

Hackney Council Customer Services, London



Hackney Council – in common with many other local authorities – wanted to consolidate all customer-facing services into one building.

Taking three years of planning, the £48million Customer Service Centre was opened on February 1st 2010, achieved on time and budget and with no cost to Council Tax payers.

Designed by Hopkins Architects, the building features a stunning five-storey atrium, which is a new public space for the people of the Borough. Through the glazed entrance facade the workings of the Council can be clearly seen, echoing the aspirations for transparent democracy in local government.

The building services specification achieves BREEAM 'Excellent' through a combination of efficient facade/environmental control, gas and wood pellet boilers, together with photo-voltaic cells.

Inside are Council services including Housing Needs, Revenue and Benefits, The Registrar and Older People's Services, which allows residents to do all their Council business in one central location, instead of travelling between different offices spread across the Borough. More than 1,000 Council staff



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also work in the building.

The architect had designed a café set off to one side on the ground floor. FCSI management consultant Andrew Etherington “assisted greatly” with the specification of the catering and appointment of a contractor, according to Mike Sofianos, Assistant Director, Customer Services.

“We knew we needed some sort of catering, but were not sure what or how,” said Sofianos.

A steering group was set up, including Council procurement and finance departments. “We preferred a local company and a Fairtrade approach but obviously could not pre-judge the tender,” said Sofianos. Hackney and some other London boroughs hold Fairtrade status and Hackney has switched all of its tea, coffee and sugar to Fairtrade.

The caterer would be operating from restricted on-site facilities. There is no kitchen on site and limited storage space. It was a requirement of the tender process that bidding companies could demonstrate they had adequate local production and support facilities.

“The tender was issued right on the timeline set out by Andrew.” Following assessment of the bids

and presentations by the shortlisted caterers, including ‘taster’ sessions, local social enterprise City Edge was appointed.

Offering function and external catering and based nearby at Hackney Community College, City Edge “ticked all the boxes” in terms of the tender spec. “In the first year 60 per cent of the profit goes back to the Council,” said Sofianos, “the remainder going back to Hackney Community College. We have also recruited four employees from the local unemployed.”

The café formally reports to the Council on a monthly basis. To assist with management of finances the café also banks with the Council’s on-site cashier’s office.

“The project has been a tremendous success from day one and the staff here love it. A regular morning sandwich round is very popular and the staff have asked if this can be extended to the afternoon as well. Light refreshments for Council meetings are also provided.

“We have also introduced red, amber and green nutritional labelling on the sandwiches, something that Andrew wanted from the start. All produce is procured from local suppliers and sandwiches, salads etc. are made fresh daily. There are two deliveries in the morning and afternoon.

“Andrew really does know his stuff and guided us at each stage. He is also very enthusiastic, which helps a lot and he adds value, making recommendations about the storage and washing facilities, for example, the first time he saw the facility.

“We changed the design slightly to allow for more cupboards and installed a double fridge.

When the bidding caterers came in to view the unit they all said ‘This is just the facility we need to provide a service’.

“As word got out about the new Customer Service Centre, we have had lots of interest from other local authorities, including a visit shortly after opening from Barry Quirk, Chief Executive Officer of Lewisham Council, followed by several other chief executives from London boroughs.

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The atmosphere in the new building is quiet and calm. Council staff are on view and on hand to answer queries or provide directions to the relevant department. Dwell time for customers is set at 15 minutes default and – echoing the theme of transparency – “we can see where we can reduce waiting time and speed up the process,” said Sofianos.

In the recent Local Government Awards (LGC Awards), Hackney won ‘Place of the Year’ and was also winner of the Children’s Services Award. It was also highly commended for Council of the Year and the Employee Engagement Award.

“We were shortlisted for five awards; we have never had that success before.”

Photos: Courtesy Hopkins Architects

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