
COUNCIL TAX IMPROVEMENT ACTION PLAN

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 improvement plan. There are 50 outstanding items against the original 211 items listed in 2003/04.

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 three-year action plan (copy appended) to meet all of the standards of the Council Tax Improvement Plan which was adopted in accordance with the recommendations of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy. Housing and Council Tax Benefit improvement is a key feature of the CPA Improvement Plan agreed by this authority. The actions outlined will facilitate the existing operation of the service.

3 ACTION PLAN

- 3.1 All outstanding items have now been moved into year three (2005/6). Where individual officers have been charged with the responsibility for actioning an item, this has been included as a target in their Performance and Development Review (PDR).
- 3.2 Members attention is drawn to an item elsewhere on this agenda which sets out proposals for a joint working, capacity-building initiative which will satisfy a number of Action Plan items if adopted. This proposal is to work with a private sector company for the delivery of a telephone call answering service, both during office hours and to extend the service for limited evening and Saturday morning cover.

4 HOUSING BENEFITS

- 4.1 The Housing Benefit Performance Standards have been revised and condensed into 19 performance measures (key outcomes expected) and 65 enablers (key activities required) from the 641 action points previously included. This will mean a complete reassessment of standards to see how many Rochford is still meeting. This will take some time as each element of

the new Standards regime will need separate assessment; an exercise which will need to be carried out at Manager or Assistant Manager level.

- 4.2 In order to avoid a clash of work both for the Revenue and Benefits Team and for Members it is proposed that the six-monthly reviews of the action plans run as follows:-

- Council Tax Action Plan – April/October
- Housing Benefit Action Plan – July/December

5 RECOMMENDATION

It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES**

- (1) To endorse the revised Action Plan for Council Tax Service Improvement.
- (2) That the action plan be reviewed again in October 2005 and April 2006.

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Background Papers:

Cipfa Code of Practice

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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
1.0	Compilation/Maintenance of the Valuation List			
1.3	Schedules are processed automatically	M		Business Support team working on procedures.
2.0	Billing			
2.1	The Billing Authority operates an incentive scheme for early lump sum payments	L	•	Members to consider as part of a package of Best practice proposals in 2005/6
2.5	Bulk issues of bills, which achieve the minimum level of penetration are passed to the Royal Mail in walksort order	H		Project Officer to organise tendering process from May 2005
2.6	The Authority funds the cost of the statutory explanatory notes leaflet through advertising or sponsorship	M	•	Corporate Communications Officer to investigate sponsorship and corporate identity of the leaflet in 2005/06
2.7	Proof of postage is obtained from the Royal Mail for the issue of all bills	H		See 2.5
3.0	Payment Methods			
3.13	Customers can pay at the post office using a swipe card	M	•	Members to consider as part of a package of Best practice proposals in 2005/6
3.14	Customers can pay by Pay Point	M		Members to consider as part of a package of Best practice proposals in 2005/6
5.0	Reductions, Reliefs, Exemptions			
5.4	Entitlement to single person discount is reviewed annually	M		Regular reviews undertaken but not on an annual basis. Will be considered when resources available.

		Ranking 2005/6		Comments
6.0	Benefit System Links			
7.0	Anti-poverty			
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 in 2005/6.
7.3	The Authority has a corporate debt recovery policy	H		See 7.1
7.4	Revenues staff are trained on anti-poverty/social inclusion awareness issues	M		See 7.1
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. To be expanded.
8.0	Pre Liability Order Recovery			
8.1	Reminder notices are issued within 15 working days of the instalment becoming overdue	L		Members to consider as part of a package of Best practice proposals in 2005/6
8.2	A summons is issued within 15 working days of the first reminder if the account has not been brought up to date	L		Members to consider as part of a package of Best practice proposals in 2005/6
8.5	A remote computer link has been established for the use of staff attending Magistrates Court	L		Courts do not have a facility to do so
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.

		Ranking	2005/6	Comments
9.0	Post Liability Order Recovery			
9.2	The Authority prosecutes if the request for information notice is not returned	L	•	Members to consider as part of a package of Best practice proposals in 2005/6
9.5	Employers who fail to set up attachments are prosecuted	L	•	Members to consider as part of a package of Best practice proposals in 2005/6
10.0	Bailiff and External Agency Recovery (unless stated refers to both internal and external bailiffs)			
10.1	External Bailiffs operate on a fee basis only (i.e. no commission)	L	•	Still awaiting new legislation to confirm if possible. (Lord Chancellor's Report on Debt)
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 for changed and included in Service Level Agreement
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
10.14	Authorities have access to external bailiff's systems via a modem link in order to make enquiries	L		To be introduced when contract is renewed or changed
10.15	Cases are transferred to external bailiffs electronically	L		To be introduced when contract is renewed or changed
11.0	Committals			
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

		Ranking	2005/6	Comments
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		See 8.9
12.0 Write Offs				
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 8.9
12.7	Checks are made with other systems within the authority prior to debts being written off	M		See 8.9
13.0 Customer Care				
13.6	The Customer Care policy is advertised on leaflets that go out with demand notices	H		To be developed with Corporate Policy Unit.
13.7	The Customer Care policy contains specific targets for council tax	H		See 13.6
13.9	The Authority has implemented a customer forum to obtain the views of council tax payers	M		Project & Publicity Officer to organise Customer panel in September 2005 after surveying take up.
13.16	The Authority provides enquiry facilities (either by telephone and/or personal visits) beyond the hours of 9 - 5 Mondays to Fridays	H		See separate report on this agenda.
13.21	Main CT bills and leaflets are accredited with the Crystal Mark	H		Crystal Mark achieved on bill but not on leaflet. Currently no budget allocation to pursue this.
14.0 Inspections				
14.11	Inspectors wards/districts are rotated as part of the internal checking process	M		When all inspectors are fully trained

		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 wonders about the cost effectiveness of this initiative
15.0 Staff				
15.1	Monthly targets exist for quantity of work processed by individuals and teams	H		To be introduced by December 2005 as part of Comino roll-out.
15.2	At least monthly performance monitoring exists for quantity of work processed, for individual staff and teams	H		Will be done once all staff trained in Revenues and Benefits functions. This should be around December 2005. Will also dovetail into Comino 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		Assistant Revenue Manager to introduce by May 2005
15.14	All staff accounts are periodically checked	H		Assistant Revenue Manager to liaise with Audit (Audit to organise)
16.0 Quality				
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.
16.4	A sample of incoming telephone calls should be recorded and checked by suitably experienced officers & used for training purposes	L	•	See separate report on this agenda.
16.5	The section has been awarded ISO 9000	L	•	No intention to apply at present
16.6	The section has been awarded Chartermark	L	•	No intention to apply at present
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. Possibly around October 2005.

		Ranking	2005/6	Comments
18.0	Systems			
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 to commence work April 2005, funded, in part, by the £25,000 agreed Budget allocation
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	•	Business Support Team to implement in August 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 during 2005/6
18.22	The Document Management /Image system provides a facility to direct and re-direct incoming work	L	•	System is capable of this
18.23	The Document Management/Image system provides management information on performance and productivity	L	•	System is capable of this
19.00	e-Government			
19.4	The authority has an autodial system to enable easier contact with customers	L		Not possible with existing telephone system
19.15	Home working facilities are available	L		Home working facilities available to selected staff only. To be considered corporately.