

EAST AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE – 28 MARCH 2000

REPORT OF THE MEMBER/OFFICER WORKING GROUP ON HOUSING AND COUNCIL TAX BENEFIT ADMINISTRATION

Report by Director of Finance

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1** To submit the report of the Member/Officer Working Group on Housing and Council Tax Benefit Administration.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1** Following concerns over backlogs and performance raised in a report to this committee by the Director of Finance, the Policy and Resources Committee at its meeting of 9 June 1999 agreed to set up a Member/Officer working group to review the administration of Housing and Council Tax Benefit.
- 2.2** The Working Group met on 12 occasions between 2 July 1999 and 16 March 2000 with the following objectives;
- (a) To identify all current issues within the Benefits service.
 - (b) To identify short-term actions to clear the backlog of work.
 - (c) To identify appropriate and robust organisational and procedural arrangements to deliver Benefits services which conform to legislation and meet the needs of customers.

3 REPORT

- 3.1** The report of the Working Group is appended and is in the form of a Service Review document which conforms to the model required for a Best Value Service Review.

4 SUMMARY OF OUTCOMES

- 4.1** The report identifies the main drivers for the review as
- Significant backlog of work and inability to cope with the ongoing workload
 - Benefit period overrun penalties for 1997/98 & 1998/99

- High level of customer dissatisfaction
- IT systems, not fit for purpose and not common across the service
- High ratio of cases to staff when compared to other Councils and the DSS benchmark
- Poor performance indicators

The report identifies that the outcomes of the review have been

- ◆ Backlog problems have been eliminated and workload is now being monitored to ensure no backlogs develop.
- ◆ Benefit Period Overruns have been limited to below 5% for 1999/2000 and no penalties will be incurred.
- ◆ The process of reviewing and termination of claims as required by regulations has now been automated.
- ◆ Claims are now being processed within 14 days of receipt of all relevant information.
- ◆ Complaints have reduced substantially following clearance of the backlog and speedier processing performance
- ◆ An improved staff structure was approved by the Council and the phased recruitment process will be completed by April 2000.
- ◆ A training initiative has put in place to ensure staff have the necessary skills through a mixture of formal training courses and regular skills/knowledge updates.
- ◆ Improvements were made in communications with staff including the issue of Member/Officers Working Group minutes and the introduction of regular staff meetings.
- ◆ The benefits section was relocated to more suitable accommodation at The Cross, Kilmarnock, and more appropriate equipment provided to staff.
- ◆ The computerised Benefits system is being rationalised with the assistance of the Software suppliers and IT services.
- ◆ Improvements have been made to the telephone system with a core team of four staff dedicated to deal with incoming calls.
- ◆ Appropriate policies and strategies are being developed and communicated to staff including a Fraud and Overpayments Strategy and detailed Procedure Manuals for both benefits and non-benefits staff
- ◆ Increased use of Local Offices has made the service more accessible and improved relationship with customers
- ◆ Appropriate working procedures have been agreed with Homes and Technical Services delivering improvements in both the Benefits Service and the Housing Service
- ◆ Improved communication with the Information and technology Section has led to a better understanding of IT issues and the resolution of long standing problems

- ◆ Better working procedures with the Council Tax Section have been developed leading to improvements in service to taxpayers
- ◆ An improvement in relationships with Housing Associations has been achieved
- ◆ A detailed Action Plan is in place to ensure that remaining issues are tackled.

5 INPUT

- 5.1** The significant efforts of the Working Group, management and staff within the department and staff drafted in from other departments should be recognised. In addition the efforts of Local Office Staff, Housing Officers and the Social Work Anti-Poverty Unit staff contributed significantly to the achievements listed above.

6 RECOMMENDATION

- 6.1** It is recommended that Members

agree that the Member/Officer Working Group be stood down having met the remit given to it;

Endorse the Service Review Report

Request that the Director of Finance prepares a follow-up report on the outcome of the Service Review to the April 2001 meeting of this committee;

Request that the Director of Finance makes regular reports to this committee on the ongoing performance of the Benefits Section; and

Otherwise note the contents of this report.

Alex McPhee
Director of Finance

AMcP/JP
14 March 2000

LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS
NIL

AGENDA