



Out of Hours Response Service

A review by the Overview Scrutiny Committee

February 2005

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1. Executive summary

1.1 Members of the Overview Scrutiny Committee agreed to undertake a review of the Council's out of hour's response service.

1.2 The terms of reference for the review were:

To consider the operation of the council's out of hours service operated through Tonbridge and Malling Housing Association;

To consider what other advice and support is available out of hours to respond to emergencies that may arise;

To advise the Cabinet on any improvements that could be made to the council's out of hours response service.

1.3 The context in which the review was undertaken was to investigate the service provided by the out hours response service when a large volume of calls is received regarding the same issue.

1.4 Three evidence gathering sessions were held. The first session was held on 1 December 2004 at the Invicta Lifeline offices and the Managing Director and two managers of the service were interviewed along with Mr D Stone, Director of Gravesham Services. Members then had a tour of the Invicta Lifeline call centre whilst calls were being taken. Mr D Stone then gave evidence independently on 2 December 2004 and a further session was held on 13 December with Mr A Rowe, Chairman of Cobham Parish Council and Mr J Wintour, Managing Director, Gravesham Borough Council.

1.5 The recommendations to the Cabinet are: -

1.5.1 Following an influx of calls to the Invicta Lifeline regarding the same incident, a designated Gravesham Borough Council senior officer should be contacted and a response should be given by that officer to the Invicta Lifeline to issue to subsequent callers.

1.5.2 All callers' details should be logged and on the first working day following an incident and a written response from the council should be sent to all callers stating what is / can be done regarding the situation, thus being proactive as opposed to being reactive.

1.5.3 An official cascade system enabling the Invicta Lifeline to get in touch with a senior officer be adopted.

1.5.4 Any future changes in legislation (e.g. the proposed temporary stop notices) or public concern regarding differing issues that may emerge nationally/locally should result in an immediate officer review of the procedure manual to ensure instructions adequately cover the potential incident.

1.5.5. Parish Council Chairman should have and lead/shadow lead members telephone numbers and those members should be supplied with the out of hours numbers for the Managing Director, Executive Directors and Head of Legal Services to be used on an emergency only basis.

2. Background

On the evening of Friday 8 October 2004 Travellers arrived and set up camp on a site in Whitepost Lane, Sole Street. The Travellers owned the site in question however they had not applied for planning permission for the encampment.

A very large number of local residents in the Sole Street area then proceeded to call the Out of Hours response service, which has been outsourced to the Invicta Lifeline (part of Tonbridge and Malling Housing Association). Residents were informed that the encampment did not constitute an emergency and would need to be dealt with on the next working day. Many residents felt this response to be less than adequate and a more robust system should be in place in the event of a similar situation arising which causes many residents to contact the out of hours service for the same occurrence, and the Overview Scrutiny Committee responded to such concerns by instigating this urgent review. It was agreed that an overall review of the Council's out of hours response service be carried out rather than an investigation into the response to this particular incident.

3. Review

3.1 Invicta Lifeline call centre

Members of the Overview Scrutiny Committee visited the Invicta Lifeline call centre, based in Borough Green, and took evidence from the Managing Director and two managers that ran the service.

Gravesham Borough Council had used the call centre to provide an out of hours service since the mid 1980's. The cost of the service is just over £15,000 per annum which equates to approximately £3 per call.

3.2 Procedures

The Invicta Lifeline operates using a procedure manual provided to them by Gravesham Borough Council and the manual is updated throughout the year. When receiving a call, a member of the call centre staff will look the problem up within the manual and follow the guidance given relating to the particular issue. In some cases the advice within the procedure manual may state that the issue will have to be dealt with on the next working day (as was the case on the evening of the 8 October 2004). A duty officer will then be contacted if a call appears to need further assistance. Further to this the duty officers have various numbers available to them and they will contact a Director if the duty officer feels it is necessary. This has usually been the Director of Gravesham Services. Since commencing the out of hours with the Invicta Lifeline there had not been an incident that had not been covered sufficiently by the procedure manual.

Following an influx of calls to the Invicta Lifeline regarding the same incident it would seem appropriate that a senior officer should be contacted and a response be given by that officer to the Invicta Lifeline to issue to all subsequent callers.

If a major incident were to occur then the Major Emergency Plan would come into operation. Calls would then be reverted back to the local authority.

3.3 Incident - Whitepost Lane, Sole Street

This incident was not considered to be an emergency and therefore residents contacting the out of hour's service were informed that this would be dealt with on the next working day. However the Invicta Lifeline call centre contacted the Environmental Health duty officer, who then chose to contact Mr Stone who attended the site.

The need to contact the out of hours service for an incident such as this is rare and in the 30 years Mr Rowe has been a member of Cobham Parish Council this was the first time he had found it necessary to contact the service. If this type of incident occurred again in the borough it was felt it would be appropriate to be able to contact a Senior Council officer easily. Currently Mr Stone (Director of Gravesham Services) is usually the officer contacted by the Out of Hours Service in this type of case, however Mr Stone is retiring in the first quarter of 2005 therefore an official system should be put in place to take over.

An on-call rota system for Directors would be too costly for a small Council however a cascade system would be easier to put into place as it was less rigid than a rota system. In the meantime the Managing Director for Gravesham Borough Council has given many Councillors his personal mobile telephone number.

3.4 Recommendations

- 1.5.1 Following an influx of calls to the Invicta Lifeline regarding the same incident, a designated Gravesham Borough Council senior officer should be contacted and a response should be given by that officer to the Invicta Lifeline to issue to subsequent callers.
- 1.5.2 All callers' details should be logged and on the first working day following an incident and a written response from the council should be sent to all callers stating what is / can be done regarding the situation, thus being proactive as opposed to being reactive.
- 1.5.3 An official cascade system enabling the Invicta Lifeline to get in touch with a senior officer be adopted.
- 1.5.4 Any future changes in legislation (e.g. the proposed temporary stop notices) or public concern regarding differing issues that may emerge nationally/locally should result in an immediate officer review of the procedure manual to ensure instructions adequately cover the potential incident.
- 1.5.5. Parish Council Chairman should have and lead/shadow lead members telephone numbers and those members should be supplied with the out of hours numbers for the Managing Director, Executive Directors and Head of Legal Services to be used on an emergency only basis.

Overview Scrutiny Committee

- Review:** Out of Hours Response Service
- Venue:** Invicta Lifeline, Borough Green - 1 December 2004 - 5pm
- Present:** Councillor M V Snelling (Chair)
Councillors: C Jupp
B Newell
M Singh
- In Attendance:** Mrs S A Whatmough, Head of Democratic Services
Miss L Dell, Democratic Services
- Interviewees:** Mr D Stone, Director, Gravesham Services
Mr S Davis - Managing Director, Invicta Lifeline
Mr C Smith, Invicta Lifeline
Mrs W Turner, Invicta Lifeline

Summary of Evidence

Introduction

The Out of Hours Response Service Review initially arose following an encampment of Travellers on a Friday night after normal office hours. Residents near to the encampment in White Post Lane, Sole Street, contacted the Council and got through to Invicta Lifeline to report this. The Overview Scrutiny Committee decided to carry out an overall review of the Council's out of hours response service rather than an investigation into this particular incident.

The Invicta Lifeline Call Centre

The call centre is a wholly owned subsidiary of Tonbridge & Malling Housing Association and was transferred to the Housing Association during the large scale voluntary transfer of housing stock from Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council.

Gravesham Borough began using the already established call centre in the mid-1980s following the hurricane when one person alone was taking calls during the out of hours period which highlighted the benefits of having an out of hours service staffed by several operators. Since then the call centre has grown and now takes calls from many other clients including Gravesham Borough Council. There are between eight and ten people taking calls overnight and in October 2004 the call centre received 370 calls on behalf of Gravesham Borough Council.

Gravesham Borough Council pays the Invicta Lifeline just over £15,000 per annum for the service which equates to an average cost of approximately £3 per call.

Invicta Lifeline staff survey 5 per cent of the calls taken each day regarding their service and over 90 per cent are either satisfied or very satisfied with the service that has been provided. Any complaints received are logged and dealt with. Any comments received

regarding the organisation for which they are taking calls are all fed back to the organisation itself.

It was noted the routine enquiries made by Invicta Lifeline to users of its services reflected high satisfaction and there was also general satisfaction with Gravesham Borough Council's services themselves.

Procedures

Gravesham Borough Council has provided the Invicta Lifeline with a procedure manual from which they operate. When receiving a call the member of staff will look the problem up within the manual and follow the guidance given relating to the particular issue the customer has called for. It is the responsibility of the individual organisation to update their procedure manuals.

In some cases the advice within the procedure manual states that the issue will have to wait until the next working day to be dealt with. This was the case when residents contacted the out of hours service regarding the encampment of Travellers on land in White Post Lane, Sole Street, although in respect of this particular case the duty officer from Environmental Health and Mr D Stone, Director of Gravesham Services, were contacted and briefed on the situation. If an encampment took place on highways or Gravesham Borough Council owned land then the highways duty officer would be contacted.

Currently Gravesham Borough Council does not have an on call out of hours rota system for Chief Officers. However, if a difficult situation arose the duty officer would contact a Chief Officer, as was the case on the evening the encampment took place.

If a major incident were to occur then the Major Emergency Plan would come into operation. Calls would then be reverted back to the local authority.

Members and officers had a tour of the Invicta Lifeline call centre whilst calls were being taken.

The meeting ended at 6:27pm.

Overview Scrutiny Committee

- Review:** Out of Hours Response Service
- Venue:** Civic Centre, Gravesend - 2 December 2004 - 6pm
- Present:** Councillor M V Snelling (Chair)
Councillors: M Burgoyne
Jean Christie
Rosemary Leadley
B Newell
M Singh
N Singh Thandi
R Target
- In Attendance:** Mrs S A Whatmough, Head of Democratic Services
Miss L Dell, Democratic Services
- Interviewees:** Mr D Stone - Director of Gravesham Services

Summary of Evidence

Invicta Lifeline - Procedures

The Panel were informed that Mr D Stone, Director of Gravesham Services, has had a working relationship with the Invicta Lifeline for approximately 20 years. In this time Mr Stone stated that the call centre had never received a call from a resident with an issue that had not been sufficiently covered by the procedure manual.

The procedure manual is updated continually throughout the year, although there was an annual trawl prior to Christmas requesting that Heads of Service ensure the addresses and phone numbers given in the procedure manual were correct. Usually very few changes are needed at this time as the majority of changes are made during the year.

Call centre staff process the calls according to the procedure manual. A duty officer will then be contacted if a call appears to need further assistance. Further to this the duty officer will contact a Director if the duty officer feels it is necessary and this is usually the Director of Gravesham Services. Various numbers are available to the duty officers although it was acknowledged that Mr Stone was usually the first port of call in such instances, as was the case of the illegal encampment of Gypsies occurred in White Post Lane, Sole Street.

Despite the procedure manual stating that this particular incident needed to be dealt with on the next working day, in this case that was the Monday, a Director, Mr Stone, was contacted. Mr Stone then contacted a planning officer as it became clear that the encampment was a planning issue due to the encampment being on land owned by the Gypsies themselves.

Questions

On the Saturday the encampment took place what was the procedure that was followed?

This incident was not considered to be an emergency, however the Invicta Lifeline call centre contacted the Environmental Health duty officer and also chose to contact Mr Stone.

Could the Environmental Health duty officer have taken any other action?

It was clear that the site was privately owned so therefore this was a planning issue.

Does the duty officer have a flow chart/brief?

No, they only have telephone numbers available to them to call and from Gravesham Borough Council the phone numbers are for an officer from Gravesham Services, Housing Services and the Environmental Health Department.

A police officer called to the scene of the encampment was told that he could not speak to a senior office, why was this the case?

In the past the police have always been able to contact Mr Stone whose number is available within the emergency plan.

Whose responsibility is it to change the manual as things become out of date?

It is not the responsibility of one person in particular. The manual is updated as new legislation comes in or when circumstances change.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 6:50pm.

Overview Scrutiny Committee

- Review:** Out of Hours Response Service
- Venue:** Civic Centre, Gravesend - 13 December 2004 - 6pm
- Present:** Councillor M V Snelling (Chair)
Councillors: M Burgoyne
Jean Christie
K Jones
C Jupp
M Singh
- In Attendance:** Mrs S A Whatmough, Head of Democratic Services
Miss L Dell, Democratic Services
- Interviewees:** Mr A Rowe - Chairman of Cobham Parish Council
Mr J Wintour - Managing Director, Gravesham Borough Council

Summary of Evidence

Mr A Rowe

Mr Rowe had served on Cobham Parish Council for 34 years and had been the Chairman for 17 years. During this period, the weekend of the 8 October 2004 had been the first time Mr Rowe needed to contact the Out-of-Hours service and this was due to the arrival of Gypsies in White Post Lane, Sole Street. The encampment was reported to the Out-of-Hours service and Mr Rowe was informed as were many of the residents in the parish, that this did not constitute an emergency.

As the Chairman of the parish council Mr Rowe felt it would have been appropriate to have been able to contact a Council officer himself or via a local district councillor. On this occasion Mr Rowe also contacted the police and he was informed that they also could not contact a Council officer.

In respect of the procedure manual it was agreed that the Invicta Lifeline call centre had followed the instructions given to them by Gravesham Borough Council.

Mr Rowe concluded that the most important thing he would like to see from an Out-of-Hours services is that a senior officer from Gravesham Borough Council is contactable in the event of a similar situation or emergency occurring.

Mr J Wintour

Mr Wintour gave the following four points:-

1. There are two services:

(a) Out of Hours Service

To deal with issues relating to repairs and problems of council housing and this has proved very effective;

(b) Emergency Service

In the event of a major emergency.

2. Mr Wintour apologised for the initial difficulty in contacting senior officers on 8 October 2004 but stated that councillors and the Out-of-Hours service did contact senior officers during the Out-of-Hours period. Senior Officers did attend the site but it is not easy with the present legislation to stop this type of encampment.
3. Mr Wintour had given several councillors his personal mobile telephone number in the event that they feel he should be contacted. It was agreed that a tightening up of the Out-of-Hours service procedure for this type of event was necessary and Gravesham Borough Council was actively looking at this.
4. The government has recently published a consultation paper on temporary stop notices, however it was felt that this would not be helpful in the sort of situation experienced by residents in the Sole Street area.

Temporary stop notices were essentially to deal with the building of a house for example and not something that could occur in an hour or so such as the encampment of Gypsies, therefore the initial reaction is that temporary stop notices will not work in this type of situation although the consultation paper did suggest that many breaches of planning control occur outside of normal working hours. Therefore it would be appropriate for planning enforcement to have the same emergency cover as other environmental and public health protection services.

The consultation period for this document is 12 weeks and it was thought the Cabinet would seek views from the Overview Scrutiny Committee when responding.

In respect of the procedure manual, members were assured that an update in respect of this kind of situation would be in place prior to Christmas and that Gravesham Borough Council would investigate procedures laid down from other district councils. It was thought that an on-call rota system for Directors would be too costly for a small Council and the cascade system was easier to put into place as it was less rigid than a rota system.

Questions:

Could the Out-of-Hours response service, in the event of such an incident occurring again, give residents a response given by a senior officer of the Council?

This was a good point and would be something worth looking into. Further to this Councillor Marven has Mr Wintour's mobile telephone number so therefore he could be contacted immediately.

The site the Travellers are currently on only covers approximately a third of the land. It was possible that another 16 caravans could arrive. What could we do now?

Currently there is a gap in the legislation so it is unlikely that the Council would be able to do more than it has done in the current situation but we are considering the options.

Close of Meeting

The meeting ended at 6:45pm.