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

Date: 10th December 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 remain in place and employees continue working from home. As a result of the recent Government announcement there are no plans to change this arrangement however, this will be reviewed in the New Year.

Our experience during the COVID pandemic has enabled us to continue successfully building on the online strategies in line with the Council's transformation programme. In January we will implement the 'Channel Shift Strategy" which includes a number of initiatives that should encourage customers to transact with the service online. This will include adding 'how to' videos on the Bromley website which will highlight how easy and convenient the online applications forms are to use. The additional provision now in place for vulnerable customers has proven critical in ensuring that services can be accessed seamlessly by all citizens within the borough.

This summary covers performance for the period: 1st April 2021 to 30th November 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 17,999 as at the end of November 2021. The caseload at the same time last year was 18,443.

In terms of our position for the processing of New Claims and Changes, the average performance for the period April 2021 to November 2021 was 13.15 days for New Claims compared to 14.34 days for the same period last year. For Changes it was 7.89 days compared to 6.89 days. Although this demonstrates a slight deterioration, this is as a direct result of the increase in UC notifications. This is against an annual contractual target of 19 days and 9 days respectively.

As at the end of November 2021, the amount of outstanding work totalled 2,422 items. We also had 875 items pended, whilst awaiting information from the claimant and/or third-party. This compares to 6,229 items and 1,282 items respectively for the same period last year. Though volumes have reduced, we continue to see a high volume of new Universal Credit (UC) award notices and changes. The reduction in outstanding work is a combination of both work volumes and the automation of UC notifications.

1.1 Temporary Accommodation
Liberata have maintained strong relationships with the various LBB Housing Teams, Orchard & Shipman and the Mears Group. Our ongoing operational meetings continue each month and have proven effective in resolving any benefit issues swiftly. Where necessary we 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 are 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 reduces 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 now 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. We have seen a significant reduction the number of ATLAS files being transmitted as a number of these cases come through the UC channels.

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 2021 to November 2021 was 1.0% which is a significant improvement from the same reporting period last year when it was 2.1%. This is compared to a contractual target of 4%. Quality assurance checking undertaken during the year was key in ensuring that Liberata deliver 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 recovery rate of overpaid Housing Benefit as at the end of November 2021 was 120.03%. 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

The volumes of UC notifications, though reduced from last year, continue to be higher than pre-pandemic volumes. Liberata has now implemented automation which was made available by the Academy software supplier. This means that around 40% of UC new claim notifications are automated through the system without the need of manual intervention. This ensure that processing errors are mitigated and the speed of processing these cases has increased.

We are now awaiting a further release from the Academy software supplier which will enable UC new claim notifications to benefit from a greater level of automation.

The new online smart forms for new claims and changes which were implemented earlier this year have proved effective with higher number of customers now using this online channel. Vulnerable customers that are not able to transact with the service online are provided with additional support from our Customer Services team.

1.7 Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)

Liberata now administers DHP on behalf of LB Bromley and are able to assist some of the most vulnerable customers within borough. This enabled us to support customers that are experiencing issues with rent arrears and rent shortfalls which mitigated the risk of evictions. Liberata work closely with LB Bromley to ensure that assistance from the discretionary fund is targeted at people that are in genuine need of support.

2.   Corporate Visiting Team (CVT)

During the pandemic Visiting Officers have been unable to conduct face to face visits with customers in their home. However, these recommenced in October when COVID restrictions were eased. Visits have now been scheduled to verify customer information which was previously assessed using the DWP's 'Trust and Protect' protocol which enabled the service to accept income and capital verbally or by email. New visit requests are also being scheduled to ensure that vulnerable customers are supported in accessing the service.

3.   Call Centre & Customer Services

The Revenues & Benefits Call Centre received 59,514 calls for the period 1st April to 30th November 2021, which is a similar volume in the same reporting period last year. We answered 98% of calls with an average speed to answer of 38 seconds. Of these calls 87% were answered within the service level target. The Call Centre also received 2,806 NNDR calls which is significantly lower than the

same period last year which saw 6,061 calls being offered. The volumes this year are much more in line with expectation.

The Customer Services front facing team continued to operate mainly an appointment only service, but vulnerable customers who presented without an appointment were seen. During this reporting period, the team saw just 1,058 R&B customers compared to 18,717 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.

This reporting period has seen more on-line self-service forms becoming available to customer through LB Bromley's website portal, this uptake by citizens has undoubtedly driven down call and footfall volumes.

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 plays a pivotal role in enabling 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 improves the speed of processing times.
- Investigating RBV automation; this would 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.
- Benefits self-service portal fully implemented; this is now being widely used by customers, LB Bromley's 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 LB Bromley have now reviewed the content of the 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 Accuaracy Initiative (HBAAI); Liberata will commence processing HBAAI workloads in April 2022. Cases identified by

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

- Universal Credit (UC) Automation; We will be implementing a further level of UC automation at the beginning of 2022. This will enable us to automate a higher volume 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.
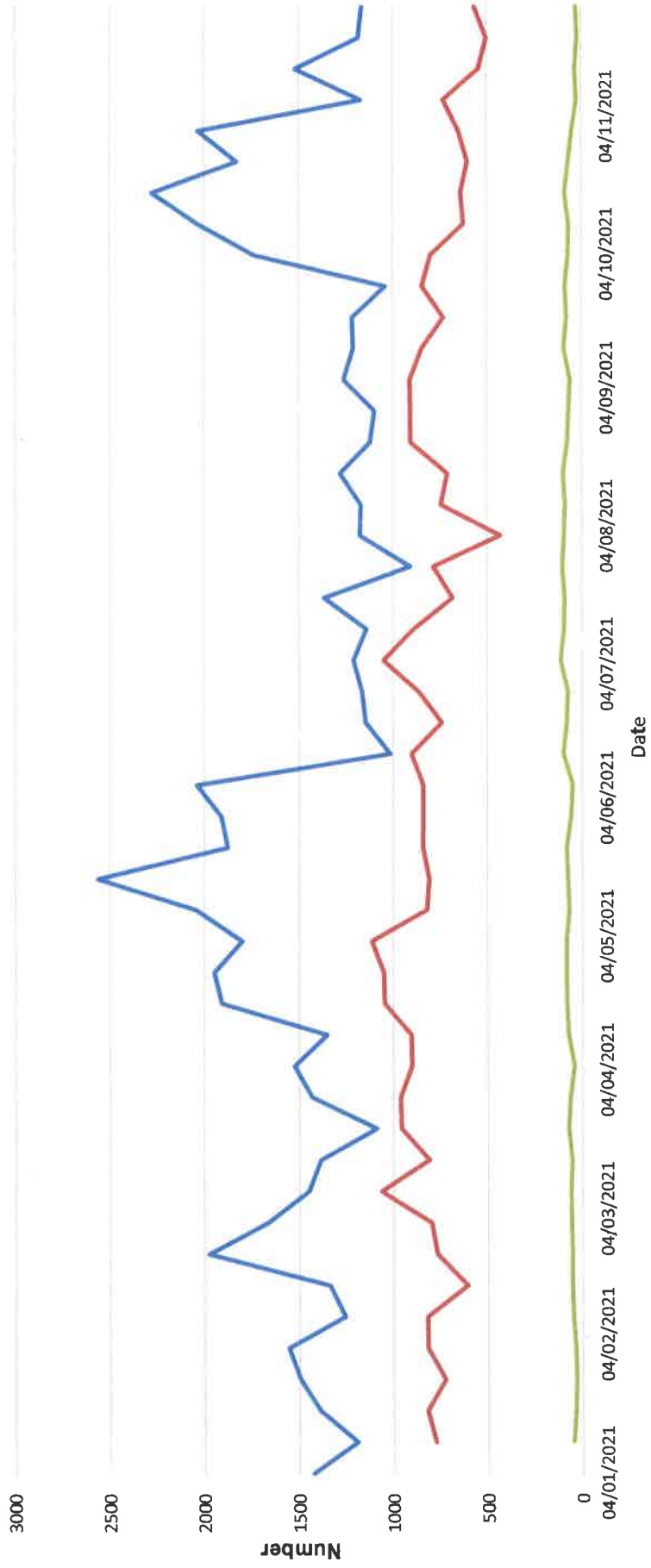
Yours sincerely,

Amanda Inwood-Field
London Regional Contract Director

Appendix 2

Outstanding Work - November 2019 to November 2021
Target - 5700
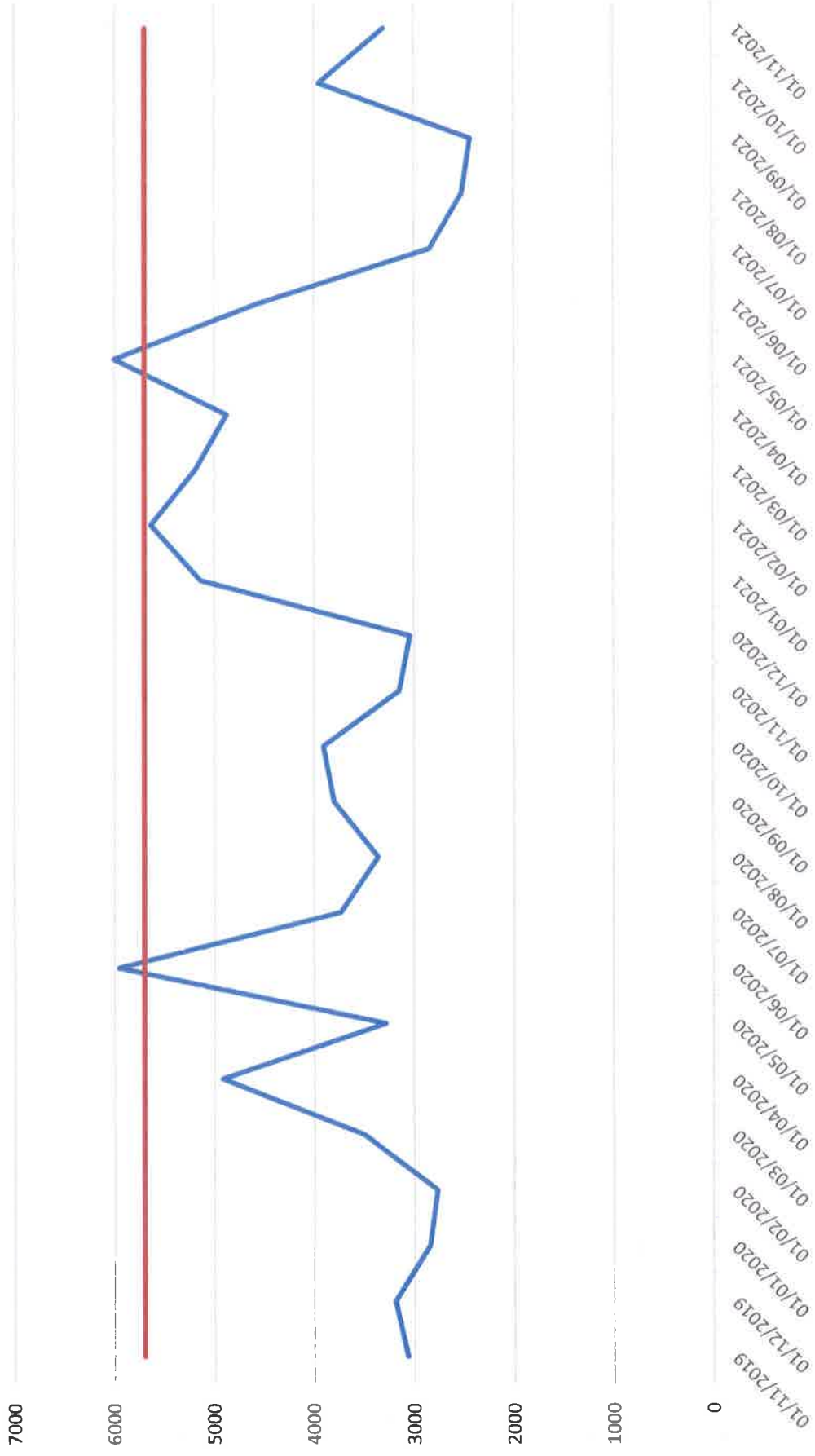
New claims, Changes in Circumstances and Universal Credit notifications received since January 2021

Right Time Indicator - April 2019 to November 2021
Target - 13 days
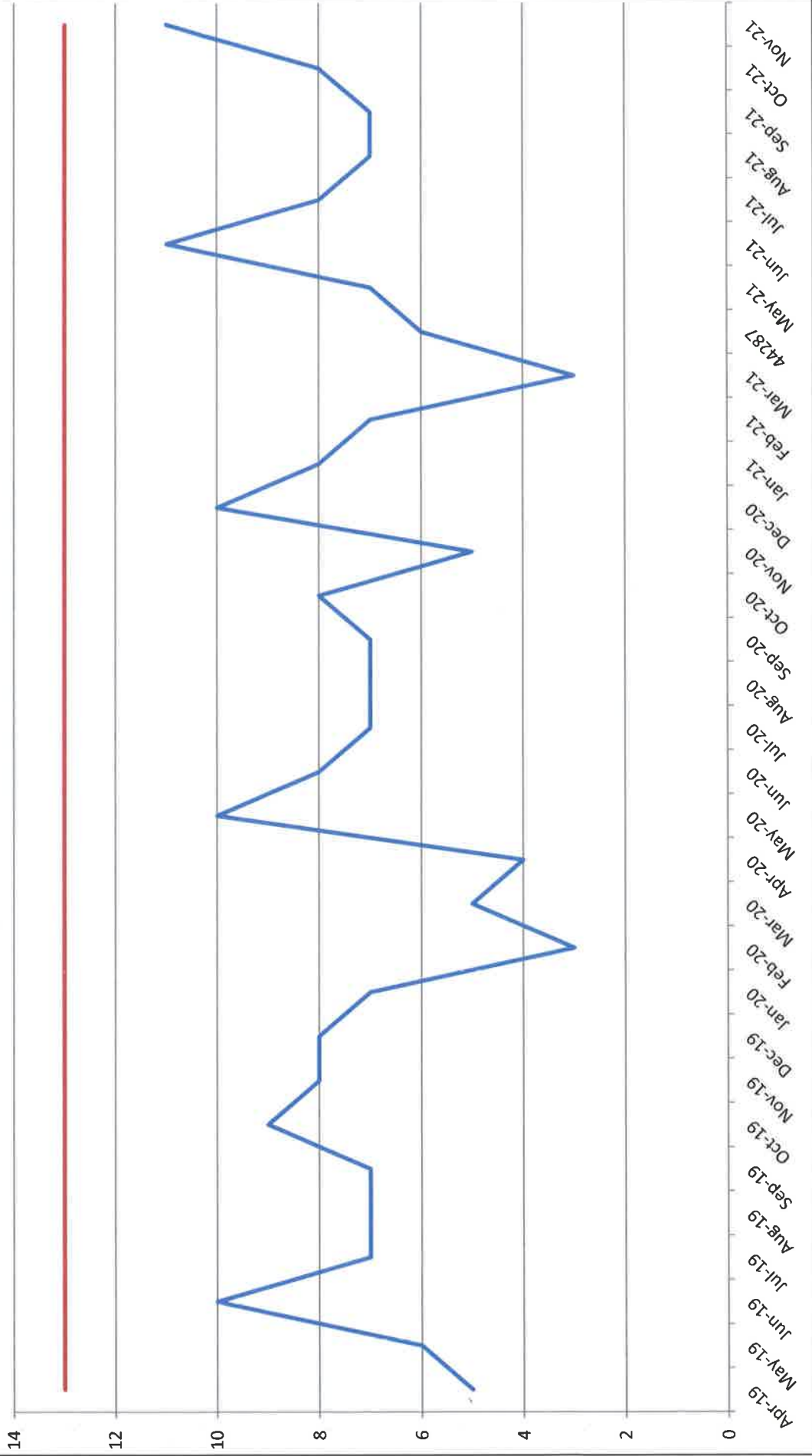
Housing Benefit - processing time breakdown April to November 2021 New Claims (1113 cases)

- Completed within 19 days
- Completed outside of 19

Number of days to process	Value 1	Value 2
0-9	540	
10-19	280	
20-29		146
30-39		126
40-49		19
50-59		1
60-69		1
70-79		
80-89		
90-99		
100 +		

Percentage

**Housing Benefit - processing time breakdown - April to November 2021
Change in Circumstances (15,792)**

Completed within 9 days
Completed outside of 9 days

Number of days to process	Value
0-9	10,564
10-19	2109
20-29	1203
30-39	1063
40-49	734
50-59	47
60-69	23
70-79	17
80-89	11
90-99	7
100 +	14

Percentage (y-axis: 0, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80)

Housing Benefit Speed of Processing Q1 2021/22 - Outer London Authorities

Y-axis: Average days to process (0 to 50)

X-axis categories: Barking and Dagenham, Barnet, Bexley, Brent, Bromley, Croydon, Ealing, Enfield, Greenwich, Harrow, Havering, Hillingdon, Hounslow, Kingston upon Thames, Merton, Redbridge, Richmond upon Thames, Sutton, Waltham Forest

Legend:
- HB Speed of Preceesing Q1 2021/22 New Claims
- HB Speed of Preceesing Q1 2021/22 C/Circs
- Target New Claim
- Target C/Circs
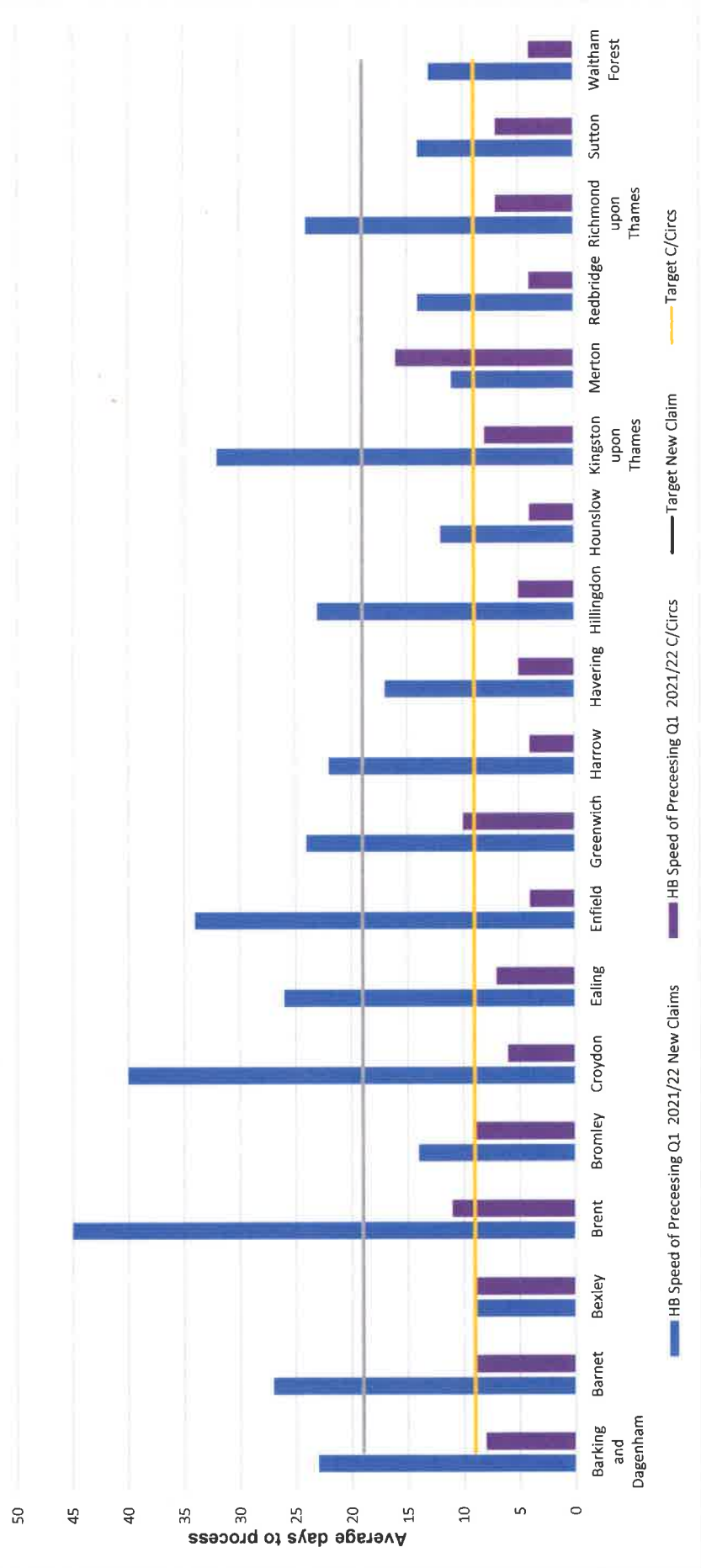
Housing Benefit Speed of Processing Q4 2020/21- Outer London Authorities

Legend:
- HB Speed of Preceesing Q1 2021/22 New Claims
- HB Speed of Preceesing Q1 2021/22 C/Circs
- Target New Claim
- Target C/Circs

X-axis (Average days to process): 0, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60

Authorities (left to right): Barking and Dagenham, Barnet, Bexley, Brent, Bromley, Croydon, Ealing, Enfield, Greenwich, Harrow, Havering, Hillingdon, Houslow, Kingston upon Thames, Merton, Redbridge, Richmond upon Thames, Sutton, Waltham Forest
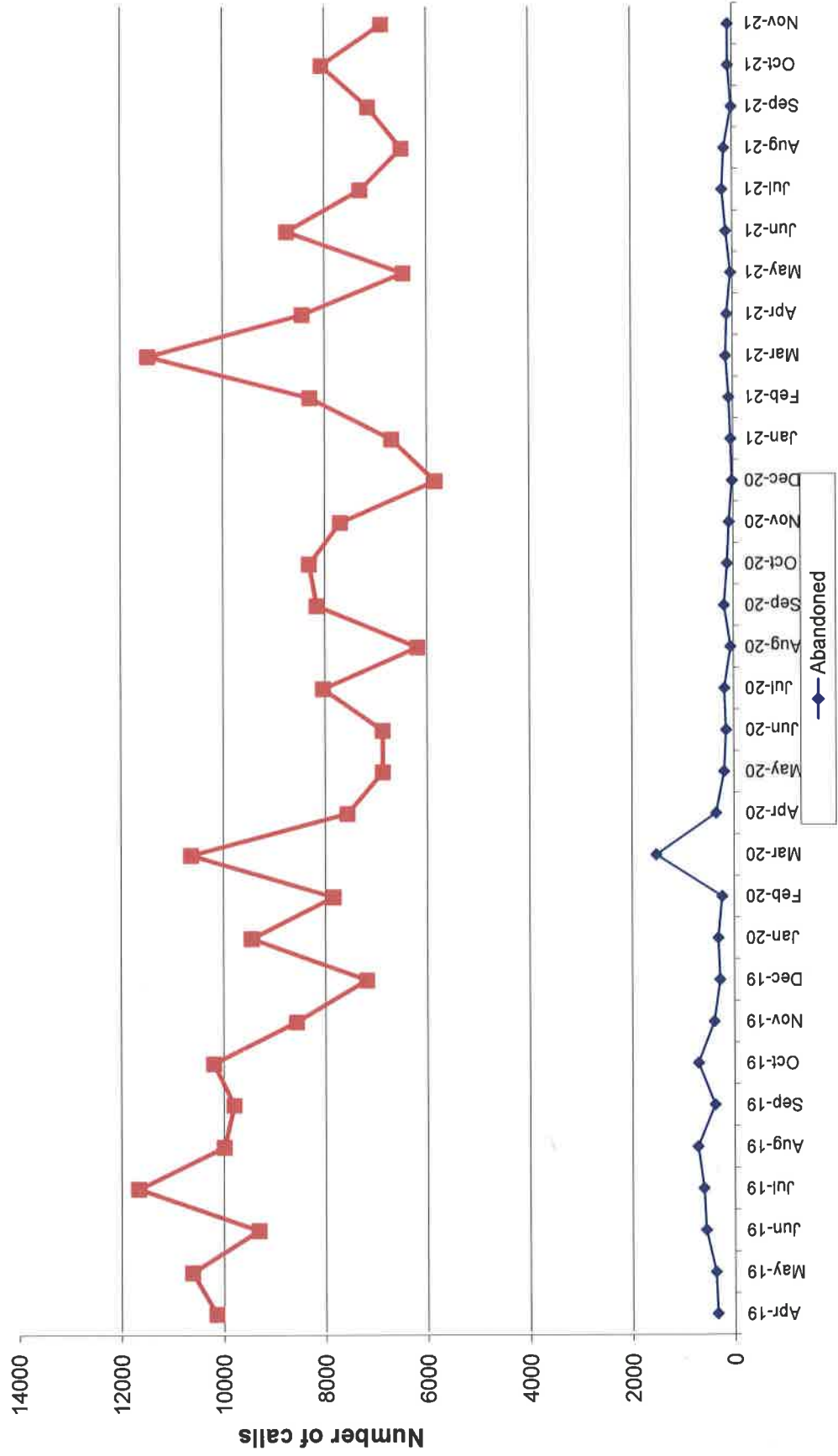
Monthly Error Rate from April 2019 - Percentage
Target - 4%
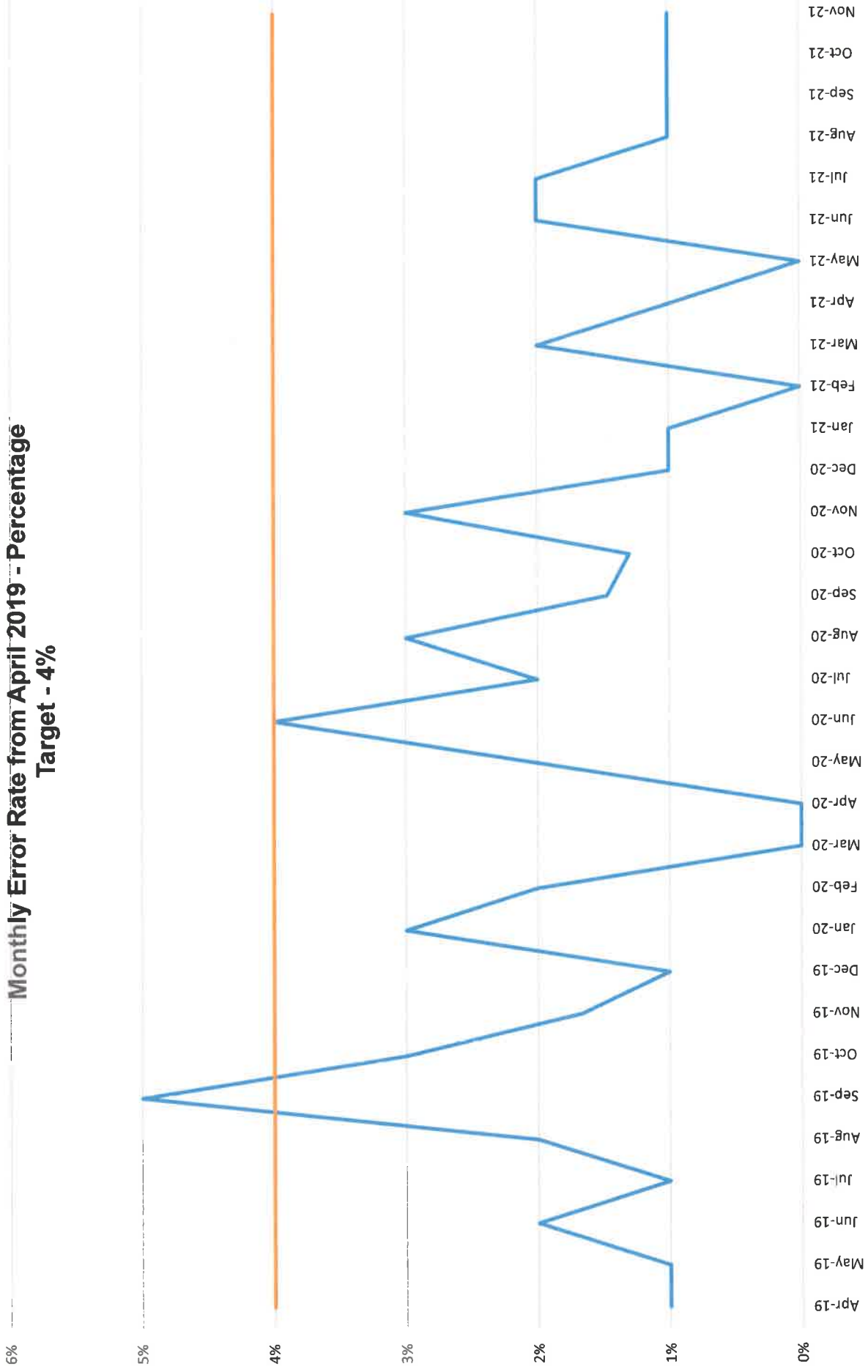
Monthly Overpayment % recovered against that created since November 2019

	Nov-19	Dec-19	Jan-20	Feb-20	Mar-20	Apr-20	May-20	Jun-20	Jul-20	Aug-20	Sep-20	Oct-20	Nov-20	Dec-20	Jan-21	Feb-21	Mar-21	Apr-21	May-21	Jun-21	Jul-21	Aug-21	Sep-21	Oct-21	Nov-21
Series3	119.05%	126.63%	102.16%	67.90%	132.23%	99.80%	111.52%	102.54%	122.48%	101.27%	122.49%	133.23%	127.53%	136.90%	186.01%	144.18%	108.46%	106.05%	112.93%	99.15%	137.76%	121.09%	143.24%	169.27%	93.48%
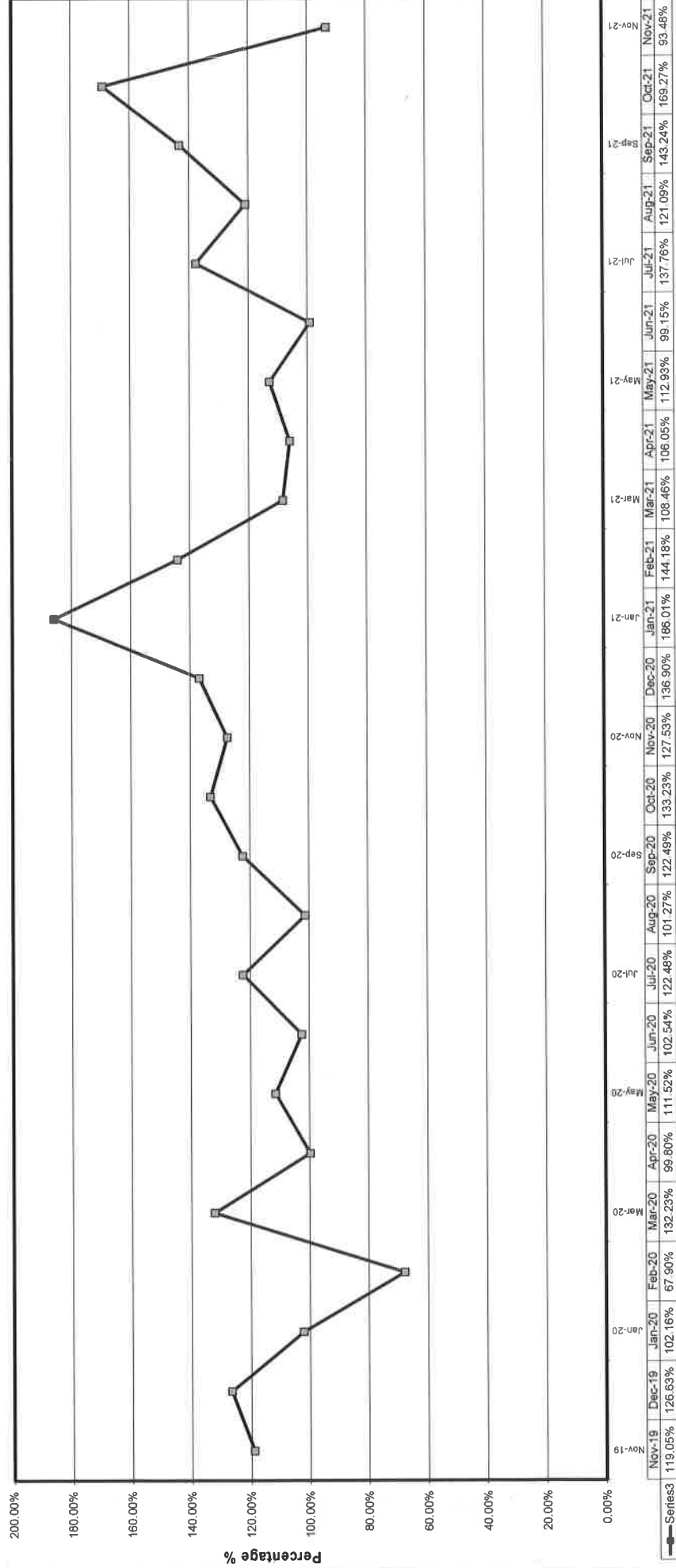
Revenues and Benefits Call Centre - number of telephone calls received and abandoned from April 2019 to November 2021

Caseload from April 2019 to November 2021

Combined Caseload — Council Tax Support