

Essex Customer Focus – Good Practice examples

Commitment

- Commitment is clearly identified in the council's priorities. These include 'including people' which is broken down into promoting independence, promoting inclusion and promoting participation. The Council clearly sets out in its BVPP where it plans to be in 2012. This priority links to the LSP priority of 'Inclusive Thurrock'. (Thurrock)
- Identification of equality and diversity champions for each service. (Tendring)
- Diversity Statement (Thurrock)
- Member champion focusing on community engagement (Castle Point)
- The council demonstrates commitment to staff by circulating a bi monthly customer focus newsletter to all council staff. This contains examples of news, corporate policy and good practice. (Chelmsford)

Council values

- Include 'be responsive to customer needs and requests' and 'work with others to improve what we do both directly and through partnership working'. (Rochford)
- Southend's values include: integrity, honesty and openness; customer care; and equality and diversity. (Southend)
- Customer Charter includes 'consult with our customers, listen to what they say and respond in the best way we can' (Epping Forest)

Community Information

- Use of ward profiling (Maldon)
- 'Basildon Trends'
- Thurrock profile
- Use of GIS mapping (Southend & Thurrock)
- Needs information available via consultation register. (Epping Forest)

User involvement / engagement

- The establishment of a Customer Focus Group. Views from users have been sought on new customer service standards and the website. There are plans to extend the role of this group. (Tendring)
- Community Well-Being directorate have a readers panel made up of local people to ensure that their publications are understood and make sense. Housing also have a readers panel and a 'Tenants Logo' appears on publications they have approved. (Thurrock)
- Basildon planning Customer First programme to improve the way they interact with local communities (Basildon)
- Ward Walkabout programme (Castle Point)
- The Leisure Services department ran a series of focus groups in early 2005 to identify users views. (Chelmsford)
- Ward advisory groups have helped to identify needs of residents and tenants. (Harlow)
- Various area based initiatives such as Parish Councils, Community Forums and Neighbourhood Committees
- Housing Services hold annual open week (Basildon)
- Gardeners Question Time in parks (Southend)
- 'Friends Of' groups in local parks (Basildon)
- Minority Communities Forum (Basildon)
- Environment Panel & Community Panel holds public consultation meetings. (Brentwood)

- Taxi licensing forum meetings. (Rochford)

Hard to reach groups

- English for asylum seekers (Southend)
- Silver surfer tenants in sheltered housing trained to improve their access to Citizen Portal (Brentwood)
- Essex Housing Officers Group commissioned study on housing related needs of BME groups. (Rochford)
- Transport arranged for residents attending tenants meetings if required (Rochford)
- Funding of BME lunch club which is then used to undertake consultation. (Thurrock)
- Thurrock have a high proportion of adult population with low reading age – so tried to engage people through the arts, sport and music and through fun days where interviewed people one to one e.g. whilst having nails done. (Thurrock)

Public involvement at meetings

- At the start of every public meeting there is a “have your say” slot, where any member of the public can speak/ask questions on any topic. (Colchester)

Reality checking of council services

- Monthly reports on key reality checks have been included as part of the council’s formal performance management arrangements. Outstanding actions are followed up a month later. (Tendring)
- Using young people in reality checks is an example of good practice. (Tendring)
- Independent mystery shopping to assess frontline housing services (Basildon)

Partnership working

- Annual Community Conference (Southend)
- Joint consultation with PCT on health provision. (Thurrock)

Formatting documents to an audience

- The front page of the BVPP appears in large print following representations by the Older Peoples Forum. (Tendring)
- The council printed the Older Peoples’ strategy in large print. (Chelmsford)

Internal sharing of learning / good practice

- The Market Research / Consultation Contact Group provides dissemination and sharing of learning and good practice across the council. (Chelmsford)
- *Consulting Our Communities* identifies issues from last years consultation and sets out the programme for the forthcoming year. This contains advice and best practice for managers undertaking consultation. It lists what the outcomes were and what changed as a result. It also gives contact details. This gives all managers have a clear picture as to what is happening with consultation in the council. (Braintree)
- Information gathering co-ordinated by Corporate Research and Information Group. (Southend)
- Cross service Corporate Consultation Working Group (Thurrock)
- Member group to review customer consultation arrangements. (Epping Forest)
- Consultation Toolkit to ensure consistency and planning. (Basildon)
- Guidelines on producing public information and for press, media relations and standards (Southend and Chelmsford)

Use of e-government and IT

- Developing the use of text messaging to engage young people. (Braintree)
- Link radio in Sheltered Accommodation (Rochford)
- Fedupwithtv youth website, digital television (Basildon)
- Use of website to advertise current consultation. (Brentwood)
- Brentwood advertise regularly public consultation meetings, council meetings are webcast. (Brentwood)

Media management

- Weekly meeting with press (Epping Forest, Brentwood and Rochford)
- Twice yearly paid editorial article to report council progress (Tendring)

Public feedback

- All participants in the recent leisure services focus groups have been sent a VIA (Views Into Action) newsletter. This explains what was found in the groups and what the council is doing to resolve the identified concerns and suggestions. (Chelmsford)
- Chelmsford Borough Life contains a Q&As section in response to questions raised directly by members of the public and a “Why are they doing that” section to explain council activity in a certain area. (Chelmsford)
- BVPP includes section on ‘what you have told us’ – ‘what you said’ and ‘what we are doing’ (Rochford)
- ‘What you told us publication’ and in BVPP section on ‘local people say’ (Thurrock)

Measuring change and performance

- The council is developing a pilot project in leisure services to measure outcomes of service change arising from user consultation. (Tendring)
- Development of PIs to measure user engagement work. (Basildon)

Share and Learn Presentation

Issues and some solutions identified at ‘Share and Learn’ event:

Member Engagement:

This could be improved through:

- Peer arrangements – will members listen to peers from other authorities?
- Joint authority member training by MORI, IDeA etc
- Breakdown ‘Member’ culture
- Challenge the status quo – need to stress positives
- Wider county Member engagement – authorities can’t improve engagement alone, useful for Member Champions/ Leads to meet (is the name Champion a problem? More difficult for 4th option authorities)
- Member ‘champions’
- Overview & Scrutiny – key role particularly for 4th option authorities
- Corporately owned
- Recognising and developing community leadership role
- Ward walking seen as a good idea

Measuring success in engagement:

This could be improved through:

- Sharing costs with wider partners – plus authorities could share costs in close geographical areas e.g. Castle Point, Rochford and Southend
- Measuring percentage of exercises fed back to participants
- Common standards, principles – Communication Strategy supported and owned at highest level
- Knowing what is going on – quite common problem
- Centralisation of budget – there are pros and cons to this – in reality consultation/ engagement happens at different levels
- Managing public expectations – asking the right questions

The need for shared consultation:

- This should cover public services within the locality – via the LSP – and should lead to a co-ordinated response and public feedback
- Also need for targets and penalties

Hard to reach groups

This could be improved through:

- Developing county wide electronic notice board to be used to:
 - Share good practice
 - Share successes and failures
 - Identify customer service lead contacts
 - Identify group contacts
- But this needs an owner
- And needs LSP wide access?
- Essex Quality and Diversity Group – not everyone aware of group and its work

Sharing Information within Councils

This could be improved through:

- Dedicated framework:
 - Champions/ groups
 - Intranet – owned by Champions
 - Managers' Forum
 - Performance Monitoring
- Member Champions for:
 - Communications
 - Hard to Reach Groups
- but don't have to be a member of Cabinet

Sharing costs such as:

- Activities
- Infrastructure
- Contact centres – e.g. Harlow will have access to Essex CC Children and Young People's database via their contact centre. Harlow will be able to fast track access to the county for child protection issues

Pooling consultation exercises:

- Are there political barriers?
- Do we have framework agreements for consultation exercises? – work is in progress – but not everyone clear about this
- Need to draw this work together and get higher authority/ approval

Joined up work on ICT:

- Is Essex on-line partnership effective? – all councils are signed up to this and pay for it

Capacity:

This could be improved through:

- Officer:
 - Short term secondments between authorities e.g. one week to look at specific area
 - Sharing good practice work
 - Essex leadership programme could be used to map out what is already happening across the county
- Members:
 - Learning events
 - Member Champions
- Using existing networks more effectively for consultation activities

Possible areas to work on together:

Areas that everyone felt were important to move forward on included:

- Improving member engagement in all authorities e.g. through appointment of champions/ leads and for these to meet across county
- Using Essex on-line partnership to share good practice, successes, inform of planned consultation work etc