

SERVICE PLAN 2024/25 – Housing Benefits

1. SERVICE OVERVIEW

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF TEAM

The Housing Benefits department assist residents on low incomes and in financial difficulty to pay their costs in rented accommodation and with their council tax liability.

We have also administered the Household Support Fund an additional scheme to help residents with fuel and food poverty.

These schemes support and assists residents in staying self-reliant and helping to provide stability in their lives, keeping their home and restricting the levels of homelessness in the borough.

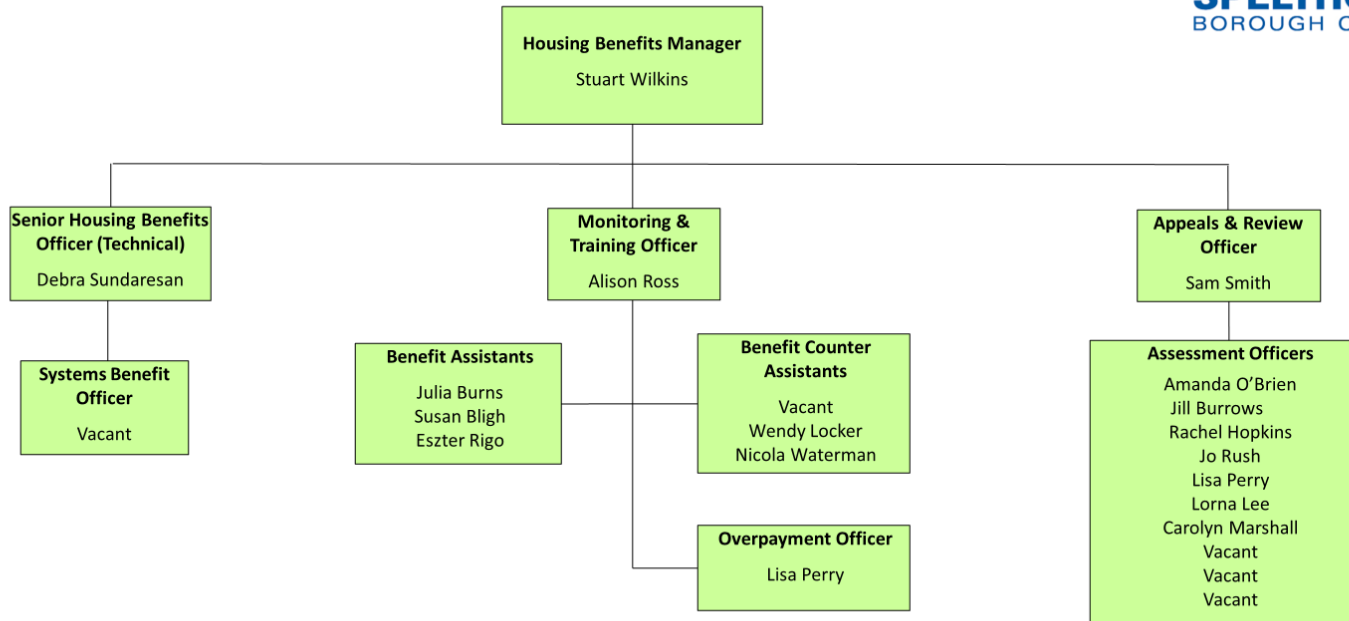
The Housing Benefit department currently has staff who are still learning all tasks involved in their role. As we are administering an additional scheme over and above our core function, we are operating at full capacity to maintain our level of service.

WHO WE ARE

The Housing Benefit department work within the Community Wellbeing structure.

We currently have 15 staff – 10 full time and 5 part time staff which in total equates to 12.9 FTE.

Housing Benefits



WHAT WE DO: Service Purpose and Core Business Functions

Our main job is to administer the payment of Housing Benefits; Council Tax Support and the Discretionary Housing Payment fund, whilst also providing residents with information and support within the benefit field.

We have also had the additional responsibility of administering a financial assistance scheme called the Household Support Fund through funding from Surrey County Council since October 2021 which offers financial assistance to help residents with the cost-of-living crisis concerning food and fuel poverty.

KEY ACTIVITIES/PROJECTS FOR 2024/25 – Significant one-off activities and projects to be undertaken in 24/25 (Projects need to have a business case, PID report before any revenue or capital growth bid is included in the tables below, before you prepare a report for MAT.

KEY ACTIVITIES DELIVERING THE COUNCIL’S CORPORATE PLAN <i>And other key statutory and service elements</i>						
What is our corporate priority (CARES)? Is the function statutory or non-statutory	Provide clear outline of what the service wants to achieve including projects and outcomes/deliverables	How will we measure the difference made?	Is a business case required? and when do you hope to action the achieve this by? Or is this just a growth bid?	Who is the lead officer?	Which Committee sign off?	Other service resources e.g. procurement and <i>budget</i> required mention if also potential growth bids
Community and Addressing housing need: - Statutory	The managed transition of working age claims being transferred to Universal Credit	Keeping records of the claims who have transferred to Universal Credit. Following DWP guidance (scheduled to complete by 2024/25 although this time frame is expected to be extended by the DWP)	N/A	Stuart Wilkins	Community Wellbeing committee	Not at present
Community and Addressing housing need: -Statutory	Assisting claimants who are affected by benefit regulations which mean that they require additional assistance through DHP to cover their rental expenses. Offering advice on obtaining other benefits to avoid the disadvantage and hardship caused by the effects of these rules	Recording management information for the people assisted in this area: The amount of DHP spent. Number of people who are on benefit cap.	N/A	Stuart Wilkins	Community Wellbeing committee	Not at present

KEY ACTIVITIES DELIVERING THE COUNCIL'S CORPORATE PLAN And other key statutory and service elements					
		Number of people assisted with the use of DHP's to prevent potential homelessness			

2. RESOURCES 2023/24 IDENTIFY FOR EACH SERVICE AREA – THIS SHOULD BE YOUR APPROVED FIGURES FOR 2023/24 (ASK YOUR SERVICE ACCOUNTANT FOR ASSISTANCE AS REQUIRED).

Service Area	Revenue Expenditure Budget £	Capital Budget £	Projected Income £	Staff (Full time equivalents)	Key risks for budget
Housing Benefits	20,960,000		20,960,000	12.9	Expenditure covered
Discretionary Housing Payment fund	400,000		202,932		Potential over-spend due to demand for DHP's
HB Administration	657,800		190,783		Continued reduction in subsidy from the DWP
Household Support Fund	413,029		413,029		Possibly extra resources required to administer an additional scheme – not required at present
Total	22,430,829		21,766,744	12.9	

Revenue, Staff and Savings Bids 24/25, 25/26 and 26/27. Given the medium term financial strategy is extremely tight please consider likely impact of each items beyond 24/25 where feasible or where savings may emerge, it is essential that you enter figures for 25/26, 26/27 and 27/28, if you don't believe there will be any figures for a year enter n/a (not applicable).

I am unable to forecast far ahead due to frequent and unknown changes DWP and central government may introduce at any time. Therefore, no revenue growth bids.

Provisional 2024/25 revenue cost/income budget requested.

Service Area	Revenue Expenditure Budget	Projected Income	Staff (Full time equivalents)	Savings	Total budget
	£	£		£	£
Total 2024/25	22,497,529	21,890,211	12.9	0	607,318
Expenditure Costs	0	0	0	0	0
Project Income/Lost Income	0	0	0	0	0
Staff	0	0	12.9	0	0
Savings	(0)	(0)	(0)	(0)	(0)
Total 2024/25 Provisional Revenue Budget 2024/25	22,497,529	21,890,211	12.9	0	607,318

Significant/Material anticipated revenue budget impacts:

Please highlight any estimate financial impacts (positive or adverse) anticipated over the next four years. For example this could arise from new anticipated statutory requirements, contractual inflation/new contracts; impact of population growth etc

Service Cost Centre	Issues Description	2024/25 £000s	2025/26 £000s	2026/27 £000s	2027/28 £000s
N/A	None				
Total £000s		0	0	0	0

Capital Bids 24/25, 25/26 and 26/27. *It is important that before you submit bid, particularly for a project, you must have gone through the PID process and discussed the project with procurement, if you have not done either, you bid will be rejected, as our medium-term financial strategy indicates that cash flow*

will be extremely tight. Therefore, please consider likely impact of each items beyond 24/25 where feasible or where savings may emerge, it is essential that you enter figures for 25/26, 26/27 and 27/28, if you don't believe there will be any figures for a year enter n/a (not applicable).

No capital bids planned at present.

Details of bid (1)	Reason for Bid and confirm which priority in the new corporate plan this relates to CARES (Community, Addressing housing need, Resilience, Environment & Services) include consideration of future years items (2)	Cost Centre code details (3)	Start Date MM/YY (4)	Gross Funding rec'd Separate line. If none enter n/a (£000) (5)	Gross Capital Cost £000 (6)	Total bid Req'd. £000 (7)	End Date MM/YY (8)	PID Req'd Y or N Mandatory (9)	Procurement involved. Y or N Mandatory (10)	24/25 £000 (11)	25/26 £000 (12)	26/27 £000 (13)	27/28 £000 (14)
Capital	N/A												
Total Capital													

3. CARBON FOOTPRINT – *working in conjunction with our Climate Change Officer please highlight in the table below how you intend to reduce the Carbon Footprint (by tons) within your department over the next four years and beyond, if there is an invest to save element in your plans, please ensure that the cost element is highlighted in the relevant section above for revenue and or capital bids*

Based on our type of work carried out by this department we unable to make any contribution to our carbon footprint at present

Cost Centre	Initiative	24/25	25/26	26/27	27/28
	Reduce use of paper				
Total carbon reduction					

4. PROCUREMENT CONTRACTS – please list below all contracts under £40,000 that will lapse and or will need to be renewed over the next four years

Cost Centre	Supplier	Contract details	2024/25 £000s	2025/26 £000s	2026/27 £000s	2027/28 £000s
	N/A					
Total £000s			X	X	X	x

5. KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS - *These measure performance for key ongoing activities of the service and corporate performance monitoring on a quarterly basis – NB review and consider meaningful as well as statutory KPIs – KPIs will be reported to Committees quarterly.*

Code	Key indicator description	Time period	Target
HB1	Average days to process new claims	Annually	25 Days
HB2	Average number of days to process changes of circumstances	Annually	7 Days

6. KEY ISSUES/RISKS FOR 2024/25 – this section highlights key issues/risks which may affect other services that work with us or support our work (add in rows as appropriate. Please ensure cover future and current service risks. In light of corporate risk please ensure consider each area fully.

WORKFORCE PLANNING ISSUES/TRAINING REQUIREMENTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant impact on Housing Benefit/Council Tax Support team with the proposed DWP role in relation to Universal Credit. Full impact is not yet known; the situation has been uncertain for many years. • Residual functions of the Housing Benefit team which will include pensioner Housing Benefit claims; supported accommodation claims; Bed and Breakfast claims; Temporary Accommodation claims; Council Tax Support claims for both the working age and pensioners; associated fraud work; Discretionary Housing Payment administration; customer interaction for vulnerable clients and helping with the transition to Universal Credit for working age housing benefit claimants. • Issues around stress and associated sickness due to uncertainty over future, increasingly aggressive client group due to increased hardship. • Cost of living crisis. • Potential high staff turnover • Difficulties in future recruitment due to the uncertain future of this department • Changes in Universal Credit will mean increased need for staff training both for new and existing staff.

COMMUNICATION/CONSULTATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consultation and communication with staff in relation to welfare reform changes • Communication relating to possible future changes to Council Tax Support scheme – none planned at present • Consultation and communication relating to changes to welfare reform to residents • Working jointly with Housing Options department to help residents in holistic manner with the wide-ranging issues relating to welfare reform and homelessness.
LEGAL ISSUES (likely to require additional legal support)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prosecution of potential fraud cases referred to legal by the Reigate and Banstead fraud team. • Remote possibility of the future transfer of staff to the DWP if applicable if DWP changes policy on staffing. No change in policy planned at present.
GDPR
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Due to the nature of the work of the department using personal data; the potential for a data breach is always a possibility
PROCUREMENT OR CONTRACTS (upcoming procurements or contracts required)
N/A at present
ICT (e.g. provide information on systems to be purchased or support needed)
Ongoing maintenance and support of the benefit systems / document imaging system and our online application form
CLIMATE CHANGE
N/A
SERVICE RISKS (consider likelihood and impact) – relate where appropriate to corporate risk
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing risks due to nature of clients and service areas relating to vulnerable adults and children. • Increase workload and number of claims received due to the cost-of-living crisis with an increased number of residents potentially experiencing financial difficulties. • System administration issues relating to Capita benefits system for Housing Benefit/Council Tax relating to the increased complex nature of the computer systems involved. • Continuing demand for front line services with budgetary pressures • Increased risk of aggression and violence from customers towards staff • Universal Credit/welfare reforms - Risk to staff motivation and retention posed by Universal Credit roll out. • Budgetary control given the uncertainty of the economic climate and the nature of the service involved. • GDPR and the impact on the Benefit service

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The continuing increased demand and pressure on the Discretionary Housing Payment Fund. Due to the reduced number of properties available to private renters where the rental liability is covered by the Local Allowance Rates (LHA) estimated at 5% of available properties; we will have increased demand for DHP's.
NON-LEGAL ISSUES
N/A
EQUALITY and DIVERSITY
N/A at present

7. LOOKING FURTHER AHEAD: OTHER KEY ISSUES/RISKS FOR THE NEXT THREE YEARS – issues e.g., legislation that we need to plan for in the medium term, financial changes, climate change,

SERVICE AREA
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The on-going rollout of Universal Credit for working age claimants as mentioned above which is scheduled to continue for at least the next one to two years. The potential long-term extension of the Household Support Fund and its impact on resources

8. KEY CONTACTS

Stuart Wilkins, Housing Benefits Manager S.Wilkins@spelthorne.gov.uk, 01784 446474	Karen Sinclair, Group Head of Community Wellbeing K.Sinclair@spelthorne.gov.uk
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9. MANAGEMENT AND PORTFOLIO HOLDER

9.1 Group Head's comment/signoff

Signature/ date	Comments
Karen Sinclair	The Housing Benefit team continue to operate very professionally despite the ongoing cost of living crisis affecting so many claimants. Staff retention and recruitment is a particular area of focus given the complex area and training required to ensure staff are competent. The eventual transfer of much of the HB function to Universal Credit is always looming, although the timescales for this have now extended to decades rather than the short term initial times forecast by the Government of the time. This always impacts effective long term planning

9.2 Comments/sign off from the Deputy Chief Executive

Signature/date	Comments
T. Collier	I thank the team for their ongoing efforts in responding to the additional challenge of administering Household Support Fund which is continuing at least until September 2024. I note the continuing uncertainties generated by Universal Credit, and also the impact of the cost of living crisis influencing the behaviour of individuals the team are liaising with.

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Date of issue	
Originator:	
Reviewer:	Lee O'Neil (May 2024)
Plan Status:	Final

Appendix A SERVICE PLAN TEMPLATE – Risk Appetite

There are numerous Services operating across the Council, possibly with varying risk appetites. Being clear on your Service risk appetite will assist you as Managers in making transparent and informed risk-based decisions as part of service provision and delivery of objectives, as well as ensuring the application of proportionate actions and risk mitigation measures (as far as practical and possible) that align with your appetite.

As an example to assist the risk appetite of the Regeneration and Growth Service sits is outlined below:

Appetite Category	Minimal	Cautious	Exploratory	Seeking
Appetite Description	Areas where Spelthorne will apply a strong control environment to reduce or minimise the likelihood that a risk will occur and/or reduce the impact of any risk	Areas where Spelthorne seeks low-risk delivery options and will pilot innovation only in a controlled environment	Areas where Spelthorne strikes a balance between the potential upside benefits and downside risks of a decision and explores new solutions and options for delivery	Areas where Spelthorne takes risks by working with new ideas and approaches, looking for innovation and recognizing that failures are an opportunity for learning and improving.
How are each of these appetites articulated when applied across the RAF impact measure for 'Service Provision'	Services delivered as planned with mandated developments only	Tried and tested changes made. Use of limited pilots to develop new approaches	Open to new ways of doing things and taking a balanced and pragmatic (capacity-driven) approach to making changes	Continuous re-evaluation of services and how they are delivered to explore new ideas, learn from failures to invest in ever-improving delivery
What is the Council's		X		

overall risk appetite for 'Service provision' (CURRENT)?				
Use the information above, review the content within your Service Plan and reflect on your Service approaches to establish where your specific Service risk appetite is currently positioned. Add X				
Appetite Category	Minimal	Cautious	Exploratory	Seeking
1.Housing Benefits	X			
2.Discretionary Housing Payment fund	X			
3. HB Administration		X		
4. Household Support Fund		X		
Why does your service risk appetite(s) sit against this category? Provide one or two examples of practices and approaches within your Service to support your assessment. For example, if you define your Service(s) to have a minimal or cautious risk appetite is this influenced by a strong regulatory working environment presenting wider implications or repercussions if this appetite category was not adhered to.				