



“CSE is not just accreditation, but an excellent business model”

Case Study: Sandwell Library and Information Service

Sandwell Library and Information Service (SLIS) delivers developmental services through Sandwell Central Library, a network of 18 community libraries, 4 express libraries, 2 mobile libraries, housebound library service, Community History and Archives Service and 2 customer facing websites.

SLIS has been operating against a background of significant challenges including changing customer needs, significantly reduced budgets and lower staff levels. SLIS has had to develop the skills, confidence and creativity to respond to these changing environments and customer needs. As such they identified the need to use Customer Service Excellence, (CSE) as a tool to drive positive change throughout the Service.

The Journey

The journey to CSE involved SLIS progressing from a Service that cared about its customers through to a Service that now has the customer at the centre of planning, delivery and change.

During the process, the dedicated Library Management team worked together with the Directorate lead for Libraries to arrive at solutions to keep libraries open against a backdrop of significant financial constraint. The solutions implemented using key CSE principles were:

- In-depth consultation with staff and key stakeholders to reconfigure service delivery
- Introduction of self-service and enhanced customer care training
- Development and sharing of community spaces with partners
- Working closely together with key priority groups, stakeholders and partners to meet the needs of diverse local communities
- Involvement and engagement with local communities

SLIS carried out a comprehensive annual Community Engagement Mapping exercise to focus on shifting the balance of how we deliver services away from being 'information giving' towards more consultation and engagement with communities.

Barry Clark, Chief Librarian, said 'I have always believed that customer care should be central to how SLIS operates, and that we are a customer focussed organisation.'

SLIS worked closely with key priority groups and stakeholders to meet the needs of diverse local communities. The team enhanced

its involvement and engagement with local communities and is further integrating this work into its core business across all sites, following the successes of the Big Lottery funding and other innovative projects. Amongst the actions to 'help people in hard times' SLIS became increasingly engaged with customers, volunteers and 'friends' groups to improve the quality of life for all living within Sandwell, to address the needs of priority groups and to prepare people to combat any lack of paid work opportunities.

The Result

SLIS were delighted to become accredited to CSE in 2010. Our assessor noted that the process has led to a positive change in the culture of the organisation and the way it works, allowing the team to deliver benefits for their customers, communities, partners and staff. This is a change recognised internally. Barry commented: 'By going through the CSE accreditation we have significantly sharpened our focus and processes'.

Several other key benefits have been achieved, including:

- Increased use of libraries
- Increased engagement in libraries – volunteers and partners delivering on our behalf, Friends Groups taking on more critical roles
- Increased value for money
- Improved staff skills, understanding and confidence
- Enhanced reputation and recognition corporately
- Nurturing partnerships that are focussed on customer needs.

Since the initial assessment SLIS has worked year on year to demonstrate full commitment to the principles of CSE, which is supported by their high compliance rating against the Standard.

Our assessor was particularly impressed by how the team has used the Standard despite significant budget cuts, noting 'the Standard shaped the re-configuration of service delivery, development of community spaces, the implementation of cuts or the completion of new builds and refurbishments. With more partners and volunteers helping in the delivery of services, no reconfiguration activities lessened the customer-focussed service delivered by staff at all sites'.

Central to SLIS' performance is the customer; and they have also noticed the improvement in service delivery with one commenting 'I wish it to be noticed that it is the centre of the community with a warm and pleasant atmosphere with something for all ages. Even with the reduction in staff they have still been able to increase regular weekly sessions such as Knit and Natter, Reading Groups and IT classes'.

The principles of Customer Service Excellence are integral to and firmly embedded throughout the organisation. CSE has supported SLIS in transforming its service into a best practice example that other public services in the country can use. Barry notes: 'For me CSE is not just an accreditation, but an excellent business model'.