

**REPORT FOR: OVERVIEW AND
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
AND SCRUTINY SUB-
COMMITTEES**

Date of Meeting:	13 April 2010
Subject:	Customer Service Update including Mystery Shopping
Responsible Officer:	Carol Cutler, Director Business Transformation and Customer Services
Scrutiny Lead Member area:	Councillor Stanley Sheinwald and Councillor Mark Versallion, Policy and Performance Lead Councillors Corporate Effectiveness and Finance
Exempt:	No
Enclosures:	None

Section 1 – Summary and Recommendations

The purpose of this report is to update Overview and Scrutiny on the projects within the Access to Services Strategy that have been delivered, delivered and closed as business as usual.

Recommendations:

- That Overview and Scrutiny comment upon progress made on the Access to Services plan and support these initiatives as business as usual activities.

Section 2 – Report

Introductory paragraph

Harrow's original Access to Services strategy, adopted in February 2005, was updated in January 2009 to reflect the progress made in implementing its recommendations, and outlined a more detailed forward plan to 2010. The plan reflected the Council's new corporate objectives, feedback from a number of external audits, and changes to Government targets.

A large number of projects have now been delivered within the last year that underpins the strategy's key principles:

- Customers are able to access services in a way that suits their needs and preferences, thus improving customer satisfaction.
- The council is able to reduce the cost of delivering services through appropriate use of technology.

The Access Strategy has delivered a large number of key projects and customer service initiatives across the council. This is a significant achievement as the recommendations from the Audit Commission Access to Services Review have been addressed and the council are now at the forefront of excellence compared to our London counterparts.

Access to Services – Update on the Plan

1. Development of Harrow's Website and Continued Channel Migration

- 1.1 The development of Harrow's transactional website, combined with important, accurate, up to date and useful Council information, is at the heart of the wider channel migration strategy. If the site is useful and secure for transactions and accurate in the presentation of information, people will be encouraged to use it for a large number of the transactions for which they currently use traditional channels, such as telephone. The results so far in terms of the increase in the number of web form transactions, and visits to the site, have been extremely encouraging. Web visits have risen by over 200% in the last two years and the use of web forms has risen by over 130% which has helped reduce our average transaction costs from £1.33 to £0.92.
- 1.2 Several new services have been launched on the website. This includes a fully functional planning portal and as part of the Waste Services project, an integrated web form enabling residents to check the reason for their bin not being collected and report any legitimate missed bins.
- 1.3 The website has also been refreshed with an enhanced design and new functionality, including integrated videos. The 'myHarrow' facility on the Harrow Council website has been created to allow residents to obtain information about services available to them in their neighbourhood. By typing in a valid postcode you can access

information about controlled parking zones, bin collection dates, planning applications on your street and details about your local councillors.

- 1.4 The 'Your Nearest' tab displays information on different facilities and their proximity to your property. Examples include Libraries, Schools, GPs and Travel stations and more. The categories are divided into subsets such as Leisure & Culture, Health & Social Care, Transport & Streets or Education & Learning to allow for easier navigation. You can either look at the information on a map or in a list and it is provided with distances and further contact information where appropriate.

2. Focus on Resolution and reducing Failure Demand

Expansion of Access Harrow/One Stop Shop

- 2.1 It was agreed that an effective way to understand and increase resolution by the Council would be to complete the migration of appropriate services into Access Harrow. The plan first expanded the capacity of the One Stop Shop and integrated Planning Services and Building Control. Housing Rents are in place as of 1 March 2010, with Housing Residents Services to follow at the end of the month as well as elements of Registrar Services to follow. It is worth noting that Electoral Services has been integrated into Access Harrow, handling over 700 calls a month with no additional resource, whilst Housing Services is being transferred with the equivalent of just 4.5 FTEs, compared to the 9 staff previously supporting the service.
- 2.2 When we first implemented the Cisco system in Planning & Building Control the statistics showed that only 50% of calls were answered and the average time for the calls to be answered was over 90 seconds, whereas now 95% of calls are answered and the average wait time for a customer to get through is 20 seconds.
- 2.3 Avoidable contact data (NI14) is now captured through Access Harrow via the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system allowing us to assess failure in demand at process level. This will aid us in reducing the highest areas of avoidable contact. The initial cut of data in April 2009 highlighted 27.7% of contacts were avoidable across 170,000 customer contacts. The second tranche of data taken at Quarter two in 2009/10 showed that this had reduced to 21%.
- 2.4 The expanded Access Harrow also presented the opportunity to share our facilities with our Partners, including the Police, Citizen's Advice Bureau and representatives from disability groups. A custom built information desk is now available within main reception for our partners to offer a range of service.
- 2.5 The renewed focus on resolution demanded that we review each service offered in Access Harrow and assess what actions should be taken to allow more decisions to be taken during the first contact with customers. This involved changes to processes between the front and back offices and additional training for staff. A major contribution to this is the completion of the Waste Services project which has vastly

improved resolution at first point of contact by using state of the art technology to provide real-time information to Access Harrow on missed and contaminated bins.

Numbering strategy

- 2.6 We also reviewed the different telephone numbers advertised for services across the council. From a customer's point of view, in some cases this presented a barrier to accessing the right services. We have initiated the process of streamlining the number of telephone numbers by allocating the most popular services within Access Harrow with a new telephone number which will be publicised in the next edition of the council's A-Z in March 2010. Further numbers will be progressively introduced where services are integrated into Access Harrow over the coming 18 months.

3. Providing Services based on a better understanding of Customer Needs

Mystery Shopping

- 3.1 We completed mystery shopping in October 2008 (wave 1) and December (wave 2) 2009 measuring the quality of our access channels and informing us of the areas of customer services in which we need to target improvement. As with wave 1, the exercise was carried out in accordance with the Market Research Society Code and Guidelines. C&R Market Research's assessors played the part of a Harrow Council customer and carried out: 46 face to face visits, 255 phone calls, 74 emails and 26 letters
- 3.2 The questions and answers used were developed by C&R Associates in conjunction with Harrow Council. The contacts were assessed according to the channel in use, with a combination of basic and more advanced customer service standards applied.
- 3.3 The analysis indicates that overall performance (measured as the proportion of customers who rates their experience as either 'very good' or 'good') has improved on Wave 1 across three of the four channels (See Figure 1). Much of this improvement has been achieved by the completion of customer service training, improvement in technology and raising awareness of customer services via the Customer Service Working Group and performance monitoring.

	Wave 1		Wave 2	
	Good / Very Good	Bad / Very Bad	Good / Very Good	Bad / Very Bad
Visits	71%	11%	81%	4%
E-mail	48%	38%	47%	36%
Phone	56%	27%	60%	25%
Letter	30%	52%	50%	35%

Figure 1

3.4 There are a number of specific actions for the council to consider:

- There are still relatively high numbers of emails and letters that did not receive any reply. Although this has improved since wave 1 (See Figure 2a & 2b) this can be greatly improved further. There is more use of automated acknowledgements for email enquiries, however this is only within certain service areas and therefore this should be deployed corporately across the council. This would serve as an efficient holding reply but should not deter services from responding more fully to enquiries at the earliest opportunity.

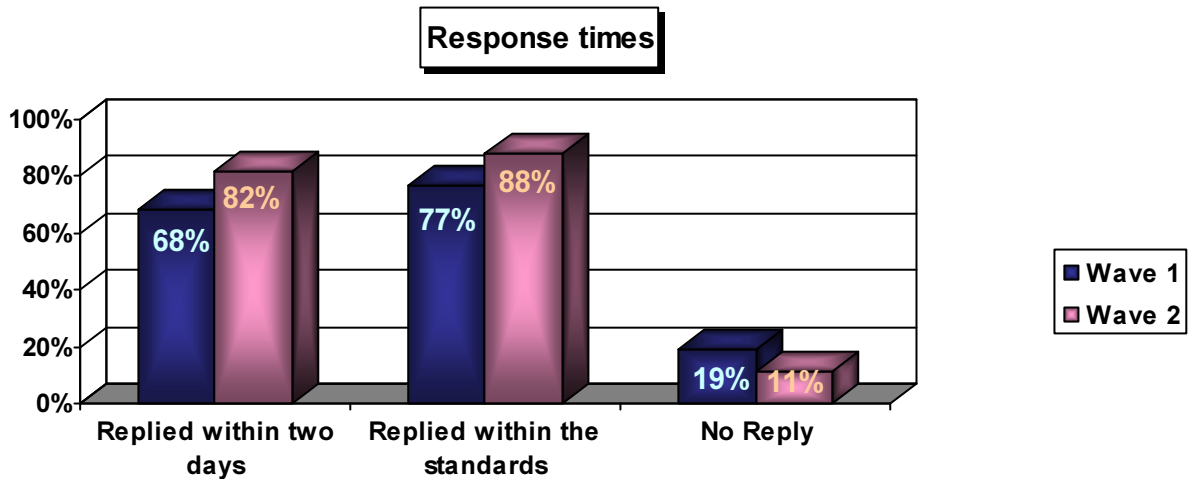


Figure 2a – Email response times

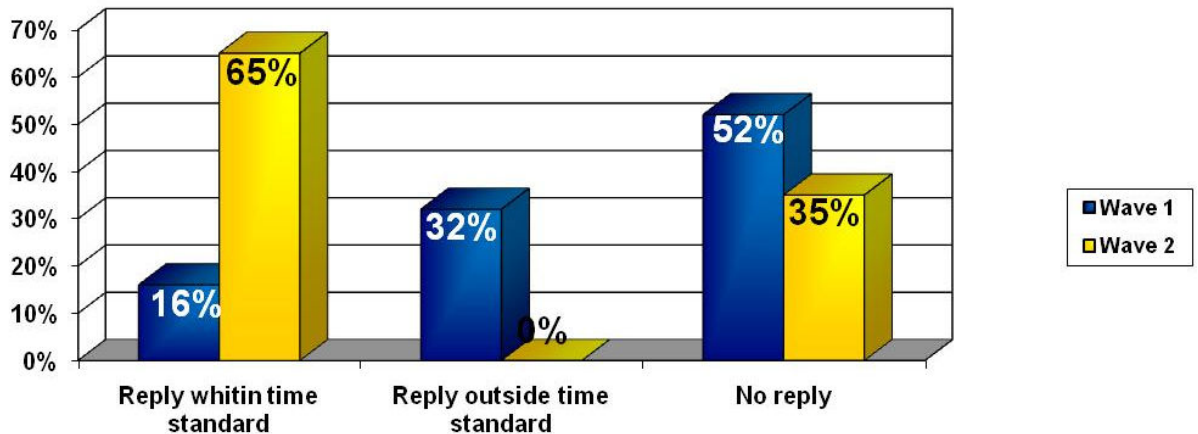
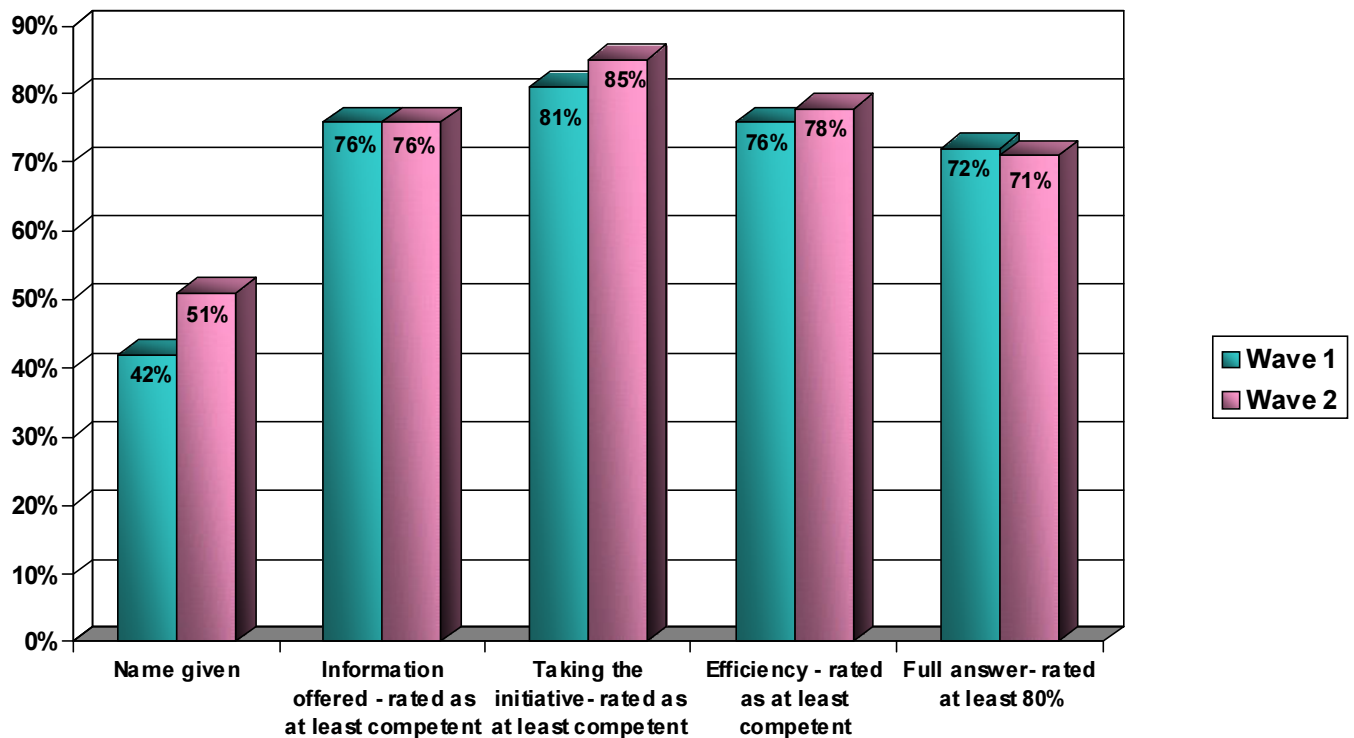


Figure 2b – Letter response times

- The council should build upon the progress made in replying to letter based enquiries and attain levels comparable with other channels. The authority would need to investigate why a large number of the letters sent out during this exercise were unanswered. (See Figure 2b).
- There is still an insufficient level of consistency with the use of corporate letter heading, layout and presentation of letters. The council should reiterate the importance that this has on the impression of the council and professionalism.

- With regard to face-to-face enquiries, there has been a marked improvement since the first wave. However, the council could do more to reiterate to staff the importance of a) checking with customers that they fully understand the query being presented to them and b) check with customers that they fully understand the response they have been provided with, particularly if further action is needed.
- Telephone performance has largely remained high (see figure 5 below). Again, the council should continue to reiterate the importance of answering calls within 5 rings and using appropriate voicemail systems to reduce the number of abandoned calls.



- 3.5 As a result of the mystery shopping exercise there are a number of actions that will follow to address the issues raised. These include:
- A further rollout of NVQ training in customer services (level 2)
 - The Management Development Programme (MDP) for managers will continue to have a customer services module as will the new Practitioner course.
 - A Telephone Handling course has been run within Access Harrow
 - The council are currently running a series of written communication courses. Further dates have been confirmed for April.
 - The Customer Service Working Group (CSWG) will continue to meet on a monthly basis to discuss issues. The representatives of the CSWG are from across the council and are required to promote good customer services within their directorate and share good practice.

Experian Mosaic

- 3.6 We have completed the delivery of the Customer Insight Programme with our partners Experian and the programme has been passed onto the Performance Team to be integrated into business as usual. The results of the programme have created an evidence base on the characteristics and behaviours of Harrow residents to support decision-

making at a tactical and strategic level across the Council. This included actual data on actual service consumption and breakdown of resident opinions from the Quality of Life Survey. The use of this data is a mandatory part of the service planning process.

- 3.7 The data produced by the Customer Insight Programme has been used to support the Transformation programme and the programme has been extended to cover future projections and partnership data.

Consultation Portal

- 3.8 A web based consultation portal has been launched with clearer internal processes to pull together the various consultation exercises across the Council. The portal will be the hub for the council's consultation activities and therefore become the single point of access where citizens can access all relevant consultation events and information.
- 3.9 The Portal provides a comprehensive set of tools for consultation management, analysis and reporting which will allow easier collation and reporting of data which can be shared across the council and eventually amongst our Partners.

3 Developing and implementing customer service standards

- 4.1 In consultation with our residents and partners, corporate customer service standards were developed and then launched during National Customer Services Week in October 2008. There are also mechanisms in place to measure performance of these standards (i.e. mystery shopping and technical solutions) which are reported on a quarterly basis to relevant improvement boards.
- 4.2 In October 2009 further consultation with the Resident's Panel was undertaken which ascertained that improvement in customer service had been noted and gratefully received. Notable achievements were commented on the speed of responding to emails, less mis-directed calls and using web forms to log issues or feedback.

5 Management of complaints

- 5.1 We have developed a Compliments, Comments and Complaints policy with clearly defined definitions of a complaint and outlines the process for identifying and handling complaints. This is managed by a number of complaint co-ordinators in each directorate and the appointment of a Corporate Complaints Officer who will oversee the entire process and report on performance. Also, further developments have been made to the existing technology to assist in recording complaints.
- 5.2 The impact of introducing the policy and system shown that between April-September 2008 and retrospectively within 2009 the number of Ombudsman enquiries has decreased slightly. More importantly, of those complaints investigated by the Ombudsman, there has been a 60% increase where the council's decision has been upheld.

- 5.3 As a result of the new complaints process, we now have data to show how many complaints have been received, how quickly they were addressed and what the causes of discontentment are. As we move into 2010/11 we will be able to analyse comparable data for the first time to assess improvement.
- 5.4 CSB have now agreed that the corporate complaints system will also be used to log all Member's Enquiries (ME's) and Complaints (MC's) that are received by council officers. Therefore all MC's and ME's will be signposted via the council's standard complaints procedure and as such treated consistently with other complaints. This includes:
- Recording all MC's and ME's onto the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system
 - Responding to MC's & ME's within the 10 working days timescale applicable to corporate complaints.
 - The Corporate Complaints Manager to have overall ownership of the member complaint procedure
 - Member complaints will be incorporated into the quarterly complaints reports that go to the relevant Improvement Boards.
- 5.5 There are substantial benefits in managing ME's and MC's in this way as it will ensure that complaints are being managed consistently across the council, increase the ability to log complaints and track progress and report back on what has been done, and more performance management information will be available on MC's and ME's (e.g. Business Warehouse reports).

6 Delivering excellence in Customer Service

- 6.1 Over 70 members of frontline staff have completed a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) in Customer Services (Level 2 or 3). Further government funding has been secured to continue with this programme of training via the Learning4 programme.
- 6.2 There have also been modules developed and completed for the Management Development Programme (MDP) whereby approximately 220 managers were trained in recognising who their customers are and how to use customer comments and complaints as vital sources of information for planning for improvement. It also showcased a number of tools that can be used by managers to help ensure that their service is meeting customer need. Learning and Development and the Customer Services Department are currently working on developing the Practitioner element of the course.
- 6.3 Specific training courses are currently being run on written communication and telephone answering (Call control). 3 written communication courses have completed and have covered staff from Chief Executives, Finance, Adults and Housing and Children's Departments. There are two further courses being run until the end of March and more dates secured throughout April.

- 6.4 These significant achievements and the overall processes and procedures within Access Harrow have been recognised with the award of the Customer Excellence Standard (formally Chartermark), a significant and rare achievement for a first application. Over the course of the plan the achievements of the operational and project teams have been recognised further with a number of awards, Harrow Clicks 2009 (Marketing Award for the Harrow Web-site), National E-Gov Award 2010 (Waste Project), and finalist in the National Planning Forum Call Centre Innovation Award 2010 (Winner to be announced in April) and Guardian Awards (winner also to be announced in April).

7 Performance Issues

- 7.1 The table below illustrates improvement in the percentage of contacts by access channels since delivery of the plan:

	2006/07	2008/09
Face to face	8.6 %	6.3%
Telephone	80%	36%
Website	10%	55%

The overall cost per enquiry has reduced to £0.98 from £2.23 between 06/07 and 08/09.

- 7.2 The council now receive on average 1300 web form submissions each month of which over 30 are now fully integrated into back office systems. There has also been a 169% increase in the use of 'myHarrow' on the website.

- 7.3 The table below illustrates the performance indicators that this programme seeks to meet and their current performance which are reported to quarterly improvement boards.

Indicator	Target	Q3 Actual
Access Harrow		
To resolve customer enquiries at the first point of contact with the Council at the One Stop Shop	80% (overall) within Access Harrow	91%
To ensure that customer wait times are kept to a minimum in the One Stop Shop	< 15 minutes on average	15-20 seconds
To ensure that customer calls are successfully answered i.e. not abandoned	> 95%	96%
To ensure that customer calls are answered within a timely manner	90% of calls answered in 30 seconds	85%
To ensure that emails and web forms are answered within a timely manner	Web Forms 95% < 24 hrs. Emails 95% < 72 hrs	Awaiting email manager
To reduce the number of times customers contact the Council unnecessarily (NI14)	To reduce the level of avoidable	24%

	contact by 20% Target 25%	
The rest of the council		
% of calls answered within 5 rings or 30 seconds	85%	79%
% of emails responded within 5 working days of receipt	85%	63%
% of letters/faxes responded to within 10 working days	70%	86%

Environmental Impact

There are no environmental impacts associated with this programme.

Risk Management Implications

There are two key risk registers for the overall programme plan. One is contained within the BTP & customer services Service Plan and the other is part of the BTP Programme Board which is jointly managed with Capita.

Also each individual project within the plan has risk logs.

Corporate Priorities

The Access to Services strategy has many links to our current corporate priorities:

- Deliver cleaner and safer streets –
The waste management project
- Improve support for vulnerable people
- Build stronger communities

Section 3 - Statutory Officer Clearance

There is no requirement for statutory officer clearance.

Section 4 - Contact Details and Background Papers

Contact: Kireen Rooney, Senior Project Manager – Customer Services,
020 8420 9360

Background Papers: There are no background papers.