

RBR Noise and Nuisance Executive Summary

Background

- A Royal Borough Review (RBR) of the Council's noise and nuisance service was carried out between April 2005 and May 2006.
- This is a high profile service for which there is considerable demand – approximately 10,000 complaints and enquiries per annum. For some residents, the intervention of noise and nuisance can prevent their health and quality of life from being seriously compromised.
- Officers investigate complaints of noise and other nuisance from various sources, domestic and commercial, for which there is often no straightforward 'quick-fix' solution. As resolution can be a protracted process, the service often attracts criticism from residents (and ward Councillors) whose expectations are not always met.
- As well as dealing with residents' complaints and enquiries, the work of the service cuts across wider Council agendas. For example, officers are routinely asked to provide expert reports of noise and other environmental impacts for Planning and Licensing purposes. Officers also work closely with their colleagues in Adult Social Care in those instances when vulnerable adults are no longer able to look after themselves, and their activities place their health at risk (and that of their neighbours). The service also contributes to the community safety agenda as domestic noise issues frequently contain an element of anti-social behaviour, requiring liaison with the police and other partners.
- Demand for the service is predicted to rise following changes to Housing and Licensing legislation. Under the new Housing 'fitness' standard, inadequate sound insulation is a 'hazard' requiring assessment by professionally qualified officers. In recent years 'light nuisance' has become increasingly problematic in urban areas and officers now have powers to investigate complaints and intervene through formal action if necessary. The greatest increase in demand, however, is likely to be in the licensing arena where, following liquor licensing reform, interested parties may now request a review of a licence and the expert opinions of noise officers will undoubtedly be sought.
- In the present climate it is therefore easier to make a business case for investment in the service to meet projected demand, rather than any reduction to make savings.

- The noise and nuisance service costs around £1.5 million per annum. As the great majority of this controllable expenditure is salaries, the potential for savings tends to be restricted to reductions in personnel.
- The RBR presented an opportunity for all aspects of the service to be examined in depth. The review set out to fundamentally challenge the need for the service to exist at all. It went on to consider alternative methods of operation and hours of coverage following analysis of patterns of demand (which show considerable variation throughout the week and throughout the year).
- Extensive consultation was undertaken with service users, residents, officers, Councillors and other stakeholders, e.g. the Metropolitan Police, with whom the service enjoys a good working relationship.
- Benchmarking exercises were undertaken to examine how the service compares with those offered by other authorities.
- The review also considered the scope for contracting out the service, either to a neighbouring authority or to the private sector.
- All findings, conclusions, options for service improvement and recommendations are included in the main body of this final report and in the attached Service Improvement Plan.

Snapshot of consultation findings

Councillors told us that:

- a "faster speed of complaint resolution" was their overall top priority for improvements to the service.
- a "comprehensive out-of-hours service" was the most essential aspect of the service.

Recent **service users** told us that:

- they were most satisfied with the speed of the first response by call handlers.
- they were least satisfied with the time taken for the officer to respond and that their problems were not always resolved.

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- As well as the efficiency gains which are outlined at the end of this summary, the review identified **three options for a reconfiguration** of the service, two of which would achieve savings in the region of £18,000 (the two per cent savings aim of the RBR). These need to be considered in the context of the current

establishment of 20 officers. In addition to the 14 officers in the reactive arm of the service who work on a shift rota, the team comprises a team manager, two assistant managers, two area senior officers and one specialist noise officer, all of whom work normal office hours. There is also a part-time (0.5 FTE) management support officer who provides essential administrative support to the team.

- The three options for reconfiguration are summarised below (None of the options involves any changes to the three management posts).

Option one

- Team structure: ten officers on reactive shift rota; five officers in new specialist technical team
- Drivers/ guards: paired with officers on one weekend day shift and one weekday night shift
- Noise and nuisance officers: **loss of two posts**
- Management support: no increase
- Estimated net saving: **£18,000**

Option two

- Team structure: 13 officers on shift rota; no technical team
- Drivers/ guards: none
- Noise and nuisance officers: **loss of one post**
- Management support: no increase
- Estimated net saving: **£15,000**

Option three

- Team structure: twelve officers on reactive shift rota; four officers in specialist technical team
 - Drivers/ guards: none
 - Noise and nuisance officers: **loss of one post**
 - Management support: **increased to full time**
 - Estimated saving: **none**
- A summary of advantages and disadvantages of each option is included on page 24

Recommendation: option three is adopted to reconfigure the service.

This option provides an improved service with the same resources. Efficiency gains are outlined on page 11 of this summary. Ultimately cost efficiencies will be achieved through the Environmental Health Modernisation Programme, which is outside the remit of this review. This is aiming to reduce overheads through a reduction in fixed office space.

- A summary of the rationale behind each element of the options is included below; further detail can be found in the main report as referenced. An explanation of the financial considerations is also included.

Recommendation (team structure): improve the overall effectiveness of the team through the creation of an additional specialist technical team.

- Commercial cases are often highly technical and can require specialist skills and experience to deal with them. Under existing arrangements, due to the rotating shift system, the investigating officer is often not available to progress the case, which has an obvious impact on case continuity, speed of resolution and customer care. Indeed, consultation with officers showed that they felt case management suffered with the current shift pattern, particularly when cases were complex or technical (see appendices 1.2, 1.3, 2).
- It is proposed that the service is restructured to include a dedicated specialist technical team working normal office hours. This would allow the new team to dedicate its time wholly to technical cases, and to accommodate the expected expansion in sound insulation, licensing reviews and light nuisance. Furthermore, shift officers would be released to deal entirely with reactive cases. This streamlined approach would improve case continuity and customer care for both technical and reactive matters, and lead to faster case resolution (Councillors' top priority for service improvement – see appendix 1.5).
- The technical team would also be equipped to provide a general advisory service to Councillors, residents and partners - an aspect that Councillors ranked as their second priority for improvements (see appendix 1.5).
- Further detail on the benefits of having dedicated specialist technical and reactive teams is included on page 27.

Recommendation (drivers/ guards): drivers or security guards are not used by the service during the regular shift pattern.

- The comparison element of the review showed that other councils use drivers or security guards paired with a noise officer on out-of-hours shifts. This means that instead of two qualified officers visiting

premises to investigate a complaint, a driver or security guard escorts one officer. Other authorities have adopted this approach to reduce costs, however this makes the service vulnerable on those occasions when officers are unavailable due to sickness or other unforeseen absence. As it is extremely difficult to secure a replacement shift officer at short notice, under such circumstances the service usually has to be shut down.

- Officers have expressed concerns about using drivers or security guards because there would be no scope for sharing professional opinion and peer-to-peer learning and on-the-job training would be rendered impossible (see appendices 1.3, 1.8).
- Feedback from the Councillors' questionnaire showed that a "comprehensive out-of-hours service" was felt to be the most essential aspect of the service (see appendix 1.5). Such a service would be harder to achieve should drivers or guards be employed but, given the potential for savings, one of the options presented does make use of drivers/ guards.
- Further discussion regarding the use of drivers/ guards, including the potential impact on the quality and professionalism of the service, is included on page 29.

Recommendation: re-invest the savings into increasing the management capacity.

- The management support officer (MSO) currently provides 2.5 days administrative support to the noise and nuisance team and plays a vital role in relieving managers from routine but essential tasks, e.g. rota administration and processing shift swaps.
- The review team concluded that this resource could be used to greater effect and that increased management support would play a pivotal role in some of the proposed improvements.
- In line with guidelines from the 'Here to Help' initiative, the consultation with recent service users identified the need for improved communication at case closure stage, as well as at regular intervals (see appendices 1.1, 1.6). The intention is to seek regular feedback from service users at the closure of their case to measure satisfaction levels with the service provided. This will entail processing and analysis time to inform further priorities for service improvements and contribute to equalities monitoring, a role that could ideally be performed by the MSO.

- Amongst residents' and Councillors' priorities for the service were concerns about the time taken for officers to respond to complaints and the frequency of progress reporting (see appendices 1.1, 1.5, 1.7). Appropriate performance management procedures need to be put in place to monitor these aspects. Increasing the MSO role to a full time post would facilitate the development of performance management systems.
- Increased availability of management support would also permit other aspects of the Service Improvement Plan to be implemented more quickly and efficiently.
- More detailed discussion of the MSO post is included on page 30.

Financial considerations

- During consultation with officers, major concerns were expressed with regard to pay levels, both in comparison with colleagues elsewhere in Environmental Health, and also in comparison with their counterparts in other boroughs. It was recognised that resolution of this issue needed to be incorporated within the review. A job re-evaluation was therefore carried out by Personnel and the noise and nuisance officer post was evaluated on a HAY range (201). The cost of this in terms of annual bonuses is estimated at around £25,000. This should be regarded as an investment in the service to improve stability (addressing concerns over recruitment and retention), while at the same time enhancing the quality and professionalism of the officers in the team.

Cost of HAY re-grading: £25,000

- Given the above cost and the fact that 93 per cent of the controllable budget is salaries, inevitably a post would need to be lost to fund the HAY re-grading. In effect, fewer people would be paid more money to provide an improved service. Including on-costs, the saving involved in losing one noise and nuisance officer post is about £40,000.

Saving from cutting one noise and nuisance officer post: £40,000

- The potential use of drivers/ security guards clearly has cost implications. Quotes were obtained from agencies that provide a similar service to other boroughs. To accompany an officer on a weekday night shift, the estimated costing for a driver/ guard was £24,000 per annum. For a weekend day shift the quote was £13,000 per annum.

Cost of drivers or security guards (weekday nights): £24,000pa

Cost of drivers or security guards (weekend days): £13,000pa

- To increase the management support officer post from its current level of 2.5 days per week to full time capacity would cost £15,000.

Cost of augmenting management support role to full time: £15,000

Efficiency gains

- The review recommends a variety of service improvements, all of which are intended to improve the effectiveness, accountability and consistency of the team's response to residents' complaints and enquiries.
- The service will adopt a clear mission statement. This will see the refocusing of its key priorities and the transferring of certain functions to other teams, which are better positioned to provide continuity and a more effective service.
- The review has seen a redefinition of service priorities involving a categorisation of different types of complaint received, the introduction of a key Performance Indicator (a one-hour visit response time), and an over-arching more robust enforcement culture.
- Customer care will be further enhanced by revised procedures to ensure that residents are kept better informed with the progress of their case than they have been in the past. Other improvements to communication are intended, including the investigation of an on-line complaint tracking system to reduce the number of update requests.
- In addition, revised procedures and targets are proposed to meet the demands of licensing reform, particularly with regard to the processing of new licence applications and licence reviews.
- Significant improvements are also proposed at the first point of customer contact when residents call the service outside normal office hours. The need for a favourable first impression is vital, hence one of the fundamental aims of the review was to improve the effectiveness of the initial response. Changes in management reporting lines within the existing out-of-hours call handling service are proposed. It is also envisaged that call handlers will be better informed and trained and given greater responsibility so that they are able to give advice at the point of first contact, as well as an undertaking that the duty officer will arrive within one hour.

- Finally, the investment in the service through performance related pay should be regarded as a qualitative efficiency gain.
- These proposals and recommendations are outlined in full within the report and the Service Improvement Plan.

