

5 April 2017		ITEM: 12 (Decision 01104417)
Cabinet		
Customer Services Strategy		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Key	
Report of: Councillor Deborah Huelin, Cabinet Member for Performance & Central Services		
Accountable Head of Service: Karen Wheeler, Director of Strategy, Communications & Customer Services		
Accountable Director: Karen Wheeler, Director of Strategy, Communications & Customer Services		
This report is public		

Executive Summary

Customer expectations are rising, the local population is growing and changing, and in response, we are increasingly required to strengthen our customer focus and build integrated service delivery models.

The council's approach must be based on meeting customer needs more efficiently and effectively. This means keeping their needs at the heart of what we do to provide the right customer journey, enabling self-service wherever possible.

The Customer Services Strategy sets out where the council wants to be and how it will get there. It is intended to provide a strategic overview that will lead the direction of travel through service plans and other council documents and procedures.

The strategy is part of a wider programme of projects and links closely to the Digital and People Strategies. It creates a comprehensive plan of how we will improve service to our customers across all access channels.

To succeed it will be necessary to create a culture, supported by the right operational procedures and infrastructure that will enable us to get it right first time. A review of service communication with residents will take place. The council will publish service standards and targets in a Charter so that residents know what to expect. If the council does not get it right, then an apology and quick and appropriate resolution will be found wherever possible.

Throughout the strategy, there is a strong emphasis on digital and self-service for customers that are able to utilise this method but recognition that support must still be available for the customers that cannot.

1. Recommendation(s)

1.1 That Cabinet approve the Customer Services Strategy document at Appendix 1.

1.2 That Cabinet approve the proposals as demonstrated in the Pen Portrait examples (Appendix 2) for dealing with customer enquiries

2. Introduction and Background

2.1 The Customer Services Department (contact centre, reception, face-to-face, cashiers, careline and out of hours) returned to the council from Serco in December 2015. This provided a new opportunity to consider the strategic direction for the service itself as well as the council's overall approach to customer services. The Customer Services Strategy, set out at Appendix 1, aims to address the following challenges:

- Inconsistent customer service standards across services
- Clarity and communication of what customers can expect including self-service options
- Customers mainly using more expensive channels such as face to face even for simple transactions available online
- Self-service not available for some high volume transactions
- Better understanding and use of digital methods
- Reduce avoidable contacts and promote proactive contact with residents
- Need to refresh contact centre telephony and implement other technology/ digital solutions i.e. web chat
- No single view of the customer for all contact channels i.e. web, email, face to face, telephone
- Opportunities for cross-council working, further service calls through the contact centre to deliver efficiencies and explore as a potential growth area and for income generation.

2.2 Approximately 38,000 telephone calls are handled in the contact centre each month with an additional 8,000 face-to-face visits to the civic offices.

Residents are mainly contacting the council regarding:

- Housing benefits
- Council Tax
- Rents
- Environmental issues e.g. flytipping

- Waste e.g. missed bins

In addition, face-to-face enquiries are also commonly about parking permits and bus passes.

- 2.3 Many, although not all, of these services, or elements of them, are available online. My Account was introduced in October 2013 providing access to services and transactions online. This led to a reduction of 11% for calls between April 2014 and March 2016. In December 2015, there were 27,000 My Account users, which has now risen to 50,000 – over 70% of households. The latest services to become available are bulky waste collections, registrar's services and Council Tax ebilling.
- 2.4 At present each time a customer enquiry is handled within Customer Services the resource cost alone is approximately £5 for face-to-face, £1.50 per telephone call and 15p online. The full benchmarked industry average costs per contact are £8.62 per face-to-face visit, £2.83 per call and 15p online. This means that the 38,000 calls per month cost the council approximately £57,000 and supporting 8,000 face-to-face visitors, approximately £40,000.
- 2.5 Thurrock residents, in the main, have the skills to access services online and utilise our existing self-service options. The recent Residents Survey shows that over 90% of residents have access to the internet at home or via a mobile device. Although currently preferring to contact the council by phone, 61% would be willing to access services online in future.
- 2.6 The council already encourages and supports customers to use the internet for straightforward transactions and housing benefits and housing applications are 100% online. This does not mean that by improving the digital access options providing services through traditional methods such as telephone or face-to-face will stop, but that these channels will be reduced and freed up for those that need to use them – often residents with complex and sensitive needs. Vulnerable residents who need support will be assisted in person or over the phone to go online or directly access services if required. The support available also includes through the Community Hubs in the borough.
- 2.7 The aim is to minimise the need for our customers to contact the council but if they do, provide them with an excellent self-service experience that is quick and convenient and ensure other available contact channels are publicised.
- 2.8 It is recognised that the reception and face-to-face areas of the Civic Offices are in need of modernisation. A project to improve the ground floor, including this area, is ongoing with a capital budget allocated to implementation once agreed.

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

- 3.1 The vision for customer services in the strategy is set out below.

The council will:

- Meet your needs first time whichever way we serve you
- Deliver what we say we will and keep you informed of actions being taken
- Enable you to self-serve, ensuring we provide high quality specialist and targeted support where self-service is not possible or appropriate

3.2 Delivering the vision and adhering to the principles within this strategy will help transform customer experiences. Getting it right first time will be achieved by improving service delivery through better systems, processes and communication. A review of service communication with residents will take place. The council will publish service standards and targets in a Charter so that residents know what to expect. If the council does not get it right, then an apology and quick and appropriate resolution will be found wherever possible. Residents will have greater access to services, will receive regular updates on service areas that are of interest to them and proactive contact to avoid them having to contact the council.

3.3 The council's workforce will have the right skills for the future and the ability to guide our customers to the right services for them. The council will continue to work closely with communities to increase access and support to our services and will have strong partnerships in place that allow local ambassadors to support local people.

3.4 The key recommendations and actions in the strategy are summarised below:

1. Review of customer contact within services including methods and quality of communication – work with all areas to identify customer service issues, training requirements and review quality of communication i.e. letters and ensure learning plans and actions are in place for complaint areas with follow up on progress and actions – from **April 2017** and ongoing - linked to service reviews.

2. Develop a customer services charter by reviewing existing service standards and targets, ensuring that customers are aware of the process and timeframes they can expect as well as the council's commitment to get it right first time and if not, to say sorry and resolve the issue quickly - **July 2017**

3. Channel migration – digital only services – approve recommended services as digital only from **April 2017**, removing other channels to maximise the use of resources for customers that really need support or where there is no online solution. This will allow appropriate support for vulnerable residents to ensure they are not excluded and assisted self-service via telephone or face-to-face where needed. Residents will be encouraged and supported wherever possible to go online. See **Appendix 2** – pen portraits giving examples of how enquiries would be handled for different customers.

4. Channel migration - face to face – remove specific face-to-face service desks to allow for an increase in self-service facilities and appointment service only for vulnerable service users - phased in from **May 2017** to January 2018. Provide a self-service scanning solution for documentation, a meet and greet floorwalker and business visitor self- service check-in solution instead of a reception desk and all customer services advisors multi-skilled. This will enable flexibility of resource and appointments for vulnerable customers.

5. Technology - implement a new contact centre telephony solution, along with new customer satisfaction, call recording and scheduling. Ensure new solution will link effectively for potential technology enhancements i.e. advanced voice recognition (IVR) capability and potential omni- channel (single view of the customer) technology solutions, to be explored in 2017/18.

6. Organisational design – review the best fit for customer interaction across all departments, completing a review of customer demand and call volumes directed to specific service areas. Determine the best fit within the organisation as part of all service reviews from 2017 through to 2019. This is an opportunity to review existing call volumes across all services and identify transactions not currently digital that would be better placed within the contact centre initially.

7. First time resolution and avoidable contact - reduce the need for customers to contact the council by reducing bureaucracy, learning from mistakes and complaints, continuing to automate processes, process reengineering and working with partners to provide joined up services and manage demand e.g. failure demand, avoidable demand, value demand. Link to Customer and Demand Management Board and service reviews from 2017 to 2019.

8. Growth - there is an opportunity to explore joining forces with other local authorities for customer services delivery. This should be pursued in 2018/19 as a potential growth area with a view to Thurrock's customer services department providing services on behalf of other local authorities and generating income.

9. People and Culture - embed the vision and principles in customer service delivery, and a set of service standards, throughout the organisation from 2017. A holistic approach to customer services with customer care training available to all staff via the classroom or e-learning **by December 2017**. This should include the vision and principles with clear standards of performance that are visible and transparent to customers through the customer charter. The aim is to create a culture that supports the delivery of high quality customer services. Robust leadership and governance arrangements will be in place to drive the strategy from the top and provide a shared vision that everyone can work towards. There will be a focus on digital and innovation to empower our employees using the right tools and technology. The change management programme will support this along with a refresh of our current behaviour frameworks. Customer services should be part of staff objectives

and included in all job descriptions and service plans - links to People and Digital Strategies.

10. Social media - utilise information received via existing social media to its full potential to proactively reduce contact i.e. if made aware of a general issue or trend via social media, respond to proactively reduce the need for other customers to contact the council – ongoing from 2017.

11. Community Options – ongoing support for the development of community hubs and consider additional community access points alongside service reviews so that solutions can be explored collectively to manage demand and reshape services – links to Customer and Demand Management Board, Community Hub Board, Property Board and Service reviews.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1 That Cabinet approve the Customer Services Strategy at Appendix 1 and proposals for customer service delivery as set out in Appendix 2 pen portraits.
- 4.2 Budget savings of £120k in 2017/18 and £100k in 2018/19 are proposed as part of the Council Spending Review and budget setting process against a total budget of £1.2m. The delivery of these savings is dependent on the strategy being agreed by Cabinet in April 2017 in order to implement changes to the resources within Customer Services by the end of May 2017.
- 4.3 Further savings, both within customer services and other back office areas across the council, could be realised in future years.

5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

- 5.1 Consultation, and development of the strategy, has taken place through the cross-council Customer and Demand Management Board, Digital Board and other internal customers including ICT and Directors Board. Feedback has been obtained via Managers and Staff Conferences and Resident Survey feedback has been incorporated.
- 5.2 The draft strategy was presented to Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee in November 2016. The final strategy is significantly shorter than that presented to the committee but the overall approach and proposals remain the same. A summary of the feedback is set out below and has been considered in preparing the final version of the strategy:
 - Web-chat would be beneficial to assist customers online
 - Importance of links with community hubs and promotion of services and support available there
 - Importance of service areas following up on actions and service requests logged online
 - Ensure all customer needs are met including vulnerable residents

- Ensure customers are aware of timescales for completion of service requests – this will be addressed specifically in the Customer Charter
- Ensuring consistency across all departments not just the Customer Services Department

6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

6.1 Delivering the vision and adhering to the principles within this strategy will help transform customer experiences. Customers will have improved access to services; receive regular updates on service areas that are of interest to them and proactive contact to avoid them having to contact the council at all. The workforce will have the right skills and ability to guide customers to the right services for them. The council will continue to work closely with communities to increase access and support, and have strong partnerships in place that allow local ambassadors to support local people.

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Carl Tomlinson**
Finance Manager

Budget savings of £120k in 2017/18 and £100k in 2018/19 are proposed as part of the Council Spending Review and budget setting process. The delivery of these savings is dependent on the strategy being agreed by Cabinet in April 2017 to enable implementation May 2017.

Capital investment may be required in technological solutions to address some of the proposals set out in the strategy. Many of the proposals within the strategy already form part of the capital programme and digital board work programme.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **David Lawson**
Monitoring officer

There are no legal implications.

7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Natalie Warren**
Community Development and Equalities Manager

An equality impact assessment has been undertaken. Whilst digital channels for accessing services and transacting with the council will be a primary focus going forward, assisted self-service, support at community hubs and existing channels such as face-to-face and telephone via the contact centre will remain, albeit reduced, for those most in need and unable to go online.

7.4 **Other implications** (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder)

- None

8. **Background papers used in preparing the report** (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

- None

9. **Appendices to the report**

- Appendix 1- Customer Services Strategy
- Appendix 2 - Pen portraits for customer journey

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