

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

CABINET

Date of Meeting: 1 August 2011
Report of: Customer Services Manager
Subject/Title: Customer Services Strategy
Portfolio Holder: Councillor David Brown

1.0 Report Summary

- 1.1 A new Customer Services Strategy has been developed by a cross-functional steering group. The purpose of the strategy is to outline the broad principles that will drive the development of an efficient and customer focused operating model across all Council services. These principles may reinforce decisions already taken and implemented, or they will influence service redesign and be implemented through a series of related projects.
- 1.2 In considering the face to face element of the strategy, a review and lessons learned from the phase 1 transfer of customer service points to libraries was undertaken. The strategy recommends providing customer access through all remaining libraries in Cheshire East. This will increase the number of communities with local customer access and deliver a net annual saving of £240k.

2.0 Decision Requested

- 2.1 Cabinet endorse the new Customer Services Strategy and support the recommendation to extend face to face customer access across all Cheshire East libraries.

3.0 Reasons for Recommendations

- 3.1 Following the Comprehensive Spending Review, local authorities are challenged to try to reduce costs without compromising service standards or reducing access or uptake (particularly among more vulnerable or disadvantaged service users). The Government continues to call for public services for all that are efficient, effective, excellent, equitable and empowering – with the customer always at the heart of service provision.
- 3.2 Research recently published by the Institute of Customer Services reported that there is strong evidence that customer service contributes to the success of organisations, with an increasing recognition within the private sector of customer service as a source of competitive advantage and differentiation. The research found that there was no magic ingredient to excelling at customer service but organisations that took part in the research stated repeatedly that success came from getting the basics right such as delivering

on time, keeping promises, communicating effectively, correcting mistakes, and streamlining processes to make doing business as easy as possible for the customer. The research also found that success is driven by a clear, organisation wide vision of the importance of customer service.

- 3.3 The Customer Services Strategy considers how customers can access Council services, what we can do to better understand customer expectations, and how our culture and the behaviours and attitudes of our people is critical to providing customer service excellence. This strategy is critical in ensuring Cheshire East achieves its corporate objective of '*being an excellent Council*'. The Customer Services Strategy is provided as an appendix to this report.

4.0 Wards Affected

- 4.1 All wards.

5.0 Local Ward Members

- 5.1 Not applicable.

6.0 Policy Implications including - Carbon reduction - Health

- 6.1 Extending face to face customer access across all libraries will reduce the travel and associated energy usage for residents in communities that currently travel to another town for face to face access.

7.0 Financial Implications (Authorised by the Borough Treasurer)

- 7.1 The extension of customer access across the remaining libraries will require an increase in the revenue budget for libraries. This increase is required to ensure the smaller libraries have sufficient resources to handle the increased demand from customers. Based on the experience of the first phase, the larger libraries have been able to absorb the additional customer demand. Additional budget will also be required for re-grading of staff at larger libraries that have traditionally been on a slightly lower grade than their colleagues at the smaller libraries. The additional responsibilities for customer access bring the roles into alignment. This revenue budget increase will be funded by efficiency savings in Customer Services.
- 7.2 The £240k net annual saving from transferring the former Customer Service Points to libraries has been included within the 2011/12 budget.
- 7.2 Any other changes introduced as a result of the Customer Services Strategy will be cost neutral or contribute to savings already budgeted.
- 7.3 The cost of new systems and equipment required as a result of the Customer Services Strategy will be funded from the Customer Services capital budget.

8.0 Legal Implications (Authorised by the Borough Solicitor)

- 8.1 If redeployment or voluntary redundancy is not possible for any staff displaced when an existing customer service point is transferred to the library, there is a risk that compulsory redundancy may be necessary following an appropriate selection exercise.

9.0 Risk Management

- 9.1 There is a risk that key stakeholders within communities that will experience changes to their local face to face access will not support this proposal which could generate adverse publicity for the Council. Consultation will be held with stakeholders within the local communities to discuss any concerns with the proposed changes.
- 9.2 There is also a risk of confusion amongst customers affected by changes to their local face to face access, in particular attempting to access Council services in the former customer service locations. A customer communication plan will be developed to mitigate this risk and ensure customers are fully informed of any changes to local access.

10.0 Background and Options

- 10.1 Cabinet approved a proposal in February 2010 to transfer the former District Council Customer Service Points to libraries to provide a single Council access point in those communities. The formation of the unitary authority created this opportunity to make better use of both staffing and property resources, but also provide customers with more flexible opening hours into the evening and weekends. This transfer was completed in six locations from April to September. In developing the Customer Services Strategy, a review of the lessons learned from the initial transfer was considered to clearly define the role that libraries will play as the local community hub, and what customers can expect.
- 10.2 Customers can expect to receive information, advice and signposting on all Council services. In most situations this will involve:
- answering the enquiry directly
 - or directing customers to a resource on the internet;
 - or providing them with a telephone number of somebody that can help;
 - or providing them with a form to complete;
 - or helping them connect to a specialist via video conferencing technology for more in-depth enquiries;
 - or for some services this may involve making an appointment for them to meet a specialist at another time in the library.
- 10.3 When a customer walks into a library they will not see a separate customer service desk, but will be able to approach any member of library staff to assist them. There will not be a confidential meeting room available in every library, but the layout of the library will facilitate discrete discussions if required. This

issue has been considered in the new library design that is being introduced with the roll out of self service, with the removal of the traditional counter and the encouragement of customer self service to reduce queues. Customers will be able to talk to staff at pods or desks that are distributed throughout the library. The opening hours of the library will not change because they become a community hub, but will continue to be reviewed to try and achieve the optimum opening hours for the local community within current resources.

- 10.4 All of the libraries will be equipped with scanners to quickly forward benefits claim information and remove the need for a daily courier service. A video conferencing kiosk will be installed at each library to enable library staff to put customers in touch with the Contact Centre or directly to back office specialists for in-depth enquiries. It will also enable the provision of some new services via the library, such as issuing of Blue Badges. Alternatively, some services may offer the option to make an appointment for the customer to meet a specialist at another time in the library. In Crewe and Macclesfield, customers will be directed to the nearby Customer Service Centres rather than arranging appointments in the library or connecting them via TellyTalk.
- 10.5 Customer access will be extended to the remaining libraries in Cheshire East. Customer access in Nantwich, Poynton and Sandbach could transfer from the existing arrangements to the libraries subject to further local consultation.

11.0 Access to Information

The background papers relating to this report can be inspected by contacting the report writer:

Name:	Paul Bayley
Designation:	Customer Services Manager
Tel No:	(01606 2)71567
Email:	Paul.Bayley@cheshireeast.gov.uk