

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF CUSTOMER TRANSFORMATION TASK AND FINISH
PANEL
HELD ON TUESDAY, 1 JULY 2008
IN COMMITTEE ROOM 2, CIVIC OFFICES, HIGH STREET, EPPING
AT 7.00 - 8.43 PM

Members Present: B Rolfe (Chairman), , A Boyce, Mrs R Brookes, Ms J Hedges, Mrs J Lea, R Morgan and J Philip

Other members present:

Apologies for Absence: D Bateman

Officers Present D Macnab (Deputy Chief Executive), J Chandler (Assistant Director - Community Services and Customer Relations), T Carne (Public Relations and Marketing Officer), S Mitchell (PR Website Editor) and A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer)

1. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

The Panel noted there were no substitute members.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

3. TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Deputy Chief Executive took the Panel through the draft terms of reference. As background information the Panel noted that there was a working party some years back, set up under the then Portfolio Holder, that looked at the potential Customer Transformation Programme. The Working Party had commissioned an external company, Steria Ltd, to review customer service performance and identify areas for improvement.

The initiative was eventually held in abeyance until such times as the affordability of the project could be assessed, given the 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 what improvements could be practically achieved.

The Panel then considered the terms of reference, discussing each point in turn, and agreed them, noting that under item 5 of the terms of reference they would be taking special note of using plain English and doing away with jargon in dealings with the public.

The Panel then went on to discuss what start time would be preferred by the members. They decided on 7.30pm. There was also a plea that the meetings not be held on a Tuesday.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the Terms of Reference for this Task and Finish Panel be agreed as set out in the agenda and submitted to the next Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting for their endorsement.
- 2) That the Panel agreed a start time of 7.30pm for future panel meetings.

4. SCOPING REPORT

The Panel considered the Scoping report which set out the background to the Council's Customer Transformation programme. This has long been an aspiration of the council dating back to 2002. In 2005 the council commissioned an external company (Steria Ltd.) to review customer service performance and identify areas for improvement. They 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 report and commissioned an external agency (Foresight Consulting Ltd) to develop a plan for the improvement and for the implementation of a Customer Services Transformation Programme (CTP) to address the issues identified above.

A number of objectives were identified and agreed by the Cabinet for the CTP. They were:

- 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.

Provision was made in the Council's finances, with a budget of over £2.2 million identified. 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.

Members of this Task and Finish Panel would have 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.

The Panel will revisit these reports and conclusions at its next meeting.

The Chairman asked if the money that was set aside, was ring-fenced. The Deputy Chief Executive replied that it was; it was allocated to the Customer Transformation Programme and is still there for use.

Councillor Mrs R Brookes commented that they would have to look to see if any progress had been made since the reports were made. The Deputy Chief Executive agreed and added that the Panel needed to consider if they still needed everything that was identified and, should it be re-prioritised.

Councillor Philip said that the Panel should also look at how the £2.2 million budget was allocated.

The Panel noted that Environmental Services had recently split the district up into neighbourhood areas based on the Planning Sub-committee areas. A lead officer was appointed for each area. They would have to consider if the one-stop-shops should mirror these areas. Other authorities had gone down this route and perhaps this was something the Panel should look at. Perhaps a visit could be arranged to another Council's one-stop-shop to see how they work.

ACTION: to make enquiries about arranging a visit for the Panel to an existing one-stop-shop.

The standard of 'Customer Communication' should also be considered. The Council utilises a number of ways to communicate information and consult with residents. These range from the website, to publications, press releases and the Forester magazine. It was important to ensure that information was provided in a form that was accessible and easily understood by the public. This was true also of committee reports which are now accessible through the Council's website. The Panel would need to consider the Council's current written communication and how/if it could be improved by the adoption of 'Plain English' standards and if so, the practicality of adopting such an approach.

Councillor Morgan asked why the Plain English 'Crystal Mark' was considered so expensive. He was told that the council had to submit each document for the plain English Campaign to comment on. That would cost about £500 per document. It

would be more prudent if we could achieve these standards without going down this externally evaluated route.

The full Government text for National Indicator 14 was tabled, this ran to six pages. This indicator was designed to gauge the District Council's Performance with respect to answering enquiries from the public. It looks at 'avoidable contact', testing whether enquiries were answered at the first point of contact and avoided subsequent need to seek further information. Many authorities collect this type of information by using a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) System. Such systems record, manage and route telephone calls and enquiries. The Council currently lacks such a system. There is a need to log calls onto some sort of database, as the database is built up so repeat callers can be identified and their history of calls displayed.

Councillor Philips said that statistics show that these types of systems, set up for the first time, are doomed to failure. The Deputy Chief Executive said that he had not heard of this before, but they would look into the background. The Council does have its own smaller, stand alone systems for some of the directorates such as Environment and Street Scene. They may be able to be joined them up so that they can talk to each other.

Councillor Mrs Hedges asked how such a system would effect the 'personal touch' that was so important. She was told that the Council had to get the balance right. Customers may be happy with their first contact with the Council and need not come back again and again. Others may need more detailed information and it would be more appropriate for them to talk to an officer.

The Panel will have to consider the feasibility of acquiring a CRM system for the Council not only to comply fully with NI14 but also to improve customer services.

5. PRESENTATION ON THE COUNCIL'S WEBSITE

As an addition to the agenda the Head of Public Relations, Tom Carne and the Council's website editor, Steve Mitchell, were invited to give the Panel an insight into the workings and the breath of information held on the Council's website. They also gave a live, real time demonstration of the website.

Tom Carne started by making the point that the Audit Commission was after improved services and improved value for money. People cost money and are only available part of the day, and only five days a week. The Council's website however, is available 24/7, 365 days a year, and had become one of the Council's most important channels of service delivery and communication. It runs on an application called Punch, provided by Harlequin. Currently it has 1,734 pages plus over 7,000 pdfs and images attached to it.

Usage is soaring. In 2006/07 it received 664,000 visits. In 2007/08 it received over 787,000 visits.

Public Relations provide much of the content (about 735 pages of news items). The website also provides a framework for lots of service based applications, such as i-Plan, Home Option, Jobs, Coms and Public-i.

The Council has one editor for its site and that is Steve Mitchell, who is employed more or less full time to manage the web content. Technical support is provided by the Council's ICT section.

The most important page on the website is the home page (the Council's shop window), which is based on the BBC website. There is a need to keep putting new things on it to keep people interested, such as news items and press releases.

EFDC are at the forefront of webcasting, not just of meetings, but public information, Civic Events and the Chairman's and Leader's messages.

The system also has forms on line, provided by BWS and online consultation software (SNAP). Customers could also access online payments, such as paying car parking fines.

Members should appreciate that there is a massive amount of information on the website and it helps people to access services and cuts down on the need for staff resources. Because the website is so successful it puts serious challenges on the Council, the volume of new information is stretching the system and there is a very streamlined staffing structure, i.e. Steve Mitchell, compared to most other councils.

Under DDA legislation the website makes the Council's services accessible to many groups of people to whom the Council was previously inaccessible. Currently the Shaw Trust is auditing the website for accessibility. They employ people with different disabilities to test the Council's site and will then report back to us. This will mean changes to the design of the website, e.g. links, layout, use of colour and graphics. This may mean a cultural change by the people who produce web content around the Council.

A great deal has been done but the Council is now at the margins of its capacity as far as the website is concerned. There are concerns on having to rely on one or two key individuals who in other Councils would be part of a bigger team.

The question was how ambitious do members want to be, what do they want done with it?

Councillor Boyce asked if it was known how many people can't use the internet. What could be done for them? Mr Carne answered that they have the Council's information centres which has the ability for face to face contact and the telephones.

Councillor Mrs Lea said that part of the answer to the problem of personal contact was the Ward Councillors; they should act as the first line of contact. Her other worry was housing tenants that do not have web access. Mr Carne replied that Housing were very conscious of this and were contacting everyone on their list who had not made a bid and asked them what their problems were and to follow up on them.

Councillor Philip asked about tracking numbers, what is the Council doing about these? Mr Carne replied that BWS forms could help by creating a work flow through the system.

Councillor Philip then asked if the council used synthetic transactions surveys. He was told that the Council was not that sophisticated at present, but they do test any new applications that go up.

Councillor Mrs R Brookes asked what the biggest hits on the site were. She was told that it was the home page and then local democracy. After the elections in May the site received double the amount of hits it would normally get. The Chairman added that the Council still published the results on the notice boards outside the Civic Offices.

The Deputy Chief Executive asked Tom Carne where the Council was ranked compared with other local authority websites and what would be his priority if he had the money to spend. Mr Carne said we were currently near the bottom of the league table, other councils provide a lot more resources for their websites. Redbridge are a very good example of a good website. As for what we would like to do, well, other websites use more geographical personalised information. Redbridge are currently asking their residents what they would like to spend money on in their local area. There are also ways that people could customise their home page specifically to their own area, just by putting in their name and post code.

6. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

No other business was raised.

7. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting was agreed for Monday 15 September 2008 at 7.30pm.