



SUBJECT: CONSULTATION ON CUSTOMER FIRST STRATEGY

REPORT BY: DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 This report provides Cabinet with a review of the current Customer First Strategy and provides a new approach to providing services to the citizens of the County Borough, utilising new technology and also expanding on the current services provided by the existing Call Centre and the Council's web site and DigiTV channel. This will enable the Council to realign its current investments and provide cashable savings to enable the £250,000 budget reduction contained within the Medium Term Financial Plan to be achieved.

2. SUMMARY

- 2.1 Contained within the report to Council on 24 February 2010, the Medium Term Financial Plan identified a savings target for Customer First Services of £250,000, as part of the Directorate of Corporate Services savings target of £2.2 million. This report outlines a change in strategy for delivery of services to citizens, necessary to achieve this saving.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The current strategy started with the opening of the Blackwood shop style facility in 2003, offering a single place for the citizen to access a list of services that had been expanded over time.
- 3.2 This strategy was then developed within a report approved by Cabinet in 2006, where further shop style locations were proposed, together with the introduction of a call centre. Since that time, services have continued to be added to the list provided from the call centre, this list having been modified at various times, reflecting the priorities and policies adopted by the authority.

4. LINKS TO STRATEGY

- 4.1 This report indicates how Customer Services will continue to contribute to the delivery of the Council's Improvement Plan 2009-12. The report also supports the objectives of the Medium Term Financial Plan, as set out in the 2010/11 budget report.

5. THE REPORT

- 5.1 The current provision of services is a mix of One-Stop Shops, call centre, website and more recently DigiTV. The authority's strategy has been multi-channel, enabling people to transact, whichever way they chose. Whilst we try and replicate services through all the channels, this is difficult to achieve because the level of resource available to develop services is fixed, plus some technological restrictions and appropriateness of the channel to the specific type of service required, apply. Unfortunately, the harsh financial future for the public sector means this strategy has to be modified to reduce costs and yet maintain the availability, trust and confidence which citizens require of their Council services.

5.2 Numerous studies by authoritative sources indicate that, whilst the cost of transactions may vary across sectors, what is always true is that the relationship of costs between face-to-face, telephone and web/DigiTV transactions have a relationship in the order of 100:10:1. If we are to reduce our costs, therefore, we have to encourage citizens to move ultimately towards using the web service. We do this, whilst recognising that there will always be some people, who will require for good reasons, face-to-face contact and this report reflects that need in its proposals.

5.3 **One-Stop Shops**

One-Stop Shops are currently located at Ty Penallta, Blackwood town centre, Pontlottyn together with cashiering, plus a limited service offering at Bargoed, Newbridge, Risca and Caerphilly. It had been planned that at Risca, Bargoed and Caerphilly, the existing cash offices would be transferred to a combined Customer First/Library provision when new development opportunities arose and until this review, plans had been made to deliver this policy.

5.4 This report proposes a revision of this strategy by closing the current facilities at Blackwood and Pontlottyn and not developing specific customer service areas within the new library projects. Face-to-face services will be continued at Ty Penallta, thus enabling this style of interaction between the public and officers to take place. Indeed the current menu of services will be expanded. Following the closure of the cash office at Pontllanfraith, the reception area will be improved to enable visitors to that office, who are meeting officers located at that site, to be dealt with appropriately. Costs will be kept to a minimum and funded by existing revenue budgets.

5.5 At the authority's main library sites, librarians will be trained in handling many of the requests currently handled by Customer First staff more complex queries will be dealt with by contacting the call centre. There will be access available using PC's at each site for a person to forward a query to the authority, via the website or by using a free phone service, enabling people to speak to a member of staff at the call centre. A room will also be designated to enable the call to be made privately, this room then being available for confidential exchanges, or if an appointment is made with an officer. It is proposed that two staff initially are made available from current resources, to provide a peripatetic service, travelling either to an appointment at a convenient library location, or when necessary a person's home. As we develop this reactive service, it is hoped that these appointment style meetings can include officers from the services, perhaps where travelling to an office by a member of the public is restricted.

5.6 **Call Centre**

The Call Centre currently provides a range of services. It had been planned to continue to develop and enable new services, using the current approach of budget virement from the "back office" budget to enable the appropriate staffing to either transfer or be employed. This strategy proposes an acceleration of this activity to enable the economies available of such an approach to be achieved more quickly.

5.7 This activity will also support services in achieving their budget efficiencies as contained in the Medium Term Financial Plan. These savings have not been included in this report, as they will vary dependent on the nature of the service transferred.

5.8 **Website/DigiTV**

These facilities will be developed in line with the services transferred to the call centre, in order to ensure a consistent approach to service requests.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The current budget of the £1,671,741 will be reduced by £250,000, thus achieving the objectives contained in the Medium Term Financial Plan.
- 6.2 The savings will accrue as sites close. Pontlloftyn can be closed co-terminus with the cash office, therefore, Spring 2011. The building will revert to Housing and a suitable retail tenant sought. The Blackwood shop lease is due for renewal in 2015, therefore, there would be significant termination costs, if this were also to close in the Spring 2011. It is, therefore, proposed that this site be continued until 2015 and closed at that point.

7. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 The reshaped service proposed in this report necessitates a restructure of the Customer Services section. The closing of the two existing shops and the fact that we will not be providing staff in the new library provision means the anticipated growth will no longer be required.
- 7.2 This restructure will also need to reflect the implications that closing the existing cash offices will have. Clearly, the result of these changes will mean staff being placed in the re-development pool and whilst every effort will be made to find them suitable positions, it is likely that some will find themselves in a redundancy situation. The restructure will therefore have implications for both senior management, supervisory and customer facing staff. The current structure contains 61 FTE's, the closures will result in 7 FTE posts being deleted.

8. CONSULTATIONS

- 8.1 This report is presented to Policy and Resources Scrutiny, as part of the ongoing consultation process. Staff and their trade unions were formally provided with this report on 8 September 2010, at the Chief Executive's JCC. The trade unions' feedback, to date, will be presented on 5th October, as part of this report.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 9.1 It is recommended that:
- (a) Cabinet conform the proposed strategy for Customer Services contained within the report.
 - (b) The offices at Pontlloftyn is closed in Spring 2011.
 - (c) The proposed restructure be implemented in a phased manner up to and including 2015, when the Blackwood office is closed.
 - (d) The savings in the report of £250, 000 be phased over the period until 2015, as they are achieved.

10 REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

- (a) To improve the services provided to citizens in the most economic and appropriate way.
- (b) To achieve the savings target contained in the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan.

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