



# Recommendations from Special Efficiency Policy Panel 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2006

Date: 26/10/2006  
Open Report

Report of: Efficiency Policy Panel

## Shared Services – Revenues and Benefits in Worcestershire

### 1. Introduction

The Efficiency Policy Panel, at its meeting on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2006, considered the findings of the Shared Services – Revenues and Benefits Task and Finish Group which was established to consider the business case for a Worcestershire Districts Revenues and Benefits Shared Services.

The Group comprising the following Councillors met five times between 20<sup>th</sup> September and 18<sup>th</sup> October 2006.

Councillors G W Ballinger (Chairman), J Aston, Mrs H E Dyke, M B Kelly, H J Martin, Mrs F M Oborski, J C Simmonds, N J Thomas and S J Williams.

### 2. RECOMMENDATION

The Efficiency Policy Panel at its meeting on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2006 discussed in depth all of the information presented by the Task and Finish Group and after careful consideration made the following recommendation to the Cabinet.

#### **RECOMMENDED to the Cabinet:**

**Having considered and carried out a full scrutiny on the detailed Business Case, including receiving feedback from the employees and trade unions, the Panel recommends to Cabinet that they do not support the formation of a Shared Service for Revenues and Benefits in Worcestershire.**

### 3. Summary

In summary, the Task Group carried out a detailed scrutiny exercise to include:-

- i. Presentation by Patrick Birch on the detailed business case and executive summary outlining the financial and performance benefits of a Worcestershire Revenues and Benefits initiative. (See section 4 of report)

- ii. Presentation by the Chief Executive on the forthcoming White Paper and the wider issues where it is anticipated that the Government will be promoting enhanced two tier working for District Councils. (See section 5 of report)
- iii. The Head of Financial Services reported on the financial aspects of the business case. After an initial investment in the first two years, significant savings in excess of £400,000 per annum are anticipated in the business case, subject to the Council addressing residual support service costs. He was of the opinion that whilst it is unlikely that there would be any financial grant penalty for not agreeing to be part of the county-wide Shared Services initiative, future grant settlements would be tight reflecting the need to make Gershon efficiency savings in line with Government policy. (See section 6 of report)
- iv. The Accountancy Services Manager provided a paper giving a comprehensive breakdown of support service costs to the Revenues and Benefits function. Support service costs recharged to Revenues and Benefits are in excess of £600,000 per annum and 51 members of staff (9FTEs) time is charged to provide this service. (See section 7 of report)

The business case assumes that 75% of those costs can be saved after a two year period. The working party felt it would be difficult to achieve in excess of 50% saving and as a consequence, should there be a decision to enter into a Revenues and Benefits Shared Service initiative, this would lead to further Shared Services initiatives for Support Services across the authority.

- v. The task group considered employee issues. In particular, the Group were concerned about how the proposed reduction in staff numbers would impact on Wyre Forest employees, employees being located at the Headquarters and how the secondment/TUPE arrangements would be managed. (See section 8 of report)
- vi. The Financial Services Manager presented information relating to performance and efficiency initiatives that had been achieved in the Revenues and Benefits section. The task group acknowledge the fact that the Wyre Forest performance was national top quartile and 2<sup>nd</sup> in the county and the performance targets anticipated in the business case were only marginally above what is currently being achieved. Proposed future efficiency measures were also outlined to the Group. (See section 9 of report)
- vii. The ICT manager gave a presentation on the ICT proposals contained in the business case, including the risks relating to timescale for implementation and costs. The task group were concerned that the proposals in terms of timescale and costs, would be difficult to achieve. There is a history of non-achievement and escalating costs in relation to the implementation of ICT systems. (See section 10 of report)
- viii. The Financial Services Manager produced a paper on environmental issues. The task group were particularly concerned, in relation to the travelling distances and time spent travelling in respect of those employees that would be headquarters based. (See section 11 of report)

- ix. The Revenues and Benefits Managers gave presentations on the management perspective in relation to the business case. They made the task group aware of concerns relating to ICT timescales, proposed staffing numbers particularly in relation to projected performance targets. (See section 12 of report)
- x. The Financial Services Manager reported that the Leaders and Chief Executives panel on the 13<sup>th</sup> October have recommended Wychavon to be the host authority for Revenues and Benefits.
- xi. UNISON and employee representatives outlined, as part of the consultation exercise, their concerns on the consequences for employees if the proposals were accepted. UNISON responded to the business case on Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2006 and all members have received a copy. The employees main concern was in relation to location and the loss of a personal service at a local level. (See section 13 of report)
- xii. In conclusion, the task and finish group acknowledge that the Revenue and Benefits Shared Service initiative is the biggest single issue that the Council have had to consider with regard to the delivery of services since the transfer of the management leisure centres in 2003. A decision to transfer would lead to a reshape of the provision of services at Wyre Forest District Council.
- xiii. The Task and Finish group have carried out a full scrutiny exercise on the principle of Shared Services for Revenues and Benefits and are passing their deliberations to the special Efficiency Policy Panel for a final decision given that the membership was not politically balanced.

#### **4. Presentation on the Executive Business Case**

A presentation was received from Mr Patrick Birch, Chairman of the Project Board on the business case for Shared Services.

He explained to the Panel that this presentation was based on the one that had launched the consultation period with staff three weeks ago, the contents of which were attached as Appendix 1 to the minutes. He elaborated on a number of points raised including a number of issues also raised by Councillors as follows:

- a) For Shared Services to happen, a considerable amount of investment had to be made.
- b) The Worcestershire Hub would be crucial for the implementation of this Shared Service. It would be more complex in some areas where they did not have a fully functionary hub.
- c) The service for users would be quicker and the amount of back office resources needed to handle the service would reduce.
- d) Staff would be employed by the host authority but many staff would work locally or from home.

- e) There would be an opportunity for existing staff to be seconded to assist with the work and this had been built into the proposal.
- f) At the moment, the business case was Shared Services for Revenues and Benefits in Worcestershire but in time there was the possibility of others joining the Shared Services Organisation. There was also an opportunity for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Age Project, which was about financial assessment for older people, to be part of Shared Services.
- g) The first point of contact would be the Worcestershire Hub, but when more specialist details were required, to answer a query, the matter would be dealt with by a member of staff from the Shared Services Organisation.
- h) The Shared Services Organisation could run with three or four authorities but obviously the participation of all six District Councils in the county would be ideal. It would not be feasible if only two authorities were to sign up. All of these details had been incorporated into the business case. If not all six authorities signed up for Shared Services, there would be an increase in investment required from those that agreed to sign up.
- i) The business case indicated that Shared Services could operate more effectively and would be more streamlined. There was a lot of work being duplicated at the present time.
- j) What must be remembered in this business case, is that the service user must come first.
- k) Each authority has the opportunity to bid to be the host authority.

Members thought that a decision had to be made too quickly and they were being “railroaded”. They also did not see why there seemed to be an assumption that savings would be made and the service would be improved if this option were agreed. They felt that improvements could be made without having Shared Services.

## **5. Presentation on the White Paper and wider issues relating to Shared Services in general**

- 5.1 The Chief Executive gave a verbal presentation on the forthcoming White Paper and the wider issues related to Shared Services.
- 5.2 He explained that the White Paper would probably be issued in November 2006 and there were conflicting views about what it would contain. Some authorities wanted unitary councils some did not. The one point that would be certain would be that any council would not have the luxury to stay as they were. Whether Wyre Forest stayed as a district council or became a unitary authority, the Council would have to change and Shared Services would have to be looked at.

- 5.3 The Chief Executives across the county had got together and drawn up a primary list of relevant service areas and these included ICT and revenues and benefits. The subject of Shared Services had first been raised two years ago and before a decision could be made, a business case was asked to be presented. The outline business case for Revenues and Benefits was completed 12 months later and provided the basis for the detailed Business Case. The White Paper might provide that if councils stayed as they were, they would have to look at Shared Services; but one way that the Government might seek to persuade Councils that shared services were viable would be to limit the Revenue Support Grant. Another factor which might be addressed was the conversion of the Local Strategic Partnership into a Strategic Body.
- 5.4 Members felt that no decisions or any further commitments could be made until the rules were known and felt it was too premature for a decision to be made until the White Paper had been viewed.
- 5.5 The Chief Executive advised the Group that he would be attending a meeting on 5<sup>th</sup> October 2006 to discuss the merger of the Community Partnership and would advise the Group of the facts.

## **6. Financial Aspects of the Proposal**

- 6.1 Members considered a presentation from the Head of Financial Services on the Financial Aspects of the Revenues and Benefits Shared Services Business Case. The Head of Financial Services outlined the important parts of the financial summary and key points of the Business Case.
- 6.2 It was currently costing £10.7 million per annum to deliver the Revenues and Benefits Service across the county and in excess of £2 million at Wyre Forest.
- 6.3 The Business Case had identified that following IT investment of almost £3 million, the intention was to have a new county-wide IT system to deliver services for those Districts that would become part of the Shared Services Organisation. It would also include the necessary software to deliver mobile working and home working. Members were advised that these figures were based on estimates from computer suppliers and the ICT Manager would be attending the Shared Services meeting on 11<sup>th</sup> October and would be able to provide further information.
- 6.4 Total savings over a 10-year period were estimated to be £8.2 million across the county. This equated to, after 3 years of implementation, a figure of £1.6 million per annum assuming that all Districts in Worcestershire would take part.
- 6.5 Because savings had been allocated based upon transactions for Benefits and the number of hereditaments for Council Tax and Business Rates, Wyre Forest would be the biggest recipient of savings.
- 6.6 Savings had been based on the assumption that 75% of support services costs could be saved and also that for Wyre Forest, there would be no need for any further investment in Worcestershire Hub. Money had been included in the Business Case for other Districts to reach the same level as Wyre Forest would

be when it opens on 14<sup>th</sup> November 2006. These costs would be met directly by individual Councils. If the Hub required additional staffing, the costs would have to come off the bottom line figures.

- 6.7 Currently, across the county, it had not been envisaged that there would be any difficulty reducing staff to the projected levels. There were currently in excess of twenty FTE posts either having agency staff in place or staff with temporary contracts. There was also a turnover level of over 8%.
- 6.8 Extra costs amounting to £1.8 million had been put into the Business Case to cover the transitional period. The extra costs were to maintain service standards during the change.
- 6.9 A Member asked whether it would be possible to form a partnership with the Community Housing Group for them to deal with housing benefits instead. However, it was noted that the Community Housing Group did not have experience of dealing with benefits and that their expertise lay more with front office work.
- 6.10 In the Business Case for Wyre Forest, there was a financial budget projection over a 10-year period. In year 0, the current financial year, Wyre Forest would have to make a net investment of £32,222 to get the new organisation off the ground. In year 1 (2007/08), there would be a requirement to make a net investment of £237,451, in year 2 (2008/09) a net investment of £398,028. These investments were over the existing Council budget for Revenues and Benefits. From year 2009/10, there were anticipated savings of £274,202 rising to between £430,000 and £450,000 subject to the Council being very able to reduce support service costs by 75%. Members were informed that probably 50% of the investment cost could be capitalised and recovered from future savings. However, there was a possibility that investment could be funded by the host authority to be paid for out of future years efficiency savings.

## **7. Wyre Forest's Support Services Costs**

- 7.1 Members received a presentation from the Accountancy Services Manager on Wyre Forest's Support Services Costs. Members considered the budget for Revenues and Benefits Support Services based on the 2006/07 original budget.
- 7.2 Fifty one staff charge time to revenues and benefits. This was the equivalent of nine Full Time Equivalents (FTEs).
- 7.3 Members considered the breakdown of the £600,000 Support Services Costs included in the Benefits and Revenues Budgets based on the 2006/2007 original budget, which assessed which of the costs were deemed to be fixed and which variable, together with what could potentially be saved.
- 7.4 The Financial Summary assumed in the model that all Councils could achieve a 75% saving in support costs over a three year period but from seeing the breakdown of support services costs, this appeared to be rather over ambitious.

A more realistic figure would be 50% and serious decisions would have to be made with regard to staffing levels.

- 7.5 Members did not feel confident about the predictions that savings would be made in three years and felt that seven years was a more likely length of time. However, during that period, there would be increases in rent and prices. They felt that there were too many unknowns and therefore these were risk factors.
- 7.6 The Head of Financial Services reported that no consultation had taken place yet with other partners, e.g. The Community Housing Group. This would be addressed after the decision making process.

## **8. Employee Issues**

- 8.1 The Head of Financial Services told the Group that from the starting point of Shared Services, employees would be seconded to the host authority and this would be followed by TUPE transfer. The Host Authority would be there as a legal entity to employ those members of staff but the staff would actually be working for the Shared Services Joint Board comprising one member of each District Council and a County Council representative. Eventually the employees would cease to be Wyre Forest employees and would be working for a joint board but as that was not a legal entity, they would be taken on by the host authority.
- 8.2 The host authority would have to either employ additional staff to carry out the Support Services function or commission them to be carried out elsewhere. Costs had been incorporated within the business case and these were included in the financial analysis that would be considered later.
- 8.3 The Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Affairs explained that staff savings would be made through natural wastage rather than redundancy, as there was generally a high turnover of staff. The Council would not be trying to force anyone out of a job. The Council would provide opportunities for home working and mobile working and would be adopting a modern approach to work.
- 8.4 At its 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2006 meeting, the Efficiency Policy Panel, considered an additional paper circulated at the meeting. This was a joint UNISON and GMB response to the proposals set out in the Worcestershire Councils Revenues and Benefits Shared Services Business Case.

Members had concerns over issues raised in the paper relating to the proposal to second staff to the host authority, Wychavon District Council. The Principal Personnel Officer confirmed that Wychavon had not yet entered into the Single Status Agreement and the Head of Financial Services advised that Wychavon staff were the highest paid in the district.

Members noted that Wychavon District Council, as the host authority, would, therefore, take on staff who would be required to undertake the same or similar jobs as Wychavon staff, but who would be employed on different rates of pay and have different contractual terms and conditions. Members thought that if

Shared Services went ahead, the staff from the other five authorities might have a case for the regrading of their posts. The Principal Personnel Officer replied that this would be the responsibility of the host authority to determine.

**9. Performance Issues and proposed efficiency measures being considered currently at Wyre Forest**

The Financial Services Manager gave a presentation on performance issues in relation to Revenues and Benefits and the proposed efficiency measures being considered currently at Wyre Forest District Council.

She provided further information to members as follows:

- a) As at March 2006, Wyre Forest District Council's Revenues and Benefits service had achieved Level 4, (which was the highest level available) as part of the Department of Works and Pensions assessment. Malvern Hills District Council, Redditch Borough Council, Wychavon and Worcester City had also already achieved Level 4. Bromsgrove District Council planned to gain level 3 by July 2007.
- b) Wychavon District Council had the lowest cost per work caseload in the County in relation to benefits.
- c) Wyre Forest District Council had received the minimum levels of complaints and referrals to the tribunal service and had had no adverse comments from its external auditors, KPMG.
- d) Costs could be saved on postage and staff time due to the introduction of automated paperless direct debits. Money could also be saved on the benefits fraud management system but this had been put on hold pending the outcome of Shared Services.
- e) A local housing allowance would be introduced, which would mean that instead of a person claiming for housing benefits based on their rental payment, they would receive an allowance depending on regional circumstances. This would be rolled out to the private rented sector in 2008 and was being considered for social housing sector in 2010.
- f) If shared services were to go ahead, the customers should, in theory, see no difference in the service offered other than some staff having less local knowledge. Many of the people that visited the Kidderminster offices would only speak to specific officers but with Shared Services they would no longer be able to choose who they wish to speak to.

Members raised the following concern:

- a) As the Council's Revenues and Benefits service had been rated at the highest level, Wyre Forest residents might experience a reduction in service quality as a result of Shared Services. Staff were very dedicated to their jobs in Revenues and Benefits and proud of the service that they provided.

**10. ICT proposals including risks relating to timescale for implementation and costs**

A presentation was received from the ICT Manager on the ICT proposals within the business case in relation to the proposed creation of a Shared Service for Revenues and Benefits staff, including the risks relating to the timescale for implementation and costs.

He elaborated on a number of points and responded to a number of issues raised by members as follows:

- a) Wyre Forest District Council Revenues and Benefits Section used a system called IBS.
- b) The computer systems for Revenues and Benefits sections were integrated into the network and they were able to send emails and have access to the intranet and internet. An important part of their service included the links that were available for payments, refunds and electoral register queries. They also had links to external systems such as BACS, direct debits and links to the Department of Works and Pensions (DWP).
- c) ICT provided operational functions such as printing cheques, running reports and carrying out any overnight requirements.
- d) The Worcestershire Hub “front office” would provide the highest possible level of Revenues and Benefits service, but this would need careful monitoring as work was taken on.
- e) The County’s Wide Area Network would provide the network links. Other options had been considered but were discounted primarily due to cost implications.
- f) If Shared Services were implemented, in the first instance, not much change would be made and the headquarters would be ready to take on the work.
- g) There would be a potential downturn and out-of-hours maintenance when the movement of servers from the five districts to the new Headquarters was carried out. Whilst the servers were being moved, ICT would still have to carry on with day-to-day tasks and this would have an effect on staff.
- h) One of the main tasks for the interim arrangement would be to integrate the different systems. This would have to be undertaken carefully so that effective working was maintained, e.g. the cashier service was done differently in most districts. Another task would be the setting up of staff working from home. The installation of broadband in the home of relevant staff would require adaptation to the Council’s network. One other important factor would be to ensure that home working was appropriate from a health and safety perspective.
- i) For the proposal to go ahead, all IT applications would require moving to a single software application. Contact had been made with two suppliers (Academy and IBS) who had both indicated that significant savings could be achieved by

transferring to a single supplier of a Revenue and Benefits system. There were several companies that supplied revenues and benefits software but none would be able to cope with the requirements of all six authorities at this stage. It must be ensured that the best supplier was selected and the specification given to the potential supplier would be vital.

## **11. Consideration of Environment/Sustainability Issues**

- 11.1 The Group considered a paper giving the environmental and sustainability issues in relation to Shared Services.
- 11.2 The Financial Services Manager (Audit and Benefits) reported information on additional travelling time that would be incurred by staff if Wyre Forest District Council decided to sign up to Shared Services for Revenues and Benefits and the service was hosted by Wychavon at Pershore.
- 11.3 The Financial Services Manager (Audit and Benefits) then reported that the extra travelling time incurred was based on travel from Kidderminster to Pershore taking one hour.
- 11.4 The Head of Human Resources explained to the Group that Wyre Forest District Council paid an Appendix E allowance for staff whose place of work was moved. For very short distances, an amount of 31p per mile was paid for two years. Compared to other authorities, it was a relatively small amount. Nationally there was an allowance of 45p per mile for four years. Information was being gathered from other authorities to find out what their rate was. Malvern Hills District Council paid 54p per mile but it was unsure for how long this was for. Wychavon District Council paid a disturbance fee of 42p per mile.
- 11.5 It was noted that each employee would incur an extra 12,000 miles for travelling between Kidderminster and Pershore.
- 11.6 Members were concerned about the mileage figures and wondered whether there was some agreement such as TUPE on working hours under these circumstances. They wished to pursue the possibility of reducing working hours to compensate for increased travelling time, as it would mean staff leaving home earlier to get to their point of work.
- 11.7 Members were also concerned that extra costs would be involved for staff working from home, i.e. the authority would need to provide a telephone line, desks and suitable chairs. Health and Safety requirements would have to be adhered to and there were implications for household insurance.

## **12. Presentation on Revenues and Benefits Management Perspective**

A presentation was received from the Principal Revenues Officer and the Benefits Manager on the Wyre Forest Revenues and Benefits management perspective.

The Principal Revenues Officer thanked members who had visited the Revenues Department and had listened to the concerns of staff. The staff appreciated these

visits. He then went through the role of the Revenues Department and the work it undertook. The main points were as follows:

- a) Staff were worried about job losses and the distance they would have to travel. If Shared Services went ahead, some staff were likely to leave the Council. The department had already lost one junior member of staff and although it was a promotion, the uncertainty over the future of the revenues department did have an effect.
- b) Figures were produced showing that Wyre Forest District Council's revenues collection figures were the best in the county over the last nine years and also showed that the number of revenues staff had reduced since 1993, whilst producing these results. Also, the dip in performance when converting to a new computer system in 2002 had been minimal. Staff were all proud of this record and the positive way that it reflected on the Section.
- c) The public would be affected and staff had concerns as to whether the Worcestershire Hub would be able to manage.
- d) There were concerns about the proposals for staff, satellite locations and working from home. It was felt that there were too many assumptions in the business case with not enough detail.
- e) The Principal Revenues Officer explained that if Shared Services were introduced, there would still be a duplication of tasks as six sets of Government returns, one for each authority, would still be required. In his view, the only way to gain the full economies of scale would be to remove these duplications and this could only be achieved through a unitary authority.

The Benefits Manager highlighted the following points:

- a) The funding received from the Department of Works and Pensions, together with match funding from Wyre Forest District Council, had helped the Benefits Section achieve their current performance.
- b) The Benefits Section was looking to bring in electronic forms that would reduce printing costs, which in turn would help to reduce the Council's paper usage. The section achieved a high standard of service and would like that to continue.
- c) The average time to process new benefits claims had reduced from 41 to 25 days over the last few years.
- d) It was fully appreciated that, if Shared Services were implemented it would reduce costs over a period of time, but there were concerns as to how the data included in the business case had been used. Where was the factual evidence to substantiate the case? It would be better to start with two authorities and then build it up slowly, if the Council were to go down this route, it would have a better chance of working. In response to a member query, the Principal Revenues Officer replied that the Revenues and Benefits staff had had an input into the figures side of the shared services business case, but had not been asked to put across their views directly.

- e) Technology was vital to the service and this in turn might well reduce the number of staff needed to carry out Revenues and Benefits functions. However, new technology needed extra staff when initially implemented and it needed to be proven that it would work. She was aware of only two Revenues and Benefits systems on the market. There might be a dip in performance whilst getting used to lots of new working procedures and a new computer system. Most of the benefits staff were likely to leave because of having local child care in place and they would not contemplate travelling. Temporary staff would be required and this was not a cheap option.
- f) Staff had chosen to work for Wyre Forest, not for a neighbouring authority. They wondered whether it would affect their pensions. All but six staff in Benefits lived in Wyre Forest. Staff would incur not only extra mileage but extra travel time too.
- g) She asked members to be aware of the achievements made to date when considering their recommendations.

### **13. Formal Consultation Exercise**

A verbal presentation was received from the UNISON Secretary.

He thanked the Chairman for enabling him to inform members of the Union's views on Shared Services – Revenues and Benefits. He reported the following:

- a) The consultation would end on Friday 20<sup>th</sup> October 2006. He had attended a meeting on 18<sup>th</sup> October 2006 of the Shared Services Joint Project Board on which all six authorities in the county were represented to present the Union's concerns.
- b) From a county wide perspective, after talking to Union members and managers, the Union had very serious concerns that the business case that had been put forward was flawed and that the savings and the benefits would not be realised.
- c) There would be fewer people employed but the workload would be the same. Work would be integrated so there would be staff from other Revenues and Benefits Section from Wychavon answering queries about issues relating to Wyre Forest. It would be a big change as each district's area was slightly different.
- d) With regard to ICT, there was no ICT revenues and benefits system available that could be used county-wide as an integrated system had not yet been developed. The Union were therefore doubtful that computerised functions would operate efficiently for Shared Services.
- e) Locally from the Wyre Forest perspective, the Union had looked at the Council's Revenues and Benefits Sections and had noted that the sections were already in the top quartile for the county for their services. They could not see how the service was going to improve for the residents of Wyre Forest. What they could see happening was a dip in the quality of services if Shared Services were introduced.

- f) Further, quite a large number of benefits staff were part-time staff with domestic responsibilities and commitments who needed to work locally. Hence a move to Wychavon would be detrimental to them.
- g) The Union anticipated that, if Shared Services were introduced, staff would leave and could not be easily replaced as they were highly trained and specialised.
- h) The Worcestershire Hub was to be the first point of contact for Revenue and Benefits services whether or not shared services were introduced. Any queries would be referred to Revenues and Benefits staff that were not able to be answered at the Hub. The Union had concerns that the Hub operated differently in the six districts. It was believed that one or two of the other hubs were not as efficient and that needed to be highlighted.
- i) Overall for Wyre Forest, the Union could not see any possible reason to go along with Shared Services. The Union did not think it would save money in the long run.
- j) The proposals for Revenue and Benefits were just the beginning. At the meeting at County Hall on 18<sup>th</sup> October 2006, the next section to be looked at would be ICT and Human Resources. It was understood that consideration would be given to the introduction of Shared Services for Legal Services and building maintenance etc. over the next few years.
- k) The Union foresaw that the introduction of Shared Services would progressively reduce the autonomy of the District Councils involved.

#### Mrs V Sloane – Team Leader Revenues

Mrs Sloane thanked the group for giving her the opportunity to speak at the meeting. She was a Team Leader for the registration section for Council Tax and Business Rates. She had four staff working for her in the registration section. She provided the following information:

Staff were very worried about the security of their jobs. Many staff had worked for the Council for a number of years and had shown considerable loyalty. In the event of shared services going ahead, it would effectively mean a 48 mile round trip from the centre of Kidderminster. Her staff lived in Stourport-on-Severn, Bewdley and even as far as Cleobury Mortimer. Therefore their travelling distance would be even further. They had concerns about moving the revenues office. It would not only influence their job situation, but also remove job opportunities for future generations and this was considered to be an important factor.

With regard to travelling to the host site, some staff did not have transport and there was no direct transport available to Pershore for them. Those staff with cars would incur extra travelling costs. There was no car parking provision at the new site and after driving to Pershore, staff would be expected to park their cars and walk for 15 minutes to the office. Travelling time of up to two hours per day would be unproductive time and would affect family life.

Staff working for the Council in Kidderminster had been able to coordinate their days, with evening and morning runs to schools, visits to dentists and doctors etc. They did not want to add to the congestion on the roads and fuel consumption. In addition, they would not be able to shop locally. This would have an impact on local businesses.

Staff in the Revenues Section were very proud of their collection rates. In the year 2005/06 the Council had achieved 98.4% and the Business Rate achieved was 99.4%.

Staff were able to make detours on the way home from work and monitor properties. As well as dealing with all the changes for Council Tax and Business Rates, the section also had to deal with new properties and commercial houses which needed to be banded in accordance with their rateable values. Again, this could be monitored whilst travelling to work as they knew what to look for. If they were to be relocated to Pershore, this valuable observation would not be an option.

With regard to working from home, there were concerns as to how this was going to work, and at what cost. Not all had the room at home for the office equipment. If the computer system failed what would happen? How would the increased heating and maintenance be costed? There were concerns as to how TUPE would apply with the two years probationary period. For example, would salaries be dependent on different work placements? The position was unclear. Also, would people be made redundant? There were currently three people in the section over 60 years of age and two disabled staff. Would they have to retire early?

With regard to team support, Mrs Sloane was a team leader and was frequently asked for advice on different issues. This was possible when working in an office, but if a member of staff was not based in the office, how would this support be provided? Working together in an office was far better than home working and it could also provide emotional support.

In summarising, she reported that since 1990, the Revenues Section had achieved a high standard of efficiency whilst dealing with a range of issues including a new computer system, claims relating to floods and foot and mouth disease. Over the years, the staff numbers had decreased but they had worked immensely hard to maintain a high standard of work. It was a happy office.

#### Sue Bissett – Team Leader Benefits

Mrs Bissett had 24 years experience working in the Benefits Section. She reported that much of what Mrs Sloane had said was how her section felt and they had the same worries and concerns with regard to travelling, particularly as 50% of her section had children, and many had responsibilities for elderly relatives. Also, travelling would be in the main rush hour time.

The Benefits Section was run effectively and staff cared about the people they dealt with. They were available for the public as and when required and felt that if the numbers of customers served in one combined section totalled approximately 91,000, this personal service would be lost. Furthermore, customers would not be

able to contact a preferred member of staff and vulnerable people might slip through the net. Another concern was that the section worked as a team and was motivated in dealing with their own portion of case loads and strived to do it quickly and effectively. In a county-wide section, it would be difficult to monitor and follow up work effectively. They liked being a small enough section to care and to be there for people. This was why the staff had chosen their profession. With regard to local knowledge, staff were very observant whilst travelling to and from work and were often able to identify cases of benefit fraud.

All the staff appreciated the visits by Councillors and the way they listened to their views. She thanked the Group for allowing her to speak.