

TELFORD & WREKIN COUNCIL

CABINET –	7 January 2020
TITLE	Telford & Wrekin Council Customer Strategy Improving Our Customer Experience - Our Journey to Excellence
REPORT OF	Director: Communities, Customer and Commercial Services
LEAD CABINET MEMBER –	Cabinet Member for Enforcement, Community Safety and Customer Services

PART A) – SUMMARY REPORT

1. SUMMARY OF MAIN PROPOSALS

- 1.1. The purpose of this report is to set out a new Customer Strategy (see Appendix A) from 2021 to 2025.
- 1.2. Our customers are at the heart of everything we do, and we want to ensure that the experience that they have is outstanding. The Customer Strategy sets out our vision to *‘Work with our customers to develop quality services that are accessible to all and to make every contact count’*. It describes what we want to achieve to realise this vision and how we will deliver it.
- 1.3. The strategy builds on existing good practice and highlights recent improvements in customer service, including improved telephone call handling performance in our main Contact Centre, a reduction in the time taken to respond to complaints across all Council Directorates, the launch of a new customer insight programme and significantly increased take-up of online services.
- 1.4. The strategy sets out how we will continue to modernise our approach to reflect innovations in technology and changing customer expectations. We already offer more than 100 services online, but we want to make even more information and services available, so that digital services become the contact method of choice for most customers. We recognise that doing things online is not always the best option for everyone and that we also need to continue to provide alternatives for people who are unable to use online services.
- 1.5. We want to enhance our understanding of customers’ needs and behaviours. We are also committed to listening and learning from what we hear and feeding back ‘you said, we did’ improvements. We want to ensure that the customer service that we provide is excellent and our key measure of this is when customers tell us this themselves.

- 1.6. To achieve our aims, we will need to focus on consistent delivery of our new Customer Service Standards, training and development, involving customers and employees in improving services and developing our online services. We will also review our services to ensure that all barriers are removed and that our services are accessible for all, including working with partners and communities to provide the technology and the skills to help people move to using online services. We will also improve our branding and signage so that it is clear which services are provided or funded by the Council and we will support customers to get the help they need, even when we have to refer them to another organisation.
- 1.7. The strategy highlights the initial actions planned, to deliver our aims through to March 2022, underpinned by a longer-term detailed action plan. This will be reviewed annually, with progress being reported to members.
- 1.8. As part of this new strategy, we have reviewed and refreshed our Customer Charter, which we have now renamed our Customer Contract. The Contract includes our commitments to customers and the service standards they can expect when contacting us, but also what we ask from customers in return when using our services. This can be seen at Appendix B.
- 1.9. A formal Consultation regarding the draft aims of the strategy and proposed Customer Contract took place between 25 September 2020 and 23 October 2020, as detailed in Section 4. Customers were also asked to provide details of their experience of contacting the Council which will inform our action plan. The consultation confirmed that there was strong support for the strategy, key headline results were;
 - 83% of respondents agreed with the vision and aims of the Customer Strategy, whilst 4% disagreed;
 - 70% of respondents agreed with the proposed service standards outlined in the Customer Contract, whilst 13% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 That Cabinet approves the new Customer Strategy and the Customer Contract attached at Appendix A and B. This Strategy will be implemented with effect from 7 January 2021.

2.2 That Cabinet grant delegated authority to the Director: Communities, Customer and Commercial Services in consultation with the Lead Cabinet Member for Enforcement, Community Safety and Customer Services to take the necessary steps to implement these recommendations.

3. SUMMARY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

COMMUNITY IMPACT	Do these proposals contribute to specific Co-Operative Council priority objective(s)?	
	Yes	A community- focussed, innovative Council providing efficient, effective and quality services. Key outcome: Our customer experience is the best possible and facilities are accessible to all.
	Will the proposals impact on specific groups of people?	
	Yes	All of the borough's customers and stakeholders will be impacted by the Customer Strategy and Customer Contract. The strategy will particularly benefit those customers who have protected characteristics for example, those with disabilities, older people and those where English is not their first language. The needs of our customers have been considered throughout the development of this Customer Strategy and its associated actions. We have incorporated outcomes identified through our ongoing integrated equality analysis into the Customer Strategy and supporting action plan.
TARGET COMPLETION/DELIVERY DATE	The Customer Strategy will be launched in January 2021 with corresponding actions being completed by April 2024.	
FINANCIAL/VALUE FOR MONEY IMPACT	Yes/No	The costs of undertaking the customer consultation exercise has been met from existing budgets. The cost of handling Customer enquiries and complaints are in the form of officer time and are again funding through existing budgets. There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. MLB 19.11.20
LEGAL ISSUES	No	Although there is no statutory requirement for a local authority to have a customer strategy it is good practice to set out how the Council intends to interact with its customers in the provision of services, and in terms of the methods to be applied section 111 of the Local Government Act 1972 provides the power for the Council to do anything, including the spending of money, to facilitate the delivery of its primary functions.

		The Customer Strategy has been assessed in accordance with the Council's duties under the Equalities Act 2010 and in particular section 149, the public sector equality duty. All forms of customer interaction and strategic engagement must be delivered in accordance with these duties and the need to deliver services having due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between different people when carrying out their activities. To these ends the strategy recognises the requirement to consult and seeks to engage different customer groups at various stages of process development to ensure that our services are fit for purpose.
OTHER IMPACTS, RISKS & OPPORTUNITIES	No	The risks and opportunities relating to the Customer Strategy are outlined within this report.
IMPACT ON SPECIFIC WARDS	No	Borough wider impact

PART B) – ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

4. INFORMATION

4.1 Consultation and Analysis

4.2 A formal consultation on the draft Customer Strategy with residents and stakeholders took place between 25 September 2020 and 23 October 2020. Comments were sought on the proposals through a number of channels;

- An article was included in the weekly Community Newsletter sent to approximately 2,000 email addresses.
- Emails were sent to all key stakeholders including Town and Parish Councils, Citizens Advice Bureau, Senior Citizens' Forum, Young People's Forum, Voice, Shropshire Disabilities Network, Visually Impaired Group, Shropshire Deaf and hard of hearing forum, Dementia Alliance, Visual Interpreting and Communication Service Shropshire, the Interfaith Council, Veterans Hub and other armed forces groups. The stakeholders were asked to promote the consultation with their members.
- Details of the consultation was issued as a press release and posted on social media channels.
- An article was included in Staff News, which is shared with all employees.
- A news article was sent via gov-delivery to 2,409 recipients.
- A banner was added to MyTelford to encourage users to take part.
- Customers contacting the Corporate Contact Centre were also invited to take part in the consultation via an automated message.

- Service Delivery Managers and Team Leaders were asked to comment in Leadership Forums.
- A number of focus groups were held with members of the community, including Town & Parish Councils, members of the Making it Real Board, and our deaf community group.
- A focus group was also held with Mystery Customers to discuss their experiences of using our services and the service standards outlined in the proposed Customer Contract.
- Focus groups were held with members of the Employee Panel.

- 4.3 A total of 79 on-line surveys were submitted, 9 of which were partially completed. Qualitative data was also obtained from a number of focus groups. The responses received confirm that most customers supported our draft vision and aims. 83% of respondents to the survey agreed or strongly agreed with the Customer Strategy's vision and aims. The comments received from customers who disagreed or strongly disagreed have fed into the analysis.
- 4.4 The results of the consultation regarding the proposed Customer Contract confirmed that 67% or higher of those who responded were in agreement with every service standard proposed. We received a large number of specific comments regarding individual service standards, in particular, suggesting that some of the response times were not ambitious enough. Based on these comments we have reduced our response time's targets for emails and letters, strengthened our target for call handling and clarified how we will deal with social media. These are reflected in the customer contract.
- 4.5 There were also comments regarding the design of the Customer Contract, concerns were raised regarding the colour contrasts used and how this could cause problems for some customers, who have additional needs, for example customers with dyslexia. The Customer Strategy and Contract have been redesigned with these comments in mind and has been tested to ensure that our website screen reader will correctly read the document.
- 4.6 Accessibility for those customers with additional needs was highlighted across the piece, including the importance of ensuring that the website is easy to navigate and is not a barrier to these customers. Customers were supportive of actions regarding accessibility outlined in the strategy and were keen to work alongside the Council to improve accessibility for all.
- 4.7 Feedback also highlighted that the Council's programme to Protect, Care and Invest needed to be given more weight within the document, particularly with regard to the strategy's key aims. In response to these comments we have amended the aims to better reflect the feedback received and also to more closely align them to our co-operative values.

4.8 Customers were keen that our online offer allows them to undertake every transactional enquiry in one place and that this is reliable. They were supportive of asking customers who can, to do business online and where they can to self-serve.

4.9 As part of the consultation, customers were asked to provide details of their recent experiences of accessing Council Services. The results obtained from this survey will be used as a baseline to measure improvement.

The key baseline measurements from the survey include;

- 72% agreed or strongly agreed that the Council treats customers fairly and with respect, (13% disagreed or strongly disagreed).
- 68% agreed or strongly agreed that their enquiry was dealt with by professional, friendly and helpful staff, (12% disagreed or strongly disagreed).
- 64% agreed or strongly agreed that the Council provides clear, simple and up to date information about services, (14% disagreed or strongly disagreed).
- 62% of customers were satisfied or very satisfied with their experience of contacting the Council, (30% were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied).
- 57% agreed or strongly agreed that their enquiry was dealt with correctly the first time they contacted, (35% disagreed or strongly disagreed).
- 55% agreed or strongly agreed that the Council designs the services it provides around its customers, (20% disagreed or strongly disagreed).
- 46% agreed or strongly agreed that the Council's services are accessible to all, (17% disagreed or strongly disagreed).

4.10 As with the customer contract we also received specific feedback on customer's experience of engaging with the Council.

As part of delivering our new strategy, we will be using the feedback received from the engagement exercise to shape the development of our services.

Some specific key comments were:

What the customers said	How we are addressing this?
There are barriers when trying to do business online, particularly when using screen reader programmes. Customers	Through our actions to ensure the website complies with the new public sector accessibility standard and also

also commented that the website was not easy to navigate.	through our ongoing programme of website reviews.
Customers with additional needs commented that staff often do not know how to communicate with them and that they also do not consider if customers have additional needs, particularly when speaking to them over the phone. Some commented that advisors talk too quickly.	As part of our work to ensure that all barriers are removed and that services are accessible for all, training will be given to all customer services officers regarding communicating with customers, particularly those that may have additional needs and hidden disabilities.
Some customers reported experiences that enquiries/reports are not being resolved, or responded to within a reasonable timescale and they felt there was lack of action or clear resolution.	Our action plan includes improving communication regarding completed jobs this will provide customers with a photo of the completed works and also details of the work carried out. Customer insight reviews will also be completed to ensure that the amendments are effective and no further concerns are being raised.
Comments highlighted that there was a need for a single unified online presence to report and seek out council services and that this portal should work the same on the website, as an app and the forms should be intuitive.	Our key action of developing the online application for mobile devices will also focus on improved location mapping and full user account access to online services.
Customers commented that our reception staff are excellent and helpful.	This directly links to our aims, and this is something that will be further reinforced through new guidance for employees on what is expected from them to ensure a consistently excellent customer experience across the organisation.
Customers commented that where a decision is made a full explanation is always provided in a clear and concise manner.	This will also be highlighted through new guidance for employees on what is expected to ensure an excellent customer experience.

We plan to undertake a further survey in 18 months' time and then again in 3 years to measure the improvements in the services we provide.

4 IMPACT ASSESSMENT – ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

N/A

5 PREVIOUS MINUTES

None

6 BACKGROUND PAPERS

Appendix A- Customer Strategy

Appendix B- Customer Contract

**Report prepared by Rebecca Zacharek, Customer Relationship and Quality Assurance
Team Leader, Telephone: 01952 383890**