

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C-026-2008/09.

Date of meeting: 1 September 2008.



**Epping Forest
District Council**

Portfolio: Housing.

Subject: Review of Epping Forest Careline.

Responsible Officer: Roger Wilson (01992-564419).

Democratic Services Officer: Gary Woodhall (01992-564470).

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 that detailed consideration be given in the future to the following enhancements:

(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) periodically monitoring existing Council-owned CCTV systems through website access following the appointment of the new CCTV Co-ordinator and formulation of a Corporate CCTV Policy; and

(d) monitoring the whereabouts of the Council's lone workers on a 24-hour basis; and

(2) That the Careline premises be extended into the ground floor of the vacant adjacent former Scheme Manager's accommodation and that the first floor be converted into a one-bedroom flat and incorporated into the Council's sheltered housing scheme at Parsonage Court, Loughton, funded from Miscellaneous Structures within the existing Housing Capital Programme.

Executive Summary:

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, that 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.

The Review considers the following three main options for the future delivery of the service:

- Retaining the existing service
- Externalising the service
- Retaining and enhancing the service

The Careline service is funded in the main through Essex County Council's Supporting People Grant. The Supporting People Team have been consulted and are not in favour of the service being externalised. Their view is that if the Careline Centre was retained and enhanced, it would provide a better service to residents.

They would prefer that the Council's Careline service was reviewed at the same time as their own Essex-wide review of alarm centres. If the Council decided to externalise the Careline service now 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 enhanced. If any savings were made as a result of any externalisation, then Essex County Council would reduce the Council's Supporting People Grant accordingly.

As the number of alarm connections has increased, additional computer stations at the control centre have been installed, which has resulted in office space being limited. If the service is retained, 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, whilst converting the first floor for an additional older persons flat, which would be incorporated into the sheltered housing scheme. The cost of the Careline extension and flat conversion is around £110,000, which can be funded from Miscellaneous Structures within the existing Housing Capital Programme. The new flat on the first floor of the adjacent house would bring additional income of £3,200 per annum to the HRA.

Retaining and enhancing the service, and expanding the existing premises, is recommended as this will enable the Council to provide an improved service to residents at the same cost.

The Housing Scrutiny Panel, Essex County Council's Supporting People Team, the Tenants and Leaseholders Association, Careline staff and UNISON have agreed the recommendations.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

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. In addition, if the service was externalised, the Supporting People Team would only allow a short-term contract with any external provider, which would leave the Council vulnerable. Furthermore, Supporting People Funding would reduce by any savings made.

Other Options for Action:

- (i) To externalise the Careline Service.
- (ii) To retain the existing Careline Service.
- (iii) To retain the existing service and not extend the premises.
- (iv) To retain an enhanced service and not extend the premises.

Report:

1. 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.

2. 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; and
- monitoring testing of all alarm systems, including weekly telephone line checks.

3. 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.

4. 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

5. 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

6. 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 detectors which provide an early warning of a potential flood situation;
- carbon monoxide detectors which warn of dangerous CO levels within a property;
- fall detectors which automatically detect a serious fall and raise an alert;
- pill dispensers which automatically call the monitoring centre if medication is not

taken;

- pressure mats which monitor inactivity dependent on individual needs;
- bed occupancy sensors which warn that a user has left their bed and not returned; and
- epilepsy sensors which warn of an epileptic attack whilst in bed.

7. 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 bring 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.

8. 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.

9. 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

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

- (i) 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;
- (ii) the STATUS tenant satisfaction survey found that over half of the Council's tenants are over 60 years old and 1 in 3 are over 75, it is therefore an advantage to have a local service to meet the future needs of an ageing population;
- (iii) users become known to staff, as the same staff who visit will also speak to them regularly on the system;
- (iv) it is easier for outside agencies to liaise with a local service when dealing with victims of domestic violence, bogus callers or users requiring Telecare sensors;
- (v) scheme Managers have a local service which supports them in their work; and
- (vi) 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.

11. 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.

12. The following table sets out the costs of the Careline service based upon the 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

Option Two - Monitor the Service Through Another Provider

13. 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.

14. 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). They stated that they would charge around £37,000 for a basic monitoring service, although this would be subject to the outcome of any tendering exercise.

15. Although these charges are less than the Council's current costs, there is no guarantee that these would 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.

16. 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	37,000
Managing the service including proportion of Housing Manager and Assistant Housing Manager (Older Peoples Services) and some senior management costs	38,000
Mobile Careline staff (3.FTE)	71,000
Cost of premises	6,000
Telephone lines etc.	25,000
Service contract costs, not including Careline control equipment and disaster recovery	43,000
Careline equipment budget	19,000
Work station to enable staff to call residents nominated "at risk"	4,000
Sub Total	243,000
Less income from dispersed alarms	136,000
Less Supporting People Grant	107,000
Total cost to the Council	Nil

Supporting People Funding

17. 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 has 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.

18. In comparison with Option One, (where the Council continues to manage the service), there is a potential saving of around £89,700 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 manage and monitor the centre; service contract for the call answering equipment; the disaster recovery plan, and telephone lines.

19. 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; and
- undertaking general administration.

20. 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.

21. 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 have to 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 to 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.

22. 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 £89,700 to £81,400 per annum for the first three years.

Option Three – The Council continues to provide an enhanced service

23. This option is to retain the existing service, but to give detailed consideration to enhancing the service to provide additional facilities and services at no extra cost.

24. There is potential to monitor alarms for other local 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.

25. Currently, tenants can only report routine repairs up to 5pm, Monday to Fridays. 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.

26. With the numbers of CCTV systems being installed throughout the District, due to improved technology, following the appointment of the Council's CCTV Co-ordinator, and the formulation of a corporate CCTV policy 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.

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

28. 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 Paragraphs 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

29. 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. As the number of alarm connections has increased, additional computer stations have been installed which has resulted in office space being limited. If either Option One or Option Three is agreed and the service is retained, it is recommended that the current accommodation be extended 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 and converting the first floor for an additional older persons flat, which would be incorporated into the sheltered housing scheme. Members have previously agreed that this work can be undertaken, but it has not been progressed pending this review. The cost of the Careline extension and flat conversion is around £110,000, which can be funded from Miscellaneous Structures within the existing Housing Capital Programme. The new flat on the first floor of the adjacent house would bring additional income of £3,200 per annum to the HRA.

30. However, if, under Option Two, the Careline service was externalised, then it could free up one 3 bedroom house. However, it is considered that it would not be appropriate to let the house as a general needs property, due to its very close proximity to the Parsonage Court sheltered housing scheme in Loughton. Therefore, the house would be better converted into two one bedroom flats at a cost of around £110,000, and could be incorporated into the Parsonage Court sheltered housing scheme. Based upon 2007/2008 rent levels, the two 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 three bedroom house, would need to be used to accommodate those staff retained, unless accommodation can be provided elsewhere.

Conclusion

31. 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:

(i) 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;

- (ii) Essex County Council would prefer to continue funding at the same level and recommend that the Council retains and expands the service, as it will provide a better service to residents;
- (iii) 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
- (iv) 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;
- (v) 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;
- (vi) the Careline service can be expanded, offering a better service to residents without any additional costs being incurred by the Council.

Resource Implications:

Retain and expand the Careline Service itself within existing resources. The Capital costs of extending Careline are £110,000, which can be funded from Miscellaneous Structures within the existing Housing Capital Programme, which includes providing one additional flat in the former Scheme Manager's accommodation. The additional flat will provide £3,200 per annum additional income to the HRA.

Legal and Governance Implications:

Housing Act 1985.

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

Providing an expanded Careline Service will assist in making estates safer as there is a potential to monitor CCTV systems through the Centre.

Consultation Undertaken:

The Tenants and Leaseholders Federation

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

Careline Staff

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 which 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 5pm & 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

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

As set out in the report.

Housing Scrutiny Panel

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

Background Papers:

Best Value Service Review.
Supporting People Contract.

Impact Assessments:

It is considered that the recommendations would present the lowest risk to the Council and ensure that a reliable service is delivered to customers. Externalising the Careline Service would result in Essex County Council reducing its grant to the Council. In addition, under the terms of the Supporting People Contract they would require that any external provider only be employed on a short-term basis until they carry out their own Essex-wide review which would be an unnecessary high risk strategy.