

6th October 2014

MEMBER REPORT TO THE LB SOUTHWARK

HOUSING & COMMUNITY SAFETY SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE

VISIT TO SOUTHWARK'S NOISE & NUISANCE TEAM

- 1.0 All local authorities have a statutory duty placed on them by the Environmental Protection Act 1990 to provide a noise service that investigates noise complaints of statutory nuisance, and to serve abatement notices if the officers believe a statutory exists or is likely to exist (this step can be deferred).
- 1.1 On Friday 12th September 2014 I gratefully accepted an invitation from Southwark's Noise and Nuisance team to shadow them on a shift.
- 1.2 The Noise & Nuisance team is a reactive service that responds to complaints of alleged statutory nuisances. It provides an out of hours service which deals with various issues which include: noisy neighbours, dust and smell complaints, machinery noise, construction site noise, burglar alarms, noisy licensed premises and other issues that are set down in the Environmental protection Act 1990.
- 1.3 I reported to the team's Queens Road base at 8pm and met Unit Manager Joanne Stowell and Team Leader Peter Magbadelo.
- 1.4 Peter phoned the Call Centre Tracker and asked them to prioritise us as a team and to give us the next call that came in.
- 2.0 There were two teams of 2 rostered on. Calls had started coming in much earlier and both teams had been out since 6pm. Joanne and Peter had come in to host me on their own time and I am extremely thankful to them for that. So, effectively, there were three teams available on the night.
- 2.1 Being an inner-city borough, Southwark has a much higher noise problem than most parts of the UK. In acknowledgement of this, the service provided is much more comprehensive, although resource restrictions mean that a 24/7 service is not viable.
- 2.2 Ordinarily, the team operate the following service:
 - Monday to Thursday 07:00hrs – 03:00hrs (1 team of 2 officers, last call taken at 02:30hrs)
 - Friday 0700 – 04:30hrs (2 teams of 2, last call taken at 04:00hrs)
 - Saturday 0700 – 04:30hrs (2 teams of 2, last call taken at 04:00hrs)
 - Sunday 0800 – 03:00hrs (1 team of 2 last call taken at 02:30hrs)
- 2.3 Over the summer period 3 teams of 2 people have covered Friday and Saturday night shifts, as the good weather has led to an increase in complaints. However, there is no dedicated budget for this provision, and the costs were covered by a vacant post that has now been filled.
- 2.4 Originally, the noise team was part of Environmental Health & Trading Standards, and all Officers within the team held either a Bsc degree in Environmental Health, or post graduate

diploma in acoustics (professional qualifications). In 2007 the team was then merged with Environmental Enforcement, and the requirement for formal qualifications removed.

- 2.5 In 2010 the Noise and Environmental Enforcement functions were separated again, and a decision was made to reintroduce the requirement for officers in the Noise Team to hold a professional qualification, as their previous removal had been detrimental to the provision of the service. After consultation with Unions, it was decided that the 6 non-qualified officers would be re-graded from a pay 9 to pay 7 on the understanding that management would support officers in achieving the necessary qualifications, and that they would have their higher grade reinstated if and when they were successful. To date 4 of these officers have now qualified and have had their grades reinstated. Joanne holds both the degree in Environmental Health, and the Diploma in Acoustics and Noise Control, Peter and the other Team Leader Martin Talbot hold the diploma in acoustics.
- 2.6 Joanne and Peter gave me a briefing while we awaited our first call. Peter then rang the call centre again only to discover that a call had come in but this hadn't been passed on. This will be discussed later in this report.
- 3.0 We attended two calls during the evening:
- On-street music and general allegedly coming from a studio off the Walworth Road.
 - Complaint about noise allegedly coming from a youth centre in Camberwell.
- 3.1 On both calls I was extremely impressed by the professionalism and empathy that Joanne and Peter exhibited. Somebody having a noise officer arrive on their door-step is naturally going to be on the defensive. On the second call it became obvious that the youth centre was not the source of the noise (it was coming from a church behind the youth centre). We met the centre manager, a mature man, who was concerned that the centre had been accused of producing the noise which could reflect badly on them.
- 3.2 The first call exemplified Joanne and Peter's experience as it involved approaching a large gathering of teenagers on the street. Handily, police officers arriving at the Walworth Police Station were able to provide backup although the youths were completely compliant and were not acting with any malice. The way the team interacted with the youths was very impressive, and the nuisance that was witness was stopped.
- 3.2 Even though a statutory nuisance had not been witnessed on the second visit. Joanne and Peter still visited the youth centre. It used to be that officers only spoke with alleged perpetrators, and only sent warning letters if a statutory nuisance was witnessed, However, following the manifesto commitment on noise, officers now speak to all alleged noise perpetrators (where appropriate) to offer advice, and they also send a noise advisory letter explaining what could happen if a nuisance is witnessed in future.
- 3.2 The manager's concern escalated when he was informed that the centre would receive a noise advisory letter. It took deft handling by Joanne and Peter, and considerable time to reassure the manager that this letter would not be a black mark against the centre. In fact the letter serves a dual purpose – it is a tool to measure un-neighbourly behaviour but also logs where the complaint has come from (this information is confidential and is not given to the alleged perpetrators), to protect against serial complainants. In other words, it forms a defence for the wrongly accused. The manager also asked questions about his sound limiter

device that needed a technical response, Joanne was able to explain in layman's terms the issues behind these devices.

4.0 SUMMARY AND OBSERVATIONS

4.1 In the interests of brevity, I will bullet-point my observations:

- Response times are paramount as residents who log a call have an expectation of a speedy response. The team aim for a 1-hour response and aim to achieve this 75% of the time (as they have dedicated additional resources they currently over achieve on this target). However, the new practice of visiting and writing to all those accused of creating a noise nuisance, even when a nuisance isn't witnessed takes up a lot of time, both when the officers are out on the call and when they are back in the office doing their administration tasks. This may lead to delays on busy nights, and may have the knock on effect of impacting on the team's ability to achieve their current targets as they have not changed to reflect this new practice. The issue that targets have not changed will also impact on the team's ability to manage customer expectations, and often leads to officers staying beyond their rota time to complete their notes and letters.
- A number of other factors are also out of their control when it comes to getting to a customer in an hour, such as: the notorious London traffic, the many road closures, the new roads that do not appear on GPS and the sheer size of the Southwark's territory. At most there are 3 teams covering the whole borough on weekends, (but the budget only covers 2). Sunday to Thursday there is only ever 1 team.
- It is imperative that the call centre expedite in-coming calls. I was concerned to witness a case where a call had not been passed on. It is easy for call centre agents to get distracted with other calls however the call centre need to understand that it is essential noise calls are not delayed.
- To effect an accurate and timely response to a call and to ensure that meaningful data analysis can be done, the call centre needs to ensure that address details are accurate.
- I would have preferred to have gone out with regular officers rather than managers but appreciate that officers may have felt intimidated by having a councillor observing them.
- A benchmarking exercise carried out by Joanne (using statistics compiled by the chartered institute of environmental health) comparing Southwark's noise team performance against others in England and Wales, and what is known as the London sub-set, shows that the team's performance is in the top quartile for responses to noise. The benchmarking also showed that the pressures on the team are considerable and that they receive 22% more rapid response service requests compared to London, and 429% more than England/Wales.
- It was quite clear to me that this is a role for qualified officers who have a natural ability to relate to people and employ strong people skills. Some situations, especially if alcohol is involved, require very careful handling and empathy with the residents who are creating the noise nuisance. Joanne and Peter clearly have these skills, and I'm assured the rest of the team also do, but this criterion must be paramount in any future recruitment. It is not a job for just anybody.

Finally, I would like to thank Joanne and Peter for giving up their own time to take me out. It was an eye-opening experience and I believe that we should be very proud of the good work the Noise and Nuisance Team do in often challenging circumstances.

Cllr Damian O'Brien
Housing and Community Safety Scrutiny Sub-committee