

**City Services Scrutiny Panel  
Spotlight Policy Review 2012 – 2013**

**Tell Us Once For Bereavement Service**

**Final Report**

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# **1 Foreword from the Scrutiny Lead Member for City Services**

It gives me great pleasure to be able to introduce the City Services Scrutiny Panel's first spotlight policy review into the operation of the Tell Us Once for Bereavement Service in Sunderland.

At the start of the year, when the Scrutiny Committee was considering the range of issues it wished to examine, the Panel was asked to undertake a brief spotlight review into the operation of the Tell Us Once for Bereavement Service in Sunderland.



The Panel's review has therefore looked into the background to the introduction of the TUO service at a national and local level, together with its operation and implementation in Sunderland. We have examined how far the service is delivering the anticipated benefits and how far it is contributing to the Council's efficiency agenda. This has involved finding out more about what customers and our partners think of the service and any areas we feel could be developed and improved.

As a result of our review, we have found that the introduction and operation of the Tell Us Once Services in Sunderland has been a great success and has clearly enhanced the customer experience when registering a birth or death.

However, the Panel's report does include a number of recommendations which we hope will help to build on this success.

For example, we consider that while the level of take up has been good to date, the Council should continue to look at new and innovative ways to promote the existence and potential benefits of the service to local residents and that the level of take up rates should continue to be closely monitored. We also consider that the Council should continue to work closely with the Department of Work and Pensions at a national level to ensure the TUO service, systems and databases continue to evolve and improve.

We also consider that there is scope for the Council to look at ways of building on the principles of the Tell Us Once Service, transferring any 'lessons learnt' or best practice to other service areas.

In conclusion, I would like to thank my colleagues on the City Services Scrutiny Panel and all of the officers and staff involved for their hard work during the course of the review and thank them for their valuable contribution.

Councillor Stephen Bonallie, Lead Member for City Services

## **2 INTRODUCTION**

- 2.1 On 7 June 2012, the Scrutiny Committee requested that the City Services Scrutiny Panel undertake a brief spotlight review into the operation of the Tell Us Once Service in Sunderland. This issue was highlighted as a policy review topic during the Council's Annual Scrutiny Conference 2012.

## **3 AIM OF THE REVIEW**

- 3.1 To examine and evaluate the operation of the Tell Us Once for Bereavement service from a customer perspective.

## **4 TERMS OF REFERENCE**

- 4.1 The Panel agreed the following terms of reference for the review:-
- (a) to examine the background to the introduction of the TUO service at a national and local level;
  - (b) to review the operation and implementation of TUO in Sunderland and consider how far it is delivering the anticipated benefits and contributing to the efficiency agenda;
  - (c) to consider whether there are any other areas of the Council's operation where the principles of the TUO system could be adopted for the benefit of the Council and people receiving services.

## **5 MEMBERSHIP OF THE PANEL**

- 5.1 The membership of the City Services Scrutiny Panel consisted of Councillors Stephen Bonallie (Lead Member), Michael Essl, Stephen Foster, Neville Padgett, Stuart Porthouse, Katheryn Rolph, Lynda Scanlan, Peter Wood.

## **6 METHODS OF INVESTIGATION**

- 6.1 The following methods of investigation were used for the review:
- (a) Desktop Research
  - (b) Use of secondary research e.g. surveys and questionnaires;
  - (c) Evidence from relevant Council officers and key stakeholders;
  - (d) Site visits including viewing at first hand the appointment booking process of the service at the Moorside Contact Centre and the Court and Offices of District Coroner.

## **7 FINDINGS OF THE REVIEW**

Findings relate to the main themes raised during the Panel's investigations and evidence gathering.

### **7.1 Tell Us Once Service - Background**

- 7.1.1 The Tell Us Once (TUO) programme is a cross-government programme hosted by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). It has been developed to provide a service whereby customers only need to inform a local authority **once** of a change in their circumstances, such as a birth or a death. Following this initial contact the information is shared with various government departments and local authority services.
- 7.1.2 The programme is designed to tackle the issue of people being required to report a change in their circumstances to a large number of government departments and organisations – often at a time when they are most vulnerable such as during bereavement.
- 7.1.3 Indeed, it has been estimated that people have to make on average to 44 contacts when reporting a death to government bodies and their local authority.
- 7.1.4 From the Governments perspective, as well as cutting unnecessary bureaucracy and red tape, the TUO system has a number of other potential benefits:-
- Customers receive faster, cheaper and easier access to government services leading to improved satisfaction and reduced avoidable contact;
  - Local Government benefits from improved use of resources, reduced fraud, reduced write-offs and overpayments and reduced administrative costs;
  - Central Government benefits from easier verification, reduction in error, duplication and fraud and quicker processing times;
  - Frontline staff can enjoy improved job satisfaction from delivering a personalised service that makes a real difference.
- 7.1.5 It should be emphasised that participation in the TUO service is entirely voluntary.

### **7.2 Tell Us Once Service - Local Context**

#### *Introduction of TUO in Sunderland*

- 7.2.1 In November 2010, Sunderland City Council was one of a handful of local authorities chosen by the Department for Work and Pensions to become a Pathfinder Authority to their TUO service for Births. The Council was also subsequently chosen to be one of the first in the

country to introduce TUO for Bereavement in October 2011.

- 7.2.2 There are around 3000 deaths recorded in Sunderland per annum and around 3000 births.

*How the System Operates in Practice*

- 7.2.3 The operation of TUO is relatively straightforward. Customers are able to use the service in person when visiting the Registration Service in Sunderland for a birth or death registration appointment. In these circumstances, TUO is delivered face to face to the customer by the Registrar.

- 7.2.4 It is also possible for customers to take up TUO for Bereavement by using the DWP telephony service following their death registration appointment. The DWP have a dedicated team and contact telephone number relating to this service.

- 7.2.5 Finally, from April 2012 customers are also able to take up TUO for Bereavement online by using a dedicated DirectGov webpage, and again once the death has been registered.

- 7.2.6 The TUO Birth service migrated onto the new DWP Change Reporting System in September 2011 enabling Registrars to continue to offer TUO but with a more streamlined ICT application. This is a secure internet site which ensures the integrity of the information collected by the Registrar during TUO.

- 7.2.7 The following organisations are informed of a birth, following customer participation in TUO Birth:-

- Department for Work and Pensions
- Jobcentre Plus
- Housing and Council Tax Benefits
- Council Tax
- Library Services
- Children's Services (Family Information Service)
- HMRC – Child Benefit

- 7.2.8 In the case of a death, the following organisations are informed:-

- Department for Work and Pensions
- War Pensions Scheme
- HMRC – Child Benefit
- HMRC – Personal Taxation
- Identity and Passport Service
- Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA)
- Housing and Council Tax Benefits
- Council Tax

- Library Service
- Blue Badges
- Adult Services
- Children's Services
- Electoral Services
- Collection of payment for council services (Income & Payments Section)

7.2.9 Staff at the Moorside Contact Centre who speak to bereaved families when they make a death registration appointment have a very important role in operation of the system. This involves advising the customer of the various organisations who will receive notification of the bereavement and also promoting the benefits of the service in terms of saving the family time and effort in having to notify these organisations independently. In an attempt to raise awareness, the Council has started to produce publicity material to promote TUO and this are being distributed across GP surgeries, the hospice and Funeral Directors across the city. It is interesting to note that those families who decline to use the TUO service often say that they have begun the process to contact these organisations already and would rather complete a task they have already started.

7.2.10 As part of the TUO for Bereavement appointment conducted by Registrars, a printed tick list of all organisations who have been notified of the death which has occurred is given to the customer once the appointment is complete. This tick list also shows a list of other organisations outside the scope of TUO for Bereavement who may need to know that a loved one has passed away, and is a useful tool for bereaved families to ensure that all relevant parties are made aware of the even.

7.2.11 While the Council is unable to make local amendments to the TUP process, there is scope to develop a prompt list within the Bereavement Guide which could be launched on the Council's web pages. This would enable the Council to make amendments as and when the contact details of the various support groups change so that the guidance remains accurate. If customers require a hard copy, it is intended that a print version could be provided with assistance at any of the Council's CSN facilities or upon specific request a print copy could be provided.

7.2.12 An online Bereavement Guide is also currently in production, which will be posted to [www.sunderland.gov.uk](http://www.sunderland.gov.uk) Should customers require a hard copy, this document may be printed. It will also be able to be viewed at any of the Customer Service Centres across the city which provide online access to customers.

#### *TUO Coroners*

7.2.13 In a drive to make the TUO service fully inclusive to families in

Sunderland, on 12 June 2012 Sunderland City Council began to offer TUO to families whose loved one's death has been referred to HM Coroner for investigation.

- 7.2.14 Previously, deaths referred to HM Coroner were out of scope for TUO but following partnership working with DWP, Sunderland are one of the first local authorities nationally to offer the TUO service in such circumstances.
- 7.2.15 Once families receive the interim death certificate from the Coroner's Team, they are able to book a TUO appointment with a Registrar who will take details from the family relating to their loved one who has passed away, and refer the information onto other local authority and government departments. Again, appointments are made by telephoning the Contact Centre at Moorside.
- 7.2.16 The Panel took the opportunity of visiting HM Coroners court and the offices of the Coroner in order to view at first hand the facilities now available and to discuss with the Coroner the improvements made through the TUO system.
- 7.2.17 Members were very impressed with the improvement that have been made and the opportunity to build on the already strong relationship between the Council and HM Coroner.

### **7.3 TUO Benefit Realisation – Effect in Sunderland**

- 7.3.1 As part of our review of the TUO system, the Panel considered that it was important to obtain feedback from staff and service users on their view on the operation and success of the TUO service and the range of benefits that have accrued to both the customer and the Council and other organisations.
- 7.3.2 In this work, we were greatly assisted by Karen Lounton and staff from both the Bereavement and Registration Service and Contact Centre. Central to this has been the result of feedback from staff and the users of the service. While it is recognised that the numbers taking part in the survey are quite small, we do feel that it provides a useful snapshot of the operation of the service in Sunderland.

#### *Staff Feedback*

- 7.3.3 Twelve staff from the Contact Centre and Registrars completed a questionnaire on the TUO Bereavement Service. As part of the survey, staff were asked if they thought the TUO Bereavement Service had contributed to an improved service to customers. Results showed that 83% strongly agreeing and the remaining 17% agreed. All staff surveyed agreed that they would recommend the service to customers. One member of staff had stressed the importance of making sure that customers were aware that the service was free as the belief that there

was a charge could adversely affect take up rates. Another commented that families had been very grateful for the help given to them by TUO.

#### *Customer Feedback*

- 7.3.4 From a sample of families who had registered a death in May 2012, twenty families were contacted by telephone as part of a customer survey. Sixteen agreed to provide feedback on the service. All families contacted agreed that the TUO for Bereavement service they experienced was provided promptly, they were treated with dignity and trusted the service provided.
- 7.3.5 Comments made by family members included that it was a “really helpful service at such a difficult time”, and “such a convenient service, I can’t understand why it isn’t compulsory”.
- 7.3.6 Overall, therefore, feedback from the survey was very positive and the outcome was to be shared staff.

#### *End User Feedback*

- 7.3.7 Managers representing the end data users were also surveyed as part of the benefit realisation exercise. Lyn Laws, Processing Manager in Housing and Council Tax Benefits stated the following:-
- 7.3.8 *'Tell us Once has had a beneficial impact on the Housing and Council Tax Benefit Section, it has helped to speed up the process of dealing with Bereavement claims and we can issue correspondence directly to the next of kin. It is more customer friendly and there is no unnecessary contact at a difficult time for partners and relatives of the deceased person as all the information is provided at the first point of contact.'*
- 7.3.9 Marina Clark, Billing Manager from Council Tax also stated the following:-
- 7.3.10 *“Since the introduction of “Tell us Once”, the Council Tax Section is now informed on a daily basis up to date information of deaths in and out of the area. The information collected from the informant now includes details of next of kin and executors contact details and telephone numbers, which enables any credits to be issued quickly and also to find out information regarding probate, sale of property etc; as well as highlighting if there is anyone else living in the property who may be entitled to a Single Person Discount”.*
- 7.3.11 As part of the review, the Lead Member of the Panel, Councillor Stephen Bonallie visited the Contact Centre at Moorside and spoke to the staff involved in providing the service. Councillor Bonallie was most impressed by the quality of the service provided and the

professionalism and expertise of the staff.

#### **7.4 Take Up Rates for Bereavement / Birth TUO**

7.4.1 The Panel considered that an integral part of the review was to find out more about the level of take up rates for the TUO service and also the kind of measures that were in place for its promotion.

7.4.2 The Panel heard that since its launch, take up rates for TUO Birth in Sunderland averaged around 66%, whilst TUO Bereavement was 55%. A more detailed breakdown of take up rates is set out below:-

<b>Week Ending</b>	<b>Bereavement</b>	<b>Birth</b>
8/7/12	43%	63%
15/7/12	56%	76%
22/7/12	53%	65%
29/7/12	46%	60%
5/8/12	66%	81%
12/8/12	58%	56%
19/8/12	65%	70%
26/8/12	42%	54%
2/9/12	47%	70%
9/9/12	48%	59%
16/9/12	60%	61%
23/9/12	54%	57%
30/9/12	62%	74%
7/10/12	62%	72%
14/10/12	58%	73%
21/10/12	65%	71%

7.4.3 The Panel considers that take up rates and their gradual growth are pleasing. We are also highly encouraged by the obvious commitment of staff to improve them still further, ensuring the maximum number of families are given the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of the TUO service.

7.4.4 As has already been mentioned, in an attempt to raise awareness, the Council has started to produce publicity material to promote the existence and benefits of the TUO service. During the review, we were shown examples of the kind of promotional activity taking place, including a range of posters and leaflets.

7.4.5 Promotional material has been distributed across all Funeral Directors in the city, whilst posters and leaflets have been provided to the Hospice in Newcastle Road and the Maternity Wing of Sunderland Royal Hospital.

- 7.4.6 The service is clearly committed and aware of the importance of continuing to promote the TUO service. For example, a presentation on TUO was provided to the South Forum at Farringdon in September 2012, and as result of this a further presentation was arranged for a group of local GPs at Silksworth Health Centre in November 2012. The GPs have expressed a wish to distribute all TUO promotional material relating to both birth and bereavement across practices in Sunderland.
- 7.4.7 As a Panel, we look forward to the continued development of new ideas and initiatives to promote of the service and improve levels of take up.

## **8 CONCLUSION**

- 8.1 The introduction of Tell Us Once for both Birth and Bereavement has clearly made a positive impact and offered customers an improved experience when registering a life event, such as a birth or death.
- 8.2 We are satisfied that, in line with the objectives of the TUO programme, the sharing of information across services, has helped to relieve the customer of the burden placed upon them to contact each organisation in turn. As well as the obvious benefits to the customer, TUO has also helped to reduce avoidable contact and introduces efficiencies to the 'end data user' organisations who are able to react to the information shared with them without the need to verify directly with the customer details of the life event that has occurred.
- 8.3 The evidence suggests that there has been a reduction in processing times for Child Benefit claims by HMRC, reduction in Housing and Council Tax Benefit incorrect benefit payments and fraud whilst Children's Services are being helped to strategically target key service users for local Children's Centres across the city.
- 8.4 The feedback received to date is exceptionally positive, but some families have mentioned that they initially thought the service sounded 'too good to be true' and there is a concern that some families have declined TUO as they simply do not have faith in one organisation's ability to notify all of the others. It is hoped that the publicity material and raising general awareness may go some way to combating these issues.
- 8.5 The DWP have not set accuracy targets to be met by the Registration Service and although Management Information (MI) has just begun to be reported by DWP, this does not include statistics relating to incorrect referrals. One area covered in the MI is the number of notifications received through the TUO process that are yet to be read / collected by the end users (such as Council Tax, Libraries, Electoral Role etc). This aspect of the report shows the volume of uncollected data that hasn't been read by services in a 21 - 28 day and 29 - 34 day window of time from the day the Registrar collected the information

from the family at the point of death registration.

- 8.6 It is important that data is read / collected by end users in a timely manner as this supports the purpose and credibility of the whole TUO process. By the MI report highlighting any failures, action can be taken with the relevant service to identify and procedural or staff training issues and ensure the TUO service suffers no reputational damage.
- 8.7 A future development for TUO will be for the Registration On Line (RON) system which is used by Registrars to record the actual death registration into, to link to the Change Reporting System (CRS) directly and transfer details of the deceased (name / address / place of death / date of birth / date of death). This will save the Registrar an element of double inputting as currently this information is input independently by them into each system. Not only will this enhancement save time, but will also reduce the risk of errors.
- 8.8 The 'end users' who are the different central and local government departments who receive the data once collected as part of the TUO process are stipulated by the DWP. Whilst the Council is unable to insist that particular organisations are party to this information, it can make a recommendation to the DWP that other third party groups be considered to join the TUO end user group. A recent recommendation has been made to them for the Local Government Pension Service to become party to the TUO information. The Registration Service will continue to work with and liaise with the DWP when service enhancements are deemed necessary.

## **9 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 9.1 The Panel's recommendations are as outlined below:-
  - (a) that whilst the level of take up for the Tell Us Once Service in Sunderland has been good to date, we consider that the Council should continue to look at new and innovative ways to promote the existence and potential benefits of the service to local residents and continue to monitor accordingly;
  - (b) that the Council should explore ways of building on the principles of the Tell Us Once Service in other areas of service delivery, transferring any 'lessons learnt' or best practice realised from TUO to other service areas;
  - (c) that the Council should continue to work closely with the DWP on a national level to ensure the TUO service, systems and databases continue to evolve and improve.

## **10. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

10.1 The Committee is grateful to all those who have presented evidence during the course of our review. We would like to place on record our appreciation, in particular of the willingness and co-operation we have received from the below named:-

- (a) Les Clark, Head Of Streetscene;
- (b) Karen Lounton, Bereavement and Registration Services Manager;
- (c) Martin Lancaster, former Bereavement and Registration Services Manager;
- (d) Liz St Louis, Head of Customer Service and Development;
- (e) Derek Winter, HM Coroner for Sunderland;
- (f) Councillor James Blackburn, Portfolio Holder for City Services.

## **11. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

11.1 The following background papers were consulted or referred to in the preparation of this report:-

- (a) [New Department for Work and Pensions bereavement service - Turn2us](#)
- (b) <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/eia-tell-us-once-wr2011.pdf>
- (c) <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/tell-us-once-wr2011-ia.pdf>
- (d) [Sunderland City Council : Tell Us Once](#)
- (e) Notes of Meetings of Scrutiny Panel – 2 June, 23 June, 10 September, 15 November 2012.