



Policy and Resources Committee – 7 November 2011

Customer Service Strategy

Purpose of report

This report seeks Member approval for a new Customer Service Strategy

Appendix 1 – Customer Service Strategy

1.0 Background

1.1 The Council's new Corporate Plan includes the following outcomes:

- Good Value for Money
- High Quality Service Delivery - Customer-Focused Services
- Customer and Community Insight

1.2 The draft Customer Service Strategy, attached at Appendix 1, sets out our proposed approach to providing excellent customer service while being cost-effective at a time of significant financial constraint.

2.0 Equality and Diversity Implications

2.1 There are no equality and diversity implications arising from the proposals. A key aim of the strategy is to recognise the differing needs of our customers and to provide services in the way that best meets those needs.

3.0 Legal Implications

3.1 There are no legal implications arising from the proposals.

4.0 Risk Management

4.1 The risk inherent in the strategy is that the ideal balance between managing costs and delivering services is not achieved, so that service levels cannot be maintained or improved as costs are driven down.

5.0 Financial Implications

5.1 There are no immediate financial implications of the strategy. However, as projects are undertaken a need may be identified to invest to save, for example to introduce new technology to reduce operating costs. Any such potential investments would be the subject of a separate report to this committee at the appropriate time.

6.0 Corporate Outcomes

6.1 The Corporate outcomes that the strategy will contribute to achieving are set out in section 1.1 above.

7.0 Recommendation

7.1 The Committee is recommended to approve the Customer Service Strategy

(Reason – To recognise and meet differing customer needs while providing good value for money)

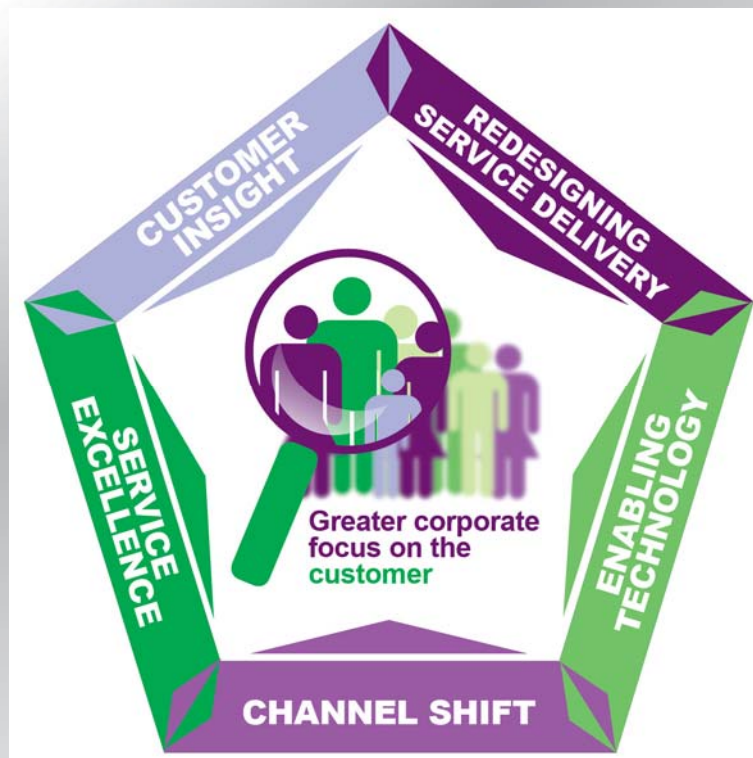
Legal	Power: Local Government Act 1972, Section 111				
	Other considerations:				
Background Papers: None					
Person Originating Report: Lisa Hyde, Head of Customer & Community Services					
Date: 21.10.11					
CFO		MO		CX	

(Committee Report Normal Rev. 22)



East
Northamptonshire
Council

Corporate Customer Service Strategy Draft V0.4



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V0.1	23/08/10	1 st draft to CMT for comments
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V0.4	20/10/11	4 th draft to CMT for final review then to P&R

Consultees

Internal	External
CMT	
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Distribution List

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Links to other documents

Document	Link
Corporate Plan	
Knowledge Skills & Behaviours (KSB)	
Continuous Service Improvement (CSI)	

Additional Comments to note

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1.0 Foreword

Extract from East Northamptonshire Council Corporate Plan 2011 -2015

We remain ambitious and will play a full part in ensuring that the District thrives and prospers. This Corporate Plan includes a small number of key priorities which we will be focusing on over the next four years, including:

Customer-focused services – despite the economic downturn, the District is still relatively affluent. Many of our residents and businesses routinely use the internet and we will upgrade our website significantly to provide better quality information and to enable far more transactions to be carried out online. We will also work even more closely with our partners, particularly the County Council, to meet the needs of the most vulnerable members of our community.

East Northamptonshire is a great place to live, work and visit. This Council will continue to play its part in making it even better.

David Oliver
Chief Executive

Steven North
Leader

2.0 Scope

2.1 Many projects and activities have already been, and are being, undertaken across the council that have an impact on improving customer service, for example Continuous Service Improvement (CSI), website development, and using Experian's MOSAIC customer segmentation data to redesign service delivery.

2.2 This **Corporate Customer Service Strategy (CCSS)** brings those strands together and clearly defines how we intend to provide responsive, high quality and accessible services whilst driving down costs and improving efficiencies.

2.3 As with all strategies it covers,

Where we are now? - What do we know about our customers, and how well do our current services and culture meet their needs?

Where do we want to be? – A picture of how we want to deliver services in the future, use of technology, resources to be deployed and the future outcomes we expect to achieve.

How we will get there? – A range of actions and projects that will contribute to this vision and deliver the changes that are required.

2.4 The strategy will demonstrate improved outcomes for our:

Customers – they will receive responsive, accessible, high quality services, feel listened to and understood.

Staff – they will understand what they need to do, feel empowered and responsible, and be complimented and praised.

Councillors – they will receive fewer complaints and more compliments, and will see increased efficiency and reduced costs.

3.0 Outcomes

The outcomes that this strategy will contribute towards are:

- Financial stability
- Customer focused services
- Committed staff
- Customer and community insight
- Appropriate behaviours

4 Where are we now?

4.1 Since 2005 the Council, through the development of the Customer Services Contact Centre and general improvements to service delivery, has been committed to:

- **Improved access to services** – making it quick, simple and straightforward
- **Service excellence** – designing and delivering high quality services which focus on customer and user needs
- **Focusing on the customer** – taking responsibility for resolving enquiries and problems quickly and efficiently.

4.2 Improved access to services

4.2.1 Our recent focus has been on improving the website. We launched our new website in April 2010, since when we have spent a significant amount of time and effort improving the quality and simplicity of the content. Customers can now access a significant amount of useful and well-presented information via the web, but the facility to carry out self-service transactions is limited.

4.3 Service excellence

4.3.1 At a time when finances are very limited and there has been no scope to increase resources, we have developed our understanding of customer needs and preferences with a view to focusing those limited resources more effectively. We have done so by obtaining MOSAIC customer segmentation data, which identifies different customer groups, their locations and their preferred means (face-to-face, phone or electronic) of accessing services. This has enabled us to map the District and analyse our service users accordingly, although we have yet to use this information extensively either in our service planning or in our decision-making.

4.4 Focusing on the customer

4.4.1 District Council functions are mostly regulatory, and the culture of the Council historically has reflected this, with an emphasis on using technical expertise to apply and / or enforce legislation. We have done much recently to complement those necessary skills and behaviours. In particular, we have:

- Developed and implemented our customer service standards, which are set out in Appendix 1. These are regularly measured and reported on by the Customer Services Team, although they need to be further embedded corporately across the organisation.
- Developed and adopted a framework of corporate knowledge, skills and behaviours (KSBs), an important element of which relates to customer service. This framework underpins each employee's annual Performance and Development Review (PDR) and their learning and development programme. It has also been incorporated into the recruitment and selection process to ensure we recruit people with the correct KSBs. The knowledge and skills tend to be job-specific. The more generic customer service behaviours are set out in Appendix 2.
- Joined the Institute of Customer Service (ICS) through the Northamptonshire Consortium. A number of staff in front-line roles have received customer service training as a result of this membership, and we have conducted an initial self-assessment of how customer –focused we are as an organisation. A summary of the results of this self-assessment is set out in Appendix 3.

4.6.2 We know from Experian data that over 50% of the East Northamptonshire population has a high or very high likelihood to self serve via the web, and that 32% have an average likelihood to self serve. This needs to be set in the context that some of our customers may be prevented from doing so by the lack of good broadband links in the rural areas.

5.0 Where do we want to be?

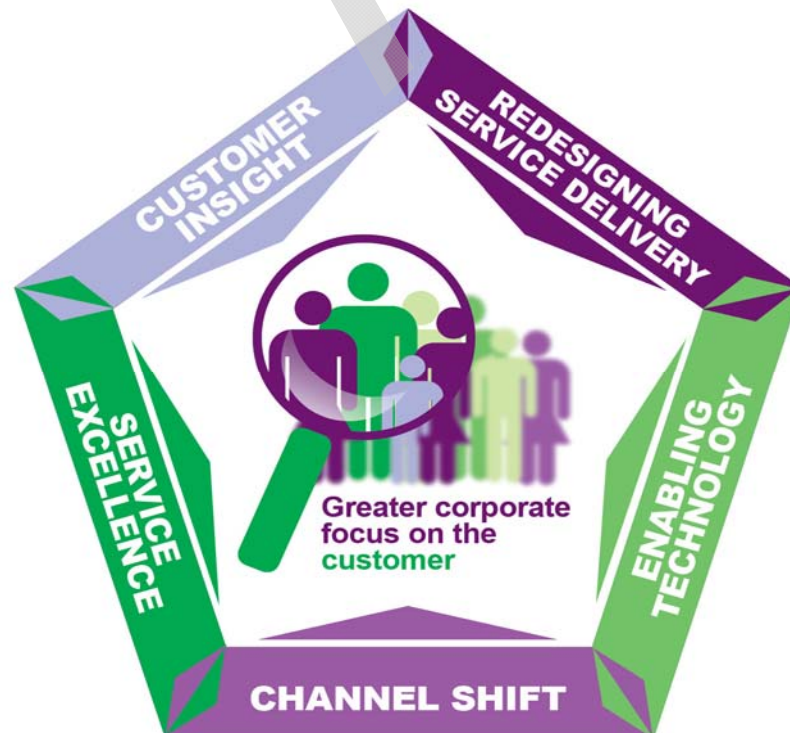
5.1 Our aim is to become an organisation that is recognised by its customers as providing excellent service, where:

- they can access the services they want or need the way they prefer;
- it is easy for them to do what they want, be that to obtain information, advice or a service, to make a payment or to report a problem;
- they feel like we have listened to them and taken account of what they have to say, even if conflicting views and interests mean that the decision we end up making isn't what they wanted;
- they don't have to chase us up, because we've either met our service standards or told them in advance if we won't be able to;
- when we've made a mistake, we admit it and learn from it; and
- we not only respond effectively to their requests but anticipate them where possible and meet their needs before they even ask.

6.0 How will we get there?

6.1 Our approach will be to:

- Develop and embed customer insight so that we have a thorough understanding of our customers' needs and preferences at all levels of the organisation
- Use that knowledge to redesign the way we deliver services, seeking efficiency savings in the process
- Identify, acquire and / or use the technology we need to make those changes
- Achieve 'channel shift' by making customers aware of new ways of accessing our services and encouraging them to use them
- Train and develop staff at all levels to see things from the customers' perspective, to understand their differing needs and preferences and to provide excellent service at all times



6.2 Customer Insight

- 6.2.1 Customer insight is a thorough understanding of our customers' needs and preferences. Knowing what services they need or want, when and where they want them and what channel they would prefer to use. This includes:
- Experian MOSAIC profiling – categorising all our customers both geographically and demographically and understanding their needs and preferences.
 - Service-specific information – many service areas hold information about their customers, who they are and how they access that service.
 - Partner information – many of our public sector partners have assessed their customers and hold similar information.
 - Equality Impact Assessments – how do our services and the decisions we make impact on the various specific groups within our communities, and is there a disproportionate impact on some groups or the more vulnerable members of our communities?
 - Understanding the reasons why different people do or don't want to change, and communicating appropriately with different groups to encourage them to change.
- 6.2.2 We know our customer base is continually changing and this change can sometimes be quite rapid. We will continue to build up that picture and become more sophisticated about how we shape future service delivery and how we use our knowledge of our customer base to influence and support the Council's decision making processes.

6.3 Redesigning Service Delivery

- 6.3.1 We need to ensure that the services that our customers use are simple and understandable. At a time of financial pressure, we also need to ensure that those services are provided as cost-effectively as possible. We will therefore:
- Identify those services / processes which are most commonly used.
 - Determine, based on customer insight information in relation to those services, how they should best be delivered in the future.
 - Identify situations where technical specialists are dealing with straightforward enquiries or transactions that could easily be handled electronically or by Customer Services staff.
 - Seek opportunities for reducing the unit cost of transactions by identifying those that are relatively expensive (such as payment by cheque) and assessing whether they can be delivered a different way (such as by electronic payment).
 - Work with partners to achieve efficiencies or economies of scale by delivering services jointly or sharing information more effectively.
- 6.3.2 We will aim to:
- Focus face-to-face service delivery on complicated situations where an extended dialogue is required between our staff and the customer;
 - Provide a telephone service designed to support customers in situations where limited help is required; and
 - Deliver the vast majority of simple services electronically, particularly through our website, especially where the service only involves providing information or enabling the customer to carry out simple transactions such as ordering a service or making a payment.

6.4 Enabling Technology

- 6.4.1 There are several respects in which enhancements to our existing systems and technology will be needed in order to provide services in different ways to meet changing customer needs and deliver efficiencies. These include:

- Better data capture, to ensure that the information we need about our customers is collected and recorded in an easily retrievable way to enable us to compare and analyse it.
- Integration of our ICT systems, where this is cost-effective, to avoid multiple data entry, thereby saving staff time and minimising the risk of recording errors.
- Better use of GIS to display information geographically, identify patterns of service use and demographic distribution, and plan service changes accordingly.
- Exchanging information electronically with partners, for example through the 'Tell Us Once' project with NCC through registrar records.
- Introducing Electronic Document Management (EDM), thereby reducing our reliance on paper records and enabling self service in areas such as Land Charges.
- Developing our website to make it simple for customers to self serve, making sure that they can easily find all the information they need in a form that they find easy to use.
- Using new technology and social media such as i-phone apps, Facebook and Twitter to engage with customers, for example to:
 - Send them updates on issues they have expressed an interest in
 - Enable them to alert us to 'street scene' issues such as graffiti, abandoned vehicles, fly tipping, litter or dog fouling
 - Provide discussion forums on emerging policy

6.5 Channel Shift

6.5.1 Channel shift means moving customers from one service delivery channel to another, both to reduce our costs and to provide customers with a better service. We will achieve this by:

- Ensuring (see sections 6.2 and 6.3 above) that we tailor our service delivery to the needs of our customers, taking into account the level of complexity of the various services we provide
- Making customers aware of which services are available via which channels
- Encouraging them to use online services, by promoting / marketing those services and considering the use of discounts and incentives.

6.6 Service Excellence

We will provide Service Excellence whichever channel customers use to access our services. This means making the following commitments – we will:

- Ensure that all our services remain accessible
- Treat each customer as an individual, dealing with each person according to their differing needs
- Be polite, courteous and helpful, but we will not tolerate any form of abusive language or behaviour from customers
- Aim to resolve queries, enquiries or service requests at the first time of asking, both by:
 - making the website easy to navigate and to use so that customers can serve themselves; and by
 - giving staff the training, the information and the authority to enable them to fulfil requests and complete transactions
- Aim to meet our customer service standards (see Appendix 1) at all times
- Communicate using Plain English, either on the website, by letter or on the phone
- Behave like one council, so that customers only need to tell us anything once. We will put in place systems and processes, including getting customers' permission to share data, to ensure that, if other parts of the organisation need to be aware of something a customer has told us, we pass that on without the customer having to provide the information to different service areas themselves.

Customer Service Standards

Face to face – We aim to keep you waiting no longer than 5 minutes before a member of staff sees you.

Telephone – We will always try to answer your call within 5 rings.

Letters and faxes – Where a response is required, we will provide it within 10 working days of receipt. (This does not include service requests with a statutory response time).

Email – We will respond to service emails within 5 working days of receipt

In all cases, where a full response cannot be provided to your first contact with us, we will advise you when a full response can be expected.

Customer Service Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours

The behaviours relating to customer focus are:

Employee Core Behaviours – Customer Focused

- Shows discretion and integrity
- Puts the customer at the centre of every decision and activity
- Is respectful and diplomatic
- Ensures everyone receives a level of service appropriate to their needs
- Makes time for customers – shows care and understanding
- Listens to and values the opinions and needs of others

Manager Core Behaviours – Customer Focused

- Shows discretion and integrity
- Puts the customer at the centre of every decision and activity
- Is respectful and diplomatic
- Ensures everyone receives a level of service appropriate to their needs
- Makes time for customers – shows care and understanding
- Listens to and values the opinions and needs of customers

**Institute of Customer Services' Servcheck
Customer Service Self-assessment – results August 2011**

Strategy and culture	Disagree	Agree	Don't Know
1.1 Senior management monitor service progress	26.0 %	62.0 %	12.0 %
1.2 Value reputation, protect it through actions	14.0 %	86.0 %	0.0 %
1.3 Measure what is important	16.0 %	80.0 %	4.0 %
1.4 Measure customers' perceptions	16.0 %	68.0 %	16.0 %
1.5 Clear promise about our standards	12.0 %	82.0 %	2.0 %
1.6 Standards based on expectations/priorities	22.0 %	70.0 %	8.0 %
1.7 Everyone takes ownership	38.0 %	58.0 %	4.0 %
1.8 Empower people to use initiative	34.0 %	66.0 %	10.0 %
1.9 Complaints/mistakes are positive opportunities	34.0 %	58.0 %	4.0 %
Overall	24.0 %	69.0 %	6.7 %
People	Disagree	Agree	Don't Know
2.1 People recruited against competencies	16.0 %	54.0 %	30.0 %
2.2 People reflect organisation's image	22.0 %	70.0 %	8.0 %
2.3.1 People fully informed about: products	22.0 %	74.0 %	4.0 %
2.3.2 People fully informed about: services	16.0 %	82.0 %	2.0 %
2.3.3 People fully informed about: features/benefits	18.0 %	78.0 %	4.0 %
2.3.4 People fully informed about: prices	24.0 %	68.0 %	8.0 %
2.3.5 People fully informed about: service recovery process	24.0 %	46.0 %	30.0 %
2.3.6 People fully informed about: customers	24.0 %	72.0 %	4.0 %
2.3.7 People fully informed about: organisation	20.0 %	76.0 %	4.0 %
2.4 People encouraged to reach competency	26.0 %	74.0 %	0.0 %
2.5 People are flexible, proactive, use initiative	22.0 %	78.0 %	0.0 %
2.6 People assessed on skills	34.0 %	54.0 %	12.0 %
2.7 People are empathetic listeners	16.0 %	82.0 %	2.0 %
2.8 Managers understand technology	38.0 %	60.0 %	2.0 %
2.9 Managers value their people	38.0 %	56.0 %	6.0 %
2.10 Organisation supports people	32.0 %	64.0 %	2.0 %
2.11 Organisation prefers diversity	42.0 %	46.0 %	12.0 %
2.12 Service performance is a key element	14.0 %	78.0 %	8.0 %
2.13 We reward and recognise service	26.0 %	72.0 %	2.0 %
Overall	24.9 %	67.7 %	7.4 %
Process	Disagree	Agree	Don't Know
3.1 Processes have customer perspective built in	36.0 %	54.0 %	10.0 %
3.2 Processes ensure fitness for purpose	26.0 %	66.0 %	8.0 %
3.3 Communications display emphasis on service	20.0 %	80.0 %	0.0 %
3.4 Allocate resources to meet service demands	30.0 %	66.0 %	4.0 %
3.5 Arrangements for those who need special assistance	10.0 %	84.0 %	6.0 %
3.6 Technology helps minimise errors	24.0 %	68.0 %	8.0 %
3.7 Stimulate environment where creativity flourishes	38.0 %	56.0 %	6.0 %
3.8 Suggestions for change taken seriously	34.0 %	60.0 %	6.0 %
3.9 Introduction of new service based on clear rationale	34.0 %	54.0 %	12.0 %
3.10 Consider customers/staff when introducing change	32.0 %	64.0 %	4.0 %
3.11 Systematically seek and share best practice	22.0 %	50.0 %	28.0 %
Overall	27.8 %	63.8 %	8.4 %

Action Plan

Appendix 4

Strategic Theme	Key Actions	Accountable	Target completion date
Customer Insight	Ask all customers to register with us, whatever channel they use, so that we can hold their details and direct them to other services they might find want.	LJH	31/3/12
Customer Insight	Update our assessment of which services / transactions should be delivered to which customers through which media, taking into account the opportunities provided by new technology such as i-phone apps and social media.	LJH	30/6/12
Customer Insight	Develop processes to ensure that Customer Insight is integrated into our decision-making.	MD	30/9/12
Customer Insight	Move more services through the Customer Relationship Management system (CRM) so that we have a more rounded picture of the services we are providing for them.	LJH	31/3/13
Redesigning Service Delivery	Analyse our transaction costs to identify those that are the most expensive, and develop plans to eliminate, simplify or change the associated processes to reduce costs while maintaining service levels to customers	KE	30/9/12
Redesigning Service Delivery	Prioritise simple telephone transactions to transfer to the contact centre to free up specialist staff to deal only with complicated / specialist queries.	LJH	31/3/13
Redesigning Service Delivery	Look for opportunities to share face-to-face services with other public and third sector providers in joined-up ways that aim to meet the needs of our most vulnerable customers.	LJH	Ongoing
Enabling Technology	Review our current data storage arrangements and assess the scope for simplifying, rationalising or combining records to improve accuracy and provide a more complete picture of each customer.	GJ	30/6/12
Enabling Technology	Develop use of social media to enable two-way communication with our customers in relation to consultation and service provision	LJH	31/3/13
Channel Shift	Develop and implement a communications plan to make customers aware of ways of accessing services which we believe best meet their needs, and encourage them to use those channels which are the most appropriate for them and the most cost-effective for us.	LJH	30/6/12
Service Excellence	Provide CS training for all staff to the appropriate level with ICS accreditation where appropriate.	KE	31/3/13
Service Excellence	Continuously review customer feedback and performance statistics to identify areas for improvement through, for example process redesign or better communications.	Each Head of Service for their service area	Ongoing

Note: A detailed project plan will be prepared for each action above, at which point the target date for implementation will be reviewed and amended if appropriate, taking into account resource constraints and other priorities.