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REPORT TO:	FINANCE AND MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE	AGENDA ITEM: 10
DATE OF MEETING:	19 JULY 2001	CATEGORY: DELEGATED
REPORT FROM:	CHIEF FINANCE OFFICER	OPEN
MEMBERS' CONTACT POINT:	CHRIS SWAIN (595812)	DOC:s:\cent_serv\committee reports\finance and management\19 jul 2001\rev and ben issues.doc
SUBJECT:	REVENUE AND BENEFIT ISSUES	REF: CJS/JHM
WARD(S) AFFECTED:	ALL	TERMS OF REFERENCE:

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## 1.0 Recommendations

- 1.1 Members are asked to approve the revised opening hours of the cash office to the public. These being 9.30am to 2.30pm, Monday to Friday. These hours also relate to revenue and benefit enquiries (with effect from Monday, 3 September 2001).
- 1.2 Members are asked to confirm the continuing closure of the benefits section to the public on Wednesdays.
- 1.3 Members are asked to approve the additional appointment facilities for revenue and benefit queries between 8.45am and 9.30am on Tuesdays and 2.30pm and 5.00pm on Thursdays (with effect from Monday, 3 September 2001).
- 1.4 Members are asked to note the contents of the Benefit Service Plan, 2001/2002.
- 1.5 Members are asked to approve the extension of the Council's contract with Jackson Heath and Jacobs as Bailiffs for the period to 31 March, 2003.
- 1.6 Members are asked to consider the general scheme for the granting of discretionary rate relief and the delegated powers. Members can either:
  - Extend the scheme to include additional categories of application
  - Restrict the scheme so that all applications are submitted to the Committee
  - Leave the scheme as it currently operates

## 2.0 Purpose of Report

- 2.1 The report addresses a number of issues around the provision of the Revenue and Benefit Service and seeks approval for a number of actions.

### 3.0 Detail

#### 3.1 *Opening Hours*

At its meeting on 24 July, 2000, the former Policy and Resources Committee approved revised opening hours for the Cash Office Service, these being operative from 4 September, 2000. The revised hours of opening to the public were between 10.00am and 3.00pm, Monday to Friday.

Since the revised opening hours have been in operation, the situation has been monitored and it appears that on most days there is a queue at 10.00am. Whilst the number of hours available to deal with remittances from those who visit the cash office cannot be increased with the current level of resources, an adjustment to the opening hours may assist those who wish to use the cash office earlier in the morning.

It is, therefore, suggested that the opening hours be amended from 10.00am to 3.00pm to 9.30am to 2.30pm. To allow a reasonable time to publicise the new arrangements, the effective date of the changes could be Monday, 3 September, 2001.

Revenue and benefit enquiries are also restricted to these reduced hours and the change would also apply to this facility.

#### 3.2 *Housing Benefits – Opening Hours*

At meetings of the Urgency Sub-Committee on 8 January and 26 March, 2001, Members agreed to close the Benefit section to the public on Wednesdays. This was to address the backlog in processing claims which, in January, 2001, had reached 9 weeks.

Since that time considerable effort has been put in by both staff and management to address this backlog. The result is that the Council is now up to date in dealing with Benefit applications. **Annexe A** provides further detail showing how the backlog has been removed since January.

The revised opening times have made a significant contribution to dealing with this backlog and enabled staff to concentrate on processing claims without interruption. Staff have also shown their commitment to these new opening hours by avoiding taking leave on these days.

It is apparent that the level of backlog can fluctuate as indicated in **Annexe A**. The following factors can all have an impact on the level of the backlog:

- Staff sickness – in a small team of 7 benefits assessors any sickness absence will place an increased burden on other staff and will have an impact on processing times.
- Renewals – each benefit application needs to be renewed every 60 weeks to ensure that the claim is still valid. While attempts are made to spread some of these renewals over the year, they do have a considerable impact on workload levels when a large number of claims fall due for renewal e.g. in July.
- Council Tax Billing – this usually results in a significant increase in claims.

All of these factors present a problem to the Council in delivering a consistent level of service and maintaining the current processing times.

There are also other issues to be addressed and these include:

- Staff training – Benefits regulations are becoming ever more complex. This means that there is an on-going need to keep staff up to date with how these changes will affect claims assessment.
- Ensuring accurate processing – the internal checks carried out by management indicate that the section has high accuracy rates when assessing benefits. Nevertheless there is still a need to put extra time into ensuring that reports generated by the computer system to highlight inconsistencies are investigated fully.

These include:

- Critical Age List
  - Cases not referred to the Rent Service
  - Rent Service decisions not returned
  - Inconsistencies between Benefit and Council Tax Systems
  - Private Tenant inconsistencies between benefit periods
- Benefit Fraud Inspectorate – the Council has not been subject to a visit from the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate, which has undertaken to inspect all Benefits Sections over a five-year period. These inspections are comprehensive and require considerable advance preparation.

In summary, the Council now has the opportunity to address a number of other important issues now that the benefits backlog is under control. At the same time it cannot be complacent and must realise that all of the factors outlined above can have a damaging impact on processing times.

With this in mind it is proposed that the current opening arrangements should be maintained with the benefits office opened on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday but closed on Wednesday.

### 3.3 *Additional Facilities*

It has, however, been recognised that the revised opening hours do, on occasions, present problems for those who are not able to call at the office when it is open.

In a bid to assist such customers, it is proposed to operate an appointment system for revenue and benefit enquiries outside the revised hours. This would be:

8.45am to 9.30am on a Tuesday  
and  
2.30pm to 5.00pm on a Thursday

### 3.4 *Benefit Business Plan*

Now that the backlog of benefit work has been eliminated, it is felt appropriate to look to the future shaping of the service. To facilitate this process, a Benefit Service Plan 2001/2002 has been produced, a copy of which is produced for Member's information at **Annexe 'B'**.

This highlights a number of issues and challenges facing the Benefits Team. These will be addressed within the Best Value Review of Finance Services, which includes Revenues and Benefits Services.

### 3.5 *Bailiff Services*

The Council employs two firms of bailiffs to assist in the collection of Council Tax and the National Non-Domestic Rate.

The current contracts with Jackson Heath and Jacobs expire on 31 March, 2002.

Members will recall that Jackson Heath is the new name for Ross & Roberts Ltd., appointed in March 1999, and Jacobs were appointed in August, 2000 following the collapse of Gaults.

Both companies are monitored to ensure that remittances are received on a regular basis. Jackson Heath send remittances to the Council on a monthly basis, whilst Jacobs forward remittances every fortnight.

Approval is sought to continue to employ both firms of Bailiffs for the period to 31 March, 2003. The reasons for the request are as follows:

- To give an acceptable timescale for the performance of each Bailiff to be monitored and compared
- To coincide with the anticipated introduction of any recommendations that will come from the Best Value Review

### 3.6 *Discretionary Rate Relief*

In 1990 the former Finance Committee approved a general scheme for the granting of discretionary rate relief, the scheme being delegated to the then Director of Finance and Administration.

The scheme is as follows:

<u>Type of Property</u>	<u>Relief</u>
Village Halls	80% mandatory or discretionary, whichever is relevant, subject to a maximum of 80%
Recreational Clubs	50% discretionary relief with any registered charity or sports clubs receiving 80% mandatory relief
Scouts & Guides	80% mandatory relief
Elderly & Handicapped	80% mandatory relief Organisations
Charity Shops	80% mandatory relief

All applications where there is a licensed bar, cases which do not fall into the above property types and all applications for additional discretionary relief (where mandatory relief has been granted) are to be submitted to the Committee for approval.

In practice, almost all applications for discretionary relief are submitted to Committee as they either have a bar or are in respect of discretionary relief in addition to mandatory relief.

Members are asked if they wish to amend the scheme that has been in operation for over 10 years. Such amendments may include the inclusion of cases where there is a licensed bar or where a new venture is seeking additional relief for the first year of operation. This would reduce the number of cases taken to Committee.

Alternatively, Members may wish to receive all applications for discretionary relief for consideration (in line with all applications for Hardship Relief being submitted to Committee). It is anticipated that the impact would not be particularly great as almost all application, in practice, fall outside the exiting scheme.

#### **4.0 Financial Implications**

##### **4.1 None**

