

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C/nnn/2008.

Date of meeting: 1 September 2008



**Epping Forest
District Council**

Portfolio: Housing – Councillor D Stallan

Subject: Review of Epping Forest Careline

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This report has been considered and endorsed by the Housing Scrutiny Panel

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- 1. That in accordance with Option Three in the report, the Careline Service continues to be provided locally by the Council but be expanded to include the following:**
 - (a) Exploring the potential to monitor alarms for other authorities and housing associations;**
 - (b) Extending the routine repairs reporting service for tenants from 5pm to 8pm on each working day;**
 - (c) To periodically monitor existing Council-owned CCTV systems through website access; and**
 - (d) To monitor the whereabouts of the Council's lone workers on a 24-hour basis; and**

- 2. To extend the Careline premises into the ground floor of the vacant adjacent former Scheme Manager's accommodation converting the first floor into a one-bedroom flat which will be incorporated into the Council's sheltered housing scheme Parsonage Court, Loughton.**

Report:

1. Following the completion of the Best Value Service Review of Housing Services in February 2004, the Member Service Review Panel which was set up to oversee the Review agreed that the Careline Service provided a good service and, after considering a number of options for its future, it should be retained and reviewed again in 2007. The Review has been delayed whilst consideration was being given corporately to the possible introduction of a Customer Contact Centre, which may have incorporated the Careline service. Since this is not being actively pursued, the Careline review has now been undertaken.

2. The Council's Careline Centre is based at Parsonage Court, Loughton. The Careline Service offers a twenty-four hour, 365 days per year, emergency alarm service to older and disabled people living within the District. The Service is also offered to other vulnerable groups including victims of domestic violence and younger people with disabilities.

3. In addition to emergency alarms, Careline provides many other important services which include the following:

- Monitoring of smoke detection systems
- Short-term alarm provision for people who require the service for a brief period
- Use of call history to monitor calls received
- Monitoring and supporting Scheme Managers who are on/off site
- Monitoring dispersed alarm installation times
- Monitoring alarm manufacturer's response to repair requests
- Monitoring battery replacement deadlines
- Monitoring of systems of other housing providers
- Monitoring testing of all alarm systems, including weekly telephone line checks

4. Users of the service are connected via the telephone network. The Council's own sheltered housing schemes and other designated dwellings for older people on housing estates have a hard-wired system installed in their properties with a speech module mounted on the wall and a pull cord in each of the rooms. A total of 2,500 properties, representing approximately 3,000 people, are linked into the service.

5. In addition to providing an essential emergency alarm service to vulnerable local residents, the Careline Centre gives valuable support to Scheme Managers. In the Scheme Manager's absence, Careline contact residents over the alarm system at varying frequencies based on their level of risk. Scheme Managers pass information about their schemes to Careline staff when going off duty, and are updated on any incidents when they return. Two full-time Housing Assistants are based at Careline and visit residents at the schemes in the absence of the Scheme Manager, test alarm equipment, and install dispersed alarms. The Supporting People Co-ordinator is also based there.

Private Sector Installations

6. Around 1,250 of the connections are private sector dwellings, which are connected via a dispersed alarm, which has an associated neck worn radio trigger. The user pays an annual rental to the Council for the service with the Council receiving a total income of around £136,000 per annum. Alternatively, provided the user meets the eligibility criteria, the system can be fully funded by Social Care.

Telecare Services

7. Telecare is a relatively new concept, introduced since the last review, and is an important enhancement to what the Careline Service already offers. A wide range of sensors are now available that can be linked into a dispersed alarm which, when activated, automatically send a call through to Careline eliminating the need to press a button or pull a cord. The Council works in partnership with Essex County Council who provides the equipment free of charge to the Council and funds the first 12 weeks rental for the user. Some examples of Telecare sensors include:

- . Smoke detectors which raise an instant call if it detects smoke.
- . Flood detector which provides an early warning of a potential flood situation.
- . Carbon monoxide detector warns of dangerous CO levels within a property.
- . Fall detectors automatically detect a serious fall and raise an alert.
- . Pill dispensers automatically call the monitoring centre if medication is not taken.
- . Pressure mats monitor inactivity dependent on individual needs.
- . Bed occupancy sensors warn that a user has left their bed and not returned.
- . Epilepsy sensor warns of an epileptic attack whilst in bed.

8. Telecare sensors offer a comprehensive way of managing the risks to a person's health and home environment 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, enabling people to live independently for as long as possible and brings additional security and peace of mind to new and existing service users. In addition to Telecare, Telehealth allows patients with long term medical conditions to monitor their own vital signs over the system although this would need to be explored further with the health service and may be beyond what Careline can currently provide.

9. Since the Review in 2004, the Council has worked very hard promoting and expanding the service, with Telecare itself generating additional revenue. As more people become aware of the benefits of Telecare and purchase these products revenue will increase further.

10. The Council has introduced many further initiatives which include the following:

- A Disaster Recovery Plan which is an essential back up system. In the event of a major incident at the Careline Centre, all calls can be diverted and handled at the equipment manufacturer's own control centre in Yorkshire where clients' information is securely stored and is regularly updated should this alternative system be needed.
- Careline has an ongoing test programme ensuring all systems are working. This includes testing for any faults with the equipment itself, or the telephone line, which provides the link for the scheme.
- The Council has a comprehensive service agreement with the manufacturer. In order to ensure value for money, the Council is a (founder) member of the Essex Service Agreement Consortium, which ensures maximum discounts to providers.
- Following the installation of a dispersed alarm system, the client's next of kin is notified in writing. Various advice is given about Careline including, British Telecom Protected Services Scheme (whereby telephone line faults will be repaired within 4 hours), and testing of the system, etc.
- Client records are updated regularly, backed up on disc and stored away from the Careline Centre with hard copies being filed at the Centre.
- The Housing Manager (Older Peoples Services) gives presentations to local groups, and other agencies, promoting the service. In addition, leaflets and posters are placed at the Council's Information Points, Libraries, and Citizens Advice Bureaus, etc. The service is advertised in the local press, and the Council's tenants' magazine "Housing News". When an enquiry is received about the service, an application pack is sent out including, an application form, leaflet and terms and conditions.
- The Council pledges to install dispersed alarms for any new private client within 2 working days of receiving the application. This target is regularly achieved.
- Careline works in partnership with other agencies like the Police who promote its use when assisting victims of domestic violence and bogus callers etc.

- All conversations which take place over the alarm service are tape-recorded. This is an important safeguard and enables the Council to investigate any complaints made about the service.
- There are two full time Housing Assistants based at the Careline Centre who undertake a wide range of duties. These include visiting tenants in the absence of the Scheme Manager, installing and testing equipment, and undertaking detailed assessments for Telecare equipment and of those wishing to move into older people's accommodation.
- Careline monitors fire alarms within the sheltered housing schemes when the Scheme Manager is off duty
- When the Scheme Manager is absent for long periods due to annual leave, sickness, or when there is a vacant Post, Careline offer additional services to residents. All those residents who are nominated as "high risk" are called and accounted for every day.
- Epping Forest District Council is the founder member of the Essex Emergency Communications User Group, which was set up in 1984. This is an important means of liaising with other alarm service providers throughout Essex.
- Careline alarms are installed at Council offices to enhance staff safety, enabling lone-working staff to summon assistance in the event of an emergency or potential assault. The locations include the Council's homeless persons hostel Norway House, North Weald and all Information Centres. Various passenger lifts are monitored by Careline including those at sheltered housing schemes and on the Limes Farm housing estate, Chigwell.
- The Council is undertaking a pilot scheme with Social Care where they will visit Careline users when the numbers of calls received from them have increased to identify if they would benefit from any care or support services to reduce the need for hospital admission.

11. There appear to be the following three options for the future delivery of the Careline service:

Option One - The Council Continues to provide the existing Local Service

12. The advantages of continuing to provide the service locally are considered to be as follows:

- The Council has greater control over the management of the service, including ensuring procedures are followed for issues like keeping relatives up to date with incidents
- The STATUS tenant satisfaction survey found that over half of the Council's tenants are over 60 years old and 1 in 3 is over 75. It is therefore an advantage to have a local service to meet the future needs of an ageing population
- Users become known to staff as the same staff who visit will also speak to them regularly on the system.
- Easier for outside agencies to liaise with a local service when dealing with victims of domestic violence, bogus callers or users requiring Telecare sensors.
- Scheme Managers have a local service which supports them in their work

- The Service can initiate the call-out of rest centre staff in the event of a civil emergency, in accordance with the Housing Emergency Plan

13. Careline is staffed by four full time and three part time Careline Operators (5.5 FTE in total) who work to a twenty-four hour, four-week rota. Enhanced payments are made for bank holiday and night working.

14. The following table sets out the costs of the Careline service based upon 2006/2007 actual out-turn which is fully funded by Essex County Council's Supporting People grant:

Item of expenditure	Cost per annum (£)
Management of the service including proportion of Housing Manager & Assistant Housing Manager (Older Peoples Services) and some senior management costs	38,000
Careline staff monitoring the centre including overtime costs (5.5 FTE) and Housing Assistants (2 FTE) undertaking Careline duties	177,000
Cost of premises	6,000
Careline equipment budget	19,000
Service contract costs	58,000
Disaster recovery plan	4,700
Telephone lines etc.	30,000
Sub Total	332,700
Less Income for dispersed alarms	136,000
Less Supporting People Grant	196,700
Total Cost to the Council	Nil

Careline Premises

15. The Careline centre is located at the Council's sheltered housing scheme at Parsonage Court in Loughton. The premises is a converted three bedroom house which was originally built to accommodate the Deputy Scheme Manager, this role was phased out at all schemes with the savings being used to fund Careline when it was introduced. If the Council continued to provide the existing local Careline service, as office space is limited, it will be necessary to extend the current accommodation into the adjacent house which was originally built to accommodate the Scheme Manager who no longer lives on-site. It is proposed to extend the Careline centre into the ground floor of the adjacent house using the first floor for an additional older persons flat which would be incorporated into the sheltered housing scheme. The cost of the Careline extension is around £55,000 with the flat conversion being around £55,000. The new flat on the first floor of the adjacent house would bring additional income of £3,200 per annum to the HRA.

Option Two - Monitor the Service Through Another Provider

16. Following a survey of members of the Essex Communications User Group it was discovered that of fifteen local authority and housing associations, eleven have their own control centre, and one switches the service to another provider overnight. The remaining three link into neighbouring authorities' centres.

17. As an example, Basildon District Council's Careline centre offers a monitoring service to other authorities. To offer a basic monitoring service of the Council's 2,500 properties currently linked into Careline on a 24-hour basis, Basildon District Council have indicated they would charge approximately £65,000 per annum. Officers have also contacted a well established external provider "Invicta" (based in Kent), who stated that they would charge around £37,000 for the same service offered by Basildon District Council, although this would be subject to the outcome of any tendering exercise.

18. Although these charges are less than the Council's current costs, there is no guarantee that these will remain at this level in future years. Under this option, there is a danger that the Council could close the Careline Centre and then be vulnerable to having no alternative but to accept unreasonable increases in monitoring charges at a later date. Although this could be overcome by approaching other providers, this would involve a further time consuming and costly tendering exercise. Furthermore, if it was decided to out source the service under this option, it could prove difficult running the Careline centre leading up to the closure/transfer, as staff would be de-motivated by the process knowing they could become redundant.

19. The following table sets out a cost analysis of providing the Careline service externally based upon 2006/2007 actual out-turn costs and the lower indicative monitoring cost:

Item of expenditure	Cost (£) per annum
Estimated cost of monitoring through another service provider, including calling risks, testing telephone lines etc.	37,000
Managing the service including proportion of Housing Manager and Assistant Housing Manager (Older Peoples Services) and some senior management time	38,000
Mobile Careline Staff (3.FTE)	71,000
Equipment - telephone lines etc.	25,000
Service contract not including Careline control equipment and disaster recovery	43,000
Equipment Budget	19,000
Sub Total	233,000
Less income from dispersed alarms	136,000
Less Supporting People Grant	97,000
Total Cost to the Council	Nil

Supporting People Funding

20. Importantly, the full net cost of the Careline service (excluding income from clients) is funded through the Supporting People Grant received by the Council from Essex County Council's Supporting People Commissioning Body. Therefore, any saving made from externalising the service would be a saving to the County Council. It should be noted that, Essex County Council have advised that it is intending to undertake a value for money exercise commencing September 2008 (similar to that already carried out for floating support services) exploring themselves if savings could be made with emergency alarm services across the County.

21. In comparison with Option One, where the Council continues to manage the service, there is a potential saving of around £99,700 per annum to Essex County Council, although this figure could vary according to the outcome of any tendering exercise. This is due mainly to the reduction in costs of Careline staff who monitor the centre, managing the service, service contract costs for the call answering equipment, the disaster recovery plan and the reduction in the cost of telephone lines.

22. The table includes provision of a Housing Manager and Assistant Housing Manager (Older Peoples Services) and 3 FTE Mobile Careline staff. If this Option was agreed, although an external provider would be monitoring the service, the Council would still need to employ these staff to carry out the following functions:

- Undertaking the client role in managing the new service provider
- Continuing to manage the rest of Older Peoples Services
- Performance monitoring
- Partnership working with Social Care, Police etc
- Calling around 250 residents (in the absence of the Scheme Manager) on a weekly basis who are nominated as "at risk"
- Visiting users to update information
- Providing cover at sheltered schemes in the Scheme Manager's absence
- Installing and removing dispersed alarms
- Undertaking Telecare assessments and installing sensors
- Undertaking battery changes and testing equipment
- Presentations to local groups and promoting the service generally
- Undertaking general administration

23. If the service was externalised the Council would still be able to offer alarms to people in the private sector and Telecare services monitored by the new provider with no reduction in income.

24. The Director of Corporate Support Services advises that if the service was outsourced, existing staff (who spend more than 50% of their time on Careline duties) would transfer to the monitoring authority or organisation under the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) (TUPE) regulations. Should their new employer not require their services then around £25,000 redundancy costs would almost certainly be added in the first year's monitoring charge. This could be reduced should it be possible to re-deploy staff. This figure is based on 4.5 FTE's transferring.

25. When taking into account the average cost of redundancy, based on a three-year pay back period, the saving to Essex County Council between Options One and Option Two, reduces from around £99,700 to £91,400 per annum for the first three years.

Careline Premises

26. If Careline was to be externalised then it would free up one 3 bedroom house originally built to accommodate the Scheme Manager who no longer lives on site, which could be converted into 2 one bedroom flats at a cost of around £110,000, and would be incorporated into the Parsonage Court sheltered housing scheme in Loughton. Based upon 2007/2008 rent levels the 2 new flats would produce further rental income to the Council of around £6,400 per annum. However, under the Government's subsidy rules, the Council will not receive any additional rental income for any additional properties created, therefore the income to the Council would reduce to £3,200 per annum with the income received on the additional flat being reclaimed by the Government. The existing Careline premises being a converted 3 bedroom house would need to be used to accommodate those staff retained unless accommodation can be provided elsewhere.

Option Three – The Council continues to provide an expanded service

27. This option is to retain the existing service, but to expand the service to provide additional facilities and services at no extra costs.

28. There is potential to monitor alarms for other authorities and housing associations, although the increased workload may require additional full-time Careline Operators to be employed. Indeed, when Essex County Council undertakes its value for money exercise in the future that may result in the reduction of the number of control centres in Essex, there would be much more potential for the Council's Careline Centre to monitor alarms for other authorities. Monitoring alarms for other organisations would produce further income reducing the funding gap. It has been assessed that, based on the potential income obtained by other providers, and the cost of additional staff resources, the funding gap between the cost of the Council retaining the service (Option 1) and the cost of outsourcing (Option 2) could be completely closed, if around 5,000 connections could be made to the Council's Careline Centre by other councils and housing associations.

29. Currently, tenants can only report routine repairs up to 5pm, if the Careline service was retained then there is potential to extend the Council's Repairs Reporting Service which could be managed by Careline up to 8pm on each working day without any additional costs being incurred. This would result in a much improved service particularly to those tenants who work and have difficulty contacting the Council during the daytime.

30. With the numbers of CCTV systems being installed throughout the District, due to improved technology, Careline could periodically monitor estates through website access within the centre. This would improve the Council's response to incidents of anti-social behaviour creating a safer environment for local communities.

31. The Council could consider monitoring the whereabouts of lone workers corporately on a 24-hour basis, ensuring a safer working environment for staff.

32. If the service was retained in accordance with this option, the enhancements could be achieved with all of the advantages of continuing to provide a local service at the same costs set out in Option One. The loss of any potential savings to Essex County Council as set out in paragraph 21 and 25 would be justified due to the planned service enhancements which would not be achievable under Option Two. This has been discussed with Essex County Council who are supportive of this approach.

Careline Premises

33. If the Careline service was expanded further, there would be a need for additional office space. Therefore, it will be necessary to extend the current accommodation into the adjacent house which was originally built to accommodate the Scheme Manager who no longer lives on-site. It is proposed to extend the Careline centre into the ground floor of the adjacent house using the first floor for an additional older persons flat which would be incorporated into the sheltered housing scheme. The cost of the Careline extension is around £55,000 with the flat conversion being around £55,000. The new flat on the first floor of the adjacent house would bring additional income of £3,200 per annum to the HRA.

Conclusion

34. It is considered that retaining and expanding the Careline service in accordance with Option three is the most appropriate Option and would bring the following advantages which are in addition to those set out in the recommendations:

- Any saving made by externalising the service would not be of any benefit to the Council as Essex County Council's Supporting People Grant would be reduced accordingly
- Essex County Council would prefer to continue funding at the same level recommending that the Council retains and expands the service as it will provide a better service to residents.
- Essex County Council has asked that the Council retains and expands the service until they undertake their own Essex-wide review of emergency alarm monitoring centres
- If the service were to be retained, and following their review, Essex County Council decide to reduce the number of emergency alarm centres in Essex, the Council's Careline centre could tender to monitor other providers alarms
- If the Council were to externalise the service, then under the contract with Essex County Council they will require that any agreement with any external provider be only short-term to ensure that appropriate changes can be made following the Essex-wide review. A short-term contract with an external provider would leave the Council vulnerable.
- The Careline service can be expanded offering a better service to residents without any additional costs being incurred by the Council

Statement in Support of Recommended Action:

35. Continuing to provide the Careline 24-hour emergency alarm service to older and vulnerable people locally will enable the Council to make a number of service improvements at no extra cost and would continue to provide valuable support to Scheme Managers.

Other Options for Action:

36. As set out in the report.

Consultation Undertaken:

The Tenants and Leaseholders Federation

37. The Tenants and Leaseholders Federation were consulted at their meeting on 20 May 2008 and agreed with the recommendations.

Careline Staff

38. Careline staff were consulted at their meeting on 10 April 2008 and given a deadline of 1 June 2008 to respond. Generally, all staff agreed with the recommendations. However, they have some concerns about being able to monitor CCTV systems when dealing with emergency calls from service users must be their priority. It has been explained that, as set out in paragraph 30 in the report, Careline would “periodically” monitor estates through website access within the centre. As has always been the case, emergency alarm calls from service users would be the priority. In addition, staff have raised some concerns about repairs reporting out of hours being managed by Careline up to 8pm. They believe this could present a problem as between 5 & 6pm is a busy period with Scheme Managers calling through to the centre when switching off-site. It will be explained that when the repairs reporting service is extended, emergency calls from alarm service users will remain the priority. If Careline staff are unable to take any repairs calls, an answering service will be available explaining to the caller that an emergency call is being taken and their call will be returned soon after.

UNISON

39. UNISON have been consulted on the report and state that they would vehemently oppose any attempt to outsource the service.

Essex County Council Supporting People Team

40. Essex County Council agree with the recommendations. They agree that if the Careline centre was retained and enhanced it would provide a better service to residents. The Supporting People Team undertaking their own review of community alarm providers in Essex commencing later this year in partnership with Adult Social Care. They would prefer that the Council’s Careline service was reviewed at the same time as their own review. The findings of the Council’s review will feed into the County’s Essex-wide review and will assist them in their work. If the Council decided to externalise the Careline service, then under the Supporting People contract they will only allow the Council to enter into a short-term contract with any external provider pending the outcome of their review. They would not encourage this as it would leave the Council’s service vulnerable and subject to changing again in the future. Essex County Council are happy to continue with the same level of funding which they believe is more justified if the service was expanded. If any savings were made as a result of any externalisation, then Essex County Council would reduce the Supporting People Grant accordingly.

Housing Scrutiny Panel

41. The Housing Scrutiny Panel considered and endorsed the report at its meeting on 3 July 2008.

Resource Implications:

Budget Provision: Retain the Careline Service within existing resources. £110,000 Capital costs of extending Careline and providing one additional flat in the former Scheme Manager accommodation. The additional flat will provide £3,200 per annum additional income to the HRA.

Personnel: 4.5 FTE Careline staff at risk if service externalised

Land:

Council Plan 2006-10/BVPP Reference:

Relevant Statutory Powers: Housing Act 1985

Background Papers: ...

Environmental/Human Rights Act/Crime and Disorder Act Implications:

Key Decision Reference (if required):