

**INVESTIGATION AND REVIEW SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
13TH APRIL 2005**

ITEM 5

REPORT OF THE CUSTOMER SERVICE CENTRE PANEL

The Panel

Councillors Fryer, Green, Hubbard (Chair), Snartt and Tormey

Officer Support

S. Phipps	Assistant Chief Executive – Change Management
F. Whittington	Committee Services Officer
S. Meikle	Community Leisure Development Officer

Terms of Reference

The Panel was asked to consider how it would undertake scrutiny in respect of progress of the Customer Service Centre, within the following terms of reference:

1. Assess the effectiveness and efficiency of Phase 1 in terms of customer satisfaction and staff working arrangements.
2. Examine the layout and procedures for implementation of Phase 2 commenting on perceived weaknesses and problems if any in relation to user friendliness.
3. Consider customer satisfaction with front line contact with Charnwood Borough Council including Contact Centre and Website interaction.
4. Is staff and management training in Customer Relations at the necessary level to ensure customer confidence from the start?

Documents

Phase 2 plans
Site visit to Harborough District Council
Questions to Heads of Service
Questions to the Public/ Customers
Information on visit volumes and types of enquiries
Information on web site including user satisfaction and volume of visits

Witnesses

The Panel spoke with the following witnesses to obtain their opinion:

P. Upton, Building Contracts Design Manager; M. Fitzgerald, Senior Change Manager; A. Russell, Crime Prevention Officer; Heads of Service who are most directly affected by the Service Centre arrangements (Housing, Planning, Benefits and Revenue and Environmental Health); members of Service Centre staff, public users.

Note: The Disability Forum & RNIB vocational college were invited to attend meetings by the Panel, but they were not available to do so.

Supporting Information

The information upon which this report is based is collated with the record of the Panels' deliberations and is available as a separate supporting information pack.(to follow)

The Report

This report was drafted by the Panel and supporting officers based on the notes taken of discussions at meetings of the Panel, and was agreed by the Panel at its final meeting on 4th April 2005.

The Panel found both the documentary evidence and witnesses' opinions it considered being invaluable in assessing the items agreed in the terms of reference. The Panel would like to express its thanks to all who participated in and supported its work.

Background

The provision of a Customer Service Centre is a further development of Charnwood's commitment to improving front line services following the successful introduction of the Contact Centre which identified that "In addition to redesigning the management of telephone contact all reception facilities will need to be radically re-engineered."

Following an initial report by the Centralised Customer Support Services Project Team on how administrative services could be reorganised to improve service delivery, a project was initiated in 2003 to take forward the implementation of a Customer Service Centre.

The concept of the Customer Service Centre is that it provides the face to face contact point at one location for all Council services, making it easier for the service user to access the service or information needed. It complements the two other key access channels to Council services – the Customer Contact Centre (telephones) and the Charnwood web site (internet).

The main objectives of the project were defined as:

1. To deliver customer focussed services at the first point of contact.
2. To establish business systems and processes which enable a consistent responsive service to be delivered to the customer.
3. To provide effective and responsive admin support to service units.
4. To ensure that all those people who are impacted by the project are properly consulted.

The critical success factors for the project were defined as:-

1. To maintain the speed and quality of services delivered to the customer.
2. To maintain the standard and efficiency of administration and support services.
3. To achieve the objectives of the project at reduced costs compared with current arrangements.
4. That a Customer Service Centre, which will include centralised front line service delivery, postal duties, word processing and file management is fully operational by October 2005.

That project was to contribute to the strategic aim of cost effective support to front line services and the core values of 'customer first' and a 'well managed council'. The Council's e-Government Route-map had identified, as a high priority, the development of a Customer

Service Centre supported by efficient and effective back office information systems. This was seen as contributing to achieving the BVPI 157 objective of 100% electronic service delivery.

The Customer Service Centre is intended to have the capability to:

1. provide rapid access to the information customers want, which links departments and services seamlessly.
2. provide business systems and processes which enable a consistent responsive service to be delivered to the customer.
3. develop and meet the requirements of a Customer Service Centre.
4. facilitate 80% of customer enquiries at 1st point of contact.
5. make information more available resulting in improved access to services.
6. improve communication between services.
7. provide a communication service which is capable of being available to all Government, Local Authority and Council departments.
8. measure and report on service performance.
9. track customer enquiries and complaints using established systems developed within the contact centre.
10. provide multi-skilled staff with the core competencies required to work in a customer services centre.
11. provide centralised general administrative and clerical support to all service units.
12. to act as an internal service provider where additional clerical and administrative services are required as a temporary measure.

Through out its work the Panel recognised that the Phase 1 arrangements were designed to be an interim solution pending the construction of Phase 2.

Enquiry Area 1: Assess the effectiveness and efficiency of Phase 1 in terms of customer satisfaction and staff working arrangements.

The Panel used the following techniques to assess this issue;

- Information provided by the Senior Change Manager leading the project
- Direct observation of the operation of Phase 1 by Panel Members, including shadowing advisors.
- Informal interviews with staff in the Customer Service Centre.
- Qualitative interviews with members of the public carried out by Panel Members to gauge user views.
- Discussions with Heads of Service whose services are being delivered by the Customer Service Centre.
- Access to the initial results of a user satisfaction survey being carried out in parallel with the Panel' work programme.

The Panel acknowledges that Phase 1 is an interim solution and that the full staffing structure has not been in place for much of its operation. In this time some reception services have continued to be provided away from the Customer Service Centre and Phase 1 gives only a partial insight of how the full service will operate once all activities are brought together in Phase 2.

The Panel did not get a clear sense that there had been sufficient consultation or investigation of user, service and staff needs at the proof of concept stage. While recognising the logic of the principle of a unified service centre the Panel consider that project planning and implementation would have benefited from more investment in this at an early stage. It is also considered that greater effort on early consultation would have supported more effective communication process with the services and staff affected as the project took shape.

The Panel consider that, as an interim solution, the physical layout of Phase 1 is satisfactory for the majority of users as demonstrated through the survey work carried out and Panel member's observations and interviews with users. The quality of advice and assistance provided by advisors is considered good and the Panel recognise that a programme of training and development for Customer Service Centre staff is already underway and is to develop to meet the extended range of services to be offered through Phase 2. However the Panel recognised that the lack of training before implementation has caused problems with the effectiveness of Phase 1, for both staff and customers. Overall satisfaction by users is good and bearing in mind the interim nature of Phase 1 it appears to be operating efficiently. Nevertheless the Panel identified the following areas of concern which apply to the Phase 2 scheme:

1. **The arrangement for all visitors to report to the reception has the potential to form a bottle neck, especially at peak times.** The mixing of visitors to the Customer Service Centre with those with appointments in other parts of the building was seen as problematic, potentially reducing the quality of service for both categories. This could be compounded by those seeking a leaflet or "simple" piece of information that didn't warrant seeing an advisor.
2. There remain concerns about the **degree of confidentiality** for visitors at the reception point.
3. **Staff security** had been improved by introduction of a uniformed security presence. However, the Panel also supported the concept of the security role being pro-active in supplementing the reception, queue management, giving directions etc
4. The development of an **operational guide** for Phase 1 would have clarified working arrangements for staff and supported services and would have provided a basis for development of the operational arrangements for Phase 2.
5. The Panel is concerned that **staffing should be flexible** and levels should be sufficient to ensure appropriate cover to match the pattern of visitors and to accommodate foreseeable peaks in activity
6. It is accepted that lessons from Phase 1 have informed the design and development of Phase 2. It is suggested, however, that a more **formalised evaluation** would have enabled more effective sharing of those lessons and could have been used to foster communication with services most affected.
7. The Panel identified potential issues with levels of staffing due to a lack of forward planning and consultation with regards to number of staff required and the usage of particular service units prior to the implementation of Phase 1.
8. The Panel acknowledged the need to hold further meetings with Heads of Service prior to the implementation of Phase 2 in order to resolve all outstanding issues to ensure a clearer understanding of the way forward.
9. That the Panel notes that effective administration support is essential for the efficient operation of the Customer Service Centre. Concerns were raised regarding the difficulties of 'back-room' support. To support both staff and customers these difficulties should be addressed prior to the implementation of Phase 2.

Enquiry Area 2; Examine the layout and procedures for implementation of Phase 2 commenting on perceived weaknesses and problems if any in relation to user friendliness.

In addition to the evidence gathered through Enquiry Area 1 the Panel used the following techniques to assess this issue;

- A presentation by the Building Contracts Design Manager of the design and layout plans for Phase 2.
- Information provided about IT developments to support the Customer Service Centre and linkages to supporting systems.
- Observations on the Phase 2 Plans by the Police Crime Prevention Officer.
- Visit by Councillor Snartt and the Senior Change Manager to the service centre operated by Harborough District Council.

The Panel was aware that the timing of their review ran in parallel with the letting of tenders for the Phase 2 works and as such the design was far advanced. Nevertheless following scrutiny of the proposals, and issues raised by the Panel and the Crime Prevention Officer the Panel was pleased that two key changes had been able to be incorporated prior to implementation. The first was to reconfigure the location of the secure interview room to ensure staff could exit into a secure area rather than into the public area, meeting the Panel's concerns and those of the Crime Prevention Officer. The second was to provide some form of seating in the queuing area for cash payments for the benefit of those people who might find standing in a queue physically demanding.

In addition to the areas of concern arising from Enquiry Area 1 the Panel identified the following areas of concern:

1. It was welcomed that the **Service Shop** had been retained in Phase 1 although its profile was less obvious. It is recommended that opportunities for continued partnership working with the County Council to develop joint information and transactional services (including funding), continue to be pursued in the Phase 2 rollout.,
2. The Panel recognised that it is the Council's policy to encourage payments by direct debit and the web site rather than over the counter. However, there was some concern as to the **capacity of the cash area** at peak times and therefore the need for robust contingency arrangements to prevent lengthy queues.
3. The configuration of the advisor positions would need to be monitored to ensure that **confidentiality** can be properly safeguarded. Operational guidance should alert staff to use of interview rooms where confidentiality is an issue.
4. The Panel supported the intention to reconsider the location of two **children's play areas** near to the public waiting area. The Panel also acknowledged concerns regarding health and safety for the proposed play areas and the potential to question whether there is need to provide these areas. However, it was considered that under provision of the Best Value Review and Inspection of Housing Services and also to ensure the provision of a high quality service, the inclusion of these areas should be considered very carefully.
5. The Panel noted with concern the lack of operational guidelines during the design of Phase 2 and therefore recognised the need for the development of clear **operational guidelines** for the Customer Service Centre should be undertaken in parallel with the Phase 2 installation.
6. The Panel noted the steps being taken to develop appropriate **IT systems** to support the advisors, in particular through the Customer Relationship Management System, and that new services were to be phased in over time. The Panel recognised

the key role of effective IT systems to support quality service provision by advisors. The Panel points to the risks to the success of Phase 2 associated with a delay or failure in IT.

7. Information about user numbers, enquiry types, duration of visit etc are currently difficult to capture, highlighting the Panels concerns regarding a lack of consultation with users to plan levels of staff required and the demand for particular services. It is recommended that the IT systems proposed are used to best effect to provide **management data** to inform operational planning and service improvements.
8. The Panel noted the progress being made to ensure **effective linkages** and support between the Customer Service Centre and 'back office' services. The Panel considers the effectiveness of those working relationships to be highly significant to the customers experience and recommends continued effort to developing those relationships, preferably through regular management and team level liaison.
9. The Panel noted some reservations about the degree to which advisors would be able to handle **complex enquiries** and so require frequent support from specialist officers. The Panel considers that there needs to be clear understandings about the point at which advisors cease to deal with an issue and hand it over to a specialist officer.
10. At some future point the potential of **staff working flexibly** between the Contact Centre and the Customer Service Centre, to cover peaks and troughs should be re-examined.
11. Officers highlighted that on implementation of Phase 2 the levels of training to improve knowledge of services would take place at different times for the Customer Service Centre advisors. Therefore until training is completed advisors may only be able to deal with customers within their own areas of knowledge. The Panel acknowledged this, but expressed concern regarding the potential disruption this may cause if customers are dealt with out of line.

Enquiry Area 3; Consider customer satisfaction with front line contact with Charnwood Borough Council including Contact Centre and Website interaction.

The Panel used the following techniques to assess this issue;

- Information provided by the Senior Change Manager leading the project.
- Direct observation of the operation the Phase I by Panel Members, including shadowing advisors.
- Qualitative interviews with members of the public carried out by Panel Members to gauge user views.
- Access to the initial results of a user satisfaction survey being carried out in parallel with the Panel' work programme.
- Information on user satisfaction surveys of the web –site and the Contact Centre.

The findings from surveys and interviews from users of Phase I confirm a good degree of satisfaction with the facilities and services.

The Panel also considered information about usage of and user satisfaction with the Council web site and received information about the satisfaction assessments carried out on users of the Contact Centre. These also indicated good levels of satisfaction with these means of accessing Council services and information.

The Panel considered information on the planned integrated development of telephone, web and face to face services through use of IT so that eventually services and information accessed through these channels would be unified. The Panel concludes that there would be

a continuing need to **monitor satisfaction** across these channels periodically to inform future plans and to check progress.

Enquiry Area 4; Is staff and management training in Customer Relations at the necessary level to ensure customer confidence from the start.

The Panel used the following techniques to assess this issue;

- Information provided by the Senior Change Manager leading the project
- Informal interviews with staff in the Customer Service Centre
- Discussions with Heads of Service whose services are being delivered by the Customer Service Centre

The Panel recognised the relatively short timescale over which Phase 1 had been introduced and that the staffing structure had taken sometime to fully develop. At the same time the staff brought together came from different services areas with differing skills and knowledge (many with well developed skills in specific service areas). In addition some new staff had been recruited.

The induction and training for staff already undertaken was welcomed by the Panel, as was the lead role being taken in this by staff from Units whose services are to be delivered through the Centre. There was a clear commitment from Heads of Services to support advisor training in delivering services and information for their service areas. The Panel recognises that this needs to be matched by **building confidence** in the Customer Service Centre as a new way of working.

The Panel consider that there needs to be a **clear training and development plan** to support the further development of staff, in particular as Phase 2 is installed and as new services are brought into the Centre. That Plan should encompass customer services skills and best practice, technical information to the required level about the services provided, and skills in using the IT systems to best effect to process transactions and to source information, advice etc. There should also **improved communication** with the wider organisation to improve understanding of the Customer Service Centre's role and to build confidence in this new way of working. This would include sharing with services information that will assist service improvement, for instance most frequently asked questions, sources of complaint etc.

Summary

User satisfaction with Phase 1 seems to be good overall, with similar evidence available about user experience of the web and Customer Contact Centre access channels.

The proposals for Phase 2 have been considered carefully by the Panel and are broadly welcomed. The main areas of concern are outlined above and the Panel recommends their careful consideration either for action or as learning points as the project develops further.

In the Panel's view the Customer Service Centre is a significantly different way of working which challenges established practices. **To maximise its potential to serve users effectively the Panel considers the following are the critical determinates of success; the priority issues for the project team to manage as Phase 2 and subsequent Phases are implemented;**

- **Ensuring well trained and motivated staff.**

- **Ensuring excellent relationships between front and back office services – focussed on meeting user needs.**
- **Ensuring effective and integrated IT support systems.**
- **Ensuring well developed communication within the Customer Services Centre and between it and Service Units.**
- **Ensuring effective communication and consultation with service users.**

While these issues should be given priority the Panel recommends that all the recommendations in this report should be given full consideration and be acted upon accordingly.

The Panel also recommends a **further review, to include value for money** of the operation of and user satisfaction with the Phase 2 Customer Service Centre approximately twelve months after its opening.

Supporting papers for this review are available on request from Democratic Services.