

Customer-centric service is top local authority goal claims Macfarlane research

- UK local authority contact centres rate the Overall Quality of Service they provide at 7.6 out of 10 -

London, UK, 28th January 2008. New research shows that UK local authority customer service operations are now entering Phase Two in their development: focusing less on gearing up for e-Government, and more on delivering quality service that meets their customers' needs, however they choose to make contact.

"Public sector contact centres have been criticised heavily in recent times, notably in the National Consumer Council (NCC) report that criticised government contact centres for the quality of service they provide to poor and disadvantaged people. Our research, however, paints a different picture – at least in the local authority sector" said Paul Skinner, Sales Director, Macfarlane Telesystems.

"Our study reveals that local authorities are heavily focused on improving service quality, and are investing in both technology and partnership-working to improve overall efficiency (a key objective of the recent Varney report) and meet key objectives such as the new NI 14 national indicator (that aims to reduce the average number of customer contacts needed to resolve customer issues)."

41 UK metropolitan and county councils, each serving between 80,000 and 750,000 citizens, took part in the research in November/December 2007. The study was designed and conducted online by Macfarlane Telesystems by means of a detailed self-service questionnaire.

Some of the key findings are as follows:

Q1: How do you rate the overall quality of service you provide to customers?

Local authorities rated Overall Quality of Service at an acceptable 7.6 out of 10, albeit ratings did vary between different services (for example, respondents only rated the quality of Housing Services at 6.8 out of 10).

Q2: What are the most significant challenges facing your Contact Centre today?

“Improving service quality” is considered the most significant challenge faced today, followed by “Delivering high first call resolution”. Macfarlane’s findings also shatter the common perception that local councils are pre-occupied with meeting e-Gov targets. In fact, local councils rated “Meeting eGov and other targets/ objectives” the least significant of the six challenges posed in Macfarlane’s questionnaire.

Q3: What are your key objectives for the next twelve months?

The focus on service quality that Macfarlane identified in its research was also evident when Councils were asked about the relevance of key objectives for the coming 12 months. They rated “Improving service quality’ as their most significant objective, rating it 5.2 out of 6, followed by “Improving agent performance” at 4.7 out of 6, and embracing “Multi-channel working” and “Improving first call resolution” at 4.4 out of 6.

Q4: What are the prime drivers for introducing new technology into the Contact Centre?

When asked about prime drivers for introducing new technology into their contact centres, “Improving service quality” was again considered the most significant factor, rating 5.3 out of 6. “To “Become more customer-centric” was also a highly significant factor for local authorities, rating 5.2 out of 6. To “Improve CPA ratings” and because of “Pressure from Government reports” were much less significant factors according to recipients, rating only 3.4 out of 6, and 3.2 out of 6, respectively.

Q5: Partnership working and shared services

Finally, local authorities were quizzed about partnership-working and shared services. Partnership working was on the agenda of over 80% of the local authorities approached, with these Councils rating it 5.3 out of 6 in terms of its significance as a

current objective. When asked whether the aim of their partnership was to create efficiencies, this was rated a significant 4.7 out of 6.0.

In an indication of the current state of development of UK local authority partnerships, all respondents actively involved in (or planning) partnerships stated that their partnerships were with other councils – and none with other public bodies. Two thirds of them stated that their partnerships would involve more than one customer contact centre.

“Our findings show the tremendous progress that has been made in local authority contact centres over the last few years and how their focus on meeting customer needs and on quality is starting to reap significant rewards” said Paul Skinner. “While there is still a long way to go to bring UK Council Services up to the standards envisaged by the recent Varney report, there is every indication to suggest that local authorities are, more than ever, putting their customers at the heart of future planning. We’d very much like to thank everyone that took the time to participate in our research.”

About Macfarlane

Founded in 1987, Macfarlane is a UK developer and supplier of communication solutions to service providers, enterprises and public sector organisations. Its CallPlus platform supports a range of applications including multi media contact centre, IVR, management statistics, recording and unified communications. Its SpeechPlus platform supports Speech Recognition, and other speech-driven applications such as the Macfarlane VoiceDialler. The company delivers cost-effective, market-focused solutions directly and through strategic partnerships with vendors such as Lagan, Capita, Northgate, Steria and Serco.

Macfarlane has established a strong position in the public sector where it assists central and local government reach e-government targets, providing a citizen-centric approach while working within Best Value practices. Existing customers number more than 80 local councils including those within the Government’s Partnership programme such as Somerset Direct Partnership, the Warwickshire Direct Partnership, the Lancashire Direct Partnership, and more recently the Staffordshire Connects Partnership. CallPlus has enabled these Partnerships to link their many

local councils and create single 'virtual' contact centres that serve citizens on a county-wide basis. More details can be found at <http://www.macfar.co.uk>

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APPENDIX: LOCAL AUTHORITY RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE

Q1: How do you rate the overall quality of service you provide to customers?

	Score out of 10 (where 1 is very poor and 10 is excellent)
Revenue and Benefits	7.6
Housing	6.8
Switchboard	7.6
Environmental	7.4
Overall	7.6

Based on responses from 41 UK local authorities Nov/Dec 2007

Q2: What are the most significant challenges facing your Contact Centre today?

	Responses placed in priority order
Improving service quality to meet customer demands	1
Delivering high first call resolution	2
Delivering high service quality whilst maintaining efficiencies	3
Motivating staff to increase performance	4
Managing agent attrition and absenteeism	5
Meeting eGov and other targets/ objectives	6

Based on responses from 41 UK local authorities Nov/Dec 2007

Q3: What are your key objectives for the next twelve months?

	Score out of 6 (where 6 is the most significant and 1 the least significant)
Introducing VoIP and IP infrastructure	3.5
Introducing other new technology	3.5
Improving service quality	5.2
Improving Agent performance	4.7
Embracing Multi channel working	4.4
Introducing virtual/ home working	2.5
Improving first call resolution	4.4
Reduce Agent attrition and absenteeism	3.1

Based on responses from 41 UK local authorities Nov/Dec 2007

Q4: What are the prime drivers for introducing new technology into the Contact Centre?

	Score out of 6 (where 6 is the most significant and 1 the least significant)
Reducing costs	4.6
Becoming more customer centric	5.2
Improving service quality	5.3
CPA rating improvement	3.4
Pressure from Government reports	3.2

Based on responses from 41 UK local authorities Nov/Dec 2007

Q5: Partnership working and shared services

	Score out of 6 (where 6 is the most significant and 1 the least significant)
Is partnership-working a current objective	5.3
Is the partnership based on creating efficiencies	4.7
Will new technology be utilised	4.1

Based on responses from 41 UK local authorities Nov/Dec 2007