

## **Service Delivery Case Study**

**Beacon Theme:** Benefits Administration

**Authority name:** Salford City Council

**Case Study title:** The benefit(s) of a homeworker

### **Overview of service delivery**

This initiative allows Housing and Council Tax benefit staff to work from their own home by linking to a high-profile service that assesses and calculates 30,000 Housing and Council Tax benefit forms. This project has positive outcomes for both the organisation and the member of staff.

The key drivers and benefits for considering this initiative were as follows: -

### **Modernising service delivery**

The drive towards e-government and the provision of services by technology-based solutions provided possibilities for new and innovative options to achieve business benefits, while also making the most and obtaining value for money from the I.T. systems already in place.

### **Accommodation strategy**

Linking home working to an accommodation strategy provided an opportunity to reduce accommodation needs and make associated cost savings.

### **Best Value**

The best value process required Salford to look for continuous improvement in the way services are provided.

## **Environmental issues**

Potentially initiatives can lead to fewer car journeys, reduced congestion at peak time and reduced pollution.

## **Progressing the flexible working agenda**

Home working was seen as a potential area to support the wider work-life balance agenda.

## **Recruitment and retention**

The development of improved working practices has enabled the City Council to compete in terms of recruitment and retention, particularly in occupations where this was an issue. A survey conducted by the Department of Trade and Industry had confirmed the importance of flexible working arrangements in people's career choices.

## **Objectives**

The concept of home working had been considered for some time as a way of addressing some of the key issues that faced Salford City Council. A cross-directorate working group met to progress the issue, both organisationally and in relation to specific services. The working group included senior representatives from all Directorates. In May 2002 it was decided to pilot home working in Salford Direct because within the internal services operations it was clear that the technological infrastructure, which had been built around local taxation and benefits administration, would lend itself to this concept. A huge investment had purchased an electronic document management system (EDMS) including workflow, giving staff access to approximately 4 million electronic images, together with extensive use of e-mail and Outlook facilities, Part of this involved electronic forms which had been developed for communication and referral protocols.

A pilot project involved 4 benefits processing staff working from home. In a short period of time they clearly demonstrated significant service benefits as follows:

- increased productivity with no deterioration in performance.
- reduced sickness.
- improved value for money through increased staff motivation and better levels of performance.
- reduction in the turnover of experienced benefit staff.
- resolved accommodation problems in terms of costs and space.

With the assistance of funding from the Department of Work and Pensions 50 staff are now working from their own home. These 50 staff have been introduced to home working during the last financial year 2003/2004.

## **Methodology**

The technology to facilitate home working is ADSL broadband. Data is accessed through the world wide web with the appropriate security provided through relatively new technology known as a Virtual Private Network (VPN) concentrator. This hardware encrypts the data that travels through the web and recognises the pc at the staff members home. The project was managed to PRINCE 2 standards which included a full project plan, issue and risk logs, all updated on a regular basis and located on the Salford City Council Intranet for all senior managers and staff to view,

The process used for a member of staff to work from their own home is as follows:

- ask for expressions of interest from staff. (Currently oversubscribed / 70 received)
- select suitable, potential home workers in consultation with line managers.
- implement a risk assessment and health and safety survey of the property.
- aspiration talk with staff member.
- contact provider to arrange installation of broadband connection and wait for supplier to supply an activation date.
- order and take delivery of workstation, storage unit, chair, pc, printer, router, and health and safety items.
- install software and install online forms on the pc.
- rollout home worker to property.

A crucial factor in the success of this project was the recruitment of a full time I.T. resource to work along side the project officer to resolve technical, software and fault issues.

In practice the electronic document management system (EDMS) allows work to be passed to a home worker and be monitored by a line manager in the same way as a member of staff sitting in the same office, but using phone and e-mail. All staff produce their own letters via the EDMS and these are posted by the home worker at a local post box in a specially produced envelope showing an embossed first class stamp. As with staff situated in the office a 10% audit check is made too ensure accuracy.

## **Outcomes**

50 satisfied staff now work from home in pleasant surroundings. It's not only the staff that are happy, managers are too!

## **General outcomes**

Staff home working has contributed to the successful reform of the benefits function in Salford. It had been 0 star rated, but moved straight to 4 star securing both Chartermark and Beacon status.

It assisted in bringing forward by one year Salford's projected benefit processing performance.

Increased staff satisfaction levels and motivation have reduced the turnover of experienced benefit staff. In fact several staff who left Salford's employment (attracted by higher paid agency work) have now returned.

## **Council tax and Benefits processing**

Productivity improvements of between 15-20% with no deterioration in performance.

**Overpayments** (particularly in the areas of overpayments categorisation).

There are early indications that there has been a huge increase of 48% in productivity levels.

## **Council Tax Recovery Teams and the Benefit Appeals process**

Staff work programmes are being completed well in advance of anticipated deadlines

## **Sickness absence**

Based upon the first 12 months records of the initial pilot group, there has been a 75% reduction in sickness absence levels with time lost due to sickness reducing from 27 days to 7 days.

## **Accommodation**

It is important to note that at this stage there have not been significant accommodation savings as the work environment was already overcrowded. The developments to date have however alleviated this situation and enabled the Service to deal with other influxes of staff following the restructure of Internal Services in March 2003 and the increase in services attracted by the success of the customer contact centre.

## **How practice has helped achieve DWP performance standard**

### **Strategic Management**

The benefit service is speedy and accurate, is secure reducing the risk of fraud, ensures that customers receive the benefits to which they are entitled, recovers overpayments where possible. Provision of regular Benefit training to enable staff to deliver improved service and accuracy levels. The Benefit Service is more cost effective due to homeworking as this has produced higher productivity levels.

### **Customer Services**

Enabled different tasks to be divided within Customer Services. Call Centre & Front-line Advice Team deal with Customer enquiries leaving other staff to deal with the processing of benefit work. This has resulted in cost efficiency savings within the service.

### **Processing of claims**

Speedier processing of benefit claims and change of circumstances. Enables resources to look at claims earlier than previously able to and contact the claimant earlier where further information is required. More secure gateway to benefits as staff can spend longer dealing with claims. 10% accuracy checks carried out to ensure that benefit awarded is correct.

### **Working with landlords**

Faster processing times means that landlords are more likely to take on benefit claimants as tenants.

### **Internal Security**

Use of EDMS system enabled home working to be a success. Improved recruitment process as new staff will be attracted by prospect of working from home.

### **Counter Fraud**

Staff able to focus on more cases and prepare cases for prosecution due to less interruptions working from home.

### **Overpayments**

Speeded up process of categorising overpayments and therefore improve chances of recovery.

## **Positive learning points**

All staff involved within the process have been interviewed to discuss their impressions of their new working environment. These case studies demonstrate the benefits staff have experienced particularly in achieving a better work-life balance.

Rather than the common misunderstanding about home working leading to possible detachment socially from colleagues and others, their comments from these interviews reflect the contrary, with staff having more flexibility to play a greater role within their life outside work.

Some of the proven ideas and insights have been used to supply new material for new policies and procedures.

- the introduction of a home working contract for all staff involved
- the introduction of detailed risk-assessment procedures so that the working environment of home working staff was compliant with local guidance and statutory regulations. For information these assessments are repeated on a quarterly basis.
- further development of the existing City Council's home working policy

From experience already gained from home working it has been decided that this way of working can be introduced into other service areas. During this financial year it is hoped to introduce home working for telephony staff in the Customer Contact Centre.

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