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## **APPENDIX 5**

### **COMMENTS ON THE PROPOSED RE-ORGANISATION OF BLT & CUSTOMER SERVICES**

#### **General Structure Comments**

We are concerned that at a time of severe cuts across the Council there is a proposal to create four posts at PO8/SM1. This is in contrast to the current departmental headcounts of two posts at this level + one which has remained vacant for some significant period of time. We would suggest it should be possible to reduce this number thus freeing up increased resources for lower down the structure.

We recognise that work is ongoing around "Community Hubs" and the potential shared call centre with Waltham Forest and many staff have raised concerns that they will face yet another period of uncertainty in the short to medium term as a result.

As generic job descriptions across BLT & Customer Services exist to a greater degree than previously please clarify the position with reference to staff being required to move between the three component elements of the new service. Conversely what opportunities will there be for staff to request such a move where they may see it as a career opportunity?

Our expectation is that any moves would be with prior notice and consultation where they formed a permanent change of team or location. We do however recognise there may be a need for staff to be relocated within teams in each of the three services due to demand on resources.

What (if any) are the implications on home working for staff that currently have this in place post implementation? Will staff from BLT teams be expected to perform a customer service function as currently on a rota basis and how frequently?

Although we recognise the fundamental financial pressures on the Council we remain concerned that such a fundamental reduction in frontline officers will lead to a decline in service levels. We urge officers to make this point explicit to elected members, particularly with reference to increased waiting times at the two remaining Customer Service Centres. We wish to place this on record as we would not expect to see any reduction in performance targets being blamed on remaining staff or used as a cover for attempts to privatise the service or elements of it. Councillors must be clear that demands on BLT/Customer Services are increased and continuing to increase as a result of upturns in unemployment caused by the economic policies of the government. If we are to lose this number of posts then it must be recognised it may have a detrimental effect both on benefits and on collection/recovery rates for Council Tax and Business rate.

How will staff who currently work less than full time be treated when applying? Will they automatically be offered posts on hours equivalent to those they work currently or will there be opportunities for review of these hours where staff have a desire to do so?

#### **Single Status**

With the exception of CSOs and Telephonists none of the current posts have been subject to a job evaluation. We would therefore request clarity as to what steps management propose to deal with this situation. This is particularly relevant since the majority of posts are "new" and as such could not be used for backdating purposes. A number of posts in the historic BLT structure were identified as being in the appendix to the Single Status agreement and consideration needs to be given to having these evaluated.

A decision also needs to be taken in respect of posts that are largely unchanged as a result of the new structure as in such cases backdating should apply to the Single Status implementation date. From review of the posts we would say the Court Officer and Visiting Officer, the Submissions Officer roles fit into this category, as may the IT Officers although there may be others.

Finally there is the issue of job evaluation appeals under the Single Status agreement these should be made available to first time round GLPC evaluations OR where the grade goes down following a new evaluation. We would therefore contend only the two jobs who have had Single Status completed have exhausted this right.

### **Service Managers Posts**

There is a lack of clarity as to how many posts will be allowed at each level of the range grade and whether consistency will apply across the teams. For example meaning each team will contain a number of PO3s, a number of PO4s and a number of PO5s. We are concerned that the lack of a transparent explanation and a system for monitoring roles may lead to inconsistencies and/or unfairness in deciding the level of each post-holder. Additionally as the ring-fence contains staff at PO2 and PO4-PO5 please confirm that successful candidates will be appointed no lower than their existing grade.

How will it be decided whether a Service Manager post should be at the more senior or junior part of the grade? For example some managers have a larger number of staff to manage while others (in particular within the support structure) have a large number of PO graded staff within their remit.

### **Senior Practitioners**

We welcome the development of this role and in general feel it will provide a useful career path for staff. Our only query concerns how and where these roles will be deployed in the Customer Service setting. In particular whether it is intended that they be located in the Customer Service or Call Centre environment. Since in both cases work is led by customer demand consideration needs to be given to how work will be allocated to them and by whom. Equally how Service Officers can call upon their expertise in the Customer Service setting.

What is the rationale for their allocation as some teams have a Senior Practitioner while others do not: For example in the benefits structure two teams do not have a PO1. This is repeated in the revenues area

### **Service Assistant**

As for the Senior Practitioners this role is a new one in a Customer Services setting and it needs to be more clearly defined what they will be doing. We raise this as it is less possible to differentiate via work allocation in a customer environment than in a BLT "back office" one. Essentially we would seek assurances that the work required would be sufficiently different to that done by the Service Officers.

Similarly to the situation with Senior Practitioner posts the teams have a varying number of Service Assistants and in some cases have none at all. What is the rationale behind this approach?

### **Numbers of Posts in each team**

We are concerned that at a time of increased demand there are significant reductions in the number of "Service Officers" in Benefits. We note an increase in numbers within enforcement but would comment that this approach is likely to lead to increased backlogs in claims and consequent increased calls or visits to Customer Services. It will also lead to increased usage of Court procedures when the real problem is an inability to process Benefit claims in a timely fashion. Clearly as an area with high levels of unemployment and underemployment this is of concern as the results will be: Adverse publicity for Haringey Council and equally importantly to us increased abuse and aggression towards staff as well as inevitable high levels of stress. The latter was previously identified as being abnormally high in the Stress survey process last year.

### **Support Team**

We have some concerns about the construction of the support team and the level of management demand particularly upon the Control and compliance manager. The latter post is required to support a total of ten officers all of whom are PO1 or PO2. Although the over all number of posts managed is consistent we would expect that the demands upon this team would be considerably higher than other teams with a consequent need for management advice and guidance.

We would therefore suggest the Submissions Officers sit more sensibly on the Benefit Teams. This would leave a clear focus of support and development and subsidy protection within the remit of a slimmed down team.

There are two Service Managers identified within the Support area and we would ask for confirmation of where in the PO3-PO5 range these two posts will sit?

### **IT Service Officers**

We are aware that the current post-holders have concerns re the content of the job description and the grading the post attracted on evaluation. We are supportive of their concerns and would ask that both areas be reviewed. These posts are clearly key to the future delivery of our service and this should potentially be reflected in the grading.

### **Subsidy Role**

We are concerned that once again it is proposed to delete the sole dedicated resource responsible for ensuring we maximise our subsidy. There appears to be a lack of recognition throughout the structure of the key importance of this area of work. This will become even more paramount with the Council facing continued financial pressure that would be significantly worsened in the event that we failed to retrieve all monies due.

The current postholder would appear to have unique insight into the work and in deleting the dedicated post there is a very real possibility that this knowledge base could be lost since the post-holder would either be required to take on another post or a manager's post thus diluting the amount of time available for this element of the work.

The unique duties undertaken are described as follows

Undertakes subsidy cell checking reveals subsidy loss in areas such as above caps, LA errors, No rent officer determinations, above rent awards etc. Additionally they analyse, identify and help to address subsidy loss problems. This is done, by dealing with subsidy from a Benefit practitioners view, not as an accountant.

As a Benefits practitioner these skills are used to deal with Auditors on a claim-by-claim basis. There are two accountants who negotiate the actual money, account, and subsidy claim return side. We are concerned that in the new structure subsidy work may be taken from a 'subsidy accounting' perspective rather than 'subsidy benefits'. There is a huge difference in responsibility (and knowledge) between the two.

From initial discussions we understand that it is felt this work would sit on the control team and be shared between the Senior Practitioners and support and development Officers. Our counter proposal would be that this work should be enhanced in Support and Development roles and that an additional post should be created at this level to lead on subsidy work. Since we recognise the budget constraints we would propose this is funded in the main by reducing the Senior Practitioners on the team by 1FTE. We are proposing this option, as it would appear nobody would be adversely affected by this change. We have commented on the implications on this in the section on ring-fencing.

### **Visiting Officer**

We are concerned at the proposal to further reduce the number of visiting officer posts. Currently there are three substantive postholders with an additional agency worker working on the Council Tax team. The new structure reduces this to three and removes the dedicated role within Benefits. We believe this represents a risk to effective work currently delivered by visiting officers in respect of bringing properties into the Council tax and NNDR lists, fraud reduction in benefits and verification of exemptions/residency checks. The reduction in officers will lead to longer delays in visits.

### **Recruitment & selection**

We note the intent to use a combination of interview and test for some posts and would seek clarification on what combination will be applied in each instance. Any tests used should be relevant to the role required and staff should be given clear guidance of the type of test in advance of the process taking place. We would ask that examples be provided in advance to both staff and Trade Unions along with confirmation on the conditions under which the tests will be taken. There will need to be a confidential facility for staff to report any reasonable adjustments required in order to ensure equal access and outcome.

Many staff may not have been subjected to recruitment processes for some time and may therefore be in need of offers of support in terms of interviewing skills and potentially more general support where they are at risk of losing their jobs. We would therefore want any interview timetable to be reflective of the need for such support to be offered and there are internal courses offered in this area. It may be sensible to assess the demand for these in advance of referring the final proposal to Corporate Committee so as to maximise opportunities for staff to prepare themselves.

Who will be on interview panels for each post? Will attempts be made to ensure all panels have a gender and ethnicity balance?

What is the timeline for implementation of each level, is it assumed that the top tier will need to be in place before other recruitment processes can take place? We would be concerned this could lead to lengthy delays if it became necessary to interview external candidates for the PO8 posts.

### **Voluntary redundancies/Avoidance of Compulsory Redundancies**

We recognise that the department has made strenuous attempts to avoid compulsory redundancies during this process. However it is our practice to re-emphasise our absolute opposition to compulsory redundancies when commenting on reductions. Aside from favourable consideration of requests for VR in areas of reduction we would emphasise the need to view favourably any proposals from staff to reduce hours or job share etc.

We would seek an assurance that all requests will be responded to in advance of any recruitment to stay processes being commenced and that where staff ask to leave early rather than serving notice this will be facilitated.

### **Job Description Content/Job evaluation**

We have no specific comments on the contents of the job descriptions at this point although we have encouraged staff to support comments/amendments to these and where possible to do so as groups rather than as individuals. The exception to this is the Visiting Officer job description having met with the staff fulfilling the role currently. (See attached). Where changes are made the job description following the consultation outcome revised versions should be referred back to HR to ensure that the original evaluation is still correct.

In terms of the job evaluation outcomes we have commented on these and signed them all off with a small number of exceptions as follow

Support & Development Officer  
Visiting Officer  
Admin Team Senior (also no job description to date)

### **Ring-fencing**

We would seek clarity on the number of post-holders in each ring-fence as this information is not included in the proposals, it would also be helpful to be clear where post-holders are in multiple ring-fences.

We are assuming that the intention will be so far as possible to minimise the number of interview/selection processes staff in multiple ring-fences will need to take part in? It would be helpful if this and the expression of interest processes could be explained to both UNISON and staff in advance of the process commencing.

We are unclear what the proposed order of ring-fencing is and whether recruitment to posts where there are no (or insufficient) candidates will fit into this process. We raise this as clearly success in such posts could reduce or eliminate the need for ring-fencing. The obvious posts that fall into this category are the Assistant Heads of Service (1 candidate for four posts) and the three IT Officer posts that do not have substantive post-holders.

Also we would request clarity on whether staff will be required to express an interest in all posts for which they are ring-fenced. If this were the case we have some concerns with regard to this approach since some posts are significantly different to those staff currently occupy.

### **Specific Ring Fence Comments**

#### **Assistant Heads of Service**

Please clarify the current grade of the 1 remaining post-holder in this ring-fence, as they are also included in the ring-fence below. Will an internal advert for the other posts be issued at the same time? Will those applying be entitled to express a preference for one or other of the posts, although the job description is generic there are clearly lead areas in each case.

#### **Service Managers**

Although the role has been altered it is not fundamentally different from that fulfilled currently. Particularly since the post has a range grade reducing the need for current PO2 postholders to demonstrate that they could act at the higher level role. The key difference is an expectation of more generic functionality, the key knowledge base is largely unchanged and as such we believe a closed ring-fence would be appropriate as opposed to the current one. If voluntary redundancy requests result in there being a match between the numbers of posts the assimilation should be considered assuming staff do not have competing preferences for specific posts at this level. In the latter case we would suggest a closed ring-fence selection process could still be legitimately used to resolve who obtained which job within the ring-fence.

#### **Support & Development Officers**

We have no objection to the proposed assimilation of the postholders indicated. We would however propose an additional assimilation of the current Subsidy Officer into one of the remaining vacancies on the team.

This request is based upon a comparison of the Subsidy posts job description and the new role. There is a large degree of overlap covering areas such as provision of training, management statistics, production of policy and procedure notes, financial and performance monitoring etc. We consider that based on a point to point comparison this would most closely resemble the role of the subsidy officer particularly since it also refers to subsidy work as well.

### **Appeals & Submissions Officers**

We received a number of conflicting views with regard to this proposed ring-fence: Some staff were in agreement with it while a number of post-holders felt the post was fundamentally that of the current submissions officers and that as such an assimilation should be offered to those staff currently fulfilling this role. This opinion was particularly based upon the fact that the representation of the Council at Hearings is now a clear part of the role whereas previously it was only required at the top end of the range grade. We would suggest further consideration is given to this ring-fence. In view of the close similarity between it and the posts undertaken in the complaints and appeals team we are concerned that an open ring-fence is not the appropriate method of recruitment since it is clearly fundamentally an unchanged job we would propose it be amended to a closed one. Please clarify the number of post-holders in the ring-fence.

### **Workforce Demand Officer**

As the post is completely different we have no objection to the use of an open ring-fence since there is no obvious current member of staff who is a match. We would suggest potentially this post is dealt with after the main ring-fences. If there is nobody who is displaced then the post could be released for an internal advert and/or referred to the deployment officer.

### **Senior Practitioner**

We would suggest this ring-fence be completed after those for Service manager, appeals and submissions officers, and support and development since for some staff involved it would represent a downgrading. Although the role has some variation we believe it could justifiably be drawn as a closed ring-fence rather than an open one. Will staff be able to express a preference between the teams? How will applicants be assessed as the roles cover three distinct disciplines?

### **IT Officer**

We have no objection to the proposed assimilation. With regard to the other vacant posts our view would be that once it has been established there is no fall out from existing candidates at SO1 and above that the post be released as an internal advert. This would facilitate applications from the candidates who have been acting into this post for a sustained period.

### **Service Officers**

We have no objection to the proposed assimilations please confirm how staff will be allocated to teams and whether they will be able to express a preference.

### **Visiting Officer**

We feel this ring-fence is incorrect. These posts are distinct within the structure and are largely unchanged from the current posts. As such we believe the three substantive postholders should be assimilated to the new posts. Additionally as the post involves significant outside work we do not feel it would be a suitable alternative employment opportunity for staff that are currently office based.

### **Service Assistant**

We can see no justification for this ring-fence being treated as "open" if there is notionally an excess of staff then a closed ring-fence should be utilised, as there is no evidence that staff at this level would not be appointable. As with the Service Officer role the duties covered are largely unchanged. It would be our view that these posts should only be subjected to a ring-fence after all other vacancies have been completed as it is highly likely that sufficient candidates would be successful elsewhere (particularly at Service Officer and IT Officer level) to make the numbers of candidates and posts match. If this were the case then we would say assimilation would be appropriate. If selection is necessary then we would suggest it is limited to interview rather than a test.

### **Senior Admin Officer**

We have not seen the job description for this role so cannot comment fully on the ring-fence proposal. However as we have commented with the visiting officer post we feel the ring-fence is incorrectly drawn, as we do not feel the visiting officers should be included. As with the service assistant we would expect this ring-fence to be one of the last in the sequence. By doing so the need to consider Complaints and Appeal and BLT Seniors may well have been removed. We assume the open nature of the ring-fence is based upon the fact that current Admin Staff (only in post in Customer Services) do not supervise? We would question whether offering the post to a specialist such as a complaints and appeals officer would be appropriate offer of alternative employment as it would be likely to involve a high level of "deskilling"

### **BLT Court officer**

We have no objection to the proposed assimilation on this post, as it is significantly unchanged from the role in the current structure.

### **Switchboard Supervisor**

We have no objection to the proposed assimilation on this post, as it is significantly unchanged from the role in the current structure

### **PA to head of service**

Could you confirm when the support function review on admin/PA support will be taking place? If it is imminent I would suggest there might be a case for allowing the postholder to be considered for the Admin Senior Posts?

### **Internal Vacancies**

It is clear that after the process is completed there will be a number of vacant posts. These would either arise from a failure to fill posts or because even after doing so there are remaining vacancies.

Since it is clear there will be a deficit of post-holders at the Service Officer grade UNISON would propose an additional ring-fence be created allowing current BLT Assistants the opportunity to apply in the first instance along with any other post-holders within one grade. (This may well include any displaced post-holders at SO1 for example.

Other than this we would be supportive of internal adverts for vacancies, a decision would have to be taken whether such internal adverts were limited to BLT/Customer Service staff or opened up more widely. In advance of such an advert occurring it would be necessary to ensure there are no current staff in the deployment pool that are within the one grade band of the relevant posts as they would have priority over internal candidates. I am also aware for example that Strategic Housing has impending reductions and that there are post-holders there with Benefits or Customer Service experience.

### **Visiting Officer post : Additional comments**

We are concerned that uniquely among the scale graded posts there is no reflection or opportunity for range grade progression in the role. In any case we believe the role to be under-graded at Scale 5 and await a copy of the finalised job evaluation that has yet to be supplied. We note that many of the additional duties included at Scale 6 in the Service Officer role are incorporated into the Visiting Officer post as outlined below.

*Progression to Scale 6 will require the postholder to fulfil all the duties listed above and in addition, be self motivated, work with minimal supervision, and work to the following higher standards: **Comment (this would certainly apply to an experienced visiting officer, it should be noted that they have less available management support than office based staff)***

- *To acquire and maintain a more detailed knowledge of relevant legislation and good practice, with a broader understanding of procedures and systems. (Again one would assume an experience officer would be required to deal with more complex issues: as a field worker they would be required to deal with more on the spot queries, although they do not generally update the system they are required to understand its workings and to interrogate it)*
- *To provide comprehensive advice and be able to deal with complicated correspondence, telephone calls and personal visits, i.e. less straightforward appeals and complaints. We would accept they do not generally respond to complex correspondence but would contend that as a lone worker they may be more exposed to the need to provide comprehensive advice, equally they have a greater level of personal contact both by phone and in person. In respect of appeals and complaints their visits often arise from these*
- *To deal with more complicated areas of benefit work such as student claims and backdate requests. We would accept this would not apply in the same way to a visiting officer*
- *To deal with more complicated areas of revenues work including HMO's, sole and main residency, recovery disputes, business rate interest calculations, transitional relief and re-valuation cases. Obtaining relevant information on HMOs and establishing residency are a routine part of the visiting officers job) Clearly on re-valuation they are responsible for bringing properties into the rating list*

- *To deal with more complicated customer facing queries and provide accurate and relevant information and responses that enable first time resolution of the query raised. (This would apply in reference to their home visits)*
- *To assist in ad-hoc projects, as directed by the Service Manager. (This would equally apply for example on anti fraud initiatives or Single persons discount/void property reviews)*
- *To consistently achieve performance targets and standards. (Postholders are clearly required to do this!)*

In view of this we would contend either the post should be on a range grade or the current evaluation is to low!

In respect of the specific content of the job description comments are as follow (para numbers refer to the copy as sent out)

In para 2 (again a lit from the service officer role) there is a reference to “customer facing services” this might give the inference that the V.O. would be required to work in customer services as the Service Officers will be. We would suggest this be re-worded to make it explicit the V.O. customer contact will be by way of visits and/or telephone contact.

In para 12 (starting) “to attend court” add a reference to tribunals since both in Benefits/NDR/Council Tax there may also be a requirement for visiting officers to give evidence in the event of dispute. It should also specify that they may be required to give statements for this purpose.

Page 2 “ to take action to minimise loss of subsidy...” We are assuming this is a direct lift from the Service officer post but are not sure it fits in the V.O post.

Having compared the old job description to the current we would propose the insertion of the following clauses as they are not covered elsewhere in the new job description but are still requirements.

2.23 “ To consistently achieve performance targets and standards”

2.24 “ to have a broad awareness of welfare benefits”

### **Implementation timetable**

Assuming Corporate committee endorses the report on the 27<sup>th</sup> September could you confirm the process and likely timeline for implementing both the new jobs and new grades where appropriate? In particular the order for recruitment process and interviews.

We would be happy to meet and discuss the issues raised in more detail and to engage in an ongoing dialogue through the implementation period.

We would also ask that we meet urgently to review the situation with regard to potential voluntary redundancy applications.

Yours sincerely

**Seán Fox**  
**Branch Secretary**

**c.c. Gerard McGrath**  
**UNISON members**  
**GMB Union**