

**THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE**

**RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**HELD ON TUESDAY, 8TH JANUARY, 2008**

Present: Councillor A. Burnip (Chair)  
Councillors Mrs M Baird, A. Collinson,  
J Haggan, Mrs. J. Maitland and M Nicholls

Apologies: Councillor D Maddison

Also Present: Councillor D Myers, Executive Member for Customer Services

1. **THE MINUTES OF THE LASTING MEETING** held on 11th December, 2007, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member, were confirmed.

2. **MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES**

- (i) **Centralisation of Hackworth Road Depot**

The Scrutiny Support Manager reported that O Sherratt, Director of Community Services had advised that the centralisation of depots to Hackworth Road, Peterlee was complete. It was suggested that O Sherratt be invited to attend a future meeting of the Resources Scrutiny Committee to outline the improvements that had been made and a site visit to the Depot be arranged if necessary. With regard to the disposal of the satellite depots further information was needed from the Asset and Property Management Unit.

**RESOLVED** that O Sherratt be invited to attend the Resources Scrutiny Committee to be held on 19 February 2008 to discuss the centralisation of the depots to Hackworth Road, Peterlee.

3. **THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE** held on 18th December, 2007, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member, were submitted.

**RESOLVED** that the information contained within the Minutes, be noted.

4. **PUBLIC QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION**

There were no members of the public present.

5. **FEEDBACK FROM SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT BOARD**

The Chair advised that at the last meeting of the Scrutiny Management Board held on 4 January, 2008 the following issue was discussed.

- (i) The establishment of a Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee which would deliver the accountability arrangements required for the implementation Executive. The Council's representative on the Committee would be Councillor A Burnip, Chair of the Scrutiny Management Board.

**RESOLVED** that the information given, be noted.

**6. SERVICE UNIT PERFORMANCE REPORTING – CUSTOMER SERVICES CENTRE UPDATE**

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Customer Services which gave an update on the progress and performance of the Customer Services Centre (CSC), a copy of which had been circulated to each Member.

Councillor D Myers, Executive Member for Customer Services explained that the performance of the CSC also relied upon the work of back office staff and the role they played.

Members were advised that the CSC had been operational since December 2005 and in March 2006 the old switchboard and customer service teams were merged and all staff were trained to handle both types of calls.

It was explained that the first phase of Council Tax, Planning and Development Control, Environmental Services and Asset and Property Management calls were migrated into the CSC during 2007. All CSA's could now handle information requests and give advice on these subjects, as well as take credit and debit card payments, send out relevant forms and complete requests for service. The CSA's also covered the reception area of building 9 which was the main reception area for customers on the site.

During the summer of 2007 particularly August and early September, the CSC was under a lot of pressure from the volume of calls. The number of calls offered in August was higher than in March, when the annual Council Tax bills were sent out. Coupled with the high volume of calls during this period was a mixture of staff holidays, and a higher than usual amount of sickness. Details of performance of the CSC since October 2006 were outlined in the report.

In addition approximately 8% of the CSC's daily calls were related to East Durham Homes (EDH). Handling these calls during the summer period prevented CSA's answering calls from customers of the Council and contributed to the longer waiting times, queues and number of calls which were abandoned. Another contributing factor was the number of calls from business contacts, other authorities, colleagues and family members which accounted for approximately 20% to 25% of the CSC's daily calls. A further issue, which affected the CSC's ability to handle the volume of calls, was the lack of communication related to mail-outs of leaflets. If the CSC was not advised of mail-outs it was impossible to plan ahead for the most effective use of its resources.

These factors led to a period of very poor performance and a rise in the number of complaints from customers, officers and Members regarding the ability of the CSC to answer calls.

A number of solutions were identified to try and lessen the impact of the volume of calls received during the summer. The actions taken were a mix of short and long-term actions and were put in place to prevent further incidents of a similar nature.

A new call routing mechanism using an IVR system was introduced which allowed customers to by-pass the CSC if they wanted to speak to EDH or they knew the name or extension number of the officer they wanted to speak to in the Council. The system allowed callers to press 1 to be routed through to EDH and 2 to be routed through to PC Consoles, which were quicker at dealing with switchboard-type calls. Customers who did not wish to use this system or had older BT Telephones had the option of holding on the line to speak to a CSA. Councillor D Myers explained that the Council

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had resisted the use of the options but due to the issues outlined the system had to be introduced. Approximately 30% to 35% of customers were now using this facility, which allowed calls to be handled quicker.

Discussions were underway with the marketing team at EDH to improve the marketing of the EDH free phone number, which was currently not listed in the telephone directory.

A new Telephony Policy, to be considered early in 2008, was being drawn up which would define the use of direct dial numbers, voicemail, hunt groups and diverts throughout the Council. Direct dial numbers had been introduced for colleagues and family members of officers to avoid calls being routed via the CSC.

The migration of further services to the CSC had been delayed to allow officers to assess the impact of the actions taken since August.

Heads of Service had been asked to identify peak periods of the year for calls to their departments to help the CSC plan its resources.

The number of CSA's able to take holiday together had been reduced so that extra resources were available during holiday periods.

As part of the plan to lessen the impact of the higher call volumes some part-time CSA's had temporarily altered their working hours to better match the pattern of calls. Temporary staff were employed for a short period of time to handle switchboard calls and overtime/temporary increases in hours for part-time CSA's were offered.

The impact of these actions had been positive and performance had improved steadily from September to November, details of which were outlined in the report.

The biggest improvement in performance came from the introduction of the new call routing mechanism in late November. Approximately 5% of all daily CSC calls were diverted straight to EDH and 30% were choosing option 2. Therefore, 35% of all daily calls on the Council's main number did not have to queue in the CSC. Feedback from customers and colleagues had been positive and customer satisfaction with how their calls had been dealt with remained very high.

There were still approximately 10% of daily callers who were not using the options to route their calls but these, and calls the CSC should be handling, had been more easily dealt with because of the new routing mechanism.

Having temporarily increased/alterd the working hours of some part-time CSA's had helped to provide better coverage throughout the working week. However, these were temporary arrangements and were only in place until the end of March, which would help to provide extra resources during the annual Council Tax bill run.

It was not possible to assess the impact of the introduction of direct dial numbers until the approval of the new Telephony Policy and it would take time for the effects of the policy to be felt within the CSC.

Councillor Mrs M Baird queried the percentage of customers who had older BT Telephones. D Payne advised that the percentage would be very small as they were gradually being phased out, however customers with this type of Telephone were not disadvantaged as they had the option of holding on the line to speak to a CSA.

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Councillor Mrs J Maitland referred to the volume of calls in August and pointed out that the authority would have expected more calls during the Council Tax bill run in March. D Payne agreed that the volume of calls in August could not have been predicted. Councillor D Myers explained that during August the Leisure department hosted a number of events, which required customers to pre register using the CSC number, therefore the volume of calls increased. In future departments would be asked to advise the CSC of such events.

Councillor A Collinson queried what the peak periods for calls were during the day. D Payne explained that there were 3 peak periods during the day between 9am and 10am, lunch time and 3.15pm to 4pm.

The Chair welcomed the improvements and the good progress that had been made. Councillor D Myers congratulated D Payne and the CSC staff on the excellent work that had been undertaken.

The Chair asked if customers used the e-mail system to report complaints to the CSC. D Payne advised that complaints could be received by either e-mail, fax or in person. All complaints received by the CSC were logged and tracked and an acknowledgement of the complaint was provided within one working day with a full response given within ten working days.

**RESOLVED** that the information given, be noted.

### **7. ADDITIONAL URGENT ITEM OF BUSINESS**

In accordance with the Local Government Act, 1972, as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985, Section 100B(4)(b) the Chair, following consultation with the Proper Officer, agreed that the following item of business, not shown on the Agenda, be considered as a matter of urgency.

### **8. SEMINAR - EFFECTIVE FINANCIAL AND BUDGET SCRUTINY (AOB)**

The Scrutiny Support Manager reported the receipt of correspondence from Durham City Council which gave details of a seminar to be held on 1 February 2008. The seminar would consider the scrutiny of the Council's budget and finances and would be led by CIPFA.

**RESOLVED** that Councillor Mrs M Baird be nominated to attend.