

**SERVICE DEFINITION – COUNCIL TAX and BUSINESS RATES**

The Council has a statutory obligation to provide a service to administer Council Tax and National Non Domestic Rates.

The Revenues service impacts on every household and commercial property in the borough of Runnymede. The section is responsible for the billing, collection, recovery and enforcement of Council Tax and NNDR owed to the Borough. It is also responsible for ensuring that the Council's records are accurate, up to date and all exemptions and discounts granted are regularly reviewed.

Service Type	
Front Line	✓
Support	
Contract	
Agency	
Other	

Reason for Selection	
Strategy before Operations	
High Profile (worst first)	
History of problems	
Key links to others	
Other	
<b>To suit Corporate Timetable</b>	

Service Boundaries	
Budget	✓
Staff	✓
Location	
Nature of Work	
Other	

Service Measurement				
Volume	Net Collectable Debit	For 2003/2004 Council Tax NNDR	£ 32,322,732.00 £ 37,670,843.00	
Budget Estimates	<b>2004/05 estimates</b>	<b>Council Tax Service</b>	<b>Business Rates Service</b>	<b>Total</b>
	Staffing cost	£279,000	£94,000	£373,000
	Supplies and Services	£72,600	£5,100	£77,700
	Communications and Computing	£130,800	£55,300	£186,100
	Office accommodation	£40,900	£6,800	£47,700
	Support services	£121,700	£24,500	£146,200
	<b>Sub-total - administrative costs</b>	<b>£645,000</b>	<b>£185,700</b>	<b>£830,700</b>
	Cost of collection allowance		£142,000	£142,000
	Costs recovered/received	£29,000	£3,000	£32,000
	<b>Sub-total - government grants</b>	<b>£29,000</b>	<b>£145,000</b>	<b>£174,000</b>
	<b>Net expenditure on administration</b>	<b>£616,000</b>	<b>£40,700</b>	<b>£656,700</b>
Performance Benchmarks	Ensure that the cash collection performances of the sections are maintained at 'top quartile'. BVPI Numbers 9 and 10.			
RBC Targets	CTax - 98.00% of the debit to be collected by 31.3.04			
	NNDR - 99.84% of the debit to be collected by 31.3.04			
	Correspondence to be replied to and any necessary action taken within 10 working days.			

	<p>Complaints to be acknowledged upon day of receipt and a full reply given within 5 working days.</p> <p>Bills generated to be despatched within 24 hours of production.</p> <p>Credits to be refunded with 15 working days of credit arising.</p> <p>Incoming telephone calls to be answered within 4 rings.</p> <p>Valuation office schedules received to be processed and a bill to be issued within 10 working days of receipt.</p> <p>Inspect all newly empty properties within 2 months of it being void and every 3 months thereafter.</p> <p>All Council Tax discounts and exemption to be reviewed each financial year. NNDR review forms to be despatched with Annual Bills.</p> <p>All accounts to have a nil balance by the end of the financial year or appropriate recovery action to be in place. Recovery action to take place in accordance with Recovery timetable produced each year.</p>
Quality Benchmarks	<p>Internal Audit Reports. Both Council Tax and NNDR were awarded 'Good' for recently completed audits.</p> <p>Surrey District Benchmarking Exercise.</p>
Service Difficulty Factors	<p>There is a need to retain experienced staff. Some other Councils have a better pay structure and there is a risk that staff will be lured away. It has also been noticed that other sections within the Council are paying higher salaries for jobs that are not too dissimilar to some of those in our sections.</p> <p>Computer down time is often outside the control of the Services concerned. This and software releases inadequately tested by the supplier can result in backlogs of correspondence. Only so much testing can be completed internally and there have been occasions when new software has affected other related parts of the system that result in unexpected or unanticipated problems. There is also a concern that the expertise needed to support the system is limited within the IT section to one individual. This has caused problems when that person is not available or is on leave.</p>

Corporate Policies affecting this Service								
Quality of Life	5 Year Financial Forecast	Equality of Access	Communications and the use of IT	Encouraging urban renewal	Community safety	Housing Strategy	Best Value and create/save	Community Strategy
✓	✓ ✓	✓ ✓	✓ ✓			✓	✓	

**Key Links to this Service**

Benefits, Housing, Customer Services, Receptionists, Switchboard Operators and Creditors.  
Information Technology - System Maintenance and Support.

**External Agencies** – Citizens Advice Bureau, Bailiffs, Magistrates Court, Valuation Office and  
Insolvency Practitioners.

## SERVICE DEFINITION - BENEFITS

The Council has a statutory obligation to provide a service to administer Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit to residents of the borough.

Service Type	
Front Line	✓
Support	
Contract	
Agency	
Other	

Reason for Selection	
Strategy before Operations	
High Profile (worst first)	
History of problems	
Key links to others	
Other	
<b>To suit corporate timetable</b>	

Service Boundaries	
Budget	✓
Staff	✓
Location	
Nature of Work	✓
Other	
<b>Government Agencies</b>	

Service Measurement				
Volume	Housing Benefit caseload = 2,967 Council Tax benefit caseload = 3,684  Total = 3,826 (some cases are combined claims for Housing Benefit & Council Tax Benefit)			
Budget	<b>2004/05 estimates</b>	<b>Benefits Service</b>	<b>Counter Fraud Service</b>	<b>Total</b>
	Staffing cost	£413,800	£78,900	£492,700
	Supplies and Services	£34,000	£3,400	£37,400
	Communications and Computing	£111,900	£9,200	£121,100
	Office accommodation	£46,000	£8,300	£54,300
	Support services	£88,300	£14,800	£103,100
	<b>Sub-total - administrative costs</b>	<b>£694,000</b>	<b>£114,600</b>	<b>£808,600</b>
	Administration subsidy/grant	£373,100		£373,100
	Fraud recovery subsidy		£50,000	£50,000
	<b>Sub-total - government subsidies</b>	<b>£373,100</b>	<b>£50,000</b>	<b>£423,100</b>
	<b>Net expenditure on administration</b>	<b>£320,900</b>	<b>£64,600</b>	<b>£385,500</b>
Performance Benchmarks	BV78A BV78B BV79A BV79B BV80  Plus 649 performance standards issued by the DWP.			
Quality Benchmarks	Internal Audit reports CPA and BFI reports Surrey benchmarking exercise DWP quarterly reports			

Service Difficulty Factors	<p>Complex legislation that is constantly changing. The complexity of the legislation means that it can take 12 to 18 months to train a Benefits Assessor to a fully competent level.</p> <p>Lack of regard by the Government and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) on the complexity of the legislation and taking that into account when introducing new changes that have a direct impact on Housing and Council Tax Benefits.</p> <p>The small size of the Benefits team means that sickness, annual leave, training courses and other absences, e.g. jury service, all impact on the level of service delivery.</p> <p>There have been problems with internal IT delivery and this seriously impacted on the service level in past years and is always of concern.</p> <p>The pay structure within the Revenues and Benefit teams compares unfavourably with other departments within the council and external bodies, which makes it difficult to retain staff.</p> <p>Liaison with other agencies, e.g. Department for Work and Pensions, Inland Revenue, Rent Officer Service and Pensions Agency.</p>
----------------------------	---

Corporate Policies affecting this Service								
Quality of Life	5 Year Financial Forecast	Equality of Access	Communications and the use of IT	Encouraging urban renewal	Community safety	Housing Strategy	Best Value and create/save	Community Strategy
✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓

Key Links to this Service
<p>Internal Links: Council Tax section, Housing department, Creditors, Customer Services, Reception, Legal, Housing Accountant, Switchboard, Information Technology- system maintenance &amp; support.</p> <p>External links: Department for Work and Pensions, Pensions Agency, Inland Revenue, Rent Officer Service, National Anti-Fraud Network (NAFN), Local Authorities Officer Group (LAOG), Jobcentre Plus, the Appeals Service and Citizens Advice Bureau.</p>

## Challenge – Revenues and Benefits

Question	Response
<p>What are the justifications for exercising these functions</p>	<p>Council Tax – statutory scheme required of local authorities under the Local Government Finance Act 1992.</p> <p>Business Rates - statutory scheme required of local authorities under the Local Government Finance Act 1988.</p> <p>Housing Benefit - statutory scheme required of local authorities under the Social Security Act 1986.</p> <p>Council Tax Benefit – statutory scheme required of local authorities under the Social Security and Contributions Act 1992 and Social Security Administration Act 1992.</p>
<p>At what levels are the services going to be provided</p>	<p>Council Tax – all billing, collection, recovery and enforcement functions except Bailiff service and annual billing printing, which are provided currently by Chandlers and Alexanders, and FDML respectively.</p> <p>Business Rates – all billing, collection, recovery and enforcement functions except Bailiff service, which is provided currently by Chandlers and Alexanders.</p> <p>Benefits – all application, verification, assessment, payment, appeal, fraud investigation, visiting and advice/reception functions.</p>
<p>What are our objectives (service outcomes)</p>	<p>Council Tax – to meet and, when possible, exceed collection targets. To be in the top quartile of performing councils in England and Wales.</p> <p>Business Rates – to meet and, when possible, exceed collection targets. To be in the top quartile of performing councils in England and Wales.</p> <p>Benefits – to meet all of the DWP performance standards deemed appropriate for this District Council. To be in the top quartile of performing councils in England and Wales.</p>
<p>How are the services going to be provided (in-house, agency, contractor, joint venture etc.)</p>	<p>The services are undertaken in-house.</p> <p>Options that must be considered as part of the Best Value process include</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Retain the service in-house</li> <li>• Joint arrangements with neighbouring authorities</li> <li>• Joint arrangements with external contractors</li> <li>• Part or full contracting out</li> <li>• Part or full contracting out with a parcel of inter-linked support services</li> </ul> <p>All the services were subjected to Voluntary Competitive Tendering in 1999. The in-house team won this market testing exercise. Whilst cost savings were achieved, there was a deterioration in the service provided by the Benefits section. The constant changes to the scheme and additional pressure from the DWP and BFI for improved performance proved difficult to manage with reduced resources. Standards in Council Tax and Business Rates were maintained but it was not possible to improve performance year-on-year with the reduced resources available. For this reason, and with the advent of Best Value and Comprehensive Performance Assessment, it was deemed appropriate to abandon the DSO and reintegrate the client and contractor functions to cope with the changes and meet BVPIs.</p>
<p>What national, local or derived Performance Indicators are going</p>	<p>Council Tax – BVPIs and local indicators.</p> <p>Business Rates – BVPIs and local indicators.</p>

to be used for this review	<p>Benefits – BVPIs, DWP Performance Standards and local indicators.</p> <p>Comparison to similar LAs using Surrey wide and national indices</p>
What quality level is required	<p>The BVPIs, Performance Standards, Audit reports and Surrey benchmarking will dictate the quality of the service.</p> <p>It is important for customers to be able to make personal contact with the council. “Benefits surgeries” held in the Day Centres and the provision of Visitors to help customers at their homes will continue. Front-line reception and telephone facilities will be maintained for all three Services.</p>
How should we be organised	<p>It is believed that Council Tax and Business Rates Services are organised correctly at this time to maximise effectiveness and efficiency for the collection of these revenues. More use may be made of the Internet in the near future once its capabilities are fully understood and products developed that may offer alternatives to help deliver these services.</p> <p>The Benefits Service is in a constant state of flux looking for the optimum organisational structure. Currently, the structure is working well and has produced good results over the past 12 months. The Service has moved from one in the middle ranks to being at or near top quartile performance. However, the Benefits schemes change so frequently that it is often necessary to review how it is organised to produce the best results to meet the changes</p> <p>A possibility for future investigation would be closer integration of the Council Tax and Benefits Service using generic teams or generic officers. The accommodation in the Civic Offices precludes this currently as a feasible option.</p>
What are our known costs	Costs are shown earlier in this report.
<p>Proposals for change</p> <p>Council Tax – make better use of e-services technology to meet the aims of e-government.</p> <p>Business Rates – make better use of e-services technology to meet the aims of e-government.</p> <p>Benefits – to meet the Performance Standards Improvement Plan, Achieve and maintain top quartile performance in all areas and make better use of e-services technology to meet the aims of e-government.</p>	
<p>Implications of changes</p> <p>Council Tax – better access to information and provision of the means for customers to view and manage their accounts on-line</p> <p>Business Rates – better access to information and provision of the means for business customers to view and manage their accounts on-line</p> <p>Benefits – if and when the Performance Standards are met and maintained the Council will be providing an excellent quality benefits service for its residents that will be one of the best in the country. Provision of the means for customers to apply for benefits and provide supporting information on-line.</p>	

## Revenues and Benefits Services Challenges

### Questions raised about Council Tax and Business Rates

**Challenge No. 1 Should customers be offered more than one payment date?**

**Response** More than one date may help customers budget better, in line with their earnings payments dates. However, there are cash flow implications for the Council, the cost of which would have to be borne by council taxpayers as a whole.

**Action** Consult customers and undertake an evaluation of costs and the impact on existing resources.

**Challenge No. 2 Are the current payment methods offered cost effective and in line with customer requirements?**

**Response** Payment methods are currently in line with the Council's policy

**Action** Investigate alternatives and analyse the cost/benefits of the current and other possible payment methods. Withdraw methods where the cost outweighs the benefit and implement new methods where appropriate.

**Challenge No. 3 Is the provision of a free to customers Post Office service for council tax payments, which is currently funded by the Council, no longer necessary considering the increasing number of bank accounts resulting from State pensions and benefits now being paid by BACS?**

**Response** The total cost to the Council is currently in the region of £14,000. This may now be a prohibitive cost that is unnecessarily being incurred considering the number of customers paying by direct debit and the rising number of bank accounts.

**Action** Consult customers and investigate consequences to them of removal of free Post Office payment service and report to Committee.

**Challenge No. 4 Should customers be offered early payment discounts?**

**Response** This has been looked at in the past. It could be viewed as rewarding those who can afford to pay in full in April whilst penalising those who cannot.

Action Consult customers and investigate the potential cost and improvement in cash flow and report to Committee.

**Challenge No. 5** **Would cash flow be improved by sending reminders to defaulters including an instalment due within the next 7 days, e.g. instalment due for 1<sup>st</sup> April is unpaid and a reminder is sent on 25<sup>th</sup> April which includes a reminder for the instalment due on 1<sup>st</sup> May?**

Response This would bring forward the recovery timetable recover allowing for earlier issue of summonses and court action.

Action Consult authorities that employ this method of recovery. The Director of Finance to implement if deemed effective.

**Challenge No. 6** **Would cash flow be improved if the Council reminded defaulters earlier than the current 25 day requirement on council tax and the 18 day requirement on business rates after their instalment due dates?**

Response It is known that other local authorities remind earlier than this Council.

Action Consult other authorities that remind earlier on their results. Report to Committee if change would be beneficial.

**Challenge No. 7** **Does the level of the summons and court costs charged for defaulting on payment cover the Council's costs of administration?**

Response This Council is believed to charge less than other Surrey Councils.

Action Investigate costs in neighbouring boroughs and seek guidance from the Magistrates court. The Director of Finance to increase charges if justified and appropriate.

### Questions raised about Benefits

**Challenge No.8** **Has the Benefits Service completed its self-assessment against the DWP/BFI Performance Standards and produced an improvement plan?**

Response The self-assessment was finalised in December last year and an improvement plan has been produced.

Action Achieve the objectives and targets in the improvement plan.

**Challenge No.9** **Complaints are a good thing as they can highlight poor service or operational procedures. Are complaints about service or staff monitored and taken seriously enough for remedial action to be taken whenever required?**

**Response** The number of complaints about service/staff is small. Action has been taken in the past when a complaint has highlighted a deficiency in procedures or training. It is not believed that any other action is required.

**Action** Continue to make changes when a complaint highlights deficiencies in the provision of the service. Analysis of complaints will be reported to the Benefits Quality Review Group.

**Challenge No.10** **Is the system in the Civic Offices for customers to make written complaints adequate?**

**Response** The complaints service generally works well in the Civic Offices. However the availability of complaints forms needs to be more prominent at the departmental reception desk.

**Action** Provide signage for the complaints forms at the departmental reception desk.

**Challenge No.11** **Benefits notifications of entitlement letters are long and complex, which makes them difficult for customers to understand. What can be done to make them more comprehensible?**

**Response** It has long been acknowledged that the letters are difficult to understand but the software supplier has been slow to change them. However, a new suite of letters is being released in the early part of 2004/05.

**Action** Seek a release date from the software supplier and implement as soon as possible. Advice agencies such as CAB will be involved in the design and layout of the new letters.

**Challenge No. 12** **Are customers dealt with quickly and efficiently at the Benefits reception in the Civic Offices with a minimum of "hand offs"?**

**Response** Benefits reception staff are trained to deal with minor queries and to take forms and supporting evidence. Benefits Advisers are trained to deal with more complex claims and usually see customers on an appointment basis.

Action Look at training Benefits Receptionists to deal with a wider range of enquiries/queries to speed up the turnaround time for customers. Undertake an annual exit survey to determine the quality of the service provided.

**Challenge No.13 Is it possible for customers to apply for benefits over the telephone as they do for Pension Credit?**

Response This is possible but it would have additional staffing implications.

Action Whilst acknowledging that this would improve the accessibility for people to apply, the Benefits Service is not staffed to provide such a personal service. A report will be submitted to the Benefits Quality Review Group on the costs and benefits of providing such a service.

**Challenge No.14 Retention of Benefits staff is difficult because of the high value placed upon their services by other local authorities. Should more staff be permitted to work from home to help with staff retention?**

Response Benefits staff are difficult to retain and turnover is high, especially because working as contractors they can earn significantly more than being employed directly by a local authority. Home working may give more incentive to remain with the Council. The Benefits Service currently has one part-time home worker. With the immanent implementation of EDMS, home working may become more of an option in the future.

Action Investigate the possibility of more home working when the EDMS is working satisfactorily.

**Questions raised common to the three services**

**Challenge No.15 Will staff be consulted on the level and quality of service provided as part of the Consultation process of this Best Value review?**

Response Staff have a valuable contribution to make in daily operations and in the future direction of the delivery of the services.

Action Staff will be consulted and their views will be included in the final report.

**Challenge No.16 Increase the extent by which the sections' services can be accessed electronically, including the introduction of on-line forms.**

Response This is consistent with e-Government principles and the Council's IT & Communications strategy

Action Work closely with Communications Strategy Officer and IT section to identify and implement appropriate areas. Attention will be focussed particularly on Benefit application forms, single occupancy discounts and changes in property occupation.

**Challenge No.17 Use benchmarking data to improve the quality of the services.**

Response Information from the Surrey Districts and other Councils nationally should help inform about the relative performance of the services.

Action This will be undertaken at the *Compare* stage of the process

**Challenge No.18 Review service levels and quality levels in the light of consultation**

Response Customers will be consulted using questionnaires and exit interviews.

Action Benefits customers were consulted in October 2003 and January 2004 and the results are being compiled for Best Value Performance Indicator No. 80. Council tax and business rates customers will be contacted as part of the *Consult* stage of the process.

## CHALLENGE MEETING ATTENDEES

<u>Name</u>	<u>Title</u>
Councillor P Waddell	Chairman Housing and Community Services Committee
Councillor H Meares	Vice-Chairman Housing and Community Services Committee
Councillor P Greenwood	Leader of the Runnymede Labour Group
Councillor A Alderson	Member of the Runnymede Independent Group
J Simpson	Benefits Manager, Surrey Heath Borough Council
P Thompson	Runnymede CAB
M James	Runnymede CAB
S Cawthorne	Director of Finance
D Cooke	Chief Internal Auditor
H Stewart	Tenancy Manager
N Boyd	Assistant Director of Finance (Revenues)
C Sefton	Revenues Manager
M Cooper	Council Tax Manager
E Kavanagh	Business Rates Manager
L Parry	Benefits & Customer Services Manager
S Mackintosh	Deputy Benefits Manager
J Mitchell	Secretary to Director of Finance

### **Promoting Good Practice in Runnymede**

This policy is designed to help staff and members of the Council react in a timely and professional manner to any concerns raised through their contact with children and families in the course of their work. It is consistent with the Surrey Area Child Protection Committee guidelines.

The following key issues and actions are essential in order to promote good practice and to help safeguard children, young people, staff and volunteers, whether they are working for, or accessing services provided by, Runnymede Borough Council.

### **Recruitment and Employment**

It is not easy to recognise persons likely to abuse children or young people. It is therefore essential that all reasonable steps are taken to make sure that unsuitable people are prevented from working with children and young people. A standard approach is therefore adopted with regard to recruitment and employment of paid and voluntary staff, whether they are working on a temporary, permanent, casual, part-time or full-time basis. A review of posts will be undertaken on a four-yearly basis to ensure that all applicants for positions in which they build up trust with children due to their position, are checked. This is to reflect the changing nature of posts.

The following actions must apply to the engagement of all staff working with children:

#### **Action:**

- i. Issue relevant job descriptions and person specifications for each job, with an application form. This is in accordance with the Council's standard recruitment procedure.
- ii. All volunteers and staff working with children or young people must complete an application form, showing their name, contact details, evidence of qualifications and experience and referees.
- iii. Request and check qualifications and details of competence from governing bodies and educational establishments.
- iv. Take up a **minimum** of one reference from previous employers and, wherever possible, include at least one that involves working with children and young people. No appointment should be made without at least one written reference being obtained.
- v. Obtain consent from applicants to make enhanced Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks for anyone working directly with children and young people and other circumstances where departmental managers consider that the potential contact with children or young or vulnerable people justifies it. Applicants must submit two forms of identification and verification of their address for the previous 5 years for these checks to be made. Applications to the CRB are made through the Personnel section.
- vi. Issue a statement of the terms of employment/engagement.
- vii. Establish a review procedure appropriate to the role of staff and the period of employment to include regular supervision by the nominated manager.
- viii. Obtain consent from existing staff to make enhanced CRB checks for anyone in circumstances where departmental managers consider the potential contact with children, young or vulnerable people justifies it, in the same way as for v) above. Clear corporate guidelines will be provided for this.
- ix. Recheck individuals checked under v and vii every 5 years.

### **Training and Education**

The provision of quality training and information is widely recognised as an essential process in raising awareness and addressing child protection issues so that staff and volunteers are aware and sensitive to potential situations.

#### **Action:**

All staff must be vigilant in avoiding putting themselves in a vulnerable situation. Staff should refer to the Council's procedure for "Avoiding Violence at Work" for advice about home visiting and dealing with children and vulnerable people.

Each Department will nominate an officer who will participate in the Surrey ACPC multi-agency child protection training and will then:

- i. Provide an appropriate induction programme to familiarise new staff with their role and that of the organisation in general with specific reference to child protection issues. Where a member of staff is not employed on a permanent contract, it will be the responsibility of the manager employing them to ensure they understand their role with reference to legal obligations and child protection issues.
- ii. Prepare and distribute basic instructions to all new staff.
- iii. Provide and promote an ongoing programme of child protection training opportunities within the framework of the Surrey Area Child Protection Committee procedures.
- iv. Ensure that relevant Council Officers are kept updated on current information and policies regarding child protection.
- v. Attend quarterly meetings of officers overseeing child protection in other departments to ensure information about issues affecting child protection is shared.
- v. Provide copies of the Council's Child Protection Policy to partner agencies, contractors and clubs.

#### **Responding to Suspicions and Allegations of Child Abuse**

It is not the responsibility of anyone working for Runnymede Borough Council, in a paid or voluntary capacity, to decide whether or not child abuse is taking place. However, the Council has a duty of care to protect children and young people and report suspicions in order that the appropriate agencies can make enquiries and take any necessary action to protect the child or young person.

Surrey County Council Social Services Department has a statutory duty under the Children Act 1989 to ensure the welfare of the child. When a child protection referral is made, its staff have a legal responsibility to investigate. This may involve talking to the child or young person and their family, and gathering information from other people who know the child or young person. Enquiries may be carried out jointly with the police.

If an allegation of child abuse is made against a member of the Council's staff, that staff member will be suspended on full pay whilst a thorough investigation is undertaken. In accordance with the Council's procedures it should be noted that suspension is not in itself a disciplinary action. Managers must take advice from the Council's Personnel Officer before any action is taken.

#### **What to do if you suspect abuse or have concerns about a situation:**

- i. Report your concerns to the Manager who takes the lead child protection role in your department.
- ii. Where concerns are raised, the Manager will consult colleagues responsible for child protection in other departments to see if other staff have reported concerns. Concerns will be relayed to the Children's Service assessment team. Depending on the length of time and type of working relationship, the manager may be required to notify parents of the referral, if this would not compromise the child's welfare.
- iii. If it is agreed that a referral to Social Services will be made, the assessment team will need an accurate record of all facts about injuries, times of injuries (if known), explanations given, action taken and by whom action has been taken. Wherever possible, these should be collected by the person who raised the initial concern. However, Runnymede Borough Council staff must not attempt to undertake an investigation themselves, or to ask leading questions of any children or family concerned, as this could put a later investigation in jeopardy.
- iv. A referral to the Children's Service assessment team will be confirmed in writing by the referring manager within 48 hours. A response should be received within 24 hours. If none is received, the manager should chase it up.

- v. If the manager decides not to make a referral, staff are not prohibited from making referrals to the assessment team on their own account.

### **Communication**

To ensure that this Child Protection Policy is effective, it is essential that the issues and recommendations are communicated to and adopted by all staff and volunteers who come into contact with children, young people and families. It is also important to ensure staff and volunteers are aware of their own vulnerability and departmental protocols are established and adhered to in order to reduce risk to staff or unsubstantiated allegations.

#### **Action :**

The Council, in partnership with other agencies will:

- i. Seek to raise awareness of child protection issues at a local level through disseminating its own policies and co-ordinating training, where appropriate.
- ii. Encourage the development of child protection policies in local clubs and organisations.
- iii. Share information according to the Surrey Information Sharing protocol.

**Runnymede Borough Council**  
**Information Strategy Member Working Group**

**Agreed Action Notes of meeting held on Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> March 2004**

	<b>Action By:</b>
<p><b>Present:</b> Cllrs Niall Thewlis, Roger Habgood, Mrs Eiry Price, Mrs Lynda Gillham, Hugh Meares, Bob Ray, Tim Williams, Ian Blowers, Nigel Watson, and. Alex Robinson <b>Apologies:</b> Adrian Tollett and Gordana Vitkovic</p>	
<p><b>3. Revised Working Group Membership</b> Cllr Bob Ray was welcomed to the group.</p>	All to Note
<p><b>1. Upgrade to the Housing System</b> IB and NW outlined the details of the report to Members of the group. Although officers had considered a number of alternative suppliers it was felt that the most cost effective option would be to upgrade to SX3's I-world and that the Data conversion should be simpler and less risky overall given that SX3 have already carried out between 50-60 similar upgrades to the new product. Members comments included: NT – whilst he acknowledged that there was no impact on the General Fund he queried whether it was necessary to upgrade prior to a decision being made on the possibility of stock transfer. HM – questioned the possibility of collaboration with another authority although officers reported that there was little interest in this. BR agreed that the upgrade needed to take place given that the existing product was 12 yrs old.</p> <p>It was agreed that the report should go to Corporate Mgt Cttee 1 April 2004.</p>	
<p><b>2. Members Computing Facilities</b> 2MB Broadband is being tested and evaluated over a three month trial period. NW will report back the findings. Concern was expressed at the additional costs ( £100 vs. £30 current rate). NT reported performance issues with his current pc settings – HM to assess and resolve. HM praised IS staff in particular Sally Barrett on notifying everyone about possible viruses during the last couple of weeks.</p>	<p>NW</p> <p>HM</p>
<p><b>3. ICT Strategy</b> Members requested guidance points or questions from Officers to take back to party groups. NW advised Members to take account of the ministerial amount allocated to us in respect of our successful IEG3 submission. We anticipate that the £350,000 grant will be dependant upon the implementation of some prescriptive requirements by the end of 2005. If we do not comply we will be required to return the grant. TW sought guidance from Members of the group on the type of policies that may wish to be developed. EP requested that as such a significant item the ICT strategy should be tabled for a meeting in its own right to give it the necessary time.</p>	All Group to note

<p><b>4. Any Other Business</b>  HM asked that enhanced presentational media equipment be considered for the Council Chamber following a visit to a Planning Committee at Windsor and Maidenhead.</p>	
<p><b>Date of Next Meeting</b>  The date of the next meeting will be at 6.00pm on Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> April 2004. Cllr Ray offered his apologies and advised that Cllr Greenwood may attend in his place.</p>	<p>All to Note</p>

Circulated by e-mail to:

Cllrs Niall Thewlis, Roger Habgood, Hugh Meares, Mrs Eiry Price, Mrs Lynda Gillham, Bob Ray & Adrian Tollett,  
Tim Williams, Nigel Watson, Gordana Vitkovic & Alex Robinson

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY WORKING GROUP  
17 MARCH 2004

Present: Councillors J. Haas, Mrs. S.E. Jacobs, Mrs. C.Y. Jones and Mrs. E.E. Price;  
Andrew Pearson, David Thomas, Ian Langmead, Nigel Watson and Kathryn Jack.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Miss M.N. Heath.

2. NOTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The notes of the meeting held on 12 February 2004 were accepted as a correct record. They had been submitted to Corporate Management Committee.

3. OUTLINE OF CURRENT P.R. ACTIVITY

The Group noted that a sum in the order of £101,450 was spent on "external communications". This was only a general guide, collated from departmental budget heads, since there was no central budget and no central budget manager.

The figure included:

- Marketing
- Dissemination of information to the public about services - leaflets, guides, notices, etc.
- General publicity/communications material for service users and tenants
- Brochures and reports for public consumption
- Communications with particular sectors - business, voluntary, residents, etc.

It excluded:

- Staff time (including the 0.25 FTE allocated to media relations)
- Formal advertisements and public notices

- Statutory communications where we have no real discretion
- Information designed for internal use but made available to the public.

Description	Department	Cost (£)
Annual Report net of advertising income	DAL	15,000
Runnymede Directory	DAL	3,000
Maintenance of notice boards	DAL/DTS	2,400
Posting on notice boards	DAL/DTS	1,500
Council Tax explanatory leaflet	DF	5,300
Promotion of recycling	DTS	6,000
Environmental health information	DTS	8,000
Building Control handbook and promotion	DTS	1,800
Safer Runnymede publicity	DTS	3,500
Leisure leaflets, information, Splash/Playscheme brochures, Halls publicity etc. (not Museum and Sports Centres)	DAL	22,000
Chertsey Museum information and publicity	DAL	2,150
Egham Sports Centre promotion and advertising	DAL	18,500
Abbey Fit Sports Centre promotion and advertising, say	DAL	5,000
Publicity for Day Centres, Careline, and Transport	DHCS	2,800
Housing/Community services info to general public	DHCS	3,000
Communications with particular sectors - partnership etc.	DHCS	1,500
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>101,450</b>

It was emphasised that this list was probably not exhaustive, and that the amount of staff time expended on public relations "per se" and external communications generally was significant. Members felt that ideally a central co-ordinator was needed to control this varied expenditure, and possibly to establish "Best Value". A central co-ordinator could also impose some economies of scale, avoid duplications, and possibly establish some savings targets. It was suggested that the greater efficiency imposed could in itself contribute towards the cost of the post.

#### 4. RESOURCING

In view of the current policy to achieve £1m net reduction in recurring annual revenue expenditure over the next 3 years, the Group took a hard look at the costs involved in providing a dedicated public relations/communications resource. The Group were of the opinion that the establishment of such a post was necessary if the Council was to have a fully effective communications policy (both internal and external). The main advantages of such a post would be:

- Availability of staff time to oversee and promote external communications across the

Authority and offer advice on communication of the Council's work and objectives;

- Pro-active development of long term strategy and annual planning/review;
- Management of branding, and presentation of information sources including website;
- Advice and assistance in communicating corporate objectives and messages internally;
- Prime contact point for external relations;
- Advice and assistance in developing methods for effective feedback in both external and internal communications.

Although some fact-finding was needed, it was estimated that the annual revenue cost of such a full-time post (including on-costs) would be approximately £40,000. It was suggested that consultants could be employed on a one-off basis to design and market a corporate image but no conclusion was reached on this.

The Group discussed the hours needed for a communications post, with most feeling that a full-time post would be better. It was recognised that under the current medium-term financial strategy the cost of a post must be accommodated within the net revenue savings target.

Accordingly, it was AGREED -

that the Officers would report to the next meeting on a proposed Job Title, Job Description, and Person Specification for the proposed new post.

5. MATTERS IDENTIFIED BY THE CONSULTANTS

- (i) Media Relations Objectives:

The Group agreed with these recommendations contained in pages 26 and 27 of Luther Pendragon's report:

1. All media relations activity should be managed by the communications and information function.
2. The function should develop a strategic and proactive media relations strategy which incorporates the views held by local and national media.
3. Develop effective relationship with the local media meeting annually and bi-monthly to discuss plan.
4. There should be external communications champions in each department who will liaise regularly with the external relations officer to identify news stories.

(ii) Enhance Two-Way Internal Communication

David Thomas, who submitted a comprehensive discussion paper, emphasised that a fundamental culture change was not required, since the Staff Survey had shown that internal communication was good in many areas. However, the Group agreed that the Personnel Bulletin could be usefully upgraded into a Staff Newsletter. This would be a matter for the new postholder, who would also be asked to consider ways and means of increasing staff interface with Council policies and targets. The following specific recommendation from Luther Pendragon was also agreed:

Our key recommendation in this regard would be to establish clear agreed communications structures for every department on how to cascade information and ensure continuous two-way feedback.

(iii) Intranet Calendar

Nigel Watson tabled a paper offering three ways to provide an Intranet Calendar to improve internal communication. It was agreed to ask the I.T. Working Group to look at the first proposal. The following Luther Pendragon recommendations were also agreed:

1. Create internal communication champions who seek proactive news to be shared through a staff newsletter.
2. Create a process to harness staff ideas and news through the staff newsletter.
3. Improve the internal Intranet.
4. Develop an on-line calendar for communications priorities, to include marketing, events and media relations ideas.
5. Where possible drive cross departmental training opportunities.
6. Drive cross-departmental groups on consultation for the new office.

6. MATTERS SPECIFICALLY RAISED BY MEMBERS OF THE WORKING GROUP

- (i) Public/Council Communication: It was suggested that any future public survey or questionnaire should carry an additional question asking the public their preferred mode of communication with the Council. This could also be a responsibility of the new postholder. Members emphasised the need to be "audience aware".
- (ii) Use of Councillors in Communication: The Group felt that the new postholder needed to ensure that Members were kept informed of key issues. This particularly applied to Ward issues, where the system was not working at the moment. Information (and photographs) about Ward Councillors could be placed on the Council's notice boards. Nigel Watson reported that the Borough Intelligence Model (BIM) would go some way to improving access to information, although work was still ongoing on the input form design.

- (iii) Area Offices: This had been raised by Councillor Pate. The Group felt that it was a matter which went beyond its communications remit. It had previously been considered by the former Policy and Resources Committee and full Council, and it was agreed that any further review was really a matter for the Corporate Management Committee.
  
- (iv) Council Branding and Strapline: A Housestyle or Brand would only be effective if compliance was assured. Some elements of a uniform style had been agreed in the 1990s, but had been ineffective because compliance could not be maintained. Andrew Pearson confirmed that the policy was still in force. It was agreed that the issue should be a key task for the new postholder, if approved.
  
- (v) Communication about New Civic Offices: This was a sensitive issue as the final decision had not yet been made. It was AGREED that David Thomas would submit a further report.

## 7. ALLOCATION OF WORK AREAS TO MEMBERS

The Group agreed to defer any Member involvement in specific communications/media topics until the new post was established.

## 8. NEXT MEETING

It was agreed that the next meeting would be held at 10.30 a.m. on Thursday, 22 April in the Committee Room.