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**REPORT TO:** Council Resources Commission

**DATE:** 19 September 2005

**DEPARTMENT:** Resources

**REPORTING OFFICER:** Head of Revenues and Benefits (Keith Simpson)

**SUBJECT:** **Benefits and Local Taxation Best Value Service Improvement Plan – Implementation Progress Review.**

**WARD/S AFFECTED:** All

**FORWARD PLAN REF:** N/A

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**1.0**

**PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 1.1 One of the responsibilities of the Council Resources Commission is to monitor the delivery of approved actions contained in appropriate Best Value Service Improvement Plans.
- 1.2 The purpose of this report is to present information to the Commission which will enable it to fulfil this role. The Commission may also decide to comment on any aspect of the delivery of the Plan.
- 1.3 Members of the Revenues and Benefits Senior Management Team will be present at the meeting to contribute to a power point presentation and to answer Members questions.
- 1.4 Delivery of the Service Improvement Plan is phased over a 4 year period. This is the first progress report. At least one further report will be submitted to the Commission in due course to report future progress.

**2.0 RECOMMENDATION**

- 2.1 That the presentation and the report be received and the information noted.
- 2.2 The Council Resources Commission to make appropriate comments on the delivery of the Service Improvement Plan.

### **3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION.**

- 3.1 A Best Value review of the Benefits and Local Taxation Services took place between April 2002 and September 2003.
- 3.2 The Best Value Review process included consultation with, and the involvement of a Steering Group, which included representatives of several local organisations (e.g. Citizens Advice Bureaux), and also included the responsible Cabinet Member, Officers and two Members representing Scrutiny.
- 3.3 The Best Value Review concluded with a final report to the Cabinet on 24 September 2003, which requested the Cabinet to approve the Best Value Service Improvement Plan (SIP) for the Benefits and Local Taxation Services.  
A copy of this report and the Service Improvement Plan may be obtained from the Head of Revenues and Benefits on request.
- 3.4 The Best Value Review was inspected by the Best Value Inspectorate, and their report was generally supportive of the process followed in the review and the proposed Service Improvement Plan.
- 3.5 One of the main concerns of the Revenues and Benefits Service Managers and Inspectors at the time, was how the SIP linked with other projects and plans that were in existence e.g. Access to Services, Benefits Performance Framework, the Revenues Division Business Plan etc.
- 3.6 The SIP approved by the Cabinet in September 2003, was a composite document which brought together all known proposals for change, from whatever source, and grouped them under nine key objectives, within seventeen broad project areas.
- 3.7 The SIP contained detailed project briefs for each of the project areas, which, amongst other things, identified the intended benefits, business case, and key deliverables.
- 3.8 Inevitably new projects, initiatives and tasks have come to the fore during the last two years and been incorporated into the Improvement Plan.
- 3.9 The SIP has been subject to regular review, monitoring and revision by the division's management team both throughout the last two years and during the annual business plan process.

#### **Key Drivers for Service improvement.**

- 3.10 There are several key external drivers which are strongly influencing plans to achieve service improvements in Council Services, and specifically Revenues and Benefits.
- 3.11 These key drivers currently include the following :
- The Government's Targets for Electronic Delivery of Services.
  - The Government's Comprehensive Performance Assessment of the Council
  - The DWP Performance Standards Framework.
  - The current emphasis on improved Access to Services for customers.
  - The rapid rate of Technological change, which provides improvement opportunities.

### **4.0 SUMMARY OF PROGRESS – FIRST TWO YEARS OF S.I.P. (September 2003 to August 2005)**

- 4.1 This section of the report provides Members with an overall picture of progress and key achievements, in the last two years.
- 4.2 Within the 17 project areas there have been 79 sub-projects, tasks or deliverables identified. Progress on these can be summarised as:-
- **Achieved** – project or task completed and improvements delivered **27**
  - **Partially achieved** – some improvements have been delivered but a project or task will be carried out in future to deliver further improvements **3**
  - *In progress – work underway on project or task.* **20**
  - *Ongoing – specific tasks have been undertaken and/or improvements delivered. Further changes will be delivered as part of continuous improvement through operational management.* **3**
  - *Limited action – minor improvements delivered but major work still remains* **1**
  - *Not started – task or project either not yet due to start or has been deferred for a later start* **19**
  - *Deleted – task or project either no longer viable or deliverable* **6**
- 4.3 Appendix 1 provides a full progress report against all the planned service improvements. This includes the original targets and timescales with commentary on the achievements to August 2005 and plans for the remaining two years of the 4 year plan. The appendix also highlights new items which were not included in the Service Improvement Plan, but which for various reasons have been necessary Service developments in the last two years.

### **Key Achievements 2003 to 2005.**

- 4.4 There have been many significant achievements during the first two years of implementing the Service Improvement Plan. The key achievements within each of the key objectives are set out in the following paragraphs.
- 4.5 **Delivering Better Customer Care**  
 Restructures and training in both Revenues and Benefits have improved service for face to face and telephone customers. Launch of EasyPay (card payment through all access channels) has met customer demand and improved payment options, delivered one of the ODPM Priority Outcomes and will help to maintain high collection rates in the future.
- 4.6 **Improved Communication with Customers**  
 The production of all benefit letters from the Document Management System and the new benefit claim form have improved the quality of documentation to customers and the quality of their replies which has also generated efficiencies in the benefits process.

Launch of the new website has significantly increased the amount and quality of information available to customers and together with increased advertising of the joint Revenues and Benefits email address, email contact, particularly within Revenues, has grown considerably. Customers are able to communicate in a manner they find convenient and receive a quicker response.

4.7

#### Develop Relationships

Relationships have developed with Citizen's Advice Bureaux, Social Housing providers and Landlord forum leading to involvement and consultation on new forms and new initiatives. A very successful relationship has developed between Benefits Services within North Yorkshire Districts and this has led to successful joint funding bids, training, leaflets and procurements of software.

4.8

#### Develop Systems

A major upgrade of core systems was achieved with the move to Revenues and Benefits Iworld system in line with the general shift to browser-based systems. A new project to upgrade all desktop PCs to Windows XP has resolved many problems and has provided a more stable and reliable working environment.

4.9

#### Improve Business Processes

Reform of pensioner Claim updates has led to customer improvements with more customers receiving benefit. The Government's Benefit Verification Framework has been implemented and provides a more secure service with reduced risk of fraud. A new debtors system in Benefits is more effective and providing better customer service.

4.10

#### Develop Staff Welfare

New induction, training and evaluation procedures have led to better trained staff, much less turnover and improved customer service.

4.11

#### Achieve Accreditation

Achieving the Investors in People Standard has improved staff management, led to more staff involvement and improvements in the welfare of staff.

### **5.0 PLANS FOR 2005 TO 2007.**

5.1

This section of the report informs members of the more significant service improvements which we plan to deliver over the next 2 years within each of the key objectives. Full details are included in Appendix 1.

5.2

#### Delivering Better Customer Care

A three phase customer service project already underway in 2005 and continuing through 2006 will build on the improved Customer Service already in place and interface with corporate projects for Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system and improved telephony.

A facility for paying benefit to bank accounts will be introduced to improve

efficiency and security.

Visiting officers reviewing and verifying benefit claims in people's homes will be able to capture information and evidence using tablet devices which connect wirelessly to back-office systems. This will streamline the process and provide better customer service.

5.3

#### Improved Communication with Customers

Further development of the website will add more online forms including an online benefit claim and calculator. Customers will be able to enquire about accounts and claims and receive bills electronically. Arrangements will be put in place to engage with customers about the Revenues and Benefits services and to advise them of performance against customer service standards.

5.4

#### Improve Physical Access for Customers

To respond positively to changing customer needs, the best location and methods for delivering face to face service will be determined in order to inform requirements to the corporate project.

5.5

#### Improve Business Processes

Bankruptcy petitions will be instigated for relevant debtors to improve collection of Council Tax and Business Rates. Phase 2 of the customer service project will review and re-engineer processes for use within the CRM system, automating tasks and flow of work and integration with back-office systems.

5.6

#### Develop Staff Welfare

Better management information on training, delivered and required, will ensure priorities are addressed and improve development of staff. Working with the corporate project in this area the division will consider how home-working can be facilitated for some staff.

5.7

#### Achieve Accreditation

The division will work towards achieving appropriate accreditation as recognition and culmination of the improvements in service.

5.8

#### Reduce Service Costs

Service costs will be reviewed to improve efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

### **6.0 IMPACT OF IMPROVEMENTS ON SERVICE PERFORMANCE.**

6.1

Some of the tools used to measure the standard of service delivered to customers are the National and Local Performance Indicators.

6.2

Over the first two years of the Service Improvement Plan, the principal P.I.s have evolved as follows :-

- Council Tax Collection maintained at 98.3%
- Business Rates Collection increased from 98.1 to 98.3%
- Average time to process a new Benefit Claim reduced from 48 to 42 days

- Average time to process a benefit change reduced from 11.8 to 7 days
  - Percentage of new Benefit Claims processed within 14 days of receiving all information has risen from less than 60% to around 85%
- 6.3 Customer complaints to Revenues have reduced by 47%.
- 6.4 The percentage of written communication received by email has risen from 0.5% to 36% with responses issued on average within 2.7 days
- 6.5 A significant improvement in service can be demonstrated through the results of Customer Satisfaction surveys. In 2003/04 a government inspired survey of customer satisfaction levels reported customers experience of visiting the benefits office at 79% and their opinion of staff in the Benefits office at 83%. As part of developing continuous improvement to customer service, surveys are now being run on a regular basis. In relation to both 'visiting the office' and 'staff in the Benefits office', customers now express over 90% satisfaction.
- 6.6 Statistically therefore, it can be demonstrated that the Service has improved in standard

## 7.0 CONCLUSIONS

- 7.1 This report demonstrates that significant progress has been made in delivering the key elements of the Best value Service Improvement Plan.
- 7.2 In addition to delivering many of the SIP Projects, new projects have emerged in the last two years, some of which have had to be given priority over some of the SIP projects. It is constantly necessary to reprioritise project delivery to meet changing Government and Service demands.
- 7.3 Further significant progress will be made in moving the Service forward and delivering further improvements in the next two years, so that by the end of the 4 year delivery plan all the original significant projects will have been delivered.
- 7.4 The Council is fortunate in having a team of Managers and staff in the Revenues and Benefits Service who are dedicated to achieving continuous service improvements, and have a long standing track record of achievement.
- 7.5 I would like to place on record my personal thanks to the whole team for their dedication and support.

**Background Papers:** Benefits and Local Taxation Best Value Review Service Improvement Plan (September 2003) Revenues and Benefits Service Business Plan 2005/06

**OFFICER CONTACT:** Please contact Keith Simpson if you require any further information on the contents of this report. The officer can be contacted at Scottsdale House, by telephone on 01423 556414 or by Email – [keith.simpson@harrogate.gov.uk](mailto:keith.simpson@harrogate.gov.uk)

## SUSTAINABILITY ASSESSMENT / POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

		Implications are		
		Positive	Neutral	Negative
A	Economy		X	
B	Environment		X	
C	Social Equity :-			
i)	General		X	
ii)	Customer Care / People with Disabilities		X	
iii)	Health Implications		X	

D	Crime and Disorder Implications		X	
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If all comments lie within the shaded areas, the proposal is sustainable.