



East
Northamptonshire
Council

Personnel Sub-Committee 20 July 2015

Revenues and Benefits Services Apprentice

Purpose of report: To recommend the creation of a new Revenue and Benefit Services Apprentice post to undertake work previously undertaken by the Revenue Support Group staff.

1.0 Background

- 1.1 Revenue and Benefit Services main roles are the:
- billing and collection of council tax
 - billing and collection of business rates
 - assessment and payment of housing benefit and council tax support
- 1.2 This year we will collect over £40m council tax from around 38,500 domestic properties. We will also collect nearly £23m from, and deliver rate relief of £3.9m to, around 2,400 businesses.
- 1.3 In addition we will pay out around £19m in housing benefit and £4m in council tax support to 5,400 households.
- 1.4 Due to the number of customers we deal with we send and receive high volumes of correspondence which involves a lot of administrative work.

2.0 Revenue Support Group (RSG)

- 2.1 The RSG is a group of casual employees that provide administrative support to the service. For example, they open and distribute incoming post, record incoming post onto the computer systems, fold and dispatch bills and file paperwork.
- 2.2 The employees do not have fixed working hours and are paid minimum wage.
- 2.3 Over the past five years the number of employees in the RSG has reduced from 15 to 7. In previous years this has not impacted too much on the service, this is due to a number of reasons:
- current RSG employees working more hours
 - processes reviewed and streamlined
 - integration between Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services.
- 2.4 This year the availability of the RSG has become a concern and administrative tasks are often being absorbed into officers' roles, taking them away from direct service delivery. The reduced availability of hours is projected to create a budget underspend of £10,000 in 2015/16.

3.0 Impact of Welfare and Technical Reform changes

3.1 Since April 2013 the service has seen a number of changes as follows:

- Council Tax technical reforms
- introduction of the Local Council Tax Support Scheme
- Removal of Spare Room Subsidy
- Benefit Cap
- transfer of fraud staff to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Single Fraud Investigation Service
- introduction of the Fraud & Error Incentive Scheme (FERIS)
- introduction of Real Time Information data matching (RTI)

3.2 The DWP FERIS fund financially rewards local authorities for identifying claims that are being incorrectly paid. For example this may be where a customer has had a change in circumstances but failed to tell us. The council successfully secured FERIS maintenance funding from the DWP of £5,764 in 2014/15 and £7,750 for this financial year. It is therefore essential that we are proactive in this area but many of the tasks that identify potential incorrect claims are administrative in nature.

4.0 Proposed solution – appointment of apprentice post.

4.1 It is proposed to combine the funding from FERIS with part of the RSG budget in order to create a Revenue and Benefit Services apprentice post which will provide administrative support by undertaking the most simple of tasks and free up time for the rest of the team.

4.2 The fixed term nature of an apprenticeship (they are generally for 18 months) also builds in an automatic review timeframe and fits in well with the roll-out of Universal Credit which will in turn have an impact on workloads in the service in the medium term.

5.0 Equality and Diversity Implications

5.1 There are no legal implications arising from this paper.

6.0 Legal Implications

6.1 There are no legal implications arising from this paper.

7.0 Risk Management

7.1 Not recruiting may lead to:

- sickness levels increasing for existing staff due to them ‘absorbing’ additional work
- an increase in customer contacts/complaints due to council tax and business rate bills not being issued promptly
- customers ‘chasing’ the progress of their benefit claims due to backlogs in work
- ENC not being able to meet the turnaround targets set within the DWP Universal Credit Delivery Partnership Agreement.

8.0 Resource and Financial Implications

8.1 The cost of appointing an apprentice is between £7,177 and £12,173 per year (depending on their age). The apprenticeship is a fixed term contract for 2 years, after which the need for this original resource will be reviewed. For 2015/16 the post will be funded by the DWP FERIS funding of £7,750 (as detailed in 3.2). We cannot assume that further FERIS funding will be available in 2016/17 and beyond therefore the post will be funded from the RSG salaries budget for that year as part of the budget process.

9.0 Constitutional Implications

9.1 There are no constitutional implications arising from this paper.

10.0 Corporate Outcomes

10.1 The Corporate Outcomes are:

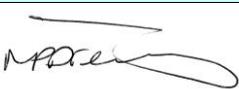
- Good value for money – cost effective administrative support.
- High Quality Service Delivery – employing a full time member of staff to provide administrative support will help maintain service delivery.

11.0 Recommendation

11.1 The Committee is recommended to:

- To create a Revenue and Benefit Services Apprentice post

[Reason: to maintain service delivery through a period of significant change]

Legal	Power:				
	Other considerations:				
Background Papers: None					
Person Originating Report: Lucy Hogston, Benefits Manager 01832 742194, lhogston@east-northamptonshire.gov.uk					
Date: 02/07/15					
CFO 09.07.2015		DMO 09.07.2015		CX	