

**Community and Cultural Services Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Thursday, 27th March, 2008.**

**Present:-** Councillors Small (Chair), Dhaliwal, Dhillon, Latif Khan and Shine.

**Co-opted Members Present:-** Barbara Goldstein and Glynys Higgins

**Apologies for Absence:-** Councillors Aziz, Grewal & Jenkins and Heather Mason.

**PART I**

**34. Declarations of Interest**

Councillor Small declared a personal interest in agenda item 4 – ALMO Update - as she was a Board Member of People 1<sup>st</sup> (Slough). Councillor Dhaliwal declared a personal interest in agenda item 4 as she was a tenant of People 1<sup>st</sup> (Slough). They would however remain and speak during consideration of these items.

**35. Minutes of the Last Meeting**

The minutes of the meeting held on 30<sup>th</sup> January, 2008 were approved as a correct record subject to the inclusion of Barbara Goldstein and Glynys Higgins in the list of attendees.

**36. Matters Arising**

The Member who raised the issue concerning ground maintenance on the Britwell Estate had not yet received any feedback on this issue. It was agreed that this would be passed to the appropriate Officer to respond to the Members' queries.

The Panel were reminded that a letter had been distributed to all Members of the Panel informing them that the impression given at the last meeting concerning the changes to housing benefit was misleading and the letter gave the Members the correct information regarding this.

**37. Customer Service Centre Update**

The Head of the Customer Service Centre (CSC) introduced a report updating the Panel on the current service level statistics in respect of the Customer Service Centre. Members were reminded that the statistics contained in the report were the same format as previously but included recent information. The report updated Members on the current service level statistics on the CSC. The report contained customer analysis data including ethnicity, gender, age range and disability. The report also contained statistical information on the call centre telephone enquiries, including time taken to answer calls and deal with telephone queries as well as front of house enquiries at Landmark Place.

Members raised the following issues in the subsequent discussion of the item:-

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- A Member questioned how information regarding ethnicity was collated. Members were informed that this information was collected by CSC staff when answering enquiries by asking a number of questions. Members present at the meeting confirmed that they had never been asked this information.
- A Co-opted Member requested further information on the purpose of gathering this information. An Officer explained that the CSC was continually monitoring the service it provided and how this could be improved. Through the collection and analysis of the information presented in the report the CSC could address the management of different issues. It was confirmed that although none of the Members on the Panel had been asked the appropriate questions, in the last quarter 38,268 callers had been asked, enough to compile the appropriate statistics. An Officer noted that the questions being asked depended upon the call volume and the type of query. If the caller had asked to be put through to a different Department or person then the questions would not have been asked. In many instances the CSC would already have the information about the caller. A Member asked whether callers were asked these questions before the query was dealt with. The staff at the CSC would gauge when and whether it was appropriate to ask the questions and in many circumstances most of the information had already been gathered.
- A Member informed the meeting that they were concerned about the apparent lack of publicity for the recent Britwell Talk Shop open day and asked if it was known how many people attended this event and how many knew about it. An Officer informed the meeting that as the open day was part of the Lifelong Learning Team's remit they organised the publicity for the event. However a number of posters and leaflets had been put up and distributed in Landmark Place. It was also believed that a lot of work had been completed concerning this event in the Britwell area. It was agreed that the Officer would look into this and find out what work had been carried out and a report concerning this would be brought to the next meeting.
- A number of Members were concerned that when they phoned to speak to an Officer at People 1<sup>st</sup> or other Council departments they were directed to the CSC, either through voice mail or directly redirecting the call. When the CSC was called and People 1<sup>st</sup> was selected they were then directed back to a voice mail message redirecting them back to the CSC. In this way Members were going round in circles and were redirected repeatedly to different departments. Officers informed the Panel that advice had been issued about redirecting phones to the CSC. It was believed that this had ceased to be a major problem. Members clarified that they had been caught in a phone 'loop' in the past three months. The Head of the CSC requested that when this happened Members should contact her directly. It was noted that some people may not want to do this after they had been waiting on the phone. However Members were informed that they could e-mail the Head of the CSC including the time, date and nature of the call to notify the problem.
- A Member made a request to spend a day at the CSC. This had been offered to Members in the past and they could spend a day observing the front of house and phone calls any time they wished. Members needed to contact the Head of the CSC to arrange this.

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- A Member noted that on their last visit to the CSC there was some confusion regarding the waiting system for customers and numbers called. These were being called out repeatedly without any customers answering. It was felt that this increased delay for other customers. The Member also suggested that it was difficult to see which numbers would be served next. However, Officers confirmed that TV screens in MyCouncil showed this information.
- Members raised two issues concerning the behaviour of members of staff at the CSC. The Panel were informed that they had seen a member of staff jumping over a desk and felt this raised health and safety concerns. Another Member had witnessed an elderly customer being 'shrugged off' by a staff member when seeking help, in order for the staff member to speak to a security guard. Members felt that these Officers displayed inappropriate behaviour for the public face of Slough Borough Council. The Head of the CSC requested that both Members provide the details of these incidents in order that they may be looked into.
- The Chair noted that many people were experiencing problems when using MyCouncil and that other Officers were becoming overburdened with calls that should be directed through the CSC. An action plan was in place to look at the key priorities of the CSC which would be taken forward. Changes to the operating procedure had been implemented over the past month and improvements in some areas already showed. Council Tax bills had gone out daily rather than weekly which had dramatically improved customer service in this area, as there was no 'avalanche' of phone calls. The benefits department had also improved wording on their letters in an effort to reduce the number of people querying the content of letters received.
- A Member explained that they could not find the opening times of MyCouncil on the internet site. Officers explained that the times were on the website.
- Members advised that they had observed long queues from MyCouncil down Slough High Street. This often occurred on a Thursday morning when the CSC opened late. However, Officers felt that the public were well aware of the situation and noted that it was needed for staff training. Opening times were arrived at on the basis of customer feedback and part time staff were employed to cover the busiest times and extra part time staff had been taken on in the latest recruitment drive. 8 to 8 opening had been looked into, however this would require more extra staff than would be cost effective or if staff were stretched out across the day this could worsen the situation.
- The number of people visiting Landmark Place had remained fairly static since its opening. However calls had increased due to several elements including additional responsibilities and extended opening times. A proposal had been put forward to deal with the high demand of phone calls. Officers were looking into operating an e-service system on the internet in order for people to access information 24 hours a day.
- A Member asked about the provision of a complaints service for Slough. This was in operation and was known as Respond. Eventually as this was rolled out

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across the Council, there would be a champion in each section to deal with complaints. The public could access this through the website or the CSC staff would inform people of the appropriate action to take in order to make a complaint. A report on the complaints service was issued every month for all services except social care.

- The CSC opened in October, 2005 as the One Stop Shop and switchboard set up. The dynamics of MyCouncil had changed considerably since then. However Members felt that it was still experiencing the same problems. It was agreed that Panel Members should ensure that a copy of all case work concerning MyCouncil was sent to the Head of the CSC, who assured Members that they wanted to provide better services and the staff at My Council were working hard to achieve this. A member requested that an item on the uniform of the 'meeters and greeters' should be added to the agenda plan.

**Resolved - (a)** That the agenda plan be updated as detailed above

**(b)** That the performance statistics in relation to the Customer Service Centre and the Action Plan to improve services to residents be noted

### 38. ALMO Update

The Chief Executive of the ALMO, People 1<sup>st</sup> (Slough) updated the meeting on progress made by the ALMO so far. People 1<sup>st</sup> were looking to build upon their two star status and make sure that the recommendations in the report were implemented. The recommendations were:-

1. Strengthen the focus on access and Customer care – by ensuring level three of the equality standard was reached.
2. Improve the organisation's approach to performance management and value for money – by exploring new approaches through the Interserve contract.
3. Improve customer service and resident involvement – by developing new arrangements to involve tenants.

Officers informed the Panel that they would ensure that People 1<sup>st</sup> met its targets. People 1<sup>st</sup> was looking to incorporate targets from the existing service plan and it was reported that when the Panel next meets the progress over the coming year could be reviewed. This included not just the PIs but overall service targets. Members requested that in future the performance indicators be given as a separate report including additional information.

Members raised a number of issues in the subsequent discussion:-

- A Member pointed out that re-let times had increased again for February and questioned the cause of these time lags. It was noted that this was probably due to the delays in people going into properties to repair them and this may be due again to logistical difficulties that had been experienced in the past.

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- The service charge collection rate had decreased since the previous year and Members felt that this trend would continue as people were unwilling to pay controversial charges that, they believed, were for services that they had not received. The Leaseholders Forum, an independent organisation, was discussing this at its next meeting and would look into how best to deal with the charges. 1 in 8 leaseholders had received dramatically increased bills and did not know what action to take. People 1<sup>st</sup> had worked with Forums around different initiatives, including spreading payments across a longer period and was aiming to introduce e-mail services for tenants and leaseholders. Information and dates of leaseholder meetings was included in the People 1<sup>st</sup> newsletter. Members requested that an article on leaseholder services be included in the next People 1<sup>st</sup> newsletter to remind people of available services.
- A Member asked about issues concerning recharges for repairs to properties. There was awareness amongst Officers of the controversy surrounding this issue but assured Members that this no longer happened and previous concerns had been addressed. When Interserve received a request for repair they informed the caller if there was a chance that it would be a rechargeable repair. However people were no longer being charged before a call out takes place. Members requested that tenants needed to be made aware of what constitutes 'wilful damage'. It was agreed that the policy on wilful damage and a list of the charges that had recently been instigated would be passed to all Members of the Panel. Members asked whether tenants were asked their age before being informed of the recharge. There was a system in place to flag up this information but some data was currently unavailable, although this would be continually improved.
- Members asked if rent agreements still contained the clause that people should keep their properties clean and tidy. Officers responded that it was and that it was mainly enforced on resident's front gardens. Members questioned why Housing Officers were not dealing with this. It was noted that this was difficult to enforce in many cases but Housing Officers were doing their best to respond to problems.
- Members felt that for years people had paid for services that they had not received but until the bills were itemised people did not realise this.
- Officers notified the panel that a briefing note to Members would be received in their packs over the next few weeks.

**Resolved:** That a separate report be submitted to the next meeting detailing the performance indicators.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 5.00 p.m. and closed at 7.25 p.m.)