

Report to Cabinet



Report Reference: C/012/2006-07.

Date of Meeting: 10 July 2006.

**Epping Forest
District Council**

Portfolio: Finance, Performance Management, and Corporate Support Services.

Subject: Additional Provision of Staff for Maternity Leave Cover.

**Officer contact for further information: Bob Palmer (01992 – 56 4279).
Janet Twinn (01992 – 56 4215).**

Democratic Services Officer: Gary Woodhall (01992 – 56 4470).

Recommendations:

- (1) That, in order to maintain acceptable levels of service whilst staff are on maternity leave, a supplementary DDF estimate for 2006/07 in the sum of £40,000 be recommended to the Council for approval; and**
- (2) That, a DDF growth bid for 2007/08 in the sum of £40,000 be made.**

Report:

1. The Benefits Division currently has an establishment of 33 staff. Within that establishment, two Benefit Officers and one Benefit Assistant are due to go on maternity leave shortly. The expected dates of confinement are all within one month of each other and they are expected to commence their maternity leave in September/October.
2. These Officers are all experienced and the absence of the three of them, for a period that could be up to one year, will seriously impact on the performance of the Benefits Division. It is not possible to absorb these absences within the existing resources and therefore the performance for BVPI's and Government returns will suffer. There are currently three key BVPI's that are benefit related and the two that relate to the speed of processing for new claims and changes in circumstances will show a poor level of performance. A greater impact however, will be on the claimants who will receive a lower standard of service and delays in the receipt of their benefit entitlements, unless we can take steps to minimise the impact of these absences.
3. In the past the Benefits Division has attempted to cover periods of extended absence through overtime working. This has only been partially successful as inevitably staff performance reduces during long periods of overtime. Consequently staff morale and BVPI's have suffered. In this instance there is sufficient time available to put a more appropriate solution in place.
4. There are various options that can be considered which are:
 - **Employ temporary members of staff for fixed term contracts.** This is probably the best option to secure temporary cover for the Benefit Assistant but there are two difficulties with this option. Firstly, it is unlikely that experienced Benefit Officers will be looking for a short-term contract as an employee of an authority. Such Officers normally sign with an agency to carry

out contract work through the agency at a much higher level of pay. Secondly, it is not known how long the staff will be on maternity leave and therefore it is difficult to determine the length of the fixed term contract. Obviously the longer the contract, the greater the likelihood of attracting suitable staff but, it may result in an overlap if a member of staff returns before the fixed term contract ends. This option would also allow staff interested in acting up to express their interest. There is a possibility that one member of staff may wish to take this opportunity to gain more experience, but that would still leave another vacancy to be filled on a temporary basis.

- **Employ agency staff during the period of maternity leave.** Previous experience has shown that this is the most reliable option for employing experienced Benefit Officers. They can be employed at short notice and, as they are on just a weeks notice to terminate their services, an overlap when the employee returns to work can be avoided. It is a more expensive option than employing temporary staff ourselves, however, agency staff are only paid for the hours that they work and we do not pay them for absences such as sickness, annual leave etc, as we would if they were employed by the Council. Previous experience has also shown that this is probably not the best option to secure cover for the Benefit Assistant.
 - **Employ a combination of temporary and agency staff.**
5. It is considered that the third option above is the best course of action. An advert can be placed for a temporary Benefit Officer and a temporary Benefit Assistant on six-month contracts, specifying the possibility of an extension. Depending on the response to the advert, it may then be necessary to use agency staff. As staff turnover will inevitably occur during the period, the use of temporary staff may provide some suitable applicants for any permanent vacancies that arise during the period.
 6. At the present time it is not known exactly how long the members of staff will be absent on maternity leave but they are all expecting to have at least six months maternity leave, with the possibility that it will be up to a year. The cost (inclusive of oncosts) for a grade 6 Benefit Officer on a temporary contract will be £27,100 per annum, and for a grade 3 Benefit Assistant the cost will be £17,800 per annum. Experienced Benefit Officers employed through an agency are currently costing £24.00 per hour but many authorities pay up to £30.00 per hour for such staff. Allowing for absences for which they are not paid, the cost of a contractor will be in the region of £40,000 per annum. There will be some salary offsetting as staff on maternity leave do not receive full pay and receive no pay after 26 weeks. Taking the offsetting into account, it is estimated that the total cost of maternity cover will be £80,000 and that it will fall half in 2006/07 and half in 2007/08.

Statement in support of recommended action:

7. It is essential that temporary cover be provided in order to maintain good performance in the Benefits Division.

Options for Action:

8. In addition to the options above, the option to do nothing has been considered and rejected. The absences, which could be up to a year each, cannot be covered from within existing resources and to do nothing would result in a decline in performance

for BVPI's and could cause hardship and potential homelessness to claimants through excessive time taken to process claims.

Consultation undertaken:

9. Unison have been consulted and support the recommendations.

Resource Implications:

Budget Provision: Additional budget provision of £40,000 of DDF money requested as a supplementary estimate for 2006/07. A bid for a further £40,000 of DDF money is proposed for 2007/08.

Personnel: 3 temporary members of staff either on temporary contracts or employed through an agency.

Land: Nil.

Community Plan/BVPP reference: CP3 (a) and CP3 (c).

Relevant statutory powers: N/A.

Background papers: None.

Environmental/Human Rights Act/Crime and Disorder Act Implications: None.

Key Decision Reference (if required): N/A.