

Castle Point Borough Council

Benefit Service: Summary of current performance

Overall, we found that Castle Point Borough Council's HB and CTB service is providing a **Poor** performance. Castle Point Borough Council's performance shows a number of strengths. These included:

- a service plan that linked to corporate targets
- weekly monitoring of its caseload and processing times by the Benefits Manager
- monthly reporting of performance to the Head of Revenue Services and quarterly to elected Members
- full compliance with the Department for Work and Pensions' (the Department) Verification Framework since August 2000
- regular refresher training for all staff on verification of documents used for processing and calculating benefits
- up-to-date policies and procedures
- notification letters sent to landlords and claimants at the same time
- a 5-year rolling Internal Audit work programme which was endorsed by elected Members
- comprehensive and secure procedures for post opening
- vetting procedures for prospective new staff that met the Audit Commission's recommendations
- experienced and trained counter-fraud staff
- an Overpayments Team that prioritised fraudulent overpayments.

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

- endorsement of the Benefits service's policies by elected Members
- developing an IT security policy for the Benefits service
- introducing procedures for monitoring the number of:
 - personal callers to the benefits office and the time taken to be seen
 - telephone calls and the time taken to answer them
- increasing office opening times to a minimum of 36 hours per week, Monday to Friday
- developing a strategy to encourage the take-up of benefits

- improving performance to top quartile performance for processing claims and changes of circumstances
- introducing management checks that meet the Audit Commission's recommendation of 10% of all claims processed
- developing closer liaison with its landlords
- introducing the use of the Royal Mail's Do Not Redirect envelopes for all benefits mail
- monitoring performance against targets for its counter-fraud activity and reflecting these as part of individual key work objectives for staff. The council's performance in this area was poor. Its failure to administer only one sanction between April 2001 and January 2004 is particularly disappointing
- implementing a risk-based approach for sifting referrals
- providing regular feedback to all staff following their referrals
- introducing working practices that reduce the number of overpayments caused by delays in processing claims
- introducing effective monitoring of the level and age of debt.

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