CUSTOMER CONTACT STRATEGY

INTRODUCTION

Access to Services is a theme in the **Vale Community Strategy.** The Council has previously adopted an **Access to Services Strategy** which drove improvements in three areas of access to the Council's and Partners services:

- Physical access
- Opportunity and
- Electronic

Progress under that strategy has been good. The Council has:

- Developed its Local Services Points in Abingdon and Wantage
- Improved physical access to the buildings from which it delivers services
- Reached Level 2 of the Equality Standard for Local Government improving equality of access to services
- Implemented Customer Relationship Systems and workflow to streamline customer contacts and improve quality of service
- Introduced a call centre and laid the foundations for online self service
- Improved the Council's web presence
- Introduced, with the other Oxfordshire authorities, the Community Information database www.oxfordshiregateway.co.uk

This strategy builds on the Access to Services Strategy and takes forward our Corporate aim of improving and modernising access to our services by providing a clear vision of how the Council wants to see access to services further developed and how new technologies and ways of working will be engaged.

Background Information

The Vale Council has around 700,000 contacts with customers a year. The channels for these contacts are set out in Table 1 below.

Current Contact Numbers by Enquiry Channel

	2003/04	2004/05
Face-to-Face		
Abingdon LSP	25964	27427
Wantage LSP	16276	16028
Cashiering – front and back office		
Abingdon	75000	71555
Wantage	17041	14980
Faringdon	6000	6190
Telephone		
Incoming Calls	294000	274000
Post In	261323	257967

Self-Serve	7000	7000
Total	**708604**	**701147**

The Council fully expects the number of contacts to grow reflecting both increasing demand and growth in the breadth of services but, most significantly, growth in 'new business' as contacting the Council is made easier and more convenient and more people utilize the services on offer.

The Vale is an affluent area with a well educated population.

Only 1.6% of the Vale population is unemployed, as compared with the rate of 3.4% for England and Wales. The population is generally better educated than average across the UK with 28.2% of people of working age educated to degree level or higher (England and Wales average 19.8%). (Source: Census 2001)

This profile is reflected in a high take up of new technology and broadband internet penetration in the area

PC ownership in Western Europe is around 70%[1]. 99% of all premises in the UK are technically able to be connected to broadband internet[2] and take-up of broadband services is expected to settle at around 60% by 2008.[3] The last survey of online take-up in the Vale was undertaken in 2002, when 59% of citizens had access to the internet from home. It is likely that this figure has risen since then. In addition, all libraries in Oxfordshire provide free access to the internet, as do VWHDC's two Local Service Points.

This places the Council in an ideal position to exploit new technologies to improve customer contact and gain efficiencies. The Council is aware that not everyone is able to make use of these technologies over the internet. However, the same underlying technologies can be applied to make face to face and telephone contact effective, efficient and of the desired quality.

Having said that, since the Council has introduced its Choice Based Lettings scheme, which is internet based, (see Valehomechoice.org.uk) and has a client group which includes many who are relative to the bulk of the population, disadvantaged. 72% of 'bids' reviewed under the scheme have been received on the internet.

AIMS

The aims of this Strategy are that:

- Cost effective channels will be developed and marketed to encourage as many customers as possible to self-serve or use our call centre services

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[1] ZDnet news, 25 November 2005
[2] BT.com
[3] ZDnet news, 25 November 2005

- Customer service will be, as far as practicable, coordinated and process managed to ensure a quality repeatable service which reflects the adopted service standards
- Opportunities will be taken through process re-design and workflow to create cashable and non-cashable efficiencies.
- The Council will continue to develop access channels which reflect the changing preferences of our customers

The Principles

These aims lead us to the following principles which underpin the Strategy:

- A small number of reliable access points of contact
- Consistent delivery of service standards
- Automation of transactions
- Removal of duplication and overlap
- From an efficiency point of view self serve is the Council's preferred channel

Current Position and Way Forward

The diagrams in Appendix 1 set out our thinking about our current position and the way forward. Diagram 1 represents where we were. Customers funnelled through a small number of access channels making contact directly into the service departments with little opportunity for control over consistency or opportunities from economies of efficiencies of scale.

Diagram 3 shows what most local authorities are aiming for. Broad access channels to a single point (or small number of points operating identically), contact information captured on a Customer Relationship Management system, backed up by a content management system which co-ordinates the same information as available from the front of house and call centre and "self serve" facilities.

Diagram 2 shows what it is feasible for the Vale, and the vast majority of local authorities to achieve for the foreseeable future. The front end is provided but there is little or no integration of the CRM and CMS into the back office systems. We refer to this as the "Broad and Shallow" approach. The reasons for this approach are the technological challenges and high capital costs of deep integration. We intend to follow the broad and shallow approach combined with a watching brief on developments, particularly through the national "connectors club" projects, looking for cost effective opportunities for deeper integration.

With this approach, without compromising service quality and customer satisfaction, the benefits are likely to be focused in the "non-cashable" elements set out on the grid attached – Appendix 2. In the light of this the Council will be cautious about firming up potential savings that would be achieved until identifiable savings steps have been identified.

LINKS TO OTHER INITIATIVES

This strategy should be read in conjunction with other initiatives across the organisation.

- Customer Focus – with initiatives around
  - Building understanding of modern approaches to customer care
  - The development of service standards
  - Consultation and customer feedback
- Re-organisation of central administration functions
- Re-organisation of processing functions such as land charges and licencing
- Financial transactions
  - The Council has introduced debit and credit card payments for those services transferred to the contact centre. This development presents opportunities to streamline payments to the Council and make efficiency savings. The Council's preferred methods of payment are:

    - regular payments by individuals – direct debits
    - one-off payments – debit or credit cards
    - regular payments on business or business basis – BACS payments

In implementing this strategy and the development of services these preferences will be taken into account. Over time this will significantly reduce the amount of cheques and cash handled by the Council. This will enable rationalisation of our cash and post handling functions.

Taken together there is expected to be significant opportunities for efficiencies and costs savings.

MILESTONES FOR STRATEGY

- Roll out LSP2 to remaining high call volume areas of the Council
- Implement service standard methods for those transactions which are essentially paying the Council.
- Review deep integration of services/transactions on an individual business case basis.
- Promote and incentivise the cheapest methods of transaction for the Council.
- Seek opportunities i.e. to build economies of scale through working in collaboration.

The graph below shows projected trends in usage of various access channels over the next 3 years, based on the current model of Council service provision.:

Access Channels: Projection
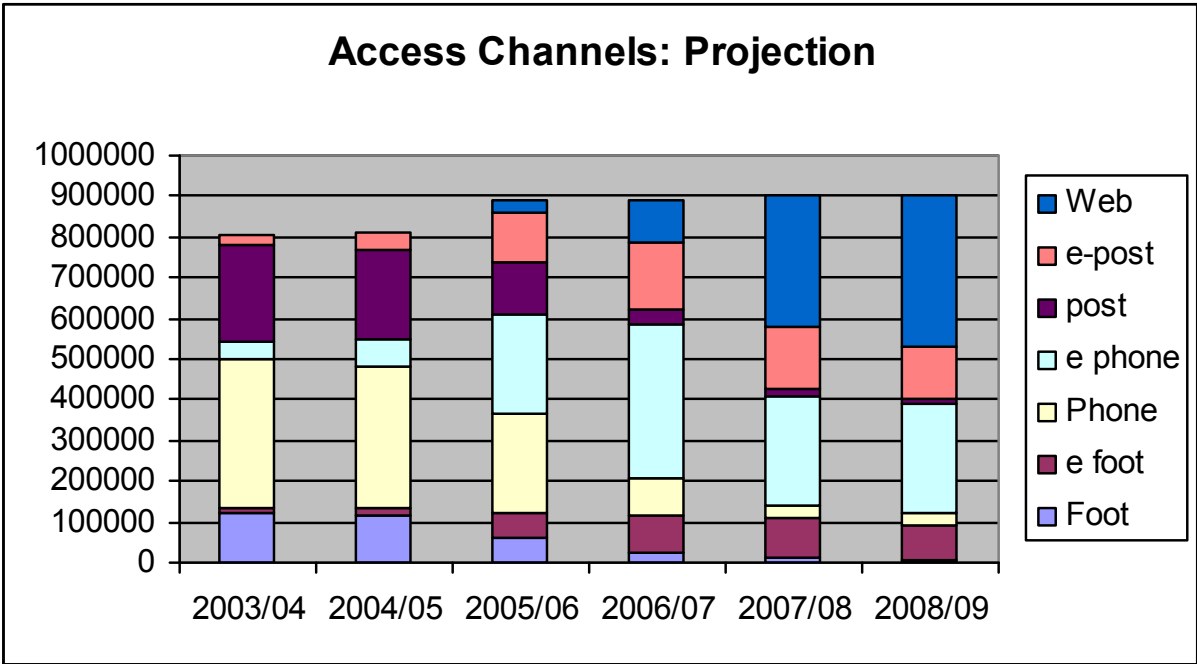
A separate business case investigating the costs, benefits and risks of the Strategy has been produced.

That business case will be used as the starting point for the project management of this Strategy.

1.

CUSTOMERS

Post | Face to Face | Phone

Service Area
Service Area
Service Area
Service Area

Back Office Systems

2.

CUSTOMERS

Face to Face | Phone | Post | Email | Website

Local Service Point

CRM System & Workflow

Service Area
Service Area
Service Area
Service Area

(Reduced) Back Office Systems

3.

CUSTOMERS

Face to Face | Phone | Post | Email | Website

Local Service Point

CRM System & Workflow

Back Office Systems

Service Area
Service Area
Service Area
Service Area

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What are the benefits?

CRM Benefits Matrix

Yes

Financial

Cost Reduction & Efficiency Savings

- Increase in number of queries resolved first time
- Reduction in repeat calls
- More cost-effective use of channels
- Queries quickly directed to subject matter experts (improved use of resources)
- Single team of customer facing council staff (greater efficiency across entire council)

Service Improvement/ Added Value

- Services delivered more effectively across the organisation
  - Development of re-usable skills
  - Enterprise-wide processing of information
- More efficient production and effective use of MI
- Use of MI for predictive management of services
- Earlier cash collection

Service Improvement/ Added Value

- Improved customer satisfaction
- Improved customer response
- Use of new, more effective channels
- Improved BVPI

Strategic & Intangible Benefits

- Improved public perception
- Increased awareness of quality of local services
- Improved information about citizens and authority customers
- Catalyst for organisational change

No

Yes   **No**

Quantifiable