

Item No.	Classification: Open	Date: 24 th July 2008	Meeting Name: Overview and Scrutiny sub committee C
Report title:		Freedom Passes	
Ward(s) or groups affected:		All	
From:		Deputy Chief Executive	

RECOMMENDATION

1. That the Overview and Scrutiny sub committee considers the issues outlined in this report and agrees the areas they would like to be examined in a more detailed report(s) to the sub committee.

OVERVIEW

2. This report sets out the range of issues arising from the processing of Freedom Passes up to and beyond the deadline of 31st May 2008. There were a number of failings experienced resulting in an unacceptable level of service being received by some of the Councils most vulnerable clients. This report does not attempt to address those failings but seeks the direction of the sub committee in how it would like to pursue its enquiries into these matters. The Overview and Scrutiny committee has agreed that this sub committee will review the issues contributing to the service failure and this was agreed at the Council assembly meeting on 9th July which resolved the motion attached as Appendix 1 which includes, inter alia:

“That council assembly welcomes the decision of the overview and scrutiny committee to undertake a full review of the renewal process and notes the decision by the executive to fully support this review and subsequently put in place an action plan no later than June 2009 outlining the steps which will ensure that the 2010 renewal process is efficiently and appropriately managed.”

3. Officers involved in the provision of this service welcome the Overview and Scrutiny process as it is clear that there are lessons to be learnt across a range of issues affecting the process. This report does not attempt to address the failings that were experienced but seeks the direction of the sub committee in how it would like to pursue it's enquiries into these matters.

BACKGROUND

4. Freedom passes are renewed on a bi-annual basis and up until 2008, the current renewal year, new passes were automatically issued to customers who met specific set criteria. At a pan-London level the rules governing the renewal of freedom passes are set by Transport for London, with the supporting process administered by London Councils on behalf of Transport for London.

5. On 1st April 2008 changes were made to the renewal process to recognise the new government policy to issue all senior citizens with the benefits of free bus travel nationwide. Current rules were tightened to create a distinction between customers with automatic and non-automatic rights of renewal. Those who qualified automatically received the national pass and non automatic customers were assessed to receive the London-wide pass.
6. This service, together with the processing of the Blue Badges scheme was transferred from Adult Social Care to Customer and Client Services in November 2007. Prior to the transfer of the service there had been a change in system within Social Services from the Helix system to the Carefirst system. As a result there had been a data transfer from one system to another, including information relating to eligibility under the previous Freedom Pass policy.
7. By 31 May 2008, the Freedom Passes team had successfully processed 6033 renewal forms. By this stage, 5325 of the forms processed had resulted in a successful outcome with freedom passes ready for collection and use by 1 June 2008. 708 applicants did not meet either criteria. We are still awaiting final figures on previous London-pass holders that are waiting to be upgraded to National passes.
8. Following the deadline of 31 May 2008, there were a number of renewal forms still being processed and new applicants still coming forward. By 15th July the Council had received a total of 6846 applications; which is 12% more than had been anticipated based on the Carefirst database.
9. In order to address the outstanding and new applications as the deadline approached an action plan was agreed that included a "same day" service to be provided on the 2nd June at the Walworth Road One Stop Shop. At that time, officers felt that only a small minority of customers would require that service. This was not the case, and combined with the continued receipt of new applications this resulted in both the queuing experienced at the One Stop Shop and the problems that continued to be experienced in completing the process of issuing Freedom passes. At the time of writing this report there were estimated to be 102 outstanding applications and a small amount of new applications are being received on a daily basis.
10. Attached at Appendix 2 is a briefing paper prepared on 4th June by an officer outside of Customer and Client Services as a first indication of the problem events of 2nd and 3rd June. At that time it was anticipated that all passes would be issued within that week. This was not the case and officers and the lead member continued to handle new applications and problems with previously received applicants throughout that month and into July. Although this very early overview of the situation did not adequately anticipate the scale of the problem that would continue to be experienced, it does give an early indication that there were a number of contributory factors and that there were clear lessons that needed to be learnt.
11. At the time of preparing this report there are two other separate reviews into the service already underway. One being conducted by internal audit and one by an external organisation, Value Adding.

ISSUES FOR FURTHER EXAMINATION

12. It is clear that there are lessons to be learnt across a range of issues affecting the processing of Freedom passes. As a starting point for the sub committee a number of areas which could be included for detailed examination are identified as follows. These are not intended to be either prescriptive or exhaustive and cover arrangements before, during and after the processing period and the deadline of 31st May 2008. In addition to these questions around management and process it is important that a proper understanding is gained of the impact the service failings had on the customer base for freedom passes which include the most vulnerable members of our community.

- What was the process of handover of management of Freedom Pass renewals?
- What was the process for considering how the 2008 Freedom Pass renewal would be managed and what risk assessment was carried out?
- Are there any concerns over the data quality within Carefirst or issues with the data transfer from Helix to Carefirst. Are there any known limitations or issues with Carefirst that could have an impact on the management of Freedom Passes?
- What are the details of the Freedom Pass scheme and the introduction from 1st April 2008 of the National Pass; including the roles and responsibilities and actions of Transport for London and London Councils?
- What was the Council's process for considering the guidance/regulations and how was the process that was followed agreed and implemented; including the process of confirming identity and eligibility and the decision to use GPs within the process?
- How was the process planned and implemented including the review of risk, anticipated workload, management information and reporting mechanisms?
- How was the application process advertised and communicated to the customer base?
- How, when and by whom were the timescales and deadlines for Passes amended?
- How was the process managed and delivered from the first automatic renewals and completed application forms up to the deadline of 31st May including the arrangements for informing the lead member and indications of numbers of applications completed across that timescale against the anticipated workload. Including when it became clear that numbers had been underestimated and that problems were being experienced by applicants prior to the deadline.
- The agreed process required important and personal documentation to be received from customers. How was that handled, stored and returned?
- An e-mail was sent to Cllr Noakes on 29th May 2008 outlining the anticipated numbers of outstanding passes and an action plan to

complete the process including the “same day” service at the Walworth One Stop Shop. What was the process surrounding the agreement of the action plan and the basis for the anticipated reduction in previous workload estimates as reported in the email from 300 to 200-250 cases.

- When were management alerted to the queues being experienced at the One Stop Shop and what action was taken to handle the situation. How could this have been improved?
- What problems continued to be experienced after the deadline of 31st May and what actions were taken to address those problems and complete the process of Freedom Pass renewals. Why was the action plan from 29th May ineffective?
- What actions were taken to capture complaints, what levels of complaints were received? What issues have complaints covered and what is the policy on compensation, has it been amended for this service and what levels of compensation have been paid?
- What are the financial implications of providing these passes and what are the financial implications of the service failure?

CONCLUSION

13. Officers involved in the provision of this service welcome the Overview and Scrutiny process as it is clear that there are important lessons to be learnt across a range of issues affecting the process. This report does not attempt to address the failings that were experienced but seeks the direction of the sub committee in how it would like to pursue it’s enquiries into these matters. An officer with the relevant skills to conduct a review to the remit set by the sub committee has been identified outside of Customer and Corporate Services and will be provided with the appropriate resources to support her in this role.

APPENDICES

No.	Title
Appendix 1	Motion 1 Council Assembly 9 th July 2008
Appendix 2	Officer briefing paper 4 th June 2008

AUDIT TRAIL

Lead Officer	Eleanor Kelly, Deputy Chief Executive
Report Author	Eleanor Kelly, Deputy Chief Executive
Version	Draft
Dated	
Key Decision?	No

Consultation with other officers / directorates / Executive member		
Officer Title	Comments Sought	Comments Included
Director of Legal and Democratic Services	No	No
Director of Finance	No	No

APPENDIX 1

9. MOTIONS (see pages of the main agenda)

9.1 MOTION 1 – DISABLED FREEDOM PASS RENEWAL (see pages 94 - 95 of the main agenda)

Amendment A – Carried

Substantive motion – Carried

- RESOLVED:**
1. That council assembly profoundly regrets the inconvenience and distress which was caused to some of the borough's most vulnerable people as a result of the council's failure to process all of the Freedom Pass applications in time.
 2. That council assembly notes and welcomes the apology issued by the chief executive on Tuesday June 3.
 3. That council assembly notes that the executive member for health and adult care had been receiving weekly progress reports and was informed on the Thursday before the deadline, that officers had exceeded the 6,000 figure, which was the total number that had always been quoted for renewals, and that they expected the same day service at the Walworth one stop shop to be used by only a small number of residents.
 4. That council assembly expresses its dismay that these predictions were inaccurate and the unacceptable consequences that this had on vulnerable and disabled residents, but notes the long hours and weekend work that officers had put in prior to the May 31 deadline to try and ensure as many passes as possible were issued
 5. That council assembly also notes the management action taken immediately after officers became aware of the problems at the one stop shop, including the extra staff and resources put in place at the location to improve the process. Council assembly further notes that the executive commissioned an urgent briefing of the process to understand the situation in the week commencing June 2.

**Deputy Chief
Executive**

6. That council assembly welcomes the decision of the overview and scrutiny committee to undertake a full review of the renewal process and notes the decision by the executive to fully support this review and subsequently put in place an action plan no later than June 2009 outlining the steps which will ensure that the 2010 renewal process is efficiently and appropriately managed.

Note: This motion is not requesting any action from the executive. Therefore it is not marked for referral for the executive's consideration.

Appendix 2

Informal Briefing – Freedom Passes

Purpose

1. The purpose of this briefing is to provide a high level analysis of the issues that concerned the final stages of the renewal process for freedom passes in the London Borough of Southwark.
2. The briefing deals with issues in chronological order and is focused particularly on events surrounding the 2 and 3 June 2008 when queues built up as clients awaited approval letters from the Council.
3. The briefing also highlights (paragraph 18) how other local authorities across London faced similar issues to Southwark and how our handling of the situation compares.

Background

4. A normal freedom pass is available to those aged 60years, allow holders to travel only during off peak hours and is issued directly by the Post Office. The disabled freedom pass provides free travel on all public transport both at peak and off peak times and processed by local authorities. Freedom passes are renewed on a bi-annual basis (every 2 years) and up until 2008, the current renewal year, new passes were automatically issued to clients who met specific set criteria.
5. At a pan-London level the rules governing the renewal of freedom passes are set by Transport for London, with the supporting process administered by London Councils on behalf of Transport for London.
6. For the Council, the administration of the freedom pass was originally undertaken by the health and social care department. Responsibility transferred to the customer and client services unit in November 2007 under the joint team. There are clear advantages with having the team located with Southwark's joint team including links to visiting officers for vulnerable claimants and access to benefits databases for more efficient processing of renewals. Prior to transfer of responsibility there had been changes undertaken to the IT systems within social care that held client data from *HELIX* to *Carefirst*.
7. On 1st April 2008 changes were made to the renewal process to recognise the new national government policy to issue all senior citizens with the benefits of free bus travel nationwide. The changes concerned tightening the rules to create a distinction between those clients with automatic and non-automatic rights of renewal. Clients who qualified automatically received the national pass and non-automatic clients received the London wide only pass.
8. Clients who had a level of disability that met the set criteria for automatic renewal received their disabled freedom pass, much like had occurred before. This affected approximately 1,000 clients. For those falling beneath this threshold the renewal procedure changed to require a form to be completed

alongside proof of right which included references from third party sources, namely General Practitioners or qualified medical professionals.

9. This in effect created a “new application” process which affected in excess of 6,000 clients (or some 85% of all clients).

What happened in the run up to Monday June 2nd 2008?

10. Since late February 2008 a communications and publicity campaign had been running at a local level to make affected clients aware of the changes taking place. The publicity activity particularly increased in the three months to 1 June 2008. There had, however, at a pan-London level been more limited publicity put out through London Councils, or Transport for London with regards the changes.
11. There had also been changes with regards the location of services. The former Disability Services offices at 151 Walworth Road (a non-DDA compliant building), from which freedom passes were originally administered, were closed as part of the Council’s broader programme to shift more frontline service transactions through the new One Stop Shops. Given the close proximity of Walworth One Stop Shop (WOSS) and 151 Walworth Road it was more likely that clients would access this site rather than the remaining One Stop Shops at Peckham and Bermondsey.
12. Estimates taken from *Carefirst* suggested that there would be some 6,000 clients affected by changes to the rules governing the issuing of freedom passes. An estimated additional 300 forms were posted out to clients by request.
13. To effectively prepare for the renewal process a dedicated freedom pass team was set up by Customer and Client Services. By 31 May 2008, this team had successfully processed 6,033 renewal forms. By this stage, 5325 of the forms processed had resulted in a successful outcome, with freedom passes ready for collection and use by 1 June 2008. 708 applicants did not meet either criteria.

Table 1 - Key Statistics

All applications processed	6433
Total number of applications processed by 31 May 2008 of which:	6033
- <i>Successful outcome</i>	5325
- <i>Refused</i>	708
“New” clients pending as at 1 June 2008	400
Applications processed	150
Applications outstanding	250
Total number of applications successfully processed as at 3 June 2008	6183 (96%)

14. Following the deadline of 31 May 2008, there were a number of new applicants still coming forward for applications. There were three principal reasons for this. Firstly, people not appreciating the changes that had taken place to the renewal procedure. Secondly, information from third party sources (namely GPs and other qualified medical professionals) had not been forthcoming therefore a decision could not be made on the application. Thirdly, people who had not been caught by the system following the transfer from *HELIX* to *Carefirst*. This resulted in the queuing experienced principally at WOSS. The total number of 'new' clients affected exceeded the estimated 6,000 by approximately 400.
15. On Monday 2 June some 7 additional staff were deployed at the WOSS to handle the increase in demand and speed up the process of renewal. This included floor staff handing over approval letters to clients where all the relevant information was available so that freedom passes could be collected from the Post Office as normal.
16. By the end of Monday 2 June analysis suggested that about 250 -300 clients would not have their freedom pass issued due to a lack of available information supporting their application. Of that total, some 75% of clients could not be issued with approval letters as there was no verification from their GP or other qualified medical professional.
17. Through Monday 2 June and into Tuesday 3 June all relevant GPs were contacted by the freedom pass team to ensure as much of the backlog as possible could be cleared.

What happened in other local authorities?

18. Southwark was not isolated in the issue of renewing freedom passes. Officers investigated how other, principally inner London, authorities had been affected. Similar queues were known to be experienced in **xx(1)** and **xx(2)**. However, in **xx(1)** clients were being asked to return at the end of week, thus leaving individuals without a valid freedom pass until that time. In **xx(3)** and **xx(4)** extensions had been granted suggesting an inconsistency in approach by London Councils in the treatment of different local authorities. In **xx(5)** some 1385 clients had not completed applications by Monday 2 June and reminders are now only being sent out. This means that many invalid passes are in operation questioning the extent to which the passes are being checked by Transport for London staff.

What will happen next?

19. As at close of play on Wednesday 4 June 2008, it was expected that where the Council is awaiting evidence from GPs new passes would be issued in advance of receiving this evidence to therefore minimise any further disruption to affected people. It is therefore expected that all existing freedom passes will be issued by Friday 6 June.

Conclusions

20. There are a number of interrelated factors that affected service delivery and performance:

- a. The change of rules and process governed by Transport for London added a level of burden and possible confusion on individual clients which, until 2008, had not been felt.
 - b. The actual number of clients exceeded planned estimates, caused as a result of the change in the database from *HELIX* to *Carefirst* and therefore created an unknown factor and level of demand.
 - c. Third party factors (e.g. gaining the necessary evidence from GPs or other qualified medical professional) affected the efficiency of the management process for the Council
21. However, when put into context, although highly distressing for the individuals involved it should be remembered that by 31 May, over nine in ten applications had been processed. Of the remainder, the majority received a new pass within two working days with the Council channelling extra resources to respond to the final queues.
22. There are lessons to be learned. These include:
- One Stop Shop (OSS) management had not been proactive in assisting the freedom pass team to deal with the issues on the morning of Monday 2 June. People with disabilities were not offered seating or refreshments until midday. It is therefore required that Vangent's senior management review their approach to dealing with emergency situations and the speed of response.
 - Whilst additional resources had been put in place to assist with customer enquiries on Monday 2 June the level of staffing was found to be insufficient to deal with the volume of customers. The time taken to report the volume of customers within the OSS to management was too long and pre-training of OSS to assist with enquiries in the event of an emergency would have resulted in an improved service response.
 - The links to stakeholders (adult social care and disability groups) needs to be improved so that all associated groups are involved and aware where change of procedures and process impact on affected groups.
 - Information given out from the Contact Centre was at times incorrect. Although staff within the centre were briefed, there needs to be greater quality assurance processes in place to prevent this situation from occurring in the future.
 - Use of GP's to assess mobility adds delay to the process. The freedom pass team need to explore greater use of occupational therapists to assist with this process in the future.
 - The approach from London Councils was found to be inconsistent. However, Southwark needs to create closer links with London Councils to ensure effective communication on related processes in the future.
 - There needs to be a review of the IT systems to ensure the data is accurate and whether developments such as document imaging will add value to deliver greater efficiencies.

An independent review of the service is currently underway (Value Adding). It is imperative that the points raised above are captured in that review so that the Council learns from the process and ensures effective evaluation of

service performance. This review was commissioned at the point the service transferred departments.