COALFIELD AREA COMMITTEE **12 March 2009**

REPORT OF THE CITY TREASURER

HOUSING AND COUNCIL TAX BENEFIT PROGRESS REPORT

FOR INFORMATION

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1 The purpose of this report is to inform Members of the performance of the Benefits Section in the processing of new claims and changes in circumstance in accordance with the new National Indicator (Right Time), NI 181 for Housing and Council Tax Benefit and, in addition, update Members on developments relevant to the business.

2. PERFORMANCE

2.1 Members were previously informed of the two National Indicators (NI 180 "Right Benefit" and NI 181 "Right Time") against which the performance of the Benefits Service is judged.

2.2 As can be seen from the table at Appendix 1, the performance of the Section is good in relation to speed of processing. However, the statistics which are being produced by the ICT system in relation to NI 181 are still to be treated as an interim position as there are further changes being made to the reporting software by the ICT system provider.

2.3 In the case of NI 180, the Council is on course to meet its quota of changes in benefit entitlement for the year but there is still the need for more clarification from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) as to how this new National Indicator counts the changes.

2.4 It is proposed that this report will continue to contain performance statistics on the old BVPIs (78a and 78b), so that Members are aware of performance in relation to new claims and changes in circumstances.

3. LOCAL HOUSING ALLOWANCE

3.1 The Local Housing Allowance (LHA), a new way of calculating Housing Benefit for private tenants, was introduced with effect from 7 April 2008. As at 31 December 2008 there were 2,642 LHA claims in payment and 3,156 old style claims in payment which demonstrates the rapid shift to LHA.

3.2 Members will recall that, under LHA rules, the Housing Benefit should normally be paid to the tenant. Requests to pay the landlord must be carefully considered as there are only certain circumstances in which the payment can be made to landlords. Benefit staff resources are continuing to be used to collect evidence and information to inform the decision as to whom the Housing Benefit payment should be paid, landlord or tenant. Whilst this is not having a dramatic impact upon performance overall, the situation is being monitored carefully and options considered. Neighbouring authorities are experiencing similar issues in this respect.

4. BENEFIT TAKE-UP AND PUBLICITY

4.1 The Council is keen to ensure that those persons who have an entitlement to benefit actually receive that benefit and therefore work is always on-going on take-up and publicity. In addition to the usual methods employed, for example leaflets and adverts on billboards, buses and in the press, the Section is contacting persons who are in arrears with their Council Tax and is contacting companies which have job losses.

4.2.1 In order to receive various views, comments and suggestions on areas of take-up, improvements to service delivery generally the Section is consulting with its Customer Group which comprises organisations including the Citizens Advice Bureau, Age Concern, Physical Disabilities Alliance, Primary Care Trust, the Probation Service, Gentoo and the DWP. There is also internal representation from the Council's Customer Service Network, Welfare Benefits and the Carer's Centre. The group has endorsed our take-up action plan and our local Benefit Fraud campaign to support the national Benefit Fraud campaign (launched 5 January 2009) and has agreed to develop a joint calendar of events to promote all services involved.

5 RECOMMENDATION

5.1 Members are asked to note the contents of this report.

6. BACKGROUND PAPERS

6.1 No background papers were used in the preparation of this report.