

SCRUTINY REVIEW OF CUSTOMER SERVICES

NOTES OF FOCUS GROUP – STAFF & CLIENT SIDE

29th NOVEMBER 2005

Members Present: Cllrs John Bevan, Sheila Peacock & Brian Miller

Also present: Colin Morgan (CSO), Handan Veleddin (CSO), Esther Walters (CSO), Yvonne Johnson (CSO), Tijen Ali (CSO), Muideen Akorede (CSO), Vince Piraino (CSO), Lisa Cass (Cs, Service Development Manager), Cecilia Verry (Housing Administrator), Mel Davis (Housing Manager), Helen Kent (Council Tax Assistant), Maxine Broadbridge (Benefits & Local Taxation Manager), Sinem Mustafa (Senior Benefits Caseworker), Ryan Ledger (Benefits, Communications Officer), John Forde (Deputy Head of Student Finance), Ray Gallo (OD&L Consultant), Michael Carr (Principal Scrutiny Support Officer), Afazul Hoque (Principal Scrutiny Support Officer).

1. WELCOME & INTRODUCTIONS

Cllr John Bevan welcomed all present and gave a brief background to the Scrutiny Review Process.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (IF ANY)

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Oatway.

3. STAFF & CLIENT SIDE FOCUS GROUP

Ray Gallo from Organisational Development & Learning introduced himself and asked all present to introduce themselves. Following which Ray explained to the group that the aim of this focus group was to 'raise awareness of the strengths and areas for improvements in Customer Services including relationships and communication with Client Side'. He explained that the session will take place in four parts which are as follows:

1. From a Customer Services perspective list the strengths, areas for improvement and relationship and communication with internal customers;
2. The whole group to discuss and highlight their main concerns under each of the headings;
3. Individuals to rank in terms of priority for improvement each of the heading;
4. Each group to choose one of the highest ranking heading to define what the issue is, and how it can be resolved and to finally present this to the whole group.

The Focus Group raised the following issues:

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Staff Training & Motivation

- Involve client side in CS training to ensure customers receive consistent service and also send CS staff to Client Side training;
- Targeted training for specific staff;
- CS staff need recognition and incentives for achieving targets, such as a monthly award;
- There needs to be a balance between targets and quality of service expected, to reduce pressure on staff trying to balance both;
- Customers expect staff to have full knowledge of an area when they contact Customer Services. Basic knowledge of staff in CS of client services may be detrimental to other services;
- Generalists vs Specialists;
- Quality vs Quantity (targets)

Waiting Times

- Depends on the time when the customer contacts CS;
- CS staff under constant pressure to keep waiting times down, this may compromise the quality of service;
- Customers wanting basic information have to wait in a queue. This may be fast tracked by having a specific desk for basic queries, or handing in documents etc;

Performance

- Targets to be realistic – Quality vs Quantity
- Currently balance between targets and service expected is not right;
- Client Side not aware of CS targets and vice versa;
- CS and Client Side offering different standards of services;
- Client Side expect a lot of their customers queries to be dealt at first point of contact;
- Queries are not being dealt with at first point of contact because of lack of knowledge on subject which comes to the training of staff;
- Staff not aware of the cut off point between the role of CS and Client Side;
- There are a large number of repeat customers contacting CS because Client Side are not completing tasks. I.e Repairs not been undertaken.
- Only Team Managers are allowed to contact Client Side staff;
- Customer contacting about student finance face different service levels because they may have to contact different organisations such as the student grants department;
- IT has a significant effect on performance.

First Impressions & Elderly Service Users

- Elderly customers are often confused and frightened by letters sent by the Council. There needs to be a different way of dealing with this group of customers;

- They need a personal touch, empathy and understanding;
- Letters sent out by the Council could be simplified;
- Queries about repair service take long time and create a bad impression because there are only 3 staff in back office to take calls and therefore lines are often engaged;

Client Services

- Communication breakdown between the two services;
- No clear cut off point between different areas of responsibility ;
- Lack of understanding about each others roles;
- Each service area needs to be approached individually and a service provided according to their needs;
- Different priorities for each service (CS calling Client Side affects their staffs ability to meet their targets);
- General perception of CS within the Council may be one of resentment for various reasons;
- Staff within the Council need to realise that everyone needs to work together as everyone working towards the same goal;

STRENGTHS

Training

- Well structured and regular;
- There is a need for Team Managers to acquire greater knowledge of a service area to reduce calling client side. Each Team Manager should have full knowledge of the process involved in the Client Side especially for the key services;
- Shadowing of staff in Client Side may be a good way of improving knowledge;
- Customers have stated that the CSC are nice and staff approachable and friendly.

Customer Focus

- Customers said the experience of visiting a CSC was better then before;
- Customers treat staff with more respect because of the service they receive and the environment in which they receive that service.

Access

- More ways available for residents to contact the Council;
- Improvements have been made to providing services to the diverse communities through specific surgeries such as the Turkish Surgery;

COMMUNICATION & RELATIONSHIPS WITH CLIENT SIDE

- Lack of communication;
- Better understanding of each others roles and what is expected from each other;
- Us vs them attitude;

- When CS set up did not give enough consideration on the impact it would have on staff in other services;
- There is a need for all staff to show that they can work together;
- CS and Client Side have different priorities;
- Management need to be trained on each of the key service areas;
- Better communication to staff from Management from both CS and Client Side.

Following on from the above discussions the groups looked at an issue and suggested ways of improving that issue:

Area of Concern: Service capacity and training – Process / knowledge/ expertise	
What is it?	How can we improve it?
Home Visit	Written solutions / follow up (Information pooling)
Definition of roles	Clarification and communication
Specialist / expertise	Share skills & knowledge – relationship between CS and Client Side

Area of Concern: Relationships with Client Side	
What is it?	How can we improve it?
Communication	Feedback on liaison, shadowing of services (both Client Side & CS)
Priorities	Understanding each others roles, include visit to CSC for new staff as induction
Information	Prioritise information sent and at the right time
Customer Focus is the responsibility of the whole Council not just Customer Services.	

Area of Concern: Quality not quantity	
What is it?	How can we improve it?
Transaction times	Revised transaction time depending on nature of enquiry.
	Specialist Team Leaders

Cllr John Bevan thanked everyone for attending and explained that the Panel would be producing a report from all the information they have received. The report and its recommendations will have to go through the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and the Executive before any recommendations are implemented. He said that the final copy of the report would be sent to all participants.

The meeting finished at 9.10pm.

Cllr John Bevan
Chair, Scrutiny Review of Customer Services