

Community Engagement Working Group Report November 2018

1. Membership

Councillors N Way (Chair), Mrs C P Daw, Mrs G Doe, Mrs J Roach and F J Rosamond and F W Letch

2. Officers supporting the Working Group

Jill May (Director of Corporate Affairs and Business Transformation), Jane Lewis (Communications and Engagement Manager), Lisa Lewis (Group Manager for Business Transformation and Customer Engagement), Kevin Swift (Public Health and Policy Research Officer), Carole Oliphant (Member Services Officer), and Sally Gabriel (Member Services Manager)

3. Rationale

The Council has a duty to consult and engage effectively with residents, partners, employees and other stakeholders when deciding about future changes to services and new developments.

As a council we must offer value for money and customer satisfaction, therefore engagement is an essential part of a service review in order to meet this criteria.

4. Scope

Look at current ways of working when customer first makes contact and make suggestions for improvements.

Explore ways of keeping the customer informed across the whole process.

Investigate customer behaviours to see if the current strategy needs improvement.

Feed into the Community Engagement Strategy being presented to the Community PDG.

Build better working relationships with Town & Parish Councils and feed important and relevant information to them on a regular basis.

Assess the introduction of mobile units to district parishes.

Assess the need for improved communications between back office services and Members.

5. Methodology and Approach

Members will meet every 3 months to review and feed into the draft Communication and Engagement Strategy before it goes to Community PDG and then Cabinet.

A survey will be sent to all parishes. The results will feed into the Communication and Engagement Strategy and will be fed back to the Annual Clerks Meeting on 26th September.

6. Briefing Paper

The Working Group considered the Community Engagement Working Group Briefing Paper and the following items (grouped) were raised:

6.1 Customer interactions and complaints

- Concerns that customer complaints were not being logged as official complaints, were not being passed to the correct officers to deal with and customers were not being kept informed of the progress or outcomes of their complaints;
- Officers were not acting on customers issues that had been passed to them by Customer First in a timely manner causing customers to have to call again and chase this up;
- The need for a central customer record to be created which logged all customer interaction and with which departments they had been in contact with so that this could be used to direct them to the correct officers;
- Calls being misdirected by Customer First to Town or Parish Councils to deal with issues they had no powers over;
- The possibility of a one stop Devon wide call centre where people could go to find out which council to contact;
- There was a need to have champions for customers who wanted to be able to contact the Council on line and have issues dealt with there and then in real time;

In response to these issues officers reported that they were looking into how complaints were logged, the type of communication taking place and the need to achieve a customer centric service. A Project Initiation Document (PID) was being prepared which would detail what the Council did with the information when it was received. The Council had professional skilled officers answering calls that could be dealt with by the Customer First Team by giving front end staff more knowledge to answer simple queries. This could also result in financial savings.

6.2 Reaching out to and keeping residents informed

- The possibility of a mobile officer to be able to go out and look at issues that customers had raised on the ground and deal with the issues there and then;
- Existing mobile officers to report issues immediately that were not in their jurisdiction whilst on their rounds, litter or parking problems for example;
- The possibility of a mobile unit going out to Parishes to keep people in touch with what the Council were doing;
- The introduction of face to face surveys where officers went door to door to gather public opinion;
- The possibility of customer surveys being sent out with rent demands;
- Good practice was observed with Bereavement Services Model but concerns that not enough people knew this service existed;
- The introduction of a District Council contact booklet which explained to the public who and where to contact, similar to the Devon County Council booklet.
- The possible use of community noticeboards to communicate information instead of relying on people going on line;

- Members and Officers could work together to help prepare something for surgeries and there was a need to use Members in a better way to get the message out there;

6.3 Using our existing networks, particularly Town and Parish Councils

- Use of Parish councils and community groups to carry out surveys on the Councils behalf;
- The Council could contact the editors of Parish magazines so that information could be communicated through this channel; and
- That our residents need to know all tiers of local government - to know who was responsible for what;

Officers agreed to conduct a survey with Town and Parish Councils to identify any changes or improvements that could be made.

7. Communications and Engagement Strategy

The group discussed and reviewed a draft of the strategy and provided feedback with officers providing answers and insights.

7.1 Relationship with local press and benefits of media training

Media Training should be included within new Member development training.

7.2 Concerns about relations between Staff and Members (from the staff survey)

Results may reflect the fact that some officers had limited interaction with Members. An Action Plan has been produced in terms of the staff survey results via Group Managers.

7.3 Communication to staff

The Group requested that other forms (other than digital) of communication with staff be considered as not all employees had access to the system. It was felt there needed to be an avenue for staff to bypass their immediate managers to inform senior managers of issues and concerns.

7.4 Town and Parish Charter

The Group requested that the Town and Parish Charter be included within the document.

The Group Manager for Business Transformation and Customer Engagement explained that all forms of internal communication were being looked at and the Communication and Engagement Strategy and Action Plan detailed how the Council were going to change communication with the public and the Town and Parish Councils.

7.5 Community Panel

The role of the Community (Citizens) Panel was raised and it was noted that the Council needed a good cross section of the population to be involved and were mindful of equality. Council needed to ensure that everyone had access to respond and not to exclude anyone. The Working Group asked to consider having a pool of

translators available so that people, for who English was not their first language, could also be involved.

7.6 Other stakeholders and events

The Working Group also noted a lack of direct communication with schools and schoolchildren and pointed out that the Action Plan did not include Local Democracy Week or State of the Debate and they felt that this should be promoted. Officers agreed to include this in the Action Plan.

8. Customer First

The Group Manager for Business Transformation and Community Engagement reported on a number of initiatives that would be occurring in Customer First.

- Working practices to be improved to enable the majority of calls to be handled at first point of contact.
- The possible introduction of a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system so that all the different IT systems currently being used could be joined up to enable officers to update members of the public on any queries that they have raised. This was currently being reviewed.
- Encourage customers to use the digital platform whilst still maintaining face to face contact for people who could not access it. A business case was being prepared for purchase of the new system but this was not the only avenue being considered.
- Revised Customer Care Policy and Channel Access Strategy.

The Working Group discussed how the CRM system could be funded if this was the route taken and it was explained that the intention was to retrain staff and when there was natural wastage from people leaving voluntarily staff savings could be made by moving the excess resource around.

The Working Group highlighted ongoing issues with the current telephone systems and felt that other organisations seemed better able to direct calls effectively. It was acknowledged that currently the Council had a training deficit and that Officers all had different skill sets which were not interchangeable and that more staff needed to be crossed trained to enable them to answer more of the queries they were presented with first time.

9. Town and Parish Council Survey

Local councils provided feedback to the District about communication flow via a survey sent to each Town and Parish clerk. 22 of the 62 councils (35%) responded.

Although most of the Parish Councils were happy with the communication they received from Mid Devon District Council and with District Members there were still instances where queries raised by them had appeared to have been lost in the system. Other points highlighted included:

- Communication between Parishes around planning applications needed improving.
- Timeliness of responses from various departments was a concern and required follow up.
- Visible improvements as a result of the new Parish Liaison Officer in post.
- Direct contact with key officers would be useful.

- Balance of volume/type of communication (papers, reports, Comms) was good though some was irrelevant.
- Very good support from Members.

Feedback has been provided back to the local councils at the Clerks Annual Meeting held in September 2018.

10. Conclusions and Recommendations

1. That the Communication and Engagement Strategy is recommended and includes references to the Town and Parish Charter, Local Democracy Week or State of the Debate and schools.
2. That media training will be offered within new Member induction program.
3. That consideration is given to launching a representative community panel, similar to the previous Citizen Panel. This panel would need to be inclusive and accessible with clear objectives. The feedback from such a panel would need to be meaningful and be able to be acted upon within current budget levels.
4. That the Council assess the potential to promote communication with our customers through the use of mobile units and officers where resources are available, face-to-face surveys, community noticeboards, Members' surgeries and using Town and Parish Councils.
5. That a Customer Relationship Management system is progressed and reviewed.