

**REPORT TO: BEST VALUE SUB-COMMITTEE OF
POLICY & RESOURCES COMMITTEE - 21 DECEMBER 2004**

REPORT ON: BEST VALUE REVIEW OF BENEFITS AND COUNCIL TAX

REPORT BY: CHIEF EXECUTIVE

REPORT NO: 854-2004

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1 To report the findings of the Working Group on the Best Value Review of Benefits and Council Tax.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Sub-Committee:-

- 2.1 Notes and accepts the contents of the report.
- 2.2 Instruct the Officers to continue to monitor the performance of the Benefit and Council Tax services.
- 2.3 Instruct the officers to consider appropriate action on resources in the future should the necessary performance standards not be met.
- 2.4 Instruct the officers to continue to apply for monies from the DWP Performance Fund where applicable.

3.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

3.1 There are no direct financial implications as a result of the recommendations.

4.0 LOCAL AGENDA 21 IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The service continues to strive to ensure that resources are used efficiently.
- 4.2 The customers' needs are met, where possible, in the locality that they live.

5.0 EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IMPLICATIONS

5.1 There are no direct Equal Opportunities implications.

6.0 REPORT

6.1 The Working Group met on four occasions between March and November 2004 and a sub group met on three occasions during the same period to consider the benefit service's documentation.

6.2 The Working Group was chaired by the Chief Executive and consisted of representatives from Council Members, Officers, Housing Associations, Citizens Advice Bureau, Dundee Federation of Tenants Association, Dundee Anti Poverty and the Trade Unions.

6.3 The terms of reference were agreed by the group as follows:-

6.3.1 Scope of the Review

What changes do we need to make to achieve the statutory and other key timescales for processing benefit applications and also achieve our target for Council Tax collection.

6.3.2 Objectives

- a) To review all forms that are completed by claimants.
- b) To review the exchange of information between Revenues, Pension Section, Social Work, Housing, Revenues, DWP and Inland Revenue.
- c) To examine current performance delivery and establish future performance delivery targets.
- d) To examine the current generic working arrangements and suggest improvements.
- e) To consider improvements to overpayments procedures and systems.
- f) To examine and consider improvements to current collection systems and procedures.

6.4 Presentations

The Working Group received four presentations from Council Officers namely:-

6.4.1 Current generic working arrangements

The group noted the differentiation between Benefit and Council Tax staff who are either generic or specialist in this particular field and the workload and processes in each type of operation. The group was content with the present method of operation.

6.4.2 Current collection systems and procedure

The group noted the collection systems and procedures in operation and further noted that the Revenues Division were taking forward a number of proposals to improve collection and collection rates.

The group agreed that procedures be developed, in discussion with the Welfare Rights Section of Social Work, to enable the consolidation of debts for debtors towards maximising income and minimising complications for debtors. The group further agreed that the procedures currently operated by other local authorities in relation to debt collection and the means by which the public could be made aware of the provision of benefits available to assist their position relating to the payment of debts be examined.

6.4.3 Overpayment procedures and systems

The group noted the deduction levels presently operated, that they are reviewed annually and that the Head of Revenues had flexibility with these deductions depending on customer circumstances.

6.4.4 Performance Delivery

The group noted:-

- a) That the length of time given to benefit applicants to return information is to be reduced from 56 days to 28 days.
- b) That up to 90% of benefit applications are incomplete and that this requires the applicant to be contacted for further information to be provided.
- c) That a Customer Survey at 6/7 City Square had received positive results.
- d) That it was not practical to set up a section to deal only with Registered Social Landlord tenants.
- e) That the four weekly rent period used by Revenues could not be changed to match the Housing Association monthly periods.
- f) That Housing Department members of staff were being trained in order to assist with the verification of documents required from benefit applicants.
- g) That members of the Welfare Rights Team are also to be trained in the verification of documents.
- i) That Revenues Division staff will in future be present in three further area housing offices.

The group agreed:-

- a) That the Head of Revenues should review the early screening of application forms.
- b) That a meeting be arranged with Housing assistance to take forward proposals that Housing Association officials can assist with the verification of documents.

6.5 **Sub Group**

- 6.5.1 A sub group was established to examine the content of forms with a view to establishing what, if any, changes could be made with a view to refreshing the information contained therein.
- 6.5.2 The sub group considered in detail all the relevant documentation and made many suggestions as to the layout of each form. These suggestions have been considered and where possible have been implemented. In particular the sub group asked that font size be increased, that the Council's logo appears on documentation and that any penalty clause be prominent.

6.6 **Visits To Other Councils**

- 6.6.1 The Working Group requested that officers visited other Councils to investigate whether anything could be learned from how they administered their benefits functions.
- 6.6.2 Visits were made to West Lothian and North Lanarkshire Councils.
- 6.6.3 During these visits the officers found no fundamental difference between the way these authorities and our own operate, that would explain the differences in processing times. It is clear however that there are differences in certain areas, namely the amount of verifying and recording of information to Verification Framework (VF) standards and the way these authorities calculate their administration cost per case.
- 6.6.4 With regard to the Verification Framework (VF), it would appear that not as much time is spent on verifying information or recording the crosschecking required under VF.
- 6.6.5 With regard to administration costs, neither authority includes all the staff involved in the administration of benefit, nor do they include the cost of the assistance received from other departments. (eg West Lothian include only 42 staff when calculating their administration cost per case, whereas a conservative estimate would suggest up to 52 staff are involved. North Lanarkshire has no accommodation charges or enquiry staff costs as these are met by their Housing Department).

6.7 **Continuous Improvement**

- 6.7.1 In light of the visit to other Councils, it is felt that to improve our own processing times, it is necessary to investigate further the following areas:-
 1. Providing additional training to staff regarding the correct input of "Period Types" and application/information received dates onto the SX3 system and explaining the importance of processing times and the need for benefit to be timeously processed.
 2. Investigate the possibility of reducing and simplifying the level or recording staff have to complete in order that the Council remains VF compliant. This could improve the Council's DWP performance and increase our productivity.
 3. Reporting on processing times on a weekly basis with member(s) of staff allocated to scrutinise the timings for new applications and changes in circumstances, with cases that have taken a long time being investigated.

4. Reconsidering the amount of information processing staff are asked to ascertain for VF purposes.
5. Inviting the BFI PIAT Team to visit with a view to identifying improvements in the way in which we deal with VF and the revision/appeals process.
6. Improve the processing speed of the Council Tax/Benefits and Data Imaging/Workflow systems, thereby improving the productivity of the Revenues staff.
7. Through the training of Housing Department, Housing Association and Welfare Rights staff, improve the speed of processing of benefit applications.

6.7 Enquiry Offices and Telephone Contact Team

The group received detailed report on the operation of the Enquiry Offices and the Telephone Contact Team. In respect of the main Enquiry Office at 6/7 City Square it was demonstrated that the average waiting time was 7 minutes and the average time at the counter 14 minutes. In respect of the Telephone Contact Team it was demonstrated that 91% of calls were answered within 5 minutes, with an average call execution time of 1 minute 30 seconds.

6.8 Performance Measurement

The group received a detailed report on the introduction of Performance Measurement and acknowledged that this initiative has the potential to improve the productivity of the Revenues Division.

7.0 CONCLUSIONS

The quality of the provision of both the Benefit and Council Tax collection services has a major impact on the lives of the citizens of Dundee.

The Working Group agreed that both procedures and staffing resources within the Revenues Division should be continually monitored and if necessary further reports should be brought before the Council.

8.0 CONSULTATION

All members of the Best Value Benefits and Council Tax Working Group have been consulted on the contents of the report.

Alex Stephen
Chief Executive

Date 14 December 2004