

Joint Worcestershire Hub Scrutiny Redditch Borough Council Representative's Update

The following notes were recorded during a meeting of the Joint Worcestershire Hub Scrutiny Task Group on Monday 7th June at Redditch Town Hall in the Chief Executive's Office by Councillor Gay Hopkins, Redditch Borough Council's representative on the Group.

It was made clear during the meeting that Redditch and Bromsgrove had not agreed to have a shared service approach to the Hub. As Redditch retained a housing stock many of the calls received by the Hub in Redditch related to housing, maintenance, rents, repairs etc. and Redditch had a very high volume of calls. Redditch also used a number of bespoke systems such as PayPal for customers paying Council rents. These could be accessed at a number of local shops and neighbourhood offices. This helped to reduce the flow of customers within the Town Hall and was more convenient for some customers. Increasingly, the Council was also encouraging residents to use direct debit for payments for Council services.

Bromsgrove had not retained a housing stock and therefore the types of enquiries received there and the use made of the Hub tended to be different. The Hub had had a major impact in Bromsgrove following the introduction of the service in 2005. Many enquiries were dealt with at the level of the Hub which had helped to reduce the amount of time spent by back office staff on responding to enquiries. For example, out of a sample of 600 calls in a given period only 100 would be referred to a back office function. One consequence of this had been that the length of calls had often become longer, particularly when responding to more complicated enquiries.

The Chief Executive of Redditch Borough Council confirmed that he believed that the Worcestershire Hub represented value for money. However, assessing the value of the service needed to be explored in further detail. It was questioned whether assessment of the quality of the service should only focus on response times to customer calls and it was suggested that it should also include asking residents whether the Hub was delivering the job they expected and meeting their needs.

The performance of the quality of the customer service delivered by the Worcestershire Hub was measured face to face through the completion of 100 questionnaires per month. The questionnaires contained performance related questions.

It was argued that the focus of each branch of the Worcestershire Hub needed to remain local as it was important for the customer to feel that the operator had local knowledge. A number of examples were provided to illustrate this point and it was noted that in circumstances where the operator was not familiar with the area it made it difficult for them to relate to the issue reported by a customer, particularly if it referred to a particular location.

In the south of the county there appeared to be longer call times for the Hub. There were also Welfare Officers available to meet with residents to help them to complete forms.

There were particular arrangements in place for responding to complicated enquiries. In these cases the operator recorded all the relevant details provided by a customer. These details were then referred to the back office function and a relevant Officer was required to call the customer to provide a response.

The Benefits team in Bromsgrove had a VRA voice recognition analysis system. This system was used when responding to benefits calls. The system operated by identifying both high and low risks and aimed to improve the speed of processing benefits claims and taking calls away from the Customer Service Centre. Some low risk claims could easily be processed and finalised for payment within a 48 hour period.

At both Redditch and Bromsgrove Councils there were Customer Service Managers and both attended this meeting. There did not appear to be a specific structure for operating Hub branches throughout the county. Instead, Hub branches appeared to operate in diverse ways from location to location reflecting local needs and service delivery.

On 15th July a new Head of Customer Services would start work at Redditch and Bromsgrove Councils. This Officer would be working to implement a more customer focussed service with an ultimate aim to reduce the number of calls to the Hub. Increasingly, residents would be encouraged to use the internet rather than to call the Hub. It was also intended that there would be regular meetings for all of the relevant Customer Services Managers in the County with responsibility for the Hub.

A number of changes were already being implemented. For example, Bromsgrove had one telephone number for their revenue and benefits service and this reduced the number of enquiries that were referred on to the back office. Redditch was in the process of introducing a similar system and expected that there would similarly be a reduction to the number of enquiries referred to their back office services.

During the course of the meeting it was confirmed that the current internal recharge allocated to the Library Service to support the Hub was £750,000. Worcestershire County Council also paid a significant percentage towards the costs for each district operating the Hub across the county which was in proportion to the level of County Council services provided from each District Customer Service Centre.