

Revenues and Benefits Service

Annual Report 2009-10



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Foreword

Welcome to our annual Revenues and Benefits report for 2009-10.

The economic downturn has meant this year has been a particularly challenging one to say the least. We have seen a continual rise in the number of people claiming benefit but, despite this increase, we have made huge improvements in the speed of processing new claims.

In the first half of the year we were taking an average of 33 days to process a new claim. However, since November we have improved significantly and our average has dropped to 18 days. Much of this improvement is down to new methods of working and the continual efforts of the staff to improve performance.

Despite the current financial climate we have yet again collected an unprecedented level of council tax. Whilst we have robust systems in place to collect the monies due a lot of credit must also go to the diligence of the majority of our taxpayers who pay their council tax on time. Without this Rochford District Council would not be able to sustain the high levels of public service it provides.

We have progressed well with our work with other organisations. We are working closely with Castle Point Borough Council on a number of joint working initiatives and our new partnership with Rochford Housing Association is delivering a better level of service for their tenants. We are also meeting regularly with a number of public, community and voluntary sector organisations to discuss ways of working closer together. Over time we hope to deliver coordinated and improved levels of service to customers.

We are also investing in technology to drive forward service improvements that I think will have a real positive impact. In particular the e-claim software we are purchasing is revolutionary and not only will people be able to make a claim for benefit via our website, it will also help facilitate home visits for people wishing to make a claim. These new channels for making a claim should give the customer a much better experience of using our service.

The technology will also improve our processing times because it links directly into our core processing system. This will reduce a number of current administrative processes and speed up the turnaround of new claims dramatically. Other investments, such as the change of address module highlighted in this report, also integrate with our core processing system. We are anticipating similar benefits when we process notifications from people who are moving to or within the District.

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Considering all the pressures and the innovation we are adopting, I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere appreciation to all my staff. They are a dedicated group of people who pride themselves on providing our customers with the best possible service and they have worked tirelessly to deliver some outstanding achievements. They are the bedrock of the service and, despite having to dig deep this year, their commitment has never wavered.

Dealing and coping with the pressures and delivering innovation at the same time is no easy ask. It has only been possible to do this because of the work ethics and team ethos that every member of staff aspires to.

There can be no doubt that all public sector services are in for a very tough ride over the coming years. The Revenues and Benefits service at Rochford District Council has set itself up to deal with the challenges that lay ahead and, whatever happens, we will continue to strive to give our customers the best possible service we can.

I hope you find the report useful and informative. If you have any comments to make please do not hesitate to contact me on 01702 318006.



Nick Scott
Revenues & Benefits Manager

Review of the Year

In our 2008/09 annual report we told you what some of our plans were for 2009-10.

Here's what happened:

What we said	What we did
<p>We said our Community Outreach Group (COG) would do more consultation with customers and stakeholders</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We produced a comprehensive consultation strategy detailing which groups we would consult with, what we consult them on and how we do it. We are now in the process of implementing the strategy. • We set up and now host a Multi-Agency Group (MAG) on a quarterly basis. The MAG consists of representatives from various Government organisations, Registered Social Landlords and voluntary organisations. The aim is to keep each other informed and also to work jointly with each other to provide better customer service. • We ran a Revenues and Benefits customer satisfaction survey. Of those surveyed 75% were very satisfied with our service, 16% were satisfied and 9% were dissatisfied • We set up a questionnaire on our website. This survey asks whether you think we are providing a value for money service and one that meets customer needs and expectations. The survey can be found at: http://www.rochford.gov.uk/feedback
What we said	What we did
<p>We said we would establish a group of staff to work on promoting the take-up of housing/council tax benefit, council tax discounts and reliefs for local businesses.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The group has been formed. A detailed strategy has been produced and work is now progressing on various take-up initiatives. In our next annual report we will tell you how successful the various initiatives have been.
What we said	What we did
<p>We said we would evaluate an automated telephone payment system</p>	<p>We have purchased a state of the art speech recognition payment system which automates the handling of payments. The main benefits of this new system are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customers will have 24/7/365 days access to the payment service

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The service uses natural conversational speech and this will allow the customer to use a conversational approach to interact and make their payment • Improved accessibility to this new service will stop complaints from people who are not able to get through to our call centre at peak periods to make their payment. • The removal of high volumes of calls from our call centre will improve customer service for customers who need to talk to an advisor about their council tax or housing/council tax benefit <p>The system is very easy to use. Anyone can make a payment for Council Tax or car parking Penalty Charge Notices by phoning 0207 138 1976.</p>
What we said	What we did
<p>We said we would alleviate the frustration some of our customers experience when phoning our contact centre</p>	<p>Our new automated payment system has removed over 8,000 calls from our contact centre. This has released staff from dealing with these phone calls and we are now providing a much faster more responsive service.</p> <p>Our contact centre has also upgraded their telephony system. One of the new features will be a 'queue busting' system. This is an automated process that will allow the customer to leave a name and telephone number if they would prefer not to wait for an advisor</p>
What we said	What we did
<p>We said we would carry out a review of everyone receiving a council tax single person discount</p>	<p>We carried out a review in conjunction with an external agency. The review is coming to an end and we will report the outcomes in a later issue of Rochford District Matters.</p>
What we said	What we did
<p>We said we would review the content of the Revenues and Benefits information contained on our website and also promote our on-line services to our customers</p>	<p>A small working group has been set up to review our website and promote our on-line services.</p> <p>Details of future website improvements will be published through Rochford District Matters. For more details on our on-line services please visit our website.</p> <p>http://www.rochford.gov.uk/council_tax_and_benefits.aspx</p>

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What we said	What we did
We said we would target people receiving their Housing Benefit payment by cheque and try to convert them over to receiving it by BACS	132 people agreed to change over to receiving their benefit payments by BACS. This has helped make an annual saving of nearly £3,000.
What we said	What we did
We said we would benchmark our service with other Councils	We joined the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) benchmarking clubs for council tax administration and benefits administration.
What we said	What we did
We said we would explore how we could work closer with Rochford Housing Association (RHA) to help them provide a better service to their tenants.	<p>We have established a partnership with RHA. The partnership has provided their staff with the necessary skills to enable them to provide effective assistance to their tenants in completing HB/CTB claim forms and collecting documentary evidence to support the claim.</p> <p>Working with RHA in this way helps to ensure that claims are made more quickly. It also helps to minimise rent arrears and property repossessions.</p>
What we said	What we did
We said we would continue with this publication on an annual basis	This is our second annual report and our commitment to this publication remains.



Performance for the Year 2009-10

Here is how well we performed in 2009/10 compared to previous years:

Performance indicator	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Council tax collected	98.9%	98.9%	98.9%
Despite the recession we have maintained a consistently high council tax collection rate.			
Customers paying their council tax by Direct Debit	76.9%	77.17%	77.29%
We continue to make a modest improvement in the number of people paying their council tax by Direct Debit.			
National non-domestic rates collected	98.6%	97.5%	97.2%
<p>A reduction in our collection rate is also a national trend that is being experienced by other councils. The reduction in collection has primarily been caused by the recession and also the impact of empty property rate relief rules introduced in April 2008.</p> <p>We are working hard to address the reduction in collection. In particular we are partnering our Economic Development team to promote the financial help available to local businesses. We are also intending to visit businesses, not only to discuss the financial help available, but also to work out manageable payment plans to help them pay their business rates.</p>			
Customers paying their national non-domestic rates by Direct Debit	60.72%	60.53%	61.98%
Despite the reduction in collection we have improved the number of businesses paying their business rates by Direct Debit.			

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Benefit fraud - number of prosecutions, cautions and financial penalties achieved	38	41	45
A year on year improvement showing effective and robust safeguards are in place to protect the public purse against abuse of the housing and council tax benefits system			
Average time taken to process new claims for housing benefit and council tax benefit	22.57 days	23.04 days	25.88 days
Despite a cumulative decline in our annual performance we have, since November 2009, been taking an average of 18 days to process new claims. This level of performance has continued into 2010/11 and our target this year is to process claims, on average, within 21 days.			
Average length of time taken to process changes in circumstances for housing benefit and council tax benefit	9.47 days	12.32 days	16.71 days
Performance indicator	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
<p>Our decline in performance is primarily due to our rising workload. Some initiatives we have introduced to address the situation are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • our biggest Registered Social Landlord, Rochford Housing Association, are now accepting and verifying changes on our behalf • we are making better and more efficient use of the phone and our visiting officers to chase information, and • we have reviewed our current procedures for dealing with changes and introduced new ways of working to improve our turnaround times 			
HB overpayments recovered as a percentage of all HB overpayments raised in year	64.22%	58.76%	61.17%
An improvement compared to our performance in 2008/09			

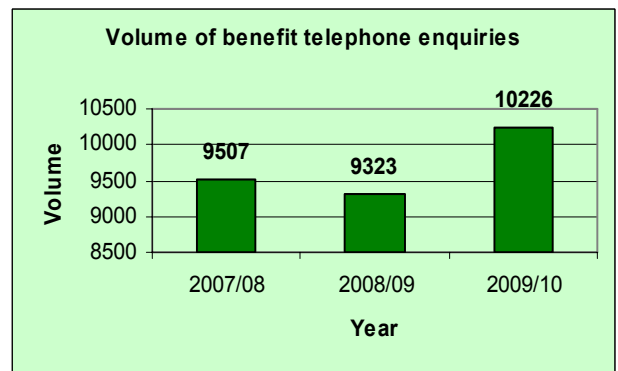
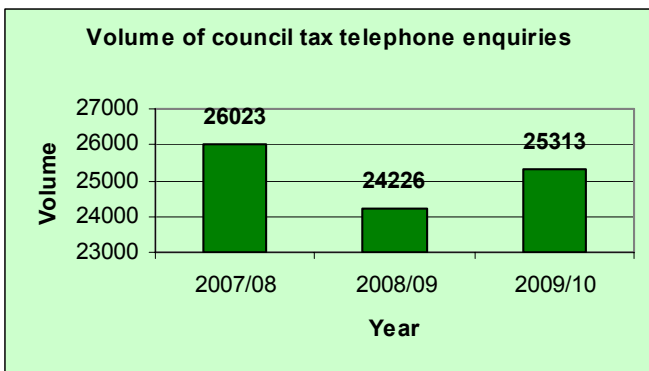
Customer Service in the year 2009-10

Here's what happened this year compared with previous years:

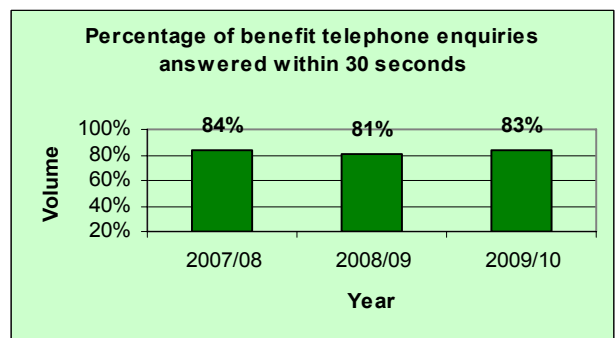
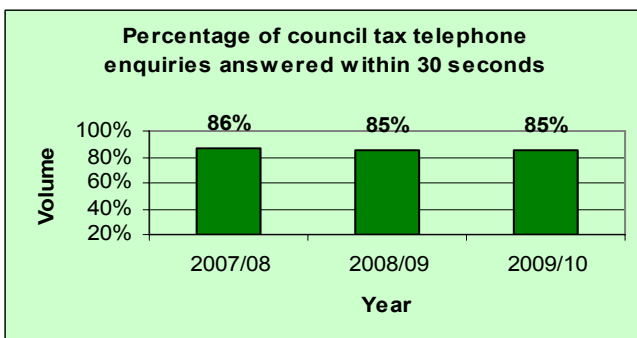


Telephone Enquiries

Compared to 2008-09 we have seen an increase this year of 4.5% in council tax telephone enquiries and 9.7% in benefit telephone enquiries.



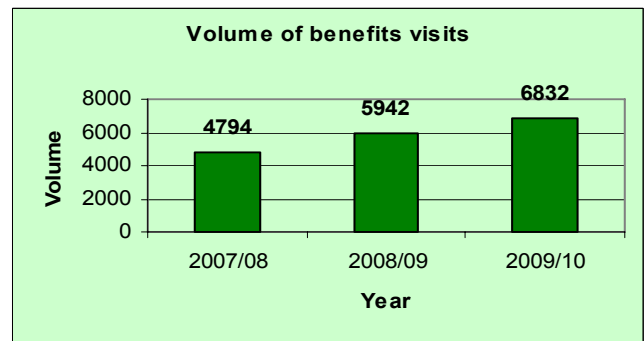
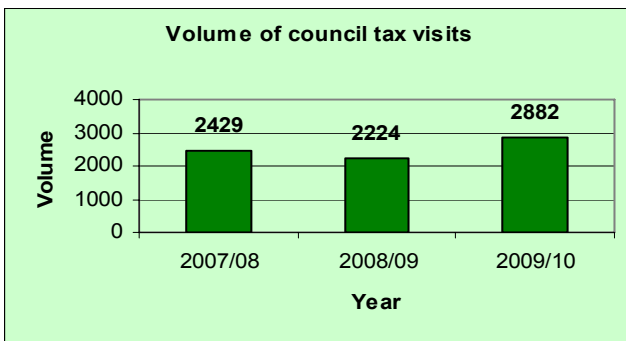
The speed of our telephone service has also improved for benefit telephone enquiries and remained consistent for council tax enquiries.



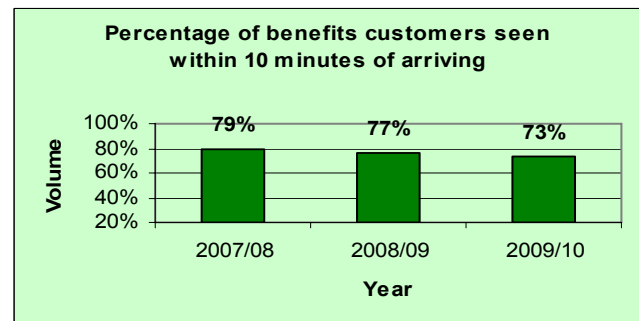
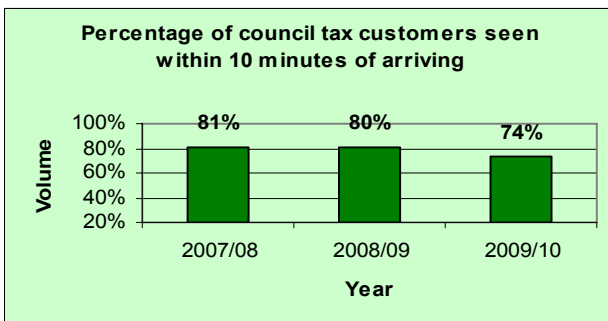


Visits to our Office

Overall we have seen a 19% rise in the number of customers visiting our office in Rochford.



Due to the significant increase in the number of people who have visited we have inevitably seen our speed of service decline slightly.



Customer Comments

Throughout the year we carry out a variety of consultation. Here are some of the comments our customers have made about our service.

I can only compliment the assistance given by the advisor – excellent service

When will benefits ring me back. Their phones are always busy

The staff were so helpful. They listened to what we had to say and told us what we had to do

Call centre always busy and they never ring me back

Reception staff were very patient, kind and helpful. Thank you

I didn't wait long. The staff were very helpful, pleasant and fast.

I would like to have more privacy when talking about my business

I sometimes have problems getting through to pay my council tax

Have more than one person available when having a lengthy consultation

Excellent. Staff in the office have always been polite, helpful and very informative

Comments, Compliments and Complaints

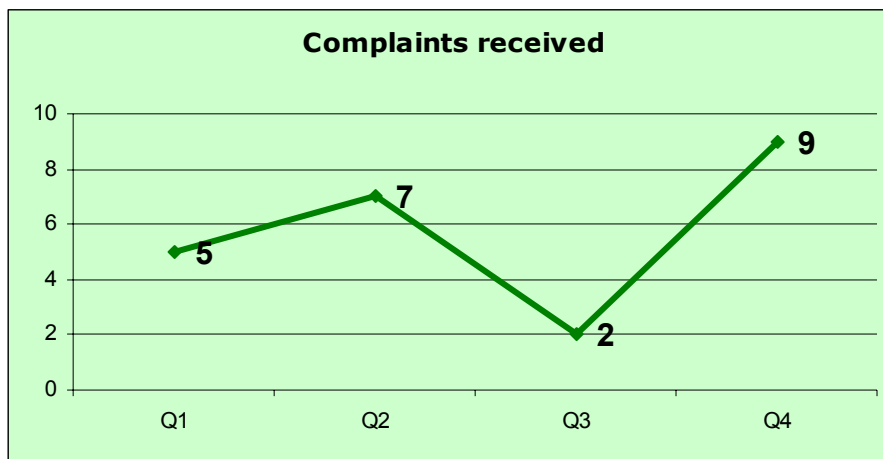
In addition to the customer comments above we also received the following number of formal comments, compliments and complaints about our service.

Complaints – 23

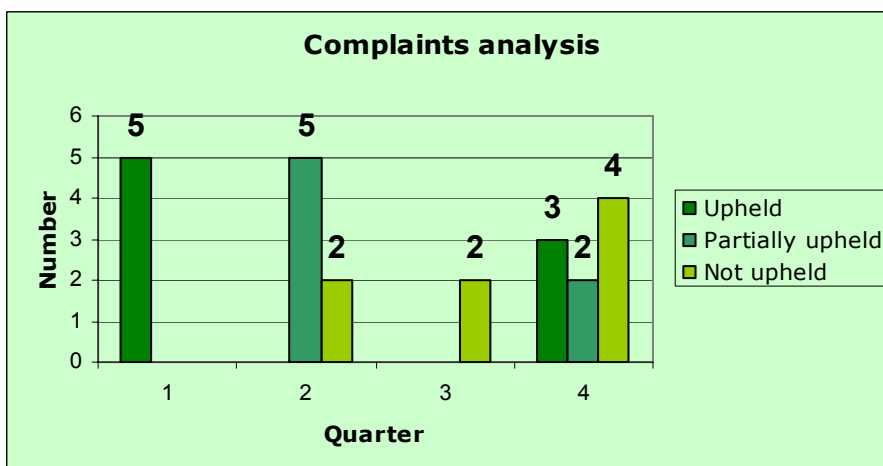
Compliments – 11

Comments – 1

The graph below shows when we received complaints about our service.



Of these complaints it was determined that some were found in favour of the complainant (upheld), some were partially found in favour of the complainant (partially upheld) and some were completely unfounded (not upheld). The breakdown is as follows:



We are always grateful to people who take the trouble to complain about our service. They are a valuable source of feedback and, where appropriate, they help us to improve our processes and procedures.

Achievements in the year 2009-10

Charter Mark

The Revenues and Benefits Team were awarded the prestigious Charter Mark in June 2006.

As part of our continuous certification we undertake an annual health check to make sure we maintain ongoing compliance with the standard. Our latest health check in January 2010 confirmed our Charter Mark status and it also established that we were fully compliant with all the criteria.



Council Tax Collection

Our council tax collection rate of 98.9% is the best in Essex.

Nationally we are ranked in the top 20 councils in the country for our council tax collection.

New partners we have worked with

This year we have worked with the following organisations:

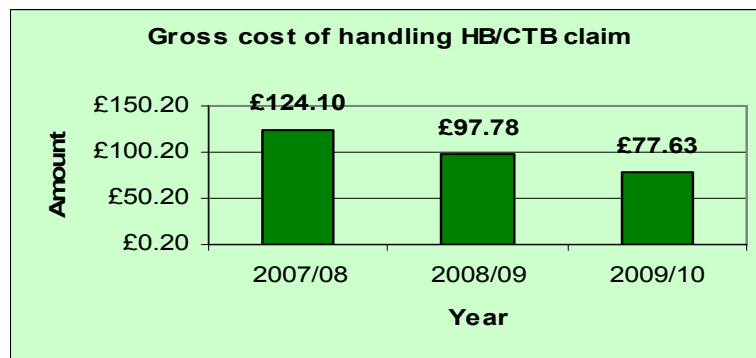
- We worked with the Holistic Company to deliver an innovative training, education and development programme to our staff. This project has focused on improving staff morale, engagement, health and wellbeing and it has been the bedrock that has delivered much of the improvement we have seen in performance and customer service this year. The work we have done is also forming the basis of our submission to the Institute of Revenues, Rating and Valuation's national performance awards.
- We invited the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Performance Development Team on site to review our working practices and procedures in our counter fraud investigation team. They came in February and produced a findings and recommendations report that is now being used to make improvements in the team.
- Risk Solutions were a research company who were commissioned by the DWP. They visited us in March and we provided them with information to help them assess the national costs of administering housing benefit and council tax benefit. This research will help the DWP to update its understanding of the cost drivers and also the full

range of challenges faced by local authorities. Results of the research and a benchmarking report will also be made available to us in due course.

Value for Money

Here are some of the things we did in 2009/10 to achieve better value for money:

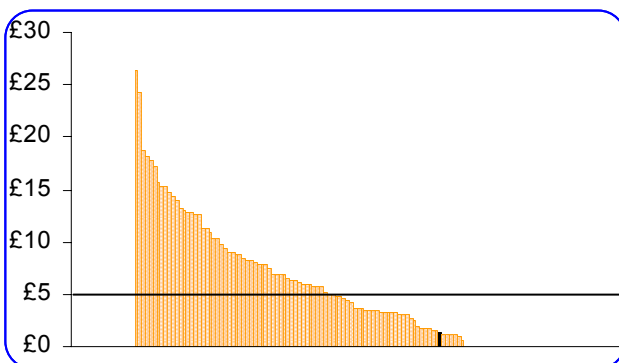
- We reduced our new year annual billing costs by £5,000 by using a new supplier
- We made a saving of nearly £3,000 by converting people from cheque to BACS for their housing benefit payments
- We arranged various training events throughout the year and sold some of the places to delegates from other organisations. We raised nearly £2,000 additional income by doing this.
- We further reduced the gross cost of handling a benefit claim



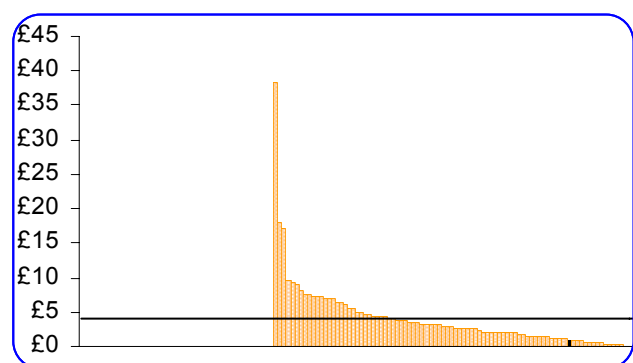
We renegotiated our contract with Capita for our call centre service. We tied ourselves into a 3 year deal and made a saving of £20,000.

Our benchmarking data shows that the cost of our contact centre represents excellent value for money. The horizontal black bar in the graph below shows the average cost of call centres amongst our CIPFA benchmarking comparators. The vertical black bar shows where the cost of our contact centre ranks amongst those comparators

Contact centre cost for benefit enquiries



Contact centre cost for council tax enquiries





Plans for 2010-11

E-claim form

We will implement an electronic claim forms package. The advantages of this investment will be:

- Increased access – customers will be able to make a claim via Rochford District Council's website
- Simplified process – the ease of use and the accuracy of the technology simplifies the complex process of making a claim because it guides the customer each step of the way
- Better customer experience – we will start to offer home visits to customers wanting to make a claim for benefit. This will mean that we can complete the claim with the customer in the comfort of their home and also gather all the information we need to support the claim. This will mean that we will not have to chase the customer for further information.
- Quicker processing of claims – the new technology integrates with our core processing system and this eliminates the need to key in data again. This will reduce the time to perform assessments and the speed of processing a new claim should noticeably improve

Report a change of address online

We will implement a self-service change of address facility on our website. The advantages of this investment are:

- Increased access – customers will be able to report a change of address via Rochford District Council's website. The new service will also allow customers to tell other council departments of the change at the same time
- Improved process – we will also use the technology at our call centre and when people visit our offices to report a change of address
- Quicker processing of notifications – the new technology integrates with our core processing system. Once the notification reaches our system we will be able to process the change at the click of a button
- Promotes other services – at the same time as providing details of the move customers will also be encouraged to sign up for Direct Debit, apply for a single person discount and sign up to our e-billing and other self service modules.

Direct Debit over the web

People and businesses that pay their council tax and business rates by Direct Debit are helping us to keep our administration costs down. We will therefore implement a facility on our website to allow Direct Debits to be set up at a time convenient to the customer. This facility will also complement the self-service change of address module.

Direct Debit payments can be paid on 1st, 10th or 20th of the month. Payments can also be spread over 12 instead of 10 months if customers pay by Direct Debit.

Closer Working

We will make progress with Castle Point Borough Council to find ways of working closer together, particularly in areas such as counter fraud investigation, promotional literature, training and the encouragement of benefit take-up.

Customer Service Excellence

We will make the transition from the Charter Mark accreditation to the Government's new Customer Service Excellence accreditation.

Customer Service Excellence is a standard which tests in great depth the areas that research has indicated are a priority for customers, with particular focus on service delivery, timeliness, information, professionalism and staff attitude. There is also an emphasis on developing customer insight, understanding customer experience of using our service and measuring customer satisfaction.

Consultation

We will implement our consultation strategy so that we get a better understanding of the needs and experiences of our customers and stakeholders. The strategy focuses on consultation with the following groups:

- Claimants for Housing and Council Tax Benefits
- Council Tax and NNDR charge payers
- Landlords (both social and private sector)
- Voluntary and Community sectors
- Our partners

We will report back on the outcome of our consultation in next year's annual report.

Service Standards

We will develop a set of service standards, in consultation with the groups above, and clearly set out what standard of service customers can expect.

We will monitor and report our performance against these standards on a regular basis.

Equality and Diversity

We made a significant contribution in helping the Council to achieve Level 4 in Equality and Diversity standards. By this time next year we hope to have helped the council progress to level 5, the highest level that can be attained.

Community Outreach Group

Our Community Outreach Group hosted various charity events throughout the year. The group raised £871 for the following charities.

- Great Ormond Street Hospital
- Barnardos
- Jeans for Jeans
- Breast Cancer Care
- Children in Need
- Ronald McDonald House
- Haiti Appeal
- Sport Relief

Councillor Tracy Capon, Portfolio Holder for Council Tax Collection, Benefits and Strategic Housing says:

Nick Scott and his team should be congratulated for their work in the past year. Times have been challenging with an increased and more complicated work load but again, the team have pulled together to end on a high. Previous plans have been executed to improve our service and more are planned.

A big thank you to all the staff.

Contact Details

Visit

Council Offices
South Street
Rochford
Essex
SS4 1BW

Civic Suite and Rayleigh Information Centre
2 Hockley Road
Rayleigh
Essex
SS6 8EB

Office Hours:

Monday to Thursday:
8.30am - 5.30pm

Friday:
8.30am - 5.00pm

Office Hours:

Monday to Thursday:
8.30am - 5.30pm

Friday:
8.30am - 5.00pm

Telephone

Council Tax and Benefits enquiries: 01702 318197 or 01702 318198	Business Rates enquiries: 01702 318017	Payment line for council tax and parking fine payments only: 0207 138 1976
Office Hours: Monday to Friday: 8.00am – 8.00pm Saturday: 9.00am – 12 noon	Office Hours: Monday to Thursday: 8.30am – 5.00pm Friday: 8.30am – 4.30pm	This is a 24 hour payment line open 7 days a week

Letter

Revenues & Benefits
Council Offices
South Street
Rochford
Essex
SS4 1BW

Email

revenues&benefits@rochford.gov.uk



Rochford District Council

Council Offices South Street
Rochford Essex SS4 1BW

Telephone: 01702 546366

Facsimile: 01702 545737

Website: <http://www.rochford.gov.uk>