

**Committee: SCRUTINY 2 – RESOURCES & ENVIRONMENT**

**Date: 1 October 2003**

**Agenda Item No: 9**

**Title: BEST VALUE REVIEW OF REVENUES SERVICES**

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**MEMBER REFERENCE GROUP: Councillor Mrs C A Bayley, Councillor R Lemon, Councillor V Lelliott and Councillor Mrs S Schneider**

### **Summary**

- 1 This report details the progress made to date with the Best Value Review of Revenues Services. It seeks comments from the Committee on whether the review is progressing satisfactorily and recommends that the Scrutiny Committee note progress. It also seeks comments on the coverage of the review.

### **Progress to Date**

- 2 The Member Reference Group (MRG) has now met on three occasions, the last meeting being held on 28 August 2003. The progress made in respect of the review is shown under the four headings below of compare, consult, challenge and compete. The draft Service Improvement Plan is being developed and will be presented to this Committee on 3 December 2003 and to Resources Committee on 22 January 2004.

### **Compare**

- 3 The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) Benchmarking Club comparative data has now been received for Council Tax, Business Rates and Housing Benefits. This information has been made available to the MRG and a small sample of the information is shown at appendix 1 to this report. Some of the comparative data needs further investigation and similar local authorities are to be contacted for more detailed information.

### **Consult**

- 4 It was originally proposed to engage an external company to carry out the customer surveys. However, due to the cost involved, officers have undertaken the task. The Council Tax and Business Rates customer surveys have been carried out and a sample of the results is shown at appendix 2 to this report. The Benefits survey has to be carried out in two sampling windows. The first batch of survey forms was sent out during week

commencing 15 September 2003. The second batch of survey forms will be sent in January 2004.

- 5 An exit survey is currently being carried out, which involves randomly selecting personal callers to the Revenues Services enquiry counter. The survey will end on 3 October 2003.
- 6 A survey has also been carried out on personal caller waiting times. A sample of the results is shown at appendix 3.

### **Challenge**

- 7 The 'Challenge' element of the Best Value Review has focused on a number of key areas of service delivery. The up to date position is shown below under each heading.

- a. Challenge event

- i The Best Value Challenge Event is taking place on 25 September 2003. A verbal update will be given to Members at the meeting.

- b. Customer accessibility

- i Personal callers

A recent audit undertaken by the Council's Access Group covered the Revenues reception facilities. Members of the MRG have also visited the reception area. It is evident that changes need to be made and costings for two separate options have been sought, which will be discussed at the next MRG. It is proposed to submit a bid to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) performance standards fund for financial assistance towards the cost of improving the facilities.

- ii Telephone and personal caller access hours

The CIPFA benchmarking results indicate that our opening hours are competitive. Further discussions on this subject are to be carried out by a corporate working group.

- iii Revenues web page

Changes to the Revenues web page to enable on-line transactions are planned to be completed by March 2004.

- iv Surgeries

A Revenues surgery at Dunmow CIC is to be provided, initially on a trial basis. Also, Revenues staff have recently been present on the mobile police unit.

c. Customer payments

i Payment at Post Offices

A feasibility study into the cost and usage of payment cards has been carried out. This is to be the subject of further discussion at the next MRG.

ii Payment at neighbouring authorities

In the spirit of partnership, negotiations are in progress with neighbouring local authorities for them to accept payments of Council Tax. It is envisaged that this would be a reciprocal arrangement.

iii Discount for prompt payment of Council Tax

A report on the feasibility of introducing this scheme is to be discussed at the next MRG.

iv Automated Direct Debits

It is proposed to introduce this to streamline the administration of Direct Debit payments, including the facility to set up such a payment over the telephone.

v Instalment dates

The customer surveys asked for information on additional payment dates. The results will be discussed at the MRG on 2 October 2003.

vi Direct payments of Housing Benefit

This facility will be available when the existing financial management system is replaced in the summer of 2004.

vii 24/7 debit and credit card payments

This facility is being considered as part of the Essex on-line partnership.

d. Housing Benefit

i The DWP performance standards have been embraced. A self-assessment is currently being conducted against the standards to identify areas of weakness for inclusion in relevant action plans.

ii It is intended to trial the use of dual flat screen VDU monitors with a view to improving the accuracy of data input onto the Revenues and Benefits computer system. A bid for funding is to be made to the DWP to meet some of the expenditure.

e. Peer challenge

- i A peer challenge involving visits to three local authorities is proposed, which will involve discussions about best practice and areas for improvement.
- ii Two neighbouring local authorities have been conducting mystery-shopping exercises. The results of these will be available shortly and a verbal update will be given at the meeting if details have been received in time.

f. Homeworking

- i A survey of Revenues Services staff is to be carried out to find out the number of staff willing to do homeworking. This will enable a full cost benefit analysis to be undertaken, with the prospect of a funding bid being made to the DWP to meet some of the expenditure.

**Compete**

- 8 At its next meeting, the MRG will discuss the need for a market assessment of the services to be carried out by an external company. The findings of the CIPFA benchmarking group indicate that the service is very competitive in most areas.

**Further work to be done**

- 9 Work has already started on establishing the service improvement plan. The Challenge Event on 25 September 2003 will provide further information to enable the improvement plan to be finalised and presented to the next Scrutiny 2 Committee meeting on 3 December 2003.

RECOMMENDED that Members note the progress made and comment on the coverage of the Best Value Review.

Background Papers: Best Value Review of Revenues Services file (held by Mike Brean)