

REVENUE AND BENEFIT SERVICES – PARTNERSHIP WORKING

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report advises Members of current developments in partnership working and seeks approval to extend these should the opportunity arise.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 The Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) report recognised that the Council had a number of capacity issues across a range of services. One of those identified was the Revenue and Benefit services and this report draws to Member's attention the work currently being undertaken to address these areas for improvement.

- 2.2 The report encompasses:-

- Business Rate Collection.
- Sharing Fraud Expertise.
- Collaborative working with partner local authorities.

3 BUSINESS RATE COLLECTION

- 3.1 Rochford has around 1,800 properties subject to Business Rate which generates work for just under one full-time equivalent (FTE) member of staff. The 2002/03 Best Value Review of Financial Services revealed the lack of robustness in this service area and highlighted the Council's dependence on one member of staff for expertise. Rochford initiated talks with neighbouring local authorities (Castle Point, Basildon, Brentwood and Chelmsford) to see whether there was scope for partnership working. Chelmsford Borough Council was the only authority to show positive interest. Attention on this project was re-focussed when in May 2004 Rochford's "expert" left to work for another Essex local authority and we had to employ agency staff at premium rates to cover this important and specialised area of work.
- 3.2 Following detailed negotiations with Chelmsford Borough Council, work was transferred to that authority on a three-month trial basis in March 2005. Chelmsford is a top quartile performing authority that uses the same Business Rate collection software as Rochford. The changeover was seamless and transparent to customers. Rochford currently retains the recovery and enforcement elements of the task, but Chelmsford cover all other billing and collection functions.

- 3.3 In June 2005 the Corporate Director (Finance and External Services) signed a longer term two-year contract, having been satisfied as to collection rates and account administration during the pilot period. This was reported in the Members' Bulletin in July 2005.

4 SHARING FRAUD EXPERTISE

- 4.1 The Assistant Manager (Fraud) is a well-regarded practitioner and a reference point for fraud in Essex. He has developed policies and practices to minimise fraud and error in the Benefit system and is an acknowledged expert in this field.
- 4.2 In April 2005 Castle Point Borough Council was looking to strengthen its fraud team and to introduce new procedures and bring them into line with best practice. This included:-
- the introduction of "Do Not Redirect" postal procedures;
 - developing investigative procedures to detect fraudulent claims;
 - assessing and actioning cases for referral to fraud;
 - developing management reports, setting targets and monitoring performance.
- 4.3 Castle Point turned to Rochford for assistance and, in August, the Head of Service agreed a package of 'paid for' consultancy spanning seventeen days assistance during September and October. During this period research was carried out to assess whether there was scope for further collaborative work to be undertaken in this area.

5 REVENUE AND BENEFITS

- 5.1 Following initial work developed by the Essex Chief Executive's Association, the Head of Service is working with service professionals in Chelmsford Borough Council, Colchester Borough Council and Maldon District Council to see whether there is scope for collaborative work in the field of revenue collection (Council Tax) and benefit administration.
- 5.2 All four local authorities use the same Revenue and Benefit software systems and three have the same document imaging systems, so it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that systems could be linked electronically.
- 5.3 Currently work is in its initial stages and has been confined to a scoping exercise, but the Council made a successful bid to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for £35,000 to help towards capacity building in the Revenue and Benefit arena and as part of the CPA Improvement Plan this funding will be used to progress the project further as and develop a Rochford "Service Specialist Offer". Chelmsford have agreed to host an exploratory meeting in October.

- 5.4 Free consultancy support is being given by The Anglian Revenue Partnership, a collaboration between Breckland District Council and Forest Heath District Council who started this process three years ago and who have now set up an independent body for service delivery. The Chelmsford, Rochford and Maldon Partnership could possibly develop in the same way over a period of time.

6 CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1 Local authorities can no longer work in isolation and are subject to external drivers for efficiency and savings. Collaborative working provides a path to both without exposure to outsourcing the function.

7 RECOMMENDATION

- 7.1 It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES** to note the current progress on collaborative working and endorse the proposals for further work with the partners mentioned in the report.

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Background Papers:-

None.

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