

HOUSING BENEFIT PERFORMANCE FRAMEWORK – ADOPTION OF VISION STATEMENT, POLICY OBJECTIVES AND SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLAN

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 Members to adopt the Vision Statement and Policy Objectives associated with the delivery of the Housing Benefit Performance Framework (HBPF). The Head of Service also submits a delivery plan for approval.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 In June the Council adopted the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Performance Standards for Council Tax Benefits and Housing Benefits, and was congratulated by the Minister for Work and Pensions, Malcolm Wicks MP, for being one of the first Local Authorities in the country to be proactive in this direction.

- 2.2 The Standards are designed to:-

- Give a comprehensive picture of what makes up secure and effective benefits administration – divided into seven key functional areas.
- Be a clear strategic and operational framework for assessing the performance of each Authority.
- Be an aid to identifying local priorities for action and planning for continuous improvement
- Improve accountability for £14 billion of public funds.

- 2.3 The key issues embodied in the standards are described as:-

- How standards form part of a wider programme of housing benefit reform.
- What the standards cover, why, and how DWP set the level of standards
- The implementation timetable and the advantages for each Authority in making early use of the standards.

3 FINANCIAL SERVICES BEST VALUE REVIEW

- 3.1 The Council have earmarked this year for a Best Value Review of Financial Services which would naturally include Council Tax Benefit and Housing Benefit functions. The Officer Review Team felt that the Self Assessment toolkit contained in the Performance Standards Package provided an excellent document to which they should work and Members agreed to adopt this approach.

4 PROPOSALS FOR CONSIDERATION

- 4.1 Having adopted the standards it is now important to advance the process in the Member arena by setting out an overarching Vision Statement followed by more detailed Policy Objectives. These are appended for Members consideration (Appendix 1 and 2). They mirror the DWP proposals set out in the scheme overview but have been tailored to a “Rochford perspective” throwing emphasis on areas where we know we need to strengthen our procedures to deliver a customer focussed service.

5 CUSTOMER SURVEY

- 5.1 Benefit claimants were surveyed throughout July and August and asked 15 searching questions about the delivery of Revenues and Benefits services. 1000 claimants were surveyed with a 52% response rate – this places a high level of reliability on the information provided.
- 5.2 Appendix 3 shows the analysis of responses received identifying high priority being given to:-
- Speaking to the same person about Council Tax and Benefits (Question 1)
 - A single point of enquiry for Council Tax and Benefits (Question 6)
 - Direct call-back response rather than waiting on the telephone for a reply (Question 7)
 - Speaking on the telephone to the same person and not being transferred (Question 8)
 - Dealing with all queries with one telephone call (Question 9)
 - Being given a linked reference for all enquiries (Question 10)
 - Being served by a team dealing with Council Tax and Benefit enquiries within 24 hours (Question 12)

5.3 “New Technology” responses by e-mail and online applications for benefit ranked the lowest, although this could rise over the years as today’s generation of technology users become the claimants of the future.

5.4 Appendix 4 provides an in depth analysis of each question.

6 CONCLUSION

6.1 The Vision Statement and Policy Objectives will provide Members and Staff with a clear focus on what has to be achieved for the future.

6.2 The survey points the way to how our customers would like to see the service develop and clearly there is an overwhelming argument for a single point of delivery for the Revenue and Benefit functions which will need to be addressed to meet customer expectations.

6.3 Appendix 5 illustrates a Service Improvement Plan broken down into the seven functional areas (described under Policy Objectives). This will ensure the timely delivery of the Performance Standards for HB/CTB.

6.4 In some areas the standards are met in full; in other areas considerable work is required to meet the standards. Much of this work will require input from senior staff and Section Managers.

7 RECOMMENDATION

It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES**

- (1) That the Vision Statement and Policy Objectives for delivering the HBPF be adopted.
- (2) That the Service Improvement Plan be adopted and reviewed annually by this Committee, along with any resource issues arising so that these can be considered as part of the budget making process.
- (3) That appropriate resources be devoted to ensuring the plan remains on target.
- (4) That the Head of Revenue and Housing Management bids for Government finance to advance the plan.
- (5) That an annual customer survey be undertaken to ensure the plan is delivering customer demands. (HRHM)

Steve Clarkson

Head of Revenue and Housing Management

Background Papers:

HBPF Handbook and Standards letter from Malcolm Wicks MP

For further information please contact Steve Clarkson:-

Tel:- Ext 3120

E-Mail:- steve.clarkson@rochford.gov.uk

APPENDIX 1



Our Vision

We are committed to

- ***Providing a modern, customer-focused, efficient, effective, and secure housing benefit system that is continuously seeking to improve and reducing the risks of fraud and error***
- ***Delivering an effective Housing Benefit system that is set within the broad context of local authority and stakeholder aspirations in order to meet wider strategic objectives***
- ***Ensuring that benefits administration be given the priority needed to raise standards***
- ***Delivering a cost effective service which provides value for money to all stakeholders.***
- ***Ensuring that all involved with administering or claiming Housing Benefit understand what they must do to make the system effective and secure***

In doing so, our service users will find we

- ***ensure people receive the benefit to which they are entitled***
- ***are accessible***
- ***are speedy and accurate***

- *minimise barriers to work*
- *support people to live in decent housing*
- *maximise the recovery of overpayment of benefit and protect Council finances.*
- *always investigate potential fraud and punish benefit fraudsters*

APPENDIX 2



Our Policy Objectives

Making the Vision a reality

Through the efforts of a determined and committed Housing Benefit Team

By using the HB Performance Standards, to carry out a self-assessment of our service in order to identify our performance in particular areas

By carrying out a Best Value Review of our service in preparation for any Best Value Inspection and Corporate Performance Assessment

By having a Service Improvement Plan which is reviewed annually

Meeting the full range of HB performance standards

By analysing our current management and operational activities around the seven functional areas of:

1. Strategic management
2. Customer services
3. Processing of claims
4. Working with landlords
5. Internal security
6. Counter-fraud
7. Overpayments

We will also seek to identify how our service compliments the aims of wider strategies both internally and in partnership with our key stakeholders.

We will develop new policies and procedures to achieve all the HB/CTB Performance Standards over the next 5 years

Step-change approach

Our approach will be visible and apparent to our customers by us demonstrating a structured approach to service delivery that will include:

- A single point of service delivery for Council Tax and Benefit Administration
- acknowledging that our customers identify this as the most important aspect of service delivery
 - 25% increase in our performance
- using performance targets to measure our success as outlined in the Ministerial Letter of 2 September 2002
 - 99% elimination of error
- directing limited resources to where they are most needed

Efficiency savings and value-for-money improvements

By learning from good practice and the HB/CTB Performance Standards

- aiming to maximise income and using 'spend to save' techniques

By using the latest technology to enhance performance and efficiency savings

- bidding for funds to introduce technology on a cost share basis

Minimising backlogs

By prioritising our work to prevent backlogs occurring

- identifying early signs of backlogs and diverting resources to maintain service delivery.

Ensuring staff are trained, motivated and resourced to meet customer expectations

- securing appropriate funding to ensure team members are suitably skilled and rewarded for effort.

APPENDIX 3

Results of Best Value
Survey

Returned Forms:	Counter	126
	Telephone	164
	Postal	230
	Total	520

	Very important	Important	Neither important or not important	Not important	
1. Speaking to the same person about your Benefit or Council Tax at the counter who are able to deal with your query immediately in most cases?	268 (52%)	177 (34%)	49 (9%)	26 (5%)	0
2. To be able to see your Council Tax account or Benefit claim as it is being updated in front of you?	158 (30%)	209 (40%)	97 (19%)	56 (11%)	0
3. To be issued with a revised or new bill or benefit notification before you leave the office.	147 (28%)	179 (34%)	137 (27%)	57 (11%)	0
4. Being interviewed in a private room.	174 (33%)	146 (28%)	122 (24%)	78 (15%)	0
5. Having an electronic queueing system that allows you to see how long it is before you are seen	156 (30%)	171(33%)	131 (25%)	62 (12%)	0
6. To speak to a central point for all Council Tax & Benefit enquiries	235 (45%)	219 (42%)	44 (8%)	22 (5%)	0
7. To leave a number for the officer to call you back instead of staying on the line until your query is dealt with?	261 (50%)	203 (39%)	39 (8%)	17 (3%)	0
8. To be dealt with by the same person and not transferred?	352 (68%)	133 (26%)	17 (3%)	18 (3%)	0
9. To be able to answer your query in that first phone call?	228 (44%)	226 (44%)	52 (10%)	14 (2%)	0

10. To be given a reference number when contacting us by phone, which can be used when querying original request?	218 (42%)	214 (41%)	67 (13%)	21 (4%)	0
11. Having a local surgery to be able to drop in documents etc?	187 (36%)	211 (41%)	93 (18%)	29 (5%)	0
12. Dealt with by team of people able to deal with all revenue and Benefit enquiries within 24 hours	236 (45%)	228 (44%)	45 (9%)	11 (2%)	0
13. Asking questions via e-mail	39 (7%)	101 (19%)	158 (31%)	222 (43%)	0
14. Able to apply online for HB	46 (9%)	102 (19%)	163 (31%)	209 (41%)	0
15. More leaflets on all revenues aspects available	141 (27%)	204 (39%)	114 (22%)	61 (12%)	0

APPENDIX 4

Benefits Customer Service
Results and analysis

1000 benefit claimants were surveyed covering all types of benefit claim. 500 survey forms were sent out by post, 250 forms were placed at the revenues and benefits counter and 250 were used for phone calls received. The survey covered a period of three weeks before the results were analysed. The response was extremely good with 520 forms completed, which was an overall return of 52%. The general response was positive and customers were generally happy with the overall service of the Benefits section but as can be seen from the survey results there were some overwhelming recommendations for improvements in some areas.

The first five questions were related to how our customer wished to be dealt with when they come into our counter area.

1. Speaking to the same person about your Benefit or Council Tax at the counter who are able to deal with your query immediately in most cases?

86% of the people surveyed, of which 52% said it was very important, felt it was important that their revenues and benefit enquiries were dealt with by the same person and wanted that person generally do deal with that enquiry from start to finish immediately wherever possible. Only 5% of those surveyed felt this was not important

2. To be able to see your Council Tax account or Benefit claim as it is being updated in front of you?

70% of the people surveyed, of which 30% said it was very important, felt it was important to be able to see their details being updated in front of them. 11% of those surveyed felt this was not important.

3. To be issued with a revised or new bill or benefit notification before you leave the office.

64% of the people surveyed, of which 28% said it was very important, felt it was important to be issued with their new notification or bill immediately. 11% of those surveyed felt this was not important.

4. Being interviewed in a private room

61% of the people surveyed, of which 33% said it was very important, felt it was important being interviewed in a private room. 15% of those surveyed felt this was not important. This question was included in the

survey as there are limited private interview facilities at Rochford and Rayleigh.

5. Having an electronic queuing system that allows you to see how long it is before you see one of our officers.

63% of the people surveyed, of which 30% said it was very important, felt it was important to have an electronic queuing system. 12% of those surveyed felt this was not important. Currently a manual queuing system is used with no indication of waiting time.

The next five questions were related to how our customer wished to be dealt with when they telephoned these offices.

6. To speak to a central point for all Council Tax and Benefit enquiries.

87% of the people surveyed, of which 45% said it was very important, felt it was important to speak to one person regarding their Council Tax and Benefit enquiry. Only 5% of those surveyed felt this was not important. Currently callers are transferred between sections.

7. To leave a number for the officer to call you back instead of staying on the line until your query is dealt with?

89% of the people surveyed, of which 50% said it was very important, felt that ringing them back was important if the query was going to take some time. Only 3% of those surveyed felt this was not important.

8. To be dealt with by the same person and not be transferred from one section to another.

94% of the people surveyed, of which 68% said it was very important, felt that it was important that they were not transferred from within the revenues and benefits area. Only 3% of those surveyed felt this was not important. The current practice of transferring between sections was viewed as the most frustrating of activities.

9. To be able to answer your query in that first phone call?

88% of the people surveyed, of which 44% said it was very important, felt that it was important that we dealt with their enquiry from that first phone call. Only 2% of those surveyed felt this was not important. A "right first time" approach is needed.

10. To be given a unique reference number each time you contact us by phone, which you can use when querying anything about your phone conversation.

83% of the people surveyed, of which 42% said it was very important, felt that it was important that we gave them a unique reference to use each time they rang with a query. Only 4% of those surveyed felt this was not important. Such a facility would reduce frustration for callers and speed up the service delivery

The final five questions were related other customer service related areas.

11. Having a local surgery periodically to be able to drop in your documents for copying or speak to someone about your benefit or Council Tax.

77% of the people surveyed, of which 36% said it was very important, felt that it was important that we were to offer local surgeries periodically. Only 5% of those surveyed felt this was not important. More use of the Civic Suite has been identified as an area of expansion.

12. Being dealt with by a dedicated team of people able to deal with all of your Revenues and Benefit enquiries within 24 hours of your first contact.

89% of the people surveyed, of which 45% said it was very important, felt that it was important that were dealt with by a trained team able to deal with all types of revenue and benefit enquiries. Only 2% of those surveyed felt this was not important. Generic work teams would solve this situation

13. Being able to ask questions via E-mail and receive an answer that same day?

26% of the people surveyed, of which only 7% said it was very important, felt that it was important to be able to ask questions via E-mail. 43% of those surveyed felt this was not important. Currently very limited scope for Internet delivery.

14. Being able to apply online for Housing and Council Tax Benefit?

28% of the people surveyed, of which only 9% said it was very important, felt that it was important to be able to apply for benefits online. 41% of those surveyed felt this was not important. Again, only limited access to the Internet at the moment.

15. More leaflets on all benefits and discounts available and what the Revenues and Housing Management do.

66% of the people surveyed, of which 27% said it was very important, felt that it was important that more leaflets were to be produced. 12% of those surveyed felt this was not important. Inroads are being made in this direction.

SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLAN

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT	Completion Date	Resources needed	Officer Responsibility	Step-change required	Progress Monitoring Date	Communication with Stakeholders	Report to Members
Vision	11/09/02	(3) officer time	HHRM BM LSPO	Yes		25/09/02	24/09/02
Policy Objectives/	11/09/02	(3) officer time	HHRM BM LSPO	Yes		25/09/02	24/09/02
Operational Plan	11/09/02	(2) officer time	BM LSPO	Yes		25/09/02	24/09/02
Performance Target	05/02/03	(4) officer time	BM SBOs	Yes			
Performance Monitoring	05/02/03	(3) officer time	HHRM BM SBO	Yes			
Organisational Structure	October 2002	(2) officer time	HHRM BM	Yes			
Contractors			NOT APPLICABLE				
Procedural Guidance	October 2002	(2) officer time	BM	Yes			
Management Assurance	Ongoing	(3) officer time	HHRM BM SBO	No			
Management Information	Ongoing	(3) officer time	SBOs BO	Yes			
Training & Development	October 2003	(2) officer time	BM SBO	No			
I.T.			STANDARD MET IN FULL				
Internal Audit	October 2002						

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External Audit							
Cost of Claims							
Internal Working	2005/06						
External Working	December 2002 2003	(2) officer time	BM SBOs	No			

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CUSTOMER SERVICES	Completion Date	Resources needed	Officer Responsibility	Step-change required	Progress Monitoring Date	Communication with Stakeholders	Report to Members
Claim Forms		(3) officer time	BM SBO BO	No			
Timely-helpful response to public enquiry	October 2003	(3) officer time	BM SBO BO + Capita & Publicity	Yes			
Effective training & development	October 2003	(2) officer time	BM SBO + Capita & Personnel	Yes			
Clear information letter			STANDARD MET IN FULL				
Accessible, quality service for claimants with specific needs	October 2003	(8) officer time	BM HSO HA BOs HSO SBO + Civic & Public relations	Yes			
Accessible quality service for those in work				No			

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Encouraging benefit take-up, reducing poverty	September 2003	(1) officer time	BM + various external agencies	Yes				
Addressing complaints about the service effectively	December 2002	(2) officer time	BM HA	Yes				
Dealing with requests for reconsideration & appeals referrals effectively			STANDARD MET IN FULL					

SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLAN

PROCESSING OF CLAIMS	Completion Date	Resources needed	Officer Responsibility	Step-change required	Progress Monitoring Date	Communication with Stakeholders	Report to Members
New claims speed of processing	April 2003	(4) officer time	HHRM BM SBO BO	Yes			
Reported changes of circumstances	October 2002	(2) officer time	HHRM BM	No			
Change of circumstances	February 2003	(4) officer time	HHRM BM SBO BO	No			
Renewal claims							
VF policies & procedures			STANDARD MET IN FULL				
VF of identity			STANDARD MET IN FULL				
VF of residency & liability to pay rent			STANDARD MET IN FULL				
VF of receipt of IS/JSA			STANDARD MET IN FULL				
VF of income & capital			STANDARD MET IN FULL				

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VF of non-dependant circumstances			STANDARD MET IN FULL				
Management checks	October 2003	(1) HB Manager & all SBOs	HB & SBOs	No			
Tayloring benefit period			STANDARD MET IN FULL				
Risk assessing & checking claimants circumstances	November 2002	(1) officer time	Capita	No			
Requirement to refer to Rent Office							

SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLAN

OVERPAYMENTS	Completion Date	Resources needed	Officer Responsibility	Step-change required	Progress Monitoring Date	Communication with Stakeholders	Report to Members
Overpayment policies & procedures	April 2004	(4) officer time + Capita	BM SBO OPO SBO	Yes			
Identification of overpayments	March 2005	(3) officer time + all SBOs	BM SBO BO	Yes			
Calculation of overpayments	November 2005	HB + Capital & Publicity Team	BM	No			
Decisions on recoverability			STANDARD MET IN FULL				
Decision notices			STANDARD MET IN FULL				
Recovery of overpayment debt	March 2005	(2) officer time	HHRM BM	No			
Classification of overpayments			STANDARD MET IN FULL				
Management of debt	October 2003	(3)officer time	HHRM BM SBO				

SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLAN

WORKING WITH LANDLORDS	Completion Date	Resources needed	Officer Responsibility	Step-change required	Progress Monitoring Date	Communication with Stakeholders	Report to Members
1 Communicating effectively with landlords	February 2004	(5) officer time + Publicity Team	BM LSPO SBOS BO	Yes			
Paying landlords, preventing evictions	November 2003	(1) officer time	BM	No			
Minimising & recovering overpayments		STANDARD MET IN FULL					

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INTERNAL SECURITY	Completion Date	Resources needed	Officer Responsibility	Step-change required	Progress Monitoring Date	Communication with Stakeholders	Report to Members
Internal security post opening	October 2005	(1) officer time	SBO	No			
Recruitment	October 2005	Audit & Personnel	Audit & Personnel inc. Personnel Manager	Yes			
Internal control mechanisms	April 2004	Audit	Audit	No			
Information technology	April 2005	(1) officer time	TARA & SIS	Yes			
Document management			STANDARD MET IN FULL				
Payment & accounting			STANDARD MET IN FULL				

SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLAN

COUNTER FRAUD	Completion Date	Resources needed	Officer Responsibility	Step-change required	Progress Monitoring Date	Communication with Stakeholders	Report to Members
Policies & Procedures	April 2004	(2) officer time + Capita	SBO & FO	Yes			
Fraud referrals	September 2004	(1) officer time + New SBO fraud officer & Personnel	SBO & FO	No			
Data matching	January 2005	(1) officer	SBO & FO	No			
Do not redirect			STANDARD MET IN FULL				
Authorised individuals			STANDARD MET IN FULL				
Quality fraud investigations			STANDARD MET IN FULL				
Management of investigations	May 2004	(1) officer time + & Capita	BM	No			
Training for fraud investigations	March 2005	(1) officer	BM	Yes			
Liasion with BFIS/BIS/BASIS			STANDARD MET IN FULL				
Formal Cautions	December 2002	(1) officer time	BM	No			

SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLAN

Administrative penalties	April 2004	(1) officer time + Capita	BM	Yes			
Counter fraud prosecution	December 2002	(1) officer time	BM	No			

Key HRHM = Head of Revenue and Housing Management
BM = Benefits Manager
LSPO = Local Supporting People Officer
SBO(s) = Senior Benefit Officer(s)
BO(s) = Benefit Officer(s)
HSO = Health and Safety Officer
HA = Housing Association
OPO = Overpayments Officer
TARA = Technical and Revenues Administration
SIS = Securicor Information Systems
FO = Fraud Officer