

Housing Rents and Revenues & Benefits IT Migration – Operational Impact

Executive of the Council

17 June 2003

1 Purpose of report

- 1.1 To report progress and highlight changes to the previously agreed plans for the migration of the existing Housing Rents and Revenues & Benefits computer systems, and the potential impact of these changes on the operation of services to the general public.

2 Background

- 2.1 The Council has been planning the migration of the above systems for some time. A key deliverable within the ICT Partnership Agreement is the migration of Housing Rents and Revenues & Benefits computer systems from legacy mainframe platforms to an integrated modern environment capable of providing the Council's Smart City vision. In the longer term this means that the move from existing systems to the new systems will give customers greater and easier access to services.
- 2.2 The migration programme is necessary because existing services are delivered on unsustainable and ever more unreliable ICT systems. These same systems are inhibiting the Council's ability to make the desired improvements to services. For example, the current performance on rent arrears is badly affected because of large amounts of downtime of the Housing Benefit System, and it is now critical to the future of good rent collection levels that the system is replaced. In the medium to long term the new systems will deliver major benefits in efficiency of processes and in much more transparent management information.
- 2.3 For some time now migration teams have been working with BT and SX3 to convert to new systems. This report outlines revised migration timescales which the Council will have to manage carefully to ensure that the impact on members of the public is limited. However, these systems provide direct services to a significant number of customers and migration will inevitably have some transitional impact on service delivery. Efforts are being made to communicate with private tenants and their landlords to ensure that any

payment difficulties which may arise are properly addressed. The Landlords Forum and the Registered Social Landlords forum will both have briefings during June.

- 2.4 Contingency plans are being finalised to ensure that the short term disruption that will arise is limited and key management aims are to (a) minimise such disruption and (b) recover levels of service as quickly as possible.

3 Migration Timetable and Action

- 3.1 The "go-live" date for migration of Revenues & Benefits computer systems has been set as 1 September 2003. The "go live" for Housing Rents is set as 11 August 2003.
- 3.2 To facilitate the migration on this date the existing Revenues and Benefits computer systems will require to close down on 25 July 2003. IBM Rents will be available on read-only basis. Rent account information on IBM will continue to be fed from cash systems so will provide information on existing (but not new) rent accounts. During this downtime period it will not be possible to process new benefit applications or changes in circumstances. However, benefit based on the position of the claim at systems close down, will continue to be paid and Direct Debit payments of Council Tax and Non-Domestic Rates will continue to be called. There will be no interruption to the receipt of any other payments. Rent payments from customers will continue to be taken using the cash system.
- 3.3 There will be arrangements to make emergency⁴ benefit payments as appropriate and any adjustments required because of changes in circumstances notified during the downtime will be actioned as quickly as possible after 1 September. External support is being provided in addition to overtime working to enable as quick a recovery as possible. More details are included in 3.11 below.
- 3.4 A full Communications Action Plan has been prepared and arrangements are in hand to communicate with all stakeholders, e.g. benefit claimants, Council Taxpayers, elected members, landlords and members of staff. Unison are being kept fully informed of progress. Advice and assistance for private sector tenants and their landlords is being tailored to deal with the cut-over period. Close working between Housing and Revenues and Benefits will take place to ensure the communications plan is comprehensive.
- 3.5 The new computer systems will enable staff to work efficiently and effectively and this will be further enhanced by the subsequent introduction of Electronic Document Management for Revenues and Benefits (planned for after Migration period). However, in the short term there will be a disruption to the service we can provide to customers because of the requirement to close down the updating facility between 25 July 2003 and 1 September 2003 while migration to the new systems.
- 3.6 In addition, there is a current and ongoing loss of operational resources while staff undergo training in the new systems. Training started at the end of April

and the staff response to it has been positive and extremely encouraging with the vast majority who have undergone training indicating that they are quite confident in being able to operate the new system. As the training for both Housing and Revenues and Benefits staff will continue to take place over the main holiday period, this inevitably adds to the need for very careful management, to ensure adequate resources are available to bridge this period. Nevertheless there will be a learning curve post 1 September.

- 3.7 Ongoing testing of the new systems indicate that it will not be possible to electronically migrate as much of the data as previously thought. It is currently thought that up to 7 days of manual data cleansing following migration may be required, rather than 1 as previously planned. This additional time is however included in the 25 July – 1 September downtime.
- 3.8 As reported to the Executive on 30 July 2002 the functionality of the new system is not "As Is" in all respects and will involve certain changes to current operational arrangements. However the system is in use in many Councils in Scotland and work is ongoing with BT to minimise any issues that arise.
- 3.9 The Communications Plan referred to in 3.4 above will ensure stakeholders are advised of changes to operational arrangements.
- 3.10 An unplanned backlog of work has accumulated due to the problems associated with the amount of downtime of the existing computer systems at year-end/year start and the system's subsequent poor performance/ lack of reliability. The delay in processing benefits has contributed to increased rent arrears in the first quarter of the year and is a serious concern which is being addressed.
- 3.11 Action is being taken to reduce and, if possible, eliminate this backlog before close down on 25 July. Actions include controlled overtime working by staff and external back office support arrangements which provide for remote processing of work. Incoming telephone calls are also being redirected temporarily to an external Contact Centre. This enables staff to have uninterrupted processing time. Redirected phone calls which require urgent action are being prioritised and details e-mailed to processing staff.

This action will continue post migration to recover the service performance levels for both Rent Arrears and Housing Benefit. Additional staff are in place in Housing to help collect HB information for customers so that processing can be done rapidly. Overtime working for the 'Out of Hours' contact team will also remain in place to remind people with small arrears to continue to pay rent over this period.

- 3.12 This will be a very busy and challenging period with the objective of radically upgrading and improving the speed and quality of service we are able to provide to our customers.
- 3.13 Mention has been made earlier in this report of the introduction of Electronic Document Management (EDM) which it is hoped to introduce shortly after Migration. This will considerably reduce the number and handling of paper files and provide a more secure way of dealing with claims and other

correspondence. It will also allow a better and closer means of managing and monitoring the time taken to process claims and other correspondence.

Submission of Tenders for the new EDM system are currently being evaluated following the submission closing date of 9 June. The evaluation process will ensure that the chosen solution will be capable of future roll-out across the Council.

- 3.14 In anticipation of new computer systems the Division is currently closely involved with the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate's Performance Improvement Team. They are providing direct assistance in reviewing procedures and devising improved methods to improve the flow of work and efficiency of work practices.

4 Recommendations

The Executive of the Council is recommended to :

- 4.1 Note that the Migration project and new systems in Housing Rents and in Revenues and Benefits are part of the Council's plan to significantly enhance the Council's ability to further modernise services in line with the Smart City Vision.
- 4.2 Note that in the short term some disruption to services is inevitable as the new systems are introduced and staff become familiar with the new technology.
- 4.3 Note that the Communications Plan will address customers directly affected by the changes and will also inform the public more generally about the changeover.
- 4.4 Note that contingency plans and solutions to minimise potential problems will be in place for the critical period spanning migration, until the service to customers is fully recovered for both Housing and Revenues and Benefits. It is critical that adequate resources are deployed for this service recovery, therefore steps will be taken to ensure that customers do not face excessive delays as the year progresses, and so that the Council's main performance targets are recovered as soon as possible.



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Appendices None

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**Background
Papers**

None