

## CHRISTMAS / NEW YEAR WORKING GROUP

### Minutes of the meeting held at 09.30 on the 16<sup>th</sup> of November 2010

**Present:** John Gilbert (Env & Street Scene)  
Laura MacNeill (Env & Street Scene)  
Paul Pledger (Housing)  
Robin Hellier (Planning & Eco Development)  
Paula Maginnis (Corporate Support Services)  
Jackie Close (Deputy Chief Executives)  
Stephen Bacon (Finance & ICT)

#### 1. Introductions and background

John Gilbert introduced and welcomed everyone to the meeting. He set out the background to the formation of the Working Group, which was, amongst other things, the operational difficulties which had arisen during the Christmas and New Year shut down in 2009/10 which coincided with adverse weather conditions. This had resulted in significant difficulties for some members of the public in obtaining service information, particularly around refuse and recycling collections.

These issues had been considered by the Safer, Cleaner, Greener Standing Scrutiny Panel who had sought consideration of the reasons for a shutdown at this time of the year and, if to continue, how severe weather and other similar events could be better managed. Management Board had concluded that a Working Group should be established under the chairmanship of the Director of Environment & Street Scene to consider Members' concerns.

#### 2. Terms of Reference

John Gilbert went through the draft terms of reference and the Group agreed to accept them as written and also to use them as the work plan.

#### 3. Work Plan

##### (i) Current shutdown arrangements

Paula Maginnis informed the Group that the present arrangements for closure over the Christmas and New Year periods had arisen in the light of very low service usage/activity and the high costs of opening the offices during this period. Following negotiations with Staffside and the Trades Unions, an agreement had been reached whereby officers utilised their "statutory days" and the Council supplemented these to provide a shut down period from 12 noon on Christmas Eve to the first working day after the New Year Bank Holiday. The current agreement was scheduled to remain in place until Christmas / new Year 2012/13.

There were a number of service areas where this agreement was not implemented, in particular the waste management service, housing repairs, North Weald Airfield and the Nursery Service.

**It was recommended that there were no pressing reasons to revisit this agreement at this time in order to deal with the issues of concern.**

(ii) As indicated above a number of services are provided through this shutdown period, albeit to differing levels:

- waste management – normal service, with supervising staff in attendance

- housing repairs – to deal with scheduled and emergency works
- nursery – watering of stock
- homelessness – emergency allocations etc
- noise etc – normal 24/7 response
- flooding etc – normal 24/7 emergency response
- dangerous structures – normal emergency call out

**The above services were noted and it was not considered necessary to recommend the inclusion of any further services to be provided during this period.**

The SCG Panel had put forward the suggestion that even if the shutdown was to be maintained, a “skeleton staff presence” should be provide for key front line services such as waste management. However, the Group did not consider that this was necessary, since barring adverse weather etc, the requirement for residents to contact the service during shut down was very limited, and there was adequate information provided through the website and via telephone messaging systems for residents to obtain the information they required. In the event of particular difficulties, the staff present at the Depot, supervising the contractor, would be in a position to assist.

**It is recommended that it is not considered necessary to provide a skeleton staff presence during the current shutdown period. This recommendation could be subject to review as part of future negotiations on the present shutdown arrangements.**

(iii) A distinction was made between these services and what would need to be provided in the event of an “emergency”. Adverse weather, such as that of last winter, was not considered to be an emergency event since lives and property were not put at significant risk and it would not merit the implementation of the Emergency Response Plan and the immediate opening of the Civic Offices complex. Staffing during an “emergency” is a well rehearsed process, undertaken by the Emergency Response Team, whereas staffing during adverse weather would tend to be a more ad hoc process, other than waste management and homelessness etc. where staffing levels are pre-arranged.

**It is recommended that the distinction between “emergencies” and severe weather events be retained.**

(iv) a key issue in dealing with incidents during the shutdown period is that of providing information to the public and dealing with direct calls. These can be broken down as follows:

- (a) direct telephone calls to the switchboard or to specified extensions;
- (b) residents accessing the Council’s website to obtain information; and
- (c) residents seeking information through the telephone system

Severe difficulties arose last winter in respect of waste management due to:

- the offices not being open when some residents clearly felt they should be, and they were therefore unable to obtain information direct from officers;
- problems in updating the information on the Council’s website; and
- the inability to be able to update the messages on the Council’s telephone systems without recourse to a ICT Engineer

The result of the above was confusion for residents around whether or not collections were being made and what they should do in the circumstances. Whilst in relative terms the numbers of complainants was low, it would have been preferable to be able to provide up to date information throughout the period of adverse weather, since this would

have, in general terms assisted residents, but would also have considerably reduced the volume of follow up calls which arose once the offices reopened in the New Year.

A detailed discussion followed on what could be done to deal with these particular issues:

Office opening: as stated above, the Group could see no reason at present, especially in view of the associated heating, lighting and other costs, to opening the Civic Offices in whole or in part just to provide some level of service for waste management. However, in the event of adverse weather etc, if a decision was made that a telephone service should be provided, then a means should be found to do so. Following a discussion on the technical requirements around ICT, it was clear that the most suitable location was the Epping Depot since:

- (a) it was (normally) open and staffed during this period in any event;
- (b) there were a sufficient number of work stations available;
- (c) the ICT links were as for the Civic Offices and therefore all systems should operate normally and at an adequate speed; and
- (d) there were adequate staff facilities available.

#### Updating the information on the Council's website

It was explained that there were two components to updating the website:

- (1) the links originating on the front page/screen; and
- (2) the data which the front page link pointed to

Taking the latter first, all Directorates had officers who were trained and authorised to amend data on the web page. Given the nature of the ICT links at Epping Depot, it would be a straightforward exercise to keep this data valid. It would be for Directorates to ensure that the editing of the data was sound and that the final message was accurate.

With regard to the first issue, the editing of front page links is currently restricted to officers in PR. It was thought that this should be reviewed in the light of the need for speedy changes being required to the Council's web site, with other officers being enabled to undertake these changes.

#### The Council's telephony system

This is a particularly difficult area. As stated earlier this presented significant problems last winter when we were unable to ensure that telephone messages were up to date and providing residents with accurate and useful information. During the severe weather event last year it was often necessary to update the message several times during one day to reflect what was actually happening.

However, the system is such that:

- (a) the message can only be changed by an ICT Engineer; and
- (b) this can only be achieved at the Civic Offices and cannot be undertaken remotely

This means that ICT would need to have trained personnel available through the shutdown period in the event that severe weather required Epping Depot to be utilised. At present, no such arrangements exist for ICT staff to be on call.

Furthermore, for the telephones to be fully available at the Epping Depot, it would be necessary to 'transfer' existing numbers from Civic Offices to the Depot, since even though information could be placed on the web site, many residents will expect the

number they know and is printed on waste management literature, to function as expected. This is another technical issue which has no straightforward solution.

**It is recommended that in the event of severe weather and the need to provide customer contact during the shutdown period, Epping Depot be utilised, subject to testing to demonstrate ICT capabilities.**

**It is recommended that Directorates ensure that they have adequate numbers of trained/authorised officers to provide updated web pages to the Council's website and that Public Relations give consideration to the availability of officers to update the front page of the Council's web pages**

**It is recommended that the Director of Finance & ICT investigate means by which the messaging system of the telephony system can be updated using other officers or remotely by ICT engineers.**

(v) Paula Maginnis set out for the Group the current remuneration arrangements for officers required to work during periods of shutdown. The payments varied dependant upon whether the day was an official bank Holiday or one of the officers' statutory days. Officers on formal standby arrangements had specific arrangements in place. Paula agreed to provide the Group with the broad principles of payments for such activities.

#### 4. Arrangements for Christmas / New Year 2010/11

It was agreed by the Group that no arrangements for skeleton staffing should be put forward for 2010/11. It was agreed that Directorates should, where appropriate, put into place contingency arrangements for staff to operate from Epping Depot in the event that severe weather required public contact with residents to be implemented. It was also agreed that this could not be seen as a contractual requirement at this stage and that the best that could be achieved was for volunteer officers to "do their best" to attend Epping Depot, subject to their own travel restrictions

**It is recommended that in the event of severe weather during the 2010/11 shutdown period and the need to provide customer contact, Epping Depot be utilised.**

#### 5. Officer actions

<b>Officer</b>	<b>Action</b>
Paul Pledger Laura Macneill	(i) Test the ICT systems at the Epping Depot to determine ICT capability and the ability to run a full range of operational systems; (ii) Assuming a positive outcome to the above test, to ensure suitable access arrangements are in place for Epping Depot for non Housing based officers.
Paula Maginnis	Provide details of remuneration arrangements for officers working on Bank Holidays and/or statutory days during the Christmas/New Year shutdown period
Robin Hellier	Report on the current arrangements for dealing with dangerous structures and related matters during the Christmas/New Year shutdown period
Stephen Bacon	(i) report on the arrangements which need to be put in place to enable remote changes to be made to the telephony messaging

Officer	Action
	systems; (ii) report on the degree to which ICT resources can be made available during the Christmas/New Year shutdown period; (iii) ensure access to network printers located at the Epping Depot for non Housing based officers; and (iv)
Jackie Close	(i) report on the availability of PR/web officers to assist frontline staff during the Christmas/New Year shutdown period; (ii) report on whether or not trained officers can have access to the 'front page' of the website to enable changes to be made during the Christmas/New Year shutdown period

6. Next meeting

**It was agreed that, subject to the outcome of the above tasks and the report to Management Board, no further meeting of the Working Group would be required.**

7. Recommendations

- (1) There were no pressing reasons to revisit this agreement at this time in order to deal with the issues of concern.
- (2) It was not considered necessary to recommend the inclusion of any further services to be provided during this period;
- (3) It is not considered necessary to provide a skeleton staff presence during the current shutdown period. This recommendation could be subject to review as part of future negotiations on the present shutdown arrangements;
- (4) The distinction between “emergencies” and severe weather events be retained;
- (5) In the event of severe weather and the need to provide customer contact during the shutdown period, Epping Depot be utilised, subject to testing to demonstrate ICT capabilities;
- (6) Directorates to ensure that they have adequate numbers of trained/authorised officers to provide updated web pages to the Council’s website and that Public Relations give consideration to the availability of officers to update the front page of the Council’s web pages;
- (7) The Director of Finance & ICT investigate means by which the messaging system of the telephony system can be updated using other officers or remotely by ICT engineers;
- (8) In the event of severe weather during the 2010/11 shutdown period and the need to provide customer contact, Epping Depot be utilised; and
- (9) The availability of key PR and ICT staff during emergencies and/or shut down periods be considered.