

What all this about....Surrey Heath's Contact Centre?

In October, Surrey Heath plans to open a Contact Centre as part of its modernisation programme. There will be a new reception area at Surrey Heath House, a new telephone number to call, and newly recruited staff with access to new IT systems ready to response to (some of) your queries and complaints.

Customer Relationship Management

Every large organisation these days has IT systems that help it deal with the public - think about your Bank, Insurance or Telephone Company. If you call them, the Customer Representative can tell you about their services, and can access your account details to answer any queries you have. These are called "Customer Relationship Management" (CRM) systems.

But Surrey Heath Council is currently not like this. There are at least a dozen telephone contact numbers, and many enquiries end up on voicemail. There is not one reception at Surrey Heath House, but five. Worse, all the records (even names and addresses) are kept separately by each department and not shared. All this duplication leads to extra cost for the Council and frustration to residents trying to deal with the Council.

Surrey Heath has been planning since early 2004 to implement IT systems to bring together this information, and to put in place a Contact Centre. Whilst members of the public will be able to call or email, they will also be able to come in person to a new centre at the council offices and get their questions answered - then and there - be it about dustbins, playgrounds, planning or council tax.



SHBC Forced To Take Action

Government has long been encouraging councils to go down this route as part of its "Implementing Electronic Government" programme, and has made generous grants available. However, it took threats of "special measures" and an Audit Commission assessment which branded Surrey Heath the "Worst Council in Surrey" to convince the current Conservative leadership to take action!

Updating the Organisation

A necessary part of this introduction of CRM is a review of the Council's ways of working, and consequential organisational changes. A group of the Council's own staff has been used to drive this process, rather than use external consultants. Lib Dems support this approach, and commend the enthusiasm and dedication of the Surrey Heath staff involved.

50% over budget, 50% longer than planned - so far!

When Council approved the project (24.05.2004), the Contact Centre was to be fully operational on 1st April, 2005, and was to cost £1.308m. Currently it is believed that the cost will be over £2.0m, and that the centre will open in mid-October, 2005. So 50% over budget, and taking 50% longer! But this is not the whole story. When the Centre opens, it will only deal with around 20% of expected contacts. It will take until June, 2007 to migrate all the services into it. Lib Dems also believe that there will be more cost overruns.

FOCUS SAYS:

Lib Dems strongly support the concept of making SHBC more "customer friendly", and approve of the overhaul of the Council's IT systems using government grants to provide better services. In May 2004, Lib Dems supported the initiative, but said then that we had severe doubts about both plan and budget, and voted against them. We also doubted the ability of the Council to run a project of this size. .

Environmental In-action

In a motion to Council on 15th December, 2004, Cllr Judy Douch & Cllr Bob Smith called on SHBC to sign up to the "Nottingham Declaration" on Climate Change. This would commit the Council to reduce its own carbon emissions, and also to provide leadership on this issue in the local area. Although over 80 other local authorities have committed, there has been little action so far from this Council.

If you could help us research environmental issues locally with a view to getting action from SHBC or Surrey County Council, we would welcome your help (contact details on page 4).

See www.surreyheathlibdems.org.uk/news/29.html

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