

Appendix 1

Benefits, Local Taxation and Customer Services Integration

1.0 Background

Haringey Council has and is facing significant budget reductions. We want to minimise the impact of these cuts across front line services but this will not be easy. We are aiming to prioritise the things that matter to local people by re-designing services so that they cost less and work better, concentrating on getting right outcomes, customer satisfaction and enabling people and communities to become self reliant.

Customer contact and customer satisfaction is a major factor in defining the quality and reputation of Haringey Council and the current staff within Benefits, Local Taxation (BLT) and Customer Services manage a significant number of customer transactions through personal contact, telephone contact, electronic contact and back office processing. The customer contact and channel strategy has set some challenging commitments that require us to redesign those services that are key to the customer experience. Benefits and Local Taxation customer interactions account for at least 60% of the traffic which interacts with the Council through Customer Services.

The Benefits and Local Taxation division has previously undertaken a review under value for money. The recommendation from this review is that the links between BLT and Customer Services need to be improved and this was endorsed by the Department for Work and Pensions. Following analysis of the support functions review diagnostics it is apparent that there are high levels of resources allocated to managing the initial stages of customer contact, including assessment of eligibility of services across the council. In March and April 2010 an exercise was undertaken to understand the pattern of contacts, the channels used and the level of avoidable contacts. A three tier model of customer contact across the council has been developed that will increase customer query resolution at an early stage.

The integration of Benefits, Local Taxation and Customer Services will provide both a phase one approach to implementation of the revised customer contact operating model and a tactical solution that focuses on handling customer enquires at the first point of contact.

The proposed structure identifies our future requirements as an integrated service and will encourage a joint front and back office approach to customer resolution and satisfaction. Our main aim will be to reduce hand-offs, waste and duplication of effort and eliminate the inevitable customer frustration that follows. Furthermore, effectiveness and efficiency improvements will be sought in the business support activities of IT, administration, training and control. Through focussed leadership and direction the structure will deliver a confident, learning, supportive and disciplined culture.

2.0 The Key Elements and Rationale of the Proposals

The foundation of the structure is supported by the following key elements:

2.1.1 To ensure that performance is maintained and improved.

The structure reflects the attention required to key performance measures and customer expectation and satisfaction.

2.1.2 Creation of a supporting, learning and developmental environment.

Benefits, Local Taxation and Customer Services employ a large number of staff who require training, development and support to meet personal objectives, customer objectives and ultimately, business objectives. Generic job descriptions across the service will enable managers, officers and assistants to widen their breadth of knowledge and skills over differing functions. This provides a flexible approach to the management of resources to meet customer requirements and also provides staff with the opportunity of lateral movement and promotion opportunities.

The proposals focus on a career-grade approach for staff development and advancement. A career route would exist from assistant to senior levels.

The proposals detail an integrated Service Support Team, which have specific responsibilities for training and performance improvement. This would take the form of coaching and support for individual and divisional requirements. Further responsibilities for Support and Development Officers would include policy interpretation, formulation and implementation, maintenance of a quality management system, supporting channel shift activities, key deliverables from the customer contact and web strategy, close partnership working with internal and external customers and supporting the approach to community hubs.

2.1.3 A focus on matching and excelling customer demand and expectation.

The new structure supports a flexible approach to resourcing demands placed on the service and clearly focuses on processes that are of value from a customer point of view. Customer resolution at the first point of contact with minimised hand-offs, delays and waste will be the primary aim. This can take the form of front and back office staff working together.

60% of all contact through Customer Services is Benefit and Local Taxation related enquiries. The integration provides the opportunity to streamline processes to match customer demand and expectation. Processes are being redesigned to enable the resolution of customer enquiries at the first point of contact, whether through the call centre or customer services centre.

A core of Benefits and Local Taxation staff previously designated as 'back office' staff will be working alongside Customer Services staff to gain a shared understanding of the enquiry and to support each other to resolve the customer request. Those enquiries that are considered highly complex, time consuming or require further information will be referred to specialists within the 'back office' to

complete. Following a transition stage it is expected that there will be a reduction of Benefits and Local Taxation enquiries that are referred to the back office. This will increase customer satisfaction and will also reduce the cost of hand-offs, delays, repeat customer contact and processing activity.

The remaining 40% of enquiries relating to non-BLT activities will also undertake a process review in line with the proposed customer contact strategy. This will require working with the service directorates to streamline the processes and to ascertain a level of resolution that can be achieved at the first point of contact.

2.1.4 Improved leadership and accountability.

The structure proposes that senior management be strengthened to ensure the complexities of the business are managed in a disciplined manner through clear objectives and accountability.

The proposals reflect best practices in devolving responsibility through clear lines of strategic and operational management and providing a framework for continuous improvement. As part of the reshaping, the service has streamlined the spans of control by reducing the numbers of managers and layers. The integrated service is proposing four layers from Head of Service through to operational Officers and Assistants. This equates to two levels of strategic management across all disciplines and two levels of operations. Strategic management provides for 1.7% of the overall FTE count.

2.1.5 Managing Work Demand

The proposal for a Workdemand Officer to support the operational management team by accurately matching staffing to projected workload patterns, planning schedules, and maintaining accurate staffing data for the Contact Centre (CC) using the Council's workforce management system (Shift Track). The role is common to Call Centers, as it allows the management team to focus on the day-to-day management of staff including quality and coaching. The post was successfully trialed in the Call Centre for 9 months during 2011-12. The expertise provided by the role enabled the Shift Track system to be fully utilised for the first time since it was installed in 2007, resulting in an increase in performance and played an intrinsic part in the Call Centre achieving its performance targets last year. This role is expected to be enhanced to manage demand across all the activities of the service.

2.1.6 Managing financial risk

Demand for our services continues to increase as a direct result of the economic downturn and our benefit and revenues caseload has continued to consistently rise over the last two years. Haringey has experienced the sixth highest national caseload increase in 2010/2011.

Benefit payments make up a substantial amount of any Local Authority expenditure. Over £290 million pounds is paid out in benefit to Haringey residents on an annual basis. There is a considerable financial risk to the Council if our subsidy claim to the DWP is not managed well. Risks to subsidy repayment include a failure to maximise the subsidy claim, an inability to support our subsidy claim at audit stage, under or over claiming and subsidy penalties where consistent errors are uncovered.

Following a successful trial in 2010/2011, the proposal is to create a new 'Compliance and Control' team, to ensure that our subsidy repayments are maximised, The team will undertake focussed quality assurance checks of benefit claims and where required, the team will make recommendations for improvement. Recommendations will range from individual feedback to Officers, new training proposals, competency based Officer testing and, in some cases, recommendations to review all similar claims of any given type where a significant risk to subsidy repayment has been identified.

The Compliance Team will also monitor and action 'control and exception reports' across the service in order to maintain the integrity of the database and ensure compliance to legislation and regulation is maintained, taxpayers are billed at the earliest opportunity and overpayments of benefit are minimised.

2.1.7 Developing a Joined Up Service

Both BLT and Customer Services interact with a high number of internal and external bodies to ensure that the service is delivered. These include the Citizens Advice Bureau, Housing Associations, DWP, Enforcement Agencies, the Valuation Agency, Homes for Haringey, the Pension Service, the Landlord Forum etc...

During the development of the integrated approach it has been identified that improved joined up working would support the streamlining of processes and enquiry resolution leading to customer satisfaction. This will develop into a key enabler to provide a more holistic view of customer requirements.