



front office shared services  
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# the worcestershire hub

The Worcestershire Hub is a partnership programme focused on improving access to services for the people of Worcestershire. Partners include the county council and the six districts in Worcestershire. The Hub is designed to resolve customer requests at the first contact through a choice of channels, without customers needing to understand how government works. Delivering this required a strong commitment to the implementation of customer relationship management, to working with partners and with ICT consultancy and technology providers, Hewlett Packard.

Conceived in 2001 and implemented in 2003, the Hub now handles more than 80,000 contacts in person in an average month, and over 60,000 by telephone. At least 80% of queries and service requests are dealt with in a single contact. The Hub offers the partners a platform and way of working that encourages further partnering, such as with Job Centre Plus and the Police. A relatively mature project, the Hub has produced substantial learning for the sector. It is now part of 'the way things are done in Worcestershire'.



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## overview

The Worcestershire Hub:

- is a **partnership programme** focused on **improving access to services for the people of Worcestershire**
- includes Worcestershire **County Council and the six district councils** in Worcestershire; Bromsgrove DC, Malvern Hills DC, Redditch BC, Worcester City Council, Wychavon DC and Wyre Forest DC
- partners recognise that they have a responsibility to **meet customers' expectations of better quality public services**
- partnership **provides a one-stop service** covering web-based, telephone, and personal contact in customer centres for all service provision
- **transforms customer service** in a way that triggers other internal efficiencies and extends, via partnerships, to other public and voluntary agencies that need an efficient point of contact with the citizen
- is already a **mature and proven programme** that continues to extend its scope and ambition.

## background

The local authorities in Worcestershire have a long-standing commitment to a partnering ethic. The Worcestershire Partnership<sup>1</sup>, which pre-dates the Hub, is a wide forum for partnership covering many agencies within the county. The county council was created in 1998 and no recent bids for unitary status have been made. Local government re-organisation is a less sensitive topic here than in many other counties, creating a better climate in which partnership may prosper.

When the Hub was conceived, the use of customer relationship management (CRM) in the public sector was in its infancy. The then Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) sponsored a national project to learn more about the successful employment of CRM by local authorities. At much same time, the ODPM also launched the Strategic Partnering Taskforce. The Worcestershire Hub was one of the few partnerships to be selected to participate in both schemes, and has remained a viable partnership beyond these two initiatives.

The objectives at the end of 2002 were to:

- secure an inclusive, seamless approach to service delivery across the county
- improve the efficiency and effectiveness of systems and processes that support access to improved quality services
- introduce new access channels with extended service access to enable services to be accessed quickly, simply and effectively
- utilise the potential of technology to meet the needs of all sections of the community for joined-up access to high-quality services
- introduce technology to enable information sharing and service delivery between partners and across access channels
- improve services at lower cost by securing economies of scale and reducing the number and complexity of business processes.

The project required an active private sector partner with a wider role than simply supplying technology. The Hub has progressively been brought into operation since a contract was signed with Hewlett Packard in 2003.

People can now enquire about council services at customer centres in eight locations across the county. Opening hours vary, based on local need, in some cases comparable to supermarket opening hours. Over 30 broad categories of service are available in most centres – from abandoned vehicles to social care.

1. The Worcestershire Partnership – details can be found at <http://www.worcestershirepartnership.org.uk>

The Hub also handles telephone queries on county and district functions. The original concept of one large 'virtual' contact centre is well on the way to being met. In most cases the contact centre is located in the same building as the customer centre, with a single team of customer service staff operating across both channels.

A single website – Worcestershire Hub Online – offers web access across the partner organisations and five of the seven local authority partners use a single content management system hosted by the county council.

Although now a relatively mature partnership, the Worcestershire Hub continues to develop its services and looks to expand to wider partnerships with other agencies within Worcestershire. Initiatives include co-location of staff with Job Centre Plus and the Police, and providing points of contact for several voluntary agencies. Several discrete projects can trace their own development and implementation to links with the Hub programme. An excellent example of this is work on joint financial assessments of the elderly shared by county, district and Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) services.

## customer experience

Improved customer experience is the prime motivation for the Hub. Two-tier local government presents difficulties to service users; they should not need to know the different service delivery responsibilities of the two tiers. The Hub recognises that access to specific service functions can be complex; the right person may be difficult to find; and back-office staff may not have a customer service mind-set in their contacts with the public.

The Hub has delivered against its original objectives. Customers can access services from all three channels – web, phone and face-to-face. Hub access does not differentiate between county and district functions. Customer services staff access common customer records when recording and accessing service requests and enquiries. Customers enjoy a high rate of enquiry resolution thanks to the re-skilling of staff within front office functions and re-design of processes to allow devolved operation.

For example, application for blue badge parking entitlement for the disabled motorist has been transformed. Previously operated by two separate teams operating different systems, issue of a blue badge could take two or three weeks if the customer automatically qualified, or up to eight weeks if an assessment was required. Now, following the training of all front-line advisers within the Hub, a visit to any customer centre usually results in the customer taking their blue badge with them at the end of their visit.

Customer satisfaction surveys are carried out for each channel, with consistently high results. Recent surveys in Wychavon tested opinion over eight topics, including time per query, competence of staff, accuracy of response, resolution and overall satisfaction. All figures exceeded 95%, and showed an average year-on-year improvement of over three percentage points. Verbatim comments are also requested – these are often the most useful in triggering review of existing practices by managers.

Facilities have been implemented at times and in ways that suit local needs. This is an important part of the evolution of the partnership. Attempts to mandate timetables and implementation routes would have led to progress at the speed of the slowest, and created strains between partners. This flexibility has allowed individual districts to tailor their local services to their own circumstances and policy preferences. Malvern Hills, for example, has adopted a single telephone contact number across all their local services, while the county council has retained some specific numbers for specific service functions.

The phased transfer of functions to the Hub gradually extended the range of services, leaving some functions still working in the conventional manner with others transferred completely to the Hub. In readiness for their new tasks, front-office staff received systematic preparation and training.

This flexibility also assisted the Hub to widen its range of services beyond those of the two main tiers of local government. Several of the customer centres offer local or parish council activities, along with some local voluntary agencies including Age Concern, usually on a part time basis. Other public sector agencies, such as the Pension Service, also use the facilities.

The most significant examples of inter-agency working both occur at the centre in Evesham. This building was originally a police station and a police presence was incorporated within the service delivery plan from the outset. West Mercia Constabulary contributes towards the 11 full-time equivalent staff that provide services here. All the staff are fully trained in police processes as well as in county and district service delivery. As a result, the local police service is maintained with extremely good access hours, which would not otherwise have been possible.

The size of the premises in Evesham has allowed Job Centre Plus, to co-locate a team of 30 staff in the building. The two services are not directly integrated – the service elements are sufficiently different to make that inappropriate. However, the client-base overlaps, so the shared location is an added benefit for some customers. The Evesham partnership is the only instance in the country of a co-location of this type between Job Centre Plus and local government.

Besides contributing direct service improvement for customers, the Hub has been influential in the development of other improvements in service in the county. These include the development of a single financial assessment process for older clients (the Third Age Joint Team) regardless of whether the trigger for the assessment comes from:

- fairer charging – services from social services for support of older people within the community (county)
- assessment of council tax and housing benefit (district)
- pension credits, attendance allowance and other personal benefits (Department of Work and Pensions).

A representative from any one of the organisations involved visits a client at home and their assessment incorporates the wider entitlements across all three service providers. Setting up this type of complex arrangement is a major task, but a crucial aspect is reducing the initial workload of the assessors by identifying targeted clients. The Hub assesses clients' initial suitability in either telephone or customer centres. Awareness of the range of benefits available to older people has encouraged pro-active intervention on behalf of customers.

Recently a member of staff in the customer centre at Malvern Hills identified nine pensioner couples in receipt of housing and council tax benefit plus attendance allowance. They all accepted a home assessment and eight couples subsequently were allocated carers benefits, which would otherwise have remained unclaimed.

The Hub is still developing. Limited work has been carried out to date on profiling or segmenting customers, and market survey mechanisms are yet to be used to identify customer preferences. However, having established a stable technical infrastructure, the customer service managers involved with the Hub are now considering further benefits that could be exploited without radical change to the basic provision.

One such area is in re-balancing the relative volumes of transactions in each channel. Web-based methods of transacting business with the authorities are not recognised widely enough amongst the customer base. The convenience and speed of this channel may be more widely exploited if take-up can be appropriately promoted and encouraged. Alternative channels could be promoted at face-to-face meeting points, recognising that this channel is currently widely used. The Worcestershire Hub now employs a communications and marketing officer to drive publicity and increase awareness and take-up of self-service.

## partnership working

Cooperation and partnership working between local authorities are often taken for granted, but the reality is that partnering is a discrete skill which has to be cultivated, learned and consciously implemented. This was recognised and addressed within the Worcestershire Hub from the outset.

A governance structure for the Worcestershire Hub was part of its initial development around 2003. All the councils involved signed the partnership agreement that defined their mutual obligations. The supporting governance arrangements remained broadly unchanged from that point until recently, when revised arrangements strengthened the strategic input from council members.

The governance structure has three levels of working groups:

- Strategic (Worcestershire Hub Board) for chief officers and members
- Managerial (Worcestershire Hub Strategic Management Group)
- Operational (with supporting working groups).

In 2005 the Hub considered moving to a 'full' shared service model, either through a joint committee structure or an organisational construct wholly-owned by the participating councils. This was not implemented at that stage, but may be re-assessed in the future.

The Worcestershire Hub has a relatively long history as a partnership programme going back to 2001. The initial phase of development saw the building of the partnership, establishing its credibility, its capability to deliver and its development into a proven delivery mechanism for customer services. Latterly, the Hub has recognised that it is a platform from which new development can take place, and an enabling mechanism for other initiatives.

The peak effort in setting up the infrastructure and systems to deliver new ways of working happened when commitment to the project was still being built. Although the authorities involved faced many common issues, their starting points and their capacity to change and adapt to new working methods varied. Flexibility was required if the pace of the partnership was not to be limited to the speed of its slowest member.

The county council took the lead in creating the basic infrastructure – offering the new services in ways that made it attractive to the districts to share in the economies of scope and scale that working with a larger group of organisations could bring. Sensitive leadership recognised that timing of key processes could be varied to suit individual situations without detriment to the overall programme.

As a result, the Hub has achieved many of the original ambitions of the partnership. The relatively 'loose' partnership agreement and governance mechanisms were appropriate to the early phase of the development, and the pragmatic style of management ensured that the developing bonds of partnership were not overstretched.

The strategic leaders of the Hub programme are now reviewing their objectives for the Hub, recognising that having achieved a stable platform they can seek further development in two important directions. The Hub is robust enough to incorporate a broadening of delivery across all functions within existing partners, and can extend to other service providers in the locality. The efficiency of the Hub can be increased: to eliminate shortcomings from its original development mode; to remove remaining inconsistencies; to focus management onto agreed priorities; and to continue to improve customer service.

The new emphasis recognises that sympathetic call handling and feedback do not compensate if the end-deliverable is not achieved with equal speed and efficiency. With revised objectives, the Hub is reviewing its overall governance arrangements.

The Hub's partnership ability is a major contribution. The partnering ethos pervades staff attitudes – from front-line customer service staff to senior management – and encourages further partnering initiatives both within the existing organisations (for example, the Hub's role in supporting the Third Age Joint Team), and beyond the council partners to other local agencies.

Those agencies already working with the Hub report that the attitude and experience from Hub staff makes working within Worcestershire simpler, especially when developing potential areas of partnership working. The West Mercia Constabulary, for example, commented on preparatory discussion of the plans to implement a single non-emergency contact number for telephone queries. Implementation is dependent on timings dictated via the Home Office, but in Worcestershire the plans could be implemented swiftly.

Job Centre Plus referred to the Hub's understanding of partner requirements in setting up their facilities in conjunction with the Centre at Evesham. The co-location of their staff in the shared premises was a venture not achieved elsewhere, and the ability to respond to the needs of Job Centre Plus in this situation was a vital component.

Local authority partnerships bring particular issues to the fore that may not apply in other partnership arrangements. Political representatives must balance the benefits in operational arrangements – such as economies of scale and scope – against the dilution of accountability. Such a reduction in absolute control is inherent where the authority is no longer the sole decision maker involved in the definition of policy and methods.

In Worcestershire this issue has not been apparent as a major inhibitor of progress within the Hub. Despite changes in political leadership in one district, support for the Hub has continued. One senior councillor, with involvement in the Hub since its inception, sits for both county and district constituencies. His view was pragmatic in seeking good quality services, and he commented that the Hub arrangements could be regarded as 'a coalition rather than a take-over'. For the Hub to continue its expansion beyond local authority services into partnerships with other agencies, the involvement of local politicians may be a crucial factor in representing local needs.

The Hub has encouraged local partnering initiatives but may not be the only route for further partnership. The districts within Worcestershire have recently considered a shared service for the provision of revenues and benefits services. A county-wide group would fit well with the parallel work in the Hub, but, in the event, the differences in the starting positions in some districts prevailed against it. A consortium of three districts plans to deliver a shared service in the south of the county: the three remaining districts will consider other delivery options. The Hub will remain flexible in its handling of revenues and benefits, with some degree of process standardisation where possible.

## public value of investment

The following information has been collected from several sources within Worcestershire. The analysis attempts to identify costs and benefits for the Hub partnership as a whole rather than for any individual partner, although in some areas – particularly benefits – this approach is not easily achieved.

The Worcestershire Hub was targeted at improvements in customer service. The project's viability was tested against several important policy goals and objectives of the time including e-government (IEG) targets and Local Public Service Agreements. The business case was based around good practice models adapted from PFI methodology, and included a Public Sector Comparator to compare the development costs for internal routes to achieve the same aims. This business model confirmed that the Worcestershire Hub proposals were the most effective way of achieving the necessary objectives.

The current methodologies of checking viability of projects – efficiency gains, cashable and non-cashable savings etc. – were not developed at that time, so attempts to assess the position on these new criteria are not wholly appropriate.

### financial value

Costs are broken down into capital and revenue.

The three largest capital costs associated with the Worcestershire Hub are:

- payments for the contract with HP, the main private sector partner for the Hub project (including change requests)
- developing the buildings for the customer centres
- investment in the countywide ICT network.

The table below summarises the capital costs for the Hub Project:

Capital Costs (£000s)	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	Total
<b>HP contract</b>	£0	£1,498	£2,314	£1,131	£0	£4,943
<b>Building development</b>	£175	£410	£1,077	£1,462	£174	£3,298
<b>IT network infrastructure</b>	£511	£642	£227	£24	£90	£1,494
<b>Other capital costs</b>	£208	£192	£13	£117	£537	£1,067
<b>Total cost</b>	<b>£894</b>	<b>£2,742</b>	<b>£3,631</b>	<b>£2,734</b>	<b>£801</b>	<b>£10,802</b>

Funding came from each of the partners, the major share coming from the county council. IEG grants and LPSA reward grants were also pooled by all authorities.

The Hub revenue costs stem from three main sources:

- hub general expenses – including contract payments to HP; capital financing charges; network rental; provision for support costs from change requests etc; other Hub general expenses
- service centres – including staffing costs for the service centres; other ongoing running costs for each of the service centres
- operational management – including cost of the central Programme Office; central recharges; operational training.

<b>Revenue costs (£000)</b>	<b>2006/07</b>
<b>Hub general expenses</b>	<b>1,835</b>
<b>Service centres</b>	<b>3,489</b>
<b>Operational management</b>	<b>369</b>
<b>Total cost</b>	<b>5,693</b>
<b>Cashable savings</b>	
<b>WCC – savings from migrating processes to the Hub</b>	<b>1,315</b>
<b>Districts – savings from migrating processes to the Hub</b>	<b>1,896</b>
<b>Total cashable savings</b>	<b>3,211</b>
<b>Net Revenue Cost</b>	<b>2,482</b>

Cashable savings have been estimated for the Hub.

These include service area savings within social, educational, environmental and corporate services at Worcestershire County Council from migrating processes to the Hub, as well as those migrated by the individual district councils.

The £2.5 million net revenue cost has enabled councils to make further savings (detailed below) as well as providing the basis for further improvements. These service improvements and savings are in the following areas:

- office accommodation: rationalisation of local authority office accommodation through having a single 'front door' for council services in each of the main districts and towns – the Worcestershire Hub. Other reception points – both county and district council – have been closed and office accommodation rationalised
- social care: as well as rationalising local office space, the Worcestershire Hub enabled service-based improvements including handling the Blue Badge process. Migration of the Blue Badge process from social services back office to the Hub delivered savings of £195,200 p.a. in 2005/06 and 2006/07. The Hub also offers applicants a significantly reduced processing time from several weeks to just 30 minutes
- third age assessments: the new single assessment scheme for older people will provide customers using the Hub with access to additional benefits. The rationalisation of the assessment process will also yield efficiency gains to all the partners involved
- highways: the Hub enabled a restructuring of the Highways Service, building on changes to the way in which customers access services. The changes included office rationalisation, closing of receptions, increased focus on reporting defects online and improved customer service
- revenues and benefits: three of the district councils in Worcestershire are developing a shared service for revenues and benefits. The Worcestershire Hub is at the 'heart' of the proposed model, dealing with revenues and benefits enquiries at first point of contact. Once operational, this shared service will deliver savings to each of the participating authorities
- partnering with other organisations: the Hub centre in Evesham features partnering with the local town council, Job Centre Plus and the Police. An agreement between Wychavon DC, Worcestershire CC and these partners made a significant contribution to the capital costs, revenue expenditure and refurbishment costs of the building. Other opportunities to share accommodation and front-office service delivery with other organisations are being progressed.

### **organisational value**

Worcestershire now has comprehensive analysis of the usage statistics of the virtual call centre formed by all the telephone contact points within the Hub. Trend analysis provided to customer service managers includes overall call volumes, resolution at first point of contact, answering speed, percentage of calls answered etc.

Statistics are extracted showing the breakdown of service requests across geography, by access channels, and split between county and district functions. Management use a league table of the most prevalent service requests to monitor take-up and capacity.

### **customer value**

As other sections of this report have set out to demonstrate, the Worcestershire Hub dramatically improves the customer experience. This of great value to the authorities participating directly in the Hub, but has a wider value to the citizen in acting as the focus for other organisations – both public sector agencies and voluntary organisations – that also require contact points within the local community.

### **political value**

The Worcestershire Hub operates in seven councils each of which has its own unique political identity and policies. In responding in a coordinated manner to customer need, and to central government policy initiatives, the Hub has succeeded in supporting a wider political consensus that the goal of efficient services is achievable within a partnership. The Hub spans two tiers of local government, and in working together at an operational level, improves other aspects of cooperation such as the political trust between these tiers.

## capacity

The capacity to handle a programme as large as the Worcestershire Hub would be a challenge in any situation since, when first mooted, the project involved major expenditure on technologies that were unproven in local government. The fact that the project involved delivery via a newly set-up partnership compounded this difficulty, and made the range of skills required even more diverse.

The policy climate in 2001/02 encouraged local government to change its service delivery mechanisms to match those available in the private sector – particularly from retail and financial organisations. In setting out to procure an IT partnership that could deliver this functionality the Worcestershire Hub were early adopters of the new technology.

The original tender for a technology partner included consultancy skills to supplement the change management skills of the local authority partners. The selected provider was Hewlett Packard in collaboration with Deloitte. However, budget pressure – particularly on the major funder of the project, the county council – resulted in adjustment of the scope of the partnership prior to contract reducing the business change consultancy and levels of integration between systems. This has probably resulted in a longer implementation phase for individual elements of the overall programme, aligning resources to restricted capacity.

The re-profiling of processes into the front-office/back-office split of workload implied by the Hub model was a significant barrier to change. These changes required significant internal negotiation between the established professional service functions and the new customer service functions. The fact that customer service methods were unproven added to the sensitivity of these negotiations.

In the Hub it was crucial that champions for the revised model were brought into the debate at all levels of the organisation. The Hub had political endorsement from members, and was led by a director at the county. Project management resource provided support and reassurance to the service functions in the detailed negotiations. Experience within the Hub suggests that the degree of support for such change can be attitudinal rather than relating to any inherent complexity in particular service tasks.

Significant effort went in to creating a customer service 'community' in the Worcestershire Hub and considerable re-skilling has taken place. This involved cross-training front-line staff in functional areas new to them, and general improvements in customer service capability.

The Worcestershire Hub was one of the then ODPM's pilot sites in two policy initiatives offering support to new practices. It was one of the Implementing Electronic Government (IEG) Partnership projects and also one of eight e-Government pilots tracked by the SPT. The Hub experience confirms that these forms of support are important in the early stages of innovative projects. The funding helps overcome the inevitable high set-up costs early in the life of projects, before pay-back can commence. Opportunity to consult expert resources such as those in the SPT, and to make peer-to-peer contact with other authorities following related projects are also of high-value, particularly in the early stages of the programme.

Worcestershire also worked hard to fill gaps in their capability in programme management. The scale of project deserved significant project management skills, and early in the process a specialist project manager with private sector experience was recruited by the county to take direct control of the internal programme management. At subsequent stages additional staff came in to the small central team bringing the skills for implementation.

Recruitment is not always the optimum method to provide necessary skills in a programme of this nature, and this is particularly true during the early set-up phases. Worcestershire used external advisers to support them in three important areas – procurement; programme implementation; and legal advice.

Procurement advice about the EU Journal tender process was provided by West Mercia Supplies. The project also hired a consultant from a small, specialised consultancy with previous experience of significant public-private partnership to advise on the general structure of the contract development, and on the implementation plan. Finally, external legal advisors drafted the contracts with the private sector provider and also the inter-authority agreement. External advice was not used on the commercial preparation of business cases or risk management. This was done by staff from the partners with guidance from sources such as the SPT.

## sector learning

The rich detail of the Worcestershire Hub project is hard to capture in a relatively short case study. Nevertheless there is much in the experience that participants have gained that is transferable to other authorities.

The early formative stages in any partnership are crucial. Many of the early development steps could be show-stoppers if allowed to unbalance the overall vision and justification for the project. Once up and running, however, the project risks are different. Ways need to be found to refresh the purpose and re-analyse the working processes against a changing backdrop of strategic policies, economic factors, changes in customer behaviour etc. The Hub provides learning opportunities in both these areas.

As one of the SPT pilot authorities some of the early learning points were captured and reported in the overall outputs from the taskforce. These reports are still available from CLG<sup>2</sup>. The key areas include:

- joint working: how to engage other local authorities as partners in a cooperative framework
- leadership: the importance of strong, inspirational leadership within the project
- pump priming: the benefits of resources provided to aid set up: both government grant funding and relevant skills from outside the organisations
- project scope and affordability: the project must be scoped to fit available resource even where, as in the Hub, this means significant changes part way through planning.

In the second phase of a long-term project such as this, the learning points focus on different experiences. The project benefits need to be reviewed and re-appraised against new contexts – revised policy requirements; new organisational goals; different economic circumstances etc.

The Hub benefited from a re-appraisal of its original vision and objectives. Re-tuning of both strategic governance and operational processes is underway to capitalise on the stable platform.

The Hub can also identify areas that it would treat differently given the experience of hindsight, including:

- bringing in key additional skills earlier, e.g. communications and marketing, business analysis, training and development and project management
- improving identification and monitoring of all of the benefits
- establishing single points of accountability through a clear management structure.

2. Worcestershire Hub Position Statement – details can be found at [http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1136645next\\_steps](http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1136645next_steps)

## next steps

The Hub's current priorities are:

- standardisation of processes
- single management structure – including performance management
- self-service via web transactions
- virtual operations – making effective use of resources
- improved information and workflows
- complete transfer of remaining local government services to the Hub
- focus on end-to-end customer service
- further development of the CRM solution
- promotion and publicity.

The Hub has gone from being a high-profile, innovative project demanding attention and change at many levels within the participating authorities, to being part of the way in which things are done in Worcestershire. The challenge now is to maintain momentum. This is not an impractical objective as the Hub can be seen to be relevant to many potential developments both inside and outside the existing partners. The original mode of operation may need adjustment to cope with the new developments, but the results are worthwhile and the partners are committed to achieving them.

## appendices

For the appendices, please go to [www.idea.gov.uk/foss](http://www.idea.gov.uk/foss)

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