



Neighbourhood Offices



A report from Overview & Scrutiny





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Preface

By Cllr Timothy Huxtable, Lead Member
and Cllr Mark Hill, Chairman, Local Services and
Community Safety O&S Committee



Neighbourhood Offices are essential in the front-line delivery of Council services and are the public face of the City Council. They are one of the most public facing services provided by the City Council and the staff who work in these offices have to deal with a very broad range of enquiries, in many different languages, everyday. They are therefore often the subject of issues raised in our Ward Councillor surgeries.

We therefore set out to understand how and where Neighbourhood Offices currently operate, including what services are offered, and to understand different approaches to Neighbourhood Offices across all ten Constituencies since Localisation. We also wanted to explore the customer experience at Neighbourhood Offices.

It became clear that Neighbourhood Offices offer a highly valued and valuable service, which is greatly appreciated by users. In addition, Neighbourhood Offices are successfully contributing to city-wide targets on processing Benefits claims resulting in the prompt payment of claims and in dealing with homelessness through Home Options. The Charter Mark was re-awarded this year. Success was demonstrated after the closure of the Longbridge MG Rover plant in 2005, when staff from local Neighbourhood Offices worked hard to deal with the sudden demand.

However, not all of our concerns were allayed. Whilst waiting times are generally within target, those targets are not particularly ambitious. Telephone answering times are certainly an issue. We saw some Neighbourhood Offices in poor condition of decoration and received evidence of falling numbers of interviews being conducted. We heard about the problems of keeping offices open when staff shortages occurred. We saw that not all Neighbourhood Offices are located in where they are easily accessible by public transport.

Evidence was also received about how other Core Cities provide similar services, and whilst Neighbourhood Offices provide a valuable in-depth service, the breadth of services offered did not compare so well. Neighbourhood Offices are not "one stop shops" – they are not resourced to be. Our Scrutiny Review found, that whilst Neighbourhood Offices fulfil a clear role in relation to benefits, housing and council tax issues, their place within a wider customer service strategy was not so clear. Links with Contact Birmingham and other methods of communicating with the Council are ad hoc.

Integrating methods of accessing Council services is something people will increasingly come to expect in the future, and we are pleased that this is being addressed via the Business Transformation programme Customer First.



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We welcome the proposals of a Single Customer Record to enable greater co-ordination across departments and services and the rationalised access around a community “hub and spoke” model (plus a city centre “one stop shop”). However, there is still a significant lack of clarity around certain issues. How exactly will Neighbourhood Offices be integrated into the “hub and spoke” model? To what extent with the current depth of service offered be maintained in its current form? What opportunities will there be to provide a better service or make efficiency savings by co-locating Neighbourhood Offices with other Council or public sector service providers. How will these services be managed – at a local level or centrally, and what will Members involvement be?

There are two important considerations in assessing the future of Neighbourhood Offices: firstly to reassess their role since Localisation and how they can simultaneously support locally based priorities and play a role in maintaining city-wide customer-focused services. This has not yet been made clear within the Customer First programme and the Local Services and Community Safety O&S Committee will be studying the proposals in detail once the place of Neighbourhood Offices within the new structure is made explicit.

Our recommendations therefore had a two-fold purpose: to ensure good practice in Neighbourhood Offices is not lost in the transformation, and to ensure improvements are made in line with changing preferences. It is critical that the service we build now looks forward to how people will want to access services ten, twenty years from now.



Summary

The Local Services and Community Safety O&S Committee undertook a Scrutiny Review of Neighbourhood Offices in order to contribute to the debate on the future shape of face-to-face services at the City Council and to make recommendations as to the future operation of Neighbourhood Offices.

The Full Business Case for the Business Transformation programme "Customer First" was approved by Procurement Cabinet Committee in April 2007, and we agreed that now was the right time to present a report on Neighbourhood Offices – specifically "*what role do Neighbourhood Offices fulfil and how should this be best developed?*" – to assist the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety to give Neighbourhood Offices full consideration within the wider context of customer facing services.

Evidence was taken using a mixture of formal Committee items and informal sessions, including visits to four Neighbourhood Offices and to Contact Birmingham.

The evidence we received showed that there are 32 Neighbourhood Offices across the city. In 2006-07 552,001 interviews were carried out in Neighbourhood Offices across the city, plus around 225,000 minor enquiries.

The three core services offered by Neighbourhood Offices are:

- Benefits which include Council Tax Benefit and Housing Benefit – these enquiries accounted for 57.6% of all enquiries in 2006/07;
- Housing (rent arrears, homelessness and Home Options, housing applications, transfers and repairs reporting) – 14.4% of all enquiries in 2006/07;
- Council Tax – 7.8% of all enquiries in 2006/07.

Income maximisation (including money and debt advice and welfare benefits take up) is also a significant part of the service offered by Neighbourhood Offices.

Our enquiry found that Neighbourhood Office users largely fall within the poorest 25% of the population, with a greater proportion of people in social housing. Mapping the location of Neighbourhood Offices shows the majority are located in the poorest areas in the city. This perhaps reflects the core services offered at Neighbourhood Offices.

We also found that whilst the 32 offices are spread across the city, they are not evenly distributed between Constituencies: Ladywood is the largest provider of Neighbourhood Office services, with five offices and over 100,000 interviews conducted last year. In contrast, Sutton Coldfield has only one office and conducted 15,000 interviews.

The 2006/07 Neighbourhood Offices Annual Customer Satisfaction Survey shows that 86.8% of customers "overall are satisfied with the service provided by their local Neighbourhood Office". No survey has been conducted on the views of non-users and what would encourage or discourage usage.



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The Neighbourhood Offices service has held a Charter Mark for 11 years, and also has a Community Legal Services quality mark.

A crucial difference between the Neighbourhood Office service in Birmingham and that provided by most other Local Authorities is that Birmingham's Neighbourhood Offices are not simply a referral service for benefits and housing – i.e. logging issues and passing them onto a "back-office". Officers are able to deal with a range of queries via flexible mix of drop-in, pre-booked appointments, home visits and surgeries.

However, looking at other Local Authorities also shows that most of the Core Cities offered a service broader than that in Birmingham. There were also more examples of partnership working, e.g. co-locating with the NHS, and of weekend and evening opening.

Accessibility was one theme of our Scrutiny Review: some of the top complaints made about Neighbourhood Offices are that offices are closed when advertised as being open, that opening hours are limited (there is no weekend or evening opening); and telephone calls are not answered or responded to. There is also the issue of physical accessibility – the location of Neighbourhood Offices is critical, rather than simple geographical spread. Proximity to shopping areas or location on bus routes is important.

Overall we felt that it is not practical to commit significantly greater resources to Neighbourhood Offices in their current configuration. Our recommendations therefore focus on supporting the Customer First programme in realising the optimum organisation of Neighbourhood Offices alongside other modes of access.

We are particularly keen to ensure that Customer First pays sufficient attention to:

- Access to services (i.e. physical and opening hours);
- Links to public transport and access to parking;
- Appropriate use of surgeries outside Neighbourhood Offices.

In addition, the contribution of other advice agencies was considered and questions were raised around the issue of duplicate funding – is the City Council funding organisations to undertake the same activities as are provided by Neighbourhood Offices? Or should contracting-out of some services be considered? Both questions are beyond the scope of this Scrutiny Review but ought to be given further consideration by the Cabinet Member.

The Customer First programme clearly still has some way to go and will take some time to implement. However, there are some immediate issues of concern to Members.

Primarily this is around the information available on the performance of Neighbourhood Offices and Contact Birmingham and how this is communicated to Members. In particular, the issue of the Neighbourhood Offices closing due to lack of staff is of particular concern and it is suggested that Members should be kept informed when offices are closed during advertised opening hours in their constituency.



Summary of Recommendations

	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R01	<p>It should be made clear what role Neighbourhood Offices should fulfil both in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • delivering customer services across the city to corporate standards; and • delivering localised and devolved services for the local population. <p>The name of the service should reflect this role.</p>	Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety and the Deputy Leader, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing	29 February 2008
R02	<p>Customer First refers to the need for a single customer record. The Committee is keen to see the detail of this when available, in particular the extent to which Neighbourhood Offices and Contact Birmingham systems will be integrated. A report should therefore be brought to the Local Services and Community Safety O&S Committee.</p>	Deputy Leader	29 February 2008
R03	<p>To ensure that service performance meets specified standards, Constituency Committee Members should receive regular performance information on the service. Members should also be provided with examples where services have gone beyond the requirements of the Service Level Agreement or the Service Specification, and where they have fallen significantly below those requirements.</p>	Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety	31 December 2007
R04	<p>In Customer First's review of the provision of services through Neighbourhood Offices, key aims must include improvements to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to services (i.e. physical, transport, opening hours, compliance to opening hours); • Links to public transport and access to parking; • Appropriate use of surgeries outside Neighbourhood Offices. <p>Evidence that these have been thoroughly considered as options should be presented to the Local Services and Community Safety O&S Committee.</p>	Deputy Leader	29 February 2008



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	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R05	Progress towards achievement of these recommendations should be reported to the Local Services and Community Safety Overview and Scrutiny Committee in March 2008. Subsequent progress reports will be scheduled by the Committee thereafter, until all recommendations are implemented.	Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety	10 March 2008



1 Introduction

1.1 Background

- 1.1.1 The very first Neighbourhood Office in Birmingham opened its doors on 17 July 1985 at Botteville Road, Acocks Green. Ever since then, Neighbourhood Offices have been a significant part of the City Council's front line presence and are now the principal means of contacting the Council locally.
- 1.1.2 Neighbourhood Offices were last considered in detail by Scrutiny in 2004 as part of the Developing Customer Focused Services Review conducted by the Co-ordinating Overview and Scrutiny Committee. That Scrutiny Review concluded that an overall co-ordinating focus upon delivering what the customer wants was needed, alongside a framework of customer service standards across the entire Council. The Customer Service Strategy that followed is now being implemented via the Customer First branch of Business Transformation.
- 1.1.3 It was therefore agreed by the Local Services and Community Safety O&S Committee that this would be a good time to examine Neighbourhood Offices in more detail, to facilitate the contribution of a Member perspective to the current debate on the future shape of Neighbourhood Offices, and to make recommendations as to the future operation of Neighbourhood Offices.

1.2 Aims and Objectives

- 1.2.1 The question the Scrutiny Review sought to answer was:
- What role do Neighbourhood Offices fulfil and how should this be best developed?
- 1.2.2 The specific objectives as laid out in the terms of reference were:
1. To understand how and where Neighbourhood Offices currently operate, including what and how services are offered; locations; numbers of visitors and who these are; and the corporate standards required of Neighbourhood Offices.
 2. To understand different approaches to Neighbourhood Offices across all ten Constituencies since Localisation.
 3. To complement the ongoing reviews involving Neighbourhood Offices including the Customer First element of Business Transformation.
 4. To examine services provided by Neighbourhood Offices in the light of:
 - a. Whether there are other means of providing similar services (e.g. by telephone, via the internet or by other agencies);
 - b. How other Local Authorities provide these services;



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- c. How other organisations undertake similar activities;
 - d. The overall aims of the services involved (i.e. benefits, Council Tax);
 - e. Other services that may be added to these.
5. To explore the customer experience at Neighbourhood Offices.
 6. To understand the links with the Neighbourhood Agenda and how Neighbourhood Offices complement this.

1.3 Methodology

- 1.3.1 Evidence was taken using a mixture of formal Committee items and informal sessions, including visits to four Neighbourhood Offices and to Contact Birmingham. Members spoke both to officers working in Neighbourhood Offices and officers involved in supporting them from the centre, as well as those responsible for the overall delivery of the Council Tax and Benefits services. Additional evidence was received from officers working within the Customer First programme. We were also fortunate to be able to speak to Mary Allen, the Charter Mark Assessor for Neighbourhood Offices. Written evidence was also gathered from Constituency Chairmen and Directors.
- 1.3.2 A full list of witnesses is contained in Appendix 1 and the Committee wishes to express its thanks for their contribution.
- 1.3.3 We were also keen to get a view of public opinion. Annual surveys are carried out by the Neighbourhood Offices Support Unit (NOSU), the results of which are included in this report. Therefore, in order to avoid duplication, the Committee decided on a public participation exercise, involving:
 - An advertising feature on screens in some Neighbourhood Offices;
 - Feature on the Scrutiny website;
 - Article in the Birmingham Forward;
 - Requesting Members of the City Housing Liaison Board to submit their views.



2 Findings: Current Operation

2.1 Neighbourhood Offices Today

2.1.1 There are currently 32 Neighbourhood Offices across the city, and as the City Council website states, they exist to "provide a link between people who live and work in Birmingham and the services available from the City Council"¹. Services are provided to all residents irrespective of housing tenure.

2.1.2 The service is located within the Neighbourhood Advice and Information Service, which also offers home visits to people who cannot get to offices and a network of surgeries. However, operational management is devolved to the Constituencies, governed by the *Constituency Service Specification 2007/8: Neighbourhood Advice & Information Service* (Appendix 2).

2.1.3 The key services offered by Neighbourhood Offices are:

- Benefit claims and income maximisation;
- Housing issues;
- Council Tax queries;
- Advice and information on debt problems;
- Advice on getting a job, education and training;
- Information on waste recycling.

2.1.4 To give an idea of the size of the service, in 2006-07 552,001 interviews were carried out in Neighbourhood Offices across the city – the majority of these related to Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit (58%). In addition, there were around 225,000 minor enquiries.²

Usage

2.1.5 The number of interviews conducted at Neighbourhood Offices has declined over the last five years, however the number of enquiries to reception has increased:

- 2002/03: 881,923 specific enquiries / 21,478 reception enquiries;
- 2003/04: 834,468 specific enquiries / 16,099 reception enquiries;
- 2004/05: 662,262 specific enquiries / 20,744 reception enquiries;
- 2005/06: 554,734 specific enquiries / 207,929 reception enquiries;

¹ *Neighbourhood Offices: About Us*, Birmingham City Council website http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/GenerateContent?CONTENT_ITEM_ID=135&CONTENT_ITEM_TYPE=0&MENU_ID=5057; 06 August 2007.

² i.e. those that did not require an interview and were more typically dealt with at reception and therefore recorded as a 'headcount'.



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- 2006/07: 552,001 specific enquiries / 254,412 reception enquiries.

2.1.6 The issue of declining specific enquiries is being considered by the Neighbourhood Offices Support Unit (NOSU). However, it should be noted that there are five fewer Neighbourhood Offices today than there were in 2002: 32 compared to 37 in 2002. How much of the decline is due to declining need and how much is due to lack of capacity is unclear.

2.1.7 We also looked at the profile of Neighbourhood Offices customers. A comparison of Neighbourhood Offices user data from 2005/06³ with the 2001 Census returns for Birmingham shows:

- The gender balance of Neighbourhood Office users reflects that of the city as a whole;
- Neighbourhood Offices were visited by relatively few home owners, who made up 15% of Neighbourhood Office users in 2006/07 but 60.4% of Birmingham residents (2001 Census);
- A smaller proportion of white people used Neighbourhood Offices (46.8%) than live in Birmingham (70.3%). Significantly more black residents visit Neighbourhood Offices (15.3%) than lived in Birmingham in 2001 (9.6%);
- Whilst most Neighbourhood Offices users in 2006/07 were English speakers (89%), there were significant numbers of Urdu (2.1%), Mirpuri (1.6%) and Punjabi (1.6%) speakers.

2.1.8 There is also evidence that Neighbourhood Office users largely fall within the poorest 25% of the population, and this goes some way to explaining the differences between the Census data and Service user data:

- A greater proportion of people in social housing is to be expected given the service's emphasis on housing and Council Tax benefits;
- The higher proportion of black and minority ethnic residents is perhaps explained by their over-representation in lower income bands.

2.1.9 However, it is important to note that the figures show those who got an interview – not all those who requested one, and so are not necessarily an absolute measure of need.

Location

2.1.10 The 32 offices are spread across the city, though not evenly distributed between Constituencies. Table 1 shows the number of Neighbourhood Offices in each Constituency and Appendix 3 shows their locations.

2.1.11 This shows Ladywood to be the largest provider of Neighbourhood Office services, with five offices and over 100,000 interviews conducted. In contrast, Sutton Coldfield has only one office and 15,000 interviews.

³ Data is for number of enquiries, not individuals.



2.1.12 Looking at the changes in number of interviews between 2005/06 and 2006/07, the general decline in numbers is reflected across all Constituencies with the exception of Selly Oak and Sutton Coldfield. The well above average drop of over 10% of interviews in Yardley can be explained in part by the closure of the Sheldon office in 2006.

2.1.13 This data relates to the location of the Neighbourhood Office, not of the enquirer, so it is unclear to what extent Hodge Hill offices have absorbed some of the impact of the closure of the Sheldon office. This serves to underline that although there is not one office per ward, this need not be an issue – political boundaries are irrelevant to customers and offices will serve across boundaries.

2.1.14 Mapping the location of Neighbourhood Offices against Super Output Areas (SOAs) shows the majority are located in the poorest areas in the city. Out of the 32 offices:

- 20 Neighbourhood Offices are located in SOAs which are in the worst 10% in England;
- 6 Neighbourhood Offices are located in SOAs which are in the worst 10 to 24.9% in England;
- 6 Neighbourhood Offices are located in SOAs which are in the worst 25 to 49.9% in England.

2.1.15 This reflects the decision in the early days of Neighbourhood Offices to allocate resources for the service based on need. It is however noticeable that there is one area of the city, a large proportion of which is in the worst 10%, with no Neighbourhood Office – Bordesley Green.

Table 1: Neighbourhood Offices by Constituency (Source: Birmingham City Council)

Constituency	Number of N'hood Offices	Number of Interviews 05/06	Number of Interviews 06/07	Percentage Difference	Total number of days open per week per Constituency 06/07
Ladywood	5	113,102	111,735	-1.21%	22.5
Erdington	4	69,495	64,832	-6.71%	16
Hodge Hill	4	63,619	62,377	-1.95%	13.5
Selly Oak	4	53,628	55,147	2.83%	16
Edgbaston	3	49,687	47,942	-3.51%	13.5
Hall Green	3	61,939	61,811	-0.21%	13.5
Northfield	3	45,933	44,547	-3.02%	11.5
Perry Barr	3	39,701	38,697	-2.53%	11.5
Yardley	2	43,790	39,372	-10.09%	9
Sutton Coldfield	1	13,840	15,235	10.08%	4.5



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2.1.16 However, it is acknowledged that physical accessibility is most important, rather than simple geographical spread. For example, Small Heath – one of the busiest offices – is located on a bus route, and on a shopping parade with hostels nearby. While most have been located to optimise accessibility not all are so easy to get to: one Neighbourhood Office is situated at the top of a hill and some distance away from the nearest bus route. For elderly and disabled clients this can prove a problem.

Opening Hours

2.1.17 Opening times vary across the 32 Neighbourhood Offices, however most are open for four and a half days a week (closed one afternoon a week for staff training) and closed at weekends. Six offices are open for half the week. None open into the evening.

2.1.18 Reasons given for this pattern of opening in the Scrutiny Review of Developing Customer Focused Services (City Council, April 2004) were:

- The resources are not available to extend opening times, even were there to be a demonstrable demand for service at other times;
- The customers of Neighbourhood Offices are typically those who do not want to access services via the telephone – often those who are not employed, for whom these hours are convenient;
- It is not always practical to arrange lunch breaks in small teams to ensure that all offices remain open through lunch times. Offices also will not open without at least three advisors present, for safety reasons.⁴

2.1.19 The report went on to note: "It is a pattern that has remained broadly unchanged for a considerable time, largely since the Neighbourhood Office concept was introduced in the mid-1980s. Consequently, many of the staff within Neighbourhood Offices have chosen the role because the work pattern fits their needs, and fits around their domestic commitments."

2.1.20 It was highlighted that when Neighbourhood Offices first opened, some offices did operate extended hours i.e. open until 5.30-6.00pm. However due to very low usage, the opening hours were gradually revised. When senior management prior to Localisation, looked at this in detail, they found that it was more beneficial to open until 3.00-4.00pm each day rather than close at 2.30pm one day to be open until 5.30pm another.

2.1.21 It should be noted that even though offices maybe be open for 30 hours, the purpose of this is to allow advisers to carry out follow up work after the office is closed (this is required due to the in-depth nature of the work). Also, an office may close at say 3.30pm but advisers will still be interviewing until long after this time.

2.1.22 The working hours of staff are still standard City Council hours e.g. 36.50 hours per week.

⁴ Scrutiny Review of Developing Customer Focused Services, April 2004.



2.1.23 Current users of Neighbourhood Offices were asked about their satisfaction with opening hours in the Annual Customer Survey conducted by the Neighbourhood Offices Support Unit. This showed that most of those who use the service are happy that the opening hours are convenient (93%). However, opening hours were also one of the top three complaints made about Neighbourhood Offices (see 2.4.20). There is no data on the perceptions of non-users.

2.2 The Role of Neighbourhood Offices

2.2.1 As already noted, the key aim of Neighbourhood Offices is to “provide a link between people who live and work in Birmingham and the services available from the City Council”. This means Neighbourhood Offices do more than simply providing access to Council services. As a “link” they also support people, particularly the more vulnerable, to access those services and others. This is evident not only in the type of services provided but in how these are delivered.

2.2.2 The three core services offered by Neighbourhood Offices are:

- Benefits which include Council Tax Benefit and Housing Benefit – these enquiries accounted for 57.6% of all enquiries in 2006/07;
- Housing (rent arrears, homelessness and Home Options, housing applications, transfers and repairs reporting) – 14.4% of all enquiries in 2006/07;
- Council Tax – 7.8% of all enquiries in 2006/07.⁵

2.2.3 Income maximisation (including money and debt advice and welfare benefits take up) is also a significant part of the service offered by Neighbourhood Offices.

Benefit Service

2.2.4 Neighbourhood Offices provide all face-to-face customer services on behalf of the Benefits Service. The Constituency Service Level Agreement (SLA) specifies the services to be provided, and includes:

- Assistance with making claims;
- Assistance to maximise all benefit;
- Providing a verification process – receipting and verifying new claims / changed circumstances to improve the speed of processing;
- Detection and reporting of suspected fraud.

2.2.5 The Committee took evidence from the Head of Benefits on how Neighbourhood Offices contribute to the delivery of that service. The view was positive, citing excellent joint working and a strong

⁵ It is important to note that some enquiries may encompass more than one area – e.g. rent arrears (classified under Housing) may also include a degree of debt advice.



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SLA facilitating a prompt response to customers' enquiries, as well as fast track arrangements for urgent situations.

- 2.2.6 Access to advice and information regarding benefit claims is largely split between Neighbourhood Offices and Contact Birmingham. Neighbourhood Offices deal with between 25,000 and 30,000 Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit matters each month; Contact Birmingham with around 20,000. The former are more heavily involved with the full process including assisting people with identifying entitlement and actively supporting people to make the claim. Contact Birmingham is able to give rather less in-depth assistance and instead answer general queries and give general information regarding claim progress and claim results.
- 2.2.7 One way in which Neighbourhood Offices add real value to the service includes dealing with new claims. This is a priority for the Benefit Service as these are people who are currently not receiving any benefit at all and are most at risk of hardship because they are unable to pay their rent or Council Tax. Neighbourhood Office staff are able to "verify" claims – i.e. ensure all the relevant checks have been done. Approximately 70% of new claims are received via Neighbourhood Offices and 70% of these are "buttoned up" (i.e. ready for immediate payment). This assists both the customers and attainment of Government-set Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI) targets.
- 2.2.8 Neighbourhood Offices also perform an important role in terms of verifying the wide range of original documentation required to evidence a claim before payment can be made. This is only possible through a face-to-face service unless the claimant chooses to send the information by post. Many claimants are reluctant to do this with unique valuable documents. The last full Best Value Performance Indicator satisfaction survey resulted in an overall 81% satisfaction rate with face-to-face services.

Housing

- 2.2.9 The Home Options service was developed in partnership with Neighbourhood Offices, and it has been highlighted as a successful partnership between Housing, Neighbourhood Advice and other partners. The service received a national housing award recently for its work in supporting those threatened with homelessness.
- 2.2.10 Home Options is being specifically monitored by the Housing and Urban Renewal O&S Committee, resulting from their Scrutiny Review of Homelessness. This emphasised the need for consistency in application across the city as Home Options is rolled-out further, but did emphasise that Neighbourhood Offices are now "able to provide more advice and assistance in order to prevent homelessness occurring".⁶
- 2.2.11 Currently it is proposed to bring Neighbourhood Offices and Housing Services closer in the future, through central management within the new Strategic Directorate of Housing and Constituencies – though this is yet to be confirmed by Cabinet.

⁶ Scrutiny Review of Homelessness, December 2006.



Council Tax Service

- 2.2.12 The focus of the Council Tax service is revenue collection and accurate billing, which is necessarily a more reactive service than Benefits. Neighbourhood Offices provide an enquiry service, and will pass notification of name and address or circumstance changes to the back offices. Enquiries typically include assisting customers to make arrangements for the re-payment of Council Tax debt or dealing with registration and liability enquiries.
- 2.2.13 The Council Tax service receives 240,000 calls a year via Contact Birmingham and 20,000 emails. The Council Tax office at Waterloo Street deals with 17,500 queries, with 5,128 memos passed back from Neighbourhood Offices. Overall in 2006/07, 979 Council Tax payment arrangements were made through Neighbourhood Offices. This lower volume of enquiries at Neighbourhood Offices perhaps reflects the difference in the nature of the service – Council Tax payments cannot be made at Neighbourhood Offices, but can be at Waterloo Street. In addition the city centre location of the main office can be more convenient for those who work, shop or visit the city centre.
- 2.2.14 Revenue collection is critical in the Council Tax service, and Council Tax payment arrangements at Neighbourhood Offices are made in line with the guidelines issued by the Revenues office. However, concerns were expressed by officers that on occasion Neighbourhood Office staff perhaps allowed overly generous repayment schemes. The guidelines were revised by Council Tax in April 2006.

Customer Services

- 2.2.15 However, as already noted, Neighbourhood Offices also have a more pro-active role in providing support to the more vulnerable in society. This means they are contributing to “softer” aims of the Council, in supporting the Community Strategy’s aims of:
- “Flourishing Neighbourhoods” which recognises “people living in different parts of the city experience differences in quality of life ... thirteen wards ... are home to nearly a third of the city’s residents – are rated among the most deprived areas in the country”;
 - “Diverse And Inclusive City” which aims to “reduce the number of people for whom poverty limits opportunities by improving access to work and welfare” and “encourage the take up of benefits and direct payments by older people and vulnerable adults in order to enhance their choices and quality of life.”
 - “Connected City” where it is acknowledged that “access to information and advice is also important in today’s society ... Birmingham has a network of local libraries and neighbourhood offices that could provide local points of contact, which people could visit without needing to make long journeys.”
- 2.2.16 They are also contributing to the strategic outcomes within the Council Plan 2007+, such as “Succeed economically” and “Stay safe”.



Neighbourhood Offices

- 2.2.17 Provision of the core services described above obviously supports this, as do other services – for example the provision of assistance to residents experiencing financial problems, as Neighbourhood Offices are often the first point of contact for those with rent or Council Tax arrears or benefit overpayments. Neighbourhood Office Advisors are all trained in debt advice work and follow the traditional debt advice process. The Scrutiny Review of Problem Debt recommended that Neighbourhood Office staff, who already had the ability to make repayment arrangements in respect of Council Tax arrears, should be allowed to input the arrangements directly. This recommendation has been implemented by the Debt Team and an action plan is currently being put together to pilot this in Neighbourhood Offices.
- 2.2.18 The Neighbourhood Office service is also flexible enough to be able to respond to events, for example following the Rover closure, one Neighbourhood Office saw a 400% increase in enquiries. Staff worked long hours to ensure both telephone and face-to-face support was available at this critical time.
- 2.2.19 In addition the Committee found evidence of Neighbourhood Offices going beyond simple provision of services. Advisors are trained to take a multi-problem approach – a resident may come in with an issue regarding Council Tax and in the course of the interview the advisor is able to point to benefit entitlements.
- 2.2.20 Advisors will assist members of the public with a variety of issues, for example some offices are now reporting centres for environmental services. In others, this help can take the form of assisting people to call Contact Birmingham – with the emphasis on empowering customers to deal with the problem themselves – or contacting other services with the customer there where extra assistance is required.
- 2.2.21 For example, a crucial difference between the Neighbourhood Office service in Birmingham and that provided by most other Local Authorities is that Birmingham's Neighbourhood Offices are not simply a referral service for benefits and housing – i.e. logging issues and passing them onto a "back-office". Officers are able to deal with a range of queries via flexible mix of drop-in, pre-booked appointments, home visits and surgeries.⁷ A range of languages are offered, as is British Sign Language – widening access to a larger number of people. Wheelchair/pram access and mini-loop facilities are also available.
- 2.2.22 Advisors are trained to deal with all types of enquiries, so more are dealt with at the point of first contact. This approach is exemplified in Small Heath where the receptionist is often one of the most experienced members of staff. This enables the office to conserve resources by ensuring that people are not waiting for answers to basic enquiries or taking up advisors' time inefficiently.

⁷ For example, Yardley Wood Neighbourhood Office has a system whereby most appointments are pre-booked, with one person on the phone to book interviews. A maximum of three booked interviews per day leaves space for walk-in interviews, plus there is a fast-path option with a dedicated officer – 15-20 minute slots set aside to deal with quick issues or assess need for a longer interview.



2.2.23 Surgeries are also held out in different locations to enable more people to access the services, for example at a care home in Erdington and a Family Support project in Sparkbrook.

2.2.24 Also, other organisations hold surgeries at Neighbourhood Offices to widen the range of information and advice on offer, for example at Kings Heath Neighbourhood Office, the Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB) hold a surgery every Friday. In addition, there are also partnership links with organisations which facilitate signposting e.g. Job Centre Plus, Sure Start.

2.3 Localisation

2.3.1 The day to day operation of Neighbourhood Offices is devolved to Constituency level. However, in practice we found very little variation in how Neighbourhood Offices operate in different Constituencies. Reasons for this include the detailed Constituency Service Specifications which set out the level of service to be provided and the funding basis for Neighbourhood Offices.

2.3.2 The allocation of revenue budgets to Neighbourhood Offices is based on historic costs – i.e. need and usage as assessed in 2004. It appears that this formula has not changed commensurate with changes in volume of enquiries and alterations in the organisation (such as office closures).

2.3.3 The Committee found evidence of close working with the corporate centre of the City Council in the form of the NOSU. There are regular meetings and training is undertaken jointly. Responses from Constituency Chairs and Directors indicated that they welcomed a network of minimum standards of service as well as some flexibility in running the service. Flexibilities cited included:

- Ability to use resources to enable more targeted work to take place in our more deprived priority neighbourhoods, establishing 'surgeries' within these communities;
- Ability to consolidate the service into fewer but far more attractive premises, making the most of the staff and the budget that are available;
- To use offices as a base for neighbourhood management – e.g. locating local services such as environmental wardens and Police Community Support Officers at Neighbourhood Offices.

2.3.4 However, other Constituency Chairs and Directors saw less room for local manoeuvre:

“Given the scope of the service ... we are somewhat limited to make sweeping changes.”

“The Constituency does have the freedom but is bound by staffing budgets and existing buildings that are getting increasingly costly to run due to the rise in such things as fuel and IT costs etc.”

“If we did want to make radical changes to the service I guess we might find opposition from the Centre.”

2.3.5 Their priorities for Neighbourhood Offices were centred on examining the service in more detail to ensure that they are meeting the needs of customers today:



“I believe the Neighbourhood Advice and Information Service provides a valuable service within the Constituency, particularly around the anti-poverty agenda ... it contributes significantly to the economic wellbeing of the Constituency.”

“A fundamental review of the services provided – [looking at] whether they meet customer needs and whether a different way of delivering will raise performance – is welcomed.”

2.4 Measures of Success

Customer Views

- 2.4.1 Annual surveys are conducted with Neighbourhood Office visitors via:
- A postal survey – sent to a random sample of customers;
 - A face-to-face survey – conducted with customers at the end of their interview;
 - An on-line survey.
- 2.4.2 The 2006/07 Neighbourhood Offices Annual Customer Satisfaction Survey shows that 86.8% of customers “overall are satisfied with the service provided by their local Neighbourhood Office”. The breakdown by Constituency is shown in Table 3.
- 2.4.3 Overall levels of satisfaction are consistently high, with only a slight decrease from 88% to 87% between 2005/06 and 2006/07. Over 90% satisfaction was recorded in Erdington, Sutton Coldfield and Northfield.
- 2.4.4 In particular, customers were satisfied with the staff in Neighbourhood Offices, with over 90% satisfied that *staff treated me with respect* and *were friendly*, as well as *the way they were dealt with by the member of staff at reception*.
- 2.4.5 Results of the Scrutiny exercise in public engagement reinforced the largely positive message that users have of the service. The majority felt that Neighbourhood Offices “met their needs” and when asked what changes they would like to see, requested:
- More staff;
 - Better liaison with Housing Managers;
 - Availability of refreshments.
- 2.4.6 The positive feedback was backed up by informal feedback, such as that received at Small Heath Neighbourhood Office, where they reported that customers were pleasantly surprised by the range of issues covered (e.g. someone would come in with a late bill and get advice on income maximisation, Council Tax and accommodation as well, if that were appropriate).



Table 3: Customer Satisfaction with Neighbourhood Offices (Source: Birmingham City Council).

Constituency	Number of responses	% of customers overall satisfied with service provided by their local Neighbourhood Office	
		05/06	06/07
NAIS Citywide	2001*	88%	86.8%
Sutton	88	79%	93.2%
Erdington	214	84%	92.5%
Selly Oak	296	83%	89.8%
Hodge Hill	245	98%	89.0%
Perry Barr	123	91%	88.6%
Edgbaston	240	86%	88.3%
Ladywood	419	84%	88.1%
Hall Green	221	83%	87.9%
Northfield	33	100%	100.0% [◇]
Yardley	90	98%	78.7% [◊]

* Including 32 responses which did not specify a Neighbourhood Office.

◇ NB: results are for Hawkesley N.O only.

◊ NB: results are for Acocks Green N.O only.

2.4.7 However, it was only possible to get data from users of Neighbourhood Offices – which clearly excludes those who have not accessed the service. No survey has been conducted on the views of non-users and what would encourage or discourage usage, and indeed it would be much more difficult and costly to do so.

Performance Indicators

2.4.8 Other indicators relating specifically to Neighbourhood Offices include:

- Waiting times;
- Closures – i.e. when offices are closed during advertised opening hours;
- Telephone response times.



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- 2.4.9 These indicators are currently used by both NOSU and Constituency management to review performance on a quarterly basis. Quarterly reports are produced by NOSU and presented to each Constituency.
- 2.4.10 Neighbourhood Offices have two indicators relating to *average waiting times*: the percentage of people seen at reception within 5 minutes (60%) and within 15 minutes (80%). The figures are for reception enquires, for those who turn up on the day for an interview and those who have an interview pre-booked. A detailed table can be found in Appendix 4, and this shows all Constituencies with the exception of Ladywood surpassing the first target, and all Constituencies the second. Perhaps this is unsurprising given the targets do not seem overly ambitious.
- 2.4.11 *Closures* are measured in terms of the percentage of advertised opening hours that are actually open. The target is 100%. Whilst 100% was not achieved city-wide, over 99% was. Both Perry Barr and Selly Oak achieved 100% throughout the year. Neither Hall Green nor Selly Oak met the 100% target in any of the four quarters (see Appendix 4 for more detail).
- 2.4.12 The telephone answering standard (within 6 rings) is the corporate standard of Birmingham City Council. Recent data (see Appendix 4) shows varying compliance: Ladywood only met the standard in 26% of cases one month, whilst Northfield achieved 100% in another. Telephone access can be important for a number of reasons:
- To make or change an appointment for interview;
 - To check opening times;
 - To pass on relevant information on an on-going issue;
 - To access general information;
 - To speak urgently with an Advisor or Manager.
- 2.4.13 With regard to income maximisation (i.e. work to ensure individuals' incomes are as high as they could be, with all appropriate benefits claimed), targets have been exceeded: from a target of £20m, £25.8m was actually obtained in 2005/06. In 2006/07, this dropped to £15,056,912. The reasons for this are not fully understood, although it is accepted that there are large amounts of unclaimed benefit.

Service Specific Indicators

- 2.4.14 Compliance with the Benefits Service SLA is measured via the percentage of forms sent to Benefits that are completed and compliant with the Verification Framework. The compliance target set for this area is 70%. Across the city the target was not met in any of the four quarters of the year, although over 60% of forms were completed and compliant – 69% in Quarter 4.
- 2.4.15 The best performing Constituency was Hall Green, which exceeded the target in three of the four quarters of the year. Erdington, Hodge Hill, Northfield, Perry Barr and Selly Oak also exceeded the target in at least one quarter.



- 2.4.16 At the other end of the scale, Edgbaston, Sutton Coldfield and Yardley fell below 60% of compliant claims in two quarters of the year – Sutton Coldfield with the lowest level at 51% in Quarters 1 and 2.
- 2.4.17 Neighbourhood Offices also contribute to BVPI 213 Prevention of homelessness, which was introduced with effect from April 2005. In order to be compliant with this target, Local Authorities must demonstrate that they have taken action to assist with the prevention of homelessness and that this is sustained for at least six months. This has been achieved in over 70% of cases over the year (Home Options was rolled out to all 32 Neighbourhood Offices in July 2006). Based on this a compliance target of 70% has been set for offices.

Charter Mark

- 2.4.18 The Neighbourhood Offices service has held a Charter Mark for 11 years, and also has a Community Legal Services quality mark. The Charter Mark was re-awarded at the end of 2006, and the Committee heard evidence from the Assessor as to why this had been agreed. A number of reasons were cited:
- There is a good audit and verification framework in place resulting in prompt payment of benefit claims with a high percentage of benefits claims processed at Neighbourhood Offices that were ready for immediate payment;
 - There are close knit teams valued by Constituency managers and by the Neighbourhood Office Support Unit (NOSU), who are encouraged to perform well;
 - There are clear Service Level Agreements (SLA) to enable each office to meet the targets;
 - Customer satisfaction is high (see previous section);
 - The service is flexible enough to cope with sudden increases in demand;
 - Home options scheme – considered a national example of best practice for dealing with homelessness.

- 2.4.19 In conclusion, the Assessor stated that the biggest challenge facing Neighbourhood Offices was to remain a front line service during and after devolution, whilst still maintaining a corporate vision and strategy.

Top Three Complaints

- 2.4.20 102 complaints were made by Neighbourhood Office service users in 2006/07. Under the "Compliments, Comments, Complaints" procedure, the top three complaints are:
- Access to Neighbourhood Offices (offices being closed when advertised as being open⁸ and opening hours);
 - Not answering / responding to contact made by telephone;

⁸ Common reasons for this include too few staff to open the office safely.



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- Staff attitude.

2.4.21 Whilst complaints about the telephone service may be justified by the performance data (see 2.4.12), it should be noted that complaints about staff attitude does not tally with the survey results, where the way people were dealt with by staff was one of the most satisfactory areas. Perhaps therefore the complaints reflect issues that people are more likely to complain about, rather than indication of prevalence.

2.4.22 Each of these are being monitored by NOSU, with Constituencies to address individual issues in action plans. In particular, with regard to staff attitude, Customer Care training is to be rolled out in 2007 to all Neighbourhood Office staff and Customer Care included in inductions for all new staff. Staff are also participating in the Institute of Customer Care training, with the Neighbourhood Advice and Information Service (NAIS) staff also trained to be assessors.



3 Other Local Authorities

3.1 Key Questions

3.1.1 One of the aims of the Scrutiny Review was to look at how other Local Authorities organise their front-line customer services. It was decided to focus on the Core Cities as they provided appropriate comparators in terms of being larger urban areas where having a number of local offices would be a viable option.

3.1.2 The key questions considered for each authority were:

- What options are there for face-to-face contact with Council services and what policy considerations determined this approach?
- If a Neighbourhood Office system or similar does operate:
 - What services are included?
 - Who uses the service?
 - What are the accessibility issues?
 - What are customer's views of the service?

3.2 Options for Face-to-Face Contact

3.2.1 Six of the seven Core Cities offers residents the option to access Council services at a local office:

- *Bristol* has eight Customer Service Points (CSP), launched in October 2006;
- *Leeds* has 15 One Stop Shops across the city, started in 1993. In addition, work is continuing on the development of three new Joint Service Centres with Primary Care Trusts;
- There are 10 One Stop Shops across *Liverpool*, which have been in existence for six years;
- *Newcastle* has a network of four Customer Service Centres (CSCs) which have been developed as part of its Customer Service Strategy since 1998;
- *Nottingham* has recently opened the Clifton Cornerstone Centre (April 2006), the city's flagship Joint Service Centre which offers customers access to City Council services, a local GP Practice, dental services, Nottingham City PCT clinics and Nottingham City Homes services. Two more schemes are planned – one due to open in 2008.
- In *Sheffield*, there are four local "First Point" centres and one "City Centre First Point".



- 3.2.2 The main policy drivers behind these approaches were broadly similar: to improve customer access to efficient, cost effective services through single point of access, including:
- To intensify the focus on customer care by separating out the front-line from those who deliver the services (Bristol);
 - Having specialist customer focused teams who can deal with any and all Council and partner service enquiries/requests (Bristol, Liverpool), often within a specific customer services section of the Council ("Contact Leeds", "Liverpool Direct", Newcastle Customer Services) which also manage the corporate contact (telephone) centre.
- 3.2.3 The exception is *Manchester*, which has a number of contact centres at present: Environment On Call, Housing On Call and the Council Tax and Housing Benefits sections. Manchester plans to extend these "On Call" centres, focusing on a high quality service which resolves up to 75% of calls at the first step.

3.3 Which Services are Included?

- 3.3.1 The services offered at these outlets in the six Core Cities are broadly similar and encompass:
- Education services including free school meals, bus passes, school admission forms;
 - Housing management including repairs, information on vacant properties;
 - Payments including utility bills and mobile phone top up, Council services including Council Tax;
 - Environmental Services including pest control, street lighting, waste collection and recycling, anti-social behaviour;
 - Trading Standards including taxi licensing;
 - Electoral registration;
 - Parking: football parking, parking fines and appeals, disabled parking permit (blue badge), residents parking schemes;
 - Leisure: apply for and renew your Leisure cards, book venues, contact play and youth services to get information on activities running during the school holidays;
 - Social Services: access to children's services; information on adoption, mobility equipment for the home, residential or nursing care; apply for a disabled bus pass and rail card, meals at home;
 - Council matters including access to the City Council Job Shop and copies of agendas and minutes from council committee meetings.
- 3.3.2 Newcastle has the most comprehensive range of services. Leeds and Liverpool also have wide ranges of services, with Nottingham extending further to include other services.



- 3.3.3 In each case, the services most used are Housing Benefit, Council Tax advice and Environmental issues. However, in order to compare like with like, it is necessary to examine the level of service offered. As we have seen, one of the key elements of Neighbourhood Offices is that they do not simply offer information and advice on Benefits, but can verify claims so that they are ready for payment.
- 3.3.4 Verification is also offered at Bristol, Leeds and Liverpool, but in each case processing is conducted in the back-office. In Newcastle, residents can discuss, complete and hand in documents.
- 3.3.5 With regard to Council Tax, another key service offered by Neighbourhood Offices, Council Tax payments can be taken at the local offices in Bristol, Liverpool, Newcastle, and Sheffield. Leeds offers a full service although payments are taken at the Post Office.
- 3.3.6 As in Birmingham, a range of surgeries are offered, including
- Job Centre Plus;
 - Citizens Advice Bureau;
 - Local Councillors;
 - Credit Union;
 - Victim Support.
- 3.3.7 However, we noted that money or debt advice was not offered by any of these authorities.

3.4 Volume of Enquiries

- 3.4.1 Data on the number of enquiries shows a wide variation between the Core Cities – a variation that is particularly stark when set against the populations within each city. Further investigation reveals that differences in counting can be found.
- 3.4.2 In Newcastle, which has more enquiries per year than residents, around two-thirds of customers in an average week will use the Payment Points, with the remaining 33% going to a Customer Reception Point. This indicates a number of repeat users, often for simpler transactions.

	Number of enquiries 2006/07	Population (2005 mid year estimates)
Bristol	Not Applicable [The forecast is for c.375,000 customers in 2007/08]	398,300
Leeds	428,378 face-to-face enquiries (2,085,467 customer enquiries altogether)	723,100
Liverpool	350,000	447,500
Newcastle	333,845	276,400
Nottingham	[Data not available]	278,700
Sheffield	61,346 (Q1-3 only)	520,700



3.4.3 What cannot be discerned from the figures is what percentage are repeat visitors, how many are simply making payments and how many result in lengthy interviews.

3.5 Accessibility Issues

Opening Hours

3.5.1 The offices in all of the Core Cities are open five days a week within office hours. In addition, two offices in Liverpool are open on Saturday mornings, and there is one evening opening. Originally, all shops were open on a Saturday, but it was concluded that the footfall did not justify the cost, therefore reduced to two shops, one in the City Centre. Clifton Cornerstone in Nottingham is also open on Saturday morning.

3.5.2 Bristol intends to review their opening hours as part of the project to open new CSPs in key city locations, and opening hours will reflect the opening hours of the retail businesses in these locations (e.g. if located in a shopping centre that opens until 8pm, then the Council will consider keeping that CSP open until then). In contrast, Leeds has considered evening and weekend opening but rejected keeping face-to-face offices open due to cost. The telephone service will be encouraged.

Location and Access

3.5.3 None of the Core Cities reported any problems with accessibility. In Bristol the offices are based on existing Council housing estates and so are generally easily accessible for local residents. Additionally (due to the density of population) most are on main bus routes. Most have good parking facilities.

3.5.4 As is the case in Birmingham awareness of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) compliance is also clear in other core cities. For example, Liverpool advertises the details relating to accessibility on their website. Each shop has the following facilities:

- Wheelchair/pram access and specially lowered desks;
- Mini-loop facility;
- Advisors trained in British Sign Language;
- A "language line" through which they can contact an interpreter for customers whose first language is not English.

3.5.5 Bristol provides translation services and is working on providing videophone technology in the near future.

3.5.6 Newcastle are clear that their customer service strategy is being developed alongside property renewal – something which Birmingham hopes to achieve via the confluence of the Customer First and Working for the Future elements of Business Transformation.



3.6 Customer Views

3.6.1 As with Birmingham, satisfaction is generally very high amongst users:

- Leeds: in 2006/07, 80% of customers rated the service as "excellent", 19% as "good" and 0.6% as "poor" or "unacceptable";
- Liverpool: satisfaction levels above 95% for last 6 years;
- Newcastle: in 2005/06, 99% of customers were satisfied with the service provided;
- Nottingham: 91% of customers of Clifton Cornerstone were satisfied with the services they received;
- Sheffield: in 2005/06, 95% of customers were satisfied with the service provided.

3.6.2 All undertake regular surveys (as the service in Bristol is relatively new, there is no customer data available yet – they will be doing surveys next year). In addition, Newcastle have Community Focus Groups, which are set up to help in the development of new Customer Service Centres. Their purpose is to:

- Consult potential users of new customer service facilities to find out what they think about how facilities should look and what services we should provide;
- Ensure that community representatives feel informed and involved;
- Give key customer service messages consistently;
- Evaluate and review the success of any new customer service projects.

3.6.3 As with Birmingham, there is little or no data on non-users.



4 Other Agencies

4.1 Advice and Information Services

4.1.1 One of the aims of the Scrutiny Review was to look at how other organisations undertake similar activities. There were two reasons for this:

- To look at how such organisations undertake this sort of work and what might be learned from them;
- What similarities there are and what duplication exists within Birmingham.

4.1.2 Identifying appropriate organisations to consider was problematic in that the core services delivered by Neighbourhood Offices, whilst not unique, are highly specialised and there are therefore no direct comparators. However, there are organisations which deal with similar groups of people:

- Citizens Advice Bureaux;
- Job Centre Plus;
- NHS Direct.

4.1.3 These tell us about how other organisations organise such work in terms of access and level of service. In addition to this, there are a number of locally-based organisations – some of which are funded by the City Council – which offer information and advice to different groups of people across the city.

4.2 National Organisations

4.2.1 The three organisations looked at were Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB), Job Centre Plus and NHS Direct. Customers can access all three services face-to-face or via the telephone, e-mail or their websites. Each organisation believes that it is important to provide a variety of ways of accessing information so that an individual can pick the method that best suits them.

4.2.2 All three services have tried to develop their electronic services in recent years. This includes ensuring their websites offer up-to-date information and advice on a variety of different topics. Other electronic systems are also being trialled. For example, the CAB has introduced electronic information kiosks in its offices which provide the same information as their website, using touch-screen technology. The kiosks are becoming increasingly popular, especially when positioned prominently with a skilled worker on hand to encourage their use. Job Centre Plus also uses similar equipment to enable customers to access the latest job vacancies and training opportunities.



- 4.2.3 Each organisation acknowledges, however, that electronic information is not a panacea for everyone. Instead, some people will always prefer face-to-face contact and could be deterred from accessing a service if this method of communication was not available. The way in which face-to-face contact is dealt with varies, however, amongst the services.
- 4.2.4 Job Centre Plus, for example, is increasingly using booked appointments only. People can just walk in off the street, but there is no guarantee that they will be able to see an advisor and so may have to make an appointment and come back. In contrast, NHS Direct actively encourages the public to visit one of their 85 Walk-In Centres, located in town centres across the country. They are open seven days a week and no appointment is necessary.
- 4.2.5 The approach taken by the CAB in relation to face-to-face contact is slightly different again. Currently, each CAB office decides how it will manage the delivery of services. This means that while some provide drop-in services for face-to-face customers, others operate an appointment only system. During 2007/08, the CAB is introducing a gateway assessment approach to service delivery which aims to make the service more consistent across the board by:
- Showing clearly the defined routes into the CAB service (i.e. personal callers, telephone callers and users of electronic services);
 - Taking staff through the best route to help their clients to make the process more efficient and effective;
 - Ensuring information is given at an appropriate level, with people being given the tools to help themselves as much as possible.
- 4.2.6 This approach recognises that:
- Some people can resolve their own problems with minimal help;
 - Others can resolve them after detailed advice or a brief intervention on their behalf;
 - Those in greatest need, require a skilled adviser.
- 4.2.7 This approach also acknowledges that users will have a preferred method of contacting the CAB and although some people may be able to use an alternative approach to get information, others will not be able to do so. This means that different options need to continue to be made available. In addition, it recognises that the CAB cannot and should not attempt to be all things to all people. Instead, other agencies or specialist CAB services may be better equipped to deal with particular problems or groups of people. In these cases, clients should be signposted to the most appropriate organisation.
- 4.2.8 All three services therefore emphasise the importance of having a variety of ways of accessing information and advice. In each case, electronic services are being increased with the aim of enabling customers to access information themselves wherever possible. This then frees up the time of advisers to help those who need to speak to someone in person.



4.3 Local Organisations

- 4.3.1 In 2006/2007, £2.7 million was spent on grants to voluntary sector agencies providing information/advice/advocacy on legal entitlements. The bulk of this sum (£2 million) went to agencies holding the Community Legal Services Quality Mark at General Help Level or above. This continues support given over many years to local organisations and supports the aims of the Birmingham Community Strategy (including the need to reduce poverty by increasing take-up of benefits, to improve access to advice and information services and to develop the voluntary sector).
- 4.3.2 These organisations provide similar services to Neighbourhood Offices to some degree. A couple of examples are given below.

Birmingham Asian Resource Centre

- 4.3.3 The Centre serves the needs of the local communities, most of which are Asian. It provides advice and assistance on social security, debt, immigration, nationality and asylum, family and matrimonial, consumer matters, housing, Council Tax Benefit through regular advice sessions. The Centre provides information, advice and assistance in relation to all housing matters including homelessness, housing applications, transfers, repairs, Home Improvement Grants and provides support for victims of racial harassment. All major Asian languages including Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Sylheti, Gujarati and Mirpuri are spoken.
- 4.3.4 In 2005/06, 64% of enquiries related to welfare benefits (including housing, health & Council Tax) with 14% relating to other financial queries (advice on arrears, rent, mortgage and general money advice) and 20% on housing queries (housing applications, transfers, repairs, improvements, homelessness, tenancy queries). The remaining 2% related to education, employment and environmental concerns.

Birmingham Settlement

- 4.3.5 Birmingham Settlement offers free and confidential money advice services. The Settlement provides information and practical assistance, enabling people to see a way through what are often stressful and embarrassing times.

St. James Community Support and Advice Centre

- 4.3.6 The St. James Community Support and Advice Centre offers information and advice for the local community, particularly around benefits, immigration, nationality, debt, housing problems and legal issues. They serve the local community (Aston, Nechells, Perry Barr, Erdington, Newtown, Witton, Small Heath). Over 50% of St James' clients are Bangladeshi and 90% of users are from the Sylheti and Mirpuri communities.



4.4 Summary

4.4.1 This examination of other organisations sets Neighbourhood Offices in the context of other advice and information services – both large volume organisations and local organisations funded by the City Council.

4.4.2 This raises several ideas worthy of further exploration:

- Co-location with other services – as we have seen in Nottingham in particular, this is something already done in other areas of the country. Having larger centres with many purposes would increase footfall and therefore perhaps usage of all services. This will not be appropriate in all situations but certainly some consideration could be given to working more closely with the NHS for example. We recognise that this is being considered within the city in the Business Transformation stream 'Working for the Future' – and in some cases is already happening;
- The smaller organisations tend to focus on specific local communities, yet the services to some degree replicate those provided by Neighbourhood Offices. This therefore raises the question of duplication and whether there is scope for the City Council to reduce its funding of other organisations or contract out certain information and advice services.

4.4.3 Detailed investigation of these options is beyond the scope of the Scrutiny Review, however they should be considered as part of the Customer First review of Neighbourhood Offices. In particular, any gap in Birmingham City Council provision should be considered, and how other organisations can complement existing services.



5 Customer First

5.1 Introduction

5.1.1 The Customer First Business Transformation programme is one of the city's nine Business Transformation programmes and aims to ensure that the City Council provides "world class customer service". The Programme will be delivered through a four and a half year plan.

5.1.2 The Full Business Case was approved by Procurement Cabinet Committee in April 2007. This was arrived at after:

- A review of strategies and visions across the Council;
- Discussion with officers in all Directorates;
- Service reviews and analysis;
- Customer focus groups from the People's Panel.

5.1.3 The Business Case sets out the city-wide model, with the revised programme budget and target benefits.

5.2 The Customer First Vision

5.2.1 Customer First sets out the following vision:

"Simplicity: Imagine if the customer hadn't been passed from pillar to post, and they could easily access services using the method they prefer at a convenient time.

Personal Service: Imagine being able to tailor services to our customer's needs, knowing what drives their satisfaction and how to resolve the causes of contact and complaints.

Professionalism: Imagine if our staff delivered a consistent high quality of customer service every time in a safe and welcoming environment.

Efficiency: Imagine being able to solve most of our customers' problems there and then, at the first point of contact, and being able to track enquiries through to delivery."

5.2.2 This vision is intended to deliver eight outcomes:

- Simple and convenient access to all Council services across a choice of methods;
- More transactions completed at the first point of contact with the customer;
- Being able to follow a transaction through from the point of contact to delivery, so that performance is visible to staff, Members and customers;
- Consistent and improved standards of customer handling;



- Customers dealt with by proactive, knowledgeable customer focused staff, empowered to put the customer first;
- Use of knowledge about the Council's customers to both ensure the way services are delivered effectively meets customer needs and outcomes, and that the Council resolves the root causes of customer contact and complaints;
- Increased awareness of the City Council's services;
- Increased customer and staff satisfaction.

5.3 Future Operating Model

5.3.1 The Customer First programme has also started to develop the models and practices which will yield these results. These include:

- Developing the *Customer Insight* tool;
- Optimising *customer access* to Council services;
- Resolving customers' interactions efficiently through a *graded response model*.

5.3.2 The following sections below detail some of these capabilities.

Customer Insight

5.3.3 Customer Insight is about bringing together the range of data the City Council holds on customers to have a deeper understanding of customer needs and preferences through the analysis of the different data.

5.3.4 It is also the aim to have a system whereby customer details are verified once. In other words, when a customer needs to visit or contact the Council more than once, they will not need to keep giving the same details in order to have the problem diagnosed. This will give the customer a better experience and will lead to more efficient processes. Having a Single Customer Record will also enable greater co-ordination across departments and services.

Customer Access

5.3.5 A second thread relates to how customers access Council services. There are a number of options here:

- The Website: One website for information and transactions. There are currently over 50 relating to the City Council. Customers will also have a personal account to access certain services.
- One contact centre will deal with phone, e-mail, text and post, aiming to complete as many transactions as possible at the first point of contact. One telephone number, one email address and one postal address, for those customers who do not know who to contact within the City Council.



Neighbourhood Offices

- Face-to-face: rationalised access and delivery around a community hub (major and mini) and spoke model, plus a city centre “one stop shop”.
- The Major Community Hubs will provide a first response for all city services, with as much as possible resolved at first point of contact – i.e. simple transactions, payments, information and complaints for all services. In addition, there will be a full range of second response, including housing, benefits, environmental services, health services for adults and children, including education services.
- There will also be internet and phone services through kiosks.
- Mini hubs will be smaller versions of the above, with reduced second response capability based on customer need and demand. These will be supplemented by the “spokes”, which will be placed in a variety of locations – typically libraries, schools, leisure centres – with indirect access through kiosks with internet access and phone hotlines to Council supported facilities.

Graded Response Model

5.3.6 The graded response model varies the resources according to the nature of the problem. Simple (transactional) services will be dealt with by generalists where as more complicated queries require specialists. The response levels will be:

- *1st Response Level* – a wide range of enquiries and simple service and information requests are processed at this level;
- *2nd Response Level* – more complex, sensitive or longer queries are handled and sit within a team who have more in-depth understanding of the customer’s specific needs;
- *Specialist Response* – the processes and activities carried out by the case workers and service delivery specialists who will focus all of their time on each individual customer case or job that they are working on.

5.3.7 The programme will use the graded response model to develop an approach that makes it easy for the customer to do business with the Council. The customer will not need to know how the Council is structured internally and will be able to resolve multiple needs at a single point of contact. The Council will manage the enquiry from first response through to full resolution through a combination of customer service representatives and specialist staff in the operating departments.

5.4 Next Steps

5.4.1 Customer First does not yet have a fixed view as to what services will look like. The next stage of the programme is “Common Design”, which will look at how service areas will fit into the operating model. Customer First will continue to work with the service areas and the Working for the Future programme (property arm of Business Transformation) to define this.



- 5.4.2 A revised Business case, including revised costs, implementation plan and benefits case (with benefits cards signed off by service areas) are being developed within this current Common Design Phase, with completion due January 2008, when this will be presented again to Procurement Cabinet Committee.



6 Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

6.1.1 The impetus for this Scrutiny Review was to address the question:

What role do Neighbourhood Offices fulfil and how should this be best developed?

6.1.2 In this section, we outline our answers and corresponding conclusions and recommendations to the Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety and Deputy Leader to take forward.

6.1.3 Overall, the evidence shows us that Neighbourhood Offices are currently a compromise – fulfilling specific needs very well, but not serving the whole community. Whether this is a problem or not depends upon what role the Council needs Neighbourhood Offices to fulfil. It is our belief that Neighbourhood Offices do not currently have a clear role in face-to-face customer services within the city, and this needs addressing before more detailed recommendations can be made about the operation of Neighbourhood Offices.

6.2 The Role of Neighbourhood Offices

A Valued and Valuable Service

6.2.1 It is clear that Neighbourhood Offices are very much appreciated by users, who give high satisfaction ratings with the service they receive. This is reflected in the re-awarding of a Charter Mark. Simultaneously, Neighbourhood Offices are contributing to city-wide targets on processing benefits claims resulting in the prompt payment of claims, and in dealing with homelessness through Home Options, a national example of best practice. Neighbourhood Offices provide both valued and valuable services, which are flexible enough to deal with sudden demand, such as after the closure of the Longbridge MG Rover plant in 2005.

6.2.2 Neighbourhood Offices are also genuinely local – with 32 across the city, this is more local offices than any other Core City. They are also managed locally, with locally-based managers able to shape services, particularly through the use of surgeries, to meet local demand.

6.2.3 The approach taken by Neighbourhood Offices is more in-depth than a standard “one stop shop”, which tends to be a front-office service only, passing queries to a back-office. Neighbourhood Offices in Birmingham not only deal with the verification of benefits claims – which means they are ready for immediate payment – but take a multi-problem approach, enabling advisors to provide information and advice to the customer on matters other than the problem with which the customer came in. Members of the Committee were impressed with the dedication of Neighbourhood Office staff and the obvious commitment to providing a first class service.



- 6.2.4 This approach is very positive in engaging with people who perhaps most need assistance from the City Council. However, it also highlights one of the difficulties we found in examining Neighbourhood Offices: it is not clear how Neighbourhood Offices fit into the picture of face-to-face customer services across the Council. Whilst Neighbourhood Offices were originally conceived as being access points for all Council services, the reality is that only a limited number of Council services can be directly accessed at Neighbourhood Offices, although advisors will provide assistance where necessary.
- 6.2.5 This uncertainty of focus is typified by the performance on the telephone answering standard. With advisors focusing on providing high quality, thorough, face-to-face interviews, it is clear that telephones do not always get answered as quickly as they should. It may be that this is a necessary consequence of the Neighbourhood Office approach and limited resources – but do customers understand this? The fact that telephone response was one of customers' top three complaints suggests not.
- 6.2.6 It was noticeable when considering the Core Cities approach to providing this kind of service that most had a distinct, stated customer services strategy, which integrated face-to-face, telephone and on-line options for contact. In contrast, whilst Neighbourhood Offices and Contact Birmingham work together on some issues, they operate largely independently.
- 6.2.7 The lack of an over-arching customer strategy was highlighted in the Scrutiny Review of Developing Customer Services (2004), and is now being addressed through Customer First. As Customer First is still in the relatively early stages, the place of Neighbourhood Offices within the overall picture has not yet been made explicit and there are still key questions to be answered. Will they become absorbed into the "hubs" and "spokes", and if so how will the high quality benefits, Home Options and income maximisation services be protected? If they are to be kept separate, how will their role as part of the City Council's customer services be defined?

Resources

- 6.2.8 In terms of the Neighbourhood Offices themselves, we were also presented with evidence of limited and declining usage, and of resource constraints. The lack of resources is particularly clear when looking at some of the buildings. Two of the offices we visited were in poor condition with no prospect of additional money to improve them in the near future. Recent refurbishments (e.g. Saltley Neighbourhood Office) were paid for with money from the Council's capital budget.
- 6.2.9 The issue of co-location was raised in our evidence gathering – i.e. should Neighbourhood Offices share office space with other City Council or public service agencies. Other Local Authorities have gone down this route – e.g. Nottingham's Clifton Cornerstone. This is already being considered in Birmingham, for example in Northfield Constituency, offices are located next to the Connexions office and they may be scope to pursue this further under the Working for the Future Business Transformation programme.



Declining Usage

- 6.2.10 There is also the issue of declining usage (see 2.1.5). This is a general decrease in number of specific enquires, although at times usage can increase dramatically (such as after the Longbridge closure) and reception enquiries have increased over recent years.
- 6.2.11 In the 2004 Annual MORI Survey, 21% of respondents stated that they or their family used or benefited from Neighbourhood Offices. In addition, comparing the figures for usage in the 12 months prior to the survey being conducted show a year on year decrease:
- 2002 – 16% contacted a Neighbourhood Office in the previous 12 months;
 - 2003 – 8% contacted a Neighbourhood Office in the previous 12 months;
 - 2004 – 5% contacted a Neighbourhood Office in the previous 12 months.
- 6.2.12 These figures should be set in the context of declining overall contact with the City Council: 52% of respondents contacted the Council in some way in 2002, falling to 37% in 2004.
- 6.2.13 The 2004 Annual Survey was the last city-wide survey to ask specifically about Neighbourhood Offices.⁹ The 2006/07 Best Value Performance Indicator survey addressed questions around how people contact the Council, but did not ask about Neighbourhood Offices. When asked how they made contact with the Council on their most recent contact, the majority reported making contact by telephone (77%), around one in five in person (25%), 7% by letter, 4% by email, and 2% via the website.¹⁰
- 6.2.14 However, it should be noted that declining usage may not be as a result of a decline in demand but rather a lack of access due to reducing resources. Other factors may include the difficulty in getting through to Neighbourhood Offices by telephone, if opening times cannot be confirmed for example. As already noted, however, there are fewer Neighbourhood Offices today than five years ago. There is a need to look at unmet demand – a piece of work around this is currently being undertaken by the Neighbourhood Office Support Unit (NOSU).

The Short Term

- 6.2.15 The Customer First programme clearly still has some way to go and will take some time to implement. However, there are some immediate issues of concern to Members.
- 6.2.16 Primarily this is around the information available on the performance of Neighbourhood Offices and Contact Birmingham and how this is communicated to Members. In particular, the issue of the Neighbourhood Offices closing due to lack of staff is of particular concern and it is suggested that Members should be kept informed when offices are closed during advertised opening hours in their Constituency.

⁹ The Annual Survey was not conducted in 2005 or 2006.

¹⁰ The results of the face to face survey.



Conclusions

1. We recognise that Neighbourhood Offices are a popular access point to Council services. It is clear that they also provide services to meet specific needs, often to our most vulnerable citizens.
2. It is not practical to commit significantly greater resources to Neighbourhood Offices in their current configuration. We feel that the approach should be to reassess their role post-Localisation and understand declining usage.
3. However, clarity is needed about how Neighbourhood Offices fit into the overall picture of the City Council's front line customer services.
4. We can understand the benefits of the 'Major Hub' model of providing face-to-face services. However, before committing to this wholeheartedly, we need to understand better:
 - a. The impact on current Neighbourhood Office facilities; and
 - b. The detail of how 'Mini Hubs' and 'Spokes' will operate;
 - c. How the first and second response will be managed and if this is to be a corporate structure, how this will accommodate directorate and local priorities.
5. We have concerns over the consistency and effectiveness of help provided by Contact Birmingham. We are aware of cases where customers have simply been referred to Neighbourhood Offices when assistance could have been provided.
6. We have some concerns over short-notice closure of Neighbourhood Offices during advertised opening hours. Keeping local Members and Constituency Directors aware of decisions to close offices on a daily basis is essential.
7. There must also be oversight of performance on opening times at a Constituency level. This will assist Members and Constituency Directors in maintaining a level of constructive challenge to keep offices open.



	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R01	<p>It should be made clear what role Neighbourhood Offices should fulfil both in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • delivering customer services across the city to corporate standards; and • delivering localised and devolved services for the local population. <p>The name of the service should reflect this role.</p>	Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety and the Deputy Leader, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing	29 February 2008
R02	<p>Customer First refers to the need for a single customer record. The Committee is keen to see the detail of this when available, in particular the extent to which Neighbourhood Offices and Contact Birmingham systems will be integrated. A report should therefore be brought to the Local Services and Community Safety O&S Committee.</p>	Deputy Leader	29 February 2008
R03	<p>To ensure that service performance meets specified standards, Constituency Committee Members should receive regular performance information on the service. Members should also be provided with examples where services have gone beyond the requirements of the Service Level Agreement or the Service Specification, and where they have fallen significantly below those requirements.</p>	Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety	31 December 2007

6.3 The Future

6.3.1 When looking at how Neighbourhood Offices should be developed into the future, we were conscious of two things:

- That a policy decision is needed as to the role the City Council wants Neighbourhood Offices to play;
- That decision ought to come about as a result of Customer First – the Business Transformation programme developing a city-wide customer framework.

6.3.2 However, there were a number of issues raised as a part of this Scrutiny Review that we would like to emphasise, including:

- The importance of having face-to-face contact with citizens;
- The relationship between services provided and accessibility issues.

6.3.3 The discussion and conclusions under these headings look to the future and the implementation of Customer First. However, there are also some more short term issues, relating to the current configuration of Neighbourhood Offices that also need addressing.



Face-to-Face Services

- 6.3.4 Firstly, we acknowledge the importance of providing face-to-face contact with our customers, particularly with regard to Housing and Council Tax Benefit claims. We also recognise the merit of Neighbourhood Offices being much more than a referral or reception service, particularly with regard to benefits provision, and we are happy to endorse the findings of the Charter Mark Assessor.
- 6.3.5 However, we also have to address the reality of declining usage and the changing preferences of customers. This will vary according to the service – for example a survey undertaken by the Department for Work and Pensions found that only 1% of Housing Benefit/Council Tax Benefit claimants would choose to use the internet as a means of contact.¹¹
- 6.3.6 We therefore re-iterate the need for the role of Neighbourhood Offices to be clearly set amongst a range of contact options for customers – linking up with the Community Strategy on the “Digital City” and increasing internet use. We should be clear, within Customer First, that we are preparing a customer strategy for the future – for ten/fifteen years hence – and whether a large number of offices dedicated to providing face-to-face services will necessarily be the best and most efficient way of providing Council services.

Services and Accessibility

- 6.3.7 Part of the issue around declining usage relates to the services offered. Other Local Authorities – in particular Nottingham – have looked at the services they offer customers, and encouraged a range to ensure maximum footfall. The focus should be on services that people want to access face-to-face (such as benefit claims and homelessness, but extending to perhaps the purchase of leisure cards or collection of containers for waste, alongside NHS facilities or even a Post Office). There will always be services that most people prefer to access in other ways, such as paying Council Tax by direct debit or on-line, and non-usage of these at places such as Neighbourhood Offices should not be taken as an indication that they are failing.
- 6.3.8 The key is to provide a range of services in the manner in which people want to access them. This relates directly to accessibility issues – particularly opening hours. Questions were raised by Members about opening times of offices and the accessibility of the service for those employed and with caring responsibilities, i.e. whether the service was provided when it was needed.
- 6.3.9 Some discussion took place on options for adjusting office opening hours to evenings and weekends and employing additional staff. Additionally, unsocial working hours could have cost implications. It was highlighted that offices were busiest during mornings and when Neighbourhood Offices had opened later (to 1800 hours) there were problems with reaching back office staff to resolve queries. In addition, evidence suggested that those who used the service at these times were not new customers – rather ones that would have used the office during the day

¹¹ Department for Work and Pensions, issued on 30th November 2006 at the Housing Benefit Security Roadshow.



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anyway. Some offices opened on Saturdays during the introduction of the Community Charge (Poll Tax) but no records were kept as to the effectiveness of this.

- 6.3.10 The experience of other Local Authorities reflects this, but the experience of Nottingham and Liverpool in particular shows that the success of longer opening hours is dependent on what services are offered. It is unlikely that Neighbourhood Offices, which offer mainly benefits advice would need to open at weekends, but a genuine one-stop shop (with information on leisure activities, and perhaps selling tickets, for example) would benefit from opening hours outside working hours.
- 6.3.11 Part of the issue is that Neighbourhood Offices are often perceived to exist for housing and benefits advice only, and indeed are sometimes referred to as the "rent office". This does largely reflect the proportion of enquiries, but is also a matter of perception. This is not aided by the condition of many of the buildings – generally old and in need of some attention.
- 6.3.12 Customer First will address many of these issues, but it is important to emphasise the need to link properly with Working to the Future – the Business Transformation programme looking at Council-owned property. Some form of rationalisation is perhaps inevitable. However, this would need to be sensitive to local needs, resulting in fewer buildings, but of a higher quality, providing there is no compromise on accessibility of location or on quality of the reception service.

Conclusions

8. **We are supportive of the broad aim of moves to review and rationalise Neighbourhood Offices. However, we must stress that if this results in fewer facilities, this must deliver higher quality facilities with improved services and should not be about reducing resources.**
9. **Any review should also seek to ensure appropriate accessibility is maximised.**
10. **Whilst there is scope for efficiency improvement in dealing with simple, transactional services, within the Council's delivery of services there will always be a need to provide services face-to-face.**



	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R04	<p>In Customer First's review of the provision of services through Neighbourhood Offices, key aims must include improvements to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to services (i.e. physical, transport, opening hours, compliance to opening hours); • Links to public transport and access to parking; • Appropriate use of surgeries outside Neighbourhood Offices. <p>Evidence that these have been thoroughly considered as options should be presented to the Local Services and Community Safety O&S Committee.</p>	Deputy Leader	29 February 2008

6.4 Summary

- 6.4.1 The evidence we have gathered thus far does show Neighbourhood Offices offering an excellent service to the people who use the services. However, they are not configured to serve the whole community, nor are they a true "one stop shop" as not all Council services can be accessed via a Neighbourhood Office. Convenient location and physical accessibility are issues in many cases, perhaps with too many offices for the resources allocated and too many in poor quality buildings.
- 6.4.2 It was suggested during the Scrutiny Review, and we concurred, that if a Neighbourhood Office network were to be set up today, it would look very different to what we currently have. We have concluded that there are fundamental questions to be addressed about the purpose of the City Council's Neighbourhood Offices. There needs to be greater clarity about what the City Council and the people of Birmingham need Neighbourhood Offices to be, and there needs to be a clear policy direction on this issue.
- 6.4.3 It is not the place of the Committee to set that policy. We acknowledge that both Customer First and Working for the Future will have a significant impact on the setting of this policy and we await the outcome of these. However, we will continue to pursue issues specific to Neighbourhood Offices.
- 6.4.4 Critical to this is ensuring that Neighbourhood Offices contribute to the key outcomes that the City Council is trying to achieve through the Council Plan, and whether this is being achieved in the most cost effective way. We will therefore be continuing to monitor whether there is any duplication by other service providers and whether there are new ways of working to maximise efficiency and coverage of services across the city, ensuring that residents are consulted and changes are sensitive to local needs.



Neighbourhood Offices

6.4.5 Many of the recommendations in this report call for more detail as Customer First develops. To keep the Committee informed of progress in implementing the recommendations within this report, the Deputy Leader and the Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety is recommended to report back on progress periodically. This will be carried out through the established tracking process.

	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R05	Progress towards achievement of these recommendations should be reported to the Local Services and Community Safety Overview and Scrutiny Committee in March 2008. Subsequent progress reports will be scheduled by the Committee thereafter, until all recommendations are implemented.	Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety	10 March 2008



Appendix 1: Evidence gathering

Visits to four Neighbourhood Offices across three Constituencies – our thanks to:

- Yardley Wood Neighbourhood Office: Michael Kenneally (Manager), Jan Satterley (Service Development Officer), Jane Cross (Local Housing Manager).
- Maypole Neighbourhood Office: Carol Gordon (Housing Service Manager).
- Small Heath Neighbourhood Office: Melanie Dewell (Neighbourhood Office Manager) and Dave Allport (Interim Constituency Director).
- Saltley Neighbourhood Office: Peter Barratt (Neighbourhood Office Manager) and Rob James (Constituency Director).

Evidence received at Committee from Ian James and Lesley Ariss from the Neighbourhood Office Support Unit (NOSU) and the Charter Mark Assessor, Mary Allen.

Meetings with Jan Evans, Chris Gibbs, David Collier and Martin O'Neill charged with delivering Council Tax and Benefits services across the Council;

Written evidence from the Constituency Chairs and Directors from the following Constituencies:

- Edgbaston,
- Erdington,
- Hodge Hill,
- Selly Oak,
- Sutton Coldfield.

Additional evidence was received from Dawn Flook from the Customer First Business Transformation programme, and from officers working at Contact Birmingham, in particular Georgina Foxwell and Jason Price.

Introduction

1. This specification sets out the standards to be met by Constituencies in relation to the provision of the Neighbourhood Advice and Information Service.
2. It describes the range of services to be provided as well as the quality standards, which will govern those services. The specification also sets out minimum requirements in terms of monitoring and reporting on standards.
3. The service has always benefited from a number of City-wide procedures e.g. the ability to use resources flexibly to meet the needs of staff or in times of local shortages. It is intended that this facility will remain in place.
4. For Constituencies to deliver these services and standards they will require a range of professional and technical support services, much of which will be provided from the Local Services Strategic Directorate. These will include policy and performance management support, information provision and staff development and training. The strategic priorities for the service for 2007/8 are set out at Appendix V.
5. Additionally the delivery of many of these services will be on the basis of Service Level Agreements. These will provide the detailed requirements for specific Constituency customer services together with the responsibilities on the commissioning service departments to support the customer services operation.
6. A Constituency will provide sufficient capacity to meet the local need for face to face services in terms of access to advice, information, delivery and referral services in relation to:
 - All Council Services.
 - Other Statutory, public and voluntary services including national welfare benefits and debt and money advice.

Service Description - Council Services

7. Advice, information and referral mechanisms should be provided for all Council Services.
8. In addition, Constituencies will be responsible for providing front end services in respect of key Council services as follows:
 - **Benefit Service** - Constituencies will provide all face to face customer services on behalf of the Benefits Service including:

CONSTITUENCY SERVICE SPECIFICATION 2007/8
NEIGHBOURHOOD ADVICE & INFORMATION SERVICE

- Assistance with making claims;
 - Assistance to maximise all benefit;
 - Explanation of decisions and rights of appeal;
 - Access to complaints processes;
 - Providing a verification service;
 - Completing transactions as agreed; and
 - Detection and reporting of suspected fraud.
- **Revenues** - Constituencies will provide information and advice on all aspects of council tax liability, payments and accounts, recovery and enforcement. Specifically Constituencies will also be responsible for agreeing and instituting payment arrangements within City Council guidelines.
 - **Housing Services** - Constituencies will provide a comprehensive Home Options Service, for people who are potentially homeless and will provide a customer services function in relation to people who are roofless on-the-day. They will provide the front-end service for Council tenants in specified landlord/tenant matters.
 - **Social Care & Health** - Constituencies will provide appropriate referral arrangements in relation to child and adult protection duties of the Council and advice on and access to all services in this area.

Service Description - Other Statutory, Public & Voluntary Functions

9. Constituencies will provide advice and information and assistance with the following:
- Take up of national welfare benefits including participating in take up campaigns, proactive identification of benefit entitlement, assistance with claims, explanations and problem solving;
 - Debt and money advice including help with budgeting, negotiation with creditors and referral to specialist agencies;
 - Claims and problems associated with working and child tax credits;
 - Appropriate referral to specialist statutory and voluntary agencies for services not provided by the City - e.g. racial harassment reporting, specialist domestic violence services;
 - Subject to the agreement of existing proposals undertaking verification on behalf of the Pension Service in relation to claims for Pension Credits; and
 - Applications for charitable payments.

CONSTITUENCY SERVICE SPECIFICATION 2007/8
NEIGHBOURHOOD ADVICE & INFORMATION SERVICE

Method of Access

10. Constituencies will maintain a range of access arrangements to include:
- Drop in service;
 - Pre booked appointment service;
 - Home visiting service for people unable to visit offices due to health, disability or caring responsibilities; and
 - Responses to telephone and internet enquiries.

Standards of Service

11. There are a range of Customer Service standards with which Constituencies will be required to comply. These include national accreditation schemes for the service; other national standards including those related to national BVPI's; and local standards in terms of both facilities and customer service.

National Accreditation Schemes

12. Constituencies will be required to maintain accreditation with two national standards:
- The Community Legal Service General Help quality mark - a set of comprehensive advice work standards across all areas including strategic management, access and equalities, quality of advice and monitoring and case recording arrangements.
 - The Charter Mark - emphasising customer service and consultation and partnership working.

Other National Standards, BVPI's & City-wide Standards

13. Constituencies will be required to meet the following standards:
- **National Housing Benefit Standards for Customer Services** - The DWP requires Benefits Services to meet a number of services standards. These standards form part of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment. Constituency services will be required to meet customer services elements in terms of:
 - Reviewing customer needs, including DDA and RRA requirements
 - Response times to enquiries
 - Minimum opening times;
 - Providing a verification service
 - Promoting take-up of Housing Benefit/Council Tax Benefit
 - Feeding back customers' views and experiences as appropriate

CONSTITUENCY SERVICE SPECIFICATION 2007/8
NEIGHBOURHOOD ADVICE & INFORMATION SERVICE

- **BVPI's** - delivery of the front end of Benefit Service will mean that Constituencies are responsible for contributing to BVPI's in terms of:
 - Receipting and verifying new claims to improve the speed of processing (BVPI78a and 78b);
 - Receipting and verifying changes of circumstances (BVPI79); and
 - Claimant satisfaction.
 - **BVPI's** - delivery of the front end of Housing services will mean that Constituencies are responsible for contributing to BVPI's in terms of:
 - Number of cases where housing advice prevented homelessness (BV213);
 - Proportion of homeless households accepted in last 2 years (BV214);
 - Actions against domestic violence (BV225)
- **City-wide Standards** - Domestic Violence Services. These standards support safe and reliable services for those experiencing domestic violence. Constituencies will be required to meet the minimum standards covering:
 - Nature and methods of intervention in domestic violence.
 - Organisational requirements for delivering domestic violence services.

Local Service Standards

14. Local standards exist both in terms of customer services and facilities. Constituencies will be required to meet these standards.

In terms of service standards the following are required:

- Compliance with the performance management framework for advisers and managers.
 - Choice of gender of interviewer;
 - Maintaining a workforce reflecting the diversity of all communities within the City;
 - Advisers who are able to communicate in the main community languages and provision of interpreting arrangements where language need are not catered for;
 - Provision of BSL advisers;
 - Maintenance of a corporate approach to reception areas and public information and
 - Appropriate queue management systems to maximise privacy at reception.
15. Constituencies will be required to maintain existing facilities standards including:
- Disability access - ramps, automatic opening doors, toilet facilities;
 - Loop systems;
 - Open plan offices;
 - Private interview facilities on request;
 - Child play, nappy changing and breast feeding facilities; and
 - Upright chairs in waiting areas.

CONSTITUENCY SERVICE SPECIFICATION 2007/8
NEIGHBOURHOOD ADVICE & INFORMATION SERVICE

Monitoring Arrangements

16. Constituencies will be required to monitor and demonstrate their compliance with these standards. This will require:
- Use of a standard case recording system.
 - Regular reporting on critical service areas including:
 - Number of enquirers and service requests;
 - Waiting times;
 - Unscheduled office closures;
 - As agreed in SLA's, transactions completed on behalf of other Departments and services (e.g. the number of completed benefit claims achieved);
 - Equalities indicators against access and service provision;
 - The results of take up activity against locally agreed targets;
 - Compliance with CLS requirements; and
 - Compliance with domestic violence standards.

Appendix 3: Locations of Neighbourhood Offices Constituency Key

- | | |
|--|--|
|  EDGBASTON |  NORTHFIELD |
|  ERDINGTON |  PERRY BARR |
|  HALL GREEN |  SELLY OAK |
|  HODGE HILL |  SUTTON COLDFIELD |
|  LADYWOOD |  YARDLEY |





Appendix 4: Performance Data

Waiting Times

	Edg	Erd	HG	HH	Lad	Nor	PB	SO	SC	Yar	City	Target
% of callers seen at reception within 5 minutes	92	80	78	74	54	100	76	94	98	99	85	60
% of callers seen at reception within 15 minutes	99	93	93	89	80	100	83	98	98	100	93	80
% of on the day interviews within 30 minutes	89	79	60	91	80	50	88	80	97	71	79	80
% of appointments seen within 5 mins of appt time	75	70	92	77	50	92	86	73	100	0	72	80
% of appointments made for within 5 working days of request	77	47	70	69	71	80	74	92	0	0	58	80

Edg Edgbaston

Erd Erdington

HG Hall Green

HH Hodge Hill

Lad Ladywood

Nor Northfield

PB Perry Barr

SO Selly Oak

SC Sutton Coldfield

Yar Yardley



Closures

Percentage of advertised opening hours where office is actually open.

	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Quarter 4
City Average	<i>99.0%</i>	<i>99.3%</i>	<i>99.5%</i>	<i>99.8%</i>
Compliance	<i>100.0%</i>	<i>100.0%</i>	<i>100.0%</i>	<i>100.0%</i>
Edgbaston	100.0%	99.4%	100.0%	100.0%
Erdington	97.6%	100.0%	99.2%	100.0%
Hall Green	98.6%	99.8%	99.4%	99.6%
Hodge Hill	99.7%	99.6%	99.9%	100.0%
Ladywood	98.7%	100.0%	99.9%	99.3%
Northfield	100.0%	99.7%	100.0%	99.8%
Perry Barr	99.7%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Selly Oak	96.6%	96%	96.3%	99.8%
Sutton Coldfield	100.0%	99.0%	98.1%	100.0%
Yardley	99.4%	99.8%	100.0%	99.9%



Telephone Answering Standard

Calls answered within 6 rings.

	July 2006	November 2006	February 2007
Edgbaston	88.9%	88.9%	77.77%
Erdington	41.7%	75%	66.7%
Hall Green	44.4%	77.8%	88.88%
Hodge Hill	83.3%	100%	83.33%
Ladywood	26.7%	53.33%	53.33%
Northfield	33.3%	83.3%	100%
Perry Barr	55.6%	100%	88.88%
Selly Oak	83.3%	91.7%	91.7%
Sutton Coldfield	33.3%	100%	33.3%
Yardley	33.3%	83.33%	50%



Benefits “Buttoned Up” Claims

New claims processed and ready for payment.

	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Quarter 4
<i>City Average</i>	63%	63%	66%	69%
<i>Compliance</i>	70%	70%	70%	70%
Edgbaston	56%	53%	60%	62%
Erdington	68%	68%	68%	70%
Hall Green	68%	71%	72%	71%
Hodge Hill	64%	69%	65%	71%
Ladywood	64%	66%	66%	66%
Northfield	69%	66%	66%	70%
Perry Barr	70%	66%	67%	65%
Selly Oak	59%	64%	66%	73%
Sutton Coldfield	51%	51%	61%	68%
Yardley	58%	57%	66%	69%