

Subject:	Field Officer Review		
Date of Meeting:	12 January 2023		
Report of:	Executive Director for Housing Neighbourhoods and Communities		
Contact Officer:	Name:	Jo Player	Tel: 01273 292488
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Ward(s) affected:	All		

FOR GENERAL RELEASE

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND POLICY CONTEXT

- 1.1 To provide an update on the work and progress of the Field Officer Team ('the Team') since it was fully launched in December 2018. The progress of this Team has routinely been reported to committee.
- 1.2 A review has been carried out, which consisted of a scoping exercise comparing the work undertaken by the Team to corporate policy objectives and a series of engagement exercises with key services who were identified as working with the team or who might potentially work with the team in future.
- 1.3 This Committee is asked to note the findings of this review and to approve the recommendation, in principle, not to continue with the field officer team (which was created by the Council's then Neighbourhoods, Inclusion, Communities & Equalities Committee) and delegate the decision and implementation of any service changes to the Executive Director, Housing Neighbourhoods and Communities, following the completion of the appropriate staff consultation.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the Tourism Equalities Communities and Culture Committee

- 2.1 Notes the outcome of the review of the field officer team as set out in the report.
- 2.2 Agrees in principle to ending the current field officer team arrangements from 1st April 2023 and the reallocation of resources set out in paragraphs 3.22 and 3.23 of the report and delegates to the Executive Director Housing Neighbourhoods and Communities the final decision, following the conclusion of the appropriate staff consultation.

- 2.3 Recommends to Policy and Resources Committee that it approves any necessary changes to the Council's constitutional documents.

3. CONTEXT/ BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 On the 22nd January 2018 the Neighbourhoods, Inclusion, Communities and Equalities Committee (NICE) agreed the business case for the creation of a new Field Officer team. The team became operational in December 2018, with a focus on delivering enforcement and inspection functions across services and working with our communities to promote a more proactive and preventative way of working, with the aim to deliver solutions and resolve problems. Regular reports on the work of the team have been presented at committee as requested, the last being in January 2021. It was also agreed at the last TECC committee that a full review would be presented to this committee following a notice of motion requesting this, presented by the Conservative group.
- 3.2 The intention was always that the Field Officer team is funded from existing budgets across a variety of services. The services still in scope are within Housing, Neighbourhoods and Communities, and Economy Environment and Culture directorates. At NICE Committee in January 2018 the funding and resources required for the setup of the Field officer team were agreed. Setting up the team required £0.360m and thereafter £0.376m per annum. Further reports regarding the team, were submitted to committee in July 2019 and January 2021.
- 3.3 3 elements of the team's role were originally identified:-
1. Enforcement activities that are quick and responsive to customer needs: timely effective enforcement action resolves problems which will reduce unnecessary demand on partners and services.
 2. Gathering intelligence and evidence for existing specialist services: gathering quick and robust evidence including photographs, mapping and statements to inform these services and enable them to deliver faster, more effective and coordinated enforcement action that is resolving both environmental and community problems.
 3. Working proactively promoting behaviour change and community collaboration.
- 3.4 Based on these objectives the Field Officer team was created, with the aim of working flexibly across services, preventing duplication, reducing response times and improving the way customers access services, with improved customer satisfaction, as well as working proactively with communities. The team works seven days a week 12.00 to 20.00 and consists of 1 FTE Field Officer manager and 7 FTE field officers.
- 3.5 9 services were originally brought into scope to work with the Field Officer team, and these were: -
- Regulatory Services

- Housing Management
 - Private Sector Housing
 - Planning Enforcement
 - Community Safety
 - City Parks
 - Highways
 - Travellers
 - Seafront Office
- 3.6 In 2021 a further function was identified and added when a temporary Unauthorised Encampments coordinator post was created to address issues associated with unauthorised encampments in the city. A review of the team and the services it provides has been undertaken over the last 8 months to consider whether it has been successful in achieving the purpose envisaged and options for future provision. This exercise included scoping the functions of the team and comparing this to corporate priorities, engagement with key stakeholders, and a report with recommendations to this committee.
- 3.7 Of the services identified above, funding for the Field Officer team is only provided by Regulatory Services and by the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), not all services as originally envisaged. Regulatory Services (Safer Communities) provides the majority of the funding £322,000 and the HRA provides £64,000.
- 3.8 The Field Officer team was allocated 3,487 tasks in the last 12 months. The majority of these (2,619) related to noise complaints. The next highest case load (240) was in relation to supporting the encampments co-ordinator to deal with illegal encampments in the city. The remainder of tasks involved public health matters (in relation to COVID), planning, illegal street trading and assisting the seafront team. 20% of cases investigated by Field Officers are reported by council housing tenants. Field Officers have also been working with the police in relation to crime hotspots. This is an additional role to those identified when the team was set up. If the issues raised cannot be dealt with by the Field Officers initially, they are referred back to the specialist teams to further investigate. There has been little community engagement from the team, with much of this work being undertaken by the designated community engagement team within Communities, Equalities and Third Sector (CETS).
- 3.9 There is sometimes an expectation that Field Officers can respond and deliver a wider range of services than originally agreed at Committee. Where gaps and service demands increase, there is sometimes expectation that Field Officers will fill these emerging gaps.
- 3.10 However, the review found that there were no additional functions that the Field Officers could reasonably provide, in line with corporate priorities.
- 3.11 Over the last 2 years the retention of staff has sometimes been an issue, and there have been various reasons for this including the challenges of having to deliver such a broad and diverse range of roles, anti-social shift

pattern covering weekends and evenings, flat team structure with little career development opportunity, and as with many frontline services challenge and confrontation from service users. Currently the Field Officer Manager post is vacant with a field officer acting up into that role, creating a vacant Field Officer post.

- 3.12 Access to service specific databases has been problematic for the team and digital solutions such as the use of mobile tablets has also not been successful. This has meant that a duty officer has had to allocate daily work, reducing the resource to be available to deal directly with tasks.
- 3.13 During the engagement phase of the review, we undertook an online survey with front line officers who work with the field officer team. We received 21 responses.
- 3.14 Some of the key survey findings were:
- 55% of respondents said that they found the service 'responsive' or 'very responsive'
 - 55% of respondents said that they found the service 'effective' or 'very effective' in dealing with their request
 - 46% of respondents said that their overall experience of the service was 'good' or 'very good'
- 3.15 Respondents said that they feel the team could have a greater role in enforcement and inspections and said that the service could be improved by being more joined up, and be clearer on how they can help or what their responsibilities are
- 3.16 Officers also undertook interviews with relevant managers of services. Some of the key findings were that:
- Most of the services initially identified would not be significantly impacted by the withdrawal of the Field Officer service
 - Most stakeholders said that work was often handed back by the Field Officers as it become too technical and would often end-up resolving the issues themselves. The Field Officers were described as 'generalists' and not 'specialists'.
 - Some services said that they would prefer the resources invested back into specialist services to help them deal with cases more quickly and effectively
 - Most stakeholders said that the Field Officers have a very useful role in witnessing or collecting evidence to support investigations
 - Most stakeholders said that the working hours of the Field Officers did not meet their 'Out of Hours' needs.

- 3.17 A number of services identified initially to work with the Field Officers haven't because of:
- Not wanting to allocate any funding
 - The Field Officers not having the right knowledge or skills required to deal with a request
 - Having alternative and appropriate services in place to deal with the work
- 3.18 An independently facilitated workshop was also held with the team to seek their views on the service. Some of the key findings from the workshop were that the team's:
- Interaction with customers and communities, response times and operating hours 'worked well'
 - Working relationship with other teams, Information Technology and being away from the council's offices 'didn't work well'
- 3.19 Following the review, it is felt that whilst the team do offer support to other specialist teams and to partners and the officers are willing to try new ways of working and have had some excellent results, the team is not providing the services nor receiving the funding that was initially envisaged.
- 3.20 Since the implementation of the Field Officer Team the Environmental Enforcement Team has become established and picks up on the portfolio of waste and street furniture enforcement. They have also taken responsibility for the enforcement of dog control orders and officers are exploring whether they could also pick up enforcement in relation to estate agents boards and illegal street trading. This team is self funded through collection of fixed penalty notices etc and also work later hours than field officers (to 10pm).
- 3.21 In light of the findings of the review, the current financial position of the council, and the need to identify possible budget savings across services including from the Safer Communities service, officers believe that it would not be appropriate to continue with the team.
- 3.22 The HRA funding contribution to the team will instead be reinvested in local housing services in line with HRA budget priorities, for instance supporting the estates walkabout programme and dealing with issues raised by residents about their estates.
- 3.23 The remaining budget from regulatory services (Safer Communities) will be used to create additional resource within environmental protection to deal with noise complaints and other nuisances. (1x senior environmental health officer and 2x technical officers.) The fixed term encampments co-ordinator role created in 2021, will be made permanent, and an additional encampments co-ordinator post will be created to work to address issues with unauthorised encampments in the city. It is anticipated that the field officer team members will have support and opportunities to consider applying for new roles in Safer Communities and existing vacancies within

the Council. The remaining budget (approximately £63,000) will be offered as a saving.

4. ANALYSIS & CONSIDERATION OF ANY ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 4.1 The team could continue as is but it is felt that this is not viable due to the current budget position of the council and the lack of engagement and funding from other services within the local authority.
- 4.2 Consideration has been given to creating a team that is self financing. The manner in which the team operates, and the roles that they undertake does not lend itself to it becoming self financing in the same way the that Environmental Enforcement team is.

5. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & CONSULTATION

- 5.1 Services that engage with or were identified as working with field officers at the team's inception were engaged with as part of the review. An on line survey was also undertaken with front line staff who work with the team. As the service does not receive complaints directly from the public, wider consultation was not undertaken. Partners such as Sussex Police were also engaged with as part of the review. Feedback from some of the area panels, suggests that the field officers are not as visible as they might be on some of our estates.
- 5.2 The staff have been advised regarding the recommendations in the report and a formal consultation process will commence shortly.

6. CONCLUSION

- 6.1 Delivery of this service whilst being successful in part, has not delivered the service as originally envisaged and due to the financial pressures the council is currently facing, the team should be discontinued from 1st April 2023.

7. FINANCIAL & OTHER IMPLICATIONS:

Financial Implications:

- 7.1 The gross budget in 2022/23 for the Field Officer team is £0.386m and is funded from within the Safer Communities revenue budget of £0.322m and funding of £0.064m from the HRA.

The financial implications of the proposed deletion of the Field Officer team and the resultant budget saving of £0.063m for 2023/24 are set out in the main body of the report. This figure was reported to Policy & Resources Committee on 1st December as part of the first draft savings included within the Draft General Fund Budget and Resources Update 2023/24 report.

Finance Officer Consulted: Michael Bentley

Date: 05/12/2022

Legal Implications:

In 2018 when the creation of a Field Officer Team was contemplated, relevant functions fell within the remit of the Council's then Neighbourhoods, Inclusion, Communities & Equalities Committee. Those functions are now exercised by this Committee, which has since received reports on the work of the Team.

As the relevant Committee agreed the creation of the Team in 2018, it is considered appropriate for Committee to consider this proposal to delete the Team and - if it considers appropriate – approve it. Any changes to the Scheme of Delegations to Officers which forms part 6 of the Council's Constitution must in addition be formally approved by Policy & Resources Committee.

The Council has a broad discretion regarding how it discharges its enforcement responsibilities. No direct legal implications over and above the need to consult with existing staff and with representatives as well as stakeholders have been identified.

Lawyer Consulted:

Victoria Simpson

Date: 1/12/22

Equalities Implications:

- 7.2 A budget Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) has been completed regarding the discontinuation of the team. No significant impacts have been identified that would have a disproportionate impact on any protected characteristics.

Sustainability Implications:

- 7.3 None

Crime & Disorder Implications:

- 7.4 There maybe some impacts on the partnership work undertaken by the team to address crime and disorder such as 'hotspot patrols' discontinuing. However some resource will be allocated to other services as set out above to address issues such as noise nuisance and unauthorised encampments in the city.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

Appendices: None

