

**REVIEW OF THE COUNCIL'S HOUSING AND COUNCIL TAX BENEFITS
IMPROVEMENT PLAN**

Working Group Lead Member

1 INTRODUCTION

This report invites the Environment, Culture and Communities Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) Panel to note the conclusions of the Working Group's (WG) review of the Housing and Council Tax Benefits Improvement Plan, and to consider the related recommendations of the WG.

2 SUGGESTED ACTION

2.1 That the Environment, Culture and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel:

- (a) notes the conclusion of the Working Group's (WG) review of the Housing and Council Tax Benefits Improvement Plan in paragraph 3.3;**
- (b) agrees that the Working Group's work has been concluded;**
- (c) receives the report of the inspection of Housing and Council tax Benefits at its next meeting in October 2009;**
- (d) is provided by officers with an annual update on the Benefits Improvement Plan;**
- (e) refers this report to the Overview and Scrutiny Commission for its consideration;**
- (f) invites the Overview and Scrutiny Commission to consider reviewing the progress on procuring and implementing the new IT system for Benefits administration.**

3 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 3.1** The Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Review of the Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Improvement Plan, in June 2009 contained the following recommendation, which was accepted by the Environment, Culture and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel, and the Overview and Scrutiny Commission:

'The Working Group should continue to operate and intend to review the H&CTB Service Improvement Plan for 2009/10 once it has been prepared, and again before the end of the year to review progress on implementing the plans' objectives and how any new processes and/or procedures are affecting the H&CTB Service.'

- 3.2 In furtherance of that agreed recommendation, the Working Group, comprising Councillors Finch, Beadsley and Burrows, met on two further occasions, on 7 December 2009 and 20 May 2010. At those meetings, the WG reviewed a range of issues, with the assistance of officers, including: the Executive response to the WG's O&S report; progress on the 2008/09 and 2009/10 Housing and Council Tax Benefit Improvement Plans; the design of the 2010/11 Improvement Plan; preparations for and initial feedback from the Audit Commission's inspection of the benefit service in May 2010, including the self assessment produced by officers; preparations for the new Benefit Service IT system, replacing the current system which is due to become unsupported by the software supplier; and receiving information on the outcomes of the Benefits User Focus Group
- 3.3 On the basis of the further work described above, the Working Group has concluded that:
- (i) Good progress has been made on the improvement plans for the Housing and Council Tax Benefits Service.
 - (ii) The WG endorses the Benefits Improvement Plan for 2010-11.
 - (iii) The Benefits Service is well placed for the inspection by the Audit Commission in May 2010.
 - (iv) As the report of the inspection of Housing and Council tax Benefits will not be available until later in July, this report should be reviewed by the Panel at its next meeting in October 2009.
 - (v) Replacing the 'Pericles' Benefits service IT system will be an important IT project. As the IT function falls within the remit of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission, the Panel should invite the Commission to consider reviewing the progress on procuring and implementing the new IT system for Benefits administration.
 - (vi) Starting in April 2011, the Panel should be provided by officers with an annual update on the Benefits Improvement Plan.
 - (vii) The Working Group thanks the officers for their assistance throughout this review.
 - (viii) The Working Group's work has been concluded.
 - (ix) This report should be referred to the Overview and Scrutiny Commission for its consideration.

Background Papers

Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Review of the Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Improvement Plan, June 2009.

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