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Case study: West Lothian Council

West Lothian Council employs around 8,000 staff and provides more than 100 services to customers within their area. The culture of the Council has always been clear and focused on its primary purpose of 'serving its customers'.

Making such a statement of intent is of course the easy part: aligning structures, measuring performance, achieving targets, developing managers and engaging with customers is more difficult to achieve, which is why the Council, who held Charter Mark since 2007, engaged the Customer Service Excellence (CSE) Standard 3 years ago.

The Journey

To achieve this, the council embarked on an incredibly challenging and demanding assessment journey; achieving independent certification and striving for continuous improvement across all areas and services. They engaged G4S as their assessment body and from the Council's assessment team adopted a united approach. Lead Assessor, John Wood, has been very impressed with the total commitment of the council, commenting "it has been a fascinating experience to observe, from an external perspective, the on-going developments in the Council, its management, its staff and its processes."

The journey provided the Council with several process improvements, Graeme Struthers Head of Service - Corporate Services at the Council remarks "The CSE standard challenged our services to engage with customers directly on the issues that are important to them and helped our staff redesign service delivery to reflect customer needs."

Whilst it is unfair to single out key areas that have led to this success there are perhaps two less obvious areas that come to the forefront when reflecting upon the developments in the Council.

Firstly, although strong and detailed financial management may not be the first thing that springs to mind when considering customer service, for the assessment team it has been one of the key enablers. Graeme comments "by developing a detailed understanding of our costs we can provide an extremely responsive service which is adaptable to changes in customer needs. In addition we have been able to form strategic partnerships to seamlessly deliver high quality public services, without getting immersed in the traditional "what budget pays for this" management arguments."

Similarly, performance management and target setting may not seem to be directly linked to excellent customer service. However the Council has developed and implemented a performance management and target setting system that is focussed and consistently applied across all activities to identify customer needs. The deployment of this consistent approach across all areas of service, from waste collection to human resources ensures that the management team have a consistent view of the outcomes that they are achieving for their customers and the resources deployed.

The Result

Following on from our assessment on the Council the team were awarded Customer Service Excellence. Our assessor commended the team on their work, commenting they are 'a highly customer focussed organisations'.

The Council's assessment is complete; the council is embedding their newly found insight within all their operations to encourage continuous improvement. Graeme affirms "CSE has provided the challenge to demonstrate ongoing improvement; through focusing on customer needs, continually assessing and improving access and information about our services and considering how partnerships work and improving their effectiveness".

The smooth transition from Charter Mark, the certification makes the Council the largest unitary authority in the country to hold CSE.