

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL**  
**NOTES OF A MEETING OF CUSTOMER TRANSFORMATION TASK AND FINISH**  
**PANEL**  
**HELD ON TUESDAY, 14 OCTOBER 2008**  
**IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CIVIC OFFICES, HIGH STREET, EPPING**  
**AT 7.30 - 9.42 PM**

**Members Present:** B Rolfe (Chairman), J M Whitehouse (Vice-Chairman), Mrs R Brookes, Ms J Hedges, Mrs J Lea, R Morgan and J Philip

**Other members present:** M Cohen and D Stallan

**Apologies for Absence:** D Bateman

**Officers Present** T Carne (Public Relations and Marketing Officer), A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer), D Macnab (Deputy Chief Executive), J Barnard (Office Manager) and A Stephen (Technical Services Manager)

**17. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)**

The Panel noted that there were no substitute members.

**18. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

No declarations of interest were made.

**19. TERMS OF REFERENCE**

The Terms of Reference were noted and agreed.

**20. MINUTES FROM THE LAST MEETING**

The minutes from 15<sup>th</sup> September 2008 were noted and agreed as a correct record subject to noting the apologies of Councillor Mrs Lea.

**21. PROGRESS REPORT ON NATIONAL INDICATOR 14**

The Deputy Chief Executive updated the Panel on the introduction of the National Indicator 14 and its aim to reduce avoidable contact. They noted that a cross directorate working party of senior officers had been set up to progress the implementation of a manual recording form. This form will be piloted in the Planning Services Section. It was projected that a thousand samples per service area would have to be collected in order to make the data statistically valid. The collected data will not only go towards providing data for NI14, but will form the basis for future service improvement.

An analysis of this first round of data collection will be brought to the Panel when available and also to the Finance and Performance Management Standing Panel.

**22. VISIT TO HARLOW CIVIC OFFICES**

The Panel discussed their visit earlier that day to the Harlow Civic Offices to review their one-stop-shop, 'Contact Harlow'. A short note of that visit is attached to these minutes. They noted that Harlow introduced the Contact Centre on an incremental basis over a few years.

Councillor Morgan was very impressed with the layout and facilities of the centre. Councillor Rolfe agreed and commented that EFDCs problem was that it just did not have to space to do the same thing. Councillor Mrs Lea added that there were no decent transport connections into Epping. As a mainly rural district Epping will still need to have some 'out stations' spread around the district. Councillor Stallan agreed that there was the problem of out laying areas of the district and the associated problems of travelling to Epping. He would like to know how much it had cost Harlow to set up. Derek Macnab said he would ask them to share information on their costs with us. They used existing staff resources and the Capital costs were met from the planning gain resulting from the provision of the new shopping centre.

Councillor Cohen said that Epping Forest would have more resistance to centralisation as we have various district centres such as Loughton and Waltham Abbey. Some of these people in these population centres may never come into Epping; therefore centralisation may not suit this district as such. It was noted that they would have to come to Epping for Benefits and Planning advice and that there was a need to increase telephone and website contact.

Councillor Cohen noted how little Harlow could do on their website. They expected people to go into Harlow town centre for everything.

Councillor Philip thought that they had got the reception area right, with the message boards etc. and the fact that they had interchangeable, generic staff capable of manning the switchboard, contact centre, cashiers and reception was very useful. Mr Carne, Public Relations and Marketing Officer, said that Epping could use staff from other parts of the Council to help out in peak working situations. Councillor Philip added that we may need to do a lot of training for these staff.

The meeting was impressed that Harlow resolves 80% of calls at their first point of contact and that abandoned calls are down to 4%. It was also impressive to be able to seek feedback from 10% of enquirers.

Councillor Mrs Lea saw the benefit of a call centre but thought we would still need to have some 'outstations'. Derek Macnab noted that some councils have a mobile information/cash office that toured the more rural areas of their district.

In conclusion the Panel said that they like the idea of having generic, interchangeable staff, the CRM system and a Contact Centre. They would also like a single contact number for the Council and the continued need for 'outstations' to be kept under consideration.

## **23. TELEPHONE CONTACT**

The Technical Services Manager, Angelo Stephen gave the Panel a short talk on the Council's current telephone system. The current system can track the number of calls that come into the Council. They adhere to the Citizen Charter Limit (CCL) performance standard requiring 95% of calls be answered by the switchboard within 15 seconds and other desk phones within 10 seconds.

Last year the Council received 1.9 million calls, 89% was answered within the time laid down; the switchboard achieved 67%, but they have their own problems. They have to deal with the same problems as a contact centre, acting as a mini contact centre without the resources. They have to tease out the information they need from confused callers. Most times without adequate information they have to guess. They also receive a lot of unusual calls that they do not know what to do with.

A lot of people have voice mail, and the switchboard has to hang on to see if they will pick up and answer, thus extending the time before the next call can be answered. Some people also use the switchboard as a directory service. A lot of calls are not being transferred onwards; internal staff are calling the switchboard for other staff's numbers and also outside organisations numbers. It was noted that officers have an electronic telephone directory which they should be using instead of using the switchboard as it took time away from outside customers. Councillor Philip said that perhaps it showed that the directory was not as good as it should be.

The switchboard only has an average of 2.5 staff on at any one time, compared to the twelve staff at Harlow. At present abandoned calls are running at 41% on average. Councillor Cohen questioned these figures because if a call is diverted it is classed as an abandoned call. In some of the bigger departments it may go through several telephones before it gets picked up.

Councillor Stallan asked if the switchboard were dealing with calls within 15 seconds instead of just answering them within that time. He was told that they try to answer and deal with a call within 15 seconds so they can move on to the next call within the time set out.

Asked what the policy was on applying voicemail Mr Stephen said it was up to the service director to set out a policy for their staff. Mr Macnab said that this was an area they needed to look at and develop some criteria for.

The Panel next heard from Julie Barnard, the office manager for Environment and Street Scene Services. Their general office changed in April from using standard handsets to a new call monitoring system that enables the team to be more proactive. They are currently answering about 97% of all calls with an average waiting time of 18 seconds. It also captures information on an ongoing basis and can produce reports on a daily, weekly or monthly basis.

The Panel then undertook a tour of the Council's Switchboard and the new telephone system in the Environment and Street Scene general office.

After the tour, the Panel noted that:

- The Switchboard was located in a very small room, although it was the frontline of the Council;
- In comparison the Harlow service was very impressive;
- The service was only as good as the information they have access to;
- The system used in the Environment and Street Scene general Office was not a CRM system, it just logged the calls and the work needed;
- That officers using the switchboard as a directory enquiry tended to clog up the system;
- Councillors were surprised to see hardcopy of directories still being used, it should be on line;
- That more direct line numbers had been introduced to relieve the pressure on the switchboard;

- Most customers now want to only call one number.

## 24. FORESTER MAGAZINE PUBLIC CONSULTATION

The Public Relations and Marketing Officer, Tom Carne, informed the Panel about the Council's Forester magazine. He informed the Panel that the distribution of the magazine up to the Christmas edition would be handled by the Royal Mail. The Royal Mail has handled the distribution of the Forester up until now as they had provided been the most reliable and the best value for money, especially in the rural areas.

However, the distribution of the Forester will be moving to a new distributor, (D2D or Door 2 Door), in the Spring of 2009, who will employ people to deliver the Forester door to door. The Royal Mail has said that it would not be cost effective to deliver it to certain post codes. The cost at present is about £20,000 per annum. There has also been an ongoing problems with Royal Mail over the last few distribution runs and that not everyone was receiving the magazine.

Councillor Stallan said this was also about the effective use of ratepayer's money and we should be asking for a refund if not all areas were being distributed too. Mr Carne said that he would be asking for some recompense and that this failure should be made public.

Mr Carne went on to inform the Panel about the latest review being carried out on the Forester Magazine. They will be asking the public what they would want from the publication, are they happy with the size of the magazine, should it be delivered electronically, the type and amount of advertising, are they happy with the quality of the magazine and what do they like reading in it. There is also a debate to be had on the balance of Council vs. Community news to be included. Although the Forester is for everyone, it could be that this is almost impossible to provide in one magazine, although they do try. The Forester is increasingly becoming important to the Council as a consultation vehicle as it was a very valuable way of getting into every home.

Along with the survey there will also be four focus groups set up to consider the magazine. The groups would be drawn from:

- a) Epping Forest District Youth Council
- b) A local Town Centre Partnership
- c) Older residents based in sheltered council housing
- d) A residents association representing private sector residents.

Councillor Stallan commented that Christmas was not the time to hold consultations. He like the magazine as it was, the adverts were a necessary evil but it was about the right amount. He also liked the size, but was concerned about who decided what part of the community news got into the Forester as it was a magazine for the district and not really for local parish or town councils. The items should be more general to the district and should not drill down too deeply.

Councillor Mrs R Brookes said that people need to be motivated to read this as people get a lot of junk mail through their door. It was essential that focus groups are used but the questions need to be pitched very carefully.

Councillor Philip said that one option in the survey not given was to keep the publication as it is. Mr Carne said it could be added as it was still in draft.

**ACTION:** to add a 'keep it as it is' option to the survey form.

Councillor Philip added that a further focus group should be added to the four identified, and that would be to speak to people who would not normally get involved in surveys and focus groups. He proposed a focus group by random sample of some kind.

**AGREED:** to add a fifth focus group of participants chosen at random.

Councillor Mrs Lea added that it needed to attract young families, young mums and appeal to children.

Mr Carne thanked the Panel for their comments and said he would put their comments and additions into his proposed survey.

**25. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

The Deputy Chief Executive told the Panel that as they had now held three meetings, an interim report will be brought to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 11<sup>th</sup> December. A verbal report will be brought to the November Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

**26. DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting was agreed for Tuesday 25 November 2008 at 7.30pm.

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## Visit to Harlow's One-Stop-Shop "Contact Harlow" – 14 October 2008

Councillors present: B Rolfe, J Philip, Mrs Lea, Mrs Hedges, Mrs R Brookes, Mrs Whitehouse, Jon Whitehouse, R Morgan, M Cohen and Mrs P Brooks.

1. The Customer Transformation Panel and some appropriate officers went to Harlow Civic Centre to view their one-stop-shop.
2. Simon Pipe, their Customer Contact manager gave the Panel a talk on the background of the facility.
3. Before the one-stop-shop (Contact Harlow) was opened they had numerous neighbourhood officers that handled the various enquiries from the public.
4. They opened a one-stop-shop in September 2001, which had cashiers and a call centre. Initially it was housed in a small outbuilding.
5. They had to buy a bespoke CRM system, as at that time there were no commercially available ones, and they are still using and developing it.
6. They moved into the Civic Centre in January 2004. Contact Harlow occupies all of the ground floor. They deliberately designed it to be high and spacious. There are 7 interviewing booths that can be pre-booked, each with CCTV and a Panic Button. People can come in and carry out land and electoral searches on the PCs provided. There also have cashier stations there and operate a ticketing system. They have an LCD information screen and a video user guide.
7. Contact Harlow consists of a reception area, a call centre, a switchboard, cashiers, face to face advisors on benefits, Council Tax and Homelessness. The main Switchboard is separate from the Contact Centre. Their aim is to resolve 80% of queries at this first point of contact. They deal in about 11,000 transactions a week and seek feedback from about 10% of the clients. They average about 478 calls a day, and have a 4.83% abandon call rate. The average waiting time to speak to an advisor on the phone is 28 seconds, with an average call processing time of 2 minutes 24 seconds. They handle about 94 face to face visits a day, with an average waiting time of 7 minutes 24 seconds, and an average transaction time of 10 minutes 16 seconds.
8. Reception has about 250 visitors a day; the Cashiers handle about 676 transactions a day and receive about 90 emails a day.
9. Staff are vigorously assessed over a day of tests before they are offered a job in Contact Harlow and they organised by various Duty Managers and each service had a 'champion' as a contact point. Staff operate a two shift system. All staff are generic and are interchangeable and take turns at manning all the desks.
10. Their CRM system was now coming to the end of its life, and they are now looking for a new, more flexible system. They are also trying to develop their website to make it more interactive, they would like to replicate the contact centre on line.

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