

EAST AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE – 20 SEPTEMBER 2005

IMPROVING CUSTOMER SERVICE

Report by the Chief Executive

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1** To advise the Committee of the recent publication and findings from an Audit Scotland report entitled 'Improving Customer Service Through Better Customer Contact' and to recommend measures to further strengthen East Ayrshire Council's approach to customer service.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1** On 19 May 2005, Audit Scotland published a report entitled 'Improving Customer Service Through Better Customer Contact'. Copies of this report and the associated key findings document were made available to Elected Members at the Members' information point.

- 2.2** The key recommendations contained in the study are as follows:-

- a targeted programme to manage customer service improvements is good practice and an important first step for councils;
- councils should improve how they research customers' opinions of services; and
- councils should improve performance measurement including specific targets for customer satisfaction and targets for improving the effectiveness of council services.

3. CONSOLIDATING EXISTING GOOD PRACTICE

- 3.1** East Ayrshire Council has many areas of good practice in terms of customer service. The Decentralisation Strategy has ensured the provision of high quality accessible services in local communities. Similarly, the Council's Co-location strategy has been recognised as a ground-breaking initiative and this has delivered easy access to integrated public services in local communities. The Council's web-site has been rated as the top transactional council website in Scotland by the Society of IT Managers.

- 3.2** The Policy and Resources Committee, on 23 October 1997, approved the Council's policy on dealing with comments, suggestions and complaints. The Council has a comprehensive set of corporate guidelines for dealing with customer comments, suggestions and complaints. These arrangements have been reviewed periodically.

The Council deals with complaints as follows:

- **Stage 1** - The complaint is resolved at the first point of contact.
- **Stage 2** - If a formal complaint is then registered with the relevant department, the department should respond within 7 working days.
- **Stage 3** - If the person remains dissatisfied, they can request a review of their case by the Executive Director of the department. A written response will be provided within 14 working days.
- **Stage 4** - If the complainant is unhappy with the response from the Executive Director, they may then ask the Chief Executive to review the complaint. The Chief Executive will respond within 21 working days.

Should the individual be dissatisfied with the Chief Executive's response, they have the right to take their complaint to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman. Timescales for responding to customers are set out in the Council's "It's Better to Listen" leaflet which is widely available in Council offices. Our target is to respond to customers within 7 working days of receipt of a letter or other communication.

- 3.3** The Corporate Governance Committee, at its meeting of 9 June 2005, considered the annual statistics for complaints and comments for 2004/05. This report reflected that a total of 116 complaints had reached the formal stage of the Council's procedure. The report also indicated that some 775 individuals had made a positive comment about Council services.
- 3.4** Departments also have their own arrangements for responding to customers in particular circumstances. In general these arrangements operate well and customers' complaints and comments are treated seriously and appropriately.
- 3.5** The Council, with its Community Planning Partners, is currently carrying out research amongst East Ayrshire residents and this survey will provide an increased understanding of residents' views on service provision and satisfaction. The survey will assist the Council to identify the priority service areas for local people. The feedback from the survey will form the baseline data for reviewing customer service. It is also envisaged that the establishment of a Residents' Panel will assist greatly in this respect. It should also be noted that individual Departments also carry out surveys of service users to obtain feedback on Council services and a great deal of data is available through this mechanism.
- 3.6** The Council's Training and Development Section offer training in customer care for all Council employees, again an area currently under review, and a number of frontline staff from Libraries and Local Offices are currently working towards recognised vocational qualifications in customer care.

4. CUSTOMER SERVICE ISSUES FOR EAST AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

4.1 Strategy

The Council's arrangements for customer service have, to date, worked well for service users. It is now appropriate to review these arrangements in the light of some of the examples of best practice highlighted by Audit Scotland in their report. Our existing good practice has been drawn together and set out in a Customer Service Commitment for East Ayrshire which is Appendix 1 of this report. This Commitment will ensure consistency of approach across the Council.

Action 1: Review our customer service strategy, reflecting on Audit Scotland's guidance.

4.2 Evidence of customer satisfaction

As mentioned in 3.5 above, the Community Planning Partners are currently undertaking a Residents' Survey. Local Offices have a programme of customer surveys in place and other Council services also hold data on customer satisfaction. This information will be drawn together at a corporate level.

Action 2: Review the available data on customer satisfaction.

4.3 Improving service quality through better customer contact

The Residents' Survey will provide information on how and why people contact the Council. Again, this information will be valuable in improving customer service.

Action 3: Review and refine the available data on number and type of customer contacts.

Audit Scotland's report highlights that the provision of a dedicated first point of contact should help improve customer service. East Ayrshire Council has, through a recent Member Officer Working Group reviewed and re-affirmed its commitment to retaining a presence in local communities, although it is appreciated that Local Offices must adapt to remain viable and deliver a wide range of high quality services.

The Customer Contact Gateway (CCG), recently launched by Tom McCabe MSP, Minister for Finance and Public Service Reform, has been implemented in Local Offices and this has the potential to significantly improve the service to the customer who contacts a local office, either in person or by telephone. The potential of this system needs to be communicated to key Officers from across the Council with a view to ensuring that as many services as possible can be accessed via the CCG. Work is progressing on the Distributed Contact Centre (DCC) model within the network of Local Offices and this will greatly improve the service to those who telephone Local Offices.

Action 4: Consider a series of presentations, targeted at line managers from across the Council, to present the CCG as it currently stands and the potential for further service developments following the on-going review.

4.4 Leadership and organisation of customer services

In the light of the importance of these matters, the Council's customer service arrangements have been considered by the Corporate Management Team. Here there is a high level of commitment to improving the services delivered to the people of East Ayrshire and customer service will be one of the key areas to be covered at the next Extended Corporate Management Team. An Officer has been designated to co-ordinate the review of customer service arrangements.

Audit Scotland recommends that councils should have measurable targets for customer service. The outcomes from the Residents' Survey will give an indication of customers' priorities and this data will be useful in setting targets.

Action 5: Consider setting measurable targets for customer service.

4.5 Use of customer feedback

Audit Scotland note in their report that councils should make better use of feedback from customers. They point out that many councils, as we do in East Ayrshire, encourage staff to resolve complaints at the first point of contact and that these matters are generally not recorded. Our existing procedures will be reviewed and refined as part of the review of customer service arrangements.

Action 6: Consider a further review of corporate complaints procedures.

4.6 Best Practice

Audit Scotland's report is based on data obtained from 32 Scottish councils.

Action 7: Consider any changes needed in East Ayrshire Council's systems and procedures based on the available information on best practice.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 East Ayrshire Council has an excellent track record of providing a high standard of service to the people we serve. The Customer Contact Gateway and the Distributed Contact Centre model are innovative approaches which will further enhance the services which the Council provides.

- 5.2** The proposed actions in section 4 form the Council's ongoing management arrangements for refining our approach to Improving Customer Service. It should be noted that, whilst some of the actions outlined can be achieved in the short term (3 to 6 months), others will only come to fruition in the medium (6 to 12 months) or long term (12 to 18 months).
- 5.3** Progress on these matters will be reported through our existing reporting mechanisms.

6. FINANCIAL / LEGAL / POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1** None arising from this report.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 7.1** It is recommended that the Committee:-
- (i) approve the actions proposed in the report; and
 - (ii) otherwise note the content of this report.

Fiona Lees
Chief Executive
13 September 2005

LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS

1. Audit Scotland report "Improving Customer Service Through Better Customer Contact' available at www.audit-scotland.gov.uk
2. P&R Committee, 31 May 2005, Agenda item 18, Electronic Government
3. Corporate Governance Committee, 9 June 2005, Agenda item 6, Annual Report 2004-05: On Complaints and Comments.

Members wishing further information should contact Fiona Lees, Chief Executive, Tel. (01563) 576019 or Elizabeth Morton, Depute Chief Executive/Director of Corporate Support, Tel. (01563) 576103.

IMPLEMENTATION OFFICER: Carol Foote, Principal Officer, Corporate Support

EAST AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

CUSTOMER SERVICE COMMITMENT

We aim to provide high quality services for all of the people we serve. We provide a wide range of services for you and aim to deliver and develop services to meet your needs.

Our Commitment sets out the standards of customer service you can expect from East Ayrshire Council.

We will:

- Treat you fairly and with respect
- Offer a friendly and polite service and be sensitive to your needs
- Deal with your letters, phone calls and visits to our offices promptly
- Do our best to help you and let you know how quickly we can take action
- Provide easy to understand information about the services we provide
- Deal with your feedback positively and quickly
- Keep your details confidential as far as possible
- Expect you to treat our staff with respect.

In our offices

We will:

- Have user-friendly public offices, with clean and tidy reception areas
- Provide up-to-date leaflets giving you information that is clear, easy to understand and available in other formats and languages if required
- Deal with all of your enquiries about any Council service, contacting the appropriate Council service as required
- Have clear signs and display our opening hours in all our offices
- Clearly display how you can make a complaint
- Have induction loops in all our public offices
- Provide a private interview room if you need one.

On the phone

We will:

- Answer the phone within five rings whenever possible
- Give you our name when we answer your call to let you know who you are speaking to
- Deal with your enquiry or complaint on the spot if we can
- Tell you what we can do and when, or tell you why we cannot help (if we can't help you immediately, we will try to tell you who can)
- If you call and the person you need to speak to is not in the office and you leave a message on their voicemail or with another member of staff, we will return your call within one working day.

Letters and e-mails

We will:

- Answer your letters and e-mails within 7 working days of receiving them, or keep you updated if an answer will take longer
- Make our letters clear and easy to understand
- Arrange for letters to be translated, interpreted over the phone, or made available in large print or Braille if you ask us.

Face to face

We will:

- See you within ten minutes if you have an appointment
- Tell you how long you may have to wait and who will see you if you don't have an appointment
- Offer to make you an appointment if you can't wait
- Phone the National Interpreting Service immediately if you need their services
- Wear identification badges
- Offer you somewhere private to talk to us if appropriate
- Arrange an interview with someone of the same sex if you request this
- Enable you to bring along a friend, relative or support worker to your appointment
- Help you to fill in Council forms if you need help
- Try to make other arrangements if you cannot visit our offices
- Show you identification if we need to visit you in your own home.

Complaints

We will:

- Make it easy for you to complain by making our comments, suggestions and complaints leaflet, called "Its Better to Listen", available at every public access point in public buildings and on the Council website
- Try to sort out your complaint on the spot if we can
- Respond to your complaint within 7 working days in the first instance or keep you updated with the reason for the delay (in Social Work, different legal standards apply)
- Tell you what you can do next if you are still not happy.