

# SSO EL

front office shared services  
may 2007

engaging the workforce  
in service transformation

## foreword

Front office employees have a pivotal role delivering citizen-centric customer services. Simply put, front office staff help shape the citizen's experience of public services.

The Front Office Shared Services (FOSS) project was sponsored by the LGA, CLG, Cabinet Office and IDeA to investigate examples of multi-agency service delivery. Given the role of front office personnel, the investigation took workforce transformation as one of its key lines of enquiry.

The Front Office Shared Services (FOSS) project investigated 16 examples of innovative and good practice in late 2006 and early 2007, and this paper presents some of the findings relating to workforce transformation. Examples of the projects investigated included:

- Rushcliffe 'First Contact', whereby professionals from a range of public and third sector agencies use a common, agreed checklist of questions when visiting an older person to assess their need for a range of services provided by the partners.
- Northumbria '101', whereby Northumbria Police Authority and all local authorities in the region jointly deliver a single non-emergency number – '101' – for 1.4 million citizens over a shared virtual contact centre.
- Braintree Children's Trust, which offers personalised services to children with additional needs who are at risk of social or educational exclusion but who would not meet the thresholds for other services. Partners include Braintree District Council, Essex County Council, the PCT and the Police.

The findings illustrate that moving to a more citizen-centric, but simultaneously collaborative, way of working can produce real benefits for both the citizen and the participating agencies. However, the changes can also prove challenging for both workforce and management.

The following pages provide an analysis of the challenges that organisations face in managing the implications of service transformation for the workforce. The paper then describes some of the good practices that the projects employed to address these issues.

## background

### integrating services locally

In any discussions about how to make fundamental improvements to our public services, two themes reoccur, both of which have implications for the front office workforce.

First, public services are most effective when they work together in an integrated way. Indeed, most of the truly important outcomes – greater quality of life, stronger economic performance, better health, less crime – can only be achieved in partnership. More integrated services are also easier for people to understand, access and use and, by being designed around the needs of users, are more efficient to deliver.

Second, although our public services operate within a national policy context and are delivered by many different organisations, including central government agencies, most are ‘consumed’ locally – in particular places and within particular communities, with their own demography and geography, physical and social infrastructure and needs and preferences. The design of services needs to reflect this.

‘Our vision is of revitalised local authorities, working with their partners, to reshape public services around the citizens and communities that use them.’

Strong and Prosperous Communities.  
The Local Government White Paper 2006

Any drive for transformation must therefore address the issues of integration and locality, as an increasing number of policy statements recognise. By implication, the front office workforce will need to become more citizen-centric while simultaneously learning to work collaboratively with other bodies.

‘Further improvement in public services and the quality of life can best be driven locally through strong local partnerships across the public sector, focusing on locally drawn targets and priorities, and working more closely with the private, business, voluntary and community sectors.’

Closer to people and places,  
Local Government Association, 2006

### the role of local authorities

Local authorities have a major part to play in realising this vision. Indeed, they are already at the centre of much emerging practice, through their roles in Local Strategic Partnerships and Local Area Agreements, as well as through their day-to-day work. Councils are locally focused, multi-functional, democratically accountable to their constituents and have an explicit role as community leaders.

They are therefore well positioned to act as strategic leaders, ‘place-shapers’ and mobilisers of local citizen involvement.

Place-shaping: ‘the creative use of powers and influence to promote the general well-being of a community and its citizens.’

The Lyons Inquiry 2007

‘Many of the most innovative examples of joined-up services...are in the local government sector’.

Sir David Varney’s report on Service Transformation

These drivers require new skills at both a strategic level, such as partnering and commissioning service, and at the day-to-day level, such as in managing multi-agency teams.

## its objectives and governance

It was against this background of an emerging consensus around a locality-led approach to public service transformation, combined with an awareness that a great deal of activity was already taking place at local level – usually with local government acting as a coordinator or ‘convenor’ – that the Local Government Association (LGA), Communities and Local Government (CLG), the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) and Cabinet Office came together in 2006 to commission the research from which this analysis derives.

The overall objective of the programme was to investigate the opportunities for delivering more integrated and efficient local services, involving a range of public bodies, through shared front office arrangements. Local authorities and their partners were invited to submit details of current projects where multi-agency front office shared services were being developed. Selecting from over 50 initial submissions, a research team spent time in 16 projects, investigating in detail the way in which the projects had been implemented, the benefits they were achieving (both financial and non-financial) and the factors that had helped or hindered progress.

## workforce transformation

Since Front Office Shared Service (FOSS) projects depend on collaboration between partners to deliver citizen-centric services, they represent a major cultural change in the delivery of public services. Since front office staff are responsible for interacting with customer, the workforce literally ‘owns the means of production’.

However, the research found that the transition can be problematic. Partnership working and transformation can cause stress and anxiety in the workforce, resulting in resistance to change. Furthermore, other critical factors – such as partnership governance and programme management – compete for management attention.

However, many of the projects studied by the FOSS team demonstrated good practice in overcoming these issues – to the benefit of both the workforce and the citizen.

## context

To join-up and deliver services collaboratively, a number of significant differences must be overcome:

- Partners come to a partnership from different positions and with different priorities and preconceptions
- Partners in local arrangements have relationships with different central government departments
- Partners’ workforces have different terms and conditions, working hours, performance indicators, and reporting and management structures.



Peter Dunkley, Head of Customer Services at Staffordshire Moorlands, with Sue Wrench, Job Centre Plus Lone Parents Advisor

Collaborative service delivery has significant implications for the workforce in terms of both workload and 'workstyle':

- **Workload** – the re-balancing of workload between the back-off and the front-office can be a significant barrier to change. There can be debate between different groups of staff regarding professional boundaries and the nature of their current and prospective roles.

In the case of the Worcestershire Hub, these changes required significant internal negotiation between the established professional service functions and the new customer service functions.

- **Work style** – transitioning to 'customer-centric' facilities, structures, roles and processes represents a major cultural change in the delivery of public services.

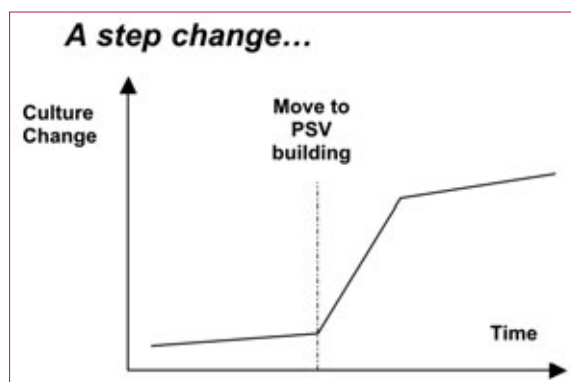
A respondent at Kent remarked 'It is new to the service deliverers, new to the public and new to front line staff. Officers had to adjust to new ways of working and in some cases there was resistance to the changes.'

Similarly, regarding Braintree's 'Better Working Together' initiative 'some of the staff directly affected put up significant resistance to joint working and to the impact that this had on their jobs.'

Furthermore, multi-disciplinary teams can bring novel reporting structures. In Braintree's Children's Trust, members of the team with management or supervisory experience began to supervise a team comprising personnel with diverse professional backgrounds. The transition requires sensitivity coupled with a focus on the end outcome (i.e. a better result for the service recipient).

In the light of these challenges to the workforce, one project emphasised that 'it is important not to underestimate the resultant stresses that can arise'.

The graphic below illustrates how a change to facilities or systems (in this case, Bury St Edmund's construction of a Public Service Village) can produce a dramatic step change and act as a catalyst for major cultural change. The 'disruption' to existing ways of working also represents a transformational opportunity.



## issues

Although the outcome has been positive for staff, the case studies indicate that transformational front office projects can initially cause stress and anxiety among the participating workforces. This can result in resistance. Staff are known to express the following sentiments:

- **'they're after our jobs'**...the shared service can appear as a take-over by another authority. At Tameside 'the biggest risk at the outset was mutual mistrust and suspicion about the creation of one team from two'. The project reported that team-building workshops at the outset proved invaluable.
- **'we can't change the way we work'**... collaborative, customer-centric service delivery typically requires re-skilling, up-skilling and cross-skilling. After training, staff at Northumbria 101 now 'look upon any service migration as a development opportunity and...job enrichment'.
- **'they earn more / less than we do'**...creating multidisciplinary teams requires authorities to address grading issues. Northumbria 101 addressed this by creating a 'Single Status' project within the programme, involving liaison with Human Resources department and consultation with the Unions.

## key learning points

The following quotation summarises the themes found in the research:

**‘Address the human resources and change management needs of the programme early and comprehensively. In the end, people are more important than bricks and mortar.’**

Bury St Edmunds PVS Case Study

Given the difficulties in getting different organisations to work together, and the inherent workforce challenges, the following section highlights some of the practical steps the projects recommend for progressing citizen-centric collaborative projects:

### **exercise clear, energetic and visible leadership**

Share the vision from the top of the organisation and encourage buy-in through visible leadership.

For example, in Staffordshire Moorlands, the Chief Executive addressed three all staff briefings to convey the message, and Members took the lead in talking to external parties. But the project emphasises that leadership was demonstrated at all levels of the organisation. One source of leadership arose from staff recruited from the back office to work in the new front office. Their attitude and enthusiasm played a major role in encouraging their former colleagues in the back office to engage with the initiative positively.

Another example of visible leadership can be seen in the Kent, where the roll-out of the Gateway project requires all the participating agencies to operate under a single, Gateway brand. From an early stage, Kent County Council had to demonstrate a commitment to forego its own logo before expecting the other parties to do likewise.

## **engage and consult with stakeholders**

Recognise that stakeholder management is critical and requires time and resources – do not underestimate the energy and attention this will require.

For example, Staffordshire Moorlands established ‘Partnership Forums’ for each One Stop Shop comprising local representatives from organisations like Age Concern. These local forums enabled them to gain input and feedback from a wide range of stakeholders, including hard-to-reach groups, in a coherent and manageable way and formed an important part of the communications strategy.

The Kent Gateway project has a two-tier governance structure comprising an overarching Multi-Agency Advisory Board that takes a strategic perspective, and a Project Board at each Gateway to manage roll-out on a day-to-day basis. The division is necessary to allow the participants to consider operational and strategic issues separately – to ‘see the wood for the trees.’ Furthermore, while the strategic body advises the local implementations and seeks consistency across the county, it does not direct their activity.

Engage staff very early on and ensure you have the backing of senior officers. As the project progresses, pay attention to staff morale and staff selection. Throughout the project, share credit, satisfaction and recognition.

Staffordshire Moorlands took several approaches towards cultivating a collaborative and customer-centric environment. The council sought to mix-up staff from the front and back office to inculcate and develop a customer-centric culture. Giving staff a sense of ownership and involving them in making decisions and in shaping the environment was critical. One practical step to achieving this was to reduce the size of team meetings in the One Stop Shops from up-to seven people at a time to three or four people. This has the effect of emphasising to staff that their views and input are being listened to and valued.

Start communicating early, prepare people for the change and deal with their concerns well ahead of the change.

*'Involve staff in the design of the service.'*

Northumbria 101 Case Study

### **communicate, communicate, communicate!**

Given multiple parties and multiple perspectives, constant communication is necessary to verify understanding and interpretations and ensure that everyone is moving in the same direction.

Consider appointing a dedicated communications officer. Several projects expressed regret at not having done so.

The projects emphasised the need to keep everyone – staff, senior officers and members – informed throughout the project.

Techniques that proved productive include:

- a 'rumour-busting' section on the intranet site
- encouraging and facilitating staff feedback – linked to staff briefings
- staff briefings e.g. 'flexible working for managers'
- providing a regular newsletter with updates and answering questions
- designing joint training and workshops with staff from other partners
- having representatives from the staff on the extended programme team to encourage dialogue.

*'Staff are recognised as one of the most valuable assets, they face the customer, so it is very important that they are happy and well-trained. They have also found that clear lines of communication are essential to maintaining and improving standards.'*

Staffordshire Moorlands Case Study

Kent Gateway emphasise that communication is a challenge, but is also a collective responsibility. Participants in collaborative multi-agency projects need to be willing to take responsibility for communicating the same message, and to recognise that communication is essential but time-consuming.

### **focus on training and development**

Do not underestimate the time needed for training and development. One of the key learning points reported by Northumbria 101 was the timescales required to train staff properly (ten consecutive days). Joint training between agencies can also work well as a trust and rapport-building exercise.

*'Training on a multi-agency basis is a valuable partnership-building measure' which helped the parties 'to share the joint vision, promote mutual understanding and unite around the intended outcomes.'*

Tameside and the Pensions Service Case Study

*'Early challenges centred on gaining the commitment of staff from all partners. Intensive and carefully thought out training helped to address this issue.'*

Rushcliffe First Contact Case Study

'Change is unsettling, but when they were presented with the opportunity to grow into new and exciting roles, they worked very hard and undertook all the new training.'

**Councillor John Redfern,**  
Staffordshire Moorlands

Peter Dunkley, Head of Customer Services at Staffordshire Moorlands, emphasises that empowering staff is essential in a front office function, where change is 'at the coal face'. The council is seeking to create an atmosphere where members of the workforce are confident about speaking-up and making changes in the way they work.

### recognise that cultural change takes time

'It has taken time for the staff to take on the new culture. Any development of this type should allow time to embed new ways of working.'

**Kent Gateway Case Study**

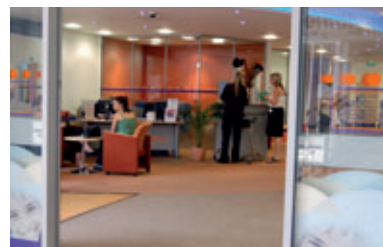
'Culture change is a long, often relatively slow process. The move provides a step change in the process and, even then, culture change needs to continue afterwards.'

**Public Service Village Case Study**

The change in the working environment at the Gateway in Ashford, Kent was radical. Staff moved from a closed environment where they worked behind screens, to an open-plan configuration. Staff initially raised concerns regarding security, but over time the new environment has proven conducive to a much friendlier relationship with customers and a removal of the 'them and us' atmosphere.

This experience has informed project's approach to rolling out the Gateways elsewhere in the county. Rather than introduce the new working practices to staff through 'tell, train and explain', staff will be encouraged to spend time at an existing Gateway to enable them to experience and feel the changed environment in advance of roll-out.

## the future face of public services – kent gateway



## conclusions

While many FOSS projects have built on past investments in ICT infrastructure and systems, increasing collaboration between agencies and improving the customer experience of services are both primarily issues of cultural change, communication and people management.

Although the challenges are significant, paying attention to workforce issues results in better morale, better retention, and improved productivity. These 'soft' factors often drive the realisation of 'hard' benefits including efficiency gains and increases in customer satisfaction.

## wider reading

The publication 'Delivering Public Service Transformation' reports the findings and conclusions of the FOSS report. The project also published an executive briefing 'New Designs for Public Services – Delivering Better Outcomes'.

These, as well as the 16 in-depth case studies, are all available to download from [www.idea.gov.uk/foss](http://www.idea.gov.uk/foss).

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