

Appendices:
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NORTHAMPTON
BOROUGH COUNCIL

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY VIEWS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO CABINET

AGENDA STATUS: PUBLIC

Report Title	RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – CUSTOMER SERVICES
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Cabinet Meeting Date:	11 July 2012
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Directorate:	Customer and Communities
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1. Purpose

- 1.1 To present to Cabinet for consideration, the comments and recommendations of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the findings of the Review – Customer Services.
- 1.2 The Executive Summary to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's report is attached at Appendix A. Members of Cabinet have been issued with a copy of the full report. All Overview and Scrutiny Review reports are published on the Overview and Scrutiny page on the Council's Webpage and a copy of the this report can be located: www.northampton.gov.uk/scrutiny - Previous Scrutiny Reviews.
- 1.3 The purpose of the Scrutiny Panel was to evaluate all customer services with a review of the customer contact centre, customer satisfaction and the refurbished and extended one stop shop.
- 1.4 The Scrutiny Panel highlights that over the last two years there has been significant improvements made and new and innovative improvements introduced. This Scrutiny Review demonstrates the importance of good quality customer services to each and every customer. The Scrutiny Panel has put forward a series of recommendations to Cabinet that it feels will further develop and improve customer services facilities at Northampton Borough Council:

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommends to Cabinet:
- 2.2 That funding for improved signage both outside and inside the Guildhall be made available, particularly in relation to signs for housing and registrars; with a particular focus on the improvement of signage around the old building of the Guildhall.
- 2.3 That floor walkers, located in the One Stop Shop, be provided with a uniform that makes them and their role clearly identifiable to customer.
- 2.4 That funding for additional uniforms for front line Customer Services Officers be investigated.
- 2.5 That the uniforms provided for front line Customer Services Officer identify the corporate image of the Council.
- 2.6 That the plasma screens in situ in the One Stop Shop be utilised to broadcast news channels which can be done at no extra cost to the Council.
- 2.7 That those departments not currently delivered through Customer Services, such as Planning, Building Control and Licensing be brought into Customer Services for “first contact”, to apply customer services skills, to enable the channel shift strategy to be fully applied to calls/visits in relation to these departments.
- 2.8 That Planning Services is incorporated into the One Stop Shop and the Planning Reception desk is constantly manned during opening hours by a fully trained Customer Services Advisor.
- 2.9 That, with a particular focus on the entrances and exits, the layout of the One Stop Shop be altered to improve customer flow and further support channel shift.
- 2.10 That funding is identified for a further automatic ticketing machine to support the improved layout and increase the number of floor walkers.
- 2.11 That in order to reduce the time the process takes, the volume of evidence requested from customers in relation to housing applications is reduced and evidence is only sought upon offer of accommodation to validate the information given.
- 2.12 That a project be undertaken to assess the feasibility and cost implications of extending the hours of the contact centre and One Stop shop from 8.30am to 5.30pm, Monday to Friday.
- 2.13 That the mystery shopping exercise is repeated, including the Centres under the management of the Northampton Leisure Trust, and that in order to achieve consistency the same questions should be used and repeated on a regular basis.

- 2.14 That further methods of communication both to and from the Council, such as social media sites and short messaging services be investigated; with a special focus to pre-empting messaging regarding local issues.
- 2.15 That in recognising that more customers may seek assistance due to the current economic climate and a number of changes to the benefits system a priority queuing system be introduced.
- 2.16 That the area of the One Stop Shop located around the Planning reception desk be better utilised for use by customers.
- 2.17 That it be ensured that Neighbourhood Wardens share all relevant data and information with EMS.
- 2.18 That a tour of the EMS site be incorporated into the Councillor Induction Package so that Councillors are aware of all the processes and procedures in place.
- 2.19 That tours of the EMS site be arranged for all front line Customer Services Officers to further aid them in answering queries and providing information to the public.
- 2.20 That Equality and Multi-cultural Awareness continues to have a high priority for Induction and on going training of Customer Services Advisors, recognising the skills and knowledge required of Advisors dealing with a very diverse range of customers.
- 2.21 That a Protocol be produced for all NBC staff to follow that details clear guidelines, including the wearing the appropriate PPE, when visiting the site at EMS.
- 2.22 That improvements be made to the signage at Westbridge depot, with a particular focus regarding signage for the EMS site.
- 2.23 That, where budgets permit, the GPS in-cab system is extended more widely to appropriate departments.
- 2.24 That the Scrutiny Panel informs Cabinet that it recognises the value of a shared customer service for both the customer and the organisation.
- 2.25 That a copy of the updated Customer Excellence Strategy 2009-2012 be circulated to the Panel when finalised.

3. Issues and Choices

3.1 Report Background

- 3.1.1 Northampton Borough Council's (NBC) ambition is to become one of the best Councils in terms of public service by 2013; one of the key management aims that will contribute to achieving this is to provide excellent customer service. By focusing on the delivery of Customer Services at NBC, the Panel contributed ideas to an area of particular interest and focus for Cabinet.
- 3.1.2 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed at its work programming event in June 2011 to include a review of Customer Services to its work programme for 2011/2012 and commissioned Scrutiny Panel 3 to undertake the review. A short, sharp review commenced in January 2012 concluded in May 2012.
- 3.1.3 A Scrutiny Panel was established comprising Councillor Mike Hallam (Chair); Councillors Tony Ansell, Dennis Meredith, David Palethorpe, Terry Wire and County Councillor Marion Minney (co-optee).
- 3.1.4 This review links to the Council's corporate priorities - Corporate priority: CP9 – Satisfying our customers.
- 3.1.5 The Scrutiny Panel agreed that the following needed to be investigated and linked to the realisation of the Council's corporate priorities:
- i. Baseline data
 - ii. Data from other Local Authorities
 - iii. Published Guidance
 - iv. Evidence from internal Officers
 - v. Evidence from appropriate external witnesses
 - vi. Evidence from partners
 - vii. Site visits and desktop research
 - viii. Focus Group
- 3.1.6 The work of this Scrutiny Panel followed on from the previous Scrutiny review that had been undertaken late in 2008 that had looked at customer services facilities throughout the Council with the purpose of putting forward recommendations for improvement. All of the recommendations contained within that Overview and Scrutiny report were accepted by Cabinet and implemented. Following on from this Review, Overview and Scrutiny agreed that there was a need to evaluate the impact of the improvements introduced.

3.2 Conclusions

- 3.2.1 After all of the evidence was collated the following conclusions were drawn:
- 3.2.2 It was highlighted that over the last two years there have been significant improvements made within customer services and new and innovative improvements introduced, although it was recognised that there are still some further limited improvements that could be made to help improve both customer satisfaction and the customer experience. . This Scrutiny Review demonstrates the importance of good quality customer services.
- 3.2.3 In considering the data for the mystery shopping exercise, the Panel felt that the mystery shopping exercise should be repeated, including the Centres under the management of the Northampton Leisure Trust, and that in order to achieve consistency the same questions should be used. It welcomed the re-establishment of the Northamptonshire Customer Services Group so that different members would be able to mystery shop each other.
- 3.2.3 The Panel acknowledged that the Customer Excellence Strategy 2009-2012 was being updated; to reflect the fact that there was no longer a separate site at Cliftonville and also the implementation of the Northampton Leisure Trust.
- 3.2.4 Satisfaction scores for Northampton Borough Council (NBC) were welcomed. On an average basis is 85%. This compared to the national average of 75% for public sector services.
- 3.2.5 In considering the desktop research exercise, the Panel concluded that::
- a) Targets for customer services were similar
 - b) Some Local Authorities offer additional points of contact such as text message and live chat
 - c) In the main the most frequent form of contact was telephone
 - d) Costs of dealing with customers were provided by Rugby Borough Council who also provided details of the average costs that had been provided via a channel benchmarking group:
- 3.2.6 The value of a shared customer service for both the customer and the organisation was recognised.
- 3.2.7 The importance of various methods for the customer to contact the Council was highlighted. It was acknowledged that external organisations and the Northampton Leisure Trust provided other methods such as social media sites and short messaging services as a form of contact. Social media is a method to quickly disseminate information.
- 3.2.8 Migration of services to Customer Services provides value for money due to optimal use of agent's time. Therefore the Panel recognised that more technical departments could be incorporated into the call centre for "first contact" to enable the channel shift strategy to be fully applied to these calls too.

- 3.2.9 It was acknowledged that flow of people into the One Stop Shop is not normally monitored, but had been manually counted for a month.
- 3.2.10 The Panel emphasised the need for improved signage, in particular directing customers to the Registrars. Signage must be clear, precise and displayed in an appropriate time frame. The provision of signage at Danes Camp was commended. Signage at Rugby Borough Council was perceived as very good and informative:
- 3.2.11 Positive feedback was received from the survey of Councillors of Northampton Borough Council regarding their experiences of the Contact Centre. However, one Councillor indicated the automated telephone system was rather slow when the caller needed to contact a particular officer or service area.
- 3.2.12 The Panel highlighted that public perceptions of how they were dealt with within the service area is vital, irrespective of whether people receive the outcome that they want. They should feel that best efforts have been made to help them. It was accepted that there might be an issue regarding managing people's expectations of service.
- 3.2.13 It was realised that due to the current economic climate and a number of changes being introduced to the benefits system, more people will be seeking help, therefore there is a need to prioritise queries.
- 3.2.14 Queries from customers to the One Stop Shop, such as homeless and rough sleepers can be very challenging for staff and disruptive to other customers.
- 3.2.15 The Panel felt that it was important that the floorwalkers, located in the One Stop Shop, were easily identifiable.
- 3.2.16 It was highlighted that first impressions count. The Panel felt that this is demonstrated by staff being very positive and friendly, smart and efficient. There is a need for uniforms to be replaced regularly to ensure that staff are always of smart appearance.
- 3.2.17 The Panel noted the recommendation of the previous Customer Services Task and Finish Group "*That resources be allocated for the provision of uniforms for frontline Customer Services Officers, identifying a corporate image. Staff be consulted on the style of the uniform.*" The Panel felt that the uniforms provided did not clearly identify the corporate image.
- 3.2.18 The Panel supported the broadcasting of news channels in One Stop Shop at Rugby Borough Council, noting that as long as the Authority has a television licence there is no cost to providing this.
- 3.2.19 The Panel realised that there is difference between the customer base of commercial organisations and that of Local Authorities. The customer base of Local Authorities is fixed. The Panel emphasises that if the majority of staff are happy, the workplace is a better and more productive environment and fits for both a commercial organisation and a Local Authority. There is also

the element of corporate responsibility and promoting good citizenship.

- 3.2.20 The Panel was concerned at the numbers of single homeless people that were presenting to the Council. It was noted that although it is not a statutory duty to re-house them unless they are within a vulnerable category, staff made an effort to help and advice them. It was noted that numbers presenting to the Council could increase as a result of the Welfare Reform Act 2012, which will increase the pressure on staff.
- 3.2.21 The area of the One Stop Shop where the Planning desk is located could be better utilised and it was felt that there should be a clearly signed designated area in the One Stop Shop for Planning.
- 3.2.22 The Panel recognised the need for interface with the Lagan System of reporting and the system used by EMS so that queries can be easily shared and supported the upgrading of the system.
- 3.2.23 It was felt that good links between Neighbourhood wardens and EMS would improve customer services.
- 3.2.24 The Panel agreed that a better customer service will be provided if less Agency staff are engaged at EMS as there had been problems with the attitude of some Agency staff particularly in respect of spillages at the side of the lorry but understood that a staffing structure was currently being investigated which would involve the engagement of less Agency staff.
- 3.2.25 The Panel supported the introduction of new technology that EMS is introducing to the lorries which details information such as the street, which households require assisted collection. The operator can detail whether bins are put out on the specified day. This technology will soon connect to the Customer Services system at NBC which was felt to be very useful.
- 3.2.26 The Panel supported the education package offered by the Northampton Waste Partnership. It is a good customer service practice.
- 3.2.27 Tours of the EMS site would be useful for both Customer Services Officers and Councillors at NBC so that they are aware of all the processes carried out by EMS. This would help them in their role answering queries and providing information to the public.
- 3.2.28 Health and Safety is a key priority of EMS. It was considered to be important that all staff and visitors to the site adhere to the wearing of the appropriate PPE when on site.
- 3.2.29 The Panel recognised that the most inexpensive method of contact was via the Internet. It was realised that channel shift to other methods such as the Internet would only apply to those customers who are happy with this

3.2.30 Upon conclusion of its Review, the Scrutiny Panel put forward a series of recommendations to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for its consideration:

- a) That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee undertakes a Scrutiny Review of customer services provided by EMS in relation to the environmental services contract.
- b) That, in recognising that customer services is a continuous improvement process, this Scrutiny Panel reconvenes in 2014 to evaluate all customer services provided by Northampton Borough Council.
- c) That a Scrutiny Review is set up to assess the impact on the Council of the Welfare Reform Act 2012.
- d) That a copy of this Overview and Scrutiny Review be circulated to all those involved in the Review.
- e) That the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee contacts all those involved in this Review, informing them of Cabinet's response to the recommendations and provides continuous feedback at regular intervals regarding the implementation of the accepted recommendations.
- f) That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as part of its monitoring regime, reviews the impact of this report in six months time.

3.3 Choices (Options)

3.3.1 Cabinet will need to consider the possible options as part of its response to the recommendations.

4. Implications (including financial implications)

4.1 Policy

4.1.1 The work of Overview and Scrutiny plays a major part in the development of the Council's policy framework through its work programme.

4.1.2 The report and its recommendations have policy implications in relation to Customer Services. Cabinet's response will need to consider these issues in detail.

4.2 Resources and Risk

4.2.1 Cabinet will need to consider the resourcing issues for the recommendations made.

4.3 Legal

4.3.1 Legal issues will need to be considered as part of Cabinet's response to the recommendations.

4.4 Equality

4.4.1 Equality issues will need to be considered as part of Cabinet's response to the recommendations.

4.5 Consultees (Internal and External)

4.5.1 The Scrutiny Panel consulted and took evidence from a variety of sources as detailed in paragraph 3.1.5 of this report.

5. Background Papers

- Overview and Scrutiny Committee Report – Customer Services (May 2012)
- Minutes of the meeting of Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 28 May 2012

**Tracy Tiff- Overview and Scrutiny Officer - 7408
(On behalf of Cllr Marriot – Chair of O and S)**