

An Inspector Calls: Citizen-Led Service Inspection by West Lothian Council

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Organisation: West Lothian Council

Country: United Kingdom

Level of government: Local government

Sector: General public services

Type: Public Service

Launched in: 2011

Overall development time: 1 year(s)

Link to the innovation's website

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Description

In 2011 West Lothian Council (a local authority close to Edinburgh, with about 170,000 inhabitants) initiated citizen-led inspections as a new form of engagement that empowers local people to inspect and improve public services.

Citizen inspectors evaluate the way services are delivered and assess whether they achieve the expected outcomes. In particular, they provide feedback to the local council on how public services can be improved. The key success of the process has been service improvements that are driven and designed by customers.

Why the innovation was developed

- The initiative was launched because the Chief Executive championed it as a way to strengthen customer focus throughout the organisation and as a practical mechanism to involve customers in review and redesign of services.
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Objectives

Enhance public trust, Improve service quality, Improve user satisfaction, Increase citizen engagement

- The project aims to achieve three primary outcomes: better designed services that meet customer needs and preferences;
- Community inclusion;
- A greater level of co-production between the council and the people living in West Lothian.
- Residents of West Lothian
- West Lothian Council

Results

Service quality

Responsiveness:

- The key successes of this process have been the improvements being developed by services, driven by the feedback of customers. This kind of participation and co-production with the local community usually comes only as a result of expensive, high volume, repeated interfaces through a myriad of engagement exercises. By investing in citizens, the council is building capacity in people that it will continue to nurture and engage in future council improvement processes.
- The process also means that council officers are gaining valuable insights about community needs and preferences that bring about positive changes in the planning, prioritisation and improvement of services. Detailed responses from the community are being used to develop customer-led improvements, saving time and costs of consultation and, crucially, getting it right first time with meaningful improvements for the customer.
- The two inspection processes undertaken to date have been responsible for the direction of tens of thousands of pounds of investment in service improvement and staff development. Following the success in winter maintenance and pupil placement, the council is now expanding the process into a rolling inspection programme that will be targeted at services with the greatest impact on the people living in West Lothian.

Development

Design

In 2011 the council reviewed the corporate approach to community engagement as part of the development of a new Improvement Strategy, and as part of its overall strategy to be a progressive and inclusive council. This identified the customer-led inspection (CLI) process as a new engagement method, involving customers in challenging and reviewing services.

Implementation

Tools used:

- West Lothian Council set up a project team of 2 members, led by a Deputy Chief Executive as the project sponsor, each working part-time on the process. Because it was delivered within existing resource, the two project team members were selected for their knowledge of this type of activity (one in customer participation, one in quality assurance), as opposed to bringing in dedicated resource. It is anticipated that, as the project matures, the inspection team will increase their control and autonomy, with a corresponding reduction in the council resource required to deliver inspection activity. At present each inspection requires around 8-10 FTE days from council staff. This includes recruiting, training and supporting the team.
- The team at West Lothian Council created a bespoke 2-day training course to provide citizen inspectors with the skills, knowledge and capabilities to carry out the inspection and reporting activity effectively and the confidence to critically evaluate services. The training was designed to be engaging and participative, and focused on providing the inspectors with an understanding of the council; and knowledge of the inspection process, framework and scoring, report writing and how to deliver feedback. It also explained the inspection techniques available to them, such as interviewing; shadowing; mystery shopping; desk top audits; surveys and focus groups and site visits.
- The council was keen for inspectors to come from a representative sample of people from the community. As a result, it launched a multi-media information and recruitment campaign. This involved the creation of CLI pages on the council website; articles in the local media and council newsletters; Twitter and Facebook updates; direct mailings and emails to participants in existing forums and community groups, including the parent councils, tenants groups, older and younger people forums and the disability and race forums.

Resources used:

- The cost of the process to the council is largely officers' time – both those participating in the review and those supporting the team – with a small expenditure on course materials, again developed internally at minimal cost.
 - The process was developed and officer support provided using existing resources; with one officer experienced in customer engagement activity (tenant participation) and a quality and performance officer practised in quality frameworks and external inspection.
 - Beyond the training, the role of the two officers was limited and the main function was to act as a conduit for access to the council's services, staff and systems. It is too early to tell if the approach has resulted in a reduced need for internal audit, but Audit Scotland has asked for information about the project as part of the Council's annual risk assessment.
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Diffusion

- Interest built as information was cascaded through the different media. There was a high volume of telephone and email enquiries and an open evening was held. The intention was to raise awareness across the community but it was recognised that the initiative should start from a low base to build experience and knowledge of the process, on the part of both the inspectors and the council.
- The recruitment generated 35 notes of interest/applications, from which 15 were placed on a Register of Interest. From the Register, 8 people were trained, making 2 inspection teams of 4 people. These 8 people ranged in age from early 30s to early 60s, with three-quarters being female. There were representatives from 4 different towns in West Lothian, with 5 inspectors coming from Livingston, the largest settlement.
- For future inspections, the council aims to ensure balanced representation on the Citizen Inspection register and particularly hopes to ensure more involvement from young people through greater engagement with the Youth Congress in West Lothian.

Lessons Learned

Lessons Learned

- An open recruitment process was held, with the hope of engaging as wide a range of people as possible, potentially capturing people who had never chosen to participate or those who may have felt excluded in the past. This was successfully achieved.
 - However, the council also directly promoted this pilot to established networks and community groups in order to encourage potential 'expert' customers as well.
 - The inspectors involved in the first two inspections are now on a register (along with the other applicants who were not selected for the pilot) and will be able to volunteer for future inspections. The intention is that a programme/calendar of inspections will be circulated to inspectors on the register on an annual basis and they will indicate areas of interest. The teams will be selected based on this feedback, again focusing on ensuring that it is representative, but also that there is a mix of new and experienced inspectors.
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Other information

The Citizens-Led Inspections initiative won the 2011 'One to Watch' category at COSLA (the Council of Scottish Local Authorities), because of the approach and its potential impact. It is too early to tell about its impact, as there is not yet a full year of data yet to compare the pre- and post-inspection results.

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