

Wards Affected:

All Wards.

ITEM 11**CABINET****25 JULY 2012****Closure of Housing Offices**

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Executive Summary:

In June 2012 a report recommending closure of the housing offices at West Bletchley, Netherfield and the Lakes Estate was considered by Cabinet.

As a result of this further information has been requested around the adequacy of the systems in place for handling customer enquiries.

This report sets out the methods of working, how this has been tested and evaluated together with analysis of customer complaints since transformation of the service began in February 2011.

1. Recommendation(s)

- 1.1 That the adequacy of the systems in place for handling customer enquiries within the housing management service be noted.

2. Issues

- 2.1 During the period 2008 – 2011 a number of key housing processes and procedures were reviewed which highlighted many areas where improvements to service delivery could be made.
- 2.2 Mapping was also carried out to identify the number of enquiries received, how and where they were received, the nature of the enquiry and the geographic area they were coming from.
- 2.3 This data showed that customers were not always receiving a good service and were often experiencing long delays waiting for enquiries to be dealt with. There were a lot of hand offs and resources were not aligned to demand.
- 2.4 In response to this during February 2011 the housing management service began testing a number of models aimed at delivering a more streamlined, customer focused service.
- 2.5 The initial pilot involved a group of staff dealing with customers living in the north of the borough covering approximately 43% of the housing stock, spread across a variety of locations. This volume together with the diverse nature of the stock and range of locations provided an excellent opportunity to trial different methods.

- 2.6 During this test we moved away from patch based officers responding to estate based enquiries to a system where work was allocated according to the next available appointment.
- 2.7 Telephone enquiries were handled by a dedicated team of Housing Assistants who were able to resolve 85% of the demand at the initial point of contact. This was possible due to the routine nature of many of the enquiries combined with the specialist knowledge acquired by the team over a period of time. For those more complex cases an appointment would be arranged at a time and place convenient to the customer, usually at home. There was never a need for customers to come to visit offices in Central Milton Keynes.
- 2.8 These changes immediately led to a reduction in the time customers had to wait to see an officer from on average two weeks to between one and three days.
- 2.9 Due to the sensitive and confidential nature of debt management and the need to build good relationships we continued to operate patches for income collection. We also recognised the importance of having local knowledge so allocated a Housing Officer to work with each Residents Association.
- 2.10 Control measures were put in place during the test to ensure the new methods were providing a better, more responsive service. For example some Housing Officers reverted to working within a clearly defined patch so that these outcomes could be compared to non patch based working. The response times for those operating within a patch rose from an average 3.5 days to 6.8 days. It was, therefore, decided to continue with patchless working only.
- 2.11 A variety of contact methods were also tested which identified that letters were not usually very effective when compared to direct contact by telephone or home visit. This approach also allowed the opportunity to explore a range of issues with customers rather than just the presenting enquiry.
- 2.12 The pilot in the north was widened out to all area teams between April and June 2011 to see if the service were able to continue to provide an improved response to customers with the increased volume of enquiries. The results confirmed that by working in this way we were able to deal with customer demand far more quickly. At the end of June 2011 a number of staff were moved to different locations to ensure the right balance of resources. All area offices remained open to visitors.
- 2.13 The new way of working met many of the aspirations of public access transformation such as resolving enquiries at the first point of contact. This remains one of the Council's key corporate priorities
- 2.14 Since June 2011 we have continued to develop the service by responding to customer feedback, testing new ideas and evaluating outcomes. The service handles on average 5000 telephone calls a month and carries out approximately 500 home visits
- 2.15 Since April 2012 we have been using Survey Monkey to obtain feedback on the service and ideas where improvements could be made. A total of 123

customers have been contacted and of these 51 have given feedback. The results show that 45 of these (88%) were either very satisfied or satisfied with the service, 3 (6%) were neither satisfied or dissatisfied and a further 3 (6%) were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. 48 customers (94%) reported that their enquiry was dealt with politely and 42 (82%) said that it was resolved fully at first contact. Of the 9 cases where immediate resolution was not possible, 4 (37%) had a repairs enquiry, 2 (25%) requested a home visit which we were able to arrange, 2 (25%) wanted to speak to another department within the council and the remaining 1 wanted further information.

- 2.16 Although satisfaction levels are fairly high there have been problems with some aspects of the service which have led to complaints. These include concerns about calls being taken in one area office, customers unable to get through on the telephone, tenants wanting to speak to a specific Housing Officer and late arrival at home visits (9%).
- 2.17 Staff have also on occasions used the greeting 'West Bletchley Housing Office' when answering telephone calls rather than the more generic 'Housing Services'. This can be confusing for customers although it does not matter where calls are taken as the focus is on being able to resolve the enquiry quickly and effectively.
- 2.18 Our capacity to answer calls promptly continues to be affected by running two systems at the same time, old and new, meaning that some calls have been diverted to an answering service. Vacancies were held whilst systems were tested and as a result have now filled three vacant posts.
- 2.19 A significant proportion of calls were also identified as being not housing related. By working with colleagues across the Council we have been able to improve the voice recognition service and ensure that calls are now directed to the correct service. This has resulted in a reduction in the total number of calls from 6000 a month at the beginning of the year to 5000 by May 2012.
- 2.20 In addition to the issues identified in 2.16 the current office arrangements have also contributed to some of the complaints received. For example there have been occasions where officers have been unable to leave the office to attend appointments due to the staffing levels required to keep them open.
- 2.21 By regularly reviewing feedback from customers the service continues to evolve with improvements continually being implemented. Very recently we decided that Housing Officers will work in teams of five across a number of named estates. This will provide additional local expertise and greater consistency to residents as well as ensuring visits can be grouped together making the best use of resources.
- 2.22 During the early test period we were keen to offer specific timed appointments to those customers we were visiting. What we have learnt is that people are generally happy to have either a morning or afternoon appointment slot so this approach will be adopted in future. This will provide greater flexibility and allow officers to stay as long as necessary to resolve complex issues. Appointments will continue to be offered at a specific time if requested.

- 2.23 Whilst working from four local offices the service is unable to fully implement all improvements as constraints around staffing levels make it impossible to focus on priority work. The total number of Housing Officer hours available a week equates to 884. Of these 159 hours (18% of their time) is spent providing a duty service to visitors coming in to the housing offices. This time could be better used for carrying out home visits, dealing with income collection or estate management issues. If closure of the offices at Netherfield, West Bletchley and Lakes is agreed only 37 hours a week would need to be dedicated to duty in the future.
- 2.24 In July 2011 a presentation was given to the Milton Keynes Council Tenant Group to advise them of the new arrangements. At that time lots of concerns were expressed which we took on board as part of the continuous improvement. A further update was provided to the same group in April 2012 where no concerns were expressed.

Management test of the system to confirm adequacy

During the period 4th – 6th July 2012 a total of 34 calls were made to the housing service to test adequacy and identify any issues. Feedback from Cabinet was taken on board with some questions being framed around the concerns that had been raised. A total of 20 calls were made by tenants and a further 14 by staff with some enquiries being of a routine nature and others more complex.

Questions and topics included:-

- How can I make a rent payment?
- What day is rubbish collected from Netherfield?
- Can I speak to my Housing Officer – I have a confidential issue I need to discuss
- I am separating from my partner and have a joint tenancy
- I am suffering domestic violence
- I want to put a new kitchen in my property – what is the process?
- I have been served a Notice to Quit – what does this mean?
- I am concerned about living in a high rise block of flats
- I want to move to Milton Keynes from Birmingham
- Who is my local Councillor?
- My neighbours fence has fallen down – can you replace it?
- My neighbours are always making lots of noise, can you make them stop?

The results are set out in Appendix A but show that the majority of callers (73%) rated the overall response as 4 or above (out of 5). No call received a rating of below 3.

Some callers were unable to get through straight away although some of these were outside of office hours. Others were over the lunch time period so we will now use this information to identify trends and see whether there is a need to increase resources at particular times of the day.

3. Alternative Options

3.1 These remain as reported to Cabinet in June 2012

4. Implications

4.1 Policy

This remains as reported to Cabinet in June 2012

4.2 Resources and Risk

These remain as reported to Cabinet in June 2012

Y	Capital	Y	Revenue	Y	Accommodation
Y	IT	Y	Medium Term Plan	Y	Asset Management

4.3 Carbon and Energy Management

This remains as reported to Cabinet in June 2012

4.4 Legal

This remains as reported to Cabinet in June 2012

4.5 Other Implications

This remains as reported to Cabinet in June 2012

	Equalities/Diversity	Y	Sustainability	N	Human Rights
Y	E-Government	Y	Stakeholders	N	Crime and Disorder

Background Papers: Delegated Decision report 31st January 2011
 Changing the housing service consultation document
 Closure of housing offices Cabinet report June 2012
 Equalities Impact Assessment