NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

Scrutiny Panel 3 - Customer Services

Core Questions - Director of Finance and Support and Head of Customer Services and ICT

1 Please supply details how you evaluate whether customer services is providing value for money around:

   I. The quality of the Service and Service delivery

   Monthly customer satisfaction is measured through surveying customers on a monthly basis, this survey looks at general measures around quality of service received by the council and assesses customer opinions on elements such as environment and length of wait for service. Satisfaction scores on an average basis is 85%.. This compared to the national average of 75% for public sector services.

   An annual benchmark survey is also conducted as part of national customer services week, this survey asks the customer more in-depth questions in relation to service delivery and allows us to benchmark as part of the national OSS benchmarking group.

   II. Customer Satisfaction across the whole organisation

   As well as surveying our own customer satisfaction on a monthly basis, the customers' opinion generally impinges on the view of the end to end service the council provide, customer services will see most customers at the first point of contact and raise a service request. On occasions the customers will contact customer services to chase requests that have failed to meet their expectations so therefore our survey processes are planned to measure individual satisfaction with the service received by customer services and then also the customers end-to-end experience across the whole organisation on the services provided through customer services. Corporate reputation is an exercise measured through the performance team with current satisfaction at 54%.

   III. Cost and efficiency

   Monthly 'PAFs' are undertaken on each team member. The PAF is our Customer Services Performance Assessment

Framework where each Customer Information Officer is measured for quality and accuracy of Customer interaction, and for adherence to the standards and behaviours expected to ensure that the customer's experience of the Council is effective and high quality.

There is now a much lower rate of referrals to 'back-office'. Due to the high level of on-going cross-training through qualitative training, the hand-off to back offices is much reduced as the Customer Services team deal with many more enquires to a greater degree of depth. This has taken pressure from departmental resources such as Benefits and Council tax and enabled them to reduce their own 'backlogs'. Value for money can also be demonstrated by the capability of Customer Services to support other departments to reduce their workloads prior to projected high demand. A recent example being the Contact Centre supporting Council tax to reduce their back-log prior to annual billing. The value is demonstrated by proactively working together to reduce the number of calls from those customers who have recently advised of change of circumstances, and the Contact Centre staff have updated the Council Tax system to ensure accuracy of information at time of billing publication.

Migration of services to Customer services provides value for money due to optimal use of agents time Services such as Rent Income, and Housing management calls, are migrating to customer services without any additional resource.

IV. Staff satisfaction of the process

A recent internal staff survey indicated that staff were very satisfied that customer services provide good value for money and provide a high quality service.

2 Please explain how you use current technology and social networking to drive services forward?

Current Technologies
Process Improvement - We are starting to use BPM (Business Process Management) software to manage and monitor customer interactions, bringing back office services into line with customer services for responding to interactions with customers in a consistent manner. It will also enable more back office functions to be brought forward to the contact centre so that a greater percentage of contacts can be resolved at the first point of contact.
Automation - We have automation software currently in development that will take ownership of repetitive and time consuming tasks which currently need to be actioned manually. This will allow customer centre operatives to deal with more calls per operative.

Google Maps - We have been using Google Maps as the base for our MyCouncil application which has handled 40,000 customer queries since it's launch, 25,000 of which were self served queries by the public

with would have previously gone to our contact centre. MyCouncil also handles our environmental reporting issues, Find My Bin Round, Find My Polling Station and election results.

Mobile Application - We are currently developing a mobile application with a view to bringing all the council functions available via our website to mobile phones, this will further increase channel shift and reduce calls made to the contact centre.

Cloud Computing - We already have one cloud computing server in operation, in the coming weeks we will be launching more for the public to use. They are more robust and yet also more cost effective than locally hosted solutions. In addition to this cloud computing is scalable, if no-one uses the site, it costs us little or nothing to run, if demand peaks (as in the Find My Bin Round example) we are automatically allocated more resources from the cloud to cope and ensure that service delivery of that information remains consistent.

Gamificiation - We are currently working on methods to encourage customers to deal with environmental issues themselves, where appropriate. Via the mobile application, instead of a 'report a problem' there will also be a "I fixed a problem" whereby customers can notify us that they resolved an issue themselves (litter, leaves, fly-tipping, graffiti, etc). In doing so we can then reward them in non financial ways, by giving them kudos via our social media channels and awards, running competitions to see who has fixed the most problems in a given time period ("Citizen of the Year", for example) and having ward versus ward competitions to see which ward can resolve the most issues themselves (making a game of the popular community clear up campaigns). This will result in further channel shift, fewer calls to the contact centre and greater participation in the "Love Northampton" campaign.

Social Media

TWITTER

We currently have a very advanced use for twitter. We have the basic NorthamptonBC twitter account, which notifies customers of news and events in Northampton. We have also developed localised new notification channels, such as Northampton_All and Northampton_SW. These have been developed to make the workings of the authority more transparent and promote the work the authority is doing around Northampton, they also help to reduce avoidable contacts. These channels currently contain details of environmental problems reported to the authority (reducing the avoidable contact because everyone in the local area is notified that we are working on the problem already) and a date by which we will have the issue resolved. Coming additions to these channels are notifications when calls are closed, the facility to allow customers to rate how we dealt with a call and potentially opening up of the channels to allow councillors and other service providers to post notification messages to the public (road closure, crime, gas leaks, school closures, etc). New channels will also be arriving that focus content down to Ward level, so customers can

choose to be notified of events and issues all around town, or just for their area. Councillors will be able to use these channels to notify their customers directly of the work they are doing for their ward. This function will be via a simple web page we are setting up, that means even councillors with no prior knowledge of social networking will be able to speak directly to their electorate.

FACEBOOK

We are working on replicating the twitter functionality above onto Facebook in the coming months. In addition to this we are currently in the process of setting up Facebook to be treated as just another communication channel (like phones or email) in our contact centre. This will enable customers to interact with the authority via Facebook just as they would by telephone. Our BPM system will continually monitor Facebook for when someone asks the authority a question and then assign an agent to respond to that query on Facebook. In addition to the service improvement for the customer, this gives the authority the opportunity to cross promote our other online services for further channel shift opportunities. It also allows us to reduce avoidable contact, as interactions (where appropriate) will be available for all to see. This will mean common questions will already be answered before someone poses the question to us. As other Facebook users become familiar with our social media presence we expect to find that they themselves take to answering common queries and become 'champions' for the authority. We will also have the facility to post video messages and responses from councillors or agents where appropriate to give a much more human touch to our interactions.

3   How do you encourage customers to access the Internet to make contact with the Council?

Encouragement for web usage - within the site we are making it easy to use. Simple layout, improving the search, simplifying content, using real English terms instead of council based English, and improving links to transactions. This also includes removing email as an option.

External to the site, friendly URLs are used to advertise initiatives. Facebook and twitter are used to both push out communications and respond to customer comments, so awareness of the site increases. By responding we encourage more use of the web as an access channel generally. Cross linking with other websites including direct gov, and the county and local district councils so customers can find the right service provider. Also use of the PCs in the One Stop Shop to do direct channel shift, so showing customers how to use the web. General awareness through our printed literature always listing the website. Also sending pin codes with Council Tax bills to encourage citizen account usage.

4   Please explain the advice and services that you provide to customers who are unable to access the Internet.

Customers can *choose* how they access services and advice. The full range is available on the phones and Face-to-Face, and the web is

being further developed in this respect. Channel shift and the internet is to support choice and value for money in accessing the advice and guidance that the Council and its partners have to offer.

5   In particular, in relation to those customers who have the most need for services, please explain how the services that the organisation offers are advertised.

Now that the newly transformed One Stop Shop has settled-in, and the partnerships firm and established, Customer services are in the process of planning a 'launch' of the facility, our partners, and what customers services can provide with an marketing campaign which will reach far out into the community through forums, community groups, posters etc in doctors / dentists etc etc.

6   Do you feel that the One Stop Shop at the Council makes best use of the space available, and how would you rate comfort and accessibility?

We are still reviewing the refurbished One Stop Shop and will have a presentation available at Overview and Scrutiny on 1st March to demonstrate our findings to date.

6(a) What do you feel are the best features of the One Stop Shop and why?

Friendly, relaxed, clean and calm environment. Spacious, good atmosphere, one point of access. The One Stop Shop has a very modern, professional ambiance and is quite unlike any other 'One Stop Shop' in that it has a unique and very appealing design, style and colour-scheme, and the Council has 'dared to be different' – and to great and well-received effect. There is a strong One Stop Shop 'identity' now, which is further enhanced with stylish, non-authoritarian uniforms, which supports the ambience of professionalism, consistency and approachability.

Customers view the Council's One Stop Shop as a place to go to get help, particularly when they find themselves in a position of crisis for a variety of reasons. Long gone are the days when customers only dealt with the council 'because they had to'.

The private interview rooms are superbly designed and perfectly meet the needs for customers to discuss their issues in a confidential yet practical and comfortable environment, with formal, informal and family sized rooms to best meet the individual needs of customers particular situations. For example, the family room is quietly located and is of a size to fit an entire family comfortably – a recent example of how this worked well was a whole family made homeless by a house-fire, extremely distressed and were able to have their needs discussed and addressed in confidence, all-together as a family, and away from other customers. The informal interview room has also proved a real hit in that vulnerable young adults who have hit a crisis in their lives can be helped in a private room which does not feel 'council-like', in that it has a sofa and easy chair in and feels a bit more like home., and again this is located in a quieter area of the One Stop Shop. The design of the

'secure room' is also a good feature, in that we have done away with the high counter and glass partition type of interrogation feel, and instead provided a room which is secure by design, but can also be used for other interviews ergo maximising value for money with regards to use of accommodation.

6(b) Please provide suggestions of where you feel improvements could be made?

Presentation to be made on 1st March at Overview and Scrutiny Meeting.

7 Do you feel that customers are comfortable entering the One Stop Shop, if not, please provide examples of why you feel this is the case.

Included in Presentation.

8 Please supply details of how the customer can access the customer services facilities.

Customers can choose how to access services, face-to-face, on the phone or via the internet. The physical facility is DDA compliant, centrally located, and welcoming

9 Is the organisation successfully identifying the levels of the service that the customer requires? If not please explain why.

Customers are regularly consulted via forums, feedback and through monitoring of complaints.

10 Please advise which is the most frequently used method of contacting customer services.

Telephone contact is the most frequent being nearly 360,000 per year, face-to-face contact is around 67,000 per year and emails being 22,000 per year.

For calendar year 2011

Footfall 67000
Phones 359218
email 21567
lagan transactions online (not all online transactions) 5377
online visits (less internal usage) 926529

11 Please can you provide details of:

a. Current targets for customer services – to follow separately.
b. How the targets were arrived at – verbal update to be given at O&S on 1 March.
c. How the data is analysed
   Performance data is analysed using Q-Nomy reporting and Callplus reporting to analyse footfall into the One Stop Shop and phone calls

into the Contact Centre. Speed of answer/wait time is monitored as well as number of customers abandoning their wait. This is then reported against agreed service levels.

In addition, quality is measured through the Performance Assessment Framework. This focuses on assessments on individual interactions with customers (face to face and telephone) as well as performance statistics, escalations, errors, compliments and complaints. This information is then fed back to CSO's individually in 121s.

12 What level of information compliance has the organisation been awarded for its customer service facility?

Customer Service Excellence Accreditation.

13 How does the organisation prioritise emergency situations?

If it is a situation occurring in the OSS, we deal with them in the most appropriate way at the time – each situation is different and usually needs handling differently. There are panic buttons on each position and in each interview room, and there is a security guard on site with direct access to CCTV and the Police for immediate back-up. There is also a permanent Police presence in the One Stop Shop as they are one of our partners with their own Police desk.

14 Please provide details of the training given to officers to help them to deal with distressed customers?

'Dealing with Difficult Situations' training, 'Customer Services' training. Domestic Violence training, 'Keep Safe' training. The Team Leaders also 'counsel' members of staff individually as and when required to help any team member who has had to deal with distressed customers.

15 How are staff supported in cases where dealing with distressed customers have caused them levels of distress?

Personal counselling with team leaders, 'time-out', CIC counselling.

16 Please supply details of a `Lessons Learnt Process' that is in place following contact with difficult customers?

Lessons learnt are implemented from the recommendations we give when we investigate an accident/incident, however the line manager is responsible for the implementation.

Example:
Lessons Learned from dealing with difficult customers:

- Employees must be clearer at the start of a discussion that appears to have become difficult
- Recognise the early warning signs and what to do.
- Examples are: rudeness; being overly-critical of what the employee had said or about the service. Knowing when to call their line manager to intercede or to get out or use the panic alarm.

- Learning to spot the difficult customers as quickly as possible and don't be afraid to calm the situation down and/or get help. If it is a phone call, let them know that you will put the phone down if they continue to use offensive or abusive words.
- Part of the lessons learnt is the use of security staff at the One stop shop to intercede and/or remove difficult customers who have become aggressive.
- To ensure prompt reporting of all incidents and the use of PVP register.

Lastly we advise personal training for all staff who deal with members of the public and the use of fair statement letter.

17 Please supply details of how you analyse complaints received and how complaints are dealt with?

We analyse and monitor the levels of complaints on a monthly basis, making yearly comparisons to measure our performance and effectiveness of the department. We identify the cause of complaint and lessons learnt, and make changes to service delivery where necessary. A report is produced each month which includes the detailed analysis of complaints received through customer feedback and survey responses.

For example

A customer complained that she found it difficult to access our services when trying to report a neighbour's dead animal. She reported that she was unable to get through to someone, and the phone line was unobtainable during working hours. We carried out an impartial investigation, putting ourselves in the customer's shoes, and found that the information provided on the website, regarding dead animals, was not as clear as it could have been.

We also found through web searches that the web page was not available through Direct Gov (due to a broken link), and the RSPCA were advertising an incorrect telephone number for us. We made the necessary changes to our website, and requested that Direct Gov and the RSPCA did the same to theirs. We apologised to the customer, thanked her for bringing this to our attention, and advised her on the action that we had taken following her complaint.

We aim to deal with complaints at the first point of contact, but where this is not possible the complaint is re-directed to the appropriate person, and the customer is informed of our action. Customer Services Team Leaders are responsible for investigating and responding to all informal complaints (NIPs). Formal Stage 1 complaints are investigated and responded to by a complaint owner (minimum Operational Manager), and Formal Stage 2 complaints are responded by the Director (Investigated by minimum-Head of Service)

Whether the complaint is formal or informal we carry out full and impartial investigation, and handle them with dignity and respect. We

admit when we get things wrong and put them right at the earliest opportunity.

If the complaint is covered by an alternative appeals process, we will advise the customer of this, and inform them what they need to do. Any complaints that are received about staff may, if it is appropriate, go through the staff disciplinary procedure.

18 Please explain the process for dealing with customers who feel that they have contacted numerous departments and still not spoken to the correct service area. How could this process be improved?

Currently the process for dealing with a situation as above would be to firstly obtain as much details from the customer at the point of contact with customer services to see if the enquiry can be resolved locally. If this is not the case the enquiry will be escalated as a NIP to the service area (informal complaints stages), this will highlight to the service area that there is a dissatisfied customer and the enquiry will be dealt with by an appropriate level office.

Processes to improve this include migration of all 1st point of contact to customer services, in line with the service area, types of enquires are mapped to ensure that all relevant details are collected, correct information is re-laid to the customer and if unable to deal with at the first point of contact, there is an appropriate hand off to the service area and a firm SLA to provide to the customer for when they can expect a response.

Customer services are currently in the process of optimisation all current services to ensure adequate processes are in place to support this improvement.

19 Would it be possible for Councillors to be given access to the CRM system and log complaints and issues themselves?

It would be possible for councillor to be given access to the CRM to add their own complaints, however the process is more streamlined and user friendly to log complaints and issues through the web. My council has been developed for councillors and residents to report issues with ease.

Further development is currently underway for complaints to be added directly into the CRM via the web using integration technology, this will also enable the councillors to receive notifications and track responses.

20 Was there any resistance to change when the new customer services facilities were implemented? If so please explain how this was managed?

No

21. Please explain the process for customer contact with the organisation during out of hours?

Switches to Call-care. Highly trained call care officers can deal with all out of hours calls using a host of information on the intranet and internal knowledge base.

22. Please provide your views on the benefits of a shared customer services facility

    Partnership and synergy working enables the 'gaps' between organisations to be recognised and addressed, and intelligence shared for the good of the customers.

23 Please supply details of both allocated and unallocated reserves for customer services for your area?

    Budget information supplied separately

24 Any other comments