

## REVENUES AND BENEFITS SERVICE PLAN 2008/2009 ONWARDS

### 1 BACKGROUND

1.1 The Revenues and Benefits Service covers the following core functions:

- Administration and Recovery of Council Tax
- Administration and Recovery of Non-Domestic Rates
- Administration and Payment of Housing and Council Tax Benefit including recovery of Overpayments, preparation of Benefit Subsidy Claim and completion of all Government Returns
- Investigation and Prosecution of Benefit Fraud
- Administration of the Central Cashiering Function including development of the Council's e-payment roll out
- Recovery of all Miscellaneous Income to the Council

1.2 All services provided with the exception of the Central Cashiering Function and the recovery of Miscellaneous Income are statutory services.

1.3 The Council Tax and Non-Domestic Rates part of the Service has shown consistently improving performance over a number of years. In 2000/2001 the in-year collection rate for Council Tax was 94.3% and 95.6% for Non-Domestic Rates. By 2006/2007 these had risen to 99.2% and 99.4% respectively. The 2006/2007 performance for the in-year collection of Council Tax was the 6th best in the country, an achievement of which we are justly proud.

Prior to 2005/2006, Benefits performance in terms of processing new claims has also been consistently high with performance ranging between an average of 24 and 27 days per claim against an upper quartile figure of 36 days. During the early part 2005/2006 there was a deterioration in Benefit processing performance, which improved towards the end of the year and has continued to improve during 2006/2007. At the end of January 2008, the average days to process new claims had reduced to 24.0 days.

This improvement has been achieved against the backdrop of an increase in claims from 4,451 in 2005/6 to 4,897 in 2006/7, an increase of 10%.

In addition, the Fraud Investigation Team has continued to significantly beat the Government targets for Prosecutions and Sanctions.

For 2006/2007 there has been a change in the way that the Government subsidise Fraud prevention and detection. Instead of awarding subsidy for each prosecution and sanction achieved, the subsidy is rolled up within the normal administration grant, resulting in an overall reduction in Government support and a disincentive to

prosecute fraudulent claimants because of the costs involved in bringing cases to court.

As a result of this, in 2006/2007, we reviewed our Anti-Fraud Policy Statement to reflect the change in emphasis. The Council continues to prosecute Benefit Fraudsters where this is considered to be in the public interest. In 2007/2008 we are expecting to achieve around twelve successful prosecutions compared with thirteen in 2006/2007. By comparison, at the end of January 2008, fifty-three other Sanctions had been applied against a total of fifty during the whole of 2006/2007.

In respect of the Prosecutions I must acknowledge the assistance given by our colleagues in Legal Services particularly during the last year.

The Service is continually looking to provide value for money and make efficiency savings. Staff numbers have reduced as technology has been introduced. Since April 2006, there have been staff reductions of 3.8 FTE.

On 31 March 2005 the outward facing Cash Collection Service was closed due to the increasing reductions in transactions and the introduction of new, electronic payment methods.

- 1.4 The Revenues and Benefits Service achieved registration for ISO9001:2000 in May 2002 and has been subject to six monthly audits by the British Standards Institute since then to maintain registration. In June 2005, the Service was subject to the three-yearly British Standards Institute Strategic Review of the Quality Management System, where we had to demonstrate how we intend to provide continued improvements in service delivery to our customers. The Service was successful in that review and therefore maintained its Quality Management Registration. The next Strategic Review is due in June 2008. The Quality Management System is now firmly embedded within the Service, puts the needs of customers first and firmly supports how we deliver our Service.

In September 2006, following a two day assessment, the Service was awarded Charter Mark status, one of only 35 Revenues and Benefits Services in the country to achieve this.

This followed a considerable amount of work by Officers in compiling the evidence to support the application and we were greatly supported by a number of partner organisations and customers, who were involved in the assessment process.

In 2007, the Service decided not to renew its Charter Mark. This followed an analysis of the business benefits and the requirement to involve a considerable amount of staff time to maintain the Charter Mark in its new format. Despite not renewing the Charter Mark

Standard, the Service will continue to follow many of its principles in terms of customer service. The Service is justly proud of its Quality Management registration, which demonstrates its commitment to putting customers first.

- 1.5 Revenues and Benefits is a high volume service. There are 53,686 domestic properties in the District and 4,071 Commercial properties. We have around 8,500 Benefit Claimants. The Council is expected to pay around £30.0M in 2007/2008 in Benefits, which accounts for over 50% of the Council's total gross revenue expenditure. In addition we would expect to collect around £63.551M in 2007/2008 in Council Tax and £35.672M in Non-Domestic Rates. These amounts, together with Miscellaneous Income take the total to be collected in 2008/2009 to well in excess of £100M.

This work involves dealing with approximately 90,000 items of post per year, 75,000 telephone calls and 17,000 personal callers to.

In addition, we expect to process in excess of 600,000 payment transactions each year.

Much of what we propose to do over the next three years is aimed at managing these volumes more efficiently and subsequently making savings. Revenues and Benefits will however continue to be the Council's Service with the highest volume of transactions and personal contacts.

- 1.6 In 2005/2006 the Council as a whole completed a restructure. For Revenues and Benefits, this entailed the transfer of all Support Staff to the Management Support Unit, as well as a restructure of the management, with one Senior Manager leaving the Council.

Further, more minor structural changes have taken place during 2006/2007, with staff transferring to the new Customer Service Centre, staff moving towards Home Working, a re-alignment of some duties and further reductions in hours from some members of staff. This work will continue during 2008/2009. At the end of January 2008, the Service had 28 staff with Home Working capability and it is intended to carry out a review of required staffing levels taking into consideration the affects of the change management programme.

- 1.7 The Service successfully completed all the actions detailed in last year's Service Plan except for implementation of the new Benefits Calculator and on-line Claim Form and migration of Benefit enquiries to the Customer Service Centre. These will be carried forward into the work programme for 2008/2009.
- 1.8 In addition to completing the actions in last year's Service Plan, the Service also had the following successes:

- Completion of the 2006/2007 Benefit Subsidy Claim with no qualifications and a reduction of over fifty days auditing time
- Continued registration to ISO9001:2000 Quality Management Standard
- On-going support to the establishment of the new Customer Service Centre
- Support of Corporate Groups and voluntary support to areas such as Civil Contingencies and Elections
- Corporate training given by the Fraud Manager on Identity Fraud
- Successful completion of the Housing Benefit Review conducted by the Department for Works and Pensions indicating a high level of accuracy of Benefit processing
- Introduction of Chip n Pin for the Customer Service Centre
- Electronic loading of daily bank tapes
- Electronic interface between the cash receipting and ledger systems
- Implementation of Northgate Version 6
- Server Swap and migration to Windows operating platform

## 2 **MEETING THE COUNCIL'S MISSION STATEMENT AND STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES**

2.1 The Council's Mission Statement is:

*Making North Hertfordshire a vibrant place to live, work and prosper*

2.2 Underpinning this Mission Statement, the Council has identified six Strategic Objectives:

### **Sustainable Communities**

To promote sustainable development of the district to ensure we deliver adequate affordable housing, protect the environment and conserve the heritage of our historic settlements

### **Safer Communities**

To encourage responsible citizenship and to create safer communities with less crime and less fear of crime

### **Satisfied Communities**

To ensure that we listen to our citizens and deliver responsive, high quality, value for money, customer-focused services

### **Healthier Communities**

To promote first class leisure and cultural facilities to contribute to healthy living for all our citizens

## **Equal Communities**

To target resources at areas of disadvantage in the district to reduce social exclusion and improve the quality of life for everyone

## **Prosperous Communities**

To create opportunity for all by promoting sustainable economic development

2.3 At a meeting of Heads of Service on 22 February 2008, it was announced that the Council will be prioritising three of the Strategic Objectives, Sustainable, Safer and Satisfied in line with the views of customers expressed through the latest District Wide Survey.

2.4 To support these priority Objectives, the work programme for the Council as a whole will concentrate on the following:

- Waste and recycling
- Town centre issues
- Dealing with major development issues including continuing to look after the green belt
- Engineering issues such as Controlled Parking Zones and Traffic Regulation Orders
- Disposal of assets
- Moving forward with our plans on reducing expenditure on office accommodation

2.4 In addition to the new priorities, Members of the Council have identified three major Strategic Themes:

Green Matters  
Town Centres and  
Sustainable Developments

2.6 By its very nature the Revenues and Benefits Service contributes significantly towards three of the Council's six Strategic Objectives. Although we are unlikely to contribute significantly towards the Strategic Themes or priority work programme, we will be able to make some contribution. The three Strategic Objectives that we are most able to contribute towards are:

## **Equal Communities**

The Benefits scheme is designed to deliver this. By providing a quality service and dealing with claims and enquiries quickly, we are able to ensure that payment is made promptly thus reducing hardship and threats of homelessness.

2007/2008 was a consolidating year for the Benefits Service. The number of new claims continued to increase due in the main to greater awareness of Benefits brought about by the introduction of Tax and Pension Credits and our own efforts at bringing about greater awareness.

In addition to the increasing caseload, there was a reduction in the number of Benefit Assessors. The Service continued to introduce new technology to increase processing efficiency, which will ultimately lead to a further reduction in the number of Benefit Assessors required.

Despite this, the Council was able to process new claims in 2007/2008 in an average of 23.3 days (Feb 2008), which was an improvement on the previous year's figure of 24.2 days.

We now have our Benefit Claim form available on the web site for customers to download and complete.

In addition, we have also implemented a "Benefits Calculator" on the web site, which informs potential claimants whether it would be in their interests to make a formal claim.

The Government has announced a change in legislation, which will allow Councils to accept Benefit Claims on-line and during 2008/2009 we will be working towards replacing our existing on-line Benefits Calculator with a combined Benefits Calculator, which will also be an electronic application.

Unfortunately the partnership arrangement with the County Council and a number of other Hertfordshire District Councils to promote Benefit take-up has stopped due to lack of funding however and we plan to build on this start during the next two years, by using other take-up methods such as promotion through Outlook, articles in the "Retired" magazine aimed at pensioners and the arrangements for drop-in sessions with North Hertfordshire Homes and the Howard Cottage Society.

Mobile working in Benefits was introduced in May 2006 and has been a major contributor towards the improvement in processing times. At present, we are limited in the number of Assessors that we can have working mobile at any one time as we have to cover other duties in the Customer Service Centre and answering the telephones. However, as the Customer Service Centre becomes more self-sufficient, we will be able to increase the number of Assessors we have carrying out visits, which will in turn further improve both performance and customer service.

Mobile working has also enabled us to enter into an arrangement with the Hitchin C.A.B. where we attend their offices on the first Thursday of every month and provide a drop-in session for any customers wishing

to come along to obtain Benefits advice. Recently, as described above, we have extended this service by working with North Hertfordshire Homes and the Howard Cottage Society to provide similar drop-in sessions at a number of their Sheltered Housing Schemes.

Our successes in the detection and prosecution of Benefit Fraud has helped to ensure that public money is spent correctly and will ultimately play its part in providing more resources for those most in need. The amount of publicity given when we have a successful prosecution continues to be very disappointing, as this has a major deterrent factor. Despite this, more emphasis has been placed on Fraud Investigation and the Fraud Team is expected to reach its increased target of 65 Prosecutions and Sanctions during 2007/2008.

The Government has announced changes to the Subsidy arrangements, which removes the financial incentive to carry out prosecutions and therefore during 2007/2008, we reviewed our policy on Prosecutions and Sanctions to reflect the changes in the Subsidy Regulations.

### **Prosperous Communities**

In recent years we have implemented legislation in respect of Rural Rate Relief, Small Business Rate Relief and have developed a protocol for determining Discretionary Rate Relief. This protocol will be reviewed in 2008/2009.

We have also introduced a series of two Ratepayers' Consultations each year at which we discuss the Council's budget preparations and other topics of interest to local businesses. This initiative is now to be taken forward and expanded to four meetings per year by the Council's Economic Development Team.

### **Satisfied Communities**

The Revenues and Benefits Service has a proven track record of listening to its customers through its Quality Management System. This ensures that the Service remains focussed on the needs of customers and that their interests are placed first. There are many examples of where processes have been introduced or changed following feedback from customers. Such an example is amending the process to allow personal callers to pay by Debit and Credit Card as well as personal cheque, without the need to see a member of staff. This was a change brought about following a comment by a customer.

As detailed above, the quality of the service provided is high and the Service, along with the rest of the Council is going through major change as new technology is introduced.

These changes continue to represent the biggest challenge for the Service in 2008/2009.

The Revenues and Benefits Service will continue to promote and increase the amount of Mobile Working.

In addition, the Service is acting as a pilot for the Authority for Home Working. We now have twenty-eight staff with Homeworking capability and this has proved to be very successful. This will continue to be rolled out during 2008/2009.

The Service will also continue to support the migration of more processes into the Customer Service Centre including the provision of greater integration between the Customer Service Centre technology and the Revenues and Benefits back office systems.

Finally, as a Service that has had the use of a Document Management and Workflow system for over ten years, we will be assisting the rest of the Council in its corporate wide implementation of this technology.

These changes are designed to bring about improved quality services and more value for money. Bringing about major change will need resources, which when taken away from the front line service may result in a reduction in service level for a period followed by an improvement beyond the existing point.

### **3 LEGISLATIVE CHANGES AND HOW WILL THEY AFFECT THE SERVICE**

3.1 During 2007/2008 the Service introduced a change in Benefits Administration in the form of the Local Housing Allowance, which comes into force on 7 April 2008. This represents a major change, which will have to be carefully monitored to ensure compliance with the new regulations.

3.2 The Tribunals, Courts and Enforcement Act is expected to come into force in April 2009 and considerable work will be involved during 2008/2009 to implement these changes. At present regulations have not been laid and so it is not clear at this stage what the exact implications of the new legislation will be.

3.3 Housing and Council Tax Benefit probably sees more legislative changes than any other service provided by Local Government. Each year there are around 80 circulars issued by the Department of Works and Pensions either introducing new legislation or clarifying existing legislation that has been challenged. This is an accepted part of the workload and shows little prospect of changing.

3.5 Most costs relating to changes in Enforcement or Housing and Council Tax Benefit will be met from existing budgets. However, depending on

the extent of any changes, there could be additional costs associated, which would be impossible to predict at this early stage.

#### **4 BEST VALUE REVIEWS**

- 4.1 There are no plans for any best value reviews to be carried out in the near future. Benefits did however form a significant part of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment, when it was the only single service subject to inspection. The Service's ability to comply with the Department for Works and Pensions' Benefit Performance Standards forms a part of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment Action Plan. A considerable amount of work had been carried out towards achieving compliance with the Standards when the Department for Works and Pensions decided to completely revise them. The Service met this challenge and delivered a self-assessment of "Good" by the deadline date in November 2005. We failed to meet only one of the Enablers and we have since taken steps to address that.
- 4.2 The Service underwent a full Best Value Review during 1999/2000 and all the actions resulting from that Review have been completed.
- 4.3 The Service places continual improvement high on its agenda. Key to this is the concept of multi-skilling of staff in order to give the greatest flexibility to management to cover for absence and peaks of demand. This is a concept that has worked well in the past and is being further developed with the introduction of new technology.
- 4.4 Performance is reviewed on a regular basis and Managers are presently developing new ways of monitoring individual performance as well as performance at a Team level. Care has to be taken here due to the nature of the business and the high volume of public contact as some queries can take substantially longer to deal with than others.

#### **5 CONSULTATION AND CUSTOMER NEED**

- 5.1 The Service is required to carry out statutory consultation on a three-yearly cycle but does try to do this annually. The statutory consultation is being carried out as this Plan is being prepared along with other non-statutory consultation, which we use to determine whether there are areas for improvement in the service provided.
- 5.2 In addition, the Service is very pro-active in using the 3Cs as a means of obtaining the views of customers and acting on this where possible and where the service can be improved. This is evidenced by the six-monthly audits and continuing registration to the Quality Management Standard.
- 5.3 We have set up and continue to use a Customer Panel, consisting of customers who are interested in helping us develop the service to meet their needs.

## 6 SERVICE OBJECTIVES

6.1 The key Objectives for the Service in 2008/2009 are:

- 6.1.1 **Service Objective:** Review of Kirona and assessment of alternative mobile solution for Benefits  
**Strategic Objective(s):** Satisfied/Equal  
**Strategic Work Priority:** Office Accommodation  
**Strategic Theme:** Green Matters

The Service introduced Mobile Working in its Benefits Team in 2006. The product used is Kirona, which is Northgate's mobile partner. There have been some technical difficulties with the product, which has meant that the functionality has not been used to its full capacity, although the service has been provided to customers and has been well received.

In 2008/2009 we will review the effectiveness of the Kirona product and take steps to either improve the existing functionality or seek an alternative solution.

In 2007/2008, we introduced the principle of keeping to a minimum the issue of claim forms and instead arrange appointments for customers wishing to make a claim. This reduces processing time and saves customers having to visit the office. It also reduces the number of contacts as generally claims can be dealt with at the first attempt. We will aim to build on this during 2008/2009.

The introduction of Home and Mobile Working is also a key component of the Council's Accommodation Strategy designed to enable the Council to move to smaller, alternative accommodation by 2011.

**Expected Outcome:** Ability to put electronic claim forms into the Document Management System and update the back office system

**Target(s):**

- Visit 75% of new claimants
- Reduce average processing days for new claims to 21 days or less

- 6.1.2 **Service Objective:** Review of implementation of Local Housing Allowance  
**Strategic Objective(s):** Satisfied/Equal/Legislative  
**Strategic Work Priority:** N/A  
**Strategic Theme:** N/A

Local Housing Allowance becomes law on 7 April 2008. The preparation for its implementation was carried out during 2007/2008, however there is a need to ensure that it is carefully monitored to

ensure compliance with the law and the small amount of discretionary power the Council has in terms of recipients of payments.

Although this is a major change in Benefits legislation, it only affects a relatively small percentage of the caseload. (Approximately 900 claimants out of 8,500).

**Expected Outcome:** Compliance with Local Housing Allowance legislation

**Target(s):**

- 100% check of first 50 claims
- Normal checking procedures (4%) to be completed

6.1.3 **Service Objective:** Implementation of e-Benefits product  
**Strategic Objective(s):** Satisfied/Equal  
**Strategic Work Priority:** N/A  
**Strategic Theme:** Green Matters

The Council's Revenues and Benefits application system suppliers, Northgate has developed a module, which allows customers to complete a Benefit claim on-line and which will also populate the back office system. The product is very intuitive and easy for customers to use and provides them with a check list of documents that they need to provide as proof to support their claim.

We intend to implement this module in 2008/2009. This will support the Council's objective to promote self-service through its web site and will reduce the number of paper forms that the Council has to process. It will also support the move to migrate some Benefit services into the Customer Service Centre as staff can use this module to complete Changes in Circumstances for customers without having to be a trained Benefits Assessors.

**Expected Outcome:** To promote self-service in Benefits provision

**Target(s):**

- 10% of new claims and changes in circumstances in 2008/2009 to be via e-Benefits

6.1.4 **Service Objective:** Promotion of e-Billing  
**Strategic Objective(s):** Satisfied/Equal  
**Strategic Work Priority:** N/A  
**Strategic Theme:** Green Matters

The Service introduced a small pilot scheme for e-Billing for the 2008/2009 annual billing run. The intention is to promote and build on this during 2008/2009. E-Billing allows customers to gain electronic access to their Council Tax and Business Rate bills and means that the Council does not have to print and post these out each time, which saves money and is environmentally friendly. Like e-Benefits it promotes self-service. From the customer's point of view it means that

they get faster access to their bills and they are stored electronically for them. This is achieved over a secure network hosted by our partner EPSIIA (UK) Ltd.

**Expected Outcome:** To promote self-service in delivery of bills  
**Target(s):**

- 1,000 accounts signed up for annual billing in March 2009

6.1.5 **Service Objective:** Implementation of Tribunals, Courts and Enforcement Act  
**Strategic Objective(s):** Satisfied/Equal/Legislative  
**Strategic Work Priority:** N/A  
**Strategic Theme:** N/A

This legislation is expected to come into force on 1 April 2009 and preparation for it will have to be done during 2008/2009. Although the proposed legislation is still under consultation the intention is to regulate Enforcement Agents and standardise fees and charges. This should make the enforcement process more transparent for customers. At this stage, we are not aware of the details of the legislation or what will be required but we do know that we must be prepared for this new legislation by April 2009. This may require software changes.

**Expected Outcome:** To implement the Tribunals, Courts and Enforcement Act  
**Target(s):**

- Compliance with the Act

6.1.6 **Service Objective:** Ensure compliance with Empty Rate legislation  
**Strategic Objective(s):** Satisfied/Sustainable/Legislative  
**Strategic Work Priority:** Town Centre Issues  
**Strategic Theme:** Town Centre

This legislation comes into force on 1 April 2008 and effectively abolishes Empty Rate except in a few exempt categories. The intention behind the legislation is promote the return of empty property into the market and thus improve the buoyancy of the local economy, which will include Town Centres. The Service Objective will be to review our implementation of the new legislation and ensure that we are compliant.

**Expected Outcome:** To ensure compliance with the Act  
**Target(s):**

- Check sample bills at annual billing process
- 100% check of all returned NNDR post

6.1.7 **Service Objective:** Review of Discretionary Rate Relief Scheme  
**Strategic Objective(s):** Equal/Satisfied/Prosperous  
**Strategic Work Priority:** N/A

**Strategic Theme:** N/A

In April 2003 the Council introduced a new policy and scoring matrix for the award of Discretionary Rate Relief. It was agreed at the time that this would be reviewed from time-to-time. It is now felt that it is time to review the scheme to ensure that support is given where it is most needed. The review will include extensive consultation with customers and other stakeholders and the final recommendations will need to be approved by Members.

**Expected Outcome:** To consult with stakeholders and review the Discretionary Rate Relief Scheme and scoring matrix

**Target(s):**

- Establish an open and transparent scheme that is up-to-date and reflects the needs of customers

6.1.8 **Service Objective:** Review of Mandatory Rate Relief Scheme  
**Strategic Objective(s):** Equal/Satisfied/Prosperous  
**Strategic Work Priority:** Town Centres  
**Strategic Theme:** Town Centres

The Mandatory Rate Relief Scheme is, as the name suggests a compulsory scheme. In general it allows for the award of 80% Relief for premises belonging to Registered Charities, provided they meet certain criteria. We do believe that not all premises meet these criteria, especially around the amount of donated goods sold by charity shops. We will therefore carry out a review of recipients of Mandatory Rate Relief during 2008/2009 to ensure that these criteria are met and there is no commercial gain for these shops over other non-charitable retailers.

**Expected Outcome:** To ensure compliance with the legislation and proper administration of the scheme

**Target(s):**

- Inspect 100% of premises where Mandatory Rate Relief has been awarded

6.1.9 **Service Objective:** Continued Roll Out of Home Working  
**Strategic Objective(s):** Equal/Satisfied  
**Strategic Work Priority:** Office Accommodation  
**Strategic Theme:** Sustainable Developments/Town Centres

The Service has at March 2008 rolled out twenty-eight staff with Home Working capability. So far this has proved to be very successful with Benefit Assessors achieving considerable increases in output, sometimes in excess of 50%, depending on the nature of the work they are doing. The roll out of Home Working is key to the Council's Accommodation Strategy aimed at allowing the Council to move to smaller, more appropriate and less expensive accommodation by 2011. The Service has more staff wishing to move to Home Working and will

continue to roll this out during 2008/2009. Coupled with this is the need to establish hot desking capability within Town Lodge to pilot this new way of working and help to develop a model, which can form the basis for the new building. In addition, the Service is taking a lead through the Flexibility Works programme within service@north-herts in assisting the rest of the Organisation to roll out Home Working.

**Expected Outcome:** To complete the roll out of Home Working within the Service and provide guidance and assistance with the corporate roll out

**Target(s):**

- All staff qualifying for and wishing to have Home Working set up by the end of March 2009
- Accommodate all residual staff in one office
- Establish hot desk facility within Town Lodge

**6.1.10 Service Objective:** Migration of agreed Benefit Processes to Customer Service Centre

**Strategic Objective(s):** Equal/Satisfied

**Strategic Work Priority:** Office Accommodation

**Strategic Theme:** N/A

Council Tax was one of the first services to be migrated into the Customer Service Centre when it opened in October 2006. By its very complexity, Benefits is not an easy service to migrate into Customer Service Centres, but with the implementation of e-Benefits, this is more possible, especially for the more routine enquiries such as Changes in Circumstances. Migrating this work will mean that we will have less need for Benefit Assessors to be present on site and will contribute to the aim of reducing our office accommodation requirements. Therefore in 2008/2009, following the implementation of e-Benefits, we will negotiate with the Customer Services Manager for the migration of Benefit Changes in Circumstances and any other relevant work to the Customer Service Centre and discuss the best way that we can continue to support Customer Services staff.

**Expected Outcome:** Migration of Benefit Changes of Circumstances and any other relevant process to the Customer Service Centre and reduction in number of on-site staff

**Target(s):**

- To implement e-Benefits
- Complete migration by end of March 2009

**6.1.11 Service Objective:** Improve Benefit Take Up

**Strategic Objective(s):** Equal/Satisfied/Prosperous

**Strategic Work Priority:** N/A

**Strategic Theme:** N/A

Improving Benefit take-up is an on-going objective for the Service and is a Government target for reducing poverty, especially pensioner and child poverty. In 2008/2009 we will work with the Hertfordshire Benefits Consortium to maximise resources to target take-up campaigns at specific groups. The groups to target are:

- Employers of large numbers of part-time and low paid workers
- Those over 80, who may be entitled to Attendance Allowance
- Those in receipt of Maintenance Payments as recent legislative changes may mean a greater entitlement

In addition, we will continue joint take-up campaigns with Stevenage Borough Council at the Lister Hospital and separately with Registered Social Landlords in the District.

We will also promote on-line use of e-Benefits and the Benefits Calculator.

**Expected Outcome:** Targetting of specific groups for take-up of Benefits

- Target(s):**
- 5% increase in the number of Benefit applications in 2008/2009
  - Implementation of the on-line Benefits Calculator

6.1.12 **Service Objective:** Support BID applications for Royston and Hitchin

**Strategic Objective(s):** Satisfied/Sustainable

**Strategic Work Priority:** Town Centres

**Strategic Theme:** Town Centres

During 2007/2008 both Hitchin and Royston business communities have been working towards submitting proposals to become Business Improvement Districts (BID). This will require assistance from the Council in the form of providing data, agreeing the objectives of the BID, facilitating a ballot, implementing software and setting up suitable accounting procedures. We will work with both the Hitchin and Royston BIDS during 2008/2009 to achieve an outcome.

**Expected Outcome:** Completion of the BID process for Hitchin and Royston

- Target(s):**
- Provide required data
  - Evaluate BID application
  - Facilitate ballot
  - If necessary implement software and accounting procedures

6.1.13 **Service Objective:** Assist with roll out of Corporate Document Management

**Strategic Objective(s):** Satisfied

**Strategic Work Priority:** Office Accommodation  
**Strategic Theme:** Green

The Service has extensive knowledge of Document Management, having used the system for over eleven years. As part of the service@north-herts roll out of Corporate Document Management, the Service will continue to advise and assist on set up and procedures. As Document Management is a requirement to enable Home and Mobile Working, this project is seen as a vital part of the overall work priority to move to more appropriate office accommodation by 2011 and will contribute to the green theme by reducing the amount of paper used throughout the Authority.

**Expected Outcome:** Continued roll out of Corporate Document Management in line with service@north-herts  
**Target(s):**

- Provide advice and assistance on use of Document Management as required

**6.1.14 Service Objective:** Officer lead for Transport Fundamental Service Review  
**Strategic Objective(s):** All  
**Strategic Work Priority:** Town Centres  
**Strategic Theme:** All

The Head of Revenues and Benefits has been appointed as Lead Officer for the Transport Fundamental Service Review.

**Expected Outcome:** Final Report and Action Plan  
**Target(s):**

- Completion of Review and report to PARC by end of October 2008

**6.1.15 Service Objective:** Succession Planning with review of staffing requirements  
**Strategic Objective(s):** Satisfied  
**Strategic Work Priority:** Office Accommodation  
**Strategic Theme:** N/A

Within the next two years, the Service is expecting to lose at least two senior officers due to retirement and several other officers will also be able to exercise that option. We will review our staffing requirements bearing in mind the investment made in technology to support Home and Mobile Working and other improvements such as e-Benefits, improved web site and opening of the Customer Service Centre. These changes have brought about new ways of service delivery and we need to ensure that we have a framework in place that reflects these changes and informs our future staffing requirements. We will make adequate provision to ensure that there is a smooth transition when the senior officers retire.

**Expected Outcome:** Staffing structure to meet the on-going needs

- of the Service and smooth transition of senior staff
- Target(s):**
- Develop a framework to inform on future staffing requirements by September 2008
  - Have plans in place by September 2008 to facilitate succession of senior staff

6.1.16 **Service Objective:** Data Quality  
**Strategic Objective(s):** Satisfied  
**Strategic Work Priority:** N/A  
**Strategic Theme:** N/A

The Service uses two major software systems, its application system supplied by Northgate and its document management system supplied by Anite. Both these systems currently hold excessive data as defined by the Data Protection Act and we need to remove this. This will require the implementation of and use of the Deletion Module within the document management system. However, there is no such provision as yet within the Northgate system and we need to use our influence through the various User Groups to move this provision forward.

- Expected Outcome:** Full compliance with the Data Protection Act
- Target(s):**
- Implement and utilise the Anite Deletion Module
  - Encourage Northgate to develop a similar module through influence via User Groups

6.1.17 **Service Objective:** Strategic Review of ISO9001:2000 Quality Standard  
**Strategic Objective(s):** Satisfied  
**Strategic Work Priority:** N/A  
**Strategic Theme:** N/A

The Service achieved the ISO9001:2000 Quality Standard in 2002 and as part of the on-going award is required to undergo a strategic review every three years. The next one is due in June 2008. This will involve a review of our policies and on-going priorities and this Service Plan will be an important component.

- Expected Outcome:** Continued award of the Quality Standard
- Target(s):**
- Review existing policies
  - Review on-going priorities in relation to customers

6.1.18 **Service Objective:** Right Time Right Benefit Standard  
**Strategic Objective(s):** Satisfied/Equal/Prosperous  
**Strategic Work Priority:** N/A  
**Strategic Theme:** N/A

The Department for Works and Pensions has introduced two new performance measures for 2008/2009, which are designed to encourage Councils to pay the correct Benefit in a timely manner. In 2008/2009 we will have to establish procedures for setting targets, once the details of the Indicators have been published and to monitor these and seek ways to improve performance. To achieve the Right Benefit part of this, we will have to target specific income types and groups for review.

**Expected Outcome:** To meet targets set for these Indicators  
**Target(s):**

- Establish target groups and income types and establish review programme
- Set local targets
- Monitor outcomes monthly
- Review procedures as required

6.1.19 **Service Objective:** Council Tax & Business Rates Collection Rates  
**Strategic Objective(s):** Satisfied  
**Strategic Work Priority:** N/A  
**Strategic Theme:** N/A

Although removed from the national set of Indicators for 2008/2009, the collection rates for both Council Tax and Business Rates are considered to be important indicators in terms of the corporate health of the Authority. The Service has traditionally performed very well in these indicators over the previous five years or more and we are committed to maintaining high collection rates. During 2008/2009, we will continue to rigorously pursue the timely payments of both Council Tax and Business Rates

**Expected Outcome:** Continued top quartile performance for the collection of Council Tax and Business Rates  
**Target(s):**

- 99.1% collection for Council Tax
- 99.2% collection for Business Rates

6.1.20 **Service Objective:** Fraud Awareness talks to staff  
**Strategic Objective(s):** Satisfied/Equal  
**Strategic Work Priority:** N/A  
**Strategic Theme:** N/A

For a number of years the Service has increased the profile of Fraud prevention and detection by carrying out a series of Fraud Awareness talks to staff from all Council Service areas. In addition, we have spoken to all new staff about Fraud Awareness as part of the new starters induction programme. We will continue to provide these talks during 2008/2009.

**Expected Outcome:** Increased fraud awareness amongst staff  
**Target(s):**

- Two fraud awareness talks to Revenues

- and Benefits staff
- One learning event on fraud awareness for all staff
- Fraud awareness talks to all staff induction sessions

## 7 **CONCLUSION**

- 7.1 This is an ambitious work programme for 2008/2009 and as such there are a number of inherent risks associated with it mainly around reliance on external organisations and the fact that we will be looking to maximise any opportunities to make efficiencies.
- 7.2 We will minimise these risks by keeping the programme constantly under review through our Management Meetings, one-to-ones between the Head of Service and senior managers and through the appraisal and review process.
- 7.3 If necessary, we will review the programme and make changes to the priorities to ensure that we meet the targets we have set.