



OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY VIEWS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO CABINET 20 MAY 2009

Report Title	RECOMMENDATIONS OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 3 (IMPROVEMENT, PERFORMANCE AND FINANCE) – REVIEW OF THE COUNCIL'S CUSTOMER SERVICES FACILITIES
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Agenda Status: PUBLIC

1. Purpose

- 1.1 To present to Cabinet the report of Overview and Scrutiny Committee Three on the findings of the Customer Services Task and Finish Group.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 The Task and Finish Group recommends to Cabinet that:-

1. In order to ascertain whether a good Customer Service Facility is being provided by Northampton Borough Council, benchmarking against the family group be undertaken.
2. A cost saving exercise regarding the number of leaflets produced be undertaken and consideration given to alternatives such as information made available electronically and the installation of plasma screens in the One Stop Shop to display relevant information.
3. A higher promotion of customer focus throughout the whole Authority be introduced by promoting the Customer Excellence Strategy 2009-2012.
4. The Complaints Policy Procedure be updated.
5. The Customer Services Leaflets and Customer Feedback forms be updated and contain Officers' posts rather than the inclusion of Officers' names.
6. In depth training for all Customer Services Staff be strengthened, in particular training for staff on how to deal with job related stresses.
7. The front desk based in the One Stop Shop deals with simple queries such as receiving customer's additional paperwork and completed forms.

8. A Health and Safety report for Cliftonville House be produced for environmental issues such as the lighting, heating and air conditioning systems, along with the cleanliness of the premise.
9. The Task and Finish Group informs Cabinet of its support for the introduction of an automated queuing system at the One Stop Shop at Northampton Borough Council.
10. A team from Customer Services be set up to work with managers to draw up Service Level Agreements around customer focus.
11. The provision of Council documents are translated into formats suitable for a range of disabled customers be strengthened, by offering the facility of tapes or compact discs of requested Council documents being provided to those such customers.
12. Customer Services Officers be allocated sufficient time to keep up to date with 'Regulatory changes' using the new computer trainer system.
13. A questionnaire be sent to customers after complaint resolution, all Services be sent a copy on which to comment.
14. All Councillors be reminded to use the Councillor Contact Centre rather than contacting individual departments/services. This is necessary to ensure that accurate information about the service provision is provided.
15. Training for Councillors on how to use Councillor Contact Centre and the whole Customer Services Process be given. The same training be given to the Political Assistants and Leader's Secretary.
16. A copy of this report be sent to the Chief Executive, Head of Customer Services, Northamptonshire County Council and all those who have participated in this Review.
17. The Task and Finish Group welcomes the capital resource of £250,000 for improvements to the One Stop Shop.
18. That resources be allocated for the provision of uniforms for frontline Customer Services Officers, identifying a corporate image. Staff be consulted on the style of the uniform.

3. Background and Issues

- 3.1 The purpose of the Task and Finish Group was to evaluate the success of investments made in Customer Services since 2005.
- 3.2 This Review has been part of the Committee's Work Programme for some time and it was agreed that it was timely in late 2008 for the Review to commence.
- 3.3 Information obtained from the following sources formed the main body of evidence gathered by the Committee:
 - Assistant Head of Customer Services, NBC
 - Assistant Head of Finance, NBC
 - Portfolio Holder (Performance)
 - Portfolio Holder (Finance)

- Various Customer Services Officers, NBC
- Members of the public visiting the Council's customer services facilities
- Kettering Borough Council
- Milton Keynes Council
- Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council

3.4 In considering the evidence the following conclusions were made:-

- 3.4.1 Northampton Borough Council's Customer Services is classified as medium in terms of value for money and the average cost per visiting customer is £12.50. The cost of a telephone enquiry is £2.50 and an on-line query equates to 50 pence. It is realised that Customer Services at Northampton Borough Council offers an in-depth service; therefore the cost will be higher. Benchmarking against other Authorities is currently not undertaken. The Task and Finish Group acknowledged that to ascertain whether a good Customer Service Facility was being provided by Northampton Borough Council, benchmarking against the family group (Councils that are similar in size, population etc) should be undertaken. However, it is not compulsory for this to take place but it is noted as a best practice exercise.
- 3.4.2 The Complaints Policy Procedure required updating. The Customer Services Leaflets and Customer Feedback forms were out of date, in particular detailing Officer's names that have since left the Authority. It would be better to include Officer's job roles with a contact number rather than the inclusion of Officer's names. The Task and Finish Group realised that from looking at the Customer Services documentation and the fact it was outdated that there was a need to review all Council core documents to ensure they are up to date and produced in plain English, following the same corporate style.
- 3.4.3 The Call Centre is working very well and is a value for money service.
- 3.4.4 Staffing levels were felt to be adequate at the Call Centre. Two members of staff deal with Customer contacts and complaints, request for Services passes on to the Contact centre. The use of the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system has been in progress for eight months and can allow checks on what action has been taken. This is an excellent system, which has all information and can answer customer calls immediately.
- 3.4.5 Staff training is carried out in-house in each service area. The Customer Services Officer has a mentor who is very experienced with long service. Training also includes shadowing experienced staff. The Task and Finish Group felt that there are other courses and forums where staff could be more involved, for example, drug and alcohol abuse awareness, County of Northampton Council on Addiction (CAN) provides some courses in this area.
- 3.4.6 It is recognised that the separation of Customer Services staff on different sites is not conducive to good teamwork.
- 3.4.7 The Task and Finish Group acknowledges that there needs to be higher promotion of customer focus throughout the whole Authority. There appears to be a resistance to more customer friendly services, for instance, the customer comes first, and a territorial attitude still exists. A culture change is needed. There is a desire to monitor the 'Customer's Journey' and consider the ethos and equality of the service along with the degree of consistency.

- 3.4.8 The uniforms worn by Customer Services Officers at Kettering Borough Council and the reception staff at Milton Keynes Direct impressed the Task and Finish Group. £250,000 of capital resources has been made available for the One Stop Shop. It is felt that it would be beneficial for some of this resource to be used to provide uniforms for Customer Services Staff at Northampton Borough Council, identifying a corporate image.
- 3.4.9 Abusive, aggressive calls and upset housing needs assessment customers' calls can cause stress for staff. There is good support from principles 'walking areas', internal discussions, and a watchful environment with extra headsets for difficult matters all being available. The Task and Finish Group realised that there was a need for further training for Customer Services Officers around how to deal with the stresses of the job. Whilst evidence gathering, the Group heard of training offered by the Samaritans for its staff on 1:1 mentorship and it was felt that this type of training would be beneficial for Northampton Borough Council's Customer Services Officers.
- 3.4.10 It was noted that many customers had to queue in the One Stop Shop to hand in additional paperwork or a completed form or questionnaire. At Kettering Borough Council, the front reception deals with such queries alleviating the need to queue.
- 3.4.11 The Task and Finish Group was concerned with some of the environmental issues at Cliftonville House, such as the working of the air conditioning and heating systems. Some areas of the building were too hot and others seemed to be too cold. The lighting in the Revenues and Benefits section required updating, often staff had to turn off the lights to work, which could have an impact on their eyesight. Staff also had concerns regarding the cleanliness of the building.
- 3.4.12 Kettering Borough Council uses the automated queuing system (Queue-Matrix) in its One Stop Shop and on observing this in use; the Task and Finish Group noted its effectiveness. An automated queuing system is due to be introduced in the One Stop Shop at Northampton Borough Council.
- 3.4.13 The Call Centre does not deal with planning, building control or environmental health issues. There is a need for more technology, which may have initial set up costs but the improved, more efficient service would recoup costs in a short time.
- 3.4.14 Customer Services Officers working in the Revenues and Benefits section of the Call Centre advised of the need to have time to keep up to date with 'Regulatory changes'. It was noted that there will be a new system with information on a computer screen trainer, but staff will still need adequate time to use it.
- 3.4.15 The system that the Customer Services Officers use in the Revenues and Benefits section of the Call Centre is out of date. There is no scanner available, and all the individual pages have to be date stamped, items photocopied and then returned to customer, the paper work then goes to the post room, is scanned and then inputted onto the computer.
- 3.4.16 Located with the Customer Improvement Team is an Ombudsmen Link officer, who ensures that complaints enquiries go to Customer Services. There is a direct route to the Chief Executive. The Task and Finish Group recognised that there was a need for a questionnaire to be sent to customers after complaint resolution. All Services should receive a copy on which to comment.

- 3.4.17 The Council produces many leaflets, in excess of seventy, all of which contain valuable information. The Task and Finish Group felt that this information could be relayed in more cost effective ways such as on the Council's website for customers to download. Kettering Borough Council has a policy to display minimal leaflets; the majority of information is displayed on its plasma screens in situ in the One Stop Shop. Plasma screens display the most up to date information and news and can be shared to display partners' information.
- 3.4.18 The Task and Finish Group is impressed with the overall presentation of the Councillor Contact Centre, which is working very efficiently, the staff are friendly and helpful, there is a record of contact and response which can provide data. It is noted that not all Councillors use the Councillor Contact Centre. It was acknowledged that a strong team is needed to work with managers to draw up Service Level Agreements around customer focus.
- 3.4.19 There is a need for training Councillors on how to use the Councillor Contact Centre and the whole Customer Services Process. It would also be beneficial to involve Political Assistants and the Leader's Secretary in this training. Councillors could use their Political Assistants more effectively.
- 3.4.20 The Task and Finish Group was supportive of the 24 hour claim guarantee scheme whereby customers who present a fully completed and signed new benefit claim or benefit change of circumstances form together with all necessary documentary evidence are given the assurance that their claim will be processed within 24 hours.
- 3.4.21 Future expectations comprise initiatives such as E-Benefits, a cashless system, re-designing of the One Stop Shop and benefits assessments taking place by Customer Services Officers in the One Shop were noted.
- 3.4.22 It was agreed that Northamptonshire County Council's Registry Office, based at the Guildhall is very small, cluttered and unwelcoming. Concerns were initially raised regarding the appointment system in operation to register births, deaths and marriages, but following desktop research it was acknowledged that this is standard practice. It takes approximately thirty minutes to register a death, the operation of an appointments system ensures the person registering the death does not have to wait and helps to alleviate a backlog or queue.
- 3.4.23 The Task and Finish Group agreed that the Equality Impact Assessment for Customer Services is very comprehensive and the majority of areas are covered. The provision of Council documents translated into formats suitable for a range of disabled customers needs to be strengthened, by offering the facility of tapes or compact discs of requested Council documents to those such customers.
- 3.4.24 Prior to its final meeting, the Task and Finish Group had a final walkabout of the Council's customer services facilities. The Task and Finish Group was pleased to note that some improvements have already been made; for example, some environmental improvements to the workstations of Customer Services Officers located at Cliftonville House have been implemented. Proposed improvements such as simplifying corporate leaflets and removing those that are now obsolete are planned. The Task and Finish Group supported the new Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) kiosk now located in the One Stop Shop. The ambience of the One Stop Shop has changed since the Group's initial visit, it felt more pleasant, the seating area is now laid out nicely and labels from the backs of the

chairs have been removed. The carpet appears brighter and there is no longer a musty smell. Leaflets are now nicely presented and appear to be up to date. The Group noted that the major improvements will take around twelve months to complete and was pleased to hear that these will consist of new carpeting and the installation of plasma screens in the One Stop Shop

3.4.25 The Task and Finish Group welcomed and supported the Customer Excellence Strategy 2009-2012. This document should be readily accessible by all staff.

4. Options

4.1 Cabinet will need to consider the possible options as part of its response to the recommendations..

5. Implications (including financial implications)

5.1 Policy

5.1.1 The report and its recommendations have policy implications for environment and welfare support work. The Cabinet response will need to consider these issues in further detail.

5.2 Resources and Risk

5.2.1 Cabinet will need to consider the resourcing issues for the recommendations made, for example there will be resourcing implications that would arise from

5.3 Legal

5.3.1 Legal issues will need to be considered as part of Cabinet's response to the recommendations.

5.4 Equality

5.4.1 Equality issues will need to be considered as part of Cabinet's response to the recommendations. This will need to include an Equalities Impact Assessment.

5.5 Consultees (Internal and External)

5.5.1 Comprehensive consultation work was carried out as part of the evidence gathering stage of the Task and Finish Group work.

5.5.2 The Task and Finish Group spoke with members of the public and various Customer Services Officers regarding the facilities provided by Northampton Borough Council.

5.5.3 The Task and Finish Group visited Kettering Borough Council to see its customer services facilities.

5.5.4 The Portfolio Holder (Performance), along with the Task and Finish Group, attended a site visit to Milton Keynes Council to see its customer services facilities.

5.5.5 The Portfolio Holder (Finance) and the Portfolio Holder (Improvement) provided a response to the Task and Finish Group's core questions.

6. Background Papers

- None.

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