

LGA Remote Peer Support: Sheffield City Council Customer Service

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Sheffield City Council

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Structure

- Approach undertaken
- Delivering Customer Service Ethos: Benchmark
- Overview and observations
- What you told us in your own words
- Recommendations in relation to benchmarks
- Where next: Quick wins, next steps and questions



Purpose: To verify, confirm and add value from external perspective to Sheffield City Council's (SCC) assessment of the issue and objectives they have set to improve performance of its customer services operations, across all channels and the Council services accessed via this operation.

Peer Team

- Kirsteen Roe, Stockport Council, Service Director Citizen Focus
- Kathryn Rees, Stockport Council, Service Director Strategy and Commissioning
- Siobhan Coughlan, LGA Programme Manager
- Frances Marshall, LGA Programme Manager

Process: Peers reviewed a range of information to ensure they were familiar with the Council, the challenges it is facing and its plans for the future. They gathered information and views from more than 16 meetings, in addition to further research such as reports, governance meetings, website and Contact Centre call listening. They spoke to more than 30 people including a range of Council staff and elected members.

Benchmark: Delivering a Customer Service Ethos

Needs a coordinated effort across a number of related areas including:

- **Clear standards:** For everyone to work to supported by performance measures and Business Information
- **Staffing:** Recruited, trained and supported to deliver excellent customer service who have the autonomy and authority to make decisions when dealing with customers
- **Technology tools and solutions:** IT and telephony designed to support staff do their job, and meet customer needs
- **Customer Insight:** An understanding of and engagement with customers to design user friendly services
- **User designed:** Access to user designed services including online, for those customers who are happy to use them

Underpinned by

- **Organisational leadership:** Senior officer and member ownership
- **Clear agreed vision:** Customer service is everyone's' business and responsibility
- **Governance arrangements:** To support, oversee, monitor and scrutinise customer service
- **Agreed programme of work** for customer service

Overview and observations

- There is **recognition of the Council's overall performance challenges** – with the Customer Contact Centre seen as a barometer – and there is a **shared desire for improvement** from SCC's political and officer leadership, as well as wider staff core
- Addressing these issues against the backdrop of Covid 19 pandemic, changes in political leadership and organisational re-prioritisation has been challenging. Whilst the **pandemic has created additional challenges and pressures**, it has exacerbated existing fault lines, and is **not the root cause** of the performance issues
- To address the performance challenges, **customer service as an ethos** and a responsibility, **needs to be collectively owned** across the organisation
- Multiple well-intentioned efforts to address the challenges have been undertaken over the years but not had the desired outcome. For SCC to make meaningful inroads it will require a **dedicated focus, organisational buy-in, culture change and investment** – of both time and resources – to break down siloed approach to customers and transform services
- The Portfolio Holder, Director and Head of Contact Centre are working hard **to put customer service front and centre of Council's agenda**, with multiple initiatives underway to identify and address the underlying issues
- There are **great assets to build on** with skilled, knowledgeable, committed staff, individual examples of great customer services, un-tapped functionality in some systems, and a collective goodwill internally to get this right

Overview and observations

- **Clear standards and vision:** Whilst there are multiple documents stating customer service commitment, a standard approach and consistent focus on customer standards is not apparent
- **Staffing:** Frontline staff are an asset, however current structures, systems, silo working, and lack of career pathways inhibit resources being deployed in an agile and flexible manner to better manage demand. Increasing levels of customer demand on Customer Contact Centre staff risks burn out, increased absences, or individuals leaving
- **Technology tools and solutions:** IT investment over the pandemic has been transformational. Nevertheless, the multitude of IT applications, lack of integration or join-up across change processes, inadequate user testing and training results in untapped functionality and are huge barriers to productivity and customer satisfaction. IT should be an enabler to transformation, not driver of it
- **Customer Insight:** There is a renewed commitment across the Council to understand and engage with its communities. To realise this, a more holistic view is needed of SCC's customers and the services they use/need to better tailor and design how services are accessed. Frontline staff will also have valuable insights into what works well and what improvements should be made
- **User designed:** In-house resource and expertise around service re-design and business processes exist. There are some examples of where this is happening (e.g., automated Council tax balance), but there is huge scope to systematically redesign processes and services to deliver improvement - both for the customer and those supporting them
- **Organisational leadership:** The organisation's commitment to putting '*communities and people of Sheffield at the heart of everything it does, and that works hard to deliver excellence first time, every time*' is clear. Translating aspirations into actions and outcomes will require focus and actively championing from senior leadership
- **Governance and work programme:** Over time accountability for, and governance around, customer service improvement and change management has become dispersed. Strong governance, with senior political and officer sponsors, and robust programme management, will be important to provide oversight to an agreed programme of work, monitor delivery and maximise opportunities for join-up across initiatives

What people told us is working well

Fantastic staff who are committed and knowledgeable

A lot is working well in the contact centre

Close cross-organisational working in response to Covid 19

Front line on view:

- Contact Centre Team
- Professional and knowledgeable staff
- Helping people
- Signposting people

Politicians let us get on with stuff

We know the issues, challenges and have the capabilities - we now need to clearer on what the culture of delivering customer excellence means

We have a good medium-term plan for improvements: what's needed now is immediate actions

Political and officer leadership are working hard to put it front and centre of Council's agenda

Contact centre is a good launch pad into other parts of the Council

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IT transformation and digital literacy of staff has transformed over the pandemic

There is now a recognition of the independencies across Council services and customer service

Got good technical functionality in applications

Bringing together and understanding of citizen debt with finance and resources

Some examples of excellent customer service

Contact centre are a great team – we need to help them to achieve

Done a lot of thinking and talking – now we need action

Excellent training in Customer First means Contact Centre Staff are head hunted by rest of the Council

What people told us could be improved

Need to accommodate more focused time with customers

Don't analyse the data we have - just focused on doing things faster for less money

Not good at system thinking

Want permission and ability to make decisions to drive change

Too many failure loops build into the system

Resources not in the right places nor working together

Have resources but burdened with ineffective processes

Frontline view:
- Greater agency, control & closer joint working across services
- More staff
- Improved digital offer
- Fewer systems, which function effectively & are integrated
- Linkages across change projects & services
- Consistency & culture

Honest ambition for excellent customer service but lacks infrastructure to deliver

Need to progress channel shift

Want quality not quantity - e.g. getting it right first time

Decision making is slow & doesn't enable responding to challenges

Not harnessing capability properly - need support & buy-in from services & EMT

Need frontline staff input into the change agenda

Users are circumventing the system which creates more work

Offering Jam tomorrow

Not enough done to ask citizens how they want communicating with...How can we think about totality of people in the City?

No whole organisational approach

Takeaway the 'noise'

So easy to get lost if you're a customer

No single view of change across the organisation

Understand who our customers are but gap between that and making improvement

Variability is endemic across the Council

Systemic problem, but not a systemic solution

Struggling to engender flexibility between 'front' and 'back' office staff

Not seeing efficiencies would have expected

Clear Standards

- Revise, refresh and then actively promote your '**customer commitments**' as a driver of excellent customer service, ensuring these are relevant for today's digital world as well as consistently applied by staff in all roles throughout the Council
- Build basic **customer service training into induction/training** for all staff across all roles in the Council
- Establish a **customer service career pathway** with specific customer service training e.g., recognised training qualifications, for those in a dedicated customer service role to develop and build their skills
- Look at ways to **continuously check and improve** customer service standards by actively seeking user feedback, analyse your complaints and comments to understand the cause and consider carrying out mystery shopping exercises

Staffing

- **Review current staff resource** operating in customer service roles to clarify, numbers, roles, and levels of experience (NB: not just those working in Customer Contact Centre)
- Devise an approach to **utilise this resource more flexibly** as a whole organisation (as opposed to specific service areas) to better meet customer demand peaks
- To help plan this resource - **look at current suite of MI, BI and Performance data** to see if this provides the necessary data to effectively managing customer contact
- Put in place appropriate working arrangements to ensure a level footing and ‘one team’ ethos’ between Customer Contact Centre and the service areas they support. This should include arrangements for **service areas to systematically engage in with the Customer Contact Centre to set out their plans** which generate demand (e.g., mass mailings to residents) so resources can be better planned and coordinated to handle the additional work
- If staff resources, and how they work, are not addressed, there is a real risk to their wellbeing, retention, the delivery of services, as well as wider organisational reputation

Technology, tools and solutions

For customers, look at how the Council can:

- Enable **greater levels of self-service** where customers are happy to do so - via the Council website, Apps, automated telephony, text messaging, etc. to reduce the need to call the Council
- Better **shape customer's expectations** in terms of when they will hear back / get a full response, etc. to reduce the need for chase up calls

For staff, look at how services are redesigned so:

- Reflects the **end-to end process** and journey, and is better supported by the necessary IT systems
- **Rationalise and integrate the number of different IT systems** those working in a customer service roles need to do their job
- Enables a '**one and done**' approach to capturing and entering information into the IT system
- Better **join-up staff in a customer service roles and the relevant service area**, so reduces the need to rekey data

Understanding of and engagement with customers

- Review the different sources of 'customer insight' and data you currently use, to see if this is sufficient and provides a **holistic view of your customers** and the services they use/need to support your work to digitalise services (for those customers that can use it)
- **Build on previous work done** by the Council (e.g. customer experience strategy) to understand and engage with your residents and businesses across Sheffield to driver a user centre design approach
- **Look at how you currently engage with residents and businesses** via various stakeholder groups to see how this might support your work to improve customer services



User designed services

- Apply user design principles to the **redesign of Council services end-to-end** (especially where this crosses different operational areas). Be this for direct customer access, or for staff in their jobs across all channels
- **Engage in-house expertise** - within the Council's Business Change team and those design teams located in specific service areas - **before starting work on the redesign of a service** or the implementation of a new system and/or processes
- **Review in-house service design resources** to understand the skills and capacity you have, the gaps, and how you can **better deploy this resource** to the benefit of the Council, its residents and businesses
- Apply **behaviour change techniques** to support service design and demand management



Organisational leadership and clear agreed vision

- **Ownership and commitment from the top** – both by senior management and the senior political leadership – that customer service is a key priority is critical to delivering this agenda
- Articulate **an agreed vision to deliver excellent customer service** that reflects the make-up and needs of the people and communities the Council serves
- The leadership needs to **take responsibility for delivering this vision** for what good customer service looks like of for the residents and communities in Sheffield
- A **commitment to put in place necessary resources** to deliver excellent customer services
- Set out **clearly what good customer service looks and feels like and how measured**, so that can be easily understood by everyone (e.g., officers, members and customers)
- **Ensure customer service principles are embedded in everyone's work** i.e., part of JDs, induction and performance reviews
- **Empower and listen to staff so they have permission** to make change happen



Governance and Work Programme

Governance arrangements including:

- SRO for the programme overall
- Elected Member Lead
- Regular reporting to appropriate boards/committees at senior level to ensure delivered
- Agreed monitoring processes

Work programme

- All projects mapped and resourced
- Clear reporting lines for all projects
- Overall programme management arrangement to manage resources more effectively
- Clearly articulate how your programme will support channel shift and demand management
- Risk Register
- Clear on what good looks like within each programme of work





**'Doing nothing will cost
more than addressing the
issues'**



Quick wins

- Start small, take measured risk, and then expand out - do not be afraid to fail and learn
- Pilot switching on 'call back' and 'chat bot' functions as early as possible
- Identify your top transactions and prioritise redesigning processes to digitalise these to enable greater levels of self-service
- Fast track those things that can be done at scale to maximise economies of scale and impact (e.g., webforms)
- Take steps to better understand the nature of your demand, including that created in service areas e.g., cyclical mailings to plan how to better manage this business
- Apply a 'demand management' approach to reduce the need for calls (e.g., by shaping expectations, explore [EAST Framework for Behavioural Change](#))
- Tap into existing user groups to inform customer insight (e.g., tenant and lease holder groups)
- Expediate decision around existing CAPITA arrangements to ensure delivering value for money
- Create “champions” or “business change leads” within projects to ensure there is an awareness “on the ground” and their view is considered

By tackling this you will create the space to plan for the longer term changes you need to make. If you don't, there is a real risk to staff wellbeing, retention and delivery as well as organisational reputation



Next Steps

- Questions and comments
- Offer to talk through findings to other audiences if helpful
- Critical friend perspective on development of SCC's Action Plan in response to recommendations
- Peer to Peer conversations
- Insight gained through this activity to inform Corporate Peer Challenge

