1. Introduction and Background

1.1 At the beginning of 2011 there was concern raised by Members regarding delays in processing of benefit claims.

1.2 The benefits service had recognised these delays and were inputting a new process, to be known as ‘Benefits Direct’ whereby customers would be seen by a benefit officer at the One Stop Shops and have their benefit award processed in one visit.

1.3 PAASC reviewed this new process and undertook a site visit to view the service.

1.4 PAASC noted that they were pleased with the progress that had been made and
the new Benefits Direct service. They made six recommendations to further improve the service for customers.

2. Proposal and Issues

2.1 The recommendations are detailed below:

- A “hotline” telephone number should be created and circulated to all elected members and relevant third sector groups
- An officer working group should be established to take ownership of benefit claims
- The language used in correspondence about benefit claims is improved, where legislation allows
- The “Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Charter” should be given to all customers at the outset of their benefits claim and specifically referred to in other correspondence
- The Living & Working Select Committee (LWSC) considers multiple occupancy as a potential scrutiny review topic in 2012/13
- The Instant Claims Processing service offered in the One Stop Shops is protected from cuts in future rounds of budget savings

2.2 Below are the responses to these recommendations

3. Service Improvements

3.1 The Housing Benefit Service have a hotline number in place illustrated below in Appendix A. This number has been circulated to all Councillors.

3.2 The assessment team, who are part of the Housing Benefit Service have ownership of benefit claims, directed by the Benefits Management Team (BMT). Our established customer facing team (Benefits Direct) assess all new claims and changes brought in by customers to the One Stop Shops.

3.3 A key project to improve presentation and simplicity of all Housing Benefit letters is underway with completion due at the end of the year. The revised letter will seek to ensure clear and simple messages are conveyed to the customer, with more complicated information required by legislation moved to the end of the letter.

3.4 The Benefits Charter is available to all customers in the Barking Learning Centre and the Dagenham Library One Stop Shop. Assistance is provided to customers to help them access their accounts on the web, in line with the Council’s channel shift strategy.
3.5 Information on Multiple Occupancy is held and is available to be reviewed if requested by LWSC.

3.6 In the current climate, it is difficult to safeguard any specific service against cuts. Comprehensive reviews and Impact Assessments will be completed when services are faced with any cuts.

4. Consultation
None.

5. Financial Implications
None.

6. Legal Implications
None.

7. Risk Management
No risks identified.

8. Contractual Issues
No contractual issues identified.

9. Staffing Issues
No staffing issues identified.

10. Customer Impact
Customers benefit from direct contact with the Housing Benefit Service and experienced benefit officers via the Benefits Direct service.

11. Safeguarding Children
No safeguarding children issues identified.

12. Health Issues
No health issues identified.

13. Crime and Disorder Issues
No crime and disorder issues identified.

14. Property / Asset Issues
No property/asset issues identified.

Background Papers Used in the Preparation of the Report:
None.

List of appendices:

Appendix A – Hotline number
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