

**CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE OF CLAIMING COUNCIL ADMINISTERED
BENEFITS AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT WORKING GROUP**

**MEETING HELD AT THE COMMITTEE ROOM. TOWN HALL, BOOTLE
ON MONDAY 14TH SEPTEMBER, 2015**

PRESENT: Councillor Robinson (in the Chair)
Councillors Cluskey, Dawson and Owens

ALSO PRESENT: Angela Ellis, Christine Finnigan, Paul Fraser and
Kurt Goldman

4. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillor McGuire.

5. MINUTES

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 10 August 2015 be approved as a correct record.

6. SEFTON CUSTOMER CARE SATISFACTION SURVEY

The Working Group considered the Sefton Customer Care Satisfaction Surveys and their Executive Summaries for April and July 2015. The Executive Summary reports presented the findings to emerge from a sample survey of customers choosing to access services face-to-face via Sefton Council's One Stop Shops. The main aim of the surveys was to collect data from users of services to measure their experience of contacting the Council and to record their satisfaction with the service they received from the Bootle and Southport One Stop Shops. Best practice had been used for the collection of the satisfaction data using the National One Stop Shop questionnaire designed for face to face interviews and administered as an exit survey. The Executive Summaries provided information on various questions posed to customers who visited the One Stop Shops between the periods 20 April to 1 May 2015 and 13 to 24 July 2015.

The table below identifies the type of enquiries made by customers participating in the surveys in relation to housing benefit (HB), Council Tax (CT) and the Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS)

		APRIL 2015 SURVEY	JULY 2015 SURVEY
Enquiries by customers	HB	45%	48%
	CT	22%	22*%
	CTRS	12%	13%
Overall customer satisfaction		93.19%	93.23%

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In obtaining an overall view of customer satisfaction the following questions were used to determine the relative importance customers placed on specific elements of service and to determine their satisfaction with those aspects

Questions	Satisfaction April 2015 (%)	Satisfaction July 2015 (%)
CSA's are friendly & polite	97.49	97.65
CSA's are knowledgeable	97.15	97.01
CSA's are professional	97.11	97.28
How your enquiry was dealt with in overall terms	96.98	97.38
Information easy to understand	95.98	95.95
Our opening times	91.85	91.74
The length of time you waited	86.29	87.09
Comfort and facilities in waiting area	86.95	85.72
Convenience and accessibility of One Stop Shops	88.88	89.26

Analysis of the data indicated that the satisfaction survey results between both the Bootle and Southport One Stop Shops was very similar.

As part of continued consultation to help identify possible service improvements customers were asked to select their preferred choice of communication methods when accessing Council services and the following table provides the results survey

SERVICE CONSULTATION		
Preferred Communication Channels	April 2015	July 2015
Face to face	61%	62%
On-line	4.5%	3.5%
Email	8%	6%
Letter	10%	11%
SMS	1.5%	2%
Telephone	15%	15.5%

The following table, included in the Executive Summaries, details the 2015 customer service Action Plan that was based on the principle of providing a better service for the customer

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NEED	IMPROVEMENT
As part of the commitment to delivering the best possible service we listen to and value customer's views.	In order to facilitate customer feedback a series of quarterly satisfaction surveys have been
Improvement - faster and more efficient service	In order to enhance customer's experience when accessing our services a framework of continuous improvement has been implemented maximising opportunities for enquiries to be resolved at first point of contact
Improvement in choice and access to services	Self Service PC's implemented in One Stop Shops in order to facilitate and improve customer journeys helping towards a reduction in customer waiting times
Improvement in choice and access to services	Self Service to be more widely promoted and used across the borough
Improvement in choice and access to services	All Self Service access channels continue to be developed

Members discussed issues associated with the following:-

- Waiting times experienced by customers
- Charges applied to telephone calls to the call-centre. Officers advised that a briefing paper for the Strategic Leadership Board was currently being prepared by the ICT Partnership Manager who would notify Christine Finnigan as soon as it was available.

RESOLVED: That:-

- (1) the Sefton Customer Care Satisfaction Surveys and their Executive Summaries for April and July 2015 be noted; and
- (2) the Chief Finance Officer be requested to provide the briefing note for Members (as referred to above) on the charges applied to the Council's 0845 number and the potential introduction of a 0345 number to reduce the cost of customer's calls from their mobile telephones.

7. CASE STUDIES

The Working Group considered six case studies relating to (i) changes in Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) benefit and where a Councillor had intervened to Sefton's Benefits Service; (ii) a new claim for Housing Benefit and where a Member of Parliament had intervened to Sefton's

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Benefits Service; (iii) a case of a male with severe mental health problems; (iv) a male client on Job Seekers Allowance; (v) a single parent with two children; and (vi) a single parent with three children.

Case studies (iii) to (vi) inclusive were provided by the Council's Welfare Rights Advisory Service and related to the effects on Housing Benefit of the termination or suspension of DWP benefits. The caseworker from the Welfare Rights Advisory Service has stated that what seems to be happening is the DWP are telling the department that benefit A has stopped. They do not appear to give any reason why the benefit has stopped so HB stop Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction. Clients state that they are not informed by either the DWP or HB and so may not know anything has happened until there is no money in their bank accounts or the landlord gets in touch wanting to know where the rent is. It is acknowledged that this is anecdotal and there is no way of knowing if this actually happened, but this what clients regularly claim. The Welfare Rights Advisory Service advised that it had managed to resolve the client's issues in these cases.

The Lead Member of the Working Group had also contacted One Vison Housing (OVH) and asked various questions and requested examples of case studies where problems had arisen regarding tenants in receipt of housing benefit payments. The questions and answers are set out below.

Question - Without identifying any individual can you give some examples of problems that both your tenants and your organisation have in receiving housing benefit payments?

Answer - Housing Benefit & DWP working relationship Issue.

OVH tenant was sanctioned on their Job Seekers Allowance in September 2014. Housing Benefit continued to be paid as they had made a nil income statement to Housing Benefit. Sanction finished in January 2014.

OVH tenant was then told to apply for both Universal Credit and Job Seekers Allowance again. DWP did not know what benefit they would be entitled to. As they were not in receipt of Job Seekers Allowance their Housing Benefit stopped. At this point arrears were circa £650. The tenant went backwards and forwards between Housing Benefit and DWP. DWP finally awarded Universal Credit in March 15. OVH requested an Alternative Payment Arrangement and at the end of May 2015 OVH were given two Universal Credit payments. At this point the arrears with OVH stood at circa £2k. This was a combination of the DWP effectively giving the tenant the run-around.

Housing Benefit Evidence

A general problem is that people are asked to provide information, and when they do, this seems to raise yet another problem and people are sent away again. The Housing Benefit section do not think in advance of all the information that they need to process a claim and keep sending people away with new tasks.

Question - Any difficulties that you have resolving these problems?

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Answer - OVH have an excellent working relationship with Housing Benefit. We have a Housing Benefit Advisor based with us two days a week to help resolve enquiries. Occasionally, it is difficult to get through to them on the telephone. When OVH speak to Housing Benefits Service they will only answer three questions per conversation. OVH acknowledge why this system is in place as the conversation could last for quite some time.

Question - What procedures could be put in place to prevent problems occurring?

Answer - I think Housing Benefits Service offer a prompt service to both us and customers.

Officers informed the Working Group that a Service Level Agreement existed between the Council and One Vision Housing. Key staff in OVH had a link to the Benefits Service systems. In addition, a member of staff from the Benefits Service was located in OVH. OVH would need to advise the Council of any breakdown they had experienced with the arrangements that were put in place.

Members expressed the view that customers' problems arose due to the DWP not providing the Council with adequate information regarding the cessation of benefits; and that it would be beneficial if a representative of Job Centre Plus could attend a meeting of the Working Group to be questioned as a witness.

The Chair requested that a PCS Union Representative from DWP attend that meeting to provide information from a staff perspective. Council Officers suggested that a representative from Sefton at Work also attend to gain a better understanding of the problems and to seek possible solutions.

Council Officers offered to provide anonymised case studies of applications for financial assistance from the Council's own Discretionary Housing Payment Scheme and The Council Tax Exceptional Hardship Fund.

RESOLVED:-

That the Head of Commissioning Support and Business Intelligence and the Head of Schools and Families be requested to provide the Working Group, respectively, with a briefing note on how customers apply for Emergency Limited Assistance Scheme and educational transport funding together with case studies.

8. CUSTOMER FEEDBACK OBTAINED FROM "RATE THIS PAGE" VIA THE COUNCIL'S WEBSITE AND THE COMPLIMENTS/COMMENTS/COMPLAINTS SYSTEM

The Working Group considered a briefing note on customer feedback Obtained from "Rate this Page" via the Council's Website and the Compliments/Comments/Complaints System.

The briefing note indicated that In the 12 month period 12 July 2014 – 12 July 2015 there had been approximately 720 instances of users clicking on the thumbs-down icon to leave comments. Of those, the following ratings for the associated page were:

- Very Poor – 261
- Poor – 172
- Average – 43
- Good – 12
- Very Good – 14

These figures do not add up to 720 because the rate My Page feature had been amended a few times as the site had developed, so the rating feature had only come in part way through.

Appendix A attached to the briefing note provided information on all the page likes for the website.

Appendix B attached to the briefing note provided information, for the period 12 July 2104 to 12 July 2015, relating to compliments/comments/complaints in relation to Housing Benefit and the Council Tax Reduction Scheme.

RESOLVED:

That the Chief Finance Officer be requested to provide statistics on the number of visits to the various pages on the website and ranking over the last 12 months so an analysis could be made as to which of the "help and assistance pages" ,particularly for Council administered financial support, are being most/least visited; together with an analysis of complaints received about financial assistance.

9. VISITS TO ONE STOP SHOPS

The Planning Chart attached to the Working Group's Scoping Document indicated that site visits to the Bootle and Southport One Stop Shops and the Council's Call Centre would be undertaken. Accordingly, the Working Group was requested to consider dates for such site visits.

RESOLVED:

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That the next meeting of the Working Group be held at 1.00 p.m. on 28
September 2015 at St. Peter's House, Balliol Road, Bootle to visit the
arvato call-centre.