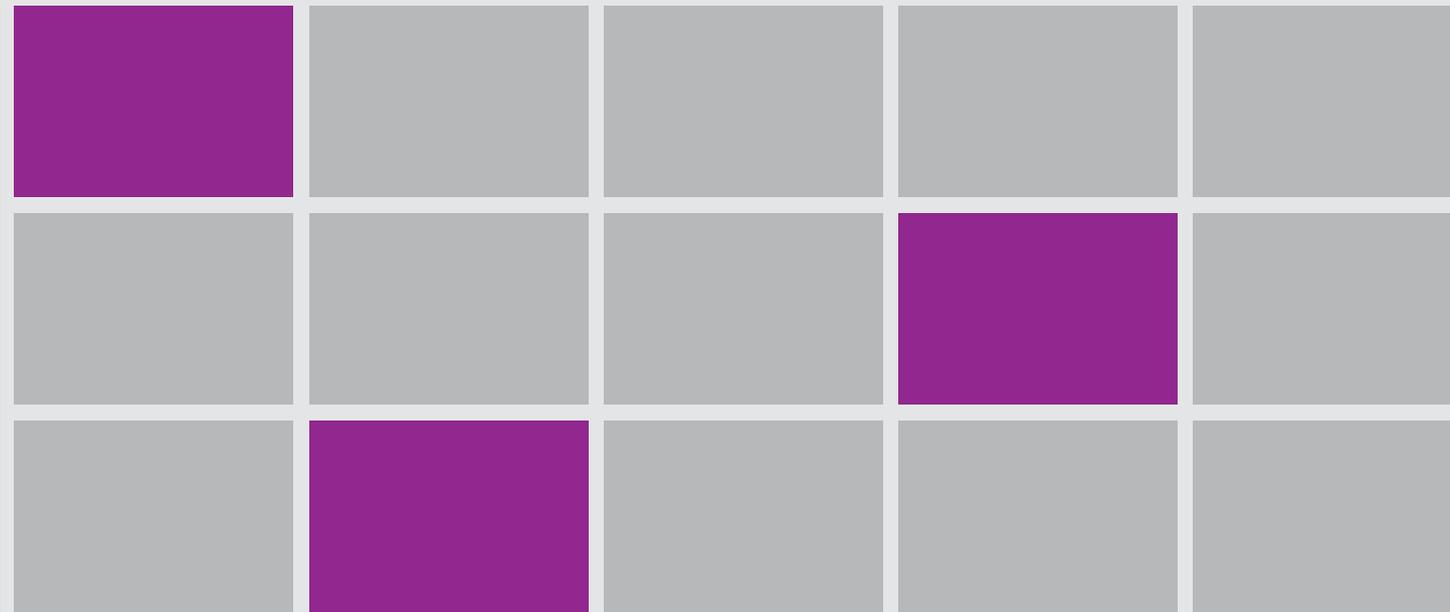


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Lambeth Gracefield Gardens
customer centre

case study



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The London Borough of Lambeth is one of a ring of fourteen local authorities which constitute Inner London. Lambeth measures seven miles north to south, and about two and a half miles east to west. It is one of the most densely populated inner London boroughs, with a population of around 272,000 (based on 2007 figures) in 127,000 households and is home to more than 10,000 businesses.

The borough has a higher proportion of older and younger residents than the London average and is the 23rd most deprived borough in the country. The council offers over 600 services to residents and in February 2008, the Audit Commission deemed it to be London's most improved council.

Based on the 2001 census, 38% of Lambeth's population is from ethnic minorities, the seventh highest figure for a London borough. Approximately 150 languages are spoken in the borough; after English, the main languages spoken are Portuguese, Yoruba, French, Spanish and Twi.



The London Borough of Lambeth developed the Gracefield Gardens customer centre as part of its Customer Services Strategy, whereby they intend:

"to exceed the expectations of all our customers, consistently delivering excellent and cost-effective public services."

The strategy is being implemented through the provision of three channels of communication - the internet, the telephone-based Lambeth Service Centre, and customer centres for one-stop face-to-face services.

Five customer centres, one in each of the five town centres in the borough, are proposed under the strategy, two of which are now operating - The Brixton customer centre, at Olive Morris House, opened in September 2007, and Gracefield Gardens in Streatham, opened in January 2008. The customer centres will house both the council's face-to-face services and those of partner organisations.

The Gracefield Gardens Customer Centre is part of a site developed by Lambeth Primary Care Trust (PCT) and is the result of a partnership between Lambeth Council and the PCT. This partnership means that local people have access to the full range of council services as well as GP, nursing, foot health, midwifery and therapy services. Other services offered at Gracefield Gardens include:

- Greater London Enterprise's (GLE's) oneLondon Business Advisory service delivering business support services including advice and training services to local people and businesses
- NHS Health trainers - Gracefield Gardens Customer Centre works with the PCT to deliver an innovative scheme aimed at tackling health inequalities. Customers and staff are able to access one-to-one support from a Health Trainer who will help them to make positive changes to their health
- Every Pound Counts – benefit advice; customer centre staff make referrals to one of the weekly Every Pound Counts sessions so that customers receive face-to-face advice from an experienced benefits officer.

The centre employs cutting-edge technology such as video display walls, a bespoke queuing system and customer internet access points.

The London Borough of Lambeth has identified three priority outcomes. These are:

- Only delivering high quality services that focus on individuals' needs and represent value for money
- Only tackling inequality and social inclusion, and
- Engaging more closely with Lambeth's citizens so that people's needs are listened to and acted upon.

Staff have been working across the council to achieve these outcomes through a process of continuous improvement of core services and by promoting innovation through a series of transformational strategies and programmes. Part of this process is identifying innovative ways to deliver services and achieving economies by saving money, delivering more for the same amount or sharing services with partners.

The council's Customer Services Strategy arose from the realisation that customers were unhappy with the services they received. They felt that services were fragmented, difficult to access, difficult to navigate and uncoordinated. In the council's residents survey in 2003/04:

- 41% said that the council's services were efficient and well run
- 28% said that the council's services were good value for money.

To address these issues, the council developed its proposals for five customer centres in prime locations across the borough. The core principles for service delivery at the customer centres are:

- Services will be organised from an integrated, cross-council and cross-partner perspective, and not on a council or directorate basis
- The centres will provide a forum for joined-up front and back office processes with partners
- The centres will be used, over time, to influence channel migration for service contact from face-to-face contact to internet where appropriate
- All council services will be included unless a case is proved against their inclusion, and
- Payments facilities will be included.

The local authority's vision for the customer centres is that they are geared around the customer and provide first class services in an environment designed to improve access for all residents and make contact with the authority an enjoyable experience.

The intention of the customer centres is that front-line staff will handle the bulk of enquiries and then, where necessary, escalate more complex issues to back office specialists. Customers will also have access to the internet and to the Lambeth Service Centre over the telephone.

At Gracefield Gardens, the council's officers provide front-end customer service for the large PCT operation and two GP surgeries. On arrival, customers are greeted by council officers who determine the nature of the enquiry and direct individuals to the appropriate part of the building.

The 'meet and greet' staff also help visitors use the free online and telephone access channels for services and educate customers on how to conduct future contacts from home.

If customers want to speak to a Customer Service Advisor (CSA) face-to-face, they are directed to the team of cross-trained advisors, able to help out on a range of issues and experts in excellent customer service. For quick queries, or payments for example, customers might use the over-the-counter service. For more in-depth enquiries, CSAs and customer might use the various interview rooms situated around the centre, where they can have a private conversation.

Each customer inquiry is logged on to Lambeth's customer relationship management system, so that staff will have background information to hand about customers, and may be able to identify other ways in which they can help.

The centre presents a smart, business-like appearance; open plan, bright and modern. It aims to give a sense of well-being, while retaining the professional feel.

Council services provided include the following high-volume face-to-face transactions:

- Housing benefits
- Housing – rent and repairs
- Cashiers – credit/debit card payments for rent, parking fines, council tax amongst others
- Parking – issuing of permits, processing fines, and
- General advice and information on social services, environment and education.



The centre employs cutting-edge technology such as video display walls, a bespoke queuing system and customer internet access points. The video walls are used to promote services and events, to give useful information to users and to communicate messages, such as current waiting times and monthly performance figures. By providing free-to-use internet points as well as 'hot-phones' which link directly to the Lambeth call-centre, users are given a choice of multiple access channels to resolve their enquiry. By providing these facilities within the customer centre, Lambeth is aiming to encourage its customers, who traditionally prefer and are used to face-to-face contact, to utilise self-service channels in the future.

The speed of service is high, with an average waiting time of just over 8 minutes and an 85% success rate of meeting the target of no waiting time longer than 20 minutes. A comprehensive set of customer care standards has been developed and published. The quality of the service provided has been recognised by the award of a Chartermark and Institute of Customer Services accreditation.

The centre is open from 8.30 – 5.30 on Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays, 8.30 – 3.00 on Tuesdays to allow for continuing staff development, from 8.30 – 7.00 on Wednesdays and from 10.00 – 2.00 on Saturdays to allow access to those who cannot visit during normal working hours.

To enhance the quality of service, the council has worked to embed a qualitative approach and to monitor the services provided. It uses a range of methods to check on quality including:

- Mystery shopping conducted by an external provider - the first round of results produced an overall satisfaction rate of 81% with several results of over 90%
- Quality assessments conducted by the in-house quality and development team – the first assessment rated the service provided as “very good”, and
- Independent customer surveys – these were conducted during National Customer Service Week and showed a very high satisfaction rate with 94% of customers saying they were either satisfied or highly satisfied with the service they had received.

In addition, comments from customers are recorded via a comments book and a touch-screen computer. Drop-in discussion groups are also held with customers. These have resulted in comments such as:

- “This is an excellent, welcoming facility with friendly and helpful staff. I work in local government and know how challenging it can be to get it right – you’ve done it!”
- “Well done Lambeth Council! It was a real pleasure to come to Gracefield Gardens. Light, airy, friendly staff and no hassle! Thank you.”
- “Great facilities, quick service (under a minute!) and the friendliest staff. The complete opposite of what we were expecting, well done guys....”
- “I was very impressed with the staff on reception customer service skills. I felt very welcomed and directed to my destination”
- “Gracefield Gardens feels like something from the future”
- “Gracefield Gardens is a really good idea – having all things in one place.”

- “I’d just like to express our sincere thanks for all of your assistance today. In these days of apathy, particularly in the service industry, it is rare to find someone who takes genuine pride in helping others. Both my colleagues were concerned that they were going to face insurmountable difficulties obtaining their parking permits; given the reputation of government agencies, you made what could have been a frustrating and annoying experience something that was pleasant and easy”
- “My granddaughters have just been born so it is really useful for me to be able to speak to people from the council while my daughter takes the twins to the baby clinic”
- “Very pleasant experience, despite parting with so much money – happy staff, good environment”.
- “People here are really pleasant. I didn’t have to wait too long and the building is bigger and much better”

- “The building is very smart and impressive, reception staff helpful and a very short wait to be seen. It’s good to be able to sit down and not have to talk through glass and it’s useful to have a number of services in one building particularly for residents in the South of the borough”
- “Very impressive surroundings – staff extremely helpful and cooperative”
- “Very helpful! Nice building. Didn’t have to wait as long to be seen.”

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Steve Reed, has used the centre and left the following message for staff:

“I want to offer my congratulations. I went into the Customer Centre at the weekend as a local resident to use the services. I was greeted politely at the door and directed to someone able to help me. The second person took time to understand what I needed and then offered advice that was helpful and accurate. Having found out what I needed, people then said goodbye to me as I left.

I have to say, I can only describe the quality of service I received as exceptional. The politeness and professionalism of the people I spoke to was outstanding.

I was extremely impressed. You’re doing an amazing job”.

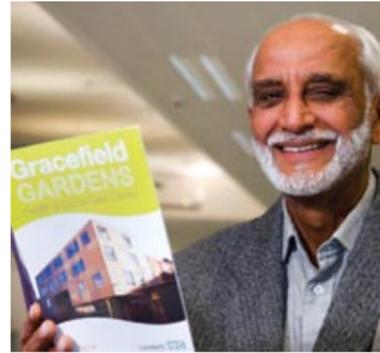
Gracefield Gardens healthcare facilities have been highlighted by Healthcare for London as one of five healthcare centres across the capital that exemplify the polyclinic service model. It is a concrete expression of Lambeth PCT's commitment to transform the quality of health and social care in Lambeth, reduce health inequalities and promote healthier living in line with what service users and partners say they need and want from their local NHS.

Gracefield Gardens is part of the PCT's wider programme to improve healthcare in Streatham by improving or opening a number of GP practices and health centres and by promoting closer integration between the NHS and services provided by Lambeth Council. The location of the council's customer centre alongside NHS services at Gracefield Gardens is seen as a firm example of the close partnership between the authority and the PCT.

The programme is in line with the PCT's strategy to develop a number of new centres in identifiable geographical areas across Lambeth, working with local stakeholders to develop local solutions to local needs. Within this system, local GPs, the PCT's community nursing teams and other health and social care providers will work together to create local healthcare networks.

A Gracefield Gardens Building Board, which meets quarterly, has been set up to deal with strategic management issues affecting the centre, building issues and the ongoing development of Gracefield Gardens. The board members are senior PCT and Lambeth managers.

Additionally, a Gracefield Gardens User Group has been set up. This group meets monthly to discuss and agree the day-to-day running of the centre, act as the steering group for the implementation of the Green Travel Plan and inform the Building Board about any strategic issues. The members of this group are made up of staff representatives from the many business units within the building – staff with and without management responsibilities.



Financial benefits

Development of the customer centres, including Gracefield Gardens, is intended to be cost neutral, the main drivers being better customer service and delivering the customer services strategy. Part of this drive is to join up customer services with other council and partners' services such as libraries, the PCT, youth service and job centres.

At Gracefield Gardens, efficiencies have been delivered with more customers being seen by fewer CSAs, but with a better level of service. Since services are now delivered from the Gracefield Gardens building, several pockets of accommodation have been released elsewhere; these cannot deliver cashable savings, however, until all accommodation needs have been rationalised and the buildings sold.

Customer benefits

The benefits to the customer have been illustrated above, these include:

- Time savings due to increased speed of service
- Cost savings due to availability of multiple services in one location
- Greater convenience through longer opening hours, and
- Improved customer experience through the design of the new building.

Organisational benefits

The benefits to the organisation have been illustrated above, these include:

- An ability to view customer history over the CRM, and so learn from customer interactions
- Greater levels of customer intelligence on which to base future service innovations
- Developmental opportunities for staff through cross-training
- Improved working environment for staff
- Greater levels of staff productivity and satisfaction, and
- Opportunity to educate customers and migrate them to lower-cost channels.

Political benefits

- Demonstrates commitment to area and a readiness to respond to local need
- Provides transparency in the reporting of performance at the centre, and
- Builds trust and a track record with the PCT.

Challenges

The Gracefield Gardens centre faced a number of serious challenges during its first year of operations, these included:

- Compiling a complex 14 week training course which includes class-based and hands-on training, shadowing, IT testing and refreshers
- Taking account of differing learning styles of team members has required a great deal of ongoing training and support from existing officers. During the course, trainers had to evaluate the abilities of team members, add in refresher and extra sessions
- Team members facing the challenge of adapting their attitudes to learning, as many had to return to the classroom after long periods of absence from such environments

- A number of technological difficulties - a key challenge was to make sure all the technology worked together to offer a number of channels; resolving this included bringing together and training staff on queuing systems, software packages, customer technology (including self service phones, internet points and survey machines) and information screens
- To embrace this wide range of technology, team members have taken part in an ongoing user-test, where they report new faults and glitches or recommend improvements to the IT and project teams.

A particular problem was that at the time of opening, several of the IT links at the customer centre were not working. This meant the team had to deliver services without some facilities and involved a great deal of strategic team work to organise manual methods for collecting data. Using manual reports and old systems to manage staff and monitor output, while not compromising the customer experience, was extremely challenging, but the team worked successfully to ensure services were delivered in a professional and proactive way during this period.



Financing

Gracefield Gardens was developed at a cost of £8.9 million under a national NHS initiative known as LIFT (Local Improvement Finance Trust). The initiative brings public and private sector partners together to invest in the provision of new and improved health and social care facilities. LB of Lambeth contributed approximately £4.4 million in Private Finance Initiative (PFI) credits. It has a 25 year sub-lease from the PCT for its accommodation in the building.

Partnering

The site was designed in partnership with the PCT. In developing the design, focus groups were held with elderly people, black and minority ethnic (BAME) residents, people with young children, people with disabilities and council tenants. Workshops were also held with representatives of Streatham area delivery partners and of the area forum.

Developing the workforce

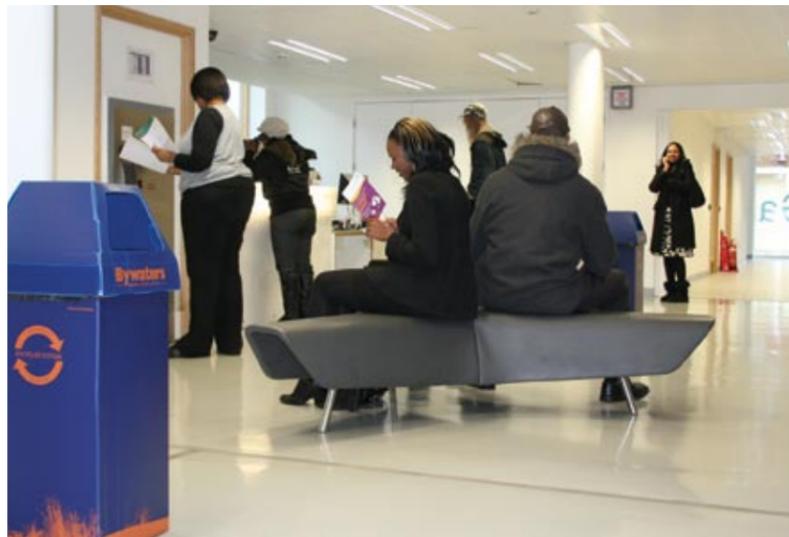
Gracefield Gardens operates with a team of eight officers at three different tiers. Officers work on a rotation basis between the Gracefield Gardens site and the Brixton Customer Centre. The rotation system allows staff to experience variation and diversity, as the sites differ in terms of operational requirements and remit. Building rapport across split sites is a key factor in keeping the team motivated, happy and consistent in their delivery of quality services. The remit of the customer centre requires team members to have an extensive knowledge of a very broad range of services and communicate with customers to provide beneficial, timely and efficient services. To fulfill this remit the council has taken a number of steps to develop a customer-focused culture and motivate, empower and engage staff. These include:

- On-the-spot encouragement by shift managers to individuals as well as groups during the normal operation of the day
- Valuing opinions and differences by listening to all staff before making key decisions
- Individual appraisal results are incorporated into team results, which provides motivation to succeed
- Compliments received by the team are escalated to management level so team members receive public congratulation for their efforts.

- Team members work together to identify development areas, not only for themselves but for each other to ensure that they are all able to complete multiple enquiries satisfactorily; as part of the appraisal process, staff identify areas where they need to develop skills and knowledge, both in the short and long term, and compile a personal development plan (PDP)
- When team members attend training, they feed back the results at their team meeting to share learning, and
- Team members have access to a centrally-funded professional qualification scheme for staff in the Finance and Resources department, offering financial support for self development and consistent access to development opportunities.

The effect of the attention to detail in developing and motivating staff is exemplified by the comment from one member of staff:

“With procedures in place and all the right tools for the job, serving customers and providing help when really needed makes me a proud and an honourable member of the customer service team. Taking ownership and providing help creates a sense of humanity, provides inspiration and motivation to see and serve the next customer.”



Sector learning

Factors other authorities should take into account when considering whether to implement a similar project include:

- Involving partners and a representative range of user groups when developing new facilities to ensure they meet the needs of both service providers and customers. At Gracefield Gardens this has resulted in a building that is attractive both to visit and to work in
- The need to have an understanding of both customer needs and of how the council will meet those needs both now and in the future. Lambeth has identified that customers currently prefer face-to-face contact to resolve issues, but that, for both the council and the customer, other channels may be more effective in the future. The provision of hands-on technology at Gracefield Gardens together with ‘meet and greet’ staff to assist in using it, has increased the possibility of customers using technology in the future
- Paying particular attention to the development of staff to increase their motivation and hence improve the customer experience.

Next steps

The council is continuing to develop its proposals for three further customer centres in Clapham, Norwood and North Lambeth in partnership with other agencies. Depending on the partners in each case there are a number of different models for service delivery:

- Joint front office service delivery: advice, information and booking services across a range of public services, provided by shared CSAs
- Co-located front office, with centre meeting rooms used for advice surgeries and workshops for the public, led by partner organisations
- Back office customer centre space used for collaboration between different agencies and residents’ groups to create synergies in back office processes and for joint planning sessions, e.g. between the Police, Neighbourhood Watch schemes and Street Care services on community safety, and
- Shared space with partner organisations having the opportunity to hire meeting rooms for their own meetings.



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The Local Government Association is the national voice for more than 450 local authorities in England and Wales. The LGA group comprises the LGA and five partner organisations which work together to support, promote and improve local government.

