

10 October 2012		ITEM 4
Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee		
Transformation of Local Housing Services		
Report of: Councillor Val Morris-Cook. Portfolio-Holder Housing		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: No	
Accountable Head of Service: Linda Sinclair, Interim Head of Housing		
Accountable Director: Barbara Brownlee, Director of Housing		
This report is Public		
Purpose of Report: To report on proposals to transform the way in which housing services are delivered to tenants and leaseholders locally. This includes the cessation of static service delivery points from local offices to the provision of more versatile and mobile ways of customer-tailored services.		

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report advises Members about the changes that are needed to transform the provision of local housing services so that they are more efficient, targeted and provide more effective responses for those customers who are most vulnerable

Essentially the specific proposal in this report is to move from a static concept of service delivery from local offices to the provision of more versatile and mobile ways of delivering customer-tailored services. The current proposal is to move to this method of working in 2 areas, Stanford and Corringham and Purfleet. In these two areas the local office would be replaced by a range of service delivery models, which are designed to fit with local needs and current local opportunities. This range would include; home visits, monthly estate based events, regular housing surgeries held at existing council venues.

1. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1.1 That Members note this report and make any comments necessary to be taken forward as part of proposed changes.**
- 1.2 That Members agree to proceed to a new model of service delivery as outlined in 2.11 in this report.**

2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND:

- 2.1 A report to Health Overview and Scrutiny on 22 March this year raised the issue that changes needed to be considered in the way local housing services were delivered following the approval of the HRA Business Plan by Cabinet in February 2012.

Members were advised that in order to meet the two key objectives of the Business Plan (meeting statutory housing need and supporting sustainable communities), it would be necessary to ensure a strong visible presence on the Council's housing estates.

The report to Health Overview and Scrutiny also explained that Cabinet had agreed an action plan to improve the delivery of housing services and that a range of specific proposals would be presented to Members to consider. Amongst these improvements was a proposal to consider the reconfiguration of local housing offices to achieve better service outcomes and value for money.

While the development of a Community Hub was also trailed at this time further detail of this proposal will come to this and other Overview and Scrutiny groups throughout October and November, this report deals only with the specifics of new methods of delivering housing services.

2.2 Proposed Modern Local Service Delivery Model:-

- 2.3 Since March 2012, further work has been done to give shape to the original proposal. A series of business transformation workshops have been held with staff to look at new ways of delivering services. These have focused on the following improvements:- using customer information to target service delivery better, rationalising some processes, improving access for residents by increasing the amount that can be carried out via the web, strengthening the local presence on housing estates whilst at the same time delivering increased value for money.

- 2.4 The two main conclusions that have emerged from this work are:-

- That in order to free up housing staff so that they can spend more time with tenants in their homes, and be more visible out and about on housing estates, they need to work in a completely different way. Staff need to be more mobile and versatile in the way in which they directly deliver services; this means not working from a static office, but actually working most of the time in tenants' homes and on estates.
- The second conclusion is that if housing officers are able to target the most complex of service requests and needs, mostly from vulnerable tenants, the other more routine service requests can be more efficiently handled through existing or new automated telephony and computer systems.

- 2.5 As a result of this work, the current key proposal has been developed. This is to devise a system of service access and delivery that provides targeted help to the most vulnerable tenants alongside an automated system for more routine service requests. This model of local service delivery is seen as the best way of achieving a flexible, mobile housing service that can provide a strong visible presence on estates. A consequence of this fundamental change in service delivery is the closure of some of the local housing offices and a more flexible use of other Council buildings
- 2.6 Further work has also shown that there are already many other ways in which customers access council services, and that key housing services such as reporting repairs and paying rent are no longer accessed from Local Offices. It is therefore recognised that inefficiencies in the delivery of services have already crept in over a period of time as a result of separate service improvements and changes elsewhere in the Council. A list of these other ways of accessing services is contained at Appendix 1. They include:
- Freephone repairs line.
 - Dedicated rent payment and advice line.
 - Payment of rent and other charges on-line.
 - Bidding for properties under choice-based lettings on-line.
 - Information about tenants rights and responsibilities in the e-handbook.
 - On-line service request forms for tenants to make an enquiry about any type of housing service.
 - Home visits from the Council's benefit team for the elderly and vulnerable.

2.7 **Service Rationalisation**

Analysis of current access to housing services has revealed the following information:

- 77% of people who visited the Local Offices between April and July this year did so for housing services (housing issues = 39%, housing benefit issues = 38%).
- Of these, the three main reasons people contacted a Local Office for a housing issue were:-
 - About a housing registration;
 - About a repair.
 - About rent payment or account query.

Currently, the actual service that a Local Office provides concerning these three types of request is to act as a "post office" where requests are passed on to specialist teams. They do not actually report responsive repairs and tenants cannot make rent payments.

- 2.8 All of these three services can now be accessed in more efficient ways.

- Housing registrations: The housing website has been changed and updated to provide more user friendly information for people wishing to apply for housing or transfers. A new on-line application form is due in February 2013. Applications are expected to decline if the Council adopts the new allocations policy, currently being drafted in response to the Localism Act.
- Repairs requests: These have been logged by a central repairs team at the Civic Offices since February this year. In order to facilitate direct reporting of repairs by tenants a new repairs freephone was also launched on 3 September and is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
Rent Payment: Rent payments can be made on line or over the phone via a dedicated rent payment line. Over 200 paypoints have also been established across the Borough and adjoining areas where tenants can pay rent and other housing charges.

2.9 Housing Benefit service requests can now also be dealt with in other ways. Changes introduced in April 2012 have meant that the number of people required to bring in additional documents to offices for verification has reduced by 60%. Additionally, Housing Benefit Officers carry out home visits to vulnerable residents who need assistance.

2.10 Value for Money

As part of its transformation programme the Council wants to improve the visibility of housing officers, deliver better services to older and vulnerable residents, and it also wants to achieve better value for money. This means that it needs to consider more cost efficient ways of local service delivery.

An analysis of the different costs of customer contact methods has revealed the following:

- Web contacts:- 17p per transaction.
- Telephone contacts:- £5 per transaction.
- Face to face:- £14 per transaction.

It can be seen from this analysis alone that in terms of cost savings, the Council needs to follow a service delivery model that delivers more routine services via the web with more complex, high-need services delivered face to face for customers who are vulnerable or have high service needs.

Proposed Closure Programme:-

2.11 The proposal that has currently been made is to close the Stanford & Corringham, and Purfleet Local Offices from Monday, 5 November 2012.

2.12 Stanford and Purfleet have been selected as the first offices to close because they experience the least volume of customer transactions by face-to-face contact (Nb: Chadwell Local Office closed several years ago, with a limited

service provided from the Chadwell library). The following table illustrates the volume of callers per office.

Personal Visit Volumes per Local Office (April – August Data)

Local Office	Number of Visitors	% of Visitors
Purfleet	1075	6
Chadwell	3089	16
Tilbury	4629	24
Stanford-Le-Hope	3377	18
South Ockendon	6854	36

2.13 Appendix (2) shows a comprehensive data analysis for customer visits to Local Offices by type of customer, reason for visit and by Local Office.

3. ISSUES AND/OR OPTIONS:

3.1 The key issues arising from this report for the Council are:-

1. How to improve the delivery of housing services at a local level that increases the visibility and output of housing officers;
2. How to better support the housing needs of the most vulnerable and elderly tenants; and,
3. How to achieve (1) & (2) but also deliver the most value for money.
4. How to respond to the specific issues raised through consultation.

3.2 In tackling these issues, the options for members are:-

1. To continue with the current service delivery model. However, as has been discussed in the background section to this report, this old model does not deliver effectively in relation to the three key service issues in 3.1.
2. To proceed, as outlined in the background section, to a new model of service delivery and to implement the proposed closure of the two offices with additional safeguards to address the key points arising out of the consultation.

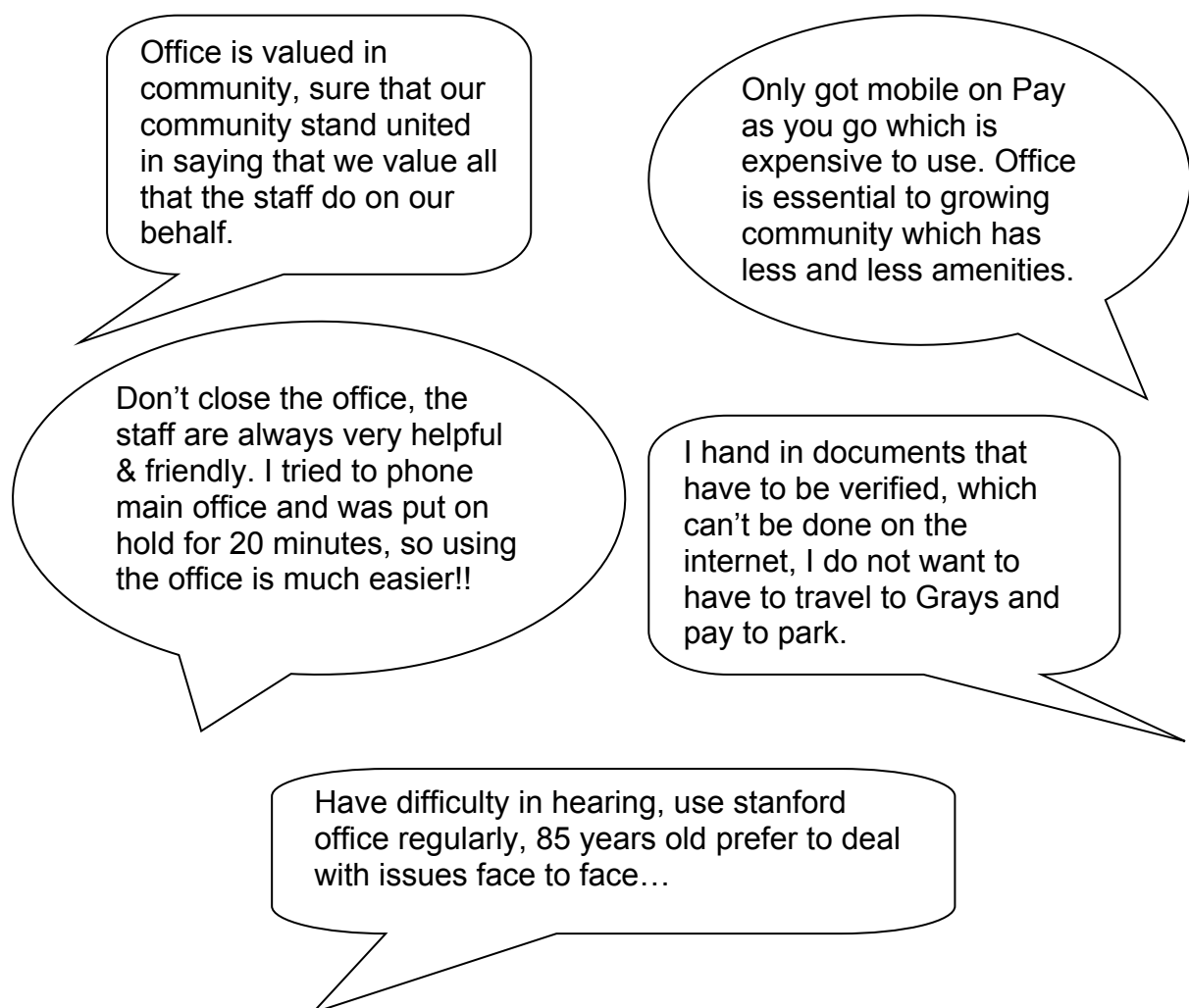
4. CONSULTATION (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

4.1 Consultation has been carried out with all tenants in the Corringham/Stanford and Purfleet areas in regard to the proposed closure of these two offices. Letters explaining the proposal were sent to the tenants and members for both offices on 8 August.

4.2 A total of 84 responses (48 Council tenants and 36 non-Council tenants) were received from the residents of Stanford and Corringham, and one from those in Purfleet. Amongst the non-Council tenant responses was a response from an ex-Mayor and one from SERICC. There were also 5 responses from members.

4.3 Appendix 3 shows the detailed consultation comments received from those who responded. The majority of respondents were concerned about how the vulnerable, those with young children and elderly people would be able to access the Council for services currently provided by the Local Office. Many also felt that the face-to-face service given at the Local Office was much better than that provided by phone or using the website, and many said that they would not be able to travel to Grays to speak to someone face-to-face. Quite a few people felt that the community would suffer if the local Office was closed, and several cited the increase in costs for them to travel to Grays or to phone; a few commented that the freephone did not help those who only use mobiles.

The following is a sample of some of the comments:



4.4 A petition from 29 elderly residents living in O'Donaghue House, Thors Oak and Bellmaine Court was also received on 17 September in response to the consultation. The deadline for the response is 17 October.

4.5 The petition stated that the “residents, friends, relatives, carers and neighbours of the tenants of O’Donaghue House and Thors Oak sheltered housing complex are against the closure of the office. It is not fair that elderly council tenants should be singled out to bear the cost of dubious efficiency savings by abandoning personal neighbourhood services for centralised computer call centres”.

4.6 The key issues arising out of the consultation exercise have been addressed in a number of different ways; a sample of these appear as follows:-

Consultation Issue	Response
How vulnerable people, such as the elderly and disabled will still be able to access Housing services.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Various access points on the Council’s website, depending on the service request. ○ Appointment system will be operational from 5 Nov to book appointments direct with Housing Officers. ○ Pro-active, targeted visits to vulnerable tenants.
People would not be able to travel to Grays (cost etc) to see an officer face-to-face.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Appointment system will be operational from 5 Nov to book appointments direct with Housing Officers. ○ Pro-active, targeted visits to vulnerable tenants.
Office is valued in community and community would suffer.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ A programme of monthly Housing surgeries will be published initially for these two offices and eventually for others. Each surgery will spotlight a particular housing theme, such as HB issues, repairs, and ASB and nuisance. Tenants will be able to get advice and help from a range of professionals (not just Housing Officers, but also HB staff, surveyors, and police etc).
A high number of tenants only use mobiles and not landlines – there is a cost issue for such people when phoning the Council.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ With the current model of service delivery, there is still a need for tenants to use a phone to report repairs (the main reason that tenants contact the Housing Service). With an emergency repair, most tenants are likely to be using their mobile if the have one. This change will not therefore affect such tenants. ○ For those tenants who might be affected and have access to a landline number, the Council has introduced a free-phone; for those who do not, a free-phone kiosk will be provided from the library in Corringham.
Tenants will have to travel to Grays for the verification of documents.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The main documents that need verification are HB applications. There has been a massive reduction in the volume of HB documents that need verification due to recent changes in the process. Also, where there are particular issues with HB applications, a home visit service is now available from the HB Team.

5. IMPACT ON CORPORATE POLICIES, PRIORITIES, PERFORMANCE AND COMMUNITY IMPACT

- 5.1 The key proposal in this report, which is to devise a system of service access and delivery that provides targeted help to the most vulnerable tenants alongside an automated system for more routine service requests, is in line with the HRA Business Plan and Housing Strategy key objectives.
- 5.2 With the various means of access that already exist and the new ones that have been, and are being introduced, residents who currently use the Local Offices will be able to continue to access services conveniently. The new arrangements for service access include pro-active, targeted visits for the benefit of older and vulnerable people.

6. IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Financial

Implications verified by: Mike Jones.
 Telephone and email: 01375 652772.
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Any costs incurred to deal with these changes will be contained within existing resources within the HRA.

6.2 Legal

Implications verified by: Alison Stuart
 Telephone and email: 01375 652 040
alison.stuart@bdtlegal.org.uk

S105 of The Housing Act 1985 requires that consultation be carried out with customers where there is likely to be 'a change in housing management arrangements' and this has been undertaken. There are no further legal implications.

6.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: Samson DeAlyn.
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Consultation has been carried out with all those affected by these changes. As a result an assessment has been made in relation to the impact these changes are likely to have on older and more vulnerable tenants and their households. This has resulted in an enhancement to existing means of

access (such as the freephone repairs line) and new ways (targeted visits) of meeting the service needs of those most at risk.

6.4 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Section 17, Risk Assessment, Health Impact Assessment, Sustainability, IT, Environmental

None

7. CONCLUSION

7.1 This report presents a new model for delivering housing services at a local level which is more cost efficient and more effective in terms of meeting the needs of vulnerable and older people.

7.2 Full consultation has been carried out and the main concerns identified and addressed in the final proposal to members.

BACKGROUND PAPERS USED IN PREPARING THIS REPORT:

APPENDICES TO THIS REPORT:

Appendix 1 List of alternative means of service access.

Appendix 2 Customer data analysis of visits to Local Offices.

Appendix 3 Consultation Comments

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