

ACCESS TO SERVICES STRATEGY

Forward Plan Ref No 16/07

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report contains details of the development of the Access to Services Strategy.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 In December 2006 the Audit Commission undertook an Access to Services inspection. The report produced by the inspection team was considered by the Policy, Finance and Strategic Performance Committee on 19 April 2007.
- 2.2 The four recommendations in the inspection report are as follows:
- (1) Develop and implement a Customer Access Strategy supported by a robust and SMART action plan with clear outward facing targets to:
 - define what accessibility means
 - identify users needs
 - prepare actions to address and improve accessibility especially those needs identified by users
 - identify user focussed and measurable targets to ensure successful delivery of improvements to users
 - identify and allocate human and financial resources required to implement improvements
 - clarify roles and responsibilities, including lead officer and political champion.
 - (2) Extend the Council's knowledge and understanding of the specific needs and preferences of all community groups by building on the work undertaken to date and engaging with:
 - user and non-users
 - marginalised groups
 - local community groups
 - utilise information from complaints.

- (3) Establish a systematic approach to managing and improving value for money for access to services' functions by:
- using comparative data already collected, supplemented where necessary, to identify areas where performance is low and and/or high cost compared to that achieved by other councils; and challenging the reasons for this
 - establishing robust cost and efficiency indicators
 - maximising opportunities for benchmarking to improve understanding of the relative quality and effectiveness of the revenues and benefits contact centre, and to learn from the experience of other councils.
- (4) Increase Council knowledge and understanding of the access to services agenda by:
- working jointly with other Council and partner organisations to share information and expertise
 - improve accessibility to partner organisation sites to enhance accessibility to public services
 - identify resources and skills to progress this agenda
 - access appropriate training to address identified skills gaps
 - clarify Officer and Councillor leadership regarding 'access to services'.

2.3 We have been working on these recommendations in two ways – firstly through the development of individual projects, and secondly by using funding obtained through 'Building Capacity East' for the employment of the consultancy firm Tribal to help build our capacity and knowledge in this area.

3 ACCESS TO SERVICES PROJECTS

3.1 The projects we have been working on are as follows:

- Implementation of mystery shopping of planning, revenues and benefits, refuse and recycling and housing services on a reciprocal basis with Castle Point and Southend Councils. The results of the first phase of mystery shopping are currently being analysed to learn from and make service improvements where appropriate.
- Review of complaints procedure to ensure a consistent corporate approach, particularly in respect of learning from complaints.

- Review of translation arrangements to ensure best value and production of a flowchart procedure for staff to follow to ensure that we can provide consistent services for non-English speaking customers and those with vision and/or hearing impairments.
- Overhaul of 'welcome pack' for new residents moving into the District, including the production of an A-Z of Council services.
- Establishment of Citizens Panel and organisation of four focus groups to obtain feedback to assist in the development of the access to services strategy.
- Work on developing a value for money approach for access to services.

4 ACCESS TO SERVICES STRATEGY

- 4.1 The consultancy firm Tribal have been working with us to develop the access to services strategy. Their work has been particularly useful in identifying best practice and providing added value in the development of our geographical information system and approach to value for money.
- 4.2 Whilst the Council enjoys a high level of customer satisfaction, Tribal have found during the course of their research that we resolve relatively few customer enquiries at first point of contact, we lose around 12% of calls, and transfer a number of callers before they reach the correct destination; this experience is also reflected in the feedback from the focus groups. There is also a view from our residents that extended operating hours would be welcomed.
- 4.3 To address these issues and meet increasing customer expectations, Tribal's work on the access to service strategy has identified that we need to consolidate how we deal with customers to enable us to answer more questions on first contact, which in turn should enable us to achieve economies of scale. We need to develop our system of management of customer records so that we maintain a joined up view of each household/resident that identifies any special needs and also enables us or the customer to track service requests. We also need to further develop our website as it is a cost effective way for us to deliver services that can release resource to the frontline for those residents who need personal contact. However, we need to ensure we make these service enhancements without compromising the existing high level of customer satisfaction.
- 4.4 The access to services strategy is attached at Appendix 1. The strategy contains a series of recommendations and in outline terms defines the approach the Council needs to take. However, this now needs to be developed into an action plan with costs that can be considered for integration into the medium term financial strategy and implemented over the next two-four years.

- 4.5 To achieve an understanding of the costs and benefits a detailed business case needs to be developed for the transformation and centralisation of the management of frontline customer service (which will enable greater first time resolution of customer enquiries, a single reception area in Rochford, and extended operating hours). It is proposed that this business case should be developed over the next 3 months.
- 4.6 'Quick wins' with limited resource implications that can be implemented in the short term (next 3 – 9 months) include:
- content for the intranet on customer insight (to share knowledge and understanding amongst staff of our communities and their specific needs and preferences)
 - SMS text pilots (for young people, people with hearing impairments, anti-social behaviour hotline and feasibility on parking fine payments)
 - feasibility studies of working with partners to develop services in Hullbridge, Great Wakering and Hockley
 - expansion of customer services at Rayleigh
 - early business process re-engineering to optimise the frontline customer service for the new refuse and recycling contracts
 - development of the business case to separate the switchboard function from the reception function to improve customer service at the Rochford offices.
- 4.7 These are the high level key themes emerging from the access to services strategy and Members' views are sought at this stage as work continues on the development of the detailed action plan. Officers will bring the detailed action plan back to a future meeting of the Executive Board.

5 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The development of the access to services action plan and business case will identify the resource implications for inclusion in the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

6 RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The Audit Commission inspection report requires the Council to produce an access to services strategy by December 2007, and there is a risk to our reputation and future inspections if we do not deliver to timescale.
- 6.2 The development of the access to services action plan will require the production of a full risk assessment.

7 RECOMMENDATION

7.1 It is proposed that the Board **RESOLVES**

- (1) To agree to the overall direction of the access to services strategy, subject to the production of a detailed business case for the centralisation of the management of frontline customer service.
- (2) To agree to the implementation of the 'quick wins' identified in paragraph 4.6.
- (3) To agree that a detailed action plan be submitted to a future meeting of the Executive Board.

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Background Papers:-

None

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