

# COMMUNITY AND CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

4 February 2009

## 29. ACCESS TO SERVICES

The Director of Finance reported on the outcome of the Audit Commission report on Access to Services, following the inspection undertaken in September 2008. The inspection had assessed Wirral Council (on a scale of zero to three stars) as providing 'good, two-star access to services that has promising prospects for improvement ... because of its impact on improving and providing access to services to meet the needs of the borough's diverse communities – one of the Council's aims'.

Malcolm Flanagan, Head of Benefits, Revenues and Customer Services, explained the context of the inspection and referred to the strengths and weaknesses identified in the report. He reported on the action being taken to address the Audit Commissions specific recommendations, in respect of:

- increasing the number of hours for telephone contact by the public – extended hours were already available in a number of key service areas such as Revenues and Benefits (8.00am to 6.30pm weekdays and Saturday mornings) and it was planned during 2009 to include more services where it could be demonstrated to be of value to service users;
- dealing with the number of abandoned calls – Streetscene had been identified as the problem area and additional staff had been put in place to deal with the issue;
- improving access to buildings for disabled persons – that was being addressed as part of the Strategic Asset Review.

Overall, however, Wirral had equalled the highest national grading so far under the new inspection criteria.

In response to members' questions Mr Flanagan stated that the extended hours had been publicised and the most marked increase had been early in the morning; it was the aim to have made progress on the three key recommendations by June 2009 - they were part of a more comprehensive action plan, and the Committee would be able to see how the service improved from the regular performance monitoring reports. Russ Glennon, Head of Policy, added that the inspection report would be incorporated into the Council's overall CAA and referred to the action being taken to provide more targeted analyses of customer satisfaction.

Councillor Gilchrist referred to the proposal by the Cabinet to relocate the Eastham One-Stop Shop to Bromborough, as part of the Strategic Asset Review. He asked how that could be justified, given that the Council had recently invested £240,000 in providing the facility, and queried whether the Council would, as a result, be failing in its LPSA target of having customer services within one mile of 95% of residential properties. Malcolm Flanagan explained that having attained that target for LPSA purposes, it was not now a measurement that central government required from the authority. Councillor Kelly responded that it was likely that an information point might still be required in Eastham, but in an alternative location, such as a post office - he would take account of the views of local councillors on that issue.

Councillor Gilchrist also asked about the cost of relocation – his estimate was £100,000 – but was advised that that would depend on how services were divided between the two locations. Other members queried whether the figures on which such a decision might be based were sufficiently precise to predict future usage. Malcolm Flanagan stated that Asset Management staff would provide statistics of the potential customer base; Finance could provide numbers of actual customers, along with their general area, though not precisely where every one lived. It would be difficult to compare current use of the Bromborough information point and the Eastham One-Stop Shop, and it would be an estimate as to how many current customers in Eastham might have used a one-stop shop facility in Bromborough.

It was moved by the Chair and seconded that -

“The report be noted and the Committee record its appreciation of the work of the staff involved in achieving the rating of ‘good, two-star access to services that has promising prospects for improvement’.”

It was moved as an amendment by Councillor Gilchrist, and seconded, that –

“In addition, however, this Committee expresses its concern that a proposal has been made to relocate the Eastham One-Stop Shop; notes the considerable expenditure on the building; questions the basis on which the decision was made - whether it was informed by levels of usage, standards of service, accessibility and the needs of the area – and looks forward to receiving a detailed factual assessment.”

The amendment was put and carried (4:3).

**Resolved – That**

**(1) the report be noted and the Committee record its appreciation of the work of the staff involved in achieving the rating of ‘good, two-star access to services that has promising prospects for improvement’;**

**(2) in addition, however, this Committee expresses its concern that a proposal has been made to relocate the Eastham One-Stop Shop; notes the considerable expenditure on the building; questions the basis on which the decision was made - whether it was informed by levels of usage, standards of service, accessibility and the needs of the area – and looks forward to receiving a detailed factual assessment.**