



Wirral Council Customer Service Focus Group Findings 2010

Qualitative Findings

January 2010

Wirral Council

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Town Hall, Brighton Street, Wallasey, Wirral, CH44 8ED

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Sarah Swan *N. Godbehere* *K. Spicer*

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Executive Summary

Mott MacDonald was commissioned by Wirral Council to carry out qualitative research with users of Wirral Council contact points. Users had contacted Wirral Council either in person at the One Stop Shops or by telephone.

The main purpose of this research was to determine what customers perceived as good and bad customer service, how this relates to the service received by Wirral Council and what improvements could be introduced.

Main Findings

The following outlines the findings from the focus group:

Customer service in general was discussed in terms of what constitutes good and bad service.

Participants felt that good service they had experienced was staff orientated, specifically, where there was well-trained staff with a personable and friendly attitude.

Participants listed their key factors for good customer service – all linked to staff:

Key factors to good customer service:

1. Providing good reliable information
2. Aware of everyone's needs e.g. visual
3. Sufficient numbers of staff to deal with customers
4. Knowledgeable staff
5. Identifiable staff
6. Positive attitude of staff e.g. sympathetic, patient

Recollections of bad service centred on the length of time participants have spent waiting for assistance or information.

Participants highlighted the key factors that are associated with bad customer service:

Key factors to bad customer service:

1. Bad attitude
2. Indifference to customers' needs
3. Unclear information
4. Passed around from department to department
5. Excuses for non service
6. Lack of knowledge/information
7. Waiting times
8. Keeping to dates given

Wirral Council:

The focus of the discussion then shifted to Wirral Council. With regards to the ease of contacting Wirral Council opinion was positive and participants discussed their experiences of contact.

Face to face:

Participants attended the One Stop Shops local to themselves. One Stop Shops that they visited were found to be easily accessible, were well-placed on bus routes or easy to get to by car and most of the One Stop Shops had car parks.

The opening times of the One Stop Shops were not a great concern as it was assumed that the One Stop Shops were open between 9-5 Monday to Friday at the very least. Participants would always make sure they would go between these times and were happy to do so.

Via telephone:

Participants considered finding the right council number to call straightforward and easy, with it available in One Stop Shop information, letters received from the council or in the yellow pages. It was felt that problems arise when attempting to “go in cold” without prior information. Receptionists/switchboard workers often do not know how to respond to a query that is not simple or obvious.

Via Web:

Few participants had attempted to access the Wirral council website. However, those that had found it easy to find through Google and felt that website was functional and easy to use and locate the information needed.

Something that participants were all interested in seeing on the website was a tool where they could login to see the progress of queries, complaints or repairs that were due to take place. If this could be provided they felt it would reduce the need to call the council to ask where their query is up to etc.

Those participants who were willing to use the website more often felt that the following would make it more attractive:

- A job number assigned for any query submitted so they have something concrete and that is recorded for proof;
- A timescale for a response so customers can be sure that something will be done;
- Up to date information and advice that they could access as a first port of call;
- Correct contact numbers and emails for staff in different departments that participant may need to contact without accessing through a central point.

Effects of Past Experiences:

The group discussed their previous experience of council contacts:

Good experiences clearly improved the relationship between the customer and the council; resulting in the customer feeling more confident in the Council which participants felt can help undo the reservations that result from a negative experience.

However participants reacted to bad service from the council by simply giving up; the relationship between customer and council may be damaged as they feel that the council is incompetent and that it is not worth fighting for their cause:

“I’d just think oh it’s not worth it”

Participants conceded that the council generally provide an excellent service as much as it can provide a ‘not so good’ service and it really was dependent on the issue and the member of staff they encounter.

Improvements

To improve customer services the following approaches were suggested by participants:

- Keep customers informed;
- More training for staff;
- Reduce the times the customer have to explain themselves when passed around;
- Improve communication both within the Council and with the customer;
- Go the ‘extra mile’;
- Improve follow up care to contacts.

Customer Care Standards

None of the participants were aware of specific customer care standards and each participant was given a copy of the customer care standards of Wirral Council to discuss;

Timescales

In terms of whether the Council were prompt in dealing with issues opinion was split with the group recognising that every issue is different and will, therefore, evoke a different response from the council.

The timescale of 15 days was felt to be too long to wait for a response, however as it stated ‘within 15 days’ if 15 days would be the maximum – this was considered acceptable if some acknowledgment was made earlier.

Complaints

All participants felt that if they were unhappy with the service they received by the council then they would complain about it. They felt that they would want a response to complaints (or at least acknowledgement of) their complaint within the day and would not find it acceptable to wait 15 days. It was felt that rather than waiting for a service to be received a complaint is a negative on the part of the council and they should want resolve it as soon as possible. Ultimately, participants had high expectations about how their complaints should be dealt with. It was clear that acknowledging a complaint quickly can help in diffusing situations and ‘*buying the council time*’ – again good staff are key to this acknowledgment.



1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Mott MacDonald was commissioned by Wirral Council to carry out qualitative research with users of Wirral Council contact points. Users had contacted Wirral Council either in person at the One Stop Shops or by telephone.

The main purpose of this research was to determine what customers perceived as good and bad customer service, how this relates to the service received by Wirral Council and what improvements could be introduced by Wirral Council.

1.2 Background Information

This research follows on from a quantitative survey in which past customers of One Stop Shops and the telephone contactees were interviewed. The survey was designed to provide information relating to people's enquiries to the Council including methods of contact, enquiry details, satisfaction with the service received and suggestions for improvements.

1.3 Methodology

One focus group discussion took place on the 20th January 2010. All participants were drawn from the quantitative research sample who had agreed to take part in follow up research.

The group lasted 1.5 hrs and was held at the Laurie's Centre in Birkenhead.

Each participant received £25 as a thank you for their time and to cover any expenses incurred.

1.4 Topic Guides

The topic guide (available in appendix A) was designed by Mott MacDonald staff in conjunction with staff from Wirral Council. The topic guides were designed to discuss all aspects of required topics and ensure thorough information was collected for analysis. The focus groups used a skilled facilitator to steer the conversation and ensure all topics were covered, without introducing bias and make sure that everybody 'had their say'.

1.5 Analysis of data

Each of the focus groups was moderated by Mott MacDonald staff and audio recorded in order to preserve a verbatim record of responses that could be collated during data analysis. All recordings were treated as confidential including names and addresses of participants. Throughout this report no comments are attributed to individual participants.

The analysis procedure involved thorough scanning of the recordings, drawing out the thoughts, experiences and reasoning of the participants to understand the key themes and arguments of each discussion. A round table discussion was then held by the project team where these key themes were further discussed and analysed.

2. Findings

The following outlines the findings from the focus group:

2.1 Customer Service

Customer service in general was discussed in terms of what constitutes good and bad service.

2.1.1 Good

Interestingly perceptions of good service centred on staff and staff attitudes, indicating that positive interaction can lead customers to overlook other issues. Participants felt that good service they had experienced was staff orientated, specifically, where there was well-trained staff with a personable and friendly attitude.

It was noted that often the attitude of staff members is dependent on 'your own attitude' as a customer – a two way communication:

"If you are nice they are usually nice."

Participants could not recall any specific companies that provided particularly good service; although one participant felt that ASDA provided good service as they open more tills to keep queues down and even open tills at one end of the store for school children as they are often in a hurry to be served during their lunch break. The participant felt that this was an example of good service as the store is being responsive and considerate of the customers' needs.

Participants listed their key factors for good customer service – all linked to staff:

Key factors to good customer service:

1. Providing good reliable information
2. Aware of everyone's needs e.g. visual
3. Sufficient numbers of staff to deal with customers
4. Knowledgeable staff
5. Identifiable staff
6. Good attitude of staff e.g. sympathetic, patient

Ultimately, positive, enthusiastic and personable staff were considered THE key to good customer service and well-trained and helpful staff can circumvent many other problems and issues.

2.1.2 **Bad**

Participants found recalling and discussing bad service much easier suggesting they may encounter bad service more regularly and that bad service is more memorable.

Participants found that timings can influence the type of service they received. For example, they felt they often received bad service at the weekend rather than in the week. It was felt this was due to the higher volume of customers that staff have to deal with. Also it was felt that at the weekend they often encountered young part-time staff who are uninterested in their work and customers' needs.

It was agreed that in America customer service was "fantastic" and that "they could not so enough for you" while in the UK this was not the case. The reason for this was felt to be the tip culture that is popular in America and not in the UK; as a result it was felt that many members of staff have no incentive to go the 'extra mile' for customers.

Recollection of bad service centred on the length of time participants have spent waiting for assistance or information. As an example of bad service encountered, most participants mentioned long queues in banks and no apology from most counter staff. It was felt this was often due to the staff spending too long with each customer offering (selling) the many different services on available.

Another frustration was staff chatting to customers that they know for a length of time causing other customers to wait for longer.

These issues were further exacerbated by the insufficient numbers of staff on the counters – something that many felt had gradually impacted more and more over the years.

Accessibility to banks was also regarded as poor customer service, it was noted that few banks have a dedicated car park and many customers dislike having to pay for parking for a quick trip into the bank, highlighting the importance of accessibility for customers.

Participants highlighted the key factors that are associated with bad customer service:

Key factors to bad customer service:

1. Bad attitude

2. Indifference to customers' needs
3. Unclear information
4. Passed around from department to department
5. Excuses for non service
6. Lack of knowledge/information
7. Waiting times
8. Keeping to dates given

Again it was clear that poor customer service is strongly influenced by staff and their responses.

2.2 Wirral

The focus of the discussion then shifted to Wirral Council. With regards to the ease of contacting Wirral Council opinion was positive and participants discussed their preferred methods of contact.

Many preferred contact face-to-face. Those who visited the One Stop Shops as the first point of contact felt that when contacting by phone the discussion/communication can feel protracted and stilted and that, as a result, it is considered easier, more effective and less lengthy to go in person to the One Stop Shop.

Contact at the One Stop Shop was felt to be 'fairly easy' if you have got the time to wait – which can become an issue – and the One Stop Shops were praised for the amount of information that they have available:

"If you can't get it there you can't get it anywhere!"

Others, who usually contacted by phone, had a view that phone contact was fine and they often got straight through and had their matter resolved efficiently.

Phoning the council or visiting the One Stop Shop were the most preferable methods of contact, one participant had contacted the council in writing feeling it to be more official while one other participant had used the website to obtain some information.

Most participants tended to contact the council 'as and when' they needed to rather than on a regular basis. The average contact being twice a year to 3-4 times a year.

Each contact route was then examined in more detail.

2.2.1 In person

Participants attended the One Stop Shops local to themselves. These included Moreton, Rock Ferry, Bebington, Wallasey, Heswall and Conway Park.

All participants felt that the One Stop Shop that they visited was very easily accessible and were well-placed on bus routes or easy to get to by car. They were also commended for having car parks at most of the One Stop Shops:

"I'd much rather go the One Stop Shop than a bank 'cos they all have car parks outside so it's really easy"

When thinking about whether there are enough One Stop Shops to serve Wirral most agreed that there were, one participant was concerned about the outer lying areas of Wirral, Moreton to Upton, and whether there were enough 'out that way'. However, in general the group felt well-served by the number of One Stop Shops in Wirral:

"Everyone lives within a decent distance to one"

The opening times of the One Stop Shops were not spontaneously known by any participants. However this was not a great concern as it was assumed that the One Stop Shops were open between 9-5 Monday to Friday at the very least. Participants would always make sure they would go between these times and were happy to do so.

It was felt that late nights/weekends would be beneficial to other users and is something that the Council should consider introducing and promoting.

A majority had found it very straightforward to find the right person to speak to in One Stop Shop; you approach the reception and the receptionists filter you on to the right advisor. Participants could not see a better system than this and were very satisfied with the arrangement:

"I don't think there is any other way that they could do it"

However, the waiting times at One Stop Shops were often criticised, as highlighted as an important aspect of bad customer service. Participants felt that at One Stop Shops there is no limit on waiting times and felt that if an advisor is going to need to spend a long time with a customer they should delegate other cases to shorted waiting times. However, and despite this

concern, most felt that they do not mind waiting if they receive a thorough service and have their query resolved.

2.2.2 By phone

Participants considered finding the right council number to call straightforward and easy, with it available in One Stop Shop information, letters received from the council or in the yellow pages. However, it was a concern that if using directory enquiries they sometimes give the incorrect numbers as these often end up at the wrong department resulting in frustration.

If they have received a letter from the council to call they are confident this number is always right. However, when attempting to “go in cold” without prior information problems can arise when trying to find the right department. Receptionists/switchboard workers often don’t know how to respond to a query that is not simple or obvious.

Participants did have examples of being ‘passed around’ when calling – often leading to explaining themselves a number of times. An example of which was given by one participant who called Adult Social Services and got passed around six different people who did not know how to deal with her query. Eventually the customer found the information needed off the internet, from a central government website not the Wirral Council website.

Opening times were considered fine and none in the group had never come across a closed service indicating opening times fit in with their lives. The only negative was that one participant stated that once they had called and the number had been engaged and had to keep recalling until the number was free – however this was likely to be expected at certain times.

2.2.3 By internet

Few participants had attempted to access the Wirral council website. However, those that had found it easy to find through Google.

Those who had accessed the website did so to obtain information on planning permission and bin collection and both participants stated this information was found with no need to then call the council. They found the website functional and easy to use and locate the information needed.

Something that participants were all interested in seeing on the website was a tool where they could login to see the progress of queries, complaints or repairs that were due to take place. If this

could be provided they felt it would reduce the need to call the council to ask where their query is up to etc:

“I’d like to just go on and check when my repairs are coming and things like that”

Those who do not access the website chose not to mainly due to having no easy access to the internet and not being computer literate enough to be confident to do this. These participants stated that they would rather go in person and be sure that their query will be resolved or information was correct by seeing someone.

In terms of encouraging these participants little was suggested, possibly showing that for some participants habits and lack of computer literacy mean that behaviour change is likely to be difficult:

“I haven’t got a computer and don’t know how to use one so I’ll just go for face to face”

Some participants were willing to use the website more often and felt that the following would make it attractive:

- A job number assigned for any query submitted so they have something concrete and that is recorded for proof;
- A timescale for a response so customers can be sure that something will be done;
- Up to date information and advice that they could access as a first port of call;
- Correct contact numbers and emails for staff in different departments that participant may need to contact without accessing through a central point.

2.3 Past contact

The group discussed the good and bad experiences of contact with the council that they had had in the past:

2.3.1 Good

A number of examples of good customer service were highlighted. For example, one participant went to a One Stop Shop and saw an advisor. The advisor was considered very knowledgeable and enlightened on the subject and saw the issue through until the end. It was felt to be good service because the customer saw one advisor who was very helpful and interested in the case. Again staff had a very positive effect on the customers’ experience:

“A nice attitude goes a long way”

One participant phoned the council about a neighbour’s wheelie bins; they had three wheelie bins all overflowing into the road. An advisor told the participant that an inspector would be out to visit by a specific date. The inspector came out and the situation was resolved promptly. This was deemed good service as it took only one phone call and the action was completed within the given time schedule.

Another participant highlighted that when they phoned the council their query was dealt with in one call and the advisor was very knowledgeable, although the action promised did not take place this participant still considered the service to be good.

Another example was when a participant visited a One Stop Shop without their correct forms and the advisor was very patient and allowed the participant to go to the front of the queue when they returned. This consideration really made the service experience good for this participant and they appreciated this.

These good experiences clearly improved the relationship between the customer and the council; resulting in the customer feeling more confident in the Council which participants felt can help undo the reservations that result from a negative experience.

2.3.2 Bad

A number of bad experiences were also noted. For example, one participant phoned the council about an overgrown hedge that was causing a blind corner on the road. No action was taken until there was an accident involving a police car. In this case the participant felt that their phone call was dismissed and it took an accident for the council to listen.

Another participant in Wirral Partnership Homes asked the council for help with gardening as it was too much for them to take care of. In response they received a letter saying “Sorry your leaving Wirral Partnership Homes” this was deemed bad service as the communication had clearly broken down and the information was wrong.

Participants react to bad service from the council by simply giving up; the relationship between customer and council is harmed as they feel that the council is incompetent and that it is not worth fighting for their cause:

“I’d just think oh it’s not worth it”

However, even in this small group good and bad experiences were discussed and participants conceded that the council generally provide an excellent service as much as it can provide a 'not so good' service and it really was dependent on the issue and the member of staff they encounter.

2.4 Improvements

To improve customer services the following approaches were suggested by participants:

- Keep customers informed of progress of claims/issues and not leave progress chasing to the customer to do;
- More training for staff to be more knowledgeable – as an unknowledgeable, badly trained member of staff is a key source of bad customer service;
- When passing the caller to different departments rather than the customer having to explain themselves too many times; put them on hold and pass the information on to colleagues;
- Improve communication both within the Council and with the customer;
- Go the 'extra mile'; do not just stop helping at the first obstacle;
- Improve follow up care to contacts; ensure the customer is happy with the outcome before the case is signed off.

In addition, participants were not aware if any organisations work within the One Stop Shop setting, however they were interested in seeing the following services in One Stop Shops:

- Police – some felt this would be beneficial as in a One Stop Shops there is less intimidation to approach the police about issues than in a police station
- Citizens Advice Bureau
- Social Services
- Job Centre

To promote these organisations it was suggested that putting some information in the local newspaper would raise awareness, alongside information on the website which would also reach some people.

2.5 Customer Care Standards

None of the participants were aware of specific customer care standards and each participant was given a copy of the customer care standards of Wirral Council to discuss;

2.5.1 Timescales

In terms of whether the Council were prompt in dealing with issues opinion was split with the group recognising that every issue is different and will, therefore, evoke a different response from the council.

The timescale of 15 days was initially felt to be too long to await a response. However, upon consideration participants recognised that the council would need to do a lot of “*behind the doors*” work before providing a customer with an answer. It was also recognised that the care standards state ‘within 15 days’ so 15 days would be the maximum – this was considered acceptable. Furthermore if the member of the public is kept up-to-date on the progress of their issue then they would not be waiting ‘*in the dark*’.

It was suggested that the timescale should be two weeks rather than three (15 days), or if the issue is urgent it should be dealt with in one week.

Participants would also like to see issues prioritised so that more urgent issues are dealt with faster than less urgent ones. An example given was that if there are issues that are structural and potentially hazardous should be dealt with quickly and minor issues can wait a little longer.

2.5.2 Complaints

All participants felt that if they were unhappy with the service they received by the council then they would complain about it. They felt that they would go to the manager or higher level member of staff:

“I’d ask for their manager”

They felt that they would want a response to (or at least acknowledgement of) their complaint within the day and would not find it acceptable to wait 15 days for a complaint to be resolved. It was felt that a complaint is a negative on the part of the council and they should want resolve it as soon as possible. A reasonable timeframe given to resolve a complaint was 5 working days, 1 week, as long as it is acknowledged within 1-2 days:

“I’d want it sorted that day! Not in three weeks!”

It was hoped that the council took complaints on board, but it was felt that it is very dependent on the department and member of

staff who deals with it and, in the main, the group were quite cynical as to whether it is truly taken on board.

The group agreed that other organisations do take complaints more seriously, e.g. banks, and often sort them out there and then. It was felt that this was because customers of banks can take their custom elsewhere while customers of a council cannot. As a result many customers *'grin and bear'* the bad service as they have nowhere else to go and council staff are aware of this:

"You've only got one council and they know that. It's where the incompetence comes in"

Ultimately, participants had high expectations about how their complaints should be dealt with. It was clear that acknowledging a complaint quickly can help in diffusing situations and *'buying the council time'* – again good staff are key to providing this acknowledgment.

Appendices

Appendix A. Topic Guide _____ 15

Appendix A. Topic Guide

Wirral Council Customer Service Focus Group – Discussion Guide (Draft)

Introduction:

Introduce self and Mott MacDonald, an independent market research agency, we have been asked by Wirral Council to discuss the subject of customer service. Remind everyone that they took part in a survey recently either upon exiting a One-stop-shop or via telephone.

Stress independence, confidentiality, MRS code of Conduct and Data Protection Act.

Ask permission to record group.

- Participants to introduce themselves: name, age, work, family

Customer service:

*Let's start generally...thinking about other services, **NOT Wirral Council**, e.g. banks, retail, telephone, media etc.*

- Have you experienced **good** customer service?
- When did you receive good service?
- Who did you receive good service from?
- What about that did you feel created a sense of good service? *Spontaneous first then prompt if required: the person dealt with, the help offered, help completing forms, the follow up care etc.*
- What format do you feel you get good service in? *Probe: face-to-face, telephone, web*
- Has this good service had an effect on your relationship with the organisation involved? In what way?
- What about **bad** service? Have you experienced bad customer service?
- Tell me about that? When was it, where was it, what format was it in?
- What made it bad service? *Spontaneous first then prompt if required: the person dealt with, the help offered, help completing forms, the follow up care etc.*
- How did you react to the bad service? How did you feel?

- Has this bad service had an effect on your relationship with the organisation involved? In what way?
- Can you tell what, to you, is good customer service? *Let's list 5-10 things that we think make good customer service?*
- Can you tell what, to you, is bad customer service? *Let's list 5-10 things that we think make bad customer service?*

Use flip chart to record lists

Wirral Council:

Let's think about Wirral Council – I know you all had contact with Wirral Council in the last 12 months, let's talk about that.

- How easy is it to contact Wirral council?
- How often do you tend to contact the council? How do you feel about the number of times you contact the council? (too often/ok?)
- How do you tend to contact Wirral council? Does this vary with the issue? In what way?
- How do/would you prefer to contact the Council? What makes you say that?

If contact in person:

- Where do you go?
- Is this close enough to access?
- Are there enough places/venues to go to?
- Are these located in the right place/area?
- How about opening times? Are these easy to find? Are they the right times? Do they fit with life? When do they need to be?
- How easy was it to find the person you wanted to talk to?

If by phone:

- How easy was it to find the right number?
- When you rang was it the right number?
- How easy was it to find the person you wanted to talk to?
- Tell me about the opening times for the helplines – are the right times? Do they fit with your life?

If by internet:

- How easy was it to find the right website? How did you find the right website? Google etc
- How easy was it to find the right information/resolve your enquiry using the website?
- Was the issue resolved? Did you need to re-contact either in person or over the phone?
- Tell me what you liked or disliked about the website?
- Was there anything missing that you would have liked to see on the website?

- What services would you like to see on the website?

If not used internet:

- Why not?
- Government are trying to push for websites major route of contact; what stops you from contacting the council this way?
- What would encourage you to use the website?
- What would you use it for? What makes you say that?
- What services would you use if they were on the web? What makes you say that

Past contact

- Thinking about your past experiences with Wirral council;
- Tell me about the contact, do you think you received **good service**? What makes you say that? (refer to 'homework sheets')
- Have you experienced good customer service from Wirral Council?
- When did you receive good service?
- Who did you receive good service from?
- What about that did you feel created a sense of good service? *Spontaneous first then prompt if required: the person dealt with, the help offered, help completing forms, the follow up care etc.*
- What format do you feel you get good service in? *Probe: face-to-face, telephone, web*
- Has this good service had an effect on your relationship with the organisation involved? In what way?
- What about **bad service** from Wirral Council? Have you experienced bad customer service?
- Tell me about that? When was it, where was it, what format was it in?
- What made it bad service? *Spontaneous first then prompt if required: the person dealt with, the help offered, help completing forms, the follow up care, accessibility, opening hours*
- How did you react to the bad service? How did you feel?

- Has this bad service had an effect on your relationship with the organisation involved? In what way?

Improvements:

- What could be done to make the service better/help you?
Examine specific issues to provide detail
- Do you think any of these contacts could/should have been avoidable? Tell me about these. How could they have been avoided? *Information available on the internet, sharing of information between departments etc. E.g. 's to prompt:*
 - Unnecessary clarification required by customer
 - Duplicate information requested
 - Poor signposting at the original contact
 - Premature closure of original contact
 - Progress chasing

Would you like to see different organisations working from the One Stop Shop e.g. Pensions

Thinking about your contacts with Wirral Council:

- Do you feel your issues get dealt with promptly? *Probe: examples/anecdotes*

Introduce Customer Care standards doc and use as basis of discussion, e.g.

- Are the timescales reasonable?
- What would be reasonable?
- Would you make a complaint if you had received bad service? Why/not? Who to?
- As the CC Standards state any complaints will be responded to within 15 working days, which is three weeks. What do you think of this? Is this your experience?
- Do you think the council would use your feedback about bad service? Why/not?
- Do you know of any other organisations that do use feedback to improve services? Who?

Sum up:

Ok you now have the chance to pass on to Wirral Council your concerns/issues regarding customer service. Let's list the top 5 good and bad.

Thanks participants and close.