

Report to the Communities Select Committee

Date of meeting: 14 March 2017

Portfolio: Housing – Councillor Syd Stavrou

Subject: Review of the Expansion of Services and Opening Hours at the Limes Centre, Chigwell

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Committee Secretary: Adrian Hendry extension 4246



Recommendations/Decisions Required:

That the Communities Select Committee recommends to the Housing Portfolio Holder that due to the success of the pilot, in order for the Limes Centre, Chigwell to continue to provide extended services and longer opening hours, the additional temporary part-time Housing Officer post is made permanent.

Report:

Background

1. Following the re-development of the Limes Farm Hall, Chigwell, the new Limes Centre was opened in February 2012. The Limes Centre is an important community facility on the Limes Farm Estate and when first opened accommodated the following services:

- Housing Management Estate Office which opened each morning between 9:00am and 12.30pm providing a housing management service to both the Limes Farm Estate, and other parts of Chigwell and Buckhurst Hill
- Benefits and Council Tax advisors available to give advice during normal office hours each Wednesday
- Debt Advice Service provided by the Epping Forest Citizens Advice Bureau one morning each week
- “True Stars” Children’s Centre, Monday to Friday from 9.30am to 5pm
- NHS Health Clinic, which provides a baby clinic and a range of other services for the community
- Youth Club provided by “Red Balloon Family Group”
- Job Centre Plus drop-in Centre on Thursdays between 11:00am to 2:00pm

2. In addition to the above services, which provide a “multi-agency hub” for local people, the Limes Centre has a large main hall and smaller activities hall which are available for hire, for both regular bookings and one-off events, including evenings and weekends. These bookings include sports clubs such as Judo and Karate, a range of fitness and wellbeing sessions such as Tai Chi and Yoga and many children’s parties and large faith gatherings at weekends.

Expansion of Services and Opening Hours

3. At its meeting on 9 March 2015 (Minute 148 refers), the Cabinet agreed the report on the Housing Improvements and Enhancements Fund. One of the agreed Recommendations was that an additional temporary part-time (18 hours) Housing Officer post be created for a period of 18 months to enable the expansion of services and opening hours at the Limes Centre in Chigwell for a pilot period of 12 months. It was further agreed that a review of the success of the pilot be undertaken by the Communities Select Committee following 12 months of operation to decide whether the temporary post should be made permanent. Therefore, the Committee is asked to consider the report and make its recommendations to the Housing Portfolio Holder.

4. Unfortunately, due to recruitment difficulties there were delays in appointing a person to the new temporary part-time post due to the original hours being offered. As a result, it was necessary to re-organise working hours within the Housing Office at the Centre. Therefore, the post was not filled until January 2016.

Review of the Success of the Pilot

5. The pilot period commenced in January 2016 and covers the calendar year and included the following achievements and activities:

- In advance of the pilot period commencing, the additional opening hours and services were publicised through the Council's website, the tenants' magazine Housing News, leaflets were delivered to all properties on the estate and posters placed in public areas. Members were advised through the Council Bulletin
- Following a launch event, the office hours were extended from 9:00am to 12:30pm Monday to Friday to 9:00am to 4:30pm Monday to Friday
- A chip and pin facility was introduced in order to enable residents to pay their Council Tax, rent and other payments at the Centre for the first time
- A new local periodic Newsletter was introduced and is delivered to all local residents, an example is attached as an Appendix to the report
- As part of a re-organisation of housing management services 400 additional properties are now managed from the Limes Centre covering Abridge and Theydon Bois. As a result of the change a further existing part-time member of staff was transferred from the Area Housing Office (North) at the Civic Offices to the Limes Centre which further facilitated the extension of hours and services
- The Housing Related Support provider "Family Mosaic" commenced a weekly "surgery" at the Centre from January 2017
- The Citizens Advice Bureau's Debt Advisor extended their service from one half day to two half days each week
- London and Quadrant Housing Trust who own and manage over 100 properties on the estate have set up a monthly surgery for their tenants which may be extended subject to take-up

6. As a result of the extended opening hours and the provision of additional services, the number of residents accessing services has increased substantially from 933 visitors in the calendar year 2015 to 1,982 in the calendar year 2016 representing an increase of 1,049 visitors (112%). The types of enquiries in 2016 are detailed in the following table:

Type of Enquiry	Number of visitors
General enquiries at reception about all services at the Centre	811
Rent matters	478
Housing Benefit and Council Tax	515
Citizen Advice Bureau's Debt Advisor	178
Total	1,982

7. Due to the introduction of chip and pin and telephone payments at the office for a range of Council services for the first time, during the pilot period payments amounting to £131,808 were made.

8. A customer exit survey was undertaken between January 2016 and December 2016. Of the 132 responses received 123 (93%) stated they are in favour of the extended opening hours and 132 (100%) were satisfied with the service.

9. Due to the success of the pilot, in order for the Limes Centre, Chigwell to continue provide extended services and longer opening hours, it is suggested that the Committee recommends to the Housing Portfolio Holder that the additional temporary part-time Housing Officer post is made permanent.

Reason for decision:

For a recommendation to be made to the Housing Portfolio Holder that the additional temporary part-time Housing Officer post is made permanent, to enable the extension of services and longer opening hours at the Limes Centre Chigwell to continue.

Options considered and rejected:

No to recommend that the additional temporary part-time Housing Officer post is made permanent, and reduce the services and opening times offered at the Limes Centre, Chigwell.

Consultation undertaken:

The Tenants and Leaseholders Federation were consulted at their meeting on 22 February 2017 and agree with the recommendations.

Results of the customer exit survey are set out in the report.