

CUSTOMER TRANSFORMATION TASK AND FINISH PANEL

Item 5 – Scoping Report

Customer Services Transformation Programme

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. Indeed, 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 to Members' concerns and in line with many other local authorities across the region, in 2005 the Council commissioned external expertise, Steria Ltd, to review customer service performance and identify areas for improvement.

Whilst identifying that there were some examples of good customer service, this had not permeated throughout the authority in a consistent way. In particular, the consultants concluded that:

- 1. Opening hours are not designed around customer needs, in particular with respect to telephone enquiries.**
- 2. The Authority appeared to suffer from a lack of internal communication and adherence to standards.**
- 3. Five reception desks in the Civic Offices is too many and confusing.**
- 4. 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 identified and 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 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.

Point 1 – Members of the Task and Finish Panel are asked to consider whether they feel the Objectives of the CTP are still relevant, and whether they would like to focus on any particular aspect previously identified.

Neighbourhoods/First Stop Shops

The Council agreed the Best Value Performance Plan on the 20 June 2008. Contained within the Plan are the Cabinet Objectives 2008-09. Corporate Priority No. 2 "is to explore options to improve the accessibility of the Council's services, through customer focused initiatives including neighbourhood services and one stop-shops".

Point 2 - The Task and Finish Panel are asked to accept the responsibility for undertaking this exploratory work to ensure that services are accessible, which may involve visiting/reviewing other neighbouring authorities' approach.

Customer Communication

The Council utilises a number of different mediums to communicate information and consult with residents and visitors to the District. These range from the Website, to publications, press releases and The Forester magazine. It is important to ensure that information is provided in a form that is accessible and easily understood by the public. This is true also of committee reports which are now accessible through the Council's Website. The Council has previously engaged a "Plain English" consultant and a number of publications received the "Crystal Mark" accreditation. The Task and Finish Panel will be receiving a presentation on the Council's Website, to give an insight into its current format and its future potential.

Point 3 – Does the Panel feel that Council's current written communication could be improved by the adoption of "Plain English" standards and if so, they wish to explore the practicality of adopting such an approach.

National Indicator

The previous statutory Best Value Performance Indicators have now been replaced by a new National Indicator Set. As part of this new set is an indicator, which is, designed to gauge District Councils Performance with respect to answering enquiries from the public. NI 14 looks at avoidable contact, in effect, seeking to test whether enquiries are answered at the first point of contact and avoiding subsequent need to seek further information. Many authorities are in a much better position to collect the data on this indicator given that they have Customer Relationship Management Systems. Such systems record, manage and route telephone calls and enquiries. The Council currently lacks such a system and will be required to resort to a manual survey, to meet our statutory requirement to provide performance data. This is unlikely to be sustainable in the long-term.

Point 4 – The Task and Finish Panel are asked to consider including the feasibility of acquiring a CRM system for the Council, not only to comply fully with NI 14 but also to improve customer services.