SURREY
COUNTY COUNCIL

Making Surrey a better place

Extracting value from customer feedback – a Customer Services perspective

Report to Communities Select Committee - January 2013

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Report to Communities Select Committee 16 January 2013

1. PURPOSE

This report describes how customer feedback is captured; how it is shared with stakeholders; how it is used by Customer Services, and its potential for improving service delivery, informing policy and strategy and new ways of delivering services that align with customer expectations.

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2. WHO ARE OUR CUSTOMERS?

The council's customer base includes Surrey residents, service users and highway users -

- We serve a resident population of 1,132,400[1]
- 145,000[2] people routinely travel into Surrey to work
- Approximately 2,000,000 visitors stayed overnight in Surrey in 2009[3].

Invariably, customers have no choice of whom to contact as the council is the sole service provider. Nonetheless, consumerism and fast evolving communications technologies are heightening customer expectations of quality and design of services and speed of response.

Our customers tend to contact us –

- for information about or access to a council service
- when online information or self-serve transaction fails
- when something we are doing or are planning to do affects them
- when we fail to do something promised or expected.

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3. HOW WELL DO WE LISTEN TO WHAT THE PUBLIC ARE TELLING US?

3.1 Customer Services

Contact Centre, Web Operations, CSI Customer Relations[4] and Disabled Blue Badge teams make up Customer Services. As these teams are located in one space, the sharing of feedback to fix faulty processes and information is made easy. However, using feedback to change service delivery and inform policy is not simple. There can be many hurdles to success which only time and dedicated effort can overcome.

3.2 Contact

For the public and other agencies, the Contact Centre is the first point of telephone, email and SMS text contact, giving access to a wide range of transactions, information and advice. The graph below illustrates the relative demand for each council service –

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[1] Office of National Statistics, 2011 census
[2] Source: Head of Economy Team, Oct 2012
[3] Source: Culture and Tourism Legacy Team, Oct 2012. (Most recent figure available).
[4] CSI is Customer Service Improvement

Contact Centre relative demand

Category	Value
Registration	3.9
Signposting	3.8
Libraries	3.5
Highways	3.35
School admissions	3.3
Children's social care	2.3
Blue Badge	2.25
Adults social care	2.2
Bus passes	0.9
Districts/Boroughs	0.65
Street lighting	0.6
Waste	0.5
Roadworks	0.45
Passenger transport	0.4
Schools and Learning	0.4
Parking	0.25
Early Years and FIS	0.2
Environment	0.15
Olympics	0.15
Adult education	0.15
Rights of Way	0.08
"Tell us once"	0.05

All inbound and outbound contacts are logged and categorised as one of 650 different subject/reason types. 497,144 inbound contacts were logged in the period October 2011 – September 2012[5], of which -

14.7%	Business as usual	- contacts that add value for the customer and/or the council
44.0%	Channel shift	- contacts that could be self-serve/lower cost transactions
19.4%	Failure of information	- faulty or inadequate information creating an avoidable contact
8.8%	Process failure	- faulty or inadequate process creating an avoidable contact
13.1%	Switchboard	- internally transferred contacts to services and individuals

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[5] Source: Achiever database

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3.3 Data capture

Feedback is gathered from what customers tell us verbally and in writing. It's also found in the choices people make and the behaviours they display.   The table below describes how feedback is captured. Choices and behaviours are characterised as passive feedback; communicated feedback is active.

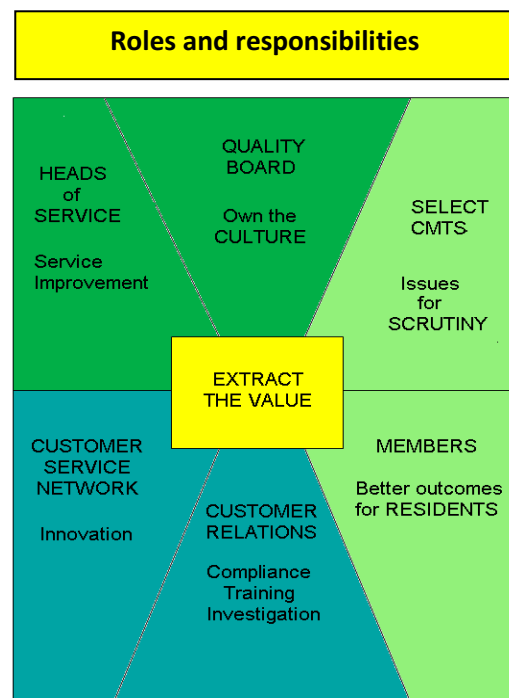| Passive	Active
Achiever – call logging software attributes a contact type to every call and econtact received in the Contact Centre	**Service tick** – a telephone survey offered at the end of calls to capture satisfaction ratings and recorded verbatim comments
Web analytics – records the search terms that the public type into Google and other search engines, leading them to SCC website	**Web "pop-up" survey** – offered to 1 in 20 visitors to the website, capturing satisfaction ratings and comments
Web trends – a website tracking system that shows user activity and content popularity	**Complaints** – interrogative database revealing trends and individual issues by type, service and electoral division

3.4 Data sharing

As customer feedback is a valuable commodity; it is routinely shared with stakeholders across the council.

3.5 Sharing with Members

Information for Members is published on the Members' Portal, in the Quarterly Digest of what customers are telling us, and in Complaints by Electoral Division. More detailed information is provided by Customer Relations on request.

3.6 Sharing with other Services

The Customer Service Network is made up of representatives from each Service Management Team across the council, whose purpose is to enable the use of, and learn from feedback, promote customer focus, and promote cross-service working by removing artificial internal boundaries. They have access to a datastore of all the feedback captured by Customer Services.

Roles and responsibilities

HEADS of SERVICE
Service Improvement

QUALITY BOARD
Own the CULTURE

SELECT CMTS
Issues for SCRUTINY

EXTRACT THE VALUE

CUSTOMER SERVICE NETWORK
Innovation

CUSTOMER RELATIONS
Compliance Training Investigation

MEMBERS
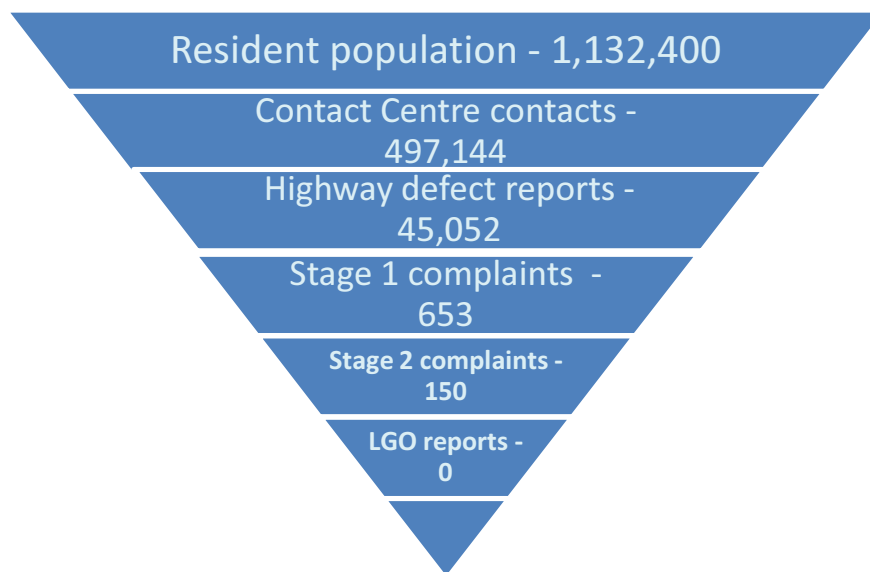Better outcomes for RESIDENTS

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4. HOW WELL DO WE USE WHAT THE PUBLIC ARE TELLING US?

4.1 Customer Relations

The Customer Relations team leads in promoting the customer focused culture of the council, providing advice and training on effective customer relationships. They are responsible for procedures for complaint handling, investigating complaints that reach stage 2, and the link with the Local Government Ombudsman. *N.B. There are several complaints and appeals processes[6] that are outside their remit and not considered in this report, most notably, statutory complaints about Adults Social Care and Children's Services.*

Complaints are useful for discovering what is not going well, and putting things right; particularly, non-compliance with the statutory framework, policy, guidance or standards. And where these are out of step with customer expectations, or simply out of date, complaints can prompt a review. A single complaint can be as useful as an observed trend. All complaints investigated at stage 2 of the corporate complaints procedure are followed up with a Corrective Action Plan signed off by the respective Head of Service, as invariably improvement opportunities are found, irrespective of the outcome of the complaint.

These data for October 2011 - September 2012, illustrate that relatively few complaints are logged when compared with our customer base and the number of customer contacts.

> Resident population - 1,132,400
> Contact Centre contacts - 497,144
> Highway defect reports - 45,052
> Stage 1 complaints - 653
> Stage 2 complaints - 150
> LGO reports - 0

- 1 in 4 complainants are not satisfied with the outcome at stage 1
- stage 2 investigations are highly effective in getting closure, and are at least equal to the standards applied by the Local Government Ombudsman.   No LGO reports against the council is a key performance objective of Customer Relations' complaints investigators. And,
- of the 653 stage 1 complaints, only 5 were mediated for the complainant by a Member
- 40% were logged by the Contact Centre
- 18% were logged by Customer Relations
- 15% were logged by Cultural Services
- 12% were logged by Highways

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[6] See Members' Portal – My Residents – Advice on complaints procedures

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4.2 Customer Focussed Culture v Customer Behaviour

These examples demonstrate that dealing with complaints can be challenging, and it can be difficult not to take them personally –

> "Which buffoon allowed this to happen and not be dealt with at an off-peak time with due notice. I want the head of the highways department to contact me rather than me have to fill out some pointless form. Your service is awful, you should be damn well ashamed."

> *"Basically, this is a complete joke. I honestly don't understand how this can happen, any independent business would not survive if they operated in this way, and for good reason because its complete rubbish."*

> "Unless I hear from you in 10 working days that these actions will be carried out promptly …. I will involve the local press in a campaign for which I have masses of fire-power …. my mission will be to make Surrey County Council viewed by its customers as worse than MPs are …. I trust I make myself clear."

Getting the response right first time and avoiding the tendency towards paternalism and defensiveness are essential. As the example below shows, even **polite and reasonable customer requests can be met with an unhelpful response -**

Example -

Apr 2011 – Resident (JP, MRICS, ex-London borough councillor) complains on behalf of several others, about wrong materials used in resurfacing an A-class road, causing excessive noise and vibration.

Jun 2011 – Response from SCC highway engineer – yes, the recently laid surface had failed, but it has been repaired.

Jun 2011 – Unhappy resident disagrees and writes to MP.

Nov 2011 – Stage 2 investigation by Customer Relations results in Highways deciding to start from scratch using appropriate materials.

Apr 2012 – New surface laid.

Was the customer's perception? -

❖ *They put it right first time = efficient, listening council,* **or**
❖ *I had to write to my MP to get anything done*

4.3 Other recent complaint outcomes in brief

➢ **Removal** of poorly designed traffic calming scheme
➢ **Better management** of houseboat tenancy arrangements by EPM
➢ Highways **new process** for notifying property owners about overhanging vegetation following angry complaints about officiousness
➢ Trading Standards improvements around **use of warrants** by Animal Welfare Inspectors
➢ **Strict enforcement** of Local Committee Annexe deadlines
➢ Legal and Highways **update policy** on highway encroachment

4.4 Service Tick

Some of the unprompted comments recorded by callers on Service Tick give valuable insight into how people feel and think. Often they articulate reasoned expectations, useful and local knowledge and common sense. Here are the transcripts of some recent examples with something in common -

"My query is the fact that they are planning to resurface our road, (beacham?) Lane, Lower Kingswood next week. And it was completely resurfaced about 3 years ago. There is nothing wrong with the surface and it just seems a complete waste of money. It possibly doesn't need doing or they've got the wrong road."

"Yes, I was just phoning Surrey council about the resurfacing being done in South Drive Banstead. I live in Fairlong Grove in Banstead, which is two turnings up and our road is 100 times worse than South Drive, yet theirs is being resurfaced ours is not. I'm deeply disappointed in knowing that and I would like to know why they got preference over us. Over 40 years it must be that our road hasn't been done. I mean it's diabolical, holes everywhere, potholes being filled in and opened up in 5 minutes. It's totally ridiculous to be left like this. We pay enough tax for this sort of thing to be done and we just get ignored over others. I hope soon that something will be done about it, thank you."

"My comment is this, I live in Scotland Lane, Peasemore and all the residents here are up in arms about the condition, the serious, poor condition of the section of Scotland Lane that runs between the Fiveways Crossroads where the junction meets Tennyson Lane and Haste Hill and that section of the Scotland Lane that runs down towards Lyes Hill, the condition of the road surface there is an absolute disgrace and what we all don't understand is why the Council can throw thousands of pounds at an improvement that we all maintain wasn't necessary, i.e. the Junction with Scotland Lane and the Midhurst Road, if they can throw thousands of pounds worth at an unnecessary improvement like that, why on earth can't the Council get on and proceed with renovation to that section of the Scotland Lane which is in dire need of renovation and currently has a pothole in it, two foot long and one foot deep. Thank you."

4.5 Customer Service Improvement

CSI routinely forage through customer feedback to identify avoidable contact, channel shift and process improvement opportunities. They evaluate and prioritise, and develop and manage projects to deliver the improvements.

Example 1	**High value, long job**

In May 2011, negative comments about SCC **school meal payment online** were posted on a blog by a dissatisfied parent. He was unable to pay for two children at different schools without entering all his personal details for each child and each payment. Picking up this comment led to a CSI project, which is nearing completion, to improve the customer experience and change our way of working. CSI developed the proposition that all primary schools should acquire online payment software from a short-list of preferred suppliers, so that parents can pay direct. The project will deliver significant savings on admin and banking time across 300 schools and reduce costs for Commercial Services.

Example 2	Low value, quick fix

Customers began to complain on the Web "pop-up" survey that the online application process for **Concessionary Bus Pass** was unsatisfactory. At the start of the process there was no mention of the need for a photo, and if the applicant did not have one stored, they would have to obtain one and then start the process all over again. CSI worked with the process owner to improve the customer experience.

4.6 Digital Delivery Team (formerly known as Web Operations)

The platform, structure and functionality, but not the content of the external website are managed by Web Ops. The website is the primary source of information for the public and the Contact Centre on council policy, procedures and guidance, and many transactional and downloadable forms for reporting, applying and paying for services.

Analysis of Web Trends data and the Website Pop-up survey are routinely used to improve the customer experience of using the website. The data gathered also identify the most popular topics customers are searching for. A summary of this information is reported in the Members' Quarterly Digest of what customers are telling us.

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5. CAN SERVICES DEMONSTRATE THAT THEY ROUTINELY CONSIDER CUSTOMER FEEDBACK IN DEVELOPING STRATEGIES?

In July 2012, for a report to Quality Board, the Customer Service Network were asked to provide evidence of recent customer engagement activity, and how it had led to service improvement or innovation. The returns showed some interesting activity and initiatives. A number of Services reported they had used a survey or a focus group or a consultation to inform their thinking.

However, only Cultural Services reported that they had evaluated or used the customer feedback available to them as described in this report. No services reported that they routinely considered this feedback in their strategic thinking or planning.

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6. CONCLUSIONS

- The culture of individual Services defines the way customer feedback is viewed.
- Customer feedback must be evaluated and widely shared with Members and officers if its potential is to be exploited fully.
- Where it is evaluated routinely, feedback leads to initiatives that make a difference, either to the customer experience or efficiency or both.
- Although the feedback described in this report is made available to all services, the recent research through the Customer Service Network showed little evidence of its use in development of policy, priorities or design of services. Consequently, insight and opportunities are being missed.
- There is a greater role for Members in mediating complaints for residents.

- Good practice in complaints handling is widely promoted by Customer Relations, yet in some areas there remains unwillingness to recognise complaints, or to respond to them positively.
- Letting residents and service users know when and how their feedback has helped to make a difference can have a positive effect on public opinion and the council's reputation. Failing to act or communicate is likely to have the opposite effect.