

Item 2: Noise Response Service

Background

1. The Environment & Community Support Scrutiny Sub-Committee on September 21st requested further information about the Noise Service as follows:
 - costs of Noise Team
 - details of performance and comparable with previous years
 - details of any benchmarking work
 - coverage on typical day/evening
 - why target is 45 minutes, and resources required for 30 minutes response time.
2. These issues are addressed in this briefing note.

Introduction

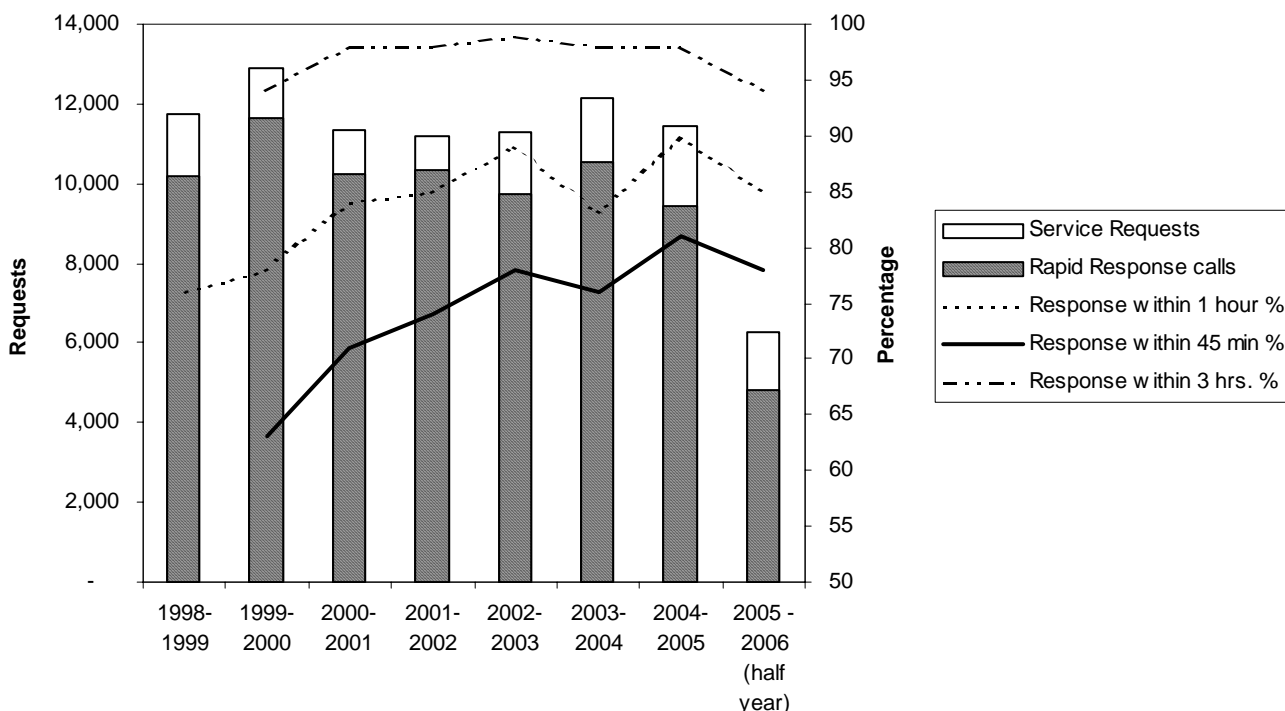
3. The Noise Response service is the reactive arm of the Noise & Air Quality Team, whose additional responsibilities include:
 - regulating polluting industrial and commercial processes
 - regulating the environmental impact of construction and development
 - providing consultation responses & detailed advice to Planning on applications - noise, air pollution and land contamination issues
 - providing expert advice and regulating compliance as 'responsible authority' for ensuring 'prevention of public nuisance' on premises licensing
 - leading implementation of Air Quality Strategy and Improvement Plan, Land Contamination Inspection Strategy and development of Noise Policy.
4. The Council has been operating an out of hours noise response service since 1978 when Environmental Health delivered this on Friday and Saturday nights through to the following morning staffed on a volunteer arrangement.
5. By the mid 90's neighbour noise had become a such significant concern in inner City areas that the Government reacted by tabling the Noise Act 1996 which gave extended powers to adopting authorities. Southwark was one of the few authorities to establish a dedicated Noise Team in 1996.
6. Demand was high from the general public and over 10,000 service requests were made in 1997. The Department responded by moving to a full 24/7 operation in 1998-99. Annual service demand has been around 11,000 enquiries per year.

7. Analysis of noise enquiry data shows that there has been a continuing rise in the percentage of service requests that are made outside of Monday to Friday 09:00 to 17:00 hours, Presently 85% of our calls fall within this category with peaks during the early hours at week-end.
8. Demand fluctuates seasonally, with a higher demand in the summer to winter and is also weather dependent.

Meeting the demand

9. The response service is designed to provide an on location response across the whole of the Borough, to all ongoing noise and environmental nuisance complaints day and night, at any time of the year within the minimum time, and visiting both the customer and the perpetrator. The service is car-based once leaving the office at the Chaplin Centre, and relies on a strong working relationship with the Customer Contact Centre for receipt of calls, priority allocation and monitoring whereabouts.
10. To meet customer expectation we initially (1998/9) set a target of responding to 75% of requests within 1 hour of receipt, this was improved in 2002/3 to 75% within 45 minutes – with an increase by 1% per annum to the present target of 78% for 2005/6. We do not anticipate being able to increase this target with current resources
11. Southwark is one of two local authorities in the UK offering a 24/7 x 365 field service. In benchmarking exercises we have found to be only service offering 45 min response. Westminster have reverted to a 1 hour response.

Noise Demand & Response - Year on Year Comparison



Resources

12. The number of field personnel needed to meet the response target and seasonal demand is set out in the following table. Note for health & safety reasons officers work as a pair, one enforcement officer (Hay 9) with an assistant (Hay 4) in each response team.

	Monday-Saturday DAY	Sunday–Thursday NIGHT	Friday NIGHT	Saturday NIGHT	Sunday DAY
SUMMER (May –Sept)	1 pair	1 pair	2 pairs	3 pairs	2 pairs
WINTER. (Oct – April)	1	1	1	2	1

13. The number of staff needed to maintain shift patterns, to comply with the European working-hours Directive and provide minimum cover within the available budget is:

- 9 x Enforcement Officers working a complex pattern of 9 and 12 hour shifts (72 hour fortnight)
- 7 x Assistant Noise Officers working 12 hour shifts (72 hour fortnight).

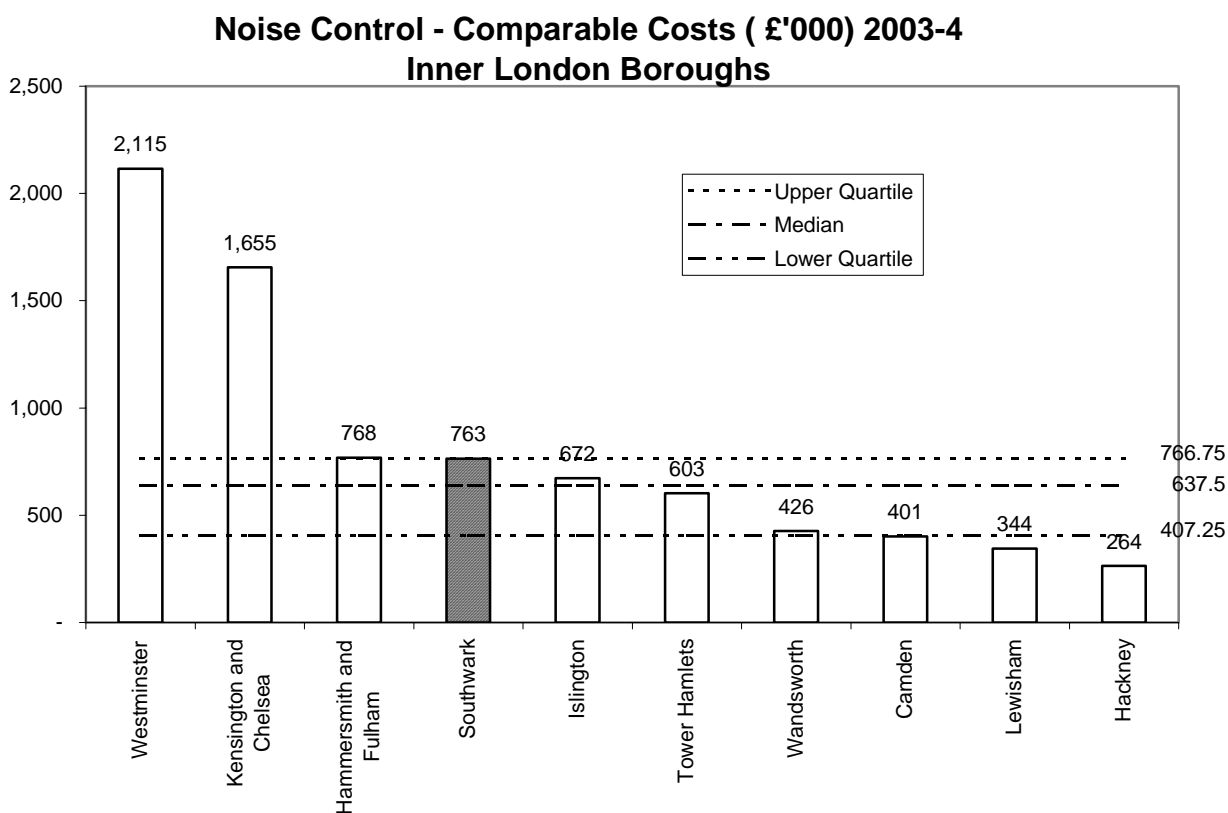
14. Enforcement Officers undertake the whole process through the whole regulatory and enforcement spectrum, from field assessment, gathering and presentation of evidence in the Courts, seizures of equipment, and disconnection of noisy premises and car alarms.

15. There is a national shortage of environmental health practitioners. Resourcing a service of this nature is not easy, since it is unusual on a national level for Environmental Health Professionals to work on a shift basis similar to police or nurses. Recruiting and retaining specific and competent staff resources for such an out of hours operation requires payment at a premium rate.

16. The cost of current operation is £800,000 gross, representing 80% of the Noise & Air Quality Team budget and 75% of staffing 19 FTE's Officers. This does not include the front office costs of receiving calls, which is managed through the Council's Customer Contact Centre.

17. The Team is reliant upon annual income of £200,000 from the Housing Department to meet its budget. This allocation is elected annually from HRA, in response to the Noise Team providing a service to witness breaches in tenancy terms in Housing managed properties out of hours. Approximately 70% of demand is estate based.

18. The comparable costs of Noise Control is shown in the following table however service provision and times are not as comprehensive as Southwark's and Westminster's services



Enforcement Action

19. The action taken by the Noise Team will be dependent on substantiating statutory nuisance within the customer's home environment. Where a nuisance is witnessed officers will immediately attempt to negotiate with perpetrators; dependant on co-operation or not an Immediate Notice may be served. If and when a breached is witnessed, action will be escalated, this may lead to prosecution, seizure of equipment and request for its forfeiture. Where irresponsible behaviour is witnessed the service liaises with Anti – Social Behaviour Unit and managing landlords for concurrent ASB action. In extreme cases High Court Injunctions have been sought and imprisonment for breach has been resultant.

20. The table below illustrates the enforcement action comparable over the 10 years:

Table showing action taken and customer satisfaction

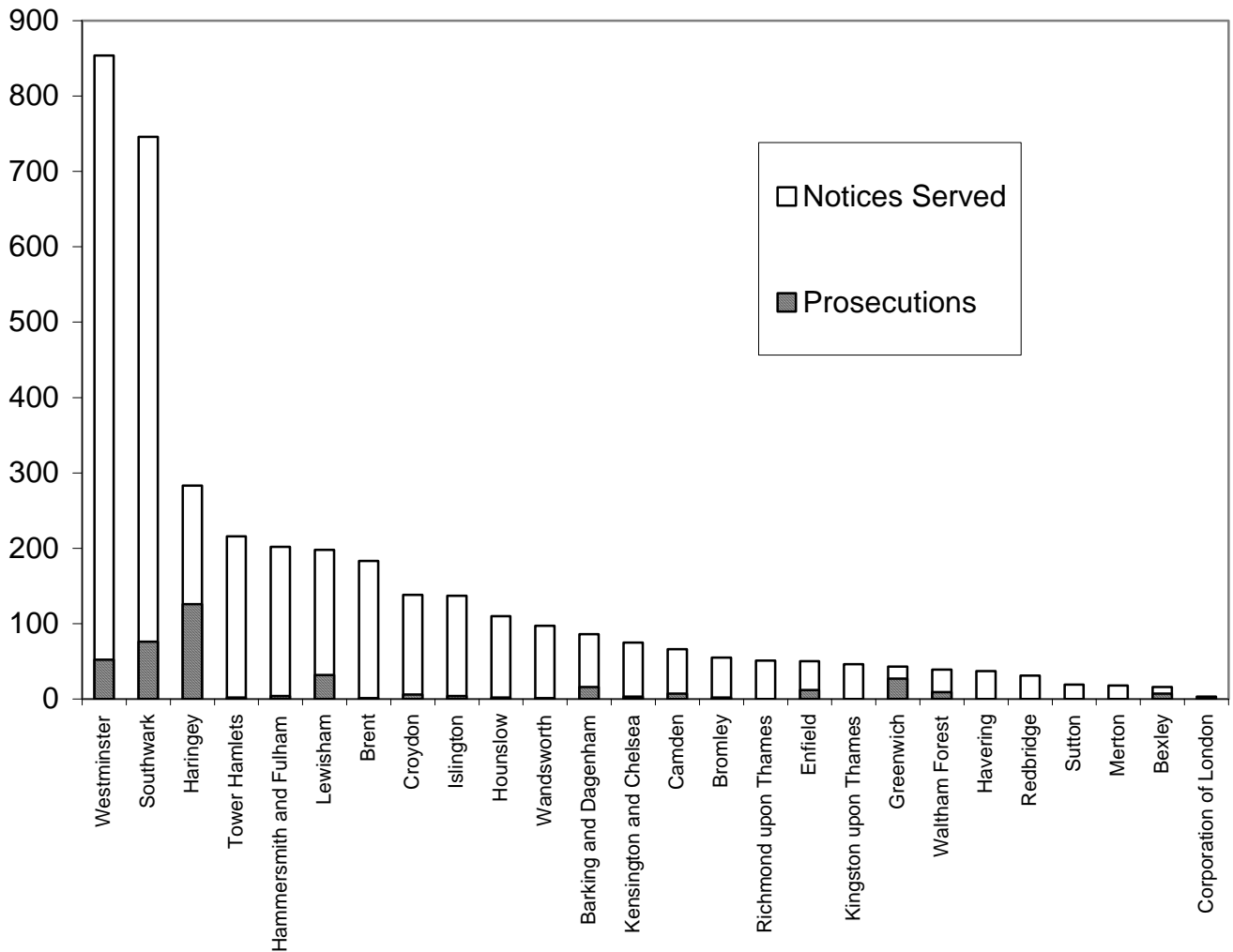
Enforcement Activity	1996-1997	1997-1998	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004	2004-2005	2005-1/2 yr
Notices Served	494	419	553	681	685	854	1093	1131	1181	448
Warning Letters	N/A	N/A	N/A	679	839	894	765	741	823	472
Contraventions	N/A	N/A	N/A	72	138	177	154	179	189	42

Prosecutions	41	38	26	15	28	46	90	76	64	35
Formal Cautions	0	0	0	4	9	12	19	14	13	8
Seizures	0	19	17	4	9	13	23	14	20	4
Customer satis.		74%	76%	79%	81%	85%	81%	85%	79%	

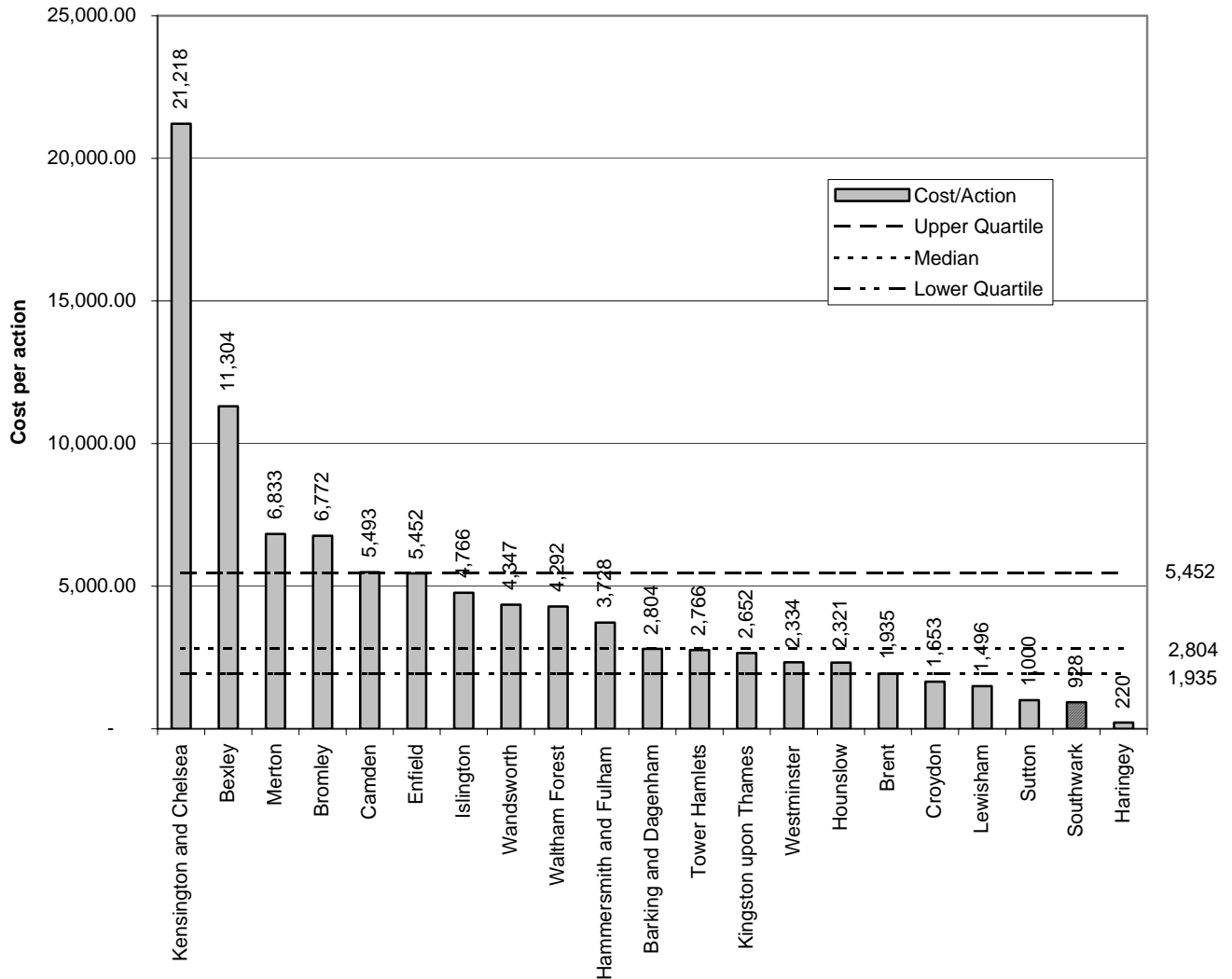
21. The charts below illustrate:

- enforcement action KPI's recorded for other London Boroughs and
 - relationship between service costs and enforcement actions
- (source CIPFA)

Noise Enforcement Action Comparable with London Borough 2003-4



Noise- Formal Enforcement: Service Costs Comparable 2003 – 2004



Exploring a shorter, 30 minutes response towards 80% of the time

22. We have collected data on the number of service requests responded to within 30 minutes for the past 3 years which shows: 2003/4 (54%) 2004/5 (58%) 2005/6 to date (56%). There is no capacity within the present resources to operate more efficiently or effectively. We are already concerned that the new licensing regime will impact on demand on the service to witness 'public nuisance' from people based noise/presence on and off licensed premises; for which no additional budget for field resources has been allocated.

Customer care – each client / customer has an expectation of a assessment of the impact the noise or nuisance is causing to them and their families use and enjoyment of their home. There may be more than one customer affected.

(10-15 minutes).

Identifying the source premises, is complex within high density estates, where adjoining flats may not necessarily be entered off the same deck access.

(5 –10 minutes)

Negotiating with Perpetrators.- officers will be ‘cold-calling’, will not be welcomed and need time to explain their presence, requirements and potential actions.

(10 minutes)

Securing corroborative evidence, making contemporaneous notes and sourcing database records remotely via ‘blackberry’ for history of actions, occupant details and health & safety client references. Courts ask Officers how long the nuisance was observed for.

(5-10 minutes)

Travel – at off-peak times when only one team is working, the whole Borough will need to be covered. Traffic conditions and parking will impact on daytime response, darkness and weather also will have their influence. Officers must drive and park within legal requirements – we are not a ‘blue light’ emergency service. This improves when additional teams are available on Friday and Saturday nights shift, although they do not work within specific areas since there may be several concurrent problems in the same area.

(10-30 minutes)

Flatted estates present delays in accessing higher storeys and long corridors.

(5 minutes)

Contact Centre - speed of hand-off of requests via customer contact centre, is influenced by other services demand weekday, and availability of out-of hours staff at high peak times.

Human Resources – as previously mentioned the availability of competent Enforcement Officers to undertake this activity is a scarce resource, such that recruitment and retention is difficult and few officers exist ion the agency service providers. This is highly confrontational and stressful work where health and safety risks and pressure of workloads need to be carefully managed. A high percentage 30 minute response target would add to these concerns.

23. With the majority of the above factors taken into consideration, It is felt that to reduce response time to 30 minutes towards a target of around 80% of all requests would require a re-design of the service operations, which would include working from satellite locations, a possible doubling of resources on each shift, on-costs of further pool transport. As the budget is almost entirely staffing costs this would require a growth of approximately £700k. There would also impact on the service specification and costs of Council’s Contact Centre.

Conclusion

24. The Noise Team as presently operated provides the most economic and effective service for Southwark residents, and in comparison with service provision and costs elsewhere, Southwark is the field leader; and has been recognised as such by the Government, National Societies and the BBC. Customer satisfaction has been maintained at over 75%.

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