

# CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

## ***Committee Report***

Public

Date of  
Meeting:

13 June 2002

Title: CUSTOMER CONTACT BEST VALUE REVIEW - UPDATE

Report of: City Treasurer

Report  
reference: Financial Memo 2002/03 No 21

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 and comment on :-

- a. Further results from the consultation exercise on the current service
- b. The progress in consultation of the new customer contact policy
- c. The Commencement of work on the location of a customer centre
- d. The first draft of the detailed customer contact model
- e. Detailed proposals for improvements of any future service
- f. Progress for including partner organisations
- g. The revised timetable for the review

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## CITY OF CARLISLE

To: The Chairman and Members of the Financial Memo

Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee 2002/03 No 21

13 June 2002

### CUSTOMER CONTACT BEST VALUE REVIEW – UPDATE

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

#### 1 Current Service - Consultation Exercise

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1. At the previous meeting to this O&S Committee it was reported that a final piece of consultation had been commissioned to determine the state of the current service.
2. This was to be a focus group of external customers which was run in two sessions.
3. The result of this consultation is presented in Appendix A.
4. The overall view of the current customer contact service supports the view that whilst performing well in some areas, overall the Council's current customer contact service is not performing well and is in need of reform
5. In response to criticism made during the sessions the Review team has made sure attendees to these sessions have been circulated with a summary of their comments and have been invited back at a later date to comment on the Council's recommendation's on improving the service.

**6. *This Committee is asked to note the work and make comments as appropriate.***

#### 2. New Customer Contact Policy – Consultation

1. This Committee approved a draft customer contact policy at its last meeting.
2. Consultation on the draft policy has now taken place with service managers and staff. A total of nineteen responses have been received to date and some helpful ideas were generated on a wide range of related issues.

Some of the more common issues raised included:-

- o The potential problems with name badges for staff in terms of personal security;
- o That the obligations on customers to be polite and treat staff with respect should be set out in the policy;
- o Concern over the suggested extended opening hours for receptions, including the fact that whenever receptions are open there needs to be back office support

- That better use should be made of voicemail, keeping it up to date, with information about annual leave etc. and always with an alternative phone number to ring.

Other comments and suggestions were:-

- That out of hours contact arrangements should be specified and set out in the policy;
- Consideration should be given to Saturday morning reception opening;
- There was support for the idea of acknowledging all mail within 5 days and responding fully within ten;
- The principle of a centralised customer service reception was supported widely;
- One person commented that the draft policy is a good idea, but could only be successful if applied to a new customer service centre. That person held the opinion that if the policy was applied to the "existing, inadequate reception facilities" it would fail.

1. All comments received are shown in anonymous form in Appendix B. The comments will be considered and incorporated where possible into the revised document. The next version to come to members of Overview and Scrutiny will be the final version.
2. The review team has considered the best route for consulting about the public about the customer contact policy. The external focus group mentioned in 1.5 above coupled with a continuous improvement programme based on customer comment after implementation would seem the most appropriate route to adopt.
- 3. *This Committee is asked to note the work and make comments as appropriate.***

## 2. Customer Contact Centre – Location

1. Discussions have commenced on the possible location of a central customer contact centre.
2. Possibilities include sharing premises with other organisations, using a City Centre retail premises or alternative Council owned premises (e.g. the Assembly Rooms)
3. Although alternatives to the Civic Centre are being examined the possibility of re-utilising the Civic Centre is also being considered.
4. The practical issues and costs of the individual alternatives will be presented along with the final customer contact model.
- 5. *This Committee is asked to note the work and make comments as appropriate.***

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## 4. Detailed Customer Contact Model

1. At the last O&S meeting, Members requested that detailed proposals be drawn up for two different customer contact models, namely a separate, single customer contact centre and a similar model with the out of hours services provided for by a separate organisation.
2. The draft detailed model is produced in Appendix C. It should be noted that the document is very much a working document produced here for consultation. In particular the brand name of the service has still to be decided.
3. This draft model is a very important element of the review in that, for the first time, it brings together the elements of the service which have been reviewed and shows how weaknesses that have been highlighted will be addressed. It shows the proposed form and shape of future customer contact within the Authority and outlines how the service will be delivered in the future.
4. Following comments from this committee consultation on the final model will be undertaken with interested parties and considered for inclusion in the final version. These parties will include CMT, Unit Managers, Portfolio Holder, Trade Unions and an external focus group.
5. The final report, incorporating appropriate comments and suggestions will be presented to the next meeting of this O&S Committee.

6. The final draft will contain budget details. They are missing from this draft due to the work being carried out about the location of the customer contact centre which will have a bearing on the final cost.

**7. *This Committee is asked to note the proposed model and make comments as appropriate.***

## 5. Detailed Service Proposals

1. At the previous meeting of this Committee a number of key solutions were presented with recommendations that some could be effected immediately.
2. These solutions still need to be circulated to service managers, staff and customers for comment.
3. It is the intention for these key solutions to be incorporated into any implemented customer contact centre solution.
4. In response to concerns expressed at the previous meeting it was agreed that Members would detail their own priorities for implementation.
5. Comments from three Members has been received. These are shown in Appendix D.
6. Since the last committee meeting some immediate improvements to the service have been made at the suggestion of individual Members. These have chiefly been in the area of the Civic Centre environment and have had a positive impact on the current service. The extra cost to the Authority has been minimal and has chiefly occurred by tightening up and enforcing existing procedures.

**7. *Members are asked to:-***

- ***Note and comment on the key solutions***
- ***Consider any of the key solutions for immediate implementation***

## 5. Partner Organisations

1. Tentative contact has been made with partner organisations to assess their willingness to host information points on behalf of the Authority.
2. Existing and potential users of the Civic Centre are being contacted regarding our customer contact proposals. These users, chiefly Social Services and Riverside, will be approached about the possibility of joint working in this area.
3. The review team has been notified about the existence of a Cumbrian initiative called the Cumbria Information Hub which could be a significant partner in delivering joined up services between District and County. Further investigations are being made to see if the initiative could be incorporated into this review.
4. The consultation and dialogue with partner organisations about joined up services will continue for the duration of the review and will continue after it has completed. It will form an on-going process in the new customer contact service.
5. ***This Committee is asked to note the progress of including partner organisations and make comments as appropriate.***

## 6. Revised Timetable for the Review

7.1 The projected timetable for the review is now as follows:-

- Final Customer Contact Policy: Final Report on Customer Contact Model: Finalised Action Plan. – 1<sup>st</sup>. Aug O&S 2002
- 2<sup>nd</sup>. Aug Final Best Value Report Issued for Executive approval.

**2. This Committee is asked to note the timetable and make comments as appropriate.**

D THOMAS

City Treasurer

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City Treasury,

Carlisle

13<sup>th</sup> June 2002 JN/CH/f40203

Carlisle City Council

Customer Contact Best Value Review – April 2002

Focus Groups

Summary Report

Background

The City Council asked CN Research to run two Focus groups to discuss the interaction between the customer and the council. The discussions explored issues which included, what was important from a customer's point of view, what were the strengths and weaknesses of the council in relation to customer contact as well as access, the physical environment of the Civic Centre and the subject of the One Stop Shop.

Methodology

There were two Focus Groups one made up of 8 people; the other had seven members of the public. The discussions were carried out on Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> April in the Slupsk Room, Civic Centre, Carlisle.

What is important when dealing with customer?

Both groups agreed that when dealing with a customer the most important issues were politeness, speed of service, friendliness and reasonableness. It was felt that when dealing with the Council the customer was not always put first and the staff did not have the drive to give good customer service. It was suggested that the times of access could be improved e.g. a Saturday morning.

***Comments included:***

"I think you need to make the customer feel you are interested in their problem"

"They are complacent"

"They don't seem to have the drive"

"They should use different methods of communication including e-mail"

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

There were a number of points here which included, a failure to meet promises made to the customer, restricted opening hours, the Council is not proactive in it's approach to assessing public opinion. A major cause of aggravation was when people take your telephone number, say someone will call back but never do.

***Comments included:***

"Asking for something to be done and it never does get done"

"There are too few signs throughout the City"

"The hours are too restrictive"

"I can see that the Council is now asking our opinions, that is good"

What annoys customers most when dealing with the Council?

Slow service and bureaucracy caused a number of problems and they felt that some areas of the City were treated differently to others.

***Comments included:***

"They are very lax at times"

"A street light was off in our street, I rang after two days and a week later it was still off. I contacted a councillor in the end"

"I contacted reception and they don't say who they are putting you through to, I think they should tell you first who they are putting you through to, they seem very aggressive"

What are Carlisle City Councils strengths and weaknesses in relation to customer contact?

The strengths of the City Council were said to be it's gardens which were thought to be very good, the cemetery which was said to be "One of the best in the country" also the collection of rubbish was seen as a strength.

Some inconsistencies were highlighted such as not taking garden waste and building rubbish away, however some of the group said that they had no trouble getting the refuse department to take their rubbish away.

It was suggested that some public buildings such as the library and Tullie House could be open at hours that are more convenient for the public. It was also suggested that a telephone help desk would be useful for customers as they could then access the right department for their query. The increase in Council taxation above the rate of inflation was thought to be a weakness as the quality of service had not obviously improved.

***Comments included:***

"They should tape and monitor calls, this would give you confidence in your call being handled well"

"You don't just want a receptionist who passes you on, you want a proper professional help desk"

"It might be an idea to have a mystery shopper going into different departments"

"It's nice to see the library open on a Sunday afternoon"

Do you have any suggestions for improving the customer contact process?

It was suggested that this process would be improved if Heads of Departments spent time in front line positions to see what the customer experiences. Again the idea of a Help Desk was suggested as a way of improving service, it was suggested it should be open 24 hours a day as out of hours queries were seen as a problem. It was also felt to be very important that the public should be consulted about things such as, new roundabouts, speed humps and the traffic system.

***Comments included:***

"They should have a job swap scheme with the managers, so that the heads get to see what happens so they can improve it"

"They used to have regional housing offices however these were moved back into the main office I thought they were great"

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

Both groups felt that they had little experience of the issues relating to this question. However it was commented that the shop mobility scheme was excellent.

What do customers think of the physical environment of the Civic Centre (reception desk etc.)?

The groups thought the Civic centre to be a blot on the landscape of Carlisle, they felt the atmosphere inside to be terrible describing it as cold, unwelcoming, intimidating and not customer friendly. A lack of signage was seen as a problem. Some thought that local area offices were a better way for the public to contact the council.

Do you feel there is a growing demand for alternative ways to access the council?

One group felt that the council should reflect the fact that the rest of the world operates seven days a week and someone should be available 24 hours a day for emergencies. Another group recognising the need for the public to be able to contact the council via e-mail, thought that face to face contact was still very important.

***Comments included***

"On a letter I received from the council there was no web site address to contact them on"

Is the Councils customer contact approach better or worse than the private sector, for example banks and building societies?

Both groups felt that the private sector provided a more professional service to it's customers than the council. The difference was seen to be that banks etc. were genuinely interested in solving your problem and treating you as a valued customer. It was commented that tourists are treated more favourably than the local

public in this area. More generally it was felt that in most large companies now you have to speak to someone elsewhere in the country and they disliked doing this.

***Comments included:***

"I don't think I can think of a business, which is still in business that has the negative image that the council does"

"They are over the top for the tourist, but there isn't much for the people who live here"

Do customers know how to make a complaint at the Council?

Both groups felt that the public would not be aware of how they could complain. Again a help desk was suggested as a way of being directed to the right department.

***Comments included:***

"It isn't publicised too well as they don't want you to do it"

"I think a help desk would help those who wanted to complain"

The group had made no mention of a One Stop Shop reception area by the end of the discussion group, so the moderator asked what they thought of the idea?

Both groups said that it would be a good idea, it was suggested that it should be sited in the entrance to the Civic Centre. It was also commented that it should be staffed by senior employees.

***Comments included:***

"It could be moved around the different areas"

"It should be where the flowers are now"

Carlisle City Council

## Customer Contact Best Value Review-April 2002

### Citizens Panel- Group1

The focus group was held on Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> April 2002 in The Slupsk Room, Civic Centre, Carlisle.

***Personal***

The group was made up of 8 people (5 males and 3 females). The majority of the group live in Carlisle, with two living in nearby villages. Their occupations included a shop owner, a retired research chemist and two engineers.



What is important when dealing with customers?

The group felt that speed of service, polite and friendly staff and proper feedback to the customer were most important. It was agreed that the customer was not always put first when dealing with the Council and that the staff didn't seem to have the drive to give good customer service. It was suggested that the Council offices should be open at more convenient times for the public, like one evening per week and also on a Saturday morning.

The members of the group also agreed that the Council should be proactive in finding out what services could be improved, rather than just acting upon the complaints that come to them. It was also mentioned that they could provide the public with more, clear information about what they do and how money is spent.

**Comments:**

"Be polite to them. I phoned the Energy Efficiency Department of the Council recently. I left my number and am still waiting to hear back."

"I think that local government don't have a customer approach at all. It takes a threat that they will lose their jobs to make them realise. They don't see the people of Carlisle as their customers."

"They are complacent. My daughter, who works at the Council, is always saying that the Heads of Department don't listen and won't listen and won't improve."

"When I worked at the Council, I was in a group who were trying to bring about changes at the Council and you ended up feeling isolated yourself. All that you were trying to do was to have a team."

"They don't seem to have the drive."

"They don't think of people as customers. They seem to resent the fact that they have to help them."

"The customer is the reason that I am in business. Without them I wouldn't have a business. I have to be 120% sure that I give service to the customer. In the Council there isn't the incentive for people to give service as they still get a wage at the end of the week. Drive is the most important thing."

"A good incentive scheme or bonus is needed."

"You are being paid to do it already. Why should you get paid extra to do you job properly."

"I think perhaps opening on Saturday mornings or one evening a week would help."

"You need adverts- "Please come to this department"- then everybody would know what they did."

"Customer service must come from the top."

"It depends on the individual departments and department heads. I've been to the Council a couple of times recently and they have been absolutely excellent, coming back to me every time. Maybe one thing that we do not know is how much work these people have got, to comply with regulations. Certainly the people that I dealt with for an exhibition a couple of weeks ago were stretched with the things that they had to do. On the other hand, we are the ratepayers and some of the things that they are doing, we know are wrong. It's inconsistencies as far as I am concerned."

"You have to have feedback, pretty prompt service and no delays. It took me 7 days to get a street light fixed. I think that that is a long time, there should be no reason why that couldn't be done the next day or weekday. Perhaps I'm underestimating the work that they have to do. There should be some way of back-checking that the work gets done or if you have a query, that you get a reply."

"You must get a speedy and polite response. That is what everyone wants- time is of the essence for everyone these days. We are the people who provide the wages. I know that staff are stretched, but this is the same in every industry. We cut staff to make profits, but customers are the most important people in the business. The chap who comes in with a query doesn't know that you are busy and wants a reply straight away."

"They should use the method of communication that the customer wants, whether it is e-mail, telephone or letter."

"They were very polite when they took my name and telephone number, but then I didn't get a reply. Then you call back again and get the same thing again. When you call back a second time you feel really angry."

"You go to them and they say that it is not their fault and that they are under pressure. I've heard that a lot."

"I do think that people don't bother to complain to the Council about things that they feel strongly about. I think that if they don't get complaints then they think that they are doing alright."

"It would be quite easy to send someone into a crowded street and ask their opinions. I can't see why that doesn't happen more often, not even in the town centre, but out in the districts."

"If people don't complain, then I think that the Council think everything is OK. It is the British culture to complain to the person next door, rather than the Council. They can only put right what they know is wrong."

"From my profession, I think that you have to go out and ask people, rather than expecting them to come to you."

"They are the worst paid and least trained, and they are the front line staff."

"I would like to know how they justify an increase in Council Tax of three times the rate of inflation and not perform to a high standard. My pension doesn't go up by 8.2%, so why should the Council Tax do that? I wouldn't mind finding the extra money, if they were providing an excellent service. There should be some justification, when they have a large increase, of where the money is being spent."

"You can't understand the information that the Council puts out, it means nothing to an ordinary person."

"They should be more positive about what they spend the money on."

"And more open too."

"In rural areas there are no street lights and the pavements are terrible and yet you pay the same Council Tax."

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

The group members came up with a number of points. These included failure to meet promises made to the customer, restricted opening hours, a lack of signs and comfortable benches in the city and that the Council is not proactive enough in its approach to assessing public opinion.

**Comments:**

"When you don't get things done as you want them. Missing things. Things that you have asked for, for years and have not been done."

"The hours are too restricted, perhaps it should be open one evening a week and a Saturday morning. I know it will cost more in wages but we should at least have one evening a week and one Saturday in four, so that people can wander in and out."

"They do it in every other service industry."

"Put a booth in a supermarket or department store so that people could put their comments in. Even in the railway station. They could do it even just once a month. The idea is to get the people on the streets to tell you things that they usually keep quiet about. It's like these photographic booths that they have in the back of supermarkets."

"There are too few signs throughout the city as to where things are e.g. the park etc."

"It's like they don't put proper, comfortable seats with backs on in nature reserves. This discourages old people from going into the reserves as they are not comfortable."

"I've been involved in a number of different things, like City Vision, during the last year. We can see now that the Council is asking our opinions. That is good."

"Because local government are being forced by central government to do it, then they feel under pressure."

"How long has the Citizens Panel been going on? You never get any feedback. I haven't seen anything change."

What are Carlisle City Council's strengths and weaknesses in relation to Customer Contact?

Everybody agreed that the strengths of Carlisle City Council's service are its gardens, which were thought to be very good, and the cemetery, which was said to be "One of the best in the Country."

It was suggested that some public buildings like the library and Tullie House could be open at hours that are more convenient for the public.

The increase in Council Tax, above the rate of inflation, was thought to be a weakness, as the quality of service provided had not obviously improved.

**Comments:**

"Because we have fewer policemen, we now have more CCTV cameras, but they can only work within their budgets. It can't go on year after year increasing Council Tax like they have, it's just not acceptable. They have to administer and spend money better. They have to make cuts if necessary. They must be more cost-efficient."

"Perhaps if they showed more clearly where the money was going, then the public would be more sympathetic."

"I think that there should be a system of penalising them for poor service."

"I'd like to see how much has been paid out in compensation due to accidents caused by poor pavements and bad lighting."

"It might be an idea to have a mystery shopper going into different departments."

"It's nice to see the library is open on a Sunday afternoon."

"Perhaps if they can't afford to have extra hours then maybe they could close on a Wednesday morning instead."

"It used to be open on a Sunday and later in the evenings as well."

"Tullie House is another one that could be open later, perhaps until 6.30pm, or even 7-8.00pm. Even if they had to close one morning per week. I think that they'd get more people in by doing this."

Do you have any suggestions for improving the customer contact process?

It was suggested that the customer contact process would be improved if Heads of Department spent time in front line positions, to see what the customer experiences.

**Comments:**

"They should do a job swap with the managers so that the Heads get to see what happens and how they could improve it."

"Can you complain by e-mail? That way you'd get a lot more feedback."

"But a lot of elderly are afraid of this type of thing."

"They have tried to go out to customers by having the regional Housing Offices. It was great for people as they could do everything and pay their bills there, but the Council moved them back, saying that they weren't working."

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

The group felt that they had little experience of the issues relating to this point.

**Comments:**

"It would be better if everything was on the ground floor, but there isn't enough space."

What do customers think of the physical environment of the Civic Centre (reception desk etc)?

Group members said that they felt that the atmosphere of the Civic Centre was terrible. It was described as being cold, not customer friendly, unwelcoming and intimidating.

**Comments:**

"You don't even see the reception desk."

"The Magistrates Court looks like a public toilet. The Council does one thing itself and tells their customers what they are allowed."

"Trying to get planning permission is terrible and the cost is very high. You go all through the system and you worry that it'll cost you all this money and you'll lose it."

"The Civic Centre is not a welcoming place. It is intimidating."

"The descriptions aren't good. The signs aren't clear."

"If someone wanted to plant a bomb, they could just walk in and do it."

"I walked all around the first floor looking for this room and didn't see anyone."

"There is no one to ask if they can help you."

"There should be more obvious security. It's not just in the Civic Centre, but in the parks as well. The whole Council domain."

Do you feel there is a growing demand for alternative ways to access the Council?

The group believed that the Council should reflect the fact that the rest of the world operates 7 days a week and that someone should be available of emergencies out of hours.

The group also raised concerns about the level of Councillors' expenses at the point, feeling that it wasn't clear how the figures originated.

**Comments:**

"If the Council encouraged people then they could get more feedback."

"Now we live in a world where it is 7 days a week. Shops, banks, chemists all work longer than the 5 days a week, so why not the Council. There should be someone downstairs for emergencies."

"How about all these horrendous expenses for Councillors? How do they justify the amount that they get for their hours? - I've heard that if they stretch their meetings longer than a certain length then they get extras."

"The leader has newsagents shops and he has horrendous expenses on top, without explanation of where it is going to."

"Nobody knows how they get these expenses."

"They stretch these meetings, have 1<sup>st</sup> class travel and go on these wonderful trips. We'd all like to do this."

"I think that they should justify the rises. That is fair comment. I think that they need a lay person to explain it."

Is the Council's customer contact approach better or worse than the private sector, for

example banks and building societies?

All of the group felt that private companies offer a superior service to their customers. It was commented that tourists are treated more favourably than the local public in this area, and whilst they do generate revenue for the area, it is the locals who pay the Council Tax. A number of suggestions for improvements for the public are noted below.

**Comments:**

"Banks now operate 24 hours a day which the Council do not."

"I don't think that I can think of a business, which is still in business, that has the negative image that the Council does."

"You never see Council adverts on boards. You only ever see it in the back of the paper."

"They could tell you how much they generate from the fireshow."

"I'd rather see fewer fireworks and a smaller rise than 8.2%"

"I can't understand spending on the fireworks at all."

"You can buy your own fireworks!"

"They are over the top for the tourist, but there isn't much for the people who live here. I think that those who live here get less of a preference than the tourists."

"Tullie House, if they want something new like a flashy bit, they get it straight away, but it will take them years to put a few seats in an open bit of land."

"The refuse collection has improved a lot since it was taken over by a private company. In the past, if you had 2-3 bags then they would shout "I'm not taking all this rubbish" and leave it there. It improved by privatising it."

"I would like to see them do more recycling. There have been some improvements, but we need big strides."

"The Green Boxes are a good idea and the sooner that they spread it out the better."

"Things that are put in the tip could be reused. Even down to things like plant pots."

"Kids should be educated not to throw aluminium cans away as they are very valuable."

"Kids also need to be told not to smash glass bottles on the floor as it is bad for dog walkers. The broken glass can damage their feet."

"Near us it is the glass in the phone box. They should put polycarbonate in it. It doesn't break and it would be in there for 10 years."

Do customers know how to make a complaint at the Council?

The group all believed that the public was not aware of how they could complain to the Council.

**Comments:**

"I think that they find it intimidating."

"I don't think that it is in our nature to complain."

"It isn't publicised too well as they don't want you to do it. Its too time consuming for them."

"The people who complain to you might not be too typical of the population and therefore you need to go out and get the opinions of the others."

"If you are a business in the city, why should you have to pay extra to have your rubbish collected. They were meant to collect our cardboard free of charge. They never came to collect it. I phoned up each week for 2 or 3 weeks but nothing happened so now we have to take it to the tip. They start these things, but there is no follow up."

"We haven't had a calendar to say when paper collections will take place."

The group had made no mention of a One Stop Shop reception area by the end of the discussion group, so the moderator asked what they thought of the idea.

It was agreed that a One-Stop Shop was a good idea, most popularly sited in the entrance to the Civic Centre. It was commented that senior staff should man it.

**Comments:**

"We have said that we need someone in the lobby with a sign saying "I can help", so that they can send you directly to the right department."

"I don't even think that a One-Stop Shop has to be in the Civic Centre, it could move around the different areas."

"It must be manned by senior staff."

"When you come in, you don't see the reception desk."

"You should have it where the flowers are now."

"They haven't got a receptionist. They've got telephonists who are answering call non-stop and the Keepers who I don't think know what they are there for."

Carlisle City Council

## Customer Contact Best Value Review-April 2002

### Citizens Panel- Group2

The focus group was held on Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> April 2002 in The Slupsk Room, Civic Centre, Carlisle.

## ***Personal***

The group was made up of 10 people (6 males and 4 females). Seven members of the group lived in Carlisle, with the other three coming from Brampton, Dalston and Kirklington. Their occupations included a service manager at BNFL, a farmer, a farm adviser on agricultural products, a self employed forklift truck instructor, a business advisor for Business Link, an employee of Defra, two retired civil servants and two other retired people.

What is important when dealing with customers?

The group felt that politeness, reasonableness and being interested in the customer are very important. Speed of service and doing what is promised were also highlighted as being fundamental.

## ***Comments:***

"You can't beat the face-to-face approach. If you can achieve it you are a lot better off than over the phone. If you call and ask to speak to the person in charge and are told that they are not in, then that is the last you hear of it. If you are in the office, then you can say that you'll wait until someone comes in."

"I think that you've got to make the customer feel that you are really interested in their problem."

"You should be polite, whatever they look like."

"The speed that they get something done; I think when contacting the local authority, the delay in getting something done is rather excessive."

"Actually doing what they say they'll do. I don't know, but these days people don't seem to do what they say they'll do. If they say that they can't do x, y and z, but they can do a and b, then you would know where you stood."

"I think people promise that they'll do too much."

"Generally, the problem is getting through to the person that you need to speak to. You can spend a lot of time in the telephone answering system pressing 1 and 2 and going around in a loop, never getting to speak to the person that you originally spoke to."

"Not many people are prepared to accept responsibility. People should admit when they don't know something and say that they will find out. That way the customer has far more respect for you, rather than you trying to waffle your way out of it."

"People pass the buck, You get passed from person to person on the phone and have to explain things again."

"People should say when they can't do something. Rather than promising that they can and not doing it, it would be far better to say that they can't and pass you on to someone who can help you further."

"They should send out some note confirming what they say they'll do."

What causes aggravation for the customer?



Everyone agreed that one major cause of aggravation was when people take your telephone number, say that someone will call you back and never do.

What annoys customers most when dealing with the Council?

The group came up with a number of situations that had caused them annoyance. Slow service and bureaucracy caused a number of the problems. The group also felt that some areas of the city were treated differently to others.

**Comments:**

"They are very lax at times."

"A street light was off in our street. I rang after 2 days and a week later it was still off. I contacted a councillor in the end. It eventually got put on and went off again. Every time they promised that they'd do it within a day and it wasn't."

"Why should it cost you money to keep contacting them?"

"I would like to think that planning could be changed. We've had a lot of development in our village with farms becoming empty and being converted into houses. They have been done outside of the regulations. When you ask the planners why this has been allowed to happen they just give you a lot of white wash. They are getting away with murder. They are doing extensions without permission. I think that they should stick to their word and not let them get away with it. The planners know what is going on, but don't do anything about it."

"Red tape has a lot to do with it. There is a cul-de-sac near us, which is used as a parking area for a shop. There is a lot of broken glass in it and I have to carry my dog down it. There was a street cleaner in the next street and I asked if he could clean it up, but he said that he wasn't allowed to cross the line into it and that it was the shop's responsibility. I spoke to the shop, but they said that they had done some and that it was the Council's responsibility."

"On both times that I have contacted the Council in the last 2 years, I have had very prompt service."

"Last year I was looking at putting new windows in an old building and went to the City Council about insulation around them. I sat for 25 minutes reading posters about how you could save money. When a girl came out, she asked if I was working. When I said that I was she said that she couldn't help. She just gave me some leaflets. I thought that someone would come out and assess the situation. They just assumed that I was looking for a grant, rather than wanting advice on energy saving."

"I don't contact the Council often, but when you speak to reception they don't say who they are putting you through to, so you have to find out before you can explain to them what you want. I think that reception should tell you first to whom they are transferring you. They are aggressive. They should research more what you want."

"The service is not consistent all over the city. Some streets get cleaned far more often than others. There isn't consistency and I wouldn't know whom to ask. Reception put you through to a department quickly, but it isn't necessarily the right person."

"I've never yet found out who is responsible for putting in a western by-pass and another crossing over the River Eden. If you ask the City Council, you are told to ask the County Council. Nobody will actually tell you after 25 years of asking."

What are Carlisle City Council's strengths and weaknesses in relation to Customer Contact?

The collection of rubbish was seen to be a strength within the city, however inconsistencies in service were highlighted when one gentleman said that the Council would not take garden waste and building rubbish away and others said that their bin-men took it away without any problem. Again inconsistencies in the grass-cutting service were brought up as well.

It was suggested that a telephone Help-Desk would be useful for customers, as it would mean that they could easily access the right department for their query.

**Comments:**

"I don't have a lot of contact with them. I have been fairly satisfied with who I have spoken to. I don't have any complaints."

"The bins are the most frequent contact that we have with the Council and they are great. They turn up when they are supposed to and take the rubbish away. It's very reliable."

"The regular bin service is great, but try to give them building waste or garden rubbish and they won't take it."

"We have a lot of grassy area around us and one good service that we get is grass-cutting. They come and cut it, whether it needs it or not."

"There is a communal area near us, where the elderly hang their washing. It isn't cut often and when they do, they do not pick up the clippings, so you see the elderly having to walk through them. I think that they should pick it up."

"There seems to be a need for some kind of help desk, where someone, who is well trained, can direct you to the right department. You need some kind of well-advertised number that you can call and speak to a professionally trained person who can put you through to the right department. They could log it and keep statistics on software."

"They should tape and monitor calls. That sometimes makes you feel good as you think that it will be handled pretty well. It makes you feel confident."

"In the Civic Newspaper they could produce information on statistics as to how many people have called about different things like grass-cutting for example."

"You don't just want a receptionist who passes you on, you want a proper professional help-desk."

"I don't know whether people are aware that on most estates in Carlisle there are tenants' and residents' meetings where the Council come and you can go and speak to them about anything. It's not just for Council tenants. Usually you get the local Councillors at these meetings."

Do you have any suggestions for improving the customer contact process?

Again, the idea of a Help-Desk was suggested as a way of improving service. As out of hours queries were seen to be a problem, it was suggested that the desk should be open 24 hours a day.

The group also felt that it was very important that the public should be consulted about things like new roundabouts, speed-humps and the traffic system.

**Comments:**

"The Help-desk should be separate from the usual reception. They would need to have people with a detailed knowledge of what the Council does."

"Ideally it would be 24 hours a day."

"I rang the Council with an environment problem relating to noise and they said that there was no one there to help. The man that I spoke to said he was going home. It was only 4.45pm. He came around on his way home, but it is no good if you have a problem at night and they are closed from 5pm. The Police said that they wouldn't get involved in a noise problem."

"The bus lanes on Botchergate cause a great problem to drivers."

"Roundabouts seem to be popping up all over the place and no one seems to be taking any notice of them."

"Were the public asked about the bus lane in Botchergate?"

"And speed humps. We have got over 12 speed-humps to get to our house down a cul-de-sac."

"And there are none near St Monica's school where a lot of people speed and there are children trying to cross."

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

The group felt that they were not sufficiently familiar with the problems of access to comment. It was commented however that the Shopmobility scheme is excellent.

What do customers think of the physical environment of the Civic Centre (reception desk etc)?

Many of the group thought that the Civic Centre and Magistrates' Court were a blot on the landscape of Carlisle. Internally, a lack of signage was highlighted as a problem. A number of the group thought that local area offices were a better way for the public to contact the Council.

**Comments:**

"I drive past it everyday and I still think "What is that hideous building?"

"On the few occasions that I've been inside it, it strikes you as a time warp. It is really dated. It needs updating."

"Wasn't the architect who did the Civic Centre, the same one who did the glass pyramids."

"The Magistrates' Court doesn't fit in. It looks like the public baths or a toilet. I don't know what possessed them to do it."

"We came in tonight and if there hadn't been a chap there to tell us where to go we would have been wandering around, so obviously the signage is no good."

"The tenants' group in Botcherby has got its own house where you can go and contact the Council, but not every area has them."

"I think that local offices would be much better, particularly for the elderly."

Do you feel there is a growing demand for alternative ways to access the Council?

Although the group recognised the need for the public to be able to contact the Council via e-mail and web-sites, face-to-face contact was still thought to be very important.

**Comments:**

"There is a need for alternative types of access to the Council, but they aren't suitable for everyone. Face-to-face communication in a satellite office would be better for some."

"Maybe you could have some I.T. set up in each area office for people to use."

"On a letter that I received from the City Council there is no web-site address for you to contact them on."

Is the Council's customer contact approach better or worse than the private sector, for example banks and building societies?

Virtually the entire group felt that private companies gave a far more professional service. The difference was seen to be that banks etc were genuinely interested in solving your problem and treated you as a valued customer.

More generally, the group disliked the fact that when you contact most large companies these days, you have to speak to someone elsewhere in the country.

**Comments:**

"Generally, in banks you get a far more professional service, the type that you are looking for. You always get someone who will take a lot of interest in what your particular problem is."

"They have to look after their customers to keep them."

"You are a valued person to them."

"If you have a query with a bank it gets sorted out immediately."

"9/10 calls to a private company are monitored."

"When you call the Civic Centre you get straight through to someone, whereas if you call a bank you spend ages keying in your date of birth and account number. When you eventually get through, you have to do it all again. I'd rather get a person, but they could be better trained."

"I wrote to the bank with a problem. I got a call from the manager asking me to call in so that we could discuss it further. I was quite impressed. You wouldn't get the Chief Executive of the Council doing that."

"B.T. have lost the plot recently. I needed a new business line putting in. We were told that someone would come one day at a particular time and they didn't. They had to pay out a lot for loss of earnings due to the time that I had given up."

"Now you can't phone the local bus or train stations with a query, you have to speak to someone down south or in Newcastle."

"I had my car stolen. I rang the Police Station, but no one answered for 10 minutes. I ended up ringing 999, which clogs up the system, simply to get someone to answer."

"I suppose that one advantage is that the Council is here, rather than having to contact a call centre somewhere else. It is local at least."

"The Civic Centre is out of the way in terms of public transport."

Do customers know how to make a complaint at the Council?

The group felt that the majority of the public would not know whom specifically to contact and that a Help-Desk might help in directing them to the right department.

**Comments:**

"I suspect that they would just send it to the Civic Centre, rather than a specific department."

"I would look in the telephone book to see who I need to speak to."

"I looked at the web-site before I came here and there was a good list of who did what within the Council."

"Is there any out of hours contact available?"

"I think a help-desk would help those who want to complain."

The group had made no mention of a One Stop Shop reception area by the end of the discussion group, so the moderator asked what they thought of the idea.

Everyone agreed that it would be a very good idea.

**Comments:**

"It would be one person talking to you."

"You would need a telephone Help-Desk as well."

"Do they have duty officers to help with problems? They could do it on a rota basis, with a bleeper."

"I think that councillors should advertise a contact number more widely as they can get through, when you can't."

"The Tenant Participation Groups are not advertised widely enough."

### Feedback to the Focus Group Members

The group asked whether they would be receiving any feedback from the discussion group. The moderator explained how their comments would be used in the policy planning process.

#### ***Comments:***

"It goes back to communication. You'd think that someone would send us a letter/ copy of the report."

"We've given up 1.5 hours. It would be courtesy to do it."

"It goes back to good customer relations. I've been to meetings for the Council in the past and we never heard anything back."

"Will we get a letter to say that we won't be sent a copy of the report?"

"As a member of the Citizens' panel, I got questionnaires, filled them in and then got feedback about the previous surveys."

### Appendix B

#### Draft Customer Contact Policy – Staff Comments

##### Comment 1

Nothing amazing to add it looks quite solid to me the only comments I have relate to:

Receptionists ID badges - there has been a deal of reluctance in the past for people dealing with the public to wear name badges for fear of reprisals,

Opening hours- presently all sections have different opening hours. The Telephonists and the Town Clerks are open longest and they operate from 8.45 - 5.30. Most other sections open 9 - 5 or less than that.

If the model is only to be applied when a new customer centre is created then these issues can be addressed in establishing the centre but if they are to be applied before then they could raise issues about staffing levels etc

voicemail - protocol, messages updated and current, diversion to admin or alternative phone line

-----Original Message-----

From: Karen Hook

Sent: 10 May 2002 15:20

To: Management Briefing Attendance

Subject: Customer Contact - your views

The customer contact best value review team would appreciate your views on the attached.....

<< File: policy consult memo.doc >> << File: policy.doc >>

## Comment 2

Thank you for your memo of 10 May on this subject. I have passed it around the section and any comments I have received have been incorporated into this response or they have contacted you directly.

My/our comments are as follows:

Hours Reception Desk open - 8.30 - 5.30 is an extension of existing hours - do you mean this to apply to each individual reception desk or is this for when we have a 'one stop' shop? If it is to apply to individual desks - this is an extension to the hours currently covered. Are the hours expected to apply to Fridays - currently an accepted early finish. If adopted before a 'one stop' reception set up (when hours/rotas can be established) will at best require renegotiation of working hours and, at worst, an additional cost.

Name badges - in principal, no problem provided that those selected do not damage clothing. However, in some cases, there is a safety concern as it is possible for our 'less desirable' customers to threaten staff - possibly more of a mental stress problem than actual, but nevertheless important. Parking Wardens do not wear name badges for this reason (they have numbers for identification).

## Comment 3

Karen

I'm not sure when would be cut off for feedback re the draft, but here are some comments from in here - ignore if its too late...

Do we need to specify what happens out of hours?

Re phone contact - Is eight rings too long to wait to be answered (if you're on the ringing side it is q a while) - how about five rings?

Should there be a maximum number of times a caller is transferred?

Re Writing and e mails - can there be a system of all letters/ e mails automatically getting an acknoweldgement by return of post, ie standard postcards saying we acknowledge receipt of enquiry and will be contacting them within 10 working days or something?

Only other comment was do we need some kind of short customer charter - ie what they expect from us (which is the aims and our staff will... bit in the policy) and in return what we expect from them (eg non aggressive behaviour etc) - just bearing in mind customers should behave themselves too...!

ust some thoughts

## Comment 4

Karen,

Excellent policy - one issue should the aims be worded as inclusively as the rest of the Policy?

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Sent: Friday, May 10, 2002 3:20 PM  
To: Management Briefing Attendance  
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## Comment 5

Karen

Comments of my section as follows.

### 1. Name Badges

We have discussed this at TIR meetings and general consensus that staff do not wish to wear badges as this may place them at personal risk. It is not unknown for staff identified in this way to be stalked by predators.

### 2. Opening Hours.

The opening hours for the Housing Department are 9.00 to 17.00 Monday to Thursday and to 16.30 on Friday. General view is that an extension is unnecessary. Would the Authority pay Contractual overtime for the additional 5.5 hours or would staff be expected to be more flexible.

### 3. Home Visits

The need to issue a reference no has been queried. Housing already use reference numbers for housing applications etc and the use of additional references may be confusing.

### 4. Abusive Customers

The Charter makes no reference to Abusive Customers. There should be a section stating that staff are not expected to be subject to verbal abuse, threats or unreasonable behaviour from customers. It should go on to explain that customers who behave in this way may have services withdrawn eg home visits and that their names may be added to a risk management database to alert staff to the potential risk. Finally the Charter should state that the Council will where necessary take legal action to protect its staff and members.

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## Comment 6

Karen, My observations.

Our staff will..... suggest add "expect to be treated with respect in return" This is contained in the Council's Constitution.

Could be problem for some staff giving name. Parking Wardens used to have name badge. After threats of violence and "I know where you live" they reverted to having an officer number similar to the police.

Currently some receptions would have a problem opening from 8.30 to 5.30. May be OK if "one stop shop".

## Comment 7

Comments as follows:

1. Staff in the section were unhappy that they were not included in providing feedback as they have most of the customer contact! In view of this I have incorporated their feedback also.



2. Staff should always give their name when answering a call.

3. Not at all happy with reception times. Presumable "back office" staff would also have to be available from 8.30 to 5.30pm to deal with queries? Although this wouldn't usually be a problem in my section, it most certainly would be in other sections! flexi time for some staff would also be severely restricted I would imagine.

4. I like the "reply within 5 days" scenario even if only to acknowledge receipt of a letter. I am currently experiencing extreme difficulties with Capita dbs highways on Parish Council highways matters regarding them not replying to letters sent in February and April! I keep telling them that all I want is an acknowledgement that someone has got my letter, completing the work is secondary.

Hope this feedback helps

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## Comment 8

Karen

I can fully appreciate all the comments made in the document, but will there be anything relating to the 'rights' of our staff eg that they also have a right to be spoken to in a courteous manner and are not there for people to take out their aggression/frustration on.

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## Comment 9

whether we need to make a statement around reimbursement/compensation for people who have been put out of pocket as a result of the council (services) being negligent. on second thoughts it sounds like Pandora's box but its up to you.

Hi

Thanks for commenting. I'll put these in the pot to analyse with the rest, but can I confirm your what your thoughts are on the compensation issue.

Karen

just a couple of comments.

1 cancellation or suspension of services. we should make a statement re why and when to resume.

2 closure of services. as above

3 should we say anything re " compensation "

4 are the public able to complain via e-mail/net.

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## Comment 10

Thanks Karen

Gill Wadeson and myself have a Front of House meeting on the morning of the 27th May and will put this on the agenda and forward their comments to you hopefully later that day.

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Sent: 10 May 2002 15:20  
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## Comment 11

just a couple of comments.

1 cancellation or suspension of services. we should make a statement re why and when to resume.

2 closure of services. as above

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4 are the public able to complain via e-mail/net.

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## Comment 12

Good Morning, I think the policy and targets are OK and should all be achievable. Does the operation of the Policy though not hinge on the development of a one stop shop? All the various reception points currently available to the public in this building have different, and often unadvertised, hours of operation. To staff all of them between 08.30 and 17.30 would be impracticable as many of them do not have dedicated, or trained, receptionists, relying instead on rota's for other staff. Even where there are dedicated reception points, i.e. 7th floor, opening times are less than is proposed.

I fully support the early introduction of a one stop shop, preferably on the ground floor, access for the disabled, security etc., and think the policy would work well for a professional, dedicated service. It would be opening the Council to justified criticism if we adopted the policy now and tried to apply it to the existing inadequate reception facilities.

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## Comment 13

Karen "Good Practice" in meeting CPA requirements is that Councils receptions should be open a minimum of 36 hours per week to meet the standard. It would give the Council far more flexibility in meeting customers needs if we used this benchmark(or set higher standards say 40 hours per week subject to funding being available). For example Customers are likely to prefer Saturday morning opening rather than an extra hour a day in the week.

Also the policy does not indicate how long a customer who hasn't made an appointment should wait to be seen. The CPA standard is that customers without appointment should wait no longer than 15 minutes to be seen( the standard suggests that 80% of customers are seen within 15 minutes but Council's are given up to 5 years to meet this standard). In April the Revenues one stop reception only saw 66% of its customers within 15 minutes so this would be a very challenging customer care policy performance standard.

## Comment 14

Karen - only one point.

The policy state's that the facility will be open to the public from 8.30am to 5.30pm.

This would have significant implications for "cashiers" (if they are included) because they need 30 minutes pre opening and post closing to deal with set up and close down procedures and the collection and return of monies from the overnight vault.

You may recall that I recently shortened the cashier hours to tie them back to the same opening times as the rest of the offices.

Also , you do not appear to make any concession to Friday where staff tend to finish 1 hour earlier.

I appreciate that a more customer friendly service might attempt to give longer access - but it will have to be paid for.

-----Original Message-----

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**Sent:** 10 May 2002 15:20  
**To:** Management Briefing Attendance  
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### Comment 15

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### Comment 16

I have added some comments within the enclosed policy doc.

- If you ask to speak to a specific individual, you will be put through to them. *My name goes on the bottom of all correspondence going out of the Benefit Section and, despite having other contact numbers, claimants often think I am personally handling their claim. It would not be practical or possible to put everyone through who asks for me by name so this situation will have to be catered for.*
- 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. *This is already a problem for my Verification Visiting Officers who receive all manner of queries when they visit a claimant in their home. They would have no control over or working time to devote to being responsible for these enquiries which they normally bring back to the Civic Centre. Further, a written policy on this would encourage even more enquiries yet these visitors are under pressure to complete a large number of visits each day and are rarely in the office much.*

- We will first try to resolve your complaint informally at the reception facility. The receptionist will contact the appropriate department for you. *Many of the benefit queries are complex and need someone to look at the file and adjudicate on the action required. Whilst I accept the policy states 'try' it may well, frequently, only be capable of being resolved by written communication.*

*Is it worth including something on multi-lingual posters/leaflets and general policy re posters/leaflets/info sheets available to the public? Also facilities for deaf/hard of hearing etc.*

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### Comment 17

Karen,

I would like to raise these points:

- While I understand the references to providing customers with names and wearing identification, unfortunately in today's society this can be used by aggrieved customers to target individuals.
- The "out of office" messages for voice mail could also be used to identify if people are possibly on holiday.
- The charter covers what the customer should expect from ourselves but does not cover what we should expect from them, i.e. respectful, no threat of violence and provide the correct information.

Michael Scott

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<< File: policy consult memo.doc >> << File: policy.doc >>

### Comment 18

-----Original Message-----

From: Karen Hook  
Sent: 10 May 2002 15:20  
To: Management Briefing Attendance  
Subject: Customer Contact - your views

Karen, ref Our Staff will----Give their name and wear identification!!! This may not not be appropriate depending upon the nature of the visit, the work or job being carried out.ie Car Parking Patrol, Enforcement Officers,Benefit Personel .Just a

sample.?

### Comment 19

The customer contact best value review team would appreciate your views on the attached.....

<< File: policy.doc >>

if the reception is open at 8.30, then offices need to be manned for enquiries that front office can't deal with. Also think interview rooms are excellent idea, but there needs to be some form of escape for officer if things turn nasty.

My responses, suggestions etc are in *itallics*

Attached is my teams procedure re requests for assistance so you can see the timescales we work to

Hope this is useful

## CARLISLE CITY COUNCIL

## CUSTOMER CONTACT POLICY

We Aim To:

- Put customers first.
- Develop equality of opportunity (*what does this mean?*) and access to services.
- Encourage the involvement of the community (*in what?*) 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. *Being well informed and trained doesn't mean you are competent!*

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. *And tell you who that person is &*

## *contact details*

When you come to the desk:

- Our reception desks will be easy to access for everyone wherever possible *accessible to all?*
- 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 8.30 am to 5.30 pm. *!!!?*
- The staff will be trained in customer care practices and will have received disability awareness training. *Competent?*
- They will be well-informed and helpful. *If they are competent this should follow*
- All customers will be treated equally *what does this mean? People need to be treated appropriately with regard to age, sex etc*, 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. *A private interview room will be available*
- If you have an appointment, we will give you an explanation and a revised likely time if there is more than a 10 minute delay.

When you telephone us:

- We aim to answer your call within eight rings.
- If the person answering your call cannot deal with your query, they will put you through to someone who can. *And tell you who that person is/from*
- If you ask to speak to a specific individual, you will be put through to them.
- 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 10 working days. *What is a reponse? Will it be by e-mail or letter or phone?*
- If there is a reason why we cannot respond within 10 days, we will acknowledge your enquiry within 5 working days of receipt, explaining the delay, and aim to reply in full within 20 working days of receipt.
- Our reply will identify the employee who is dealing with your enquiry (or give you an enquiry reference number). *and give contact details*
- 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 *(on every occasion? My staff do not do this)* 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. *And contact details*

- Our staff will aim to deal with the query you raised at home within 10 working days. If this cannot be done, they will tell you why, either by letter *or e-mail?* or telephone call, within 5 working days.

If you have any complaints:

- You should complain if:- *you think that*
- 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:

ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES – FOOD SAFETY TEAM

***Procedure for responding to complaints and requests for service received by food safety team***



This guidance outlines the procedure to be adopted by staff of the Food Safety Team for the receipt, recording, allocation, actioning and concluding of complaints and requests for service made to the Food Safety Team.

## 1. General

1. The Environmental Services Business Plan sets a target that the Food Safety Team will endeavour to respond to 90% of urgent complaints within 2 working days and to all others within 5 working days.
  - a. The time between the date of receipt and date of response will be monitored and reported annually.
  - b. The targets are for all complaints received by Food Safety Team. If the processing of a complaint is delayed, the time left for a response may be less than the target.
  - c. "Urgent" complaints are those requiring a quicker response in order to safeguard public health e.g. infestations in food premises, matters which may lead to food borne illness.
1. The PEHO (Food Safety) will audit the Teams performance at least once every quarter.

## 1. Definitions

### 1. "Complaint"

A "Complaint " is any request/report made to the Food Safety Team for assistance or a service. This includes requests/reports from or on behalf of a member of the public, trader, the media, other local/government authorities and elected members.

### 2.2 "Response"

The word "response" has been defined by the Audit Commission:-

"Response" – is not an acknowledgement and should comprise:

- a telephone call or visit to the person complaining or requesting a service by a member of staff authorised by the Authority to take relevant action, or a meeting between the 2.

Or

- o a letter, fax, card or e-mail that details
  - o the action to be taken (if known) and
  - o the timing of the next step if appropriate, and
  - o the name of the person dealing with the matter

or

- o Sending information or providing the service requested.

## 3.0 Initial Receipt of Complaints

3.1 Any member of staff receiving a complaint should take one of the following actions

a) Enter the details onto a green complaint form (copy attached) and into the complaint register and then pass it to the appropriate officer.

Or

b) Pass the details to the appropriate officer who will then record them as in a) above.

NB If in the appropriate officers opinion, the matter is "urgent" as in 1.1.c a "u" should be added to complaint type code.

Or

c) If the complaint is made by telephone and requires only an answer/advice being given at the same time over the telephone, the matter shall be recorded on the general enquiry log (copy attached). At the end of each month a copy of this log shall be handed to the Technical Clerk who will record the details on a

2. All complaints shall be entered into the complaints register the same day or the following working day. If entered the following working day the actual date of receipt must be recorded.
3. Any documents associated with the complaint shall be forwarded straight away to the person who is to respond/action the matter.

#### 4.0 Allocation of complaints

1. On entering details into the complaints register, it is the responsibility of that member of staff to pass the matter to the most appropriate officer.

#### 5. Responding to complaints

1. Response times must be indicated in the complaints register by the appropriate officer.
2. In responding to a complaint, the officer must ensure that the complainant is told:-

a) What action can be taken if the complaint is warranted

and

b) Wherever possible, when the conclusions will be known

and

c) Whenever possible, the date by which the matter will be resolved.

5.3 Where the officer to whom the complaint is allocated is unable to respond within the appropriate time, it is the responsibility of the PEHO (or APEHO in their absence) to ensure a response is made, e.g. by explaining that the (named) officer will deal with the matter on their return or by assigning the matter to another officer.

5.4 Officers must ensure that complainants are kept regularly updated of progress of any enquiry/complaint and eventual outcome. This should occur at least monthly or as agreed with the complainant.

#### 6. Conclusion of complaints

1. All complaints should only be concluded when the officer is of the opinion that the matter is resolved or that no further action can reasonably be taken. Complaints must be concluded with

the knowledge of the complainant (unless anonymous) and he/she must be advised of the outcome in writing unless the complainant is happy for verbal feedback. The complaints register must be updated accordingly.

2. All associated documentation shall be filed in the appropriate file to allow easy retrieval and shall be maintained for 6 years.
3. At the conclusion of a complaint, the green form shall be passed to the PEHO for signing off.
7. Anonymous complaints
  1. Officers should use their professional judgement to determine whether any action is necessary. In all cases, details of the complaint should be entered using the above procedure although it is clearly not possible to communicate or record a response.
8. Record Keeping

8.1 Written and other records should be kept for 6 years.

## 9.0 Complaints about service

9.1 Carlisle City Council has a policy and procedure available for those who are dissatisfied with the service provided by the Council.

9.2 Such complaints are received and recorded centrally by the Councils Corporate Planning & Information Unit.

3. The Environmental Services Section makes details of the procedure available at its 7<sup>th</sup> floor reception in the Civic Centre and by post to anyone requesting a copy. A copy of the procedure is attached to this document.

### **Customer Contact - Model for Carlisle City**

The Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee have approved the overall shape of the new customer contact service within the Authority. This paper outlines in more detail a new model for dealing with customers who contact the Authority for a variety of services, advice and transactions

#### **Recommendations:-**

1. That a separate unit be established to manage and operate all initial contacts with the general public
2. That a central physical contact centre be established by consolidating existing reception centres within the Authority
3. That a central telephone service be developed to deal with all customers service requests
4. That a new access channel be developed to include e-mail and web access.
5. That, whatever the channel utilised by a customer they always receive the same level of service
6. That a corporate wide customer care culture be established
7. That partner access channels should be established
8. That the customer service methodologies, tools and services be able to be accessed by back office staff
9. That the service, although managed and operated by a customer service manager, should be owned by the back office.

#### **The Vision**

It will be possible for any Citizen, within or without the Authority:-

- to make contact using any access method of their choice
- to make contact at any time of their choice
- to have that request satisfied at the first asking or have definite information about when and how might will expect the Council to act.

To achieve this the Council will operate a single point of contact for all services and enquiries, delivered to the same high level of service, managed and operated as a single entity..

It will brand and actively promote the service it delivers as Carlisle xxxxxx. Carlisle xxxxxx will be the primary contact point for requesting services and contacting the Authority.

To deliver this vision the Council will set up a Customer Contact Centre – a central service facility located in xxxxx to provide:-

- a central reception service
- a telephone contact service
- an automated electronic contact service
- a mail handling service
- a multi channel cash receipting facility

The Carlisle xxxxx's role will include:-

- Being tasked not only with the initial customer contact but with delivering those elements of a service which can dealt with immediately
- This would include elements of what is traditionally recognised as the "back office"
- The customer service unit would have the ultimate long term aim of responding to 80% of all customer contact enquiries directly – though it is recognised this depends on the nature of the service being requested

These should not include professional contacts, scheduled appointments or expert queries where the unit would act as a signposting service.

The Council will run a partnership program with the customer contact services of other external organizations to enable them to access a subset of Council services and provide a similar service to their Customers – with the Council enjoying a reciprocal arrangement on behalf of partner's customers.

Eventually all Council services will be accessed through Carlisle xxxxx, replacing all existing reception services as the program is rolled out. The only exceptions to this process will be this process will be Tullie House, the Sands Centre (prior to externalisation) and Tourist Information Centres. Due to their different client base and in recognition of their existing high quality customer service these centres will carry on as before. However, they will be expected to become senior partners in the partnership program providing a range and depth of Council services to the point where they could be described as mini-Council Centres. Similarly, in a move to bring these service cultures together, Customer Contact Centre will be geared up to provide a range of senior partner services.

### Supporting the Vision

Underpinning the customer contact service will be a series of Information, Computer and Telephone (ICT) systems. These will cover the following functional areas where appropriate:-

1. Knowledge database of services and frequent service requests
2. Call tracking and management system (CRM)
3. Voice call handling system
4. Visitor queuing system
5. Middleware to connect to back office systems
6. Automated processing of service requests
7. Scanning and video conferencing technologies

These systems will go much of the way for satisfying the Governments requirement on the Authority of ensuring that all transactions with the public are capable of being delivered electronically by 2005.

### The Benefits

#### ***Making contact with Carlisle and accessing services will be simplified.***

It's not necessary for any customer to understand the structure of the Council to access the service they require.

The customer will always have their request satisfied at the first asking.

They will have their requests dealt with to a consistent standard.

Meaningful management information become available about our client base and the nature and volumes of the services they request. This will help in the planning and directing of the Council resources in the future.

### Back office experts

Whilst most of the business arising from customer contacts will be dealt with by the Customer Support Centre staff there will always be a need for senior and more experienced staff to deal with those queries that are specialised, more difficult or non-routine in nature. These may form a large number at first but the aim is to reduce these to the 20% of service calls. To cater for these non standard enquiries the specialist staff will need to be available to augment the customer service staff. In other customer service centres this is achieved by the permanent secondment of staff on a rotational basis to the unit where transaction volumes are high or a standby rota system where such transactions are lower. The obvious gain here for service managers is that they relieve their skilled staff from customer contact work to concentrate on mainstream back office activities.

### Carlisle xxxxx - Budget

Revenues and capital budget consideration needed here.

The set-up cost should include a project officer required to help during the implementation.

Business plan to follow detailing net cost/saving to the Authority.

### Resourcing Carlisle xxxxx

The theory is that no new function is being undertaken by the creation of the customer service unit and so will not cost the Council any extra. The theory continues that as the same work is being carried out but in another Unit it is merely a matter of reallocating the resources from where the function is currently performed to the new unit. In those cases where there is an identifiable member of staff associated with an existing

customer contact function they will be transferred to Carlisle xxxxx.

However, the best value review team is aware that the people carrying out customer contact duties within Units at the moment are also carrying out other duties which will still need to be performed after the transfer. A process of job analysis will need to be undertaken to establish the split.

There may be an element of requiring existing staff to work part-time in the customer care unit – which would greatly aid skills and knowledge transfer. Part time working is not ideal and eventually as posts become vacant we would need to look to consolidate part posts into customer contact FTE's.

Audit have been asked to conduct a transaction analysis of those budgets associated with customer contact with a view to re-allocating these to the new unit. The servicing of customer contact from within one specialised unit will produce economies of scale that will make up the shortfall.

Each service will have to be approached individually to establish on a how much of their front end service will transfer. Each case will differ but it will greatly aid the resource distribution by adopting logical end points during service assessment.

The Council will be expected to invest a significant capital amount in the creation of the Customer Contact Service.

A proportion of the technology aspect underpinning Carlisle xxxxx will be funded through IEG monies.

New resources have already been found by the Council to support improved customer contact. A significant investment has been made by the Authority in a call handling system and the Council has agreed to create the new post of Web Designer. It's interesting to note that investment in Customer Services need not necessarily be made directly in the Customer care unit. It's a sign of the time that investment made in one part of the Authority is now considered to be made available for use elsewhere.

### Migration towards Carlisle xxxxx

There will be a phased roll out with the main operational services moving over customer contact associated with Commercial & Technical Services, Revenues & Benefits, Environmental Protection Services, quickly. However, the phasing should also apply to the access channels. The order of implementation here would be electronic, face to face, telephone and then mail.

### The relationship between the back office and the Carlisle xxxxx

There will be a normal and natural reluctance at first for service managers to release this element (sometimes known as the commodity enquiries) of their service. This is especially true when coupled with some resource (budget) transfer.

However, Unit managers are urged to look at the bigger picture. One of the prime objectives of the current organisational review is to break up silo working and facilitate cross service working. The traditional concept of vertical delivery of services must be left behind. Service Units should view the customer contact service as being an extension of their existing service. Importantly, the Review Team has reached the conclusion that for this to happen then Carlisle xxxxx must be considered to be acting in a contractor role for customer contact on behalf of the other business units of the Authority.

Attention is drawn to Business Unit managers that for Carlisle xxxxx to be successful, the front office staff will need access to back office information systems. This will obviously need to be done in a controlled manner

but is essential for dealing with routine enquiries. However, the Customer Service Manager is served notice that this access to information systems is bilateral. The Client Business Units will have access to Carlisle xxxxx's customer contact information systems.

### The relationship between Carlisle xxxxx and the corporate aims and objectives

The new corporate plan has set targets for customer service.

These are:-

In general terms the service unit would seek to strive for continuous improvement in terms of quality of service and volumes of transactions handled and the success of the new electronic access channel.

Because customer contact is controlled through a separate unit there is a danger that the organisation as a whole loses sight of the fact that it exists to service the needs of the customer. This might be lead a service unit to detach themselves from customers requirements if they no longer need to undertake customer contact. The review team were particularly impressed by the input from external organisations that customer care should be the responsibility of everyone in an organisation – regardless of where the customer contact id delivered. A customer care culture should be introduced – and including during the induction process for staff.

### Appendix D

Solution	Detail	Members Highlighting
Location Directors	Location of Civic Centre to be included on road signs. A prominent sign signifying the Civic Centre location be commissioned.	2
Toilets	Improvements needed. SLA improved to increase frequency of cleaning and clearer signposting.	2
Corporate standardisation of Customer Care	By adopting this measure we will eliminate the service being delivered at different levels, some good and some bad	1
Display Area	Re-think the area for displaying notices and announcements. New standards to be created and controls put in place	2

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.	1
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.	2
Staff Facilities	Tea/staff room – helps motivate staff – well motivated staff equals a better service	3
Identify customers	Lowther Street entrance to be used for all staff and deliveries/collections. Rickergate entrance for customers only.	1
Meeting and Greeting	All customers to be acknowledged when making contact. Met and greeted at reception points and acknowledged through other access channels.	2
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.	2
One Stop Shop	No multiple reception areas. Staff would also deal with initial voice and electronic contact.	2
Implement a problem management/tracking/reporting system	Commence specifying, prior to the purchase and implementation, a Customer Relationship Management system.	2
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.	1



Customers satisfied at first contact	This is a key measurement to drive and improve customer contact. It should be measured on a daily basis.	1
Customer Service Manager	Appointment of a Customer Service Manager with specific customer contact and customer service information	1
Customer Care Culture	Creation and maintenance of a customer care culture	1