

**STUDY: CONSULTATION PROCESS
(Report by the Head of Democratic and Central Services)**

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Following discussion on a recent consultation, the Chairman has suggested that a review should be undertaken of the Council's current consultation processes. Perceived weaknesses in procedures adopted for recent consultations, adverse reactions to decisions following consultations and the perception by some residents that the Council does not listen to or consider the views of local residents are the justifications for the study. The purpose of the study is to determine whether the approach taken to consultation is suitable and consistent across the authority. This report summarises progress to date and discusses a number of issues that have been identified for further consideration.

2. STUDY METHODOLOGY

- 2.1 In accordance with the Overview and Scrutiny study methodology, a study template has been completed. The template is reproduced in Appendix A. The Policy and Strategic Services Manager has delivered a presentation on the role of the Policy and Research Team in offering advice and guidance to internal service departments on consultation and research methodologies. Copies of the Consultation and Engagement Strategy and associated Guidance have been circulated, together with a link to the consultation calendar and database. The latter contains details of consultations that have previously been undertaken by the Council

3. INVESTIGATIONS

- 3.1 The Panel has referred to the cost and role of Market Research UK (MRUK) in assisting the Council with various consultations. MRUK have agreed a County-wide schedule of prices for undertaking consultations, which has realised savings compared with the cost of entering into contracts with external companies for individual pieces of work. However, Policy Officers in Cambridgeshire have been engaged in discussions on whether they might collaborate to provide the same service internally at a further reduced cost to Cambridgeshire Councils. Further information can be found on page 15 of the Council's Consultation Guidance.

Pre-consultation Considerations

- 3.2 The Panel has suggested that it would be useful to introduce a requirement that the benefit / value of undertaking consultation exercises are formally assessed prior to commencement. Some consultations are undertaken because there is a legal requirement to do so; however, there is some discretion over whether and how others take place. There should be rigorous assessment of whether consultations are justified.

Consultation methodology

- 3.3 The Council has produced a substantial amount of guidance on consultation methodology. It covers, for example, consultation techniques, types of questions to ask and data collection. The Guidance has been circulated to Members and, as a result, a number of matters have arisen that will be considered in the course of the study. Some of these are referred to in the existing Guidance. The question of the level of responses to postal surveys is addressed on pages 5 and 6 and the structure of questions is discussed on pages 10 and 11.
- 3.4 Considerable importance has been attached to communication throughout the consultation process. It is held that effective communication ensures consultations incorporate all sectors of the community including those in isolated rural areas. The Council has a separate Communications and Marketing Strategy, which can be found here <http://teams.huntsdc.gov.uk/PAS/cam/Documents/Communications%20and%20Marketing%20Strategy%202008%20-%202011.doc>. It would probably make the study too unwieldy to review this Strategy as well. However, the view has strongly been expressed that communication needs to be taken into account including the language used in the course of consultations. Publicity for the purpose of consultation is an area that has already been identified as requiring attention. As part of these investigations Members should have in mind the fact that the Council has adopted a Customer Service Strategy: 'Customer Insight', one of the aims of which is to be good at communicating with and listening to people and organisations. A copy of this strategy is attached at Appendix B.

Other Considerations

- 3.5 Other considerations relating to the consultation methodology that Members have identified for investigation during the study are:
- the role of community / pressure groups;
 - public perceptions of the consultation process;
 - consultation in rural areas (see Consultation Guidance on Accessibility p 25), and
 - the use of Neighbourhood forums to promote consultations.

Clearly, given the financial pressures on the Council, it will be necessary to look at financial aspects of consultation. The cost of different survey methods will form an important part of the study. In addition, future savings might be achieved if the Council adopts a more rigorous approach to determining whether consultation is necessary.

Consultation Outcomes

- 3.6 The Panel has given preliminary consideration to what happens once a consultation exercise has closed. The Council's Guidance contains advice on data analysis and on how results are interpreted on page 14.

Members have suggested that it would be helpful to interpret the data that is collated on a Ward level though this should be subject to cost / benefit analysis and acknowledgement that the data generated from small areas will be limited. This relates to consultation's ability to support the role of Members and help Members engage with their constituents.

Post Consultation

- 3.7 One of the main reasons that this study is being undertaken is to examine whether more should be done to manage the presentation of subsequent decisions. It is suggested that for consultation to have value and to demonstrate that the views elicited have been taken into account, the Council should explain to the public the reasons why a chosen course of action has been taken following a consultation exercise.

Assessment of the Outcome and Effectiveness of Consultations.

- 3.8 The view has been expressed that there should be a process of review after each consultation has been completed. The Council's Guidance on consultation contains the following:

“Evaluating the effectiveness of consultation is vital to ensure effective future consultations. The key issues are:

- Did we consult the right people in the right way?
- Did they understand the issue so that they could contribute effectively?
- Was enough time allowed for the consultation exercise?
- What impact has the consultation had on decisions making process?
- How have participants of these decisions been informed?
- Have the results of the consultation been fed back to appropriate Members and Officers”.

Members will want to consider if this advice could be improved and whether it is being complied with.

4. CONCLUSION

- 4.1 The Panel has identified a number of matters that might be investigated. Some of them are already addressed in the Council's Guidance. In these cases the Panel may want to consider whether the Guidance should be amended. Where the Guidance is found to be satisfactory Members might have a view on whether it is being complied with. Finally, other matters have been outlined that might merit inclusion in the Guidance / process. It is now necessary to consider these matters in detail with a view to making recommendations on them.

- 4.2 Members may also wish to consider whether any additions need to be made to the study's design in order to reach a conclusion. Recent developments suggest there might be greater requirements on the Council to consult, for example, as a result of the “duty to involve” and

new statutory requirements relating to Council Tax. In addition, the Council is in the process of reviewing Growing Success and its performance management system and both of these will need to incorporate consultation. At the same time, there could be opportunities for Cambridgeshire local authorities to share information obtained through consultation.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being) Reports and Minutes - 7th September and 5th October 2010.

Huntingdonshire District Council Consultation and Engagement Strategy

Huntingdonshire District Council Consultation Guidance

Huntingdonshire District Council Consultation Guidance on Accessibility

Huntingdonshire District Council Communications and Marketing Strategy

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APPENDIX A

AREA OF REVIEW	<i>DETAILS/COMMENTS</i>
Title of Study (name of Working Group)	Consultation Process
Appointing Panel	Overview And Scrutiny Panel (Social Well-Being)
Members Assigned (including date Working Group appointed)	Working Group to be identified
Possible Co-Options to the Group	
Interests Declared	None
Rapporteur	N/A
Officer Support	A Roberts / H Thackray
Purpose of Study / Objective (specify exactly what the study should achieve)	To review the Council's consultation and engagement policies, procedures and practices and make recommendations for improvements to them.
Rationale (key issues and/or reason for conducting a study)	Perceived weaknesses in procedures adopted for recent consultations. Adverse reactions to decisions following consultations. Perception by some residents that the Council does not listen to or consider the views of local residents.
Terms of Reference	Review and update the Council's policies, procedures and procedures relating to consultation and engagement. Review the implementation of policies and procedures. Examine the practices of other authorities. Make recommendations for improvements to the Council's policies, procedures and practices.
Links to Council Policies/Strategies	Council Aim - To improve our systems and practices To enable Councillors to carry out their leadership role effectively. To be good at communicating with and listening to people and organisations.
Methodology / Approach (what types of enquiries will be used to gather evidence)	
External/Specialist Support	
Existing Documentation	Consultation and Engagement Strategy.

	<p>Consultation and Engagement Guidance.</p> <p>Communication Strategy.</p>
<p>Evidence to be Obtained (e.g. witnesses, documents, site visits, consultation, research, etc)</p>	
<p>Reference Sites</p>	
<p>Investigations</p>	<p>Communication (including the language used in the course of consultations)</p> <p>Consultation methodology</p> <p>Structure of questions</p> <p>The role of community / pressure groups</p> <p>Review the effectiveness of consultations</p> <p>Consultation in rural areas</p> <p>The use of Neighbourhood forums to promote consultations</p> <p>Consultation's ability to support the role of Members and help Members engage with their constituents</p> <p>Public perception of consultation</p> <p>Publicity for the purpose of consultation</p> <p>Explanation of decisions following consultation</p> <p>Data analysis</p> <p>Assessment of the outcome and effectiveness of consultations.</p>
<p>Witnesses</p>	
<p>Site Visits (if necessary) (where and when)</p>	
<p>Meetings of the Working Group</p>	
<p>Costs (resource requirements, additional expenditure, time)</p>	
<p>Possible Barriers to the Study (potential weaknesses)</p>	
<p>Projected Timescale (Start and end times)</p>	

Customer Service Strategy: 'Customer Insight'

Purpose

Huntingdonshire District Council aims to provide excellent customer service.

Our vision is one where, for each of our services, we have a clear insight into the needs of our customers and provide services in a way, which meets those needs. Specifically this means each service will;

- ◆ Carefully consider who its customers are, and what services they require; and
- ◆ Design service delivery around the needs of those customers.

Contribution to the Council's Corporate and Strategic Framework

The Council has many roles, but to achieve our aims and objectives in our corporate plan, Growing Success, we are committed to consistent and sustained customer service.

Using our customer insight, the Council aims to achieve the following objectives in Growing Success:

- **to provide high quality customer services** – by making it as easy as possible for customers to access our services and get appropriate information;
- **to improve access to our services** – by introducing new ways of contacting the Council including: self service via web site, mobile/home delivery of services, increase use of call centre and customer service centres;
- **to be good at communicating with and listening to people and organisations** – this will entail regular and effective communication with local residents about Council services, seeking their views on new proposals, and regularly asking them their opinions and considering what they say;
- **to be clear about what we can do and aspire to achieve** – by regularly publishing our plans and services standards and information about our performance;
- **to be a part of effective partnerships** – by continuing to take opportunities to work with others where it will meet community needs and maximise the resources;
- **to strengthen our commitment and capacity to achieve equality, diversity and inclusion** – by maintaining or establishing statutory equality schemes which consider gender, race and disability equality issues and the needs of disadvantaged groups at all levels of services, policies and practices.

The achievement of these objectives means that the Council must be excellent at understanding the needs of the users of our services, those we represent and in organising services around those needs. This requires excellent customer service standards and practices, communications, marketing, consultation and engagement skills and activities.

In addition to the objectives in Growing Success, a series of strategic policies, including the Corporate Equality Policy, Consultation and Engagement Strategy and Communications and Marketing Strategy, all contain objectives and activities which require effective customer service and/or contribute towards the approach adopted within this strategy.

These strategies and policies are mutually supportive and are inherently connected in terms of the objectives they are seeking to promote. In delivering the vision for excellent customer service the Council also has to balance the costs and value of improvements we make.

Background

Where are we now?

Huntingdonshire District Council Customer Service Strategy, approved in 2003, has been successfully achieved. In the past four years the way that customers can contact the Council, obtain services and information has been significantly improved -

- A Call Centre has been established which deals with the majority of initial calls from customers and provides a more detailed call answering service for an increasing range of services.
- A temporary Customer Service Centre has been established in Huntingdon which brought together disparate points of contact for customers, including a tourist information centre. In addition to the physical change this has facilitated a consistent approach towards customer service and improvements in the development of employees. A new permanent centre is being built as part of the Council's new headquarters.
- Satellite Customer Service Centres have been maintained in St Ives and St Neots offering payment facilities and a range of other services.
- Community Information Centres have been successfully established in Yaxley and Ramsey working closely with many external partners.
- Continuous improvements have been made to the Council's website as a means of obtaining information about services.
- The St Neots Tourist Information Centre has been maintained pending its amalgamation with an enhanced customer service centre in the town.
- A Mobile Display Unit is used extensively around the district to promote services and as a mobile office. Trials have also been conducted on mobile working, mobile information provision and flexible working for employees. These trials have provided information about the demand and costs of such activities.

In the main, face to face services have developed independently and we need to ensure we learn from existing best practice across these locations. Officers also act as 'advocates' for those customers who need more help than others, and this will continue.

Where do we want to be?

Having made these achievements and having regard to increasing customer expectation and good practice in this field the time is right to revisit the strategy.

The strategy is planned to have a life of approximately three years and includes a broad action plan required to achieve its objectives. It is intended to reinforce existing good practice and performance already present across the Council. The strategy is focussed on the initial contact we have with customers and the subsequent delivery of service.

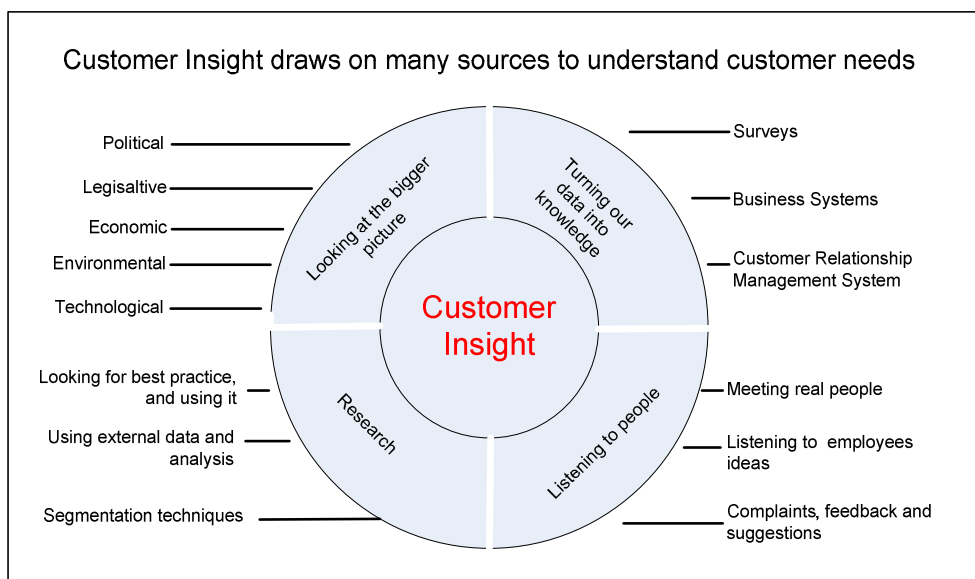
Understanding our customers better

Every potential or actual user of our services is a customer. The Council works hard to ensure customers receive excellent service, and while it knows a great deal about customers, more can always be done.

The Council wants to better understand the diversity of its communities, and deliver services which respond to different needs and aspirations. To do this, it needs to get maximum value from the information it gathers, and be able to bring different information sources together to build a richer, more comprehensive, picture of its customers.

Equality Impact Assessments are being carried out on all our services and policies and they will highlight issues that need to be addressed through customer service activities. It is important that we have a coordinated approach to the use of information from these assessments.

Each service needs to have a clear insight into the customers it serves. The following diagram highlights many of the sources of information the Council will use to develop this insight.



The services the Council provides

The Council delivers many services and for operational reasons and efficiency they will continue to be delivered in the most appropriate way. However, as

our 'customer insight' develops new ways of meeting customer needs will be identified, and opportunities will arise to bring together services to work in a way better suited to meeting customer needs.

The way the Council is structured will need to reflect the objectives of this strategy. While Heads of Service will remain responsible for the delivery of customer service within their own service this will concentrate on more complex enquiries, requiring a level of specialist expertise. Such contact may lower in volume, but require more time and resources. However, to promote the exchange of best practice, service development, improved training and consistent levels of high quality customer service it is proposed that Customer Service will become within the remit of an existing single Head of Service who will be responsible for:

- ◆ ensuring a customer perspective is at the heart of all services
- ◆ overseeing the delivery and monitoring of this strategy
- ◆ managing the first point of contact with customers including:
 - The Call Centre
 - Customer Service Centres
 - Community Information Centres
 - Visitor Information Centres

They will deal with high volume, relatively simple services. They will interact heavily with customers and will need to be experts in customer service. They will also be responsible for:

- ◆ coordinating campaigns which involve services provided by the customer service team
- ◆ providing advice and guidance to services
- ◆ ensuring managers acknowledge their responsibility for customer service in their own service.

Customer Service Skills

Customer service and customer insight are key skills for all employees. This strategy promotes high quality training and development of employees to deliver the Council's objectives.

Meeting the needs of all our customers

The Council has a duty to ensure the services it provides do not exclude any group of customers, and this remains a high priority. For example we are meeting the needs of the emerging group of customers from the new EU member states. The website now has a screen-reader function enabling access to blind customers. Other new developments are underway and will be completed during the life of the strategy. We will ensure that information and communication requirements of disabled people are considered, specifically, disabled people have asked to be better informed about facilities and funding.

Making the most of our website

Offering 24/7 access to information and services will be a key part of meeting customer needs. By doing this we actively encourage greater access to services, at a cheaper cost to the Council, and free resources to deliver services to those customers most in need.

Where appropriate as part of our everyday business with our customers, we will:

- ◆ make them aware that the information or service they require is available online, encouraging them to use the website
- ◆ include a link to the Council's home page, or other relevant pages, in e-mails
- ◆ include our website address in printed material.

We will continue to look at the design and scope of the website to ensure it meets customer needs and consideration will be given to personalising the content for particular customers. We will ensure the website provides high quality and useful information, and the number of on-line services will increase.

Developing the points of contact with customers

The Council will continue to develop ways for customers to obtain services from the Council.

- The Call Centre will remain the primary method of dealing with telephone calls and with more services will be offered over time.
- Direct dial – customers will be able to contact direct service areas. As services transfer to the Call Centre, direct dial volumes will decrease and these calls will become more focussed on the complex, specialist calls, best dealt with by service experts.
- Face to face - the Customer Service Centre at Huntingdon will be a primary point of access, but there will be Customer Service Centres at St Ives and St Neots. The Community Information Centres at Yaxley and Ramsey will continue to provide services to customers. The range of service and information between these centres will be brought together.
- Mobile or flexibly delivered services – services delivered away from the Council's premises; sometimes in a customer's home will be further developed. Work is underway to introduce more flexible ways of working. Where there is a clear business case, this has potential to provide service at locations more suited to the customer, particularly in rural locations.
- Via the internet – either from their own home, from mobile devices, or from public points of access.
- In writing - this may be within a letter, or a customer may have to apply for a service using application forms.

Getting it right first time

Ensuring we answer customer enquiries first time is important. It means the customer receives an excellent level of service, and the Council does not spend effort dealing with avoidable and repeated customer contact. The establishment of the Call Centre and the Customer Service Centre in Huntingdon has meant a greater percentage of enquiries are dealt with at the first point of contact – but more could be done.

All services can help to improve our performance. Developing a clear customer insight requires all staff to understand the needs of customers and building services around those needs will reduce costs and lead to greater

satisfaction. The Council should also use data more effectively to inform day to day contact with customers. This will increase the likelihood that the service offered fits the needs of the customers.

Encouraging customers to provide feedback, and understanding their comments allows the Council to make improvements and this is an area the Council will develop further.

Managing and responding to customer demand

The Council will also manage demand better by 'smoothing' the day-to-day peaks in customer demand. This will increase access to service, especially at busy times.

For example, collecting and publishing information showing the least busy times may encourage some customers to plan their next visit or phone call to coincide with these quieter times. In addition it will help services to plan for peaks in demand.

Making more of contact with customers

The Council has a Communications and Marketing Strategy and structure in place to promote marketing activities and many services already market themselves to customers and deliver excellent results. But the Council has identified that it can do more. Coordinated and targeted campaigns, based upon an increased understanding of customer needs and preferences, will ensure customers are more aware of services delivered by the Council.

Increasing the electronic provision of services and information

For some services currently there are limited practical alternatives to a paper application form, and some customers prefer to write to the Council. New media is becoming an increasingly preferred method for communication for many customers. This is something that must be taken into account and is being considered in the communications and marketing strategy, as more customers opt to receive electronic communications.

The Council will increase the use of e-mail and the website where possible and appropriate. This approach will reduce the time taken for the Council to respond to a customer, reduce the use of paper and reduce expenditure.

Bringing together services

While it is important that customers appreciate the distinctions between providers of services increasingly they are looking for simple or single points of contact. The Council already shares some elements of our customer service delivery for the benefit of our customers. Where practical, we will engage with partners and other agencies to try to deliver an improved service. This will mean customers can access a number of services in one location. The Council will need to share information with partners, and this will be encouraged.

Action Plan

This strategy is supported by a three-year action plan which will help to ensure a consistent approach across the whole of the Council. The Council's Head of Service overseeing customer service will be responsible for the monitoring

and implementation of the plan and will work with other services to make sure this happens.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation are critical to ensuring that we achieve the objectives.

To ensure we are making progress we will:

- monitor our performance against local (and national, if any) measures
- report performance on customer service
- collect and publish evidence of good practice throughout the Council.

This strategy and action plan will be reviewed annually so that we can set specific targets for the future. A comprehensive review of the strategy will be undertaken every three years.

Risks

The council's corporate risk register identifies a large number of risks that may have negative effects on the council.

An effective customer service strategy is imperative to ensure the risks and the possibilities of them becoming a reality are kept to a minimum or prevented altogether.

The following key risks have been identified:

- Delivering the strategy may require resources already committed to other activities and projects.
- Customers are targeted in an uncoordinated way, using resources inefficiently and lowering customers' perception of our services.
- Customer insight may focus effort onto the majority of customers at the expense of hard to reach groups.
- Shared service requires commitment from outside the Council; it may be this is not forthcoming.

Action Plan 2008-2011

Outcome	Action	Measure	Target	By whom	When
To provide High quality customer service <i>Services are provided in a way that meet customer needs</i>	Designates a Head of Service to be responsible for overseeing the delivery of this strategy and for the provision of 'front-office' service.	Head of Customer Service appointed	April 2008	Terry Parker	April 2008
	Embeds the concept and practice of 'customer insight' into the organisation by encouraging services to implement this strategy.	Achieve commitment and buy in from all departments	All activity managers have attended a customer insight workshop.	Customer Services Manager	March 2009
		Review the complaints & feedback system to record feedback from customers, particularly satisfaction with the level of service provided.	% Improvements made based upon feedback from customers through comments and complaints.	Customer Services Manager & Central Services Manager	March 2010
To provide high quality customer service	Training and development course for relevant employees in customer	Adequate courses to meet personal	100% in relation to appropriate actions.	Customer Services Manager	March 2009

Outcome	Action	Measure	Target	By whom	When
<i>Services are provided in a way that meet customers needs</i>	service activities.	development plan needs.			
	Establish and publicise customer service standards.	Publication of standards	September 2008	Customer Services Manager	September 2008
	Production of protocols and good practice guidance for customer service.	Publications and dissemination of protocols.	January 2009	Customer Services Manager	January 2009
	Reduce the amount of avoidable customer contact by 'getting it right first time'	NI14	Methodology in place – Oct 08 Data Gathered – Baseline Data produced April 09 % Reduction of avoidable contact TBC.	Customer Services Manager &HOS	Ongoing
Achieve recognition of providing customer service excellence across all customer service locations	Achievement of the prestigious Customer service excellence award		Dec 2010	Customer Services Manager	Dec 2010

Outcome	Action	Measure	Target	By whom	When
<p>To make it as easy as possible for customers to access our services and get appropriate information.</p> <p><i>Services are accessible to our customers</i></p>	To make better use of available data to improve our understanding of customers needs	Services are built around the needs of customers	All activity managers attended customer insight workshop	Customer Services Manager	March 2009
	Maintain or establish systems to ensure employees know how to share information and knowledge	Sharepoint site used to share information and Knowledge	All customer service staff update and use the Sharepoint site to share information and knowledge	Customer Services Manager	December 2008
	Continued development and updating of web site and web based material	% Of customers satisfied that web-based information meets their needs.	80%	The Web Team	Ongoing
<p>To make it as easy as possible for customers to access our services and get appropriate information.</p> <p><i>Services are accessible to our</i></p>	To promote the use of the website to improve service and 'free-up' resources	% Of selected transactions (e.g. payments) completed online compared to other channels (where there is a choice)	50% (this measure is part of the updated Growing Success, so may change once approved by Members)	The Web Team & Customer Services Manager	Ongoing

Outcome	Action	Measure	Target	By whom	When
<p><i>customers</i></p> <p>To make it as easy as possible for customers to access our services and get appropriate information.</p> <p><i>Services are accessible to our customers</i></p>	To develop the website and web based services so they are more personalised to customers needs	Implement personalisation on the website	By Mar 2010	IMD Development Team	By Mar 2010
	Continue the development of the Call Centre and Customer Service Centre in Huntingdon.	More services introduced and customers dealt with quickly and efficiently	Service level agreements continue to be met at the call centre and customer service centre	Customer Services Manager	Ongoing
	Develop the face-to-face customer service in St Neots and St Ives.	Make recommendations To improve service delivery.	Report to cabinet outlining recommendations	Customer Services Manager	October 2008
	Explores with other public services and the voluntary sector, opportunities to provide services in a way that meets customer's needs; especially to establish a shared "high street" or prominent presence in St Neots.	Make recommendations To improve service delivery	Report to cabinet outlining recommendations	Customer Services Manager	October 2008

Outcome	Action	Measure	Target	By whom	When
<p>To be good at communicating with and listening to people and organisations</p> <p><i>To work to ensure that communities are inclusive</i></p>	Improves access to services by managing, and responding to, the demand on services better.	% Of customers who rate access to council services as good or excellent.	TBC from growing success	Customer Service Manager & HOS	Ongoing
	To improve the delivery of mobile services around the district.	% Of customers who rate access to council services as good or excellent.	TBC from growing success	IMD Development Team & HOS	Ongoing
	To ensure all customers, including those groups which are considered to be excluded or do not engage with the Council, are considered when delivering services.	Use mosaic and other customer feedback to target customer groups correctly to increase the % of customers who rate access to council services as good or excellent.	TBC from growing success.	Customer Services Manager & Heads of Service.	Ongoing
	Use the results of Equality	Number of	100% of	Customer Service Manager	Ongoing

Outcome	Action	Measure	Target	By whom	When
	Impact Assessments in the planning of customer service activities.	actions arising from EIA's, which are used to inform customer service activities.	appropriate actions	& Heads of service	