

Report by: Borough Solicitor

Consulted: FCS, BS

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SCRUTINY COMMISSIONS: REPORT ON HOUSING BENEFITS SERVICE

PURPOSE

To submit the report of the Scrutiny Commission investigating the performance of the Council's Housing Benefits service which is being provided by an external contractor - Capita Business Services since December 1997.

OPTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the Committee approves the attached report of its Commission on the 'Performance of the Housing Benefits service'
2. That the Committee refers the report to Council via Cabinet and Policy Committee for further endorsement so that implementation actions can be undertaken on the detailed action plan.
3. That a report on progress be submitted to SC in six months' time.
4. That protocols are established for contractor involvement in the operations of the Scrutiny process to ensure completeness.
5. That the Committee acknowledge with thanks the assistance and co-operation it received from the officers concerned in Finance and Corporate Services directorate and external parties.

FOR DECISION

1. CONTEXT

- 1.1 The Council at its meeting of 26 May 1999 approved a new decision-making structure for the Council, including the establishment of a Scrutiny Committee. The Terms of Reference for the Committee include:

"To monitor, question and investigate the performance of the Council and its services, identifying any shortfalls in achievement; by calling for relevant persons and papers and undertaking in depth taskforce investigations; and to make appropriate recommendations to policy Committee or Council.

To nominate chairs, agreed terms of reference and monitor the performance of up to five scrutiny task forces investigating any service area, policy, performance or

other issue affecting residence of the Borough ensuring that members of all parties have a fair and reasonable opportunity to lead these detailed investigations. All nominations and terms of reference for scrutiny task forces to be subjected to unanimous agreement of all members of the committee."

- 1.2 SC meeting on 23.06.99 approved the establishment of a Commission to investigate the performance of the Housing Benefits Service'. SC meeting on 14.07.99 approved a revised Terms of Reference with an indicative Work programme for the Commission.

2. JUSTIFICATION

- 2.1. The Commission held an initial meeting to agree its terms of reference and a firm Work Programme (WP) with officers from the directorate concerned - Finance and Corporate Services. The Commission experienced difficulties initially in getting the contractor Capita to participate in its hearings and they agreed eventually to attend a session in private, which was held on 26th October 1999. However, they declined an invitation to attend a Public Hearing session on 6th November 1999. As a result, protocols are needed for contractor involvement in the Scrutiny process.
- 2.2. The Commission thirteen themed sessions including a Public Hearing to receive submissions from officers and external individuals and parties.
- 2.3. A draft report was prepared and agreed by Commission Members and then circulated to the officers concerned in FCS. Officers then forwarded the draft report to Capita who in turn provided a response to them. The response was discussed with the Co-ordinating Team and the report was amended to reflect certain facts, as appropriate and passed to the Chair of the Commission for clearance.
- 2.4. As can be seen from the attached report, the key messages emerging from the Commission's investigations were that -
- 1) Capita's performance in delivering the Council's housing benefits service is poor, both compared to other neighbouring London boroughs, and their own performance elsewhere where they are contracted to deliver the same service.
 - 2) There was overwhelming evidence from stakeholders to demonstrate the poor performance.
 - 3) At the same time, it was acknowledged that Capita's predecessor, the In-house Service, was worse and many London boroughs that have outsourced their HB service are currently experiencing similar problems. As a result, cessation of the contract with Capita was not considered as an immediate option.
 - 4) However, there were concerns that Capita's performance was allowed to get into such a poor state and, also, the powers of enforcement available in the contract were not used effectively by Lambeth.
 - 5) Capita's promises could not be relied on and the way forward is to set firm targets in failing areas such as missing files, complaints, customer care, treatment of the vulnerable, for Capita to improve the service over the next 12 months, as per Section 5 of the Commission's report. These targets must be monitored closely internally and accompanying external pressures built up through the formation of a Capita Users Group. If these targets are themselves not met, then action needs to be taken on the contract with Capita.
 - 6) The Corporate Anti-Fraud Team (CAFT) needs to consider issues around vulnerability when undertaking its visiting programme, based on the feedback given to the Commission by several agencies involved with vulnerable claimants.

2.5. A detailed action plan has been prepared and is shown in Section 5 of the attached report and requires Cabinet's and Council's endorsement to ensure its implementation.

2.6. Officer and Capita Initial Response to the Commission's Report

"We welcome the report and the focus of attention on the Benefits Service. We are determined to ensure that the service is improved as rapidly as possible. We are pleased to inform Members that action has already been taken to address 14 of the 17 recommendations contained in the report. Officers and Capita will be pleased to meet with members to explain these actions and initiatives and to discuss further action required to address the remainder of the recommendations."

3. STAFFING ISSUES

3.1 None specific

4. LEGAL POWERS AND ADVICE

4.1 None specific

5. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

5.1 None specific

6. AUDIT TRAIL

Committee Deadline	23.12.99				
Author	M Khan				
Date Drafted	11.01.2000				
CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS					
Name	Directorate	Sent	Received	Cleared	Received
G.Curran	Legal	06.01.00	06.01.00	06.01.00	06.01.00
M Crich	FCS	10.01.00	10.01.00	10.01.00	10.01.00
Date sent to Committee Secretariat					11.01.00
Date received by Committee Secretariat					11.01.00
Date Sent To Councillors					11.01.99

LONDON BOROUGH OF LAMBETH**SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**Final Report**SCRUTINY COMMISSION INVESTIGATION OF HOUSING BENEFITS SERVICE, JULY TO DECEMBER, 1999****Key message(s)**

Based on the evidence received and considered by Members of the Commission, it is our view that Capita's performance in delivering the Council's housing benefits service is poor both compared to other neighbouring London boroughs, and their own performance elsewhere where they are contracted to deliver the same service.

At the same time, we acknowledge that Capita's predecessor, the In-house Service, was worse and many London boroughs that have outsourced their HB service are currently experiencing similar problems. As a result, we do not feel that cessation of the contract with Capita is an immediate option.

However, we are concerned that Capita's performance was allowed to get into such a poor state and, also, the powers of enforcement available in the contract were not used effectively. We feel that we cannot rely on Capita's promises and the way forward is to set firm targets in failing areas such as missing files, complaints, customer care, treatment of the vulnerable, for Capita to improve the service over the next 12 months, please see our Action Plan in section 5. These targets must be monitored closely internally and accompanying external pressures built up through the formation of a Capita Users Group. If these targets are themselves not met, then action needs to be taken on the contract with Capita.

Finally, we would like the Council's Corporate Anti-Fraud Team (CAFT) to consider issues around vulnerability when undertaking its visiting programme because of the feedback given to the Commission by several agencies involved with vulnerable claimants.

Commission Members: Cllr John Whelan, Conservative Party Group, Chair
Cllr Keith Fitchett, Lib-Dem, Member
Cllr Esther Green, Labour Party Group, Member
Cllr Simon Stevens, Labour Party Group, Member
Mr David Green, Lambeth Tenants Association, Co-opted Member

Directorate Officers : Ann Biddle, H/Corporate Commissioning, Finance & Corporate Services
Peter Davies, Deputy Director of Finance

Co-ordinating Team : Mohamed Khan and Richard Blackmore

This report was compiled by Members of the Commission and is addressed to the executive administration of the Council. It seeks to focus attention on the shortfalls in performance and policy that members of all parties were elected to address and is based on evidence collated from invited officers and external consultant(s) during its sessions.

LBL/SC/Dec 99

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1. **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1. The annual meeting of Council in May 1999 created a Scrutiny Committee (SC), in line with the new decision making structures for local government separating the executive and scrutiny roles of elected councillors. The SC's activities will be driven by its scrutiny commissions charged with "investigating any service area, policy, performance or other issue affecting residents of the borough".
- 1.2. The Committee at its first meeting held on 23.06.99 agreed to establish a Commission chaired by Cllr J Whelan, Conservative Party Group, to investigate the performance of the Council's Housing Benefits service.
- 1.3. The HB service is statutory and responsible for the provision of Housing and Council Tax benefits, on a means tested basis, to eligible members of the public resident within the borough - in particular, the poor, disadvantaged and vulnerable members of society. It is estimated that about 40% of the borough's residents are claiming some form of benefit.
- 1.4. The service was contracted out to Capita Business Services (Capita) for a period of seven years commencing December 1997. The Council's clientside for this contract are Corporate Commissioning and the Determination officers.
- 1.5. The HB service was chosen for a scrutiny investigation because of Members' concerns about its failings as evidenced by their growing mailbags, complaints at their surgeries and own experiences.
- 1.6. An earlier detailed review by external consultants (Austin Mayhead) was instigated by the new administration to review the service after 6 months. Conclusions generated an action plan in October 1998 for improvement of the service, in particular meeting statutory and contractual targets for processing benefit claims.
- 1.7. The Commission met on eleven occasions and received evidence including missing files, customer care, turnaround of new applications/renewals, staff attitude.
- 1.8. Capita was invited to participate in the Commission's hearings but declined the invitation on the grounds that it will not meet with Councillors within their formal structure, in line with Board policy. They were prepared to discuss individual cases with Councillors and address any issues raised by the Commission in writing. Leading Members and top management then intervened to change Capita's stance and they agreed to attend a session in private, which was held on 26th October 1999. However, they declined to attend a Public Hearing on 6th November 1999.
- 1.9. The following areas were covered in the sessions held by the Commission through written submissions and/or presentations on behalf the stakeholders:

Process Mapping Proposals of Capita's internal operations at Lambeth

Lambeth Tenants Association

4. MORI survey results on HB service

3. Interface with the Court system

5. Complaints system

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------|
| 6. District Audit | 7. North Lambeth Law Centre |
| 8. Cabinet Secretary and Deputy with responsibility for the HB service | |
| 9. Visits to other Local Authorities - Lewisham and Brighton & Hove | |
| 10. Metropolitan Housing Association | 11. Advice Sector |
| 13 Ombudsman cases | 12. Welfare Rights |
| 15. Performance statistics | 14 Client side monitoring |
| 17. Public Hearing | 16. Contractor |
| 19. Lambeth Homes | 18. Pensioners Liaison Group |
| 21. Executive Director, Finance & Corporate Services | 20. Blackfriars Advice Centre |

1.10. Approach

- 1) The Members of the Commission met with the Co-ordinating Team and relevant officers from the Directorate of Finance and Corporate Services (FCS) to discuss their concerns on the performance of the HB service and agree terms of reference and approach. Further meetings [13] were held at which officers and external individuals/groups provided written and oral submissions. Two of these sessions were devoted to the contractor and a Public Hearing respectively.
- 2) **A DRAFT REPORT WAS PREPARED AND AGREED BY COMMISSION MEMBERS AND THEN CIRCULATED TO THE OFFICERS CONCERNED IN FCS. OFFICERS THEN FORWARDED THE DRAFT REPORT TO CAPITA WHO IN TURN PROVIDED A RESPONSE TO THEM. THE RESPONSE WAS DISCUSSED WITH THE CO-ORDINATING TEAM AND THE REPORT WAS AMENDED TO REFLECT CERTAIN FACTS, AS APPROPRIATE AND PASSED TO THE CHAIR OF THE COMMISSION FOR CLEARANCE.**
- 3) In the event of officer and Capita's comments not being accepted by the Commission, they have been told that they can submit a paper separately to the Scrutiny Committee meeting which would be considering the Commission's report.

1.11. Acknowledgements

- 1) The Commission Members would like to thank the relevant officers and external agencies and individuals for their co-operation and assistance during the Commission's deliberations.
- 2) It must be stated that the Lambeth's clientside - the Corporate Commissioning Unit, the Executive Director of FCS and Deputy Director of Finance supported the work of this Commission in a big way

2. CONTRACTOR PERFORMANCE: Targets, Actual Levels, Comparisons

2.1. Targets and Sanctions

- 1) One of the measures used to monitor Capita's performance is currently in terms of the turnaround time from receipt of all of the information required to assess a claim.
- 2) Capita's current performance does not meet either the contract standard or its own action plan target.
- 3) Capita is expected to assess 70% of all new and renewal HB claims within 14 days, as per Joint Action Plan following the Austin Mayhead report, alluded to in paragraph 1.6 above. The target was set at this level in recognition of Capita's inheritance.
- 4) The Council's powers of enforcement are contained in conditions 3.7, 11 and 13 of the contract. The agreed contract sanctions process is based on a penalty points procedure for non-compliance, issuing Default Notices and calculating Default Notice Points. To date, only two Default Warning Notices have been issued and, according to the EDFCS, it is a major concern that this was not done earlier in the contract. We have been assured that the client side now have procedures in place to enforce the sanctions contained in the contract.
- 5) The current contract is structured so that full payment is reached only when the bonus targets are reached. However, all bonus arrangements are in relation to income collection with the HB part on a fixed fee basis. At present and two years on, these targets are not being met and, therefore, Capita is not receiving full payment.

2.2. According to official government performance indicators

- 1) The official government performance indicators, as per table below, show a small improvement in the performance of the HB service between 1997/8 and 1998/9 and between 1998/99 and the current year (as at October):

Turnaround Time for Processing

Indicator	1996/7 [all In-house]	1997/8 [4 mts for Capita]	1998/9 [all Capita}	1999/2000 [Annualised as at Oct 99]
New council tax benefit claims processed within 14 days	46.80%	25.69%	27.24%	32.25%
New rent rebate claims for HB from	46.50%	29.33%	33.80%	33.51%

local authority tenants processed within 14 days				
New rent allowance claims paid within 14 days	34.10%	29.05%	39.30%	45.63%
Rent allowance renewal claims paid on time	N/A	43.20%	59.05%	58.26%
Total number of claimants	44,674	31,398	36,200	N/A
Cost per claimant	£134.53	£100.58	£127.21	N/A

2.3. Comparison with neighbouring boroughs

We have used neighbouring boroughs here for comparison. However, it is acknowledged that these not belong to the same family based on the deprivation indices - Tower Hamlets, Hackney and Islington.

Turnaround Time for Processing, 1998/99 year

Indicator	Lam-beth	Croy-don	South-wark*	Wands-worth	West-minster+	Bexley+	Brom-ley+
New rent rebate claims for HB from local authority tenants processed within 14 days	34%	84%	23%	72%	88%	17%	77%
New rent allowance claims paid within 14 days	39%	84%	3%	46%	90%	45%	78%
Rent allowance renewal claims paid on time	59%		23%	64%	92%	42%	79%
Total number of claimants	36,200	30,000	39,002	27,878	26,245	15,856	19,437
Cost per claimant	£127.21	£98.49	£124.51	£111.90	£317.55	£56.07	£115.54

Source: Citizen's Charter Performance Indicators

* Southwark: outsourced service plus adoption of verification framework (requires higher standards of evidence/documentation)

+ Where Capita is the outsourced contractor

2.4. Capita's achievement elsewhere

HB claims processed within 14 days

Council where Capita is the contractor	1997/98 Audited	Current in month of Oct 99
Bexley	69.2%	84%
Bromley	82.0%	80%

Lambeth	29.0%	55%
Westminster	84.0%	92%
East Cambs	99.6%	98%

Source: Capita's own figures submitted to meeting with the Commission

2.4.1. The above Table shows that Capita's turnaround time is much better elsewhere.

2.5. Visits to other boroughs:

The two boroughs visited by the Commission – Lewisham and Brighton & Hove - were achieving 90% of cases being processed within 14 days. The visits were undertaken to these two boroughs because their size and social composition were similar to Lambeth.

2.6. Other indicators of a poor service at Lambeth

- 1) Lambeth County Court: It is the Court's experience that a considerable number of cases involving repossession – as much as 25% - have to be adjourned because defendants raise issues concerning outstanding claims at the hearing. The costs to the Borough of such adjournments are quite considerable and, additionally, a waste of judicial resources.
- 2) Pre-court checks: 5,000 cases taken to court. Recently about 20% of cases have had a problem at court stage from a Legal Services perspectives

Update: On 10/12/99 Judge Cox of Lambeth County Court announced that he was adjourning all rent arrears actions until 15/01/00. The Judge indicated that he would not deal with any rent arrears court cases unless the existing pre-court checks were changed into legally binding statements of truth. Senior management are discussing with Capita its willingness to sign statements of truth for all pre-court checks.

- 3) Complaints: Complaint levels are about 400 per month – there does not appear to be any falling off. CAPITA is taking on average 36 days to deal with complaints and is thus failing to process complaints within ten days, although other similar councils that have been used as benchmarks are able to. Outstanding work has been reduced from 610 to 535 during October and there is a backlog of some 200 items, the earliest of which dates from January 1999.

Members believe that complaints are high because Capita management has not identified this area as a priority; discrepancy between the 2 databases used; how complaints are handled - triangular relationship between client/contractor/complainant is confusing; the way Capita handles Stage 1 complaints - no logging system in place.

- 4) Local Government Ombudsman: The volume of complaints referred to the LGO is "worrying" - the highest amongst LA s in England, of which a high proportion is justified. Since July 1997, 13 reports issued on 21 complaints proving "maladministration causing injustice" – see written submission, dated 22/09/99

Last year 296 complaints were recorded from Lambeth to the Ombudsman, compared to an average number of formal complaints in London of about 23.

The Council has paid £60,706 in settlement of cases brought by the Ombudsman between 01.01.98-11.11.99. Capita paid all of the 1999/00 cases amounting to £13,956 and most of the 98/99 cases amounting to £35,895.

5) Advice Sector: Housing and Council Tax benefit queries have increased by 164% in the last 12 months and currently reflect 30% of their work with a knock on impact on their ability to meet demand in other areas.

[The only positive development relates to District Audit's certification of the subsidy claim. The quality of 1997/98 grant claim is of the highest standard and best supported in recent history. A large random sample (400 cases) was used to audit claim and the results were indicative of high quality benefit accuracy. *However, this was achieved because Lambeth officers on the client side took the lead.*]

3. Public Hearing, 6/11/99 at Lambeth Town Hall

- 3.1. Attended by about 50 residents who shared their experiences of Capita
- 3.2. Capita declined an invitation to attend. However Lambeth Officers on the clientside were present and provided the answers.
- 3.3. The main points raised were:
 - Procedures used by Capita & Corporate Anti-Fraud Team (Caft-Lambeth) need to be adapted to reduce stress among elderly - a recurrent theme.
 - Concern about CAFT visits and actions taken when claimants are not in - assumption that these people are fraudulent
 - Language line for non English speakers - issue around who pay for it - Housing or Capita
 - Delays in processing due manual paper system
 - Aware of problems at Olive Morris House (where is Capita is located in Lambeth) - long time spent in queues, staff attitude, repeated requests for information.
 - HB forms do not tell public about their rights Suggestion: Forms should state that claims will be processed within 14 days -see recommendations
 - Cowley Estate managers raised issues around cases for assessment where overpayment (local authority error) is being deducted at one go
 - Motion proposes and passed "That this meeting has no confidence in the HB services provided by Capita"
 - Suggestion: visit other boroughs to see how they manage their systems - 2 such boroughs were visited by the Commission
 - Suggestion: adopt a pro-active approach to fraud prevention by telling the public what is required - see recommendations
 - Have a Liaison Person for each large landlord
 - Promote better liaison with Department of Social Security and Employment Agencies
 - Have clear rules about claiming
 - Suggestion: financial penalty to Capita - pay interest on sums owed to landlords and cover costs of eviction
 - Automatic and failsafe receipt systems
 - Wrong forms are sometimes sent out to public
 - Adopt alphabetic demarcation of cases so that responsible staff can be contacted directly
 - Capita staff not giving their names to callers
 - Housing Officers are doing the job for Capita
 - Poorly written contract with Capita
 - Suggestion: on bills introduce " How you can calculate your HB"

4. CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1. We found unacceptable the less than full participation in the Commission by the contractor. Contractors being paid by the Council to perform work on its behalf must not be allowed to behave in this way. The work of future Commissions will be severely restricted if this continues and raises questions about the implementation of the Commission's recommended actions.
- 4.2. With regard to the Housing Benefits service at Lambeth provided by Capita, there was overwhelming evidence to show that they have provided a poor service to eligible residents in Lambeth. As a result, a large proportion of Lambeth residents - about 40 per cent of whom claim some form of benefits - are affected by this poor service.
- 4.3. The HB service at Lambeth provided by Capita was deficient in many respects - in particular, missing files, complaints, customer care, treatment of the vulnerable - and we are not convinced about the promises made by Capita. We found its performance was inconsistent and that improvements in one aspect of service delivery appear to be at the expense of another.
- 4.4. We found that Capita's poor performance levels at Lambeth were unacceptable when compared with similar London boroughs or those boroughs where Capita is the housing benefits contractor e.g. Westminster, Bexley and Bromley.
- 4.5. We are concerned that the HB service provided by Capita was allowed to get in such a poor state although Members were advised two years ago that it would be beneficial to externalise the service. Moreover, it would appear that a complacent attitude has been taken in ensuring that the contractor met its statutory and contractual targets. Indeed, it is a matter of great concern that there are no financial penalties within the contract for agreed under performance/non-delivery.
- 4.6. We are concerned about the appropriateness and effectiveness of the monitoring & controlling carried out as evidenced by the very limited use of the sanctions available in the contract. As a result, redress through the Courts if necessary may not be an option.
- 4.7. We note the measures being taken by the Executive Director of Finance and Corporate Services in the last month to address the deficiencies in three areas - mislaid files, complaints and customer care - but feel that these would be effective

only if the specific tasks are identified and the contractor is set definitive timescales for achievement.

- 4.8. However, it was apparent that the remedial action to date has involved simply setting and perhaps, meeting targets rather than the contractor using these targets to address systematic failings and thus provide meaningful information to the client.
- 4.9. We have identified a number of emerging issues and have placed these in an Action Plan for executive Administration to progress further with officers and Capita.

5. RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Emerging Issue	Recommended Actions	Priority	Timeframe
5.1. General	1) We feel that the credibility of the scrutiny process is at stake if the actions recommended by the Commission are not translated into firm actions to improve Capita's performance over the next 12 months. The HB service impacts on a large part of Lambeth residents e.g. 58% of public sector tenancies.	Very High	Over next 12 months and by Dec 2000
5.2. Penalties on poor performance levels under current contract	2) The powers of enforcement contained within the existing contract as per conditions 3.7, 11 and 13 must be considered in order to push Capita to perform. 3) In recognition of the fact that the contract with Capita is weak in financial penalties for poor performance, we recommend that firm targets for performance must be set for Capita over the next 12 months and failure to meet these must be the basis for a re-negotiation and payment by results. 4) We would like to see the emphasis being on benefits delivery and no backlog.	Very High Very High Very High	Immediate Dec 2000 with staged reviews every 3 months up to Dec 2000 Over next 12 months
5.3. Pressures on Capita to improve performance	5) We would like to see an immediate acceleration of pressures on Capita and are recommending a Capita Users Group composed of organisations where Capita is providing their HB service. The Group would - <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share information on performance • Issue counter reports to other Councils where Capita is bidding • Inform financial analysts in the City 	High	Created by April 2000
5.4. Recent action by senior officers of Finance & Corporate Services - Lambeth officers leading on 3 failing areas	6) Whilst we welcome these initiatives and a wider role for the clientside beyond monitoring and controlling, these actions must be based on firm targets which redress known failings in Capita's internal processes on a sustainable basis.	Very High	Immediate

5.5. Use of sanctions against claimants	<p>7) We would like to see Capita 'getting the basics right' as the priority so as to avoid having to apply sanctions against claimants through -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving effective communication between Capita, the Housing Officers and Legal Services. This would ensure that possession cases are issued with up to date HB situation being known to Legal Services. • Considering vulnerability, ability to pay etc in the Council's use of Bailiffs to collect • appreciating issues around vulnerability when CAFT (Council's investigators) is undertaking its visits 	<p>Very High</p> <p>High</p> <p>High</p>	<p>Immediate</p> <p>Over next 12 months</p> <p>Immediate</p>
5.6. Capita's internal operations processes at Lambeth	8) We are not satisfied with the effectiveness of Capita's internal operations and support officers' attempts to get Capita to undertake a professional process mapping project on benefits delivery. This will highlight blockages or bottlenecks, process elements that are no longer required, duplication or repetition.	High	Over next 12 months
5.7. Capita's Academy conversion	9) We would like to see a close monitoring of this changeover to ensure that our requirements are met and there is a smooth and timely return to normalcy.	Very High	By Feb/March 2000
5.8. Implementing Document Image Processing which will address the 'paperchase' endemic with the current process.	10) The Administration must ensure that there is a firm commitment by Capita to implement DIP - from initial scanning of post through to case assessment - following the Academy conversion.	High	In place by Oct 2000
5.9. Customer care - getting the basics right	<p>11) The Administration must ensure that there are high standards of customer care covering -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical environment at Olive Morris House must be welcoming • Effective response to inquiries • Effective linking of documents to files • Logging of all calls from claimants and the nature of the 	Very High	Over next 12 months

	discussion		
5.10. Complaints system and turnaround	<p>12) The Administration must ensure that the complaints system is improved dramatically covering -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting turnaround time of 14 days • Resolving problem with how complaints are handled • Clarifying triangular relationship between client / contractor/claimant • Using the same system • Resolving discrepancies on the number of outstanding complaints. • Training for Councillors and other stakeholders around a checklist (which has been prepared already) as one of the means of reducing the number of complaints 	Very High	Over next 6 months
5.11. Pre-court checks on court action for rent arrears cases - 20% of recent cases	<p>13) The whole process of pre-court checks must be reviewed covering -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-statement of Council policy • Recent requirement from a Lambeth County Court Judge that pre-court checks be changed into legally binding statements • Capita's compliance • Interaction between Capita, Housing, Legal and the Court. 	Very High	Immediate
5.12. Impact on Housing Associations - poor HB performance	<p>14) We support the Housing Associations' assertion that the high level of rent arrears is mostly due to a poor HB performance and their demands for -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Claims processing to statutory timescales • Effective co-operation between stakeholders • High standards of customer care • Appreciation of vulnerability issues by CAFT 	High	Over next 12 months
5.13. Lambeth County Court - a considerable number of cases involving repossession – as much as 25% - have to be adjourned because Defendants raise issues concerning outstanding claims at the hearing. The costs to the Borough of	<p>15) We support the following recommendations received from the Lambeth County Court -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All HB applications should be brought to the immediate attention of the Neighbourhood offices as soon as they are received. In turn, the NHO should be responsible for notifying 	High	Over next 6 months

<p>such adjournments are quite considerable and, additionally, a waste of judicial resources.</p>	<p>this to the attention of Legal Services if possession proceedings are or are about to be commenced.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All computer systems currently used by Capita, NHO s and Legal Services should be able to interface with each other. • All Housing Officers should have some training in identifying those tenants who may qualify for HB. At the very least, those officers should be able to advise tenants of the existence of HB and how to apply. • All Housing Officers should ensure that tenants are given a “plain English” explanatory leaflet on the HB system, in particular when they are being granted a first tenancy and are vulnerable because they are often of ethnic origin, some do not have a good command of the English language and unemployed. • Vulnerable tenants should be told of the Advice Bureau and Advice Centres that are in a position to advise them in regard to HB matters as well as how to contact their Councillor. 		
<p>5.13. Local Government Ombudsman - Defects still remain in the administration of HB</p>	<p>16) We urge the Administration to ensure following defects identified by the Ombudsman are remedied :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Failure to determine HB complaints within 14 days of receiving all the required information • Asking complainants to provide information which has been provided already, so causing unnecessary delay as well as avoidable time and trouble for claimants • Failure to provide adequate or accurate answers to claimants' questions • Inadequacies in dealing with complaints made direct to the Council 	High	Over next 6 months
<p>5.14. Fairness & Equality Issues</p>	<p>17) During the course of our sessions with stakeholders the following suggestions were received which we would like clientside officers</p>	High	Over next 12 months

	<p>and Capita to assess with a view of adopting -</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A Team Liaison/trouble shooter is required in each assessment team area within Capita with the authority action cases and authorise payment, to liaise with HB/CTB, neighbourhood Housing Officers, CT billing, bailiffs and advisers 2. An effective liaison should be set up between Benefits Agency, Capita and key workers in the borough including welfare benefit and debt specialists 3. An accountable system should be developed for all claims processing, tracking documents, inviting renewal claims, issuing reminders notice of end of benefits and so on. 4. Fast track processing for those identified as most vulnerable - disabled, elderly, etc 5. Scanner system for copying documents at time of receipt on to computer so evidence logged immediately. 6. Decentralise access points to include NHO s where claim forms and supporting documents, where evidence can be submitted and logged on the system for both benefit, rent account and Council Tax purposes. Ensure that officers dealing with these are trained to assess benefit entitlement and liability to pay and can therefore advise client as to benefit due and what they have to pay. This will prevent arrears accruing on the accounts due to client being unaware of entitlement and liability pending HB/CTB departments' benefit assessment and payment. 7. Compile database of vulnerable people ie sheltered housing schemes (council, housing associations and church run); Social Services' data on those with disabilities, families at risk; etc 8. Share this information within the constraints of the Data Protection Act 1998 9. Claim date logged at time of renewal or claim form request giving 28 days for return with all supporting documents, accepting claimants' valid reasons for any delay in the returning claims within the good cause rules. 10. Claims sent out encouraging clients to reclaim HB/CTB (under change of circumstances) when Capita notified by DSS of Income Support/Job Seekers Allowance refused or ceased. 11. Visiting Officers to assist with submitting claims and evidence particularly important as a service to the vulnerable people 12. Staff must be trained in basic welfare rights 13. Comprehensive review of Appeal Section's performance 14. Council to set maximum bailiffs fees for attendance with vehicle 		
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	<p>and other fees where legislation states reasonable fees.</p> <p>15. Legal requirements must be applied, eg, Determination notices that comply with Sch 6 HB regs, especially regarding overpaid benefit; Reg 72 applies re date of claim upon receipt of notification (NHB1) from DSS of IS/JSA benefit paid</p> <p>[Council officers have indicated that the last two - #14 & 15 - are being complied with already]</p>		
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