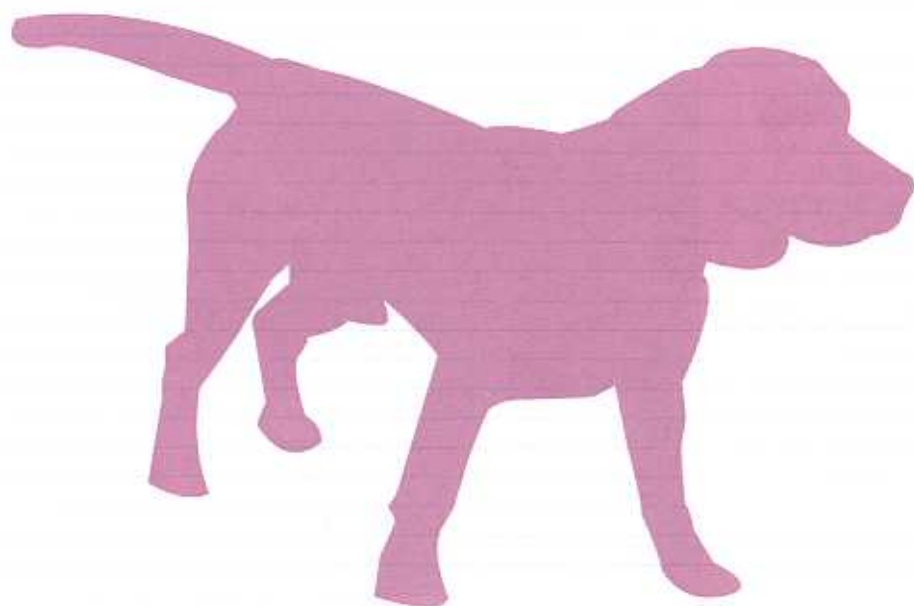


It's not the size of the dog in the fight...

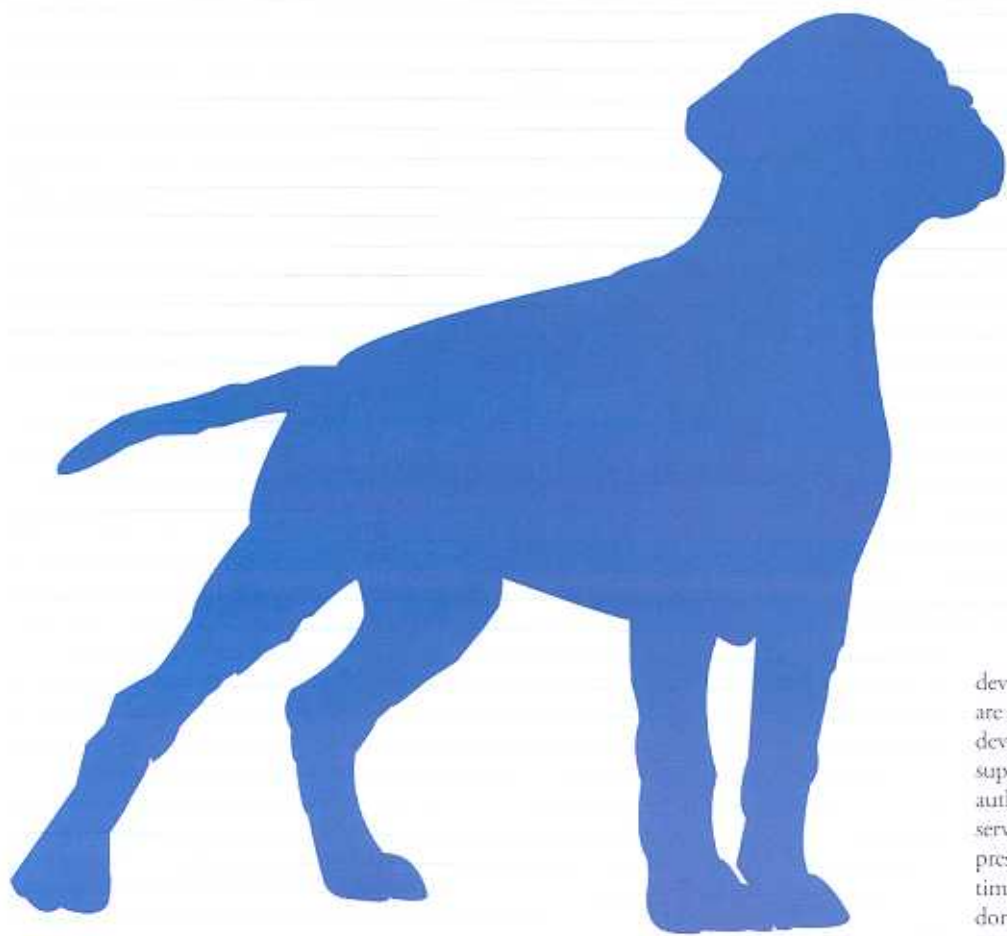
Nicola Begley reveals how Lichfield District Council won the IRRV Revenues Team of the Year Award



A small team can achieve great results. This is the message Lichfield District Council put over in its submission to the IRRV Performance awards. This was based not only on the service the Revenues Team has provided in the last year, but also on the way the team has continued to show improvement in performance and in the service to customers.

The district sits in the heart of the midlands, and is made up of two urban centres, Lichfield City and Burntwood, with a population of approximately 93,000. Employment is good, but the earnings are well below the national average and while many see the district as a very wealthy area, 23.4 per cent of its residents live in the 25 per cent most deprived wards nationally. We currently look after 41,500 domestic properties and 2,585 non-domestic hereditaments.

We have been committed to improving our performance and service, with figures showing we are achieving this. The collection of council tax has consistently risen to 99 per cent in 2005/06 and non-domestic rates to 99.2 per cent in 2005/06. This places the authority in



It's the size of the fight in the dog

the upper quartile for collection performance. We have worked hard to reduce our arrears and have seen the outstanding balance at year end reduce year on year. During our comprehensive performance assessment were highlighted as a service "which has seen significant improvement".

We have a very dedicated team who are committed and work hard. They are a great asset to the authority and have shown a great ability to embrace change, face hurdles and remain upbeat. The team consists of 12 full time equivalent members of staff, assisted by "Lichfield Connects" our newly formed corporate contact centre. Among us we have a vast amount of revenues experience, with five members having served in revenues for more than 20 years, one of them for 48. Our team members enjoy working at Lichfield and we have a very low turnover of staff. Most officers also have experience of benefits, as the department was at one time generic.

Finding ways to provide training can be difficult at times with such experience, but all team members have a regular performance

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development review in which objectives are set, responsibilities are reviewed, career development discussed and feedback and support given. To help those new to the authority and members of our customer services team, we have developed a training presentation, which can be accessed at any time, providing the basics of council tax, non-domestic rates and recovery practices.

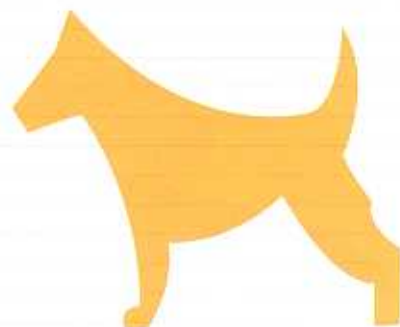
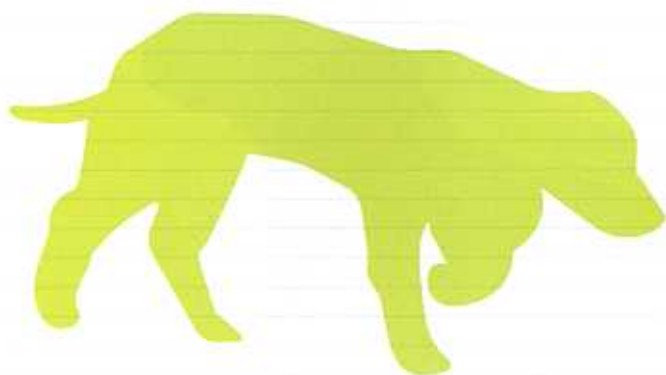
In the past few years the team has faced many challenges. We have had a key member of the team absent on long term sick leave, and potentially this could have had a great impact on the small team, but they pulled together and took extra steps to ensure they remain focused. The highlight of this achievement is to go from having 1,000 processes normally outstanding to none prior to annual billing (except those pending awaiting further

information). We have also seen a major upgrade of our core system, a new document management system, new procedures for the automation of

services, new managers joining the team, implementation of single status employment and moving offices, but the team has remained positive and constantly achieved targets and improved collection. They have sought the best from the changes brought their way.

But it is not just about work. Many members of the team have worked together for a long time and seen each other develop not only at work but in their personal lives too. We have a great team spirit. The team regularly socialise together and celebrate each other's personal goals and life events - especially if there's an excuse for a cake in the office.

There have been major steps taken to improve the service we offer our customers. In April 2005 we commenced the use of



paperless direct debits. This has meant that we can now take details over the phone at point of initial contact. Furthermore, we now have no close down of our system when we can't enter new direct debit details and have seen a large reduction in the number of instructions issued. We also eliminated all the problems whereby customers have returned instructions and they have not been received in time or have been "lost in the post".

In the last year, giro bank payments have been automated. Previously a payment had to be manually input by cashiers and was a labour intensive procedure. We have also introduced the facility to pay online for council tax and non domestic rates and have an automated telephone payment system. Payments can be made 24 hours a day seven days a week using a credit or debit card.

We now receive all payments from our enforcement agents, Bristow and Sutor, electronically and these can be automatically posted to accounts. We also electronically submit our new cases to them, meaning they are instantly put on their system without the need to manually input each case. Bristow and Sutor now issue our 14 day letters and this has given the recovery team valuable extra time to concentrate on other areas of work.

The introduction of a new document management system from Comino in June 2005 has been the biggest project we have undertaken in the last year. This has seen a dramatic improvement in the service we can provide our customers. Previously we had an archive system for revenues and paper files for benefits. Some files were retained in a different building, in another town. In the initial stages we consulted with our neighbour authority East Staffordshire Borough Council and valued their help and support. We have seen many benefits with the introduction of the Comino system. We save time not searching for paperwork and having all the information needed in one place, we can deal with our customers more quickly and efficiently, it improved the time we take to deal with paperwork and collection rates have

improved despite an anticipated drop while arrears have reduced. We all work to the same standard and implementing Comino gave us the opportunity to improve our procedures and our documents, letters and forms.

But we have not stopped there. In order to improve we agreed procedures and practices with our magistrates' courts, improved working relationships with building control to ensure we submit accurate and speedy submissions to the Valuation Office, updated and improved the information available about council tax and non-domestic rates

on our website and maintained our involvement with the audit family benchmarking group. This means we have a comprehensive group of best practice maps which we have adopted. We

also liaised with the Local Land and Property Gazetteer officer in the cross referencing and preparation needed for Valuebill, working closely with our local valuation officers and we pride ourselves in being able to assist our neighbouring authorities with various projects whenever possible.

A small team has shown that by remaining focused and being committed, building good working relationships within and outside an authority and having fun together, targets can be achieved and expectations exceeded. By using our experience and knowledge we have helped those who work with us and around us. We have embraced change and innovation, challenging the way we work and setting firm foundations for the future.

We are very proud to have received the accolade of being Revenues Team of the year and the acknowledgement of the hard work undertaken by the team. It has also given us the impetus to continue looking for ways to improve, new ideas and initiatives and to strive to remain a top performer. ■

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Nicola Begley is
Recovery Manager at
Lichfield District Council.

