

SELF REGULATION SELECT COMMISSION

Venue: Town Hall, Moorgate
Street, Rotherham.

Date: Thursday, 11th October, 2012

Time: 3.30 p.m.

A G E N D A

1. Apologies for Absence.
2. To determine if the following matters are to be considered under the categories suggested in accordance with the Local Government Act 1972.
3. To determine any item which the Chairman is of the opinion should be considered as a matter of urgency.
4. Communications.
5. Declarations of Interest.
6. Questions from Members of the Public and the Press.

For Decision:-

7. Minutes of the previous meeting held on 20th September, 2012 (herewith) (Pages 1 - 4)

For Monitoring:-

8. Complaints - Annual Report 2011 - 2012 (report herewith) (Pages 5 - 28)
9. Localisation of Support for Council Tax (Council Tax Benefit) and Council Tax Technical Changes (report herewith) (Pages 29 - 37)
10. Exclusion of the Press and Public.
The following item is likely to be considered in the absence of the press and public as being exempt under Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended March 2006) (information relates to finance and business affairs).
11. Digital Region (Officers to report)

12. Date and Time of Next Meeting - Thursday, 22nd November, 2012 at 3.30 p.m.

Members of the Self-Regulation Select Commission:-

Councillor Currie (Chairman)

Councillor J. Hamilton (Vice-Chairman)

**Councillors Atkin, Beck, Beaumont, Ellis, Godfrey, Mannion, Pickering, Sharman, Tweed and
Watson.**

SELF REGULATION SELECT COMMISSION
Thursday, 20th September, 2012

Present:- Councillor Currie (in the Chair); Councillors Atkin, Beaumont, Beck, Ellis, Godfrey, J. Hamilton and Mannion.

Apologies for absence:- Apologies were received from Councillors Pickering, Sharman and Watson.

17. COMMUNICATIONS

There were no communications to report.

18. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no Declarations of Interest to report.

19. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS

There were no questions from members of the public or the press.

20. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 12TH JULY, 2012

Resolved:- That the minutes of the meeting of the Self Regulation Select Commission held on 12th July, 2012 be approved as a correct record for signature by the Chairman.

21. CORPORATE PLAN OUTCOMES

Consideration was given to a report presented by Matt Gladstone, Director of Commissioning, Policy and Performance, and supplemented with a presentation which provided an analysis of the Council's current performance against the twenty-nine key delivery outcomes contained within the Corporate Plan. This was a year end and/or current position based on available performance measures together with an analysis of progress on key projects and activities which contributed to the delivery of the plan.

As a result of service reductions the Council's ability to deliver all the corporate plan objectives was high risk. The potential for under performance as a result of budget reductions highlighted the importance of integrating performance, risk and financial reporting.

All of the twenty-nine outcomes and associated high level measures would be reviewed during this reporting year to ensure that they remained meaningful and relevant, taking into consideration any new or changing outcomes dictated by external bodies.

The presentation drew further attention to:-

- The Scorecard.
- The Changes in Risk Rating.
- The areas of good performance and areas for improvement and recovery

actions within:-

- ◇ Making sure no community is left behind.
 - ◇ Ensuring quality education, ensuring people have opportunities and improve skills, learn and get a job.
 - ◇ Ensuring care and protection are available to those people who need it most.
 - ◇ Helping create safe and healthy communities.
 - ◇ Improving the environment.
- Political Influences.

The Select Commission welcomed this report, but raised a number of queries, particularly relating to:-

- Outcome No. 1 (Fewer children are living in poverty) – relaunch of the Early Help Strategy, its current and future success, the escalation of an outcome that had been a “red” (not meeting targets) concern and the discrepancies around the criteria used/target setting in the information contained in the report (pages 10 and 26).
- Involvement of schools in the targeting of support to vulnerable families.
- Outcome No. 21 (More people are physically active and have a healthy way of life) - the apparent increases in obesity levels and the reasons for this, alongside the delivery of effective treatment to more people. A detailed overview was required of the initiatives around active lifestyles and obesity. It was recognised that the reduction in benefits as part of the Government’s welfare reforms and low wages, may mean that fresh, healthier food is less affordable to many families on low incomes
- Outcomes 18 and 19 (People feel safe where they live and anti-social behaviour and crime is reduced) - whilst this was “green” this may be due to people to under-reporting. This still needed to be closely monitored.
- Format of Performance Clinics and their effectiveness.
- The need for a full assessment of targets and standards and their importance.
- Outcome No. 20 (People are able to live in decent affordable houses of their choice) - how this could be improved given that it only related to Council owned properties and whether this should be “amber” rather than “green”.
- The impact on the environment and the reductions to services such as grass cutting and weed clearance and whether consideration should be given to “meadow” planting.
- Costs associated with children living in poverty, particularly the Troubled Families Initiative, the criteria used and the make-up of the 700 families.

- Local Strategic Partnership involvement and promotion of new initiatives to boost the local economy, worklessness and job creation and the contributions from outside agencies, such as Job Centre Plus.
- Improvements in the targets associated with litter in Outcome 25 (Clean streets) and also in performance for Outcome 14 (Vulnerable people are protected from abuse).
- Promotion of the good news within the targets and as a result of the service reductions the ability to deliver all the corporate plan objectives remained a high risk, especially with the possibility of welfare reform.
- Councillors' surgery reports and how these factor into the performance and service delivery.

The Select Commission within its discussion suggested, as a means to taking forward the concerns, that:-

- That the relevant Cabinet Member and Strategic Director to be invited to a future meeting to discuss action to address child poverty
- To keep under review the reasons for the increasing in childhood obesity.
- The need to keep a close eye on an emerging anti-social behaviour issues not being picked up routinely.
- The need to ensure that Performance Clinics follow a consistent format.
- The possibility of the Self Regulation Select Commission being involved in the overview of the twenty-nine corporate plan outcomes.
- Availability and timescales of the performance scorecard on the Intranet.

Resolved:- (1) That the Performance Team be thanked for their hard work in pulling together the report.

(2) That the current position against each of the Corporate Plan outcomes, ensuring implementation of the proposed interventions and corrective actions, be noted.

(3) That any performance issues be kept under close review to prevent amber outcomes becoming rated red.

(4) That the inclusion of year end information and first quarter 2012/13 information be noted.

(5) That the Self Regulation Select Commission keeps under review child poverty, obesity and active lifestyles and the outcomes relating to worklessness and job creation,

(6) That a further report be provided to the Self-Regulation Select Commission on the format of performance clinics.

(7) That Information be shared with members around the criteria used for the 700 families, their make-up and costs associated with the Initiative.

(8) That consideration be given to including the Self Regulation Select

Commission in the review of the corporate plan outcomes.

22. WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE: 2012/13

Further to Minute No. 6 of the meeting of this Select Commission held on 31st May, 2012, consideration was given to the report presented by Caroline Webb, Senior Scrutiny Adviser, which provided an update on the Scrutiny Work Programme for 2012/13.

The work programme was drawn up on the basis of its priorities and informed by comments from Commission Members and discussion with Cabinet Members and the Senior Leadership Team.

The work programme was flexible and issues may be referred to the Commission which were not known about at this stage.

The issue of parking charges was raised at the meeting on the 31st May, 2012 and it was noted that the Chair and Vice-Chair had met with the Director of Street Pride and the Parking Services Manager to explore concerns. As a result of the discussions, changes have been made to information provided to customers. The Chair and Vice-Chair agreed that no further action was required at this time.

In considering the contents of the work programme it was noted that the review into district heating, chaired by Councillor Beck, would be reporting to the November, 2012 meeting of this Commission.

Discussion ensued on areas for future scrutiny and it was suggested that some consideration be given to the commissioning of contracts and for this to be performance managed, the need for the budget setting process to come forward at a much earlier stage Council Tax reforms and the timetabling of revenue account outturns. It was suggested that, in light of previous discussions, a review of the corporate outcomes also be included in the work programme.

The Select Commission noted the changes that had occurred during the last year and in the reduction of staffing resources and suggested that an update be provided on the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

Resolved:- (1) That the work programme and its contents be noted.

(2) That the budget setting process and the corporate plan outcomes be listed as priority areas for future scrutiny.

(3) That the Deputy Leader and Strategic Director of Resources be invited to a future meeting to provide an update on the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

23. DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

Resolved:- That the next scheduled meeting take place on Thursday, 11th October, 2012 at 3.30 p.m.

ROTHERHAM METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

1. Meeting:	Self Regulation Select Commission
2. Date:	11 October 2012
3. Title:	Complaints – Annual Report 2011 – 2012
4. Directorate:	All Directorates

5. Summary

This report provides information about complaints made between 1 April 2011 and 31 March 2012 to the Local Authority, under the Corporate Complaint's Procedure, the Adult Social Services and Children's Social Services complaint regulations

The figures in the report include details of the number of complaints made by customers. The information is presented for the Council and by each Directorate. It contains a summary of complaints received, main complaint issues and how services have been improved.

The report also includes details on how complaint handling has been improved over the year and how it can be improved further.

In total over the last 12 months the total number of complaints received by the Council has **reduced** from **1248 (2010/11)** to **724 - 42%** reduction

Overall **94%** of all complaints were responded to within the statutory timescales, compared to **76% (2010/11)**

6. Recommendations

That the Self Regulation Select Commission

- Note the content of the report

7. Proposals and Details

In 2011-2012 the Council has greatly improved performance in terms of complaints dealt with in target time. We are also committed to reducing the number of complaints received, reducing the number of escalations through the complaint procedure, improving the experience of customers and reducing the cost of dealing with complaints both in terms of efficiencies in complaint handling and the amount of compensation awarded.

Overall 94% of all complaints were responded to within the statutory timescales, compared to 76% (2010/11). This demonstrates a progressive approach to performance management across the Council, leading to year on year improvement. All Directorate leads are targeted to achieve 100% performance.

Headline Results 2011/12

- Number of comments (quick response concerns) increased **30%** from **1457** in 2010/11 to **2095**
- Number of complaints (at all levels) reduced from **1248** to **724** (42% reduction)
 - Complaints for NAS – Housing and Neighbourhood services reduced from **781** to **370** (52% decrease)
 - Complaints for Resources reduced from **86** to **44** (49% decrease)
 - Complaints for Children and Young Peoples services reduced from **120** to **87** (27% decrease)
 - Complaints for Environment and Development services reduced from **148** to **115** (22% decrease)
 - Complaints for NAS – Adult services reduced from **113** to **108** (4% decrease)
- Total number of complaints (at all stages) upheld increased, **319**, **43%** compared to **380**, **40%** 2010/11.
- Reduction in the number of complaints escalating reduced **40%** from **102** in 2010/11 to **61** (Stage 1 complaints escalating to Stage 2)
- Complaints about quality of service reduced from **286** in 2010/11 to **195**
- Complaints about actions of staff reduced from **222** in 2010/11 to **176**
- Ombudsman average response time was **25.1** days from **14** first enquiries (**25.1** days from **7** first enquiries in 2010/11)
- Total compensation awards made in 2011/10 was **£540**

- External complaint investigation costs in CYPS reduced from **£22,541** in 2010/11 to **£12,592** in 2011/12.
- Savings made in Resources and CPP restructure in respect of complaint team's resources was **£112,391** (staffing costs).

The Directorate complaints teams has maintained the recent significant improvements in the following areas:

- Learning from all Complaints to identify service improvements
- Improved performance on enquiries responded to in time
- Reduced the number of complaints received
- Increased the number of comments (quick response concerns) received
- Improving the timeliness of responses to customers
- Improving the quality of responses
- Improving satisfaction of the complaint management process
- Training in complaint handling which is delivered on a rolling programme to all managers.
- Learning from complaints workshops with staff.
- Reduction in the amount of compensation paid.
- Reduction in cost of responding to complaints, reducing cost of external investigators
- Aligned complaint functions – improved sharing of best practice.
- Internal review of complaint handling completed – see **2011/12 Improvement Actions** page 18.

8. Risks and uncertainties

Although positive management of complaints can be achieved, the number and type of complaints received is determined by circumstances beyond the control of the complaint service. Regardless of any external factors the service is required to maintain a high level of performance and excellent customer care.

The financial decisions the Authority is making will also affect the number of complaints received, changes to services drive the level of complaints received.

9. Policy and Performance Agenda Implications

The complaints report reflects the policy and performance agenda requirements of both national government and the Council. These include;

- Local Authority Social Services and National Health Service Complaints (England) Regulations 2009 (Making Experiences Count).
- The Children Act 1989 Representations Procedure (England) Regulations 2006.
- Corporate Complaint procedure (Making Experiences Count)
- Rotherham's local plans including corporate and service plans.
- Corporate Complaint Review, looking at complaint handling processes across the Authority.

10. Background Papers and Consultation

- Appendix 1 Complaints Annual Report 2011-2012 (in full)

Contact Names:

Dave Roddis, Performance & Quality Manager, ext 23781
Stuart Purcell, Performance and Improvement Officer, ext 22661

Annual Report

April 2011 to March 2012

Complaints

Rotherham
Metropolitan
Borough Council



Where Everyone Matters

Executive Summary

This report provides information about complaints made between 1 April 2011 and 31 March 2012 to the Local Authority, under the Corporate Complaint's Procedure, the Adult Social Services and Childrens Social Services complaint regulations

The figures in the report include details of the number of customers and the number of complaints they have made, each Directorate area has provided information and a breakdown summary.

In total over the last 12 months the total number of complaints received by the Council has reduced from 1248 to 724 - 42% reduction. This reduction is due to improved management of complaints, the restructures in Resources, an internal review of complaint handling and that wherever possible complaints are dealt with at the earliest possible opportunity – this is why the number of quick response concerns has increased. *(Further explanation of these changes is provided throughout the report)*

Complaint information is shared and monitored by the Council through the central database and a quarterly / annual reporting mechanism to its Strategic Leadership Team and to Cabinet. Directorate Services also report monthly and quarterly at both a Directorate and Service area level and to Directorate Cabinet Members.

Overall 94% of all complaints were responded to within the statutory timescales, compared to 76% (2010/11). This demonstrates a progressive approach to performance management across the Council, leading to year on year improvement. All Directorate leads are targeted to achieve 100% performance.

Headline Results 2011/12

- Number of comments (quick response concerns) increased **30%** from **1457** in 2010/11 to **2095**
- Number of complaints (at all levels) reduced from **1248** to **724** (42% reduction)
 - Complaints for NAS – Housing and Neighbourhood services reduced from **781** to **370** (**52%** decrease)
 - Complaints for Resources reduced from **86** to **44** (**49%** decrease)
 - Complaints for Children and Young Peoples services reduced from **120** to **87** (**27%** decrease)
 - Complaints for Environment and Development services reduced from **148** to **115** (**22%** decrease)
 - Complaints for NAS – Adult services reduced from **113** to **108** (**4%** decrease)
- Total number of complaints (at all stages) upheld increased, **319**, **43%** compared to **380**, **40%** 2010/11.
- Reduction in the number of complaints escalating reduced **40%** from **102** in 2010/11 to **61** (Stage 1 complaints escalating to Stage 2)
- Complaints about quality of service reduced from **286** in 2010/11 to **195**
- Complaints about actions of staff reduced from **222** in 2010/11 to **176**
- Ombudsman average response time was **25.1** days from **14** first enquiries (**25.1** days from **7** first enquiries in 2010/11)
- Total compensation awards made in 2011/10 was **£540**

- External complaint investigation costs in CYPS reduced from **£22,541** in 2010/11 to **£12,592** in 2011/12.
- Savings made in Resources and CPP restructure in respect of complaint team's resources was **£112,391** (staffing costs).

The Directorate complaints team has maintained the recent significant improvements in the following areas:

- Learning from all Complaints to identify service improvements
- Improved performance on enquiries responded to in time
- Reduced the number of complaints received
- Increased the number of comments (quick response concerns) received
- Improving the timeliness of responses to customers
- Improving the quality of responses
- Improving satisfaction of the complaint management process
- Training in complaint handling which is delivered on a rolling programme to all managers.
- Learning from complaints workshops with staff.
- Reduction in the amount of compensation paid.
- Reduction in cost of responding to complaints, reducing cost of external investigators
- Aligned complaint functions – improved sharing of best practice.
- Internal review of complaint handling completed – see **2011/12 Improvement Actions** page 18.

Top complaint issues - complaints received 2011/12

Directorate complaint teams have reported complaint trends around the following areas;

Neighbourhoods and Adult Services

Adult Services

The main areas of complaint in Adult Social Services were regarding the assessment process in older people's services (38% of complaints received) and direct payments (10% of complaints received). These were centred on the outcomes of assessments, delays in the process and lack of information and advice. Changes and restructuring of the assessment teams are expected to reduce the number of complaints received and work to improve information and advice provided at assessment is ongoing. There were also significant numbers of complaints received about direct payments. Direct payment complaints increased in line with an increase in the provision of direct payments but work has also been completed to improve advice available and to clarify Council procedures.

Housing and Neighbourhood Services

The number of complaints has dramatically reduced by 52% in 2011/2. Reductions in complaints have been seen across all services, however, the reduction has been particularly driven by improvements in the repair and maintenance service and contractors performance. The level of complaints in 2010/11 was also skewed upwards by the severe winter and the response to the problems experienced by gas boilers. There is no room for complacency

because repair and maintenance complaints remain the majority of all complaints received by the service. The next highest number of complaints were made against the Housing and Neighbourhood Teams, this area also showed a 41% reduction in complaints in the year.

Resources

Although formal complaints more than halved (52% reduction), it was again Revenues and Benefits (65% of complaints received) and Contact Centre (31% of complaints received) that received the highest number of complaints. These were mainly regarding advice and information provided by staff and individual members of staff making incorrect decisions and providing misinformation. Action was taken with individuals through supervision and HR procedures but also through robust ongoing training and briefing protocols.

Environment and Development Services

The number of official complaints received has reduced by 22% in 2011/12. However this has been met with an extraordinary (66%) increase in customer comments (unofficial complaints). The highest number of complaints received related to Streetpride and were specifically around services delivered by Leisure and Community Services including complaints around litter build up, lack of weed killing and a reduction in grass cutting. In Network Management customer complained about the lack of maintenance of road surfaces and number of pot holes evident across the borough along with complaints relating to re-siting of new street lighting columns without consultation. 41% of complaints received centred around the quality of service received.

Children and Young Peoples Services

Complaints regarding all aspects of children's social care accounted for over 96% of all complaints received by the directorate in 2011/12. The highest number of complaints relate to services provided by the Locality Social Work Teams who collectively received 74% of all Stage 1 complaints, which has reduced from 86.8% in the previous year. Locality Teams deal with the vast majority of people who receive a service and the number of complaints reflects the nature of the social care role and the role of the complaint procedure.

Learning from Complaints

Learning from Complaints discussions with accountable managers to promptly identify service improvements and changes in current practice now take place in respect of all complaints responded to.

Learning outcomes case studies are presented in the Directorate Performance update sections in the shaded text boxes;

Directorate Performance in 2011/12

Neighbourhood and Adult Services

Neighbourhood and Adult Services Directorate complaints are split into statutory (Adult Services) and non statutory complaints (Housing and Neighbourhood Services). They are usually recorded and reported separately.

However, combined results for the whole Directorate are as follows;

Over the last 12 months the total number of complaints received for Neighbourhood and Adult Services has reduced from 894 in 2010/11 to 478 (53% reduction).

Overall 91% of all complaints were responded to within the timescales, compared to 75% in 2010/11.

- Number of comments increased from **498** to **774**
- Total number of complaints upheld was **233** compared to **205** in 2010/11
- Decrease in the number of complaints escalating :-
- From **81** (2010/11) to **44** for Stage 1 complaints escalating to Stage 2
- **£440** total compensation awards made in 2011/12 (HNS only)

Adult Services

Adult Services Complaints are dealt with under the complaints and representations procedures established through the Local Authority Social Services and National Health Service Complaints (England) Regulations 2009 (Making Experiences Count).

Over the last 12 months the total number of complaints received for Adult Social Services has reduced from 113 to 108 (4% reduction).

Overall 100% of all complaints were responded to within the statutory timescales for the third year in a row, compared to 94% (2008/09) and 88% (2007/08). This performance again benchmarks the best against the regional Yorkshire and Humberside Local Authority complaints group based on numbers received (15 Local Authority areas).

Headline Results 2011/12

- Number of comments increased from **73** to **100**
- Number of complaints (at all levels) reduced from **113** to **108**
- Complaints regarding Action of Staff increased from **15** to **23**
- Complaints regarding quality reduced from **29** to **28**
- Complaints regarding Delay reduced from **22** to **13**
- Total number of complaints upheld was **43** compared to **27** in 2010/11

- Increase in the number of complaints escalating :-
 - From **9** (2010/11) to **14** for Stage 1 complaints escalating to Stage 2
- No compensation awards made in 2011/12
- External complaint investigation costs were maintained at zero in 2011/12

The Adult Social Services complaints team has maintained the recent significant improvements in the following areas:

- Reduced the number of complaints received
- Maintained performance at 100%
- Maintained high levels of satisfaction with the complaint process
- Promoting and increasing accessibility of the complaints procedure through the development of the internet, information packs and campaigns in our reception areas.
- Training in complaint handling which is delivered on a rolling programme to all managers.
- Learning from complaints workshops with staff.
- No compensation paid.
- Reduction in cost of responding to complaints, investigations (no external investigators were procured in 2011/12).

Learning from complaints case studies

1

Adult Services

Customer was not happy that they had been provided misleading information about Direct Payment regulations. The customer wanted to employ a family member as their personal assistant.

In response to their concerns we have;

- Taken action to ensure that customers are given accurate information regarding the use Direct Payments to employ close relatives. We have reviewed and updated available information.
- Managers reminded to be certain that information contained in correspondence to customers is checked for accuracy before being sent.

Top complaint issues - complaints received 2011/12

Delays in Assessment process

There has been a significant reduction the number and proportion of complaints received regarding delays in assessment. The reorganisation of the Assessment and Care Management service has streamlined the process by which referrals are received and planned and unplanned reviews take place. There is now a single point of contact for new referrals via Assessment Direct and the intake team focuses on ensuring that initial assessments are completed in a timely manner and that where appropriate planned reviews are arranged within a specific timescale.

Information about services

A significant number of complaints received were from customer's not happy about the availability of information or the accuracy of information they had received. Complaints were received about information not correctly recorded on assessment documents that could potentially impact on the outcome of the assessment. Other complaints were received about out of date information online or in leaflets and advice booklets. As well as advising individual members of staff regarding mistakes we have an ongoing process of reviewing the information

we provide to customers. In addition complaints were received about lack of information available, customers felt that they were not advised about what services were available or were not kept informed following requests for service. We have changed processes for individual services and teams to make sure that customers are kept better informed. We are in the process of reviewing the availability of information about our services, including signposting to information available in our partner organisations.

Direct payments

There was an increase in the number of complaints received that involved Direct Payments. These were regarding delays in the process, lack of or inaccurate information provided about Council direct payments rules. This reflects an increase in the provision of Direct Payments by the Council, however, we have looked at ways to reduce the complaints received by making sure customers are better informed about the Direct Payment process at the time of assessment and by reviewing our internal procedures around direct payments.

New Developments in 2011/12

- There is a continued commitment to putting things right and that enquiries and concerns are dealt with at the earliest opportunity. Again as a result complaints have decreased and comments have increased In 2011/12 Adult Services received 108 complaints and 100 comments. This compares with 113 complaints and 73 comments received in 2010/11.
- Regular feedback sessions to the Director Of Health and Wellbeing has improved accountability, reduced risk and ensured timely service improvements.
- The Ombudsman has published new guidance documents providing advice regarding their new powers to investigate complaints from customers in receipt of self funding care. We have ensured that these documents were distributed to independent providers throughout the borough.

2012/13 Improvement Actions

The Adult Services complaints Team will ensure that all enquiries through the team are dealt with in the best possible way, that any issues of concern are resolved at the earliest possible opportunity and take the opportunity to learn and seek improvements to service.

They will work with management and staff to improve customer care around; information and advice provided to customers and to reduce complaints regarding actions of staff and lack of service.

They will increase the number of learning from complaint issues and work with managers to ensure these lead to real service improvements. They will also ensure that learning issues are referred into the wider service level reviews. They will also develop ways of keeping customers informed of service improvements that were generated by their complaints.

Learning from complaints case studies**2****Adult Services**

A customer visiting one of the contact centres was given the wrong information regarding eligibility for a Blue Badge.

In response to their concerns we have;

- We now ensure when changes are made to how we issue documents like Blue Badges, information is updated and all frontline staff are made aware of the information customers will need.
- Changes to Blue Badge applications nationally highlighted a need to ensure that customers are advised to apply for renewals one month before their current Blue Badge runs out. Where a customer has difficulty doing this they will be advised to contact Rothercare Direct for further advice.

Housing and Neighbourhood Services

Housing and Neighbourhood Services' complaints are dealt with under the Council's corporate Complaint's Procedure, Tell Us Your Views.

The figures presented in this summary include the complaints for services previously managed by 2010 Rotherham Ltd. They also include Environmental Health, Business Regulation and the previously retained housing function – for the purpose of this report they will be referred to as Neighbourhood Services.

The combined figures show a significant reduction of complaints over the last 12 months, reducing from 781 to 370- 52 % reduction. The biggest single improvement being the reduction in complaints about the repair and maintenance service.

Overall 89% of all complaints were responded to within the statutory timescales. (Neighbourhood services recorded 100% throughout the year and Housing services maintained 100% performance since January 2012)

Headline Results 2011/12

- Number of complaints (at all levels) reduced from **781** to **370**
- New (stage 1) complaints about the former 2010 Rotherham Ltd managed services fell from by 52% from **616** to **293**
- New complaints about services not previously contracted out to 2010 Rotherham Ltd reduced by 43% from **76** to **43** (Neighbourhood Services)
- The total number of complaints upheld was **190** or **57%**, **178** or **24%** 2010-11.
- The number of complaints escalating from stage 1 to stage 2 to reduced by 58.5% from **72** to **30**
- New complaints about lack of service decreased from **180** to **110** or 39%
- New complaints about delays in service decreased from **266** to **93** or 65%
- New complaints about actions of staff decreased from **80** to **71** or 11%
- New complaints about the quality of service decreased from **116** to **51** or 56%
- New complaints about the lack of information reduced from **21** to **3** or 86%
- New complaints about the cost of the service reduced from **20** to **5** or 75%
- **£440** total compensation awards made in 2011/12

- Number of comments increased from **425** to **674**

The figures which show both improvements in service delivery and case resolution have had a positive impact, with both the number of complaints reducing and the percentage escalating beyond stage 1 dramatically reducing. This suggests the service is putting right what has gone wrong and learning from the customer experience to improve the services.

Top complaint issues - complaints received 2011/12

Improved variation process

A considerable number of customers experienced delays generated or exacerbated by the repairs partners seeking approval from the client for a variation to the contract before starting repair work. The process was reviewed and from the 16th January 2012 a more streamlined service was introduced, contributing to a reduction in the delay in services category of complaint in 2011/2. The improvements included:

- Partners self approving any work outside of price per property which is required to restore "*minimum service*"
- Partners self approving any work outside of price per property which is required to restore "*normal service*" which requires less than one persons – day labour.
- Client approval is deemed to be given unless otherwise authorised within 24 hours.

Improvements to the Standard of Empty Homes

The year also saw a trend of complaints about the standard of empty homes, this in part has been addressed by restructure of the Housing and Neighbourhood Service and the creation of a dedicated Empty Homes Team. A significant improvement adopted by the team following a complaint in December has been the adoption of the Housing Health and Safety Rating System to assess and quality check empty homes. It is anticipated this will reduce the number complaints.

Improving how we respond to damp and disrepair

Reports of damp constituted a significant proportion of repair complaints and disrepair claims received in 2011/12. The issues were highlighted to the director who chaired a meeting of managers which resulted in the following improvements being implemented:

- 100% of damp reports are now inspected.
- 100% empty homes to be inspected for damp using a damp meter.
- ITC Reports developed to map all damp reports and inform future preventative investment programmes.
- A revised disrepair process has been implemented with Legal and Democratic Services resulting in a more responsive service for the customer and minimisation of risk for the service.

Learning from complaints case studies

3

Housing and Neighbourhood Services

A complaint was received stating the decision letter following a licensing Board decision was inaccurate.

In response to this problem;

- Officers now have access to the rationale behind each board decision and incorporate into the decision letter.

New Developments in 2011/12

- The re-incorporation of 2010 Rotherham Ltd and realignment of the service has provided greater transparency and accountability, this combined with embedding the externalisation of the repair service has resulted in an improved service and greatly reduced level of complaints.
- The re-incorporation of 2010 has released resources to analyse complaints in more detail and target common themes of complaint and then work alongside service managers to share best practice and put things right.
- The volume of repair related complaints has allowed trends to be identified and focused upon the most significant being; loss of heat, delays caused by the repairs variation process, damp and the standard of empty homes.
- Regular feedback sessions to the Director Of Housing and Neighbourhood Services has improved accountability, reduced risk and ensured timely service improvements.
- Reports have been introduced to identify learning from complaints and allowed best practice to be shared.
- Staff learning from complaints workshops have been introduced to allow front line staff a contribution into the service improvement process.

Learning from complaints case studies

4

Housing and Neighbourhood Services

A new tenancy start date was delayed by weeks due to a high security door being damaged and the need to measure and supply a new one.

In response to their concerns we have;

- The contractors now have arrangements to access temporary high security blank doors which can be installed pending the delivery of a standard high security door.

2012/13 Improvement Actions

- Housing and Neighbourhood Services Complaint Officer will continue to assist the service to make service improvements based on the outcomes of the complaints received, and on what our customers have told us are their main concerns.
- Analysis of complaints by service and type will continue to inform service improvements and the corporate complaints teams focus. Trends show that despite the reduction in repair related complaints there are still significant improvements that can be made in areas such as communication with the customer. This means the complaints team will particularly support this area of the service in 2012/3.
- There will be an increased emphasis on improving the accountability of the complaint service in 2012/3 by engaging both staff and customers in complaint based service developments.
- Training will be provided in complaint handling to all investigation managers on an ongoing basis.
- The authority is preparing for changes to Housing (tenancy management and repair) complaints introduced under the Localism Act 2011. From April 2012 complaints will be investigated by the Housing Ombudsman and not the Local Government Ombudsman. It is also considering the introduction of tenant complaint adjudication panels, in line with suggested good practice in the legislation (Localism Act 2012).

Learning from complaints case studies

5

Housing and Neighbourhood Services

A new tenancy in a sheltered bungalow was let with a damp problem and level floor trip hazard, resulting in reimbursement and a significant delay in the tenancy starting.

In response to this problem;

- The Empty Homes Team has now issued all surveyors with Damp Meters and provide specifications of work based on their readings.
- The Empty Homes Team has implemented the use of the Housing Health and Rating System for all empty properties which provides a robust template to assess the hazards.

Children and Young People Services

Children and Young People's Services complaints are responded to in accordance to The Children Act 1989 Representations Procedure (England) Regulations 2006.

The Service records customers and complaint points as is required under their regulations. **The number of people making complaints has decreased from 120 to 87, which is a 27% decrease.** (422 complaint points were registered).

Overall 91% of all complaints were responded to within the statutory timescales, compared to 61% (2010/11).

Headline Results 2011/12

- Number of people making complaint at Stage 1 has decreased from **115** to **82**
- Reduction in the percentage of complaints which were upheld from **77 (64%)** in 2010/11 to **30 (34%)** in 2011/12
- **30** compliments were received about services.
- External complaint investigation costs reduced from **£22,541** in 2010/11 to **£12,592** in 2011/12.

The Children and Young People's Services Complaints Team has made significant improvements in the following areas:

- Improving the timeliness of responses to customers
- Improving the quality of responses
- Learning from complaints

Top complaint issues - complaints received 2011/12

Inaccuracies and omissions from assessments and reports

The subject of some of the most complex complaints often relates to the contents of assessments and reports produced by social workers. Because of the nature of children's social care, customers are often unhappy with what is written about them in reports and assessments and customers are entitled and encouraged to share their views with the relevant social worker as part of the assessment process.

Complaints about Section 7 Welfare Reports typically result in customers complaining as the reports are usually completed as part of contested private court proceedings between parents in divorce / separation. Customers typically complain as they feel that reports favour one party and are inaccurate or omit facts about the other party in the case.

Training in the completion of Assessment and Section 7 Reports is provided to social workers where training needs are identified. Issues of social work practice are identified through regular supervision with Team Managers and Social Workers.

In some cases where complaints about assessments and reports are upheld inaccuracies and omissions are put right straight away and reports and assessments are amended.

Communication and customer service

Complaints about phone calls not being returned or about customers being unable to contact members of staff still account for a significant proportion of all complaints received. However these types of complaints rarely form the basis of a complaint and tend to be raised supplementary to the customer's main issues which they have complained about.

A significant proportion of complaints are also about the actions, conduct and professionalism of staff while undertaking their duties. Again these types of complaints are usually made supplementary to the main issues which the customer has complained about. These types of complaints particularly refer to verbal comments made by social workers while undertaking their duties and it is acknowledged that in most cases there is little evidence to support or disprove the complaint being made.

From May 2012 issues of practice learning for social workers are fed into workforce development plans through the Practice Improvement Group. These issues of customer care and professionalism when dealing with customers will be addressed through staff training in 2012/13.

Lack of information

A significant number of customers make complaints about not receiving documents on time; or in some cases not receiving documents at all. The documents referred to often relate to Case Conferences, Core Group and Children in Need Meetings.

Customers often complain about not receiving reports on time to enable them to respond to them at meetings; particularly social worker's reports for case conferences. This issue has been reported to the Practice Improvement Group and further work is planned to explore the reasons for delays in submission of information and decision-making around information that is sent out to customers. This work will then lead to service improvements and will address this issue.

Learning from complaints case studies

6

Children and Young People services

Customer was not happy that some of the details included in the Initial and Core Assessment were not accurate and they had felt that they had not been able to have their views represented within the assessment.

In response to their concerns we have;

- Changed our practice to now encourage customers to challenge the content of assessments with their social worker as part of the assessment process.
- Have reported the issue to our Practice Improvement Group to contribute to improvements in social work practice through workforce development.

New Developments in 2011/12

- Following the Commissioning Policy and Performance review in 2010 the complaints function for Children and Young People Services is undertaken by the Performance and Quality Team by an identified lead officer.
- Reporting protocols have been reviewed, complaints performance and key issues will be reported on a monthly and quarterly basis to CYPS DLT and SMT meetings.
- Learning from complaint procedures have been refreshed, all complaints are considered for learning.

2012/13 Improvement Actions

Maintain the improvement in performance which has seen 100% of Stage 1 Complaints responded to within statutory timescales since September 2011; by continuing the excellent performance management of complaints.

Reduce the number of complaints dealt with through the formal complaints process by working with teams to take immediate actions to put things right at the earliest opportunity and achieving resolution for our customers.

Improve the timeliness of Stage 2 Complaint responses so that more Stage 2 Complaints are dealt with within statutory timescales through performance management and working closing with the independent investigators.

Focus on improving the quality of complaints responses through the introduction of quarterly quality checks on response letters.

Re-introduce processes to capture the satisfaction of customers with the complaints handling process.

Learn from customers by ensuring that learning issues and actions are identified for all complaints where appropriate; and improve the recording and reporting of comments so that learning issues are identified and implemented.

Improve access to the complaints procedure for children in care by improving information provided to them and opportunities to tell us their views.

Provide training to all managers in complaints investigation and response.

Learning from complaints case studies

7

Children and Young People services

A child complained that they were fed up of having lots of different social workers.

In response to their concerns we have;

- Made sure that since the beginning of 2011, all children in long-term care have an allocated social worker in the Looked After Children's Team.

Environment and Development Services

Environment and Development Services' complaints are dealt with under the Council's Corporate Complaint's Procedure, Tell Us Your Views.

Over the last 12 months the total number of complaints received for Environment and Development Services has reduced from 148 to 115 - 22 % reduction.

Overall 97 % of all complaints were responded to within the statutory timescales.

Headline Results 2011/12

- Number of complaints (at all levels) reduced from **148** to **115**
- Complaints regarding Streetpride **66**
- Complaints regarding Planning, Regeneration & Cultural Services **47**

- Total number of complaints upheld was **39, 45%** compared to **46, 35%** 2010/11
- Reduction in the number of complaints escalating reduced:-
 - From **16** to **12** for Stage 1 complaints escalating to Stage 2
- Complaints about quality of service increased from **39** to **48**
- Complaints about actions of staff reduced from **34** to **32**
- One compensation award made in 2011/12 as part of LGO enquiry
- Number of comments increased from **543** to **902**

Environment and Development Services has maintained the recent significant improvements in the following areas:

- Improving the timeliness of responses to customers
- Improving the quality of responses
- Improving satisfaction of the complaint management process
- Learning from all Complaints to identify service improvements
- Training in complaint handling delivered to new Managers

Learning from complaints case studies

8

Environment and Development Services

A complaint was received relating to a planning application which suggested that the customer couldn't understand from the planning officer's report why a certain recommendation had been made.

In response to their concerns we have;

- Made improvements to the standard of the case officer reports to ensure that specific detail is included within the reports which clearly identifies why a recommendation has been made by the planning officer.

Top complaint issues - complaints received 2011/12

Improved Planning Consultation Process

A considerable number of customers complained that the level of consultation and information provided relating to planning applications via Planning Officer reports wasn't acceptable. A review of the statutory consultation requirements was undertaken along with reviews of case officer reports. The following improvements were implemented:-

More detailed reports produced containing as much information as possible and careful checking of documentation against all objections received with the statutory 21 day consultation period to ensure all details are referenced within the report for determination.

All planning application documents and objections to be made available for public view on the web site as soon as possible after receipt.

Frequently asked questions to be produced for customers relating to enforcement cases.

Most prominent position for planning notification signage identified so that wider consultation takes place.

All objection letters publicised on the website must contain address information of the sender i.e. no anonymous objections will be considered

Cross referencing of Right to Speak for attendance at Planning Board requests takes place with objections received to ensure all objectors have had the opportunity to make representations to Members of the Planning Board.

Improved Access to Household Waste Recycling Facilities for customers that don't own a vehicle

Following a complaint and an LGO investigation relating to the fact that only registered vehicle keepers could receive free entry to our Household Waste Recycling Centres a review of our policy was undertaken. The following improvements were implemented:-

Entry is now allowed on an appointment basis for family members who have access to a vehicle to dispose of domestic waste for relatives that don't have access to a vehicle

Improvements in process undertaken in the siting of new Street lighting Units

A number of complaints were received from customers who had had a new street lighting column positioned in close proximity to their homes without prior consultation. In order to ensure complaints of this nature weren't received in the future the following improvements were implemented:-

The addition of a consultation process has been added to the scheme for the placing of new street lightings columns where they are in a different position to an existing unit. Customers are also provided with contacts details for the Council Officer that is responsible for the scheme so that direct contact can be made should they have any queries.

New Developments in 2011/12

- There has been a greater focus on putting things right, consideration has been given to dealing with the issue of concern at the earliest possible opportunity. This is manifested itself in the reduction of complaints and the increase in the number of comments. In 2011/12 EDS received 115 complaints and 902 comments. This compares with 148 complaints and 543 comments received in 2010/11.
- The team supplies complaints performance information (complaints, comments, MP enquiries, compliments and Freedom of Information Requests) and contributes to Learning from Customers Workshops.

Learning from complaints case studies

9

Environment and Development Services

A number of customers complained that new street lighting columns had been erected close to their property without prior consultation.

In response to their concerns we have;

- Reviewed our procedure for dealing with the placement of new columns and introduced a consultation phase to ensure that customer feedback is received prior to works being undertaken to reduce the need to re-site the column following a complaint.

2012/13 Improvement Actions

Environment and Development Services will continue to assist the service to make service improvements based on the outcomes of the complaints received, and on what our customers have told us are their main concerns.

The Directorate lead, based on the trends apparent in 2011/12 will work with management and staff to improve customer care around; information and advice, seek to continue to reduce complaints regarding actions of staff and lack of service. The team will continue to highlight the need for improvements where customers express a concern regarding quality of service.

The recording of comments and concerns will be improved and learning issues will captured from all feedback and not just formal complaints.

Training will be provided in complaint handling to all managers and senior staff in EDS on an ongoing basis.

Resources

Resources' (former RBT services) complaints are dealt with under the Council's Corporate Complaint's Procedure, Tell Us Your Views.

Over the last 12 months the total number of complaints received for Resources has reduced from 86 to 44 - 52 % reduction.

Overall 100% of all complaints were responded to within the statutory timescales.

Learning from complaints case studies

10

Resources

Customer complained, in April 2011 regarding the lack of response from a case opened in June 2010.

In response to their concerns we have;

- Apologised to the customer, this case should have been followed up by making a simple diary entry. Procedures have now been put in place to ensure all staff carry this out.

Headline Results 2011/12

- Number of complaints (at all levels) reduced from **86 to 44**
- Complaints regarding Revenue and Benefits **29**
- Complaints regarding Contact Centre **14**
- Total number of complaints upheld was **17, 38%** compared to **52, 55%** in 2010/11
- Reduction in the number of complaints escalating reduced:-
 - From **3** (2010/11) to **0** Stage 1 complaints escalating to Stage 2
- Complaints about quality of service decreased from **41 to 16**
- Complaints about actions of staff decreased from **48 to 19**
- No compensation awards made in 2011/12

- Number of comments increased from **98** to **178**

Resources maintained the recent significant improvements in the following areas:

- All complaints dealt with in time
- All complaint and comments Quality Assured
- More timely responses to customer enquires
- More learning from all Complaints issues identified

Top complaint issues - complaints received 2011/12

Information and advice

A significant number of complaints were received about information and advice provided. This is reflective of the type of service officered by the Directorate, i.e. from the Customer Service Centres and Contact Centre. Where individuals have found to have provided misinformation or poor and incomplete advice, they have been dealt with on a one to one basis. However, the services will always feedback to their wider team and service areas to ensure errors are not repeated. Issues included customer enquiries not being processed correctly leading to a lack of response or promises made to a customer that was not kept.

Revenue and Benefits

The majority of complaints for the Directorate were received in Revenue and Benefits. These complaints were mostly regarding how people had been dealt with by staff and the advice that they had been provided. Complaints were received around how quickly benefits would be assessed and processed and how housing benefit can be paid – landlord/ tenant. Again in response issues were resolved locally and individuals dealt with but learning and service improvements for the whole service were made.

New Developments in 2011/12

- Launch of a new print on demand leaflet for complaints. To significantly reduce costs and place a greater emphasis on services / outlets resolving complaints at the point of access
- Officer guidance for managing customer complaints / comments
- Revised complaint officer group, new terms of reference and reporting structure.
- Rollout of processes for capturing key learning issues and time / cost recording for complaints
- Concerted effort to deal with all enquiries within 10 days. Remove need for complaint escalations.

Learning from complaints case studies

11

Resources

Customer complained that their details had been passed to a third party.

In response to their concerns we have;

- Spoken to the member of staff concerned and issued a reminder to all staff regarding Data Protection and have refreshed information governance training.

2012/13 Improvement Actions

The Resources complaint service is part of the corporate complaint team structure. Resources complaint handling will be a shared responsibility of team.

The improvements and new developments from previous years will be delivered at a significantly reduced cost as part of the new structure.

New Developments in 2011/12

In 2011-12 the Council's complaint service as part of the new Performance and Quality teams in Commissioning Policy and Performance continued to embed the changes and improvements to their operating structures. As expected this led to much improved communication, sharing of best practice and a more joined up approach between the Directorate Complaint Officers. This is evident in the reduction in complaints, improved learning from complaint outcomes and overall reduction in costs, including compensation awards. Performance was also improved and is at its current highest ever level.

The Complaint teams continued to make improvements in complaint handling attempting to reduce unnecessary processes for customers. There is a focus on putting things right, dealing with the issue of concern at the earliest possible opportunity. This is partly why there is an increase in the number of comments recorded, customers are being responded to more effectively and their concern is dealt with quickly and at a lower cost.

The staffing structure of the complaints function also reduced with a greater support role being provided by the Performance and Quality Teams. This means that efficiencies in complaint handling within the teams that were once desirable have become essential and processes were improved to accommodate the reduction in resource.

Teams continued to provide and improve levels of complaint training in some areas, either ad-hoc or part of a rolling programme. The consistency and frequency of training for staff across the Council will be addressed as an improvement action in 2012-13.

Teams continued to improve learning from complaint outcomes and continue to work with services to drive forward improvements to services. Complaints data is recorded better and learning issues contributed to a number of Directorate level service improvements.

2012/13 Improvement Actions

Internal Complaint review

Following the restructures of the Performance and Quality services across the Council, the creation of the Commissioning, Policy and Performance Department and Resources Directorate, we internally reviewed how we can most effectively deal with customer complaints.

The Directorate complaint functions, now part of the new matrix management structure, are all working in an aligned team in one department. This structure allows for a consistent approach to how complaints are dealt with and how they are used to improve services.

However, as shown in the report, although significant improvements in how the Council deals with complaints have already been made and we have already made great progress towards our review recommendations, there are still further improvements that we would like to make. Our review made recommendations of how the new structure could be the mechanism to continue to deliver step change in the following areas:

- Responding to complaints in appropriate timescales so that the customer receives a more timely response to their concerns
- To ensure that there is a consistent, customer focused approach, adopted across the organisation
- Addressing complaint issues quickly and putting things right for the customer at the earliest opportunity, removing internal layers of bureaucracy that may act as a barrier
- Reducing the cost of delivering a complaints service through reducing bureaucracy and getting things right first time
- Learning from customers to improve services and make sure poor customer service is not repeated
- Clarifying roles and increasing accountability through removing duplication throughout the complaint process and current structures
- Improving governance and reporting arrangements to become accountable to members and customers.
- Provide customers with a faster, more effective and streamlined complaints process.
- Putting in place a flexible resource to provide a faster response for customers.
- The Council's complaints service is fit for the future.

Review outcomes

It was clear from the review that complaint staff wanted a new approach to allow them greater ownership in how the Authority deals with complaints. Previously they felt that their views, knowledge, skills were dismissed and overlooked due to complete lack of flexibility in the current system. They felt that the previous system was too prescriptive and did not allow much scope for ideas around service improvement. This led to good practice being put in place at Directorate level, with good learning and service improvements gains, but not been shared across the Authority.

Complaint staff in the Commissioning, Policy and Performance Structure wanted a complaint handling system in place that at the same time as maintaining the objectivity of the complaint procedure, allows them a greater voice and allows them to add value to the experience of the customer and wherever possible provide real outcomes for customers.

The change in structure and the alignment of the Directorate complaint functions in the Commissioning, Policy and Performance department has meant that we have the opportunity to facilitate improvements in complaint performance, a more consistent approach around complaint handling, better value for money and improved learning from complaints, addressing problems with the current complaint handling arrangements.

There are a number of cashable and non-cashable efficiency savings that can be delivered through the implementation of the recommendations through, removing duplication, reducing complaint escalation, revising the current stage 3 process, reducing need for independent investigation and getting things right first time.

The changes should be used as an opportunity to completely refresh the way that complaints are responded to. Under a Putting Things Right approach each complaint should be considered to be an opportunity for service improvement, by doing so this will in turn provide better value and better quality of service for the customer.

The recommendations in the review are expected to continue to deliver;

- Improved performance in complaint handling – an aim to achieve 100% complaints responded to in time and where not this is by extreme exception.
- Reduced costs in investigation and escalation.
- Reduced number of complaints escalating through the complaint procedure (Stage 2 and Stage 3) through an earlier resolution and acceptance of service failure
- Improved customer satisfaction, as evidenced in best practice models that exist across the council.
- Improve the learning and service improvement from complaints
- A better experience for customers making a complaint.

ROTHERHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL – REPORT TO MEMBERS
--

1)	Meeting:	Self Regulation Select Commission
2)	Date:	11th October, 2012
3)	Title:	Localisation of Support for Council Tax (Council Tax Benefit) and Council Tax Technical Changes
4)	Directorate:	Resources

5. Summary

From April 2013, the Government is abolishing the current national Council Tax Benefit (CTB) scheme and asking local authorities to set up their own local schemes to meet the needs of their local area. In making these changes the Coalition Government is cutting the amount that Rotherham Council has to provide Council Tax Support by £4.1million.

The Government is also allowing Councils more discretion with regards to certain Council Tax discounts and exemptions which can be amended in order to raise additional Council Tax income which could be used to partially meet the funding cut.

Proposals for Rotherham's local Council Tax Support (CTS) scheme and changes to Council Tax discounts and exemptions have been developed and are attached as Appendix A in the form of a consultation leaflet. In order to meet legislative requirements these proposals must be put out to public consultation.

Following an eight week consultation period, commencing on 24th September 2012, the responses will be considered before the final scheme is agreed and finally adopted by Council. The adoption of the scheme must happen by 31st January 2013 in order to avoid the imposition of a Government default scheme which would have severe financial implications for the Council.

6. Recommendations

That the Self Regulation Select Commission:-

- **Note the contents of the report; and**
- **Note the proposed Local Council Tax Support scheme and Council Tax changes for public consultation to commence 24th September 2012 for an 8 week period.**

7. Proposals and Details

Further details regarding the proposed CTS are set out in the consultation leaflet presented at Appendix A to this report.

In developing the scheme consideration has been given to the following:

- The Equality Act 2010;
- Child Poverty Act 2010;
- Safeguarding vulnerable groups;
- Promoting work incentives;
- Armed forces covenant; and
- Prescribed requirements of the Government's Department for Communities and Local Government.

7.2 Proposed Council Tax Support Scheme – The proposed scheme set out in the consultation leaflet is similar to the current Council Tax Benefit scheme with the following changes:

- To introduce a maximum Council Tax Support level - this will be set at a percentage of the Council Tax entitlement which is sufficient to meet the likely shortfall in Government funding; and .
- Abolition of Second Adult Rebate.

7.3 Proposed Changes to Council Tax Discounts and Exemptions – The following changes are proposed to raise additional Council Tax income to meet some of the funding shortfall set out in Section 5:

- Removal of the current 50% discount for second homes. These properties would receive a full charge.
- Replace the current 100% exemption for homes undergoing major structural repair with a 25% discount.
- Replace the current 100% exemption for vacant and unfurnished properties in the first 6 months with a 25% discount.
- Remove the current 50% discount for vacant and unfurnished properties between 6 months and two years. These properties would receive a full charge.
- Charge an additional 50% premium for vacant and unfurnished properties over two years meaning these properties would receive a 150% charge.

8. Finance

Clearly the funding cut has significant financial implications for the Council, claimants and Council Tax payers.

The proposed Council Tax Support scheme and changes to Council Tax discounts and exemptions have been developed to enable the Council to meet the funding shortfall while seeking to minimise the potential impact on those vulnerable and most in need in the borough.

9. Risks and Uncertainties

9.1 Funding for the scheme – the Council has not yet been provided with a final funding figure. This figure will be available before the final scheme is adopted and will be part of the decision process. As the position is clarified further details will be reported through to Members

9.2 Council Tax Collection Rates - the proposals transfer the risks associated with Council Tax Benefit from central government to local authorities with implications for the Council Tax collection rate which it is anticipated will fall. There is also likely to be an increase in the cost of collecting Council Tax as a result of an increase in debt recovery activity.

9.3 Fluctuations in Caseload – the economic downturn has resulted in a steady increase in CTB claims (this year the rise has been 2.9%) and there is no sign that this trend will change in the near future. When finalising the new scheme consideration will need to be given to potential in year fluctuations in demand for Council Tax Support.

10. Policy and Performance Implications

The changes to CTS are part of the Coalition Government's wider welfare reform programme, the effect of which will be a substantial reductions in overall benefit entitlement.

As indicated the CTS proposals together with the wider welfare reforms could have an adverse effect on the levels of Council Tax collection in the Borough.

Additionally the work levels in Revenues and Benefits services, including telephone calls, are anticipated to substantially increase as is face to face contact through the Customer Service Centres. This could have an adverse impact on performance standards in these areas.

11. Background Papers and Consultation

- Appendix A - Consultation leaflet

Contact Names:-

Robert Cutts, Service and Development Manager Revenues and Benefits, Ext 23320, email address: robert.cutts@rotherham.gov.uk

Stuart Booth, Director of Financial Services, Ext 22034, email address: stuart.booth@rotherham.gov.uk

Council Tax Benefit is Changing

We want your views

1. Introduction

From April 2013, The Government is abolishing the current national Council Tax Benefit (CTB) scheme and asking local authorities to set up their own local schemes to meet the needs of their local area. Our local scheme will be known as Council Tax Support (CTS). In making these changes the Coalition Government is cutting the amount that Rotherham Council has to provide Council Tax support by £4.1million.

During 2011-2012, Rotherham Council awarded £22.8 Million to 31,000 claimants of whom 15,000 were pensioners. It should be noted that the Government has stated that where the claimant and partner are both pensioners they will be protected from any changes.

At present the Government funds 100% of the current Council Tax Benefit scheme. However under the new Council Tax Support scheme Rotherham will receive a set figure as an annual grant. The government will reduce the grant by 10% of the amount paid out in Council Tax benefit. In Rotherham's case it is estimated that under the Coalition Government's proposals this will result in a funding cut of £4.1 million for 2013/2014.

Any spend on Council Tax Support above the grant level will have to be met out of the Councils own funds to the detriment of other Council services.

As a result we will have to make some difficult decisions about who will get financial help to pay their Council Tax and how much help they will receive.

2. Considerations

Although the scheme will be local, the government has outlined some main principles which all Councils must apply:

The Equality Act 2010

The Council must have regard to disabilities when making decisions of a strategic nature in order to reduce any inequalities. There is a duty on the Local Authority to eliminate discrimination and advance equality of opportunity.

With this in mind the Council proposes that it retains the present scheme of allowances, premiums and income disregards as the best way of recognising the particular needs of families, carers and people with disabilities.

Child Poverty Act 2010

Part 2 of the Child Poverty Act 2010, sections 19-25, place a duty on Local Authorities to reduce child poverty in their area.

With this in mind the Council intends to continue to disregard child benefit and child maintenance when calculating Council Tax Support.

Guidance from the Secretary of State

When designing a scheme the Council must also have regard to any guidance issued by the Secretary of State to:

Safeguard vulnerable groups

The rules for Council Tax Benefit, Housing Benefit and DWP means-tested benefits have a scheme of allowances and premiums that take into account the make-up of the claimant's household, including responsibility for children, caring responsibilities and varying degrees of ill health and disability. Additionally some types of income related to children or disability are not counted in assessing a claimant's income for Council Tax Benefit.

The Council proposes that it retains the present scheme of allowances, premiums and income disregards in the Council Tax Support scheme as the best way of recognising the particular needs of families, carers and people with disabilities.

Promote work incentives

With this in mind the authority proposes to maintain the current 4 week run on period in order to incentivise work. This means that a claimant entering work or increasing their hours will, as at present, not see their Council Tax Support entitlement reduce for a period of 4 weeks. Additionally the 20% taper will be retained meaning employed claimants will lose only 20p benefit for every additional £1 they earn.

Have regard to the Armed Forces Covenant

With the covenant in mind the Council proposes to retain the existing disregard of 100% of all monies received in respect of war widows and war disablement pensions.

Comply with any prescribed requirements in legislation issued by DCLG.

All prescribed requirements will be included in the new Council Tax Support scheme.

3. Detail of what is being proposed from 1st April 2013

There are a number of constraints on what the Council can do and, after consulting with our partners and modelling the likely effects on residents of various options, we have identified a preferred Council Tax Support scheme for Rotherham.

The Council is giving consideration to the following options to make up the shortfall in funding:

- Reduce benefit expenditure through the cuts to the new Council Tax Support scheme as outlined in Section 4
- Increase Council Tax income through changes to discounts and exemptions as outlined in Section 5
- Meet some of the shortfall from Council funds including a potential increase in Council Tax levels

We need to have an agreed scheme in place by 31st January 2013 and are consulting on our draft proposals. The results of the consultation will be taken into account when drafting the final scheme.

4. Overview and principles of the draft Council Tax Support scheme for working age claimants

The Council has produced a draft Council Tax Support scheme based largely upon the existing Council Tax Benefit rules. We have also introduced a number of simplifications to ease administration and to ensure that the scheme is clear and easy to understand for claimants.

Maximum Council Tax Support entitlement for working age claimants

The main proposed change to the current Council Tax Benefit scheme is to introduce a maximum Council Tax Support level. This will be set at a percentage of the Council Tax entitlement which is sufficient to meet the likely shortfall in funding.

At present a claimant may be entitled to Council Tax Benefit to meet 100% of their Council Tax bill. However it is proposed that the maximum entitlement for Council Tax Support will be reduced to a percentage yet to be decided. This will mean all working age Council Tax Support claimants will have to make some payment towards their Council Tax.

The maximum percentage entitlement will vary dependant on decisions made regarding funding the shortfall through other changes to the scheme, additional income raised from changes to Council Tax and subsidy from Council funds.

If none of the other options are implemented the maximum Council Tax Support a working age claimant would receive is likely to be 80% of the Council Tax liability.

If a maximum Council Tax entitlement of 80% was introduced, someone currently living in a Band A property who is entitled to full Council Tax Benefit would pay a minimum of £190 per year or £3.65 per week.

In addition to the maximum entitlement the council is considering the following change for the new scheme. A decision on the final scheme will be made following full consideration of the consultation results.

Abolish Second Adult Rebate

Currently, claimants whose income and capital is too high to for them to be entitled to Council Tax Benefit, but who have other adult(s) in the household with low income, can receive a Second Adult Rebate up to 25%. This is designed to compensate people who would normally qualify for a single person discount if a second adult did not live with them regardless of how much income they receive.

The authority proposes to abolish the current second adult rebate scheme for single working age claimants which would affect 232 claimants and save £51,000.

Should Second Adult Rebate be abolished following the consultation, claimants currently receiving it would be able to make application for Council Tax Support based on their own income and capital. Our records indicate that these numbers would be very low as the average income above the Council Tax Benefit entitlement level for these claimants is £122 per week.

For someone in receipt of full second adult rebate in a Band A property this will mean they would pay an additional £238 per year or £4.58 per week.

5. Overview and principles of the proposed changes to Council tax discounts and exemptions

From 1st April 2013 the government is allowing Councils local discretion on the levels of some Council Tax discount and exemptions. The Council is proposing therefore to make the following changes in order to raise additional funds to meet some of the losses in government funding for the new Council tax Support scheme.

Proposal 1 - Second Homes

At present the authority grants 50% discount on second homes but proposes to remove this discount making Council Tax payable in full for such properties.

This will mean that someone in receipt of second home discount in a Band A property would pay a minimum additional £476 per year or £9.16 per week.

Proposal 2 - Vacant properties undergoing major structural repair

At present these properties are exempt from Council Charge for the first 12 months. The Council proposes to replace this exemption with a 25% discount.

This will mean that someone currently receiving the exemption for a Band A property would pay a minimum additional £715 per year or £13.75 per week.

Proposal 3 - Vacant and unfurnished properties (first six months)

At present these properties are exempt from Council Tax. The Council proposes to replace this exemption with a 25% discount.

This will mean that someone currently receiving the exemption for a Band A property would pay a minimum additional £357 for the six month period or £13.75 per week.

Proposal 4 - Vacant and unfurnished properties (vacant for over six months)

At present these properties receive a discretionary 50% Council Tax discount. The Council proposes to remove this discount making Council Tax payable in full for such properties.

This will mean that someone currently receiving a 50% discount for a Band A property would pay a minimum additional £477 per year or £9.17 per week.

Proposal 5 - Long term vacant and unfurnished properties (vacant for over two years)

At present these properties receive a discretionary 50% Council Tax discount regardless of how long they are empty. The Council proposes to introduce a premium 150% charge. This is intended to encourage owners of long term empty properties to bring them back into use.

This will mean that someone a 50% discount for a Band A property would pay a minimum additional £953 per year or £18.33 per week.

6. Developing a final Council Tax Support scheme

It should be noted that a final scheme is dependant on the following factors:

- The outcome of the consultation;
- The passing of the Local Government Finance Bill and subsequent secondary legislation; and
- The bringing into force of the relevant provisions of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and any secondary legislation.

The Council will enter into public consultation for eight weeks from the start of 24th September 2012.

The final proposal will be adopted by the full Council by 31st January 2013 and will be published on the Council's website once final approval has been granted.