

HALIFAX



During its construction in 2000, HBOS PLC's call centre in Belfast was the largest new build of its kind in Northern Ireland.

Today, employing around 1,600 people, the spectacular £45 million building is a monument to the group's determination to be the leading player in new banking channels - and to its confidence in Northern Ireland as the place to help it achieve and maintain that vision.

Belfast is now the largest by far of the 10 call centres operated by Halifax - part of HBOS, the UK's largest mortgage and savings provider. The flagship operation can handle up to 6,500 calls an hour from Halifax customers throughout the UK on subjects ranging from banking and savings products to mortgages, personal loans and credit cards. Staff at the centre also handle telephony applications for current accounts, personal loans and travel insurance.

Just as impressive as the scale of the operation and the scope of the services it offers is the speed with which it was set up. Construction work got underway in January

2000 and, three months later, the first 12 Team Leaders and three Team Managers were sent on a three-month training programme. The operation went live in July the same year, staffed by 60 people housed in its training centre premises on the outskirts of the city.

In the months that followed, employment expanded rapidly. The new purpose-built premises were officially opened in June 2001 with an initial complement of 650 staff before expanding to its current staffing levels of 1,550 people at 29th February 2004.

In addition to the customer contact centre, the huge new building also

houses an E-Commerce Centre which develops software solutions for the entire HBOS group.

Halifax chose Belfast as the location for the new centre to gain access to people who not only have in-depth knowledge of the financial services industry but also possess the most up-to-date skills in Java and .Net software development.

The bank has not been disappointed. Currently employing over 50 people, the centre recently designed and developed a unique, high security, online payment system for HBOS Corporate Banking that will handle nearly £100bn worth of transactions in its first year.

Staff in Belfast worked with HBOS teams in Edinburgh and West Yorkshire over a period of two years to design, test and implement the system at a cost of £7 million.

Capable of delivering limitless, real-time payments across the globe for corporate customers with 'gold-standard' level security, it is the most sophisticated online corporate payments system ever offered by the bank and is unique in UK corporate banking.



Halifax's choice of location for both the contact centre operation and the software development unit was dictated by its determination to find a fresh place, a competitive cost base with a reliable infrastructure and a pool of available talent with the educational skills, enthusiasm and dedication needed to support and sustain its major investment.

The availability of fully digital communication links, a strong technology infrastructure and a central site with good public transport links were also important factors.

Head of Operations, Carole Joy, recalls the roller coaster ride that saw the operation grow from a standing start to employ several hundred people within a matter of just a few months.

"We needed a lot of people very quickly with the right sort of qualifications and experience.

"Having reached our 1,500 target several months ahead of schedule, we've clearly fulfilled and exceeded our recruitment objectives. That's been due in no small part to the fantastic support we've received from organisations and community groups across Northern Ireland. The help provided by Invest NI and the Department of Employment and Learning was particularly valuable as it allowed us to cast our net very widely around the entire Greater Belfast area.

"The people we've been able to recruit here are highly enthusiastic and adaptable. They're also highly educated - many of them having degrees. And they have an extra quality- they know how to relate to people both in person and on the phone. That makes them ideally suited to working in this type of operation.

"Another major advantage of locating here is that Northern Ireland has a very sophisticated telecommunications infrastructure. That has allowed us to integrate the new Belfast networks and systems with our existing ones at very little cost.

"Cost is, of course, a very important consideration for any business but the factors against which we judge our customer contact operations have more to do with how well we

satisfy and build relationships with them. "In the case of Belfast, it's already recognised throughout the entire group as being a highly successful operation. It is producing great business results and it scores highly in our regular surveys with colleagues.

"The people who work there are fantastic, particularly when their backs are against the wall. They're very flexible and very supportive and if there's a problem, they'll happily stay long into the evening until it's sorted out.

"That approach makes Belfast an ideal location for our contingency centre which we use to ensure continuity of service in the event of emergencies. We've operated it twice with great success in recent months when Belfast was hit by lightning strikes.

For Carole Joy, a native of the North East of England, Northern Ireland is not just a good place to do business. "Northern Ireland people make you feel at home. They are very warm and very welcoming. It's thanks to them I can honestly say that Belfast is the best place that I've ever lived and worked in," adds Carole.