



Performance and Finance Select Committee

9 October 2007

Report from the Director of Finance and Corporate Resources

For Information

Wards Affected:
ALL

Report Title: Revenues & Benefits Performance

1.0 Summary

- 1.1 This report provides an update on performance in relation to the Council Tax and Business Rate (NNDR) collection as at 31 Aug 2007.
- 1.2 The report also provides a summary of performance for the Benefits (Housing and Council Tax Benefit) Service as at 31 Aug 2007.

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to note Capita's Council Tax and NNDR collection performance against contractual targets for 2007/08 and the current forecast which indicates contractual targets for in year Council Tax collection will be exceeded but arrears targets for 2003 to 2006 are unlikely to be achieved.
- 2.2 Members are asked to note the Benefit Service's current and projected "3" score for the 2008 Comprehensive Assessment (CPA).
- 2.3 Members are asked to note the financial importance of achieving the LAA target for new applications in 2008/09 (24 days) and the potential future need to prioritise this area of work over others.

3.0 Detail – Revenues

Summary of General Position

- 3.1 Council Tax in year collection has begun well and is currently on course to exceed last year's collection performance. At 31 August 2007, in year collection had reached 49.31%, which is exceeding collection performance for the same time last year when 44.46% had been collected. Some of this increase relates to changes to Direct Debit instalment payments, which are now paid over 10 months compared to 12 months in 2006/07. Notwithstanding this, in year

collection is improving and likely to exceed the amounts collected in 2006/07 and this is very positive.

- 3.2 Business Rate collection has been slower to show improvement this year. At the end of August 2007, 49.01% was collected for NNDR due (excluding amounts due for Wembley National Stadium Ltd) in comparison to 50.21% at the same time in 2006. NNDR collection can be subject to fluctuations during the year, particularly when new properties are brought into rating. Collection will be monitored closely in future months to ensure that actions are taken to increase collection in the remaining months of the year to sustain improvement.
- 3.3 Post contract Council Tax arrears collection (for the years 2003/04 to 2005/06) has remained disappointing and is not forecast to achieve contractual targets. Performance for 2006/07 is however more encouraging and is currently forecast to reach the target set for March 2008.
- 3.4 Pre contract Council Tax arrears collection has also seen a drop in collection with £53,776 collected at the end of August 2007. This debt spans as far back as 1993 and is becoming increasingly difficult to collect over time. Further details are provided at paragraph 3.19.
- 3.5 IT performance has remained largely stable for the period April to August 2007.
- 3.6 **Council Tax Collection for 2007/08**
In 2007/08 Capita are contractually required to achieve an in year collection rate of 94% (including summons costs) by 31 March 2008. Given that this target was exceeded in 2006/07, Capita have set an internal target to achieve 94.5% for 2007/08.
- 3.7 In order to measure the progress of collection throughout the year a monthly profile of expected collection levels was drawn up by Capita at the beginning of the year. The profile for 2007/08 is shown in Table 1 and shows that by the end of August 2007, the collection profile was exceeded by 1.34%. Continued performance at this rate should see further improvements to collection compared to 2006/07 and a continuation of the year on year improvement trend.

Table 1: 2007/08 Actual collected as a % of debt, in comparison with Monthly Profile

	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Contract Target 2007/08	14.09	23.47	31.67	39.87	47.87	56.02	64.07	72.32	80.37	88.52	91.12	94.00
Aspiration 2007/08	14.09	23.47	31.67	39.87	47.97	56.17	64.37	72.57	80.67	88.87	91.52	94.50
2006/07 Actual	14.09	23.47	32.25	40.87	49.31							
Variance			0.58	1.0	1.34							

- 3.8 A revised recovery policy was implemented in 2006/07 which aimed to ensure that customers kept their in year payments up to date and gradually reduced any arrears due for previous years. Customers who have outstanding arrears owing for previous years, can find it difficult to meet both their in year liability and

arrangements for previous years. In such cases, we are allocating any payments received to in year debt first, to prevent new arrears arising and then seeking to agree affordable repayment arrangements for all arrears, so that these gradually reduce. This approach is supporting our aims to achieve continued improvements to in year collection and to reduce levels of Council arrears going forward. Where a customer has arrears spanning a number of years, these can be amalgamated into a single affordable arrangement, subject to the completion of a means enquiry form by the customer.

- 3.9 Table 2 below compares performance at the end of August 2007 with the same time in the previous 3 years. When comparing collection at the end of August 2007 with the end of August 2006 (Table 2), collection is 4.85% ahead in 2007. However, it should be noted that this is not a direct comparison as the reduction from 12 to 10 Direct Debit instalments has increased the amount of money to be collected between April and January when compared with the previous year. The implementation of the recovery policy outlined in 3.8, has also meant that payments are allocated to in year debt first.

Table 2: 2007/08 Collection as a % of Net Collectable Debt compared with 2006/07

Cumulative Collected – Council Tax												
	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	March
2004/05	13.77	22.01	29.9	37.42	44.79	52.66	60.15	67.59	74.92	81.53	87.3	93.41
2005/06	14.11	22.6	30.51	37.7	45.21	52.91	60.44	68.07	75.46	82.31	87.78	93.56
2006/07	13.51	21.85	29.52	37.05	44.46	52.09	59.68	67.39	74.67	82.05	88.01	94.3
Actual	14.09	23.47	32.25	40.87	49.31							
Comparison with 2006/07	0.58	1.62	2.73	3.82	4.85							

- 3.10 We continue to monitor levels of direct debit payers as these are cost effective and a guaranteed way of preventing arrears. Direct debit payees have increased from 33,511 at the end of April 2007 to 37,488 at the end of August 2007. This is a welcome increase of 3,977, and represents 48.14% of Council Tax payers (with an outstanding debt) the highest level ever achieved in Brent.
- 3.11 To provide some context to the percentage of Council Tax collection achieved, 1 % of the net debit represents £992,810. The total value of Council Tax to be collected for 2007/08 before any exemptions, discounts or benefits are awarded is £142.994M (gross debit) at the end of August 2007. After Council Tax Benefit, discounts and exemptions have been awarded this leaves a balance of £99.281M (net collectable debit) to be collected. At the end of August 2007, £48.954M had been collected, leaving a total of £50.113M outstanding.
- 3.12 Table 3 below shows the cumulative cash collected on a monthly basis for the in-year Council Tax debt from April 2006. This allows a comparison of the cash collected for the months of April to August 2007 in comparison with the same period in 2006. The table also provides details of the amount of cash collected in each month since April 2007 and how that amount equates to a percentage of the net collectable debit. This shows that an additional £7M has been collected in Council tax this year compared to the same period last year.

Table 3: Cash collected for 2007/08 Council Tax

Cash Collected £000's– Council Tax												
	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
2006/07 Cumulative	12,782	20,690	27,901	34,935	41,906	49,062	56,165	63,234	69,930	76,714	82,001	87,364
2007/08 Cumulative	13,999	23,287	32,023	40,604	48,954							
Monthly £	13,999	9,288	8,736	8,581	8,350							
% NCD	14.09	9.38	8.78	8.62	8.44							

3.13 Table 4 below provides details of Council Tax Benefit awarded and the percentage of the gross Council Tax debit that this represents. (The gross debit is the full amount of Council Tax before any exemptions, discounts or benefit has been awarded). When compared with 2006/07 this shows that there is a reduction in the percentage of Council Tax Benefit awarded. This reduction has probably arisen following the introduction of new benefit targets to identify reductions to levels of benefit (known as PM 10). These have required increased activity by the benefit service to identify changes in customer's circumstances that may reduce their level of entitlement.

Table 4: Council Tax Benefit Awarded for 2007/08 year

£ Benefit	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb
2006/07 % Gross*	19.26%	19.53%	19.71%	19.76%	19.79%	19.80%	19.761%	19.82%	19.83%	19.69%	19.41%
2007/08 Gross	142,540	142,585	142,721	142,927	142,994						
2007/08 £000	£27,404	£27,286	£27,085	£27,071	£27,049						
% Gross*	19.23%	19.14%	18.98%	18.94%	18.92%						

3.14 Table 5 below shows the total cash and council tax benefit collected at the end of each month for the 2007/08 year in comparison with previous three years.

Table 5: Comparison of Accumulative Cash and Council Tax Benefit

£ 000	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb
2004/05	33,585	41,389	48,540	55,230	61,729	68,586	74,998	81,353	87,511	93,114	97,784
2005/06	36,861	44,736	52,523	59,029	65,805	72,567	79,239	85,974	92,482	98,442	103,113
2006/07	38,694	46,979	54,439	61,559	68,587	75,764	82,843	90,024	96,741	103,347	108,074
2007/08	41,403	50,573	59,108	67,675	76,003						

3.15 Council Tax Collection for previous years

2006/07 Collection

At the end of August 2007, a collection rate of 95.01% had been achieved for arrears relating to 2006/07. Should collection continue at this rate for the remainder of the year, it is likely the target of 96.25% will be achieved at the end of March 2008.

Table 6 shows the cumulative and monthly performance in collection of outstanding 2005/06 debt for each month in 2007/08

Table 6: Collection for 2006/07 Arrears in 2007/08.

	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb
2007/08 %	93.89	94.11	94.43	94.79	95.01						
2007/08 £	87,030	87,086	87,268	87,530	87,673						
Monthly %		0.22	0.32	0.36	0.22						

3.16 2005/06 Collection

At the end of August 2007, a collection rate of 95.55% had been achieved for 2005/06 debt. Performance so far indicates that the target of 96.5% will not be achieved by 31 March 2008. Current indications are that a collection rate of 96% will be achieved by March 2008; this would close the gap on the shortfall at the end of 2006/07 by 0.3%, but would be insufficient to meet the contractual target of 96.5%.

Table 7 shows the cumulative and monthly performance in collection of outstanding 2005/06 debt for each month in 2007/08.

Table 7: Collection for 2005/06 Arrears in 2007/08.

	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb
2007/08 %	95.27	95.34	95.4	95.49	95.55						
2007/08 £	83,222	83,263	83,316	83,375	83,418						
Monthly %		.07	.06	.09	.06						

3.17 2004/05 Collection

The 2007/08 contractual target for collection of 2004/05 debt is 97%. Collection at the end of August 2007 was 95.94% which means that only 0.21% has been collected since 1 April 2007. This leaves 1.06% to be collected by 31 March 2007 to achieve the 97% target. It is highly unlikely that this target will be achieved with existing levels of collection. Current estimates indicate a shortfall of 0.76% against the target at the end of March 2007.

Table 8 shows the cumulative and monthly performance in collection of outstanding 2004/05 debt for each month in 2007/08.

Table 8: Collection for 2004/05 Arrears in 2007/08

	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb
2007/08 %	95.78	95.81	95.86	95.91	95.94						
2007/08 £	80,090	80,111	80,144	80,179	80,202						
Monthly %	0.05	0.03	0.05	0.05	0.03						

3.18 2003/04 Collection

Capita have continued to experience difficulties in recovering 2003/04 debt with only £72,000 (0.16%) collected since the beginning of April 2007.

Table 9 shows the cumulative month-by-month performance in 2007/08 for the outstanding 2003/04 debt, giving details of the percentage and money collected for each month. The contractual target for collection of 2003/04 debt by the end of 2007/08 is 97%. It is highly unlikely that the collection target of 97% will be

achieved by March 2008. Indications are that a collection rate of 95.3% will be achieved by March 2008, a shortfall of 1.7%.

Table 9: Collection for 2003/04 Arrears 2007/08

	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb
2007/08%	94.98	95	95.04	95.06	95.09						
2007/08£	74,232	74,247	74,272	74,289	74,304						
Monthly%	0.05	.02	.04	.02	.03						

3.19 Pre Contract Arrears Collection

Since the commencement of the contract, Capita have collected £5.494M in pre contract Council tax arrears. This relates to all arrears outstanding from April 1993 to March 2003, and a total debt value of £18.925M as at 1 April 2007. An incentive is obtained each year for collection exceeding a cumulative collection figure. £53,776 has been collected in this year to 31 August. This reduction is partly attributable to a number of band reductions that have been granted by the Valuation Office as far back as April 1993 and thus resulting in Council Tax refunds, reductions to benefit entitlement or cash movements between liability years. Between 1 April 2007 and 31 August 2007, 37 band reductions, with a total value of £42,943 for the period April 1993 to March 2003 were received from the Valuation Office in comparison to 5 reductions received between April 2006 and March 2007.

3.20 NNDR Performance

2007/08 Collection

- 3.21 At the end of April 2007 the value of NNDR to be collected for the 2007/08 year before any discounts or empty relief was awarded on accounts was £92.903M, this has since increased by £5.29M to £98.1830M. This increase is mainly related to the Wembley National Stadium which was formally rated for Business Rates after April 2007.
- 3.22 The NNDR in-year collection rate at the end of August 2007 was 47.87% which is 2.34% below the monthly profile set by Capita in April. The charge for Wembley Stadium was raised in June 2007 with a bill of £4.562M for the 2007/08 year. The first instalment was not due until July 2007 so this has affected the performance against the profile, if Wembley National Stadium is removed from the calculation, the shortfall is 1.2% against the profile. All payments due for Wembley have been received at the time of writing.
- 3.23 Table 10 outlines the collection performance and compares it with the previous year and the profiled targets set to achieve 98.66%. Collection has shown a month on month improvement from June and indications are that the target of 98.6% will be achieved in March 2008. Monthly collection in August 07 was 10.18% compared to 9.47% in August 2006.

Table 10: %NNDR collection 2007/08

% Collection Cumulative	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
2005/2006	10.57	19.75	28.99	40.08	49.61	59.56	68.94	78.99	88.56	96.39	97.06	98.29
2006/2007	9.64	19.72	30.69	40.74	50.21	59.82	69.47	78.54	87.73	96.9	98.3	98.66
2007/08 Profile	9.64	19.72	30.69	40.74	50.21	59.82	69.47	78.54	87.73	96.9	98.3	98.66
2007/08 Actual	9.46	19.09	27.75	37.69	47.87							
Variance on last year	-0.18	-0.63	-2.94	-3.05	-2.34							
2007/08 Adj Wembley	9.46	19.09	27.75	39.07	49.01							
Variance adj Wembley	-0.18	-0.63	-2.94	-1.67	-1.2							
% Month on month		9.45	8.66	9.94	10.18							

3.24 Details of cumulative cash collected for NNDR in 2007/08 compared with 2006/07 is contained in Table 11 below.

Table 11:£000 NNDR collection

£ NNDR	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
2006/2007	7,269	14,758	22,835	30,276	37,321	44,451	51,471	58,344	65,362	72,131	73,626	
2007/2008	7,396	14,957	22,787	30,882	39,050							

3.25 Although 98.66% is the target for 2007/08, the financial deduction and incentive scheme is based on collection compared to payments that have to be paid into the National Pool. This increases Capita's motivation to exceed the targets set, whilst ensuring that incentives are firmly based on speed of collection.

3.26 From 1 April 2008, empty business properties will no longer receive relief (exemption or part exemption) from payments due. These reliefs were introduced in the 1980's and as a result some properties attracted between 50% and 100% (for owners of empty industrial properties) relief from Business Rates for a significant amount of time. The removal of this relief in April 2008 could affect just over 1,400 properties and will result in a further £9.9m NNDR to be collected. Capita have arranged for mailshots to be sent to the last known owner of these properties to ensure that they are made aware of the change to empty rate exemptions and to ensure that we hold correct and up to date details of the present owner. It is likely that this increase in NNDR will have some impact on the collection rates for the 2008/09 year.

Improvement Plan

3.27 Our overall strategy since 2006/07 has been to refine recovery processes so that those charge payers who are genuinely having difficulty paying are given the opportunity to agree realistic repayments and those who are wilful non payers are dealt with robustly. Recovery policies have been amended to allow greater discretion in consolidating arrears payments and repayment timescales for those in financial hardship. This has been balanced with tough action against those who won't pay, including suspended prison sentences, bankruptcy, charging orders on properties and removal of goods, including cars. This

strategy has been supported by the implementation of the Anti Poverty Policy for Revenues and Benefits and the Welfare Benefit Take Up Campaign that was successfully run in early 2007 and will commence again in September.

The following paragraphs provide more detail of our activities.

Bailiff

- 3.28 The turn around time for debts held by the bailiff without any payment arrangement has been reduced from 6 to 4 months. In practise this means that bailiffs will return liability orders to Capita within 4 months, if they have been unable to secure payment or an arrangement. This will enable other methods of recovery to be considered and implemented at an earlier stage. Monitoring will also be undertaken to ensure that where appropriate, cases with the bailiff are under a consolidated payment arrangement for debts in line with the amended recovery policy.
- 3.29 A demonstration was recently received from the bailiffs of their vehicle number plate recognition vans. The technology contained in these vans allow the bailiffs, while driving, to identify vehicles owned by those who have a debt with the bailiff (e.g. Council Tax or Parking), and thus allowing for much improved tracing of recoverable assets from those who owe Council Tax both within and outside Brent. The vans are not currently in use in Brent but are being considered.

Bankruptcy

- 3.30 The number of cases being progressed to bankruptcy for non payment of Council Tax has also been increased. To date, 31 Council Tax debtors have been made bankrupt. 42 statutory demands are awaiting service and a further 334 are in progress. Statutory demands are a pre-requisite to bankruptcy proceedings.

Charging Orders

- 3.31 27 charging orders have also been obtained for properties, with 3 orders of sale in progress and 2 orders of sale where the debt due has been fully paid. A further 67 charging orders are in progress.

Attachment of earnings

- 3.32 The number of Attachment of Earnings will continue to increase in 2007/08 and where a payer defaults on an arrangement and employer details are available this will be the preferred method of collection. An attachment of earnings means that we can require the employer to take deductions from the employee's pay to meet any Council Tax owed. An additional 174 Attachments of Earnings have been set up since the beginning of April 2007 bringing the total number of Attachments of Earnings that are currently active to 561.

Benefit Take Up

- 3.33 Following the success of the benefit take up campaign for pensioners completed in March 2007, we will be undertaking further campaigns in 2007/08 commencing in September 2007. Plans include a further campaign targeted at pensioners and a pilot campaign to target customers in Council tax arrears.

Publicity

- 3.34 We continue to utilise publicity campaigns to raise awareness of the need to pay Council Tax promptly. During July and August a number of tube stations in the

borough displayed posters outlining the actions the Council is willing to take against non payers in order to improve collection, including bailiffs and taking possession of properties. Publicity is also used to promote direct debit as a payment method. We plan to undertake another campaign in tube stations again later in the year along with items in the Brent Magazine. In order to ensure that we can get information in the local papers whenever possible we also make sure that any news relating to actions taken to recover Council Tax is contained in press releases.

Capita IT Provision against contractual requirements

- 3.35 The provision of IT has been good for the year 2007/08 with no significant impact on service availability.

From April 2007 “e-billing” has been offered to all Council Tax payers whose payment method is Direct Debit. This will allow those customers who request it to receive all future bills via email if they pay their instalments by Direct Debit. This method of billing for NNDR customers will be introduced from April 2008.

Offshore Working

- 3.36 From September 4th 2007 Capita Offshore - have begun to process some of the Council Tax work for Brent from India. This has resulted in contract savings equating to £40,000 per annum, without any reduction in staff within the Brent offices. The service has been successfully implemented with more clerical tasks now being undertaken outside of Brent, allowing those sited in Brent and Bromley more able to focus on recovering outstanding debt.

4.0 Council Tax complaints

The Tables below show recent performance in responding to Council Tax complaints received.

- 4.1 Work continues with Capita to identify ways of improving the escalation rates of Council Tax complaints from Stage 1 to Stage 2. Stage 1 complaints are currently responded to by Capita, with Stage 2 responded to by the Revenues and Benefits complaints team and Stage 3 and Ombudsman complaints by the corporate complaints team. Table 12 below provides details of the number of Council Tax complaints received at each Stage of the complaints process, the % responded to within the timescales of 15 days for Stage 1 and 20 days for Stage 2.

Table 12: Complaints performance
Council Tax Complaints

Received		Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb
Stage 1		29	27	25	33	32						
Stage 2		4	7	1	5	6						
Stage 3		0	1	3	2	2						
Ombudsman		1	3	0	0	1						
Total		34	38	29	40	41						
Response on Time												
Stage 1		93.18%	96.40%	97.00%	100.00%	100.00%						
Stage 2		67.00%	72.70%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%						
Upheld												
Stage 1		23.00%	36.00%	48.00%	33.33%	42.80%						
Stage 2		33.00%	45.00%	50.00%	66.67%	66.67%						
Stage 3		100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	0.00%						

Includes partially upheld complaints

5.0 Housing Benefits Performance and Service Update

5.1 Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) and Key Performance Measures (PM's)

Tables 13 and 14 below show CPA performance for the month of August and Year to Date (YTD) (to 31.08.07). August's performance was particularly strong showing an overall score of 3.36 (the range for a CPA 3 being 2.51 – 3.5) with best-ever monthly scores for New Claims (28.68 days) and Changes in Circumstances (7.13 days) (both reaching a 4 score).

Year to date (YTD) performance for these two measures show 30.10 days and 9.68 days respectively – both marginally a 3 score and the overall YTD score is accordingly 3.08. It is expected that the New Claims score in particular will achieve a 4 for the year.

Table 13.. : CPA August score

Table 1: Comprehensive Performance Assessment - August 07

Claims Administration- 50%		Grade Ranges				Scores			
Performance Measure	Weight	1	2	3	4	Result	Grade	Grade * Weight	
PM1 - New Claims	15	>48	48-37	36-30	<30	28.68	4	60	
PM2 - New Claims over 50 days	7	>26	26-17	16-9	<9	3.36	4	28	
PM3 - New claims 14 days of last info	5	<73	73-82	83-90	>90	90.79	4	20	
PM4 - RA paid 7 days of decision	5	<73	73-82	83-90	>90	90.10	3	15	
PM5 - CIC's	12	>28	21-28	20-9	<10	7.13	4	48	
PM6 - Accuracy	6	<96	96-97	98-99	>99	98.40	3	18	
Total	50								189
Score									3.78

Overpayments PM's 7, 8 & 9 not scored

Security-35%		Grade Ranges				Scores			
Performance Measure	Weight	1	2	3	4	Result	Grade	Grade * Weight	
PM10 - Interventions	15	<22521	22521 - 25616	25617 - 28150	>28150	26209	3	45	
PM11 - Data Matches	12	<81	81-90	91-99	100	100	4	48	
PM16 - Successful prosecutions per 1000	8	<1.2	1.2 - 2.8	2.9 - 4.2	>4.2	2.40	2	16	
Total	35								109
Score									3.11

Counter-fraud PM's 13,14, 15 & 16 not scored

Use Focus (Appeals)- 15%		Grade Ranges				Scores			
Performance Measure	Weight	1	2	3	4	Result	Grade	Grade * Weight	
PM17 - Revision 4 weeks	4	<50	50-59	60-65	>65	83.64	4	16	
PM18 - TAS 4 weeks	7	<50	50-59	60-65	>65	50.00	2	14	
PM19 - TAS 3 months	4	<85	85-89	90-95	>95	85.50	2	8	
Total	15								38
Score									2.53

Total Performance Measure Score	3.36
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Table 14 : CPA YTD score

Table 2: Comprehensive Performance Assessment - Quarter 1 2007/8

Claims Administration-50%		Grade Ranges				Scores			
Performance Measure	Weight	1	2	3	4	Result	Grade	Grade * Weight	
PM1 - New Claims	15	>48	48-37	36-30	<30	30.10	3	45	
PM2 - New Claims over 50 days	7	>26	26-17	16-9	<9	3.36	4	28	
PM3 - New claims 14 days of last info	5	<73	73-82	83-90	>90	90.79	4	20	
PM4 - RA paid 7 days of decision	5	<73	73-82	83-90	>90	90.79	3	15	
PM5 - CIC's	12	>28	21-28	20-9	<9	9.68	3	36	
PM6 - Accuracy	6	<96	96-97	98-99	>99	98.40	3	18	
Total	50								162
Score								3.24	

Overpayments PM's 7, 8 & 9 not scored

Security-35%		Grade Ranges				Scores			
Performance Measure	Weight	1	2	3	4	Result	Grade	Grade * Weight	
PM10 - Interventions	15	<22521	22521 - 25616	25617 - 28150	>28150	26209	3	45	
PM11 - Data Matches	12	<81	81-90	91-99	100	100	4	48	
PM16 - Successful prosecutions per 1000	8	<1.2	1.2 - 2.8	2.9 - 4.2	>4.2	2.4	2	16	
Total	35								109
Score								3.11	

Counter-fraud PM's 13,14, 15 & 16 not scored

Use Focus (Appeals)-15%		Grade Ranges				Scores			
Performance Measure	Weight	1	2	3	4	Result	Grade	Grade * Weight	
PM17 - Revision 4 weeks	4	<50	50-59	60-65	>65	56.82	2	8	
PM18 - TAS 4 weeks	7	<50	50-59	60-65	>65	63.64	3	21	
PM19 - TAS 3 months	4	<85	85-89	90-95	>95	87.88	2	8	
Total	15								37
Score								2.47	

Total Performance Measure Score	3.08
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5.2 Performance against the new PM10 measure (number of reductions in benefit identified and calculated) continues to be as forecast (CPA 3 score), based on latest data confirmed by the DWP (up to 18.08.07).

Table 15 - PM10 reductions

Date of DWP data extract	No. of weeks	Reductions	% of DWP target (ie to achieve CPA 4)
07/05/07	5	2806	10%
28/05/07	3	1277	5%
23/06/07	4	3221	11%
21/07/07	4	2178	8%
18/08/07	4	1923	7%
Total to date	20	11405	41%
Projection for year	52	26256 (CPA 3)	93%

- 5.3 Brent's performance for PM10 in the year to date is the second highest in London with 41% of the annual target achieved. Harrow have achieved 42% of their target however their data extracts cover a slightly longer period.
- 5.4 The benefit reductions identified in June included an exercise to ensure that Council Tax single person discounts were awarded to all single people on benefits. Once a discount has been awarded, any entitlement to Council Tax benefit is concurrently reduced to reflect the amended liability. The PM10 projection for the year treats this as a one-off exercise.
- 5.5 Current performance is being achieved in the main by pro-active issuing of postal review forms. These require customers to confirm any changes to their circumstances experienced since claiming and typically 27% of customers report a changes that reduces their benefit entitlement. A further 20% identify an *increase* in entitlement while 53% of cases reviewed are established as already receiving the correct entitlement. This is quite resource intensive with 11,000 review forms already issued this year to end of August, and the Service is considering ways of improving the targeting of reviews..
- 5.6 It should also be noted that postal reviews are sent out on a risk basis to those customers most likely to have changes in their entitlement. There is therefore a likelihood that as the year progresses the return on these reviews will reduce.
- 5.7 Performance for reconsiderations (or internal appeals: PM17) was hampered throughout last year by backlog clearance, and is still the lowest priority Benefits area this year. Performance is forecast at CPA 2 (50-59% processed within four weeks). However due to ongoing improvements in clearing backlog (see age profile later) and processing the majority of work as it arrives, we have seen a steady improvement in PM17 throughout the year (from 28% in April) and achieved 83.6% (CPA 4) in August. Year to date performance has accordingly

increased to 56.82%, and continued performance at this level should enable this measure to exceed its forecast.

- 5.8 Since the clearing of a backlog last year of Appeals (or Tribunal requests), performance has suffered slightly this year due to the processing of a small number of appeals outside target. The impact of these is exacerbated by the relatively small numbers of cases involved in Tribunals and the small margins between different CPA scores.
- 5.9 In total eight cases were submitted to The Tribunal Service in August of which four were over 4 weeks old (one of these being over three months old). This has reduced performance against PM18 (submission within 4 weeks) to a CPA 3 (marginally) and PM19 (submission within 3 months) to a CPA 2 (again marginally) against targets of 4 and 3 respectively.
- 5.10 Work is being undertaken to identify reasons for the cases being delayed in reaching the Complaints and Tribunals Team, to avoid even these small numbers of cases being submitted outside targets. A table showing appeals performance is shown below.
- 5.11 Note that CPA results on the above tables which are not in bold, are quarterly figures represented by the performance at the end of Quarter 1.

5.12 Complaints & Appeals summary

Performance for August and year-to-date is summarised below.

Table 16 Complaints & Appeals summary

	Target	August Performance	Year to date performance
% of Stage 1 benefits complaints responded to on time	85% on time against 15 working days target	96.77%	94.80%
% of Stage 2 Revenue and Benefits complaints responded to on time	75% on time against 20 working days target	100%	88.06%
% of appeals sent to The Appeals Service (TAS) within 4 weeks of receipt (PM18)	65% on time	50%	63.64%
% of appeals sent to The Appeals Service (TAS) within 3 months of receipt (PM19)	90% on time	88%	87.88%
% escalation rate from Stage 1 to Stage 2 Revenue and Benefits complaints	20% or below	19.05%	18.87%

5.13 Complaints performance for August was well above target and year-to-date performance is on track to exceed targets. Outstanding work has been kept to a minimum despite the holiday period and a long-term absentee. One Stage 1 Officer has recently been seconded to another position within the Unit and recruitment has taken place for a secondee to replace him for the next six months.

5.14 Age profile of outstanding work

The table below illustrates the age profile of outstanding work items awaiting officer action as at 03.09.07. (Diarised items pending further information from customers are excluded.) Notwithstanding some fluctuation during the month, the good position from August has been maintained, despite the continued high level of postal review activity, the holiday period and two staff resignations (see later). There were also some performance issues from one of our IT systems, which have now been resolved.

5.15 It can be seen from the table that over 93% of work is now less than one month old. This compares to 66% as at the start of July. The total outstanding work should be seen in the context of an incoming workload of approximately 3500 items per week.

The exercise to clear 751 outstanding items in the Overpayments work queue has been successfully completed (24 items left at 03.09.07 which have now been cleared).

Table 17 : Age profile

Work Age Profile

Number of work items outstanding at 03 September 2007 by target date (excludes pending items)

Month when work item due (usually 3 days after receipt)	New claims	CIC	Interventions	Other assessment work	Comp'ts	O/P	Total work	%	Total at 01 August 07	% of grand total	Total at 01 July 07	% of grand total
Dec-05							0	0.00%	0	0.00%	6	0.18%
Jan-06							0	0.00%	0	0.00%	1	0.03%
Feb-06							0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Mar-06							0	0.00%	0	0.00%	2	0.06%
Apr-06							0	0.00%	0	0.00%	2	0.06%
May-06						1	1	0.04%	1	0.04%	4	0.12%
Jun-06							0	0.00%	1	0.04%	14	0.43%
Jul-06							0	0.00%	1	0.04%	15	0.46%
Aug-06						2	2	0.08%	2	0.08%	12	0.37%
Sep-06							0	0.00%	0	0.00%	24	0.74%
Oct-06							0	0.00%	1	0.04%	16	0.49%
Nov-06						2	2	0.08%	2	0.08%	25	0.77%
Dec-06							0	0.00%	2	0.08%	16	0.49%
Jan-07						2	2	0.08%	3	0.11%	31	0.96%
Feb-07						3	3	0.11%	8	0.31%	82	2.53%
Mar-07		1				2	3	0.11%	8	0.31%	125	3.85%
Apr-07		2				1	3	0.11%	6	0.23%	84	2.59%
May-07		3				1	4	0.15%	25	0.95%	643	19.82%
Jun-07	3	8	1	3			15	0.57%	100	3.81%	1042	32.12%
Jul-07	10	63	53	5		5	136	5.14%	906	34.55%	1105	34.06%
Aug-07	72	812	361	58	1	2	1306	49.36%	1556	59.34%		
Sep-07	165	495	360	165	1	3	1189	44.94%				
Grand Total	250	1384	775	231	2	24	2666		2622		3249	
Total at 01 August for comparison	193	1423	624	324	5	53	2622					
Total at 01 July	238	1516	542	551	17	385	3249					

5.16 Staffing / Recruitment

We have had seven new trainees starting with us in September after our recent recruitment exercise. The trainees will undergo our standard 14-week induction training and move onto the assessment teams in late December. They are showing good progress so far.

- 5.17 We have had two permanent staff (1.58 FTE) leave during August and one due to leave in September – the first turnover in the Assessment Section this year. One person left due to retirement and the others to take up positions in other boroughs (in related fields but with some differing duties). We have also reduced two of our agency staff in line with our objective of further reducing reliance on agency resources. A more detailed update on staffing will be provided in the January 2008 report to the Performance and Finance Select Committee.
- 5.18 As mentioned in the previous report, the Service was successful in two bids to the Chief Executive's Performance Fund, to fund new projects relating to Benefit Take-up and Front-line processing. Two project officers have now been seconded to these projects from 17th September. Progress on both projects will be reported to Members in January.
- 5.19 Having introduced Benefits IRRV qualifications opportunities to staff last year, several more staff are undertaking study this year; three managers are undertaking professional management qualifications and three more staff undertaking the IRRV Certificate (formerly Technician) examinations.

5.20 Local Housing Allowance

As mentioned in the previous report, a project has begun for the introduction of Housing Allowance (LHA) next April. Publicity is being planned, and there is ongoing work to encourage customers to open bank accounts to enable benefit payments to be made directly to themselves via Bacs, rather than to their landlord. A safeguards policy is being developed to ensure that vulnerable customers who cannot manage their own affairs can still get their rent paid to their landlord, and the Service will be consulting with landlords and other stakeholders on this policy before Christmas.

- 5.21 Key to the levels of LHA which will be set is the division of Local Authorities into Broad Rental Market Areas (BRMA's), which will replace the localities used currently in Rent Officer determinations. The Rent Service recently advised of two proposed BRMA's for Brent, which would involve the majority of the borough falling into a BRMA with the whole of Harrow and the northern half of Hillingdon, with Kilburn being included in an Inner London BRMA also containing Camden and Islington. (Currently the borough has three localities, reflecting the North, South and Kilburn.) There are potentially serious implications in the proposed approach both for tenants in the south of the borough whose rents may be restricted, and for the Housing Department in procuring properties for temporary accommodation.

5.22 Representations have been made by the Benefits Service and Housing & Community Care Department for the boundaries of the new BRMA's to be redrawn to reflect the clear North / South split in the borough. Brent is also leading on representation to the DWP on behalf of the West London authorities.

5.23 A full update on LHA will be provided in the January Committee report; however a short briefing note is attached to this report as Appendix A.

5.24 Overpayments

The following table shows overpayment recovery against profile and the previous year's performance.

Table 18 : Overpayments Recovery

	This Month	Last Month	Last Year	+ / - last year
<u>Recovery</u>	£1,878,829		£1,574,892	£303,937
Profile for £4M	£1,668,562			
Profile Variance	£210,267			
In Month	£321,584	£449,201	£380,578	
<u>Composite</u>				
YTD	£149,785		£184,239	-£34,454
In Month	£18,958	£44,728	£32,554	
<u>Cash</u>				
YTD	£942,874		£654,480	£288,394
In Month	£209,975	£172,427	£160,000	
<u>Ongoing HB</u>				
YTD	£786,169		£736,174	£49,995
In Month	£92,650	£232,047	£187,994	



5.25 Composite recovery is down on last year's levels as it is a recovery against landlords and landlord debt is both under control and at much decreased levels as each year goes by. Composite recovery only represented around 9% of our revenue last year to put this in some context.

5.26 Current performance remains ahead of last year by 19.3%, with cash receipts being £288,394 ahead of last year.

5.27 We are continuing with our strategy of focusing on large fraudulent debts where the debtor has assets. We continue to liaise with the Audit & Investigation Section (A & I) regarding information on cases they have investigated and accelerate them through the recovery process. We are in various stages of the charging order or possession proceedings in cases worth £181,000 with half those cases about to go to Order For Sale stage.

5.28 Anti-poverty strategy

The anti-poverty strategy has now been fundamentally reviewed and amended in consultation with both internal and external stakeholders. The revised strategy sets out clearer definitions of potentially vulnerable customers and the actions that will be taken to ensure that they can make successful claims to benefits and keep their claim in payment. It also sets out new arrangements for customers experiencing financial difficulties in paying Council tax or Housing Benefit overpayments. These include benefit take up campaigns, extended payment arrangements and consolidation of debts to facilitate one affordable payment arrangement. A high level Executive Summary is attached as Appendix B for information. The full strategy will be sent to all members of the Performance and Finance Select Committee as well as stakeholders and staff. The strategy will be reviewed on an annual basis.

6.00 Customer Service Update

6.1 The One Stop Service (OSS) provides customer services for Revenues and Benefits dealing with face to face and telephone enquiries.

6.2 The counter or face to face service is provided from the four OSS locations with Brent House local office being the busiest. The Telephone and On-line Centre has two dedicated telephone lines, one for Benefit enquiries and one for Council Tax enquiries.

6.3 Table 19 provides details of the number of customers who visited the Brent House location from April to August 2007; this includes Revenues and Benefits enquires. It also contains details of the Council Tax enquiries dealt with over the telephone.

6.4 In the year to date, the Brent House counters have handled 26594 enquiries. On average 78.6% % of customers were seen within 30 minutes. In August itself 5642 were seen; 94 % within 30 minutes.

6.5 In the year to date the Contact Centre answered a total of 106,678 out of 118,018 telephone calls presented. In August 21,158 were answered out of 22,914 presented, with 61 % of Benefit calls and 61.9% of Council Tax calls answered within 15 seconds. Levels of abandoned calls reduced in August both in terms of the percentage of all call presented and also the numbers of calls presented.

Table 19: Customer Services

Counter

Counter - Percentage of customers seen in 30 minutes												
	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Total seen	4396	5220	5449	5587	5642							
Number seen within 30 minutes	3589	3884	3498	4404	5330							
% seen in 30 minutes	82%	74.0%	64.0%	79.0%	94.0%							

Counter - Average wait time (in minutes)												
	Apr											
Average wait time (mins)	23	29	32	21	13							

Call Centre

Call Centre (Benefits Line)												
	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Calls presented	8572	9352	9619	10246	9706							
Answered	8078	8445	8576	9030	8869							
Abandoned	469	859	1043	1127	786							
Engaged	236	893	807	834	1126							
% of calls answered in 15 seconds	72.0%	58.6%	52.3%	53.0%	61%							
% of calls answered in 5 minutes	91.0%	91.0%	85.0%	83%	88.0%							
% abandoned	5.5%	8.9%	10.9%	11.1%	8.1%							
Average time to answer (secs)	36	63	63	69	53							
Average call duration (secs)	287	293	310	293	279							

Call Centre (Council Tax Line)												
	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Calls presented	13292	13227	15686	15202	13208							
Answered	12488	11821	14101	13281	12289							
Abandoned	785	1313	1518	1824	883							
Engaged	359	884	744	1992	1033							
% of calls answered in 15 seconds	71.0%	54.0%	53.9%	48.0%	61.9%							
% of calls answered in 5 minutes	92.0%	92.0%	83.4%	82.0%	90.4%							
% abandoned	5.9%	9.6%	9.6%	12.1%	6.7%							
Average time to answer (secs)		69	57	76	47							
Average call duration (secs)		262	297	299	280							

7.0 Financial Implications

- 7.1 Any failure to maximise collection of Council Tax and NNDR will impact on the Council's cash flow and budgetary provision for current and future years.

8.0 Legal Implications

- 8.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

9.0 Diversity Implications

- 9.1 There are no direct diversity implications arising from this report.

10.0 Staffing/Accommodation Implications (if appropriate)

- 10.1 There are no direct staffing implications arising from this report.

Background Papers

Contact Officers

Margaret Read - Head of Revenues and Benefits

Paula Buckley - Head of Client

David Oates – Head of Benefits

Local Housing Allowance

The Department for Work and Pensions is changing the rules for calculating housing benefit for new claims from private tenants made after 7th April 2008. The new scheme is called Local Housing Allowance.

What is Local Housing Allowance?

Local Housing Allowance (LHA) is a new way of working out Housing Benefit for tenants who pay rent to a private landlord. LHA is a flat rate allowance towards rent costs based on the area where the tenant lives and the size of their family. This avoids the need for The Rent Service to examine every property and decide on the level of rent that is eligible for Housing Benefit in each case. Payment of benefit under the LHA rules will normally be to the tenant, who will then pay the landlord.

Since November 2003, LHA has been trialled in 18 Local Authorities, including the London Boroughs of Lewisham and Wandsworth. As a result of these pilot schemes, the Government has made some changes to the national version of LHA, which will be introduced in all local authorities from April 2008.

Who will be affected by the Local Housing Allowance?

LHA will be used to work out Housing Benefit for all new claims received on or after 7th April 2008, except for the cases listed below. LHA will also apply to claimants already in receipt of Housing Benefit if they move home after 7th April 2008 and claim benefit at their new address.

LHA will not apply to tenants who:

- ◆ Pay rent to the council
- ◆ Pay rent to a registered social landlord (e.g. housing associations)
- ◆ Pay a rent that has been registered as a 'fair rent'
- ◆ Have a tenancy that is excluded from the current housing benefit rent restrictions (such as pre-1989 tenancies)
- ◆ Have a tenancy where The Rent Service decides that a substantial part of the rent is for board and attendance, such as hotel accommodation
- ◆ Live in a hostel, caravan, mobile home or houseboat.

How are the LHA rates worked out?

Each local authority will be divided into areas called Broad Rental Market Areas (BRMAs). The Rent Service will set monthly LHA rates for different size properties in each of these areas. These will be published by the Council and The Rent Service so that landlords and prospective LHA customers can find out the maximum amount of rent that will be used to calculate Housing Benefit. People looking for accommodation will be able to see the LHA rate that will apply to them, before deciding whether to rent a property.

The amount of LHA that a tenant may receive for depends on:

- The area they live in – this will establish the BRMA they fall under
- Who lives with them – this will determine the size of property they are allowed.

Property size

When deciding the correct property size, the Claimant is allowed one bedroom for:

- A single Claimant
- every adult couple (married or unmarried)
- any other adult aged 16 or over
- any two children under age 10
- any two children of the same sex aged up to 15
- any other child.

Claimants aged under 25 years who live alone

Single claimants aged under 25 years will be entitled to the standard rate for a room in shared accommodation. This will be based on properties where the tenant has a room of their own but shares all or some of the facilities (for example, a living room, kitchen or bathroom). This is known as the shared Local Housing Allowance rate.

How much Local Housing Allowance will a tenant get?

The claim is based on the LHA rate applicable for the month the benefit claim is made. The amount of benefit they get will depend on their income, savings and circumstances. There is no change to the benefit entitlement rules. In some cases the LHA rate may be higher than the actual rent the customer pays. The maximum excess amount has been limited to no more than £15 a week above the actual rent.

If a tenant decides to move into a property with a rent that exceeds their LHA, they will need, as they do now, to make up the difference themselves. But if their rent is below their allowance and they are entitled to maximum Housing Benefit, they will be able to keep any difference of up to £15 a week more than their actual rent.

How does the Local Housing Allowance affect landlords?

As well as the amount of Housing Benefit that can be paid, the main change for landlords is that LHA will usually be paid to the tenant. The tenant will then be responsible for paying their rent to the landlord. It will no longer be possible to make direct payments to the landlord just for the tenant's convenience.

Safeguards

Safeguards will be put in place to protect tenants that may struggle with the

Responsibility of paying their rent. Brent Council will have the authority to make payment direct to a landlord where evidence is provided to support this course of action.

For example, some of the circumstances where the local authority may decide to pay Housing Benefit direct to a landlord are;

- ◆ if they consider that the tenant is likely to have difficulty managing their own affairs. Examples of this could include vulnerable tenants, such as those with disabilities.
- ◆ if they think the tenant is unlikely to use their Housing Benefit to pay their rent. This could be if the council knows the tenant has consistently failed to pay their rent in the past.
- ◆ if the tenant has built up rent arrears of more than eight weeks, the council may decide to make payments direct to the landlord.

What will happen next?

The legislation allowing for the national roll-out of the Local Housing Allowance has just received final approval. All local authorities, including the London Borough of Brent are now starting to prepare for the implementation of LHA. As this work progresses further details and information will be sent out to housing benefit customers, landlords and other stakeholders.

Further information

In Brent, LHA implementation is being dealt with by a project team of Officers from the Policy and Training Team. They are Jon Zlotnick, Jenny Franklin, Bhavna Pattni and Leigh Neville and can be contacted on 020 8937 1685 or by email at lha@brent.gov.uk

Other sources of information can be found at www.dwp.gov.uk and www.therentservice.gov.uk.

LHA Project Team
September 2007

Appendix B

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Revenue and Benefits Anti-Poverty Strategy

Foreword and Aim

The Revenue and Benefits service is responsible for collecting Council Tax from 104,000 households living in Brent and administering financial help with Council Tax and rent payments to some of the most vulnerable members of the Brent Community (there are currently 33,000 people in receipt of Housing/Council Tax Benefit).

We recognise that although there are pockets of affluence within Brent, on the whole there are large areas of deprivation and poverty. Brent is the 81st most deprived borough (out of 410) in England and Wales. Brent also has a richly diverse community, with a majority Black Minority Ethnic population. This diversity needs to be reflected in the design and delivery of the Revenue and Benefits service to ensure that it can effectively serve the community in Brent.

Balanced against this, we recognise that income from Council Tax and Business Rates represents a significant proportion of the council's overall revenue requirements. This means that we need to maximise the collection of these taxes to help fund the provision of vital services to those living and working in Brent. We aim to carry out these responsibilities sensitively and fairly and to ensure that in doing so, our policies take account of the differing circumstances of our community.

We know that effective administration of Housing and Council Tax Benefit is a key element to the prevention of homelessness and severe financial hardship. This is a vital service to some of the most vulnerable members of the Brent community. We aim to ensure that those who are entitled to these benefits are made aware of them and can easily access them. We believe that all customers are entitled to receive prompt and accurate assessment of their claim. We also recognise our duty to protect public funds and to ensure that we prevent fraud and error entering the benefit system, so that only those who are genuinely entitled receive help.

This strategy sets out the policies that will support these overall aims and our commitment to identifying our most potentially vulnerable customers and delivering the Revenue and Benefits service in ways that best meet their needs. This revised document replaces the Anti-Poverty Strategy that was first drafted in 2002.

Consultation

We have consulted widely with both our external stakeholders and partners, and internally within Brent. Wherever possible we have incorporated comments received and we are extremely grateful to all those who have

contributed to this important document. We remain committed to working with partners and stakeholders to ensure that we continually strive to improve our service to the community in Brent. To this end, we will seek to actively engage wide participation in the continued development of this important strategy.

Action plans supporting the strategy

This strategy sets out our clear aspirations for the development of the Revenue and Benefits service. These aspirations will be achieved through the implementation of our detailed action plan which sets out the actions that we need to take to ensure that the strategy is delivered in practice, e.g. our need to develop records of potentially vulnerable customers more fully and our need to extend Housing Benefit take-up campaigns. The action plan forms an integral part of our annual service plans which are monitored regularly throughout the year.

Key Commitments of the Strategy

1. Identifying and recording details of potentially vulnerable customers

The strategy sets out broad guidelines to help staff identify potentially vulnerable customers. This is not a prescriptive list and all staff are advised to consider the personal circumstances of each case.

Potentially vulnerable customers include:

- Customers who are 80 years or more in age
- Customers with physical disabilities that significantly impair their mobility
- Customers who may find it difficult to manage their own affairs because of mental health difficulties, literacy difficulties or substance abuse problems.
- Customers in fear of domestic violence
- Homeless customers
- Customers with sensory impairments

We aim to pro-actively identify potentially vulnerable customers from information available to us, such as housing benefit claim details. Once identified, potentially vulnerable customers will be recorded on the Revenue and Benefits computer system to help ensure that any action or communication with the customer, takes appropriate account of their needs.

Work is scheduled to be carried out in the autumn of 2007 to update our potentially vulnerable records

2. Collecting Money Responsibly and Sensitively

Key Commitments

(i) Council Tax

- Council Tax Summonses will not be issued whilst a Council Tax Benefit claim is outstanding and claims will be processed urgently where these have been submitted following recovery action.
-

- Consideration will be given to extending payment arrangements and re-instating instalments where severe financial hardship is demonstrated.
- Once identified, potentially vulnerable Council Tax customers will usually be excluded from summons action. Where appropriate a summons will be issued to enable recovery from Income Support and Job Seekers Allowance. Summons costs will be reviewed in these cases.
- Customers who have multiple Liability Orders will be given the opportunity to agree an affordable payment agreement, to cover all outstanding arrears. This will be subject to completion of a means enquiry form.

(ii) Overpayments

- Underlying entitlement will be used to reduce overpayments wherever possible
- Customer's circumstances will always be considered before exercising any discretion to recover an overpayment and write off will be considered if appropriate.
- Recovery methods and rates of recovery will take account of the customer's circumstances.
- Consideration will be given to extending payment arrangements - where severe financial hardship is demonstrated

3. Helping customers to claim and keep their claim in payment.

Key Commitments

- There will be a regular review of the Housing Benefit application form and guidance, to ensure that this is helping customers to understand the requirements of the scheme and to make a successful claim.
 - Where a customer is identified as potentially vulnerable and unable to attend our offices, we will aim to arrange a welfare home visit to help them complete their application form (new application or postal review) or provide required evidence.
 - Additional steps will be taken to contact potentially vulnerable customers who have failed to provide all evidence necessary to support their claim or who have failed to respond to a postal review. If the evidence or form is not received within one month, consideration will be given to extending the time limit for doing so.
 - Urgent claims will be dealt with within 3 working days of identification – these include threatened evictions, cases where Council Tax recovery action is being pursued or cases where action has been outstanding for 13 weeks or more.
-

4. Income Maximisation

Key Commitments

- Efforts will be made to increase take up of Housing/Council Tax Benefits, through targeted benefit take up campaigns. These will be carried out in collaboration with stakeholders wherever possible. Two Housing Benefit take up campaigns are planned for 2007/08; these will target pensioners, and those in arrears with Council Tax.
- The existing Discretionary Housing payment (DHP) policy will be reviewed during 2007/08, to ensure that awards are targeted to those who are most in need of help.

5. Identifying and Removing Barriers

Key Commitments

- We will consult with stakeholders and customers (where possible) to help identify any barriers adversely affecting access to the Revenue and Benefits service or customer's ability to understand communication sent to them. We will also make use of any available data (such as census data, and equalities monitoring data) to help us to identify any potential issues.
- We will continue to arrange language interpreters and translation services for customers whose first language is not English.
- We will regularly review written communications (Council Tax recovery notices, leaflets etc) and evaluate the effectiveness of these.
- We will seek to strengthen links with Community Groups to increase our understanding of specific needs of customers and will work collaboratively with them to better meet their needs.
- We will continue to ensure our buildings are easily accessible by all and that we make appropriate arrangements for sensory impaired customers and customers with learning disabilities.
- We will always consider our customer's interests when contacted by third parties. We will seek authorisation to disclose information to a third party but where the customer is unable to provide this will consider their best interest, in line with data protection.

6. Working Collaboratively with Stakeholders

Key Commitments

- We will actively seek to build constructive relationships with our stakeholders and work with them to identify problems and solutions, in line with the aims of this strategy.
-

Future review of the strategy

The overall strategy and action plans will be reviewed on an annual basis to ensure that they remain relevant and fit for purpose. The policies contained within the overall document will also be reviewed in their own right where appropriate, for example where legislation changes. We will value the involvement of partners and stakeholders in any reviews and will actively seek to consult widely when we do so.

If you would like to be included in the annual review, have any other comments on the strategy or would like a copy of the full document, please contact.

Margaret Read,
Head of Revenue and Benefits.
Tel: 020 8937 1506
Margaret.Read@brent.gov.uk