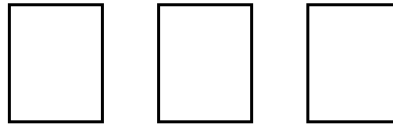




Overview and Scrutiny Committee Briefing Paper

DISTRICT COUNCIL
NORTH OXFORDSHIRE



Subject: Customer Service Improvement project

Director: Customers and Service Development, Claire Taylor

Officer Responsible: Assistant Director Customers and Corporate Services, Geoff Kent

Background and Reason for Briefing Note

The aim of this briefing is to provide an overview of the “Customer Services Marathon” which is a project to improve the performance and effectiveness of the Council’s Customer Services function.

The starting point

Customer Services is currently operated as a shared team between Cherwell and South Northants Councils; the team is the Council’s “front door” as first point of contact for most Council enquiries.

Last year the team took 111k phone-calls from Cherwell customers, answered 40k emails, helped 4k customers with face to face enquiries and “metted and greeted” a further 10k callers to our offices. The team also processes incoming and outgoing post at Bodicote House.

Telephone calls come in to us through a range of 01295 numbers and are routed into the team to be answered. The same applies to a range of service email boxes. Face to face appointments are offered to customers who ask for our help to make applications for things like Benefits or would prefer to meet someone face to face to go through their enquiries. Face to face appointments are available at Bodicote House and our local offices at Banbury Castle Quay, Bicester Franklins House and Kidlington. These local offices are called “LinkPoints” and also offer PCs to access our services on-line as well as a self-service phone to contact us as well.

From missed bins through to stray dogs, electoral registration, Council Tax and Business Rates and everything in between (and enquiries that relate to our public bodies, for which we signpost customers to another organisation as appropriate), the team helps our customers.

The Customer Services Marathon



The improvement plan in progress for Customer Services has been called the “Customer Service Marathon”. This is to energise the team, emphasise the scale and length of the improvement journey and also to use the 26 mile marathon distance to make a point of reference, as the marathon is a 26 week journey that started last October and concludes next month.

The plan is to stabilise Contact Centre performance, to create a stronger and more tangible

customer-first ethos and also to move into 2019-20 on a more focussed footing.

One thing is clear; the team were already showing high standards of customer service and want to offer the best service. However they were hampered by systems used in the team and its culture. There was also a lack of praise and recognition for great customer service.

The Customer Services Marathon has focused on four themes; the principles of and progress of which are set out below.

Theme 1 – Customer Service Excellence

Principles:-

Champion a customer-first ethos in the team, work closer with Council departments, celebrate exemplary customer service, train staff to be better equipped to do the job and leadership to be more engaged with the team. In addition, mistakes will be examined more effectively, lessons learnt and acted upon.

Progress:-

All 60 staff who serve customers directly have received in-depth Revenues and Benefits training as well as training to help them focus on providing the best service to customers including techniques for managing pressure and challenging situations in order to promote personal resilience.

Compliments are captured and shared with the team, Director and Portfolio Holder weekly with the Assistant Director expressing personal thanks collectively.

A “lessons learnt” process has been put in place to examine why mistakes are made to ensure they are not repeated as well as implementing clear, auditable actions to move forward that include training and procedural changes.

Theme 2 – Maximise capacity

Principles:-

Make emails more urgent to ensure effective responses. Stagger lunches in the team to create additional capacity at a time when more customers look for our help in their free moments. Reduce the non-productive time of meetings so that they are more focused and capacity is not lost before or after the meetings. Use flexible working to maximise resources at peak times and process emails at times during the day when there is a more immediate need to answer phone-calls.

Progress:-

There are now three lunch slots in the team over the 1200-1500 period and staff “buddy up” with colleagues to handover the reigns for the phones at the start of their break so that lunches do not reduce capacity excessively. There are now clear rules with regards the use of meeting time out of the office. Flexible working is used to resource email work outside of core Contact Centre opening hours so that we are better able to manage times of peak demand.

Theme 3 – Staffing

Principles:-

Key roles in the office are reviewed and resources realigned to give more capacity for direct customer service (phone-calls and emails). At the same time, resources at Supervisor level have been repurposed to work on the Jadu website project that is delivering more self-service for customers. In addition, the staffing budget is “sweated” to ensure that capacity generated from vacancies at any time is used quickly and effectively to retain capacity within budget.

Progress:-

One admin role has been repurposed to take routine work and tasks such as managing the rota for the team away from more senior staff, so that they can concentrate on performance management and leadership. Two staff have been seconded to the Digital Customer transformation project, working on new self-service web forms. They have key customer service skills and knowledge to make these forms customer-centric.

One partial senior vacant post (0.4 FTE) has been held vacant and the budget used for flexing customer facing capacity.

Theme 4 – Using IT

Principles:-

The team uses a number of computer systems, reflecting the range customer enquiries they help with. The telephony used in the team was not fit for purpose and at end of life. There was a “knowledge base” information and guidance system on our intranet that was clumsy to use and update, not searchable and not fit for purpose.

Progress:-

As part of a corporate project the telephony has been replaced and moved from an on-premise to internet based system. For the first time one telephone system is used across the Council rather than separate systems for the Contact Centre and the remainder of the Council. In addition, the new system offers significantly better management information and the forthcoming ability to translate call recording data into searchable transcripts that will give benefits to quality assurance, training and service development. The knowledge base is being replaced with a new intranet product that is more current, concise and searchable as well as having been quality assured by other departments.

What next?

By the end of this month, the Customer Services team will be ready to take on the challenges of delivering great, timely and effective customer service in the new financial year. In particular, they will have the highest levels of resilience and knowledge to more effectively help the spike in customer demand that is now underway as our annual Council tax Bills are sent to residents and their first payment of the new financial year becomes due.

The Customer Services Marathon is not a destination and not the end. We are now in a culture of continuous improvement and the next phase will encompass:-

- Using the new telephony system to give higher quality management reporting, demand forecasting, targeted training, and greater quality assurance.
- Implementing more self-service opportunities for customers through our website. In addition, working with CSN colleagues to rollout a new self-service portal for Revenues and Benefits that allows customers to look up account and claim information and update their own records without the need to speak to us.
- Driving out future efficiencies in team resourcing within the current budget.
- Examining how to make workforce management more automated.

Another major current project is that of separation between Cherwell and South Northants. Customer Services is currently fully integrated both in terms of service delivery to customers and staffing. As we make incremental changes, our customers will not see any difference as existing telephone numbers, email addresses and service delivery approach will remain tailored to the two Councils as it is now.

Our absolute priority is to ensure excellent customer service is delivered as the service is separated over the coming months.

Completed by: Geoff Kent

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