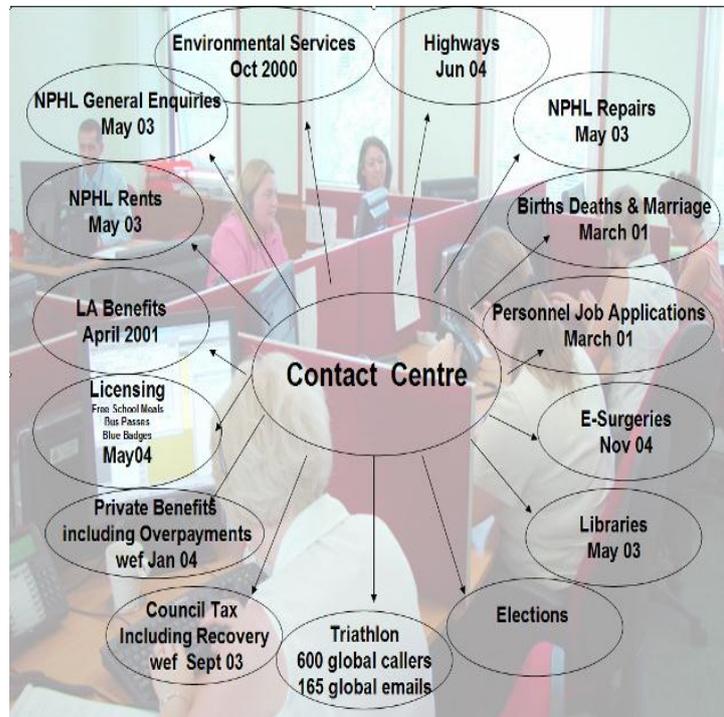


# The Salford Contact Centre<sup>1</sup>

The development of the Call centre at Salford City Council represents in many ways SPRINT's finest hour, certainly in terms of the scale of change if not its radicalism. In early 2006, I interviewed Martin Vickers, then head of Customer Services, and John Tanner, the Operations Manager.

At the time of the interview, 15 services were housed in the Contact Centre, which had 110 staff, and the service had recently celebrated its millionth caller. Salford's website proclaimed a radical change from the "bad old days", when the phone would ring "in an office full of people busy doing other things and it was an inconvenience for officers to have to pick it up". A culture of "customer service professionalism" had now been developed: "There are now swift call response times. The aim is to answer 70% of incoming calls within 30 seconds and our monthly customer surveys show satisfaction rates to be consistently above 90%".



The Contact Centre had been built piece-by-piece, adding one service at a time. In every case, customer services had taken over both the 'front office functionality' and the staff from the prior directorate. Housing services had been a big step forwards, with 45 new 'seats' (i.e. Contact Centre jobs) accruing. JT remarked:

*There was an inspection [of Housing] in May 2003, and the result was basically nil star. We were told to take in the front line people. Staff were given the option to stay where they were or come to us, and we got the highest level volunteers, the best people, to come over and we delivered it.*

Notably, SPRINT had been used to evaluate critically each new acquisition, in particular to identify areas where significant service improvements could be made. The website emphasised that:

*...every new service is subject to a business process reengineering programme... we are not looking just to replicate old services, but to carry out new processes with benefits for the customer. BPR helps the city council to go for a win-win, combining better front-end services with more efficient back-office processes.*

Free school meals (available for children in households with an income below a certain level) was cited in the interview as a good example where dramatic service improvements had occurred. In the past, it had been necessary for applicants to take proof of eligibility to one of the council offices and several visits might have been involved before the paperwork was in order. Because all citizen-related information was then integrated on Citizen (Salford's home-grown CRM system) the checking was

<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from "Managers as designers in the public services", D. Wastell 21/12/11

automatic. The caller rings and “as soon as eligibility has been approved an email is sent off straight away and the pupil will get it the next day” (MV).

MV provided another example:

*We're dealing with vulnerable people, and we need to maximise the contact in terms of opportunities. We've had lots of health promotion successes – flu jabs is the best example. The take-up was 30%. Now we know all the over 65s, so when the caller rings up about, say rent arrears, a box pops saying “Mr Vickers is over 65”. The take-up is now 70%. And because we have direct access to the appointment books of the health centres, an appointment can be made, there and then. We're the only authority in the county doing that...*

Citizen, by providing an integrated database covering all services, was at the heart of things. Described by MV, as the best “customer database” of any organisation in the City, it enabled seamless sharing of information across council services and with other agencies. MV highlighted its ‘value for money’: “it was originally built by 2 people and now it's managed by 5. XYX [a neighbouring authority] had paid £1.5 for their CRM”. Such sharing of information may not seem so radical, but it had required something of a buccaneering approach. The issue of consent had been critical. JT explained:

*Consent arises at the first contact. After authenticating the caller, a box pops up, asking if we can share information to improve the services to them. Pretty much everyone agrees to this. We've spoken to 280 councils about what we're doing, and we're still the only one doing it. Local government people tend to get hung up about issues like data protection, they use it as a reason for not doing things. It's still very silo-based. We don't have a silo here; we're a corporate service.*

An important principle in the growth of customer services had been the requirement for staff to volunteer out of their old organisational unit. JT explained:

*They have to feel it is right for them, and we have to feel they are right for us. I spend a lot of time just taking staff round the Contact Centre and explaining to them what we do and how we do it. Those that get excited by the vision will volunteer – we sometimes have to turn people away.*

The work culture in the Contact Centre was highlighted by MV, especially its multi-skilled nature, with staff covering a range of services, and its collegiality:

*We call it the “family business”. We were recently assessed for Investor in People and in the feedback the assessor said “you're right” this is a family business. 5 years ago everyone had the one skill, now they've got 8 business areas. There's great potential for career development and job satisfaction. Our turnover is not the traditional call centre turnover; they often move on to better positions in the organisation because they've got a broader range of skills. We really work hard with our staff – we really do empower people.*

Although there had been dramatic gains, the approach taken had a distinctively piecemeal, pragmatic character. The presence of a like-minded, ‘can do’ philosophy in IT Services had been key:

*When we launched it, it wasn't that clever – we try to learn in real time. Too many people are looking for sophisticated solutions, but then the piece of work is too big, the change process is too large. We just do the first bit, then see where we are and what we can do, one stage at a time. If we'd written a detailed business case, we'd still be stuck at the start. It's about seizing the opportunities when they come along... We're very flexible here. The IT people don't insist on dotting i's and crossing t's. If we say we need something by Friday, they'll do their best to get it done (MV).*

SPRINT had been vital building capacity for change. In the interview, MV remarked:

*In many ways we're the validation of BPR. SPRINT brought formality and control. We were lucky in having some good people, but we needed the discipline of SPRINT. It gave us a structure for doing service design. We're going to re-BPR tax and benefits, but it's part of the day job now. We'll be doing it ourselves. We won't need BPR analysts... Once you've been BPRed, you've been BPRed for life.*