

# Scrutiny Committee

Report of Head of Corporate Strategy

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## Customer service performance - 2010/11

### Recommendation

Scrutiny Committee is invited to note current performance on customer service, including performance against our corporate customer contact standards; and the areas for improvement identified for further work.

### Purpose of Report

1. This report shows current performance on customer service, including performance against the corporate contact standards.

### Strategic Objectives

2. Improved customer service is fundamental to improving access to services and improving customer satisfaction, and therefore underpins all of our strategic objectives. It makes a specific contribution to our corporate priorities 'to optimise access to our services' and 'provide value for money services that meet the needs of our residents and service users'. The contact standards are aimed at achieving an improvement in customer service across the council.

### Background

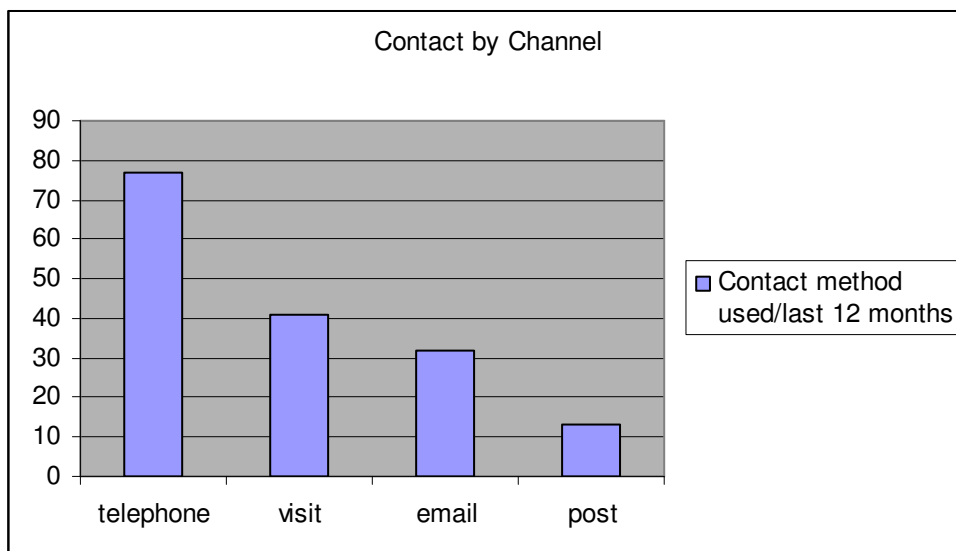
3. Our customer charter and customer contact standards have been in place for a number of years. However, this is the first time that we have carried out any formal measurement of our performance against the standards; we do not therefore have

any trend data to compare against. This report sets out the results of a survey of the councils citizens' panel, carried out in May/June 2011.

4. The standards apply to our contact with external customers, whatever contact channel is used, i.e. telephone, email, letter or face to face. They do not apply to internal communications. A copy of the standards is attached at appendix one to this report.

## Methods of contacting the council

5. 234 people had contacted the council over the past year (more than half of the people who responded to our survey). Of these 77 per cent had done so by telephone, 32 per cent by email 13 per cent by letter, and 41 per cent visited the offices in person, as shown in the chart below. (Note these figures add up to greater than 100 per cent as people may have contacted us by more than one method in that period).



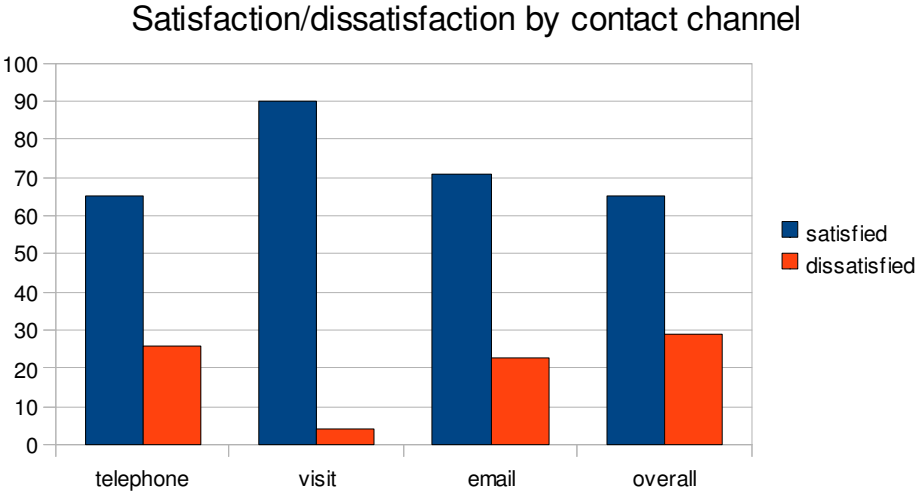
6. 45 per cent of those who contacted us did so with a query about waste and recycling and 14 per cent about planning. Given that the survey was carried out at a time when the new waste contract was bedding down and in a year when we experienced significant weather problems with the waste and brown bin service; and that high number of contacts were about waste, this may well have impacted negatively on perceptions of customer service.
7. 56 per cent of people said their enquiry was resolved on first contact; a significant and disappointing 36 per cent had to contact us again before it was resolved.

## Overall satisfaction with contact

8. 65 per cent of customers were satisfied with the way their issue was dealt with overall, and a third of these were very satisfied. However, a significant 29 per cent said that they were dissatisfied, which shows that we have some room for improving our customer experience.

## Satisfaction by contact channel

9. Results by channel show that satisfaction with visits to the local services point (LSP) is higher than that for either telephone or email – see graph below.



## Visits

10. For those visiting the council offices, satisfaction with different aspects of the overall customer experience varied, with relatively high levels of satisfaction with initial greeting (80 per cent); but lower satisfaction and significant levels of dissatisfaction with staff understanding the issue (65 per cent satisfied/21 per cent dissatisfied respectively), advice/help given (63 per cent satisfied/27 per cent dissatisfied) and availability of staff (62 per cent satisfied/21 per cent dissatisfied)<sup>1</sup>. This suggests that there could be some significant training or confidence issues among staff and also some issues around back office staff providing the necessary cover to deal with enquiries when people visit.

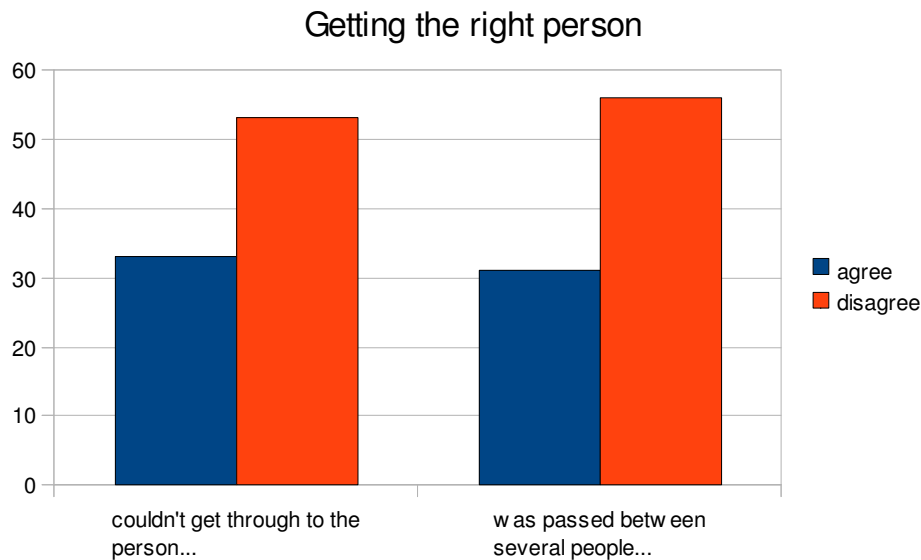
## Telephone

11. Our contact standard says that we should answer all calls within six rings or transfer the call to an answer machine/voicemail. During the year we received 416,967 incoming calls to the council offices, 118,869 of which were dealt with by the LSP. For calls to the LSP the abandoned call rate for the period was 5.4 per cent. Unfortunately our existing telephone system is not able to provide reports on call answering times/abandoned calls etc across the council, so we cannot report on overall performance against this standard. We are working on a technical 'fix' to make more comprehensive monitoring possible.

12. In terms of customer feedback, those telephoning via the switchboard were more satisfied with the overall service they received (74 per cent) than those who called a direct line number (65 per cent) and a significant number (26 per cent) of those calling direct dial numbers were actively dissatisfied. Taking both calls to switchboard and direct dial calls together, 32 per cent couldn't get through to the member of staff they wanted to, and 31 per cent of callers were passed between

<sup>1</sup> These are positively satisfied or dissatisfied – does not include those who were neutral

people as shown in the graph below. This indicates issues with availability of staff and staff knowledge of who to transfer calls to in order to get them resolved.



13. Changes in staffing and staff location as a result of team restructures and in order to achieve efficiencies could have been a major contributing factor to low levels of satisfaction with these aspects of telephone service. We would expect to see improvements in future years now that most team restructures have been completed. However, these results suggest that staff may not be using the benefits of the telephone system e.g. group pickups, as fully as they could to ensure that there is telephone cover in the back office.

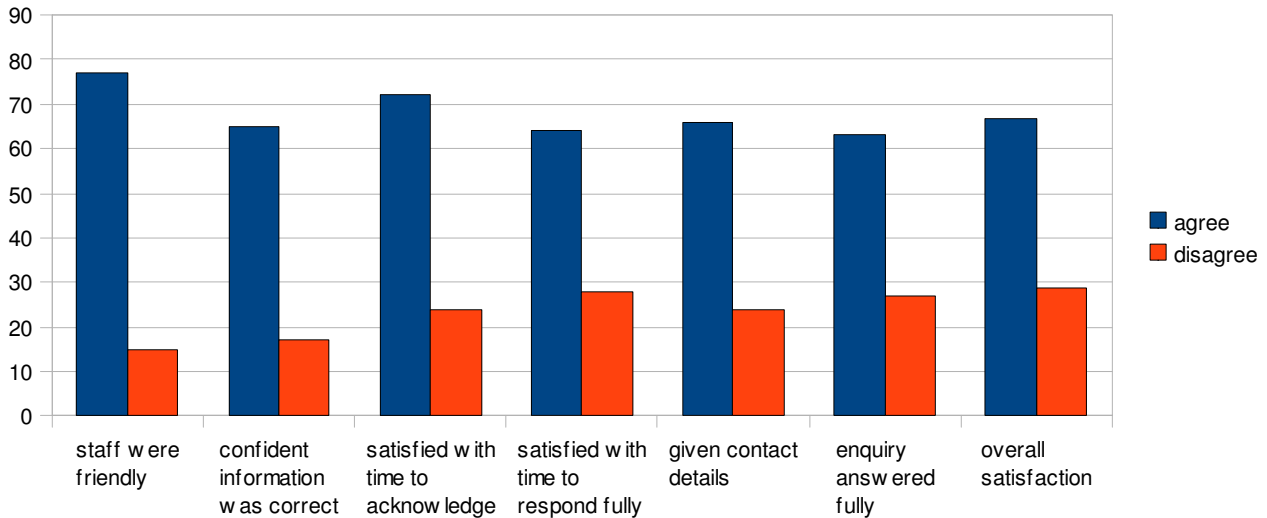
14. Where a customer leaves a message our standard says we should respond to that message within seven working days. 65 per cent of people said they got a response to their message within seven working days, but 20 per cent said they had not received a response at all. This is obviously not acceptable, and staff need to be reminded of the standards for response to messages.

## Email

15. Our contact standard says that customers should get a response to emails within seven working days. 75 per cent said that they got a response within this timescale but 20 per cent didn't get a response at all. 64 per cent of people were satisfied with the time it took for a full response, 28 per cent were dissatisfied.

16. Results also show significant room for improvement across other aspects of email satisfaction as shown in the graph below. Most disappointing is that 19 per cent of people said that they didn't trust the information staff had given them, which suggests issues around training and possibly style and language used in emails. Again the staff restructures could be a contributing factor as many staff would have been new to their roles or to the council at the time covered by this research.

## Satisfaction with elements of email contact



## Letters

17. Of those surveyed only 30 had written to us; of these just five people got a response within the seven working days that our contact standard specifies, for the remaining 21 it took longer or they did not get a response. Again people were not confident in the information given, but the main dissatisfaction was with time taken to respond.

## Actions

18. The period of change as restructures were put in place and bedding down may have contributed to some of the findings addressed in this report, and we would expect this to resolve itself now that most structures are in place. Similarly the new waste contract is bedding down and issues around this have been resolved – this should reduce the amount of contact on waste issues and increase satisfaction.

19. We are currently working with different service standards across the two councils, which is not ideal given that often the same staff are working across the two, and this could lead to confusion. We have scheduled a review and harmonisation of service standards for spring 2012. Once this is complete we will carry out a programme of internal communication. However, in advance of the review we will remind staff of the current service standards, especially those relating to email contact, and the results of this monitoring.

20. In addition we have identified the following actions which will help to address the areas for improvement identified in this report.

- encourage staff to take up existing email good practice training available through the corporate training programme
- feed email and customer service considerations into corporate time management training and encourage staff to attend
- include further customer service training in the corporate training programme (similar to training provided previously at South)

- remind teams of the need to keep staff contact details up to date on the electronic 'whos who'
- introduce telephone monitoring reports and better monitoring of responses to messages
- remind staff and audit signatures on external email
- consider the business case for introducing mystery shopping in relation to email contact

## **Financial Implications**

21. There are no financial implications arising from this report.

## **Legal Implications**

22. There are no legal implications arising from this report.

## **Risks**

23. The key risk is a reputational one as customer experience is a recognised driver of overall satisfaction with the council. Poor performance could impact upon how satisfied residents are with the council and its services.

## **Other Implications**

24. None identified.

## **Conclusion**

25. This is the first customer service performance report of this kind, showing results from our recent citizens' panel survey which asked about peoples experiences of contacting the council. This report compares responses received to the councils agreed customer contact standards. Results show some areas of good practice e.g visits to the local services point. They also suggest some significant areas for improvement, particularly around availability of back office staff to respond to telephone calls, handling of email contact and responding to messages from customers. The report sets out actions proposed to respond to these so as to improve our customer service by the time of the next annual report.

## **Background Papers**

- Report of citizens' panel survey, June 2011

# **Appendix One – customer contact standards**

The Council aims to meet the following general corporate standards:

## **Letters**

We will provide a full response within seven working days. Where this is not possible we will still reply within seven working days, letting you know why we need further time to deal with the enquiry. After that we will deal with the matter as quickly as possible.

## **Emails**

We will reply to emails received at service mailboxes with an immediate automated response. We will provide a full response to all emails within seven working days. Where this is not possible we will let you know why we need further time to deal with the enquiry. After that we will deal with the matter as quickly as possible.

## **Phone**

Whenever possible a member of staff will answer the phone within six rings and we will always try to answer your enquiry at that point. Otherwise the call will be diverted to an automated message or answer machine. We will provide a full response within seven working days. Where this is not possible we will let you know why we need further time to deal with the enquiry. After that we will deal with the matter as quickly as possible.

## **Visitors**

Visitors to our Local Service Point in Abingdon who do not have an appointment will be seen in order of arrival. We aim to resolve 99 per cent of enquiries during the same working day. If we are unable to do so we will resolve your enquiry as fast as possible and will keep you informed at every stage.

The volume and types of customer contacts in some service areas means that alternative operational standards will apply. You will be informed of this at point of contact.