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RETURN OF ONTARIO WORKS SCREENING AND INTAKE OPERATIONS TO YORK REGION

The Community Services and Housing Committee recommends adoption of the recommendations contained in the following report, March 22, 2005, from the Commissioner of Community Services and Housing:

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

1. The Community Services and Housing Department increase its staff complement by six full-time employees (FTE's) to assume the transfer back of Ontario Works screening and intake functions from the Central East Region Intake Screening Unit, located in Peterborough, conditional upon no net increase to the department budget for this function.
2. The 2005 budgeted expenditures and revenues be amended to reflect the ongoing operating budget including an increase in provincial Cost of Administration funding to assume the transfer of Ontario Works screening and intake functions, with no net regional tax levy impact.
3. In support of York Region's 'New Deal' strategies, on behalf of Council, the Regional Clerk communicate Council's position to the Minister of Community and Social Services that the Province meet its commitment of 50/50 cost share funding for the Social Assistance Cost of Administration.

2. PURPOSE

This report informs Committee and Council of the Province's decision to dissolve the current Ontario Works Intake Screening Unit (ISU) operations, now centralized in Peterborough for the Central East Region, and to return all Ontario Works screening and intake processes for York Region applicants to York Region. The report analyzes the impact of this major service delivery reintegration and outlines a staffing and operations strategy to manage the workload transfer in a cost neutral manner. It also seeks approval to add six FTE's to the Business Services Division in order to perform these mandatory functions being returned to the Consolidated Municipal Service Managers (CMSMs).

3. BACKGROUND

In January 2001, the Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS) introduced seven Intake Screening Units across the province to screen and take applications (intake) for Ontario Works applicants over the telephone. Prior to January 2001, CMSMs were each responsible for their own screening and intake functions. The Central East Region ISU, located in Peterborough, currently screens and takes Ontario Works applications over the phone for residents of York, Durham, Simcoe, Northumberland, Kawartha Lakes, and the City of Peterborough.

When the ISU was implemented, the Social Assistance Division, in the Community Services and Housing Department, reduced its staff complement by 10 positions and reallocated monies from the Division to meet York's mandatory 50/50 cost share of administration requirements of the Peterborough ISU. In 2004, the York Region contribution was \$274,769. Another \$274,769 was contributed by the Province for a gross amount of approximately \$549,538 related to York Region's proportionate share of ISU operations. These funds and allocations were incorporated in the Ontario Works Cost of Administration envelope which provides provincial funding for the administration of the full range of services provided under Ontario Works. The 2005 Regional Budget estimates a similar contribution in 2005.

The Province has now reversed their 2001 decision by dissolving the seven ISU's (effective June 16, 2005) and returning all workload associated with the screening and application functions along with a level of funding to the CMSMs.

The Community Services and Housing Department must now, within a limited and shortened timeframe, implement a structure and processes to reassume the screening and intake functions while continuing to manage application volume demands within provincially determined timelines and service requirements.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

4.1 Peterborough ISU Operations

The City of Peterborough operates a call centre (ISU) staffed by approximately 30 FTE's to process applications from callers who are applying for Ontario Works from across the Central East Region. In 2004, the Peterborough ISU received approximately 80,000 inbound calls. ISU staff take the required information over the phone, determine the caller's initial eligibility for Ontario Works, and where it applies to a York Region resident, schedule an interview for the caller with a York Region Social Assistance Case Coordinator. York Region staff are required by legislation to visually verify the applicant's information, make copies of prescribed file documentation, make a final eligibility decision based on verification and then assume on-going case management responsibilities for the client.

As York Region's caseload accounts for 24% of the combined caseload for the Central East Region, workload at the ISU associated with York Region residents is significant. Currently,

calls from York Region account for over 21% of all Peterborough ISU call time. Peterborough has indicated that overall call volumes have been increasing every year.

4.2 York Region Intake Structure and Processes

Prior to 2001, the Social Assistance Division performed the full Ontario Works screening and intake service in its four local offices. Through face-to-face interviews, the equivalent of 10 FTEs met with York Region residents each month to take their applications for Ontario Works and to determine their eligibility. In 2001, the caseload averaged 3,713 cases. The caseload is projected to reach 4,600 in 2005.

When the Province implemented the ISU model, the Department's Social Assistance Division reduced its staff complement by those 10 FTEs who performed intake and reallocated monies from the Division to cost share the operations of the Peterborough ISU along with the other municipalities who were served by this screening unit. The Department budgeted this cost as its share of the Peterborough operation.

In developing a service model to manage the return of intake to York Region, and taking into account higher caseload pressures, the Department will utilize its telephone-based Contact Centre. This allows for the most efficient and cost effective service model to manage the significant workload associated with this major service change.

4.2.1 Proposed York Region Service Model

The Contact Centre service model builds on our existing Department "One door...One service" operations managed through the Business Services Division. Ontario Works applicant enquiries will be managed centrally by phone through the Department's Contact Centre. Staff will screen calls, take OW applications, enter information into the OW Service Delivery Model Technology (SDMT) database, review preliminary eligibility, and schedule verification meetings with Social Assistance Case Coordinators. Corporate Information Technology staff have been involved with planning for this transition and there are no impacts to overall regional telephony expected.

Strategies will also be implemented over time to integrate Social Assistance application services with application, referral, and information services for our Child Care, Early Intervention and Housing programs creating even more effective services. New technology and telephony allows staff to better schedule interviews, electronically manage and transfer client data, perform searches in other government databases, respond to a wide range of client enquiries, and perform eligibility calculations.

Through centralized operations, integrated service support, and new technologies, the Department has designed a cost neutral service model that will allow York Region to effectively reintegrate the OW application process and integrate them with all Department programs and services.

4.2.2 Staffing

Based on York Region's share of caseload, call time at the Peterborough ISU, and outbound call and case follow up time, taking into account the proposed contact centre model, and discussions with ISU and provincial staff, the Department has projected the workload and staff requirements associated with the return of the screening and intake functions to be six FTE's at this time. By containing this function in our Contact Centre we will also be able to collect better data and look towards benchmarking the function in order to monitor customer service thresholds and efficient and effective service. Table 1 outlines the Department's intake and screening staff requirement.

Table 1
Department Intake and Screening Staff Requirement

Call Types	Calls Per Year	Average Call Length	FTEs Required
Inbound Application Full Applicant Interviews(eligible/ineligible)	6,000	45 min.	3.1
Other Inbound Inquiry/Information (prior to completion) Redirection to local office Referrals to other services 30 Day Reapplications File Transfers Appointment booking	12,000	10 min	1.4
Outbound/Follow up After-call and follow-up/administrative related	18,000	3 min.	0.5
Supervisor			1.0
Total FTE's			6.0

Note: Available staff call time = 6.5 hrs/day, 223 days/year.

The Department is requesting approval to reinstate six FTEs (ten FTE's were reduced in 2001 with the transfer of these functions to the ISU) to its staff complement to manage the screening and intake functions transferred from the Peterborough ISU to York Region.

4.2.3 Budget

The Department has developed a budget to deliver intake and screening services in York Region totalling \$399,293 (see Table 2).

Provincial administrative funding related to the range of services provided under Ontario Works including intake services, are included in the overall Cost of Administration envelope. While the Province has stated they are expecting to realize some savings from the

return of intake to CMSM's, they have also indicated they will be increasing York Region's overall Cost of Administration subsidy based on a cost per case and proportional caseload allocation adjustment in 2005. This increase to the overall envelope will allow for an equitable relative cost sharing associated with the return of these services to York Region.

Although this anticipated increase in overall provincial funding is sufficient to maintain a 50/50 cost share for the returning intake function, this may not be the case in other regional municipalities. In support of York Region's 'New Deal' strategies toward its provincial funding partner it is recommended that, on behalf of Council, the Regional Clerk communicate York Region's position that the Province meet its commitment of 50/50 cost share in our Social Assistance Cost of Administration programs.

In addition to the budget of \$399,293 noted above, one time costs for furniture and technology totalling \$71,085 will be managed through 100% provincial transition funding which the Department has applied for, and is expecting to be approved or within the Department's overall budget through a reallocation of existing funds.

Table 2
Department Intake and Screening Budget

Description	Amount
Annual Operating Cost:	
Salaries and Benefits (6.0 FTEs)	\$382,978
Supplies/Services	\$ 16,315
Total Annual Operating Costs	\$399,293
Cost of Administration Contributions:	
Region Contribution (approved in 2005 base budget)	\$199,646.50
Provincial Contribution*	\$199,646.50
Total Contributions	\$399,293
Net Tax Levy Impact	\$ 0

Notes:

1. Furniture and technology costs of \$71,085 to be managed through provincial transition funding or reallocation of budget funds.
2. * Based on overall Cost of Administration funding increases.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The service transfer from the Peterborough ISU to York Region requires no additional regional funding above what is already approved in the 2005 Budget. The Department

requests a reinstatement of six FTEs to its staff complement in order to manage the transfer of work. One time transition costs for furniture and technology will be managed through expected 100% provincial transition funding or within the Department's approved budget. Should this initial structure prove insufficient changes would be addressed through the 2006 Budget process.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

There are no local municipal impacts associated with the transfer of the intake functions from Peterborough ISU to York Region. However, York Region residents will receive effective service through prompt responses to their inquiries, fully local application process, and a coordinated and efficient access to all Department programs and services.

7. CONCLUSION

Through its mandated policy decisions in 2001, the Province redirected York Region's screening and intake functions to the Peterborough ISU. As a result, the Department reduced its staff by ten FTEs and reallocated on-going funding to the ISU to support their staffing and operational needs.

The Province is now reversing its decision and these functions are being returned to York Region's 'in-house' operations. By implementing structural efficiencies and new technologies, and taking into account an increase in the overall Cost of Administration provincial subsidy envelope based on a recent proportional caseload and cost per case review, the Department will implement a cost neutral transfer and is requesting a reinstatement of only six of the ten FTEs reduced in 2001 despite the demands associated with higher caseload and associated participant volumes and demands.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.