

**THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING
OF THE RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

HELD ON FRIDAY 3 AUGUST 2007

Present: Councillor A Burnip (Chair)
Councillors Mrs M Baird, A Collinson,
J Haggan, Mrs J Maitland, D Myers,
R Taylor and Mrs V M Williams

Apology: Councillor Mrs J Maslin

1 **THE MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING** held on 17 July 2007, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member, were confirmed.

2 **THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE** held on 24 July 2007, were submitted.

RESOLVED that the information contained within the Minutes, be noted.

3 **PUBLIC QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION**

There were no members of the public present.

4 **FEEDBACK FROM SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT BOARD**

The Chair reported that there were no issues considered at the Scrutiny Management Board meeting held on 30 July 2007 which fell within the remit of this Committee.

5 **SERVICE UNIT PERFORMANCE REPORTING – CUSTOMER SERVICES CENTRE UPDATE**

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Customer Services which gave an update on the progress and performance of the Customer Services Centre, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member.

Members were advised that the Customer Services Centre (CSC) had been operational since December 2005. In March 2006 the switchboard and customer service teams were merged and all staff were trained to handle both types of calls. Staff were fully supported in their development and following a competency assessment in November 2006, six out of seven staff were upgraded to the role of Customer Service Advisor (CSA).

Following further training the first phase of Council Tax and Planning and Development Control calls were migrated into the CSC in January/February 2007. All CSA's could now handle all basic information requests and give advice on these subjects, as well as taking credit and debit card payments by telephone. In July 2007 several types of calls from Environmental Services were migrated to the CSC and all staff were trained on these services.

Since the merge of the switchboard and the old customer services team, the telephony system had been able to provide detailed statistics on the number of customers telephoning the Council, details of which were reported to Management Team on a regular basis.

Resources Scrutiny Committee – 3 August 2007

As part of the department's commitment to customers a main reception area was opened on the site and a new DDA compliant meeting room was created for the benefit of the entire organisation. There was still some work outstanding, which would improve access for customers to the site, and the authority would be investigating new, or improving existing, access channels for customers during the coming year.

Work was ongoing on the migration of services into the CSC and a project plan had been developed which would mean the transfer of more of Envirocall's work in August and October 2007. Unfortunately the transfer of one full time equivalent member of staff did not take place when the Envirocall work was transferred and the Centre had to recruit a further CSA.

As part of the migration of services an overall plan had been developed which outlined a number of other services where the first point of contact could be handled by CSA's. This included further parts of Planning and Development Control as well as Benefits, Sports Development, Asset and Property Management and Democratic Services. This was neither a definitive or exhaustive list, and other service areas may be identified where the CSC could help with customer contact.

Reference was made to the call statistics for 2006/2007. The volume of calls received by the CSC was 341,050 and was much higher than neighbouring authorities.

It was explained that some of the statistics could be benchmarked against other organisations and, whilst there were currently no BVPIs for customer contact to enable a breakdown of what "upper quartile" performance would look like, the performance was benchmarked against an annual contact centre industry-wide benchmarking survey.

The percentage of calls answered within 20 seconds was 77% which was higher than the UK/European average of 76% and significantly higher than the Government, Education and Healthcare sector average of 69%.

The CSC's target for the percentage of calls which were abandoned was lower than the industry average of 5% reflecting the authority's aim to provide a better service to customers. However, whilst the CSC's actual performance of 8.9% did not hit the target, it was significantly lower than the average of 14%.

Customer satisfaction levels were 92% and significantly higher than the industry average of 82%. This showed that as more customers had their calls answered and resolved at the customer's first point of contact with the Council, customers were more satisfied with their overall contact with the Council.

Whilst statistics could be benchmarked against other contact centres, complaints received via the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) could not. However, the LGO provided an annual summary of complaints in its Annual Letter to the Council and there were 15 new complaints received during the year, compared to 21 in 2005/2006. There were also 17 premature complaints, which needed to be investigated under the Council's complaints procedure, as well as 1 complaint which was outside of the LGO's jurisdiction. There had been no cases, which resulted in a report of maladministration by the Council, and 7 out of 15 were resolved locally, without the LGO needing to make a determination.

Unfortunately the time taken to resolve complaints to the LGO's satisfaction took longer compared to the previous year. This was mainly due to the number of

Resources Scrutiny Committee – 3 August 2007

complaints relating to East Durham Homes (EDH) and several complaints which were very complicated. However, procedures had been put in place to deal with LGO complaints which should see the amount of time taken to respond to a complaint reduced.

There were several changes facing the department during 2007/2008 as it continued to absorb customer contact work from other service units, was inspected by the Audit Commission and worked to implement the recommendations made in the Varney Review from December 2006. The corporate complaints procedure and customer satisfaction surveys would also be reviewed.

Another area, which was currently being analysed, was the increase in calls created by the dispatch of annual Council Tax bills, annual National Non- Domestic Rate bills and confirmation of Benefits letters during March. In March 2007 these three items totalled 57,500 items sent out to customers in the district creating an increase in the number of calls received. Steps had already been taken to reduce the number of CSA's taking holidays in this period in March 2008 in order to provide a better service for customers and the authority would continue to look at ways of reducing the demand for contact at peak periods of the year.

The implications of the Varney review of accessing government services would be the subject of a further report and would have a major impact on the work of the department.

The Chair queried the possibility of a dedicated phone line to enable Members to bypass the switchboard. D Payne advised that if there was a number especially reserved for Members to enable them to bypass the switchboard there was the potential problem that this number would become known and members of the public would ring the Council on this number if it was not kept secure. Councillor D Myers advised that the authority were attempting to reduce the time customers waited for an advisor and particular attention was being paid to peak periods when the authority knew to expect a high volume of calls.

Councillor Mrs J Maitland asked if calls received for EDH were transferred or were customers asked to ring the 0800 number. D Payne advised that there was a mix of both and whilst advisors would transfer calls to EDH they would also issue the 0800 number and ask customers to ring this in future.

Councillor A Collinson asked if the CSC received many nuisance/abusive calls. D Payne advised that annually the centre received very few nuisance/abusive calls and implemented a policy of "three strikes and out" rule.

Councillor Mrs J Maitland asked if abusive calls were monitored and D Payne advised that it would cost approximately £10,000 to record and monitor all calls and whilst calls were monitored for quality assurance individual abusive calls were not monitored.

The Chair pointed out that there was only one member of staff on reception and asked if this was adequate. D Payne explained that one member of staff at any one time on reception was adequate and staff rotated on a day to day basis to allow a variety of work within the Centre.

Councillor J Haggan asked if the CSC had staff on work experience. D Payne advised that the authority had four business administration apprentices who were rotated around the complex.

Resources Scrutiny Committee – 3 August 2007

The Chair queried if the CSC would need to acquire any new equipment in the foreseeable future to improve the service. D Payne advised that it was possible that the CSC would need to purchase new software equipment at a cost of £35,000 in 2008/2009.

Councillor A Collinson asked about staff morale and sickness levels. D Payne advised that it was a very busy period for the CSC particularly during the holiday period. Sickness levels remained stable throughout the year.

Councillor D Myers outlined the importance of the Scrutiny Committee's involvement with policy development and explained the current situation with regard to direct dial telephone numbers at the authority which was something that was being investigated by the Head of Customer Service and the Head of IT Services. By issuing employees with a direct dial number this would relieve some of the pressure from the switchboard however there was a danger that the CRM system would not then give a true reading of how many calls were being received.

In the main Members felt that direct dial telephone numbers were a good idea on a selective basis but that further investigation was needed.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted and further developments be awaited.

JW/MA/com res/070801
6 August 2007