Ceredigion Association of Voluntary Organisations

Your local county voluntary council

3. Working with others

3.5 Customer care

Customer care is a concept which is at the heart of voluntary sector organisations, many of which originated as user-led groups. As the number of different ‘stakeholders’, each with different claims on the organisation, increases, it is helpful to draw up a policy which makes sure that users’ needs are at the forefront of the group. This helps to ensure best services.

Procedures

Procedures should be established to take account of customer care provisions and to ensure that staff, volunteers and users are aware of them and involved in making them work.

Appropriate services

Whilst the aims of the organisation may remain the same, services need to be reviewed from time to time to ensure that they are appropriate. User needs may change and services should be planned with regard to any changes in levels of resources available.

Information

Information about the organisation should be available to all who might have an interest in using its services, or contributing to them, and should be reviewed regularly. Information for users should be clear about the services being offered and the people for whom they are intended. The hours of availability and the names and telephone numbers of appropriate contacts should be given. Records of where publicity material has been sent or displayed should be kept, so that outdated material can be replaced. Information should be provided in different formats, such as through web sites, large print and different languages, if appropriate to the local community.

Suggestions

Most organisations welcome suggestions on their services and will have methods of attracting and dealing with them. Suggestion boxes, visitor books, e-mail addresses, dedicated phone numbers, face-to-face contact can all be used. For each method there should be a recognised procedure for acknowledging comments and a time scale within which this will be done. Clear lines of responsibility for responding to and dealing with the suggestions should be laid out. Regular meetings should review practices to

take account of suggestions made and feedback on the outcome of the suggestion to the person who made it.

Surveys

Well designed surveys of user satisfaction form an important part of many organisations' customer care procedures. They might be part of an ongoing process, such as client reviews or case closures, or an evaluation of a social or training event. Alternatively, they might be a full scale postal survey or a series of face-to-face interviews or focus group discussions. They might involve all users or a sample of them. Cost and resources will be a factor in the methods used, but need not be a barrier to user surveys if the commitment to them exists and a suitable method is set up for the purpose. But, don't ask for users' views if you can't or won't do anything with them: a survey without a willingness to change is worse than no survey at all.

Collecting information is often the simplest part of conducting a survey. The presentation of the evidence, discussing the conclusions, and reviewing the services are equally important. The involvement of users, volunteers, management committee and other 'stakeholders' in this process is a valuable experience.

Confidentiality

For both customer surveys and suggestion schemes, it is essential that respondents feel able to make comments in confidence and remain anonymous. Unless there are pressing reasons for doing so, respondents should not be asked to reveal their name or address. If the identity of the respondent becomes evident, for example, from the handwriting, their identity should not be revealed widely or be published, if doing so might enable others to identity the author. Users have a right to expect that their contributions to customer care research are handled in confidence and that they will not be disadvantaged by contributing.

Involvement

Users should be able to become involved in the running of the organisation if they wish. The opportunities for involvement will vary: there may be a constitutional right to stand for elections to the committee, the right to observe committee meetings without full voting rights, a consultative forum of users, or meetings called by the committee. The methods used should take account of the various 'stakeholder' groups, whether the users are regular or occasional and whether they have opportunities to meet each other. The methods will be appropriate to the type of organisation and will take account of the need for confidentiality and legality.

Support

Users might need support in order to participate in the organisation. They may require payment of travelling expenses or provision of transport to meetings. Other support

could be: payment of expenses to a carer; the provision of advocacy; translation, interpreters or signers. Positive action to ensure that everyone can take part should prevent one group of users from dominating the process.

Training

Incorporating customer care and complaints procedures into the work of the organisation requires training opportunities to be provided for staff, volunteers and users.

Complaints procedures

Complaints from users are an important way for an organisation to learn that its services or staffing need to be changed or improved. Complaints serve a useful purpose and should be welcomed and this should be clear at all levels of the organisation and built into the policy and procedures for dealing with them.

The procedures for dealing with complaints can be complex and should be clearly set out, publicised and made available to anyone who wants to see or use them. Flow charts and diagrams may help. The existence of the procedures and ways of accessing them should also be set out in the Annual Report.

Welcoming complaints

Many people are afraid of complaining and fear repercussions from doing so. Users should, therefore, be aware that their complaints will be welcomed, as they will help the organisation to do better in the future. This should be stressed in publicity materials about the complaints procedure.

It may be helpful to suggest areas of service about which complaints may be made eg poor service, discrimination, failure to provide accurate information, unreasonable delays in responding to enquiries or requests for appointments. Where standards of service are already set out in writing eg in Equal Opportunities policies, Health and Safety policies or procedures established by a national federation, these should be referred to in the literature. It may also be helpful to suggest who may complain.

Recording complaints

Complaints might be made verbally or in writing. Help should be available for people to write their complaint, express it in privacy, read and understand the procedures. All complaints should be recorded even if they are resolved at an initial verbal stage. The response and outcome of each complaint should be recorded and the outcome reviewed. Feedback should be given to the complainant.

Stages of the complaints process

Most complaints procedures incorporate stages through which a complaint may pass. The initial stage may be for a verbal or written complaint to be made to a responsible person. If it is not resolved at this stage, it may be referred to a named person or postholder. Complainants should have the right to by-pass any stage if they feel that the person responsible is not sufficiently detached from the cause of the complaint to be able to deal with it objectively. Usually, there will be a third stage, in which the Committee or its Chair will review the complaint and the action taken in previous stages. This may be the final stage at which the complaint can be resolved internally. At each stage there should be a timescale within which the complaint will be heard and a decision communicated to the complainant.

Arbitration

Users who are still not satisfied with the outcome of their complaint often have the right to use external mediation or arbitration, and provision for this is recommended. The mediation or arbitration service might be provided by a named organisation.

Relevant law

The organisation must be aware of the legal implications of complaints received. Complainants should be made aware if they have legal means of redress, which they may use without prejudicing their right to use the organisation's own procedures. This information should be given if the complaint is not dealt with at the initial stage, as there are time limits for applications under legislation such as the Race Relations Act.

Confidentiality

Users must be assured that their complaints are dealt with in confidence and that they will not be disadvantaged from using the service as a result of having complained. In circumstances where guarantees of confidentiality cannot be given (e.g. to young children, elderly people in the care of others) the limits of confidentiality must be explained prior to receiving a complaint.

Review

If complaints are to be regarded as a useful means of improving services, there must be a process through which all complaints can be periodically reviewed. This may take place within the Committee or through a separate review panel. The outcome of reviews should be published so that complaints are seen by all stakeholders to be a useful means of improving services. The Annual Report is an appropriate place to do this. However, no details should be included which would enable the complainant or a person complained about to be identified from the published report.

Further information

Charity Commission for England & Wales
CC47 - Complaints about Charities
Tel: 0845 3000 218
www.charity-commission.gov.uk

VolResource
www.volresource.org.uk

Disclaimer
The information provided in this sheet is intended for guidance only. It is not a substitute for professional advice and we cannot accept any responsibility for loss occasioned as a result of any person acting or refraining from acting upon it.

For further information contact

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