

**NOTES OF A VISIT TO NEWCASTLE CITY COUNCIL AND  
DERWENTSIDE DISTRICT COUNCIL TO DISCUSS CUSTOMER SERVICE  
CENTRES**

Present – Councillors Guest, Bowman, Joscelyne and S Fisher from the Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Councillors Bloxham, Firth, L Fisher and Geddes from the Executive.

Officers present – J Nutley, Head of IT;  
J Mallinson, Head of Corporate Policy and Strategy;  
M Whitworth, IT Section  
S Halstead, Committee Section.

In accordance with Minute CROS.90/02, Members and Officers visited Newcastle City Council and Derwentside District Council to view and discuss their Customer Service Centres.

**Newcastle City Council**

Diane Scott, Customer Services Manager, and members of her staff showed Members and Officers the facilities at Newcastle City Council's Customer Service Centre and answered Members' questions about the facility.

The services available at this Centre included:-

24 customer service points;

Machines to obtain a numbered ticket to join a queue for a particular service. Screens displayed the number of people waiting in queues so the customer had some idea of the likely waiting time;

A freephone facility for customers to contact Council Officers direct;

A small meeting room;

A number of private interview rooms, some with glass partitions for security, although these were infrequently used;

Toilet facilities, disabled toilets and a baby changing facility;

Play equipment for children;

An electronic information point about Newcastle City Council services, tourism, accommodation, etc;

IT equipment for customers to use with direct access to the Council's intranet system;

Details of planning applications lodged were available on IT equipment for customers to browse;

Forms were available for customers to serve themselves;

Language line services were available;

Induction loops and an interpreting service for deaf customers were available;

High level and low level seating and counters;

Automatic doors;

A video booth for customers to use providing direct access to Inland Revenue and Benefits Agency services;

Information leaflets supplied by Departments were displayed and maintained by Centre staff.

Details of job opportunities in the City Council were on display at the Centre;

Staff operated an IT management system which detailed when the customer was seen, the transaction time, the information given and the staff member who dealt with the enquiry. Newcastle were looking to develop this system further in conjunction with an Irish firm, Laggan, which provided a similar service for Birmingham City Council;

Departments operated a rota system to ensure that a member of staff in each service area was on call to provide specialist advice to customers should this be necessary;

Staff had to be able to operate Departments' internal computer systems;

Staff in various disciplines were on call to meet peaks in demand in the Centre;

A member of staff was employed as a floor walker to help customers and deal with any difficult customers. The member of staff was a trained door supervisor and trained in dealing with conflict. Staff also had panic buttons and the Centre was served by CCTV cameras linked to a control room;

Staff were trained to a minimum of NVQ level 2 in Customer Care;

65% of enquiries were dealt with by Centre staff without recourse to Departments;

The customer service centre did not operate an appointment system. Specialist Officers could make pre-booked appointments to see customers either at the Centre or in their Departments;

Process mapping for enquiries was being developed which would provide Centre staff with a list of questions on their computer screens to ask customers relevant to particular enquiries. A Process Development Manager had been appointed to get this process mapping done;

Newcastle also operated call centres for Environmental Health, Benefits and Council Tax enquiries;

The concept of the Customer Service Centre had been backed by the Chief Executive who had provided support in obtaining co-operation from Departments in the transfer over of certain tasks. It had taken over a year to get that co-operation. However, trust had built and now Departments were coming forward with work for the Centre;

The Trade Unions had initially been concerned about protecting jobs and specialisms but once it had been explained that job losses would not occur the Unions had raised no objections;

The Licensing Section was based at Newcastle's MOT Testing Station and customer services for Licensing were all provided there as parking was available. Registrars services were not provided at the Centre;

Newcastle were committed to providing electronic contact to services by 2003. Next month Council Tax payments could be made on line with a debit card. Direct debit mandates could also be set up on line;

The Centre was considering experimenting with extended opening hours with Saturday opening and one late night to 7pm being considered;

A further two Area Customer Contact Centres were being developed.

### **Derwentside District Council**

Members and Officers met M Clark, General Manager, Councillor M Malone, Deputy Leader, J Miller, Customer Services Manager and L Spry, Information Services Manager and received a presentation on their Customer Services provision.

Mr Clark, General Manager gave a general overview indicating that Derwentside District Council was based in NW Durham with a population of about 85,000 and covered the former coal and steel areas of Consett and Stanley and surrounding rural areas.

Before the introduction of their one stop shops, customer services were provided at separate receptions for Housing, Council Tax and Benefits with Technical Services on a different site. The objective had been to provide a one stop shop with a high level of service at a single point of access for the customer. The service was staffed by generic Officers who were responsive to the customers' enquiries, good communicators and customer focussed. Derwentside had employed existing reception staff who were used to dealing

with one aspect of the service and had subsequently been trained in other service areas.

The principles followed by staff were –

- We are the Council;
- We will help you through the maze;
- We will do the running around;
- We are responsible for your enquiry.

There were two customer service centres, one at Consett and one at Stanley. In addition, the Council operated a Call Centre which was based at Stanley. Staff were interchanged between the customer service centres and the call centre.

Mr Clark indicated that the development of the customer service centres and the call centre had been problematic and were currently not developed to completion. Derwentside had just completed a Best Value Review of Customer Services and the Best Value Inspectors would be commenting on the Review shortly.

Derwentside were looking at the possibility of their call centre being open 24 hours a day.

Mr Clark considered that Derwentside could offer the following key messages for Carlisle –

- (a) the customer service centre and call centre facilities should not be under resourced, there were no savings to be made from adopting the new approach;
- (b) staff needed to be well trained, dedicated and have the right approach to customer services being able to deal with difficult situations/circumstances;
- (c) The use of technology was important;
- (d) Protocols for the uses Departments make of the customer service centre and call centre should be in place;
- (e) Everyone should understand and appreciate the role of the centre and the role of the Centre Manager;
- (f) Flow charts should be developed to assist service delivery;
- (g) Outputs from Departments needed to be controlled so that unacceptable peaks in demand could be avoided to the benefit of the customer. The Call Centre Manager needed to be aware of large mailings which would generate demand for customer services so that the resultant demand could be met.

In response to Members' questions, the following points were made by Mr Clark –

- (1) There was a requirement for central control over the customer service centres and call centre. The Customer Services Manager needed to work closely with Directors and Councillors to ensure that the customer focus of the

Council was being met and the rest of the Local Authority has to relate properly to the new arrangements. They represented a cultural change for the Local Authority and strong political and managerial leadership was required to effect that change.

(2) Staff for the new arrangements had been selected following psychometric tests from those who had been working on reception desks within the Local Authority. There had been morale problems with those members of staff not selected because the salary levels were higher than existing reception staff.

(3) There was no difference in the level or quality of service between internal and external customers. It was important for internal customers to have service level agreements specifying the extent of the service to be provided by customer service centre staff and the point at which Departments would need to attend to enquiries personally to give specialist advice.

(4) Staff had been trained for a period of three months although this may not have been long enough.

Councillor Malone then spoke on partnership working Derwentside were involved in with other Districts, the Health Service and the private sector in IT and the desire of Derwentside to provide one stop shop facilities which cut across other Agencies areas, eg employment services, DSS, Social Services, Education, driving licences, passports so that all services could be provided at one point of delivery. A presentation had been made by the Council to Frank Field MP when he had been Social Security Minister. Whilst supportive of the Council's aims, Mr Field resigned his Ministerial position a few weeks later.

As part of the Regional Assembly debate, Derwentside and Durham County Council had been working together with the aim of becoming more responsive to the public. The possibility of a shared one stop shop being developed in Stanley was being considered. At present, when a customer calls in with a query which is the responsibility of the County Council, details are taken and passed to the County Council rather than the customer merely being told that it is the County's responsibility and not a matter for the District. There was currently a problem over whether the County acted upon referrals as no system was in place to feedback action taken.

Further joint working including operating a one stop shop alongside the County and possibly the Citizens Advice Bureau were being considered.

Since the introduction of the new arrangements in 1999, staff retention had been good.

Mr Miller, Customer Services Manager, then gave a detailed presentation on operational aspects of customer services in Derwentside and which included the following points:-



- Derwentside's call centre dealt with 220 to 550 calls a day and their performance indicator required staff to answer 90% of callers. Call centre software was used and which provided information on calls and how long the caller took to be dealt with. Information on the telephone number of the caller was shown (except callers who were ex-directory) and which was useful to identify lost calls and people who had called back a second time. Call information went onto an excel spreadsheet and could be sorted by type of call and telephone number. A report could be produced showing the total number of callers who did not get through the first time, those who had phoned a second time and got through and those who did not get through at all. Callers were held in a queuing system and information on the place in the queue would be added to the system shortly as an added benefit to the customer. When staff at the customer services centres were quiet, they helped with call centre work.
- The customer service centres at Consett and Stanley deal with 150 to 300 people a day.
- Fluctuations in demand for services needed to be carefully managed. Monday and Tuesday were the busiest days for customer services and so Departments were encouraged to send out letters on a Monday or Tuesday so that the subsequent calls/callers were received later in the week to even out service demand. The majority of calls/callers related to problems with services, failure of the Council to provide a service eg failure to empty bin. If Departments provided the correct service in the first instance, it would not generate calls/callers.
- Contact with citizens was by way of –
  - face to face contact
  - phone contact
  - letter
  - e-mail
  - web site
  - minicom
  - Member enquiries
- Services covered by the customer service centres/call centres were –
  - Housing
  - Council Tax
  - Benefits
  - Requests for removal of household effects
  - Wheelie bin enquiries
  - Other technical services such as roads, street cleaning, drainage queries.

- The Planning Department still had its own reception. Enquiries on planning matters would eventually be dealt with centrally but pressure of work on Benefits verification had halted the development path.
- In order to make the new customer service system work –
  - All Council processes to be delivered centrally needed to be charted;
  - Agreements with Departments as to the extent of the service to be provided, which should be flexible, were needed;
  - Agreements as to instructions to be given to people with specific queries were needed;
  - Agreements as to the specified route for tasks (who would be responsible and how responses made) were needed;
  - Agree targets and escalations for work being done for Departments;
  - Access for central staff to Departmental procedure notes;
  - Departments needed to supply knowledge and training;
  - Good working relationships with Departments needed to be established.
- Staff had received 35 days training before going "live." Capita had given staff a basic 2 day training course in call centre techniques. Internal Departments had trained staff in Council Tax, Council Benefits and Housing. The Customer Service Manager was of the opinion that insufficient time had been given for training. The quality of internal training was important. Staff training was continually topped up and often carried out at the end of the working day (5pm to 6pm).
- Partnerships were being developed with the County Council to take queries on each others behalf. Derwentside linked into the County's Highways Action Line. Links with the DSS and Social Services and the Health Service were being explored. A joint customer point was being proposed for Stanley.
- Staffing consisted of a team of 14, consisting a Manager and Assistant Manager and three teams of 4 working at Stanley, Consett and the call centre. The system had gone live in July 1999 and staff retention had been good with only three employees leaving, none caused by working pressures. Staff interchanged between customer service centres and the call centre. One person from each team was rotated every two weeks.
- Ensuring that sufficient staff were available to provide the customer services needed careful managing. The Manager and Assistant Manager were called upon to perform customer service duties when necessary. Leave during March was not available for customer service staff because it was Council Tax billing month. Staff could not benefit from flexi working because of the need to maintain the service. Trials had been carried out with extended hours for the call centre of 7pm instead of 5pm but the demand had been low.

- Relationships with Departments needed to be carefully managed and there was a need to demonstrate the benefits of the new working systems to Departments to overcome their suspicions, the psychometric testing for staff had caused much upset amongst staff.
- The use of internal IT systems was helpful in dealing with enquiries. A countywide CRM solution was being sought but it was indicated that this was not necessary to be able to run a call centre.
- In conclusion, The Customer Services Manager indicated that the customer services now being provided in Derwentside were not a change to an existing service. It was about turning round the emphasis on how you deliver services to your customers to reflect their wishes and requirements.

The following points were made in response to Members' questions –

It was sometimes possible to ring people who had telephoned in but not been answered.

Most people contacted Local Authorities by telephone. The use of direct line numbers in letters was good practice.

Whilst there were costs incurred for the customer whilst in a telephone queueing system, it would cost the Local Authority £50,000 per year for a freephone system.

Careline took emergency calls between 4.45pm and 8.30am.

Staff got a lot of job satisfaction working in customer services and wanted to help the public. They were frustrated sometimes by Officer's attitudes.

Before the service was introduced there was a 50% - 52% satisfaction rating with the public and this was improving.