



## Belfast City Council

<b>Report to:</b>	Strategic Policy & Resources Committee
<b>Subject:</b>	<b>Department for Social Development – Social Security Agency – Delivering a Better Service for Customers</b>
<b>Date:</b>	Friday 6 <sup>th</sup> February 2009
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### Relevant Background Information

#### Purpose

To bring to the attention of Members, a consultation by the by the Department for Social Development, Social Security Agency on Delivering a Better Service for Customers and to present for approval a draft response to this consultation.

#### Background

Over the past two years, the Social Security Agency has been conducting a Strategic Business Review into how services are provided within their local office network of Jobs & Benefits/Social Security Offices. As a result, they have developed proposals to restructure their local operations function to ensure the future delivery of high quality services for customers. This public consultation document "Delivering a Better Service for Customers" explains the proposed changes.

Recent correspondence received from the Social Security Agency on 27<sup>th</sup> January 2009 addressing some of the issues of this consultation document is attached at Appendix one for Members attention.

### Summary of the Consultation Document

#### ***Proposal***

In order to provide a better service to customers, the Social Security Agency (SSA) is proposing to make changes to the way services are delivered through its local office network of Jobs & Benefits and Social Security Offices. It is envisaged that the changes will be introduced on a phased basis over 3 years, starting in October 2009.

#### ***Background***

The Agency currently delivers its services to around 550,000 customers through a network of 35 Jobs & Benefits/Social Security Offices dispersed throughout the main cities and towns in Northern Ireland and through a number of centralised benefit branches. The local office network is mainly responsible for the administration of Income Support, Jobseekers Allowance, Social Fund, National Insurance Number applications/allocations and the provision of information and advice on the broad spectrum of social security benefits. The current front office services provided by Social Security Agency staff in local offices, including new claims, national insurance number applications, information and advice and over the counter payments are not affected by the proposed changes. The proposed changes relate to **how** these services will be delivered in the future.

#### ***Drivers for Change***

The proposed changes are driven by two main factors:

##### **A) The Need to Improve, Modernise and Make Services more Accessible for Customers –**

The Agency recognises that a more modern and effective telephony system could provide a major opportunity for increasing customer accessibility to its services. Independent customer research recently undertaken by PricewaterhouseCoopers, on behalf of the Agency, indicates

that there is scope for improvement in the telephony service provided to local office customers. Feedback from Social Security Agency frontline staff would also suggest that many of the enquiries raised by callers to offices could be dealt with by telephone.

**B) Viable Business Model Going Forward** – Following an in-depth assessment, the Agency concluded that its staff are spread too thinly across the network and, consequently, its ability to deal with future major changes and continue to provide a high standard of customer service into the future is severely constrained. Consolidation of the current 74 back-office Income Support, Jobseekers Allowance and Social Fund processing teams, which are spread across 35 sites, into Benefit Processing Centres is, therefore, unavoidable.

### ***Proposed Changes***

The Agency recognised the importance of local access to its services and therefore the consultation document states that proposed changes to the current local service delivery model, summarised below, are premised on the basis that a strong network of public offices delivering frontline services will continue to exist:

- Back office processing for Income Support, Jobseekers Allowance and Social Fund will be centralised in 18 Benefit Processing Centres located on 16 sites;
- National Insurance Number processing will remain centralised in 3 locations;
- The introduction of an **enhanced** telephony service including low/fixed rate calls;
- The creation of dedicated Telephone Support Units for each Benefit Processing Centre;
- Extension of existing appointment system to include the majority of current caller traffic;
- The introduction of Customer Access Phones in front offices which will connect the customer to the ESA Centre, Social Fund Crisis Loans Tele-Claims Unit or an expert benefit adviser in the District Telephone Support Units; and
- Access to the Agency's website

The consultation document makes the following key points with respect to the proposed changes:

**Centralisation of Back Office Processing** – at present most customer contact with back office staff is conducted via the telephone or by post and this is expected to continue. It is not anticipated, therefore, that centralisation of back office processing will have a major impact on customers. However, it will have a significant impact for staff as it is anticipated that, over the 3 year implementation period, around 1050 staff will have to be relocated. Approximately 850 of these staff will have to move from their current offices to Benefit Processing Centre locations and a further 200 staff will be redeployed to vacancies elsewhere in the SSA/wider Northern Ireland Civil Service. There will be no redundancies as a result of the proposed changes. In order to help reduce costs and minimise staff travel distances it is proposed to make best use of the Agency's local office estate by locating the Benefit Processing Centres in the back office of 16 of the Agency's current local offices.

**Introduction of an Enhanced Telephony Service** – introducing a single telephone number for Income Support/Jobseekers Allowance (there are currently 38 telephone numbers, excluding fax numbers, in the SSA section of the BT telephone directory). The Agency is exploring the feasibility of implementing a short dial "101" contact number with the NI Direct Programme. It is expected that calls to "101" will be charged at a fixed rate of ten pence per call, irrespective of the duration, location or whether from landlines or mobiles.

The full consultation document can be accessed at <http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/consultations.htm>. The deadline for responses is **Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> January 2009**. However, the Council has gained agreement from the Social Security Agency to submit a response after the deadline. It has been agreed that the Council response is submitted on the 6<sup>th</sup> February 2009 after committee approval, subject to Council ratification. A draft response to the consultation is attached at Appendix 2.

### **Resource Implications**

N/a

### **Recommendations**

The Strategic Policy & Resources Committee is asked to note the content of the report and to approve the response attached at Appendix 2 to the consultation document and its submission to the Social Security

Agency. Members are asked to outline any additional comments that they would wish to make in the response.

**Key to Abbreviations**

N/a

**Documents Attached**

APPENDIX 1: Correspondence received from the Social Security Agency

APPENDIX 2: Draft Belfast City Council Response to the Social Security Agency Consultation on Delivering a Better Service for Customers

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