



South  
Cambridgeshire  
District Council

# Scrutiny Review of Customer Contact Services



June 2011

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The scrutiny and overview committee (SOC) acts as a local watchdog for the people of South Cambridgeshire, looking at how to improve local services, whether or not they are provided by the Council. This work is designed to complement the work done by the council's cabinet. It provides a forum for non-cabinet councillors to use their knowledge and skills to benefit residents.

The committee can also challenge decisions made by cabinet members, or help them to develop new policies. This work demonstrates the council's commitment to openness and accountability.

SOC often sets up small task and finish groups to look at an issue in depth. These groups are usually cross-party and often involve other participants, such as residents or representatives of partner organisations.

In November 2010 the scrutiny committee set up a task and finish group to look at how to provide a modern, integrated customer contact service on expiry of the Council's contract with the existing Contact Centre in December 2012. The aim was to help inform the portfolio holder's decision on whether a new service should be provided internally or tendered externally, and what such a service should include.

The following councillors made up the task and finish group:

Jose Hales

Lynda Harford

Sally Hatton

Bridget Smith (chair)

Peter Topping

Bunty Waters

Cllr Tom Bygott, the cabinet member for Policy and Performance, attended all meetings.



## Customer Contact

A scrutiny task and finish group was set up to look at how customer contact services could be provided following the end of the Council's contract with Cambridgeshire County Council in December 2012. This contract had provided a telephone handling service at a joint contact centre in St Ives since 2003.

The contact centre was achieving high customer satisfaction and comparatively good value for money. However, there was a need to explore the possibility of even greater value for money, given the increasingly difficult financial environment within local government. There was also a need to consider how to best provide a holistic customer contact service, given customers' reducing usage of the telephone and increasing shift to other access channels such as email; this was referred to as 'channel shift'.

The task and finish group worked alongside an officer group from January to June 2011 carrying out visits to other councils; surveying and meeting residents, staff and partners; and researching new methods and technologies. They learned of recent developments in call handling technology that had led to much more flexible and affordable systems. These handled modern and cost efficient channels such as webchat, smartphone apps and texting. Staff were handling enquiries via these channels alongside telephone calls, providing a flexible service that could readily respond to channel shift.

The group recognised that channel shift would continue to happen, and that it would be financially beneficial to further encourage this, for example by improving the transactions available electronically. This meant that any future customer service would need to be flexible. It would also need to be scalable to accommodate any reduction in customer numbers, for example if services were contracted out.

The group learned of advances in customer relationship management systems (CRM) – the software which stores customers' records and details of all contacts so that they do not have to supply the same

information every time. The latest CRM systems were enabling councils to provide impressive and highly efficient customer service and the technology had become much simpler to use since the St Ives service was set up in 2003.

They also found that none of the councils visited were open to visitors or phone calls outside 8am to 6pm on weekdays and some had even shorter hours than this.

A final learning point related to the location of the service. The group found that on-site contact services integrated better with the back-office. They were also able to combine with reception services, which improved the quality and efficiency of the face-to-face service. There was one example of the customer contact team being used as a pool of staff which reduced that council's need for agency staff.

Weighing all these factors, there was agreement amongst the task and finish group, officers and portfolio holder that December 2012 presented an opportunity to bring the customer contact service in-house and on-site.

## **Recommendations**

The task and finish group made several recommendations for improving customer care based on the good practice observed at other councils:

1. That the reception area at South Cambridgeshire Hall is
  - a) equipped to cater for visitors accompanied by small children and
  - b) upgraded to create a quieter and less draughty environment, with access to privacy where desirable or requested
2. That consideration is given to providing joint customer care training for councillors and officers
3. That a system is developed for using text messaging to send payment reminders to those who request it
4. That research is conducted into the use of apps for smartphones such as My Council Services

5. That the Council considers producing a full range of easy-to-read booklets on SCDC's services for display on reception and via parish councils, libraries, local access points and other outlets
6. That the next customer contact service provision should
  - a) include telephone; email; texting; social media; and webchat
  - b) provide a telephone service during office hours only, with further research into the need for one late night per week
  - c) include a Customer Relationship Management system capable of being used throughout the Council and with the capacity to link with partners' CRM systems
  - d) provide flexibility and scalability that would enable a timely response to any need to grow or reduce or serve other partner organisations
  - e) reflect the Council's priorities, especially those regarding sustainability, equal opportunities and supporting local economic development
7. That if the next customer contact service is based at South Cambridgeshire Hall then it should include the face-to-face service; and inclusion of the post service should be considered as part of the management review of the post service in 2011/12.
8. That the Council's emerging Customer Access Strategy should include the intention to encourage and support customers to use the most cost effective customer contact channels such as email, webchat and social media.
9. That the customer contact service provided by the Council from December 2012 be managed in-house and located at South Cambridgeshire Hall

The recommendations were all accepted by the Cabinet in July 2011. The scrutiny and overview committee will monitor the outcomes over the next two years.

## **Achievements during the review**

During the review it was inevitable that some findings would be actioned immediately. For example, the Cabinet discussed a reduction in opening hours at the Contact Centre. Based on its research, the task and finish group supported the decision to close on Saturday afternoons and this took effect in June 2011.

Also, feedback gained from residents and partners regarding customer service was used to inform the council's Customer Service Excellence project and its work on setting performance standards.



## **Acknowledgement and Thanks**

The task and finish group would like to offer sincere thanks to the officers of Babergh District Council, Broadland District Council, Cambridge City Council, Huntingdonshire District Council and Wokingham Borough Council.

Thank you also to everyone who took time to tell us about their customer contact needs: community groups, the council's Equalities Forum, respondents to the South Cambs magazine survey and visitors to our reception.



## How to get involved

The process of scrutiny is strengthened by involving partners, residents, service users and so on. They bring expertise, local knowledge, fresh ideas and an element of external challenge.

If you would like to know more, please ring the Scrutiny Development Officer

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