LONDON BOROUGH OF BRENT

ENVIRONMENT'S REGULATORY SERVICES – BEST VALUE REVIEW

FINAL REPORT

1.   INTRODUCTION

1.1   Background

Brent's Environmental Services include five highly regarded service units whose role is largely regulatory or to do with enforcement. These are the Planning Service, Building Control, Environmental Health, Trading Standards and Health Safety and Licensing.

Between February and November 2003 a Best Value Review was conducted of the regulatory and enforcement work of these service units. The self assessment prepared by this review was considered by an independent panel in December 2003 and January 2004. The panel interviewed the heads of these service units, more senior officers and the Lead Member for the services, heads of key support services and ran focus groups talking to users of the services, businesses, staff of the services and staff from other Council departments with regular contact with the services. The panel reported their conclusions at the end of March 2004.

This report presents the final outcome of the review, adapting the self assessment to take account of the panel's conclusions and recommendations. It summarises briefly the work undertaken, sets out the conclusions under headings based on the EFQM model used in both the self assessment and the panel scrutiny, and concludes with an Improvement Plan for the services.

1.2   Organisational Context

The service units under review have been stable in their current form since 1996. Each is headed by a unit director who is the professional head for that service and has delegated powers to run the service. The role of the Assistant Director responsible for the services does not require professional qualification in any of the relevant disciplines.

A consequence of this strong and effective delegation has been that, over time, each unit has developed innovative and service specific solutions to problems and has, to some extent, developed its own organisational culture. Common elements in these cultures, include a focus on customer needs reflected in the Chartermarks held by each service unit, a pattern of continuous improvement, good use of IT to support business processes, valuing staff reflected in Investors in People and a strong and effective service planning and performance management process. Many of these elements are shared with the wider group of Environmental Services service units.

Initial assessment of the services identified considerable strengths in each unit considered on its own. To ensure that the review process added as much value as possible the services were concerned in carrying out the self assessment to ensure that not only were the opportunities for improvement within the individual service units identified and their strengths celebrated, but that opportunities for improvement through different ways of working across the services were found.

The Terms of Reference for the review were written with this in mind.

1.3 Terms of Reference

The best value review of regulatory services will examine the collective efficiency, effectiveness and economy of:

♦ *Building Control and Consultancy Services*

♦ *Environmental Health (excluding Private Housing Services)*

♦ *Health, Safety and Licensing*

♦ *Planning*

♦ *Trading Standards*

and their interface with the community. It will aim to secure continuous improvement in the way these services are delivered.

The Review will examine:

♦ *The extent to which the services focus on what matters to the local people and businesses.*

♦ *How these services and their performance contribute to national and corporate priorities.*

♦ *Opportunities for improving access and usability of these services.*

♦ *Opportunities to improve the quality of outcomes for customers.*

♦ *The ability of these services to meet their statutory obligations.*

♦ *The opportunity to change existing work processes and to develop staff to deliver what matters to local people and businesses.*

Not all the work of these services is regulatory or to do with enforcement. Within the Planning Service, for example, there are teams dealing with landscaping and with Local Land Charges. Because of the cross cutting focus of the review, elements of service with little regulatory and enforcement involvement have not been examined in detail.

2. WORK UNDERTAKEN

The self assessment was led by a Steering Group with four sub-groups undertaking much of the detailed work. The four sub groups focused on the needs of individual customers, the needs of businesses, organisation and staffing issues, and finance and performance issues.

2.1 Challenge

The review sought to challenge existing standards, structures, systems and practices to ensure that good practice was identified and shared and that opportunities for change and improvement were also identified. Many different approaches to challenge were used including facilitated challenge days for all staff involved in the review groups and sub-groups, and for other staff; work by the customer and business sub-groups, considering relevant conclusions from other Best Value Reviews, visits to other authorities and consultation with service users and businesses.

Key questions considered were:

♦ Did the organisational culture support continuous improvement

♦ Whether the current structure best met the needs of customers

♦ Whether we could better meet the needs of businesses

♦ Whether we were making best possible use of ICT

The conclusions reached are included in later sections.

2.2　Compare

Comparison with other authorities was carried out in a number of ways to assess relative levels of performance, costs of service provision both gross and per capita, identification of good practice recommended by the Audit Commission and visits to authorities demonstrating interesting or good practice.

Numerical comparisons were based on BVPI statistics, CIPFA statistics, relevant benchmarking groups and local and national performance indicators. Again, the conclusions are discussed in later sections.

2.3　Consult

Consultation is an integral part of the daily running of these services. All service units had in place many opportunities for customers to give their views on the services. Feedback was well used to help improve services as was evidenced by the Chartermarks held and renewed.

For the purpose of the review additional consultation was undertaken including:

♦ MORI Citizens Panel Survey.

♦ MORI/Consultation Team focus groups for non-users and a BME group.

♦ Members consultation

♦ Consultation with all businesses receiving letters from the services during May 2003 and those attending business forums and local business partnership meetings.

♦ Partners consultation via email sent out to partners with designated contact details.

♦ Staff consultation and challenge days.

2.4　Compete

There is no developed market for the majority of the regulatory or enforcement functions undertaken by these services. Indeed, until recently it was not lawfully possible for a contractor to exercise many of the decision making functions involved. Nevertheless, the services make good use of consultants and contractors where it is possible and advantageous to do so.

The review examined the scope for making better use of support services including the One Stop Shops and their Contact Centre, legal services and IT support.

The review also examined the scope for economies of scale or greater effectiveness through sharing certain functions rather than duplicating them in different units.

3. CONCLUSIONS

3.1 Overview

The regulatory services that have been the subject of this review have grown individually strong in a managerial environment of clear and effective delegation to unit heads in respect of both their professional and managerial responsibilities. This delegation has been in the context of an organisational culture with strong expectations of innovation, continuous improvement and customer focus.

As a result, the majority of the services provided deliver good and improving outcomes for customers with high levels of customer satisfaction (evidenced by the Chartermarks held and renewed by all the service units and the levels of customer satisfaction shown in the regular surveys).

They do so within a strong framework of service planning and performance management that ensures that objectives are clear and related to strategic priorities; and that relevant performance indicators, challenging but achievable targets and robust monitoring and reporting systems lead to well focused services.

Performance against these challenging targets is generally good. Where targets are not being achieved, recruitment and retention difficulties for professional staff are usually the cause. These difficulties are common across London.

Where accurate comparisons can be made, the costs at which these services are provided are generally below average for the Audit Commission Family Group. Comparison with our three "excellent" neighbours shows that our costs per head of population were less than half the costs they incur.

Review of Audit Commission Inspection Reports on other authorities' regulatory services identified a wide range of good practice. Almost all the initiatives identified are already in place in Brent. In addition, the regulatory services' use of IT and their use of external accreditation as a driver for improvement are good practice strengths. As an example, the recent FSA Audit of our Food Safety Service identified several strengths and no key areas for improvement.

Recognising these strengths, the review has considered carefully where the greatest opportunities for further improvements to service outcomes can be found. The review has concluded that a further step change towards achieving excellence will more readily be found by considering the regulatory services, and their relationships with different customer groups, as a whole rather than as five service units or a greater number of individual services. As individual management units the services have been providing excellent services and practical service improvement for many years. The review has identified a number of practical steps to move the services on and improve outcomes for customers.

3.2 Structure of Conclusions and Recommendations

The evidence for the conclusions and recommendations has been drawn from the wide range of sources discussed earlier. The conclusions and recommendations are organised here around criteria from the EFQM Excellence Model to give a structured framework within which to consider the issues and opportunities.

3.3 Leadership, policy & strategy

3.3.1 Strategic goals and service planning

The services each have Service Operational Plans (SOPs) which relate clearly to the Environment Service Development Plan (SDP). This, in turn relates to the Council's four year Corporate Strategy. These links ensure that strategic goals are delivered. The processes for service planning and development can lead to good common understanding of direction and objectives within units. There is evidence that service planning is now relating better to cross cutting themes and initiatives.

3.3.2 Shared vision and values

The services have shared values which include a commitment to continuous improvement and service excellence, focus on the needs of customers and businesses and a common goal of protecting the community and the environment. These shared vision and values have not been clearly articulated for the services as a managerial group. Doing so will provide a common focus for the services and will further strengthen service planning through the SDP.

3.3.3 Leadership

Leadership within the units is recognised to be innovative and creative with a strong feeling of ownership and empowerment amongst staff. This supports the continuous improvement culture and has created strong and well motivated teams, loyal to their units. Building in the statement of common purpose and values should strengthen collective leadership and further support cross cutting working without compromising the strength of leadership within the service units.

3.3.4 Balance in enforcement

All the services are party to the Council's adoption of the Enforcement Concordat and all have effective, published enforcement policies which follow the principles of the Concordat. The Concordat embeds principles of fairness, openness and proportionality into the Council's enforcement practice which means that an appropriate balance between education, advice, support and enforcement is used to ensure compliance with the law. The review and panel have identified that a strategic enforcement plan, included in the SDP and, as appropriate, the SOPs will help ensure consistency and assist with targeting action, cross service co-ordination and monitoring.

3.3.5 Capacity to manage change

The review has evaluated options to reorganise these five service units to reflect customer groups, proactive and reactive problem solving and the nature of business processes. It has concluded that the key changes needed relate to people and their working relationships across service units rather than an immediate need for organisational change. The services have sufficient management capacity to manage the changes required from this review but implementation needs to be managed across the service units rather than by each service head individually. The newly established Regulatory Services Management Group (RSMG) will provide a natural vehicle for this.

Small scale options for achieving improvement by, for example, sharing some service development functions or call handling approaches will continue to be evaluated.

3.4 People

3.4.1 Staff satisfaction and motivation

The annual Environment staff survey, conducted and analysed by external contractors has been benchmarked by those contractors against the results of similar surveys conducted elsewhere in the public sector and, separately, against other organisations holding IIP. In common with other services in Environment each of these units scored above the average for the public sector and above the average for IIP organisations.

The detail of the survey shows that the highly skilled, well trained and professional workforce in these services is well motivated, loyal and committed; appreciative of the levels of staff development and training provided; and show high levels of job satisfaction believing that they are empowered and trusted to get on with the job.

The directorate has the lowest sickness record in the council. Staff surveys appear to show a common culture, and shared values. These values need to be communicated and promoted back to staff. The directorate is developing a communications strategy which supports internal promotion of the shared values.

3.4.2 Recruitment and retention issues

In common with other parts of Environment, staff in all these professional areas express concerns over workloads linked to problems over recruitment and retention. The higher living costs of London significantly affect the number of qualified and experienced officers willing to work in the capital, resulting in councils chasing a decreasing number of suitable staff. Unfilled vacancies put additional pressure on staff in post. Where positions are filled with temporary or agency staff there is a decrease in detailed local knowledge as staff change. Customers in focus groups commented on the turn over of staff and their occasional frustration at having to explain the 'background' of their case to different staff. Members, managers and staff see that recruitment and retention is a problem causing stresses and lack of capacity in services to deliver

Exit interviews happen regularly, and confirm that reasons for staff leaving are generally due to changing personal circumstances, career development, quality of life outside London, and pay progression that would not be possible within the borough.

Most of the services can now offer market supplements for hard to recruit posts. The process of agreeing the application of these supplements was difficult, with extended discussion between Corporate Human Resources and Environmental Services. Recent changes in Corporate HR are likely to provide more options for a flexible but consistent cross council approach. It is clear that the council will need more flexible tactics to meet employee needs, building packages that are attractive to potential employees.

Graduate recruitment schemes are being developed as is a head hunting scheme overseas (New Zealand). In house training schemes aim to develop existing staff to meet projected needs. Ten trainees are in place on the Path Trainee Scheme, and an additional management development programme is in place.

The review concluded that Corporate and Environment based human resource officers need to develop and agree a definitive recruitment and retention strategy, and take action. The strategy needs to be based on what the services believe they need to be

achieving in 5 years time, taking action to ensure staff with relevant skills are available. Options on partnership approaches with others, including private enterprise, need to be investigated further.

3.4.3 Equity issues

Staff expressed some concerns over equity linked to issues around London Weighting, hours of work, historic terms and conditions and the implementation of single status. In addition there is some disquiet over the fairness of the recently implemented market supplements. These issues should be addressed through the implementation of single status although there will be a tension in the removal of some existing allowances not to undermine remuneration and worsen recruitment and retention problems.

3.4.4 Communication, awareness and cross unit working

Staff feed into strategies and plans through assessments from the previous year. Staff representatives also feed into the SOPs through ISO14001, Chartermark, EFQM and IIP. Staff surveys highlight shared issues which are then resolved by staff representatives. Cross cutting groups of officers develop elements of the SDP.

Recent successful cross unit working has been based around area initiatives, such as abandoned cars, Wembley Market, conservation areas and environmental clean ups. Units are increasingly working with other agencies and staff members have welcomed this approach. This has built positive relationships between officers in different units and other external agencies. However, the challenge of committing individual services budgets to joint initiatives could remain problematic. Although there was no 'silo' approach or professional protectionism identifiable between units, there are some hard realities about the efficient use of resources, which could affect existing structures.

There is a need to identify more systematically service delivery issues which would benefit from a cross service approach. Regular day to day cross service working will result in efficiencies and customer service improvements. Whilst senior staff can identify joint strategic and area priorities collectively, it is crucial that front line officers are able to identify issues which require a joint approach. These then need an agreed plan of action and system to identify who 'owns' or 'leads' the response from the customers view point. Inevitably, a priority for one unit will not necessarily be a priority for another.

Regular meetings between team leaders and other key staff from the different units are being progressed, as are wider networking staff events. Initial staff networking lunches have been well received and appear to have the ability to build relationships between units further. A development programme for staff has been initiated, drawing officers from across Environmental Services together. These initiatives are recognised by staff as related to real service needs.

Continuing staff commitment and involvement in change processes and their working practices is a key to continuing success. The potential for better joint communication needs to be realised by re-organising staff networks and inter-group meetings to better serve communication across the different units. The use of staff secondment to develop awareness of other services will be considered. These forums should be used to communicate any proposed changes to staff and gaining their input as to the best way to implement any changes.

3.4.5 Maximising productivity of scarce professional staff

Service units have introduced alternative methods of training staff to take on professional tasks. The scope for extending the ability of non professional staff to resolve customer problems without seeking professional advice must be maximised through the use of effective ICT and training.

The potential for changes in working practices such as home based working, remote and mobile access to IT systems, hot desking and so on is being investigated and in some cases is already being implemented.

3.5 Partnerships and resources

3.5.1 Internal partnership working

There is recent improved practice in partnership working with bilateral meetings between pairs of services established to ensure more effective joint prioritisation and coordination. The RSMG has given opportunities for greater cross working by providing a forum for identification and resolution of problems that require input from more than service. Joint developers and agents forums between Planning and Building Control are established.

There is an Envirocrime coordinating group operating across Environment and growth in the 2004-05 financial year has allowed the establishment of a proactive envirocrime enforcement team which will work on identified problems in specific geographic areas including town centres with warden services. This team is located in Environmental Health but will use powers presently restricted to Planning, Building Control and StreetCare to tackle problems on primarily on private land. There is also growth for proactive work with communities on alley gating.

All the options for cross unit collaboration have not yet been pursued. These include Officers from Health Safety & Licensing and Food Safety sharing some information provisions to customers on visits, as many officers have joint understanding and knowledge; and an area specific approach. Allowing officers to develop a deeper understanding of each area, and a related team of other officers. It is not proposed that the area approach should lead to area based offices.

3.5.2 External partnership working

The Trading Standards Consortium with Harrow provides good value for money through the sharing of fixed costs and offers consistency to businesses over a wider area. This Consortium approach is unique in London and appears very effective. It has an excellent reputation professionally and receives frequent visits from other local authorities and from visitors recommended to visit by national government. The arrangement is popular with Members in both Boroughs. Some of the benefits such as economies of scale might be might be obtainable by sharing overheads and other resources with other regulators. Analysis of this option would need careful examination and would raise accommodation and IT issues that would take considerable time to resolve. If major organisational changes are evaluated at some point in the future these options ought to be included.

Regulatory services have begun to use utilise volunteers and community groups to help deliver services particularly in relation to envirocrime.

The range of partners linked to the regulatory services is wide but the arrangements for working with them are ad hoc, and often rely on personal relationships rather than formalised arrangements. They work best at present when tackling a specific problem or location rather than continuous work. Partner relationships need to prioritised and made more formal to ensure that the most effort is given to partnerships that are most critical to the services with joint procedures for communication and working.

3.5.3 Information systems and information management

There are many specific issues around information systems which are properly considered under the "Processes" heading. There are however some more general issues about the capacity to develop the use of ICT and about information management and sharing which are resource issues and best considered here.

Use of ICT within the services have been relatively sophisticated, with planning information and the property database being highly successful. However there have been considerable problems with new and developing ICT projects. The services aspire to use new IT as solutions for a range of issues to assist effective and economic working practices. This includes both information sharing and remote access for officers working in the field. The requirements of the services are presently outstripping the corporate capacity to support IT developments. This situation may change as the Information Technology Unit (ITU) have recently employed more staff with the relevant skills although means will have to be put in place to ensure that the staff can be targeted at the regulatory services priorities.

Present corporate and directorate funding arrangements for IT do not cover the range of development requested. ITU will soon be renegotiating the Service Level Agreement (SLA) with Environmental Services. This process must be used as an opportunity to fully map out what will be provided by ITU, by when and how much it will cost. This SLA should be monitored and reviewed regularly and treated as any other contract would be treated. .

Presently, the slow pace of IT developments is causing problems for regulatory services staff who feel frustrated and incapable of bringing about desirable improvements that have a direct improvement implication for their services. Environmental Services' representatives do attend ICT Development Group and the customer services and e-government steering groups, run by ITU.

The Council has purchased the Customer Relationship Manager (CRM) software. This purchase was initially for the use of customer data in one stop shops. The system can be shared and spread to other areas, and the intention is that in the fullness of time it will be. However the first system to link to CRM will be the Corporate Complaints System. This is due to go operational in 2004. It is likely that the next priorities will be housing benefits and council tax.

Many of the services under review are using Acolaid. Therefore there are already options for sharing information resources across the units, prior to investigating links to CRM and or other information systems that may be developed. However these

packages are based on property information rather than around an individual customer or user.

The review identified a lack of common understanding amongst officers about the extent to which information relating to regulatory and enforcement functions can lawfully be shared. This is a potential obstacle to providing the joined-up services to business which the government is encouraging and needs to be resolved.

Benefits in shared customer information could radically improve service delivery, but does require a sophisticated understanding and shared approach to data protection across the council, and significant resources. In addition, the availability of off site access to information has been slow. As a result, officers who regularly work across the borough in less office bound posts waste time in making visits to access and enter information.

3.5.4 Legal services

Legal support is provided to the regulatory services by the in-house corporate legal team. The review has identified some areas of work where the legal support provided is recognised to add considerable value. An example is the legal presence at planning committees and the consequent ready availability of advice which reduces some of the risks inherent in this decision making process. A further example is the highly regarded support provided to Health, Safety and Licensing in their preparations for implementation of the Licensing Act 2003.

In other areas potential improvements have been identified in the way in which the services use legal support. An example is the low number of prosecutions undertaken within Environmental Health where the lack of recent experience of using the in-house service has led to a lack of confidence over process and potential costs. A concern during the review period was the low level of detail supporting invoices from Legal Services which made management of costs more difficult.

The concern over invoices has been resolved and the Borough Solicitor and management within Environmental Services are concerned to ensure that further opportunities for improvement are realised. Areas being examined are the possibility of reducing legal costs if the volume of prosecutions increases to a more appropriate level, and the scope for improving systems and processes through legal involvement in their development and the possibility, where systems and processes are robust, for regulatory staff to undertake prosecutions themselves as Trading Standards officers already do.

3.5.5 Value for money

Comparisons based on BVPIs and CIPFA statistics show that the services operate efficiently, delivering good results for costs below the average for the audit family. However, the cost comparisons are rough and ready because of the significant organisational differences between authorities and the inexactness of the ways that authorities apply "best Value Accounting" for overhead costs. It has not been possible to compare unit costs in a meaningful way.

Resources used are very much less than those spent by our neighbouring "excellent" authorities who spend between 2.5 and 3.5 times per capita the amount spent in Brent.

Further work may be needed to assess what extra value our high spending neighbours are getting from their level of expenditure. It will be necessary to take a more detailed look at these authorities if their cooperation can be secured.

The panel was concerned that the majority of the performance indicators in use were process or at best output indicators. Work to identify and measure outcomes will be important. not enough had been done to identify and benchmark unit costs.

The review did not address the issue of efficiency savings. As the report was being completed in October 2003, a request was made to identify a saving of 2%. It was thought that saving of up to the value of £120,000 might be identified through economies of scale in call handling and service development functions but this proposition was not tested in detail before the report was completed.

Using the 2003/4 budget 2% of gross expenditure minus grants gives a figure of £173,000. Savings options are presently being identified as part of the normal budget processes and identified savings should go forward as part of the service areas proposals to meet the savings targets inherent in the cash limits.

3.6   Processes

3.6.1 Current and future use of ICT

The services have historically made good use of IT to support their business processes with shared main business systems across four .of the units underpinned by an effective property gazetteer. They have responded well to the e-government agenda with relevant, up-to-date web site information, electronic forms and some transactional areas of the internet. There is a clear plan for compliance with the formal e-government requirements.

There is good practice in places in the use of mini call centres and specialist support staff to free up the time of professional staff but, now the approach is proven, there is considerable scope for building on this success to improve the offer to specific customer groups.

The use of Expert systems with Case Based Reasoning for decision support in call centres appears to offer scope for extending the ability of call centres and non-professional staff to meet customers needs more cost effectively. It will be important to evaluate the full scope for improvements in this area.

A large number of desired IT improvements has been identified by the review and prioritised to some extent. These are being built into a fully prioritised programme of improvements so that detailed implementation dates can be agreed with ITU. As discussed above, a significant constraint and risk factor on improving performance through improving processes lies in the lack of capacity to deliver IT projects.

3.6.2 Working practices

The services have been innovative in terms of working patterns and arrangements to support the different needs of customers and drive for efficiency. Home and remote working has been deployed in some units but is constrained from making the contribution it could by limitations of IT.

A programme of further innovations to improve productivity has been identified in some units and is now being implemented.

Innovative practice in Trading Standards in conducting their own prosecutions without legal support has been successful, motivates staff, and is cost effective. The extent to which other services can use this model will need to be reviewed.

3.6.3   Joint working:

Staff working in the best value teams acknowledged the need for a more formalised approach to internal working. The scope for more cross service working/meetings has been discussed above. Clear work flow processes and prioritisation criteria for dealing with joint issues is a fundamental part of joint working. The current potential for dealing with joint issues needs to be properly mapped and processes for work flow and prioritisation should be devised. The RSMG should commission this work.

Two aspects of Westminster's approach to joint working impressed the review. A 24 hour/7 day operations centre would significantly improve ability to respond to customer service requests and to co-ordinate action in response. Following the work of this review such a centre has been funded and will begin to be operational in June 2004.

Westminster also operate a joint tasking forum. This is a regular meeting chaired by an Assistant Director and attended by operational managers from across the Council and outside agencies. Problems can be brought to the forum where help is needed from colleagues and partners to resolve the issue and decisions are usually made there and then as to the approach and whose resources can best be used to reach a solution. An evaluation will be made of the scope for and value of such a forum in Brent.

Two units have designated staff in call centres. The call centres are small. One usually operates with 3 staff, with an Automatic Call Distribution system. This allows it to take an average of 51 calls per hour. Given the number of calls received by Regulatory Services the feasibility of units pooling resources and set up a joint working call centre should be assessed.

The One Stop Shops take a variety of enquiries for which staff have been trained. Such a call centre could be managed by the OSS or a separate call centre and service point specifically for Regulatory Services could be established. The cost implications and effectiveness of both alternatives will require further investigation,

3.7   Stakeholders and customers

3.7.1 Customers

Individual units produce customer information in the form of leaflets, advertising, news editorial customer charters and web based information. Service contact details are listed in the Yellow Pages and Thompson directories. Community newsletters are also utilised, and in some cases the development of newsletters was supported by service units to provide the means to disseminate information to the public. However there are few cases when service literature or distribution is shared.

Officers regularly attend and are one of the main items on area consultation forums, and officers from some of the services visit schools and other community based groups to share information with the public.

Information on customer standards and the results of customer surveys are published on the web. The services show a 'frequently asked questions' section on the web, and one stop shop staff have training on key questions which are likely to be repeatedly asked.

As well as the Chartermarks held by all units for excellence in customer service, Trading Standards hold a Community Legal Service Quality Mark guaranteeing the standard of the advice offered and linking into the wider advice network overseen by our Community Legal Service Partnership. They also have DTI funding for a Consumer Support Network.

Customer complaints feed into service operational plan processes, so that problems identified earlier are used to improve services annually. Customer surveys, including the annual Environment wide customer survey and continuous consultation in a variety of forms are used to inform service planning. However, in many cases response rates are low and little analysis is undertaken.

A consistent theme is that almost every survey for every unit requested more communication and information from the units.   Suggestions were centred on –

♦ communication about what the service has to offer.

♦ communication about the progress of individual cases and requests for service.

♦ communication with other units to ensure continuity of service and advice given.

Customers also want quicker responses to service requests and faster completion of cases. Legal processes do not always allow control of progress, so it will be necessary to communicate better with customers about what is to be expected, keep them informed about time scales to expect, and keep them informed about progress on a regular basis.

Request for easier access to services throughout the day (and night) have a number of potential solutions. Varying staff hours and extending opening times is an option. The Wednesday evening surgery run by Planning and Building Control is a simple example. Call centres and the web site, if given enough functionality, will meet some of the need. Market research will be needed to assess where take up of extended services would be high enough to justify the cost.

3.7.2 Information on BME customers

The services are generally responsive to a wide range of needs, being aware and sensitive to the effect of new legislation on Brent's diverse population. This has resulted in additional visits and information being circulated to ensure that new legislation does not adversely affect certain groups of people or businesses.

Translation is offered on all information, and web sites are linked to translation sites. Translated information is taken on inspection and site visits, usually when an issue has been highlighted or special circumstance noted. Requests for translation are infrequent. Generic nationally printed information leaflets in key languages are also used.

At present the information gathered shows that BME customers are possibly more dissatisfied with the services offered. A MORI Survey (2003) showed a balanced

response from BME and other groups; however information from customer complaints appears to show a higher level of dissatisfaction from BME groups.

Where possible information should collect details of ethnic background, to ensure that all individuals receive satisfactory services, and any areas of inequality are addressed. Comparison with satisfaction information by other council services should be made, to see if general levels of dissatisfaction are the same with these groups, and if the level of dissatisfaction is about perception, rather than one based on actual service supply.

The scope for involving community, voluntary and faith groups should be investigated as a means to deliver services in a more focused way to meet the needs of the customer.

3.7.3 Businesses

A large proportion of the interactions that the regulatory services have with customers are with business customers. Broadly, these customers fall into two groups with slightly different needs. Trading businesses will predominantly be subject to regulation of their trading and operational activities through Health & Safety, Food Safety, Trading Standards and, perhaps Licensing. Developers will interact with Planning, Building Control and again, perhaps, Licensing.

Businesses felt that in general officers needed a better understanding of the business they were dealing with and the constraints under which businesses have to operate. Although specific officers were praised for their excellent understanding.

The general feeling of businesses towards the Regulatory Services is that they 'are out to get you' and businesses acknowledge being very wary of them. Businesses want more support from the services rather than regulation. This includes support for start ups, training, self assessment, website and forums.

All surveys and consultation exercises showed a huge need for being kept up to date and given more information on the law and the regulations under which they have to operate, including clearer information on the Council's powers and duties. A comprehensive business data base needs to be built so that bulletins can be emailed out and businesses can opt in or out of specific information bulletins. Regulatory Services should invest in a newsletter service for our businesses providing news of forthcoming events and developments together with timely seasonal advice on cyclical issues and, of course, enforcement successes

All surveys and consultation exercised requested easier access to information and contact of officers for advice and support. This included information on service and charges. Businesses also wanted a faster rate of follow up responses, as many felt their livelihood depended on this. Where the legislative framework makes faster response time difficult and it will be necessary to better manage expectations of businesses, through explanations and communication, as well as designing systems that better meet the business need. This will allow businesses to plan around these timescales.

Regulatory Services should invest in developing an information pack for new businesses in Brent that provides contacts and links to all the latest tools available to assist new and prospective market entrants. This could be linked to the Council Tax – Business Rates registration process.

There are already two designated members of staff focused on the needs of trading businesses in the regulatory services (one in TS and one in EH). Given that businesses are a major customer and that the legislation under which they must function is complex, it is proposed that units work more closely in this area to set up a joint working team of business liaison staff.

Development teams have been effectively deployed to improve the liaison of major developers (eg Wembley) with the regulatory units. The needs of developers are different from those of trading businesses and this co-ordinated approach to their needs can be extended to mutual advantage. A policy should be developed to identify which projects will benefit from a formal development team approach

Regulatory Services should develop a business focussed portal on its internet site and could use the approach taken by Norfolk County Council to model this.

The Trading Standards government accredited Local Business Partnerships for both large and small businesses have been very successful and are engaging other regulators. These partnerships could be diversified to sponsor develop and service new and existing business sector forums.

3.7.4 Members

The lead member is involved in service planning, and ultimately approves all SOPs. Members report a positive relationship with the services, and share a good understanding of the roles of the services and issues for the borough.

Formal relationships with Members in the context of the Planning and Licensing Committees are good, with high levels of training and effective compliance with the Codes of Conduct.

Councillors generally felt that they were not being used by the services over issues that had a direct effect on their wards. It was suggested that named councillors could be consulted on specific issues and give their advice on how their constituents were likely to react to situations, and give details about their ward that would impact on any service delivery. The general feeling was to want to help the services deliver a better service and to be consulted are a useful resource.

4. IMPROVEMENT PLANS

The key areas for improvement have been identified and are set out in the plans set out in Appendix 1. Provisional plans were first drawn up as the draft review was completed in October 2003 and some of the priority issues have already been addressed. All actions including completed ones are included to ensure that a holistic view is taken of progress through the review.

REGULATORY SERVICES
BEST VALUE IMPROVEMENT PLAN
PROGRESS TO JULY 2004

INTRODUCTION

This note summarises progress with the Improvement Plan flowing from the Regulatory Services Best Value Review up to the end of July 2004.

Progress

Organisational arrangements are in place for implementation of the Improvement Plan:

♦ The Regulatory Services Management Group (RSMG) has been established and meets to co-ordinate implementation. It next meets in August and then September to review progress with the Working Groups' programmes and take its own workload forward

♦ A Customer Working Group has been established and has met to action the priority projects relating to improved customer service identified by the RSMG

♦ A Business Working Group has been established and has met to action the priority projects relating to improved services to business identified by the RSMG

Progress with the individual actions identified is summarised in the table that follows:

Overall, actions which are the sole responsibility of the Regulatory Services Management Group have been delayed by an average of one month by the need to focus management resource on the Whole Service Inspection of the Planning Service in May and June 2004. It is anticipated that this ground will be made up by November 2004.

1. Shared Framework

Improvement Area	Approach	Priority	Respon-sibility	Timing	Progress July 04
1.1 Vision and Values	Set out a statement of the shared vision and values for the services to promote common identity and culture Communicate the vision and values through network lunches, newsletters, induction etc	High	RSMG	Jan 04 Ongoing	Vision and values developed, consulted on and agreed. Communication begun via network lunches
1.2 Operational Policy	Develop shared operational policies to promote a common approach, consistency and joined-up working				
Enforcement Policy	A statement of our common approach to the enforcement role	High	RSC	May 04	Audit of concordat in PS & BC complete. Draft enforcement policy complete.
Customer Care Policy	A statement of our common approach to serving our customers	High	CWG	June 04	In CWG work programme
Business Policy	A statement of our 'offer to business' as regulators	High	BWG	June 04	In BWG work programme
1.3 Shared Objectives	Develop objectives and performance measures relating to the common purpose of the services to inform next service plans	Medium	RSMG	Sept 04	

Improvement Area	Approach	Priority	Respon-sibility	Timing	Progress July 04
1.4 Customer Satisfaction	Develop a common strategy and behaviours across the services for improving customer satisfaction levels, including improving feedback to customers about progress of casework and expectations	High	CWG	Mar-July 04	In CWG work programme. MORI focus groups in Planning to understand drivers of satisfaction
	Implement the strategy across the services	High	RSMG	Sept 04	
1.5 People Policies	Tackle perceptions of inequity and promote common culture through:				Work in progress; allowances classified and prioritised for action
	• review of use of allowances/rewards to ensure fair and consistent application	High	Corp HR	May-July 04	
	• ensuring services are using common HR policies and standards	Medium	Env HR	July-Oct 04	
	• review of training and development practice to ensure fairness and consistency	Medium	Env HR/ RSMG	July-Oct 04	
1.6 Organisational Structure	Assess the scope for and benefit from joint service development functions and implement as appropriate	High	RSMG	Sept 04	
	Review progress in achieving joined-up outcomes through process and relationship improvements and consider need and options for organisational change to provide improved service to customers and value for money.	Medium	AD(P&R)/ RSMG	Nov-Dec 04	
	Implement any change found necessary	Medium	AD(P&R)	Jan 05	
1.7 Member Involvement	Develop and implement a plan for better engagement of and involvement with elected members in the services which presently have little involvement	Medium	RSMG	Aug-Sept 04	

Improvement Area	Approach	Priority	Respon-sibility	Timing	Progress July 04
1.9 Partnerships	Maximise potential for using partnerships in the delivery and improvement of service • review and prioritise partnerships • assess value of 'Partnership Conference'	Low	RSMG	Sept 04 Nov 04	
1.10 Voluntary and Community Groups	Better engage Voluntary and Community groups in service delivery and improvement extend area based envirocrime initiatives develop and implement strategy for working with community and faith based groups to involve 'hard to reach' groups	High Medium	Env Coord CWG	April 04 Sept 04	Three alleygating initiatives Mar/June; further programme including "Soul in the City" July/August

2. Cross-service Processes and Systems

2a - Information Systems

Improvement Area	Approach	Priority	Responsibility	Timing	Progress July 04
2.1 Information Management	Assess need for and benefits of information sharing amongst the services and other relevant data holders	High	HI&P/RSMG	July-Sep 04	Prototype intranet framework developed for Reg Servs information sharing
	Review data protection issues including e around the CRM system and develop appropriate protocols for information sharing	High	HI&P/DPM	Sep 04	In discussion with Data Protection Manager
	Implement systems and protocols	High	RSMG	Sep 04 on	GIS links to Acolaid; links to Flair and NonStopGov under development
2.2. Business Databases	Integrate databases of information on Businesses currently held within Regulatory (and other) Units to better inform decision-making and coordinate action	High	BWG/HI&P	May-Sep 04	Draft structure for database currently subject to consultation

2b. Customer-facing Systems

Improvement Area	Approach	Priority	Responsibility	Timing	Progress July 04
2.3 Telephone call handling	Implement call handling specialist(s) in Planning	High	Dir Planning	Jun-Jul 04	JDs and PSs prepared ready for recruitment in Sept
	Assess existing decision support systems and assess other expert system/case based reasoning approaches	Medium	HI&P	Aug-Oct 04	Ilika installed; evaluation from users awaited
	Assess benefits of EH call centre transfer to One Stop Shop Contact Centre	High	Acting Dir EH	Jul 04	New IT system in place and scope for transfer being evaluated
	Review other call handling needs	Medium	CWG	Sep 04	
2.4 One Stop Shop for Business	Develop and implement a 'One Stop Shop' approach for providing advice and information to businesses on all regulatory issues	High	BWG	May-July 04	In BWG programme
	Review and update business pages on website and plan for a "business portal"	High	BWG/ HI&P	April 04	Initial improvements made; more work to be programmed
	Document scheme and criteria for 'development team' approach for smaller schemes	High	Dir Planning/ Dir BC	April-May 04	Proposal drafted to be considered at next RSMG
	Develop packages of material for business start ups	Medium	BWG	Sept-Oct 04	
	Develop and publish business newsletters	Medium	BWG	Sept 04	

Improvement Area	Approach	Priority	Responsibility	Timing	Progress July 04
2.5 '24/7' Control Centre	Ensure that the 24/7 Control Centre being established following this review meets the needs of regulatory services enabling an effective response to referrals, joint tasking with partners and better personal safety	High	Acting Dir EH	April-Jul 04	Control Centre on track for July start. RSMG represented on Steering Group
2.6 Joint Tasking	Assess the added value from a Joint Tasking Forum to improve response to and outcomes from cross-service issues compared with existing co-ordination arrangements	Medium	RSMG	Oct 04	
2.7 Developers and Agents Forums	Expand the existing forums, including new systems of communication with these groups Assess need for Licensees Forum	Medium Medium	Dir Planning/ Dir BC Dir HS&L	Sept 04 Sept 04	
2.8 Business Partnership Groups	Assess the scope for and value of extending or duplicating the existing BPGs to better meet customer needs in respect of other regulatory services	Low	BWG	Oct -04	

2c. People Systems

Improvement Area	Approach	Priority	Responsibility	Timing	Progress July 04
2.9 Recruitment and Retention	Assess what additional measures are required to address the recruitment difficulties affecting the services in a strategic and effective way. Put measures in place.	High	RSMG/ EnvHR	Mar-July 04	Equity share and flexible packages being researched and evaluated

Improvement Area	Approach	Priority	Responsibility	Timing	Progress July 04
2.10 Graduate Recruitment Scheme	Address the recruitment difficulties affecting the services through an effective graduate recruitment scheme with attached professional training	High	AD(P&R) EnvHR	April-July 04	Scheme in draft to be finalised for Sept
2.11 Managing Agency Staff	Improve use of agency staff by effective participation in and use of corporate tendering exercise and more effective management where permanent appointments are difficult or inappropriate	Medium	AD(P&R) RSMG	Jan-Oct 04	Corporate procurement exercise subject to slippage but full participation to present
2.12 Secondment scheme	Develop an inter-service secondment scheme to improve awareness of other services and promote co-ordinated action	Low	RSMG	Oct 04	

3. Collective Performance issues

Improvement Area	Approach	Priority	Responsibility	Timing	Progress May 04
3.1 Target Setting	Review all indicators and measures of performance to ensure that they are increasingly outcome-based and that targets are challenging but achievable	High	SUDs/ P&IM	Mar 04 repeat Sept 04	March review completed
3.2. Legal Support	Review the respective roles and expectations of the services and the Legal Service to ensure that the legal support received by the services is adequate, appropriate, cost effective and fully meets their needs and those of the Council corporately	Medium	AD(P&R)/ Borough Solicitor	July 04	AD(P&R) and Borough Solicitor have met to establish principles for more effective use of legal support.

Improvement Area	Approach	Priority	Responsibility	Timing	Progress May 04
3.3 IT Support	Agree a prioritised programme of IT developments to support the development of the regulatory services	High	HI&P	Mar-Jun 04	Priority programme of IT developments agreed and being progressed
	Review the required level and quality of ongoing IT Support and system development to ensure the programme is delivered	High	HI&P/ITU	July 04	Preliminary review of needs complete and draft SLA under consideration
	Conclude a new and appropriate SLA or consider other arrangements	Medium	RSMG/ HI&P/ITU	Sept 04	
3.4 Action on Equalities	Prepare a programme of work to ensure that equalities in the delivery of regulation and enforcement services are addressed in a coordinated way	High	RSMG/ Env HR	June 04	Priorities in Race Equality Scheme – other issues addressed in SOPs
3.5 Business efficiency	Examine the scope for extending the use of non-professional staff with decision support and training to free professional staff time	Medium	RSMG	Sept 04	
	Develop a portfolio of alternative working methods to improve efficiency and criteria for their application including piloting them	High	RSMG	July-Dec 04	

4. Review

Improvement Area	Approach	Priority	Responsibility	Timing	Progress May 04
4.1 Review Process	Develop & document a robust review process to ensure the development and improvement of the Regulatory Services through and following completion of the Improvement Plan	High	RSMG /PIM	June 04	No progress to present; complete in Sept 04

Improvement Area	Approach	Priority	Responsibility	Timing	Progress May 04
4.2 Alternative Models for Service Delivery	Maintain an ongoing process for investigating alternative models for service delivery to assess their value for money and transferability to Brent	Low	RSMG	Ongoing	
	Seek opportunities for benchmarking costs, systems and outcomes with neighbouring "excellent" authorities	Low	RSMG	Jan 05	

GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS FOR 'RESPONSIBILITY'

AD (P&R)   Assistant Director (Policy & Regulation)
BWG   Business Working Group
Corporate HR   Corporate Human Resources
CWG   Customer Working Group
Dir BC   Director of Building Control
Dir EH   Director of Environmental Health
Dir HSL   Director of Health, Safety & Licensing
Dir Planning   Director of Planning
DPM   Data Protection Manager
Env Coord   Envirocrime Co-ordinator
Env HR   Environment Human Resources
HI&P   Head of Information & Performance
ITU   Information Technology Unit
P&IM   Performance & Information Manager
RSC   Regulatory Standards Coordinator
RSMG   Regulatory Services Management Group
SUDs   Service Unit Directors