

LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

Indicator Description	Better to be?
Time taken to process Housing Benefit new claims and change events	Low

2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17				Target
			Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	
19.06 days	26.8 days	19.89 days	17.98 days	18.14 days			28 days

Commentary:

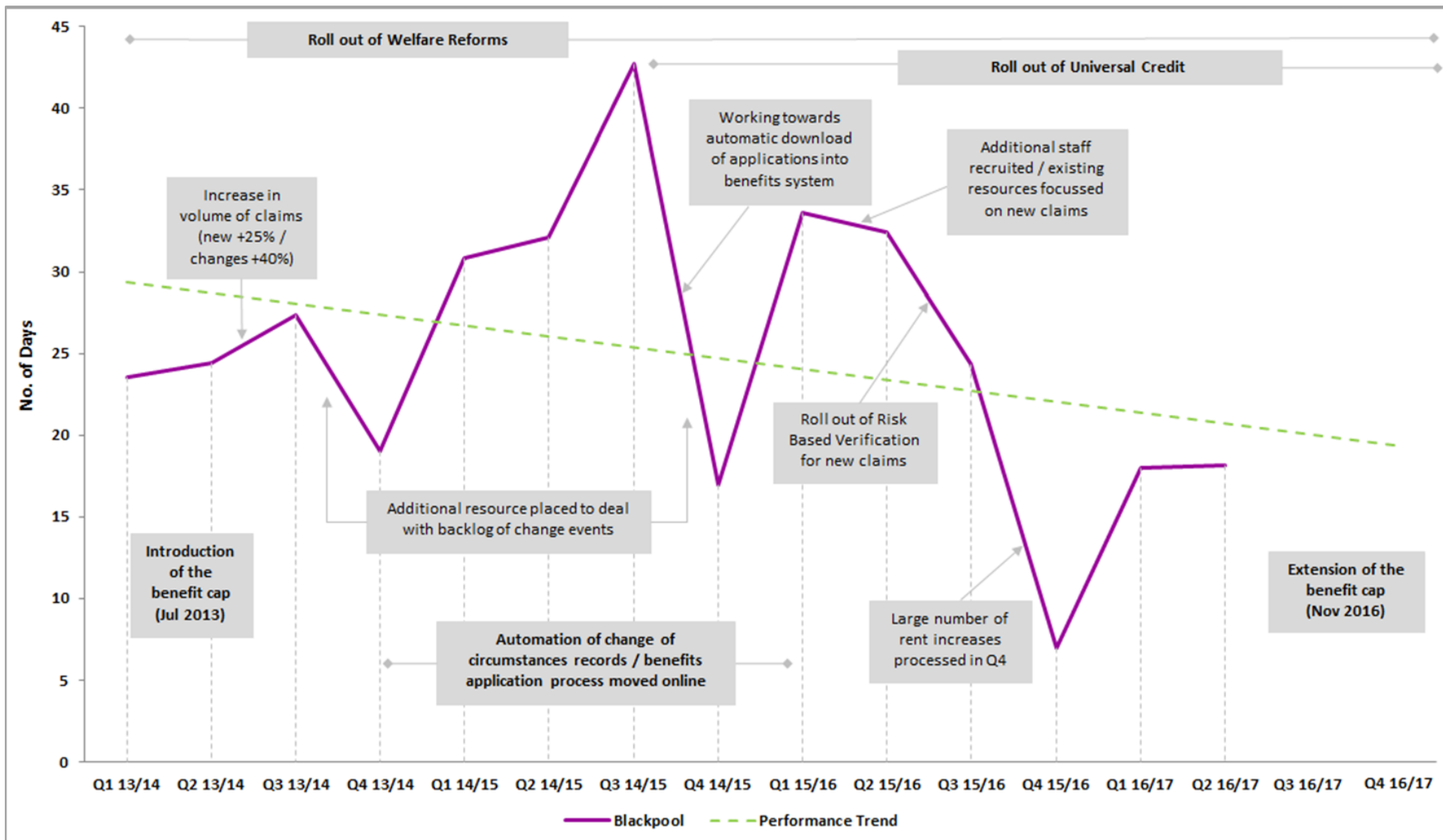
The average time taken to process a Housing Benefit new claim and change in circumstance is currently 18 days, which represents a considerable improvement on the position reported during 2014/15. The volumes of new claims and changes in circumstances received over the last three years are shown below to provide an indication of the scale of core processing work handled by the department.

	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17*
No. of new claims	8,476	8,526	7,066	3,111
No. of changes in circumstances	194,234	185,861	148,587	77,741
Average caseload	26,592	25,717	24,696	24,162

* Oct 2016

The improvement in processing times for these core areas of work has been achieved despite a number of Welfare Benefit changes, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) new initiatives aimed at reducing fraud and error and the introduction of automated data transfer with DWP and HMRC. This additional work has included:

- Implementation of the Spare Room Subsidy, reducing Housing Benefit for working age claimants in the Social Sector;
- Reduction in Housing Benefit for under 35's to the Shared Room Rate;
- Implementation of the Benefit Cap (and, from November 2016, the extension of the Benefit Cap);
- Use of Real Time Information (RTI), providing information on discrepancies between our data and that held by HMRC;
- Fraud and Error Reduction Incentive Scheme (FERIS), incentivising local authorities to detect fraud and error in their caseloads by carrying out targeted reviews;
- Introduction of automated records and information exchange from the DWP; and
- Annual review, development, consultation and sign off of a Council Tax Reduction scheme in time for main billing.



The graph above shows the time taken to process Housing Benefit new claims and change events for the last 3 years, as well as the key factors impacting on performance. An improvement action plan was initially drawn up to identify key areas of work on which to focus to help tackle the backlog of work that had arisen. As processing times have improved, the action plan has been reviewed and updated. Improvements made are also reflected in the volume of new claims and changes in circumstances work outstanding, which has reduced from 37,343 in August 2014 to 10,317 in August 2016. However, the improvements in processing times have been at the expense of other areas. Unpopular choices have had to be made in order to free up resources to focus on core processing work. For example, the availability of the Benefits telephone line has been cut from 9am-5pm to 3pm-5pm and the service no longer responds to “chasing” enquiries from landlords and tenants; were our position on these to change, then there would be a negative impact on performance times.

What Has Worked Well:

- Production of weekly reports detailing outstanding work, as well as performance monitoring of staff, enables the service to monitor, manage and focus work priorities more effectively.
- The introduction of Risk Based Verification for claims has enabled the service to re-allocate resources and to focus verification on medium and high risk cases in order to reduce the chance of fraud and error entering the system.
- Online claim forms now enable new claims to be downloaded directly into the back office processing system, which reduces the need to re-key information and then only requires a decision maker to finalise the claim; it is hoped that this process will be extended to changes in circumstances work in the near future.
- The allocation of grants to the service for various DWP initiatives enabled a recruitment process to be undertaken. This improved resource levels - although there is no guarantee that these grants will continue to be made in the future.

Challenges:

- Whilst performance has improved, we are now in a position where we are starting to clear a large number of old changes in circumstances for both Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction. As these records are cleared, there will be an adverse effect on performance in the short term but once they have been dealt with we should be in a better position to keep on top of new work.
- Some of the automated records from the DWP contain spurious information and we do work with DWP to try and improve the quality of the data they supply. Each record received has to be looked at carefully as any inaccurate or unnecessary records cannot easily be identified. This takes time and can be a drain on resource.
- The DWP has indicated that additional initiatives are being considered. Should these be rolled out nationally then they could increase the volume of work that the Local Authority receives.
- The introduction of a number of DWP initiatives to reduce the amount of Housing Benefit claimed have increased both the volume and value of overpayments raised which we have to look to recover. Additional resources have had to be allocated to overpayment recovery work to try and maintain recovery rates.

The Future:

- The rollout of Universal Credit (UC) has been relatively low with only 2,900 claimants so far in Blackpool as at August 2016. At some point, UC will transfer to "Full Service" within Blackpool when any type of household will be able to apply for UC. At this point, the number of UC claimants will start to increase and the Housing Benefit caseload will start to reduce. To date, we have not been given any indication when Full Service will commence in Blackpool. The latest date we have for the transfer of all Working Age claimants onto UC is currently 2022.
- FERIS 3 is expected to be announced soon in time for implementation for 2017/18 and we will need to consider what resource we have to re-allocate to focus on this work.
- Supported Accommodation is currently undergoing a review by Central Government and when changes are announced this will be a significant piece of work for the Benefit Service, other areas of the Council, and partner organisations to ensure claimants are supported through any changes.
- As things currently stand, we expect that there will still be a significant amount of work undertaken by the department in the future once UC rollout is completed. This work includes all Housing Benefit pensioner claims, supported accommodation Housing Benefit claims and all Council Tax Reduction claims.