

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

CUSTOMER SERVICES CONSULTATION WITH OLDER RESIDENTS



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1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- All five of the participants stated that they had contacted the council in the last twelve months. Reasons for contact included, to make a benefits enquiry, to collect a bus pass and to request a new refuse bin.
- The group had no preference in terms of contact method with respondents saying that their contact method varied depending on the nature of their issue. If they wanted a quick response they would ring the council, if they had a complex issue they preferred to make face to face contact so that all issues could be fully addressed.
- In terms of telephone contact respondents felt that council staff were very efficient when answering the phone and always spoke in a friendly tone and were professional. Again as with previous focus groups respondents found the use of automated messages frustrating and confusing. Voicemail was seen as inappropriate by the group with respondents preferring for phones to be diverted to other officers when a member of staff was not available. The passing of calls was seen as acceptable by the group who said they did not mind being transferred as long as they eventually got to speak to the person who could help them.
- The perception of the council as being unfriendly, unhelpful and inefficient was seen as being linked to dissatisfaction with the council tax and the perceived lack of value for money given by the council. As with previous focus groups there was consensus from the group that there is general lack of knowledge as to what services are provided by the district council and what services are provided by the county council and other external organisations.
- None of the participants were 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.
- All participants agreed with the Putting People First Standards and felt these meet their Customer Care needs, except for the statements around responding to e-mails and meeting customers within 10 minutes of their arrival at the office. For e-mails respondents felt that the two day turn around for responding to an e-mail was too long and that a response should be received on the same day even if this was just to acknowledge receipt of the customers e-mail. In terms of meeting customers within 10 minutes, respondents felt this was acceptable if they had not made an appointment but felt this was too long to expect people to wait 10 minutes if they had an official appointment with a member of staff.

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 older persons focus group was the third in the series following on from the Black Minority Ethnic focus group and the disabled persons focus group. This will be followed by a focus group for young people. The older persons focus group was recruited through the Consultation database which was established as part of the 2006 District Wide Survey consultation process. This was a difficult focus group with only five out of the thirty people contacted willing to attend the session.
- The focus group was held in Committee Room 3 at the main council offices in Letchworth on 4th July 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 five people attended the focus group. Three of the group were male and two were female.
- Two of the group live in Letchworth, while one lived in Offley, Baldock and Royston. All participants have lived in the district all their life.
- The age range of the group was 61 to 63.
- In terms of ethnicity, all participants were from a White British Background.
- Four of the participants are retired, while one is semi retired and a part time lecturer.
- All five 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

WHAT IS CUSTOMER CARE

- Several participants provided quotes on what customer care meant to them and these are detailed below:

'Customer care is everything. Its how you are treated as a customer from start to finish, irrelevant of what method of contact you use.'

"Customer care is about being treated well by staff, being treated like a human being!"

""Customer care is about the whole package. Not just about providing a friendly face and talking professionally but actually carrying through what you say and delivering what you have promised.'

CONTACT WITH THE COUNCIL

- As with the previous focus groups the consensus from the older persons group was that staff at NHDC provide a good standard of customer care overall.

"Whether I have contacted in the council in person, by phone or by letter I have always been well treated by well trained and polite staff.'

'I can say, hand on heart that staff at the council have always been polite professional and treated me with respect.'

- There was no preferred method of contact highlighted by the group with participants agreeing that different enquiries required different contact approaches.

'If I have general query with the council, say about when the bins will be emptied I will ring them up as this is the quickest and most effective method for getting a quick response. If my query is about a planning application or issue of that type I more likely to write to the council or pop into the offices. Basically the more complex the query the more likely I am to write or go to the offices in person.'

' My husband prefers to do council business in person. He always would go to town lodge to pay our council tax in person. He liked to see the cheque being received by the cashier and then to receive a receipt of payment. You don't get those securities when you pay by post or Internet. This approach is not in place now that the offices have moved to Gernon Road and he missed it.'

' I prefer to use the e-mail for contacting the council as it is quick and easy and I usually get a speedy response.'

- In terms of telephone contact, participants again highlighted the importance of the initial greeting and that this should be clear and unrushed. In terms of what should be included in the greeting, the group agreed that this should include either good morning or afternoon followed by the council name, service area, the officers name and can I help you. Participants said that they were happy for call to be transferred as long as they were told the name and number of the person they were being transferred to. This was seen as essential as participant had previous experience of being put on hold while a call was being transferred only for the call to be cut off. This was seen as a major frustration by the group.
- Like with other groups there is dislike of automated messages with participants saying that these were confusing, frustrating and also unfriendly.

'Problem I have with automated messages is that all those menu options are so confusing. Listening to a machine winds me up and its just so cold and impersonal.'

'I don't like automated messages but I get round all the menu options by simply pressing zero, which puts me through to an operator.'

- Unlike previous focus groups who supported the use of voice-mail, participants of the older persons focus group did not like the use of voice-mail, preferring for calls to be picked up by someone else in the office so that a message could be left.

'I don't like voice-mail because I am never sure if the message I have left is received properly or understood. If a person is not able to pick up their phone, it should be diverted to a colleague who can take a message. At least this way I know my message has been received and I know that someone will get back to me.'

'What I don't like about voicemail is you leave a message and then find that you sit in waiting for the person to call back which feels like an endurance test at times'

- Like with contact by phone, participants highlighted the importance of a good greeting when making contact in person. Again as with telephone contact, participants said they would expect to be greeted with a 'good morning' or 'good afternoon' followed by 'how can I help you.' Eye contact and a smile were also seen as important qualities. The speed at which you are seen when making face to face contact was seen as very important with the group consensus being if you have an official appointment you should not be made to wait more than a couple of minutes. Staff showing their name badge was also seen as important when making face to face contact with staff.
- Three issues were raised with regard to face to face contact with the council both based on recent experiences. Firstly one participant mentioned that she found it inappropriate that a member of staff should be eating chewing gum or a sweet when talking with residents. This was seen as unprofessional and rude by the group as a whole. The next issue raised was around officer dress with one participant complaining that some staff were inappropriately dressed in vest tops etc. While the participant was not suggesting staff should wear a uniform she did suggest that dress code for council staff should be tightened to 'smart casual.' The third and final issue raised was with regard to the use of 'plasticised' language. This refers to the use of 'Have a nice day' etc. All participants agreed that such terminology was annoying.

" If there is one thing that really annoys me is people eating on the job. I find someone talking to me while chewing gum or a sweet very rude and totally unprofessional. I have been known to complain to managers on this issue on more than one occasion.'

- Participants then discussed contact by letter stressing that all written correspondences should be correctly written and not full of spelling mistakes. The letter should be written on official council paper, should have a heading, should provide a response to all issues raised and finally should have a timeframe for when issues will be dealt with by.

5.0 MAIN 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 participants being confused about what services are provided by the district council and those provided by the county council and issues around the council tax and value for money.

'I don't care what anyone says but personally the minute I get that council tax bill I get cross and straight away I have a negative opinion of the council. Its to do with value for money and sorry but I don't feel we get that which I why I think so many people have this view of council staff being unhelpful and unfriendly.'

'I am never clear about who provides what services. For example is road and pavements repairs the responsibility of the district council or the county council. '

5.0 KEY FINDINGS

CUSTOMER SERVICE CENTRE

- None of the five participants in the older persons focus group was aware of the Customer Service Centre but once briefed on this all agreed that this represented good customer care.

“This sounds just perfect and would defiantly tick all my customer care boxes.”

“This sounds good in theory but does it actually work.”

“This is excellent but I am concerned still about communications. How do we know that staff manning the centre will all be signing from the same song sheet and not sending out mixed messages.”

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 4-6 rings would be acceptable. In terms of responding to a letter, participants felt that 4 days was extremely good. In terms of responding to an e-mail, participants felt this should be the same day as e-mail was sent even if this was only to acknowledge receipt. There was a little discussion on the time detailed in the Putting People First Standards for seeing someone when they visit the office. Participants agree that it was acceptable to wait 10 minutes to see someone if they did not have an appointment but felt that if they did have an appointment they should be made to wait for longer than a few minutes.

“4 rings is extremely quick. I would be happy with 4-6 rings and for staff to pick up the phone and respond in a calm, unflustered and friendly manner.”

“If I don’t have an appointment I would be happy if I was seen in 10 minutes but if I do have an appointment I would expect to be seen at the time on my appointment card. If I had an appointment and was kept waiting for 10 minutes, I would find that very unprofessional and rude!”

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:

“Very good, keep up the good work.”

“I have always found staff friendly and efficient, don’t let the standards slip”

“Don’t allow staff especially reception staff to chew when on reception. Its rude!”