

Executive

Access Strategy

16 March 2009

Report of the Strategic Director of Customer Service and Resources

PURPOSE OF REPORT

To update the Executive on the development of the Access Strategy and ask for comment on the direction it takes and the action plan it proposes, prior to finalising the draft.

This report is public

Recommendations

The Executive is recommended to:

- (1) Agree the vision, aim and objectives of the strategy
- (2) Agree all, some or none of the main pillars of the action plan:
 1. deliver the services most face to face customers want (not just our local office customers), at locations near them.
 2. deliver more services through the telephone contact centre so that more customers have their enquiry or request satisfied at first contact.
 3. deliver the services our online customers want to access themselves, and persuade those customers to change from phone to online.
 4. Use information from customers to improve service delivery, ultimately reducing the amount of contact we handle that is classified as “avoidable” in the definition of NI14.
 5. use NI14 data, customers’ own feedback, complaints and compliments, mystery shopping and customer consultation, to improve our service processes so that the customer need be less proactive and the Council can make best use of its resources – principally staff time.
 6. identify potential efficiencies and improvements to service processes and the investment to achieve those efficiencies, and put in place a means of getting decisions about whether to realise those efficiencies and improvements.
- (3) Instruct the access strategy development group to complete work on the strategy and action plan and bring it back to the Executive for adoption

Executive Summary

Introduction

- 1.1 The Council has an agreed strategic priority of being an accessible, value for money organisation. This strategy is about achieving that ambition, focusing on removing barriers to access and providing choices to customers, by preventing unnecessary contact and making sure the most cost effective access channels are available and known about.
- 1.2 Unnecessary or avoidable contact is both costly to the Council and an irritation and barrier to customers. Reducing it will enable more services to be delivered within existing resources.
- 1.3 People who use online methods to book holidays and go shopping are not yet able to take that approach to getting the most popular Council Services or doing business with the Council so must phone us when we're open or complete paper forms and so on.
- 1.4 Established processes and procedures can get in the way of easy access, prolonging contact as forms are sent back and forth, both delaying the customer getting what they need, and wasting our own resources.

Proposals

- 1.5 To implement and deliver a strategy that ensures that the processes we use to deliver our services are as simple and quick for customers as possible, and available to them in ways they want that maximise the use of council resources.
- 1.6 To include in the strategy clear objectives and actions that identify and reduce "avoidable contact" as defined by NI14, on all our access channels – face to face, phone, online.
- 1.7 To include in the strategy actions that identify ahead of time the efficiencies that are available through changing a particular process and then capture that efficiency in a clearly identifiable way.
- 1.8 To include in the strategy the implementation of a robust and simple service improvement loop, taking all the information customers provide to use through our feedback channels (Govmetric (the smiley faces on the website, feedback panel in Banbury and phone survey), monthly satisfaction enquiry, annual satisfaction survey, mystery shopping, complaints and compliments, and avoidable contact (NI14 recording)) and making it available in a simple form to service managers to take action.

Conclusion

- 1.9 A draft access strategy has been prepared and comment and feedback on its objectives and aims is sought from the Executive is invited prior to finalising the strategy and its action plan. The draft is attached at Appendix 1.

Background Information

- 2.1 The arrangements the council has put in place to improve access to services are an excellent platform from which to understand and manage access. Directing customers through a single team allows a wealth of management information to be collated and acted upon.
- 2.2 In particular, information about avoidable contact is able to be collected and used to improve services, remove barriers to access, and free up resources to deliver more services. The definition of NI14 is attached as Appendix 2.
- 2.3 This strategy applies this approach to more strands than just access to services, embracing access to information, engagement and decision-making, physical buildings and facilities, doing business with the council, and to equal treatment.

Key Issues for Consideration/Reasons for Decision and Options

- 3.1 The Executive could decide to restrict the remit of this strategy just to customer service. However, the avoidable contact and barriers to service reside in the services themselves; the customer service function can only flag up what is getting in the way of customers accessing services. Service improvement and the reduction of avoidable contact must be a partnership between customer service and the services themselves.
- 3.2 Similarly, information about services and the council as a whole is very important in making sure customers know what is available and what to expect, and therefore has a key role in minimising avoidable contact.
- 3.3 Some services are not accessed through the customer service team. Access to doing business with the Council is one area where, particularly in the current economic climate, a strategic approach to reviewing how people access the council is appropriate. By encompassing these areas in the strategy we ensure a consistent and systematic approach.

The following options have been identified. The approach in the recommendations is believed to be the best way forward

Option One Limit the scope of the strategy to customer service and develop a customer service access strategy instead. The downside of this is that customer service is simply the common “front end” to many Council services, and so requires an holistic approach.

Option Two Don't have a separate access strategy but require access issues to be embedded in all service strategies. The downside of this approach is that there is no consistency of approach and that similar processes carried out by different services – issuing forms, verifying age etc – are conducted differently and efficiencies are not realised.

Option Three Separate out NI14 data collection from the concept of access, and simply choose to “tick the box” on data

collection. The downside of this approach is that we would then be expending effort collecting the data with no benefit to the council. The real merit of NI14 is using the information to change our information, processes and services so that customers do not need to contact us for clarification, additional information or because they don't know where else to go, and thereby saving the customer unnecessary effort and removing value-less activity from our customer service and other service teams.

Consultations

Consultation on the draft strategy will be carried out once the final format and content is agreed.

Implications

(Financial, Legal and Risk and other implications e.g. Equalities, Human Resources, Data Quality and Environmental where relevant)

Financial:

Setting targets to reduce avoidable contact will enable the customer service function to take on more customer handling from other services without increasing its own resource, and therefore preserve services while generating savings.

Similarly, taking a proactive approach to managing customer access so that use of the most cost effective channels is maximised, is intended to release resource for use delivering additional services.

It is however important that the savings are specified ahead of time so that achievement of them is able to be clearly identified. Application of a technique such as activity-based-costing will help identify and realise efficiency benefits.

Comments checked by Denise Westlake, Service Accountant 01295 221559

Legal:

Any access strategy must ensure the Council has complied with all equalities legislation and ensure all reasonable adjustments are made for services to be accessible to all.

Comments checked by Liz Howlett, Head of Legal and Democratic Services/Monitoring Officer 01295 221686

Risk Management:

The "do more for the same" approach relies on being able successfully to remove wasteful contact, which is not yet proven. There is a risk that the targets being set for this are not achievable.

Comments checked by Rosemary Watts, Risk Management and Insurance Officer 01295 225566

Equalities impact:

The overarching aim of this strategy is to make it easier for all people to get what they need from the council. A

"hard-to-reach" group consultation on Customer Service was carried out as one of the fast-track full Equality Impact Assessments (EqIA) resulting in an action plan which includes requirements for physical changes to buildings such as automatic door openers and signage and, staff development such as training for staff in cultural differences and dealing with aggressive or abusive . Similar consultation is planned for the EqIA of online services.

Comments checked by Grahame Helm, Head of Safer Communities and Community Development 01295 221615

Wards Affected

All

Corporate Plan Themes

Strategy Priority 4: An accessible, value for money Council; Improvement strategy aims: Deliver value for money by achieving the optimum balance between cost, quality and customer satisfaction for all services; ensure there is a culture of continuous improvement and innovation across the Council; recognise the diverse needs of the population and communities of Cherwell.

Executive Portfolio

Councillor Nicholas Turner
Portfolio Holder for Customer service and IT

Document Information

| Appendix No | Title |
|----------------------------|---|
| Appendix 1 | The Draft Access Strategy |
| Background Papers | |
| None | |
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