

Options Appraisal – Revenues and Benefits Service – Results of the Consultation with Staff and Unions

In total 14 responses have been received all of which support Option 1

Staff Comment
<p>The following are just some of my personal comments, I have in favour of keeping the Revenues Service in-house.</p> <p>1) Home working we have already got nearly 50% of the staff working from home and potential to have around 80% by the New HQ. We have also spent money on routers, monitors, thin clients and other equipment most of which will become redundant if the service is lost - wasted expense.</p> <p>2) The report mentions <b>Two or more</b> IT staff having to transfer which is extremely worrying with all the projects IT have to do - new HQ being a crucial one to deliver in just over a year. We are all flexible in IT and tend to know a multitude of different systems/applications to varying degrees. There are not two specific people in IT who manage/support IBS but it is most likely equivalent to 2 posts over a number of IT staff. The problem is if you remove two IT staff you will remove extremely valuable skills required in other areas to maintain our current projects including the new HQ and other cost saving initiatives. Also what about the effect on the morale of the staff transferring and those remaining.</p> <p>3) Staff Morale. The Council has been cut back significantly in the last few years and losing this service will deplete staff morale even further in the belief that Management/Councillors do not care about the staff that work for them. Yet they will still expect these remaining staff to work harder and more efficient in the future to meet the demands put on them. This needs good employee morale.</p> <p>4) We are soon to make the Civica/IBS OpenAccess application live, to enable much greater self service and more efficient CSA queries. This should save costs and/or be a lot more efficient. Significant expenditure has already been spent on this which would again be wasted if Revenues join a shared service.</p>
<p>Following a thorough look at the 'Revenues &amp; Benefits Service Appraisal' document, I would like to confirm that I wholeheartedly support your recommendation for the Revenues and Benefits service to remain in-house.</p> <p>This option would ensure that redundancies are kept to a minimum whilst still meeting the required savings. If the service remained in Wyre Forest, it would allow for us to maintain our high level of customer service and revenue collection rates. In addition, the local knowledge would be retained which is crucial in providing an effective and efficient service. Disruption to service provision and staffing would be kept to a minimum which would ensure that employee morale remained high. This would allow us to focus on continuing to provide an effective service whilst striving to streamline the service further and continue to make savings.</p>
<p>After reading your report, I would like to confirm that I support <b>Option 1</b> which seems to offer the best option for both the Customers and staff.</p> <p>It seems the most cost effective option and also offers the least disruption to the service. Keeping staff employed by WFDC working in the WFDC catchment area also has the benefit of maintaining good local knowledge of business activity and customers/properties within the area. It is also helps the carbon footprint, reducing fuel costs &amp; emissions which would be increased if travelling to Pershore.</p> <p>I would finally like to thank you for such a thorough and well balanced report which I feel can only help the morale of the staff within both sections. During a time of such uncertainty, it is good to know that both yourself and Val Upton have been working so hard for the staff.</p>

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**Staff Comment**

I am obviously supportive of the proposal and with the question mark over Universal Credit and also the set up charge for SWRBSS then the Recommendation is the most logical and beneficial to the Council at this moment in time.

However I do have a number of comments :-

First as you would expect I am concerned re the 2 members of ICT staff transferring to the shared ICT service as part of the recommendation. I assume this has been calculated via Salary allocations, to me this does seem high and I would have been more comfortable with just 1 transferring, as there is no member of staff that solely deals with Benefits / Revenues. Support for just IBS and related issues would no where near equate to 2 post, estimated support for just IBS 1/2 a post. You would still also have related issues re Payments etc.

As you will be well aware if 2 members of staff transfer you would not only lose IBS skills but also skills and knowledge in a number of other areas which is required to support existing ICT Services / Infrastructure but also new Projects i.e. Telephony / Mobile & Flex working and also the move to new HQ.

We have heavily invested in IT over the last couple of years in SAN and Thin client technology to support home working with Revs / Bens benefiting from these investments, we have got 50% of Revs / Bens staff out with the potential for 80% by new HQ.

New Telephony system and the facilities it brings will also assist the Revs / Bens service with home working i.e better Unified Comms, Work Groups for improved call distribution. As you mentioned we have brought in Bar Coding, eBilling but we are also implementing OpenAccess for improved self service and we do have Corporate Workflow as part of the Northgate package that can be used to automate processes, not aware that SWRBSS have this module. We have already done some work on processes using this tool but this has been but on hold pending the out come of this appraisal.

Consideration needs to be given not only to the conversion of IBS to Academy but also migration and documents from our Northgate System to their system, just because they are on the same system does not mean there won't be costs involved.

Finally I am sure staff morale particularly in IT would be effected if this service was lost within WFDC.

The only comment I've got is that yes I have been exceedingly worried about waiting for the final decision but understand that savings have to be made-Option 1 the only way to go as less disruptive for **everyone** concerned.

I (as do most of us) appreciate there may be changes we may not relish, but understand it is for the best and for efficient continuance of our service to 'stand alone' even though part of a shared service.

I just wish to reiterate my offer that I will gladly cut my hours, and hope 'when it comes down to it' enough assessors will do the same to save the equivalent of - will it be about 4 full time assessor jobs?

I understand there may be some who will leave voluntarily, but am assuming this will be the likely number of this post grade that will have to go.

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Staff Comment
<p>I Personally would like to thank David for doing a very well balanced and comprehensive report that I feel covered all the areas in a non biased way. Again on a personal note I would like to say that having worked for Wyre Forest for 29 years I have found them to be good and flexible employer and enjoy working for them hence why I have stayed so long . I have been in Benefits approx 24 of those years and have found the work varied, rewarding and challenging as the field of benefit is ever changing. I would like to thank you Val for being a very supportive, approachable and flexible manager which has made working and bringing up a family a much easier task. I hope that the cabinet do vote for option 1 to remain in house and look forward the next chapter of benefits at Wyre Forest</p>
<p>I have worked for Wyre forest for over 15 years now and have always found them a great employer to work for. I have found your personal support invaluable over the years and I would not be in the position I am today with out your help. The work life balance is now perfect for me as I have two young children and I feel I can contribute more now that the flexible working policy is in place and working well and been a great success in our office.</p> <p>I feel the office as a whole always pulls together under pressure and everyone takes pride in the work they do for Wyre Forest. As a team we ensure standards are met for the customer and I for one for see it as a personal failure if not.</p>
<p>I fully support the Recommendation to keep the Rev's and Ben's Section within Wyre Forest. We are extremely proud of the Service we deliver and have been working exceptionally hard to maintain a high performance during this difficult economic time, which has impacted greatly on our caseload. Whilst I believe the In-House Option to be the most favourable, I can understand why there may be queries regarding our ability to maintain performance levels with reduced resources. However, we are a committed team who have always embraced change and overcome any challenges thrown at us. We have an exceptionally strong Leader who is passionate about our Service and I can only offer my full support to whatever changes are made and assure you that the staff left to deliver our newly created Service will continue to be extremely dedicated, professional and always working to the best of their ability.</p>
<p>I am pleased to hear that the scrutiny committee are supporting Option 1. Having worked in the Benefits section of Wyre Forest District Council for more than twenty years and in local government for even longer I have first hand experience of how committed you and your staff are in providing an excellent service to the customers in the Wyre Forest District.</p> <p>Over the years we have faced many challenges and worked as a team to ensure that our customers receive their correct entitlement to Housing and Council Tax benefits and best advice to prevent hardship and homelessness in the area.</p> <p>We have worked through difficult economic times before and I consider that as a team we will continue to face up to any changes in the future and meet any new challenges to meet the needs of our customers.</p> <p>If the cabinet decide on another option I consider that it is our customers who will suffer. You can compare this with the facts that the banks have now decided that call centres should now be based in the U.K and are now opening call centre in the U.K.</p> <p>I believe that local knowledge is so important when dealing with customers who are facing difficult times. It is also important to deal with local agencies e.g social landlords and Citizen's Advice Bureau and in the case of young people other agencies.</p>

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<p>Staff Comment</p>
<p>I would just like to say I'm really happy that the scrutiny committee decided to support Option 1, the in house option and follow your recommendation especially after all the hard work and effort that you've put into creating the proposal. Also that if the council allow us the opportunity I'm sure they will not be disappointed by the effort which will be shown by both revenues and benefits in trying to provide the best service at the best cost.</p>
<p>Looking at the report option 1 :-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• reduces staff redundancies, which will help with staff morale</li><li>• helps keep local knowledge local</li><li>• a lot of effort has gone into home working which has improved productivity and saved costs with the building, if staff now had to travel to Pershore and work there it would undo all the hard work.</li><li>• with the uncertainty of Universal Credits it seems a safer decision to stay in house until it is in place and working.</li></ul>
<p>I have worked in Housing Benefits for nearly 19 years, in various roles. In that time I have seen, and indeed helped implement, many changes to the service. We have always been a responsive, evolving section which has reacted to both changes in Government regulations and the Council's monetary constraints. The last two years have been particularly challenging due mainly to the economic climate. We have managed to maintain the service to customers despite the massive increase in both caseload and workload. I have recently carried out a Benefit survey of customers views and the majority of people were very satisfied with the service and made some very complimentary comments. I firmly believe that if we are allowed to stay 'in-house' we can improve on the service offered whilst at the same time reducing our costs and offer the residents of the Wyre Forest an excellent service.</p> <p>With the unknown factors surrounding the implementation of Universal Credit I think we could be investing unwisely if we were to join South Worcestershire Shared Services.</p> <p>I therefore support your recommendation, Option 1, to remain 'in-house'</p>
<p>I am writing to confirm my support for Option One of the Revs and Bens Service Appraisal.</p> <p>Our Benefits Service has been dedicated to serving the public for many many years and has done so, extremely successfully, with the dedication of experienced, welfare minded, and committed staff.</p> <p>Our staff have a proven record for bringing in changes on time and efficiently, giving clear messages to our customers and I am certain that it is in the best interests of these customers that we continue to deliver the service locally and continue to build on and expand upon our liaison with local partners.</p> <p>If Option One is chosen we are well placed to help the Government guide our service towards Universal Credit, because we have knowledge of our area and the needs of our customers.</p> <p>I would like to assure you that Option One has the full support of the entire Benefits Office, who will continue to strive towards a service the whole of Wyre Forest can be proud of.</p>