

**TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL**  
**FINANCE, INNOVATION and PROPERTY ADVISORY BOARD**

**14 May 2014**

**Report of the Director of Finance and Transformation**

**Part 1- Public**

**Matters for Information**

**1 BENEFITS UPDATE**

**A report advising Members of current issues arising in the benefits field**

**1.1 Performance and Workload of the Benefits Service**

1.1.1 At the previous Board meeting I advised Members of the continuous improvement in the number of days taken to assess new benefit claims and I am pleased to be able to report that the trend is ongoing. Most recent performance indicators show an average of 28.5 days to process a new benefit claim and 7.5 days to process a change in circumstances.

1.1.2 These figures are particularly encouraging as they cover one of the busiest periods of the year and set the Service in good stead for the oncoming financial year. Current workload is high, as expected for the time of year.

1.1.3 The 2013/14 annual performance saw new benefit claims taking on average 37.8 days and change in circumstances, 8.7 days to process. The Council paid out £34.5m in housing benefit in 2013/14.

1.1.4 The number of households claiming housing benefit and / or council tax reduction has reduced slightly over the past year, about 30 less homes compared to that of 6 months prior. The number of households with 'in-work' claims has risen by about 70 over the same period, indicating a trend of movement from 'out of work' to 'in work'.

**1.2 Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)**

1.2.1 The fund of £129,610 for 2013/14 was used in full to help households, mainly to support those suffering financial loss through welfare reforms. The Service received 578 applications for DHP, of which, 400 awards were made.

1.2.2 Our Government grant for DHP for 2014/15 has risen to £165,494.

### **1.3 Welfare Reforms**

1.3.1 There has been no further significant news on the testing and roll-out of Universal Credit. Plans remain for national implementation to start during 2016.

1.3.2 The benefit cap, introduced in July 2013, which restricts non-working households to a maximum of £500 total 'benefit' income remains unchanged in its application. Since introduction, 30 households in the Borough have been restricted by the cap. There are currently 18 cases with housing benefit restrictions ranging from £2.06 to £241.22 per week.

1.3.3 The social sector size criteria restriction or spare room subsidy, commonly known as bedroom tax, continues to bite with 582 households affected in the Borough. Overall, this reform has caused a reduction in housing benefit payments of around £600,000 in the last year. This has been the most common reason for application and award of DHP. The Service works alongside our Housing Service and other organisations to find longer term solutions to shortfalls in income created by this cut. However, the majority of those households affected have not made applications for DHP and through conversation with social landlords across the Borough, the level of rent arrears has by no means proportionately increased. That said, a great deal of effort and resource is dedicated by all those concerned to manage this reform in preventing rent arrears and homelessness as far as possible.

### **1.4 Legal Implications**

1.4.1 None

### **1.5 Financial and Value for Money Considerations**

1.5.1 None

### **1.6 Risk Assessment**

1.6.1 No risk identified

Background papers:

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Nil

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