

Report to: Audit/Governance and Improvement Review Committee

Date: 31 January 2008

Subject: Departmental Performance

Report of: Director of Finance & IT

Contact officer: David Smith 01942 827232

Purpose / summary: To update Committee on the Department's performance in collecting council tax and national non-domestic rates, benefit payments and collection of income in 2007/08.

Alternative options considered and reason for selecting the one recommended:

Recommendation / decision: To note the report.

Key Decision: This report does not involve a key decision.

Risks / Implications:

Financial: Resources contained within 2007/8 budget – additional resources obtained from DWP to support improved performance in processing benefit claims.

Staffing: N/A

Policy: N/A

Equal Opportunities - Has a N/A

Diversity Impact Assessment been conducted?

Wards affected: N/A

Property Implications– Does the proposal involve a reduction, addition or change to the Council’s asset base or its occupation?

No

If yes have the property implications been agreed with the Corporate Property officer?

Does this proposal have significant implications for the Council and the local population?

A diversity impact assessment is not necessary at this stage, however, equality and diversity implications have been considered when producing this report.

Does this proposal involve a new policy or procedure or significant changes to an existing policy or procedure?

A diversity impact assessment is not necessary at this stage, however, equality and diversity implications have been considered when producing this report.

Has the Director of Legal and Property Services confirmed that the recommendations within this report are lawful and comply with the Council’s Constitution? **Yes / No ***

Has the Director of Finance and IT confirmed that any expenditure referred to within this report is consistent with the Council’s budget? **Yes / No ***

Are any of the recommendations within this report contrary to the Policy Framework of the Council? **Yes / No ***

* delete which applicable

For Cabinet reports only :

Categorisation of the report:	X
Discussion leading to a decision	
Monitoring	
Sharing for corporate understanding	

	X
Discussion	
Decision	
Information	

Tracking/Process:

	Consultation	Ward Members	Partners
Panel	Overview & Scrutiny	Cabinet	Council
31 January 2008			

There are no Background Papers to this Report within the meaning of Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

Proper Officer David Smith

Date 21 January 2008

BACKGROUND:

This is the third report in a series of four during the year to this Committee which advises on progress during the financial year in collecting Community Charge, Council Tax and Business Rates.

This report also provides information regarding the collection of Sundry Debtor income along with performance in processing Benefits claims. This supplements the information on Benefits performance we have included in the Members information bulletin and helps ensure compliance with the Department for Work and Pensions Performance Standards.

The separate sections are attached as appendices:

Appendix A Collection of Community Charge, Council Tax and Business Rates.

Appendix B Collection of Sundry Debtor income.

Appendix C Benefits Administration.

Appendix A

1. Community Charge

Arrears re Years (Net of Overpayments)	Position at				
	31/03/07		31/12/07		
	£	%	£	%	
1990/91	14,115	0.02	14,022	0.02	Reduction of £93
1991/92	24,959	0.05	25,512	0.06	Increase of £553
1992/93	50,521	0.09	50,224	0.09	Reduction of £297
TOTAL	89,595		89,758		Increase of £163

2. Non-Domestic Rates - Earlier Years

Arrears re Years (Net of Overpayments)	Position at				
	31/03/07		31/12/07		
	£	%	£	%	
1990/91	-2,849	-0.01	-3,234	-0.01	
1991/92	2,588	0.01	2,588	0.01	
1992/93	5,988	0.02	5,305	0.02	Reduction of £683
1993/94	2,287	0.01	2,494	0.01	Increase of £207
1994/95	6,508	0.02	6,174	0.02	Reduction of £334
1995/96	9,801	0.03	9,304	0.03	Reduction of £497
1996/97	37,225	0.11	34,037	0.10	Reduction of £3,188
1997/98	40,614	0.11	37,182	0.10	Reduction of £3,432
1998/99	60,031	0.14	54,588	0.13	Reduction of £5,443
1999/2000	99,260	0.21	93,632	0.20	Reduction of £5,628
2000/01	150,648	0.30	145,533	0.29	Reduction of £5,115
2001/02	172,436	0.31	159,187	0.29	Reduction of £13,249
2002/03	208,779	0.36	201,253	0.35	Reduction of £7,526
2003/04	333,392	0.57	297,103	0.51	Reduction of £36,289
2004/05	506,065	0.85	390,801	0.65	Reduction of £115,264
2005/06	692,713	1.12	717,392	1.17	Increase of £24,679
TOTAL	2,325,486		2,153,339		Reduction of £172,147

3. Non-Domestic Rates 2006/07

	Position at				
	31/03/07		31/12/07		
	£	%	£	%	
Amount Collectable	64,919,204		64,392,556		Reduction of £526,648
Plus Costs	47,288		55,888		Increase of £8,600
	64,966,492		64,448,444		
Less Write-Offs	-62,462	0.10	-50,293	0.08	Reduction of £12,169
Less Cash (Net of Refunds)	-63,664,392	98.00	-63,539,306	98.58	Reduction of £125,086
Arrears	1,239,638	1.90	858,845	1.34	Reduction of £380,793

4. Non-Domestic Rates 2007/2008

	Position at 31/12/07	
	£	%
Amount Collectable	68,724,891	
Plus Costs	47,760	
	68,772,651	
Less Write-Offs	-0	0.00
Less Cash (Net of Refunds)	-60,059,065	87.33
Arrears	8,713,586	12.67

Cases where nothing paid	648
Recovery action taken to 31/12/07	
Formal Reminders	5,125
Summonses	699
Liability Orders	431
Direct Debit Payers	3,526

5. Council Tax - Earlier Years

Arrears re Years (Net of Overpayments)	Position at				
	31/03/07		31/12/07		
	£	%	£	%	
1993/94	16,063	0.04	12,663	0.03	Reduction of £3,400
1994/95	16,805	0.04	13,347	0.03	Reduction of £3,458
1995/96	27,866	0.06	22,522	0.05	Reduction of £5,344
1996/97	53,457	0.11	42,783	0.09	Reduction of £10,674
1997/98	78,824	0.14	63,167	0.12	Reduction of £15,657
1998/99	112,001	0.19	89,876	0.16	Reduction of £22,125
1999/2000	188,317	0.30	153,710	0.24	Reduction of £34,607
2000/01	227,912	0.33	176,958	0.26	Reduction of £50,954
2001/02	305,859	0.41	230,461	0.31	Reduction of £75,398
2002/03	430,620	0.55	336,412	0.43	Reduction of £94,208
2003/04	656,547	0.76	510,711	0.59	Reduction of £145,836
2004/05	951,969	1.07	741,300	0.83	Reduction of £210,669
2005/06	1,460,604	1.55	1,051,578	1.12	Reduction of £409,026
TOTAL	4,526,844		3,445,488		Reduction of £1,081,356

6. Council Tax 2006/07

	Position at				
	31/03/07		31/12/07		
	£	%	£	%	
Amount Collectable	97,198,793		97,027,375		
Plus Costs	720,741		870,127		
	97,919,534		97,897,502		
Less Write-Offs	-31,928	0.03	-104,715	0.11	
Less Cash (Net of Refunds)	-94,633,630	96.64	-95,967,532	98.03	
Arrears	3,253,976	3.33	1,825,255	1.86	Reduction of £1,428,721

7. Council Tax 2007/2008

	Position at 31/12/07	
	£	%
Amount Collectable	102,193,970	
Plus Costs	606,217	
	102,800,187	
Less Write-Offs	-8,293	0.01
Less Cash (Net of Refunds)	-87,056,674	84.69
Arrears	15,735,220	15.30

Cases where nothing paid	4,921
Recovery action taken to 31/12/07	
Formal Reminders	45,491
Summonses	11,014
Liability Orders	8,878
Direct Debit Payers	66,695

8. Court Costs

The following Court Costs (Net of payments made to the Courts) have been paid during the financial years:

1990/91	£ 90,236
1991/92	£ 530,273
1992/93	£ 881,157
1993/94	£ 1,043,149
1994/95	£ 940,299
1995/96	£ 732,183
1996/97	£ 733,623
1997/98	£ 514,424
1998/99	£ 592,906
1999/00	£ 486,035
2000/01	£ 564,823
2001/02	£ 719,592
2002/03	£ 714,058
2003/04	£ 750,231
2004/05	£ 812,115
2005/06	£ 798,018
2006/07	£ 720,272
2007/08	£ 703,462
	<u>£ 12,326,856</u>

9. **Progress with Recovery after Liability Orders have been obtained.**

The situation regarding those payers against whom Liability Orders had been obtained was as follows at 31/12/07:-

(a) <u>Council Tax</u> (in respect of financial years 1993 to 2006)	<u>Numbers</u>	<u>Amount</u> <u>Owing £</u>
Paying by voluntary arrangement	275	60,219
Employers details requested prior to Attachment of Earnings	1,985	609,963
Attachment of Earnings Pending	955	333,459
Attachment of Earnings in Operation	926	246,413
Deductions from Income Support Pending	2,578	707,732
Deductions from Income Support in Operation	1,548	275,467
Visited - arrangements made on distraint	3,650	981,853
Visited - awaiting Means Enquiry Court Hearing	536	156,943
Referred to private bailiffs	1,060	326,976
Various stages of Means Enquiry Court Hearings	2,040	714,313
Suspended Sentences imposed, payments ordered	420	177,654
Bankrupt / Deceased / Liability in dispute		
Other query	724	284,562
Absconded - trying to trace	1,156	415,482
Unable to Trace - for write-off	176	53,138
Bankruptcy Proceedings instigated	<u>44</u>	<u>23,601</u>
	18,073	5,367,775

Since the introduction of Council Tax:

194,679 liability orders have been obtained, of which 176,606 have since been cleared.

80,996 Attachment of Earnings Orders and

42,867 Deductions from Income Support have been implemented.

Deductions from Income Support now total £1,951,908

(b) <u>NDR</u> (in respect of financial years 1990 to 2006)	<u>Numbers</u>	<u>Amount</u> <u>Owing £</u>
Liability Order granted – Arrangement prior to action	13	181,099
Letter issued - Bailiff visit pending	116	137,690
In House & Private Bailiff action	290	399,637
Returned from bailiff – awaiting Means Enquiry Court Hearing	162	183,073
Various stages of Means Enquiry Court Hearings	306	403,604
Bankrupt / Deceased / Liability in dispute / Other query	31	69,200
Absconded - trying to trace	81	96,175
Unable to Trace - for write-off	570	1,138,630
Bankruptcy Proceedings instigated	<u>23</u>	<u>40,000</u>
	1,592	2,649,108

In the previous 2 tables, the “Numbers” shown at each stage of recovery relate to the number of accounts and not the number of debtors.

The number of debtors per financial year is:

Council Tax

	<u>Numbers</u>	<u>Amount Owing £</u>
1 Financial Year	4,784	1,225,861
2 Financial Years	2,256	1,445,782
3 “ “	872	928,100
4 “ “	413	601,935
5 “ “	236	476,018
6 “ “	119	286,022
7 “ “	65	197,164
8 “ “	19	73,542
9 “ “	18	78,541
10 “ “	6	23,878
11 “ “	2	13,385
12 “ “	2	11,722
13 “ “	0	0
14 “ “	1	<u>5,825</u>
		5,367,775

NNDR

	<u>Numbers</u>	<u>Amount Owing £</u>
1 Financial Year	596	818,761
2 Financial Years	287	1,147,666
3 “ “	85	411,888
4 “ “	22	153,476
5 “ “	6	34,598
6 “ “	4	47,665
7 “ “	1	11,628
8 “ “	0	0
9 “ “	2	<u>23,426</u>
		2,649,108

10. Performance Indicators.

Annual targets in respect of the Corporate Health Best Value Performance Indicators relating to the in-year Collection of Council Tax and Non-Domestic Rates have been set for the 2007/08 financial year as:

Council Tax	97.3% (96.9% achieved for 2006/07)
Non-Domestic Rates	98.0% (97.6% achieved for 2006/07)

These have been determined against the Government's expectations that Councils will aspire to achieve collection rates by the 31 March 2008 which would see performance to be in the top quartile for "All England" authorities – 98.29% for Council Tax and 99.1% for NNDR.

The interim collection rates achieved at the end of December 2007 as compared to the position this time last year show:

	Council Tax	NNDR
31 December 2007	84.8%	86.7%
31 December 2006	84.8%	85.9%
Change(percentage points)	No change	+0.8

Council Tax performance at end of December when compared to last year continues to show a very marginal upward trend. Comparative recovery actions in 2007/08 are at a more advanced position than was able in 2006/07 – delayed due to the problems following the document management upgrade applied in January 2006. During the last 2-3 months an additional 1,000 or so new properties have been banded which, in these initial months since issuing these confirmed new bills, will be influencing the collection rate. Constant monitoring of the collection rate and associated factors continues. The general increases in household bills, mortgage repayments, energy and fuel costs are impacting on taxpayers ability to meet Council Tax payments on-time as we are experiencing more requests for longer time in which to pay their bills. An increasing number of taxpayers when opting to pay by direct debit are selecting to pay by 12 instalments (restricted to those choosing 6th of month only) which consequently gives rise to a slight delay in the payment profile and, although not relevant to the out-turn position at year-end, has some very minor impact on the month-end collection rate during the year.

The part-year improvement in performance in collecting Business Rates is largely down to the impact that the new Grand Arcade shopping development is having on our collection rate as payments of the new bills – amounting to over £2.3m issued – are now catching up with standard instalment profiles and delivering the improved performance expected which should continue to realise a marked improvement for the out-turn PI in March.

Comparative figures across GM Authorities at end December showed:

Authority	Council Tax	NNDR
Bolton	84.2%	86.6%
Bury	85.6%	86.9%
Manchester	71.1%	84.1%
Oldham	n/a	n/a
Rochdale	84.1%	88.9%
Salford	76.6%	86.1%
Stockport	83.3%	87.7%
Tameside	84.2%	89.2%
Trafford	86.1%	89.1%
Wigan	84.7%	87.4%

The current position in respect of Council Tax, NNDR and Poll Tax amounts collected in respect of all relevant financial years is given below to demonstrate the continuing progress made after the end of each financial year.

Council Tax	Amount Due	Amount Paid	% Collected
1993/94	44,716,706	44,512,812	99.54%
1994/95	41,292,437	41,137,326	99.62%
1995/96	43,807,763	43,639,640	99.62%
1996/97	49,998,938	49,776,014	99.55%
1997/98	54,474,287	54,193,291	99.48%
1998/99	57,700,843	57,366,521	99.42%
1999/2000	63,079,073	62,648,158	99.32%
2000/01	68,127,801	67,601,008	99.23%
2001/02	74,508,862	73,968,637	99.27%
2002/03	78,849,891	78,234,276	99.22%
2003/04	86,055,839	85,303,288	99.13%
2004/05	89,115,903	88,200,656	98.97%
2005/06	94,082,760	92,859,886	98.70%
2006/07	97,897,501	95,967,532	98.03%
Total	943,708,604	935,409,045	99.12%

NNDR	Amount Due	Amount Paid	% Collected
1990/91	37,683,260	37,018,432	98.24%
1991/92	37,770,004	37,246,510	98.61%
1992/93	32,625,346	32,233,815	98.80%
1993/94	28,418,424	28,050,215	98.70%
1994/95	29,384,939	29,092,316	99.00%
1995/96	32,486,250	32,145,827	98.95%
1996/97	34,947,239	34,543,272	98.84%
1997/98	38,543,950	38,068,127	98.77%
1998/99	43,594,097	43,037,950	98.72%
1999/2000	46,986,353	46,234,173	98.40%
2000/01	51,056,811	50,350,708	98.62%
2001/02	55,093,309	54,392,199	98.73%
2002/03	57,267,725	56,599,595	98.83%
2003/04	58,041,068	57,392,051	98.88%
2004/05	59,835,452	59,108,788	98.79%
2005/06	61,240,925	60,232,407	98.35%
2006/07	64,448,444	63,539,306	98.58%
Total	769,423,596	759,285,691	98.68%

Poll Tax	Amount Due	Amount Paid	% Collected
1990/91	63,872,296	63,005,859	98.64%
1991/92	45,950,732	45,191,479	98.35%
1992/93	53,523,880	52,561,109	98.20%
Total	163,346,908	160,758,447	98.42%

11. Use of Private Bailiffs

In my last report to this Committee (6th December), I provided information about the use of Rossendales (external private bailiffs) for collecting NNDR debt and advised we would soon be making short-term use of them for collection of some larger Council Tax debts also, and members sought some comparative bailiff performance information between ourselves and the private sector.

From this month, we are to issue a number of "In Borough" bailiff cases for Council Tax to Rossendales and, as mentioned previously, these will be mainly aimed at debtors with larger balances for 2007/08 accounts. However if the same people still have balances for previous financial years at bailiff stage these may also be included.

It is difficult to monitor like-for-like performance, in-house bailiffs against private bailiffs, as the work carried out by each is vastly different, and also as it takes varying periods of time to recover debt dependent on debtors circumstances. Private bailiffs are often reluctant to accept long-term payment arrangements due to the costs of administering such an arrangement and also their associated costs with accepting and handling multiple payments.

Comparison based on "collection results" alone is therefore extremely difficult due to the consideration of "how long" is the period over which payment results are measured. Private bailiffs pay funds over when collected, whereas with in-house bailiffs payments are often being made regularly over a long period of time.

All bailiffs work on a "prescribed fee basis" - which is charged back to the debtor. However, unlike the Council where various methods of recovery action are available to be deployed, distraint action (taking possession of goods) is the only recovery method open to the private bailiff - fees charged are prescribed within the regulations to cover their costs.

Should the private bailiff encounter any query during the visit - e.g. payment dispute, liability dispute or benefit query - they would refer the debtor back to the Local Authority and a clerical member of staff would then clarify the situation. In the case of in-house bailiffs, they should be able to deal with these queries without involving support from colleagues.

If the private bailiff obtained employment or benefit details during a visit they may still consider distraint action to obtain their fees - although an attachment of earnings order or deduction from benefit may have been the preferred recovery method by the Council.

When monitoring performance the additional clerical work involved by authority staff in the preparation of and issuing cases, monitoring and informing the private bailiff company of payments made direct to the Council or changes in the amount due because of benefit or other charge changes (for example discounts being granted) must be considered, along with the work involved in unpaid cases being returned from the private bailiff.

It is difficult to measure the effect on debt collection, particularly for Council Tax where, these days, debtors possessions are often seen as having very little value at auction, and especially so when compared to the amount of Council Tax debt, that distraint is less effective, however it remains a legal requirement and therefore essential element along the chain of debt recovery action.

It has always been our view and preference to employ our own Certificated bailiffs and consider the work they do not just collects debt but also encourages the uptake of discounts and benefit. The in-house bailiff also provides a more personal approach to vulnerable residents within the Borough.

Importantly, we do monitor external bailiffs – on “cash collection” and “quality of performance”. Quality taking into account standards and equality, both measured by complaints and supported by issue of random questionnaires.

Our preference remains for in house bailiffs, as the process is about making contact with the debtor, establishing the validity of the debt and agreeing acceptable payment arrangements, with the legal fees collected supporting the cost of the activity.

Within the “Tribunals, Court and Enforcement Bill” consideration is made to costs associated with the process of seizure and sale of goods. The current fee structure is to be replaced - further consultation and research is currently under way to determine the exact costs and fees that enforcement agents will be allowed to charge. It is anticipated the new regulations will only come into force at the earliest on the 1st April 2009 and will apply equally to our own in-house bailiffs.

12. Changes to NNDR Charges on Unoccupied Properties.

I verbally updated members at the last Committee (6th December) about forthcoming changes to the charges levied on unoccupied business premises.

In the current legislation, charges at 50% are levied on unoccupied commercial premises (i.e. shops, offices etc.) after an initial 3 month exempt period. Industrial premises (factories, workshops etc.) are completely exempt.

With effect from 1 April 2008, and with few exceptions, business rates at 100% will be charged on all unoccupied properties following the initial 3 month free period for commercials and, for industrial properties, after a 6 month free period.

Members are reminded that councils collect National Non-Domestic Rates on behalf of Central Government and the additional charges as a consequence of this change in the legislation will not result in additional income for councils.

This change in the legislation follows from the consultation document “Modernising Empty Property Relief”. The Government’s proposals for reforms to empty property relief were part of a package of measures introduced in the Budget to help incentivise the efficient use of land, to help increase the supply of commercial property and to reduce costs for businesses. The Government considers that the reforms provide a strong incentive for owners to re-use, re-let or re-develop their empty shops, offices and factory buildings, and so improve access to property and reduce rents for businesses.

In preparation for these changes, we are updating our records to ensure we have accurate ownership details and have issued almost 800 mail-shots to affected businesses now that the draft legislation is clearer. Formal legislation is expected to be in place late January / early February.

Because of the delay in the legislation, we are still waiting for our Business Rate I.T. system supplier to provide a software release that makes appropriate changes to the charging structure ready for when we issue the first 2008/09 bills in early March. The release is scheduled for later this month.

Until this release is available, installed and tested, we cannot undertake a year-start test that will provide accurate data about the additional charges we expect to levy and recover during the next financial year.

In the current financial year, 2007/08, the amount of relief/exemption given to properties thought likely to be affected by the change in legislation is as follows:

Commercial Premises (current 50% relief after initial 3 months)	£863k
Industrial Premises (current 100% exemption)	<u>£3,500k</u>
Total	£4,363k

The position with regard to vacant premises is continuously changing and so not all of this relief/exemption would automatically equate to becoming additional charges because of the ongoing 3 month (commercials) and 6 month (industrials) free periods. However owners / leaseholders of unoccupied properties that have benefited from the relevant 3 / 6 month free period prior to 1 April 2008 will be liable for the 100% charge immediately.

Without the new release of software, it is not possible to accurately forecast the additional charges that will be billed next year, but an estimate based on the current data suggests this could be around £3m – equates to less than 4% of gross debit for 2007/08.

Whilst we are endeavouring to ensure we have correctly identified ratepayers liable for these additional charges next year, like all other authorities, inevitably our records may not be 100% accurate and up to date in readiness for annual billing in March.

As a consequence of the Grand Arcade development, our out-turn collection rate for 2007/08 is expected to increase to over 98.0% (97.6% actual for 2006/07). However if the legislation pertinent to unoccupied properties had been in place from 1 April 2007, and not 2008, and assuming a considerably lower collection rate for affected properties, then the impact could, potentially, have caused the PI to have dropped to below 97%.

In considering our target for 2008/09 therefore, and I must stress this is without the benefit of the upgrade to systems that will calculate accurate charges, this authority, and along with all other authorities, expects its NNDR PI for 2008/09 to reduce considerably and I would suggest a target as low as 96.5% should be adopted for next year. With the new structure of Performance Framework applicable from April 2008, the existing Corporate Health BVPI for NNDR (and Council Tax) is abolished, but will be retained locally. In suggesting a local target of 96.5%, this assumes the definition for this PI will remain unchanged; or does not identify the need for some separate reporting of the collection relevant to unoccupied properties – however to be able to do so would require the system supplier to enable a mechanism for separate monitoring.

13. Collection of Sundry Debtor Income

1. Background:

The Income Group collects Sundry and Periodic Income due from invoices raised by Council Departments, the Leisure Trust and GM Fire Authority. A comparison for the activity relating to invoices raised for Wigan Council for the period April to December 2007/08 compared to the same period for 2006/07 is shown below:

Details	April 06–Dec 06	April 07–Dec 07
Invoices	28,826	28,173
Value £m	£63.2m	£62.5m

These results show small decrease in both the number of invoices raised (-653) and the value of invoices raised (-£0.7m).

Wigan Council also undertakes debt recovery work for the Leisure Trust and the GM Fire Service. From April 2007 to December 2007, invoices were raised valued at £18.9m (+£0.2m) and £1.8m (+£0.2m), respectively. Details relating to the activity will be reported to the Leisure Trust and GM Fire Service separately.

2. Summary of Performance Information for Wigan Council.

Performance information is supplied to the Greater Manchester Authorities Metropolitan Treasurer's Group (GMAMT) and a copy of the return for Wigan Council for the year up to the end of December 2007 is shown here:

Details	Value
B/Fwd at 01.04.07	£6.6m
Raised Apr–Dec 2007	£55.9m
Total	£62.5m

Debt over 3 months old	£1.7m	2.7%
Debt with Legal	£51.0k	0.1%

i) Debt over 3 months at Dec 2006 compared to Dec 2007:

Whilst the debt over 3 months old has increased it is not considered significant in the context of the overall debt as figures can fluctuate substantially depending on the number and value of invoices raised on a particular day. However an exercise to review the level of debt and the composition of it is currently underway and the intention is to report on this when the review is completed.

ii) Debt with Legal Services:

Only very few cases are referred to Legal, generally re-assignments of lease and the value of cases with legal has decreased from £57k to £51k.

3. Further Statistical Returns:

Wigan is a member of the CIPFA and GMAMT and has provided information for both on an annual basis for some years. As mentioned in the last report, the last CIPFA report was completed in August 2007 showed Wigan to be one of the best Councils in many aspects. The next report is due later in 2008.

4. Improvements:

i) User Group Meetings:

User group meetings are continuing and have been useful not only for disseminating information and reminding users of changes etc, but also as a forum for questions and issues to be raised and to seek solutions to problems and to make improvements and suggestions for the future.

ii) User Training:

New and refresher training has undertaken since December 2006. Staff are not given access until training has been completed and this goes some way to increasing effectiveness and efficiency in user Departments. Users have been reminded of the refresher training now available.

iii) Support Services Review:

Following the review work has now started on business process re-engineering which may affect the method of operation for Debtors Section in the near future. Meetings have been taking place with users to work out the most efficient way of administering and managing the debtors processes and more are planned. Steps are planned to reduce the numbers of invoices raised, especially for pest control, removal of household waste and new bins. Further changes to policy, procedures and processing will be reported to members when decisions have been made.

5. Conclusions:

The Income Group has again managed the debt recovery and monitoring function very well in financial year to date. The CIPFA statistics for 2006-2007 show Wigan Council to have one of the best debt recovery sections in many collection aspects. As changes to billing e.g. payment-up-front are more widely promoted, this may, sooner or later, affect the unit cost per invoice next year, but it is expected that the same high standard of effective and efficient recovery will continue and the Income Group will carry on delivering their excellent service to both Departments and customers.

14. Benefits Administration

Claim Processing

Benefit processing times, continue to meet Audit Commission targets as illustrated below:

Category	01/04/07 to 31/12/07	2007/2008 Target
New claims (days to process)	29	30
% of New Claims processed within 14 days	88.5%	80%
Changes in Circumstances (days to process)	9	10

Benefit Reviews

Prior to 01/04/07, performance was measured against a target of the number of cases reviewed. From 01/04/07, the measurement is based upon the number of reductions in benefit discovered from changes in circumstances identified. Our target for the current financial year is 17,040 reductions in benefit. As at 31/12/07, our achievement against the annual target was 88%. This performance remains one of the highest in the country.

Benefit Fraud

The DWP set a target of 135 sanctions for 2007/08. Performance to 31/12/07 shows that this annual target has already been exceeded with three months still to go:

Sanction Applied	No. of Cases
LA Caution	68
Administrative Penalty	46
Successful Prosecutions	37
Total	151

Diversity Impact Assessment form

Section: Revenues, Benefits and Miscellaneous Income

Policy/Service Area: Finance & IT

Person Completing Form: Alan Cartwright

Date: 14/01/08

Do any of the below groups suffer specific disadvantage (please indicate)

	Yes	No		Yes	No
Race		No	Disability		No
Ethnicity		No	Gender		No
Age		No	Religion		No
Class		No	Sexual Orientation		No

Is there evidence of disadvantage or associated problems?

No

How was the information collected and/or who have you consulted with?

N/A

Action Plan – *What specific actions are planned to tackle any disadvantage identified?*

N/A

Is the policy in line with current equality legislation and relevant codes of practice?

Yes

Timescale	n/a
Responsibility	n/a
Comments	n/a

Are the actions specified included in any other documents/plans?

Departmental Service Plan	Yes
Section/Team Plan	Departmental Service Plan
Other (Specify)	n/a

Date for further review	April 2008
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