

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

CUSTOMER SERVICES CONSULTATION WITH RESIDENTS
WITH A DISABILITY



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1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- All eight of the participants stated that they had contacted the council in the last twelve months. Reasons for contact included, checking the opening times for services, making enquiries about the road and pavement service, the waste and recycling service and tree cutting service and how to complain about traffic noises.
- The preferred method for contacting the council was the telephone which was cited by all eight participants. However while this was the preferred method participants also liked to make contact in person and four out of the eight had used the e-mail for contacting council staff.
- While the telephone was the preferred method of contact, participants did identify a number of frustrations when contacting the council by telephone. These ranged from being put on hold for unnecessary lengths of time, having their call transferred on numerous occasions and not being greeted on the telephone with a smile.
- All participants highlighted their dislike of automated messages as these were seen as not being user friendly with participants saying they found the process of pressing numerous buttons on the phone during the call as frustrating.
- Participants did not mind the use of voicemail as this would allow them to leave messages for staff and not have to continuously ring up again and again to make contact. It was stressed however that if they did leave a voicemail message they would expect a reply with 2-3 hours.
- Only one out of the eight participants was aware 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. The one member of the group who was aware of the CSC raised concerns about the staffing levels of the CSC saying that on more than one occasion he was made to wait inappropriate lengths of time before seeing the relevant member of staff.
- The perception of the council as being unfriendly, unhelpful and inefficient was seen as being linked to the media and the slant they put on council issues and also linked to rumours being circulated word of mouth.
- Communication was seen as being an issue that the council needed to address to improve customer care.
- All participants are in agreement with the Putting People First Standards and feel 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. This 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 satisfaction with the current Customer Care Standards which are due for re-evaluation in November 2007.

METHODOLOGY

- The disabled persons focus group was the second in the series following on from the Black Minority Ethnic focus group. This will be followed by a focus group for young people and a focus group for older people. It was envisaged that the disabled focus group would be recruited via the NHDC Consultation panel but was instead recruited via the North Herts Disability Forum so as to develop stronger links between NHDC and the forum.
- The focus group was held in Committee Room 2 at the main council offices in Letchworth on 24th May 2007 and was facilitated by the consultation officer from NHDC.
- The focus group was recorded using a digital voice recorder to allow for analysis after the event. Participants were paid £15 to attend the focus group.

3.0 BREAKDOWN OF RESPONDENTS

- In total eight people attended the focus group. Three of the group were male and five were female. The group consisted of three married couples.
- Three of the group live in Letchworth while five live in Hitchin. All participants have lived in the district all their life.
- The age range of the group was 33 to 72.
- In terms of ethnicity, all participants were from a White British Background.
- Five of the participants are retired, while three have caring responsibilities for family members.
- All eight participants had contacted the council in the last 12 months.

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

EXAMPLES OF GOOD AND BAD CUSTOMER CARE

- All participants had a good understanding of customer care and were able to provide examples of good and bad customer care practice. While most of these examples are based on other companies and not NHDC they are still worth highlighting so as to ensure NHDC is aware of the customer care practises to avoid.

“Customer care is not just about taking first enquiry and being polite/courteous and so on it. It is doesn’t stop there. It is about seeing through the whole enquiry, right through to implementation and ensuring all concerns are addressed.”

Examples of good customer care	Examples of bad customer care
<p><u>NHS Hospital appointment</u></p> <p><i>“I had an appointment to see a specialist at the hospital. When I arrived I was met by a member of staff who was very polite and had a smile on her face when she greeted me. I was seen straight away and was kept waiting for longer than 5 minutes between each test that I went through. That to me was perfect customer care.”</i></p> <p><u>Town Lodge</u> (The following quote comes from a participant in the group with vision and hearing impairments.)</p> <p><i>““I went into town lodge with a query and I couldn’t hear or see the lady at the counter properly. She was very patient with me and told me to take a seat for two minutes and then she would come out and sit down and talk me through the query. She was true to her word, sat down with me face to face and we tackled the problem together. This was good customer care as it met my individual needs.”</i></p>	<p><u>Restaurant in Hitchin</u></p> <p>(The following quote comes from a participant in the group who is in a wheelchair and went to a local restaurant with her husband as part of a mystery shopper exercise.)</p> <p><i>“We went into the restaurant and we were neither acknowledged or greeted by staff who chose to simply ignore us. After about 5 minutes we said to the member of staff we had a reservation. Staff member was abrupt and said the table would be a while. After about 5 minutes another member of staff told us are table was ready and it was table 5 which was up the stairs. They made no effort to meet my requirements as a disabled person.”</i></p> <p><u>Town Lodge</u> (The following quote comes from a participant in the group with vision and hearing impairments.)</p> <p><i>“ The lady was obviously aware that I had hearing problems as she came down the stairs and proceeding to shout at me in a ranting manner.”</i></p>

	<p><u>British Gas</u> <i>"We had a small leak from our radiator, nothing major but we contacted British gas to have this corrected. I kept ringing the customer service number and was continuously put on hold. When I did finally get to speak to someone they assured me they would look into it and give me a call back. They didn't and I am forever ringing them up and still my call is now be responded to. This has been going on for 3 weeks now. I am now going to write to them!"</i></p> <p><u>Local Housing Association</u> <i>"I rang the office and initially I was hung up on. I rang up again and the person put me on hold but didn't press the hold button. She then started to moan about me to other staff in the call centre saying what a pest I was. When she realised the phone was not on hold she hung up again. I rang back to complain and she called me a liar."</i></p>
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- The examples of customer care above highlight the key themes of customer care that are seen as important to this focus group. These are:
 - A polite and friendly greeting which includes a smile and eye contact throughout
 - Being seen promptly and not kept waiting
 - Tailoring the service to meet individual needs
 - Being dealt with at the first point of contact when making contact via the telephone

5.0 MAIN FINDINGS

CONTACT WITH THE COUNCIL

- The consensus from the group was that staff at NHDC provide a good standard of customer care overall.

"May I say that I have never had any problems with anybody when I have contacted the council. They have always been very polite in the first instance anyway and extremely helpful."

"Staff that I speak to are very informative and do their best to help us"

- The telephone was the main method of contact used by the group, followed by in person. Four members of the group also stated that they had used and liked using e-mail contact.
- In terms of telephone contact, participants highlighted the importance of the initial greeting and said that this should include a greeting of either good morning or good afternoon followed by the officers name and service area and finally "how can I help you today"

"If you get a pleasant voice and you feel like the person on the other end is smiling, it makes a good start to the discussion."

- Like with previous groups there is a general dislike of the use of automated messages with people findings these both confusing and complicated to use. Voicemail was seen as an appropriate tool as long as staff responded effectively to messages left.

"I hate those things and find it so frustrating. Being asked to press this button and then that button is very confusing" (Quote referring to the use of automated messages)

"Voicemail is acceptable as long as something happens and pretty quickly. If staff cant answer their phone I would much rather leave a message on voicemail rather than hang on the line and get more and more frustrated. Replying to a voicemail or at least acknowledging the call within 2-3 hours would be acceptable."

- Like with contact by phone, participants highlighted the importance of a good greeting when making contact in person. Participants commented on the importance of a greeting with a smile and also that eye contact should be maintained throughout the conversation. Participants stressed the point that all staff should have name badges and also felt that staff in the receptions should wear a standard uniform which would make them easily identifiable, particularly to customers with vision impairments. Two participants of the focus group did highlight specific issues that they had encountered with staff at the reception and these are detailed below. These should be addressed as part of future staff training.

"Staff should maintain eye contact with you as this shows they are listening and interested. While I was talking to a receptionist she was being interrupted and talking to other staff and not looking at me. I found this rude."

"When I came in today for this meeting, I experienced bad customer care. I was pushing me wife, who is in a wheelchair and when she spoke with the receptionist, the receptionist responded to me the carer and not my wife. This should not happen!"

- Participants then discussed contact by letter, stressing that the format was very important and that all letter correspondences should have a heading in bold letters saying what the letter is about and that the main points of the letter should be bulleted. It was also stressed that the letter should provide a response to all issues raised and not just a select few. The letter should also include a time scale for when the issue will be resolved.

- Participants stressed that often letters sent out by the council were getting confused by junk mail. To get round this, it was suggested by the group that envelopes and not just letters should include the NHDC logo.
- Participants also suggested the use of postcard type correspondences. It was suggested that these could be used for acknowledging receipt of letters that could not be resolved straight away. For example if a residents has a complex query which is likely to take a few weeks to respond to, it would be good customer care for the staff member to send a postcard acknowledgement saying the issue is being looked into but it may take a few weeks to provide a definitive response.

5.0 KEY FINDINGS

HELPFUL, FRIENDLY AND 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 the perception ranged from negative stories in the media to negative comments heard through word of mouth.

“This perception comes from people not getting what they want and is fuelled by the local press.”

“If a group of friends are sitting around talking and one person says something negative about the council, the other friends, who may not have had any dealings with the council, may simply go along with what the person has said and have this seem opinion of the council.”

- Two participants of the group did provide examples to support the idea of staff being unhelpful and both of these are linked to communication breakdown. One of the participants requested that letters sent to her be produced in large print due to her vision impairment. This request was carried out following a telephone conversation with staff. However when the lady received her next letter from the council it was in normal font size again. The participant found this process of continuously ringing the council to request a large font size frustrating and saw this as an example of staff unhelpfulness. Another participant experienced the same problems when she requested that plain black text on white be used as she was unable to read black text on a grey background. Both participants requested that their individual requirements be stored on a database so that this practice does not continue.

5.0 KEY FINDINGS

CUSTOMER SERVICE CENTRE

- Only one of the eight participants was aware of the Customer Service Centre. While this participant raised concerns about the staffing levels at the centre all were in agreement that this approach represented good customer care practice.

"This sounds very good in theory but the proof of the pudding will be in testing the process."

"This is the right way forward and as long as you get the staffing issues right this will be successful."

"This sounds ideal, but I do have concerns that mixed messages may be communicated by the staff of the Customer Service Centre and the relevant officers who have the service expertise."

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 6-8 rings would be acceptable. In terms of responding to a letter, participants feel this should be within a week and if the process was going to take longer a postcard reminder should be issued within a couple of days of receiving the letter. In terms of responding to an e-mail, participants felt this should be within 2-3 hours of receipt or at least within the next day.

"I think most customers would be patient enough to wait for 6-8 rings when telephoning the council. I think any longer than this and people would get frustrated."

"If I sent an e-mail to you today I would expect an answer that same day. Even if you were unable to provide an answer to my query, I would expect at least an acknowledgement within 2-3 hours and hopefully a response the next day."

"I am little confused about the statement around seeing you within ten minutes of your arrival when you visit us. I have never been seen within 10 minutes! Does being seen within the 10 minutes refer to seeing the receptionist or the person who can actually answer your query. I would hope it means seeing the person to answer your query within 10minutes."

FINAL THOUGHTS

- At the end of the focus group participants were invited to pass on a message about Customer Care to the council. This question received the following responses:

"I would have liked a smile from the girl on reception, didn't get one. Admittedly she was very busy but a smile would have made us feel welcome."

"Look at us when you talking to us"

"Pretty well done all round. Keep up the good work."

"Put on a smiley face whether on the phone or in person"