

Scrutiny Committee – 8th January 2008

9. Review of Contact Centre – Report from Commission

<i>Chair of Commission & Report Author</i>	<i>Rupert Cox, Scrutiny Chairman</i> Rupert.cox@southsomerset.gov.uk
<i>Lead Officer:</i>	<i>Emily McGuinness, Scrutiny & Acting Democratic Services Manager</i>
<i>Contact Details:</i>	<i>Emily.mcguinness@southsomerset.gov.uk or (01935) 462148</i> <i>Rupert.cox@southsomerset.gov.uk</i>

Purpose of the Report

To report back to the Scrutiny Committee the findings of the Contact Centre Review Commission.

Recommendation(s)

The Scrutiny Committee is asked to comment on and endorse the recommendations of the Contact Centre Review Commission and to receive an up to date Performance Report from the service in June 2008.

The improvements to performance of the Contact Centre over the last three months be noted and applauded.

The Contact Centre Review Commission recommends that to improve performance and customer satisfaction further: -

- (1) The allocated resources for this service be maintained, but the service manager be encouraged to continue to make continuous improvements.
- (2) The “abandoned calls” performance measure is reinstated as a Performance Indicator.
- (3) Consideration is given, through the Transformation Board, to collaborative working with other authorities, without prejudicing performance and customer satisfaction.
- (4) More work needs to be done with Heads of Service to link the work of the Contact Centre with their own service.
- (5) More work needs to be done with external partners such as Somerset County Council and the Somerset Waste Partnership.
- (6) The SSDC website to be enhanced to become more “user friendly”
- (7) Support the *trial* of a more automated telephone response system

Background

Context

In March 2007, members of the Scrutiny Committee agreed to establish an Overview Commission to review the performance of the Contact Centre as the service had been consistently failing to meet the quarterly performance targets, as reviewed by District Executive and the Scrutiny Committee.

It was agreed to delay the commencement of the review to allow time for recent management decisions on the Customers First service to become evident.

The Scrutiny Committee scoped the review at its meeting in July 2007 with the following areas identified for consideration:

- Investigate ways to reduce errors and waste in current systems by using Business Process Re-engineering to re-design the process in the light of lessons learnt
- Investigate why the Contact Centre was failing to deliver in some service areas – this would reduce repeat callers and the number of complaints
- Investigate establishing internal processes that will ensure that all communications with the public are consistent, correct, make sense and are produced in Plain English and therefore cannot be misinterpreted – this element of the review should involve advice from the Communication Team.
- Investigate a change in staffing contracts that better caters for seasonal staffing and short notice changes to times of work so that the service can cover predicted 'busy' periods. This needs to be looked at both in terms of the Contact Centre and 'back office' teams
- Encourage service areas to systematically review all their major work processes and then ensure all their staff are trained adequately on these processes.
- Look at ways to encourage staff to accept calls from the Contact Centre quickly and efficiently – perhaps include this in the Corporate Customer Care package that is currently in development
- Investigate how the Council could better collect data from customers once and then use across services. An example of this is a customer's change of address being notified across all corporate software systems
- Investigate establishing direct integration between Northgate (Customer Services computer system) and other major Council systems. This will reduce the amount of time staff need to spend re-entering information that has been collated within the Contact Centre. This is most urgently required between the Council Tax system and the Customer Services system
- Understand the need to encourage customers to use cheaper access channels. For example, Council Tax banding enquiries is number 10 on the most frequently delivered services, yet this information is readily available on the Council's website for those who have access.
- Need to look at how our customers choose to contact the Council at the moment and in the future: need to look at the levels of funding committed to the different access channels.

The Commission

The members of the Commission were:-

- Cllr Rupert Cox (Chair)
- Cllr Tom Parsley
- Cllr Alan Smith
- Cllr Derek Yeomans

Other members supporting the review:-

- Cllr Mike Lewis Executive Portfolio holder
- Cllr Robin Munday Theme Advisor – ICT

Officers supporting the review:-

- Emily McGuinness Scrutiny Manager
- Rina Singh Corporate Director – Communities
- Jason Toogood Interim Customer Services Manager
- Mike Lay Head of ICT and Customer Services (now left the authority)
- Angela Oxenbury Committee Administrator

Progress of the review

Members of the review attended the Contact Centre prior to the first Commission meeting where they were shown how the centre operates and became familiar with some of the challenges and issues that are faced when managing such a service.

The Commission then met on 3 occasions to explore the issues that are affecting performance and to make recommendations to improve performance and customer satisfaction still further – *the notes of these meetings are appended to this report.*

At its first meeting on 20th September, the Commission went through the issues identified in the scoping report and recognised that they fell into two distinct areas of work

- The operational issues involved with managing the service.
- The strategic ICT issues.

It was agreed that the focus of the review should be around the operational performance, and if performance was found to be affected by more strategic issues then these should be highlighted in the final report.

The main points of discussion at the meeting on 20th September were summarised as:

- It was acknowledged that customer satisfaction with the service was good but the main problems centred around a slow response time.
- A quality service was important to members but a balance was needed between providing this and improving the speed of response.
- Improvement of the service to customers across all services was required. Links with the web team should be developed to reduce the need for people to phone the Council.
- More awareness of future service related issues was needed for the Service to be better able to gauge staffing needs.
- Other centres to be contacted to benchmark best practice.
- The HR & Performance Manager should be invited to a future Commission to discuss staff contracts.
- All services should be encouraged to review their processes and ensure adequate training of staff to deal with customers.
- The Commission should flag up with Heads of Service the need for staff to be more responsive.
- What progress is being made on the Corporate Customer Care Package?
- The timescale for integrating services was unclear at present but information sharing was already taking place.
- A comparison of the costs of different channels of access should be made and the public encouraged to use low-cost channels.

At the second meeting of the Commission on 24th October, job descriptions for the Customer Services Manager and the Head of ICT and Customer Services were presented to give clarity of the two roles.

Cllr Robin Munday confirmed that, as theme adviser for ICT, he had spent time in both the Contact Centre and the IS Unit to monitor the system and ascertain the links between the two units. He felt that in some instances the Contact Centre system was not receiving up to date information for its operators to be as effective as possible.

Consideration was given to benchmarking our service against other authorities. The Scrutiny Manager was asked to contact North East Derbyshire Contact Centre about their performance as they had been recognised as a “best practice” authority. The

Scrutiny Manager reported that N.E. Derbyshire focussed more on customer satisfaction, but it was unclear how this related to other performance indicators or to financial resources. She also reported that due to staff changes at N.E. Derbyshire she was unconvinced that the answers to her questions were a robust platform from which to base recommendations at SSDC.

Neighbouring authorities were difficult to benchmark against as they did not purport to offer the same service to customers as SSDC and had differing PIs making comparisons deceiving. It was also too early to judge how effective SouthWest One (the new IBM/SCC/TDBC system) is likely to be.

The Interim Customer Services Manager updated the Commission on improved performance over the last 2 months and suggested that this was due to encouraging more flexible working to account for peaks in anticipated demand and an appreciation in some services that “back office” staff are obligated to take calls directed at them.

During discussion members recognised that more work needs to be done to change the culture of back office services in that they have an obligation to take calls from customers that relate to their service. It was noted that Development Control and Environment/Street Scene had made good progress in this area.

Members expressed concern about the enquiry service offered as part of the new Somerset Waste Board arrangements and it was agreed that this, and other external services should be improved and is more transparent.

The third meeting on 20th November was attended by Cllr Mike Lewis (the Portfolio Holder) and Rina Singh (Corporate Director - Communities) in order for the Commission to question the Executive on how the recent improved performance will be maintained, and what measures are to be taken to continually improve performance and customer satisfaction.

Members asked the Portfolio Holder what he saw as the key service objectives over the next 12 months and he outlined the key priorities as outlined in the Portfolio Holder Statements;

- Deliver actions for 07/08 as set out in Access to Services Strategy
- Maintain customer satisfaction with service at 95%
- Increase percentage of calls resolved at first point of contact in line with Somerset partnership targets
- Increase percentage of calls answered within target time

Critical Success Factors

- 100% actions for 07/08 as outlined in Access Strategy delivered.
- Over 95% of customers to be either satisfied or very satisfied with the call centre service
- Over 60% of calls to the contact centre resolved within the contact centre.
- Over 80% of all call centre calls to be answered within 30 seconds
- Over 90% of call centre calls to be answered within 60 seconds

Members of the Commission welcomed the proposed service developments but asked what impact the current financial climate will have on the Contact Centre. They were particularly concerned that the performance of the service should not be adversely affected by budget savings.

The Corporate Director – Communities informed members that savings were identified according to Corporate Themes and that the required level of savings had been identified from elsewhere in her directorate, therefore there would be no impact on the Contact Centre. However, the Interim Customer Services Manager told members that he would still be looking to achieve efficiencies as he felt this was good management practice.

Members asked the Corporate Director what work, if any, was planned to join up contact centres with neighbouring authorities. They were informed that the Council is pursuing a transformation agenda across the organisation and all possibilities are being explored. The Transformation Board that consists of members of the Management Board is leading on this work.

The Portfolio Holder outlined to the Commission his plans to explore the merits of a more automated telephone service. While it was noted by more long standing members that this was not what was envisaged by Council when the Customer First project was originally agreed, it was recognised that a trial of a more automated system might improve performance and customer satisfaction further

Conclusions

The Commission recognised that between March 2007 and the commencement of the review working practises had been changed sufficiently to improve performance so that it was no longer an “exception” under the Performance Management framework. The Commission noted any underperformance was now manageable.

The Interim Customer Services Manager has made excellent progress and realises that more work needs to be done. He would welcome the reinstatement of the “abandoned calls” PI as he regards this as an effective management tool – The Commission agree with this judgement.

The Commission was reassured that the financial resources allocated to this service would not be cut in the 08/09 revenue budget, but recognised that continuous efficiencies would be sought in future. The Interim Customer Services Manager supported this.

The Commission welcomed the involvement of the Theme Adviser for ICT and was reassured that he was encouraging a closer link between the Contact Centre and the ICT services – particularly the website. The Commission regard an effective “user friendly” website as a key tool in improving customer satisfaction.

While the benchmarking process the Commission tried to undertake was not as effective as was hoped for, the Commission was reassured that the Transformation Board is considering strategic improvements to the service, such as working with other authorities in delivering an integrated customer contact service. The Commission were of a view that the balance between performance, financial resources and customer satisfaction must be maintained.

The Commission gave guarded support to the Portfolio Holder's consideration of a trial of a more automated telephone system. The Commission felt there was scope to automate some of the telephone response service, such as waste, but customer satisfaction must not be compromised.

It was recognised by the Commission members and supporting officers that more work needs to be done to encourage (and/or instruct) Heads of Service to make provision

within their service to take calls from customers via the Contact Centre. Time is wasted, and customer satisfaction is diminished by a customer adviser having the customer “on hold” on the phone while trying to speak to an officer through an internal line. Calls of a technical nature that cannot be resolved by a customer adviser must be directed through to the relevant service.

Similarly, the Commission were of a view that queries from customers with regard to the Somerset Waste Partnership should be directed to one point of contact at the Partnership and not through the SSDC Contact Centre.

Financial Implications

There are no direct financial implications associated with this review, however, if recommendations 1,3 and 7 as set out above are to be considered for implementation, there would need to be financial appraisals. This was not part of the scope of this review.

Recommendations 2, 4, 5 and 6 should be met from existing budgets, as they require a change in culture and working practices rather than financial investment.

Implications for Corporate Priorities

An effective Contact Centre contributes in some part to all 5 of the Councils corporate aims as set out in the Corporate Plan, but specifically to “**Deliver well managed, cost effective services valued by our customers**”

An effective Contact Centre also contributes to the following critical activities as set out in the Corporate Plan – 1, 2, 4, 5,10, 15, 16, 17 and 18.

Background Papers: *Notes of the meetings of the Well-Managed Services Overview Commissions held on 20th September, 24th October and 20th November 2007.*