

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

Date: 30<sup>th</sup> November 2023  
Our Ref: BO/DK

Dear Claudine,

As we approach the January 2024 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 now the majority of employees are working on a hybrid basis where they work one or two days in the office with the remainder from home.

This summary covers performance for the period: 1<sup>st</sup> April 2023 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024.

## 1. Current Status of the Benefits Service

As at the end of November 2023, the Benefits caseload was 16,052, which was down by 541 on the same period last year. This caseload measures all households receiving Housing Benefit (HB) and/or Council Tax Support (CTS).

The average performance for the period on New Claims was 16.97 days compared to the previous year of 11.12 days. The average time for Changes was 11.82 days against 5.35 days for last year. Both of these are much higher than our usual standards of service delivery and whilst New Claims remains within our contractual target of 19 days, performance to date on Changes is currently exceeding our annual contractual target of 9 days. The drop in performance has been primarily caused by the turnover of several staff at the beginning of the year, replacing and training the new team has had an inevitable impact on our work outputs as the new staff bed in.

I am pleased to say that the team are now producing performance in line with previous expectations and that we expect to achieve all contractual obligations by the end of the year. By quarter 1 of the new financial year, we will be back to exceeding contractual targets and achieving the historical excellent service standards that LB Bromley is used to. Indeed, as you will see below, the outstanding work is now in a much healthier position than in previous years.

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Outstanding work items at the period end totalled 873 with 687 items pending i.e. cases where we were awaiting information from the claimant and/or third-party. The totals for the previous year were 1,247 items and 720 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 sustain tenancies and prevent homelessness.

We have in place a dedicated Temporary Accommodation Benefit 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 the majority 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 ongoing 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 2023

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to September 2023 (Oct and Nov are not yet verified) was 1.53% which is slightly higher than the same reporting period last year, but this is to be expected given the number of new members on the team. 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 on-going checking helps feed into the training program for our new recruits and the upskilling of existing employees. This quality checking forms part of the on-going 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. I am pleased to point out that Liberata's performance continues to remain well below the lower threshold, thereby attracting maximum subsidy for the Authority.

## 1.5 Overpayment Strategy

The creation of overpayments is a natural byproduct 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 83.67%. This underlying trend includes the recovery of current year and previous year debts. In order to maximise recover we have continued to use a range 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 high as more customers are moved over to the new benefit. In order to deal with this, and speed up processing, we have utilised automation which means that 84.2% of UC change notifications were automatically uploaded through the system without the need of any manual intervention. This has underpinned our ability to deliver an efficient benefit service to our customers.

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.

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## 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 67,449 call which was 2% lower in comparison to the same reporting period last year. Our Call Centre answered 96.36% of calls with an average speed to answer of 1 minutes and 48 seconds. The average overall service level for this reporting period was 69.95% with an average abandonment rate being 3.4%. In 2023, the service introduced a VoiceBot to assist in directing customers to the most appropriate contact channel and this has allowed 1,985 customers to resolve their enquiries without the need to talk to an operator.

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 1,033 Revenues & Benefits customers compared to 1,029 during the same period in 2022.

## 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:

- **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 under 2,800 cases. All forms will have been issued by the end

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of December which is two months ahead of the DWP deadline. 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.

- **Mass Recalculation Automation:** Whilst this is primarily a tool to ensure that assessments are not left uncalculated (majority with no change to entitlement), this should facilitate an improved automation levels for both UC and ATLAS changes.

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)**

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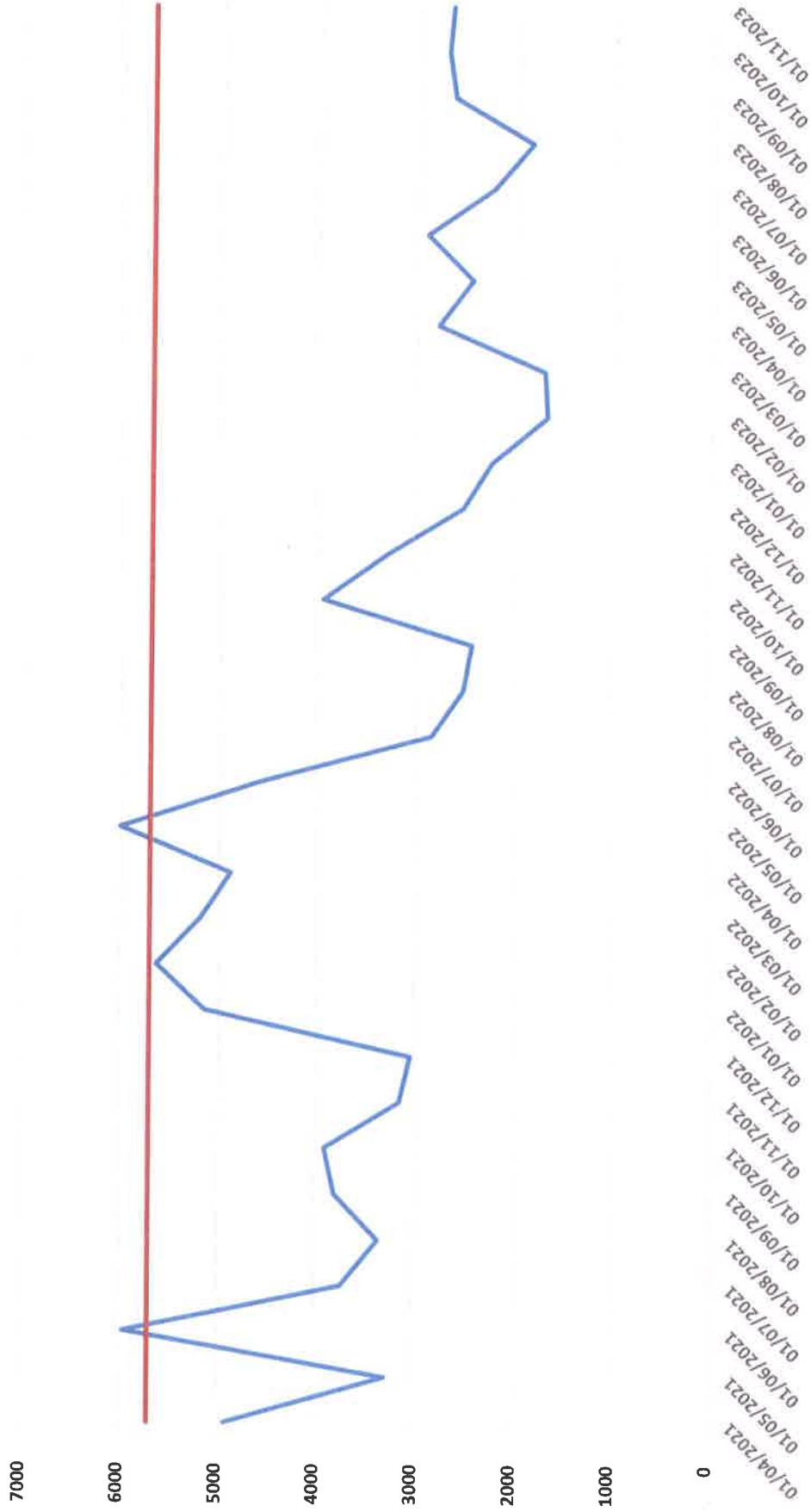
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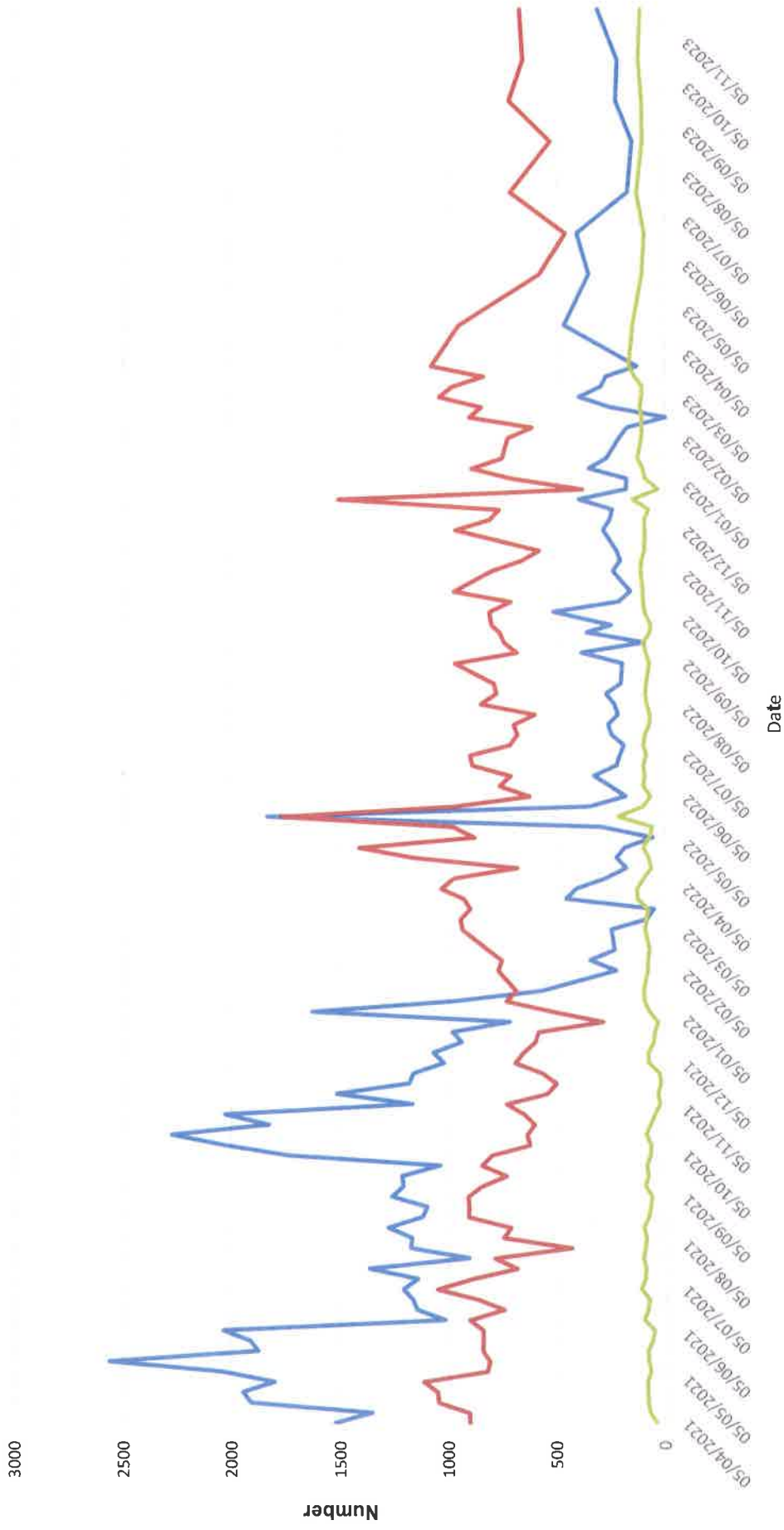
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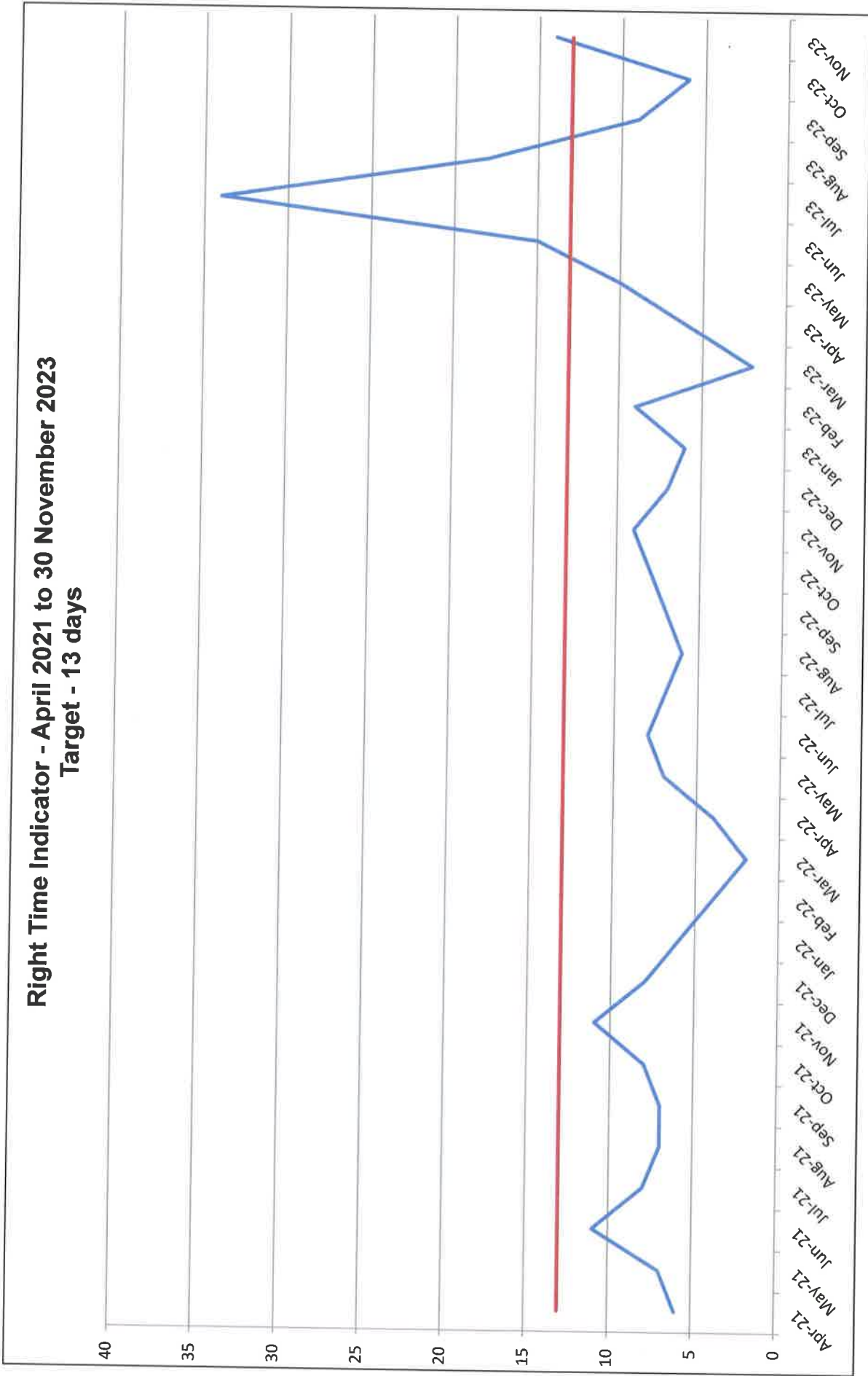
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Outstanding Work - April 2021 to 30 November 2023  
Target - 5700 documents



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

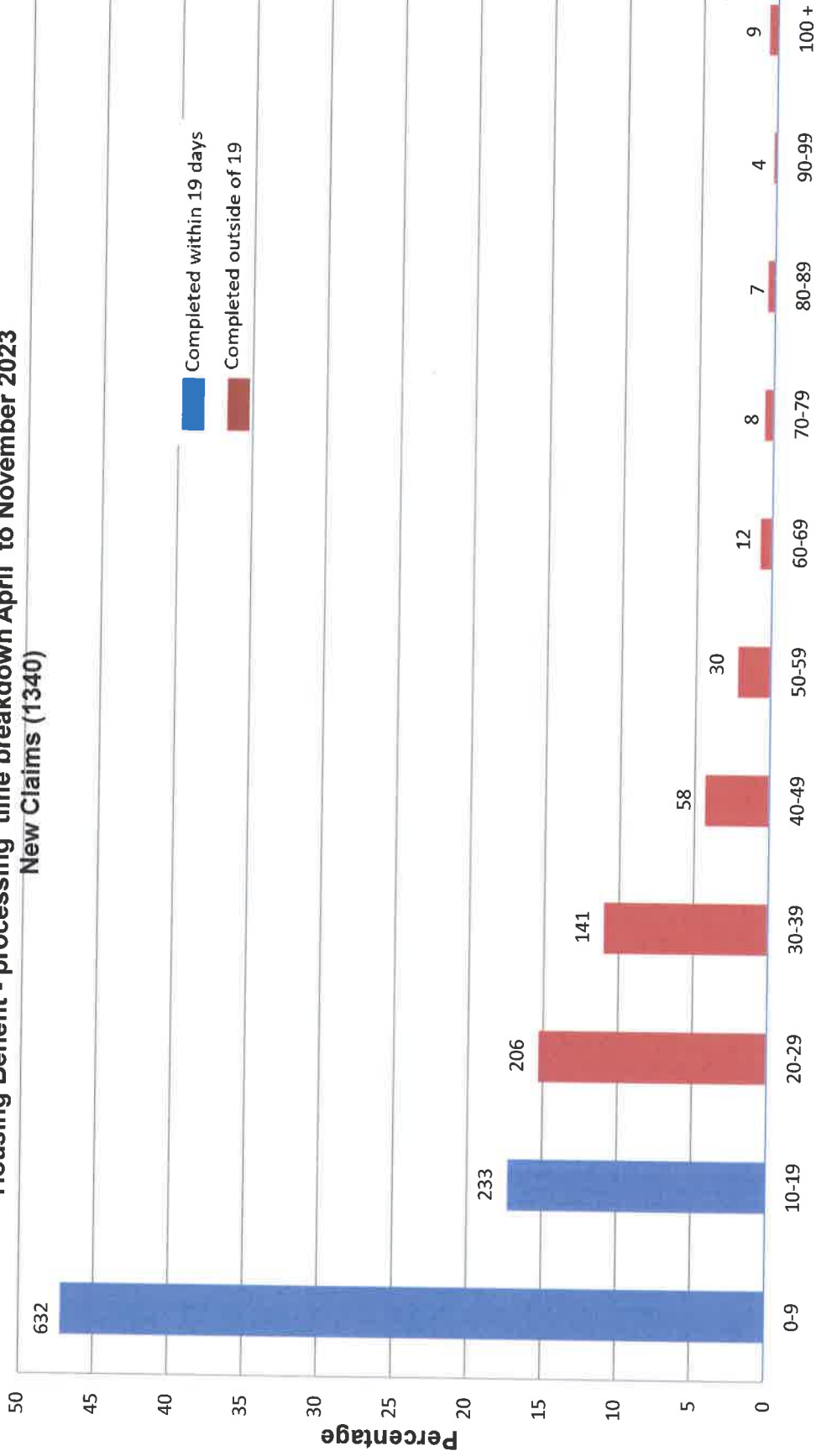






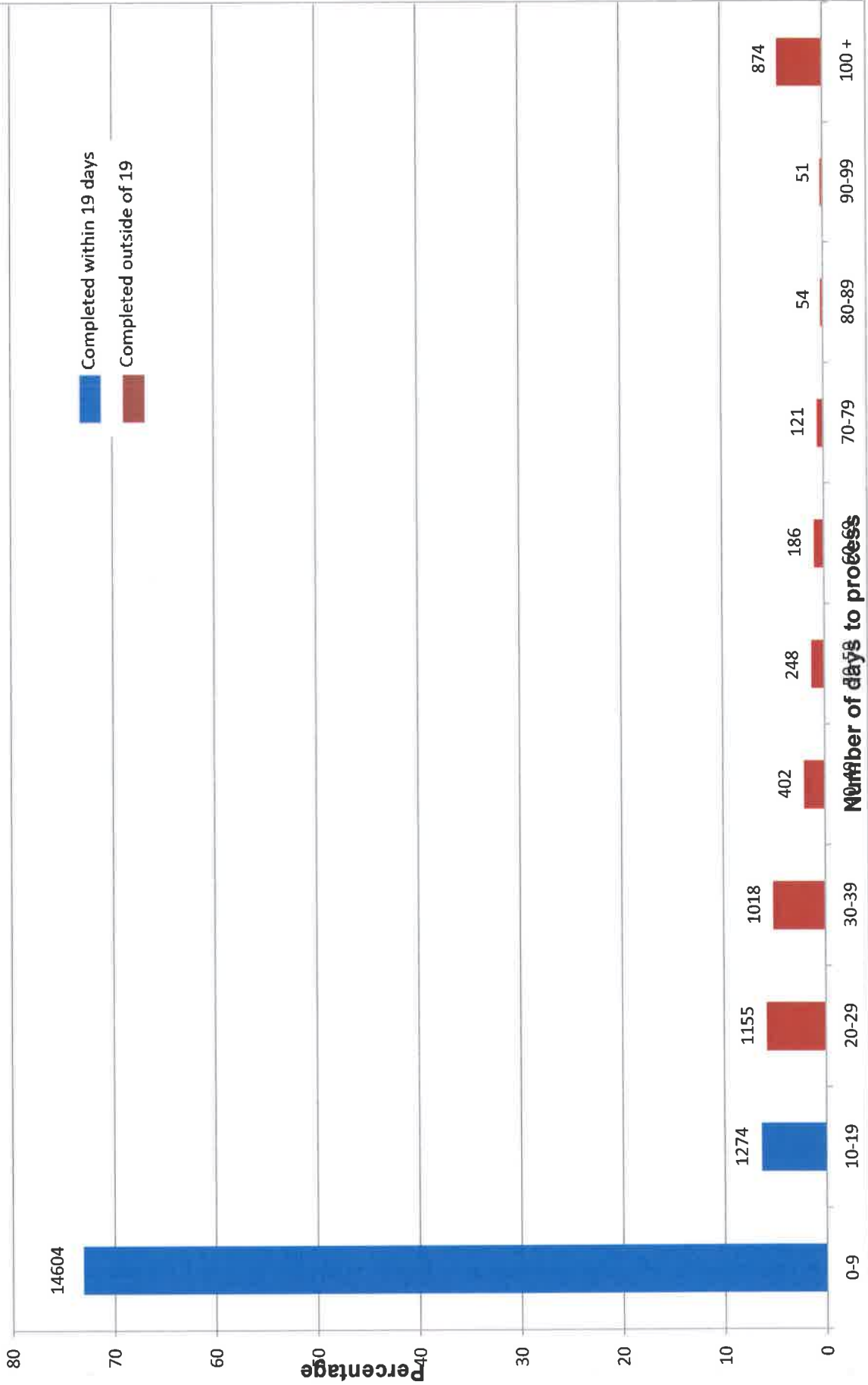
### Housing Benefit - processing time breakdown April to November 2023

New Claims (1340)

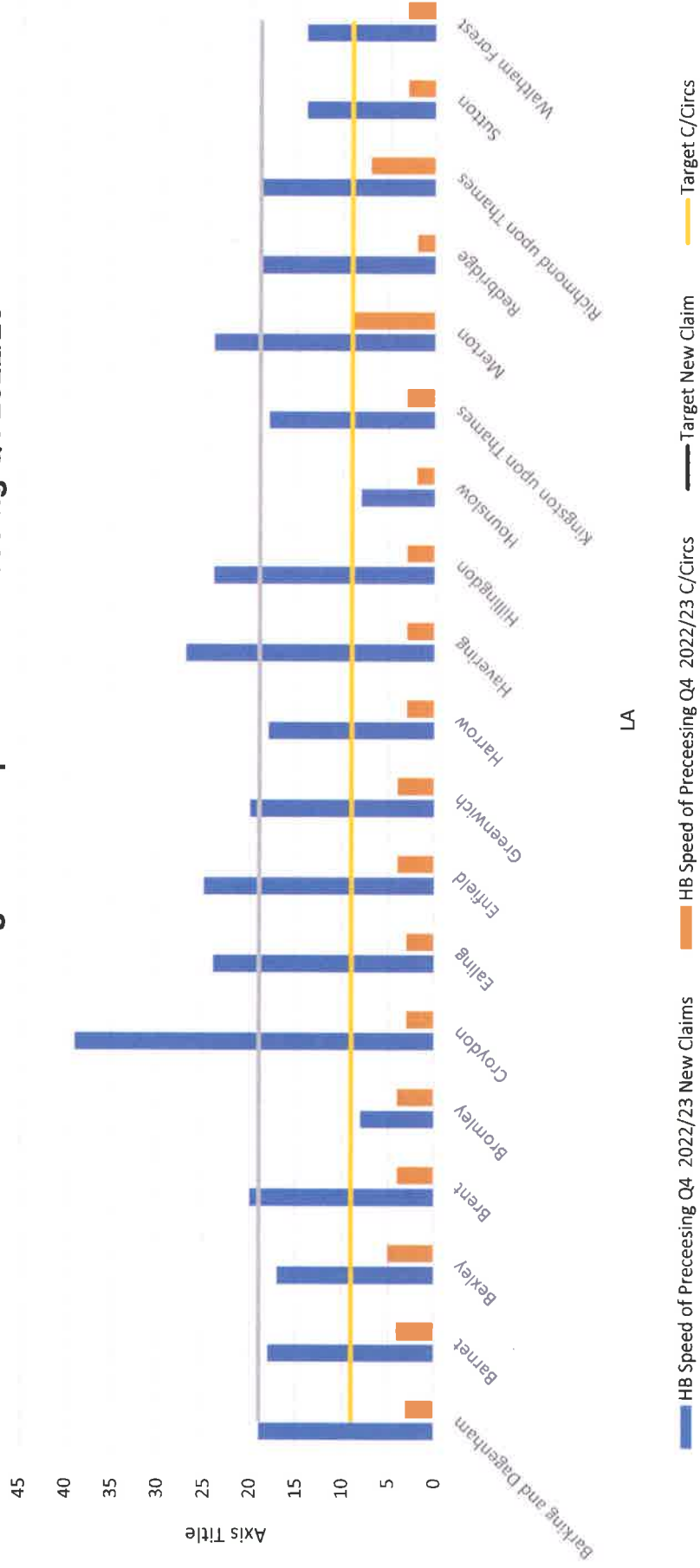


Number of days to process

### Housing Benefit - processing time breakdown - April to November 2023 Change in Circumstances (19,987)

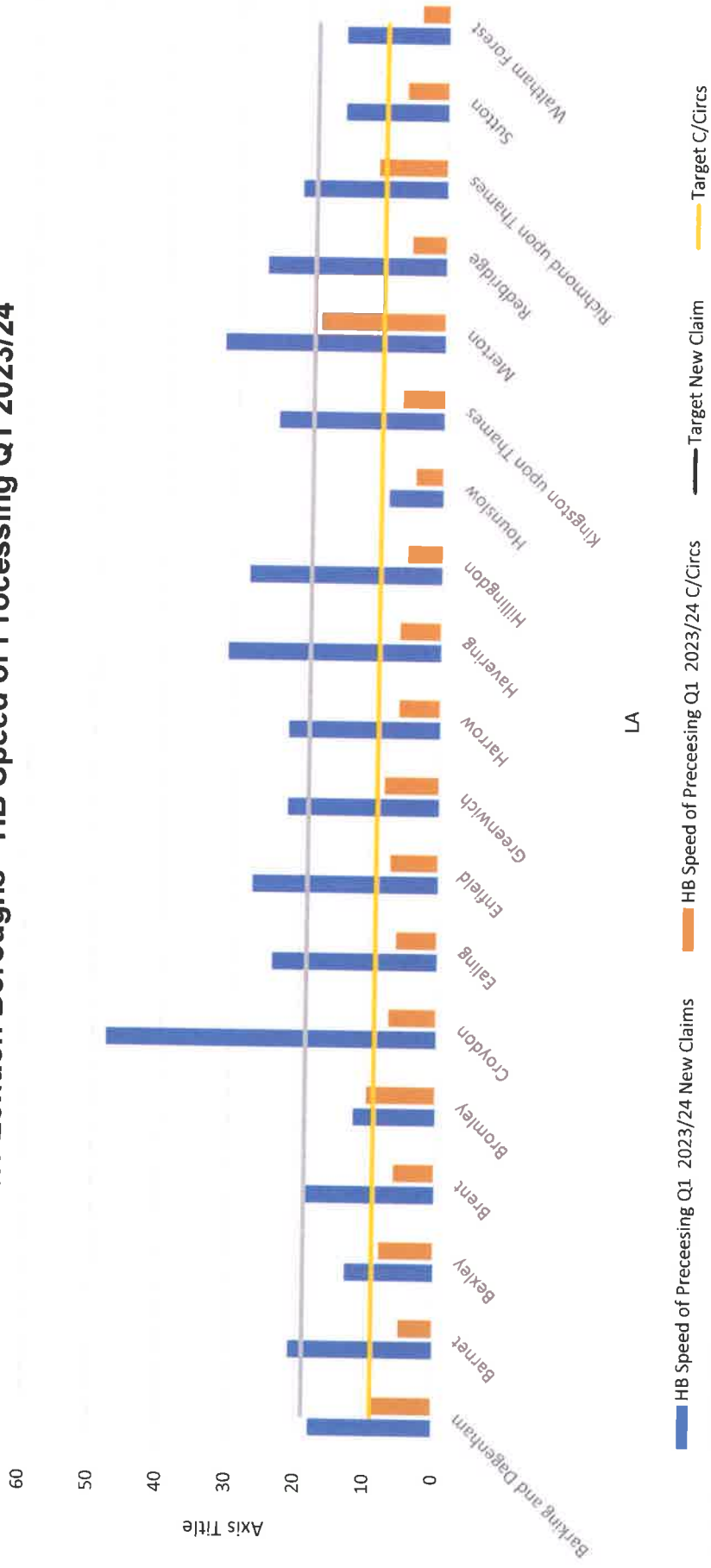


### Outer London Boroughs - HB Speed of Processing Q4 2022/23



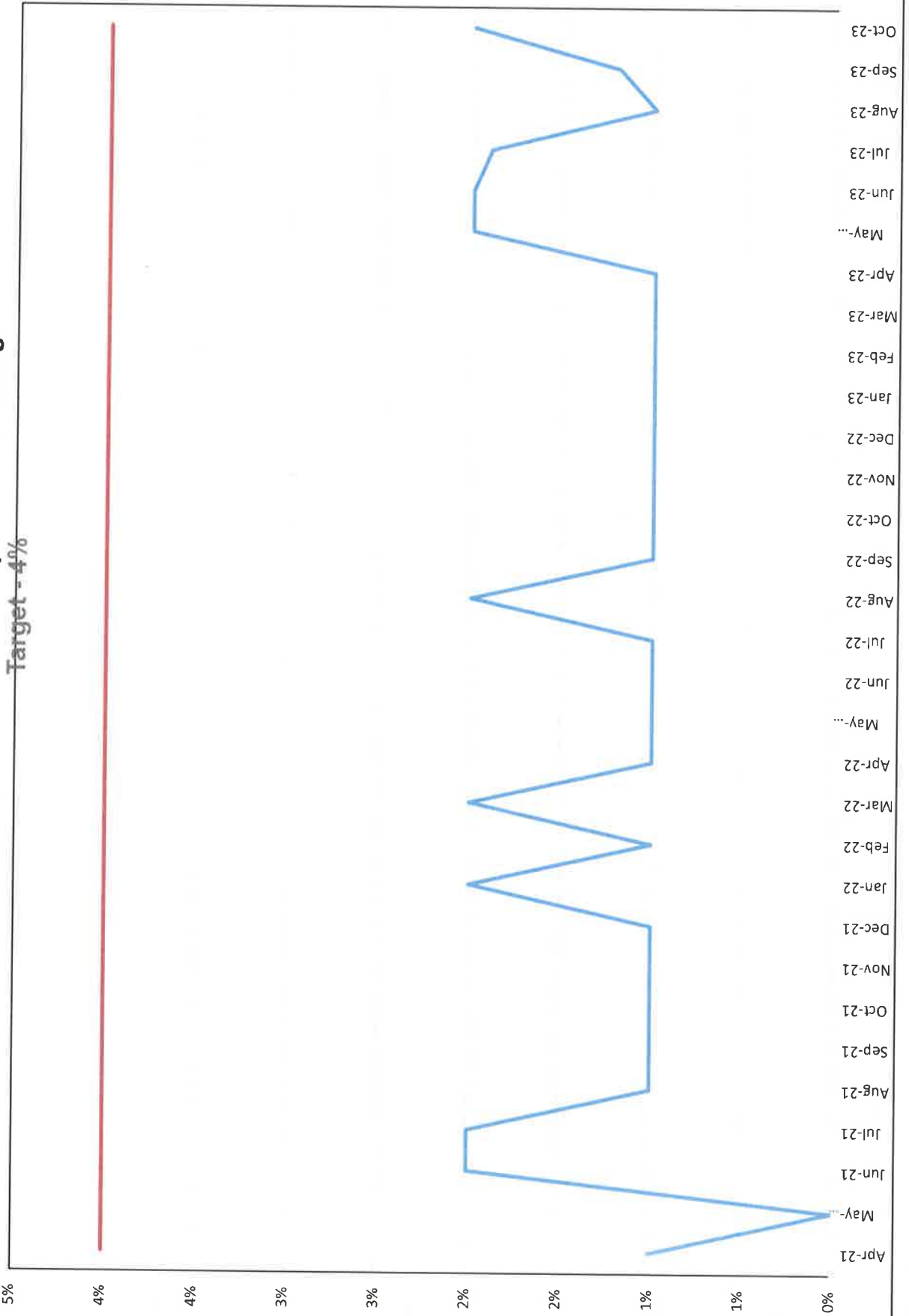
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### Outer London Boroughs - HB Speed of Processing Q1 2023/24

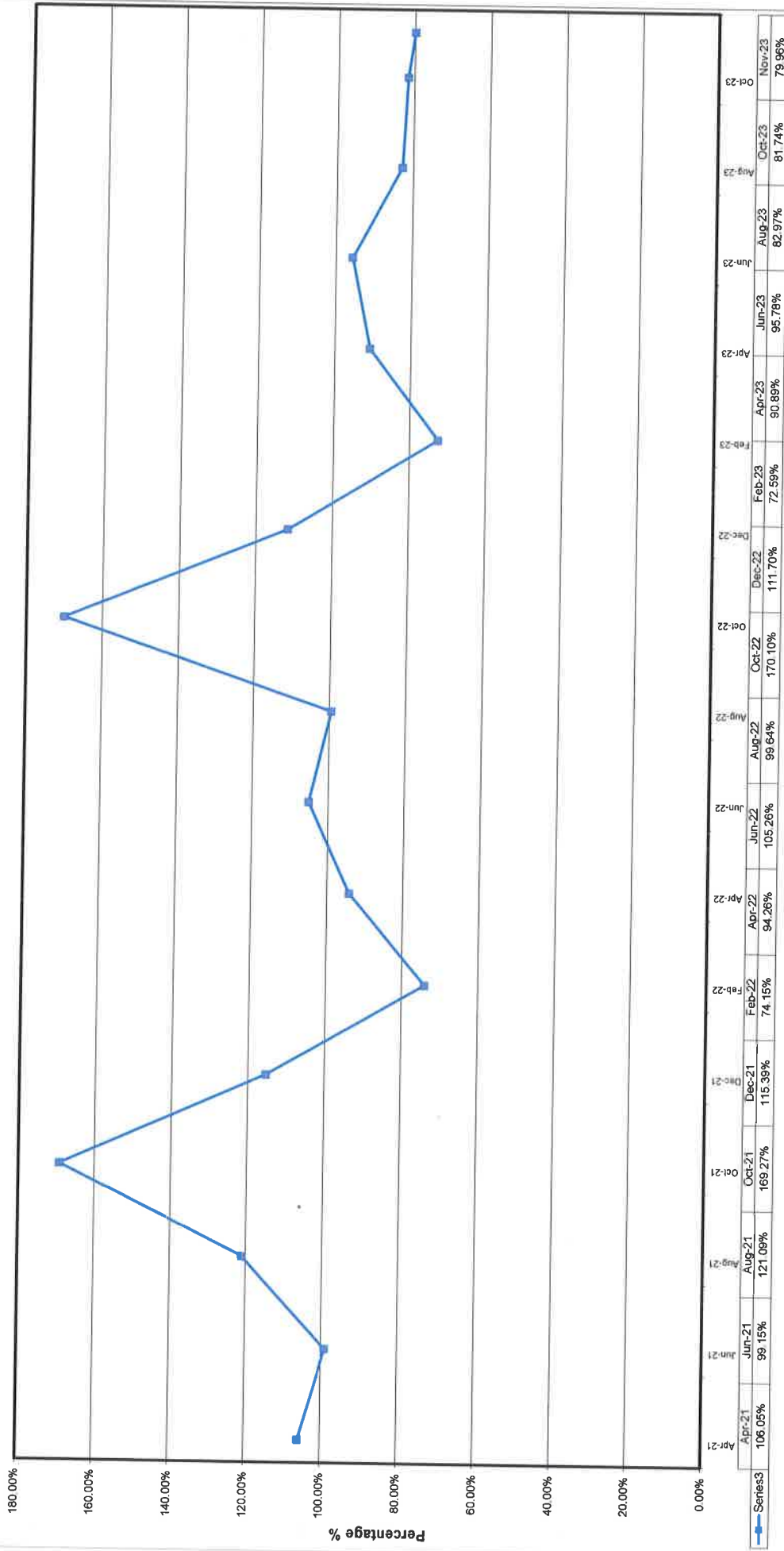


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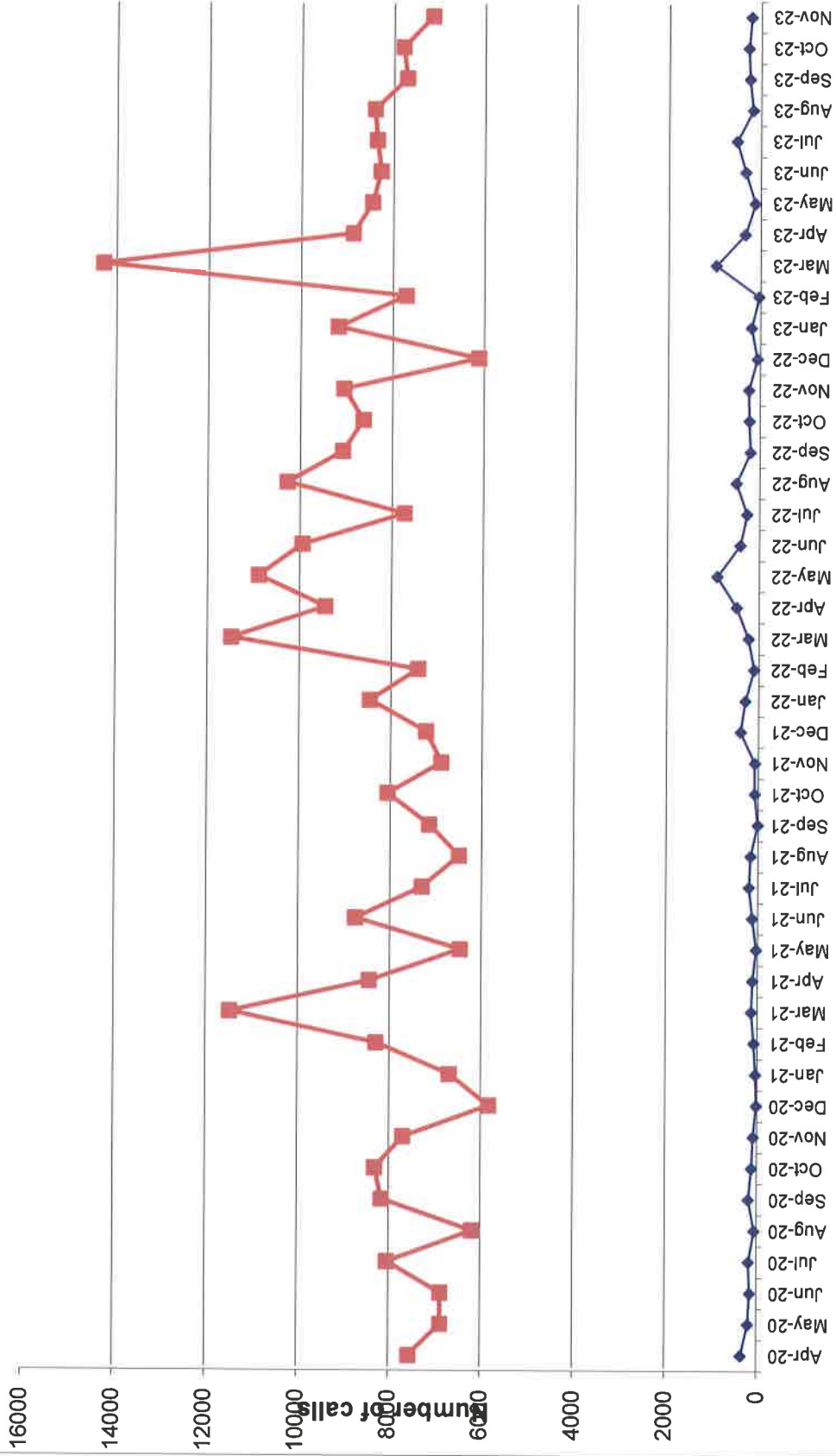
### Monthly Error Rate from April 21 - Percentage



Monthly Overpayment % recovered against that created since April 2021



Revenues and Benefits Call Centre - number of telephone calls received and abandoned from April 2020 to November 2023



Abandoned

### Caseload from November 2020 to 31 March 2023

