

CUSTOMER EXCELLENCE STRATEGY

2009 - 2012



NORTHAMPTON
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Introduction

Organisations that provide the best customer service have a clear vision of the quality and service they want to achieve and the way in which it will be delivered.

The Council's ambition is "To be one of the best councils in terms of public service by 2013". Providing excellent customer service is the first of the council's five management aims which underpin the delivery of the corporate priorities and outcomes:

- Provide excellent customer service
- Engage in meaningful dialogue
- Make best use of resources
- Be a single effective team
- Work towards a better Northampton

The Council's vision for customer service is to provide residents and customers easy access to services through a multi-service contact centre providing a single point of telephone contact, a multi-service one stop shop and 24 hour transactional internet access.

The council provides a range of options where customers can access services face to face including:

- One Stop Shop, Guildhall, Northampton Town Centre
- Cliftonville House (Planning, Building Control and Environmental Health)
- Leisure Centres
- Museums



Background

In 2006 the Council set up a telephone contact centre for the services in highest demand from customers (Streetscene, Revenues, Benefits and Housing). Other high demand services have set up single contact numbers and are benefiting from call handling technology to improve the customer experience (Environmental Health, Planning).

The Councils website www.northampton.gov.uk was updated in 2006 and customers are able to access online billing for Council Tax, make payments and get information on a wide range of council services.

Over the next 4 years we plan to build upon this progress to transform the way in which customers access our services by creating:

- A single telephone contact centre serving the whole borough;
- A single one stop shop based in the Guildhall in the centre of Northampton Town Centre.
- 24 hour internet access providing a wide range of interactive, self-service and information services;
- A network of local access and outreach for the wider community that addresses the diverse needs of local people and other centres of population.

This range of access channels will give customers flexibility and choice in how they contact the Council.

This document is intended to be used as a framework for Northampton Borough Council to achieve excellence in Customer Service, by delivering quality, local and joined-up, customer-focussed services. Improving access to services requires this clear vision, which can then be converted into reality by the development of a detailed business case and financial model and a full implementation plan including the definition of critical success factors and performance targets.



The Customer Experience

Our surveys tell us that generally, local people are satisfied with the way in which services are delivered, however experience of contacting the Council can differ. There can be lack of consistency in the way that customers are dealt with. Customers can be asked to provide the same information several times to different services, or may be transferred between services before their query or request for service can be resolved.

Research has highlighted the multiple receptions across the borough, the large number of telephone numbers listed in the Council's A-Z of services and on the website and a lack of management/customer information.

Anyone wishing to talk to a Council officer in person has to first of all determine which of the receptions they need to visit and then will probably have to travel to get there. Enquiries about a number of services will require separate visits to different offices.

Customers do not want to visit several different offices, or have their telephone calls passed around if they want to interact with the Council, nor should they be expected to know the complexities of the Council's workings in order to access services.

"If the person I contact can't help they usually give me the number/name of a person who can, but it's hard to know who to contact first"

Changing Relationships with Customers

In today's busy existence, people demand a choice of access methods for services telephone, face-to-face, electronic at a time that is convenient for them.

In many organisations, customer access has to fit around the needs of the organisation, rather than the customer. Traditional organisations made up of separate "functional departments" can hinder the organisation's learning and understanding of its customers and complicate avenues of customer contact when these departments do not work together jointly in the interest of the customer. Team Northampton will have a traditional structure with a radical ethos. We will continue to develop and foster a culture of all working together seamlessly in a customer focussed approach.

We believe that to work towards a better Northampton we need to provide better access to services by working together to remove service, geographical, physical, attitudinal and professional barriers.



Customer Preferences and Demand

When designing services to meet customer needs, we need to understand that customers will wish to use and access services in various ways. A resident with Internet access may prefer to check the progress of their planning application on line, rather than make a journey to Cliftonville House. Someone submitting an application for Housing Benefit might require help from an experienced officer and therefore may prefer access through a telephone or face-to-face environment.

CRM Customer Relationship Management

CRM is an approach to doing business and providing better customer service. Technical solutions are “enablers” of this approach, but CRM is as much about cultural and process change as it is about new technology. CRM aims to improve customer service by encouraging a higher quality of customer interaction and smoother internal organisation. The emphasis is on improving services to the individual customer. Our ICT Strategy supports the ongoing development and expansion of our CRM system.

OUR VISION

The Council's ambition is “To be one of the best councils in terms of public service by 2013” This means making best use of resources, working as a single effective team to make it as easy as possible for all customers to access the services they require and to deliver positive experiences for all customers that contact us, regardless of when or how they make contact. We have recently merged our Customer Service and ICT Services into one joint service to ensure that ICT enables and supports improvements to our Customer Service delivery across the Council.

Underpinning this strategy are some key strategies and documents which support the delivery of excellence in customer service these are:

- Customer Engagement Strategy
- ICT Strategy
- Service Plans
- The People Strategy
- Corporate Equality Plan

The Council has a clear view of the outcomes that it wants for its customers, employees and the Council as a whole:-

Outcomes for Customers

- Greater clarity on how to access services and what to expect when they do request services
- Increased choice and convenience when accessing services
- Service solutions that meet their needs now and in the future
- Services that offer value for money
- Involvement in helping to shape both the design and delivery of services
- Increased opportunity to answer enquiries right the first time
- Greater focus on ensuring that services are accessible for people with additional needs such as those with disabilities or those for whom English is a second language.
- More consistent and accurate provision of basic information and answers to frequently asked questions.
- Increased confidence and trust in the Council and a belief that the Council is working for them.
- Opportunity to extend opening hours to meet demand
- Staff are competent in resolving enquiries regardless of the complexity
More customers are dealt with

Outcomes for Employees

- Increased job satisfaction through the creation of an empowered, enabled and motivated workforce
- Greater understanding of what drives customer satisfaction and how their roles and responsibilities contribute to delivering customer solutions.
- Clear focus on customers as individuals with individual needs
- The right tools, skills and information to enable them to deliver service excellence
- Increased confidence in the Council as a first choice employer
- Pride in the services they provide and the role they perform
- The support of partner organisations
- The opportunity to develop skills in other areas and improve their career progression

Outcomes for the Council

- Confidence that the needs of customers are being addressed and that services of an appropriate quality are being delivered.
- Improved understanding of the diversity of opinions and needs of customers and confidence that no sector of the community feels disadvantaged
- Increased satisfaction that value for money in primary activities is being achieved
- Improved decision making through the contributions of a wider set of customers
- External validation that the council is effective and competent through improved customer satisfaction ratings and other commendations from external bodies.
- Improved ability to manage customer demand effectively
- Enables the collection of comprehensive management information regarding customer contact
- Increased value for money as services become cheaper to provide through the economies of scale available and removal of simple and moderately simple work from more highly paid specialist staff.
- Successful and fruitful working partnerships with a broad range of external organisations.

Face-to-Face Contact

The Council's ambition is to expand the existing One Stop Shop in the Guildhall, right in the heart of Northampton Town Centre.

The multi-service One Stop Shop will deliver a wider range of Council Services and also Partner Services. This will provide an integrated first point of contact where queries will be dealt with by highly trained staff. They will focus on reaching a broad customer base and will provide a full range of transactional, informational, signposting, self-service, assisted self-service and surgery-based services. Residents, visitors and businesses will be able to access the Council, and ultimately other services, easily and irrespective of need.

Telephone Contact

The vision also includes the creation of a single telephone contact centre serving the whole Borough. E-mail enquiries and requests for service will also be dealt with through the telephone contact centre. Currently not all key services are delivered through the contact centre and this will be expanded to include those services. Voice recognition software will be utilised to further improve customer service and generate efficiencies.

In time the telephone service will be expanded to include proactive outgoing calls for example promoting Council services or special events, debt recovery and satisfaction surveys including partner services.

Electronic Access to Services

The range of informational and transactional facilities available through the Council's website, www.northampton.gov.uk needs to be expanded and improved. The Council will continue to develop its website to meet the needs of its customers and will evaluate other technology solutions such as SMS/Text Messaging and social networking in order to maximise the potential of new technology for improving customer access to services. The Council's Website and Electronic Government Strategy underpins this aim and provides further detailed information.



Access to Services Across the Borough

To meet the diverse needs of local communities and individual customers a wider access to services network will be developed in consultation with our customers and stakeholder groups. This will deliver a range of more targeted services, possibly on a part-time outreach basis and utilise existing Council buildings and partner premises.

We will exploit the benefits of new technology, providing outreach access to the Council's Web site and telephone contact centre in libraries, community centres, schools, supermarkets etc.

The Longer Term

The Council is actively seeking to re-engineer customer access to its services, wrapping service provision around customers' needs. To address the wider needs of residents to access a broad range of services easily. In the medium term, the One-Stop-Shop will include contact points for partner organisations and in the longer term this will be expanded to include telephone contact.

The Council will work with its partners to extend the range of services provided from the One Stop Shop and the telephone contact centre. We will work towards a goal of "joined-up services" the provision of public services in an integrated and unified environment.

We will invite organisations such as the Northamptonshire Primary Care Trust, the Northamptonshire Police, the Northamptonshire Fire Service and the Citizens Advice Bureau and other voluntary sector organisations to provide joined up shared service operations thereby facilitating easy access to a broad range of services that reflect the diverse needs of local residents. We will also work with Northamptonshire County Council to further expand the range of County Council Services provided and we will also explore whether the arrangement could be extended to include government departments such as the Department for Works and Pensions, Job Centre Plus and HM Revenue and Customs.



Success Factors

A range of factors will be identified and targets set to judge the success of the Access to Services Strategy. These will include measures that matter to Customers and to the Council, for example:

- Improved customer satisfaction
- Increase in the percentage of enquires that are resolved at the first point of contact
- Increased customer confidence
- Improved staff satisfaction
- Increased staff retention
- Change in the profile of access channel usage
 - The % of letters received reduced
 - The % of face to face contact reduced
 - The % of telephone and electronic contact and self-service increased
- Reduction in cost per transaction
- Services complying with the equality standard for local government and Disability Discrimination Act 1995
- The management of data, content and knowledge is improved and streamlined (e.g. data collected once and used many times)
- Improved customer insight.
- Achievement of the Cabinet office Customer Service Excellence standard in key service areas and work towards accreditation for the whole Council by 2013
- Reduction in avoidable contact (NI 14)
- Improved standards reported through Mystery Shopping exercises
- Improved value for money (NI 179)
- Increased understanding of our customer and non-users needs (Customer Insight)
- Staff accredited with customer service qualifications (NVQs or Institute of Customer Service Accreditation)

The initial targets will be to deal with 80% of enquiries at the first point of contact and to achieve 85% Customer Satisfaction.

We will consult with our customers regularly through customer forums and during outreach and this consultation will inform our ongoing targets for first point resolution and customer satisfaction. We will feedback our performance against targets and advise customers of our on-going progress and planned improvements.

Management Information

Management Information is critical in ensuring that the Council regularly measures its performance against its objectives. To this end the council will:

- Measure and report on performance regularly based on what is important to customers
- Develop and publish a range of comprehensive performance indicators and service standards including Customer Service and Access Standards which will determine the success of the Council in achieving its objectives.
- Benchmark its performance against other organisations both public and private sector to ensure that it is delivering value for money.

Moving the strategy forward

The strategy is to be presented to Cabinet on 18th March 2009.

Once approval has been gained, consultation with all internal services will take place to ensure that the objectives of the strategy are integrated into their service plans.

Specific customer engagement service delivery plans will be developed.

Consultation with customers will take place to agree the Customer Service and Access Standards which will then be monitored and reported on a regular basis.

An action plan will be developed to define how the different elements of this strategy will be taken forward.

Equality Impact Assessment

It is anticipated that this strategy will have a positive impact on members of our diverse communities by the very nature of its aims. An equality impact assessment for our customer services operation was undertaken during 2008 and the findings of the assessment have influenced the development of this strategy. An Equality Impact Assessment will be produced before the strategy is adopted.

