

## APPENDIX 2 - PROPOSED COUNCIL RESPONSE TO THE CONSULTATION

### SOCIAL SECURITY AGENCY: “DELIVERING A BETTER SERVICE FOR CUSTOMERS - CHANGES TO HOW SERVICES ARE DELIVERED THROUGH THE JOBS & BENEFITS AND SOCIAL SECURITY OFFICE NETWORK”

#### BELFAST CITY COUNCIL RESPONSE

Belfast City Council welcomes the opportunity to comment on “*Delivering a Better Service*”. The Social Security Agency’s package of proposals aimed at improving services for customers of its local office network.

Belfast City Council is committed to working in partnership to improve the quality of life and well-being of all people living in Belfast. As a city with high levels of deprivation the Council would emphasise the importance of ensuring, as the consultation suggests, that no front office sites will be closed in Belfast.

Figures published by the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment in January 2009 indicate that the annual percentage rise in unemployment benefit claimants in Northern Ireland was the highest in nearly 33 years. In light of this the Council would stress the need for Social Security Offices to remain open with adequate staff provision. The rising unemployment figures, particularly newly unemployed would indicate that more people will be making use of the benefits system than ever.

Given the complexities of the benefits system, in terms of completing forms, a move away from face-to-face contact in the current economic climate may have a detrimental effect on claimants. It is important that claimants receive the best service possible and a fully accessible service.

In terms of the agencies approach to supporting “vulnerable customers”, the Council would also be concerned about the implications of the proposed changes for those with difficulties in communicating their needs effectively, whether this is because of poor literacy or other issues. The Council would seek reassurance that the needs of those for whom English is not their first language would be adequately addressed under the proposals.

The Council would like to see a more overt reference to the improvement in performance standards that will result from the changes proposed. For example, what will be the impact on waiting times for customers? What quality standards are being used to gauge the effectiveness of the experience that customers will have in using the system? The Council would welcome assurance that the changes are being driven by a robust assessment of the needs of customers in an increasingly difficult environment.

The Council emphasises the importance of ensuring, as set out in the consultation document, that any staff employed in sites in Belfast would be redeployed within Belfast. The Council would draw attention to the fact that the Spatial Development Strategy identifies Belfast as the dynamic, metropolitan core, regional gateway and focal point of the regional strategic transport network. It refers also to the regional advantages gained from the role of Belfast as the strong heart of the region and serving as an economic powerhouse and centre of administration. It further acknowledges that securing a strong and vibrant Capital City and Metropolitan Area is vital to the economic and social well being of Northern Ireland.

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