

CAPITAL PLAN LIST C – EVALUATIONS

1.	E-BENEFITS SOFTWARE		
	1.	Specification:	
	(i)	Purpose of the scheme	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To enable applications and declarations of changes in circumstances for council tax and/or housing benefit to be made over the telephone and via the internet 2. To simplify, for claimants, the process for claiming council tax and/or housing benefit 3. To improve the speed with which applications for council tax and housing benefit are processed 4. To improve customer care within the Benefits Section of Financial Services
	(ii)	Relevance to National/Council's Strategic Objectives	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (a) National: Improve the quality of life of children, young people, families at risk and older people. (b) Council: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Increase the availability of electronic information and transactions to help make local services more accessible, convenient, responsive and seamless. 2. To provide financial assistance through the timely and accurate processing of claims for housing and council tax benefit. 3. Achieve top quartile performance in accuracy of calculating benefit due, while sustaining top quartile performance for speed of processing.
	(iii)	Targets for judging success	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (a) An improvement in the best value performance indicator for speed of processing new benefit claims (BVPI 78a) (b) An improvement in the best value performance indicator for speed of processing changes in circumstances to benefit claims (BVPI 78b) (c) An improvement in the best value performance indicator for customer satisfaction (BVPI 80)

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2.

Scheme details:

The following difficulties are associated with the current paper-based system for claiming benefit and reporting changes in circumstances:

- (a) Although the application form has been made as simple as possible, often claimants will fail to answer questions that they must answer before their claims can be assessed, or become confused and give obviously incorrect answers. When this happens, it is necessary to contact the claimant to establish the correct answers.
- (b) A considerable amount of written evidence must be supplied by claimants in support of the answers on the application form and to support information regarding a change to their circumstance. Often claimants are confused as to what evidence they must supply. If the correct evidence is not supplied, then the application or change cannot be processed until the claimant has been contacted and given an opportunity to supply the missing evidence.
- (c) The size and complexity of the application form no doubt deters some people from submitting a claim. These people could well be the ones most in need of benefit. Indeed, there has been research that shows that many elderly people, who should be receiving benefit, do not claim because of the perceived complexity of the system.

The above have two important impacts. First, they delay the payment of benefit to those entitled to benefit. Secondly, they affect the performance of the Benefits Section in terms of how quickly it is able to process new claims for benefit. The speed of processing new claims is measured by best value performance indicator 78a and speed of processing changes in circumstances is 78b..

We consider that the eBenefits software will address these issues in the following ways:

- (a) This means that the claim form or report of change of circumstances form will automatically adapt to the circumstances of the claimant and will prompt the claimant, or whoever is using the form, as to what questions must be answered and what evidence must be supplied in support of the person's answers. Therefore, if the claimant is merely wishing to claim council tax benefit, he or she will be guided through the form and taken only to those questions that are relevant to council tax benefit. The questions relevant to housing benefit will not even appear on the form before the claimant. The claimant will be unable to complete the application form without having answered all the relevant questions.

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3	<p>Additional benefits of the scheme</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) At the point where the claimant has completed the form, the software will provide a list of any further details that are required from the claimant. The software will also provide the claimant with an indication of any other benefits to which he/she might be entitled. (b) An additional function that is offered within the e-Benefits software is provisional entitlement. Once the application form has been completed, the provisional entitlement, which is a one page sheet, informs the claimant of their likely entitlement to benefit. It states that the provisional entitlement is according to the answers provided and is subject to change. This would be an improvement on the benefits calculator that is currently available to claimants via our website.
4	<p>Accessing the software</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) The software can be accessed by the claimant via the internet and my staff have reported that, in their opinion, the software is very user-friendly. Should the software be accessed in this way, the claim can then be sent to the Benefits Section electronically or printed out by the claimant and returned by post. If the claim is sent electronically, the claimant will be required to print out, sign and return a signed, single page declaration. (b) Alternatively, the software could be accessed by the claimant at our offices without the need for the claimant to be seen by a member of the benefits staff, thereby saving valuable staff time. Having spoken to the Customer Services Manager, it is our intention that the software should be available on a PC in the reception areas. (c) There will be occasions when possible claimants will not be able to visit our offices or the customer does not have internet access. For customers that do not have internet access, they will continue to be able to submit paper claims. However, I would propose to install the software on the PCs within the benefits office so that claims could be made via the telephone. The member of staff taking the telephone call would complete the form with details supplied by the caller. The claimant would then, once the claim had been completed, be sent the claim to check along with a declaration to sign and a list of any further evidence that was required in support of their claim. This list would be output by the software. (d) The software can also be installed on a laptop, which will enable any member of staff making a home visit to assist a claimant with completion of the form. The claimant would sign a single page declaration during the visit and the completed application form would be downloaded by the member of staff on their return to the office.

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5	Consultation: We have consulted Maidstone Borough Council, which already uses the software, and have spoken to three other local authorities who use e-benefits software.			
6	Capital Cost: The estimated capital cost of the scheme is £56,000. Software £35,000 Hardware £11,000 Training £10,000			
7	Profiling of Expenditure			
	2007/08 (£'000)	2008/09 (£'000)	2009/10 (£'000)	2010/11 (£'000)
	45	0	0	0
8	Revenue Impact: Support and maintenance charges. £7,500 pa for first 5 years then rising Loss of investment income £2,800			
9	Partnership Funding: None			
10	Post Implementation Review: Twelve months after completion.			
11	Recommendation: Transfer from List C to List A with immediate effect.			