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Bromley  
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Date: 7<sup>th</sup> June 2022

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 have continued to work from home where possible to do so. However, there are plans now to move to hybrid working whereby most employees will split their working arrangements between home and office.

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. We have commenced implementation of the 'Channel Shift Strategy' which includes a number of initiatives that will encourage customers to transact with the service online. This will eventually include adding 'how to' videos on the Bromley website which will highlight how easy and convenient the online application forms are to use. The additional provisions now in place for vulnerable customers have proven critical in ensuring that services can be accessed seamlessly by all citizens within the borough.

This summary covers performance for the year 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022.

#### **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 17,383 as at the end of March 2022. The caseload at the same time last year was 18,512.

The average performance for the processing of New Claims and Changes during the year April 2021 to March 2022 was 13.00 days for New Claims compared to

14.46 days for the same period last year. For Changes it was 7.02 days compared to 6.84 days. This is against an annual contractual target of 19 days and 9 days respectively.

Outstanding work at the year end totalled 830 items. In addition there were 876 items pended, where we were waiting for information from the claimant and/or third-party. This compares to 4,075 items and 1,118 items respectively for the same period last year. Although work volumes have reduced, we are still seeing a high volume of new Universal Credit (UC) award notices and changes. The reduction in outstanding work is due to a combination of reducing work volumes and the impact of us automating the processing of UC notifications.

### **1.1 ATLAS**

ATLAS is a process of transferring data from the DWP systems to the Local Authority systems. The data covered includes details of changes to state benefit which customers may not have previously notified us of. We have been able to automate the processing of the majority of the ATLAS files received. This increases our processing speed and reduces the risk of re-keying errors by assessors. The number of ATLAS files being transmitted has continued to reduce as a number of these cases now come through the UC channels.

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

During the year we have continued to receive VEP alerts, from the DWP. These alerts help ensure that the earnings and pension information held on the Academy benefits system is accurately maintained.

Our specialised VEP Team help ensure that the daily VEP files that we receive from the DWP are downloaded and processed. These alerts extract key information held by various organisations including HMRC and the Pension Service to provide 'real time' information which is essential in the administration of Benefits.

These files not only help ensure the accuracy of our data but they also significantly reduce the potential for overpayments in cases where the customer may have delayed or not notified the Council of any changes in their household income.

### **1.3 Temporary Accommodation**

We have a strong relationship with the LBB Housing Teams, Orchard & Shipman and the Mears Group. Regular monthly meetings ensure that any benefit issues

arising are quickly resolved. This also allows us to effectively fast track particular cases to prevent arrears from accumulating and help sustain tenancies.

The dedicated Temporary Accommodation benefit assessment staff work closely with LBB's Housing staff and stakeholders in a virtual team which focuses on benefit claims being paid quickly and efficiently.

#### **1.4 Quality**

As ever we continue to be firmly focused on ensuring the quality of our service and always looks for ways to eradicate errors from the assessment process. The average financial error rate for the period April 2021 to March 2022 was 1.2% 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 mitigate the risk of financial error.

All new employees, and any existing employees who require upskilling, undergo an intense training program. Once the training is completed these employees are subjected to significant monitoring of their work in order to ensure that they achieve the required accuracy levels. Any errors identified are immediately addressed with the employees and form part of the discussions during their regular review meetings with their manager. Additional refresher training and mentoring is also provided to ensure that high standards of quality in the assessments are maintained.

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 thereby attracting maximum subsidy for the Authority.

#### **1.5 Overpayment Strategy**

A natural bi-product of administering Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support will be the creation of overpayments. This will require recovery of this debt from some of the most vulnerable members of the community.

The recovery rate of overpaid Housing Benefit as at the year end was 113.51%. This underlying trend includes the recovery of both 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**

Volumes of UC notifications have continued to be higher than pre-pandemic volumes. Liberata has implemented automation which means that around 80% of UC new claim notifications are automated through the system thereby avoiding the need for any manual intervention. This not only increases processing speed but also reduces the risk of any processing errors.

### **1.7 Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)**

Liberata administers DHP on behalf of the Council which allows us to assist some of the most vulnerable customers within the borough. This provides support for customers who are experiencing issues with rent arrears and rent shortfalls in order to mitigate the risk of evictions. Liberata work closely with the Council to ensure that assistance from the discretionary fund is targeted at people who are in genuine need of support.

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

During the pandemic Visiting Officers had been unable to conduct face to face visits with customers in their homes. However, following the easing of restrictions these visits recommenced in October. Prior to this we were following the DWP's 'Trust and Protect' protocol to verify customer information which enabled the service to accept income and capital verbally or by email. We are now completing visits for these cases to conduct a physical check of this documentation. In addition new visit requests are being scheduled to ensure that vulnerable customers are supported when accessing the service.

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

The Revenues & Benefits Call Centre received 34,638 calls for the period 1<sup>st</sup> December 2021 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022. This was a 7% increase on volumes for the previous year. Just over 97% of calls were answered with an average speed to answer of 100 seconds. Of these calls 72% were answered within the service level target.

The Call Centre also received 1,917 calls for the NNDR service. This was 24% higher than the same period last year which saw 1,551 calls being offered. Volumes were driven by businesses calling about the Omicron Hospitality and Leisure (OHLG) and Covid Additional Relief Fund (CARF) support grants.

The Customer Services front facing team continued to operate mainly on an appointment only service, but vulnerable customers who presented without an

appointment were also seen. During this reporting period, the team saw 521 R&B customers compared with 434 during the same period in 2020/21, a 20% uplift in footfall. This appointment only system does not appear to have had an adverse impact on the ability of customers to transact with the Council, and there have been no complaints about this aspect of the 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 allows claims to be risk scored in line with the customer's circumstances. Those customers who are deemed as low risk now have their new claims and changes processed without the need for them to provide additional information to validate their claims. This drastically improves the processing speed for these claims which provides an enhanced customer experience.
- Benefits self-service portal fully implemented; this is now being widely used by customers, the Council'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.
- Universal Credit (UC) Automation; During the year we utilised functionality within the Academy system which drove our automation levels up from 40% to 80% by the year end. We are continuing to review the process to see how we can further increase our automation levels.

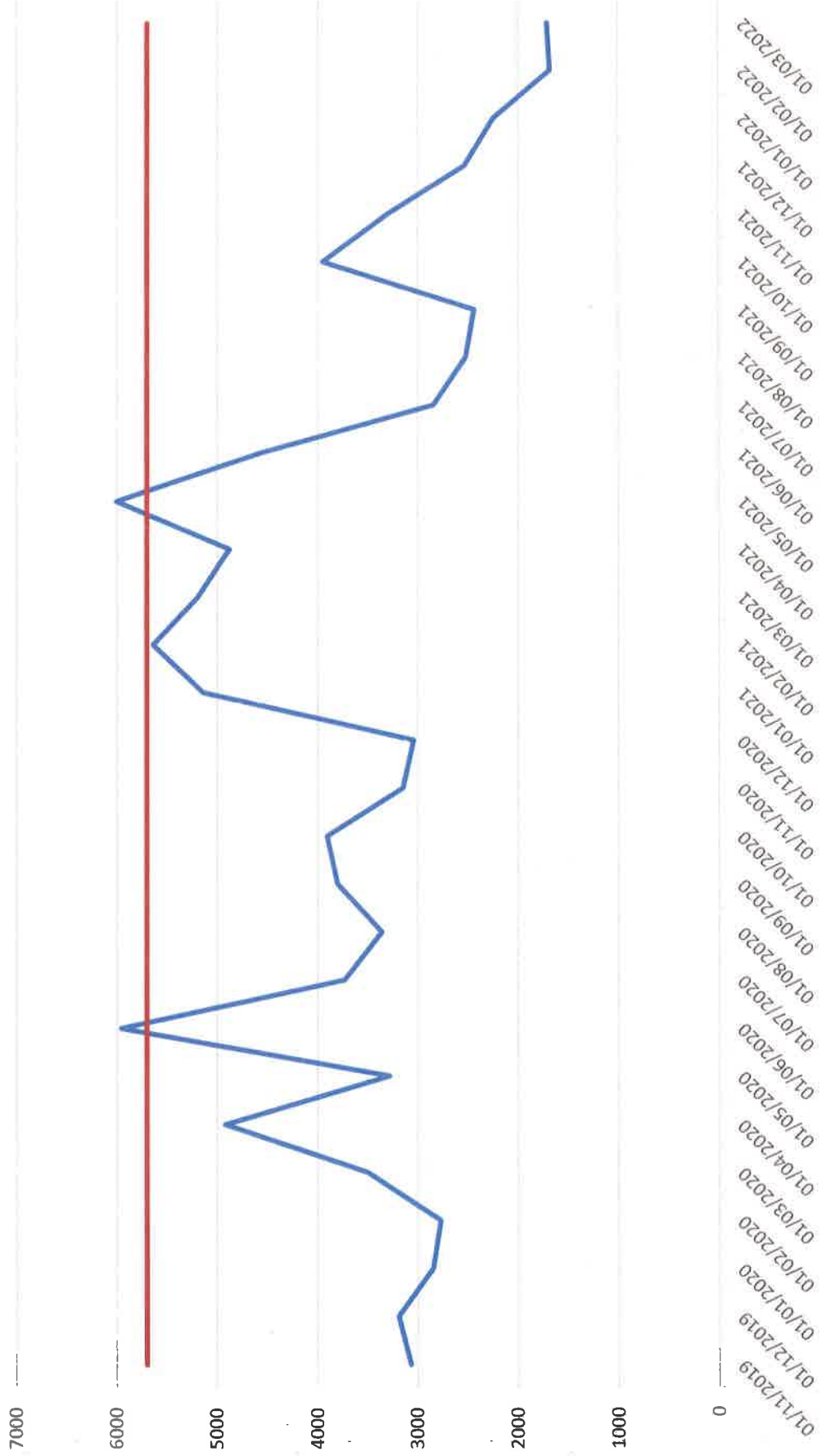
Liberata remains firmly committed to delivering an outstanding service to the London Borough of Bromley and its citizens.

Yours sincerely,

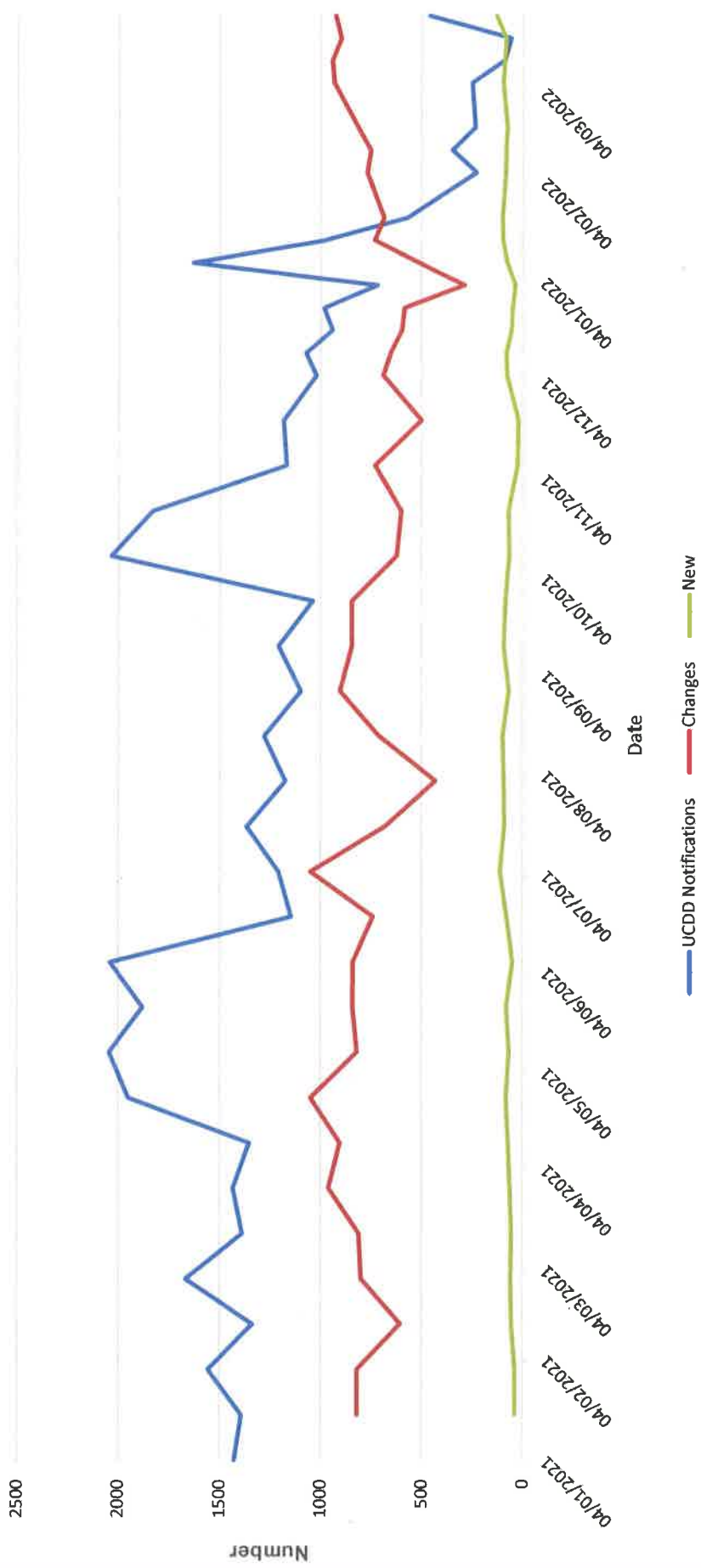
*Amanda Inwood-Field*

Amanda Inwood-Field  
London Regional Contract Director

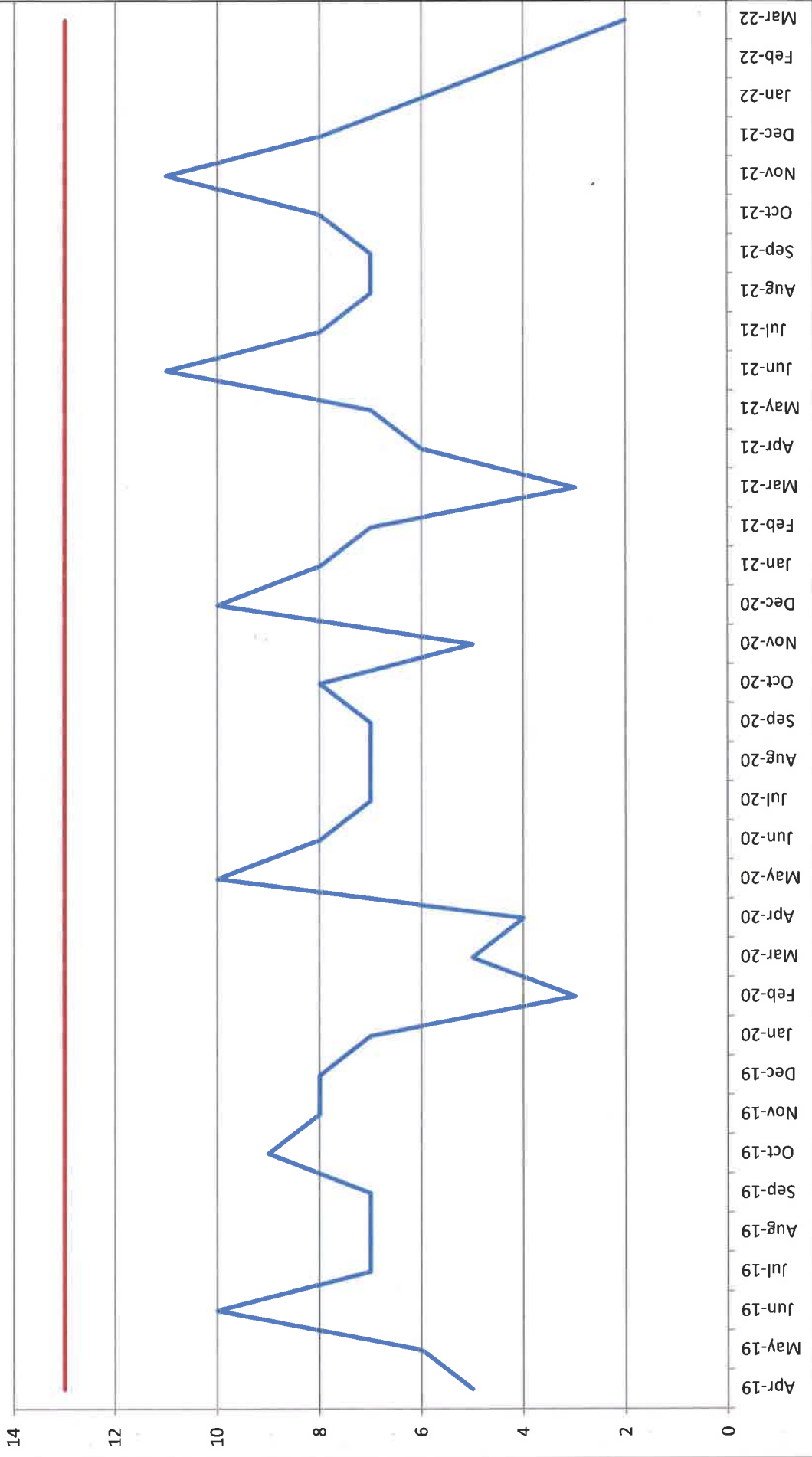
### Outstanding Work - November 2019 to March 2022 Target - 5700



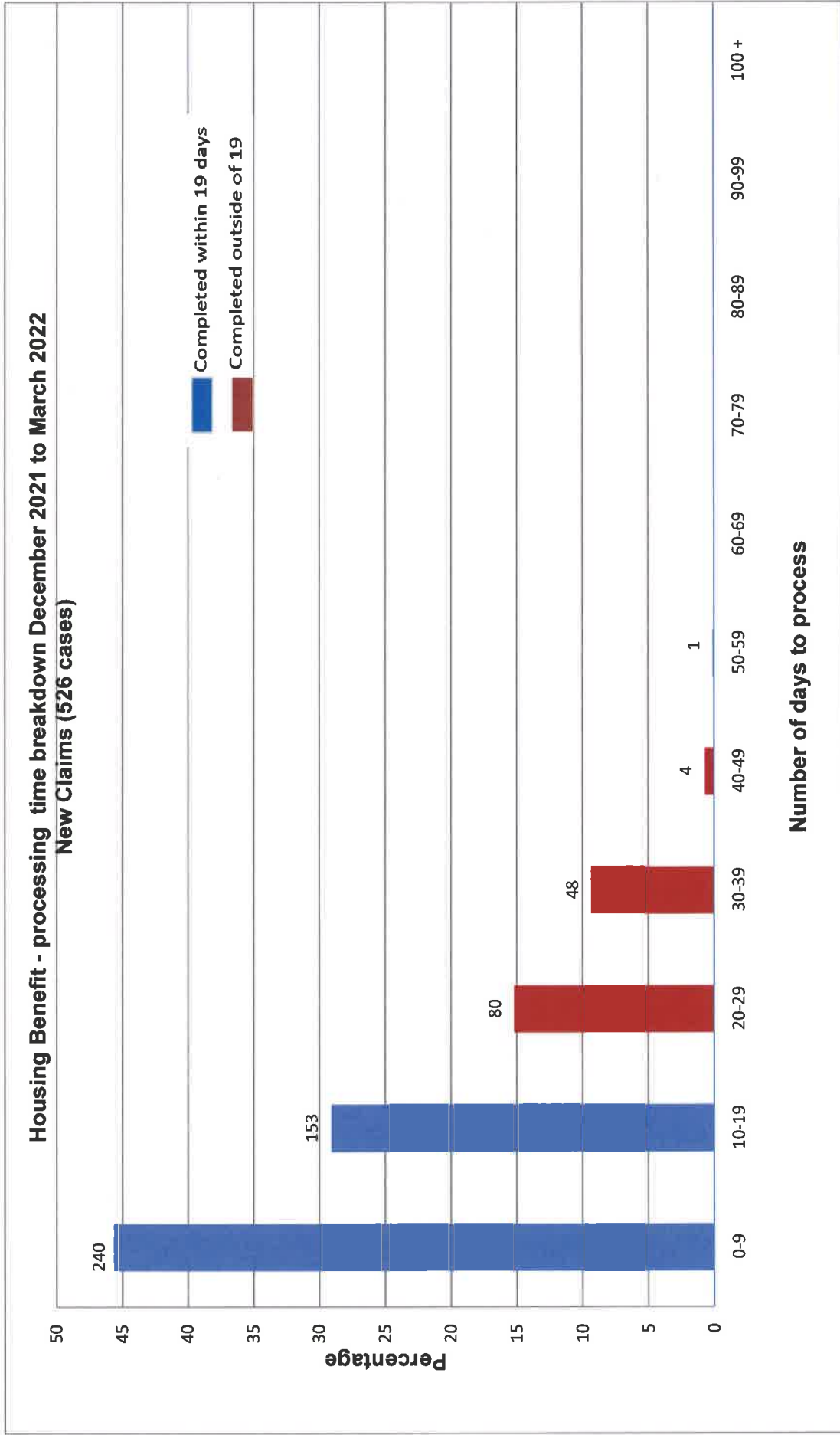
New claims, Changes in Circumstances and Universal Credit notifications received since January 2021



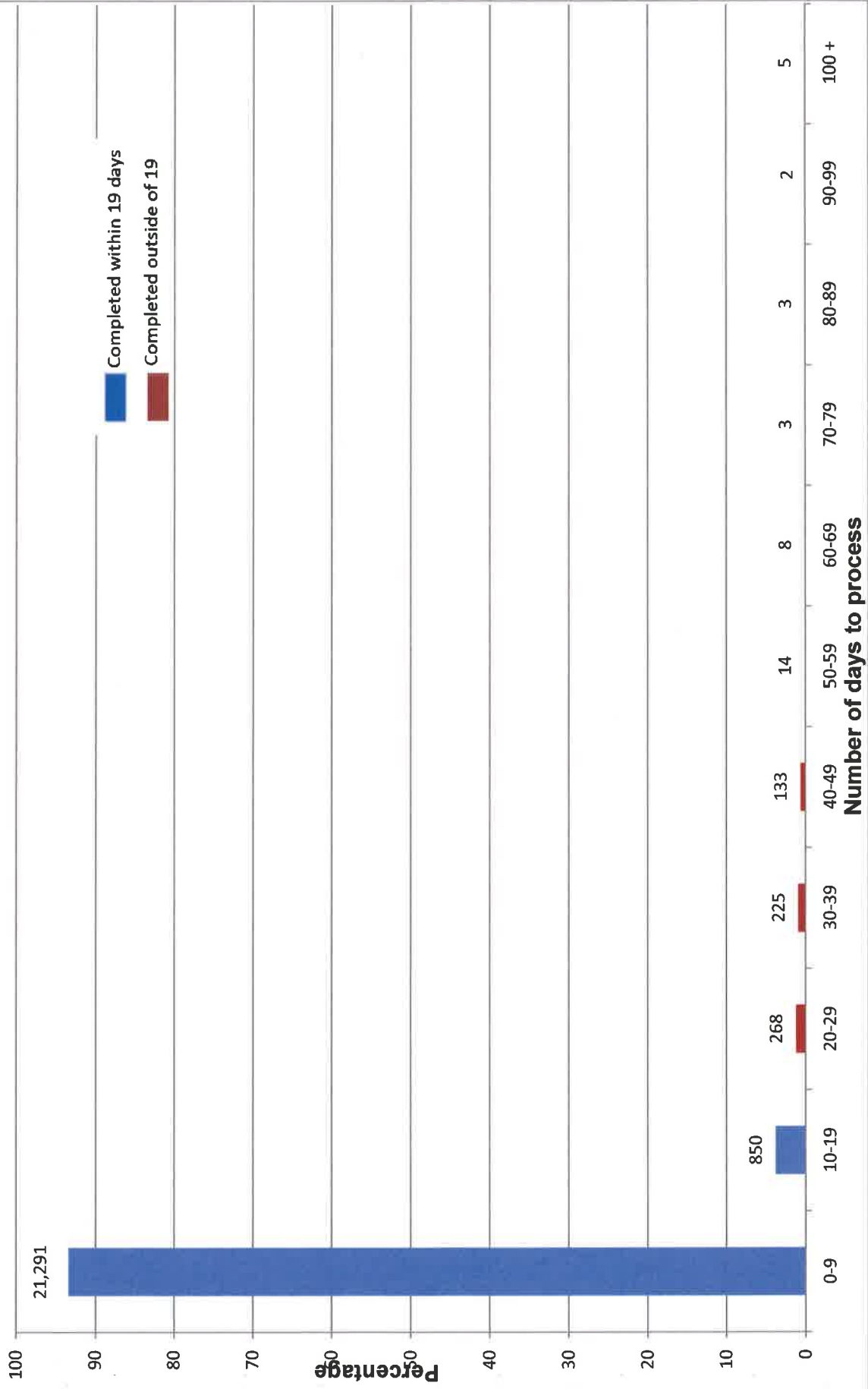
Right Time Indicator - April 2019 to March 2022  
Target - 13 days



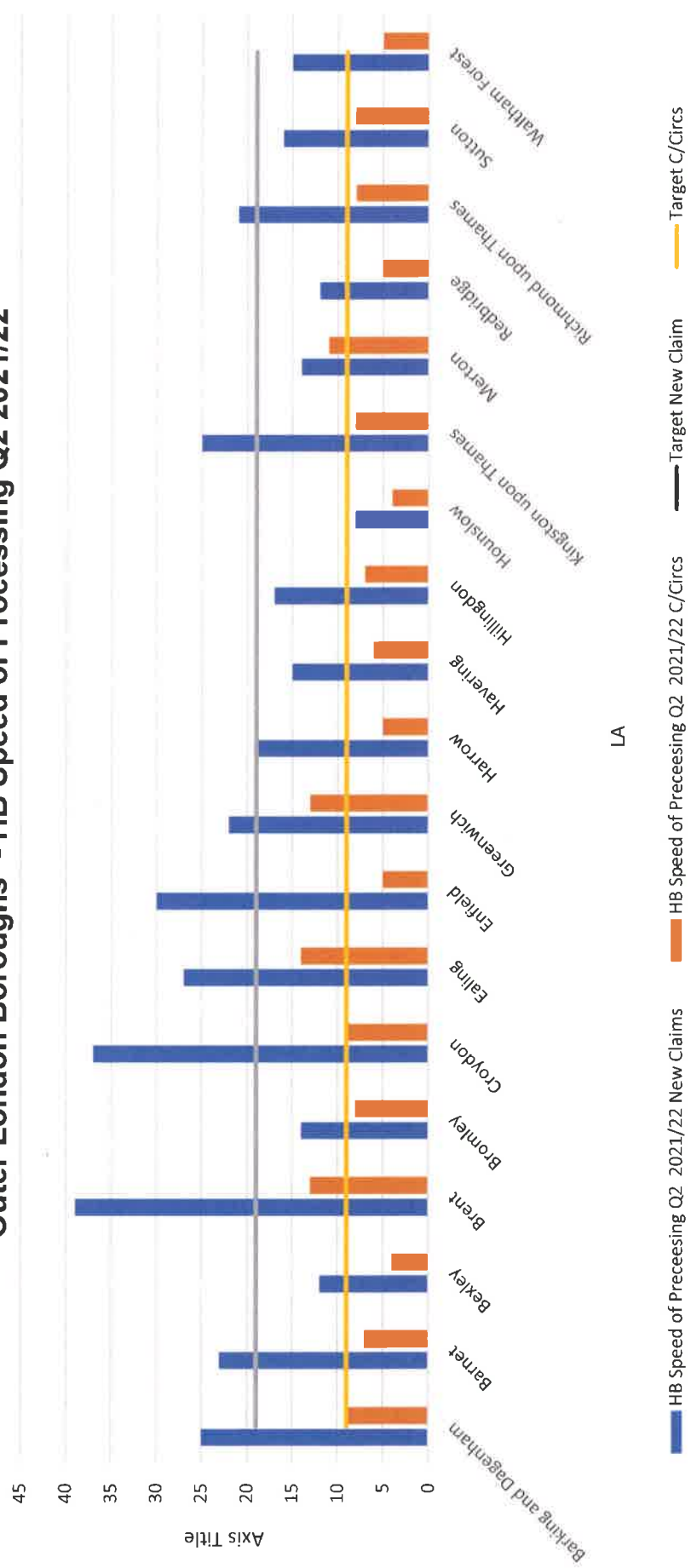




Housing Benefit - processing time breakdown - December 2021 to March 2022  
 Change in Circumstances (22,802)

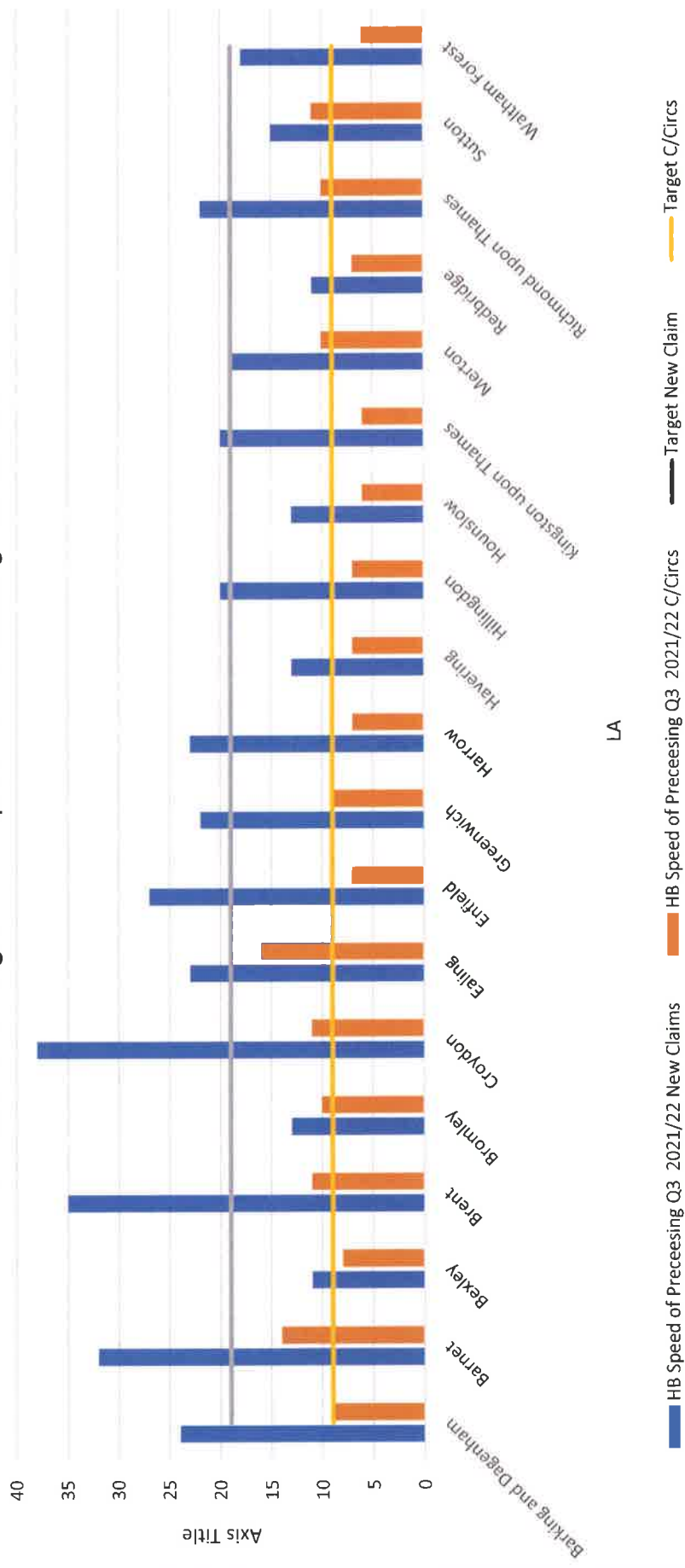


### Outer London Boroughs - HB Speed of Processing Q2 2021/22



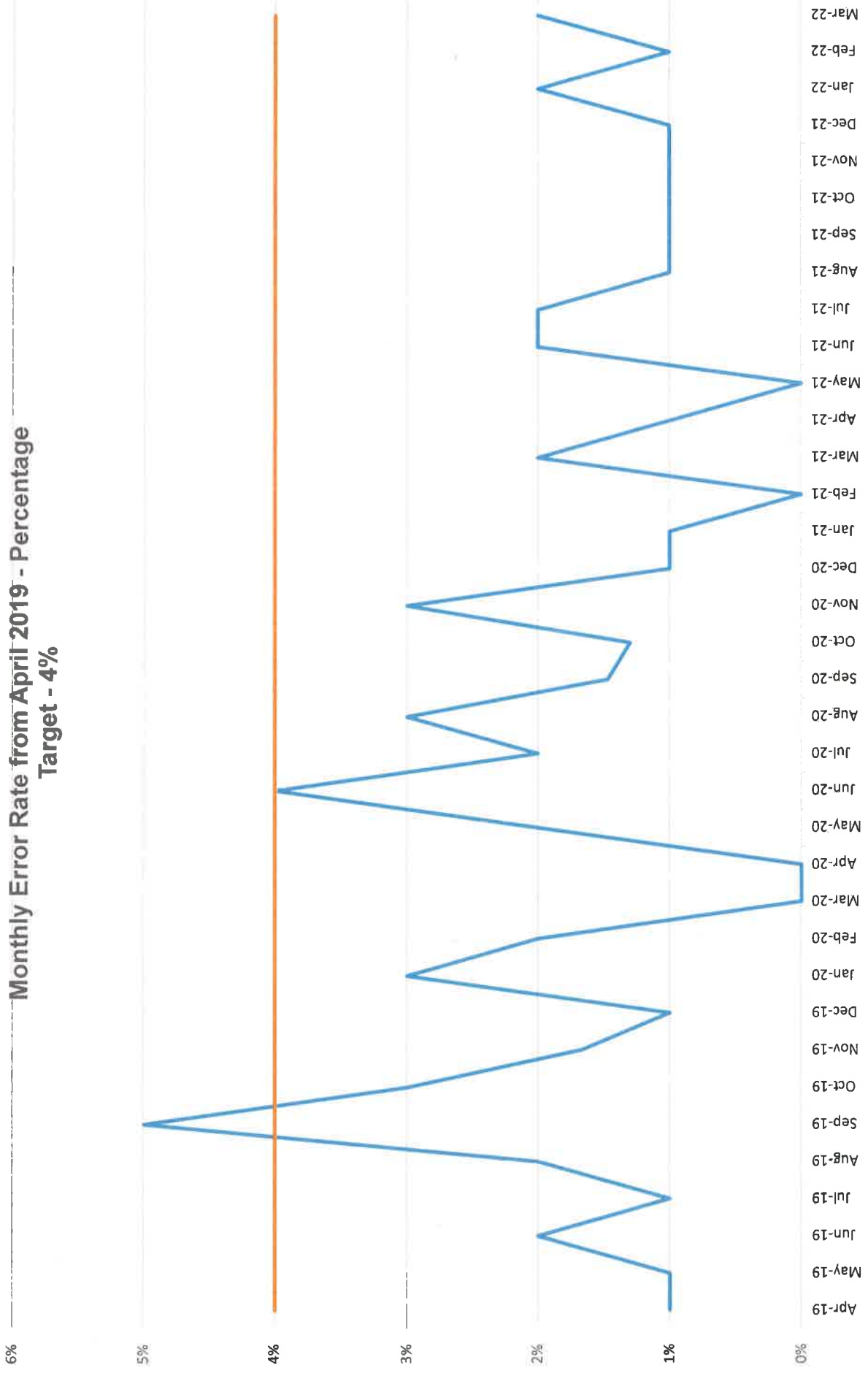
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Outer London Boroughs - HB Speed of Processing Q3 2021/22

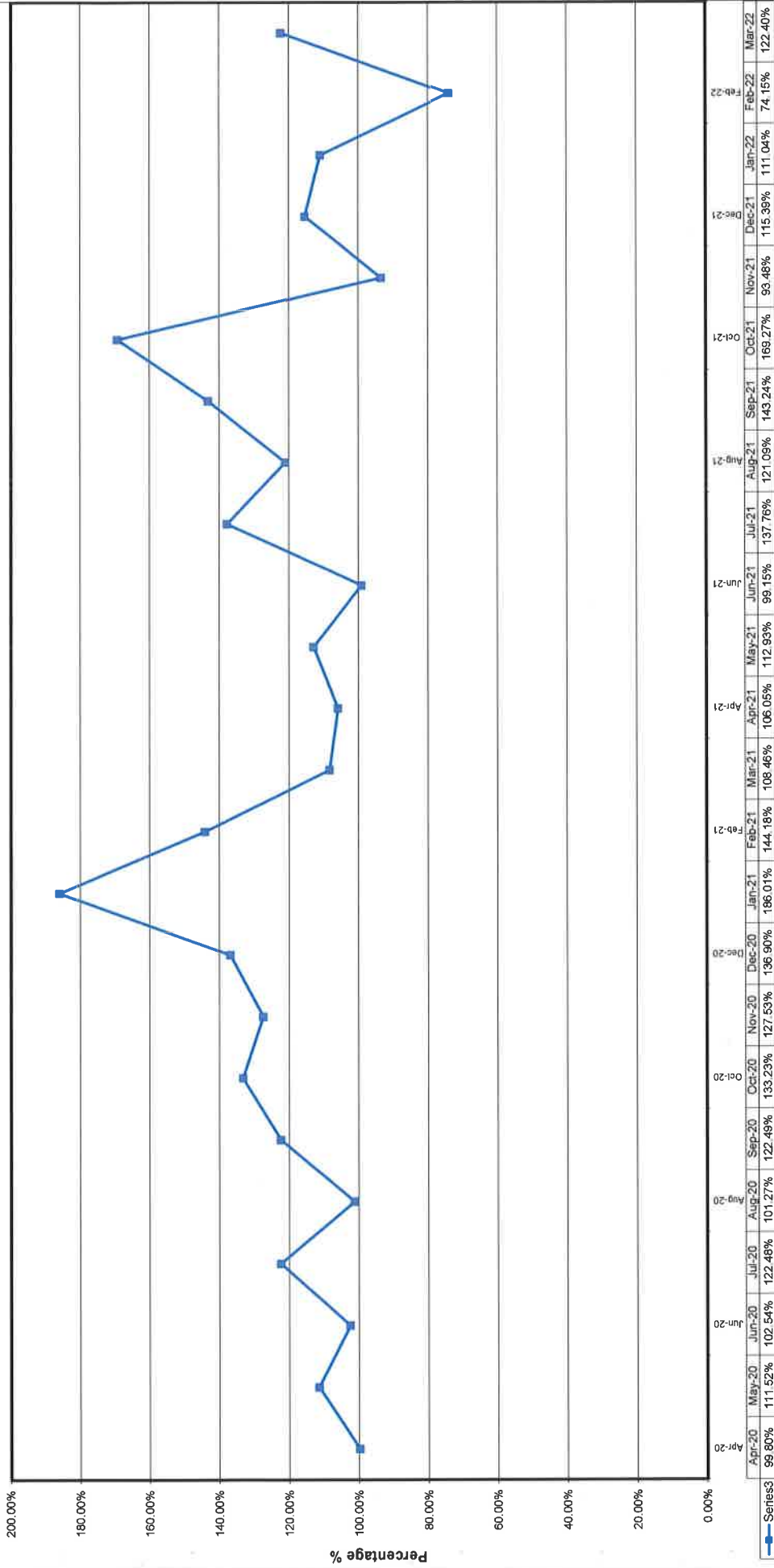


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Monthly Error Rate from April 2019 - Percentage  
Target - 4%



Monthly Overpayment % recovered against that created since April 2020



Revenues and Benefits Call Centre - number of telephone calls received and abandoned from April 2019 to March 2022

