

Customer Service Excellence Commercial in Confidence



Assessment Report

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Organisation	South Yorkshire Pensions Authority
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On behalf of Centre for Assessment Ltd



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Introduction

The Authority is responsible for administering the Local Government Pension Scheme in South Yorkshire. It maintains, invests and administers the scheme on behalf of over 300 contributing employers and around 140,000 members. Key employers are the district councils of Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham and Sheffield and the civilian arms of the Fire and Police services. The Authority has been accredited under the CSE standard since 2011, having previously been accredited under Charter Mark since 2004.

The main objective for the assessment was to establish whether or not the Authority continues to meet the requirements of the CSE standard; no additional objectives were agreed with the client. The assessment covered the work of the whole of South Yorkshire Pensions Authority.

Executive Summary

Overall impression

It was clear from the evidence provided throughout the assessment process that the organisation does meet the requirements of the standard and accreditation should therefore be agreed for a further three years, subject to the mandatory reviews each year. This is a significant achievement for the Authority as it has been through a challenging few years, yet has managed to continue delivering high quality services.

A number of areas of strength were identified which are summarised below:

- The level of engagement and involvement of staff in developing and delivering customer-focussed services was apparent and impressive. The recent dips in performance due to the introduction of the new IT system were a cause of great frustration for staff as they have been so used to performing at a high level; however, this frustration was put to good use as staff worked hard to bring things back on track.
- There is a real sense of continuous change and development in the Authority with significant developments being reported on each visit. This focus on continuous improvement seems to be well-developed and embedded.
- Staff are increasingly seeing colleagues as customers and are looking at ways to identify what their colleagues might need and expect from them.
- Feedback from customers remains extremely positive; the 'personal touch' that SYPA offer seems to be a key feature in driving satisfaction with the service offered.

Working with the CSE standard has provided the client with a number of benefits:

- It has given a clear and effective framework for assessing what is done for customers and to keep the offer relevant
- Staff have engaged with the standard and see it as a way of self-monitoring
- Development opportunities that have been identified over the years have helped to drive improvements and developments in the service offered
- It has provided an annual opportunity for reflection and review which has helped staff recognise the good work that has been achieved as well as the areas for development

Although there are no partial compliances, there are a few areas where further development might be helpful:

- Consider ways to formalise recognition of the internal customer; although staff have begun to think of colleagues as customers are there opportunities to make this more formal and embedded in the way of working for all staff?
- Ensure that key changes are identified and recorded and that the impacts of change are evaluated effectively; this may help staff see change as a positive thing and also identify areas where change has been less successful
- Consider how the customer journey might be formally mapped, focussing not just on what happens at each stage, but also on how it feels for the customer; this could give further insight into what customers need
- Look at how 'compliance plus' might be achieved for individual elements at future assessments and reviews. (In order to be scored as compliance plus an element needs to show service that exceeds the basic requirement, that demonstrates exceptional practice or delivery and that provides an exemplar for others)

Summary of findings against Customer Service Excellence

Criterion 1 - CUSTOMER INSIGHT

The organisation undertakes a lot of research and profiling of customers to make sure that data held is accurate and of value. Regular data cleansing makes sure that information is up to date about members and detailed analysis of the customer groups is published in the annual report and in newsletters. Consultation with customers has always been a high priority for the authority and strategies to communicate and consult are developed around broad groupings to help ensure that communication and consultation activities are focussed appropriately. For example, bespoke seminars are provided for different age groups. New methods of communication are also being developed – eg increasing use of social media channels. To help make sure that everyone can access the services a range of options is provided, including emails, letter, phone, on-line and face to face meetings (including home visits if appropriate). Many of the formal meetings are live streamed so that people who can't physically attend can still be part of it.

There is a clear strategic approach to consultation and engagement which has been revised to extend the reach. Communications are age-related and methods of contact are tailored to different customer groups. A Pensions Board was set up in 2015 and employers and members are represented. Again, a wide range of methods are used for engagement to help reach as many people as possible. Customer views are sought before any major initiative is introduced – for example, views were canvassed on the design of the new newsletter and there are regular opportunities for members to make comments and suggestions. More formal processes (eg the editorial group, mystery shopping group) are used to gain views and opinions from members.

A wide range of methods for measuring customer satisfaction were also evidenced. The Authority carries out a lot of surveys and have been able to differentiate services and products according to customer needs. Several examples were provided to show how analysis of the data collected has been used to improve service delivery and to enhance the customer experience.

Criterion 2 - THE CULTURE OF THE ORGANISATION

The Authority has clear corporate values under the strapline 'Commitment to Excellence' and the first specific value is 'customer focus – focus on, understand and satisfy customers' needs'. The values feed into strategic plans which helps to embed the approach to customer service. The commitment to customers also appears in the 'Commitment to Excellence' document, induction procedures, training and monitoring processes. The approach to customer insight has been embedded over a long time and this has resulted in a range of improvements and developments in the service offer. Examples provided to illustrate include 'Employers web', improved interactivity on line, feedback on year end processes and the development of age-related newsletters. The organisation makes great efforts to ensure that staff are polite and provide a service that is tailored to the needs and expectations of its customer groups; this was evidenced through documentation, observation and feedback from customers. The customer focus group members were very clear that the personal touch – ie being able to see someone face to face, the tone of written and verbal communication and the accessibility of staff – is immensely valued and helps make potentially confusing information more easily understood. Several have pensions with other providers and were able to make direct comparisons of the levels of service received – all agreed that the service offered by SYPA was by far the best! Staff are actively encouraged to use their initiative and are empowered to take appropriate actions to meet customer needs (eg through amending letters as appropriate). Training and development are provided for both staff and managers to help maintain the high levels of service that are routinely offered to members.

The importance of customer focus is clearly communicated in the recruitment process so that all candidates are aware very early in the process that they will be required to deliver high levels of customer service and to deliver on the core values of the authority. New starters are reminded of these processes through the use of induction checklists and existing employees have access to effective development programmes which again reinforce the focus on customers. Documentary reminders are provided through the Customer Charter, staff training content and the Code of Conduct. Staff are actively encouraged to come up with ideas and suggestions that will improve services (eg through staff meetings, the Pensions Strategy Group and via informal means). Staff believe that their contribution to developing and delivering customer-focussed services is recognised and valued by the organisation through a range of formal and informal processes.

Criterion 3 - INFORMATION AND ACCESS

Customers are provided with information about the services on offer, and any related costs, through a range of channels including the web site, member booklets and leaflets and the Customer Charter. A range of options is provided for customers to obtain information and to make contact with the service. These include face to face, phone, email, on-line and written information. The Authority takes account of the fact that most active members will still be working and therefore make channels available that can be accessed out of normal office hours. Recent developments in access and communication processes have seen an increasing use of social media, which is helping engage with younger members, and the live streaming of the annual fund meeting so that people who can't physically attend can still take part.

Standard communication materials are subject to consultation prior to publication to ensure that they provide clear and unambiguous messages. All letters to members invite them to get in touch if there is anything the member doesn't understand. A key feature of the access strategy is the provision of face to face access where necessary; members of the customer focus group who were interviewed during the on-site visit were very clear that this is an important aspect of the service and one of the things that makes SYPS's service feel better than that provided by others.

The central access point of the Headquarters building is supported by local access points, to allow members to access face to face contact without having to travel too far. All the local access points provide easy physical access and additional support such as signers, interpreters and alternative format literature can be provided as required. The Authority used the DART tool to evaluate how customers access the service and have used the data collected to inform future service developments – for example changes to the way that overseas pensioners are dealt with. Analysis of contact methods also led to changes in the way that newsletters are provided – they are now provided in a range of formats to meet the needs of different customer groups.

Partnership working is seen as being essential to the way that the Authority operates and it has developed a very collaborative way of working with employers. Key agencies are engaged to provide access to information for members (eg through providing key speakers for events, offering a range of courses for members and providing effective induction for members. The work of partners is often regulated via SLAs and other contractual agreements to make sure that the service offered to members remains effective.

Criterion 4 - DELIVERY

The Authority sets clear and effective standards to govern its service delivery. In fact, SYPA was one of the first LGPS administrators to set customer service standards, to produce a customer charter and to publish its performance details. Performance against the standards is monitored and reported on the website and in the annual report. SYPA consults regularly on standards and uses the results of consultation to inform future work on standards. For example, a recent exit survey was undertaken and confirmed that the current timescales the Authority works to are acceptable and meet customers' needs.

Customers are made aware of the levels of service they can expect through information on the website, details contained in the Customer Charter, the welcome pack and through leaflets and information on specific issues (eg death of a pensioner). Feedback from customers via surveys and through general feedback show that customers know what to expect and are generally happy with what is delivered. The performance of SYPA is compared to that of others through participation in a benchmarking club. The results are discussed each year to see what can be learned from them and from others in the club. However, it is often difficult to use the benchmarking data to improve services directly as SYPA tend to be ahead of others, but data is used to constantly challenge practice and ensure it remains appropriate.

Where dips in performance do occur, these are identified and customers are made aware of them and of what is being done to put things right. For example, when the new IT system was introduced there was a dip in performance as staff needed to familiarise themselves with how it worked. This was identified and many staff worked extra hours to clear the backlog that had built up. Customers were kept informed via the website and through newsletters which explained what was happening and how the staff were working to put things right.

Criterion 5 - TIMELINESS AND QUALITY OF SERVICE

The services standards that are set include standards for timeliness and quality. These are included with other service standards in the Customer Charter commitments. Customers are made aware of these commitments on timeliness and quality in the same way they are made aware of other service standards. Staff are provided with development opportunities to make sure that they acquire and retain the appropriate skills and customer care training is specifically provided for managers to help them manage and support staff effectively.

The IT systems allow staff to share customer data as appropriate, even at the local offices. Comprehensive data about each member is kept together in one place and the 'Tell us once' facility ensures that changes to customer details can be captured and shared effectively. These processes help make sure that customers can be helped effectively wherever and whenever they contact the Authority. Data is also shared with other LGPS funds where appropriate to ensure a seamless and comprehensive service for all members.

As with all standards, the performance of the Authority against the timeliness and quality standards is measured and monitored. Performance is reported in a quarterly performance report, the annual report and in management group discussions. Customers can see how the Authority is performing on the website, through letters sent directly (eg when delays are being experienced) and in newsletters. Benchmarking data shows that SYPA performs well compared to others and the feedback from customers in surveys, mystery shopping exercises and in general feedback confirm that they are generally very happy with the standard of service provided.

Scoring

- To achieve Customer Service Excellence an organisation may not have any non-compliances
- To achieve Customer Service Excellence organisations must demonstrate compliance with each of the criteria. To do so the organisation must achieve full compliance or compliance plus in at least 80% of the elements contained in each of the criteria
- The maximum number of partial compliances allowed within each criterion is shown in the table below

Criterion	Number of Elements	Maximum number of partial compliances	Actual number of partial compliances	Actual number of compliance plus elements
1	11	2	0	0
2	11	2	0	0
3	12	2	0	0
4	13	3	0	0
5	10	2	0	0

Conclusions

Assessment

Having carried out the assessment process in accordance with the guidelines provided for assessors by the Cabinet Office the Assessor was satisfied beyond any doubt that South Yorkshire Pensions Authority meets the requirements of Customer Service Excellence. The Assessor recommends to the Panel that the Authority be recognised under the standard. On behalf of Centre for Assessment Ltd. the assessor would like to congratulate all the staff on their achievement.

Assessor Name: Andrew Mackey
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