Statement that this has been achieved since 1st October 2005 – but that would be too short a period to confirm that the enabler has been met over the assessment period. Additional work needs to be done to confirm that overpayments are accurately calculated within 14 days (on average) of the date that sufficient information is received. This may also require some consultation with the IT software supplier to ensure that the system can accurately provide reliable statistics.
E14	YES
E15	YES
E16	YES
<i>Section Result –</i>	<i>YES 14          NO 2</i>

## **Security**

E17	YES
E18	YES
E19	YES
E20	NO – Fraud awareness is applied to all staff directly employed within the Benefits Service, but is only – ‘available’ - to staff not under direct management control, of the Revenues and Benefits Section. Specifically, this concerns the customer services staff at Rayleigh. Compliance with the Performance Standards is an authority-wide responsibility and the commitment of the appropriate management within Rochford DC is required to ensure time and priority is given to wider staff awareness training.
E21	YES
E22	YES
E23	YES
E24	YES
E25	YES
E26	YES
E27	YES
E28	YES
E29	YES - The line manager was uncertain if this had been met, due in part to low level of activity, but in interview the information he supplied confirmed that the enabler was met.

E30	NO – A documented Fraud Policy has not yet been drafted and in order to comply, the policy must be developed and be given member approval. A time table for this is in hand with managers.
E31	YES
E32	YES
E33	YES
E34	NO – In discussion it was recognised that Rochford may be meeting this enabler but there was no evidence available to provide confirmation and some uncertainty of interpretation. Officers need to clarify the requirement and document the evidence.
E35	YES
E36	NO – Managers were unconvinced that this was a viable process. However, if that is the case the matter should be taken up with DWP to ensure that any uncertainties of interpretation are resolved. Ultimately this may also be a resources issue, but if so a clear policy and procedure approach needs be agreed.
E37	YES
<i>Section Result –</i>	<i>YES 17          NO 4</i>

#### **User Focus**

E38	YES
E39	YES
E40	YES
E41	NO – The quality of notification letters is regarded as below standard. Improvement is subject to work by IT software supplier. Rochford does not have resources to give individual attention to each notification but must rely on software solution. A group of User authorities is working with the IT software supplier on this issue but Rochford need to obtain an up-to-date progress report and to raise the matter at the User Group if necessary.
E42	NO – Individual monitoring of staff response times is not undertaken. The implementation of the Comino document management software in 2006 will provide the tools for this exercise to be undertaken.
E43	YES
E44	YES
E45	NO - The SLA is not yet in place with JobCentre Plus – this is targeted for January 2006.
E46	NO – This enabler cannot be met until the last SLA is in place (E45) after which a review of all SLAs should be undertaken.
E47	YES
E48	YES
E49	YES
<i>Section Result –</i>	<i>YES 8          NO 4</i>

## Resource Management

E50	YES
E51	YES
E52	NO – A disaster recovery plan is held by Vivista for the provision of emergency IT services and systems recovery but this needs to form part of an overall service recovery plan dealing with premises, staff, equipment and services. The plan is in managers' work schedules but has not yet been finalised. The final document should be available, electronically and in hard copy off site.
E53	YES
E54	YES
E55	YES
E56	YES
E57	NO – Value for money is very much a subjective assessment which requires levels of service and efficiency to be judged against costs. One approach which can give a valuable indication is for an authority to 'benchmark' its service against other authorities charged with providing the same level of service. Benefits is an ideal service for benchmarking due to the statutory nature of the service and the common service level objectives sought by the DWP. It is recommended that Rochford consider the following two options: (1) As members of the CIPFA Revenues Consortium, Rochford could consider participating in the benchmarking service provided through the consortium. However, there may be questions regarding the validity of the data supplied by other consortium members due to the different approaches to costing followed by different councils. (2) Rochford is developing partnership working with three neighbouring authorities. The establishment of a local Benefits Benchmarking Group would provide a valuable source of comparable statistics, provided the Group agrees a common approach to costing for benchmarking purposes through an initial discussion by accountancy representatives.
E58	YES
E59	NO – Rochford does not have any internal or external computer audit reports to confirm that the management information provided by the Academy system is fully accurate. Managers have no reasons to doubt the information and the Academy software is a widely used IT package for benefits administration but the lack of a computer audit prevents Rochford from marking a positive result on the Enabler as currently worded. It is recommended that this item be checked with DWP to see whether computer audit checks by other user authorities would be acceptable.
E60	YES
E61	YES
E62	YES
E63	NO – There is currently no sample case check on the performance measure statistics to validate the Management Information data

supplied to DWP each quarter. It is recommended that steps be taken to provide the evidence required for E63, ie., a list of checks and a completed check sheet.

E64 YES  
E65 YES

*Section Result – YES 12 NO 4*

**TOTAL ENABLERS RESULT: YES 51 NO 14**

### **Summary of Recommendations**

- E10 – Additional work needs to be done in order to apply information obtained from Quality Checks on a structured basis to improve performance and reduce error by management review of any procedural weaknesses identified and training.
- E13 - Statement that this has been achieved since 1st October 2005 – but that would be too short a period to confirm that the enabler has been met over the assessment period. Additional work needs to be done to confirm that overpayments are accurately calculated within 14 days (on average) of the date that sufficient information is received. This may also require some consultation with the IT software supplier to ensure that the system can accurately provide reliable statistics.
- E20 – Fraud awareness is applied to all staff directly employed within the Benefits Service, but is only – ‘available’ - to staff not under direct management control, of the Revenues and Benefits Section. Specifically, this concerns the customer services staff at Rayleigh. Compliance with the Performance Standards is an authority-wide responsibility and the commitment of the appropriate management within Rochford DC is required to ensure time and priority is given to wider staff awareness training.
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- E63 – There is currently no sample case check on the performance measure statistics to validate the Management Information data supplied to DWP each quarter. It is recommended that steps be taken to provide the evidence required for E63, ie., a list of checks and a completed check sheet.

### **Audited Outcome and compliance statement**

The audit verified the data reported by Rochford for the 19 Performance Measures which are confirmed to be a true and accurate report of the information contained in the Council's records.

A small reduction in the number of positive statements on the 65 Enablers was agreed by managers and were incorporated in the submission.

The overall result was that the audit-supported submission of the Self-Assessment for 2005 shows Rochford to be at Level 4 (Excellent) in relation to the Performance Measures and with a weighted Enablers score of 81.14% which, being above 75%, is also at Level 4. This gives an overall classification of 'Excellent'.

Weight enabler score :-	81.14%
Performance Measures Score	4
Enabler Score	4
Overall Score	4
Rating :-	Excellent

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