

**Agenda Item No: 8**

**Report to:** Overview and Scrutiny (Resources)

**Date of Meeting:** 11th March 2010

**Report Title:** Scrutiny Review of Public Contact Arrangements Update

**Report By:** Kevin Boorman  
Head of Communications & Marketing

---

### **Purpose of Report**

To update Overview & Scrutiny Committee of progress made since the Scrutiny Review of Public Contact Arrangements report was published in March 2008 and the update report was given in March 2009.

---

### **Recommendation(s)**

1. That progress made on improving public contact arrangements be noted, especially in respect of the areas highlighted as being of particular concern
2. That further progress on improving public contact arrangements is reported to Overview & Scrutiny Committee through the regular quarterly performance monitoring process.

---

### **Reasons for Recommendations**

Good progress has been made in the three areas identified as being of particular concern - the time taken to answer the telephone in some offices; staff attitude; and the use of 0845 numbers. However, there are still some items from the original action plan that have not yet been fully implemented. Progress in these areas is still being made, and will be reported to Overview & Scrutiny through the regular quarterly performance monitoring process.

---

## Background

### Introduction

1. At its meeting on 13th March 2008 the Overview & Scrutiny Committee for Resources received the final report of the Scrutiny Review into Public Contact Arrangements
2. Cabinet considered the management response into the Scrutiny Review at its meeting on 7th July 2008. The management response fully supported the action plan as part of the Scrutiny Review and dealt with the three particular areas of concern that had been identified by the review :- the time taken to answer the telephone in some offices; staff attitude; and the Council's use of 0845 numbers. Cabinet voted unanimously to agree the management response.

### Two Years On

3. A progress report to Overview & Scrutiny Committee for Services was presented at its meeting on 10th March 2009. This updated the Customer Contact Action Plan produced for the original Scrutiny Review. A further update is provided as Appendix A.
4. As noted in the original Scrutiny Review, the management response and in last year's update report, two cross-cutting groups were established early in 2008, one on Communications (including corporate identity and style, and items such as letters and email templates), the other on Service Quality Assurance. These have proven to be useful vehicles for taking forward a number of areas identified for improvement, in particular the three highlighted as being of particular concern in the management response to the Scrutiny Review. These two groups have recently been merged into a wider Service Quality Assurance Group.

### Telephone Answering

5. One of the key findings of the original review team was the fact that the Council had a problem with the amount of time taken to answer the telephone in some departments. Urgent action was taken as soon the findings of the review team were made, and this has produced significant improvements.
6. The Service Quality Assurance cross-cutting group now consider telephone answering statistics at every one of its meetings. Appendix B show the time taken to answer the telephone when the management response to the Scrutiny Review was being progressed, in June 2008. Appendix C shows the figures for the year to January 2009, and Appendix D the figures for the year to January 2010.
7. As noted in last year's update, the Service Quality Assurance Group set more challenging targets for 2009/10, and this initiative appears to have been successful. In Benefits, for example, a total of 25 797 calls were answered in the year to January 2010 compared to 19 593 in the year to January 2009. And, despite the much greater volume of calls answered in the year to January 2010, 1653 took over ten minutes to be answered, compared to 3247 in the year to January 2009. Similar improvements were made in Local Taxation :- in the year to January 2010,

a total of 29 224 calls were answered, compared to 25 205 calls being answered in the year to January 2009, of which 3446 took over ten minutes to be answered.

8. It was noted in last year's update that work was in progress in developing a business case for a contact centre. The decision has not been made to progress a contact centre for Hastings Borough Council, and this is expected to be ready to go 'live' at the end of the 2010/11 financial year.

### **Staff Attitude**

9. Comments were made to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee meeting in March 2008 over the low number of formal complaints regarding staff attitude; some members felt that this painted too good picture. Members of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee were asked for details of particular attitudinal complaints, but no responses were received. A formal system for dealing with complaints about staff attitude has been in place for well over a year and there does not appear to be a significant problem in this respect, although this continues to be monitored as part of the complaints review process.

### **0845 Numbers**

10. As noted in the management response to the Scrutiny Review, a petition relating to the use of 0845 numbers by the Council was received shortly after the scrutiny review was published. The management recommendation to abandon the use of 0845 numbers from April 2009 was accepted by Cabinet in July 2008 and in fact their use was phased out from late 2008. All council literature and advertising material now uses the 01424 geographical numbers.

### **Other Items**

11. In addition to the main areas of concern specifically mentioned in the management response to the Scrutiny Review, all other action points identified in the Review are being taken forward and, indeed, most have now been achieved. As noted above the original action plan with an extra column added to show progress to date is included in Appendix A.
12. Of particular interest is National Indicator 14 which measures 'avoidable contact'. This is an indicator of the calls to the council that could be avoided, for example because the customer seeks unnecessary clarification; because of poor information on who to contact or because the customer was not given correct information on who to call; repeat contact; the customer having to chase progress; etc. Work is well underway in this area, with the Information Technology Manager liaising with Service Heads to ensure a consistent approach is taken that fits with the guidance for the indicator.
13. Another area of concern was the quality of letters being sent out. As part of the original Scrutiny Review the review team asked for copies of all public letters sent during a week in November 2007. Several hundred letters were received and reviewed. These were variable in quality, with a number containing poor grammar/spelling errors, others apparently being very abrupt in tone. There were also inconsistencies between departments as to who should sign letters. A further audit of letters was undertaken during 2009 and training courses in letter writing

introduced, initially concentrating on those areas where there was thought to be a particular problem. Standard letter templates have also been introduced.

### **Recommendation**

That progress made on improving public contact arrangements be noted, especially in respect of the areas highlighted as being of particular concern

That further progress on improving public contact arrangements is reported to Overview & Scrutiny Committee through the regular quarterly performance monitoring process.

---

### **Wards Affected**

Ashdown, Baird, Braybrooke, Castle, Central St. Leonards, Conquest, Gensing, Hollington, Maze Hill, Old Hastings, Ore, Silverhill, St. Helens, Tressell, West St. Leonards, Wishing Tree

---

### **Area(s) Affected**

Central Hastings, East Hastings, North St. Leonards, South St. Leonards

---

### **Policy Implications**

Please identify if this report contains any implications for the following:

Equalities and Community Cohesiveness	No
Crime and Fear of Crime (Section 17)	No
Risk Management	Yes
Environmental Issues	No
Economic/Financial Implications	Yes
Human Rights Act	No
Organisational Consequences	Yes

---

### **Background Information**

The Overview & Scrutiny Report in to Public Contact Arrangements (O&S Resources 13th March 2008)

Management Response to the Overview & Scrutiny Report in to Public Contact Arrangements (Cabinet 7th July 2008)

Scutiny Review of Public Contact Arrangements update (O&S Serevices, 10th March 2009)

---

### **Officer to Contact**

Kevin Boorman  
kboorman@hastings.gov.uk  
01424 451123

