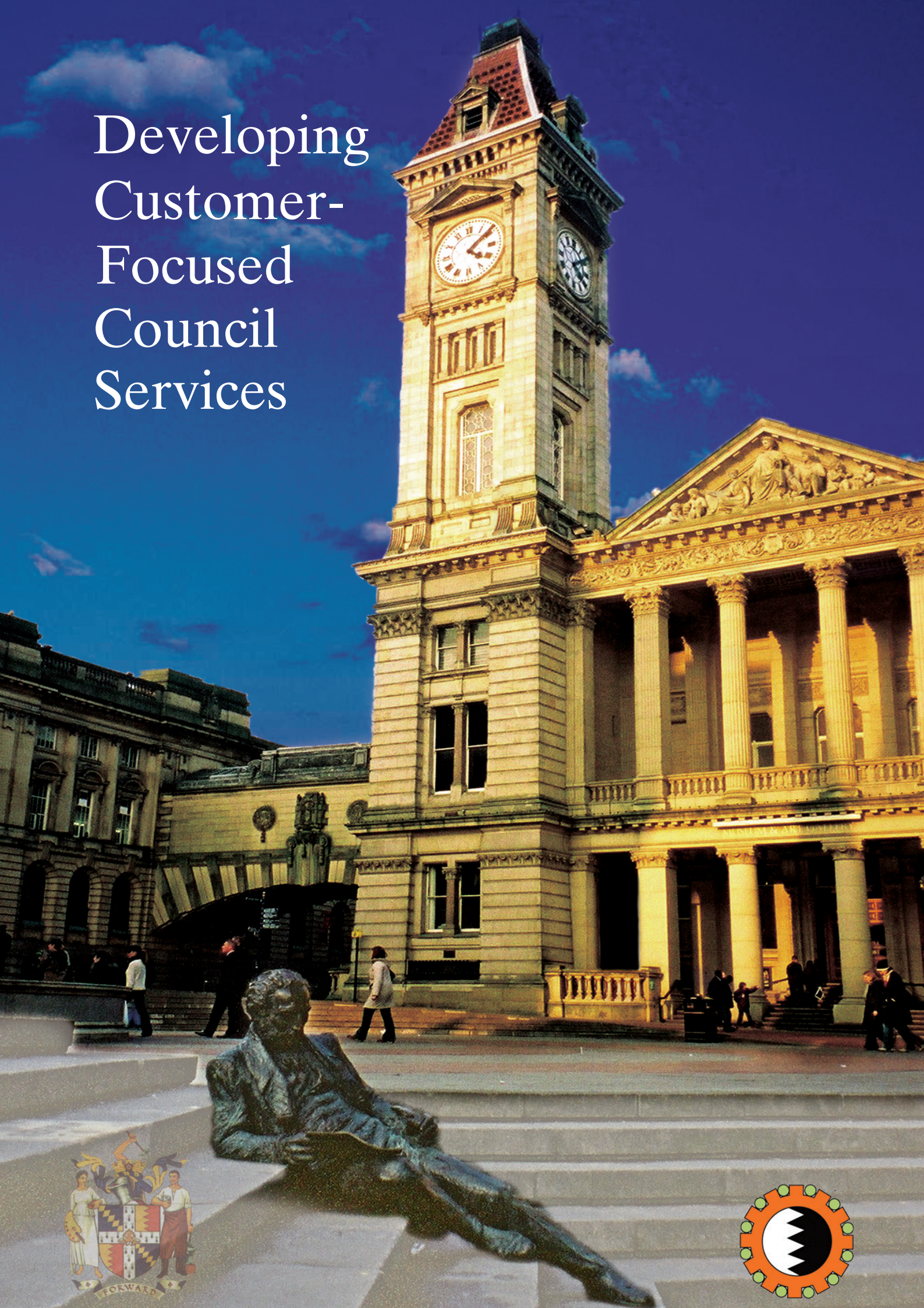


Developing Customer- Focused Council Services





Developing Customer-Focused Services

06 April 2004

Report of the Co-ordinating Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Developing Customer-Focused Council Services



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Preface

By Councillor Len Gregory

Chairman, Co-ordinating Overview and Scrutiny Committee



In embarking on this review, my fellow members and I were under no illusions as to the scale of the task before us. Our starting point was simple. We set out to discover the extent to which Birmingham City Council gets it right, first time, on time, every time. The review ambitiously examined the breadth of Council provision, looking at overall standards, corporate focus and service consistency. At the onset, the only knowledge we had were the experiences encountered by our constituents and ourselves.

The provision of good customer-focused services to all citizens is the key ingredient of a successful local authority. A good customer-focused service includes mechanisms for listening and responding appropriately to customers, focuses upon meeting customer expectations and aspirations and delivers an efficient, relevant, timely and good quality service.

It is not the case that there are no good customer-focused services in Birmingham. On the contrary, this review found some excellent examples of how a customer-focused authority should perform. However it also found extensive evidence of variable levels of customer focus, inconsistency of service and a fragmented and disjointed approach to service provision.

The catalyst for change will be the acceptance by all within the Authority that the citizens of Birmingham, our customers and indeed our "employers", deserve and demand first class value-for-money services and nothing less will be acceptable. The focus of the Council's efforts must be to bring that standard of service to reality.

This review provides a necessary framework for the future development of customer-focused council services - one which supports actions already in place but which also focuses attention on key actions for ensuring that the corporate aim of the Council is to deliver first time, on time, every time.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "L. R. Gregory".



Developing Customer-Focused Services

1: Summary

- 1.1.1 Developing services that are focused upon the expectations and aspirations of customers is fundamental to the success of any service organisation. However, it acquires special significance in a local authority context: Councils have been challenged by the Government to dispel public perceptions of inefficiency and deliver the quality services that people demand.
- 1.1.2 The principles involved in ensuring customer focus and delivering good quality customer service are not esoteric and need not be complicated. They derive from listening effectively and openly to customers and then applying common sense solutions to what customers say.
- 1.1.3 In this respect, this review has only quantified and provided a clearer definition of the problem that was expected to be found: that the Council has variable levels of customer focus, provides inconsistent service and has a fragmented and disjointed approach to service provision.
- 1.1.4 The key at this point is to take action and this is what the Council has failed to do in the past when such problems have been highlighted. Localisation and devolution must be a catalyst for change in how services relate to their customers. It is about bringing decision-making and service management closer to the customer, varying service provision according to customer expectations on a constituency basis.
- 1.1.5 This review has looked at the frameworks that are in place to deliver this from April 2004, in many cases as they have been developing. There are a number of important corporate steps that the Council must take to ensure that localised services are acutely aligned with customer views and aspirations.
- 1.1.6 These corporate steps include
- Having an overall, co-ordinating, focus upon delivering what the customer wants;
 - A framework of customer service standards across the entire Council to provide structure, comparability and assessment of progress across all services;
 - Clearer processes around responding to correspondence and complaints and the necessary systems that must be in place corporately in these areas.



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- 1.1.7 Whilst not a primary focus of the review, it has been inevitable that two of the over-arching assets of the Council have entered the equation: the human resource and information and communications technology (ICT). Achieving a real change in the quality and customer focus of services will indubitably require a significant contribution in both fields.
- 1.1.8 It is always important to maximise the opportunities afforded by technology to simplify processes and achieve additional efficiency. However, this process is principally driven by the attitude of people being willing to apply the technology to solving problems of customer service and efficiency. In this respect, building a sound foundation of customer awareness and consideration among all Council staff is imperative.
- 1.1.9 Localisation represents an opportunity for the Council to genuinely drive forward the way in which services are delivered. In doing so, the Council must strive for greater consistency of service provision and the highest possible standards in customer care and focus.



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2: Summary of Recommendations

	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R1	<p>Overall customer focus and customer service within the Council should be clearly defined as the responsibility of the Performance Improvement Directorate. The Directorate should</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be the 'customer champion' in arbitrating on issues of non-integration of services;• Have the ability to directly challenge the actions of other directorates in how they provide services and to ensure that a performance compliance plan is agreed with the relevant director for their customer services;• Be responsible for proposing corporate customer standards and ensuring compliance with them.	Chief Executive	30 April 2004
R2	<p>Put in place a corporate framework of customer service standards across the Council.</p> <p>The framework of standards must define the required levels of courtesy, behaviour, information and provision of facilities for</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• All dealings with customers (face-to-face, by correspondence and by telephone);• List/specification of services provided;• Specification of facilities provided at service access points and locations;• Mechanisms by which customer views must be gathered; and• Presentation of staff, buildings and corporate materials.	Deputy Leader	30 June 2004



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	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R3	Provide evidence to demonstrate corporate compliance with this corporate framework by 31 December 2004.	Deputy Leader	31 December 2004
R4	<p>Processes for handling correspondence should be reviewed and determined corporately. There must be full compliance with a clear set of criteria and definitions, including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That the person initially receiving the correspondence ensures it gets to the appropriate person who is then responsible for replying; • Providing a response to all written communication (including letters, e-mails and text messages) in compliance with the agreed City Council Performance Plan; • If a substantive response cannot be provided within ten working days, an interim reply will be sent, which will include at least: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Details of who is dealing with the matter; ○ The timescale for addressing the issue; ○ And is consistent with corporate customer service standards. • Provision for escalating the matter to the Director of Performance Improvement if a response is not given within 10 working days; • Requiring external providers of Council services to adopt the same or higher standards in response to correspondence on those services. 	Deputy Leader	30 June 2004
R5	<p>Local Indicators of performance relating to correspondence must be revised to account for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measuring whether correspondence is responded to according to the standards in R4; • Measuring success at resolving complaints with the first response; • Penalising performance exponentially once correspondence goes beyond the 10 working day target; • Continuing to differentiate between correspondence from members of the public and Councillors / Members of Parliament; • Excluding measurement of vexatious correspondence where this is being dealt with by Legal Services. 	Deputy Leader	30 August 2004



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	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R6	<p>There must be a corporate best practice guide for handling correspondence and customer complaints. This guide should be</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Readily available to all staff dealing with correspondence and complaints; • Common across all areas of the Council; • Integrated with the processes of training staff in dealing with customer enquiries and complaints outlined in recommendation R11 and R12. 	Deputy Leader	30 September 2004
R7	<p>A protocol must be agreed by City Council following discussions with elected members, balancing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The need for members to receive a response to enquiries as citizens' advocates with • The need for directorates to be able to focus upon service delivery. <p>This protocol must be implemented consistently by all Members and Directorates.</p>	Deputy Leader	30 September 2004
R8	<p>Establish a customer access strategy that sets a corporate standard for customer contact and relationship management which includes a plan for building access channels around customer needs and a single customer knowledge infrastructure.</p>	Deputy Leader	30 October 2004
R9	<p>Within this corporate framework there needs to be a framework for development of local services which should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be flexible to allow constituencies to determine the types of access that they want, consistent with corporate standards; • Define the levels of service available clearly and in terms of the standards in recommendation R2; • Provide for the co-location with other public sector and partner organisations. 	Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety	30 October 2004
R10	<p>The introduction of a universal and effective system of individual performance management and appraisal, linking performance to career progression and development.</p>	Cabinet Member for Equalities and Human Resources	30 September 2004



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	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R11	<p>Induction and basic training for all City Council employees must include core elements relating to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer care and standards required to be observed; • The diversity of the Council's customers, including awareness of gender, disability and cultural issues. 	Cabinet Member for Equalities and Human Resources	30 September 2004
R12	<p>All roles that require more intensive training in customer care (i.e. beyond the basic level provided by recommendation R11) must be identified within the profile of training for the role. This training must be</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structured to support the implementation of the standards outlined in recommendation R2; • Specifically included as an element within all Service Plans. 	Cabinet Member for Equalities and Human Resources	30 September 2004
R13	<p>The performance contracts of all senior officers must now include performance against a defined battery of corporate customer service performance indicators, including (but not exclusively) performance upon</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measurement of customer satisfaction with their service area; • The revised indicators for correspondence in recommendation R5; • The indicators to measure success at dealing with complaints (being developed under the new Corporate Complaints Process). 	Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Equalities and Human Resources	30 September 2004
R14	<p>Progress towards achievement of these recommendations should be reported to the Co-ordinating Overview and Scrutiny Committee in October 2004.</p> <p>The Committee will schedule subsequent progress reports, until all recommendations are implemented.</p>	Deputy Leader	October 2004



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3: Background

3.1 Introduction

- 3.1.1 Improving the quality of delivery of public services is the principal challenge for local government. The public has a proper expectation of good levels of service from their local authorities, and it must be the prime goal of local authorities to meet that expectation.
- 3.1.2 At the root of this is a process of understanding what the customer expectation is and what can reasonably be delivered. This is the extent to which services focus their delivery upon what the customer wants. This enables us to measure where we are now, and where we want to be, and is the basis of planning how we are going to get there.
- 3.1.3 Of course, the reality is that no service provider can be perfect and customers are willing to accept that things can occasionally go wrong. At such times the reactive customer care that an organisation provides is critical to the perception that the customer retains. More importantly, it is what they tell their friends about.
- 3.1.4 Any local authority is a complex organisation providing a multitude of services to the widest possible customer base in a geographical area – potentially every member of the community. Birmingham is the largest local authority in the country, providing services to over a million people.
- 3.1.5 The range of services that is provided by Birmingham City Council is vast. This is a level of complexity matched by few organisations. To deliver the range of services the Council employs more than 50,000 people, with thousands of points of customer interface around the city.
- 3.1.6 However, the size of the organisation and the role it has in delivering services are of no consequence to the customer. The challenge is in delivering the diversity of service, yet appearing to be one coherent organisation.



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- 3.1.7 Through examination of corporate performance in Birmingham against the Performance Plan it is clear that there is almost as much variation in the quality of provision as there is diversity of services provided. It is this inconsistency of quality that drives public perceptions of inefficiency. To address this inconsistency it is important that the Council focuses on the highest possible standards and not the lowest common denominator.
- 3.1.8 This is not something that the Council has ignored in the past. The modern vernacular of local government is peppered with phrases such as 'joined-up thinking' and trying to defeat the 'silo mentality'. The challenge is in making this work by delivering truly integrated services.
- 3.1.9 Nor is the Council sitting idly on this currently. The Deputy Leader has responsibility for Corporate Customer Standards. Priority 4 in the 2003/4 Performance Plan relates to establishing Corporate Customer Standards and a Complaints System. Success in this area was set out to be measured by
- Development of a Corporate Complaints System by October 2003;
 - Development of an improved basket of indicators to measure response times;
 - 90% of letters from Councillors and MPs responded to within 14 calendar days (LI 39a – see Chapter 6);
 - 95% of letters from Members of the Public responded to within 14 calendar days (LI 39b – see Chapter 6);
 - 95% of phone calls from outside the Council answered within agreed service levels (LI 72 – see Chapter 5);
- 3.1.10 This review is the first Scrutiny Review commenced by the Co-ordinating Overview and Scrutiny Committee in the 2003/4 Municipal Year. It has resulted from member concerns with the extent to which the provision of Council services in Birmingham reflects the desires and aspirations of the citizens they represent. Such aspirations are for services worthy of the City's national and international status.

3.2 Terms of Reference, Methodology and Data Collection

- 3.2.1 This review has looked at the subject in overview. With any one of the services that has been examined it would have been possible to examine service provision in great detail. However, a key part of conducting this review has been ensuring that it looks at the extent to which services are focused on customer wants.



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- 3.2.2 The approved terms of reference for the review were as follows:
- To understand better service customers' expectations;
 - To ensure that there are clear, accessible and up to date service standards;
 - To assess what quality assurance measures are in place to ensure that the right service is provided first time every time;
 - To identify how services learn from complaints, including the proposed corporate complaints procedure;
 - To assess the impact of the localisation of services on service quality;
 - To identify good practice in other Local Authorities;
 - To ensure that appropriate training and development measures are in place to produce a customer-centred service culture within the City Council.
- 3.2.3 Councillors Len Gregory and Hugh McCallion (respectively, the Chairman and Vice-Chair of the Co-ordinating Overview and Scrutiny Committee) have led this review. It has however involved all members of the Committee in evidence gathering.
- 3.2.4 Members worked in three types of group to undertake this:
- *Full Committee* (all members of the Co-ordinating Committee);
 - *Sub-Group A*: Consisting of Councillors Gregory and McCallion, with Councillors Sue Anderson, Don Brown, Nigel Dawkins, Gordon Green, Les Lawrence and Bryan Nott;
 - *Sub-Group B*: Consisting of Councillors Gregory and McCallion, with Councillors Margaret Byrne, Ken Hardeman, Kath Hartley, John Lines, Mike Nangle, Penny Wagg and Michael Wilkes.
- 3.2.5 A wide range of methods has been used to gather the information and evidence that underpin this review. These have included
- Structured discussion with Chief Officers in review group sessions, supplemented by written evidence;
 - Obtaining views and case studies direct from service users, in the form of
 - A group discussion with a selection of customers;
 - Meeting customers at the point of service delivery;
 - A phone-in following publicising the review on the *Ed Doolan Show* on BBC Radio WM.



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- Member visits to
 - The Corporate Customer Contact Centre at Waterlinks House, Aston;
 - Sample points of service delivery, including Neighbourhood Offices, with associated Housing Offices and a leisure centre;
 - Other local authorities (Newcastle and Sunderland City Councils).
- Background research and information directly requested from directorates, summarised, analysed and presented to members in briefing notes;
- Information gathered regarding the localisation and devolution of services by the Policy and Performance Task and Finish Overview and Scrutiny Committee, chaired by Councillor Hugh McCallion.



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4: What Customers Tell Us

4.1 Introduction

- 4.1.1 The first goal of this Review was to “understand better service customers’ expectations” (see Terms of Reference, section 3.2). This not only helps to inform the Council of what the expectations are in developing customer focused services, but also enables the identification of where things do go wrong.
- 4.1.2 This chapter therefore explores customer expectations, aspirations and experiences as gathered from a number of sources:
- Corporate level surveys, namely the *MORI Annual Opinion Survey* (2003) and the *People’s Panel Surveys* (2002);
 - Service specific information submitted by the Chief Officers;
 - Additional evidence collected from service users during the course of the Review, mainly via a group discussion with a randomly selected sample of service users;
 - Elected members of Birmingham City Council, who were invited to give their views to the Review group on how the Council performed in delivering a customer focused service.
- 4.1.3 The following section gives more detail on each of the sources of information used in this chapter. There then follows a summary of relevant information taken from each of them, focusing on:
- Overall opinions of Council services;
 - Contacting the Council;
 - Customer Care;
 - Customer Complaints.



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4.2 Sources of information

MORI Annual Opinion Survey

4.2.1 The Council has been conducting Annual Opinion Surveys of its residents since May 1997. The objectives of these surveys are:

- To produce annual public action plans setting out targets for service improvements across the Council – in 2003/04, this was incorporated into the Cabinet and Corporate Plan;
- To meet and exceed Best Value targets;
- To provide comparative data, both over time and with other authorities and national surveys.

4.2.2 The survey uses a representative sample of over 1,000 residents, interviewed at their homes. It records a range of 'demographic factors' such as age, gender, ethnicity, tenure, employment circumstances, disability, household size, relationships and religious faith. Issues covered are:

- Perceptions of the city as a whole;
- Satisfaction with the City Council as a whole;
- Satisfaction with Council services;
- Use of these services;
- Contact with the Council and reason for contact;
- Satisfaction with contact and outcome;
- Priorities for additional budget spending;
- Other policy issues as required (e.g. community safety and changes to local democracy).

4.2.3 The most recently published data is from a presentation of the headline results of the 2003 survey¹ and this data is cited in this chapter. In total, 1,034 residents across Birmingham were interviewed.

¹ Presentation by Andrew Collinge, Associate Director, MORI Social Research Institute on 21st January 2004. All information relating to the MORI survey cited in this report is taken from this presentation.



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People's Panel

- 4.2.4 The Panel was established in 1999 to provide an ongoing 'sounding board' for public opinion and to explore key issues in depth. The Panel consists of a representative sample of around 1,500 residents and is administered by the Policy Development Team, with support from the Communications and Customer Relations Division. In December 2001, Birmingham City Council commissioned MVA, an independent research agency, to refresh and manage the Birmingham People's Panel and carry out research with panellists.
- 4.2.5 A number of different consultation approaches are used, such as telephone or postal surveys, citizens' workshops, focus groups and face to face interviews.
- 4.2.6 Two pieces of work undertaken in 2002 with the Panel are pertinent to this Review:
- Complaints and Customer Care Survey;
 - Access to Services Focus Groups.
- 4.2.7 The *Complaints and Customer Care Survey* took place in August 2002, and aimed to obtain quantitative information on customer expectations of standards, experience of contacting the Council and experience of making complaints.²
- 4.2.8 The *Access to Services focus groups* were conducted as part of the Best Value Review of Access to Services, and aimed to assist the Review with qualitative research providing a more detailed insight into relevant issues.³

Service Specific Information

- 4.2.9 As part of the Committee's evidence gathering, written submissions were requested from Chief Officers. These contained information on research and consultation undertaken at service level, either as part of on-going consultation and monitoring of customer views, or in response to specific, ad-hoc, needs.
- 4.2.10 In addition, information is gathered in relation to some services as part of the MORI survey to meet Best Value Performance Indicators.

² All information relating to the Customer Care and Complaints Survey cited in this report is taken from *The Birmingham People's Panel - Customer Care and Complaints Survey*, September 2002.

³ All information relating to the Peoples' Panel focus groups cited in this report is taken from *Consultation on the Council's Best Value Access to Services Review: People's Panel Focus Groups*, July 2002.



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Group Discussion With Members

- 4.2.11 Given the amount of information already collected by the Council, both corporately and locally, Members were careful not to replicate this information. However, as part of their evidence gathering it was considered important to meet with service users to:
- Discuss their general experience of contact with the Council;
 - Hear first hand the issues service users face; and
 - Discuss ways of improving the service.
- 4.2.12 This was conducted through a group discussion with members of the public, visits to Neighbourhood Offices and other service points and gathering views of listeners to *The Ed Doolan Show* on BBC Radio WM. A summary of the points raised is in **Appendix 1**.

Member Views

- 4.2.13 In addition to talking to service users, the Committee invited Members of the City Council to give their views on the Council's performance with regard to customer focused services. This was considered to be important as the Ward Councillor is often an advocate for customers within the Council, and is often a constituent's last resort, having been unsuccessful previously in raising issues with services directly.

4.3 Overall Opinion of Council Services

- 4.3.1 Whilst this section of the report is primarily concerned with customer care aspects of service delivery, it is worth noting that these are very closely connected to residents' perceptions of service delivery and their overall perception of the City Council. It is therefore pertinent to take a look at how the Council is rated overall and how its key services are perceived.
- 4.3.2 The 2003 MORI Annual Opinion Survey found that:
- Over half of respondents were satisfied with "how the Council runs the city" (57%) – this is down on the 2002 figure of 63%;
 - A fifth (20%) are dissatisfied;
 - There were big differences between areas of Birmingham, representing "a challenge for constituency directors and politicians".



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- 4.3.3 In addition to the views of overall performance, exploration of service performance gives an indication of what concerns residents most. There is a wealth of information gathered at service level, and this section is intended only to give the headline figures and indicative findings from the frontline services.

Satisfaction With Services

- 4.3.4 As part of the MORI survey, questions are asked about individual services as part of the Best Value Performance Monitoring. The findings from the 2003 survey are detailed in **Figure 1**.
- 4.3.5 The results are generally positive. All Leisure and Culture services measured receive 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' ratings from over 70% of residents, with 90% of respondents satisfied with libraries. Similarly, there are high levels of overall satisfaction with primary (90%) and secondary schools (79%) and these levels have increased in recent years.
- 4.3.6 The Performance Indicators for Waste Management show that 81% of respondents are satisfied with the overall service (up from 73% in 2002). These indicators also show the sharpest drops in dissatisfaction: waste collection down to 10% from 16% in 2002, and recycling down to 9% from 27% in 2002.
- 4.3.7 These figures are clearly an improvement on previous years, and this is attributed to targeted action, particularly with regard to missed collections. However, satisfaction with information on public transport is the lowest at 40%.

	Satisfied	Dissatisfied
Primary schools	90% (86%)	3% (3%)
Libraries	90% (79%)	2% (1%)
Adult Education	88% (84%)	2% (3%)
Theatres / concert halls	87% (72%)	1% (1%)
Nursery schools	85% (85%)	4% (4%)
Waste collection – overall	81% (73%)	10% (16%)
Museums / galleries	81% (67%)	2% (1%)
Secondary schools	79% (79%)	15% (10%)
Sports/ Leisure facilities	78% (71%)	8% (5%)
Parks / open spaces	77% (75%)	12% (12%)
Recycling facilities	65% (55%)	9% (27%)
The local tip	43%	1%
Public transport info	40%	17%

Fig. 1: Performance Indicators – satisfaction

Source: MORI 2003 (Figures in brackets 2002)



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Service Priorities For Customers

- 4.3.8 The MORI Survey asked about service priorities. Street cleaning came top of the list (74% of respondents said this was important), followed by household waste collection (68%) and maintenance of roads and footpaths (64%).
- 4.3.9 When asked to prioritise spending on Council services, "helping people find work and training" came top of the list (37%), in contrast to 2002 when elements of the street scene (road maintenance, street cleaning and street improvements) topped the list (**Figure 2**).

	2003	2002
Helping people to find work & training	37%	33%
Social services for the elderly	34%	37%
Road maintenance	33%	47%
Schools	33%	34%
Street sweeping/cleaning	32%	38%
Youth clubs	29%	28%
Council housing repairs & maintenance	24%	29%
Street maintenance/improvement	24%	38%
Street lighting	24%	29%
Children's play areas	23%	30%

Fig. 2: Spending Priorities

Source: MORI 2003

- 4.3.10 However, local issues, in particular the street scene, are still clearly important to residents. Such issues also constituted the vast majority of comments made by participants in the group discussion and the majority of issues raised after the Chairman's appearance on the Ed Doolan Show (see **Appendix 1**), reinforcing MORI's findings. Inevitably much of this focuses on services provided by waste management. Examination of issues raised here serves to exemplify a number of general problems experienced by service areas across the Council.
- 4.3.11 Refuse collection attracted a third of complaints on Ed Doolan show, particularly the non-delivery of black bin bags to residents. Participants in the group discussion cited examples of good practice, but they also expressed concern about an inconsistent service.

One member of the group gave an example of her experience when trying to get the council to remove an old mattress from the front of her house. Firstly she was given the wrong number and then eventually once she had made contact she was given the wrong information. She persisted with the same telephone number and eventually spoke to a helpful member



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of staff and was told that the mattress would be picked up the following Saturday and it was.

- 4.3.12 Another point raised by the group was that residents do not understand what services the Council actually provides, nor are they told how to get the most out of a service. The group felt that in order to be able to use a service adequately and understand why problems occur, it would be effective to know this.

An example of this was that some members of the group did not know if they were supposed to leave rubbish outside their house or in their front garden to be collected. It was mentioned that sometimes it would be collected if it was in their garden and other times it would be ignored.

- 4.3.13 One suggested that service providers should leave a card explaining why a service had not been delivered. It was felt that it is important to develop a complaint procedure and a code of practice, which is implemented and advertised to residents well.

- 4.3.14 One participant expressed concern that waste collectors were sometimes inflexible and would not collect an above average load:

"The people who drive the waste collection vans, they will not do anything outside their guidelines. If there are 21 bags to be taken away and we specified 20, they will leave one."

- 4.3.15 The entire group agreed that the black bin bags, which are provided by the Council, should be delivered to the resident's front door and should not be thrown into people's gardens.

- 4.3.16 Although other services attracted fewer comments from both Ed Doolan show respondents and those attending the group discussion, examples of inconsistency and lack of clarity were found in these services also. For example, three calls were received after the Ed Doolan show relating to trees that needed pruning but where no action had been taken - participants in the group discussion were unaware of which service was responsible.

One participant gave an example of when he wanted a grass verge cut. He had to phone up two or three different 'departments', as each one would deny responsibility. Eventually, after speaking to the 'correct' member of staff, the job was completed.

- 4.3.17 Such problems are not confined to waste management services. For example, within the Housing service there are similar issues with communication between the service and the repairs contractors:

A caller to the Ed Doolan show complained that he had central heating installed but the workmanship was poor, and he was still waiting for the council to make this good. The Housing service response to this was to check the system, but



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they had no records of [the company] installing the central heating, and were not sure who could have handled this work.

4.4 Contacting the Council

- 4.4.1 One of the key issues in developing customer focused council services is ease of access to the Council and its services. The Council can be contacted via letter, telephone, E-mail or face-to-face and how each of these interfaces is managed is discussed in the next two chapters. This section describes residents' experience of contacting the Council and their preferences for doing so.

Ease Of Access

- 4.4.2 Two-thirds of respondents to the People's Panel Survey on Complaints and Customer Care (60%) found it 'easy' or 'very easy' to contact the Council. The 2003 MORI results show that the percentage of those who say that 'getting hold of the right person was easy' has fallen from 63% in 2002 to 56% (the 2001 level).
- 4.4.3 Whilst this shows a majority of respondents to be happy with ease of access, almost a half of those who contact the Council report that they experience difficulties before they even get to speak to the right person. There is clearly much room for improvement.
- 4.4.4 The People's Panel Survey went on to ask those who found it difficult to make contact why this was the case. The main reasons given were:
- A delay in answering the phone / it was engaged or they were continually transferred around services (69%);
 - Staff knowledge / internal communication (9.2%);
 - Unhelpful staff (5.7%).
- 4.4.5 The People's Panel Survey respondents were asked what improvements could be made and the following responses were made:
- Staff training / knowledge / internal communication / attitude (27.2%);
 - More phone lines / answer quickly (23.3%);
 - Follow up contact / acknowledgement (8.4%);and
 - Automated switchboard to select service / leave message / direct lines (7.4%).



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Preferred Methods Of Contact

4.4.6 The People's Panel survey on Complaints and Customer Care explored preferences in contacting the Council, and the results are shown in **Figure 3**.

	People's Panel
Telephone	79%
Visit to Council house	1%
Visit to a local Neighbourhood Office	7%
In writing	6%
Website/E-mail	8%

Fig. 3: Preferred method of contacting the Council

Source: People's Panel 2002

4.4.7 It is clear that telephone is the most preferred method (79%). Just under one in ten (8%) of People's Panel respondents preferred to see a member of staff in person, and the same proportion (8%) preferred to contact the Council electronically (via the website or e-mail).

4.4.8 The motivations behind these preferences were discussed in more detail during the focus groups carried out as part of the Peoples' Panel research into Access to Services. Some participants, particularly those on low incomes and from ethnic minority backgrounds, felt that making an enquiry in person can be more effective than telephoning. It can be difficult to get through to the right person by telephone and staff are more likely to take action if you go in. However, others had become frustrated with local Neighbourhood Offices and felt that making an enquiry in person was no longer effective. Reported difficulties included:

- Long queues;
- 'Unhelpful' staff;
- Language difficulties;
- A lack of or slow communication between the Neighbourhood Office and Council services, and within directorates.

4.4.9 There is also an issue with regard to the perception of Neighbourhood Offices (perhaps explaining the low proportion of those who would choose to contact the Council this way). Neighbourhood Offices are perceived to cater more for the needs of housing tenants and particular areas rather than being a resource generally available to all citizens who access local authority services.



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- 4.4.10 Writing to the Council was felt to be more appropriate when the issue is felt to be more serious or if previous attempts to contact the Council by telephone or face-to-face had been unsuccessful.
- 4.4.11 Resistance to the use of e-mail was identified, partly because many people still don't have access to the Internet and therefore feel the Council should concentrate on methods of access which are available to all residents.

4.5 Customer Care Performance

- 4.5.1 There were a number of elements of customer care explored in the both the MORI and People's Panel surveys. In his presentation, Andrew Collinge (Associate Director, MORI Social Research Institute) stated that "*customer care remains an issue*", and results from the 2003 survey show why.

Council Staff

- 4.5.2 A third of MORI respondents (68%) found council staff helpful – down from 73% in 2002. Whilst this is a majority, it still leaves a startling 32% who did not find Council staff helpful. The Peoples' Panel research was ambivalent towards Council staff: whilst 26% stated that courteous, helpful and friendly staff was one of the best things about contacting the Council, 11.3% said staff attitude was one of the worst things about contacting the Council.
- 4.5.3 This was attributed to unwillingness, inability, stress and overwork. The report on the Peoples' Panel focus groups states:

"In general, participants did not feel that Council staff are helpful and in some instances they can be dismissive and rude (particularly in Neighbourhood Offices). They complained that they are not customer focused and associated this with the culture and ethos of those working for the Council. This was partly attributed to poor management within the Council and to the reliance on temporary staff. The exception to this were staff in libraries."

(People's Panel Focus Groups)

- 4.5.4 Perhaps exacerbating this problem is the issue raised by participants in the group discussion, who said that they were sometimes unsure who they were speaking to by telephone and in which service they were based. One member said that he was unable to establish if he had reached the contact centre or not.



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Speed Of Response

- 4.5.5 The speed of response to enquiries or requests is another area for improvement. Just over half (54.8%) of the People's Panel respondents were 'very / fairly satisfied' with the speed of response to their last enquiry to the Council, while more than a third (34.8%) of respondents were 'very / fairly dissatisfied' with the speed on response.
- 4.5.6 This was the aspect that respondents were least satisfied with overall. A quarter of respondents cited the length of time taken by telephone contact as one of the worst things about contacting the Council. Only 11% cited a prompt response as one of the best things about contacting the Council.

Resolving The Problem

- 4.5.7 One in twenty Peoples' Panel respondents said that problems not being resolved was one of the worst things about contacting the Council, and 4% said knowing you have spoken to appropriate person and that action will be taken was one of the best. Getting an answer or an action in response to the contact clearly has an impact on how that contact is viewed.
- 4.5.8 Problems occur when there is inconsistency in response – an issue raised by the participants in the group discussion with Members. They noted occasions when issues had been dealt with straight away, and also occasions when the response was a lot slower or did not occur at all.
- "Sometimes you ring up and it's brilliant, your problem is sorted by the next day."*
- "When it's good it's very good, but when it's bad it's bad."*
- 4.5.9 The issue of responsibility or ownership of the problem was discussed: one participant felt strongly that if people write to specific services with complaints and they are not dealt with effectively then the Chief Officers should be liable for this. One member of the group was interested in finding out who within the Council was responsible for *"making sure that each department is doing their job efficiently"*.



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- 4.5.10 The importance of a member of staff 'owning' the query was reinforced by the Peoples' Panel focus group:

"There was considerable support for the idea that the person who takes an enquiry from a resident should follow it through until it is resolved, rather than passing it on to someone else. If staff took 'ownership' of the enquiry there was a belief that the ease of accessing Council services would be dramatically improved."

(People's Panel Focus Groups).

- 4.5.11 Participants in the group discussion pointed to another aspect of this problem: on many occasions, customers did not manage to speak to the same person more than once, which led to them having to explain the situation in full again. One suggestion made to ease this problem was a system of common reference numbers.

One participant in the group discussion stated that when she had last contacted the Council with a request to move some waste she had been given a reference number by the person at the Contact Centre. However, when she rang back several days later, she was informed that the reference number did not exist.

Keeping Residents Informed

- 4.5.12 The MORI survey found that just under half of residents felt that they are kept informed by the Council about the services it provides (46%). Half (50%) did not feel well informed.
- 4.5.13 MORI underlines the importance of this as there is a definite correlation between well informed residents and satisfied residents: only 41% of those who did not feel well informed were satisfied with how the Council is run, compared to 76% of those who did feel well informed.

4.6 Customer Complaints

- 4.6.1 With regard to complaints handling, MORI shows that satisfaction has fallen from 40% in 2002 to 27% in 2003.
- 4.6.2 The People's Panel Survey explored how respondents would like to make a complaint to the Council: by letter (67%); telephone (65.9%); and in person (33.3%). Those wishing to complain in person would like to make a complaint at a Neighbourhood Office (61.7%) or the Council House (51.1%).



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- 4.6.3 Just over a third of respondents would prefer to contact the directorate providing the service (38.3%), while just under one third (32.3%) would prefer to contact 'Contact Birmingham'. The percentage who would prefer to contact a specialist team that just deals with complaints/comments was 28.7%.
- 4.6.4 Half of respondents (52.3%) would expect an acknowledgement to their complaint within three to five working days, and a further 27.5% would expect an acknowledgement within two working days.
- 4.6.5 Finally, respondents were asked to list what they felt were the most important aspects of the process of making a complaint to the Council. The most important thing to respondents was knowing action would be taken and a prompt response (43.3%). Other frequently listed responses were:
- Speaking to someone who understands / listens (11%);
 - Acknowledgement/receipt with reference number (10.7%);
 - Staff training / knowledge / attitude (9.6%); and
 - Honesty (5.6%).

4.7 Members' Views

- 4.7.1 As part of gathering an all-round perspective on customer opinion, the views of elected members were also invited. The majority of the comments made were critical of the Council's customer focus.

"I am not aware that departments take any steps to ensure service delivery. They seem not to take on board what service users say. Not a lot seems to go right and one or two officers are not very good at getting back."

"..No one department stands out. It is individual officers which over the years I would identify as being particularly customer focused."

- 4.7.2 Positive comment was generally reserved for individual officers. It was a recurring theme of Members evidence that many (particularly the more experienced) know individual officers in different areas who have proved capable of resolving problems and so the members direct queries at them.

"In general my experience is that officers will 'bend over backwards' on a lot of occasions to ensure that they deliver the correct service on time every time to service users. However there are occasions when things go a little awry."

"It seems entirely down to the 'luck of the draw' as to which Manager/Officer deals with a particular Ward. Some of them are excellent and do an efficient job whilst others leave a lot to be desired."



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- 4.7.3 There were specific service areas that received negative comments, reflecting the concerns of residents and the high profile of certain services, e.g. Waste Collection and Highways. Within these complaints were a number of customer service issues. Primarily, Members felt that problems were not dealt with quickly enough. One Member submitted a report of his current caseload that contained twelve complaints where services had not responded or fixed a problem. He was reassured on each occasion that the work would take place, yet it did not materialise. This is another recurring theme of members' evidence – promises are made but not kept.
- 4.7.4 The issue of responding to correspondence was another focus of discontent amongst Members. The current methods for dealing with this are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6, but it is worth noting here that this was a persistent source of complaint from Members.
- 4.7.5 The complaints process is another source of contention.
- "I frequently receive complaints from constituents who have received no response to letters and e-mails that they have sent to departments. When things go wrong, it seems that certain officers have difficulty in admitting it. Petitions, protests, letters from councillors, residents' associations, police etc. all fall on deaf ears".*
- "On the occasions when things go wrong it is my view that people believe that I will get a different answer to that being given to themselves. In my experience this is not the case. What has happened however is that sometimes individuals provide me with more information than they have the council staff with whom they have been dealing with previously. Therefore, because I have more information I 'seem' to sometimes get a different answer. There have been few occasions when officers have failed to respond within 15 calendar days. When this has happened a gentle reminder has usually been followed by a quick response and an explanation plus apology for the delay."*
- 4.7.6 However, members were conscious of examples of good practice in other public bodies. One Member cited a newly created Social Landlord, which he believed has changed the organisational culture from that traditionally associated with a large scale public organisation to a more community focused, customer led agency. This indicates that such a change can be achieved.

Summary

- 4.7.7 There are a number of corporate mechanisms by which the views and aspirations of customers are gathered. These are critical in focusing the shape of service provision to customers' wishes.



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- 4.7.8 These highlight areas borne out in anecdotal evidence supplied in the course of this review. There are important messages regarding the priority services for customers, how they wish to access those services and how the customers feel that the Council treats them.
- 4.7.9 These messages need to be continually listened to and responded to in order to assess the success of changes in how the Council manages customer service.



5: Managing the Customer Interface

5.1 Introduction

- 5.1.1 There is an extensive and multi-faceted interface between the City Council and its customers. Due to the number of services that the Council provides to its customers, it is sensible to set parameters defining this area. Whilst technically anyone getting service from a facility operated by the Council is a customer, this is examined here at the main points at which customers can obtain or gain access to a number of Council services: Contact Birmingham and Neighbourhood Offices.
- 5.1.2 Many areas of Council service provision lie outside of provision through the Neighbourhood Office. A user of park, library, museum or leisure facility is of course still a customer of a Council service, as is a pupil in a school, or an elderly person receiving care in the home.
- 5.1.3 The Access to Services Best Value Review was undertaken in 2001/2 to examine the provision and management of access to services across the City Council. Whilst the review never progressed to the stage of approving a Service Improvement Plan, the key findings were:
- The lack of a corporate 'access to services' strategy;
 - The variation between directorates in terms of service offered;
 - Needs for staff training and development;
 - A lack of information and especially the lack of shared information between directorates.
- 5.1.4 Work began on a corporate strategy, recognising the different components necessary to provide a good quality customer service. The strategy was based on four, linked elements. Two of these have a corporate dimension (the Customer Contact Centre and web site), whilst the other two have a local dimension (hub offices and local access to services). These are represented diagrammatically in **Figure 4** on the following page.



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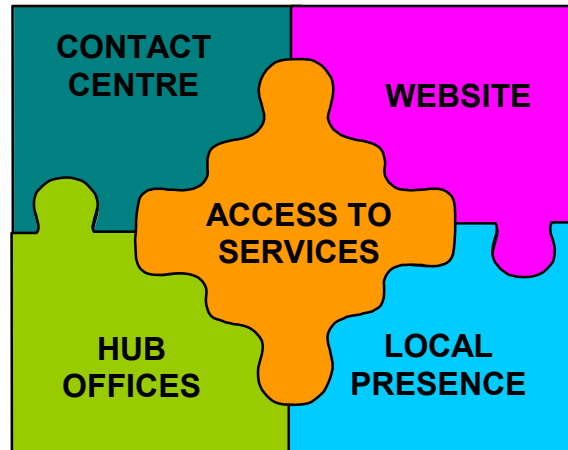


Fig. 4: Access to Services Strategy

Source: Corporate Customer Relations

- 5.1.5 It is clear from the Peoples' Panel research that customers prefer to contact the Council predominantly by telephone (Section 4). Accordingly, this chapter begins by considering this interface.

5.2 The Customer Contact Centre

Background to the Contact Centre

- 5.2.1 Prior to the Contact Centre opening, the Council received 18 million calls per year across existing departmental call centres. There were more than one million visits to Neighbourhood Offices, 10,000 visitors to the website per day and 150,000 letters. However, the Annual Opinion Survey from MORI was recording an overall decline in citizens' perceptions of quality of service access.
- 5.2.2 The Customer Contact Centre ('Contact Birmingham') opened in March 2002, with a public launch to promote the service in July 2002. The capital cost of the project was £8.08 million. In the first few months of Contact Birmingham opening, there was a 20% increase in call volume, with over a million calls answered. Response time to answer calls improved by 85% to 20 seconds.
- 5.2.3 The centre's overarching objective is:

"To make optimum use of new communication and information technology to make the Council more accessible, adaptable and accountable to local people".



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- 5.2.4 The centre exists to give a good 'front-end' service, dealing with high volume / low duration calls in order to free up specialists in the directorates to deal with more complex or involved cases. The aims are therefore to:
- Provide a single point of contact;
 - Maximise the number of calls answered without the need for referral;
 - Improve customer services and access;
 - Provide consistency.
- 5.2.5 The centre has a City Centre location and is open from 0800 to 2000 hours, Monday to Friday.

Organisation

- 5.2.6 Contact Birmingham is organised on a selective outsourcing basis. Vertex was awarded the contract to run the Centre under a five-year contract with an option to extend at the end of year four (in April 2006) for a further five years.
- 5.2.7 Vertex has sole responsibility for managing the Centre and the premises. Responsibility for staff and technology is shared with Birmingham City Council. The contract is monitored by Corporate Customer Relations.
- 5.2.8 As a result of this amalgamation, there are three groups of staff within Contact Birmingham. Each has differing terms, conditions and pay for doing essentially the same job:
- Birmingham City Council employees (under the day-to-day management of Vertex);
 - Vertex employees who were previously employed by BCC and chose to transfer from the Council (now only five employees);
 - Vertex employees (all staff recruited after Contact Birmingham opened are and will be Vertex employees).
- 5.2.9 The original contract with Vertex applied the call centre service to the services provided by Environmental Services, Neighbourhood Advice and Information Service and Revenues. The Benefits Service was incorporated in February 2003 by variation to the contract.



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Performance

- 5.2.10 There is one Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI) applying to the Customer Contact Centre, covering the answering external telephone calls:
- **LI 72:** Answer telephone calls from outside the Council within agreed service levels.
- 5.2.11 Performance monitoring for the Deputy Leader Portfolio at Quarter 3 showed performance against this indicator to be 'Green' - the target performance of 95% for LI 72 is likely to be met.
- 5.2.12 This indicator is supplemented by more specific managerial indicators within Contact Birmingham, including
- The percentage of abandoned calls
 - The number of engaged / busy tones
 - The average handling time of calls.
- 5.2.13 Performance is shown in **Fig. 5** and **6** on the following page. These figures show that
- The majority of calls are received in connection with Environmental / Waste issues;
 - General performance on answering Environmental Waste, Revenues and NAIS / General calls is slightly decreased compared to last year and remains short of the 95% target;
 - Performance on Revenues calls remains a particular problem in relation to the overall target, but had improved substantially since 2002 before slipping back in the second half of 2003/4;
 - There are still significant numbers of busy tones and calls abandoned in this area. This situation was highlighted when Members of the review group visited the contact centre observing a waiting time of 11 minutes at one point.
- 5.2.14 Concurrent with these performance figures, customer satisfaction with customer care issues (as measured by MORI) initially improved, but has returned to the 2001 level: in 2002, 63% of respondents said that 'getting hold of the right person' was 'easy', compared to 56% in 2001. In 2003 this returned to 56%.



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	No. of calls answered		% of calls answered (monthly average)	
	Apr 02 – Mar 03	Apr 03 – Feb 04	Apr 02 – Mar 03	Apr 03 – Feb 04
Environmental Waste	413,000	371,024	94.6%	92.3%
Revenues	245,000	172,185	66.8%	44.6%
NAIS / General Enquiries	116,000	86,599	93.6%	89.3%
Benefits ⁴	-	149,813	-	51.4%
Recruitment	-	12,603	-	94.8%
Homeworks ⁵	-	2,445	-	91.1%
Total	774,000	794,669		

Fig. 5: Total Call Volumes

Source: Corporate Customer Relations

	% of calls answered			% of calls abandoned		
	Apr 2002	Mar 2003	Feb 2004	Apr 2002	Mar 2003	Feb 2004
Environmental Waste	28%	93%	90.9%	20%	5%	3.8%
Revenues	9%	76%	67.3%	29%	14%	30.4%
NAIS / General Enquiries	72%	94%	86.9%	10%	6%	7.1%
Benefits	-	-	83.7%	-	-	16.2%
Homeworks	-	-	94.6%	-	-	5.4%
Recruitment	-	-	88.5%	-	-	7.1%

	Average handling time (minutes)			No. of engaged/busy tones		
	Apr 2002	Mar 2003	Feb 2004	Apr 2002	Mar 2003	Feb 2004
Environmental Waste	5.6	2.8	2.41	149,000	0	0
Revenues	5.3	4.8	7.23	615,000	7,800	2,306
NAIS / General Enquiries	4.2	2.0	1.37	N/A	0	0
Benefits	-	-	6.56	-	-	0
Homeworks	-	-	2.34	-	-	0
Recruitment	-	-	2.36	-	-	0

Fig. 6: Key Performance Indicators

Source: Corporate Customer Relations

⁴ Handling of Benefits calls was transferred to the Contact Centre from February and July 2003.

⁵ Homeworks and Recruitment are new services transferred into the Contact Centre on 01 December 2003.



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5.3 Issues Identified with the Contact Centre

- 5.3.1 A number of issues have been highlighted as a result of the Members' visit to the Contact Centre.
- 5.3.2 Further service migration to the Contact Centre is a matter that particularly concerned members. One of the main strengths of the Contact Centre is economy of scale and there is the potential to expand further. However, there is work to be done to ensure no deterioration in service as services are transferred.
- 5.3.3 Those answering calls are taken through a 'script', which has limited scope for flexibility. In particular, there does not appear to be scope within the system to deal with enquiries from Members, which may be different from the norm.
- 5.3.4 Another key concern is the compatibility of technology within the Council. The Contact Centre uses a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system called Frontline. Whilst the system is compatible with systems in use in some services (e.g. the Waste Services system Panorama) this is not the case universally. For example, Neighbourhood Offices handle the majority of face-to-face transactions use the Neighbourhood Office Statistical System (NOSS) which is not linked to Frontline.
- 5.3.5 Staff terms and conditions of employment were also highlighted as an issue. There are groups of staff on differing pay and terms and conditions doing the same job within the Contact Centre. Contact Birmingham argues that this does not have a great impact on retention as Vertex pay the market rate, so employees leaving Contact Birmingham would not get a better rate of pay elsewhere. However, this is manifestly unfair, and a potential source of discontent.
- 5.3.6 Staff turnover in the Contact Centre is around 10-12%, which is higher than for the Council as whole, but compares well with the call centre sector. Sickness is also a problem. It is recognised that there are specific issues inherent in call-centres (particularly related to stress and behaviour), and therefore occupational health professionals are used regularly.
- 5.3.7 A pilot of eight weeks of Saturday opening was tried in the summer of 2003 and is being evaluated. Not all 'back office' systems are available at weekends and therefore, the options are to:
- Offer a 'diluted' out of hours service; or
 - Put additional resource into making the systems in other areas of the Council available at these times.



Developing Customer-Focused Services

5.4 Neighbourhood Offices

The Neighbourhood Office Network

- 5.4.1 The network of Neighbourhood Offices forms the principal means through which services are accessed on a local basis. There are 34 offices around the city. As such they represent a diverse range of services provided to a diverse range of communities, and the character of Neighbourhood Offices varies considerably across the city.
- 5.4.2 The aim of Neighbourhood Offices has been to be a gateway to all services provided by the Council. In the main, this is provided face to face by multi-skilled advisors. Advisors are met by appointment, with the emphasis on providing a high-quality interview.
- 5.4.3 Benefits advice does form the core of staff training and approximately half of all enquiries are related to benefits. Other Council services that can be accessed through Neighbourhood Offices include
- Benefits advice and income maximisation, including promoting the take-up of benefits;
 - Housing, including dealing with rent arrears, moving to different areas, but not repairs;
 - Debt advice and financial concerns;
 - Access to education and training;
 - Advice on getting a job;
 - Information upon and access to other Council services.
- 5.4.4 The core of the Neighbourhood Office network is the 'Hub Office'. There are four of these: Erdington, Newtown, Northfield and Sparkbrook offices. These offices have been prioritised for investment, and offer an increased specification of service, compared to other offices.



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Opening Hours

5.4.5 The opening times of Neighbourhood Offices can be described as follows:

- Open on average for 27.55 hours per week;
- All hours are Monday to Friday, with 28 offices opening on five days, two on four days and four on three days. There is no weekend opening;
- The earliest opening time is 0830 hours and the latest finishing time is 1730 hours; typically offices are open for four days from 0900 to 1600 hours;
- Of the 34 offices, 20 close for a lunch break on one or more days and 14 do not;
- All offices close on one afternoon each week.

5.4.6 There are a number of reasons given for this pattern of opening:

- The resources are not available to extend opening times, even were there to be a demonstrable demand for service at other times;
- The customers of Neighbourhood Offices are typically those who don't want to access services via the telephone – often those who are not employed, for whom these hours are convenient;
- It is not always practical to arrange lunch breaks in small teams to ensure that all offices remain open through lunch times. Offices also will not open without at least three advisors present, for safety reasons.

5.4.7 This is a pattern that has remained broadly unchanged for a considerable time, largely since the Neighbourhood Office concept was introduced in the mid-1980s. Consequently, many of the staff within Neighbourhood Offices have chosen the role because the work pattern fits their needs, and fits around their domestic commitments.

5.4.8 The appearance given by this is that the service provided through Neighbourhood Offices is determined by supply factors rather than customer demand. The question that must be asked is does the use of Neighbourhood Offices reflect the hours that they are open, or are they arranged meet a particular customer need? On balance, it is probably an element of both.

5.4.9 As stated in paragraph 4.4.9, there is a perception that Neighbourhood Offices cater for those claiming benefits or with accessing services related to Council housing. It was cited on more than one occasion that customers often refer to the Neighbourhood Office as the 'rent office'. It is perceptions such as this that must be overcome in creating genuine points through which a range of Council services can be accessed.



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Physical Appearance and Presentation Standards

- 5.4.10 Neighbourhood Offices have a varied appearance, depending upon the nature of the office and its origins as a local service point. Some are traditional public buildings; others were built for purpose, whilst others still were built for purpose with a temporary life span. Externally and structurally, Neighbourhood Offices exhibit many of the typical characteristics of public buildings, comparing less favourably to modern private sector service access points.
- 5.4.11 Management of the buildings and property relating to Neighbourhood Offices is conducted by Property Services. This relates the management of the premises to the general property strategy of the Council. What it does not do is specifically link developments in service delivery to
- Necessary refinement and review of assets under a property management strategy, or
 - Requirements to develop levels of compliance to meet the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA).
- 5.4.12 There are elements of common standards in the presentation and format of the offices:
- There are common values in how the service is provided – described as the CORE values (Caring, Open, Responsive, Effective);
 - There is a preferred layout; either
 - A 'snaking' desk layout and slim screen computer monitors to reduce barriers to the customer, or
 - Paired desks distributed around an open-plan office;
 - Information boards have common headings, although content varies between offices;
 - Staff are provided with name badges and a dress code is presently in the process of being introduced.
- 5.4.13 However, there is a relaxed attitude to presentation standards in Neighbourhood Offices. This is cited as being deliberate in part. The aim has been to provide the customers of Neighbourhood Offices with an informal and relaxed setting in which to discuss the problems that they have. It is considered that uniform and corporate presentation standards might make the service less approachable, and therefore the current environment is considered appropriate for their needs.



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Systems and Processes

- 5.4.14 At hub offices, the receptionist (normally a relatively senior and experienced member of the team) sees each customer first. For approximately half of enquiries, the receptionist may be able to deal with the query straight away. If the customer has an appointment, the receptionist notifies the relevant advisor. Otherwise, the customer takes a ticket and joins the queuing system. At busy periods, some offices operate with more than one receptionist.
- 5.4.15 The emphasis in approach with Neighbourhood Offices is upon a quality interview with the customer. Advisors are encouraged to actively identify any other potential issues that the customer might have, and to assist with resolving these as much as possible. This is closely related to the role that the service has in maximising the take-up of benefits.
- 5.4.16 Neighbourhood Offices do have quite extensive use of ICT. The principal system is the Neighbourhood Office Statistical System (NOSS), which is a database system for recording all customer contacts. Its basic purpose is to record what people have been told, what action is promised and what has happened. There is also an extensive library of support material stored on Lotus Notes databases.
- 5.4.17 NOSS is accessible from any Neighbourhood Office, and an advisor can view the notes entered by previous advisors at previous contacts, anywhere in the city. It also provides statistics on the type and number of transactions.
- 5.4.18 However, NOSS is an old system, and does not interface with other systems, including Frontline, the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system used by Contact Birmingham. Therefore whilst it is useful to the Neighbourhood Offices in what they do, it limits future options for any attempt to integrate services.

Localisation of Neighbourhood Advice and Information

- 5.4.19 The Neighbourhood Advice and Information Services (NAIS) will transfer to the Local Services Directorate on 01 April 2004, as part of the first phase of services being managed in constituencies. The service is subject to a Constituency Service Specification – a set of standards that are to be met by constituencies in terms of providing the service locally.



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- 5.4.20 The Constituency Service Specification for NAIS covers
- Specific services to be provided through the Neighbourhood Office network (e.g. Benefits, Revenues (Council Tax));
 - Services that can be accessed through the Neighbourhood Office (e.g. assistance regarding Housing and Social Care and Health services);
 - Statutory, public and voluntary functions (e.g. take-up of benefits, debt and money advise, Working and Child Tax Credits claims, verification of Pension Credits);
 - How these services will be accessed;
 - Standards in delivering the services (including national and local standards); and
 - The monitoring arrangements for constituency compliance.
- 5.4.21 These standards are presently draft and under discussion, but do cover most of the areas that are required for standards of customer service. Other subjects that are proposed to be covered by standards, such as the Constituency Communications Protocol and Branding Guidelines.
- 5.4.22 There are also areas that are not covered, such as
- The presentation of the service environment (an extension of branding); and
 - Standard mechanisms by which local constituencies will gather and respond to customer views.
- 5.4.23 Whilst some of these are undoubtedly further levels of detail that must be explored to take localisation forward, it is difficult to envisage an effective transition of the service to the Local Services Directorate in April 2004 without final standards being in place.

5.5 Localisation of Services

- 5.5.1 It is not an understatement to say that devolution of aspects of decision-making and localisation of services represent one of the biggest changes to how the Council delivers service to its customers. In terms of localisation, the aim of these changes is to:
- Provide council services that respond more quickly to local needs;
 - Create opportunities for local people to get involved in running their local area and their local services;
 - Provide a more streamlined and effective strategic authority for the city.



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- 5.5.2 Not all services are proposed to be localised (either eventually or in the first phase of localisation). There are five different levels of how services will be localised, determined on a service by service basis. These are shown in **Figure 7** below.

Level	
1	Services managed centrally that will continue to be managed in this way
2	Existing local outlets that will come under constituency management . In this model budgets and decision making will move from the centre to the constituencies
3	Services managed centrally that will continue to be managed in this way with a central client, but with localised budgets to allow for local influence and planning (including potentially some local staff). In this model budgets will move to the constituencies but overall management and delivery will remain at the strategic level
4	Services to come under local management through service level agreements and fully localised budgets , but where physical operational structures (e.g. depots) might remain unchanged. In this model budgets and decision making will move to the constituencies, but delivery functions remain organised on a city wide basis , within the strategic directorate structure
5	Services that will be fully localised – i.e. all staff, management and budgets moved from central management to the 11 constituency offices

Fig. 7: Five Levels for Service Management

Source: Local Services Directorate



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5.5.3 The service areas where localisation will take place from April 2004 and the levels at which this will occur are shown in **Figure 8** below.

Environmental And Consumer Services	Level
Refuse Collection	4
Street Cleaning	4
Recycling – Doorstep	4
Domestic Pest Control	4
Transportation	
Car Parks – Local	5
School Crossing Patrols	5
Constituency Engineers/ Local Road, Footway And Street Lighting Maintenance	5
Neighbourhood Advice And Benefits	
Neighbourhood Offices	2
Leisure And Culture	
Community Libraries	2
Local Arts Development	5
Community And Play	5
Parks Management	4
Ground Maintenance	4
Parks Wardens/Rangers	4
Leisure Centres And Swimming Pools	2
Ward Support	
Ward Support Officers	2

Fig. 8: Localisation: Phase One Services and Levels

Source: Local Services Directorate

5.5.4 The key aspect is ensuring that the structures are in place to provide for the transition of the interface to these services. Localisation of services must appear as smooth as possible to the customer.

5.5.5 Under the localised structure, the eleven constituencies each have a Constituency Director, whose role it is to

- Support the Constituency Committees in implementing the devolved governance arrangements;
- Operationally manage services (through managing and developing Service Level Agreements);
- Support and drive forward 'radical and innovative approaches' to managing services;
- Support the development of flourishing neighbourhoods.



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- 5.5.6 The Constituency Directors operationally come under the Strategic Director of Local Services⁶, whose role it is to
- Determine the policy, performance and strategy for local services;
 - Develop 'radical and innovative approaches' to managing services;
 - Contribute to the strategic management of the Council.
- 5.5.7 One of the key objectives for Constituency Directors early in the localisation process is to establish a Community Plan for their constituency. Other areas within the role are about encouraging integrated and cross-service working within the constituency.
- 5.5.8 We need to embrace devolution as an opportunity to improve services. However, there are inherent dangers that must be guarded against:
- That we do not end up with eleven different versions of the same problem, or
 - Eleven versions of the current status quo.
- 5.5.9 This matter has also been of interest to the District Auditor. As part of the audit programme, there has been an emphasis on ensuring that the Council's work programme for the creation of the Local Services Directorate and the eleven constituencies is robust.
- 5.5.10 The comments of the District Auditor have been broadly positive in this respect:
- "... the Council has developed a generally sound approach to the significant challenges it has set itself. The project is being well-run there are sound arrangements for monitoring the project plans ..."*
- (Audit Commission: Audit and Inspection Annual Letter, December 2003)*
- 5.5.11 The Auditor has also acknowledged that there is still work to be done:
- "... during the transition from service department responsibility to the new constituency arrangements, the Council needs to ensure that the level of service delivery does not drop. The Council has a work programme in this area which involves the setting of minimum standards and ensuring that service level agreements reflect the need for continuous service improvement."*
- (Audit Commission: Audit and Inspection Annual Letter, December 2003)*

⁶ Although for line management purposes each Strategic Director will manage two or three constituencies.



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- 5.5.12 There are also key areas in which it is logical to expect devolution and localisation to deliver. Whilst service improvement is the key thrust of localisation, issues that follow within this approach are:
- Aligning service provision closer to the aspirations and expectations of customers;
 - Changing the way in which services are delivered, to make the services more efficient;
 - Improving access to service points;
 - Achieving the compliance requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act for public buildings;
 - Providing increased electronic access to services.
- 5.5.13 This picture is constantly developing, and will continue to develop in greater detail into the first phase of localisation in Summer 2004. Work on designing service standards is ongoing. It is important that the development of these standards includes the wider issues of customer focus and compliance that need to be addressed.



6: Dealing with Service Failure

6.1 Introduction

- 6.1.1 How the Council responds to service failure is one of the critical incidents within the customer experience. It has long been the case in the private sector that effective secondary (i.e. reactive) customer care can go a long way towards healing the injuries to the reputation of the organisation caused by service failure.
- 6.1.2 A number of responses to analyse the reasons for service failure and improve the quality of responses to customers are being developed as within the Deputy Leader's portfolio. These specifically include:
- Harmonising complaints procedures corporately;
 - Guidance in dealing with customer feedback;
 - Customer care training for employees.
- 6.1.3 This chapter examines how the Council deals with service failure in terms of responding to correspondence and the complaints procedures in place corporately.

6.2 Replying to Correspondence

- 6.2.1 There are a number of interfaces through which the internal and external customers of the Council access services. Whilst most customers have said that they would prefer to make contact by telephone (79% - see section 4.4.6), those that complain to the Council would prefer do so by letter (67%).⁷
- 6.2.2 Written enquiries are also one of the main methods by which elected members (of both the Council and Parliament) make contact on behalf of their constituents. How effectively the Council deals with such contact is therefore of particular interest to members, and this has been borne out by the detail and emphasis of member questions in evidence-gathering sessions with senior officers from directorates.

⁷ Source: Peoples' Panel Survey, 2002.



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- 6.2.3 Members have expressed a clear interest in examining performance in this area in more detail as part of this review. It has also been clear that there is a great deal of member concern over this area. Members have viewed the performance in how the Council handles correspondence as being symptomatic of the problems underlying the consistent delivery of high quality services.

6.3 Performance Indicators

- 6.3.1 There are two performance indicators covering response to correspondence:
- **LI 39a:** Improve response times: percentage of letters from *Councillors and MPs* responded to within 14 days;
 - **LI 39b:** Improve response times: percentage of letters from all *members of the public* responded to within 14 days.
- 6.3.2 Both of these are designated as 'Local Indicators' of performance, reported within the overall framework of Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs). This means that they are *not* indicators that the Government requires the Council to report upon: they are *voluntarily* provided and measured by the Council.
- 6.3.3 Local Indicators do not have the same degree of definition as BVPIs. The Audit Commission does not audit these indicators externally and there is a degree of flexibility about how the Council defines and collates performance against the indicators.
- 6.3.4 The LI 39a / LI 39b targets are set corporately as part of the performance planning process, within the portfolio of the Deputy Leader. They do not however uniformly apply across the Council: there are some areas in which there are different targets for response. These are:
- **Resources Directorate (Council Tax):** Three targets exist for different circumstances. The target for *Council Tax enquiries* is a response within the normal 14-day target. However, there is a local indicator within the Service Plan to highlight certain cases as *Urgent* and requiring a response within seven days. For *National Non-Domestic Rates* (NNDRs – business rates) the target is set to 21 days by their own Customer Charter;



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- **Resources Directorate (Information and Communications Technology):** A target of two to three days to send a standard acknowledgement, and 40 days to respond to the enquiry is set. This is to enable responses to be gathered to enquires under the Data Protection Act;
- **Resources Directorate (Neighbourhood Advice and Benefits):** A target of 21 days to respond to letters is set as part of the NAB Service Delivery Framework;
- **Leisure and Culture (Library Service – E-mails only):** A target of 48 hours to respond to all e-mails was set in the year 2000.

6.4 Collecting the Data

How Is The Information Collected?

- 6.4.1 The data is collected each quarter by the Corporate Customer Relations team within the Resources Directorate. Each directorate has a number of specified co-ordinators to gather the information for the different areas of the directorate.
- 6.4.2 In some directorates those co-ordinating the data collection are doing so for significant areas of the organisation and significant amounts of correspondence. Examples of this include Education, Housing, Leisure and Culture, the Resources Directorate and Social Care.
- 6.4.3 In other areas the data collection is carried out in relatively small areas of the organisation with low volumes of correspondence. Examples here include the services reporting to the Chief Executive and parts of the Development Directorate (with the exception of Planning and Highways).
- 6.4.4 The data collected is required to reflect all letters during the quarter for LI 39a (from Councillors and MPs). For LI 39b (members of the public) it reflects a sample, taken from the middle month of the quarter.
- 6.4.5 This is for two main reasons:
- There are significantly higher numbers of letters from the public, and
 - Letters from Councillors and MPs are often the second or subsequent time that a matter has been raised. Elected members therefore consider that their letters should be treated as a priority.



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- 6.4.6 The performance information is provided as the number of letters received during the period and the number responded to within the 14 day time period.
- 6.4.7 In addition to providing the performance information, directorates are also asked to respond to questions about the processes that they have in place.

How Comprehensive Is The Data In The Indicators?

- 6.4.8 The returns indicate that a significant proportion of correspondence is included in the indicators. The problem is that it is difficult to estimate what is *not* being captured.
- 6.4.9 It is clear that not all areas of the Council are covered by the responses. In Social Care procedures for responding to correspondence have been distributed to all sections and all buildings and sections are expected to record and report upon this. However, only high-volume sites (all Area Offices and the Occupational Therapy Service) provide a quarterly return. This does not therefore guarantee that all correspondence is included.
- 6.4.10 The data does not include correspondence sent to external providers of Council services, such as Housing repairs contractors.
- 6.4.11 All other returns indicate that all sections of the directorate are covered. However (particularly in the larger directorates), it is not possible to say with certainty that all correspondence is being routinely and consistently included. In looking at how the indicators are compiled, the detailed responses were examined for Quarters 1 and 2 for 2003/4. There is an issue that not every co-ordinator has provided complete returns or provided them in the format requested.

Is E-Mail Included In The Indicators?

- 6.4.12 The inclusion of e-mails in correspondence that is counted as part of the indicators was a key question for members. However, it is not stated clearly in calculating the indicators that there is a requirement for all e-mails to be included.
- 6.4.13 Areas of the Council that did not include all e-mail within the data calculated in LI 39a / LI 39b were:
- Services reporting to the Chief Executive: Policy Development and Community Safety;
 - Development Directorate: East Side, Economic Development, Planning and Urban Design.



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- 6.4.14 There are numerous benefits of e-mail. It is fast, convenient and located on the computer desktop of the person receiving it. It is also a very convenient way of ensuring that a number of people receive the same message. There is also no need for a paper copy of the message in many cases.
- 6.4.15 Monitoring e-mail is however an operationally difficult area. To lose the benefits mentioned above by labouring the process with printing out and accounting for responses is self-defeating.

What Constitutes 'A Response'?

- 6.4.16 The definition of what actually constitutes 'a response' in the context of the indicators was previously determined in revised guidelines from the General Purposes Committee in April 1997⁸, recommending that the following measures should be implemented in relation to letters from Councillors and Members of Parliament:

"Ensuring that, wherever it is not possible to completely 'close' an issue within 14 days, an explanatory interim reply is sent. This should provide information, for example, on the reasons for the delay in providing a full response, the actions taken so far and the expected time scale for resolving the issue. This aspect of good practice has yet to be fully implemented in some Departments."

⁸ Reported to Council on 06 January 1998.



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6.5 Performance Against the Indicators

6.5.1 The combined performance for 2003/4 (quarters 1 to 3) is shown in **Figure 9** below. This data does not include letters to schools within the Education directorate.

	LI 39a: Councillors and MPs			LI 39b: Members of the Public		
	<i>(All letters recorded)</i>			<i>(Sample: One Month in Quarter)</i>		
	Letters Received	Answered in 14 Days	% in 14 Days	Letters Received	Answered in 14 Days	% in 14 Days
Chief Executive	592	554	93.58%	807	789	97.77%
Development	4,672	3,657	78.27%	18,816	15,352	81.59%
Education	223	185	82.96%	460	425	92.39%
Environmental and Consumer Services ⁹	1,174	993	84.58%	2,778	2,323	83.62%
Housing	5,582	4,873	87.30%	8,722	7,612	87.27%
Leisure and Culture	1,834	1,796	97.93%	1,948	1,827	93.79%
Local Services ¹⁰	578	544	94.12%	781	725	92.83%
Resources	912	877	96.16%	69,505	66,179	95.21%
Social Care and Health	473	417	88.16%	1,411	964	68.32%
Total	16,040	13,896	86.63%	105,228	96,196	91.42%

Fig. 9: LI 39a/b Performance, Quarters 1 to 3, 2003/4

Source: Corporate Customer Relations

6.5.2 **Figure 9** shows that there is

- A variation of between 78% and 98% in the response within 14 days to Councillors and Members of Parliament (LI 39a);
- A variation of between 68% and 98% in the response within 14 days to members of the public (LI 39b);
- A higher response rate within 14 days to letters from Members of the Public (91.42%), than for Councillors and MPs (86.63%).

⁹ Information for the Environmental and Consumer Services Department is for quarters 1 and 2 only. For quarter 3, correspondence is recorded under the Chief Executive (for Regulatory Services) and Local Services Directorate.

¹⁰ Information for the Local Services Directorate is for quarter 3 only.



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- 6.5.3 Reasons behind the higher response rate for letter from the public are related to the volume of letters received:
- Letters for the Resources Directorate (including those for Council Tax) account for two-thirds of the letters from the public (69,505 letters received – 66.05%);
 - High response rates here (95.12%) drive the overall higher response rate for LI 39b.
- 6.5.4 A significant proportion of letters from Councillors and MPs go to Housing and to Development Directorate (around 90% of which go to Highways and Transportation). These two areas alone account for 34.80% and 29.13% of letters - around 64% of Councillor and MP correspondence recorded for the three quarters.
- 6.5.5 The inconsistency in how the figures are collated by directorates means that it is difficult to analyse this information to a greater degree of precision. However, it is clear that there is a great deal of variation in the volume of correspondence and the extent to which services deal with this within 14 days.

How Is The Data Audited And Quality Of Response Checked?

- 6.5.6 Audit of the data is a matter for each directorate to determine. As stated earlier, there is no external audit (such as is conducted by the Audit Commission for BVPIs) or any corporate level of audit.
- 6.5.7 It is relatively common for responses to be checked by senior managers before they are sent, as a means of checking quality. Some directorates (e.g. Highways and Transportation) conduct checks centrally.

How Is Performance Managed And Challenged?

- 6.5.8 This is again a matter for each directorate to determine. The performance against the indicator is part of the directorate's general performance, and therefore is the responsibility of the Director.
- 6.5.9 Similar to auditing, some directorates actively challenge and chase responses as a managerial process (e.g. services formerly within Environmental and Consumer Services, Highways and Transportation and the Resources Directorate).
- 6.5.10 As a general point, most directorates had specific mechanisms to track progress on correspondence from councillors, and Members of Parliament / European Parliament. Given the organisational priority on this factor, this is a logical development.



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How Is Good Practice Encouraged?

- 6.5.11 Some directorates (e.g. Leisure and Culture and Social Services) have 'good practice guides' in place to assist with responding to correspondence – especially from members of the public.
- 6.5.12 These provide practical guidance in how to respond positively to customer correspondence, and are particularly useful for those with little prior experience of this. There is no corporate set of guidelines on responding or other method of passing on best practice.

6.6 Seeking Improvements

The Performance Indicators

- 6.6.1 As part of the work under the Deputy Leader's portfolio to establish Corporate Customer Standards and a Complaints System (Priority 4), an improved basket of indicators is being developed. This was not delivered as planned by October 2003, and at the Quarter 2 Performance Plan Monitoring was listed as "*Amber – too early to say if this will significantly affect the delivery of this priority*".
- 6.6.2 As indicators of performance, the measurements do not measure against key success criteria other than the length of time taken to respond. This is a fundamental factor that gives the indicators meaning.
- 6.6.3 The relevance of the indicator is a key factor in determining how services respond. For example, in the Resources Directorate there were nearly 70,000 letters in the sample for the first three quarters from members of the public.¹¹ Response rates are consequently a key indicator at the directorate management team.
- 6.6.4 Some directorates consider an acknowledgement as 'a response', whereas others consider only a substantive response as such. This lack of clarity thereby encourages a position whereby there is effectively no incentive to respond beyond a holding response or acknowledgement.

¹¹ Due to the sampling technique used; the total volume can be expected to be in the region of 210,000 letters for this period.



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- 6.6.5 Members have expressed frustration at matters not being concluded quickly enough, and it can be anticipated that the expectations of external customers will be no different. As such, performance indicators in this area should be expected to measure against factors such as:
- The length of time to respond, and
 - Whether the response is substantive.
- 6.6.6 Directorates are operating to different definitions of what 'requires a response' and which responses are to be counted (i.e. letters, e-mails, and memoranda). Because of the inconsistencies in the data collection, it is difficult to analyse it precisely.
- 6.6.7 These issues must be addressed corporately. Updating and reiterating the definition of 'a response' (see paragraph 6.4.15) could usefully be done at this time. If the indicators are to have any credibility, then they must be based upon clear and consistent definitions, understood and adhered to by all respondents in a consistent manner.
- 6.6.8 It must be acknowledged that it is not always possible to reach what is a satisfactory outcome for the customer. This is dependent upon the expectations of the customer and the extent to which the Council is able within reason to meet these.

Improving Data Collection

- 6.6.9 Data collection obviously needs to be an integral part of reviewing the performance indicators in this area. There is a fundamental dichotomy illustrated by the collection of performance information in this area:
- If we don't monitor how well we respond to correspondence, then we will never understand the exact nature of the problem, but
 - To monitor performance uses resources that could be better used in *tackling* the problem.
- 6.6.10 One solution might be to monitor samples, measuring the extent to which a defined standard is being met. It would entail taking a sample from each area, and monitoring whether the required standard had been met.
- 6.6.11 This has the advantage in that it is less time consuming than absolute monitoring of all correspondence. Obviously though, the samples collected might not be representative of actual performance. Increasing the sample size and ensuring that it is random can reduce the element of imprecision. It is also important to ensure that there is effective coverage of the organisation, so that the indicator is meaningful to all sections. Specifying certain collection methods as part of collecting data towards a corporate set of indicators is essential.



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Improving Auditing And Challenge

- 6.6.12 Performance in this area partly happens because it isn't consistently and actively managed across the Council. At the better end of the scale the directorates have processes in place and actively pursue customer correspondence as a key indicator. At the worse end of the scale, there are processes in place, but they appear to be inconsistently applied and not actively managed.
- 6.6.13 Specifying the levels of checking and auditing of data to be done by directorates is one way to improve the quality of the data collected. This would also need to be supplemented with audits from outside the directorate.

6.7 Development of a Corporate Complaints Procedure

Background To Complaints Procedures

- 6.7.1 Managerial guidelines and a corporate code of practice for managing complaints were introduced within the Council in April 1993. The guidelines were reviewed in November 1994 and have not been reviewed since.
- 6.7.2 Corporate Customer Relations' experience was that officers and front line staff in many services were largely unaware of these guidelines. Additionally, many services had developed their own individual complaints procedures. Such differences in service only serve to fuel perceptions that the Council does not provide an integrated service.
- 6.7.3 Many of the issues identified had been previously raised in the Best Value Review of Access to Services. Whilst this review had been undertaken and completed, it was never finalised due to the development of proposals for localisation of services, which were deemed to supersede it.
- 6.7.4 The Council was criticised in the 2002 Comprehensive Performance Assessment in relation to how it handles complaints:

"In order to improve learning, the Council should complete the overhaul of the complaints procedure and improve corporate learning from complaints received."

(Audit Commission, Corporate Assessment of Birmingham City Council, December 2002)



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6.7.5 Within the Performance Plan for 2003/4 the Deputy Leader is committed to the development of a Corporate Customer Complaints Procedure by March 2004. Work is currently underway towards this, led by Corporate Customer Relations.

The Proposed Corporate Complaints Procedure

6.7.6 The issue of dealing with complaints has already been examined in microcosm by the Scrutiny Review of Social Care Complaints¹². This review looked specifically at seeking improvements to the process and practice of dealing with complaints in Social Care, and reducing the costs arising from those progressing to the formal stage. A particular emphasis was upon effectively dealing with complaints at the informal stage, and thereby reducing the likelihood that they will progress to a formal complaint.

6.7.7 Issues identified by this review included

- The need to have 'customer champions' within Social Care to manage, mediate and resolve complaints;
- A need for training in delivering customer care and managing complaints;
- Learning from experience with complaints;
- A need for a clearer complaints process.

6.7.8 These are all issues that need to be considered within the revision of the corporate complaints process.

6.7.9 The Corporate Complaints Procedure will apply to dealing with instances of service failure; a first request for service or enquiry is therefore not a complaint.

6.7.10 There are instances where the Complaints Procedure will not apply:

- By organisations receiving funding from the Council complaining about their funding or associated matters (the appropriate procedures will be in contract documents or agreements);
- By employees complaining about terms and conditions of employment etc., (grievance procedures are available for these complaints);
- By councillors, unless they are complaining as a private citizen, or acting in the role of advocate;

¹² Approved by the City Council on 04 November 2003.



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- In special cases covered by statutory and legal limitations such as:
 - Town and County Planning appeal against refusal of planning permission;
 - A school admission or exclusion appeal;
 - Complaints where the customer or the Council has started legal proceedings or taken court action;
 - A complaint that has already been heard by a court or tribunal;
 - Complaints being investigated under statutory procedures for Children and Families;
 - Parking and traffic offences;
 - Complaint against the refusal of disabled badges for parking exemption.

6.7.11 The basic purpose behind the Complaints Procedure is to ensure that failures in service are recorded and this information is used to make improvements. This is a deliberate strategy to tackle complaints at source. It extends beyond the monitoring of speed of response to correspondence that is measured by the Local Indicators LI39a and LI39b.

6.7.12 The procedure provides for three stages:

- **Stage 1 – Informal, at point of service delivery:** The aim is to resolve the complaint as soon as possible. It may be possible to resolve the complaint on the spot to the satisfaction of the complainant.
- **Stage 2 – Formal, Service Area:** These are formal complaints made about a Service Area. They are responded to formally, setting out findings and what action is being taken.
- **Stage 3 – Formal, Service Area Review:** These are formal complaints where the complainant is not happy about how the original complaint has been handled. If the complainant is still unhappy after this response, they are given details of the Local Government Ombudsman.

Performance in Handling Complaints

6.7.13 The Complaints Procedure will apply to all directorates of the Council. For the first time there will be an identical approach to complaints across all directorates. This will allow complaints to be monitored consistently, without the problems experienced in looking at customer correspondence.



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- 6.7.14 As part of the complaints procedure, on a similar basis to that proposed for customer service standards, there will be a basket of local performance indicators. This is presently under development in conjunction with services.

6.8 Corporate Customer Service Standards

- 6.8.1 There are currently no corporate standards of customer service in place. Establishing these standards is a priority for the Deputy Leader in 2003/4. The aim is to develop these standards by March 2004.
- 6.8.2 The Corporate Customer Relations Team, within the Resources Directorate is leading the development of the standards, involving co-ordinators from all directorates. Once the standards are in place, managing the service to the standards will be the responsibility of each service.
- 6.8.3 There is however no clearly established role for corporately managing standards of service. This is divided as follows:
- Chief Officers are currently accountable to their Cabinet Members for the service provided, and this will remain to be the case in the future;
 - There is a Corporate Customer Relations Manager within the Resources Directorate, responsible principally for managing the Customer Contact Centre contract and for collating the customer service standards and performance against the indicators;
 - Local Neighbourhood Offices are located in another area of the Resources Directorate, and will transfer to the Local services Directorate in the first phase of localisation (April 2004).
- 6.8.4 This fragmented approach makes it extremely difficult to establish and manage to a single set of customer service standards across the organisation. It requires managers within services to be willing to deliver to those standards and to withstand the pressure of trying to deliver a service against delivering *customer service*.
- 6.8.5 Progress towards this so far is slight. The work was reported as 'Amber – There is a delay to the achievement of this milestone' at the last Performance Plan Monitoring (Quarter 3). A draft Customer Charter is available and is shown within **Appendix 2**. As part of the development of the customer service standards, there is planned to be a basket of local performance indicators. These are presently under discussion with service directorates.



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- 6.8.6 However, the work in place so far only covers the basic aspects in which standards should be expected to be set. With the deadline for localisation of services looming, it is concerning that this fundamental aspect of customer service infrastructure is not in place.

6.9 Dealing with Statutory Complaints

- 6.9.1 Complaints may be received and dealt with by the Council under a variety of statutes, particularly
- The procedures for the independent investigation of complaints by adults and children who are clients of Social Care and Health;
 - The independent review procedure for admission and exclusion from schools; and
 - The procedure available to any service user to complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman.

As explained above, these procedures are not within the scope of the proposed Corporate Complaints Procedure.

- 6.9.2 It is expected that some complainants will remain dissatisfied with the result of the Council's investigations under the new procedure and that they are likely to proceed to complain to the Local Government Ombudsman.
- 6.9.3 This statutory service, independent of the Council results in a small but significant number of complaints each year. In 2002/3, the Ombudsman determined 462 complaints against Birmingham.
- 6.9.4 Whilst Birmingham has an excellent reputation for settling complaints quickly and efficiently, there are serious consequences to investigations where the Ombudsman determines that there has been mal-administration by the Council causing injustice to the complainant.
- 6.9.5 These include a report which (whilst not identifying the parties) will be published and normally results in adverse publicity for the Council, a compensatory payment which may range from a token to a very substantial settlement, and there may some further required remedy, such as rectifying poor workmanship. There were two reports against Birmingham in 2002/2003.
- 6.9.6 The independence of the Local Ombudsman is valuable. The Council may investigate a complaint itself and be accused of a lack of impartiality, once a complaint is investigated by the Ombudsman, who is based in York, and has powers similar to those of a High Court Judge, no question of bias can arise.



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- 6.9.7 The Ombudsman regards a complaint to her as the last resort, so she will not consider a case where the complainant has not exhausted Council procedures first. The Council regards her determination as final and that can be helpful to us when a complainant persists after her involvement has ended. Once an independent investigation has been conducted, it is not an efficient use of the Council's resources to continue corresponding with the complainant.
- 6.9.8 Where the Ombudsman receives a number of similar complaints, it may indicate an area of service that is failing and enable the Council to correct the problem. It can occur where the Council's policy is not sufficiently clear and causes service users to complain because they believe that they are being treated unfairly. The Ombudsman service can assist the Council in identifying pressure points and problems and allow us to deal with them promptly.



7: Focusing on Customers

7.1 Introduction

- 7.1.1 As part of the evidence gathering in the review, Members wished to understand the ways in which areas of the Council already focus services upon customers.
- 7.1.2 Chief Officers were asked to provide written evidence in response to five questions about their service:
- How are service priorities set and how are customers involved in this process?
 - What are the expectations of the departmental customers?
 - By what methods does the department foster a culture of customer focus?
 - What are the views of departmental customers (including potential customers) on the service?
 - What is the process for dealing with complaints from service users?
- 7.1.3 These reports were discussed between the members and the Chief Officers or their representatives. Responses to each of the questions are set out below.
- 7.1.4 The Chief Officers invited to attend were selected via the following criteria:
- Those with responsibility for services identified as important by customers (waste management, education);
 - Those with responsibility for other high profile services (Social Care, Highways, Housing);
 - Those with responsibility for large areas of the organisation (leisure and culture, resources).
- 7.1.5 The following chapter is based on the evidence submitted by the Chief Officers concerned, and their perceptions as presented to the Committee during questioning. This is reported in good faith below. However, there were questions raised in some instances as to how some of the policies actually translated into practice. Members therefore drew on their knowledge gained from other Scrutiny reviews to supplement this evidence.



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7.2 Setting Service Priorities

- 7.2.1 The first question addressed the setting of service priorities, in order to gauge how a focus on customers was achieved within this, and also to appreciate how involved customers were in this process.
- 7.2.2 Inevitably, each of the responses from Chief Officers detailed a number of demands made upon them determining service priorities. These largely fall into two categories of frameworks and policy: *national* and *corporate*.
- 7.2.3 National framework or policy documents include legislation and other statutory duties, and performance indicators that determine the level of service to be achieved.
- **Waste Management** has some service priorities prescribed by statute: the Environmental Protection Act (EPA) 1990 sets out standards to be achieved by the street cleansing service, including detailed response times to clean-up littered streets.
 - National framework documents govern much of **Social Care** and **Education**. The response from Social Care states that "growing emphasis upon national standards, for example National Standards Frameworks now exist in mental health and older people with a forthcoming one in children. These prescribe to a large extent the type of service and standards of service delivery that are required."
 - The priorities of the Revenues and Payments Division of the **Resources Directorate** are determined around the Best Value Performance Indicators 9 (collection of council tax), 10 (collection of business rates) and through the business planning process.
- 7.2.4 However, within these frameworks the Council has discretion to influence how the services are provided and also the ability to exceed the minimum prescribed standards if so desired.
- 7.2.5 Corporate framework or policy documents include the Cabinet and Corporate Plan and locally determined performance standards. In addition, there are service specific documents, for example the Housing Service cites the Housing Performance Improvement Plan (PIP), which was strengthened following the Audit Commission's report in September 2003 on the Re-inspection of the Repairs Service. This details over 20 critical actions for the Service to be carried out in the next two years.
- 7.2.6 Each of these show priorities set largely in response to usually high level priorities set outside the directorate. However, alongside this, every directorate undertakes consultation. These are intended to feed into the priority setting process.



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- 7.2.7 Examples of instances where consultation is used to set priorities include:
- **Highway Maintenance Strategy and Policy** was set after the Best Value service review in 2000, and the resulting 5-year service improvement plan was approved in July 2002. The consultation undertaken included the MORI Birmingham's Peoples' Panel, service level surveys (e.g. Winter Maintenance Telephone Survey) and surveys for other stakeholders (e.g. Contractor Questionnaire Approach, Members Questionnaire).
 - The **Corporate Customer Relations** team, whose service priorities are based on the results of corporate consultation via the Annual Opinion Survey, People's Panel, Coalition of Disabled People and specific focus groups targeted at people who are 'hard to reach'.
- 7.2.8 Within Social Care and Education much of the consultation cited was at national level. For example, in Social Care the national service frameworks are "*devised on the basis of evidence, research and consultation with service users and their representatives.*" Locally, within both directorates, there are formal mechanisms for
- Social Care:
 - User Involvement and Carers Unit set up to provide "*a critical point for the exchange of information between service users, their carers and the Directorate about the services and standards they require*".
 - Service User and Carer Executive Group, which brings together "*Chairs or other representatives from the complete range of user and carer forums across the city.*"
 - Education:
 - Secondary Head Teachers Forum
 - Primary Head Teachers Forum
 - Birmingham Governors Network
 - Major Road Shows open to all Schools and Governing Bodies.
- 7.2.9 As can be seen from this, the depth and breadth of consultation varies greatly, as does the extent to which it is then taken into account in priority setting - even within directorates. A further issue to arise here is the distinction between *involving* customers and *consulting* them. Members asked Chief Officers to set out how they *involved* customers in these processes, and almost universally were given examples of *consultation* in response.



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- 7.2.10 The only example given of a truly participative approach was the *Tenants Conference for Birmingham Council Tenants*, held in October 2002 to identify key priorities and policy issues. Six major policy issues were identified and the tenants identified their key objectives and determined their importance within each of those priorities.
- 7.2.11 At the opposite end of the scale was the response from the Decriminalised Parking Enforcement section within Highways, which had an essentially a reactive approach, where taking into account *"letters, E-mails and telephone calls received"* was deemed to be involving customers.
- 7.2.12 The other most commonly cited means of 'involving' customers was attendance at ward meetings. For example Minor Traffic Management Schemes are
- "... rooted in the involvement of Constituency Services officers in the work of the Ward Committees, Ward Advisory Boards and their role as Ward Service Officers"*
- (Highways Written Submission)*
- 7.2.13 However this is problematic in terms of fully involving customers. Such meetings tend to be wholly within the control of the Council (who sets the agenda, chooses the time and place) and do not attract a range of residents. Although this is a visible and democratic means of engaging with residents, it is also very formal and a 'duty' for most directorates. No evidence submitted discloses how these meetings are actually used in setting priorities.
- 7.2.14 An extension of this is attendance at residents groups and other user groups. Again, whilst a useful means of being seen to be listening to customers, these are problematic: they can be unrepresentative and often a formal requirement rather than a genuine response to customers.
- 7.2.15 Community engagement and involvement is not a focus of this Review. It is also noted that these issues are addressed as part of the devolution and localisation guidelines. One of the stated aims of Devolution is to *"create opportunities for local people to get involved in running their local area and their local services"*. The report on guidance to constituency committees on community engagement states, inter alia, that each Constituency Committee will need to publish - in an accessible form - an annual Community Engagement Plan, and that *"consultation is an element of engagement"* - it is not a substitute. Whilst it is reassuring that this is understood at a corporate level, it is unclear how forcefully this point will be made to Constituency Directors. As can be seen by the evidence submitted by some Chief Officers, there is a real danger that lip service will be paid to the ideal of customer involvement, but this will not manifest itself in practice.



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7.3 Customer Expectations

7.3.1 The second question asked of Chief Officers was around what their customers' expectations were perceived to be. The responses varied greatly in their interpretation. Essentially there were two kinds of responses:

- Summaries of perceptions of customers' expectations,
- Summaries of prescribed standards.

7.3.2 The responses in the former category were based on consultation undertaken and experience gained from running the service involved, and represent a genuine attempt to understand what customers want over and above the core business and already prescribed standards:

"Customer expectations are sometimes contradictory with car users expecting free flowing traffic, event organisers expecting road closures, pedestrians expecting to cross roads without waiting and businesses expecting little or no disruption while development proceeds."

(Highways Written Submission)

"Increasingly customers expect the Council to respond to information received and for their views to be reflected in the decision making process. In its most basic terms, consultation to date has revealed a desire for clean streets, an efficient and reliable refuse collection service and action to tackle graffiti and other anti-social activities. The most recent MORI poll found that top of the list for future priorities was more money being spent on the "street scene" including street cleansing."

(Waste Management Submission)

7.3.3 The latter category of summaries of prescribed standards show that the service sees customer expectations as a reflection of what they aim to provide (albeit after consultation with customers, or in line with statutory or external accreditation guidelines). This suggests that these services are not looking outside their own frameworks for what the customer wants and represents an extremely limited vision of customer expectations. Housing gave the following examples:

The Tenants Quality Promise sets out the service standards for our customers (council tenants and leaseholders). It is reviewed regularly through the local Housing Liaison Boards. Tenants are also involved in the selection and setting of service standard in the procurement of external contractors for example the repairs service.



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The Quality Mark Scheme for approved private building contractors setting out service standards for improvement and renovation work carried out for private sector owner-occupiers.

(Housing Submission)

7.3.4 Libraries provide a list of their service standards, for example:

- *Be open when customers wish to use the service;*
- *Provide a wide range of reading material for free loan to adults, children and young people in a variety of accessible formats and in community languages and which reflect the cultural and ethnic diversity of local communities;*
- *Train staff so that they are able to provide a high standard of service.*

(Libraries Submission)

7.3.5 It is therefore a question as to whether some services are over-reliant on existing frameworks in managing their customer relations. Where such standards are continually reviewed and do genuinely reflect customer expectations and aspirations, then this can be a very useful tool. However, there is a danger that such an approach limits the focus on customer care to that which is already within the service's current sphere of activity.

7.4 Fostering a Culture of Customer Focus

7.4.1 Chief Officers were asked how their directorates fostered a culture of customer focus. The aim of this question was to get beyond specific actions taken as a part of service delivery (however good and customer focused) and understand how staff, processes and the environment were managed to promote good customer care.

7.4.2 In posing this question, there was no suggestion that a 'customer is always right' culture ought to be imposed. Rather there is a need to encourage an ethos where responsive staff view the customer as fundamentally important as to how they do their job. There is little evidence of this. The majority of responses did focus back on the specifics, giving examples of customer care rather than addressing the more fundamental question of *fostering a culture* of customer focus.



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7.4.3 A good example is Highways, which presents somewhat patchy evidence. Whilst the consultation undertaken was wide the evidence presented of a 'customer focus' relies on examples of customer-friendly policies (some of them statutory) and some rather vague statements:

"For planned maintenance schemes advance notice is given 7-14 days prior to start on site, notification letters issued to all frontages and other directly affected premises, hand delivered by casual staff. 7-14 days prior to start on Site, notification letters issued to Ward Councillors."

(Highways - Network Management)

"Many of the services within the Highway Maintenance area are customer focused e.g. Planned Maintenance, Street Lighting, Footway Crossings."

(Highways - Network Management)

7.4.4 The response from the Parking section exemplifies this, listing actions such as CCTV cameras, clear signage, and publicised contact details. Whilst these undoubtedly improve customer care and may well be in response to customer feedback, it is not in itself evidence of a culture in which the customer is key.

7.4.5 The problem is not with the policies or standards in place, but the evidence does not show how these relate to what the customer wants.

7.4.6 There is also clear evidence of a continuing 'departmental' approach to customer focus, rather than any overarching guiding strategy or approach. Highways, Leisure and Culture and Resources all presented their evidence in sections relating to each service / directorate, with no effort made to combine the response.

7.4.7 However, there were examples of innovative methods of fostering a customer-focused service. The submission from Housing again shows an aspiration for their customers to be more embedded in their processes. As well as general consultation with customers on major government policy changes, e.g. rent restructuring, supporting people, tenancy conditions, the service:

- Supports tenants to develop local structures to provide services;
- Supports tenants in two Pathfinder areas to appoint independent external tenant advisors in developing future options. This includes local Housing Conferences for tenants;
- Launched a Tenant Participation Compact in 2000 that aims to develop the involvement of customers in all aspects of the management of local housing services.



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7.4.8 However, a different perspective was brought to bear on Housing's submission in the Audit Commission report of 2003.¹³ The Tenants Quality Promise (described in section 7.3.3) was described as "ambitious" and that:

"... the Council is not seeking regular feedback from individual customers across the range of Repair and Maintenance Services delivered and when it is obtained is not used to inform future Service development and individual concerns raised by customers are not always attended to"

7.4.9 The previous Inspection report had recommended a review of the Tenants Quality Promise, and the 2003 report stated that this "had not been fully reviewed".

7.4.10 Waste Management is the only service to use performance management information to ensure staff are aware of the impact of their actions / performance on customers. Performance related pay is being introduced for Refuse Collectors, linking pay directly to the number of missed collections reported. In addition:

"The Department has adopted a "flat" management structure to ensure Senior Managers are not remote from Service Users. Managers regularly attend Ward Committees, Neighbourhood Forums, Housing Liaison Boards etc., and are able to adjust local service provision accordingly – e.g. changing timings / frequencies of Street Cleaning."

7.4.11 The Education directorate submitted a "Framework of processes for providing and obtaining feedback about services", which sets out how the various stakeholders can contribute to planning within the directorate.

¹³ Birmingham City Council – Repairs and Maintenance Re-inspection, Audit Commission 2003



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7.4.12 However, the best statement of how a customer-focused culture is focused comes, not surprisingly, from the Corporate Customer Relations team within the Resources Directorate. Their submission states:

"Specific methods by which the team foster a culture of customer focus include:

- *Employee induction and ongoing training in customer service skills*
- *Regular evaluation and review of systems and processes to ensure they are working for the customer*
- *Outbound calling which involves contacting customers to canvass their views on the service*
- *Customer service competencies are embedded in job descriptions and employee personal development*
- *Best practice and learning are shared amongst the team and within the Directorate*
- *Service processes are analysed and where appropriate redesigned, prior to inclusion within the Contact Centre operation, checking each stage the customer must go through, and making sure each one is handled well*
- *All members of the team are expected and do 'lead by example'*
- *Regular communication mechanisms are in place between the contact centre and service departments to ensure that the systems and procedures work 'end to end'*
- *Open days and presentations both internally and externally to promote the work of the team and explain how the contact centre works."*

(Resources Written Submission)

7.4.13 The statement goes on to say:

"In order for new initiatives such as the contact centre to be successful, the whole council needs to work as a customer focused organisation -all services need to have a common goal, right first time as close to the first point of contact as possible. It's not just about improving service responsiveness - it has to result in improved service delivery. Getting it right first time means that citizens receive a high quality service free of basic errors without being told 'you've come to the wrong place'. For the Councillors right first time means eliminating waste caused by basic errors."



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External accreditation

7.4.14 External accreditation is one way in which some services aim to focus on customers. These processes not only recognise achievement in this area but also provide a method for involving and responding to customers. Examples given include:

- Highways: Beacon Status for 2003/04 for Street and Highway Works, - a large part of the success was due to the Considerate Contractor Scheme, which promotes good customer care in external contractors;
- The Council Tax and Business Rates and Neighbourhood Advice and Information Service sections of Resources were awarded the Charter Mark in 2003;
- Building Control was awarded the Charter Mark in 2000. In addition, they were one of the first Building Control units in the country to achieve the International Quality standard ISO9000 in 1994.

7.4.15 Indeed, the City Council holds of a further ten Charter Marks:

- Birmingham Library and Information Services;
- Sport and Leisure;
- Wyndcliffe Junior Community School;
- Civic and Commercial Catering;
- Regulation Division;
- Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery;
- Local Land Charges;
- Employment Preparation Team;
- Shakti Day Centre;
- Trading Standards.

7.4.16 This is very much down to the will and diligence of individual services, but this does demonstrate that there are those in the Council who are prepared to recognise and confront customer focus issues.

7.5 Customer Views

7.5.1 The fifth question asked what the views of customers (including potential customers) were on the service provided.

7.5.2 The views of customers on service delivery have already been explored above (Chapter 4). However, it is worth noting here that all directorates gather their customers' views in one form or another – either via on-going consultation and monitoring, or in response to specific, ad-hoc, needs.



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7.6 Complaints Processes

- 7.6.1 Currently, directorates are responsible for producing and managing their own complaints procedures. Managerial guidelines and a corporate code of practice for managing complaints were introduced within the Council in April 1993. However, these have not been reviewed since 1994.
- 7.6.2 A corporate complaints strategy is being implemented across all Council directorates and this is discussed in section 6.7. However, this is not yet in effect. The evidence submitted of current procedures however demonstrated the considerable variation across directorates in how such processes are managed.
- 7.6.3 There is variation in how customers are expected to raise a complaint with the service concerned:
- Within Housing, service users fill out a complaints form at their local office.
 - The overwhelming majority of complaints / requests for assistance regarding Waste Management are received by telephone at the Corporate Contact Centre. Complaints and requests for assistance are also received directly at Fleet and Waste Management via e-mail and letter.
- 7.6.4 There is further variation in response time:
- The Highways service procedure is to acknowledge the complaint within 3 working days of receipt, then to resolve the complaint or give a decision within a further 15 working days;
 - The local Housing office has 10 working days to respond to the complainant although this does not necessarily mean that the complaint is resolved within this timescale;
 - In Waste Management there are prescribed timescales for dealing with the most common types of complaint e.g. a missed refuse collection must be picked up by the end of the next working day. (Staff at the Contact Centre input details of complaints and requests into the Service's complaints management system whilst talking to the caller and they are instantaneously dispatched to the Operational Depot to be actioned).
- 7.6.5 Social Care cites the national standard: *"it is a legal requirement for both adults and children that there is a publicised complaints and representations procedure. This outlines the process that must be followed in relation to a complaint, which includes local examination, an independent investigation if required, and ultimately an independent complaints panel. There are prescribed timetables within the law for responding to complaints and a presumption that complaints will be resolved at the lowest possible level."* However, this does not exclude the need for a local procedure, but no detail is given of this.



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- 7.6.6 Most alarmingly, two directorates (Housing and Education) are currently developing new procedures, concurrent with but with no apparent direct relationship to the new corporate system.
- 7.6.7 The Education Directorate is currently revising the procedure for responding to concerns raised by service users (over and above the procedures described in the National Framework). The aim is to "*streamline a range of existing processes and establish the key point of contact for such concerns (where they cannot be dealt with through existing processes) in the strategic core of the Directorate.*" It was stated only that the Directorate is "*keeping an eye*" on what complaints procedures City Council is corporately developing.
- 7.6.8 The response from Leisure and Culture demonstrates that not only is there variation across services, but also within directorates:
- *Arts and Events, Community and Play*: a 'Customer Comments' leaflet, available at all our services and facilities enables users to highlight comments, compliments and complaints;
 - *Parks and Nature Conservation Division*: A fully integrated Quality Assurance procedure is in place across the division's services, (ISO 9002) which extends to the service provider partners. This covers all aspects of the grounds maintenance operation and includes systems for: enquiry handling, joint evaluation, health and safety and customer liaison. This is externally accredited annually.



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7.7 Summary

- 7.7.1 As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the five questions addressed to Chief Officers aimed to gain an appreciation of the ways in which Council services already focus upon customers.
- 7.7.2 The responses clearly demonstrate that there is much variation within and across directorates. Most worryingly, in some cases there is a lack of cohesion within directorates. Examples of excellent practice are often side by side examples of poor practice. The work of good individuals and sections is often overshadowed by the varied and inconsistent picture across the organisation.
- 7.7.3 There is good reason to be concerned about the level of coherence and strength of direction with regard to customer focus. This can and is being addressed corporately. However, as has already been discussed, there is the simultaneous move to localisation. The challenge must therefore be to ensure that corporate good practice does not get lost at constituency level and is properly monitored and enforced. The lesson from the directorate responses above is that without a strong corporate direction there is the danger that service provision will continue to be inconsistent and patchy.



8: Other Local Authorities

8.1 Introduction

- 8.1.1 As part of the evidence gathering for this review, three members of the Committee undertook a visit with officers to Newcastle and Sunderland City Councils. This section summarises what was found.
- 8.1.2 Newcastle and Sunderland were rated respectively as 'Good' and 'Excellent' by the CPA overall in their last inspections. These authorities were selected because they are regarded as having been successful in driving forward their approach to delivering services. Whilst in scale they are obviously smaller authorities than Birmingham (serving approximately 250,000 and 300,000 citizens respectively), there is much that can be learned from their approaches.

8.2 Newcastle City Council

Customer Service Strategy

- 8.2.1 Newcastle City Council was rated as 'Good' in their last Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA). Newcastle has been developing its Customer Service Strategy corporately since 1998. The strategy was in response to an observed fall in customer satisfaction with services, and a perception that services were not horizontally integrated – the often referred to 'silo mentality'.
- 8.2.2 In developing a corporate strategy, there was very firm direction from the Chief Executive of the Council with a clear vision of integrated service and strong leadership to ensure implementation. This was matched on a political level by the Leader of the Council.



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- 8.2.3 The strategy provides for four main areas:
- A **network of Customer Service Centres (CSCs)** - 'one-stop shops' where customers can access a variety of services;
 - Development of **Call Centre** technology to deal with telephone enquiries – the preferred means of contact by customers;
 - The **use of Information Technology (IT)**, not to replace personal contact in the process, but as a vehicle to enable staff to 'work smarter' and increase the number of channels for accessing services. (Self-service);
 - **Training and development of staff** in customer service, to support them in identifying and delivering what the customer wants.
- 8.2.4 Newcastle has set ambitious targets in the area of Implementing E-Government (IEG). The Government requirement in this area is for full accessibility of services by March 2005, but Newcastle has agreed to achieve this a year ahead of schedule. Present levels of electronic accessibility have recently increased to around 98% of services, making this achievement likely.
- 8.2.5 The Customer Service Strategy also combines with the Asset Management Strategy. It was estimated that it would cost around £150m to make the Council's public buildings compliant with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act, 1995 (DDA). Consequently, the Customer Service Strategy focuses upon high-quality local centres, rather than more numerous lower quality facilities.
- 8.2.6 As the initial consultation on customer service, the Council issued a 'Customer Service Green Paper', aiming to seek the views of its approximate quarter of a million citizens. There was relatively high quality feedback to this; whilst there were around 1,000 responses, the detail of these was relatively high.

Customer Service Centres

- 8.2.7 The strategy provides for six primary CSCs, providing for more than 90% of the population to have access within a 1½-mile radius of at least one centre. The aim is to create a network of smaller, satellite centres as the next stage.
- 8.2.8 The CSCs aim for a seamless approach to accessing Council services, but also are providing greater access to other public services, such as Job Centre Plus, Connexions and the Inland Revenue. It is proposed to include access to PayPoint through the CSCs, additionally allowing the payment of utility bills.



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- 8.2.9 The approach taken to the CSCs is similar to that used in many Call Centres (including Birmingham's). Through dealing with enquiries with multi-skilled staff at the initial point of contact, the time of specialised 'back-room' staff is freed. This uses IT systems such as the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system to guide the operator through a set of scripts, as well as interfacing with back-office computer systems.
- 8.2.10 Newcastle's Civic Centre CSC resolves 83% of enquiries at the first contact, compared to 40% in 2000.
- 8.2.11 The first CSC opened in July 2000 at the Civic Centre. Two pilot local centres were opened in August and October 2003. The Council has successfully agreed a Private Finance Initiative (PFI) to obtain a further £15m to complete the network of six CSCs between 2004 and 2007.
- 8.2.12 In terms of financing, the benefits put forward for this approach were:
- The PFI has enabled additional up-front funding to be made available for Newcastle to complete its strategic network of CSCs;
 - The costs will be partly recouped through reclaiming costs from services based on use of the CSCs;
 - There is a remit with City Service to reduce overall cost of delivering services by £38m and 150 posts over the next ten years;
 - Improvements in IT and process refinement (particularly in areas such as the collection of Council Tax) will enable other aspects.

The Civic Centre Customer Service Centre

- 8.2.13 The Civic Centre originally had 13 different reception points, and these have been integrated into one customer reception. This provides access to 90 services from six Council Directorates, serving 3,000 customers a week. Feedback indicates 93% satisfaction with the centre.
- 8.2.14 Customers enter the building and are actively greeted by a 'Welcome and Greet Officer', whose role it is to walk the floor, anticipating and dealing with customer needs. This role is similar to that used within the retail sector of having what are essentially 'security staff' on the door, but available to additionally provide customer contact and greet people.



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- 8.2.15 Customers take a ticket from a machine and then wait in a comfortable seating area. The ticket machines allow the customer to differentiate between the services that they require (for example, to select Council Tax payments or Benefits enquiries); this determines which staff they might need to see. Irrespective of this, if customers have more than one enquiry in different sections their ticket number can subsequently be transferred to other queues within the electronic queuing system.
- 8.2.16 The queuing system is provided by Q-Matic. This is an electronic system that not only allocates transactions to available operators, but also provides managerial information on numbers and purpose of transactions, and the length of time taken to conduct those transactions. This is an invaluable tool in diagnosing where to make operational changes, because it allows the manager to objectively evaluate customer feedback on queuing. It illustrates exactly what the nature of the queuing problem is, and how often it is occurring.
- 8.2.17 There are a number of different service points and interview rooms, ranging from straightforward transactions to secure areas where cash and payments are handled. Customers have the option of discussing any matter in a private interview room.
- 8.2.18 Additionally, the CSC provides a large amount of information about Council services, such as for example:
- Customers can enquire about benefits or payment of their Council Tax;
 - Those seeking employment with the City Council can obtain all the information that they need to apply for any job with the City Council;
 - Copies of every planning application made in the city are available for inspection.

Outer West Customer Service Centre

- 8.2.19 The second CSC visited was the Outer West CSC in Denton, this opened in November 2003. The development consisted of demolishing the existing library and building a new library, housing office and CSC linking into the existing leisure facilities. The layout improved access for the leisure centre users. A rotunda building containing a lift joined each of the facilities.



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- 8.2.20 As well as increasing the utility of the building in making it a 'one-stop shop' for a range of services, this is also an important link in the context of the Asset Management Strategy. By investing in this way the Council has made the site entirely compliant with the requirements of the DDA, an investment that would need to be made anyway in many locations.

Presentation Standards

- 8.2.21 It was evident in visiting the CSCs that there was a clear corporate standard on presentation in the same kind of way used within the private sector retailing and services.
- 8.2.22 The layout and appearance of the centres visited was open and markedly different to the 'traditional public building'. There is a strong emphasis on standards of appearance and an open layout.
- 8.2.23 The colour scheme is corporate (black and green) and customer-facing staff wear uniforms and name badges. Whilst the décor uses corporate colours, in the Civic Centre it also integrates the original 1960s murals that are part of the Civic Centre. Even where (in the leisure centre for example) the colour scheme was not corporate green and black, it was in a matching two-tone blue (because of the swimming pool).
- 8.2.24 This may seem a minor point. However, it was evident that the staff took pride in the appearance of both the sites and their personal appearance.
- 8.2.25 All front line staff were issued with uniforms in corporate colours. All staff seen were very smartly dressed, as well as having the utility of practical and smart work attire. In terms of the décor and colour schemes, these presented the image that the building was all part of one organisation, not a library and a leisure centre.

Management Style

- 8.2.26 Through discussing with the officers involved in customer service it was clear that one of the key factors in the approach taken towards customer service has been that of managerial style. This was acknowledged as being different to that elsewhere within the City Council.



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8.2.27 Key aspects of this observed were:

- The emphasis placed upon **ensuring that staff enjoy their work**, and that staff problems were resolved quickly;
- The extent to which managers and staff were **informed about their performance** and were able to say exactly how they were performing;
- **Training and development** of staff, from a thorough corporate and then departmental induction, through to specific training in customer care, awareness of disabilities and special needs and even work shadowing with service departments;
- Celebration of success and achievement, with **positive reinforcement and support** by managers;
- The **levels of involvement** that staff have (via focus groups) in the decisions that affect their roles. Trade unions are actively involved in developing approaches, and ensuring that the fears and difficulties of staff regarding any change are resolved.

8.2.28 This is felt to have contributed to benefits in other human resource areas. Absence within Customer Service is around 3%, whereas previously in Revenues (Council Tax) it was around 10% (the level experienced generally in other areas of the Council).

Success Factors

8.2.29 Newcastle identified a number of success factors were identified within their approach. Many of these have been critical in being able to deliver a customer-focused strategy:

- **Clear vision** on the direction in which they wanted to take their service provision, combined with **strong leadership** at both an officer and political level in order to deliver this;
- **Political support** for the process within the Council;
- The **funding** available to do it, achieved through obtaining the money to invest up front via a PFI and then driven by efficiency savings and charging this back to service departments / partners as accommodation costs in the future;
- **Breaking down barriers** between departments of the Council, thereby encouraging a seamless approach to service provision;
- **Equipping and empowering staff** with the ability to resolve problems relating to their work area (often utilising their specific knowledge and resolving personal frustrations in the process);
- **Involving stakeholders** in the design of facilities and the means by which services are provided.



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- 8.2.30 Other factors that were identified as contributing to this during the course of the visit were:
- Having **consistent corporate standards of service in place**, covering all aspects of presentation as well as the delivery of the service;
 - **One corporate complaints procedure** being in operation, having had many different systems operating in departments.

8.3 City of Sunderland

- 8.3.1 The City of Sunderland was assessed by the CPA overall as 'Excellent' in its last assessment. The Council provides services to a population of around 300,000 people.
- 8.3.2 Sunderland's customer service strategy is called People First. Its direction is determined by consultation with the citizens' panel ('Community Spirit' - 1,800 people from the city, similar to Birmingham's People's Panel in principle). The strategy was launched in March 2003, and similarly to Newcastle, the investment has been enabled by Housing Stock Transfer and funding from partner organisations.
- 8.3.3 There is a planned investment of £50m in services through People First in the next four years (by 2007). Additional to this there is the cost of establishing the Moorside Centre (£10m) where the Change Team and Contact Centre are based.

The People First Strategy

- 8.3.4 The strategy is part of a process of transforming services. As part of doing this, Sunderland is seeking to
- Achieve major strategic change, unequalled in local government in terms of scale, ambition and citizen-led ethos;
 - Put people at the heart of their services;
 - Provide better, more accessible services;
 - Provide greater choice in services;



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- 8.3.5 Partnership plays a key part in the proposals for service integration. Similarly to Newcastle, Sunderland is seeking to provide access to not only Council Services, but also other public services in the city. These include
- Sunderland Housing Group;
 - Health and community health care services;
 - Northumbria Police and community policing services;
 - Jobcentre Plus;
 - Learning and skills, including City of Sunderland College.
- 8.3.6 There are presently variable degrees of sign-up to the strategy from the partner organisations involved. Some (particularly newly-formed) organisations do not want to lose their new identities as part of signing up to a co-ordinated approach.
- 8.3.7 An additional objective involves aligning performance management between the Council and its partners. This involves measuring against the same performance outcomes, with the same measures and frameworks in place. The Council is not currently aligned with its partners, but this is an aspiration for the long term.

Levels of Facility and Access

- 8.3.8 The People First Strategy provides for variable levels of specification for access points to services. At the core of this is the Electronic Village Hall (EVH), points at which there are computers to allow services to be accessed electronically via free Internet access.
- 8.3.9 The levels of specification can broadly be described as follows:
- **Area Centres:** Including the EVH, indoor leisure facilities, a branch library, youth and community facilities, a service point (see below), as well as access to partners' facilities;
 - **Sub-Area Centres:** Including the EVH, library, a service point, and access to partners' facilities;
 - **Local Centre:** Including an EVH or library and service point, assisted service using the Contact Centre (see below) or video-conferencing facilities to provide services;
 - **Mobile Service Centre:** Using Call Centre and video-conferencing facilities to provide advice and payment services, EVH and free internet access, library services and crèche / childcare facilities;
 - **Service Point:** Based within existing facilities (such as shops, community associations, post offices and public venues), the service points provide information on all services, booking or ordering a range of services, 'Your nearest' service, news updates and training / education and employment information;



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- **Contact Centre:** A call centre (similar to Contact Birmingham) to provide access to services via multi-skilled staff who can either resolve the problem or deal with this on a 'one transfer' basis. The centre becomes operational in January 2004.

8.3.10 Sunderland's strategy provides for the following scale of facility provision:

- 6 Area Centres;
- 6 Sub-Area Centres;
- 12 Local Centres;
- 3 Mobile Service Centres;
- 30 Service Points;
- 57 access points, at a gross estimated cost of £35.7m.

Achieving 'Service Transformation'

8.3.11 There is a programme of phased change, to 're-engineer services' (changing how the services work). People who are experienced in operating and delivering the service look at the process by which work is carried out.

8.3.12 The concept is that services can be genuinely transformed by challenging existing methodologies. Changes to services are only made where there is demonstrable service improvement. This improvement is used as the basis of selling the change to those who need to implement it, and achieving their buy-in.

8.3.13 To do this, the staff in the Change Team are seconded from the services concerned. This provides the expertise in the processes necessary to make informed and appropriate improvements.

8.3.14 This does create some resentment from service departments because the secondees are selected because they are among the most proficient and knowledgeable within their service areas. This is however accepted as being a necessary part of driving the overall service forward.

8.3.15 The secondment process is a key part of the process changes necessary behind People First. Those examining the processes are removed from their work environment, reducing the influence of their peers in resisting necessary change, as well as removing the pressure of also having to do the job and deliver the service.

8.3.16 The secondments to the Change Team are funded centrally and (in the majority of cases) the individual's job is open for them to return to upon completion of the secondment. The central funding allows for the department to back-fill behind the secondee during the secondment.



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- 8.3.17 Trade unions were wary of any potential for outsourcing services, as they perceive this as a means by which their members' terms and conditions could be eroded. It has been an important element that the trade unions are involved closely in the consultation process and are able to appreciate the benefits of service change.

Moorside – Media Showcase

- 8.3.18 The Information and Communications Technology (ICT) team is integrated with the E-Government team at Sunderland and is a key part of change management. This is a key factor that provides for the potential of exploiting the new options of technology: people with the knowledge of technology are working alongside those with knowledge of the processes in applying the technology. Sunderland has been awarded Beacon Status for the use of ICT to promote social inclusion.
- 8.3.19 The driving force behind the strategy is to offer people the services that they want along with choices in how they access them. The requirements of implementing E-Government are thereby being used to support face-to-face service delivery (especially through means such as webcam and video-conferencing).
- 8.3.20 Within the Moorside Centre there is a 'showcase' room illustrating some of the means by which People First will use technology improve services and accessibility. Not all services will be available through all media, but there will be a considerable range. Examples include
- The **Electronic Village Hall** (EVH), a local point through which a range of Council services can be accessed electronically with free internet access;
 - **Smartcards** to identify and record information about students' studies, allowing them to access online teaching support from home;
 - Use of **Personal Digital Assistants** (PDAs) by staff carrying out assessments in remote locations to distribute information to multiple parties (e.g. to contacts in Housing services, social care, etc);
 - **Video-conferencing** facilities provided by both **Video-Phone** and **Web-cam**, allowing service users in local centres or the home to speak face-to-face with specialists in central locations;
 - **Service Points** (information kiosks), allowing access to free e-mail to the Council, and reporting / booking services;
 - Accessing services via **Digital TV** in a similar way to through the EVH.



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- 8.3.21 The showcase aims to overcome some of the hesitancy that people experience in adapting to the changes in how services will be provided. It provides an opportunity to see and experience these, first hand. This is particularly important as part of the staff orientation in this area, and there is a programme of introducing staff to the changes.
- 8.3.22 There are also E-Champions within the community (presently around 50, with an aspiration for a further 50). These champions show how services can be accessed electronically and encourage and support others in doing so.
- 8.3.23 Many of the opportunities illustrated with technology are about encouraging the development of new, multi-functional front-line personnel. These are particularly useful in the home. For example, equipping front line staff with PDAs would enable them to
- Combine health, care and other visits (e.g. housing), distributing information from the visits via e-mail;
 - Integrate neighbourhood and street services (such as reporting items for cleaning);
 - Integrate regulatory functions (licensing, planning, health and safety and hygiene).
- 8.3.24 Much of this technology is relatively cheap. Service points are provided at a cost of £21k each for four years, including maintenance and repair contracts. PDAs cost around £250 each (and are becoming cheaper).

The Hetton Centre

- 8.3.25 The Hetton Centre is an Area Centre within the People First strategy, located in the parish of Hetton in the Coalfields area of Sunderland. The location was the site of a colliery until the 1980s, which provided community focus and sports and leisure facilities.
- 8.3.26 The Hetton Centre is a location where a community regeneration initiative is also combined with a general service initiative. Upon the closure of the colliery the site was left not only without financial support, but also in need of physical development. Sporting facilities have been maintained, and for example where there were slag heaps, there is now a golf course.



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- 8.3.27 The new centre opened in April 2002 and provides a number of facilities, including
- Library and EVH;
 - Youth facilities, including a room that youths can use in the evenings;
 - Free childcare / crèche facilities available for anyone using the facility;
 - A community café, which also generates income;
 - Outdoor leisure facilities including a football pitch;
 - Home care facilities;
 - A Police sub-station;
 - A local Housing Office operated in conjunction with the Sunderland Housing Group.
- 8.3.28 Through co-location the centre has created benefits such as the Police being able to work with the Youth Service, particularly on issues such as drug use. This has seen a 15% reduction in the last six months.

Benefits from People First

- 8.3.29 Sunderland identify the following intended benefits from People First by 2007:
- More choice and access for local people;
 - Integrated services through single access channels;
 - Partners working together – not just about Council services but also those of other partners;
 - Contribution to national targets, such as social exclusion, education, E-Government;
 - Investment in and improved access to key buildings;
 - Phasing out of dilapidated buildings, avoiding the need for up to £5m of essential maintenance;
 - Achieving compliance with the DDA in all People First locations;
 - Reduced cost of delivering services, with savings reinvested in building capacity.



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8.4 Summary

- 8.4.1 There are clear benefits exemplified by both Newcastle and Sunderland in delivering a 'one-stop shop' approach to services. This approach does however require significant organisational commitment from the top, as well as political support and of course, corporate investment.
- 8.4.2 In both cases, there was a clear level of corporate drive and control in terms of
- A clear specification of what the corporate service product should look like;
 - The extent to which the customer leads the direction of service provision;
 - Corporate provision and the degree to which the specification is corporately determined and controlled;
 - The extent to which innovative use of ICT underpins improved efficiency of process and delivery of services.
- 8.4.3 Neither Newcastle nor Sunderland is proceeding with extending access to services on a local basis on a particularly variable level. The approach is very much a corporate one, aiming for the relatively simple extension of access, rather than the relatively more complicated system of extended access and variable specification that Birmingham is adopting through localisation.
- 8.4.4 A key link is made with the Asset Management Strategies of both authorities. This includes
- Rationalisation of the existing structure of facilities and points through which service is accessed;
 - Strong emphasis upon having DDA compliant facilities: both Councils have the approach that whatever they do in their service initiatives must result in DDA compliant offices;
 - In the case of Sunderland, combining the asset renewal strategy with a focused local regeneration initiative in Hetton.
- 8.4.5 Both authorities are taking a positive approach with regard to the human resource changes that are necessary to facilitate service change. Within Newcastle there are managerial practices focused upon the ethos of 'happy staff equals happy customers'. In Sunderland there was a clear emphasis on the role of staff developing in line with the processes and technology that they use.



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- 8.4.6 Both Newcastle and Sunderland have driven a high degree of integration through their main service centres. The approach has focused upon multi-skilled staff at the point of access, aiming to resolve customer issues at the initial point of contact or within one transfer.
- 8.4.7 There is also an ambitious but also flexible approach taken with partner organisations. Partly this is necessitated by the fact that access to services related to housing in both authorities requires co-ordination with the housing partner. However, working with other public service providers such as Jobcentre Plus is also an important part of providing access.



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9: Identified Issues

9.1 Introduction

- 9.1.1 During the course of this review members felt that there were a number of areas where action should be taken to address issues identified. It has been important to acknowledge that in many cases work is already being undertaken to address some of these issues. The efforts of the Committee here have therefore been to complement and amplify existing processes wherever possible.
- 9.1.2 The members have focused upon examining the strategic frameworks that are necessary for taking forward issues of customer focus and service in the developing organisation. However, it is inevitable that within this that an element of detail had to be considered within certain aspects of the process. In this respect there are also specific recommendations in these areas.
- 9.1.3 It has also been inevitable that key strategic themes have arisen within the areas of Human Resource (HR) management and Information and Communications Technology (ICT). These areas have already been the subject of other Scrutiny exercises; the intent here is to flag certain topics regarding how these strategic themes must be expected to support localisation and the agenda of cultural change in how the Council becomes more customer focused.
- 9.1.4 Devolution of decision-making is one of the most significant changes to affect the Council. However, it is only one dimension of the relationship between the Council and those it serves. Localisation of services, bringing their management and delivery closer to their customers is the other aspect. Underpinning the relationship between the political and service elements is the participation of the customer. It is essential that in moving towards this new structure that the opportunity is taken to develop better services by focusing upon local customer aspirations and expectations.



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9.2 Organisational Customer Focus

9.2.1 There is a clear aim to increase customer focus through the process of devolution of decision-making and localisation of services. The ambition here is to drive improvement through integrating service delivery and bringing service management closer to the customer.

9.2.2 'Seamless service' has also been an aspiration for the Council for a long time, but the reality of how far we must move culturally on this was highlighted by one particular case presented to members by a customer:

A lady requested a dropped kerb to be constructed outside her house. Three years after the original request she was still waiting. The customer had completed all preliminary work that was requested of her and had paid for the work to be completed three months before relating her complaint to the Members.

However, the work required meant that whilst the customer had arranged for this with the "Dropped Kerb Department", work could not be started until the "Tree Root Department" had attended to the roots of an adjacent tree. No indication was given by the "Dropped Kerb Department" of when this would happen, only that the "Tree Root Department" had been advised of the work and would do it as soon as possible.

On numerous occasions the customer had been told she would be telephoned back and was not. Eventually she was told that her request had been cancelled (by herself). This was not the case and the request was reissued. Whilst the issue has now been resolved (following the direct intervention of members of the review group), the duration and handling of the incident had deeply frustrated the customer.

9.2.3 The reality is that there is a necessity for cross-functional working and co-operation to deliver any service. But despite aspirations towards seamless service, in this case the seams of the organisation were laid bare by a failure to consider the matter from the perspective of the customer, and ensure that they got what they had paid for. The customer did not want to hear about the problems behind the service failure. She only wanted to know when the problem would be fixed.

9.2.4 The problem is one of failing to 'own' and 'champion' the customer's right to a decent service. This lies at the root of many customer service failures. Following (or, if at all possible, before) such failures there needs to be an intercession on behalf of the customer; in a local authority environment the elected member has emerged as the customer champion. Often the most effective way to get service is to go through your local Councillor.



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- 9.2.5 This is of course a fundamental part of Councillors representing citizens. However, if Council services are to improve and appear seamless to the customer then the aim must be for this mechanism to only serve as a support to what the organisation itself does in terms of diagnosing and repairing service failure. The organisation must genuinely strive for 'right first time, every time', but support this with a paradigm of customer care that is second to none.
- 9.2.6 Within Birmingham, whilst corporate standards are in the process of being established, the directorates manage the services that they provide. Ultimately, the directorates are accountable to their Cabinet Members. They are not accountable to a focal point in the organisation for customer service; without this corporate focus there is and will continue to be inconsistency of approach. This is seen not only in the standards of service being aspired to by different directorates, but also in the quality of delivery of services.
- 9.2.7 The role of the newly created Constituency Director posts is to integrate the delivery of services within their constituency. They will manage a package of services delivered by either their own staff, or those of service directorates, tailored to their customer needs in the constituency. To a certain extent, the responsibility for providing services integrated on a local basis therefore lies with these roles.
- 9.2.8 There are two elements to delivering customer service:
- **Strategic direction** from corporate standards of customer service; and
 - **Managing the delivery of service** to the customer.
- 9.2.9 However, strategic customer focus will remain organisationally separate from those managing delivery for the customer in the constituency. There needs to be a very clear relationship established here. Clearly where there is discord between service directorates that must work together to deliver a product to a customer, an intercession on behalf of the customer is necessary.
- 9.2.10 If customer needs are to focus the shape of service delivery, then there is a need to have a corporate force to represent this and combine the efforts of services in the seamless approach that has for so long been an aspiration. The ideal is that the customer should never need to know which directorate they are dealing with, only that the service will be delivered.



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Conclusions

1. *It is clear that there is no one directorate managing corporate customer focus within Birmingham. Services largely determine priorities for customer care in their service areas.*
2. *This is a fundamental factor in the customer perception that customer service and delivery of service within the City Council are disjointed.*
3. *A clear corporate priority of 'serving the customer' must determine the shape of service provision. This priority needs to be managed overall by one directorate, with the ability to directly challenge the actions of directorates not in line with corporate standards, acting as the 'customer champion'.*
4. *There are options for how this role could be carried out organisationally. The preferred option is that this role is a complementary, corporate role to that of the Local Services Directorate, within the Performance Improvement Directorate.*

	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R1	<p>Overall customer focus and customer service within the Council should be clearly defined as the responsibility of the Performance Improvement Directorate. The Directorate should</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be the 'customer champion' in arbitrating on issues of non-integration of services; • Have the ability to directly challenge the actions of other directorates in how they provide services and to ensure that a performance compliance plan is agreed with the relevant director for their customer services; • Be responsible for proposing corporate customer standards and ensuring compliance with them. 	Chief Executive	30 April 2004

9.3 Establishing Customer Service Standards

- 9.3.1 The starting point for measuring performance in any form is a benchmark against which performance can be measured. In the case of customer service and focus, this benchmark is provided in most organisations by a system of standards of service to be delivered.
- 9.3.2 Setting standards on an organisational basis is the fundamental part of aiming for a level of consistency in service. It is the point of reference to which you refer for cross-comparison and progress. Performance indicators must naturally flow from standards, measuring performance against the standard.



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- 9.3.3 The Council has been slow in taking forward the issue of corporate standards. There are no such standards in place corporately, although performance targets do exist and work is currently underway towards delivering this. A framework for Constituency Service Standards (i.e. areas where standards are needed) was approved by the Cabinet Committee – Devolution in November 2003. The aim is to have standards in place for service by April 2004 in order to provide an effective framework for localisation.
- 9.3.4 The subject of standards was also covered by the Best Value Review of Access to Services. This found that while several services had achieved external accreditation from nationally recognized auditing bodies such as Chartermark, Investors in People and Community Legal Service Quality Mark, there were no existing corporate customer care standards applying uniformly across the organisation.
- 9.3.5 The broad areas that service standards should be expected to cover should include:
- What the product looks like – a specification of the service provided, and clear outcomes that can be expected by the customer;
 - How staff are expected to behave in dealing with customers;
 - How staff, premises and correspondence are expected to appear to customers, within the parameters of corporate identity;
 - How customers will be able to access services, including recognising any special needs for access or service provision;
 - How services are to be kept in tune with the needs of customers.
- 9.3.6 Some of these are provided for at a simplistic level by the (draft) Customer Charter (see **Appendix 2**), and have been developed within the minimum service specifications for localised services. However, this does not comprehensively cover all areas of the Council and all services provided.
- 9.3.7 Localisation is the cornerstone of Birmingham’s strategy to relate the delivery of services directly to the wishes of the customer. Yet devolution is a force that may threaten the very corporate nature of customer standards. It involves constituencies taking decisions about what is right for their constituents.



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- 9.3.8 It is imperative that localisation of services delivers on two fronts in addressing this tension: the services must reflect the local differences determined by customer choice, but also make it clear that those services are provided by one Council and not eleven disparate entities.
- 9.3.9 The key to maintaining and then developing standards further lies not only in introducing standards, but also in monitoring and managing compliance. Too often strategies and policies lie on the shelf gathering dust because no one follows up implementation. This cannot be the case with an issue as important as how we deliver service. The introduction of standards must be followed up with energy, with a clear managerial mandate to comply.

Conclusions

5. *The Constituency Service Standards outlined in November 2003 are a starting point for developing local service specifications. However, a much more detailed framework of a corporate nature is needed to take forward standards of customer service and care.*
6. *Work has started on the development of corporate customer service standards and a single corporate complaints procedure. However, progress has been slow and will result in only the basic elements of the framework being in place for the first phase of localisation in April 2004.*
7. *This framework must be developed as a priority to ensure continued consistency as services are transferred to constituencies under localisation. It is also an essential part of measuring where all services (not just those being localised) are against where they need to be, to meet customer expectation.*
8. *Other authorities present their corporate identity clearer and more cohesively than Birmingham. This is not related to the size of Birmingham, but rather typifies our weak corporate nature and inability to exert influence over all areas of the organisation.*
9. *Presentation is an integral part of appearing to be one Council, both for customer perception and for staff feeling as part of one organisation. A single identity must be retained following devolution and localisation; however this must also allow for local variation within a clear framework of corporate standards.*



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	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R2	<p>Put in place a corporate framework of customer service standards across the Council.</p> <p>The framework of standards must define the required levels of courtesy, behaviour, information and provision of facilities for</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All dealings with customers (face-to-face, by correspondence and by telephone); • List/specification of services provided; • Specification of facilities provided at service access points and locations; • Mechanisms by which customer views must be gathered; and • Presentation of staff, buildings and corporate materials. 	Deputy Leader	30 June 2004
R3	<p>Provide evidence to demonstrate corporate compliance with this corporate framework by 31 December 2004.</p>	Deputy Leader	31 December 2004

9.4 Dealing with Service Failure

- 9.4.1 The mechanisms by which the Council deals with service failure have been a core part of the consideration within this review. The weight of member concern regarding this issue and how it is handled is one factor that has emerged at the fore. Underlying this is the concern that how the Council deals with and responds to service failure is symptomatic of how it operates in other ways.
- 9.4.2 In looking at this in detail, members found great variation in the performance and practice of different areas of the organisation in responding to correspondence. A lack of corporate focus for both the setting and enforcement of standards and the process for responding to customers sits alongside variable ownership of performance. Put simply, in some areas of the organisation this was taken seriously; in others it was not.
- 9.4.3 It is also apparent that the Corporate Complaints Procedure is developing slowly and is at risk of not being implemented prior to localisation. The solutions being worked upon at present focus heavily on diagnosing the reasons for complaints, rather than resolving the complaints through an effective secondary care process.



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- 9.4.4 Such diagnosis is an important part of understanding why complaints arise, and in introducing a 'virtuous' rather than 'vicious' circle to ensure that there is continuous improvement. However, this approach sits uncomfortably close to the common accusation that performance in local government is 'monitored rather than managed'.
- 9.4.5 Whilst in a small minority, the Council does receive a number of vexatious complaints that require the involvement of Legal Services to resolve. Such complaints are not felt to be 'genuine' complaints. It is considered appropriate that at such point as they are accepted by being dealt with by Legal Services these complaints should be excluded from any performance upon complaints and correspondence handling.
- 9.4.6 The issues relating to correspondence from Members of both the City Council and Parliament require particular note. Because letters from members are often pursuing matters in their advocate role on behalf of citizens, there needs to be clarity around how these are dealt with. This must balance competing priorities: that of the elected member as citizens' advocate and that of services to focus on delivering their own service.

Conclusions

10. *Councillor and MP correspondence is rightly treated as important by directorates. However these responses are less speedily dealt with than with correspondence with the public (see Figure 9, page). Performance needs to be improved in this area because elected members often act in an advocate role regarding complaints that have failed to be resolved through normal processes.*
11. *Performance in handling correspondence is measured inconsistently by indicators LI 39a/b. There is a demonstrable need for more clarity and definition. In particular, this is necessary for what does and what does not constitute 'a response'. An acknowledgement is not adequate.*
12. *Measures of performance in relation to dealing with correspondence need to measure the extent to which the correspondence deals with the key expectations of customers. They must also retain incentive to respond, even when the indicators have not been met. Examples include resolving with the first letter, responding in a certain time, and ensuring that the customer receives a reply, even with late letters.*
13. *Where complaints have not been responded to within the required timescale, members felt that performance indicators in this area should penalise performance exponentially. In other words, where a situation continues to be unresolved, this is counted additionally as another failure. This penalty within the indicator should therefore make resolving a complaint that is already late of higher priority than one that is within the timescale for responding.*



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14. *Some Council services are already provided by external organisations and this may increasingly be the case in the future. Where services are provided externally, a method must be found (such as clauses in service contracts) to ensure that providers meet the same standards (or better) for replying to correspondence as the Council.*
15. *E-mail needs to be acknowledged by all departments as a fast and effective way of dealing with correspondence that is likely to see increasing use in the future. As such, it is important to ensure that a wider area of the organisation can be reached by e-mail.*



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16. *Inadequate corporate focus has led to the replacement of a previous corporate complaint system with divergent systems operated by individual services. The Council has been slow in getting a Corporate Complaints Process in place, despite criticism from the CPA in this area.*

	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R4	<p>Processes for handling correspondence should be reviewed and determined corporately. There must be full compliance with a clear set of criteria and definitions, including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That the person initially receiving the correspondence ensures it gets to the appropriate person who is then responsible for replying; • Providing a response to all written communication (including letters, e-mails and text messages) in compliance with the agreed City Council Performance Plan; • If a substantive response cannot be provided within ten working days, an interim reply will be sent, which will include at least: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Details of who is dealing with the matter; • The timescale for addressing the issue; • And is consistent with corporate customer service standards. • Provision for escalating the matter to the Director of Performance Improvement if a response is not given within 10 working days; • Requiring external providers of Council services to adopt the same or higher standards in response to correspondence on those services. 	Deputy Leader	30 June 2004
R5	<p>Local Indicators of performance relating to correspondence must be revised to account for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measuring whether correspondence is responded to according to the standards in R4; • Measuring success at resolving complaints with the first response; • Penalising performance exponentially once correspondence goes beyond the 10 working day target; • Continuing to differentiate between correspondence from members of the public and Councillors / Members of Parliament; • Excluding measurement of vexatious correspondence where this is being dealt with by Legal Services. 	Deputy Leader	30 August 2004



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R6	<p>There must be a corporate best practice guide for handling correspondence and customer complaints. This guide should be</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Readily available to all staff dealing with correspondence and complaints;• Common across all areas of the Council;• Integrated with the processes of training staff in dealing with customer enquiries and complaints outlined in recommendation R11 and R12.	Deputy Leader	30 September 2004
R7	<p>A protocol must be agreed by City Council following discussions with elected members, balancing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The need for members to receive a response to enquiries as citizens' advocates with• The need for directorates to be able to focus upon service delivery. <p>This protocol must be implemented consistently by all Members and Directorates.</p>	Deputy Leader	30 September 2004

9.5 Local Access to Services

- 9.5.1 The means by which services are accessed remains a key issue related to this review. It is apparent that there is a wide range of access points, with many variations within types of access point. Much of the strategy relating to 'Access to Services' is developing as part of the agenda for localisation and devolution. The catchphrase of localisation is that 'one size does not fit all'; this is very much the case in a city as diverse in nature as Birmingham.
- 9.5.2 A key part of a localised strategy to determine how services are accessed is the creation of a 'Hub Office' in each constituency - a principal Neighbourhood Office, through which services can be accessed. However, there has been little development of this beyond the creation of offices from which local services in the constituencies can be managed and run.
- 9.5.3 Other authorities have been more prescriptive in their approach to localising services. Examples include the 'matrix approach' adopted by Sunderland, whereby localised services have varying local permutations within a corporate scheme of access points. However, the evidence is that this does not fit with Birmingham's aspirations.



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- 9.5.4 There are elements in the approach of other authorities that there is considerable scope to take forward. Seeking to co-locate Council services with other non-Council services (such as Jobcentre Plus) is something that other authorities are doing, but there are no well-developed views on how Birmingham will be taking this forward. This has already been identified in the area of Social Care, where there is an aspiration to co-locate services with those of the Health Service.
- 9.5.5 It is important that the approach adopted within Birmingham relies substantively and whole-heartedly on consultation with the citizens in constituencies.

Conclusions

17. *There needs to be clear direction on how the Council is taking forward providing access to its services. Other authorities examined have this in place. Within Birmingham, whilst there is intent to do this, it appears to be awaiting the onset of localisation.*
18. *There is no clear categorisation of either the differing level of local access points or the services that are to be available through those access points. Such a definition would benefit the process of localisation by*
- *Providing clear definitions to customers of the levels of service available, enabling them to make a choice as to what they prefer;*
 - *Clarifying the workload and resources required in delivering such locally-varied levels of service;*
 - *Retaining a clear identity and standards within a corporate framework.*
19. *In establishing such standards, care needs to be taken that this is congruent with the varied aspirations of constituencies.*
20. *A strategy of co-locating Council services alongside those of partners and other public sector organisations has been pursued by other authorities, as part of their strategies of access to services. Social Care have also identified this as a way in which their service can be taken forward. Strong consideration must be given to these possibilities as part of working towards integrated public services.*



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	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R8	Establish a customer access strategy that sets a corporate standard for customer contact and relationship management which includes a plan for building access channels around customer needs and a single customer knowledge infrastructure.	Deputy Leader	30 October 2004
R9	<p>Within this corporate framework there needs to be a framework for development of local services which should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be flexible to allow constituencies to determine the types of access that they want, consistent with corporate standards; • Define the levels of service available clearly and in terms of the standards in recommendation R2; • Provide for the co-location with other public sector and partner organisations. 	Cabinet Member for Local Services and Community Safety	30 October 2004

9.6 Human Resource Issues

- 9.6.1 A common thread running through this review has been that fundamentally it is about how the staff of the City Council treat their customers. It is impossible to divorce this from the way in which the City Council manages its human resource. How Council staff focus on customers needs constant emphasis, from the recruitment process prior to employment, through induction and training into performing within the job role.
- 9.6.2 Another important aspect of human resource management relevant in this area is the organisational development of the Council. For many years the Council has talked about behaving as 'one organisation', to the extent where this has almost become clichéd and trite. As discussed in section 9.2, it has become evident in this review that the Council still not one organisation.
- 9.6.3 A key challenge for the strategic element of human resource management in the Council is to provide a strong corporate lead on organisational development. This is presently unclear in the build-up to devolution and localisation. The means by which HR is supporting the process of localisation of services need to be clearer. Whilst localisation of services is an opportunity, failure to support this in the development of the organisation could lead to not only a missed opportunity but also an outright failure.
- 9.6.4 It was immediately apparent in visiting other authorities that the observable differences in customer service output were rooted in the way the staff were managed and encouraged within the



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strategic direction of the authority. This was clearly delivering new flexibility in job roles, which is essential in examining how services can be delivered more effectively and can appear seamless to the customer.

- 9.6.5 Part of this relates to challenging cultural assumptions. A traditional mistake has been to view the organisation in terms of roles that are 'front line' and 'support'. The reality is that as structures become slimmer and staff are aligned closer to their customers, all staff within the City Council must understand the tenets of dealing with customers effectively. Whilst some roles may need more intensive or specific customer-handling skills, the basic skills and attitudes should form part of all roles. This should not rely purely upon traditions of professional behaviour and etiquette.
- 9.6.6 Although the management of human resources within Birmingham has not been the core focus of this review it is important to note that human resource management must play a critical role in the future. The human resource function must support changes in service provision among the staff of the Council in three main ways:
- Developing and fostering the development of proficiency in managing people;
 - Restructuring (where needed) the terms and conditions of employees to ensure that they reflect the need to deliver the service;
 - The introduction of a universal and effective system of individual performance management and appraisal, linking performance to career progression and development.
- 9.6.7 This is nothing new. The Best Value Review of Access to services found that the level and quality of training and development afforded to front line staff was "mixed". It ranged from in-house training provided by each Directorate to working towards external accreditation. There was no clear baseline standard of training for all front line staff and in some cases, while staff are offered training, it is not seen as compulsory.
- 9.6.8 What is different now is that with the localisation of services starting in April 2004, human resources must have a programme to deliver on the fronts mentioned above.

Conclusions

21. *Delivery of a customer-focused service strategy is fundamentally reliant upon successfully managing the human resource of the Council.*
22. *Integration of service structures will not be delivered without the development of more flexible and integrated job roles. This must develop employees who are multi-skilled in delivering services, but with a robust foundation in customer care skills.*



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23. *The other authorities examined in this review are integrating human resource change with service change. In reviewing how services are provided, the City Council must seek to align processes, people and technology towards delivering more effective and efficient services.*
24. *The Council has approached the issue of project-managing the localisation of services as an additional task to existing job roles. Other authorities (e.g. Sunderland) have not done this and have removed staff from their workplace to develop fundamental improvements in services. This has allowed a genuine process of 're-engineering' the delivery of those services and the maximisation of the opportunities to integrate this with Implementing Electronic Government (IEG).*
25. *Whilst this review has not been wholly concerned with how the HR function supports the delivery of customer service, there are some basic HR issues that will be necessary to support the introduction of local service delivery and customer service standards.*

	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R10	The introduction of a universal and effective system of individual performance management and appraisal, linking performance to career progression and development.	Cabinet Member for Equalities and Human Resources	30 September 2004
R11	Induction and basic training for all City Council employees must include core elements relating to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer care and standards required to be observed; • The diversity of the Council's customers, including awareness of gender, disability and cultural issues. 	Cabinet Member for Equalities and Human Resources	30 September 2004
R12	All roles that require more intensive training in customer care (i.e. beyond the basic level provided by recommendation R11) must be identified within the profile of training for the role. This training must be <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structured to support the implementation of the standards outlined in recommendation R2; • Specifically included as an element within all Service Plans. 	Cabinet Member for Equalities and Human Resources	30 September 2004



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R13	<p>The performance contracts of all senior officers must now include performance against a defined battery of corporate customer service performance indicators, including (but not exclusively) performance upon</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Measurement of customer satisfaction with their service area;• The revised indicators for correspondence in recommendation R5;• The indicators to measure success at dealing with complaints (being developed under the new Corporate Complaints Process).	Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Equalities and Human Resources	30 September 2004
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9.7 Use of Technology

- 9.7.1 It is expected that (as in the area of human resources) this review should cover the application of the role of ICT in customer focus and improving services. At a time where the pace of technological innovation often appears astonishing, there is a reasonable expectation that ICT will be able to deliver greater efficiency, higher service quality or both when applied to a problem. It is also an approach encouraged by the Government.
- 9.7.2 Electronic access to and provision of services also holds the potential for significant efficiency gains. However, at present, our customers tell us that they prefer other means of accessing services. This is however expected to change in the future as more services are accessible through this medium and use of the Internet becomes more widespread. The Council must both change with its customers and also encourage them to change.
- 9.7.3 The Best Value Review of Access to Services found that there was a lack of information in some service areas. It was evident that management information systems within and between directorates varied, with some being unable to provide basic performance details.
- 9.7.4 The review also found that information was not shared and managed as a corporate resource. At the technical level there was little integration between different systems / directorates. This reduced the opportunity to provide information on other potentially relevant services. At the corporate level, there was little evidence of a cross-organisational vision of shared information and good practice. Nearly two years on, this is still the case.



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- 9.7.5 The challenges in the role that ICT must play in the development of services are clear. It must support the achievement of wider Council objectives, rather than be an objective to be achieved in its own right. The challenge is being able to use technology as a key to open the doors to new opportunities, allowing a genuinely innovative way of providing better services at lower cost. ICT must be used as a vehicle for business transformation.
- 9.7.6 The Council is currently in the early stages of the process of procuring a strategic partner for this business transformation. This is a highly complex process, but it is expected to yield a partner by March 2005 (when all current IT contracts expire). By using IT to fully integrate innovative approaches to information management into the business processes of the Council, it is expected that there will be the greatest return on ICT investment.
- 9.7.7 There are areas of the Council (such as the Contact Centre) that already have a high use of modern ICT on improving customer service. Such areas are acknowledged as a probable area in which a private partnership on ICT will be expected to deliver in the early stages of the partnership. However, it is also apparent that there are problems in looking to achieve effective interfaces between new technology and other (mainly older) systems in use in other areas.
- 9.7.8 Other authorities examined in this review have based their approaches to improving service around using technology. This has been very much about working smarter rather than harder. The IT strategies of both Newcastle and Sunderland appear integrated into the customer service strategy.
- 9.7.9 Newcastle and Sunderland have increased access to the Internet and made their services more accessible electronically. In Birmingham these have been treated as discrete projects. Whilst feedback from customers may indicate that they want more face-to-face interaction, within Birmingham the benefits of IEG appear to have been ignored as a potential means of improving delivery.
- 9.7.10 Work has already been done in the areas of Social Care and Health in terms of sharing information and integrating databases. Whilst there are some issues to be resolved in this area around compliance with the Data Protection Act, there are clear benefits to be realised in economies of scale for such activities.
- 9.7.11 There are, however, no quick fixes here. The procurement of a strategic partner for business transformation through ICT is projected to be a lengthy process. The partnership is expected to start with IT services and the Contact Centre. Further incremental development of this partnership will take longer: progression into other service areas will be subject to satisfactory performance in the first two years of the partnership, and can therefore not be realistically expected much before 2007.

Conclusions



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26. *ICT must be integrated in the review of how service staff carry out their roles. It must be customer and business-driven, focused on practical application to the problems to be faced.*
27. *Other authorities have tied their improvements in service delivery to targets for Implementing E-Government. By improving access to services electronically through local centres, this meets targets for both IEG and improving access to services. No evidence of a similarly integrated approach was seen in Birmingham; Implementing E-Government is 'another task' for directorates in Birmingham, not an integrated part of how directorates are improving services.*
28. *Due to the scale of the task involved, a strategic partner in ICT may well be the way forward for the City Council. However, change will not be overnight, and it will take time for the partnership to impact on front line services.*

9.8 Monitoring Progress

- 9.8.1 In order to keep the Committee informed of progress in implementing the recommendations within this report, it is recommended that the Deputy Leader report back on progress periodically. It is expected that the pace of change in many of these areas will be rapid. The initial report should therefore account for the period following the first phase of localisation, with periodic reports scheduled at appropriate intervals thereafter by the committee.

Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R14 Progress towards achievement of these recommendations should be reported to the Co-ordinating Overview and Scrutiny Committee in October 2004. The Committee will schedule subsequent progress reports, until all recommendations are implemented.	Deputy Leader	October 2004



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Appendix 1: Case Studies

A1.1 The Ed Doolan Show

A1.1.1 On October 30th, Councillor Len Gregory went on The Ed Doolan Show on BBC Radio WM. In response to the discussion, seven calls were made on air and a further forty-six were made to a special Scrutiny telephone line, set up for the purpose. The table below shows the subject of the calls made to the Scrutiny Office.

Directorate	Subject	Number
Development	No bin bags delivered	12
Development	Recycling box not delivered	1
Development	Street Cleaning	2
Development	Streets	2
Development	Illegal parking	1
Development	Waste removal	3
Housing	Cleaning	1
Housing	Fence	1
Housing	Homelessness	1
Housing	Repairs	11
Housing	Transfer request	5
Leisure & Culture	Trees	4
Resources	Benefits	1
Resources	Council tax	1
Resources	Neighbourhood Offices	1

Fig. 10: Responses received from the Ed Doolan Show

Source: Scrutiny Office

A1.1.2 Of the seven calls made on air, two were positive about council services. However, inevitably given the nature of the show, the calls to the Scrutiny Office line were overwhelmingly negative – all the above comments were complaints. However, it must be remembered that:

- The sample was self-selecting, drawn from a narrow band of radio listeners, and cannot therefore be taken as representative of all users experiences;
- Listeners were asked to relate good and bad experiences, but in addition a promise was made that any problems would be resolved by officers in the Scrutiny Office. This no doubt encouraged those with ongoing issues to contact the programme.



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- A1.1.3 The details of complaints to each Directorate have already been discussed in Chapter 4.3. However, the exercise did raise some more general points of interest:
- Of the services mentioned by complainants, all except Leisure and Culture received complaints that requests for information or action are not followed up or (in most cases) responded to in any way. Obviously not all requests can be immediately actioned, but residents repeatedly complain that they receive no communication at all from Council officers.
 - The responses from Directorates to Scrutiny bringing these cases to their attention varied. Waste Management responded by contacting each listener and delivering rolls of bin bags where necessary. In contrast, Housing responded to Scrutiny's questions with an explanation of the individual circumstances but there was no evidence that any attempt was made to contact the individuals concerned.
- A1.1.4 Details of the individual complaints received via the Ed Doolan Show and visits to neighbourhood offices' are contained in the following table (A1.2). These are illustrative of the types of problems regularly faced by Council customers.
- A1.1.5 The table also shows the responses received from the Directorates (in the "response received" column), whether this is information on action taken or action planned. It is planned to follow up the latter at the beginning of May to track what has/has not been done.

A1.2 All Case Studies

Ref	Directorate	Source of case study	Summary	Detail	Response received
1	Development	Call to Ed Doolan show	Bulk waste removal	<p>The complainant:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has made several requests for the removal of a fridge/freezer blocking the road; Is annoyed no action has been taken after being promised it will be done on a given day but it still remains. 	It appears that rubbish has been dumped on privately owned land, which the Council has no obligation to remove. This has not been made clear to the complainant and efforts are being made to contact her. In view of the failure to advise her of this, arrangements will be made to remove the rubbish as a good will gesture.
2	Development	Call to Ed Doolan show	Bulk waste removal	This will be the seventh Saturday since the complainant requested removal of sofa. Have phoned six times.	The sofa will be collected this Saturday. The Contact Centre recorded the location of the collection as being on a different road and the collectors were unable to locate the rubbish.
3	Development	Call to Ed Doolan show	Non delivery of black bags	Bin bags not delivered since first week in May 2003	A complaint was received that the complainant did not get her scheduled bulk delivery of refuse sacks in May. Replacements were issued, but the complainant states these did not arrive either. A further supply will be provided.
4	Development	Call to Ed Doolan show	Non delivery of black bags	No bags for last two Wednesdays. When she phoned, she was told to go and buy some.	Refuse sacks are delivered to residents in bulk. Each householder is left sufficient to last 13 weeks. Deliveries take place 4 times a year. If residents use their allocation of sacks before the next delivery is due they are advised they will have to purchase extra. The number of sacks delivered is limited to encourage waste minimisation and recycling. The scheduled delivery of sacks has now been made.
5	Development	Call to Ed Doolan show	Non delivery of black bags	Complainant has experienced problems in trying to obtain a fresh supply of black bags since 2 October. Several calls and promises – no action to date.	Some difficulties have been experienced at this location as operational responsibility for this road has been transferred to another depot. Sacks have now been delivered to this road.
6	Development	Call to Ed Doolan show	Non delivery of black bags	Complaint about lack of black bags.	The complainant requested double his entitlement of refuse sacks.
7	Development	Call to Ed Doolan show	Non delivery of black bags	Black bags still not delivered – left message and no one has called her back	There is no facility to leave messages at the Contact Centre so it is not known who the complainant called. Officers are attempting to contact her to determine this and refuse sacks will be delivered within the next two days. There is no record of a call/complaint on the Departments system.
8	Development	Call to Ed Doolan show	Non delivery of black bags	Lived at address for 3 years – never had black bags	There is no record of a complaint from the complainant. A roll of sacks will be delivered to him within the next 2 days.
9	Development	Call to Ed Doolan show	Non delivery of black bags	No black bags for whole road for a long time	There is no record of a complaint from the complainant. He has been visited and sacks provided.

10	Development	Call to Ed Doolan show	Non delivery of black bags	No black bags for 6 weeks. Men throw them into garden from where they are stolen.	There is no record of a telephone call about this having been made to the Department. A supply of sacks will be delivered within the next 2 days.
11	Development	Call to Ed Doolan show	Non delivery of black bags	Last delivery of bin bags was the beginning of June	There is no record of a telephone call about this having been made to the Department. A supply of sacks will be delivered within the next 2 days.
12	Development	Call to Ed Doolan show	Non delivery of black bags	Phoned to say not received bin bags since 28 July but the response was that it would take 1-2 weeks to arrive. The complainant is questioning what they do with rubbish in the mean time.	This call also related to bulk delivery of sacks and the complainant exhausted her supply, before the next delivery was due. Scheduled delivery has now been made.
13	Development	Call to Ed Doolan show	Non delivery of black bags	Never had any bin bags – have been phoning for 12 months	This is an error by the Refuse Collection Crew who have been unable to locate the property which is new-build. The complainant has been contacted and apologies made. Refuse sacks have been delivered.
14	Development	Call to Ed Doolan show	Recycling	Recycling box was taken and not yet got a replacement. Continually told it would take 28 days but no box as yet.	Records indicate a replacement box was delivered on 22 October. A further box will now be supplied.
15	Development	Call to Ed Doolan show	Street cleaning	Rubbish has been left on the road by a Council house clearance crew. The response to his request to remove this has been most unhelpful. It still needs to be cleared.	Arrangements are in hand to remove the rubbish.
16	Development	Letter in response to Ed Doolan Show	Street cleaning	Pathway: Carlland Rd to Newlands Rd: Can this be cleaned as there is rubbish and over hanging trees.	Highway Inspector will attend to assess the condition of the fence and overhanging trees. Officer to confirm outcome.
17	Development	Call to Ed Doolan show	Street cleaning	Street Cleaning – crews don't come often enough. Dumped tyres in road not removed. Have phoned many times.	The dumped tyres are on land owned by the Housing Department who have responsibility to remove them. Callers to the Contact Centre would be advised of this and provided with the relevant contact phone number. Officers have contacted the Housing Department and arrangements have been made to remove the tyres. The complainant has been advised of this and that standards of cleanliness in the road will be monitored and extra cleansing provided if appropriate.

18	Development	Call to Ed Doolan show	Street cleaning	Street cleaning not undertaken. There are dumped cars. No action taken after telephoning the Department.	There have been no complaints from [this complainant] about Street Cleansing in the past, but his road is currently cleaned twice weekly and it will be checked for cleanliness. There is also a problem in the road with refuse sacks being put out prior to collection day and these are removed promptly. One abandoned car was reported in this road in August. It was not present when an officer called to investigate.
19	Development Directorate - Highways	Group discussion	Dropped kerb	Dropped kerb – paid for but not yet installed.	The dropped kerb was paid for in August, and the order went to the DLO on 24th November after Scrutiny pursued the order (see section 9.2.2). The work was carried out on 2 nd December.
20	Development Directorate - Highways	Call to Ed Doolan show	Highways	Steps outside Minworth Primary School needs to be cleaned	The steps in question are actually beyond the gates and not on the school premises; they lead to the frontage off the main pavement, but are not part of the school but the responsibility of Highways. The BSS has regularly asked Highways Inspectorate to deal with these steps and has advised that they currently need resurfacing.
21	Development Directorate - Highways	Call to Ed Doolan show	Highways	Based on the experiences of the complainant's sister-in-law, a wheelchair user, he would like traffic wardens to make sure that people do not park their cars on grass verges etc because they are obstructing footpaths.	We have little success (city wide) with preventing cars parking on grass verges as this is a Police enforceable matter (not traffic wardens) who do not see this as a high priority. However, we are arranging to have a "No Parking on Grass Verge" sign put up at this location but appreciate that this will only help when the complainant's sister-in-law comes to visit him.
22	Development Directorate - Highways	Group discussion	Street lighting	Faulty lamp – have phoned five times but no action taken	There were no reports on the street lighting management system prior to this date for any faulty street lamps in the immediate vicinity of the address. Between 10th October and 26th November five reports have been received for various street lamps in the road and repairs completed within the specified standards of service response times. A faulty street lamp opposite no.5 was reported on 26th November and subsequently repaired. A night inspection carried out on 15th December found all street lamps working.
23	Development Directorate - Highways	Call to Ed Doolan show	Trees	Hedge needs clipping at the bottom. Has requested this twice already.	This has been checked with the Service Provider regarding this matter and assured that the work will be completed within the next two weeks.

24	Development Directorate – Highways	Call to Ed Doolan show	Highways	<p>Weeds on the pavement. Complained to a councillor months ago. Five weeks ago a man inspected the pavement and nothing has happened since.</p>	<p>A highway inspection took place on 29th October and all defects that met with the BCC criteria for repair were identified and orders placed with our contractor to carry out permanent repairs. In addition we have telephoned the complainant and a visit has been arranged to visit the complainant at home. He complainant has medical problems and has had to cancel the appointment but has agreed to contact the department when he is able to re-convene the meeting.</p>
25	Housing	Call to Ed Doolan show	Homelessness	<p>Twenty-two year old grandson cannot get council house. He cannot get a job without address.</p>	<p>The complainant applied to go onto the housing register on 22.1.02. He has a total of 132 points and has requested accommodation in Ladywood or Edgbaston. It was noted however, that he has had two previous council tenancies. He owes late tenancy arrears of £257.60 and £99.62 respectively. His application has therefore been archived until the arrears are paid.</p> <p>The complainant applied as homeless in January 2002 and was given a non-priority decision on 23.1.02. He was offered appropriate advice and assistance.</p>
27	Housing	Visit to Neighbourhood Offices	Homelessness	<p>The complainants were waiting for an interview with the housing duty officer, and waited over an hour whilst members were present. The complainant is homeless, having given 28 days notice. They have been told that, although there are flats empty, they are not available.</p>	<p>The long wait was due to there being 3 <i>Homeless On The Day</i> (HOTD) that morning.</p> <p>All of these people were already registered with the department as presenting on a previous occasion as homeless and were attending the NO again on the 24th as HOTD. In these circumstances NAB staff do not always book them in and record a time, but just refer them to the Duty Officer.</p> <p>The procedure is that when someone presents as HOTD and are <i>not already registered</i>, they are either given an <i>On The Day</i> appointment or if all of these appointments have been taken then they are seen by 'Fast Track' officer/s - all NAB staff. On both occasions customers are advised as to when they will be seen.</p>
29	Housing	Call to Ed Doolan show	Repairs	<p>Kitchen flooded in July. The flooring is compressed boarding which is swelling and needs to be renewed. No-one has followed up the request for repair.</p>	<p>Repair on system to repair timber floor. It was part of the holding contract. And is now released. As part of the planned programme, AWG will be working in the area mid December – end February 2004.</p>

30	Housing	Call to Ed Doolan show	Repairs	Has got problems with the repairs to her back door. Rain is seeping in and causing damage to her property - which she reported over a year ago. Phoned again after 3 months since reporting the repair, having not heard anything. She is 70 years old.	This job was on holding contract. Now released. As part of planned programme, AWG will be working in this area mid December - February 2004.
31	Housing	Call to Ed Doolan show	Repairs	Repairs requested for rotting windows - no one will come out. Neighbour has had double glazing fitted. Unhappy that no one is prepare to even look at the problems.	This job was on holding contract. Now released. As part of planned programme, AWG will be working in this area mid Jan - end March 2004
32	Housing	Call to Ed Doolan show	Repairs	Requesting for Central Heating dismissed and was told this was due to lack of money. Family have health problems - on-going for 6 years. This has reported to the housing office and local Councillor etc but no-one is addressing this. She feels as though she is not getting anywhere and is very frustrated. Her health is suffering.	We have no record of a complaint to our section in housing services from this person. We would have maintained that this property has a blow air heating system and as such would be a low priority for a new wet system. Currently, from a repairs viewpoint, we would only change the system if it became uneconomic to repair. We are unlikely to include these properties early in the "Decent Homes" programmes as it was built in 1965 and we are currently targeting older properties which have no central heating before we upgrade existing heating systems. The "Health through Warmth" scheme would not apply as it will only provide additional heating if there was none present. Therefore, the only advice we would be able to provide would be to contact the local housing team and request a medical assessment for a move to a property more suitable to their medical needs.
33	Housing	Call to Ed Doolan show	Repairs	Double-glazing installed at end of August - 2 windows outstanding (living/bed room). Has tried calling Service Team and has been told she must wait.	Aware of outstanding windows. On order with supplier.
34	Housing	Letter in response to Ed Doolan Show	Repairs	Concerned that her front door is not secure enough and has repeatedly asked for work to be done. Also, when workers came to clear the guttering, they did the front and left the back.	AWG have job number for rear gutter work to be done a.s.a.p. AWG will try and deal with her front door problem today.

35	Housing	Call to Ed Doolan show	Repairs	Awaiting new windows - windows in very bad state. Waiting since March.	Checked property, where there is a job to repair/renew timber windows. This job was on holding contract. Now released. As part of the planned programme, AWG will be working in this area mid Jan - end March 2004.
36	Housing	Call to Ed Doolan show	Repairs	Waiting for new windows - have contacted the Council many times and have got nowhere. Complainant feels that s/he is not getting any answers and that the estate is being neglected.	Checked system against the property. No window repairs reported. Checked [all properties in block] against the window replacement programme, nothing found.
37	Housing	Call to Ed Doolan show	Repairs	Had central heating installed - poor workmanship - still waiting for the council to make good.	Checked system. No records of AWG installing central heating.
38	Housing	Call to Ed Doolan show	Repairs	Immersion heater - reported it broken 15 months ago. Recently received a letter to ask if satisfied with the work when nothing had been done!	Job recorded on system. AWG attended 4 times, no access, each time carded. Customer satisfaction generated in error.
39	Housing	Letter in response to Ed Doolan Show	Repairs	When will the council houses in my area be fitted with replacement window frames?	This job is currently with Accord.
40	Housing	Call to Ed Doolan show	Repairs	Renewal of window frames needed - never get any replies to requests.	The complainant has reported his windows as a repair once since 01/04/02. This was on 28/10/02 and was recorded by Birmingham Accord as a non-urgent repair and held in the parked works. Birmingham Accord has set up nine programmes to complete all parked works by 31/03/04. They are just starting in the complainant's area and expect to complete all parked works in his area by 31/01/04. However, if the windows cannot be repaired, they will order new windows in line with the Council's policy. There was a new uPVC window completed on 11/12/02 fitted to the rear of his property. This had been reported on 4/12/01 and had been identified as requiring a new window and was placed in the "one off" window programme.

41	Housing	Call to Ed Doolan show	Repairs	Blocked drains for over a year bringing up sewage. This repair has been outstanding for a long time, keep getting promised to fix it but little work has been carried out.	<p>The situation with the drains at the above address is being investigated.</p> <p>The outcome is that the tenant did have a problem with the drains on 7/05/02 and further repairs were logged and completed on 9/05/02, 13/06/02 and 25/07/02, but no further problems have been reported since. The only other repair reported by the tenant was to repair an electrical fitting reported 29/08/03. Therefore, the question of an ongoing problem with the drains does not appear to be the case as the tenant has not contacted the call centre.</p>
42	Housing	Letter in response to Ed Doolan Show	Repairs	Need for downstairs shower or chair lift – no response to enquiries from Councillor.	<p>This property was sold on the 7/9/03 and is no longer the responsibility of Birmingham City Council's Housing Dept.</p>
44	Housing	Call to Ed Doolan show	Transfer	Complainant has been trying for a transfer for thirteen years from one to two bedroom property. Currently sharing bed with 10-year-old daughter, because of this fiancé has left her. Offered two places on either side of city, wants Erdington because of daughter's school.	<p>The complainant has been on the transfer list for 11 years in that time she has received 5 offers, the last one being 15/11/01. The reasons for not accepting the offers are 3 times failed to call, 1 too far from daughter's school and 1 for disliking the area. The type of property requested 2-bed house are hard to achieve because the areas requested do not have a lot of 2 beds houses. We have a lot of flats/maisonettes, but the complainant suffers from mental health problems and needs a low level property. The Housing Officer for the area will visit the complainant to establish any changes in circumstances, and to update on the present situation in terms of the transfer request, and to see if she can widen her areas of choice.</p>
45	Housing	Call to Ed Doolan show	Transfer	Currently lives in 1 bed flat with 19-month son (sharing same bedroom). A priority medical form and personal letter have gone missing (officers say it was posted back but never arrived). Another form sent out but now has to wait another 8 weeks. Not had any reply as yet.	<p>The complainant was interviewed on 3 October 2003 and a medical priority application completed. She supplied a letter from her GP with a copy of an earlier letter dated 3 Jan 03 from the Practice Counsellor addressed to Neighbourhood Office. I have checked our post log and there is no record of it having been received. The complainant was advised that the decision on her medical application would take approximately 8 weeks.</p>

46	Housing	Visit to Neighbourhood Offices	Transfer	<p>The complainant lives with his two children (one of whom is mentally disabled) in a house which he insists is unsuitable, a view confirmed by visits from Social Services and Environmental Health. He has repeatedly requested re-housing, but so far has not been offered anything. He is only entitled to a ground floor flat.</p>	<p>The complainant has only recently widened the area he will accept to the whole city. A place was found in Otter Croft, Shard End, but asbestos has been discovered and it will take six weeks to remove.</p>
47	Housing	Call to Ed Doolan show	Transfer	<p>Request for transfer to a larger property. Presently in a one bedroom flat. Has a child aged 18 months. The tenant thinks previous tenant must have been disabled because the kitchen units are extremely low. His child has pulled a cup of hot water over and has been scalded. Also there is a low window in the lounge which is also dangerous to the child. Has been requesting a transfer for two years.</p>	<p>The complainant took the tenancy of the above property on 9/7/01. In line with the normal transfer system the complainant became eligible to apply to go on the transfer waiting list on 2/7/02. He was awarded 170 points. After a year of transfer he was awarded 34 further points, which equates to 20% of the original 170. His total is now 204.</p> <p>With reference to his areas of choice he is requesting a House/Flat in most of the east side so I have done a supply and demand check in this area and confirm the following.</p> <p>There are at present 2648 applicants/transfer cases on the waiting list for houses in the east side of the city and as of today the minimum amount of points needed to obtain one of these is 400. We have 4,158 2-bedroom houses in our management with approximately 236 becoming available each year. For a two bedroom flat in the east side there are 1657 applicants/transfer cases on the waiting list and again the minimum amount of points required is 400 to obtain one of these. We have 3674 2-bedroom flats within our management and approximately 581 become available each year. With reference to the low work unit this would be classified as a home improvement, I will send a fax to the call centre who will then forward it to Housing Management Investment client side for their approval. The windows are on the current parked works programme and will be completed before 31 March 2004.</p>

48	Housing	Call to Ed Doolan show	Transfer	Request for transfer two year ago - has been told she is not a priority. Expecting a baby in January.	<p>The complainant registered for a transfer to alternative accommodation on 24.9.01 and has requested a ground floor maisonette or a house in Ladywood, Edgbaston, Harborne, Quinton, Small Heath or Selly Park. She has been awarded 490 points in the 3-bedroom queue. This points award takes into account that she is an expectant mother.</p> <p>The current supply and demand information would indicate that only Ladywood and Small Heath West would have accommodation of the type required within her points range. Unfortunately due to the present high demand from homeless applicants who require family accommodation, the majority of 3 bedroom properties are being allocated to them.</p> <p>It should also be noted that the complainant has rent arrears as at 27.10.03 and she will need to clear these and maintain a satisfactory rent account before she is considered for a move.</p>
49	Leisure & Culture	Call to Ed Doolan show	Trees	Tree needs to lopped at C Close - already contacted Council	Enquiry received via MP dated 30/10/03. Tree Officer has visited, inspected the tree and identified pruning work which will be completed by the end of February 2004.
50	Leisure & Culture	Call to Ed Doolan show	Trees	Trees -overgrown and leaves everywhere Has produced petitions given to MP.	Tree Officer visited road & inspected trees. No work was required. Last pruned as part of 1999/2000 Annual Maintenance of Highway Trees pruning programme. Searches with City Council, Ward Committees and MP's office has not traced receipt of a petition.
51	Leisure & Culture	Call to Ed Doolan show	Trees	A tree has fallen on her shed (June 2003). An officer from Parks & Leisure has visited. The Council have agreed to move the tree but nothing has been done!	Tree Officer visited. Arranged with resident to have tree removed on 13 November 2003.
52	Resources	Call to Ed Doolan show	Benefits	Received 5 letters from the benefits department all giving similar details. Complainant is not sure why she is receiving them - please stop sending them.	Each time a claim is amended as a result of a change of circumstances, the Council is required by law to notify a claimant of the effect of that change. This is to allow claimant's to check that we have used the correct information and notify the legal right to appeal the decision.
53	Resources	Call to Ed Doolan show	Council tax	Has given information to Council Tax officer, but still waiting for assessment	This claim has now been resolved and the complainant will be receiving revised bills and payment details from Revenues in the next few days. The original claim was received by the Benefit Service on 12 November 2002 dated 28 October 2002. The claim was assessed but regrettably the complainant's income was too high to qualify for main council tax benefit.

54	Resources	Visit to Neighbourhood Offices	Neighbourhood Offices	Conflicting information given over calculation of pension credit	The information given at Neighbourhood Office was correct, and the call-centre member of staff gave the most recent information available, but was not aware that a further adjustment was about to be made. The introduction of the new benefit brought significant changes to Housing Benefit which for many people means the benefit has to be reassessed twice.
55	Resources	Visit to Neighbourhood Offices	Neighbourhood Offices	Treatment of two young girls at neighbourhood office – felt that their complaint of mistreatment by housing contractors was not taken seriously enough or handled well	The first complaint was caused by a misunderstanding on the part of the complainant. With regard to the housing contractors, officers did speak with the girls in question, and their mother, and the matter was formally referred to the housing manager on site.
56	Resources	Call to Ed Doolan show	Neighbourhood Offices	Went on a Monday to make appointment at a Neighbourhood Office for Tuesday. Told to come back on Tues to make appointment for Tues	The current members of the team have been approached by their manager and no-one recalls the complainant or the circumstances of his visit and state that they would have offered an appointment for the following day if one had been available, or at the nearest available time later in the week. The difficulty is that most NOs do preserve some interview slots for urgent "on the day" homeless callers and it is possible, if he had called on Tuesday, he could have been seen in a "vacant" appointment slot. The suggestion that he calls the following day was an attempt to provide him with access to the service quickly rather than book him in for a certain appointment some time in the future. The staff are encouraged to be sensitive to the needs of callers and elderly people or carers do generally get a priority when appointments are booked. A personal apology has been made to the complainant.



Developing Customer-Focused Services

Appendix 2: Birmingham's Draft Customer Charter

We promise....

- To answer all telephone or text phone calls within six rings or 20 seconds;
- To answer calls by giving a suitable greeting, saying who we are and offering our help;
- Not to use voicemail or answer phones on numbers used by the public during normal office hours, except where we cannot transfer calls;
- To answer all letters within ten working days and e-mails and faxes within three working days, or to provide a response explaining why a reply might take longer;
- To use language in our letters, faxes and e-mails that shows we accept and respect all our customers equally;
- To clearly display opening times both outside our offices and in reception areas;
- To display clear and useful signs at all our offices and other premises to help visitors;
- That all employees will carry an up to date Birmingham City Council ID card;
- That we will keep any appointments we make;
- To be polite and treat customers with respect.

In return, we ask that our customers:

- Treat our employees with the same courtesy and respect that we show them, in face-to-face meetings, on the phone and in correspondence;
- Tell us as clearly as they can how we can help them;
- Keep appointments with us or tell us in advance if they are unable to do so;
- Provide any documents or other information we need to deal with them promptly and properly.

Developing Customer- Focused Council Services

