

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

MINUTES OF SCRUTINY PANEL 3 CUSTOMER SERVICES

Thursday, 1 March 2012

COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillor Mike Hallam (Chair), Councillors Tony Ansell, Dennis Meredith and Terry Wire

Witnesses Councillor David J Mackintosh (Leader) Item 5A
Councillor Brandon Eldred (Cabinet Member for Community Engagement) Item 5A

Officers	Lesley Wearing	Director of Housing Item 5B
	Marion Goodman	Head of Customer Services and ICT
	Julie Seddon	Director of Customers and Cultural Services
	Tracy Tiff	Overview and Scrutiny Officer
	Becky Gittins	Administrative Officer (Planning)
	Joanne Birkin	Democratic Services Officer

Members of the Public Mr Burton
Tony Mallard
Sheron Watson

1. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence from the meeting was received from County Councillor Marion Minney.

2. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 2nd February 2012 were approved and signed by the Chairman.

3. DEPUTATIONS/PUBLIC ADDRESSES

There were none.

4. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING)

There were none.

5. WITNESS EVIDENCE - EXPERT WITNESSES

(A) COUNCILLOR DAVID MACKINTOSH, LEADER OF THE COUNCIL, AND COUNCILLOR BRANDON ELDRED CABINET MEMBER FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The Leader of the Council and the Cabinet Member for Community Engagement submitted written responses to the core questions and addressed the Panel.

The key points of discussion were as follows: -

It is important to understand that there is a split between delivering good customer service and delivering an outcome that the customer believes is a good resolution to their problem. It is often that this disappointment can colour a person's perception of their customer service experience.

Work is being done to identify any common problem areas.

Councillor Eldred had recently visited the contact centre and listened into some calls, and asked customers about their experiences. Overall customer satisfaction was very high and all the staff were very professional.

With regard to changing the ways in which people accessed Council services the Leader stated that the most important factor was that people used the method that they were most comfortable with.

There are many complex changes happening at the moment over a wide range of services and it was vital that people were provided with adequate and timely information. More people were requiring Council services and often their needs were complex and urgent.

It is very important that resources are not wasted on concentrating on the wrong targets. From the customer viewpoint it might be that their overall waiting time is not as important as them being able to fully resolve their query in one visit.

The use of floorwalkers has been very effective in directing traffic in the One Stop Shop. They will attempt to identify the most vulnerable and assist them in finding the help they require. Members considered that the floor walkers were not easily identifiable.

Members also considered that it would be preferable if the uniform had a logo on it, easily identifying the wearer as a Northampton Borough Council employee.

The Chair thanked the Leader of the Council and the Cabinet Member for Community Engagement for their responses.

6. DIRECTOR OF FINANCE AND SUPPORT AND HEAD OF CUSTOMER SERVICES NBC

The Panel received some statistics relating to the One Stop Shop: -

- 70% of customers were seen within the standard waiting times, 82% within 15 minutes.
- The One Stop Shop self serve phone system generated 190 calls a day.
- 45% people enter through the self-service area, 55% into the main reception. This can lead to a backlog in the reception area.

The Head of Customer Services gave a short presentation detailing potential improvements on the layout of the One Stop Shop. The options were: -

1. No Change

2. Remove the general reception area, create a drop in desk in the self serve area, use floor walkers to direct incoming visitors and direct them to where they needed to be.
3. Other options could be considered arising from outcomes of the Review.

Flow of people into the One Stop Shop is not normally monitored, but had been manually counted for a month.

Members of the Panel commented that the reception desk area often seemed very busy but the area with the private rooms past the Police desk can often seem under utilised. Members were advised that this area was used by external partners for surgeries and could then be quite busy. However option 2 of the layout for the One Stop Shop would make better use of that area.

Members suggested that signage could be reviewed; in particular there were examples of people looking for the Registrars within the old part of the Guildhall.

Members considered that it would have been helpful to visit the One Stop Shop at different times of the day. This they were free to do as individuals.

7. HEAD OF STRATEGIC HOUSING, HEAD OF LANDLORD SERVICES AND HEAD OF PLANNING

The Panel considered written responses from the Heads of Strategic Housing, Landlord Services and Planning.

The Head of Strategic Housing, Head of Planning and Planning Administrative Officer also addressed the Panel.

The main points of discussion were as follows:-

Housing

- Public perceptions of how they were dealt with within the service area are vital. Irrespective of whether people receive the outcome that they want they should feel that best efforts have been made to help them.
- Managing customer expectations of out of hours services.
- With regard to Housing it was likely that people would have a different customer service if they were a tenant. Tenants are issued with handbooks giving them details of contact numbers and procedures and would be unlikely to be visitors to the One Stop Shop.
- Service requests are divided into Emergency, urgent and routine. Emergency would be dealt with on the same day .

- Out of Hours contact goes through the CORE Care handling service. The Service also handles calls from sheltered housing residents, those calls would take priority, although people could leave a message and they would be phoned back. Out of hours services would only classify a repair request as an emergency if there was a threat to life. An example given regarding tenants who had no water should have been treated as urgent, but would not have been seen as an emergency needing a visit that night.
- It was agreed that the Head of Strategic Housing would provide Panel members with details of the criteria used to assess urgency of need. It was accepted that there might be an issue regarding managing peoples expectations of service. Emergency work is more expensive and therefore it is a better use of resources if as much work as possible takes place on a planned schedule.
- Other housing customers, i.e the homeless, rough sleepers, tenants requesting right to buy will be more likely to access services via the One Stop Shop. Some of these visits can be very challenging for members of staff and disruptive to other customers. The current economic climate has made things more difficult and there are a number of changes to benefits being implemented which will mean that more people will be seeking help. Queries already need to be prioritised.

Planning

- When a member of the public calls the Planning service they will be given a number of options i.e Development Control, duty Planning Officer. Any calls coming into the Contact Centre would be diverted to the Planning system. Numbers of calls and responses times are monitored.
- There is a designated Planning area within the One Stop Shop, this is not manned by Planning staff, but the floor walker should direct people to that area if required and advise them of who they need to see.
- Members complained that they had difficulties in contacting Planning Officers. It was emphasised that Planning Officers spend a lot of time out of the office but that there were duty officers who were available between 8.30am- 5pm.
- Both the Head of Planning and the Head of Strategic Housing stated that they had not been aware of complaints that duty officers were not available when requested. Members need to ensure that complaints made by Members are recorded properly. Many times a Member is acting for one of their constituents who have contacted them in frustration.
- Members of the public are more reassured if they feel they are receiving a friendly and consistent approach.
- Members of the Panel will be visiting Housing and Planning Services and will have an opportunity to meet duty officers.

8. BASELINE DATA

It was agreed to examine further updated baseline data on the One Stop Shop Performance at the Panel's meeting on 21st March 2012.

9. REPORT BACK FROM SITE VISITS

Councillors Meredith and Ansell had visited Rugby Borough Council accompanied by the Scrutiny Officer.

The main points of their visit were as follows: -

- Rugby is a much smaller Authority serving a population of half the size of Northampton.
- Members listened into calls and set with customer service advisors and customers visiting.
- Members felt that Northampton was more efficient..
- The reception space at Rugby was much smaller than that available at Northampton. Members felt that it was unwelcoming and poorly lit.
- There was a TV screen showing news channels in the waiting area, which members felt was useful to help customers to pass the time.
- Members felt that the staff was friendly and professional, but there were fewer numbers than at Northampton.
- Members felt that signage was clear at Rugby.
- They felt that seats in the waiting area were unclean and there was a dated feel.
- There was a feedback podium in the reception, which gathered data electronically. Panel Members felt that this was cost effective.

Members had also visited the Northampton Borough Council's Contact Centre and One Stop Shop.

The main points of their visit were as follows: -

- Members felt that Northampton had made considerable improvements in the One Stop Shop.
- Members felt that the staff were all very friendly and professional. Staff handled difficult calls very well, calming down angry callers and taking charge of the call in order to reach a conclusion. Some of the calls and visits could be very stressful for the staff; staff could discuss these matters and get support from their line managers. The staff had panic buttons and that calls security.
- From their visit Members were advised that the CCTV cameras were not always on. The Customer Services Manger was to follow that up, as they should be on all of the time.
- Members felt that it was important that the floorwalkers were more visible and that the uniforms were regularly replaced to make sure that they were always smart.

- First impressions count and Members were keen that this should be really positive and friendly, smart and efficient.
- Members felt that over the last two years there had been improvements made within customer services and that Northampton was 'leading the way' in this field.
- Members commented that it had been a recommendation of the previous Customer Services Task and Finish Group that staff uniforms contain the Council crest.
- The Panel felt that a potential recommendations for the report could be around:
 - Clothing to make the floor walkers more visible.
 - Funding for uniforms to be investigated, in particular in relation to change of uniforms for staff and the incorporation of the Borough crest
 - Improved, clearer signage in particular in relation to housing and registrars
 - Plasma screen in the One Stop Shop broadcasting News Channels, which makes for a warm and welcoming feel for the customer
 - Bringing more technical departments more into the call centre for "first contact" to enable the channel shift strategy to be fully applied to these calls as well.

The meeting concluded at 8:00 pm