

## **COUNCIL MEETING – 20 JULY 2004**

### **REPORT OF COUNCILLOR HALL - RESOURCES**

#### **FINANCIAL SERVICES UNIT**

During the last three months the Financial Services Unit have been finalising the annual accounts for the year ending 31 March 2004. This work is now complete and the Unit is now working with the Audit Commission who is currently auditing the accounts. In addition with the forthcoming Leisure Trust the final financial arrangements are being made to ensure a smooth handover and finally work on the first formal budget monitoring exercise of 2004/05 is underway.

#### **MEMBER SERVICES**

The programme for the review of the Council's Overview and Scrutiny role continues with visits to Beacon Authorities and with pilots being undertaken by the Community Leadership Review Panel and the Strategic Planning, Transportation & Economic Development Review Panel. Helen Watson of Public Sector Training has been engaged to facilitate the proposed Member's Forum and to deliver training.

The Ministry of Defence have announced plans to commemorate the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the end of the Second World War. Commemoration events will take place on 10 July 2005, which is the mid point between VE Day and VJ Day.

This will be the last official, formal commemoration of the end of the Second World War. We are currently working in partnership with the Royal British Legion, United Services Association and the Police to mark this occasion locally and discuss initial thoughts on what form the commemoration could take.

Following a demonstration on the use of a web cam as a means of improving communication with citizens, further discussions are taking place on the possible use of this technology by the Council.

A report is to be submitted to the Resources Review Panel at its meeting on 22 July regarding a suggestion that the Council make a contribution towards the cost of Councillors subscribing to Broadband.

A report will also be submitted to the Review Board at its meeting on 5 August asking for guidance how best to allocate the budget for attendance at Conferences by Councillors.

#### **OFFICE SERVICES**

A trial of revised working arrangements for Caretaking staff at Deane House has proved successful. The 'split shift' pattern of working, with its inherent wild fluctuations in hours from week to week, has been replaced with a formal rota of early and late working. This has the twin benefits of the building being covered from 7.00am to whenever evening meetings finish and the staff themselves being able to enjoy more freedom away from work.

Replacement of the mail-franking machine with a more up-to-date model will allow us to monitor and analyse much more closely postage trends and costs. This will be an important tool in helping us to reach the planned reduction in postage costs by switching as much as possible to Second Class.

The Geographic Information Systems (GIS) team is continuing to introduce new technology across Service Units. Putting much of our information into a mapping background will help deliver services to the public by making the information much easier to present – a picture being worth a thousand words. It will also mean that information will be much more readily accessible and interchangeable between all sections of the Council.

## **CUSTOMER SERVICES**

The Customer Services team is now established, and dealing in varying depths with nine of the first ten services that were scheduled to be included in the first ten. Those are, the exchange facility of 356356, Housing Benefits, Electoral services, Parking services, Land charges, Waste Management, Planning services, Democratic services and taking electronic payments. Council Tax is the last of the first phase, which will be completed by the end of this month.

The service is dealing with between 900 and 1000 calls per day, and already some 33% of calls are being dealt with at the first point of contact. This means that the average 'talk time' is now in excess of 2 minutes.

There remains staffing and accommodation difficulties, which are currently being worked upon, plus the reliability of the telephone system needs to be made more robust. Again this is being worked upon, and these minor points should not detract from the overwhelming view that this is the way of dealing with customers is the right way that makes maximum use of today's technology.

The system is now providing invaluable management information on calls levels etc. that will allow us to more closely align staff to calls and thereby improve our service.

## **BENEFITS**

April 2004 saw the abolition of the requirement for customers to complete renewal claim forms every year. However, the Government recognise that customers sometimes forget to tell us about changes in their circumstances, so they have replaced renewals with targeted reviews. We must visit at least 50% of those claims that we review. Since April, we have found that nearly half of those we visit have failed to tell us about something that means they are entitled to less benefit. Although this increases the level of overpaid

benefit we identify, it means we ensure more accurate payments to those genuinely entitled. The implementation of the new review regime impacted on our performance as officers adapted to new working practices. However, we saw steady improvement in speed of processing in May and June and the outlook in achieving our annual targets looks very positive.

## **REVENUES**

Much work has been undertaken during the first couple of months of the financial year in order to implement the Revenues Team Plan for 2004/05. Individual team plans have been developed for each of the 5 teams within Revenues as part of the PREDs process.

The major areas of the team plan currently being worked on are as follows:

- *Cash Allocation System Development* – a new in-house cash receipting system was introduced in April 2004. This system is being further developed so that it will help us to streamline and automate, where possible, our cash balancing and reconciliation processes. Doing so will save time, provide full audit trails for each transaction and provide for greater accuracy and procedural clarity in a complex area.
- *Council Tax & NNDR Collection Rates* – these are being closely monitored in view of the change this year to the standard instalment date. The statistics for the end of the first quarter indicate an increase in the percentage of Council Tax collected and put us ahead of target. The NNDR percentage is slightly down on target, but the figure has been adversely affected by the creation of large amounts of new debit since the start of the financial year. (A full report on collection is being made to the Resources Review Panel on 22 July 2004).
- *Council Tax IT System Development* – a project has recently been started to upgrade our Council Tax IT system – this will result in a move to windows based technology and will introduce enhancements such as electronic billing.
- *Non-Domestic Rate Legislation Changes* – April 2005 sees the introduction of major changes to Non Domestic Rates legislation. These include a re-valuation of all business properties and the introduction of new transitional and small business relief schemes together with the business improvement districts (BIDS) scheme. All will require major changes to our software. Much work has been undertaken since the beginning of the financial year to prepare for these changes.
- *Non Domestic Rate Discretionary Relief Guidelines* – we are currently in the process of reviewing our existing guidelines with a view to updating them and including the various new reliefs. Once complete a revised draft will be put before the Executive for approval.

## **INFORMATION SYSTEMS**

Training - The development team (11 staff) are undertaking a 5-day training course in Microsoft DotNet technology from 19th - 23rd July.

During that period we will only be responding to 'emergency' system support calls.

FMS Review - A PAR is being prepared for to capital funding to replace FMS software. Target implementation date is Oct 05.

Housing - work on developing an integrated stock condition / programmed maintenance / asset register has commenced - target completion December 04.

Land Searches - testing of electronic link to Somerset CC in progress, when live this will speed the turn around for County's input to the land search significantly.

Storage Network - Tenders are now being received, with target live date Oct 05.

Intranet - Staff are now being consulted on ideas for the new intranet system. A 'working group' of IS Unit and Policy and Performance staff is being set up to specify the work.

6 week placement from West Country Training Services - helping people recovering from long term illness get back in to work. We have taken on someone as part of this programme with significant project management experience for a 6-week placement. We expect both us and the 'placement' to gain significantly from this.

Wireless networking - a small area of The Deane House is now enabled - we continue to check the security of this and will enable the entire building once satisfied.

## **INTERNAL AUDIT**

The Audit Team have been concentrating on getting on with the main systems based audits during the first quarter of 2004/05 which include Bank Reconciliation, Treasury Management, Housing Rents. The section undertakes other non-audit duties which have seen individual members of the team dealing with issues covering a wide range of Council activities such as: -

- Data Protection – General advice and guidance on data protection issues (Dealing with subject access requests, providing guidance to staff on disclosures)
- Risk Management – Facilitation of Risk Management sessions and ongoing involvement in the creation of risk registers covering various areas of Council activity.
- Corporate Governance – Setting up arrangements for the Council's new Corporate Governance Committee.

**Councillor Terry Hall**