

Revenues and Benefits



Operational Plan

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SECTION A PREFACE

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Rochford District Council has a statutory duty to administer and deliver Housing Benefits (HB) and Council Tax Benefits (CTB) and to act against fraud, under the general direction and guidance of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). HB consists of Rent Allowances payable to the tenants of private landlords and Housing Associations, and Rent Rebates, payable as credits against rent to council tenants. CTB provides financial assistance to council taxpayers, both tenants and owner/occupiers and is paid as a credit against council tax.
- 1.2 It also has a duty to collect Council Tax (CT) and National Non Domestic Rates (NNDR) under the general direction of the Department for Communities and Local Government.
- 1.3 Generally, Rochford is a prosperous area but there are pockets of relative deprivation. Overall, the District has a population of 79,100 in an area of 65 square miles. 1.7% of this population comes from a mixed or ethnic minority background. Much of the district is rural in nature where difficulties with public transport are common. Approximately 86% of the District's 33,700 households are owner occupied, 8% live in social rented housing and 6% rent privately. The population is ageing with people living longer and a declining birth rate. This trend is higher than the national average with an increase of 30% forecast in those over 85 by 2011, compared to 3.4% in England and Wales and 8% for Essex.
- 1.4 The benefits case load for Rochford in February 2007 was as follows:

Council Tenant Rate Rebates	1099
Private Tenant Rent Allowances	1528
Council Tax Benefits	<u>2189</u>
	4816

The number of Council Tax dwellings at the end of February 2007 was 33,968

The number of business premises at the end of February 2007 was 1988

1.5 Funding

The cost of HB and CTB represents a substantial financial input into the economy of Rochford District. At £15.7m (2006/07) the overall sum paid in benefits far exceeds the cost of all the Council's other services put together and in terms of gross expenditure from Council Tax at £9.7m (2006/07) is equivalent to 162% of the Council's budget.

1.6 For operating the service, the Council receives an administration cost subsidy from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), which approximates to 50% of the running costs, leaving 50% to be funded by the District Council. In 2006/07 the cost to the Council's budget, after allowing for central support, was £345,300.

1.7 The cost of administering the Council Tax and NNDR elements of the Revenues and Benefits service was approximately £674,000 for the financial year 2006/07, this administration cost is met from the General fund. However, for the same financial year £35 million was collected in Council Tax and £12 million in NNDR.

1.8 External inspection

The Revenues and Benefits service is subject to inspection by the Audit Commission. It is also subject to audit by the External Auditor and is a key element in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) under which the Government seeks to measure and improve the corporate performance and service delivery of local authorities.

2. Status of the Operational Plan

- 2.1 The Operational Plan is a high level statement of the Council's aims and objectives linked to specific actions. It provides for identifying compliance and variation with the Performance Standards, the CPA and best practice including policy issues, priorities, key actions and objectives for the council. The plan identifies required inputs, risks and targets for performance monitoring in relation to corporate strategies as well as performance standards.
- 2.2 The Operational Plan is adopted by the Council as a primary statement of policy and commitment in relation to Revenues & Benefits.

SECTION B EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Operational Plan links the Council's vision for the Revenues & Benefits Service with the management processes and organisational procedures that will enable the Council to achieve its objectives. Ownership of the Plan is vested in Members, Management and Staff. It is a working document, kept under constant review but may only be varied with approval at the highest level of management.

The Council's vision for the future is a simple one that the Revenues & Benefits section has an integral role to play if the vision is to become a reality. The vision is:

“To make Rochford the place of choice in the County to live, work and visit”

To help achieve this vision the Council has adopted 6 corporate aims and 6 core values some of which can be delivered directly by relevant departments, whilst others including all the core values should be carried out by all departments and staff throughout the authority. The 6 aims are to:

- Provide quality, cost effective services;
- Work towards a safer and more caring community;
- Provide a green and sustainable environment;
- Encourage a thriving local economy;
- Improve the quality of life for people in the district;
- Maintain and enhance our local heritage

The Revenues & Benefits Service help to deliver the overall vision of the authority and in particular the first, fourth and fifth aim are of particular relevance to the section.

The core values are:

- Act with integrity
- Be open and transparent about what we do
- Respect others and treat people courteously and equally
- Be responsive to customer's needs and requests
- Always try and improve on what we do
- Work with others to improve what we do both directly and through partnership working

The 6 core values apply to and affect everything that the Revenues and Benefits Service is trying to achieve by its vision of "Working in partnership to deliver an excellent service" and, indeed, without these overarching aims and core values Revenues and Benefits' own vision and Customer Charter is meaningless.

Due to Rochford's geographical location and the nature of local government in Essex, the Council is open to partnership arrangements and will both investigate and welcome opportunities for working in partnership with other authorities or with the private sector.

However, we recognise that there is scope for service improvement within the Council itself, by working closer with other service sections like the Housing Advice Team to ensure that those in need of revenues and benefits advice are sign-posted to the services we offer. Procedures within these sections will be amended to ensure these links exist. Joint funding from DWP has permitted the Benefits Service to be rolled out to the Council's 12 sheltered housing schemes across the District, permitting those in rural areas to access the service more easily.

The service will ensure that we remain customer focussed, helping those who need assistance with housing costs and ensuring that there are no barriers to work.

We are totally committed to the Housing Benefits Performance Standards, CIPFA Revenues Best Practice Model and the principles of best value.

The Standards and Targets set out in this document demonstrate how Rochford's Revenues & Benefits Service is at the hub of the community, injecting over £15.7m into the economy and ensuring that those most in need of help and assistance are provided with a first class service.

SECTION C POLICY AND OBJECTIVES

The section's Policies and Objectives derive from the adopted key core values of the authority.

The following objectives and values link up to the core values in particular but are relevant to all the aims and core values that the authority stands for.

3. Primary Objectives – Service Provision

- 4.1 Communicating well internally and externally;
- 4.2 Working together to deliver one vision;
- 4.3 Leading and motivating staff to achieve their potential;
- 4.4 Effectively using resources to achieve our goals;
- 4.5 To continuously improve and develop ourselves as individuals and as an organisation to achieve our full potential;
- 4.6 Working together as a team to deliver our services;
- 4.7 Being responsive to customers and staff needs
- 4.8 Consulting staff, our customers and partners;
- 4.9 Celebrating our successes.

5. Primary Objectives – Service Delivery

- 5.1 Reduce the average time for processing new claims to 23 days;
- 5.2 Increase recovery of housing benefit overpayments to 37%;
- 5.3 Obtain a Charter mark accreditation for the Revenues & Benefits Service;
- 5.4 Increase the level of Council Tax Collection;
- 5.5 Reduce the average time for processing benefit change of circumstances;
- 5.6 Increase the levels of fraud detection and increase fraud prevention;
- 5.7 Maximise the accuracy levels of benefits processing;

- 5.8 Consult our customers regularly about our service;
- 5.9 Achieve 100% of the new performance standards;
- 5.10 Continue to look for efficiency gains and saving by working in partnership;

6. Prioritising of Objectives

- 6.1 The Section's 10 service improvement objectives have not been prioritised in any particular order as some of the objectives are for continuous improvement over time without specific dates and targets, such as consulting our customers and partnership working, whereas other objectives have key milestone dates with specific completion dates, like the Housing Benefit Performance Standards. Each of the ten objectives has a specific action plan with targets or has overall aims and objectives, which are clearly illustrated later in this document
- 6.2 As well as these 10 service improvement objectives the section also has other objectives and planned activities which are important in themselves, as without these some of the key objectives and the vision for Rochford's Revenues and Benefits team will not be met.

7. Revenues & Benefits Service Values

- 7.1 A Revenues & Benefits Team that is determined and committed to achieve all its goals.
- 7.2 Commitment to the HB/CTB Performance Standards, to carry out service self-assessment to identify performance levels in all areas.
- 7.3 Commitment to the concept of Best Value and to the conduct of service reviews in accordance with best value principles.
- 7.4 Service improvement and constant maintenance of an improvement plan, which is reviewed annually.
- 7.5 A workforce that is well trained, motivated and rewarded for its success
- 7.6 A commitment to our vision and Customer Charter.

8. Compliance with Performance Standards

- 8.1 Management and operational activities are analysed against the national Performance Standards, supplemented by a set of locally determined aims and objectives.
- 8.2 Policies and procedures are being reviewed and developed to achieve all the HB/CTB Performance Standards over the 3-year period from 2005.
- 8.3 The Council will also seek to identify how the Revenues and Benefits Service complements the aims of wider strategies both internally and in partnership with our key stakeholders, as identified at paragraph 9.
- 8.4 Change will be managed through a step-change approach managed through a series of Improvement Plans and Action Plans. Improvement will take account of customers needs and views expressed through consultation and will be visible and apparent to service users and stakeholders.

9. Key Stakeholders

- 9.1 The key stakeholders in relation to Rochford's Revenues and Benefits service have been identified as follows:
 - Benefit claimants and their dependants;
 - The general public;
 - Council tax payers;
 - Occupiers of commercial properties;
 - Private tenants and tenants of social landlords;
 - Council tenants;
 - Landlords;
 - The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP);
 - Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG);
 - Local offices of DWP including Job Centre Plus and the Pensions Service;
 - Fraud intelligence agencies and Specialist Units;
 - Operational Intelligence Unit (OIU – DWP)
 - Counter Fraud Investigation Service (CFIS – DWP)
 - Investigation Officers in other authorities and public bodies;
 - Benefits Fraud Inspectorate;
 - Audit Commission;
 - The Rent Service;
 - Third Age Service (TAS) (Pension Service)
 - The Appeals Tribunals service
 - Housing Benefits Matching Service (HBMS)
 - Other departments within the authority;
 - Citizens Advice Bureau;
 - Essex Revenues Managers;
 - Essex Benefits Managers;

- Neighbouring authorities;
- Land Registry;
- Magistrates Court;
- County Court;
- Essex County Council;
- HM Revenue & Customs;
- Debt Recovery Organisations;
- Bailiffs & tracing agents.

10. Operational Policies

- 10.1 The Council's approach will be visible and apparent to customers and stakeholders by the demonstration of a structured approach to service delivery.
- 10.2 The Council will strive for efficiency savings and value-for-money improvements:
- By learning from good practice, best value 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;
 - By working in partnership with neighbouring authorities, similar districts or the private sector to stop duplication and resolve capacity issues as well as finding efficiency savings.
- 10.3 Minimising or eliminating backlogs will be an operational priority:
- By prioritising 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.
- 10.4 The Council recognises the crucial role of training for staff and managers. It is committed to a comprehensive training programme for new staff, update training for existing employees and refresher training. Training needs are monitored as part of the staff appraisal process of individual Performance Development Reviews as well as the direct assessment of training needs by supervisors and managers. Training is provided by in-house provision, and by external training courses.
- 10.5 The Council's approach will be to set SMART targets - Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound.

SECTION D STRATEGY AND IMPLEMENTATION

11. Strategy

- 11.1 The Council's framework for development of operational policies requires a comprehensive partnership approach involving Members, the Senior Management Team, Service Managers and operational staff.
- 11.2 Resource allocation is a matter of judgement for Members, advised by senior management, having due regard to competing demands on the Council's finances, but these decisions will be made through an informed approach based on policy, performance measures, and risk analysis.
- 11.3 The key actions required to achieve the Council's objectives are to be structured to a firm timetable.
- 11.4 Success will be measured by regard to Performance Standards, CIPFA's Best Practice model for Revenues and the quality of supporting evidence indicating the Council's level of attainment.
- 11.5 Local targets and standards will be set, reviewed and monitored annually but may be subject to intermediate amendment and adjustment if new developments or new priorities require flexibility and are adopted with corporate approval.
- 11.6 Monitoring of performance and reporting variations against targets, together with any remedial actions, is a key function of operational management.

12. Comprehensive Annual Performance Review

- 12.1 To be undertaken annually each October based on the September quarter performance statistics. The review is to identify performance against the Performance Standards, Best Value Performance Indicators other local performance indicators.
- 12.2 The Annual Review is the opportunity for Members to review policy issues, including targets and standards, as well as performance. The timing is calculated to enable resource issues to be linked to the budgetary process for the next financial year
- 12.3 The Review will confirm standards and set challenging targets for the coming year, including the level of achievement to be targeted against and targets will be linked to corporate priorities as identified in the Corporate Plan.
- 12.4 The outcome of the Annual Performance Review will generate the requirements for any necessary Improvement Plans and Action Plans related to specific

- 12.5 functional areas, including defined success factors with goals, timetables and milestones, together with monitoring arrangements.

13. Targets and Standards

- 13.1 Rochford's key objectives are that Revenues and Benefits should be delivered accurately and in a timely fashion. The priorities identified have been built upon from the Divisional plan which in turn is links to the Corporate plan for Rochford District Council. The adoption of the operational policies in paragraph 10 are further defined as a set of ten Targets and Standards to be implemented and monitored by a series of Policy Procedures, Action Plans or Improvement Plans.

- 13.2 Risks arising from the failure to attain any of the identified targets have been considered in relation to each of the ten targets and contingency planning is included at paragraph 17.

13.3

i) Reduce the average time for processing new claims to 23 days

This forms part of the processing of claims Performance Standard but is more focussed on processing times and has been selected for special attention. It is considered essential that this key element is closely monitored to attain the Council's key objectives.

Current position (where we are now)

For the year 2007/08 Rochford has given a corporate target of processing of new claims in 24 days. Looking at the last quarters output for 2006/07 we should be on course for achieving this target and maintaining it during the year.

Aims (where we want to be)

- New claims processing 24 days for 2007/08;
- New claims processing 23 days for 2008/09;
- New claims processing 23 days for 2009/10.

Step Change Process (How we will get there)

- Adoption of the Processing of Claims Improvement Plan
- The Plan to incorporate specific inputs of additional resources
- Weekly monitoring of management information to predict trends and types of caseload
- Contingencies in place in case performance starts to dip.

Risk Analysis

Risk

Claims not decided within 14-day rule.

Work backlogs arise.

Emergency cases arise.

Impact

Claimants and affected persons kept waiting for decisions.

Resource issues for council, hardship for claimants.

Staff diverted from primary tasks.

ii) Increase recovery of housing benefit overpayments to 37%

Current Position

Although we have now a new bailiff contract which incorporates collection of overpayments we will remain in lower quartile whilst we collect our outstanding fraudulent overpayments over the next 20 years. These overpayments equate to over 25% of the outstanding debt. The performance indicator is not seen as a priority for this reason.

Aims

- Achieve steady progress in performance by 2009/10
- Percentage of overpayments recovered 37% by 2007/08;
- Percentage of overpayments recovered 37% by 2008/09;
- Percentage of overpayments recovered 42% by 2009/10.

Step Change Process

- To monitor all tracing methods
- To monitor bailiff on collection of overpayments

Risk Analysis

Risk

Overpayments not identified

Failure to link overpayment to other factors relating to that individual customer

Impact

Incorrect payment continues with loss of public funds.

Lack of joined-up service causing customer hardship.

Failure to collect overpayments
Council Tax payers will have to meet deficit in subsidy payment.

iii) **Obtain a Charter Mark accreditation for the Revenues & Benefits Service**

Current Position

We are collating evidence in accordance to Charter mark criteria ready for pre-assessment in July 2007

Aims

- To achieve Charter Mark accreditation by October 2007

Step Change Process

- Collate evidence for pre-assessment
- Identify areas that require work/evidence
- Implement improvement plan to fill gaps in criteria

Risk Analysis

Risk

Failure to prepare properly
Failure to allocate sufficient time
Insufficient resources

Impact

target dates will not be kept.
Exercise will be a waste of time and resource
Accreditation not achieved and morale suffers

iv) **Increase the level of Council Tax collection**

Current Position (Where we are now)

Current performance still very good but because of the political nature of Council Tax and its future, it is becoming difficult to maintain this level of performance

Aims (Where we want to be)

- To maintain Upper Quartile Performance.
- To continuously improve performance up to and beyond 99% if resources allow.
- To look at more effective ways of collecting Council Tax quickly and efficiently.

Step Change Process (How we will get there)

- Regularly monitor performance against year on year collection figures.
- Monitor our performance against other Essex authorities.
- Review our resources and move them around if collection starts to fall
- Regularly review our action plan

Risk Analysis

Risk

Impact

Loss of adequate resources

Collection rate suffers and
Pressure mounts on reserves

Nationally Council Tax
complacency grows

As above and staff receive most
animosity and reluctance
against trying to collect Council
Tax.

v) Reduce the average time for processing benefit change of circumstances

Current Position (Where we are now)

During the last quarter of 2006/07 we have processed changes of circumstance at upper quartile performance. However, this may take a slight dip in the early part of the year.

Aims (Where we want to be)

- To process changes of circumstance in 13 days for 2007/08
- To process changes of circumstance in 11 days for 2008/09
- To process changes of circumstance in 9 days for 2009/10

Step Change Process (How we will get there)

- Adoption of the changes of circumstances action plan.
- Weekly performance monitoring to monitor performance and accuracy in this area.
- Appropriate resources allocated if there is a downturn in performance or a peak in workload.

Risk Analysis

Risk

Impact

Claims not decided within 9 days

Claimants left waiting for
decisions and overpayments
occur.

Backlogs occur

Resource issue for authority
and possible subsidy loss

Complaints rise

Credibility and pressure on staff

vi) Increase the levels of fraud detection and increase fraud prevention

Current Position (Where we are now)

Close to compliance on all enablers and performance measures for Security. All procedures now in place. However due to the

departure of the Asst Manager Fraud this may not progress much further during 2007/08

Aims (Where we want to be)

- To achieve all enablers and performance measure targets by end of 2007/08
- To have individual targets for fraud officers to overall sanction target.
- To deliver a cost-neutral service by March 2008.

Step Change Process (How we will get there)

- Adopt new improvement plan for 2007/08.
- Carry out an assessment of cost breakdown with Accountancy
- Undertake 'Spend to Save' initiatives.
- Carry out benchmarking exercise with similar Essex authorities

Risk Analysis

Risk

Fraud at too high a level
Individual cases not investigated
Poor quality investigations

Impact

Loss of public funds
Each is an opportunity for an overpayment to continue.
Inability to prosecute

vii) Maximise the accuracy levels of benefits processing

Current position

Rochford continues to maintain high accuracy levels of between 98 to 99%. However, because of the small amount of cases that are checked it is easy to randomly pick a bad sample that could mean we do not maintain high performance. Indeed to reach upper quartile you must maintain 99% or above performance all year.

Aims

- To maintain upper quartile performance for 2007/08 and beyond
- To monitor accuracy and quality assurance levels on a regular basis.
- Adhere to the new management information and monitoring policy document

Step Change Process

- Adoption of the Accuracy Improvement plan
- Adoption of the Policy and procedures for Management checking and monitoring policy.

Risk Analysis

<u>Risk</u>	<u>Impact</u>
No accuracy checking carried out	Errors occur, overpayments Increase and subsidy loss Training gaps not identified

viii) Consult our customers regularly about our service

Current position

The service currently carries out regular surveys. It also participates in road shows, forums and various organised open days etc. It also produces regular newsletters and press releases. However our project and publicity officer is part of a working group to co-ordinate all our consultation corporately

Aims

- Events will be carefully co-ordinated to achieve certain aims.
- Results of surveys and consultancy exercises will be analysed and results publicised.
- Areas of take up, diversity, information or awareness will be identified and plans put in place to rectify.

Step Change Process

- Incorporation and refinement of the Council's revised communications strategy to ensure the service is promoted in a more co-ordinated and corporate way.
- Improvement and action plan to be adopted
- Project and Publicity Officer to use corporate policy spreadsheet of key events etc
- Project and Publicity Officer to co-ordinate with corporate policy unit to ensure same message comes across and we do not duplicate work.

Risk Analysis

<u>Risk</u>	<u>Impact</u>
No structure to publicity or consultations	Mixed message gets sent out causing confusion
No analysis of information received	Customers never receive vital information and most deprived could suffer
No publicity	Our customers become apathetic

ix) Achieve 100% of the new performance standards

Current position (Where we are now)

In May 2006 Rochford submitted its second self assessment against the new Housing Benefit Performance Standards. Our self assessment score was 'Good'. However, since the BFI have now become part of the Audit Commission it appears that the standards may not be used as such an important part of the CPA process.

Aims (Where we want to be)

- Achieve all the enablers with supporting evidence
- To continue to improve on all of the performance measures as described in the standards.

Step Change Process (How we will get there)

- Adopt the action plan to achieve all the Standards by 2008/09.
- Review and monitor our performance against the standards at least quarterly.
- Review the operational plan at least quarterly.
- Use our resources to achieve the standards that require more attention.

Risk Analysis

<u>Risk</u>	<u>Impact</u>
Insufficient resources to meet all enablers	Performance could dip in these areas
Rochford could become to focussed on weighted measures	Other less weighted areas could suffer
Rochford could become	performance will slowly slip

x).

Partnership working and efficiency gains

Current position (Where we are now)

Rochford continues to build its shared service relationship with Chelmsford and hopes to provide the detailed business case for a full blown partnership with Chelmsford's Revenues and Benefits section by June 2007.

Aims (Where we want to be)

- To have identified all the options around providing a shared service with Chelmsford for Revenues and Benefits .
- If the business case is agreed to have a full blown partnership up and running by 2008/09.

Step Change Process (How we will get there)

- Adopt the Service Action Plan created.
- Continue to develop the meetings with the Chelmsford and prepare scoping documents.
- Allocate appropriate resources to partnership work.
- Finalise business case and if agreed prepare phased implementation plan

Risk Analysis

<u>Risk</u>	<u>Impact</u>
No political will to change	Resources looking at partnerships wasted
Staff feel vulnerable	Performance falls and staff leave
Authorities become possessive	Not genuine open partnership

SECTION E OPERATIONAL PROCEDURES

14. Service Delivery Strategies

- 14.1 The organisation/staffing structure is set out later in this document. The approach adopted provides for a 'generic' organisation in which staff are responsible for local taxation administration as well as revenues & benefits assessments for a defined work group of residents.
- 14.2 Workload trends are monitored by operational management and prompt action is taken in response to day-to-day events and changing priorities.

15. Operational Management

- 15.1 Administration of the revenues & benefits service requires that local authorities carry out checking procedures on all parts of the revenue & benefit calculation process. This is to ensure that all cases are dealt with in accordance to the regulations and that the Council is using best practice in the way it delivers services. It is a requirement that authorities use management information to assist with checking, predict trends in Council Tax and Benefits, predict peaks and troughs in workloads and help management to allocate resources.
- 15.2 The *Policy and Procedures for Management checking, monitoring and information* document that has been compiled and adopted, defines the policy, strategy and performance targets for Management checks carried out by Rochford District Council. It also demonstrates the management reporting mechanisms currently in use.

- 15.3 The final action plan later in this document is to monitor all ten of the business improvement plans and other key milestones that Rochford's Revenues & Benefits service have to manage over the next couple of years. The Revenues and Benefit Manager will review this document quarterly reporting back to senior management and Members as and when necessary if changes are required.

16. Operational Procedures

- 16.1 Written Policies & Procedures are provided for each of the following areas:

- Customer Charter
- Operational procedures
- Management checking, monitoring and information
- Customer Services
- Training & Development
- Complaints
- Recovery
- Overpayments
- Appeals
- Landlords
- Discretionary Housing Payments
- Benefits Administration
- Revenues Administration
- Fraud Administration
- Consultation & take up policy

- 16.2 Where Action Plans are formulated in respect of any of the above areas, these are linked to the written procedures as appropriate.

17. Contingency Planning

- 17.1 The Risk Analysis exercise undertaken in conjunction with the setting of Targets and Standards produces risks and events that may be classified as

- i) Specific to Rochford:
- loss of key staff;
 - failure of ICT systems;
 - surge in claims;
 - deterioration in performance;
 - loss or reduction in local funding.

- ii) Events of a broader or national nature, such as:
 - major changes in the revenues & benefits scheme;
 - multi-tasking burn-out of staff;
 - changes in DWP or DCLG administration, direction and guidance;
 - increase in claims due to economic downturn.
- 17.2 The Contingency Plan details the Council's approach to service failures, overload and to peaks and troughs. This includes the willingness of the Council to recruit additional resources in emergency situations, including the use of agency staff and the use of the private sector.
- 17.3 Contingency planning is developed taking account of the need to inter-react with other corporate policies and requirements, for example:
 - ICT recovery plan
 - Corporate debt and overpayment policies
 - Write-off policy, etc

SECTION F SERVICE IMPROVEMENT

18. Planned Service Improvement

- 18.1 The Council is committed to service improvement, with the improvement plans providing a formal structure to facilitate the improvement process. This document will be regularly updated as necessary but at least every 6 months. Observations and comments from staff and stakeholders are welcomed and should be sent to the Head of Community Services or to the Revenue and Benefit Manager.

IMPROVEMENT PLANS

<u>Processing new claims</u>	Completion Date	Resources needed	Officer Responsibility	Notes	Progress Monitoring Date
Introduce 2 nd HB cheque Run	30/05/07	Assistant Manager (Business Support) Senior Benefit Officer	Assistant Manager (Benefits)	Arrange with BSU to introduce 2 nd cheque to pick up 1 st and urgent payments.	30/04/07
Expand offer of processing new claims 'while you wait' to members of the public	01/06/07	All assessment staff	Assistant Manager (Benefits)	Invite claimantss to bring missing information in next day and in exchange process their claim	01/05/07
Set targets for processing of new claims	01/06/07	All Senior Officers	Assistant Manager (Benefits)	All assessment staff to be set targets for volume of work	01/05/07
Introduce new claim forms	01/08/07	Forms working group	Training Officer		30/06/07

<u>Overpayments</u>	Completion Date	Resources needed	Officer Responsibility	Notes	Progress Monitoring Date
Monitor effectiveness of new bailiff contract	Ongoing	Overpayments Officer	Assistant manager (Benefits)		Ongoing
Continue to review effectiveness of other recovery methods – Bankruptcy, Charging Orders	Ongoing	Overpayments Officer	Assistant Manager (Benefits)		Ongoing
Arrange SLA with Debt Management	30/09/07	Assistant Manager (Benefits)	Assistant Manager (Benefits)		01/08/07

<u>Charter mark for Revenues & Benefits</u>	Completion date	Resources needed	Officer responsibility	Notes	Progress monitoring date
Assess current score against the scheme. Identify areas of weakness and adjust improvement plan	25/05/07	Project & Publicity Officer	Project & Publicity Officer	Using set criteria from Charter Mark	01/05/07
Create an indexing system to record evidence collated	25/05/07	Project & Publicity Officer	Project & Publicity Officer		01/05/07
Carry out staff briefing with staff	18/04/07	Revenues & Benefits Manager	Revenues & Benefits Manager	To gain staff commitment and understanding of Charter mark process	18/04/07
Pre-assessment from Charter Mark body	19/07/07	Revenues & Benefits Manager, Project & Publicity Officer	Revenues & Benefits Manager, Project & Publicity Officer	The Pre- assessment body is SGS	01/07/07
Submit application for Charter Mark	31/10/07	Revenues & Benefits Manager, Project & Publicity Officer	Revenues & Benefits Manager, Project & Publicity Officer		01/10/07
Once accredited arrange publicity campaign for Revenues and Benefits	30/11/07	Project & Publicity Officer	Project & Publicity Officer		When award obtained

<u>Council Tax collection</u>	Completion Date	Resources needed	Officer Responsibility	Notes	Progress Monitoring Date
Monitor collection rates on a monthly basis	Ongoing	Assistant Manager (Business Support)	Assistant Manager (Revenues)		Ongoing
Monthly analysis of the years debt by status	Ongoing	Assistant Manager (Business Support)	Recovery & Enforcement Officer	Substantiate the monthly collection figures	Ongoing
Additional reminder and final runs throughout year	30/04/07	Recovery Team	Assistant Manager (Revenues)	Ongoing from April 2007	15/04/07
Consideration of temporary debits for new properties	31/08/07	Assistant Manager (Business Support)	Assistant Manager (Revenues)	Increases the opportunity of new tax payers to pay prior to property being banded	30/06/07
Introduce new procedures for reclaimed benefit prior to recovery	30/06/07	Recovery Team	Recovery & Enforcement Officer		30/05/07
Introduction of payment by Electron Card	01/05/07	Recovery Team Business Support Team	Recovery & Enforcement Officer	Increase options to pay	15/04/07
Review post liability recovery procedures	30/09/07	Recovery & Enforcement Officer	Assistant Manager (Revenues)	To look at tailoring options eg bankruptcy/ charging orders in appropriate cases	31/07/07
Out of Hours telephone contact with debtors	Ongoing	Recovery Team	Assistant Manager (Revenues)	With support of Capita	31/08/07

<u>Changes of Circumstances</u>	Completion Date	Resources needed	Officer Responsibility	Notes	Progress Monitoring Date
Target specific income types for checks.	Ongoing	Assistant Manager (Benefits) BSU team	Assistant Manager (Benefits)	To be included as part of action to increase the number of reductions found	Ongoing
Produce and distribute leaflet about importance of reporting changes	30/06 07	All senior staff	Assistant Manager (Benefits)	To be included as part of action to increase the number of reductions identified.	31/05/07
Produce a specific Change of Circumstances form.	31/08/07	Forms working party	Training Officer		31/07/2007
Review advice included in award letters about reporting changes	30/09/07	All senior staff	Assistant Manager (Benefits)	To be included with project to review standard of all benefit award letters	31/07/ 07
Set targets for processing changes of circumstances	01/0607	All senior staff	Assistant Manager (Benefits)	All assessment staff to be set targets for volume of work	01/05/07

Counter-Fraud Improvement Plan	Completion Date	Resources needed	Officer Responsibility	Step-change required	Progress Monitoring Date
Circulate e-mail to all staff to advise when there has been a successful prosecution	01/12/07	Assistant Manager (Fraud) Investigation Officer	Assistant Manager (Fraud)	Include within Investigation Procedure	01/09/07
Increase publicity of successful prosecutions	01/10/07	Assistant Manager (Fraud); Project & Publicity Officer Corporate Communications Officer	Assistant Manager (Fraud)	Meet with Project and publicity Officer Corporate Comms Officer to discuss	01/08/07
Place Fraud tel number on reverse of envelopes, together with slogan 'benefits are for the needy not the greedy' to increase external fraud referrals	01/04/08	Assistant Manager (Revenues); Assistant Manager (Fraud); Project & Publicity Officer Corporate Communications Officer	Assistant Manager (Fraud)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meet with Revenues and Benefits' Assistant Managers to discuss the above Agree on literature to be inserted with Council Tax Bills / paragraph inserted into standard letters Amendment to existing procedures Agree a timetable for implementation 	01/12/07 and 01/02/08
Monthly One-2-One with Investigation Staff	01/08/07	Assistant Manager (Fraud) Investigation Officer	Assistant Manager (Fraud)	Agree times and locations for monthly one-to-ones in advance	01/06/07
Provide fraud awareness sessions to staff, to encourage more good quality referrals	01/01/08	Assistant Manager (Fraud) Investigation Officer	Assistant Manager (Fraud)	Prepare presentation , and location for presentation, arrange availability times for staff to attend, with their line Manager	01/11/07
Prepare and Issue Newsletter to all staff on a quarterly basis, to give staff more of an insight into the work undertaken by the Investigation Team	01/01/08	Assistant Manager (Fraud) Investigation Officer	Assistant Manager (Fraud)	Collate any current statistics, meet with Investigation Officers for items for inclusion	01/11/07

Commence Fraud Investigation case reviews, to assist in improving case turnaround time	01/08/07	Assistant Manager (Fraud)	Assistant Manager (Fraud)	Include checks within Investigation Procedure	01/06/07
Review Investigation section's policies and procedures, making changes where needed	01/12/07	Assistant Manager (Fraud)	Assistant Manager (Fraud)	Meet with Investigation Officers to review and discuss any changes before implementation	01/08/07

<u>Improve accuracy levels</u>	Completion Date	Resources needed	Officer Responsibility	Notes	Progress Monitoring Date
Introduce 4% check on all decisions prior to notification/payment being issued	31/08/07	All Senior Officers	Assistant Manager (Benefits)	Identify all decisions made via Academy All officers work to be checked at least once every 2 weeks All types of decisions to be checked	31/0707
Implementation of National Performance Management framework	15/06/07	Assistant Manager (Benefits)	Assistant Manager (Benefits)		15/05/07
Introduction of Skillwise	01/09/07	Training Officer	Training Officer		01/08/07

<u>Customer consultation</u>	Completion Date	Resources needed	Officer Responsibility	Progress Monitoring Date	Communication with Stakeholders	Report to Members
Draft a policy and procedure for Revenues and Benefits	30/06/07	RBM & PPO	Rev & Bens Manager/Community Planning Officer	30/05/07	Yes	
Consult stakeholders re policy	31/08/ 07	PPO	Rev & Bens Manager/Project & Publicity Officer	31/07/07	Yes	
Final procedure and action plan produced	01/10/07	RBM	Rev & Bens Manager/Project & Publicity Officer	01/09/07		Yes
Policy agreed on analysis method of consultation	01/10/07	PPO	Project & Publicity Officer/Access to Services team	01/09/07		
Publicity of all methods of consultation and programme of events	01/11/07	PPO	Project & Publicity Officer	10/10/07	Yes	
Quarterly analysis of information received to commence	01/01/08	RBM & PPO	Rev & Bens Manager	30/11/07	Yes	Yes
Members bulletin to receive information quarterly	01/03/08	PPO	Project & Publicity Officer	01/02/08		
Review policy, procedure and action plan	01/04/08	RBM & PPO	Rev & Bens Manager	01/03/08		Yes

<u>Achieve 100% of the HBPS</u>				
<u>Performance Measure</u> <u>or Enabler</u>	Officer responsibility	Resources needed	Target date and how to be achieved	Progress Monitoring Date
E10 – Using quality checks to improve performance and reduce error	Asst Manager (Benefits) &	Revenues & Benefits Manager Assistant Manager (Benefits) Training Officer	<u>By June 2007</u> Changes to Benefit regulation, which come in force from 01/04/07, will allow us to improve our performance and reduce error by identifying errors more quickly. We will also be able to predict changes quicker and send forms for customers to complete prior to changes taking place.	01/05/07
E36 - The LA always checks the DWP's database and Police National Computer (PNC) or SOL P (as per HB/CTB Security Manual) for previous benefit fraud sanctions and convictions before issuing a caution or penalty.	Assistant Manager (Fraud)	Assistant Manager (Fraud)	<u>July 2007:</u> Clarify what DWP require to meet this enabler first <u>July 2007:</u> If necessary, arrange access protocol with SOLP and/or local police to have access to required information	01/06/07
E41 - Decisions on claims are notified promptly to customers and if relevant third parties and are written concisely, with the reader in mind and in the right tone. Letters state the decision clearly, do not contain jargon and explain technical terms such as non-dependant. Overpayment decisions are notified to the person(s) affected within 14 days of the final calculation.	Assistant Manager (Benefits)	Assistant Manager (Benefits) and Technical Officer (Benefits) Training Officer and working group	<u>October 2007:</u> Rochford has signed up for all its leaflets, forms and notifications to be accredited through the Plain English Campaign. A working group is reviewing all of our documents during this year.	01/0807
E42 - Employees have been set and are achieving targets, which as a minimum reflect corporate customer service targets for dealing with enquiries, made by telephone, in person, by letter or e-mail and the LA monitors performance against the targets.	Revenues & Benefits Manager	Asst Manager (Benefits) Asst Manager (Fraud)	<u>May 2007</u> Targets are currently being reviewed and monitored to ensure target setting is accurate from start of financial year.	16/04/07

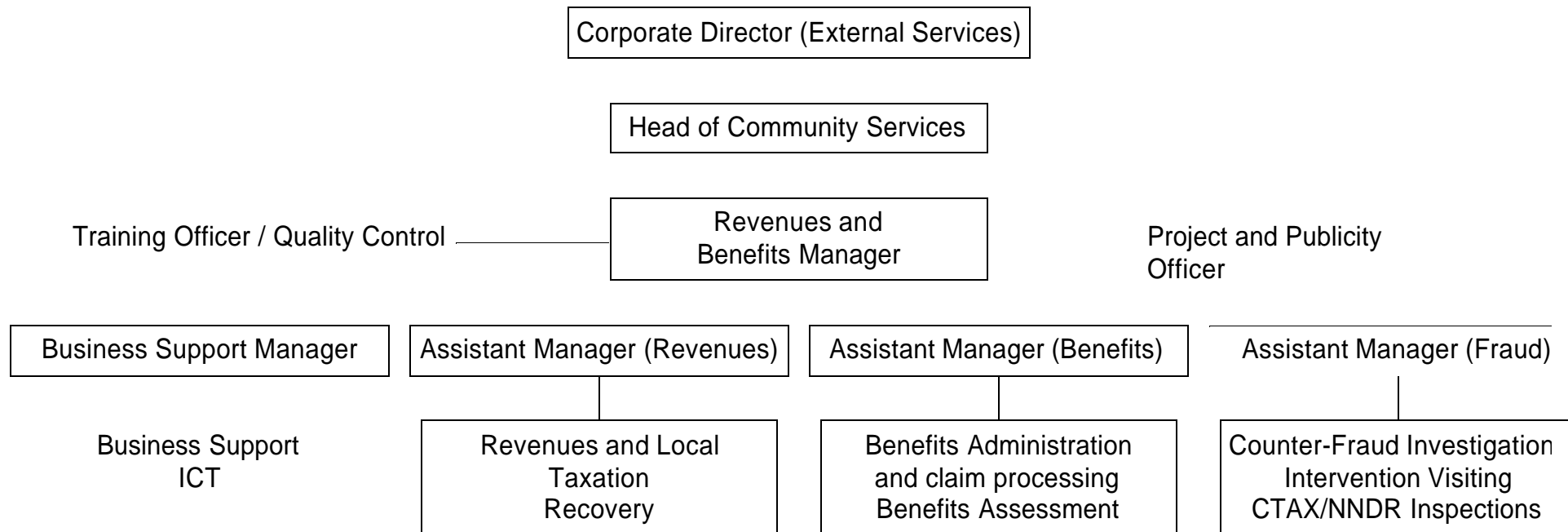
E46 - The LA maintains regular contact, supported by formalised and documented working arrangements if considered appropriate, with other organisations, for example RSLs, CAB, Police, Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) or Procurator Fiscal in Scotland.	Assistant Manager (Benefits)	Assistant Manager (Benefits)	Ongoing: Assistant Manager (Benefits) and Assistant Manager (Fraud) to have ascertained appropriate "other organisations" and identified potential Benefits and Fraud shared interests with particular organisations.	Ongoing
E57 - The LA operates a costing structure that provides an assessment for the Benefit Service's overall cost, including counter fraud work, and shows the relationship between cost and the level of service provided. Costs are monitored, reviewed and adjusted in the light of potential over or under spends or efficiency objectives and there is an audit trail on the costs and adjustments.	Revenues & Benefits Manager	Revenues & Benefits Manager and Financial Services Manager	Ongoing: Costs and recharges are being scrutinised as part of the business case for Rochford's partnership aspirations with Chelmsford for Revenues and Benefits.	Ongoing

<u>Partnership working & efficiency gains</u>	Completion date	Resources needed	Officer responsibility	Progress monitoring date	Report to Members
Review the Business case provided by Anglia Revenues Partnership	May 2007	SMT and Revs & Bens Manager	Revs & Bens Manager	April 2007	
Agree Business Case for Chelmsford and Rochford Revs & Bens Partnership	June 2007	SMT and Revs & Bens Manager	Revs & Bens Manager	May 2007	Yes
Set up a Implementation Team including two members to support the steering group	July 2007	SMT and Revs & Bens Manager	Revs & Bens Manager	June 2007	Yes
Accommodation Review	September 2007	Implementation team	Revs & Bens Manager	August 2007	
IT Review	November 2007	Implementation team	Revs & Bens Manager	Ongoing	
Partnership structure	October 2007	Implementation team	Revs & Bens Manager	Ongoing	
Costings and savings review	Ongoing	Head of Finance, Audit and Performance Mngt	Revs & Bens Manager	Ongoing	Yes

MONITORING THE OPERATIONAL PLAN

TARGET or Action Plan	Priority (1 highest, 3 lowest)	Full Compliant/ milestone date	Resources needed	Lead Officer Responsibility	Step-change required overall	Progress Monitoring Date	Communication with Stakeholders	Report to Members
Processing of claims	1			Asst Manager (Benefits)		December 2007	No	No
Overpayments	2			Asst Manager (Benefits)		December 2007	No	Yes
Charter mark accreditation	3			Project & Publicity Officer		December 2007	Yes	No
Council Tax collection	1			Asst Manager (Revenues)		December 2007	No	No
Changes of circumstances	1			Asst Manager (Benefits)		December 2007	No	No
Fraud detection	2			Asst Manager (Fraud)		December 2007	No	No
Accuracy	1			Senior Officer (quality)		December 2007	No	No
Consultation	3			Revenues & Benefits Manager		December 2007	Yes	No
Performance standards	2			Revenues & Benefits Manager		December 2007	Yes	Yes
Partnership working	1			Revenues & Benefits Manager		December 2007	Yes	Yes

ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE



POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Policy documents, Office procedures and instructions have been, or are to be, compiled for each of the functional areas set out below, the status and date of the procedure notes being as follows:

Policy/Procedure	Document Status	If not issued, responsible officer(s)
Operational Plan	Issued	
Policy and Procedures for Management Checking, monitoring and information	Issued	
Contingency Plan	Issued	
Overpayments Procedure	Issued	
Recovery administration	Issued	
Customer Services	Issued	
Customer Complaints and Comments	Issued	
Appeals Procedures	Issued	
Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)	Issued	
Fraud policies & procedures	Issued	
Anti Fraud & Corruption policy & Investigation policy	Issued	
Benefits Administration	Issued	
Training & Development policy	Issued	
Landlords Policy	Issued	
Revenues Administration	Issued	
Consultation& take up	Pending	Scott Logan/Zandra Neeld