

## **Development of a Customer Service Strategy**

### **Executive Summary**

Local government is taking a strong lead in putting the citizen at the centre of public services. This document outlines what a local government Customer Service Strategy could look like for consideration by SLB Subgroup A. It is being presented in order to generate ideas and thinking around how local government in Northern Ireland may approach the transition from being service focused to citizen focused. The strategy that is presented represents a true citizen focus; it is not just merely a contact solution to providing public services. It is based around best practice from other regions, with the inclusion of a single number call centre for all public services (NI Direct) and the introduction of Public Service Centres that allow citizens to receive services when and where they want them (One-stop-shops). The ideas presented align with Central Governments directives on delivering E-government. E-government is not just about electronic service delivery, but improving services to the citizen. There are 4 key principles – citizen focused government, accessible services, social inclusion and using information better.

The Strategic Vision for the Customer Service Strategy will put the citizen at the centre of service delivery to ensure an enhanced service experience that exceeds expectations.

To help achieve this Vision, the objectives are:

- To create an organisation with the skills, processes and culture to deliver better access to improved public services.
- To make it more convenient, easier and quicker for citizens to interact with public sector organisations.
- To make sure that all citizens have equal access to the services that they need.

- To provide more responsive, more reliable, more satisfying public services that meet the expectations of citizens for better access to better quality public services.
- To deliver better access to better quality public services in the most cost-effective and efficient way.

The changes required to achieve this fall into four main categories;

- Process – the way Councils do things.
- Organisational – where Councils are located and how they are structured.
- Technological – the Information and Communication Technology systems used to support Council transactions
- Cultural – the attitudes Councils have and the way they behave.

The Customer Service Strategy represents a step change in service delivery, but it is not a leap into the unknown. The technology that enables Councils to make the most of these changes has been used by many other local authorities for years. We can learn from their experiences, and can try to avoid the problems that have been reported.

## **Introduction**

Local government is taking a strong lead in putting the citizen at the centre of public services. E-government is not just about electronic service delivery, but improving services to the citizen. There are 4 key principles – citizen focused government, accessible services, social inclusion and using information better.

Central and local government are urged to provide services in partnership and in a way that is meaningful to the citizen. All services, where practicable, should be available electronically. These services should be accessible through the telephone, Internet, digital TV and contact centres. They should be available when the citizen wants them and in locations that are conveniently located to provide ease of access. New services need to be developed to promote an inclusive society. Information should be used effectively to enable better policy-making, service delivery and more efficient working.

Section 75 and Schedule 9 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 places a duty to promote equality and avoid discrimination in service delivery. In particular Disability Discrimination Act 1995 requires that all reasonable adaptations should be made to permit disabled people to access buildings used by the public. Therefore this legislation needs to be considered as part of the Customer Service Strategy.

In order to implement a Customer Service Strategy a robust Customer Insight programme needs to be undertaken. This will give Councils information on how and when citizens want services delivered. The customer insight programme will be developed using other stakeholders such as community partnerships, voluntary organisations and local businesses, doing this will allow communities to decide on the way they want Councils to deliver services. The following sections outline a strategy for customer service, which should be based on the output of the Customer Insight Programme.

## **THE STRATEGY**

### **Strategic Vision**

The Vision for Customer Service is outlined below:

This is what the Vision will mean for the citizen –

Citizens need advice on how to get a wheelie bin, building control or dog licensing. The vision is to give the citizen the ability to walk into one convenient building and have all of these enquiries dealt with. The public service centre will be able to deliver all public services. The citizen can order a wheelie bin and license their dog electronically. They are able to give citizens basic advice on building control.

Citizens will be able to track the progress of any communication or application through the Council's website. E-mails to the Council will have a guaranteed response to enquiries within three hours during service opening hours.

Council services will be available by various delivery channels -

Telephone, minicom, videophone, Language Line, or internet up to 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and a fully accessible public service centre with extended opening hours.

The service provided is consistent, co-ordinated and proactive. Customer Service employees will be able to identify if the customer needs extra help or advice, will help resolve problems and take personal responsibility for them.

The Council will make sure that services are responsive and accountable to all citizens by regular reporting and consultation. This will deliver true Citizen Relationship Management.

## **Strategic Objectives**

To help achieve this Vision, the objectives are:

- To create an organisation with the skills, processes and culture to deliver better access to improved public services.
- To make it more convenient, easier and quicker for citizens to interact with public sector organisations.
- To make sure that all citizens have equal access to the services that they need.
- To provide more responsive, more reliable, more satisfying public services that meet the expectations of citizens for better access to better quality public services.
- To deliver better access to better quality public services in the most cost-effective and efficient way.

Each Objective is explained below:

### **To create an organisation with the skills, processes and culture to deliver better access to better public services**

Training and development will be central to the successful implementation of this Strategy. Customer services training will be rolled-out across the organisation, not just confined to frontline employees. All new employees will receive customer service training as part of their induction to the Council.

Customer service employees require more than just customer service skills. They will need to understand the diversity of all customers' needs, the business as well as the

ICT systems they are using. The actual amount of training will depend on the overall strategy for implementation of any new IT systems.

Changing current work processes will be the single biggest and extensive project of this Strategy. Business Process Re-engineering (BPR) will provide the means by which processes are transformed in line with requirements in order to deliver services in new ways that meet customers' needs.

Impact and needs assessments are extremely important in making sure our services remove barriers and do not create any new ones, particularly for minority ethnic customers, disabled people and women.

Implementation of this Strategy is dependent on bringing new beliefs, attitudes and ways of working into the Council. Customer expectations have been raised in recent years, therefore the quality of customer experience delivered by the Council must increase to meet this enhanced service expectation.

**To make it more convenient, easier and quicker for citizens to interact with public sector organisations.**

The Council's services will be presented to the customer as a cohesive portfolio, with services provided by partner agencies, such as NI Direct<sup>1</sup>, seamlessly integrated. Citizens will not be expected to know or understand the complexities of Council's. As many services as possible should be capable of delivery through a single contact; face-to-face, telephone, minicom, videophone, Language Line or electronically.

Front line staff will be trained to meet these customer expectations and be supported by up to date technology including a Customer Relationship Management System. When customers contact the Council, they can expect the customer service staff to access, comprehensive, accurate and real time information, about them and their interactions with the Council.

All citizens should have equal access to the services provided by the Council. This means the recognition that people have different needs and requirements. The Council will use this Strategy to connect the power of e-Government positively to deal with exclusion from services and communities.

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<sup>1</sup> NI Direct is the single point of contact for all public services; this will be one telephone number for all public services in Northern Ireland.

**To make sure that all citizens have equal access to the services that they need.**

The Council will continue to work towards complying with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act and Section 75 and Schedule 9 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to make sure that the Council's buildings are fully accessible for disabled citizens and for non-English speaking citizens.

**To provide more responsive, more reliable, more satisfying public services that meet the expectations of citizens for better access to better quality public services.**

Once citizens access any Council service, they are being met by polite and well-informed employees, who are eager and enthusiastic to help. Multi service type questions should only need to be asked once as all previous information will have been captured centrally, including information about accessible formats citizens may need, such as Braille, large print, or a particular language. Information will be used in the interest of the citizen wherever data protection legislation allows and the customer will be allowed to opt in or out where legislation is unclear whether or not information about them should be shared.

The Council will put in place a set of Customer Service Standards, owned by senior management and members across the Council. The aim is for these to be known, understood and believed by all front-line employees. Performance monitoring against the Standards will be implemented and these will be used to improve delivery of customer services.

When services in the Contact Centre (NI Direct)/Public Service Centre are fully integrated, the first citizen contact will be able to resolve multiple service requests. When an enquiry needs to be referred to a specialist in the back office or another agency then the initial contact will become the customer's advocate or champion and own the enquiry until it is resolved.

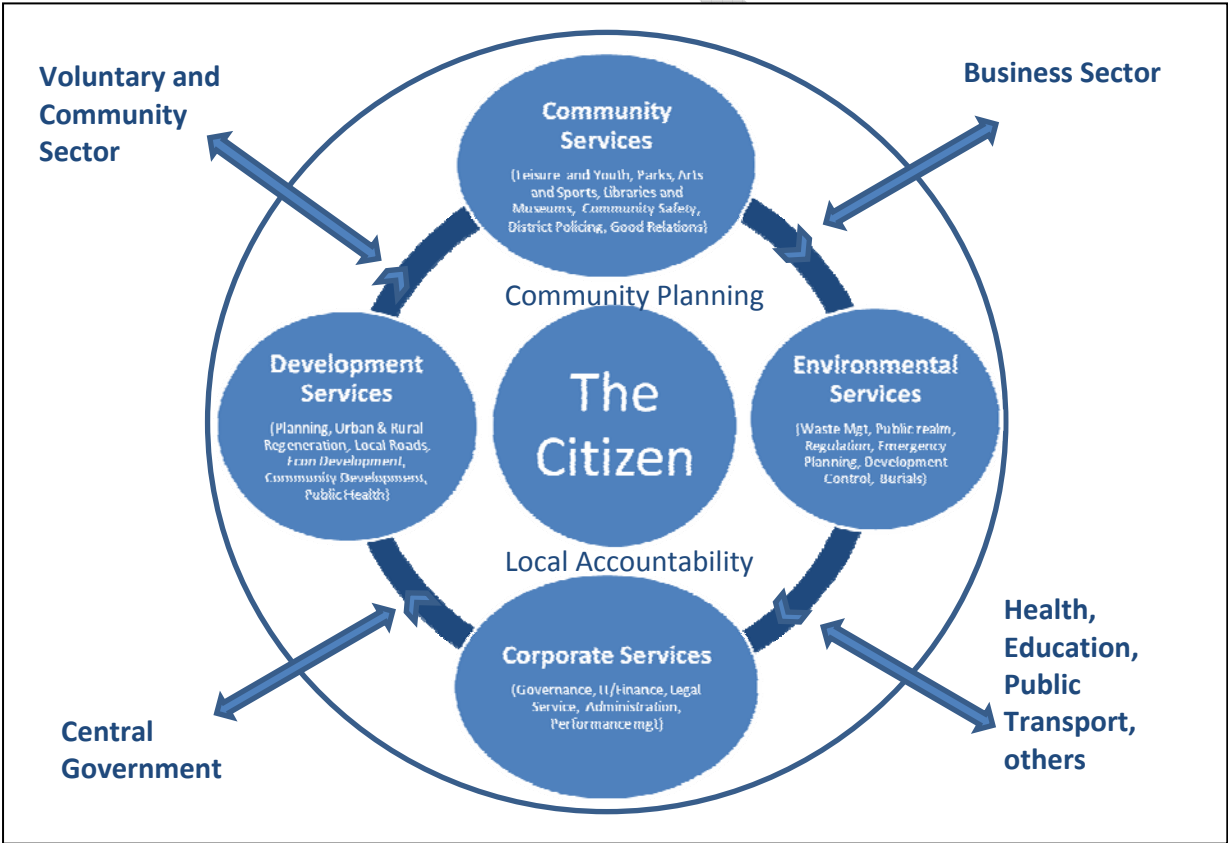
**To deliver better access to better quality public services in the most cost-effective way.**

Customer service will be the focus for plans to bring 'joined-up' services to the citizen. In line with savings targets and collaborative working plans, Councils will need to initiate specific linkages and projects with key partners and agencies both corporately and within service areas. This will involve pilot projects as well as best practice from

elsewhere. Councils will seek key partners whether in the public, voluntary or private sectors to work with on specific initiatives to fully engage with community planning to shape communities and improve the well being of the citizen.

Figure 1 below shows diagrammatically how the new Council Service model would look.

**Fig 1. Model of New Citizen Centric Council**



**Implementation of Strategy**

The Customer Service Strategy aims are to focus Councils around citizens, rather than structure everything around individual services. The changes required to achieve this fall into four main categories;

- Process – the way Councils do things.
- Organisational – where Councils are located and how they are structured.
- Technological – the Information and Communication Technology systems used to support Council transactions
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## **Vision and Strategy**

The success of this Strategy will be determined by the effectiveness of its dissemination and understanding throughout the organisation. Customer Service Champions will be created across the organisation and will have authorisation to be sufficiently influential to encourage both senior management and staff at all levels to make sure that their working practices support both the citizen and corporate needs, ahead of their departmental needs. This will be a big challenge.

A customer care training and development programme initially for frontline employees will be developed and will ultimately be rolled-out to all employees. New employees will receive customer care training as part of their Corporate Induction to the Council.

All employees will be provided with a copy of the Council's Good Service Guide and they will be expected to demonstrate that they are contributing towards the Council's vision for customer service. Departments will be expected to demonstrate how they are contributing towards delivery of the Vision through the Departmental Business Planning process.

In order to make sure that services are delivered in-line with best practice, it is necessary to develop excellent standards of customer service. A clear set of customer service standards will be developed and quarterly monitoring systems put in place. Stretching targets will be set in the aim to continuously improve customer services.

## **Corporate Capacity**

Councils will acknowledge that customer service cannot be seen simply as an 'add-on' to the existing jobs that people do. It needs to become an integral part of the daily job. In addition, there needs to be sufficient corporate resource to co-ordinate and drive forward the Strategy. A Head of Customer Service post will be established to co-ordinate this

work and an organisational structure developed to meet citizen demands as the strategy is being implemented.

The Customer Services Champions Group will support the Head of Customer Services in implementing this Strategy. This approach will be central in delivering the cultural change across the Council.

### **Integrated Delivery Solutions**

Integrated delivery solutions for voice and face-to-face contact are inextricably linked to Council's Accommodation Strategy. NI Direct will deal with telephone enquiries and will be seamless in service delivery if the citizen needs referred to back office Council staff.

Centralised telephone and minicom call handling will be the ultimate aim through NI Direct.

A contact centre for telephone and minicom enquiries is a cost-effective way of achieving the levels of service citizens expect. The NI Direct contact centre design should include;

- Back office experts who must own and maintain the information that the call agents access in order to deal with customer queries.
- They must also be the ones who decide where the cut-off is in any given situation before the citizen is passed on to them for specialist advice.
- Back office systems need to be re-engineered before any service is integrated into the NI Direct contact centre. A plan to migrate all front line services should be put in place
- Adequate resourcing and training are essential
- Any system must be accessible to Deaf people and to no-English speakers

A centralised service will enable Council's to extend the current opening hours should this be required to meet citizen service expectations. The NI Direct contact centre for telephone and minicom enquiries should be integrated with the Public service Centres for face-to-face enquiries.

### **Face-to-Face Provision**

Many citizens want a face-to-face service, and many of the transactions Councils carry out require it. Public Service Centres will be developed in convenient locations that are accessible to the whole community.

Mobile technology should be used where appropriate to enable services to be taken to the citizen in the field and for information to be accessed and updated electronically. These will link into the mobile working pilots that are already underway.

### **Management Information**

All of these channels will need to provide the full range of services and link in to the customer relationship management system. Management Information Systems for capturing, monitoring and recording levels of citizen contact will be put in place. These will be developed to enable Councils to become more effective and take a more corporate approach to management of customer service activity in the future. Management information on Council performance against stretching targets will be used as a driver for improved customer service.

Systems to capture all forms of feedback made by citizens will be implemented. The feedback forms will enable Councils to respond to the needs of citizens and should ultimately lead to a reduction in the number of complaints and an increase in the number of compliments as service improvements are made following customer feedback.

Local performance indicators will be developed to enable customer service to be monitored and reported. Business Units will develop and include customer service performance indicators within their annual Business Plans.

### **Business Process Re-engineering**

Changing current processes will be the single biggest and extensive project of this Strategy. Business Process Re-engineering will provide the means by which processes are transformed in line with requirements in order to deliver services in new ways that meet citizen needs. Any financial savings arising from this change will be used to improve front line customer service.

### **Information and Technology**

Technology is vital to the implementation of the Customer Service Strategy. Technology cannot just be bolted on and the process re-engineering outlined above must take place first before technological solutions are implemented. Excellent customer service can only be delivered where employees have been provided with excellent accessible information.

## **Customer Relationship Management – CRM**

A vital element of the Strategy is the implementation of CRM. CRM can help to optimise service delivery mechanisms, enable better understanding of the customer and provide a more joined up service. CRM can support a front/back office split that allows employees with the best citizen facing skills to spend more of their time using those skills.

Implementation of CRM will take the citizen information and best practice, which exists, at a departmental level and manage it on a corporate basis. Ultimately, the citizen will be able to view and interact with the Council as a single entity.

CRM requires the Council's service delivery mechanisms to be organised around the needs of the citizen rather than reflecting current internal structures. To achieve this, will require a complex set of changes including culture and strategy as much as process transformation, restructuring or technology.

In the context of this Strategy, CRM is not a computer system although as the strategy develops and is implemented, it will need to incorporate an ICT system and other supporting technology as a facilitator to help deliver the business objectives. Technology is an integral a component of the solution and is not in itself CRM.

The CRM solution will be used to improve the quality and consistency of the citizen experience. To do this, Councils will need to become focused on providing a consistent resolution to as many of the citizen's service requests as possible from the first point of contact. The Council's knowledge and systems will be made available to customers through all relevant delivery channels, including the NI Direct contact centre, the internet, Public Service Centres and possibly kiosks in town centres.

CRM will allow Council employees to work to their strengths. The employees with the best customer facing skills occupy the front office spending most of their time interacting with the customer and acting as their advocate. In turn managers, administrators and specialists occupy the back office, where they are not regularly interrupted by customer contact.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The ultimate aim is to provide levels of customer service that exceed citizen expectations and are comparable with the best providers in the private sector. The ongoing delivery of this strategy will enable Councils to achieve this.

It represents a step change in service delivery, but it is not a leap into the unknown. The technology that enables Councils to make the most of these changes has been used by many other local authorities for years. We can learn from their experiences, and can try to avoid the problems that have been reported.

Councils need to put the right level of resources in to the services that are developed. Through a change management programme, Councils can enhance back-office systems and simplify business processes before implementing these solutions for the benefit of citizens.

It is important to recognise that this Strategy will benefit employees as well as citizens. Specialist customer service roles will be created. There will be more opportunities for employees who enjoy dealing with citizens to do so and become accredited through training. Employees will be provided with the means to give citizens excellent service. The specialist customer service roles will be filled by people from diverse backgrounds, so employees reflect the community they live in. Much of the routine work currently dealt with by service experts will be transferred to the front-office, leaving the experts to concentrate on the more complex issues for which they are trained.

Citizens' needs alter and their expectations increase. Up-to-date technology allows new potential for service delivery. This strategy should be reviewed regularly to ascertain that Councils keep pace with new developments and the improvements being made by other service providers.