

REPORT OF BUSINESS SERVICES CONTRACTS COMMITTEE

(Meeting held 3 March 2000)

1. REVIEW OF RENT ARREARS RECOVERY PROCEDURE (REPORT A) (MINUTE NO 17)

The Committee noted work undertaken to date by the Temporary Arrears Recovery Officer under a pilot scheme for increased home visits, and other ideas for ensuring that rent arrears recovery was as effective as possible. The Recovery Officer was appointed for 6 months starting in November 1999. Rent arrears traditionally increase around Christmas time, so it is difficult to obtain a true reflection of the success of the pilot scheme within a single 6 month period. Officers are confident that increased home visits are succeeding in reducing rent arrears. It was therefore agreed to extend the pilot scheme for a further 6 months to enable the level of improved recovery to be quantified over an entire year, and to ensure the success achieved to date continues. The extension of the Recovery Officer's contract will be funded from the projected surplus on the Housing Management Contract for 2000/01.

2. HOUSING MANAGEMENT CONTRACT PROGRESS REPORT (REPORT B) (MINUTE NO 19)

The Committee was pleased to note that the contract was running smoothly and that there was a satisfactory surplus for the period 1 April 31 December 1999.

3. TAX AND BENEFITS SERVICE CONTRACT PROGRESS REPORT (REPORT C) (MINUTE NO 20)

The Committee was pleased to note a satisfactory surplus on this contract also for the period ending 31 December 1999.

Members will recall that, following introduction of a new Government initiative from 1 June 1999 designed to reduce fraud and abuse of welfare payments (the Verification Framework), there was a significant increase in the timescales within which claims were processed. However the situation is improving following some simplification of the procedures by the government, and as claimants become more familiar with what is required of them. As at February 2000 90% of claims were being decided within 14 days.

Since the contract came into operation in January 1999 there has been a slight but steady reduction in the number of new benefit claims, notably following introduction of the Verification Framework. An inevitable consequence of this is an increased administration cost per claim. However, the total cost of administering the contract has not increased and is below budget for the financial year to date.

The Committee was pleased to note that out of 40 applicants, New Forest Tax and Benefit Services was one of only 5 to be awarded Beacon Status by DETR. A lump sum payment from the Government is covering any additional costs incurred as a result, such as through participation in road shows and conferences. Committee members' involvement in an open day to be held at Lymington Town Hall on 3 May 2000 will be welcome.

Changes in Council Tax legislation mean that from 1 April 2000 there will be a 12 month limit on the exemption currently enjoyed by owners of properties which are uninhabitable. Officers are writing to owners of such properties who will become liable for Council Tax, and messages are being included on Council Tax bills for uninhabitable properties inviting owners to contact the Empty Homes Officer if they wish to bring the building back into use.

Councillor B Rickman
CHAIRMAN

(BC030300)