11. CENTRAL SERVICES

11.1 Revenues and Benefits

Introduction and background

Revenues and benefits is one of the key service areas in supporting the needs and requirements of vulnerable members of society. As such, it is important to look at the quality and accessibility of services as the key driver for any proposed change. At present there is no unified system or approach in the delivery of revenues and benefits across Cornwall. While there have been some attempts to unify certain elements of delivery, the present situation does not provide a standardised service that can be accessed by the people of Cornwall regardless of their location. In consequence, the availability and access to benefits advice is varied across the county and is delivered to varying quality standards by the district councils. This has lead to a degree of confusion over how and where services can be accessed, and it is also an inefficient approach to a service where uniformity of delivery is paramount

Opportunities for improvements

It is envisaged that there would be a more unified approach to the revenues and benefits service to ensure that uniformity of delivery and standards was enforced. This would be achieved through a progressive transition over a period of time to ensure that the quality of services will not be compromised. By streamlining the benefits advisory services in the county through the establishment of a unified system, it should be possible to increase the level of benefits take-up in the county.

Having a central system will mean that we can capture people's information once and establish a single citizen dataset which will inform all services and therefore reduce an individual's needs to supply personal information to differing parts of the organisation. This will be particularly helpful for benefits clients who may move from one district to another; with a countywide information system they will not need to supply their base information again. Whilst we will operate one overall IT system, we will also use the benefits of other corporate network systems to make sure we have a solution that will support good local working in terms of collection rates and response times.

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While there will be a more unified approach to the back-office functions of the service, the localism aspect is key to ensuring that access to the service remains local. We plan to establish a local presence in the 16 Community Networks Areas, supported by the central IT system including a document management system which will allow for people's cases to be dealt with in their locality if they so wish. Each delivery area will be set ambitious targets for service improvement, and we will also set an overall corporate minimum delivery standard which we will achieve by using the countywide resources to deal with particular problem areas and hot spots.

Efficiencies will be accrued through the integration of the existing district activities into a county-wide Cornwall operation, with the requirement for one administrative centre for revenue and benefits. The aggregation of these services could lead to savings of around £250,000, although it must be emphasised that these savings would only be accrued over a period of years to ensure that the level of support that is given to the vulnerable residents of Cornwall remains at a high level. This phased approach will initial develop links between existing county council and district activities before moving towards a more integrated system.

11.2 Electoral Functions (including Electoral Registration)

Introduction and background

In the current system, district councils have responsibility for the key electoral functions of electoral registration and of keeping polling districts and designated polling places under review. They run both district and parish elections, and, on behalf of others, run elections for the county council, the UK Parliament and the European Parliament.

Electoral staff in the districts have the:

• professional expertise/qualifications

• local knowledge

• necessary resources (Register of Electors, equipment, etc.)

The electoral function in Cornwall is carried out efficiently, but there is a lack of easily available performance data to prove this. The existing arrangements by which the county council commissions the districts to run its elections work effectively.

Opportunities for improvements in a unified council

Under a unified structure, the service will be delivered more efficiently because:

• economies of scale for procuring such functions as printing, publicity, IT support, etc., thus, lower costs overall

• less confusion for the public about what council they are voting councillors to

• having one database of electors (using one system) rather than six databases (and three different systems)

• synergies with other council functions that may enhance service performance (such as appropriate links with other citizen databases)

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