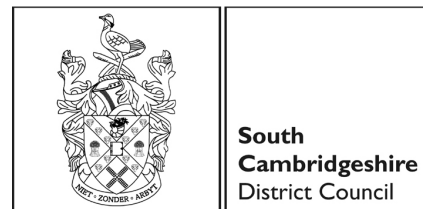


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29 June 2009



To: Councillor SM Edwards, Portfolio Holder

R Hall
MB Loynes
RB Martlew
RT Summerfield

Scrutiny Monitor
Scrutiny Monitor
Opposition Spokesman
Opposition Spokesman

Officers: Patrick Adams
Alex Colyer

Senior Democratic Services Officer
Interim Executive Director, Corporate
Services

Susan Gardner Craig
Laura Lock

Human Resources Manager
Electoral and Support Services Manager

Dear Sir / Madam

You are invited to attend the next meeting of **FINANCE AND STAFFING PORTFOLIO HOLDER'S MEETING**, which will be held in **JEAVONS ROOM, FIRST FLOOR** at South Cambridgeshire Hall on **TUESDAY, 7 JULY 2009 at 10.00 a.m.**

Members are respectfully reminded that when substituting on committees, subcommittees, and outside or joint bodies, Democratic Services must be advised of the substitution *in advance of* the meeting. It is not possible to accept a substitute once the meeting has started. Council Standing Order 4.3 refers.

Yours faithfully
GJ HARLOCK
Chief Executive

Requests for a large print agenda must be received at least 48 hours before the meeting.

AGENDA		PAGES
PROCEDURAL ITEMS		
1.	Declarations of Interest	
2.	Minutes of Previous Meeting and matters arising The Portfolio Holder is asked to sign the minutes of the meeting held on 9 June 2009 as a correct record.	1 - 4
DECISION ITEMS		
3.	Unspent Budget Rollovers from 2008-09 to 2009-10	5 - 12
INFORMATION ITEMS		

- | | | |
|-----------|--|----------------------|
| 4. | Benefits Service Workload and Performance | 13 - 18 |
| 5. | Pay Award 2009 | To
Follow |
| 6. | Forward Plan
The Portfolio Holder will maintain, for agreement at each meeting, a Forward Plan identifying all matters relevant to the Portfolio which it is believed are likely to be the subject of consideration and / or decision by the Portfolio Holder, Cabinet, Council, or any other constituent part of the Council. The plan will be updated as necessary and published on the Council's website following each meeting. The Portfolio Holder will be responsible for the content and accuracy of the forward plan. | 19 - 20 |
| 7. | Date of Next Meeting | |

GUIDANCE NOTES FOR VISITORS TO SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE HALL

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Security

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- **Do not** re-enter the building until the officer in charge or the fire brigade confirms that it is safe to do so.

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No member of the public shall be allowed to bring into or display at any Council meeting any banner, placard, poster or other similar item. The Chairman may require any such item to be removed.

Disturbance by Public

If a member of the public interrupts proceedings, the Chairman will warn the person concerned. If they continue to interrupt, the Chairman will order their removal from the meeting room. If there is a general disturbance in any part of the meeting room open to the public, the Chairman may call for that part to be cleared.

Smoking

Since 1 July 2008, the Council has operated a new Smoke Free Policy. Visitors are not allowed to smoke at any time within the Council offices, or in the car park or other grounds forming part of those offices.

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SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder's Meeting held on
Tuesday, 9 June 2009 at 10.00 a.m.

Portfolio Holder: SM Edwards

Councillors in attendance:

Scrutiny and Overview Committee monitors: R Hall

Opposition spokesmen RT Summerfield

Also in attendance:

Officers:

Adrian Burns

Head of Accountancy

Susan Gardner Craig

Human Resources Manager

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr MB Loynes, Cllr RB Martlew, Greg Harlock, Chief Executive, and Alex Colyer, Interim Executive Director Corporate Services.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**Finance Portfolio Holder's meeting**

The minutes of the Finance Portfolio Holder meeting held on 21 April 2009 were agreed as a correct record.

Matters arising

Item 49: Chairman's Allowance

It was confirmed that secretarial support to the Chairman was met from the Council's secretarial resource.

Item 50: Revenues Quarterly Update

The Portfolio Holder was advised that there had been a 50% increase in New Benefit applications and as a result performance against the 20-day target had slipped to 33 days. A more detailed update would be provided at the July Portfolio Holder meeting.

It was confirmed that the Financial Position Report and the Integrated Business Monitoring report were two different reports, with the latter including performance data compiled by the Performance Officer. However it was confirmed that item 4 on the agenda should be re-titled 'Financial Position Update'.

Staffing Portfolio Holder's meeting

The minutes of the Staffing Portfolio Holder meeting held on 1 May 2009 were agreed as a correct record.

There were no matters arising.

4. FINANCIAL POSITION UPDATE

The Head of Accountancy presented a report to provide the Portfolio Holder with an update to the previous provisional outturn report. The Portfolio Holder was advised that the figures in the report would be subject to finalisation and approval by the External Auditors of the Final Accounts.

The Portfolio Holder was further advised that there had been some unexpected movements in the accounts since the previous provisional outturn report, but that it was expected that the final results would be within the 3% target range.

Questions and Comments

The General Fund underspend had increased by £200,000.

The Housing Revenue Account would be 'fine tuned' at the end of the year.

It was confirmed that the overspend on the working estimate for Housing Repairs had come about as a result of more repair work being undertaken than forecast. It was noted that the DLO had performed much of this work and, as a result, the DLO deficit (estimated at approximately £40,000) had been eliminated.

The Portfolio Holder was advised that the £400,000 underspend in 2007/08 had been added into the disabled adaptations budget for 2009/10.

The Portfolio Holder was further advised that a Rollovers Report would be presented at his July meeting.

The Portfolio Holder was advised that final data for the concessionary fares scheme was awaited.

The Portfolio Holder was advised that departmental staff overspends were generally due to the costs of recruitment and that underspends corresponded with vacancies.

The report was **NOTED**.

5. PROCUREMENT SAVINGS 2008/09

The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder observed that the Procurement Officer had done an excellent job and requested that this feedback be given to the Procurement Officer.

The report was **NOTED**.

6. FORWARD PLAN

The Comprehensive Equalities Policy 2009-2012 item was moved to the Housing Portfolio Holder Forward Plan.

The Pay Award 2009/2010 and Relocation Policy items were added to the Forward Plan for July.

The Car Leases item was added to the Forward Plan for December.

The Tree Warden Scheme item was deleted from the Forward Plan.

The Portfolio Holder requested that the Forward Plan be amended to reflect the reporting path of the various performance reports.

Action: Guy Moody

7. DATE OF NEXT MEETING.

The dates of the next meetings were agreed as:

- Tuesday 7 July 2009
- Tuesday 11 August 2009
- Tuesday 8 September 2009

All meetings will start at 10am.

The Meeting ended at 10.35 a.m.

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SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder 7 July 2009
AUTHOR/S: Chief Executive/Principal Accountant (General Fund and Costing)

UNSPENT BUDGET ROLLOVER FROM 2008-09 TO 2009-10**Purpose**

1. To consider approval of requests for rollover of unspent budgets from 2008-09 to 2009-10.
2. This is not a key decision. However, it may result in increases in the 2009-10 budget estimates of the Council for specific, exceptional items that were originally included in the 2008-09 estimates but will now fall in 2009-10. The item was first published in the March 2009 Forward Plan for the Finance Portfolio.

Background

3. Budget rollover rules are governed by the budget and policy framework rules, as follows:

“Rollover of unspent budget provision from the previous financial year to the current year will only be permitted in exceptional cases (excluding employees). A list of rollovers will be completed and reported for approval to the Finance (and Staffing) Portfolio Holder by 31 July each year. Rollovers may then only be used with the approval of the Section 151 Officer, approval being on an individual basis during the year, when the corporate/cost centre manager can demonstrate that the current year’s budget is fully spent/committed and that there are no sources of funding, including virement. Rollovers are for specific items and cannot be vired.”
4. The list of rollovers is compiled from rollover requests from cost centre managers, who are required to obtain the approval of the relevant corporate manager and portfolio holder (Scheme of Officer Delegation), as evidenced on rollover request forms. All actual expenditure comparisons for this purpose are made with the Revised Estimates, as amended for any subsequent virement. It should be noted that, as well as requiring the individual rollover item to be under spent by at least the rollover amount, the overall spending position (excluding recharges) of the relevant service is also taken into account.

Considerations

5. The Appendix A summarises the rollover requests, which total £72,820 on General Fund revenue budgets, £170,760 on the Capital Programme and £40,000 on the Housing revenue Account. Details of the items are included on Appendix B. These amount to considerably less than in previous years, particularly in respect of revenue expenditure.
6. The Expenditure Outturn 2008-09 was reported to Cabinet on 2 July, as part of the Integrated Business Monitoring Report. It was reported that there was under spending of £189,000 on General Fund revenue, £295,000 on Capital and £112,700 on Housing

Revenue Account. That result confirmed that actual expenditure was sufficiently under spent to enable all the requested rollovers to be implemented.

Options

- Rollover approval is requested for each item, as detailed in the appendices, which can be considered individually on their merits. All have been proposed as exceptional cases. Most of these appear to be for expenditure that has already been committed, but could not be charged to the old year. Non-approval would cause overspendings in the current year in those particular areas, unless virement could be found from other areas, which is not likely at this stage, given the amounts involved and it being so early in the financial year. The additional requirement to demonstrate to the Section 151 Officer the funding need before adding the rollover to the current budget should reduce considerably the risk of any under spending arising from any areas involving the approved rollovers.

Implications

8. Financial	Budgets carried forward involve a shift in the phasing of expenditure from one year to the next. Subject to the Section 151 Officer giving subsequent approval for each individual item at the appropriate time, the relevant estimates in 2009-10 will be increased by the sums rolled forward, therefore increasing the overall budget for 2009-10. These increases are matched by the under-spending originating in 2008-09.
Legal	None
Staffing	None
Risk Management	The consequences of non-approval of each rollover can only be assessed by the spending officers, who have indicated that the items are exceptional
Equal Opportunities	None

Consultations

- The comments and recommendations of the cost centre managers were invited on the budget rollover approval forms and have been reproduced on Appendix B. The relevant corporate managers and portfolio holders will also have given the items consideration before approval.

Effect on Strategic Aims

10. Commitment to being a listening council, providing first class services accessible to all.	Rolling forward unspent budgets where necessary assists cost centre managers in meeting their original approved spending, which forms a part of the plan to achieve the aims of the Council.
Commitment to ensuring that South Cambridgeshire continues to be a safe and healthy place for all.	
Commitment to making South Cambridgeshire a place in which residents can feel proud to live.	
Commitment to assisting provision for local jobs for all.	
Commitment to providing a voice for rural life.	

Conclusions/Summary

11. The rollovers for approval in Appendix A amount to £72,820 in respect of the General Fund revenue budget, £170,760 for the Capital Programme and £40,000 relating to the Housing Revenue Account.

Recommendations

12. It is recommended that approval be given for the budget rollovers, as summarised in Appendix A, to be carried forward into the 2009-10 financial year, subject to final confirmation by the Section 151 Officer being given on an individual basis at the appropriate time during the year.

Background Papers: the following background papers were used in the preparation of this report:

SCDC Revised Estimates and Expenditure Outturn 2008-09
Rollover approval forms.

Contact Officer: **Peter Harris, Principal Accountant (General Fund and Costing)**
Telephone: (01954) 713073

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ROLLOVERS FROM 2008-09 TO 2009-10 ESTIMATES

The following items in the 2008-09 budget were underspent at the end of the 2008-09 financial year, but the expenditure will now fall within 2009-10. If approved by the Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder, the relevant estimate provisions will be rolled forward into 2009-10 ONLY IF or WHEN the S151 Officer is satisfied that the relevant 2009-10 budget has been fully committed.

Each of these rollovers will have been approved by the relevant Corporate Manager and Portfolio Holder before being presented to the Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder.

Item No.	Budget Booklet/Account Ref	£	£
GENERAL FUND REVENUE BUDGETS			
Finance and Staffing Portfolio (Cllr S Edwards)			
Finance and Support Services			
1.	Corporate Services - Cashiering - consultancy	T13	1,970
2.	Miscellaneous - Asset Revaluation	C5	1,430

			3,400
Environmental Services Portfolio (Cllr S Ellington)			
3.	Waste Management, Street Cleansing & EE Strategy - consultants	E4	5,000
Planning Portfolio (Cllr N Wright)			
4.	Planning - Conservation - Training	T76	2,820
5.	Planning - Conservation - consultants	T76	9,600
6.	Economic Development - Business Strategy	G4	20,000

			32,420
New Communities Portfolio (Cllr Dr D Bard)			
7.	Community Development - Community facilities audit	H2	8,910
8.	Growth Agenda - Cambourne/Orchard Park - consultants	H4	14,000

			22,910
Sustainability, Procurement and Efficiency Portfolio (Cllr T Bygott)			
9.	Sustainability - CAMCO/ESD study and Cambridge Carbon Footprint pilot	H3	9,090

Total General Fund revenue budget rollovers from 2008-09 to 2009-10			72,820
CAPITAL PROGRAMME			
Finance and Staffing Portfolio (Cllr S Edwards)			
10.	Cambourne - landscaping/final works on car park extension	K3	9,760
11.	Waterbeach - telephone system improvements	K3	10,000

			19,760
Policy and Performance - ICT (Cllr T Wotherspoon)			
ICT Development -			
12.	PC refresh, GIS, Flexible working, cash receipting, Land Charges	K3	64,000
Environmental Services Portfolio (Cllr S Ellington)			
13.	Housing Renewal Scheme - major renovation loan	K4	10,000
14.	Improvement Grants - Home Repairs Assistance Grants	K4	25,000
15.	Improvement Grants - Disabled Facilities Grant (Mandatory)	K4	52,000

			87,000
Total CAPITAL PROGRAMME budget rollovers from 2008-09 to 2009-10			170,760
<u>HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (Cllr M Howell)</u>			
General Administration			
16.	Payments to Tenants for Management Moves	F.4	40,000

Total HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT budget rollovers from 2008-09 to 2009-10			40,000

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DETAILS OF ROLLOVERS FROM 2008-09 TO 2009-10**GENERAL FUND REVENUE BUDGETS****1. Cashiering Consultancy - £1,970**

This is for the remainder of consultancy work to improve security of electronic payment transactions (debit cards) to meet the requirements of the APACS and Payment Card Industry Data Security Standard. Specific budget was included in 2008-09. The work could not be completed during 2008-09 due to supplier delays and must be completed in 2009-10, but there is no consultancy budget in 2009-10.

2. Asset Revaluation - £1,430

Additional expenditure of £2,000 was included in the 2008-09 estimates to carry out a revaluation of the assets of the Council, but it was not carried out until the new financial year and was fully completed by 19 May 2009. There is no budget provision in 2009-10.

3. Waste Management Consultants - £5,000

This sum is needed to fund the completion of a consultation exercise in relation to the Waste Management Strategic Review.

4. Conservation & Design Professional Training - £2,820

Funding was vired to this budget head in 2008/9 to pay for part of the MA urban design course being taken by David Bevan who joined SCDC in November 2008. This funding covered the majority of the second year and the MA dissertation stage, and included course fees, travel and other additional costs. The second year ended in May and the dissertation stage ends at the beginning of September. Attempts to pay all remaining fees in 2008-09 were unsuccessful. There is no budget for this item in 2009-10.

5. Conservation & Design Consultants - £9,600

Funding was vired to this budget heading in 2008-09 to pay for an historic buildings consultant to help compensate for the vacant Principal Conservation Officer and Section Manager posts. When those posts were filled it was agreed that the remaining funding would be used to help catch up on backlogs related to service/corporate targets, in particular producing conservation area appraisals. This work was due to be completed in 2008-09 but the consultant was used by Development Control to give essential extra input to Papworth planning applications and appeals. This work was commissioned and funded by Development Control. It delayed the majority of the conservation area appraisal work until 2009-10. That work has been commissioned, but there is no budget under this item for 2009-10.

6. Economic Development Business Strategy- £20,000

Phase 1 of the baseline study was completed in 2008-09, but delays have led to Phase 2 not being started until 2009-10. There is a budget of £20,000 in 2009-10, but the costs to complete the study are estimated at £40,000.

7. Community Facilities Audit - £8,910

The Community Facilities Audit was two thirds complete at the end of March and is now virtually complete. It consists of the audit of existing community facilities and village halls to develop an SCDC Standard and Formula for developer contributions towards community facilities in villages facing growth. The audit was delayed due to the difficulty the consultants faced in setting up site visits to every village hall in the district. We expect a good outcome from the study.

8. Growth Agenda re Cambourne and Orchard Park – £14,000

There was a delay in receipt of the Cambourne 950 homes application and protracted discussions has led to delay in placing viability assessments. Work with regard to Orchard Park improvements is ongoing, with a series of activities in place, or planned in conjunction with external funding.

9. Sustainability Projects – totalling £9,090

(a) CAMCO/ESD Study - £6,800

This is in connection with business and commercial sector carbon emissions and action planning. The work was 50% complete at the end of the financial year and the remainder of the work should be invoiced shortly.

(b) Cambridge Carbon Footprint - £2,290

This is a training pilot for Carbon Conservation group facilitators in four South Cambridgeshire local communities. The budget was in 2008-09, but targeting hinged upon launch and sign-ups to Sustainable Parish Energy Partnership. These did not come on stream until April/May 2009. Costs have been quoted, but commission is awaiting rollover approval.

CAPITAL PROGRAMME

10. Cambourne Car Parks - £9,760

The final works on the car park extension were delayed until 2009-10, but there is no budget provision beyond 2008-09.

11. Waterbeach Telephone System Improvements - £10,000

Budget provision was provided in 2008-09 only, but slippage into 2009-10 has occurred.

12. ICT Development - £64,000

Programme slippage occurred on PC refresh, GIS, Flexible Working, Cash Receipting and Land Charges systems.

13. Housing Renewal Scheme Major Renovation Loan - £10,000

The scheme was approved late in the year, giving too short a time to spend any of the budget. The take up is now anticipated to be heavy.

14. Improvement Grants: Home Repairs Assistance - £25,000

The start up and progression of Home Repairs Assistance grants was delayed in the last financial year, but in the new year the current commitment is over and above the level of previous years.

15. Improvement Grants: Disabled Facilities Grant (mandatory) - £52,000

Due to an increase in Disabled Facility Grant referrals over the past year, additional resources have been brought in to help progress these. The budget commitment at June 2009 already stands at £440,000. The annual budget is £660,000.

HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT

16. Payments to Tenants for Management Moves - £40,000

Tenant moves in relation to the Windmill Estate have slipped and there will be insufficient in the 2009-10 budget to cover these statutory payments to tenants.

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder

7th July 2009

AUTHOR/S: Executive Director Corporate Services / Head of Revenues

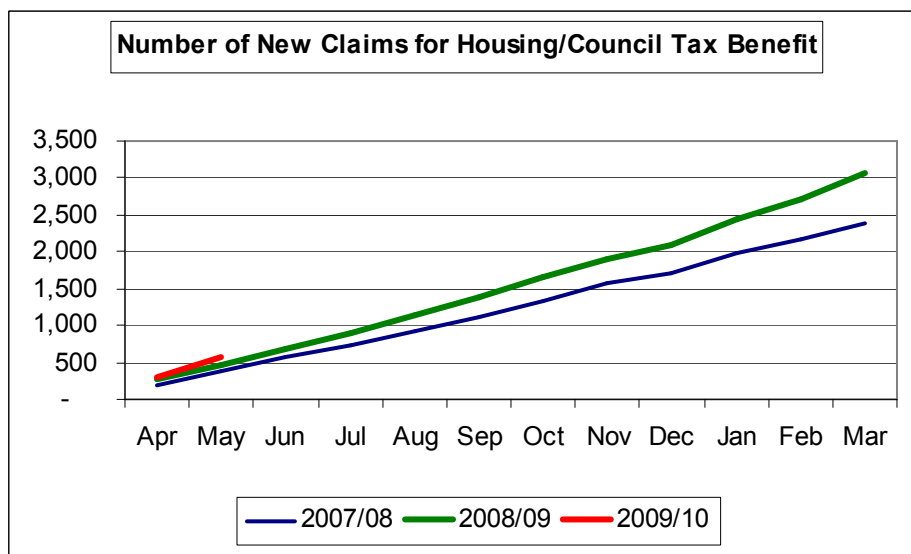
BENEFITS SERVICE WORKLOAD AND STAFFING

Purpose

1. To inform the Portfolio Holder of the impact of increasing numbers of claims for Housing and Council Tax Benefit, and of arrangements put into place to minimise the effect on delivery of benefits services.
2. This not a key decision and is reported following a request from the Portfolio Holder for an update on the current position.

Background

3. The current economic recession is resulting in increasing numbers of claims for all types of benefit as the number of people unemployed or on reduced income has increased. The Council administers claims for Housing and Council Tax Benefit and has seen a significant increase in the number of new claims since April 2008.
4. During 2008/09 there were 672 more new claims received than in the previous year, an increase of 28%. In the first two months of the current financial year 581 forms were received compared to 463 in the same period in 2008/09, and 391 in 2006/07. This is an increase of 26% and 48% respectively.
5. The chart below shows the increasing number of claims received over the last two financial years.



6. The Council has set a target of 13 days for National Indicator 181, which measures the average number of days taken to process new claims and changes to Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit entitlement. In order to meet this target the Benefits

Service aims to process new claims within 20 days and changes of circumstance within 8 days.

7. Residents in receipt of Housing and Council Tax benefit were consulted on these targets through a customer satisfaction survey during March 2009. A total of 400 completed survey forms were returned, which equates to around 6% of benefit recipients. Of those responding 91% agreed that 20 days was a reasonable time in which to process a new claim, with just 5% disagreeing and 4% not answering the question. A similar number, 90%, agreed that 8 days was a reasonable time in which to process a change of circumstances, with 5% disagreeing and 5% not answering the question. The survey results indicate that the Council has set targets at the right level to ensure customer satisfaction.

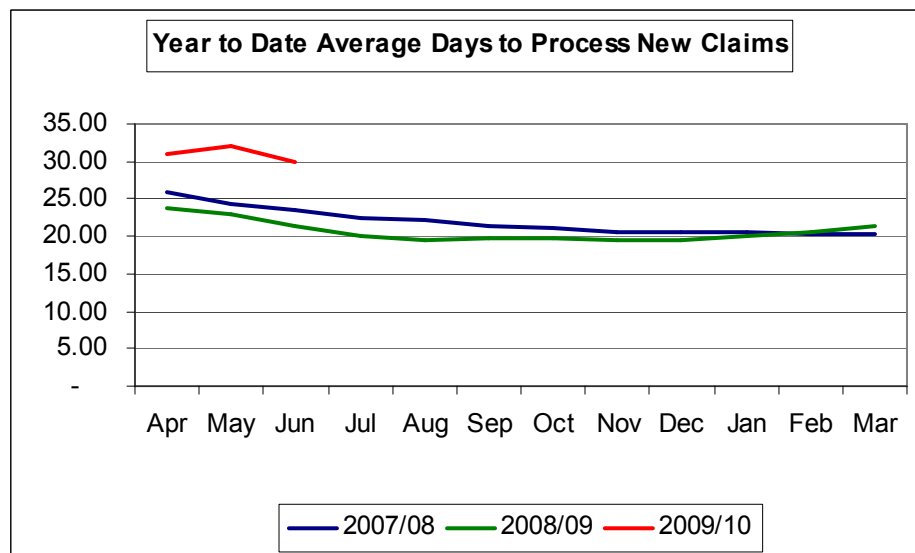
Considerations

8. The actual level of performance over the last three years is shown in the table below:

	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10*	Target
New claims	29.1 days	20.1 days	21.4 days	30 days	20 days
Change of circumstance	10.3 days	8.5 days	9.9 days	16 days	8 days
NI181	n/a	n/a	12.2 days	20 days	13 days

* as at 29/6/09

9. Performance began to deteriorate towards the end of 2008/09 due to the increasing number of applications and worsened during April and May 2009. The chart below shows the average time taken to process new claims over the last two years. Deterioration in processing time for new claims appears to have peaked at the end of May, when it averaged 32 days, and is now improving with the year to date average now 30 days. However, this is still well above the target of 20 days.



10. During the latter part of the previous financial year and first quarter of this year a variety of strategies have been utilised to cope with the increased demand:
 - (a) Workload has been prioritised with less critical work temporarily deferred.
 - (b) An additional assessor has recently been employed on a temporary basis through an employment agency.

- (c) Procedures have been reviewed to ensure workload is being dealt with in the most effective and productive manner depending on the level of demand.
 - (d) Benefits assessors have worked overtime to prevent backlogs of work developing.
 - (e) A part-time worker is working additional hours.
11. The average time to process new claims is monitored on a weekly basis and has reduced steadily from 33 days for claims completed during the week ended 24th May 2009, to 24 days during the week ended 26th June 2009. This is primarily due to the recent employment of an additional benefit assessor through an employment agency utilising additional finance provided by DWP, which effectively increased assessment capacity by around 10%. Further improvements are anticipated.
 12. Assessing benefit claims is a complex technical task and a minimum of six months training is required for inexperienced recruits. This makes it impractical to recruit to fixed short-term contracts on the Council's normal terms and conditions, consequently there is a reliance on experience agency workers to provide short-term resources. There is a ready market of experienced assessment officers available through employment agencies, but rates tend to be approximately 60% higher than the cost of employing equivalently experienced Council officers. The current high level of demand for these workers has also acted to increase hourly rates.
 13. There are 10 people (9.25 full time equivalents) employed as Benefit Assessors on the Council's staffing establishment. One member of the team is currently on maternity leave with another due to take maternity leave in the next few weeks. Experience has shown that it is necessary to provide cover for such absences by employing temporary experienced assessors if performance levels are to be maintained. The current heightened level of demand makes this cover essential.
 14. The Benefits Service also employs a small team to process incoming and outgoing post, scan documents and interview customer calling at the office with benefit enquiries. In addition to the increase in new claims there has also been a significant increase in the number of people making enquiries in person at the Council's reception desk. The work of this team cannot be deferred because it is entirely demand led and consequently during busy periods benefit assessors were required to interview customers at reception or assist with post duties.
 15. This small team took on responsibility for administration of concessionary passes from April 2009. An additional post was agreed for this team as part of the budget setting process in recognition of the additional duties and to improve resilience. This increased the team from two to three people. The post is now filled and in recent weeks a noticeable improvement has been seen with benefits assessor only required to provide assistance on infrequent occasions.
 16. Additional funding of £85,025 will be provided by DWP in 2009/10 to assist in meeting the demand arising from increased numbers of benefit claims. The Chief Executive has exercised his delegated authority to approve the use this funding to employ additional temporary assessment officers through an employment agency to meet the demand and provide cover for maternity absences.
 17. Processing times are currently improving following the employment of an agency worker, and other remedial actions. It is still relatively early in the financial year and there remains sufficient time for these remedial actions to take effect and enable annual targets to be met. However, the situation should continue to be closely

monitored, and in the event that the remedial actions do not prove effective other options may need to be reconsidered.

Implications

18.

Financial	<p>The Council will receive additional funding of £85,025 in 2009/10 from DWP. This is considered sufficient to provide cover for maternity leaves, and to employ one additional benefits assessor through an employment agency for up to 12 months.</p> <p>The cost to the Council of employing a benefits assessor is between £28,000 and £36,500 including the additional employer's costs. This rate is considered to be competitive with neighbouring authorities.</p> <p>An agency employee at an hourly rate of £30.00, taking four weeks holiday, will cost approximately £51,500 per annum.</p>
Legal	<p>The Benefits Service is a statutory service that the Council is obliged to provide.</p>
Staffing	<p>Increased workload and reduced performance can lead to low morale and stress amongst staff. This can lead to sickness absence, which creates further pressure.</p> <p>One member of the team is currently on maternity leave with another due to take leave in the next few weeks. It is essential that cover be provided for these absences.</p>
Risk Management	<p>Performance of the benefits service is closely monitored and actively managed, with quarterly performance reports provided to the Portfolio Holder.</p> <p>There are two national indicators for the Benefits Service, NI180 and NI181.</p> <p>The Audit Commission has announced its intention to conduct around 30 inspections of local authority benefit services per year as part of the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) framework. Inspections are likely to target authorities with poor performance figures. Therefore, maintaining good levels of performance will assist in achieving a good Comprehensive Area Assessment and reduce the likelihood of an inspection.</p>
Equal Opportunities	<p>Residents claiming benefits are amongst the most vulnerable residents in the District. Prompt payment of housing and council tax benefit can help to prevent debt problems developing and in extreme cases can prevent homelessness.</p>

Consultations

19. Residents in receipt of Housing and Council Tax benefit were consulted through a customer satisfaction survey during March 2009 and have agreed that the targets set by the Council for processing claims are reasonable.

Effect on Strategic Aims

20.	<p>Commitment to being a listening council, providing first class services accessible to all.</p> <p>The Council has consulted with residents receiving benefits, who have supported the Council's targets for dealing with benefit claims. It is important that the Council achieve the stated targets in order to maintain confidence amongst residents that their views are valued and help to shape service delivery.</p>
	<p>Commitment to ensuring that South Cambridgeshire continues to be a safe and healthy place for all.</p> <p>Housing benefit assists vulnerable residents in meeting their housing costs. Delays in paying claims can cause stress and anxiety, and may even lead to homelessness.</p>
	<p>Commitment to making South Cambridgeshire a place in which residents can feel proud to live.</p> <p>Delivering benefits swiftly to those entitled to them will help to develop a positive view of the Council amongst those relying on this service.</p>
	<p>Commitment to assisting provision for local jobs for all.</p> <p>None</p>
	<p>Commitment to providing a voice for rural life.</p> <p>None</p>

Conclusions/Summary

21. The increase in benefit claims has placed pressure on the Benefits Service, and this is exacerbated by periods of maternity leave. Performance had deteriorated in the first two months of the financial year, but is now improving. However, performance levels are still well outside target.
22. Additional funding of £85,025 will be provided by the DWP and this is being utilised to employ additional temporary benefits assessors to provide cover for the maternity leave and meet the additional demand. Other management actions are also being taken to mitigate the impact of the increased demand.
23. It is difficult to predict whether the demand will continue to grow, or whether it has peaked, since this is dependent on the performance of the local economy as a whole.
24. Performance monitoring processes are in place to ensure that the situation is kept under close scrutiny and so that remedial actions can be taken where required.

Recommendations

25. The Portfolio Holder is recommended to note;
- (a) The increased pressure on service delivery created by the increase in claims.
 - (b) That processing times did deteriorate, but have improved in recent weeks.

- (c) That Chief Executive has authorised use of additional financial resources of £85,025 provided by the DWP to employ additional temporary assessment officers to help meet demand for the service and to cover for maternity leave.

26. It is further recommended that the performance of the Benefits Service should continue to be closely monitored with an updated report to be submitted to the Portfolio Holder in the event that performance remains below target at the end of the second quarter.

Background Papers: the following background papers were used in the preparation of this report:

- Service performance statistics
- DWP Housing and Council Tax Benefit Circulars

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Date of Finance and Staffing PFH meeting	Agenda Item	Responsible Officer
2009		
7 July	Rollovers Report Pay Award 2009 – 2010	Peter Harris Susan Gardner Craig
11 August	Financial Position (Apr – Jul) (SMT) Revenue Collection Performance Q1 Sickness Absence (Q1) (EMT) Leavers (Q1) (EMT) Relocation Policy	Adrian Burns Lee Phanco Susan Gardner Craig Susan Gardner Craig Susan Gardner Craig
8 September	Integrated Business Monitoring (Apr – Jul) and Financial Update (Apr – Aug) (SMT / Cabinet) Treasury Management Update (Cabinet) Staff Satisfaction Survey (SMT) Workforce Plan Annual Review (Cabinet)	Adrian Burns Adrian Burns Susan Gardner Craig Susan Gardner Craig
October	Rural Settlement List Revenue Collection Performance Q2 Financial Position (Apr – Sep) (SMT)	Lee Phanco Lee Phanco Adrian Burns
November	Integrated Business Monitoring (Apr – Sep) and Financial Update (Apr – Oct) (SMT / Cabinet) Sickness Absence (Q2) (EMT) Leavers (Q2) (EMT)	Adrian Burns Susan Gardner Craig Susan Gardner Craig
December	Financial Position (Apr – Nov) (SMT) Car Leases	Adrian Burns Susan Gardner Craig

2010		
January	Revenue Collection Performance Q3 Financial Position (Apr – Dec) (SMT) Revenue and Capital Estimates (Cabinet) Review of all fees and charges for this Portfolio	Lee Phanco Adrian Burns Adrian Burns Lee Phanco / Catriona Dunnett / Sid Webb
February	Integrated Business Monitoring (Apr – Dec) and Financial Update (Apr – Jan) (Cabinet) Sickness Absence (Q3) (EMT) Leavers (Q3) (EMT)	Adrian Burns Susan Gardner Craig Susan Gardner Craig
March	Treasury Management Update (Cabinet) Finance and Support Services service plan (SMT) Financial Position (Apr – Feb) (SMT)	Adrian Burns Lee Phanco Adrian Burns
April	Revenue Collection Performance Q4 Financial Position (Apr – Mar) (SMT)	Lee Phanco Adrian Burns
May	Sickness Absence (Q4) (EMT) Leavers (Q4) (EMT)	Susan Gardner Craig Susan Gardner Craig