

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

Date: 31st May 2024

Our Ref: BO/DK

Dear Claudine,

As we approach the June 2024 Executive, Resources & Contracts PDS meeting where we consider and review the performance of the Benefits Service, I'm 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 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: 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024.

1. Current Status of the Benefits Service

As at the end of March 2024, the Benefits caseload was 15,986, which was down by 416 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 15.95 days compared to the previous year of 10.22 days. The average time for Changes was 8.09 days against 5.37 days for last year. Both of these are much higher than our usual standards of service delivery. Whilst we recognise that the outturn on both indicators remain within the range of our respective contractual targets, please be reassured that we are keen and committed to reverting back to the higher performance standards historically achieved on this contract.

The drop in performance was primarily caused by the loss of several staff at the beginning of the year. Replacing and training the new team had an inevitable impact on our work outputs while the new staff bedded in. The team are now in a good position to deliver to the historic levels of performance expectations for the coming year.

Outstanding work items at the period end totalled 1,463 with 807 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.

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(Registered in England and Wales - No 1238274)

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1.1 Temporary Accommodation

We have continued to maintain our strong relationships with the various LBB Housing Teams, Pinnacle (formerly Orchard & Shipman) and the Mears Group. We hold regular operational meetings in order 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 in order to ensure that benefit claims are paid as quickly and efficiently as possible. We will also work with the Council to understand and try and minimise arrears where 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 in order 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 also 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 to March 2024 was 1.53% which is slightly higher than the same reporting period last year (0.95%) but well within both the contractual target of 4% and the '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

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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.

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.

As at the period end, our recovery rate, known as the underlying trend, was 90.69%. This underlying trend includes the recovery of current year and previous year debts. In order 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 continues 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 86.9% of UC change notifications were automatically uploaded through the system without the need of any manual intervention.

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)

The Visiting Officers continue with their face-to-face visits to verify customer information on income and capital levels or to assist them in accessing the service.

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3. Call Centre & Customer Services

During the period under review the Revenues & Benefits Call Centre received 105,923 calls which is 13% lower in comparison to the same reporting period last year where we received 121,416 calls. Our Call Centre answered 92.5% of calls with an average speed to answer of 3 minutes & 26 seconds. The average overall service level for the Revenues & Benefits telephone service (excluding Business Rates) during the reporting period was 63.70%, with an average abandonment rate of 7.4%. The average handling time has increased by 24% in comparison to 2022/23, our average handling time is now 421 seconds compared to 340 seconds in the previous year.

The service has introduced a signposting voicebot to assist in directing customers to the most appropriate online service and this has allowed customers to resolve their enquiries without the need to talk to an operator. The voicebot has completely resolved 6% of customer interactions since implementation in August 2023 (4,962 calls).

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 1,509 R&B customers compared to 1,033 during the same period in 2023.

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:

- 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.
- During the year we have switched to summary notification letters in order to simplify the information and for the ease of understanding of most customers.
- Housing Benefit Award Accuracy Initiative (HBAAI); Liberata reviewed 2,760 HBAAI cases. 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.

I trust you find that the above has been informative and comprehensively demonstrates that 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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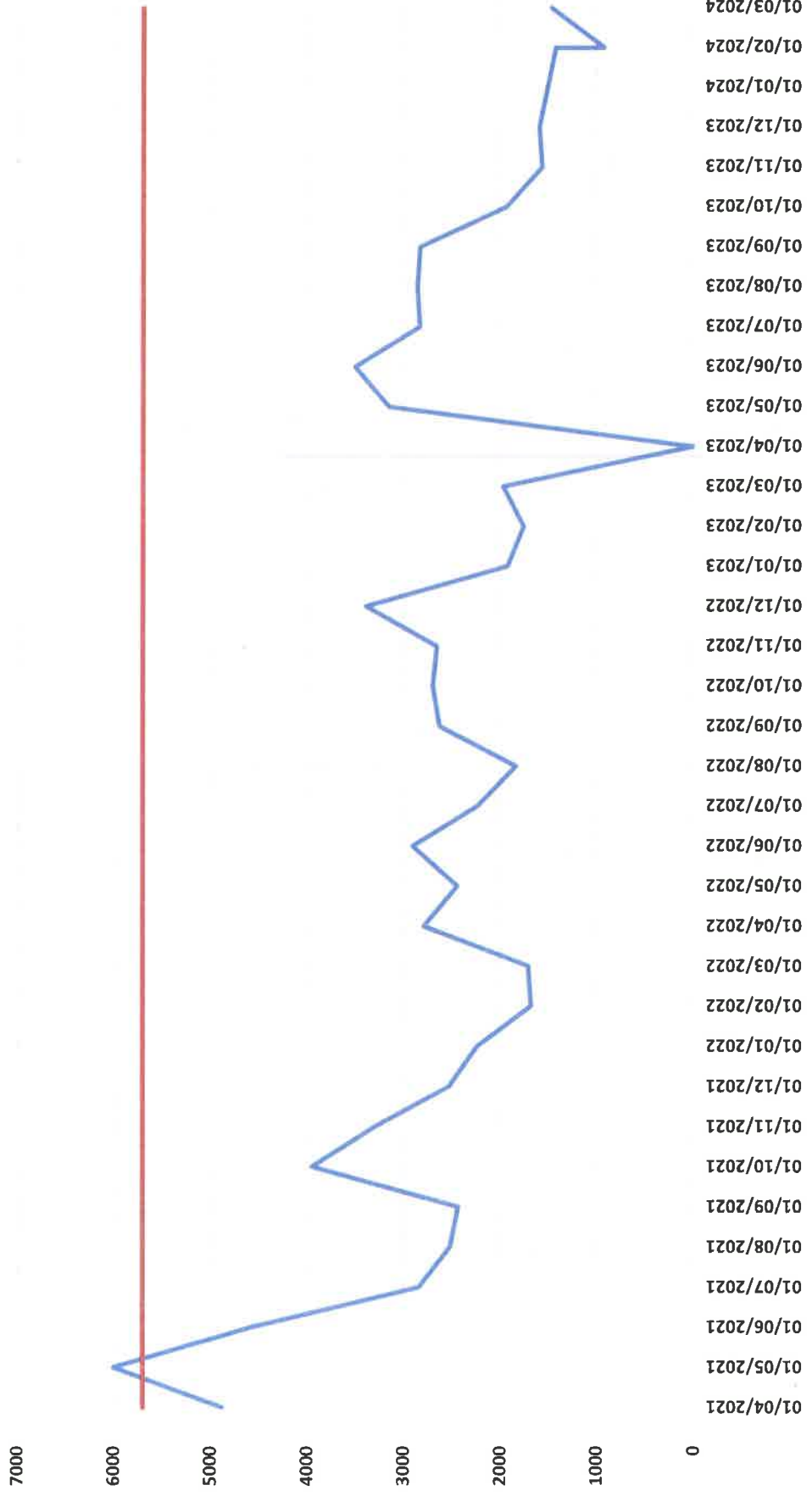
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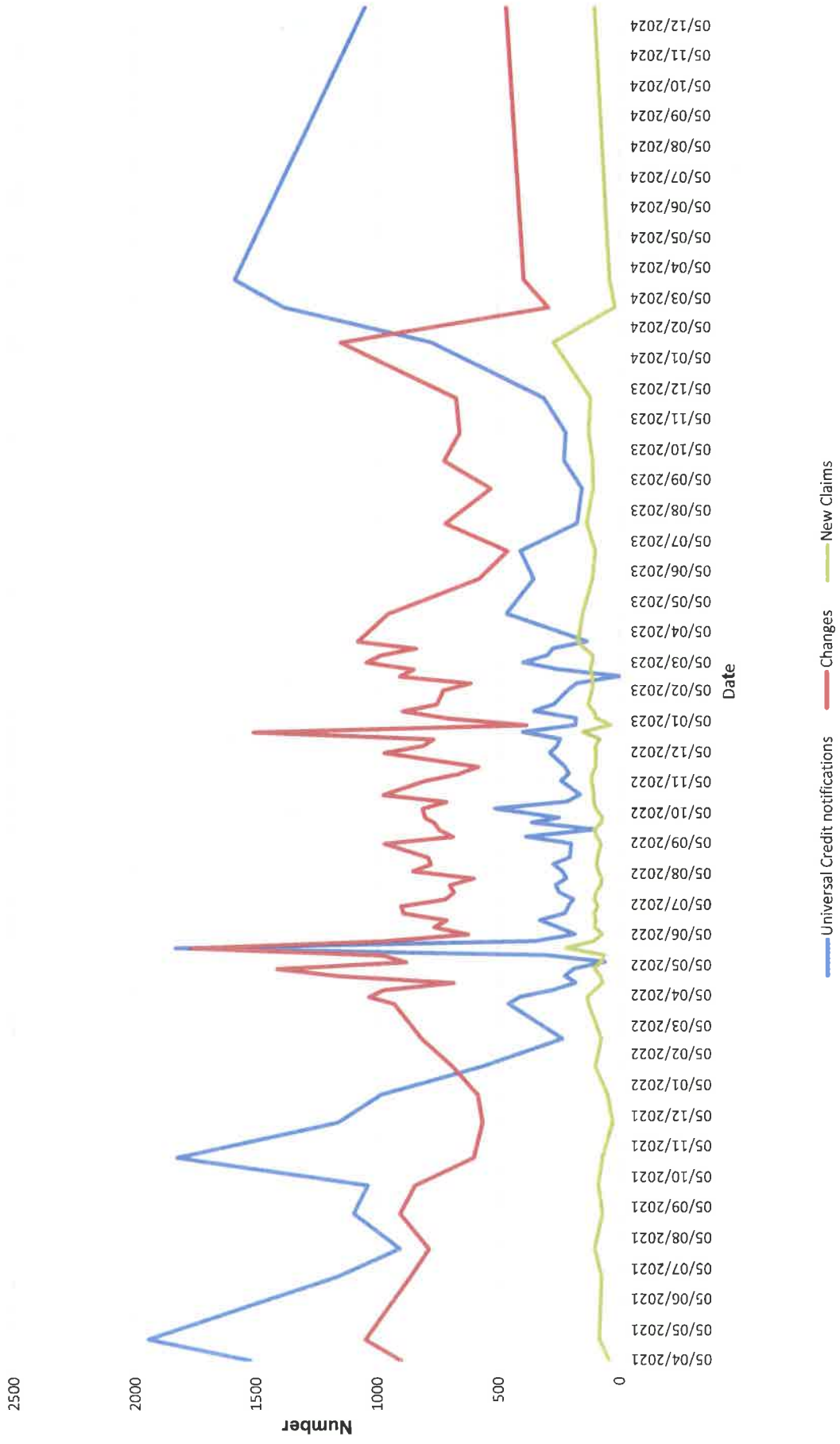
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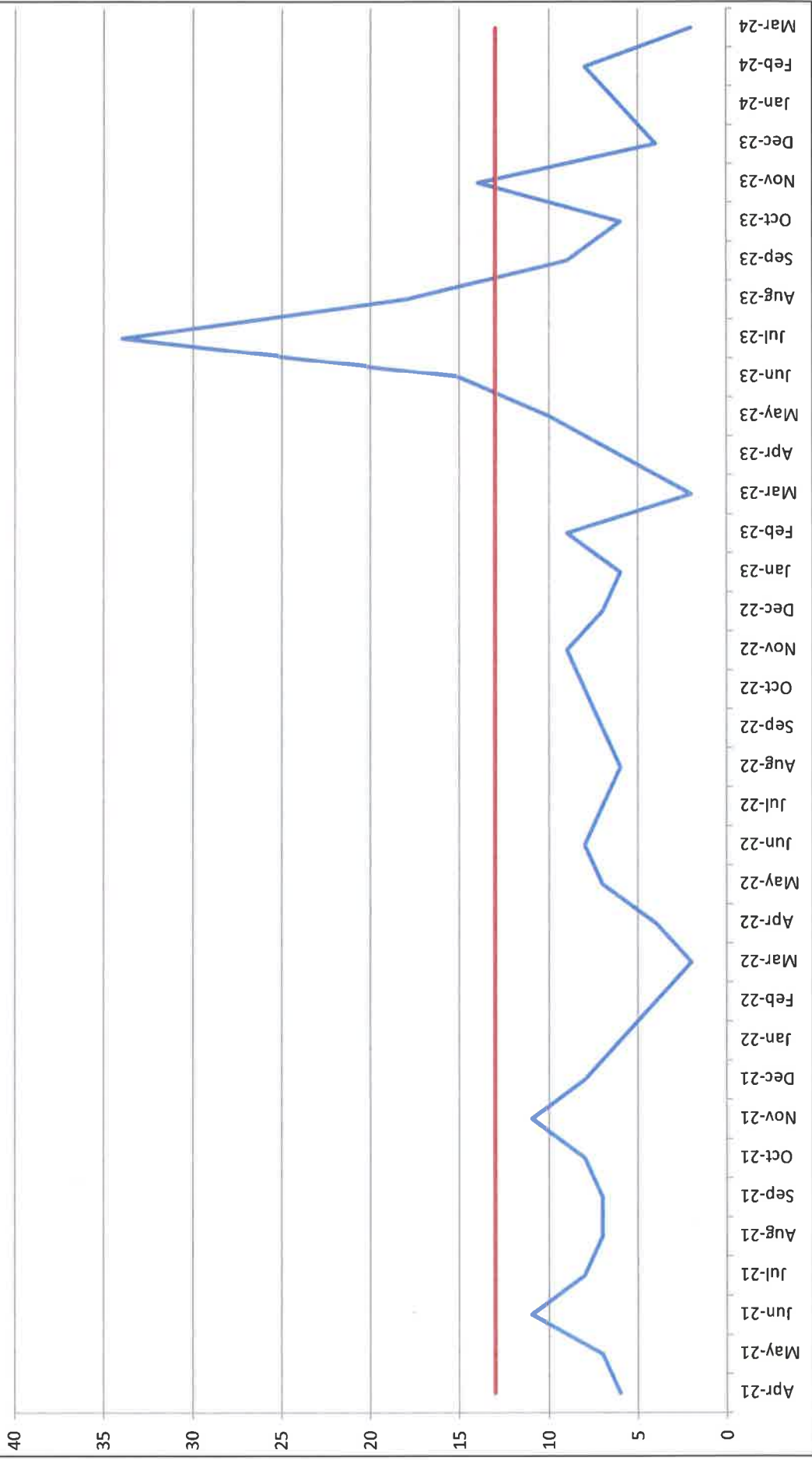
Outstanding Work - April 2021 to March 2024
Target - 5700 documents

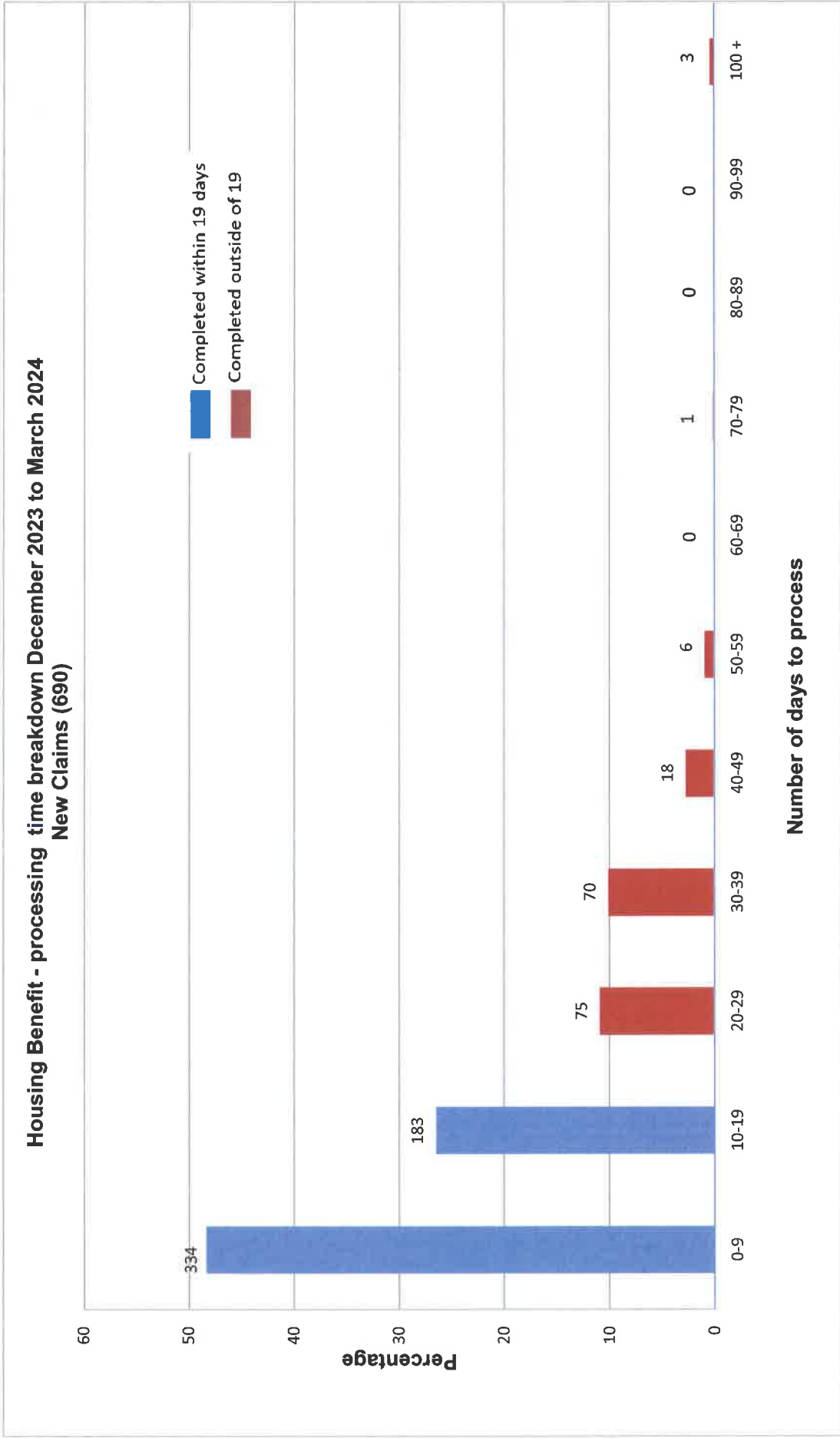


New claims, Changes in Circumstances and Universal Credit notifications received since April 2021

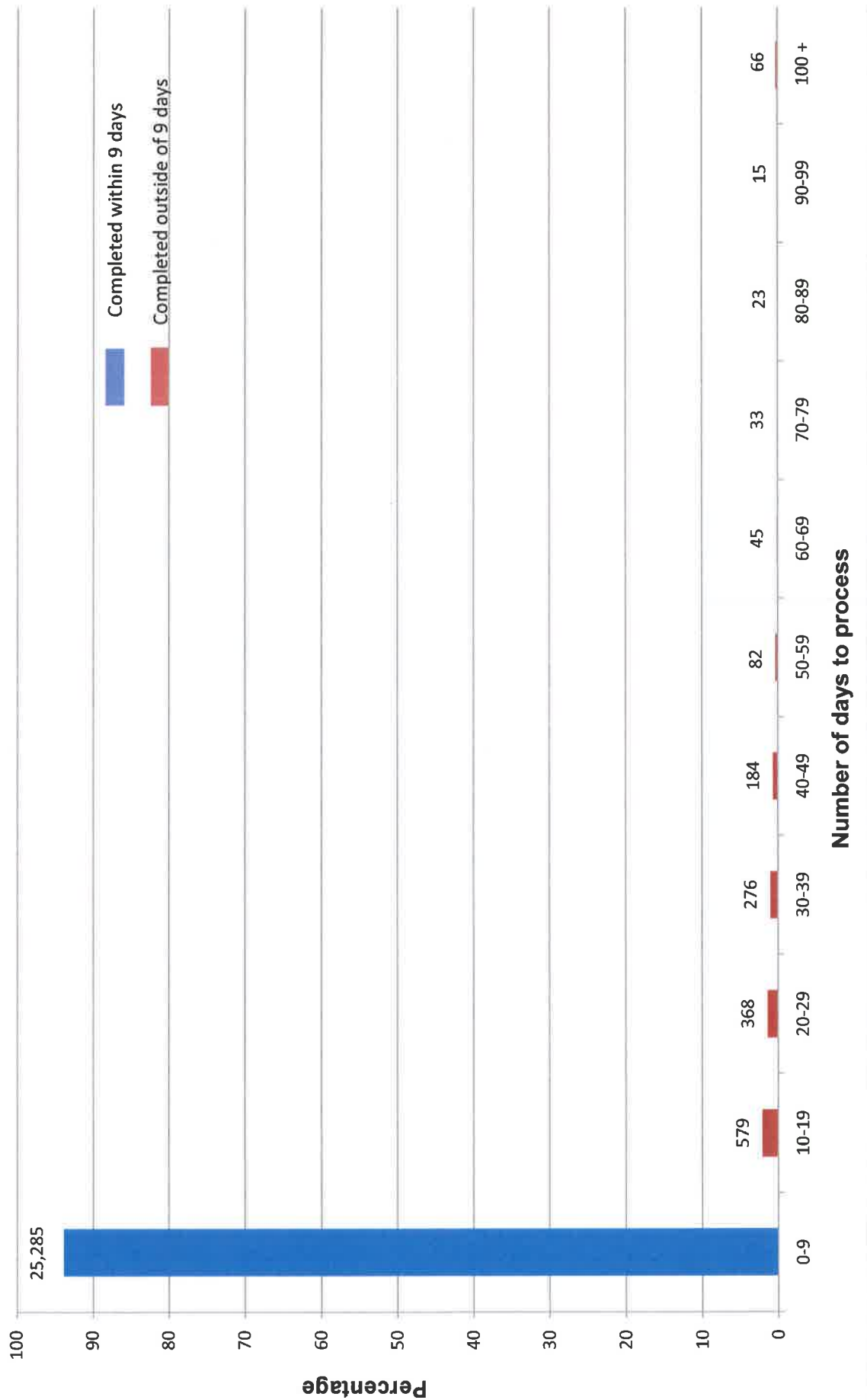


Right Time Indicator - April 2021 to March 2024
Target - 13 days

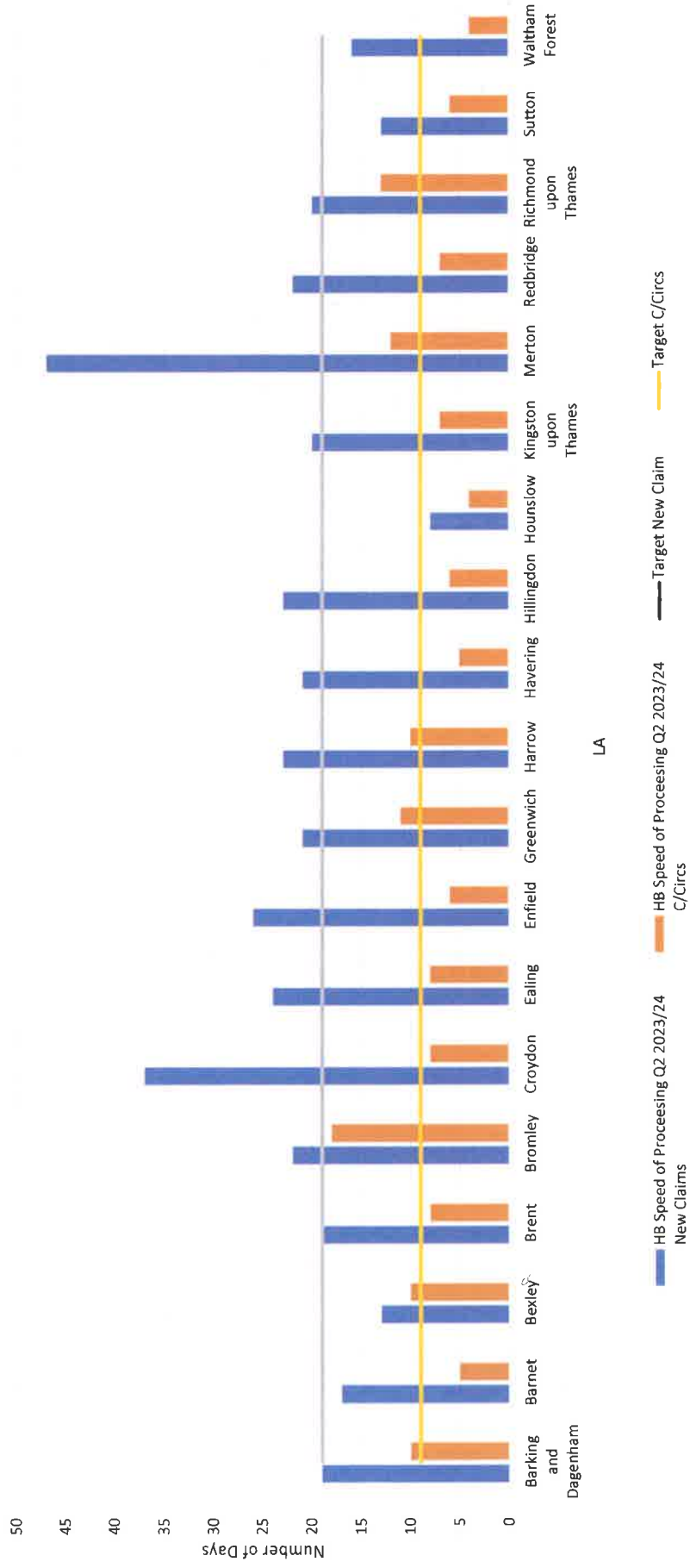




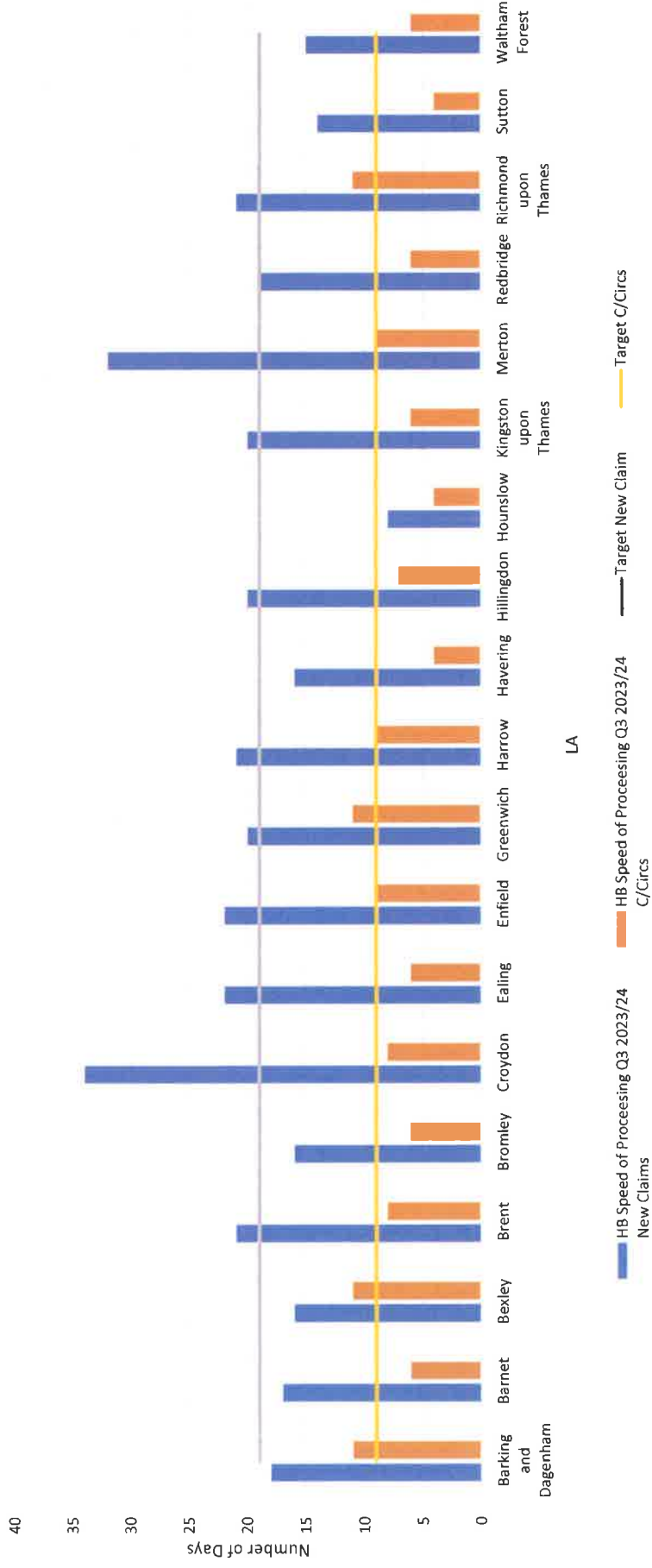
**Housing Benefit - processing time breakdown - December 2023 to 31 March 2024
Change in Circumstances (26,956)**



DWP benchmarking - HB Speed of Processing Quarter 2 - 2023/24

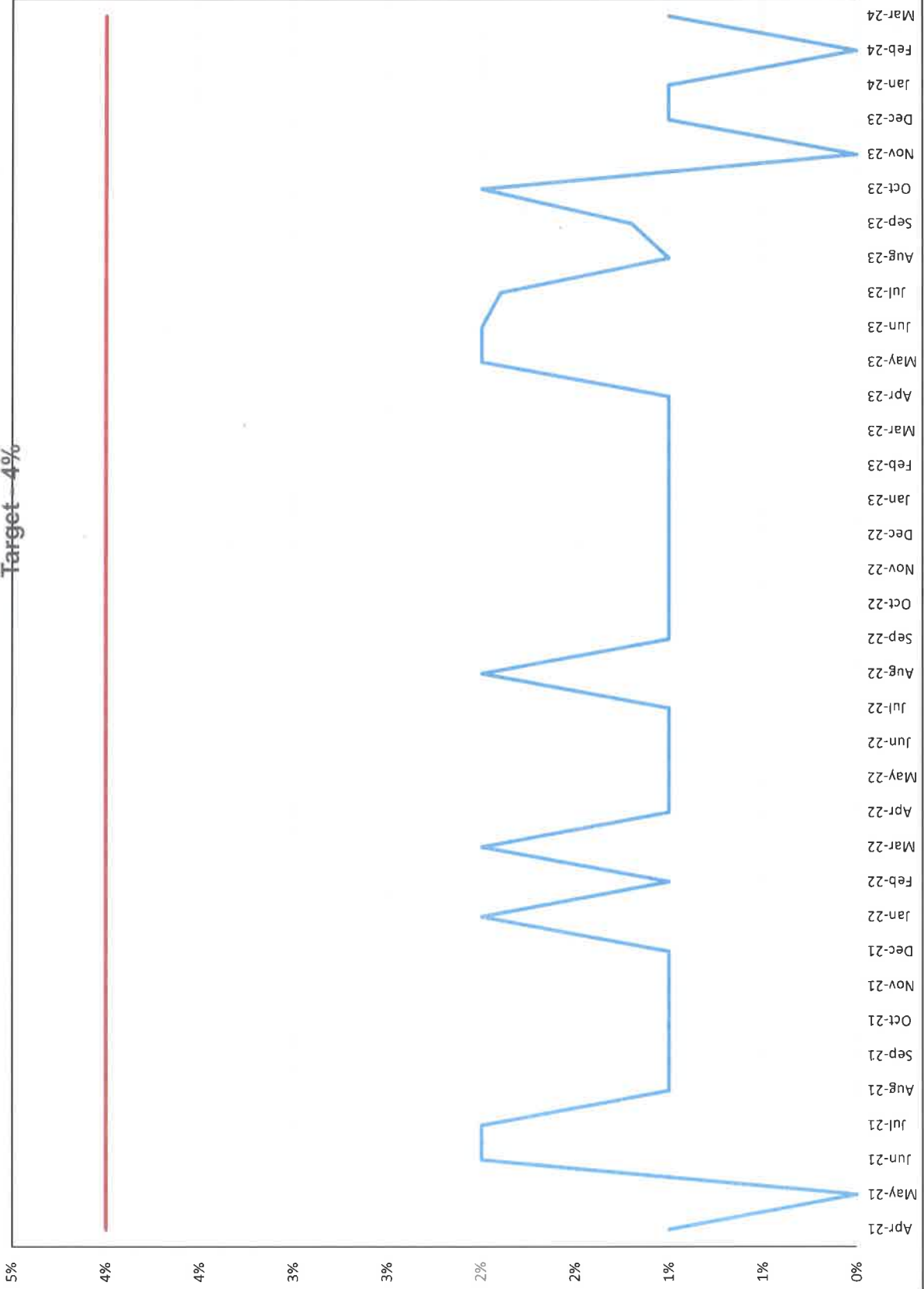


DWP benchmarking - HB Speed of Processing Quarter 3 - 2023/24



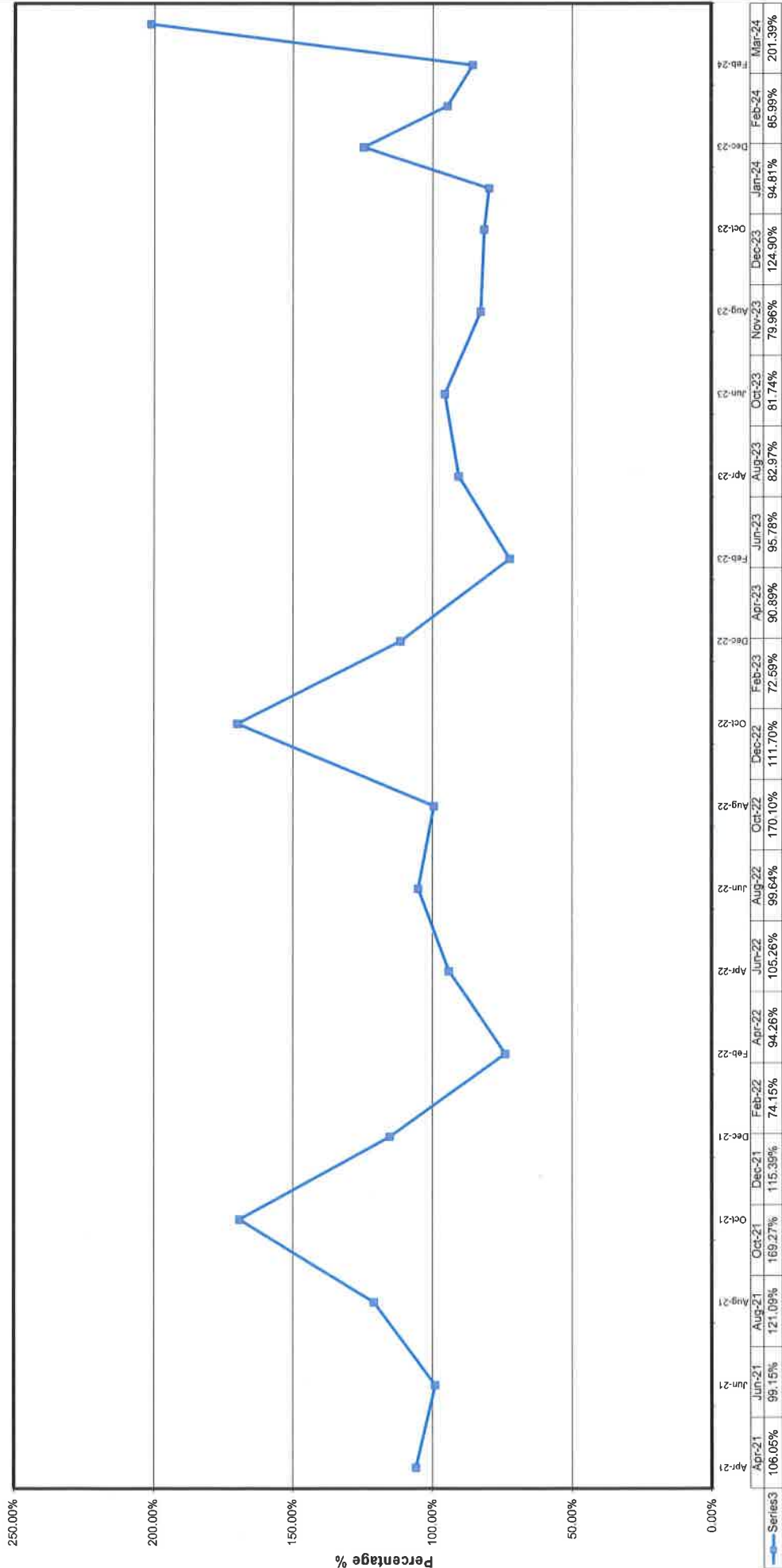
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Monthly Error Rate from April 21 to March 2024 - Percentage

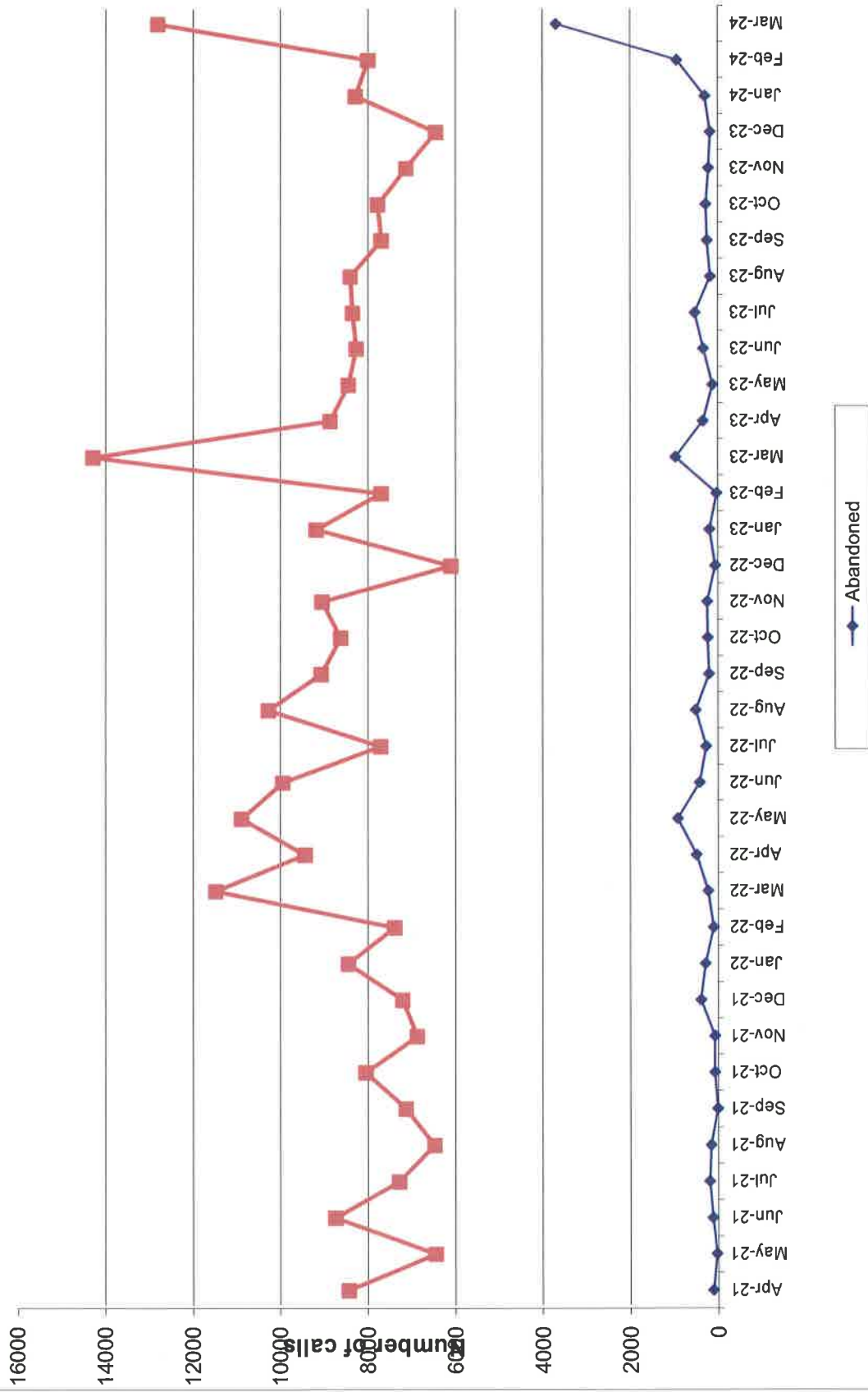


Month

Monthly Overpayment % recovered against that created since April 2021



Revenues and Benefits Call Centre - number of telephone calls received and abandoned from April 2021 to March 2024



Caseload from March 2021 to 31 March 2024

