

WYRE FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL**CABINET MEETING**
22ND NOVEMBER 2007**Benefits Service – Vision & Objectives and Benefits Service Strategy updates**

OPEN	
COMMUNITY STRATEGY THEME	
CORPORATE PLAN THEME:	Delivering Quality Services
KEY PRIORITY:	Improving Customer Services
STRATEGY:	Benefits Service
CABINET MEMBER:	Councillor John-Paul Campion
RESPONSIBLE OFFICER:	Head of Financial Services
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APPENDICES	Appendix 1 - Benefits Service – Vision and Objectives - update Appendix 2 – Benefits Service Strategy - update

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To seek endorsement of the updated Vision and Objectives of the Benefits Service and the updated Benefits Service Strategy.

2. RECOMMENDATION

The Cabinet is asked to RECOMMEND to Council:

The Vision and Objectives of the Benefits Service, attached as Appendix 1, and the Benefits Service Strategy attached as Appendix 2 be endorsed.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Council in July 2003 endorsed the current Vision and Objectives of the Benefits Service and May 2004 endorsed the current Benefits Service Strategy.
- 3.2 The Vision and Objectives of the Benefits Service and the Benefit Service Strategy have been reviewed to ensure in line with best practice.
- 3.3 The Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) have published Performance Standards which cover the whole Housing and Council Tax Benefit Service and are

considered to be required in order to provide an effective and secure service. The standards include members endorsing the objectives and service strategy of the Benefits Service and that these are regularly reviewed.

- 3.4 The Council has adopted a Corporate Plan for 2003 – 2008 with a vision “Building a Better Future” underpinned by values which influence work and planning of the authority which is at the centre piece of the corporate planning framework. This plan covers eight themes that define strategic aims and priorities. The Benefit service has been aligned to the theme of Delivering Quality Services.
- 3.5 The Financial Services Divisional Service Business Plan states how the Division will work towards the Council’s strategic aims and priorities to deliver the Corporate Plan. The Divisional Plans are produced annually reported to members and provide direction and more detailed aims and objectives. Sectional Service Plans as appropriate translates the Corporate and Divisional plans into more specific objectives, targets, actions and outcomes.
- 3.6 The current Vision and Objectives are included within the Financial Services Divisional Service Business Plan for the Benefits Service.

4. KEY ISSUES

- 4.1 The Vision of the Benefits Service details the commitment of the Council to provide an effective and secure Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Service which is inclusive, customer focussed, efficient and secure.
- 4.2 The Objectives of the Benefit Service are to deliver the full range of Services as required by the DWP Performance Standards within available resources.
- 4.3 The Benefits Service Strategy provides a framework in which the Benefits Service can move forward focussing on the key issues, in line with Council priorities.
- 4.4 In order to continue to provide a secure and efficient benefit service these documents are kept under regular review.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 There are no financial implications associated within this report.

6. LEGAL AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 It is a requirement that this authority administers Housing and Council Tax Benefits in accordance with legislation and DWP requirements.

7. RISK MANAGEMENT

- 7.1 To ensure compliance with the DWP Performance Standards the Vision and Objectives of the Benefits Service together with the Benefits Service Strategy are kept under regular review and endorsed by Members.

8. CONCLUSION

- 8.1 Council endorsed the Vision & Objectives of the Benefits Service in July 2003 and the Benefits Service Strategy in May 2004. A review of these documents has been undertaken to ensure they remain in line with current best practice and only minor changes have been made. In accordance with good practice recommended by the Department of Work and Pensions members are requested to reaffirm the endorsement of the Vision & Objectives of the Benefits Service and the Benefits Service Strategy.

9. CONSULTEES

- 9.1 CMT

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 10.1 Council 16th July 2003 – Benefits Service – Vision and Objectives
10.2 Council 19th May 2004 - Benefits - Service Strategy.



BENEFITS SERVICE – VISION AND OBJECTIVES

VISION

To provide an effective and secure Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit service which is inclusive, customer focused, efficient and secure.

This vision is a commitment of the authority to provide a service that is:

- Customer-focused, modern and efficient
- Paying the 'Right Benefit' at the 'Right Time'
- Secure, reducing the risks of fraud and error
- Supporting claimants to live in decent housing

In so doing, the service will:

- Be accessible to everyone in the community
- Ensure claimants receive the benefit to which they are entitled
- Minimise barriers to work
- Recover overpayments
- Reduce the levels of fraud and error while investigating fraud and taking appropriate action
- Encourage good performance within the authority



BENEFITS SERVICE - VISION AND OBJECTIVES

OBJECTIVES

To meet over time, within available resources, the full range of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Performance Standards set by the Department of Work and Pensions and the Audit Commission.

The service strives to seek continuous improvement by way of efficiency savings and value-for-money improvements in line with Best Value and Gershon principles including working in partnership with external agencies, stakeholders and other local authorities.

The service has an objective to;

- Minimise the time taken to process all benefit claims and changes in circumstances in line with DWP targets;
- Identify errors in benefit or situations where benefit should be reduced promptly and in line with DWP targets;
- Secure efficiencies in service delivery through the use of telephone, written and electronic methods of working;
- Maintain a secure gateway into the benefits service minimising fraud and error in all circumstances.

November 2007.



FINANCIAL SERVICES
Housing & Council Tax Benefits
Service Strategy

November 2007

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Strategic management

- 1.1 The following document has been produced in line with the DWP requirements for Performance Standards within Housing & Council Tax Benefits.
- 1.2 The document consists of the following parts:
 1. Links with the Corporate Plan 2003-2008
 2. A vision statement for the Benefits Service
 3. A statement of intent
 4. Reporting Mechanisms
 5. Policies adopted by the Council in the ongoing delivery of the Benefits service
- 1.3 The Benefits Service is a key part of the Council's overall service delivery and as such is inextricably linked with the Council's own Vision and Values.
- 1.4 Whilst the Benefits service has its own vision and statement of intent as laid down within this document, all of the key areas have strategic aims connected to the Council's overall policy objectives

The corporate vision and values

The Council's vision statement and values have been laid down within the Corporate Plan¹ 2003 – 2008. These are as follows:

The Corporate Vision

We want Wyre Forest to be a District with healthy, safe and flourishing communities that are supported by a strong and diverse economy. The local environment will be clean, inspiring and valued, where people are proud to live and work and are attracted to visit and invest.

Our Vision is underpinned by the following Values, which will influence all our work and planning.

We believe in:

- **Being Open, Responsive and Accountable**
 - We will ensure that decision making processes are clear and transparent and that there is effective and regular consultation with our communities.
- **Giving Value for Money**
 - We will provide high quality, value for money services and strive for continuous improvement.
- **Promoting Sustainable Development**
 - We will make sure that decisions will benefit both present and future generations by considering the social, economic and environmental implications.
- **Putting Communities First**
 - We will ensure that the needs of our communities are at the heart of everything we do.
- **Valuing Employees**
 - We will support, praise and invest in our workforce to develop our organisation.
- **Working in Partnership**

¹ The Corporate Plan is linked with the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act
Cabinet 22/11/2007

- We will continue to develop productive working relationships with other local authorities, organisations and our communities to achieve common goals and provide effective services.

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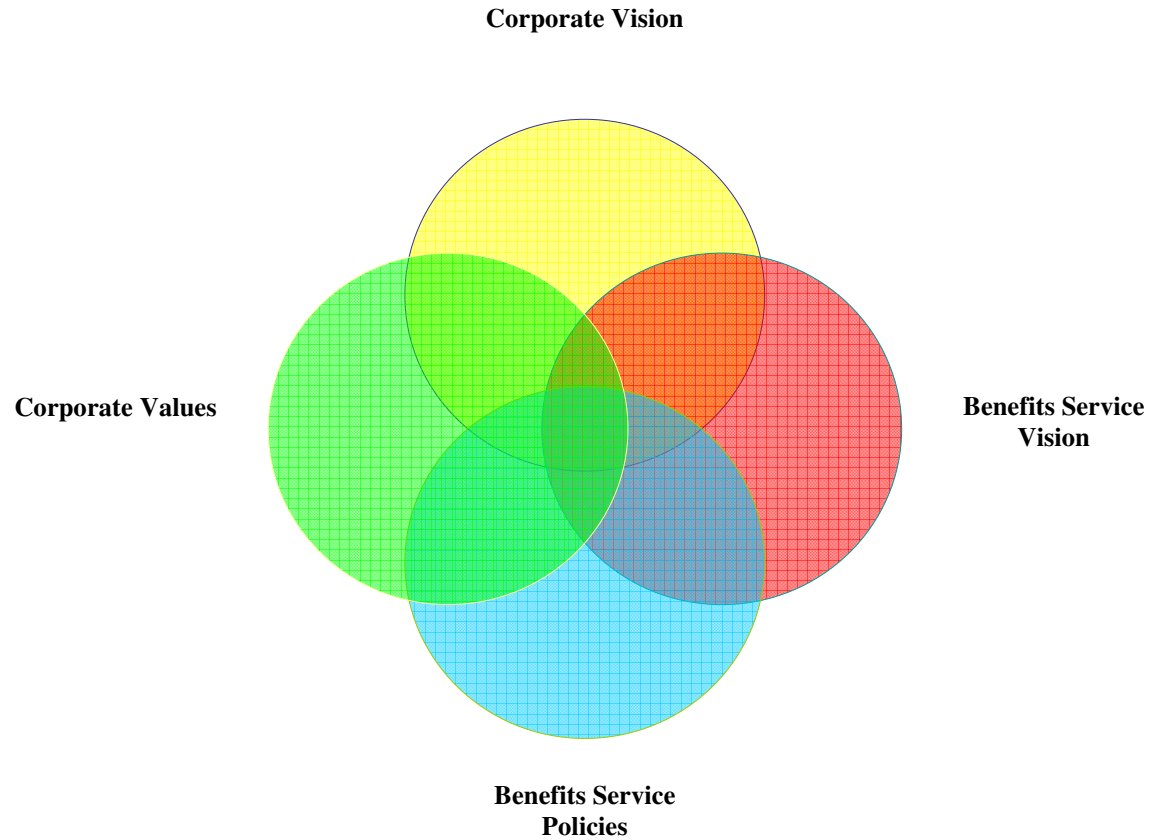
Linking the Benefits Service to the Corporate Vision and Values

The Benefits Service is linked to Corporate Vision and Values as follows:

Corporate Value	Policies and actions within the Benefits Service
Being open responsive and accountable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access for all; • Customer surveys ; • Publication of service objectives; • Customer feedback; • Contact with landlords / landlord initiatives including landlord forums.
Giving Value for Money	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full engagement with the Comprehensive Assessment Area (CAA) and revised performance standards regime; • Effective and efficient budgeting; • Monitoring of cost of claim processing.
Promoting sustainable development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modern systems; • Use of Document Imaging and Electronic Document Management; • Web based application forms and documents; • The use of telephone and electronic claims and notifications of changes; • The use of electronic claiming; • Payment of benefit by automated electronic means such as Bankers Automated Claiming Systems (BACS);
Putting Communities First	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prompt payment of benefit in line with the requirement for Benefit 'On Time'; • Ensuring that the correct benefit is paid in line with the requirement for 'Right Benefit'; • Ensuring maximum benefit take up; • Ensuring maximum welfare benefit take up wherever possible; • Provision of advice to claimant groups; • Fast tracking of claims and changes in circumstance using all schemes available within the regulations set down by Central Government; • Recruitment of employees to the service from the community;

Corporate Value	Policies and actions within the Benefits Service
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Liaison with Social Services; • Liaison with the Supporting People team; • Liaison with third party agencies and groups to assist all vulnerable claimants ;and those who are in financial difficulties; • Liaison with local banks and building societies to allow claimants to be financially and socially included by taking advantage of electronic means of payments; • All benefit services are linked with the provision of good housing and maximisation of income for claimant groups;
Valuing employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruitment and development of employees within the service • Provision of high quality training; • Annual Appraisal Programme; • Identification of training needs on an individual basis; • Engagement of employees within the Best Value process; • Engagement of employees within the Performance Standards and Comprehensive Assessment Area process:
Working in Partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensive partnership working with the: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Department of Work & Pensions; ○ The Rent Officer Service; ○ Her Majesty's Revenues & Customs; ○ Social Services; ○ Supporting People teams; ○ Council Tax Department;

The Benefits Services vision and objectives link inextricably with the Corporate vision and values

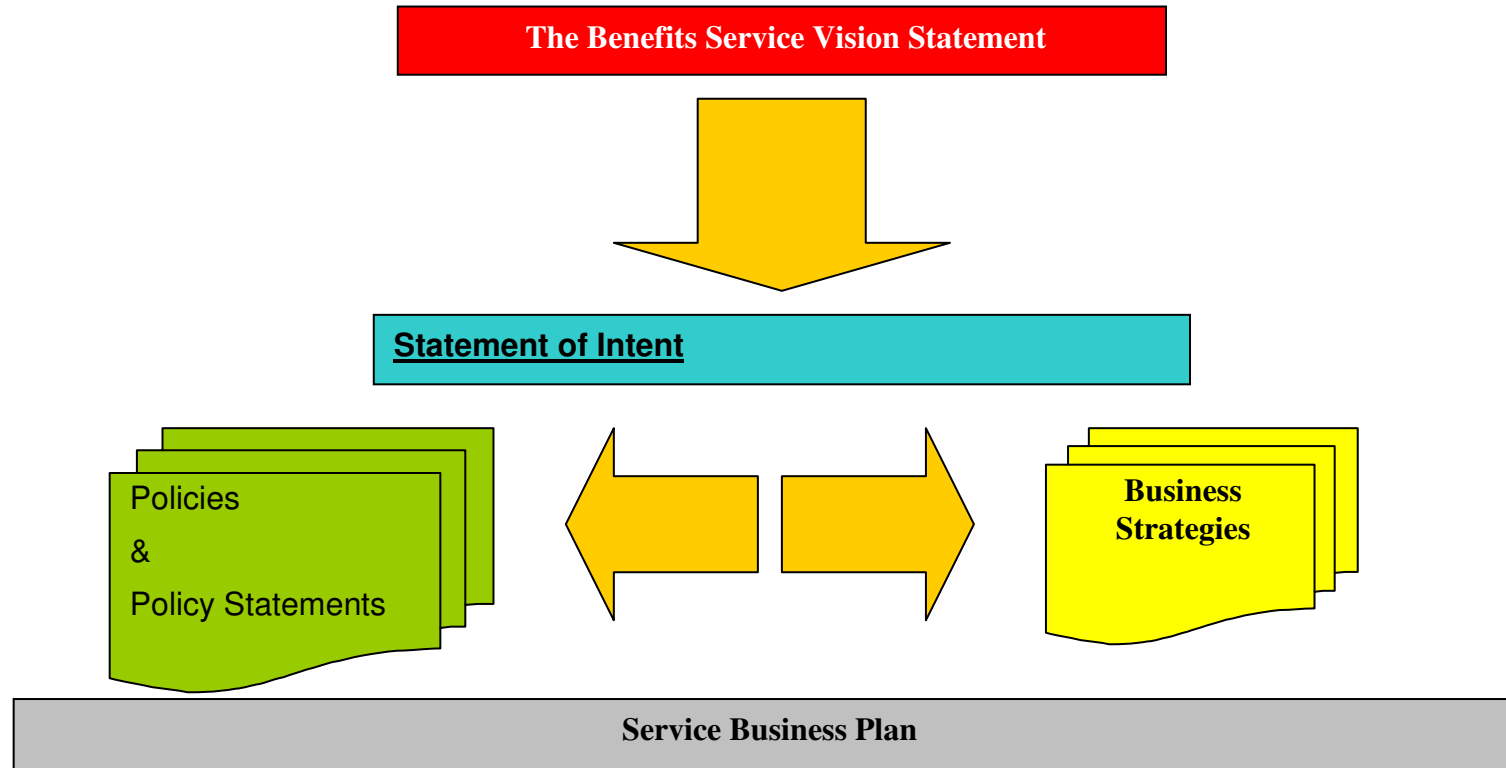


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The Benefits Services Vision and values

- 4.1 The benefits vision statement has been adopted by the service and endorsed by the Council as a clear intention and promise for both current and future service delivery. It is the intention of this approach for the vision statement to be incorporated within all business and service plans operated by the Housing & Council Tax Benefits section and to be the focus point for employees and customers alike.
- 4.2 The vision statement is clear and concise meeting both local needs and the requirements of central government directed by departments and agencies such as the Department of Work & Pensions (DWP), the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Audit Commission.
- 4.3 The vision statement is supplemented by a full statement of intent, which clearly identifies specific deliverables demanded from the service and which in turn are directly reflected in the ongoing business plan adopted by the service annually as part of its normal business planning processes.
- 4.4 In all cases areas where the service has committed to a certain level of delivery, the fundamental principles are covered by either specific policies (in which case a policy document is enclosed) or particular strategies, which are defined within the service business plan.

4.5 Diagrammatically the approach is shown below:



4.6 The Council has endorsed the vision statement and the statement of intent in their entirety and agreed that where appropriate certain policies are brought before the Council for ratification prior to their inclusion within the service / business plan. It has been agreed that particular business strategies will only be brought to the Council if they directly affect other policies or at any time conflicts other defined strategies or policy objectives.

- 4.6 It has been agreed that Council will regularly re-commit to the objectives of the service. Equally all employees will be required to read and understand the services vision and to familiarise themselves with both the statement of intent and individual policies specific to their service area and responsibilities. This document will be considered at the time of employee's Employment Development Review (EDR)
- 4.7 Where appropriate it is has also been agreed that the vision and certain policy commitments be made available to all stakeholders and produced in such formats that all can access them. The formats of the documents will reflect the particular requirements of stakeholder groups.

The Benefits Service Vision Statement and Statement of intent

4.8 The Benefits service has its own vision statement which aligns with the corporate vision and values namely;

To provide an effective and secure Housing & Council Tax Benefit Service which is inclusive, customer focused, efficient and secure

4.9 We will achieve our vision by:

1. Customer Focussed ~ Customer Services

- o Providing state of the art customer services facilities allowing all customers and stakeholders generally to have access to the service as follows:

Method of Access	Our Commitment
Telephone Access	By providing a telephone service which is available to all from 9.00 am until 5.00pm Monday to Friday; By ensuring that all calls are dealt with within 5 minutes; By ensuring that enquiries are wherever possible dealt with completely at the first point of contact; By ensuring that customer's case details are available to all employees answering enquiries; By ensuring that where a full answer cannot be provided immediately that the customer will be contacted by either telephone or in writing within 24 hours; By enabling the claiming of benefit by telephone; By enabling the reporting of all changes in circumstances by telephone;

Method of Access	Our Commitment
Counter Facilities	By providing modern open public enquiry facilities at The Worcestershire Hub, Town Hall, Kidderminster; By ensuring that all visitors are seen within 15 minutes; By providing an appointment system whereby customers can book appointments in advance of their arrival at the offices; By providing confidential enquiries either at the main counter or within a private interview facility;
Visiting Service	By providing a visiting service for all customers who are unable to take advantage of the customer services facilities within the Offices or who are considered to be vulnerable; By enabling the claiming of benefit and reporting of changes in circumstances to be undertaken within the claimant's home using the latest wireless technology;
Written Correspondence	By committing to answer all letters and written enquiries within 14 calendar days of receipt; By ensuring that all replies are written in plain English and answer the customer's queries in full;
Via The Internet	By committing to provide a customer service portal via the Council's web site thereby allowing for the use of communication such as e-mail and e-forms including on line claiming; By committing to reply to email enquiries within 14 calendar days of receipt
Leaflets forms and explanatory notes	By committing to providing a full range of documents, leaflets and forms in hard copy at all Council offices and electronic forms which can be accessed either via the internet or from the Worcestershire Hub at Kidderminster Town Hall.
Security	By committing to providing customer enquiry facilities which are secure for both employees and customers alike.

2. *Timely and Accurate processing of claims*

- Providing a service which will not only process claims promptly but also ensure that all claims are processed without errors. We will pay benefit in line with the Department of Work and Pensions requirement to pay 'Right Benefit' 'Right Time'

Timely & Accurate process	Our Commitment
Right Time	To process all new claims and changes of circumstances within DWP standards ²
Right Benefit	To identify all reductions in benefit as required by the DWP and to identify all cases where the benefit should be increased in line with the customer's circumstances
Errors & complaints	We will commit to reducing the level of errors and complaints year on year

3. Resources

- Providing a service that has sufficient resources at all times to meet both our vision and 100% of our commitments

4. Accessibility

- Providing a totally inclusive service by;

Facility	Our Commitment
Meeting the Disability Discrimination Act requirements in full	By providing facilities which do not in any way discriminate on the grounds of disability namely; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Meeting the needs of the visually impaired; ○ Providing easy access to all facilities used by customers; ○ By providing facilities for the deaf and hard of hearing;
Meeting Equal Opportunities	By committing to provide services which do not in any way discriminate on the grounds of sex, race, religion, language, age or sexual orientation
Meeting Financial Inclusion requirements	By encouraging all claimants to have access to at least basic banking facilities and to assist claimants who have difficulty in dealing with their financial affairs;

5. Maximisation of benefit entitlement

- Providing a service which maximises the claimants entitlement to Housing & Council Tax Benefit as well as providing advice and guidance on other welfare benefits available to the claimant based on information provided
- Ensuring that claimants who return to work are encouraged to take up in work benefits and credits identifying and preventing any barriers to work

² To be set from 1st April 2008

6. To assist in the provision of good quality housing

- Providing assistance to the claimant in obtaining and retaining good quality housing by:

Tenure	Our Commitment
Private Tenant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ By paying benefit promptly and by at all times reducing delays in payment ○ By paying benefit on account ○ To at all times look to ensure that claimants do not fall into arrears due to delays in benefit processing ○ To correctly process claims in line with all of the existing Rent Schemes including Local Housing Allowance; ○ To provide information on current levels of rent allowable within each Broad Rental Market Area (BRMA). ○ To provide accurate and timely information to the Rent Officer Service where required; ○ To at all times encourage good liaison with landlords and Registered Social Landlords;

7. Overpayment recovery

- Providing a service that looks to minimise the creation of overpayments but which also looks to actively recover overpayments, which are correctly due and payable.
- Providing a service which year on year reduces official error overpayments
- Providing a service that year on year increases the percentage of overpayments collected
- Providing a service that is responsive to customers and looks to recover overpayments in line with legislative requirement, at all times taking into account the circumstances of the claimant and using the most appropriate method of recovery given those circumstances.

8. Fraud

Cabinet 22/11/2007

- Providing risk based verification procedures which meets the DWP standards of evidence in accordance with the Performance Standards which looks at all times to prevent and detect fraud. Securing the gateway to the social security system;
- Providing an active Investigation team whose objectives will be to fully investigate fraud and to pursue fraudsters using all legal remedies available to the service;
- Providing a Benefits service which exists within a Fraud prevention environment:

9. Performance Management

- Providing a performance management culture whereby all levels of employees are committed to working within the aims and objectives of the service and the Council;
- Providing year on year efficiencies in line with Gershon and DWP requirements;
- Providing a clear vision of performance management to all levels of employees;
- Providing feedback and performance monitoring systems which will ensure all targets and commitments are met in full;

10. Working in partnership

- Providing a benefit service which will work in partnership with other departments, other organisations and other Local Authorities to improve customer service and encourage efficiencies;

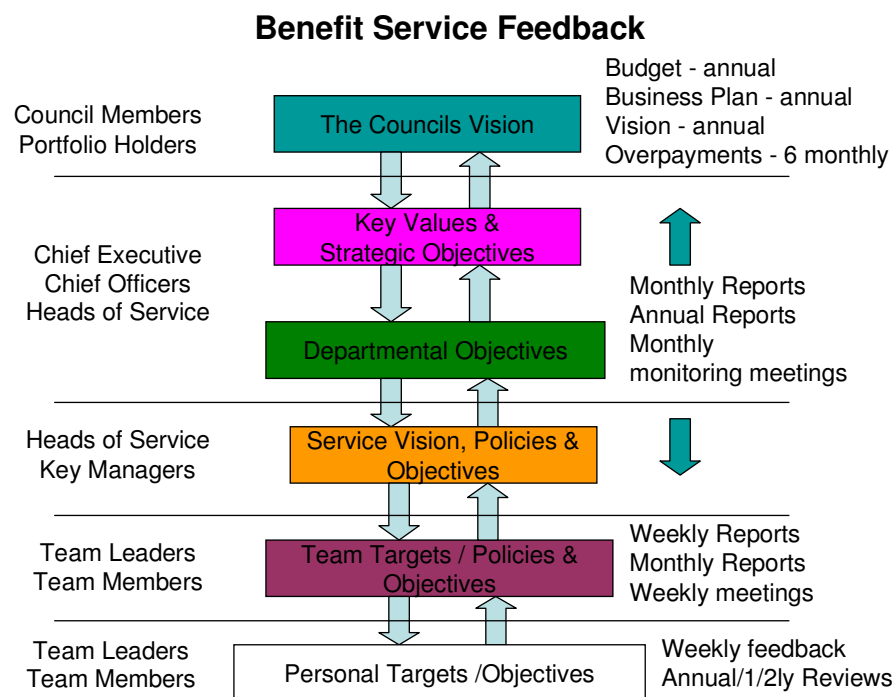
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Ensuring Service Delivery

Delivery in line with our vision and values is essential. In order to ensure delivery we have established a feedback and review mechanism in line with the Audit Commission's 'Golden thread' principles.

The Council, management and employees are linked within the mechanism so that key service deliverables are monitored on a regular basis.

The basis of the reporting mechanism is shown diagrammatically below:



The above clearly shows how the service is responsive to both corporate requirements and also to actual service delivery. Employees are required to perform in line with targets and objectives set by the service. Employees also have a clear link between the tasks that they undertake and the Council's vision.

Employees operate individual tasks in line with policies developed by the Service. These are endorsed and monitored by the Council and are as follows:

- Customer Service Strategy
- Equality and Diversity Policy
- Fraud Prevention and detection Policy ~ Anti Theft, Fraud and Corruption Policy
- Prosecution policy
- Overpayment Policy

5.6 In addition to the above the Council annually reviews the overall resources financial or otherwise employed within the service to ensure that our commitments can be met in full