

Cheshire Constabulary Call Management Team

Prioritising customer service has taken Cheshire Constabulary's Call Management Team from the bottom of the Home Office rankings to a customer satisfaction rating of 92 per cent and rising.

Cheshire Constabulary's 300-strong Call Management Team works around the clock, taking over 10,000 calls per week. When a 2006 Home Office survey ranked the force as lowest in the country for customer satisfaction it was, as Business Process Inspector Mike McBride admits, 'a big wake-up call'.

Mike and his team immediately set to work to develop a strategy and, alongside it, a business plan that set out the steps the team needed to take to achieve its overall goal of providing a service that would inspire respect among 'communities, partner agencies and communities'.

'Customer Service Excellence offered a great way of keeping our plans on track and giving us something to aim for.'

Originally, accreditation wasn't part of the plan, but Mike was quick to realise the benefits a formal assessment could offer. 'When my superintendent first suggested the Customer Service Excellence standard, I was sceptical to say the least,' he says. 'But when I looked into it a bit more, I realised it was a great way of keeping our plans on track and giving us something to aim for.'

Think 'customer'

The significant overlap between the Customer Service Excellence criteria and the business plan objectives meant the two strands of work could be combined, complementing and reinforcing each other. In total, the Customer Service Excellence process took three months to complete. As well as gathering evidence, Mike involved 60 call centre staff in a series of focus groups with the aim of raising awareness and getting buy-in to the planned new ways of working.

'One of the biggest challenges was to get people thinking in terms of "customers",' Mike explains. 'Many of those in the call centre are entry-level police staff, and they really are at the sharp end. The message we had to bang home is that everyone who needs any part of our service – even someone who's drunk and calling you at midnight! – is a customer, and that means we have an obligation to deal with them in a certain way.'

Mike and the team opted for an interim visit from their assessors, which helped to ensure that their evidence was in good shape by the time of the assessment proper. On the day, the assessment team spoke to colleagues from across the team, including training, quality assurance and the customer service desk. 'The assessor had worked in public service,' says Mike. 'I felt he had a really good grasp of our business.'

People-focused service

Together, the business plan and the Customer Service Excellence assessment have had a major impact on the way the team works. Perhaps the biggest change is the introduction of an appointment system for non-urgent calls, which is also helping Cheshire satisfy the requirements of the Home Office's new Policing Pledge, which calls on forces all over the country to find ways of delivering a more locally responsive, people-focused service.

'Item 6 of the Pledge sets out how we should be dealing with non-emergency calls, explains Call Management Trainer Karen Dickin. 'Where an issue relates to a neighbourhood priority, we're committed to sending an officer within 60 minutes; where it's less urgent, we make an appointment within the next 48 hours. Before, people didn't know when we were going to turn up, and that was major source of frustration. Now, they get regular feedback and updates. We're constantly managing people's expectations.'

Tailored training

Karen has also overseen some significant changes to the way call managers are trained. 'Instead of a broad eight-week programme, new staff now get a four-week induction then four to five weeks' focused coaching,' she explains. 'It's training by call handlers, for call handlers.'

Every five weeks, call centre staff are assessed three times by dedicated quality assurance colleagues, so that further training and support can be designed around specific needs. 'For example, we've just given everyone a refresher course in handling 999 calls', says Karen. 'Often, customers will be agitated and distressed, so it's incredibly important that we respond to them in a calm and empathetic way.'

The recruitment and training process reflects the force's desire to promote professionalism, inculcate the right attitudes and, in particular, to reinforce its commitment to equality and diversity: Cheshire Constabulary recently appeared in Stonewall's top 100 employers list. When it comes to demonstrating that commitment to external customers, call handlers are in the front line.

'We work hard to make sure our team reflects the diversity of the area we serve,' says Karen Dickin. 'Our induction includes a half-day session on diversity and hate crime. More generally, we expect staff attitudes to reflect our values as an organisation. We want them to treat each caller as an individual, and adapt their communication style to meet their needs.'

Measurable impact

The success of the changes is reflected in the dramatic increase in levels of customer satisfaction. When the Home Office survey took place, customer satisfaction stood at 73.7 per cent. Measured again exactly one year on, it had risen to 89.6 per cent. By January 2009, it had reached 92 per cent and the trend is still upwards.

‘Just over two years on, customer satisfaction is up from 73.7 per cent to 92 per cent, and still rising’

Customer service desks, set up in late 2007, provide proactive updates for customers, giving both information and reassurance. They also gather hard statistics and more subjective feedback. ‘We make use of everything,’ explains Performance and Research Officer Mark Riley. ‘If we get a negative comment, we’ll go back to the customer and let them know how we plan to improve our service in the light of what they’ve said. Positive comments get fed back to individual officers as recognition and reward for good performance.’

The past two years has been a period of major change for Cheshire Constabulary. For Mike McBride, the Customer Service Excellence process has performed a dual function, helping to shape and steer the change programme and providing a valuable way of demonstrating just how far the force has come.

‘As I said, no one could have been more sceptical than me,’ he says. ‘What made Customer Service Excellence so valuable for us was the way we were able to weave it into our business planning process and really see how it was contributing to our wider goals for improving the way the team worked. For our staff, it’s been a fantastic morale-booster. Achieving the Customer Service Excellence standard has given them the recognition they so richly deserve.’