

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

Date: 11th June 2021

Our Ref: AIF/GT

Dear Claudine,

As we approach the June 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.

Liberata's Business Continuity plans are still in place and employees remain working from home, continuing to provide high levels of service to customers. The online application functionality which has been implemented enables customers to access the Benefits Service safely online and provide the required evidence and information through the Evidence Upload Facility.

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

This summary covers performance for the period 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021.

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 18,152 as at the end of March 2021. The caseload at the same time last year was 17,808. 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 the 2020/21 financial year was 14.43 days for New

Claims and 5.82 days for Changes. This is against an annual contractual target of 19 days and 9 days respectively.

As at the end of March 2021, the amount of outstanding work totalled 4,075 items. We also had 1,118 items pended, whilst awaiting information from the claimant and/or third-party. The impact of COVID19 has had a significant impact on volumes which we are receiving in respect of new Universal Credit (UC) award notices and changes. This increased volume has continued throughout this year which we believe will continue until the end 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 which ultimately sustains tenancies and prevents homelessness.

The dedicated Temporary Accommodation benefit assessment staff and LBB's Housing staff and stakeholders have created a robust, collaborative virtual team which focuses on benefit claims being paid quickly and efficiently.

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.

Liberata's specialised VEP Team, based in the shared service centre, plays a key role in ensuring that the daily VEP files provided by the DWP are downloaded and processed in accordance with the information being provided. The VEP alerts draw relevant information held by various organisations including HMRC and the Pension Service which provide 'real time' information 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 has delayed or 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 the speed of processing and reduces the risk of input error by

assessors when re-keying information. However, since April 2020 we have seen a month on month decrease in ATLAS files transmitted to us by the DWP compared to last year.

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 March 2021 was 1.69% which is a significant improvement from 2018/19 when it was 2.1%. This is compared to a contractual target of 4%. The additional quality checking undertaken during the year was key in ensuring that Liberata were delivering a high quality service to customers and mitigating the risk of financial error.

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 or mentoring is provided to maintain our high standard of quality in the assessments that are undertaken.

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 continues to remain well below the lower threshold attracting 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 March 2021 was 121.34%. 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 has continued to receive high volumes of UC notifications advising us of new UC awards and changes to existing ones. The impact of COVID 19 has been significant in this area and reflects the financial hardship which residents of the borough have experienced during the pandemic. We are currently working with the Academy software supplier to finalise automation which will upload data from the notifications directly into the Benefits database. This solution will minimise

assessment errors in re-keying data and also increase performance in processing claims.

Since April 2020 the volumes of Council Tax Support (CTS) applications have increased month on month. Though the increase has slowed down since August 2020, the caseload still remain higher than it was in 2019. The increase in applications has been as a direct result of the COVID19 pandemic, which we forecast will continue to increase for the remainder of 2021.

The online smart forms for new claims and changes which were implemented earlier this year have simplified the application process for customers applying for assistance. At the point in which a customer submits their online form they are advised whether there is a requirement for them to provide any further information. The information can then be submitted online along with their application.

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

1.7 Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)

As a result of the new contract, Liberata now administer DHP and are able to assist some of the most vulnerable customers within Bromley. During 2020/21, the DWP released funding which was significantly higher than previous years, to be used to support customers that were experiencing issues with rent arrears and rent shortfalls during the pandemic. The funding provided totalled £893k which was fully utilised by the end of March 2021.

2. Corporate Visiting Team (CVT)

The COVID 19 pandemic has prevented Visiting Officers from conducting face to face visits with customers in their home. We incorporated the DWP's 'Trust and Protect' principles last year, 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 once visits can resume. This principle has been effective and enabled the Benefits Service to carry out assessments without creating a delay to the customer. All assessments which have been made under 'Trust and Protect' have been logged and we are aiming to visit customers in June once lockdown has been lifted.

3. Call Centre & Customer Services

The Revenues & Benefits Call Centre received 92,324 calls for the period 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021, with 98% being answered with an average speed to answer of 40 seconds. Of these calls 86% were answered within the service level target. The Call Centre also received 7,591 NNDR calls, up from 4,065 in the same period 2019/20. This large increase was indicative of the turmoil being felt by businesses as lockdown was imposed.

The Customer Services front facing team re-opened at the end of June 2020 after being closed for the whole of April and May, and most of June due the national Covid lockdown restrictions. The service was mainly appointment only, but vulnerable customers who presented without an appointment were seen. During this reporting period, the team saw just 1,434 customers compared to 26,453 during the same period in 2019/20. 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;

- Risk Based Verification (RBV) has been implemented; this now enables claims to be risk scored in line with the customers circumstances. Customers deemed as low risk have their new claims and changes processed without the requirement for them to provide additional information to validate their claims. This provides enhanced customer experience and significantly improves the speed of processing times.
- Planned implementation of 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 also significantly increase the processing times for new claims and changes as well as a further enhancement to customer experience.
- A full launch implementation of the Benefits self-service portal; this is currently in use by the 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 have now reviewed the 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.
- Housing Benefit Award Accuracy Initiative (HBAAI); Liberata will commence processing HBAAI workloads from information provided by the

DWP. Existing cases will be reviewed to ensure that current awards of Benefits are accurate and the Benefits database is up to date.

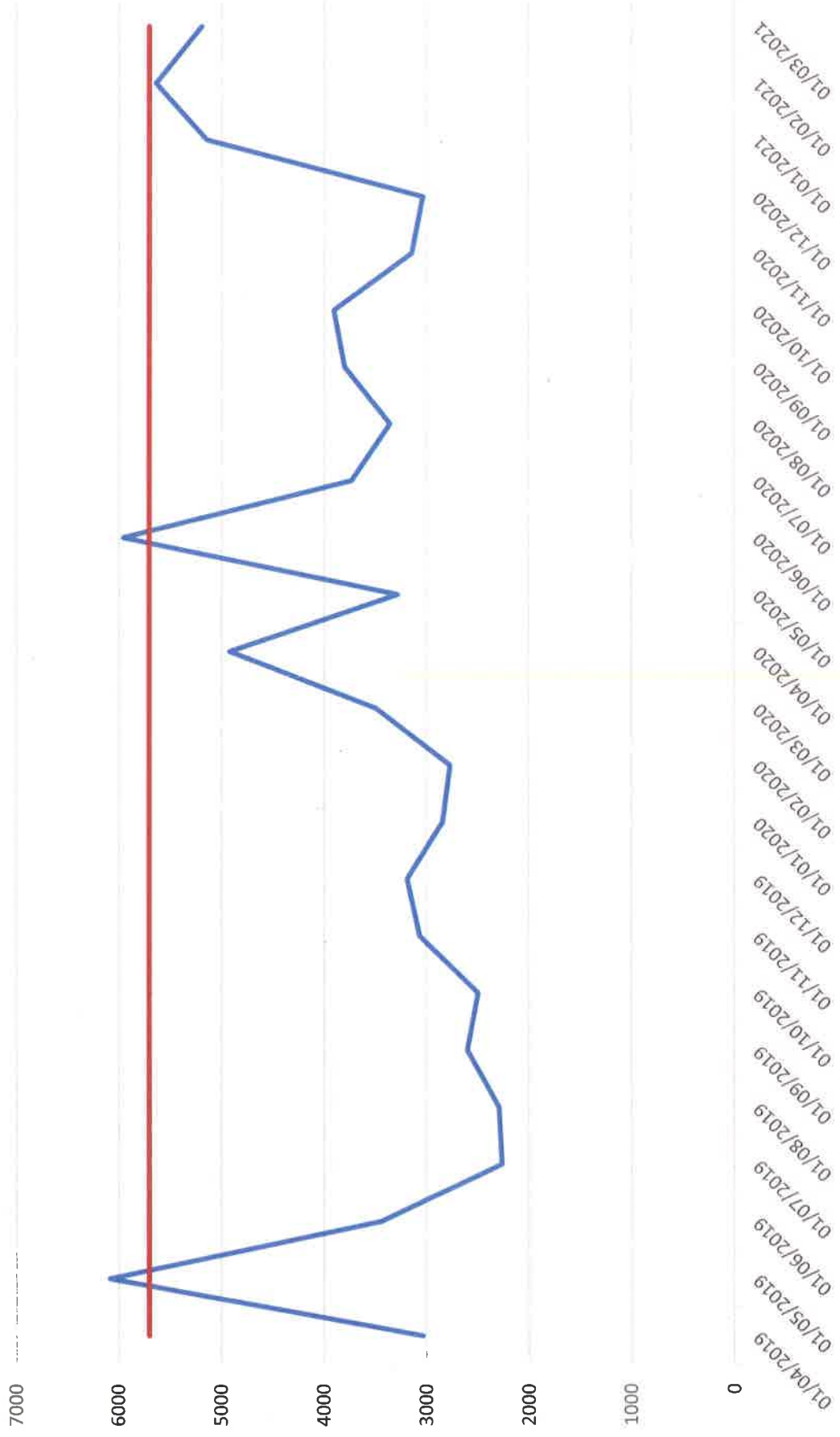
- Universal Credit (UC) Automation; We will be implementing UC automation later this year. This will enable us to automate the vast majority of UC notifications and reduce errors as a result of manual re-keying of data into the database.

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

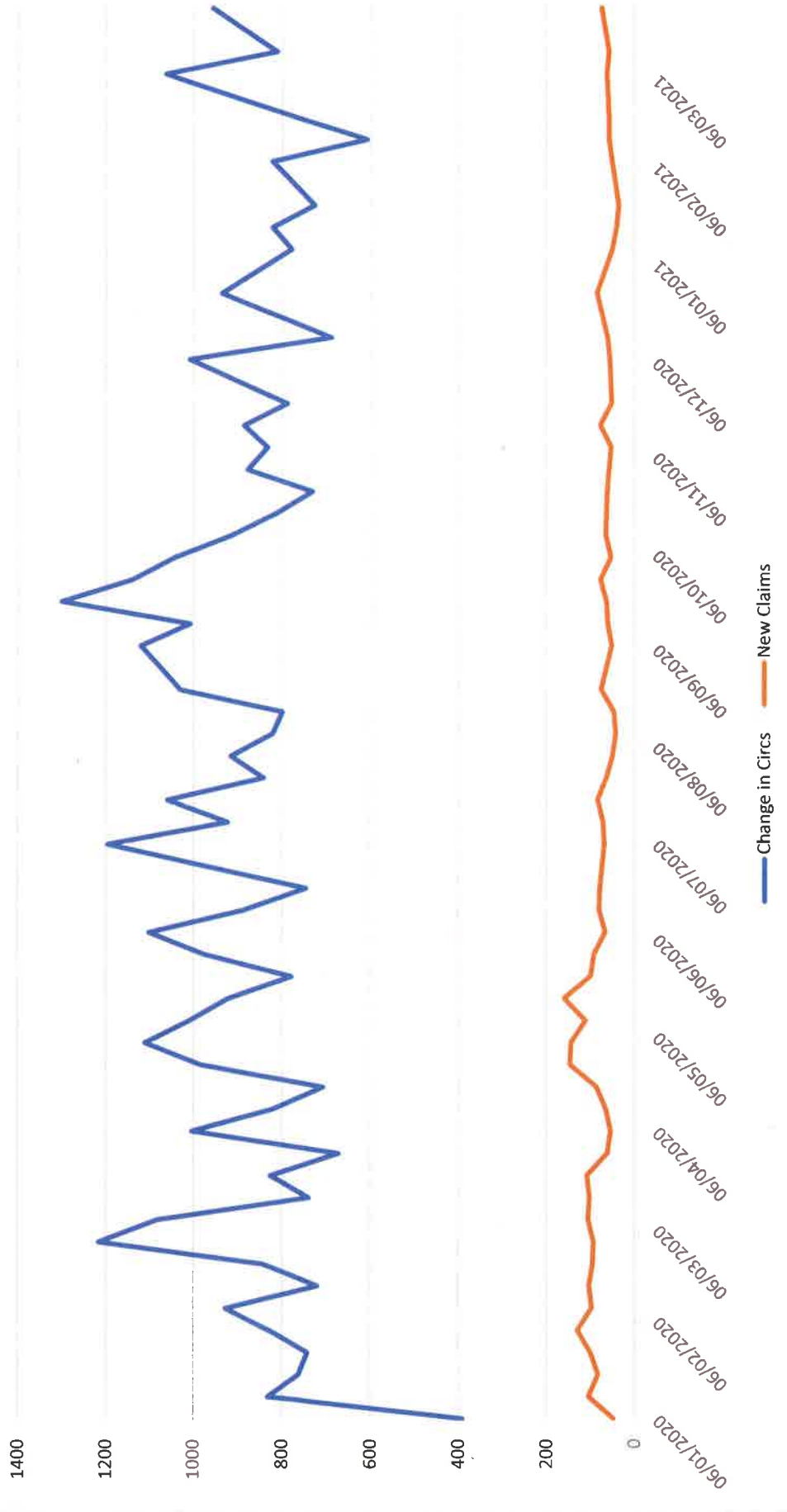
Yours sincerely,

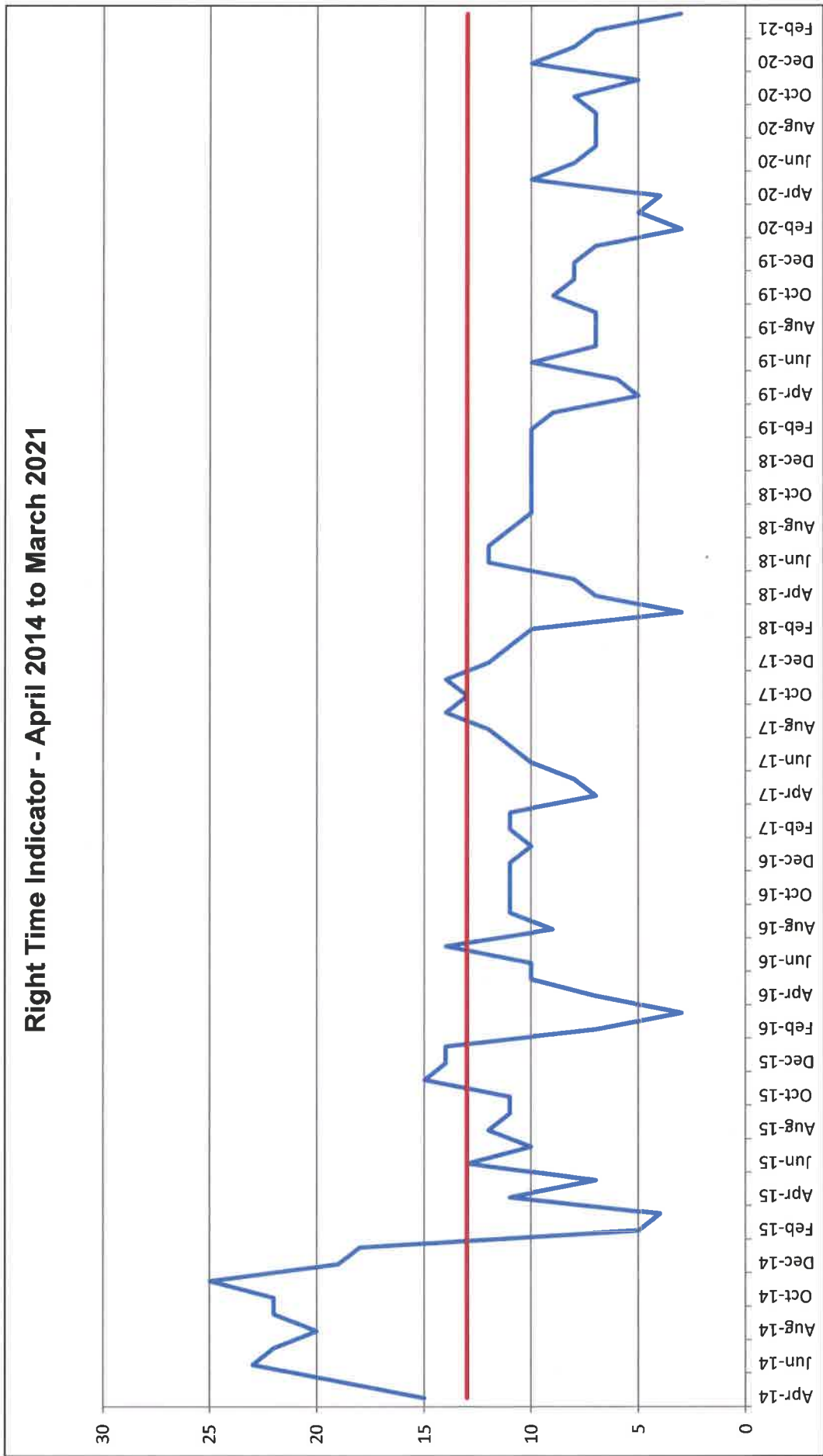
Amanda Inwood-Field
London Regional Contract Director

Outstanding Work - April 2019 to March 2021 Target - 5700

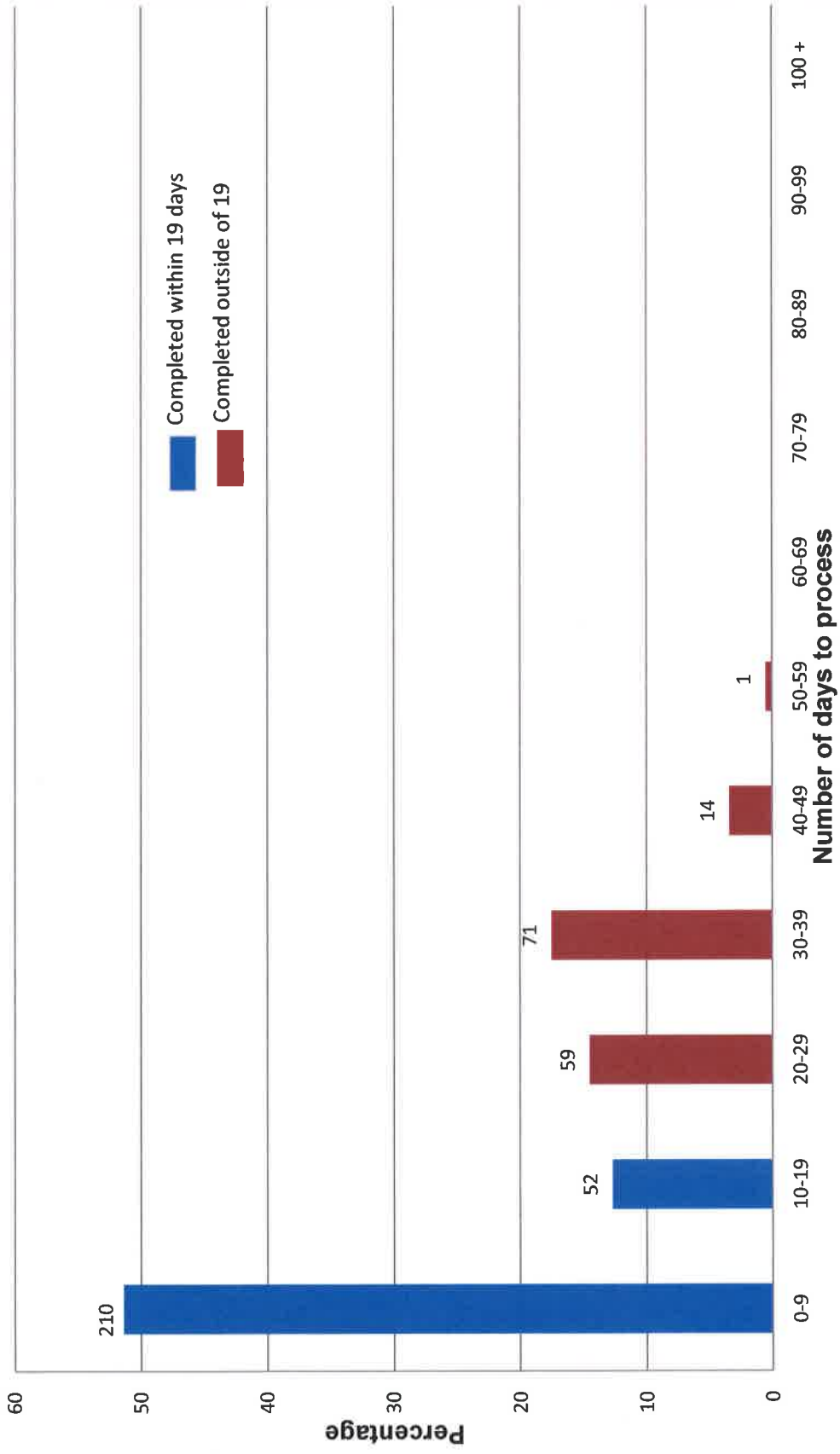


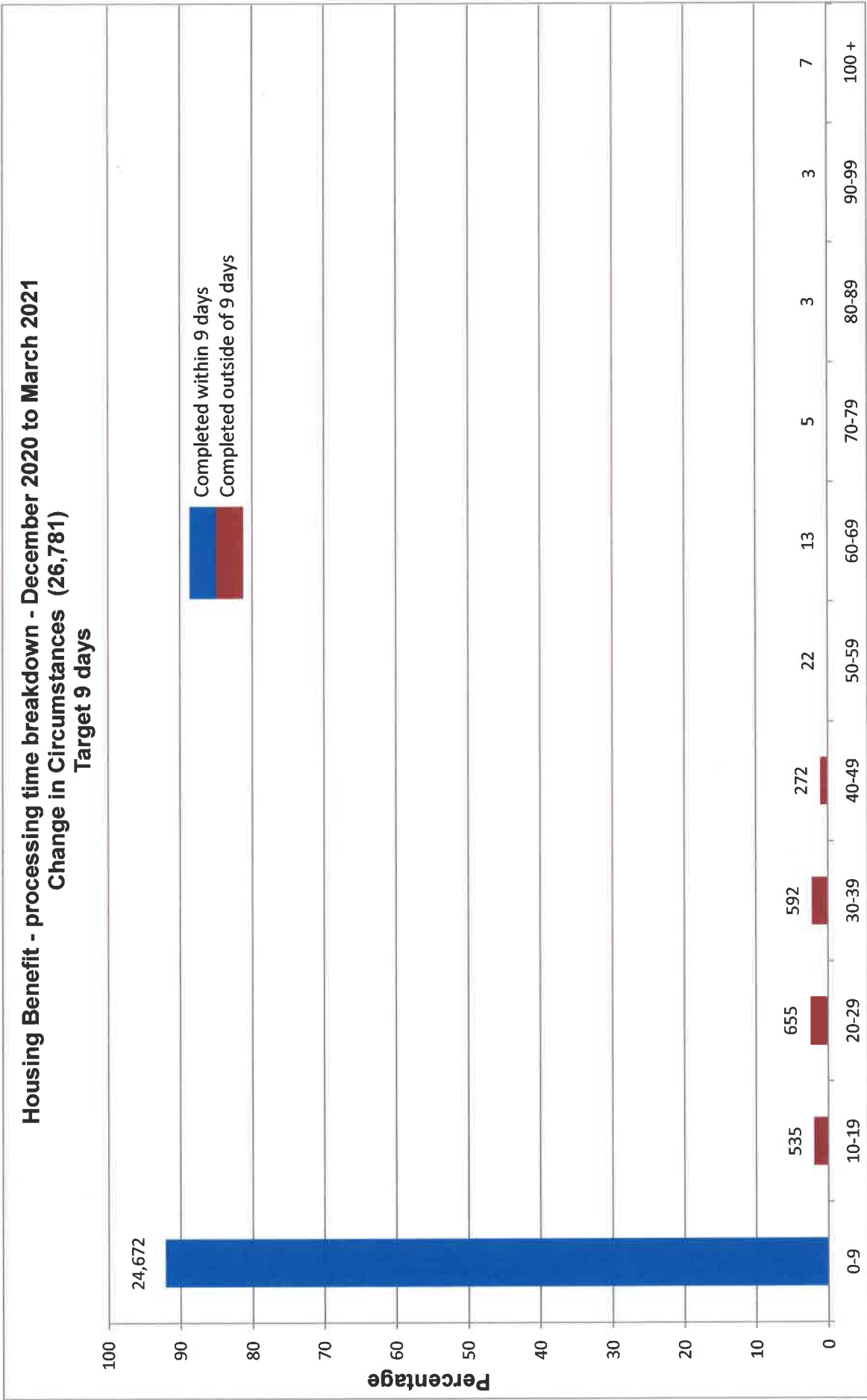
New Claims and Changes in Circumstances received from January 2020 to March 2021



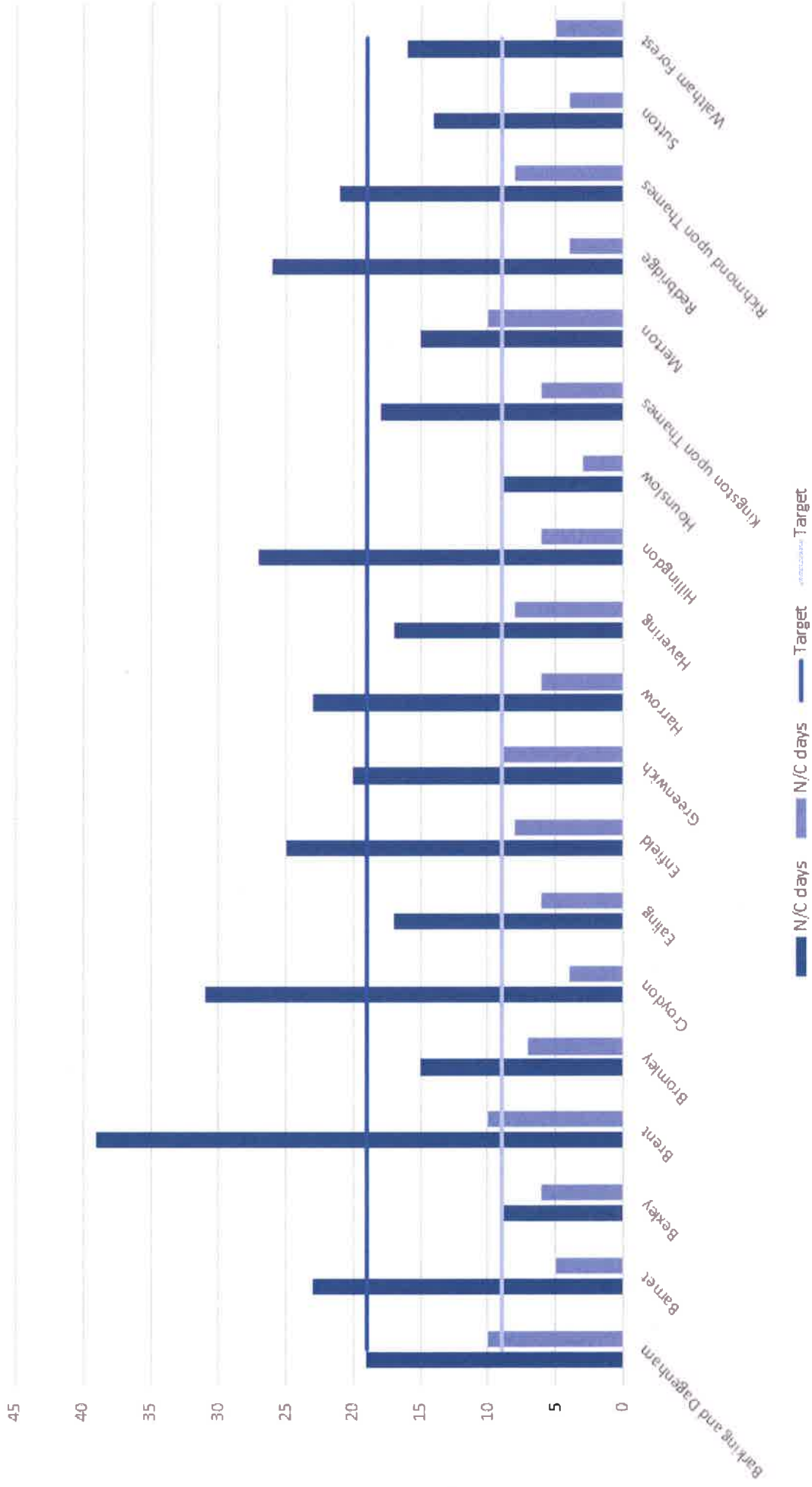


Housing Benefit - processing time breakdown December 2020 to March 2021 New Claims (408 cases)

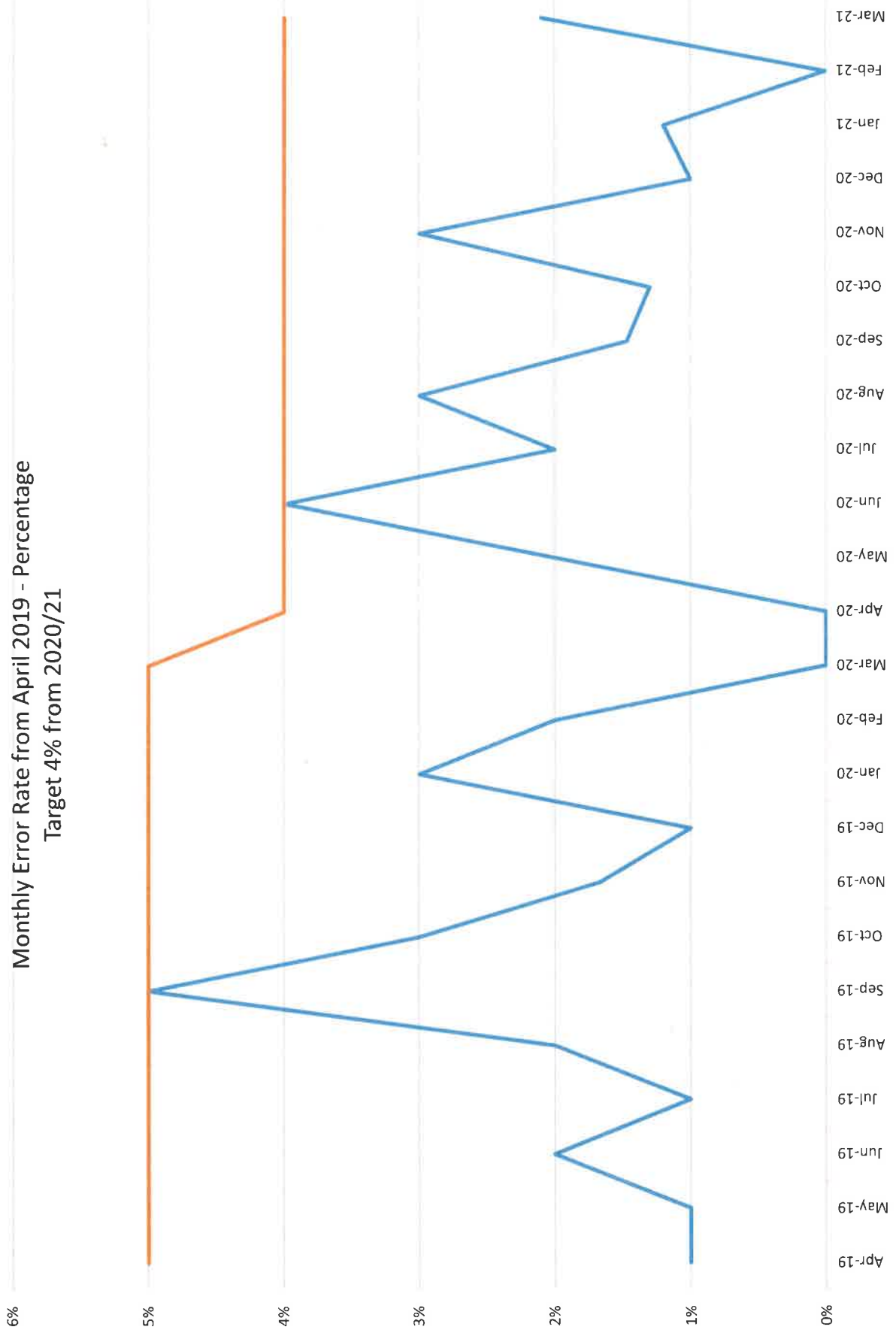




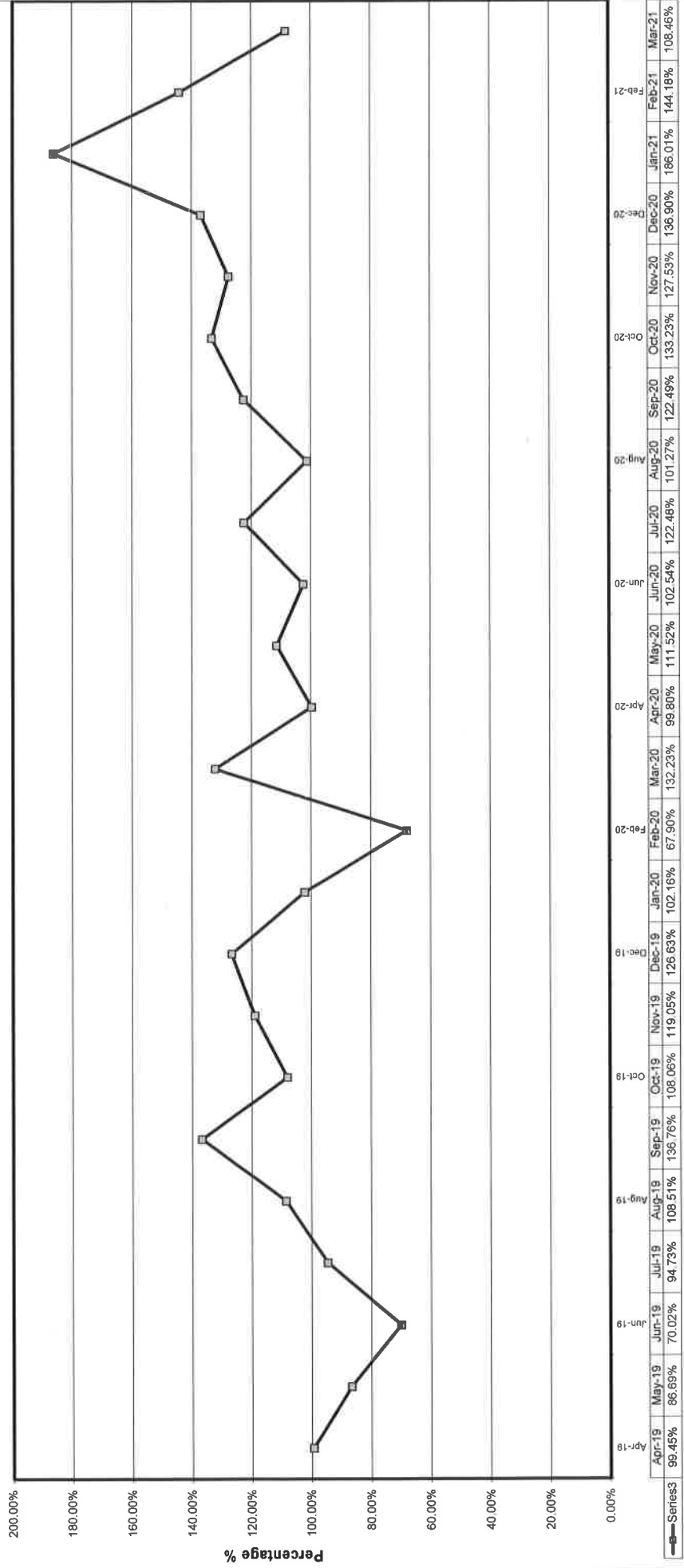
Outer London - DWP Q3 Performance - 2020/21



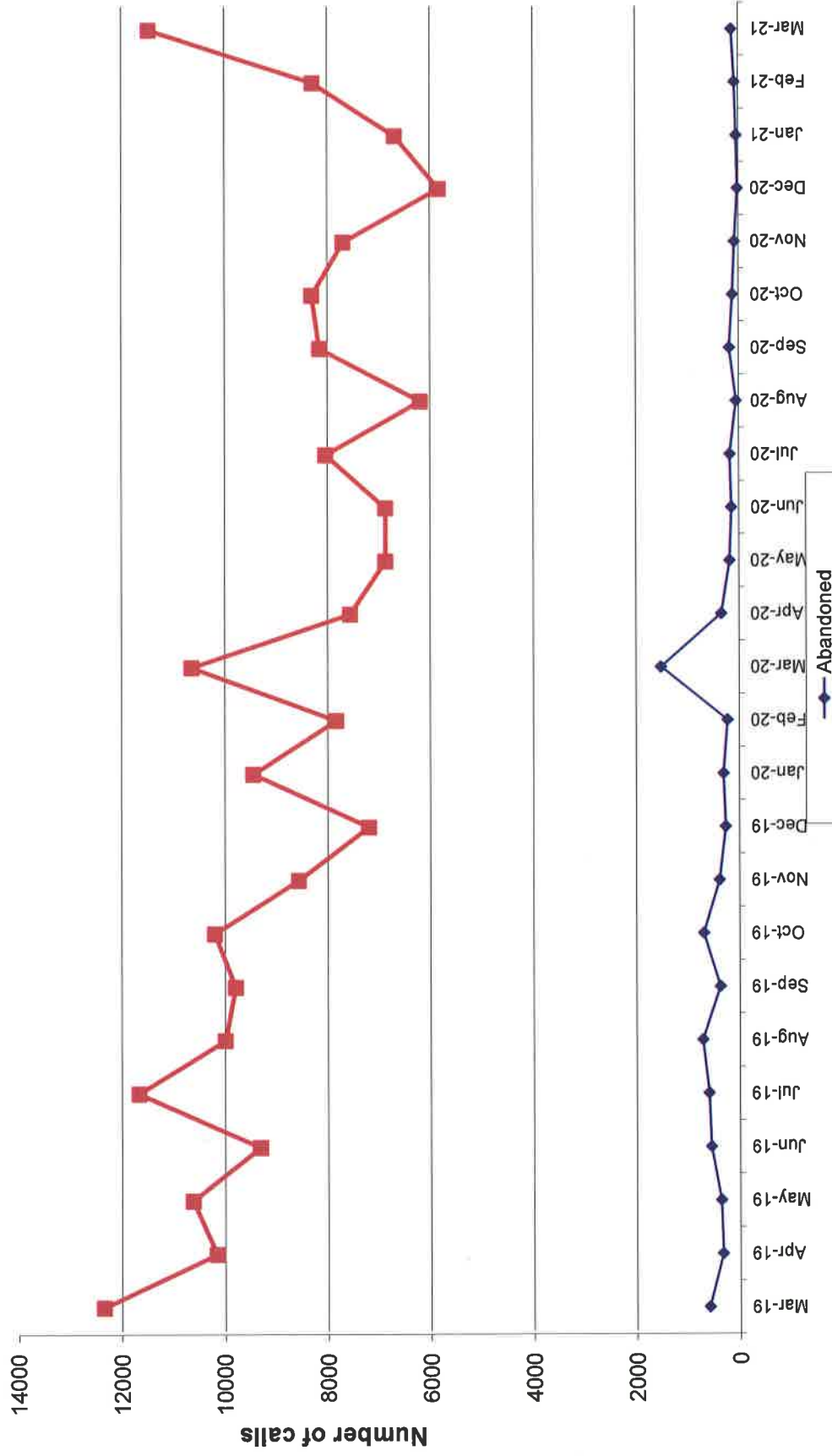
Monthly Error Rate from April 2019 - Percentage
Target 4% from 2020/21



Monthly Overpayment % recovered against that created since April 2019



Revenues and Benefits Call Centre - number of telephone calls received and abandoned from March 2019 to March 2021



Caseload from July 2018 to March 2021

