

Scrutiny - Cooperative Scrutiny Reviews

Customer Services Strategy

Friday 10 October 2014

PRESENT:

Councillor Kate Taylor, in the Chair.
Councillors Sparling and Tuohy.

Apology for absence: Councillors Sam Leaves.

Also in attendance: Kelechi Nnoaham, Director for Public Health (Transformation Programme Senior Responsible Officer for Customer Services), Faye Batchelor-Hambleton, Assistant Director for Customer Services (Transformation Project Executive), Peter Honeywell, Transformation Programme Manager, Ross Johnston, Transformation Project Manager, Di Charlton, Service Development and Partnership Manager (Scrutiny Lead Officer) and Katey Johns, Democratic Support Officer.

The meeting started at 11.05 am and finished at 1.15 pm.

Note: At a future meeting, the committee will consider the accuracy of these draft minutes, so they may be subject to change. Please check the minutes of that meeting to confirm whether these minutes have been amended.

1. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest made by members in respect of items on this agenda.

2. **CHAIR'S URGENT BUSINESS**

There were no items of Chair's urgent business.

3. **CUSTOMER SERVICE STRATEGY**

With regard to the Draft Customer Services Strategy 2014-2017, Members were informed that -

- (a) customer services was one of the areas that had been identified as needing significant change in order to realise the Council's goals of meeting ongoing budgetary pressures and achieving its aspiration of becoming a 'Brilliant Co-operative Council';
- (b) understanding customers, their needs and behaviour patterns in interacting with the Council would ensure that funds were spent effectively in areas of value and that services were relevant and easy to

use. Following a comprehensive review of customer services across the Council it had become clear that there was –

- inconsistent service standards across departments
 - a failure to adapt to changes in technology (e.g. growth in mobile computing)
 - a failure to capitalise on the national trend of customers wishing to self-serve
- (c) the approach to this Strategy had been one which would build the capability to meet the city's needs and improve the customer experience by providing facilities for customers to 'self-serve' and services which were designed to get it right first time. Getting it right first time prevented avoidable/duplicate contact which was an added cost to both the customer and the council;
- (d) the Council acknowledged that not all services could be delivered via digital channels and customers would have the choice to 'go digital' or retain 'face-to-face'/human contact. The new First Stop Shop would enable customers to make that choice, as well as provide assistance to those who hadn't previously been able to use, or had access to, on-line services. In addition, the self-serve option would be available in many of the City's libraries thereby increasing access to council services and transactions to many customers who would no longer need to come into the City Centre;
- (e) in order to enable (d) above, significant improvements were being made to the Council's web pages with some being totally redesigned to be more customer friendly and interactive;
- (f) additionally, early improvements were also planned for the Customer Contact Centre. Currently, customers telephoning the Council did so through the customer contact centre where calls were put into queues until an agent was available. Installation of the new IVR system would result in customer requests for information being handled through automated messages allowing calls to be dealt with faster and more efficiently. At all times customers would retain the option to speak to an agent where preferred or where the automated service could not resolve their requirement;
- (g) the new First Stop Shop had been designed around staff and customer feedback and would enable greater staff/customer interaction with the aim being to either resolve customer enquiries there and then, sign-post them to the relevant agency, assist them to self-serve or make an appointment for them so that they can leave as quickly as possible feeling satisfied that their enquiry has been dealt with. In addition, a trial of extended opening hours on a Thursday evening and on a Saturday morning would allow greater customer access to Council services;

- (h) development of the Strategy was only one element of a five-step programme of change which included –
- planning and policy formulation (understanding the customer)
 - Customer Service Strategy
 - Blueprint – description of the vision defined in the Strategy, looking at what currently existed compared to what was required
 - Roadmap – an outline of the key initiatives required and timescales for delivery, dependent on ordering and procurement restrictions. The roadmap was also designed to maximise delivery of benefits by prioritising those service areas that delivered most benefits;
 - Implementation – currently identified as between November 2014 and December 2017

In response to questions raised, it was further reported that –

- (i) with regard to the First Stop Shop, discussions had taken place with both staff and the Trade Unions over the proposed changes to working conditions and staff had now been asked to sign new contracts which would allow a greater degree of flexibility to the opening hours should future changes be considered appropriate to meet customer needs. Some staff had concerns over the new terms and conditions and had refused to sign new contracts. Whilst efforts were being made to resolve the situation, those staff who did not sign would effectively be making themselves redundant;
- (j) the Strategy should state clearly that staff would be adequately supported and engaged throughout in order to help them best achieve delivery of the principles;
- (k) the automation of services and move toward customer self-serve would not necessarily mean a need for less staff. It was hoped that these measures would free up staff time to more effectively deal with an increasing number of vulnerable customers with more complex needs who often take longer to deal with and require face-to-face contact;
- (l) the self-serve facilities in libraries would be additional to those computers already provided and would be dedicated for the use of self-serve customers only. Library staff would be trained to assist customers in using the facilities and in sign-posting customers to other agencies where appropriate. In addition, with the roll-out of free wi-fi across libraries, customers will be able to use their own mobile devices to access council services and make transactions on-line;
- (m) customers who had been assisted in using the self-serve system could be provided with a simple 'how-to' guide containing the council's web address to remind them how to do it next time;

- (n) models of good practice had been explored with other local authorities prior to the review taking place as well as extensive research into the standards of service being applied across the Council by different departments;
- (o) two areas of risk had been identified as having potential to delay the project's implementation were staffing and IT issues not being resolved.

The Panel welcomed the opportunity to visit the new First Stop Shop premises and to scrutinise the Customer Services Strategy. It recommends that –

- (1) the Customer Services Strategy is supported and endorsed by Cabinet;
- (2) the Customer and Services Transformation Programme Full Business Case is considered by the Your Plymouth Scrutiny Panel prior to its submission to Cabinet in March 2015;
- (3) the Your Plymouth Scrutiny Panel is kept updated on progress with the customer services programme, particularly in regard to –
 - the Customer Services Management Restructure
 - Library Services Review
 - Debt Collection and Prioritisation (Housing Benefit payments)
- (4) with regard to the Customer Services 'principles' –
 - the Strategy should state clearly that staff will be adequately supported and engaged throughout in order to help them best achieve delivery of the principles;
 - consideration should be given to putting them on display in the new First Stop Shop.

4. **EXEMPT BUSINESS**

There were no items of exempt business.