REPORT OF COUNCILLOR TERRY HALL – RESOURCES
COUNCIL MEETING – 20 APRIL 2004

1 CUSTOMER SERVICE (SOMERSET DIRECT)

At the time of writing (5 April) none of the Districts or County Council has so far been able to fully bring their systems in to use. This is a consequence of software problems, which are the responsibility of the supplier to solve. A new version of the software has been received which we will be testing on behalf of the whole partnership before Easter, and if OK we expect to go fully live after Easter.

However, all incoming calls to 356356 are being answered by the Customer Services section using the new telephony systems which enables important data regarding call arrival patterns and durations to be obtained. This will permit us to match staffing to demand more closely in the near future.

The Customer Services section through existing Deane systems is providing enquiries relating to Benefits, Council Tax and other simple elements of information. Migration of the other services to Customer Service will follow as soon as possible.

I hope to be able to give a more encouraging update at the Meeting on 20 April.

2 PERSONNEL

The installation and testing of the new HR/Payroll system has gone according to plan. Two parallel runs have been successfully completed, with the new system paying staff exactly the same as the old one. The pay staff receives towards the end of April will be the first generated by the new system alone, the old system having now been closed down. We are looking forward to using the new system to produce useful management data - particularly to help us in continuing to manage staff absences.

At the end of this month the IiP Assessors return to decide whether or not the Council as a whole has achieved the Investors in People Standard.   Whilst there are no guarantees of achieving the award, we hope that all of the efforts by many staff will pay off, and that we will be able to report success to the next Council.

3 BENEFITS

On 30 March 2004, we received our long expected visit from the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) for the Comprehensive Performance Assessment. While the Inspectors were only with us for the day, they set a challenging schedule

covering all areas of the Department for Work and Pensions' Performance Standards.

We expect to receive the BFI's draft report by 16 April 2004. We will then have 2 days to add any comments before returning it for submission to the Audit Commission.

Our end of year results against Best Value Performance Indicators show we worked out new claims 3 days faster than in the previous year. However, in working out changes of circumstances, our performance dropped by 0.27 days. Our Investigation Team surpassed all expectations in 2003/04; we had hoped to get £30k from the DWP for our action against fraudsters - instead we will receive over £60k!

4 REVENUES

The Revenues Team have largely been concentrating on the year-end processes over the last couple of months for the Rents, Council Tax and Business Rate systems.

Year-end has largely gone smoothly with all Council Tax/Business Rate bills and Rent notifications having been produced and issued to timetable. The timetable for Council Tax and Business Rate has been much tighter this year due to the payment date having moved forward to 1 April 2004. Savings in postage costs have been made, where possible, by issuing documents using the Post Office's walksort discount system.

The project to produce a Council Tax leaflet in conjunction with the other Somerset districts and the County Council has been successfully completed. This has resulted in our issuing a better quality leaflet, but at a reduced cost.

Figures recently produced indicate that we have increased direct debit take-up for Council Tax and Business Rates over the past year. It had been feared that bringing forward the payment date might have resulted in large numbers of people cancelling their direct debits. However, so far, this has not proven to be the case. 65.5% of Council Tax payers and 59.6% of Business Rate payers now pay by way of direct debit.

Our Council Tax in-year collection rate has again improved on previous years. At 31 March 2004 we had collected 97.92% of the charge for 2003/04. This marks our highest collection rate since the return in-house of the Revenues Service in 2000. The collection rate for Business Rates fell slightly below that for last year and stood at 98.49% at 31 March 2004.

5 FINANCIAL SERVICES

The Financial Services Unit is now working towards the speedy closedown of the 2003/04 Accounts. The outturn for the year will be reported to the Executive at the June meeting.

Work is also starting in conjunction with the IS Unit on a review of the financial systems employed by the Authority and the links with other feeder systems. It is hoped that this review will enable streamlining to take place and for more efficient use of resources.

Finally we are looking at the Financial Awareness Training that is available to Members of the Council. Revamped training sessions will take place in July, details will be available from Greg Dyke in the next few weeks.

6 MEMBERS SERVICES

A survey of councillors is currently being undertaken to ascertain which papers they would like to continue to receive as hard copies, thus reducing the amount of paperwork sent out. Any Member who has not responded to the survey is asked to do so as soon as possible.

A booklet drawing attention to the services available to Members has recently been circulated to all councillors.

Arrangements are well in hand for the forthcoming civic functions, Annual Council on 5 May , Civic Reception, Dinner and Dance at Oake Manor Golf Club on 6 May, Civic Service at St. Andrew's Church on 9 May and the admission of Councillor Meikle as a Freeman of the Borough at the Brewhouse Theatre on 10 May.

The Member Training Programme for 2005/2006 has been approved and this will include training sessions on Ethics and Probity, Interviewing Skills, Disputes and Appeals, Finance, Licensing, Overview and Scrutiny, Time Management and Personal Organisation, Chairing Skills and Dealing with Lobbying, Case Work and Advice Surgeries.

Finally, initial discussions have started regarding the setting up of individual web pages for councillors on the Council's web site.

7 INFORMATION SYSTEMS

Last week saw the main year end process for the rents system. This was the final process of what has been a pretty intense 2 months.

Supporting People - we had to make last minute changes to the system to cope with the difference between our new charges and the amount of funding that supporting people are giving us this year.

Cash Receipting - this major new system went live on 1 April. A few teething problems with telephone payments were sorted by the morning of 2 April, and the system is now running smoothly (this system is helping realise about £12,000 pa in savings)

Payroll/HR - the report generator that comes with the new system is proving less user friendly than anticipated and so we are now developing the reports down here rather than the personnel staff doing them. I should point out that this is not necessarily the fault of the system, instead it is a demonstration of the fact that any complex system will need support from the IS Unit.

E-Government
Over the last 2 months our web site had an average of 2300 page views per day, with about 20,000 unique visitors. These figures mean we are set to exceed our forecasts of visitors published in our IEG statement. The new content management software (allowing users to create and maintain their own web pages) is being used in Benefits, Planning, Building Control, Local Plan, Economic Development, Community Initiatives, Office Services (the Old Municipal Buildings site) and Heritage & Landscape. This tool includes automatic review and expiry dates of the pages.

Storage
Our 5 main data servers recently hit 1/2 terabyte of data stored collectively - We are now working hard on the storage area network procurement with some site visits being arranged later this month.

Councillor Terry Hall