

Key Decision Required :	YES	In the Forward Plan:	YES
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**CABINET**

**13 JUNE 2012**

**REPORT OF THE PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR TOURISM AND COMMUNITY LIFE**

**A.2 CARELINE IN GROUP SCHEMES**

(Report prepared by Kevin Giles)

**PART 1 – KEY INFORMATION**

<b>PURPOSE OF THE REPORT</b>
To consider the provision of Careline support in our “Group Schemes” in the light of the fact that the existing equipment needs replacement and there have been connectivity problems at 2 sites.

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>
<p>The Council owns 351 properties/ flats based in 28 different locations in the district, known collectively as “Group Schemes”. All 351 units benefit from the basic Careline response service provided by a hard wired pull cord alarm system, linked to the Careline Control Centre, designed to enable each occupant to summon assistance if necessary.</p> <p>In 2008 a survey of the alarm equipment in use in our Group Schemes was carried out by Tunstall (the company which the Council currently uses in support of our Careline activities). The report stated that the majority of the equipment was over 20 years old and outside its intended design lifespan. A cost for a full upgrade at that time was estimated at £342,000. Recently there have been connectivity problems in two of the Group Schemes, one in Percy King Estate, Clacton and the other in Mary Warner Estate at Ardleigh. There is an urgent need to consider a replacement strategy.</p> <p>The current system has very high maintenance costs and it makes economic sense to replace the hardwire system with individual units. This can be undertaken and can also be achieved quickly.</p>

<b>RECOMMENDATION</b>
<p>(a) <b>That the Council replaces the hardwire system in those Group Scheme properties with individual equipment for those who wish to retain the Careline basic response service, and that option (a) or (b) on page 2 will apply depending on the service user’s choice and financial standing.</b></p> <p>(b) <b>That the cost of this work is met from the Capital programme and Reserve budgets for Careline.</b></p>

**PART 2 – IMPLICATIONS OF THE DECISION**

<b>DELIVERING PRIORITIES</b>
In a recent letter to Local Authorities concerning the protection of vulnerable people, the Minister for Housing and Local Government stated that “evidence shows that for £1.61bn investment in housing-related support services, overall net financial benefit is an estimated £3.41bn, mainly because of avoided social care, homelessness, and NHS costs.” The Careline service provided by

Tendring is exactly the type of support to which the Minister referred and is the type of approach required in support of community budgeting which is a priority for this Council.

Careline provides peace of mind to the user and their families in the event of an emergency such as a fall, feeling unwell or a safety concern in or around the home. This is particularly pertinent in Tendring given the demographics of the local population, and includes the Careline Control Centre working in conjunction with the NHS Falls Prevention team.

## **FINANCE, OTHER RESOURCES AND RISK**

### **Finance and other Resources**

The potential annual income to Careline from the 351 group schemes is £50,712 based on the current charge of £3.01 for 48 weeks per year. Essex County Council fund £2.94 per week for 222 units as Supporting People funding. This equates to £31,328 per annum. The cost for Careline in the remaining units is met by the tenants themselves.

Budgetary provision was made some time ago to resolve some of the Careline issues and the following one off funding is still available.

£38,000.00 is held in an earmarked reserve in respect of – Careline System Replacement

£60,000.00 in Capital programme in respect of Careline Equipment Upgrade to BT 21CN (Digital)

Our records indicate that, of the 351 units in the Group Schemes, 77 do not have a BT phone line but do have a mobile phone and one has no telephone connection whatsoever. For those with a BT line, connection to the Careline service can be achieved with a base unit and pendant at a total cost of £109 per unit. For those with a mobile phone, but without a landline, the cost of mobile technology is:

- a) £210 if a mobile phone unit is used or
- b) £239 if a BT phone line is installed at £130 for landline installation, plus £109 for the Careline base unit and pendant.

The cost of telephone calls and line rental, or topping up the mobile phone SIM card, will be the responsibility of the tenant.

Based on the information received from a recent survey of service users (40% response), 54 users have indicated that they do not require the service. Whilst we will not incur replacement equipment costs for these users, there will be a subsequent loss of income for these and any other users who do not want the service. However, a large proportion of this income may ultimately be affected as Essex County Council, who currently meet the cost of 222 residents within the Group Schemes via the Supporting People budget, are currently reviewing their funding.

The total purchase of 219 landline units and 78 mobile units using option (a) is £40,251 or £42,513 using option (b). The equipment has at least a 5 year life span. The hardwire system currently costs £17,124 per annum in maintenance despite the fact that there are no longer any guarantees of repair. Over a 5 year period this is a saving of £85,620 in maintenance costs.

It therefore makes economic sense to swap to the new individual base units for those wishing to remain on Careline. There are sufficient funds to pay for the up front initial costs.

The timescale for the installation of telephone landlines will depend upon BT.

There will be an additional total estimated cost of £14,508 for the work to be carried out to decommission and make safe the existing infrastructure at the Group Schemes. It is envisaged that this will involve no disruption for most tenants with minimal impact on the few affected.

Life Opportunities will arrange to remove the existing pull cords plus residual equipment at the next change of tenancy. This has not been included in the decommissioning costs and will be part of the "making good" work at the termination of a tenancy.

## **Risk**

There is now a significant risk of connectivity problems in the remaining 26 locations of the hard wired system at a time when a customer wishes to summon help.

As the replacement equipment is freestanding and cannot always easily be secured to the building infrastructure there is a potential risk of loss of equipment, particularly at change of tenancy, although there is a similar element of risk with other Careline users. It may be necessary for a working procedure to be adopted between the Control Centre and Housing at change of tenancy whereby the equipment is collected and returned if the new tenant requires the service.

From past experience the strength and continuity of a mobile telephone signal varies depending on a number of factors including location, prevailing weather conditions and network usage. Landline telephone connections can, on rare occasions, also be unavailable. These issues can be pointed out to tenants in their tenancy documentation.

Essex County Council are reviewing their funding, via Supporting People, of community alarm services such as those in our Group Schemes. This means that we are likely to lose significant funding towards the Careline costs but we cannot delay the decision on the Group Scheme connectivity problems until this issue is resolved. We have been advised that any decision is not expected to be implemented until the beginning of the 2013/14 financial year.

## **LEGAL**

The suggested action is within the Council's powers.

## **OTHER IMPLICATIONS**

**Consideration has been given to the implications of the proposed decision in respect of the following and any significant issues are set out below.**

**Crime and Disorder / Equality and Diversity / Health Inequalities /Area or Ward affected / Consultation/Public Engagement.**

The group schemes are based in Alresford, Ardleigh, Beaumont, Great Bromley, Little Clacton, Lawford, Mistle, St Osyth, Brightlingsea, Frinton, Holland & Kirby, Harwich East, Harwich West Central, Clacton Alton Park, Clacton Rush Green and Clacton St Marys.

### **Equality and Diversity**

All tenants can be given the option to receive a basic Careline service which will match their current service level.

## PART 3 – SUPPORTING INFORMATION

### BACKGROUND

The Council owns 351 properties/ flats based in 28 different locations in the district, known collectively as “Group Schemes”. All 351 units benefit from the basic Careline response service provided by a hard wired pull cord alarm system, linked to the Careline Control Centre, designed to enable each occupant to summon assistance if necessary. Every one of the 351 properties has its own pull cord alarm but shares connectivity to Careline via a communal (but dedicated) telephone line at each of the 28 locations. If a resident pulls the alarm cord a signal is sent to the Careline Control Centre in Clacton where staff are on duty 24/7 to respond to the call. Unlike our Sheltered accommodation there are no resident wardens but the Careline service has the benefit of mobile wardens who can respond if necessary.

There is currently a charge of £3.01 per week (£13.04 per month) for this service. Essex County Council currently meets the cost of 222 residents within the Group Schemes via the Supporting People budget, whilst the remainder of customers are self funding.

### CURRENT POSITION

#### Obsolete Technology

In order for the Careline system to function correctly the connection, i.e. telephone line, must be BT21CN compliant. (This is the term commonly used to describe BT’s latest communication standards based on Internet Protocols.). Unfortunately, the hard wired pull cord equipment used in the Group Schemes is not compliant with the new standards. Non compliance does not necessarily cause total failure but creates a reliability issue.

In 2008 a survey of the equipment in use in our Group Schemes was carried out by Tunstall (the company which the Council currently uses in support of our Careline activities). The report stated that the majority of the equipment was over 20 years old and outside its intended design lifespan. A cost for a full upgrade at that time was estimated at £342,000.

However, a partial upgrade with an estimated cost of £61,000 was suggested to resolve the issue of the BT21CN compliance. The partial upgrade would **only** resolve the BT21CN issue and **not** the problem of aged equipment. Although funding was set aside for the partial upgrade, implementation was deferred pending the relocation of the Control Centre and an assessment of the viability of the project, given the age of the equipment. A budget of £60,000.00 is still in the capital programme in respect of Careline Equipment Upgrade to BT 21CN.

#### Equipment Problems

Recently there have been connectivity problems in two of the Group Schemes, one in Percy King Estate, Clacton and the other in Mary Warner Estate at Ardleigh. The residents here are receiving the Careline service on the basis that they have been given a direct phone number to telephone the Careline Control Centre if they require assistance, rather than pull the alarm cord.

The disadvantage of this type of contact is that the call is received in the Control Centre as an ordinary phone call and the operators are unable to identify it as a priority call as would be the case if the alarm was raised by the pull cord. This is not therefore a suitable long term solution to provide support for residents of **all** of our Group Schemes.

Historically Group Scheme tenancies were let on the basis that the tenants needed to use the hard wired Careline system to enable them to live independently. However, this was not made as a condition of the tenancy and there is doubt that the need for Careline support is universal within the Group Scheme units even though every unit has the system and is charged for the facility.

### Supporting People

The issue is further complicated by the fact that Essex County Council are in the process of reviewing their funding of community alarms such as those in our Group Schemes. We have however, now been advised that any decision is likely to be with effect from the beginning of the 2013/14 financial year. We are likely to lose significant funding towards the Careline costs but we cannot delay the decision on the Group Scheme connectivity problems until this issue is resolved.

Investigations into a business case for the ongoing provision of the Careline service are underway and the overall implication of the Supporting People funding change will be covered as part of this process.

### The Way Forward

A questionnaire was recently sent to all residents in the Group Schemes to ascertain individual information about their requirements. Replies were received from 40% of residents of which 54 stated that they did not require the Careline support service.

Many of the tenants in the Group Schemes have very particular needs and we cannot simply remove the Careline facility and expect them to remain in their current accommodation without support. We do not have the capacity to relocate them to the Sheltered Scheme accommodation and the interim solution on the sites where there have already been connectivity problems is not ideal and certainly not practicable for larger numbers.

We also know from our current records that 84% of Group Scheme tenants receive Housing Benefit and therefore have a low income. Although they currently have arrangements in place to meet the cost of the current service at £12.04 per month any additional costs could cause financial difficulty.

Careline customers in private accommodation pay £17.14 per month and receive a more comprehensive service based around an assessment of their needs. The necessary equipment is largely provided by Essex County Council based on that assessment.

The best way to resolve the issue is to ensure that all tenants requiring continued support from the basic Careline response service have access to an independent BT phone line, a Careline base unit and pendant alarm. The pendant alarm button when pressed will trigger a base unit linked to the telephone to dial the Careline Control centre based in Clacton. This type of call will show as an alarm call and receive priority from the Control Centre staff. It will replicate the basic response service provided by the hard wired system.

The Council could offer to provide the necessary equipment free of charge to those who wish their current level of service to continue as there is sufficient funding in the capital programme. £60,000 is allocated in respect of Careline Equipment Upgrade to BT 21CN. However, as only 40% of the affected tenants have responded to our questionnaire it is difficult to be accurate about costs because we do not know the exact total number requiring ongoing support. We have used Housing records to establish if each unit has an independent phone line or a mobile phone.

### **BACKGROUND PAPERS FOR THE DECISION**

There are none.