

Customer Focus

North Wiltshire District Council

Audit 2006-2007

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Summary Report

Introduction

- 1 Customer focus is about refocusing services around the needs of all sections of the community. An accessible and user-focused organisation places the customer at the heart of the service delivery, it knows what local people want and has organised itself to deliver this. Developing a more user-focused approach is not just a regulatory obligation. It is also part of good management and providing high-quality services.
- 2 Access to local information and services remains a key issue for local government. Local people often find access to Council services difficult and confusing. Local people are not clear about how to access the right service in councils particularly in areas where there are two tiers of local government.
- 3 Local people are demanding easier access and more access outside traditional core hours. The government also sees customer access as important and has identified seven key tests of success for service delivery in the local government of the future. Other national drivers include the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 and the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995, the national e-government strategy and the ODPM priority outcomes that local authorities were expected to achieve by December 2005.

Background

- 4 Improving Customer Focus was seen as a key improvement priority following the Council's Comprehensive Performance Assessment in 2004. The Council's vision included the following aim for "Customer Focus - :
 - to be 'The Council in your living room' – a visible presence, increased communication and ability to access services from the home;
 - to be used as an information resource;
 - to have easily accessed services for the whole community;
 - to have refocused the services provided to meet the changing population profile;
 - to ensure that people of all ages have a strong voice in the community; and
 - to have covered the cost of services without recourse to local Council Tax."

- 5 We therefore carried out an inspection of the Council's approach to customer focus in May 2005 in conjunction with studies in the other councils in Wiltshire. Key recommendations to the Council arising from the inspection included (please see full report):
- define a long-term vision and develop a strategy for delivering the customer focus priority;
 - improve access to Council services by;
 - taking positive steps to embed equality and diversity and a customer focused culture across the Council;
 - ensuring that all information about Council services is clear, uses plain language and is widely available in appropriate alternative formats;
 - developing a robust understanding of the needs of all sections of the local community through effective monitoring systems and engaging with under-represented groups;
 - considering the need for and benefits of adopting more customer-focused practices such as revised opening hours, implementing plans to improve disabled access, and developing an integrated pricing policy across all services that effectively balances the need to maximise income while also promoting social inclusion;
 - improve Council services to customers by;
 - ensuring consultees are given feedback on how their views were taken into account in policy and decision-making;
 - consulting with local people in the development of corporate service standards and in identifying options from the change programme;
 - support change in the Council by;
 - developing robust plans that identify success criteria by which the programme will be measured;
 - ensuring that there are clear policies procedures and training in place to support the business process mapping work; and
 - developing a communication plan linked to the project plan to ensure the effective internal communication of the vision and benefits of the programme to key groups such as Councillors and middle managers.
 - Work with partners to provide a more joined up and seamless service across the County.

Audit approach

- 6 We have used the recommendations from the original report as a basis to establish progress. This is reflected in the headings used in the detailed report that follows. In order to understand actions taken we have reviewed key documents and interviewed key staff.

Main conclusions

- 7 The Council is making good progress in carrying forward its customer focus agenda. It has taken effective action to support and improve customer focus and access to services and information. The Council has ensured that customer focus has been given a higher corporate profile. It has established improved arrangements for communication and consultation. It has improved its understanding of customer needs through better use of surveys and introducing new IT systems and developed its understanding of diversity. The Council has introduced clear processes to support improvements in customer focus across the Council and it now works actively with neighbouring authorities to improve access and support better customer focus.

Recommendations

- 8 No specific recommendations have been identified beyond those in the original report. The Council should continue to develop its approach to customer focus to give effect to those recommendations.

Detailed Report

Vision and strategy

- 9 The Council has ensured that customer focus has been given a higher corporate profile. Customer focus is included as a central strand within the Council's vision and its revised structure with a single customer contact team under one Customer Contact Manager, dealing with all customer interactions at a single point of contact. The Corporate Plan includes specific reference to the increased emphasis on customer focus across the Council, and the Council has established an Improving Customer Experience (ICE) Project Board to oversee implementation.
- 10 The Council has taken effective action to support and improve customer focus and access to services and information. It established a Customer Contact Programme Brief, which identified 10 specific projects to deliver 54 improved outcomes for customer focus within the Council. It has a clear access policy in place. In developing these projects it has paid specific attention to diversity issues through focussing on potentially excluded groups.

Improved access

- 11 The Council has established improved arrangements for communication and consultation. It has set up a Communications Group, pulling together key staff from across the Council, and is reviewing all internal and external communication. This review includes testing different methods of communicating through newsletters and customer forums – feedback will be used to shape future communication. The Council has signed up to the LGA/I&DeA Reputation project and has produced an annual plan for communication and consultation.
- 12 The Council has improved its understanding of customer needs. An additional question was added to the Customer Satisfaction Surveys asking the customer if the information they received was easily understandable. The Council has identified the need for more work on translation and transcription services to further improve access. The newly introduced Customer Relationship Manager (CRM) system will provide a single record of contacts with each customer. The management information the system generates will help the Council to better understand the needs of the community.
- 13 Opening hours are kept under review through customer questionnaires, the Best Value Satisfaction survey and monitoring customer satisfaction levels within Switchboard and the Revenues & Benefits Call Centre.
- 14 Services are responsive to customer and external comments. Changes have been introduced as a result of customer feedback; these include some modification of signs at the main Council offices arising from a disability access audit and modifications to the Council website. The website is more accessible to a wider audience through using Browsealoud software and has now achieved the RNIB accreditation “See It Right”.

- 15 The Council has improved access to its services for people with disabilities. The RNID undertook a 'Louder than Words' benchmark assessment of the Council's provisions for deaf and hard of hearing customers and employees in November 2005. The report from the RNID highlighted a number of improvements that the Council needed to make. An improvement plan has been put in place. The Council has revised the layout in the main council reception. This includes improved signing, drop desks and a hearing loop. A further loop is installed in the Council Chamber and a portable loop is also available for use throughout the building. A wheelchair is also provided for use by customers visiting the Council.

Improved Council services to customers

- 16 The Council has developed its understanding of diversity. It now has a disability equality scheme in place. It has set up an Equality and Diversity stakeholder group to ascertain the public's perception and particularly the perception of disabled people of any barriers against accessing the services provided by the Council and will take appropriate action to improve access. The membership of the internal Equality and Diversity Group has been extended to include a representative of the North Wiltshire Access for the Disabled Group. A Young People's Council has been established and holds regular meetings through the year.
- 17 The Council has revised its comments and complaints policy and process to ensure that customer comments are captured and actioned. Corporate Service Standards have been developed and adopted. They are available in leaflet form within reception and with stakeholders and on the Council's website. Customer satisfaction levels and service standards are monitored and published monthly and reported to the Council. Customers are actively encouraged to provide feedback on the customer service standards and on the level of service received.
- 18 A new Benefits Freephone number is now in place, which is available for use by all customers phoning regarding Housing/Council Tax benefit.

Supporting change in the Council

- 19 The Council has introduced clear processes to support improvements in customer focus across the Council. All customer focus development has been undertaken under the auspices of the ICE Programme Board, utilising Prince 2 project management methodology.
- 20 Comprehensive Disability & Deaf Awareness training has been organised for all frontline staff, as well a half-day training session for all other staff. The Equalities & Diversities Group is currently investigating the possibility of offering staff training in basic sign language. All employees and members have undergone Respect for People training supported by an on-line test. Respect for People training forms part of the formal induction process for all new members and officers.

- 21 The Council has achieved Level 2 of the local government Equality Standard. It has introduced a diversity audit tool (e-sat) to help monitor progress in this area. The Equalities & Diversities Group developed an integrated pricing policy across all services which will be introduced in 2007.
- 22 About 50 Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) including for customer contact and access were completed by the end of 2006 and the Council has a programme in place for further assessments. To date no major adjustments have been identified, but the assessment recommendations are used as audit trail to indicate work undertaken. The Council's standard template for reports has been amended to ensure that the implications of the report on equality and diversity issues are set out and considered as part of the decision making process. Guidance has been produced to remind and assist officers undertaking equality impact assessments on new policies as they are developed.
- 23 Business process mapping work has been effectively supported through training, planning and secondments. The Business Process Management team and key team leaders in the council have been trained in the business process reengineering (BPR) process the Council is currently using. A joint BPR & CRM Project Manager has been appointed and three secondments approved to undertake mapping and scripting duties. A detailed workplan has been developed.
- 24 A Communications Group has been established and a review of corporate communications is underway. An annual action plan for communication and consultation has been produced to address the key aspects of improving customer awareness of standards, what to expect, access to information and service/project news updates.

Working with others

- 25 The Council works actively with neighbouring authorities to improve access and support better customer focus. It works closely with Wiltshire Customer First Partnership, a county wide group that includes the county's four District Councils, the County Council and the Police. This partnership is actively developing projects to align customer care standards, values and access strategies across the County; to develop shared services in specialties such as building control where councils are experiencing difficulties in recruiting sufficient qualified staff; to encourage sharing access points; common technology (the CRM system and common e-forms) and delivering joint customer service training. It has also established a joint communications group to review information provided to customers. The Partnership has a steering board consisting of senior councillors and officers drawn from the participating bodies who provide strategic direction. Below that sits the Officers Board and the Customer Services Managers Forum.
- 26 The Partnership is continuing its work to develop common standards approaches and technologies in the light of current consultations on Local Government Reorganisation locally. This recognises the value of continued cooperation on developing common systems and approaches if the decision is to maintain the local government status quo, and the benefits of an agreed approach if services were to be reconfigured.

- 27 The Council was an active participant in developing the partnership's recent Single Non-Emergency Number (SNEN) pilot bid aimed at providing a single point of access to Council services across the County. The bid was well received but further work on developing SNEN projects has currently been shelved by the Government.
- 28 The Council has increased its use of benchmarking. In addition to continuing to work with the "Daventry" benchmarking group (a group of similar councils), NWDC have entered into 2 national local government-benchmarking services: the Local Authority Call Centre Group and the national One-Stop Shop benchmarking Group. The groups benchmark both performance and costs, and encourage sharing best practice with local authorities across the country.