



Customer Service Strategy

Introduction

I am pleased to introduce the Customer Service Strategy for Huntingdonshire District Council (HDC). It sets how we will deliver against the Council's Strategic Priority of ensuring we are a customer-focused and service-led Council.

The strategy sets out what we are working towards, the principles that underpin our work and some of the initiatives and projects we are delivering to make the strategy a reality. The document also contains the measurements we will use to prove we have delivered what we promise.

I recognise what our customers want from us is changing. At the same time the public sector continues to face challenges. These factors combine to allow us to be bold and innovative when we think about delivering customer service and this strategy presents some key ideas to the Council. The use of techniques to make the Council more efficient, working with other organisations for the benefit of customers and making sure we invest in our staff are strong elements of the strategy. We also know that increasing use of the Council's website allows customers to serve themselves whenever and wherever is convenient to them – as well as allowing us to focus on customers who really need to call or come to see us. We also recognise that value for money is crucial and the strategy contains a number of elements that show how we will continue to deliver services but also achieve the Council's financial plans.

This is a strategy for all parts of the Council. I am sure you will join with me in ensuring that Huntingdonshire District Council delivers this strategy. It is a challenging future, full of opportunities, and I think we can move towards it with real confidence.



Councillor Darren Tysoe – Executive Councillor for Customer Services

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How this document works

The Customer Service Strategy helps all services to contribute towards achieving one of the Strategic Priorities in the Council's Corporate Plan - to 'ensure we are a customer focussed and service-led Council'. It will also help all support the two objectives that underpin this – 'to become more business-like and efficient in the way we deliver services' and, 'to ensure customer engagement drives service priorities and improvement'.

We have adopted a set of six principles and defined what they mean to us. We have also provided examples of the type of key initiatives and projects the Council will deliver to make this strategy become a reality.

We have also included some good practice examples from all services across the Council, these are intended to help us all see what can be achieved and trigger our own ideas so that we can all help contribute to the success of this strategy.

Finally, we have agreed three outcomes and set ourselves a number of targets that will enable us to measure how successful we are.

Strategic Priority: Ensure we are a customer focussed and service led Council

Objectives

Ensure customer engagement drives service priorities and improvement

Become more business-like and efficient in the way we deliver services

Principles

Listen to customers

Find out what customers want and design services that enable them to help themselves

Get it right first time

Remove waste and make sure every contact with customers has value
Bring the response as close as possible to the customer

Provide value for money service

Know the cost of providing good customer service
Increased self-service, focus on customers who need our help and use technology to do things better

Act and behave in the right way

Work in the best interest of customers
Treat customers with dignity and respect

Make it matter to staff

Act as 'One Council'
Retain, recruit and train the best people

Work with partners for the benefit of customers

If working together gives a better outcome, we do it

Corporate Initiatives and Projects

Improve & relaunch the Customer Feedback process
Update our service standards
Report on our performance
Survey customers to assess how well we are doing

Improve the way we work using trained Officers from across the Council - we call this LEAN

Deliver a mobile friendly website focussed on customer need
Use the Zero Based Budgeting exercise to balance cost and service delivery

Deliver on the Code of Conduct and our 7 Core Values

Customer Service features in all Service Plans
Deliver the Organisational Workforce Development plan
Communication – Key Issues, Team Meetings, news stories etc

Shared services with our strategic partners and others
Develop multi-agency customer service at Pathfinder House

Outcomes

Customers are satisfied with the services we have provided to them

Services we provide are value for money

Staff are motivated to do their job, feel valued at work and deliver their best for customers

Principle: Listen to customers

Delivering good customer service involves understanding what customers want, and delivering services to meet that need. There are two main ways of gathering customer views; this can be through consultation exercises or through customer feedback (see Appendix 1). It can also come from simple day to day interactions with customers. The important thing is to involve and listen to customers - and act on what we hear.

Members represent their local community, they guide the development of local policies, set service standards and priorities, and they ensure the needs and interests of residents are fed back to the Council.

Our Customer Feedback process helps us listen to customers and allows them to inform service provision. It helps to improve customer satisfaction by allowing us to find out when we are getting things right and when we need to fix problems and prevent them from reoccurring. Many customer satisfaction surveys are carried out across the Council and they will continue to be used to ensure that services are tailored to the needs of customers. The Council produces and publishes a quarterly performance report; this key document contains a number of measures of customer satisfaction and our performance against them.

Working with Young People

Feedback from sixth formers at a local school indicated that young people wanted to try non-traditional sports; evidence indicated that water sports, specifically canoeing was a popular request.

As part of the DASH project, Sport & Active Lifestyles Team (SALT) was successful in obtaining funding from Sport England to purchase eight inflatable kayaks, paddles and helmets. Working with Canoe England, sessions, led by SALT, were introduced for local sixth form students

Health Walks

The Huntingdonshire Health Walks scheme is part of the national initiative "Walking for Health" and is delivered by the SALT team and supported by Cambridgeshire County Council's Public Health Team. The scheme currently runs in five towns and provides people with the opportunity to participate in organised health walks with trained leaders and volunteers.

Feedback from participants indicated that new Health Walk routes were required. As a result nine new walks were introduced during 2014/15.

Refuse & Recycling

This issue causing the most dissatisfaction with the Waste Service is when garden waste bins are rejected for being contaminated with other waste. This led to high volumes of calls from customers to the Call Centre to find out why. In response the current garden waste contamination policy has been fundamentally reviewed and involves the following changes:

- Crews taking a photograph of contaminated waste in a bin to be able to evidence to the customer the reason for rejection
- If it is clear that small items have been dropped into the bin overnight then the crews will now remove such items and tie them to the emptied bin in a small recycling sack.
- Other small items that are not recyclable and that are not easy to remove will be left in the bin but the bin will be emptied.

So far, the new approach has significantly reduced the volume of calls to the Call Centre and reduced the number of complaints from customers.

Principle: Get it right first time

Getting it right first time means resolving enquiries when we engage with a customer. It involves reducing customer contact that could have been avoided – for example when someone calls us because we sent them a poorly worded letter. To achieve this we need to resolve problems at the first point of contact, identify and remove wasteful processes and use customer feedback to improve customer experience. Sometimes a potential outcome could be that more telephone enquiries are dealt with by the Call Centre on behalf of back office departments ensuring customers experience a more consistent service

Officers from across the Council are working on this, and we use a technique called LEAN to remove waste and focus on actions which add value.

Elections

Electoral registration forms are sent out annually to 75,000 households in the district. All households are required by law to provide a response and have the ability to complete the form online, by text, or by phone. Although not obligatory, most local authorities offer an online registration service as part of the annual canvass in preparing the new register of electors to be published on 1st December each year. The Council offers both an online and text option.

So far 30% of registration forms have been completed online, resulting in less postage costs, less time spent by Document Centre opening and sorting returned postal forms and the Elections team spends less time inputting data and scanning returned forms.

Some people still want to register by returning a paper form and still want to talk to someone on the phone – generally because they do not have easy access to the Internet; telephone queries tend to focus on helping those people for which a query with their application has arisen. The Call Centre identified these calls as quite high volume and worked with the Elections Team to identify what they could do to avoid passing calls onto them. Working together, the teams created a 'mind map' of potential customer queries. With support and training along with access to the right system, Call Centre advisers would be able to resolve many customer issues themselves.

During 2015 Call Centre advisers felt confident to support customers and cut down on the calls they were passing onto the Elections Team and saving the number of call backs to customers. The new approach resulted in a higher number of queries being resolved during the customer's first point of contact with the Council.

Call Centre

Whenever a customer contacts the Council with a Notification of Change request (e.g. moving into/out of a property) advisors can now update Council Tax details, organise delivery of refuse/recycling bins, provide bin collection dates and advise on electoral registration.

Advisors have been proactive in identifying the key issues that customers need to be aware of and now, instead of making a number of calls many of these issues can be dealt with in one call reducing avoidable contact and increasing the number of first time resolutions.

Planning Enquiries

Teams within the Call Centre and Planning Services have worked together to improve the service offered to customers. Call Centre advisors highlighted that they did not have enough knowledge or experience to resolve some of the Planning enquiries. As a result Development Management First Contact Officers (i.e. Planning Duty Officers) are now available to take these calls.

This has resulted in an increase in the number of enquiries being resolved at the first point of contact with the Council.

Principle: Provide value for money service

This means continuing to generate money saving ideas and encouraging everyone to come forward with suggestions to improve how we work. The Council's new website focuses on customers completing tasks online rather than on the phone or face to face and allows 24/7 access to services; it also provides a starting point for Services to develop more on-line services for customers.

Every year each service will be challenged to look at the service it provides, and ensure it offers value for money – this is Zero Based Budgeting, and this step is a key element of making sure value for money is part of our long term plan for service delivery.

Council website

Development of the Council's website involved looking at the website from a customer's perspective and a rethink of the customer experience. It found that content was difficult to understand, the website was not mobile friendly and the content structure was inappropriate for customers.

Research found that 75% of all customer transactions are now carried out online, the top 100 pages served 85% of customers and 60%+ of visits are now from smartphones and tablets.

The project aimed to bring value and benefits to customers whilst also creating additional value for the Council e.g. support the Council "doing more with less".

A new website has been produced that is fit for purpose and designed for mobiles and tablets.

One Leisure

One Leisure introduced a mobile booking app enabling users to book activities and get accurate information on class timetables and availability on their phone or tablet.

This has improved customer contact as the information is more accurate and the booking process is quicker. The number of calls to One Leisure Direct has reduced – although telephone booking is still available for those that need it.

The Council no longer prints off swimming or fitness class timetables reducing design and print costs.

Housing Benefits

Customers who claim Housing Benefit now submit over 96% of new applications online. This new way of working offers 24/7 access to the service and has also saved the Council money. It allows Officers in Housing Benefits to spend time helping those who need the most help in getting the benefits they are entitled to.

Principle: Act and behave in the right way

Customers must be treated with dignity and respect and we should always act in their best interests. This means being polite and thoughtful, keeping customers informed and ensuring their privacy is respected. We need to be patient and tolerant when we interact with customers, and if we have to provide an answer a customer doesn't want to hear, then we do it in the right way.

The Council's Code of Conduct and 7 Core Values have been prepared to help us shape our working environment and guide, explain and support our understanding of the standards and behaviours we are required to exhibit and what we can expect from others.

Members communicate with local residents and employees on a wide range of issues and they too have a role in representing the Council – they are a very visible 'shop window' for the Council.

Group Exercise Classes

Group Exercise Classes offers a wide range of sport and health related activities to promote a healthy population within the district. One of these is the Right Start group exercise class, which is aimed at older people requiring additional support to exercise and prefer a class setting rather than a gym environment.

Many participants have never exercised before or are returning to exercise after a medical condition. A key skill for the instructor is to alleviate any nervousness or confidence issues that participants may have.

Feedback from two customers illustrate that although we know that all customers place a high importance on being treated with dignity and respect; but when supporting people with a health or medical condition this is even more important.

"The instructor has helped me to achieve my goals; there is a strong sense of comradeship amongst the group, helped in many ways by the instructor's constant encouragement for members to work at their own level but also to try new exercises".

"I have nothing but praise for the instructor; she is encouraging but does not make you do anything you really are not happy with".

Parks & Open Space

Amphill Lifelong Learning, a charity working with adults with learning disabilities began visiting Paxton Pits Nature Reserve regularly over four years ago. Initially their visits were self-guided, without any input from the HDC Rangers. They would eat their lunches in their minibus, assuming that they wouldn't be able to eat their own food in the Visitors' Centre café. The Senior Ranger noticed this happening and invited them into the Visitors' Centre and tried to make them feel very welcome.

The Ranger then began to work with the group to design some structured, self-led educational activities for their weekly visits so that they could get more from the sessions. The teachers are now leading the sessions with minimal or no input from Rangers.

Recently the teachers from Amphill and the Senior Ranger organised an Inclusivity Day at Paxton Pits Nature Reserve specifically for organisations working with children and adults with special needs. The aim was to encourage other groups to visit the reserve and lead educational and fun activities in the same way that Amphill Lifelong Learning do. Working in partnership, HDC and the charity are now developing resources for all groups to use and hope that this will result in more special needs groups benefiting from using the Reserve.

Principle: Make it matter to staff

Our employees ensure we are a customer-focussed Council by providing customers with good service and by representing the Council in all our interactions with customers. We know engaged and motivated employees are more likely to provide good customer service so we are committed to recruiting, retaining and training the best employees. The Employee Opinion Survey will continue to be used to gain a picture of strengths and weaknesses to ensure the Council is a great place to work.

Our Workforce Development Strategy reinforces the need for the Council to have a capable, confident and committed workforce and helps to ensure we have a skilled and motivated team. Supplying training and reinforcing this through Personal Development Plans will ensure we maintain the skills we need.

Every service will have actions in their annual Service Plan to make the link between this strategy and the everyday work we do. We all serve customers, and we should all be clear how we contribute.

Equality Training

Following a training review a gap was identified in attendance on equality & diversity awareness sessions from employees within Operations.

The timing and length of existing training options were not convenient for employees working set shift patterns. There were up to 130 employees working within this area of the Council including refuse & recycling and grounds maintenance; providing one of the most high profile services to customers.

A one hour bite size equality & diversity training session was developed and delivered over a number of weeks to enable all employees the opportunity to understand some basic principles around equality and diversity and to raise awareness of their own actions and behaviours in the workplace.

Principle: Work with partners for the benefit of customers

Partnership working is an increasingly important way in which the Council can deliver more efficient and effective services to local residents.

Effective partnership working between organisations can lead to improved access to services, better communication between services, and an improved customer experience.

Put simply, if working with others delivers a better outcome for customers, then we do it.

Shared Services

HDC, South Cambridgeshire District Council and Cambridge City Council are now working in partnership to deliver Building Control, Legal Services and ICT Shared Services.

Shared Services is one of the ways the Council is aiming to reduce reliance on central government funding. The Council also recognises that moving forward it is likely to be a smaller and more streamlined organisation; it also needs to find significant savings.

This new model of working with partners presents a great opportunity for all three councils to save money and build resilience across their current services, which often contain highly specialised roles. It also provides the opportunity to improve services to customers, by ensuring a focus on seamless service delivery.

Anti-Social Behaviour

In April 2015, in response to increasing complaints from residents to both Huntingdonshire District Council and Cambridgeshire Constabulary, the Council introduced controls to minimise the impact of street drinking within Huntingdon Town Centre. The Public Space Protection Order, the first of its kind within Cambridgeshire, was introduced by the Council and the Police working together for the benefit of our residents and visitors. Initial feedback from local residents was very positive, and included comments like '... I wanted to thank you for the work you have done over the last few months in establishing and enforcing the Protection order. The impact on the neighbourhood has been dramatic..... and the atmosphere is much better.'

Pathfinder House (PFH)

The Council's commitment to work with a variety of public and voluntary partners is an opportunity to improve customer experience by extending the range of services on offer in one location. Our partners can complement the housing and benefit advice already on offer at PFH, specifically for vulnerable customers or those facing financial difficulties.

Collaborating with others in this way can reduce costs by transforming the way services are delivered. As the Council moves towards more digital interaction or self-service with customers the Council is forecasting that it will use the customer service centre space less over the coming years. It makes sense to work with other organisations to use this space and generate income for the Council.

The Council is currently working with the Citizens Advice Bureau, Department for Work & Pensions (Jobcentre Plus) and Rainbow Saver Anglia Credit Union and over the next 12-18 months these organisations should have dedicated space at the PFH customer service centre.

Measuring Success

This section sets out how the Council will measure achievement of the outcomes this strategy is expected to deliver. For each outcome, a set of measures are documented, along with the targets we are setting and details of when we'll be measuring performance.

Outcome: Customers are satisfied with the services we provide to them			
Measure	Target	Frequency	Comments
Call Centre telephone satisfaction rates	95%	Twice yearly	Existing measure/target
Customer service centre satisfaction rates	95%	Twice yearly	Existing measure/target
Waste Collection - % of residents satisfied with the overall service	TBA	Annual November	New measure
One Leisure – Net Promoter Score based on likelihood of recommending service	Continual improvement	Monthly	Existing - cross-section of 1,000 members
Website satisfaction	75%	Monthly	Existing measure/target
Housing Benefits - % of customers satisfied with the service provided	90%	Annual September	New measure
Total number of complaints received	TBA	Quarterly	New measure
% of complaints resolved at Stage one	TBA	Quarterly	New measure
% of complaints resolved at Stage two	TBA	Quarterly	New measure
Number of enquiries to Local Government Ombudsman	TBA	Annual	New measure

Outcome: Services we provide are value for money			
Measure	Target	Frequency	Comments
% of Services that are subject to a Zero Based Budget review	100%	Annual	The final results of reviews are agreed by Council in February each year.
Achievement of the Council's medium term financial strategy	100%	Annual	This is audited by an external organisation each year
Change in Band D Council Tax	0%	Annual	The Council is aiming to continue to freeze its Council Tax charge
Lean - number of business process reviews	TBA	Quarterly	New measure of ongoing reviews

Outcome: Staff are motivated to do their job, feel valued at work and deliver their best for customers			
Measure	Target	Frequency	Comments
I feel valued for the work I do	TBA	Annual	2015: 35% agree
I feel motivated at work	TBA	Annual	2015: 42% agree
I am proud when I tell others I am part of the Council	TBA	Annual	2015: 37% agree
I have the skills I need to do my job effectively	TBA	Annual	2015: 88% agree
I have the tools I need to do my job effectively	TBA	Annual	2015: 74% agree

Tell Us What You Think

We want to provide you with a good service, but you might want to suggest improvements, or you might want to compliment us on getting it right. Sometimes things do go wrong and you may want to complain or just tell us about your concerns.

Compliments

A compliment can be about a service, a team or a member of staff. We would like to hear about it if you have received excellent customer service for example, staff have been professional, clear and helpful explanations have been provided, or if you have been treated with friendliness and respect.

"Your staff member was very efficient and helpful and explained everything thoroughly to us. Thank you."

"I appreciate the communication skills of your staff. They explained everything clearly & easily. Thank you."

Compliments will be shared as good practice and in the training of new staff.

You can provide feedback online or telephone us 01480 388388 or talk to any of our staff.

Complaints

We want to hear if you have had a poor service; did not get a service at all; or you have been treated unfairly or unprofessionally. We encourage any customer who has a concern to first speak to a member of staff in the relevant service area. If the problem can be solved on the spot then there is no need for the issue to go through the formal complaints process. However if the complaint cannot be dealt with immediately, or you would like a formal response, you can request this via our website: www.huntingdonshire.gov.uk, by email: complaints@huntingdonshire.gov.uk, by phone: 01480 388388, or in person at one of our Customer Service Centres.

Complaints will be used to help us improve our services

The outcome from a Planning complaint will be used as part of a training session for planning officers to better understand the council's duties with respect to protected species.

The outcome from a waste collection complaint has resulted in greater consideration now being given to the particular circumstances for customer requests to move from sack to bin collections and will allow a more flexible interpretation of the Council's policy.

There are some situations that we wouldn't take through the complaints process, for example a single incident of a service failure such as one missed bin collection as we should be given the opportunity to put this right; or where there is a disagreement with the result of a process that has its own appeal process such as planning or benefit decisions and parking fines; or the conduct of a Councillor, these will be dealt with by the Monitoring Officer; and finally, some complaints are expressions of dissatisfaction with the Council or Government policy as opposed to the Council's failure to live up to service standards. The Council will do its best to explain the policy and the reasons for it.

We aim to:

- acknowledge your complaint within 5 working days;
- fully investigate and respond within 20 working days. If we are unable to meet this timescale we will write to you again to tell you what action we are taking and when you can expect a response.

Your complaint will be dealt with in confidence and will only be discussed with those who need to know. We will contact you by email or letter.

If however you are still unhappy, the complaint will be passed onto the next stage where it will be investigated by a senior officer or independent officer.

If you are still not satisfied, you have the right to take your complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman. The Ombudsman will not usually investigate a complaint until the Council has had an opportunity to investigate and answer it first.

We will monitor trends and performance in our handling of complaints and report to our Standards Committee on an annual basis.

