

## **Case Study 6: Accessible West Offices**

### **Knowing our Communities**

Just over 200,000 people comprising 83,500 households live in York and receive a range of services delivered by the council.

### **Leadership, partnership and organisational commitment**

Feedback from the Place Survey and Talkabout told us residents were dissatisfied with access to council services which they felt were spread across too many buildings, some of which were run down, unwelcoming and had poor accessibility. Prior to the opening of West Offices there were thirteen reception areas across the city.

A key priority within the Council Plan was to operate one point of customer contact in West Offices. This is supported by the vision set out in the 2012-2015 Customer Strategy: 'To deliver the right services, cost-effectively, at the right time, in the right way for you.'

### **Involving our Communities**

To ensure the Customer Centre in West Offices would meet customer access /service delivery requirements we worked in partnership with:

- Tenant Service Inspectors/ Residents' Committees
- Staff Equality Reference Group(SERG)
- Equalities Action Group (EAG)
- Youth Council/Young Inspectors
- "Looked after children" groups
- Older people's groups
- Residents and service users
- Staff
- Partners/Voluntary organisations e.g. CAB, SYCU

We also undertook a range of activities including:

- Site visits to other local authorities to learn from best practice
- Advice from specialist consultancy groups
- Public consultation events where specific groups were able to put their thoughts across
- Data gathering on why people used the council's services

- Surveys - both face to face and in written form
- Liaison with specific customer groups to ensure the service embraced their requirements. These included Youth Council, Young Inspectors, team leaders and managers of customer-facing services and sessions with Children's Services

A thorough and detailed Community Impact Assessment was undertaken over the course of four years to ensure changes were soundly based on clearly understood feedback from consultations and customer input. The CIA also took care to incorporate and reference

- Other relevant programmes including the Fairness and Inclusion Strategy, Engagement Strategy, Information and Communication Technology and Development Strategy as well as the efficiency agenda and service plans.
- Anti-discriminatory and employment legislation including: Anti Social Behaviour Act 2003; Human Rights Act; Data Protection Act; Disability Discrimination Act 1995; Gender Recognition Act; Special Educational Needs and Disability Act; Children's Act 1989.

The CIA was continuously revised and amended as the Customer Centre vision and purpose evolved and customer needs and expectations became clearer. Ten sets of consultation took place using a variety of methodologies enabling us to draw on a wide variety of representative groups and individuals. Extensive preparatory work was carried out with customers from all Communities of Identify (CoI) to ensure services would be fully accessible and inclusive. Consultation with stakeholders and feedback from service users raised a number of issues enabling original plans to be adapted to accommodate specific needs. Plans and proposals were shared with CoI customer groups at each stage, enabling their detailed feedback to guide and shape both the physical environment and service delivery.

Careful consideration was given to specific aspects including:

- Proximity of the building to public transport to allow for independent travel
- All front and most rear parking spaces are designated for people with disabilities

- The physical structure of the building structure includes full accessibility with level entrance, automatic entrance doors and ease of use of all public spaces for wheelchair users and people with prams/buggies.
- WCs caterer for the comfort of all visitors, including *Changing Places*, disabled access facilities and family-friendly facilities.
- A multi-faith contemplation space with private washing facilities is available
- Easy navigation around the Customer Centre via static and electronic signage, all designed with large, clear, high contrast lettering.
- Self-service monitors are height adjustable with some especially adapted for people with epilepsy.
- Customer information is delivered by announcements and visual displays meeting the needs of customers with visual or hearing impairments.
- The height, font size and contrast of static and electronic displays enhance information delivery to customers.
- To make waiting a comfortable experience, the seated waiting areas are child-friendly with free Wi-Fi available and screens offer a rolling programme of informal customer information.
- Deaf or hearing impaired customers have access to staff trained in British Sign Language or the use of hearing loops, two of which are permanently available in the Customer Centre.
- The *Language Line* translation service is available over the phone at the Customer Centre with staff able to request written translations if required.
- Fire evacuation plans for wheelchair users or those unable to negotiate staircases
- Baby feeding and changing areas
- Facilities for support dogs both in and outside the building
- Accessible, private interview rooms offering customers space for confidential discussion.

Prior to opening, the Customer Centre it was 'road tested' by residents from various user groups aiming to identify any flaws or barriers to service access. This exercise proved to be crucial given the diversity of our customers, including those requiring specific support as well as our staff. For example, following a dry run by people with visual impairment, we identified a hazard created because both the desk partitions and the carpet were grey.

People with visual impairment found it difficult to differentiate between the two surfaces. Repainting the desk edges to increase the contrast resolved the problem.

To capture ongoing customer feedback, our “Seeds of Change” suggestion scheme displays customer comments along with a response from the council.

## **Responsive Services**

We can now meet the needs of customers far better. Customers can deal with most council business at one convenient, accessible location. The first six months were essentially a time to see how arrangements and facilities worked in practice.

From customer and staff feedback since opening, we have made a number of changes including:

- Reconfigured the layout of the help desk and self-service areas to improve directional flow for customers
- Installed additional signage to more clearly identify the specialist desks in the open plan area.
- Drawing on census information, the welcome desk now greets customers in the top five spoken languages in York.
- New signage on the self- service access points helps customers identify what they can do at these points.

Recognising the need to improve the service offer for deaf customers we are investigating the provision of a British Sign Language translation and interpretation service. This would be accessed remotely via a secure weblink during opening times but with scope to extend to out of hours access where required. The initial service would be available at West Offices but once fully operational could be extended to other locations including libraries/Explore Centres, Hazel Court and community venues. Opened in March 2013, CYC's new Customer Centre dealt with 125,164 customer contacts in its first year of operation.

**Quick query/ Service data:**  
customers dealt with in less than five minutes without needing to see a service representative.

**Ticket data:**  
customers needing to see a service representative

Top 4 service areas	Number
Advice Benefits including York Financial Assistance Scheme	22,117
Parking	19,827
Council Tax	12,363
Housing	8,232
19 Other Services	24,906
<b>Total</b>	<b>87,445</b>

Service area	Number
Business and visitors	28,056
Self-service	4,815
Application forms	3,243
Leaflets / Information	1,111
CAB	207
Future Prospects	156
Adult Social Care	116
Veritau (fraud)	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>37,719</b>

## Workforce

Staff working in or based in the Customer Centre take part in training and awareness-raising sessions ensuring they are enabled to understand and meet customers' differing needs.

The help desk staff direct and assist customers and visitors, ensuring a warm and professional welcome.

Trained floorwalkers are available to provide in-person support. By meeting and greeting customers, the trained floorwalkers are able to direct customers to the most efficient way of meeting their needs. Where appropriate, customers are steered towards self-service, saving them time and contributing to service delivery channel-shift. The floorwalkers offer a personal service to customers lacking skills or confidence in using self-serve technology.

Being fully aware of the range of facilities and technology available in the Customer Centre, they are able to ensure each customer gets the most out of their visit. Some staff have been trained in British Sign Language to assist deaf or hearing impaired customers.