

# What's all this about....Surrey Heath's Contact Centre?

In October, Surrey Heath plans to open a Contact Centre as part of its modernisation programme. There will be a new reception area at Surrey Heath House, a single telephone number to call, and newly recruited staff with access to new IT systems ready to respond to (some of) your queries and complaints.

## Contacting the Council

Every large organisation these days has a single telephone contact number – think about your Bank, Insurance or Telephone Company. But up until now, Surrey Heath Council hasn't been like that. There have been at least a dozen telephone contact numbers, and many enquiries have ended up on voicemail. There has been not one reception at Surrey Heath House, but five. Worse, all the records are kept separately by each department and not shared. All this duplication leads to extra cost for the Council and frustration for residents trying to deal with the Council.

But now, Surrey Heath is implementing a Contact Centre. Residents will be able to ring one number and get their questions answered - then and there - be it about dustbins, playgrounds, planning or council tax. Or come in person to a new centre at the council offices to have those questions answered.



## SHBC Forced To Take Action

Government has long been encouraging councils to go down this route as part of its "Implementing Electronic Government" programme, and has made generous grants available. *However, it took threats of "special measures" and an Audit Commission report that branded Surrey Heath the "Worst Council in Surrey" to convince the Conservative leadership to take action!*

## Updating the Organisation

A necessary part of this modernisation is a review of the Council's ways of working, and consequential organisational changes. A group of the Council's own staff has been used to drive the improvement process, rather than use external consultants. Lib Dems support this approach, and commend the enthusiasm and dedication of all the Surrey Heath staff involved.

## 50% over budget, 50% longer than planned – so far!

When Council approved the project (24/05/2004), the Contact Centre was to be fully operational on 1<sup>st</sup> April, 2005, and was to cost £1.3m. Currently estimates are that the cost will be over £2m, and that the Centre will open in mid-October, 2005. So 50% over budget, and taking 50% longer! But that is not the whole story. When the Centre opens, it will only deal with around 20% of expected contacts. It will take until June, 2007 to migrate all the services into it. Lib Dems also believe that there will be more cost overruns.

## FOCUS SAYS:

*Lib Dems strongly support the concept of making SHBC more "customer friendly", and approve of the overhaul of the Council's IT systems using government grants to provide better services. In May 2004, Lib Dems supported the initiative, but expressed serious doubts about both plan and budget (and voted against them). We also doubted the ability of the Council to run a project of this size. We take no pleasure in being proved right.*

## Action on Climate Change

In a motion to Council on 15<sup>th</sup> December, 2004, Lib Dem Councillor **Judy Douch** called on SHBC to sign up to the "Nottingham Declaration" on Climate Change. This would commit the Council to reduce its own carbon emissions, and also to provide leadership on this issue in the local area. So far, around 80 other local authorities have signed up to the Declaration, representing both urban and rural areas, and of all political persuasions.

Recently, Surrey Heath's Leisure & Environment Committee accepted the conclusions of an internal report that the Council's current actions in this area were "fragmented and uncoordinated", and that signing up to the Declaration would provide "focus". The Committee's recommendation will now go to the full Council for consideration.

*If you could help us research environmental issues locally with a view to getting action from SHBC or Surrey County Council, we would welcome your help (contact details on page 4).*

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