

Claudine Douglas-Brown
Assistant Director of Exchequer Services
London Borough of Bromley
Civic Centre
Stockwell Close
Bromley
BR1 3UH

Date: 11th December 2020

Our Ref: AIF/GT

Dear Claudine,

As we approach the January 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 customers.

Business Continuity plans were successfully implemented as a result of the numerous operational challenges which the COVID19 pandemic created. We are pleased to report that our workforce are now all working from home and continue to provide high standards of service to customers. The online application functionality which has been implemented now enables customers to apply for services safely online and provide the required evidence and information through the Evidence Upload Facility.

Customer engagement with LBB during the COVID lockdown continues to see a significant increase in customers interacting digitally, which has enabled us to deliver more timely services compared to dealing with legacy paper applications. Earlier this year we implemented the DWP's 'Trust and Protect' principles which allow us to make prompt decisions on Benefit claims and verify the evidence at a later stage when it is safe to do so.

Our commitment to channel shift customers to digital channels is a key focus for us. Our experience of seamless continuation of service delivery throughout the COVID pandemic demonstrates our ability to further develop online services. Liberata have implemented additional provision for vulnerable customers that require assistance in accessing services via the web.

This summary covers performance for the period 1st April 2020 to 30th November 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 18,443 as at the end of November 2020. The caseload at the same time last year was 18,034. The caseload has continued to increase as a direct result of the COVID 19 pandemic.

In terms of our position for the processing of New Claims and Changes, our average performance for November 2020 was 13.12 days for New Claims and 4.83 days for Changes. This is against an annual contractual target of 19 days and 9 days respectively. This is an improvement from the previous year where the average performance for the same reporting period on New Claims was 13.89 days and 7.81 days for Changes.

As at the end of November 2020, the amount of outstanding work totalled 6,229 items. This included 1,282 items pending, whilst awaiting information from the claimant and/or third-party. The impact of COVID19 has had a major impact on volumes which we are receiving in respect of new Universal Credit (UC) award notices and changes. This increased volume has continued and we believe the impact will be even more significant at the beginning of 2021.

1.1 Temporary Accommodation

Liberata have maintained strong relationships with the various LBB Housing Teams, Orchard & Shipman and the Mears Group. We meet regularly each month to resolve any benefit issues quickly and when necessary fast track cases to minimise the risk of arrears accumulating and ultimately sustaining tenancies.

The dedicated Temporary Accommodation benefit assessment staff and LBB's Housing staff and stakeholders have created a virtual team with the focus being to ensure that Benefit claims are paid as quickly and efficiently as possible.

1.2 Verify Earnings and Pensions (VEP) Alerts Service

Liberata continue to receive VEP alerts, from the DWP. The processing of the alerts have proven to be an effective tool in ensuring the earnings and pension information within the Academy benefits system is accurately maintained. 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 accordingly. The VEP alerts draw relevant information held by various organisations and provide 'real time' information which is essential in the administration of Benefits.

The effective processing of the alerts not only ensure that the Academy database is accurate, but also significantly reduce 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. The majority of the ATLAS files which we receive 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 period April 2020 to November 2020 was 2.1%. Compared to a contractual target of 4%.

Liberata undertakes an intense training program for all new recruits and the upskilling of existing employees. This involves significant post completion monitoring and mentoring to ensure accuracy rates remain at a high level. Errors which have been identified are addressed immediately with employees and additional refresher training provided to maintain our high standard of quality.

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 well 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 year to date recovery rate of overpaid Housing Benefit as at the end of November 2020 was 114.46%. This underlying trend includes the recovery of current year and previous year debts. 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 have proven effective tools in securing the repayment of these debts.

1.6 Universal Credit

Liberata continue to receive high volumes of UC notifications advising us of new UC awards and changes to existing ones. We are in the final stages of introducing automation which will upload data from the notifications directly onto the Benefits database. This solution will minimise assessment errors in re-keying data into the database and also increase performance in processing claims.

Since April 2020 the volumes of Council Tax Support claims (CTS) have increased month on month. The increase in applications has been as a direct result of the COVID19 pandemic. We are forecasting that the increase will continue well into the new year which is reflective of the financial challenges which customers are currently facing. The online webform which was created earlier this year has simplified the application process for customers applying for assistance.

Liberata's Customer Services team continue to play an active role in sign posting customers to the Job Centre Plus when contact 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 provides 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.

The COVID19 pandemic has prevented Visiting Officers from conducting face to face visits with customers in their home. We have incorporated 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 principle has been effective and enabled the service lines to carry out assessments without creating a delay to the customer.

3. Call Centre & Customer Services

The Contact Centre (Revenues & Benefits Help Line) received 60,043 calls for the period 1st April to 30th November 2020 with 98% being answered, of which 85% of calls were answered within the service level target.

The front facing team opened the door to citizens on Monday 29th June for a mainly appointment only service, although a process was put in place to serve vulnerable customers who presented themselves without an appointment. Between July and November, the team saw 980 customers, compared to 11,094 during the same period in 2019. This large reduction does not appear to have been to the detriment of customers being able to transact with the Council, and there have been no complaints about the appointment only service.

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.

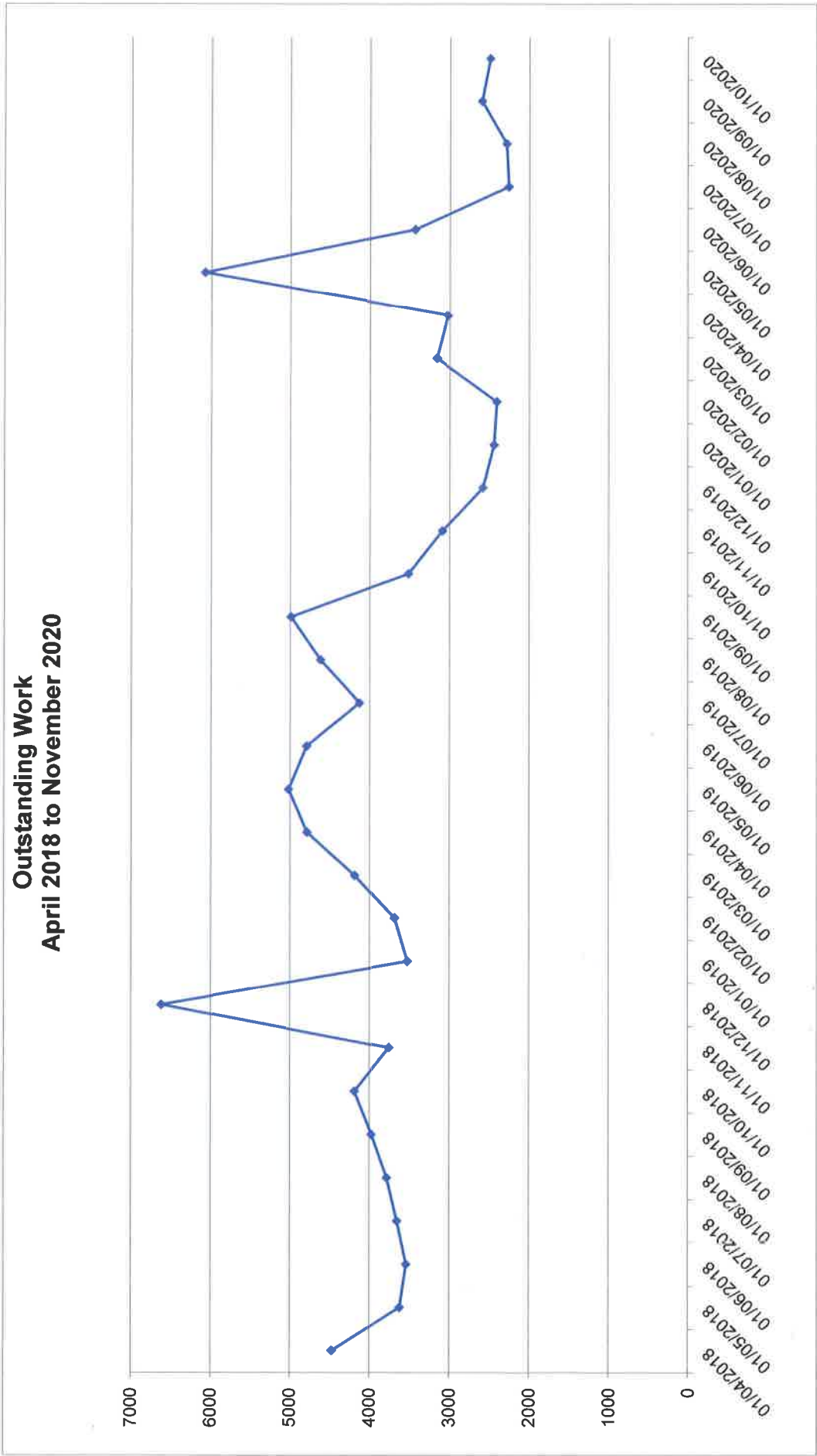
Examples of current year new and ongoing initiatives;

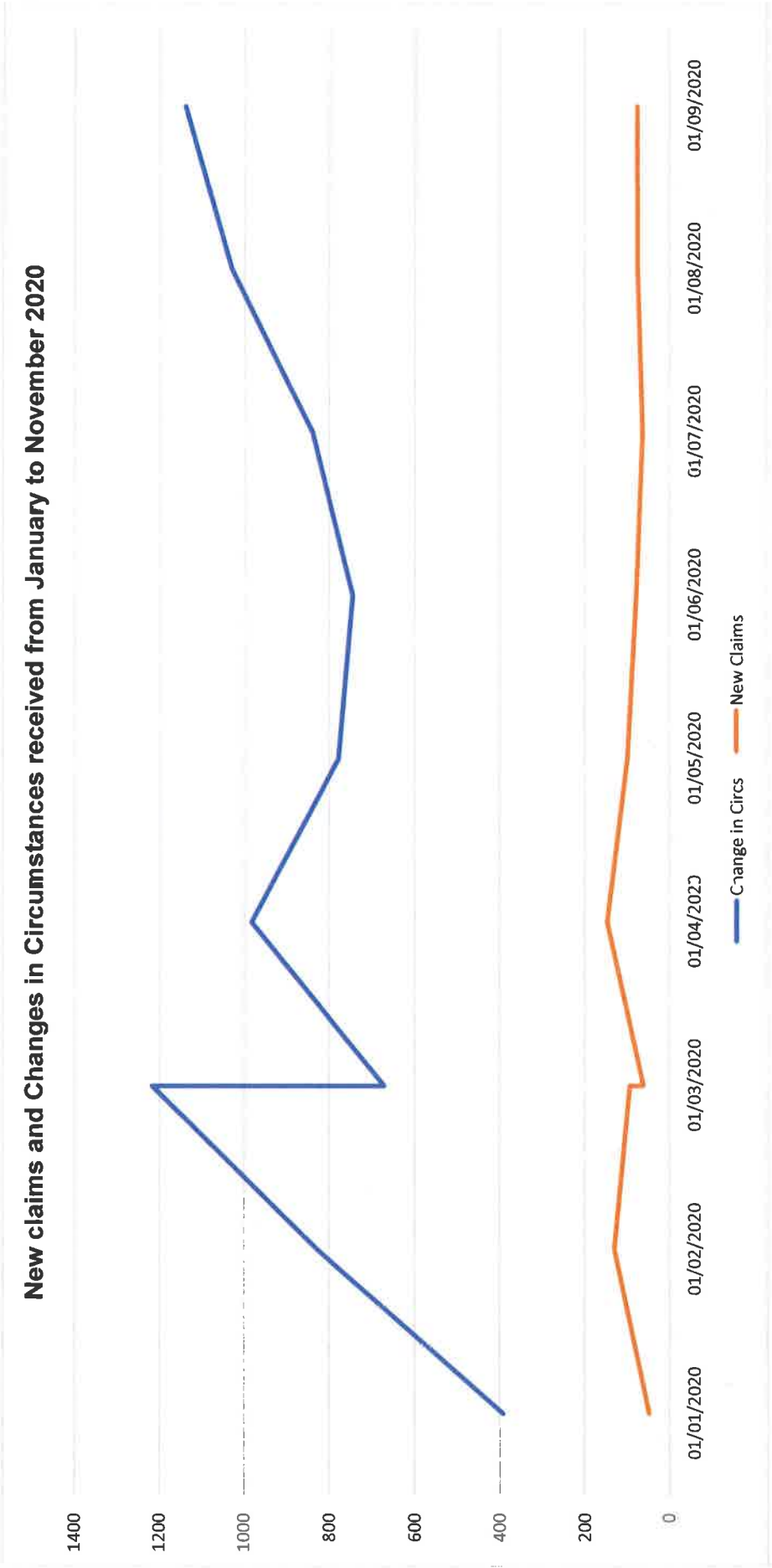
- Implementation of Risk Based Verification (RBV); this enables claims to be risk scored in line with the customers circumstances. Customers deemed as low risk will have their claims processed without the requirement for them to provide additional information to validate their claims. This will provide enhanced customer experience and significantly improve processing times for both new claims and changes.
- Planned implementation RBV automation; once implemented, this will enable low risk claims to be automated through the back office database without the need of re-keying information. This will significantly increase the processing times for new claims and changes as well as enhance customer experience.
- A 'soft' launch implementation of the Benefits self-service portal; this is currently in use by LBB Housing teams, Leaving Care and the Citizens Advice Bureau. This enables online new claims and changes to be submitted directly into the back office system.
- Liberata in conjunction with LBB are reviewing the content of the LBB website and also the letters which are sent out by the Benefit Service. This forms part of our ongoing digital transformation programme to channel shift customers to online services.

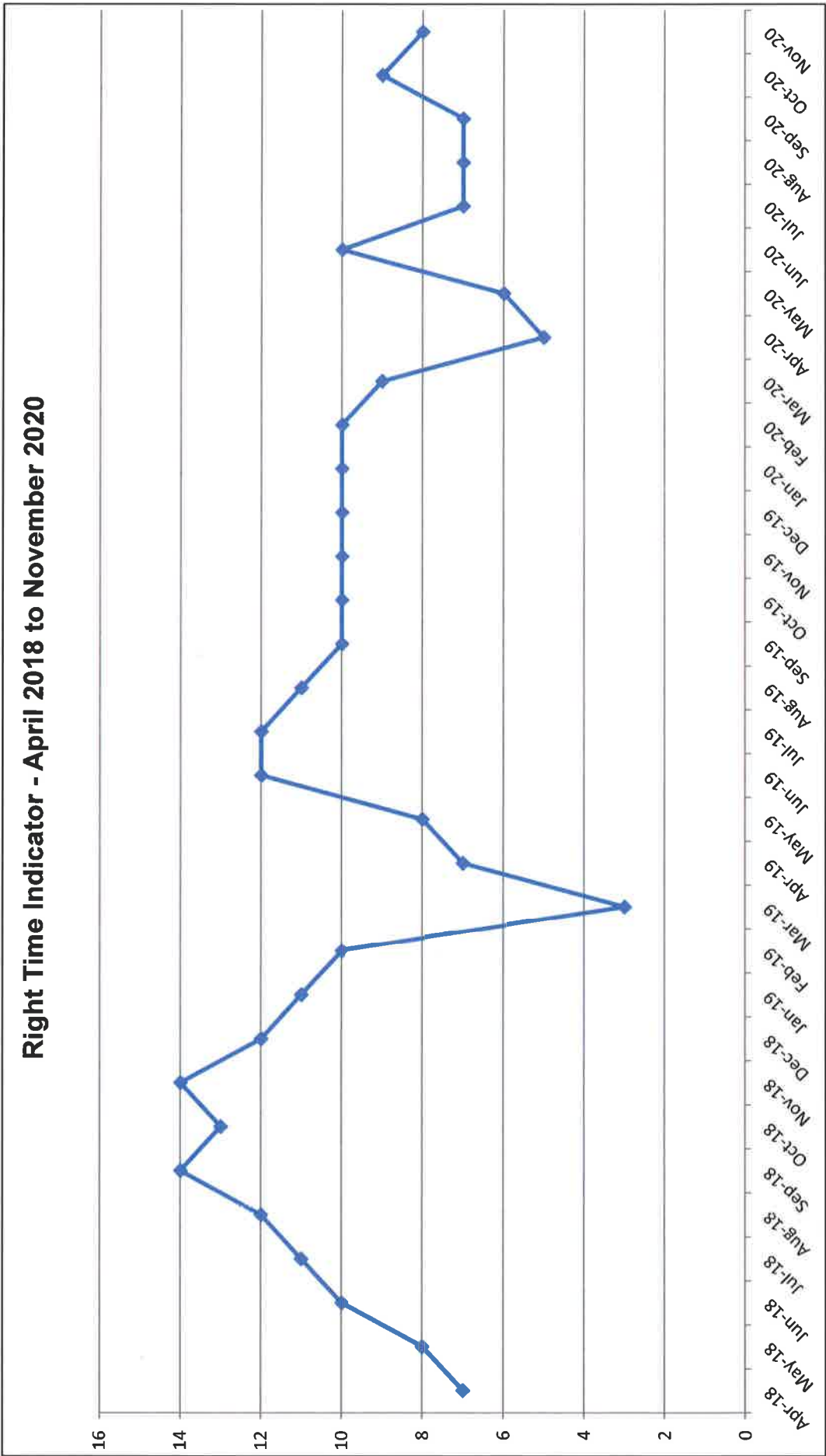
Liberata remains firmly committed to delivering an outstanding service to the London Borough of Bromley and its citizens.

Yours sincerely,

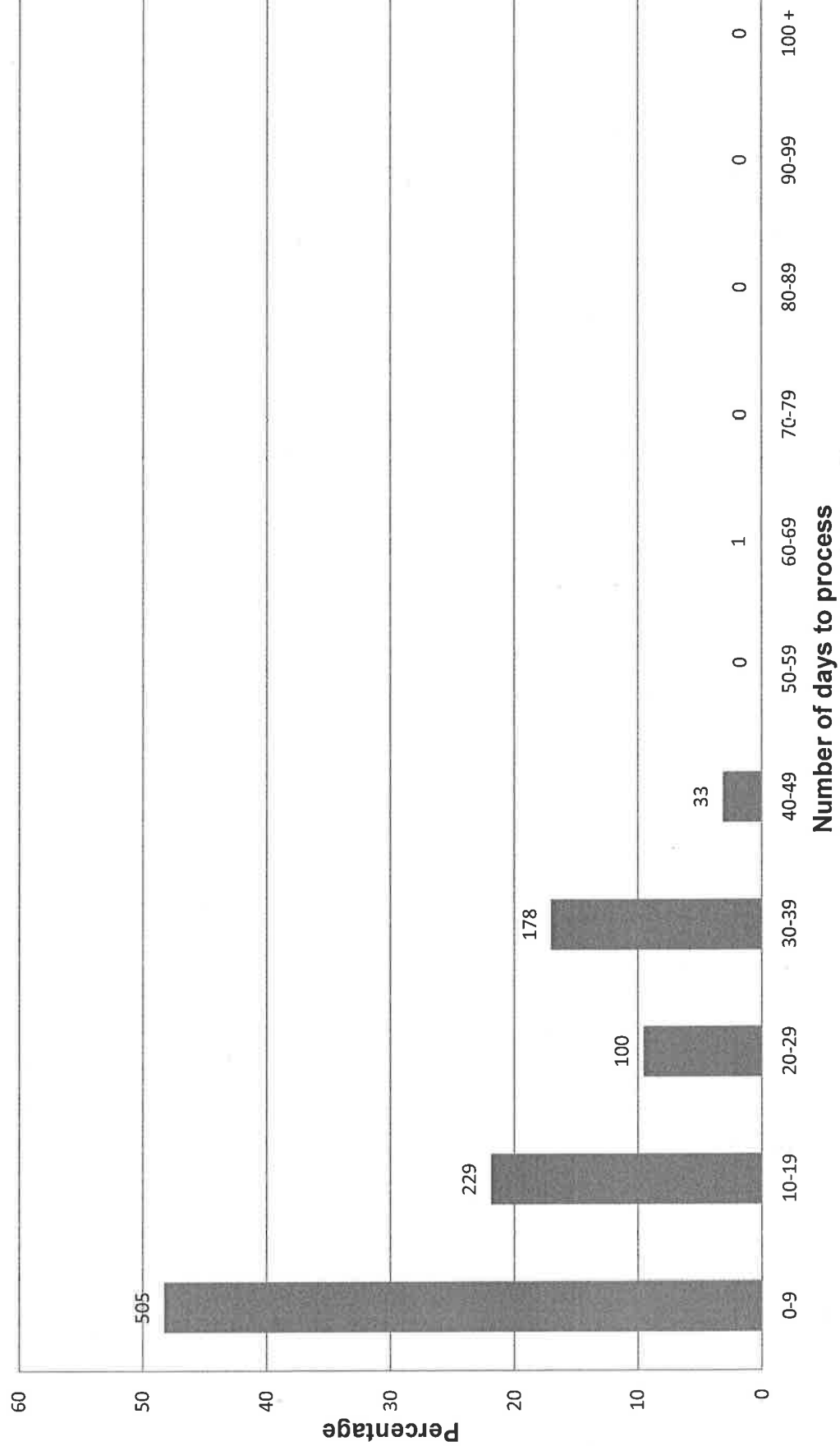
Amanda Inwood-Field
London Regional Contract Director



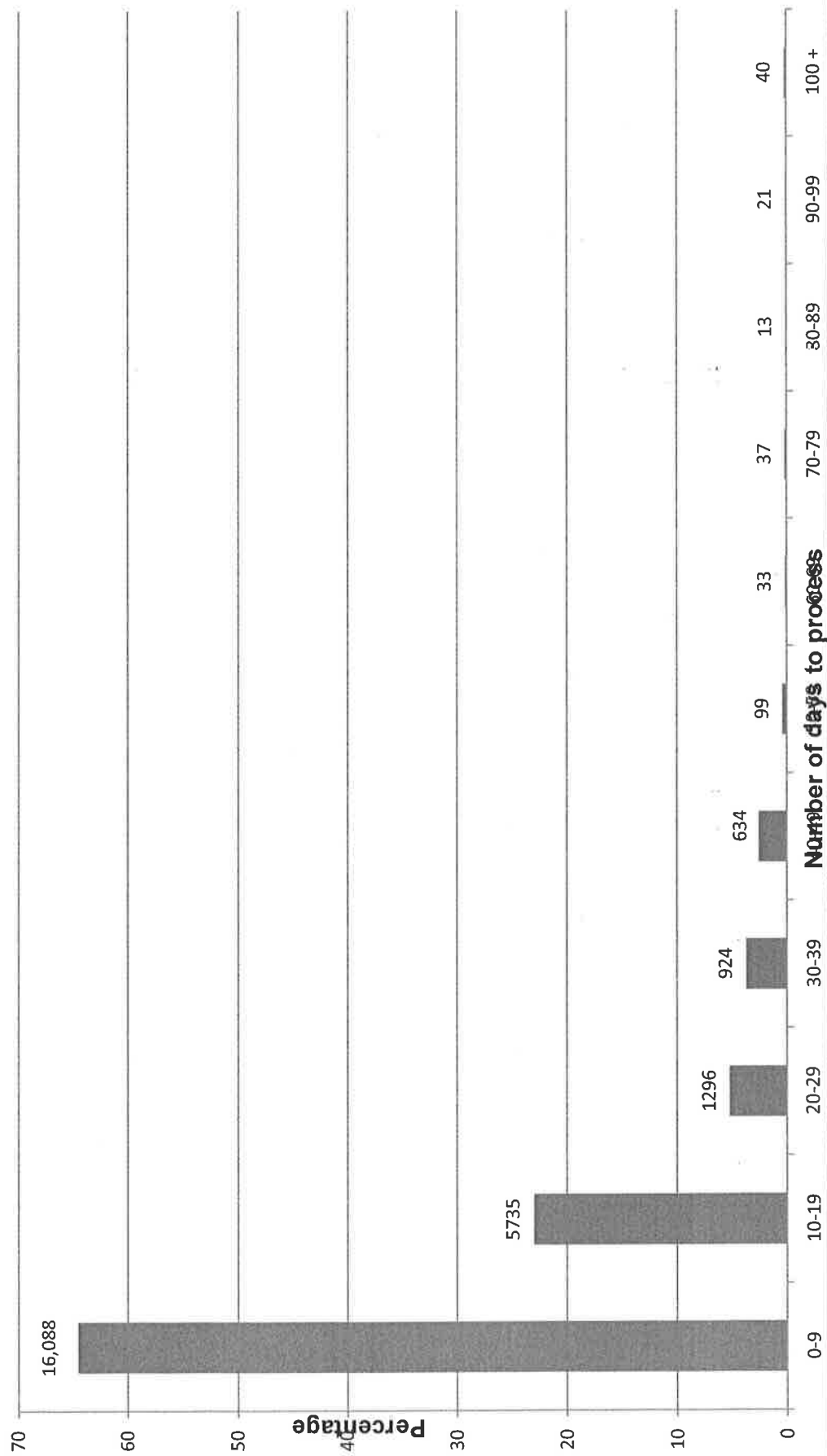




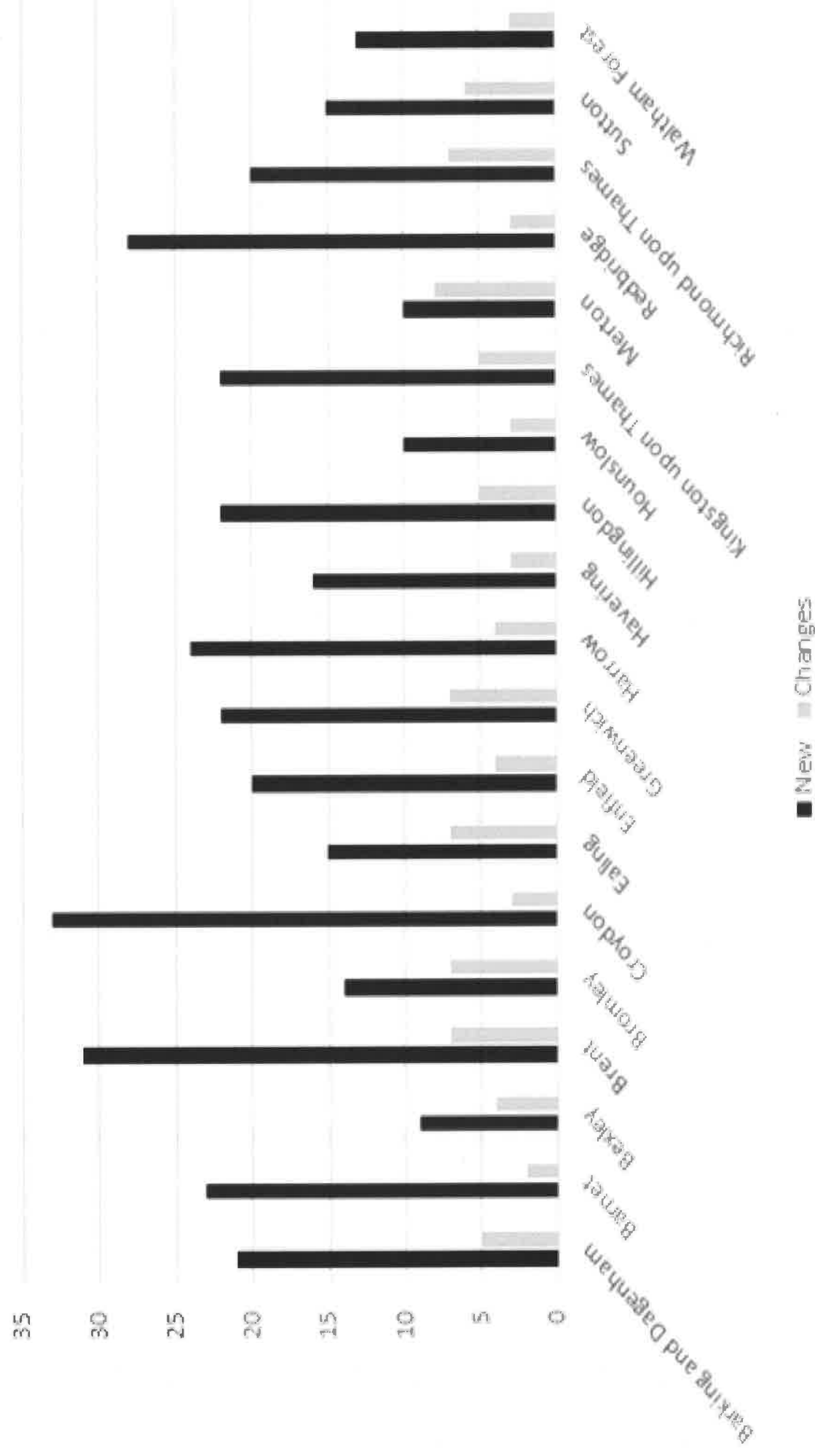
Housing Benefit - processing time breakdown April to November 2020
New Claims (1046 cases)



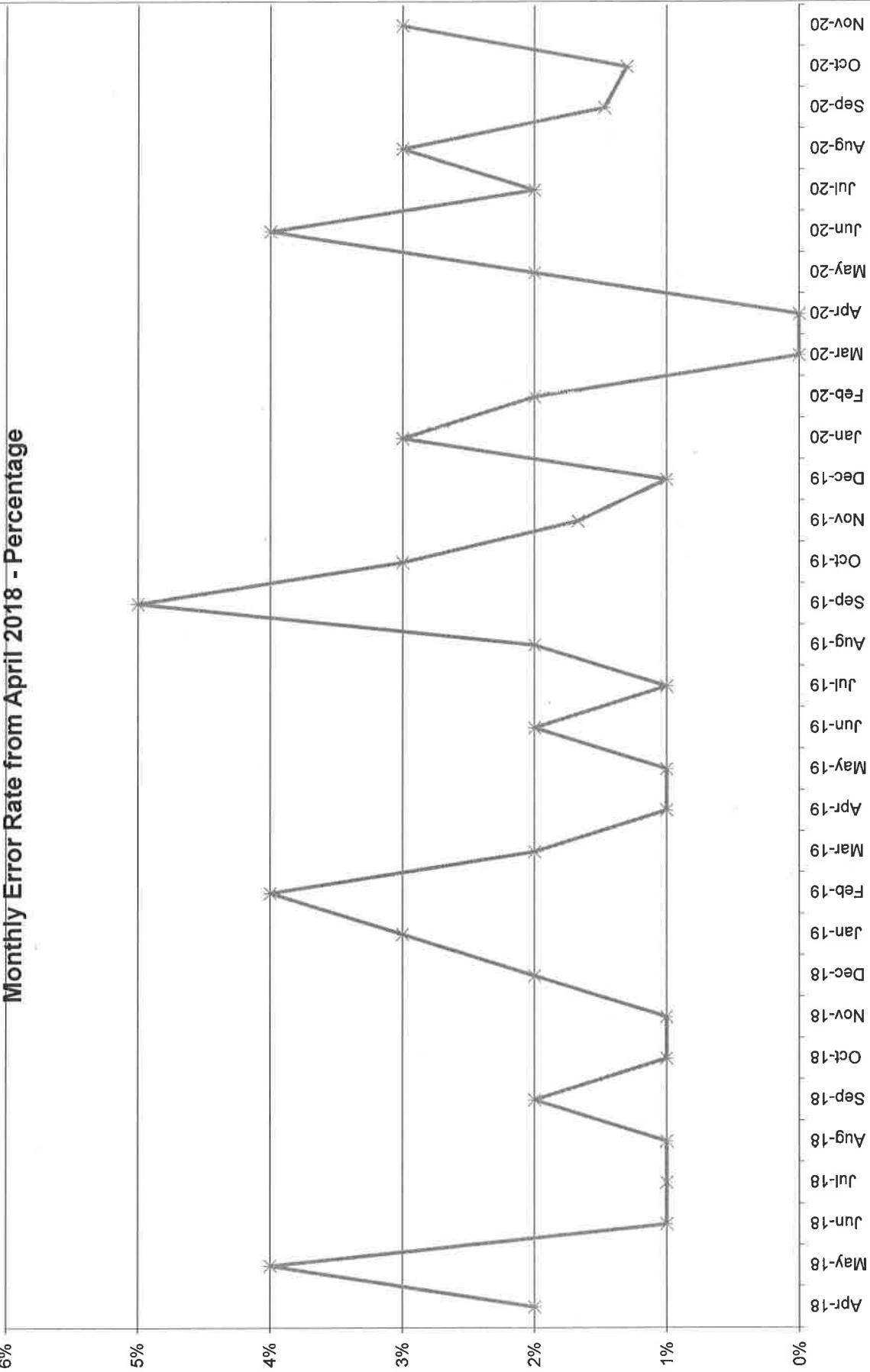
Housing Benefit - processing time breakdown - April to November 2020
Change in Circumstances (24,920)



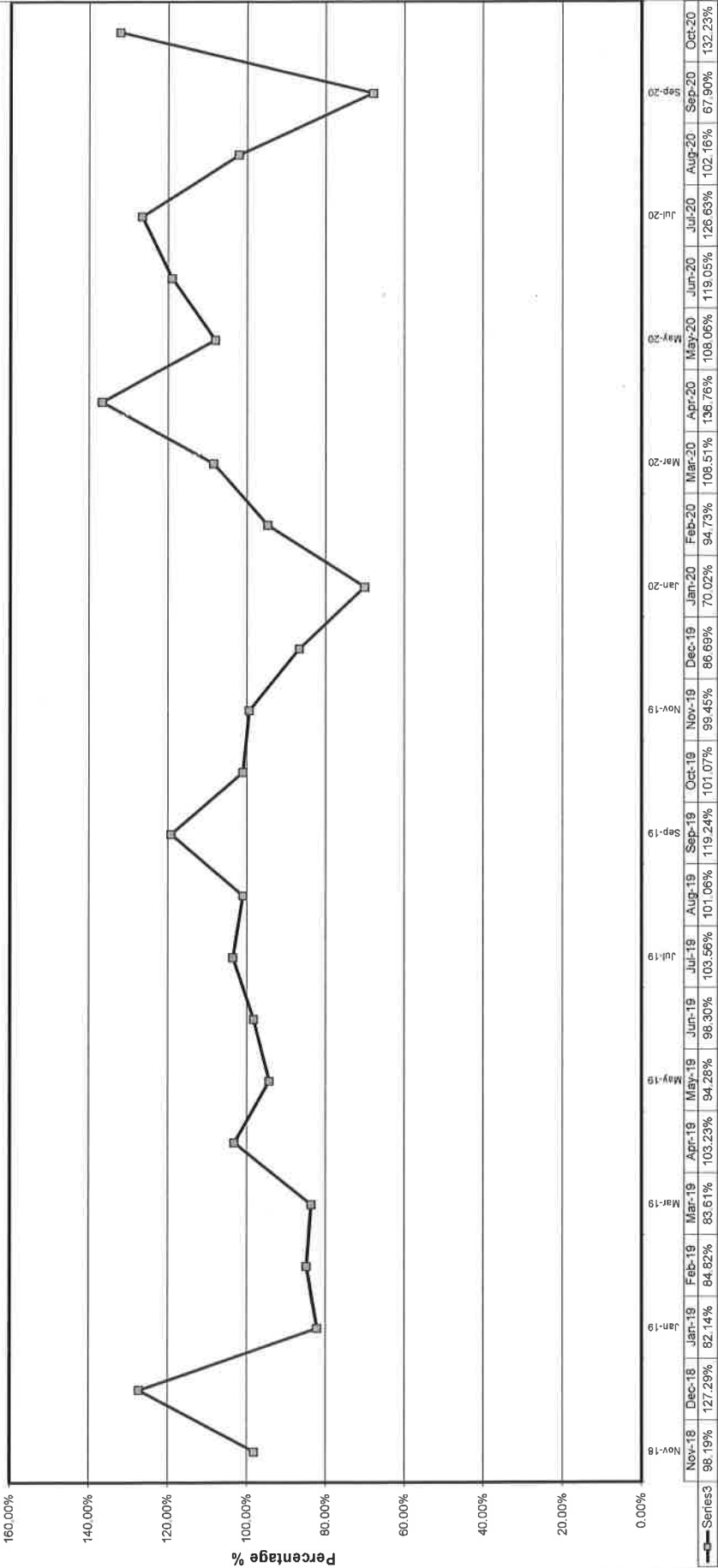
DWP Housing Benefit Speed of Processing - Q1 2020/21



Monthly Error Rate from April 2018 - Percentage



Monthly Overpayment % recovered against that created since November 2018



Revenues and Benefits Call Centre - number of telephone calls received and abandoned from March 2019 to November 2020

