

# **Supplementary Committee Agenda**



**Epping Forest  
District Council**

## ***Finance and Performance Management Cabinet Committee Monday, 23rd November, 2009***

**Place:** Committee Room 1, Civic Offices, High Street, Epping

**Time:** 6.30 pm

**Democratic Services:** Gary Woodhall  
The Office of the Chief Executive  
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- 10. UPDATE ON PERFORMANCE OF BENEFIT CLAIM PROCESSING (Pages 3 - 6)**  
(Director of Finance & ICT) To consider the attached report (FPM-015-2009/10).
- 11. REPORT OF THE JOINT MEMBER & OFFICER 2010/11 BUDGET WORKING GROUP (Pages 7 - 10)**  
(Director of Finance & ICT) To consider the attached report (FPM-016-2009/10).

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**Report to the Finance and  
Performance Management Cabinet  
Committee**



**Epping Forest  
District Council**

**Report reference: FPM-015-2009/10**

**Date of meeting: 23 November  
2009**

**Portfolio: Finance & Economic Development**

**Subject: Update on Performance of Benefit Claim Processing**

**Responsible Officer: Janet Twinn (01992 564215).**

**Democratic Services Officer: Gary Woodhall (01992 564470).**

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**Recommendations/Decisions Required:**

- (1) That the current performance of Benefit claim processing be noted; and**
- (2) That the service is due to undergo an inspection by the Audit Commission be noted.**

**Executive Summary:**

The report sets out the current performance levels for the processing of new benefit claims and change events for existing benefit claims and advises of a forthcoming inspection by the Audit Commission.

**Reasons for Proposed Decision:**

To keep Members informed of the current performance levels and workload issues.

**Other Options for Action:**

Currently Members are only being asked to note current performance and workload issues.

**Report:**

1. The average time taken to process Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit claims has increased during the last couple of years. This has primarily been due to the conversion of the IT system, which diverted resources away from the processing of claims, and also meant that in December 2008/January 2009 there was a period of 6 weeks when no claim processing work could be done at all. The Audit Commission became concerned at the processing times and, in January 2009, began arranging monthly meetings over a six month period. An action plan was produced and targets were set and achieved. In July 2009, the Cabinet approved a restructure of the Benefits Division and new posts were created to help with the recent increase in the number of new claims received.

2. At the meeting on 15 June 2009, the Finance & Performance Cabinet Committee were

updated on the performance of benefit claim processing and the purpose of this report is to give a further update of the current position. Appendix A shows the monthly performance of benefit claim processing since January 2009. The effect of the conversion of the IT system can be clearly seen but there was a steady improvement up until June 2009. Performance declined from June for two main reasons. Firstly, four permanent members of staff resigned for various reasons, and resignations were also received from three very good agency members of staff that had been employed to help clear the backlog of work. These vacancies, and the fact that July/August/September are very popular months for staff to take annual leave, meant that performance declined during the summer months. However, more agency staff have been employed and both the processing times and the number of claims processed have started to improve again, particularly towards the end of October. Another reason that contributed to the decline in the performance was that the section was restructured in July. Whilst it is anticipated that the change will have long term gains, in the short term, performance was affected whilst the assessment staff adapted to their new roles. It should also be noted that the caseload has continued to rise and is currently at a higher level than it has previously been in the last two decades, and in addition, the number of items of post received each week continue to be generally 200-300 items more each week than the numbers received for the comparative weeks last year.

3. A recruitment exercise has been undertaken to recruit to 8 vacancies in the section. Job offers have been made and accepted for the posts of Investigation Officer, Visiting Officer, Senior System Administration Officer and Overpayment Officer. Currently, we are waiting for references, medical approval etc, but it is not expected that they will be able to start their employment until after Christmas. The response for the fixed term contract post of a Benefit Officer was disappointing, although two applicants with suitable experience were offered the post. However, both applicants have declined the job offer, one specifically because it is a fixed term contract. Further options are currently being considered for this post. It was hoped that the post of System Administration Officer would be determined as a Grade 6 following a job evaluation, but unfortunately, it was determined that it should be a Grade 5. Again the response was disappointing, with no applicants having any relevant experience and therefore, if an appointment is made, there will be a significant training requirement. Interviews are ongoing for this post as well as the two Benefit Assistant posts.

4. Although we had met the agreed targets with the Audit Commission, we have received notification from the Audit Commission that the Benefits Service will be undergoing an inspection by them in the week commencing 26 January 2010. An initial meeting has been arranged with them regarding the inspection on 24 November 2009 and a self assessment has to be completed before the inspection. Benefit inspections used to be carried out by the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate and were first introduced in the mid 1990's. The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate has since been incorporated into the Audit Commission and it is now their responsibility for carrying out inspections. The Benefits Service of the Authority has not previously undergone any such inspection.

**Resource Implications:**

Within existing resources.

**Legal and Governance Implications:**

No specific implications.

**Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:**

No specific implications.

**Consultation Undertaken:**

None.

**Background Papers:**

Report to Finance & Performance Management Cabinet Committee 15 June 2009.

**Impact Assessments:**

Risk Management

The decision to note current performance and workload issues has no Risk Management impacts.

Equality and Diversity:

Did the initial assessment of the proposals contained in this report for relevance to the Council's general equality duties, reveal any potentially adverse equality implications? No

Where equality implications were identified through the initial assessment process, has a formal Equality Impact Assessment been undertaken? No

What equality implications were identified through the Equality Impact Assessment process?  
The decision to note current performance and workload issues has no Equality & Diversity impact.

How have the equality implications identified through the Equality Impact Assessment been addressed in this report in order to avoid discrimination against any particular group?

<b>Benefit processing times</b>								
<b>Month</b>	<b>Caseload</b>	<b>New claims actioned in month</b>	<b>New claims average time (days)</b>	<b>New claims average time (cumulative)</b>	<b>Change events actioned in month</b>	<b>Change events average time (days)</b>	<b>Change events average time (cumulative)</b>	<b>Number of post items received</b>
<b>January 09</b>	8677	314	98.04	46.85	448	26.87	12.96	5758
<b>February 09</b>	8646	549	57.59	48.33	19410	2.02	5.80	6457
<b>March 09</b>	8875	948	42.03	47.12	2371	9.26	6.05	10083
<b>April 09</b>	8917	592	36.55	36.55	1481	12.92	12.92	6694
<b>May 09</b>	8913	393	30.58	34.17	1291	11.53	12.27	6560
<b>June 09</b>	9002	376	32.49	33.71	1252	9.44	11.39	7545
<b>July 09</b>	8964	462	34.31	33.86	1354	11.06	11.31	5733
<b>August 09</b>	9067	401	39.76	34.92	5000	3.58	7.58	6489
<b>September 09</b>	8861	529	38.47	35.61	1380	13.68	8.30	5547
<b>October 09</b>	9109	507	36.92	35.81	2682	12.17	8.15	6437

## ***Report to the Finance & Performance Management Cabinet Committee***



**Epping Forest  
District Council**

**Report reference:** *FPM-016-2009/10*  
**Date of meeting:** *23 November 2009*

**Portfolio:** Performance Management/Finance and Economic Development

**Subject:** Report of the Joint Member & Officer 2010/11 Budget Working Group.

**Responsible Officer:** Bob Palmer (01992 564279)

**Democratic Services Officer:** Gary Woodhall (01992 564470)

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### **Recommendations/Decisions Required:**

- (1) To consider the areas for review identified by the Working Group and where appropriate request the relevant Portfolio Holders and Chief Officers to commence the reviews; and**
- (2) To determine the frequency when update reports on the reviews are required.**

### **Executive Summary:**

At the meeting of this Committee on 5 October it was decided that a joint Officer and Member Working Group be established to identify areas for review and ensure that resources were allocated in line with the key Cabinet priorities. This was endorsed by Cabinet on 12 October.

The Working Group met on 5 November and considered a number of areas. It was decided that some of these were not appropriate to pursue at this time but a number of reviews were identified. It is not intended that the items set out in the body of the report are an exhaustive or definitive list and Members and Chief Officers are invited to identify any additional areas that might provide net savings.

### **Reasons for Proposed Decision:**

To focus available resources on reviewing key areas to produce the net savings required in the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

### **Other Options for Action:**

Members may identify other areas that they feel could provide greater net savings or that are a higher priority for review.

### **Report:**

1. On 5 October this Committee created a Working Group comprising the Leader, the Finance and Economic Development Portfolio Holder, the Performance Management Portfolio Holder, the Deputy Chief Executive and the Director of Finance and ICT. The Working Group was asked to identify areas for review and ensure that resources were allocated in line with the

key Cabinet priorities. The formation of the Working Group was endorsed by Cabinet on 12 October.

2. Due to various leave commitments it was not possible for the Working Group to meet until 5 November. A wide ranging discussion took place and a number of areas were identified as either suitable for review or not currently in need of further examination.

#### Areas Suitable for Review

3. *Forester* – it was felt that the current exercise to tender for printing and distribution could be expanded to cover the potential outsourcing of aspects of the editorial role and greater input from the Local Strategic Partnership. A saving of £40,000 was identified as a target with the review to be led by the Deputy Chief Executive and the Leader.

4. *Members* – concern was expressed about the growth in the number of meetings and whether 58 remained an appropriate number of Members for the Council. A target saving was not identified and it was acknowledged that a review to reduce the number of Members might take a number of years to complete. However, a review was felt necessary and, as he has previously examined this issue, the Assistant to the Chief Executive is to be invited to lead the review with the Leader.

5. *Police Community Support Officers* - the Council entered into the commitment to jointly fund 6 PCSOs prior to the heavy investment in the Safer, Cleaner, Greener initiative and the expansion of the Safer Communities Team. It was felt appropriate that the funding for the PCSOs should be negotiated down in a tapered way over a period of time. The appropriate Chief Officer and Portfolio Holder to take this forward are the Director of Environment and Street Scene and the Community Safety and Transport Portfolio Holder.

6. *Insurance* – a tendering exercise is currently underway as a collaborative procurement with 8 other authorities. This is being co-ordinated by the Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership and a target saving of £100,000 has been identified (with a minimum of £60,000 of the saving relating to the General Fund). This work is being led by the Director of Finance and ICT and the Performance Management Portfolio Holder.

7. *Voluntary Sector* – it was felt that the grants to Voluntary Action Epping Forest, Citizen's Advice Bureau and the women's refuge should be protected but at their current level. The area suitable for review here is the process by which grants are administered as it was felt that this could be streamlined. The appropriate people for this review are the Assistant to the Chief Executive and the Leisure and Wellbeing Portfolio Holder.

8. *Information Centre* – there was no desire to withdraw services from remote locations but it was felt that a review could consider the appropriateness of current locations. Specifically, a review considering the relocation of the Information Centre in Waltham Abbey from the Town Hall to the Museum or Library might be beneficial. This review should be conducted by the Deputy Chief Executive and the Leader.

9. *Print/Messenger Service* – concern over value for money had been highlighted by an Internal Audit report. It was felt that a review should be conducted by the Director of Corporate Support Services and the Performance Management Portfolio Holder to examine the greater use of electronic access and possible outsourcing.

10. *Secretarial Bureau/Land Charges* – Members felt a review covering efficiency and value for money should be conducted by the Director of Corporate Support Services and the Performance Management Portfolio Holder.



11. *Legal Services* – the Group were unsure why the Council were not participating in the shared services arrangements involving Essex County Council and most other districts in Essex. A review was felt appropriate to cover working with this shared service and examining other models of service delivery. This review should be led by the Director of Corporate Support Services and the Legal and Estates Portfolio Holder.

12. *Building Control* – the Planning Services Standing Scrutiny Panel have already initiated a review to consider a shared service and alternative models of service delivery. The need for this review was agreed and it is suggested that this Committee keeps the work of the Standing Scrutiny Panel under review.

13. *Grounds Maintenance/Country Care/Nursery* – it was felt that a review of these areas should concentrate on the combining of functions/management, ensuring full cost recovery from the Housing Revenue Account and Essex County Council and evaluating the direct purchasing of plant stock. This review should be led by the Director of Environment and Street Scene and the Environment Portfolio Holder.

14. *Leisure and Young People* – spending on Community Arts, the Museum, Sports Development and Community Development is currently £1.1 million. A target saving of £100,000 was identified from these areas, with the review to be led by the Deputy Chief Executive and the Leisure and Wellbeing Portfolio Holder.

15. *Depot Rationalisation/Property Development* – the Working Group noted the work of the officer asset management group and the projects underway to either reduce costs or create new income streams. It is suggested that this Committee keeps the work of the asset management group under review.

#### Areas not currently for further review

16. *Car Parking Charges* – Members felt that car parking charges should again be frozen. However, this should only be the case for 2010/11 and a review should be considered as part of next year's budget process.

17. *Waltham Abbey Cash Office* – it was felt that this facility was valued by the local community and should not be subjected to a review at this time.

18. *Cost of Senior Management* – given the short period of time since the last restructure it was not felt appropriate to conduct another review at this time.

#### Other Suggestions

19. The Working Group felt that it was important that the items set out above should not be seen as an exhaustive or definitive list and that both Members and officers should be invited to come forward with any additional suggestions they may have.

#### **Resource Implications:**

The Medium Term Financial Strategy established savings targets of £300,000 for 2010/11, £600,000 for 2011/12, £400,000 for 2012/13 and £200,000 for 2013/14. In order to achieve the savings required reviews will have to be undertaken in a number of areas. The resource implications of each review will not become clear until additional work has been performed.

#### **Legal and Governance Implications:**

Each review is likely to have different implications and the lead officers will need to be mindful

of these.

**Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:**

Some of the reviews will have environmental implications and lead officers will need to be mindful of these.

**Consultation Undertaken:**

None.

**Background Papers:**

Previous reports to this Committee.

**Impact Assessments:**

Risk Management

If savings reviews are not concentrated on key areas and initiated soon the Council may find it difficult to achieve the savings targets set out in the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

Lead officers will need to be mindful of the risks associated with their reviews.

Equality and Diversity:

Did the initial assessment of the proposals contained in this report for relevance to the Council's general equality duties; reveal any potentially adverse equality implications? YES

Where equality implications were identified through the initial assessment process, has a formal Equality Impact Assessment been undertaken? Not fully

What equality implications were identified through the Equality Impact Assessment process?

The savings on community and cultural services may impact adversely on their target groups of the elderly, young people and people with disabilities.

A cap on voluntary sector grants will affect the level of service available to be provided by the Woman's Refuge, CAB Advisory Services and the work of the Voluntary Sector generally.

How have the equality implications identified through the Equality Impact Assessment been addressed in this report in order to avoid discrimination against any particular group?

Will be considered in greater detail as part of the review.