

Meeting of:- Cabinet

On:- Monday 25th September 2006

Agenda Item No.:-

Topic:- Customer Service and Access to Services Strategy

Type of Report:- Non-Key Decision

Executive Summary:-

To revisit and restate the Council's approach and Customer Service and Access to Services Strategy in the light of:-

1. The recent BDC/ECC protocol on collaboration, joint access and shared service delivery.
2. Customer access arrangements for Greenfields Housing Association.
3. Best Practice in Local Authority Customer Service and the National e-service delivery standards for customer service.

1. Background

In 2003 the Council embarked on a transformational change programme to improve access to services, improve standards of customer care and deliver efficiency savings. This approach was delivered in association with the drive towards e- government, making more services available on line and using technology to work smarter. This was the Customer First Programme and our access to services approach was embodied in that programme.

Much progress has been made since the inception of the programme as originally approved by the Council especially in relation to the development of the telephone Customer Service Centre and the face-to-face facilities at the Halstead Area office, Witham Library and Causeway House.

The Customer First infrastructure is now largely in place and in project terms the programme concludes by March 31st 2007. The approach has developed to a position where Customer Service is seen as central to the Council's direction and ambition to:-

- Improve access to Council Services and information, especially in rural areas.
- Make the Council's services and decisions open and accessible.
- Deliver seamless services directly or through partnerships and, where possible maximise income for investment in frontline services.
- Deliver better value through improved performance.
- Focus on partnerships that deliver real benefits.

The ECC/BDC Working Better, Together protocol was endorsed by Cabinet on 4th September.

It is now appropriate for the Council to revisit the Customer First programme and establish how a joint access to services approach can best meet the needs of Braintree Council, Essex County Council, the new RSL and other public services and comply with emerging best practice and national standards for customer service.

Also by building on and learning from the Witham Library project to consider how such an approach can engage with the current drive and ambition towards greater collaboration and the sharing of service delivery across the public sector.

In other words to set out a Customer Service and Access to Services Strategy to support those aims and specifically to:-

- Set out a clear vision and model for the development and delivery of customer contact and access to services
- Deliver real benefits to customers
- Respond to the changing needs of customers
- Provide the tools and training for staff to deliver excellent customer service
- Aid decision making and provide flexibility in the context of Housing Transfer and a possibly changing local government landscape
- Recognise and support political and management objectives;
- Incorporate mechanisms for implementation, review and performance management.

2. Access to Services Strategy

Central to the Council's strategy is an ambition to provide citizens with a single point of entry to access public services and at the same time to generate financial savings.

This means working towards a co-ordinated, consistent and joined-up approach within the Council and with other agencies to develop and initiate a variety of ways for Customers to contact the Council and other agencies either by:-

- Face-to-face (the customer coming to a location to access services)
- E mail
- Telephone (through the customer service centre with first time resolution)
- Text messaging
- Internet Self Service (the customer accessing services by themselves)
- Mobile Services (face-to-face but with the service taken to the customer)
- Alternative payment methods

A multi agency model where services are built around customer needs and not organisational structures and where face-to-face and telephone contact can be provided through a front office not specifically badged or owned by Braintree District Council but housed in accommodation jointly occupied by BDC, ECC the Housing RSL and other agencies.

This approach is not inconsistent with the needs of Greenfields Housing Association and the Shadow Board have recently endorsed in principle the concept of entering into a long term relationship with the Council to provide joint access arrangements for Customer Service for face-to-face and telephone transactions.

In practical terms the physical location and ownership of the face-to-face service points will depend upon local circumstances, financial viability and the agreed area office model of the RSL. The telephone contact centre is currently located in Causeway House.

If Greenfields area staffing model requires a space footprint larger than the existing arrangements at Halstead and Witham then Witham Library can be adjusted to meet that

footprint and premises adjacent to the existing Halstead Area Office are about to come on the market which again would enable the space requirements to be achieved.

If the existing premises are adjusted and prove fit for purpose for the RSL then the approach could be for the RSL to lease and manage the premises and for BDC to buy in their corporate customer service arrangements from the RSL.

Until and if the joint office feasibility study with ECC produces new accommodation then Causeway House is seen as the location for the joint front office with the RSL and others for Braintree.

This joined-up approach adds value for the customer and both BDC, ECC and Greenfields could benefit from economies of scale particularly in asset management terms as has been demonstrated with the Witham Library project. For example, sharing a Customer Service Centre, whether it is a face-to-face facility or telephone contact centre also means sharing the costs of building maintenance and upkeep, compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) and health and safety legislation, security and facilities management and IT and telecommunications networks and equipment. It also develops a culture where behaviour is focused on the customer. A joined-up approach can also assist with issues such as fraud prevention, data protection and social inclusion.

All these access points and channels should have a common “look and feel” to help the customer access services and offer the same high standard of quality service.

Finally, the approach embraces the drive to social inclusion. This means ensuring that services are available through other than traditional delivery channels. The Witham Library project has demonstrated that this is achievable.

3. Objectives of the Strategy

(a) To give customers more choice in when, where and how they access public services.

This means:

- Creating multi-agency one-stop-shops for face-to-face visitors through a variety of models
- Developing the customer contact telephone centre so it can resolve an increasing range of enquiries first time at the first point of contact.
- Making effective use of new access channels to encourage all sectors of the community to access services.

This can be achieved by:-

- Continuing the move to a front/back office model where services are built around customer needs and not organisational structures.
- Developing the multi agency approach for face-to-face contact piloted by the new Witham Library front office and by the expansion and promotion of the Rural Libraries initiative including the Mobile Library Service.
- Further use of the mobile front office capability pioneered by the Town Centre road shows and the Mobile Police van.
- Redesigning processes to transfer more and more enquiry types into the customer services telephone contact centre.

- Continual development and deployment of the customer relationship management system.
- Continual development of the website and increasing number of online self service interactive services
- Publicity and marketing campaigns to increase customer awareness and take up of new access choices.
- Designing and implementing systems to provide better quality, joined up and accessible services to customers.

(b) To deliver high quality consistent and cost effective customer service whenever and however customers contact the Council.

This means:-

- Creating a culture of customer service within the organisation.
- Managing performance
- Consulting with our customers to ensure we understand their individual needs and preferences in order to give them a good experience.
- Making more effective use of data by better methods of access and retrieval

This can be achieved by:-

- Continuing customer consultation and mystery shopping exercises
- Delivering a comprehensive customer service excellence training and development programme. This to include staff dealing with both external and internal customers.
- Changing the way we deliver services and redesigning processes to deliver continual improvement in our performance and customer service.
- Council wide deployment of electronic document management
- Setting customer service standards
- Managing performance through performance indicators
- Recognising that investment in customer services will improve the quality and accessibility of services for customers and that economies of scale and efficiencies will follow as the entire Council becomes more customer-focused and service areas reconfigure themselves accordingly.

(c) To ensure that the approach can be aligned to cope with Housing Transfer and the possible changing local government landscape.

This means:

- Working within the Council and with other organisations to establish the most appropriate and cost effective configuration of locations and means of access to services.
- Co-ordinating a joined up approach across the Council and with partner organisations to benefit from efficient resource utilisation and deliver real benefits to customers in the form of improved service delivery.
- Taking a strong community leadership role to join up and promote access to services.
- Recognising and reinforcing relevant strategies, projects and initiatives.

This can be achieved by:-

- Creating multi-agency area based one-stop-shops in the towns of Halstead, Braintree and Witham to provide joint access to public services.
- Collaborating with ECC and examining options and opportunities for joint front/back office accommodation with the ECC and other public service agencies in Braintree District.
- Exploring tactical opportunities for joint working with the ECC and initiating pilot schemes which if proved successful can be rolled out more widely.
- Collaboration with the Police and Essex Local Authorities 101 single non emergency number partnership.

4. Recommendations

1. That the Customer Service and Access to Services Strategy as described in this paper and the BDC/ECC Working Better Together protocol be endorsed as the agreed way forward for the Council.
2. That the Council's preferred access to services model of a long term relationship with Greenfields Housing Association providing for joint customer access arrangements through the use of the Customer Service Centre for telephone contact and appropriate face-to-face facilities in each of the three towns be endorsed.
3. That compliance with the I&Dea Benchmark for Customer Service and the National e-Service Delivery Standards as described in the appendices to this report be adopted as the Council's target and performance measure for its Customer and Access to Services Strategy.

Options: N/A

Risks: None identified at this stage. These will form part of the Business Case.

Background Papers:- None

Financial Implications:- None at this stage.

Equalities Implications:- None at this stage

Legal Implications:- None at this stage

Date report prepared:- 8th September 2006

Author(s):- Roger Bramwell

Designation:- Head of Customer Services

E Mail Address:- roger.bramwell@braintree.govuk

IDeA Benchmark for customer service

Customer service is about ensuring that every time someone is in contact with the council, the experience is a satisfactory one.

It is not about always providing the information or the service that is requested, as there are often limits imposed by local policies and national priorities. However, it is about ensuring that the customer feels that they have been treated equitably, promptly and appropriately in every case. Customer service is increasingly important in ensuring efficiency and effectiveness and in responding to the shared services agenda. Customer service is also an important indicator and driver for performance improvement and therefore local authorities need to ensure they are monitoring their customer contact, as well as how this is being dealt with across the council.

What is this benchmark?

This document outlines the principal practices of an ideal authority in customer service. It draws from the strategic context of CPA 2005, the National e-Standards, the Gershon Agenda, the Lyon Review, the Children’s Act, and the Local Government Reputation Project. It has been developed through an iterative consultation process involving members of the local government community, and will be continually updated and reassessed as appropriate.

This benchmark serves several purposes. It is intended to be the foundation of a route map for improvement, a common standard against which authorities can assess their status and direction of travel, and a method of raising awareness of customer services in an authority. Its structure provides a framework for each customer service peer review, and its details and emphasis may be tailored to suit a particular authority’s situation.

Though the areas of investigation are thorough, the scope of this assessment is primarily corporate. The benchmark investigates an authority’s capacity for delivering customer services (generally through policies, procedures, and planning), more than it focuses on specific outcomes. The peer review is based on the premise that an authority with an increased capacity to engage with its customers and increase the efficiency of their service delivery will be empowered themselves to improve their outcomes.

What are the key features of an ideal authority?



An ideal authority	
Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is sustained political and managerial leadership of the customer services agenda and long-term corporate support for it including internal and external communication. • Customer satisfaction is a prime target area used as a focus for identifying areas for improvement. • Customer service is seen as part of the bigger picture and is integral to the council’s ambitions and vision for public services in the locality. There are clearly articulated objectives for the council’s investments in customer service, against which success can be measured. • Sustainable customer service is everyone’s business. • Elected members and senior officers are seen to be advocates for change and improved customer service and understand the implications for reshaping their authorities. • The majority of citizens are satisfied with the service they get from their council.

Understanding and engaging with customers

- **Demographic analysis** is used to identify trends and anticipate changes in demand for specific services through specific channels by specific customer groups
- **Channel analysis** is used to target marketing and encourage increased take-up of appropriate channels.
- **Contact volumes** (including lost calls, resolution at first point of contact, follow-up calls chasing progress, tracking, days of the week, seasonal trends etc) are recorded and used to adjust capacity and scheduling in both customer services and back office areas.
- **Reasons for contacting the council** are recorded and tracked and used in service improvement planning.
- **Customer profiling** is used to ensure appropriate responses to specific service user groups e.g. SEN, older people, children, neighbourhoods etc.
- Contacts with **local businesses** are monitored and trends form part of regular consultation with business representatives and agencies.
- Contacts with **suppliers** are monitored and trends form part of local economic development and planning and corporate procurement.
- Calls and information passed to and received from **partner organisations** are monitored and trends form part of regular consultation with local strategic partners.
- There is a clear and consistent **consultation strategy** (including, as appropriate, residents' surveys, mystery shopping, user surveys, partner surveys etc.), which serves to engage all sectors of the community, particularly from representatives of special needs groups.
- There is a focus on customer outcomes and on ensuring that improvements are recognised by customers.

<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Corporate approach to customer access and delivery</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a corporate customer access strategy which outlines the ‘vision’, the expected standards, the process to deliver these across the council, the monitoring process and how this helps the council to deliver its corporate objectives (NB: linked to the post-CPA improvement plan). • The customer access strategy covers all parts of the council, not just those directly responsible for customer services, and emphasises consistency of delivery, including effective links between “front” and “back” offices. • The processes in place to join-up related services for customers making these more ‘customer focused’, including where these cross traditional departmental silo’s, or involve outside partners, e.g. in two tier councils, the other relevant council, or the relevant public sector partner e.g. the PCT, etc. • The allocation of resources (people, skills and finance) is sufficient to deliver the strategy. Including, how customer service initiatives and projects are financed e.g. recharges to service departments. • Corporate standards and policies for dealing with customers cover both internal and external customers; all channels including face-to-face, telephone, e-mail, letters, SMS and all other electronic channels; and include agreed response times, writing standards, complaints process, hours of availability, etc, all embedded in a customer charter or membership of an appropriate customer services organisation, and are monitored regularly. • There are adequate performance monitoring processes and procedures in place at all levels to ensure that the strategy is delivered and sustained across the whole council and its partners.
<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Programme management</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A clear business case is developed for all projects designed to deliver the customer access strategy to ensure that the project will meet the criteria required to move the strategy forward. • The programme of projects has been agreed and resourced. • Project management processes are used to deliver the programme, including clarity of leadership and responsibility for benefits realisation. • The process includes effective risk identification and management disciplines, including gateway reviews, to ensure that the impact of risks is minimised. • Business continuity is an integral part of the programme, covering all aspects of the customer service operation including technology, information, communication, office space and skills.
<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">ICT and IM strategies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The required information technology, telecommunications, systems and processes are in place to deliver the programme, including modern telephony systems, CRM and CMS. • There is a strategy for the management of information and knowledge to ensure that information is managed and used in ways that enhances its value and ensures consistent availability and use across all access channels and throughout the council from the back office to the direct customer interface.

Accommodation /property strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The council has undertaken a full review of the location and condition of council-owned and managed properties that are visited by citizens to ensure that they are all accessible and necessary within the customer access strategy. • The council reception points have been reviewed to ensure consistent branding and customer experience. • Availability of information and services at each customer access point is regularly reviewed to ensure equality of access and consistency across the council area.
Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is appropriate strategic governance of the whole programme to provide the 'vision' and maintain the overall direction. • There is elected member engagement with the customer service strategy both at Cabinet level and via the scrutiny process. • Operational governance provides a lead officer at the appropriate level within the authority to ensure that the programme can be delivered, the necessary resources can be allocated and any risks can be managed. • The organisation structure for delivery of the customer access strategy is appropriate to ensure the programme can be delivered and sustained.
Service redesign	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a real commitment to challenging service silo operation, including business process mapping and business process re-engineering to deliver customer-centred services. • All service processes are base lined and benchmarked to ensure efficient and effective operation. • The front office/back office split is under regular and consistent review across all services from a crosscutting perspective and a whole system approach is adopted in every review. • Division and/or sharing of responsibilities are reviewed for each customer access channel to seize any opportunities for simplification, standardisation and streamlining of processes. • Service delivery is designed to respond to the needs of citizens. • Social and technical aspects of service design are under continuous review to ensure that opportunities are taken to increase productive time while maintaining or improving quality. • The impact on staff and service recipients of home visits and mobile working is taken into account in service re-design.
Communications strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is clear branding of the council and this agenda, providing a consistent message on the importance of the customer to both customers and staff. • An internal communications programme has been developed to promote the programme to staff and partners and help drive the cultural change programme. • A comprehensive external communication and marketing programme promotes the range of different access channels and their benefits (e.g. convenience) as well as the range of services available to help maximise take-up of e-enabled services.

Appendix 2 – National E –Service Delivery Standards

Ref	Standard
	Customer Experience
1	The Customer finds it easy to contact the organisation through all channels:- <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 1a Telephone• 1b Face to Face• 1c Self Service/Electronic (Email/Web Form/SMS)• 1d Post (including Fax)
2	A high percentage of customer interactions are resolved at the first point of contact.
3	Response times are managed across all channels: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 3a Telephone• 3b Face to Face• 3c Self Service/Electronic (Email/Web Form/SMS)• 3d Post (including Fax)
4	The Customer is dealt with proactively.
5	All Customers have access to services; irrespective of language, disability, gender, religion, age or learning.
6	Customer can access service information and advice.

Ref	Standard
7	Customers can complain via a single point.
8	Face to Face customer access points have been designed with a customer-focus; providing ease of access, comfort, security and privacy.
9	The Customer Charter is displayed and clearly demonstrated across every customer service channel and through every interaction.
	Strategy
10	There is an agreed Customer Service Strategy.
	Leadership and Governance
11	The Local Authority's Members and Senior Management create a service culture with the focus on the Customer.
12	There is clear governance for Customer Services.
	People
13	All staff are provided with appropriate customer service training and development.
14	The Authority uses appropriate and rigorous selection and recruitment processes to recruit customer service staff.
15	The Local Authority measures the motivation and satisfaction of staff who delivery customer service.
16	Staff are empowered to deliver excellent customer service and help customers.

Ref	Standard
	Performance Management
17	Customer service satisfaction is measured and reported.
18	The volume of Customer Service activity is measured and reported.
19	The quality of Customer Service activity is measured and reported.
20	Customer comments and views are recorded and acted upon.
	Resource Management
21	Customer service resources are managed effectively and efficiently.
	Processes
22	The Authority manages customer interactions end to end.
23	The Local Authority has a single view of the customer (i.e. citizen, business and community group) which covers all service areas.
24	The hand-off to between initial contact channels and service professionals is automated.
25	Customers are authenticated and transactions are secure, inline with a clear security policy.