
PUBLIC REGULATION, INSPECTION AND PROTECTION BEST VALUE REVIEW - INTERIM REPORT

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report appraises Members of the progress so far with this review and seeks agreement on the process for consultation. It is being reported to both the Community and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committees as services under the review fall within the terms of reference of both.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 As identified in the Council's Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP) for 2002/03, a review of those services that deal with public regulation, inspection and protection is being carried out.
- 2.2 The review is wide-ranging and encompasses 25 services provided by a number of divisions. It includes:-
- environmental health functions including food safety, health and safety, licensing, pest control, nuisances, air pollution and private sector housing enforcement;
 - planning enforcement;
 - litter, abandoned vehicles, dog fouling, stray dogs;
 - byelaw enforcement;
 - dangerous buildings and structures;
 - drainage and surface water control;
 - tree preservation orders and dangerous trees;
 - house-to-house, street collections and small lotteries.
- 2.3 The review excludes taxi licensing, although it is likely that recommendations will be made in respect of licensing functions generally.

2.4 As the review deals with many services, it is not intended to carry out specific process reviews of any particular function. The aim of the review is to establish the current level of service, identify desired levels of service and to produce an action plan in order to secure the desired improvements.

2.5 Many of the services under review will contribute to the overall Comprehensive Performance Assessment for the authority, either in the context of "Clean Green and Safe Public Space", or "Balancing Housing Markets".

3 LEVELS OF SERVICE

3.1 Officers have already considered each function under review, how it currently performs, customer feedback where this is available and what are the weaker areas where significant improvements need to be made.

3.2 In some service areas there are clear best practice guidelines and performance levels to aim for, often nationally set, for example, the Food Standards Agency Framework Agreement on local authority food law enforcement. In other areas these factors are not so clearly defined. The full analysis of current service performance and actions to address weaker performance has been placed in a folder in the Members Lounge, Civic Suite. A resume of the analysis will be presented at the meeting for Members' consideration.

3.3 In most of the functions, potential process improvements have been identified, but there are also a number of common "themes":-

- The need to make more information available on specific issues, on duties and on the Council's policies. The Council's Website, and links to other agencies and organisations will be of particular value and will help more towards e-government targets.
- Adoption and publication of enforcement policies, so that complainants and those being regulated are clear about what to expect.
- Better feedback to customers. The review has identified performance on keeping customers informed appears to vary widely, with poorer communications often linked to high staff workload.
- Prioritising use of resources - with finite resources, it is not possible to do everything, and agreement on the tasks which rank as high priority is needed.

- Better working between different parts of the Council and with outside bodies. Much joint working is already undertaken where this adds value, but there are some areas where it can be improved.
- Continued staff development - the Personal Development and Review (PDR) process is now well established and will continue to be essential as new duties and roles develop.
- Out of hours services - the Council receives relatively few emergency calls outside office hours. The majority of these relate to housing and are largely dealt with by the Council's contractors. As such, the current out of hours arrangements have worked satisfactorily over a number of years.

However, there needs to be a guaranteed response to rare, but serious, events should they occur, such as a fatality in a premises where the Council have an enforcement responsibility, or a major food poisoning outbreak. The enforcement management frameworks of, for example, the Food Standards Agency which the Council is required to follow expect a response to significant events outside office hours. Costed proposals for an enhanced response scheme will be brought forward.

Customer expectations as to service provision outside normal working hours is increasing and if the Council were to attempt to deliver in this area, additional resources would be required.

- 3.4 Given the range of matters outlined above and in the light of the presentation, Members are asked whether there are any further matters that need to be considered within the context of the review.

4 CONSULTATION

- 4.1 The review work so far has shown that in many of the areas under consideration, little if any structured customer feedback has been sought. There are records of compliments and complaints, but these cannot be used as a reliable indicator of the majority of customer's views. An issue, therefore, is what type of consultation to conduct as part of the review. With such a diverse range of services, some of them only having relatively low numbers of customers each year, it would not be sensible to consider surveys of satisfaction levels in every one. Instead, it is proposed to concentrate on surveys of a sample of customers, (which will include regulated businesses) in the higher profile service areas:-

- planning enforcement;

- nuisances;
 - "street scene" (litter, fly tipping, dog fouling, abandoned vehicles, stray dogs);
 - public entertainment;
 - food safety;
 - housing/caravan site enforcement.
- 4.2 Resources will be required to undertake this exercise and the use of an independent research organisation is also likely to encourage respondents to give an honest view. The survey work will need to assess customer views both on the quality of existing services and the priorities for resource allocation.
- 4.3 Given the experience with other consultation exercises undertaken by the Council, it is suggested that a sum of £10,000 be allocated from the provision for Best Value consultation for this work.

5 COMPETITION

- 5.1 As part of the review the Council will need to demonstrate that it has tested the competitiveness of the services. Some of them are already provided by contractors appointed through competitive tendering, for example, litter removal and pest control.
- 5.2 Given the diverse range of services being reviewed, it is unlikely that there will be many contractors who have the skills and experience necessary to undertake a comprehensive service provision. It is understood that one company is contracting to provide a range of services for a London Borough and as a first step, it is suggested that informal discussions be held with that company to establish whether there is a market for a smaller contract appropriate to the Council's needs. If the discussions are positive, a soft market-testing exercise using external consultants could then be undertaken. This second stage would be subject to a further report with costings for Members decision.

6 RESOURCES

- 6.1 At present, Officer time is being expended in carrying out the review. There will be costs associated with carrying out customer surveys, as previously indicated.
- 6.2 Proposals to alter the type or level of services, or the way they are provided will need to identify the financial implications for Members' consideration.

7 RECOMMENDATION

7.1 It is proposed that:

- (1) Progress so far on the Public Regulation, Inspection and Protection Best Value Review be noted.
- (2) In the light of the presentation and the points raised, Members identify those matters that they feel need to be given further consideration as part of the review.
- (3) Customer consultation as indicated in the report with funding of £10,000 be recommended to the Policy and Finance Committee.
- (4) Informal discussions be held with a contractor to determine the level of interest in contracted service provision, with a further Committee report on soft market-testing if appropriate.

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Background Papers:

Assessments of service areas under review

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