

Scrutiny Task and Finish Panel Agenda



Customer Transformation Task and Finish Panel Tuesday, 25th November, 2008

Place: Council Chamber, Civic Offices, High Street, Epping

Time: 7.30 pm

Democratic Services Officer: Adrian Hendry, Office of the Chief Executive
email: ahendry@eppingforestdc.gov.uk Tel. 01992 564246

Members:

Councillors B Rolfe (Chairman), J M Whitehouse (Vice-Chairman), D Bateman, A Boyce, Mrs R Brookes, J Demetriou, Ms J Hedges, Mrs J Lea, R Morgan and J Philip

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

2. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

(Assistant to the Chief Executive) To report the appointment of any substitute members for the meeting.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

(Assistant to the Chief Executive). To declare interests in any items on the agenda.

In considering whether to declare a personal or a prejudicial interest under the Code of Conduct, Overview & Scrutiny members are asked pay particular attention to paragraph 11 of the Code in addition to the more familiar requirements.

This requires the declaration of a personal and prejudicial interest in any matter before an OS Committee which relates to a decision of or action by another Committee or Sub Committee of the Council, a Joint Committee or Joint Sub Committee in which the Council is involved and of which the Councillor is also a member.

Paragraph 11 does not refer to Cabinet decisions or attendance at an OS meeting purely for the purpose of answering questions or providing information on such a matter.

4. TERMS OF REFERENCE (Pages 3 - 4)

(Chairman/Lead Officer) To note the attached updated Terms of Reference. The Panel are asked at each meeting to review this documents.

5. MINUTES OF THE MEETING (Pages 5 - 12)

To consider and agree the notes of the meeting of the Panel held on 14 October 2008.

6. DRAFT PANEL REPORT (Pages 13 - 28)

For the Panel to consider the draft annual report for this panel.

7. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Introduction:

In order to improve access to services and improve response to enquiries, the Council has previously embarked on exploring the feasibility of a "Customer Transformation Programme". The initiative was held in abeyance until such times as the affordability of the project could be assessed, given pressure on the Council's revenue Budget and uncertainty around the cost of the new Waste Management Contract. Now that the Council's Medium Term Financial Forecast is clearer, there is value in revisiting the Customer Services Agenda, to see where improvements can be practically achieved.

Term of Reference:

1. To undertake a review of the Customer Services Programme previously explored by the Council, and to identify and prioritise these initiatives which could have the greatest impact on improving access to services and response to enquiries.
2. To review existing quality standards with respect to Customer Services and recommend change as necessary to ensure that they meet the current expectations of the Council's customers.
3. To ensure that the Council is complying with its duty under Equalities Legislation to provide access to all sections of the Community to Council Services.
4. To assess the most appropriate and cost effective method of enabling the Council to meet the requirements of the New Statutory National Indicator N14, with respect to "avoidable contact".
5. To identify areas for improvement in how the Council communicates its "key messages" to our community, ensuring that public information is clearly understood and accessible.

Aims and Objectives/Methodology:

To gather evidence and information in relation to the topics through the receipt of data, presentations and by participation in fact finding visits;

To consult with Partners, Agencies, Stakeholders and Users of the services under review, to establish key issues and future need;

To evaluate all relevant facts in relation to the topics under review in an objective way and to produce recommendations for future action accordingly;

To establish whether there are any resource implications arising out of the topics under review and advise Cabinet for inclusion in the Budget Process 2009/10; and

To report back to Overview and Scrutiny Committee at appropriate intervals and to submit any final reports in the proposed Corporate Format for consideration by O & S, the Cabinet and Council.

CUSTOMER TRANSFORMATION TASK AND FINISH PANEL: TERMS OF REFERENCE

TIMESCALE	ESTIMATED	ACTUAL
Commencement	June 2008	
<u>Finish</u> 1. Interim report to include any budgetary items for the next budget round.	By October 2008	
Reports.		
Chairman: Councillor B Rolfe		

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 15th 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 Stellan 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 11th 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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SCRUTINY

REPORT OF CUSTOMER TRANSFORMATION TASK AND FINISH PANEL

NOVEMBER 2008

Contact for Enquiries:

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1. Chairman's Foreword

Foreword by Councillor Brian Rolfe – Chairman of Panel



2. Panel Composition

The Customer Transformation Task and Finish Panel 2008/09 comprised of the following Members:

Councillors B Rolfe (Chairman), J M Whitehouse (Vice Chairman), D Bateman, A Boyce, Mrs R Brookes, J Demetriou, Ms J Hedges, Mrs J Lea, R Morgan and J Philip.

The Panel met on four occasions throughout the Review Period and undertook a visit to "Contact Harlow".

3. Introduction and Overview

The Customer Transformation Task and Finish Panel was established by the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee at their meeting of 10th April 2008.

The improvement of Customer Services has been a long held aspiration, with references dating back to the Council's Implementing Electronic Government Statements, from 2002 onwards. However, as part of the Council's last Comprehensive Performance Assessment, the Audit Commission were critical of the authority's lack of progress in this area.

In response the Council commissioned external expertise in 2005, Steria Ltd, who reviewed customer service performance and identified a number of areas for improvement.

Whilst Steria identified that there were some good examples of customer service, this had not permeated throughout the authority in a consistent fashion. In particular, the consultants concluded that, opening hours are not designed around customer needs in particular with respect to telephone enquiries. In addition they identified that the authority appeared to suffer from a lack of internal communication and adherence to standards, that five reception desks in the Civic Offices is too many and confusing and finally that telephone answering performance is poor, with a propensity to pass the customer on.

In September 2005, the Council endorsed the findings of the consultants and agreed to commission a further external agency (Foresight Consulting Ltd) to develop a plan for the implementation of a Customer Services Transformation Programme (CTP) to address the issues identified above.

The objectives subsequently agreed by Cabinet for the CTP were as follows:

- To transform the organisation to a position where the customer is seen at the heart of the Council's operations;
- To improve the customer experience and ensure the quality of service is consistent whenever, wherever and however customers contact the Council;
- To achieve an improvement in customer satisfaction and customer service within the first twelve months of the programme;
- To establish a front/back office organisational model and set up a Corporate Customer Services front office where a high number of enquiries are resolved first time at the first point of contact.
- To re-organise the Civic Offices to enable customers to access the majority of Council services at a single reception/customer services area on the ground

floor and to improve access to Council committees and other public meetings.

- To improve back office efficiency and productivity by answering a high number of enquiries in the new customer services front office.
- To deploy and develop Customer Relationship Management software in association with the website and a new intranet to provide accurate and timely information for Members and officers on service issues, customer trends, access channels and service usage and costs.

The Programme Plan itself was developed and approved by the Council in July 2006. In addition, the Cabinet also requested provision be made in the Capital Programme of some £2.2 million and that a CSB Supplementary estimate of £150,000 and DDF Supplementary for £362,000 be recommended to the Council to resource the changes proposed.

In the event the Capital Bid was agreed and provision still exists within the Council's current Capital Programme, but due to uncertainty at the time around the costs of Waste Management, no provision was made in the 2007/08 Budget or in subsequent years for additional revenue. As such the programme has been held in abeyance.

However with the re-tendering and subsequent appointment of a new Waste Management Contractor in early 2008, our Task and Finish Panel were asked to revisit the Customer Transformation agenda, to consider whether we felt that the objectives of the original CTP are still relevant and to identify any priority areas for improvement.

The Public Interest Justification and Impact on Social, Economic and Environmental well-being considerations, presented as part of the original proposal forms, are attached at Appendix 1.

4. Terms of Reference

At our initial meeting, the Panel developed and agreed the following Terms of Reference and Aims and Objectives. These were kept under review throughout the period of our work, to ensure their continuing relevance.

Terms of Reference:

- To undertake a review of the Customer Services Programme previously explored by the Council, and to identify and prioritise these initiatives which could have the greatest impact on improving access to services and response to enquiries.
- To review existing quality standards with respect to Customer Services and recommend change as necessary to ensure that they meet the current expectations of the Council's customers.
- To ensure that the Council is complying with its duty under Equalities Legislation to provide access to all sections of the Community to Council Services.
- To assess the most appropriate and cost effective method of enabling the Council to meet the requirements of the New Statutory National Indicator N14, with respect to "avoidable contact".
- To identify areas for improvement in how the Council communicates its "key messages" to our community, ensuring that public information is clearly

understood and accessible.

Aims and Objectives:

- To gather evidence and information in relation to the topics through the receipt of data, presentations and by participation in fact finding visits;
- To consult with Partners, Agencies, Stakeholders and Users of the services under review, to establish key issues and future need;
- To evaluate all relevant facts in relation to the topics under review in an objective way and to produce recommendations for future action accordingly;
- To establish whether there are any resource implications arising out of the topics under review and advise Cabinet for inclusion in the Budget Process 2009/10; and
- To report back to Overview and Scrutiny Committee at appropriate intervals and to submit any final reports in the proposed Corporate Format for consideration by O & S, the Cabinet and Council.

5. Methodology – How we went about the Task

From the outset we acknowledged that it was appropriate to approach the review from the perspective of the “customer”. As such we received a number of presentations, including a “live demonstration” of the capabilities of the Council’s current website.

We also participated in a tour of the Council’s five reception areas. At each reception area, we were given an insight into the customer service considerations by staff representatives of the appropriate Directorate.

We reviewed performance data in relation to the Council’s telephone system and had the opportunity to view the Telephone Switchboard facilities at the Civic Offices. The review of telephone issues also included a demonstration of the contact system utilised by our Environment and Street Scene Directorate to handle enquiries in relation to Refuse Collection, Highways maintenance etc.

We undertook a very informative visit to Harlow District Council’s Civic Offices, hosted by their “Contact Harlow” team. This not only included a presentation on the rationale and improved outcomes for customers delivered by Contact Harlow, but also we saw how their reception and Customer Contact Centre staff (including the Customer Relationship Management System) handle enquiries. The visit took place during their opening hours.

We also welcomed the opportunity to meet with Harlow’s Chair of Scrutiny and Deputy Leader of Council, to hear about “Contact Harlow” from an Elected Member’s perspective.

6. Summary of Recommendations

TOPIC ONE

THE COUNCIL WEBSITE:

The Panel Recommends:

- i) That given the increasing importance of the Website with respect to communication, information and electronic interactions, consideration is given to increasing the level of dedicated resource to the maintenance and development of the Council's Website.
- ii) That a bid is submitted to fund an additional two Website Officers as part of the Budget Process 2009/10.

TOPIC TWO

PROVISION OF RECEPTION SERVICES AT THE CIVIC OFFICES:

The Panel Recommends:

- i) That a re-organisation should take place at the Civic Offices to enable customers to access the majority of Council Services at a single reception/customer services area of the ground floor.
- ii) That detailed feasibility work is undertaken to establish the costs of the new single customer services/reception area, for which provision should be made from the existing allocation of funds within the capital programme.

TOPIC THREE

TELEPHONE ENQUIRIES

The Panel Recommends:

- i) That the Council develops and deploys a Customer Relationship Management System to provide accurate and timely information to enquirees.
- ii) That any such Customer Relationship Management System be capable of providing accurate management and monitoring information, not only to meet the requirements of N14, but also to drive customer satisfaction levels higher.

TOPIC FOUR

PUBLIC INFORMATION – THE FORESTER

The Panel Recommends:

- i) That the results of the Forester consultation are considered by Overview and Scrutiny Committee prior to any fundamental design changes or content.

TOPIC FIVE

NATIONAL PERFORMANCE INDICATOR 14 – AVOIDABLE CONTACT

The Panel Recommends:

- i) That in line with our recommendations in respect to Telephone enquiries, that a Customer Relationship Management System is developed capable of efficiently collecting data to improve services and meet the requirements of N14 – Available Contact.

TOPIC SIX

ONE STOP SHOPS/CONTACT CENTRES

The Panel Recommends:

- i) That the Council pursue the establishment of a Corporate Customer Services, front office model such as “Contact Harlow” where the maximum number of enquiries and transactions completed at the first point of contact.

7. Report and Summary of Main Conclusions

At our first meeting in July, we received a scoping report providing the background to the Council’s previous consideration of the Customer Transformation Programme, including the previous set of objectives which we had been tasked with reviewing. The report also highlighted new developments in the area, such as the new National Performance Indicator N14, which we are statutorily obliged to address.

From the scoping exercise, we identified a number of priority issues that we wish to explore in more detail, namely the Council’s Website, Reception Services at the Civic Offices, Telephone Enquiry Performance, “One Stop Shop”/Contact Centres, Public Information – Forester and compliance with National Indicator N14 Avoidable Contact.

The results of our investigations and recommendations, with respect to each issue, were as follows;

A. The Council’s Website

We received a presentation and “real time” demonstration of the Council’s Website from our Public Relations Manager and Website Editor. This was in order to give us an insight into, not only the breadth of information currently held on the Website and the type of interactive transactions that are available, but also resourcing and access issues.

We were informed that the Website has become one of the Council’s most important channels of communication, given the massive increase in computer use amongst the general community and the wide range of electronic transactions now available across public and commercial services.

Available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year the Website runs an application called “Punch”, (provided by an external supplier) and at the time of our consideration our website contained some 1,734 pages plus over 7000 pdfs and images. We observed how usage is increasing annually with 664,000 visits received in 2006/07 rising to some 787,000 visits in 2007/08.

Although the Council’s Public Relations section provide much of the content,

about 750 pages of news items, it was noted that the Website also provides a framework for a whole number of other service based applications such as i-Plan, Choice Based Lettings, Recruitment, Democratic Services Reports and Agendas as well as the Public – i system, for the Webcasting of meetings.

It was interesting to hear how the Council appeared to be at the forefront of webcasting, not just of meetings but also webcasting public information, Civic Events and the Chairman's and Leader's messages.

It was also demonstrated how the Website contains a number of online forms and online consultation software, enabling online payments such as paying car parking fines.

It was explained that under Disability Discrimination Act Legislation (DDA) the Council is required to provide information in an accessible format. To this end the authority had commissioned a specialist organisation the Shaw Trust, to audit the Website. The Trust employ people with a range of physical and sensory disabilities to test the site. Initial feedback was that significant changes will be required to the design of our Website with respect to layout, colour and the use of graphics.

We concluded that whilst there is currently a considerable amount of information on the Website and a range of other interactions are possible, compared to other authorities our Website is ranked comparatively low on the SOCITM Rankings at "Standard". In addition the Council is currently exposed to considerable risk in that with only one member of staff responsible for the Website, if that key individual was to leave/be absent then the service would be severely challenged. In addition to the risk, the current level of dedicated resource to the Website means that the scope for development is severely constrained, with staff largely engaged in maintaining the current level of service.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- i) That given the increasing importance of the Website with respect to communication, information and electronic interactions, consideration is given to increasing the level of dedicated resource to the maintenance and development of the Council's Website.**
- ii) That a bid is submitted to fund an additional two Website Officers as part of the Budget Process 2009/10.**

B. Provision of Reception Services at the Civic Offices

A key finding of the previous Customer Services Consultancy was that there was likely to be a degree of confusion amongst visitors to the Civic Offices, given that there are five reception desks at diverse locations throughout the building.

As a Panel we took the opportunity to visit all reception areas, where staff from each Directorate explained the functions provided. In addition this gave an insight into some of the concerns around our current ability to provide a good customer experience.

Starting at the main reception desk in the foyer, we then went on to the Housing Needs and Repairs separate areas, before crossing to Benefits and Cashiers, finally going to the third floor to visit Planning Reception.

We concluded that there were a number of significant issues created by the five reception points. Clearly the need for customers, who on one visit to the Civic Offices, may be required to go to more than one location was irritating, confusing and inefficient, particularly if they had to join the “end of the queue” at each reception area.

It was apparent that there is a general lack of privacy for customers, who may have to discuss matters of a highly personal nature with respect to their financial circumstances in areas, where they could be overheard. The lack of appropriate interview rooms, particularly in the area of Benefits was a particular concern, as was the design limitations of the Cashier and Benefit reception, with respect to wheelchair users.

For customers who may have to bring young children, there is currently inadequate provision in waiting areas and a danger presented by the need to cross the main vehicular access, in the underpass.

The reception areas, particularly the main reception are currently required to receive a large number of deliveries with no proper goods received area. This is resulting in materials having to be stacked in the public areas, with potential Health and Safety issues.

The number and type of display/notice boards distributed across the five service points, seems to lead to customers being bombarded with uncoordinated messages and presents a lost opportunity with respect to the Council being able to present its key messages.

As currently designed and operated we had concerns about the general security and wellbeing of staff and despite the provision of panic alarms, the inability to ensure that there was a safe working environment. It was felt that the current design of particularly the Housing and Benefits receptions, may lead to customers being antagonistic.

We concluded that the provision of a single reception area for the Civic Offices was a priority in achieving significant improvements to Customer Services for the Council. The Panel felt that this should be pursued.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- i) That a re-organisation should take place at the Civic Offices to enable customers to access the majority of Council Services at a single reception/customer services area of the ground floor.**
- ii) That detailed feasibility work is undertaken to establish the costs of the new single customer services/reception area, for which provision should be made from the existing allocation of funds within the capital programme.**

C. Telephone Enquiries

As a Panel we were advised that although the use of alternative methods of contacting the Council, such as email has increased and the authority now offers a range of interactive services through its website, the Council still receives in excess of one 1.5 million phone calls per annum.

Having reviewed a breakdown of the annual telephone statistics for the year

2007-08 (Attached at Appendix 2), it was observed that the Council's current performance of calls being answered within the Citizens Charter Standards fell short of the 95% target. This was particularly true of the Council's main switchboard, which achieved a 67% rate within the 10 second requirement.

On further analysis, which involved the Panel visiting the switchroom it was apparent that there are a number of factors leading to the current performance level. In effect the switchboard operators, (the Council has 2.5 full-time staff compared to Harlow's 12 staff) have to act as a mini-contact centre, in cramped conditions with ageing telemetry systems. Many callers are not clear around what department they wish to speak to, and often are raising enquiries about services not provided by the District Council. This takes time to establish and transfer the call to the appropriate officer, often whilst other calls are queuing.

In addition the telephonists problems are compounded by the use of voicemail, with the operators having to hang on until the voicemail clicks in, thus extending the time before the next call can be answered. Another inefficient practice noted was the propensity for staff to use the switchboard as a Directory Enquiry service, rather than utilising internal/external directories.

We were concerned that the headline figure for abandoned calls is currently running at 41% although this includes calls diverted from one number to another. Therefore the actual figure is likely to be lower.

As a panel we had a demonstration from the Office Manager in Environment and Street Scene of the call management system that they utilise to handle Waste and Street Scene enquiries. The system allows calls to be handled more efficiently, with the team currently answering around 97% of all calls with an average waiting time of 18 seconds. Although the system captures enquiry information on an ongoing basis, it still falls well short of the Customer Relationship Management System we saw utilised so effectively in Contact Harlow.

The Panel concluded that the current telephone enquiry service provided by the Council is inefficient and does not reflect well on the authority.

RECOMMENDATION:

- i) That the Council develops and deploys a Customer Relationship Management System to provide accurate and timely information to enquires.**
- ii) That any such Customer Relationship Management System be capable of providing accurate management and monitoring information, not only to meet the requirements of N14, but also to drive customer satisfaction levels higher.**

D. Public Information – The Forester

The Council's Public Relations and Marketing Officers informed the Panel that the Council's main public information publication was the Forester Magazine, distributed to all households 4 times a year. To date distribution had been handled by the Royal Mail, but due to an inconsistent level of service, was due to transfer to another agency.

We were advised that the Forester was being reviewed by way of a general consultation exercise and through focus groups. This was to check whether

changes were needed in terms of content and presentation. It was acknowledged that the Forester is increasingly being used for consultation purposes as demonstrated by the recent 'Green Waste' exercise.

We felt that generally the Forester was well received in its current format but should move with the times. We asked that consideration should be given to how to make it a read of choice, given the amount of free post people already receive. We thought it was also important to ensure that it appealed to a wide age range of readers.

RECOMMENDATION:

- i) **That the results of the Forester consultation are considered by Overview and Scrutiny Committee prior to any fundamental design changes or content.**

E. National Performance Indicator N14 – Avoidable Contact

As part of our terms of reference, we looked into the implications of a new Statutory Performance Indicator, in relation to customer contact N14, which is one of the 198 new indicators, against which Local Government will be assessed.

N14 aims to reduce “avoidable contact” between the community and local authorities. Examples of “avoidable contact” are usually of little value to either the public or the Council, but can often represent a significant proportion of contact volumes. The indicator therefore seeks to provide more cost effective service delivery.

Members were made aware that data collection for N14 will be very resource intensive particularly for these authorities such as ourselves who do not have a Customer Relationship Management System (CRM). We have been required to manually collect information on all aspects of enquiry across a four week period, across a number of Directorates. In this way details of the various types of avoidable contact will be recorded and an overall corporate level of avoidable contact will be reported, as 2008/09 outturn in April/May 2009.

As a Panel we were keen to ensure that the data is simply not collected to satisfy the requirements of the statutory indicator, but rather is utilised to identify areas for improvement. We were concerned about the amount of time and effect on services by having to collect the data manually particularly in the absence of a CRM system.

RECOMMENDATION:

- i) **That in line with our recommendations in respect to Telephone enquiries, that a Customer Relationship Management System is developed capable of efficiently collecting data to improve services and meet the requirements of N14 – Avoidable Contact.**

F. One Stop Shops/Contact Centres

The Panel visited “Contact Harlow”, Harlow District Council's One Stop Shop/Contact Centre which is located within the new Civic Centre in Harlow. (Notes from the visit are attached at Appendix 3).

Harlow Council's Customer Services Manager gave an initial presentation to us, explaining how a number of neighbourhood information offices had been brought together to provide a one-stop information point. This had involved a range of officers from diverse service areas, housing, finance, community etc, being brought together and becoming "generalists" capable of answering 80% of initial enquiries, without the need to pass to other more specialist back office staff.

In addition to bringing the team of customer operatives together to provide general information, on the tour of the Contact Centre facilities we observed how staff were rotated between the general reception area which included the administration of a number of interview rooms and advice booths, the cashiers office and the telephone contact centre, working on the Customer Relationship Management System.

We heard how this added variety to the staff's work and assisted morale and motivation. We were advised that not only were 80% of enquiries resolved at the initial point of contact but that abandoned calls were down to 4%. It was also impressive that 10% of all enquiries were revisited to seek feedback from the customer, as to how they felt that their enquiry had been handled.

We also had an opportunity to speak with Senior Harlow Councillors who felt that the whole contact centre set up, had not only greatly assisted the public, but also that Members found access to information and response to enquiries far better.

On evaluating our visit, the consensus was that we were very impressed by Contact Harlow and it was a model we would like to aspire to. We particularly liked the generic interchangeable staff model, the CRM system and the facilities to engage with the public by use of interview rooms, enquiry booths etc. We thought the single contact number for all enquiries was worthy of seeking to achieve.

We did however acknowledge that Harlow is a new town with a compact population and only one town centre. In any move to a One Stop Shop/Contact Centre for Epping Forest we should still appreciate the requirement for 'outstations' to be retained for those less mobile.

RECOMMENDATION:

- i) That the Council pursue the establishment of a Corporate Customer Services, front office model such as "Contact Harlow" where the maximum number of enquiries and transactions are completed at the first point of contact.**

8. Conclusion

Our Panel has revisited the Customer Services agenda for the Council, testing the conclusions reached by the previous review and identifying a number of recommendations.

Whilst in some respects our recommendations are less ambitious than the original CTP aspirations, if delivered in a pragmatic practical way, within existing resources and the capital funding currently allocated these should lead to significant improvements to the level of customer service that we as a Council provide to our local residents, visitors and businesses.

Acknowledgements

The officers and Members of Harlow District Council who hosted our visit to “Contact Harlow”.

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