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**REPORT TO: AUDIT AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE ON 19 APRIL 2019**

**SUBJECT: CUSTOMER FOCUS UPDATE**

**BY: CORPORATE DIRECTOR (CORPORATE SERVICES)**

**1. REASON FOR REPORT**

- 1.1 To inform the Committee of progress in implementation of the Council's Customer Focus Strategy and Charter.
- 1.2 This report is submitted to Committee in terms of Section III (I) (10) of the Council's Scheme of Administration relating to scrutinising the effectiveness of the Council's policies.

**2. RECOMMENDATION**

- 2.1 **That the committee consider and note the progress in implementation of the Council's Customer Focus Strategy and Charter.**

**3. BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 The Council's Customer Focus [Strategy](#) and Customer [Charter](#) were approved by Council on 29 April 2015 in response to Audit Scotland recommendations that the Council needed to take a more strategic approach to customer focus and use customer feedback to improve services (paragraph 8 of the [minute](#) refers).
- 3.2 The Customer Charter sets out the minimum standards which all Council services promise to meet. It complements the standards which some specific services are required to meet such as housing or regulatory services.
- 3.3 The Customer Focus Strategy details a number of actions which the Council has committed to taking to improve its responsiveness to customers. These actions, with progress against them, are shown in paragraph 4.1 below.
- 3.4 The Customer Focus Group oversees progress and reports to the Corporate Management Team. This group comprises officers from different sections within the Council.

## **4. SUMMARY OF PROGRESS**

### **4.1 Strategy**

Many of the actions in the Strategy have now been embedded in the Council. These include:

- E-learning/paper modules for staff
- Customer care [web page](#)
- Digital programme better targeting our customers' needs.
- Performance information within committee reporting framework.
- Formation of Customer focus group to coordinate activity.

A review of the Strategy is now overdue. This is likely to involve consolidation of existing practice and further co-ordination of customer service improvements across the Council.

### **4.2 Charter**

The Charter is due for review. iESE (in their recent review of customer services) praised the Charter for stating what behaviours are expected from customers as well as pledging the minimum standards customers can expect from the Council. In view of increasing pressure on Council budgets there may need to be a re-negotiation with customers about these minimum standards.

- One of the Council's improvement and modernisation projects seeks to transform face to face contact with the public, by placing responsibility on customers to self-serve where possible.
- With a strategic priority to protecting the most vulnerable service users the Council may need to have different service standards for different user groups.
- Decreasing standards may lead to an increase in complaints. Good communication with customers will be vital to manage their expectations.

### **4.3 Links to complaints**

An important part of customer focus is to learn from complaints and use this knowledge to improve practice. The annual complaints report went to the Council's Policy and Resources Committee on 4 June 2019, however this report is more focused on the numbers/timescales of complaints, rather than what has been learned from mistakes. Details of the substance of complaints are published on the Council's Service Performance [webpage](#) but there is no clear "lessons learned" trail. Further development work would be beneficial in this area.

### **4.4 Customer focus group**

Meetings of the Group have been less frequent than planned with officers attention having been largely focused on budget issues for the past 12 months. Membership of the Customer Focus group was initially targeted at Heads of Service. In practice more junior officers have attended, and not all services have sent a representative. It would help for membership of the group to be re-established with the focus given in paragraph 4.7 below.

### **4.5 Customer service excellence model**

Between 2017 and 2018 all services were asked to self-assess themselves using questions in a nationally recognised Customer Services Excellence

Model and produce an action plan detailing what improvements they have identified. In summary:

- The majority of services completed the assessment although some larger services did not participate.
- No central support was available and services were left largely to their own devices in completing the survey. This led to variable quality and lack of real challenge.
- The responses showed reasonable self-awareness by those completing the assessment but only a few services identified improvements.
- The exercise would have been more credible if an independent team evaluated each service and scrutinised their responses.

All said, there are examples of good practice to be found. Some services (for example Housing) have external auditors who review how the service deals with customer feedback and engagement.

For future years Council services are committed to using the Public Sector Improvement Framework (PSIF), a self-evaluation questionnaire to help with continuous improvement and the “How good is our...” tool in education . These tools include questions on customer focus which will help maintain the Council's focus on customer responsiveness.

#### 4.6 **Areas of good customer focus practice**

There are examples of good practice in public consultation and engagement:

- Development Services consultation on the draft Development Plan
- Tenant consultation on housing strategies, policies and plans:
- Consultation with local communities (locality planning) as part of the community planning framework.
- Budget consultation and use of facebook to engage with customers over controversial issues.
- Customer engagement in the Council's digital services programme.

But it is hard to attribute these to a concerted corporate drive or focus. The Council needs to find a way to highlight such areas of good practice across the Council.

#### 4.7 **Next steps**

Suggested next steps are to re-establish and convene further meetings of the Customer Focus Group to:

- Agree the direction and strategy for the next three years.
- Review the Customer Charter to be realistic about future service standards with an increased responsibility for customers to self-help.
- Expand on current complaints reporting with evidence of “lessons learned” resulting in a change in practice.
- Find ways to identify and share good practice.

## **5. SUMMARY OF IMPLICATIONS**

**(a) Corporate Plan and 10 Year Plan (Local Outcomes Improvement Plan (LOIP))**

Customer Focus helps support both national and local outcomes:

*Our public services are high quality, continually improving, efficient and responsive to local people's needs*

**(b) Policy and Legal**

Customer Focus has been identified by Audit Scotland as an area where the Council could improve.

**(c) Financial implications**

None arising directly from this report.

**(d) Risk Implications**

Failure to achieve Customer Focus and the outcomes of the Strategy/Charter would present risk in terms of reputational damage, loss of public confidence in our ability to deliver quality services and risk of further adverse audit comment.

**(e) Staffing Implications**

None arising directly from this report.

**(f) Property Implications**

None arising directly from this report.

**(g) Equalities/Socio Economic Impact**

An Equality Impact Assessment is not needed because there are no firm proposals within this report.

**(h) Consultations**

Members of the Customer Focus Group have been consulted on a draft of this report, any comments received have been considered in writing the report.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

**6.1 The council has made good progress on the objectives of the Customer Focus Strategy and Charter.**

**6.2 The Strategy and Charter now need reviewed to ensure the Council is clear about customer expectations whilst remaining responsive to customer needs.**

Author of Report: Alasdair McEachan, Head of Legal and Democratic Services

Background Papers: None

Ref: