



Corporate Management Committee

Thursday, 14 December 2023 at 7.30 pm

Council Chamber - Civic Centre

Members of the Committee

Councillors: T Gracey (Chairman), C Howorth (Vice-Chair), D Coen, MD Cressey, L Gillham, S Jenkins, R King, M Nuti, S Ringham, P Snow, D Whyte and M Willingale

In accordance with Standing Order 29.1, any Member of the Council may attend the meeting of this Committee, but may speak only with the permission of the Chairman of the Committee, if they are not a member of this Committee.

AGENDA

Notes:

- 1) Any report on the Agenda involving confidential information (as defined by section 100A(3) of the Local Government Act 1972) must be discussed in private. Any report involving exempt information (as defined by section 100I of the Local Government Act 1972), whether it appears in Part 1 or Part 2 below, may be discussed in private but only if the Committee so resolves.
- 2) The relevant 'background papers' are listed after each report in Part 1. Enquiries about any of the Agenda reports and background papers should be directed in the first instance to **Mr G Lelliott, Democratic Services Section, Law and Governance Business Centre, Runnymede Civic Centre, Station Road, Addlestone (Tel: Direct Line: 01932 425620). (Email: gary.elliott@runnymede.gov.uk).**
- 3) Agendas and Minutes are available on a subscription basis. For details, please ring 01932 425620. Agendas and Minutes for all the Council's Committees may also be viewed on www.runnymede.gov.uk.
- 4) In the unlikely event of an alarm sounding, members of the public should leave the building immediately, either using the staircase leading from the public gallery or following other instructions as appropriate.
- 5) Filming, Audio-Recording, Photography, Tweeting and Blogging of Meetings

Members of the public are permitted to film, audio record, take photographs or make use of social media (tweet/blog) at Council and Committee meetings provided that this does not disturb the business of the meeting. If you wish to film a particular meeting, please liaise with the Council Officer listed on the front of the Agenda prior to the start of the meeting so that the Chairman is aware and those attending the meeting can be made aware of any filming taking place.

Filming should be limited to the formal meeting area and not extend to those in the public seating area.

The Chairman will make the final decision on all matters of dispute in regard to the use of social media audio-recording, photography and filming in the Committee meeting.

List of matters for consideration	<u>Page</u>
Part I	
Matters in respect of which reports have been made available for public inspection	
1. Notification of Changes to Committee Membership	
2. Minutes	5 - 12
	To confirm and sign, as a correct record, the Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 23 November 2023.
3. Apologies for Absence	
4. Declarations of Interest	
	Members are invited to declare any disclosable pecuniary interests or other registrable and non-registrable interests in items on the agenda.
5. Social Media Work Plan 2024-26	13 - 32
6. Social Media Policy	33 - 55
7. Medium Term Financial Strategy	To Follow
8. Council Tax - determination of tax base and estimated collection funds surplus or deficit	56 - 61
9. Review of Local Council Tax Discounts	62 - 74
10. Financial Inclusion and Housing Benefit Overpayment Recovery	75 - 91
11. Exclusion of Press and Public	
Part II	
Matters involving Exempt or Confidential Information in respect of which reports have not been made available for public inspection	
12. Microsoft Procurement	92 - 97
13. Procurement exercises relating to Runnymede owned trees incorporating the procurement of a borough wide tree audit and procurement of a contractor or contractors to deliver tree maintenance and emergency works	98 - 101
14. Procurement of Grave Digging Contractor	102 - 105
15. Waste Management IT upgrades	106 - 117
16. Bid Acceptance	118 - 124
17. Potential Letting at Building 5, Pine Trees	125 - 131
18. Asset Disposal	To Follow
19. Referral from Environment & Sustainability Committee: Environmental Services Restructure	132

Runnymede Borough Council

Corporate Management Committee

Thursday, 23 November 2023 at 7.30pm

Members of the Committee present: T Gracey (Chairman), C Howorth (Vice-Chair), V. Cunningham (in place of D. Coen), MD Cressey, L Gillham, S Jenkins, A King (in place of R.King), M Nuti, S Ringham, P Snow, D Whyte and M Willingale

Members of the Committee absent: None

In attendance: Councillor T. Gates

86 Notification of Changes to Committee Membership

Cllr V. Cunningham substituted for Cllr D. Coen and Cllr A. King substituted for Cllr R. King

87 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 October 2023 were confirmed and signed as a correct record.

88 Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies for absence.

89 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

90 Reconsideration of the 25 May 2023 minutes

The minutes of 25 May 2023 were agreed as a correct record.

91 Recommendations from committees

91a Standards and Audit Committee - provision of internal audit services

The Assistant Chief Executive outlined the referral from the Standards and Audit Committee and asked for a deferral in entering into a partnership with the named organisation to enable the Standards and Audit Committee to convene a special meeting in December with the named organisation. They would then report back to the Committee at a later meeting.

It was resolved that:

The decision to enter into a partnership with the named organisation be deferred until after a special meeting of the Standards & Audit Committee

91b **Environment and Sustainability Committee - Implications of climate change for Runnymede Borough Council**

The Planning Policy and Climate Change Manager outlined the referral from the Environment and Sustainability Committee and asked the Committee to consider recommending that Runnymede Borough Council declares a climate emergency.

Members stated that this motion was welcome, and thanked officers for their actions in creating a clear strategy to tackle climate change but expressed regret that this had not been declared sooner.

The Committee **recommended** to the Council that:

1. A Climate Emergency is declared in Runnymede in line with the wording recommended at paragraphs 5.16 to 5.18 of the report

92 **Electric Vehicle Strategy**

The Planning Policy and Climate Change Strategy Manager outlined the Electric Vehicle Strategy.

A member raised concerns about the car club, a venture set up to enable residents to rent fuel-efficient, hybrid and electric vehicles. They believed that it was not publicised well and there were concerns that diesel cars were using the allocated parking spots. The Planning Policy and Climate Change Strategy Manager agreed to contact Enterprise to check the minutiae of the agreement.

Another member asked about provision for an electric vehicle strategy for staff of Runnymede Borough Council. They were assured that such provisions were in the corporate strategy and would begin in earnest when the new Corporate Head of HR began.

It was **resolved** that:

1. The Electric Vehicle Strategy for Runnymede Borough Council was endorsed.

The Committee **recommended** to the Council that:

1. The Electric Vehicle Strategy be adopted with an implementation date of 14th December 2023

93 **Draft Climate Change Action Plan**

The Senior Planning Policy Officer outlined the Draft Climate Change Action Plan and timeline for implementation.

Concerns were raised about the commencement of the consultation period before Christmas when the public have other priorities. It was suggested that January may be a more appropriate time when there are less distractions. However, it was agreed that consultation should start as soon as possible to ensure the policy was passed within the current financial year. The consultation period would therefore

be extended from five weeks to six and a half weeks ending on Sunday 14th January 2024. This would give the public more time to submit their responses following the festive season. Whilst it was pointed out that responses to consultations have typically ranged from single figures to a thousand depending on the topic, it was hoped that the extra time would mitigate this effect somewhat.

It was resolved that:

- 1. The draft Runnymede Borough Council Climate Change Action Plan was approved for public consultation for a period of six and a half weeks, to commence on Friday 1 December 2023.**

94 Release of previously agreed funds to enable alteration to staffing structure in the Planning, Economy and Built Environment service

The Corporate Head of Planning, Economy and the Built Environment outlined the report to alter the staffing structure in the Planning, Economy and Built Environment Service to enable job roles and salaries to better represent their current responsibilities.

It was resolved that:

- 1. A release of the sum of £9,844 from the £20,000 previously set aside at the CMC meeting of April 2023 to the Planning, Economy and Built Environment service for the purpose of upgrading a Career Grade Planner post to an Assistant Development Manager post**

95 Reserve Forces Policy

The Chief Executive outlined the Reserve Forces Policy. He firstly drew members' attention to the provisions on p.211 of the agenda and clarified that an administrative error had not allowed the fourth bullet to separate from the third, but that it was to 'ensure that reservists are not disadvantaged by their role as reservists.' He then stated that this policy was intended to allow the Council to pursue its ambition to secure a Gold Armed Forces Covenant Award. He stated that the Council's submission would be viewed more favourably by implementing the changes as suggested.

A member asked how many employees of Runnymede Borough Council serve in the Reserve. The Chief Executive stated that there was only one employee who, to their knowledge, was part of the reserve forces, although he emphasised that members of the reserves are not obliged, subject to a waiver system, to inform their employers. The Chief Executive also clarified that there was a special leave policy for employees who are part of other voluntary organisations.

It was recommended to the Council that:

- 1. The revised policy be adopted**

96 Proposed Fees and Charges 24/25

The Corporate Head of Finance outlined the context and proposed fees and charges for the financial year 2024/5.

It was **resolved** that:

1. The proposed fees and charges were approved to be effective from the dates within the appendix or as soon as practical thereafter.

97 **Council Tax Support Scheme 2024/25**

The Assistant Chief Executive outlined the context in which the Council Tax Scheme was proposed. She outlined the proposed scheme which would use universal credit data to assess entitlement, introduce a flat rate non-dependent deductions for claimants, and reduced the weekly entitlement from £10 to £5. This had the benefit of ensuring the team had greater capacity to process claimants, and more people were able to benefit from the scheme.

It was recommended that the current scheme be continued into the next financial year to allow for a full year's data to assess its effectiveness. This would ensure that should any amendments be required in the future, that they were based off of data from a full financial year.

Whilst members welcomed the reform, one member felt that they could not support the scheme as it did not go far enough to support the most vulnerable families. They stated that 62% of those who are eligible for support take it up, which meant that 38% do not, and asked if there were plans to create take up scheme to publicise the support available and encourage those who are eligible to take it up. The Assistant Chief Executive agreed to look into this with the Corporate Head of Customer, Digital and Collection Services upon her return.

The Assistant Chief Executive also clarified that it was not possible for residents to obtain 100% council tax relief, and that the amount of relief received was proportionate to a resident's income. She agreed to clarify what the maximum income for council tax relief was.

It was recommended to full Council that:

1. **The Council Tax Support Scheme be continued for the 2024/25 financial year, including the provision to automatically apply legislative changes for the annual uprating of the prescribed applicable amounts for 2024/25 financial year as set by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP).**

98 **Review of Household Support Fund (Fourth Round)**

The Assistant Chief Executive outlined the updates to the Household Support Fund to ensure a greater number of residents were able to benefit from the help available to them. Members welcomed the changes to the scheme that allowed more residents to benefit from the support available to them, especially the self-employed who were often ineligible for such schemes.

However, some members raised concerns that the new savings cap of £6,000 down from £10,000 and household income limit of £33,000 may exclude some previously eligible residents, and asked that the Assistant Chief Executive look into had these limits applied during the third round, how many residents would have been ineligible for support who had been able to claim support in the third round.

It was **resolved** that:

1. The amendments to the policy were approved to ensure the limited grant funding received benefits as many residents as possible during the remainder of the financial year

99 **Treasury Management Report - Mid Year 2023/24**

The Corporate Head of Finance outlined the Treasury Management Report for the first six months of the financial year 2023-4. Members noted the contents of the report.

100 **Budget Monitoring Report - April 2023 to September 2023**

The Corporate Head of Finance outlined the budget monitoring report for the first six months of the financial year 2023-2024. He drew members' attention to the net expenditure, and the splitting out of finance spent via SO42 for greater transparency. HRA and General Fund spending was also outlined, which the Corporate Head of Finance believed, would allow the Council to make inroads into eliminating the £5.2 million budget gap.

A member raised concerns about the lack of progress towards the £5.2 million budget gap, stating that no progress had been made in the current financial year, and this would lead to the Council now having two years instead of three to balance its budget.

The Assistant Chief Executive and Leader explained that financial reviews were currently ongoing, which would lead to savings of almost £800,000 for the Council. These would be brought to the Service Reviews Member Working Party in January before being brought to the Committee at a later date.

Members also raised concerns about £23,000 being spent on tennis courts, with the Corporate Head of Community Services explaining that they were used for a variety of sports, and it was part of larger management works.

101 **To adopt a policy in respect of councillor surgeries and to approve funding to cover the cost of premises hired for councillor surgeries for the financial year 2023/24 and for the hiring of premises in which to conduct councillor surgeries for future financial years [rejected]**

The Corporate Head of Law and Governance outlined the report for councillor surgeries brought to him by Cllrs R. King and D. Whyte. The Corporate Head of Law and Governance outlined that they had asked eleven of the surrounding councils for their councillor surgery policies. Out of the eleven areas queried, nine had responded stating that they did not reimburse councillors who held surgeries.

Cllr D. Whyte was invited to share his thoughts on the report as he and Cllr R. King had instigated it. He stated that he believed that councillors should have access to Council owned properties when carrying out their civic duties as a democratically elected councillor. He also clarified the third recommendation so that it read 'to recommend to Full Council that a growth bid be included in the budget for the

financial year 2024/25 of £3k to cover the cost of councillors hiring premises to hold councillor surgeries' rather than the published £20k.

Whilst it was clarified that such surgeries incurred costs in terms of overtime and clean up to the Council, it was also pointed out that some areas of the borough did not have access to Council-owned buildings and thus, councillors had to pay out of pocket for them. This potentially caused a financial barrier to people wishing to become councillors. Whilst it was accepted that some councillors now held online surgeries for their residents which held no charge, other members believed that some residents were unable to access these and thus, the Council should provide physical surgeries to enable all residents to access their councillors should they wish.

It was also emphasised that members were paid an allowance to enable them to carry out their duties and negate any potential financial barriers. It was therefore plausible and reasonable to expect councillors to use this allowance to pay for surgeries. Indeed, it was clarified that there were no legal requirements for councillors to spend their allowance in any particular way, and this would be a possible avenue.

However, other councillors raised concerns about personal safety in the holding of surgeries, and discussion veered towards local government advice for councillor safety.

Cllr A. King asked for a named vote on the three recommendations, with the third recommendation being amended from £20k to £3k as amended by Cllr D. Whyte. Voting was as follows:

In favour (5) – Councillors Gillham, Jenkins, A. King, Ringham, D. Whyte

Against (6) – Councillors Gracey, Howorth, Cunningham, Nuti, Snow, Willingale.

(Cllr M. D. Cressey had left the meeting at 21.14 and was not present for the vote)

The recommendation was not passed.

102 **Minor amendment to the Constitution - recommendation from the Constitution Member Working Party**

The Corporate Head of Law and Governance outlined a minor amendment to the Constitution that would allow for a Standing Council Tax Setting Committee to be established. They clarified that its only function would be to approve the appropriate council tax setting motion, and this would only happen should the relevant precept authority have not provided the figures required to set the Council Tax by the date when Runnymede Borough Council holds its Council Tax setting meeting.

It was **resolved** that:

1. The Corporate Head of Legal and Governance be delegated authority to make further necessary amendments to the Constitution, to give effect to the amendments proposed in this report.

It was **recommended** to Council that:

1. A standing Council Tax Setting Committee be approved.

103 **S042 - Urgent Action**

103a **1028 - To report urgent action taken regarding a virement of money from the Planning Policy budget to the Climate Change budget to underpin the production of Heat Decarbonisation Plans for the Hythe Community Centre and Manor Farm Day Centre and other technical information to underpin a funding bid for round 3c of the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme**

In response to a member's question, it was clarified that the lateness of the SO42 in coming to committee was due to an oversight which led it to miss the October Corporate Management Committee.

103b **1029 - To report urgent action taken regarding business rates pooling 2024/25**

The SO42 was noted.

104 **Exclusion of Press and Public**

By resolution of the Committee, the press and public were excluded from the remainder of the meeting during the consideration of the remaining matters under Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972 on the grounds that the discussion would be likely to involve the disclosure of exempt information as set out in Schedule 12A to Part 1 of the Act.

105 **Recommendations from committees**

105a **Community Services Committee - Procurement of Digital Alarms**

The Corporate Head of Community Services outlined the referral to upgrade the Careline equipment in Runnymede and Surrey Heath to digital alarms. This would cover both the refresh of digital equipment for residents to ensure connectivity and connectivity, and the digitalisation of Safer Runnymede as the monitoring centre.

A member asked for clarification why this referral was in part two when there was no budgetary information in the report. The Corporate Head of Law and Governance clarified that the item was placed into part two to enable members to discuss more thoroughly items, but agreed to look into alternatives such as putting parts of reports into a part two appendix to allow greater transparency.

It was **recommended** to Council that:

1. A supplementary capital estimate in the sum reported to the Community Services Committee for the purchase and installation of digital community alarm equipment be funded from the Better Care Fund over the next year.
2. Approval was given to enter into a procurement process for the purchase of digital community alarm equipment on behalf of both Runnymede and Surrey Heath Borough Councils up to a potential total value in the sum reported to Community Services Committee.

105b **Environment and Sustainability Committee - Environmental Services and GIS restructure incorporating Environmental Health and Licensing, Engineering, Green Spaces, Grounds Maintenance, and Street Naming and Numbering**

This item was withdrawn from the agenda.

The Corporate Head of Law and Governance clarified that the item had been deferred to December's meeting.

106 **Building Compliance**

The Assistance Chief Executive outlined the need for remedial works. This would be part of a wider package of works to ensure building compliance.

Several members voiced their disappointment that the Civic Centre required significant refurbishment after fifteen years, when such a building should last at least thirty years. It was suggested that the original BREEAM contract be consulted to see what the terms were, and if the current repairs meant that the terms of the contract had been breached. There then followed significant debate around the breadth and remit of a BREEAM contract. It was agreed that the Corporate Head of Law and Governance would consult the original BREEAM contract to see if the repairs had breached it.

It was **resolved** that:

1. A capital estimate was approved for the compliance works at the Civic Centre.
2. A supplementary revenue estimate was approved for the compliance works at the Civic Centre.
3. The release of the figure specified in the report was approved from the Property Repairs and Renewals Reserve to fund the works set out above. Committee to approve the compliant procurements of the contracts identified within this report.

Chairman

Meeting ended 22:00

Report title	Social Media Work Plan 2024-26
Report author	Peter Le Riche, Head of Public Relations and Marketing
Department	Chief Executive's Office
Exempt?	No

Purpose of report:

To resolve

Synopsis of report:

The Council's use of social media has increased substantially during the last two years, and its audiences have grown as a result.

The time is now right to implement a work plan which has as its objectives to:

- 1. codify how different social media platforms will be used,**
- 2. create a structure which will guide continued growth and engagement, and**
- 3. demonstrate how the use of social media contributes to supporting the Council's reputation overall.**

This report sets out the approach which will be taken in each area including to pause the use of X / Twitter for six months during 2024 to create capacity within the Communications Team to trial the use of Instagram.

Recommendation(s):

Members are recommended to adopt the Social Media Work Plan 2024-26 and give authority to the Head of Public Relations and Marketing to pause the use of X / Twitter for six months during 2024 to trial the use of Instagram.

1. Context and background of report

- 1.1 The Council has operated multiple social media platforms since around 2015 with follower numbers and engagement increasing throughout that time but particularly so during the last two years.
- 1.2 The platforms which the Council has corporate accounts on, and which therefore have the largest audience, are Facebook, X / Twitter, Nextdoor and LinkedIn.
- 1.3 In addition to corporate use, a small number of service areas also have 'sub accounts' on social media, these exist on Facebook, X / Twitter and Instagram.
- 1.4 A Youtube account also exists, although this is used as a video hosting platform rather than as a social media channel. It is not actively promoted.

- 1.5 The corporate accounts are controlled by the Communications Team and they have been operated based on the experience of the Head of Service and other members of staff. A guiding approach to content, management and quality has existed informally which has delivered good results to date.
- 1.6 As the platforms have grown in audiences, volume of content shared and relative importance to the Council as a way to share information with the public, a work plan to drive and structure future use is now required.

2. Report and, where applicable, options considered and recommended

- 2.1 Social media is constantly 'on' and needs a regular flow of content and engagement with audiences in order to be properly managed, to present the Council in a positive light and to explain services.
- 2.2 For the last four years, the Council's Communications Team has delivered this work successfully through its experience, skill and judgement, and a rise in audience and engagement levels has been observed.
- 2.3 To continue to drive further growth and to better define how social media is used, a structured approach is now needed. The proposed Social Media Work Plan 2024-26 sets out to do this by codifying how different social media platforms will be used, creating a structure which will guide continued growth and engagement, and demonstrates how the use of social media contributes to supporting the Council's reputation overall.

Codifying the Council's approach to and use of social media

- 2.4 The Council will be structured in its use of social media and focus its limited resources to spend time and effort on the areas which best help the authority to meet the Corporate Business Plan and its underpinning strategies. The work plan also explicitly sets out the benefits of using social media and the governance, management and ownership arrangements in place

Increasing audience and engagement rates

- 2.5 Increasing audience and engagement rates will be achieved by
 1. Define use of each platform and actions involved.
 2. Moving towards a social first approach. This means that more of the Council's messaging will appear on social media first, instead of in news stories. This allows for a faster turnaround of information, making it more timely and relevant.
 3. Greater focus on a smaller number of key topics. This is intended to drive home the most information and messaging by repeated publication. To manage this there will be a reduction in one off posts, which do not tend to achieve the desired result.
 4. Increasing visual content.
 5. Embedding house rules.
 6. Careful and targeted spending on promotion of specific types of content, primarily where the Council is asking people to do something, rather than just to be aware.
 7. Focus on existing platforms over new. In general, the Council will continue to prioritise Facebook, Nextdoor and LinkedIn.

Instagram trial

- 2.6 Related to 2.5.7 above, the Council's engagement rate and reach on X / Twitter has declined in recent months. The Council will pause activity on this platform in order to

create capacity to launch an Instagram account. A six month trial will be planned to measure follower numbers, whether it is possible to gather broad location information to demonstrate that the audience built lives in or near Runnymede, the ability of the Council to provide content which engages audiences on Instagram, and the volume of material available which is specific to under 25s.

Using social media to improve the Council's reputation

- 2.7 Posts across social media reach a large number of people on a daily basis. The type and quality of material posted, the language used, imagery chosen and the way people are engaged with when they comment plays a huge role in the Council's reputation. Our reputation can be supported via social media in terms of having a strong and well run presence on each platform, building trust and openness in what we say and post about and by promoting positive news and successes to demonstrate the Council provides value for money and is an organization which residents and stakeholders should be happy with. Furthermore, it can be used to facilitate dialogue with the community, to share timely and relevant information, and to manage and explain issues which arise.

Feedback from relevant Member Working Party

- 2.8 Councillors attending the Communications and Service Transformation Member Working Party on 23 October 2023 discussed the work plan with the lead officer. A summary of their comments which impact the work plan are as follows:

Comment	Response from Head of Service
Would different social media platforms allow the Council to reach a younger audience?	Potentially yes, but younger people do use all social media platforms. The question is whether they are engaging with local authority content whatever social media platform they use. The proposed Instagram trial is intended to examine this issue.
Keep close control of advertising costs.	The work plan has been updated to provide greater clarity in this area. Advertising will only be considered where the Council is specifically asking followers to take action, rather than to be aware of a topic. Spending will be agreed with Corporate Heads of Services and will only be on an occasional basis.
Investigate how other councils use social media.	Research has been carried out on this topic and is listed below:

- 2.9 North Surrey area borough councils' use of social media

Council	Followers	Number of posts	Average number of likes in past 10 posts
Spelthorne	2,028	6,033	1.1 (one post received 32 likes, taking this into account, the average was 4)
Elmbridge	2,639	2,401	4.8
Woking	3,151	1,057	8.9 (One post unrelated to Council activity received 109 likes. Including this, the average was 19.8)

3. Policy framework implications

- 3.1 The Social Media Work Plan is intended to improve the way in which the Council communicates about its core themes as set out in the Corporate Business Plan and its five underpinning strategies.

4 Resource implications/Value for Money

- 4.1 The work plan does not require any extra budget, over and above very small levels of spending on carefully targeted advertising, and occasional staff training, which is already budgeted for.
- 4.2 The work plan does not require any extra staffing resource, it sets out a different way of working, rather than extra work.

5. Legal implications

- 5.1 None.

6. Equality implications

- 6.1 None.

7. Environmental/Sustainability/Biodiversity implications

- 7.1 None

8. Risk implications

- 8.1 The risk of not implementing a work plan is that use and management of social media platforms would be less structured and may be less effective at supporting communication of the Council's priorities, work and successes.

9. Timetable for Implementation

- 9.1 The work plan will cover the period January 2024 to December 2026

10. Background papers

- 10.1 Social Media Work Plan document.

11. Appendices

- Appendix A – Social Media Work Plan

Appendix A

Runnymede Borough Council

Social Media Work Plan – DRAFT

December 2023

Contents

Background and information.	3
Objectives of this work plan.	5
Approach to and use of social media.	6
Increasing audiences and engagement rates.	8
Using social media to improve the reputation of the Council.	14

Background and information

Runnymede has an active presence on the most popular social media platforms, which are used to deliver important messages and information about the Council's work and priorities.

However, social media as a regular tool of communication at Runnymede Borough Council came comparatively late when viewed against other councils in Surrey. Runnymede was the penultimate local authority in the county to join Facebook and the last to join Twitter.

Since then, and especially in the past four years, the authority has made progress in growing its follower numbers and engagement rates to be on par with our peers. This vital work is carried out to support the Communications Team's efforts to deliver the Council's messages and information to a greater number of people both in the Borough and outside.

Growth has been achieved by carefully curating content and an insistence on very high standards on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. During this most recent time frame, the Council has, in addition to broadcasting news also increased engagement with audiences by replying to comments they post, sharing extra information, asking for their views on consultations, flagging potential issues to relevant service areas before they escalate and highlighting community led activity.

Statistical snapshot of corporate Facebook profiles as of May 2023

Council	Borough population	Actual Followers (May 2023)	Percentage of Borough population following	Launch date
Surrey Heath	90500	7,500	8.2	July 2010
Reigate and Banstead	150800	12,000	7.9	March 2010
Spelthorne	103000	7,500	7.2	July 2009
Guildford	143600	10,000	6.9	July 2010
Woking	103900	7,100	6.8	March 2015
Runnymede	88000	5,700	6.4	July 2016
Epsom and Ewell	80900	5,000	6.1	July 2012
Mole valley	87400	4,600	5.2	September 2010
Waverley	128200	5,100	3.9	August 2011
Tandridge	87900	2,700	3.0	January 2017
Elmbridge	138800	3,900	2.8	August 2011

- Followers as a percentage of population: Runnymede is 6/11
- Followers: Runnymede is 6/11 in pure follower numbers
- Age: Runnymede 9/11 or the second youngest profile, which allows the second smallest time to grow an audience. Other councils have had up to seven years longer to do so.

Social media channels operated by the Council

Across the Council there are a mix of corporate channels, which are managed by the Communications Team and sub channels, some of which are managed by relevant service areas and others by the Communications Team.

Platform	Active corporate profile (run by Communications Team)	Sub profile (run by service areas or Communications Team)
Facebook	Yes	Chertsey Museum Addlestone One What's On in Runnymede
Twitter	Yes	Chertsey Museum Addlestone One Community Services (Sports) Development Management Business Runnymede
Linkedin	Yes	No (Many individual staff members have personal accounts)
Nextdoor	Yes	(Individual staff members may have personal accounts)
Instagram	No	Addlestone One Magna Square Town Centre Manager Business Runnymede
Youtube	No	Platform exists as a place to publish videos so they can be displayed on the Council's website or other outlets.

Objectives of this work plan

This work plan's objectives are to:

1. Codify the Council's approach to and use of social media.
2. Increase audiences and engagement rates.
3. Use social media to improve the reputation of the Council.

Approach to and use of social media

The Council will be strategic in its use of social media and focus its limited resources to spend time and effort on the areas which best help the authority to meet the Corporate Business Plan and its underpinning strategies. Therefore the primary focus of social media content will be in the areas of:

1. Climate Change
2. Health and Wellbeing
3. Empowering our Communities
4. Economic Development
5. Organisational Development

In addition, social media will be used to help residents and customers access services and understand the Council's priorities and decisions.

There will be occasions when requests to publish content are turned down. These will usually be because they do not align with the Corporate Business Plan, or because individual posts are unlikely to achieve the desired outcome.

Benefits of social media use

Social media is now the most used tool for the Council to reach its residents en masse, therefore it plays a vital role supporting its reputation and explaining its work. Social media provides a method for information sharing and exchange, and is the primary route used to signpost and link to relevant information on our website.

It provides the Council with a method of communication which reaches mass audiences, is quick, allows for two way communication and where factual inaccuracies or misconceptions can be corrected and the mood of the public can be gauged.

The growth of online audiences and use of social media channels enables us to work more effectively in three ways:

Communication

Directly communicate important and timely messages news and information, promote events and improve awareness of services by providing direct digital access to them. Support two way communication and an increased ability for residents to highlight issues to the Council which can be acted on. Provides an early warning of issues which may arise.

Engagement

Seek opinions, share conversations and better engage with residents. Help to improve residents' knowledge and correct misconceptions.

Collaboration

Working together with partners and sharing information across platforms which can enhance partnership working, and demonstrate the effectiveness of working together.

Governance, management and ownership

Messaging through social media is instant and wide reaching. In addition to reaching the followers of the Council's social media accounts, those users may share the Council's messages to their own contacts. The Council can also share its messages into dozens of groups based on local areas or interests. Both of these activities substantially increase the reach of individual content.

Given this, and the importance of good social media use to the reputation of the Council as a whole, it is essential that our social media accounts are:

- Well planned
- Effectively managed
- Regularly monitored,
- Used regularly,
- Fed with fresh content which promotes the good work the Council does.

The Communications Team, which focusses on the Council's reputation as a whole, owns the Council's corporate social media channels and carries out this work, using experience and judgement to make appropriate day to day decisions.

The team has an overview of the whole Council's work and therefore able to take a wide view of issues. It is best placed to judge what content to publish or not publish, appropriate messages to convey and how to respond to negative comments.

Increasing audiences and engagement rates

To increase audience and engagement rates, and therefore improve the reputation of the Council, the Communications Team will use its limited staff resources for the greatest benefit, and will deliver growth by:

1. Defining the use and content focus for each platform.
2. Moving towards a social media first approach. (Telling stories and communicating online without the need for a press release or website news story.)
3. Giving more exposure to a smaller number of key announcements and services.
4. Making a significant jump forward in visual content, such as a greater range of graphics in the house style, gifs, infographics and videos.
5. Embedding the use of a set of house rules which staff and users will be expected to follow, and which will be the basis for decisions on dealing with negative comments.
6. Using carefully planned and targeted small scale spending.
7. Focussing on developing existing platforms while monitoring the benefits and take up of new platforms.

Defining the use and content focus for each platform

Facebook

1. Facebook will become the primary social media platform for the Council.
2. Content will be limited to messaging specific to Runnymede created by the Council or very select content from other partners.
3. Audience has grown substantially in the past two years and this platform provides the greatest ability for engagement and messaging due to the range of functionality and the demographic of the audience, which we have the most data on.

General actions

1. Increase in good quality moving picture content, including video, showreels, slideshow and animation.
2. Greater focus will be placed on scheduling content at key times depending on likely audiences.
3. Greater use will be made of boosting posts (small scale payments to increase audience) and small-scale advertising of posts.
4. Regular reviews of platform tools such as moderation so the Council consistently makes the most of the functions available within Facebook.

Groups

1. Consideration will be given to launching new groups administered by the Council on specific topics such as climate change.
2. The Communications Team will engage with administrators (controllers) of existing community groups to build a relationship and provide useful content ideas.
3. Content will be posted directly into community groups as an absolute priority, in addition to posting on the Council's own profile.

4. An audit of groups the Council is a member of, and could join, will be carried out to identify potential new communities which the Council can communicate messages to.
5. Increased use of Facebook groups to proactively talk about issues of interest eg controversial planning applications.

Engagement

1. The Communications Team will increase number of accounts which the Council follows to demonstrate a two way relationship. This will include councillors, carefully selected community groups and community leaders and Surrey-wide organisations.
2. Increased engagement with people who comment on our posts has proved worthwhile, this will be maintained and more attention given to comments on posts we have shared into groups.

Analytics

Greater use of analytics will be adopted to provide greater insight into which topics gain most traction and who audiences are by demographic. Use of this demographic information will be used to target weaknesses by developing tailored content.

Platform functionality

Greater use will be made of:

1. Live streams
2. Events listings
3. Stories
4. Reels
5. Photo galleries

Meta Business Suite

1. Training for staff to understand full scale of functionality.
2. Consultancy input to ensure the Council's accounts are correctly set up and that all accounts are linked through our Facebook pages

Nextdoor

Nextdoor provides a substantial audience of verified local people and the Council will increase the level of content published on its channel, bringing it into the core of social media work.

Nextdoor allows for messages to be sent to single wards or neighbourhood areas, as well as to the whole Borough audience and the Council will make substantial use of this functionality.

In its operation and breadth of functions, Nextdoor is similar to Twitter in that it is designed to provide a rolling feed of posts rather than a wider environment to exist in.

Content focus and use:

1. Content will be limited to messaging specific to Runnymede created by the Council or very select content from other partners.
2. Increase moving picture content.

3. Consultations.
4. Localised information relevant only to individual areas.
5. Local event sharing such as housing clean up days.

LinkedIn

This platform provides a valuable route to both businesses and increasingly to a sector of the population who may not regularly engage with the Council or have need of its services, but who do live in the area and benefit from knowing about its work. It also allows the opportunity to project positive messages about the Council, and jobs, to potential future employees, and provides a way to present long-form articles on topics which require more detail than a post.

Content focus and use:

1. Wider range of content, including corporate and service successes, news announcements and jobs, as well as information for businesses.
2. Moving from information for businesses towards using LinkedIn to reach the following audiences with messages relevant to them:
 - a. Professionals living in Runnymede (but working elsewhere) who may not use Council services and are therefore less likely to follow us on Facebook.
 - b. Current staff members.
 - c. Potential future staff members
3. The Communications Team will encourage existing staff to create LinkedIn profiles and to talk about their working life and sector. This is to create a community of active LinkedIn users around the Council, generating a 'buzz' among future employees.
4. Staff successes, projects and priorities will be showcases through features, articles, and Employee of the Month awards, to humanise our presence.
5. Recruiting managers and Human Resources will be encouraged to investigate the professional tools available through LinkedIn eg Talent Solutions, LinkedIn Learning.

X / Twitter

The Council's Twitter profile still holds a large audience, but functionality of the platform is limited and following a change of ownership, the Council's ability to reach to its followers has reduced.

Content focus and use

1. Day to day messaging about Council services.
2. Twitter will become the home for many of the partner requests we receive from NHS, SCC, Govt etc.
3. Greater sharing of posts by local organisations.
4. Greater use of advice from Twitter about types of content which work best so we can optimise our output.

Pausing use of X / Twitter to test Instagram

Following the decline of engagement and reach on X / Twitter the Council will pause its use of this platform for a period of six months during 2024. This will allow capacity to launch and test the benefits of the Instagram platform.

A six month trial will be carried out on Instagram, sharing the Council's existing social media content and also prioritising material which is particularly relevant to younger audiences.

The trial will determine:

1. Follower numbers
2. Whether it is possible to gather broad location information to demonstrate that the audience built lives in or near Runnymede.
3. Ability of the Council to provide content which engages audiences on Instagram.
4. Volume of material available which is specific to under 25s.

Moving towards a ‘social media first’ approach

Social media has grown substantially and is now a very well used place for residents to find out about their local area.

Starting to tell stories on social media first rather than through other channels means that messaging can be published in a more timely way. This is especially important when sharing news about decisions taken at committee as the Council will be able to inform residents faster.

By publishing faster, residents are better informed, the work of committees is shared much closer to the time it is undertaken and residents are likely to engage more with the content being shared.

Using social media as the starting point also allows more creativity in how the Council tells stories by using videos, slideshows, imagery, presentations, interviews etc.

Other methods of communication, on and offline, will still be used on a regular basis.

Giving more exposure to a smaller number of key announcements and services

The Council’s audiences are deluged with information on their social media platforms. In order for its messaging to land with audiences, in the middle of their busy lives, a more focussed approach is needed, which will take two forms:

- 1) The Council will post more often about a smaller number of topics, which is intended to give key announcements and services which can benefit from exposure on social media the greatest chance of being seen by audiences. These topics are likely to be:
 - a) Items related to our Corporate Business Plan and strategies (primarily Empowering our Communities, Health and Wellbeing and Climate Change)
 - b) News announcements
 - c) Alerts (eg severe weather)
 - d) Campaigns (eg elections)
 - e) Key front facing services
 - f) Announcements affecting a large proportion of the population.
 - g) Announcements where publishing on social media is likely to help achieve the overall objective.
- 2) To allow for space within the publishing schedule, and not overloading platforms, which have an optimum numbers of posts per day, the number of one-off posts on individual topics will be substantially reduced. In some cases advice will be given about using other channels of communication.

This approach is aimed at giving the most important announcements and service area functions a better level of exposure so they are received by a higher number of residents.

Making a significant jump forward in visual content

During the past year the Communications Team has brought a greater volume and range of visual content to social media posts. This will continue and be increased as social media platforms have prioritised video in recent years.

Within reasonable limits given the resource available, the team will put more time into creating the following content assets, which will be used multiple times to tell stories.

- Videos
- Showreels (videos without interviews)
- Animations
- Gifs
- Picture galleries
- Infographics

Content will be branded in line with the Council's Corporate Style Guide to build recognition and trust.

Embedding a set of house rules which staff and users will be expected to follow, and which will be the basis for decisions on dealing with negative comments.

The Council's social media platforms are an important place where residents find accurate and up to date information, and discuss matters that interest them. However, with a follower count of over 13,000 across three corporate platforms, and the ability to reach many thousands more through engaging with groups, it is vital to provide some basic house rules on the community.

The first set of house rules were introduced in July 2023 and exist to maintain a healthy and productive online community, while also reducing the time spent by the Communications team on moderating and fielding inappropriate comments.

The rules were created following research into other local authorities' arrangements to ensure common practice across local government. The Communications Team has been specific where possible, such as requiring adherence to the Equality Act 2010.

By having a list of published rules, the Communications Team will have a greater ability to manage difficult social media users. The rules will create a clearer framework to judge the severity of an infringement, the repercussion for which can range from deleting comments, up to blocking users.

Under this work plan, the rules will be reviewed on an annual basis. The House Rules can be found on the Council's website at: www.runnymede.gov.uk/news-media/social-media-1

Using carefully planned and targeted spending

During the past year the Council has carefully increased the amount of very small scale advertising it carries out on Facebook and LinkedIn. This will be continued but with clear understanding that cost control is a priority.

Types of content which will be considered for advertising will be those where the audience is asked to do something, for example:

1. take part in a consultation,
2. subscribe to a service,
3. attend a meeting,
4. update information or
5. take part in the electoral process.

Requests for spend in other areas, such as when part of a wider communications campaign, will be discussed with the Corporate Head of Service and services will be expected to meet the cost from their own budgets.

The Council will not spend money to promote general awareness raising or 'news' posts.

Advertising allows the Council to reach beyond its existing audience. It also means specific demographics or audience groups can be targeted, so messages can be placed with the most appropriate people.

This advertising is similar to placing adverts in local newspapers, and is usually cheaper but more data is available on the success of the advert or post which is paid for in terms of the number of people reached. The amount of money spent is completely within the control of the Council.

Facebook's advertising offer is extensive and complex, and time will be dedicated to understanding it and using the functionality only when genuinely useful and relevant.

Focussing on developing existing platforms over expanding to new platforms

The world of social media is a regularly changing landscape as new platforms are created and others decline. The Council will focus its efforts on the platforms it currently has corporate accounts on.

This position will be reviewed annually dependent on staff resource, changing interest levels in platforms and the overall behaviour of the platforms and their owners. Attention will also be paid to the benefits of other communications channels outside social media, such as newsletters. Where there is a genuine benefit to launching a presence on a new platform, this will be seriously considered. For example, the trial on Instagram referenced above may result in a permanent presence on that platform.

Resource within the Communications Team, and the need for a separate approach to content for other channels limits what can practically be achieved on a day to day basis.

Using social media to improve the reputation of the Council

In today's digital era, social media serves as a window to organisations, providing an accessible platform for communication and engagement, as well as being an immediate snapshot of what kind of organisation they are, what their values are, and how they are perceived by their community.

It is essential that the Council's channels are a well-run, regularly updated and engaging social media presence. This will be delivered via all the actions listed above, and in doing so, this will improve and strengthen the reputation of the Council. The following are important steps towards building a good reputation via our social media accounts:

Establishing a strong online presence

By actively maintaining social media accounts, the Council acknowledges the expectations of residents who turn to social media for information and updates. By doing so, the Council shows itself to be easily accessible and responsive to the interests, needs and concerns of the community.

Building trust and openness

A corporate social media presence instils trust and transparency in the Council's operations. By sharing relevant information, updates, and insights, the Communications Team aims to foster an environment of openness and approachability. Through social media, the Council provides a place for direct communication, enabling staff to listen to the community's feedback, address their queries, and explain initiatives more effectively.

Amplifying positive stories and achievements

Social media enables the Council to showcase the positive impact the Council has on the community. By highlighting success stories, initiatives, and achievements, the team can celebrate progress and promote a positive image of the Council. Engaging visuals, stories, and testimonials shared through social media channels can inspire and create a sense of pride among the community.

Facilitating dialogue and community engagement

By engaging in two-way communication with the community, the Council show it is committed to fostering meaningful discussions, listening to diverse viewpoints, and inviting public input on important matters. By actively engaging with the community through comments, messages, and live Q&A sessions, people's voices are heard, promoting a sense of inclusivity.

Sharing timely and relevant information

Social media enables the Council to release information quickly and efficiently. Whether it's sharing updates on upcoming events, community programmes, or vital announcements, the social media channels need to be perceived as a reliable source for timely and accurate information. By positioning these accounts now as a source of prompt and accurate information, they are in a better position should there be an emergency, and there is a need to communicate quickly with residents (eg during a flood). It is essential that residents trust the content and know to visit the channels regularly for vital information.

Managing and explaining issues

Inevitably negative issues arise and social media provides a place for the Council to explain itself, justify or mitigate decisions actions or inactions and provide context as to why a situation may have arisen. Managing the Council's reputation in this way, whilst being able to reach wide audiences is an important function to calm frustrations and ease negative comment. While publishing this type of content can generate more negative comments, the Council believes in transparency and is also a public body. The number of people who may subsequently change their view of the Council on a specific topic may be out of all proportion to those who post negatively.

By codifying the Council's approach to and use of social media, the actions listed above and in the forthcoming Social Media Policy will all help to increase audiences and engagement rates, while at the same time raising the reputation of the Council.

With the support of residents, and by fostering a community that feels listened to and supported, the Communications Team will be able to provide better, faster and more effective information to the public.

**For all information contained within this document
contact:**

Runnymede Borough Council
The Civic Centre
Station Road
Addlestone
Surrey KT15 2AH

Tel: 01932 838383

email: communications@runnymede.gov.uk

www.runnymede.gov.uk

Further copies of this publication,
or copies in large print other
formats or languages
can be obtained via the
above contact details.



Search: Runnymede Borough Council

Report title	Social Media Policy
Report author	Peter Le Riche, Head of Public Relations and Marketing
Department	Chief Executive's Office
Exempt?	No

Purpose of report:

To resolve

Synopsis of report:

The Council has been active on social media for several years. In the last two years use of this channel of communication has grown, both in terms of audience numbers and relative importance in how the Council reaches local people.

In addition, Council staff now use more functionality of the various social networks and interact to a greater extent with the public. The time is now right to implement a policy which:

1. Brings a framework to the use of social media for staff members operating the Council's corporate accounts.
2. Set out how the Council acts, operates and manages its social media platforms.
3. Explains to the wider social media community how they may expect to be treated in specific circumstances.
4. Gives guidance for staff members' personal use of social media, insofar as it could affect the Council or result in disciplinary proceedings.

The policy falls into two parts:

1. Governance, management and usage arrangements.
2. Day to day publishing and community management.

Recommendation(s):

The Committee is recommended to approve the Social Media Policy and authorise the Head of Public Relations and Marketing, and his delegates to implement it on a day to day basis.

1. Context and background of report

- 1.1 The Council uses social media to communicate about its work, successes and the services it provides to the community. The main social media platforms in use are Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and Nextdoor.
- 1.2 A small number of service areas also have sub-accounts in Instagram.

- 1.3 Until the last two years, social media had been used in a productive but basic way, primarily with text and pictures being posted, and engagement with residents taking place in a limited way.
- 1.4 More recently, through staff changes in the Communications Team, which is responsible for social media, the type of content, functions used and level of resident engagement have all increased substantially.
- 1.5 As a result, the time is right to introduce a policy bringing structure and a framework to how the Council and its staff operate on council-branded social media. This will provide clarity for employees and the public about the way in which commonly used functions or activities are carried out, and the restrictions within which the team works.
- 1.6 The policy also provides guidance for all employees about the personal use of social media insofar as it affects the Council.

2. Report and, where applicable, options considered and recommended

- 2.1 Using social media to communicate with residents is now the most important way in which the Council can reach large audiences in an effective manner. It has become integral to the way in which information is shared, successes are highlighted and the authority's work is explained.
- 2.2 As a result the Council publishes information on its corporate social media channels daily, or multiple times per day.
- 2.3 The variety of content created and the range and type of interactions with the public have grown substantially over the past two years. On a regular basis the Communications Team now publishes, videos, slide shows, image galleries and graphics as well as individual photos. A wider range of information is also shared in text format.
- 2.4 Employees also respond to followers' comments on multiple topics and explain issues, correct inaccurate statements or provide further detail where appropriate.
- 2.5 Implementing a policy brings structure and sets out how the Communications Team will deal with some of the common situations which arise. It also explains the framework which the Communications Team works in, to demonstrate that social media operation is not a free for all and that restrictions do exist on the types of material which can be published.
- 2.6 It sets out why the Council uses social media, what it is used for, and the types of content which are acceptable and unacceptable.
- 2.7 The policy includes statements on restrictions on confidential information which may become known to the Communications Team and how any attempts by the public to send personal information by social media should be handled.
- 2.8 The policy confirms that the Communications Team 'owns' the Council's corporate social media presence, and how each platform is controlled.
- 2.9 The process for requests for new accounts from service areas is set out, as is the use of social media in partnerships, how complaints and statutory requests for information should be managed.

- 2.10 The use of the Council's logo as its identifier (the equivalent of a person's face) is set out, together with clarification that it would not be adapted or changed in any way to support individual causes or topics. This is because there is no set list of causes or topics which should or should not be supported by the Council, and within the community opposing views may exist on any which are put forward. The Council's role is to serve and be accessible to all members of the community.
- 2.11 The policy also provides information on day to day management, including setting out how content is quality controlled and approved, rules around sharing and responding to direct messages.
- 2.12 Guidance on when the Council would and would not respond to comments is included, as is detail on when comments would be removed, how individual users may be blocked in rare cases and how social media is used during the pre-election period.

3. Policy framework implications

- 3.1 Appendix B within the policy sets out guidance for employees when using their own personal social media, insofar as it could affect the Council's reputation. It explains that as with other behaviour or activities, Council staff remain subject to a number of employment policies and that it is these policies which would be brought to bear if inappropriate behaviour is found to have taken place. This is with regards to the use of the Council's corporate and sub accounts and also by employees using their personal accounts.

4 Resource implications/Value for Money

- 4.1 The policy does not require any extra budget or extra staffing resource.

5. Legal implications

- 5.1 The Corporate Head of Law and Governance has been consulted and his comments incorporated into the policy.
- 5.2 Local authorities have to communicate with residents to inform them of their activities. Historically local authorities would use press releases as the method of communication. With the advent of modern technology the means of communication has greatly expanded. Social media is now a commonly used tool by most organisations.
- 5.3 Controls regarding local authority publicity are contained within the various pieces of legislation, namely the Local Government Act 1972 and the Local Government Act 1986. Under the provisions of section 4 Local Government Act 1986 the Secretary of State may issue one or more codes of recommended practice as regards the content, style, distribution and cost of local authority publicity, and such other related matters as he thinks appropriate; and local authorities shall have regard to the provisions of any such code in coming to any decision on publicity.
- 5.4 In exercise of those powers the Secretary of State issued in March 2011 a Code setting out such guidance. When using social media the Council is subject to the same legal controls as apply to any user of social media regarding the material it publishes.

6. Other implications

6.1 The policy sets out how social media requests relating to the Freedom of Information Act would be managed.

6.2 The Interim Corporate Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development has been consulted and his comments incorporated into the policy.

7. Timetable for Implementation

7.1 Subject to approval, the Policy will be implemented 1 January 2024. It will be reviewed annually.

8. Risk implications

8.1 This policy alleviates the reputational risks associated with the Council's use of social media, by putting in place rules which the users of its corporate accounts must follow. It also sets out what acceptable and unacceptable use and content are and how commonly occurring situations should be handled to create consistency. In addition, the policy identifies that there is a level of risk associated with the Council's presence on social media platforms, in that they are free to use and available to a very wide range of people worldwide, with many different views. The risk of the Council's content being placed in proximity to content advocating negative behaviour, or the negative behaviour of the platforms themselves will be kept under review and action taken appropriately if required.

9. Appendices

- Appendix A – Social Media Policy document

Appendix A

Runnymede Borough Council

Social Media Policy - DRAFT

October 2023

Background, scope and definitions relating to this policy

Runnymede Borough Council is an active user of social media on Facebook, LinkedIn, X (Twitter), Nextdoor, and on Instagram for several individual service areas. The Council also uses Youtube as a platform to host video for use on other outlets such as its website.

Residents engage with the Council on all channels where it has a presence through liking, sharing or commenting on our posts.

Staff members and councillors also use social media platforms extensively in a personal and political capacity.

This policy does not cover Whatsapp, Signal, Meta Messenger or other direct messaging platforms. The use of these platforms is different to other social media in that they involve a greater level of personal data from contacts. As a result the Council does not currently use these platforms for external communication on a regular basis.

The main groupings of social media used in this policy are:

Corporate channels: These are the Council's main social media platforms, which are managed by the Communications Team and content is published as the voice of the authority.

Sub-channels: These are accounts run by individual service areas. They typically have much smaller audiences than the corporate channels, but still publish as the voice of the Council.
Personal social media

Corporate and sub platforms are listed in Appendix A

Definitions:

1. Channel: all of social media.
2. Platform: individual social media sites eg Facebook.com Instagram.com, x.com
3. Page/s: the area of Facebook controlled by an administrator e.g. the Council's area of Facebook.com
4. Groups: communities of people who have come together based around an interest e.g. Chertsey Chatter, Royal Holloway students. Groups are also controlled by administrators.
5. Account / profile – an individual user's personal area of a social media site – the place where people post family photos etc.
6. Community / audience: the people who follow a page or group.

This policy is intended to:

1. Bring a framework to the use of social media for staff members operating the Council's corporate accounts.
2. Set out how the Council acts, operates and manages its social media platforms.
3. Explain to the wider social media community how they may expect to be treated in specific circumstances.
4. Give guidance for staff members' personal use of social media, insofar as it could affect the Council.

The policy falls into two parts:

1. Governance, management and usage arrangements.
2. Day to day publishing and community management.

Governance, management and usage arrangements

Legislative and regulatory framework

The Communications Team carries out all of its work within the parameters set by the following:

1. Politically restricted posts – a statutory restriction on certain types of staff (including all members of the Communications Team) prohibiting them from speaking or publishing work which could be seen as in support of or opposition to a political party.
2. The Council's Constitution.
3. The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity (A 2011 Government publication).
4. Local Government Act 1986.
5. The Runnymede Social Media House Rules which were approved by Councillors in 2023.

The Council uses corporate social media platforms to:

1. Maintain an appropriate online existence which is recognisable as the official presence of the Council.
2. Inform, explain, promote or defend the work and operation of the Council, thus supporting its reputation.
3. Promote the services which the Council offers.
4. Share information which promotes the Council's corporate themes.
5. Promote the Council's successes, to demonstrate to residents that the authority is high performing and provides value for money.
6. Highlight issues relevant to the Borough.
7. Share information from partners.
8. Engage in two-way communication about the Council's work and priorities.
9. Promoting job opportunities at the Council.
10. Encourage community engagement and local events
11. Reaching audiences across a range of platforms and who do not receive the Council's messages elsewhere.
12. Using sub-channels where appropriate, for example to promote a specific service or message
13. Monitor local groups to view conversations or topics which may require input from the Council to be accurate and unbiased.

Acceptable content:

1. Content sourced by the Communications team highlighting wider corporate messages.
2. Content supplied by services.
3. Non-political content sent by Councillors and which does not highlight individual members, for example litter picks, community events.
4. Content supplied by public sector bodies, for example the police, county council, Met Office.
5. Content which uses the Council's local high profile status to bring attention to an issue of public importance.

6. Content which features other community representatives e.g. Borough MPs, county councillors, the Police and Crime Commissioner, health leaders, senior public sector staff or officials, *where doing so assists Runnymede to communicate its message or to demonstrate partnership working.*
7. Content where a councillor is namechecked because they have instigated a course of action (for instance through a motion to Full Council) which has subsequently become Council policy.
8. Content where the Leader of the Council, as the authority's most senior elected member (by virtue of being the leader of the largest group of councillors), gives a statement on an urgent issue, even when the topic has not been debated by a committee.

This situation may arise when there is an emergency or 'breaking news' and there is not time to convene a committee meeting or there is no decision of any committee which could be reflected in the comments. In some circumstances, the public (or journalists) would expect that the Council gives a response within a very short time frame to provide community leadership. In these circumstances, Council staff would advise the Leader to comment in a way that is as neutral as possible, so it is not perceived as predetermining any future decision at a committee. Advice would further include that the Leader should comment in a non-political way.

Unacceptable content

1. Content that doesn't add value or have a useful message for the audience.
2. Content which when published in isolation is unlikely to achieve the expected aim.
3. Promoting events the Council is not involved in (except on Whats On in Runnymede Facebook page as this is its purpose).
4. Promoting products, services, or surveys where there is no link or benefit to the Council.
5. Political content or content intended to encourage people to vote in a particular way.
6. Content which promotes individual councillors and their community work, unless they are the recognised spokespersons for the Council, as set out in the Constitution and are commenting on an issue related to their committee.

Unacceptable use

1. Posting about topics unrelated to the work of the Council or its partners.
2. Bringing the Council into disrepute.
3. Promoting an individual user's outside interests.
4. Personal use of Council platforms such as following individual accounts, re-posts or likes, or viewing pages not relevant to their job.
5. Giving personal opinions.
6. Publishing content which is likely to bring the Council into conflict with other organisations.

Confidential information

Confidential information relevant to the Council or held by it about individuals would be a significant data breach and must never be published on any corporate or sub-channels. Contravening this is likely to result in action under existing Human Resources policies.

If a conversation is more appropriately dealt with off social media, as it appears likely to result in confidential information being exchanged, staff must request via a private direct

message where this is possible either a contact number or email address. This must be done privately to avoid any breach of the Council's [Data Protection Policy](#). Alternatively, the Communications Team would pass on contact details to an appropriate generic email address.

No confidential information, personal data, or contact details relating to or held by the Council which are obtained during the course of employment should be publicised on personal or Council-run social media platforms. Photographs obtained by an employee during the course of their employment or relating to the Council must not be published on personal platforms and should only be used on corporate channels when clear permission has been obtained.

Accessibility of content

As leading businesses required to meet Government accessibility standards, all social media platforms have accessibility built into their systems as standard. Where metadata or alt text can be submitted, such as when posting images, this must always be carried out.

Visual content that is posted must be accompanied by written posts which carry enough information to allow for users of screen readers to have a comparable experience and to understand the main points of the content. On video content, subtitles must be included where there is an audio track.

Ownership, access to channels, responsibility for posting and security

The Communications Team owns all of the Council's current and future corporate social media channels and is responsible for posting on them and ensuring they are maintained and standing information is up to date. The Communications Team will have sole responsibility launching any new corporate channels.

The 'administrators' of each platform will be the members of the Communications Team members required to manage the platform (there are currently three members of the team).

In almost all cases, only the Communications Team will be able to access corporate channels. In exceptional circumstances colleagues from other teams may be invited to become an editor (a lower level of access) if they are deemed to have a regular need to post on corporate channels. This is to maintain security and accountability. Where this the case, a full briefing will be given in advance and the minimum level of access required will be given.

The Communications Team may grant access to external agencies to deliver campaigns on the Council's behalf. Where this is the case, checks will be made in advance to ascertain the veracity and trustworthiness of the agency. This is common practice in the sector.

Two factor authentication tools will be used on corporate social media channels, and on the personal accounts which Communications Team members create to access corporate channels. This is to create extra security and protect the pages from being hacked and used wrongly.

Requests for new accounts, profiles and pages within existing platforms

Any service area requesting new accounts, profiles or pages should make a business case to the Head of Public Relations and Marketing. This should be supported by the Corporate Head of Service.

New accounts, profiles or pages will only be approved if a clear need can be proven, and sufficient resources are made available to maintain the new page with regular content and respond to messages.

If new pages are subsequently found not to be in regular use the Communications Team will request for them to be deleted after a discussion with the relevant senior manager.

Any new pages created will be a part of the Runnymede social media 'family' and must be recognised as a Council channel and branded as such. In practice this means:

1. the profile picture must be the Council's logo,
2. the hours it is monitored must be listed,
3. the biography should reference that the page is owned by the Council, and
4. content posted, whether written or visual, must meet the Council's usual standards including its Style Guide.

Sub-accounts

The Communications Team has overall responsibility for all corporate channels, however a small number of sub-accounts already exist which are the responsibility of individual service areas.

Each head of service must appoint an editor at middle manager level who is responsible for overseeing posts by junior colleagues to check the language, imagery and relevance of posts and ensuring incoming messages are responded to promptly.

Login details should be individual, not shared, to ensure accountability in case of an incident.

Sub-accounts are part of the Runnymede social media family. With the exception of channels where a separate identity has been approved they must confirm to the points set out in the new pages section above in terms of identity and quality.

Monitoring

Administrators of corporate accounts can see which users have posted every piece of content. Any evidence of inappropriate use will be dealt with according to this or other relevant policy.

Out of hours

Staff do not monitor corporate or sub-accounts outside of working hours unless there is a specific reason, for instance an emergency or a controversial or high profile post has been published.

Complaints

Members of the public who wish to complain about posts on the Council's social media channels should use the [complaints process](#).

Complaints about councillors' use of social media should be made to the [Monitoring Officer](#). The Monitoring Officer cannot investigate complaints about candidates in elections as this is beyond their powers.

All social media platforms have their own functions for reporting inappropriate posts to the platform itself and members of the public can always use these as they feel necessary.

Use of social media in partnerships

Increasingly services are provided in partnership with other organisations and this can sometimes cause conflicts surrounding issues like branding, names, colours or content.

If the account is controlled by an employee of Runnymede Borough Council, then this policy applies to them.

If the account is administered by a partnership directly, or by someone employed by another organisation, then its own rules will apply, but administrators should be made aware of this policy. The design and use of partnership social media channels will be developed between the services involved and the Communications Team.

Logo

The Council's logo is its social media identity, and is the equivalent of a picture of an individual user's face. It is the only icon or image that should be used in the profile picture section on each platform.

The Council's Style Guide states that the logo is not to be adapted in any way so on this basis it will not be amended to demonstrate support for individual causes, campaigns or activities. The only exception is that on the death of the Sovereign, the logo would be turned black.

The secondary reason for not adapting the logo to support causes is that there is no definitive list of what cause should and should not be supported. Within the local community, different people may have different views on what the Council should be seen to support.

To show support for a cause, publishing posts demonstrating how we do so in a practical or policy based way is more effective.

Statutory requests for information

It is acceptable for people, businesses or organisations to submit Freedom of Information and requests under the Environmental Information Regulations via social media channels. Individual people or their representatives can also submit Subject Access Requests via social media.

To be a legal request, the sender only needs to provide their real name or identifier on a social media platform eg @janesmith123 and an address for correspondence which can be an email, postal or their identifier.

Messages must be addressed directly to Runnymede Borough Council for this authority to respond to them, and must include a clear request for information.

Any [FOI](#), [EIR](#) and [SAR](#) received via social media in public via a post or by notification, or privately by direct message, will receive a brief acknowledgement from the Communications

Team or editor of sub channels asking the sender to provide an email address for ease of communication.

The message will also include information similar to the following statement:

As guidance for the public, while social media is checked daily, the Council prefers requests for information be made via FOI@Runnymede.gov.uk. More detail is available on this [web page](#).

The original message or post and acknowledgment will then be immediately copied and pasted and passed directly to foi@runnymede.gov.uk to be dealt with under existing procedures.

The FOI Officer will formally acknowledge receipt of the request and subsequently deal with it.

Social media content forming part of an FOI response

Where a person submits an FOI request, public comments on social media channels which are relevant may be included as part of the response where these can be traced, but direction will be given by the FOI Officer.

Direct (private) messages will not normally be covered by FOI rules.

Users of corporate accounts should be aware that direct (private) messages about an individual may need to be disclosed if that individual or their legal representative makes a formal Subject Access Request.

Risk to the Council of using social media platforms

Social media platforms are a free to use mass appeal form of communication. While they provide a substantial benefit as a means for the Council to communicate with local people and others, they also carry an element of risk.

This risk is primarily related to the Council's content appearing in close proximity to other content which could breach the Equalities Act, or be seen as inciting other negative behaviour or opinion.

The Council will keep under review the balance between the benefits of using individual platforms, and the risk to its own reputation in having a presence on them. In extreme circumstances, the Council could suspend or end its presence on an individual platform.

Day-to-day community management

Planning and quality control of content

The Communications Team maintains a day by day grid of content to organise material. All posts must be recorded in this grid, and another member of the team must spell and sense check posts before publication.

Most content will be drawn from either the Council's website or news stories, which will previously have been approved via a separate detailed process. Where this is not the case, and social media is the first outlet for information, the sign off procedure will be as follows:

1. Raw information received by Communications Team.
2. Further research carried out with relevant service area to understand the background and context of an issue and to ensure a social media post is the most appropriate and useful way to communicate the message.
3. Draft post text written and visual elements created.
4. Text checked by another member of the Communications Team.
5. Text checked by a member of staff in the service area who is at a minimum a manager-level employee.
6. For high profile or controversial content, the Head of Public Relations will also approve or amend the content.
7. If required, the Corporate Head of Law and Governance will also be asked to check the content.
8. Once all approvals are confirmed, the post will be published or scheduled for publication.

Sharing and retweeting

It is acceptable for users of the corporate and sub-channels to share and repost relevant employee or partner content when appropriate, for example LinkedIn blog posts relating to work. Due care and attention should be given to re-posting businesses or individual's posts.

Council-led posts can also be shared into relevant community groups on Facebook as this is a key way to reach interest groups in the borough.

Due diligence must be taken before following, re-posting, liking or joining community groups using corporate or sub-channels. This would include checking the Council is not in conflict with a business or that a group is not politically motivated.

Responding to direct messages

Where direct messaging is enabled, if enquiring, commenting or critical messages are received the service area account manager within the Communications Team will either respond directly, having researched the facts with relevant business units or notify the Customer Services Team if appropriate and pass on an email address.

In all instances, the preferable action would be to point enquirers to relevant web pages, or to external bodies when responsibility does not lie with the Council. The Council will aim to respond to all messages within three days of when they are received, issuing a holding response if appropriate while a more considered statement is prepared.

Messages which are spam, attacking, offensive or which appear to be rhetorical will not be responded to. Messages where the language suggests that a response could enflame the situation will also not be responded to. Messages from accounts which appear to be spam, bots, marketing, or have profanity in the name will also not be responded to.

Deletion and retention of direct messages

In order to comply with the [General Data Protection Regulation](#) in respect of not holding personal information for longer than is necessary, the Communications Team will delete direct messages after they are no longer required. This is because the messages usually contain personal information in the form of names and an identifying photograph.

On a rolling basis the Team will delete direct messages six months after the last message in a conversation is received and dealt with. 'Dealt with' implies there is no follow-up message after one month.

Monitoring and handling of comments

Social media is a forum for opinion and comment as well as a place for raising genuine questions and seeking information. Across the sector it is recognised that it is not necessary for administrators to respond to every comment on every post. In some cases doing so can lead to amplified negative reaction or more inaccurate information being shared by the community.

Within available resources, the Communications Team will monitor comments on the Council's posts, or incoming direct messages, and use experience to judge whether a response is justified. This will be based on a number of factors, including the tone of the comment and the thread of comments as a whole. Examples might include:

Response given	Response not required
A genuine question is raised	Comments made are opinion or vitriolic in nature
Specific factual misinformation has been posted	Other followers have already defended the Council's position
The reputation of the Council or an individual member of staff has been called into question	The Council is tagged in a post about a service which is not its responsibility (redirection would usually be provided).
The response would add value to the conversation	Where the language used is profane
The response would not enflame a controversial conversation	Any response is likely to enflame a conversation and risk further reputational damage
The response would not re-open a conversation which has ended.	The response is likely to re-open a conversation
New information which can be provided could enhance the conversation	There is no new information to provide
To correct an inaccuracy on the original post	Followers are expressing a general view

The Communications Team does not actively monitor comments about the Council on posts not originating from the Council, and users do not require permission to post a comment about the Council. When the Communications Team is made aware of comments or posts by other users in public groups or on a public account, it will attempt to do so

Removal of comments

Where it is able to, the Communications Team or sub-channel editors will remove any comments on areas of social media that come to its attention which breach the Council's [House Rules](#).

A light touch approach will be taken to comments which could be deemed as mildly offensive as the Council respects others' freedom of speech.

Examples of offensive posts likely to be removed may include:

1. derogatory references to councillors in a specific political party or political group,
2. derogatory comments about a party or political group as a whole,
3. highly offensive comments aimed at an individual councillor, or
4. patently untrue statements about a councillor or other politician.
5. Use of profane language.
6. Threatening posts,
7. Patently untrue statements about the Council as a whole,
8. Comments breaching the Equalities Act 2010, and
9. Posts which are solely intended to provoke disgust or argument.

There will be no right of appeal for removed comments, though it is possible for followers to re-post material in a re-written way which would not be blocked.

The Communications Team will not remove political comments and opinions by users on its posts unless they become particularly offensive. This does not mean that the Communications Team or the Council agrees / disagrees with or condones posts. Intervening in a political argument can place staff members at risk of being seen to be politically motivated depending on the posts which are removed. All Communications Team staff are in a formal category of employment titled 'politically restricted posts' which means they cannot get involved or demonstrate support or disagreement for a party.

Blocking of individual followers

In exceptional circumstances, the Communications Team will block users for reasons listed on the House Rules.

Process for deciding whether or not to block a user

The decision to block an individual would only be taken after a review between the most senior member of the Communications Team available and another senior member of staff, usually the Monitoring Officer. This review would include assessing the severity and regularity of the comments made.

A record of blocked users and the reasons for the block will be maintained by the Communications team.

The owners of blocked accounts can still view the Council's social media pages whilst being logged out as the pages are public, but cannot comment on them.

If a blocked user wishes to appeal, they may do so through the complaints process.

If a follower is blocked, no message would be posted, and the follower would not be informed.

Social media use during the pre-election period

The formal pre-election period begins when a notice of election is published, and runs until the end of voting on polling day.

During the pre-election period extra caution will be taken when posting on social media. Staff will abide by guidance circulated by the Corporate Head of Law and Governance and the additional rules in The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity, which states, *inter alia*

During the period between the notice of an election and the election itself, local authorities should not publish any publicity on controversial issues or report views or proposals in such a way that identifies them with any individual members or groups of members. Publicity relating to individuals involved directly in the election should not be published by local authorities during this period unless expressly authorised by or under statute.

The Corporate Head of Law and Governance has advised that 'Individuals involved directly with the election' in the above statement is taken to mean people standing to be elected and therefore whose names appear on the statements of persons nominated. Therefore existing councillors who are not standing for re-election are not directly involved in the election.

Councillors (and candidates for election) will still be able to use their personal social media, over which the Council has no control, to publish comments on posts on the Council's social media accounts. As these comments are not posted by Council staff they would not be removed unless they meet the criteria above.

The type of content posted by the Communications Team will focus more on day to day council services and great care will be taken to avoid any material which could be deemed as controversial.

Where necessary posts will be published if they are required to counter false information about the Council.

During this period, a member of the Council's Corporate Leadership Team, its most senior staff body, will act as the spokesperson for the Council if an identifiable person is required to speak, and comments will be factual.

Members' use of social media

Members are free to use social media in the exercise of their duties as councillors, and are encouraged to share the Council's posts. Guidance for members on the use of social media is set out in the Members Code of Conduct and the Constitution.

Council staff will not be able to provide training or advice to individual councillors on the use of different social channels, but open training sessions available to all councillors can be delivered from time to time. This approach is aimed at raising the standard of social media output among councillors to allow members to engage in the democratic process and with their ward residents more effectively.

Outside of the pre-election period, councillors may be provided with pictures, graphics or films produced by the Council, for use on their own social media, if they are requested. These will only be made available once they have been published on the Council's corporate channels.

Appendix A: Runnymede Borough Council's social media presence

Platform	Active corporate channel (run by Communications Team)	Sub-channel (run by service areas or Communications Team)
Facebook	Yes	Chertsey Museum Addlestone One What's On in Runnymede
X (Twitter)	Yes	Chertsey Museum Addlestone One Community Services (Sports) Development Management Business Runnymede
Linkedin	Yes	No (Many individual staff members have personal accounts)
Nextdoor	Yes	No (Individual staff members may have personal accounts)
Instagram	No	Addlestone One Magna Square Town Centre Manager Business Runnymede
Youtube	No	Youtube page (Purely as a platform to publish videos for display on the Council's website.)

Appendix B: Guidance on personal use of social media

With the exception of LinkedIn, staff should not use their personal social media accounts for Council business, ie to talk to tenants about their property or to discuss fly tipping. Staff should also exercise caution when posting opinions about work, or their working day on their personal social media.

The onus is on individual staff to ensure their personal social media is not used in a way which breaches any of the Council's policies or brings the authority into disrepute, therefore damaging its reputation.

Inappropriate use of social media channels including but not limited to commenting about the Council negatively, or bullying or harassing colleagues or members of the public, may result in disciplinary action. The following policies and documents may be relevant to staff members who use social media.

1. Bullying and Harassment Policy (forthcoming October 2023)
2. [Code of Conduct for Staff](#)
3. [Runnymede Data Protection Policy](#)
4. [Politically restricted posts](#)
5. [Disciplinary procedures](#)
6. [Councillors' Code of Conduct](#)
7. [Policy for use of information and communications technology by staff \(within the Constitution\)](#)

Privacy

The Council encourages employees to list their employment at the authority on LinkedIn, but does not believe it is necessary on other channels which are for non-work use. The final choice rests with the individual, however, a user identifying publicly as a Council employee on any social media must be mindful as to what content they post and how it will reflect on both themselves and the authority.

If an employee states 'all views are my own' they must still be cautious as any negative comments can still affect the Council's reputation. It is unlikely that this would be a suitable defence if a person has identified themselves as an employee and made a comment which could open them to disciplinary proceedings.

Employees who identify themselves as Council staff should also take care in groups they join or comments which they like or share on personal social media. Being a member of a group promoting banned organisations, or those which are perceived to be dangerous or inflammatory, could create negative perceptions of the Council by association.

Everything published on social media could become public and can be potentially accessed by anyone, or shared and published elsewhere. Even private direct messages can become

public if anyone involved wishes to publicise it by taking a screenshot and posting it publicly. With this in mind, employees should exercise due diligence in groups they join where being revealed as a member could affect theirs and the Council's reputation.

While it is a matter of choice, it is advised that employees should set their privacy level to the highest setting, in order to limit access to personal information and opinions.

Conflicts of interest

Employees involved in contract tendering or purchasing goods and services or any other situation must make clear if they know of anyone in the process they are connected with on social media and who might stand to benefit from a contract or purchase. Employees should identify this to their manager for a decision to be taken whether a conflict of interest could be seen to occur.

Similarly, where staff are caseworkers or involved with vulnerable people, they should not be connected with them on personal social media. Being connected would allow them to see more of the individual's personal information than might be appropriate for a professional relationship, especially if it is with a child. The employee also opens themselves up to risk by allowing their personal life to be accessible to someone they have professional dealings with.

Inappropriate material

If an employee is found to be viewing inappropriate content via personal social media at work or on a Council-owned device it will be formally investigated under the appropriate pre-existing policy and action may be taken.

If an employee is found to be publishing inappropriate content via personal social media relating to the Council, whether at work or in their own time, it will be formally investigated under the appropriate policy and action may be taken accordingly.

Inappropriate content could include confidential information, derogatory or inflammatory comments, bullying or material which breaches the Equality Act 2010, pornography, extreme 'political' or terror-related information or anything which could be seen to bring the Council into disrepute.

The reporting process

If an employee posts inappropriately by accident on personal or Council-owned social media channels, they must immediately attempt to rectify the issue. This may include apologising for any inappropriate behaviour, removing comments or contacting the platform to request for a post to be removed.

Where the post relates to the Council employees are responsible for informing humanresources@runnymede.gov.uk and their manager as soon as possible once the error has occurred, even if attempts have been made to resolve the issue.

Their manager is then responsible for taking appropriate measures, bearing in mind the scale of the audience who may have seen a post and the information posted. The Communications Team will be responsible for dealing with any fallout on the relevant platform.

The Council will seek to understand how mistakes have happened in order to prevent any further incidents, although should the disciplinary procedure be appropriate it will be invoked.

Employees who believe a colleague may have been posting inappropriate material or has breached any part of this policy should inform their manager and Human Resources.

For information on this document contact:

Runnymede Borough Council
The Civic Centre
Station Road
Addlestone
Surrey KT15 2AH

Tel 01932 838383

email: communications@runnymede.gov.uk

www.runnymede.gov.uk

Further copies of this publication,
or copies in large print other
formats or languages
can be obtained via the
above contact details.



Search: Runnymede Borough Council

Report title	Council Tax: Determination of Tax Base for 2024/25 and Estimated Collection Fund Surplus or Deficit at 31 March 2024
Report author	Amanda Fahey, Assistant Chief Executive (s151 officer)
Department	
Exempt?	No

Purpose of report:

To resolve

Synopsis of report:

This report sets out the calculations to determine the Council Tax base for 2024/25 and the estimated surplus or deficit on the Collection Fund at the end of 2023/24, including the respective shares notifiable to the precepting bodies.

Recommendations:

- 1. That the tax base (showing the estimated number of Band D equivalent dwellings within the Borough for the financial year 2024/25) be approved at 35,495.8, and**
- 2. The estimated surplus on the Collection Fund for 2023/24 be declared at £415,403 to be split amongst precepting authorities as set out in the report, in accordance with the relevant statutory requirements**

1. Council Tax Base

- 1.1 The Council is required to undertake a formal calculation of its Council Tax base annually, in accordance with the requirements of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 and the Local Authorities (Calculation of Council Tax Base) (England) Regulations 2012 and to notify precepting bodies of this figure by 31 January.
- 1.2 The tax base is an estimate of the number of chargeable dwellings within Runnymede for the year ahead, which will be used in each preceptor’s budget-setting process to determine the total amount of Council Tax each will expect to receive in the following year.
- 1.3 While the methodology for calculating the tax base is determined by statute, there is an element of local judgement applied in determining the final tax base. The starting point for the calculation is the statutory Council Tax Base form (CTB1) completed in October each year, which takes the number of dwellings in each tax band according to the Valuation Office’s list, and then applies adjustments for various discounts and exemptions and the application of the Council’s Localised Council Tax Support

Scheme. The numbers of dwellings under each Council Tax Band are then converted into an equivalent number of Band D properties to provide a single tax base figure.

- 1.4 When determining the final tax base figure to use for budget setting purposes, the Council can make judgements as to the likelihood of changes to the tax base after the point at which the CTB1 form is submitted, such as future growth or demolition, and the effect of the prevailing economic climate on housebuilding and the take up of Council Tax support.
- 1.5 The other main area to consider is the collection rate to be applied. This allowance is made to provide for the expected level of uncollectible tax. Council Tax nationally has very high levels of collection and Runnymede's own collection rates have remained consistently high, even throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, achieving 97.8% against an estimated 96%. Collection rates will inevitably come under pressure during times when rising costs of living are felt most acutely by households. Year-end collection rates for Runnymede over the past 4 years are set out below:

Year	% collection rate	YOY change
2019/20	98.44%	
2020/21	97.80%	- 0.64%
2021/22	98.29%	+0.49%
2022/23	97.91%	- 0.38%

As at October 2023, collection rates for the current year were marginally below the level achieved by October 2022, at 65.87% compared to 66.23%, a decrease of 0.36%

- 1.6 Given that collection rates in the current year are behind those of the previous year, and on-going economic pressures are likely to be experienced in 2024/25, it is proposed to retain the collection rate for tax base estimation purposes at 97.5%.
- 1.7 On average the tax base reported in the CTB1 each October has grown 1.38% per annum after adjusting for discounts, exemptions and the application of the Council Tax Support Scheme but before any allowance for non-collection. The reduction in tax base as a result of Council Tax Support is shown as relatively static in Oct 2023 when compared to Oct 2022. Taking these factors into account, it is proposed to add 200 Band D equivalents to the reported CTB1 tax base to allow for some modest growth while also reflecting the potential for an increase in support to be required. This will take the CTB1 reported figure from 36,162.4 to 36,362.4 and provides a tax base for 2024/25 of 35,495.8 as set out below.

	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Tax base after allowing for Council Tax Support	35,182	35,712.4	36,362.4
Estimated Collection rate	98%	97.5%	97.5%
Tax base net of non-collection estimate	34,478	34,819.6	35,453.3
Add Armed Forces Accommodation*	46	45	42.5
Total estimated tax base	34,524	34,864.6	35,495.8

*These properties are not subject to a collection rate reduction

2. Calculation of the Council Tax Surplus or Deficit for 2023/24

- 2.1 As the Billing Authority, the Council administers the Collection Fund on behalf of itself, Surrey County Council and Surrey Police and is responsible for collecting the

total Council Tax due from Runnymede residents and ensuring the correct distribution of the Fund between these bodies. Each year an estimate of the amount of Council Tax each will receive is made by multiplying the tax base, as set out in section 1 of this report, by the level of Council Tax each body sets for a Band D dwelling. In the following year, the Billing Authority must estimate the amount over or under recovered against this estimate and share any surplus funds with preceptors, or recoup any deficit, in accordance with their shares.

- 2.2 The Local Government Finance Act 1992 (as amended) requires the Council to determine the estimated surplus or deficit on the Collection Fund in respect of Council Tax by 15 January. This will enable the precepting authorities to factor in their share of any surplus or deficit before finalising their precepts for the following year.
- 2.3 As with determination of the tax base, the calculation of the surplus or deficit is set out in statutory regulations although some element of judgement is also required to estimate the final income position at the year-end due to the timing of the calculation.
- 2.4 The calculation is required to take account of the overall position on the collection fund, as reported in the Council's Statement of Accounts for the prior year, adjusted for payments in and out of the fund in the current year, the estimated closing position on the fund and any changes to collection rates.
- 2.5 The tables below show the estimated surplus on the Collection Fund generated in 2023/24. Based on the latest collection data, these tables show that an estimated £76,128,175 will be collected during 2023/24, compared to original estimates of £75,676,055, producing an estimated in-year surplus of £452,120. This is largely due to the increase in Council Tax base as more dwellings become liable for council tax.

	2023/24
	£
Due to collect as at 31 October 2023	78,080,179
Assumed collection rate	97.5%
	<u>76,128,175</u>

	2023/24
	£
Precepts:	
Surrey County Council	58,400,994
Surrey Police & Crime Commissioner	10,827,899
Runnymede Borough Council	6,447,162
	<u>75,676,055</u>
Probable tax collected	76,128,175
In-year estimated surplus / (deficit)	452,120

- 2.6 This calculation feeds into the table below and is combined with the opening balance on the Collection Fund and other payments to and from the Fund, to produce the anticipated balance at the close of 2023/24.

Estimated Surplus/Deficit calculation 2023/24		
	£	£
Balance on the Collection Fund relating to Council Tax as at 31 March 2023 after provision for bad debt		2,627,088
Less: Surplus paid in 2023/24 (based on forecast made in previous year)		
Surrey County Council	2,061,278	
Surrey Police & Crime Commissioner	375,677	
Runnymede Borough Council	226,849	2,663,804
		- 36,717
Add: Estimated surplus in 2023/24		452,120
Estimated surplus at 31 March 2024 for distribution in 2024/25		415,403

- 2.7 The calculation shows an estimated £415,403 surplus to be distributed to preceptors in 2024/25, allocated to preceptors based on their shares of the Council Tax during 2023/24. The following table sets out the total share of the surplus to be distributed to each authority, and to be included in their budget estimates for 2024/25.

Share of Surplus			
	2023/24 Band D Council Tax	Share	Total share to be distributed in 2024/25
	£	%	£
Surrey County Council	1,675.08	77.2%	320,577
Surrey PCC	310.57	14.3%	59,437
Runnymede BC	184.92	8.5%	35,390
	2,170.57		415,403

- 2.8 The effect on the Council's budget will be an additional £35,390 flowing into the general fund in 2024/25.

3. Policy framework implications

- 3.1 The setting of the Council Tax base and the calculation of the surplus or deficit on the Collection Fund form part of the budget-setting process and inform the medium-term financial forecast which supports the production of the Medium-Term Financial Strategy.

4 Resource implications

- 4.1 The increase in the Council Tax base from 34,864.6 to 35,495.8 will increase the expected Council Tax income due to the Council by £116,722 before any increase in the actual level of Council Tax is considered. The Council will set its final Council Tax level, taking into account Government announcements on referendum limits, at its budget-setting meeting in February. An additional £35,390 will also be released into the General Fund from the Collection Fund as part of the annual surplus calculation, providing additional resources to support the provision of services in 2024/25. The estimated surpluses due to Surrey County Council and the Office of the Police and

Crime Commissioner for Surrey, will be distributed during 2024/25 alongside precept payments.

5. Legal implications

- 5.1 Under the Local Government Finance Act 1992 (as amended) and the Local Authorities (Calculation of Council Tax Base) (England) Regulations 2012 the Council is required to calculate its Council Tax base for the following financial year by 31st January of the preceding year, and to determine the surplus or deficit on its Collection Fund by 15th January, informing the relevant precepting bodies within 7 days of that date.

6. Equality implications

- 6.1 While Equality Impact Assessments are completed in respect of any changes to the Council's Localised Council Tax Support Scheme or to any discretionary Council Tax discount, exemption or premium, there are no direct equality implications pertaining to the calculations set out in this report.

7. Environmental/Sustainability/Biodiversity implications

- 7.1 There are no direct environmental, sustainability or biodiversity implications arising from this report.

8. Risk Implications

- 8.1 The risk of error in the calculation of the Council Tax base or the Surplus or Deficit on the Collection Fund is mitigated to a large extent by adherence to the relevant legislation. However, small variations in the collection rate or changes in the taxbase can have a significant financial impact, particularly for major preceptors.
- 8.2 While Council Tax is a very stable tax, there may be greater volatility in collection rates in the months ahead due to the economic conditions and the effect of the cost-of-living crisis on residents' ability to pay their Council Tax. A prolonged period of high inflation or suppressed housing growth may restrict growth in the tax base while any increased uptake of Council Tax Support will also have a negative impact. These factors have all been considered within this report.
- 8.3 Should the actual tax base for 2024/25 prove to be lower than that estimated, or the surplus anticipated not materialise in full, then this may result in a deficit on the Collection Fund in the future, which will need to be met proportionally by each of the precepting bodies.

9. Timetable for Implementation

- 9.1 As noted in the report, the Council is required to set its tax base for 2024/25 by 31st January 2024 and declare the surplus or deficit on its collection fund by 15th January 2024. Surplus payments to preceptors will be distributed during 2024/25 alongside payment of precepts.

10. Conclusions

- 10.1 The Committee is recommended to approve a Council Tax base of 35,495.8 for the year 2024/25 and to declare a surplus on the Collection Fund of £415,403 for the

year ending 31 March 20234 to be distributed in relevant proportions to preceptors during 2024/25.

11. Background papers

- None

12. Appendices

- None

Report title	Review of Local Council Tax Discounts
Report author	Linda Norman Corporate Head of Customer, Digital & Collection Services
Department	Revenues
Exempt?	No

Purpose of report:

- To recommend to full Council

Synopsis of report:

The purpose of this report is to review the existing Local Council Tax Discounts currently in place.

To recommend the continuation of existing discounts for:

- Care leavers
- Ukrainian Refugees
- Properties affected by flooding

To recommend amendments to the level of Council Tax Discount for unoccupied and unfurnished dwellings and to consider increasing the premium on properties that are long term empty (unoccupied and unfurnished) for more than one year.

From 1 April 2024, to reduce the Council Tax Discount for unoccupied and unfurnished dwellings from 100% for up to 3 months from 100% for up to 28 days.

From 1 April 2025, to increase the long-term empty charges in line with legislation from 50% to 100%, 200% and 300% depending on length of time the dwelling has been empty. This will support the Council's Housing priority and encourage empty dwellings to be brought back into use more quickly.

In addition, there is also the potential to raise additional Council Tax income of approximately £106k of which £9.5k will be retained by Runnymede BC which will reduce pressure on the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) although additional costs will be borne by the Housing Revenue Account and the Council's wholly owned company (RBCI).

Recommendation(s):

To consider and agree to recommend to full Council the amendments set out below:

That with effect from 1 April 2024:

- To recommend the continuation of existing discounts for:

- **Care leavers**
- **Ukrainian Refugees**
- **Properties affected by flooding**
- **the Council Tax Discount for unoccupied and unfurnished dwellings is reduced from 100% for up to 3 months to 100% for up to 28 days (Class C of the Council Tax (Prescribed Classes of Dwellings) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2012)**

That with effect from 1 April 2025:

- **In accordance with Section 11B of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 and Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Act 2018 increase the additional amount payable for Council Tax from 50% to 100% for dwellings that are unoccupied and substantially unfurnished for more than one year**
- **Increase the additional amount of Council Tax from 50% to 200% for properties that are unoccupied and unfurnished for more than five years**
- **Increase the additional amount of Council Tax from 50% to 300% for properties that are unoccupied and unfurnished for more than ten years.**

1. Context and background of report

1.1 Local Authorities were given the powers and flexibility to amend certain Council Tax discounts under the Local Government Finance Act 2012, which were enacted by the Council Tax (Prescribed Classes of Dwellings) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2012 and the Council Tax (Exempt Dwellings) (England) (Amendment) Order 2012.

1.2 The Council has exercised this flexibility under the regulations and has introduced several local discounts over the years:

- 2013/14 Empty and unoccupied properties
- 2015/16 Flood relief discounts
- 2020/21 Care leavers
- 2022/22 Ukrainian refugees

It is worth noting that Runnymede has introduced the last three discounts to support residents in difficulty.

1.3 Section 12 of the Local Government Finance Act 2012 added section 11B to the Local Government Finance Act 1992 enabling Local Authorities to increase the charge on long term empty dwellings (unoccupied and substantially unfurnished for at least 2 years) by up to 50%. The Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Act 2018 further amended this regulation to enable local authorities to increase the amount that can be charged on long term empty dwellings up to 100%.

1.4 The Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 received Royal Assent on 26 October 2023 which reduces the period the increased premium on empty homes can be charged from two years to one from 1 April 2024.

- 1.5 However, as Runnymede has not previously implemented any of the percentage increases for properties that have been empty in excess of two years, a two-stage approach is recommended with regards to changing the discounts and premiums on empty homes.
- 1.6 Stage one will focus on short term empty properties with the proposed reduction of the 100% discount from three months to 28 days from 1 April 2024.
- 1.7 Stage two will look to increase the empty homes premiums from 1 April 2025, which will enable owners to bring properties back into use during the 2024/25 financial year before the proposed increases.
- 1.8 The Levelling-Up Act has also introduced a new section (11C) within the Local Government Finance Act 1992 which specifically relates to dwellings that are occupied periodically, namely second homes. This amendment allows authorities to remove any discount for this category and limit the increase to 100%. Although Runnymede does have some properties (182) that are designated as second homes, the Council has not introduced a local discount for these properties and as such, these owners are already charged 100% Council Tax on these properties.
- 1.9 With the Council's current financial position and the need to look for savings, efficiencies and net revenue reductions of £5.2m by the end of 2025/26 financial year, it seems only pertinent to review the Local Council Tax discounts that are wholly funded by the Council Taxpayer.
- 1.10 It is worth noting that properties left empty where the owner/leaseholder has died and probate has not been granted, they will remain exempt and will not be affected by changes to the empty homes' legislation. Once probate has been granted, there is a further six months exemption which is applied from the date of the grant of probate. After this additional six-month period, if the property has still not been sold or re-occupied, only then will it be considered an empty property and be liable for the empty property premium.
- 1.11 Similarly for properties where the owner/leaseholder is living elsewhere to receive or provide care (excluding a care home or hospital), these properties will remain exempt until such time that the property is re-occupied and are not classed as long-term empty properties so will not be liable for the empty property premium.

2. Report and, where applicable, options considered and recommended

- 2.1 Care leavers (i.e. young people who have been in the care system and have now left) moving into independent accommodation have been identified as finding their finances extremely challenging. With little or no family support and in some cases insufficient financial education, care leavers can find themselves falling into debt and financial difficulty. The Children's Society recommends that care leavers should be taken out of the council tax regime until they turn 25 years of age.
- 2.2 The number of care leavers living in Runnymede in the year 2023/24 is 11 at a cost of approximately £14k. In previous years both SCC and Surrey Police have waived their precepts for this discount, and SCC have recently confirmed they will continue to do so until March 2026. The Council have yet to receive the same confirmation from Surrey Police so the maximum potential cost to Runnymede could be £3,220 based on 23/24 levels, which is minimal when comparing the support provided to vulnerable young adults. As such, it is proposed that this local discount remains

unchanged and is again reviewed in December 2025 to ensure SCC continues to waive their element of the precept.

- 2.3 Following the 2014 flooding in Surrey, Runnymede created a local discount to support residents who had to leave their homes, many of which were uninhabitable requiring significant repairs which went beyond the existing three-month empty discount that was currently in place. Many homes had become uninhabitable with residents displaced and facing financial hardship.
- 2.4 This discount supported over 1000 residents and cost almost £620k in Council Tax exemptions, much of which was refunded by the Government.
- 2.5 The discount has not been applied for in recent years but should remain in force to ensure the Council is ready to support residents in a time of emergency with processes already in place that will alleviate financial and human distress.
- 2.6 In April 2022, the Government laid regulations which made the following changes:
 - Amending the Council Tax (Additional Provisions for Discount Disregards) Regulations 1992 so that a person who has secured a visa under the Homes for Ukraine sponsorship scheme is disregarded for council tax discounts. This will protect the sponsor's single person discount and the 50% discount received by any households where all the occupants are already disregarded.
 - Amending the Council Tax (Exempt Dwellings) Order 1992 so that there is no loss of an exemption where a household hosts a person who has secured a visa under the Homes for Ukraine sponsorship scheme.
- 2.7 However, there was no provision to disregard the £350 thank-you payments for residents who were in receipt of Council Tax Support. To facilitate this, the Government revoked the Collection Fund (Council Tax reductions) (England) Directions 2013 and replaced them with directions specifying that where a discount is provided to offset an increase in liability resulting from a Homes for Ukraine thank-you payment or non-dependant deduction no billing authority payment need be made into the collection fund.
- 2.8 Therefore, billing authorities were able to create a local discount to this effect under existing powers to ensure there is no loss of LCTS to a sponsor family. The amount of discount required was equivalent to the reduction of LCTS lost.
- 2.9 The Council is committed to supporting the Government's Home for Ukraine initiative and as this is no financial impact of granting this discount, it should continue to remain in force.
- 2.10 This leaves the local discounts in force for empty and unfurnished properties left to review. Research with other Surrey authorities shows that Runnymede is the only Surrey Authority that continues to grant an exemption for 3 months, most have reduced to either 28 days or 1 month. The table below details the schemes across the county:

Local Authorities	Unoccupied, unfurnished home discount	Period
Elmbridge	0%	0 days
Epsom	100%	1 month
Guildford	100%	7 days
Mole Valley	100%	0 days
Reigate	100%	28 days
Runnymede	100%	3 months
Spelthorne	100%	30 days
Surrey Heath	100%	0 days
Tandridge	100%	0 days
Waverley	50%	1 month
Woking	100%	1 month

Again several Surrey authorities have taken advantage of the change in premium levels as detailed below:

Local Authorities	Long term empty premium 2 years	Long term empty premium 5 years	Long term empty premium 10 years
Elmbridge	100%	200%	300%
Epsom	100%	200%	300%
Guildford	100%	200%	300%
Mole Valley	100%	150%	300%
Reigate	100%	200%	300%
Runnymede	50%	50%	50%
Spelthorne	100%	200%	300%
Surrey Heath	100%	200%	300%
Tandridge	100%	200%	300%
Waverley	100%	200%	300%
Woking	100%	200%	300%

- 2.11 Given the increasing pressures on housing within the Borough, by reducing the period of empty property discount to 28 days, this will provide a greater incentive for owners of empty properties to bring the property back into use in a timely manner, without putting undue pressure on owners if the discount was totally removed. It puts Runnymede in line with most other Surrey Authorities allowing 28 days for owners to re-let properties without accruing liability.

Band	Total Amount of 3 Months Discount (£)	Total Amount of 28 Days Discount (£)	Difference Between 3 Months and 28 Days
A	3,255.86	999.06	2,256.80
B	9,707.27	2,978.67	6,728.60
C	22,670.33	6,956.38	15,713.96
D	32,015.91	9,824.06	22,191.85
E	18,570.44	5,698.33	12,872.11
F	33,704.15	10,342.10	23,362.06
G	27,132.15	8,325.48	18,806.67
H	5,426.43	1,665.09	3,761.33
	152,482.54	46,789.16	105,693.37

- 2.12 It is also worth considering the potential additional Council Tax that could be raised as a result of reviewing the current discounts levels.
- Potential income for changing the unoccupied and unfurnished dwellings discount from 100% for 3 months to 28 days will raise an estimated £106k in additional Council Tax.
 - If the discount was removed completely, this could raise an estimated £153k in additional income.
 - It is worth noting that any changes in empty discounts will apply to all properties and as such, could have an impact on the Housing Revenue Account, the Council's General Fund (where residential units are being held for sale) and the Council's wholly owned subsidiary (RBCI) which manages the letting of residential units in the private rented sector.
- 2.13 As shown in the benchmarking with other Surrey authorities, many have taken advantage of the increased charges on long term empty properties and whilst Runnymede does not have many properties, there is potential to increase Council Tax on these properties which may incentivise the owners to bringing back into use.
- 2.14 **Appendix 1** shows potential options for Empty and Unfurnished locally defined discounts. By increasing the premium within the amounts permissible within the regulations, this has the potential to raise an estimated £722k in additional Council Tax, split between the preceptors. The current number of empty properties paying the existing premium as of October 2023 is 153. This has remained fairly constant over the past two years which suggests owners of long-term empty properties are happy to pay the existing levels rather than proactively return them to the property market.
- 2.15 However, with the introduction of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023, the definition for long term empty properties has been amended and the time frame has been reduced from two years to one year where the higher amount for long term empty properties can be applied. Should Runnymede choose to implement these new regulations, it gives owners of empty properties very little time to adjust to these changes and bring their properties back into occupation. Therefore, it is proposed that the Council embarks on a communication campaign during 2024/25 to inform

owners of the increase to long term empty properties that will come into force from 1 April 2025.

- 2.16 This will allow owners time to consider their options before facing large increases in Council Tax on their empty properties.

3. Policy framework implications

- 3.1 This change in policy will support the Corporate Business plan with regards to Housing and Financial stability.

4 Resource implications/Value for Money

- 4.1 The estimated additional Council Tax raised by changing both discount schemes would be £828k as follows;

	£
28-day discount	105,693
Empty homes premium	722,075
Total	827,768

and would be shared approximately as follows:

	£
Surrey County Council	637,381
Surrey Police	115,888
Runnymede BC	74,499

- 4.2 In previous years, Surrey CC have reallocated its share of the additional Council Tax funding that directly results from changes in Empty Homes policies. However, as Runnymede are not considering implementing these changes until 1 April 2025, the Council must currently presume that Surrey will retain this proportion of additional monies.

- 4.3 Whilst both the additional income and homes returning to use in a timelier manner would be welcome, implementing this scheme would have additional consequences for the Council.

- 4.4 Currently the HRA are liable for Council Tax on empty properties. As of September 2023:

- 0-3 months 28 properties
- 3-12 months 21 properties
- Over 12 months 16 properties

- 4.5 As at September 2023, the HRA has 16 properties that would be affected by the changes to the long-term premium. Should these changes be implemented, the potential annual cost to the Council could be in the region of an extra £31k Council Tax liability.

- 4.6 28 properties would be affected by the reduction in discount from 3 months to 28 days in the region of £9k. Therefore, the overall potential cost to the HRA based on current costs, including their existing liability of £21k would be £30k for 24/25 year and £61k for 25/26 year.

4.7 In addition to the HRA, there are a further 27 properties owned by the Council's commercial company which could be affected by these changes as they have been empty for over 2 years and the potential cost could be in the region of an extra £104k. By introducing these changes from 1 April 2025, it also provides a slightly longer period for RBCI to progress the sale of Witley House

- 0-3 months 0 properties
- 3-12 months 15 properties
- Over 12 months 27 properties

4.8 Changes to the policy will automatically be administered by the NEC Revenues system with minimal training and testing. However, there will be an annual charge for the licence, support and maintenance of this additional module of approximately £1000 pa which would increase revenue expenditure on the NEC system. However, it should be noted that the NEC empty homes module is designed in line with the existing regulations and therefore, any deviation from the regulations will not be permitted within the software and the Council will be unable to automatically administer the scheme. ^(Obj)

5. Legal implications

5.1 There is no legal requirement to consult on the recommended changes but there is a legal requirement to publish any changes to the Council Tax regime in at least one newspaper circulating in the Billing Authority's area. This must be done within 21 days of the resolution being agreed by full Council.

As the Council does not have a local discount relating to second homes, Section 11C is not relevant.

Making changes to the existing level of discounts means that, as the Billing Authority, the Council will incur the additional costs associated with implementing and administering the changes, although this is not expected to be significant.

5.2 The Children and Social Work Act 2017 places corporate parenting responsibilities on borough and district councils for the first time, requiring them to have regard to children in care and care leavers when carrying out their functions.

6. Equality implications

6.1 Councillors need to demonstrate that they have consciously thought about the three aims of the Public Sector Equality Duty, as set out in Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, as part of the decision-making process. The three aims the authority must have due regard for are:

- eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation
- advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it
- foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic

6.2 The Council must pay due regard to any obvious risk of such discrimination arising from the decision before them. There is no prescribed manner in how the equality duty must be exercised though producing an EIA is the most usual method

The protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race (including ethnic or national origins, colour or nationality), religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation

- 6.3 However, any amendments made to Council Tax discounts for empty or long term empty dwellings are not based on individual circumstances or family characteristics but on whether the property is empty and for how long. Therefore, the recommendations will apply equally to everyone.

7. Environmental/Sustainability/Biodiversity implications

- 7.1 There are no implications on Environmental, Sustainability or Biodiversity implications but by encouraging owners of empty properties to bring back into occupation in a timely manner may have a positive impact on communities where properties are not left unkempt or rundown which may impact on environmental issues.

8. Risk implications

- 8.1 There is also a risk to the collection of debts resulting from any changes. The recommended levels are based on the considered implications on collection whilst, at the same time, maximising the potential income opportunity for the Council.
- 8.2 By taking a two-stage approach to implementing changes to the empty property discounts, will allow owners of long-term empty properties more time to decide what they do with these properties before they are liable to pay the increased charges.
- 8.3 The revised discounts may lead to some complaints and appeals. Section 13A of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 allows for the Council to reduce or remit any amount of Council Tax (at the full cost of the Council). These powers can be considered in certain circumstances where a dwelling cannot be occupied, such as fire or flood damage.

9. Other implications

- 9.1 There are none.

10. Timetable for Implementation

- 10.1 That with effect from 1 April 2024:
- the continuation of existing discounts for:
 - Care leavers
 - Ukrainian Refugees
 - Properties affected by flooding
 - the Council Tax Discount for unoccupied and unfurnished dwellings is reduced from 100% for up to 3 months to 100% for up to 28 days (Class C of the Council Tax (Prescribed Classes of Dwellings) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2012)
- 10.2 That with effect from 1 April 2025:

- Increase the additional amount payable for Council Tax from 50% to 100% for dwellings that are unoccupied and substantially unfurnished for more than one year
- Increase the additional amount of Council Tax from 50% to 200% for properties that are unoccupied and unfurnished for more than five years
- Increase the additional amount of Council Tax from 50% to 300% for properties that are unoccupied and unfurnished for more than ten years.

11. Conclusions

- 11.1 The Council is under severe financial pressure and by undertaking a review of locally set discounts, there may be an opportunity to increase income whilst ensuring vulnerable residents are still protected.
- 11.2 Two of the discounts relating to care leavers and ‘thank you’ payments for Sponsors supporting Ukrainian refugees have minimal impact on the Council’s budget and therefore should continue to support these two areas of work.
- 11.3 Whilst there have been no recent applications for flood relief, this discount will play a critical role in alleviating financial hardship in times of emergency so should also remain in force.
- 11.4 Changes to empty property discounts will bring in much needed income and encourage owners of empty properties to bring them back into occupation.
- 11.5 It will also align Runnymede with other Surrey authorities who have already reduced their empty property discounts.
- 11.6 By allowing a 28-day exemption for empty properties, this will continue to support landlords giving them time to ‘make good’ the property prior to reletting.
- 11.7 By deferring the implementation of the long-term empty property increases until 1 April 2025, this will enable owners to bring properties back into use during the 2024/25 financial year before they are liable for the proposed increases.

12. Background papers

There are none.

13. Appendices

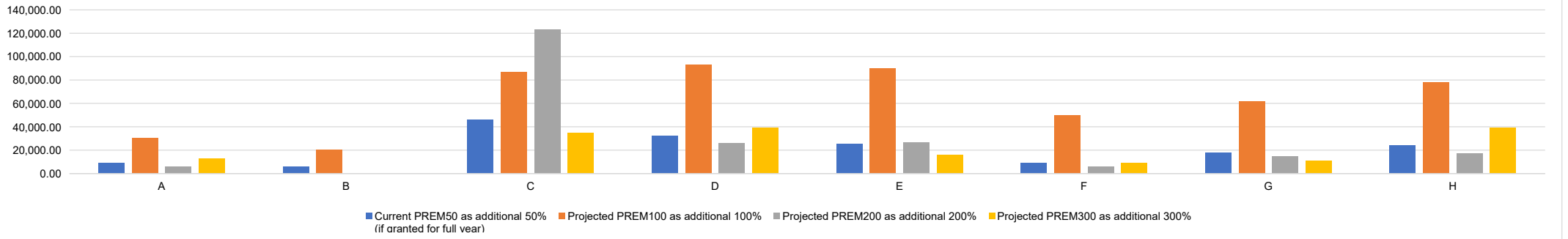
- Appendix 1 – Projected increase for long term empty properties.
- Appendix 2 – Options for Empty and Unfurnished discounts

Projected Figures for Increasing PREM50 from 50% to 100%, 200% and 300%

Appendix 1 - Options for Empty and Unfurnished Locally Defined Discount (Premium) - Over 1 years, 5 years and 10 years

Band	Numer of PREM50 Properties	2023/24 Charges (£)	Full Liability	Current PREM50 as additional 50% (if granted for full year)	Accounts over 1 but under 5 years	Projected PREM100 as additional 100%	Accounts over 5 but under 10 years	Projected PREM200 as additional 200%	Accounts over 10 Years	Projected PREM300 as additional 300%	Additional Revenue To Collect
A	13	1447.05	18,811.65	9,405.83	21	30,388.05	2	5,788.20	3	13,023.45	39,793.88
B	7	1688.22	11,817.54	5,908.77	12	20,258.64	0	0.00	0	0.00	14,349.87
C	48	1929.39	92,610.72	46,305.36	45	86,822.55	32	123,480.96	6	34,729.02	198,727.17
D	30	2170.57	65,117.10	32,558.55	43	93,334.51	6	26,046.84	6	39,070.26	125,893.06
E	19	2652.92	50,405.48	25,202.74	34	90,199.28	5	26,529.20	2	15,917.52	107,443.26
F	6	3135.27	18,811.62	9,405.81	16	50,164.32	1	6,270.54	1	9,405.81	56,434.86
G	10	3617.62	36,176.20	18,088.10	17	61,499.54	2	14,470.48	1	10,852.86	68,734.78
H	11	4341.14	47,752.54	23,876.27	18	78,140.52	2	17,364.56	3	39,070.26	110,699.07
	144	20,982.18	341,502.85	170,751.43	206	510,807.41	50	219,950.78	22	162,069.18	722,075.95

Options for Empty and Unfurnished Locally Defined Discount - Over 1 years, 5 years and 10 years



Projected Figures for Increasing PREM50 from 50% to 100%, 200% and 300%

The below shows records for RBC Housing and RBC Alex Williams properties separately but please note these are also included in the figures above.

Runnymede Borough Council (Housing) Only

Band	Numer of PREM50 Properties	2023/24 Charges (£)	Full Liability	Current PREM50 as additional 50%	Accounts over 1 but under 5 years	Projected PREM100 as additional 100%	Accounts over 5 but under 10 years	Projected PREM200 as additional 200%	Accounts over 10 Years	Projected PREM300 as additional 300%	Additional Revenue To Collect
A	7	1447.05	10,129.35	5,064.68	11	15,917.55	1	2,894.10	0	0.00	13,746.98
B	4	1688.22	6,752.88	3,376.44	4	6,752.88	0	0.00	0	0.00	3,376.44
C	1	1929.39	1,929.39	964.70	5	9,646.95	0	0.00	0	0.00	8,682.26
D	0	2170.57	0.00	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0.00
E	0	2652.92	0.00	0.00	2	5,305.84	0	0.00	0	0.00	5,305.84
F	0	3135.27	0.00	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0.00
G	0	3617.62	0.00	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0.00
H	0	4341.14	0.00	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0.00
	12	20,982.18	18,811.62	9,405.81	22	37,623.22	1	2,894.10	0	0.00	31,111.51

RBC C/O Alex Williams Only

Band	Numer of PREM50 Properties	2023/24 Charges (£)	Full Liability	Current PREM50 as additional 50%	Accounts over 1 but under 5 years	Projected PREM100 as additional 100%	Accounts over 5 but under 10 years	Projected PREM200 as additional 200%	Accounts over 10 Years	Projected PREM300 as additional 300%	Additional Revenue To Collect
A	0	1447.05	0.00	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0.00
B	0	1688.22	0.00	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0.00
C	26	1929.39	50,164.14	25,082.07	13	25,082.07	25	96,469.50	0	0.00	96,469.50
D	1	2170.57	2,170.57	1,085.29	2	4,341.14	1	4,341.14	0	0.00	7,597.00
E	0	2652.92	0.00	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0.00
F	0	3135.27	0.00	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0.00
G	0	3617.62	0.00	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0.00
H	0	4341.14	0.00	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0.00
	27	20,982.18	52,334.71	26,167.36	15	29,423.21	26	100,810.64	0	0.00	104,066.50

Appendix 2 - RBC Investments (Surrey) Limited

Band	2023/24 Charges (£)	Current Accounts with 3 Months Disc	Amount Due with 3 Months Discount (£)	Total Amount of 3 Months Discount (£)	Amount Due with 28 Days Discount (£)	Total Amount of 28 Days Discount (£)	Amount Due when No Discount Applied (£)
A	1,447.05	0	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
B	1,688.22	0	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
C	1,929.39	3	4,341.13	1,447.04	5,344.15	444.02	5,788.17
D	2,170.57	0	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
E	2,652.92	0	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
F	3,135.27	0	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
G	3,617.62	0	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
H	4,341.14	0	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
			4,341.13	1,447.04	5,344.15	444.02	5,788.17

Therefore, if we were to change from 3 months to 28 days discount it would result in an increase of liability to collect of:

£1,003.02

The table below shows how this is calculated when broken down by band:

Band	Total Amount of 3 Months Discount (£)	Total Amount of 28 Days Discount (£)	Difference Between 3 Months and 28 Days
A	0.00	0.00	0.00
B	0.00	0.00	0.00
C	1,447.04	444.02	1,003.02
D	0.00	0.00	0.00
E	0.00	0.00	0.00
F	0.00	0.00	0.00
G	0.00	0.00	0.00
H	0.00	0.00	0.00
		1,447.04	444.02
			1,003.02

Report title	Financial Inclusion and Housing Benefit Overpayment Recovery
Report author	Linda Norman
Department	Housing Benefits
Exempt?	No

Purpose of report:

To resolve

Synopsis of report:

To review how Housing Benefit debt can be recovered in a more targeted and efficient way, taking a collaborative approach to debt recovery and financial inclusion.

To approve a 12-month pilot for a dedicated resource to undertake detailed analysis of the outstanding Housing Benefit Overpayment debt and collate any other debts owed to the Council to facilitate a corporate approach to multiple debt recovery.

To approve the procurement and implementation of specialist software to access credit reference agency data. This data will provide information on a resident's propensity to pay and how the Council can then best recover monies owed whilst having regard to the individual's personal financial circumstances.

Recommendation(s):

To approve a supplementary estimate of approximately £50,000, to employ a dedicated resource to undertake a more corporate approach to debt recovery whilst having regard to a person's propensity to pay, to be funded from the Service Transformation reserve

Committee approve the business case for Welfare Support and Corporate Debt Software and to release the £20,000 provision set aside in the capital programme to procure the specialist software systems to access third party financial information to maximise collection of monies owed to the Council, to be funded from the Service Transformation reserve.

1. Context and background of report

- 1.1 Housing Benefit overpayments are often created when there is a change in the customers circumstances that is reported late. As non-beneficial changes in entitlement generally take effect from the Monday after the change, this is how many overpayments arise. However, there are also overpayments that are caused by deliberate fraud or wilful neglect in reporting changes that would have led to a lower

entitlement which create large overpayments for individuals who then struggle to repay the amounts.

- 1.2 In 2009 Housing Benefit Overpayment recovery was transferred to Finance where one part time Overpayment Recovery Officer and the Exchequer Services Manager dealt with all overpayment recovery through the Finance system issuing Sundry Debtor invoices.
- 1.3 Following a staffing review in Financial Services, it was agreed that the recovery of Housing Benefit overpayments would return to the Housing Benefit Team. It was anticipated that the recent system improvements within NEC including the facility to set up Direct Debits, deduct from ongoing benefit, create payment arrangements, an integrated overpayment module and better management reports, would mean the Housing Benefit Team were better placed to manage this debt.
- 1.4 In September 2022, £1.3m of Housing Benefit overpayments were transferred back to the Housing Benefits team to undertake this work.
- 1.5 Whilst some initial analysis of the debt was undertaken to try to understand which debts were still recoverable, which were on payment arrangements, which were being managed within Total Finance and which were in NEC, the level of debt still remained very high with £1.1m outstanding due to the lack of a dedicated resource to manage the debt.
- 1.6 In February 2023, the DWP undertook a health-check of the Council's overpayment debt to assist the Council with its approach to debt recovery.
- 1.7 The report identified that there were inaccuracies between the NEC system and Total Finance with many cases being shown as paid in Finance but outstanding in NEC. Severe delays in the recovery process were identified due to the separation of debt being moved out of NEC into Total Finance. The average time from the initiation of the debt to recovery was 93 days which is far too long from a debt recovery perspective.
- 1.8 Payment arrangements of £5 and £10 were accepted irrespective of the level of debt outstanding with some having decades to run before they were paid in full. These amounts are way below the statutory deductions set by the DWP for attachments to benefits and whilst it is appreciated that some of these arrangements were set up to support those customers on low incomes, it is unreasonable to have such payment arrangements in force where the customer will never be clear of the debt.
- 1.9 The DWP calculated that the Council's current collection rate for 21/22 year was 21.8% which is comparable across other Surrey authorities. However, as councils receive 40% subsidy on overpayment debt, any payments above 60% is considered additional revenue to the Council and should be recovered in an efficient manner whilst still having regard to the customer's ability to pay.
- 1.10 Currently there are not the resources within the Benefit Team to effectively analysis and target this debt and with every year that passes, the Council is collecting less monies than have been raised. Each year, the debt is growing as Benefit is often paid in advance and with the cost-of-living crisis and various government grants for the team to deliver, this area of work although important, is not a top priority.

2. Report and, where applicable, options considered and recommended

- 2.1 With the cost-of living crisis, many Local Authorities are finding that they are chasing the same customers for multiple debts who are often in financial difficulty and unable to effectively manage their finances. Staff resources are not being targeted effectively with different staff often dealing with the same customer and payment arrangements are defaulted on as the customer is overwhelmed and unable to meet their obligations.
- 2.2 Many households will face financial hardship, and this will result in loss of income to the Council as customers prioritize food and heating overpaying for Council services. Non-payment of statutory areas such as Council Tax and Rents may result in enforcement action with increased costs, potential evictions or imprisonment. Customers may choose to cancel services such as care alarms and meals at home to try to meet their obligations which could put vulnerable residents further at risk. Non-payment will also affect the Council's income and ability to provide services and it is important to have efficient and effective recovery mechanisms in place to maintain the Council's cash flow.
- 2.3 Debt advice charities are often overwhelmed with the number of people requiring their services with many charities having waiting lists for financial support advice. With a lack of financial advice and support readily available, many residents feel unable to manage their finances and are unable to break the cycle of debt.
- 2.4 There is now vast amounts of data available to the public sector to enable authorities to make informed decisions on a customer's ability to pay and allow councils to work with customers to break the cycle of debt, ensuring they are receiving all benefits and financial support they are entitled to and effectively recovering monies that is owed to the Council. By procuring a software system that is able to give a single view of debt and the debtors' credit score will enable the Council to make a more informed decision about how to recover monies owed.
- 2.5 The use of Ascendant Solutions with robotic process automation (RPA) has a proven track record of bringing efficiencies to Revenues and Benefits services in identifying and supporting vulnerable families through third-party data enhancement. One of their modules is currently being used to administer the much-needed Household Support Fund. Their 'Pathway' solution can provide a clear picture of our residents' financial situations. Ascendent have partnered with Vulnerability Registration Service (VRS) which further enhances their data, not just providing financial data, but also incorporates the VRS data of the customers that have registered themselves as vulnerable.
- 2.6 Local Authorities that are using the Pathway solution have implemented tailored solutions for those in financial hardship. As such, they have seen increased engagement including earlier engagement with their customers. As part of the software solution, standard template letters are available for use.
- 2.7 For those who are unable to pay, the Council can work with these families and other partners to look at solutions for reducing the liability whilst targeting those that can pay in an effective manner. Currently service areas are working independently chasing smaller and smaller disposable incomes and not looking at the implications across the Council on whether non-payment in other areas will result in more costly recovery.
- 2.8 With a more corporate debt approach to collection which is intelligent led through software systems that access relevant data to identify a person's propensity to pay, staff resources can be targeted affectively to recover monies owed to the Council and support residents during this economic crisis. Currently debt recovery across the Council is department led with each service area focusing on their own collection rates

without consideration of the impact service specific payment arrangements may have on the customer or the organization corporately. Legislation relating to recovery varies widely across categories of debt with eviction or imprisonment being the ultimate penalty for non-payment.

- 2.9 It is quite common for customers to have multiple debts particularly those on low incomes or who are more vulnerable and unable to manage their finances effectively. There is often a strong correlation between customers who are in receipt of Housing Benefit and Council Tax. Quite often, if there is an overpayment in Benefits, there will be arrears for Council Tax and if the customer is also a Council Tenant, there may be rent arrears as well.
- 2.10 By employing a corporate resource to look at all Council debts, working collaboratively with colleagues, using local intelligence and specialist software systems, ensuring all available benefits, discretionary payments and budgeting have been explored to maximize the disposable income of the customer, this will provide a more individual and compassionate approach to debt recovery which will enable the Council to effectively recover monies owed whilst supporting vulnerable customers in a time of most need.
- 2.11 In addition to the implementing the Pathway solution, it is proposed to employ an additional member of staff on an initial 12-month fixed contract at Scale 10 (£50,000 including on-costs) to undertake a data cleansing exercise of the Housing Benefit overpayments, collating other debts owed across the Council to pro-actively recover much needed revenue to the authority.
- 2.12 It is anticipated that approximately £450k of revenue could be recovered in a 12-month period which would be returned over a number of years. This role would be expected to visit vulnerable customers in their homes to provide a safe environment where they are able to discuss in depth their individual circumstances.
- 2.13 At the end of the 12-month period, a post-pilot review would be undertaken to assess the impact of the pilot on collection rates, whether any unexpected benefits such as reduction in administration and recovery costs have been delivered and whether a corporate debt approach should be made permanent and what the associated ongoing revenue costs would be against the potential increase in income achieved.

3. Policy framework implications

- 3.1 This pilot underpins the Council's Corporate Theme of 'Health and Wellbeing'. The Council is committed to supporting vulnerable residents particularly through the current cost of living crisis. However, with the Council's current financial position and the need to look for savings, efficiencies and net revenue reductions of £5.2m by the end of 2025/26 financial year, it seems only right that the Council should consolidate its approach to debt recovery to ensure all monies owed are recovered in an efficient manner whilst having regard to individual financial circumstances.

4 Resource implications/Value for Money

- 4.1 Having a specialist resource will enable customers to have a single point of contact and receive compassionate and professional advice to ensure that the Council's income is protected whilst ensuring payment plans are affordable and realistic.

- 4.2 Whilst this post will predominantly work on the 700 cases within Housing Benefits, the postholder will work collaboratively across the organisation to ensure any other debts are dealt with at the same time to avoid duplication.
- 4.2 With better financial data from third party organisations, we should be able to predict more accurately the collection rates and will be able to write off irrecoverable debts in a more efficient manner. Independent credit reports will enable the Council to decide best course of recovery and by working with customers on the whole debt will ensure scarce disposable income is allocated fairly across the organisation.
- 4.3 Potential to recover monies owed in a more organised and methodical without increased legal costs which the customer may be unable to afford.
- 4.4 Clear targets will be set as the Council can no longer afford to lose income through inefficient processes and poor payment arrangements. Collection rates for Housing Benefit Overpayments will be set at 45% to ensure the Council maximises this area of revenue.
- 4.5 The 2023/24 budget approved by full Council in February 2023 included a capital provision of £20,000 for Welfare support and corporate debt software (The Ascendant Pathway solution), along with a £2,000 ongoing revenue provision for ongoing licencing and maintenance costs, subject to a future committee report, including the submission of a full business case for member approval.
- 4.6 In order to ensure that the system is set up correctly and used to its greatest potential, the original business case has been amended to reflect and additional revenue growth of approx. £50,000 for the 12-month pilot that has been identified as 'an invest to save' initiative. This is to be funded from the Service Transformation Reserve approved by Councillors earlier in the year.
- 4.7 It is also now proposed to fund the Welfare support and corporate debt software from the Service Transformation Reserve rather than Capital Receipts as originally planned. This will help preserve our capital receipts and is more in keeping with the intentions of the new reserve.

5. Legal implications

- 5.1 The Council is able to collect monies owed under various statutory instruments and regulations including:
- The Social Security Administration Act 1992 and the Housing Benefit Regulations 2006 set out the definition of an overpayment and how it may be recovered.
 - The Council Tax (Administration and Enforcement) Regulations 1992
 - The Traffic Management Act 2004
 - Part 3 of, and schedule 12 to, the Tribunals, Courts and Enforcement Act 2007 and the Taking Control of Goods Regulations 2013.
- 5.2 Section 112 Local Government Act 1972 allows a local authority to appoint such officers as they think necessary for the proper discharge by the authority of such of their or another authority's functions as fall to be discharged by them and the carrying out of any obligations incurred by them in connection with an agreement made by them. An officer appointed under this power shall hold office on such reasonable terms and conditions, including conditions as to remuneration, as the authority appointing him think fit.

6. Equality implications

6.1 Councillors need to demonstrate that they have consciously thought about the three aims of the Public Sector Equality Duty, as set out in Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, as part of the decision-making process. The three aims the authority must have due regard for are:

- eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation
- advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it
- foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic

6.2 The Council must pay due regard to any obvious risk of such discrimination arising from the decision before them. There is no prescribed manner in how the equality duty must be exercised though producing an EIA is the most usual method. The protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race (including ethnic or national origins, colour or nationality), religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation.

6.3 It is anticipated that this pilot will have a positive impact on those with protected characteristics as a dedicated resource will assist those individuals on a case-by-case basis. An EIAQ has been completed and approved by the Equalities Board.

7. Environmental/Sustainability/Biodiversity implications

7.1 Reduced journeys for customers to the Council offices as staff will visit in homes and assist with applications for benefits and able to verify original documents at that time.

7.2 Potential to reduce issuing of recovery notices through better engagement and payment plans via online and Direct Debit channels.

8. Risk Implications

8.1 There are some risks that have been identified with this pilot:

- Salary may not attract suitable calibre of candidate
- Anticipated collection target may be too high and not realise expected income
- Existing staff across different service areas may not have capacity to deal with cases in a more intensive and personal way
- Pilot may be successful but no further funding for future years

8.2 Some mitigation measures have been put in place to reduce these risks:

- Ensure advert and job description is clear, promoting benefits of role both from an employee and resident perspective. Grade is set at a more senior level to reflect complexity and individual responsibility to attract the right candidate
- Once data cleanse completed and unrecoverable amounts written off, recalibrate collection target based on 50% income required and monitor monthly
- Introduce monthly corporate case management reviews which may be a more effective use of other service staffs' time. Case conferences will share local intelligence together with objective credit reports will ensure resources are targeted effectively with uncollectable debt written off
- Close monthly monitoring of collection rates will soon establish whether the project is a success and an extension can be considered in the following year's budget setting process

9. Other implications

9.1 There are none.

10. Timetable for Implementation

10.1 Direct award of The Ascendent ' Pathway' Software to be undertaken and software Implementation and training undertaken from January 2024 to March 2024.

10.2 Job description, advert and recruitment process to be undertaken from January 2024 to March 24.

10.3 Appointment of Financial Inclusion Officer from April 2024.

11. Conclusions

11.1 The Council currently has a collection rate of 21.7% for Housing Benefit overpayments. The current level of Housing Benefit debt is just under £1m.

11.2 For any increase in the collection rate above 60%, this is considered as extra income from the Council and as such, should be considered as a priority for the Council given its current financial position.

11.3 There are no additional resources within the Housing Benefits Team to prioritise this work and with the current cost-of-living crisis, the team are fully committed to processing benefits and administering various government grants.

11.4 Debt recovery is currently service led with very little collaborative working resulting in duplication and low recovery rates.

11.5 By changing the Council's approach to debt recovery and having a more holistic and collaborative approach which is data driven can lead to more positive outcomes for both the resident and the Council.

11.6 By employing a dedicated resource who can work with residents on an individual basis, ensuring they have claimed all the financial support they are entitled to help increase their disposable income and will enable the resident to break the cycle of debt. By consolidating the monies owed and creating achievable payment plans will ensure all service areas receive something every month without putting undue pressure and hardship on the individual.

11.7 By using financial data to assess an individual's propensity pay will inform the Council on the right approach to debt recovery. It is anticipated that residents will fall into three categories:

- Green: Can pay but have been evasive
- Amber: Have some financial difficulties and need support or signposting
- Red: Those who are in severe financial difficulties and may also be vulnerable

12. Background papers

- There are none

13. Appendices

- Appendix 1 – EIAQ
- Appendix 2 – Business case for Welfare Support and Corporate Debt
- Appendix 3 – Business case for HBO Debt Recovery resource

Appendix 1
EQUALITY SCREENING

Equality Impact Assessment guidance should be considered when completing this form.

POLICY/FUNCTION/ACTIVITY	LEAD OFFICER
Financial Inclusion and Housing Benefit Overpayment Recovery	Linda Norman

A. What is the aim of this policy, function or activity? Why is it needed? What is it hoped to achieve and how will it be ensured it works as intended? Does it affect service users, employees or the wider community?

To have a more holistic and collaborative approach to debt recovery whilst being aware of an individual's financial circumstances and their propensity to pay. The Council will be embarking on a 12-month pilot to employ a dedicated resource to analysis the current level of Housing Benefit debt and then work collaboratively with other service areas to identify multiple debts to avoid duplication of effort and harassment of the customer.

B. Is this policy, function or activity relevant to equality? Does the policy, function or activity relate to an area in which there are known inequalities, or where different groups have different needs or experience? Remember, it may be relevant because there are opportunities to promote equality and greater access, not just potential for adverse impacts or unlawful discrimination. The Protected Characteristics are; Sex, Age, Disability, Race, Religion and Beliefs, Sexual Orientation, Marriage and Civil Partnership, Gender Reassignment, Pregnancy and Maternity.

This will be relevant to equality as the Council will be engaging with various individuals across the Borough who may owe the Council money for various reasons such as non-payment of Council Tax, Housing Benefit overpayment, rent arrears, parking fines and sundry debt invoices. Some of these individuals may have protected characteristics and as such, should be treated in a fair and transparent manner.

If the policy, function or activity is considered to be relevant to equality then a full Equality Impact Assessment may need to be carried out. If the policy function or activity does not engage any protected characteristics then you should complete Part C below. Where Protected Characteristics are engaged, but Full Impact Assessment is not required because measures are in place or are proposed to be implemented that would mitigate the impact on those affected or would provide an opportunity to promote equalities please complete Part C.

C. If the policy, function or activity is not considered to be relevant to equality, what are the reasons for this conclusion? Alternatively, if there it is considered that there is an impact on any Protected of Characteristics but that measures are in place or are proposed to be implemented please state those measures and how it/they are expected to have the desired result. What evidence has been used to make this decision? A simple statement of 'no relevance' or 'no data' is not sufficient.

A full impact assessment is not required as it is anticipated that this pilot will have a positive impact on those with protected characteristics as the Council will be providing a more collaborative and holistic approach to debt recovery, treating debtors as individuals. Access to third part data including those that have registered on the Vulnerability Registration Service (VRS) will enable the Council to take into account an individual's circumstances ensuring they are in receipt of all benefits and discounts they are entitled to and providing individual bespoke support to assist vulnerable residents in managing their finances and breaking the 'cycle of debt'

This screening assessment will need to be referred to the Equality Group for challenge before sign-off.

Date completed: 06.11.23

Sign-off by senior manager: Linda Norman

Project Initiation Stage

Project/Item Title	Welfare support and corporate debt software		Version	1
Corporate Head	Linda Norman	Service Area	Customer, Digital and Collection Services	
Service Committee to Approve Budget	Corporate Management Committee			
Anticipated Cost of Proposal (Capital)	£20,000	Anticipated Cost Proposal (Revenue)	£2,000	
To be completed for Projects only				
Type of Project	Improvement	Project Duration	26weeks	
Proposed Project Start Date	Sep-23	Proposed Project End Date	Mar-24	

Business Case Context

Background

Describe the purpose of the Business Case, what benefits are expected to be delivered or what problem will be solved (What is wrong with the status quo? What are the drivers for change?). Is the scheme a result of legal/statutory requirements or a stakeholder consultation?

Coming out of Covid and with the current economic crisis, many residents are struggling with the cost of living and the energy crisis. Runnymede is committed to supporting vulnerable residents and whilst the Government have announced various schemes to mitigate the position, the rising costs of fuel, food and other essentials are putting many households at greater risk of both immediate hardship and reduced opportunity and wellbeing. Many residents not only have Council Tax and rental liability due to the Council but also subscribe to other services where payment is required and currently each service area is working in silos with no appreciation of customers individual circumstances and propensity to pay whilst keeping a roof over their heads. Each separate department is chasing for the same disposal income without prior knowledge of the resident's personal circumstances and propensity to pay. Quite often, service areas who have 'got in first' have taken what little money there is leaving other areas with difficult decisions to be made around recovery and cancellation of services provided. Whilst there needs to be a distinction between those who can't pay and those who won't pay, better financial intelligence is required to deal with an individual as a customer of the whole council and work with the customer to support them in difficult circumstances and break the cycle of debt. Many 'rob Peter to pay Paul' and with closer collaborative working and a single view of debt, this will enable officers to work with customers to prioritise their commitments and reduce non payment across Council services.

Do nothing: Many households will face financial hardship and this will result in loss of income to the Council as customers prioritise food and heating paying for Council services. Non payment of statutory areas such as Council Tax and Rents may result in enforcement action with increase costs, potential eviction or imprisonment for non payment. Customers may choose to cancel services such as care alarms and meals at home which could put vulnerable residents further at risk and without financial intelligence and collaborative working, many residents could fall into real hardship and poverty. Non payment will also effect the Council's income and ability to provide services and it is important to have efficient and effective recovery mechanisms in place to maintain the Council's cash flow.

List your Business Case Objectives, ensuring they are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timely

By purchasing software that gives the Council a single view of debt which integrates with major financial systems that give an overview of a persons ability to pay will enable the Council to target its resources effectively working with those customers who need additional support in managing their finances and working on mutually acceptable payment plans that secures the Council's monies whilst not causing hardship to the resident. Where systems indicate that repayment will never be made, the Council can decide not to waste time and costly resources to try to recover the debt when there is little scope of repayment but target resources to help those in need where financial support can improve the outcome for all concerned.

List the Constraints or Parameters in which this Business Case will operate

Technology solution needs to be procured and ensure that it is able to sit across the varied backoffice systems the Council holds to capture the relevant data.

List the Outcomes and Benefits (including efficiency gains) you expect the scheme to achieve

By having an holistic approach to debt management and working more collaboratively across the Council, income should increase and vulnerable customers start to break the cycle of debt improving quality of life for the resident and their families

Appraisal of Business Options (must include evaluation of a 'do nothing' option)

Option 1 (preferred option):

Description

Describe the preferred option and why. Describe the current position and the consequences/reasons that do nothing is not a viable option.

To procure a software system that is able to give a single view of debt and the debtors credit score will enable the Council to make a more informed decision about how to recover monies owed. For those who are unable to pay, the Council can work with these families and other partners to look at solutions for reducing the liability whilst targeting those that can pay in an effective manner. Currently service areas are working independantly chasing smaller and smaller disposable incomes and not looking at the implications across the Council on whether non payment in other areas will result in more costly recovery.

Benefits (comparison to other options considered)

Consider any tangible benefits of the Preferred Option, consider benefits such as income generation, savings, great efficiency, compliance with legislation / industry standards – soft benefits, reputation, residents' satisfaction, perception of Council

Benefits include better increased collection rates across all service areas and customers dealing with one officer for multiple service areas where realistic and proportionate payments are agreed.

Finance will be able to predict better collection rates and will be able to write off irrecoverable debts in a more efficient manner. Independent credit reports will enable the Council to decide best course of recovery and by working with customers on the whole debt will ensure scarce disposable income is allocated fairly across the organisation

Officers will spend longer with each customer dealing with payments for services not necessarily in their remit

Costs to Organisation (preferred option)	Benefits to Organisation (preferred option)
Cost of software and more staff time spent on individual cases and collaboration	Potential to recover monies owed in a more organised and methodical without increase legal costs which the customer may be unable to afford

Resource Requirements
Staffing Appraisal (preferred option):
 Outline the expected staffing / resourcing requirements for the preferred option in the table below, think about resources required in your team and others. This should include job titles, number of hours worked and salary.

Existing Staffing	New RBC Staff Requested	New External Staff Requested
DS to implement software modules and integration with back office systems and external credit agencies. Staff from finance, revenues, parking, housing, community services require training and		

FINANCIAL APPRAISAL

Finance Appraisal (preferred option) - To be completed with the Finance Department:
 Describe the financial and resource implications of this option. See Financial Appraisal below to capture numbers.
 How will it be financed? Is a Supplementary Revenue Estimate required? Can it be resourced via a Virement (including areas other than your own)?
 Is there other funding available? Has funding been agreed? Demonstrate how the council can receive a return on investment, whether cashable, cost avoidance or quantifying tangible benefits – **Seek advice from your accountant. Business cases will not be considered by the Chief Executive unless a full financial appraisal has been agreed by the Accountancy Team.**

Explain how the cost estimate has been drawn up e.g. based on the costs of a similar project/item; based on quotes from suppliers etc:	Indicative costs have not been obtained as software demos have not been arranged or costs discussed.
Please explain how you have considered the VAT implications of the project/item:	
If this project involves building or refurbishment work within corporate assets has the project/work been consulted on and agreed by the Corporate Head of Strategic Land and Property Assets? Please give details.	N/A

CAPITAL COSTS

Capital Expenditure (specify codes required)	Year 1 (£)	Year 2 (£)	Year 3 (£)	Year 4 (£)	Year 5 (£)	Year 6 (£)
Corporate debt	15,000					
Integration with back office and external systems	5,000					
Total Capital Expenditure	20,000	-	-	-	-	-

Capital Income (specify codes required)	Year 1 (£)	Year 2 (£)	Year 3 (£)	Year 4 (£)	Year 5 (£)	Year 6 (£)
Total Capital Income	-	-	-	-	-	-

Net Capital Outlay	20,000	-	-	-	-	-
---------------------------	---------------	---	---	---	---	---

Estimated Useful Life of the Asset: Where the expected lives of each significant component of the asset are different (i.e. buying a house with a flat roof) you must estimate both the useful life and cost of replacing each component part. Please only include components greater than £20,000 in cost or more than 20% of the total value of the asset.	Estimated Value (£)	Estimated Life (yrs)
Overall asset		
Component 1 (specify):		
Component 2 (specify):		
Component 3 (specify):		

REVENUE COSTS

Revenue Expenditure (specify codes required)	Year 1 (£)	Year 2 (£)	Year 3 (£)	Year 4 (£)	Year 5 (£)	Year 6 (£)
Support and maintenance for system	2,000	2,000	2,000	2,000	2,000	2,000
						86

Less: Savings to existing budget (Please specify)						
Total Revenue Expenditure	2,600	2,600	2,600	2,600	2,600	2,600
Revenue Income (specify codes required)	Year 1 (£)	Year 2 (£)	Year 3 (£)	Year 4 (£)	Year 5 (£)	Year 6 (£)
Total Revenue Income	-	-	-	-	-	-
Net change to revenue budgets	2,600	2,600	2,600	2,600	2,600	2,600
Business Case / Risks						
<i>Outline the risks (Managerial, Financial, Operational etc.) to RBC if delivering the preferred option. A risk summary only is required here.</i>						
Risk Description			Mitigation / Help needed			
Impact						
<i>Consider the impact of the Business Case on the Organisation / Environment / Technology / Commercialisation / Cultural / HR</i>						
Authorisation						
Approved by Corporate Head of Finance					Date	
Approved by Corporate Leadership Team			Date		Priority Score	
Corporate Leadership Team Feedback						
Taken to Corporate Property & Acquisitions Member Working Group / Services and Digital Transformation Working Party (Where applicable)				Date		
Committee Report to be presented to:					Date	

Project Initiation Stage

Project/Item Title	Housing Benefit Debt Recovery and Welfare Assistance		Version	
Corporate Head	Linda Norman	Service Area	Housing Benefits	
Service Committee to Approve Budget	Corporate Management Committee			
Anticipated Cost of Proposal (Capital)		Anticipated Cost Proposal (Revenue)	£50,000	
To be completed for Projects only				
Type of Project	Staffing Growth	Project Duration	12 months	
Proposed Project Start Date	01/03/24	Proposed Project End Date	01/04/25	

Business Case Context

Background

Describe the purpose of the Business Case, what benefits are expected to be delivered or what problem will be solved (What is wrong with the status quo? What are the drivers for change?). Is the scheme a result of legal/statutory requirements or a stakeholder consultation?

Housing Benefit overpayments (HBO) are often created when there is a change in the customers circumstances that is reported late. Some overpayments are caused by deliberate fraud or wilful neglect in reporting changes that would have led to a lower entitlement, others are caused by the way changes are notified and effective dates of changes incurred. In September 2022, following the Financial Services staffing review, HBO was transferred back to the Benefits team without any additional resources. The amount transferred was approximately £1.3m. This has now reduced to approximately £1.07m over the past year with some of the historic debt being written off as uncollectable. However there are still over 700 cases going back many years, with several small balance arrangements that will never clear the debt and are well below the minimum attachment levels set by the DWP. The DWP undertook a review of the Council's HBO and debt recovery processes in February 2023. The recovery rate for HBO debt was established at 21.8%. They also calculated that those arrangements on £5/£10 a month would take 32 years to clear whilst deductions from those in receipt of ongoing benefit or earnings would be paid on average within 12 months. The Council currently receive 60% of the overpayment in subsidy from the DWP. If we collect anything over 40% of the value of any overpayment, this is considered as additional income, so on the value of £1.07m, the Council will have already received £642k, so any income collected above 428k will be additional monies for the Council. A collection rate of 21.8% means that the Council is losing much needed revenue but currently there are not the resources to effectively target this debt. In the last four years the Council has collected less than we have raised, so each year the debt has been growing. Now as Universal Credit reduces the Housing Benefit caseload and we have taken the recovery back into the Benefit Team we are reaching a tipping point where the value of new debt will be less than the value of debt recovered and with the cost of living crisis and various government grants to deliver the team are unable to dedicate a resource to this area of work. This proposal is to employ an additional member of staff on a fixed initial 12 month contract at Sc 10 (£38 276) to undertake a data cleansing exercise of the data and proactively recover approximately £45k per month. This would bring in around £540k in a 12 month period. This role would be expected to include other corporate debts when engaging with the customer and make use of the Financial Inclusion software that is subject to a separate business case and growth bid to ensure these debts that are unrecoverable are effectively written off, those that can pay are proactively targeted with attachment to earnings or benefits and those that are struggling to pay are supported ensuring they apply for all relevant benefits and other support available and individual payment plans agreed. By employing a corporate resource who can look at Council debts as whole, work collaboratively with colleagues using local intelligence for individuals and ensuring all available benefits, discretionary payments and budgeting have been explored to maximise the disposable income of the debtor.

balance arrangement of £

Strategic Links - relate this Business Case to RBC Corporate Strategies and Corporate Values

Corporate Strategies	Describe how this Business Case meets / contributes to the Corporate Business Plan through each of the Corporate Strategies. - Delete those not applicable
Climate Change Strategy <i>Reducing Carbon emissions from the Council's operations and the wider Runnymede community.</i>	By working with individuals and prioritising debts can support residents out of the cycle of debt, reducing the need to send recovery notices by post and arranging payment plans via Direct Debit which is a more efficient and greener payment option
Organisational Development Strategy <i>Enable Officers and Members to perform their duties to the best of their ability and make Runnymede Borough Council the employer of choice for local people.</i>	Officers will be able to work collaboratively across all areas of non-payment ensuring that payments are allocated fairly and objectively with a transparent process, with clear policies and procedures to ensure income is maximised and where customers are not dealing with different areas of the Council
Economic Development Strategy <i>Ensuring that the Borough continues to be a leading economy in Surrey and the wider sub-region.</i>	
Empowering the Community Strategy <i>Evidence Based Decision Making, Listening to residents, Enabling Communities to help themselves and to take control of services or plans for their areas, Working effectively with partner organisations, Dealing with inequalities.</i>	By working with vulnerable customers, ensuring they get access to all the financial support they are entitled to will enable them to take control of their circumstances and worked towards a more sustainable financial future.
Health and Wellbeing Strategy <i>Support the delivery of a range of services and functions to improve outcomes for residents and their quality of life.</i>	By working with residents in managing their finances in a more inclusive way will help break the cycle of debt and enable more positive outcomes for families struggling with the cost of living crisis. Having payment arrangements that go on beyond the statute of limitations is unreasonable and may have a detrimental effect on people's health and well being.
Corporate Values	Describe where this Business Case fits in our Corporate Values - Delete those not applicable
People-focussed – we will put people at the heart of what we do and they will be able to deal with us easily.	By having a specialist resource will enable those customers to contact a single point in the Council and receive compassionate professional advice to ensure that the Council's income is protected whilst ensuring payment plans are affordable and realistic.
Passionate – we will empower our staff to be passionate about all we do.	
Performance driven – we will strive for excellence in all we do.	Clear targets will be set as the Council can no longer afford to lose income through inefficient processes and poor payment arrangements. Collection rates will be set at 50% to ensure the Council maximises this area of revenue
Innovative – we will aim to creatively improve our services and be open to new ways of providing services.	By using third party software to research a customers propensity to pay will ensure customers are treated as individuals where their own circumstances will be taken into account when reviewing their liability.
Promoting equality and diversity – we believe in	By taking an individual approach to debt recovery will ensure individual needs are taken into account rather than

fairness as well as maintaining a diverse workforce so we can draw upon a wide range of views and experiences to meet the changing needs of our communities.

automatic processes where letters and court action are taken in bulk without consideration of individual circumstances

Delivering excellent value for money – we will strive to be as efficient and effective as possible.

The Council need to increase the collection rates from 21.8% to at least 40% to ensure value for money

Collaborative – we will work together and with others to deliver positive outcomes for our communities.

Whilst this post will predominantly work on the 700 cases within Housing Benefits, the postholder will work collaboratively across the organisation to ensure any other debts are dealt with at the same time to avoid duplication

Transparent – we will be open and honest to all about what we do.

List your Business Case Objectives, ensuring they are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timely

Advertise for post Nov 23/ Dec 23. Employ individual from Jan 24. Undertake software training and data cleanse from Jan 24 to Mar 24 using third party software. Prepare unrecoverable and statute barred debts by June 24. Review existing processes and set up monthly corporate debt meetings. Develop comms strategy and reach out to third part charities and partners to advise about change in approach. Implement new approach from July 24 and monitor collection rates. Collection rate target set at 50% (535k) by 1 April 2024

List the Constraints or Parameters in which this Business Case will operate

Technology solution needs to be procured and ensure that it is able to analysis data from various backoffice systems the Council holds to capture the relevant data in a compliant way ensuring GDPR is not compromised.

List the Outcomes and Benefits (including efficiency gains) you expect the scheme to achieve

By having an dedicated resource to review HBO debt management will increase collection rates and ensure old historic debt that is unrecoverable is written off. In addition, this role will be working more collaboratively across the Council, income should increase in other areas, administration decrease as vulnerable customers start to break the cycle of debt improving quality of life for the resident and their families

Appraisal of Business Options (must include evaluation of a 'do nothing' option)

Option 1 (preferred option):

Description
 To employ a dedicated resource to target uncollected HBO debt will ensure the Council can increase its income in this area. Any monies recovered above 40% is additional and can be used to protect other service areas. Currently there is £1.07m owed to the Council much of which is now statute barred from recovery and others have long term arrangements that will ensure the customer is never free of this debt. Once the data cleanse has been conducted, teh resource can then work with other colleagues to ensure all debt owed to the Council is known and a tailored recovery plan can be developed where the Council are aware of the csutomers circumstances and propensity to pay. A dedicated resource can build up a trusting relationship and vist teh debtor in their home where they are comfortable and able to discuss the volume of debt owed and be supported in applying for any additional entitlement to ensure customers are able to maximise their disposable income to meet their financial commitments. By using software system, the Council is able to make a more informed decison about how to recover monies owed. For those who are unable to pay, the Council can work with these families and other partners to look at solutions for reducing the liability and ensure they have applied for any additional financial or other support they could be entitled to which in turn could increase the amount of dispoable income available. For those that can pay, the Council will be able to target collection in an effective manner to protect the Council's income. Currently service areas are working independantly chasing smaller and smaller disposable incomes and not looking at the implications across the Council on whether non payment in other areas will result in more costly recovery.
 Option 2 - to do nothing - The Housing Benefit team can continue to try to reduce new overpayment debt by improving processes including issuing recovery noticesd in a more timely manner and offering Direct Debits to new overpayments to try to maintain the level of debt that is currently due but will not be able to review the 700+ cases within a reasonable time period nor improve on the 21.8% collection rate currently being achieved. In addition, no collaborative working will be undertaken so ophther service areas may be dealing with the same person on multiple occassions

Benefits (comparison to other options considered)

Consider any tangible benefits of the Preferred Option, consider benefits such as income generation, savings, great efficiency, compliance with legislation / industry standards – soft benefits, reputation, residents' satisfaction, perception of Council

Advantages to Service Area (preferred option)

A dedicated resource to review 700+ cases and deal with customers on an individual and case by case basis. Increased collection rates on HBO debt and long term arrangements reviewed to ensure they are in force for a mutually acceptable time period. Write offs for unrecoverable debt will be more efficient and will not create an over inflated picture of debt within HBO

Disadvantages to Service Area (preferred option)

This resource will be expected to work with other areas of the organisation prior to engaging with the customer and as such, may not be able to deal with total case load within 12 month period

Costs to Organisation (preferred option)

This is a revenue growth of approx £50k for the year which is currently not budgeted for

Benefits to Organisation (preferred option)

The staff cost maybe offset by the additional income collected by a dedicated post. There may be a potential reduction in recovery notices corporately and residents are able to manage their finances more efficiently leading to a better quality of life.

Environmental Sustainability Benefits (direct and indirect benefits to support Climate Change Strategy)

Outline any direct and indirect benefits of the Preferred Option that aims to minimise negative and promote positive environmental impacts and/or reduce carbon emissions, where possible

Direct Environmental Sustainability Benefits (preferred option)

Potential to reduce issuing of of recovery notices through better engagement and payment plans via online and Direct Debit channels

Indirect Environmental Sustainability Benefits (preferred option)

Reduced journeys for customers to the Council offices as staff will visit in homes and assist with applications for benefits and able to verify original documents at that time

Negative Environmental Impacts

Resource Requirements

Staffing Appraisal (preferred option):

Outline the expected staffing / resourcing requirements for the preferred option in the table below, think about resources required in your team and others. This should include job titles, number of hours worked and salary.

Existing Staffing	New RBC Staff Requested	New External Staff Requested
DS to implement software modules and integration with back office systems and external credit agencies. Staff from finance, revenues, parking, housing, community services require training and creation of corporate debt staff group	1 new FTE Sc 10 to target HBO debt and provide welfare support to vulnerable residents	

Add any costs into the financial appraisal table.

FINANCIAL APPRAISAL

Finance Appraisal (preferred option) - To be completed with the Finance Department:

Describe the financial and resource implications of this option. See Financial Appraisal below to capture numbers.

How will it be financed? Is a Supplementary Revenue Estimate required? Can it be resourced via a Virement (including areas other than your own)?

Is there other funding available? Has funding been agreed? Demonstrate how the council can receive a return on investment, whether cashable, cost avoidance or quantifying tangible benefits –

Seek advice from your accountant. Business cases will not be considered by the Chief Executive unless a full financial appraisal has been agreed by the Accountancy Team.

Explain how the cost estimate has been drawn up e.g. based on the costs of a similar project/item; based on quotes from suppliers etc:	The Sc 10 is based on the grade the current Homes 4 Ukraine team are on as they are undertaking similar work and support for the Ukrainian refugees.
Please explain how you have considered the VAT implications of the project/item:	
If this project involves building or refurbishment work within corporate assets has the project/work been consulted on and agreed by the Corporate Head of Strategic Land and Property Assets? Please give details.	

CAPITAL COSTS

Capital Expenditure (specify codes required)	Year 1 (£)	Year 2 (£)	Year 3 (£)	Year 4 (£)	Year 5 (£)	Year 6 (£)
Total Capital Expenditure	-	-	-	-	-	-

Capital Income (specify codes required)	Year 1 (£)	Year 2 (£)	Year 3 (£)	Year 4 (£)	Year 5 (£)	Year 6 (£)
Total Capital Income	-	-	-	-	-	-

Net Capital Outlay	-	-	-	-	-	-
---------------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---

Estimated Useful Life of the Asset: Where the expected lives of each significant component of the asset are different (i.e. buying a house with a flat roof) you must estimate both the useful live and cost of replacing each component part. Please only include components greater than £20,000 in cost or more than 20% of the total value of the asset.	Estimated Value (£)	Estimated Life (yrs)
Overall asset	(basis of estimation)	
Component 1 (specify):		
Component 2 (specify):		
Component 3 (specify):		

REVENUE COSTS

Revenue Expenditure (specify codes required)	Year 1 (£)	Year 2 (£)	Year 3 (£)	Year 4 (£)	Year 5 (£)	Year 6 (£)
Staff costs Sc 10 @ 1.285%	50 000					90

Less: Savings to existing budget (Please specify)

Total Revenue Expenditure

- - - - -

Revenue Income (specify codes required)

Year 1 (€) Year 2 (€) Year 3 (€) Year 4 (€) Year 5 (€) Year 6 (€)

Increase in collection rates

450,000 - - - - -

Total Revenue Income

450,000 - - - - -

Net change to revenue budgets

450,000 0 0 0 0 0

Business Case / Risks

Outline the risks (Managerial, Financial, Operational etc.) to RBC if delivering the preferred option. A risk summary only is required here.

Risk Description	Mitigation / Help needed
Salary may not attract suitable calibre of candidate	Advertise in JobsGoPublic, Indeed, Reed. Ensure advert and job description is clear, promoting benefits of role both from an employee and resident perspective. Grade is set at a more senior level to reflect complexity and individual responsibility to attract the right candidate
Anticipated collection target may be too high and not realise income	Once data cleanse completed and unrecoverable amounts written off, recalibrate collection target based on 50% income required and monitor monthly
Existing staff across different service areas may not have capacity to deal with cases in a more intensive and personal way	Introduce monthly corporate case management reviews which may be a more effective use of other service staffs time. Case conferences will share local intelligence together with objective credit reports will ensure resources are targeted effectively with uncollectable debt written off
Pilot may be successful but no further funding for future years	Close monthly monitoring of collection rates will soon establish whether the project is a success and an extension can be considered in the following

Impact

Consider the impact of the Business Case on the Organisation / Environment / Technology / Commercialisation / Cultural / HR

Option 3 (rejected option)

Description

What else have you considered and rejected? Why were they rejected? The DWP has reviewed the Council's approach and level of HBO debt and have made several recommendations. Whilst some business process improvements have already been implemented such as offering DD and reducing the number of days between recovery notices, the volume of debt inherited cannot be effectively tackled within the current staffing of the HB team. The potential loss of income to the Council with a collection rate of 21.8% is not sustainable and the amount of debt is over-stated with historic and unrecoverable debts sitting on the books gives an inflated picture of the position. Staff are already stretched with increase caseloads and the fourth round of the Household Support Fund to administer. Do nothing will mean that some vulnerable people will never be free of this debt with unrealistic and lengthy arrangements that are never reviewed and much needed income due to the Council will not be collected in a timely manner.

Advantages to Service Area (rejected option)

Disadvantages to Service Area (rejected option)

The true picture of HBO debt will not be known as the team do not have the resources to manually go through a review of all cases

Costs to Organisation (rejected option)

Benefits to Organisation (rejected option)

Potential reduction in additional income as collection rates are below the break even level of 40% for subsidy purposes

Authorisation

Linda Norman

Approved by Corporate Head of Finance Date

Approved by Corporate Leadership Team Date Priority Score

Corporate Leadership Team Feedback

Taken to Corporate Property & Acquisitions Member Working Group / Services and Digital Transformation Working Party (Where applicable) Date

Committee Report to be presented to:

Date

By virtue of paragraph(s) 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

Document is Restricted

By virtue of paragraph(s) 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

Document is Restricted

By virtue of paragraph(s) 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

Document is Restricted

By virtue of paragraph(s) 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

Document is Restricted

By virtue of paragraph(s) 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A
of the Local Government Act 1972.

Document is Restricted

By virtue of paragraph(s) 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

Document is Restricted

By virtue of paragraph(s) 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A
of the Local Government Act 1972.

Document is Restricted

By virtue of paragraph(s) 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A
of the Local Government Act 1972.

Document is Restricted

By virtue of paragraph(s) 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A
of the Local Government Act 1972.

Document is Restricted

By virtue of paragraph(s) 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A
of the Local Government Act 1972.

Document is Restricted

By virtue of paragraph(s) 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

Document is Restricted

By virtue of paragraph(s) 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

Document is Restricted