

**THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING**  
**OF THE COMMUNITY SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**  
**HELD ON TUESDAY 28 OCTOBER 2008**

Present: Councillor C Patching (Chair)  
Councillors T Longstaff, D Milsom  
and T Unsworth

Apologies: Councillors B Burn, R Burnip  
Mrs A E Laing and Mrs S Mason

**Prior to the consideration of business Members observed a one minute silence as a mark of respect for Councillor PJ Campbell who had died recently.**

- 1 **THE MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING** held on 7 October 2008, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member, were confirmed.

**MATTER ARISING**

**Post Office Limited Network Change Programme – Area Plan Proposal for Tyne and Wear with Northumberland and Durham  
(Minute no 1 refers)**

The Scrutiny Support Manager explained that the Post Office had sent written confirmation that the lower Seaside Lane Post Office, Easington Colliery would re-open on 21 October 2008 following its temporary closure due to a burst water main underneath the premises.

For information he informed Members that the contract for the Post Office card account was due to end in the near future. If the contract was lost, there were concerns that this could impact upon Post Offices and cause further closures.

**RESOLVED** that the information given, be noted.

- 2 **THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE** held on 14 October 2008, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member, were submitted.

**RESOLVED** that the information contained within the Minutes, be noted.

3 **PUBLIC QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION**

There were no members of the public present.

4 **FEEDBACK FROM SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT BOARD**

The Chair reported that at the last meeting of the Scrutiny Management Board held on 20th October, 2008 the following was discussed:

- Minutes of the Executive – 14 October 2008.

**RESOLVED** that the 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 gave a position statement in respect of the revenues and benefits service, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member.

Details of performance from 1 April 2007 to date was outlined in Appendices 1 and 3 of the report. The tables showed national upper quartile performance for previous years by way of comparison.

The Benefits Manager explained that in terms of sickness levels, the position had improved in Revenues, although the figures for Benefits were slightly worse due to long term sickness absence.

He provided an update on performance in relation to benefits claims, stating that the average time taken to calculate new applications for 2008/9 was 21 days, a reduction of 5 days compared to 2007/8.

A new combined indicator 'Right Time Indicator' had been implemented with effect from 1 April 2008 which replaced BVPI 'Days to process new claims and change of circumstances'. This was 10 days at present and although there was no information available to compare or benchmark with, performance was expected to be rated as 'excellent'.

Appendix 3 of the report also showed grades for the relevant performance figures which were set by the Department for Works and Pensions (DWP), and the levels were set out in Appendix 4 for Members consideration.

The report also provided details of performance in respect of the Revenues service, including the percentage of council tax and business rates collected and the cost of collecting council tax per property.

The Benefits Manager advised that council tax collected showed a decrease of 0.3% compared to the previous year, however this still represented one of the highest collection rates achieved by this Council.

He continued that the Section was currently in the process of carrying out a single person discount review using an external agency. As a result, 512 discounts had been withdrawn, resulting in an extra £146,000 in charges being raised. The remaining claimants would be reviewed by the end of the financial year.

With regard to complaints, the report provided details of written complaints received for the period April – September 2008. A Member asked for clarification of the figures reported in respect of benefits complaints. The Benefits Manager advised that one of the unresolved complaints had been referred to an industrial tribunal and the other was ongoing but was expected to be resolved in the near future.

To summarise, he reported that the workload in the Benefits Section continued to be at a manageable level.

The Section continued to work with partners to encourage benefits take-up and a promotional DVD had been produced to send to prospective claimants.

New procedures had been introduced for the immediate processing of claims in the office, online claims and telephone claims, details of which were given in the report.

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The Section also continued to be proactive in dealing with fraud and during this financial year 18 fraud sanctions had been issued. This gave a DWP grading of 'excellent'.

The Section had also been successful in the recovery of older and previous tenant overpayments, using an outside collection agency which had resulted in £42,191 being collected in 2007/2008 year.

In discussing the report, the Chair made reference to the workload in the Unit and asked if there would be capacity problems and undue pressure on staff as a result of the increase in sickness levels and the new initiatives introduced.

The Benefits Manager responded that the figures in relation to sickness had been affected by the long term absence of the Revenues Manager who had now retired, with one other employee on long term sick leave. He reiterated that at present the workload within the Benefits Section continued to be at a manageable level, however it would continue to be closely monitored. He added that the LGR Revenues and Benefits Workstream had assessed workloads across the County in the move towards the new Unitary Council to ensure that resources were directed where needed.

The Chair made reference to Appendix 3, and stated that where targets had not been achieved, the reasons should be stated in the appropriate column in the report, together with timescales for completion. He made specific reference to targets numbered 17 and 18 in the Appendix. The Benefits Manager confirmed that he would ensure that future reports included this, and would circulate to Members the information omitted in relation to targets numbered 17 and 18.

Reference was also made to the need for continuity in the level of service provided to residents in the transition to the new Council. Members asked how examples of best practice from this Council would be rolled forward.

The Benefits Manager explained that as part of the remit of the Revenues and Benefits Workstream, he was responsible for looking at procedures, which involved selecting elements of good practice from each Council. This would ensure that a high level of service would be provided to residents across the County under the new arrangements.

Members felt that it would be beneficial to include an update on the local government review in future reports.

**RESOLVED** that

- (a) the information given, be noted;
- (b) future reports include an update on progress with the local government review;
- (c) the Benefits Manager provide Members with information relating to targets numbered 17 and 18 in Appendix 3 of the report.