

Oxfordshire County Council Fire and Rescue Service

The rural nature of Oxfordshire – where over half the population live in settlements of less than 10,000 people – presented unique challenges for the County Council’s Fire and Rescue Service as it embarked on its journey to improve customer service.

The Service had already achieved Charter Mark accreditation, but it decided to take its commitment to improving services to the next level by becoming the first fire authority in the UK to apply for certification against the new Customer Service Excellence standard.

Directorate and Support Officer, Station Manager Paul Webster, was responsible for driving forward the application process and says that although achieving CSE certification in just six months was hard work, it has already delivered significant benefits.

“As a direct result of the process, service users can now expect a faster response to their feedback on the performance of the Fire and Rescue Service, whilst CSE has boosted morale and improved internal communications and data gathering,” he explained.

“Staff are committed to providing a very good service to their customers and there is pride in working for Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service.”

Paul continued: “We believed that we were already delivering an excellent service but there were a number of areas where we knew improvement was needed and there were clearly issues concerning the collection of information to support this view.

“There were also issues about how we collected feedback from service users. In the past we had given out questionnaires when attending an incident – if the situation was not too sensitive – but not many completed forms were returned. As a result the feedback was good but the number of responses was not high enough to be statistically significant.

Making the journey

The Service realised that applying for CSE certification presented the ideal opportunity to address these issues whilst reinforcing the organisation’s commitment to customer service.

Paul explained: “Initially we created an action plan for CSE and cross-referenced the new criteria against the old Charter Mark Process. With many hours of work we gathered evidence against each criteria, and produced a matrix to demonstrate how our evidence fitted that criteria.

“As part of this process we engaged the 708 Service employees through our staff newsletter, staff briefings and routine orders. This part of the process was particularly important as the rural nature of the area we cover means that a lot of our front-line staff are retained, with full-time jobs outside the Service.

“All staff were made aware of what CSE was about and how they could help. Thanks to regular communications with our assessor, we also ensured that the evidence they collected was fit for purpose.”

Once the relevant information had been collected and reviewed by the assessor, a programme of site visits was initiated. A timetable was also produced to cover all areas of work from operational incidents, performance recording and partnership working to education at the Service’s site for junior citizens.

Throughout the process, the assessor was free to access all areas, from operational personnel to senior management.

Positive outcomes

After nearly six months of hard work, Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service achieved CSE certification in March 2009 and it has made significant improvements in the following key areas:

- increasing customer focus
- improving consultation with users
- improving staff morale
- developing better internal processes
- developing more effective service delivery
- improving complaints handling
- delivering more cost-effective services

“The culture of the Service is now proactive, energetic and inspiring whilst there is an action plan in place to address outstanding issues relating to the collection of information such as service-user feedback,” Paul said.

“For example, when questionnaires have been issued but not returned, we now make follow-up calls within five weeks to ensure the feedback is collected.

“We also act upon the feedback we receive and keep service users informed of action taken, as well as giving them a clear timescale when dealing with complaints.

“When the feedback is positive, we also communicate this throughout the organisation and ensure it is recorded properly; in the past we have been held back because we haven’t sung our own praises!”

In addition to improving communications with stakeholders the organisation has made improvements in other areas, including the delivery of fire-safety inspections.

In response to feedback the Fire Service now issues reminders via telephone and email prior to visits as well as providing a structured approach to follow-up actions.

It has also made a greater commitment to working in partnership with other organisations through schemes such as the Junior Citizens Programme, which works in local schools to highlight fire and other safety issues.

“In most cases our contact with service users is in response to an emergency and we are judged by the public on how we respond in that situation. But, through CSE, we have shown that it is still possible to improve customer service in our more routine day-to-day activities as well as in response to feedback following an incident.”

Advice to other organisations

According to Paul, CSE certification has proved an excellent tool for evaluating the performance of the organisation in terms of customer service.

“It has enabled us to identify the things that we are doing well and areas that can be improved,” he said.

“I’m sure that many other public sector organisations would benefit from CSE, especially when it comes to maintaining their ongoing commitment to improving the services they provide,” he added.

Contact

For further information on Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service’s experiences of applying for the Customer Service Excellence standard, please contact Paul Webster on 01865 855216.