Shadow Economic Prosperity Scrutiny Committee
Policy Review 2015 – 2016

The Use of Customer Feedback - Draft Report

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1   Foreword

In setting its work programme at the beginning of the year, members agreed to conduct a short review into the way in which the Council makes use of the feedback and data it receives from the public; focusing particularly on the work of the Customer Services Network and the Corporate Complaints Team.

Both the Customer Service Network and Complaints Service represent a vast source of information about Council services. Coupled with satisfaction surveys they can help to build an accurate picture of how well services are being delivered and be used as a driver of service improvement.

Our review has shown the importance of gathering and using such information so we can learn from customer feedback and also look for any longer term trends or patterns affecting service delivery. But collecting and analysing information about complaints is only valuable if it leads to action being taken. We must make sure that complaints/feedback is not merely a bureaucratic process but is in fact focused on learning and improvement. To do this we must make sure that a structure is in place to that provides timely responses to our customers and helps the Council to learn from feedback. This should involve regular liaison and dialogue with service providers to ensure that information and messages are cascaded throughout the organisation. However, more important than structure is the culture of an organisation. As an organisation we should view the information generated through feedback as an opportunity to improve rather than an indication of failure.

Clearly, information and data can play major role in identifying any problems at an early stage. However, given the severe financial constraints under which the Council operates there is a danger of building up demand for services that cannot be met. It is important that expectations are realistic and can be met within available resources and that we use the tools available to help focus resources to the areas of greatest need and allows us to monitor any emerging problems.

In conclusion, we would like to thank our colleagues on the Committee and all of the officers and staff involved for their hard work during the course of the review.

2   Introduction

2.1   In July 2015 the Scrutiny Committee agreed that the Responsive Services and Customer Care Scrutiny Panel undertake a short review into the work of the Customer Service Network and the use made of information and feedback gathered by the Council. This issue was highlighted as a policy review topic by members of the Panel during the Council's Annual Scrutiny Debate held in June 2015.

2.2   In choosing to look at the issue of customer feedback, the Panel highlighted the importance of such information as a source of improvement in the delivery of Council services. From the outset it was agreed to focus on the information and data generated by the Council's Customer Services Network and also the Council's formal complaints process.

3   Aim of the Review

3.1   To consider the work of the Customer Services Network and the use made of customer insight including satisfaction data and feedback in order to improve service delivery, focusing particularly on the work of both the Customer Services Network and the Council's Complaints Team.

4   Terms of Reference

4.1   Members agreed the following terms of reference for the review:-

   (a)   To consider the operation of the Customer Services Network and the Council's Complaints Team;
   (b)   to consider the mechanism by which customer information and feedback is currently recorded;
   (c)   to examine the use made of customer insight and feedback to improve service delivery;
   (d)   to consider ways in which feedback and learning can be better circulated and cascaded within the organisation.

5   Membership of the Panel

5.1   The membership of the Economic Prosperity Scrutiny Committee is outlined below:

Councillors Beck, Blackburn, Curran, Davison, M Dixon, Elliot, English, Essl, Forbes, Foster, G Galbraith, I Galbraith, E Gibson, Lauchlan, Kay, Marshall, Porthouse, Price, Scanlan, Scaplehorn, D Snowdon, Taylor, B Turton, M Turton, Wood

6   Methods of Investigation

6.1   The approach to this work included a range of research methods namely:

(a) Desktop Research;
(b) Use of secondary research e.g. surveys, questionnaires;
(c) Evidence presented by key stakeholders;
(d) Visit to Customer Services Centre

6.2 Throughout the course of the review process, evidence was gathered from a number of key witnesses including:

(a) Liz St Louis (Head of Customer Service and Development)
(b) Helen Johnston (Customer Service Delivery Manager)
(c) James Dickinson from Palanitr
(d) Margaret Douglas (Complaints and Feedback Team Manager)
(e) Marie Johnston (Complaints Manger Adult Services)

7 Findings of the Review

7.1 Customer Services Network

7.1.1 The Panel began its review by speaking to Liz St Louis (Head of Customer Service and Development) and Helen Johnston (Customer Service Delivery Manager) about the use made of information and feedback generated by the Customer Services Network during their contact with the public and other service users.

7.1.2 The Panel heard that the Council's Customer Service Network is designed to provide an accessible, responsive, high quality and cost effective customer services function. The key objectives of the service focus on:-

- Helping people quickly, courteously and professionally
- Getting it right first time
- Providing people with what they need
- Being inclusive and providing choice

7.1.3 It was noted that the term "customers" represented a broad cross section including residents, service users, businesses, visitors, partner organisations, elected members and other Council employees. Customers are therefore seen as being anyone who requires assistance in accessing or receiving services.

7.1.4 In order to promote accessibility, the service is delivered through a variety of channels, including:-

- in person
- by telephone
- via electronic channels

7.1.5 The Network currently consists of 10 Customer Service Centres located across the city providing face-to-face services for customers. There are Customer Service Centres in each area of the city providing a full enquiry response service (based at Fawcett Street, Southwick, Houghton, Highfield and Washington) and a further five Libraries that provide a basic enquiry service and free telephone and PC access. A contact centre is based at the Civic Centre and is open Monday to Friday 8am-6.30pm. However urgent calls route to a 24/7 service for issues such as emergency repair services/ road accidents and a 24/7 telecare alarm service. The Council's web-site also provides a wide range of information and advice and the ability for customer to make payments and request a whole range of services 24/7.

7.1.6 Key principles adopted in respect of contact at Customer Services Centres includes:-

  o The availability of both drop in and appointment based services;

- o Maintenance of confidentiality for customers with private interview rooms available;
- o Telephones are available for customers to speak face to face to specialists within services where such assistance is required;
- o Computing facilities are available to allow customers to access services via the Council website

In terms of the contact centre, customers can speak directly with Customer Service Advocates or use the automated payments line or automated switchboard facility.

7.1.7 The service closely monitors figures for customer demand. The service currently handles in excess of 1,200,000 contacts per year. There are approximately 170,000 visits to the Council's website every month. Most of these involve looking for information. Only around 8,000 contacts lead to a direct service request. There are approximately 85,000 telephone calls per month and around 12,000 face to face contacts.

7.1.8 There are 118 members of staff in the Customer Service Network. Extensive training is provided for staff to help them maintain a professional customer service. The service also runs an apprenticeship scheme.

7.1.9 Staff are organised into thematic groups, with the amount of training dependant on the nature of the service. Some services tend to be more complex and require greater training than others – for example those relating to Home and Money. The thematic groups include:-

- City and Neighbourhood
- Home and Money
- Health and Well Being
- Life Family and Learning
- Business Services

The General Enquiries number; 520 5555 remains for people wishing to speak with a named contact or for callers who are unsure who to speak to.

7.1.10 Specialist staff such as Social Workers and Planning Officers are on hand to answer more detailed or complex queries or are quickly contactable. The Service also tries to "join up" service delivery to ensure that other issues are dealt with or captured i.e. someone requesting a Blue Car Badge may also require an Assisted Wheeled Bin Collection.

7.1.11 With virtually all customer contact now coming through the Network, the service's focus has changed to resolving issues and making decisions as early as possible; thereby providing a better service at a reduced cost. This has seen an increased focus on customer satisfaction. Customer contacts are reviewed and there is continual liaison with service areas and service delivery teams. An important element of this is the recording, tracking and monitoring of all complaints and compliments.

7.1.12 In terms of waiting times, it was noted that 80% of calls are answered within 60 seconds. Some periods of the year do tend to be busier than others (e.g. when Council Tax bills are delivered). Every effort is made to focus resources at these times and where there is a delay every effort is made to keep customers informed.

7.1.13 Any corporate complaints (and compliments) are recorded and tracked. Work is on-going to reduce the number of avoidable contacts by for example, clarifying and simplifying letters and correspondence sent to customers.

7.1.14 The service is also used to pass messages on to the public which can be very useful in highlighting an emergency or forthcoming changes to the delivery of services.

7.1.15 Members received an update on the information provided by the Customer Satisfaction Surveys. Overall these were felt to be good. While there were variances these principally lay within the Home and Money categories which often deal with more complex and contentious issues or require more processing time (e.g. housing benefit).

7.1.16 Details were provided on the latest customer feedback figures across a range of factors including figures relating to complaints – and customer compliments:-

Complaints

- City and Neighbourhood had the highest number of complaints; 348 of the 416 complaints related to refuse collection.
- CSN had 5 complaints relating to wait times
- Health and Wellbeing had 37; 32 of these regarded social care contact
- Home and Money had 20; 11 for Benefits and 7 for Council Tax
- Leisure Centres; 2
- Life and Family had 20; 19 for Registrars
- Other complaints totalled 12

Compliments

- 13 for City and Neighbourhood
- 1 for CSN
- 1 for Health and Wellbeing
- 1 for Home and Money
- 1 for Life and Family
- 2 Other

3.1.17 A priority for the service has been to promote and develop the use of Information Technology. This has involved increasing the number of services available on line including the reporting of graffiti, the collection of bulky waste and applications for blue badges. This process has included the ability of customers to track services and receive updates. However while the service is

attempting to put as many services as possible online they are still providing customers with other options for contact such as by phone or face to face.

3.1.18 The Schools Admissions process was seen as an example of an on line service that has been subject to a high take up by the public. Previously this had been a resource intensive mainly, paper-based application process. In October 2014 a new web service was introduced whereby customers can log-on, make their application, save it, return to it and submit once satisfied. The data is automatically transferred into the schools system. The introduction was accompanied by a communications campaign. It was felt that this had led to a much improved customer service, significant reductions in printing, distribution and data input. The pattern of demand demonstrates the convenience offered by the system with 44% of customers submitting their applications outside of traditional office hours and 291 or 7% of customers submitting their applications between the hours of 22.00 and 06.00.

3.1.19 The Panel met with James Dickinson from Palanitr, the Council's intelligence partner who demonstrated the use and manipulation of data held by the Council's Intelligence Service and the way in which this could potentially improve decision making and resource allocation. It was important that information was captured from the different parts of the Council in order to build up a picture of local trends and demands. It was noted that Members queries and issues were also logged and processed when reported via the Customer Service Network. New dashboards are being developed which show customer contact per ward, by type and include information concerning timelines and contact channels. The dashboards are available via I-Pads and are currently being tested by the Member Reference Group before being rolled out to all Elected Members.

7.1.20 The Panel heard that the Customer Services Network has a proactive approach to collecting information about the views of customers through customer contract, community engagement, customer surveys and customer satisfaction and complaints. The information gathered is fed into service delivery improvements through regular meetings with those delivering services. These are held on a regular basis and action taken is monitored to assess the effect.

7.1.21 Central to this improvement process is structure and liaison to ensure that information is cascaded throughout the organisation. Senior management in particular has an important role in the process of information sharing and ensuring that learning is cascaded throughout the organisation. Monthly Customer Insight reports are presented to and considered by the Executive Management Team and regular briefings are provided to the Portfolio Holder for Responsive Services and Customer Care.

7.1.22 Recent examples of feedback leading to improvements in service delivery includes:-

- improvement to the wording and content of letters (eg Housing Benefit notification letters) to simplify and reduce confusion and therefore need for follow up action)

- further information being provided by the Customer Service Network at the first point of contact (eg in relation to Social Care provision to allow customers to make better informed choices)

- information being electronically scanned at the Customer Service Centres to avoid loss of documentation and speed up processing times.

7.1.23 During our discussions it was noted that the direct experiences of elected members in their day to day work with the public means that they hold important knowledge about customer views that could help to improve Council services.

7.1.24 We need to be sure that we are capturing issues raised by Members and that this is being feed into service improvement. We also need to ensure that we gather and analyse the most frequently occurring complaints received by elected members from their constituents as these may collectively identify service failure.

7.1.25 There are presently a number of channels for members to direct feedback, issues or complaints. It was important that systems were in place to ensure that issues raised by members were recorded and monitored and that members were aware of who best to contact within the Council. It was also important that the information from these queries is not lost as can provide useful intelligence on issues facing the city and future priorities for the Council. The new dashboards also allow for the reporting of issues directly to the Customer Service Network.

7.1.26 Members welcomed the existence of a system for recording where staff has been complimented on the service provided. It was felt important that staff should be made aware of the positive feedback that is received and that their contribution was being recognised.

7.1.27 There was also reference to the importance of ensuring the service is used to promote messages that the Council wishes to pass on to the public.

7.2 Complaints Process

7.2.1 The Panel then went on to look at the work of the Complaints Team and the way in the information generated is used to inform improvements in service delivery. As part of this process, the Panel met with Margaret Douglas (Complaints and Feedback Team Manager) and Marie Johnston (Complaints Manger Adult Services) to discuss the work of the Complaints Team and, in particular, the way in which feedback from complaints can be used by the Council to improve service delivery.

7.2.2 The Complaints function for the Council is provided by a single team based within the Council's Development Directorate. The procedure adopted is made up of 3 separate sections covering:-

- Adult Health and Social Care
- Children's statutory procedure
- Corporate Process

7.2.3 The team maintains a log and records all statutory investigations. This allows it to monitor the quality and speed of performance in responding to complaints and makes sure that any lessons learnt from feedback are systematically captured, analysed and responded to.

7.2.4 The information generated from complaints was considered vital in providing feedback on the services we commission, influencing services and helping to shape how they are formed in the future. The information and data can also help the Council to identify any themes or trends that may require remedial action.

7.2.5 Reference was made to the Centre for Public Scrutiny publication "Aiming for the Best". It was noted that one of the key messages of the document was the importance of the corporate culture of an organisation and its willingness to learn from experience and improve. The document stresses how complaints were frequently a valuable useful tool for helping to understand the overall health of an organisation and the challenges it faces. In particular the report highlights a number of factors that can help to either enable or represent a barrier to improvement.

Enablers:-

Create a culture of learning and improvement
Provide people with lots of ways to give feedback
Provide leadership in sharing lessons across the organisation

Barriers:-

Being defensive about complaints
Adopting a silo approach and not sharing the lessons across an organisation
Little connection between feedback and strategic planning

7.2.6 It was recognised that for many complaints there would be no specific learning derived from the incident. However, in areas such as social care there were often a number of potential recommendations for improvement. The findings of external review and ombudsman recommendations were also a vital source of learning for the organisation.

7.2.7 As well as being receptive to learning and improvement, it was also important that the leadership of the Council ensured that systems and communications were in place to ensure that the lessons learnt from formal complaints were cascaded throughout the organisation.

7.2.8 It was noted that since the Customer Services Network had begun logging feedback there had been a big increase in the number of complaints. This increase could be explained in part by the effectiveness of training and the new systems in place to record and log the feedback and comments of users. However, it also perhaps highlighted the need to better manage expectation at a time of spending cuts. It was important that the Council effectively communicates with its residents to make them more aware of the implications of reduced resources on the services provided.

7.2.9 Members referred to the importance of education and enforcement in reducing the demand for services in areas such as litter collection and grass cutting. However, it was recognised that this would be a difficult message to communicate and that it will take time to have an effect.

7.2.10 With regard to the complaints process for social care and adult services, these were dealt with at service manager level and the recommendations received a formal response. The action required from recommendations varied from the straightforward to complex. For more complex action, it often took longer to respond. However, actions were logged and progress monitored.

7.2.11 It was important that actions were addressed as quickly as possible in order to prevent their seriousness escalating. A lot of work was going on to deliver the recommendations for improvement, with extensive work with staff on areas such as recording of information. While progress was being made there was a feeling that even more rapid progress was necessary.

7.2.12 As an organisation, it was felt that lessons were learnt but that this could sometimes be in a piecemeal manner. It was important that the Council ensured that the recommendations resulted in long term change and improvement. Overall it was felt that the Council was perhaps not as good as it could be in sharing and learning from complaints across the Council.

7.2.13 With regard to the monitoring of complaints for services commissioned externally by the Council, it was important for the Council to work closely with providers to ensure that it was fully aware of any issues. Regular contract monitoring meetings were held which should highlight any problems. It was recognised that this relationship would be increasingly important as more services were commissioned externally.

8   Conclusions

8.1   This review has looked at the way in which the Council makes use of the feedback and data it receives from the public, focusing particularly on the work of the Customer Services Network and the Corporate Complaints Team.

8.2   The Council has a strong customer focus. Central to this is the gathering of feedback and intelligence from people who are contacting the Council. Such information can help the Council to maintain a strong customer focus and promote services that meet resident expectations.

8.3   As part of this, the Council should be committed to:-

- o Taking customer views into account when improving services
- o Using customer feedback to inform business planning
- o Continually reviewing the way in which we deal with customer feedback including complaints, comments and compliments
- o Letting customers know when their feedback has been used to shape service provision

8.4   The Customer Service Network and Complaints Service represents a vast source of information about Council services. Coupled with satisfaction surveys they can help to build an accurate picture of how well services are being delivered and be used as a driver of service improvement.

8.5   It is important that we gather information so we can measure opportunities for learning and improvement and look for lessons learnt from individual complaints and also for any longer term trends or patterns affecting service delivery. Customer feedback and complaints are a vital source of information about Council services and can help to identify reoccurring or underlying problems and potential improvements.

8.6   But collecting and analysing information about complaints is only valuable if it leads to action being taken. We must make sure that complaints/feedback is not merely a bureaucratic process but is focused on learning and improvement. To do this we must make sure that a structure is in place to that provides timely responses to customer and help the Council to learn from feedback. This should involve regular liaison and dialogue with service providers to ensure that information and messages are cascaded throughout the organisation.

8.7   However, more important than structure is the culture of an organisation. As an organisation we should view the information generated through feedback as an opportunity to improve rather than an indication of failure. As an organisation we should be actively seeking and appreciating customer feedback.

8.8   The Panel would highlight the way that customer service and the feedback we receive can be enhanced by the use of new technology – it can make it easier to track and monitor caseloads and responses. It also provides the

opportunity to use new techniques such as the new dashboards. Mapping complaints can identify hotspot areas which may need to be addressed.

8.9   Clearly, information and data can play major role in identifying any problems at an early stage. However, given the severe financial constraints under which the Council operates there is a danger of building up demand for services that cannot be met.

8.10   It is important that expectations are realistic and can be met within available resources and that we use the tools available to help focus resources to the areas of greatest need and allows us to monitor any emerging problems.

8.11   Looking into the future complaints over commissioned services are likely to become a bigger issue moving into the future. We need to ensure that we have close liaison and that there are regular meetings so we can detect any emerging problems at an early stage.

9 Recommendations

9.1 The Committee's recommendations are as outlined below:-

(a) That the Council continues to look at measures to improve current systems to ensure that the outcome of feedback and complaints are recorded and that any intelligence is used to improve services;

(b) that the Council continues to work to realise the benefits of new technology in order to respond to the changing patterns of customer demand and behaviour;

(c) That the Council continues to examine ways of encouraging users to go on line and engage in digital technology while maintaining a variety of access channels to prevent digital exclusion;

(d) that Customer Services Network and the Complaints Team continue to work closely in order to share information and feedback being generated;

(e) the Council consider ways of further sharing the learning from complaints across the Council.