

## **WIRRAL COUNCIL**

### **COUNCIL EXCELLENCE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**21 SEPTEMBER 2010**

#### **REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF FINANCE**

##### **CUSTOMER SERVICE FOCUS GROUP**

### **1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1 This report details the work undertaken by Customer Services to ensure service standards are maintained and reviewed at the One Stop Shops, the Call Centre, and on the Web. A number of ways are employed to do this and one undertaken in 2009/10 was the use of a Customer Focus Group. The Council Excellence Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 8 July 2010 (Minute 21) asked for more details on the Focus Group which this report provides.

### **2. BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 Customer Services provide three main access channels, face to face (via the One Stop Shop network), Call Centre and Web.
- 2.2. In order that both users and Members can have a measure of service quality there are Customer Care service standards. These set timescales for responses and quality in handling enquiries which then have to be monitored. In order to minimise monitoring and ensure resources are maximised at the front line a variety of monitoring methods are used, ensuring a wide representation of views and results.
- 2.3. Timescales can in many cases be system monitored but quality is harder to measure. This can be measured by using on site exit surveys, peer review (by another body), benchmarking with other local authorities, mystery shopping and responses from the Residents Survey. Alongside this I use independent accreditation such as Charter Mark (now Customer Service Excellence standard), Investors in People, and Equality Framework for Local Government (Level 3) the latter two being achieved as part of a corporate project.
- 2.4. A further option is to access a small group of customers to be asked by an independent person for their detailed views which can sit alongside the exercises above.

### **3. CUSTOMER FOCUS GROUP**

- 3.1 The Group was set up by Mott McDonald an independent market research agency in Liverpool which includes the former Merseyside Information Service. Their role was to set up the Group, administer it and report back. They were supported by one member of the Customer Service Team who acted as link and set out what needed to be covered by the Group.
- 3.2. The people used were members of the public who on contact with the Council had given their name as being willing to be contacted further. When contacted by Mott McDonald they agreed to attend a one off meeting to air their views on Customer Services. A total of six unidentified people were used to help form the report. This was felt by the facilitators to be an appropriate number in being able to bring out each person's own view and not to be lost in a larger group.
- 3.3. The idea behind this information is to understand customer needs and preferences. This group of local residents was used to explore and define what constitutes good customer service. The independent facilitator helped generate discussion and responses on subjects such as general views on good and poor customer service, experience of contacting the Council (ease of doing so and quality), and ongoing preferences in methods of contact.
- 3.4. The intention is to use such direct consultation, supported by customer feedback analysis, satisfaction surveys and exit interviews to provide the services customers require, at the appropriate time and using the most relevant delivery channel.
- 3.5. The small number of people used was sufficient to create a detailed report. However it is accepted that such a small number cannot drive a strategy but is a useful addition to help balance, reinforce or counterpoint results from other methods.

### **4. REPORT SUMMARY AND OUTCOMES**

- 4.1 I have attached as an appendix the report which details the views of the Group on general customer service and what was thought of the Wirral Council contacts.
- 4.2. The key outcomes can be summarised as:
  - 4.3.1. One Stop Shops – were felt to generally respond to expectations.
  - 4.3.2. Telephone responses (Council wide not Call Centre specific) - overall there was felt to be a need to improve handling of calls as people were passed around and had to explain their issue again. This was linked to having well trained and knowledgeable call handlers.

- 4.3.3. Website had thus far seen little direct use by the Group and they identified that whilst easy to find they would want information to be up to date and to have it as a tool to follow up their own enquiry or complaint thus reducing direct contact. This replicates some of the work already done for example in Revenues and Benefits where a person can log in and see their own information. This then needs to extend to being able to follow up other service enquiries. Currently the most likely way forward is via the Customer Relationship Management system or on a system by system basis. Suggestions were made in regard of how the website could be made more user friendly and since this report was prepared the new website has been launched.
- 4.4. Key customer service improvements the Group suggested were:
- Keeping customers informed;
  - Reducing the number of times customers explain their problem when being passed around between departments;
  - Better overall communication between customer and Council;
  - Improve follow up care to contacts.
- 4.5. On Customer Care standards the Group acknowledged the breadth of enquires the Council dealt with which may affect the time taken to respond but in general a 15 day response time to either an enquiry or a complaint was now felt to be too long and this should be a maximum with an earlier acknowledgement provided.

## **5. NEXT STEPS**

- 5.1. This Group was set up as a one off to assist Customer Services to balance the range of information received. Should it be necessary to run the Group again then it would be annually or more likely two yearly. Any reconstitution of the Group would almost certainly not involve any previous participants.
- 5.2. These views will prove helpful in delivering customer services in the best way possible, identified areas that need to be reconsidered under the Customer Care Standards and how they may be addressed.

## **6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1. The cost of the focus group was £1,625. This was funded from the Customer Services budgets.

## **7. STAFFING IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1. There are none arising out of this report.

## **8. EQUAL OPPORTUNITY IMPLICATIONS**

- 8.1. There are none arising directly from this report.

**9. HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS**

9.1. There are none arising directly from this report

**10. LOCAL AGENDA 21 IMPLICATIONS**

10.1. There are none arising directly from this report.

**11. COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS**

11.1. There are none arising directly from this report.

**12. PLANNING IMPLICATIONS**

12.1 There are none arising directly from this.

**13. LOCAL MEMBER SUPPORT IMPLICATIONS**

13.1. There are none arising directly from this report.

**14. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

14.1. Wirral Council Customer Service Focus Group Findings – Mott MacDonald – January 2010.

**15. RECOMMENDATION**

15.1. That the report be noted.

IAN COLEMAN  
DIRECTOR OF FINANCE

FNCE/152/10