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AGENDA ITEM

7.1

EXECUTIVE

DATE: 12 MARCH 2007

SUBJECT: PETITION - HOUSING SERVICES

REPORT BY: HEAD OF HOUSING LANDLORD

CONTACT OFFICER: TREVOR MORROW/ 01582 546202/546240
LIAM DAWSON

IMPLICATIONS:

LEGAL	STAFFING	✓
EQUALITIES	COMMUNITY SAFETY	
FINANCIAL	RISKS	
OTHER		

CONSULTATIONS:

COUNCILLORS CONSULTED	SCRUTINY COMMITTEE CONSULTED
STAKEHOLDERS CONSULTED	OTHER ✓

WARDS AFFECTED: ALL

LEAD EXECUTIVE MEMBER(S): COUNCILLOR R. DAVIES

RECOMMENDATION(S)

1. Executive is recommended to receive the petition, note its contents and determine the Executive's response to the petition.

REPORT

2. A petition was received on 9th February 2007 from 259 residents in the following terms:

'We the undersigned, being tenants and residents of Marsh Farm and North Luton, are concerned about the proposals to reduce significant parts of the Housing Service at the Luton North Area Housing Office.'

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We value the services provided by the Area Team both by the reception service and the Housing and Inspection Office in the back of the office.

We want these to continue to serve Marsh Farm and North Luton as a whole and in their current location as they not only provide local and direct contact but also as a means to meet the needs of the elderly, infirm and those who find it difficult to visit other areas of the town.”

BACKGROUND

3. The Housing Service is undergoing a major change to the way it provides its services to meet the changing needs of our customers. This involves a major change to the staff structure, updating of all policies and procedures and implementation of a new IT system. Executive agreed both the Business Case and Change Plan for the Service Excellence Project in September 2006.
4. Three main drivers to this project have been:
 - Our poor performance in rent collection leaving the Council with arrears of £832,892 at end of January 2007 and being in the bottom 25% of local authorities for rent collection
 - A large minority of customers (34%) not being satisfied with the state of their neighbourhoods
 - The work carried out with ATOS, the consultancy that formed part of the Luton Business Partnership, to identify efficiencies and improvements to service
5. The staffing restructure will provide for specialisation in the service. Within housing Management it forms an Income Team based in the Town Hall and a Tenancy Management Team at Farley (a more detailed description can be seen in Appendix One) This will bring together a majority of back office staff from the Town Hall and the three area teams, in Purley, Lewsey and Farley, into two specialist teams.
6. The second key improvement is the removal of the artificial client / contractor split between the maintenance staff. By bringing together these staff into one team, based at the depot considerable duplication is removed.
7. The Council continues to explore different methods of IT working. The Housing Service vision is one where IT working is more flexible. At present, the only live data available is through the office. However, we are looking at providing this through a more robust and functional web based system for customers to, for example, report repairs, identify where they are on the housing waiting list, find their rent balance, and report complaints. The technology would also allow remote working for housing officers to access the IT system from the customers home or on estates so they are not tied to an office. This would further free up officer time so they can spend more time working with resident groups and visiting our vulnerable and elderly customers.

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8. This restructure and review of IT, will enable the Housing Service to provide services more in-line with customers needs. Year on year efficiencies of £453,000 were identified through elimination of duplication and IT improvements. Savings will be reinvested in those areas identified as the new priorities for the service. To be assessed as a 3-star service by the Audit Commission in terms of providing excellent services, we need to demonstrate that we are providing a value for money service in a customer focused way.
9. The restructure is nearing completion with Housing Management jobs having been evaluated with improved job descriptions and the process of slotting staff is underway. A report was presented to the Tenants Consultative Committee (TCC) on 21 February 2007 updating the committee on the progress of the project. A further update on Customer Access issues is in the TCC Forward plan for 28 March.
10. The Area Offices will continue to operate with the same opening times as they do now. We will be constantly reviewing the service, as with all parts of the Council, to ensure the service meet customer needs and we are providing value for money. We will be discussing with the TCC in the future about the expansion of the services offered at these receptions to include other council services and enable reporting of a wider range of issues than at present.
11. The restructure will enable the service to focus on quality of service. We will do this through;
 - Freeing up time for officers to spend time visiting customers, including the vulnerable and elderly.
 - Removing the apparent inconsistencies that arise through operating from three offices
 - More training for officers
 - More monitoring of services provided to our estates
 - Using a quality model with in built quality checks
 - Better trained managers
12. Whilst area housing offices provide an important role in provision of the housing service, they come with obvious limitations:
 - They are costly
 - They need to be staffed, possibly when there are limited visitors meaning staff are limited in the visits to tenants they can make.
13. We currently carrying out a survey of customers that visit our offices, a majority of tenants visit to report and chase repairs (this is duplication of services provided via the call centre and work is on going to encourage a greater take up of this service), to identify where they are on the waiting list (service provision in this area will change dramatically as we move towards a

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choice base lettings approach) and to discuss arrears repayments. Only a limited number of these involve the need for more detailed consultation with staff. The survey also highlighted that a number of tenants would be willing to use a different form of contact, e.g. telephone/internet.

14. The new structure will enable basic queries to continue to be dealt at Area Offices, and ensure that clear information is given to enable customers to obtain information and report repairs over the telephone. For more detailed queries we would offer appointments for customers in their home, at area offices or at the Town Hall. This will widen the method of service provision.
15. The exit survey of customers visiting our area offices will give us a clear picture of when the area offices are most used and alternative methods of contact that tenants would prefer to use. Whilst the survey continues we are discussing the expansion of area offices with other council departments to enable provision of wider services at sites other than the Town Hall.
16. Once clearer proposals on the expansion of these services are drawn up full consultation as recommend in the Executive reports last year will take place, in line with our legal requirements

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

17. The Service Excellence Project is expected to generate significant cashable efficiency savings for the Council that can be reinvested in the housing service. Should the Council decide to delay or change the project this would have an adverse impact on the savings that could be achieved. This report has been agreed by the Finance Manager (Housing and Community Living) on 1 March.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

18. There are no specific legal implications at this stage. This report has been agreed by Legal Service on 1 March.

OPTIONS

19. The options are to:
 - Reconfirm the agreement to the Service Excellence Project - refocusing the service whilst keeping the area offices open, allowing for better customer service, efficiency savings and increased performance
 - Agree continued consultation with the TCC and wider tenants as required to expand service provision at area offices.
 - Unpick the service restructure of landlord services to reinstate the old service provision via the area offices. This would frustrate a central theme of the Service Excellence project as previously agreed in the business case and change plan.

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20. Appendix 1 – TCC Report – 21 February 2007– Update on Service Excellence Project (outlining the role of the proposed specialist teams).

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Housing Landlord Services Service Excellence Business Case (electronic link)
Housing Landlord Services Executive Report 4 June 2006
Housing Landlord Services Executive Report 11th September 2006
Housing Landlord Services Service Excellence Change Plan (electronic link)
TCC Forward Plan March 2007