

2 December 2009

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London Borough of Sutton:

E-Benefits

Summary of policy/project

The London Borough of Sutton seeks to transform the housing and council tax benefit claim process through e-enabled claiming only.

Description

Sutton wishes to help customers access housing and council tax benefits by removing the need to complete lengthy complex application forms and by offering a choice of assisted ways to claim. Customers will be able to apply by;

- **Telephoning the Council.** An adviser takes the customer through the application process by asking a number of questions. They then make an appointment for them to bring in all the necessary supporting information or for a visiting officer to call and collect the information if they are unable to visit the Civic Offices.
- **Going through the Councils website.** The Customer will go through an intelligent application process that only asks relevant questions. This reduces the time taken to apply and will let the person know what information is required, and by when. This can be done 24 hours a day 7 days a week.
- **By asking a visiting officer to call and go through an application.** The officer will use a tablet PC to take the customer through the application. The customer can sign the form electronically and will receive a print out of the information required (via a

portable printer). The visiting officer will arrange to call back and collect the supporting information. Visiting the Civic Offices and going through the application with an adviser. The form will be signed off electronically and the adviser will let the customer know what supporting information is required. They will then make an appointment for them to return with the relevant information.

- **Through a third party partnership organisation** (Citizen Advice Bureau, Age Concern, Sutton Housing Partnership etc) by taking the customer through the electronic application form. Again, the customer will receive a print out explaining what additional information is required and by when. This process currently happens through a paper application form. The difference will be that the process will be quicker and the form will be sent to the authority electronically.

What problems does the policy/project solve?

This will bring with it a reduced burden on customers and advisors having to complete long and complex claim forms. Information will be gathered quickly and efficiently.

It will allow advisors to ensure customers understand what is required, which ensure claims are completed and not cancelled unnecessarily. They are able to complete the process

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electronically including an electronic signature, eliminating the need to re-key known information.

Customer advisors are able to access accurate, up to date information at the touch of a button; They are able to work more closely in partnership by making available to other trusted intermediaries or agencies.

It also helps improve rent collection for stakeholders. Achieving consistency in the way benefit applications are dealt with

This initiative has improved decision making and the ability to measure performance and view the high-level situation in real time. It has led to a reduction in administrative errors and overpayments.

It has also seen an increased take-up of other benefits by customers.

And finally there is the reduction in printing costs as we will no longer be using a paper application form.

Would this work in other Councils?

It has been put into practice in both Rotherham and Milton Keynes.

What were the difficulties of implementation?

Most challenges have been from the software / hardware and project implementation. The project started as the economic recession began. This inevitably placed pressure on the benefit service in terms of increased demand

when they had planned to release some resource into the project. Additional funding was identified to increase the available resource into the project.

There have been issues around staff change management, which led to some vacancies. A public consultation exercise has since helped to resolve some staff concerns. The Benefit Teams have been restructured to meet the challenge of the new ways of working.

Stakeholders have been reluctant to take on this new way of working without additional support, which has been identified and we now hope to make more progress with registered social landlords and internal partners.

We already have a joint visiting team with the pension service (PS) and the staff use tablets, however the PS estates (and for security purposes) will not allow their software to be loaded onto their tablets. This means staff have to take two tablets out visiting and log off of one before logging onto another. There is ongoing resistance to the change in the Joint visiting team.

They continue to have some ongoing issues with the tablets but have devised some workarounds to ensure they meet the project aims, while technological solutions are sought.

The self-service module (web) has yet to be fully tested and there have been issues with the providers version control.

Very little support provided for any hardware peripherals. Stopping stakeholders requesting paper forms - they had to undertake an exercise to identify where the paper forms were coming from.

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What is the cost of implementation?

The cost has been identified to be £200,000; for purchase of hardware, peripherals, training, tablets, project management and system testing resource, ongoing costs for training being absorbed by the service. £20,000 p.a. for ongoing support and maintenance.

What is the evidence of success?

Claims processing times have reduced considerably. Total claims average 20 days Ebenefits claims average 7 days.

They have been able to complete the process over the telephone and with customers bringing evidence in on booked appointments reducing re-work on claims.

Customer advisors have been able to pass changes of circumstances to the back office for immediate action, again reducing the burden on the customer.

They have delivered training to in house stakeholders and their ALMO.

They have been able to track their improvements on a week to week basis.

They have also identified (an anecdotal) increased take-up of the scheme. Advisors dealing with Council Tax queries have

encouraged take up by explaining the simplified process.

They have stopped ordering paper forms as they have made one available on the website to be used for customers not wishing to take the supported route.

Finally, they have restructured and achieved full time equivalent staff savings of £52,000 pa; this is expected to increase as they bring on more partners/stakeholders However, the recession has led to an increase in demand, which has been met by the additional administrative grant funding.

What advice would you give any Councils wishing to adopt this idea?

Ensure you understand what service your customers would like and publish the results. Encourage as many staff change champions as you can and ensure that there is regular feedback and communication (internal, external and to all stakeholders).

Provide change management and stress management training. Tell everyone what is working and ask everyone involved for solutions when things are not working so well.

Ensure staff understand what you are trying to achieve. Definitely run a soft 'live' period, which we did before our main launch. This helped us to give real case studies on the real benefits to customers of this process.

Publicise the success stories.

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For more information

For more information on this please contact Julie Turner, Executive Head of Business Services at the London Borough of Sutton, Email Julie.turner@sutton.gov.uk.

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