

Department of Social and Family Affairs

Executive Summary -
Strategic review of customer facing services

15 December 2008

Executive Summary

Introduction

Grant Thornton was engaged to assist the Department of Social and Family Affairs (“the Department”) to carry out a strategic review of its customer facing services as part of the Department’s Modernisation Action Plan under Towards 2016. This Executive Summary is intended to give an overview of the background and context for this review, the issues raised during the review and the key recommendations arising.

The objectives of the review, as outlined in the main body of the report, are to:

- formulate a plan for the operation of enhanced customer facing services of the future.
- identify the range of the Department’s customer services and related activities that are most appropriately delivered in the frontline environment; the skills required to deliver these services, the ICT opportunities, the design and layout of the offices that would facilitate their optimum delivery and the criteria to establish the locations in which the Department should have a presence to deliver these services.
- identify the channels best placed to deliver any customer facing services deemed not appropriate for frontline delivery.

To identify the key issues arising under each of the above areas we carried out extensive consultations with key staff in selected Regional offices and also other key internal stakeholders. We also conducted certain external consultations. This consultation process comprised predominantly of group meetings, one-to-one interviews, workshops and focus groups. A detailed breakdown of the key stakeholders consulted is provided in Appendix 9. We also conducted an extensive review of literature from the Department and other sources. A summary of the documentation reviewed by us during the review process is set out in Appendix 10.

Background and Context

The Department has been engaged for the last number of years in a programme of business transformation to improve service delivery and achieve internal effectiveness and efficiency goals. As part of this transformation the Department has given commitments in its Strategy Statement 2008-2010 (7.16), to “developing and implementing a Channel Strategy to optimise the use of each of its customer contact channels (i.e. telephone, eServices, post, face to face)”. In relation to its face to face channel, the Department made specific commitments in its Modernisation Action Plan

under Towards 2016 (Action 56.3), to “conduct a strategic review of its customer facing services”. In the context of this review, this comprises the Department’s Local and Branch Office network, plus its Inspectorate and facilitation field services.

At the time of undertaking this review (mid July 2008 – December 2008), Ireland had entered a recessionary period as a result of national and global economic slowdown, following a decade of unprecedented growth. This has resulted in a rapid month on month growth in the Department’s Live Register figures. The total of 251,951 unemployed at the 31st of October 2008 exceeded a quarter of a million for the first time in 11 years. The standardised unemployment rate in October, 2008 was 6.7%. This compares with 5.4% in the second quarter of 2008 from 4.7% in the second quarter of 2007, with the most recent figures, available at the time of writing the report, predicting that unemployment would rise to 8.5% by October 2009. Detailed Live Register figures for the week ended 31st of October 2008 are set out in Appendix 2 of this document.

It is against this backdrop of a rapidly changing environment that we have conducted our review.

Strategic Review of Customer Facing Services – Design Principles

The Steering Group established to oversee the assignment set out a number of broad design principles to guide the review. These principles combined with some other generally accepted process design principles are set out below. When combined, these principles set out the review’s vision and focus for the operation of customer facing services in the future and as such, any issues arising from the review were considered in the light of these principles to highlight any gaps or inefficiencies in current operations.

Strategic Review of Customer Facing Services – Design Principles

- The correct payment is made to the right person in a timely manner.
- The Local Offices and Branch Offices will be a front door to all schemes (“no wrong door” service).
- The Local Offices and Branch Offices will provide ALL channel access.
- Services are tailored to customer circumstances to ensure that all interactions add customer value.
- There is a single point of contact for customers, where possible.
- Customers are never asked for data that the Department already has.
- A “Once and done” approach to service provision is adopted as far as possible to increase service efficiency and reduce opportunity for error.
- Each Business Process is optimised for customer service.
- All staff are valued, empowered and multi-skilled to deliver customer service in accordance with these principles and to deal with problems as they arise.
- All staff and resources are deployed in the most effective manner.

Customer Facing Services

The Department's customer facing services for the purpose of this review have been defined as:

- Local and Branch Office network;
- Inspectorate and Facilitation services.

The review highlights some clearly identified constraints and challenges in the current operation of these customer facing services which impact on the provision of service to customers on a day to day basis. It also includes some key findings from the review of ICT opportunities, the design and layout of the Local and Branch Offices of the future and the criteria to determine the locations in which the Department should have a Local or Branch Office presence. These include the following key factors:

Local Offices and Branch Offices – Key Issues Arising

The following issues arose specifically in relation to the Local Offices visited. However, they relate also to the operation of Branch Offices, given the role of Branch Offices in providing customer facing services on behalf of the Department.

- **Adequacy of Service Delivery**
 - **Lack of Differentiation** - Local Offices adopt the same administrative approaches to all JA/JB customers.
 - **Support** - Current interaction with customers in Local Offices (outside of the SFSS) in the view of those consulted, does not add value and is not in their view “meaningful engagement”.
- **Consistency in Approach, Service Delivery and Service Gaps**
 - **Information Provision** – There is a need for a more “holistic” and “co-ordinated” approach to information provision in Local Offices.
 - **Information capture and reuse** – The Department lacks the ability to adequately capture and reuse information provided by customers, using its current systems.
 - **Training** - There is a lack of a dedicated Training Officer in some Local Offices¹ and as such there is an inconsistent approach across offices with regard to training.
 - **Queue Management Systems** – Currently, there is no consistency of approach across the local offices to the management of queues.

¹ There are no dedicated Training Officers for Branch Offices.

- **Complex nature of work**
 - In addition, it was generally accepted during the review that the work of the Department, given the evolving nature and range of schemes, has become increasingly complex and detailed.
- **Coordination with Other Agencies**
 - The feedback from the review indicates that there is scope for greater co-operation and information sharing between regional staff and other external bodies.
- **Co – Location**
 - While co-location, where it exists, is generally considered to work well, a number of issues were also highlighted in relation to this as part of the review.
- **Branch Office Specific Issues**
 - The Department is open to potential “reputational” risk should issues arise with regard to the customer service provided by the Branch Offices.

Social and Family Support Service (SFSS) and Inspectorate Service – Key Issues Arising

- **Lack of Balance** - An overarching issue arising from the review in relation to SFSS, is that there is a lack of balance in relation to the Department’s role from a control and support perspective.
- **Inspectors’ Role in Information Provision** – While the role of Inspectors in relation to information provision is generally one of referral, customers often have expectations that Inspectors will be able to deal with their broad ranging queries on the spot. This can give rise to a duplication of effort with that of Facilitators in terms of certain information provision.
- **Single Stations** – The feedback from the review indicates that single stations, given their isolated locations, have the potential to give rise to low staff morale and health and safety risks.
- **Inspectors’ “Office mornings”** – The operation of “Office Mornings” is a resource intensive approach to providing Inspectorate services and as such is costly in that it ties up an Inspector’s time for this period, time that could be better spent on other key activities.

ICT Review – Key Issues Arising

The ICT review focused on building a detailed understanding of the current use of information systems by Departmental staff and the range of new ICT initiatives that are currently being rolled out or are in development by the Department. The purpose of this is to identify any ICT opportunities arising in the delivery of the future service and to outline possibilities of how future frontline services can be enhanced using ICT.

- **Improved systems access to scheme information in Local and Branch Offices** -It is recognised that the ideal spectrum of customer information is not readily available to staff via their office systems.
- **Local and Branch Office Network not well supported by ICT Deployment** – The current office processes in the Local and Branch Office network are broadly manual, very paper oriented and not well supported by ICT deployment. There is little capacity to electronically transfer case work between the Local and Branch Offices in the network and / or Headquarter Offices. In addition, there are no ICT options available to customers to self serve at present.
- **No standard customer authentication system** - There is no central system for staff to view previous interactions customers may have had with the Department.
- **No central customer case management system** - There is no dedicated case management system to support the Activation process.
- **Lack of secure remote access to customer information** - Where an Inspector wishes to retrieve an existing file for reference, often it has to be sent by post from the appropriate Scheme Section to the Inspector's location.
- **Lack of voicemail services** - A pilot introduction of voicemail services has been running in the Department, however to date voicemail facilities are not available in most Local and Branch Offices or for Facilitators and Inspectors.
- **No systems based access to other Government Department's data for relevant information** – This can lead to delays in getting any required supporting information to assist with a customer's query or application.
- **No customer profile system to support the facilitation process** - Currently Facilitators do not have access to a Departmental customer profiling system to assist in their dealings with customers.
- **No system availability to assist customer preparations before visit to the Local Office** – Unlike most other Departmental schemes, it is not possible to download JA/JB claim forms at present. There is no capacity to complete JA/JB claim forms and return online.

Office Design and Layout – Key Issues Arising

- **Project Management and Communication** - The feedback from the review indicates that the outputs from individual projects do not always fully meet expectations.
- **Lack of set design criteria for Local Offices** - As a result of this each Local Office visited as part of the review was very different in terms of finish and general design. At present, the Department does not have an easily recognisable “high street” identity or image.
- **Office restrictions impact on design** - Local Offices are very much restricted in design by the available space in the town or city and the budget available for this space and as such an Architect can rarely plan from a blank canvas. Generally there is no physical demarcation between the front and back office work areas.
- **Sign-on Days and Design** - Signing on days are the busiest days in the Local Offices and the design and location of the signing on hatches can give rise to problems for Local Office staff from an operational perspective. The operation of the hatches inhibits optimum customer service delivery.
- **Security** - The feedback from the review indicates that despite developments in this area, there continues to be a lack of consistency with regard to how security issues are being dealt with across Local Offices.
- **Storage in Local Offices** - Given the manual nature of the Department’s current work processes and the requirement to retain files on site, storage is a problem for all of the Local Offices visited.
- **Interview Room Design** - Another issue arising during our visits to Local Offices is that there seems to be no consistency with regard to the layout of the interview rooms.
- **Information Display** - Information displayed and available to customers in the Local Offices visited, was generally considered by the consultants to be poor.
- **Over Specification of Local Offices** - Nearly all of the new Local Offices visited were over specified in terms of finish.
- **Privacy and Accessibility** - There are issues in relation to privacy in some Local Offices, both in relation to the design of hatches and the layout and design of waiting areas.
- **Specific Branch Office Issues** - One Branch Office was visited as part of this review and the overall view was that this was fitted out to a much lower specification than Local Offices.

Customer Facing Services - Recommendations

The recommendations to deal with the issues highlighted in relation to the Department's customer facing services, are set out below.

In advance of outlining the recommendations and their rationale, the following is a high level Vision Statement for the empowered Local and Branch Office of the future, based on the review design principles. This Vision Statement is a key driver in the formation of the review's recommendations.

Vision Statement: The Empowered Local and Branch Office of the Future

As a primary channel for delivering customer facing services on behalf of the Department, we envisage that the Local Offices and Branch Offices will become an "Empowered Service Delivery Channel of the Future". As such, only functions and processes that have a customer facing element will be undertaken in the Local and Branch Offices of the future, while other non customer facing activities will be performed in a back office environment.

Therefore, in the Local and Branch Offices of the future customers will be able to:

- Obtain information on all schemes;
- Make a claim for any scheme or make an appointment to make a claim at a later date;
- Obtain a decision, there and then, depending on the nature and complexity of the claim;
- Get an update on a claim for any scheme;
- Have a query dealt with, there and then; and
- Generally receive a service tailored to individual circumstances.

The remainder of this Executive Summary sets out a summary of the recommendations contained in this report to deal with the issues which arose during this review and essentially to make the above vision a reality.

Local Offices and Branch Offices – Recommendations

Recommendations 1 - Nature and Extent of Services and Related activities most appropriately delivered through the Local and Branch Office network

We recommend that the following services are suitable for frontline delivery through the Local Office and Branch Office network in the future:

- 1.a. Provide information on all schemes
- 1.b. Accept and register a claim on all schemes, or provide an appointment to accept and register a claim at a later date
- 1.c. Make a decision, there and then, depending on the nature and complexity of the claim.²
- 1.d. Deal with routine / low level customer queries and updates on all schemes. The common SDM platform will provide for most customer queries to be dealt with by first point of contact.

Recommendations 2 – High Level Operational Processes

In order to ensure that Local and Branch Offices can fulfil their remit to provide the services set out above:

2.a. We recommend the introduction of a “**Triage**” type process into Local Offices (and Branch Offices where feasible), which prioritises customers based on their personal circumstances, directing them to the most suitable area, person or facility.

2.b. To support this, we recommend an increase in the number of full-time dedicated “**Information Officers**” in all Local and Branch Offices, combining reception, telephony and information services, which will act as a first port of call for all customers. Local procedures for floor management could be introduced if required. The number of Information Officers required in each office should be correlated based on footfall levels and they should be organised in teams and rotate into and out of a number of key functions.

2.c. We also recommend the establishment of “**Customer Service Teams**”, comprising staff dedicated to customer facing activities i.e. interacting on a face to face basis with customers to accept and register ALL claims. The staff forming these teams must not only be sufficiently experienced, but must also have the authority to decide certain claims while facing customers.

2.d. In the longer term (5+ years), we recommend that there is no glass protection screens or hatches in Local and Branch Offices, a move that will, based on the feedback we received and also based on our own observations during site visits, including one to a comparable

² As part of this, we are recommending that Local Offices take on more responsibility in relation to authorising certain “straight forward” claims at the point of contact, and other activities as set out in the Toward 2016 Action Plan. This approach is outlined in more detail in Recommendation 3 on the following page.

organisation, assist in improving customer facing service delivery. In moving to this model it will be necessary for Office managers in Local and Branch Offices, which currently have glass protection, to undertake a risk assessment and review of security measures before glass partitions are removed.³

2.e. To support the Customer Service Teams, we recommend the establishment of scheme specific “**Claim Authorisation Teams**” as back office centres of excellence in Local Offices to specialise in JA, JB, and OFP (and all other claims processed and maintained in Local Offices, at the time of carrying out this review). These teams would make decisions on those claims that cannot be decided at the counter and maintain all claims.

2.f. We recommend that these teams are compulsory for every Local Office where volumes allow. Each team would include:

- Mix of roles
- Mix of experience / grades
- Staff rotation between teams – annually / bi-annually.

Recommendation 3 – Decision Making

We recommend that all staff in the customer facing teams in Local Offices are given authority to authorise certain “straightforward” claims while facing the customer; providing the fulfilment of certain required criteria with regard to predictability and contribution levels; and providing that the customer has presented all documentation required.

Recommendations 4 – Front / Back Office Delivery

4.a. In the short term (0-2) years, the claim authorisation and maintenance for existing schemes will continue to be carried out in Local Offices as at present. It is recommended that these functions should be moved to back office areas where feasible.

4.b. In the longer term (2-5+ years), and providing necessary ICT improvements are made, particularly in relation to the roll out of SDM and DRIM projects, claim authorisation for those claims that will not be decided at the counter, and maintenance for all claims, can be carried out in regionalised locations in the future.

³ More detail in relation to this recommendation is set out on in Recommendations 32 – Design Brief, under the Office Design and Layout Review on page 82.

Recommendations 5 – Skills Required to Deliver these Services

Having identified a model to deliver customer services through the Local and Branch Office network, it is necessary to identify the skills and competencies needed to enable optimum delivery of these services.

5.a. We recommend that a staff grade appropriate to a customer facing role is determined based on a range of skills / competencies and experience for the appropriate function that they provide, and that only staff at this grade occupy a customer facing role in the future.

5.b. We recommend that staff in the Branch Offices of the future possess the same broad range of skills / competencies and experience requirements as the staff in Local Offices, for the equivalent functions which they provide.

5.c. In particular we recommend that staff in Branch Offices undergo the same programme of compulsory training through the SDU as recommended for Local Offices (see Recommendation 15 on page 62) and that provision is made for weekly sessions to facilitate ongoing upskilling of staff. Branch Offices should also be subject to similar training and performance management requirements, for the equivalent functions undertaken in Local Offices.

5.d. We also recommend that staff in this role receive appropriate and regular training to maintain their skill levels (see Recommendation 15 on page 62).

Recommendation 6 – Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for Branch Offices

To ensure that Branch Offices meet the requirements placed on them, we also recommend the review of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and Standard Service Requirements in relation to the key requirements as set out above. These could be considered for incorporation into the existing arrangements with Branch Offices.

Social and Family Support Service (SFSS) and Inspectorate Service – Recommendations

Recommendation 7 – New Role of “Activation Officer”

We recommend the creation of a new role of “Activation Officer” to support the Department’s goals in relation to activation. This role will comprise a merger of the existing role of Inspectors in relation to investigating entitlement to all means-tested Social Welfare schemes, which include an element of activation, with the existing role of Facilitators.

Recommendation 8 –Suggested Further Examination of Recommendation 7

Given the complexity of the range of issues involved, we believe that the creation of the new role of “Activation Officer” will require further examination in the first instance. As such we strongly recommend that further analysis of all of the pertinent issues is undertaken by the Department prior to establishing such a role.

Recommendations 9 – Skills Required

9.a. In addition to the particular skills identified by the Department as being a requirement for the new role, “Activation Officers” should possess the same broad range of customer service skills / competencies and experience requirements as the staff in Local and Branch Offices, for the equivalent functions which they provide.

9.b. In particular we recommend that these staff undergo the same programme of compulsory customer service training through the SDU as recommended for Local and Branch Offices (see Recommendation 15 on page 62). This will need to incorporate the structured training programme introduced in September 2005 for all Inspectors and Area Managers, as appropriate.

Recommendations 10 – Phasing out of Single Stations and Inspector “Office Mornings”

10.a. We recommend the phasing out of single stations, as opportunities arise.

10.b. We recommend the phasing out of Inspector “Office mornings”.

Recommendations Underpinning All Aspects of the Service Delivery Model

We recommend that a number of measures are adopted to improve the existing work processes in each of the specified customer facing channels, in order to facilitate the introduction of the new operating model, as follows:

Recommendations 11 – Customer Profiling and Risk Assessment Programmes

11.a. We recommend, as a priority and subject to the outcomes of the final report being produced by the ERSI⁴, the introduction of Customer Profiling and Risk Assessment Programmes.⁵

11.b. We recommend that this is introduced based on the existing pilot for JA and JB, but that ultimately it is extended to all schemes for customers of working age and includes: the adoption of an agreed list of characteristics and aspects related to a customer’s personal, education, and working life as the basis for the profiling process and incorporating feedback from experienced Inspectors to form an agreed list of risk factors and mitigating circumstances.

These requirements should be built into the proposed Case Management System, to ensure that the customer’s profile and progress on the agreed Action Plan is maintained in one central system.

Recommendation 12 – Appointments System

We recommend making the Appointments system mandatory for JA/ JB with certain caveats as per the Letterkenny pilot, in order to reduce queues and the ad hoc nature of current footfall and the resulting difficulties in managing staff time.⁶

Recommendation 13 – Review of Signing-On Process

We recommend that the signing-on process be revised following the introduction of Customer Profiling / Risk Assessment and the Appointment System.

Recommendation 14 – Performance Measurement

We recommend that avenues are investigated to reward individual staff for quality customer service and that these proposals are incorporated into performance reviews. We recommend the adoption of an appropriate balanced set of KPIs to focus on customer service and suggest that these are monitored, tracked and incorporated into the Performance Management Development System (PMDS) and the Management Information Framework (MIF).

⁴ This Report has been commissioned to analyse the findings from a Customer Profiling Pilot which was carried out in the Galway region.

⁵ See Comparable Organisation’s experience, Appendix 6.

⁶ See Comparable Organisation’s experience with Appointment systems, Appendix 6.

Recommendations 15 – Training Developments

15.a. We recommend the establishment of dedicated Training Officers in each Region / with dedicated training facilities.

15.b. We also recommend there is a requirement placed on staff to complete a minimum level of compulsory training on an annual basis, for the purpose of ensuring consistency in relation to frontline staff skills. This should be delivered through the SDU and identified via the PMDS system.

15.c. We recommend that this is delivered through the recommended regional facilities and that in the case of Inspectors, it incorporates the structured training programme introduced in September 2005 for all Inspectors and Area Managers.

Recommendations 16– Reduce Complexity

16.a. We recommend that a one-off exercise is undertaken to simplify the existing schemes.

16.b. We also recommend the introduction of a Single Income Support payment be explored for the purpose of replacing a number of existing schemes in order to simplify some of the present administrative processes.

Recommendations 17 – Co-ordination with Other Agencies

17.a. We recommend that current activities in relation to liaising with external bodies are examined to determine their effectiveness including identifying who the most appropriate staff involved in these activities / meetings are, and also that the outputs from these activities are achieving the purpose intended and communicated to colleagues.

17.b. In the longer term we recommend that the Department investigate clarifying its role with FÁS to enable the Department to focus more on activation and FÁS to focus more on training.

Recommendation 18 – Co-Location

We recommend that the Department maximises opportunities to co-locate with other agencies / Departments where feasible in order to deliver a more joined up service locally.

ICT Review - Recommendations

The list of recommendations outlined below, incorporate the range of existing or planned ICT programs taking place within the Department and their implementation will we believe assist in realising the vision for the Department's customer facing services, as set out in this report.

Recommendation 19 – Rollout of Staff Training to fully optimise ICT Infrastructure Upgrade

The technology related aspects of the ICT upgrade are close to completion and the required staff training should be completed without any undue delay. The completion of this rollout should be followed by a review, after an appropriate settling in phase such as six months, to ensure that the required technology and organisational related benefits are being achieved.

Recommendation 20 –Completion of the rollout of the Office System Modernisation project

The Office System Modernisation rollout, encompassing the rollout of the Corporate Portal and the Office 2007 suite, is scheduled to start in December 2008. The full rollout across all Local and Branch Offices is estimated to take up to 2 years from January 2009. Similar to ICT infrastructure upgrade, a review should be held periodically during the rollout to assess how the technology and organisational benefits are being achieved.

Recommendation 21 – Completion of a persona analysis for the Corporate Portal

It is recommended that the capability within the Corporate Portal be customised to meet staff users preferences or the responsibilities of various staff roles.

Recommendation 22 – Expansion of the SDM system to include the Local/Branch Office schemes

The current plans for expanding the scope of the SDM system across all schemes in the Department should be reviewed to ensure that the schemes managed by the Local and Branch Office network are treated as a priority in the short term in light of the predicted significant increase in the Live Register.

To broaden the SDM system across all Local and Branch Office schemes, new /updated objects can be added to the existing object model or as illustrated by the LOCI initiative, existing BOM functionality can be assessed for deployment within the Local and Branch Office network.

The specific training required for these new functions should be provided to staff as a follow-up to the general BOM training referred to above.

Recommendations 23 – Expansion of the Digital Documents project to include the scheme forms managed by Local and Branch Offices

23.a. We recommend that the scheme forms for the various schemes managed by Local and Branch Offices would be prioritised to be included on the Digital Documents schedule.

23.b. Related to this, we recommend that the required functionality would be added to the SDM suite to enable this set of schemes' information to be accepted into BOM after having been scanned.

Recommendation 24 – Provision of a case management system to all relevant staff

The Department should examine its Case Management requirements to determine the most appropriate way to deploy the enhanced BOM case management functionality together with facilities available through the Corporate Portal to satisfy these requirements.

Recommendation 25 – Rollout of a customer profiling system

We recommend that following on from the lessons learned during the customer profiling pilot in the Galway region, and assuming that the report from the ERSI is favourable, that Departmental approval would be granted for the rollout of a customer profiling system to support the Activation process.

Recommendation 26 – Rollout of voicemail facilities to Regional Offices as appropriate

The current voicemail initiative should be formally reviewed. If the outcome of the evaluation is positive, voicemail facilities should be rolled out to Local and Branch Offices, Facilitators and Inspectors as appropriate. The rollout should be accompanied by a staff training programme on the best practices for using voicemail.

Recommendation 27 – Provision of Self Service Options

The provision of services at local level, will require staff intervention in some cases. However, for those cases where no staff contact is necessary, we recommend the provision of a range of “self service” options in all Local and Branch Offices to meet these needs, such as PCs, telephones with direct access to different scheme areas and Touch Screen facilities.

Recommendation 28 – The future use of the Information TV initiative

In the discussion on the current Information TV pilot in the ICT Issues section, it was noted that one of the objectives of the pilot was to keep customers informed while queuing in Local Offices. The vision of the future Local and Branch Offices is intended to minimise the occurrence of queuing and the provision and access to a wide range of information sources in the offices.

We recommend therefore that the Department re-assess the potential benefits of Information TV following the completion of the pilot in the light of the customer service vision and recommendations contained in this report and decide on the future uses of Information TV accordingly.

Recommendations 29 – The Provision of JA/JB Claim Forms via the Department’s website

29.a. It is recommended that JA/JB Claims forms should be made available for download on the Department’s website.

29.b. In addition, JA/JB claim forms should also be available for completion online. A customer could complete a form with the assistance of online text based help facilities. It is envisaged that upon entry of a PPS Number, it would be possible for a form to be automatically populated with any relevant information related to a customer that is already available to the Department.

29.c. Depending on the nature of a claim, it is also recommended that the receipt of an on-line form would prompt the automated issue of an invitation to attend a scheduled appointment in the customer’s relevant office. This would allow offices to manage its footfall in a cohesive manner.

Recommendation 30 - Expansion of the SDM system to facilitate secure remote access

The SDM system should be expanded to allow for appropriate staff such as Inspectors and Facilitators to access relevant customer information via mobile broadband technology using the latest in security technology. This will eliminate the need to request a customer’s complete paper file and thereby facilitate a speedier service to customers.

Office Layout and Design Review – Recommendations

Recommendation 31 – Flexible and Easily Demountable Partitions

Given the short time frame envisaged for moving to the “To-be” model, we recommend that all works currently in the pipeline should involve the use of flexible and easily demountable partitions for the construction of hatches and interview rooms to allow for easier refurbishment as the business needs change.

Recommendation 32 – Design Brief

The recommended design brief (page 82) sets out an overview of the recommended key features to be included in all Local Offices of the future. In association with the Specification Document prepared by FMU (Appendix 7), this will standardise all Local Offices of the future in terms of design over time.

Recommendation 33 – Appointment of “Architectural Consultant”

We recommend that an “Architectural Consultant” with specific experience in office design and layout and as such knowledge as to what works best, be appointed to work closely in association with FMU to provide advice to local management and to oversee all stages of development or refurbishment of Local Office from the inception of projects to their final sign-off.

Recommendation 34 – Branch Office Specific Recommendations

As with all other aspects of the delivery of service by the Branch Office network, we recommend that Branch Offices meet the standards set out in this report in relation to the design and layout of its offices, in so far as it is feasible. Given the cost involved in bringing Branch Offices to this standard we recommend that the Department undertake a separate cost benefit exercise to assess the implications of implementing this recommendation.

Recommendations 35 – Future Design Timelines

There are a number of key changes evident in the design and layout of the Local Office of the future over the various time periods, as follows:

0-2 Years

- The 0-2 years plan, represents the current or “As-is” design and layout of the Department’s new Local Offices. This can be used in relation to those offices identified for refurbishment over the next two years.
- Establish a central Information Officer Area to provide a “Triage” type service.
- Construct hatches and interview rooms using flexible and easily demountable partitions to allow for easier refurbishment as the business needs change.
- Introduce a range of self service options including: PCs, Phone Kiosks and Touch Screen Terminals, ICT capabilities allowing.

2-5 Years

- Remove the back office function from the Local Office and place in regional locations.
- Employ a mixture of open and glass protection hatches and open and glass protection interview rooms, where appropriate.
- The floor plan outlined in Figure 4.4, is designed to cater for up to 30 customers between servicing and waiting at any one time.

5+ Years

- There are no hatches and all meetings are conducted in open areas or private rooms.
- A review of security measures to protect staff should be undertaken before glass partitions are removed from offices where they currently exists.
- Again, the floor plan depicted in Figure 4.5 in relation to this timeframe is designed to cater for up to 30 customers between servicing and waiting at any one time.

Criteria for Determining Locations – Recommendations

Recommendation 36- Approach to Determining Locations

- **Existing customers** – Firstly it would be necessary to establish existing customer numbers across all scheme sections by town, city and county, to place an estimate on customer density.
- **Future customers** – Any significant increases in customer numbers by town, city and overall county would also need to be taken into account. This could be determined based on demographic forecasts by town, city and county.
- **Office Capacity** - Once the existing and future customer base is established, a decision would then be needed as to the volume that can reasonably be catered for by office size and staff number. Office design and layout considerations would need to be considered at this stage, as would productivity levels, taking ICT improvements and developments into account.
- **Distinction between Local and Branch Offices** – Finally, it would be necessary to establish the volume of customers required to justify a Local Office presence as opposed to a Branch Office presence, with Branch Offices being established to cater for customers in less densely populated areas. It may be decided from a management perspective to have at least one Local Office in each county; if so, then the agreed thresholds would need to be adjusted to accommodate this requirement.

Once the appropriate number of Local and Branch Offices is determined to service the customer levels identified in each by town, city and county, other factors could then be considered to clarify the exact location of these offices within the county. These include:

- **Opportunities to co-locate offices with other Departmental and Governmental states agencies** - this will assist the Department in reducing the cost of developing their office network and improving the availability of services for their customers.
- **Travelling time** – the distance to travel between offices within a county.
- **Transportation provision** – the availability of public transport in each county.



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