

**THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE
COMMUNITY SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON FRIDAY 3 AUGUST 2007**

Present: Councillor R. Burnip (Chair)
Councillors B. Burn, Mrs. A.E. Laing,
T. Longstaff, Mrs. S. Mason, D. Milsom
and T. Unsworth

Apologies: Councillors P.J. Campbell and C. Patching

1. **THE MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING** held on 17 July 2007 together with those of the **SPECIAL MEETING** held on 20 July 2007, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member, were confirmed.

2. **THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE** held on 24 July 2007 a copy of which had been circulated to each Member, were submitted.

RESOLVED that the information contained in the Minutes, be noted.

3. **PUBLIC QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION**

There were no members of the public present.

4. **FEEDBACK FROM THE SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT BOARD**

At the last meeting of the Scrutiny Management Board held on 30 July 2007, the following issue was discussed:-

North East Regional Overview and Scrutiny Annual Conference

RESOLVED that information given, be noted.

5. **SERVICE UNIT PERFORMANCE REPORTING - REVENUES AND BENEFITS**

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Financial Management which provided a position statement in respect of Revenues and Benefits services, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member.

Details of performance from 1 April 2006 to 31 March 2007 was outlined in Appendix 1 to the report.

The Benefits Operations Manager gave details of the key issues with regard to revenues including the percentage of Council Tax collected in the year, percentage of business rates collected and the cost of collecting Council Tax per chargeable dwelling. Members were advised of the overall performance of the Unit together with details of recorded complaints.

The Benefits Operations Manager explained that the collection rate for 2006/2007 was 96.55%, an increase of 0.3% on the previous year. This was the highest collection rate that the Council had achieved.

Details were given of the key issues with regard to benefits and in particular, performance on benefit claims, the average time for completing changes in

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circumstances and the amount of benefit paid correctly. Turn around times for new applications had reduced to previous years.

The Council had launched an on-line benefits application form. This allowed prospective claimants to check their entitlement and if they qualified, submit their claim. In the last two months, 10-15 applications had been received on line and 9 of those were processed in one day. It was intended that this initiative would be publicised widely to encourage more usage.

In respect of fraud for the year 2006/2007, 20 cases had been prosecuted and 64 formal cautions given.

A new scheme called Local Housing Allowances was to come into force on 1 April 2008. All new claims and benefits would be calculated based on the local market rent. It was estimated that a lot of people would be financially better off. Publicity materials were currently being prepared and a meeting would be held with Members to explain the detail later in the year. The tenant would be paid directly in the new scheme and they would be able to keep 15% of any difference. This was being introduced to make people more conscious of the type of property they were looking for. There were exceptions if the tenant had debt and financial problems and the benefit would be paid direct to the landlord.

The Benefits Operations Manager explained that over the next few months, Members of the public were to be consulted through the Areas Forums on benefits, to ascertain what the public would like to see from the Benefits Service.

A Member queried if there was enough staff to deal with the benefits on line. The Benefits Operations Manager explained that it was easier to handle a claim on line and the Council were trying to promote this as a way forward.

The Chair thanked the Benefits Operations Manager for his report.

RESOLVED the information given, be noted.