

Castle Morpeth Borough Authority

Benefit Service: Summary of current performance

Overall, we found that Castle Morpeth Council's HB and CTB service is providing a **Poor** performance. Castle Morpeth Council's current performance demonstrates a number of strengths. These include:

- all 215 recommendations from the earlier BFI report have been given a priority rating and an implementation action plan has been produced
- the backlogs of new claims and overpayment cases have been cleared
- management checks are now being undertaken
- it has a claim form that meets the standards of the BFI model
- a new customer caller centre is due to open in December 2003
- revised complaints procedures have been introduced
- overpayment recovery work has recommenced
- the council has made successful bids to the Help Fund and the Performance Standard Fund
- a mailshot has been sent to customers about the new Tax Credit system
- the Benefits service has signed up to working with the BFI's Performance Improvement Action Team in the areas of Processing of claims and Overpayments.

However there are some areas where Castle Morpeth Council needs to develop further to more fully meet the BFI and the Department's Performance Standards framework. These include:

- policies and strategies covering all aspects of HB and CTB administration are not in place
- overpayment and anti-poverty policies and strategies are not in place
- the vision statement still requires amendment and updating
- performance targets do not meet those set out in the Performance Standards
- the average time to process new claims, based on year-to-date performance monitoring, has deteriorated significantly, despite having cleared the backlog of cases
- there are no targets or monitoring for customer waiting times, written enquiries or telephone performance
- the claim form is not available in Braille, large print or audio tape
- risk assessments are not carried out

- the “fit and proper person” procedures are not fully in place
- there are security weaknesses in the post opening procedures
- there is no central register of staff declarations of interest
- there is no specific strategy for the prevention, deterrence and detection of fraud
- the fraud case management system is not being used to its full capacity
- all possible overpayment recovery methods are not being used
- much of the existing procedural guidance is out of date
- overpayments are not analysed by the level and age of outstanding debt
- there is no target for the recovery of inactive debt.

While the average time to assess claims, based on year-to-date statistics, has deteriorated, performance on a monthly basis has shown a marked improvement since the clearance of the backlog. The council told us that the initial deterioration resulted from a number of factors, including:

- the new IT system had not previously been taken through year-end processing and while it was successfully completed, some inevitable down time caused delays in benefit processing
- restructuring was a necessary step to take but did lead to some disruption in the short term due to the reduction in management and supervisory posts to allow for growth in processing capability
- undertaking a comprehensive training programme for Benefits staff, causing short term disruption for a longer term gain
- clearing the backlog resulted in a large number of claims with long delays being cleared in the second quarter of the year.

How BFI’s current performance assessment informs the Audit Commission’s overall assessment is described [here](#).