

Customer Access Strategy 2007

1. Introduction

1.1 Customers are demanding accessible and easy to use services from Local Government. The Council is committed to meeting these demands by offering customer choice in how and when they access services, whilst maintaining consistency and quality of service and value for money.

1.2 New reports, such as the Varney Review, *Service Transformation: a better service for citizens and businesses, a better deal for the taxpayer*, published by Central Government in December 2006, put the case for customer and community focus with key themes being

- greater access to services
- joined up services, both internally and with the community
- more coordination of services from the public's view
- greater efficiency in customer facing service channels

1.3 The Council currently delivers many services to the community it serves to include citizens, business and visitors, through a number of departmental service areas responsible for handling customer interaction related to the service it provides. This has resulted in multiple reception areas and a bewildering array of telephone numbers that, in turn, leads to customer confusion and lack of clarity in the services the Council provides.

1.4 The Council has made improvements by introducing new ways of providing services through, for example, the introduction of a Corporate Contact Centre which provides first point telephone information guidance and support for Waste Management, Streetscene and Environmental Health and through ongoing development of its Customer Relationship Management System (CRM)

2. The Vision

Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council is committed to improving access to services for residents, businesses and visitors whilst maintaining consistency and quality of service.

As part of delivering this vision we need to focus our attention on transforming the customer experience; moving towards a truly customer focused organisation.

Today, people require council services to be more accessible, to better suit their lifestyles, be more convenient and be of higher quality. They want services that :

- are accessible outside of normal office hours
- provide quick, consistent and reliable response to their query
- are easy to get in touch with
- keep them informed of the services we provide
- available to all parts of the community

Customers want the council and our public sector partners to listen to them regarding the services they use, or might use, and put more effort into finding out what they want.

In preparing a Customer Access Strategy, the Council recognises that through providing greater choice in communication channels and embracing new technology that is appropriate to customer needs, we can empower the citizen to influence decision making in ways that transform the traditional council; thereby building better, sustainable relationships with our customers.

3. Purpose of the Strategy

The primary purpose of the Customer Access Strategy is to enable customers to be able to find out about and take advantage of available services via a communication channel of their choice

Access channels could include:

- Telephone
- Face to Face
- One Stop Shops/Centres
- 'Outreach Centres'
- E-mail
- Self Service – Forms
- Self Service – Information
- SMS/Text
- Web Chat
- Interactive TV
- Letter
- Fax
- Shared/Partnership Services

'Transformational Government' requires local authorities to make best use of new technologies and encourage citizens to make contact electronically wherever possible. This is the cheapest form of interaction and offers increased self-service opportunities for customers¹

With the continuing expansion of technology, and in particular electronic means of access, it is anticipated that the current level of face-to-face contact will decrease although the Council is mindful that this service should continue where needed. In providing a greater variety in access channels it becomes increasingly important to ensure that information available through face to face contact is up to date and that a consistent organisational approach is adopted to all access channels.

4. The Aims of the Strategy

The Strategy uses the term 'customer' to embrace all residents of the borough, members of the public, service users, clients and complainants. All customers have common expectations - they simply want someone to resolve their issues at the first point of contact in a way or time that suits them. The strategy aims to ensure social inclusion by adopting a 'design for all' approach where all customers' needs are met where possible, regardless of age, gender, ability, ethnic origin or geographical location by providing a choice of multiple access channels available at times and places convenient to the customer. The Council's aim is to provide excellent customer services that provide:

- Quality - flexible, reliable, responsive services
- Choice - in communicating with the Council
- Accessibility - providing access to a wide range of information and services in locations and at times to better suit the customer that are sustainable by the Council and cost and resource effective

The Customer Access Strategy defines the Council's objectives for customer interaction. It is concerned with defining a professional, consistent approach to making contact with the Council in as appropriate and convenient a way as possible for the customer. The Strategy is a clear and ambitious programme to deliver significant improvements in customer service over a long-term framework and is closely linked to the Authority's Corporate Plan 2007-8 to 2011-12 particularly with regard to Community Engagement, and the Customer Care Strategy adopted by the Council in 2004.

5. The Strategy – Our Commitment to Excellence in Customer Access

5.1 Choice of access channels

- The Council intends to maximise the use of different access channels for information provision and the means to undertake transactions by use of self serve or direct contact
- Customer Surveys will be introduced to capture baseline information as to how and where customers currently access Councils services and to suggest channels they would be happy to use. These surveys will also highlight areas of customer demand where access channels do not currently exist
- The Council will provide greater accessibility at locations, times and in ways that ensure social inclusion, minimising where possible the need to travel or any other barriers to access
- The Council will develop its Corporate Contact Centre to provide for a greater number of services to be incorporated to enhance the ability for first point resolution
- Review and rationalise the number of publicly accessible telephone numbers with a view to decreasing the number by up to 80%. This will simplify and improve immediate access to services
- Seek to improve the times at which customers can access telephone services, outside of normal working hours. This will complement the out of hours service already provided for emergencies

5.2 Provide access to services in buildings and locations fit for purpose

- In the right locations, offering a modern environment and facilities, and flexible enough to meet the changing needs of customers
- The Council will increase its capacity and provision for 'first point of contact resolution' through the creation of 'One Stop Centres' to include the consolidation of reception areas at the Civic Offices into one customer focused area that will provide access to all council services through a single point of contact.
- The Council will work with its partners and the community to provide complementary services at its One Stop Centres to create a 'community hub'
- Customers increasingly want more convenient ways of paying bills. The Council will provide automated payment facilities for Council services to include council tax, rents sited in locations that are most convenient to customers.

5.3 Taking services to the customers

- Provision of mobile services with support from back office services to minimises travel and increase social inclusion

5.4 Increased web site provision

- Web site functions will become more interactive, requiring less human intervention to provide ease of use.
- The Council's web site will provide the whole range of council information and support web enabled transactions such as on line payments
- Increased use of Public Participation Geographic Information Systems (PPGIS) to deliver visual analysis and search facilities to encourage customer interaction in Council services
- Increase the availability of customer self serve. This represents excellent value for money to the customer whilst providing a quality, consistent service

5.5 Developing Integrated Access Channels

The Council will develop its Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system to provide

- Seamless back office integration with core departmental systems
- Faster progression of service requests through making CRM available to back offices
- Transactional workflow – requests are directed to the right person or team to avoid duplication or repetitive data entry
- Support for Customer Self Serve (CSS) through facilities being developed through the Council's website
- Support for multiple transactions through one access channel. Where appropriate, this will be extended to include partner organisations.

The Council will investigate channels that support appropriate authentication of users and security for its services to enable multiple transactions from various sources.

5.6 Improve transparency of services

- Investigate joined up working with partners to enhance transparency
- Increase community involvement in decision making through the introduction of a Customer Suggestion Scheme
- Customer Forums will be introduced at regular intervals to ensure standards in customer experience and good practice are met. Outcomes of these forums will help to determine standards and priorities for improvement

5.7 Improve Value for Money in Access Channels

- Introduce low cost, high demand access channels that offer consistently high quality at minimal cost whilst being mindful of offering customer choice.

6. Expected Outcomes

Implementing the strategy delivers positive benefits to the community, some of which are:

- Greater choice and convenience
- High quality, cost controlled services
- Joined up services
- Increased involvement in local services
- Equality of Access to services
- Greater customer satisfaction with the services Newcastle provides
- Customer satisfaction should increase therefore less complaints received
- Improved quality of life

7. Conclusion

Developing a formal approach to improved access can be problematic. The Strategy will fail if the Council does not have the ability to respond to customer needs. A realistic assessment of the delivery capabilities, skills and finance available will be important in determining the right balance between customer service delivery expectations and cost. Decisions will need to be made to prioritise outcomes and initiatives to ensure they align with the Vision. Full consultation with customers, partners, staff and communities is essential in order to move the Vision forward.