

AT A MEETING
- of the -
REVENUE AND BENEFITS
WORKING GROUP held at the
Council House, Walsall on
5 December 2006 at 5.00pm

PRESENT

Councillor Towe (Lead Member)
Councillor Bird
Councillor Griffiths
Councillor Rochelle
Councillor Sarohi
Councillor Turner

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

Lynn Hall (Joint Head of Revenues & Benefits)
Sharon Tait (Joint Head of Revenues & Benefits)

SCRUTINY SUPPORT

Simon Evans (Performance & Scrutiny Officer)

7/06. APOLOGIES

No apologies were received for this meeting.

8/06. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

The members of the political groups represented on the panel indicated there were no whipping arrangements for any of the political parties in respect of items on the agenda. There were no declarations of interest.

9/06. KEY DISCUSSION ITEMS

Councillor Towe informed the panel that there were a number of items on the agenda that were very important and invited Sharon Tait to feed back on the visit to Telford.

Sharon Tait referred to the previously circulated paper and informed the panel that it was a very useful visit. Officers from Telford highlighted lots of improvements since the implementation of the EDMS system with nothing negative to report. She commented that their system had been in place for 3 years and there had been no dip in improvement during the implementation. An example of a benefit was given whereby an officer could be allocated a case and deal with it from start to finish.

Councillor Sarohi commented that the visit was good and that he was particularly impressed with the improved BVPI'S and telephone system.

Councillor Bird stated that it was unfair to make direct comparison as our telephone system was not adequate. Phones were not being answered and callers had to dial a number of phones to get a response.

Lynn Hall agreed that the telephone system needed updating as they were unable to identify exact amounts of callers waiting at any one time.

Councillor Towe asked whether staffing was arranged to cover the busiest times.

Sharon Tait confirmed that they were aware of the busier periods and increased staffing accordingly. 8 new lines had been installed in Revenues to deal with peak in calls, however Revenues were unable to identify the number of callers waiting and were dependant upon the switchboard operators to advise them when unexpected peaks occurred.

Councillor Bird said that generally there are too many calls that are unanswered and diverted to the switchboard.

Sharon Tait said that the Revenues and Benefits service would be happy to trial any new phone system.

Councillor Griffiths informed the panel that following the visit to Telford, he had arranged a meeting with Dennis Jones (Head of ICT) to discuss a new telephony system, and would raise this item with him.

Councillor Bird commented that new technology needs to be embraced as people often get frustrated when calls don't get answered. He raised concerns about the proposal to reduce the staffing cover of the switchboard, which he felt delivered a good service.

Lynn Hall stated that she thought it was about integrating the team into the call centre and that the switchboard team would be part of that proposal.

Councillor Bird commented that the impact of the calls to the revenues and benefits service should be considered within the proposal. He then asked whether the Telford EDMS system could be used by Walsall or whether a brand new system needed to be purchased.

Sharon Tait confirmed that the interface and administration system requirements were different so it could be difficult. In addition sharing the service could restrict the possibility of rolling the system out corporately at Walsall.

Councillor Bird asked what we needed from the system and stated that it should be right for now but also able to cope with future requirements. He reminded the panel that newer technology exists in the United States and that we should consider all options available to buy the best for the future needs.

Sharon Tait stated that the current remit was to purchase a revenues and benefit specific system which may not be available in the states. She commented that they had asked Q2, a procurement and project management specialist company, to assist in order to get the best possible price, and help with the configuration and implementation, whilst also considering the corporate perspective by procuring a system that could be rolled out across all directorates. This would cost £50k which had been identified in the business case.

Councillor Griffiths said that he had received a letter from John O'Hare confirming the £400k investment for the EDMS system.

Councillor Towe asked whether the panel should look at other EDMS systems before deciding upon an option.

Lynn Hall stated that Lichfield Council use the competitors system to the one being used in Telford.

Sharon Tait said that there are two market leaders, Annite and Civica (formerly known as Comino) both of which provide revenues and benefits specific systems that can be bought off the shelf with the potential to be rolled out across all directorates. To maximise savings she stated that the ideal position would be to have the system on site by 31 March and fully operational by September.

Councillor Griffiths asked whether we could also benchmark Blackpool as he knew they were in the top 3 for Revenues and Benefits.

Councillor Turner asked whether the implementation of the new system would create a backlog.

Lynn Hall replied that there should be no backlog as extra support staff would be engaged to assist during the implementation.

Councillor Griffiths asked whether the £50k had been made available.

Lynn Hall confirmed that this had been made available through the capital programme.

Councillor Sarohi asked what happens to all incoming mail.

Sharon Tait said that Telford send all their mail directly to Leeds where it is scanned and indexed then transmitted electronically to the authority overnight. She said that there could be a possibility of sharing the courier service with Telford.

Councillor Bird asked what happens to recorded delivery mail as this could not be delivered to a PO Box.

Sharon Tait said that she thought this was possible as Telford had managed to overcome this problem.

Lynn Hall said that Lichfield was different to Telford in that they scanned all mail on-site.

Councillor Bird asked whether Walsall was looking to a proposal to scan on or off site.

Lyn Hall stated that a business case needed to be put together in order to decide the best way forward.

Councillor Rochelle asked whether Lichfield were ranked as highly as Telford in terms of Revenues and Benefits and whether or not it would be worthwhile visiting them.

Lynn Hall confirmed that Telford were an excellent authority and Lichfield were good.

Councillor Towe asked about the running costs of the scanning and indexing.

Sharon Tait said that whilst she had no figures available, from memory the set-up costs were £17k and the annual running costs were £145k. This was off-set as 12 staff could be redeployed following the successful implementation.

Resolved

That Councillor Griffiths will discuss with Dennis Jones the possibility of the Revenues and Benefits service trialling a new telephony system.

Officers to enquire about the possibility of a member visit to view the EDMS system at Lichfield.

10/06. CHARITABLE STATUS

Councillor Towe stated that this item was on the agenda as a request had been received from full council for the scrutiny panel to investigate the possibility of the welfare rights service becoming an independent trust.

Councillor Bird stated that the original motion had directed the scrutiny panel to look at ways of implementing a charitable trust but that the wording had now been changed to acknowledge the value of a charitable trust and to explore this further before deciding whether we should do it, when it could be implemented by and whether or not it would be core funded.

Sharon Tait confirmed that there was considerable work to be done and that a business case rather than implementation by April 07 is a more realistic timescale.

Lynn Hall asked for clarification about what core funding of the Welfare Rights Service meant as the salary costs were already being met from core funding.

Councillor Bird stated he thought that only 6 members of the team were core funded and 6 were funded from other sources on fixed term contracts.

Councillor Turner stated that the service needs all staff to be core funded as greater control could be gained over where they worked. Grant funded posts often came with restrictions on where they were able to work.

Councillor Sarohi said he thought only 7 posts were core funded and the others funded from other sources.

Councillor Bird suggested that some clarity was needed on this point along with further details of the full impact of charitable trust status to include TUPE arrangements for staff and the full cost implications.

Resolved

Officers to prepare a briefing note for the next Corporate Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel on 14 December 2006 detailing the process for investigating the considerations of the Welfare Rights Service becoming an Independent trust along with a proposed timescale for when the final report would come to scrutiny.

TERMINATION OF MEETING

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 5:48 pm.