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Customer First Research – Feedback from Reception Areas, the Community Access Point and Viewpoint Panel Members

Customers exiting the Municipal Buildings reception / Cash Office in Billingham were shown a poster containing the Customer First Service Standards and asked for their opinions on the standards and if, in their experience, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council consistently met these standards when they had made contact. Any comments recorded were checked with the respondent before they exited. A similar exercise was also undertaken at the Community Access Point in Tesco in Ingleby Barwick.

Comments cards were also left in Municipal Buildings and Kingsway House reception areas.

In addition to this, copies of the service standards were sent out to 100 Viewpoint Panel Members to gain additional views on SBC's customer service standards.

Responses:

1. Very Bad.
2. Acceptable standards. Contact had been made with SBC regarding their bin and had no problem with customer service.
3. SBC had always provided a good service. There is easy access to the Council through all the channels listed and the standards were always met.
4. SBC does not meet the standards every time, but generally provides a professional service. Respondent in Municipal Buildings to deal with a problem that could not be resolved by phone. Could not be told who could provide assistance with a particular matter.
5. Acceptable standards. Most of these are met consistently although one occasion when these have not been met.
6. Not all of the methods of communication had been used, but customer service was good when visiting reception areas, where there is efficient service.
7. An example of a lack of courtesy was raised where an officer was unhelpful; good customer service was seen as dependent on the individual member of staff who was dealing with the customer. Reception staff were seen as very good and willing to go out of their way to help customers in this respondent's opinion.
8. Not always experienced all of the standards when contacting the Council.
9. Although not all of the methods of communication had been used, the standards were seen as acceptable, with acknowledgement of letters and emails prior to a full response as particularly important in providing good customer service.
10. SBC are always prompt, and no problems had been experienced in eight years of dealing with the Council. It was felt that the standards could not be improved on currently.
11. SBC customer service was seen as much improved. Two departments of SBC were primarily dealt with (Planning and Land Charges) and no problems had been experienced with writing, phoning and emailing.
12. No complaints concerning the standards, commenting specifically that SBC officers generally pick up the phone within five rings.
13. The only standard that was not currently met was the email response, this was often either slower than 24 hours or no response was received at all. The respondent commented that their view of the customer service provided at the Council and their image of SBC overall was reflected in how other areas were dealt with, with street cleaning and vandalism mentioned specifically.

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14. The standards were seen as good, with telephones answered within five rings but sometimes then went into a queue.
15. The respondent stated that they were passed about a lot when phoning SBC and often put on hold, which meant that their phone bills were high. Customer service was generally better when visiting SBC offices to resolve problems / answer queries.
16. Respondent stated that voicemail and email response times are too long, responses should be the same working day.
17. The service standards were all fine.
18. The service standards were all fine.
19. Respondent stated that 10 working days was too long for responding to a letter, and felt that letters should be replied to by return post.
20. Respondent stated that they were on hold on the telephone so long that it cost £9.60 in phone credit and they still did not get through to discuss their concern.
21. Respondent stated that the customer services were marvellous.
22. Respondent stated that they were very impressed with the customer service they received. The staff were pleasant and effective, good communication skills and a competent, professional approach.
23. Respondent had received incorrect correspondence and had been made promises by the Council which had not been kept.
24. Respondent had not experienced any long delays when visiting Council reception areas. Contact beyond visiting the Council offices once a month to pay Council Tax could not be recalled.
25. Respondent had always experienced good customer service with SBC.
26. Respondent mentioned writing to the Council specifically and stated that they had always experienced good customer service.
27. Positive experiences.
28. Respondent stated that queues could become large in Billingham Cash Office with subsequent long waiting times.
29. No problems experienced. Always good customer service although they rarely contacted the Council.
30. Respondent stated that they had experienced large queues when accessing Council reception areas, but that they still found this preferable to phoning or writing to the Council.
31. Respondent stated that the service standards were fine. The only contact the respondent made with the Council was in order to pay their Council Tax.
32. Respondent stated that being seen within 10 minutes of arrival at Council reception areas was often not the case.
33. Standards were not considered to be met in all cases all of the time.
34. Respondent had left a voicemail for an SBC officer and received a very prompt return call. Reception waiting times were felt to be particularly good, especially in Billingham Cash Office.
35. The standard of customer service was felt to be good whenever the respondent had been in contact.
36. Respondent had experienced long waiting times when phoning the Council (waited for longer than 5 rings). Email response times were felt to be much better and experience of reception areas was always good.
37. As a set of objectives this is fine. Real problem is how to achieve them and why are things not like this in practice now? No mention of how and when these objectives will be reached.
38. Re: *If you write, we will send a full response in 10 working days*
I retired in June 2008 and in May 2008 wrote to the benefit office in Stockton asking for information regarding changes in my rent and council tax payments so that I could get on with my retirement happy in the knowledge that my rent account is ok. All I received was a letter from the Pension Service "About Your Pension Credit". The communication has not answered my simple question of

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what changes, if any, there are to my payments for rent and Council Tax. This enquiry has taken a lot more than 10 working days and I still have not had a satisfactory explanation.

Re: *If you make a complaint, we will investigate your complaint and respond in 10 working days*

I live on the Roseworth Estate where the grass was usually cut by the Council. I'm aware now that this service has ceased, but I was only informed about this by a Council representative telling me that the grass area around my address needed cutting. Stupidly I agreed to make weekly payments for the gardening service, but as a state pensioner I find that the weekly payments are far too expensive. I wrote a letter to Roseworth Estate Housing Centre asking them to stop payments to the gardening project and to also send me a letter of confirmation when it had been done. I later visited Roseworth's housing centre and asked the receptionist to check my housing account and it was found my written request had been ignored. Moreover, I was still paying for the garden service. The receptionist entered my information onto the computer stating "you will have to pay a month's money for the garden service". The longer it takes to get the garden payments stopped the more the Council is being dishonest in adding the gardening costs onto my rent account. My complaint is that Tristar is not providing a proper and honest service to its residents.

39. As yet I have had no complaints; your service is first class.
40. I think these are highly appropriate service standards.
41. My experience of customer service at SBC has always been positive; both recently and in the past. I used to be a Citizen's Advice Bureau volunteer and always found the Council tax and housing sections friendly, efficient and fair. Now my only contact involves queries or reporting incidents of importance to myself. Again, my contacts with customer services have been positive as before. They meet the standards, passing me on to relevant staff in an efficient, friendly way.
42. Looks fine.
43. The customer service standards seem reasonable, acceptable and achievable. I have not needed to contact the Council so cannot comment on personal experience.
44. I find office staff / reception staff very helpful / friendly. Also at organised meetings (Viewpoint). However some officers I find very unhelpful, they may not be able to do as asked, but do not offer any alternative.
45. I have never used the service so am unable to comment.
46. The offices are ok but the bin men are rubbish and lazy.
47. Providing these standards are adhered to, they seem very acceptable. I believe you should add 'wheelchair accessible' to reception areas. The only personal experience of services recently was a visit to the depot in Billingham for some extra green bags, they seemed very pleasant. I am still waiting for the gentlemen to get back in touch with me re: dropped curbs. I've rung a couple of times to find out bank holiday collection days, the girl who has answered has always been very pleasant and helpful.
48. I would be happy to be treated to this standard.
49. Delay in reply from planning department. Delay in taxation division updating records.
50. I have only had to contact Council officers on two occasions and both times was dealt with promptly and effectively and could find no fault with the personnel involved.
51. Sounds perfect.
52. I have never had a reason to complain or need the customer service, but these sound like important issues. I cannot think of any other items which are important.
53. I have always found SBC very professional at all times. I have at one time had to deal with the Billingham department I did not expect to get a very good level

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- of service but I was very surprised, the service was brilliant. Sometimes the phone answering time is not met.
54. I have not visited a reception area for quite a while when the wait was long. The new standards are an obvious improvement;
We have had experience of the work of the gardening department, doing the local hedges and grass verges. The men were polite and very hard working. Also when I rang the department they were helpful;
On the new customer service standards I wonder if it would be possible for an acknowledgement of a written query to be made on receipt, prior to the 10 working day full response;
I think the many varieties of information provision are excellent.
55. On the occasions I have had dealings with the Council I have found the staff to be helpful, courteous and professional both on the telephone and person-to-person at the Council offices.
56. All of the above statements are very true. The only time I had a complaint it was dealt with straight away and the employee was made aware and had extra training to help her in the future.
57. I have only needed help from Gloucester House recently but I found them very helpful, kind and respectful. Sorry that is all I can say.
58. I have been highly satisfied with phone calls, the help given no line and the promises kept to ring back.
59. It has been my experience that you fulfil your customer service standards of the standards I have experience of [respondent had no experience of voicemail, email, requiring large print / Braille, translation or interpretation].
60. On limited contact with the above I have found no cause to not agree, above standards are being met.
61. Standards seem acceptable and fair. Have not used any services recently so I cannot comment on any experiences.
62. Email response (10 days): too long should be within 3 days; written response (10 days): too long should be within 5 days; investigation of a complaint and response (10 days): too long should be within 5 days.
63. My experience leads me to agree with all of the service standards.
64. Delays occurred within Council Tax department.
65. I have nearly always received good customer service help and advice. The time I didn't was when I asked for my Christmas tree to be picked up and the collection people didn't call when I telephoned. The female on the telephone was quite stroppy and unhelpful and I phoned back the next day and spoke to someone who explained the problem that had happened with collections and got my tree picked up after the weekend.
66. [Of the customer service standards the respondent had experience of] seems ok to me but I have only had dealings with libraries (regularly), bus passes (twice), looking at a planning application (once), notifying you of a damaged street drain (once). I did not have a problem in connection with the bus pass – the bus companies said they couldn't supply a general timetable and seemed to be saying that this was because the Council wouldn't fund their production. I used to be able to pick one up in a branch library, but not recently.
67. I think you cover everything very well, but would like to stress 'first contact' very important to put people at ease. A hello or a good morning breaks the ice and not over the top 'have a nice day', just a little too American on leaving. I also feel privacy and confidentiality are most important, not carried out in front of others.
68. (1) Too many 'charm school' failures answering telephone calls from the public with a non-plus or too direct and forceful manner; (2) Often there is an abrasive tone to some letters usually signed by someone who is not directly accessible; (3) Most people believe that they are not getting value for money (rates) and tend to be abusive to Council staff. Staff should be trained to deal with the public in a pleasant way (part-timers and temp. staff included); (4) Recent bad

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publicity on TV and radio and in the press would suggest that the expected standards are not by a long way in some departments. The planning department is certainly not meeting the standards expected by the public; (5) Five days is long enough for a reply to a letter and e-mail, and 10 minutes at reception is usually much quicker than this; (6) The response time of plants and gardens department has been good.

69. The only time I had need was by phone; it was prompt and answered the query. It was not what I wanted, but I was told it was for my benefit. When will all organisations get this into their heads, I know what is best for me. Accept it and customer service will be just that and not a diatribe of Council policy and procedures.
70. The standards seem fair and comprehensive and I would say from experience I have found them to be on the whole accurate. The only other comment I have is that rules and regulations that have been set by Council departments seem to be able to be broken and waived in some cases to the detriment of other residents, maybe due to the work that would be involved in enforcing them. Which I don't find acceptable as rules are there for a purpose and people will lose confidence in the Council if they are not upheld and enforced.
71. I have never needed to make use of your customer services yet, but the standards sound quite reasonable if they are lived up to.