

Customer Service Strategy: 'Customer Insight'

Purpose

Huntingdonshire District Council aims to provide excellent customer service.

Our vision is one where, for each of our services, we have a clear insight into the needs of our customers and provide services in a way which meets those needs. Specifically this means each service will;

- ◆ carefully consider who its customers are, and what services they require; and
- ◆ design service delivery around the needs of those customers.

Contribution to the Council's Corporate and Strategic Framework

The Council has many roles, but to achieve our aims and objectives in our corporate plan, Growing Success, we are committed to consistent and sustained customer service.

Using our customer insight, the Council aims to achieve the following objectives in Growing Success:

- **to provide high quality customer services** – by making it as easy as possible for customers to access our services and get appropriate information;
- **to improve access to our services** – by introducing new ways of contacting the Council including: self service via web site, mobile/home delivery of services, increase use of call centre and customer service centres;
- **to be good at communicating with and listening to people and organisations** – this will entail regular and effective communication with local residents about Council services, seeking their views on new proposals, and regularly asking them their opinions and considering what they say;
- **to be clear about what we can do and aspire to achieve** – by regularly publishing our plans and services standards and information about our performance;
- **to be a part of effective partnerships** – by continuing to take opportunities to work with others where it will meet community needs and maximise the resources;
- **to strengthen our commitment and capacity to achieve equality, diversity and inclusion** – by maintaining or establishing statutory equality schemes which consider gender, race and disability equality issues and the needs of disadvantaged groups at all levels of services, policies and practices.

The achievement of these objectives means that the Council must be excellent at understanding the needs of the users of our services, those we represent and in organising services around those needs. This requires excellent customer service standards and practices, communications, marketing, consultation and engagement skills and activities.

In addition to the objectives in Growing Success, a series of strategic policies, including the Corporate Equality Policy, Consultation and Engagement Strategy and Communications and Marketing Strategy, all contain objectives and activities which require effective customer service and/or contribute towards the approach adopted within this strategy.

These strategies and policies are mutually supportive and are inherently connected in terms of the objectives they are seeking to promote. In delivering the vision for excellent customer service the Council also has to balance the costs and value of improvements we make.

Background

Where are we now?

Huntingdonshire District Council Customer Service Strategy, approved in 2003, has been successfully achieved. In the past four years the way that customers can contact the Council, obtain services and information has been significantly improved -

- A Call Centre has been established which deals with the majority of initial calls from customers and provides a more detailed call answering service for an increasing range of services.
- A temporary Customer Service Centre has been established in Huntingdon which brought together disparate points of contact for customers, including a tourist information centre. In addition to the physical change this has facilitated a consistent approach towards customer service and improvements in the development of employees. A new permanent centre is being built as part of the Council's new headquarters.
- Satellite Customer Service Centres have been maintained in St Ives and St Neots offering payment facilities and a range of other services.
- Community Information Centres have been successfully established in Yaxley and Ramsey working closely with many external partners.
- Continuous improvements have been made to the Council's website as a means of obtaining information about services.
- The St Neots Tourist Information Centre has been maintained pending its amalgamation with an enhanced customer service centre in the town.
- A network of community and visitor electronic kiosks and access points have been established in each of the market towns and some villages.
- A Mobile Display Unit is used extensively around the district to promote services and as a mobile office. Trials have also been conducted on mobile working, mobile information provision and flexible working for employees. These trials have provided information about the demand and costs of such activities.

In the main, face to face services have developed independently and we need to ensure we learn from existing best practice across these locations. Officers also act as 'advocates' for those customers who need more help than others, and this will continue.

Where do we want to be?

Having made these achievements and having regard to increasing customer expectation and good practice in this field the time is right to revisit the strategy.

The strategy is planned to have a life of approximately three years and includes a broad action plan required to achieve its objectives. It is intended to reinforce existing good practice and performance already present across the Council. The strategy is focussed on the initial contact we have with customers and the subsequent delivery of service.

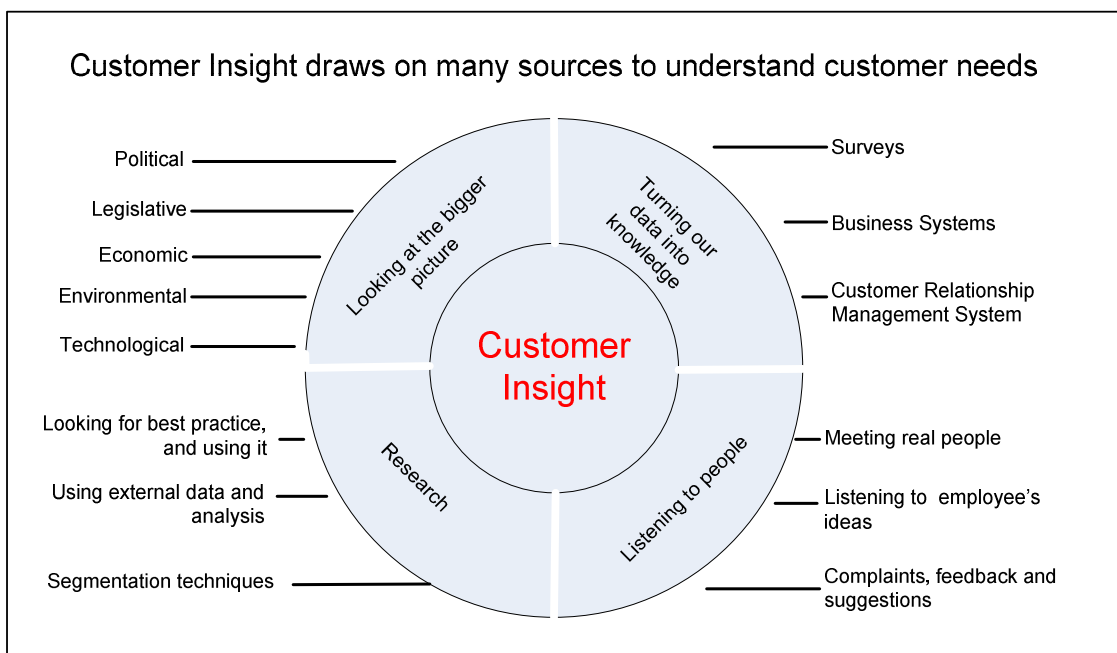
Understanding our customers better

Every potential or actual user of our services is a customer. The Council works hard to ensure customers receive excellent service, and while it knows a great deal about customers, more can always be done.

The Council wants to better understand the diversity of its communities, and deliver services which respond to different needs and aspirations. To do this, it needs to get maximum value from the information it gathers, and be able to bring different information sources together to build a richer, more comprehensive, picture of its customers.

Equality Impact Assessments are being carried out on all our services and policies and they will highlight issues that need to be addressed through customer service activities. It is important that we have a coordinated approach to the use of information from these assessments.

Each service needs to have a clear insight into the customers it serves. The following diagram highlights many of the sources of information the Council will use to develop this insight.



The services the Council provides

The Council delivers many services and for operational reasons and efficiency they will continue to be delivered in the most appropriate way. However, as our 'customer insight' develops new ways of meeting customer needs will be identified, and opportunities will arise to bring together services to work in a way better suited to meeting customer needs.

The way the Council is structured will need to reflect the objectives of this strategy. While Heads of Service will remain responsible for the delivery of customer service within their own service this level of customer service will concentrate on more complex enquiries, requiring a level of specialist expertise. Such contact may lower in volume, but require more time and resources. However, to promote the exchange of best practice, service development, improved training and consistent levels of high quality customer service it is proposed that Customer Service will become within the remit of an existing single Head of Service who will be responsible for:

- ◆ ensuring a customer perspective is at the heart of all services
- ◆ overseeing the delivery and monitoring of this strategy
- ◆ managing the first point of contact with customers including:
 - The Call Centre
 - Customer Service Centres
 - Community Information Centres
 - Visitor Information Centres

They will deal with high volume, relatively simple transactions. They will interact heavily with customers and will need to be customer service trained. They will also be responsible for:

- ◆ coordinating campaigns which involve services provided by the customer service team
- ◆ providing advice and guidance to services
- ◆ ensuring managers acknowledge their responsibility for customer service in their own service.

Customer Service Skills

Customer service and customer insight are key skills for all employees. This strategy promotes training and development of employees to deliver the Council's objectives on these areas.

Meeting the needs of all our customers

The Council has a duty to ensure the services it provides do not exclude any group of customers, and this remains a high priority. For example we are meeting the needs of the emerging group of customers from the new EU member states. The website now has a screen-reader function enabling access to blind customers. Other new developments are underway and will be completed during the life of the strategy. We will ensure that information and communication requirements of disabled people are considered, specifically, disabled people have asked to be better informed about facilities and funding.

Making the most of our website

Offering 24/7 access to information and services will be a key part of meeting customer needs. By doing this we actively encourage greater access to services, at a cheaper cost to the Council, and free up resources to deliver services to those customers most in need.

Where appropriate as part of our everyday business with our customers, we will:

- ◆ make them aware that the information or service they require is available online, encouraging them to use the website
- ◆ include a link to the Council's home page, or other relevant pages, in e-mails
- ◆ include our website address in printed material.

We will continue to look at the design and scope of the website to ensure it meets customer needs and consideration will be given to personalising the content for particular customers. We will ensure the website provides high quality and useful information, and the number of on-line services will increase.

Developing the points of contact with customers

The Council will continue to develop ways for customers to obtain services from the Council.

- The Call Centre will remain the primary method of dealing with telephone calls and more services will be offered over time.
- Direct dial – customers will be able to contact service areas direct. As services transfer to the Call Centre, direct dial volumes will decrease and these calls will become more focussed on the complex, specialist calls, best dealt with by service experts.
- Face to face - the Customer Service Centre at Huntingdon will be a primary point of access, but there will be Customer Service Centres at St Ives and St Neots. The Community Information Centres at Yaxley and Ramsey will continue to provide services to customers. The range of service and information between these centres will be brought together.
- Mobile or flexibly delivered services – services delivered away from the Council's premises; sometimes in a customer's home will be further developed. Work is underway to introduce more flexible ways of working. Where there is a clear business case, this has potential to provide services at locations more suited to the customer, particularly in rural locations.
- Via the internet – either from their own home, from mobile devices, or from public points of access.
- In writing - this may be within a letter, or a customer may have to apply for a service using application forms.

Getting it right first time

Ensuring we answer customer enquiries first time is important. It means the customer receives an excellent level of service, and the Council does not spend effort dealing with avoidable and repeated customer contact. The establishment of the Call Centre and the Customer Service Centre in Huntingdon has meant a greater percentage of enquiries are dealt with at the first point of contact – but more could be done.

All services can help to improve our performance. Developing a clear customer insight requires all staff to understand the needs of customers and building services around those needs will reduce costs and lead to greater satisfaction. The Council should also use data more effectively to inform day to day contact with customers. This will increase the likelihood that the service offered fits the needs of the customers.

Encouraging customers to provide feedback, and understanding their comments allows the Council to make improvements and this is an area the Council will develop further.

Managing and responding to customer demand

The Council will also manage demand better by 'smoothing' the day-to-day peaks in customer demand. This will increase access to service, especially at busy times.

For example, collecting and publishing information showing the least busy times may encourage some customers to plan their next visit or phone call to coincide with these quieter times. In addition it will help services to plan for peaks in demand.

Making more of contact with customers

The Council has a Communications and Marketing Strategy and structure in place to promote marketing activities and many services already market themselves to customers and deliver excellent results. But the Council has identified that it can do more. Coordinated and targeted campaigns, based upon an increased understanding of customer needs and preferences, will ensure customers are more aware of services delivered by the Council.

Increasing the electronic provision of services and information

For some services currently there are limited practical alternatives to a paper application form, and some customers prefer to write to the Council. New media is becoming an increasingly preferred method for communication for many customers. This is something that must be taken into account and is being considered in the communications and marketing strategy, as more customers opt to receive electronic communications.

The Council will increase the use of e-mail and the website where possible and appropriate. This approach will reduce the time taken for the Council to respond to a customer, reduce the use of paper and reduce expenditure.

Bringing together services

While it is important to the Council that customers appreciate the distinctions between providers of services increasingly they are looking for simple or single points of contact. The Council already shares some elements of our customer service delivery for the benefit of our customers. Where practical, we will engage with partners and other agencies to try to deliver an improved service. This will mean customers can access a number of services in one location. The Council will need to share information with partners, and this will be encouraged.

Objectives

Objective	Measure
Services are provided in a way that meet customer needs	% of customers who believe services are meeting their needs
Provision of service to customers is right first time	% of transactions right first time
Services are accessible to customers	% of customers who believe services are accessible

Action Plan

This strategy is supported by a three-year action plan which will help to ensure a consistent approach across the whole of the Council. The Council's Head of Service overseeing customer service will be responsible for the monitoring and implementation of the plan and will work with other services to make sure this happens.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation are critical to ensuring that we achieve the objectives.

To ensure we are making progress we will:

- monitor our performance against local (and national, if any) measures
- report performance on customer service
- collect and publish evidence of good practice throughout the Council.

This strategy and action plan will be reviewed annually so that we can set specific targets for the future. A comprehensive review of the strategy will be undertaken every three years.

Risks

The council's corporate risk register identifies a large number of risks that may have negative effects on the council.

An effective customer service strategy is imperative to ensure the risks and the possibilities of them becoming a reality are kept to a minimum or prevented altogether.

The following key risks have been identified:

- Delivering the strategy may require resources already committed to other activities and projects.
- Customers are targeted in an uncoordinated way, using resources inefficiently and lowering customers' perception of our services.
- Customer insight may focus effort onto the majority of customers at the expense of hard to reach groups.
- Shared service requires commitment from outside the Council; it may be this is not forthcoming.

Action Plan 2008-2011

Objective	Action	Measure	Target	By whom	When
Services are provided in a way that meet customer needs	Embed the concept and practice of 'customer insight' into the organisation by encouraging services to implement this strategy				
	Designate a Head of Service to be responsible for overseeing the delivery of this strategy and for the provision of point of contact customer services				
	Ensure all Heads of Service acknowledge their responsibility for the delivery of customer service within their service				
	Review training and development needs to ensure employees can deliver this strategy				
	Capitalise on the opportunities we have to make information on our services available to our customers				

Objective	Action	Measure	Target	By whom	When
	Make better use of available data to improve our understanding of customers needs				
	To provide a more rapid and cost effective service by encouraging employees and the customers to use email and other electronic media				
	Use the results of Equality Impact Assessments in the planning of customer service activities				
Services are accessible to customers	Maintain face to face customer service in St Neots, St Ives, Ramsey and Yaxley				
	Complete the development of the Call Centre and Customer Service Centre in Huntingdon				
	Improve access to services by managing, and responding to, the demand on services better				

Objective	Action	Measure	Target	By whom	When
	Ensure all customers, including those groups which are considered to be excluded or do not engage with the Council, are considered when delivering services				
	Provide information about services in a way that meets the needs of disabled people				
	Promote the use of the website to improve service and 'free-up' resources				
	Develop the website and web based services so they are more personalised to customers needs				
	Improve the delivery of mobile services around the district				
	Explore with other public services and the voluntary sector, opportunities to provide services in a way that meets customer's needs				

Objective	Action	Measure	Target	By whom	When
Provision of service to customers is right first time	Increase the prominence of St Neots customer service Centre by exploring opportunities to establish a "high street" or other prominent town centre location				
	Improve the consistency and quality of face to face service provision				
	Reduce the amount of avoidable customer contact by 'getting it right first time'				
	Ensure the revised complaints process is used to incorporate, and encourage, all forms of suggestions and feedback				
	To set and publicise the standards of service customers can expect				