

## Elevate East London Review

### PAASC Site Visit to Barking One Stop Shop

31 January 2013

In attendance:

- Councillor A Jamu (Lead Member, PAASC)
- Councillor T Saeed (Deputy Lead Member, PAASC)
- Councillor S Alasia (Member, PAASC)
- Christopher Owens (Scrutiny Officer, PAASC)
- Sue Lees (Chief Executive, Elevate East London)
- David Graaff (Customer Services Director, Elevate East London)
- Ashley Bryant (Head of Customer Services, Elevate East London)
- Sue Richards (One Stop Shops Manager, Elevate East London)
- Nick Lane (Barking and Dagenham Council, Client Unit)

Mr Graaff and Ms Bryant welcomed the Committee to Barking Learning Centre. It was noted that the internet access was currently faulty and access was intermittent, additionally the the Qmatic application was offline due to an application failure with the supplier. Because of this, the paper based back-up system (using raffle tickets) had been implemented. Councillor Saeed stated that on his last visit to the One Stop Shops the internet was also offline. Officers reassured members by stating that the service is in the process of changing Internet Service Providers, and it is the transfer process that is causing intermittent outages. Furthermore, the “uptime” of the systems is monitored and reported and is faulty very infrequently. The target is to keep “downtimes” to under two hours a month. It was **AGREED** that information on all systems “uptimes” will form a part of Elevate’s written evidence pack to the Committee at the Summit.

Ms Lees said this site visit will give the members useful information in advance of the Elevate Summit which is due to take place on March 26<sup>th</sup> 2013. This site visit will form one part of Elevate East London’s evidence pack. An invitation was extended to every member of the Council to pop into the One Stop Shops at any time to check on service levels.

The genesis of the review – the increase in attendances from the new Controlled Parking Zones coming into force in September 2012 – was briefly discussed, noting that there was a perception the formal monthly reporting did not match the situation being witnessed in the One Stop Shops.

Officers proceeded to deliver a presentation to the members which outlined:

- Two types of service are offered at the One Stop Shops; counter and enhanced.
- COUNTER**
- involves simple tier one enquiries (such as Council Tax balance enquiries). Officers are working to move as much of this type of “drop in” customer contact to online services to increase efficiency. Other services under this category include garage letting, Nationality Checking Service, School admissions, mobility service, freedom pass, housing, revenues and benefits, and parking.
  - Regarding the September surge in Parking applications, this was related to the introduction of new CPZs and changes to systems and processes at the same time. This led to long queues as there were a great number of people who were unfamiliar with the process and the alternative options available to them. There is a culture, locally, of people coming in at the end of the month rather than paying online or attending in advance. In order to avoid this Elevate and Parking wrote to all customers within a CPZ and included an application form so that customers were aware that they could post their application forms rather than attend an office and that they could do this up to 14 days in advance.
- POTENTIAL REC:** advise officers to increase education of public on options regarding paying for parking permits and other services.
- It was noted that 98% of school applications are now online. This demonstrates that people are willing and able to access services online.
  - General enquiries are also handled as “tier one”.
  - All this work is measured by Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)
- ENHANCED**
- This service is known as Benefits Direct.
  - It has reduced benefits processing periods from an average of 42 days down to an average of 12 days.

- People do have to wait on the day, but doing so ultimately resolves their claim far quicker than using the postal system. It was noted that this is a similar situation to fast-track passport applications. People are prepared to queue to ensure they get their passport quicker.
- People can apply online twenty-four hours a day. It's a "smart form" so if it becomes apparent early on that you're illegible for benefits the form will automatically halt your application to save the claimant and officers' time. The reasons will be clearly outlined to ensure, if an error has been made during data entry, it becomes obvious and can be corrected, before a claim is abandoned entirely. The form is user friendly and easy to use and you only need to answer the questions which specifically relate to your personal circumstances, rather than a whole form (if you were completing a paper based form). Staff in the one stop shops are trained to assist people completing it and can do this on a one to one basis if the customer requires this level of service.
- There is also a risk based verification system in place. This means that people can prove their eligibility and identity to varying degrees based on the level of risk to the system they're deemed to pose. It's judged against high, medium, and low risk and this reduces the need to bring lots of unnecessary evidence into the one stop shops.

PAASC asked if Elevate was ready for the Universal Credit system. The answer was affirmative. Lots of letters have been dispatched informing customers of impending changes due to Government changes. Letters can now be grouped together into the same envelopes, reducing postal costs, and ensuring that customers get all of the relevant information at the same time.

Everyone of working age will now have to pay at least 15% of their council tax. A support scheme is in place. It is estimated that 16,000 – 17,000 people locally will pay more than they currently do. It is estimated that 1,700 people locally will be affected by the "Bedroom tax". You're charged 14% extra for one room, and 25% of each additional spare room in the property. The housing allocation policy is being reviewed.

Regarding staffing; there are 32 people across both sites, including 7 benefits officers at each One Stop Shop. Great care is taken to ensure sufficient staff are at each site. Staff rotas are drawn up on a four week basis. Historic data is used to ensure effective staff allocation. Elevate have a resource planner to ensure busy periods are covered adequately.

Housing enquiries officers are booked to come in three days a week, depending on the number of viewings. These staff undertake all tenancy sign ups. There was a general discussion as to whether it would be beneficial if they dealt with all enquiries and Elevate explained that a new pilot scheme took place last summer it was found that the high volume enquiries were generally for things such as key fobs etc and it was not felt the most use of housing officers time to deal with this but that they should focus on the sign ups.

Discussing KPIs; in year one the target was for 80% of walk in customers to be seen within 15 minutes. However, budget savings demanded this to be altered. Waiting times were increased to 30 minutes. 25,000 customers are seen on average per month which indicates that approximately 20,000 should be seen within 30 minutes and it was accepted that on average 5,000 will not be seen in this time and there is no ceiling on waiting times. The target in any given month is based on the total number of customers. PAASC said many councillors were embarrassed at the long queue times that can be seen in the one stop shops. Officers said that as more services go online, the queues should dissipate. Furthermore, part of the problem is cultural. For example, lots of people queue before opening at 9.00am meaning a backlog can immediately be created at peak times. This is very hard to overcome but customers are told how long they will have to wait at the lectern and are offered a drop off service for benefits if they do not want to wait to be seen by a benefits officer.

When someone arrives at a One Stop Shop they are immediately signposted to the correct course of action at the Lectern; they are either entered into a queuing system, given a form to take away, have their enquiry answered immediately, or directed to online services. This is a good and reassuring process as people are "seen" straight away and are given an indication of the overall waiting time. Benefits claims have the longest waiting times due to the nature of the enquiry. An average claim takes approximately 30 minutes to process.

Internal migration of systems is taking place so all services are processed through one online portal called "My Account" where customers will transact all business with the Council. This will eventually be mobile phone compatible. The "My Account" system is based on an Agilisys piece of software. LBBB are fortunate to be able to influence the development of this software (there are only two other viable packages available on the open market). Nick Lane noted that LBBB currently offers a "Move in / Move out" function online to allow people to transact themselves on when they have moved in or out of the borough for council tax. At the time of the site visit, LBBB is the only local authority to offer this service online.

Elevate measure customer satisfaction. Exit surveys, feedback collection, and online viability are some of the ways this is undertaken. An action plan is drawn up as a result of feedback from customers which is regularly monitored. It was **AGREED** that a “you said, we did” style report will form part of Elevate’s evidence pack. Processes are in place to handle aggressive customers, and a recent incident tested these plans. Such instances are very rare, however. It is believed the open plan nature of the one stop shops encourages good behaviour (rather than having Perspex screens and holding areas, for example). Nick Lane stated he is very impressed with how staff handle aggressive customers while on telephone calls. PAASC were offered the opportunity to review some telephone call recordings should they so wish.

The committee then undertook a tour of the Barking One Stop Shop. The Committee inspected the:

- Lectern area
- Self-service Area
- Display Screens (these will soon change to a news system similar to Argos so people can see where they are in the queue).

The Committee met Earl, one of the team managers , who talked the committee through the online based services. Customers can come into the one stop shops to start an application, seek guidance, then go home to complete it if they so wish. Staff are well trained to assist people with online services. He felt that people find the system really easy and, despite some initial trepidation, are very quickly getting used to online based services. People are welcome to go straight to benefits claims officers at the shops, once they’ve completed the online application.

The “My Account” system has lots of advantages. As many “tier one” enquires are council tax balance queries, people can now access this information online twenty-four hours a day. The system, in Phase Two, will soon integrate with a phone system (similar to phone banking) to provide customers with access to their council tax and rent balances and real-time web-chat (run by the call centre) is to be rolled out too. Lots of analysis of web use is being undertaken and web copy is being updated to keep customers online, rather than calling on the telephone. This will ensure people get instant answers/services, and won’t get “lost in the system”. Online video guides are being developed to explain, in simple terms, how to access council services and Elevate are launching these “talking letters” as part of the changes to the council tax scheme.

This concluded the site visit.