



CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Committee Report

Public

Date of Meeting: 28 February 2002

Title: CUSTOMER CONTACT BEST VALUE REVIEW - UPDATE

Report of: City Treasurer

Report reference: Financial Memo 2001/02 No 143

Summary:

The purpose of this report is to inform the Resource Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the progress so far of the Project Team conducting the Customer Contact Best Value Review.

Recommendations:

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee are asked to note the contents of the report and comment on:-

- a) The draft customer contact policy
- b) The role of the critical friend
- c) Alternative service delivery models
- d) Detailed proposals for improvements of any future service
- e) Proposals for including partner organisations

Contact Officer: John Nutley

Ext: 7250

Note: in compliance with section 100d of the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 the report has been prepared in part from the following papers: None

CITY OF CARLISLE

To: The Chairman and Members of the
Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee
28 February 2002

Financial Memo
2001/02 No 130

CUSTOMER CONTACT BEST VALUE REVIEW – UPDATE

Since the last update to this Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) Committee, work has been progressing on a number of fronts and this report details that work.

1. Current Service - Consultation Exercise

1.1 The results of the consultation exercise on the existing service are presented in Appendix A. They comprise of :-

- comments of the focus groups for:- (Appendix A-1)
 - Service Heads
 - Members
 - Staff heavily involved in customer contact
 - Staff lightly involved in customer contact
- results of the Civic Centre exit survey (Appendix A-2)
- critical friends comments (Appendix A-3)
- Comments from the Help the Aged consultation (Appendix A-4)

The results of the citizens panel survey are still awaited.

Results from the Disability Access Group are still awaited.

A mystery shopping exercise is scheduled to commence in March testing the reaction of Council staff in some twenty different scenarios.

Results from these last three will be available for the next O&S meeting.

2. Analysis of existing service

2.1 The analysis of the existing service is now complete. For the first time the Authority has an understanding how customers contact the Authority and how often. This information is presented in Appendix B.

- 2.2 The figures show that there are some 85,000 contacts per week excluding Tullie House. This translates into some three and a half million per year. This is an extraordinary number and is much higher than expected. The fact that a service is being provided on such a scale, in an unstructured manner and without any guidance from the Authority entirely justifies submitting this service to the Best Value process.
- 2.3 Further detailed work is needed to analyse the raw figures to understand the nature of customer queries. For example, how many contacts require expert back office staff to deal with them and how many can be dealt with directly by front office staff.
- 2.4 Additionally, there is a chart showing which customer contact practices are in use by which units. This chart provides at a glance the depth and breadth that customer contact best practice has been implemented across the Authority.
- 2.5 Any outcomes from the challenge process will be used with this data to outline a new customer contact model.
3. Customer contact policy
- 3.1 A new draft customer contact policy is produced in Appendix C.
- 3.2 The policy has been based upon best practice found at other organisations. It has been styled and presented from a customer perspective and has deliberately refrained from being a dry, internal policy document.
- 3.3 The policy is in an embryonic state and lacks specific detail at the moment. It has been presented to encourage feedback as to style, layout and the underlying principals detailed therein. Members are invited to make any comments at this stage as to what they would like to see incorporated into the final policy.
- 3.4 It is the intention to circulate the policy to Unit Heads, staff and customers for consultation before it is formally adopted.
4. Critical Friend
- 4.1 At the last O&S meeting, Members requested to have input into the critical friends brief.

- 4.2 Appendix D shows the role of the critical friend and points during the Best Value process during which he has agreed to assist.
- 4.3 Members are asked to make known if they feel the critical friend could be asked to extend his brief into other areas.
- 4.4 To date no further work has been made to appoint an external consultant to perform an external mid term review on the work undertaken by the project team so far.

5 Challenge - Alternative Delivery Models

- 5.1 As well as looking at the detail of the service the project team is investigating the possibility of delivering the service in a different way to that currently deployed. This process forms the key element of the challenge to the existing service.
- 5.2 The last update report to this committee outlined several different models which could be employed. It was commented by Members that they needed more information about some of these models before guidance could be given to the project team about which models were worthy of more detailed investigation.
- 5.3 Possible alternative scenario's proposed included:-
- a) Continuing direct provision by the Council by either
 - i) improving on the current arrangements
 - ii) re-organising customer contact to be delivered by
 - a separate, single customer contact unit
 - a DSO run customer contact unit
 - running customer contact under the Local Strategic Partnership banner
 - running customer contact in conjunction with some other partner
 - b) Indirect provision by the Council through:-
 - i) Externalisation of the service through
 - a private sector contract
 - a partnership based on the Liverpool model

Research on the different models has involved identifying Councils where these models are already in operation and the information in Appendix E has been presented to show how such models operate in practical terms and gives a fuller description of each model.

The next stage is to produce fully detailed and costed reports on the favoured models and report back for a final decision. The Lead Officer for the review considers that in order to produce reports of sufficient detail and limit the resource demand to produce them the number of in-depth investigations should at this stage be limited to just two. The Project Team have not yet formed an opinion about which models are most likely to deliver the necessary step change to achieve significant improvements to customer contact but Members are invited to make their views known. Members will recognise that this stage of the review is one of its' key moments and any recommendations should be carefully considered

6 Challenge – Detailed service Proposals – Interim Report

- 6.1 Members will recall that a number of key issues were identified as being barriers to providing an effective service. These were summarised in Appendix A of Financial Memo 2001/02 No 130 which was presented to the last meeting of this committee.
- 6.2 Since then the project team have worked on producing solutions to address these issues. This initial work is produced in Appendix F. It shows a number of suggestions which need to be assessed and judged as to their value and practicality. These suggestions are very much in their raw state and need to be refined. In some cases the suggestions are even contradictory.
- 6.3 The project team are working to rationalise and rank the solutions in order of merit. From these suggestions will come firm proposals that will form the basis for improving any future service.
- 6.4 They are presented here in their raw state in order that Members have the opportunity to comment on the merit or otherwise of individual solutions they may feel are important.

7 Partner Organisations

- 7.1 At the last O&S meeting the project team were asked to consider how partner organisations such as Community Centres could be included in the improvement of the customer contact service.
- 7.2 The project team are working on the idea that branded information points supported by a new Council knowledge intranet could be positioned within partners premises.
- 7.3 Where such information points are implemented citizens could be certain they could receive basic, consistent and up to date information about Council Services
- 7.4 Views of partner organisations will need to be sought on this concept and the Project Team will report back their views.

8 Best Value Review Inspection

We have been alerted to the likelihood that the Audit Commission may select this review for inspection during the coming year.

9 Revised Timetable for the Review

- 8.1 The projected timetable for the review is now as follows:-
- Final Report on Challenge: Initial Report on Comparison: Final customer contact policy: Initial new Customer Contact Model – 18th. Apr. 2002
 - Final Report on Comparison: Finalised Customer Contact Model: Initial Report on Competing: Initial draft of action plan. – May/June O&S 2002
 - Finalised Action Plan: Final Best Value Report

D THOMAS
City Treasurer

Contact Officer: John Nutley Ext: 7250
City Treasury, Carlisle 22 February 2002 JN/CH/f1430102
N/CH/f1430

Best Value Review- Focus Groups

Unit Heads

The focus group was held on Wednesday, 28th November 2001 in the Civic Centre, Carlisle.

Personal

The group was made up of 14 people (6 men and 8 women). The members of the focus group were all unit heads working in departments including - Housing, Town Clerks, Planning, Environmental Service, Treasury, R. T., Design Development, Leisure, Community Services and Economic Development.

What is important when dealing with customers?

The group began by identifying specifically who their customers actually were. After discussion there was a consensus that the term included all members of the public coming into contact with the council, as well as each other within the different departments.

It was agreed that the service provided to the customer should be helpful, efficient and polite, providing the correct information, and thereby giving a good impression of the council.

Some members of the group said that they believed that customers had different expectations of the various departments, commenting that if it was a department that they *had* to contact then they expect one type of service, but if they were dealing with another out of choice e.g. the Sands Centre, then they expected another. It was acknowledged that although the approach may vary depending upon the area of work, the quality of that service should be consistent.

The “enforcement” side of some council work was highlighted and it was stressed that it is imperative that the right approach is used when dealing with this type of work e.g. cautions and fixed penalty notices. If the individual then makes a complaint, it should only be about the fine etc, and not about how they were treated.

A number of the group felt that it was particularly important that staff were aware how to say “No” to customer demands in a satisfactory manner.

Comments

“Everybody out there has expectations for the City Council to sort their lives out.”

“You have to categorise the customer a little bit so that you can give them the best help. They want a professional response from the right people. They don’t want to be passed around 3 people.”

“You can’t always give people the advice they want, you have to tell them what the law is.”

“We also have an enforcement role, that the vast majority of the public expect you to carry out. This might include giving out a caution or a fixed penalty notice. It is more important how you treat those individuals. They might complain about what you have done, but they should never be able to complain about how it was done.”

“The City Council has always had a policy of putting low graded staff on the front desk. Maybe it should be the high grades who are more able to say “No”.”

What causes aggravation for the customer when dealing with the Council?

Although the group came up with a broad range of points when asked this question, they were generally as a result of customer frustration with treatment (e.g. the customer couldn’t find who they needed to speak to either on the telephone or in person, they were passed from one person to another, or they were kept waiting), or there were inconsistencies in treatment received.

One of the major causes of aggravation for customers was seen to be the lack of a proper reception facility in the Civic Centre, which often leads to members of the public wandering around the building looking for the person or department that they need to contact.

Comments

“We are the only council in the area who doesn’t have a “One Stop Shop”. This causes a lot of frustration, as people don’t know where to go. Virtually every other authority has a One-Stop Shop reception that you can’t progress beyond without knowing what department they need to speak to and that reception desk effectively ensures that the right person deals with the problem. That reduces the amount of frustration.”

“A customer shouldn’t be passed from pillar to post.”

“There doesn’t appear to be a receptionist. The Keeper’s Desk is there as a supplement to the sign board.”

“In other local authorities you can not just wander around the building. If you go to a meeting, then an officer comes down and escorts you to the room. This building is wide open and I don’t think that the customer likes it- that they are left too much to their own devices. They don’t feel welcomed or cared for. In other areas they even have drinking water facilities.”

“Waiting 20 minutes to speak to someone about a benefits claim is unacceptable.”

“Lifts are broken down outside Tullie House.”

What do you think customers respond positively to?

The key to success was agreed to be good communication with the customer. This must include stopping and listening to what the customer wants and then saying they will do something to help. They must be interested in the customer and also ensure that the problem is dealt with speedily.

It was felt that this ethos must be part of the culture of the organisation and minimum standards of customer care must be established, with moves made towards exceeding expectations.

Again it was commented that even if you are saying “no” to someone’s demands then it should be handled in a helpful manner.

It was pointed out that it is not always easy to have the desired level of the internal décor in the offices, one member of the group commented that they had had problems with incontinent customers in their office and carpets had also been ruined in short periods of time.

It was suggested that a more central office would be popular with many customers, particularly the elderly, as they don’t like the hill on the way to/ from the Civic Centre.

It was suggested that a bus stop outside would be popular.

What do you think are Carlisle City Council’s strengths and weaknesses in relation to Customer Contact?

The group recognised that although the City Council was doing quite well when compared with other authorities, it needed to make sure that it continues to improve.

One member of the group felt that the council had avoided some of the pitfalls of a One Stop Shop by having reception areas for almost every type of problem, so that the public knows that there is a specific reception.

Members of the Housing Department thought that their 24-hour telephone system was very popular, and the majority of their contact with customers is now done by telephone.

It was agreed that the right telephone answering system/ style needs to be adopted in order to avoid customer frustration. One member of the group pointed out that someone waiting in a telephone queuing system will be prepared to wait for less time than those waiting in an office, where they can actually see something happening. It was pointed out that some systems tell you how many calls are in the telephone queue, but the member of the public does not know how long it will take to answer their call. Another important factor when waiting in a telephone queue is whether it is a freephone number.

What suggestions do you have to improve the customer contact process?

The group came up with a number of points as to how service could be improved. The main point that they felt most strongly about was the lack of a proper reception area in the Civic Centre, to prevent the public from having to wander around the building looking for the right person to speak to. There were suggestions for both a One-Stop Shop and a reception desk in the entrance area. Upon discussion however the group seemed to agree that a reception area that could deal with basic queries and also arrange appointments with more “expert” staff would be best. It was felt that such a facility would have to be available 7 days a week.

The telephone system currently in operation in the Civic Centre was also considered to be inadequate. The group felt that more could be offered to the customer in the form of message leaving facilities and also the reception area personnel being able to make appointments.”

It was also agreed by all that there is a very great need for professional training of staff who have customer contact. This must be for all front line staff and for all other employees, even though they may only come into contact with the public on an intermittent basis.

The members of the focus group felt that customer contact service standards are not currently part of the organisations culture and if standards are to improve then this must change.”

Comments

"If you have a One Stop Shop then it won't lead to departments being played off against each other."

"I deal with corporate complaints and we see how some individuals play departments off against each other."

"There are certain classes of customers that you don't mix. Some customers like to have an audience. When you take them by themselves, you quieten them down."

"We need to find the model that works best."

"You would solve an awful lot of problems by having a One Stop Shop. There is also a lot that can be done using technology these days. People should not be told that there is nobody in the department that they want to speak to so they'll be transferred to someone who can take a message. If someone needs to speak to someone about a problem for example with pests, then the receptionist should be able to type the details into the computer."

"If someone comes to the City Council with a matter which is dealt with by the County Council, then there should be a system whereby the information is sent electronically and the individual told that someone from the County Council will be in touch, rather than them having to walk right across town."

"At the moment if a customer rings up they can be told X is not in at the moment, can you call back later? It doesn't tell you when to call back later. The more effective way must be to take the name and number and say that we will call them back. It's training in customer care. It's having a quality standard of customer care."

"You must have a back office that is up-to-date, so that you can provide the efficient service promised. The front office must keep in touch with the customer. There must be good communication between the two areas."

"It is the number of people dealing with the problems that is the main thing, as the customer is no better off if the problem can't be dealt with speedily."

“The front and back offices are just different area, not different people. There is a feeling that you can’t get on with your work as customers keep interrupting you.”

“I think our back office service is where our problems are. If we improve our back office service then we will improve our front office service as well.”

“A call centre would take some pressure of interruptions off you.”

“I don’t want us to go down the route of a call centre. What we want is a good reception desk. We must get a proper corporate standard.”

“We need to make the standard of service provided to the customer mandatory.”

“It’s trying to get the philosophy into the system whereby we give good service to each customer, whether a member of the public or another department. We need to stop saying, “Call back if the problem is ongoing” and encourage employees to follow things up themselves.

“At present every manager manages customer contact as they see fit. There needs to be central control of it with a corporate strategy for customer contact.”

“The Members do recognise that this is very important.”

“Because we are such a small authority, money is spread very thinly. As Investors In People the authority needs to put money into training and uniforms.”

“We don’t let the customer know what standards they can expect. They don’t know what happens if we don’t meet our standards of service.”

“If we have an event going on then you need full training front and back of house.”

“The standards need to be part of the culture so that new employees can learn the standard.”

“Training could be given almost on a cascade basis.”

"We need to train everybody, from top to bottom, including the cleaners, as they speak to customers when they are in the building."

"Voicemail isn't popular, but if it is used properly it is very good. They can be accessed remotely, so you can deal with problems when away from the office. Staff must keep the messages up-to-date. It needs to state when you'll be back in the office."

"I think that there needs to be a divert system so that you go through to someone else to speak to." - Someone else disagreed saying, "We have had complaints to the Ombudsman regarding bad advice given out on this basis."

"It might be worth speaking to County Council as they have a medium expert One Stop Shop reception."

"We need to have someone on reception who can identify what area someone needs to speak to."

"Good security can be provided in one central area with interviews rooms available. Most of the aggression is due to enforcement/ penalties and fines."

"It is the main interface with the public, its electorate, and we should get it right. It's a good investment."

Do you feel that access is an issue for customers (access for disabled/ elderly people)?

Everybody agreed that perceptions of access problems were dependent upon which department they worked in. Some people felt that access was not an issue because they either worked largely on the telephone or through home visits. Some said however that access was always voted as the second biggest concern when interviewing the public.

It was pointed out that there is no standard for hours of service within the Civic Centre. Some departments work from 9am to 5pm, where as others open from 8.45am to 5.30pm. All agreed that there should be continuity, so that the public know what service they can

expect. It was suggested that if a One Stop Shop approach is adopted, then it would need to be on a 7 days a week basis.

What do you think of the physical environment (reception desks) etc?

The entire group felt that there should be a purpose built reception area. It was agreed that this desk should face you when you enter the building. At present there is no one sitting looking at you. It was suggested that if someone needed to see a particular expert, then appointments could be made at the One Stop Shop. In order to fit this new area into the ground floor, it was suggested that the ornamental staircase be removed.

Do you feel there is a growing demand for alternative ways to access the Council? (I.e. customers asking what's your Website name etc)

Group members had noticed that the number of enquires being sent in via the website had started to increase and they expected it to increase significantly in the next 3 years.

It was suggested that perhaps the City and County Councils could look at jointly providing a council site with one address, where individuals can access all council services and then be allowed to return to the site directly again.

Comment

"Our department's website started in the summer and we are looking to extend the net service."

"I've had problems accessing the site myself, from home."

Do you feel our customer contact approach is better or worse than the private sector, for example banks and building societies?

It was agreed that some private organisations provide a better service than the council, where as others like the Utility companies for example, are worse. The strength of many private sector companies was seen to be the fact that they are good at identifying customer needs and thereby ensure that they want to keep coming back. It was pointed out that customers often only come to the council because they have to. The group felt that building societies are good at one- to- one customer contact whereas “remote” organisations often have good telephone answering services.

Do you think the Council adequately trains staff to deal with customer contact?

It was strongly agreed that there is inadequate customer contact training within the council as a whole and where it is given it is patchy. It was said that those employees whose main job it is to deal with the public have had training, but the vast majority of the other staff hasn't received any. It was concluded that training needs to be carried out far more professionally.

Do you feel we have the right approach when a customer complains? Are adequate processes in place and can they be improved?

It was recognised that although the system was reasonable, it could be improved. The group felt that training should be given to staff to enable them to handle complaints more effectively. It was commented that complainants want a speedy response to their problem and staff should take ownership of the problems they are trying to resolve. The group members felt that employees should try to learn from their mistakes and learn to distinguish between complaints resulting from answers to questions, rather than those caused by bad treatment or service. It was mentioned that new posters about complaints are shortly to be posted in the entrance to the Civic Centre.

Carlisle City Council
Customer Contact
Best Value Review- Focus Groups

The focus group was held on Thursday 29th November 2001 in the Civic Centre, Carlisle.

Personal

The group was made up of 12 councillors (6 males and 6 females) and had representatives of both the front and back benches as well as number of Portfolio Holders for different areas.

What is important when dealing with customers?

The group felt that the most important thing when dealing with customers is to be friendly, polite and actually listen to them. The problem must then be dealt with quickly and the answer given in a clear and concise manner.

Comments

“The customer must feel important.”

“You must listen to what they say and not just assume what the problem is and give them you attention.”

“Be polite and not offhand or dismissive.”

“All those things are important, but they don’t matter if you can’t get hold of the person that you want to speak to.”

“The information must be clear and concise and the customer should go away feeling that their problem will be solved, if it is possible”

“I think that there’s nothing worse than talking for a long time to a person then to be told that “I’m not the person who deals with it”; you should be passed to the person that you need quickly.”

What causes aggravation for the customer?

The councillors came up with a number of different points, but the frustrations were largely due to being unable to speak to the person that you need to, not giving the customer the full information so that they can understand why a decision has been made, not communicating in a way that the customer can understand, particularly if they have special needs, and making them feel that they are not important.

Comments

“Being passed from one extension to another and to be told that the person that you need to speak to is in a meeting, on holiday, not at their desk or when you finally get to the extension that you need, it’s Voicemail.”

“When the person is not available then you should specify when they will be called. People can wait in all morning for a call and they don’t receive it. They feel as though their time is being wasted.”

“Some problems are ongoing for years, like getting back lanes resurfaced and as a councillor I contact officers and councillors, but nothing gets done. The residents get petitions up, but in the end they give up and the level of the council service goes down in their minds.”

“I think we do have a process in place to communicate how resources are allocated, but you have to accept that people aren’t always going to get what they want and you have to explain that this year they aren’t going to get it. You know that the persistent ones will be back next year with another petition.”

“I think that it’s important not to raise expectations too much. You have to tell them that there are problems with, for example, back lanes all over the city and several cases have gone to council and the outcome has been this, so that they don’t raise their expectations. Its important to communicate all the information.”

"I think that it's smaller issues that get people wound up, like just clearing up a particular patch, but that doesn't get the attention. Sometimes the job only gets half done and that's when it causes the irritation."

"You have to remember that in local government it's not just money, but also the politics."

"You may have frustration from people with learning difficulties or dementia who get a letter about a benefit claim saying that someone is going to call and visit them, but they may not be able to answer the door and so the member of staff goes away, without knowing that they are in, and the benefit gets stopped."

"It's where anyone has some kind of communication difficulty. We must be proactive at looking at why we haven't had a response, otherwise these people will remain isolated."

"It is essential that inaccurate information in the media is picked up and corrected, so that the public know the truth and we have "street cred" as an authority."

"I think that it is important that ward members have accurate information to pass on to their electorate."

"I think it is terrible that as councillors, staff treat us differently to members of the public. If they see that you have a fob with you and ask if you are a councillor, it opens every door to you. If you were an old lady who has come in on the bus from Denton Holme or Bewcastle, only to be turned away, then I think this is absolutely terrible."

"I get a very different response if I say that I'm a councillor, rather than just give my name. If you are an ordinary person and have a query which involves more than one department it's tying it all together for the customer."

"I don't think that the public should have to wander around the building looking for who they need to speak to."

"I think that with technology today, we must be able to use diaries to book appointments for councillors to speak to officers, so that you know whether it is worth coming in to the Civic Centre to sort out a constituent's problem."

“We need to have multi-skilled people on the reception desk. 80% of queries can be dealt with easily. Statistics show that every department has 6 questions which make up 80% of enquiries.”

“Officers can then be called if they are needed.”

“It’s trying to convince the officers that it is the customer who is the most important person.”

What annoys customers most when dealing with the Council?

Again, the councillors highlighted the frustrations suffered by customers as being passed from one department or agency, not having reasons for decisions fully explained to them, having pieces of information/ documentation lost in the system, having to keep repeating a story as they can’t speak to the same person twice and generally feeling as though they are dealing with an organisation that sometimes can’t be bothered to help.

Comments

“It’s being told “We don’t deal with that” and they are given an agency’s number. They then go to the agency and are told that it’s the council’s job. This annoys people.”

“You have to be told the reasons why you can’t have something, and not just told “no”, then at least you understand why.”

“I think that people have an unrealistic view of what councillors can achieve and the powers that they have.”

“At the end of the day they should have a courteous reply.”

“You have to show that at least you will try to help them- particularly the Housing Department- as they will tell you “You’re not on the list for central heating.”

“It’s annoying when you get passed from one person to another.”

“Having to speak to different people in the same department and repeat the story.”

“Pieces of information like wage slips are lost in the system. The officer doesn’t give them a receipt for it. They are then contacted for this information again. It can take months to sort it out and benefits are held up. They then come to their councillor in desperation to sort it out and only because you know who to speak to that it gets done.”

“On the benefits side, we have had people registered blind getting behind as they haven’t been able to read a letter that they have received. These letters should be hand delivered to ensure that the customer understands them, so we have that personal touch.”

“There are a lot of people who are illiterate and are too embarrassed to ask for help.”

“The entrance of the Civic Centre is unwelcoming, nobody is actually looking at you to help you.”

“The notice board near the entrance is a complete mess with out of date notices still on it, that are curling up at the edges.”

“The Keepers’ Desk should be turned around and manned by well trained receptionists.”

“We also fund a number of agencies as well and their service approach is the same. You can turn up at the Citizens Advice office on a Monday morning but it is closed so they send you to the Benefits Advice Centre, but you can’t have an appointment until Thursday, so they direct you to the Law Centre.”

“There is a culture where offices close at lunchtime and at 5pm.”

“We do very little to help the worst off in the community, we cater for what’s best for the staff.”

“There is a feeling among staff that if we open longer, we get more people in and get more work.”

“We need to take lessons from Central Government who are very much more customer orientated- they say what they can promise and what they expect on the customer’s part.”

“How often do councils/ authorities contact each other for advice, rather than having to employ external organisations?”

“I sometimes think that officers will let you run between offices, rather than having to be bothered themselves.”

“It’s when you get transferred and you don’t hear a proper introduction where someone states which department/ council you are speaking to.”

“An example of good customer service is Marks & Spencer’s- you have a quality service for their customer, where you know what you can expect of it.”

“Officers tolerate the councillors, but I don’t know how the public are treated.”

“I’ve had no bad experiences with service in my 2 years as a councillor.”

“I think we have to change the idea that the people we are dealing with are getting something out of charity, rather than because they pay their rents and have rights.”

What do customers respond positively to?

The focus group members thought that customers respond well to a service which puts forward the feeling that they will try to solve your problem and keeps them informed of progress. It was pointed out that it is the small things that are important like street cleaning, rather than just the big things like One Big Sunday and the Fireshow, and if the public have 2 or 3 good experiences of the councils service then they will have a good impression of the organisation.”

Comments

“If you have an attitude where you say that you are going to try to solve their problem.”

“Report back to them and say how you are getting on.”

“The flowers in Denton Holme gave a positive feeling in the area.”

“If someone feels that they’ve got someone on their side, it is good.”

“”Even if you can’t do something today, say when you’ll do it by.”

“If people have 2 or 3 good impressions of the council for example One Big Sunday and the Fireshow then it turns perceptions around.”

“People don’t know the difference between what each council does.”

“The Fireshow is good as it benefits poor families who couldn’t afford their own fireworks, but enjoy being part of it.”

“It is little things that keep people happy like keeping their streets clean and this stops them from getting depressed.”

“People are noticing the difference in the reduction in dog fouling.”

“It should be pointed out that dog owners have responsibilities.”

What do you think are Carlisle City Council’s strengths and weaknesses in relation to Customer Contact?

The weakness that was consistently brought up was the attitude of some in the organisation that they are helping people out of charity, and not because they are customers who deserve a good level of service as rent or council tax payers.

The strengths of the organisation were recognised to be the fact that it is prepared to accept change and also the streamlining of some decision-making processes.

Comments

“We are too large to be a village, but too small to be a city.”

“People know each other. It should be easier to get to know the officer dealing with the problem.”

“I use the booklet of council contacts that comes through the post. They are making positive steps.”

“It falls down if the person they want to speak to is not in the office.”

“You should not be told that someone you need is away on holidays until the 10th of next month for example. Call them back.”

“It’s the culture/ mind set- they need to think like a self employed person.”

“The decision-making process is now getting quicker which is good- Portfolio Holders can now make decisions which appears quicker to the member of the public.”

“Decisions used to have to go through a lot of committees and sometimes go to full County Council meetings even though they didn’t have a veto. “

“There is confusion now who does what with Capita dbs.”

“We should perhaps use more local media- radio and television and do information adverts about what to do in common scenarios e.g. when someone dies etc.”

“A strength of this authority is that we are happy to change.”

“We have to remember that customers have limited time.”

“The only thing that you can do is to inform people of the things that you can’t change transparently.”

“I think that the contacts booklet is a weakness as there are so many numbers in it. A simple point of contact would be best, as long as it is assessed correctly.”

What suggestions do you have to improve the customer contact process?

There was a strong consensus of opinion that the only way forward is to have a One Stop Shop reception area which could deal with the majority of queries coming into the office, with back up from more expert staff for a small number of more complex cases. This One Stop Shop service must be offered 7 days a week and be backed up with a linked call centre offering the same service. The information technology within the organisation should be developed in such a way that staff all over the building can access a full record of the council's dealings with a customer on a diary type format so that all can give an efficient service.

Staff training in customer relations was also highlighted as a point which would improve the service provided. Finally it was felt that there is a need for more information to be available to both councillors and the public about why decisions have been made.

Comments

"We need a single point of contact that can deal with the majority of simple questions and hand out forms. If some more expert information is required then it is okay to engage somebody else. I think that we could learn a lot from Social Services."

"You could have sections that deal with different groups of problems."

"A One Stop Shop is definitely the way forward with computerised records on hand, so that staff can look through the diary of events related to the customer. It overcomes all communication problems and the customer doesn't have to keep repeating the details."

"We need diaries on screen."

"Line managers and Unit Heads need to identify their weakest link and retrain them, to make them strong."

"We need one telephone number, but multiple lines."

"You don't want a system where you have to keep pressing buttons and holding on."

"We tend to want to be all things to all men, but we should be concentrating on doing our statutory things very well. We do things like One Big Sunday, the Fireshow and flowers, but don't put enough into the things that should be done like providing a good housing service."

"Confidence in councillors is getting less."

"You have to allow officers to get your details so that they can provide a good service, but with technology nowadays you should be able to do it instantly."

"The Housing Department has this system in place already. It should be put in place in other spheres."

"If we have a call centre, then we'll also need a One Stop Shop with people able to identify those with special needs."

"I don't want us to become a faceless organisation."

"It's not about politics, we all want the same things, we just disagree how things should be done."

"We want the city to grow and be a place where people want to live. Raise the public perception of the city."

"The public's expectations of what the council can achieve goes up every year, but they don't want the council tax to increase."

"People take for granted what the council does."

"It's what goes wrong that people notice, and not the flowers."

"It's important the we improve this basic service."

"People are already frustrated when they get in the office."

"It's all about staff training."

“We have the Citizens Panel which consults the public on a regular basis, but you can manipulate the responses, by asking the questions in the way you want.”

“With planning decisions we need to let people know clearly why decisions are being made.”

“Parish council clerks need to be notified of planning details if their Parish council has submitted an objection.”

“All petitions are now submitted to the full council meeting.”

“They should be given to the committees as it is intimidating for many members of the public.”

Do you feel that access is an issue for customers (access for disabled/ elderly people)?

The group felt that the council was weak in this area due to the layout of the Civic Centre building which demands that customers wander around it until they find the person that they need to speak to. It was also reiterated that there should be greater awareness of the needs of those customers with learning difficulties and communication problems. It was felt that the suggested One Stop Shop and call centre solution, with its fully trained staff, would alleviate many of these problems.

Comments

“It’s a big building to look around for the person you need to speak to.”

“The talking lift used to give out the wrong information.”

“There are a lot of people with learning difficulties and communication problems.”

"We need to look at why we are not getting a response when we try to contact people. There are a lot of people without any family. I think that we have a responsibility to protect these people and make sure that they have full access to our support."

"I think we need to advertise services as well as events."

"We need to update information services."

"You can't make people read the magazines that you produce."

"It would be useful to look at what other similar size cathedral cities do e.g. Durham and Chester."

What do you think of the physical environment (reception desks) etc?

The councillors thought that the downstairs entrance to the Civic Centre gave a poor impression of the organisation, with no welcoming reception area to help customers go off in the right direction.

Comments

"The Keepers' Desk do their job, but its not enough."

"People don't know what to do."

"You expect a reception area centrally where people take you away to an interview room if they need it."

"There have been bits added on and the overall impression when you walk in hasn't been brought together."

"You don't feel "We are here to help" when you walk in, it's more "What do you want?""

"Why are you interfering in our day?"

**Do you feel there is a growing demand for alternative ways to access the Council?
(i.e. customers asking what's your Website name etc)**

The use of information technology by customers was agreed to be on the increase but it was recognised that many customers still prefer the telephone or a face-to-face meeting. Many in the group felt that the council should look at increasing its hours of operation, in line with other authorities, to fit in with customer needs.

Comments

"The use of the website is growing."

"The majority of people still like to pick up the phone."

"A lot of the elderly are not on the telephone."

"We need to proactively communicate with the public e.g. tell them that decorators are coming around to see them in the next 3 months."

"There is an out of hours contact number."

"We need to look at out of hours services as that is when many people are available to deal with problems."

"Maybe we should be working from 8am- 8pm and have a Saturday service as well."

"Liverpool Direct have a service 12 hours a day, 7 days a week and are looking to increase to a 24 hours service."

"People have domestic problems when they are at home, not when they are at work."

"We must pay them properly if we are going to ask them to do this."

"Liverpool Direct asks its staff for their preferred hours and allows people to work on a rota that fits in."

"You have to decide that Saturday and Sunday are the same as the other weekdays."

Do you feel our customer contact approach is better or worse than the private sector, for example banks and building societies?

The group felt that the organisation had strengths, for example the personal letters that it send out, but agreed that the council could learn much from private, customer focused, companies in terms of customer service and should adopt a more “self employed mind set”.

Comments

“Banks are alright if you go to the premises.”

“The letters sent out by the council are well written, tailored to the individual’s case, not stock paragraphs put together.”

“I wouldn’t want to be compared to a bank, I want us to be compared to customer focused organisations like Marks & Spencer.”

“It’s getting back to this “How can I help you? and really mean it.”

“It’s having the appropriate atmosphere for the customer.”

“You must acknowledge people coming into the office, by saying “I’ll be with you as soon as I can.”

“You must remember that customers actually pay wages.”

“We have a reasonable system in place. We must be doing something right, as we don’t get many corporate complaints. You should never get a Voicemail message at this level.”

“How much is the lack of complaints only because people have low expectations.”

“The expectation from the public is that the council can see everything.”

“People are sometimes reluctant to use the telephone answerphone.”

Does contact with council officers need to be different from normal channels i.e is direct access to staff required or is a members' officer needed?

It was agreed that because the councillors are often time limited, then they should have direct access to staff in order to solve constituents' problems quickly, however the attitude with which staff treat them should be the same whether they are councillors or members of the public.

Comments

"We need direct access to officers so that we can get an answer quickly, as we only have limited time"

"We need shared e-mail boxes for each department so that basic queries are answered quickly, rather than waiting for one particular person to answer."

"We are special people because we are councillors. I go directly to the director of the service."

"The attitude that we are treated with should be the same for councillors and customers."

"We need a second system for councillors- if I had a query about a constituent's housing benefit, then I wouldn't come in and sit and wait in a queue."

"Service should be the same whether you are in power or opposition. You should be notified of decisions out of courtesy."

Do you see the whole area of customer contact warranting extra resources?

It was agreed that extra resources should be given to staff training, whether they be reallocated from other areas or new funds.

Comments

“Particularly for training.”

“We can achieve a lot by reallocating what funds we already have e.g. a One Stop Shop linked to a call centre. 1 reception desk rather than 7 desks as at present.”

“We cover a large geographical area. We need to go out into the community as well.”

“It’s down to how much we want to do- statutory requirements or extras as well.”

“Halton are a similar area to us. Customer contact people in collaboration with back office personnel. There must be lots of authorities similar to us that we can share best practice with.”

“All members must get the same sorts of levels of information to be able to go back to their constituents.”

“You can get details of all committee meetings on P.C..”

Carlisle City Council
Customer Contact
Best Value Review- Focus Groups

The focus group was held on Friday 7th December 2001 in the Civic Centre, Carlisle.

Personal

The group was made up of 16 people (1 male and 15 females). They were all frontline staff from the following departments: - Environmental Services, the Housing Department, Carlisle Works (Call Centre), Cashiers, Leisure Department (Tullie House & Sands Centre), Keeper's Desk, Planning Services Department, Council Tax and Welfare and the Tourist Information Centre.

What is important when dealing with customers?

The group all agreed that it was very important to be friendly and polite when dealing with customers and to be able to give answers to their queries quickly and accurately.

Comments

"Courtesy."

"Honesty."

"Giving them the right end product for what they want."

"Asking the right questions to give them what they need."

"Being able to answer if you can."

"Being polite and treating them with respect."

“Be approachable and friendly.”

What causes aggravation for the customer?

The group raised a number of different points. They ranged from people being annoyed simply because they had been given a penalty notice/ fine; irritations due to delays in service; problems due to a lack of communication between departments; inaccuracies in documents issued and problems with various systems/ services in the city centre.

Comments

“If they don’t feel that they are getting value for money i.e. as a rate payer and an entrance fee payer.”

“They don’t like being given fixed penalty notices.”

“They don’t like paying parking tickets.”

“They don’t like delays. They don’t like it if they are initially told 3 months then we need more information and it takes 6 months.”

“We get abuse on the phone. I don’t think that we should have to put up with it.”

“We had someone threaten to throw a chair through a window.”

“They want someone to blame, so they blame the first person they meet.”

“A lot of these people don’t understand the process.”

“Frustration must play a part in some people’s behaviour.”

"We have a system, if someone is abusive our line manager calls them and tells them that they can't come to the Civic Centre again and in future to contact us using the free phone number."

"Some see it as the right hand doesn't know what the left hand's doing when they provide the same information to three different departments and they find it very frustrating."

"When they go to the counter and then 3-4 weeks later they get a letter asking for something else that really should have been picked up by the person on the counter."

"A lot of it is down to a lack of communication between departments. Our job would be a lot easier if we knew what was going on."

"Like with parking- communication is a big problem within departments. People have been told they can pay by credit cards and they can't do that until next year. The parking information says they can use their credit cards, and somehow the figures have got mixed up, they've been reversed. It's not fair because as cashiers we are taking the rap for something out of our control."

"We find that the printers get some things wrong and they aren't proof read properly. As front line staff we have to take the rap for something that's not correct- you know nothing about it. Again it's communication from above to below."

"It's wrong pricing and incorrect times."

"We need information from above if they have it."

"You still expect them to go away with a smile on their face."

"People's expectations are higher now."

"They want everything yesterday."

"They want to speak to the manager straight away."

"We get complaints about the one-way system."

“We get complaints about the Sands car park.”

“We get complaints about the lifts on the new bridge.”

What annoys customers most when dealing with the Council?

It was agreed that customers get annoyed if they are passed from one department to another, if they can't get to speak to the person that they need to and are passed to voicemail, inefficiencies in the phone system generally where they can not be transferred to the right person when they have called the free phone number and finally the length and clarity of letters issued.

Comments

“Everything.”

“Being passed from department to department.”

“A lack of communication between departments.”

“Housing payments- you can end up speaking to three different people and get nowhere.”

“Also automated calls, they can be furious as it costs them money.”

“If they call the free phone number and then need to speak to someone in another department then they have to dial again which irritates them.”

“There is only one number given out in the Benefits sections and they say it is always engaged which irritates them- there's no queue, just an engaged tone.”

“We are wanting a computer data base with full customer details on it, in the call centre, so you know what has been going on with each person.”

“People come to our department with no customer reference number when they are trying to pay rent- the statements have no reference on them.”

“The letters aren’t clear as to what they mean.”

“The letters are lengthy.”

What do customers respond positively to?

The staff felt that customers respond positively to a friendly, professional service, where information is explained clearly to them and the problem is sorted out. They want to feel that they are being listened to and that they are treated as an individual.

Comments

“Smile.”

“Keeping calm.”

“Take time to explain it to them- it calms them down if they are frustrated.”

“It helps if you really show that you are trying to help them.”

“You have to put it across to them that you are trying to help them. As long as you can convince them that you are doing your utmost and the problem will get sorted out eventually.”

“In the Dog Fouling section we ring people back and make sure any problems are sorted out.”

“Prompt service.”

“Some of them just want some of your time.”

“At Carlisle Works, we are in direct contact with someone who can go out and solve the problem.”

“They prefer short communication channels- like dog fouling and Carlisle Works, as opposed to red tape with Benefits and Council Tax.”

“Value for money with the Tullie Card.”

“Getting the tickets they want or having a squash court available.”

“There is a difference in attitude with customers from different departments i.e. Tullie House and the Sands give the personal touch.”

“Treating them as an individual.”

What do you think are Carlisle City Council’s strengths and weaknesses in relation to Customer Contact?

The focus group came up with a number of suggestions. On the positive side, the compassion of many of the staff and the central location of the Civic Centre were seen to be strengths. The group also believed that there are many weaknesses that can be worked upon. These were a lack of staff training, poor communication between departments, too few staff and resources and too much bureaucracy.

Comments

“The lack of communication between departments is one of the biggest weaknesses.”

“Training so that everybody knows what other departments do and so we know who to pass information on to and also exactly who to ask for something.”

“A lot of it is down to a lack of people and resources.”

“I think one strength is the positioning of the Civic Centre centrally so that people can come in and speak to someone face-to-face.”

“Another strength is in the case of a bereavement the Gate Keepers send people directly in to staff, so there is no delay or making them wait in Waiting Areas.”

“We do a lot of that with Social Services as well (Gate Keepers).”

“It’s the personal touch- by giving them your name and telephone number it stops them from worrying.”

“You try to act as an advocate for them with other departments.”

“I do think that we are a caring council. I think that we try our utmost except for asking the infirm to go and collect their bus passes.”

“I often think that we aren’t well represented in the press.”

“A weakness is that we get too tied up in our own procedures and we forget what the end of these procedures will be. That is frustrating for both staff and customers.”

“I think that the council’s main strength is its staff.”

What suggestions do you have to improve the customer contact process?

Everyone agreed that there are too many reception areas in the Civic Centre and one central desk is needed which offers a One Stop Shop service. It was felt that acting upon staff requests and installing letterboxes for customers to use could also achieve major improvements. It was again mentioned that staff need more training and that an appointment system would reduce the amount of frustration suffered by customers.

Comments

“Planning and Car Parking need different reception areas as customers who come in about planning issues have to sit there and listen to abuse from those who have got parking fines.”

“We haven’t got as good security as Housing Department. We have gaps at the top and bottom of the glass.”

“Most people ask if they can make appointments to speak to someone about benefits- it would help a lot.”

“There are too many queue jumpers- they are often the ones with the least to do.”

“We are waiting for a letterbox to be installed. We have waited for a couple of months, but nothing has happened. It is the bureaucracy of how long it takes.”

“We have never had training on business rates, even though we work in the One Stop Shop.”

“Management won’t give us the training or the pay to reflect that.”

“In the One Stop Shop we haven’t had TIR’s for 2 years.”

“It’s vital that we work as a team.”

Do you feel that access is an issue for customers (access for disabled/ elderly people)?

Many felt that access wasn’t a problem, although it was noted that some older people don’t like using lifts. More crucially it was pointed out that there is no disabled access to the upstairs of the Sands Centre.

Comments

“Not for us as we are on the ground floor.”

“There are lifts, so no.”

“A lot of old people don’t like lifts.”

“There is no access for disabled people to the first floor of the Sands.”

What do you think of the physical environment (reception desks) etc?

The group's comments included problems with temperatures in the office, poor drains, and a lack of space for storage and poor ventilation.

Comments

"It gets very hot in the summer, so now ventilation has been installed in reception."

"The Sands is cold all year round."

"The drains are bad in our old building which sometimes makes the room smell."

"We've just been revamped- it looks well."

"There is insufficient room, there isn't enough room for files close to offices."

"We have electromagnetic fields which we are not allowed to sit near!"

"No ventilation in our office."

"Our office is freezing- some days in the winter we have to wear a coat."

"There is a sign which says where everything is when they walk in the door and if they are still not sure, then there is the Keepers Desk."

"We used to have toys for the kids."

Do you feel there is a growing demand for alternative ways to access the Council? (I.e. customers asking what's your Website name etc)

It was agreed that many departments already use technology to contact customers. It was pointed out however that many of the customers dealing with some departments would not have access to computers.

Comment

We have it already- e-mail addresses etc.”

“These people coming down with benefits queries won’t have access.”

“The Tourist Information Centre has Internet access.”

Do you feel our customer contact approach is better or worse than the private sector, for example banks and building societies?

The group felt that the council provides a better service to the customer than the private sector, as they believed that they are more accountable. The telephonists suggested that they could help by for example getting council tax band information or by sending out forms. Someone else commented however “Yes, but why should you.”

It was also noted that in the One Stop Shop they recorded the number of calls in one week. There are four people and each person took 120 calls per day so there is no time to deal with the queries.”

Comment

“Better- 100% better.”

“We are better than the private sector because Tullie House management have provided excellent customer contact training. In the private sector people have to wait on telephones too long. In banks you have to wait in queues. We are more, or feel more, accountable, but we apologise, the private sector doesn’t.”

“We let people know when a fault has been corrected.”

“We are more accountable, if people are kept waiting in queues.”

Do you think the Council adequately trains staff to deal with customer contact?

It was generally agreed that staff training is inadequate and dependent upon the management of the department. The Housing Department was held out however as one which puts more emphasis on it.

Comments

“No, there’s not enough training.”

“Training depends on the management you’ve got.”

“In the Housing Department they are very good with training, if we struggle for a day so that someone can be trained then we do so.”

Do you feel we have the right approach when a customer complains? Are adequate processes in place and can they be improved?

The group largely agreed that the complaints procedure was adequate and problems are dealt with efficiently.

Comments

“Corporate complaints are dealt with by senior members of staff quickly.”

“We have always had a complaints procedure.”

“We get complaints from those who are unhappy about planning issues and feel annoyed by the decisions made. I think that the councillors need more specialist training on things like planning, so they understand it from our point of view i.e. legislation and not just from the constituents’ side.”

“Tenants don’t like having to put their complaints in writing.”

“I do think that sometimes we go too far with customer care.”

“You have to be a social worker as well as a member of staff and listen to them.”

“There is a lot of checking up on customers which can cause a feeling of mistrust, but the honest people don’t mind you doing it.”

Carlisle City Council
Customer Contact
Best Value Review- Focus Groups

The focus group was held on Friday 30th November 2001 in the Civic Centre, Carlisle.

Personal

The group was made up of 12 front line staff (2 males and 10 females) from the following departments: - Drainage section, Town Clerks Department, Environmental Services, Bereavement Services, Brampton Business Centre, Leisure and Community Development, Central Unit of Environmental Development, Personnel Department, Town Clerk's Department, the Economic Development Unit and the Benefits Advice Centre.

What is important when dealing with customers?

The group felt that it was very important to be "courteous, friendly and polite."

What causes aggravation for the customer?

The group agreed that the main aggravations for customers are being passed from one person or department to another, being given inconsistent information, being kept waiting when they want to see someone and not being given accurate information as to what floor the department they need is on within the Civic Centre.

Comments

"Abruptness."

"Passing them on to someone else in another department gets them irritated."

"If it's in another section then I take details and pass it through."

“Inconsistencies- one person tells them one thing and another person tells them something else. People don't like to be passed around, they like one person to see their problem right through.”

“Not enough time to see them. Too many people needing service. It's getting initially to see someone who can help them. There's a long waiting time.”

“The price of copying planning applications irritates people.”

“People don't like to be kept waiting.”

“It's people's expectations- if the service that they need is not available e.g. the Internet is not available in the business centre.”

“Communication problems.”

“Don't know where they are supposed to be and who to speak to.”

“The Gate Keepers sometimes send people to the wrong floor as they aren't trained as they should be.”

“I agree, we get people sent to our floor who are needing a department on another.”

“People are sent to the 8th floor to enquire about car parking, but the enquiries desk is on the 7th floor.”

“The ground floor needs to be more clued up. They are the first people that the customer speaks to.”

What annoys customers most when dealing with the Council?

The group was able to highlight a number of problems, many of them specific to different departments. There was a feeling however that some customers have a preconception of how they will be treated, as they are the Council. Poor communication and administrative practises, as well as a lack of resources were thought to be the cause of many of these points.

Comments

"The fact that it's the council!"

"They feel that the council is there just to take money off them."

"Away from the Civic Centre, you don't get classed as the council."

"You try to overcompensate and be extra friendly as you know that they think, 'it's the council'. I don't think that this view will ever change."

"I think that they think that the council is just there for council tax and housing benefit and if they don't get what they want then they'll go to another department for a service e.g. refuse collection and have this view of the council."

"We have an objective view being an advice agency rather than directly part of the council. We get people in with problems about the council. I think that there is a blurring about what the council actually does. They just see it as a ubiquitous "they". It comes down to issues that are county or even central government. They are lumped together."

"People are quite nice to us because they want jobs- "You get loads of money to do nothing at the council"- if only!"

"Re the Benefits Section- we advise people not to put things through the letter box and to stand in line and get a receipt. Now that queue may be however long and when they get to the head of it they may not be given all the advice that they need. It is sometimes difficult to have proof of identification and income details. Nothing is done with the claim, then they get a letter saying that they need X and the people get frustrated."

"Information gets lost in the system and they keep asking for it when they've already had it."

"I had to go back three times to a building society to prove my parents council tax reduction- you should be given details of exactly what they want at the start."

“In defence of the Housing Benefits Section, a lot of the things that have to be done are legal requirements, they have no choice, but the administration could be improved a lot.”

“It’s communication, administration and resources.”

“Letters- the clarity is terrible- it’s double Dutch even though you understand the system and the size of the print is too small for those with visual problems.”

“I think that the format changed when they went on the new system.”

“We get people queuing for 1.5 hours to have a letter explained.”

“The letters don’t clearly state what you owe, that’s what the bottom line is that people want to know.”

“The central phone number that you have to call is constantly engaged.”

“When the counter is open until 5.30pm but the people that they need to speak to have gone home at 4.15pm because they’re on flexi-time.”

“Licensing and car parking go away early, but their receptions are still open which causes annoyance.”

What do customers respond positively to?

It was agreed that customers respond positively to a friendly, positive service, where the problem is solved quickly and they are able to speak to the right person straight away. It was felt that a good reception desk, manned by fully trained staff would improve the quality of service.

Comments

“Know your job so that you can put the customer on to the right person in the department.”

“Have a smile on your face.”

“Be pleasant, really listen to what they want so you are clear as to which person they need to speak to.”

“If you can’t answer it immediately, take their number and make sure that you do phone them back.”

“You can tell people are dead surprised when you call them back after 5 minutes with an answer.”

“Always try to improve satisfaction levels with our customers.”

“We get a lot of positive feedback for the services that we provide as a business centre.”

“Our department (Bereavement Services) have a comments book for comments on service.”

“Council tax, Housing Benefit and housing repairs are the three main areas of complaint.”

“There is so much Voicemail now that it frustrates people when they ring up. You should divert your phone to someone else in the section.”

“The first point of contact varies as to which department you are. On some floors there is a reception desk, whereas on others you come out of the lift and there are a bank of bells with a list of departments. I think it is terrible customer service, but it comes down to resources and having someone to staff it, but I do think that it is very unfriendly and there is no space either and there is no sitting area.”

“People don’t know what department deals with what.”

What do you think are Carlisle City Council’s strengths and weaknesses in relation to Customer Contact?

The lack of a central reception area on the ground floor of the Civic Centre was seen as being a major weakness of the organisation at the moment. It was felt that although the staff at the Keepers’ Gate provide a useful service, they have not been trained sufficiently

to offer the service that should be provided- the group said that customers are misdirected to departments, which causes frustration as well as a bad first impression. The layout of the ground floor was also highlighted as a weakness as the staff felt like new departments have been added on, without their impact on the floor as a whole being taken into account. As a result of this use of space, it was agreed that there is now a lack of privacy in some departments. The group differed as to their view of Voicemail, some people felt that it provided a bad quality of service for the customer, whereas someone else suggested that if it is used efficiently, then it can actually aid better service.

A number of the group mentioned that their departments often received good feedback on the service that they provide.

"I think a weakness is that there are so many different reception desks. The Keepers send them to either the closest department or to Personnel department if they are unsure, as they know the most departments work. There needs to be one reception to tell them where to go, even the green notice board in the entrance isn't clear."

"I think we need a fully trained, dedicated reception."

"Perhaps correspondence going out should have the correct floor on it for customers coming into the office e.g. Housing Office on the ground floor."

"You need a reception desk as a first point of contact."

"The look of that area is particularly poor."

"If it's too flash then people complain that we're spending their council tax, but it's a bit closed in."

"It needs to be more open plan."

"It's not coming in and asking that people mind, it's being directed to the right person first time, that answer needs to be right first time e.g. reception on the 7th floor."

"That means that if you don't know Carlisle City Council then the first point of contact that you have with them is inefficiency and incompetence."

"I've tried to suggest it to them at the Keepers Gate in the past, but you just get snapped at. They don't want to know."

"Sometimes one extra question would put them in the right department straight away e.g. flooding due to gullies is dealt with by Highways Department, not by the Drainage Section."

"Direct lines are good now, but the telephonists used to put you through so fast that you couldn't ask a question. It has changed a lot recently."

"It's confidentiality as well- the Benefits and Housing areas are very open and it's not private."

"It seems like they keep adding to the ground floor but don't think about it as a whole. They have taken away the spare open space and crammed in extra seating. I don't think it's very good appearance- wise, or in terms of confidentiality."

"You have to shout your banking details out so everyone can hear you."

"We had someone in the other day who was being re-housed due to a medical condition and had left the Housing Section without finishing everything as he became too embarrassed."

"You have to explain what you want, before you can have a private interview."

"It occurs to me that most junior people tend to get put on the reception desks. They haven't got the experience to handle the queries and this can lead to serious problems like benefits lapses. And I heard about something the other day when a lady had said that she would go to another agency for some advice as she didn't feel that she was getting the right advice, but was told "Oh you don't want to go there.""

"There are some good things, some sections have good telephone practises."

"We have cover in our office all of the time."

"I think that Voicemail is terrible. If someone only has 20p in a phone box and they get Voicemail telling them to call elsewhere then they are stuck. At least if they get a person, we can take their number and someone can get back to them, even if they have to wait in the call box for 5 minutes."

"If I get Voicemail in the building I get mad. I don't know how a customer must feel."

"If you are using it effectively, then it is good i.e. if you are out of the office, you can pick up messages, phone people back and amend your Voicemail message."

What suggestions do you have to improve the customer contact process?

The group members felt that it was very important to establish a reception area on the ground floor that was manned by a number of well-trained staff. A number of the staff mentioned that glass screens are currently being erected in the reception areas on each floor for staff security, but all felt that this was a retrograde step in terms of customer service, particularly as no one believed in necessary for their personal safety. The need for better internal communication between departments was also raised.

Comments

"Staff need training."

"Customer contact and reception duties."

"If someone is a first point of contact in the building then it has to be someone who knows what everyone does within the building."

"As departments we should go to reception and pass on details to them of what we do."

"Glass screens at reception desks are being put in for safety, but they are unwelcoming."

"I think it is a retrograde step."

"It's the message that we don't trust the customer."

“If we are not worrying about being attacked, why do we need it?”

“I don’t see how we can function with such a screen.”

“We need to be trained to be aware of early signs of aggression.”

“My experience is that you get back what you put in.”

“I think that there are other ways to make us safe without the screens.”

“There needs to be more staff on the desk.”

“We need better internal communication about events that are going on.”

“We need a better phone list, broken down into each department.”

“There are people on the list who left 2 years ago.”

“We could do with a lead contact number for each section.”

Do you feel that access is an issue for customers (access for disabled/ elderly people)?

The group felt that access was generally quite good for customers. A number of minor points were raised however, including the height of some counters for those in wheelchairs and some doors are difficult to open, again for those in wheelchairs. The Benefits Agency was mentioned as being difficult for disabled people to access, although the agency does carry out many home visits instead.

Comments

“We have Braille and a loop system available.”

“The Keepers Desk is still high for a wheelchair. The other reception desks have been lowered.”

“The cashiers have high desks as well.”

“The Benefits Agency isn’t very good I’m afraid. We do home visits to get around the access problem. We have remained in the premises we are in because they are discrete, but in a central location. It’s a cobbled street, but disabled people can park off Devonshire Street.”

“We have had a couple of people complain about the new one way traffic system around the Civic Centre.”

“Access wouldn’t be good if you were in a wheelchair as you couldn’t open the door.”

What do you think of the physical environment (reception desks) etc?

The group felt that the customers generally see the more attractive side of the Civic Centre, as many of the offices are old and in poor condition. It was mentioned that access to Personnel department is bad if you are in a wheelchair.

Comment

“I think that the customer receptions are smarter than the back offices. The customers get the nicer view of the council.”

Do you feel there is a growing demand for alternative ways to access the Council? (i.e. customers asking what’s your Website name etc)

It was noted that the use of the council website and e-mail facility is increasing all the time. It was recognised that it is important to keep the details up-to-date, but that by its nature it provided a much quicker service for the customer.

Comments

“People are using web pages a lot more, it’s easy to get hold of. It must be kept up-to-date.”

“We have full details of staff, e-mail addresses, telephone numbers and event details on the web. We plan to add access to forms as well.”

“Complaints procedure details are now available on e-mail.”

“Job descriptions and forms are now available on e-mail.”

“Do you agree that with e-mail you have to answer it more quickly, than with a letter that may get left in your tray for a few days until you have time to answer it?”

“Sometimes they only give you half a story by e-mail, so you have to call them anyway.”

“You can’t judge their mood by e-mail.”

“I think e-mail is good as you can answer their queries quickly.”

Do you feel our customer contact approach is better or worse than the private sector, for example banks and building societies?

The staff agreed that they feel that the council provides a better service than banks and building societies. They liked the fact that there weren’t glass screens between staff and customers at present. Some of the group felt that many bank staff are over friendly which they dislike. Small private sector companies were noted to be very good at customer service.

Comments

“I think we are better than banks.”

“You are kept waiting with banks when you call them. I was kept waiting for 40 minutes.”

“I spoke to Directline and it took 2 days of trying for them to answer a simple query.”

“You need to know how long you will be kept waiting.”

“When you go to a bank you can see that they’ve all got this veneer of customer care, because they’ve all been on a fantastic course. It’s almost too much.”

“I don’t trust banks.”

“How may I help you?- I hate it, it’s too American.”

“Small private sectors companies are very good as they have to be.”

“In a small town, if the customer care is no good, then the word is out straight away.”

Do you think the Council adequately trains staff to deal with customer contact?

It was felt that many staff do require more training on customer care, although some have already been on courses, which they found helpful.

Comments

“No.”

“We do run customer care courses, but it’s whether the managers let their staff out. They are general courses, but maybe they should be more specific to departments and carried out by managers.”

“I’ve been on a few courses and have found them useful and they generally ask at the beginning what you want from them and where you work.”

“I think that there’s a communication problem. It’s knowing what is going on within your department.”

“If nothing else, it makes you think what customer care actually is and how you can adapt it to your work.”

Do you feel we have the right approach when a customer complains? Are adequate processes in place and can they be improved?

There was a feeling that there isn't at present a corporate training scheme for dealing with customer complaints, and as a result one should be developed. It was felt by some that many complaints could be dealt with in the departments in which they originate, rather than them reaching the level of a corporate complaint. One member of the group mentioned that they felt that complaints should be acknowledged far more quickly than they are at present.

Comments

"The time scale for complaints is quite long 10-15 days to respond. I think it should be acknowledged that a complaint has been received within 2 days."

"We are looking to speed this up."

"We get complaints coming through that should have been dealt with within the department."

"Often they don't know where to complain within the department as some don't have a reception desk."

"There is nothing universal for the whole building as to how you should be treating customers. All departments are expected to train their own staff."

"We are ignorant as to what happens in the other areas of the building. I think that this is a corporate problem."

"Information needs to be shared about dangerous customers i.e. not to be interviewed by a lone female. Under Data Protection laws it has to be done internally, rather than by being able to get it from an external organisation."

Carlisle City Council
Customer Contact
Best Value Review- Focus Groups

The following are the additional confidential comments submitted after focus groups.

What is important when dealing with customers?

“In my view, getting to the route of their problem and either dealing with it properly or ensuring they are aware of whom to go to (& being confident that that person will deal with the issue effectively). Treat them with respect & pleasantly.”

What causes aggravation and annoyance for the customer when dealing with the Council?

“Aggravation caused by people not listening properly, therefore not dealing with the problem properly; being passed to numerous people to be dealt with; the person they need not being available; insufficient explanations being given when request cannot be granted/ more information required etc; waiting a long time.”

What do customers respond positively to?

“Customers respond positively to the reverse of the above- respectful treatment, explanations in language they can understand and issues resolved or sufficient help given to have it resolved.”

What do you think are Carlisle City Council’s strengths and weaknesses in relation to Customer Contact?

“Strengths- some staff are, or try to be, very helpful and pleasant; some reception areas are pleasant.”

“Weaknesses- too many reception desks; some people go to the wrong place (e.g. second floor rather than seventh or third) so more effort needs to be made to ensure they understand what they are told at the main desk; other staff who provide information to those dealing with the public not always passing information quickly enough to them to enable them to give good, accurate information.”

What suggestions do you have to improve the customer contact process?

“One reception desk in the Civic which can deal with 80% of queries- But there is a serious health issue which needs to be considered and planned for from the beginning. [One council opened a One Stop Shop which was so successful that the numbers of visitors trebled, staff became stressed and there were no support mechanisms in place to deal with this (CW has a video of a TV programme made about this council); as well as catering for those who wish to contact us electronically, to remember that the majority of people still wish to talk to an individual employee rather than computer/ voicemail etc. Remotely accessible basic information would help to remove some basic queries e.g. where am I on the housing list? When will my rubbish be collected? for some people.

Even if you retain a number of reception desks- those manning them should be able to answer 80% of queries which they get - not just take a name and fetch someone else- unless it's an appointment system.

Structure the jobs of those with full time reception duties in sections where complex information is given so that they are worth a reasonable salary to enable competent staff to be recruited and remain.”

Do you feel that access is an issue for customers (access for disabled/ elderly people)?

“I have no view on this except- from the numbers I see waiting outside the Rates Hall some mornings before it opens either a) they don't open early enough and/ or b) more seating outside is needed- some of those queuing are elderly.”

“Our counter does not really have proper disabled access as we think that some part of the counter should be lower for people in wheelchairs to be able to reach easily.”

What do you think of the physical environment (reception desks) etc?

“Many customers pass comment on how dingy and untidy and grotty our counter is, it hasn’t had any work to improve it since the place was opened, at least I don’t think so.”

Do you feel our customer contact approach is better or worse than the private sector, for example banks and building societies?

“It may be as good/bad and as accessible/ inaccessible as building societies and banks but I do not think they are very good. In general, I do not think we are as good as that which I have experienced in the private sector (and where it isn’t, I haven’t given them my custom)- mainly because of the lack of one central point to be dealt with.”

Do you think the Council adequately trains staff to deal with customer contact?

“It pains me to say this- but “no”, I think we could do better training- mainly making some degree of compulsion about training- not only customer care, but also the various disability awareness issues, ways to handle people to minimise likelihood of raising antagonism/ abuse etc. and essential knowledge about the area of work they are answering questions about (and not have a receptionist merely take a name and fetch someone else- unless one of the 20% of queries which are not so straightforward.”

General Comments

“It is sad to say that members of the public still feel intimidated by council officers- still suffering from the “Them and Us” idea.”

“There is a need to create a culture within the City Council that embraces customer care.”

“Customer care should be made a corporate issue. All staff should be trained in basic customer care skills.”

“There is a definite need for a professional reception area which is the first point of contact for all visitors to the Civic.”

“Communication is a key factor to succeed with customer care initiatives.”

“Customer care should be internal as well as external.”

“The City Council should aim to meet the expectations of all of their customers and whenever possible exceed those expectations.”

“There is a need to educate all staff that when they are working with any external customer, they are representing the entire council, not just their own department.”

“I don’t believe that Voicemail should be allowed in the building.”

” I think the staffing needs to be looked at in Treasury. Many of the staff are very unhappy which doesn’t have a good effect on how they deal with the public.”

“I think internal communications can be improved, so reception staff have all the facts.”

“It is difficult to contact staff when all extensions in a section are diverted to Voicemail. When an extension diverts to another extension with Voicemail, the customer will not leave a message as they think that they have got the wrong number.”

“Although I agree that the meeting was extremely useful, I was concerned that it gave rise to criticism of council officers, often at junior levels. Some of those present seemed to favour something of a “witch-hunt” approach and there were also suggestions about changes to opening hours, for example, which would require a major change in the terms and conditions of service of the staff involved. This caused me some disquiet.

It is clear that modernisation and change is probably necessary in the way that the Council does its business. I think it is important, however, that such change is entered into in

partnership with the staff rather than imposed upon them. Staff are more likely to adapt to a new ethos if they have been consulted and listened to at all stages of the change process.”



RESULTS FROM THE CUSTOMER CONTACT EXIT SURVEY

FEBRUARY 2002

Corporate Policy & Strategy Unit

Lynne Wild

RESULTS FROM THE CUSTOMER CONTACT EXIT SURVEY

Introduction:

As part of the consultation process for the Best Value Customer Contact Review, 200 exit surveys were carried out with members of the public leaving the Civic Centre during mid January 2002. The interviews and data entry was carried out independently by CN Research. The dataset was analysed and translated into report format by CPSU.

Q1: “Can I begin by asking your reason for coming into the Council today, was it to make an enquiry, get information, make a complaint, or something else?”

Over half the public interviewed were in the Civic Centre to make a payment (mainly Council Tax) 54%. 16% were there regarding a benefit enquiry (housing/council tax). 12% were there to ‘make an enquiry’, 9% to ‘get

information', 2% to 'make a complaint' and 6% for something else (see below):

Make a payment/fine *108

- Pay council tax *32
- Make a payment *31
- Pay a bill *25
- Pay a parking ticket *5
- Pay council tax and parking disc
- To pay rent *7
- Pay Careline bill
- Pay taxi licences *4/Taxi licensing /To obtain a driver's licence

Housing/benefit related enquiry *33

- Apply for new rent
- Handing in forms/letters/application forms *17/Filling forms to get rebate /Rent rebate /To deal with my rent account
- To hand in keys *2/Collecting keys for new home
- Looking for a house/Make an enquiry to get a house/To be re-housed /Trying to get somewhere to live - nowhere to live
- Get repairs / Enquire about a repair*2 / Housing repairs of which it is the 5th time reported - not happy
- Housing benefit

Other *13

- To drop off an invoice
- To fill forms in /To collect a form /To receive help in filling in a form
- Trying to borrow/buy footpath maps, did not get one
- To give information which as a result became a complaint by the respondent
- To attend an 'Access' meeting (Respondent was deaf - this questionnaire was 'signed' by an aide)
- To get a bus pass
- Hand a pass in
- To see about football pitch
- To plan my funeral
- To get resident parking pass/To get a parking permit

Q2: Which staff did you speak to? (Tick all that apply)

Almost a third of respondents spoke to staff in 'cashiers' (32%). See Table 1:

Table 1

<u>Staff</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>% of respondent s</u>
<u>Cashiers</u>	<u>74</u>	<u>32%</u>
<u>Treasurers (Council Tax, Business Rates, Bus Passes or Benefits)</u>	<u>49</u>	<u>21%</u>
<u>Housing Reception (Ground Floor)</u>	<u>49</u>	<u>21%</u>
<u>Ground Floor Reception/Keepers Desk</u>	<u>40</u>	<u>17%</u>
<u>Leisure &CD (5th floor)</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>2%</u>
<u>TCCE Reception</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>2%</u>
<u>Personnel (TCCE)</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>2%</u>
<u>Corporate Complaints (TCCE)</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1%</u>
<u>Environment & Dev</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1%</u>
<u>Economic Development Enquiries</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>0.5%</u>
<u>Other (People attending 'Access' meeting)</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>0.5%</u>

Q3: If you spoke to staff in reception on the ground floor, were they able to direct you to the place or people you wanted?

This question was inapplicable to 2 users of the keepers/reception desk that were handing in letters and did not need to be directed elsewhere. The remaining 38 respondents who had used the keepers/reception desk all said they were correctly directed to the place or people they wanted.

Q4: How satisfied are you with the length of time you had to wait before you were seen?

The majority of the sample was satisfied with the length of time they waited before they were seen (95.5%). Almost two thirds said they were 'very satisfied' (64%). This question was inapplicable to one respondent who had to speak on a repairs phone (she said she waited a short while).

<u>Very satisfied</u>	<u>128</u>	<u>(64%)</u>
<u>Satisfied</u>	<u>63</u>	<u>(31.5%)</u>
<u>Dissatisfied</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>(1.5%)</u>
<u>Very dissatisfied</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>(2.5%)</u>

Not applicable	1	(0.5%)
----------------	---	--------

Of the 8 that were dissatisfied, 5 made comments:

- Had child with her - too long to wait because nothing for child to do
- They were very quick today (14 Jan) but not always
- Normally have to wait but today (14 Jan) it was very quick
- Respondent had to wait 45 minutes
- As soon as respondent arrived, the cashier closed with 5 people still waiting

Q5 & Q6: How efficient & friendly is the staff you spoke to?

Of the 74 that spoke to Cashiers staff, 93% think they are efficient and 90% think they are friendly.

Cashiers

Very efficient	55	(74%)	Very friendly	46	
(62%)					
Efficient	14	(19%)	Friendly	21	(28%)
Adequate	4	(5.5%)	Neither f/u	6	(8%)
Inefficient	1	(1.5%)	Unfriendly	1	(1%)

Treasurers (C Tax, Business Rates, Bus Passes/Benefits)

All 49 that spoke to Treasurers staff think they are efficient and 90% think they are friendly.

Very efficient	36	(73%)	Very friendly	27
(55%)				
Efficient	13	(27%)	Friendly	17 (35%)
Adequate	0		Neither f/u	5 (10%)
Inefficient	0		Unfriendly	0

Housing Reception (Ground Floor)

Of the 49 that spoke to Housing staff, 92% think they are efficient and 94% think they are friendly.

Very efficient	35	(71.5%)	Very friendly	28	(57%)
Efficient	10	(20.5%)	Friendly	18	(37%)
Adequate	2	(4%)	Neither f/u	2	(4%)
Inefficient	2	(4%)	Unfriendly	1	(2%)

Ground Floor Reception/Keepers Desk

Of the 37 that spoke to Ground Floor Reception/Keepers Desk staff, 98% think they are efficient and 95% think they are friendly.

Very efficient	21	(57%)	Very friendly	20	(54%)
Efficient	15	(41%)	Friendly	15	(41%)
Adequate	1	(2%)	Neither f/u	2	(5%)
Inefficient	0		Unfriendly	0	

Leisure & CD (5th floor)

Very efficient	3		Very friendly	3	
Efficient	2		Friendly	2	
Adequate	1		Adequate	1	
Inefficient	0		Unfriendly	0	

TCCE Reception

Very efficient	5		Very friendly	5	
Efficient	0		Friendly	0	
Adequate	0		Adequate	0	
Inefficient	0		Unfriendly	0	

Personnel (TCCE)

Very efficient	3	Very friendly	3
Efficient	2	Friendly	2
Adequate	0	Adequate	0
Inefficient	0	Unfriendly	0

Environment & Development

Very efficient	2	Very friendly	1
Efficient	0	Friendly	1
Adequate	0	Adequate	0
Inefficient	0	Unfriendly	0

Corporate Complaints (TCCE Dept)

Very efficient	2	Very friendly	2
Efficient	0	Friendly	0
Adequate	0	Adequate	0
Inefficient	0	Unfriendly	0

Economic Development Enquiries

Very efficient	0	Very friendly	1
Efficient	0	Friendly	0
Adequate	1	Adequate	0
Inefficient	0	Unfriendly	0

Comments:

- Re. q5 - I am waiting to sort out somewhere to live
- Re. q5 - There wasn't enough information about what I was asking about
- Re. q5/6 Recipient not stated
- Re. q6 - staff could have a more friendly approach

Q8: How convenient are the opening times in the Civic Centre?

Over 9 out of 10 think the Civic Centre opening times are convenient:

Very convenient	119	(59.5)
Fairly convenient	69	(34.5)
Fairly inconvenient	7	(3.5%)
Very inconvenient	2	(1%)
Don't Know	3	(1.5%)

Q9: If inconvenient, which opening time would be suitable for you?

- Later into the evening for people who work or a Saturday morning
- It would help if they had maybe one night late opening or a Saturday AM opening
- Saturday would be suitable
- Saturday morning would be suitable
- Weekends would be suitable
- Prefer an earlier opening – e.g. 7 am
- 8.30 am rather than 9 am
- To have later evenings
- Would like to pay council tax elsewhere

Q10: Do you find the Civic Centre a convenient building to visit?

Three quarters of the sample (75.5%) find the Civic Centre a convenient building to visit, but a quarter (24.5%) does not.

Q11: How could this be improved (asked to 49 who find Civic Centre inconvenient to visit)

The two main problems cited by the quarter that find the Civic Centre inconvenient to visit is the inability to park near to the building (18) and the lack of centrality to the City Centre (17):

Comments:

- Can never get parked, disabled husband /Parking problems, my wife is disabled and not enough parking /Need wheelchair access at the opposite end of the building as well as more disabled parking spaces /Need to improve parking *7/Difficulty in parking sometimes *2/There's not enough car parking so more spaces outside *5/Bad to get parked and to get across town to

- It should be more central *10/Could be moved to the centre of town /Needs to be more central to be more beneficial for people /It's too far away - make it more central *2/Civic Centre is 'out of the way' - move more into the town or even Botchergate /Move it so that it's more central - I'm paying a bill for someone because they can't get to the Civic Centre because of where it is /It's too far to come just to pay the rent /It's a bit out of the way
- Don't know - you can't move the building!
- I don't know how it could be improved
- It can't be improved!
- Put back the AHO (Area Housing Office) /I live in a rural area, would prefer to have the housing offices local /Provide a housing office where I live
- Would prefer to pay at a Post Office
- Another building at the other end of town
- Requires a better road in - the one way system is confusing
- I think the building should be made smaller
- The roads aren't that accessible
- Provide a better location or scrap the one-way system

Q12: Would you prefer to communicate with the Council face to face, by other methods such as telephone/Internet/e-mail etc, or by both?

The sample overwhelmingly supported communicating with the Council via face-to-face methods. However, the method used in this survey was an exit survey as users left the building. We will need to compare the results of this question with a similar question being asked to a completely random sample, before we know which approach the public prefer.

Face-to-face	163	81.5%
Other methods (Telephone/Internet/e-mail etc)	9	4.5%
Both face-to-face and other methods	28	14%

Q13: What do you think of the surroundings in customer contact places in the Civic Centre, such as reception areas, enquiry/help desks etc?

Around 8 out of 10 think the surroundings are ok/fine/alright/spacious:

Positive comments *158 (80%)

- The surroundings are OK *76/ The surroundings are ok - you can find everything / They're ok - don't spend any of our money to change it
- They're fine *18/ It's fine: clean and tidy
- Alright *7/They are alright, not attractive but alright /Alright - 'roomy' / Looks alright, lot of space / They're quite alright /Quite open – alright/The surroundings are alright - information is left to look at which is good /It's quite alright - pretty smart /It's alright but very open - if sitting it would be draughty
- Nice and spacious *2
- The surroundings are very spacious
- Perfectly adequate /Adequate
- Quite pleasant *2/They're pleasant
- Very good *2 /They're good *5/Quite good *3/ They're fairly good
- Quite satisfied
- Quite presentable
- Quite amenable
- The surroundings are quite comfortable
- They're convenient
- Nice and clean - well cared for
- I think the surroundings are quite nice / I think the surroundings are nice
- They're very nice *4/ They're nice *2
- It's ok and clean
- They're ok although parking is difficult
- It's pretty well set out
- Its ideal as it's there as soon as you walk in and you don't need to look for them
- Its okay, you can find everything you need easily
- The surroundings are excellent *2
- I think they're great
- They're very nice
- They're lovely compared to some
- They're ok - roomy
- They're quite nice
- They're ok - spacious and warm
- I have no complaints

Neutral comments *14 (7%)

- Don't take any notice of them *6
- No comment to make *4
- I miss the fountain
- Don't know
- Pretty straightforward and self-explanatory
- There should be a coffee machine

Negative comments *26 (13%)

- Very drab, does not look very tempting
- It's a bit dull and drab - could improve
- It's very drab *2
- It's a bit dated *2
- It's a bit dated and dull
- I think the surroundings are dowdy
- They are very dull and boring
- The surroundings are very seventies /They're a bit 'seventies'
- They're a bit old fashioned
- Bit tatty /Tatty /Bit scruffy in places
- Very plain
- They are not very private
- The surroundings are old and a bit barren - need to be opened wider
- The surroundings need to be 'done up'
- A waste of space
- Waste of time and money
- The building is terrible - needs knocking down
- Not very pleasant
- They need brightening up
- More seats needed down the far end of the building and more cycle racks required
- They're bitterly cold

Q14: Do you have any comments or suggestions about Council customer contact with the public?

Positive comments *10

- It's OK by me! *2
- I have no comments - they (council staff) do come and see you
- No comment - respondent visits only once a month - quite happy
- I have no problems
- Not really - quite happy - the staff are pleasant
- Quite efficient
- Quite happy
- They are alright
- Council customer staff are very helpful

Negative comments *31

- Very hard to get in touch with any dept., switch from one to the other
- Sometimes think not able to voice opinion - seem to spend your money and then give the people the bill
- Re. q10 - occasionally difficult to park
- It's difficult to park sometimes. They're normally not very pleasant in here. I think they were today because of these questions!
- Re. q11 - The civic centre requires more accessibility re. car parking
- I thought it would be able to do more about people who are homeless
- To answer the phone more quickly and efficiently
- Could do more in the rural areas - need the dog wardens more in Dalston village and bigger police presence
- Can't contact local MP - respondent originally from Cardiff and was able to contact MP at any time
- People to be more accountable, especially for repairs and complaints
- Better reception with people who know how to use sign language
- They shouldn't tell lies - they should say what they mean rather than all the technical jargon
- Perhaps the staff could smile a bit more/A smile goes a long, long way

- Come into the Civic Centre to sort out a complaint, sent to the phone, could have done that at home, would prefer a rent man to call at my home
- Pretty rotten
- Lack of personal contact- Prefer contact with area housing office. You don't have personal contact here/Would like to see more contact/More contact with the public from the Council
- Get rid of the one ignorant bitch on the housing desk
- Provide more private areas to discuss things
- It should be made more private for people
- I think the letters that they send out to the elderly are rather confusing
- It could be made more of an open policy; the public should be more aware of what's going on
- I was disappointed with council tenancy agreement when I first moved into my home. I am still waiting for kitchen cupboards
- Sometimes they don't let you know what's going on until it's too late
- I'm not satisfied with the councillors. I have a bit of a criminal record and they discriminate me for that
- They (the Council) need to be more in touch with the public
- Need to be more efficient
- Be friendly every time
- Answer the telephone and return calls - this doesn't apply to all depts. Social Services are excellent

Neutral/other comments *159

- No *142/No comments
- The Civic Centre is easy to get to as long as I can park outside
- No, too big, people helpful but if not totally specific problem, difficult to find what you need
- Quite good but not 'child friendly' enough
- Re. q12 - I would not use the Internet/E-mail *3
- Re. q5/6 Staff is as friendly & helpful as can be, supervisor not as helpful as could be; very confusing. Also make literature more straightforward rather than complicated jargon
- The public need more information about a lot of things

- Don't feel focus groups are representative, perhaps talk to resident groups more. I find the Civic Centre convenient to visit but there are difficulties with parking
- The A.H. officers should visit
- It was a shame to do away with the housing offices
- I'd like to see more council officers in Harraby
- They've made an awful mess of the bus station
- Normally the queuing is longer
- Why are there so many empty shops? I thought this was a 'booming' city
- There should be a crèche

Q15: What age category are you in?

Under 16	1	0.5%
17-25	18	9%
26-30	17	8.5%
31-40	36	18%
41-50	30	15%
51-60	34	17%
61-70	37	18.5%
71+	27	13.5%

Q16: What are the first 3 digits of your postcode?

CA1 (East)	60	30%
CA2 (West)	79	39.5%
CA3 (North)	31	15.5%
CA4-8 (Rural)	24	12%
Not CA post code	3	1.5%
Other CA post code	1	0.5%
Homeless	2	1%

Q17: Is respondent male or female?

40% male

60% female

CARLISLE CITY COUNCIL

CRITICAL FRIEND VISIT REPORT

I have prepared this report after my recent visit to the Civic Centre to offer some suggestions regarding Customer Contact. The report follows the same format as the itinerary prepared for my visit my John Nutley.

Possible Points To be Aware Of

General

- No signage with name of building e.g. "Carlisle Civic Centre". May benefit from having a sign for people not from the area.
- Reception desk may be better facing the entrance in some way as a greeting and information point for the public.
- Large sign in main entrance area with index of floors may benefit from more public friendly wording rather than Civic Centre speak. For example would the general public know to go to the 7th floor regarding Car Parking? Graphics also work well within this format.
- To reduce footfall into the main entrance and be able to identify public from staff the rear doors of the reception area would be ideal as a staff entrance with possibly a keypad access for security.
- The area on the left as you enter the reception would be an ideal site for a display feature to promote Council Services for example.
- A lot of adhoc signage was visible throughout the building a standard format for all signage produced would make this look more professional and recognisable to the public.

Central Reception Area

- The civic staircase obscures the Housing Reception desk; eye level signage instead of ceiling signage would resolve this problem. For example the signage board currently outside the Cash Hall is the ideal type to use.
- Within the cash hall you are not aware you can pay by cheque and post it until you come to leave the hall, If this was in a more prominent position it may reduce queues during busy periods.
- Lighting is very dull in this area; a brighter look would make it friendlier to the public.
- Queuing system needs explained by signage as you walk into the hall where the yellow barriers are.

- The ticket system for the benefits section would be better nearer the entrance to the area rather than on the far wall. The digital display system is very good in this area but possibly would benefit from being opposite the seating area rather than to the side.
- Brochure segmentation would make it easier for the public to select the leaflet they require leaflets seem very cluttered at the present time. An ideal example of how well this can be done is within the Town Clerks Reception on the first floor.
- I believe the public do not require access to the lower floors, so is the down lift button required.
- Public toilet signage on this level is not very clear; this is probably one of the most popular areas people ask for when entering a building.
- The TV on the housing area is a very good idea for relaying information to the public but would ideally be better at eye level rather than high up.

First Floor

- Very bright and welcoming floor signage is clear and easy to follow.
- Town Clerks office is very approachable with clear signage good leaflet layout and very customer friendly.

Second Floor

- Public information boards explaining departments on this floor need to be more floor specific rather than outlining what comes under that department head. The current way may cause confusion for the public.
- Route to personnel on this level may be confusing, as it is quite a way from the entrances to the floor.

Fifth Floor

- The only thing noticed on this floor was leaflet consistency, having the correct leaflets at the correct departments.

Seventh Floor

- This area was probably the most public friendly I had seen, It was very welcoming and bright and signage explanations were clear and easy to understand.

Eighth Floor

- This area in general was fine; Reprographics signage could be more prominent and tariff charges more visible.

General Comments

All in all minor changes would make the Centre more public friendly, a good idea we use in the retail business is to get different Managers or Department heads to walk each others floors and make suggestions on improvements. As somebody in the area every day will ot always notice things that could be changed.

Age Concern meeting 21/02/01
Customer contact consultation.

Around 20 representatives of Age Concern held a discussion looking at:

- Whether they already contact the City Council
- If so, how – eg phone, face to face
- How is the current customer experience
- What is their preferred methods of contact
- Any suggestions for improvements in the future.

Summary of comments/ issues:

Customer satisfaction and how issues are dealt with seem to vary from dept to dept – eg someone very unhappy with parking but very happy with repairs.

Some confusion around where they could get information and help from – eg some seemed to think we already have one stop shops.

More information sent in different ways would be good, more promotion of how they can get things. Carlisle Focus was seen as a good way of communicating.

Overall their experience on the phone was good – people answering were helpful and seemed to know who to put them through to. Phones always answered quickly and politely. Good to have a 'human voice' on the end of the phone.

Acknowledgements to letters varied – was felt that a quick postcard should be sent out immediately and then a full response with two weeks.

Preferred method was by phone – freephone would be a good idea, one number to ring for all queries, should be well advertised. Should not get a computerised answering machine, asking to press options etc.

Possibly should open longer hours/ on a Saturday as most people from outside will visit the city then and could pay bills at the civic.

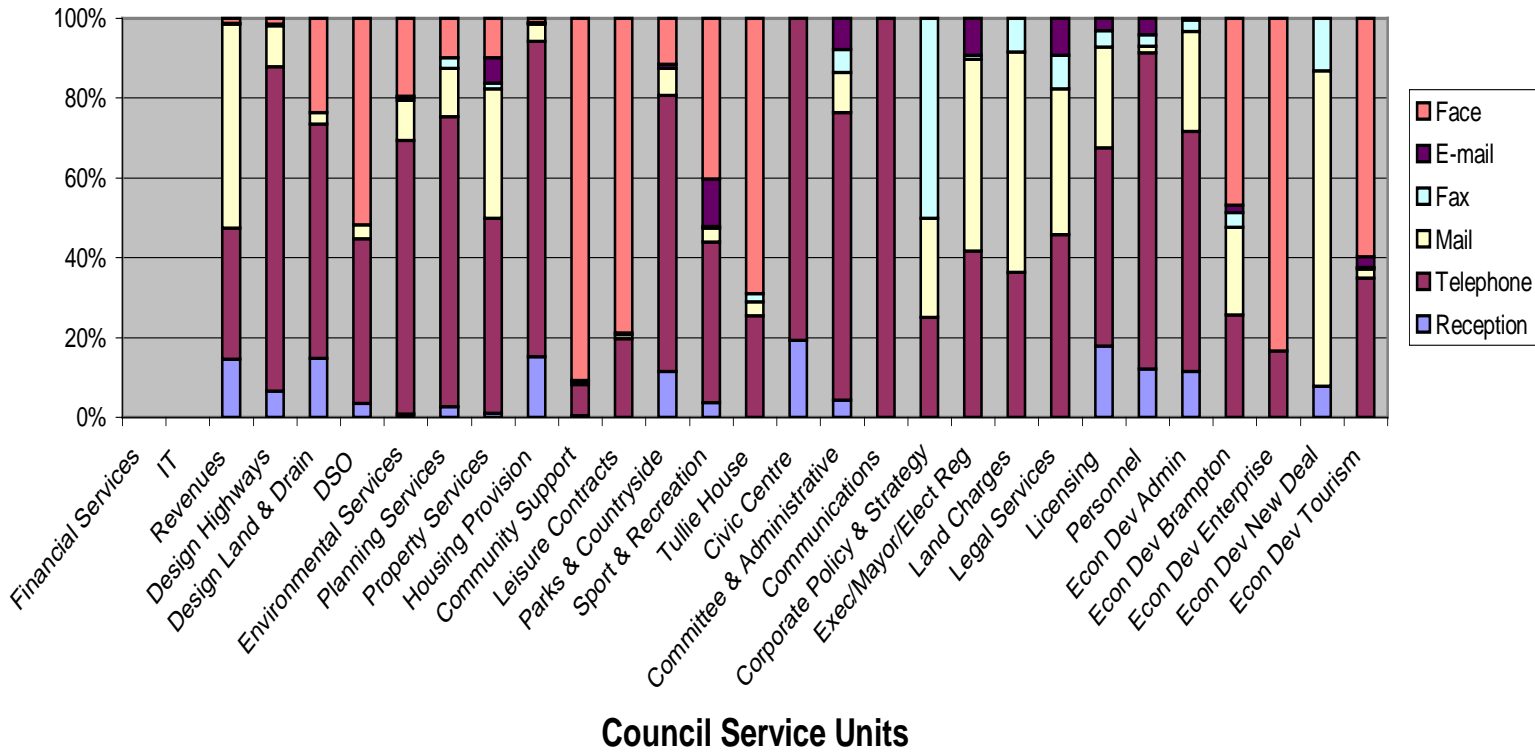
Have information centres/ distribute things through Age Concern network.

Not keen on paying things over the internet. Like the human touch.

Customer Care Weekly Summary

UNIT	Civic Reception	Telephone	Mail	Fax	E-mail	Non-Civic Face	TOTAL
Financial Services	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
IT	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Revenues	2920	6630	10265	20	0	265	20100
Design Highways	122	1495	190	5	5	25	1842
Design Land & Drain	5	20	1	0	0	8	34
DSO	50	600	50	0	0	750	1450
Environmental Services	32	2521	370	30	10	719	3682
Planning Services	70	1976	326	73	2	265	2712
Property Services	3	150	100	4	20	30	307
Housing Provision	948	4968	278	7	12	66	6279
Community Support	20	435	40	10	10	5000	5515
Leisure Contracts	0	5000	250	100	0	20000	25350
Parks & Countryside	25	150	15	0	2	25	217
Sport & Recreation	20	220	20	2	65	220	547
Tullie House	0	1840	250	150	0	5000	7240
Civic Centre	1065	4464	0	0	0	0	5529
Committee & Administrative	28	469	66	37	51	0	651
Communications	0	40	0	0	0	0	40
Corporate Policy & Strategy	0	5	5	10	0	0	20
Exec/Mayor/Elect Reg	0	371	427	10	82	0	890
Land Charges	0	77	117	18	0	0	212
Legal Services	0	175	140	33	35	0	383
Licensing	70	196	100	16	12	0	394
Personnel	75	492	10	18	25	0	620
Econ Dev Admin	25	130	54	6	1	0	216
Econ Dev Brampton	0	70	60	10	5	128	273
Econ Dev Enterprise	0	20	0	0	0	100	120
Econ Dev New Deal	3	0	30	5	0	0	38
Econ Dev Tourism	0	751	50	8	55	1287	2151
	5481	33265	13214	572	392	33888	86812

BV Customer Care Weekly Transaction Types



**BV Customer Care Customer Contact
Procedures**

Summary Data

DEPT	UNIT	Uniform	Phone	Queue	Waiting	Aims	Customer	Complain	Staff
		Badge	Response	System	Time	Statement	Satisfied	System	Training
CT	Financial Services	.				.			
CT	IT	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
CT	Revenues	.	.	●	●	.	●	●	●
DEAD	Design Highways	.	●	.	.	●	.	●	●
DEAD	Design Land & Drain	●	●	.	●	●	●	●	●
DEAD	DSO	.	●	.	.	.	.	.	●
DEAD	Environmental Services	●	●	.	.	.	●	●	●
DEAD	Planning Services	●	.	.	.	.	●	.	●
DEAD	Property Services	.	.	.	.	●	.	●	●
HOUS	Housing Provision	.	●	.	.	.	.	●	●
LEIS	Community Support	●	●	.	.	.	.	.	●
LEIS	Leisure Contracts	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
LEIS	Parks & Countryside	.	●	.	.	.		●	●
LEIS	Sport & Recreation	●	.	.	.	.	●	.	.
LEIS	Tullie House	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
TCCE	Civic Centre	●	●	.	.	.	.	.	●
TCCE	Committee & Admin	●	●	.	.	.	.	●	●
TCCE	Communications	.	●	.	●	.	●	.	.
TCCE	Corp Policy & Strategy	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
TCCE	Exec/Mayor/Elect Reg	.	●	.	.	.	.	.	●
TCCE	Land Charges	.		●	●	.	.	.	●
TCCE	Legal Services	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	●
TCCE	Licensing	.	.	.	●	.	.	●	●
TCCE	Personnel	.	.	.	.	.	●	.	●
TCCE	Econ Dev Admin	.	●	.	.	.	.	●	●
TCCE	Econ Dev Brampton	.	●	.	.	.	●	●	●
TCCE	Econ Dev Enterprise	.	.	.	.	.	.	●	●
TCCE	Econ Dev New Deal	.	●	.	.	.	●	●	●
TCCE	Econ Dev Tourism	●	●	.	●	.	●	●	●

CARLISLE CITY COUNCIL
CUSTOMER CONTACT POLICY

We Aim To:

- Put customers first.
- Develop equality of opportunity and access to services.
- Encourage the involvement of the community and to listen to Carlisle residents.
- Consult local people about the planning and delivery of services.
- Provide the services that people want and need.
- Make sure our services are delivered by people who are well informed and trained.

Our Staff Will:

- Be polite, helpful and treat you with respect.
- Listen carefully in order to understand and respond to your needs.
- Give their name and wear identification.
- Give you an explanation of their actions.
- If necessary and possible, assign your query to an appropriate officer who will follow through your query from beginning to end and keep you informed of progress.

When you come to the desk:

- Our reception desks will be easy to access for everyone wherever possible.
- The reception areas will be clean and welcoming and provide information about Council services in a variety of formats.
- The reception desk opening hours will be ??? to ???.

- The staff will be trained in customer care practices and will have received disability awareness training.
- They will be well-informed and helpful.
- All customers will be treated equally, regardless of age, race, gender etc.
- Our reception staff will see you promptly and if they cannot deal with your query, they will arrange for you to see someone who can. If this cannot be done immediately, they will make an appointment for you.
- Whenever possible and if requested, staff will move you to a private interview room to discuss your query.
- If you have an appointment, we will give you an explanation if there is more than a ?? minute delay.

When you telephone us:

- We aim to answer your call within ?? seconds.
- If you ask to speak to a specific individual, you will be put through to them.
- If the person answering your call cannot deal with your query, they will put you through to someone who can.
- If the person you want to speak to is not available, we will log your call and give that person a message to ring you back as soon as possible.
- If you get through to somebody's voicemail, their message will tell you when they are next available and give you alternative extension to dial.

When you write to us or e-mail us:

- We will register your enquiry and we will aim to respond to it within ?? working days.
- If there is a reason why we cannot respond within ?? days, we will acknowledge your enquiry within ?? working days of receipt, explaining the delay, and aim to reply in full within ?? days of receipt.
- Our reply will identify the employee who is dealing with your enquiry (or give you an enquiry reference number).
- The language in our correspondence will be simple, avoiding the use of jargon and will directly answer the questions asked.

When Council staff visit you at home:

- As far as practicable, they will arrange a mutually convenient appointment in advance.
- They will always carry and show you their identification and tell you their name.
- You can ring the Council to check their identification before you invite them in on 01228 817000, should you be concerned.
- They will take a comprehensive note of your query and give you a reference number so you can follow it up easily afterwards. This employee will remain responsible for your query until its conclusion, unless they need to pass it on to a more appropriate person, in which case they will inform you of this and tell you the new name.

- Our staff will aim to deal with the query you raised at home within ?? working days. If this cannot be done, they will tell you why, either by letter or telephone call, within ?? working days.

If you have any complaints:

- You should complain if:-
 - We have failed to do something we should have done
 - We have agreed to do something but haven't
 - We have given a poor service
 - We have treated you unfairly or discourteously
- We will first try to resolve your complaint informally at the reception facility. The receptionist will contact the appropriate department for you.
- If your complaint cannot be solved this way, the reception staff will give you a complaints form to complete (they can help you do this if you wish). If you complete it at home, no stamp is required to post it back to us. The complaints form is also available from community centres and other City Council buildings.
- When we receive your complaint form, we will register it and send you an acknowledgement within five working days. Your complaint will be investigated by a manager of the department concerned and a response will be issued to you within fifteen working days of receiving your complaint.
- If you are still not satisfied with the result of your complaint, you should contact the Head of Committee and Administrative Services who will call a Board of Arbitration made up of three City Councillors. They will examine your complaint and discuss it

with you. Their decision will be sent to you within twenty working days of your meeting with them.

- If you remain dissatisfied, you can complain to the Local Government Ombudsman. Contact Civic Centre reception and they will send you information on how to go about this.

Contact Information:

Carlisle City Council

Civic Centre

Rickergate

CARLISLE

CA3 8QG

Telephone: 01228 817000

Fax: 01228

E-mail:

Website:

Critical Friend Brief

In discussions with the our nominated critical friend we he has agreed to undertake the following:-

- 1) Conduct a “walk through” and produce a report of the existing physical customer contact service.
- 2) Attend a project meeting to give a perspective on his company’s approach to customer contact.
- 3) Provide guidance based on his background and experience in customer care
- 4) Attend any project meeting to discuss relevant issues provided enough notice can be given
- 5) Comment on any detailed proposals to be incorporated in any new service

He has indicated that he would be prepared to help, as part of his companies remit to assist and play a part in the community, in any capacity to help the project team successfully undertake it’s review

Alternative Service Delivery Models

The project team have examined a number of different models and tried to relate these to existing solutions already employed by local Councils. These include:-

- a) Continuing direct provision by the Council by either
 - i. improving on the current arrangements - **The CARLISLE model**
 - ii. re-organising customer contact to be delivered by
 - a separate, single customer contact unit – **The BRENT model**
 - a DSO run customer contact unit – **The NEWCASTLE model**
 - running customer contact under the Local Strategic Partnership banner – **The WEST SUSSEX model**
 - running customer contact in conjunction with some other partner – **The SWALE model**
- b) Indirect provision by the Council through:-
 - i. Externalisation of the service through
 - a private sector contract – **the BARROW model**
 - a partnership based on the Liverpool model- **LIVERPOOL model**

-
Further descriptions of these models are detailed on the following pages.

The CARLISE Model – Improving on the current arrangements

Outline Model Descriptions - Carlisle

Where and how used

The Carlisle method of meeting customer contact is familiar to us all. The proposal here is that it should be improved upon rather than thrown out and customer contact be restarted again from scratch. It has been suggested that by more effective signposting and the implementation of a customer care policy that the current service could be significantly improved. It would be possible to implement some of the other ideas from the key solutions paper in Appendix F to strengthen and support this proposal.

1. How it works from –

a)customer perspective

the customer would benefit from the more effective signposting by finding the service they want more easily – and the introduction of a common customer care policy would mean they were better received and dealt with by staff

b) organisational perspective

there would be little change needed in the organisation to accommodate the implementation of this model

c) staff perspective

staff would feel comfortable with the operation of the service but key managers and officers would wonder as to what had really changed

2. Implementation Issues

None. The amount of staff resource required to implement would be negligible.

3. Metric Information – calls, operators, PI's cost

The level of calls, the way they're dealt and the cost of the service would remain as now.

4. Advantages/Disadvantages wrt Key Issues & Solutions

Disadvantages

- This solution does not address any of the key weaknesses associated with the current service
- This solution goes no way to providing the joined up service the Government requires in place by 2005

-

Advantages

- There would be continuity of service
- This solution provides the option with the least risk associated with it

1. Indicative Cost

The implementation costs would be low but would rise if any of the Key Solutions in Appendix F were to be implemented. This is the least cost solution of all those proposed.

The BRENT Model – A separate, single customer contact unit

Outline Model Descriptions-Brent

Where and how used

- Initial flagship 'face to face' scheme opened by London Borough of Brent in 1991. The service was to be cost effective, efficient and simple.
- Between 1991-1996 a further 5 one stop shops were opened.
- All sections dealt with own telephone calls at first then in 1995 a specialist call centre was opened, with dedicated lines for Housing and social services.
- In November 2000 opening hours were extended to 8am-8pm and Saturday working is planned for 2002.
- They are considered 'best practice' in one stop shops and call centres – with lots of praise from the government and interest from other councils.
- Housing benefits and Council tax customer services are provided separately (by EDS) within one of the one stop shops although all the other one stop shops have access to their systems and can deal with most enquiries.

How it works from

Customer perspective

- There are regular customer surveys and consultations.
- Have surgeries on wide variety of topics

Organisational perspective

- Corporate approach to customer service
- A series of SLA's define the cut-off points between what is handled in the one-stop shop/call centre operation and what is passed back to staff in the departments.
- SLA's are under constant review however, and over time the percentage of activities handled in the one-stop operation is increasing;

Staff perspective

- Staff are reported to be highly motivated and enthusiastic
- Staff are 'carefully selected and trained for 5 weeks.'
- Many are from 'non local government' backgrounds, eg banks

Implementation Issues

Unknown

Metric Information – calls, operators, PI's cost

- There is extensive use of a number of different IT systems, including CRM The one stop shop service deals with 415,400 detailed enquiries.
- The call centre received 361,900 switchboard contacts
- There are 91 staff 30 of these in the call centre
- 56% enquiries resolved at first hit
- An Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) and Voice Processing system were installed and the One Stop Call Centre opened in early 1996.
- The comprehensive IT support provides staff with access, via a Corporate Data Network, to 10 different IT systems (former departmental systems such as Social Services, Housing Council Tax & Housing Benefit, Planning) A key component is an award winning customer tracking system and information database, based on Lotus Notes, called LASER. This maintains records of every customer who has visited or telephoned a One Stop shop

Indicative Cost

Unknown

Advantages/Disadvantages wrt to Key Issues and Solutions

Disadvantages

- Despite running for 5 years to great success they are still only able to achieve 50-60% split between front and back office functions
- Staff are recruited from external agencies which does not make the most of the knowledge base they already have

Advantages

- Strong Commitment to comprehensive training
- Separation of CTAX and Housing Benefits
- Good use of IT to benefit of customers

The NEWCASTLE Model – A DSO run customer contact unit

The description of how the Newcastle

Outline description – the Newcastle Model.

Where & how

Newcastle City Council launched its Customer Service Centre in July 2000, following extensive research and consultation.

This streamlined 15 previous reception points within the civic centre into one customer service centre in a prominent position at the front of the building. Notices and security measures ensure that all members of the public are directed to this one entrance.

The centre operates between 8.30am – 4.30pm each day. Following research into departmental enquiries, customer contact is broken down into three categories:

- Generic – front counter staff in the centre are trained in customer services and deal immediately with a range of general enquiries, these staff have access to all internal IT systems.

Specialist officers – a number of officers with specialist skills are based within the customer service centre, including planning, education and council tax specialists.

- On call professionals – for more detailed enquiries each department has an on call system where officers with specialist professional knowledge are available to attend to a customer in the service centre.

There is also a 'hotline' telephone number for a call centre based in a different location which handles environmental based calls, refuge, street cleaning, repairs and maintenance.

Customer perspective

Comprehensive research was undertaken six months after the service centre opened and found very high satisfaction levels. Detailed research will be undertaken every two years, but customers are encouraged to fill in comment cards which can highlight any issues which need to be addressed.

It makes it easier and more convenient for customers as they can get all enquiries dealt with in one place.

Organisational perspective

It has streamlined the way the organisation deals with its customers and ensures consistency in its approach with trained customer service staff providing a face for the council. It has raised standards of customer care.

Staff perspective

It offers staff new career opportunities in a new area of customer services. It prevents back office staff spending time dealing with inappropriate or simple enquiries.

Implementation issues

From gaining political agreement to opening took around 10 months, but there was substantial building work undertaken. There were a number of technological issues and investment in a queue management system which provides statistical data.

The centre was opened gradually to give opportunity for any teething problems to be ironed out.

Since implementation of the central site at the civic centre, a need for localised customer service centres has been identified and there is now a programme to roll out the centres to five other areas of the city.

Data

There are 10 dedicated front counter customer service officers dealing with generic face to face enquiries in the centre.

Also based in the centre are five cashiers, two planning officers and up to seven education officers.

Internal targets are set for waiting times etc.

Between 450 and 1400 customers are dealt with face to face on a daily basis.

(The separate hotline call centre has 20 operators and is open 8am-8pm).

Advantages/ disadvantages

It centralises customer services and offers first contact resolution. It is more convenient and ensures consistency of approach. Only designated appropriate officers deal with customer enquiries.

No disadvantages!!

Indicative costs

Around three quarters of a million pounds – mainly on building work, ensuring accessibility and IT (publicly accessible terminals are also available in the centre).

The ongoing operational costs are funded by contributions from each of the council's directorates.

The WEST SUSSEX Model

Local Strategic Partnership Banner - West Sussex Help Point Network



How it works:

A The Customer Perspective

One point of contact to find out who does what in public services – the Web motto says: "***You have the questions. We have the answers – or we'll find someone who has***"

Modes of access include:

- i. Using existing service points such as libraries, area offices and council offices, however the result is inconsistent opening hours across the network
- ii. Running a 24 hour telephone help line - separate ethnic minority 24 hour line. Both are charged at local call rate.
- iii. County Council Web Site with on-line form and e-mail contact points available 24/7.

Surveys show most valued characteristics of Help Points are:

- i. Friendly Staff
- ii. Single point of contact for a wide range of services – saves customer costs by doing the running around for them.
- iii. Guidance through the maze of public services
- iv. Enquiries dealt with quickly
- v. Local knowledge
- vi. Provision of accurate information

B The Organisational Perspective

The agencies concerned see the development as a genuine multi-agency partnership and shared commitment to public service.

The network supplements other forms of contact used by the partner agencies e.g. Adur District Council's BV Report issued December 2001 on Integrated Customer Services included in its recommendations that it be noted that customers could not always access County Council Services at all access points and recommended conducting research into developing their Integrated Customer Services in partnership with their West Sussex Network Partners as well as CAB, the Post Office and the voluntary or private sector.

C The Staff Perspective

Unknown

IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES

Need to provide a common technology base across the partnership.

METRIC INFORMATION – CALLS, OPERATORS, PI's COSTS

ADVANTAGES/DISADVANTAGES WRT KEY ISSUES & SOLUTIONS

INDICATIVE COST

The costs of the service have been minimised by using existing service points. Staffing costs are £1.17 per council tax payer but the network also saves costs for individuals services. These savings have not been quantified.

The SWALE Model – A borough council running customer contact in conjunction with some other partner

HOW IT WORKS:-

Swale Borough Council have received joint funding to provide joint Council shops jointly with other agencies, namely the police. The idea is to encourage and foster joint working between two organisations who both have to provide a public presence but who have traditionally done so separately.

Further information is being sort from the Council about their direct experiences in providing this sort of service. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some of the Council's customers feel uncomfortable at the presence of the police but the staff certainly feel more secure,

Advantages/ disadvantages

Pros

The cost of setting up and running such centres is shares.

There is overlap between Police and Council activities and such an arrangement would improve communications.

Cons

The overlap between activities is limited and to a certain extent there must be a clear separation between the Police and Council activities. This arrangement could lead to a blurring of that separation if only in the perception of the Council's customers.

It might me the case that running customer contact with other agencies such as the voluntary sector might be more acceptable but you always return to the issue of organisations needing to maintain their own separate identities.

-

The BARROW Model – Externalisation through a private sector contract

HOW IT WORKS:-

This proposal essentially involves packaging our customer contact operations through a private sector partner organisation.

The project team have struggled to find an example of a private sector company providing only a customer contact service for a Council. Most private sector companies tend to want to provide the complete business service i.e. the front office and back office operation. There are many examples of companies providing a Council Tax and Benefit's service which would include reception, telephone and mail handling services as well as the processing of the transactions. The closest example we could find

Pro's

The service is cheaper and the hours of operations would be longer.

The service would be more consistent in the answers given to clients

Con's

The service is designed only for routine or commodity transactions. If the customer query deviates in any way from the "book" the operator will struggle.

More operations of this type involve telephone enquiries. We would need to gear and direct most of our contacts so they occur through the phone. This would reduce the number of access channels available to the customer.

The LIVERPOOL Model - Externalisation through a partnership

LIVERPOOL DIRECT

Liverpool City Council have three objectives in respect to customer service provision.

1. To pioneer some of the most technologically advanced and innovative means of communicating with the residents and businesses of Liverpool.
2. To help put the customer at the heart of everything the City Council does.
3. To bring about "joined-up government" for the people of Liverpool.

To assist them with this they have formed a joint venture with BT to radically transform the way services are provided.

This JV brings with it a multimillion pound investment in innovative technologies. Any existing staff are seconded to the JV group thus retaining terms and conditions. An attractive voluntary severance package is available for those who feel unable to adopt the new working practices.

Liverpool are delivering the objectives by means of One Stop Shops, Customer Relationship Management and New Technology Social Inclusion Policies, Liverpool Direct and Call Centre.

One Stop Shops

Two of the twelve proposed customer contact centres have already opened with the ten remaining to follow within three years. They are located at the heart of local communities and bring City Council services under one roof thus removing the need to travel into the city centre. The centres utilise state of the art facilities including video conferencing and multimedia information kiosks as well as face to face one to one human contact.

Customer Relationships Management (CRM)

This uses new technologies, available through the capital injection of the JV, to reduce waiting times and make services more efficient. The aim of this service is to meet a target of answering 90% of enquiries first time. Liverpool are unique in using this system.

New Technology and Social Inclusion

This makes access to new technology available to everyone by new initiatives designed to increase availability.

Liverpool Direct

This is Liverpool City Council's call centre. It is already the largest in the UK and is expanding further. The call centre has 125 'advisors' and is open outside normal office hours to improve accessibility. The hours are Monday to Friday 8.00am to 10.00pm, Saturday and Sunday 10.00am to 6.00pm.

The call centre uses nine numbers to give access to all services as shown below:-

Liverpool City Council Services	Telephone Numbers
Disabled parking Electoral Services	0151 233 3000
Refuse collection Highways, street cleansing Street lighting Grounds maintenance	0151 233 3001
Trading standards and consumer advice	0151 233 3002
Appointments to register births and deaths To register a marriage, Tel: 0151 233 4973 or 4975	0151 233 3004
Council house repairs including out of hours emergencies	0151 233 3005

Education awards	0151 233 3006
Milk tokens	
School meals	
Uniforms	
Travel passes	
University and sixth form grants	
Information on special events	0151 233 3007
Council tax enquiries	0151 233 3008
Social services referral, advice and information service	0151 233 3010

The seconded staff have been "extracted" from clients along with their budgets and placed in the call centre where they take the calls and are empowered to action any service which they have been trained to advise upon.

I have had the opportunity to witness this first hand and they really do adopt a "can do" approach. This is possible due to effective technology and effective training and support. The staff also want it to work and are keen to adopt new practices.

Liverpool combine new technology with a willing workforce to deliver a first class service.

The immediate link to the service providers at the sharp end creates a seamless cost effective service that has removed duplication and bureaucracy to concentrate on adding value to the service provision.

The advantage of the system is that one call can get the majority of service requests dealt with by one advisor that is good for the customer and good for the City Council.

L TICKNER

DSO ESU Manager

The key to this scenario is the attitude of the partner. If they are prepared to assume some of the risk of modernising the service and share with Liverpool some of the rewards then the customer will enjoy a better service and the Council will pay less for it.

One downside for the Council must be that in entering such a deal it is giving up its' independence in dealing with customers. This has been handed over to it's partner.

REF: Highways/Briefing notes of visit to Liverpool 03.05.01

Initial Challenge

Key Solutions Summary

Central Issue	Importance	Solution	Detail	Comment
Environment		Location Directors	Location of Civic Centre to be included on road signs. A prominent sign signifying the Civic Centre location be commissioned.	
		Effective Signposting	Clearer signposting that will enable customers to the place where their enquiry will be answered at the first asking. Staff are the most efficient signposts.	
		Eliminate Enquiry Filters	By reducing the filtering and routing of enquiries you improve the chance enquiries will be answered at the first asking.	
		Dedicated staff	Nominated staff should work full time on customer contact as their primary and only function. Dedicated staff who specialise in this area will produce a better service than staff who only do it as part of another job.	
		Corporate standardisation of Customer Care	By adopting this measure we will eliminate the service being delivered at different levels, some good and some bad	
		Colour code services	Similar idea to that used in hospitals:- Blue for Council Tax, Green for Cashiers etc.	
		Improve reception area furniture for customers	Tables, chairs, drinks machine, supermarket queuing/ticketing system, provision of pens etc.	
		Relocation of cc away from Civic	Alternative suggestions – Assembly Rooms, retail premises in town centre, utilising "Thrupenny bit". Essential any alternative location is central.	
		Electronic Signposting	Replacement of current keepers board and the introduction of an electronic information and messaging board.	
		Display Area	Re-think the area for displaying notices and announcements. New standards to be created and controls put in place	
		Reception Area	Visitors to see officers are not to be directed unescorted to Departments. An area set to be set aside to wait whilst awaiting someone to come down and greet and escort visitors to where they need to be.	
		Meeting and Greeting	All customers to be acknowledged when making contact. Met and greeted at reception points and acknowledged through other access channels.	
		Toilets	Improvements needed. SLA improved to increase frequency of cleaning.	

		Cashiers	Lessons about receipting cash to be learnt from the retail and banking industry. Introduction of building society style counters with drop down security shutters.	
		Screens	Should screens be introduced at reception areas.	
		Environment extends beyond Civic	Better presentation of services before customers makes contact prepares the customer for the service they are to receive. A budget to be set aside to promote the access to services.	
		Shop Check System	Carlisle should join the Shop Check security system used by retailers in town	
		Staff Facilities	Tea/staff room – helps motivate staff – well motivated staff equals a better service	
		Reception Point Locations	These should be located close to customer access points e.g. opposite lifts and entrances	
		Reception Point Access	Lifts, automatic doors, ramps to be standard	
		Porters & Telephonists	Need to be relocated as they play no direct part in direct customer contact	
		Overall Environment	Employ professional architect/designer to suggest improvements to the physical environment. Better lighting, re-modelling of the reception area and better use of the cash hall.	
		Discourage attendance at Civic Centre	Promote electronic access as the primary route to services.	
		Extended opening hours	Late night opening on Thursday initially for all services to complement City Centre initiative and to test demand.	
		Extend opening hours	Customer contact to be provided out of hours by home workers supported by ICT	
		Extend access through electronic services	Services delivered 24x7 through electronic service delivery aimed at meeting Governments 2005 targets.	
		Extend access through electronic access points	Use of kiosks, phones and video conferencing	
		Utilise existing resources	Extend/Incorporate the Careline and or CCTV operations into out of hours customer contact	
		Joint service provision	Utilisation of a physical, open twenty four hours environment, in conjunction with other agencies to deliver services. E.g. police,	
		Identify customers	Lowther Street entrance to be used for all staff and deliveries/collections. Rickergate entrance for customers only.	
		Customer contact restricted to ground floor only	Customers shouldn't be required to "ride the lifts". They should be attended to at a main floor reception with officers coming to them if necessary. Eliminate non ground floor reception points.	
		One Stop Shop	No multiple reception areas. Staff would also deal with initial voice and electronic contact.	
Ownership		Call to be resolved at first contact	Front line staff to be empowered to make decisions	

		Underpinned by Service Level Agreements	There should be a two way service level agreement in operation between the front office staff and the supporting Departments	
		Cross department approach	Service requests to be dealt with in a consistent manner independently of which department they are directed to.	
		Cross department approach	Customer Contact TIR's, SLA's and Service Improvement Plans between front office and back office staff will encourage boundary crossing and ownership	
		Back office/Front office ownership	A series of joint performance indicators need to be developed	
		Implement a problem management/tracking/reporting system	The purchase and implementation of a Customer Relationship management system is a crucial element in making this happen.	
		Awareness Raising	Raising awareness and training in the art of customer contact and customer care amongst staff/management/members will encourage personal ownership	
		Comment and suggestion sheets	Responding to these will also encourage ownership	
		Request filtering	Efficient filtering of requests, accurately targeted to the person best able to help	
		Back office to retain control of front office decision making process	Scripts, Flowcharts, Decision Tree's for the front office should originate and be maintained by the specialist back office staff.	
		SLA Database	To control and monitor the interaction between front and back office and will form part of any implemented CRM	
		Front office staff to make early decisions	SLA's will regulate the degree of staff empowerment but the underlying assumption <u>must</u> be for greater rather than less autonomy for front office staff.	
Performance Management		IT System required	A system, preferably digital and automatic, is required for resource planning and performance measurement of any and all customer contact channels.	
		Quality responses tailored to customer need	Any customer contact will be delivered in a way that suits the customer. If some customers require more time to deal with than others and this needs to be allowed for. E.g. NHS Direct	
		Quality to be measured	Performance management should include measures of quality not focus entirely on quantitative measurements	
		Training of back office staff on customer contact	Performance will be improved if back office staff are trained and exposed to real customer contact situation. Perhaps mentoring or using a buddy system	
		Customers satisfied at first contact	This is a key measurement to drive and improve customer contact. It should be measured on a daily basis.	
		Customer satisfaction surveys	Performed on a regular basis, should feed to TIR's as a method of improving performance	

		Staff satisfaction surveys	Again feeding TIR's and leading to service improvements	
		Formal external measurement of customer service	Aim to be an Idea Level 5 Authority. Are there any other external verification of customer service that are applicable. E.g. Chartermark	
		Published PI's	PI's should be published for staff and customers. For staff these should be at very frequent intervals in order for them to see positive feedback for any improvements implemented	
		Multi-channel PI's	Any performance indicators must take account of all customer channels not just visitor contacts	
		Best practice dissemination	Mechanism is needed to review and implement any best practices that are identified	
Communication		Access channels to be customisable	Access channels to be capable of customisation in specific circumstances	
		Immediate	All communication channels to be immediate	
		Consistent consultation	All consultation exercises to be carried out at regular intervals to a consistent level	
		Customer surveys & market research	Greater emphasis to be placed on the results of such exercises with a closer link to service improvement plans	
		Electronic communication	Intranet system required for both front and back office. Repository of all service knowledge	
		Published material	A centralised digital library containing all published material to be created	
Organisation-i) Central point of contact		Central Service Desk	Central service desk to rationalise existing proliferation of reception desks	
		Staff	Service desk attended by well motivated staff	
		Common contact point	Common phone number, e-mail address, mail address, reception	
		Customer Service Manager	Appointment of a Customer Service Manager with specific customer contact and customer service information	
		Focused staff	Separated from mail handling, delivering and other sundry duties	
		Identity required	A separate identity or branding, themed within any corporate branding, will be required so customers can immediately identify locations and sources of help	
		Secure environment	Contact point to be secure – covered by CCTV and visible people/security presence	
ii) Silo Working		Transferred calls PI	An alternative measurable to "Calls answered on first contact". A high level of transfers might indicate a back office silo mentality	
		80% threshold	80% of calls to be answerable directly but those common answers should be available to all staff via an intranet who should be encouraged field queries	
		Knowledge dissemination	Creation of a knowledge customer service data base / hub intranet	

		CRM	Available as a corporate resource throughout whole organisation	
		Consistent decisions	In discretionary situations there should be consistent decisions	
iii)Links to partner organisations		Exposure to external influences	Networking with similar operations to learn best practice	
		Identify benefits	Identify and quantify the benefits to customers of such links to enable prioritisation	
		Common channels	Common access channels and interfaces to be established with partner organisations	
		Joint policy formulation	Establish joint customer care policies and strategies	
		Training	Joint training with other organisations	
		SLA	Establish SLA's with partner organisations	
iv)Corporate Approach		Handbook and induction training	Customer contact to be included in induction training and training to be extended to include existing staff	
		Policy	Customer contact to be generated and maintained by a "standing committee" of Portfolio Holder, Customer Service Manager, staff rep, Department Head, rotating head of service, customer rep.	
		Global PI's	Identification and introduction of global PI's	
		CMT Involvement	Customer contact/care to be a standing item at CMT	
		Reporting	Reports on customer contact o portfolio holder and Executive	
v)Customer Orientated		Customer sugested improvements	Suggestion books, boxes etc. routed thro' to "Standing Committee". Responses required to suggestions	
		Service flexibility	Service to change and adapt to changing customer needs	
		Service statement	Annual "state of the service" statement from the customer service manager	
vi)Customer Care Culture			Creation and maintenance of a customer care culture	
			Standing items on TIR's. Mandatory TNA entry for all staff.	
			Externally driven, inspected and tested care standard. Examining body yet to be identified:- Chartermark, ISO, BSI etc.	