

Sink or

“Local authorities need to act now before their work becomes unmanageable”

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The recession has had a huge impact on benefit caseloads, but to ensure that local authorities do not begin to drown under new claims, they should invest in web-based technology. **Jane Rose** reports

We are constantly reminded, on the television, radio and newspapers, that we are in the grips of a recession and that things may get a lot worse

before they get any better.

Obviously the effect of unemployment or redundancy on an individual and their family is huge, but it has a much wider reaching impact, and with less disposable income the local economy also suffers – people have become reluctant to partake in other social activities.

Local authorities have a responsibility to ensure that anyone entitled to housing or council tax benefit is invited to claim and is paid their award as soon as possible. But the burden on local authorities to meet this responsibility is immense.

When the local economy is suffering financially it can have an impact on the revenue collection rates of local authorities. If residents are struggling financially, they will find it increasingly hard to pay their rent or council tax. So ensuring that they are encouraged to apply for housing and council tax benefit will provide a means to meet these responsibilities and go some way to

easing the burden of collecting this revenue.

For benefit departments particularly, this means a workload increase, as more and more people become unemployed and rely on local authorities for help with housing costs. I recently saw a news report highlighting the number of skilled workers who now find themselves unemployed and “signing on” for the first time. It raised concerns that job centres are not equipped to cope, and the government was turning to private recruitment companies to assist with trying to find them work that matched their skill sets.

Local authorities have a different challenge when providing a service for these people. Many of the newly unemployed have probably never been in this situation before. Since leaving school or university they have never been out of work, and the minefield of local authority and state benefits can be confusing to say the least. It's the local authority's job to make the application process as stress-free as possible.

Many are PC and internet literate, so the ability to apply online without having to visit the local authority would be a real bonus, and being able to track the progress of their claim online is even more attractive. But this has an added bonus for the local authority. An increase in caseload normally goes hand-

in-hand with an increase in enquiries and correspondence – but if claimants are given the option and encouraged to self-serve via a secure online portal, the number of enquiries handled by staff will dramatically reduce.

Self-service will also enable local authorities to implement full or partial automation of the assessment process. Data from the electronic claim form can then be extracted and automatically uploaded into back-office systems, which will provide significant benefits in efficiency, accuracy and cost.

Full automation means the population and calculation in the benefits system, eliminating the need for the benefit officer to key in the claim details and carry out the assessment process. A copy of the completed form can be loaded into the document management system for future reference.

A partially automated process will load the form into a document management system, creating a workflow item for the officer to load into the system and calculate.

A web-based self service portal can provide the customer with 24/7 access to a fully automated, intelligent claim form together with the ability to view existing claim detail, including correspondence sent to and from the benefit section. This in itself provides a higher level of service meaning that customers are not restricted to standard office opening times.

Mobile processing can also enhance benefit services, which can work in tandem with a web-based service or in isolation. This can prove to be particularly useful in rural authorities or where there is no satellite office facility.

We must not forget that benefit sections will still be tasked with

their normal day-to-day workloads. The government has announced some increase in the administration grant for 2009/10, which will go some way to easing the extra burden, but payment of this is not guaranteed. It will be reliant on the accurate completion of the SHBE (Single Housing Benefit Extract), and the Department for Work and Pensions has already warned that authorities failing to accurately complete these could be penalised.

To make sure that you don't miss out you will need to be confident that all claims are recorded correctly and dealt with accurately. Back office systems will provide the management information to allow SHBE to be completed, but the management information will only ever be as good as the data loaded. So local authorities must decide the most effective way of utilising any additional grant award. One option could be to appoint new staff, but the amount of time it takes to train someone to become competent in assessing housing and council tax benefit claims would need to be considered first. Even if a local authority is successful in recruiting suitable staff it will be some months before they are truly effective.

Another option could be temporary agency staff. This may solve the problem in the short-term, but once the money has gone and the agency staff have left, your local authority will still have a responsibility to maintain a high level of service.

A web-based claims process, simply by the use of an electronic claim form on the local authority website, or a full secure web portal self-service module, will attract many existing and first-time benefit claimants. The customer can make an application at any time of the day or night and be reassured that it will be securely delivered to the benefit section. Most benefit sections use a document management system of some sort – obviously the functionalities vary, but whichever you have, you can be assured that the electronic claim form will arrive safely.

Electronic forms do not have to be restricted to just benefit applications. There are a number of electronic forms that will allow a local authority to capture data for any number of circumstances. And this information can all be automatically loaded into a benefits or document management system for full or partial automation. In a benefits section, the main driver must be to respond to the information provided by the customer, and this being the case, the advantages are immense.

There are a number of options that can make these challenging times a lot easier for local authorities, but they must first consider what meets their needs, both in the immediate and long-term.

Local authorities must act now before their work becomes unmanageable, rather than leaving it until they are drowning under a sea of new claims. ✦

Jane Rose, a benefit expert with Gandlake Consultancy, has 13 years local authority experience in benefit administration, five as Head of Benefits. She now works with local authorities on the challenges faced in the current benefits environment