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From Tommy O'Reilly, Chief Executive

10 March 2011

SOCIAL SECURITY AGENCY: CUSTOMER FIRST EVALUATION DECISION AND COMMENCEMENT OF ROLL-OUT

My predecessor, Bryan Davis, wrote to you in July 2009, to advise you of the outcome of the Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) consultation and that a pilot would take place in the Agency's North District under the Customer First initiative.

The then Minister of Social Development Ms Margaret Ritchie decided to pilot the proposed changes in order to fully and formally assess the Section 75 equality issues which had been raised during the formal EQIA process and the associated mitigating measures, in a controlled and safe environment.

Starting in April 2010; the new Customer First service delivery model was piloted in the Agency's North District, which comprises 7 Jobs and Benefits/Social Security Offices. The pilot involved the centralisation of back office benefit processing into 4 of the 7 District offices i.e. Antrim, Ballymena, Coleraine and Magherafelt. However, the full range of social security and employment-related front office services continues to be available in all offices. Formal evaluation concluded in October 2010 although the new arrangements have continued to operate successfully since that time.

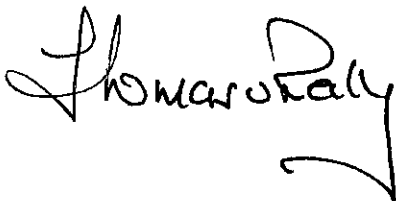
Full details of the outcomes of the evaluation can be found in the Customer First Evaluation Report (the report will be published (available from 10am) on 10 March 2011 and can be accessed at: <http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/ssa/sbr/sbr-publications.htm>).

From an equality perspective in relation to customers and staff, no differential impacts for any of the Section 75 groupings have been identified as a result of the new Customer First Service Delivery Model.

From an operational point of view, all of the strategic design principles of Customer First have been successfully implemented through the establishment of centralised processing, the introduction of an enhanced telephony system and standard operating models. The Pilot in North District also confirmed there will be no change in terms of access for any customer in the district. Although the strategic aims of the Initiative have been achieved, the evaluation has nevertheless, highlighted some wider issues which the Agency's management will further consider.

Taking into account the findings in the evaluation report, and that the Customer First Initiative has now proven to provide significant service delivery innovation for customers, Minister Attwood has endorsed the positive evaluation report and has accepted the Agency's recommendation to a roll-out commencing with the Agency's Belfast West and Lisburn District. The implementation arrangements for these offices and rollout to other areas will now be an operational matter for the Agency to take forward and further details will emerge shortly. If you would find it helpful Agency officials would be more than happy to meet with you or any other Council colleagues who would have an interest in the Customer First roll-out.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tommy O'Reilly', with a stylized flourish at the end.

TOMMY O'REILLY