

South Northamptonshire Council

Customer Access Strategy

Draft 0.2 – Draft

20th November, 2008

Introduction

This paper sets out the Council's strategy for ensuring the public can access Council services efficiently and effectively.

It forms part of a set of strategies for customer services and in particular should be read in conjunction with the Council's Customer Service Framework which is the highest level document regarding customer services at South Northamptonshire Council.

The Framework document sets out an overall vision for the Council to be:

- Approachable
- Accessible
- Effective
- Efficient
- Transparent

and describes the behaviours, characteristics and measures the Council will need to address in moving forwards.

This paper, the Customer Access Strategy, builds on this and sets out how the Council will present its services to the public to help achieve this vision.

1. OUR CUSTOMERS

1.1 Who Are Our Customers?

The term customer is not one that sits easily with public services. Many use alternative words such as clients, service users, partners, the public, citizens, stakeholders and so on and there is no single word which effectively captures the breadth of the people we deal with. For the purposes of this paper and future service delivery we will use the word customers to mean all those people who:

- live, work or play in the district of South Northamptonshire,
- are interested in the area for growth, development and other opportunities
- are interested in the work of the council
- are people who need or use our services
- are people who need our help in accessing other public services

1.2 What Do Our Customers Want?

People get in touch with the Council for all sorts of reasons. What they all have in common however is that they want services which:

- treat them as respected individuals
- meet their needs
- are easily identified and accessible
- are quick, efficient and accurate
- are right first time, every time
- and where, if mistakes are made, they are put right quickly, efficiently and honestly

There are other customers, or more accurately potential customers, who also have wants and needs which the council could support but who do not get in touch with us proactively. These are often referred to as 'hard to reach' groups (*such as the housebound, the disabled, people who have problems with literacy, travellers, people without access to modern technology and so on*). The aim of this strategy is to ensure that these customers too have effective access to our services.

1.3 Knowing Our Customers

The Council as a whole has relatively little insight into who its customers are and how and why they access (or don't access) services. This needs to be addressed in order to provide a more appropriate and responsive set of services which meet their needs. To address this, we will:

- implement an effective Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system which is capable of recording and tracking all contacts and their outcomes across all access channels.
- implement better profiling and mapping techniques to support effective analysis of demand and provision.
- provide ward based information to Members to enable them to respond to and advise on ward level requirements to meet their community's needs.

2. ACCESS CHANNELS

2.1 Channels To Be Developed.

People get in touch with the Council through a number of different routes. In the jargon of customer services, these are known as access channels and the channels we will support and develop over the next few years are as shown in the table below.

Given that the self-help channels are both significantly cheaper than other channels and can be made available around the clock, the aim will be to move enquiries across to this channel wherever possible without disadvantaging people. In addition to reducing costs, this will free up staff time to enable them to deal more effectively with more complex cases and with people who are uncomfortable or unable to use the self-help channels.

Type	Channel	
Self Help	Internet – access to information	<p style="text-align: center;">↑</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Aim is to move enquiries 'up the stack' to more cost effective channels whilst improving customer service</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Cost ratio is typically said to be 1:10:40 for self help, mediated and supported services respectively</i></p>
	Internet – service delivery	
	Touch phones	
Mediated	Physical post	
	E-mail	
	E-forms	
	SMS	
Supported	Fax	
	Telephony	
	Face to face	

2.2 Channels To Be Reviewed At A Later Date

A number of local authorities are using other channels such as kiosks and digital TV as a way of providing services to their customers. The Council will consider the use of these at a later stage but will focus on the channels shown in 2.1 for the time being.

2.3 The Internet

The Council's current web site is relatively poorly developed as evidenced by feedback from SOCITM¹. To address this, we will develop the site in four areas:

Provision of information	This refers to the provision of basic information about services (such as bin collections, planning applications and so on). This area will be developed in such a way that the same data is also used by front line staff to ensure consistency of information provision.
Service delivery	<p>This refers to the ability to carry out transactions on-line. The council is currently very poor at this and the aim is to ensure all possible services are available electronically as soon as possible and to achieve 'transactional' status' for the web site from SOCITM.</p> <p>Service delivery will be integrated with the CRM system to provide full tracking of service requests.</p>

¹ SOCITM – the Local Government Society of IT Managers

Consultation	The internet offers a very effective way of consulting with people on a wide range of issues. This area will be developed as part of the Community Engagement strategy to improve our ability to listen to and respond to customer needs, wants and views and will include social networking capabilities (often known as Web 2.0). Additional mechanisms will be provided for non-web users.
Promotion of the Council's aims and objectives	There is a significant body of evidence to indicate that keeping people informed about the work of the Council and what it is achieving adds considerably to public satisfaction levels. We will develop the web site to promote the Council's aims and objectives and to give feedback on how well we are doing against these.

2.4 Touch Phones

Touch phones offer a convenient way of providing access to some types of services. At a national level, the best examples include paying for a new car tax disc and a new TV licence. Locally, we already provide the ability to pay some invoices (such as council tax) over the phone.

Although a relatively low priority, we will further develop these services where there is a clear opportunity to move customers across to this self help channel without adversely affecting service delivery.

2.5 Mediated Channels

The Council receives a significant number of service requests and follow-up contacts by post, fax and e-mail with no systematic way of dealing with these across the organisation as a whole. There is strong anecdotal evidence that such correspondence goes astray and is not responded to effectively. This problem will be compounded as the use of e-forms and SMS texting increases.

This needs to be addressed and we will do this by:

- centralising the receipt, scanning and distribution of all physical post and faxes
- centralising the receipt and handling of initial customer enquiries via e-mail, e-forms and SMS texting
- integrating the above with the CRM system to provide full tracking of service requests
- establishing Customer Service Staff as champions of the customer to follow up on service requests with back office departments as appropriate.

2.6 Telephony

The telephone is currently the council's most important access channel with around 80% of enquiries coming via this route. The Council has been developing this channel for some time with the intention of establishing a 'front line' capable of resolving 80% of enquiries at the point of first contact. The service currently handles general queries, calls for Waste and, since the 3rd November 2008, calls for Revenues and Benefits.

Substantial additional work is required to develop the call centre service to where it needs to be. This includes the supporting technology, the reporting and use of activity and quality management data and the processes for taking-on services on behalf of divisions.

To move this channel forward, we will:

- develop the call centre part of the Customer Service Centre and provide high quality supporting tools and training to enable staff to work effectively. This includes market testing and possibly replacing the current CRM.
- extend the range of queries answered by the call centre across all service areas where this improves customer service and reduces costs. Where this cannot be demonstrated in advance, processes will be transferred and the impact evaluated during service take-on.
- move to the systematic use of 322 322 as the Council's default telephone number for all enquiries. This includes dropping the use of the LocalLink number and branding.
- use a limited set of additional published numbers where this allows calls to be systematically routed to the correct agents in the call centre. This may also require the removal of Direct-Dial-In ² functionality in some areas.
- ensure that all calls during working hours are answered in person wherever possible. Automated (*press 1 for xxx*) services will not be used on general enquiry numbers.
- Integrate all calls with the use of the refreshed CRM system to provide a full record and tracking of service requests and information provided.
- Systematically track and report on all phone activity, including call volumes, traffic profiles and resolution at the first point of contact. This includes the provision of ward based information once the refreshed CRM is in place.

2.7 Face To Face Services

The Council currently provides a full range of face to face services at Springfields. A cash collection and tourism service is provided at Brackley and individual departments provide outreach services via visiting officers. Compared to other local authorities, these facilities are relatively limited and to address this, we will:

- Develop the capacity of front line staff in all locations to provide the full range of services available through the Customer Service Centre using the CRM system and supporting technology.
- Redevelop the Springfields reception area to provide a high quality facility capable of resolving 80% of enquiries at the point of first contact. This will be known in future as the Springfields Help Centre.
- Close the existing Brackley ³ building and provide a new high quality face to face help centre in Burgess Square in Brackley. This will be known in future as Brackley Help Centre and will be capable of providing the same full range of face to face services as Springfields.

² Direct-Dial-In (DDI) – This is the function whereby everybody has their own telephone number. This may need to be suspended or removed in some areas to force the transfer of calls to the call centre. In some areas (Building Control would be a good example), customers need direct contact with officers to ensure an effective service. The use of DDI will therefore need to be evaluated on a process by process basis.

³ The new building in Burgess Square is smaller than the current building and will not be capable of supporting a cash collection facility or tourism-related shop. Space for the provision of tourist information will also be limited and will therefore focus on information and services which add value directly to the district.

The Brackley Help Centre will also aim to resolve at least 80% of enquiries at the point of first contact.

We will also:

- Explore the provision of face to face services in the proposed new Towcester Civic Building, either as an alternative to or instead of Springfields, as these proposals develop.
- Explore the provision of out-reach services, either on a mobile basis or on a shared service basis, with partner organisations such as the County Council and the Police.
- Equip mobile workers with full access to Council systems and services, including CRM, where there is a business case to justify this.

3. THE ROLE OF PARTNERS

The Council's aim is to reach and support all members of the community. As noted in the Customer Service Framework, we believe that no single organisation can hope to deliver modern services effectively across a whole community and our aim is therefore to operate across structural boundaries both internally and externally so that working with partners becomes the norm.

From the public's point of view, the end result should eventually be that they can access the full range of public services easily and effectively regardless of organisational boundaries. This will take time to develop and needs to be carried out in parallel with other work to develop to improve our own service delivery. To progress this, we will:

- Explore the provision of shared service provision with the County Council. In the first instance this is likely to mean the co-location of a County Council customer service officer at Springfields but could develop into the provision of a paid-for service by SNC staff on behalf of the County in due course.
- Explore the provision of a shared service with the Police. In the first instance this may mean the co-location of a civilian Police Customer Service Officer at Springfields but could mature into a broader service centred around the Crime and Disorder Partnerships or an on-site police presence.⁴
- Explore the provision of services through the voluntary sector⁵ and other partners. This is a relatively low priority in terms of service provision at the present time but will be an important part of the community engagement strategy and, in particular, our approach to connecting effectively with harder to reach groups.

⁴ It is important to note that the concept of shared services with the Police explicitly requires the separation of duties on their part between those to do with the general public and those to do with offenders. There is no suggestion that the police should ever deal with offenders at Council sites.

⁵ The future use of the existing Brackley building has yet to be decided. The voluntary sector has expressed an interest in taking on 'ownership' of the building to enable them to leverage in funding unavailable to the Council. Brackley Town Council have also recently expressed an interest in using part of the building in the event they go ahead with refurbishing the Town Hall. The merits of transferring the building on a long-lease as a community asset will need to be reviewed properly at a later date and a business case developed for the building's future use.

4. THE ROLE OF MEMBERS

Members have a key role to play in the development and provision of effective customer services. In addition to being able to identify emerging trends and issues in their locality, they often act as advocates on behalf of customers who are either struggling to access services effectively or who are experiencing problems that they are unable to resolve themselves.

An important part of this strategy will be to enhance the role of Members and to ensure that they are as equipped and informed as possible, within due process, to represent the Council to the public and to represent the public to the Council. To achieve this, we will:

- Provide an effective mechanism for handling and tracking Member queries as part of the implementation of the new CRM. This will ensure that all queries are visible and auditable whilst being dealt with through normal day to day processes.
- Provide members with their own telephone number for contacting the call centre to ensure a direct and prompt response.
- Explore the merits of providing Members with direct access to the CRM system to enable them to submit and track enquiries directly.
- Provide locally based reports on the volumes and types of enquiries being received in the Customer Service Centre and the way in which these are being resolved.
- Offer the opportunity to all Members to meet with a Director or Head of Service at least once a quarter to discuss customer service issues.

5. Proposed Customer Service Standards

5.1 Generic Standards

There are a number of generic standards that will apply across all service channels as follows:

- Our aim is to get things right first time, every time.
- If we do get things wrong, we will be open and honest about it, apologise, put things right where we can and take action to stop the same error happening again
- Whoever takes an enquiry or other form of contact from a customer is responsible for 'owning' it and ensuring it is satisfactorily resolved (even where handed off).
- All customer related enquiries and actions taken are visible to front and back office staff so that they can be tracked and monitored to ensure effective quality and complaint management and to enable front line staff to 'close the loop' with customers
- All enquiries are handled professionally, courteously accurately and consistently to agreed corporate standards across all access channels.
- We 'know' our customers. Once they have given us information once, we may check it is correct on subsequent occasions but we don't ask for the same information a second time.
- Customers are confident at the end of a contact that their details have been captured correctly and that the nature of their request or query has been properly understood and dealt with appropriately.
- There is no duplication of data entry in our data systems as a result of providing customer services
- Our systems are integrated wherever it enhances customer services and is cost effective to do so.
- There is consistent SNC branding and service delivery across all access channels and all parts of the organisation. Customer are clear of the best way for them to get in touch with us and services are designed to avoid the need for 'back-door' alternatives.
- Our members understand how our customer services functions work and how well they perform. They feel a valued part of the process.
- We protect the privacy and security of our customers. Data is encrypted when it leaves our systems, is kept private where required and shared where appropriate. As far as possible, the customer determines what is private and we have the means to respect this view.
- We are able to tailor services effectively to individual customer needs, including the provision of:
 - information in languages other than English
 - an interpreter scheme
 - hearing loops in public areas
 - information in different media (including web based, audio based and large print)
 - home visits
 - privacy areas

5.2 Specific Standards

The Council aims to achieve the following service levels. Some of these are more difficult to achieve than others but the overall intention is to achieve them all at the earliest possible date:

General Access

- All customers are within ten minutes travel of an SNC service access point.
- All services are designed as far as possible from the customer's perspective.
- A properly monitored and reducing number of low value, no value contacts.

Face to Face

- 100% of customers are spoken to and their need identified within three minutes of arriving (triage)
- 100% of customers are being dealt with by the right person within ten minutes
- 80% of enquiries are fully resolved during the contact
- No more than one hand off
- Reported customer satisfaction level for front line service – 95%
- Few physical barriers with safety and calmness built in
- Customers are able to make appointments for all services

Telephone

- 90% of calls are answered within 14 seconds
- Longest time to pick-up – 40 seconds
- Abandoned call rates are less than 5%
- Average call handling time (excl wrap-up) – 2 minutes
- Average call handling time (inc wrap-up) – 3 minutes
- 80% of enquiries are fully resolved during the contact
- Calls are transferred no more than once
- % of advisers are monitored each week – 25%
- 100% of answer phone messages returned within one hour during normal working hours
- Reported customer satisfaction level for front line service – 95%

Post / Fax / Email / Text / SMS

- 100% of contacts are captured electronically (scanned, indexed, in CRM etc) within one working day
- 80% of contacts are fully resolved at the point of first contact and a response provided to the customer within one working day
- The remaining 20% of contacts acknowledged and handed off electronically within one working day
- Where handed off,
 - Information is transferred electronically to back office systems with no further need for re-keying.
 - 75% of contacts receive a complete response within ten working days.
 - The remaining 25% receive a response within ten working days explaining when they will receive a full response.
 - All actions and responses auditable via the CRM system.

Self Service

- 75% of on-line (web) transactions started are completed successfully
- 85% of touch phone transactions started are completed successfully

Appointments

- All customers given a minimum of 48 hrs notice of an appointment where we request an appointment
- All customers given a minimum of 24 hrs notice where we need to cancel

Complaints and Freedom of Information / Data Protection Act Requests

- 90% of customers satisfied with the way we deal with their complaints
- 90% of customers satisfied with the way we deal with their FOI requests
- 90% of customers satisfied with the way we deal with their DPA requests

5.3 Developing a Customer Service Culture

We are here to serve the public and our business practices need to start from the customer. Over time we will re-design all of our services from the customers perspective, determining what is an excellent service and delivering this as far as possible within the bounds of current legislation and resources. We will also ensure that all staff have a clear understanding of the meaning of outstanding customer service in its broadest sense and the role they have to play in delivering this.

We will do this by:

- Systematically reviewing all current processes with officers, walking through processes from the customers point of view and changing the way we do things where appropriate.
- Identifying meaningful customer centred performance indicators for each service area, establishing current and national best practice standards against these and developing strategies and action plans to bring the council up to the best of the rest.
- Developing a consultation and training programme to engage staff and Members in exploration and development of the Customer Service Framework, this Access Strategy and other associated documents and by taking action on the outcome of this work.
- Building customer service objectives into the annual appraisal process.
- Building regular reviews of customer service into Divisional meetings
- Rewarding examples of strong, proactive customer care and taking sanctions against examples of poor customer care.
- Regularly reviewing how well we are doing through the use of surveys, mystery shopping, peer group review and other engagement processes.
- Encouraging relevant staff to undertake NVQ based training in Customer Care and seeking external accreditation such as Charter Mark or similar for our customer services function.

Short Term Action Plan

	Action	Priority
1	Market test and if appropriate implement a new CRM system	High
2	Assign a project manager to oversee the fitting out, move into and go-live of the new Brackley office	High
3	Implement effective recording and reporting of customer service centre activity levels	Medium
4	Prepare a development plan to update the Council's web site based on the four themes of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - provision of information - service delivery - consultation - promotion of Council aims, objectives and achievements 	Medium
5	Review implementation of the current RKVY electronic document management system and develop a project plan for the centralised scanning and distribution of post linked to the CRM system	Medium
6	Complete the take-on of Finance processes into the Customer Service Centre and review outcomes. Ensure the expected financial benefits are delivered.	Medium
7	Develop and implement proposals for engaging with officers and staff on the Customer Service Framework and this Access Strategy	Medium
8	Review capacity of new corporate information team, address issues and develop action plan to develop customer profiling and mapping.	Low
9	Develop a business case for the future of the existing Brackley offices	Low

CHANGE HISTORY

Version	Status	Author	Date Published
0.1	Initial draft	David Price	5 th October, 2008
0.2	Revised draft aligned to Customer Service Framework	David Price	20 th November, 2008