

Everything we do is driven by you



Corporate Governance Scrutiny Committee: Review of Customer Focus

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Corporate Governance Scrutiny Review

of

Customer Focus

Democratic Services
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Glossary

CCMT	-	County Council Management Team
CEX	-	Chief Executive's Office
CPA	-	Corporate Performance Assessment
CSPB	-	Customer Service Programme Boards
CYP&F	-	Children, Young People's and Families Directorate
E&E	-	Environment & Economy Directorate
LAA	-	Local Area Agreements
OALC	-	Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils
OWIS	-	Oxfordshire Wide Information Share
S&CS	-	Social & Community Services Directorate
TVP	-	Thames Valley Police

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of its conclusions the Review makes the following recommendations to the Cabinet: The Recommendations are grouped in **PRIORITY ORDER**.

Priority One

R5 (p.25) That a senior officer is responsible for a regular review of how information is used for evidence-based service planning and priority setting:

- **This should ensure that information is used in an effective and meaningful way.**
- **It should address what outcomes are the result of the better use of information.**
- **There should be a timely report on progress, which is available to the public.**

R4 (p.22) Adequate resources should be allocated to the Corporate Strategies team, and within Directorates, to make sure that Impact Assessments are carried out and linked effectively to service planning.

R10 (p.31) One person in each Directorate should have key responsibility and be accountable for customer focus, ensuring that the message is spread throughout the services they manage and to the wider community.

Priority Two

R9 (p. 31) The Customer Service Programme Board in each Directorate need to focus more on implementing and measuring the effectiveness of the Customer Service action plans. One person in each Directorate should have ultimate responsibility for making this happen.

Priority Three

R2 (p.15) That an appropriate senior officer is given the task of co-ordinating a cross-directorate campaign to consolidate 'life stage' information, including action to communicate to target groups.

Priority Four

R11 (p.33) A specific form of 'mystery shopping' should be initiated that simulates the experience of particular customers, or groups of customers, relating to their needs. The results of this should be used to drive improved service configuration and provision.

Priority Five

R3 (p.16) Refresher customer focus training should be included in the regular cycle of staff appraisals and development opportunities.

R8 (p.30) Customer service and customer focus training should be embedded in staff induction and staff training.

R7 (p. 29) All Managers and team leaders should show their commitment to improving customer services by taking advantage of suitable customer services training.

Priority Six

R1 (p.13) That each service unit draws up a Customer Charter to display in its reception areas, including County Council shared facilities, on key documents that are distributed externally, and on relevant websites.

Priority Seven

R6 (p.26) That an appropriate officer produces an action plan with timetable to show how the proposals to introduce OWIS fits with the collection and use of other major information systems in the County Council.

Customer Focus Scrutiny Review

Report of the Corporate Governance Scrutiny Committee

SUMMARY

Customer Focus should be looking at the needs of our client base, our customers. Customer Service provides a structure for satisfying the identified needs.

1. The Review set out to look at how far the County Council is really focusing on the needs of local people in providing its services. This is a potentially vast scope of investigation, and the Review looked in detail at particular areas: how the corporate centre encourages 'customer focus', how effectively the views of local people are reflected in service planning, how customer service initiatives are supporting the development of customer focus, and overall, how what the County Council is doing, or proposing to do, will **make a difference to the person in the street**.
2. The emphasis on 'customer focus' has been adopted as a part of the core values of the County Council. This reflects an increased local commitment to customer 'choice', and a national pressure on local authorities to prove that they are improving services in response to customer feedback. Keeping local people informed is a vital part of making sure that services are satisfactory.
3. The Review Group was extremely impressed by the commitment and enthusiasm of the front-line staff that they met who were consistently focused on the needs of local people, often in difficult circumstances. The Review Group would like to thank all the witnesses for their candour in answering questions and contributing evidence to the Review.
4. The Review found that the distinction between 'customer focus' and 'customer service' was not clearly understood across the organisation. Also, the customer focus aims of the County Council were not being promoted widely enough in the community. The results of consultation show that local people are not convinced that they are listened to enough, or that the services provided are high enough quality. Communication was also a major issue for our partners. Good partnership working is increasingly important for local service provision, and the County Council will need to properly engage with all sectors to ensure that its priorities are delivered as the new Local Area Agreement is implemented. Having 'buy-in' from staff, and communication with local people, are essential for building a properly 'customer focused' organisation. The Review concluded that there needs to be commitment from the most senior managers to take responsibility for customer focus, in order to lead from the top. The Review endorses the new 'management competencies' which include 'customer focus'.
5. Overall, the Review found that there were various Oxfordshire County Council activities in customer focus and customer service which would make a difference to the person in the street, but that there are gaps. What the County Council needs to do is ensure that it is acknowledging the gaps, and meeting needs as appropriate. At present, we are not always aware that we are failing, or who we are failing.

6. There are already initiatives underway to improve the customer focus of the County Council. An evidenced-based service planning approach is being fostered by the use of 'Impact Assessments', relating to all aspects of local people's needs. The Review very strongly endorses this approach, and think that it should be solidly resourced and supported by senior managers, so that it can be as effective as possible in making sure that needs are identified, prioritised and met as appropriate. The Review concluded that there needs to be a greater emphasis across the organisation on using available information, such as the results of consultation, in planning and delivering services. This is not a new recommendation, but it must be acted upon to make sure that money is not wasted, and that local people get the services that they need. The Recommendations made in this area should be given the highest priority.
7. The Review concluded that the plans to pursue a corporate approach to attaining 'Charter Mark' should provide a significant impetus to improving the customer focus of the Council. The Charter Mark criteria relating to service improvement, access to services, engaging with the community, and performance, all serve to reinforce the aim to identify needs, and meet them effectively. It is essential that staff are made to feel that Charter Mark is a worthwhile and effective enterprise, otherwise the organisational culture may resist the change that going for Charter Mark will no doubt bring. At present, although the great majority of staff feel that they are doing a worthwhile job, there are doubts amongst staff about the vision and leadership in the County Council. This makes it even more necessary for senior managers to properly engage all staff in pursuing service improvements for local people.
8. One aim of the Review was to look at the costs and impact of new customer service initiatives in the County Council, managed by the Customer Services Development Team. The Review was told that at present the costs of training, mystery shopping and development work fell within the general costs of the team. In judging the impact of the Customer Services Strategy, the Review found that the Customer Service Programme Boards needed to focus more on implementing their action plans for improvement, and monitoring their process and outcomes. This would be more challenging to the Directorates, but secure real improvements for customers, and not waste money because of an 'implementation deficit'.
9. Another key concern for the Review was how far customer service training is being taken up, and how effective it has been in making sure that services are well delivered. The Review concluded that although there was some positive feedback from staff who have undertaken customer service training, it was still being treated as an 'add-on', and although should now be routine in Manager's induction, it is not properly embedded in other staff induction, appraisal or development. The Review has made a number of recommendations in this area.
10. Comparisons were made with other local authorities, and with the Thames Valley Police Authority, all of whom are increasing their commitment to customer focus. The Review concluded that the councils leading in this area have all focused on improving their communication with the public, and giving local people access to high quality information. Thames Valley Police are also promoting access, diversity, and training.

11. The Review concluded that there is excellent work undertaken by front-line staff and teams, but that there is still some way to go before the County Council uses all its resources effectively for 'customer focused' service planning and delivery.