The meeting commenced at 7.00 p.m. and closed at 8.45 p.m.

1. Welcome and Introductions

Cllr Ellie Robinson, Chair, welcomed all members and officers to the meeting.

2. Declarations of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting that occurred on 12 December, 2012, were agreed as correct subject to the following addition:

1. Cllr John Gray asked that the statement about the requirement to be on the voting register being a legal requirement should be added. As there could be a link to non-compliance and anti-social behaviour in the community.

4. Update on Actions from previous meetings

Sean Moseley (SM) updated to the Group in regards to the action from the previous meeting on disused garages. SM explained that a focus group had been convened with Russell Thornton, Head of Rent Services.

The outcome of the focus group was the view that a garage strategy should
be produced, which will articulate the Council’s policy in dealing with the issue of disused garages. The strategy should include:

1. Where the empty garages are located (this is already in progress)
2. The potential usage of the existing empty garages
3. The steps that would need to be taken to re-let these empty garages - as well as the cost
4. Imaginative ways of letting the garages (e.g. reduced rate for first three months, advertising at stations, etc)
5. In the cases where the garages remain empty the next steps for improving the area should be outlined
6. Improve the publicity of the vacant garages that are suitable to rent and this could be through such mediums as the Newham Mag or train station advertising.

The Group agreed that the issue of vacant garages will be raised with Overview and Scrutiny.

5. The Focus of the Meeting is Customer Access

Susan Folwell (SF), Interim Head of Customer Services and Ron Springer (RS), Contact Centre Manager, outlined the report on Customer Access. It was explained that the main access route for the public (including tenants) is via the Contact Centre and the increased demand has put this service under increased pressure. A plan has been put in place to help mitigate the weaknesses that are outlined in the report, and this will include recruiting ten temporary employees. Improvements are also being developed in improving technology, process and further investment in staff (both existing and new).

Steve Moore (SM), Director of Environmental Services added to the report by stating that Customer Access will be moving to the Operations Directorate and will be led by Jackie Belton, Executive Director, Operations. This it was explained will give a more joined-up and strategic view of customer access. SM added that ICT improvements are needed and that the move will help raise standards in this area. In conclusion, SM stated that the current aim is to answer all calls in fifteen seconds and this is a policy that the Mayor fully supports.

Members responded that if the fifteen second target for answering calls is often not being met, then a call-back function could be offered. RS responded that there were no plans for a call-back service because the priority was to focus all Call Centre staff to deal with the call the first time in the correct manner, thus making sure that the customer does not have to call again for the same enquiry.

SM added that the system that is being improved upon is very new and that
there were no officers from the old system present. Cllr Robinson expressed disappointment that officers from the old system of operating customer access could not be present at this meeting. Members also expressed concerns about the level of detail in the report. SM replied that he would be happy to submit more details the Group required.

The Group asked if there is provision to monitor if a call was dealt with correctly the first time that it is answered. SF confirmed that this was not currently possible but it was being built into the medium term action plan.

In response to the numbers that the Contact Centre is currently understaffed by, it was confirmed that there are currently forty four staff and this will be increased to fifty five on a short term basis.

It was asked if sickness absence was a significant issue at the Contact Centre, and it was confirmed that it is not an issue and staff absenteeism is minimal. RS added that the Centre does open for a longer period of time (8am-8-pm on weekdays and 9am-1pm on Saturdays) than most other councils and this has stretched the staff resources. There is a proposal that the opening hours will be reduced to better use the capacity that is available.

A question was asked in regards to the input of resources into the Centre versus the output (results) and whether they were acceptable? SF responded that there have been ups and downs, and this was highlighted by the extra temporary support that was brought in during the Olympic Games period. However, the abandonment rate is currently increasing and this is being rectified. A report will be provided to the Mayor that will outline a request for a £900,000 Growth Bid to improve services. This is partly required due to the increase of usage of services that are being requested due to enquiries in regards to the changes to Welfare Reforms.

The Commission was concerned about the quality of the Council website for the services that tenants want to access. One example given was the lack of an icon for Repair Services. This issue members explained had been raised at the beginning of 2012, but still had not been rectified. RS agreed that improvements are still needed to be made and agreed to look into the issue about the prominence of the Repair Service function (010).

Members asked how the public can feedback to the Council about their views of the service. Members highlighted the questionnaire that is offered on the Council website, and asked if this was a useful method to gather feedback. SF responded that the questionnaire does provide very helpful customer feedback and from 31 May, the new Council website will launch. SF stated that she would welcome the Group’s comments on the website and how it could be improved. SF also explained that there will be usability testing in April and again welcomed the Group’s input into this work (011).

The Group asked that other than the questionnaire on the Council’s website how residents’ views on the quality of access were monitored and
whether any specific consultations with residents were undertaken. SF responded that there were no specific consultations; however the newly planned voice recognition service will have an option for feedback. SM added that the Liveability Survey does offer some engagement with residents and highlights their concerns.

The Group asked for more information about the planned timeline for the “channel-shift” that will involve moving in most cases from face-to-face to either online services or via the Contact Centre. SF and SM explained that a considerable amount of work was going into the channel-shift and that a revised timetable for this work will be available by the next Group meeting in June. The Group requested that this timetable is circulated to members and that it includes the targets that the channel-shift will be measured against (012).

Cllr McAlmont asked whether the staff in the Call Centre were capable and equipped to deal with the issues that customers requested and particularly in regards to specialist enquires such as homelessness information. RS responded that staff are well trained and that there are three tiers of advice that can be given. In regards to homelessness this could be generic advice or it could involve more specialist bespoke face to face interaction.

Cllr McAlmont enquired about the standard of service and explained that he had experienced a more polite service when he mentioned that he was a councillor. RS responded that the standard of his staff was very high and that a range of measures were in place to keep the consistency and this included silent listening in to calls and call monitoring. All calls are recorded and any drop in standards is taken very seriously.

The Group asked about calls to the Council’s sub-contractors such as Carillion, which supplies gas services. Members were concerned that the transfer from the Council Call Centre to the sub-contractor could be improved, as the standards that the sub-contractor operates under it was felt is not as high as the Council’s standards. In the case of Carillion, a member of the Group explained that she called on behalf of an elderly neighbour three times and had extended waiting times to get through. The Group asked if in such a scenario if the Council Call Centre should offer the option to complain about the service. SM confirmed that an opportunity to complain was not part of the Call Centre “script” when dealing with problems with sub-contractor standards, but would review this (013). John Smith (JS), Head of Housing Management explained that there is no longer one single point of contact for housing as there had been in the past. Instead some issues are picked-up by the Call Centre and then re-routed to sub-contractors or the appropriate officer and in other cases tenants still contacted an officer via a direct line. JS added that telephony is not the only route to access the Council and this was particularly the case when the most vulnerable need services that are either directly provided or sub-contracted by the Council.

The Group asked what the performance was of the Carillion and how this is
audited. Adrian Brown (AB), Head of Operations Improvement explained that the performance of Carillion was very good and gas inspection compliance was at 99.5 percent. Carillion undertakes its own audit and the Council also conducts its own assurance of the figures.

The Group explored the implications of the “Digital by Default” policy and questioned how particularly elderly members of the community would be able to interact with the Council. SF responded that the aim is that simple transactions will wherever possible be done online but there will always be back-ups and safeguards in-place. This approach, it was explained is in-line with the Mayor’s Resilience Policy. SF explained that automated response technology will also be put in place for simpler transactions. RS added that if face-to-face is the only option for a customer due to their specific needs that this will not be denied. SM stated that if face-to-face transactions were the default option that customers would take it as it is often easier but it is not cost effective.

Cllr Robinson requested that financial information regarding the channel shift that explained how much was due to be saved and how this would be realised is presented to the Group (014).

The Group asked if there were options for the Call Centre to generate revenue. SM responded that options such as the usage of 0844/0845 numbers had not been considered. It was added that work was being done in other areas of the Council to improve shared services and this had led to close collaboration with the London Borough of Havering. There were though no immediate plans for any shared services that will involve the Contact Centre.

With there being no further questions, Cllr Robinson thanked the officers for attending.

**Actions**
- To review the prominence of the Repair Services online function (010)
- For the Group to feedback any resident issues with the current website, in preparation for the new site launch on 31 May and to take part in usability testing in April (011)
- For a timetable for the channel shift that includes targets for its success to be circulated to members (012)
- To review the standards of access to sub-contractors and the options for customers to make complaints (013)
- Financial information on explaining the savings being made on the “Channel-shift” and how they will be achieved to be presented to the Group (014)

6. AOB
Adrian Brown (AB) raised the issue of the CCTV consultation and requested that the Group may want to provide a joint response. It was explained that all tenants that are affected will be written to and individual sessions with residents will take place. SM added that the current system of concierges was not viable and the current arrangements are £700,000 over budget each year. Also the variability of the offer was discussed and the proposals aimed to standardise this offer. Officers added that the proposals will not affect the provision for concierges in sheltered housing.

Cllr Robinson expressed concern that not all of the detail in regards to what could be taken away is explained in the consultation. SM agreed that there is a balance of the volume of information that should be included in the consultation.

The Group asked if any other mechanisms were being sought to engage with those that might be affected other than the letters sent. JS explained that the letters will be the main way to engage and Newham staff that are tenants are encouraged to spread the message in their communities.

Cllr Robinson asked the Group, via the Scrutiny Manager to provide comments to the consultation by Thursday 28 March (015).

**Action**
For members to submit comments on the CCTV consultation to the Scrutiny Manager and for all of the comments to be consolidated into a joint Group response (015)

7. **Date of the Next Meeting**

The date of the next meeting is Monday 24 June, 7-9pm. The meeting will take place at the Harold Road Community Centre.

Members are reminded that a pre-briefing will take place from 6:30pm.