

Special Joint Corporate Issues Overview and Scrutiny Committee/Overview and Scrutiny Management Board



27 January 2014

Public consultation on the new Customer First Strategy for the Council for 2014-2017

Report of Lorraine O'Donnell, Assistant Chief Executive

Purpose of the Report

1. To provide scrutiny Members with information on the public consultation on the new Customer First Strategy for the Council for 2014-2017, which was considered by Cabinet on 15th January 2014 (see attached Cabinet report at appendix 2).

Background

2. The Corporate Issues Overview and Scrutiny Committee (CIOSC) regularly considers customer services performance as part of quarterly performance reports. In 2012, the committee carried out a light touch review of telephony, and has remained interested in performance in relation to customer services.
3. It was proposed at the September 2013 meeting of CIOSC that a task and finish group be set up to provide policy development support to the refresh of the Council's Customer First Strategy. Terms of reference and proposed objectives were agreed at CIOSC on 22nd November, and a task and finish group of 7 Members has been put in place to hold a number of meetings and look at best practice.
4. This report gives all CIOSC Members the opportunity to consider the draft revised strategy and provide comment to the task and finish group ahead of their first meeting.

A Revised Customer First Strategy

5. In the light of MTFP savings and changing customer preferences, the Council needs to develop, implement and embed a revised Customer First Strategy across the council to replace the existing strategy agreed in 2010 following LGR.
6. The revised strategy document will provide a direction of travel for the way in which we will provide access to services and a commitment to ensure customers are at the forefront of service delivery within the context of reducing budgets and diminishing resources.
7. The main focus of the strategy document encompasses the main contact channels used by customers; streamlined service delivery and the council's approach to use of feedback, intelligence and data to inform service development.

8. In line with the 'whole council approach' to Customer Services the Customer First Strategy will seek to broaden accessibility to information and increase the online capability to transact with the council. This approach will ensure best use of existing resources and buildings to provide a network of service access points which is instantly recognisable through a single branding, provisionally entitled "Information Durham". When implementing this approach clarity will be provided in relation to where key transactions will be offered, such as benefits. By evolving this approach customers will have much greater access to services and information with little to no revenue budget implications.
9. The Customer First Strategy needs to be clear, concise and linked to the wider priorities of the Council. Delivery of the Strategy will result in changes both internally in relation to integration of services and enabling "channel shift" so that customers are able to access services through digital means at a time and location convenient to them. It is important that a comprehensive consultation process is developed to enable effective engagement with all stakeholders.

Development of the Strategy

10. The first part of the refresh process has involved working with staff to develop a draft document which addresses the known issues surrounding effective customer care.
11. A cross council project team has been set up to drive forward the refresh of the strategy, which has contributed to its content and format; this included identifying service improvements in relation to access to services and statistical data around customer contact.
12. Research data from surveys showing customer preferences in relation to access channels and demographics in terms of the make-up of our communities has also been used to ensure the strategy document is focussed around customer needs.
13. A copy of the refreshed Strategy is attached at Appendix 2 for information.

Consultation

14. The statutory requirement to consult is based on section 3 of the Local Government Act 1999 in which it states that a best value authority must secure continuous improvement in the way its functions are exercised and in deciding how to fulfil its duty; an authority must consult a range of stakeholders including taxpayers.
15. Cabinet have agreed that a consultation exercise is undertaken to obtain the views of the public on a number of issues central to the strategy document and the direction of travel proposed in it including:
 - Consideration of the vision statement and main areas of focus
 - Current customer preferences
 - Future access channels.
16. Alongside consideration by Corporate Issues Overview and Scrutiny Committee, a number of consultation methods have been agreed to encourage wide participation, including:

- On-line survey (Paper copies will be available at locations across the county to ensure those without access to PCs/internet access can participate)
 - Focus Group meetings and signposting through AAPs
 - Disability Partnership
 - Partnership Delivery Improvement Group
 - Investors in young people
 - People's Parliament.
17. The consultation will take place over a 12 week period, commencing on 20th January 2014 and running until 14th April 2014
18. The results of the exercise will be included in a future report to Cabinet on the new strategy document.

Recommendations

19. Scrutiny Members are asked to:
- a) note the attached copy of the draft Customer First Strategy at Appendix 2.
 - b) Input into the consultation by providing any comments on the proposed Customer First Strategy for the council for 2014-2017 through the Task and Finish Group, which holds its first meeting on 6th February 2014.

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Appendix 1: Implications

Finance

N/A

Staffing

N/A

Risk

N/A

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

N/A

Accommodation

N/A

Crime and Disorder

N/A

Human Rights

N/A

Consultation

Scrutiny Members are asked to input into the consultation through the CIOSC Task and Finish Group.

Procurement

N/A

Disability Issues

N/A

Legal Implications

N/A