

**Agenda Item No:**

**Report No:**

**Report Title: Resources in the Benefits Section of Revenues Division**

**Report To: Cabinet**

**Date: 23 July 2007**

**Lead Councillor: Councillor Freeman**

**Ward(s) Affected: All**

**Report By: Director of Finance and Community Services**

**Contact Officer(s): Ian Morris, Head of Revenues and Benefits**

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**Purpose of Report:**

To detail proposals of changes in the staffing structure of the benefits section of the Revenues division.

**Officers Recommendation(s):**

- 1 To consider the proposed change to the structure within the benefits section of the Revenues division.
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**Reasons for Recommendations**

- 1 To sustain improved performance in the benefits section through use of the additional funding of £27,000 approved by Cabinet in February 2007.
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**Information**

**2 Background to the changes**

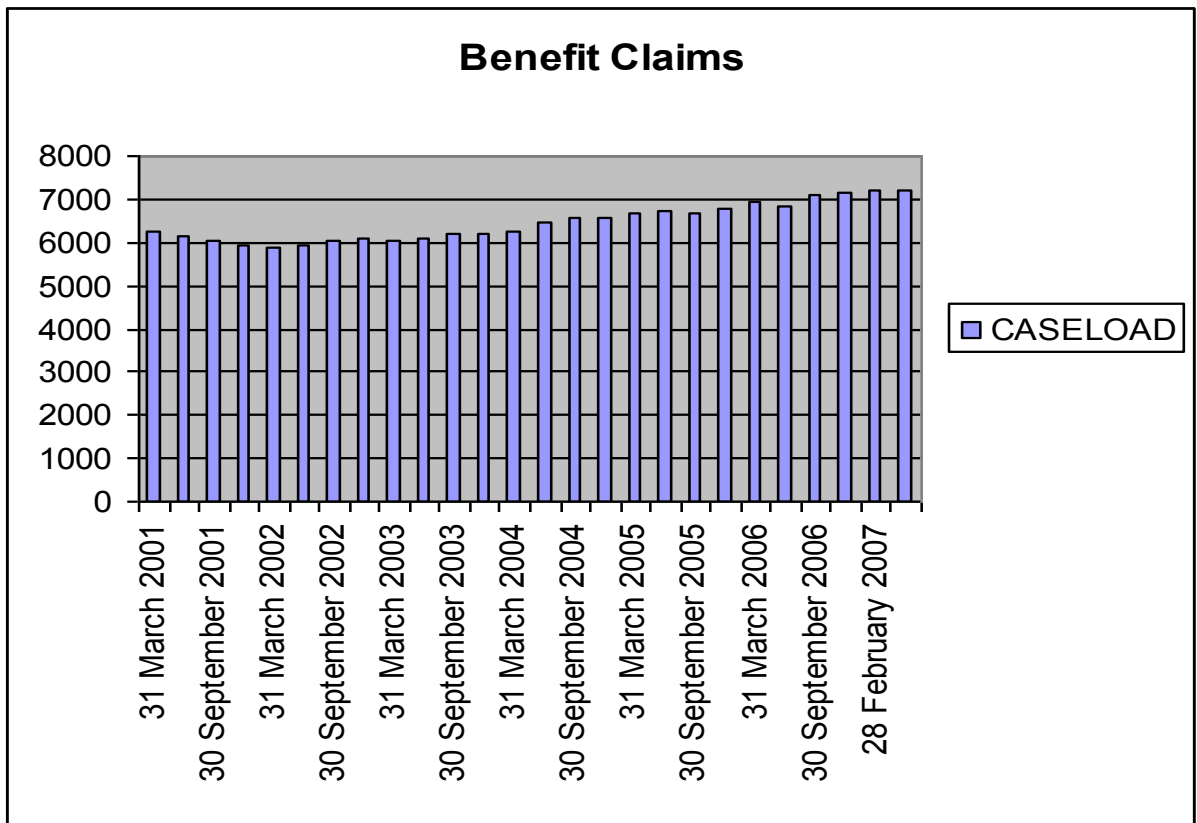
- 2.1 It was agreed in the February Cabinet that, following the Scrutiny Committee work and the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate service review, there would be extra resources of £27,000 allocated to the Benefit Service to help sustain improved performance in that area.
- 2.2 The Annual Audit and Inspection Letter considered by the Audit Committee on 27 June 2007 highlighted the need to sustain the improved performance being achieved.
- 2.3 The following proposals will assist in ensuring that the improved processing times are maintained and that the service to the customers provided by the benefit staff is improved further still.

### **3 Proposed changes**

- 3.1** It is proposed that two of the existing Assessor posts be amended to Technical Assessor posts. See Appendix 1 for the reasons for these posts.
- 3.2** It is proposed to increase the establishment by one assessor. This is required to replace the time that the Technical Assessors will be losing to assessment work and also to ensure that we can maintain the improved performance without the need to employ temporary agency assessment officers which are very expensive. In 2006/07 £52,000 was spent on temporary staff in order to maintain the performance of the section and cover vacancies.

### **4 Rationale behind the proposals**

- 4.1** The increase in the establishment is justifiable in terms of the increase in the number of benefit claims on file. In March 2001, when the current establishment was approved and implemented, the number of benefit claimants was 6,235. It currently stands at 7,225, an increase of 16%. This increase has been achieved mainly through the Council's efforts to encourage take-up of benefits through various advertising campaigns. Increased take up is a target in the Countywide Local Area Agreement.
- 4.2** Just on increased caseload alone, without factoring in the additional work involved in each benefit assessment, this would require an increase in the assessment staff from 12 to 13.9. I am proposing an increase from 12 to 13. The caseload forms the basis of the financial settlement from the Government in the form of the Benefits Administration Grant.



**4.3** In addition, it is proposed to improve the service provided to the customers at the point of contact. This service is currently provided by the benefit assistants with some limited help from the team leaders. However, due to the work load of the team leaders, the help they can provide is limited to only the most complex of cases. By the appointment of technical assessors, the work load of the team leaders can be reduced, thus freeing more time for them to assist in advising customers at the point of contact and thus improving this aspect of the service we provide. Further information about this is provided in Appendix 1.

**4.4** Please see the current staffing structure at Appendix 2 and the proposed revised staffing structure at Appendix 3.

**Financial Appraisal**

**5** The costs of the proposal are as shown below. The costs for each of the new Technical Assessor posts are subject to formal job evaluation, and are based on the assumption that the posts will be graded at scale. The amount shown is the difference between scale 5 and the top point of scale 4. All amounts include salary on costs (pensions and employer's national insurance contributions).

	Bottom of grade £	Top of grade £
Additional Assessor post	22,080	24,670
Technical Assessor post 1	650	3,140
Technical Assessor post 2	650	3,140
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>23,380</b>	<b>30,950</b>

The total cost of the proposal can be funded from the additional resources, £27,000, that Cabinet have made available, while staff remain at the lower end of the pay grade. However, as staff progress, there is a potential additional annual cost of £3,950. This cost can be funded from the Housing Benefits Standards and Improvements Reserve. The balance on this reserve is projected to be £169,000 at 31 March 2008: there will be sufficient capacity to utilise this reserve to cover the additional impact on the base budget of this proposal for the foreseeable future.

### **Environmental Implications**

- 5 I have completed the Environmental Implications questionnaire – there are no significant environmental implications over and above those associated with the recruitment of an additional member of staff. This report is exempt from the requirement because it is a progress report.

### **Risk Management Implications**

- 6 I have completed the Risk Management questionnaire and this report does not require a risk assessment because the changes/issues covered by this report are not significant in terms of risk.

### **Background Papers**

None

### **Appendices**

- Appendix 1 : Proposed duties of new post  
Appendix 2 : Current Revenues Division Structure  
Appendix 3 : Proposed Revenues Division Structure

## Technical Assessors

The role of Technical Assessor is needed for the following reasons:

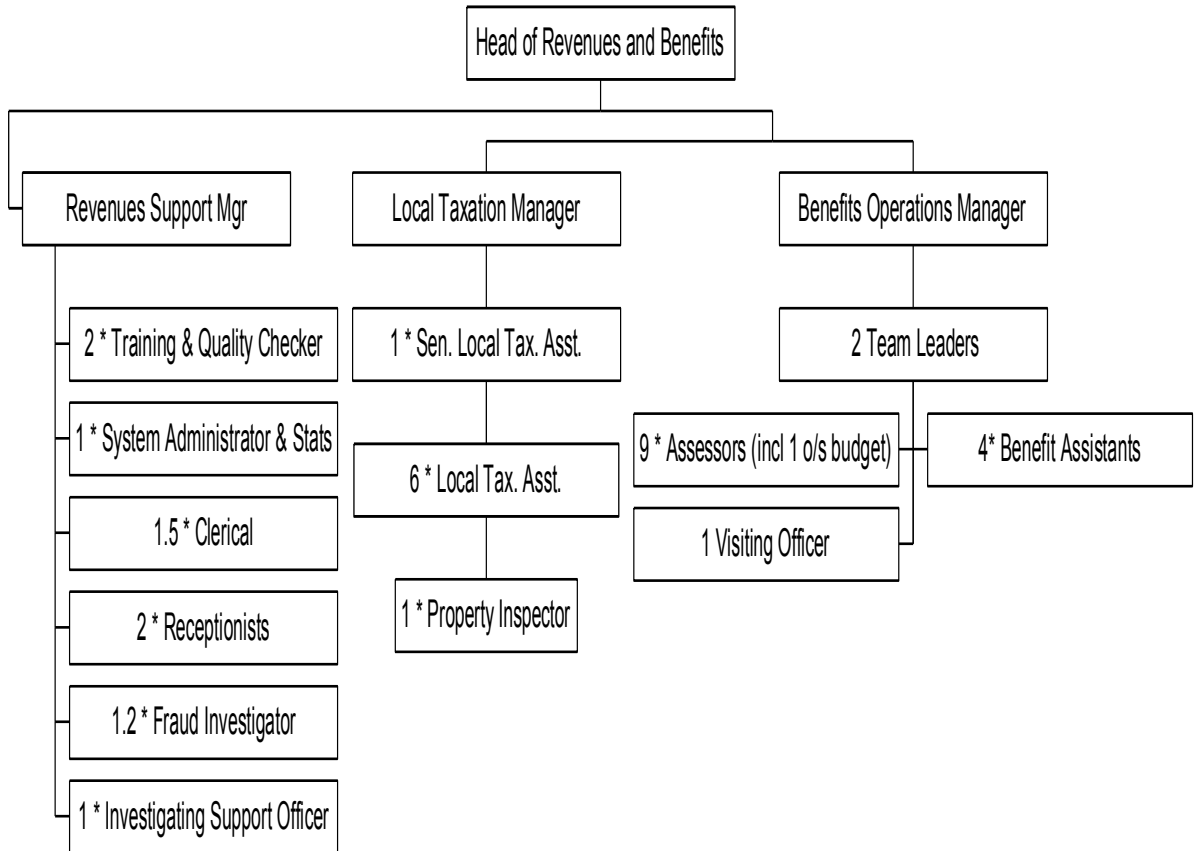
1. The Team Leaders work load is very high and much of it involves work which could be done by a more competent assessor – for example the various exception reports, making the initial decisions on back-dating requests, dealing with much of the correspondence from the customer, dealing with uncashed/returned cheques etc.
2. This would provide a natural progression through the benefit team, from benefit assistant, to benefit assessor, to technical assessor, to team leader etc. There would be personal development of the staff and this will encourage staff retention – often a problem in the area of Housing and Council Tax Benefits. It also allows for staff to develop experience with the regulations and also with the software packages that are used beyond the basic assessment.
3. The provision of support for the Team Leaders would enable the Team Leaders to have more time to support newer members of staff and also to ensure that there is adequate supervision of the section – especially for the Benefits Assistants who are dealing with the customer on the telephone and in reception. Difficult customers and more complex cases could be picked up more quickly and potential complaints avoided. (The Team Leaders would still be solely responsible for all the Appeals – preparation and presentation, Discretionary Housing Payments, and liaising with outside agencies where appropriate as well as the supervision of the staff, appraisals, monitoring etc.)

*These are extra duties in addition to the normal Assessor duties.*

- To examine, correct and action various exception reports, including Mass recalculation reports and rent officer reports.
- To liaise with the Council Tax section and the Rent Section over more complex cases.
- To resolve more complex queries with regard to overpayments and the recovery of overpayments.
- To deal with returned and uncashed cheques.
- To make initial decisions on back-dating applications.
- To review decisions made by the assessors in more straightforward cases where the applicant asks for a decision to be reviewed.

Appendix 2  
Current Divisional  
Structure

REVENUES



Appendix 3  
Proposed new Divisional Structure

