

**Portfolio Holder Business Transformation and HR
Work Priority Update for 2009/10**

Housing Benefits

The excellent performance of the Benefits service was recognised by our external audit and reported to Committee last year. Despite a 7% increase in caseload, the time taken to assess new claims is now averaging 20 days this year compared to 26 days last year. We will still need to work hard to sustain this performance with 3 staff, out of an assessing capacity of just over 21, going on maternity leave this month. Members will recall that approval was given to appoint an additional assessor post, with grant money provided by the government, and this will help. However, management and staff will be working hard to ensure that the improved performance is sustained.

Automated service access and Electronic Records Management (EDRM)

Because of budget pressures it was necessary to change the way the Information Management Service operates and this was reported to Committee just before Christmas. Now that the technical elements of the service will be integrated into IT Services, there should be a better opportunity to add value to the service by exploiting synergies between them.

This area of work is crucial to the aspirations of the Council to modernise and streamline the way it operates. To allow staff to be flexible and more productive, it is essential that the data they use is available electronically so that they can access and process it wherever they are, either working from home, on site or in the office. Considering how this work can be developed in a more challenging budget position will now be a priority for managers.

Mobile and Remote Working

Approval has now been given to the business case for mobile working in Cleansing Services. This project also provides for automated customer facilities which will improve the service to those using it and reduce the staffing resources required. This is a major initiative which involves integrating back-office systems with the Council's customer relationship management system utilised in the Customer Service Centre. A project team has been established and staff are working towards a go-live date later this year.

The work on projects in Housing and Contracts and Direct Services has been suspended pending the letting of the housing maintenance contract later this year and a review of the operation of the residual Building and Electrical Services Team. The new housing contract will employ mobile technologies but it is not possible to take the project further until it is known which system will be used by the successful contractor.

Equalities

It is proposed that the Council will have a peer review in the summer to assess whether it meets the new 'Achieving' standard of the Local Government Equalities Framework. This has been judged to be a far more cost effective way of assessing the Council as a formal review can cost upwards of £6,000. A peer review by the South West Regional Improvement and Efficiency Programme will be at no cost but will still identify those areas which the Council needs to work on. Issues identified will then be formulated into an action plan.

Budget Savings

£573,000 of savings were identified for the current financial year and all the proposals have been implemented except the corporate printer project which is now being rolled out. This proposal will dispense with virtually all desktop printers by the provision of networked, shared printers offering better quality prints, lower operational costs and significantly reduced paper usage as they will automatically print on both sides of the paper. The savings identified were in the order of £33,700 but in order to achieve this it was necessary to source an alternative make of printer. This was done and when fully implemented, in this financial year, the anticipated savings should be realised.

Local Government Review

We await the decision of the Secretary of State which, by law, he is unable to make until 2 February 2010. If there is to be a change of structure within Devon, of whatever kind, there will be a huge workload to cope with, particularly for Treasury and Human Resources.

Customer Service Centre

The recession has seen a sharp rise in visitors to the CSC with many more seeking advice on benefits. Two-thirds of customers who see an Adviser are enquiring about benefits and these transactions take, on average, about 20 minutes to deal with. Despite this, average waiting times are now down to well below our target of 10 minutes, having peaked at 19 minutes in March last year. The upsurge in visitors coincided with the integration of benefits enquiries into the CSC and the retraining of all staff so this was a particularly difficult time for them. Plans are now advanced for moving more service enquiries into the CSC, for both Home Choice and council tax. This will allow further savings to be achieved in the back offices.

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