

BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL

CORPORATE PERFORMANCE REPORT: 'HELP ME TO BE FINANCIALLY INDEPENDENT' – MAY 2019

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This report highlights the key areas for the strategic purpose 'Help me to be financially independent'.
- 1.2 The other report this month, 'Help me to run a successful business', contains the sickness measures.

2. CONTEXT

2.1 Support residents to reduce levels of individual debt

Between August 2018 and January 2019, the Financial Inclusion Team (FIT) dealt with 134 cases. Of these, 87 were women and 45 Men (where recorded), spanning an age range from 20 to 88. The vast majority of households were either single or a single parent, living in a housing association property (106 cases).

Debt was the highest reason recorded as to why cases were referred into the team. Where stated, the cause of debt included migration to Universal Credit, mental health issues and spending of non-essential items. 28 cases had had their rent arrears reduced as a result of support, 19 cases were referred for debt advice, 38 cases were awarded Council Tax Hardship and 11 cases received support from the Essential Living Fund. In 48 cases, customer confidence levels at the start and after FIT intervention were captured out of 10; 41 cases saw an improvement of 3 or more points.

The Council also continues to support the Bromsgrove Sunrise project, which is delivered by Bromsgrove District Housing Trust, providing advice and support to their tenants.

The Community Survey was run throughout September 2018 and was available to members of the Bromsgrove Community Panel and Bromsgrove residents alike. One section of the survey, 'Living Independently and Social Contact', included a question around personal finance. "To what extent do you agree or disagree with these statements about living independently and social contact?"

I am able to manage my household finances	I agree/agree strongly	91.4%
	Neither agree nor disagree	4.3%
	Disagree/disagree strongly	3.1%

Whilst the majority of people agree they can manage their household finances, there has been an increase of those who disagree, rising from 0.4% in the 2017 survey.

2.2 Develop education and skills to sustain financial independence

The Financial Independence Team (FIT) had 25 cases referred to them due to budgeting problems and 19 cases were referred for debt advice.

Until July 2018, the Council had a contract with Signs of Hope to support residents with their finances and enable them to move towards financial independence. The contract was terminated by Signs of Hope due to unforeseen circumstances.

Between 2017 and July 2018 Signs of Hope received 18 referrals from Bromsgrove District Council and BDHT. 8 cases reported having a disability. 14 cases were recorded as unemployed; no referrals were recorded as being in employment.

The FIT team has supported as many residents as possible with personal budgeting support and have referred more complex cases to the Citizens Advice. It is worth noting that from April 2019 the funding from the DWP in relation to Personal Budgeting Advice is to be withdrawn from the Council and transferred to the CAB. The FIT team will however continue to provide the service to our most vulnerable residents as it has proven valuable to our communities.

The Council is also continuing to work with local high schools to provide a financial management and advice online toolkit for students, which explains financial terminology and concepts.

2.3 Support communities during changes to welfare and benefits

A recent review of the Benefits service identified that the service was not dealing with benefit claims in a timely manner and, working with the DWP, a number of actions have been implemented which have improved performance and support to claimants.

This work produced the following short term actions:

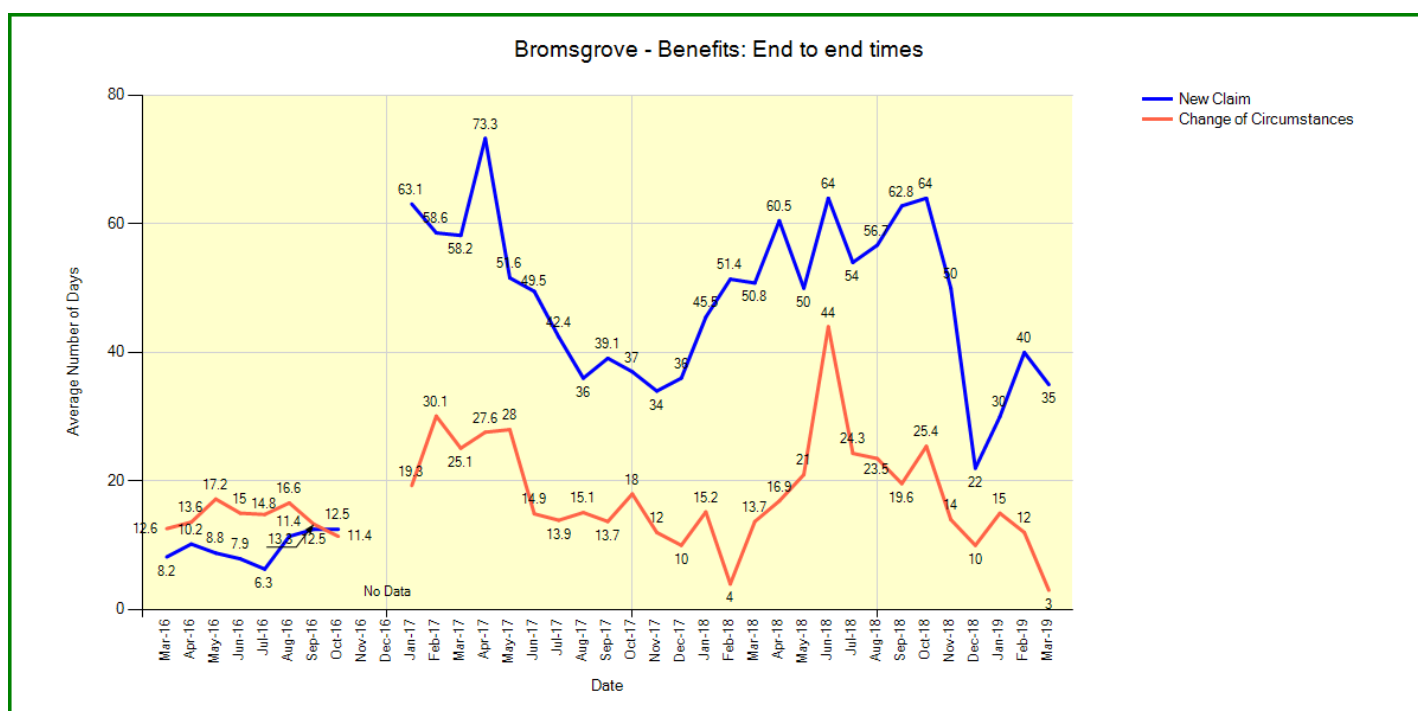
- Additional support sourced to ensure that outstanding workloads are brought under control
- Ensure that adequate resources remain in place to control forecasted workloads
- Identify training needs for new and inexperienced staff
- Introduce performance management framework to ensure processing standards are maintained.
- Identify how system and existing technology can support assessment of welfare support

In addition, it was apparent that there was a lack of management support to the teams and therefore an interim structure has been implemented to include:

- Providing specialist 4th Tier management for the Welfare Support team.
- Implement an interim management structure, adjusting internal recruitment to team leader, systems support and senior quality officer roles reporting lines of teams to new 5th tier managers.
- Implementing clear performance management frameworks for each 5th tier manager's areas of responsibility.

These actions are in the process of being implemented, with the interim management structure in place.

Benefits: End to end times



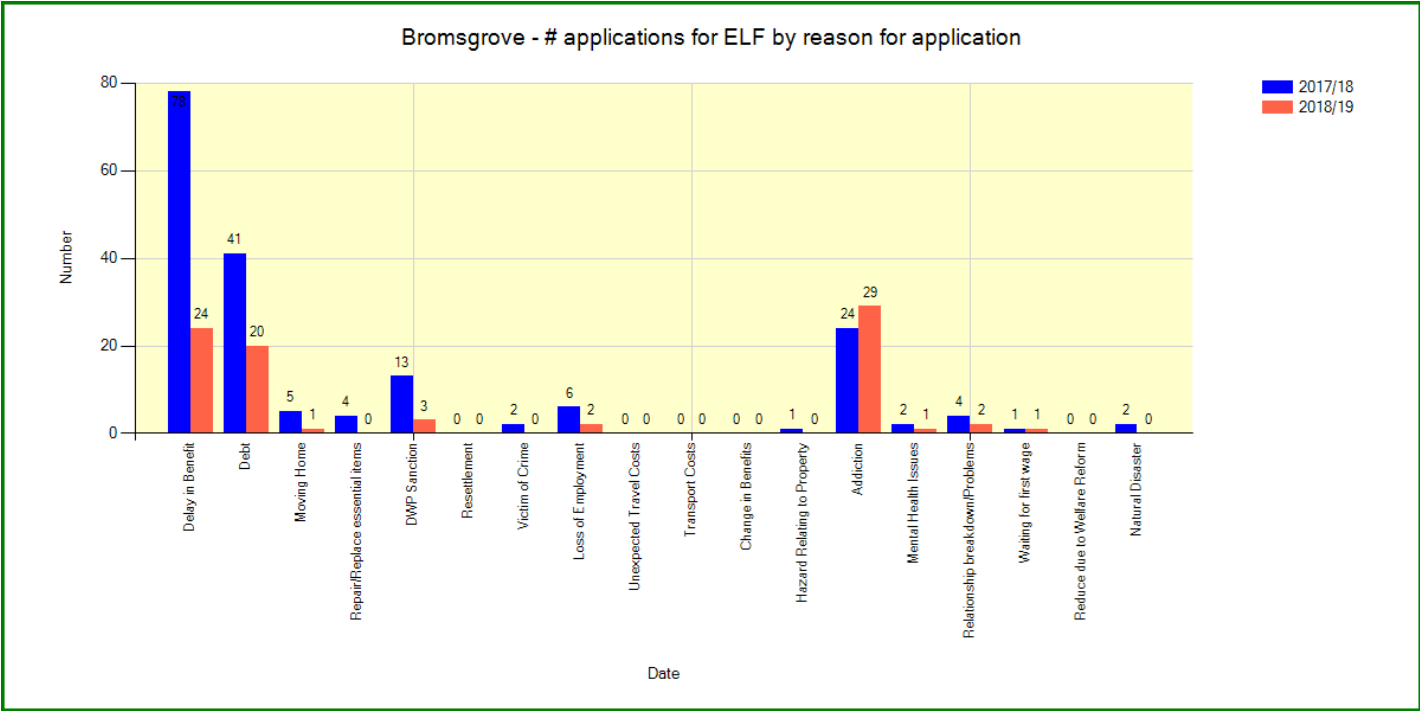
The processing times peaked in January 2018-October 2018; this was due to a number of factors, including resources available and the way the data was compiled. Officers have worked to improve performance and have cleansed the data and as a result the last 2 months have seen a significant decrease in the processing times.

Following robust interrogation of the previously submitted figures for the numbers of claims processed and number of changes in circumstances, we are currently looking into providing more accurate data. The issues identified are that the data previously provided relates to the number of documents, not claims and includes claims being submitted in error due to the changes in eligibility following the roll out of Universal Credit.

Once accurate data is obtained, these measures will be updated. We do however expect to see a reduction in new claims due to the roll out of Universal Credit, although we do not anticipate this decrease will be as pronounced in the volume of changes in circumstances.

It is anticipated that the implications of Universal Credit should have less impact in Bromsgrove District due to an older and more stable working population.

applications for ELF by reason for application



Whilst the number of applications for ELF has stayed around the same officers continue to support individuals to understand the reason that the claimant is in urgent financial need with the aim to give additional advice or signposting when required. The top 3 reasons in 2018/19 for making a claim for ELF are 1) addiction, 2) delay in benefit and, 3) debt. Although the top 3 reasons remain the same, those claiming ELF due to a delay in benefits has fallen significantly to align with the improvements we have made in speed of processing times.

2.4 Support reductions in winter deaths and fuel poverty

Fuel poverty is defined as the inability to keep a home adequately heated. In England, fuel poverty is measured by the Low Income, High Cost definition (LIHC). This measure states that a household is in fuel poverty when energy costs to heat to adequate levels are above the national average and, if they were to heat to this level, the residual income would leave the household below the poverty line. Fuel poverty data for Bromsgrove show that the proportion of households described as 'fuel poor' is 10% (2016); this is slightly lower than 2015 (10.6%) but higher than 2014 (9.1%). There are a number of factors which impact on fuel poverty and work will continue with partners to keep this to a minimum.

The Council has been working to address the issue of fuel poverty for a number of years as well as linking in to the county work through Warmer Worcestershire. The Warmer Worcestershire Network, which works together to produce and enable fulfilment of the Worcestershire fuel poverty plan, is led by Worcestershire County Council. Energy advice and support has been provided for over 15 years through partners Act on Energy, who have run several energy efficiency schemes ranging from insulation through to boiler replacements. In addition, work has recently been taking place alongside District and County partners to deliver an external wall insulation programme.

The Council is also part of the Worcestershire Climate Change Strategy and is signed up to the Worcestershire Local Enterprise Partnership Energy Strategy, which has set ambitious targets and has 'Access to affordable, clean energy' as one of its four priority themes. A new Environmental Policy Statement is currently being worked on by officers.

Community Survey 2018:

The Climate Change and Energy Support Service aims to help you use less energy e.g. reducing energy bills, support with insulation and boilers. Do you know how to access this service?	Yes, I know how to access this service	17.1%
	No, I am aware of the service but I don't know how to access it	20.9%
	No, I have never heard of this service	62.0%

This data shows that a large number of residents are unaware of the support available to them. Further work around raising awareness is planned.

2.5 Support the provision of affordable housing in the District to meet the needs of the community

The Council's Housing Strategy Team continues to provide advice and guidance to planners, developers and registered providers to support the provision of affordable housing in the district. Delivery naturally fluctuates on an annual basis. As a result, the number of affordable homes coming forward in 2017-18 was 125. In 2018-19 58 units of affordable housing were delivered in the district. There are a number of sites coming forward for development which will see further affordable housing built in Bromsgrove in the future.

Data analysis by North Worcestershire Economic Development and Regeneration indicates there is an imbalanced housing market in Bromsgrove, with rising affordability issues particularly for low earner and median income householders. ONS data shows that Bromsgrove households are wealthier than other households in Worcestershire or the combined authority; however house prices are higher in Bromsgrove, which significantly narrows the gap. The Office of National Statistics shows the lower quartile house price for Bromsgrove is £205,000 and the annual residence-based lower quartile earnings as £19,170, giving an affordability ratio of 10.69:1 (2018) for purchasing in the open market. This shows that those on lower incomes have little chance of accessing home ownership, as generally a ratio of 4:1 is considered to be affordable.

The Council is working up a wider approach to 'rebalance the local housing market'. Analysis of affordability is being undertaken and consideration is being given to establishing a local housing company as another way of driving delivery of affordable housing at a local level, an approach which includes utilising council-owned assets such as the site of the former council house at Burcot Lane in Bromsgrove.

2.6 Future Focus

There are a number of actions required to ensure we are delivering against our purpose of helping people be financially independent. These include:

- Maintaining performance in processing times
- Continuing to support vulnerable residents in terms of advice and urgent financial support
- Continuation of the debt advice support to schools (using the electronic module)
- Reviewing the service to customer to streamline and improve customer journey
- Provide ongoing digital support to residents and improve on line access

2.7 Context data

The unemployment claimant count for March 2019 was 1.7%. However, the claimant count for 18-24 year olds is the second highest in the County, at 3.2% (alongside Wyre Forest). The wards with the highest unemployment claimants are Charford (4.3%), Sidemoor (3.4%) and Rock Hill (3.3%).

For 2018, the average weekly earnings for full time employees who live in Bromsgrove District were £661.60. However, the average weekly earnings for full time employees who work in Bromsgrove District were £506.20, over £150 per week less.