

HOUSING CABINET MEMBER MEETING

Agenda Item 58

Brighton & Hove City Council

Subject:	Customer Access Phase 2		
Date of Meeting:	20 October 2010		
Report of:	Acting Director of Housing		
Contact Officer:	Name:	Ododo Dafé	Tel: 29-3201
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Key Decision:	Yes	Forward Plan No. (HSG 17571)	
Wards Affected:	All		

FOR GENERAL RELEASE

1. SUMMARY AND POLICY CONTEXT:

- 1.1 This report updates Cabinet Member Meeting on the review of customer access arrangements for the Housing Management Service and presents a number of proposals for consideration.
- 1.2 A report detailing the customer access review and proposals for taking the review forward was considered by HMCC on 12 October 2009. A report was agreed by Cabinet Member Meeting on 3 March 2010 which included 10 Broad Principles on which improvements to customer access should be based. A version of this report went to HMCC for consideration on 27 September 2010.
- 1.3 The Housing Management division provides a range of services to the residents of council managed properties in Brighton & Hove. Our customers currently access services through a number of different channels (e.g. face to face, telephone, email, website etc) and through a range of teams (eg teams at housing offices, income management and repairs desk), see Appendix 1.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 That the Cabinet Member for Housing agrees the proposals that are being considered by phase 2 of the Customer Access Review.
 - (1) A single point of contact is established for all Tenancy Management telephone calls, emails and written enquiries.
 - (2) That one free phone and one local number is introduced for Repairs and Tenancy management and telecoms technology is utilised to route calls to the correct destinations.
 - (3) That some Children & Young People's Trust services are provided from the Lavender Street Housing Office as part of a co-location arrangement with local housing area staff continuing to be based at that housing office.

(4) That work continues on looking at providing access to housing management services through 'Community Contact Points' in libraries.

3. RELEVANT BACKGROUND INFORMATION/CHRONOLOGY OF KEY EVENTS:

Customer Access Review Group

- 3.1 Since the agreement of the broad principles the service has been undertaking further work with staff and residents to look at what can be done to improve the current service, fulfil these principles and provide better value for money to residents.
- 3.2 A staff Customer Access Review Group has been set up which is made up of staff from various service areas including those who's work includes dealing directly with residents. They have been looking at exactly what customers are asking us for when they contact us and focusing on how we achieve their requests with minimum waste. This involves observing our services from the customer perspective, and importantly, discussing that specific service with some individual customers at the point of transaction. It enables the group to better understand the nature of their enquiry, whether they have contacted us previously on the matter, the use they make of housing offices, what else they might like to see at offices and their access to the internet for example. The work has also involved talking with staff providing the service, and tracking the work as it progresses.
- 3.3 Towards the end of the group's work looking at how customers access our services they will involve the relevant managers and teams in developing improvements and planning for changes that will enhance the experience of customer using our services. The group will also be using tenants feedback from mystery shopping work to inform the customer access review recommendations. This work is one way that we are looking to improve our ability to satisfactorily complete customer transactions at the first point of contact.

Why look to improve customer service?

- 3.4. Poor customer service seems to stay in the mind a lot longer and is spoken about more amongst customers than good customer service.
- 3.5 Our aim has always been to provide our customers with an excellent level of service, but we know we need to give this a much higher focus if we're going to make the step change that we want. Our customers value receiving services from friendly, knowledgeable, courteous and considerate staff, and they also want to receive services in the ways that suits their individual needs at a time that suits them. Coupled with this is the imperative upon all organisations, but especially those using public funds, to provide services quickly, efficiently and effectively.

Customer Access - Broad Principles

3.6 The findings from the 2009 review of customer access to tenancy management services were formed into 10 broad principles which provide a basis for the service to change and develop. The aims are to improve the experience of customers contacting the service and ensure that enquiries are resolved 'right first time' or 'once and done'. These principles are:

- 1) Housing management should provide an effective and efficient service that meets residents' needs
- 2) Current ways of working need to change as they are resource intensive and do not always deliver what residents want
- 3) All residents should be able to easily access the service
- 4) There should be a range of ways for residents to contact the service
- 5) Administrative functions should be organised to reduce waste and avoid duplication
- 6) Housing Officers should have a proactive role focused on providing support and tackling problems as early as possible
- 7) Housing Officers should spend less time on administration and more time with residents and taking care of their neighbourhood
- 8) Support should be targeted at those who need it most
- 9) It is possible to improve service delivery whilst reducing costs
- 10) Residents and staff should be involved in developing and delivering change and improvement

3.7 Within this area of work we are looking at all the ways in which customers access our services. Our aim to achieve a variety of choice for residents that enable them to contact us using the method they prefer, and at a time of their choosing. In doing this, we have to make sure that all channels provide an excellent customer service that meets our customers demands in a professional, complete and timely way.

The new Housing Centre

3.8 The council has signed the lease for a building in Moulsecoomb (Unit 1, Fairway Trading Estate, Eastergate Road, Brighton) which will enable us to improve accommodation for staff and service delivery for residents. Work can now start on developing the building so that it meets the needs of the service and the Repairs & Improvement Partnership.

3.9 The Housing Centre will bring a number of benefits which include:

- An area for residents where they can access resources and hold meetings
- Modern office accommodation
- Onsite training facilities and meeting rooms
- Co-location of supply chain partner with on-site stores
- The opportunity to locate back office functions together in a single office rather

3.10 The centre will be an important factor in how we can organise the Housing Management service to deliver customer focussed improvements. The building is large and therefore brings the potential to co-locate a number of housing teams along with Mears staff, and further develop communication, cross-team working and partnering relationships. The Repairs Desk will also move from their location in Bartholomew House to the Housing Centre enabling these staff to work more closely with the Property & Investment and Mears teams to resolve issues more quickly and effectively than current arrangements allow.

‘A Council the City Deserves’

3.11 As part of the overall transformation of the council taking place under the banner ‘A council the city deserves’, Housing Management staff are working with staff from other service areas in order to provide an improved and more consistent approach to customer service across the city. This involves creating consistent standards for customer service and reception areas across council services, looking at ways of improving the experience of customers contacting the organisation and improving access to services via the internet.

3.12 Part of this corporate approach involves looking at opportunities to link up services and share offices. This has the advantages of providing customers with access to a range of services at a single point, as well as achieving financial savings. The council is also looking at ways of using libraries as community contact points where people can access a range of information about local services, and be assisted by specially trained Libraries staff to access a range of services via the internet. This could have significant benefits for residents who do not have access to computers at home or need support to use the internet.

Co-location at the Lavender Street Housing Office

3.13 As part of these council-wide changes and improvements, Housing Management have been looking at an opportunity to share Lavender Street Housing Office with the Children’s and Young People’s Trust. Residents should notice little difference in the service they receive as local area housing staff will continue to be based in the office. It will however, be an opportunity to provide access to a wider range of services from this location and improve public phone and computer provision within the reception area.

Improving customer service

- 3.14 Most customers contact us by phone, so for many it might be the only experience they have of our service. It is therefore important that we get it right, as a poor service leaves a lasting impression. We currently run five mini call centres and five face-to-face customer service points from our housing offices, and this has proven to be resource intensive particularly during less busy times.
- 3.15 One way of improving the experience of customers that is being looked at by the service is to reduce the number of public telephone numbers used by the service. Currently there are many different numbers that customers use for contacting tenancy management services, for example enquiring about a rent account, reporting neighbour nuisance and enquiring about transfer request etc. This can cause confusion for residents who are not always clear who they should contact about a particular issue. It is also an expensive way to organise the service as each phone-line and reception needs to be staffed in working hours.
- 3.16 Housing Management would like to create a single phone number for accessing all tenancy management services which will be answered by a dedicated team. This team would be given the training and authority to deal with the majority of enquiries when they are first received. The council would use telecoms technology to ensure that calls are routed effectively and answered as quickly as possible. Trials at Selsfield Drive housing office have shown that over 80% of enquires can be resolved on first contact when staff are trained and empowered to do so.

Housing Offices

- 3.17 As part of the review, the way that housing offices respond to face to face and telephone enquiries will be examined. In the past a full range of services to residents were provided from housing offices and most enquires could therefore be resolved by calling or dropping into the local office. However, over the last 10 or so years this has changed significantly with services such as repairs, income management, garages and car parks, anti-social behaviour and lettings being provided by specialist teams who cover the whole city and are based at one location rather than across the local offices. This means that housing offices are not able to resolve many of the issues that they did in the past. Residents who call in to see or speak to their Housing Officer are often unable to as they are only on duty for certain periods and often out of the office visiting people in their homes, attending meetings or working on the estates. This can lead to frustration for residents calling or dropping into offices, but also means that a lot of staff and resident time is taken up dealing with enquiries that are not directed to the most appropriate place for a response.
- 3.18 In order to look at how we can better use housing offices the council is examining what happens when people contact a housing office either by phone or in person and looking at how effective our response is. Whilst we wish to continue to provide opportunities for residents to talk directly to their Housing Officers and other staff this may be better provided by appointment and ensuring that it is simple to contact an officer who can immediately

resolve a particular issue directly by telephone, internet or email. Any changes would need to consider the needs of vulnerable residents who require support to access services, and would also need to make provision for resolving emergency situations quickly and effectively.

- 3.19 There is an increasing national trend of encouraging payments for goods, services and utilities through cost effective methods and at times that best suit customers. The service would like to further promote the full range of methods that tenants can use to make rent and household insurance payments.

Next Steps

- 3.20 The work will continue with the review group reporting on their findings and suggestions for service improvements. The changes to Lavender Street should be in place for January 2011. The service will continue to work with Libraries and other services on the community contact point pilot. The service will look at how best to simplify telephone and internet access and how staff can be best organised in order to ensure that enquires are resolved as quickly as possible. There will be a particular focus on using the new Housing Centre to improve service provision and value for money.
- 3.21 Progress and further decisions will be reported to future meetings of Housing Management Consultative Committee.

4. CONSULTATION

- 4.1 Residents will be involved in the development of customer access improvements through working groups drawn from Mystery Shopping volunteers. The group of twenty mystery shoppers comprises some elected tenant representatives, including members of the Housing Management Consultative Committee, and other that have not been involved before. They have already reviewed the Repairs Helpdesk twice (before and after the new partnership with Mears). They have also tested the service provided by housing office receptions.
- 4.2 There has also been opportunities for residents to be involved when officers are observing enquires as part of their review. Wider residents will be informed of developments through communications such as 'Homing In'.
- 4.3 Staff and trade unions will be involved throughout the review process and consulted about any resulting changes that effect them.

5. FINANCIAL & OTHER IMPLICATIONS:

Financial Implications:

- 5.1 The implementation of recommendations 1 and 2 will be met within existing Housing Revenue Account budgets and staff resources.

The co-location of staff from Children & Young People's Trust (CYPT) will bring efficiency savings of approximately £0.090 million per annum.

The continuing work of reviewing access to housing management services and the review of rent payment methods will be met within existing HRA resources and any financial implications resulting from these reviews will be reported back to this committee.

Finance Officer: Susie Allen, Principal Accountant Date: 9.09.10

Legal Implications:

- 5.2 There are no significant legal or Human Rights Act implications arising from the report's recommendations.

Lawyer Consulted: Liz Woodley, Senior Lawyer Date: 14.09.10

Equalities Implications:

- 5.3 A draft Equalities Impact Assessment has been undertaken and will be agreed before any proposals are implemented. It is important that equalities implications are considered in any changes to customer access. Changing and improving customer access has the potential to affect those with disabilities and others who can find it difficult to access services. The needs of people for whom English is not a first language will also be considered.

Sustainability Implications:

- 5.4 Sustainability implications of any changes to customer access need to be considered. This should include the potential to reduce the service's carbon emissions and increase the use of access channels with the lowest environmental impact.

Crime & Disorder Implications:

- 5.5 Freeing up Housing Officer's time by improving customer access processes and arrangements has the potential to enable them spend more time out on estates which may reduce crime, anti-social behaviour and the fear of crime.

Risk & Opportunity Management Implications:

- 5.6 A risk analysis will be undertaken to identify key risks and their mitigation.

Corporate / Citywide Implications:

- 5.7 Changes and improvements to customer access arrangements in Housing Management need to be considered in a corporate context. The close links between this project and the second phase of the council's 'A council the city deserves' work and will enable the outcomes of our projects to be coordinated with corporate developments.

6. EVALUATION OF ANY ALTERNATIVE OPTION(S):

- 6.1 The review of customer access will consider different options for the future customer access arrangements for Housing Management.
- 6.2 If the review was not undertaken arrangements would remain in their current state which is not always effective, efficient or meeting all customers needs.

7. REASONS FOR REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

- 7.1 To inform Cabinet Member for Housing of progress and gain agreement on the broad principles and recommendations in this report.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

Appendices:

- 1. Table detailing current customer access arrangements for Housing Management.

Documents in Members' Rooms:

None.

Background Documents

None.

Appendix 1

Team	Services provided
Housing Offices (Five offices covering different geographical areas - taking telephone, face to face and email enquiries)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General Housing Management enquires • Transfer requests • Complaints about noise/anti-social behaviour etc. • Rent payments
Repairs Desk (Based in Bartholomew House - taking telephone and email enquiries)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repair requests • Repair progress request • Planned maintenance enquiries
Whitehawk Repairs Base (Local office staffed by Mears – Face to face and telephone enquiries)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pilot scheme with local office where residents in Whitehawk can report and discuss repairs issues
Income Management Team (Based in Bartholomew House - taking telephone and email enquiries)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rent arrears enquires • Requests for support or advice about rent account and finances
Sheltered Housing (Wardens and central team based in schemes and Oxford Street Housing Office – telephone and face to face)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wardens deal with day-today issues • Central team deal with transfer requests and other issues which can't resolved on local level
Lettings Team (Based at Manor Road Housing Office – taking telephone, face to face and email enquiries)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Request and enquiries about let viewing properties and moving
Car Park & Garages Team (Based at Lavender Street Housing Office – taking telephone, face to face and email enquiries)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requests for car parking spaces and garages • Repairs • Accounts and arrears • Related issues e.g. enforcement
Estate Services Team (Based in Hollingdean Depot – take referrals from Housing Offices and repairs Desk; also direct referrals from the public, mostly by phone)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cleaning of common areas • Cleaning of graffiti • Clearance of fly tipping • Lock changes • Emergency break-ins • Minor repairs • Estate improvements

