



Report to: Cabinet

Subject: Housing and Council Tax Benefit Strategy

Date: 7 October 2004

Author: Head of Finance

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1. Members will be aware that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) have provided local authorities with a Framework for the administration of Housing and Council Tax benefit. This framework is the Performance Standards and was developed to cover the full picture of what makes up effective and secure housing benefit delivery rather than focusing solely on key measures of speed, accuracy and security.
- 1.2. The Performance Standards are firmly founded on what needs to be achieved to deliver an effective Housing Benefit (HB) and Council Tax Benefit (CTB) system that meets wider strategic objectives and strengthens accountability for the service in local authorities. The extent of the achievement of the Performance Standards is used as an explicit measure of the benefits service by the Benefits Fraud Inspectorate in completing their assessment used for CPA purposes.
- 1.3. The Performance Standards are divided into seven modules over the following functional areas:-
 - Strategic Management
 - Customer Services
 - Processing of Claims
 - Working with landlords
 - Internal Security
 - Counter Fraud
 - Overpayments

- 1.4. Internal and external auditors and inspectors will be able to assess our performance against these standards and will be able to make direct comparisons with other local authorities.
- 1.5. Working towards achieving these performance standards will mean that the Housing Benefit section is providing an efficient service to our customers that is underpinned with sound administrative procedures.

2. CURRENT POSITION

- 2.1. We are continuously monitoring our performance against the Performance Standards and the Housing Benefit Policy and Development Officer is identifying areas where improvement is required.
- 2.2. Regular work is also being undertaken with all other Nottinghamshire local authorities' Housing Benefit Sections sharing good practices and working together to improve areas where all the local authorities have identified areas for improvement.
- 2.3. The strategic management of the service is an area that significant strides in improving our local performance standards assessment can be achieved by adopting an Housing Benefit Strategy, (Appendix A) which forms the major part of the Strategic Management Module.
- 2.4. A risk assessment has been carried out on the Housing Benefit Section to determine the major functions which could affect its service delivery and this is detailed at Appendix B.

3. STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT MODULE

- 3.1. The Strategic Management Module of the Performance Standards identifies that, to provide an effective and secure service the Housing Benefit Service should have a vision document, containing a clear statement of intent in which Members are involved and have endorsed.
- 3.2. The vision statement should be supported with high level policies and clear objectives, to eliminate the need for senior officers to make recurring or routine decisions and provide a systematic way of delegating operational decisions in a manner that will sustain consistency of approach and equity of service.
- 3.3. The Strategic Management module suggests that a Benefits Service delivery plan is essential to translate the vision, policies and objectives into practical ways of providing a service. They will also provide a basis for managing any changes that are required to improve the Housing and Council Tax Benefit Service.

- 3.4. It is stressed that the plans will only be effective if they are developed thoroughly, used, monitored and adapted to meet changing circumstances. It further states that employees need to be convinced that the plans are realistic and achievable if they are to take ownership of them and, if that does not exist, the organisation is less likely to succeed in achieving its vision.
- 3.5. Following consultation with staff from the Housing Benefit Section, Client Services Section and Gedling One Stop, a draft Housing and Council Tax Benefit Strategy has been developed based on the Strategic Management module of the Performance Standards.
- 3.6. The strategy includes a Vision Statement, Policy Objectives and a Service Delivery Plan covering 2004/2007.
- 3.7. This Service Delivery Plan has been sent to the Partnership Development Manager of the Pensions Service and Guinness Trust Housing who are a major Social Registered Landlord providing Housing in the Borough and their responses have been included, where appropriate.
- 3.8. A final draft Housing and Council Tax Benefit Strategy is attached at Appendix A and includes the Vision Statement, Policy Objectives and Service Delivery Plan.

4. **FUTURE INTENTIONS**

- 4.1. It is the intention for members to endorse the strategy, which will form the basis of the Benefits Service Policy and Service Plan delivery for 2004/2007.
- 4.2. Work will be carried out to fulfil the plan which will require work to be undertaken with partners and internal departments (mainly Housing).
- 4.3. Formal monitoring of the plan will be undertaken on a quarterly basis and reported to the Head of Finance.
- 4.4. In the future, it is envisaged that a formal review of the plan will be undertaken on a yearly basis, to reflect any required changes and this will be done in conjunction with Housing Benefit staff, partners, customers and members.
- 4.5. Once this review has been carried out, it is proposed that the plan will be endorsed by members annually.

5. **RECOMMENDATION**

1. That members endorse the Housing and Council Tax Benefit Strategy 2004/2007 at Appendix A.

APPENDIX B

	RISK		CONTROLS
1.	Appropriate resources are made available	1. 2. 3. 4.	Main funding subject to government controls Benefits seen as priority service Track record of passporting adequate resources to ensure service provision Successful bids made to DWP for funding
2.	Difficulties/Delays encountered in implementing IT systems ie EDMRS, legacy	1. 2.	Project team implemented Project meetings to identify key milestones
3.	Turnover of staff may lead in insufficiently trained and inexperienced staff.	1. 2. 3. 4.	Policy and Development Officer in post to target training Development of service plan to ensure staff are aware of Policy and Procedures Involvement of staff on key decisions to improve morale and commitment to service. Use of agency staff to cover significant shortfalls.
4.	Significant Legislative Changes	1.	Legislative changes beyond local authority control could result in delays in achieving service delivery plan
5.	Inherent risk (latest 2002/2003 final subsidy claim qualified) in size and scale of HB activity, which passports over £15m to customers and mainly recovered by subsidy claim.	1. 2. 3. 4. 5.	Monitoring of service Appropriate controls in place Service subject to internal and external audit Staff appropriately trained Replacement Benefit System to ensure subsidy claim requirements met.
6.	Complex Benefit Service is dependant on other agencies services and internal departments	1. 2. 3.	Service Level Agreement with major partners Development of Service Plan Improved liaison and training with other internal sections identified as a key target.
7.	Change in local national economy could increase/decrease take up significantly.	1. 2.	Major changes outside local authority control Regular monitoring should identify issues promptly