

Scrutiny Review: Worcestershire Hub November 2010

Response of the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Corporate Services to the Recommendations Cabinet, 25 November 2010

Summary

The recommendations of the Joint County / District Scrutiny of the Worcestershire Hub are welcomed and provide further support to the developments already underway or planned. This is valuable in driving a “whole organisation” approach to customer service.

When the Scrutiny exercise was commissioned, the Hub was experiencing challenging times primarily resulting from the increase in demand for service. It is encouraging to receive this vote of confidence in the Hub and the work staff undertake.

The Scrutiny is right to stress the value of the Hub and potential to secure further service improvements and cash savings by using the Hub for more services and developing and promoting the more cost effective online and telephone channels.

It is acknowledged that this exercise has increased the shared understanding of the members involved and that this is critical with regards future developments in customer service provision. The recommendations regarding member induction and sharing performance information with members are welcomed and will be taken forward.

The partnership of seven authorities remains strong within the framework of the partnership agreement that has been in place since 2003. The more recent development of the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service has brought about some more definitive governance arrangements for those participating authorities and whilst this means the governance may be seen as complex, it has been developed in a conscious way. Work is underway to review the overall governance arrangements for the Worcestershire Hub taking account of the key role of the Hub in service transformation. This recognises the aim to have single governance arrangements in place.

Each of the recommendations made as part of the Scrutiny have been taken in turn and a comment provided. A clear updated plan of work is emerging across the partnership and this report is being used to shape and inform the details.

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1

If the Hub is to be increasingly used as a basis for service transformation across the County, it is vital that there is councillor understanding and support across all authorities. All authorities should ensure their inductions include briefing about customer service strategies across the whole of the Worcestershire Hub (and not just their local area), including visits to both local centres and the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service Contact Centre (based at Perry Wood Walk).

This recommendation is welcomed recognising the increasingly central role of the Hub within each authority. Over recent years, Worcestershire County Council has included the Worcestershire Hub as part of the new member induction process. Consideration can also be given to the inclusion of the Hub as part of Senior Management induction.

Work will take place to enable this for 2011 onwards.

Over the last year there have been many visits to the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service Contact Centre from members from a number of the authorities.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

All authorities consider their scrutiny arrangements of shared services – this could be done at the joint scrutiny chairs and vice-chairs network.

The Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen of the overview and scrutiny committees of each authority within Worcestershire meet regularly to share good practice, avoid duplication of work programmes and discuss possible joint scrutiny. It will be helpful to consider possible ways to scrutinise shared services at this network, and the matter will be raised at a future meeting.

RECOMMENDATION 3

We recommend that each authority and the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service review governance arrangements across the Worcestershire Hub Partnership. The aim would be to ensure clarity, accountability and transparency and to move towards a single governance structure.

The governance arrangements for the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service have been established in a conscious, deliberate way. However it is acknowledged that the governance arrangements appear complex recognising the wider partnership agreement for the Worcestershire Hub and then specific arrangements for the Shared Service.

A review of governance arrangements is currently underway by the Worcestershire Hub Strategic Management Group as part of a wider piece of work agreed by the Chief Executives of all authorities in August 2010. The Strategic Management Group will report back to Chief Executives with proposals at the end

of the year.

RECOMMENDATION 4: *We recommend that the District Councils should consider researching the cost of individual transactions for different services, which will build on the work being carried out by the Hub Shared Service.*

Work to identify transaction costs and the differences across the various “access channels” is important. The basis for calculating transaction costs needs to be agreed across the partnership to confirm what costs elements are / are not included.

The Worcestershire Hub Strategic Management Group has agreed to undertake a piece of work looking at the cost model – end-to-end – for key services. This is important as looking at the transaction costs within the Hub alone does not present the complete picture recognising the depth of service provided as the first point of contact varies.

RECOMMENDATION 5

The more services use the Hub, the better value it becomes. Therefore, as part of the BOLD programme, the County Council should increase its efforts to ensure all its services use the Hub.

This is included as part of the Customer Focus work within the WCC BOLD Programme.

Work is also well underway with the Worcestershire Regulatory Service where the Hub will be the countywide first point of contact.

RECOMMENDATION 6

In light of future funding and the move towards self-service within the Hub, all authorities and the South Worcestershire Shared Services Joint Committee should monitor and record the efficiencies and savings gained by use of the Hub.

Agreed. There are two clear areas of efficiency to be gained through increasing the availability and use of self-service. These are; (1) savings within the Worcestershire Hub by reducing the amount of “assisted” contact both in person, by telephone and post and (2) savings within service areas through streamlined processes, removal of re-keying data, reduced data checking, right first time approach, as well as a reduction in paper publications and forms.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Appropriate resource plans for the Hub are in place to better plan for forecast demand.

This requires continued close working with service areas to understand what influences customer demand and patterns of demand. Forecast effects on demand will be covered as part of the regular service review process (where this is not already happening).

The Worcestershire Hub Shared Service is currently in the process of implementing a Workforce Management System. This provides greater capability for using information regarding forecasts to better match resource capacity and demand.

RECOMMENDATION 8

The Hub also needs to be prepared to deal with unpredicted peaks in service demand, and we recommend that Business Continuity Plans are in place across the Hub Shared Service and the non shared service Hubs.

A review of existing Business Continuity Plans will be carried out. The tools available within the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service Contact Centre, including the Workforce Management system, will enable greater ability to plan for peaks in demand. Plans will obviously need to take account of the resources available.

RECOMMENDATION 9

Performance information should be consistent across the Shared Service and the non-Shared Service districts, to enable like for like comparisons, and we recommend a single performance management framework is established across the Hub.

The Worcestershire Hub Strategic Management Group has already acknowledged that information needs to be clear, consistent and visible in order to drive service improvements. As part of the work to address this, the specific elements of performance information will be reviewed and agreed.

RECOMMENDATION 10

All performance information – for shared service and non-shared service districts – should be made available to all councillors.

Once the Performance Management Framework is established, the information will be made available to councillors on a regular basis. It is likely this will be via the internet.

RECOMMENDATION 11

We recommend that all partners consider the role which scrutiny could play in helping to monitor performance of the Worcestershire Hub, if they have not already done so.

Performance monitoring is a key role of the County Council's Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board and the overview and scrutiny panels. The Resources Overview and Scrutiny Panel receives twice yearly performance information which includes the Worcestershire Hub's key performance indicators. The same process is in place for many – if not all – of the other authorities.

RECOMMENDATION 12

For telephone enquiries, inform customers of their place in the queue, or an estimated

wait time for them to be able to speak to a customer services advisor.

The Worcestershire Hub Operational Management Group (Customer Service Managers from across the partnership) will review this in order to determine an appropriate course of action. However, it is important to recognise the recent and current performance with average telephone wait times of approximately 30 seconds. With this level of performance, information regarding the queue is probably not appropriate.

Customers are informed about queues/increased demand at peak times and any incidents which impact on call volumes or customer service. Messages are also used as appropriate to signpost customers to websites or provide information.

RECOMMENDATION 13

Define and agree Service Level Agreements between the Worcestershire Hub and every service area.

Agreed. This is critical to improving the quality of service for our customers. Agreements already exist between some service areas and the Worcestershire Hub and clearly there is an opportunity for these to be reviewed in light of increased focus on self service.

Service level agreements recognise the end-to-end process and provide clarity about the process followed, information available to customer service staff, information passed to service areas, timescales, performance targets, information in order to set customer expectations etc.

RECOMMENDATION 14

Ensure there is sufficient time allocated for service area staff and Hub staff to review any issues or needs, and to monitor service provision via the Hub.

Many regular service reviews take place between customer service managers and service managers. The format of these reviews will be “firmed up” and managers will ensure these take place on a regular, scheduled basis within the resources available. The frequency of service reviews is determined by the nature of the service and / or the stage of development. Clear contact points and escalation routes will also be confirmed (where they are not already clear) for matters arising.

The focus of these reviews is; improving customer service, finding solutions and driving efficiencies.

RECOMMENDATION 15

Further work on the flow of information between the service area and the Hub (and vice versa) should take place, to ensure that the correct information is provided by the Hub to the service area, and that service area staff provide a response which enables Hub staff to answer the customer enquiry. It is important that both teams understand the implications of what the information they provide will be for the customer. The creation of

Service Level Agreements between the Hub and services will support this.

Good customer service is the responsibility of all and the creation of Service Level Agreements for all services will support this.

The Worcestershire Hub Strategic Management Group (7 authorities represented) is concluding the development of a Customer Strategy. This strategy sets out a number of clear principles to improve customer service. The work to adopt this will then be completed within each authority this year.

RECOMMENDATION 16

Give all customers the enquiry reference number, to encourage and enable them to track progress themselves online, and reduce the need for repeat enquiries to the Hub.

When customers make contact via the Worcestershire Hub they are given a service request number as appropriate, depending on the nature of their enquiry.

Work is underway to implement tools to enable the improved monitoring of the status of some open service requests (for certain services) and it is intended to link this to text or email status updates for customers in the future.

For certain services, e.g. Highways, customers will be able to track the status online. This is the desired position for self-service.

RECOMMENDATION 17

Move towards more consistent IT packages, as contracts come up for renewal.

It is important to ensure that the direction of self-service, web services and improved workflow are fundamental elements of any future ICT activity. This will be reflected in ICT strategies and service transformation work across the authorities in Worcestershire.

A contract is currently in place for the support of elements of the Worcestershire Hub infrastructure, e.g. Telephony System, Customer Relationship Management (CRM). This contract ceases in 2013 and work is already underway to scope the requirements of future arrangements beyond this point. This acknowledges that there is now increased knowledge and experience “in-house”.

RECOMMENDATION 18

In view of the negative feedback from our survey of parish councillors, we recommend further dialogue between senior officer representatives from the Worcestershire Hub and parish councils, to ensure their feedback can be used to improve the overall Hub service.

Specific developments and improvements are communicated via the CALC Newsletter. However, representatives from the Worcestershire Hub Strategic Management Group will meet with CALC to take account of feedback to explore making improvements to the service.

The majority of contact made by Parish Councils via the Worcestershire Hub relates to Highways matters. The work currently underway between Customer Services and Highways to improve the quality of information available to customers will help improve the experience had by Parish Councils.

RECOMMENDATION 19

The 'Hub' means different things to different people. We recommend further communication of the Hub's identity and services to the public. This could, for example, accompany the issue of council tax bills, which would present a cost-effective opportunity for marketing.

Information regarding the Worcestershire Hub has been included in previous years as part of the information issued along with Council Tax bills. Work is underway to start preparing for the information to go out with bills in March 2011 and this will take the points regarding Hub Identity into account.

Further communications and marketing activity will also take these points into account.

RECOMMENDATION 20

Our investigation of best practice advice and customer survey results supports our findings that the website offers huge potential for helping customers to help themselves, and for making substantial efficiency savings. This can only be achieved if the website is as user-friendly and effective as possible. We are pleased to see that the website is being improved and recommend that this work continues in order to realise the potential gains in customer satisfaction and efficiency gains.

In the current climate, it is even more important that a commitment is made to self-service as a strategic issue. A working group made of representatives from across the seven authorities has recently prepared a Self Service Strategy and this was presented to Chief Executives at the end of October. This recognises the key role of self service in the future of improving customer service as well as enabling efficiencies.

A joint plan to deliver the strategy is currently being prepared, this acknowledges that progress has been and continues to be made in a number of areas, however further development work and changes are required to make self-service a core part of service delivery.

The web is fundamental to the Self-Service strategy; however it does include other media such as automated telephone services.

RECOMMENDATION 21

In addressing the website and its expanding role in customer contact, we recommend that consideration is given to where the website sits within the council's organisational structure. This should take account of the need to align expertise in customer contact and communication, as well as information technology.

The website is at the heart of improvements and the previous point emphasises the importance of getting self service right and usable. As part of this the positioning of the website within the organisations will be considered. In the meantime, the various services and functions will work together to deliver improvements, e.g. Customer Services, ICT and Marketing & Communications.

RECOMMENDATION 22

Councils' websites are very important and their profile needs to reflect this. A cabinet member for each authority should have responsibility for the website within his or her portfolio.

Alongside the positioning of the website within the organisation, Cabinet Member responsibility for the website will also be clarified where appropriate.