



Scrutiny Report: Worcestershire Hub

November 2010

Scrutiny Task Group Membership

County Council Members

Bob Banks (Lead Member)
Nathan Desmond
Lucy Hodgson
Beverley Nielsen (until April)
Stephen Peters
David Thain
Liz Tucker (from April)

District Council Co-opted Members

Bromsgrove District Council	Kit Taylor
Malvern Hills District Council	Roger Sutton
Redditch Borough Council	Robin King (January)
	Jinny Pearce (February – May)
	Gay Hopkins (May – August)
	Roger Hill (from August)
Worcester City Council	Geoff Williams
Wychavon District Council	Laurie Evans
Wyre Forest District Council	Graham Ballinger (January – March and from April)
	Jenny Greener (March – April)

Officer Support

Suzanne O'Leary, Overview and Scrutiny Manager
Emma James and Jo Weston, Overview and Scrutiny Officers
Annette Stock and Emma Breckin, Scrutiny Liaison Officers for Corporate Services

Further copies of this report are available from:

Overview and Scrutiny Team
Legal and Democratic Services
Worcestershire County Council
County Hall
Spetchley Road
Worcester
WR5 2NP

Tel: 01905 766916
E-mail: scrutiny@worcestershire.gov.uk
Website: www.worcestershire.gov.uk/scrutiny

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Foreword

I am very pleased to be able to present our scrutiny of the Worcestershire Hub. This report sums up our discussions, evidence taking, findings and recommendations for the Worcestershire Hub, which we hope will provide constructive steps towards the Hub's development in the future.

As part of our investigations we have looked at performance, finance, governance, customer satisfaction and experience, information technology individual services, council staff views, parish council views, councillor awareness, what other local authorities are doing, and best practice. At the start of this scrutiny we agreed that it was very important to look to the future development of the Hub.

This has been the first scrutiny I have led, and it has proved both challenging and rewarding. Within the Worcestershire Hub are single district hubs, as well as the Hub Shared Service, all participating to greater or lesser degrees, and this has made it extremely difficult, if not impossible to identify the differences and make comparisons.

The main reward for the task group has been the opportunity to understand more about an operation which is central to how the public accesses council services, both through the Hub Shared Service, and through the individual district Hubs. We have been surprised by the lack of common knowledge amongst many councillors, and urge our fellow councillors to become better informed. Hopefully, our report will contribute to an increased understanding.

There are a number of people to thank who have assisted with this report, starting with the task group members themselves. In spite of a number of membership changes over the course of the scrutiny, I am very grateful for your dedication and constructive debate.

We would like to thank all of those who have contributed to our investigations, both within Worcestershire County Council and the District Councils. In particular we would like to thank the staff at the various Hub centres around Worcestershire, for the time they took to facilitate our visits, and for their obvious energy and professionalism. A considerable proportion of the information we requested was provided by Rachel Hill, as Head of the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service. We are very grateful for her expertise and attention to detail in what is clearly a very demanding work area.

Finally, I would like to thank the scrutiny officers for their ongoing support in facilitating a very complex scrutiny, and for keeping us on the right track.

Bob Banks

Lead Member of the Worcestershire Hub Scrutiny Task Group

November 2010

Worcestershire Hub Scrutiny Report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Terms of Reference

- The development of the Worcestershire Hub, including the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service
- How to make the Worcestershire Hub fit for purpose in the future
- Differences in provision across Worcestershire, what they are and why they exist?
- What are the gaps in provision and what are the opportunities?

Main Findings

Development of the Worcestershire Hub, including the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service

The Worcestershire Hub is made up of the Hub Shared Service and separate arrangements for four district councils. This fact means that there are many differences and perhaps, a lack of unity. However, despite the differences, our scrutiny has revealed a clear commitment to the Hub as a whole for the future; no one is retreating.

The pragmatic approach taken in the first few years, to allow authorities to participate in the Hub to greater or lesser degrees, and the subsequent emergence of the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service, has led to considerable differences between shared service and non-shared service authorities in the way they handle customer engagement and differences in the breadth and depth of services provided by each customer contact centre.

It is apparent that if the County Council seeks to encourage the remaining district councils to join the Hub Shared Service, they need to communicate clear evidence about the benefits, including performance, customer satisfaction and cost savings.

Differences in provision

There are substantial differences in the role and depth of use of the Hub across the non-shared service councils and the corresponding lack of comparable data that is available. It is an acknowledged gap in our findings that we have therefore been unable to make clear comparisons between the different Hub operations on their performance and value for money.

Councillors' knowledge of the Worcestershire Hub

Many councillors' knowledge of the Hub is limited or patchy and often restricted to what happens within his or her own area.

Governance

The governance arrangements have developed over time due to the way the Hub has grown and evolved. In effect, two structures have evolved, one for the Worcestershire Hub as a whole and one for the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service. We consider that the current governance arrangements have developed in a piecemeal way, are complex and overly layered.

Costs, funding and savings

There is a huge variation in the cost of the different types of transaction, whether it be in person, over the phone or online. Face to face customer service is very expensive, and although we feel strongly that there will always be a need for it, it is clear that online customer access is in growing demand and offers huge potential for the future.

The more services using the Hub, the better value it becomes.

An acknowledged gap in our findings is that we have not been able to make clear comparisons between the different Hub operations on their performance and value for money. This was due to the differences and lack of comparative data, referred to above.

Performance / Quality of Customer Experience

We are satisfied that lessons have been learned from the performance problems experienced during the Summer 2009, which appear to have resulted when a major ICT implementation project for the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service coincided with the start of the economic decline, when revenues and benefits enquiries increased dramatically. We have made recommendations that plans should be in place to better forecast demand and unpredicted peaks in service demand.

How the Hub continues to perform in the future, and crucially how its performance is measured and monitored is important for building confidence with all partners and services.

The performance information traditionally gathered by the Shared Service and the non shared service areas, focuses largely on processes and transactions – such as numbers of calls and speed of answer. There needs to be a greater focus on measuring the quality of the customer experience. Our remaining recommendations on performance are targeted at improving customer experience as a whole, and the flow of information between the service areas and the Hub, and vice versa.

The Hub brand

The 'Hub' means different things to different people, and more needs to be done to communicate its role and purpose.

Changing the way in which customers access council information – council websites and self-service

There are huge savings to be made by encouraging and facilitating more customers to use online/self-service routes for their enquiries. The demand is there, and needs to be enabled by council websites that are as customer-friendly and efficient as possible. The increasing economic pressures on all public services means we cannot afford not to prioritise this, and that this will then free up the face to face and telephony services for those who need them.

The future

The pressure on all authorities to make efficiencies means that service transformation is essential. We agree that the Hub should be at the heart of this service transformation. A co-ordinated approach to customer service across the county would enable savings to be made and minimise duplication.

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).

RECOMMENDATION 2: All authorities consider their scrutiny arrangements of shared services – this could be done at the joint scrutiny chairs and vice-chairs network.

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.

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.

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.

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.

RECOMMENDATION 7: Appropriate resource plans for the Hub are in place to better plan for forecast 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.

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.

RECOMMENDATION 10: All performance information – for shared service and non-shared service districts – should be made available to all councillors.

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.

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 service advisor.

RECOMMENDATION 13: Define and agree Service Level Agreements between the Worcestershire Hub and every service area.

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.

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.

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.

RECOMMENDATION 17: move towards more consistent IT packages, as contracts come up for renewal.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

REPORT OF THE WORCESTERSHIRE HUB SCRUTINY TASK GROUP

INTRODUCTION

1. The Worcestershire Hub was launched in 2002 and is a partnership between the County Council and the six district councils. It was established to provide a One Stop Service for customers accessing council services in Worcestershire. The aim being to provide a one stop service that could be accessed in person, online and by telephone. The Worcestershire Hub Shared Service was formally established in April 2009. The authorities participating in the Shared Service are: Malvern Hills District Council Worcester City Council and Worcestershire County Council
2. In June 2009 there was a Notice of Motion to the County Council which stated that 'Residents are becoming increasingly frustrated at the difficulty in accessing the Hub and obtaining a response to their enquiries. Concerns included the length of time taken to answer calls and the lack of feedback.'
3. Following an initial briefing to councillors, in December 2009 the County Council's Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board (OSPB) agreed to establish a scrutiny task group, chaired by Councillor Bob Banks and, as the Hub is a joint initiative, to invite each district council to co-opt a councillor onto the group.
4. Although the notice of motion was an initial trigger for considering a scrutiny of the Hub, given the key role the Hub has in the future development and reform of services, the scope of the scrutiny agreed by the OSPB was much broader than just investigating the performance of the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service in 2009. Additionally, by the time the scrutiny exercise had started, it was known that the performance issues experienced during 2009 were already being dealt with.
5. It was therefore intended that the scrutiny would focus on the way forward for the Worcestershire Hub as a whole.

Terms of Reference

6. The terms of reference were to look at:
 - The development of the Worcestershire Hub, including the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service
 - How to make the Worcestershire Hub fit for purpose in the future
 - Differences in provision across Worcestershire, what they are and why they exist?
 - What are the gaps in provision and what are the opportunities?
7. In addressing these terms of reference it has been necessary to obtain information about performance, funding and governance and these are dealt with in separate sections of the report.
8. We have also looked at the way in which customer access to council services is likely to change in the future. This section and our comments on governance address in part the question of how to make the Worcestershire Hub fit for purpose in the future, but we were unable to examine this issue in great depth. Our discussion of the differences in provision across the County sheds some light on the

gaps in provision, but limited time meant we could not look in detail at all service areas across all authorities to see where future opportunities for the Hub may lie.

Methodology

9. Evidence has been gathered from discussions with a variety of officers, and through a series of smaller sub-group meetings, visits and research. Details of the task group's activity and the information considered are detailed at [Appendix 1](#).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE HUB, INCLUDING THE WORCESTERSHIRE HUB SHARED SERVICE

10. The Worcestershire Hub was established in 2002 to provide customers with a one-stop shop service for all council services that is joined-up, accessible by all, supports the two tiers of local government in Worcestershire, and offers customers a choice of how to access services.
11. There were a number of drivers to establish the Worcestershire Hub:
 - a. Improving customer service including specifically dealing with more enquiries at the first point of contact;
 - b. Improving access to services across the two-tiers of local government in Worcestershire;
 - c. The eGovernment Agenda (the Government had targeted all local authorities with providing 100% of relevant services electronically by 2005);
 - d. Local Public Service Agreement.
12. A co-ordinated approach to customer service across the county would improve the accessibility of services to the general public in all seven authorities, enable savings to be made in the back offices and minimise duplication.
13. In 2002 it was felt that the establishment of a single customer contact centre would be a step too far and therefore a network of smaller teams and centres were put in place with the intention of operating as a single virtual centre, building on the existing "one stop shops" around the County. A legal agreement – the partnership agreement – was agreed to define joint funding and other arrangements.
14. Each authority participated to differing degrees and at different paces. This has resulted in a range of service delivery mechanisms continuing to exist behind a uniformly branded front of house. The Worcestershire Hub has developed progressively through the establishment of a network of customer centres and joined up service delivery.
15. The vision agreed by Leaders and Chief Executives was for “an organisation that is owned by the Local Government family in Worcestershire to deliver excellent services to our communities and being capable of delivering services to a variety of depths”.
16. In 2008 the Chief Executives and Leaders considered a business case outlining the strategic development of the Worcestershire Hub. This resulted in a subsequent decision by three of the partner authorities to establish a shared service for the Worcestershire Hub. The Worcestershire Hub Shared Service was formally established in April 2009. The authorities participating in the Shared Service are: Malvern Hills District Council, Worcester City Council and Worcestershire County

Council. The shared service is governed by the South Worcestershire Shared Services Joint Committee and a legal framework and agreement is in place to support this.

17. As part of the agreed development of the shared service, a contact centre at Perry Wood Walk, Worcester was opened in 2009 and handles all calls for those participating in the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service. The number of services dealt with by Perry Wood has been increasing, and includes libraries, highways, regulatory services, and revenues and benefits calls (for South Worcestershire), amongst many others.
18. The County Council is aiming to make the Hub the first point of contact for all County Council services. Currently approx 70% of County Council services do so.
19. The Worcestershire Hub continues to play a key role in transforming customer services and the way all seven councils deliver services. It is now at the heart of the County Council's BOLD (Better Outcomes, Leaner Delivery) programme to find efficiencies and transform services, and it is also an important element of the Worcestershire Enhanced Two Tier (WETT) programme, helping authorities across the county to deliver efficiencies over the next few years. Key themes to the customer focused transformation are:
 - Make the Worcestershire Hub the first point of contact for council services
 - Reduce the number of contacts customers need to make
 - Increase self-service
 - Ensure services are customer focused and efficient
20. The Hub has evolved and grown since its original inception in 2002, and this journey has led to it being a complex and varied service. There is no single officer with overall responsibility for the Worcestershire Hub across the county.

DIFFERENCES IN PROVISION ACROSS WORCESTERSHIRE, WHAT THEY ARE AND WHY THEY EXIST?

21. The pragmatic approach taken in the first few years, to allow authorities to participate in the Hub to greater or lesser degrees, and the subsequent emergence of the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service, has led to considerable differences between shared service and non-shared service authorities in the way they handle customer engagement and differences in the breadth and depth of services provided by each customer contact centre.
22. It became clear at the start of the scrutiny that the phrase "Worcestershire Hub" means different things to different people. It can refer to the partnership between all seven authorities to consider coordinated customer services, to each authority's individual customer service provision, or to the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service. Councillors' perception of the Hub's performance and its value was largely based on their knowledge of their local customer contact centres. This complexity has hindered parts of our scrutiny, but has also prompted some of the recommendations we make in this report.

23. We held discussions with senior officer representatives from each of the district councils, whose roles were connected with the Hub. A summary of these discussions is included at [Appendix 2](#).

Some of the differences

- differences in the range and depth of services provided by the customer contact centres of the shared service and the non shared service
- not all County Council services use the Hub as the first point of contact, e.g. Family Information Service
- the public could be put through directly to the service area in one district, but be dealt with in full at first point of contact in another (for district council services)
- one district Hub acts as a switchboard (with a single telephone number) for the authority. This means that there are no published direct dial numbers
- all of the district councils each have a single telephone number which customers use to contact the Hub, whereas the county council issues several numbers (3 main telephone numbers, plus service based numbers). The Shared Service has 3 main telephone numbers, plus service based numbers
- there are some different performance indicators between the shared service and the non shared service authorities
- customer contact centres have different opening times (with the exception of the shared service)
- Redditch Contact Centre had started to deal with council tax telephone enquiries from the end of 2009
- different “back office” ICT systems (most relating to district council services) with no integration to the customer relationship management system (CRM)
- other than the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service, staff are employed and managed by the individual district councils.
- the County Council hosts all of the district council websites, with the exception of Worcester City.

Some of the similarities

- visitor access is equal across the county, as there are customer service centres in all the county's main towns
- a standard set of questions is used to seek customer feedback, which is used in centres dealing with contacts in person and over the phone
- if a call is received at a non-shared service district contact centre, which does not relate to one of its services (e.g. Highways), it should be dealt with if possible, or referred to the shared service contact centre
- the majority of contacts made in person relate to district council services
- Common branding and image across all centres
- Common ICT application to support service delivery
- Interactive Voice technology is being used, albeit this is limited at present.

(Interactive voice response technology automates routine telephone inquiries by leading callers through prerecorded voice prompts that let them quickly access, enter or modify data using voice commands or their telephone's touch-tone keypad)

24. One of the differences listed above is the variety of telephone numbers given to the public to access council services. The Task Group explored why this was the case and why there was no single, county-wide telephone number.

25. The Head of the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service advised that the decision had been taken to have specific service numbers for the Worcestershire Hub Shared

Service (e.g. Highways, Revenues and Benefits), as this enabled the right people to answer calls, by directing calls to advisors who have been specifically trained in these areas.

26. Those of us who visited the Shared Service contact centre at Perry Wood could see the advantage of this system and **we recognise the merit in being able to channel certain calls, depending on their subject or simplicity.**

COUNCILLORS' KNOWLEDGE OF THE WORCESTERSHIRE HUB

27. It soon became clear that councillors' knowledge of the Hub was at different levels, partly due to the complexity of the Hub arrangements and the difference in provision across the County. Some councillors had very little knowledge of how the Hub worked, or experience of using it, whereas others made regular use of the Hub as a means of obtaining information, or following up enquires. Some councillors received performance information on the Hub in their area; others did not, or were not aware of it. It is also fair to say that there was a certain amount of distrust among some councillors around the effectiveness of Worcestershire Hub Shared Service and a lack of understanding about the areas that it covered.
28. There was also a difference between the views and experiences of Worcestershire Hub Shared Service council members (Worcestershire County Council, Malvern Hills District Council and Worcester City) and non-shared service council members. Non shared service council members felt that their councils' Hub performance had continued to serve their areas well, and had not been affected by the economic downturn. However, one factor behind this could be that their councils did not use the Hub for customer enquiries on areas such as revenues and benefits, and instead, channelled enquiries via the service areas directly.
29. To gain a better understanding and improve knowledge, we visited the majority of Hub centres across the county. These visits proved invaluable to the scrutiny, and have informed many of the recommendations contained in this report. Indeed the scrutiny as a whole has allowed us all to see what happens in other areas, both within and outside the Hub Shared Service. All of us who visited were surprised by the volume of customer enquiries, and the range and complexity of enquiries being dealt with by each customer service advisor. We would like to place on record our thanks to the staff at these centres for their time, enthusiasm and professionalism in facilitating our visits.

Induction Arrangements

30. We asked each authority what their councillor induction arrangements included about the Worcestershire Hub. We found the induction programmes varied considerably: some councils provide Hub briefing sessions and facilitated visits to telephony and face to face centres, others provide little or no information on the Hub.
31. We have been surprised by the fact that many councillors' knowledge of the Hub is limited or patchy and often restricted to what happens within his or her own area. Inevitably, the future development of the Hub will be influenced by councillor understanding, and 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. Improved councillor induction is an essential way of increasing understanding of the Worcestershire Hub, and, crucially, the role it

plays for the public. The Hub is at the heart of the council's communication with the public, and it is therefore important and beneficial to councillors that they understand how it works and what the public's experiences are. A visit to Perry Wood would be especially useful in light of the WETT programme, whereby more services are becoming shared and will use this telephony centre to handle customer enquiries.

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).

GOVERNANCE

32. Closely linked to councillor knowledge of the Hub is their involvement in it. There was a feeling amongst some task group members that involvement of non-executive councillors was fairly limited. The main route to engage in the development of the Hub, and in particular the growing number of shared services, is through overview and scrutiny. However, other than this task group and the 2009 Scrutiny of the South Worcestershire Revenues and Benefits Shared Service, it appeared there had not been much thinking yet amongst scrutiny members across the County about how the various shared services would be scrutinised.

RECOMMENDATION 2: All authorities consider their scrutiny arrangements of shared services – this could be done at the joint scrutiny chairs and vice-chairs network.

33. We requested information about the governance arrangements for the Worcestershire Hub in order to look at how decisions are made and who was responsible for the Hub e.g. when performance slipped.

34. A structure chart of the current governance arrangements for the Worcestershire Hub is attached at Appendix 3.

35. The main responsible bodies are:

Worcestershire Hub Partnership Board

36. This comprises two members and one officer from each council, plus the Head of the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service. Chaired by Cllr Stephen Clee, its role was to consider the strategic direction at the start of the Hub's development. It does not have decision making powers, although it can make endorsements, which would then be taken back to the councils. This, and a lack of effective engagement from some partners, has limited its effectiveness. As a consequence, as the direction of the Hub developed, the Chief Executives and Leaders Panel has become the preferred reporting route, and more recently this is now used and the Hub Board meets infrequently.

37. The role of the Worcestershire Hub Partnership Board is supported by the Hub Strategic Management Group which comprises a senior officer from each partner, including the Head of the Hub Shared Service.

South Worcestershire Shared Services Joint Committee

38. This comprises two members from each partner council (Malvern Hills, Worcester City, Worcestershire County Council and Wychavon), but voting limited to members from councils participating in the individual service being discussed. A Legal Agreement is in place to support the delegation of functions for each of the individual services to the Joint Committee. At the time of the establishment of the South Worcestershire Shared Service Joint Committee in 2007, the only participating service was Revenues and Benefits. However, more services have since been added, and the nature of the Joint Committee has evolved, and it is hoped it will now become more strategic.
39. The South Worcestershire Shared Services Joint Committee does not report to the Worcestershire Hub Partnership Board, although it does have links and there are also a number of common representatives.

Worcestershire Hub Shared Service Management Board

40. This comprises one member and one officer from each participating council (Malvern Hills, Worcester City and Worcestershire County Council) plus Head of Worcestershire Hub Shared Service. The Management Board is chaired by Cllr John Waring, Executive Member for Customer Services, Human Resources and Performance at Malvern Hills District Council. The Worcestershire Hub Shared Service Management Board was set up late in 2009, succeeding the Project Board that established the shared service, and meets every six weeks. As well as the officer and member representatives, other officers are engaged as relevant to specific projects or services. The establishment of the Management Board was formally agreed by the Joint Committee in 2009. The more flexible model of a management board has been chosen over a formal sub-committee of the joint committee.
41. In addition to these main bodies, there is a separate joint committee for the new Worcestershire Regulatory Shared Service which uses the Hub to deal with its customer services, and a Joint Committee for the Joint Museums Service between Worcester City and the County Council.
42. We were surprised that the Worcestershire Hub Partnership Board met so infrequently and at its lack of effectiveness. It appears to no longer have a role in its current form, although one of the District Chief Executives pointed out that it was useful for all authorities to be involved in discussions about the Hub across Worcestershire.
43. The Head of the Hub Shared Service advised that she reported to the Joint Committee and Hub Shared Service Management Board on a regular basis, and that there were clear routes to look at issues from the partners. The Worcestershire Hub Shared Services Management Board has a more 'hands on' approach and we heard from the County Council's Director of Corporate Services, and the Chair of the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service Management Board, that it and the Joint Committee are effective in shaping the Hub Shared Service and holding its performance to account.
44. Irrespective of when or whether all district councils choose to join the shared

service, we feel that the current governance arrangements hinder the future development of the Hub and perhaps member understanding. Strategic decisions are now taken by Leaders and Chief Executives Panel rather than the intended governance arrangements. Additionally, the current dual structure does not seem equipped to facilitate progression of the Worcestershire Enhanced Two-Tier (WETT) programme, with more services due to become shared across all councils, such as the recently established Regulatory Shared Service for which all telephony is being provided by the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service Contact Centre.

45. The governance arrangements have developed over time due to the way the Hub has grown and evolved. In effect, two structures have evolved, one for the Worcestershire Hub as a whole and one for the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service. We consider that the current governance arrangements have developed in a piecemeal way, are complex and overly layered.
46. The Task Group found it difficult to determine where decisions were taken. The County Council Director of Corporate Services considered that the current governance arrangements did not restrict the Hub. He noted that not all district councils were signed up to the Hub Shared Service, and that there was a need to respect individual authorities' views and to 'work with the willing'.
47. However, we firmly believe that operating in a way which is clear and transparent to all councillors, would give the Hub a stronger base for future development, and greater opportunity to sell its services to a wider audience. We consider clearer governance is essential to enable any further expansion of the Hub Shared Service.

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.

48. One way to conceptualise this would be to see the Worcestershire Hub Partnership as a "business" from which "customers" (i.e. the local authorities) "buy" a range of services. We would suggest there is an overarching, decision making body which comprises a Councillor and Director from each council (or their senior officer representative), which would have an overall view of the whole Hub across the county. As we explore in the next section, no one body that has visibility of the overall cost and budget for the Hub. This overarching body could have this role. The governance arrangements of the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service and other shared services would not be affected, but would link up to the overarching body. A high level, decision making body comprising members from each authority would also help to increase the profile of customer service in Cabinet Members' responsibility, at both county and district level, where this is not already the case.

COSTS, FUNDING AND SAVINGS

49. Important questions for the task group were 'How much does the Hub cost?', 'Who is paying for it?' and 'What savings has it enabled since its creation?' To answer these questions, and to gain a better understanding of the financial model, we met the Head of Worcestershire Hub Shared Service and the Principal Financial Officer with responsibility for the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service accounts.

How much does the Hub cost and who is paying for it?

50. The financial model for the Worcestershire Hub is highly complex and, when considering the way the Hub is funded, it is important to be clear about its different elements – i.e. the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service and the customer contact centres in the other local authorities i.e. Bromsgrove, Redditch, Wychavon, and Wyre Forest. This means there is no one body that has visibility of the overall cost and budget for the Hub.
51. The table below summarises the 2010/11 budget for the Shared Service and how this is funded. It also provides the 2010/11 spend by the non shared service authorities on their customer service/contact centres.
52. Councillors were keen to see unit costs of dealing with a call / face to face / web transaction, but these are not available. We welcome the work being done by the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service to calculate the average cost of a call for the main service areas handled in the Contact Centre, Perry Wood. We consider that this work should be carried out across each of the district councils, to build a full picture, and inform decision making about the future development of the Worcestershire Hub.

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.

Table: 2010/11 budget for the Shared Service and how this is funded. 2010/11 spend by the non shared service authorities on their customer service/contact centres.

Service Area	Total Budget 2010/11	Partner Funding 10/11				
		County	City	MHDC	Other Shared Services	Non Shared Service authorities
	£000	£000	£000	£000	£000	£000
Shared Service						
Contact Centre	1,268	750	149	149	220	-
Face to Face Centres	884	270	390	224	0	-
Hub management, operational development, communication, training	307	307	0	0	0	-
Sub total	2,459	1,327	539	373	220	-
Other district Centres (outside of Shared Service)						
Bromsgrove	880	138				742
Redditch	807	185				622
Wychavon	929	208				721
Wyre Forest	741	167				574
Sub total	3,357	698	0	0	0	2,659
All Partner Related						
Hub management, development, Training, ICT support	856	856	0	0	0	0
Central Support Services/accommodation	449	449	0	0	0	0
Sub total	1,305	1,305	0	0	0	0
County Specific						
Reception	62	62	-	-	-	-
Total Cost	7,183	3,392	539	373	220	2,659

Worcestershire Hub Shared Service

53. Worcestershire County Council is the host authority for the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service, for employment and support service purposes, on behalf of the South Worcestershire Shared Services Joint Committee. It is also the largest funder of the shared service, contributing 54% of the budget. The remaining funding is provided by Malvern Hills District Council, Worcester City Council and Shared Services. The County Council employs all staff involved in:
- Contact Centre – Perry Wood
 - Face to Face Centres – Worcester City and Malvern Hills (3 centres)
 - Hub Management, Service Development, Hub Training, Operations and ICT Support
 - WCC Switchboard and County Hall reception functions
54. The contributions from Worcester City Council (City) and Malvern Hills District Council (MHDC) are based on the Shared Service legal agreement, where the districts fund the marginal costs of service, equating to agreed proportions of staff costs and non pay costs of the Face to Face Centres and Contact Centre. Funding from "Other Shared Services" includes Revenues and Benefits and planned support for Worcestershire Regulatory Service and Building Control enquiries.

Non shared service

55. The County Council does not employ the staff at the Hub customer service/contact centres outside the shared service: Bromsgrove, Redditch, Wychavon and Wyre Forest. For these centres the district councils are the employer and the County Council fund an agreed share of operating costs.
56. The basis for joint funding of the Worcestershire Hub is set out in the agreed Partnership Agreement. Information on the specific budgets and costs funded by the district councils was not readily available to the County Council. However, the scrutiny needed to have a full picture of Hub costs, and therefore we asked the districts for the information. We were pleased that all the district councils shared with us the relevant financial information for their customer service / contact centres. These costs are included in the table above.
57. This scrutiny is not commenting on the expenditure by authorities on their customer service/contact centres and has not compared this spend or analysed it to consider value for money. In addition the figures are not directly comparable due to the different nature of services, the different depth of services and differing practices provided and used by each district and the shared service. However we feel it is important that all authorities have an understanding of how much customer service centres cost across the county, to inform discussion of the future development of the Hub.
58. The table above shows the proportion funded by the County Council of the cost of Hub Centres outside the Shared Service. The allocations from the County Council to non shared service contact centres broadly equates to four Customer Service Advisors per district, and recognises that only a small percentage of enquiries received by the districts relate to County Council services.

Additional funding from the County Council

59. The County Council, in its community leadership role to work with the district councils to simplify and improve access to council services, agreed to fund a considerable portion of the central overheads relating to the Worcestershire Hub, e.g. central systems infrastructure.
60. In addition, because the Hub has a key role in driving customer-focused service transformation within authorities, the budget includes some "implementation effort" to drive further development to enable greater choice in terms of contact, enable the Hub to be the first point of contact, actively seeking to reduce avoidable contact, increase self service and work with service areas to streamline processes. These can be considered as "transition costs" rather than ongoing operational overheads.
61. Overall, the County Council's financial contribution to the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service and non-shared service in 2010/11 is £3.392m, out of a total spend by all authorities on customer service / contact centres across the County of £7.183m.
62. Councillors asked about the County Council's funding of training and it was clarified that the County pays for central training. Each district would have its own budget for specific training needs, for example training for Hub staff in Bromsgrove dealing with revenues and benefits would be met by Bromsgrove DC
63. We heard that the infrastructure costs for the Hub remained relatively steady and would not be greatly impacted by new services coming in to the Hub. The 10-year contract with Hewlett Packard is approaching the end (2013) and discussions have begun regarding future requirements. It is anticipated that arrangements will be different in the future recognising the upskilling of ICT staff in WCC over recent years, making the model more self-sufficient.
64. The task group acknowledge the decision by the County Council to pick up costs for Hub management, operational development, communication and training to drive the Hub forward in its early stages; this is at the heart of the Hub Partnership Agreement. Nonetheless we were surprised to find that the County Council was still funding a large proportion.

County Council Recharges to Frontline services

65. The County Council recharges its "frontline" services for the cost of customer services, in line with other support services such as Human Resources, Information technology and others. When we met with the Interim Head of Culture and Community Service/Strategic Libraries and Learning Manager, it emerged that the Library Service was recharged £689,000 in 2009/10 for the Hub. It was understood that this had been calculated using 2007 data on the forecast call volumes that the Hub would handle for the Library Service, and in the previous five months the Hub had only been receiving about 70% of the calls that had been estimated. This meant that on a basic calculation, the cost of the Hub dealing with a library call was £14 per call, and we were concerned that this was poor value for money. We therefore asked for further briefing about how the Hub's recharges to County Council services were calculated. Details of how County Council recharges are calculated are attached at Appendix 4.
66. The high recharge for libraries reflected the fact that this was a high volume service.

Work had been done to assess the potential volume of library enquiries which were appropriate to route through the Hub. A number of enquiries for library services did not come through the Hub, and further promotion of the shared service number would take place with a view to changing this customer behaviour. A change in customer demand for a service (e.g. more customers accessing the library online rather than through the Hub) would lead to a reduction in the recharge. It was explained that recharges cannot be used to work out the unit (transaction) costs of a visit or telephone call.

67. We queried why all services were charged (even those which did not use the Hub), and were advised that when the Hub was created, this was on the basis that the Hub would be the initial point of contact for all County Council services. The Head of Financial Appraisal stressed that recharges could be scrutinised as part of any scrutiny of the relevant support service.

Is the Hub value for money?

68. We asked whether the value for money offered by the Hub Shared Service was reviewed, and were advised that this was a complex thing to do routinely. However, the Shared Service is constantly reviewing its costs and areas where it can improve and has plans in place to drive efficiencies in conjunction with other shared services.
69. The budget and recharging approach works on the basis that the Worcestershire Hub is the first point of contact for all County Council services. There is an opportunity to make greater use of the Worcestershire Hub for a number of County Council services. If all services were to make greater use of the Hub, this would reduce the overall unit costs.

RECOMMENDATION 5: Since 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.

70. A gap in our findings is that we have been unable to build up a complete picture of the relative value for money of each non-shared service district Hub compared with the Hub Shared Service.

Has the creation of the Hub saved money?

71. The original Business Case for the creation of the Worcestershire Hub stated that the aim of the Hub was to improve customer focus and not to deliver savings. Any savings generated by services from their use of the Hub had therefore not been specifically calculated or recorded in the early years.
72. It was explained that it is possible to look at the improvements in service and efficiencies which have been enabled by use of the Hub, for example the length of the application process for the Blue Badge service, where a customer can now receive their badge during their visit – approx. 15 minutes - to the relevant centre (subject to having the right supporting evidence). Additionally, the South Worcestershire Revenues and Benefits Shared Service scrutiny found that the projected savings in the revenues and benefits shared service had been achieved.
73. We acknowledge that it would be a huge task to retrospectively consider what savings had been created for each service since 2002. Nonetheless we consider it

regrettable that the financial information had not been gathered at the time. This type of information could be a powerful motivator to authorities and service areas to use the Hub, and it would also have allowed a proper understanding of the costs and benefits of the Hub.

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.

PERFORMANCE OF THE WORCESTERSHIRE HUB

74. Although the scrutiny has focused on the development of the Hub in the future, given the concerns raised in the Notice of Motion, councillors wanted to understand the performance of the Hub Shared Service in 2009 and what lessons could be learned. In addition, how the Hub performs and crucially how its performance is measured and monitored is important for building confidence with all partners and services. We were therefore keen to understand the Hub's performance.

Worcestershire Hub Shared Service Performance in 2009

75. There were real concerns about the performance of the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service, especially in relation to call wait times, during the latter half of 2009.
76. As of June 2009 the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service Contact Centre was handling revenues and benefits calls for all three of the South Worcestershire authorities interfacing with the South Worcestershire Revenues and Benefits Shared Service. Revenues and Benefits calls for Malvern Hills District Council customers had always been handled by the Hub and calls for Worcester City were transferred in November 2008. The South Worcestershire Revenues and Benefits Shared Service carried out a major ICT implementation, converging from three to one system in March / April 2009. This coincided with starting to see the impact of the economic downturn on customers.
77. This resulted in a dramatic increase in demand for revenues (council tax and business rates) and benefits enquiries. The Shared Service equivalent average monthly call volumes in 2008/9 were 37,000. This rose to an average of 53,000 per month between April and September 2009. Call volume across the whole of the Worcestershire Hub (not just the shared service) increased from an average of 60,000 calls per month in 2008/9 to almost 100,000 in 2009/10.
78. This increase had an impact on call handling, worsening performance and increasing the time customers had to wait on the phone:
- In 2008/09 over 75% of calls were answered in 20 seconds (20 seconds is the service level agreement). In August and September 2009 this fell below 20%.
 - During September 2009, the time to answer peaked at just over 5 minutes. [though the average speed was 177 seconds over the month]
 - The number of abandoned calls was 6,023 in May 2009. In September 2009 it peaked at 23,920 with only 50.5% of calls being answered.
79. There was no increase in funding from the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service to support this significant peak in demand. In addition, during September the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service experienced its usual large volume of School Transport enquiries.

80. Another factor was that many of the revenues and benefits enquiries were complex and from people who had not previously claimed benefits, increasing the average "handle time" from 3.22 minutes in May 2009, to 4.22 minutes in September 2009.
81. The Worcestershire Hub Shared Service implemented the following actions to improve call response times:
- Extending opening hours for handling calls relating to revenues and benefits, with customers now able to call from Mon-Fri: 8am – 8pm and Sat: 9am – 5pm.
 - Recruiting new customer service staff as planned. The staffing levels within the Hub Shared Service of 9 additional staff to handle calls, were based on the Revenues & Benefits shared Service Business Case produced in 2006. No additional funding was provided to handle the increase in demand due to the economic downturn.
 - Moving all Hub Shared Service contact centre staff to a single location. This enables robust disciplines and single processes to be embedded.
 - Working with the South Worcestershire Revenues and Benefits Shared Service on a range of actions, including; introducing a single evidence checklist, better staggering of council tax reminders, and improving the quality of information available for Hub advisors and customers.
82. Performance of the Shared Service did improve week on week during October 2009. The average time to answer a call improved from 177 seconds in September, to 38 seconds in October 2009. The percentage of calls answered within the service level agreement (20 seconds), rose from 14.2%, to 59% for the same period. Appendix 5 provides further performance information figures.
83. The Revenues and Benefits scrutiny concluded that the performance problems were caused by the large increase in demand for revenues and benefits services in the south of the county due to the economic downturn. The joint scrutiny found that the recession had placed the service under enormous pressure, testing the resilience of the business case, but there was a clear view that without the shared service, the service would have been much more badly affected. The role of the Hub has been central to Revenues and Benefits Shared Service achievements to date (saving of £1m per annum).
84. The Head of the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service was sure that the district councils which did not form part of the revenues and benefits shared service would have experienced similar increased demand, which they would have handled in a different way. This view was backed up by our discussion with the non-shared service district councils, during which we learned, for example, that Redditch Borough Council revenues and benefits team had struggled and had introduced extra resources as a result.
85. Whilst accepting the unprecedented impact of the recession on revenues and benefits call volumes, some of us asked whether there had been a lack of preparedness? How quickly were the changes in performance information as a result of the recession acted on, and why had this not triggered earlier action? The Head of the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service confirmed that the Hub team had been working hard to address the issues, with a key learning point being the need to have communicated the impact of the recession on customers, demand and therefore performance earlier. More staff had been recruited as soon as possible, and earlier than planned as part of the 2006 business case. However, it had not

been possible to hire staff in May 2009 because of a recruitment freeze which had been advised by Human Resources, in order to minimise staff redundancies as the shared service was formed.

86. We asked how service areas worked with the Hub to help it anticipate changing customer demands, and were advised that the Hub worked very closely with service areas to understand peaks in demand for different services, and that the Operations Manager met with service managers on a regular basis. For example understanding that demand for school transport peaked in September, and demand for revenues and benefit rose at the beginning and middle of the month, as well as in March and April. Council tax queries would be high during April. Apart from this, the Hub did not receive any particular information regarding forecasting of customer demand.
87. There are lessons to be learned from the revenues and benefits situation in 2009. It highlights the importance of having sufficient resilience and capacity to absorb peaks in demand, acknowledging that these cannot always be forecast.

RECOMMENDATION 7: Appropriate resource plans for the Hub are in place to better plan for forecast 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.

How is the Hub performing?

88. When considering performance it is vital to understand the differences between the Hub Shared Service and the customer contact centres in the non shared service areas. It is also important to consider actual performance, rather than perceptions, as we found that councillor and officer perceptions differed depending on levels of knowledge, or which part of the service they were familiar with.
89. Within the County Council, the scrutiny function plays a role in monitoring performance, through reports which are submitted to the Resources Overview and Scrutiny Panel, twice a year. In some other authorities, performance information is also considered by overview and scrutiny.
90. Monthly performance information for the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service and the Worcestershire Hub as a whole, broken down for 2009/10, is attached at Appendix 5. Some of the issues emerging from this data are:
 - wait times for face to face visits was recorded by the Shared Service, but was not included in the area breakdown, as it could not be obtained from all centres
 - telephony figures for Wychavon were not listed as all enquiries were dealt with by the service area, apart from the revenues and benefits service (which were included in figures for the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service)
 - call figures for Redditch had significantly increased because the contact centre now dealt with all calls previously received by the switchboard
 - switchboard figures for the County Council were not included, and totalled around 30,000 per month, the majority being business calls
 - the high numbers of face to face enquiries for Wychavon related to the fact that there were three centres, Droitwich, Evesham and Pershore, where the latter is also Wychavon District Council's main reception area.

91. Traditionally the performance of the Worcestershire Hub has been good with over 75% of calls being answered within 20 seconds (the service level). It was clarified that speed of answer is the time it takes for the caller to be answered by a Customer Service Advisor.

Quality of customer experience

92. The performance information traditionally gathered by the Shared Service and the non shared service areas, focuses largely on processes and transactions – such as numbers of calls and speed of answer. It is clear, though, that there needs to be a focus on measuring the quality of the customer experience. We found it is possible to track calls from end to end with some services which are more advanced, such as Highways, but not with all service areas.
93. The task group heard that the Shared Service management team in conjunction with the Operational Management Group across the whole Hub Partnership have been working to measure quality of customer service. This has been done by a number of routes, Mystery Shopping, Customer Satisfaction Surveys and Service Requests Quality Audits. An upgraded customer relationship management (CRM) system was implemented in July 2009. This provides a solid basis on which to improve the quality of recording and processing enquiries as well as underpinning future self service developments. In addition, call recording will also be introduced into the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service Contact Centre later this year.
94. Our discussions with the district councils revealed that customer satisfaction monitoring also takes place for customers visiting centres in person. For example Redditch and Bromsgrove complete 100 questionnaires per month. Wychavon District Council use a simple visual 'How did we do?' survey prompt as part of the GovMetric system also used for Revs and Bens enquiries. Wyre Forest also carries out monthly surveys covering phone, email and face to face channels.
95. We found that there have been a number of satisfaction surveys carried out including very recently the Worcestershire Viewpoint Survey May 2010.¹ This included questions about customer services generally, not specifically about the Worcestershire Hub. The 'topline' results from the survey can be found at [Appendix 6](#) and overall show that there is demand for online access to services, but this is not yet being enabled. An 'Our Customer Questionnaire' was carried out in January/February 2010, to help shape a customer strategy for Worcestershire. This was not a Worcestershire Hub specific piece of consultation, and the responses are more generally about customer contact and experience.
96. It is essential, as councils try to shift customers away from the more traditional communication routes, that sufficient customer satisfaction monitoring is carried out on the telephone, email and online services.
97. The Worcestershire Hub Shared Service has now agreed to focus on the six key performance indicators (KPIs) which cover both quantitative and qualitative measures:

¹ 'ViewPoint' is a survey organised and managed by the Research and Intelligence Unit on behalf of the seven local authorities in Worcestershire, NHS Worcestershire and Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Services. It replaces the previous Citizen's Panel survey.

- KPI 1 – telephone service level – target of 80% of calls answered in 20 seconds
- KPI 2 – face to face average wait time – target of customers to be seen by a customer service advisor in less than 15 minutes
- KPI 3 – self-service – proportion of payments through self-service channels
- KPI 4 – Reducing Avoidable contact
- KPI 5 – Resolution at first point of contact – target of 80%
- KPI 6 – Customer satisfaction – 90% target

98. The Head of the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service would like to see a single performance management framework used across the Hub.

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.

RECOMMENDATION 10: All performance information – for shared service and non-shared service districts – should be made available to all councillors.

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.

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.

Service area and staff views on using the Worcestershire Hub

99. We spoke to officers whose service areas used the Hub as first point of contact, including Library Services and the Shared Regulatory Services. They were very supportive of Hub handling their telephone calls. The Library Service had noted that library staff were now in a position to deal with more people face to face in the library, rather than deal with routine enquiries, such as renewing books. The regulatory service acknowledged that the Hub was key to business transformation and training of all staff was important to understand each other's role.
100. There was a view that there would always be a small percentage of enquiries which would need to be dealt with by specialist staff, and that this percentage may vary depending on the complexity of the service.
101. We carried out an internet based survey of staff of all seven authorities and received over 500 responses. A summary of the results can be found at [Appendix 7](#). The results from 6 core questions and general comments were mixed; a large number of them were rather critical. However, many recognised that there had been some improvement and spoke of the difficulty faced by the customer service advisors, who could only work with the information which was provided to them from individual service areas.
102. What we heard from the staff survey reveals many service area staff, whilst complimentary about the helpfulness and professionalism of Hub staff, question the ability of the Hub to deal with an increasing range and depth of enquiries. There were a number of comments about service to the customer having deteriorated. We perceived an impression that this may be partly due to service area staff's

resistance to change and reluctance to 'let go' of their expertise. There may also be fears of a threat to job security.

103. There were some concerns that the public is not always given the right information, which in turn causes problems and reduces the quality of service received by the customer. Many staff mention problems with the flow of information between the service area and the Hub (and vice versa).
104. Another thread to the free comments was the view that the term 'Hub' was not the best way to describe the service and its purpose.
105. One element that was clear throughout was the professionalism of the customer service staff in the Hub centres.
106. Positive comments focused on staff manner, approach and helpfulness, the efficiency of being able to answer straight-forward queries which gave service area staff more time to do their jobs, and the potential of their unique central role. There appeared to be more appreciation of the face to face service, followed by the telephony service, and then the email/web-based service.
107. Negative comments questioned the expectation on staff to answer in-depth queries on such a range of areas, the need for better flow of information from the service areas to the Hub (and vice versa), the dangers of staff trying to help when in fact they did not know the accurate answer, an unwillingness to put people through to the service area and mis-allocation of queries. Call wait times was a criticism, and several comments referred to the need for clearer navigation of the website and online systems, as well as compatibility of IT systems.
108. Several members felt that although many people had complained about problems getting through to the Hub by phone, once they had made contact they had found the staff very helpful. The Head of the Hub Shared Service acknowledged that Hub staff get frustrated at not being able to 'close the loop'. There was not clear agreement with every service regarding at what point an enquiry would be referred to the service area. If the Hub experiences problems as a result of an action by a service area (e.g. an incorrect letter being sent), it was clarified that the service area would not pick up the cost of any resulting additional customer contact.

RECOMMENDATION 13: Define and agree Service Level Agreements between the Worcestershire Hub and every service area.

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.

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.

109. There is further work to do to improve the service, standardise where possible, reduce avoidable contact, increase self-service and to ensure customer feedback is consistent, with more attention given to the quality of the response. Work is ongoing to reduce avoidable contact (i.e. reducing the amount of contact a customer has to make to resolve their enquiry, not reducing overall contact with the customer) and part of this is to document and standardise processes between the contact centre and the service area. The aim is to ensure the Hub can deal with over 75% of enquires at the first point of contact.

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.

110. Full integration of IT systems between the Hub and the service areas has not yet been achieved and this hinders the flow of information relating to an enquiry. The Head of the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service was very keen to speed this process up, and considerable improvement had been made in some areas. The task group considered that a single software provider would be beneficial and we note that the current contracts are up for renewal from 2013. This gives an opportunity to take this forward.

RECOMMENDATION 17: Move towards more consistent IT packages, as contracts come up for renewal.

Parish Council views on contacting the Hub

111. Our survey was included in the weekly parish bulletin circulated by the Worcestershire branch of CALC (a representative body for parish and town councils), and we received responses from representatives (Clerks, Chairs, Councillors) from over 60 parishes. Parish council representatives often play a role in escalating queries brought to them by parishioners.

112. The preferred methods of contacting the Council were telephone (67%), and email (33%). When asked which services they normally contacted the Worcestershire Hub about, 95% of respondents had lodged enquiries about Highways, 50% about refuse/waste, and 50% had made enquiries about planning. 61% of respondents reported that their enquiries were not normally resolved to their satisfaction and within advertised timescales, which was a disappointing result.

113. A common complaint was the lack of feedback, which meant they had to chase up enquiries, in order to be able to give feedback to their parishioners. The most mentioned service was Highways. For these issues they found using the Hub took much longer and it was difficult to obtain feedback. Several respondents complained that problems occurred through misallocation of the enquiry, or being let down by the website reporting mechanisms.

114. When asked if there were specific occasions when it would be helpful to speak to an officer from a service area, the consistent response was yes, always. When asked how the Hub service could be improved for parish councillors, the consistent response was very critical, with several reports of the Hub being openly criticised in public meetings. Suggestions for improvement included the facility to be able to talk to a member of service staff on occasion, for example in order to be able to explain what action was being taken, or not being taken to their parishioners, a dedicated helpline for parish clerks, direct numbers for service staff, a better online Hub and a

quicker response.

115. Our impression is that parish councillors and clerks see themselves as first tier of the council organisation and that they find it inappropriate that they should have to use the Hub. Many continued to use direct telephone numbers for service officers where possible.
116. We discussed the idea of a dedicated parish line (similar to that trialled in a recent member casework management pilot²). However, the majority view was that this was not needed and that it was more important to work on making sure the system worked, by addressing issues raised such as feedback, website reporting mechanisms etc.

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.

117. There were a number of comments made in the staff survey which suggested there may be better brand names to communicate the purpose of the Hub. We also heard similar anecdotal evidence from comments received by councillors from the general public. We believe there are better brand names – in particular we liked Kent County Council's 'Gateway'. However, we accept that re-branding would be a costly exercise, which would certainly not be appropriate in the current economic climate. Nonetheless, there may be other marketing initiatives which could improve public understanding of what the Hub can offer.

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.

Benchmarking with other local authorities

118. In order to think more about the service in Worcestershire, it was important to look at what other local authorities are doing in relation to customer service and how customers contact their own authority. The Worcestershire Hub participates in benchmarking, but we acknowledge the difficulty of making comparisons because of the differences in provision and huge range and depth of services. We asked other county and unitary local authorities for information about how they enable easy access to council services in person, by telephone and in person. We used a common set of questions, and received results from 11 authorities. A summary of the results is attached at [Appendix 8](#).
119. There was a huge variation in the content of responses, for example, from those councils which have taken the first steps to an integrated approach, to those that have no joined up working. Ten of the authorities have shared customer contact services with other partners, or are in the process of developing shared facilities.

² **Member Casework Management:** This was a pilot project, which ran from December 2009 to February 2010, with the aim of designing a clear route of access for member logging enquiries via the Hub and managing member enquiries on a casework basis. A dedicated member telephone number was established which was administered by a customer service advisors who were trained as specialist in the process.

CHANGING THE WAYS IN WHICH CUSTOMERS ACCESS COUNCIL SERVICES

120. The main ways in which the public can access a council service, such as reporting a pothole are in person, by telephone or online. As more people have access to the internet, increasingly, services in both the public and private sector are encouraging customers to move away from face to face or telephone contact, and to use online methods of communication or transaction. This is known as changing behaviour, or 'channel shifting'.
121. At the start of the scrutiny some of us were concerned that increasing use of the internet would exclude many residents. We were reassured that the Hub recognised that some customers would always prefer a face to face service and that there was no intention to remove choices for the customer, but to maximise the use of self-service options, where there is evidence of demand from customers.
122. A major factor in channel shifting is cost savings, and we were surprised by the huge difference in costs for different transaction types:

Transaction costs (Socitm Insight December 2009)

Face to face	£8.23 per visit
Phone	£3.21 per call
Web	£0.39 per visitor

123. All of the officers we spoke to at each council were supportive of encouraging greater use of internet contact by the public, and had started to work on this. Although cost saving was a motivation, we also learned that the website provides the best way to connect with the back office, and removes the need for data input by the Hub, which was cheaper and less prone to mistakes. Experience has revealed that people find it much easier to submit information online rather than on paper, and a further advantage is that information can be validated along the way. Customers can also access information at anytime, whereas some district Hubs only provide a service around general office hours.
124. The Task Group heard that there needed to be a drive to market self-service, making it as simple as possible, and that as soon as the facilities were available, it was considered this route would take off.
125. During our scrutiny we visited the majority of the Hub centres around the county and witnessed the quality of the face to face service, and its popularity. As one senior district officer pointed out, their face to face service was very good ('perhaps too good'), but is also very expensive in terms of resources, staff and opening times.
126. Although we strongly believe a face to face service will always be required for some customers and for some enquiries, we can see that increasingly, there is a preference for other ways. There are huge savings to be made by encouraging and facilitating more use of self-service options for customers. We can see that increasing economic pressures on all public services means we cannot afford not to prioritise self-service access to council services, and that this will then free up the face to face and telephony services for those who need them.

How easy is it to use the Councils' websites?

127. We were unable to dedicate a great deal of time to this question. However, we consulted Socitm (the Society for Information Technology Management which is the

professional association for information technology managers working in and for the public sector in the UK). The County Council subscribes to Socitm, which also surveys visitors to the website, via a pop-up box which appears on screen for every fifth visitor to the website. We looked at its 2010 survey which compares all local authority websites, looking at factors such as ease of access to information, ease of carrying out transactions, resilience and volume of use. The county and district websites all rated only one or two stars, out of a possible four star rating.

128. We sought advice from Socitm about what local authorities should be doing. Their advice was:

- A need for clear and consistent branding, communicated to the public
- 'You get out what you put in' – this does not necessarily need to be financial, for example the right individuals could transform a website and its navigation
- Cost is crucial (online is much cheaper)
- 'silver surfers' are the fastest growing area in online access
- A face to face service cannot be replaced totally but most things can easily be transferred to a website
- Web content needs to be relevant and topical – for example Exeter City Council's site features the weather and travel information, encouraging the public to make it their homepage
- Websites should have their own cabinet member (or for it be part of their portfolio)
- Websites will inevitably grow, to accommodate some of the intended local authority cutbacks

129. We also heard a lot of anecdotal evidence about the lack of clarity and ease of use of the councils' website. This message also came across through our parish council survey. Initial results from the Council's May 2010 Viewpoint survey results indicate that a high proportion of residents would consider using the website to report issues – however, we learned that for a high volume service such as Highways, currently only 5% of the total number of enquiries are logged in this way.

130. This suggests that the demand for online access to services is there, but is not yet being enabled. However, we are aware that work is underway to improve this, which we would obviously support in order that the council is able to encourage more people to use this method of transaction and access to information.

131. In considering the growing profile of the website in customer communications, it will be important to ensure that development of the website is as customer friendly as possible. We looked at the fact that within the County Council, the teams responsible for communications and for the website, sit within different directorates.

132. A common IT policy would certainly be desirable, although complicated by the fact that IT packages vary between each authority.

133. We are aware that Worcestershire County Council, together with the Worcestershire Hub and District partners, is responding to these low ratings and aiming to improve, by updating our online services to make them easier to use and to give customers access to more services. The county council is aiming to achieve a 3 star rating by the end of 2010/11, and 4 stars by the end of 2011/12. We welcome continuation of this work if we are to encourage as many people as possible to use electronic access, and to enable people to monitor the progress of their enquiry for themselves.

Use of email

134. Similarly, time constraints meant we have not dedicated a great deal of time to looking at the use of email communication. The Shared Service reported that email enquiries are increasing, with approximately 2000 emails received per month (March 2010). Anecdotal evidence indicated that systems to monitor response times and quality of response etc. are not as robust as for telephony enquiries.
135. The summary results from the May 2010 ViewPoint Survey show that a considerable number of people prefer this method of communication with the Council, and therefore it is important to have clear frameworks to monitor the timeframe, quality and customer satisfaction with all methods of communication. We have made some recommendations connected to customer satisfaction in the 'performance' section of our report.

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.

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.

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.

CONCLUSION

136. In reflecting back on this scrutiny, it has without doubt been extremely educational and revealing to all members of the task group. Our attention has been drawn to areas which we did not anticipate at the start. In particular our investigations into governance arrangements and councillor awareness have surprised many of us.
137. The Worcestershire Hub is made up of the Hub Shared Service and separate arrangements for four district councils. This fact means that there are many differences and perhaps, a lack of unity. However, despite the differences, our scrutiny has revealed a clear commitment to the Hub as a whole for the future; no one is retreating. Our recommendations on governance and councillor induction seek to bring greater transparency, clarity and accountability across the partnership. We think it is important that those councils operating within and outside of the shared service have an awareness of what is happening 'on the other side of the fence'.
138. Our scrutiny has involved representation and consultation with each of the district councils. It is apparent that if the County Council seeks to encourage the remaining district councils to join the Hub Shared Service, they need to communicate clear

evidence about the benefits, including performance, customer satisfaction and cost savings.

139. The pressure on all authorities to make efficiencies means that service transformation is essential. We agree that the Hub should be at the heart of this service transformation. A co-ordinated approach to customer service across the county would enable savings to be made and minimise duplication.
140. An acknowledged gap in our findings is that we have not been able to make clear comparisons between the different Hub operations on their performance and value for money. This was due to the difference in the role and depth of use of the Hub across the non-shared service councils and the corresponding lack of comparable data that was available. To enable some comparisons to be made in the future we have recommended a uniform performance framework and that work is done on establishing transaction costs on the non-shared service authorities.
141. A revelation to many of us has also been the huge variation in the cost of the different types of transaction, whether it be in person, over the phone or online. Face to face customer service is hugely expensive, and although we feel strongly that there will always be a need for it, our evidence demonstrates that online customer access is in growing demand and offers huge potential for the future.
142. We are all agreed that self-service using the website is the way forward. If we encourage the public to make use of online access where possible to self-serve, it frees up the face to face service for those members of our community who really need it. Essentially, online access allows helping customers to serve themselves, as well as making some of the savings we need to make. Clearly, we will only maximize online self service if the councils' websites are as user-friendly and effective as possible. We are aware that many improvements to the website are planned, and we are very keen for this pace to continue, as addressed in our report.
143. Regarding the performance of the Worcestershire Hub, although there is always more to be done, we are satisfied that lessons have been learned from the performance problems experienced during the Summer 2009. We have made recommendations that plans should be in place to better forecast demand and unpredicted peaks in service demand. Although the problems experienced in the Summer 2009 were the catalyst for this scrutiny, this was only one aspect of our work, and our remaining recommendations on performance are targeted at improving customer experience as a whole, and the flow of information between the service areas and the Hub, and vice versa.
144. As our scrutiny reaches its conclusion, in many ways the Worcestershire Hub is embarking on major development, especially with the growing pace of service transformation and the growing number of shared council services across the county. We hope that our recommendations help to facilitate this future, and have agreed that we would like to reconvene the Worcestershire Hub task Group at an appropriate point in the future, to consider what influence our report has had, and to assess progress on the recommendations we have made.

SCRUTINY TASK GROUP ACTIVITY

Member briefing for the Resources Overview and Scrutiny Panel Patrick Birch, Director of Corporate Services Rachel Hill, Head of the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service	5 November 2009
A scrutiny proposal was discussed and agreed with the Lead Member, and a Scrutiny Task Group was set-up.	November 2009 – January 2010
Initial overview of the Worcestershire Hub provided to the Task Group Rachel Hill, Head of Customer Service for the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service and Patrick Birch, Director of Corporate Services Covered: background, vision, achievements, current position, performance, future direction, customer focus, challenges, opportunities and thoughts on areas for improvement	27 January 2010
Small group visits to the Hub centres (Malvern, Redditch, Pershore, Kidderminster, Bromsgrove, Shared Service Contact Centre at Perry Wood, Worcester) Sharon Ryder, Telephony Channel Manager	February - March 2010
"Mind mapping" exercise to sharpen our focus on what we wanted to find out from the scrutiny, and what was needed to achieve this Tony Dipple, Head of Financial Appraisal	18 March 2010
Evidence gathering: <u>Wychavon</u> – Vic Allison, Deputy Managing Director, Amanda de Warr, Democratic Services Manager and Nick Jefferies, Head of Revenues and Benefits Shared Service <u>Redditch and Bromsgrove</u> – Kevin Dicks, Joint Chief Executive, (Bromsgrove – Jayne Pickering, Executive Director for Finance and Corporate Resources and Roger Horton, Customer Services Manager), (Redditch – Lynn Jones, Customer Services Manager) <u>Malvern Hills</u> – Ivor Pumfrey, Head of Customer Services and Environmental Services <u>Worcester City</u> - David Thorpe, Head of Customer Services and Business Transformation and Malcolm Cox, Service Manager for Refuse and Recycling <u>Wyre Forest</u> - Linda Collis, Director of Community and partnership Services and Lucy Wright, Customer Services Manager <u>Library Service</u> Kathy Kirk, Interim Head of Culture and Community Service /	March - July

<p>Strategic Libraries and Learning Manager Steve Mobley, Quality and Standards Manager</p> <p><u>South Worcestershire Revenues and Benefits Shared Service</u> Nick Jefferies, Head of Revenues and Benefits Shared Service</p> <p><u>Members involved in the Autumn 2009 Scrutiny of the South Worcestershire Revenues and Benefits Shared Service</u>; Cllrs Rob Adams (Wychavon DC), Paul Cummings (Malvern Hills DC) and Geoff Williams (Worcester City DC)</p> <p><u>Highways</u> Position statement from Matt Nichols, Project Manager for the Worcestershire Hub</p>	
<p>Examination of:</p> <p>Performance information (with Rachel Hill, Head of the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service) Organisational charts (with Rachel Hill) Governance information (with Rachel Hill) Funding and costs (with Tony Dipple, Head of Financial Appraisal, Nick Hughes, Principal Finance Officer for Financial Services and Rachel Hill) Role of Hub within Regulatory Shared Service (with Steve Jordan, Head of Regulatory Shared Service and Ivor Pumfrey, Head of Customer Service and Environmental Service at Malvern Hills DC)</p>	March - July
<p>Information/evidence review:</p> <p>Funding and costs Customer feedback analysis Staff survey results Parish council survey results What are other local authorities doing? Comments from Cllr John Waring, Chair of the Hub Shared Service Management Board</p>	July
<p>Emerging findings / recommendations, including discussion with Director of Corporate Services and Cabinet Member for Corporate Services</p>	29 September – 1 October

INFORMATION CONSIDERED

	Date provided
Handouts from presentation by the Head of Customer Services for the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service, including performance information for 2008/9 – 2009/10	27 January 2010
Agreed action points and requests for information – resulting from task group meeting on 27/01/10	
Contact details for the Worcestershire Hub Customer Service Centres	24 February
Worcestershire Hub Shared Service Customer Service Briefing Bulletins (January 2010, February 2010) – to co-opted district councillor task group members	24 February
Diagram of South Worcestershire Shared Service Partnership Governance arrangements	24 March Task Group Meeting
Worcestershire Hub governance : paper to Worcestershire Hub Board (July 2009)	24 March Task Group Meeting
Membership of Worcestershire Hub shared Service (WHSS) Management Board	24 March Task Group Meeting
Worcestershire Hub Shared Service: paper to Joint Committee recommending establishment of the WHSS management Board (Nov 09)	24 March Task Group Meeting
South Worcestershire Shared Services Joint Committee – link to online agendas and minutes	9 April
'Online services will make savings' – interview article with Martha Lane Fox (Local Government Chronicle 25 Feb 2010)	9 April
Scrutiny plan following mind mapping exercise	14 April
Worcestershire Hub and Libraries - overview	14 April
South Worcestershire Shared Services Joint Committee 19 April 2010 – report on WHSS, including performance report 2009/10	
Summary of comments from visits to Worcestershire Hub contact centres	30 April
Performance information for the Worcestershire Hub Shared Services, and annual summary breakdown for the non-shared service districts	19 May (agenda papers)
Performance report for WHSS Management Board	26 May
Briefing about the Hub submission for Customer Service Excellence accreditation	10 June
Customer Satisfaction Data: Our Customers Consultation ViewPoint May 2010 Customer feedback carried out by the Hub	10 June
Worcestershire County Council Cabinet report and minutes:	24 June

'Worcestershire Enhances Two-Tier Shared Services Programme' 8 February 2010	
News article from Worcestershire County Council staff intranet 'Hub works with service areas to identify improvements'	24 June
News article from Worcester Evening News on a meeting of Worcester City Council's Licensing Committee's consideration of the proposed merger of council regulatory services	24 June
Regulatory Services Business Case and supporting appendices	25 June
List of work underway	22 July
Highways Update	22 July
Comments from Chair of Worcestershire Hub Shared Service Management Board	22 July
Member casework management	22 July
Financial / budget Information (non-shared service)	22 July
Council staff survey results	27 July
Results of questions to other local authorities	27 July
Kent Total Place Initiative – gateway Multi-channel	27 July
Extracts from 'Better Connected 2010: a snapshot of all local authority websites' – from the Society for Information Technology Management (Socitm)	27 July
Parish council survey results	August
Viewpoint Survey 2010 - results	22 September
Worcestershire Hub Full Business Case – Summary Report	7 October
Worcestershire Hub Online Self Service Proposal	7 October
Worcestershire Hub Customer Charter website link	13 October

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS WITH THE DISTRICT COUNCILS

Malvern Hills District Council and Worcester City Council (Joint discussion)

Both Malvern District Council and Worcester City Council are part of the Worcestershire Hub Shared Service. For services using the Hub, Worcestershire Hub Shared Service Contact centre deals with telephone calls and emails.

Malvern DC has three face to face centres (at Malvern, Tenbury and Upton Libraries)

Worcester CC has a face to face centre at Orchard House.

Malvern had taken the decision to put the Hub at the front of all services.

Worcester City's decision to join the WHSS had been based on a desire to improve customer service. At the time the move was cost neutral, and saving money had not been the motivation to join. However, there were now added pressures to save and to make processes leaner.

Both Worcester City and Malvern felt it was important to address the end to end process of service delivery, and to look at this from the customer point of view.

It was felt that the senior management teams at Worcester and Malvern had similar confidence in the Hub. Confidence had dipped during the period of massive demand as a result of the recession, but there had been general acceptance that the Council wouldn't have coped under previous arrangements.

Some of the members who had initiated this scrutiny were Malvern members. It was acknowledged that the Hub had indeed gone through a bad patch last year and Malvern had carried out analysis to understand the reasons, as well as looking at the Hub through scrutiny arrangements (Joint scrutiny of South Worcestershire Revs & Bens). Some problems were unearthed, for example the flow of information between the Hub and service areas. Having gone through the difficult patch, members were now very supportive.

Members asked the officers' views on the fact that Wyre Forest, Redditch and Bromsgrove Councils would have encountered the same problems during the economic downturn, and yet did not appear to have had the same problems in dealing with the situation. The Malvern officer did not feel it was possible to make comparisons because of the different role of the Hub in different areas in dealing with revenues and benefits enquiries. The Shared Service sought to deal with these enquiries to a much greater depth, and required an average customer time of 4 minutes, compared to the overall Hub average of 2-3 minutes

The Worcester Officers stressed the importance of doing as much as possible at the first point of contact, as each referral meant more time and greater cost.

The Worcester Officers felt that being part of the WHSS gave them a better drive on customer focus, enabling them to work with the cabinet members, and with the Head of Worcestershire Shared Service. They felt less isolated, and were happy with the current Management Board and Joint Committee set-up

When asked whether they felt it was necessary to set up a new Board for each service joining the Hub – the Malvern officer felt that this depended on the complexity of the service concerned. The Joint Committee had to focus at an overall level, and therefore for some services it was useful to have a project team.

The Worcester officers felt that it was important to offer choices, and that the same should be available to customers whether via phone, online etc. The website gave the best way to connect with the back office, and had the fantastic advantage of removing the need for data input by the Hub, which was cheaper and less prone to mistakes. Experience revealed that people found it much easier to submit information online rather than on paper, and a further advantage was that the machine could validate the information along the way. He felt there needed to be a drive to market self-service, and felt that as soon as the facilities were available, this route would take off. Simplicity was key.

The Malvern officer pointed out that currently, many web options did not present themselves easily, and did not present a better offer for the customer. For example, when introducing the recent garden waste scheme, customers had been able to sign up online, but the Hub had had to call them to collect payment

It was agreed that it was important to extend self-service options to those without computers at home, and one way to do this would be via kiosks.

Wychavon District Council

Not a 'typical model' within the Hub partnership. Face to face contact centre provision for over 20 years, with three contact centres (Droitwich High Street, Pershore civic centre, Evesham), managed within Hub partnership.

Unlike the other district councils, all telephone calls (except for revenues and benefits) are answered by a Wychavon DC switchboard (not part of Hub) .

Revenues and benefits enquiries dealt with by Worcestershire Hub Shared Service contact centre (Wychavon has joined Revenues and benefits shared service).

For all services except for revenues and benefits, face to face staff dealt with calls up to a certain point (which varied for each service), after which the enquiry would be passed onto the service area. There was a small facility within each service area, to provide a 'hub-like' service.

Wychavon had not joined the Hub in its full capacity when the partnership was set up in 2002, because its own telephony operation was managed very differently to other districts and the transition to the Hub would have been hugely complex. At the time members felt it important to have experts answering the phones and did not want an automated system, although this view went against officer advice at the time. Some members continued to hold the view that 'calls should be answered by the experts'

The way in which councils worked with their customers continued to change and evolve and Wychavon's integration to the Hub was something which would be kept under review. There was potential for change – the prime incentive to join would be customer experience, although cost saving would also be important

Wychavon's experience of working with the Hub as regards face to face customer service was very positive, and had brought benefits such as improved service, value for money and extended opening hours. Greater partnership working had resulted in a wider service (the Evesham centre worked in partnership with West Mercia Police)

50% of the face to face service time was attributed to revenues and benefits enquiries, something which was a consequence of the shared service. Previously, the face to face service would have dealt with enquiries up to a certain point, after which they would have referred on to the service area – now the face to face staff had to deal with much more in-depth enquiries, of up to one and a half hour duration

The Deputy Managing Director pointed out that face to face service, although popular (maybe too popular) was very expensive in terms of resources, staff and opening times. In addressing the current economic pressures, the scope of this provision would need to be looked at.

Bromsgrove District Council and Redditch Borough Council (Joint discussion)

At Redditch, all external and internal telephone calls are routed through the switchboard. There are no direct dial numbers, even for staff. The Redditch Customer Service Centre is at the Town Hall.

It was made clear during the meeting that Redditch and Bromsgrove had not agreed to have a shared service approach to the Hub and there are no plans to join the shared service, reasons for this differed between the 2 authorities. As Redditch retained a housing stock many of the calls received by the Redditch customer contact centre related to housing, maintenance, rents, repairs etc. and Redditch had a very high volume of calls. There was some concern that the Hub Shared Service (WHSS) would not be able to cope

with all these extra calls.

Bromsgrove members in particular were concerned about a perceived loss of local knowledge in dealing with enquiries. It was argued that the focus of each branch of the Worcestershire Hub needed to remain local as it was important for the customer to feel that the operator had local knowledge.

Bromsgrove had not retained a housing stock and therefore the types of enquiries received there and the use made of the Hub tended to be different, they dealt with many council tax queries. The Bromsgrove customer contact centre had had a major impact in Bromsgrove following the introduction of the service in 2005. Many enquiries were dealt with at the level of the Hub which had helped to reduce the amount of time spent by back office staff on responding to enquiries. For example, out of a sample of 600 calls in a given period only 100 would be referred to a back office function. One consequence of this had been that the length of calls had often become longer, particularly when responding to more complicated enquiries.

Redditch used a number of bespoke systems such as PayPal for customers paying council rents. These could be accessed at a number of local shops and neighbourhood offices. This helped to reduce the flow of customers within the Town Hall and was more convenient for some customers. Increasingly, the Council was also encouraging residents to use direct debit for payments for Council services. There was a discussion about use of kiosks. Bromsgrove had looked at them, but now want to send customers elsewhere. Worcester has had IT problems with kiosks.

The Chief Executive of Redditch Borough Council believed that R&B customer service centres represented value for money. However, assessing the value of the service needed to be explored in further detail. It was questioned whether assessment of the quality of the service should only focus on response times to customer calls and it was suggested that it should also include asking residents whether the Hub was delivering the job they expected and meeting their needs – more work needed to measure the quality of customer experience in the Hub (and maybe in their own customer contact centres?).

Members felt that DCs were dealing with highways queries but not being paid for this and it was noted that some service queries would always go to DCs as people are used to calling a particular number and it is hard to change this habit.

The performance of the quality of the customer service delivered by the R&B's customer contact centres was measured face to face through the completion of 100 questionnaires per month.

In relations to revenues and benefits queries, Bromsgrove had seen a sharp initial increase, which had then tailed off and there had been no significant impact on calls taken (n.b. most revs & bens queries are face to face). The Benefits team in Bromsgrove had a voice recognition analysis (VRA) system. This system was used when responding to benefits calls. The system operated as a form of lie detector test, identifying both high and low risks. Some low risk claims could easily be processed and finalised for payment within a 48 hour period.

Redditch had a more significant increase, especially with face to face queries. Resources to revs & bens team had been increased.

There were particular arrangements in place for responding to complicated enquiries. In these cases the operator recorded all the relevant details provided by a customer. These details were then referred to the back office function and a relevant Officer was required to call the customer to provide a response.

In relation to Regulatory Services, it was noted that there was a need to ensure processes and systems were agreed before launching the shared service; lessons would be learned from the revs & bens change. There would not be an overnight move to Perry Wood taking all calls, there was a phased approach to ensure the systems were in place first. It was noted that building a relationship with the service area is crucial and takes time.

In relation to Hub governance, Kevin Dicks would not like to see the demise of the Worcestershire Hub Partnership Board as it was useful for all authorities to be involved in discussions about the Hub. [i.e. if it was only shared service joint committees, R&B would not be involved at all.]

At both Redditch and Bromsgrove Councils there were Customer Service Managers and both attended this meeting. There did not appear to be a specific structure for operating Hub branches throughout the county. Instead, Hub branches appeared to operate in diverse ways from location to location.

On 15th July a new Head of Customer Services would start work at Redditch and Bromsgrove Councils. This Officer would be working to implement a more customer focussed service with an ultimate aim to reduce the number of calls to the Hub. Increasingly, residents would be encouraged to use the internet rather than to call the Hub. It was also intended that there would be regular meetings for all of the relevant Customer Services Managers in the County with responsibility for the Hub.

Kevin Dicks highlighted R&B's current focus on "service transformation". The WETT programme has secured funding from the West Midland Regional Improvement & Efficiency Partnership to support local authorities to deliver 'transformation' programmes. The idea is the customer should be at the heart of services. R&B's focus will be on transforming the way they do business (from the customer's point of view) and then tackling how they deal with customer service.

Some obstacles to future development were:

Concerns about loss of local knowledge by having a central call centre
Not enough work has been done so far asking customers how they want to contact councils
There was not a clear enough focus on customer satisfaction/quality
20 R&B service areas could potentially move to Hub, but it was not clear how CSAs could deal with all of these. Also, it was perceived that CSAs would not pick up customers' "hidden agendas" (these are training issues)

Wyre Forest District Council

Wyre Forest Customer Service Centre opened in November 2006 and is based in Kidderminster Town Hall. There are also two smaller centres in Bewdley and Stourport. All District Council telephone calls are routed through a single number and handled by the service. Equally, there is one e-mail address for general enquiries. There is one team, with 18FTE staff, who rotate between the 3 sites and are trained in reception, face to face and telephone enquiries to ensure that demand can be met more efficiently. Cashiers are also employed in Kidderminster and handle transactions, 60% of which are cheques.

There are always 2 members of staff when Bewdley and Stourport offices are open, but staff can "plug in" to the telephone system to provide back up to Kidderminster if the need arise. We were told that there is always the need to have at least 4 people on the telephone.

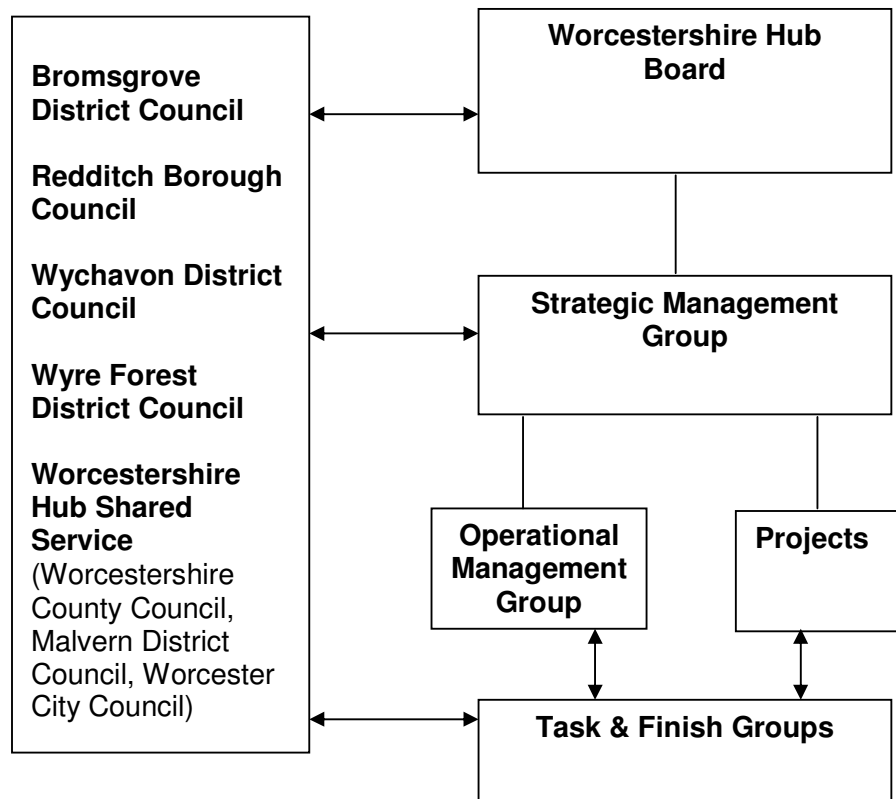
Identifying aspects of the service which could be improved, it was noted that increasing the number of staff would always be useful. Equally it was suggested that departments could update customer service advisors more frequently to enhance the customer experience.

When Highways calls were no longer answered virtually by all Partners in 2009, funding was reduced accordingly. Despite this, customers still call WFDC to report Highways issues and 60-70% of all Highways calls logged for this area, were actually still dealt with by WFDC staff, rather than by Perry Wood staff.

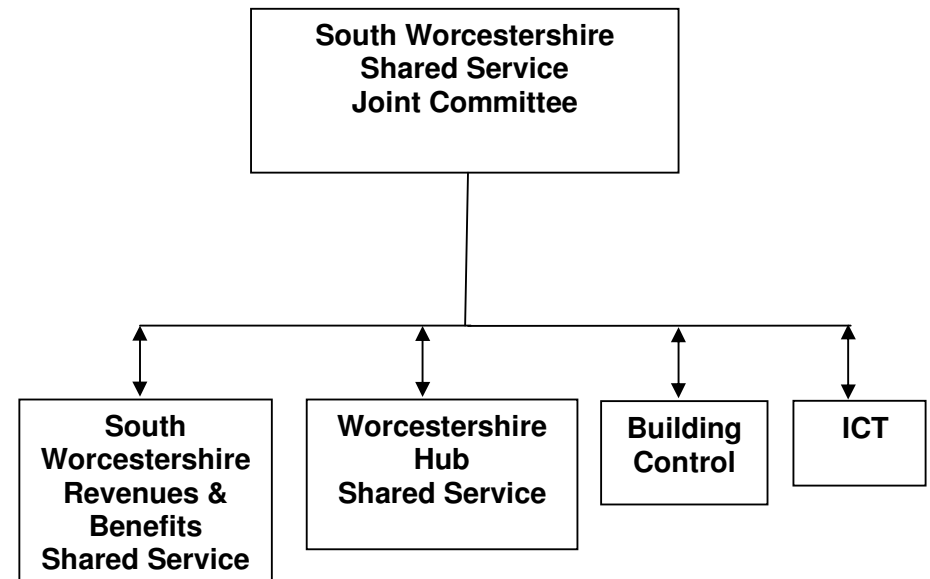
Chief Officers believe the customer service centres provide good value for money for the District Council and provide a consistently good level of performance. Councillors and the public have been impressed with the level of professionalism, although admit there was some resistance in the beginning.

The District Council has the customer at the heart and when considering the future of shared services, it would have to be clear where efficiencies and cash savings are. They are a high performing service and would not accept a drop in service for their customers.

**WORCESTERSHIRE HUB
GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS**



**WORCESTERSHIRE HUB SHARED SERVICE
GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS**



COUNTY COUNCIL RECHARGES

It was explained that the Customer Services function exists to support the frontline services of the County Council and the Hub partners. As such, the recharges system worked in the same way as for other support service functions, such as Human Resources and IT. Under the CIPFA Best Value Accounting Code of Practice, local authorities are required to apportion the costs of service to the services it supports. The County Council adopt a high level approach to this; rather than creating a bureaucratic internal accounting process of charging for actual services provided on an ongoing basis, an apportionment of the approved revenue budget is determined at the time of setting budgets on the basis of actual or planned service, allowing for the possibility for a service to migrate to the Hub. Discussion with Directorates on how to resource the Hub had taken place three years previously.

A budget for the recharge for frontline services is added to the appropriate frontline service's budget as a "top slice" and the actual charge is made at this budgeted level. The frontline service therefore carries the cost of its support services but the recharge does not impact on the service's controllable budget and nor does the service control the recharge's expenditure or take responsibility for budget variances. The Head of Customer Services therefore takes responsibility for control of the revenue budget for the service.

The basis for the apportionment of Customer Services costs to the WCC service areas takes account of:

- The volume of customer contacts for each service made via the Worcestershire Hub in person and over the phone. This data is taken from the management information systems used by the Worcestershire Hub at the time of the recharge calculation.
- A view of plans for any changes including the "migration" of services to the Worcestershire Hub, e.g. known plans to deal with a new service or extension of a service.
- Application of a weighting to take account of the average length of the customer contact (for contacts made in person or over the phone). This recognises that some enquiries, e.g. renewing a library book over the phone, are quicker than others, e.g. application for a Blue Badge.

The following table summarises the recharge to frontline services within the County Council for Customer Services for 2010/11.

Service	Recharge 2010/11 £000	Directorate Total £000
Children's services (non DSG³)		
LEA functions	17.3	
Social Care	120.5	137.8
Adult and Community services		
Social care	150.9	
Blue badge	556.1	
Registration	124.8	
Arts	36.4	
Libraries	740.4	1608.6
Environmental services		
Trading standards	47.7	
Highways	315.9	
Countryside	48.4	
Integrated Transport –Schools	183.5	
Traffic Management	160.5	
Street Lighting	11.9	
Waste Management	212.1	980.0
Corporate services		
Recruitment and Student Finance	111.6	
Admin Buildings – reception services	60.5	172.1
Planning, Economy & Performance		
Emergency Planning	8.8	8.8
Total		2,907.3
Schools DSG Funded		
School Admissions		351.8
Total		3,259.1
Corporate Management Costs (not recharged to frontline services)		133.0
Total County Council Budget		3,392.1

³ Dedicated Schools Grant

PERFORMANCE INFORMATION

APPENDIX 5

The following tables show information for the Worcestershire Hub and Worcestershire Hub Shared Service broken down by month for the year 2009/10.

Summary for the Worcestershire Hub

Indicator	2008/9		2009/10											
	Total	Average	April	May	June	July	August	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Telephone Channel														
Total Incoming Calls	798055	66505	89614	83148	106681	107173	97080	112229	91964	87724	73444	121037	89980	116725
Total Calls during Opening Hours	757172	63098	84075	78384	102365	103411	93376	108999	88706	85313	70516	117339	88955	114692
Total Calls Answered	651086	54257	72166	66197	76415	75977	62707	71419	77070	73060	62868	97068	75561	94943
Percentage of Calls Answered	85.9%	85.9%	85.8%	84.5%	74.6%	73.5%	67.2%	65.5%	86.9%	85.6%	89.2%	82.7%	84.9%	84.1%
Service Level: Percentage of Calls Answered within 20secs	75.6%	75.6%	63.9%	64.9%	51.0%	47.5%	38.7%	37.4%	65.7%	61.6%	77.1%	56.0%	64.7%	61.9%
Average Speed of Answer (seconds)	19	19	32	30	53	58	81	94	29	35	17	36	30	35
Average Call Duration (hh:mm:ss)	00:02:28	00:02:28	00:02:25	00:02:26	00:02:37	00:02:45	00:02:49	00:02:54	00:02:48	00:02:56	00:02:55	00:03:03	00:02:59	00:03:44
Face to Face Channel														
Total Number of Visitors (CRM)	179657	14971	14821	12929	13877	11872	11508	16913	17658	17890	14669	17709	16262	21413
Total Number of Visitors (other)	215401	17950	22516	19151	20587	23728	20580	23791	24169	22783	17974	20047	18380	
Total Number of Payments made in Person	482057	40171	43323	39651	42718	44178	39367	41586	38550	36436	34601	31172	19311	
Total Number of Payments made using the Kiosks	12297	1537	3898	3634	3754	3408	3060	3449	3944	3838	3479	2990	1576	2004

Worcestershire Hub Shared Service

Indicator	2008/9		2009/10											
	Total	Average	April	May	June	July	August	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Telephone Channel														
Total Incoming Calls	513544	42795	45372	42405	60317	60381	56539	67483	50503	47224	36985	59568	44726	61560
Total Calls during Opening Hours	443636	36970	42360	39975	57984	58669	54693	66000	48973	46470	36125	58262	44118	60770
Total Calls Answered	374116	31176	34240	30955	36277	36607	29183	33301	41023	37671	33591	49480	39204	51252
Percentage of Calls Answered	84.3%	84.3%	80.8%	77.4%	62.6%	62.4%	53.4%	50.5%	83%	81%	93%	84.9%	88.9%	84.3%
Service Level: Percentage of Calls Answered within 20secs	75.6%	75.6%	55.3%	53.1%	31.6%	30.7%	17.4%	14.2%	59%	51%	80.1%	54.6%	62.2%	56.4%
Average Speed of Answer (seconds)	18	18	41	43	91	96	146	177	38	51	15	39	31	42
Average Call Duration (hh:mm:ss)	00:03:14	00:03:14	00:03:11	00:03:22	00:03:47	00:03:56	00:04:10	00:04:22	00:03:48	00:03:51	00:03:42	00:03:19	00:03:42	00:03:48
Face to Face Channel														
Total Number of Visitors (CRM)	30752	2563	1939	1585	1702	2017	2804	5574	6684	6311	5356	6925	5105	7043

Total Number of Visitors (other)	67496	5625	5968	4243	3527	8409	6799	9004	7766	6525	5612	6475	5756	10342
Total Number of Payments made in Person	76812	6401	4382	4077	4241	4567	3942	4290	3674	3369	2683	2478	1519	2173
Total Number of Payments made using the Kiosks	12297	1537	3898	3634	3754	3408	3060	3449	3944	3838	3479	2990	1576	2004

1. Information by Centre

The following tables show information for the Worcestershire Hub broken down by channel – telephony and face to face, and by centre. The information shown is for the full financial year 2009/10. A comparison to the 2008/9 position is also shown.

Telephone Contacts

09/10	Worcestershire Hub Contact Centres					Total
	Bromsgrove	Redditch	Wychavon	Wyre Forest	Worcestershire Hub Shared Service	
Total Incoming Calls	151051	276553	n/a	115232	633063	1175899
Total Calls during Opening Hours	142120	265662	n/a	109755	614339	1136071
<i>Comparison to 08/09</i>	<i>-2%</i>	<i>77%</i>		<i>4%</i>	<i>38%</i>	<i>33%</i>
Total Calls Answered	127334	229894	n/a	96876	452784	903859
<i>Comparison to 08/09</i>	<i>0%</i>	<i>77%</i>		<i>0%</i>	<i>21%</i>	<i>28%</i>
Percentage of Calls Answered	90%	87%	n/a	88%	73.7%	80%
Service Level	76%	57%	n/a	83%	48%	58%
Average Speed of Answer (seconds)	20	46	n/a	8	64	44
Average Call Duration (seconds)	170	205	n/a	151	228	177

Contacts made in person (2009/10)

09/10	Customer Service Centres (Summarised by area)						Total
	Bromsgrove	Redditch	Wychavon	Wyre Forest	Malvern Hills	Worcester City	
Total Number of Visitors (CRM)	11566	18639	92430	11841	20149	32896	187521
Total Number of Visitors (other)	19177	94928	n/a	65150	22095	58331	259681
Total Number of Payments made in Person	30324	124090	134157	115688	12754	28641	445654
Total Number of Payments made using the Kiosks	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	12659	26375	39034

2008/9 Information - Telephony

2008/9	Worcestershire Hub Contact Centres					Total
	Bromsgrove	Redditch	Wychavon	Wyre Forest	Worcestershire Hub Shared Service	
Total Calls during Opening Hours	145176	63123	n/a	105237	443638	757172
Total Calls Answered	127506	52766	n/a	96698	374116	651086
Service Level	72%	63%	n/a	87%	n/a	75%

Summary for the Worcestershire Hub

Indicator	2009/10		2010/11											
	Total	Average	April	May	June	July	August	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Telephone Channel														
Total Incoming Calls	1175899	97992	97568											
Total Calls during Opening Hours	1136131	94678	93784											
Total Calls Answered	906987	75582	82436											
Percentage of Calls Answered	79.83%	79.83%	87.9%											
Service Level: Percentage of Calls Answered within 20secs	57.73%	57.73%	64.09%											
Average Speed of Answer (seconds)	44	44	32											
Average Call Duration (hh:mm:ss)	00:02:57	00:02:57	00:03:05											
Face to Face Channel														
Total Number of Visitors (CRM)	187521	15627	19939											
Total Number of Visitors (other)	259681	21640												
Total Number of Payments made in Person	445654	37138												
Total Number of Payments made using the Kiosks	39034	3253	4126											

Worcestershire Hub Shared Service

Indicator	2009/10		2010/11											
	Total	Average	April	May	June	July	August	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Telephone Channel														
Total Incoming Calls	633063	52755	48339											
Total Calls during Opening Hours	614339	51200	47043											
Total Calls Answered	452784	37732	43536											
Percentage of Calls Answered	73.7%	73.7%	92.5%											
Service Level: Percentage of Calls Answered within 20secs	48.0%	48.0%	77.7%											
Average Speed of Answer (seconds)	64	64	18											
Average Call Duration	3m 48s	3m 48s	3m 48s											
Face to Face Channel														
Total Number of Visitors (CRM)	53045	4420	6588											
Total Number of Visitors (other)	80426	6702	8249											
Total Number of Payments made in Person	41395	3450	3617											
Total Number of Payments made using the Kiosks	39034	3253	4126											

APPENDIX 6

MAY 2010 WORCESTERSHIRE VIEWPOINT SURVEY – TOPLINE RESULTS

From the questions asked about customer services, some key findings are set out below. *(It should be noted that this was not a Worcestershire Hub specific piece of consultation and therefore the responses are more generally about customer contact and experience):*

Base	Question	Response	%
5264	Do you have access to the internet?	Yes	86%
		No	14%
4434	If yes, please indicate where you access the internet most regularly?	Home	84%
		Work	14%
		Library	2%
		Internet cafe	-
5167	How would you be most likely to get in touch about council services?	In person	10%
		Telephone	49%
		Email	18%
		Online	16%
		Letter	6%
		Local councillor	1%
5184	When you have asked for a council service and we need to get back in touch with you, how would you like us to contact you?	Telephone	44%
		Email	39%
		Letter	17%
		Text message	1%
5179	How important is it that you have a single point of contact for all your council services?	Very important	40%
		Fairly important	34%
		Neither important nor unimportant	17%
		Fairly unimportant	5%
		Very unimportant	4%
	Would you consider using the following methods to access council services?		
5098	Website – to make payments	Yes	59%
		No	41%
5090	Website to report issues	Yes	70%
		No	30%
5087	Website – to apply for services	Yes	70%
		No	30%
5096	Website – to access information	Yes	82%
		No	18%
5045	Text messaging	Yes	24%
		No	76%
5094	Payment kiosks in Hub centres	Yes	32%
		No	68%
5074	Voice activated technology	Yes	22%
		No	78%

WORCESTERSHIRE HUB SCRUTINY: SUMMARY OF RESPONSES TO THE STAFF SURVEY

This was a short online survey of all county council and district council staff. There were 540 responses of which 390 were from county council employees, 68 were from District Council employees (Bromsgrove - 6, Malvern – 2, Redditch -1, Worcester – 21, Wychavon – 16, Wyre Forest – 22) and 82 blank responses.

Staff were asked 6 questions:

- Do you work for the Worcestershire Hub
- Does the service area you work in use the Hub?
- Have you contacted the Hub as part of your day job, and if so, how?
- Have you contacted the Hub as a member of the Public and if so, how?
- What services have you used?

The majority of respondents came from staff whose service area uses the Hub. Of respondents who had contacted the Hub as part of their day job, the most popular method was by phone. (Between 50 and 100% of respondents). However, email was also a very popular method (between 23 and 71%), and the face to face service had been used by around a third of respondents at Worcester City, Wychavon and Wyre Forest.

A surprisingly high % of council respondents had not contacted the Hub as a member of the public (over 40% at Worcester, Wyre Forest and Worcestershire). Of those who had, the majority had used the phone (45.6% at County Council). Email and web were little used by County Council staff who had contacted the Hub (only 11.5% and 22.7% respectively). At Wyre Forest and Wychavon around a quarter had used email. The services most used via the Hub were Highways, council tax, refuse and waste and libraries. Of the 30+ services given as 'other', the top ones planning, finding out a staff or service number and the blue badge scheme.

Free comments

The survey also asked for further comments (including a number of prompts as to what might be included), and almost 300 were received, the vast majority of which came from county council staff. There were 5 comments from Bromsgrove, 1 from Redditch, 15 from Worcester, 17 from Wychavon and 17 from Wyre Forest.

Main themes from the comments:

- A much higher %age were critical than were complimentary, though even some of the critics recognised improvement and the difficulties faced by Hub staff in needing to have detailed knowledge over a number of service areas
- In general Hub staff are found to be friendly, helpful and efficient
- Several staff pointed out the value of the Hub service as a central repository of all customer contact, which does not work in isolation like so many areas, and so is able to make recommendations for information sharing and process improvements.

- Hub staff are expected to know a huge range of information 'staff have become 'jack of all trades and masters of none' – some suggestions that it would be better to train and focus on particular areas, through close working with that service team
- Need improved flow of information between services and the Hub, and vice versa. Where comments specified a particular service, the most commonly referred to was Highways, and the majority of these comments were critical. Many comments spoke about the difficulty faced by hub staff, who needed improved flow of information from Highways staff, and for Highways to answer and take action to calls logged by the Hub
- many complaints received from the public in relation to libraries, about having to go through the Hub, when they know that their enquiry can only be answered by library staff
- Many comments about the Hub being reluctant to put people through to the service area, even when the member of public is confident they need to speak to the service directly. '(the Hub)...should not be used as an obstacle to prevent members of the public accessing the specialist staff'.
- The Hub is an efficient way to answer straight-forward queries information
- Comments that Hub has simply created 'another layer', and that enquiries should be dealt with by the service directly. A number of comments about service to the customer having deteriorated
- Clearer navigation of website and online systems is needed. Difficulty of using the online systems and accessing information on website, including highways reporting system
- Several comments about conflicting IT systems 'an application strategy is needed'. Comments about confusion caused by Highway's IT system (PEM)
- A number of comments were also made about Hub staff mis-allocating enquiries, due to lack of knowledge particularly between Client Services and Highways, which wasted time for the customer and frustrated the staff involved.
- The use of the word Hub to describe the service was confusing and didn't define its purpose.
- 'A little information can be dangerous' - a number of comments pointed out that sometimes Hub staff try to be helpful by providing information, when in fact they do not know the accurate answer – which is misleading for the customer, who believes they are talking to a member of staff from the actual service concerned.
- Many staff valued the role of the Hub and its staff, but would prefer the Hub to put through more queries to the service area than they currently do
- Many comments about queries being 'lost in translation' between the public, Hub and officer.
- Some comments gave the impression that some of the criticism was a resistance to change that might be seen as a threat to job security
- Many staff feel that the public would prefer to speak to the service directly
- There were mixed views on whether the Hub should be for just the public, or also for staff, with more people saying it should just be for the public
- Comments about the face to face service were mainly positive
- Complaints about call wait times.

RESPONSES FROM OTHER LOCAL AUTHORITIES - SUMMARY

- Do you share customer contact services with any other partners? E.g. Police. If so, how does this work?
- How are you tackling the challenge of changing the way the public access services. E.g. telephone, web, self-service online.
- What key performance indicators do you use to measure performance of customer contact?
- Do your contact centres handle all customer enquiries, or can enquiries be referred on to the service area? Is it realistic to aim to answer all queries at first point of contact?
- Are you doing any particular work to tackle avoidable contact?
- What impact has the recession had on customer contact and its performance?
- For two-tier authorities, do you have a shared customer contact provision?
- Overall, what are your Councillors' views on customer contact provision? Is there political support?

All of the authorities have various initiatives to tackle the challenge of changing the way the public access services. Examples given include poster campaigns to encourage direct debit and online payments, highlighting website contact on any documentation, training call centre staff to promote online access. Somerset County Council and Kent County Council have used Total Place projects to look at customer contact. The Kent Gateway Programme is summarized later in this section.

Most responses indicated they aimed to answer the majority of queries at first point of contact, with the general consensus being that some matters would always need specialist 'back office' knowledge and/or judgement, and that there needed to be the facility to pass some calls on. The '80/20' balance was quoted to by several respondents, based on the belief that 20% of business calls were too complicated to be dealt with at the first point of contact, and required back office resources, or expert knowledge.

The type of performance indicators used was broadly similar.

Avoidable contact was measured by all of the responding authorities. Two authorities, Suffolk County Council and Buckinghamshire County Council use specific tools to capture data and analyse why customers may end up in the wrong place. Southend Borough Council had collected data daily across 8 service areas, and through a specific action plan had reduced avoidable contact last year from a baseline of 36% to less than 10%.

When asked about the effect of the recession on the volume of enquiries, surprisingly, only 4 of the 11 responses recognised increased volumes of enquiries, 3 of these specifically for revenues and benefits enquiries.

Most responses indicated there was general political support for customer contact provision.

Some authorities have chosen to outsource their customer contact (where a company is contracted to carry out this service on their behalf), or to set up a partnership with

providers such as IBM or BT. Outsourcing is a growing option for local authorities. However, time constraints have meant we have been unable to look at this option.

Kent Gateway Programme

This project, a joint venture between the County Council and the 12 District Councils, was featured in FOSS 2007 as an innovative example of two-tier working. The Kent Gateway operates on the principle that customer needs determines both the location and mix of services provided in an area. Each of 5 gateways offers services delivered by a range of partners including the County, Districts, NHS and voluntary sector. The participating partners also agreed common governance arrangements, performance indicators and IT infrastructure.

We observed that the Worcestershire Hub has taken on similar ways of working. The main differences appeared to be the inclusion of a greater range of partners such as the NHS, and the perhaps stronger focus on customers' needs, for example regarding opening hours. Of great interest to us was their 'Tell us once' message, where information received from a customer would be automatically passed on to other affected service areas (for example, a customer reporting a bereavement).

We also liked the term 'Gateway', which would seem to be more indicative of its purpose than 'Hub'.

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