

REVENUE AND BENEFITS – ENFORCEMENT SERVICES REVIEW

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 Members to consider an external consultant's independent review of the recovery and enforcement function within the Revenue and Benefits Service.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 The Revenue and Benefits Service is in the closing stages of a three year Service Improvement Plan. Members review this plan every six months to ensure Rochford's service is moving forward against nationally recognised benchmarks. These were agreed as:-
- The Housing Benefit Performance Standards (as defined by the DWP).
 - The Chartered Institute for Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) Council Tax/Business Rate Delivery Model.
- 2.2 The review period spanned 2003/2006. Both plans are due to be finalised by 31 March 2006. Both plans encompassed a review of Recovery and Enforcement functions by an external consultant. Work was commissioned in July 2005 and the final version of the report was received in September.
- 2.3 Officers have now had an opportunity to digest this comprehensive report, analyse the emerging recommendations in relationship to the service provided and add appropriate comments. The full report is attached as an appendix.

Officer Response to Consultants Recommendations

- 2.4 The consultant made 11 recommendations in support of his work. Officers have added their comments/responses and, where appropriate give an update on progress made.

Consultants Recommendations	Officer Comment/Response
(1) Contracted Business Rate administration service to be closely monitored and local taxation collection be published monthly in the Members' Bulletin.	Existing arrangements provide for a 3-monthly liaison meeting between Head of Service and Chelmsford Borough Council (CBC). CBC have asked Rochford to consider extending the service to include debtor tracing, Recovery, Enforcement and Insolvency work. Depending upon negotiations, 'Gershon' savings may accrue to this Council. In view of the probable contract extension, liaison should be stepped up to monthly for the first full year of operation and then reviewed again against performance.

Consultants Recommendations	Officer Comment/Response
	Agreed that Members should receive monthly performance update.
(2) Exploratory discussions with neighbouring Councils for partnership working on Council Tax collection should be taken forward.	<p>Chelmsford, Colchester and Maldon have initially indicated their interest in collaborative working (see Committee report 12 October 2005). Scoping work undertaken and initial exploratory meeting held to define service delivery. High level aims defined as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance Enhancement. • Cost Savings. • Resilience of Service. • Staff Development and Opportunity. • Innovation. • Improvement in CPA score. <p>Further meetings arranged to progress this initiative.</p>
(3) External Bailiff Service to be market-tested with a view to letting a contract to a single service provider.	This reinforces views outlined in the Council Tax Improvement Plan approved by Members on 12 October. Specification drafted and now ready to go to "Invitation to Tender" stage.
(4) Bailiff's Code of Practice to be adopted.	Agreed. Incorporated into specification.
(5) Collection of HB Overpayments performance to be monitored for future review.	Agreed. Planned for March 2006.
(6) Recruitment of an additional member of staff on HB overpayments and other income to be considered, or inclusion in external bailiff services specification.	<p>A good business case for additional staff would need to be made as this goes against the Council's plans to reduce service costs in this area. Cost/Benefit analysis being conducted.</p> <p>Bailiff contract could be amended to include this service enhancement, probably at a lower cost than employing our own staff.</p>
(7) Liaison arrangements with service providers in relation to sundry income should be checked and advice issued appropriately.	Accepted. However, because Rochford has contractorised much of its services the number of sundry debtor accounts raised is very low in number – 115 in 2004/05. We shall reinforce liaison arrangements between affected offices

Consultants Recommendations	Officer Comment/Response
(8) Tracing service to be reviewed with specific reference to use of Experian.	Experian provide this service to all financial institutions and most local authorities. Rochford joined the service in October 2005.
(9) Write-off policy procedure to be documented.	Although Rochford has a formal written Write-off Policy, the procedure was not documented. This has now been remedied.
(10) Committal policy to be approved and procedures documented.	To be reported to December Committee.
(11) Systems security procedures to be enhanced by use of smart-card keyboard locks.	Under investigation with Head of Administration and Member Services.

3 RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 The Council Tax revenue stream is vital to the functioning of the Council. Weaknesses in any part of the billing, collection, account management, tracing, recovery or enforcement functions could lead to shortfalls in income which might result in an increased levy of the tax for future years.

4 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 This was a planned review for which a budget allocation was made in 2005/06.

5 RECOMMENDATION

- 5.1 It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES**

That the officer responses and agreed actions to the consultants recommendations be endorsed.

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Background Papers:

DWP Performance Standards.
CIPFA Code.

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