

TO: THE EXECUTIVE  
15 SEPTEMBER 2009

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**RESPONSE TO ENVIRONMENT, CULTURE AND COMMUNITIES  
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL WORKING GROUP REVIEW OF THE  
HOUSING AND COUNCIL TAX BENEFIT IMPROVEMENT PLAN  
Director of Environment, Culture and Communities**

**1 PURPOSE OF DECISION**

- 1.1. The purpose of this report is to respond to the report of the Environment, Culture and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel Working Group review of the Housing and Council Tax Benefit Improvement Plan.

**2 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1 **That the members of the Environment, Culture and Communities (ECC) Overview and Scrutiny Panel Working Group be thanked for their report.**
- 2.2 **That the responses to the 11 recommendations made by the Working Group as detailed in paragraphs 5.2 to 5.12 be approved and the Scrutiny Commission advised accordingly.**

**3 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1. On the 22 June Cllr Bob Edger Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission wrote to Cllr D. Birch the Executive member of Adult Care, Health and Housing asking for an Executive response to the report of the ECC Overview and Scrutiny Panel Working Party review of the Housing and Council Tax Benefit Improvement Plan.
- 3.2. This report proposes a response to the 11 recommendations of the report which is attached to this report as an appendix.

**4 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

- 4.1. There is no alternative to responding to the EEC Overview and Scrutiny report.

**5 SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

ECC review of Housing and Council Tax Benefit Improvement Plan

- 5.1 The ECC Overview and Scrutiny Working Party report made 11 recommendations to the Executive member for Adult Services, Health and Housing. The following paragraphs provide a response to each recommendation.
- 5.2 **The new Housing and Council Tax Benefit Improvement Plan should address communication issues.** There are nearly 100 letters that could be sent to customers. Most frequently sent letters have been reviewed and explanation provided

in hard copy and on the web site. The new improvement plan detailed later in this report will contain actions to continue this work.

- 5.3. **Off site processing as effective means of addressing changes in workload.** The off site processing work has been re-tendered and an organisation has been appointed for three years with an option to extend for a further two years. The contract provides the equivalent of two benefit assessors in processing time on an on-going basis and the options to increase that resource if necessary.
- 5.4. **Addressing the potential increase in need for home visits especially for older residents.** Home visits can be costly in processing time and so a balance needs to be struck between undertaking visits at the expense of the claims taking longer to process. We are working closer with the Pensions Service who will home visit for older customers and they will verify and complete claims on our behalf.
- 5.5. **Working with external organisations to improve timely notification of changes of circumstances.** We have already provided a briefing session for landlords and letting agents who attended the last private rented sector forum. We will expand this work in the new improvement plan.
- 5.6. **Clarity of written information to be reviewed.** This work is on going and forms part of the new improvement plan. Housing Benefit staff are also part of the Departmental wide initiative to improve letter writing skills which forms part of an overall customer care plan.
- 5.7. **Information that includes technical terms in correspondence should be clearly explained.** We have already amended notification letters to address this issue and we will be investigating the best way to provide information to customers drawing on feedback from the customer satisfaction survey.
- 5.8. **Increase the awareness of Housing and Council Tax Benefit.** The use of targeted marketing based on the use of market segmentation databases such as MOSAIC will help in this respect. In addition the benefit customer satisfaction survey provides insight into the ways in which benefit customers are likely to receive information on the Benefit Service.
- 5.9. **The costs of the MOSAIC database should be shared.** The first year's costs of the MOSAIC database have been shared between the Forestcare, Leisure and the Benefit service. The success of the database in providing targeted marketing information will determine future potential to share costs or to seek alternative data sources.
- 5.10. **Link the Benefit Service to Registrar Service.** The intention is to provide an information pack to the Registrar for customers who register a birth or death so that changes of circumstances can be captured. Registrars will be given access to the benefit service appointment system so customers can visit the duty officer.
- 5.11. **Train external organisations to inform and identify potential customers of the benefit service.** This work with external organisations will be captured in the new improvement plan.
- 5.12. **The Benefit Service should continue to pursue best practice.** The service has submitted benchmark information and is awaiting the report on 2008/9 data. The service has already visited high performing local council's to gain an understanding of how they operate. This work will be captured in the new improvement plan.

## 2009/10 Benefit Improvement Plan

5.13. The current and next financial year will be challenging times for the Benefit Service due to the replacement of the Pericles benefit processing system. It will be important to improve service delivery in advance of the new system implementation so that the inevitable dip in performance when the new system is implemented is minimised as much as possible. The Executive Member for Adult Services, Health and Housing is due to approve a new improvement plan which will place the service in good stead to exploit any opportunities to share services in the future when the new system is in place and operating efficiently. The new improvement plan will reflect the actions detailed in the response to the report from the working group and is based around three new themes:

- Providing more Benefit Service
- Providing the right Benefit Service
- Providing the best Benefit Service

## **6 ADVICE RECEIVED FROM STATUTORY AND OTHER OFFICERS**

### Borough Solicitor

6.1 Nothing to add to this report.

### Borough Treasurer

6.2 The recommendations themselves and the responses to them describe changes in practice on the whole and there are no responses which cannot be considered simply as ongoing service improvement with minimal or no additional resource requirement.

### Equalities Impact Assessment

6.3 Equalities Impact Assessment is attached.

### Strategic Risk Management Issues

6.4 There are no strategic risk management issues as a consequence of this report.

## **7 CONSULTATION**

### Principal Groups Consulted

7.1 None for this report

### Method of Consultation

7.2 Not applicable

### Representations Received

7.3 Not applicable

Background Papers

Report from the Working Group as attached as an annexe.

Contact for further information

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