

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C-084-2008/09.

Date of meeting: 2 February 2009.



**Epping Forest
District Council**

Portfolio: Corporate Support and ICT Services.

Subject: Report of the Customer Transformation Task & Finish Panel.

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Recommendations/Decisions Required:

That the Cabinet considers the Final Report of the Task and Finish Panel on Customer Transformation and specifically agrees the following Recommendations:

- (1) That given the increasing importance of the Council's Website with respect to communication, information and electronic interactions, the level of dedicated resource to the maintenance and development of the Council's Website be increased;**
- (2) That a Continuing Services Budget growth bid be made to fund an additional two, Range 5 (subject to job evaluation) Website Support Officers as part of the Budget Process for 2009/10, at an estimated cost of £48,860 per annum;**
- (3) That a re-organisation be undertaken 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;**
- (4) That further detailed feasibility work be undertaken to establish the costs of the new single customer services/reception area to include innovative use of information technology, for which provision should be made from the existing allocation of funds within the capital programme;**
- (5) That a Customer Relationship Management System be developed and deployed to provide accurate and timely information to enquires;**
- (6) 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;**
- (7) That the results of the Forester consultation be considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee prior to any fundamental design changes or content;**
- (8) That the establishment of a Corporate Customer Services front office model, such as "Contact Harlow", be pursued by the Council in order to complete the maximum number of enquiries and transactions at the first point of contact; and**
- (9) That the Corporate Customer services facility be achieved by the utilisation of existing staffing resources being brought together to become "generalists" as per the 'Contact Harlow' model.**

Executive Summary:

This report outlines the conclusions of the work of the Task and Finish Panel on Customer Transformation, which focused on four main areas of review. These were the Council's Website, provision of Reception Services at the Civic Offices, telephone enquiries, public information and National Performance Indicator, NI14 – Avoidable Contact. It makes a number of recommendations as to how Customer Services could be improved.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

The range of actions emanating from the review, when implemented, should significantly improve customer satisfaction with regard to the way the Council provides information about its services, enhance the visitor experience to the Civic Offices and increase efficiency, by reducing Avoidable Contact.

Other Options for Action:

Not to support the recommendations of the Panel, accepting that Customer Satisfaction and Avoidable Contact is unlikely to improve.

To investigate a partial or phased introduction of the Customer Transformation Agenda, although there are inherent linkages between the component parts of the Programme.

Report:

1. 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.
2. In response the Council commissioned external expertise in 2005, Steria Ltd who reviewed customer service performance and identified a number of areas for improvement.
3. 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 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.
4. 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 (CSTP), to address the issues identified above.
5. 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 Continuing Services Budget (CSB) supplementary estimate of £150,000 and District Development Fund (DDF) Supplementary estimate for £362,000 be recommended to the Council to resource the changes proposed.
6. In the event the Capital Bid was agreed and provision still exists within the Council's current Capital Programme. However, due to uncertainty around the costs of Waste Management, no provision was made in the 2007/08 Continuing Services Budget or in subsequent years for additional revenue. As such the Programme has been held in abeyance.

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

8. The Final Report of the Customer Transformation Task and Finish Panel is available on the Committee Management System via the agenda for the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 11 December 2008. A copy of the report has been circulated to all members of the Cabinet and further copies are available from the Officers listed at the top of the report.

Resource implications:

The additional costs of staffing to support the Council's Website will require CSB Growth of £48,869 in 2009/10.

There is existing provision within the Capital Programme of £500,000 in 2009/10 and £1,649,000 in 2010/11. It is likely that a degree of specialist external expertise will be required to implement the plan given current internal resources.

Legal and Governance Implication:

No specific implications.

Safer, Cleaner, Greener Implications:

The improvement of Customer Contact will have a significant positive impact on enquiries in relation to Waste Management, Grounds Maintenance and Community Safety.

Consultation Undertaken:

Overview and Scrutiny Committee have endorsed the findings of the Review.

Background papers:

Minutes of the Task and Finish Panel Meetings.
Notes of Visit to Contact Harlow.

Impact Assessments:

The Council has commissioned the Shaw Trust to review the Accessibility of the Council's Website. A number of issues have been raised with respect to the presentation of content for people with special needs. The extra staffing resource for the Website should enable the current deficiencies to be addressed.

The Council is exposed to significant risk at present, where Website expertise largely lies with a single officer.

The Council's N14 performance can only be currently evaluated through a laborious manual recording system. In order to achieve improvement a CRM system is required.