Liberata

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

Date: 31st May 2023

Dear Claudine,

As we approach the July 2023 Executive, Resources & Contracts PDS meeting where we consider and review the performance of the Benefits service, I am taking 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 most employees are now working on a hybrid basis where they work 1 or 2 days in the office with the remainder from home.

This summary letter covers performance for the period: 1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023.

1.   Current Status of the Benefits Service

As at the end of March 2023, the Benefits caseload was 16,402, which was down by 981 on the same period last year. This caseload measures all households receiving Housing Benefit (HB) and/or Council Tax Support (CTS).

Excellent progress has been made during the period in terms of improving our processing times. The average performance for the period on New Claims was 10.34 days compared to the previous year of 13.00 days. The average time for Changes has also reduced, moving to 6.45 days against 7.02 days for last year. LUK's performance for both indicators is significantly better than our contractual targets for New Claims and Changes of 19 days and 9 days respectively. The combined YTD figure was 5.68 compared to 6.32 for last year.

Outstanding work items at the period end totalled 1,247 with 720 items pended i.e., cases where we were awaiting information from the claimant and/or third-party. The totals for the previous year were 1,756 items and 906 items respectively.

1.1   Temporary Accommodation

We have continued to maintain our strong relationships with the various LBB Housing Teams, Orchard & Shipman, and the Mears Group. We hold regular operational meetings to quickly identify and resolve any benefit issues which arise. We are also able to fast track cases where there is a risk of arrears accumulating which helps to sustains tenancies and prevent homelessness.

We have in place a dedicated Temporary Accommodation Benefits Team who work closely with LBB's Housing staff and stakeholders to ensure that benefit claims are paid as quickly and efficiently as possible.

1.2 Verify Earnings and Pensions (VEP) Alerts Service

We receive and process the Verify Earnings and Pensions (VEP) alerts, from the DWP. These provide a valuable tool for updating and ensuring the accuracy of the earnings and pension information which is held within the Academy benefits system. These VEP alerts extract and consolidate information held by various external organisations including HMRC and the Pension Service to provide 'real time' information which is essential in the administration of Benefits. Our specialised VEP Team then ensure that the VEP files, which are received daily, are processed in a timely manner.

The effective and timely processing of these alerts helps maintain the accuracy of the Academy database and helps reduce the likelihood of overpayments which would typically occur where a claimant delays or fails to advise 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. We currently automate the transfer of most of the ATLAS files received directly into the Academy database. This not only improves the processing speed but also removes the risk of any manual re-keying errors. We have continued to see an on-going reduction in the number of ATLAS files received as a number of these cases now come through the Universal Credit (UC) channels.

1.4 Quality

As always, our focus has remained fixed on maintaining our quality levels for the service with a continual review of our processes with the aim of eradicating errors. The average financial error rate for the period April 2022 to March 2023 was 0.95% which is unchanged from the same reporting period last year. Our contractual target is 4% and we have an agreed 'soft' target of 3%. Our quality assurance checking is carried out on a continual basis throughout the year on our Assessment Officers work. This helps ensure that we continue to deliver a high-quality service to customers and mitigating the risk of financial error. In addition, the ongoing checking helps feed into the training program for our new recruits and the upskilling of existing employees. This quality checking forms part of the ongoing monitoring and mentoring of our Officers to ensure accuracy rates remain at a high level. It also allows for any errors to be quickly identified and then immediately addressed either by refresher training or mentoring. This then helps 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 thereby attracting maximum subsidy for the Authority.

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1.5 Overpayment Strategy

The creation of overpayments is a natural by-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.

As at the period end our recovery rate, known as the underlying trend, was 104.99%. This underlying trend includes the recovery of current year and previous year debts. To maximise recovery, we have continued to use a number of different 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 (UC)

The volumes of UC notifications received has continued to be at levels higher than before the pandemic. To deal with this, and speed up processing, we have utilised automation which means that around 84% of UC change notifications are automatically uploaded through the system without the need of any manual intervention. This level of automation has increased by over 40% compared to last year and means that processing errors are mitigated while the speed of processing these cases has increased.

Increasing numbers of customers are using the online smart forms for new claims and changes, which were implemented last year. We have also continued to provide support for vulnerable customers who are not able to transact with the service online from our Customer Services team.

1.7 Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)

We have continued to administer DHP on behalf of the Council, which allows for assistance to be provided to some of the most vulnerable customers within borough. In this way residents who may be experiencing problems with rent arrears can be supported to help avoid the risk of eviction. We work closely with the Council to ensure that assistance from the discretionary fund is targeted at people that are in genuine need of support.

2. Corporate Visiting Team (CVT)

Following the removal of restrictions that were put in place as a result of the pandemic, the Visiting Officers resumed their face-to-face visits to verify customer information on income and capital levels or to assist them in accessing the service.

3. Call Centre & Customer Services

During the period under review the Revenues & Benefits Call Centre received 116,214 which was a 23% increase in comparison to the same reporting period last year. Our Call Centre answered 95.2% of calls with an average speed to answer of 1 minutes and 45 seconds. The average overall service level for this reporting period was 69.0% with an average abandonment rate being 4.1%.

We continued with a predominantly appointment-only service for the Customer Services front facing team. However, we ensured that vulnerable customers who presented without an appointment were still seen. During this reporting period, the team saw 1,572 R&B customers compared to 1,607 during the same period in 2021, a slight reduction in footfall of just over 2%.

This reporting period has seen more on-line self-service forms becoming available to customer through the Council's website portal, this uptake by citizens has helped drive down footfall volumes.

4.   Service Developments

One of Liberata's goals has always been to continually improve and enhance the services provided to the Council and its citizens either through the application of new or existing technology or through process improvements. Examples of current year new and ongoing initiatives include:

- **Investigating Risk Based Verification (RBV) automation;** we introduced RBV last year as a way of enabling claims and changes to be risk scored in line with the customers circumstances. Low risk claims (50% of new claims) can then be processed without the need to contact the claimant for further information. This reduces the processing time for the claim thereby providing a better customer experience. As a further improvement we want to enable low risk claims to be automated through the back-office database without the need for re-keying information. This will once again significantly decrease the processing times for new claims and changes as well as a providing a further enhancement to customer experience.
- **Electronic Notification Letters;** As part of our ongoing digital transformation programme to channel shift customers to online services, the service is currently reviewing the introduction of electronic notification letters to be sent to working age customers and the use of summary notification letters to simplify the information for ease of understanding for most customers.
- **Housing Benefit Award Accuracy Initiative (HBAAI);** Liberata commenced processing HBAAI workloads and will have reviewed just over 2,800 cases by the DWP deadline of 30th June 2023. Cases identified by the DWP are 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;** A further level of UC automation was introduced during 2022/23 which has provided a significant increase in the number of assessments which no longer require manual intervention.

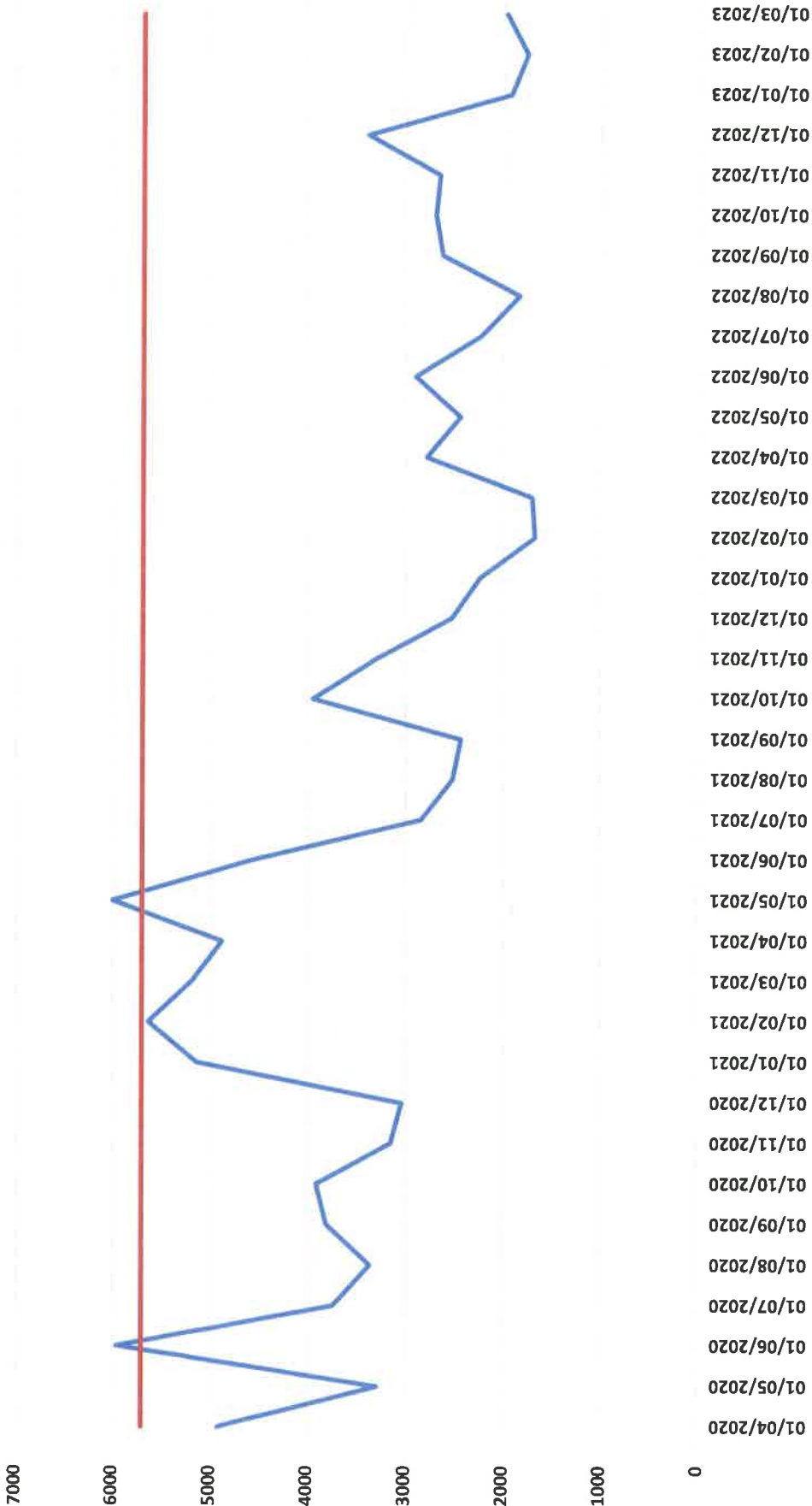Liberata remains firmly committed to delivering an outstanding service to the London Borough of Bromley and its citizens.
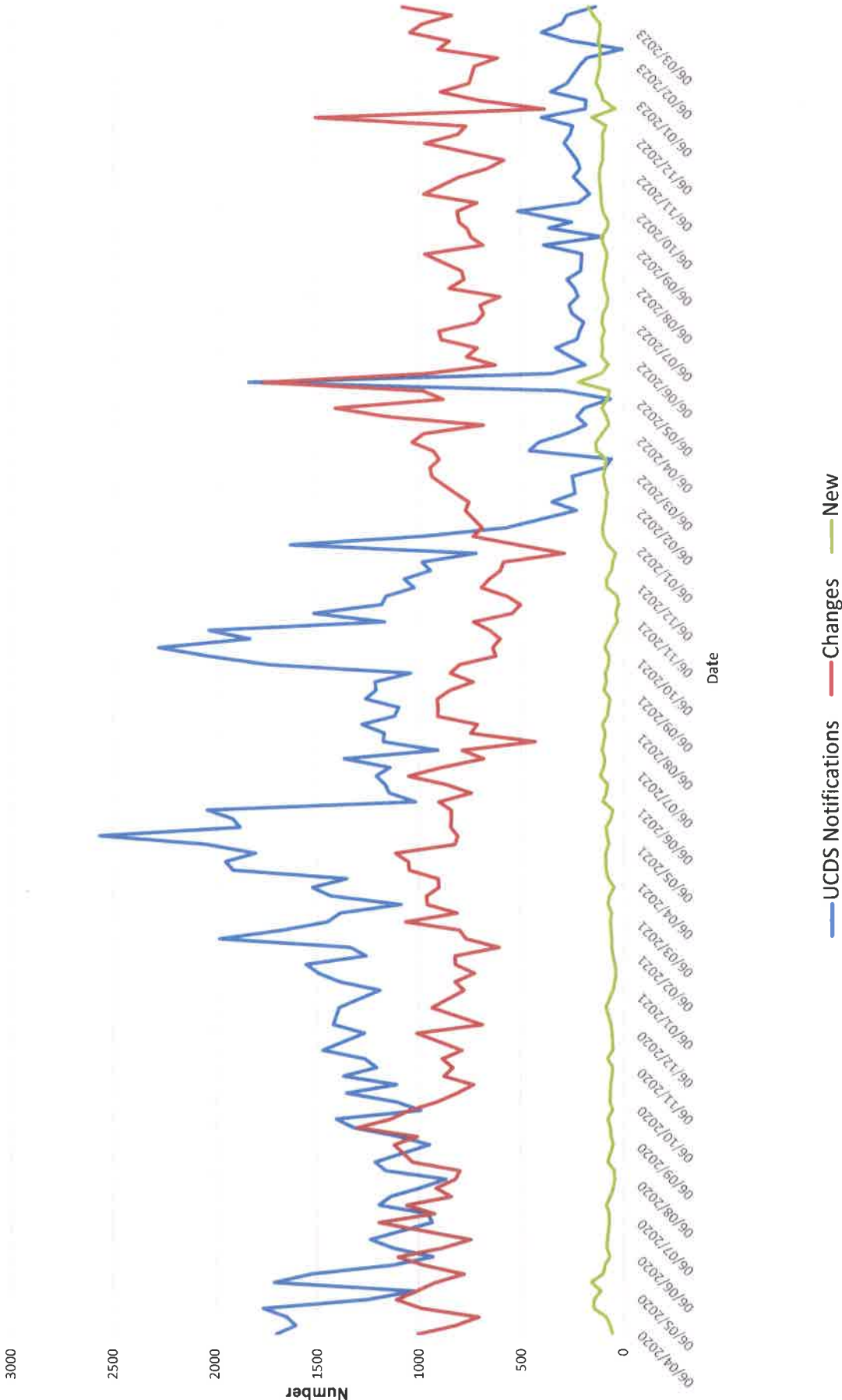
Yours sincerely

Bola Odunsi
Regional Director (London & The Southeast)

Appendix 2

Outstanding Work - April 2020 to 31 March 2023
Target - 5700 documents

Appendix 3

New claims, Changes in Circumstances and Universal Credit notifications received since April 2020

Right Time Indicator - April 2020 to 31 March 2023
Target - 13 days

Target - 13 days

Appendix 5
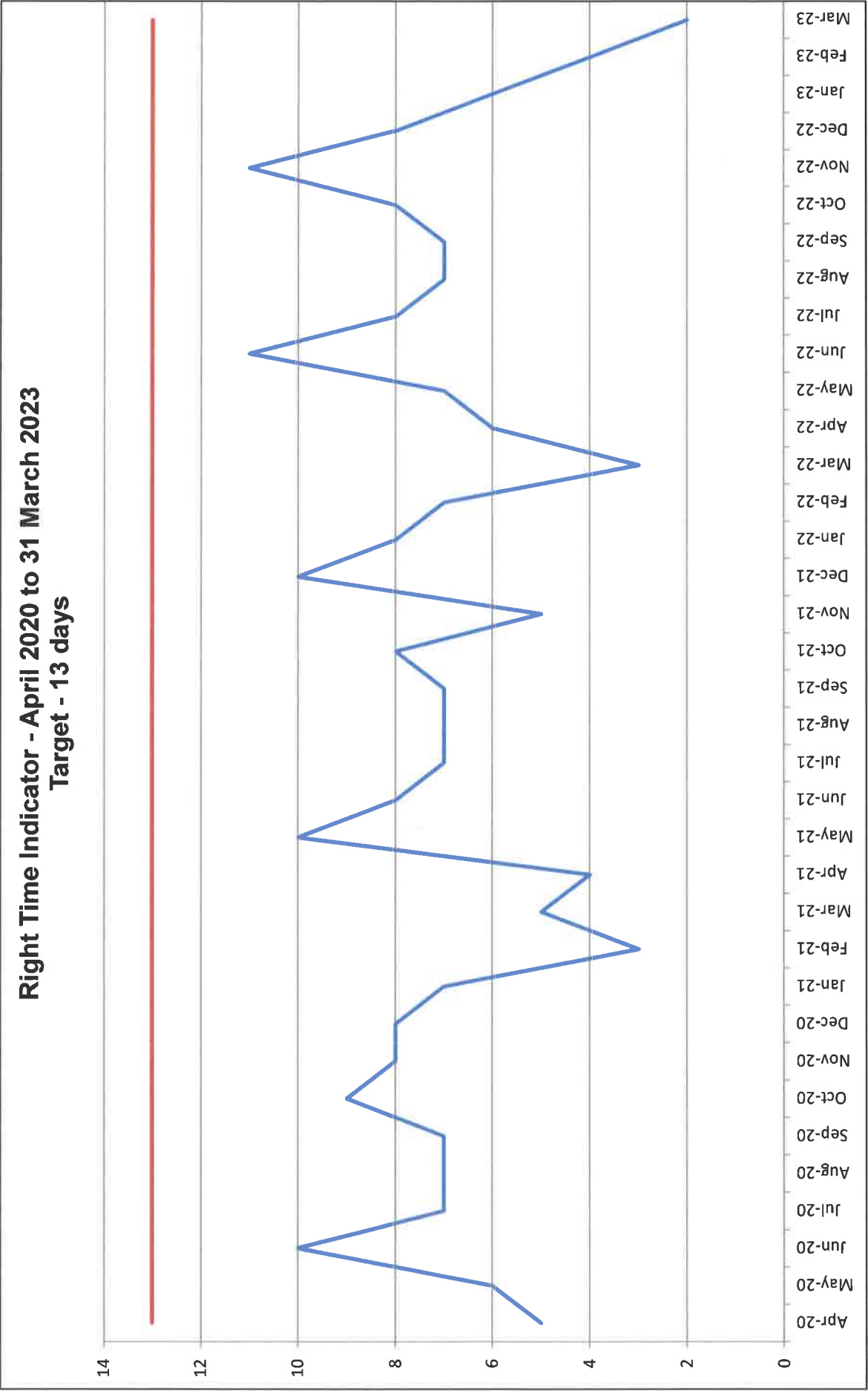
Housing Benefit - processing time breakdown December 2022 to March 2023
New Claims (704 cases)

Completed within 19 days
Completed outside of 19

467

127

88

21

0   1

0-9   10-19   20-29   30-39   40-49   50-59   60-69   70-79   80-89   90-99   100 +

Number of days to process

Percentage

Housing Benefit - processing time breakdown - December 2022 to March 2023
Change in Circumstances (22,546)

Legend:
- Completed within 19 days
- Completed outside of 19

Percentage (vertical axis): 0, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90, 100

Number of days to process (horizontal axis):
- 0-9: 20,433
- 10-19: 1046
- 20-29: 504
- 30-39: 333
- 40-49: 143
- 50-59: 26
- 60-69: 20
- 70-79: 7
- 80-89: 8
- 90-99: 8
- 100+: 18

Outer London Boroughs - HB Speed of Processing Q2 2022/23
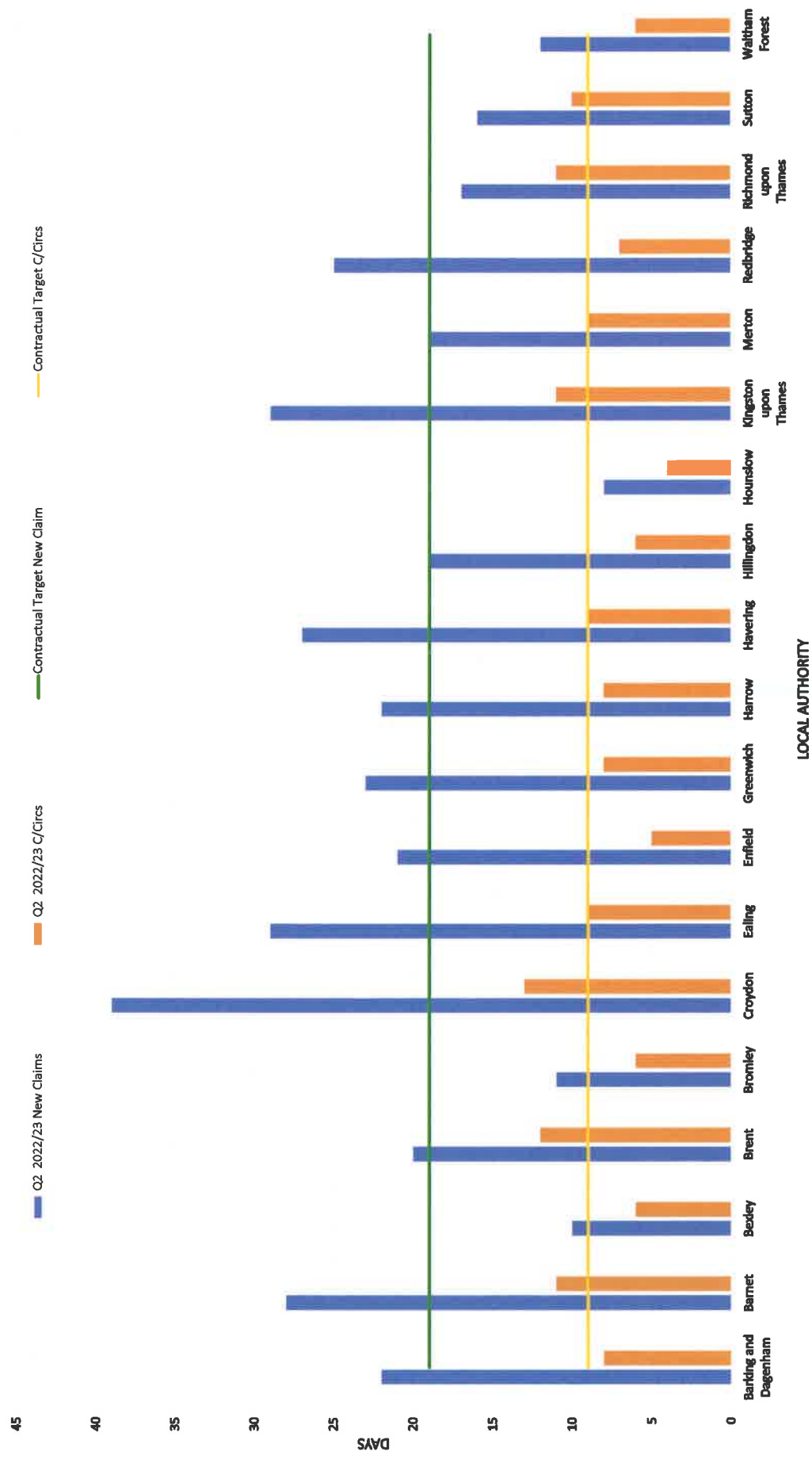
Outer London Boroughs - HB Speed of Processing Q3 2022/23

Legend:
- Q3 2022/23 New Claims
- Q3 2022/23 C/Circs
- Contractual Target New Claim
- Contractual Target C/Circs

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

Y-axis: DAYS (0, 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 35, 40)

Monthly Error Rate from November 2019 - Percentage
Target - 4%
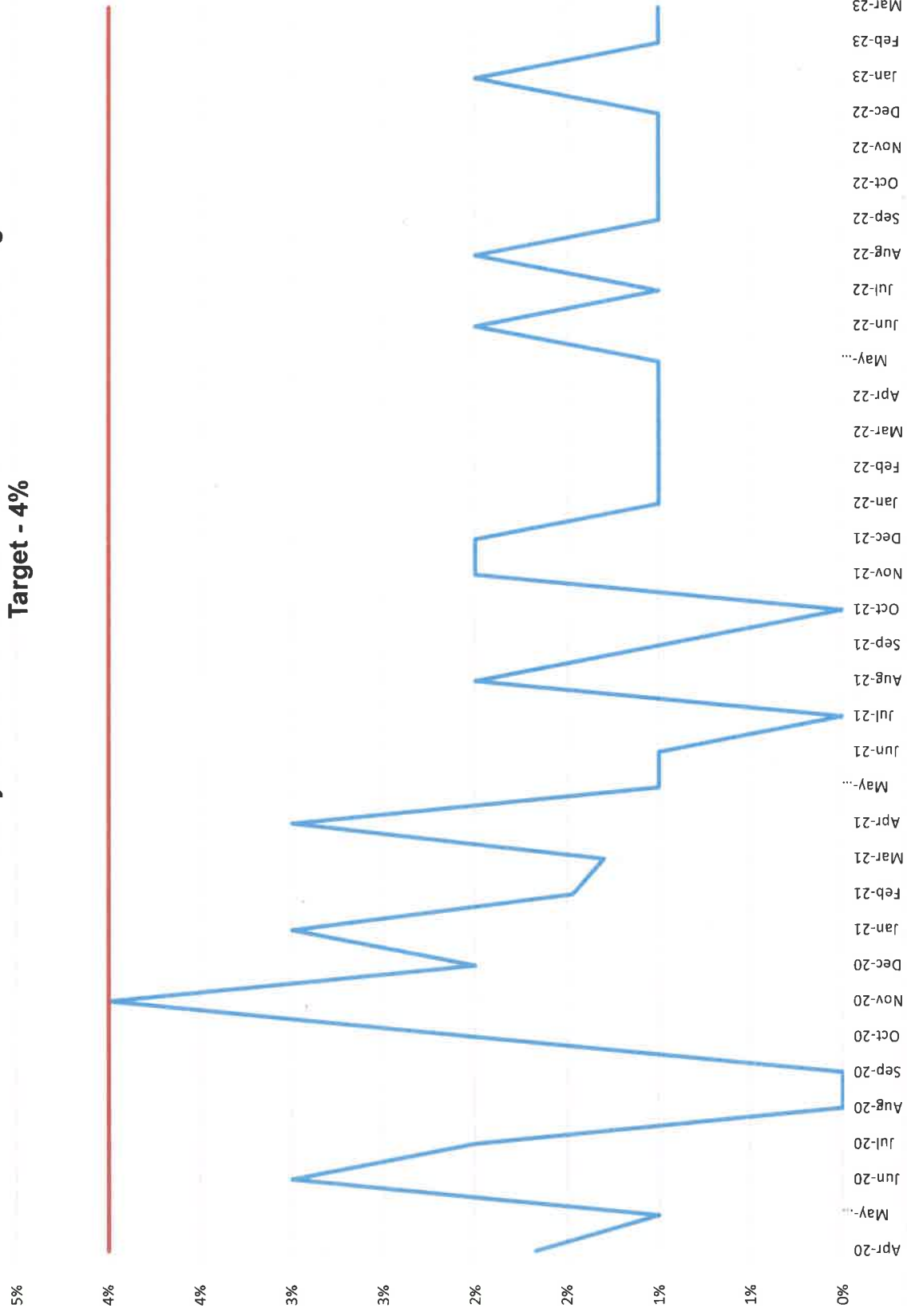
Monthly Overpayment % recovered against that created since November 2020

	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	Dec-21	Jan-22	Feb-22	Mar-22	Apr-22	May-22	Jun-22	Jul-22	Aug-22	Sep-22	Oct-22	Nov-22	Dec-22	Jan-23	Feb-23	Mar-23
Series3	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%	115.39%	111.04%	74.15%	122.40%	94.26%	93.79%	105.26%	93.10%	99.64%	125.65%	170.10%	90.96%	111.70%	106.12%	72.59%	127.99%
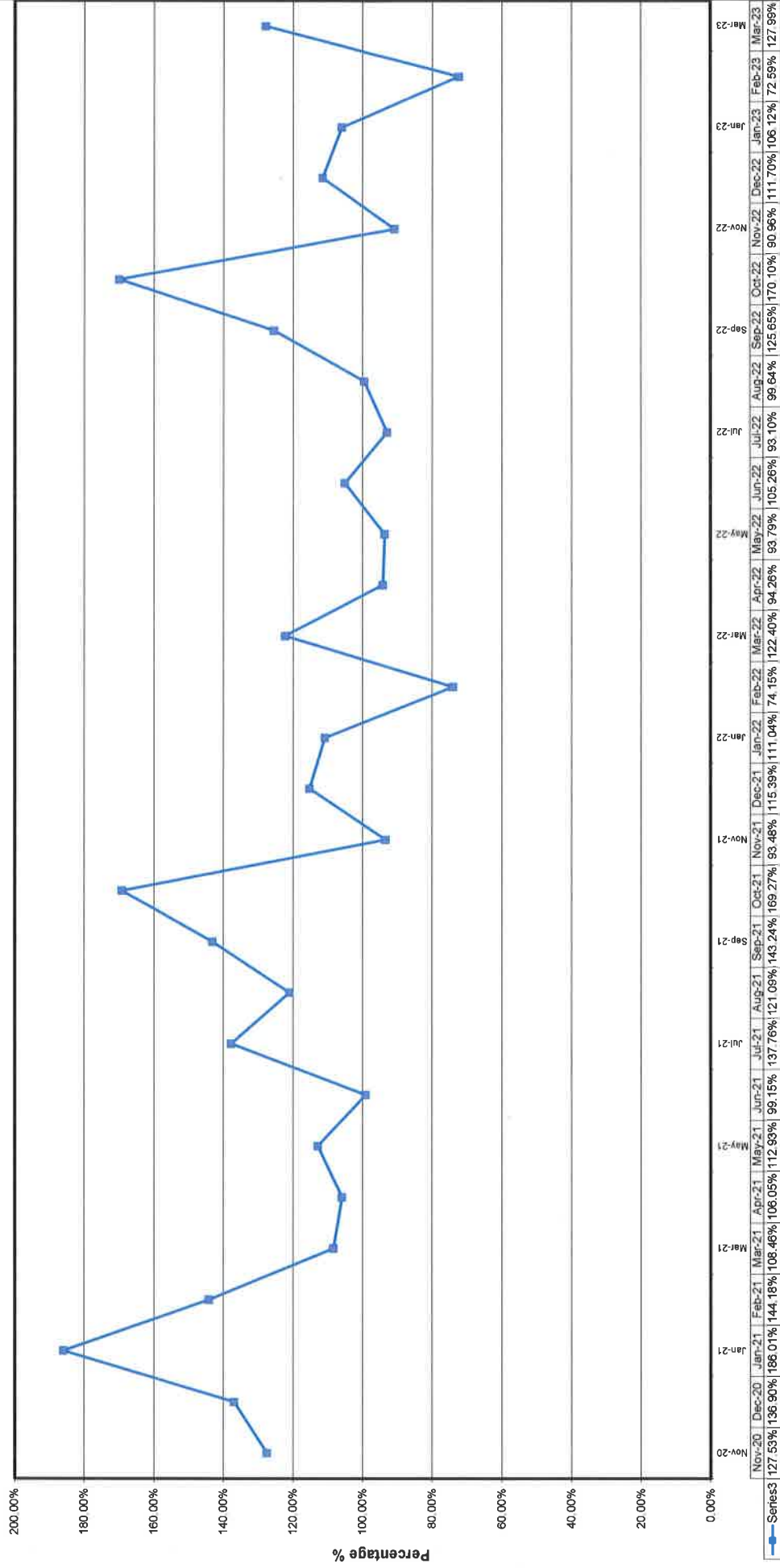
Revenues and Benefits Call Centre - number of telephone calls received and abandoned from November 2019 to March 2023
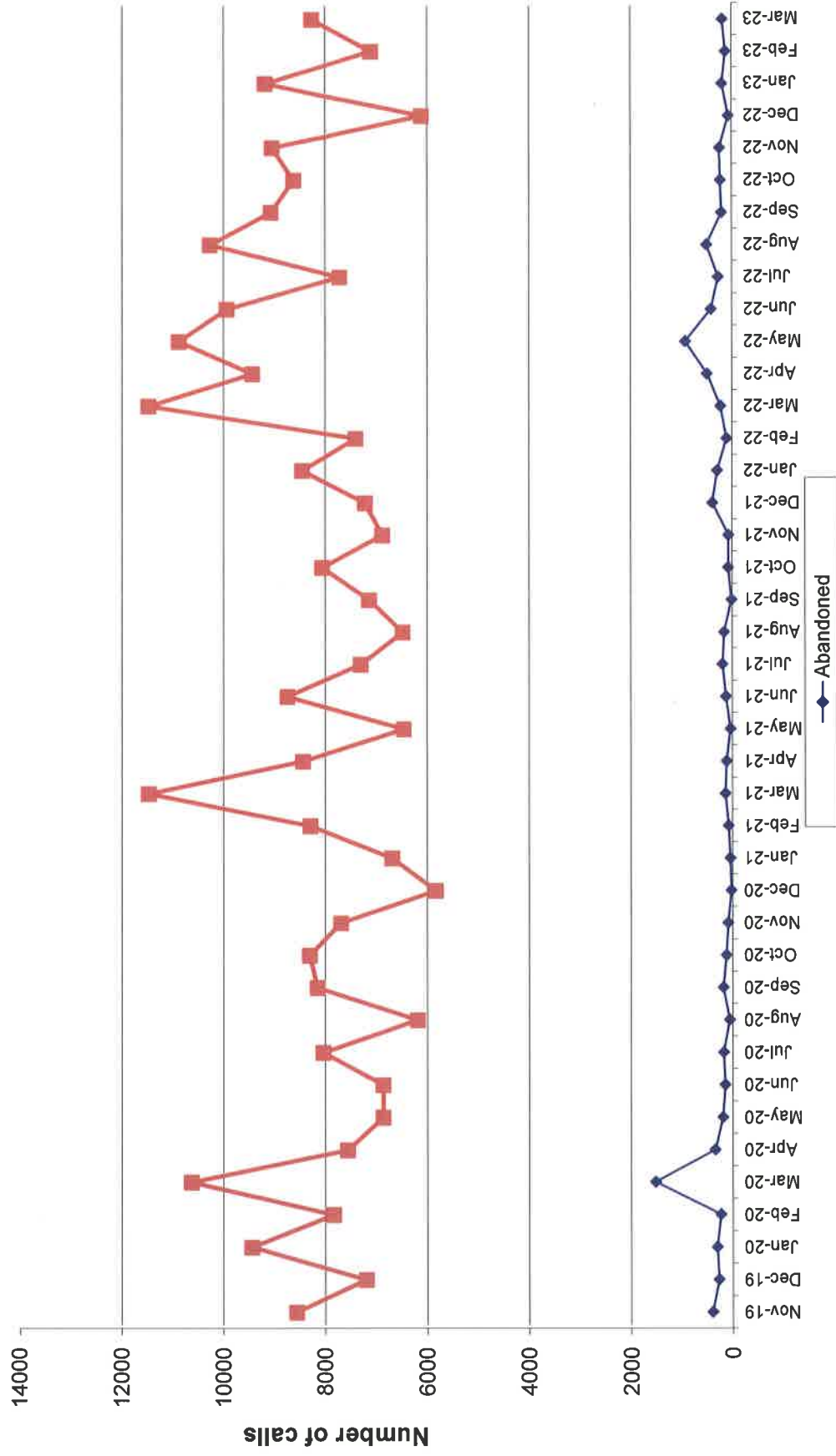
Caseload from November 2020 to 31 March 2023

20,000

18,000

16,000

14,000

12,000

10,000

8,000

6,000

4,000

2,000

0

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 Dec-21 Jan-22 Feb-22 Mar-22 Apr-22 May-22 Jun-22 Jul-22 Aug-22 Sep-22 Oct-22 Nov-22 Dec-22 Jan-23 Feb-23 Mar-23

Combined Caseload

Council Tax Support