

Belfast City Council



Draft Report & Customer Focus Strategy

**For Submission to
Strategic Policy and Resources Committee
24 April 2009**

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1.0 Introduction

The Director of Improvement presented a paper in May 2008 at the Chief Officer's Management Team on the current state of customer focus within the Council. The paper highlighted the main areas discussion and made two recommendations:

- that the Council need to devise a Customer Focus Strategy, and
- that the Council second an officer at Head of Service level or similar for an initial period of six months, extendable as required to draft this strategy.

Following interview Trevor Martin, Head of Building Control was appointed to the seconded post taking up the duties of the post on 1st July 2008.

Following initial meetings with the Chief Executive, the Director of Improvement and the Council's Improvement Manager a brief for the strategy was established. The following process and timetable for the strategy was then agreed:

Timetable

- Desk Top and Other Research: July-September
- Internal & External Interviews: October – Mid November
- Analysis of interviews and Other Information: Mid November – early December
- Drafting Strategy: December
- Test Bedding of Draft Strategy with Departments: January
- Report & Draft Strategy to COMT: End of January (reviewed now for April COMT)

In carrying out the work for the strategy over fifty documents were accessed and studied, forty structured interviews were carried out, two external surveys completed and six site visits undertaken.

The strategy cannot operate in isolation and must fit into the Council's emerging plans and also the business operations of its Services. Additionally there are 'Northern Ireland' factors under Review of Public Administration and NI Direct that will also influence any outcomes. In devising the strategy account has also be taken of findings from the:

- Work Force Development Plan
- Review of Communications
- Consultation Strategy
- Information Strategy
- Local Area Working Strategy
- PDP B Customer Service Strategy for Northern Ireland
- Review of Public Administration
- Northern Ireland Direct Programme

The findings from the Review of the Corporate Centre which might have an effect are not known at this time and not included in the paper.

It is also an established fact that we are going through a very difficult and prolonged period of economic downturn. Businesses are going into administration, jobs are being lost and money is getting harder to find. The Council therefore will need to factor economy into its plans as its rate base will inevitably be affected leading to reduced financial resources. Where possible, the recommendations are kept at cost neutral. Additionally many recommendations, if carried out will get efficiencies and should provide a better service at no additional cost. Where costs

are inevitable, in areas such as One Stop Shops and Single Numbers, then if these recommendations are adopted more detail work needs to be carried out to establish potential savings mapped against the expenditure before commencing with such projects.

The strategy must fit into the Council's four key messages:

- Better together – working with others to create a shared vision and delivering together.
- Today's action, tomorrow's legacy – city investment that improves the quality of life now and in the future.
- Value for money – minimising the rates burden, freeing up resources for more delivery on the ground.
- Better services – continuing to enhance the level of service offered to the citizen.

Bearing in mind all the above factors I am now in a position to report and submit the Draft Strategy to the Chief Officer's Management Team for discussion. Hopefully the strategy not only sets out where we are and where we need to go, but also sets out real things we can do now and do at no cost. There will be big decisions to be made around One Stop Shops and Single Numbers but there are a series of 'no brainers' that whilst less dramatic in scale, will add real value and contribute to achieving customer orientated services.

I would like here to acknowledge all those officers from the Core Improvement Team, in addition to officers from the Chief Executives who assisted with the scheduling and carried out the interviews. Additionally I would thank all the interviewees both internal and external for their time, honesty and expression of passionately held views on ensuring customer satisfaction. If anything has come out of this process it is the dedication and willingness of the officers of the Council to make a real difference to the lives of the users, visitors and citizens of this great city. That gives us sound foundations on which to build.

Trevor Martin
Head of Building Control
March 2009

2.0 Executive Summary

Customer Service is a journey, it is both difficult and endless but is one on which all good organisations must be firmly set. The Northern Ireland population is growing, it is getting increasing older, we have an influx of migrant workers, we are experiencing different cultures and languages and people's expectations are rising. There has been a trend of a decreasing lack of trust in politician and government departments as people lose faith in the institutions. Whilst some of these problems are relatively new to us, many have been tackled and addressed successfully elsewhere. In many local authorities, such as Inner London Boroughs they pale by comparison so there is expertise to draw on. The experience of all the organisations that are on a journey to achieving excellent customer focus is that it not only improves the services to the public but it also informs good decision making, increases staff morale, puts an element of pride in the community and develops us into a true learning organisation.

Whilst the Council hasn't established a defined vision for Customer Service, it has established definitions under the Value Creation Map as:

- Making the best use of our resources to provide a range of services which best meet local need and improve quality of life;
- Providing services that will be easy for everyone to access and will always be delivered to an agreed high standard; and
- Providing our services in a way that maximises their value for money and effectiveness.

Using these definitions as a template, and the key objectives under the Value Creation Map as a steer we can devise a strategy which will take us along a route to meet those objectives. It is important to state that the Council is already on the journey, indeed some parts of the organisation are well advanced in customer care provision, some having been nominated as best in class within their areas of operation. What we need to do as a council is to put in place a supporting architecture to help and assist good customer focus across the whole organisation. We need to address the gaps between the desired state and actual position by using those good parts of the organisation to help build up the others.

In order to do this we must attack the problem in the following key areas.

- Know more about our Customers (and potential customers) and their needs through better engagement and building a customer intelligence base.
- Ensuring Services within the Council deliver the best possible service to customers by continuously improving business processes and systems
- Improving access to Services through all channels and mediums reducing avoidable contacts
- Improving learning & development and sharing knowledge on customer related activities making better use of all our existing resources

All journeys need a starting point, direction, destination and route map. Our Council 2006 baseline and the subsequent findings from the research carried out as part of this project has established where the Council currently sits. Many of the recommendations contained within this strategy should set in place the architecture for improvement giving us a direction for the journey. This is not a 'one size fits all' approach and much work detailed by the plan can be tailored to suit individual Services and the diversity of their customer base. What is important is that the recommended processes, albeit that they may differ across Services, are carried out by all. Whilst all Services were keen to establish their 'uniqueness' what links them is they all have customers. It is essential that we establish progress on the journey and this will

include using the Council Baseline, working under the audit system of ICS Service check and progressing to the achievement of the Customer Service Excellence award.

The Council provides a diverse range of services and so it is vital we build strong knowledge bases by surveying our segmented customer basis. This will need to be aligned to the Consultation Strategy. That data, once collected needs to be converted into information and then knowledge to enable robust decision making, both within those Services and across the Council. This will include establishing the functions of knowledge management utilising existing facilities such as our Geographical Information System. It will include each Service mapping the customer journey of each segmented group to see what they need, when they want it delivered and in what way they want it delivered.

All Services must establish the basic mechanics of customer service including customer charters clearly setting out agreed levels of performance together with established improvement plans. Eventually this process will move towards empowering citizens to influence delivery and possibly even influence decisions through Local Area Working. We must put in place valid auditing and accreditation systems, showing clear progress towards our goal of excellent customer care and publicly demonstrating to staff and customers our real achievements in this area.

Our access channels must be improved utilising all available technology to make services accessible at home, in communities and on a 24/7 timeframe. Such accessibility also has benefits as it reduces avoidable contact enabling efficiencies to be made internally in back office processes. Access must however cater for all citizens including those who want and need face to face contact. We do not want to lose one of our greatest strengths, that of the friendly and personable face of the Council.

We must also be honest about our deficiencies, highlight our needs, learn and develop together, maximising our resources and abilities to produce better managers and well informed staff who have a dedicated customer focus. We need truly to exhibit the qualities displayed by learning organisations who interact with, and react to customer demand. The Workforce Development Plan has already addressed many areas such as management competencies and responsibilities and corporate training. The object of this strategy is to link into and support that plan ensuring all officers at every level have the skills, abilities and exhibit the behaviours we require. This linkage of customer intelligence into corporate training is an essential factor in our pursuit of corporate Investors in People.

All this work must align with the Council's overall plan and so a strong recommendation will be the need for a mechanism on co-ordination of strategies and the integration of the Council's activities. All improvement activities need to be brought under a centralised control mechanism to ensure corporate alignment, maximise resources, build on economies of scale and prevent nugatory effort.

Finally the implementation of the strategy needs to be strongly driven, have a genuine belief in the end game, credibility, desire to improve performance and has the support of all. The majority of organisations in self assessment genuinely think they had a supporting culture for change but when external assessors arrived they found culture was one of their biggest issues. It cannot be just about speeches, proclamations, directives and even strategies. It is about everyone demonstrating behaviours to match the values we all aspire to. Improving customer service will impact on other areas such as learning and development, information management and so must be seen in the context of service transformation. Much of what is required is not 'rocket science' but is 'hard slog' so there must be a sustained commitment to the work required to take us on the journey. It is important to note that some of the recommendations will need attitudinal change as well as process change, an acceptance that cultural change, though not easy, must be driven from within. There are indeed no easy options to achieving excellent customer services but it is proven that a strong plan operated with deep seated belief with people well managed, developed and focussed can truly achieve whatever goal you set for them.

3.0 Formulation of Strategy: The Evidence Gathered

The initial part of the process was in the gathering of evidence of where the Council could be and where we currently were located, essentially the Gap Analysis. This would include discovering the good, the not so good and determining the obstacles to achieving our goal. It was decided to carry this out in the following ways:

- Academic Desk Top Research
- Seminars and Conferences
- Exploring areas of Best Practice
- Review of 2006 Baseline
- Interviews with all Heads of Service (including some unit heads)*
- Interviews with key external customer advocates.*

*A full list of all interviewees can be found in Appendices 5.1 & 5.5

I have detailed in the Appendices a synopsis of the findings from this research on which many of my assumptions and recommendations are based but include in the next few paragraphs the bullet points in relation to each area.

Academic Desk Top Research

The main findings from this research established:

- Need to incorporate private sector innovations into business
- Need to think differently about customers and how we deal with them
- Customers see us as a single interface, not a series of units
- Customers are more demanding, know their rights and will complain more readily
- People want variety of access and delivery mechanisms
- We have duplication, inconsistency in information and approach
- There are efficiency savings to be made if we get it right
- Technology exists to do almost anything we want
- Think customer experience first and delivery mechanism second
- Acknowledge and learn from your mistakes, don't repeat them
- Make customer care training practical, real and relevant
- No one size fits all, tailor our strategy to our need

Examples were given of industry giants such as Amazon and Tesco who know the individual needs, likes and preferences of customers.

Position of Northern Ireland Local Authorities

PDP B, which is set up to look at Service Delivery, is currently drafting a Customer Care Strategy for the emerging Northern Ireland Councils. Work will start on that document in February and be completed by September. All 26 local authorities will be given an opportunity to contribute, buy into a NI approach, and work together to deliver a common strategy. This approach has been endorsed by SOLACE.

There has however been some good work carried out by individual councils outside Belfast such as the CRM System installed by Antrim Borough Council and the One Stop Shop established by Omagh District Council that we can use now. Visits have been made to both of these initiatives and the learning from them incorporated into our recommendations. It should be noted that we have our own CRM systems in both the Cleansing and Waste Management Services which I will make reference to later in this report.

Seminars and Site Visits

Along with other staff involved in the interview process I attended seven major seminars and visits associated with customer focus:

The common issues to come from these conferences and visits were:

People

- Have increasing expectations
- Know their rights and will complain
- Want demonstrable value for money
- Want reliability, responsiveness, empathy & delivery
- Want human interaction (70-80%) but with alternative provisions, e.g: web based services
- Want more say in delivery of services (Limited number only)

Organisations

- Engage with staff on all customer issues
- Work collaboratively internally & externally
- Put citizen at centre of process
- Lead from front & change cultures
- Invest in One Stop Shops, Telephony and Single Numbers
- Train staff and equip managers with key customer focus skills
- Learn from complaints and change systems/processes
- Concentrate on customer journey not delivery system

Exploring areas of Best Practice

Issues raised through looking at Best Practice schemes were:

- Leadership and commitment from top are key
- Ensure staff know all the drivers for change
- Work on all areas of business, don't cherry pick projects
- Keep foot on the pedal during the whole process
- Link services to external themes not internal silos/units
- Look at re-aligning existing staff not employing new staff
- Analyse your problems first, then investigate solutions

Interviews with all Heads of Service (including some unit heads)

All Heads of Service and also some associated officers (because of their individual role) were interviewed. A full list of officers interviewed is included in Appendix 5.1.

Key themes and common issues that emerged from the interviews were:

- We must work at delivering a One Council Approach
- We must build around a clear consistent vision
- We must see projects through to completion.
- A culture of continual improvement is manifested by the leader.
- Some staff are risk averse in relation to innovation
- We need a system of rewards for good performance, and more importantly, sanctions for deliberate non compliance with Council objectives.
- We need consistency in our approach to customers
- Customer Focus must be uniform across all Services.
- Individual performance measurement and management is key factor.
- Need for an 'Improvement Service' looking at assisting the implementation of internal changes, new processes, business re-alignment.
- There is a desire for specific, directed customer care training.
- We need to assess and activate any spare capacity that could be released from rationalising our functions and processes.
- We need a method of gathering and analysing customer information and building customer intelligence
- We need a forum for sharing of Best Practice or exchange of ideas.

- There should be a single point of responsibility for Customer Service
- One Stop Shops and Single numbers are inevitable consequences but need to be brought in gradually.

During the interviews it became apparent that there were many great Services very focussed on customer satisfaction with dedicated officers performing great work. However the most gratifying issue to come from the interviews was that whilst there were some negative comments the overwhelming feeling was that staff wanted to change and were committed to play their part in the creation of a better Council.

Interviews with key external customer advocates.

A sample of the questions to the three interviewees can be found in Appendices 5.51 to 5.53.

Findings from Consumer Council and Citizens Advice Bureau

- Commendation for the Council on the interface with them.
- They received little or no complaints in relation to the Council
- Their main problem areas were transport, utility providers, Social Services.
- They had positive dealings in connection with council officers.
- City Matters was an excellent and well read publication, useful at getting information to the citizen.
- Whilst web-sites useful 80% of people still prefer telephone.
- People are getting more tuned in, both to their rights and how to complain
- Some consumer show were giving some people an unrealistic expectation.
- One Stop Shops and Single Number, CRMs and public kiosks, were great ideas and expressed a desire to partner with the Council should we go down this route.

When asked generally for advice on how to deal with customers to avoid complaints they concluded:

- Respond quickly acknowledging problem
- Give names of people dealing with issue
- Give updates and dates of stages of information.
- Provide clear answers/explanations with rationales.
- Have a good customer attitude
- Go the extra mile where you can

Findings from Belfast City Centre Management

- Council comes out very well when dealing with retailers.
- Most retailers felt the Council was effective both in consultation and in the delivery of services.
- Relations with the Council were generally good and getting better
- Their members had more difficulty with central government departments
- They were of the opinion that the Council should have responsibility for and run all services within the city.
- One Stop Shops and Single numbers were a good idea.
- Happy to partner in a One Stop Shop scenario
- Most major stores would be keen to have Council kiosks on their premises
- Interest in any data that the Council might hold that could help them in making business and other decisions.
- Keen to partner in some of the Council's functions, especially in such areas as rate collection on vacant properties equity of rates provision was high on their agenda.

Findings From Public Opinion Survey in City Matters

80% wanted a single contact number

80% wanted a 'one stop shop' facility

4.0 Customer Focus Strategy

The following pages contain recommendations that need to be considered to deliver the vision on Belfast being a customer focussed council. Some of these issues are stand alone customer care work, others impinge on HR, ISB and BIS etc. The recommendations are not to be looked at in isolation, but designed to work in these areas adding weight to and supporting them.

There is also debate on do we tackle certain areas first whether they be most impact in customers, worst performing units, easiest fixed or adopt a strategy to bring everyone up incrementally. My opinion is the latter option, using the good to assist the not so good but that is open for debate. We need also need further work in this area to align the various parallel strategies (WDP, IS, Consultation & Communications) and to prioritise which of these recommendations will be carried out and in what order. This will include a piece of work ascribing the pros and cons of each of the options in the light of the priorities of those other strategies. The work in the Organisation Fit to Lead and Serve Group is beginning to coalesce all these strands into a coherent single plan and this is essential both to maximise effort and ensure resources are best used. However there are generic management issues (the no brainers) that must be done as part of any process. If therefore we take up some or all of the recommendations they should fulfil the objectives of our strategy.

- **Knowing more about our Customers and their needs through better engagement and building a customer intelligence base.**
 - Segmented Customer Engagement
 - Converting data to knowledge
 - Establishing Knowledge Management within the Council

- **Ensuring Services within the Council deliver the best possible service to customers by continuously improving business processes and systems**
 - Clear vision supported by demonstrable commitment
 - Customer orientation of processes and systems
 - Creating Customer Charters and Service Standards
 - Creating Measurement and Indicators
 - Monitoring Improvements on our Baseline Surveys
 - Continually innovating and building on best practice
 - Externally accrediting our progress

- **Improving access to Services through all channels and mediums reducing avoidable contacts**
 - Delivering on web based services
 - Exploring kiosk provision
 - Exploring One Stop Shops
 - Exploring Single Numbers

- **Improving learning & development and sharing knowledge making better use of all our existing resources**
 - Provision of Council Customer Care Training
 - Database of Officer's skills, abilities and knowledge
 - Best Practice Learning/Sharing Workshops
 - Council Run Management Development School/College

4.1 Introduction to Strategy & Rationale for Recommendations

The key factors emerging from the research defines what we need to incorporate into the strategy if we are to move forward. They are broadly along the lines of:

- Support for the vision with changes to processes and systems.
- Devise and agree a plan with measured milestones

- Equip all Services and staff with skills and knowledge to deliver
- Ensure best use is made of our internal resources
- Ensure we adopt best practice and leading edge innovation

In delivering this strategy we need be very conscious of the Council's financial position and also the current economic conditions and predictions for ratepayers. Therefore, for the purposes of this report whilst the strategy is drafted into the four key areas as mentioned in the previous paragraph they are colour coded them to indicate the following:

Black: Areas that can be implemented now with minor adjustments

Blue: Areas that may need structural or organisational change.

Red: Areas that require investment.

Additionally the recommendations are drafted in a Gantt Chart showing an approximate timeline for the various processes.

Some of the recommendations are linked, others can be carried out in isolation of others but to truly deliver customer care as many as possible should be pursued. It is essential in the current climate to look at Council finances so some recommendations will cost little but will involve the changing of ways of working or thinking. These include the essential building blocks of customer engagement and establishing service level agreements. Others may require some system or organisation change such as looking at re-aligning roles and responsibilities. Inevitably the bigger projects such as One Stop Shops and Single Numbers require investment both from a capital and revenue perspective. Where possible I have suggested delivery mechanisms though as any proposals can involve staff in your respective Departments they obviously open to debate by Chief Officers.

4.2 Customers Engagement and Building a Customer Intelligence Base.

4.21 Segmented Customer Engagement

In order that Services are more customer focused they must have a system to engage with existing (and potential) customers, define their expectations, agree on delivery and continually monitor and change. Such an engagement process would also need to address disadvantaged and hard to reach groups. Such a system will not be uniform across the Council and will depend on the type of work they do and their customer base. The Council also has an emerging strategy on Consultation and Engagement. Each unit's system should be linked within that strategy and be both appropriate and proportionate to the outcome.

Recommendation No. 1

Every Service (including some stand alone units) must establish a customer segmented consultation system (appropriate to their position) in line with that emerging Council strategy. From that engagement derive a series of service level agreements, including a full range of service standards, performance indicators & monitoring and reporting structures.

Recommendation No. 2

Every Service (including some stand alone units) to have, based on customer intelligence, a series of actions and improvement measures integral within their Value Creation Map and forming part of the VCM performance management process. Performance on this to be reported through their Directors to the Core Improvement Team at quarterly intervals.

4.3 Establishing Knowledge Management within the Council

4.31 Creating Business Knowledge from Data

We need to use our current complaints system as information on which to base change. Whilst we respond to, categorise complaints and report effectively on their status we need a

mechanism where we embed learning from them across all Services. We also record but there is no mechanism to record comments or praise if we get something right. There is a wealth of data that could be used here to establish good practices within the Council. Whilst the Council has a designated Complaints Officer, it is reactive in context. We need to establish a more positive and proactive role of Customer Intelligence Officer, not only recording data and ensuring compliance with Councils Policy but also gathering data, analysing trends and then distributing knowledge on which Services. This information could change practices, develop training, help redesign processes etc. The role could network with customer advocates like the General Consumer Council. Citizens Advice Bureau etc. building up relationships and a knowledge base on customer care.

Recommendation No. 3

The Council examine the role of creating a Customer Intelligence Officer giving that post responsibility and full reporting powers both directly to units on customer intelligence and directly to COMT on performance.

4.32 Making Best Use of Council Database

The Council has an incredible amount of data currently in its record base that could be turned into information or knowledge for decision making by Services. Additionally subject to Data Protection Act, it could be offered to other organisations for the benefit of the Council (Building Control/Land & Property Service Project). There are undoubtedly more synergies out there but first we need a comprehensive record of our data. Whilst there is a Records Officer we need to look at Knowledge Management. This is not just looking after data and ensuring compliance with the DPA and FOI but of accessing all data, looking for synergies and connections and then distributing knowledge on which Services could base better business decisions. Subject to legal provisions we could also look for markets where the data could be supplied either to central government or private sector usage.

Recommendation No. 4

The Council investigate the role of Records Manager to catalogue all the Councils databases including an exercise examining linking this data with Citistats and Corvu to form a single integrated resource. This should produce information/knowledge for use by internal Services and external customers.

4.4 Ensuring Services Delivery & Continuous Improvement

- Clear vision supported by demonstrable commitment
- Customer orientation of processes and systems
- Creating Customer Charters and Service Standards
- Creating Measurement and Indicators

Visions and strategies are mere words unless supported by demonstrable commitment and real change takes place. This is the same for customer care as for any other strategy. Once acceptance of any of these recommendations takes place we need a time bounded plan with milestones and performance indicators reported to COMT. Integral to that is the auditing and assurance throughout the Council that all managers and staff not only will adhere to the chosen route.

The first step in ensuring progress and creating the first milestone is the commitment that all Services must achieve a 'Green' standard in Category's 1-6 (not Category 7 External Recognition) of the Councils Customer Baseline Survey by 2010.

Recommendation No. 5

The Council develop a plan to support the vision, creating a sustained culture of customer focus across the whole range of services.

Recommendation No. 6

The Council devise a generic Customer Charter which forms the template for all Services/Units detailing what the customers should expect (level of service, speed of response, quality of work), how they should be treated, how they will be consulted and how results will be reported to them.

Recommendation No 7

To ensure that real and sustained improvement takes place the work carried out under Recommendation 1. the Customer Survey Baseline should be conducted annually and the results should be reported to COMT.

Recommendation No 8

Services must achieve a 'Green' standard in Category's 1-6 (not Category 7 External Recognition) of the Councils Customer Baseline Survey by 2010.

4.5 Continually innovating and building on best practice

Whilst some Services have completed many of these recommendations as internal units many have not. Additionally they may not have the skills to begin, therefore we must establish a planned approach to sharing our knowledge and experience to help each other. Services to improve must maximise our own inherent skills and abilities through accessing, sharing and disseminating best practice or knowledge to others. We need therefore to create a genuine open learning system or forum where all of us come together to maximise our jointly acquired knowledge and skills.

Recommendation No. 9

To support the Human Resources Service in their Workforce Development Plan in disseminating good customer care skills by establishing a system of transferring learning, skills and best practice across the Council.

4.6 Externally accrediting our progress

In order to reassure our customers we are providing best services and making improvements we need to measure our progress against objectives, and externally audit to establish and accredit the Councils position.

This will assure our customers that not only are we progressing towards customer excellence but that such progress is certified by external validation. It is also important to network us within a Customer Service Group giving us access to other areas of innovation, best practice and enabling us to benchmark our services against similar organisations. The government standard for accrediting customer service in organisations is the Customer Service Excellence Model formerly known as Chartermark. This should be the goal that the Council strive to meet but are presently not ready in all areas to submit to accreditation. A sensible approach would be to use the free self assessment tool, and framework set by CSE as a template. We could then review progress and look to make an assessment regarding accreditation after eighteen months with a view to accreditation by 2011.

The Council currently are members of the Institute of Customer Services (ICS) using them to accredit individuals across the Council for awards. Whilst this work has yield benefits for many individuals and pockets of the organisation it is not the most effective use of this resource. In negotiations with them we have agreed that they are content to expand their role across the Council more corporately and will carry out both customer surveys, training and accreditation work. Additionally we might be in a position to use some of our staff already accredited across the Council as 'local champions' for customer care.

Recommendation No. 10

The Council continue to engage the services of the Institute of Customer Services in the role of carrying out training, internal and external surveys.

Recommendation No. 11

The Council continue to engage the services of the Institute of Customer Services in the role of establishing a robust and certified accreditation system for all aspects of customer service.

4.7 Annual Meeting & Conference

Leadership and commitment from COMT of this strategy is integral to its success. A way to demonstrate that commitment and be continually connected to the ethos is for organisations to hold a customer conference or annual meeting. This is designed to bring key people together to:

- reinforce commitment to customer service excellence
- discuss progress against targets
- set out plans and establish targets for incoming year
- launch new initiatives and innovations
- acknowledge mistakes and highlight successes
- thank everyone for the input and energise the process

Such a meeting could include the Chairs of Service Customer Focus Groups, representatives from Council Working Groups on Services for the Elderly, the Youth Forum, Ethnic Groups and People with Disabilities. It could also include CEOs of Consumer and Citizen Advice Groups, Chairs of Business and Retail Groups. It would allow all the COMT and Heads of Service to see the wider picture of peoples needs and concerns and the completed picture of Council progress in addressing those. It could also be a public marketing opportunity for the Council to establish how far it has come in the year and set down its marker for the future. The event could be chaired by the Lord Mayor and/or Chief Executive and be a regular slot in the Council's calendar publicly establishing its commitment to public service.

Recommendation No. 12

The Council hold an Annual Customer Conference hosted and chaired by the Lord Mayor/Chief Executive to hear a report on the year to date and proposals for improvements for the incoming year.

4.8 Improving Access and Reducing Avoidable Contacts

4.81 Delivering on web based services

Whilst many customer still prefer face to face interactions the more we can move to web based services the better. It is the most cost effective way of dealing with customers and the 24/7 access it offers suits many people especially the more computer literate generation. There is a dire need to move this area faster than we are currently doing but we are hampered by the present control system. Each player in the current system has a different priority (speed/operatability, business need, corporate alignment, technology) Each in their own context are valid but all must be dealt with in a more pragmatic fashion to get our web based system operational. We need to revisit the mechanism and membership of the Web & Media Panel, to establish a system of ensuring strong corporate control without restricting the individual innovation or business needs of Services.

Recommendation No. 13

The Council investigate the fast tracking of its web based services by the agreement of targets and performance with the web & media panel. Any system designed to meet those targets must ensure that individual Service needs must be accommodated providing they are aligned to corporate objectives.

4.82 Exploring One Stop Shops

There is general acceptance that One Stop Shops are not only a good thing for customer accessing services in an accessible location, but also as a shop window for the Council to the public. The establishment of a single One Stop Shop in a central location merely for Council services is however of limited value. It provides a more accessible public counter for many services of the Council in a centralised location i.e: geographic accessibility but is less effective for service accessibility as research indicates customers rarely access more than one council service at a time.

A greater benefit would be combining our One Stop Shop with other advisory agencies. This could be achieved electronically through accessing officers from Planning Service, Housing Executive and other statutory agencies. Equally we might look to relocating services that are either operated within the Council such as Consumer Advice Centre, in addition to those with which the Council has a funding arrangement such as the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), Belfast Visitor and Convention Centre or Belfast City Centre Management. Some of these bodies were enthused at this proposal and discussions could begin on a relocation that might well suit all parties.

Because of the changing economic situation and the impact on Services who would need not just to surrender resources, both human and financial to achieve this, but would lose direct control on certain business functions it would need to form part of a separate project.

Recommendation No. 14

The Council commence a project examining the establishment of a One Stop Shop based in the City Hall or in a convenient city centre location. This facility to include other agencies in addition to being the main office for all advice, lodgement of applications, issue of certificates and administration of Council business.

4.83 Exploring kiosk provision

Whilst the provision of a one stop shop is a key part in any customer focus strategy it has certain limitations. It does centralise council customer services into a single site, which is useful, but people from outlying areas of the city still have to travel to access its facilities. In order that we put council services directly in communities we should look to establishing access through interactive kiosks. These can be located in council buildings such as community centres and leisure centres and in other buildings like shopping complexes or libraries. Whilst they are limited in range of interactions they can cover the most common services such as booking centres, buying tickets for events, registering requests for inspections, logging complaints. There is evidence that web based interactions also highlighted as a recommendation have not replaced kiosks as many people especially the elderly do not access services through that medium.

Recommendation No 15

That a paper be prepared in conjunction with the Head of Information Services detailing the logistics and costs for the provision of a kiosks in a pilot scheme across the city.

4.84 Exploring Single Numbers

Not only is there a desire for a single number to access local government services but the government are moving on the agenda of a single number for all their services. Their intention once the initial phase is completed is to look at bringing in local authorities under Phase 2 of the project. It could be said that there are very strong drivers taking us down the road of a single number.

Such projects whilst seemingly simple are immensely difficult to get right and both the public and private sectors are littered with the corpses of failed schemes. Whilst in some ways this can be seen as depressing there is available a wealth of information that we can learn from such projects to get our system, if we decide to go this route, implemented more effectively.

One of the big decisions for the establishment of a Single Number is whether to go:

Wide and Shallow: Cover all services but with a limited number of questions that can be dealt with first time by operatives. This centre would be manned by fairly unskilled operatives working from standard Question and Answer scripts, or

Narrow and Deep: Take your key customer services and answer at first response the bulk (70-80%) of questions by fully trained and dedicated staff who can access databases in real time. Such staff would be able to book inspections, update data on systems and release information on applications

Because of the customer and governmental drivers involved here we need to give the provision of a single number serious consideration. We must however be cautious and learn from the previous experiences, not just of other Councils, but indeed our own experiences in establishing such a number and allied CRM system. In order to do this with success I would suggest we pick a strong outward facing customer department and establish the system there first. I would suggest using the Health & Environmental Services Department for two reasons: firstly we can build on the existing strong working system as developed by the Cleansing and Waste Management and secondly from my knowledge of this department the databases of the remaining two Services, Building Control and Environmental Health are fairly advanced enabling them to get up to speed fairly quickly.

Recommendation No. 16

The Council commence a project examining the establishment of a single number, with a pilot to run in Health & Environmental Services through the expansion of their existing systems. This would combine Cleansing and Waste Management CRM systems and expand to the encompass Building Control and Environmental Health Services.

4.9 Learning & Development and Sharing knowledge

Much of the work involved in the following recommendations falls within the scope of the Human Resources Service. They have already carried out a great deal of this work through their Workforce Development Plan and this strategy needs to align closely to that plan. Additionally the Institute of Customer Services have been working in individual parts of the Council to great effect. We need to spread that work throughout the Council and use their expertise more corporately for maximum effect.

4.91 Provision of Council Customer Care Training

We need to maximise the benefits of the Institute of Customer Services, using their experts, databases, research and cutting edge ideas. This is also to maximise the benefits we get from paying our annual subscription fee to ICS for the whole Council, although we will need to look at the most economic and effective ways of delivery. ICS are aware of our proposed approach and are happy to examine what services they provide for us within the Councils current subscription, however as ICS may not be suitable for all scenarios we may partner with other organisations as well. If we are to instil the belief that we are a customer focused business, as set out in our vision and commitment, then not only should we have a sustained customer care training system, but it should for authenticity be part delivered by our own (preferably front line) staff as well as using external providers. This will utilise Council 'best practice' and make the training more relevant to our needs.

Recommendation No. 17

The Human Resources Services work closely with the Institute of Customer Services and other external providers in devising and delivering all Customer Care Training within the Council, through the use of external 'specialist' and internal 'best practice' (BCC) resources.

**4.92 Council Run Management Development School/College
Database of Officer's skills, abilities and knowledge**

Whilst the focus of the strategy was to look at customer care, the provision of excellence in any one area has a number of inter-related factors. These include leadership, visioning, creativity, understanding staff development, target setting, systems and processes etc. In short to drive any area of excellence in the Council, we require not only trained staff but fully developed managers. The Workforce Development Plan has already begun work on a proper management development system for all managers at all levels. My understanding is that this will be organised and facilitated internally as in the majority of areas the Council already possesses staff with the requisite skills and abilities with enough areas of 'best practice' to make such a proposal feasible. There will of course be need to bring in external assistance on topics such as leadership and strategic working but we need our own managers to step up to the plate to assist more practically in developing each other. In order to deliver this we need to establish where these skills, talents and practices reside building a database that the Council can draw from. Such a database could be aligned with the Council's new travel policy to ensure we maximise our learning resource.

Recommendation No. 18

The Human Resources Service together with Information Services continue to investigate under the emerging PSe system establishing a database of skills, competencies and examples of Best Practice across the Council.

Recommendation No. 19

The Strategy endorses and supports the work carried out by the Human Resources Service establishing a Management Programme within the Council based on the competencies required by managers, staffed and presented using the resources of existing Council staff and external providers where required.

5.0 Delivery of the Strategy

All strategies initially are words on paper the reality is in the pain, effort and changes organisations need to go through in order to deliver on them. This is where the serious hard work, realisation of changing processes, re-alignment of functions, changes of mindsets really begins. This report and strategy, not just sets us on a direction and overall goal of better customer services but also sets out some practical issues that can be tackled now. Some of the recommendations need tackled by all managers, others have identified specific Services who should carry them out.

How do we ensure delivery of the strategy.

There are several options. They include:

- Option 1: Appointment of a Customer Services Manager (External)
- Option 2: Appointment of an Interim Manager (External)
- Option 3: Seconding an existing manager within the Council
- Option 4: Utilising any spare managerial capacity within Council
- Option 5: Placing responsibility with a Corporate manager or unit
- Option 6: Allocating responsibility to a project team working group
- Option 7: Setting targets for units and performance monitoring

All the options could deliver the strategy although each will have their pros and cons. How many recommendations are taken on board and how fast we need to move may also dictate the decision. Additionally the Corporate Centre is currently under review and the likely position of any person, (if not implementing Options 6 & &7), to drive the strategy would probably be located there. I would imagine the outcome of that report would have an effect on the role assigned to Customer Focus.

There was discussion that we need to maintain momentum on this and how could this best be achieved under the current arrangements. In the interim I would suggest that the Organisation Fit to Lead & Serve Group co-ordinate the first scoping and prioritisation exercise for COMT following the adoption in principle of the recommendations in this report. This is because most of the officers who are currently responsible for strategies or who would be affected by the implications of this and other strategies are members of that grouping. Additionally the Chair of that group is the Director of Improvement whose remit many of these strategies will both impact on and be co-ordinated within.

Finally once the recommendations have been agreed with COMT then the strategy needs to be submitted to be proofed in regard to Section 75 by conducting a Screening & Equality Impact Assessment. I have submitted a draft of the document to the Council's Equality Officer who has indicated that although we may need some addition text he sees no major problems with the strategy.

Trevor Martin
27th March 2009

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