

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF CUSTOMER TRANSFORMATION TASK AND FINISH
PANEL
HELD ON MONDAY, 15 SEPTEMBER 2008
IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CIVIC OFFICES, HIGH STREET, EPPING
AT 7.30 - 9.50 PM

Members Present:	B Rolfe (Chairman), J M Whitehouse (Vice-Chairman), A Boyce, Mrs R Brookes, Ms J Hedges and J Philip
Other members present:	M Cohen and D Stallan
Apologies for Absence:	D Bateman and R Morgan
Officers Present	S Bacon (Service Business Manager, Planning and Economic Development), T Carne (Public Relations and Marketing Officer), J Chandler (Assistant Director - Community Services and Customer Relations), A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer), J Preston (Director of Planning and Economic Development), S Tautz (Performance Improvement Manager), Mrs J Twinn (Assistant Director of Finance and ICT) and R Wilson (Assistant Director Operations (Housing))

8. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

The Panel noted that there were no substitute members.

9. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

10. MINUTES FROM THE LAST MEETING

The minutes of 1st July 2008 were noted and agreed as a correct record.

11. TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Terms of Reference were noted and agreed.

12. NATIONAL INDICATOR 14 – AVOIDABLE CONTACT

The Performance Improvement Manager, Steve Tautz, introduced National Indicator 14 – ‘Avoidable Contact’, one of the 198 new indicators which local government will be assessed within the new performance management framework. This indicator will come into force from 1st October 2008, but there would be no need to report until 31st March next year. The District Council will be expected to report annually on performance against NI14 to the Department of Communities and Local Government. The Council would be trying to avoid ‘valueless or avoidable’ contact with its customers. This would cover a range of channels such as email, information desks, phone calls, letters and the website. Avoidable contact would also depend on the type of contact made in the first place. Avoidable contact is unnecessary repeat contact and would involve progress chasing and about getting it right first time.

Having a one-stop-shop would be a valuable start and collecting data would be quite straightforward with a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system.

This is not an indicator that requires an initial set of targets. The Audit Commission would not be comparing authorities for at least two or three years, thereafter a baseline would be set.

A Councillor asked how expensive CRM software was. He was told that it varied greatly, depending on how much you wanted the system to do. A few years ago the working group had it priced at £100,000 but it was not certain if this was for a top of the range system or a standard, entry level one. In any case, to meet the 31 March 09 deadline the Council could only have a manual paper system in place.

The Panel would be able to see a CRM system in operation at the one stop shop in Harlow.

Asked if this was all about data collection or did it encompass improved services, the Deputy Chief Executive replied that the real purpose of the collected data would be to provide better services and customer satisfaction.

The Panel noted that a few years ago some research had been undertaken on telephone enquiry responses and at the time the council was not performing particularly well. Therefore the starting point for measuring our performance would likely to be low.

Data collected for NI 14 would have to be laboriously collected by using manual lists, and we could only do this on a sample basis. It had been suggested that a sample size of 1,067 would give a 95% confidence in the results. It would have to be only basic monitoring with nothing too complex. That can only be achieved with a CRM system.

However, collecting the data manually until March 2009 will give officers a feel for what they need to look for and the type of information they would need to collect before a full CRM system is bought. A Councillor noted that some of the Council directorates had already got some computer systems, would they be able to tie it into a future CRM system? The officer from finance said that their system could only look at items individually. The Environmental Directorate have a mini database system that officers could learn from but it was unclear if it could be incorporated into the new system. The Director of Planning said it may be possible to link some of the Council's newer systems, but it may take a lot of work.

The Panel noted that at present the Council received enquiries in a variety of ways. Currently the switchboard has to answer calls to a performance time target so tend to move on enquiries as quickly as possible. It can also be very difficult to establish what the query was, until they had conversed with the inquirer for some time.

The Council was in the process of establishing an officer working group to set up a manual data collection system. They would have to visit other authorities and call in outside expertise to help set up a CRM system for the Council.

RESOLVED:

That the Panel noted the requirements of the new National Indicator 14 – 'Reducing Avoidable Contact' and the need to establish a manual data

collection process for the Indicator in the first year of data collection prior to further investigations into the purchase of a CRM System.

13. VISIT TO ONE-STOP SHOPS

The Deputy Chief Executive said he would like the Panel to view a 'One-Stop-Shop' in action. He had been in contact with Harlow Council who has one set up in their Civic Centre. It is called 'Contact Harlow' and is contactable via the phone, email and in person. It can deal with a whole range of activities backed up by their computer system that can help resolve most issues.

The Panel decided that they would like to visit the centre on a weekday morning and decided that Tuesday would be a suitable day.

ACTION:

Arrangements to be made to facilitate this visit and members to be notified separately about the date and time.

14. PROVISION OF RECEPTION SERVICES AT CIVIC OFFICES

A few years ago the Council's Customer Services Consultants undertook a performance review from a customer's perspective. One of their key findings was in relation to visitor's experience at the Civic Offices, where there were five reception desks at diverse locations throughout the building. It concluded that it was confusing for customers and the Council should look at simplifying the arrangements, with a view to providing a single point of contact.

The Panel then undertook a tour of the five reception areas in the Council offices, where officers from the relevant Directorate explained the type of services provided and highlighted some of the current practical difficulties for customers and staff.

They started their tour in the main reception desk on the ground floor where the Public Relations and Marketing Officer, Tom Carne, took the Panel through the layout and problems associated with the area.

Main Reception:

The Panel noted that:

- The reception area had two entry points;
- One of the doors was without an automatic opening mechanism.
- This arrangement also meant that the information assistants are caught in the middle of a draft coming from the two doorways;
- Customers tended to enter from behind the information assistants;
- Last year they had 75,000 enquiries, a large proportion was for the waste sacks;
- They have to point a lot of people to the other service helpdesks;
- They have to direct, sometime large numbers, of the public to public meetings being held in the building (e.g. Coroners Court, Planning Inquiries etc.)
- The reception area also tends to receive large deliveries, which have to be stacked in the corner of the public area awaiting collection, which causes a health and safety hazard;
- Some of the main environmental issues were: there was no out of the way storage area, not very good lighting and it could get very cold;

- There are two information assistants for each information desk around the district. One works in the morning and the other in the afternoon. They have a 15 minute handover;
- They start at 8:45, doors open at 9am and work until the offices close;
- As only one receptionist is on duty at a time, they frequently have to deal with more than one customer and may also have to answer the phone at the same time. They will need to make a judgement on who to deal with first, the phone or the person(s);
- The curved desk has no natural point of focus;
- There is no queuing system in place;
- Some people do not express themselves clearly and the information staff have to work quite hard to find out what they want;
- There are also security problems with the area and when problems arise the information assistants have no where to retreat to;
- There is no control to the access of the building;
- There was no provision to share information electronically with the customers and there was limited display space;
- A few 'quick fixes' could be put in place such as large information screens, but what was really needed was a redesign of the entire area.

Housing Receptions:

The Assistant Director of Housing, Roger Wilson explained how the housing reception areas worked.

The Panel noted that:

- There have about 480 visitors per quarter at their Limes Farm desk;
- There have about 1400 visitors per quarter at their Broadway Offices;
- The interview rooms at these outlying offices have screens and panic buttons;
- At the Civic offices there were concerns about the signage, they needed to be clearer;
- Two interview rooms were not enough, they were used for homeless interviews, housing needs interview and housing management;
- Not only are they used for housing interviews, but any other section could ask to use them;
- The Civic offices interview rooms have panic buttons;
- The Housing Needs desk was not very private only partially screened off;
- Officers wanting to use the interviews rooms may have to wait for one;
- They receive about 750 visitors per month and there can be long queues;
- It is not a very comfortable place to wait when queuing, especially if they have children with them;
- They tend to be very busy on Mondays;
- There is no formal queuing system in place;
- Appointments can be made, but officers can run late, although they will honour any appointments;
- They will in some cases use the finance interview room;
- The Repair Reception desk was not the busiest reception desk, as a lot of these queries are reported by telephone or on line;
- The Private Sector Housing staff will be taking over this area; housing repairs will be moving but will have a telephone link installed.

Finance Reception:

The Assistant Director of Finance, Janet Twinn, took the Panel through the Finance Reception area.

The Panel noted that:

- This area had major faults, such as lack of privacy;
- It also housed the secure cashiers area;
- People came there for their Council Tax and Benefit enquiries and they used a phone to alert officers when they were needed;
- The three interview booths have full screens with microphones so privacy is impossible;
- They also have to sit side on to the officer because that is the way the seats are fixed;
- There is also a screened interview room, which is the only place they can accommodate a person in a wheelchair;
- The Benefits Section sometime do interview under caution (PACE Interviews) in a very small, cramped interview room;
- They had the area carpeted to damp down some of the noise and echoes;
- It would not be easy to make physical changes to the layout of the area and it was not very well planned in the first place;
- In the road tunnel, between the reception areas, barriers had to be put up to stop children running across without looking first.

Planning Reception:

The Director of Planning and Economic Development, John Preston, took the Panel through the Planning reception area.

The Panel noted that:

- This reception area was situated up on the second floor;
- The lift had been out of operation for about four months (it was currently working);
- The signage had not been updated;
- They need to improve the signage;
- It is combined with Environment Services;
- They had added some artwork to the walls to make it a bit more “customer friendly” and less stark;
- The corridor to the reception area has various interview rooms along them, one is used for taxi licence applications, one is set up for multiple persons to electronically check planning applications;
- They have panic alarms in the interview rooms, with a special room adapted for wheelchair users;
- The reception desk does not meet wheelchair access requirements;
- They were using less paper plans now and more e-plans, so it would be feasible for them to move downstairs if required;
- They had no queuing system in place;
- They also have two receptionist, who work the morning and afternoon shifts;
- There is a usable public PC on the reception desk;
- The new planning system coming on line will supply all kinds of information for public use;
- The reception desk has a continuous PowerPoint presentation on planning to look at while waiting;

- They used to be able to take cash, but nowadays have to redirect customers to the cashiers downstairs, where they pay their fees and then have to come back up the planning reception to finish their transactions.

Councillor Stallan said it was very interesting to tour the receptions areas. He was very concerned about the lack of security for the staff. They should at least have a protocol for testing the alarms on a weekly basis.

Councillor Philip asked if more technology could be introduced, for instance a couple of touch screens could be put in main reception to speed things along.

Councillor Jon Whitehouse commented that there must be some quick fixes that could be put in such as computer terminals, redecoration and some proper signage. The Panel also needed to relate this to the customer's telephone experience. Could they redirect to Loughton if Epping was busy? Tom Carne replied that Loughton was on the same switchboard. There was still that same dilemma, if you had someone in front of you and the telephone was ringing. There were resourcing issues there. They had some money to put a few 'quick fixes' in were presently looking into this.

Councillor Mrs Brookes asked if there were facilities for the receptionist to call in another person when things got particularly busy. Tom Carne replied that they could call in someone from PR. Derek Macnab said it was not unusual for other authorities to combine their reception staff and switchboard staff who would be interchangeable.

The Deputy Chief Executive told the Panel that once they had seen how a one stop shop worked they would bring a follow up report to the Panel.

15. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Councillor Stallan asked that the details of the visit to the 'one-stop-shop' be put in the Members Bulletin. He would also like some statistics about telephone enquires to the Council, prior to the next meeting.

16. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting was agreed for Tuesday 14 October 2008 at 7.30pm.