

## IRRV AWARD SUBMISSION



### Introduction

Dartford Borough and Sevenoaks District are neighbouring Council areas in the north-west of Kent. The areas have a combined population of 207,000 people, around 90,000 homes and support 14,000 of the most vulnerable people through the payment of housing and council tax benefit.

Dartford Borough Council is recognised as a high performing Council through both CPA and CAA categorisation. The Council has a net budget of £13 million and collects £43.5 million in council tax and £79 million in business rates annually. The Council pays £30 million annually in housing and council tax benefits.

Sevenoaks District Council is rated in the top 2% of District Councils through CAA and is recognised as level 4 for the delivery of value of money. The Council has also been recognised for its work force practices. By embedding a unique culture of empowerment the Council was one of the first District Councils in the country to achieve the gold standard award for Investors in People and was also named the best district council to work for in The Times Awards in 2010. The Council has a net budget of £14 million and collects £67.5 million in council tax and £32.5 million in business rates annually. The Council pays £34 million annually in housing and council tax benefits.

In January 2010 both Dartford Borough and Sevenoaks District Councils agreed an ambitious partnership working project, to combine their Revenues and Benefits services in to a single shared service.

A delivery model was agreed that would deliver high levels of customer satisfaction, high levels of efficiency and quality, improved resilience and the targeted level of cashable savings of at least £250,000 per Council per year, with further targeted savings to be delivered in future years. Ambitiously the implementation plan was drawn up to move from two separate teams to a single team based on one site, with a single IT and customer service solution within 6 months, from June to December 2010.

What we believe to be the fastest and most effective shared service project of its type in the country was delivered on time and within budget. The drive, energy and commitment of senior management, support teams across both Councils and of course the front line staff has

delivered an excellent shared service and is a real demonstration of successful partnership working.

The project has been a resounding success;

- It was implemented in just 6 months, on time and within budget;
- Savings targets have been met and indeed stretched in future years;
- Challenging performance targets have been agreed to deliver excellent customer service; and
- Customer satisfaction remains high.

Our submission to the 'Excellence in Partnership Working' award demonstrates the exceptional amount of hard work and dedication that went in to delivering a partnership that delivers excellent customer service – as recognised by the customer, significant financial savings and the ongoing benefit of a business model that can be scaled up to introduce new partners and can also applied to other services.

This is the first opportunity to enter the team for national recognition for its achievements and one that both Councils value.



## Our Partnership

### Summary

At the end of 2009/10 Dartford Borough and Sevenoaks District Councils were employing a total of 77 full time equivalent employees and spending £4.6 million per year on their Revenues and Benefits Services.

A highly focussed six month period of implementation followed. Set up costs of £800k were allocated, to be repayable in less than two years from the savings to be generated from the partnership.

By April 2011 the partnership was in place and had been operating for 3 months with staff numbers reduced by 19%, to 62 full time equivalent staff, and the total annual budget reduced by 11% to £4.1 million. By planning ahead, holding vacant posts and offering re-training opportunities the number of redundancies were reduced to minimum levels.

Over a five year period in excess of £2.5 million will be realised in cashable efficiency savings.

In just 12 months Dartford and Sevenoaks Councils formed the initial partnership idea, developed a business model, presented a full report to Members and implemented a partnership arrangement that is saving £500,000 per year.

### Establishing the Partnership

Dartford Borough and Sevenoaks District Council each had an agreed a strategy to generate financial savings through partnership working. Management considered that there was significant scope for long term operational and efficiency savings to be delivered from a Revenues and Benefits partnership.

It was agreed to move forward as equal partners to determine a working model that met both Councils long term ambitions for its Revenues and Benefits service.

It was established that a future shared Revenues and Benefits service must deliver:

- Cashable savings of at least £200,000 per Council per year;
- Improved resilience;
- High customer satisfaction;
- High service efficiency and quality; and
- A model for wider application across other services.

After thorough investigation, consultation with Members and Officers and scenario testing it was evident that one service model would deliver the aims of the project.

Both Councils agreed that the project should proceed on the basis that the Revenues and Benefits partnership would be based in the offices of Sevenoaks District Council. As customer service was a key focus it was imperative to both Councils that customers were able to access the service from both Dartford and Sevenoaks, at their respective offices, contact centres and satellite offices, and that these should be integrated to accept customers from either area wherever possible. Customer focus was a key component in delivering the partnership.



## Our Partnership (continued)

### Project Management

The project set out ambitious timelines from the start, in order to minimise uncertainty for staff and customers and to maximise the financial opportunities the partnership offered. Initial discussions took place in January 2010, initial research, consultation and project scope were drawn up and presented to Members and approved in July 2010. From this point the ambition was to deliver a functioning one site service by January 2011, a 6 month implementation timetable. The timetable was met and the project was delivered within budget.

A strong governance framework was critically important to the projects success and the future success of the partnership. The Project Board steered the project and made major decisions. It consisted of a Director from each Council and the Head of Finance and Human Resources – the Project Manager.

A Project Team of key managers of each service from across both Councils provided the specialist skills and management advice that helped structure the service. The Project Team met regularly with the Project Board to ensure the right decisions were being made, targets were being met and problems being addressed. The Project Team played a key role in involving front line staff in all major decision making processes and feeding their comments back to the Project Board.

In addition at least 8 specialist roles were identified to provide professional advice to the project. These included Managers from Finance, ICT, Human Resources and Customer Services. Throughout the project focus and challenge was maintained with the support of external advice.

The Project Management structure was crucial to the success of the project. Key to its success was its ability to deal with challenges. These included:

- Addressing differences in organisational culture;
- Major changes to service critical IT systems;
- The physical distance between the two partner sites;
- Addressing difference in approaches to customer services for Revenues and Benefits;
- Designing a new work space for the partnership to be successful;
- Addressing differences in the terms and conditions of employment;
- Managing Member and Senior Management expectations; and
- Maintaining high levels of customer service during the project.

The most critical challenge, not mentioned above, was managing staff and maintaining morale. The project was a significant task for all involved and meant officers faced periods of uncertainty and potential changes to their jobs. The objective was to minimise the periods of uncertainty through a short 6 month implementation timetable and to ensure communication with all officers involved was a key focus.

All news, progress, challenges, concerns and highlights were communicated equally. Dedicated HR support was available individually and to groups of officers and a newsletter was issued weekly to keep officers informed on progress. Managers outside of the project were also regularly briefed on progress and were able to provide considered support.



## Our Partnership (continued)

### Overcoming Challenges

- Having a robust methodology which provides consensus on a single business case by involving staff and stakeholders.
- Ensuring there are clear and achievable objectives that all partners and stakeholders are working to.
- Direct involvement of Senior Managers – supporting efficient, effective and decisive decision making.
- Involving front line staff in all major decision making and the design of the service. Front line experience is invaluable.
- Embedding the principles of empowerment to increase productivity, a work force culture for which Sevenoaks is nationally recognised.
- Minimising periods of uncertainty – be decisive.
- Communicating – critical in bringing staff with you.
- Skills in business process re-engineering. Critical in defining appropriate work practices based on legal requirements and available resources.
- Regular project team meetings to ensure communication and involvement. Core Project team met weekly at critical times fortnightly otherwise and called in specialists as the phases of the project required this input.
- Minimising redundancy or loss of experienced staff by using vacant posts and flexibility around structure.
- Retraining ensured minimal losses of experienced staff, keeping down costs and maintaining morale.
- Accepting such a project will have a high level of risk and tailor processes to manage the high risk areas.
- Change Management Meetings – regular sessions between groups of staff and the project consultant allowed all staff to have a strong voice direct to the Project Board as well as providing a further informal communication opportunity. Many issues were identified and addressed through this approach.
- Appointing managers early in the process and act quickly to place staff in new structure.
- Involving the right people from across the organisation. Specialist advice and resource is essential in both planning and delivery of the project.
- Giving sufficient resource to managing IT projects, including the management of expectations and timelines for delivery.



## Our Structure

The Revenues and Benefits partnership employs 62 full time equivalent staff.

The Revenues Manager is responsible for the administration of Council Tax and Business Rates collection and recovery. The team is 22 full time equivalent staff.

The Benefits Manager is responsible for the administration of housing and council tax benefit assessment, payments and appeals. The team is 40 full time equivalent staff.

The Housing Benefit Fraud function is now part of an Audit, Risk and Anti-Fraud team which is also a partnership between Dartford Borough and Sevenoaks District Councils. The team is based at Dartford Borough Council, for reasons of operational efficiency.

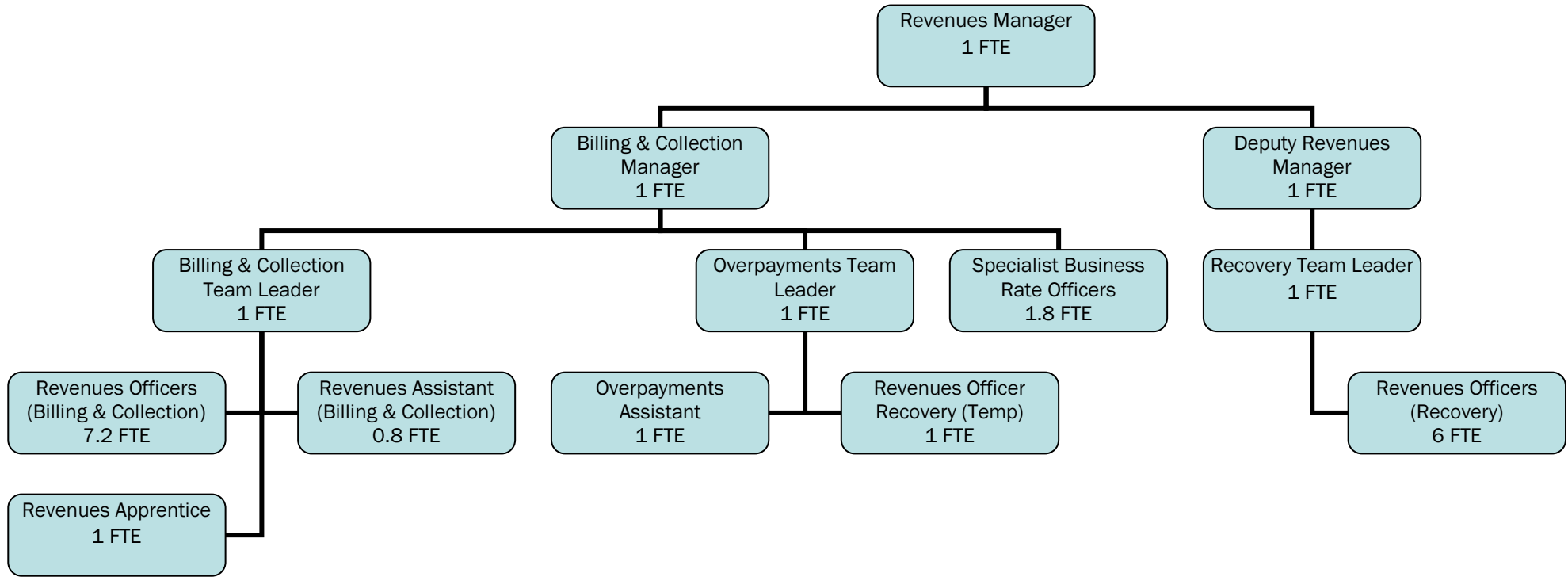
The Revenues and Benefits Managers report to the Head of Finance & Human Resources at Sevenoaks District Council who in turn reports to Directors at both Sevenoaks and Dartford on the progress and performance of the teams.

Support services such as Human Resources and IT are shared between the two councils, drawing on the particular skills at each site.

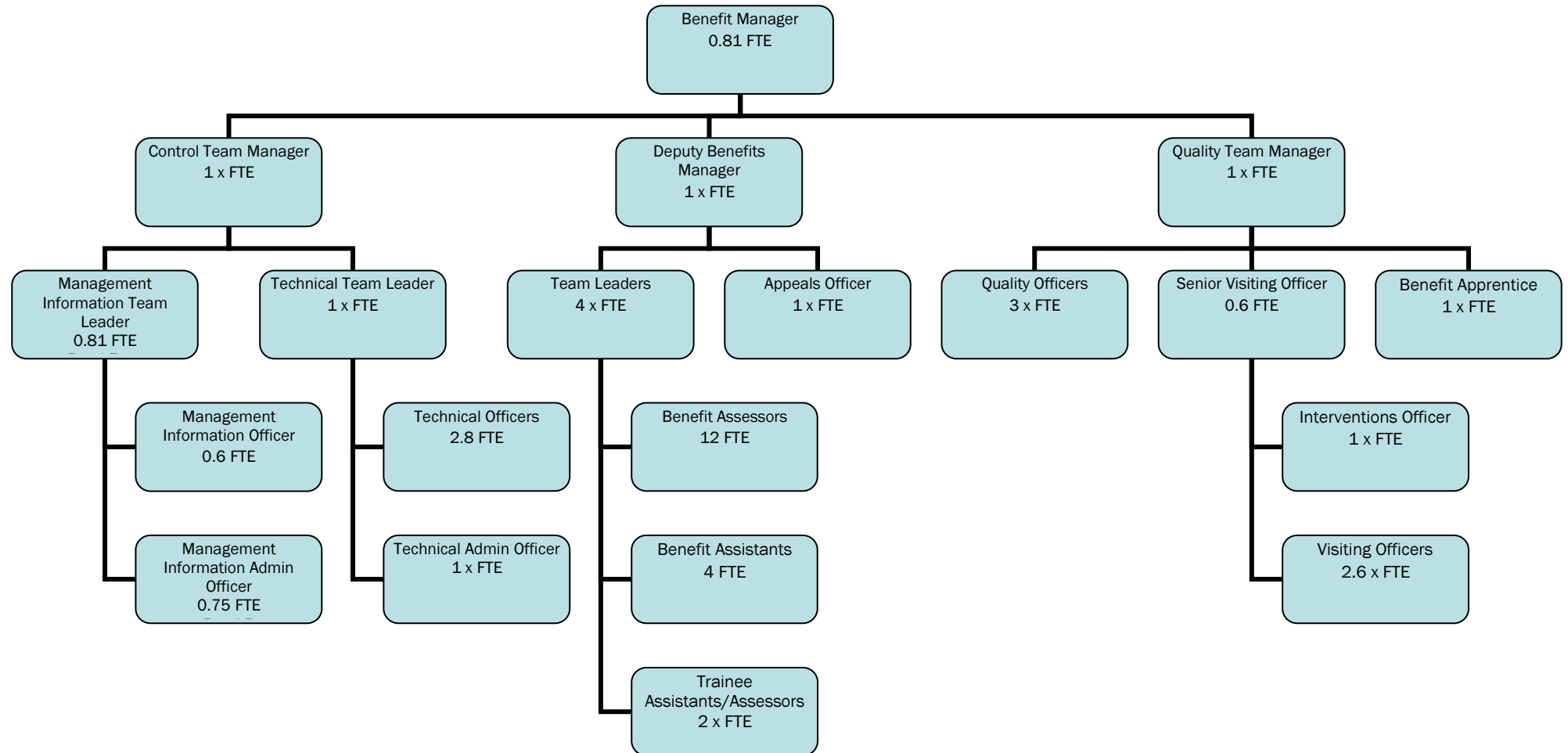
Customer Service support is provided by both Dartford Borough and Sevenoaks District Councils.

Structure charts for each of the teams are set out on the following pages.

# Revenues Structure Chart



## Benefits Structure Chart







## Our Structure (continued)

The partnership contributes to the delivery of key Council objectives at both Dartford Borough and Sevenoaks District Councils. The diagram below represents the contributions being made.



Each Council continues to adopt its own approach to Service Planning. However within these two approaches the overall objectives of the service remain the same.

Extracts from the Revenues and Benefits Service Plans are provided on the next page, setting out the teams objectives for 2011/12.

### Revenues Service Objectives

1	Achieve or exceed the performance targets for Revenues for both DBC and SDC for 2011/12
2	Deliver the planned savings from joint working for 2011/12
3	Promote the take-up of automated payment methods, particularly direct debit
4	Promote the take-up of reliefs for Business Rates, particularly Small Business Rate Relief
5	Utilise tailored payment arrangements where appropriate for Business Rates to contribute towards the sustainability of the local economy
6	Promote discounts, exemptions and council tax benefit take-up
7	Improve and align processes, building one team within Revenues, developing staff and improving efficiency
8	Develop a marketing strategy and look for opportunities to deliver services for other authorities

### Benefits Service Objectives

1	Actively encourage those eligible for benefits to claim what they are entitled to
2	Effectively manage the relationship with landlords and benefits advice agencies through the Benefits Forum
3	Achieve or exceed the performance targets for the Benefits Service in 2011/12
4	Deliver the planned savings from joint working for 2011/12
5	Improve and align processes, building one team within Benefits, developing staff and improving efficiency
6	Develop a marketing strategy and look for opportunities to deliver services for other authorities



## Our Structure (continued)

### A leading service

As well as making a significant contribution to the achievement of each Councils corporate objectives the Revenues and Benefits Partnership is recognised at both Dartford Borough and Sevenoaks District Councils as a flag ship model for the future development of partnership working.

Revenues and Benefits are critically important services to both Councils and the customers they serve. It was a significant risk for the service to become the first major partnership venture with another local authority for each Council. The success of the project in terms of delivering an effective shared service in a short period of time, with significant financial savings and minimal impact on the quality of service whilst the project was delivered has ensured it will be an exemplar for future projects.

The service model adopted is transferable across services and work has already begun on developing a similar partnership arrangement for the Environmental Health services of Dartford Borough and Sevenoaks District Councils.

The lessons learned from the Revenues and Benefits partnership will also strengthen both Councils ability to be successful in future partnership working projects.



## Our Service – Good Practice and Innovations

### Customer Service

Ensuring high levels of customer service were maintained during the implementation of the partnership and in the final service model were of critical importance.

To this end it was agreed at the outset that a Customer Service function would remain available at the main offices of both Councils. Additionally the main phone line services for revenues and benefits enquiries for each Council would remain in place and town and parish offices delivering a revenues and benefits service would all be retained. A decision was also made to strengthen the access to services by internet.

To ensure the partnership delivered the greatest level of efficiency and customer service it was agreed that customers that were traditionally from either Dartford or Sevenoaks would be able to manage their enquiry at any office or phone line or web service offered by either Council.

To achieve this critical customer service outcome required innovative IT solutions and considerable support from skilled officers within the Customer Services function of each Council.

### Examples

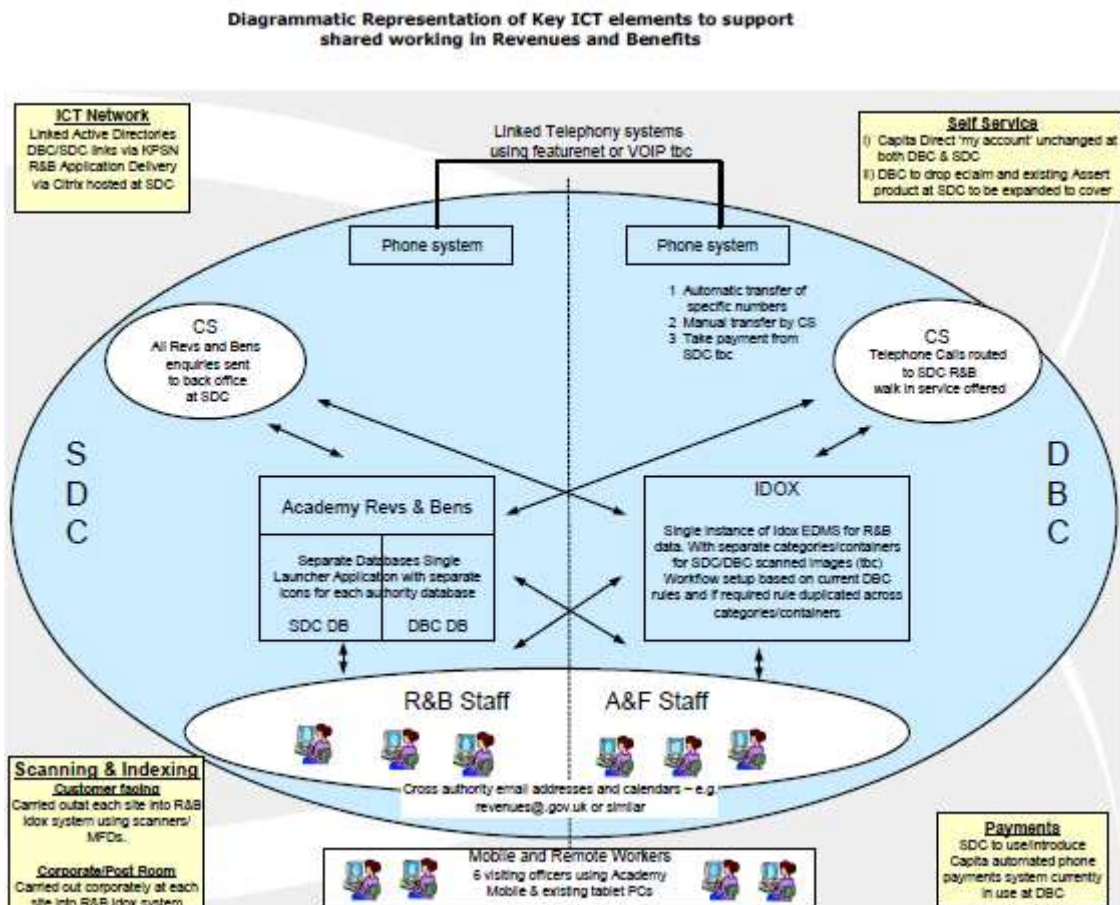
- Any phone call placed to the Dartford Borough Council revenues or benefits phone line will be seamlessly transferred to the officers based in the Sevenoaks offices. This seamless transfer ensures phone calls can be dealt with at the first point of contact.
- A Sevenoaks customer that lives in a rural part of the District would find it more convenient to manage their enquiry at Dartford offices as it is closer to their home. This is now in place and Sevenoaks customers are now accessing the service via the Dartford front office and all elements of their enquiry are being met as joint IT systems for revenues and benefits are accessible from either partner's offices.
- A Dartford customer is asked to provide some additional paperwork in support of their claim for benefits. They live near a Town Council office in Swanley which is in Sevenoaks District. At their convenience the customer is able to take the documentation to Swanley where it will be scanned in to the document imaging system and be instantly available to the officer managing their claim. The officer may be at the Sevenoaks office or equally could be working from home with full access to the systems to proceed with the claim.
- A Sevenoaks customer is visiting family in Swanscombe, a parish in Dartford Borough. That morning they had received a reminder for a council tax payment. The customer whilst in Swanscombe can visit the local office and make their council tax payment using the automated phone payment agent or be assisted to telephone the main partnership office to seek further assistance.



## Our Service – Good Practice and Innovations (continued)

### The use of IT

Underpinning the seamless service delivered to customers of the Revenues and Benefits service is a sophisticated IT system that directly links both Councils. The diagram below shows the integration of the IT network underpinning the service.



Using innovative solutions and as a strategic member of the award winning Kent Public Service Network (KPSN) it has been possible to deliver:

- The transfer of telephone calls from the public from one authority to the other at no additional cost;
- The transfer of data between departments at each authority at no additional cost;
- A service for members of the public to walk into any of the two authorities to pay for their Council Tax or Business Rates; and
- A reduction in the overall number of servers required to support the joint service and correspondingly the resource required to maintain them.



## Our Service – Good Practice and Innovations (continued)

### Valuing Staff

As most organisations are aware delivering a high quality service to customers requires a high quality and motivated workforce. Through a period of transition and upheaval this is difficult to maintain but by valuing the staff, communicating with them and providing opportunities to develop has ensured customers have remained highly satisfied with the service.

### Key Challenges and our solutions

- **Consultation on the structure** – all staff were asked for their views on the structure and as a result of staff feedback it was adjusted, with the reasons for the changes fed back to staff. Staff had confidence that their input was actively used to develop the operating model.
- **Preparing staff for interviews** – All staff competing for posts in the new structure were offered training and support on writing their applications and interviews by an external trainer. This was well-received by the staff concerned, many of whom had not attended a selection process for a number of years.
- **Team building** – As soon as the staff selection process was completed, work started on building one joint team. Initiatives included:
  - One-to-one meetings between staff and their new managers;
  - Visits in small groups to start to build up relationships between staff who would be working in the same teams;
  - Orientation visits for Dartford staff to visit the Sevenoaks' offices, to build up their familiarity with the travel time and routes, and to gain an understanding of practical issues such as parking; and
  - A teambuilding quiz, where staff were allocated to mixed teams, building their confidence in and familiarity with colleagues from the other council.
- **Flexibility in working patterns** – It was recognised early in the process that the decision to co-locate staff at one site could cause staff particular difficulties. All staff affected were consulted and the following put in place to ensure staff retention and motivation:
  - Flexible working – new joint policy developed and communicated to staff; three staff have home-worked from the date of co-location. This was a significant innovation for both authorities, where home working had not been used significantly previously. All home workers have full access to the team's IT systems and they can also take customer calls at home. Home working has recently been evaluated and both managers and staff were positive about its impact on staff retention and morale.
  - Changed working patterns – a number of staff are working compressed hours, to minimise their travel time and/or fit around carer responsibilities, with a positive impact on staff retention.
  - Compensation for additional travel costs.



## Our Performance

Our performance is focussed on delivering high customer satisfaction. We gauge the expectations of customers and design our processes, within resource constraints, to deliver high quality and valued services. To this end our key performance indicator for each service is overall satisfaction. We also maintain a close view on quality indicators that enable us to compare actual performance levels to expectation levels.

### Service Qualities

The following points set out the main qualities that the Revenues and Benefits partnership delivers:

- Customer focussed
- High quality
- Empowered staff
- Best use of technology
- Efficient and effective
- Value for Money

Progress is measured against these qualities through the annual appraisal of Senior Managers and Staff and through Service Plans and performance targets at both Dartford Borough and Sevenoaks District Council.

### Revenues Performance

Indicator	Dartford BC		Sevenoaks DC	
Percentage of council tax collected in year	08/09	97.5%	08/09	98.6%
	09/10	97.5%	09/10	98.3%
	10/11	97.4%	10/11	98.6%
Percentage of NNDR collected in year	08/09	98.0%	08/09	98.5%
	09/10	97.1%	09/10	97.7%
	10/11	98.1%	10/11	98.4%
Percentage of council tax payers on direct debit	08/09	61.0%	08/09	66.9%
	09/10	61.6%	09/10	67.2%
	10/11	62.9%	10/11	68.8%
Percentage of correspondence dealt with within 7 working days (DBC) / within target time (SDC)	08/09	100%	08/09	74%
	09/10	100%	09/10	80%
	10/11	99.6%	10/11	99%



## Our Performance (continued)

Revenues performance in the last year has been strong. This is particularly the case when the resources applied to delivering a successful partnership over a six month timeline are taken in to account.

- Council tax collection rates have remained stable and for Sevenoaks District Council was above the target level.
- The percentage of business rates collected recovered well in 2010/11 after the impact of the recession was felt in 2009/10. Dartford Borough Council performed exceptionally by increasing the collection rate by a full 1% to 98.1%. Sevenoaks District Council recorded a 0.7% increase in business rates collection.
- The percentage of people in Dartford and Sevenoaks paying their council tax bill has been increased in each of the last three years. Continually increasing direct debit take up provides efficiencies and cost savings in payment processing and increases the likelihood of all outstanding payments being collected.
- Responding to correspondence within targeted times is key to the partnerships commitment to being customer focussed. Almost all items of correspondence in 2010/11 were managed and responded to the targets set within the customer standards.

### Satisfaction with the Revenues Service

Satisfaction data about the Revenues service was collected in April 2011 from a sample of 2,000 households across Dartford and Sevenoaks via a postal survey. A summary of the results are set out below.

Question	Satisfaction Rating (%)		
	Dartford	Sevenoaks	Partnership
Contacting the right person is easy to do	81.8	82.4	83.0
Treated with consideration and respect	90.8	89.2	87.8
Council tax bill is easy to understand	90.5	90.8	91.1
Letter / Phone calls are clear and understandable	87.3	88.3	89.3
<b>Overall satisfaction with the council tax service</b>	<b>55.2</b>	<b>53.0</b>	<b>50.8</b>

The results of the satisfaction survey are very strong and open text responses received from the survey provided encouragement that the transition of officers to Sevenoaks offices was not noticed by the customer.

Although benchmark data is unavailable Management are encouraged by the overall satisfaction rating given the nature of the service. Despite this targets are being set to ensure that the partnership strives to further improve the services satisfaction ratings.





## Our Performance (continued)

### Revenues Performance Targets

The partnership has agreed performance targets for the next three years which will promote continuous improvement and better levels of service for the customer. The targets and the revised set of performance indicators to be monitored are set out below.

Indicator	Dartford BC		Sevenoaks DC	
	Year	Target	Year	Target
Percentage of council tax collected in year	11/12	97.7%	11/12	98.6%
	12/13	97.8%	12/13	98.6%
	13/14	97.9%	13/14	98.6%
Percentage of NNDR collected in year	11/12	98%	11/12	98%
	12/13	98.5%	12/13	98.5%
	13/14	99%	13/14	99%
Percentage of council tax payers on direct debit	11/12	70%	11/12	70%
	12/13	71%	12/13	71%
	13/14	72%	13/14	72%
Percentage of prior years arrears collected during the year	11-14	40%	11-14	40%
Percentage of telephone enquiries answered within 20 seconds	11-14	80%	11-14	80%
Percentage of correspondence dealt with in 7 working days	11-14	95%	11-14	95%



## Our Performance (continued)

### Benefits Performance

Indicator	Dartford BC		Sevenoaks DC	
	09/10 10/11	33 14	09/10 10/11	11.0 13.5
Average number of days taken to process benefit new claims and change events (x NI 181)	09/10 10/11	33 14	09/10 10/11	11.0 13.5
Average number of days to process new claims	08/09	38	08/09	25.83
	09/10	42.42	09/10	22.08
	10/11	25.76	10/11	27.17
Average number of days to process change events	08/09	21	08/09	10
	09/10	22	09/10	7
	10/11	11	10/11	8
Percentage of new claims processed within 14 days of full information being received	08/09	N/A	08/09	93.67%
	09/10	66.33%	09/10	96.17%
	10/11	83.70%	10/11	86.67%

Benefits performance in the last year has been impacted by the resources required to implement the partnership and by increasing work volumes. However targets remain strong for 2011/12 onwards and as processes and new technologies have now settled there is an expectation from management that future performance levels will not only return to previous levels but surpass them.

### Satisfaction with the Benefits Service

Satisfaction data about the Benefits service was collected in April 2011 from a sample of 2,000 households across Dartford and Sevenoaks via a postal survey. A summary of the results are set out below.

Question	Satisfaction Rating (%)		
	Dartford	Sevenoaks	Partnership
Contacting the right person is easy to do	73.3	86.9	80.5
Treated with consideration and respect	82.0	92.4	87.3
I know what information I need to provide	77.2	84.2	80.7
Letter / Phone calls are clear and understandable	66.8	83.0	75.5
Time taken to assess a benefit claim	60.8	74.2	71.1
<b>Overall satisfaction with the housing and council tax benefit service</b>	<b>71.2</b>	<b>82.9</b>	<b>77.3</b>

Continued on next page



## Our Performance (continued)

### Satisfaction with the Benefits Service (continued)

The results of the satisfaction survey are very strong and open text responses received from the survey provided encouragement that the transition of officers to Sevenoaks offices was not noticed by the customer.

By way of a benchmark the last Best Value survey for housing benefits was completed in 2006/07. At that point Dartford Borough Council had an overall satisfaction rating of 76%. Sevenoaks District Council had an overall satisfaction rating of 80%. Top quartile performance at that time was 82%.

In line with recent studies of satisfaction with local government services there has been an increase in expectation levels from customers that has dampened satisfaction levels. As a partnership therefore the results are very encouraging. Despite this targets are being set to ensure that the partnership strives to further improve the services satisfaction ratings

### Benefits Performance Targets

The partnership has agreed performance targets for the next three years which will promote continuous improvement and better levels of service for the customer. The targets and the revised set of performance indicators to be monitored are set out below. The targets are joint targets for both Dartford Borough and Sevenoaks District Councils.

Indicator	Partnership Targets	
Average number of days to process new claims	11/12	23
	12/13	22
	13/14	21
Average number of days to process change events	11/12	10
	12/13	10
	13/14	10
Percentage of recoverable housing benefits overpayments collected	11/12	36%
	12/13	38%
	13/14	40%
Percentage of benefit claims processed accurately	11-14	95%
Percentage of telephone calls answered within 20 seconds	11-14	80%

- **Conclusion**

Dartford Borough and Sevenoaks District Council, have, in the space of 12 months delivered a Revenues and Benefits partnership that is generating financial savings of £500,000 per year and delivering high levels of customer satisfaction.

Implemented in just a six month period with considerable focus, skill and determination from front line staff, senior management and a range of support services.

The partnership model has been developed, within resource constraints, with a unstinting focus on the customer, their needs and expectations. By maximising the use of IT innovations, listening to front line staff in the design of processes, and making best use of Customer Service functions at both Councils the partnership is set to be a great success.

The partnership model developed by the Revenues and Benefits teams is being used as a foundation for further partnership working projects at Dartford and Sevenoaks and is one that we believe Councils nationally can benefit from.