

## **COUNCIL MEETING – 24 FEBRUARY 2004**

### **Electoral Services**

The Daily Mail of the 7<sup>th</sup> February reported that it successfully registered a bogus voter (Gus Troobev) in 31 marginal constituencies. It however admits that it was foiled at Taunton Deane and The Forest of Dean. I wish to congratulate and thank Craig Morse, our Electoral Services Officer, for his diligence and quick thinking.

### **Revenues**

Instalment dates for Council Tax and Business Rates are being brought forward to 1<sup>st</sup> April. Mail-shots were sent to all affected ratepayers on 10<sup>th</sup> February.

Second home and long term empty property owners are being advised they will be liable to 90% charge as from April.

Community Amateur Sports Clubs are being told of their eligibility to claim 80% relief on their Business Rates.

### **Somerset Direct**

The initial services to be accessed via this project are Council Tax, Benefits, Waste Management, Democratic Services, Electoral Services, Parking, Planning, Land Charges, 356356 and Payment Facilities. As from mid March these services will begin to migrate to the new Customer Services section, with completion of these 10 services by 1<sup>st</sup> April, and all remaining Council Services by autumn of this year.

### **Benefits**

Benefits performance is a significant element of the CPA exercise. Considerable time has been spent, since Christmas, completing the Benefits Fraud Inspectorate's (BFI) diagnostic for despatch on the 16<sup>th</sup> February, in readiness for their inspection in May.

As I reported in my last report, performance during the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter was adversely affected by sick absence and maternity, it is expected that performance will improve again in the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter.

Our Benefit Fraud Investigation Team successfully prosecuted two benefits claimants for false claims; both offenders received 1- year conditional discharges.

### **Personnel**

The new combined Payroll and Human Resources system is currently being operated in parallel with our old Payroll System. The new system will be able to supply much more data, including sick absence information, is on target to be implemented from the 1<sup>st</sup> April.

## **Financial Services**

The Unit has been very busy over the past few weeks in preparing the budget. Work has commenced on closure of the accounts for 2003/4, which will be submitted to members by the end of June.

Our Treasury Management and Insurance contracts both expire in the next few months and work is under way in preparation for the re-tendering process.

## **E- Government**

The government has produced a consultation paper in which it proposes a number of priority services to be e-enabled by all Councils by the target date of the end of 2005. The ODPM is currently considering the responses to the priority services consultation and will be writing to Councils by the end of March setting out the agreed priority services and outcomes as part of the IEG 3 claim process.

Future funding of e-government will be linked to progress in achievement of these priorities.

Each Local Authority in England submitting a satisfactory IEG statement in 2003/4, 2004/5 and 2005/6 will receive a £500k capital grant (£350k in 04/05 and £150k in 05/06).

## **Information Technology**

All hardware required for the launch of Somerset Direct (Customer First) has been received and installed. Two members of staff are dedicated to developing the service request processes.

Work related to the Revenues Improvement Plan is proceeding with a demonstration of the completed common person database in January. This key element enables proper linking of the Council Tax and Benefits accounts and is necessary for the populating of the person database for Somerset Direct.

The two major processes of running Council Tax bills and Housing Benefit recalculation are being run consecutively in the first week of March, previously there was a break of a week between the two runs.

## **Service Support**

The Freedom of Information Act will come into full effect next year. We are looking how we can best meet our obligations. This includes how we should manage, store and retrieve documents within the Council. The main drive will be to scan and store electronically wherever practical.

Work is progressing well with the GIS two priorities of digitising the Council's Land Terrier and editing our Local Land and Property Gazetteer. The first will make the Terrier available as a corporate resource and act as a template for other property-based sets of information. The second is one of the components of the e-government agenda and will form part of the National Land and Property Gazetteer.

**Councillor Terry Hall**