

POLICY AND RESOURCES CABINET BOARD
11th JUNE 2009

DIRECTORATE OF FINANCE & CORPORATE SERVICES

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF REVENUES & CUSTOMER SERVICES
- M. JONES

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Part 1 - Doc.Code: PRB-110609-REP-FS-MJ

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ITEM 1

BUSINESS RATES - HELP FOR BUSINESSES AFFECTED BY THE RECESSION

Purpose of Report

1. To propose a policy of help with business rates for businesses affected by the recession.

Proposed Policy

2. The proposed policy is set out in the appendix to this report, and provides for a range of measures which will in the main be administered by the Business Rates Team as part of their day to day operations. However, there are measures, notably hardship relief, where a key role will be played by the Economic Development Team. In any event, close working between these 2 teams will be a key component of the successful operation of the policy.
3. To a large extent, the policy represents a drawing together of various measures which are already being actioned in order to help businesses which are affected by the recession.
4. It is envisaged that, in the majority of cases, the measures set out in Sections 2, 3 & 4 of the policy will provide the appropriate level of assistance. It is only in the small number of cases where those measures are considered not to be adequate that hardship relief would be considered.
5. The cost to the authority of the measures included in the policy are:
 - Payment Arrangements - loss of interest where payments are made over a longer period than the statutory 10 months. This is difficult to quantify, but (especially with interest rates at their current very low level) should not be significant.
 - Hardship Relief (which can be up to 100% of the rates bill) - 25% of the cost is met by this authority (with the balance being funded by the Welsh Assembly Government).

Recommendation

6. That the attached policy is adopted and that it be reviewed in September 2009.

Reason for Proposed Decision

7. To put in place a policy to help businesses affected by the recession.

List of Background Papers

8. To follow.

Wards Affected

9. All.

Officer Contact

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COMPLIANCE STATEMENT

BUSINESS RATES - **HELP FOR BUSINESSES AFFECTED BY THE RECESSION**

(a) **Implementation of Decision**

The decision is proposed for implementation after the 3 day call-in period.

(b) **Sustainability Appraisal**

Community Plan Impacts:

Economic Prosperity	No impact
Education and Lifelong Learning	No impact
Better Health and Well Being	No impact
Environment and Transport	No impact
Crime and Disorder	No impact

Other Impacts:

Welsh Language	No impact
Sustainable Development	No impact
Equalities	No impact
Social Inclusion	No impact

(c) **Consultation**

There has been no requirement under the Constitution for external consultation on this item.

BUSINESS RATES -
HELP FOR BUSINESSES AFFECTED BY THE RECESSION

1. **Introduction**

1.1. The following options are available to help businesses which have been affected by the recession:

- ensuring that a business is receiving any reduction to its rates bill which might be applicable;
- payment arrangements;
- hardship relief.

1.2. Each case will be considered on its merits and the appropriate help measure - or combination of help measures – granted.

2. **Reduction to Rates Bills**

2.1. The Business Rates Team will seek to ensure that businesses are receiving any reductions to their rates bills which may be applicable:

- 25% reduction for retail premises with a rateable value between £6,501 & £9,000;
- empty property relief;
- relief for partly empty properties.

2.2. These reliefs are also set out in the leaflet which accompanies rates bills, and referred to on the reverse of all recovery stationery, and are also set out on the Business Rates pages of the website.

2.3. **25% Reduction for Retail Premises**

2.3.1. All business which fall into this category have been written to and invited to apply for the reduction. Follow up letters will be sent to any business which fails to respond to the original letter.

2.3.2. On an ongoing basis, the Business Rates Team will monitor changes in property occupations to ensure that new businesses are made aware of the 25% reduction.

2.4. Empty Property Relief

2.4.1. The Business Rates Team will identify empty properties and ensure that empty property relief is granted promptly.

2.5. Relief for Partly Empty Properties

2.5.1. The Authority will treat all applications for relief sympathetically, and the Business Rates Team will ensure that all requests for relief are processed promptly.

3. **Payment Arrangements - Business Rates Team**

3.1. Annual Rates Bills

3.1.1. The Business Rates Team has the discretion to allow businesses to pay their annual rates bill by 12 rather than 10 monthly instalments in extenuating circumstances. For larger amounts, these arrangements will be authorised by the Principal Council Tax Officer or the Head of Revenues & Customer Services.

3.1.2. In exceptional cases, businesses will be allowed to pay their rates bills over more than 12 monthly instalments, subject to the authorisation of the Principal Council Tax Officer or Head of Revenues & Customer Services.

3.1.3. This discretion will be exercised sensibly in view of the current economic conditions.

3.2. During Recovery Process

3.2.1. In accordance with the Business Rates recovery policy, the Business Rates Team has the discretion to enter into payment arrangements at any stage of the recovery process.

4. **Payment Arrangements - Economic Development Team Recommendation**

4.1. Payment arrangements will also be set up in those cases where there is a recommendation from the Economic Development Team following an assessment by that team of the businesses' long term viability and the nature and number of jobs provided by the business.

5. **Hardship Relief**

- 5.1. Section 49 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988 gives local authorities a discretionary power to grant hardship relief. This power can only be exercised:
- if the ratepayer would suffer hardship if relief were not granted; and
 - it is reasonable to grant relief, having regard to the interests of council taxpayers.
- 5.2. Each case must be considered on its merits. For assessment of hardship relief in respect of business rates for 2009/10, the factors to be taken into account in considering whether it is in the interests of council taxpayers for hardship relief to be granted will include:
- the long term viability of the business;
 - the number of people employed by the business;
 - the nature of the jobs provided by the business;
 - the amount of local business generated by the business;
 - the nature of any services provided to the local community by the business, and whether the community would be adversely affected by the loss of those services;
 - the availability of an alternative supplier of those services.
- 5.3. In order to determine whether hardship relief should be granted, where appropriate, the Economic Development Team will carry out an assessment of the business.
- 5.4. Before considering the granting of hardship relief, it will also be necessary to consider whether a business can be given assistance under the other measures set out in this policy.

May 2009

SECTION B

ITEM 1

CUSTOMER SERVICES - CUSTOMER SATISFACTION SURVEY

Purpose of Report

1. To report on the findings of a recent customer satisfaction survey within Customer Services.

Survey Results

2. A customer satisfaction survey for the Neath & Port Talbot One Stop Shops and the Call Centre was recently undertaken. The “headline” results are:
 - 100% of people were very satisfied with the way in which our staff dealt with them in the Pontardawe One Stop Shop;
 - 99% of people were very satisfied with the way in which our staff dealt with them in the Call Centre;
 - 98% of people were very satisfied with the way in which our staff dealt with them in the Neath One Stop Shop.
 - Overall satisfaction with the service was:
 - 90.7% very satisfied in the Call Centre;
 - 93.8% very satisfied in the Neath & Pontardawe One Stop Shops.
 - People said that the staff were able to resolve their enquiry:
 - 93.8% in the Call Centre;
 - 95.7% in the Neath One Stop Shop;
 - 100% in the Pontardawe One Stop Shop.
3. The survey also asked if people were satisfied with various aspects of the member of staff who dealt with their enquiry – interest shown, professionalism, friendliness, level of knowledge, able to explain in an easy way. The results for these generally scored at 95% or above for very satisfied, with a lowest score of 91.3% (which was partly balanced by a score of 7.5% for fairly satisfied).

Survey Comments

4. People were also given the opportunity to make comments and these were generally very complimentary. A selection of comments in respect of each site is given below.

Neath One Stop Shop

5. The following are typical of the compliments given:
 - I have always found the staff extremely polite, professional, and very helpful.
 - Everyone great. You are all wonderful.
 - Staff are very helpful.
 - Keep up the good work, especially the approach and attitude of your staff.
 - Very impressed with service.
6. There were, however, a couple of negative comments regarding waiting times and the limited availability of disabled parking.

Pontardawe One Stop Shop

7. The positive comments include:
 - Excellent service every time visited office.
 - Staff always very helpful.
 - I feel that the service is second to none.
8. There were also a couple of comments regarding more staff being needed at busy times and about lunchtime closing.

Call Centre

9. The comments here were both in respect of the call centre itself and the Environment Directorate teams who in many cases delivered the service. The comments below relate to the call centre only. Positive comments included:
 - The lady that answered my query was very friendly and helpful, and I was surprised how quickly the call was answered.
 - Fabulous customer service – really good.
 - Advisor was very polite and helpful and no need for further improvement.
 - Customer care was exemplary - over and above what was called for.
 - I was very impressed with the high level of service offered by the staff.

10. Less positive comments included:
 - Staff must stop being over friendly.
 - Getting the correct number - advertising the switchboard number more widely.
11. The comments regarding the Environment Directorate have been passed on to the relevant service.

Recommendation

12. To note the report.