

Overview & Scrutiny Committee 3

IMPROVEMENT, PERFORMANCE
AND FINANCE



**To evaluate the success of investments
made in Customer Services
since 2005**



**NORTHAMPTON
BOROUGH COUNCIL**

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Foreword

The objective of this Task and Finish Group was to review Customer Services throughout Northampton Borough Council between November 2008 and April 2009, looking at our Call Centre, One Stop Shop and Housing Offices with the aim of improving Customer Services.

The Task and Finish Group was made up from members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for Finance Performance and improvement, Councillor Dennis Meredith and myself, together with Mrs Marion Minney, who we co – opted onto the Task and Finish Group.

We visited the One Stop Shop, Housing Offices, Planning Offices and Call Centre at Northampton Borough Council and compared our services against those of Kettering Borough Council and Milton Keynes Council by site visits.

We were very warmly welcomed on all of our visits and generally impressed with what we saw however, there are some areas that need attention and recommendations are made at the end of this report. I was very impressed how suggestions made on site visits within Northampton Borough Council were acted upon straight away and improvements have already made.

We also held Interviews with Portfolio Holders and Senior Staff at Northampton Borough Council and desktop research was carried out by Tracy Tiff, our Overview and Scrutiny Officer.

We are going to review this report in six months time to ensure our recommendations have been acted upon and monitor Customer Satisfaction Surveys to see if improvement has been made.

I would like to thank everyone who took part in this piece of work.



A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Jamie Lane', positioned to the right of the portrait photo and above a vertical line.

Councillor Jamie Lane

Chair, Customer Services Task and Finish Group

Acknowledgements to all those who took part in the Review: -

- Councillor Dennis Meredith and Marion Minney, co-opted member, who sat with me on this Review and attended various site visits obtaining valuable evidence to support the final report
- Councillor Brian Hoare, Portfolio Holder (Performance) and Councillor Malcolm Mildren, Portfolio Holder (Finance), for providing a response to the Task and Finish Group's core questions
- Marion Goodman, Head of Customer Services and Cheryl Doran, Assistant Head of Customer Services, for their support to this Review
- Customer Services and call centre staff, NBC, for spending time with the Task and Finish Group on its site visit
- Bill Lewis, Technical Finance Manager, for providing advice and sharing their expertise with the Task and Finish Group
- Marion Goodman, Customer Services Manager, and all the Customer Services Team at Kettering Borough Council, for spending time with the Task and Finish Group on its site visit
- Sean Hanson, Regional Director, Mark Harden, Partnership Director and all the Customer Services Team at Milton Keynes Council, for spending time with the Task and Finish Group on its site visit

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of the Review is to evaluate the success of investments made in Customer Services since 2005.

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.

A Councillor Task and Finish Group was established. One co-opted member joined the Group, Mrs Marion Minney.

CONCLUSIONS AND KEY FINDINGS

A significant amount of evidence was heard, details of which are contained in the report. After gathering evidence the Task and Finish Group established that: -

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.

Whilst undertaking its site visits to the Council's Customer Services facilities, the Task and Finish Group noted that 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.

The Call Centre was working very well and is a value for money service.

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.

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.

It was recognised that the separation of Customer Services staff on different sites is not conducive to good teamwork.

The Task and Finish Group acknowledged 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.

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 was 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 work stations 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.

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

RECOMMENDATIONS

The above overall findings have formed the basis for the following recommendations. The Task and Finish Group asks Cabinet to consider implementing the following recommendations: -

- 5.1 The Task and Finish Group recommends to Cabinet that:
 - 5.1.1 In order to ascertain whether a good Customer Service Facility is being provided by Northampton Borough Council, benchmarking against the family group be undertaken.
 - 5.1.2 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.

- 5.1.3 A higher promotion of customer focus throughout the whole Authority be introduced by promoting the Customer Excellence Strategy 2009-2012.
- 5.1.4 The Complaints Policy Procedure be updated.
- 5.1.5 The Customer Services Leaflets and Customer Feedback forms be updated and contain Officers' posts rather than the inclusion of Officers' names.
- 5.1.6 In depth training for all Customer Services Staff be strengthened, in particular training for staff on how to deal with job related stresses.
- 5.1.7 The front desk based in the One Stop Shop deals with simple queries such as receiving customer's additional paperwork and completed forms.
- 5.1.8 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.
- 5.1.9 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.
- 5.1.10 A team from Customer Services be set up to work with managers to draw up Service Level Agreements around customer focus.
- 5.1.11 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.
- 5.1.12 Customer Services Officers be allocated sufficient time to keep up to date with 'Regulatory changes' using the new computer trainer system.
- 5.1.13 A questionnaire be sent to customers after complaint resolution, all Services be sent a copy on which to comment.
- 5.1.14 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.
- 5.1.15 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.
- 5.1.16 It be recommended to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee that a Review of all Council core documents and

leaflets be added to the Work Programme for 2009/2010. The purpose of the Review would be to ensure that all documents are produced in plain English and follow the same corporate style.

- 5.1.17 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.
- 5.1.18 The Task and Finish Group welcomes the capital resource of £250,000 for improvements to the One Stop Shop.
- 5.1.19 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.

Northampton Borough Council

Overview and Scrutiny

Report of the Customer Services Task and Finish Group

1. Purpose

1.1 The purpose of the Task and Finish Group was to evaluate the success of investments made in Customer Services since 2005.

1.2 A copy of the Scope of the Review is attached at Appendix A.

2. Context and Background

2.1 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.

2.2 A Councillor Task and Finish Group was established. One co-opted member joined the Group, Mrs Marion Minney.

2.3 The Task and Finish Group agreed that the following needed to be investigated and linked to the realisation of the Council's corporate priorities:

- A synopsis of all information available
- Results of surveys undertaken
- Performance Indicator Statistics
- Evidence from the Portfolio Holder (Performance)
- Evidence from key Northampton Borough Council employees
- Visits to Best Practice Councils – Kettering Borough Council and Milton Keynes Council
- Desktop Research
- Visits to internal services – observing process and speaking to employees and visitors: -

- One Stop Shop
- Call Centre
- Switchboard
- Cliftonville reception
- Weston Favell Housing Office
- Kingsthorpe Housing Office

2.4 This Review links to the Council's corporate priorities as it demonstrates the Task and Finish Group investigating how the Council delivers quality services to its customers and communities.

3. Evidence Collection

3.1 In scoping this Review it was decided that evidence would be collected from a variety of sources: -

3.2 Assistant Head of Customer Services

3.2.2.1 The Assistant Head of Customer Services provided baseline data:
-

Performance Data – Customer Contact Centre and Face to Face Operations

Key points of evidence: -

- The Customer Contact Centre was launched alongside the introduction of the Macfarlane Callplus Automated Call Distributor (ACD) software in March 2006 and initially incorporated all customer calls for Streetscene, Housing Repairs and Housing Customer Services. Prior to the creation of the Customer Contact Centre, calls were answered from individual service areas.
- At the inception of the Contact Centre, Revenues and Benefits calls were outsourced externally to Capita. In October 2006 a percentage of these calls were taken back and answered by Northampton Borough Council (NBC) with the remainder of the calls gradually integrating back to NBC throughout 2007.
- Before the ACD software and the introduction of the Contact Centre, there was a strong pattern of unanswered calls in the majority of the main service areas. Figures for 2005 showed that 48% of calls to Housing Customer Services and 33.4% of calls to the Housing Repairs line went unanswered. In addition, the Grade of Service (percentage of calls answered within 15 seconds) for both Housing Services was only between 40% and 47%. The level of service in the Revenues and Benefits department was even more dramatic. Up to 75% of calls were unanswered in 2005 with the monthly Grade of Service never rising above 17%.
- As these services integrated into the Contact Centre the percentage of calls answered consistently rose. At the end of 2006, 89.8% of calls received by the Contact Centre were answered. In 2007 this figure dipped slightly to 86.8% before rising again in 2008 to 94.7%.
- The overall Grade of Service (GOS) follows a similar pattern since the launch of the Contact Centre. In 2006 the GOS was 60.9%, falling slightly to 59.9% in 2007 and rising to

66% in 2008.

Attached at Appendix B is a detailed performance data breakdown.

3.2.2.2 Customer Satisfaction Survey

A Customer Satisfaction Survey was undertaken between 6th and 10th October 2008. The results from the survey were as follows: -

Profile of Respondents

- The average caller suggested from the results of the survey is female, over the age of 65 and considers themselves to be British.
- Just under a third of the Council's customers consider themselves disabled, as having a long-term illness or health problem.

Avoidable Contact

- Only 5% of customers were transferred.
- 17% of customers felt their enquiry was not resolved first time.

3.2.2.3 Perceptions of Customers

- Customers saw waiting time as less important than other attributes.
- 76% of customers felt that friendliness and politeness of staff was very important and that the Contact Centre could be rated a 5 out of 5 for this attribute.
- More customers felt that the staff was not very good at asking appropriate questions or listening to the caller and it was one of the weakest areas with two customers giving a rating of only 2.
- The question asking customers to rate the knowledge had the least amount of people feeling that the rating was higher than the importance revealing that it is an area that can be improved on.
- 75.3% of customers felt that the staff deserved the highest rating possible for treating customers with respect and that this was also of the highest importance.
- Staff efficiency was highly rated in general however, one customer gave it the lowest rating of one, and this is the only attribute of customer services given such a low rating.

3.2.2.4 Improvements

- 47% of customers felt that there were no changes needed within the Contact Centre.
- Longer opening hours was the most popular suggestion by customers.

3.2.2.5 **Fair Treatment and Access to Services**

- 7% of our customers said they felt the Council had unfairly treated them in the past.
- 8% of our customers felt that the council could improve its accessibility to services. Suggestions included increasing the number of services available on line, giving fixed appointment times and providing a list of contact numbers.

3.2.2.6 **Overall Satisfaction**

- 97% of customers said they felt that contacting the Council through the Contact Centre was a positive experience overall.

3.2.2.7 **Service Transformation Agreement – October 2007, HM Government Cabinet Office**

3.2.2.7.1 The key points of evidence: -

3.2.2.8 **Vision**

3.2.2.8.1 **Service Transformation:**

3.2.2.8.2 **Tailoring services to needs** - engaging users to learn what really matters to them, making services convenient to the customers' personal circumstances, ensuring services are not confusing and inaccessible, avoiding unnecessary contact.

3.2.2.8.3 **Reducing avoidable contact** – key aim of service transformation, need to look critically and fundamentally at the design and delivery of services, make practical reduction in the number of contacts.

3.2.2.8.4 **Key aims:**

- *Better for customers* – services are simpler, streamlined, accessible, convenient and intuitive.
- *Better for staff* – delivering services they can be proud of.
- *Better for the taxpayer* – Less costly if duplicative contact and complicated services reduced.

3.2.2.9 **Governance & Accountability:**

3.2.2.9.1 **Governance arrangements**

- Overall leadership and direction
- Lead Departments
- Advisor to the Prime Minister

- 3.2.2.10 **Measuring progress**
- Reducing avoidable contact (*Progress Measure 1*)
 - Faster and more effective services
- 3.2.2.11 **Building better online services**
- Two key websites – *directgov* and *businesslink.gov*
 - Movement of services to the above websites (*Progress Measure 2*)
- 3.2.2.12 **Efficiency savings**
- No explicitly set level but will be tracked as Service Transformation Agreement is delivered.
- 3.2.2.13 **Delivery**
- Two levels** – wide programme of activity across the whole of the public sector and small number of strategic initiatives. Includes detailed plans for each department.
- 3.2.2.14 **Strategic actions:**
- 3.2.2.14.1 **Learning from citizens and businesses** – evidence based understanding and direct engagement of users.
- 3.2.2.14.2 **Grouping services in ways that are meaningful to the customer** – integrated packages of services that respond directly to the tasks which citizens and businesses face every day and offering a timely response to immediate needs.
- 3.2.2.14.3 **Rationalising services for efficiency and service improvement** – present a service framework that is simpler, clearer and accessible.
- 3.2.2.14.4 **Making better use of the customer information the public sector already holds** – pass relevant information between different parts of Government, especially important for identifying vulnerable groups in society and accessing their needs and entitlement to support.
- 3.2.2.14.5 **Linking local and central government** – Close collaborative working, reflected in alignment of central progress measures and the local government performance framework.
- 3.2.2.14.6 **Engaging front line staff** – harness the energy, input and customer insight of front line staff.

- 3.2.2.14.7 **Learning From Citizens And Businesses:**
- 3.2.2.14.8 **Customer Insight Forum**
- Building a picture of what really matters to people
 - Supporting culture change
 - Counterpart Business Insight Forum established by Businesslink.gov
 - Role – Spreading good practice, sharing information/learning, enabling cross-government service transformation by tackling barriers to change from a customer perspective, acting as a resource, establishing training requirements, exploring closer working relationships with users, sponsorship of cross-government customer insight initiatives.
- 3.2.2.14.9 **Customer Journey Mapping**
- Valuing customer’s point of view
 - Qualitative and complex
 - Customer Insight Forum will provide guidance
- 3.2.2.14.10 **Customer Satisfaction**
- Careful Interpretation necessary
 - Comparable across departments and agencies
 - Customer Insight Forum has already provided departments with guideline and framework.
- 3.2.2.14.11 **Grouping services in ways that are meaningful to the customer:**
- 3.2.2.14.12 **The “Tell Us Once Project”**
- Testing redesigning of services on a practical level
 - Citizens should be able to report change of circumstances once
 - Service piloted from April 2008
- 3.2.2.14.13 **Directgov and Businesslink.gov**
- 3.2.2.14.13.1 Presenting all citizen and business-facing government transactions and information on single, customer focused, website contribute to strategic action.
- 3.2.2.14.14 **Rationalising Services for Efficiency & Service Improvement:**
- 3.2.2.14.14.1 **Online** - single point of access, reducing departmental specific websites, built in line with customer needs, closing websites, which are no longer needed and migrating information.
- 3.2.2.14.14.2 **Telephone** - contact centre accreditation - agreed set of specific

operating standards and performance framework allowing consistent measuring.

3.2.2.14.15 **Face to Face**

3.2.2.14.15.1 **One stop shops** – greater sharing of generic administrative back office space.

3.2.2.14.15.2 **Helplines** - vital support to people in crisis, conventional customer or task segmentation ineffective in these services, Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform is developing a pilot to explore options to simplify and rationalise helplines.

3.2.2.14.15.3 **Making better use of the customer information the public sector already holds:**

3.2.2.14.15.3.1 Highly complex challenge – at a strategic level aim is that the implementation of these strategic plans is largely completed by deadline and at a tactical level tackling these issues within the context of specific projects e.g. “Tell Us Once”.

3.2.2.14.15.4 **Linking Local And Central Government:**

- Reflects key theme of saving time by focusing on reducing avoidable contact and maximising first point of contact resolution
- Engage actively with local government partners to drive through strategic initiatives
- More effective joining of the whole delivery chain

3.2.2.14.15.6 **Engaging Front Line Staff:**

- There is a recognised link between service quality, customer satisfaction and the engagement of front line staff
- Assess the drivers of front line employee buy-in
- Work in this area is ongoing

3.2.2.14.15.7 **Leaflets, posters and other information on display in the customer services areas**

3.2.2.14.15.7.1 There are in excess of seventy leaflets available in the One Stop Shop as detailed at Appendix C.

3.2.2.14.15.8 **24-hour ‘claim guarantee’ scheme**

3.2.2.14.15.8.1 Customers who present a fully completed and signed new benefit claim or benefit change of circumstances form together with all necessary documentary evidence have the opportunity to use the 24 hour claim guarantee service. Evidence is checked and certified by a Customer Information Officer. If authorised the claim is then passed to a benefits assessor and is processed within 24 hours.

Customers who do not have the necessary documentation are given the opportunity to either revisit the office with the necessary evidence to apply for the scheme or hand the evidence in at the time.

3.2.2.14.15.9 Equality Impact Assessment – Customer Services

3.2.2.14.15.9.1 An Equality Impact Assessment of Customer Services was carried out in April 2008, which was reviewed by the Task and Finish Group. It was very comprehensive and further work was not required on the document by this Task and Finish Group as all areas were covered.

3.2.2.14.15.9.2 There is no provision for partially sighted or blind customers of the facility of a system whereby tapes or compact discs of requested Council documents are available.

3.3 Assistant Head of Finance

3.3.1 The Assistant Head of Finance provided details on the Council's Value for Money process.

3.3.2 Key points: -

- The Value for Money Process used is attached at Appendix D
- Northampton Borough Council's Customer Services is classed as medium in terms of value for money
- The average cost per visiting customer is £12.50
- 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
- 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) can be undertaken. It is not compulsory for this to take place but it is noted as a best practice exercise

3.4 Looking at Best Practice and other Local Authorities

3.4.1 Local Authorities

3.4.1.1 Desktop research was carried out with Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council and the Task and Finish Group visited Kettering Borough Council and Milton Keynes Council to look at their customer services facilities. All three Local Authorities are noted as best practice for their customer services facilities.

- 3.4.1.2 Other information was obtained via the Internet and the Audit Commission's website.
- 3.4.2.1 Key issues:
- 3.4.2.2 **Kettering Borough Council**
- 3.4.2.3 The Council has its main One Stop Shop based at the offices in Bowling Green Road but also has customer services locations in three libraries in the borough. The Police and Fire Authorities are partners for the customer service facilities in the libraries and have provided some funding to set up the centres. Kettering Borough Council mans the centres.
- 3.4.2.4 The One Stop Shop has been open for around eight years. The One Stop Shop has a very welcoming, calm atmosphere. The colour scheme is green, which is renowned for its calming effects. The area is open and there are no barriers between the customer and staff. However, although the area is open, it is also very secure for the staff. Private interview rooms are available should one be requested but this facility is rarely used. There is a call waiting system in the One Stop Shop area – the customer takes a ticket and an automated system informs them which desk to go to when one becomes free. There are forty-two members of staff (thirty full time equivalent) who offer a full, in-depth service for issues such as benefit claims, council tax etc. Staff enjoy their job and surroundings. Corporate uniforms are worn and staff members are very well presented. The One Stop Shop is open until 5.30pm on weekdays and from 9am to 1pm on Saturdays. On Saturdays three members of staff, dealing with around fifty customers, man the One Stop Shop. It is one of the busiest mornings of the week.
- 3.4.2.5 There is a children's play area in the One Stop Shop, which gives an especially friendly feel to the atmosphere.
- 3.4.2.6 Customer Services deal with all service units and chase up responses on a regular basis. The Customer Services Officer logs each query onto the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) System, which keeps a record of every time the customer visits the One Stop Shop. By doing this any one of the Customer Services Officers can then deal with future queries as all information is logged. The cashiers desks have now closed which created a revenue saving. From this, additional customer services staff were employed out in the libraries. Customers now have bar coded bills and All Pay Cards. Bills can be paid at Post Offices and some shops, which display the pay point/pay zone sign. The Council is charged around forty pence per transaction. There were some set up costs for this scheme but the savings made have more than recouped these costs.
- 3.4.2.7 The One Stop Shop has limited forms on display. There used to be

feedback forms for customers to complete but the Council has now employed a member of staff to carry out a whole range of evaluation on customer services. The employee will liaise with customers to ascertain their views of their experience with the service, asking questions such as, 'was the customer happy with the service, if not, why not and what could the Council do to improve?' The member of staff also goes out to the town and speaks to the general public enquiring if they use the Council's One Stop Shop facility and if not, why not. Contact is also made by telephone to the public. This sort of evaluation is undertaken on a weekly basis.

- 3.4.2.8 The Homeless Unit is incorporated into the One Stop Shop. If accommodation is needed for someone that day, the Homeless Officer will be called to the One Stop Shop to assist, however, if this occurs on a Saturday, the Customer Services Officer has the authority to authorise emergency accommodation.
- 3.4.2.9 There is a separate desk for planning enquiries. However, staff that deal with planning queries, also deal with other customer services issues.
- 3.4.2.10 A Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) kiosk located in the One Stop Shop. The CAB has two sessions here weekly. When these sessions are not taking place the kiosks provide data for customers. The Tourist Information Centre is also located at the One Stop Shop. The following Agencies all have desk space at the One Stop Shop: -
- Welfare Rights
 - Accommodation Concessions
 - Gold Sheaf
 - Job Centre Plus
- 3.4.2.11 Publicity for the customer services facilities is sent out with the Council tax bills, leaflets are displayed in the libraries and flyers sent to schools within the borough. Customer Services Officers also attend events, such as fetes, to promote the centres.
- 3.4.2.12 Computers are located in the One Stop Shop for customers to use. Access to certain sites is blocked but the public can access: -
- Play zone (for children)
 - Northamptonshire County Council
 - Police
 - Fire
 - House Exchange
 - UCAs
 - Environment
 - On line payments
 - Planning Applications

- 3.4.2.13 Staff based on the Council's main reception that is located by the entrance door are able to receive forms from customers but will refer individuals to the One Stop Shop for more complex forms. Staff take partnership bookings, general enquiries into issues such as household and bulk refuse and payments.
- 3.4.2.14 The Council's Contact Centre opens at 8.30am and closes at 5pm. Staff do not just work in the Contact Centre but are trained to work in all customer service locations and will move around. The computer screen details how many customers' calls are waiting to be answered, as does a separate screen in the office. There is the facility for customers to leave a message and the customer services officer will call them back.
- 3.4.2.15 In its Corporate Assessment Report (April 2008) of Kettering Borough Council, the Audit Commission commented on the Council's customer services facility: -

"14 The Council is improving access to customer service. The customer service centres in Kettering and the A6 towns have improved call answering beyond the Council's targets...."

3.4.3 Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council

- 3.4.3.1 The Council's customer services facility is called Solihull Connect and it provides information and advice about Council Services. The public can make contact either in person at the Walk in Centres, or by telephone, e-mail or fax at the Contact Centre. Information and advice about services provided by partner organisations is also available. The Council has a very comprehensive website which gives details of all services.
- 3.4.3.2 The opening hours of the Walk In Centres are between 8.30am to 5.30pm and 9am to 1pm on Saturdays. Opening hours are widely publicised. The Walk in Centres have a team of Customer Service Advisers that provide a personal service when dealing with the public's queries. In depth enquiries are dealt with at the Customer Service Desk. A number of different enquiries can be dealt with at the same time, for example, Housing Benefit, Council Tax and Blue Badge enquiries can be completed in one visit rather than going to different floors of the Council House.
- 3.4.3.3 Walk In Centres are based at various locations:-
- Two libraries
 - Local Police Station
 - Area Housing Offices
- 3.4.3.4 Council service payments can be made at Solihull Connect. This includes payments such as rents, Council Tax, music fees etc. For most services payment can be made using most major credit and

debit cards. Alternatively the online payment system can be used. The cash offices are available at all Walk In Centres but payments cannot be made on Saturdays.

3.4.3.5 The Council's Contact Centre is open from 8am to 6pm daily and deals with telephone and email enquiries and aims to respond to an email query within twenty-four hours. Staff are employed to work at the Contact Centre and do not presently work at the Walk In Centres, however, the Contact Centre is due to relocate shortly and when this takes place staff may work at either the Contact Centre or one of the Walk In Centres. The Council's switchboard deals with all other queries.

3.4.3.6 Computers are located in the Walk In Centres for customers use.

3.4.3.7 The Citizens Advice Bureau is based near to the Walk In Centre at Solihull and the Department of Works and Pensions holds a day surgery at this Centre weekly.

3.4.3.8 The Walk In Centres are widely promoted on the Council's website and publicised in the local quarterly Council magazine that is delivered to all households in the borough.

3.4.3.9 The Council has an on-line customer services satisfaction survey for customers to complete and give comments about: -

- Connect Walk In Centre
- Connect Contact Centre
- Connect Contact Centre - email contact

3.4.3.10 In its Corporate Assessment Report (June 2008) of Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, the Audit Commission commented on the Council's customer services facility: -

"54 The Council is using information and communications technology (ICT) effectively to improve customer access. Council wide information systems are being implemented linked to the development of Solihull Connect. Data from partners is beginning to be integrated into the ICT systems for Solihull Connect and although some gaps remain the Connect service is able to provide a wider range of advice and some information to the public as a result of ICT development. The majority of customer enquiries are now dealt with at its first point of contact with Solihull Connect.

66 One Front Line, the Council's project to establish Solihull Connect, experienced significant service delivery problems as it was being introduced. Scrutiny maintained close and active monitoring of Solihull Connect's performance over time, resulting in significant improvement of service delivery, for example, the proportion of customers

seen within ten minutes is now above 90 per cent compared to 80 per cent in early 2007.”

3.4.4 Milton Keynes Council

3.4.4.1 The Task and Finish Group visited Milton Keynes' Customer Services Facilities on 11 February 2009.

3.4.4.2 Key issues:

3.4.4.3 Previously, access to services had been provided at different Council buildings and it was agreed to bring these together under Milton Keynes Direct. This has made a huge improvement to the customer services facility.

3.4.4.4 Prior to the introduction of Milton Keynes Direct, the reception area was reported as gloomy premises with many unfriendly partitions.

3.4.4.5 Milton Keynes Direct was introduced in two phases. Phase one was brought in a few years ago and Phase Two more recently.

3.4.4.6 One Stop Shop

3.4.4.6.1 The One Stop Shop is bright and airy with pictures placed on the wall. It is welcoming and has a friendly feel to it. Furnishings are comfortable. There is no need for robust furniture for challenging customers. Customers come in with a query and go away with it resolved.

3.4.4.6.2 A security guard is present in the One Stop Shop but he plays more of a meet and greet role, directing customers to the relevant areas. If he sees a queue forming he speaks to customers checking if they need to queue or can obtain the information from elsewhere.

3.4.4.6.3 The One Stop Shop is on two levels and customers are directed to which floor they should attend regarding the service they require.

3.4.4.6.4 Revenues and Benefits is based at the One Stop Shop and advisors man the front desks subject to demand. Staffing levels are matched in accordance to peaks and troughs of customer visits.

3.4.4.6.5 Benefits Officers carry out exit interviews, which provide valuable feedback. Such interviews are carried out on a Monday morning, which is usually the busiest time. Positive feedback is normally received.

3.4.4.6.6 Although the front desks are open, privacy screens are also in situ.

3.4.4.6.7 Benefits Officers have the provision of dual computer screens – the Officer inputs on one screen and can access other valid data on the other. It is a paperless system – the claim form is completed

electronically. This is extremely helpful for the Officers. When it was first introduced the Officers were a little uncomfortable about completing forms at the desk this way but it is now accepted.

- 3.4.4.6.8 The Benefits Officers inform customers about the details that they need to provide in respect of a benefits claim. If they do not provide all relevant paperwork on the first visit, they are asked to return at a set time, usually the same day and to ask for the Benefits Officer by name. If a customer misses an appointment, the Benefits Officer will chase them.
- 3.4.4.6.9 The benefits caseload is currently just under 20,000 per year. In comparison, it is approximately 15,000 for Northampton.
- 3.4.4.6.10 Screens are in situ in the One Stop Shop detailing the waiting time.
- 3.4.4.6.11 Screens in the Revenues and Benefits Office detail the reason why the customer is visiting, name, house number and postcode. This information gives a feel for how long it is anticipated the query should take to resolve.
- 3.4.4.6.12 There is usually a housing manager working in the Revenues and Benefits Office at any one time.
- 3.4.4.6.13 The One Stop Shop is open from Monday to Friday during the hours of 9am and 5.15pm.

3.4.4.7 **Floor One – One Stop Shop**

- 3.4.4.7.1 Situated on the first floor is the One Stop Shop area for planning, parking and environment queries.
- 3.4.4.7.2 Upon arrival the customer is informed whether they need to wait on the ground floor or visit the first floor. The main receptionist takes the customer's basic details and logs them onto the system. The receptionist based on the first floor will inform the customer which desk to go to, to resolve their query.
- 3.4.4.7.3 There is plentiful seating available in a pleasant area.

3.4.4.8 **Main Reception**

- 3.4.4.8.1 The main receptionists meet and greet customers and log their details onto the system. Details of previous visits are also retained. The customer is then placed into the relevant queue. The Post Fill Queue system is used as it is felt to be more personalised than other systems such as Queue-Matic. Customers are called by name when it is their turn to be seen. Customers cannot see what service other customers are visiting for.
- 3.4.4.8.2 Staff on the main reception wear a corporate uniform.

- 3.4.4.9 **Cashiers**
- 3.4.4.9.1 Cashiers are based in the One Stop Shop.
- 3.4.4.10 **Display Boards**
- 3.4.4.10.1 Display boards are situated in the One Stop Shop and currently the focus of advertising is benefits. There are three display boards downstairs and two located on the first floor of the One Stop Shop.
- 3.4.4.11 **Interview Rooms (Talk Rooms)**
- 3.4.4.11.1 There are three interview rooms which have been entitled Talk Rooms.
- 3.4.4.12 **Performance Indicators – Customer Services**
- 3.4.4.12.1 Performance Indicators for Customer Services are no longer used at the moment. There is a good relationship with service managers. A good service is being delivered. Meaningful performance indicators are being worked up. Staff felt that how quickly a telephone is answered is not a meaningful performance indicator.
- 3.4.4.12.2 Mystery shopping exercises are undertaken.
- 3.4.4.12.3 Measuring is taking place but not being used for performance.
- 3.4.4.12.4 Satisfaction levels are measured regularly, the overall satisfaction level by the exit interviews. Customers are asked whether they feel they have waited too long to be seen and whether their query was resolved at the first visit.
- 3.4.4.12.5 Customer demand is monitored in the Revenues and Benefits section. One of the best measures is whether a good service is being provided.
- 3.4.4.12.6 The annual survey of a random number of residents has indicated that satisfaction levels have increased.
- 3.4.4.12.7 Interactive boards are located in prominent positions in the One Stop Shop entitled “How well did we do?” The boards are easy to use, taking just a few minutes to complete. The boards are being trialled and have been in place for just a couple of months. They have been used by approximately 2% of customers.
- 3.4.4.12.8 The system ‘Winchart’ is used which details how long claims take to resolve. Any claims that are over the average time (extraordinary) are looked at to see why this was and what could be put in place to prevent it taking so long in the future.
- 3.4.4.12.9 Success is celebrated by detailing compliments received in the in-

house briefings, an Awards (Gems) system is also in operation and managers give general “thank you”.

3.4.4.13 **Satellite Offices**

3.4.4.13.1 The only satellite offices that are now in existence are Housing Offices.

3.4.4.14 **Telephone System**

3.4.4.14.1 The Mittel telephone system is used. It details the number of calls waiting, time waiting, officers logged in. On average, waiting times vary from zero to eighteen minutes.

3.4.4.15 **Staffing Levels**

3.4.4.15.1 Housing Benefit Processing (who cover phones, post and reception) has 36 employees and Revenues has 35 (including Recovery Team of 5 people).

3.4.5 **Registry Offices**

3.4.5.1 In reviewing the Council’s Customer Services facilities, the Task and Finish Group discussed Northamptonshire County Council’s Registry Office, based at the Guildhall. The Office is very small, cluttered and unwelcoming. An appointment system is in operation to register births, deaths and marriages.

3.4.5.2 Desktop Research was undertaken regarding the appointment system for the registering of deaths in other Registry Offices.

3.4.5.3 The following Registry Offices were contacted:

- Rugby
- Market Harborough
- Peterborough
- Derby
- Coventry
- Leicester
- Wigan
- Nottingham

3.4.5.4 Key Issues: -

- An appointment is required to register a death, if a person does turn up on spec and the officer is free they will often try to deal with the registering, if not, they will be asked to come back at a given appointment time.
- The reason that appointments are made is that it takes around 30 minutes to register a death.
- Without an appointment, the person registering the death may have to wait for some time and there could be a

backlog/queue.

3.4.5. Northampton Borough Council's Internal Customer Services facilities

3.4.5.1 The Task and Finish Group visited the Council's Customer Services' facilities, namely: -

- One Stop Shop
- Call Centre
- Planning Reception
- Cliftonville House
- Customer Improvement Team
- Councillor Contact Centre
- Kingsthorpe District Housing Office

3.4.6 One Stop Shop

3.4.6.1 Key issues: -

- Queuing system non-existent
- Interview rooms not appealing
- Staff were very pleasant and welcoming
- The reception area is shared with the Community Police and Wardens for specified times only
- The waiting area into Revenue and Benefits is not very welcoming
- Staff carried out their role but not as caring this could be due to volume of customers and conditions they work in. The chairs are 'labelled' – this is not liked by customers
- Furniture such as seating and desks is inadequate
- There are 65 full time equivalent employees, customers are in excess of 200,000
- There are no child facilities available
- During lunchtime the staff numbers decrease but customers increase
- There is a need for Staff training for coping with all pressures of the work

3.4.7 Call Centre

3.4.7.1 Key issues: -

- Staff are very helpful
- Calls that the Group listened in to, reported housing problems but the customer had been able to remedy his problem and rang back to cancel the job. This stated that customers felt the Call Centre to be a good facility to use.
- Four employees work on the main switchboard

- The vacant switchboard operator post is not being filled

3.4.8 Cliftonville House

3.4.8.1 Key issues: -

- This building has a good atmosphere
- Posters on the walls need to be laminated / corporate colours and placed in more prominent positions
- Leaflets need to be easily available
- There is a need to look at the confidentiality issues
- Lighting, air conditioning and heating are a Health and Safety issue
- The Call Centre deals with calls from the switchboard
- Some customers have complained of difficulties trying to log on to the Choice Based Lettings system
- There has been an increase in calls for revenues and benefits since the credit crunch

3.4.9 Customer Improvement Team: -

- The Complaints Policy procedure should be looked at to make sure it is right for customers
- The E-benefits system is due to be introduced shortly which will help alleviate the amount of time taken and paperwork required for an initial benefits claim to be processed
- The Customer Services Leaflet and Customer Feedback Forms should not detail officers' names, but just their job titles
- It is important that Customer Services Staff are given the appropriate time for the planned computer training on current and forthcoming legislation.

3.4.10 Councillor Contact Centre

3.4.10.1 Key issues: -

3.4.10.2 A demonstration of how the system works was given. The process works by, for example: a Ward Councillor is contacted by a resident with issue – the Councillor would contact the centre. A record is made of: -

- The name of the Councillor bringing issue, if not recorded a new record made
- If the resident is a previous customer, the system will show existing case and reference number, if not in the system a new record will be created with a reference number.

3.4.10.3 This is all noted as a Councillor enquiry not as a complaint. A summary of the issue is recorded, and allocated to the appropriate

manager. The Councillor is issued with the reference number and issue is categorised.

3.4.10.4 The record is attached to Councillor's folder, as proof of issue recorded and a response is emailed to the Councillor. Requests made by email will receive a response within 24 hours, with the reference number.

3.4.10.5 There are plans for a quarterly newsletter to Councillors and a questionnaire is pending to evaluate the usage of the Councillor Contact Centre.

3.4.11 Kingsthorpe District Office

3.4.11.1 Key findings: -

- The premise is spacious with a generous sized back office.
- The interview rooms are also large. There is the provision of a secure interview room but this was not perceived to be user-friendly and was rarely used. Over the past six months it had been used just once.
- The main reception area did not feel private and could have benefited from partitions
- Members of staff were very knowledgeable and friendly.
- The atmosphere was friendly and relaxed. Many customers were regular visitors and staff knew them by name.
- The cashier's desk was the facility used most and should this facility be removed it could provide additional space for a further interview room.

3.4.12 Planning Reception, Cliftonville House

3.4.12.1 Key findings: -

- Clear, easy to read, laminated signs in situ in the reception area
- Details of recognition of excellence, Customer Services Code of Practice on display
- Nice, large, area with a friendly atmosphere
- More consideration needs to be given to customers with hearing difficulties
- A customer who was interviewed, commented on the ease of using the computer system
- Another customer commented on the excellence service that he had received
- Two computers are available for the public's use but just one was working
- Planning Officers were supportive of a generic Contact Centre dealing with simple planning queries.
- Adequate time needs to be allocated for staff training on issues such as new Planning Legislation and Updates

- Many informative leaflets were on display

3.5 Witnesses

3.5.1 Portfolio Holder (Performance)

3.5.1.1 The Portfolio Holder (Performance) attended the meeting on 10 March 2009.

3.5.1.2 Key points of evidence:

- Capital resources of £250,000 have been made available in 2009/10 to make improvements in the One Stop Shop.
- The Corporate objective that relates to Customer Services is a well managed organisation that puts customers at the heart of what we do
- The target is set for 90% of customers to be seen within 20 minutes.
- The Customer Services Team has produced an action plan to reduce waiting times in the One Stop Shop and has achieved an improvement in performance. Monitoring of footfall to understand when the peak times are has taken place. The lack of space and lack of an effective queuing system has hampered the Team's best efforts. For instance, in peak times, all service desks are occupied and there are no additional spaces for other staff to work on to reduce queues.
- A queuing system would also assist in busy times as staff in the meet and greet area would be able to see wait times and move to the customer service area. The present layout of the One Stop Shop prevents staff being able to easily see this situation and move their duties to assist.
- Queuing systems can also be used to plan and manage resources more effectively.
- The capital bid for the one stop shop includes provision for a queuing and ticketing system with visual display screens for customers' convenience.
- Value for money profiles in customer services indicate that the service is a medium cost, medium performer. Reasonable value for money is being achieved, however it is recognised that this could be further improved.
- The Customer Service Excellence Strategy is in draft format and will be considered by Cabinet for approval on the 18th March 2009. The aims of this Strategy are to ensure that the Council provides excellent customer service and achieves accreditation to the national Customer Service Excellence Standard.

3.5.2 Portfolio Holder (Finance)

- 3.5.2.1 The Portfolio Holder (Finance) provided a written response to the Task and Finish Group's question: -
- 3.5.2.2 *What financial support is the Administration prepared to make towards Customer Service improvements?*
- 3.5.2.3 The Portfolio Holder (Finance) also confirmed that Capital resources of £250,000 have been made available in 2009/10 to make improvements in the One Stop Shop.

4. **Conclusions**

- 4.1 After all of the evidence was collated the following conclusions were drawn.
- 4.2 The Task and Finish Group noted that 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.
- 4.3 Whilst undertaking its site visits to the Council's Customer Services facilities, the Task and Finish Group noted that 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.
- 4.4 The Task and Finish Group felt that the Call Centre was working very well and is a value for money service.
- 4.5 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.
- 4.6 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.

- 4.7 It was recognised that the separation of Customer Services staff on different sites is not conducive to good teamwork.
- 4.8 The Task and Finish Group acknowledged 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.
- 4.9 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 was 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.
- 4.10 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.
- 4.11 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.
- 4.12 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.
- 4.13 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.

- 4.14 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.
- 4.15 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.
- 4.16 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.
- 4.17 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.
- 4.18 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.
- 4.19 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.
- 4.20 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.

- 4.21 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.
- 4.22 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.
- 4.23 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.
- 4.24 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.
- 4.25 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.

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

5. Recommendations

- 5.1 The Task and Finish Group recommends to Cabinet that:
- 5.1.1 In order to ascertain whether a good Customer Service Facility is being provided by Northampton Borough Council, benchmarking against the family group be undertaken.
 - 5.1.2 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.
 - 5.1.3 A higher promotion of customer focus throughout the whole Authority be introduced by promoting the Customer Excellence Strategy 2009-2012.
 - 5.1.4 The Complaints Policy Procedure be updated.
 - 5.1.5 The Customer Services Leaflets and Customer Feedback forms be updated and contain Officers' posts rather than the inclusion of Officers' names.
 - 5.1.6 In depth training for all Customer Services Staff be strengthened, in particular training for staff on how to deal with job related stresses.
 - 5.1.7 The front desk based in the One Stop Shop deals with simple queries such as receiving customer's additional paperwork and completed forms.
 - 5.1.8 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.
 - 5.1.9 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.
 - 5.1.10 A team from Customer Services be set up to work with managers to draw up Service Level Agreements around customer focus.
 - 5.1.11 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.

- 5.1.12 Customer Services Officers be allocated sufficient time to keep up to date with 'Regulatory changes' using the new computer trainer system.
- 5.1.13 A questionnaire be sent to customers after complaint resolution, all Services be sent a copy on which to comment.
- 5.1.14 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.
- 5.1.15 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.
- 5.1.16 It be recommended to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee that a Review of all Council core documents and leaflets be added to the Work Programme for 2009/2010. The purpose of the Review would be to ensure that all documents are produced in plain English and follow the same corporate style.
- 5.1.17 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.
- 5.1.18 The Task and Finish Group welcomes the capital resource of £250,000 for improvements to the One Stop Shop.
- 5.1.19 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.

Appendices



OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

CUSTOMER SERVICES TASK AND FINISH GROUP

1. Purpose/Objectives of the Review

- To evaluate the success of investments made in Customer Services since 2005.

2. Outcomes Required

- To establish whether the Service is providing value for money, offering a good service to the citizens of Northampton.
- To make recommendations for improvement, as appropriate.

3. Information Required

- A synopsis of all information available
- Results of surveys undertaken
- Performance Indicator Statistics
- Evidence from the Portfolio Holder (Performance)
- Best practice Council – Kettering Borough Council
- Visits to internal services – observing process and speaking to employees and visitors:-
 - One Stop Shop
 - Call Centre
 - Switchboard
 - Cliftonville reception
 - Weston Favell Housing Office
 - Kingsthorpe Housing Office

4. Format of Information

- Officer reports/presentations
- Baseline data
- Best practice external to Northampton
- Site visits to internal customer service locations
- Witness interviews/evidence
- Portfolio Holder evidence

5. Methods Used to Gather Information

- Minutes of the meetings
- Desktop research
- Officer reports
- Examples of best practice
- Site visits
- Witness Interviews/evidence: -
Customer Service Employees
Visitors to the Council's customer service locations
Portfolio Holder (Performance)

6. Co-Options to the Review Committee

Mrs Marion Allen be approached suggesting that she is co-opted to this Review for its life. Mrs Allen was previously an NBC Councillor and had suggested that this issue be included onto the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme.

7. Evidence gathering Timetable

November 2008 to May 2009

18 November 2008	Scoping Meeting
November 2008 to January 2009	Visits: Best Practice Council (Kettering Borough Council), NBC's customer services locations
3 February 2009	Evidence gathering
10 March	Evidence gathering
6 April	Evidence gathering
7 May	Finalise Chair's report

8. Responsible Officers

Lead Officer Cheryl Doran
Co-ordinator Tracy Tiff

9. Resources and Budgets

Cheryl Doran, Assistant Head of Customer Services, to provide support and advice.

10 Final report presented by:

Completed by 7 May 2009. Presented by the Chair of the Task and Finish Group to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and then to Cabinet.

11 Monitoring procedure:

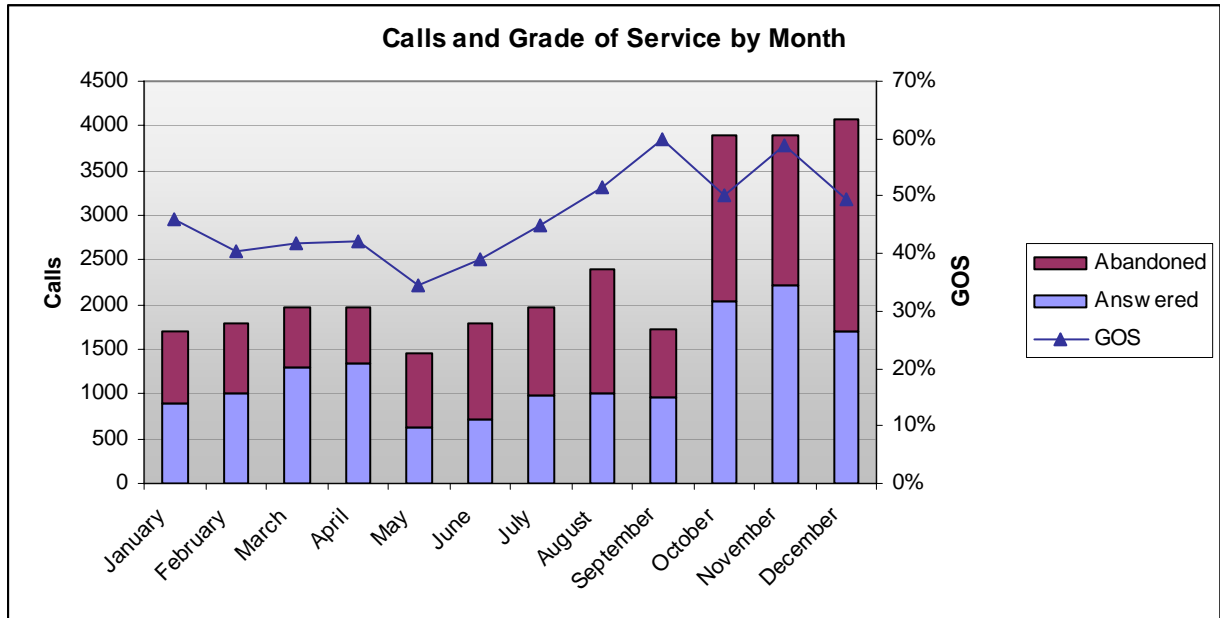
Review the impact of the report after six months (December/January 2010)

**Detailed Performance Breakdown
2005 Performance (pre-Customer Contact Centre)**

Housing Customer Services

Grade of Service (% calls ans. in 15 secs)	-	47%
% Calls Answered	-	52%

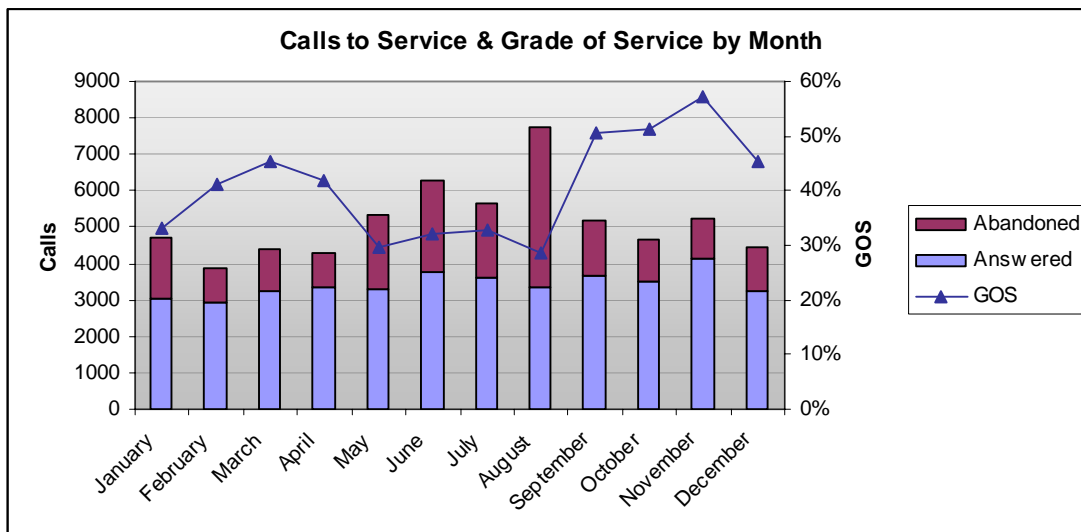
Fig 1.



Housing Repairs

Grade of Service (% calls ans. in 15 secs)	-	40%
% Calls Answered	-	66.6%

Fig 2.

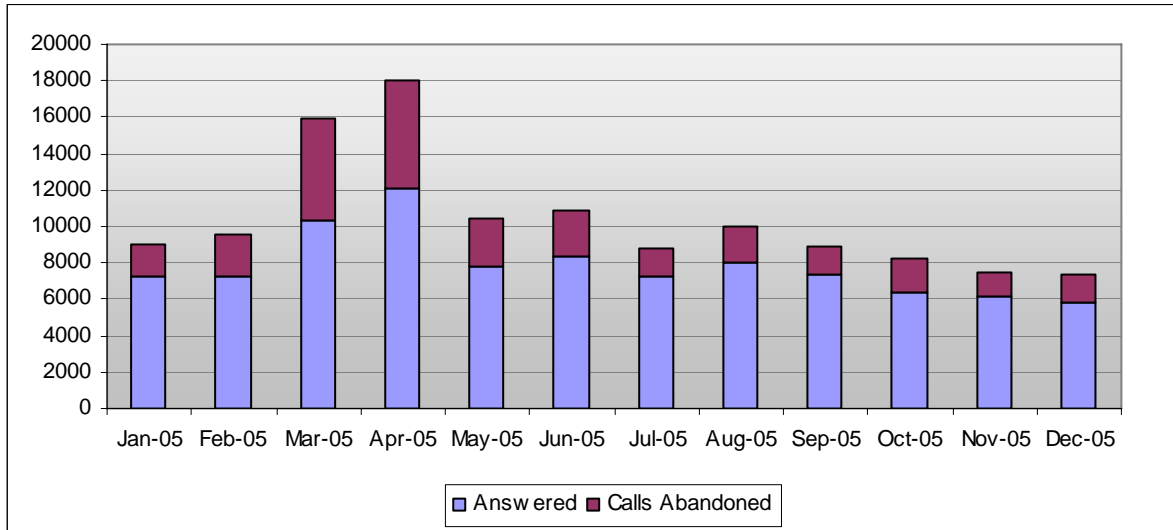


Streetscene

Grade of Service (% calls ans. in 15 secs) - 47%
 % Calls Answered - 75%

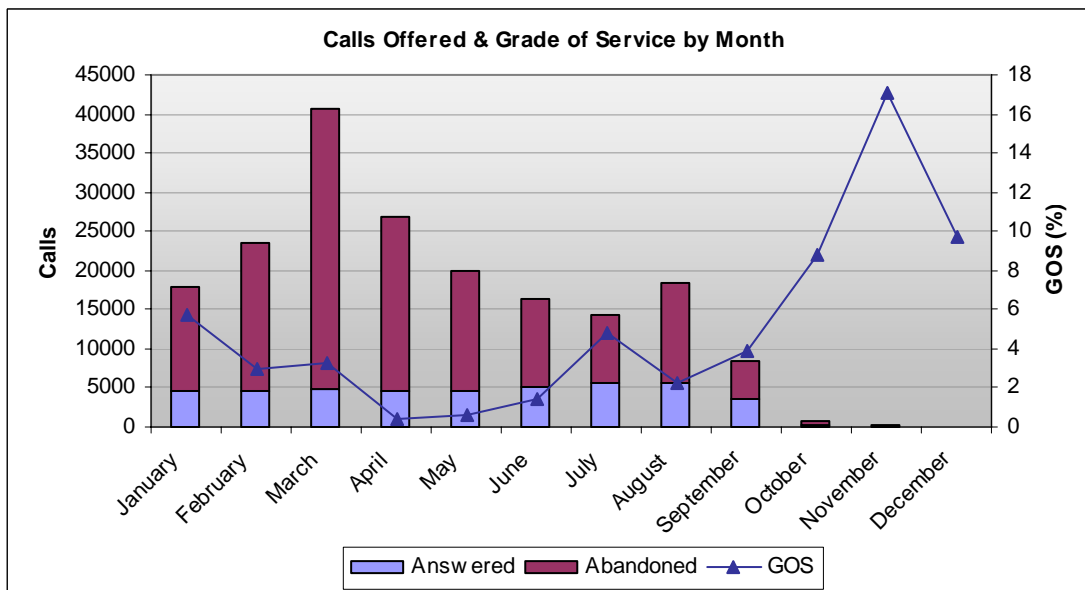
Fig 3.

Calls During 2005 by month



Revenues & Benefits

Fig 4.



Actual performance data for this period is currently unobtainable.

Customer Contact Centre Performance

The Customer Contact Centre figures below contain performance data for all Contact Centre services – Streetscene, Housing Repairs, Housing Customer Services and Revenues & Benefits.

2006 Performance

Fig 5.

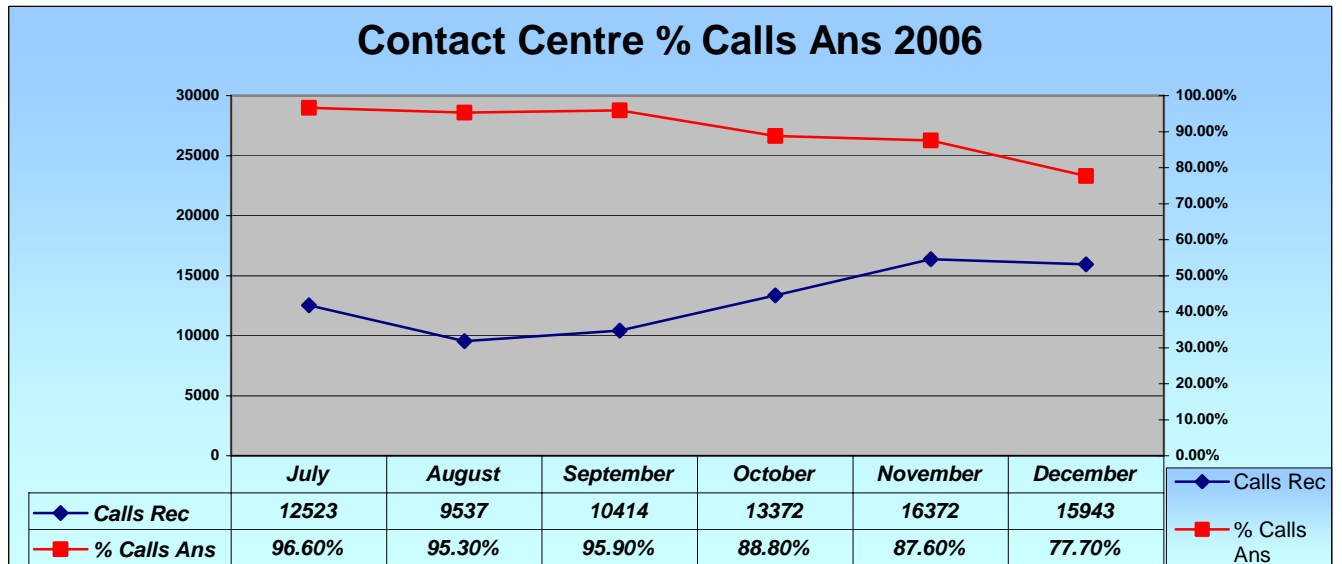


Fig 5 - 2006 performance detailing calls received and percentage of calls answered by month.

Fig 6.

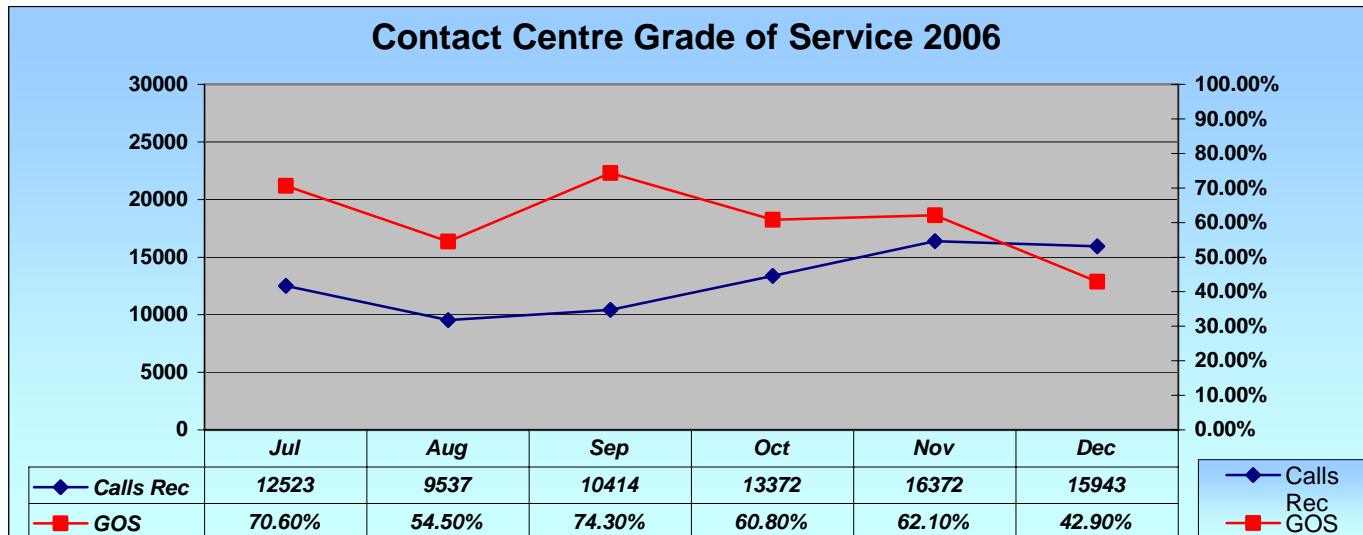


Fig 6 - 2006 performance detailing calls received and Grade of Service (percentage of calls answered in 15 secs) by month.

- Percentage of Revenues and Benefits calls incorporated into Customer Contact Centre Oct 06.

2007 Performance

Fig 7.

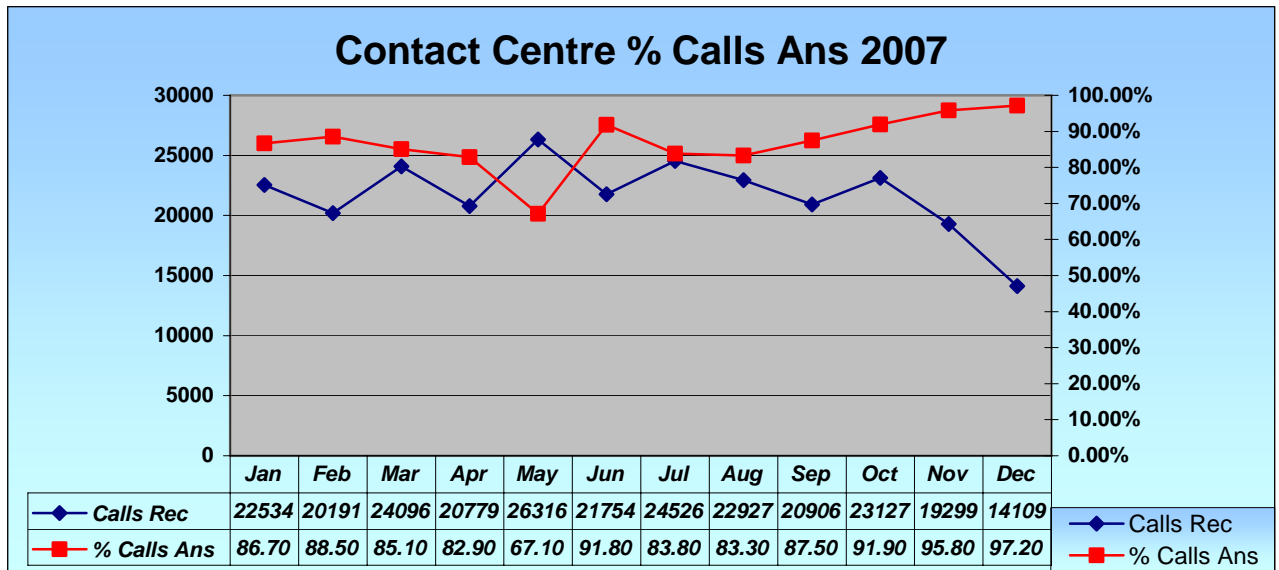


Fig 7 - 2007 performance detailing calls received and percentage of calls answered by month.

Fig 8.

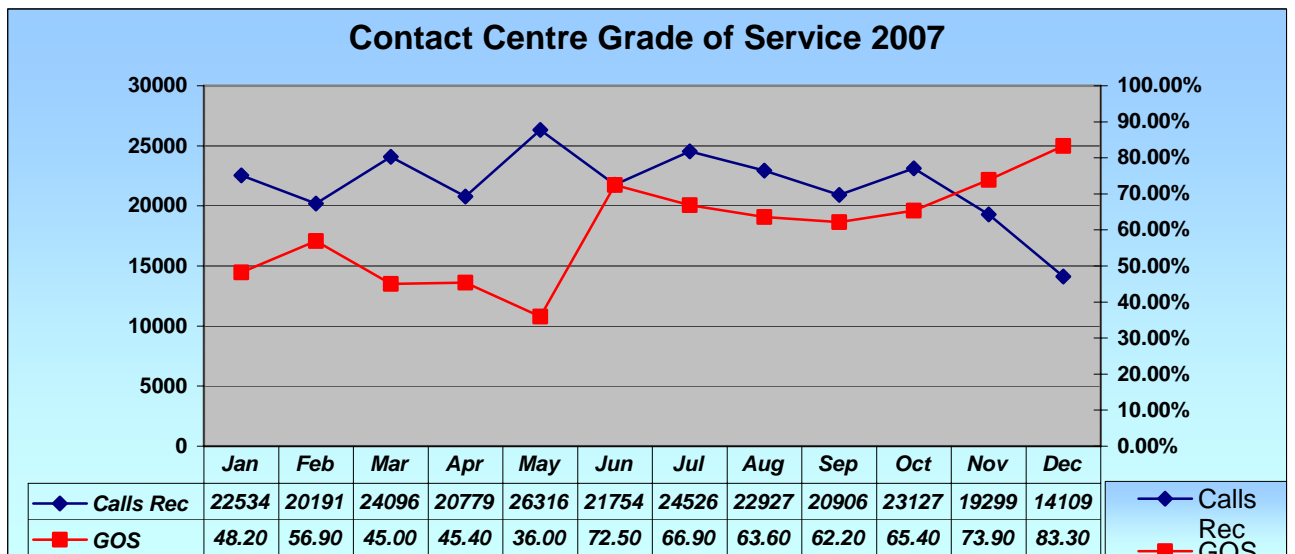


Fig 8 - 2007 performance detailing calls received and Grade of Service (percentage of calls answered in 15 secs) by month.

2008 Performance

Fig 9.

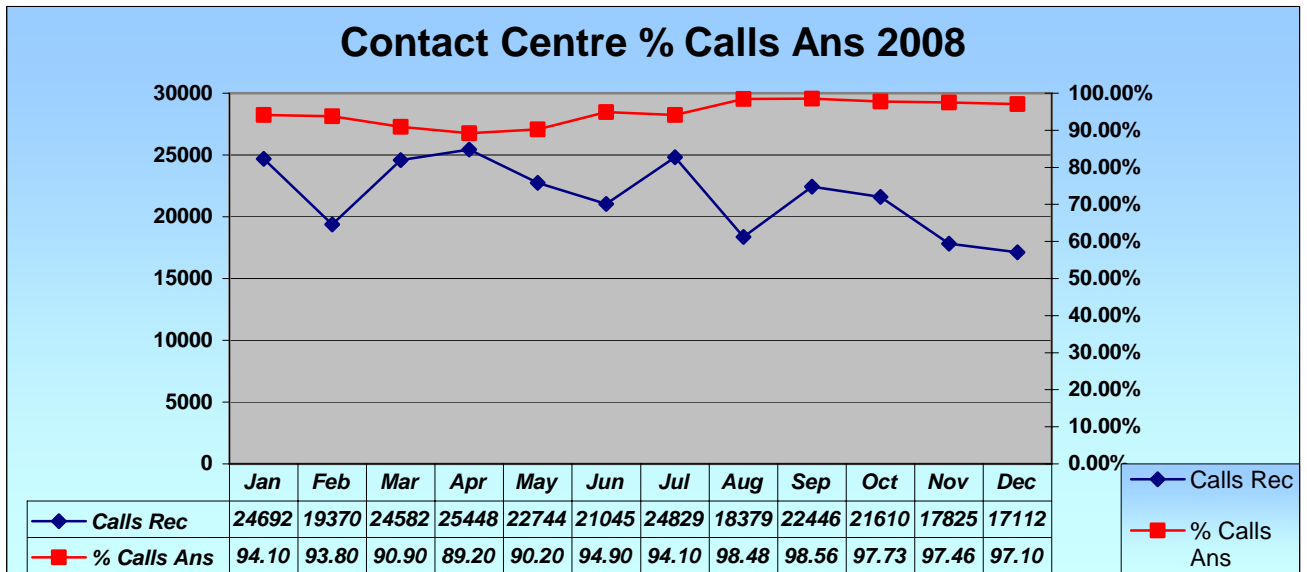


Fig 9 – 2008 performance detailing calls received and percentage of calls answered by month.

Fig 10

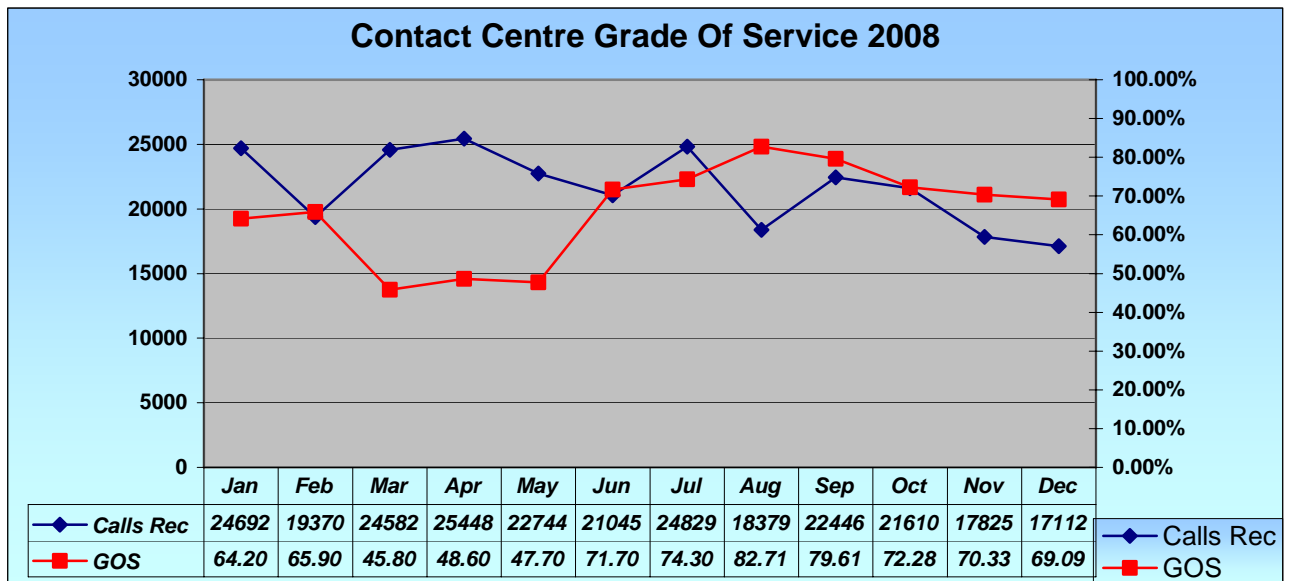


Fig 10 - 2008 performance detailing calls received and Grade of Service (percentage of calls answered in 15 secs) by month.

Face to Face Operations – Foot fall and performance

Fig 11

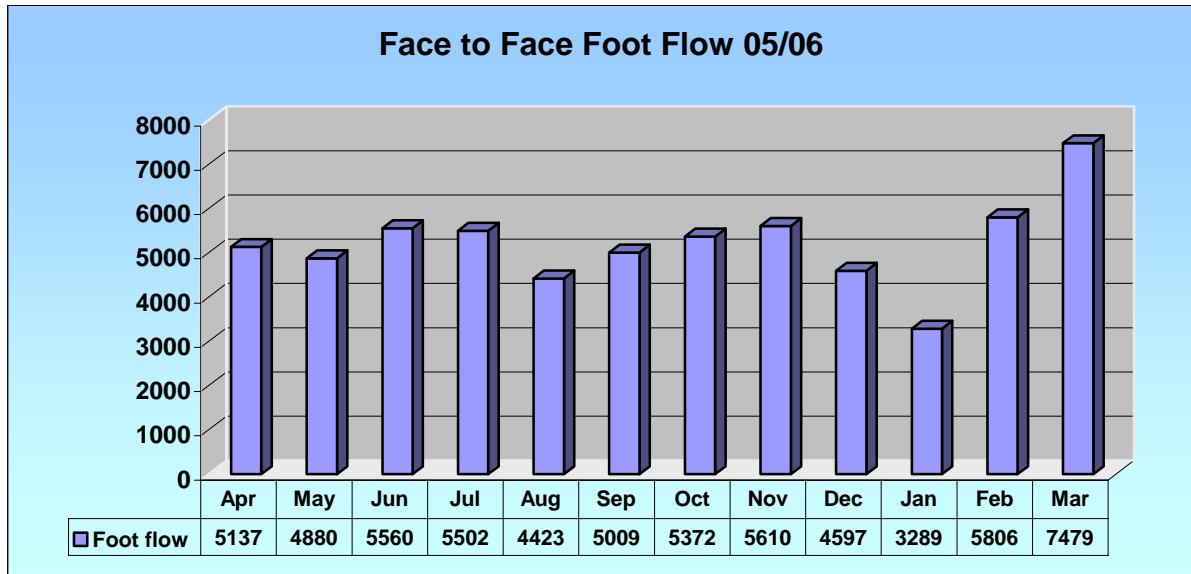


Fig 11 – 05/06 Face to Face Footflow broken down by month.

Fig 12

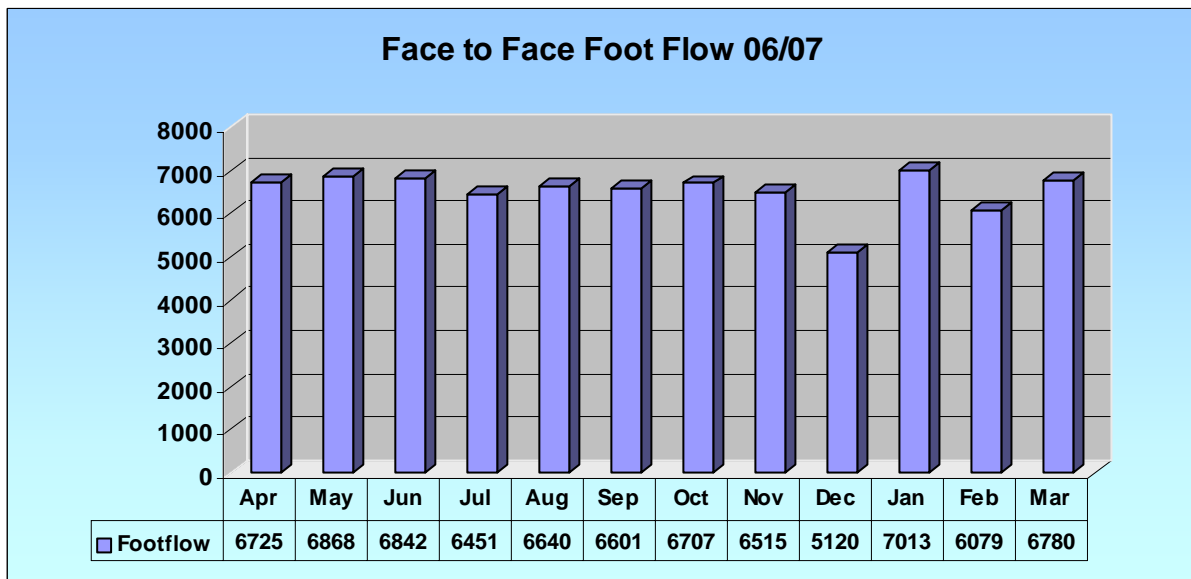


Fig 12 – 06/07 Face to Face Footflow broken down by month.

Fig 13

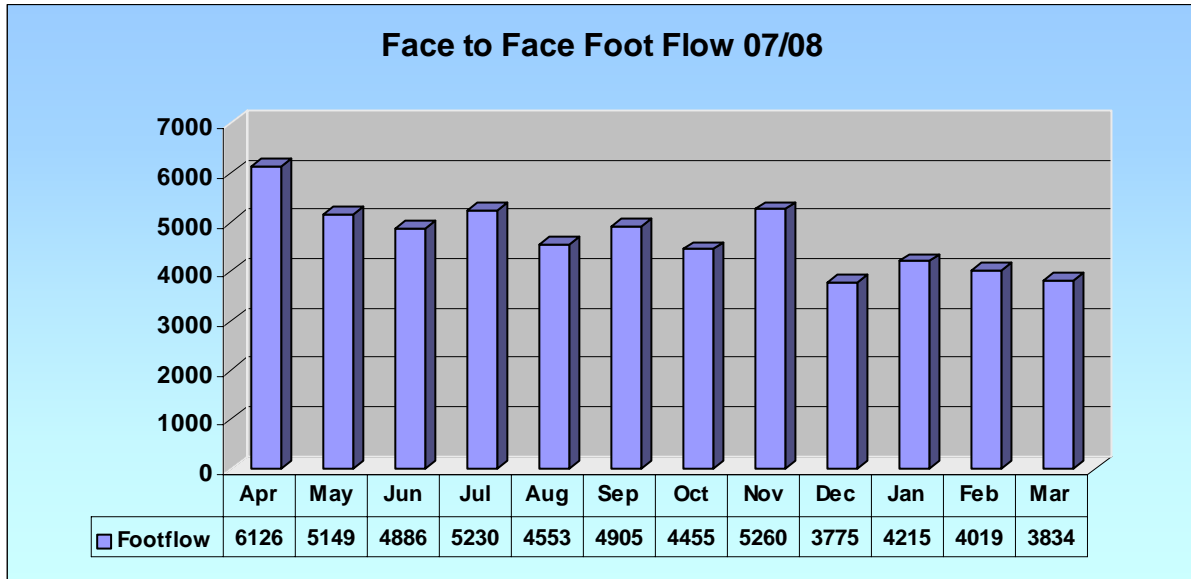


Fig 13 – 07/08 Face to Face Footflow broken down by month.

Fig 14

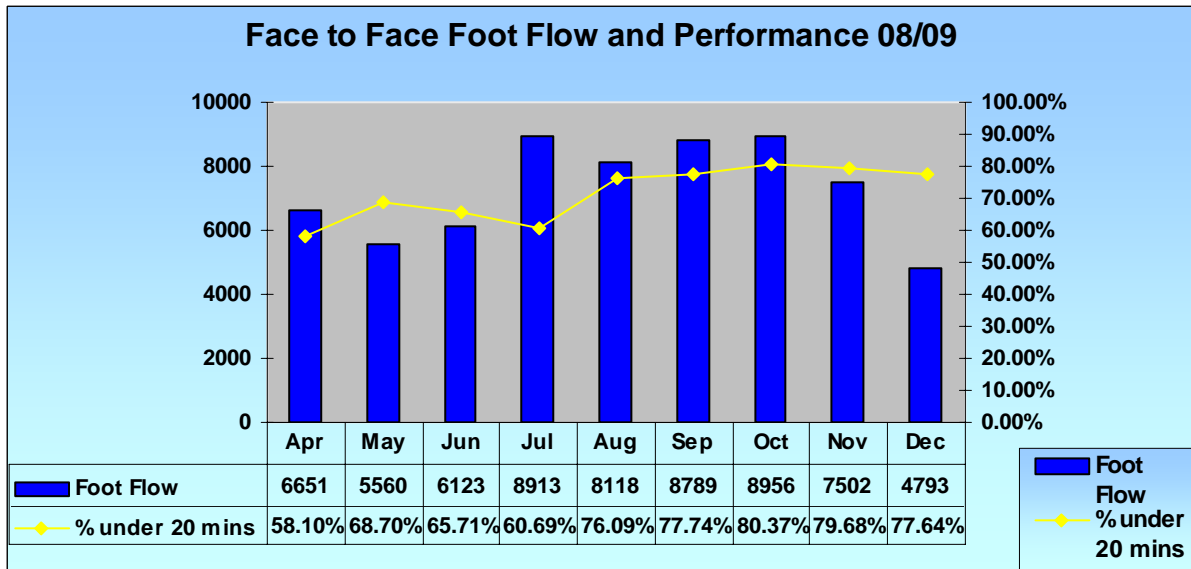


Fig 14 – 08/09 Year To Date Face to Face Footflow broken down by month, with performance against target (percentage of customers seen within 20 minutes).

Face to Face Operations & Customer Contact Centre Survey Results 2008

During the month of October a customer survey was carried out in the One Stop Shop and in the Customer Contact Centre. Customers were asked a series of questions to help ascertain customer's expectations and their opinions of the service they received.

The Face to Face sample was 91, and the Contact Centre sample was 146.

The key results from this survey can be found below –

Face to Face Operations

Fig 15.

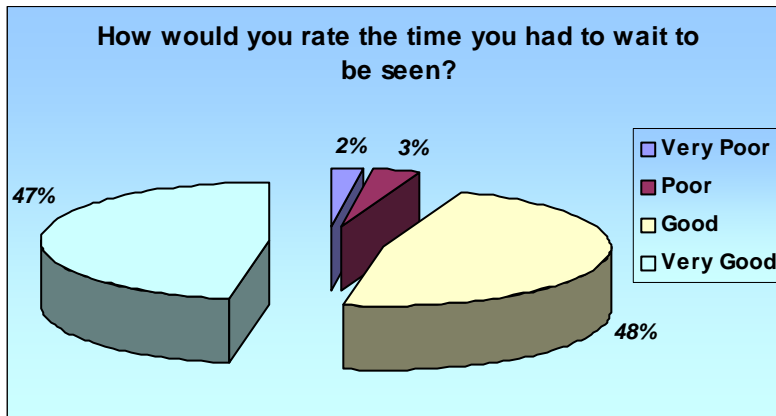


Fig 16.

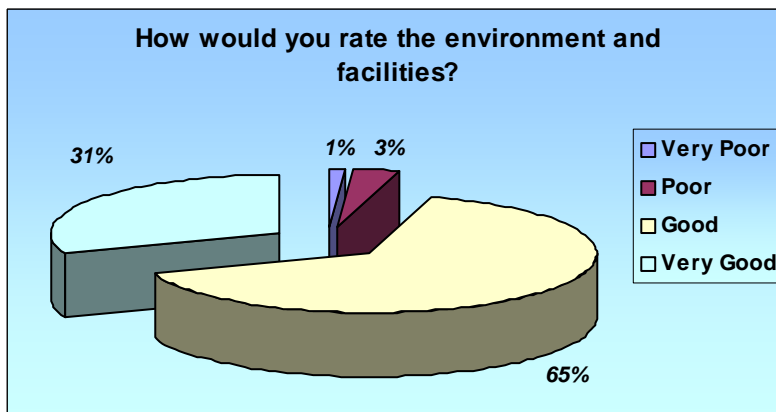


Fig 17.

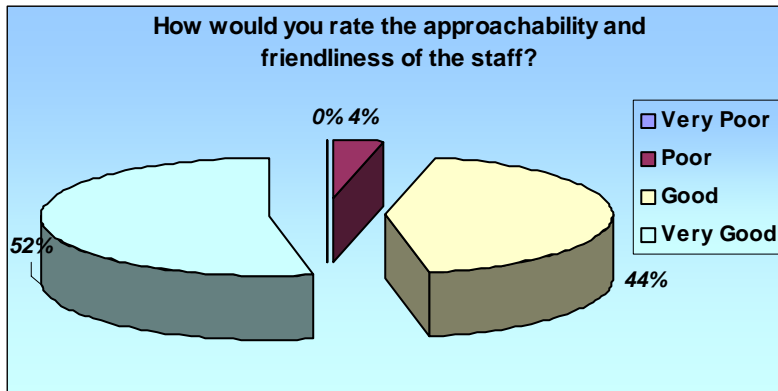


Fig 18.

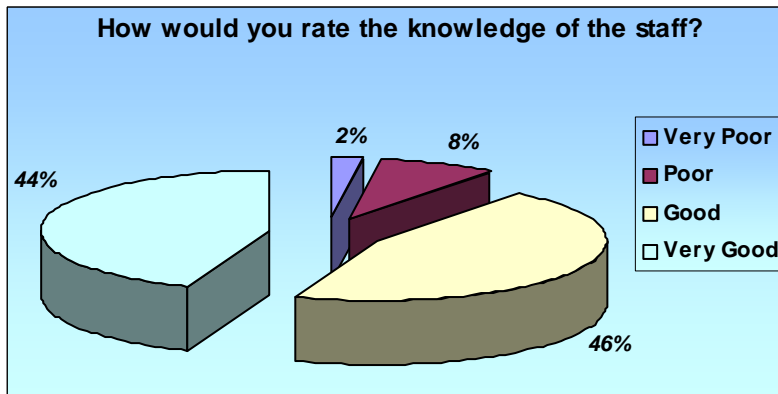


Fig 19.

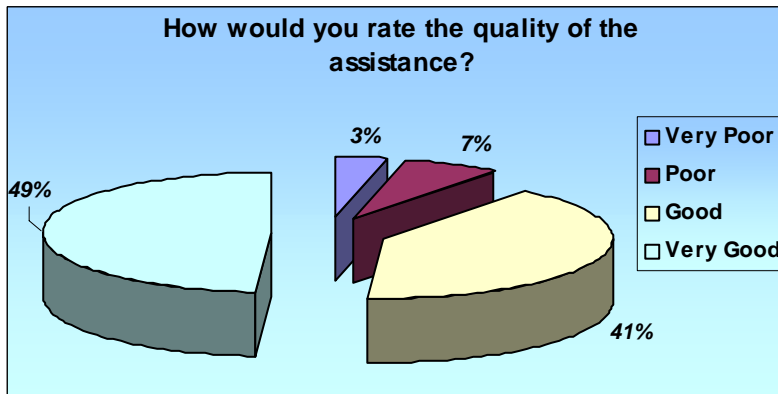


Fig 20.

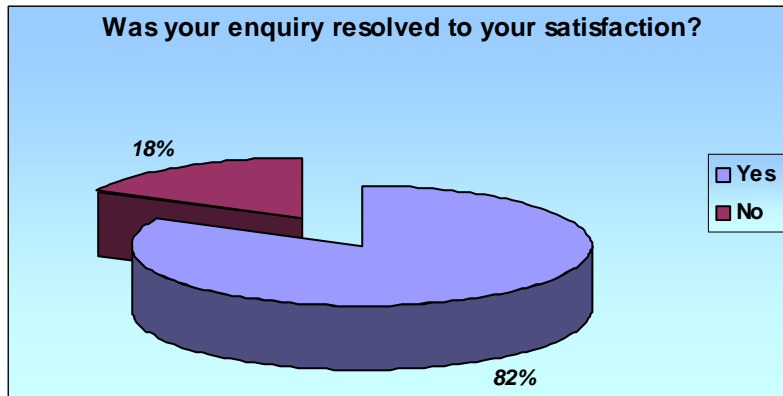
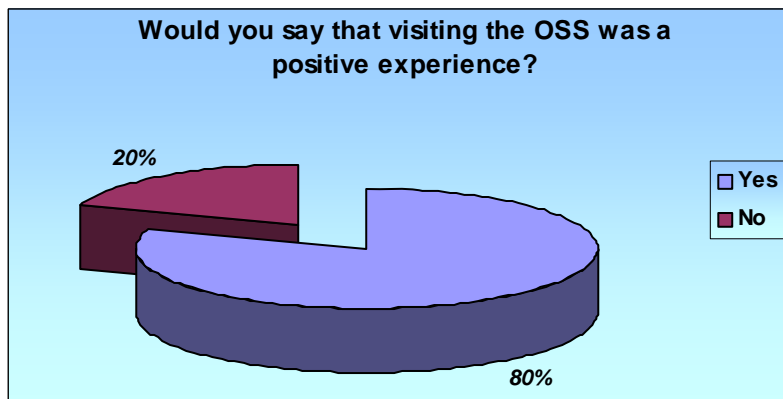


Fig 21.



Analysis of these results suggest a very strong public perception of the service delivered by NBC's face to face operations.

- In response to being asked to rate the *length of time it took to be seen by an advisor*, 95% of respondents rated the length of time as 'Good' or 'Very Good'.
- When asked to rate the *environment and facilities* and the *approachability and friendliness of staff*, this pattern of satisfaction continued. Both question elicited a 96% response of 'Good' or 'Very Good'.
- Responses to the question of *staff knowledge and quality of assistance* was marginally less positive, both received a 90% score of 'Good' or 'Very Good' – suggesting that there is room for improvement in these areas.

Customer Contact Centre

Customers were asked to rate aspects of the Contact Centre service from 5 – 1 (5 being the highest). The results were –

Fig 22.

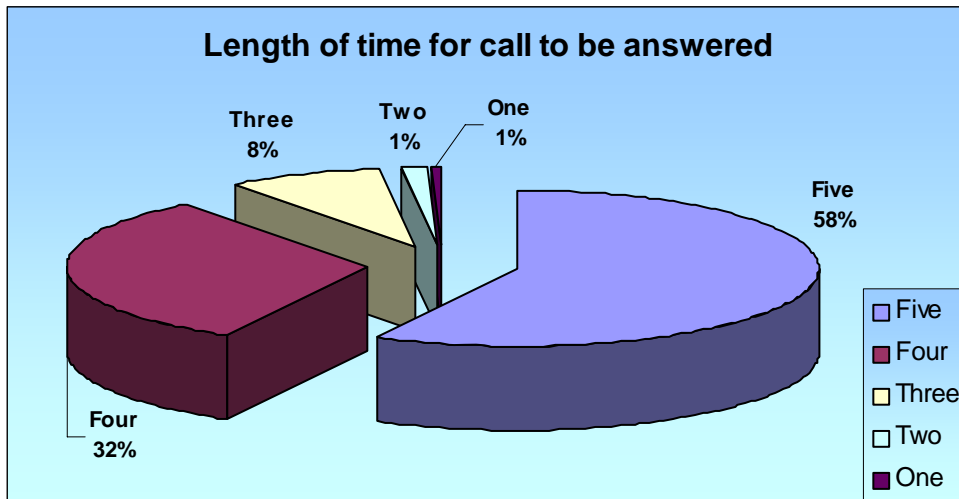


Fig 23.

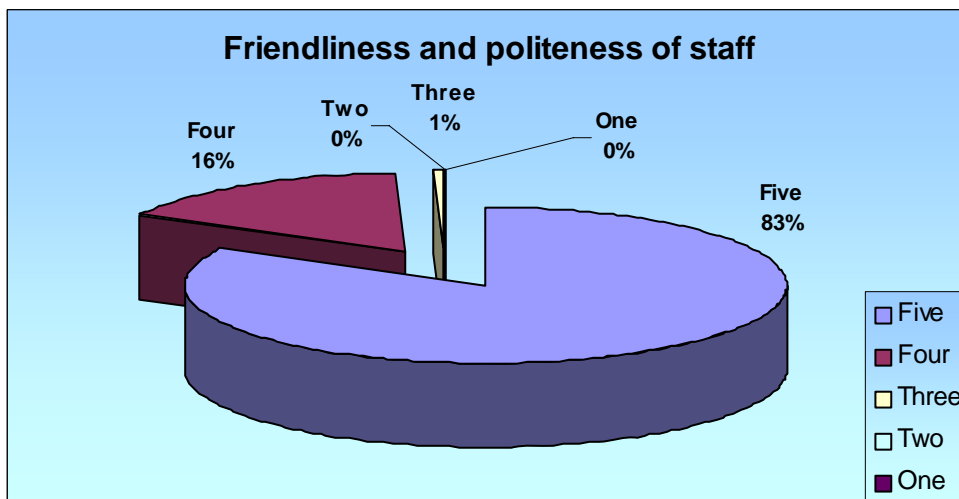


Fig 24.

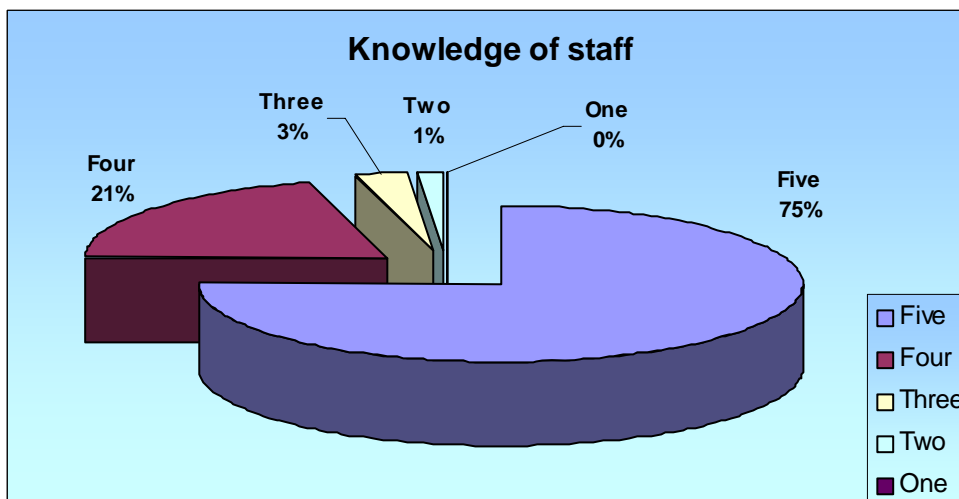


Fig 25.



Responses to the Contact Centre customer survey with very positive, suggesting customers are considerably satisfied by the service they are receiving.

- In response to being asked to rate the *time waited for a call to be answered*, 58% of customers gave the highest rating of 5 with a further 32% rating the wait as a 4. Only a combined 2% of respondents responded with a negative rating of 2 or 1.
- When asked to rate the *friendliness and politeness of staff* 83% of respondents scored the Contact Centre as a 5, with 16% scoring a 4. No respondents replied with the low ratings of 2 or 1.
- 75% of customers scored the Contact Centre as a 5 when asked to rate the *knowledge of the staff*. In addition 21% of customers rated the Contact Centre as a 4 with only 1% giving a low rating of 2 and no respondents gave a rating of 1.
- An overwhelming 97% of customers surveyed said that they had a *positive experience* when calling the Contact Centre.

Face to Face Leaflets

The following leaflets are available in the One Stop Shop:

Revs and Bens Leaflets:

Local Housing Allowance Rates Poster (updated monthly)
Pensions for Women (Pension service)
State Pensions (Pension Service)
Deferring Your State Pension (Pension Service)
Help with your rent (DWP)
Customer Service Information
24 Hour Claim Guarantee
Basic Bank Account Info (FSA)
NBC Ways to Pay
Council Tax Direct Debit mandate
Local Housing Allowance Leaflet
HM Government 50+

Housing Leaflets

Housing Management Services (Tel Numbers)
What to do if...Housing Options (1)
What to do if...You want to move home (2)
What to do if...You want to live in sheltered Housing (3)
What to do if...You want to buy your council home (4)
What to do if...You are having problems paying your rent (5)
What to do if...Your council home needs repairing (6)
What to do if...You want to improve your council home (7)
What to do if...You are experiencing anti social behaviour (8)
What to do if...You need HMA or threatened with Homelessness
Rent Direct Debit Mandate
Home Contents Insurance
Home Swapper Leaflet
Standing Order Payment Form
Keyhomes East Leaflet
Annual Report to Tenants
Credit Union Leaflet

Housing and Money Advice Leaflets – One Stop Shop

NHAS Leaflet (mortgage advice)
Losing Your Home
Dealing with Debt
Family Mediation
Living Together and your rights if you separate
Neighbourhood and Community Disputes
Alternatives to Court
Employment – Your rights at work
Dealing with Rent Problems
Domestic Abuse – Practical Advice
Northampton Sanctuary Scheme
Choice Based Lettings Leaflet
Loan Shark
Disabled Facilities Grant
Housing Service Standards
Do you or someone you care about...
Life Line (call care)
Hate Crime Reporting Forms

Northamptonshire County Council Leaflets

Bus Pass Leaflet
Bus Pass "Buzz" Leaflet
Bus Timetable
Meals on Wheels
Money4youth
Home Fire Safety Check
Community Services - Learning Disability Services
Community Services - Mental Health Services
Community Services – Libraries, Leisure and Learning
Community Services – Physical Health Services
Householders Immediate Flood Guide
Your County Council Tax explained
The Street Doctor
Direct Payments – Choice, Independence, Control
County Council – Welcoming Your Feedback
County Council – Comments Form
Northamptonshire Libraries
County Council – Useful Telephone Numbers
Free School Meals

The Council's Value for Money Methodology

