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Assistant Director of Exchequer Services  
London Borough of Bromley  
Civic Centre  
Stockwell Close  
Bromley  
BR1 3UH

Date: 15 June 2020

Our Ref: AIF/GT

Dear Claudine,

As we approach the July Executive, Resources & Contracts PDS meeting where we consider and review the performance of the Benefits service, we take this opportunity to write to you with Liberata's assessment of the performance of this critical, high profile service that we provide to London Borough of Bromley (LBB) and its citizens.

The COVID19 pandemic created a number of operational challenges for Liberata to overcome however, our Business Continuity plans were successfully implemented and we were able to get all staff working remotely from home with minimal disruption to services. Liberata's infrastructure allowed us to flex resources, maximise the use of the digital and hybrid mail solution and enable flexible working arrangements. The online application functionality ensured that customers were still able to apply for services safely online and provide information through the Evidence Upload Facility.

During the lockdown period, we saw a significant increase in customers interacting online, which enabled us to deliver more timely services compared to dealing with legacy paper applications. We also incorporated the DWP's 'Trust and Protect' principles which enable us to make prompt decisions on Benefit claims, verifying the evidence at a later stage when it is safe to do so.

Now that the new Bromley contract has commenced, our commitment to channel shift customers to online services has never been so crucial in the delivery of services. As we are unclear as to what the future holds, increasing online services is key to enable ongoing delivery of council services, whilst maintaining a specific focus on vulnerable customers that require assistance to transact online.

This summary covers performance for the period 1 October 2019 to 31 March 2020.

## **1. Current Status of the Benefits Service**

The Benefits caseload, which measures all households receiving Housing Benefit (HB) and/or Council Tax Support (CTS), was 17,808 as at the end of March 2020. The caseload at the same time last year was 18,718.

In terms of our position for the nationally recognised Right Time Indicator, our average performance was 6.22 days. This is against an annual contractual target of 13 days. This constitutes a significant improvement from the previous year where the average performance was 9.40 days.

As at the end of March 2020, the amount of outstanding work totalled 3,497 items. This included 1,705 items pended whilst awaiting information from the claimant and/or third-party. During March, we began to see the impact of the COVID19 lockdown and as a consequence received an increase in volume of new Universal Credit (UC) award notices and changes. This increased volume has continued into the new financial year and will result in an increase in the number of CTS claims being made.

### **1.1 Temporary Accommodation**

We have strong relationships with the LBB Housing Teams, Orchard and Shipman and the Mears Group. Through regular monthly liaison meetings we have been able to resolve any benefit issues or queries quickly and also fast track applications where required. This enables the Housing teams to engage with their tenants early to minimise the opportunity for arrears to accumulate and help sustain tenancies.

The dedicated Temporary Accommodation assessment staff have formed strong relationships with LBB Housing staff and stakeholders with the main focus being to ensure that Benefit claims are paid as quickly and efficiently as possible.

### **1.2 Verify Earnings and Pensions (VEP) Alerts Service**

The VEP alerts, which we receive from the DWP, have proven to be an effective tool in ensuring the earnings and pension information within the Academy system is accurate. The specialised VEP Team, based in the Pendle office, play a key role in ensuring that the daily VEP files provided by the DWP are downloaded and processed. The VEP alerts draw relevant information held by various organisations and provide 'real time' information which is essential in the administration of Benefits.

The efficient processing of the VEP alerts not only ensures that the database is accurate, but also significantly reduces the potential for overpayments where the customer had not notified the Council of any changes in their household income.

### **1.3 ATLAS**

ATLAS is a process of transferring data from the DWP systems to the Local Authority systems. This includes state benefit changes which may not have been previously notified to us by the customer. A significant volume of our ATLAS files have been developed to automate directly into the benefits database which improves speed of processing and reduces the risk of input error by assessors when re-keying information.

### **1.4 Quality**

We continue to be firmly focused on quality and strive to eradicate error from the assessment process. The average financial error rate for the 2019/20 reporting period was 1.9%. Compared to a contractual target of 5% and a 'soft' target of 4%.

All new and upskilled employees undergo an intense training program with significant post completion monitoring to ensure accuracy rates remain at a high level. Quality plays a vital role within our organisation, so regular refresher training is also undertaken by all staff to ensure that knowledge and understanding is consistent with policies, procedures and current legislation.

The DWP accept that a certain level of error will be made in the administration of Benefits. As such, an upper and lower threshold of Local Authority error is outlined by the DWP. Liberata's performance has remained below the lower threshold which attracts maximum subsidy for the Authority.

### **1.5 Overpayment Strategy**

The creation of overpayments is a natural bi-product of the administration of Housing Benefit & Council Tax Support, with recovery needing to be sought from some of the most vulnerable members of the community.

The Housing Benefit recovery rate as at 31 March 2020 was 99.17%. Liberata continues to effectively recover debts by using a variety of techniques including Blameless Tenant recovery, Direct Earnings Attachment and Debt Collection Agencies. These recovery techniques remain highly effective tools in securing the repayment of these debts.

### **1.6 Universal Credit**

During the COVID19 lockdown in March we saw a significant increase in the number of Universal Credit Council Tax Support claims, with the upward trajectory continuing into the new financial year. We have created an online web form which is on the Bromley website to simplify the application process.

Liberata continue to receive high volumes of UC notifications and are currently testing an automated solution which will upload the notifications directly into the

Benefits system. The solution will require changes to internal policy which we are currently discussing with the Council. This will ensure that assessment errors in re-keying data are significantly reduced and also increase performance in processing claims.

The dedicated Single Point of Contact (SPOC) continues to liaise directly with the DWP to ensure that any requests are administered within the agreed 5 days service level.

Liberata's Customer Services team play an active role in sign posting customers to the Job Centre Plus when they visit the Civic Centre reception and are unclear as to where to claim assistance with their housing costs.

## **2. Corporate Visiting Team (CVT)**

The CVT Visiting Officers continue supporting all service lines and provide an effective channel for vulnerable customers to access a number of services. This has created resilience for the service lines as back office staff can focus on processing workloads.

Since the COVID19 lockdown, Visiting Officers are conducting interviews with customers over the phone and have incorporate the DWP's 'Trust and Protect' principles, which means that information required from the customer in respect of income and capital is accepted verbally or by email which will be verified at a later date. This ensures that benefit claims are not held up during this difficult period.

## **3. Call Centre & Customer Services**

The number of Revenues & Benefits customers seen in Customer Services for the period 1 October 2019 to 31 March 2020 totalled 10,701 of which 88% of customers were seen within 15 minutes. The footfall represents a reduction of 24% on the same reporting period October 2018 to March 2019.

The reported figures are up to 23<sup>rd</sup> March, the last day the service was open to customers before the COVID19 lockdown was imposed. The service did not open again during the reporting period.

The Contact Centre (Help Line) received 53,875 calls which was 13% lower than the same period in the previous year. During the period 94% of calls were answered, with this figure being significantly impacted by March performance.

COVID19 had a major impact on our staff with many having to self-isolate. This had a significant effect on March's performance, prior to the home working solution being put in place early April.

#### **4. Service Developments**

Liberata's goal is to continue to improve and enhance the services provided to the Council and its citizens through the introduction of innovative and effective solutions.

Examples of current year new and ongoing initiatives;

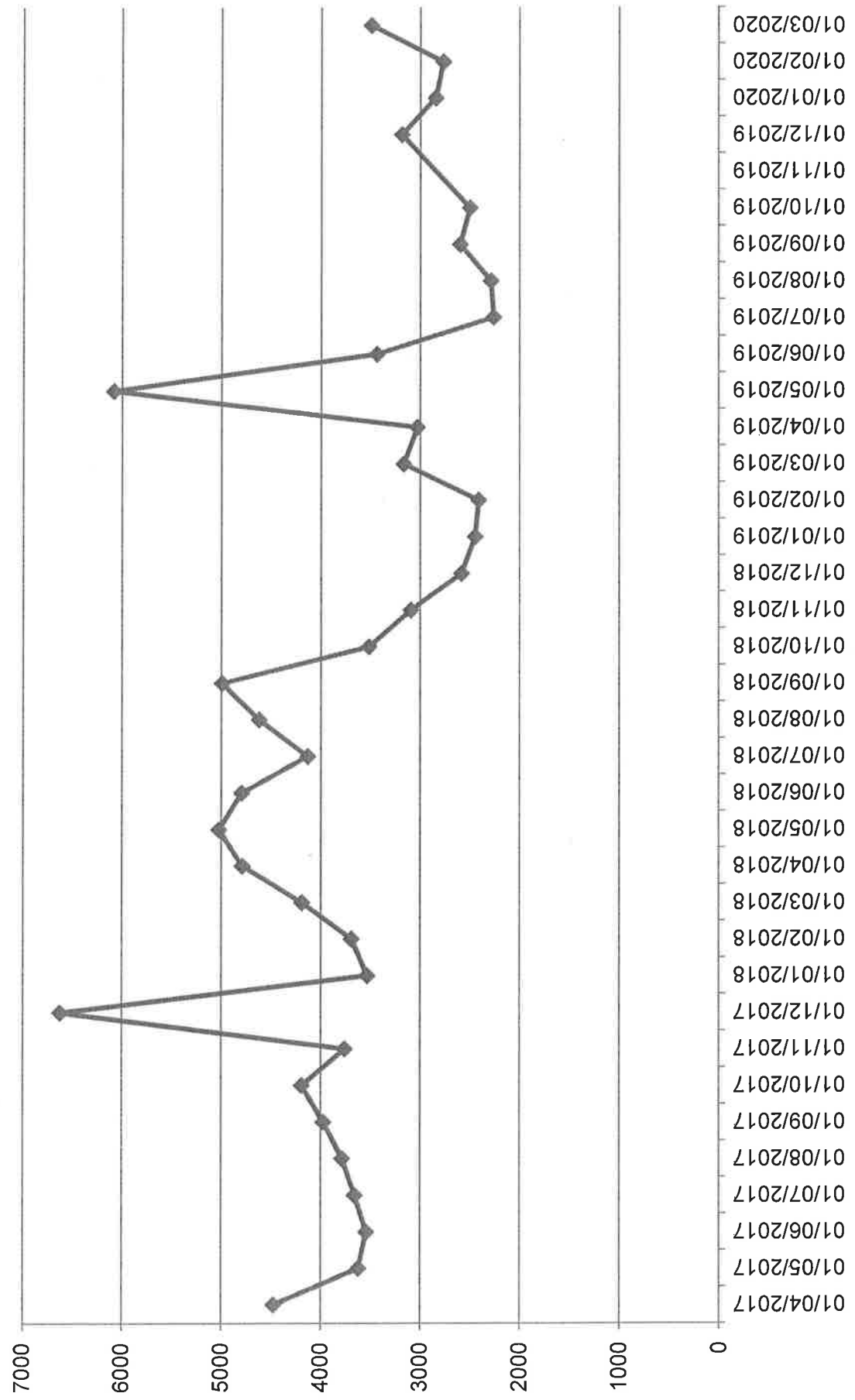
- An online UC CTS web form has been produced and is live on the Bromley website. This enables customers to transact with us online and has been really successful during the COVID19 lockdown period.
- On-going annual reviews of Self Employed cases to ensure that the Benefits database remains accurate and Benefit entitlements are correct.
- On-going implementation of the Capita Advantage Digital product. This will enable customers to use online forms to make a new claim or report changes to an existing claim. The information on the forms will be integrated with the back office processing system.
- Automation of benefit claims will be introduced as part of the implementation of the Capita Advantage Digital product. This will significantly improve speed of processing of claims and the overall customer experience.
- Risk Based Verification (RBV); the policy has now been approved by the Council and is available on the Bromley website. Once we have successfully implemented the Capita One Digital self-serve modules; eClaims and eChanges they will be used in conjunction with RBV. Once this is live, it will provide customers with an enhanced customer experience and significantly improve processing times for both new claims and changes.
- Liberata are reviewing the content of the LBB website and also the letters which are sent out by the Benefit Service. This is planned to drive those customers that are able to use the online functionality as part of our ongoing digital transformation programme.

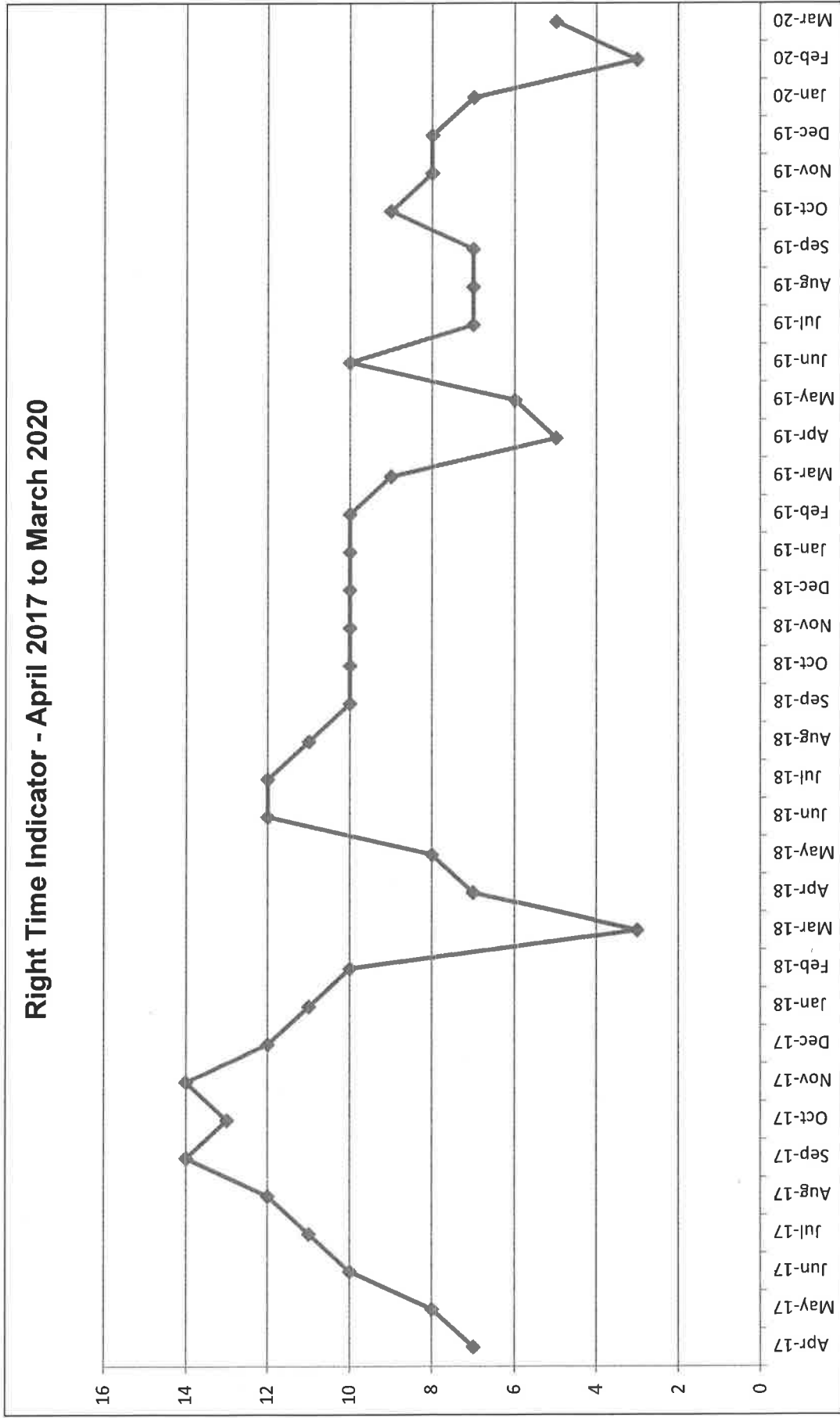
Liberata remains firmly committed to delivering an outstanding service to the London Borough of Bromley and its citizens.

Yours sincerely,

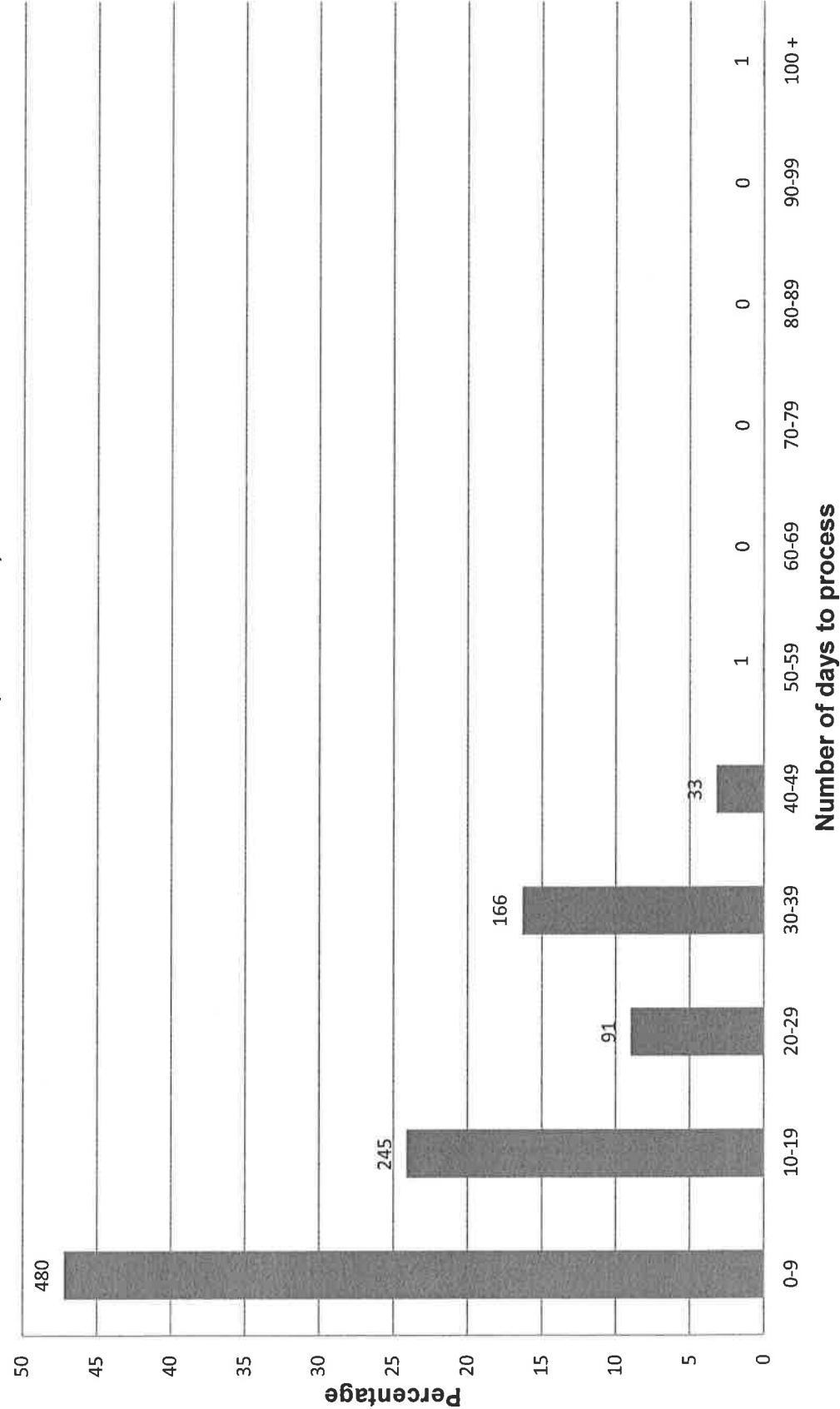
Amanda Inwood-Field  
London Regional Contract Director

# Outstanding Work April 2017 to March 2020



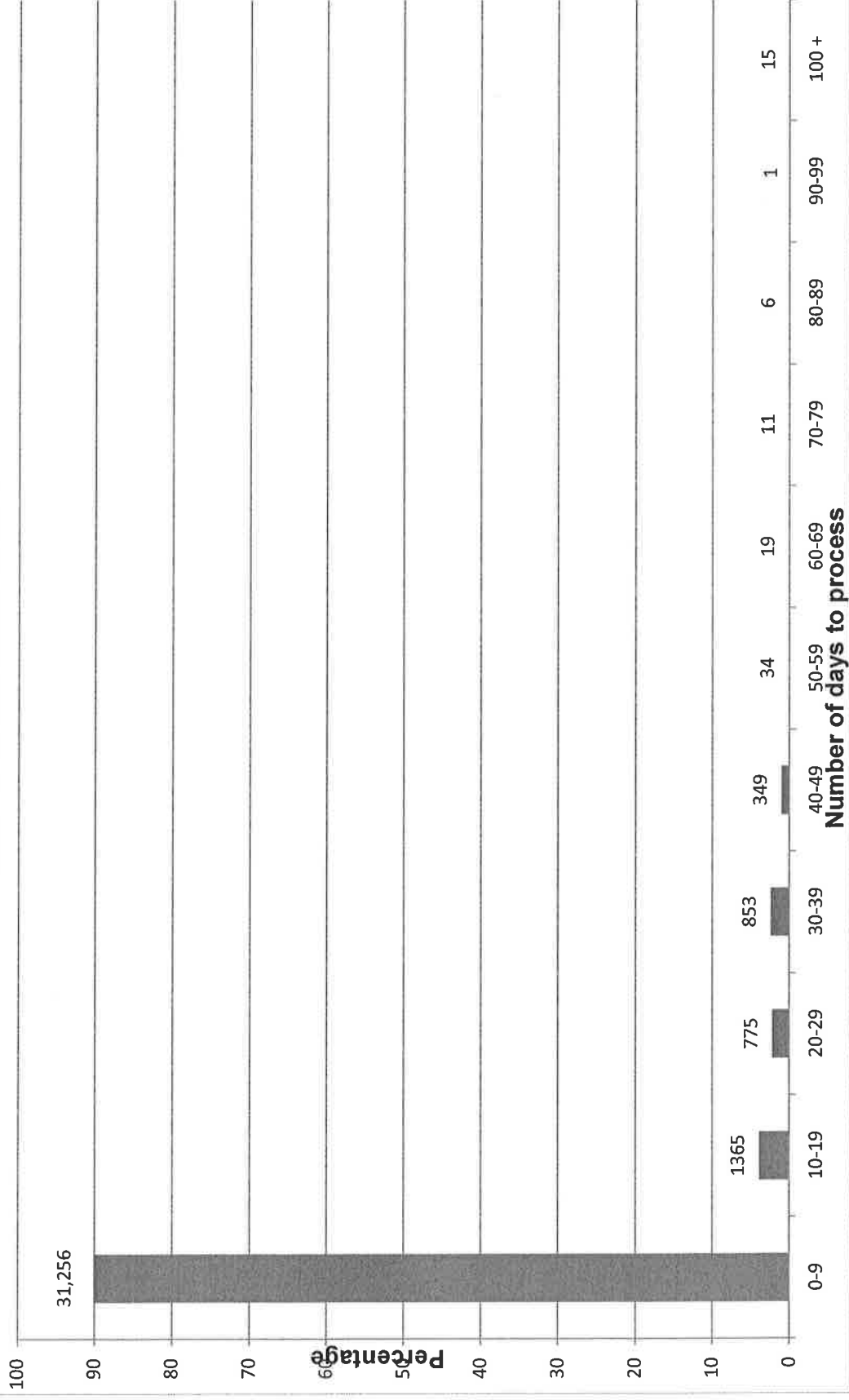


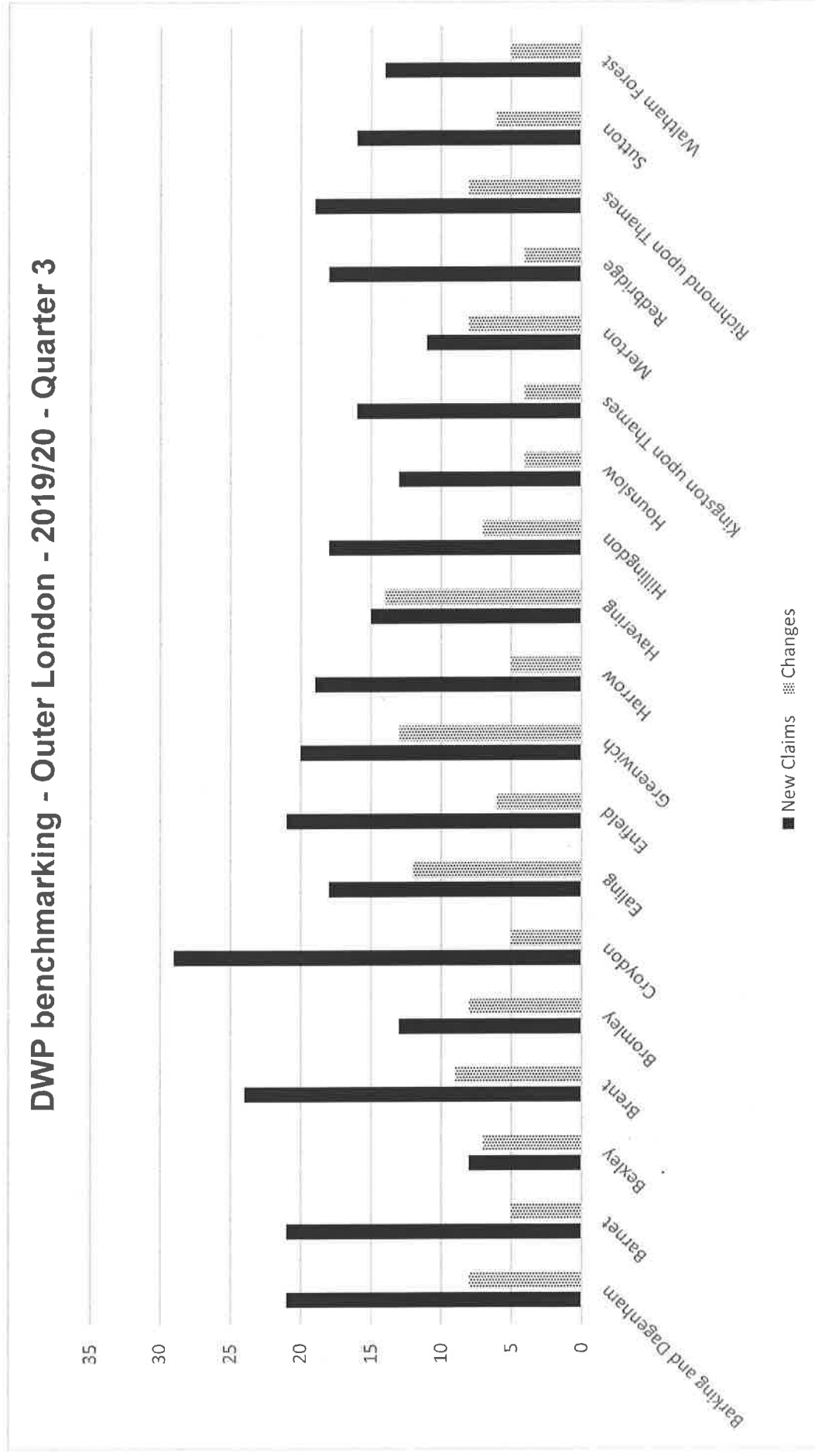
Housing Benefit - processing time breakdown October 2019 to March 2020  
New Claims (1017 cases)

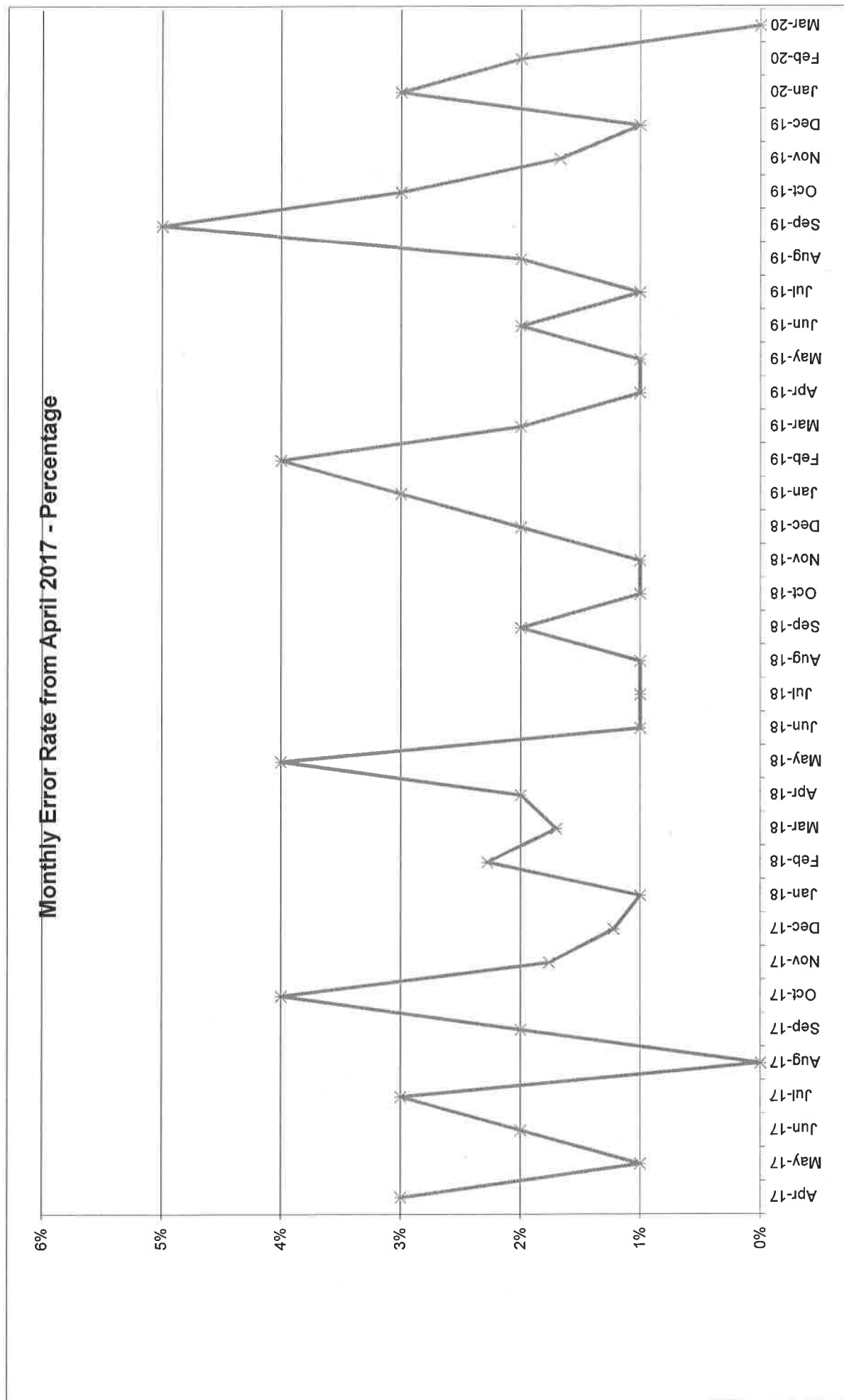




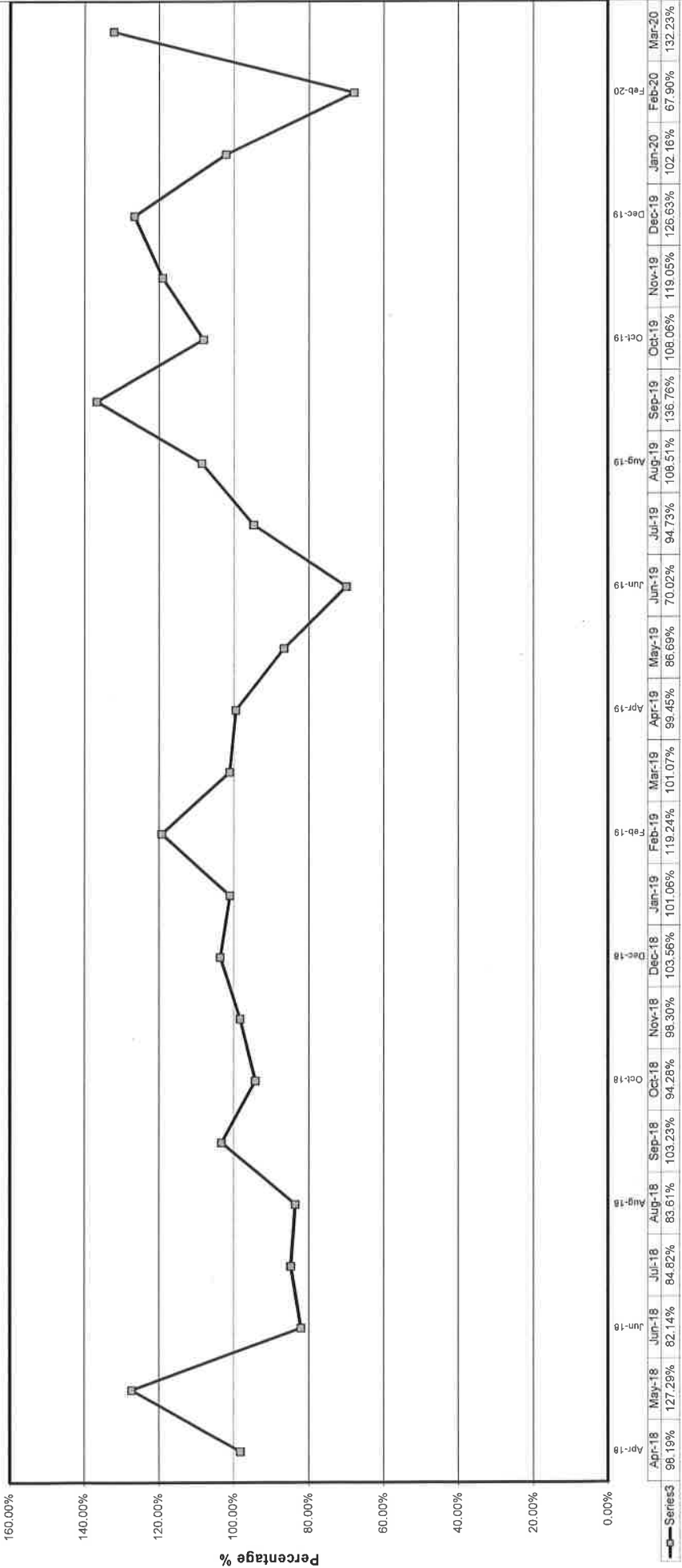
**Housing Benefit - processing time breakdown - October 2019 to March 2020**  
**Change in Circumstances (34,684)**



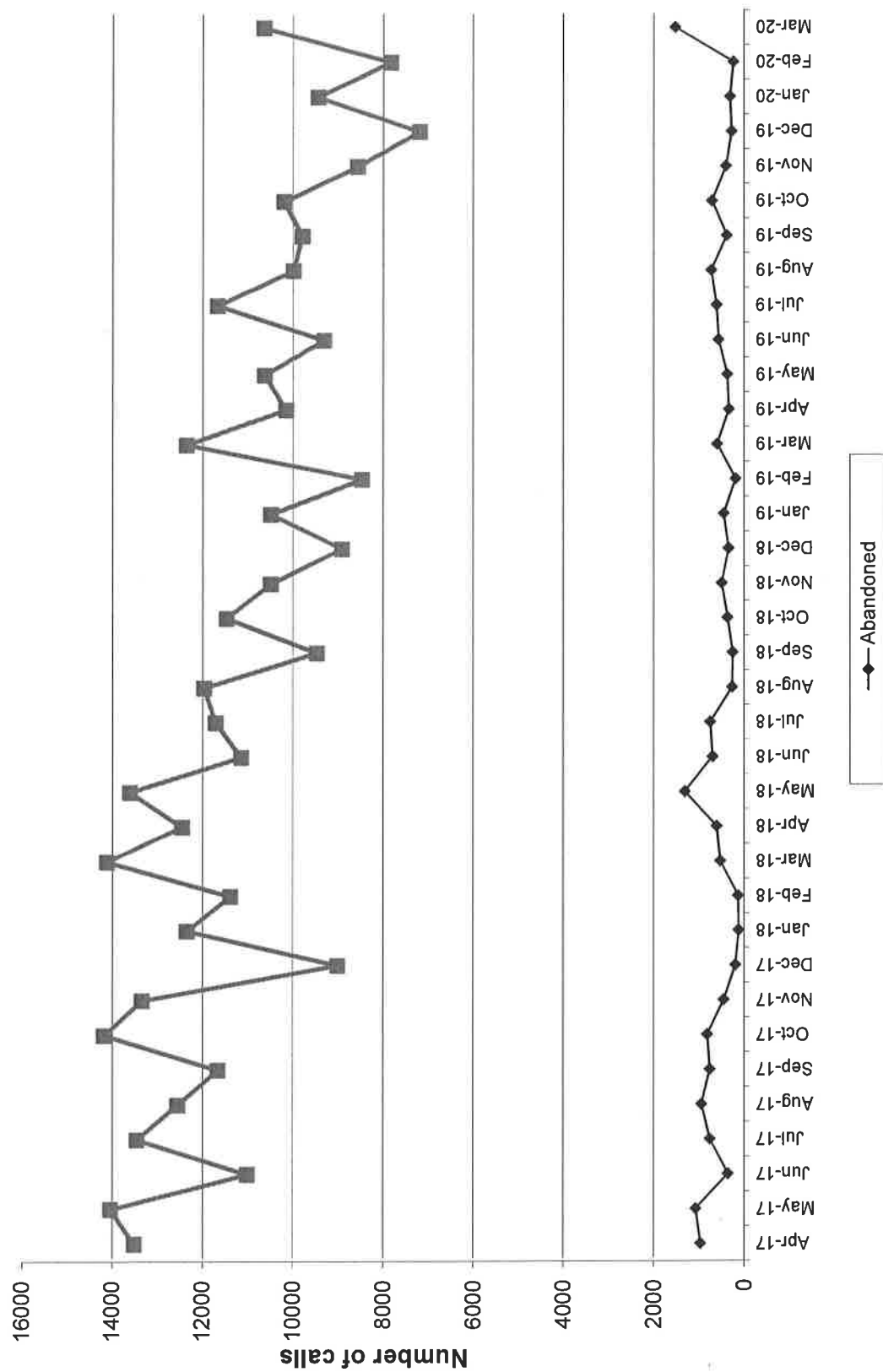




Monthly Overpayment % recovered against that created since April 2018



Calls Received and Abandoned monthly from April 2017



Caseload from April 2017 - every 2 months

