

**REPORT TO THE MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE - 22 JULY 2009**

**PORTFOLIO: SERVICE DEVELOPMENT, IMPROVEMENT & PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT**

**REPORT FROM HEAD OF INFORMATION AND CUSTOMER SERVICES**

**SUBJECT: ACCESS TO SERVICES STRATEGY - UPDATE**

**1 DECISION BEING RECOMMENDED**

- 1.1 To agree that the trial of the extended opening hours at reception should not be continued.
- 1.2 To agree that the Council's main reception should open from 8.30 am to 5.30 pm for personal visitors and phone callers (8.30 am to 5.00 pm Friday), with staff hours starting from 8.00 am.
- 1.3 To note the complaints statistics for 2009/10.

**2 FORWARD PLAN REFERENCE No: 14/08**

**3 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION**

- 3.1 In December 2006 the Audit Commission undertook an Access to Services inspection that culminated in a report considered by the Council in April 2007. The recommendations in this report were developed into the Access to Services Strategy that identified that we needed 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; to develop the management of customer records so that we have a joined up view of each household/resident that identified any special needs and enabled us or the customer to track service requests; and to further develop our website as a cost effective way for us to deliver services that can release resource to the frontline for those residents who need personal contact. These service enhancements need to be made without compromising the existing high level of customer satisfaction.
- 3.2 The Executive Board approved 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 the frontline customer service with recognition that, in view of apparent customer preference, a review of opening hours for face to face services aiming to extend the hours would be an appropriate aspiration.
- 3.3 Progress made to date in implementing the Strategy includes:-

- development of a programme of mystery shopping of services on a reciprocal basis with Castle Point, Southend, Chelmsford and Basildon Councils;
- review of the complaints procedure, service standards, translation arrangements and 'welcome pack' for new residents;
- development of the Intranet 'customer insight' and 'customer services' areas to share knowledge and understanding of our communities and to bring together all our policies and procedures relating to customer services;
- relaunch of the website with the ability for residents to customise how they receive information;
- completed roll-out of the document management and corporate contact manager software system that will act as the basis for the joined up view of customer records;
- pilot 'public service information' day being developed in conjunction with the Local Strategic Partnership;
- pilot of SMS text messaging and use of social media to communicate with young people (starting July 2009);
- the management of the frontline customer service has been considered as part of the Medium Term Financial Strategy report elsewhere on this agenda.

3.4 In December 2008 the Executive agreed that the following projects should be taken forward:-

- combination of the Rochford reception and the planning reception;
- separation of the tasks of switchboard from reception duties;
- 3 month trial of extended hours of operation;
- review of external phone numbers.

3.5 The combination of the Rochford and planning receptions took place in April 2009. This has been successful and has resulted in an improved experience for residents as they can now access services in person in a single location.

3.6 The separation of the tasks of switchboard from reception duties has taken place, with switchboard moving to a separate room within the reception area. The intention of this is to enable the frontline information officer to provide an improved level of service resolving more issues on first contact, rather than simply passing visitors on to another officer. However, whilst the principle of separation of duties is appropriate, the fact that switchboard staff have been

removed from easy contact with the staff on the reception desk means that the necessary operational flexibility in covering both functions is not achieved. Therefore, there will be some minor alterations in the reception area to extend the current desk to enable staff working on both functions to be located together to achieve greater flexibility in cover.

- 3.7 By comparison to the same 3 month period in 2008, the number of visitors to the Rochford reception has increased since April by 12% for planning related enquiries and 18% Council Tax and Benefits enquiries. Phone contacts have remained at a similar level to previous years. If we are to achieve our aspiration to resolve more customer enquiries at first point of contact and deal appropriately with phone contacts, officers believe that additional resource is required for the reception team. This should be achievable through the re-organisation of staffing resources identified in a report elsewhere on the agenda on the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). In the interim, however, to maintain and improve our frontline service, an additional temporary member of staff is required. This can be funded from the Access to Services budget.
- 3.8 The trial of extended switchboard and reception hours from 5.30 pm to 7.00 pm on a Thursday evening took place from April to June 2009. This provided an opportunity to monitor demand for the service, which we advertised on our website and in the local press. Despite this, we received only three visitors to the offices who called to deliver documents which would otherwise have been posted through the letter box. 30 phone calls were received. 21 were for the Capita revenues and benefits service, a number given out with our out-of-hours message. The remaining calls comprised 6 on missed bins, 2 for Rochford Housing Association and 1 for right to buy. On this basis, it is recommended that Thursday evening extended hours is not pursued further.
- 3.9 However, the Council's switchboard currently opens at 8.00 am but we get very few calls at that time. Staff can arrive on site for work from 7.30 am. These times are not when our residents expect a service, so it is proposed that the switchboard opens at the same time as reception; that is 8.30 am, with staff being able to be on site from 8.00 am. Switchboard and reception will then both stay open until 5.30 pm (currently reception closes at 5.00 pm) Monday to Thursday (8.30 am – 5.00 pm Friday), with staff providing cover in all services to that time. This extends the availability to personal callers by 2 hours a week.
- 3.10 The review of external phone numbers advertised to rationalise where possible these contact points to provide a more consistent telephone response is underway.
- 3.11 Following the review of the complaints procedure a new recording system has been written as part of the Intranet that enables the corporate monitoring of complaints and produces comparative reports. The annual report for 2008/09 is attached in Appendix A. This shows the total number of complaints, comments and compliments made by service area and by type of complaint

received. It is pleasing to note that the Council received a number of compliments across most service areas. In terms of complaints, these are discussed within the individual departments to ensure that action is taken where necessary and that lessons are learnt and improvements made as a result.

- 3.12 As Members are aware, the current planning permission for the existing temporary reception at Rochford expires in 2012. Following a tender process, architects have been commissioned to develop a feasibility study for a new permanent reception. The Portfolio Holder is being kept updated and the study will be presented to Members for consideration later in the year.

#### **4 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

- 4.1 The Access to Services Strategy identified options for service delivery and improvement.

#### **5 RISK IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 There is a risk to the Council's reputation and future inspections if we do not continue to develop and improve our services following the Audit Commission's Access to Services inspection.
- 5.2 There is also a risk that we will not meet residents' expectations for service delivery if we do not continue to improve the way in which we provide services.

#### **6 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1 The proposals within the report can be met within the MTFS.

SMT Lead Officer Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

**Head of Information and Customer Services**

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#### **Background Papers:-**

Report to the Executive 10 December 2008.

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If you would like this report in large print, braille or another language please contact 01702 546366.

Appendix A

Customer Feedback Reports for the period:

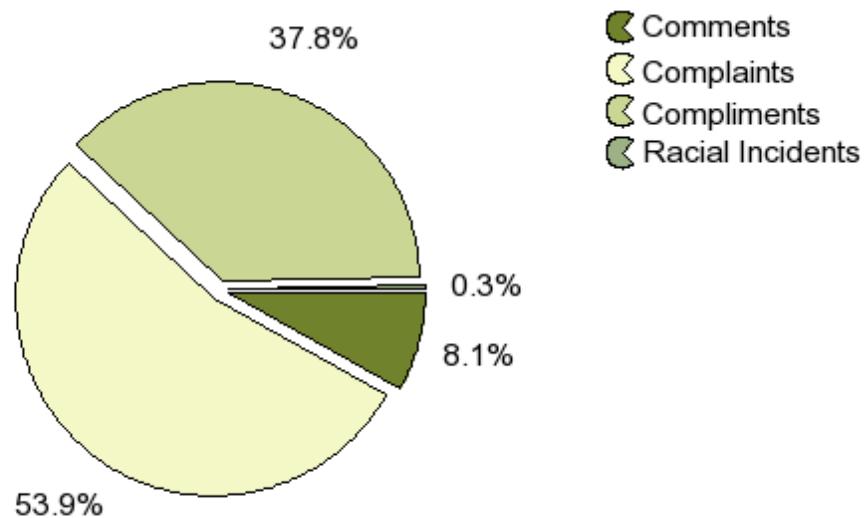
1 April 2008 – 31 March 2009

**Key**

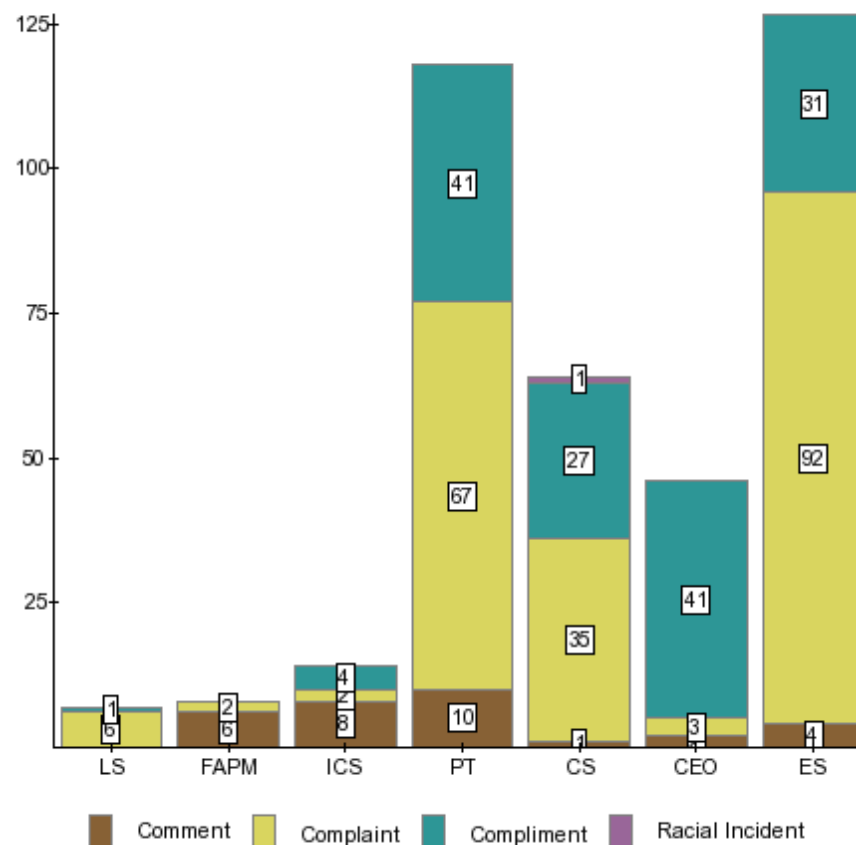
FAPM	Finance, Audit and Performance Management
CEO	Chief Executive Office
CS	Community Services
ES	Environmental Services
ICS	Information and Customer Services
LS	Legal Services
PT	Planning and Transportation

## Feedback Report - 01-04-2008 to 31-03-2009

### Total Feedback Received Corporately

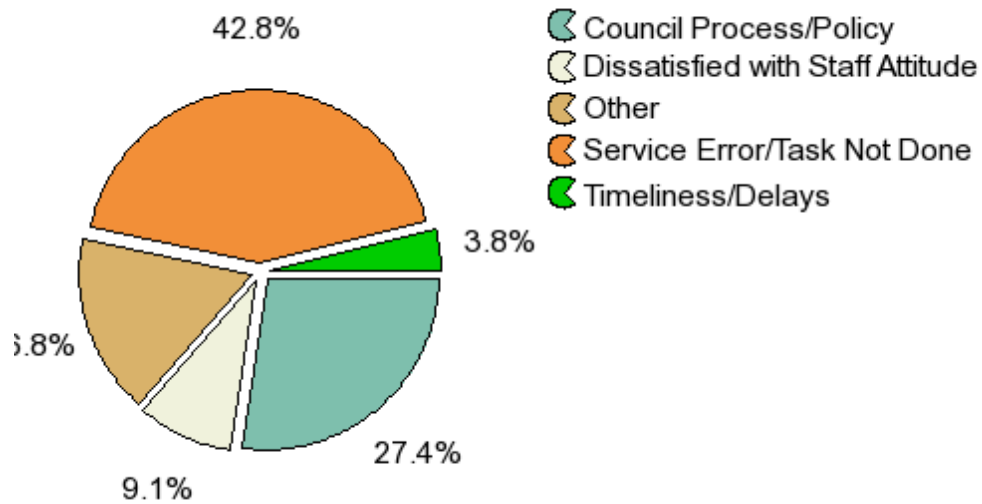


### Total Feedback Received by Service



Comments = 31    Complaints = 207    Compliments = 145  
 Racial Incidents = 1

## Total Complaint Categories



**Council Process/Policy = 57** **Dissatisfied with Staff Attitude = 19**  
**Other = 35** **Service Error/Task Not Done = 89**  
**Timeliness/Delays = 8**

## Complaint Categories by Service

