

## Worcestershire Hub Scrutiny Task Group

### Meeting 2, Thursday 18 March 2010, 11.30am – Notes / Action sheet

#### Members

##### Worcestershire County Council

Bob Banks (lead)  
Lucy Hodgson  
Stephen Peters

##### District Councils (co-optees)

Laurie Evans (Wychavon District Council)  
Roger Sutton (Malvern Hills District Council)  
Kit Taylor (Bromsgrove District Council)  
Geoff Williams (Worcester City Council)

#### Officers

##### Wychavon District Council – item 2

Vic Allison, Deputy Managing Director  
Amanda de Warr, Democratic Services Manager  
Nick Jefferies, Head of Revenues and Benefits Shared Service

Scrutiny: Suzanne O'leary, Overview and Scrutiny Manager, Emma James, Overview and Scrutiny Officer, Tony Dipple, Head of Financial Appraisal and Scrutiny Liaison Officer for Financial Services Annette Stock, Policy & Review Officer and Emma Breckin, Performance Improvement Officer (Scrutiny Liaison Officers)

#### Available papers

Agenda

#### 1. **Welcome/Apologies**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Apologies were received from Beverley Nielsen, Nathan Desmond, Jinny Pearce, Jenny Greener and David Thain.

The representatives for Redditch Borough Council and Wyre Forest District Councils had changed (to Jinny Pearce and Jenny Greener). Unfortunately they were unable to attend today's meeting.

Bob Banks declared a personal interest, as a member of the Worcestershire Hub Board. Lucy Hodgson declared a personal interest in relation to her district councillor role with Worcester City Council, as she was the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Customer Care and Citizens' Engagement, and also a member of the Hub Shared Service Management Board.

#### 2. **District Council Perspective – Wychavon District Council**

- Vic Allison, Deputy Managing Director
- Amanda de Warr, Democratic Services Manager (with responsibility for the Hub)
- Nick Jefferies, (Head of Revenues and Benefits Shared Service)

At the first task group meeting, members had agreed the importance of seeking the views of the district councils (both officers and councillors). Each district council Chief Executive had been asked to put forward witnesses who could

#### **Action**

Include item on all future agendas

most usefully contribute to the scrutiny ( a list is included in the agenda for the task group members). The first of these discussions was with Wychavon District Council officers.

The agenda report included some suggested lines of enquiry.

The Democratic Services Manager briefly outlined the nature of customer contact provision at Wychavon, which was 'not a typical model' within the Hub partnership. Face to face contact centre provision had been in place for over 20 years, and there were now three contact centres. These were now managed within the Hub partnership. However, unlike the other district councils, all telephone calls (except for revenues and benefits) were answered by a Wychavon DC switchboard, and were not part of the Hub. Now that Wychavon had joined the revenues and benefits shared service, those calls were dealt with at the Hub call centre.

For all services except for revenues and benefits, face to face staff dealt with calls up to a certain point (which varied for each service), after which the enquiry would be passed onto the service area. There was a small facility within each service area, to provide a 'hub-like' service.

#### Main discussion points

- Wychavon had not joined the Hub in its full capacity when the partnership was set up in 2002, because its own telephony operation was managed very differently to other districts and the transition to the Hub would have been hugely complex. At the time members felt it important to have experts answering the phones and did not want an automated system, although this view went against officer advice at the time. Some members continued to hold the view that 'calls should be answered by the experts'
- the Deputy Managing Director raised the question of 'where, organisationally, do we want our experts to be?' It could be argued that to reduce 'avoidable contact', experts needed to be on the frontline
- Wychavon is currently reviewing how it deals with its customers, and would need to reorganise how it deals with telephony internally, before it could consider how it may use the Hub in the future
- the way in which councils worked with their customers continued to change and evolve and Wychavon's integration to the Hub was something which would be kept under review. There was potential for change – the prime incentive to join would be customer experience, although cost saving would also be important
- Wychavon's experience of working with the Hub as regards face to face customer service was very positive, and had brought benefits such as improved service, value for money and extended opening hours. Greater partnership working had resulted in a wider service (the Evesham centre worked in partnership with West Mercia Police)
- regarding governance arrangements for the Hub, these did not present any problem to Wychavon officers, because of the way in which the district operated. The Democratic Services Manager was part of the Hub Strategic Management Board, which she found very useful. A

weakness may be member involvement, as the set-up was quite large and did not meet as often as would be useful – this meant that meetings tended to review the past rather than look to the future

- regarding agreement for a shared regulatory service, as part of the Worcestershire enhanced two tier working, the Deputy Managing Director said that getting agreement from members on the Hub had been the most difficult part. The Democratic Services Manager believed that calls would be handled at the shared service contact centre (Perry Wood, Worcester), in the same way as the revenues and benefits service operated
- customer satisfaction monitoring was something which the Democratic Services Manager wanted to do more of and produce more meaningful reports. The Hub carried out quite a lot. Wychavon itself carried out some, including complaints monitoring. It was easier to monitor satisfaction with the face to face service, as customers were generally happy to participate, whereas on the telephone it was harder to keep the customer on the phone
- the Wychavon member commented that during his visit to the shared service centre at Perry Wood, the on-screen completion of forms by customer service staff worked very well. Callers had the impression they were ringing Wychavon District Council
- in respect of measuring performance, the officers felt there was a tension between quantity and quality – the nature of a call centre environment focused on visual displays of call queues, and this clashed with enquiries which, by their nature, may require 20 minutes' attention
- when asked about the future, including the shared regulatory service, it was agreed that there was limited capacity to deal with the different customer response standards which each district council operated to, although different services could still be provided by each district within a shared service
- it was agreed that there would be a drive to standardise standards with regard to the shared regulatory service – and it was pointed out that it would be extremely complex for a CSA to work to up to six varying customer service standards
- the Democratic Services manager felt that it was important not to distance the customer so far from the back office that it led to a breakdown in the relationship between the two
- the officers referred to the 80/20 model – which was based on the belief that 20% of business calls were too complicated to be dealt with at the first point of contact, and required back office resources, or expert knowledge within the Hub
- during a member visit to the face to face Hub at Malvern, it had been learned that a Planning Officer was available every morning
- one complaint was the difficulty in getting an officer name from the Hub
- officers felt that encouraging take-up of online and self-service options

was a necessity, crucially because it freed up the face to face service for those who really needed it. To date the range of online services available was not huge and there was certainly scope for this development

- one possible source of information regarding how to move customers to a different way of contacting an organisation (known as "channel shifting") may be utility companies, although their operation may be driven more by cost than satisfaction
- it was recognised that changing customer behaviour was very difficult and the effort required to achieve this should not be underestimated. Wychavon had considered ways of incentivising customers, for example to switch from cheque payments to direct debits
- the Deputy Managing Director pointed out that face to face service, although popular (maybe too popular) was very expensive in terms of resources, staff and opening times. In addressing the current economic pressures, the scope of this provision would need to be looked at
- service transformation was very costly and onerous. Identifying service efficiencies between partners was crucial, but actually resourcing them was another thing. One of the frustrations of the current situation with the revenues and benefits shared service was the lack of 'down time' – instead they were 'treading water'
- it was agreed that although performance of the Hub telephony service had changed dramatically, negative perceptions remained
- obstacles for the future development of the Hub included IT, the many different systems and the fact that they were not integrated – resulting in duplication of effort, and how to ensure information was easily accessible

### **Revenues and Benefits Service**

- the Head of Revenues and Benefits Shared Service felt that use of the Hub for this service was logical and had supported the transition. However, he did not believe it realistic for customer service staff to provide a full service which met service levels for the subject area as well as the contact centre
- revenues and benefits queries could be particularly complex and involved many different processes. Staff from revenues and benefits continued to have concerns that some calls required expertise which could not be provided by a generic customer service advisor
- a recent report stated concerns from the citizens' advice bureaux, that the quality of service had declined
- the business case for the revenues and benefits and the intended customer interface had not yet been fully realised
- for revenues and benefits, the call centre staff had access to the same information as the service area staff

- in respect of revenues and benefits enquiries, face to face staff dealt with enquiries on the same level as customer service staff at Perry Wood. Additionally, Wychavon staff also validated forms
- a fast-track system had been introduced, which, from receipt of forms, aimed to give a decision within 48 hours. The majority of forms were posted to the Council, but it was hoped the option of being able to complete forms online would increase
- it was confirmed that more than 50% of the face to face service time was attributed to revenues and benefits enquiries, something which was a consequence of the shared service. Previously, the face to face service would have dealt with enquiries up to a certain point, after which they would have referred on to the service area – now the face to face staff had to deal with much more in-depth enquiries, of up to one and a half hour duration

3. **Hub visits update** – this item was deferred until 24 March meeting.

Agenda  
planning

4. **Next steps**

**Task group meeting 24 March, 2pm at County Hall**

- South Worcestershire Revenues and Benefits Shared Service Joint Scrutiny

Information required

- Governance – priority
- Vision
- Performance data, including that which is reported to the Boards/committees
- Performance information and key performance indicators from the districts
- Original business case
- Monthly Hub bulletins

EJ/JW to  
progress

Members were advised that some of this information, for example the governance arrangements and performance information was complex and would need to be presented in context.

In view of the discussions today on performance and the tension between quantity and quality, it would be important for the Group to consider what good performance should look like.

Members queried whether the original timetable for the scrutiny was still achievable (which had been to collect evidence by March/April, and report findings to cabinet in July). The Scrutiny Manager advised that, as the information outlined above had not yet been received, it was possible that the original timetable may slip.

The meeting ended at 12.55pm