

LONDON BOROUGH OF BRENT

MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE - 21 JULY 2003

REPORT FROM THE DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE SERVICES

CUSTOMER SERVICE STANDARDS FOR SERVICE DELIVERY

For Action

Name of Wards

ALL

1. Introduction

This report follows from earlier reports on the authority's approach to Customer Service including the Best Value Review in 2001/2. It reviews progress made and key issues affecting the future development of the authority's approach to customer services, and makes recommendations for a long term strategy which places Customer Service Standards for Service Delivery as a core initiative on the corporate agenda.

Objectives of the report are

- To propose a viable and effective way forward to improve service delivery and customer services council-wide.
- To initiate a programme of activity in line with the Corporate Strategy and the Comprehensive Performance Assessment improvement plan.

2. Recommendations

2.1 Note the progress made as detailed in section 6.2

2.2 That in relation to the Customer Service Best Value Review recommendations the objective "to create a single frontline customer service operation across the entire council" and related detailed targets should not now be implemented; but be replaced with new objectives as per the recommendations in 2.3.

2.3 Agree the following further approach: -

2.3.1 Customer Service should be consistently recognised as a vital component of all service delivery activity.

2.3.2 This will include particularly areas where response to customers may not be positive such as enforcement activities, gatekeeping in relation to service entitlement and handling complaints.

2.3.3 We will aim for a 'Right First Time' approach, minimising errors and failures and reducing rework and complaints from the public and improving cost effectiveness.

- 2.3.4 We will build on our strengths and use the experience of the One Stop Shops and others, whilst tackling weaknesses including in some areas of internal interrelationships, and achieving a better integrated approach across the Council.
- 2.3.5 Better use of information, systems and technology based facilities in all areas will be implemented to significantly improve the effectiveness of staff and service delivery. This particularly includes expanded use of the new Customer Relationship Management System.
- 2.3.6 A council-wide programme of process review and redesign will be developed and implemented to improve service delivery standards and maximise service delivery and resolution that can be achieved at first contact.
- 2.3.7 Significant short term improvements in standards and results can and should be achieved in many areas. Service delivery plans will be reviewed to build work to raise customer service standards into the 'nuts & bolts' of day-to-day operational management.
- 2.3.8 Arrangements in all physical access points for customers will be reviewed and improved to achieve common standards.
- 2.3.9 Performance management improvements will be established which focus on customer service indicators across the council and are used to drive and monitor progress. Service Development Plans and unit based operational plans will include a specific focus on customer services.
- 2.3.10 Achieving sustained improvements depends on the involvement and commitment of managers and staff at all levels and specific initiatives will be developed to achieve this.

3. Financial Implications

- 3.1 There are no additional budget requirements arising from this report. The recommendations relate to funding already included in the current year's budget and to items provisionally agreed in the 2004/5 budget which will be subject to review as part of the budget making process.
- 3.2 The budget growth agreed by members for this current year and provisionally for 2004/5 includes the following specific allocations which will contribute directly to the raising customer service standards for service delivery: -

	£ k	£ k
	2003/4	2004/5
Relocation and increased hours for Kilburn OSS	109	0
* Meeting National Public Library Standards	281	280
* Investment in IT & E-government	800	400
Additional posts to raise customer care and service standards	100	69
* Management Development Programme	100	0
* Project Management/business process reengineering	0	45
Extension of Contact Centre Hours (Saturday mornings)	0	43
Customer loop (Environment)	0	120

The provisional figures for 2004/5 in the table above are in addition to the figures for 2003/4. in the table above those items of expenditure marked with an * are aimed at a range of improvements of which customer services improvements is a major element.

- 3.3 The programme of training in customer service skills for managers and staff depends on funding from unit and service area training budgets. Further funding for work on process reengineering may be required, dependent on costed business cases being produced.
- 3.4 It is the aim of the proposals in this report to reduce cost and resource requirements across the council, by increasing the resolution of customer requirements at initial contact, reducing failures, reworking and complaints and raising standards of customer service. This will also improve public satisfaction with services in many areas.

4. Legal implications

- 4.1 Section 3 of the Local Government Act 1999 requires Local Authorities to make arrangements to secure 'continuous improvement' in the way in which they exercise their functions, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.
- 4.2 The recommendations in this report are in line with the Governments proposals for modernizing public service operation with respect to Local Government.

5. Detail

5.1 Introduction

5.1.1 Brent Council has sustained a major focus on raising customer service operations and standards for many years. This has particularly involved the development of the One Stop Shop (OSS), followed by the Council's call centre, together with the development of the website. This approach, maintained and developed for over a decade has marked out Brent from the vast majority of other local authorities and has given us a national reputation as a forward looking customer orientated organisation.

5.1.2 Since, 1999 a Council-wide officer group, the 'Customer Services Steering Group' has acted as a focus for customer service improvements, planning and initiatives across the authority. It has developed major proposals and reports subsequently agreed by members including particularly

- the Best Value Customer Services Strategy, the
- 24 hour Council initiative,
- proposals for the better use of reception points.

5.1.3 In April 2002 the Best Value Review of Customer Services brought forward a set of Council-wide proposals, which have since been taken forward. This report provides a summary of the detail of progress made in the recent period and work currently in progress. Subsequent to the internal Best Value Review itself, the Inspectors Report on the review raised a number of issues in relation to the approach being taken and the council was given a 2 star service rating but with 'uncertain prospects'. Officers have subsequently reviewed the approach that had been agreed and the initiatives proposed and are now putting forward a significant change in emphasis in approach for approval.

5.1.4 In the current year's budget 2003/4 members have allocated additional funding for customer services initiatives. A significant proportion of this is allocated to deal with growth in demand and the requirements to support major projects in the One Stop Shop area. However, the remainder will be utilised to support Council wide improvements together with other resources made available in a number of other areas, for instance, the Council's e-government programme. The proposals in this report outline the approach that is proposed to progress this.

Background and Context

- 5.2 Brent Council has been at the forefront of customer driven service provision for many years, with the development of Customer Services and the OSS network providing a prime example of service excellence in this field and examples of good practice in a number of parts of the authority. We remain a leading authority for Customer Service. However, council-wide performance is variable and the Best Value Review of Customer Services, independent assessments by external consultants and work on complaints have identified areas for improvement, consistency gaps and the need for a new approach to customer services. This is particularly as a result of the rising expectations and levels of demand for many areas of council services.
- 5.3 A range of demands and quality pressures impact both on service delivery and customer access points. Public expectations continue to rise fuelled by the quality of service and customer experiences offered by many private sector of organisations which the population encounter day in and day out. People want an integrated approach to their requirements for services rather than a fragmented response. Their expectations cover increased accessibility including a variety of new routes, meeting individual and community needs, vital to our equalities requirements, and finally speed, accuracy and efficiency of response.

At the same time staff are constrained by the quality of the information and procedures made available to them and also by training and skill levels. Furthermore in many areas, the authority must operate gatekeeping and enforcement roles for which there are major risks of alienating the public.

- 5.4 Whilst there is much good practice in a number of areas, service standards are problematic and complaints levels have been high, for example the benefits service run until recently by EDS. In addition, internal pressures caused by increasing demand and the needs of individual service areas have placed major pressures upon the OSS service, and created a situation which cannot be sustained within the current model. Demand for the OSS service is continuing to grow - trends indicate that in many ways the service is a victim of its own success - local residents are now familiar with the shops and contact centre, and expect to be able to present their enquiries at a local access point. The OSS achieves a high level of enquiry resolution, and customer satisfaction and this success ensures that customers will continue to use the service - and will recommend it to others. It also provides the authority with economies of scale against a multiplicity of service based customer service locations. Effectively the current approach is close to its limits without continued growth in resources, and review and change are essential to provide a harmonious and sustainable framework for the future.

- 5.5 The Customer Services Best Value review identified the need to improve customer service standards across the organisation, in order to reach consistent levels of performance in customer interaction. The initial recommendation of the review was to use a review of business operations to further load enquiry handling to the “front end”, in order to place as many enquiries as possible within the OSS. The subsequent Best Value inspection challenged this recommendation, and in the light of this and further consideration, we are proposing a different approach – that the responsibility for service excellence remains within the service area, and that resources are concentrated on moving to a “whole process” approach incorporating customer contact and back office operations supported by an infrastructure of corporate customer service standards, trained staff and monitored performance indicators. Such an approach would aim to resolve requests and meet needs at the first point of contact wherever possible and reduce repeat contact to a minimum, for the benefit of both the public and the Council.
- 5.6 Other Best Value reviews (e.g. Revenues and Benefits, Housing etc) have also recommended developments and changes in customer service delivery - and these need to be incorporated in our future strategy.
- 5.7 External factors - such as the modernisation agenda, e-government and the quest for "joined up" government are also issues at the heart of service delivery. A number of key priorities within the Council Strategy are fundamentally issues about identification of need - and development and support of appropriate mechanisms for meeting that need - within the economic and organisational frameworks that apply. Again customer contact arrangements need to reflect these requirements.
- 5.8 Indeed these issues are at the heart of the Council's Corporate Strategy and our Management Agenda. We need to find solutions that will deliver our objectives of:-
- “adopting a cross cutting approach to meeting the needs of our people
 - “providing excellent, sensitive and appropriate services”
 - “seeking continuous improvement”
 - “ensuring that all our communities are served sensitively and effectively “
 - “ensuring that people can access services in the way that is right for them by providing a range of customer services options”
 - “delivering these objectives through service areas that are dynamic and customer focused and units that are entrepreneurial and empowered”
 - ensuring that there is no “hierarchy of esteem” between different roles in the council, “we are all part of the Brent Council Team”
- 5.9 Likewise meeting our aims for equalities in service delivery rely on effective and sensitive customer service arrangements, designed to meet both individual and community needs.

- 5.10 The CPA inspection and assessment (together with other inspections) have highlighted key priorities for council-wide attention towards achieving improved outcomes for the public. These focus on strengthening our performance management culture and improving staff capacity, to bring about service improvements across the board.

These proposals are designed to meet these priorities and dovetail with: -

- the council-wide performance management arrangements
- the Improving Brent programme
- the significant number of service improvement initiatives being undertaken in service areas, such as the EFQM work in Social Services and Environment (with a significant emphasis on process review).

5.11 Efficiency and Effectiveness

Failure to invest in good customer services is a net cost rather than a saving to the authority as well as resulting in public dissatisfaction with performance.

Customer service failures take many forms, for example

- Failure to answer telephones
- Keeping the public waiting in queues to be seen for unacceptable lengths of time
- Lack of ownership by those who are contacted of the person and the issue
- Poor customer service skills leading to dissatisfaction
- Poor processes leading to requests taking too long to resolve or being lost
- Basic errors in processing requests

All of these lead to repeat inquiries by increasingly frustrated members of the public, with every contact incurring yet further cost for the authority. In many cases requests can be more easily and cost effectively resolved either by improving information and ease of access for the customers themselves, or by providing better tools to frontline staff. A raising of standards together with improved use of modern facilities (such as e-government) can lead to significant reductions in the millions of contacts from the public that the authority receives every year together with much improved customer satisfaction levels.

6. Progress, achievements and future plans

- 6.1 The authority has adopted a planned approach to improving customer services over a long period. Since 1999 this has been coordinated at officer level via the 'Customer Services Steering Group' composed of senior customer service related staff from all main service areas, and the approach and action plans have been agreed by members.
- 6.2 The Best Value Review which reported in April 2002 contained a detailed specific action plan which related to the agreed recommendations.

6.3 A summary of the main achievements, completed initiatives and projects in progress is contained in the table below.

Area	Activity	Status
Customer Care Policy and Standards.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Update customer care policies and standards and launch at Management/Members awaydays Undertake a public and staff customer care awareness programme, including a poster campaign, features in Brent Matters and the publication of pamphlets for the public giving Brent's promise for customer service and a staff pamphlet giving the five golden rules of customer service. Develop guidelines to ensure that customer care is fully taken into account in Service Development Plans and Service Operational Plans. 	<p>Complete</p> <p>Complete</p> <p>Complete</p>
Customer Service Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Undertake a Best Value Review (BVR) of customer services across the Council. This was rated overall as good by the Inspectors (but with uncertain prospects for improvement), with some excellent areas and some in need of improvement. Revise the Customer Service Strategy in the light of the BVR inspection. 	<p>Complete</p> <p>Complete</p>
Performance indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop customer care performance indicators and include in customer services standards and corporate "Vital Signs" Complete service level agreements between the OSS and Service Areas Establish and participate in a London-wide benchmarking club 	<p>In progress</p> <p>In progress</p> <p>Planned</p>
Process improvement to improve end-to-end customer service in line with the revised strategy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Obtain process mapping software Undertake a pilot business process review to assess applicability and likely benefits across the Council 	<p>Complete</p> <p>In progress</p>
Telephones	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review and monitor out-of-hours answering machine service and implement improvements. Pilot the use of information lines to improve customer service by providing key information at any time. New call centre facilities introduced in Housing Resources and Environmental Health. 	<p>Complete</p> <p>Complete</p>

Area	Activity	Status
Contact Centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transfer Streetcare calls to the Contact Centre, with the Contact Centre having direct access to Streetcare's Contender software. • Extend Contact Centre hours of operation to 8.00 am to 8.00 pm, Monday to Friday. • Transfer EDS Revenues and Benefits calls to the Contact Centre 	<p>Complete</p> <p>Complete Well used Complete Standards raised</p>
Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement CRM in the OSS and Contact Centre • Commission and implement a corporate complaints system • Rollout CRM to other areas of the Council 	<p>Complete</p> <p>In progress</p> <p>Planned</p>
Better use of Reception points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design and supply information display boards in libraries and other public access reception areas. • Provide free access phones for the public to contact Council officers from libraries and other public access reception areas. • Develop plans for first stop access in Libraries and other Council Buildings. 	<p>Complete</p> <p>Complete</p> <p>In progress</p>
Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Request tenders for Council-wide customer care training and commission pilot training days. • Rollout a customer care training programme across the Council. 	<p>Complete</p> <p>Planned</p>

Other Areas

Area	Progress and Achievements
Complaints	<p>Significant reduction in complaints going to the Ombudsman achieved.</p> <p>Brent now 5th lowest in London in terms of complaints settled by Ombudsman.</p> <p>Improved complaints handling Council-wide achieved.</p> <p>Council-wide complaints computer system (as part of CRM) for improved handling and monitoring being developed.</p>
Website	<p>Comprehensiveness and accessibility of information improved.</p> <p>On-line services and transactions increasingly being introduced (e.g. on-line payments, forms)</p> <p>All service areas involved actively in development of the website.</p> <p>Site externally assessed in national top 20 again. (Spring 2003)</p> <p>Site externally assessed as most used.</p>

	Local Authority website in London (Spring 2003)
Library Service	Opening hours extended. Ealing Road Library totally remodeled and re-launched to provide improved customer service for local communities.
Kilburn	One Stop Shop successfully relocated to Dyne Road with opening hours almost doubled, providing added services for BHP tenants and others. Positive public feedback. One-third increase in use compared with previous OSS and housing reception.
Community focus and equalities	Language cards introduced for One Stop Shops and other reception points. OSS translation facilities improved. Staff recruitment tailored to ensure community representation and language availability. Website translation facilities improved.

In setting the budget for 2003/4 members have made provision for additional funding for improvements in customer service operations.

Some of these relate directly to the new and ongoing initiatives detailed in the table above. There are also a range of detailed funding allocations for individual services which will include customer service improvements.

The details of the most significant funding allocations are provided in section 3 of this report and relate to

1. Costs associated with the extended opening hours of the relocated Kilburn OSS.
2. Growth in the libraries budget that provides for increased hours and other customer service improvements.
3. Major funding for a council-wide programme of IT and e-government improvements, which is specifically targeted on improving customer service operations and enhancing service access arrangements.
4. Additional funding for staff in the One Stop Shop area, partly to cope with growth in demand and partly to provide staff to directly support the initiatives that form the main part of the recommendations in this report.

7. Customer Services Misconceptions

7.1 In many organisations, including Brent, a number of misconceptions have developed around the issue of service delivery and customer satisfaction. It is important to highlight and challenge these, and develop plans to tackle their causes if we are to move forward.

7.2 The following misconceptions are particularly prevalent: -

- Customer care is an expensive luxury
- Specialist customer service functions are basically only a reception arrangements – they do not provide real services
- Customer services “do” customer care
- Managers and professionals don’t see customers – it is nothing to do with us....
- Customer care is only an issue for “front line” staff
- Customers get a consistent standard of service when they contact Brent

An analysis of and response to each of these is given in Appendix B.

7.3 Sorting out the ‘names’

These misconceptions reveal misunderstandings and resultant problems that have arisen, partly fostered by the names given to different sections.

On the one hand we have ‘Customer Service’, ‘reception’ and ‘front line’ sections and on the other ‘back office’ and ‘service delivery’ sections.

In reality both types of operation deliver real services to customers with no hierarchy of importance or value. Each depends on the other, and both need to operate high standards of customer care.

Proposed new names are ‘specialist customer service’ and ‘service operational’ sections or units.

8. So, what is needed?

8.1 The customer must be the responsibility of the whole organisation. Customer care should not sit in a silo, sidelined from business/service planning and day to day operations. To make consistent improvement we need to tackle: -

- Performance management – robust targets for service delivery that take account of customer need and expectation, and ensure consistency of service excellence across the organisation
- Whole process approach – customer care does not sit solely with the front end
- Communication and knowledge sharing – to feed in to the business planning and service delivery strategies
- Organisational development – through management training, effective use of competencies, mentoring and sharing of best practice

8.2 Brent serves a diverse community – and provides an extensive and varied raft of services. It would be inappropriate to suggest a “one size fits all” approach to service delivery and service excellence. However, there are some universal principles which can be applied, and which, if adopted, will enable the organisation to achieve it’s strategic vision.

- We should build on our achievements and share the knowledge and skills we have acquired.
- We should respond positively to the comments made in the CPA – and in a number of Best Value reports
- We should recognise our areas of weakness, and build improvements into service plans and organisational development strategy

To do this, we need to put the customer at the heart of our business planning process – balanced by considerations of priority need and VFM.

9. Best Value Review Inspectors’ Report

The majority of recommendations made by the Customer Services Best Value review were welcomed by the Inspectors and are being actively worked on via the Customer Services Steering Group. The key issue raised by the Inspectors is detailed in Section 5.5 and addressed in the main proposals that have been developed.

Additional criticisms and recommendations from the Inspectors Report are detailed in Appendix C. This report and its recommendations have been designed to address these issues. In relation to shifting the balance from face to face to other forms of contact, this was addressed in part by members’ decision in relation to the review to maintain the existing number of face-to-face operations. Increased emphasis on telephone contact plus email and internet based contact remains a key target.

In relation to resources for improvement, steps have been taken within the budget proposals for 2003/4 to begin to provide necessary resources both in relation to customer service improvements and IT/e-government developments.

10. The Way Forward

10.1 To address the issues identified in previous sections, we have developed an updated version of our current strategy. It builds on progress made via the Customer Services Steering Group and the Best Value review plans. If this is agreed then detailed proposals to take it forward will need to be developed.

Recommendations are as follows:

1. Customer Service should be consistently recognised as a vital component of all service delivery activity

Our current approach has emphasised splitting front and back office activities to raise standards of initial contact, provide a single interface for the public and resolve issues at first contact point where possible. The new approach will seek to develop the effectiveness of all aspects of dealing with service requests and enquiries, whether they are undertaken in specialist customer service or service operational areas. This will be based on a 'right first time' approach.

2. This must include particularly areas where response to customers may not be positive such as enforcement activities, gatekeeping in relation to service entitlement and handling complaints.

Achieving good customer service in areas where we must carry out a gatekeeping role or enforcement activities is complex and requires planned approaches together with staff training and effective information sharing. There have been major recent improvements in dealing with complaints from customers, under the leadership of the Corporate Complaints officer. Some complaints are unavoidable given the nature of our services and the limitations of resources to meet expectations, however a good number result from failure in services and customer contact. These are costly and avoidable and we need to systematically tackle them. Many complaints arise from failure to manage customer expectations regarding entitlement and speed of response, whilst providing acceptable service standards.

3. We should aim for a 'Right First Time' approach, minimising errors and failures and reducing rework and complaints from the public and improving cost effectiveness

Our new approach should focus strongly on minimising errors, incorrect information, delays and repeat work which currently result in both waste and duplication for our staff and frustration to customers which in turn often leads to repeat contact for one particular request and yet further work for staff. This will improve services and help reduce cost and will be particularly supported by the proposed 'process review and reengineering' programme together with improved information system and online 'Frequently Asked Questions' available to the public and staff. On the basis of planned improvements, we will attempt to encourage increasing uptake of more cost-effective means of contact and service access, such as telephone, email and internet. We should however recognise that a face to face service is still needed for particular topics and for some sections of the public.

4. We should build on our strengths and use the experience of the One Stop Shops and others, whilst tackling weaknesses including in some areas of internal interrelationships, and achieving a better integrated approach across the Council

We should build on the success of the current approach operated over the last ten years extending high quality customer service standards and techniques across the organisation. The role of the One Stop Shops should continue to be that of a specialist customer service group. Its skills and experience will be vital in assisting the development of other service delivery groups. The shops themselves should continue to be provided on the basis of meeting local access needs and of providing “front of house” facilities for other Service Areas as they currently do for BHP (particularly at North Wembley and Kilburn), for Environmental Services at Brent House and for Revenue and Benefits.

Where face to face or telephone based customer service operations exist in other parts of the Council, the arrangements and standards operated should be made indistinguishable from those in the OSS and Call Centre.

Linked to work on ‘process review’, service level agreements between the OSS and service operational sections should be improved and mechanisms established for review of the relationships, which would include looking at ways of streamlining arrangements, for example, by agreeing escalation arrangements, setting criteria defining urgent cases and those complex cases needing expert skills, and identifying areas of weakness in both areas.

5. Better use of information, systems and technology based facilities in all areas will significantly improve the effectiveness of staff and service delivery. This particularly includes expanded use of the new Customer Relationship Management System

To support such an improvement based approach we shall need to make planned and conscious use of new customer service and back office processing facilities now available via e-government and IT facilities. These need to be made a top priority in the Council’s e-government development programme. This particularly needs to include better use of telephone related facilities and techniques, because this covers the highest volumes of contact at over 5 million per year.

Current IT systems outside the One Stop Shop are provider and ‘process based’, they deal with specific transactions rather than the overall needs of individuals. Thus customer contact is not tracked, measured and cannot be successfully managed in many areas. Often staff use written notes to supplement computer systems to try and address issues. The new approach will introduce systems, centred on the Customer Relationship Management system, which will support dealing with individuals in total and measured improvements in customer contact.

In this context the development and maintenance of comprehensive Frequently Asked Questions and related service information held on the Intranet for all council services should be immediately reviewed in all areas to raise standards and consistency and reduce training requirements for **all** staff. This information would also be utilised where appropriate on the Council's website and in publications to promote self-service and manage expectations. This would be backed by publicity campaigns. The information to be maintained would also include up to date information for staff and customers on current processing times in key areas to help manage expectations.

6. A council-wide programme of process review and redesign is required to improve service delivery standards and maximise service delivery and resolution that can be achieved at first contact

In many cases current operational and business processes have not been the subject of detailed review regarding their effectiveness and the customer perspective. This is particularly the case where work is moved between different processes and groups of staff over a period of time to see it through from inception to completion. Our new approach will put a major emphasis on the review and design of operational and business processes focusing on bottlenecks, the most common types of work and drawing consciously on effective processes operated by others both internally and externally. **It will aim to maximise successful service delivery and resolution at first point of contact wherever that is and to set, publish and meet standards of performance in all areas, to assist in managing customer expectations.**

7. Significant short term improvements in standards and results can and should be achieved in many areas. Service delivery plans in all areas should be reviewed to build work to raise customer service standards into the 'nuts & bolts' of day to day operational management

Some immediate progress can be achieved by a rapid prioritised management review of areas of customer contact where there are problems and issues, drawing on support from customer service and complaints specialists. This should be supported by ensuring customer service standards and performance targets are integrated into day to day service management.

8. Arrangements in all physical access points for customers should be reviewed and improved to achieve common standards

There should be a planned programme of review and improvements in customer service standards in **all** physical and call centre based customer access points with support from the Service Director One Stop Shop. This would involve a franchising type of approach with common arrangements being developed covering such aspects as: -

- * working practices
- * training
- * joint recruitment
- * uniforms
- * marketing/branding
- * layout
- * aids & adaptations etc.

This would be promoted by giving managers in such sections a “dotted-line” accountability to her for professional standards issues. (This would replicate similar approaches in the Finance and Human Resources area)

9. Performance management improvements are needed which focus on customer service indicators across the council and are used to drive and monitor progress Service Development Plans and unit based operational plans will include a specific focus on customer service.

The authority's approach to performance management should be developed to incorporate a number of key local customer service and customer satisfaction indicators in each area, which together with national PI's will act as a focus for improvement. A key indicator should be included in the proposed 'vital signs' schedule. Guidance for the future content of Service Plans and unit operational plans will include specific focus on customer service standards, performance and arrangements.

10. Achieving sustained improvements depends on the involvement and commitment of managers and staff at all levels and this requires specific initiatives

A plan should be developed to convince managers and staff of the value of good quality customer service in saving time and money and reducing pressure on staff, as well as providing better services. It would form part of the Improving Brent and Management Development Programmes. It could include workshops and training, where participants identify the difficulties they face in providing good quality customer services, and look at possible solutions.

10.2 If this proposed approach is agreed there are significant operational and resource implications. To take this forward it is proposed to develop detailed recommendations for the next 3-4 years for Member approval in line with the following high level plan: -

- Agree scope (develop programme initiation document)
- Agree the recommendations from a feasibility study with options for proceeding (e.g. quick and easy improvements, major BPR exercises, priorities and timing etc). The feasibility study should give the business case for continuing with any aspect of the programme, resource implications, risks, checkpoints etc.
- Agree detailed plans on a project by project basis.
- Review implementation on a project by project basis.

The scope will need to cover specific projects/topics for example

- Process improvement programme
- Minimising avoidable complaints
- Plans for OSS and specialist Customer Services
- Future arrangements for effective operational inter-working
- Arrangements to raise Customer Service Standards for service delivery in all areas
- Performance Management improvements
- Improved use of IT and e-government to raise standards and improve services
- Future use of telephone facilities and development of call centres.
- Leadership role and future of Customer Services Steering Group

At this stage it is not possible to quantify the resources likely to be needed although recently agreed growth will greatly assist. Consequently, the approach recommended is in stages, with each stage being assessed and a business case prepared for approval. A significant project management role will be required.

10.3 Overall this approach will aim to address both the pressures of increasing volumes of public contact and the expectations of improved quality of service. It will be developed as a key element of a Council-wide programme to respond to the CPA inspection and achieve continuous service improvement. (under the Corporate Strategy theme of 'Achieving Service Excellence'). This will be progressed by involving staff in reviewing and improving services, integrated with effective performance management, linking strategic objectives right through to individual staff targets and performance.

- 10.4 Revenues and Benefits enquiries are the single largest enquiry area across the OSS network and illustrate the potential of the new approach. It is anticipated that the return in-house of the Customer Services and Housing Benefit functions will, in the long term, allow for economies of scale as service duplication is removed. In addition, the improvements in benefit processing will hopefully result in fewer enquiries as benefits are processed more quickly and effectively. The new revenues contract is also an opportunity to develop the customer services front end role, allowing back office resource to be concentrated on revenues processing and collection. However, these changes will not take place overnight, and any strategy for customer service needs to take a phased approach in order to accommodate changes in both demand and resolution over time. Extensive reviewing, planning and reorganizing is being undertaken jointly by managers in the One Stop Shops and the Local Tax and Benefit service to achieve these improvements in a staged manner.

11. Background Information

Report 'Best Value Customer Service Strategy' Policy and Resources Committee 11/7/99

Report 'Customer Service Strategy and 24 hour council progress report' Corporate Deciding Committee 8/11/00

Report 'Better use of reception points' Corporate Deciding Committee 8/5/01

Report 'Customer Service Best Value Review' Corporate Deciding Committee 17/4/02

Audit Commission Inspectors Report July 2002

Bernard Diamant
Director of Corporate Services

MEMBERSHIP OF CUSTOMER SERVICE STEERING GROUP

Name	Service Area
Tim Abbott	Information Technology Unit
Jackie Blundell	Housing Services – Housing Resource Centre
Paul Briscoe	Information Technology Unit
Paula Buckley	One Stop Shop – Strategy & Phones
Mick Buttle	Housing Services - Brent Housing Partnership
Sandra Carson	One Stop Shop
Carmen Coffey	Education – Communication & Student Support
Bernard Diamant	Corporate Services
Andy Hardy	Environmental Services – Building Control
Angela Hickey	Policy & Regeneration Unit – Complaints Team
Marianne Locke	Education - Libraries
Juan Murray	Social Services – Quality & Support
Margaret Read	Brent Financial Services - Local Taxation & Benefits
Mark Rimmer	Environmental Services - Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages
Janis Robert-Edwards	Housing Services - Brent Housing Partnership
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CUSTOMER SERVICE MISCONCEPTIONS**1. Customer care is an expensive luxury**

There is a view that whilst good standards of customer care are desirable they are an expensive luxury while the real priority is meeting basic statutory requirements.

There are many reasons why this is a myth, in particular–

- Achieving positive public feedback on dealings with the council fundamental to being a ‘good’ authority reinforced by external inspections.
- Poor response to initial contact leads people to make multiple repeat contacts, at ever increased cost to us, whilst getting more frustrated.
- We often have to perform the gatekeeper role and refuse requests for service, and carry out enforcement activity, doing these in as positive manner as possible is vital.
- Effective investment in customer care can save money for example by encouraging people to contact us by means which are good for them and cost effective for us.

2. Specialist Customer Service functions are basically only a reception arrangements – they do not provide real services

There is a tendency to view the OSS as message takers and receptionists, who pass the vast majority of ‘real’ work onto the service operational sections.

Whilst 20% OSS service requests and enquiries are currently referred on, the remainder are resolved to the satisfaction of customers, often at the first time of contact, significantly reducing the volume that require further staff input (& yet more resources). This is based on the information and training of the OSS staff. They should be viewed as a service delivery function.

3. Customer Services “do” customer care.

In many organisations, specialist customer services functions are seen as the repository for problems, complaints, customer communication and consultation. They become at worst, a bolt-on to standard service delivery, and at best, customer champions or advocates, who represent the customer to the rest of the organisation.

Customer Services – in Brent’s case, the One Stop Shops and Contact Centres, have achieved much over the years. However, their very success can create a false sense of security – a belief that the organisation must be good at “customer care” because we have the OSS to prove it.

This is not the case. Large numbers of enquiries do not even reach the OSS particularly those involving contact and home visits, and in many cases,

enquiry resolution requires input from service operational staff (e.g. specialist enquiries, benefit determination, inspections, leisure/sports/arts development etc)

This is the first and most important myth to be debunked – the OSS should be seen as a service delivery unit like many others – it does not have an exclusive remit for customer care. If the organisation is to become truly customer focused, there needs to be a recognition that these issues affect everyone – managers, strategists, front-line staff.

4. Managers and professionals don't see customers – it is nothing to do with us...

Customer-facing work is often seen as the remit of more junior staff. Managers climb the career ladder, and one effect of seniority is to have others to answer the phone, and an office door to work behind.

This has the effect of labelling customer facing work as less valuable, needing less expertise, a baptism of fire to be gone through before the higher rungs on the corporate ladder can be aspired to.

In reality however, managers and senior staff should lead through example – sharing their skills and experience with more junior officers, and instilling a culture of excellence and improvement in service delivery. In many ways, this is one of Brent's strengths – we celebrate achievement, support mentoring, and are trying to create this type of culture. However, there are still areas within the organisation where this approach has not filtered through, and this must become a priority for any programme of management development and cultural change.

5. Customer care is only an issue for “front line” staff.

The customer has a view about the way in which they would like organisations to treat them. Surveys have shown that the most important things for customers are:

- Getting it right – first time
- Understanding of actual need – and meeting it
- Realistic timescales – that are adhered to
- Polite and professional staff

The first three bullets are not necessarily about the “front-line” – they are about processes and performance management, and yet few organisations have considered the effect of their processes upon the ability to provide effective and efficient service delivery.

An organisation which concentrates solely upon the front end will not necessarily provide good customer care. As one OSS officer said in a recent staff workshop “what is the point of having a smile in my voice if the customer walks away with nothing?”

The front line is often dependant upon the ability of back-office processes and staff. A truly customer-centric organisation needs to recognise this, by taking a whole process approach which ensures that service *delivery* needs are built into the way in which the supporting functions are planned and managed.

6. Customers get a consistent standard of service when they contact Brent

We publish performance data relating to the One Stop Shops – waiting times, call handling, customer satisfaction etc. These show high levels of customer satisfaction (around 97%), and an ability to meet corporate standards in terms of waiting times and call answering.

The recent Best Value Report on Customer Services highlighted that no such data was available for the majority of customer transactions with Brent. We know from Complaints data that there are areas of excellence – and areas of poor performance. A truly customer focused organisation needs to ensure that there is equality in service delivery – it should not be a lottery dependant upon the way in which the customer interacts with the organisation.

Summary of key recommendations and criticisms from Inspectors Report of the Best Value Review of Customer Services

1. Customer services standards are not consistent across the council and there are areas of poor performance.
2. More work is needed to identify and address the needs of key groups within the community particularly the vulnerable.
3. There is a lack of volume, quality and cost data relating to customer services across the council.
4. There is a lack of uniform performance management information and systems in operations in relation to customer services.
5. Proposals to change the balance of customer service contact between face-to-face contact and other methods were challenged.
6. Specific weaknesses in the working relationships between the One Stop Shop and Social Services were raised.
7. The need to implement thorough service level agreements between service areas and the One Stop Shops was highlighted.
8. There was uncertainty regarding ownership and responsibility for implementation of the review recommendations and a lack of detailed costings and resources to implement the proposed plan.