REVIEW OF THE ONE-STOP SERVICE

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Performance and Policy
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. A review of the One-Stop service was undertaken to ascertain if the service provided could be improved and to address concerns raised by some councillors about the service provided.

2. The review process was undertaken in three main steps:
   - gathering background information
   - assessing the customers experience
   - examining systems and processes.

3. The opinions, of approximately two-thirds, of councillors about the One-Stop service were gathered via face-to-face interviews.

4. During the review two main themes emerged, the high quality of service provided by the One-Stop staff and problems relating to feedback. The problems relating to feedback were:
   - lack of feedback
   - timeliness of feedback
   - the quality of the response provided.

5. In addition to the main two themes that emerged, several miscellaneous areas were also identified these were:
   - low usage of the system by some councillors
   - lack of agreement between the One-Stop staff and Environment services staff on definitions in use
   - IT system developments
   - process issues arising from the transfer of housing stock and responsibility for complaints relating to housing, to Erimus.

6. Eleven recommendations have been made which relate to:
   - ensuring that feedback is provided
   - improving the quality and timeliness of feedback
   - improving internal processes.

7. An action plan providing details of the actions to be taken, timescale and responsible officer for each of the recommendations has been developed and agreed with the relevant service areas. The implementation of this action plan will be monitored by Performance and Policy. A follow-up review will be undertaken by September 2006 to ensure that the expected improvements in the One-Stop service have materialised.
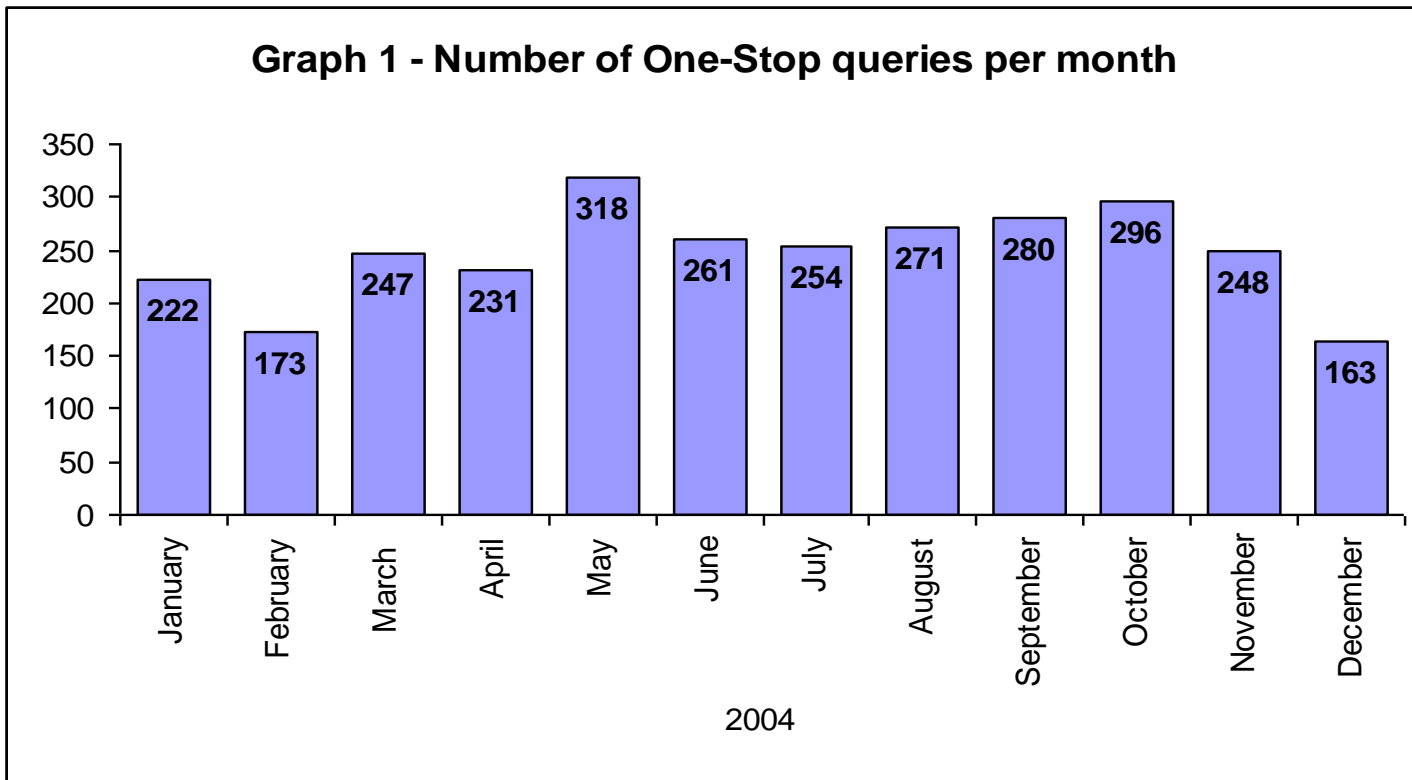
8.   The One-Stop has been operated by Members Services since 2002, prior to this a similar system called MIRA had been operating within the Environment Directorate, which is the directorate that deals with the majority of One-Stop queries.   The One-Stop service was subject to review for three main reasons.

- The One-Stop process had been operating for over two years and therefore a review was timely.

- Overall, the One-Stop service was believed to be working well. However, some councillors had expressed dissatisfaction with elements of the service provided.

- The corporate complaints system was undergoing development work and because of the similarities between the two systems it was prudent to review the one-stop processes to see if there was any benefit in developing the two systems together.

9.   This section of the report provides an overview of the One-Stop service provided by Members Services and the number of queries dealt with via this service.

One-Stop Service

10.   The One-Stop service provides a referral service for councillors when dealing with constituency casework in relation to all service areas of the Council. The One-Stop deals with initial service requests, complaints and requests for information that have been received by councillors from constituents.

11.   The One-Stop logs the query on a database, and sends it electronically to the appropriate service area or nominated officer to be dealt with. The aim is to do this on the same day that the enquiry is received. The One-Stop automatically acknowledges that the case is being dealt with and a letter is sent to the constituent on the councillors' behalf. The One-Stop process is documented in Appendix A.

12.   Once the service area has dealt with the referral, a response is provided using the database and this is returned to the member.   However, queries that are designated as 'service requests' are forwarded to the Contact Centre and dealt with via the Contact Centre process.

13.   The One-Stop system can be accessed 24 hours a day, seven days a week by all Councillors from their home. Referrals can also be made to the One-Stop in the following ways:

- direct into the electronic One-Stop system
- e-mail
- in writing
- by telephone or fax.

Number of Queries

14. In 2004, the One-Stop process dealt with almost 3,000 queries, averaging 250 queries per month. The number of queries per month is shown in Graph 1.

Graph 1 - Number of One-Stop queries per month

Month	Number of Queries
January	222
February	173
March	247
April	231
May	318
June	261
July	254
August	271
September	280
October	296
November	248
December	163

2004

15. Usage by councillors varies with some councillors contacting the One-Stop on average 40 times per month, to other councillors who rarely use the One-Stop service.

16. The majority (93%) of queries received relate to services provided by the Environment directorate.

SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES

Scope

17.   The scope of this review was to examine the One-Stop service co-ordinated by staff within Members Services to ascertain if the service could be improved and to explore concerns raised by a small number of councillors.

18.   The background research, undertaken as part of this review, briefly examined how the One-Stop service is provided in other authorities, whether Middlesbrough's provision is a cost-effective use of resources and if there appeared to be any wider issues that it would be appropriate to include within the review.

19.   The background research confirmed that the scope of this review was appropriate.

Objectives

20.   The review had three objectives.
   a)   To identify ways in which the service provided by the One-Stop could be improved.
   b)   To address councillors concerns in respect of delays or non-response to issues raised through the One-Stop service.
   c)   To ensure that any potential benefit from the development of the Corporate Complaints system was realised.

METHODOLOGY

21. This review was undertaken using a variety of different research methodologies including face-to-face interviews, analysis of data, process mapping and benchmarking. The review can be divided into three main steps:
    - gathering background information
    - assessing the customers experience
    - examining systems and processes.

22. The activities undertaken under each of the three broad headings are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 – Key review activities

AREA	REVIEW ACTIVITY
BACKGROUND	Identify current One-Stop service: - outline of one-stop service provision - aims and objectives of the service - how the One-Stop operates
	Analysis of previous 12 months data: - type of complaints - who are they from - how were they dealt with - feedback received - timeliness
	General background information and best practice - what do other authorities do and how successful are they - other software solutions
CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE	Identify and speak to all councillors who have used one-stop shop during the past 12 months (split into high, medium and low users): - what was it used for - how may times did they use it - how satisfied were they - what was the outcome(s)
	Identify and speak to councillors who haven't used one-stop shop during past 12 months - why not? - have they used it ever?
	In depth discussions with councillors who have expressed dissatisfaction with the one-stop shop: - what was the main problem - how would they have liked it dealt with - what would be considered satisfactory service

AREA	REVIEW ACTIVITY
SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES	Speak to officers who deal with requests, in particular the following: ▪ Executive Director (Environment) ▪ Heads of Service (Environment) ▪ officers with outstanding queries ▪ officers who frequently deal with queries
	Examine processes and systems: ▪ process map one-stop shop complaints ▪ examine software currently in place ▪ links to other systems e.g. CRM, AIM etc. ▪ future developments e.g. complaints system

Gathering background information

23. The 'background information' phase of the review process was used to confirm the scope of the review. The initial scope was that only the One-Stop service would be included within the review.

24. The background briefly examined how the One-Stop service was provided in other authorities, whether Middlesbrough's provision was a cost-effective use of resources and if there appeared to be a better way of delivering this service. The background work was a light touch approach to ensure that the scope of the review was appropriate and that phases two and three of the review represented the best way of undertaking it. The background research confirmed that the scope of the review was appropriate.

Customer experience

25. The One-Stop service is a service provided to all councillors. The number of times councillors use the service varies from those who make high use of the service with almost 500 queries within a year, to councillors that rarely use this service.

26. Councillors were categorised as high, medium or low users depending on the number of times they had used the service within a 12-month period. The definitions used were:

High	Over 60 queries logged per year
Medium	between 25 – 59 queries logged per year
Low	between 0 – 24 queries logged per year.

27. All councillors were contacted to ask if they would be willing to be interviewed and interviews were arranged with at least 50% of the councillors within each category. The number and percentage of councillors interviewed is shown in Table 2.

Table 2 – Interviews with councillors

	Number of Councillors	Number interviewed	Percentage interviewed
Low	25	13	52%
Medium	6	4	67%
High	17	12	71%
Total	**48**	**29**	**60%**

28.　A summarised version of the results from the interviews conducted with councillors is available in Appendix B.

Systems and processes

29.　This phase of the review was concerned with examining the processes and systems used to provide the One-Stop service. In particular focussing on any technical issues and links to the developments occurring in relation to the Corporate Complaints System.

MAIN FINDINGS

30. Overall, the comments received from councillors regarding the One-Stop service were extremely positive.   The service is much appreciated and it is perceived to work far better than previous systems.   In particular, councillors have consistently praised the staff working within the One-Stop.

31. However, the majority of councillors who use the system reported that they have problems regarding feedback in particular:

    - lack of feedback
    - timeliness of feedback
    - the quality of the response provided

32. The severity of this problem varied amongst councillors from those councillors who perceived that this was only a minor problem to those for whom the problem completely overshadowed the service provided. However, all councillors interviewed stated that feedback was, to some degree, a problem.

33. In addition to the two main themes that emerged; customer service and feedback, other minor miscellaneous issues were identified these were:

    - low usage of the system by some councillors
    - agreement between the One-Stop staff and Environment services staff on definitions in use
    - IT system developments
    - process issues, arising from the transfer of housing stock and responsibility for complaints relating to housing, to Erimus.

34. This next section looks at each of the two main themes identified; quality of service and feedback and also the miscellaneous issues, in detail and provides recommendations to address the issues identified.

Quality of service provided by One-Stop staff

35. The review process included interviews with twenty-nine councillors who were classified as high, medium or low users of the One-Stop service. All councillors interviewed gave extremely positive feedback in relation to the service provided by the staff in the One-Stop shop, examples of the comments made include:

    > "The officers dealing couldn't be more helpful. Very professional."

    > "Great – couldn't be better I would give them ten out of ten."

    > "One Stop Shop staff are brilliant".

36. It was noticeable that all councillors, including the minority who felt that there were significant problems with the One-Stop process, stated that the service provided by the One-Stop staff was good.

<u>Feedback</u>

37.   The main problem identified with the One-Stop process was in relation to feedback. Three different strands within the overall issue of feedback were identified, these were:

- lack of feedback
- timeliness of feedback
- quality of feedback.

Lack of feedback

38.   The main reason why there is a perceived problem with feedback relates to those queries within the One-Stop process that are categorised as service requests. The One-Stop process identifies two different types of query; service requests and queries that require a response from a service area. A process map showing how each type of query is dealt with is shown in Appendix A.

39.   Queries that are categorised as service requests are sent to the Contact Centre to be entered onto the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system and dealt with via the CRM process. The query is then closed on the One-Stop system, without a response to councillors. The CRM process does not include sending a response to councillors detailing how the service request has been met, therefore councillors are unaware whether or not the query has been dealt with. This can cause embarrassment, especially if a constituent approaches the councillor and requests an update.

40.   Where the outcome of a service request is apparent, e.g. a faulty light is fixed, the lack of feedback may not cause a problem.

41.   The majority of problems occur when the outcome of a service request is not immediately apparent. For example, a query is received via the One-Stop service regarding a pothole in the road. This query is designated a 'service request' and is entered onto the CRM system and closed on the One-Stop system, without any feedback to the councillor. Engineers assess the pothole and decide that it does not require immediate attention, therefore it will be dealt with during a rolling programme of maintenance work. The councillor has not received any feedback and is therefore unaware that the council has assessed the pothole and decided to address it within the Council's planned maintenance programme. The constituent remains unhappy and may complain again to the councillor. The councillor and the constituent are wrongly left with the impression that the Council has done nothing.

42.   It is possible to instigate an electronic fix to the problem of feedback from the CRM system. However, there is a perception, amongst some officers, that providing feedback on service requests may encourage more service requests to be routed through the One-Stop resulting in an unmanageable increase in workload.

43.   There are also a number of other 'softer' issues that also require addressing, for example:

- ensuring that requests entered onto CRM are flagged as One-Stop-Shop requests
- ensuring that above requests are closed on CRM

- ensuring that the closure comments are meaningful and can be understood by their audience
- ensuring that where CRM queries are sent to another system e.g. Flare, feedback is given either via CRM or direct to the One-Stop-Shop.

44. Given the extent of the current problem with regards to feedback a solution must be found. Therefore it is recommended that feedback is given via email to councillors for all One-Stop queries, including those that are categorised as 'service requests'.   The number of service requests, routed through the One-Stop service should be monitored to ascertain if this action results in an increase in workload.

Recommendations:

   i)   Instigate a technical solution so that feedback is automatically provided for service requests.   This solution should also include addressing the 'softer' issues identified.

   ii)   Monitor the number of service requests received via the One-Stop service to ascertain if there is an increase in workload.

Timeliness of feedback

45. A second issue in relation to feedback relates to the timeliness of the feedback. There was a perception amongst councillors that within certain areas of the Council the response to One-Stop queries was slow. Analysis of the data confirmed that certain areas of the Council did appear to take longer to respond to queries than others.   There are several reasons for delays in responding to One-Stop queries the main causes are:

- lack of administrative support within the Environment Directorate
- process used within the Environment Directorate
- lack of guidelines on appropriate priority / timescale for dealing with One-Stop queries resulting in variation in the time taken to respond and the comprehensiveness of the response provided by different service areas.

46. The provision of administrative support, by HBS to Environment, in relation to the work required for One-Stop queries has been subject to lengthy discussion and negotiation. This resulted in some delays to answering One-Stop queries. However, this situation has been satisfactorily resolved and therefore delays to One-Stop queries should no longer occur.

47. The operation of the One-Stop process within the Environment directorate appears to be resource intensive and potentially duplicates workload. There are two specific areas of duplication:

- the creation of another database to provide management information
- printing off hard copies of the query for distribution, by hand, to the relevant Head of Service.

48. The potential duplication of management information appears to have arisen because there is a perception within Environment that the current database cannot provide the information required by Environment officers. From an examination of the One-Stop database it would appear that all required information is available. Therefore it is suggested that this issue is examined in greater detail to see if the One-Stop database can meet the management information needs of the

Environment Directorate. This would have the additional benefit of freeing up additional time for the Administration post within Environment.

Recommendations:

  iii) Environment Directorate to review the process used for dealing with One-Stop queries to see if the process can be improved.

  iv) Examination of the One-Stop database to see if it can meet the reporting and management information requirements of the Environment Directorate.

49. There were several One-Stop queries for which numerous reminders have been sent but information had not been forthcoming from the service area. Some queries are difficult to resolve and may take a substantial period of time to investigate, therefore it is not always possible to provide a complete response quickly. However, a partial response that provides details of the actions to be taken and an estimate of the timescale involved should be provided.

50. At present there are no guidelines available to staff relating to the priority that should be attached to responding to One-Stop queries or guidance on the timeliness of responses, such guidelines would help staff prioritise their workload and help ensure a quick and appropriate response.

51. It is the responsibility of the Executive Director and Heads of Service to ensure that all officers are aware of the guidelines for responding to One-Stop queries and that these are adhered to.

Recommendations:

  v) Environment (as the directorate receiving most queries) to develop guidelines for staff on the priority to be attached to One-Stop queries, timescale for responses and quality of response.

  vi) Executive Director and Heads of Service to ensure that managers are aware of the deadlines for responding to One-Stop queries and to ensure that managers adhere to these deadlines.

Quality of feedback

52. Several councillors mentioned that they had difficulty in understanding the feedback provided. This was usually because the feedback provided was very short and did not fully answer the question or the feedback included jargon and technical explanations that did not make sense to a layperson.

53. The guidelines developed as recommendation (v) above, will address the issue of quality of response. In addition to this, One-Stop staff can add value to the process by undertaking a quality check of the response received and provide feedback, from a non-technical officers perspective, to the responding officer.

54. The One-Stop process enables councillors to request additional information relating to the query that they raised. The long-term aim is to ensure that where this feature is used, it is used because of additional questions arising from the answer provided and not to clarify a 'poor' answer.

     vii)   One-Stop staff to quality assure the responses provided by the responding officer.

     Viii)   One-Stop staff to review the use of the 'further information' field to ensure that these requests do not arise because of a 'poor' response to the original query.

Miscellaneous issues

55.   In addition to the two main themes identified within the review; quality of service and feedback, several minor issues were also identified these were:

- low usage of the system by some councillors
- agreement between the One-Stop staff and Environment Services staff on definitions in use
- IT system developments
- process issues, arising from the transfer of housing stock and responsibility for complaints relating to housing, to Erimus.

56.   These miscellaneous issues are examined in more detail below.

Low usage of the system by some councillors

57.   Councillors who had been categorised as 'low' users of the One-Stop service were asked additional questions to ascertain reasons for low usage and in particular if this was caused by any specific problem with the service provided.

58.   There were two main reasons given for low usage, Firstly, some councillors share their ward with another councillor who took main responsibility for dealing with constituents queries. Secondly, some councillors preferred to approach officers directly and thereby bypassed the One-Stop process.

59.   There were a small number of councillors who did not use the One-Stop system as frequently as they might because of difficulties in using the IT system. There were also a small number of councillors who felt that the process lacked a personal touch this was summed up by one councillor as follows:

> "It can be a cold way to deal with individuals. There is no personality to the system. An occasional conversation would be better."

Agreement on definitions

60.   Within the process currently operating there is some discrepancy between One-Stop officers and Environment officers over definitions for example:

- difference between service requests and complaints
- when a case is either a NEW case or whether it is an old case that should be re-opened.

61.   Environment officers still receive some complaints that are service requests. Given the type of complaints received there will always be the potential for mis-classification of some information. This is likely to improve as staff in the One-Stop become more familiar with issues. Environment has stated that the number of mis-classifications

has improved and this would appear to be backed up by the statistics. The percentage of complaints dealt with as service requests has risen from 34% in 2003 to 43% in 2004 to approximately 50% for the first three months of 2005.

62.   Issues regarding definitions used have arisen regarding when cases should be re-opened and when they should be classed as a new case.

Recommendation:

ix)   Protocols agreed between Environment and the One-Stop to cover definitional issues.

System developments

63.   The Council's Corporate Complaints system and CRM both utilise Siebel technology. Therefore moving the One-Stop-Shop database to a Siebel platform should be considered as this would offer a number of advantages including that three main sources of Council feedback (complaints, councillors feedback and customer feedback) would be on one system enabling easier analysis.

64.   Work on developing the Corporate Complaints system is currently being undertaken, therefore it would be sensible to scope the One-Stop requirements at an early stage, assuming that this does not have any knock on effect to the timescale for delivering Corporate Complaints.

Recommendation:

x)   The ability to move the One-Stop to a Siebel platform should be considered during the early stages of the Corporate Complaints system design.

Erimus

65.   The Council transferred its housing stock to Erimus in November 2004. Consequently queries relating to housing no longer fall within the scope of the One-Stop service. During interviews with councillors it became apparent that problems regarding lack of feedback with regard to complaints that fall under Erimus' remit were developing. This is not a council owned problem however to facilitate partnership working it is suggested that One-Stop staff meet with Erimus to offer advice to Erimus regarding this emerging problem.

Recommendation:

xi)   One-Stop staff to meet with Erimus to discuss emerging issues.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

66. This review revealed that overall the One-Stop service meets the requirements of its users. Those councillors, who had used both the current and previous systems, believe that the current system is an improvement on the previous system. In particular, councillors have consistently praised the staff working within the One-Stop.

67. However, the majority of councillors who use the system reported that they have problems regarding feedback. The severity of this problem varied amongst councillors from those councillors who perceived that this was only a minor problem to those for whom the problem completely overshadowed the service provided.

68. The review has identified a number of recommendations to improve the service provided. These are referenced in the body of the report and are also listed below:

Recommendations:

   i) Instigate technical solution to provide feedback for ALL queries (this must include addressing the 'softer' issues identified).

   ii) Monitor the number of service requests received via the One-Stop to ascertain if there is an increase in workload.

   iii) Environment to review their processes see if these can be improved and to ascertain if hard copy printing of complaints is necessary.

   iv) Examination of the One-Stop database to see if it can meet the reporting and management information requirements of the Environment Directorate.

   v) Environment (as the directorate receiving most queries) to develop guidelines for staff on priority to be attached to One-Stop queries, timescale for responses and quality of response.

   vi) Executive Director to ensure that their managers are aware of the deadlines for responding to One-Stop queries and to ensure that Heads of Service monitor and manage this.

   vii) One-Stop staff to quality assure the responses provided by the responding officer.

   viii) One-Stop staff to review the use of the 'further information' field to ensure that these requests do not arise because of a 'poor' initial response to the original query.

   ix) Protocols agreed between Environment and the One-Stop to cover definitional issues.

   x) The ability to move the One-Stop to a Siebel platform should be considered during the early stages of the Corporate Complaints system design.

   xi) One-Stop staff to meet with Erimus to discuss emerging issues.

69. An action plan which provides details of the actions required to address the above recommendations is attached as Appendix C. Compliance with the action plan will be monitored by Performance and Policy and any issues arising addressed through the appropriate forum. A follow-up review will be undertaken by September 2006 to ensure that the expected improvements in the service have materialised.