

North York Moors National Park Authority

30 September 2019

Providing Resilient Customer Service and a Cohesive Organisation

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To seek Members' support for a set of principles which the Authority wishes to adopt to ensure continuing excellent customer service and a cohesive organisation.

2. Background

- 2.1 The Authority prides itself on providing excellent customer service to the wide range of customers that it deals with on a daily basis. This is externally corroborated through the annual verification of the 'Customer Service Excellence' award by an external assessor. The Authority's improved year by year performance in this award is reported to members and forms part of the Annual Governance Statement.
- 2.2 One of the key factors in good customer service is good administration. The impetus to look at the fundamentals of this has been prompted by a number of factors. Modern electronic solutions are now more reliable and are available at lower cost than previously. The value of the DEFRA core grant (which funds all of our 'core' administration posts) continues to decline, despite cash increases over recent years. Workloads and the requirements of the organisation are changing and Officers have felt that during the years of budget cuts, there was less corporate focus on customer service. At the same time methods of communication and the expectations of customers have undergone a rapid and significant period of change.
- 2.3 It is recognised that the current structure and many of the processes, which seek to manage customer service have been in place for a long time - although incremental changes have periodically been implemented. The basic structure of administrative support was set up at a time when the majority of contacts with customers were via the telephone or written letters. While some significant changes have been made, for example, the Development Management Team led the move towards a paperless planning process and the Customer Service Team led on the development of electronic agenda, a number of basic processes, such as the method of answering the telephone, have remained largely unchanged since the mid-1990s.
- 2.4 Members will also recall that one of the very few areas where the NPA is not meeting its Business Plan objectives is the storage and retrieval of survey and monitoring data. Some concerted effort needs to be made here and it is not currently obvious who is responsible.
- 2.4 A process is now underway, led by the Head of Corporate Services, to consider what needs to be in place to ensure a resilient and proficient service for the future. Feeding into this, a series of discussions with all administrators have been held along with a session with the Senior Leadership Team. These have all aimed to consider issues and opportunities for ensuring that administrative services are provided in a way that will maintain an excellent level of service to the Authority's customers both internal and external.

3. Principles for Consideration

3.1 A set of guiding principles are presented here with the aim of ensuring that the process for improving ways of working and maintaining excellence achieves a good set of outcomes.

3.2 **Principle 1: Maintain current areas of excellence.** It is recognised that there are current areas of customer service which are operating very successfully and should be maintained. The intention here is not to change things that are already working well.

3.3 **Principle 2. Adopt specialist responsibilities.** There are several areas of expertise that have become somewhat 'diluted' due to the demands of systems which are out of date and require a number of staff to deliver them: including reception related tasks, providing committee and member services, managing organisational data and HR support. Ensuring that individuals taking lead roles in these different specialisms are able to fully focus on delivering their key roles is considered to be an important principle.

3.4 **Principle 3. Value and champion the importance of administrative support.** A huge amount of the support provided by administrative staff can go unnoticed within the organisation and administrators can find themselves chasing issues that should be dealt with by other staff. The principle of self-administration (where sensible to do so) needs to be consistently endorsed and communicated. All staff should be supported to ensure they are communicating with customers and representing the Authority in a way that matches both our corporate values and established customer service standard.

3.5 **Principle 4. Ensure systems and technologies are adopted to achieve efficiency and relevance.** There are, without doubt, a number of areas where methods of communication and technology have 'overtaken' the Authority's established customer service processes. The current system for answering phone calls is a case in point. For example at least 40% of external phone calls are for the development management team but all callers have to first go through the Authority's switchboard and can often be 'passed around' the organisation before reaching the right person to help them. Ensuring that our systems and use of technology are being used to their full potential should iron out this sort of inefficiency and improve customer service.

3.6 **Principle 5. Improve organisational cohesion.** As the organisation has grown in recent years, it has developed a more dynamic culture where staff have more freedom to plan and implement their own work programmes and ideas. These increasing levels of delegation have been successful in encouraging creativity and flexibility and have led to greater outputs. However, they can lead to a lack of organisational cohesion where opportunities for joined up working, knowledge sharing and organisational efficiencies are not taken up. It can also lead to customer service which may be below the standards expected. So we need to counterbalance the division of the Authority into very effective functional Departments headed by a Director from that field of work, with stronger cross-organisation working. Administrative staff are in an excellent position to work together to support this cohesion and ensure that one part of the organisation knows what the other parts are doing.

4. Financial and Staffing Implications

4.1 Adoption of the principles in Section is likely to result in great clarity being given to a number of job roles. These matters will, of course, be discussed with the staff concerned in due course. It is likely that any changes will result in some staff costs, not currently allocated, being available for savings.

5. **Legal Implications**

5.1 None arising directly from this report.

6. **Recommendation**

That Members:

- 6.1 Support the Principles outlined in section 3 and ask officers to proceed with considering the operational detail;
- 6.2 Ask Officers to go ahead and implement any desired changes by 1 April 2020, providing an interim report to the December National Park Authority meeting.

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Background papers to this Report

File ref

None.