WEAR VALLEY BENEFITS SERVICE

BUSINESS PLAN: 2005/06 – 2007/08

Introduction

1.   This Business Plan will cover the activities of the Wear Valley Benefits Service (WVBS) during 2005/06 – 2007/08. It will form the basis of the work carried out by the section. External stakeholders including staff, customers, Citizen Advice Bureau, landlords and the Pensions Service have received a copy of this plan for their comments. The plan integrates with the departmental wide service plan that is updated annually. The main purposes of this business plan are to:

   - serve as an instrument for continuous improvement
   - focus upon our priorities
   - make the service accountable to our stakeholders

Links to Corporate Objectives

2.   The WVBS links to all the corporate objectives. The primary link is to improving the well being of residents although the service also supports improving health and reducing crime. The payment of benefit increases the net disposable income of households, allows them to live in affordable housing and prevents eviction due to rent arrears.

Structure of Service

3.   There is 41 full time equivalent staff within the Benefits Section dealing with a caseload of approximately 8,300 customers. The current staffing structure is as below:
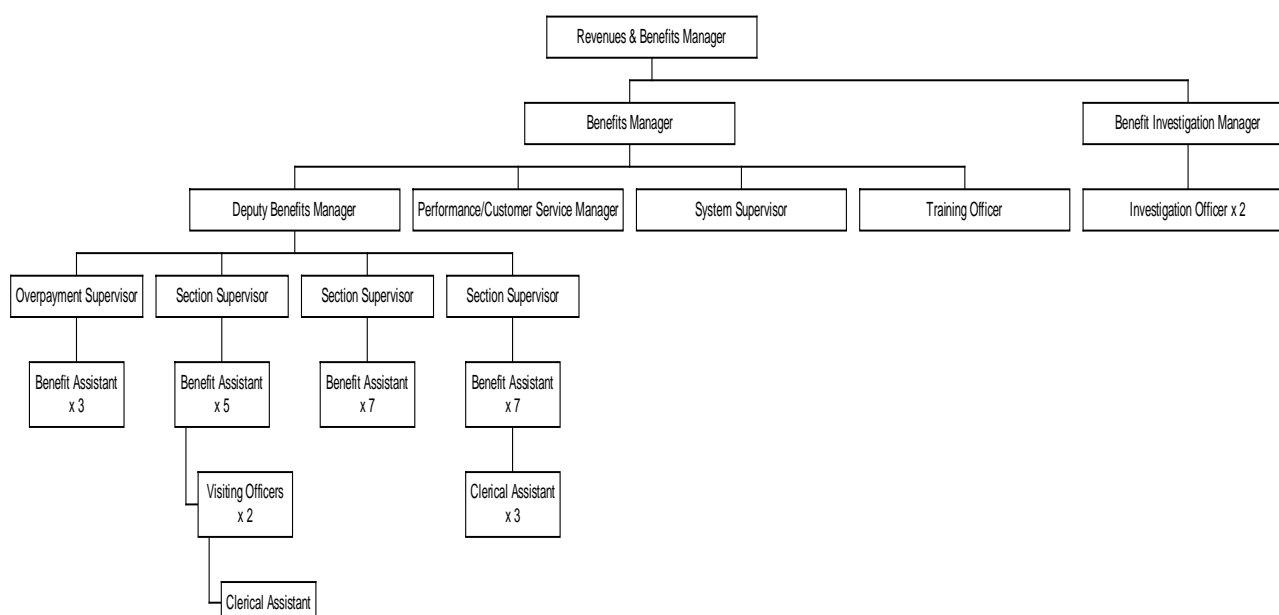
Service Objectives

4. These are drawn directly from the "Vision Statement" endorsed by all stakeholders. They are each ranked as high (H), medium (M) or low (L) priority.

Aim	Objective	Rank	Ref.
To be customer-focussed, modern, efficient and take account of the views of all stakeholders	Treat customers as the focal point for all actions	H	1a
	Embrace new technology to streamline processes	M	1b
	Listen and respond to the views of stakeholders	M	1c
To treat all claimants courteously and with respect	To apply benefit legislation fairly and impartially to all customers	H	2a
	To be aware of the needs of customers and allay their fears	M	2b
	To treat all customers with respect by adoption of a professional attitude	H	2c
To be timely and accurate by ensuring that claimants receive the correct benefit at the correct time	To provide staff with appropriate training to meet their needs and maximise efficiency	M	3a
	To process new claims and change of circumstances within the time limits laid down by best practice	H	3b
	To carry out the necessary management checks to ensure accuracy	H	3c
To have the resources required to deliver the intended service	Members are informed and updated of the resource requirements of the service	L	4a
	The service receives resources which are at least comparable to other authorities wherever possible	L	4b
	Resource requirements are amended to reflect changes in legislation and other Government requirements	M	4c
To be accessible to everyone in the community	Information leaflets and face to face customer service will be provided in a variety of formats and languages to cater for the needs of the deaf, blind and those for whom English is not their first language	L	5a
	The service will be pro-active in reaching out to potential customers to increase benefit take-up	H	5b
	The service will be contactable by a wide range of media including e-mail, local office, internet, telephone and letter	M	5c

Aim	Objective	Rank	Ref.
To ensure claimants receive the benefits to which they are entitled.	A full range of information leaflets will be available at area offices, other customer contact points and on the Council web site	M	6a
	Regular liaison will take place with other stakeholders	M	6b
	Advertise and promote details on availability and eligibility of welfare benefits	M	6c
To minimise barriers to work	Ensure benefits are paid for the correct period	H	7a
	Advise customers of the impact of changes in income upon benefit eligibility	H	7b
To help customers to live in affordable housing	Advertise and promote the use of Pre-Tenancy Determinations	M	8a
	Make available Discretionary Housing Payments where appropriate	M	8b
	Pay benefits promptly to prevent rent arrears and possibility of eviction	H	8c
To recover overpayments promptly without bringing undue pressure to bear	Minimise levels of overpayments by advising customers of the need to notify changes of circumstances	H	9a
	Pursue landlord or tenant for recovery of overpayments according to circumstances	H	9b
	Initiate recovery action without undue delay whilst taking account of individual circumstances of the customer	H	9c
To reduce the risk and level of fraud and error by a genuine commitment to its prevention, deterrence and detection	To publicise that fraud is a serious offence	H	10a
	To resource properly a Benefits Investigation Function	M	10b
	To raise the level of awareness of the need to prevent fraud for staff involved in benefits administration and housing matters	H	10c
To investigate potential fraud and take action against offenders	To initiate prosecution of offenders by application of Council's approved prosecution policy	M	11a
	Use the whole range of legal powers available to penalise fraud offenders	M	11b
To encourage a strong culture of performance within the Council	To set measurable, ambitious and manageable targets	M	12a
	Work towards meeting the performance standards of the DWP	H	12b
	Ensure high staff awareness of targets and performance on a regular basis	H	12c

Performance Targets

5.   In order to continuously improve, it is essential that we monitor performance against targets that if met will contribute significantly to meeting our objectives. Targets have been set for national Best Value measures of performance as below as well as performance standard measures:

	2003/04 Actual	**2004/05 Target**	**2004/05 Actual**	**2005/06 Target**	**2006/07 Target**	**2007/08 Target**
Days to process New Claims	46	40	32	30	27	24
Days to process changes of circumstances	11	10	9	8	7	7
%age of benefit overpayments recovered	N/A	60%	60%	60%	65%	70%
%age of benefit overpayments written off	N/A	N/A	N/A	10%	9%	8%
%age accuracy of assessment	99%	98%	99%	98%	98%	98%
%age claims outstanding over 50 days	N/A	N/A	N/A	2%	2%	2%
%age claims paid on time	N/A	N/A	N/A	90%	90%	90%
%age revisions notified within 4 weeks	N/A	N/A	N/A	65%	65%	65%
Benefit visits per '000 caseload	N/A	204	234	210	210	210
Investigators per '000 caseload	N/A	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.3
Investigations per '000 caseload	N/A	16	20.13	24	26	28
Prosecutions and sanctions per '000 caseload	N/A	0.8	0.5	1.4	1.6	1.8

Review of 2004/05

6.   Performance in 2004/05 improved significantly from the previous year. In particular processing times are well above the national average. The service began to benefit from the recruitment of additional staff and their subsequent training. Staff turnover was also modest which contributed towards good performance. The highlights of 2004/05 were:

- Commencement of home working scheme with productivity increases
- Production of benefit take-up strategy
- Production of new customer leaflets (still in print)
- Availability of benefit calculator on web site
- Transfer of responsibility of rent rebate overpayments from Housing Department
- Use of wider range of recovery methods for overpayments
- Implementation of computerised benefit fraud module
- Piloting use of mobile technology to streamline claims processing

7.   Areas where we need to improve next year:

- Performance of the Benefits Investigation section
- The failure to alter standard correspondence to make it more customer friendly
- Failing to extend the current outreach service
- High levels of sickness absence

Key Actions – 2005/06

8.   The following are the key actions for the current year:

Objective	Action	By Whom	By When	Link to Objectives
To increase the number of prosecutions and administrative penalties levied for benefit fraud	Further improve Interview under Caution skills and service review by Department for Works and Pensions	Sandra Fitzsimmons	31st March 2006	10a,10b,10c, 11a,11b
To ensure correspondence with customers is user friendly	Liaison with software supplier and early implementation of new releases	Gillian Osgerby	31st July 2005	1a,1c,2b,6b,7b
To extend out reach service	Analyse current demand for service and link with take up activity	Gillian Osgerby	31st July 2005	1a,5b,5c,7b
To maintain sickness levels within corporate	To ensure sickness absence management training for all	Stuart Reid	31st March 2006	12a,12c

Objective	Action	By Whom	By When	Link to Objectives
targets	supervisors and monthly performance analysis			
To meet 80% of performance standards	Monthly monitoring meeting	Ann Baker	30th June 2005	All
To implement Document image Processing and Workflow technology	To procure software and re-engineer processes	Tracey Robinson	30th November 2005	1b,4b,8c
To increase take up of HB/CTB of those eligible in the District	To participate in County Durham Partnership against Poverty and work with other agencies	Gillian Osgerby	31st March 2006	1a,2b,5a,5b ,5c6a,6c,8a
To improve mobile working for visiting officers	To examine capture of data and evidence and process claim	Gillian Osgerby	31st March 2006	1b,2b,3b,4c ,5b,8c
To improve recovery process for overpaid housing benefit	To review processes and compare with best practice	Maureen Clayton	31st March 2006	9b.9c
To ensure smooth introduction of DWP Customer Management System	Ongoing liaison with DWP and revision to processes	Tracey Robinson	31st March 2006	1c,3b,7a,8c

Customer Care

9.   The service strives to meet the customer service targets set out below:

- 80% of telephone calls answered within 10 rings
- 80% of customers at enquiry desk seen with 15 minutes of arrival
- Correspondence answered within 14 days

Performance against these targets are monitored on a regular basis

Performance Standards

10.   The WVBS has embraced the concept of performance standards whereby every aspect of the benefits service must improve from its present level. Adherence to performance standards ensures that focus is given to issues other than processing times such as customer service and counter fraud.

	Target March 2005	Actual March 2005
	%age achieved	%age achieved
Strategic Management	80	82
Customer Service	80	74
Processing Claims	95	98
Working with Landlords	85	83
Internal Security	85	100
Counter Fraud	85	89
Overpayments	85	95

11.   The Department for Work and Pensions revised the Performance Standards from March 2005 by replacing 641 criteria with 65. As at March 2005, the Service assessed itself as meeting 68% of the new criteria but has set a target of 80 % to be achieved by June 2005 in preparation for its evaluation under its Comprehensive Performance Assessment.

Performance Management

12.   All Best Value performance targets are measured on a monthly basis. These are discussed at section and departmental team meetings, actions agreed and minuted. A report is provided bi-annually to members on performance of the benefits sections against these targets. These are communicated to staff verbally and via wall chart displays. These support objective 12c.

13.   Performance standards are reviewed quarterly. The results are communicated to staff in the same manner as Best Value performance targets above. Performance against targets is also reported to committee. Staff will be encouraged to monitor the performance of themselves and their section.

Staff Development

14.   Staff training needs are identified through regular communication with more senior officers. A formal process supports these - the Personal Development Plan that also includes in-year follow-up on training issues. Training is geared towards meeting both employee needs and the objectives of the service as outlined in this plan. Following a successful bid to the DWP, a dedicated training officer has been recruited to support both new and existing staff in support of objective 3a.

15.   Performance issues determine training requirements and therefore there is a feedback loop from performance back to training.

Training requirements for 2005/06 are:

- Refresher course for making payments to customers on time

- Sickness absence management/awareness
- Self-employed customers
- Benefit awareness for Housing Department staff
- Fraud awareness
- Benefit take-up awareness
- New computer system releases
- Any major legislative change

16. Training will be supported by clear and unambiguous communication to all members of staff to ensure consistent processing methods.

17. Dedicated reading time will continue to be made available to understand and absorb new circulars that amend housing benefit rules.

18. The scheme for partial home working will be extended in 2005/06. This will assist in staff retention and improve productivity.

19. All staff will be encouraged to work for the benefit of the service and their section and assist as required in supporting other team members.

Backlogs

20. The service recognises the importance of maintaining a high level of output so those outstanding items of work do not build up. This leads to poor customer service, delay in processing claims, application of incorrect benefit, threats of eviction to customers and low staff morale. Statistics on outstanding work i.e. new applications, change of circumstances and unlinked post are collected and monitored on a weekly basis by the Deputy Benefits Manager to identify "hot spots". There is close scrutiny on these figures during periods of change for example the introduction of new technology. These are resolved through re-allocation of tasks, temporary additional resources such as agency staff, casual employment and process review.

21. To ensure continuity of the service in times of emergency, the computer applications supporting the service are to be included within the Information Technology Disaster Recovery Plan. This has still to be compiled although the Council has made resources available.

Resources

22. The budget for the WVBS is below:

	2004/05 BUDGET £000	2004/05 ACTUAL £000	2005/06 BUDGET £000
Staff	815	791	939
Training	5	6	5
Information Technology	96	123	124
Offices	28	26	26
Other Support Services	47	57	58

Miscellaneous	20	20	27
Government Grant	(703)	(712)	(715)
Total	**308**	**311**	**464**

23. In comparison with other authorities, the section has a low cost per claim despite recent increases in staffing. The staffing figure for the 2005/06 budget is distorted by the treatment of back funded pension costs, which accounts for around £60,000 of the increase.

24. The opportunity to transfer monies from other budgets will be accepted where additional resource is justified. Conversely, cost efficiencies will be made where resources are no longer required. The service recognises that costs must be held down and efficiency maximised. Agency staff may be employed during times of peak workload although this has become less necessary with the recent growth in staffing levels. Budget provision is also made for overtime.

25. Major changes in resource allocations will be reported to members. The budget manager for the service is the Revenues and Benefits Manager.

Capital Investment

26. £150,000 has been set aside from monies provided by the Implementing Electronic Government fund (IEG2) in order to implement a document imaging and workflow system. This is necessary investment to allow quicker retrieval of information. Around £70,000 of external funding has been secured to purchase the necessary hardware and employ consultants to assist in its implementation.

27. The change programme for implementation of document imaging and workflow will be project managed by the Benefits Manager and sponsored by the Revenues and Benefits Manager. A project plan will be drawn up indicating timescales, tasks, risks and resources. Resources will be earmarked from existing staffing. The impact upon processing performance will be closely monitored but is unlikely to jeopardise achieving agreed targets.

Plan Review

28. This business plan is a living document to be used as a tool for continuous improvement. It is not a document to be left on a shelf gathering dust whilst it becomes outdated. Consequently, it will be updated annually in line with the Central Resources Departmental Plan so it remains relevant to the service.