

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Staffing Portfolio Holder

12 March 2009

AUTHOR/S: HR Manager

SERVICE CONTINUITY ARRANGEMENTS FOR DECEMBER AND JANUARY HOLIDAY PERIOD

Purpose

1. To provide information to the staffing Portfolio Holder in respect of arrangements for public access and service continuity during the Christmas (December 2008) and New Year (January 2009) holiday period.

Executive Summary

2. The Council made a decision, at the meeting on 17th July 2008, to open the main offices and depot for the duration of the Christmas holiday period and New Year.
3. All service area managers were asked to make adequate arrangements for skeleton cover for the 29th, 30th, 31st December. Cover outside normal office hours and on Bank Holidays was provided under the usual Out of Hours arrangements. Waterbeach depot staff provided a full refuse service on 29th, 30th, 31st December and 2nd January 2009.
4. This report provides information and feedback from service areas following the Christmas and New Year period.

Background

5. South Cambridgeshire District Council had, in the past, operated a practice of closing the main offices and depot for the period covering Christmas and New years Day. This meant that offices have been closed on Christmas Day, Boxing Day and New Years Day and, depending on how the public holiday dates fall in a working week, certain week days between 27th and 31st December are also days on which the offices were closed.
6. Although the main offices and depot buildings were closed, the contact centre provided telephone access and information to the public. Statutory services such as homelessness, building control, environmental health and enforcement are always provided through 'on call and standby' arrangements whereby employees are contacted and expected to respond in emergency situations. The Sheltered Housing service always provides visits and resident contact where required and emergency call out and contact arrangements are always in place including the out of hours contract with the PCT.
7. During the Christmas holiday period in 2007, a few concerns were raised, by Elected Members following complaints from the public, these were focussed on the refuse collection service. Some residents were unhappy that there had been a longer than normal period between collections. Elected Members considered this feedback and

expressed a desire that the Council provides greater continuity of service during the Christmas holiday period.

8. Following a Scrutiny Call-In process, the Council, at its meeting on 17th July 2008, endorsed the decision of the Staffing Portfolio Holder to cease the practice of closing the main offices and depot for the duration of the Christmas holiday period and New Year. The decision was minuted as follows:

*'The Staffing Portfolio Holder **AGREED** that for this year volunteers will be sought from service areas to provide a skeleton service during the Christmas period. The extra statutory days will be added to employee leave entitlement. The concessionary day will be used to close the offices on Friday 2 January 2009. For future Christmas periods, the offices will be open as normal, and application of the concessionary day will be decided annually by the Staffing Portfolio Holder.'*

9. All Corporate and service area managers considered the minimum requirement for staffing arrangements in order to provide adequate service provision to the public. Staff were asked to volunteer to work and sufficient individuals were identified for the three days in question. Refuse collection services and support services at Waterbeach were to be maintained and arrangements agreed by the Environment Operations Manager.
10. The Council offices at Cambourne offered the following opening hours:

	Open to the public	Open for staff
Weds 24 th Dec	8.30 – 3.00pm	8.00 – 3.00pm
Mon 29 th Dec	9.00 – 4.00pm	8.30 – 4.30pm
Tues 30 th Dec	9.00 – 4.00pm	8.30 – 4.30pm
Weds 31 st Dec	9.00 – 4.00pm	8.30 – 4.00pm

11. Feedback has been sought from service areas to include comments in respect of:
- Details of complaints / issues in respect of direct service provision i.e. refuse collection, payment of benefits.
 - Issues/additional costs incurred by opening the Cambourne Office and rescheduling the refuse collection service
 - Any identified inefficiencies i.e reduced tonnage on refuse rounds/ lack of bins being put out etc
 - Information from the Contact Centre - number of calls/ any issues
 - Details of what work has been achieved by staff who have worked during the three days - particularly if this has directly improved the service to the public.

Feedback from Services

12. The Contact Centre has provided a detailed list of the number of incoming calls for the period from 24 December to 4th January. From this information it has been possible to identify the level of calls to be 39% of the normal call activity. There was generally a reduction of calls on 24th and 31st December, and in particular, less calls in the afternoon than the morning.

Normal call level – average of 4800 per week
 Call level 24 December to 4th January – 1889

The number of calls answered (including those transferred to voicemail) totalled 1840 giving a 97.5% success rate.

A breakdown of the calls is shown on Appendix A. This demonstrates that by far the most call activity relates to Revenues/Benefits, Housing (homelessness team) and Environmental Health.

13. For the three days (29th, 30th, 31st December) a total of 81 visitors were received and again, mostly for Revenue/Benefit and Housing related issues. There was a 60% reduction in the number of visitors on 31st December compared to the previous two days. An analysis of visitors to the Cambourne offices is at Appendix B.
14. **DLO**
Property Services were quiet on the client side - but the DLO was busy, there is clearly a demand to the repairs service between Christmas and the New Year. The DLO reported that during the 3-day period they were issued with 87 responsive repair jobs, of which 54 were classed as emergencies and were dealt with on the same day. The unusually high number of emergency works was as a result of the decision by City Services to close during this period. The team also managed the workload efficiently so that, by monitoring incoming jobs other work such as surveys, void properties and 30 routine repair jobs were undertaken. The DLO manager feels that this provided an excellent level of service to tenants.
15. **Housing Services** overall were relatively quiet. The Housing Officers dealt with a few visitors at the Cambourne office. In the Land section and Gypsies and Travellers service there was very little contact with customers.
16. **Supported Housing** - The staff spent time clearing paperwork and catching up on paperwork. It was difficult to do anything major as other providers/agencies were not open. The sheltered service to residents ran smoothly. One team leader was able to sort out problems on Monday 29th, which could have easily been done from home. There were no problems with cover from Invicta or PCT, and there was no need to contact the team by either party over the period. Community Telecare Coordinator did 4 visits over the 3 days, none of which were urgent and could easily have been held over until this week - the contract with Invicta/Tunstall has a 24 hour response and if there had been a problem this would have been instigated.
17. **Housing Options and Allocations** – the team were very busy on Monday 29th and continued to have a steady stream of visitors on the Tuesday and Wednesday although it was slightly quieter. None of the queries were particularly urgent, but it would appear that members of the public found the Christmas opening useful.
18. **Housing Advice and Homelessness** - there were a total of 8 new cases over the three-day period, two of which were urgent. If the office had not been open, the urgent cases would have been picked up via the normal emergency out of hours number (there were no other calls on this number over the Christmas period). In addition, there were calls/visits from existing clients which, meant that staff were busy over the three-day period. The majority of the queries were not urgent, although having staff available was clearly helpful/reassuring to the customers.
19. **Environmental Services**
A large number of Env Health staff came in during the week, well above the minimum skeleton service levels. The majority of these staff felt it was worthwhile and used the time very productively. The opportunity was taken to 'catch-up' and set things 'ship shape' i.e. they were able to do some important proactive pieces of work that would have been difficult to do any other time. Both sets of staff i.e. those who did not come in and those who did seem content, as those who wanted the time off were able to

take it and those who came in are happy that they can now take their leave during the better weather and/or at a time that better suits them. No additional costs were incurred except in respect of leave to be taken later in the year. The emergency out of hours service cost less than normal because staff were available during the working day.

20. In total, from the 27th December to 3rd January, 184 customers accessed a variety of environmental services as broken down below. These relate to those queries which resulted in a job being raised and do not include general queries/advice that could be answered without further work.

Abandoned vehicles and flytipping 13

Atmospheric pollution 3

Food 1

Recycling 39

Refuse 97

Health & safety 2

Housing 2

Noise 7

Public health 2

Pest control 18

21. Although not as busy as normal it did provide customer service for those wishing to access it, give staff the flexibility to come in or not, did not lead to inefficiencies and most importantly damage to the Council's reputation did not result from the Christmas close down.
22. **DSO**
The refuse and recycling service was successful and went off without a hitch. The Environmental Operations Manager allowed for a 2% growth in tonnages on 2007/8 figures for expansion in housing. This gives a tonnage shortfall of 188 tonnes. In other words the crews have collected slightly less this year from last although the exact causes of this may be many and varied, i.e. household not putting waste out, demographic changes; absences from area etc.
23. The supervisor's assessment of presentation on Sat 20th Dec was about 70%. In our experience that quite a high presentation rate for a brought forward collection day.
24. The number of missed collection complaints was not as high as expected. Probably helped by putting reminders on black bins for those affected by Sat 20th Dec collections. This cost £400 plus 5 officers time.
25. The cost of adding 3 days to the operatives leave and having to cover this with agency staff is circa £15,000. The working costs were broadly similar. Sufficient staff volunteered to undertake the service
26. Therefore the additional cost of collecting over the Christmas period this year compared to last was circa £15,400.
27. Missed bin numbers may become available in time but are delayed due to staff sickness. To date we have not received any formal complaints about the revised arrangements.
28. **Benefits**

There were a number of visitors and callers on all three days. Only received one visitor wanted to make a new claim for benefit. There were no requests in relation to bus passes

29. One complaint was received but did not relate to a payment or anything which could not have waited until the new year.

30. The benefits team saw a significant reduction in people visiting and telephoning the council offices on both Xmas Eve and New Years Eve; on both days visitors and callers were nearly no existent after lunchtime.

31. **Revenues**

The Revenues Manager reported that staff were busier on Monday 29th than the Tuesday and not very busy on Wednesday. The levels of calls and enquiries on Monday was not as high as a "normal" Monday. Wednesday afternoon saw virtually no activity and indeed, two staff manned the phones for the last hour with no calls or visitors at all. There were no staff on the Rents Section on Tuesday and Wednesday and no staff on the Sundry Debt Team at all.

32. There were no complaints received regarding a lack of, or failure of service provision during this period. Staff who did work during this period were 'on hand' to answer queries. There was no post delivery at all therefore staff used their time to impact on backlogs.

33. There were five payments made via the automated system on Christmas Day.

34. **Accountancy – No info provided**

35. **ICT**

ICT staff reported that it was a fairly quiet period. No work requests, problems or complaints were received. Some staff used the opportunity to undertake general 'housekeeping' activities. It proved difficult to do normal work activities as, internal colleagues were not always available and; external contacts, (suppliers, contractors) were not working over the period. Tasks such as graphics/design could be undertaken.

36. **Democratic Services**

No staff presence during the three days.

37. **Legal/Land charges**

There was a minor problem with local land charges which had no LLC cover over the break. A personal search agent who attended the office wanted sight of some enforcement notices (although a senior lawyer was expecting them and was present & who could have dealt with the query but was not asked.) Legal had cover on all days. Monday was very quiet. There was an issue with the lack of any cover in the homelessness section and the solicitor was being bombarded with requests from occupiers of Victoria View (Smithy Fen) and lawyers representing them re homelessness applications in relation to the deadline for removal from the site which, is covered by an injunction.

38. **HR/Payroll**

There were no internal or external telephone calls or visitors during the period. The time was spent mainly on the records management exercise. It was not possible to do any operational work as relevant staff and managers were not available. Payroll

work was completed in relation to pensions forms from the County and implementation of the 2008 pay award.

39. **Policy & Performance**

One member of staff was in attendance on all three days. Time was spent on report writing presentations, surveys and CorVu development. No external phone calls were rec'd.

40. **Communications**

The Communications manager reported the receipt of one media call which, was prompted by a news release that she had just completed. She completed four news releases during the slow news period between Christmas and the New Year. One media call relating to travellers was received on 2 January and it was only possible to provide a basic response to this as the offices were closed and an appropriate person was therefore not available. Time was spent on preparation/reading, filing, and generally 'catching up'.

41. **Partnerships**

Time was spent on generally 'catching up' and responding to a funding enquiry.

42. **Elections & Customer Service**

The reception area was covered throughout the three days. Information on the number of visitors to reception is at Appendix B.

43. **Planning**

The Corporate Manager dealt with one issue that related to a potential Traveller incursion, this would have been dealt with through the usual out of office service had the offices been shut. Development Control teams reported low numbers of calls (in some cases no calls at all). Staff spent the time productively and made the most of the quiet period although some commented that they had tried to ring agents in order to progress applications but the agents were not working. One case in relation to the removal of trees was dealt with by Conservation / Enforcement.

44. **Building Control**

Very little customer contact during the three days. Phone calls and inspections were considerably lower than normal. None of the phone calls/inspections were urgent or critical and could have been dealt with under the normal on-call arrangements.

45. **New Communities Team**

The Corporate Manager reported that it had been a very quiet period with minimal phone and email contact. Very few staff were in work and it was difficult to arrange meetings, either internal or external as other colleagues & partners were not in work.

46. **Number of staff**

Service area	29 December	30 December	31 December
DLO	9 operatives + 3 office staff * Project Mgrs - 3	6 operatives + 3 office staff * Project Mgrs - 2	5 operatives + 3 office staff * Project Mgrs - 1
Facilities Management	Caretakers x 2 Other staff 2	Caretakers x 2 Other staff 2	Caretakers x 1 Other staff 1
Housing Assets	3	3	2
Housing Options	1	1	1
Hsg adv /homelessness	4	2	2
Env Health (exc DSO)	20	16	16

DSO	Full staffing on crews + supervisors 1 in office	Full staffing on crews + supervisors 1 in office	Full staffing on crews + supervisors 1 in office
Revenues	9	11	9
Benefits	4	4	4
Accountancy	No info provided	No info provided	No info provided
ICT	6	7	5
Democratic Services	0	0	0
Legal	3	2	2
Landcharges	0	0	0
HR/Payroll	3	4	3
Policy & Performance	1	1	1
Communications	1	1	1
Housing Futures	1	1	0
Partnerships	2	2	1
Elections & Cust Serv	2	2	2
Planning	6	7	6
Building Control	3	4	3
New Communities	1	1	1

* plus specialist sub-contractors

Issues and Observations

47. In general, the support services areas were very quiet and found that the three days were a good opportunity to 'catch-up' with work or to undertake preparatory work. Very few telephone calls were received and many of the staff commented that this meant that they could work without interruption.
48. There were sufficient volunteers for the three days and generally staff did not feel pressurised to attend. Some staff have said that they prefer to save the two extra statutory days to use at another time.
49. It has been difficult to assess how many of the direct phone calls/personal visits could have been resolved through the contact centre/ normal out of office contacts although in some cases, building control, supported housing it was clear that the out of hours service would have been sufficient.
50. For some staff, it was difficult to progress work as other parties were not available, i.e difficult to arrange meetings or, in the case of media enquiries, to contact others for comment. Many suppliers, contractors and external contacts were unavailable during the three-day period.
51. Most businesses and organisations actually returned to work on 2nd January, it was commented that the Council should have been consistent in its opening arrangements and also be open on this date.
52. There is no evidence to suggest that there were significant additional costs incurred by opening the Cambourne building for the three days. There was additional heating (the boilers were running the whole time and wouldn't have been if the building had been closed), additional lighting and power (PCs working etc). There will be some future costs in relation to staff taking the two extra statutory days in terms of cover arrangements.

53. Overall the responsive repairs service has continued to perform at a high level over the Christmas period, and this suggests that it may be in the property services department and customer best interests to offer this level of service next Christmas.
54. Some staff who have carer responsibilities (mainly childcare) have voiced concerns about future requirements for them to attend work during this period as nurseries and other childcare is not available. The opposite angle from this is that staff, who do not have carer responsibilities, feel concerned that those staff will be given priority in terms of booking leave. Managers will need to find a fair and equitable way of balancing this issue.
55. There are concerns about the potential 'loss' of the concessionary day. Although it is not contractual, and will be given at the discretion of the Council, its loss is seen as yet another erosion of staff benefits.
56. Staff commented that the building was very cold (due to a boiler fault) and staff members also commented/complained that there wasn't any canteen facilities. Perception of unfairness that some service areas were at work and others were 'excused' from attending work.
57. Staff also commented on the increased costs to them in terms of coming into work (travel cost) and the increase to the carbon footprint.

Implications

58. Financial	Costs associated with opening the building – see 20 above
Legal	Provision of statutory services to the public. Health & Safety of staff
Staffing	See body of the report
Risk Management	None
Equal Opportunities	See points raised in 22 above

Effect on Corporate Objectives and Service Priorities

59.	Work in partnership to manage growth to benefit everyone in South Cambridgeshire now and in the future
	None
	Deliver high quality services that represent best value and are accessible to all our community
	Improved service continuity over the holiday period leading to increase customer satisfaction and public access to services and information.
	Enhance quality of life and build a sustainable South Cambridgeshire where everyone is proud to live and work
	None

Considerations

60. The decision to change current custom and practice this year was a very emotive one. Staff feeling was very strong on this issue and feedback from staff briefings, union consultation substantiates the staff morale and feelings of being undervalued. However, this needs to be balanced against the increasing expectation of the public in terms of accessing information and Council services.

61. Feed back from service managers indicates no requirement for full staffing during the same period in future years. Skeleton staffing on a volunteer basis appears to be appropriate. There is less need for support area staff to be in attendance but there should be named officers with home/mobile contact details for media enquiries / emergencies.
62. Service demand at the Cambourne office (visitors and telephone callers) was certainly higher on Monday 29th, reducing on Tuesday 30th and very low on 31st, particularly in the afternoon. The same applied to Christmas Eve. The Council should reconsider the opening hours to ensure that there meet the customer contact patterns. It may be appropriate to close the office at lunchtime on both Christmas and New Year's Eve and to utilise the concessionary day for that purpose.
63. Closing the offices on 2nd January did not correspond with other business and customer/partner organisation arrangements and this should be reconsidered for future years. There was a customer expectation that the service would be as normal on this day.

Consultation

64. Staff and local union representatives were advised of the proposals for Christmas 2009, including the arrangements for the use of the concessionary day. To date the HR manager has received comments from 10 members of staff (see attached appendix 1) and the UNISON branch has stated that "Concerns have been expressed regarding the heating, lack of catering facilities and the low demand from the public. There have been concerns about the use of the concessionary day but generally there has been little feedback."
65. Every effort has been made to ensure that the matter is being considered as early as possible and that staff are given opportunity to be involved in the decision. The Chief Executive's weekly message on 23 January outlined the proposals and offered the opportunity for staff to contribute their ideas and thoughts. A reminder to staff was included in the Chief Executive's message, week ending 13 February, to encourage staff to respond to the consultation.

Recommendations

66. Staffing Portfolio Holder is recommended to;
 - a) consider the content of the report and staff comments;
 - b) consider the service/staffing requirements the Council is to adopt for the 2009/2010 Christmas period, including shorter office opening hours on Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve to meet customer contact patterns
 - c) Agree to the use of the concessionary day as appropriate
 - d) Agree to staffing of the Cambourne offices to be on a volunteer basis.

Background Papers: the following background papers were used in the preparation of this report: None

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