

Traditionally, most of the council's cashier/advice officers at Newark Town Hall, who would deal with enquiries, had a very basic knowledge of benefits and council tax

and some knowledge of most council services. Therefore while officers could provide customers with general advice on these areas, there were many times where they would need to contact the appropriate service to obtain more detailed advice.

The obvious issues with Newark and Sherwood's approach were that:

- ◆ the widest knowledge was limited to a single officer and in their absence the service did not provide a comprehensive and consistent front line service;
- ◆ staff were not always kept up-to-date with changes to practice, approach or council policy;
- ◆ the manual forms and leaflets held by the Advice Office were, at times, out of date, of poor quality and sometimes unavailable; and
- ◆ the method of recording the visit type and production of analysis was very labour intensive and did not meet the requirements under NI14.

We needed to change to provide a more reliable and consistent level of service. It was important for us to start sharing the knowledge among other officers and to implement a mechanism for keeping staff informed of changes to approach/policy, and we need to have a knowledge base that was accessible at all times.

We also considered that by enhancing the remit of the other staff (who mainly provided a cashiering role) we could increase the number of staff providing advice to customers.

Changing our approach

We decided to consolidate all the advice and information that was provided to customers into a single 'online guide' that could be accessed by staff at all council locations.

We enlisted performance improvement company Destin Solutions to assist us in developing and structuring the guide. Destin also helped us to gather the information and advice that we provided to customers.

Destin's approach was to:

- ◆ conduct interviews with the advice officers to obtain the current advice provided to our customers;
- ◆ provide access to the 'draft' guide to all staff in order to validate and comment on the content; and
- ◆ create a library of frequently asked questions which would be instantly available to advisers.

The outputs of the project were to:

- ◆ provide recommendations on how service delivery could be improved;
- ◆ suggest additional areas that the online guide could include to supplement the advice (e.g. contacts, links to useful websites, etc);
- ◆ develop interactive 'web tools' to assist in

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THE HEART OF THE SERVICE

Service delivery should revolve around the customer. Phil Ward explains how, by adopting this approach, Newark and Sherwood DC is on its way to a first class service

providing advice (e.g. an online calculator);

- ◆ incorporate a Google-like search function that would enable us to quickly find the information required;
- ◆ create links to electronic versions of up-to-date forms and leaflets, which could be printed off as and when they are needed; and
- ◆ incorporate links into our existing revenues and benefits procedure manual.

The outcome

The council now has an online advice guide that is accessible to the whole authority. When a customer contacts the council, the staff initially check the guide for how to deal with the issue, who to contact and the action to take. If the action requires a form to be completed, the Advice Team then print the required form directly from the application.

In developing the guide we also took the opportunity to incorporate an online NI14 form for staff to complete electronically. The application enables us to monitor and report

on our avoidable/unavoidable contact. We had initially intended to manually record and correlate this information, but we felt that this was a natural extension to the guide, providing a significant efficiency saving.

The development and introduction of the guide has meant that our customers can now receive the same level of advice from all our staff at all our advice offices. It has also:

- ◆ reduced the number of internal telephone calls to the back office teams, which in turn has allowed us to see more customers during the day;
- ◆ resulted in an increase in the number of staff that customers can obtain advice from;
- ◆ reduced the customer's waiting time; and
- ◆ enabled us to do away with stocks of paper forms as we now print only the forms we need when they are required. ✨

For more information on how Destin Solutions might be able to help you, contact Duncan Baxter at: duncan.baxter@destin.co.uk