



SAVE OUR SERVICES

Benefits departments may have received additional government grants but they are still in troubled waters when it comes to delivering high quality services with limited funds. **Jane Rose** offers them a life line

The continuing pressure to maintain a high level of service while reducing costs is one of the highest priorities in a local authority (LA), with revenues and benefits well and truly in the spotlight. Over the past few months, revenues and benefits sections will have seen their workloads increase significantly as a result of the recession. This may present itself as increased debt and result from pressure to recover unpaid council tax (CT) or business rates, or the increase in housing benefit (HB) or council tax benefit (CTB) claims. With higher unemployment the inability for people to pay CT becomes a reality.

The service that continues to be given the highest profile and attracts the most scrutiny is probably the benefits service – some would say understandably – as this can have the biggest impact on people’s lives. It has been widely publicised that benefit caseloads have increased in most, if not all, LAs.

Central government has thankfully recognised this and acknowledged it by increasing the amount of the administration grant paid to each LA. But the question of how to use this money to achieve maximum results remains. One of the most obvious, and possibly quickest wins, would be to increase staffing levels to cope with the larger caseloads. But, while this might initially seem the best solution, there are no guarantees that the additional funding will be available in the future. Which means that the LA would have to release these staff or make cuts elsewhere to continue to fund them.

So what else can an LA do to absorb the additional work while maintaining a quality service and reduce costs?

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In my opinion, the way forward is to invest in technology. There are a number of support systems available that will complement the bigger back-office applications that LAs rely on to run their revenues and benefits departments. Any of these solutions are

guaranteed to bring efficiency gains, performance improvements and immediate and long-term cost savings. So what are these solutions?

The answer is ‘self service’. For some time now, LA customers have had the ability to view account details over the internet. The capabilities of these systems have come on in leaps and bounds, and now provide functionality that allows customers to access libraries of personal documents, apply for services, update personal data and make contact with the authority quickly and efficiently. In the past, self service has concentrated on the individual, however, there are many organisations that regularly interact with revenues and benefits departments.

The landlord is one such example and could vary from one extreme to another, from a private landlord who has a couple of tenants, to the national Housing Associations. This service enables a landlord to receive and view benefit notification letters and payment schedules electronically. Not only is this a quicker and a more efficient delivery mechanism, it also reduces printing and postal costs. Consider how many HB notification letters one LA might send to a single Housing Association each year, and what the printing and postal costs amount to. When you start to multiply that for all landlords it amounts to a significant sum. In

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In addition to receiving correspondence from the LA, the landlord can send correspondence via the secure portal. If he or she is signing up a new tenant, why not notify the CT section of a change of occupier and, at the same time, help the tenant to complete an application for HB and CTB?

If you want to take it one step further, link the claim form to a benefit calculator, so a landlord and tenant will have an indication of the benefit award, and if there will be anything to pay. A self-service internet facility is an ideal mechanism for a landlord to notify the benefit section of rent increases or any other changes in the tenancy that might affect the tenant's HB claim. This will significantly reduce the amount of direct contact the landlord makes with the LA, either by post or over the telephone.

Obviously the benefit claim form is not the only electronic form that an authority can make available to customers. With the technology available, customers are able to notify an authority of any changes in their circumstance. This sits very well with the DWP's Tell Us Once initiative currently being piloted. If and when this is rolled out, the ability to move electronic data around to all relevant departments will be essential, and departments that already have mechanisms for allowing the customer to provide information electronically will have a considerable head start.

In addition to a generic change of circumstance form and a benefit claim form, there are a range of other electronic forms suitable for revenues departments. These include applications for relief, discounts or exemptions, direct debit mandates, change of address and payment arrangement for recovery of debt.

With any electronic form, the data collected can be output and delivered to the relevant department in whichever format is most appropriate. As the data is collected electronically, the last thing an LA will want to do is manually process it. Because the capabilities of these services allow flexibility in the output, provided the required integration is in place, much of the information can be



automatically populated into the back-office application. This is known as Application Programming Interfaces (APIs). Basically, it means that the data from the form can be loaded into the revenues or benefits system without the need for manual intervention. The benefits of this include no re-keying in of information which results in quicker processing time and a smaller risk of error. And, of course, less resources are needed, so the cost is lower. If preferred, the form can be loaded into a document management system for a revenues or benefit officer to process. Either way, a copy of the form will be saved into a document management system for future reference and audit purposes. Even without the appropriate APIs, the LA can still automatically process these forms. They might wish to consider software applications that act as 'robotic' revenues and benefit officers, by populating systems through mapping the data onto the front-end data screens. It's all quite sophisticated, but extremely effective.

All this is very technical, but there are smaller changes that can be made that will have just as big an impact on costs and efficiency. Having already noted the added bonus of delivering

notifications and payment schedules to landlords, we must not forget that all CT and business rates bills can be delivered electronically. Not having to print or post these can produce a considerable cost saving, not only at annual billing but throughout the year. All bills are held securely within the service, and customers are emailed or texted to invite them to log on to view any new bill issued. It goes without saying that customers' benefit notification letters can also be viewed in the same way.

For customers who don't want to receive their CT bill and benefit notification letter electronically, why not consider merging the two and sending them together? Evidence shows that LAs that combine their CT bills and benefit letters, even if it's just the 'new year' bills, have made vast cost savings. They also

drastically reduce enquiries as customers find them easier to understand if they arrive together. We have come to refer to this process as 'Bill & Ben', and each year more and more LAs are adopting this as their preferred method of issuing both documents.

On the subject of notification letters, anyone who has worked in a benefits section will know they are not the easiest to understand! So why not consider taking the data from the letter and creating an easy-to-understand front page that tells the customer what they need to know in plain English? It's relatively simple to extract fields from the benefit system-generated letter and incorporate it into a letter that you can design yourself – a simple change that can have a massive impact on the number of enquiries these letters can generate.

So, to sum up, there are a number of ways to address the challenges of increased workloads and financial constraints but, in my opinion, investment at the start will reap huge rewards in cost savings, customer service and efficiency gains that far outweigh any financial outlay. ❖