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## **COUNCIL TAX IMPROVEMENT ACTION PLAN – BEST PRACTICE PROPOSALS**

### **1 SUMMARY**

- 1.1 Members to consider the report of the Head of Revenue and Housing Management on progress towards implementing the Council Tax Improvement Plan. This is the final year of the plan and all of the outstanding actions are currently been worked on with a target final completion date of April 2006

### **2 INTRODUCTION**

- 2.1 In July 2003 Members considered the report of the Corporate Director (Finance & External Services) setting out the findings of a Best Value Review of the Financial Services function. This report was considered in three parts:-

Financial Management  
Housing Benefit  
Council Tax

- 2.2 This is the third year of the 3 year action plan to meet all of the standards of the Council Tax Improvement Plan which was adopted to accord with the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy model for Service Delivery.

### **3 ACTION PLAN**

- 3.1 All outstanding items have now been allocated to an individual member of staff to implement before April 2006 as part of their Performance and Development Review Process. This will see the successful conclusion of the plan within the programmed timescale. Members attention is drawn to several specific issues within the plan (copy appended to this report) which are summarised as follows:-

- Confirm that the annual Council Tax leaflet is considered a corporate document and managed by the Corporate Communication Officer;
- Anti Poverty and Social Inclusion be regarded as a corporate issue and managed as such;
- That the external consultant's report on Recovery and Enforcement be considered in December 2005 as a separate report;
- That Bailiff Services be tested competitively or as a joint venture with other local authorities;
- Customer Care policy to be developed as a corporate issue and managed as such;
- That Charter Mark accreditation be sought in 2006/07 and a budget bid for £1500 be made;

- That the 'disclosure and amnesty' approach be made to Single Person Discounts;
- Home working be investigated in detail, either by the Council alone or as a collaborative service delivery model with other local authorities.

3.2 The Head of Service now intends to remove these elements from the Plan as their successful implementation relies on resources outside the Revenue and Housing Management Division or they will be brought back to this Committee as an independent report, as in the case of the Consultant's report.

#### **4 RECOMMENDATION**

4.1 It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES** to endorse the upgraded plan and note progress towards achievement, the plan to be reviewed again in April 2006.

Steve Clarkson

Head of Revenue & Housing Management

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#### **Background Papers:**

None

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The Revenue and Benefit Team have scored the Council Tax Service against the Institute of Public Finance Best Practice model and have identified the following area where improvements can be made.

		Ranking	2005/6	Comments
<b>1.0 Compilation/Maintenance of the Valuation List</b>				
1.3	Schedules are processed automatically	M		The next software release from Academy will facilitate this.
<b>2.0 Billing</b>				
2.5	Bulk issues of bills, which achieve the minimum level of penetration are passed to the Royal Mail in walksort order	H		Shortlist compiled of preferred partners August 2005. 4 quotes received September 2005. Evaluation and selection of external partner October 2005 under Head of Service delegated powers.
2.6	The Authority funds the cost of the statutory explanatory notes leaflet through advertising or sponsorship	M		Corporate Communications Officer will be working on booklet this year so sponsorship will be sought.
2.7	Proof of postage is obtained from the Royal Mail for the issue of all bills	H		See 2.5

		Ranking	2005/6	Comments
<b>5.0 Reductions, Reliefs, Exemptions</b>				
5.4	Entitlement to single person discount is reviewed annually	M		All SPD cases to be contacted in November 2005 to advise of review. Publicity campaign to warn people of prosecution for claiming SPD fraudulently October 2005. All cases will be offered amnesty before inspections carried out.
<b>7.0 Anti-poverty</b>				
7.1	The Revenues division incorporates the corporate anti-poverty/social inclusion policy into service delivery.	M		Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Policy to be developed at a corporate level as outlined in CPA plan. CEX advises to be concluded by March 2006.
7.3	The Authority has a corporate debt recovery policy	H		Policy established but only within Revenues & Housing Management.
7.4	Revenues staff are trained on anti-poverty/social inclusion awareness issues	M		HRM to include in training programme for 2005/06.
7.6	Revenues staff liaise with and utilise the services of the Welfare Rights /Debt Counselling/Money Advice units, where appropriate	M		Currently work closely with CAB debt counselling service. Training seminar arranged September 2005. Referrals made direct to CAB where appropriate.

		Ranking	2005/6	Comments
<b>8.0</b>	<b>Pre Liability Order Recovery</b>			
8.9	The Authority has a written policy on the tracing of absconded debtors, which incorporates guidance upon information sources and when accounts should be ended	H		Part of £25,000 capacity-building initiative incorporated into 2005/06 budget. This facilitated the employment of an external consultant to review the Recovery and Enforcement Procedures. Draft Report to hand with final version expected for December 2005 Committee cycle
<b>10.0</b>	<b>Bailiff and External Agency Recovery (unless stated refers to both internal and external bailiffs)</b>			
10.1	External Bailiffs operate on a fee basis only (i.e. no commission)	L		See 8.9 above
10.7	At least quarterly monitoring of the costs and benefits of the bailiff operation is undertaken.	M		To be introduced when contract is renewed or changed and included in Service Level Agreement. See also 8.9 above
10.11	The Authority has a policy for the use of an external collection agency in the collection process, and this specifies which cases are appropriate for this type of action	M		See 8.9 above

		Ranking	2005/6	Comments
10.14	Authorities have access to external bailiff's systems via a modem link in order to make enquiries	L		To be included in draft specification for Bailiff Services – See also 8.9 above
10.15	Cases are transferred to external bailiffs electronically	L		To be introduced when contract is renewed or changed and will be included in draft specification for Bailiff Services
<b>11.0 Committals</b>				
11.2	The Authority applies for charging orders prior to committal if these are appropriate	L		Senior Recovery Officer to investigate benefits of using charging orders by December 2005
11.6	The Authority has a written policy on cases to be listed for committal and this specifies a minimum value below which it is considered uneconomic to pursue	M		Consultant specifically requested to suggest cut-off level for non pursuant cases
<b>12.0 Write Offs</b>				
12.2	The billing Authority has a written policy on the write off of council tax accounts which specifies what action should be taken before a write off recommendation is made	M		See 11.6 above
12.7	Checks are made with other systems within the authority prior to debts being written off	M		Checks will be introduced from January 2006

		Ranking	2005/6	Comments
<b>13.0 Customer Care</b>				
13.6	The Customer Care policy is advertised on leaflets that go out with demand notices	H		To be developed with Corporate Policy Unit as policy needs to be consistent across the Council.
13.7	The Customer Care policy contains specific targets for council tax	H		See 13.6 above
13.9	The Authority has implemented a customer forum to obtain the views of council tax payers	M		Now successfully used and praised by CPA Inspector of 'User Focus' study in September 2005
13.16	The Authority provides enquiry facilities (either by telephone and/or personal visits) beyond the hours of 9 - 5 Mondays to Fridays	H		Available through partnership working with Capita PLC
13.21	Main CT bills and leaflets are accredited with the Crystal Mark	H		Crystal Mark to be achieved on all forms as part of new package after Comino implemented March 2006. also investigating Charter Mark application for 2006/07 – Budget bid £1500
<b>14.0 Inspections</b>				
14.11	Inspectors wards/districts are rotated as part of the internal checking process	M		Anticipated when all inspectors are fully trained in March 2006

		Ranking	2005/6	Comments
14.14	Inspectors carry out spot checks on cases with Single Person Discount.	L		Insufficient resources at present to consider this initiative. Head of Service recommends the 'disclosure and amnesty' approach used by many Local Authorities to great success
<b>15.0 Staff</b>				
15.1	Monthly targets exist for quantity of work processed by individuals and teams	H		To be introduced by January 2006 as part of Comino Electronic Data Management (EDM) roll-out.
15.2	At least monthly performance monitoring exists for quantity of work processed, for individual staff and teams	H		To be introduced by January 2006 as part of Comino EDM roll-out.
15.12	All staff are required to complete a declaration that they will not amend details on their own or any colleagues account or any other account in which they have an interest	H		Implemented under Internal Audit endorsement in July 2005
15.14	All staff accounts are periodically checked	H		Senior staff have introduced regular checks since July 2005
<b>16.0 Quality</b>				
16.3	5% of Bailiff visits should be checked ongoing by a suitably experienced officer & the results evaluated by that officer	L		Await new Bailiff contract and appointment of suitably qualified staff. Expected February 2005

		Ranking	2005/6	Comments
16.4	A sample of incoming telephone calls should be recorded and checked by suitably experienced officers & used for training purposes	L	•	Now possible as part of the Capita telephone cover service
16.7	The revenues division should have independent quality officers	L	•	Consideration for the expansion of Training Officer role when all team members are fully trained. Report to be considered later in 2005/6
<b>18.0 Systems</b>				
18.18	There is a formal written policy on the administration of system security, which specifies which officer can authorise the level of access for a specific user	H	•	External consultant commenced work April 2005. Conclusion expected in December 2005
18.19	The access of an individual user can be restricted so that it is not possible for that user to update their own personal records	H	•	Now implemented in July 2005
18.21	The authority has a Document Management/Image system which is used to record incoming correspondence and is available to council tax staff	L	•	Corporate system to be introduced in Revenue and Benefit team January 2006
18.22	The Document Management /Image system provides a facility to direct and re-direct incoming work	L	•	System is capable of this from January 2006

		Ranking	2005/6	Comments
18.23	The Document Management/Image system provides management information on performance and productivity	L		System is capable of this from January 2006
<b>19.00 e-Government</b>				
19.15	Home working facilities are available	L		Home working facilities available to selected staff only. Generally those in Business Support team. Scope for extension of this facility exists but depends on Corporate approach to home working.