

Client:	London Borough of Lewisham
Project:	Housing Benefits Service Review
The situation:	<p><i>"It was good to work with a team of professionals, who not only delivered the project in less time than originally quoted, but also navigated us through a more detailed thought process than originally anticipated. I felt confident at every stage of the process"; Ralph Wilkinson, assistant director for public services, London Borough of Lewisham</i></p> <p>The London Borough of Lewisham faced a series of challenges to provide Lewisham residents with better services and better access to those services. The council's customer services recognised and acknowledged the need to not only design services that focussed on individual's needs and preferences, but to also ensure efficient and effective service delivery.</p> <p>In order to meet these challenges, it was essential for the organisation to transform itself and for that transformation to be embraced internally and recognised externally among its residents and key stakeholders. As a consequence, three key commitments for delivering better customer services were identified:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Join up service delivery - make it quick, simple and straightforward to access services (one council) ➤ Deliver service excellence - design and deliver high quality services which focus on customer and user needs (improving performance) ➤ Focus on the customer - take responsibility for resolving enquiries and problems quickly and efficiently (customer focus). <p>Over the next three years, the council's structured corporate customer service transformation programme will be reviewing all customer-facing services in line with these commitments. The housing benefits service was included within the first tranche of the review in early 2008.</p> <p>Measured by the key indicator of number of days required to process a benefits claim, the performance was near the London average at 28 days. Lewisham had organised the service in a typical way for a London authority, with a back office processing written claims and a shared front office delivering advice to customers and collecting documentation. On average, a claimant would visit the front office more than four times to make a claim — a number which was felt to be too high.</p> <p>The council was keen to radically overhaul the service in order to improve its performance. It identified the front-back split as a source of inefficiencies and set about dismantling it by making housing benefits assessors available directly to claimants in the front office.</p> <p>As independent experts, iMPOWER was brought in to test the validity of this intuition and devise a new operating model for the service.</p>
The project and the results:	<p>In November 2008, in a very focussed project, iMPOWER conducted a comprehensive review of how the housing benefits service functioned across the front and back office in order to fully understand all constituent elements of the present operation and devise a robust and implementable future model.</p> <p>An improved model designed by iMPOWER considered all elements necessary for a swift implementation: processes, skill sets, systems and technology, channels, sites, document flow, outgoing communications and relevant corporate initiatives. A key design principle for the model was to</p>



ensure that the appropriate skills are available at the relevant stage in the process to create and maintain the value in the interaction.

The new model creates a single benefits team working across front and back office, eliminating a dysfunctional split. The team is however not fully cross-skilled to enable efficiencies from specialisation.

The improved model provides major benefits:

- ➔ A better customer experience - it gets a greater number of claimants into payment more quickly and for the right amount, with 4.5 average contacts reduced to 2.5
- ➔ Radically improved efficiency – annual savings of more than £500,000 identified to be achievable within months of implementation.

The final product presented by iMPower included:

- ➔ A detailed description of the future customer journey for all channels and processes (new claims and changes of circumstances)
- ➔ Specific recommendations for changes in the use of existing IT systems and procurement of a new support tool
- ➔ A workforce model considering skills, sizing, rotas and management, the impact of upskilling part of the staff and a potential size reduction
- ➔ A training schedule
- ➔ An implementation timeline considering in detail all strands of implementation activities.

In addition, iMPower created and delivered a bespoke sizing model which robustly models all elements of the service delivered by council staff to calculate as accurately as possible, with the limited data available, the resource size required.

Throughout the project, iMPower robustly engaged with all relevant internal stakeholders. As a result, even parts of the council to be radically reduced as a result of the project fully supported the new model.

The demand on client's resources was minimised as iMPower presented a detailed engagement plan at the outset of the project. The project had been originally scoped for 33 days and delivered within 31, with the underspend credited back to the client.

Lewisham Council has extended more work to iMPower through commissioning the company to implement the model in Housing Benefits and lead on managing change in the wider transformation programme.

Matt Spencer, programme manager, transformation at Lewisham said, "We were very impressed with the iMPower team, especially in light of the complexity of the overall project, which is taking a holistic approach to looking at customer service across the whole organisation."

