



Celebrating new ideas

2008 New Zealand Post Group
Local Government Excellence Awards

Project Submission Template



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Project:

Developing a framework for enhanced customer experience

Council:

Waitakere City Council

Category

Building Organisational Capability

1. The Rationale for the Project and Expected Benefits

“Organisations that are succeeding are those that have been quietly building a better customer experience – those who have recognised the importance of providing customer service and ‘emotionally’ engaging with their customers.”
Stephen Brewer, CEO, Caribbean Mobile, Cable & Wireless

In the 2002/2003 Annual Plan Waitakere City Council signalled its intentions under the umbrella of “the friendly face of council” to provide improved service to everyone and to make customer services a priority. Following this directive a myriad of projects to enhance customer services were initiated across the organisation. The focus and progress varied from department to department with indications of a growing inconsistency across the organisation and a lack of congruence leading to interdepartmental conflicts and lost opportunities for excellence. Of particular concern were the different approaches to managing complaints and the inability to provide organisational-wide information on compliments, complaints and suggestions (generally referred to in this project as feedback).

This led to the Council's senior management team identifying a need to consolidate and channel customer service enhancement efforts and establishing a “Customer Services and Complaint Processing Overview Group” in March 2004.

The overview group was tasked with looking at ways to foster working together as an organisation and to provide consistent service delivery, driven by a framework that would establish clear expectations and standards that would be understood by all parties engaged in any interaction with the Council. This was to include a consolidated process for managing feedback.

2. Linkage to Council's Strategic Direction

Waitakere City Council's vision, as an eco city, is a place where developing the economy, caring for the environment, celebrating cultural diversity and building economies go hand in hand. This vision guides Council decisions and activities and is at the heart of our aspirations for our city. Council's services have been grouped into nine strategic platforms, each of which contributes to the overall vision.

In recognising that its strategic platforms, to be delivered effectively and with impact, demanded a high customer service ethos from the organisation, the development of a framework, in the form of a Customer Services Charter, was seen as a means of supporting the council's strategic outlook.

The Customer Services Charter, and its on-going promotion, is now central to achieving this strategy by providing a set of guidelines outlining what the public can expect in any contact with the council in relation to service and information requests, compliance monitoring and expressions of dissatisfaction about the service standards, actions or lack of actions by the Council or its staff.

The charter is incorporated in the Long Term Council Community Plan for 2006-2016 as part of the overall governance strategy.

3. Project Planning

Following the establishment of the “Customer Services and Complaint Processing Overview Group” in March 2004, a small team of managers with the knowledge and skills to work together to develop the organisational framework, were appointed with the Director of Quality Assurance as sponsor.

In initial meetings of the group it was acknowledged the above scope was broad and that the project needed to be rolled out under a number of distinct stages, as follows:

Stage 1 Framework for delivering excellent customer service

Development of an organisational framework in consultation with staff representatives from across the organisation and elected members

Stage 2 Marketing – selling it to our staff

Introduction of this framework through a series of workshops aimed at providing our staff with both an understanding of the concept and gaining their buy-in

Stage 3 Process and system development

Design of processes, systems and guidelines that would support the framework

Stage 4 On-going promotion

On-going promotion of the framework and the development of initiatives to generate a continuous interest and desire in the organisation to embrace the delivery of excellent customer service

Stage 5 Review

Initiate a review, following a bedding down period, based on customer and staff feedback and operational imperatives

Stage 1 was undertaken by the Overview Group with the subsequent stages to be delivered as part of the Customer Services units' on-going operational service delivery. Before Stage 2 commenced, a dedicated role of Customer Liaison Advisor was established to both manage the feedback process and champion the Customer Services Charter.

4. Project Management

In essence a traditional project management approach was adopted for each stage, based around initiation, planning and design, implementation, monitoring, controlling and completion. However, in recognising that a key success factor of the overall project was to gain staff buy-in, there was acknowledgement from senior management that the project would evolve and weave its way through the organisation rather than be driven by specified triggers and timeframes. Following the introduction of a Customer Services Charter (to reflect the framework requested by senior management), the project was also seen as entering a cyclic mode that would see a review at Stage 5 before continuing through the full cycle again. We are now at that point after a three year development phase.

It was also recognised that each stage had particular needs and expected outcomes which needed to be carefully planned and managed. The outcomes were as follows:

Stage 1

This primarily revolved around on-going consultation, feedback, review and decision making to determine an appropriate framework for delivering enhanced customer service, resulting in the development of a Customer Services Charter and complaints and compliments processing and reporting system

Stage 2

This resulted in detailed, articulate planning to ensure the full organisation had the opportunity to attend one of the 21 workshops that were initiated. While most workshops were held in council's main administration building, others were held in outlying locations, such as; Libraries, council's Vehicle Testing Station, Aquatic Centre and Animal Welfare Centre

Stage 3

This saw the design of systems and processes, the testing of these, and the development of user friendly guidelines for all users

Stage 4

This saw a focus on creative approaches to stimulate on-going participation from our staff by actively and interestingly communicating all positive feedback received, culminating in the inaugural 2007 Customer Services Recognition Awards

Stage 5

Having come full circle, a full review will be initiated during the second half of 2008 where we take the charter and processes back to the organisation for feedback, ultimately enhancing and building on what we have achieved.

5. Relationship Management and Communication with Stakeholders

It was recognised that for the organisation to advance its journey of customer services excellence there was a need for our initiatives to benefit, and to be readily accepted, by both our customers and our staff.

Essential to the success of this project was structure, simplicity, and more importantly buy-in and commitment from our staff. We looked at the reasons why we needed this process and what we could build it to be. We needed to know where we could improve and then how we could improve our services. We drew together these actions, attitudes and processes applicable to every one of us, no matter where we sat in the organisation, analysed these and used this information to form a framework, culminating in the development of our Customer Services Charter.

In July 2005 when the charter was still in draft form we began a series of 21 workshops with each staff member receiving a copy on entering the workshop. There was a clear message in the draft document of those measures applicable to staff, at the same time providing our customers with clarification on what they could expect in their interactions with the Council. The proper management of feedback – more importantly complaints - was seen as a critical step in meeting our charter obligations. The feedback process contained in the charter was designed around an acknowledgment that the real ownership of complaints lay at the operational level. Therefore it was imperative to get full commitment from our staff. Considerable feedback was received resulting in a number of revisions to the charter which ultimately received endorsement from staff and the New Zealand Public Service Association.

In August 2005 after consulting with staff the charter became a 'live' document and was launched to our staff in what turned out to be the largest attendance ever recorded at a council internal event. We believe this was because there was transparency and consultation with all staff throughout the whole process.

In February 2006 the charter was launched externally to our customers via the [Waitakere City Council](#) website and the [Waitakere News](#), council's monthly newsletter.

While the Customer Services Charter was the key document it would be the feedback process that would have the most impact internally. Therefore it was critical that when rolling it out to staff we did it in such a way that we gained commitment from everyone in the organisation. We knew that there would be some scepticism as to whether this would work and we really needed to sell the benefits of such a document and process within our organisation. In the beginning it proved to be a hard-sell but over time it has proved to be a winner with more and more staff embracing the benefits of such a process and realising how crucial that once the commitment was made, we continued the momentum and kept it visible.

The development of clear, concise and professional documentation was crucial to communicating the charter and feedback processes to both customers and staff.

The charter, the Compliments, Complaints and Suggestions Process and Council Service Delivery Standards documents were created in an easy to read format and made readily available to customers and staff alike. The council website also became an essential means of communicating the charter and our new feedback processes to our customers.

On acknowledging customer complaints the customer receives a user-friendly brochure on the "Compliments, Complaints and Suggestions Process – How do you make these, and what happens next". Specific templates have been designed to assist our customers in understanding council processes relating to their requests.

6. Innovation and Originality

Feedback process system



Adopting Pathway technology brought us into line with a number of other local authorities enabling us to design a feedback process specific to our needs, one that would grow with us.

Whereas previously feedback received was distributed and dealt with by individual departments, often not being recorded at all, this process has provided a centralised system for feedback. In relation to complaints this has allowed us to categorise, record, allocate, escalate, track and produce reports.

The role of the Customer Liaison Advisor has been key to the administration of the process; analysing trends, identifying root causes and providing advice and guidance to staff/management.

We are now at the stage where we are able to report on individual key projects e.g. the New Lynn Town Centre/Undergrounding Project between Waitakere City Council and ONTRACK. By capturing and managing this feedback we will be able to interact with all stakeholders in a concise and timely manner which will prove invaluable on future large projects by anticipating any problematic issues that may arise.

Communication – Compliment Central



The new system began generating positive feedback and we needed to find a way of circulating it in such a way that our staff had easy access. We used in-house technology to create and launch “Compliment Central” on our internal intranet – Eco Net. Compliment Central has been a key motivator for staff, encouraging peer recognition, collaboration and morale across the organisation.

On visiting the site staff will catch the latest editorials, read about individual / team achievements and view letters of compliments and thanks from our customers, as well as the latest thought for the day and much more.

Recognition Strategy



The Customer Services Recognition Awards (of which the inaugural ceremony was held in March 2008) have come about from the implementation of the Customer Services Charter and feedback process. The aim of the awards is to encourage and recognise individuals and teams for their overall positive attitude, achievements and successes in embracing the charter and its processes to enhance overall service delivery.

To recognise contributions covering a wide sphere of customer service, four award categories were established.

Statement of Commitment Challenge Award
 Excellence in Contactability Award
 Compliment Central Top-Drawer Award
 Complaints Management Best Practice Award

When creating and designing these awards we needed to ensure the criteria would cross the entire organisation. The categories were specifically chosen to recognise a wide range of skills and attributes that underpin the delivery of excellent customer service, a reminder of our commitment to the charter and provided all staff with the opportunity to be involved in the awards selection process. On February 2008 we went out to the organisation with this message:

“Know someone in the organisation who delivers superb customer service? Nominate him or her for one of the new Customer Service Recognition Awards.

Promoting morale, motivation, collaboration and peer recognition across all departments is one of the most important tools we can have to build a great organisation from the ground up, particularly in the way we deliver customer service...please take this opportunity to think about your colleagues and nominate him or her for an award! Visit [Customer Service Recognition Awards 2007](#) and place your vote”.

With the presentation of these awards we completed the cycle and are now planning to start the journey again, building on what we have achieved and keeping our staff informed, upbeat and most of all... “quietly building a better customer experience for ourselves and our customers”.

7. Evaluation Framework

Expected benefits have been incorporated into the following evaluation criteria against which outcomes have been assessed.

Evaluation criteria	Results
Is the Customer Services Charter and associated processes actively promoted and supported by the organisation's senior management?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - An introduction to the charter is an integral part of Council's staff induction process - A selection of compliments received are incorporated in the CEO's weekly newsletter to staff
Have our customers and the community in general benefited from the outcomes of the project?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Customers have a better understanding of what to expect in their interactions with the council - More consistent service is delivered as staff also have a better understanding of what is expected of them - The complaints process ensures issues are promptly and properly addressed - Complaints' information drives enhancement opportunities and determines where our efforts are best focused
Do staff embrace the principles of the charter and do they show a passion and enthusiasm for delivering excellent customer service?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High volumes of compliments indicate staff are striving towards delivering customer service excellence - The inaugural awards saw staff positively and enthusiastically contribute to the process
Are our processes and systems robust and user friendly?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Processes and systems have been designed to capture comprehensive data leading to meaningful management information - User-friendly documentation has been specifically designed for both customers and staff
Does the charter provide a sound base for continuing our journey, to achieve excellent customer service, into the future?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Incorporated into Council's current Long Term Council Community Plan documents as part of the governance process

8. Category Specific Criteria

The Customer Services Charter has provided a great catalyst for delivering customer service excellence. The charter not only clearly spells out what customers can expect during any interaction with the Council but it also specifies what the organisation requires of its staff in delivering a service to any customer. Before this initiative, the expectations of customers and staff were not necessarily aligned, often leading to frustrations and misunderstandings. With their commitments to customer service clearly specified staff know that delivering excellent service is an integral part of their overall role. In the case of staff that are not generally in customer facing roles this has required a change in mind-set.

The introduction of a robust and transparent complaints and compliments process has benefited both staff and complainants, particularly in terms of the clear process guidelines that remove the mystery and uncertainty associated with earlier complaints processing. From a staff perspective we have removed the fear that a complaint is a negative reflection on their performance. Our processes mean complaints are received through our centralised system and then forwarded directly to the team leader / manager accountable for that service. This ensures ownership is properly reflected. It is only when complainants are not happy with the initial response an issue is escalated. This means staff/managers are now more likely to accept ownership, respond positively and to see complaints as an opportunity to look for service improvements. From a senior management perspective, the processing of complaints through a consolidated system now allows all complaints to be properly analysed and trends identified. Rather than being "caught up" in individual complaints, this allows senior management to see the big picture and contribute from an overall perspective in terms of organisation- wide enhancements.

The highlighting of all compliments through "Compliment Central", which is easily accessible by staff across the organisation, has generated a lot of interest and not only boosts the morale of the recipients of the compliments but also shows other staff that there are lots of customers out there who do acknowledge the efforts of council staff and have actually taken the time to provide positive feedback. This recognition is

appreciated by staff and is seen as a key contributing factor in maintaining staff enthusiasm to continue the journey of providing excellent customer service.

The inaugural Customer Service awards process for 2007 was another morale boosting initiative that enthused staff and which brought customer service to the fore again. The award categories were specifically chosen to recognise a wide range of skills and attributes that underpin the delivery of excellent customer service. The awards selection criteria was designed to reignite a focus on our Customer Services Charter and the delivery of excellent customer service, by providing all employees with the opportunity to be involved in the awards selection process. With a focus on inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness, a key message was that the awards were not intended to single out individuals or teams who are deemed to be the best in council - instead they were intended to recognise particular contributions that are generally reflective across the organisation as a whole.

In summary, our Customer Services Charter, the Complaints and Compliments process, Compliment Central and our Customer Services award process, all developed and introduced over the past three years, are all seen as having lifted Waitakere City Council's organisational capability to continue to enhance our journey to deliver excellent customer service.