



## Belfast City Council

|                           |  |
|---------------------------|--|
| <b>Report to:</b>         | Strategic Policy and Resources Committee   |
| <b>Subject:</b>           | Customer Service, Communications and Information Management Strategies                     |
| <b>Date:</b>              | 24 April 2009  |
| <b>Reporting Officer:</b> | Gerry Millar, Director of Improvement  |
| <b>Contact Officer:</b>   | Trevor Martin, Head of Building Control, extn 2450<br>Rose Crozier, Head of ISB, extn 4201 |

### Background

The Council is in the process of developing a number of initiatives to improve services and information for its customers. These include strategies for customer focus, consultation and engagement, IT and communications and are all interlinked with reviewing the corporate centre of the organisation.

Citizens want news and information and, in particular, access to services 24 hours a day. The 9-5 culture of service delivery is a thing of the past. They also want more focused and improved services that are transparently delivered, adaptable and good value. This means we need to re-examine how we do things at every level. There are also increasing pressures from Westminster and Europe to provide on-line public services. New technology is the key to achieving accessible services and information.

The majority of local authorities have invested most of their time and energy on the traditional communications and service methods. Some of the more forward thinking authorities are adopting the business principles and practices of the best private sector organisations. This means fully innovative customer consultation and service delivery mechanisms, of which the key strategy is the commitment to providing the full range of services and information on-line and using modern technology.

Belfast City Council needs to urgently move in this direction and is playing catch-up at this time. The RPA will bring more services and responsibilities and the implementation of an ambitious corporate plan underway. Now is the time for the organisation to commit to changing business practices, back office procedures and investing in new technology to provide our ratepayers with the opportunities to utilise our services, receive information and be consulted with in ways and at times that are convenient to them.

New technology can also assist elected representatives to perform their functions even more effectively. It can enable the organisation to help them become more accessible to the electorate and can ensure they receive information, updates on Council business and information and news alerts in a timely and effective way.

It remains vital that Belfast City Council continues to develop its progressive approach to

the traditional forms of service and communications. Additionally now is the time for the Council to consider investing more time and resources in the new channels of communications, particularly in its efforts to reach younger and older audiences, ethnic minorities and other Section 75 groupings which are regarded as harder to reach.

This approach ties in with the 'Organisation fit to lead and serve' theme of the Corporate Plan which aims to improve the Council's capacity to deliver excellent services. The customer and IT strategies and the review of communications evaluation all highlight the need to focus during the next few years on adopting new technology as a means of delivering better services and information for citizens and to deliver services more efficiently. The strategies emphasise the following key points:

### **Customer Service**

Improving how we serve the citizens of Belfast is at the heart of the Council's improvement agenda. We must deliver services that are of an acceptable standard that enable citizens to access information and services in ways that provide them with choice and convenience. We aim to improve our customers' experience of the Council through improvement in contact, service delivery, staff capability and supporting systems, processes and infrastructure. The four key areas under the strategy are:

- Building a customer intelligence base.
- Improving business processes and systems
- Improving access to Services and reducing avoidable contacts
- Improving learning & development by making better use of all our existing resources

### **Communication**

Belfast City Council is a leader in developing the city's vision and shaping the city's future. We exist because of our citizens and therefore how we communicate is of prime importance. We have achieved great successes with City Matters and our Council website but we need to acknowledge that the public's expectations of how services are made available and used are changing with rapidly changing technology and its availability. We need to adopt new methods of connecting with the public, particularly the hard to reach sections, to ensure that citizens are getting the information they want and need from the council. .

### **Information Management**

This is about ensuring that information is of high quality, is accessible and shared in a way that supports effective decision making, successful performance management and high quality continually improving service delivery. To achieve this we must ensure that we have appropriate systems, processes and technology to enable the business of the Council and to challenge our ability to deliver services in more efficient and effective ways. Through improved use and management of information, the framework will enable the Council to realise the following aims:

- To deliver increasingly effective services
- To optimise access to those services by the general public and Council employees
- To inform, involve and engage key audiences including the public and partners.

## Recommendations

It is clear from the strategies outlined that there are overlaps and that serving customer better and delivering efficiencies emerge as common objectives. It is recommended that the priorities for the year ahead are to improve on-line services and to develop customer service standards across the Council services. In summary this means:

- **Delivery of Citizen Services**

The Council should implement a programme of improved web-based services for the general public. This will include an upgraded website being the priority with all council services becoming fully transactional online. Different delivery channels will be used where this is appropriate to target different groups (e.g. SMS text messaging, online booking improvements and faster information downloads, etc). This strategy will encourage, at every level, the use of technology where it can be shown to add efficiency, cost savings, and improved services.

- **Developing Service Standards**

All services need to challenge how they are performing and how they measure up in terms of the customers' experience of their service. The Council can improve service delivery by making the adoption of service standards a priority in their service plans. There will be a need for common standards for example how we communicate and deal with customer contact. A service standard approach will establish a baseline for measurement and enable us to build on best practice as evidenced internally and externally and support accreditation against a nationally agreed standard.

Governance structures are in place to support implementing IT but in developing the strategies and having identified common themes it is recognised that in order to achieve the right outcomes the scope of governance should be broadened to include customer and communication.

It is therefore recommended that Council commits to getting the maximum advantage from technology by reviewing its governance arrangements to ensure that resources are aligned to support the objectives of the strategies and to deliver the maximum efficiencies.

## Resource Implications

In the current financial climate there is a renewed focus on better use of existing capacity and investing in technology to improve what we do to deliver more for less.

It is proposed that Council considers creating mechanisms to incentivise business transformation for corporate and departmental improvements and that this is achieved through reinvesting some of the savings gained back into improvement projects.

## Recommendations

The Committee is asked to endorse the proposed strategies and priorities for the year ahead. Next steps will be to bring forward business cases and detailed plans for approval.

## Key to Abbreviations

## Documents Attached

Appendix 1 Customer Service Strategy  
Appendix 2 Information Management Strategy

This page has been intentionally left blank.