

## **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.

### **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 Subsequent to that overarching report these elements have been considered separately and this report concentrates on improvements to the Council Tax service.

### **3 ACTION PLAN**

- 3.1 Members agreed an action plan which would see all of the elements of that service brought up to the Institute of Public Finance (IPF) standards over a three year period. The IPF is an arm of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy.
- 3.2 The Head of Service is pleased to report that all actions for 2003/04 have been completed within the timescale, save for two elements 15.12 and 15.14 which have been rolled over into 2004/05. These will be dealt with early in the year.
- 3.3 The intention was to review the Action Plan on a six monthly cycle (July and January) but this was not possible due to key staff being engaged on CPA work. Members may wish to consider adopting new reporting dates. The Head of Service is proposing May and November to keep this work separate from the Housing Benefit Action Plan.
- 3.4 Members are asked to consider the Action Plan with particular reference to the risk ranking (H – High; M = Medium; L = Low) and the timeliness of the elements.

**4 RECOMMENDATION**

- 4.1 It is proposed that Members **RECOMMEND** to Council the revised Action Plan for Council Tax Service Improvement.

Steve Clarkson

Head of Revenue & Housing Management

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**Background Papers:**

IPF – Guidance and Standards

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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.

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		Ranking	2004/5	2005/6	Comments
<b>1.0</b>	<b>Compilation/Maintenance of the Valuation List</b>				
1.3	Schedules are processed automatically	M		•	Not possible with existing system
<b>2.0</b>	<b>Billing</b>				
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			Billing procedure reviewed October 2003 should be cost effective to outsource and walksort order will be part of the outsourcing process. To be introduced for 2005/6 Billing
2.6	The Authority funds the cost of the statutory explanatory notes leaflet through advertising or sponsorship	M		•	Corporate Communications Officer to look at as part of looking at changing booklet for 2005/6
2.7	Proof of postage is obtained from the Royal Mail for the issue of all bills	H			Will be included as part of outsourcing of billing process
2.11	Refunds are paid by direct credit into bank accounts where bank details are known	M			Will be ready to be carried out May 2004
<b>3.0</b>	<b>Payment Methods</b>				
3.5	DDs are amended/cancelled automatically through the use of ADDACS	H			Reported to CMB for consideration in October 2003. Decision awaited

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		<b>Ranking</b>	<b>2004/5</b>	<b>2005/6</b>	<b>Comments</b>
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 PayPoint	M			Members to consider as part of a package of Best practice proposals in 2005/6
<b>5.0 Reductions, Reliefs, Exemptions</b>					
5.4	Entitlement to single person discount is reviewed annually	M			To commence from August 04 depending on the ability to recruit and/or retain suitably qualified staff
<b>6.0 Benefit System Links</b>					
6.2	An automatic “mismatch” facility exists to match information on the CT and HB systems (e.g. SPD with any non dependants) and “mismatches” are resolved within 5 working days	L			Facility now exists, but a bug in Academy Computer System. Senior Benefit Officer to resolve by December 2004 as low priority work
<b>7.0 Anti-poverty</b>					
7.1	The Revenues division incorporates the corporate anti-poverty/social inclusion policy into service delivery.	M			Now adopted and displayed on Website. New procedures to be put in place for May 2004
7.3	The Authority has a corporate debt recovery policy	H			Fully implemented by June 2004
7.4	Revenues staff are trained on anti-poverty/social inclusion awareness issues	M			To follow completion of 7.1 & 7.3

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7.6	Revenues staff liaise with and utilise the services of the Welfare Rights /Debt Counselling/Money Advice units, where appropriate	M			To be included with 7.3
<b>8.0 Pre Liability Order Recovery</b>					
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
8.8	Employer details are recorded when making arrangements to pay after a summons has been issued	M			To commence from May 2004
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			External Consultants to assist when all procedures are rewritten in June 2004
<b>9.0 Post Liability Order Recovery</b>					
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

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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
9.6	The database is marked to show potentially violent cases and this information is made available before recovery visits are scheduled	M			This is currently under consideration by the Corporate Policy team
<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			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			Consultant to assist when all procedures are written in June 2004
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

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<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 2004
11.5	If no contact has been made committal summonses are issued within 20 working days of the warning letter	M			To commence from May 2004
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			Consultants to assist with when all procedures are written in June 2004
<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			Corporate write-off policy now adopted. Members will soon see new style write-off report
12.7	Checks are made with other systems within the authority prior to debts being written off	M			Write-off procedures to be developed with consultants
<b>13.0 Customer Care</b>					
13.6	The Customer Care policy is advertised on leaflets that go out with demand notices	H			Revenues & Benefits manager to amalgamate policy with Benefits Customer care Policy by June 2004
13.7	The Customer Care policy contains specific targets for council tax	H			Revenues & Benefits manager to amalgamate policy with Benefits Customer care Policy by June 2004

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13.9	The Authority has implemented a customer forum to obtain the views of council tax payers	M			Project & Publicity Officer to investigate how this can be carried out within Revenues
13.16	The Authority provides enquiry facilities (either by telephone and/or personal visits) beyond the hours of 9 - 5 Mondays to Fridays	H		•	Under consideration by one of the sub-groups as part of Workforce Development Plan
13.21	Main CT bills and leaflets are accredited with the Crystal Mark	H			To be completed by September 2004
<b>14.0 Inspections</b>					
14.7	Inspection visit schedules are produced in walksort order by the system to minimise preparation, travel time and mileage	L			To be completed if new Streetwise IT equipment is purchased. Under consideration by CMB
14.11	Inspectors wards/districts are rotated as part of the internal checking process	M			When all inspectors are fully trained
14.14	Inspectors carry out spot checks on cases with SPD	L			Insufficient resources at present to consider this initiative. Head of Service wonders about the cost effectiveness of this initiative
<b>15.0 Staff</b>					
15.1	Monthly targets exist for quantity of work processed by individuals and teams	H			Revenue & Benefits Manager to introduce by December 2004
15.2	At least monthly performance monitoring exists for quantity of work processed, for individual staff and teams	H			Senior Benefit Officer to include as part of Benefits monitoring during this year

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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 2004
15.13	All staff are subjected to Investor in People (or similar) accreditation	M			Ongoing throughout the Council
15.14	All staff accounts are periodically checked	H			Assistant Revenue Manager to liaise with Audit
<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.
16.4	A sample of incoming telephone calls should be recorded and checked by suitably experienced officers & used for training purposes	L			Awaiting information on how this can be carried out on our phone system
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			Proposals contained in report to Policy & Finance Committee on 8 May 2004
<b>18.0 Systems</b>					

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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			Revenue & Benefits Manager to liaise with Audit and consultant by June 2004
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		.	
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
<b>19.00 e-Government</b>					
19.1	Inspectors have access to information "on the road" through a remote computer link	L			Achievable if Streetwise is introduced
19.2	Inspectors are given information in an electronic format and information returned by them is also in electronic format and is uploaded to the council tax system	L			Achievable if Streetwise is introduced

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		<b>Ranking</b>	<b>2004/5</b>	<b>2005/6</b>	<b>Comments</b>
19.4	The authority has an autodial system to enable easier contact with customers	L			Not possible with existing telephone system
19.12	Kiosks are provided in satellite centres	M			Awaiting line connections to satellite centres in sheltered housing
19.15	Home working facilities are available	L			No intentions to roll this out at present