

Subject: Customer Standards Monitoring Framework and Mystery Shopping

Status: For Publication

Report to: Policy Development Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date: 20th July 2006

Cabinet

2nd August 2006

Report of: Communications Manager

Portfolio

Holder: Customer Services and E-Government

Key Decision: NO

Forward Plan General Exception Special Urgency

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to explore the monitoring and research activities that the Council can undertake to examine the customer experience of the Council. Through learning more about what our customers experience we will gain a better understanding of the needs of our customers which will help us to provide better services to our residents, customers and partners.
- 1.2 In particular, this report will establish a framework for monitoring the Council's Customer Service Standards (Appendix 1) and seeks approval for a rolling programme of mystery shopping.

2. CORPORATE PRIORITIES AND OBJECTIVES

- 2.1 Customers – This report seeks to establish a framework which will embed service improvements for our customers and support a process of continuous learning and improvement.

3. RISK ASSESSMENT IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 All the issues raised and the recommendation(s) in this report involve risk considerations as set out below:
- 3.2 Legal risks – All staff who may be may be subject to a process of being 'mystery shopped' have a right to be informed in advance. All Council will therefore require a letter from HR to inform them that they may be the subject of a 'mystery shopping' exercise at some stage in the next 18 months.
- 3.3 It is essential to manage all issues which potentially impact on the reputation of the Council.

4. BACKGROUND/REASON FOR REPORT

- 4.1 Following on from the publication of the Customer Services Strategy and the Communications Strategy it is important to establish formal monitoring systems for the Customer Services Standards. This also addresses some the concerns raised at a previous Policy Development Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- 4.2 The development of the One Stop Shop, the new telephone system that has been installed, planned upgrading of the IT infrastructure and the 'bedding down' of the Customer Services and E-Government Team mean that the Council has its first real opportunity to establish comprehensive formal monitoring procedures.
- 4.3 Specific authorisation is required in order to undertake 'Mystery Shopping' and members will have a key part to play in helping us to monitor the customer services standards.

5. OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 5.1 **Recommended Option** - A wide variety of methods have been considered. No single method provides us with all the information that we require in order to monitor the service standards. The approach adopted in Appendix 1 is to set out the different ways in which each of the service standards can be monitored internally and externally. Further details of these methods is provided in Appendix 2.
- 5.2 **Do Nothing Option** – The do nothing option means that we would not be able to monitor the customer service standards effectively and would not be as quick to respond to changing customer needs and demands.
- 5.3 **'Slimmed down' Customer Standards** – a slimmed down set of standards would be easier and cheaper to monitor. However, the standards have only recently been launched and still need time to embed themselves. Given the historic weaknesses in customer service within the Council it is important to encourage a strong focus from all employees around delivering on a set of corporate standards.

6. COMMENTS OF THE HEAD OF FINANCIAL SERVICES

- 6.1 There are no immediate financial considerations. Any costs have been contained within 06/07 budget resources.

7. COMMENTS OF THE HEAD OF LEGAL AND DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

- 7.1 None.

8. COMMENTS OF THE HEAD OF HUMAN RESOURCES

- 8.1 None.

9. CONCLUSION

- 9.1 A framework for monitoring the Customer Service Standards is vital in order to ensure that the standards are followed and in order to learn from the feedback provided so that we can continue to improve our services.

10. RECOMMENDATION(S)

- 10.1 To recommend to Cabinet the approach to monitoring the customer service standards outlined in this report including the monitoring framework for the Customer Services Standards (Appendix 1) and the Internal and External Audit methods used in to monitor the Customer Services Standards (Appendix 2).
- 10.2 To recommend to Cabinet that a rolling programme of Mystery Shopping activity should be undertaken in order to support the monitoring of the Customer Services Standards.

11. CONSULTATION CARRIED OUT

- 11.1 Portfolio Holder and Deputy Chief Executive.

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| Background Papers | |
| No background papers | |

Appendix 1 – monitoring framework for the Customer Services Standards

| Service Standard | Internal Audit method | External Audit method |
|--|--|---|
| Always wear your uniform or work clothing (if provided) and a name badge so that customers can identify you. | Managers – random checks Corporate Internal Checks | Elected Members – Monitoring toolkit Customer Focus mystery shopper database Mystery shopper |
| Always provide straightforward, uncomplicated information that is appropriate to customers needs and provide information in community languages, large print, and Braille or audio tape if customers request it. | Managers – random checks Communications Audit – quality of written communication | Customer Focus mystery shopper database Mystery shopper Feedb@ck panel survey and Annual Residents Survey Community Consultation with the Community Network and key Diversity Groups |
| If customers appear to be unhappy (or particularly pleased) with the service they are receiving ask if they would like to use our formal Compliments and Complaints scheme. Put complaints right quickly and learn from compliments and complaints. | Compliments and Complaints database Use of compliments and complaints – annual report from each Head of Service | Customer Focus mystery shopper database Mystery shopper Feedb@ck panel survey and Annual Residents Survey Customer survey drawn from our complaints database |
| Written correspondence from customers should be acknowledged as soon as possible and a full response must be provided within 10 working days. This must include the Council's postal address, email address, fax/telephone numbers and details of a named officer. | Managers – random checks | Elected Members – Monitoring toolkit Customer Focus mystery shopper database Mystery shopper Feedb@ck panel survey and Annual Residents Survey |
| Email – all emails must have a 'signature' with your name, position, contact numbers, email address and the council's website address. 'Out of Office' messages must be used when you are absent and must include the email address and telephone contact of a colleague who can assist a customer in your absence. | Managers – random checks Corporate Internal Checks | Elected Members – Monitoring toolkit Customer Focus mystery shopper database Mystery shopper |

| Service Standard | Internal Audit method | External Audit method |
|--|--|---|
| <p>Telephone calls should be answered within 20 seconds. Our standard greeting should include: Good Morning (or Afternoon), Rossendale Borough Council, <Your name>, How may I help you?</p> | <p>Managers – random checks</p> <p>Corporate Internal Checks</p> <p>Telephone system software (main switchboard)</p> | <p>Elected Members – Monitoring toolkit</p> <p>Customer Focus mystery shopper database</p> <p>Mystery shopper</p> <p>Feedb@ck panel survey and Annual Residents Survey</p> |
| <p>Voicemail should include details of the section or department you work for or your name and job title, together with details of when you will be able to respond to the message and an alternative contact number for urgent messages.</p> | <p>Managers – random checks</p> <p>Corporate Internal Checks</p> | <p>Elected Members – Monitoring toolkit</p> <p>Customer Focus mystery shopper database</p> <p>Mystery shopper</p> |
| <p>Email, telephone and voicemail - All contact from customers requesting a service or further information about an enquiry should be acknowledged within 1 working day.</p> | <p>Managers – random checks including</p> <p>Corporate Internal Checks</p> <p>Auditing response times to telephone service requests logged on Flare and One Stop Shop databases.</p> | <p>Elected Members – Monitoring toolkit</p> <p>Customer Focus mystery shopper database</p> <p>Mystery shopper</p> <p>Feedb@ck panel survey and Annual Residents Survey</p> |
| <p>Home visits should be offered to customers if it is appropriate to their circumstances. If you need to cancel an appointment give at least one working day's notice</p> | <p>Managers – random checks including diary checks</p> | <p>Appointments - Customer survey</p> <p>Customer Focus mystery shopper database</p> <p>Mystery shopper</p> <p>Community Consultation with the Community Network and key Diversity Groups</p> |
| <p>All face to face and telephone contact from customers should be concluded by repeating any key information back to customers to ensure accuracy and by taking a note of any actions and timescales that you have agreed.</p> | <p>Managers – random checks</p> | <p>Customer Focus mystery shopper database</p> <p>Mystery shopper</p> |

Appendix 2 – Internal and External Audit methods used in to monitor the Customer Service Standards

Internal Audit methods

Seven different monitoring methods are required in order to check that the Customer Service Standards are being followed. Further details are outlined below.

Use of compliments and complaints – annual report from each Head of Service

Twice a year Heads of Service will be presented with a list of compliments and complaints registered on the Council's corporate complaints database (On the Record) and asked to detail how they have used these to adapt and improve their services.

Communications Audit – quality of written communication

Twice a year a communications audit will be carried out requesting copies of all letters sent out on a particular day. The information provided will be assessed on its clarity, appropriateness to customer needs and approach to customer service using a five point scorecard. Letters will also be checked to ensure that alternative formats such as community languages and large print are being offered.

Corporate Internal Checks

A series of internal checks will be undertaken once every six months including the time it takes for a call to be answered, use of the corporate greeting, response time to voice mail messages, response to email requests and the number of staff wearing name badges and/or corporate work wear.

Managers – random checks including diary checks

Line managers and supervisors will be provided with a simple monitoring toolkit checklist to enable them to carry out spot checks on a range of customer service issues including time taken to respond to written correspondence, time taken to respond to emails and time taken to respond to phone calls and voicemail messages. Diary checks will be carried out to assess our targets on meetings cancelled.

Compliments and Complaints database

Auditing the compliments and complaints database once every six months to monitor complaint volumes and to identify any patterns or trends.

Auditing response times to telephone service requests logged on Flare and One Stop Shop databases.

This will help to establish how quickly we are responding to customer service requests received by telephone.

Telephone system software

This will capture how long it takes for our main telephone number to be answered.

External Audit methods

Seven different monitoring methods are required in order to check that the Customer Service Standards are being followed. Further details are outlined below.

Community Consultation with the Community Network and key Diversity Groups

The Community Network and key Diversity Groups will be asked to provide feedback on our overall approach to customer service and specific aspects of the Customer Service standards such as the quality and clarity of written information, access to alternative formats of information and the provision of home visits.

Customer Focus mystery shopper database

A list of randomly selected customers will be asked to formally assess their contacts with Rossendale Council over a six month period by completing a series of assessments for each contact experience with the council. Each customer will receive a small retainer fee in return for committing to complete 3 assessments and will receive further payment for each assessment that they complete.

The panel will be drawn from a random selection of customers drawn from databases such as Flare, the complaints database, the OSS feedback data base, the planning applications database, and benefits data base. Customers identified in this way will be asked if they would like to assist the Council in continually assessing the service. Information packs with instructions will be provided to each customer together with pre paid envelopes. Three different types of feedback forms will be provided, one for assessing telephone contacts, one for personal visits and one for letters. At the end of the six month period a letter will be sent out to thank people for their contribution and a small payment will be made for the returns they have sent in. Any customers who have not returned any information will be thanked and removed from the database.

Information from the survey will be recorded and the findings will be circulated to all Council managers. Any recommendations arising from the survey will be presented to management team and Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Feedb@ck panel survey and Annual Residents Survey

Specific customer service questions will be included in these surveys. The Feedback survey takes place about 4 times per year and the Annual Residents Survey takes place once a year. Questions will relate to the quality and clarity of written information, access to alternative formats of information, awareness and views on our complaints system, and our speed of response to written correspondence, telephone calls and emails.

Elected Members – Monitoring toolkit

Elected members will be provided with a simple monitoring toolkit checklist to enable them to carry out spot checks on a range of customer service issues including whether staff are wearing ID badges and the time taken to respond to written correspondence, emails, phone calls and voicemail messages.

Appointments - Customer survey

A random sample of people who received appointments booked through the One Stop Shop will be undertaken twice a year to ascertain whether the correct service standards have been maintained particularly regarding cancelled appointments.

Mystery shopper

Mystery shopping is the only form of research that tests the actual service level from a customer perspective. It can be used to test the services against existing service standards, help develop future standards, identify strengths and weaknesses and drive service improvements.

It is also the best way to allow the organisation to independently test its services, providing 'hard' factual data and 'softer' data on feelings and opinions. It differs from customer satisfaction surveys by dealing with the "here and now" of customer services, and recording in detail the mechanism of each transaction. It is an ideal way of testing whether we are delivering what we think we are delivering.

Mystery shopping is delivered by trained mystery shoppers who undertake typical customer transaction in person, by telephone, by letter and by email. An external provider is required both to provide independence from the Council and to ensure that the strict guidelines set down by the Market Research Society are followed.

Customer survey drawn from our complaints database

Every six months we will undertake a sample survey of people who have used our compliments and complaints system to ask how their complaint was handled and how quickly it was dealt with.