

Title:	Presentation of the recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee
Chairman of Scrutiny Committee:	Cllr Jeff Osborn
Reporting Officer:	Paul Mountford, Policy and Performance Services Manager

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to present to Cabinet the recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee concerning:

- Customer services and the new telephone system
- Increased inspection of Houses in Multiple Occupation
- Performance Indicators in development control and overall response times to answering letters

Background

At the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 13 February 2008, Members expressed concern about three issues, namely customers' experience of the new telephone system, houses in multiple occupation, and selected performance indicators.

The Policy and Communications Portfolio Holder reported on the issues affecting Customer Services, which have been experienced with the new telephone system, and what action was planned to address these.

The Housing Portfolio Holder and Housing Services Manager were invited to provide an update on staffing issues in Housing Renewal. The section is nearly back up to strength, with just 1.5 posts vacant at the current time. The Housing Services Manager reported on one-off funding received from IDeA to inspect houses in multiple occupation, and requested help to trace such dwellings.

The chair of the Scrutiny Performance Group reported on the position and progress being made against key performance indicators, expressing some concern in relation to Development Control and overall response times to answering of letters.

Main issues

The new telephone system

The new telephone system was introduced in June 2007 to allow staff and the newly created Customer Service Unit, to handle calls more effectively. It enables all staff to be contacted on one number and immediately reduced the number of lost calls, from

around 25% to 6%. However, there have been a few issues, both due to customer error and technical error.

These have included a failure to play an 'out of hours' service message during bank holidays, and errors in 'hunt groups' (in which a call to an unanswered phone is diverted to another phone in the same department), which have resulted in some calls being left unanswered.

Work to improve the system was carried out on 16-17 February, and the problems with 'hunt groups' are being addressed. Problems are being systematically worked through and a report was presented to the Corporate Management Team on 13 February.

Opportunity to inspect more houses in multiple occupation (HMOs)

HMOs can provide accommodation for many young and vulnerable tenants. However, some poor housing standards can be found in such dwellings.

Currently, the only dwellings this Council licenses as HMOs are those of three storeys or more, containing five or more persons in two or more households. Under the Housing Act 2004, all such dwellings had to be licensed by local authorities as of April 2006. However, Councils can also register other types of HMOs, particularly in areas with problems of anti-social behaviour or low housing demand.

One-off funding has been made available from the IDeA, which will allow the Council to carry out a detailed survey to identify as many HMOs as possible and collect detailed information on housing conditions and the circumstances of the tenants. This will help the Council to decide if it needs to license many more HMOs. This should improve the safety and living conditions of tenants, who include migrant workers.

The Housing Services Manager would welcome help from Members and local people to identify where HMOs are, so they can be licensed, and would welcome help from any other departments of the Council which may be able to pinpoint such properties.

Performance monitoring

Performance indicators in Development Control are a continuing issue being kept under close review. The committee appreciates the considerable work being undertaken in this service to improve performance. It anticipates that this should result in a positive trend in performance by the end of the year (31 March 2008).

Letter monitoring was also raised as an issue in quarter three. The Policy and Communications Portfolio Holder agreed at the meeting to follow up this issue.

Effects on strategies and codes

There are no direct implications from this report on strategies and codes.

Risk management implications

There are risks to customer contact and access from issues relating to the telephone system and in responding to letters.

Finance and performance implications

This report highlights certain issues relating to the performance of the Council. There may be financial implications linked to the improvements to the telephone system and in dealing with HMOs.

Legal implications

There are no legal implications arising from this report.

Recommendations

Cabinet is asked to consider the comments and recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee as follows:

Telephone system

- That there is clearly still improvements that need to be made to the telephone system, but the Scrutiny Committee acknowledges that these are currently being worked on
- Requests that this improvement work is given high priority and that funding should not be a reason for delaying improvements
- Requests that Cabinet carry out a further consultation exercise with members of the public, via Peoples Voice and mystery shoppers, to identify any other areas of concern with the telephone system
- Requests that another detailed report on further improvements made to the telephone system be brought back to the Scrutiny Committee in May 2008

HMOs

- Consideration is given to increasing publicity and the extra support that might be needed from across the Council to identify HMOs and to ensure this new initiative to survey HMOs is successful

Performance

- There is still concern over the results of the performance indicators for Development Control in relation to the processing of planning applications. Scrutiny Committee hopes that improvements will be seen with the introduction of the Vanguard system. Scrutiny Committee does however

acknowledge that there have been a number of staffing issues within the service.

- Scrutiny Committee welcomes the commitment given by the Policy and Communications Portfolio Holder to follow up and address issues relating to
- letter response times.

Background papers

Information and reports presented to the Scrutiny Committee, 13 February 2008.
Draft Scrutiny minutes 13 February 2008.