

West Wiltshire District Council

Cabinet

5 May 2004

Wiltshire and Swindon Customer Services Programme

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report is to outline proposals for partnership working between the Wiltshire and Swindon authorities aimed at improving levels of customer service.

2. Background

The District Council is a member of the Wiltshire and Swindon E-Government Partnership. Over the last two years the Partnership has delivered a series of projects using funding secured from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

The partnership work has proved to be a valuable introduction to collaborative working and has highlighted a number of areas of common ground that can be developed beyond the life span of the Government funding.

In recent months, a number of meetings have been held to discuss the possibility and nature of continued joint working. Councillor Roy While and Tim Darsley have represented the Council at these. The consensus has been to concentrate on joint working to improve standards of customer service amongst the Wiltshire and Swindon authorities. The Partnership is now seeking agreement in principle from the constituent authorities to continue to work jointly in this direction.

3. Key Issues

(i) The Current Situation

The traditional form of customer service in local government (and the current position at West Wiltshire District Council) is characterised by:

- ? Initial telephone contact is with a switchboard operator, or
- ? Initial face to face contact is with a receptionist
- ? Enquiries are passed on to the relevant department
- ? The relevant case officers are often not available and the query is not resolved

- ? Enquiries for more than one service are passed from department to department, introducing delay and reducing the chance of a comprehensive resolution
- ? Enquiries for services which are the responsibility of another agency are not dealt with. The customer is asked to call another number

The overall picture is of fragmented and disjointed services which often lead to frustrated and dissatisfied customers.

(ii) Improved Customer Services

An alternative approach is to work to the convenience of the customer rather than that of the organisation. This has been developed in the private sector and is increasingly being adopted by Councils. This approach is characterised by:

- ? Initial contact is received by specialist customer service staff
- ? These staff have a wide range of service and case information to hand via some form of integrated computer system
- ? The staff are able to answer most (say 80%) of enquiries immediately, without having to refer to departmental officers
- ? Multiple enquiries are answered by the same person at the same time.
- ? If specialist advice or a meeting is required, the front line staff can make the appointment
- ? If a query cannot be resolved immediately, the customer service advisor retains ownership of the query and is responsible for providing or arranging the response.
- ? If a request is the responsibility of another agency, it can be received and passed on electronically for action against agreed standards and procedures.

This approach results in a higher proportion of enquires being resolved promptly and comprehensively at the first point of contact. Not surprisingly, this in turn results in higher levels of satisfaction from customer.

(iii) A Shared Vision for Customer Services for Wiltshire

A shared vision of improved customer service across Wiltshire and Swindon would be for:

- ? Each authority would have its own call centre to deal with the majority of telephone calls from the public. These would be linked so that, where necessary, customers could be transferred directly to the correct agency.

- ? There would be a consistent approach to customer contact centres where enquiries and requests are dealt with face to face.
- ? Both call centres and contact centres would be supported and linked by a common customer relationship management (CRM) system.
- ? There would be greater availability of self-service information and opportunities for direct transactions over the Internet.
- ? Departmental information would be arranged so as to be readily available to front line customer service staff.

To move towards this vision, initial work by the partnership would include projects on:

- ? The co-ordinated provision of counter service and information points by each organisation.
- ? Joint training for customer care staff.
- ? The development of a customer services charter to cover all customer contact.
- ? The specification and procurement of a joint customer relationship management system.
- ? Co-ordinated investment in ICT following on from current partnership projects.

A programme of this type will require direction and co-ordination to be successfully delivered. It is proposed that a customer services steering group is established to manage the programme. This would comprise a Member and an Officer from each authority.

Experience from recent partnership working suggests that resources need to be allocated to shared support for programme co-ordination, advice and administration. It has been suggested that each authority commits to allocating a maximum of £20,000 per year over an initial two-year period for support, to be approved by the Steering Group.

4. Financial Implications

Funding for the shared programme support could be allocated from the Council's Implementing Electronic Government (IEG) receipts. Individual projects would be considered on their merits. The existing capital programme includes funding for some projects such a CRM system. Any additional funding would be bid for through the annual Service and Financial Planning process.

5. Legal Implications

It is proposed that a legal agreement between partners be drawn up to cover liabilities for projects within the programme. Data protection requirements will need to be addressed.

6. Conclusion

The proposed direction for improvement in customer services is very much in line with the conclusions of the Council's own "Making Contact" Best Value review. It also accords with the Council's e-government strategy.

In practice, it would be necessary to proceed in stages, starting with improving standards and procedures, moving on to integrating internal services and finally developing joint arrangements.

A considerable amount of research and data collection would be needed to inform the planning of detailed arrangements. Visits to other councils could be made to learn from good practice already developed. In particular the County Council's use of customer relationship management technology and the joint contact centre currently being established in Salisbury should be assessed.

Overall, however, there is no doubt that if the Council is to move forward in this way, joint working across Wiltshire offers the best prospects of success. Not only will this be essential to achieve genuine improvements in customer service, it is also likely to provide the most cost-effective solution.

7. Recommendations

It is recommended that the Council:

- (i) Participates in the Wiltshire and Swindon Customer Services Programme.
- (ii) Nominates Member and Officer representatives for the Steering Group.
- (iii) Agrees to allocate a maximum of £20,000 from within existing IEG funding for the co-ordination and support of the programme.

8. Background Papers

E-Government Partnership file, Room F24.

Making Contact Best Value Review, 2003

Implementing Electronic Government Statement, November 2003

Roy While
Resources Portfolio Holder

Tim Darsley
Corporate Officer (Policy)

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