Background and Context for FOBO

In recent years, the Department has made significant investment in the development and refinement of new methods of service delivery through the introduction of online services on the MyWelfare platform. At the same time, the Department has been refining traditional service delivery methods utilising advances in our ICT systems to remove the location constraints of the previous paper-based system and deliver the capability to evenly balance the distribution of workload to available resources regardless of location. This is achieved through the separation of Front Office and Back Office functions and means that the processing of claims and decision making is no longer limited to local offices. FOBO is fundamental to the provision on online service options to customers in that it provides an approach to claim processing that, like online services delivered via MyWelfare.ie is independent of the location of the client. FOBO aligns with our core objective as set out in the Department's Statement of Strategy – to put the customer at the centre of our services

In implementing FOBO, the Department is fully committed to ensuring that the terms of the Technical Group Report 2007, relevant General Council reports and agreed Departmental Council reports related to grade appropriateness of functions are fully adhered to across all Intreo Centres.

Front Office/Back Office model

The Front Office/Back Office model defines four teams each with different roles in claim processing.

1. Front Office

The Front Office receives all customer service requests and passes those that require decision to the Back Office. Work requests which do not require decision e.g. routine maintenance requests are fulfilled in the Front Office. It deals immediately and flexibly with customer requests by constantly tailoring its configuration in response to customer demand. In this way, customer access points are managed depending on the volume and type of requests being received at any particular time.

The Front Office is no longer the decision maker, it is now responsible for processing of claims and maintenance requests to decision ready stage and for undertaking administrative work supporting claims in payment.

The primary role of the Front Office Team in the new model is to provide information services, to support the customer in identifying entitlement appropriate to their individual and family circumstances, and to facilitate the customer in accessing the full range of Intreo services as speedily and conveniently as possible by offering

- full information on entitlements and responsibilities
- fastest route to accessing service(s)

The Front Office Team is tasked with dealing with service requests as immediately as possible and at the first point of contact where practicable. Each service request should be sent to the back office only when it is deemed to be decision-ready i.e. when all specified information needed to action the service request has been gathered.

The SWI function is fully integrated in the model and local investigation of claims is carried out as required.

CWS support continues to be available during any period of delay in accessing entitlement e.g. in exceptional cases where the primary payment cannot be made an application for BASI should be referred to CWO for consideration.

Customer service is the highest priority in the Front Office and resources are managed as appropriate in response to real-time demand at any given time.

2. Back Office

The Back Office is made up of a central work distribution hub and a number of processing pods providing sufficient resources to process the volume of service requests coming from Front Offices. The central hub co-ordinates pod availability and activity and monitors pod performance. Back Office pods are responsible for processing claim tasks distributed to them, mainly making claim decisions on new claims and revised decisions arising from maintenance tasks. Maintenance functions not requiring decisions are dealt with in the Front Office.

Not every Intreo Centre will have a Back Office pod on site.

The Hub will continue to operate as it has done since the inception of FOBO by receiving service requests from Front Offices and distributing them to back office pods. The required resources for the Hub will be monitored as the FOBO rollout is expanded.

3. Activation Support Team

In the FOBO model, in addition to its existing functions the Activation Support Team responsibilities have been extended to include the processing and maintenance of schemes such as Back to Education and Back to Work Enterprise Allowance claims as these claim types are closely related to activation activity.

4. Control Team

While all Intreo Centres have an existing Activation Support team, many of them do not currently have a separate Control team with control work often being undertaken within the maintenance section. The new model specifies a separate team to undertake control work. While control in general remains a priority for all Intreo staff regardless of team assignment, the Control team is tasked with undertaking all systematic control activity including

- Data matching
- Systematic Reviews
- Analytics
- COE
- Control Projects

The Control team also makes statutory decisions arising from control activity.

Preparation in Advance

The Evaluation Report recommended that irrespective of whether the FOBO model is implemented, Intreo Centres should:

- Increase staff mobility/multi-skilling by implementing a policy of rotating staff across functions
- Focus on productivity through development of management understanding and use of metrics, engaging and developing staff, continue our commitment to a high level of customer service delivery as per the Department's mission statement, managing attendance and monitor performance against agreed staff work targets.
- Develop the Control and Activation functions by establishing discrete Control teams and enhancing the role of Activation Support teams

Since the acceptance by the Management Board of the FOBO Evaluation Report, Divisional management have been asked to

- Ensure full implementation of the Digital Claim
- Implement a policy of staff rotation and training
- Ensure full implementation of the Technical Group Report, adjudications and agreements.

  (separate from the FOBO project, the RSU will circulate a summary of the TGR, adjudications and agreements relating to work appropriate to the CO and EO grades)

- Introduce rostering in Intreo Centres where it was not already in place
- Develop EO management/team leadership skills
- Foster a team approach
- Create discrete Control teams
- Move BTE & BTWEA claim processing to AST (it should be noted that FOBO introduces no other changes to the duties of the AST)

Staffing Levels

Experience in 2015/2016 in developing and implementing the new Intreo Centre in Edenderry using the digital claim played a major role in informing the model. Edenderry operates as a satellite office of the Mullingar Intreo Centre and is able to offer the full range of Intreo services for an initial claimload of approximately 2,400 (at December 2015) with 4.8 staff in the Front Office supported by 2 staff in the Back Office. This led to an initial calculation that for offices with 2,000 or more claims, a minimum of 5 staff is required in the Front Office. For each additional 1,000 claims, it was estimated that one additional member of staff is required in the Front Office. This model has proved to be accurate although

allowance needs to be made for local conditions such as building layout and factors such as city centre location which may increase enquiry footfall.

Front Office resources are primarily based on claimload and claim inflows with a 25% additional resource allowance made to cover absences. This compares to the norm of 20%. The resourcing model requires management to closely manage absences for leave, training etc. to ensure that sufficient resources are available to run the Front Office at all times.

However, based on experience in the pilot project, contingency resources were added to the Front Office as follows:

- An additional staff member whose primary duty is to act as trainer/training co-ordinator but who is available to work in the Front Office as required

- An additional staff member in the Control team who is available to the Front Office on occasions when assistance is required

In the light of further experience and of additional feedback from management and staff, it has been decided to add these resources into the Front Office resource model so that they are available permanently.

Back Office resourcing was based on experience in Control Offices which prior to FOBO operated as back offices for Branch Offices and on claim inflow which provide indicators for the number of decision requests being channelled to the Back Office. Statistics on the volume of maintenance work estimated that maintenance constituted roughly 50% of its total work.

However, work on Front Office/Back Office processes indicated that in fact, 60% of the work on maintenance is actually carried out in the Front Office so the estimated maintenance resource was split 60/40 between front and back offices.

This resourcing model is currently in operation in six Intreo Centres and is proven to be capable of meeting demand as evidenced by high levels of customer service and the absence of any backlogs in administration work. This is evidenced by statistics on footfall and average waiting times in FOBO offices and by a recent survey showing that all participating offices are fully up-to-date in their work-on-hand.

While leave is subject to the approval of management in line with the requirements of the business area, in each office staff have full access to their leave entitlements and the Department is satisfied that each is meeting its obligations under the Working Time Act.

Grade Mix

In implementing FOBO, the Department is fully committed to ensuring that the terms of the Technical Group Report 2007, relevant General Council reports and agreed Departmental Council reports related to grade appropriateness of functions are fully adhered to across all Intreo Centres. Escalation points for complex cases are available by ensuring that in every pod, EO and HEO grades with relevant expertise are available to deal with more complex claims as they arise. It is not necessary for the EO or HEO with the requisite expertise to be physically co-located with the DO but access to the required expertise will always be available when required.

In the Front Office, both EO and CO grades must be capable of undertaking any of the duties appropriate to their grade. However, as the Front Office must respond to customer demand on an hour-by-hour basis, EO's play an additional role in continually assessing and responding to demand by opening and closing customer service points. The production and management of the weekly roster so as to ensure that all tasks are resourced and completed is also an EO duty with EO's normally taking it in turns to manage the Front Office for a week at a time. EO's also provide the first point of escalation for CO's dealing with complex cases.

Experience shows that a minimum of two EO's per office is required.

SWI Referrals

Front Office/Back Office policy is that all cases are assigned to a DO in the Back Office who can then refer a case for SWI investigation if considered necessary. This is done by assigning an investigation to the central SWI attached to the hub who will deal with these cases by

- Returning to DO if SWI report is not necessary (e.g. not all OPFP cases need SWI referral)
- Conducting a desk review if possible
- Referring the case for local SWI investigation only if desk assessment is not feasible.

This approach ensures consistent application of SWI referral policy and because referrals are electronic rather than paper based, there are no delays in claim processing.

This process fully implements the terms of current circulars (072_09 and 127_09).

Training/Skills Set

The pilot showed that staff tend to be skilled in relatively narrow areas of the Intreo service e.g. new claims or maintenance. However, the new model requires that staff have the capability to perform a wider range of tasks. This resulted in training requirements well beyond what had been anticipated going into the pilot. This training requirement was also highlighted in feedback on the pilot received from Forsa.

In response to the requirement, an additional staff member has been added to the Front Office team whose primary duty is to act as trainer/training co-ordinator. The standard FOBO implementation process now mandates that once teams are selected; skills profiles are collated with a view to identifying training needs and putting a training plan in place as required. Courses in team building and management for EO's have been developed by SDU and will be run as part of each implementation.

While formal training will be conducted wherever appropriate, a significant amount of training will be delivered using peer coaching and it is important that this be recognised as valid training.

Detailed training materials and process manuals have been developed and are available to all Intreo Centres. It is anticipated that these training materials will improve the level of consistency of training across Intreo Centres.

In addition, specific management training for EOs has been provided to pilot offices and a newly developed programme will be available to EOs in offices involved in future FOBO implementation to support and develop these managers in their roles.

Health and Safety Issues

The Department has no evidence that staff in FOBO offices have been placed under undue or unreasonable pressure. The Department is committed to ensuring this remains the case and will monitor offices closely in this regard. This monitoring is a standard management function and will be carried out in consultation with staff.

The Department is also committed to providing an ergonomic working environment for staff and will ensure that Back Office facilities and working conditions are of a high standard comparable to those in other claim processing centres such as those operated in the central scheme areas.

All Intreo Centres will continue to implement the risk mitigation measures detailed in the Nifast report and subsequent risk assessments. This aspect of operation is appropriate to and will be considered by the Unglazed Reception Working Group Forum.

Staff Management

The Evaluation Report recognised that management of the Back Office – central co-ordination of pods in multiple locations in which staff are managed locally - presents new management challenges in ensuring that sufficient resources are available at all times and that pods are performing consistently. The planned consolidation of the Back Office will help to ensure consistent management practices and agreed performance monitoring across all Back Office pods.

Staff Rotation

The need for a staff rotation policy is fully recognised and will be implemented across all FOBO teams as recommended in the Evaluation Report.

An Engagement and Innovation project will be established to recommend guidelines for an appropriate rotation policy.

Activation

As referenced above, the only changes to the existing duties of the AST introduced under FOBO is that activation related claims such as BTE and BTWEA are now processed within the AST. AST resourcing takes full account of this change.

Back Office Pod Size and Locations

Experience of Back Office operation to date, and particularly of recent expansion into multiple divisions and locations, has shown that issues need to be addressed in relation to the operation and management of the Back Office specifically around

- the variation in breadth and depth of DO experience – the overall DO training need is greater than had been anticipated

- inconsistency in the application of scheme rules, legislation and guidelines across different locations

- a wide range of performance levels both within and between Back Office pods

- management of some aspects of the operation of the back-office becoming diffused as a result of the back office function being centrally co-ordinated but locally managed.

In the light of this experience it is clear that Back Office resources need to be more consolidated than originally envisaged and that a management structure needs to be put in place that counteracts the diffusion of management responsibility. This will result in fewer pods overall but with each pod being bigger than had previously been envisaged. Where possible, pods should consist of a minimum of 12 staff.

Currently there are Back Office pods in Donegal, Portlaoise, Mallow and Bantry (former Control Offices) and Kings Inn, Drogheda, Dundalk, Cork, Ennis, Clonmel, Galway, Roscommon and Ballina Intreo Centres. Proposals to consolidate the Back Office in locations where bigger pods can be assembled are currently being developed. It is likely that in addition to existing pods, the majority of additional Back Office resources will be located in three Divisions – the Mid West, Cork and the South East with new pods planned for Limerick, Cork, Waterford, and Wexford. Some further capacity may be required in other divisions. While some existing smaller pods may be closed, the above list reflects the current position and this will be kept under review in the development of the overall plan. A map of the locations is attached for information.

Assurances regarding Office Closures and Staff Deployment

There is no intention to close offices, in fact it can be argued that small offices may increase viability by being able to take on additional work from outside their catchment area.

There is no intention to move staff from their location arising from the FOBO model being introduced.

While the adoption of a Front Office/Back Office model will, in association with a move to online service options, increase productivity and possibly change overall staff requirements at current levels of customer demand, it is envisaged however that any consequences

arising can be dealt with through normal staff turnover and the assignment of staff to other activities in their current location. For example staff not assigned to one of the four teams will initially be assigned to complete work-in-hand in the Intreo Centre at the date of implementation. This work normally takes a period of up to eight weeks to clear. Subsequently staff will be assigned to

- Work within the Intreo office appropriate to the grade.
- Control work within the Division
- Appropriate graded work from other departmental arears (HQ schemes, etc.)

Vacancies that arise within the Front Office / Back office structure will be filled in line with business needs.

Staff will be trained as appropriate to take on any grade appropriate functions expected of them.

Technology

The digital claim is now fully implemented across all Intreo Centres and Branch Offices so further implementation of FOBO will not add to transaction or scanned image volumes.

Standard support arrangements are in place in cases where difficulties with technology arise.

Shorter Working Year

There will be an extension to the Shorter Working Year scheme (SWY) to include an option of 6 weeks absence, subject, as with all SWY options, to the approval of management in line with the requirements of the business area.

Appropriate Communication

It is recognised that a communications vacuum exits in the absence of a published implementation plan. The Department wishes to finalise this plan as soon as possible.

Timelines and Rollout Arrangements

The standard implementation approach assumes a six week implementation cycle. This is based upon experience gained in implementing in six Intreo Centres.

In each individual office, the go-live decision is dependent on an assessment by the project team of the readiness of that office taking account of training, preparation etc. and the go-live date adjusted accordingly.

Review

All aspects of FOBO will be kept under continuous review to ensure that the standards set out above continue to be met in all locations. A project review will be carried out within 12 months of the first implementation cycle with a mid-term assessment being conducted at the appropriate time.

DSP Intreo and Branch Offices

▲ DSP Intreo
● DSP Branch Office

◆ Back Office Pods (current)
⬠ Back Office Pods (proposed)