

CONTRACT REVIEW PERFORMANCE PACK REVENUES & BENEFITS

Service Performance Summary

2018 – 2021 has been a challenging period in Revenues and Benefits, ultimately including the Coronavirus Pandemic for the final year in its entirety. This summary will highlight LBB's view on key successes within this period and also serve to highlight issues arising from the journey to support continuous improvement.

In 2018 Capita launched an online portal for customers to access their Housing Benefit and Council Tax records. This included a suite of forms enabling customers to self-serve, for example allowing residents to advise of any changes to their circumstances or apply for a single person discount. Whilst the portal itself is a positive move on the service improvement journey, this was somewhat overshadowed by the dissatisfaction caused by the premature closure of the Council Tax email account (subsequently reinstated).

In addition to the online portal, Capita also began the process of introducing Council Tax electronic billing (E-Billing), enabling residents to receive their Council Tax bill electronically, replacing the postal method if this was the resident's preferred method. Whilst this process took longer to implement than LBB had envisaged (3 years), E-Billing went live in February 2021 and is a real positive change for Barnet residents. Volume of take-up continues to increase, and the introduction of E-Billing appears to have had a positive impact on the number of residents now paying their Council Tax by Direct Debit.

Service Performance Summary contd.

Capita launched a smarter pre-recovery campaign using Tel-Solutions. This service replaced the SMS reminders with a 3-pronged approach, text, e-mail and phone. The software would learn which method worked for individual residents to allow for the most effective future communication and had a positive impact by reducing the number of residents reaching the latter stages of the recovery process.

The Benefits service undertook a full-service rollout of Universal Credit in May 2018 followed by the Verification of Earnings and Pension (VEP) and Right Time Indicator (WURTI) service implementation in June 2018.

Capita implemented partial Universal Credit automation in December 2020. This enabled faster processing of the high volumes of Universal Credit notifications. The level of automation is not where LBB envisaged by this point, however, working groups are ongoing to improve the level of automation to support Barnet's move to a banded Council Tax Support Scheme. It is anticipated that this work will be completed by the end of 2021.

Service Performance Summary contd.

March 2020 saw the arrival of the Coronavirus pandemic and the introduction of multiple government initiatives and schemes to support businesses and residents nationally. This resulted in a significant increase in work for Local Authorities and their partners.

The introduction of Business Support Grants, Test and Trace (T&T) Self-Isolation Payments, and the Council Tax Support (CTS) Hardship Scheme had a significant impact on Revenues and Benefits. £3.8m was awarded in CTS Hardship, and at the time of writing this report, £111m has been distributed to Barnet businesses in the form of Business Support Grants. Over £750k T&T payments have been distributed to Barnet residents on a low income forced to self-isolate due to Coronavirus.

The work involved led to the team being nominated for a Covid Heroes award whilst winning a Values award for the collaborative approach to delivering support to Barnet businesses and residents.

Over recent months, there has been a joint working group involving the council, Customer Services and the Council Tax service, focussing on improving the processes for handling more complex resident enquiries.

Key Figures 2018-2021

	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Management Fee (as per Financial Model 2013)	3,277,867	3,231,606	3,191,883
Indexation	196,929	260,005	319,725
Change Request	1,053,651	1,063,649	1,085,389
Total	4,528,447	4,555,260	4,596,997
Gainshare payments	457,035	721,563	395,961
Special Projects	0	307,696	0

There is no GI target within Revs and Bens, but there is a 98.5% target for 4 year council tax collections.

The basis of gainshare payments varies between 20% and 50% of the surplus over agreed targets being paid to Capita. The gainshare payments cover any additional costs incurred by Capita in exceeding the targets.

Service Journey (Including Achievements) 2018 – March 2021

The Benefits service undertook a full-service rollout of Universal Credit in May 2018 followed by the Verification of Earnings and Pension (VEP) and Right Time Indicator (WURTI – wider use of Real Time Information) service implementation in June 2018. As customers transferred or became entitled to Universal Credit, up to date information received from DWP enabled accurate updates to relevant cases with changes to income quickly. The move to automation meant that customer cases are re-calculated with little intervention from the assessment team and without having to ask the customers for further information.

In 2018 the service also launched the online portal for customers to access their Council Tax and Housing Benefit records online, together with a suite of forms enabling customers to self-serve. The forms offer a range of updates including making a claim for Council Tax Support or Housing Benefit, advising of a move or application for a single person discount. The implementation of the on-line form capability resulted in improved customer services and between a 5%-10% reduction in repeat contact, allowing back-office staff to deal with more vulnerable residents. However, due to the pandemic in the last calendar year, this trend was reversed.

Service Journey (Including Achievements) 2018 – March 2021 contd.

Challenges and Issues

The online forms available for customer use across the Revenues and Benefits service are designed by our core system developers, Civica, and therefore restrictions apply for personalised adaptation of the forms. The forms are generic in their set up and the Service has limited opportunities to customise the documentation which may benefit our customer demographics. i.e. simplify forms for an older population and disabled customers.

A further challenge is supporting those customers who are unable or unwilling to use digital channels. Whilst encouragement to try digital services is at the forefront of the digital transformation project, alternative contact channels may need to remain open.

Initially when a customer completed an online form, a generic reference number was generated and given to the claimant, which did not represent a claim or council tax reference within OpenRevenues. This resulted in problems for customers when trying to submit further evidence or contact the service against a number that did not exist within OpenRevenues. The issue was resolved with improved integration links between the online forms and the OpenRevenues system.

Service Journey (Including Achievements) 2018 – March 2021 contd.

Poor website layout, wording and jargon left customers unsure of what steps to take and what action is required from them. An example of this was when Universal Credit was introduced by the Department for Work and Pensions. Despite the best efforts of the Service, there was a high volume of claims still coming through for Housing Benefit, rather than Universal Credit. This no longer occurs as the online form has been improved to direct customers to claiming Universal Credit based on the criteria entered onto the form.

Lessons Learned

Complex and lengthy forms with poor choice of language and guidance on the Council's website left customers confused and put them off filling in the online forms. Customers want easy to understand webpages and forms that are effortless to complete. We need to strike the right balance between asking for the minimal amount of information and too much.

Optimising content for mobile devices and ensuring key fields are displayed and made mandatory is critical for today's customers who access digital services via mobile devices.

Service Journey (Including Achievements) 2018 – March 2021 contd.

In February/March 2020 the Pension Service Computer System (PSCS) rollout (auto update of State Retirement pension via DWP link) was completed. As a result, customers who previously would have had a general percentage increase applied to their state pension had their Housing Benefit/CTS cases updated automatically in line with their actual award amount. This ensured accuracy on pensioner cases and reduced the need for re-assessment and overpayment collection.

Service Journey (Including Achievements) 2018 – March 2021 contd.

There has also been increased uptake in Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) and Council Tax Discretionary relief scheme (CTDRS) applications, providing additional financial support to the most vulnerable in our community.

Financial Year	DHP paid	% of budget paid	CTDRS paid
2018 / 2019	£1,548,603.76	99.4%	£112,996.27
2019 / 2020	£1,716,144.00	99.93%	£104,333.41
2020 / 2021	£2,534,819.12	100%	£336,897.54

Housing Benefit Overpayment recovery is ongoing, after a review taken to further improve cash recovery. Year on year recovery figures are improving, with the exception of 2020, when there was a hold placed on recovery action for six months due to the Covid pandemic. The team increased from 4 to 8 FTE November 2019. Cash recovery increased from December 2019 until the Pandemic impacted in April 2020. A dedicated technical resource was introduced in 2020 improving management information, which has led to a substantial increase in cash recovery from overpayment in 21/22 to date compared with 19/20 and 20/21.

Service Journey (Including Achievements) 2018 – March 2021 contd.

Council Tax Direct Debit take-up is now at an all-time high. In April 2020 DD take up was 65.17% (94,928 accounts). As at March 2021 this is now running at 67.73% (98,662 accounts), which is the 8th highest level in London. The use of online forms which encourage direct debit take-up have all contributed to this increase. A direct debit campaign accompanied the E-Billing campaign in February 2021.

The service also launched a smarter ‘pre-recovery’ messaging campaign via TelSolutions and this replaces our previous SMS reminders. Pre reminder messages include a text, email and a pre-recorded phone message. The campaign is carried out over the course of 5 days and the urgency attached to the message increases throughout the campaign. The SMS messages sends a link to a personalised page allowing for much more detailed information to be provided than would be the case in a standard SMS message. The process learns and adapts to the ‘nudge’ which finally prompts payment so that future communication is made via the most effective channel for each customer.

Service Journey (Including Achievements) 2018 – March 2021 contd.

TelSolutions commenced October 2019, so comparison of full year does not give a true indication. October to March in 18/19 to 19/20 saw a 20% reduction in reminders issued. See below comparison on both full year stats and October to March stats:

Comparison reminders issued for Oct-Mar			
	2018/19	2019/20	%Change
First Reminders	19,955	15,558	-22.03%
Second Reminders	8,475	6,849	-19.19%
Comparison reminders issued for full year			
	2018/19	2019/20	%Change
First Reminders	60,500	56,723	-6.24%
Second Reminders	19,232	19,283	+0.27%

Service Journey (Including Achievements) 2018 – March 2021 contd.

During October 2020 the team were shortlisted for the Covid Heroes award. They also went on to win one of the Values awards for their collaborative approach in delivering the Covid grants quickly and in a short space of time whilst contending themselves with remote/homeworking.

Due to the Covid pandemic, the service went through a period of unprecedented change resulting in additional workloads seen across the services.

Council Tax residents in receipt of Council Tax Reduction (CTR) for working age customers received up to £150 awarded towards their Council Tax charge.

Test and Trace payments were implemented quickly and efficiently in September 2020, with extension to September 2021 in line with Government requirements.

Service Journey (Including Achievements)

2018 – March 2021 contd.

The Business Rates team have administered the Government's Covid-19 Business support grants since March 2020, and to date have successfully paid over 17,000 grants. This equates to over £109,000,000 pounds to help businesses affected by Covid.

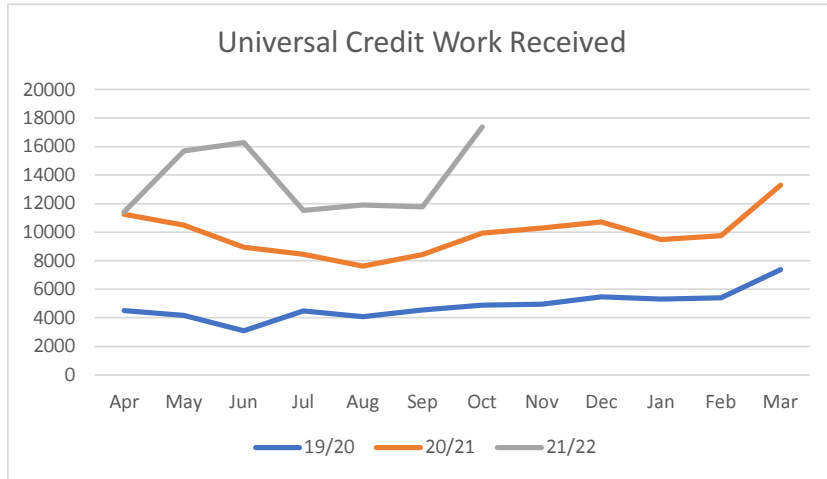
The team also successfully managed the Council's Additional Restriction Grants, processing grant support in line with the Council's own unique policy.

The team continue to provide support to the most vulnerable residents by ensuring they receive the right financial support they are entitled too quickly. A joint working platform was created with partners to provide primarily employment and benefit advice to Barnet residents. Referrals are made to other services and partner organisations, such as Barnet Homes, CAB (Citizens Advice Bureau), CAP (Christians against poverty), Barnet Wellbeing, Sangam (Association of Asian Women) and others to ensure the appropriate support is provided depending on the applicant's circumstances.

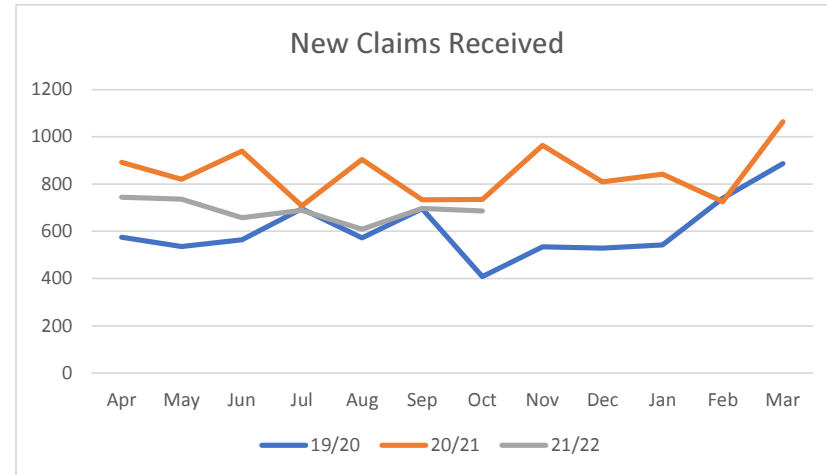
Discretionary Housing Payment awards are often dependent on continued engagement and progress in finding a job, moving to an affordable tenancy and/or being awarded the correct benefits.

Service Journey (Including Achievements) 2018 – March 2021 contd.

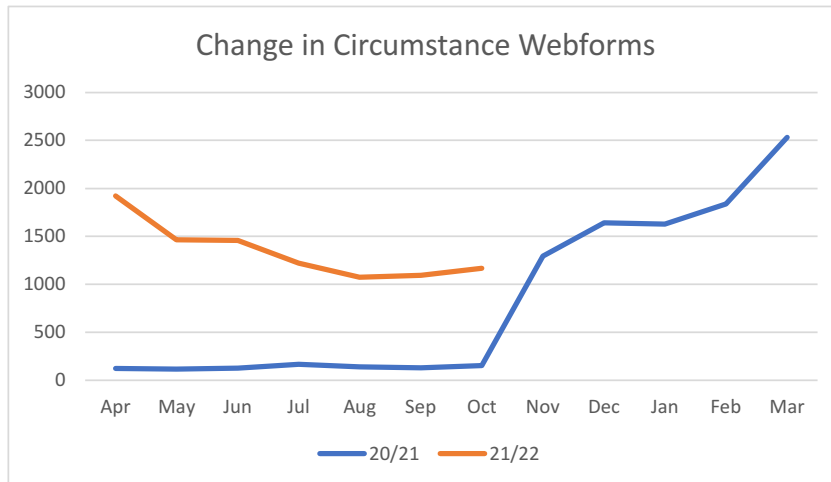
Universal Credit Volumes 2019-2020 & 2020-2021



New claims Volumes 2019-2020 & 2020-2021



Change in Circumstances webforms Apr 20 – Mar 21

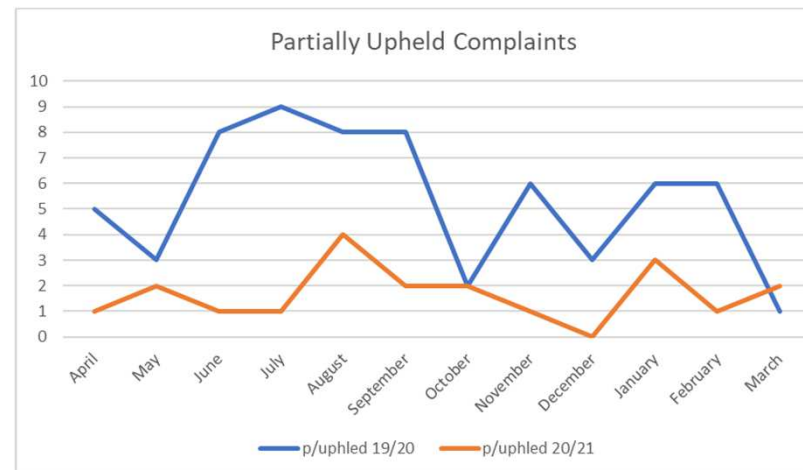
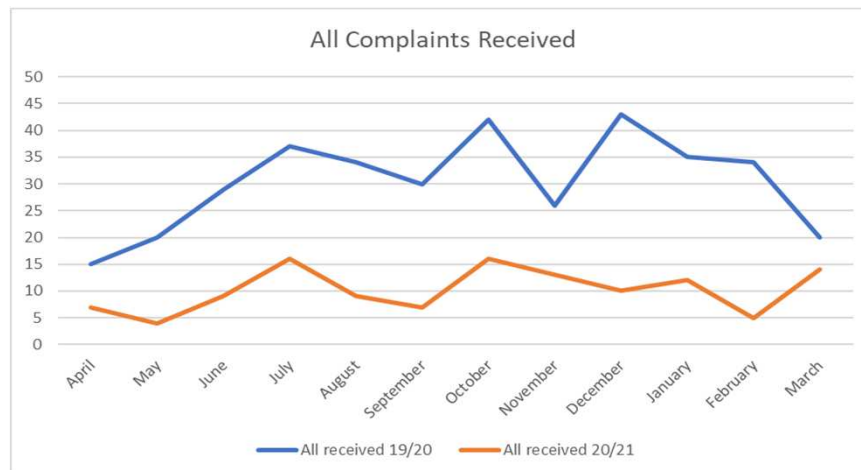
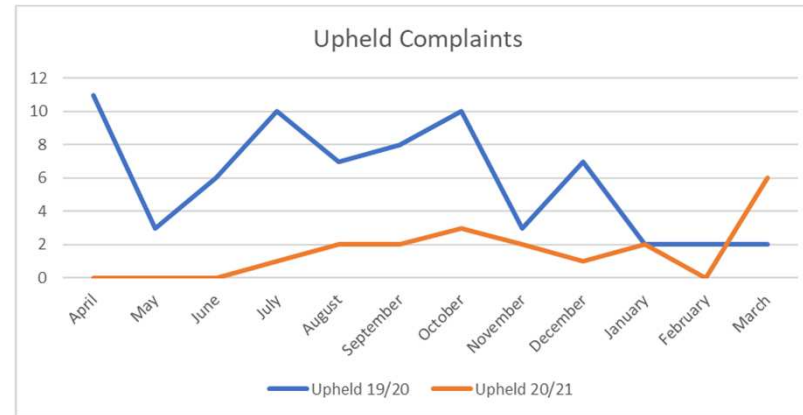


The 2 graphs above show the increase in benefit workload year on year and the graph to the left shows the increase in online forms being used by customers. As a result of the first lockdown in March 2020, we saw an immediate spike in Universal Credit awards, new claim applications, and changes in circumstance reported to us. Customers used online forms to report changes and new awards to us. As the pandemic moved forwards, and due to various lockdowns and business closures, furlough rule changes/awards of self-employed support, customers continued to report a high volume of changes to us as and when they occurred. With the job market returning to normal we are still seeing customers reporting a high volume of changes to us using online forms.

Service Journey (Including Achievements) 2018 – March 2021 contd.

Complaints Volumes 2019-2020 & 2020-2021

The graph below show the number of formal complaints received by the service reducing year on year, showing an increased satisfaction with the service being provided and decisions being made. The graphs to the right show the number of complaints upheld and partially upheld. The spike on upheld complaints March 2021 was due to a mixture of reasons on Council tax accounts and no trends identified.



Service Journey (Including Achievements) 2018 – March 2021 contd.

Complaints Volumes – 2021

The graph below shows the monthly formal complaints volumes received between April and September 2021

