Housing Management Consultative Committee	Agenda Item 69
	Brighton & Hove City Council

Subject:		**Housing Management Customer Access Review**
Date of Meeting:		**8 February 2010**
Report of:		**Director of Adult Social Care & Housing**
Contact Officer:	**Name:**	**Sam Smith** **Tel:** **29-1383**
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Key Decision:	**No**	
Wards Affected:	**All**	

FOR GENERAL RELEASE

1.   **SUMMARY AND POLICY CONTEXT:**

1.1   This report updates Housing Management Consultative Committee on the review of customer access arrangements for the Housing Management Service and presents 'broad principles' for taking the work forward.

1.2   A report detailing the customer access review and proposals for taking the review forward was agreed by HMCC on 12 October 2009.

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 (e.g. housing offices, income management and repairs desk), see Appendix 1. Reviewing customer access and developing a strategy for the future is a key project in the Housing Management Improvement Programme 2009-2012.

2.   **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

        That the Housing Management Consultative Committee recommend to the Cabinet Member for Housing that:

2.1   (1) the customer access review work to date be noted, and the next steps be agreed

2.2   (2) the "Broad Principles" detailed in points 3.6 to 3.27 be approved.

3.   **RELEVANT BACKGROUND INFORMATION/CHRONOLOGY OF KEY EVENTS:**

        What have we been doing?

3.1   Customer access arrangements have been reviewed with the support of the corporate Value for Money Programme. The review has looked at how Housing Management is currently organised, how effective it is in providing

the services that customers require and what measures can be taken to make improvements.

3.2   Earlier this year a mystery shopper group was formed made up of local residents. Applicants to the group were sought using a wide range of media including community newspapers and *Homing In*. The group of twenty mystery shoppers comprises some elected tenant representatives, including members of the Housing Management Consultative Committee, and some who have not been involved before.

3.3   The first mystery shopping exercise was undertaken in September 2009 and investigated the quality of service given by the Repairs Helpdesk. The report was welcomed by the Helpdesk team who agreed that where gaps in customer service provision had been highlighted, training would be provided to rectify them. The second exercise took place in November 2009 and reviewed the service provided by housing office receptions. This work was also welcomed and the findings of the group have resulted in implementing changes to the service, for example improved information packs to help officers answer enquiries.

What has the review has found?

3.4   The review has found that the service is not necessarily organised in the most effective way to provide excellent customer service and that resources are not always focused in the right way to most effectively meet residents needs.

3.5   The findings have been split into broad principles which provide a basis for the service to change and develop with the aim of improving the experience of customers contacting the service and ensuring that enquiries are resolved 'right first time'.

What are the broad principles?

3.6   The review has resulted in the following 'broad principles' which, if agreed by HMCC, will be used to inform the more detailed re-design of the service. The principles and a description of each are detailed below.

1) Housing management should provide an effective and efficient service that meets residents' needs

3.7   **What does this mean?** The services provided for residents by the Housing Management service should be organised in a way which makes the best use of available staff, buildings and money. The service should be provided so that residents are able to have any problems or enquires resolved as quickly and effectively as possible.

3.8   **What is the evidence?** The review found that current arrangements do not always make the best use of staff time and that residents' enquires are not always resolved as quickly as they could be. An example of this is the services provided from local housing offices where many issues cannot be

resolved at the reception counter as they are dealt with by specialist teams who are based elsewhere. Residents often come to local offices with enquiries relating to these services meaning that their journey is wasted and the housing offices spend time dealing with issues that they are unable to resolve. The review found that 60% of telephone calls to local Housing Offices related to services that were not provided from those offices.

2) Current ways of working need to change as they are resource intensive and do not always deliver what residents want

3.9   **What does this mean?** The service is currently organised in a way that can sometimes hamper customer service and does not always provide value for money for residents.

3.10   **What is the evidence?** The review has found that the current organisational arrangements result in a level of duplication with similar functions provided by different teams and from different locations. An example of this is the lettings process which involves a number of different teams and individuals. This can lead to delays and problems in the letting of properties and means that there can be lack of clarity of who is responsible for residents.

3.11   The 2008 'Status Survey' of residents found that 72% were satisfied with the overall service provided by the council. When asked specifically about customer service 72% found staff helpful and 81% found it easy to get hold of the right person. The costs for the service are high when compared to other councils and social landlords at £17.11 per week per property for 2008/09.

3) All residents should be able to easily access the service

3.12   **What does this mean?** It should be easy for residents to contact the service they require.

3.13   **What is the evidence?** The review found that current arrangements mean that it is not always clear which team, office or phone number a resident should contact for the issue or query they have. As well as being confusing this can also result in a level of duplication with similar functions provided by different teams and from different locations. An example of this is the telephone service where there are a number of possible telephone numbers and teams for residents to call (e.g. each local Housing Office, Income Management, Repairs, Anti Social behaviour team etc). This is expensive (in terms of needing several teams to cover the different numbers), and can cause confusion and wasted calls/time for residents who are not always clear about which team to call for which issue.

4) There should be a range of ways for residents to contact the service

3.14   **What does this mean?** Residents should be able to contact the council by a range of methods (e.g. phone, online, email etc).

3.15   **What is the evidence?** The review found that there are a number of different ways which residents prefer to contact the council. The majority of residents prefer to contact the council by telephone, however some residents like to contact the council by other means such as email, the website, texting and in person. The review found that face to face contact would be better focused on targeting appointments for those who need them rather than providing a 'drop-in' serive which is often under utilised and used by only a small proportion of residents.

5) Administrative functions should be organised to reduce waste and avoid duplication

3.16   **What does this mean?** Administrative functions (e.g. rent accounting procedures, and completing and filing computer/paper records etc) should be organised in a way that is efficient and minimises duplication.

3.17   **What is the evidence?** The review found that some administrative functions are not organised in an efficient way and that there is duplication between teams and roles. An example of this was identified in the administrative process to cease and create tenancies which utilised a number of forms that sometimes required the same information to be completed. The information was then manually entered onto a computer record. This process could be simplified and made more efficient by entering record directly onto the computer.

6) Housing Officers should have a proactive role focused on providing support and tackling problems as early as possible

3.18   **What does this mean?** Housing officers should be focused on understanding and providing support to the neighbourhood in which they work. By taking actions to support residents and tackle problems at an early stage Housing Officers can prevent problems becoming major issues in the future.

3.19   **What is the evidence?** The review found that current arrangements mean that Housing Officers are often unable to focus on providing support and tackling problems in neighbourhoods at an early stage. This can mean that problems increase and have a negative impact on neighbours and neighbourhoods before they are tackled. Enabling Housing Officers to have a more proactive role that focuses on understanding their neighbourhoods, building relationships with residents and tackling problems as soon as possible will have benefits for all members of the community. New ways for Housing Officers to take a more proactive approach are currently being

piloted in the Moulsecooomb through the 'Turning the Tide' initiative and any developments will be closely linked to this work.

7) Housing Officers should spend less time on administration and more time with residents and taking care of their neighbourhood

3.20 **What does this mean?** Housing officer should be enabled to spend more time working in their neighbourhood and less time completing paperwork in the office.

3.21 **What is the evidence?** The review found that Housing Officer spend on average of over 40% of their time undertaking administrative tasks (e.g. completing records and updating computer systems) and less than 60% of customer focused tasks (e.g. meeting residents and dealing with enquiries). There is potential to reduce the proportion of time spent on administration by making processes more efficient, changing the ways Housing Officers are supported and re-focussing their role.

8) Support should be targeted at those who need it most

3.22 **What does this mean?** Support and assistance should be available to all, but focused on those he need it the most.

3.23 **What is the evidence?** The review found that a lot of the resources in Housing Management as tied up in providing services which are duplicated and under utilised rather than focused on supporting those who need them most. As well as the examples around reception desks and telephone arrangements outlined above, the review also found that people contacting the service most often are not always those who have high levels of need. The 'Turning the Tide' pilot in Moulsecoomb is currently testing ways of targeting support interventions and developments will be closely linked to the outcomes of this work.

9) It is possible to improve service delivery whilst reducing costs

3.24 **What does this mean?** Current arrangements mean that is possible to improve serive provision and reduce cost.

3.25 **What is the evidence?** The review found that the duplication of tasks and roles as well as inefficiencies in processes mean that it is possible to reduce costs whilst improving service delivery. For example the review found that duplication in administrative processes and call handling mean that significant improvements can be made which could also potentially produce financial savings.

10) Residents and staff should be involved in developing and delivering change and improvement

3.26   **What does this mean?** In order to develop the high level findings of the review into practical proposals that can be implemented further work needs to be undertaken with staff and residents.

3.27   **What is the evidence?** The review has produced findings that indicate areas of the service that are not organised in the most efficient way or are not providing the level of service that residents require. To develop this into practical proposals further work needs to be undertaken with residents and staff to look at these areas in more detail and develop practical proposals that can be taken forward.

Next Steps

3.28   The work so far has been very useful in developing the broad principles and identifying areas of the service which are in need of change. The next stage will involve a detailed analysis of the end to end tenancy management process starting with the letting of properties.

3.29   Residents will be involved in this through working groups drawn from the tenants and leaseholders who have been involved in Mystery Shopping and building on their experiences to feed into service improvements. There is also potential to engage with residents who have expressed an interest in working with the council through the recent Resident Involvement questionnaire. Staff will also be fully involved through project teams and working groups. This work will start in February with the aim to have all changes in place by April 2011.

3.30   An outline timetable is presented in the table below:

Action	Date
Detailed review of end to end tenancy process	February to April 2010
Update report to HMCC	10 May 2010
Start implementation of 'quick wins'	From May 2010
Plan for implementation	May to June 2010
Link to Turning the Tide outcomes	From July 2010
Phase 1 Implementation and training	July to September 2010
Update report to HMCC	27 September 2010
Phase 2 Implementation	October 2010 to March 2011
Update report to HMCC	13 December 2010
All changes implemented	April 2011

4. CONSULTATION

4.1 Residents will be involved in the development of customer access improvements through working groups drawn from Mystery Shopping volunteers. Key decisions and progress updates will be reported to HMCC on a regular basis. Wider residents will be informed of developments through communications such as 'Homing In'.

4.2 Staff will be involved throughout the review process and consulted about any resulting changes that affect them.

5. FINANCIAL & OTHER IMPLICATIONS:

Financial Implications:

5.1 The costs of carrying out the review of Customer Access are included within existing budgets. Any efficiencies or service pressures relating to the implementation of this review will be addressed in the key decisions and progress updates which will be reported to HMCC on a regular basis.

Finance Officer: Gary Driver   Date: 14 January 2009

Legal Implications:

5.2 It is not considered that there are any significant legal or Human Rights implications arising from the report's recommendations. At any time in the future when specific actions are considered, specific legal implications will be addressed in accordance with the Council's normal decision making process.

Lawyer Consulted: Liz Woodley   Date: 20 January 2010

Equalities Implications:

5.3 It is important that equalities implications are considered in any changes to customer access and an Equalities Impact Assessment will be undertaken before any proposals are implemented. 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 should also be considered.

Sustainability Implications:

5.4 Sustainability implications of any changes to customer access need to be considered. This should included 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 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 corporate Value for Money programme will enable the outcomes of this work to be coordinated with corporate developments. The review process and outcomes will be used as a case study to help other council services to improve their customer access arrangements.

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 HMCC of progress and gain agreement on the broad principles and next steps outlined in this report.

7.2 To gain approval for continued resident involvement via the 'Mystery Shoppers' group.

<u>**SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION**</u>

Appendices:

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

Documents in Members' Rooms

1. None.
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Background Documents

1. None

Appendix 1

Current Customer Access arrangements in Housing Management

Team	Services provided
Housing Offices (Five offices covering different geographical areas - taking telephone, face to face and email enquiries)	• 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)	• Repair requests • Repair progress request • Planned maintenance enquiries
Whitehawk Repairs Base (Local office staffed by Mears – Face to face and telephone enquiries)	• 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)	• 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)	• 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)	• 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)	• 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)	• Cleaning of common areas • Cleaning of graffiti • Clearance of fly tipping • Lock changes • Emergency break-ins • Minor repairs • Estate improvements