



Appendix A

2009 - Where we are now – the detail

Whole of Council

The Council continues to receive high volumes of customer contacts which do not come into the Customer Service Centre, with many telephone calls, e-mails and letters going direct to service areas. It is accepted that the Customer Service Centre cannot always add value to a customer contact and especially if the contact is of a specialist nature so it is not appropriate for the Customer Service Centre to be a receptacle for all Council contacts.

Service areas that receive high volumes of customer contact make use of efficient and effective call routing systems to optimise customer service levels.

The majority of service areas have access to the CRM system used by the Customer Service Centre and use this to handle work processed by the Customer Service Centre.

Service areas are also working on improving access to their services either via self-serve functions on our website or other automated means.

Flexible and mobile working plays a key part in delivering customer service excellence and increased focus is now given to this to ensure staff are in the right place at the right time in accordance with business and customer service requirements.

Customer Service Centre

The Customer Service Centre is located on the Ground Floor of the Council's main offices in Gernon Road, Letchworth Garden City.

It is a modern, purpose built facility which consists of a back office 'contact centre' area and a front office, public facing area.

The front office area has:

- A reception desk as part of an open plan area where all council visitors are welcomed
- Four private interview rooms
- A Planning Information desk
- Four interview stations where customers can talk to staff with any queries they may have
- Two computers for customer use, giving access to NHDC web facilities
- A plasma information screen, regularly updated to provide visitors with topical and interesting information
- A user friendly customer satisfaction feedback tool
- Comfortable seating for visitors

- A wide range of information via leaflets, magazines – all on display
- Payment facilities
- Subject matter experts on hand to discuss more technical questions
- Trained staff who provide assistance to customers in receipt of benefits or those wishing to make new claims

The back office area is similar to a small contact centre environment and work undertaken there includes:

- Answering and transferring calls that are received via the switchboard
- Answering and handling calls for service areas supported by the CSC
- Taking payments and/or directing and assisting customers who wish to use our automated telephone payment systems
- Responding to e-mails that are sent to the Council's generic e-mail address
- Administrative work associated with some of the service areas supported by the CSC

As at March 2009 the Customer Service Centre provided support for the following services:

- Council Tax
- Benefits
- Allotments
- Waste
- Sports Course Bookings
- Environmental Health
- Planning
- Bus Passes
- IT (Helpdesk)
- Housing
- Comments, Compliments and Complaints
- Parking
- Freedom of Information Requests

The exact nature of the support will vary slightly depending on the service. The CSC adds value:

- Because the contacts received will be of a fairly low complexity (i.e will not require specialist advice), in the majority of cases we will be able to resolve the query at first point of contact
- The CSC can handle large numbers of contacts
- The contact is recorded and tracked through to resolution
- A history of customer contact is maintained

The CSC uses a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system to record all contacts and this allows the Council to fully understand which of its customers are calling and why. The system is also used to monitor service performance i.e speed of response to contacts etc.

The CRM system is closely linked to the Council's website and information from here is used to answer many of the enquiries. This ensures a consistent approach and response to the wide range of enquiries received from customers about the District, County, Council and community services.

Where we are now – what do we know about how our customers contact us

Between 1 January and 31 December 2008:

- 150,000 telephone calls came in to the CSC
- An additional 30,000 calls were received via the switchboard
- 21,000 recorded visits to the CSC
- 14,000 e-mails handled via the 'service@north-herts' e-mail address

Despite the large number of telephone calls received only 37% of all telephone calls to the Council are received via the CSC with the rest going to service areas via direct lines or via single numbers that route calls to larger teams i.e Council Tax and Benefits.

The vast majority (78% based on 2008 data relating to contact via the CSC) of people use the telephone as their preferred method of contacting the Council. 15% prefer contact in person via our offices in Letchworth Garden City and 5% prefer to send an e-mail. These percentage splits remain fairly constant on a month by month basis.

Table 1 shows volumes of contacts received via the Customer Service Centre since it opened in October 2006.

We know that fewer callers are now reliant upon our switchboard service and this is as a result of clearer information to customers as to how to contact the appropriate part of the Council. We have seen a 50 % reduction in calls received via this route since the Customer Service Centre opened in 2006.

In the first six months of being open the Customer Service Centre received 44,500 calls, this figure has dramatically increased and we now see 140,000 calls per annum coming into the Customer Service Centre, and 76% of these being resolved at that first point of contact.

E-mail traffic (via the general e-mail address service@north-herts.gov.uk) has also increased with just under 600 e-mails being received in the first six month period of the Customer Service Centre being open and just under 7000 in the most recent six month period.

There has been a small increase in face-to-face visitors but overall, this channel is the one that has seen the least amount of change in customer behaviour since the Centre opened with one or two transaction types making up the vast majority of visits.

From the above we can deduce that the Customer Service Centre is an effective way for the Council to engage with its customers. More customer enquiries are being dealt with by the Customer Service Centre, this releases capacity in back office areas – and customer satisfaction levels are high. Clarity on this statement and evidence is provided under the next heading.

Table 1 also shows an improving trend in service performance for the Customer Service Centre.

When the Centre first opened 70% of all calls were answered and 39% of those within 20 seconds. The latest figures show that 92% of calls were answered and

77% of those within 20 seconds. Work is still required to achieve what we believe are best practice targets for the Customer Service Centre i.e 95% of calls answered and 80% of those within 20 seconds (in line with National Service Delivery target for Local Government) – but the improvement to date is significant. This has been achieved by:

- Improved utilisation of staff
- Improved staff knowledge and awareness of systems and processes
- Close operational management
- Having an efficient and effective CRM system
- Close working relationships between the CSC and the back office areas it supports
- Having an effective Business Process Improvement function

As well as the channels mentioned above, our customers are also becoming more interested in and reliant upon our website. This is a primary channel of communication for the Council, it is a vital and popular means by which we deliver our services to customers. It enables customers to locate up-to-date information and access appropriate services online without the need to directly contact staff.

Our customers increasingly prefer to carry out transactions online as the web allows access to information and services at a time convenient to the user and this is a major advantage given the number of residents that work outside of our District. Our last District Wide Survey showed that 78% of our residents had access to the internet, and this compares favourably to national statistics that show 65% of households having internet access.

Between 1 January 2008 and 31 December 2008 there were just under 4 million 'views' of pages on the NHDC website. A 'view' is when a page on our website is looked at by a visitor.

We now have e-forms on our website. These are electronic forms that contain pre-filled information and that allow customers to make reports to us i.e fly-tipping, abandoned cars etc and to look up information i.e waste collection day, ward information. In January 2007 380 web users made use of this service, volumes have risen steadily since with a high of 1936 in February 2009 and a monthly average of 669 in 2008.

Customers are able to make payments to us via our automated telephone system and via our website.

We started offering the option to make payments via our website in 2004 and 1676 customers chose to do this. In 2008 this figure had risen to 11,737.

We have seen a slight decrease in the number of payments being made via the automated telephone service, although this continues to be a well used service with 12,063 payments being received via this method in 2008.

How satisfied are our customers with the current approach to service – does it meet their needs?

In 2008 we carried out our 'District Wide Survey', this asked residents for views on a number of aspects of the Council's service and whether this related to contact made with the Customer Service Centre or with any other Council department.

The full report regarding the survey can be found on our website www.north-herts.gov.uk.

Key findings include:

- 74% of customers were satisfied with the service they received when they last contacted the Council. This demonstrates that customer satisfaction levels have, on the whole, been maintained in spite of the introduction of a different and more cost effective way of handling some customer contacts (76% satisfaction in 2006).

There were high and improving levels of satisfaction with regard to our staff:

- 80% were satisfied with how helpful the staff were (78% satisfaction in the 2006 survey)
- 77% found it easy to find the right person to deal with (65% satisfaction in 2006)
- 73% found the staff competent (60% satisfaction in 2006)

When asked around satisfaction with the final outcome of their contact, 69% of customers said they were satisfied, this has fallen since 2006 where 75% said they were satisfied with the final outcome.

The Council undertakes work to identify areas of dissatisfaction and to understand how this impacts customers views of the service provided. For example, in late 2007 the Council introduced a radical change to the way it collects waste and recycling from properties and this resulted in increased levels of contacts from residents, a number of them challenged the Council's decision to introduce the new waste service and suggested the Council change it. The Council did not reverse its decision – however, residents will have taken the view that the outcome of their contact was not successful. The point here is that this demonstrates that the Council is aware of where dissatisfaction levels are and makes plans to either improve customer awareness and understanding of services and/or make improvements to services where appropriate and feasible.

Comments, Compliments and Complaints (3Cs)

A key way for the Council to understand what its customers think about the service is via the comments, compliments and complaints it receives.

These are all recorded on the CRM system in the Customer Service Centre and information is captured on the nature of the comment, compliment or complaint as well as speed of response. This is vital in allowing the Council to undertake such work as root cause analysis for complaints and this, in turn, informs service area action plans and/or Business Process Improvement work programmes.

Table 2 shows volumes of 3Cs received and speed of response between April 2006 to March 2009.

Our customers are making increased use of our 3Cs process to let us know what they think about our services and this should be seen as a positive outcome given the fact that we do widely publicise the process. This publicity is seen as a key factor of having an effective complaints process. The Council currently holds a British

Standard (ISO 10002/2004) accreditation in having an effective complaints management system.

The percentage of complaints being fully resolved within 10 working days shows a declining trend. Whilst this is recognised as being disappointing there are some key factors to bear in mind when considering the results.

- Some complaints, because of their complexity, will take longer than 10 days to resolve. The most important thing is that the customer is regularly updated as to when they should receive a full response
- Complaints are reviewed on a weekly basis and any complaints that remain open longer than the agreed timescale receive particular attention, to ensure that customers have been updated

In 2008/09 only 3% of complaints were escalated to Stage 2 of the Council's process – this allows customers who are unhappy with their initial response to seek a review of any decision. This is a decrease of 1% on the 2007/08 escalation figure.

In addition, the customer has the right to contact the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) if they remain unhappy with the outcome of their complaint. In 2008/09 the LGO investigated 13 complaints where customers were unhappy with the Council's decision on their complaint. No instances of maladministration were found against the Council.

Putting People First Standards

The Council currently sets out its public commitment to delivering customer service in what are known as '**Putting People First Standards**' – these are a set of agreed standards that show what customers can expect when contacting the Council.

These were last formally reviewed in 2004, so to ensure they were still relevant we took the opportunity to review what both our customers and staff think of the standards.

Customers – we asked customers about the standards via our 2008 District Wide Survey.

77% said they were aware of what standards of service they should expect from the Council.

In the Citizens Panel in January 2008 a representation of residents from across the District gave their views. The panel were asked to provide comments on four aspects of the 'Putting People First' standards.

- Replying to an e-mail within two working days – 63% said this fully met or exceeded their needs
- Replying to a letter within 4 days – 78% said this fully met or exceeded their needs
- Council staff will see you within 10 minutes of arrival when you visit – 84% said this fully met or exceeded their needs
- Council staff will answer your telephone call within 4 rings – 89% said this fully met or exceeded their needs

Staff – in the December 2007 Staff Survey staff were asked if they thought the current standards were realistic and achievable as they are ideally placed to comment on the resources available to them to meet our customer service standards. The responses were:

- Answering a telephone call within 4 rings – 79% felt realistic and achievable
- Replying to an e-mail within two working days – 77% felt realistic and achievable
- Replying to a letter within 4 days – 70% felt realistic and achievable
- Providing an appointment time – 82% felt realistic and achievable

Work is underway to provide further clarity around the 4 day target for replying to a letter as there is variation between departments as to response times, many of which are statutory. On the whole, the results above show that the majority of staff believe the standards are appropriate and are achievable.

In considering what action the Council has taken to meet the needs of its customers, as well as the creation of the CSC there have been other improvements in service delivery. This includes, for example, the introduction of flexible working via our Flexibility Works Programme to allow Benefit Officers to visit claimants at home to assess new claims. This has the advantage of allowing our Officers to collect all of the required information at one time and is generally more convenient for our customers.

In addition, there is increased promotion of the automated services available via the internet and automated telephone systems for payments which are convenient to the customer and often more cost effective for the council.

These changes in working practices have had an impact on how we deliver customer service. With specific challenges around the tools that we have at our disposal to deal with customers, and to ensure the current high levels of customer service are being retained we have been able to introduce 'virtual' telephone numbers and an increased use of remote telephony and technology to allow Officers to continue to provide a full service to the customer wherever they are based, reducing the need to travel into the Council Offices and bringing additional efficiencies relating to such processes as application processing timescales.

This, however, requires us to have a process in place to ensure that there are no gaps in our service provision and when systems are changed the needs of our customers at the heart of the change. The Business Process Improvement process which the Council has adopted uses customer journey mapping to ensure that this focus on customer needs is always present.

The introduction of Document Management software corporately, as part of the service transformation project that the Council underwent between 2005 and 2008, also allows us the benefit of accessing improved management information about customer enquiries received via post and e-mail thus allowing these to be more closely managed.