SUBJECT: PORTFOLIO HOLDER REPORT – CUSTOMER SERVICES

REPORT BY: COUNCILLOR SANDRA GRATRICK
PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR CUSTOMER SERVICES

1. Purpose of Report

1.1 To update Members on matters of performance relating to the Portfolio for Customer Services. The report also responds to questions submitted in advance by Members of Performance Scrutiny Committee.

2. Background

2.1 The Portfolio for Customer Services is a new appointment. It was created in May 2008 in recognition of the high profile of front-line services and to focus attention on the issues that directly affect residents and others as they access information and request services from the Council.

2.2 The Customer Services portfolio has direct responsibility for the following areas:

- City Hall main reception
- City Hall switchboard
- Cash office payment collection and banking of monies
- Face to face drop-in enquiries for Benefits, Council Tax, National Non-Domestic rates (NNDR), Housing rents and Housing Repair requests
- Telephone contacts for
  - Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit
  - Council Tax
  - Arrears recovery
  - NNDR
  - Refuse collection
  - Recycling
  - Environmental Services, including stray animals, dog fouling, abandoned vehicles and fly tipping.
  - Environmental Health, including pest control, pollution, and food safety
  - Housing repair requests
  - Housing rent enquiries
  - Travel concessions
- Issue of travel concessions, bus passes and taxi tokens
- Benefits Advice, telephone and outreach work
The Portfolio Holder for Customer Services also has a keen interest in customer care generally although technically this falls under the Portfolio of the Leader of the Council, as he has responsibility for customer care and corporate complaint handling.

3. Performance

3.1 In a year we:

- Answer over 170,000 calls to our contact centre
- 140,000 calls to our switchboard
- In total over 300,000 calls
- See 40,000 personal callers about Housing, Council Tax and Benefits enquiries
- Attend to 66,000 people at the main reception desk

3.2 The Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) peer review of Council services concluded that one of the key strengths of the Council was the high quality of the front-line team.

“The Council’s Customer Service Team are highly motivated and customer focused. These staff are consistently focused on providing a high quality service for the customer.”

3.3 When I took up my position I was delighted to spend time with the team and witness their commitment to the customer, often being obsessed with getting things right. I was, however, concerned at the time taken to answer calls within the contact centre and I know other Members were also receiving reports from constituents about the difficulty in getting in touch. My priority was to improve this situation and I am delighted that we have seen a real turnaround in performance as demonstrated in the call statistics.

3.4 In May 2008 we were answering 82.1% of the calls made to the Customer Service team as a whole, with only 73.3% of those being answered within our own target of 1 minute. That situation has been transformed to a position where in January 2009 we achieved an 92.4% answer rate with 83.5% getting through in less than 1 minute. The average wait for a call to be answered was 69 seconds in May whereas the latest figure for this measure is now 29 seconds.

3.5 This turnaround has been achieved by

- Undertaking careful analysis of call patterns and where possible re-aligning working hours to try to match busy periods
- Training staff to take calls across a number of skill areas
- Working closely with our colleagues across service areas to develop new ways of working that have reduced the time needed to deal with each call.
• Installed new, more efficient IT systems
• Holding regular performance monitoring meetings to ensure that performance is kept as the central focus of the team

4. Future Strategy

4.1 Customer Service delivery and our priorities are currently under review. We are working on the development of a sound, value for money strategy, which provides the access channels that our customers need, while making the most of promoting the most efficient methods of servicing those needs.

4.2 This review will build on our recent successes and optimise the quality and strengths that we have, while recognising the less successful and less cost effective aspects of our current service and performance.

4.3 We will be utilising technology to its best advantage to enhance what we currently offer customers. We want to ensure that we meet the needs of customers and deliver our services in the way that they expect to access them.

4.4. We have recently undertaken a channel assessment, which is essentially a comprehensive mystery shopping programme. This assessment was completed by Caltienne, a management consultancy with many years’ expertise and experience in customer service delivery. The report from this exercise was used as the introduction for the all Member Workshop, which took place on March 10 2009 and it will help us to form our plans for future improvements.

5. National Indicators

5.1 There is one National Indicator relevant to this portfolio. NI 14 Reducing avoidable contact: minimising the proportion of customer contact that is of low or no value to the customer.

5.2 In order to report on the NI14, we have completed a sample survey of 4,568 customer contacts, which were made in one week across a number of key service areas. These contacts were classified as avoidable or unavoidable, depending on the reason why customers had to get in touch with us. Often people call us for clarification of letters or to chase progress and it is these ‘avoidable’ calls that the new indicator seeks to measure.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>no. calls/visits</th>
<th>Unavoidable</th>
<th>Avoidable</th>
<th>% Avoidable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4568</td>
<td>3646</td>
<td>922</td>
<td>20.2</td>
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The percentage figure is of little use in itself, although it suggests that by making changes to the way we deliver services and by ensuring that our communication is effective, we could potentially cut the number of customer interactions that we deal with by at least one fifth.
An action plan has been drawn up with each of the service areas to help reduce avoidable calls where issues were identified as a result of the survey.

6. Member Questions

6.1 What is the level of ombudsman complaints and what is our performance in this respect?

I can report that in the current financial year there have been no Ombudsman complaints at all about Customer Services and there have been no written complaints about Customer Services.

Ombudsman complaints about other areas of Council service are considered within the appropriate portfolio, however Members may be interested in the following information as reported to Standards and Audit on 31 July 2008. The Local Government Ombudsman Annual Letter for the year ended 31 March 2008 stated the number of complaints received by the Ombudsman against the Council was 20. This is the same number as in 2006/07.

6.2 How is learning from complaints leading to service improvement?

Complaints are always taken very seriously, thoroughly investigated and discussed at management meetings to ensure that any necessary changes or disciplinary action is instigated.

A new electronic database for complaints has been built in-house utilising the existing ‘Anite at Work’ software. This software incorporates an area against each complaint for learning. This information will be passed to Directorates Departmental Management Team and also reported to Standards and Audit as part of the annual report on complaints.

In the Customer Services area itself, complaints are infrequent, therefore rather than relying on complaints we actively seek customer feedback on our performance. We do this in a number of ways:

- Telephone call-backs by Team-leaders
- Customer Satisfaction surveys
- Customer comments via the website
- Questionnaires to the Citizens panel
- Customer Comment cards

The Customer Service Management team also discuss this feedback and seek to improve services in line with customer expectations wherever possible. The comment cards are displayed prominently in the City Hall reception area.
6.3 **Access to Services Strategy – What progress is being made now that the E08 customer needs group has stopped meeting**

We are drawing up a strategy to help us meet the needs of our customers. A number of key issues including our vision for the future have been drawn together into a discussion document, which has been circulated to all Members and senior officers. This document was discussed at an all Member Workshop on Tuesday March 10. This session provided a valuable cross-section of views and has now formed the start our consultation process. Our next step will be pulling together a draft strategy, on which we will be consulting with our customers.

6.4 **What is the IT vision for the service?**

We see IT as a tool and enabler to improving our services and this will form an important part of the access strategy. We recognise that our Website is an important aspect of customer interaction and is in effect our ‘shop window’ for council services; this will therefore form a critical part of future development.

6.5 **How do we measure Customer Satisfaction in this area and what is it telling us?**

We use both quantitative and qualitative methods of gleaning our customer satisfaction levels. In terms of raw statistical information we conduct exit surveys and have a system of calling customers who have used our telephone contact centre to ask them if they are satisfied with how their enquiry was dealt with and if they found the staff member helpful and knowledgeable.

Results from this phone survey are encouraging with 76% of respondents describing the telephone contact centre as good or excellent. This data has been used to focus our improvements for example concentrating on reducing waiting times, which caused customers dissatisfaction with the telephone service.

6.6 **What progress is being made to improve DHCS complaints handling?**

This area of performance falls within the portfolio for Housing and I have asked my colleague to respond to this in writing.

6.7 **Should we look at stretching our targets next year in areas of excellent performance to ensure continued high levels of performance?**

Maintaining performance against current targets, when demand is increasing is an improvement in itself. I would like to ensure that targets are maintained or improved where possible. As part of the strategy we will be consulting on targets and service delivery standards and setting these at
levels that are stretching but achievable within our resource constraints. The delivery of other improvements such as better website access will enable us to concentrate more of our current resource on dealing with those customers who really need to talk to us, either face to face or on the phone.

6.8 Telephone answering times

Please see telephone answering times as recorded in the contact centre on the attached appendices.

6.9 How has the ‘credit crunch’ affected customer services?

We have seen an increase in the number of customers coming to see us to seek advice, particularly in the areas of Benefits and Revenues. While benefit related telephone calls to our contact centre have increased by only 4.0% in the period between January and February 2009 and the same period for the previous year, there is a particularly noticeable increase in face-to-face enquiries, where we have seen a growth of 30% in the numbers of people coming into City Hall. These enquiries tend to be more complicated and take longer to deal with than the average caller so this has affected our performance in the last few weeks.

We have opened additional enquiry points and this has helped us to some extent and we are also in the process of replacing staff that have recently left. At this time of year when the new Council Tax bills, new rent letters and benefit notifications all get sent out, demand increases dramatically. We ensure that as many staff as possible are available and manning phones and enquiry points to meet this increase.

7. Recommendation

7.1 Members consider the report and the appendices.