



# STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Tuesday,

8 January 2008

10.00 a.m.

Council Chamber,  
Council Offices,  
Spennymoor

# AGENDA

and

# REPORTS





**This document is also available in other languages,  
large print and audio format upon request**

**العربية (Arabic)**

إذا أردت المعلومات بلغة أخرى أو بطريقة أخرى، نرجو أن تطلب ذلك منا.

**বাংলা (Bengali)**

যদি আপনি এই ডকুমেন্ট অন্য ভাষায় বা ফরমেটে চান, তাহলে দয়া করে আমাদেরকে বলুন।

**(中文 (繁體字)) (Cantonese)**

如欲索取以另一語文印製或另一格式製作的資料，請與我們聯絡。

**हिन्दी (Hindi)**

यदि आपको सूचना किसी अन्य भाषा या अन्य रूप में चाहिये तो कृपया हमसे कहे

**polski (Polish)**

Jeżeli chcieliby Państwo uzyskać informacje w innym języku lub w innym formacie, prosimy dać nam znać.

**ਪੰਜਾਬੀ (Punjabi)**

ਜੇ ਇਹ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਤੁਹਾਨੂੰ ਕਿਸੇ ਹੋਰ ਭਾਸ਼ਾ ਵਿਚ ਜਾਂ ਕਿਸੇ ਹੋਰ ਰੂਪ ਵਿਚ ਚਾਹੀਦੀ, ਤਾਂ ਇਹ ਸਾਥੋਂ ਮੰਗ ਲਓ।

**Español (Spanish)**

Póngase en contacto con nosotros si desea recibir información en otro idioma o formato.

**اردو (Urdu)**

اگر آپ کو معلومات کسی دیگر زبان یا دیگر شکل میں درکار ہوں تو برائے مہربانی ہم سے پوچھئے۔

**AGENDA**

**1. APOLOGIES**

**2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

To notify the Chairman of any items that appear later in the agenda in which you may have an interest.

**3. MINUTES**

To confirm as a correct record the Minutes of the meeting held on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2007. (Pages 1 - 6)

**4. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY CORPORATE EQUALITY PLAN - PROGRESS UPDATE**

Report of Head of Organisational Development. (Pages 7 - 12)

**5. COUNCIL TAX SERVICE - PERFORMANCE**

Report of Director of Resources. (Pages 13 - 16)

**6. WORK PROGRAMME**

Report of the Chairman of the Committee. (Pages 17 - 20)

**7. ANY OTHER ITEMS WHICH THE CHAIRMAN DECIDES ARE URGENT**

Members are respectfully requested to give the Chief Executive notice of items they would wish to raise under the heading not later than 12 noon on the day preceding the meeting, in order that consultation may take place with the Chairman who will determine whether the item will be accepted.

**B. Allen  
Chief Executive**

**Council Offices  
SPENNYMOOR  
27<sup>th</sup> December 2007**

Councillor A. Gray (Chairman)  
Councillor B.F. Avery J.P (Vice Chairman)

Councillors D.R. Brown, V. Chapman, D. Farry, T.F. Forrest, Mrs. J. Gray, B. Haigh, T. Hogan, Ms. I. Jackson and B.M. Ord.

**ACCESS TO INFORMATION**

Any person wishing to exercise the right of inspection etc. in relation to this agenda and associated papers should contact Mrs. G. Garrigan Tel 01388 816166 ext 4240 email [ggarrigan@sedgefield.gov.uk](mailto:ggarrigan@sedgefield.gov.uk)

# Item 3

## **SEDGFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

Council Chamber,  
Council Offices,  
Spennymoor

Tuesday,  
20 November 2007

Time: 10.00 a.m.

**Present:** Councillor A. Gray (Chairman) and  
Councillors D. Farry, T.F. Forrest, Mrs. J. Gray, B. Haigh, T. Hogan and  
B.M. Ord

**In Attendance:** Councillors G.C. Gray, Mrs. S. Haigh, D.M. Hancock, J.E. Higgin,  
B. Lamb, Mrs. E. Maddison, J. Robinson J.P, A. Smith and T. Ward

**Apologies:** Councillors B.F. Avery J.P, D.R. Brown, V. Chapman and Ms. I. Jackson

**SL.16/07      DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**  
No declarations of interest were received.

**SL.17/07      MINUTES**  
The Minutes of the meeting held on 9<sup>th</sup> October, 2007 were confirmed as a  
correct record and signed by the Chairman.

**SL.18/07      HALF YEARLY REPORT ON COMPLAINTS RECEIVED BY  
CORPORATE COMPLAINTS STAFF**  
Consideration was given to a report of the Chief Executive (for copy see  
file of Minutes) outlining complaints/issues received by the Corporate  
Customer Relations staff in the Chief Executives department during the  
period 1<sup>st</sup> April, 2007 to 30<sup>th</sup> September, 2007.

It was explained that the Borough Council had adopted a revised  
Complaints Policy aimed at providing residents and other users of the  
Borough Services with the opportunity to comment on and criticise those  
services or service delivery. The Policy provided for the publication of a  
half yearly and Annual Report on complaints handling.

The Committee was pleased to note that the number of complaints/issues  
dealt with by Corporate Complaints staff had decreased from 394 in the  
first six months of 2006/2007 to 195 in the same period for 2007/08 – a  
decrease of 199 (51%). This could be attributed to Service Departments  
and the Customer Services Centre being able to deal with substantially  
more complaints to the customers satisfaction at the first point of contact  
and avoid issues being referred to Corporate Complaints staff.

The report identified the number of complaints received within each  
Service area and the nature of the complaint.

The main area of complaint (37%) related to services provided by the Housing Department. However, the total volume of complaints about those services fell from 153 to 73 with justified complaints falling from 16 to 9, a reduction of 43%.

In respect of Housing Maintenance Service, it was noted that there had been a continuing decrease in the number of complaints from 66 to 45 with the number of justified complaints decreasing from 14 to 6. The reason for the justified complaints was work not being carried within target.

It was also noted 15,135 jobs were issued in the period and justified complaints represent 0.05%.

Members were informed that although 18 complaints had been made in relation to the Housing Management Service only 2 complaints were found to be justified.

With regard to complaints made about capital improvements, it was noted that of the ten complaints received only one had been found to be justified.

It was noted that ten complaints had been made against the Benefits, Council Tax and Business Rates Services with only 1 regarding Benefits being justified.

In relation to the Development Control Service, six complaints had been received with one being found to be justified.

It was explained that Corporate Complaints staff aimed to respond to 100% of the complaints and enquiries within 10 Working days and achieved 97.5% in the first half of the current year compared with 98.9% in the first half of 2006/2007. Procedures had been changed to ensure that all complaints received at least a 'holding response' if it was not possible to fully resolve a complaint within target. 78% of issues were, however, responded to within 1 working day.

The Committee was also advised of the Complaints Procedure whereby complainants had the right to complain to the Local Government Ombudsman if they had exhausted the Council's Complaints Procedure.

In 2007/08 10 cases to date had been investigated and decided by the Ombudsman. The Council was not found guilty of maladministration in any of the cases.

It was pointed out that there were no complaints made relating to any of the six strands of the Equity and Diversity Standard for Local Government.

During discussion of this item a query was raised regarding criteria for determining whether a case was justified. It was explained that as a general rule a complaint was considered justifiable if the Council was found to be not providing a service in accordance with agreed policies and procedures.

Reference was made to a complaint which was contained in the Ombudsman's report relating to the repair of a central heating system. It was explained that the issue had been resolved and the tenant had been compensated as suggested by the Ombudsman. Systems had also since been put in place to ensure that the chances of a similar situation arising again were minimised. It was suggested that this issue be brought to the attention of Healthy Borough with Strong Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee for consideration.

A query was raised regarding the complaint received against Licensing and whether it was related to taxi licensing. It was explained that as part of the new regime a new policy had been introduced to protect taxi owners and members of the public. The complaint related to the policy.

*AGREED :*

- 1. That the half year report be received and the full year report for 2007/08 be prepared by consideration at a future meeting.*
  
- 2. That Healthy Borough with Strong Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee be requested to consider the issue relating to the complaint highlighted in the Ombudsman's report*

## **SL.19/07**

### **PERFORMANCE INDICATORS**

Consideration was given to a report measuring performance against corporate health element of the Corporate Plan covering the period 1<sup>st</sup> April, 2007 to 30<sup>th</sup> September, 2007. (For copy see file of Minutes).

The report provided data on 21 Performance Indicators of which five were key to the Council's aims and objectives. The report did not include figures that were calculated on an annual basis.

Members expressed their satisfaction with the following key points of progress :-

- Calls to main switchboard answered within 30 seconds
- Corporate Employee Turnover
- Number of Current Vacant Posts which had been advertised and had remained vacant for six months or over.

The Committee then broke into workshop session to give detailed consideration of performance information.

The following issues were identified for inclusion on the Committee Work Programme for further in-depth examination:-

- **Percentage of Council Tax Collected in the Year (BV009)**  
Concern was raised regarding the target of 95% which was lower than most other authorities. It was considered that an explanation was needed with a view to the target being lifted.
  
- **Number of Working Days/Shifts Lost to the Local Authority due to Sickness Absence (BV012)**  
It was noted that sickness absence was improving but sickness remained in the bottom quartile and below target by 2.7 days. All sickness cases were being addressed by new procedures and plans in place to reduce long term absenteeism via rehabilitation, redeployment, ill-health retirement and dismissal processes. Short term absences were being addressed through structured notification processes, return to work interviews and reference point reporting on a monthly basis to Heads of Service triggering formal investigations. In normal circumstances resultant improvements in sickness levels could be expected 6 – 12 months from the implementation of the new procedures. However, given Local Government Re-organisation it was uncertain whether an improvement would be realised.
  
- **Percentage of Non Council Housing Capital Projects within 5% of Budgeted Cost (CPC03) and Percentage of Non Council Housing Capital Projects within 5% of Projected Timescale (CPC04)**  
Further information was requested in relation to these areas for which no information was yet available as at Quarter 2.
  
- **Percentage of Complaints Responded to in 10 Working Days (LPI20)**  
Concern was expressed that the performance was 2.56% under target. Members however recognised that as approval had been given to appoint two further staff to the Council Tax Section this should, ultimately improve the turnaround times for answering correspondence in the section. The procedure had been amended to ensure all complaints received at least a holding response within 10 working days if it was not possible to fully resolve their complaint within target.

This was also linked to :-

**Response or Holding Response to Letters within 10 Working Days across the Authority (LPI22)**

Which was performing 11% under target due to the high volume of Council Tax mail. Members again recognised that as approval had been given to appoint two further staff to the Council Tax Section this should improve the outturn figure

The Committee suggested however that these Indicators (LPI120 and 122) could be considered as part of the Work Programme when the Annual Report on Customer Complaints was submitted to Overview and Scrutiny Committee in June 2008.



- AGREED :*
1. *That the key points of progress be noted.*
  2. *That areas of concern be incorporated in the Committee's Work Programme.*

**SL.20/07**

**WORK PROGRAMME**

Consideration was given to the Work Programme for Strategic Leadership Overview and Scrutiny Committee. (For copy see file of Minutes).

Members had identified Performance Indicators to be addressed in the Work Programme. It was highlighted that Council Tax Collection Performance Indicator would be identified as priority.

Members requested that a report be presented in relation to the Housing Maintenance Service and in particular the monitoring of jobs processed.

- AGREED :*
1. *That the Work Programme be noted.*
  2. *That the following items be placed on the Committee Work Programme:*
    - *Progress towards Council Tax Collection Performance Indicator (BV009)*
    - *Progress towards Best Value Performance Indicator (BV012) relating to sickness absence.*
    - *Progress towards Corporate Plan Performance Indicators (CPC03 and CPC04) relating to Non Council Housing Capital Projects.*
    - *Progress towards Local Performance Indicators LPI20 and LPI22 relating to Complaints Response time.*

---

**ACCESS TO INFORMATION**

Any person wishing to exercise the right of inspection, etc., in relation to these Minutes and associated papers should contact Liz North 01388 816166 ext 4237 email:enorth@sedgefield.gov.uk

This page is intentionally left blank

# Item 4

## REPORT TO STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

## REPORT OF HEAD OF ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

8th JANUARY 2008

### STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP PORTFOLIO

### EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY – CORPORATE EQUALITY PLAN PROGRESS UPDATE

#### 1. SUMMARY

- 1.1 The CEP Action Plan provides an overarching framework to steer the Council towards Level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government (ESLG) and to address actions relating to disability, race and gender equality.
- 1.2 This report sets out the progress made to date against the Corporate Equality Plan (CEP) (Minute Ref OSC(1).26/06). This document is key to ensuring the Council drives forward the equalities agenda and has been updated in accordance with legislative requirements and incorporates the Race Equality Scheme, Gender Equality Scheme and Disability Equality Scheme.

#### 2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

- 2.1 Strategic Leadership Overview and Scrutiny Committee considers the progress made to date.
- 2.2 Progress against the Corporate Equality Plan (CEP) continues to be reported to Strategic Leadership Overview and Scrutiny on an annual basis.

#### 3. CORPORATE EQUALITY PLAN

- 3.1 **Background**  
The Council has set a challenging target to achieve Level 3 of ESLG by March 2008. The CEP is a prerequisite for achieving this and is key to strengthening and formalising corporate commitment to equalities.

- 3.2 The CEP sets out:
- Equality issues in Sedgefield Borough
  - The strategic framework
  - The Equality Standard for Local Government
  - Impact Needs Requirements Assessment Programme
  - Race, Disability and Gender Equality
  - Action to date
  - Implementation and monitoring arrangements
  - CEP Action Plan
- 3.3 **Race Equality**  
The Council's Race Equality Scheme is contained within the CEP and sets out how the Council will action its general duty under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 to eliminate unlawful racial discrimination, promote equal opportunities and promote good relations between people from different racial backgrounds.
- 3.4 This is the Council's third revision to its Race Equality Scheme (RES) and builds upon the work already done in this area.
- 3.5 **Disability Equality**  
This second version of the Disability Equality Scheme (DES) focuses on how the Council will action its general duty under the Disability Discrimination Act (1995 and 2004) which makes it unlawful for a public body to discriminate against people with disabilities by treating them less favourably in employment, in the provision of services and in certain aspects of education.
- 3.6 **Gender Equality**  
This second version of the Gender Equality Scheme (GES) sets out how the Council will fulfil its general duty under the Equality Act 2006 to have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination and to promote equality of opportunity between men and women.
- 3.7 **Progress to Date  
Equality Standard for Local Government (ESLG)**  
Significant progress has been made to embed and mainstream the equality agenda across the Council. The Council has set a target to achieve Level 3 of ESLG by March 2008. Whereas Levels 1 and 2 are self-declared, Level 3 needs to be externally assessed however the peer challenge external assessment model is not available until April/May 2008 therefore the achievement date has been revised to May 2008. In preparation for external assessment, a comprehensive self-assessment exercise against the first three levels of the ESLG has been undertaken. The findings from this exercise have been incorporated into the CEP Action Plan and this has in turn informed the self-assessment report.
- 3.8 In order to prepare for the assessment, a sub group has been established and the remit of this Group is to:
- Finalise the self assessment report and monitor progress against it

- Co-ordinate departmental responses, evidence and actions to be completed prior to the external audit by stakeholder group
- Deliver briefing sessions to staff in order to prepare them for external audit

## **Corporate Equality Plan (CEP) Action Plan**

### **Leadership and Corporate Commitment**

- 3.9 Following consultation the CEP and associated action plan have been revised and re-published and the incorporated Race, Disability and Gender Equality Schemes have been updated and revised in accordance with legislative requirements.
- 3.10 All completed Impact, Needs and Requirement Assessments (INRA's) have been audited in order to ensure that adequate consultation took place and that the resulting actions from the INRA process were incorporated into Service Plans.
- 3.11 The INRA Programme has been re-prioritised in light of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). A number of impact assessments covering transitional projects are now underway and emerging projects that will have a lasting effect on the Borough's Communities, such as Housing Market Renewals, have also been started. It has been agreed through the Corporate Equality and Diversity Group that departments need not start any new Priority 3 INRAs in this financial year as a result of LGR, but must continue with those already started. The importance of impact assessing any new initiatives or projects before they are agreed has been reiterated.
- 3.12 Work is underway to devise a corporate mechanism for tracking and monitoring adverse impacts. This is scheduled for completion by March 2008.

### **Community Engagement and Accountability**

- 3.13 Consultation with communities continues through the INRA process. A number of equalities objectives have been set within each service, ensuring that equality targets are in line with service user needs and work continues to be undertaken to ensure that the Council's consultation mechanisms are robust and reach all representative communities and groups within the Borough.
- 3.14 'Inform', 'Borough Matters' and other media are being used to promote positive publicity on equality issues.
- 3.15 The Council is also committed to providing all documentation in a number of formats upon request. 'First Contact' has been issued to all staff to ensure that they are aware of how to deal with customers with specific needs.

### **Service Delivery and Customer Care**

- 3.16 The Council has devised an 'Equality Guide for Suppliers and Contractors' in order to both inform contractors of their legal obligations and to enable Council Officers within relevant services to monitor contractor compliance with Equality Legislation. Additionally the Council has taken part in the equality and diversity peer review process for the North East Centre of Excellence's Harmonisation of Local Government Documentation (Goods and Services) Project. The purpose of the project was to produce a harmonised set of Pre-qualification questionnaire (PQQ) and Invitation to Tender (ITT) documents to further improve competition and diversity within the supply market. The documents will be available for use across the region from early next year.
- 3.17 An equalities site has been set up on the intranet and internet. All corporate documentation is published on this site, including the Corporate Equality Plan. The site will also be used to publicise news and events.
- 3.18 The Corporate Complaints Policy has been revised to include equality issues. The bi-annual report to Strategic Leadership Overview and Scrutiny highlights the fact that no complaints were received covering the six strands of equality.
- 3.19 In order to monitor the take up of services by race, gender and disability some equality statistics have been compiled across service delivery areas and these have been incorporated into the CEP.

### **Employment and Training**

- 3.20 A number of actions contained within this section of the CEP Action Plan are underway. A series of training events for staff have been held on broader equality issues with over 170 attendees. More training is scheduled in 2008 for both staff and members, with member training being arranged in partnership with Wear Valley District Council.
- 3.21 Homeworking is currently being piloted in the Benefits Section and the policy is subsequently being refined to reflect current legislation.

### **Future Issues**

- 3.22 Forthcoming legislation and the requirement to annually review race, gender and disability equality schemes will necessitate the ongoing refinement of the CEP and associated action plan.

## **4. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

### **Human Resources**

- 4.1 The CEP Action Plan details the specific resource implications and the officers responsible for delivering the aims of the plan. It is expected that this can be met from existing staffing resources.

## **Financial Resources**

4.2 The financial implications set out in the CEP Action Plan are as follows:

	£
External validation against ESLG	8500
Equality and Diversity Training Programme	6000

This can be met from the Equality and Diversity revenue budget 2008/9.

## **5. CONSULTATION**

- 5.1 The CEP has been subject to detailed consultation via a number of organisations, including the Ethnic Liaison Group, Age Concern, Chinese Association North East Region, County Durham and Darlington Race Equality Council, Disability Rights Commission, as well as other officers within the Borough Council. Other partner organisations have also been consulted including Sedgefield Children and Young People's Partnership, Sedgefield Learning Disabilities Group, Sedgefield PCT and SureStart.
- 5.2 In July 2006, the Council took part in a countywide event – "Have Your Say" – which consulted on disability issues that impact on the public sector. Feedback from the event was then used for further consultation with representative organisations that informed the writing of the DES.
- 5.3 Extensive consultation was also carried out when developing the GES, including Focus Groups with female employees.
- 5.4 The action plan will be monitored through the Corporate Equality and Diversity Group.

## **6. OTHER MATERIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

### **6.1 Links to Corporate Ambitions/Values**

The contents of the Equalities plans and schemes attached to this report contribute directly towards ensuring Council services are provided in an open, accessible, equitable, fair and responsive way. The outcomes of the plans will contribute towards tackling disadvantage and promoting social inclusion of minority groups.

### **6.2 Risk Management**

The following risks have been identified via a STORM risk assessment and details of the mitigating action are set out in the Equality and Diversity Risk Management Action Plan (Reference OD 4):

- Non-compliance with statutory duties

- ❑ Non-compliance with the legislative framework
- ❑ Failure to achieve targets set out in the corporate plan
- ❑ Risk of challenge from minority groups
- ❑ Adverse inspection by Audit Commission

### **6.3 Health and Safety**

No additional implications have been identified.

### **6.4 Equality and Diversity**

The Council has a key strategic role to play with respect to equality and diversity and is committed to promoting equality of access to and appropriate use of its services and facilities regardless of race, gender, disability, age, sexual orientation or religious or philosophical belief.

The CEP, DES and GES are an essential part of a Corporate Equalities Framework designed to firmly embed equality issues within the culture and day-to-day activities of the Council.

### **6.5 Legal and Constitutional**

The Council has a moral and social duty to recognise that discrimination does not take place whether within the workplace or in the wider community. However, the CEP will (importantly) enable the Council to meet the requirements of current and future legislation including, Race Relations Act (1976) plus amendments (2000, 2003), Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006, Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003 and Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2003.

Both the DES and GES are legislative documents and set out how the Council will meet its duties arising from the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and amendment 2003 and the Equality Act 2006.

No other material considerations have been identified.

**Contact Officer:** Helen Darby  
**Telephone No:** (01388) 816166 ext 4436  
**Email Address:** hdarby@sedgefield.gov.uk

**Ward(s):** All wards are affected

### **Background Papers**

The Equality Standard for Local Government – Guidance Document  
Sedgefield Borough Corporate Equality Plan



# Item 5

## STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

8 JANUARY 2008

### REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF RESOURCES

#### **COUNCIL TAX SERVICE - PERFORMANCE**

##### **1. SUMMARY**

- 1.1 There has been a strong focus in recent years on improving the in-year collection rates of council tax. This is evidenced by a Best Value Performance indicator (BVPI), Government targets and publication of improvement tables.
- 1.2 The Borough Council has been successful in collecting tax over time but its in-year collection rate has not kept pace with improvement by other authorities. Whilst this has been monitored and limited improvements have taken place within existing resources there has been a long held view that collection costs should be kept low.
- 1.3 Although the collections costs have traditionally been very low, this Council's in-year collection rate has been the worst in County Durham for some time and in 2006/07, collection was the fourth worst in the country. If this matter was left unaddressed, the Council's Use of Resources Assessment could be adversely affected. The Chief Executive therefore recently approved the creation of two new posts in the Council Tax Service to address this issue following a report to the Audit Committee which looked at a number of options available to improve cash flow.
- 1.4 This report outlines the main issues regarding the collection of council tax and highlights how performance can be improved.

##### **2. RECOMMENDATION**

- 2.1 That the information be received

##### **3 BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 There is one Key Best Value Performance Indicator in relation to council tax. BVPI 009, "Proportion of council tax collected in year", is a measure of performance that the Audit Commission regularly reviews.

- 3.2 Since the introduction of the Key BVPI's in 2002/03 the Council's performance in respect of this Indicator had improved year on year until 2006/07 as shown below:

Year	%
2002/03	94.6
2003/04	94.9
2004/05	95.3
2005/06	95.4
2006/07	95.0

- 3.3 Although the trend is one of gradual improvement this still represents a bottom quartile level of performance. It was determined in the past that increasing collection costs would not represent value for money with increased returns being more than offset by costs. However, the amount due for 2007/08 of £33M is now over three times the amount due in 1993/94 when council tax was first introduced and the case to review the level of staffing to improve cash flow can now be justified.
- 3.4 The additional resources referred to in 1.3 will enable a Visiting Officer to be appointed who will try to ensure that vulnerable taxpayers receive all of the reductions to which they are entitled, including discounts, exemptions and/or council tax benefit. An Administration Officer will assist the Council Tax Service to speed up recovery by issuing recovery notices earlier and promoting payment by direct debit more actively.
- 3.5 Even with the inclusion of the additional resources the most recent information suggests that Sedgefield will still have the lowest collection costs of the authorities in County Durham. Low collection costs have been a feature of our approach over the life of the tax.
- 3.6 Members should be aware that over time, the Council has an excellent record of collecting council tax with a relatively low amount being written off. In the 15 years since council tax was introduced, the total amount due to be collected from taxpayers is in excess of £316m of which the total amount written off during that time amounts to only £614,000. This represents less than two tenths of one per cent of the amount to be collected.

#### **4 IMPROVING THE COLLECTION RATE**

- 4.1 The Council has a duty to maximise collection and cash flow and the Government has determined that all Councils should aim to achieve 98.3% in-year collection rate. This is a demanding target and there is therefore a need to strengthen recovery procedures by issuing recovery notices earlier and promoting direct debit to council tax payers as the preferred means of payment.
- 4.2 Procedural changes also need to ensure a customer focus with the intention that any push for earlier payment is not targeted at those who cannot pay but those who choose to pay late.

- 4.3 Promotion of the Benefits Service is an important factor in the event of identifying taxpayers who are having genuine difficulty in meeting their obligations.
- 4.4 It must also be borne in mind that any tightening of current procedures will be unpopular as there will be many taxpayers who believe that the current culture of paying within the month, missing months to catch up later or waiting for recovery action to take place is perfectly reasonable. It is important, therefore, to communicate changes in policy as widely as possible, ensuring that members are aware and prepared to deal with comments and issues as they arise.
- 4.5 The picture will not change overnight but whilst short-term problems and resistance to change may be encountered this is not sufficient reason not to attempt to improve the current collection rates.
- 4.6 A review of Council Tax recovery procedures has identified key features for improving the collection rate for staff to follow. The key features that need to be considered in improving the collection rate are:
- Instalments are due on the first of the month. A concession is made to those choosing to pay by direct debit where a range of dates is offered. This is on the basis that direct debit offers certainty of collection and reduces administration. This is in line with other authorities and utility companies that recognise that direct debit is a cost effective method of collection
  - The instalment date will be enforced with earlier reminders
  - The Council will utilise its full range of powers to recover the outstanding amounts.
- 4.7 Mail shots are being prepared to advise council tax payers about the new procedures and also to encourage payment by direct debit.

## **5 CONCLUSION**

- 5.1 The authority is falling behind in terms of achieving targets of in-year council tax collection. A review of current processes and resources has been considered to improve the current position. There are a number of benefits associated with improving collection rates including:
- Improving cash flow
  - Reducing arrears
  - Reducing correspondence
  - Better use of resources
  - More consistent service
- 5.2 Improvements in performance will not happen overnight as the existing payment culture will need to be challenged and changed and this will inevitably lead to resistance in some quarters. However, this is not sufficient reason not to make the changes to

satisfy an obligation to the good taxpayers in the Borough and to achieve greater efficiencies and optimum use of resources.

5.2.1.1 5.3 Local Government Reorganisation in County Durham is now a reality and this Council has a duty to match other constituent Councils by maximising its in-year collection rate and thereby minimising any arrears to be transferred to the new Authority.

5.4 As a result of increasing the staffing capacity within the Service and having completed the review of current processes, it will be possible to increase the in-year collection rate target for 2008/09 in line with Members of this Committee's expectations.

**Contact Officer:**  
**Telephone No.:**  
**E-Mail Address:**

Colin Jennings  
(01388) 816166 ext 4005  
cjennings@sedgefield.gov.uk

# Item 6

## STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

8<sup>th</sup> JANUARY 2008

## REPORT OF CHAIRMAN OF THE COMMITTEE

### WORK PROGRAMME

#### SUMMARY

This report sets out the Committee's current Work Programme for consideration and review.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the Committee's Work Programme be reviewed.

#### DETAIL

1. In accordance with Overview & Scrutiny Procedure Rule 8 of the Council's Constitution, Overview & Scrutiny Committees are responsible for setting their own work programme.
2. Each Overview & Scrutiny Committee should agree a realistic, achievable and considered work programme on the understanding that, from time to time, more urgent or immediate issues may require scrutiny. Issues may, for example, be raised by Cabinet reports, Members' constituency business or be referred to Scrutiny by Cabinet in advance of a Cabinet decision.
3. The current Work Programme for this Committee is appended to the report which details:-
  - Scrutiny Reviews currently being undertaken.
  - Scrutiny review topics held in reserve for future investigation.
  - A schedule of items to be considered by the Committee for the next 6 meetings.
4. **Scrutiny Review**  
The Committee should aim to undertake a small number of high quality reviews that will make a real difference to the work of the Authority, rather than high numbers of reviews on more minor issues. Each Overview & Scrutiny Committee should therefore aim to undertake two reviews concurrently. Any additional review topics that have been agreed by Members will be placed on a reserve list and as one Review is completed the Committee will decide on which review should be undertaken next.

Scrutiny reviews will be conducted by a Review Group established by the Committee comprising of 5-6 Members. In most cases the Review Group will

be made up of Members from the establishing Committee. However, Members may decide to conduct a review that cuts across the responsibilities of another Overview & Scrutiny Committee. In these cases Members should consider whether it would be appropriate to co-opt Members from the other relative Overview & Scrutiny Committee(s). If it is decided that the review is crosscutting the Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen of Overview & Scrutiny Committees concerned should decide which Committee should take the lead on the review and how many Members should be co-opted from other Overview & Scrutiny Committee(s). The number of Members to be co-opted will depend on the extent to which the responsibility of the topic is shared, however the Review Group should have no more than 6 members.

#### **5. Business for Future Meetings**

The Work Programme sets out a plan of when it is anticipated that certain items will be considered by the Committee. These items may include:-

- Best Value Service Improvement Plan updates
- Items which are submitted at regular intervals
- Issues identified by Members for consideration
- Any updates requested by Members

Members are requested to review the Committee's Work Programme and identify, where necessary, issues which they feel should be investigated by the Committee. It will not always be possible to anticipate all reports which will need to be considered by an Overview & Scrutiny Committee and therefore a flexible approach will need to be taken to work programming.

#### **4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

None associated with this report.

#### **5. CONSULTATION**

**Contact Officers:** David Anderson  
**Telephone No:** (01388) 816166 ext 4109/4362  
**Email Address:** [danderson@sedgefield.gov.uk](mailto:danderson@sedgefield.gov.uk)

**Ward(s):** Not ward specific

**Background Papers** None

## STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

### WORK PROGRAMME

<b>Ongoing Reviews</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>No reviews currently ongoing</i></li></ul>
<b>Future Reviews</b> <p>The following review topics have been identified by the Committee for future review. As one review is completed Members will decide which review should be undertaken next.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>No reviews identified</i></li></ul>

### ANTICIPATED ITEMS

<b>22<sup>nd</sup> January 2008</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Budgets</i></li></ul>
<b>12<sup>th</sup> February 2008</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Overview &amp; Scrutiny Review Group Report: Review of Sickness Management Action Plan – Update</i></li></ul>
<b>25<sup>th</sup> March 2008</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Customer Relationship Management System (CRM) Update</i></li><li>• <i>Update on Best Value Performance Indicator BVPI 11a</i></li></ul>
<b>1<sup>st</sup> Meeting in the 2008/09 Municipal Year</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Annual Report on Complaints Received by Corporate Complaints Staff</i></li><li>• <i>Performance Indicators – 2007/08 Year End Performance</i></li><li>• <i>Recruitment &amp; Retention (Update)</i></li></ul>
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Meeting in the 2008/09 Municipal Year</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>No items identified</i></li></ul>

This page is intentionally left blank