

Fenland District Council

Fenland District Council is a local authority serving a rural area of north Cambridgeshire with a population of around 93,000. The Council employs 680 people and over the last five years it has undergone a transformational journey from being a top-down, hierarchical, bureaucratic organisation to one that has adopted a 'one team, can do' approach.

“The transformation programme included a major cultural shift from a departmental or silo way of working to a ‘One Team’ approach which is 100% people driven.”

Today all staff are valued for their contributions and management lead by example, and this approach is reflected in the Council’s successful application for certification against the Customer Service Excellence standard.

Keith Ashworth, Head of Customer Access at Fenland District Council, explained that working toward corporate CSE certification fitted well with the organisation’s ‘One Team’ culture, which is 100 per cent people driven.

“We felt it also helped us to maintain customer focus and enable further development of our understanding of customers’ and citizens’ needs and desires and so the achievement of corporate CSE became a key objective in our 2008/9 Corporate Plan.”

“Achieving this new standard would demonstrate our firm commitment to shaping our service around the needs of our customers”

The results of the Council’s ongoing commitment to continuous development have already been dramatic, with a Comprehensive Performance Assessment of ‘excellent’ awarded to the Council in December 2007. The Council has also been shortlisted for the prestigious LGC ‘Council of the Year’ award for two years running and commended in the MJ ‘Best Achieving Council’ category for 2009.

With CSE certification, the improvements at Fenland District Council have been given fresh momentum.

Making the Journey

The decision to apply for CSE certification followed on from the Council’s previous commitment to Investors in People and Charter Mark Certification, which has been achieved by two Council services, Customer Access and Building Control and Planning Compliance.

“In order to achieve these standards we had already seen a major cultural shift,” continued Keith. “When it came to preparing for CSE assessment we set up a project team that included staff from all levels of the Council, and utilised the Council’s ‘Fenland Way’ project planning tool to guide it.

“Its first task included full research and evaluation of the new CSE standard and members of the team attended a number of seminars about the standard.

“The Council then appointed its assessing organisation/partner and agreed with them as to how the assessment process would be completed. This included agreeing, at an early stage, how Council services would be grouped for the assessment.”

The Council’s ‘one team’ approach ensured staff from across the organisation were involved in completing an evidence matrix for each service area, ensuring as many people as possible were involved in the process.

“The project group members also completed gap analyses for each service, identifying whether or not a specific sub criterion of the standard was met, whilst the results were disseminated across the organisation to enable shared learning.

“All members of the organisation were kept fully informed about what was happening via our communication plan, which included updates at team meetings, our weekly staff newsletter and actions included in each team’s service plan. To ensure information was shared as widely as possible – and to provide more feedback routes – we set up an internal CSE email address and intranet site.

“The assessment was planned in stages and we had a corporate review about six months before the service-by-service assessments. Each service area had to create their own matrix of evidence and the folders they produced were the key to a smooth and successful assessment process.”

“CSE has enhanced our engagement with customers so that as an organisation we do not assume to provide services to customers that we think they want; rather, the Council is able to provide services to customers that we know they want.”

Keith went on to stress that this was not just a ‘tick box’ exercise and that it had achieved all its objectives in relation to:

- truly understanding who its customers are across all service areas.
- understanding customers’ needs and preferred methods for accessing services.
- understanding how customers perceive the services offered to date.
- improvements they would like to see.

“It has enabled us to focus on ongoing improvements and build these into the annual service-planning process, with ongoing targets set for the next three years,” continued Keith.

“All areas of the Council are engaged with the process as the benefits are clear, with the central focus being on our customers.”

More services for residents

As part of its earlier commitment to the Charter Mark, Fenland District Council launched a series of initiatives aimed at improving access to Council services and encouraging greater transparency, and these have been further enhanced to achieve CSE certification.

The Council’s **Fenland @ your service** brand, developed in-house, has symbolised the Council’s commitment to putting customers first, whilst customer feedback has resulted in the opening of four ‘one-stop-shops’ across the district.

Located in the market towns of Chatteris, March, Whittlesey and Wisbech, the one-stop-shops deliver a wide range of Council services and now also provide information on planning matters.

Continued Keith: “The shops have proved a real success and we have followed this by introducing a series of Community Fairs in towns and villages across the district. The Community Fairs build on the success of the member led ‘Golden Age Fairs’ initiative which has proven to be a big hit with the local community.

“These have been held in schools, community halls and other easily accessible locations and have involved other important organisations such as the police, the fire service, CAB and the NHS.

“The open events are about us going out to our customers, rather than waiting for them to come to us.

“Overall, all Council services now understand the merits of engaging customers in the planning and improvement process, therefore encouraging customers to voice their views on service delivery.

“This has started to support the organisation to deliver improvements which get as close as possible to treating customers as individuals.”

Advice to other organisations

Although the CSE certification process has undoubtedly delivered rewards for both Council staff and customers, Keith says the process has proved demanding.

“Although we achieved the CSE standard within a year and already had many of the processes in place, it was still hard work and I would advise any organisation thinking of embarking on the process to set realistic timescales.

“However, if they are committed to meeting the standard and improving customer focus, they should just go for it,” he added.

Contact

For further information on Fenland District Council's experiences of applying for the Customer Service Excellence standard, please contact Keith Ashworth on 01354 622382.