

BEST VALUE REVIEW OF CUSTOMER CONTACT

The Review has been undertaken in accordance with the Government's guidelines, namely to consider the existing service on the basis of Challenge, Consult, Compete, Compare. The service has, therefore, been reviewed on the basis of the following:

Challenge

The Core Group undertaking the Review questioned why the Council needs to have customer contact and whether it is necessary or appropriate that the Council carries out this function. The Group concluded that the Council must consult its customers but questioned whether the Council itself needs to be the initial point of contact. Independent organisations could provide the initial contact and engaging such might provide better value.

Consult

The Core Group has consulted existing users of the service by surveying all points of contact that the Council has with the public and undertaking external surveys at reception points and via the telephone. Focus and Reference Groups were also organised to gauge public opinion. The 1997 and 1999 public attitude surveys were also utilised. These surveys and studies provided an understanding of how the public currently view the systems by which the Council contacts its customers.

Compare

The manner in which the Council contacts its customers was compared to other authorities and a Milton Keynes based company which specialises in providing front line customer contact via the telephone for a number of national firms.

Compete

An assessment of whether the Council's existing customer contact systems can compete favourably with the best was made. This, however, proved difficult as none of the authorities listed as having undertaken Best Value reviews of their customer contact services have reached a point where improvements in services could be quantified. An assessment was made of those authorities who have been highlighted in government reports and other documents as providing good customer contact, or are in the process of making significant improvements. Meetings were arranged with Hertfordshire County Council and Sheffield City Council and Merchants call centre was visited. Details of the London Borough of Brent's customer contact system were assessed.

These studies have concluded that notwithstanding a general level of acceptance of the existing customer contact systems within the Council, significant improvements could and should be made.

Options

The Core Group has identified a number of alternative ways forward. These were assessed against a framework of desirable outcomes which are:

- (a) Easy access for all customers.
- (b) Customers should get the right person the first time.
- (c) Relevant information should be driven down the hierarchy.
- (d) The right of customers to take matters higher should be maintained.
- (e) All staff should have customer care skills.
- (f) A 5% reduction in the cost of delivering the service.

The alternative ways forward considered were:

- (a) Make No Change to the Existing Service

Not considered a satisfactory way forward as it would not provide access for all customers, does not allow customers to access the right person first time, will not assist in enabling a customer to take a matter higher, will not provide customer care skills to all staff and no efficiency savings will be made.

- (b) Staff Training

Could assist in improving access for all customers but would provide no improvements in enabling customers to contact the right person the first time. Neither would it drive information down the hierarchy or bring about any savings in the cost of service provision.

- (c) Changes to Management Practices

If office opening times were extended to provide customer contact during flexi-time hours (8.30 – 18.30), there would be some improvement in service as it would allow easier access for those who have difficulty in contacting the Council during working hours. There would be no improvement in terms of driving information down the hierarchy or enabling the caller to speak to someone at a higher level. There would be no improvement in the service itself and it is unlikely that there would be any savings made as a result of any changes.

- (d) Joint Working Initiative

Some existing customer contact facilities function in a similar way to call centres with the first point of contact dealing with many routine inquiries. Combining these facilities would enable single points of contact to answer queries and provide information about a number of services. Such initiatives would not assist those groups who have difficulty in accessing the Council and would have no effect in ensuring that customers can take their concerns to a higher level. It would assist in enabling customers to contact the right person the first time and would, of necessity drive information down the hierarchy.

There would be overall improvements in efficiency but these are unlikely to manifest themselves as significant savings.

(e) Additional Staff

Would assist in reducing queues at reception desks and the number of calls where the public fails to get through. Additional staff would, therefore, assist in enabling customers to contact the Council but not in ensuring that they obtain the right person to answer calls first time. There would be no improvement in terms of enabling customers to take a matter higher or improve the quality of service that would be delivered. Providing additional staff will not provide any savings in the cost of service delivery.

(f) Changes to Additional Technological Solutions

Improvements could be brought about by reviewing the manner in which the existing customer contact is utilised. Better links between points of contact and information systems would allow front line staff to deal with inquiries rather than referring these to officers. This would not improve access for customers but would assist in them contacting the right person the first time. Information would be driven down the hierarchy as a consequence. There would be no change to the situation in relation to customers having the right to take a matter higher, staff needing customer care skills or the cost of providing the service.

(g) Call Centres

Many of the system difficulties associated with customer contact would be resolved with a call centre. The Council could have one point of telephone contact in a dedicated facility where staff would be trained to deal with all inquiries. Such a system would ensure that, as far as possible, a customer is able to speak to a person who can deal with their inquiry without the need to be transferred - most call centres operated by local authorities aim to allow for 80% of calls to be dealt with by front line staff. As a result, officers in "back offices" are better able to answer detailed inquiries. Systems can enable a level of caller recognition and tracking of inquiries providing more customer focus. Call centres allow better access to the Council for all customers, drive information down the hierarchy and assist in allowing a customer to take a matter higher as the relevant officer will have more time available. There are significant start up costs, whether the Council operates a call centre itself (as Sheffield) or engage an agency to run it for them (as Herts). However, those authorities which have invested in corporate wide Call Centres anticipate that efficiency savings will result in the installation paying for itself in the medium term.

(h) Improvements at Receptions

The experience of customers visiting Council offices could be improved if receptions had information screens, automatic catering facilities, creches etc. The quality of service would not be improved and there would be no savings in the cost of running the service.

(i) Reducing the Cost of Providing the Service

A 5% saving could be made by reducing the budget required to provide the customer contact service by this amount. Whereas this would bring about one of the desirable results of the review, there would be no improvement to the service and a reduction in the level of customer satisfaction is likely to be the result.

Conclusions

Improvements to the customer contact service will be brought about by adopting, in some form, some of the options highlighted. Staff training will improve the quality of service provided, changes to management practices will extend the period during which the public can contact the Council. Additional staff, particularly during peak periods would reduce waiting times and lost calls and minor changes at reception points would improve the time that the public spends with the Council when some waiting is inevitable. Changes to the manner in which existing customer contact is used would incur some cost but could bring about significant improvements particularly if this is combined with joint working initiatives. The report will, therefore, recommend that these measures are implemented. However, presently, the only system that appears to bring about the desirable outcomes and provide a reduction in the cost, albeit in the longer term, is the Call Centre approach. The report will, therefore, also recommend that further study in relation to the introduction of a call centre is undertaken.