

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

CUSTOMER SERVICES CONSULTATION WITH BLACK MINORITY ETHNIC RESIDENTS



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Prepared for:
Neil Sloper
Customer Service Manager

Prepared by:
Ashley Hawkins
Consultation Officer

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- 5 out of the 12 participants stated that they had contacted the council in the last 12 months. However after probing, it becomes apparent that only 3 of the participants had actually contacted North Hertfordshire District Council (NHDC) while 2 had contacted other businesses, which they had wrongly associated with the council. Of the 3 participants who had contacted the council, 2 had contacted the waste collection service while 1 had a query regarding grass cutting.
- The preferred method for contacting the council was the telephone. All 12 participants cited this method. However while this is the preferred contact method a number of participants highlighted the passing on of calls as frustrating and an example of poor customer care with all agreeing that issues should be dealt with at the first point of contact.
- There was no interest amongst the group for making contact via the Internet. This opinion was shared by all participants, with lack of computer experience and issues around security when paying for services on-line cited as the main reasons for not using this method.
- There is consensus of opinion from the group that automated messages should not be used at the council. This was seen as confusing especially for the elderly participants in the group and also seen as an unfriendly approach.
- Participants were unimpressed with the usage of voicemail with some feeling this was an unfriendly approach while others found it frustrating as they found themselves continuously leaving voicemail messages for staff that did not return their calls.
- There was no awareness within the group of the Customer Service Centre. However once provided with a description of the facility all confirm that this represents the level of Customer Care they want from the council.
- All participants are in agreement with the Putting People First Standards and feel that these meet their Customer Care needs.

2.0 BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

BACKGROUND

- The consultation officer at NHDC was approached by the Customer Services Manager to run a series of focus groups on Customer Care. This consultation exercise was commissioned following a drop in satisfaction ratings for a number of elements around Customer Care in the 2006 District Wide Survey. The 2006 District Wide Survey showed a sizeable drop in satisfaction in terms of staff friendliness, helpfulness and efficiency when compared with the 2004 District Wide Survey findings. Customer Care is seen as a driver in overall satisfaction so focus groups carried out, firstly to ascertain customer needs in terms of customer care and secondly to measure staff satisfaction with the current Customer Care Standards which are due for re-evaluation in November 2007.

METHODOLOGY

- The Black Minority Ethnic (BME) focus group was the first of the Customer Care focus groups and will be followed up by focus groups for young people, older people and those with disabilities. It was envisaged that the BME focus group would be recruited via the NHDC Consultation panel but was instead recruited via the North Herts Minority Ethnic Forum (NHMEF) so as to develop stronger links between NHDC and the NHMEF.
- Mohammed Alam who runs the NHMEF recruited the BME focus group. The focus group was held at the NHMEF offices in Hitchin on 23rd May 2007 and was facilitated by the consultation officer from NHDC.
- The focus group discussion was recorded using a digital voice recorder to allow for analysis after the event. Participants were paid £15 to attend the focus group. Translators for the group were provided by the NHMEF

3.0 BREAKDOWN OF RESPONDENTS

- In total twelve people attended the focus group. Eight of the group were female and four were male.
- Ten of the participants live in Hitchin while two live in Letchworth.
- The age range of the group was 28 to 79 years of age.
- In terms of ethnicity, four of the group were Asian, two were Chinese, three were Afro-Caribbean, one was Polish and two were Italian.
- With the exemption of three all other participants are retired with four of them being involved in voluntary work. Two of the group are in full time employment while one is a full time housewife.

4.0 A NOTE ON QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

- Qualitative research involves an interactive process between the researcher and those being researched. It provides a way of probing underlying attitudes and obtaining an understanding of the issues of importance.
- It must be stressed however that these results are based on a small number of respondents and not based on quantitative statistical evidence. The findings cover a cross-section of residents but must not be confused with statistical representativeness.
- The results from this focus group will be tested with a representative sample of the district via a quantitative consultation approach.
- The findings in this report may be based on perceptions rather than facts.
- All verbatim quotes appear in italics.

5.0 MAIN FINDINGS

CONTACT WITH THE COUNCIL

- The preferred method for contacting NHDC was the telephone and this was the preferred method cited by all participants. This method was preferred for all types of contact whether it was to make an enquiry or complaint. The second preferred method of contact was in person.
- While the telephone was the main method of contact, participants did identify a number of problems they had experienced when telephoning the council. The main problem highlighted was that calls were not being resolved at the first point of contact with many participants commenting that their calls were being passed around the council office leading to frustration. This issue was seen by participants as an example of bad customer care and was cited as one of the reasons why the public may view council staff as unhelpful.

“When I call the council I do not want to be put on hold and passed around different departments. I find this very frustrating especially when I have to explain myself over and over again. By the time I get in touch with the right person I have usually forgotten why I rang in the first place.”

- Another problem experienced when calling the council was automated messages. There was agreement from all participants that this process was frustrating with many confused by the instructions given to them. Participants also found the use of automated messages as unfriendly preferring to speak with a member of staff instead.

“I am old and find those calls when you have to listen to instructions and press numbers on the phone very confusing. I usually get frustrated and end up hanging up. Why cant I just speak to a human being rather than a recorded message.”

- While the use of voice mail was tolerated and understood by participants many cited examples of when they had been frustrated by voice mail.

“Most of the time voice mail is fine. I leave a message and usually someone will get back to me. However, on more than one occasion, I have found myself leaving voice mail message after voice mail message to no avail.”

5.0 MAIN FINDINGS

CONTACT WITH THE COUNCIL

Face to face contact

- While telephone contact was preferred by the group several did comment on their experiences of face to face contact with the council. This approach was deemed the most appropriate when respondents felt they had a query that required a detailed response.

"If I have a complicated enquiry I like to do this face to face as sometimes it is too much to take in on the phone. Also it is nice to put a face to the voice sometimes."

- However as with contact by telephone, participants did highlight a number of issues when making face to face contact. Issues included poor body language displayed by council staff and unfriendly manner as the main issues. It was stressed however that only two of the twelve participants in the group raised issues around face to face contact.

"The most annoying thing for me when I went to the offices was that nobody smiled. A smile doesn't cost anything and would help put us at ease. It is welcoming when you are greeted by a smile. I just felt I was wasting the persons time."

"The person I spoke to stood over me like a bully and wasn't interested in what I had to say and kept jumping in with his own statements. His tone was aggressive and his body language was very confrontational. He stood there arms crossed. It was very unpleasant!"

Internet /e-mail contact

- There was no interest from the group for using the Internet or e-mail to contact the council or to make a payment. The group consensus was that this approach was more geared towards young people and not older people who found the process confusing. The group all agreed that they did not have sufficient computer knowledge to contact the council in this way and in terms of making payments on line would not use this approach due to security issues.

"I am too old to try and work out computers. That is for the teenagers. It suits them not us!"

"I use the telephone or go to the offices in person. Computers cold, I like to hear a voice or see a face when I have something to say."

"I would never pay my bills on line, I don't think it is safe! Besides it is easier to all this by standing order with the bank. This way if I go on holiday for six months I know I don't have to worry that it is has been paid."

HELPFUL, FRIENDLY, EFFICIENT STAFF

- The group was informed from the outset of the focus group that one of the reasons for running the focus group was to establish the reasons why council staff may be perceived as unhelpful, unfriendly and inefficient. Reasons behind this perception ranged from the mood of the individuals on the day they were surveyed, negative comments heard through word of mouth and people having a bad opinion on the council as they are seen as being directly linked with central government.

"The perception of the council being unhelpful is because people associate them with central government. If central government do something wrong, its also the local council whose reputation gets tarnished as people see local council as merely the puppet for Tony Blair."

"The poor perception simply comes from rumour. Someone tells someone else that the council did this to them and that person passes it on again etc."

- A group discussion then took place looking at the elements that make someone helpful, friendly or efficient both in terms of telephone queries and queries in person face to face

TELEPHONE CONTACT

- The group highlighted the importance of the greeting when contacting the council by telephone. This was seen as important in establishing a friendly rapport with the residents.

'When I ring up the council I want to be greeted appropriately and want to know the name of the person I am speaking to and their job title. This to me would be a friendly greeting. The tone and manner with how they speak is also important. I should be able to hear their smile in their voice.'

- In terms of helpfulness when contacting the council by telephone this was based entirely on whether the member of staff took ownership of the call or passed it around the office.

"If I ring the council I want that person to deal with the enquiry. I don't want to be put on hold or passed around the building. Each time this happens, I have to explain the reason for my call over and over again. This is both frustrating and not particularly helpful."

FACE TO FACE CONTACT

- As with telephone contact the greeting when you first come to the office is crucial. As well as a smile and welcome greeting which should start with good morning/afternoon, followed by the officer providing his name and job title, the group agreed that eye contact is crucial.

"If I am speaking with someone, it is so annoying if they are not looking at me, but gazing at something else in the room or even worse talking to someone else. I find this really rude!"

5.0 MAIN FINDINGS

CUSTOMER SERVICE CENTRE

- There was no awareness within the group of the Customer Service Centre. However when the centre was described to them there was complete agreement that was a perfect example of good customer care.

"We have this in North Herts. Sounds like what we have all been crying out for. Sounds like very good customer care but I want to see for myself before handing out praise."

"This definitely sounds like a step in the right direction."

"

PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST STANDARDS

- Before looking at the current Putting People First standards the group were asked to comment on the level of service they expected when in contact with the council. In terms of answering the phone, participants agreed that 5-6 rings would be acceptable. In terms of responding to a letter or an e-mail the group agreed that a 7 day turn around would be acceptable for a letter and within a day for an e-mail.

"If I ring the council I would expect someone to pick up after 5-6 rings. Staff are busy so it not fair to expect them to pick up quicker than this. Any longer and I would be frustrated and probably hang up."

- The group then looked at the Putting People First Standards and agreed that these were appropriate and represented good customer care.

"This is very impressive. I will put this on my wall and put it to the test the next time I contact the council."