

Date: 4 February 2009

TO: All Members of the Scrutiny
Committee
FOR ATTENDANCE

TO: All Other Members of the Council
FOR INFORMATION

Dear Sir/Madam

Your attendance is requested at a meeting of the **SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** to be held in the **GUILDHALL, ABINGDON** on **THURSDAY, 12TH FEBRUARY, 2009** at **7.00 PM**.

Could Members please bring to the meeting the Executive Agenda for 6 February 2009, and the draft minutes of that meeting, which will be circulated when available.

Yours faithfully



Carole Nicholl
Head of Democratic Services

Members are reminded of the provisions contained in the Code of Conduct adopted on 30 September 2007 and Standing Order 34 regarding the declaration of Personal and Prejudicial Interests.

A G E N D A

Open to the Public including the Press

A large print version of this agenda is available. Any background papers referred to may be inspected by prior arrangement. Contact Claire Litchfield, Democratic Services Officer, on telephone number (01235) 540306.

Map and Vision

(Pages 5 - 6)

A map showing the location of the venue for this meeting, together with a copy the Council Vision are attached.

1. **Notification of Substitutes and Apologies for Absence**

To record the attendance of Substitute Members, if any, who have been authorised to attend in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order 17(1), with notification having been given to the proper Officer before the start of the meeting and to receive apologies for absence.

2. **Minutes**

(Pages 7 - 11)

To adopt and sign as a correct record the minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 17 December 2009 (attached).

3. **Declarations of Interest**

To receive any declarations of Personal or Personal and Prejudicial Interests in respect of items on the agenda for this meeting.

In accordance with Part 2 of the Local Code of Conduct and the provisions of Standing Order 34, any Member with a personal interest must disclose the existence and nature of that interest to the meeting prior to the matter being debated. Where that personal interest is also a prejudicial interest, then the Member must withdraw from the room in which the meeting is being held and not seek improperly to influence any decision about the matter unless he/she has obtained a dispensation from the Standards Committee.

4. **Urgent Business and Chairman's Announcements**

To receive notification of any matters, which the Chairman determines, should be considered as urgent business and the special circumstances, which have made the matters urgent, and to receive any announcements from the Chairman.

5. **Statements and Petitions from the Public Under Standing Order 32**

Any statements and/or petitions from the public under Standing Order 32 will be made or presented at the meeting.

6. **Questions from the Public Under Standing Order 32**

Any questions from members of the public under Standing Order 32 will be asked at the meeting.

7. **Council Sundry Debt and Write Off**

(Pages 12 - 15)

To receive and consider report 158/08 of the Strategic Director and Head of Finance.

8. **Review of the Brown Bins Scheme Administrative Arrangements**

(Pages 16 - 19)

To receive and consider report 156/08 of the Strategic Director.

9. **Government Funded Mandatory Services**

(Pages 20 - 29)

To receive and consider report 155/08 of the Strategic Director relating to the Concessionary Fares Scheme and Disabled Facilities Grants Scheme.

10. **Corporate Governance Third Quarter 2008/09 - to monitor performance and take any necessary action**

To receive and consider report 150/08 of the Senior Management Team.

This report was considered by the Executive on 6 February 2009. Members are asked to bring their copies of the Executive Agendas to the meeting.

The Corporate Governance Third Quarter report can be found at **page 151 of the Executive Agenda.**

11. **Review the Activity of the Executive**

To review the activity of the Executive and consider any references to this Committee.

12. **Referrals under the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules or the Budget and Policy Framework Procedure Rules**

To receive Referrals under the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules or the Budget and Policy Framework Procedure Rules.

13. **Responses of and References from the Executive**

To consider any responses of the Executive to reports of this Committee, together with any references for consideration by this Committee (if any).

14. **Exclusion of the Public, including the Press**

The Chair to move that in accordance with Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public, including the press, be excluded from the remainder of the meeting to prevent the disclosure to them of exempt information, as defined in Section 100(I) and Part 1 of Schedule 12A, as amended, to the Act when the following items are considered:-

Item 15 - Exempt Minutes 17 December 2008

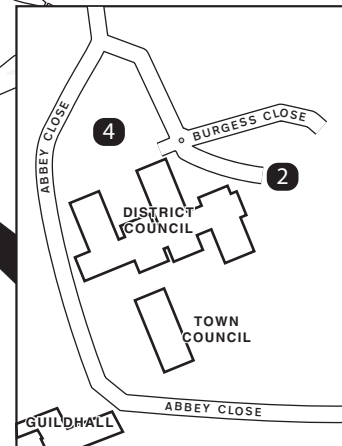
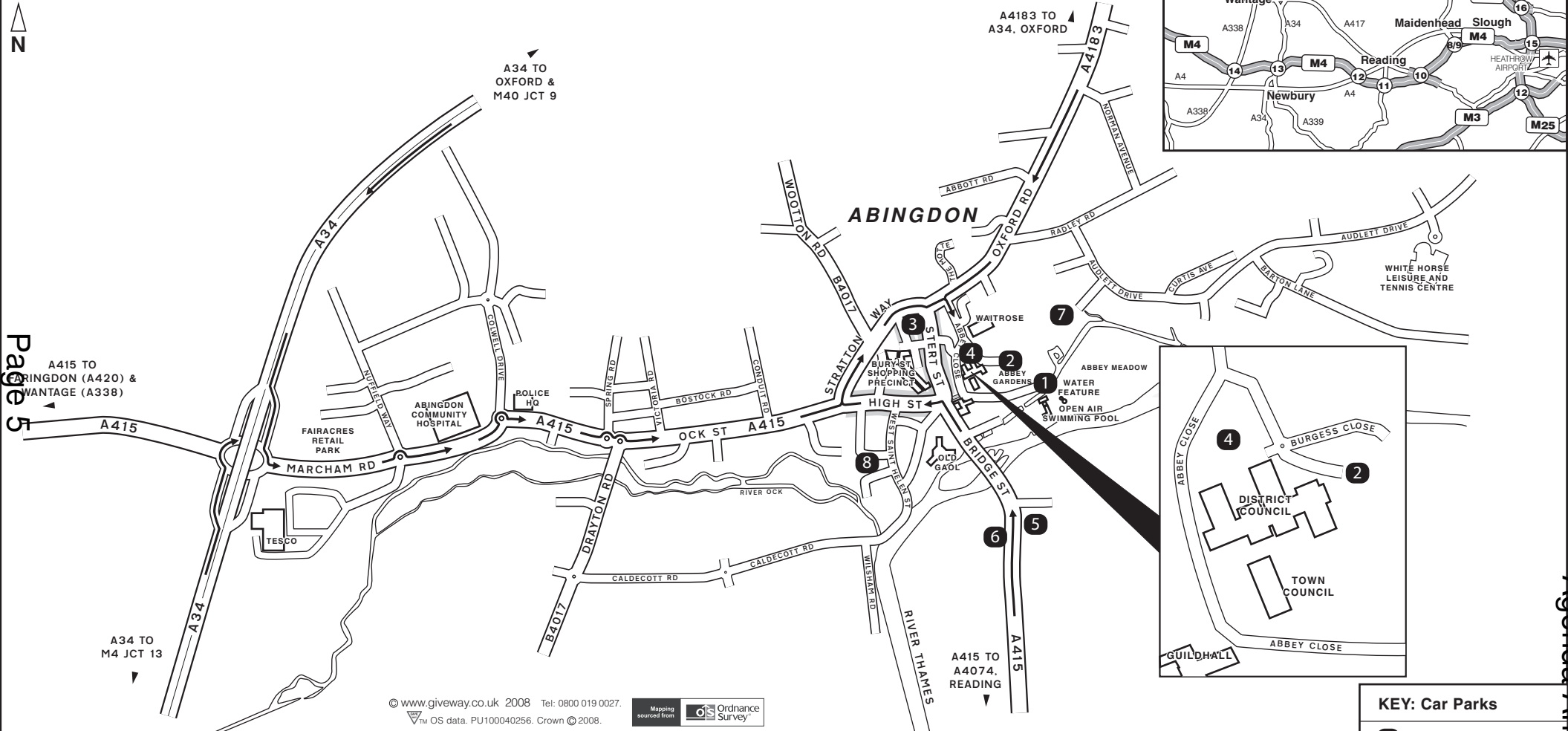
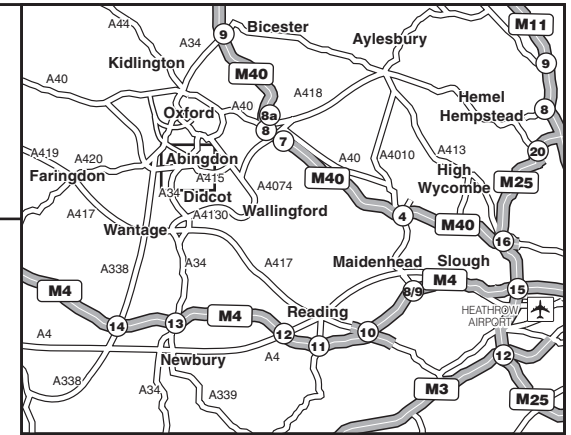
(Category 3 - Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information.)

EXEMPT INFORMATION UNDER SECTION 100A(4) OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

15. **Exempt Minutes**

(Pages 30 - 32)

To receive and adopt as a correct record the Minutes of the Meeting held on 17 December 2009 in Exempt Session.



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OS data. PU100040256. Crown © 2008. Mapping sourced from Ordnance Survey

By rail – the nearest main line railway stations to Abingdon are either Didcot Parkway (seven miles) or Oxford (eight miles). Radley railway station is located on the main line between Oxford and Didcot and is three miles from Abingdon town centre. For details of train times visit www.nationalrail.co.uk or call 08457 484950

By bus – there are a number of bus routes serving Abingdon town centre. For details of services and timetables, visit Oxfordshire County Council's website at www.oxfordshire.gov.uk. Contact details for bus operators can be found on the travel information pages on our website www.whitehorsedc.gov.uk

Parking – details of car parks charges can be found on our website

KEY: Car Parks

1	Abbey Close
2	Cattle Market
3	Charter Multi-storey
4	Civic
5	Rye Farm
6	Hales Meadow
7	Audlett Drive
8	West St Helen Street



The Council's Vision Statement

The Vale of White Horse District Council exists to serve its Citizens across all of its three Towns and sixty-five Parishes. This new Constitution sets out the detail of how this is to be managed. Our guiding principles will continue to be as set out in our "Vision Statement", adopted by the Council on 16th November 2005.

Our Vision and Aims-

Our Vision is to build and safeguard a fair, open and compassionate community

The Vale of White Horse District Council aims to:

Strengthen local democracy and public involvement through access to information, consultation, and devolution of power so that everyone can take part in our community and contribute to the decisions which affect our lives

Create a safer community and improve the quality of life among Vale residents

Encourage a strong and sustainable economy which benefits all who live in, work in or visit the Vale

Help disadvantaged groups and individuals within the Vale to realise their full potential

Provide and support high quality public services which are effective, efficient and responsive to the needs of people within the Vale

Protect and improve our built and natural environment

It will be through the efforts of our staff, our Councillors, our Town and Parish Councils and by all members of our Vale community that we can, together, seek to turn this Vision into action.

*Adopted by the Vale of White Horse District Council
16th November 2005*

Sc.15

**MINUTES OF A MEETING
OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**HELD AT THE GUILDHALL,
ABINGDON ON WEDNESDAY,
17TH DECEMBER, 2008 AT 7.00
PM**

Open to the Public, including the Press

PRESENT:

MEMBERS: Councillors Melinda Tilley (Chairman), Jim Halliday (Vice Chair), Matthew Barber, Andrew Crawford, Yvonne Constance, Jenny Shepherd, Tim Smith, Laurel Symons, Reg Waite and Chris Wise.

SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS: Councillor Julie Mayhew-Archer

NON MEMBERS: Councillors Jenny Hannaby, Jerry Patterson and Tony de Vere.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

OFFICERS: Steve Bishop, Alice Brander, William Jacobs, Claire Litchfield, Mike Mackay and Tim Treuherz

NUMBER OF MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC: 0

SC.27 NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTES AND APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

The Committee noted that Councillors Joyce Hutchinson and Julia Reynolds had sent apologies for absence and that Councillor Julie Mayhew Archer was in attendance as a substitute.

SC.28 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 October 2008 were adopted and signed as a correct record.

SC.29 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

SC.30 URGENT BUSINESS AND CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman welcomed the Members of the Executive who were in attendance at the meeting. She stated that she was concerned whether the Committee would have enough time to consider the budget proposals in full, given the other items which were on the agenda. She suggested that an additional meeting of the Committee could be arranged in January if necessary to consider the budget fully.

The Committee agreed that if the budget proposals were not given enough time at this meeting, that a further meeting could be called in January.

SC.31 STATEMENTS AND PETITIONS FROM THE PUBLIC UNDER STANDING ORDER 32

None.

SC.32 QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC UNDER STANDING ORDER 32

None.

SC.33 REFERRALS UNDER THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PROCEDURE RULES OR THE BUDGET AND POLICY FRAMEWORK PROCEDURE RULES

None.

SC.34 SERVICE AREA HALF YEAR REPORTS

Members had each been allocated service area for consideration.

Contracts and Procurement

Councillor Constance commented that she had read the report and had spoken with the Deputy Director and had no concerns to report.

Environmental Health

Councillor Symons reported the tables on page 27 of the report showed an overspend of more than 50%.

Commercial Services

Councillor Hutchinson was not in attendance at the meeting.

Planning and Community Strategy

Councillor Crawford commented that there was not much to concern him, however he could not see any reference to planning enforcement. He had noted that the planning department had been affected by the economic downturn.

Councillor Halliday commented again that the interface areas between legal and planning, such as section 106 agreements and planning enforcement were not addressed.

Organisational Development – Contact Services and Communications

Councillor Smith commented that he had considered the report and had been pleased to note that staff sickness levels had reduced.

Organisational Development – Organisational Change

Councillor Waite commented that the report had been well written and that he was satisfied with the content.

Organisational Development – Human Resources

Councillor Wise was satisfied with the report.

Democratic Services

Councillor Shepherd had nothing of concern to note.

Legal Services

Councillor Halliday commented that he was pleased to note that the team had enjoyed a number of recent successes. He was disappointed however that there were items which were outstanding from the Service Plan, in particular the establishment of regular meetings with client departments so as to be able to provide a more responsive service. He advised that this was important, particularly in respect of planning enforcement.

Housing and Community Strategy

Councillor Tilley was satisfied with the content of the report.

Finance

Councillor Barber commented that overall he was satisfied with the report and that Officers should be congratulated on a number of notable successes. He questioned what the current position was in respect of the Vale's interest in Landisbanki.

The Strategic Director confirmed that the Local Government Association (LGA) was handling negotiations on behalf of a number of local authorities who had investments with Landisbanki. He advised that the feedback from them was positive and it was hoped that most, if not all of the investment could be recovered, although there were no guarantees at this point. He advised that as a result of current economic problems the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) and the LGA had issued advice and clarification on accounting rules. He reported that at present there were no operational difficulties and the Vale was not experiencing problems in using a tighter group of borrowers.

SC.35 CORPORATE GOVERNANCE REPORT - SECOND QUARTER

Members received and considered the Corporate Governance Report for the second quarter.

One Member commented that in Appendix D, relating to sickness and turnover he had noticed that Contracts and Procurement stood out from the other service areas for quarters 1 and 2 with a figure of 1.92 average days lost. It was reported that this could

be explained by the fact that there had been three cases in the department of long term sickness, two of which had now been resolved.

SC.36 INITIAL BUDGET PROPOSALS

Councillor Patterson was in attendance at the meeting as the portfolio holder for Finance. He stated that the budget proposals had been published earlier this year, so as to give more time for responses. He advised that the budget assumed an increase in Council tax of 4.99%. He stated that William Jacobs, the Head of Finance and Alice Brander, the Chief Accountant were in attendance to answer any detailed questions.

It was noted that one of the proposals was to charge staff and Members £100 per year for parking permits. One Member commented that she was against this proposal, as it would penalise those who lived in areas with no suitable public transport provision.

It was noted that the proposals contained £319,500 per annum until 2014 allocated for concessionary fares. One Member questioned whether the age of the population should be factored in. Councillor Patterson advised that Officer's estimates had been accepted. The Head of Finance stated that it was difficult to predict the cost of this scheme, he commented that it may be the case that the number of people applying for passes falls off following an initial surge of interest. He stated that the scheme would be carefully monitored and charges had been requested on a monthly basis. It was added that it was possible that the scheme would be moved to the remit of the County Council and there was concern that the amount of the Vale's funding which would transfer to the County was uncertain at this stage.

One Member commented that he had been surprised to see the inclusion of a loan to cover the cost of Parliamentary elections within the unavoidable growth bids for Democratic Services. It was explained that this had been included as a possibility to ensure that funds were available to cover it should it be called. There was also surprise expressed at the timing of the loan given the likely election date.

One Member questioned what the assumed rate of inflation was in preparing the budget, given that it was likely that inflation would be reducing. The Head of Finance advised that the figures had been based in respect of salaries at 2-2.5%. He advised that it was likely that these figures would be revisited, given the current economic climate. The Member agreed that this was a sensible approach.

One Member questioned what Strategy (SB) was. The Strategic Director advised that SB, were his initials. He explained that under this heading sat budgets for corporate core, which included all of the senior management team salaries. One Member commented that it would be helpful if that had been made clear. She then went on to question what the LABGI grant was. It was explained that this was the Local Authorities Business Growth Incentive Scheme which recognised good past performance. Another Member suggested that footnotes would have been helpful, so that this would be clear to members of the public considering the budget.

One Member wished to clarify the proposal in respect of an increase in car parking fees. Councillor Patterson explained that there had been an officer proposal to increase car parking charges by 5%, however this had been rejected.

One Member questioned whether the Government's free swimming scheme had been considered. Councillor Patterson replied that the Vale would not be introducing the scheme as it had not been sufficiently funded and would be very costly.

SC.37 REVIEW THE ACTIVITY OF THE EXECUTIVE

None.

SC.38 RESPONSES OF AND REFERENCES FROM THE EXECUTIVE

None.

SC.39 EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC, INCLUDING THE PRESS

RESOLVED

that in accordance with Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public, including the press, be excluded from the remainder of the meeting to prevent the disclosure to them of exempt information, as defined in Section 100(1) and Part 1 of Schedule 12A, as amended, to the Act when the following item is considered:

Item Joint Waste Contract

(Category 3 - Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information.)

SC.40 JOINT WASTE CONTRACT

The Committee received and considered a presentation from the Deputy Director (Contracts and Procurement) relating to the procurement of the Joint Waste Contract with South Oxfordshire District Council.

REPORT OF THE STRATEGIC DIRECTOR
TO THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
12TH FEBRUARY 2009

Council sundry debt and write-off levels report

1.0 Introduction and Report Summary

- 1.1 The Council provides various goods and services to the residents and businesses within the District and beyond. In return the Council receives payment for these goods and services in the form of sundry debtor income.
- 1.2 In accordance with the Council's financial policies it is the Council's aim to recover all income due to it in an efficient manner. Strong and prompt inward cashflow enables the Council to earn more interest at a corporate level which in turn supports the budget and reduces the level of Council Tax required. It also enables the Council to be seen as an efficient, cost-effective, fair and equitable organisation both in its dealings with its external customers and its internal administration procedures.
- 1.3 Authority for the writing off of irrecoverable debt is in accordance with Part 9 of the Constitution. Where recovery action through the legal process has failed or a debtor is untraceable or has been made bankrupt then the debt should be written off. Promptly writing off debts helps to focus on those debts which are pursuable. It also ensures that the level of debtors is not misrepresented in the financial accounts leading to e.g. confusion about the level of bad debt provision to be made.
- 1.4 The contact officer for this report is Paul Howden, Revenues and benefits Client Manager, telephone (01235 540385).

Email address paul.howden@southoxon.gov.uk

2.0 Recommendation

That the Committee reviews the level of debt and write-off and indicates any further specific actions that are required.

3.0 Relationship with the Council's Vision, Strategies and Policies

This report relates to the Council's Vision in that the collection of sundry debt income supports the objective for providing and supporting high quality public services which are effective, efficient and responsive to the needs of people in the Vale.

4.0 Current debt status and actions being taken to maximise collections and minimise write – off levels

- 4.1 The table at **Appendix 1** provides current debt levels against the different service departments as at 5 January 2009 and the value of write-off from 1 April to 5 January 2009. In addition to this there is additional Housing current and former tenant arrears debt totalling £85,000. A total of £650 has been written off in respect of this debt between 1 April 2008 and 5 January 2009.

- 4.2 The Council operates a strict automated billing and recovery process which ensures that debt is progressed through the recovery stages and is not allowed to stagnate. This is supported by monthly meetings between cost centre managers and the council's legal team to decide on the best course of action for debts which have remained uncollected following the issue of reminders and final notices.
- 4.2 Actively managing debt helps to achieve optimum collection rates and minimises write-offs and to this end monthly debt reports are issued to all Heads of Service, Management Team and the Executive Member for Finance. This is helping to focus minds on the importance of maximising revenue collection in relation to sundry debts.
- 4.3 In the last month, the Council has instigated its first bankruptcy proceedings on a debtor that has continued to evade payment. The council needs to enforce these firm but fair measures to safeguard and protect its interests. Along with legal action, which has gleaned £270,000 in the last 12 months, actively managing debt is becoming an ingrained culture of the Council.

STEVE BISHOP
STRATEGIC DIRECTOR

Vale of White Horse District Council - Aged Debt Analysis Report

As at: 05-Jan-09

Business Unit Summary

	Write offs processed since Apr 08	Total Outstanding	<30 days	31 to 90 days	91 to 180 days	181 to 365 days	1 to 2 years	2 to 3 years	3 to 4 years	4 to 5 years	5 to 6 years	> 6 years
	£	£	£	£	£	£	£	£	£	£	£	£
Building Control	-26.25	24,783.20	12,434.26	9,940.47	1,040.36	1,368.11	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Commercial Services	-21,591.52	139,026.51	(3,160.65)	8,455.59	29,494.44	71,179.68	18,922.06	7,050.63	1,172.88	2,060.81	2,775.32	1,075.75
Community Strategy	0.00	(4,396.40)	603.60	0.00	(5,000.00)	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Communications	0	1,360.03	220.80	1,000.00	0.00	1,139.23	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Community Safety/CCTV	-50.00	1,231.95	0.00	1,000.00	0.00	0.00	231.95	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Contracts & Procurement	-653.33	180,836.36	76,594.76	66,000.00	14,552.70	12,414.49	9,963.51	271.00	63.00	102.00	178.70	696.20
Direct Services	0.00	21,891.78	19,813.78	2,078.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Environmental Health	-5,405.72	15,315.00	1,301.26	1,388.37	1,001.87	(1,936.48)	10,622.99	1,563.99	562.00	274.00	262.73	274.27
Estates	-2,001.62	28,439.01	0.00	1,398.26	1,437.37	449.01	22,513.43	2,540.94	50.00	50.00	0.00	0.00
Food/Health & Safety	0.00	1,050.00	1,050.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Food/Health & Safety	-7,506.16	20,450.99	0.00	0.00	(150.07)	0.00	0.00	1,089.36	2,489.41	4,792.79	9,299.50	2,940.00
Housing Register & Homelessness	0.00	622.80	144.00	0.00	478.80	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Human Resources	0.00	3,591.38	414.00	1,800.00	1,150.00	227.38	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Legal & Democratic Services	-522.40	470.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	(570.00)	940.00
Legal Services	-416.00	3,915.00	197.00	685.00	2,778.00	785.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Mobile Home Parks	0.00	61,328.06	1,369.80	5,689.50	1,758.00	52,510.76	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Organisational Change	0.00	14,812.00	14,812.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Organisational Development & Support	-90.00	18,989.02	0.00	30.00	0.00	11,750.00	2,293.32	3,709.62	1,206.08	0.00	0.00	0.00
Car Parking	0.00	967.95	967.95	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Parks & Open Spaces	0.00	73,899.41	54,328.67	19,570.74	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Planning & Community Strategy	-1,515.00	2,766.65	154.96	929.52	1,567.62	114.55	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Property Services	0.00	157,455.01	15,494.63	118,848.05	100.00	23,012.33	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Ridgeway Services	0.00	70,925.15	3,846.75	0.00	0.00	67,078.40	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Sports Development	0.00	24,917.00	24,917.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Waste Services	-1.00	281.00	0.00	(4.00)	285.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Capita use only	0.00	(10,420.04)	0.00	0.00	(109.13)	(674.51)	(9,636.40)	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
	-39,779.00	854,518.82	225,504.57	237,779.50	49,884.96	239,517.95	54,910.86	16,225.54	5,543.37	7,279.60	11,946.25	5,926.22

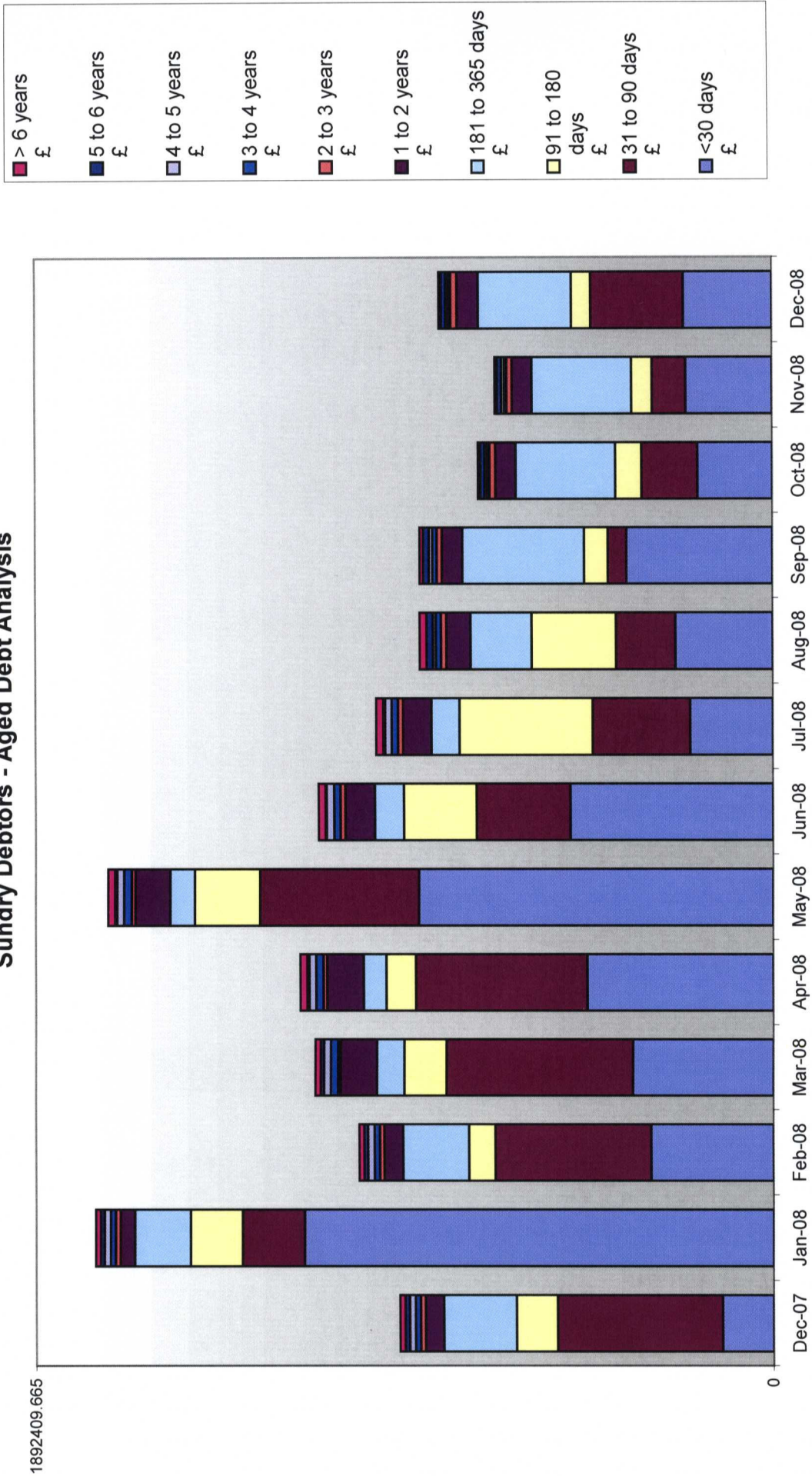
Nov-08	710,487.73	219,402.58	86,613.36	52,637.82	256,419.51	51,043.48	13,585.59	5,741.95	7,271.19	11,767.55	6,004.70	
Oct-08	754,324.87	189,898.67	143,535.34	67,554.38	52,321.41	14,745.37	14,745.37	5,860.17	6,656.67	11,759.09	5,797.43	
Sep-08	905,717.80	372,507.32	45,054.02	60,894.57	313,545.24	52,802.23	13,078.95	11,454.02	8,998.55	14,803.35	9,579.55	

Note Mobile home debt includes the full annual rental invoice issued in April 08 however this is paid by agreement in weekly/monthly instalments the actual outstanding debtor figure for Mobile Home Parks is £8770.90

2008/09 Invoice Collection Figures

During 08/09 invoices raised by the Council have totalled £4,644,630 and £3,733,676.00 has been collected during 08/09 in respect of these invoices. £4,558,601 has been collected in respect of all outstanding invoices.

VOWHDC
Sundry Debtors - Aged Debt Analysis



REPORT OF THE STRATEGIC DIRECTOR
TO THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
12TH FEBRUARY 2009

Review of the Brown Bins Scheme administrative arrangements

1.0 Introduction and Report Summary

- 1.1 The Council introduced a garden waste collection ('Brown Bins') scheme four years ago. It is an 'opt-in' subscription scheme, open to all residents. For an annual subscription of £33 (2008/09) the Council provides a brown wheelie bin which is emptied by the Council's waste collection contractor on a fortnightly basis throughout the year. The scheme has been an operational success, steadily growing as more residents join, and currently contributes 3,850 tonnes in recyclable/compostable material, diverting it from landfill.
- 1.2 The administrative arrangements for maintaining customer records and processing subscription income have been problematic. The action plan attached to this report sets out the main problems and the actions required to address them. The Committee is invited to query any aspect and assess whether the actions proposed to rectify the problems are adequate.
- 1.3 The contact officer for this report is Steve Bishop, Strategic Director , telephone (01235 540332). **Email address steve.bishop@whitehorsedc.gov.uk**.

2.0 Recommendation

That the Committee reviews the action plan for rectifying the problems in the Brown Bins administrative arrangements.

3.0 Relationship with the Council's Vision, Strategies and Policies

This report relates to the Council's Vision in that it supports the objective for providing and supporting high quality public services which are effective, efficient and responsive to the needs of people in the Vale. The Brown Bins scheme also promotes higher recycling and composting levels which is a key aspect of the Oxfordshire Joint Municipal Waste Strategy.

4.0 Need for an Action Plan

- 4.1 The accompanying action plan sets out the problems and remedial actions which have been identified by officers.
- 4.2 There are financial and budget implications. Some of the problems affect the accuracy of customer records which are used to generate invoices and direct debit instructions to customers. Errors and ambiguities in the customer records have led to delays in recovering debts due to the Council. An estimate of any potential under-recovered income was being calculated at the time of writing this report and this will be provided at the Committee meeting. The inaccuracies in customer records also impact the inventory

of brown bin assets. There is a risk that some brown bins could be misappropriated without the Council being able to trace them or recover them.

- 4.2 In addition to the financial risks there are reputational risks. Errors in the customer records have led to some customers not being invoiced, whilst others have been invoiced incorrectly. These errors have dented some residents' confidence in the scheme and in the Council, which has also resulted in an increase in the level of complaints.
- 4.3 Officers at the Council are working with colleagues at South Oxfordshire District Council and Capita to achieve the action plan, which will rectify the problems and manage the risks.

STEVE BISHOP
STRATEGIC DIRECTOR

ACTION PLAN – to rectify problems with the administrative arrangements of the Brown Bins Scheme

Controller: Steve Bishop

Plan last updated: 4/2/09

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No	Problem	Remedial action	Task owner	Deadline	Achieved/comment
1.	The customer records database (CRM) and financial management system (Agresso) are not synchronised, preventing adequate reconciliation. Consequential risk of inconsistencies, errors and under-recovery of income.	<p>Establish a common identifier field - by inserting the Agresso CustID reference into CRM.</p> <p>1a assess whether this can be done automatically for the 13,170 records which have been manually matched.</p> <p>1b Provide estimate of time needed to synchronise the systems & complete the reconciliation to SB</p> <p>1c 'Freeze' updates to systems during which record matching is completed and adjustments are made to synchronise the systems.</p> <p>1d Perform full reconciliation to demonstrate to SB that the two systems are perfectly synchronised.</p>	<p>Jeremy Beach (JB)</p> <p>JB & Grant Bennett (GB)</p> <p>JB</p> <p>JB</p> <p>JB</p>	<p>6/2/09</p> <p>6/2/09</p> <p>To be determined – see 1b</p> <p>To be determined – see 1b</p>	
2.	Need to quantify any under-recovered income.	<p>2a Estimate the number of payments received (£000s income/annual subscription) and compare to numbers of brown bins issued for each year since scheme introduced.</p> <p>2b Assess the magnitude of any unidentified receipts in the suspense accounts.</p>	<p>Dave Wilson (DW) and accountant</p> <p>Dave Wilson (DW) and accountant</p>	<p>11/2/09</p> <p>11/2/09</p>	
3.	Customers in arrears	3a Liaise with Clare Kingston (SODC) to agree a	DW	6/2/09	

No	Problem	Remedial action	Task owner	Deadline	Achieved/comment
	have not been chased for payment.	<p>common 'stage 2' recovery letter, informing resident of arrears and threatening to remove brown bin unless arrears are paid.</p> <p>3b Agree removal procedure with waste contractor.</p> <p>3c Liaise with Local Services Point to send out all outstanding 'stage 2' letters (LSP to handle resulting customer contacts.)</p>	<p>DW</p> <p>DW</p>	<p>28/2/09</p> <p>16/2/09</p>	
4.	The procedures are not adequately documented, which could lead to further misunderstandings and errors after the two databases are brought into sync.	<p>4a Fully document the new 'steadystate' procedures needed to maintain the accuracy & completeness of customer records, keep the two databases in sync and provide monthly reconciliations to SB.</p> <p>4b Each officer to sign off the procedure as being accurate and will be fully complied with. (NB For Capita this will be incorporated into the contract Service Level Agreement)</p>	<p>JB, DW & James Rainsborough (JB - Capita)</p> <p>SB, DW, JB & Craig Richmond (CR - Capita)</p>	<p>28/2/09</p> <p>7/3/09</p>	

REPORT OF THE STRATEGIC DIRECTOR
TO THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
12TH FEBRUARY 2009

Review of Concessionary Fares and Disabled Facilities Grants

1.0 Introduction and Report Summary

- 1.1 The Concessionary Fares Scheme and the mandatory Disabled Facility Grants Scheme are two services which the Council, along with all other district and unitary councils, has a statutory duty to provide to residents. Both result in the Council incurring significant expenditure, a proportion of which falls on local tax payers.
- 1.2 Several Members of the Scrutiny Committee requested a report from officers to summarise the schemes and set out the financial burdens. The Committee is invited to query any aspect of either scheme and highlight and particular concerns.
- 1.3 The contact officers for this report are: Steve Bishop, Strategic Director, telephone (01235 540332); Ian Forster, Team Leader (Housing Operations) for Disabled Facilities Grants; and, Ben Watson, Senior Revenues and Benefits Client Officer for Concessionary Fares.

2.0 Recommendation

That the Committee reviews the schemes and indicates any further specific actions that are required.

3.0 Relationship with the Council's Vision, Strategies and Policies

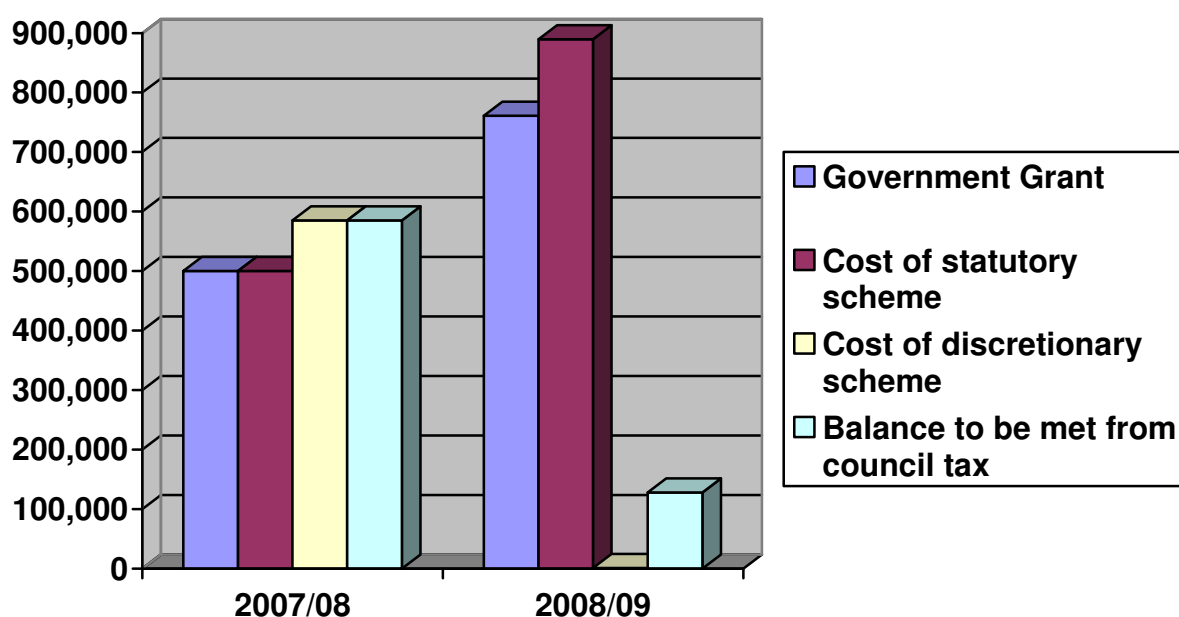
This report relates to the Council's Vision in that it supports the objective for providing and supporting high quality public services which are effective, efficient and responsive to the needs of people in the Vale.

4.0 The Concessionary Fares Scheme

- 4.1 Since April 2006 the council has been under a statutory duty to provide free bus travel for residents aged 60 and above and also for certain disabled residents.
- 4.2 Between April 2006 and March 2008 the statutory duty only required the council to provide free travel within the boundaries of the district. At its own discretion the council chose to enhance the scheme to allow free travel to and from certain neighbouring areas – Oxford City, Newbury, Swindon, Didcot and Witney.
- 4.3 The scheme was tapered back in the Autumn of 2007 to reduce the costs of the scheme. Pass holders could still travel into Oxford City (excluding Park & Ride) but could no longer travel around freely once there.
- 4.4 Since April 2008 the statutory scheme has been extended to allow free bus travel anywhere in England on "local" bus services (which excludes National Express, etc).

- 4.2 There has also been a fundamental change in the way that councils pay for the journeys undertaken. Prior to April 2008 the council paid for all journeys undertaken by holders of a Vale of White Horse DC bus pass so, for example, if a resident travelled into Oxford to do their shopping, the council picked up the cost of the outbound and inbound journeys. Likewise, if a resident from another council used their bus pass within the Vale (the council's scheme rules permitting), the issuing council picked up the cost of the journey.
- 4.3 Since April 2008 councils are required to pay for all concessionary journeys that commence within their boundaries. This means that the Vale picks up the cost of any journey that begins in the district, but no longer picks up the cost of its residents returning from other areas. Because the Vale's scheme with the discretionary elements prior to April 2008 was extremely popular, we have seen a reduction in overall costs this financial year because of the new reimbursement arrangements.
- 4.4 The statutory element of the concessionary fares scheme is supposed to be funded by the Government which has stated that it believes that the current funding arrangements satisfy this. However, it is not possible to determine how much funding the Vale is actually receiving. Before April 2006 there was a statutory half-fare bus scheme for which the council did receive funding from the Government within its Revenue Support Grant, which appears to have continued to the present day. However, the formula used to calculate each council's Revenue Support Grant uses general demographic information to cover a multitude of statutory services – it does not identify how much of the funding covers assisted travel schemes. Officers asked the relevant Government Department (Communities and Local Government) (DCLG) to quantify the funding, but the DCLG stated this was not possible.
- 4.5 When the completely free bus pass scheme was introduced in April 2006 the council received an additional £307,000 but the DCLG was unable to say how much general Revenue Support Grant funding the council was receiving in total. For 2008/09 the council has received an additional £261,000 (on top of the £307,000), but again, we cannot identify the total amount of Government funding.
- 4.6 Based upon the limited information that the council receives from the bus operators, officers have estimated the cost of the statutory element of the bus scheme to be £500,000 for 2007/08 out of total expenditure of £1,085m (the additional £585,000 being the cost to the Vale of the discretionary scheme it operated). The current predicted outturn for 2008/09 is £890,000 and whilst a very small element of this will be discretionary expenditure for companions accompanying disabled pass holders (£1,000 used in the example below), in the main it relates to the statutory concessionary fares scheme.
- 4.7 If we work on the principle that prior to April 2008 the statutory scheme was fully funded (which is far from certain and cannot be proven), the additional funding for 2008/09 would take total funding to £761,000 (£500,000 + £261,000). Based upon the predicted outturn for 2008/09, this leaves the council with a shortfall of **£128,000** which must be met by local council tax payers.

Cost of concessionary fares 2007/08 & 2008/09



5.0 Disabled Facilities Grants

Mandatory – ‘Disabled Facilities grants’

- 5.1 The Council has a statutory duty to provide grants for registered disabled persons in both private and social housing to facilitate access to and from an applicants dwelling and access to basic amenities i.e. toilet, sleeping accommodation, bathing and food. This enables residents to remain in their own home allowing them independent living.
- 5.2 The total annual amount of grant is capped by Government, e.g. in 2009/10 the Council will be able to spend up to £850,000 and receive a rebate of 60% of the costs. The Council has the power to spend above that should demand require it but will receive no rebate.
- 5.3 Grant applications are usually made upon referral from occupational therapists. The occupational therapist makes an assessment of clients needs prior to applying to the Council for apply to the assistance.
- 5.4 Grant works commissioned in the private sector are organised and inspected by the Home Improvement Agency, Anchor Trust. This is a shared service arrangement with South Oxfordshire District Council. The Vale Housing Association carries out a similar function for their tenants (excluding test of financial resources) with Council Officers overseeing, validating and auditing the whole process.
- 5.5 The Council’s proposed budget for 2009/10 is £850,000. This is the maximum level at which the Government will refund 60% of the costs, namely £510,000k leaving a net cost to the Council of £340,000. It is the officers’ opinion that, whilst demand exceeds this level, the Council can manage the demand. Social services are committed to

reducing the current waiting time which could be as long as 6 months for their initial assessment to be made.

- 5.6 In 2007/8 143 DFG grants were completed. Of these, 63 were in the private sector, 80 were for Vale Housing Association tenants.
- 5.7 Recent Government reforms are likely to have an impact upon future demand for disabled facilities grants. The maximum ceiling for grants has been raised from £20,000 to £30,000 and means testing has been relaxed for certain cases. This is likely to cause financial pressures in future years. The Government's response has not been to raise the funding granted to councils but instead to give greater freedoms to councils to manage their budgets across a range of housing issues.

Discretionary – 'Home Renewal Assistance Grants'

- 5.8 The Council has a range of assistance measures to assist qualifying homeowners resolve unsatisfactory housing conditions. Currently the award of grant is primarily for energy incentive grants, 'Warm Front' top-up grants and essential repairs grants.
- 5.9 Award of financial assistance by award of grant is driven by the following principals.
- Owner's circumstances can vary considerably. These services are targeted and prioritised on helping the most vulnerable individuals and dealing with the homes most in need of repair and thermal improvement.
 - With the exception of the energy incentive grant financial assistance is strictly limited to those qualifying by virtue of being on a means tested benefit, or are subject to the prescribed test of resources which measures applicants ability to contribute to the cost of any approved scheme of works.
- 5.10 The grant policy aims to provide a range of assistance to homeowners who are not able to resolve housing disrepair issues themselves. The strategy makes the presumption that there is normally considerable equity in a property and that financial assistance will normally be in the form of a loan charged against the property where significant works are required costing over £5,000.
- 5.11 The budget also provides for the costs of the Anchor Home Improvement agency, a shared service with South Oxfordshire District Council.
- 5.12 The budget for 2008/2009 was set at £108,000 and to date has been utilised as follows:

Funding of home improvement agency	£40,000
Funding costs of flexible home improvement loans	£4,000
143 energy incentive grants	£7,150
17 energy top up grants	£11,832
14 essential repairs grants	£19,049

- 5.13 The proposed budget for 2009/10 is £140,000. The proposed increase this year reflects the increase in demand for grants for energy conservation measures. This is the main reason why houses in the Vale fail the Government's Decent Homes Standard.

5.14 The eligibility criteria for the Home Renewal Assistance Grants scheme are contained in the table appended to this report for the Scrutiny Committee to consider.

PAUL STAINES
DEPUTY DIRECTOR (HOUSING & COMMUNITY SAFETY)

WILLIAM JACOBS
HEAD OF FINANCE

STEVE BISHOP
STRATEGIC DIRECTOR

VALE OF WHITE HORSE DISTRICT COUNCIL- HOUSING RENEWAL ASSISTANCE

Type of Assistance	Amount/Method	Eligibility	Conditions	Repayment	Comment
Empty Homes Grant	Grant up to £10,000 maximum. Maximum eligible expense £20,000	In same ownership for 2 years. To bring back into use as property that has been unoccupied normally for two years and there are valid reasons to encourage its return to useful housing stock.	To be made available for letting for 5 years - not holiday letting. All relevant works to make property fit, have adequate insulation and heating works carried out. 50% of cost of eligible works Nomination rights for use by the Council where appropriate.	On first transfer of title or breach or letting condition.	This Grant is to encourage owners to return properties into use and to increase supply to rented stock with nomination rights where appropriate.
Park Homes Grant	£750	When aged 60 and cannot fund works when applying the Disabled Facilities Grant (TOR) Nil contribution condition or criteria for Warm Front. To assist with repairs to a park home/or to comply with longstanding breaches of site licence conditions that they are responsible to remedy.	To maintain standards in park homes.	Not applicable.	To maintain standards on park homes.
Energy Incentive Grant	£100 maximum	To facilitate uptake of schemes promoted by Thames Valley Energy Centre and energy suppliers discount schemes.	To target groups.	None	Small leverage for significant outcome
Energy Grant Top up	Up to £1000 per qualifying applicant.	"Warm Front" clients who are not eligible for the heating component where there is a justified need for heating measures.	None	None	

VALE OF WHITE HORSE DISTRICT COUNCIL- HOUSING RENEWAL ASSISTANCE

Type of Assistance	Amount/Method	Eligibility	Conditions	Repayment	Comment
Relocation Grant	40% of Mandatory Disabled Facilities Grant.	Test of Resources as prescribed by legislation. Owner/occupier and private sector tenants willing to move to a more suitable property when it is not cost effective to make adaptations for a disabled occupant in the existing property.	Prescribed by legislation	None	This grant is to provide an option to achieve a cost effective scheme that would minimise building costs.
Mandatory Disabled Grant	£25,000 (statutory maximum) grant	Test of Resources as prescribed by legislation.	Prescribed by legislation	None	
Discretionary Disabled Facilities Grant	£5,000	As prescribed for mandatory DFG's (TOR) to assist with schemes recommended by Occupational Therapist for example; Provision of safe plan areas Adaptation to enable specialist care/treatment other relevant works for energy measures. GP supporting the need where a medical condition exists but applicant not eligible for Warm Front.	Prescribed by legislation Not eligible for Warm Front.	None	This will enable schemes outside the mandatory scheme to be considered where supported by Occupational Therapist.

VALE OF WHITE HORSE DISTRICT COUNCIL- HOUSING RENEWAL ASSISTANCE

Type of Assistance	Amount/Method	Eligibility	Conditions	Repayment	Comment
Repairs Grant	£750	<p>Owner/occupier with 3 year residency who cannot fund works when applying Test of Resources as prescribed by legislation - nil contribution or criteria for warm front (ie income related benefit/low income) (excluding fees to Home Improvement Agency).</p> <p>To assist with:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minor repairs and improvements to assist someone over 60 to stay in own home • Essential works to maintain the property in a safe and weatherproof condition • Energy measures except where an alternative grant is available • Security works for someone over 60 	<p>No more than two grants in any 3 year period, not normally less than 12 months apart.</p> <p>Where refused by insurance. Where works can be completed within grant amount. No grant given where works so severe to require a loan. All relevant energy measures through various schemes are expected to be carried out.</p>		Small scale grants to support the small repairs scheme.

VALE OF WHITE HORSE DISTRICT COUNCIL- HOUSING RENEWAL ASSISTANCE

Type of Assistance	Amount/Method	Eligibility	Conditions	Repayment	Comment
Essential Repairs Grant	<p>Maximum of £10,000 over 3 years.</p> <p>Any grant over £5000 repayable</p>	<p>Applicant has a disability which will be assisted by the work required</p> <p>Has a repairing obligation in law, and</p> <p>Has works that are not covered under any insurance claim, and</p> <p>Applicant has lived in the house as main residence for 5 years prior to application, and</p> <p>Has circumstances that make them eligible for the governments warm front grant or a nil contribution under the DFG scheme</p> <p>Where the applicant has been refused or does not qualify for equity release through the "House-proud Scheme" and would be subject to enforcement under the Housing Acts.</p> <p>Where an applicant meets these criteria, grant assistance may be given with a view to making the property fit, achieve a good overall standard of repair and eliminate major hazards under the Health and Housing Rating System.</p> <p>Substantial works are required to execute works to bring property up to the fitness standard</p>	<p>Quotations based on unapproved specifications will not be acceptable</p> <p>At least two quotations are required and must be itemised</p> <p>Financial contributions to Keep the grant below the repayable threshold will not be allowed.</p> <p>A competent agent or Anchor Home Improvement Agency shall be engaged to supervise the works and there fees will be included as an eligible cost.</p> <p>Where essential unforeseen works arise and cause the overall cost of works to exceed £5,000</p>	<p>Grant over £5000 repaid in full on sale or transfer of title.</p>	<p>Renewal of a failed element will take place when this is the most cost effective</p>

Type of Assistance	Amount/Method	Eligibility	Conditions	Repayment	Comment
		<p>Applications will be considered where:</p> <p>A risk to the security of the occupier exists ie insecure windows or doors</p> <p>Where a breakdown of the primary source of heating or hot water has arisen, or where it is so far defective that a breakdown is inevitable and there is no assistance through a national scheme</p> <p>Where a major defect exists that puts the health and safety of the occupier at an unacceptable risk e.g. unsafe gas or electrical system</p> <p>Where there is a significant risk to public safety e.g. from an unsafe chimney or loose coverings, roof or unsound wall structures</p> <p>Where internal works that pose an immediate risk to the occupier or visitors to the property exist e.g. rotted flooring or a dangerous staircase.</p> <p>Where a major structural element is so far defective that significant further damage of the property or an adjoining property will arise if remedial action is not taken e.g. a badly leaking roof, or leaking gutters or down pipes.</p>	the whole grant will become repayable.		

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

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