Title: External Audit Reports - Audit Commission -

Customer Focus Inspection 2006/07

Portfolio holder: Cllr Andrew Davis

Reporting officer: Sharon Larkin – Head of HR & Customer Services

Purpose

To consider a progress report from the Audit Commission on Customer Focus.

Background

In 2005 the Audit Commission carried out an inspection of the Council's approach to customer focus in conjunction with studies in the other councils in Wiltshire. In a report published in October 2005 it concluded that the Council provided a 'fair' level of customer-focussed services with promising prospects for further improvement.

In November 2006, the Audit Commission undertook a follow up inspection to assess the progress on the recommendations made in the original inspection report. The report attached at appendix 1 sets out the Audit Commission's conclusions and recommendations.

Overall, the report is very positive and concludes that the Council is making good progress in carrying forward its customer focus agenda. It particularly highlights the Council's clear vision and strategy for West Wiltshire, the increased investment to support customer focus, the work being done to understand customer needs and how the Council actively works with neighbouring authorities to improve access and customer focus.

The report has been discussed with the Corporate Management Team and the portfolio holder for customer services. It will be brought to the attention of all members via the members information sheet and it will be available to view on the Council's website.

Key Issues

The following are the recommendations made by the Audit Commission which are being addressed by the Council:-

- Monitoring the impact of the new Customer Service Unit against its targets and its influence on customer satisfaction overall; and
- Developing the use of the Customer Relationship Management System (CRM) to provide effective management information.

Effect on strategies and codes

The report and recommendations of the Audit Commission support the current Customer Services Strategy.

Risk management implications

These are referred to in the individual reports

Finance and performance implications

There are no financial implications.

Legal and human rights implications

There are no direct legal or human rights implications.

Next steps

- Ongoing monitoring of the performance indicators contained within the Customer Services Service Plan and other relevant performance indicators within the Council's Performance Plan.
- Providing training for staff that use the CRM System to ensure consistency.
- Setting up a system to monitor complaints through the CRM system.

Recommendations

The Customer Focus Inspection report 2006/07 is noted.

Performance Detailed Report

Date

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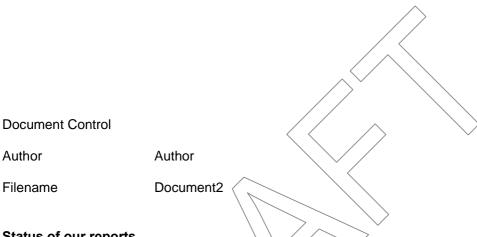
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Customer Focus

West Wiltshire District Council

Audit Year 2006/07

- Audit Commission descriptor to be inserted by Publishing-



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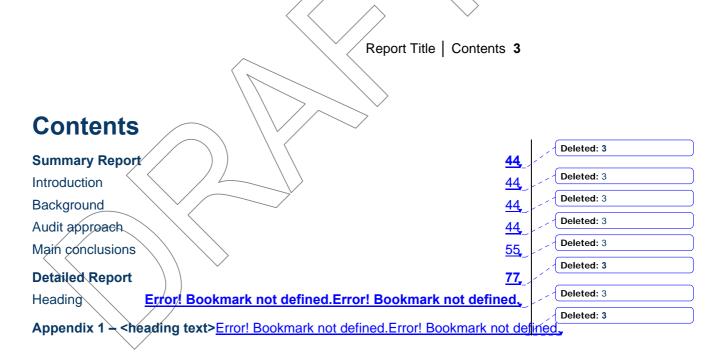
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Summary Report

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 see customer access as important and have identified seven key tests of the success of the local government of the future in service delivery. Other national drivers include the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 and the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995, the national egovernment strategy and the ODPM priority outcomes that local authorities were expected to achieve by December 2005.

Background

- Improving customer focus was seen as a key improvement priority for the Council following the Council's Comprehensive Performance Assessment in 2004. We therefore carried out an inspection of the Council's approach to customer focus in 2005 in conjunction with studies in the other councils in Wiltshire. The Audit Commission report of October 2005 concluded that the Council provided a 'fair' level of customer-focused services with promising prospects for further improvement. It recommended the Council:
 - define a long-term vision and strategy for delivering the customer first priority, that:
 - reflects the needs and aspirations of customers, local communities, and

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other stakeholders; and

- informs the key corporate plans and strategies of the Council and its
- partners.
- improve access to council services by:
 - developing a robust understanding of the needs/requirements of all sections of the local community through effective monitoring systems and engaging with under-represented groups;
 - developing an up-to-date and forward looking asset management strategy
 that includes clear and costed plans to improve access for all local people
 for example, by improving disabled access;
 - developing an integrated and targeted pricing policy across all services that effectively balances the need to maximise income while also promoting social inclusion; and
 - taking positive steps to embed equality and diversity and a customer focused culture across the Council for example, through its approach to training, performance management and policy making.
- improve council services to customers by:
 - working with partners to provide a more joined up and seamless service across the county;
- · support change in the Council by:
 - developing a robust and fully resourced project plan which identifies risks,
 - value for money targets, performance management arrangements and
 - identifies the role that partners will play, for example, in sharing learning; and
 - developing a bespoke communication plan and training and development plan linked to the project plan.

Audit approach

5 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 individuals in the organisation. Deleted: Detailed Report

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Main conclusions

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The Council is making good progress in carrying forward its customer focus agenda. It has developed a clear priority on customer focus in its vision and strategy for West Wiltshire. It has increased investment in customer focus, for example through an improved IT infrastructure. The Council has developed its understanding of customer needs with particular emphasis on developing its approach to equalities and diversity. The Council works actively with neighbouring authorities to improve access and support better customer focus.

Recommendations

- 7 As a result of this follow up inspection we recommend the Council:
 - monitors the impact of the new Customer Service Unit against its targets and its influence on customer satisfaction overall; and
 - develops the use of the Customer Relationship Management system to provide effective management information..

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Vision and strategy

- The Council has developed a clear priority on customer focus in its vision and strategy for West Wiltshire. The Council 2005-2010 Corporate Plan identified 'Putting Customers First' as a 'spotlight' area for priority action and set out four key objectives:
 - Enabling easy access to the Council recognising the needs of different customers:
 - · Providing consistent and fair treatment to all customers;
 - Dealing with customers as an integrated organisation rather than a series of disjointed departments; and
 - Dealing with the majority (80 per cent) of customers at the first point of contact.
- The Council is seeking to drive all its priorities through customer focus and keep it at the heart of all its services. Customer focus appears first on the list of priorities in the updated corporate plan for 2007. There is a clear customer service strategy for 2006-2008 that sets out a five stage programme to improve the way the Council interacts with its customers. There is an action plan in place with agreed resources. Progress on delivering against the action plan is on schedule for 2006/07.

Improving access

10 The Council has increased investment in customer focus. It has revised its structure to accommodate a customer facing (front office) and non-customer facing (back office) services configuration. Customer facing services are being brought together in a new Customer Service Unit, supplemented by customer service teams in key services such as revenues and benefits and planning. Recruitment and training began in late 2006 and the new unit is expected to be functional by May 2007. Recruitment has been completed and most training delivered at the time of this review.

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Rhe@Gincihhas interoxed the IT infrastructure available to support its customer focus work. It has commissioned a new telephony system for the entire council and Customer Relationship Manager (CRM) technology which will be available to a range of council services. This is aimed at improving the ability of the council to respond effectively to customer enquiries and meet their needs, increase customer friendliness, make the council easier to contact and improve management information. This is due to be introduced in mid-2007. The Council also has plans to extend services such as payments and bookings available by phone or internet.

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- 12 The Council has developed its understanding of customer needs. It has used information from regular surveys People's Voice, general satisfaction, housing needs and specific consultation exercises, for example on sites for new affordable housing. These consultations have been conducted within a new council framework, the Statement of Community Involvement. It has introduced a new range of councillor 'surgeries' to improve feedback from the community.
- 13 The Council is developing its approach to equalities and diversity. Its internal planning framework now includes the requirement for a specific section in service plans to ensure equality and diversity is addressed. It has achieved level 2 of the local government Equality standard, and full compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act. Specific initiatives have been started to support and engage under-represented groups for example, Polish migrant workers. Equality and diversity awareness training has been rolled out across the Council for all existing staff. For all new staff an equalities module is included in the induction training.

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Improving council services through joint working

- The Council works actively with neighbouring authorities to improve access and support better customer focus. It works closely with Wiltshire Customer First Partnership, a sounty wide group that includes all the county's 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. The Partnership works flexibly to enable participants to tailor their involvement to their own strategic aims.
- 15 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. 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.

Supporting change in the Council

The Council has planned its customer services project well. The overall strategy was clearly linked to resource plans, including staffing, training, IT and telephony procurement and accommodation plans. Links to wider Council plans such as risk management, performance management, and the Gershon efficiency plan is also evident. Business process review has been built into the Council's approach, aimed at ensuring the Council maximises the benefits from the changes. Processes have been streamlined to be more effective and deliver improved services and better value for money.

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The Council seeks to learn from its own experiences and those of others. The Customer First managers Forum and the Wiltshire Improvement Partnership provide forums for learning and development. The WIP was successful in gaining a £316k grant for joint capacity building work in Wiltshire. This includes work to improve partnerships by reviewing governance (including roles, constitutions and risks) and performance management arrangements, particularly in LSPs. This work will help to ensure LAA targets and outcomes are achieved for the community from April 2007. A significant element of this work will be to share learning and experiences across the partner organisations and elsewhere.

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Appendix 1 – Action Plan

Page Recommendation	Priority 1 = Low 2 = Med 3 = High	Agreed	Comments	Date
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Monitor the impact of the new Customer Service Unit against its targets and its influence on customer satisfaction overall;	2			
Develop the use of the Customer Relationship Management system to provide effective management information;	3			

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