

Customer Service Strategy – 5 year

Introduction

How we deliver customer service impacts on the whole of our region as it touches everyone who comes in contact with us. North Somerset Council offers over 600 separate services to our residents, businesses and partners and we have not always been consistent in delivering those with the best customer service.

We want to do better. This document provides a vision of how what we would like to engage with our customers and a plan to deliver this over the next 5 years.

We all experience customer service every day and we can't help but compare one experience against another. Whether it's a large multi-national with huge funds to invest in technology and customer service (such as the much-quoted Amazon) or whether it's the corner shop.

As a council we are constantly having to cut costs to meet the funding gap from central government. But we need to ensure we do the best we can with the resources we have, and this strategy looks to maximise what we have, be it people, assets or processes to deliver the best service that we can.

We plan to do this by putting you, the customer, at the centre of what we are doing, to talk to you more to find out what your needs are, and to use our limited resources in the best possible way. We may not always be able to meet your every need but we will do the best we can and explain why if we can't.

People who work for the council do so because they want to help people and deliver a great service. This strategy will empower everyone and provide direction in the achievement of that goal.

To achieve our goals we do need to ensure that we strongly promote our digital services and ensure that those who can use them do so. This allows us to use our limited resources in the best possible way. In return, we need to make sure that our digital services are fit for purpose and provide enough feedback so that you don't have to contact us another way to follow up.

This strategy is a live document so we will be constantly looking for more ways to improve the services that we provide as we go through this journey, and as we understand your needs more.

Scope

The purpose of this strategy is to review our customer service across the council. This strategy looks at our customer contact - how we engage with you and how we can improve the way in which we do this.

Vision

We will put our customers at the heart of what we do, reflecting their feedback in the design and delivery of our services

Outcome

We want to ensure that we provide a positive experience for our customers, by being open, transparent and fair. We will design our services as digital first and will make sure that those services are easy to use and provide good feedback. In return we ask our customers to use digital wherever possible so that we can use our limited resources to help those who really need additional support. By the end of the five-year period we aim to have award winning digital services supporting our customers and officers, whilst able to provide more bespoke services where needed. We will measure our progress over the term of the strategy to ensure that we are clear about where we are now and that we have achieved our objectives. We want to remove barriers to going digital, find ways to make our digital offer more attractive and maximise its potential, increase customer satisfaction and reduce the amount of upheld complaints.

Why we need to change

We have recognised that our customer service offer is not always as good as we would like it to be. When we have encountered problems, we have tackled them, but this doesn't allow us to make wholesale improvements as quickly as we would like to. We need to invest in customer service and fix the gaps.

We know from customer feedback that there are things that need to be fixed or developed. Here are some of the key findings:

- There are multiple entry points into the council, and it can be confusing
- We introduced MyAccount several years ago in order to make it easier for our customers, so we need to maximise its use
- We feel that we can improve upon the way that we gather customer feedback
- We need to improve the way that we feed back to our customer well and in a timely way
- We need to improve our end-to-end customer experiences so that we know that they work well
- We need to review our face-to-face offer to ensure that it meets the needs of the most vulnerable
- We could improve the way that we manage demand and do our forecasting to ensure that we have the right resources in the right place at the right time
- We feel that we can improve upon the way that we implement new things by involving you, the customer
- We need to move towards being more proactive in our communications and service delivery

Our customer service themes

Customer focused - We are a customer focused council, we will

- rethink the way we deliver our services, putting you at the centre of our design
- create a culture where customer service is owned by everyone
- be more transparent in how we will engage with you, being upfront about how long it will take to get things done or to respond
- treat you with empathy and professional curiosity because we want to understand what you want or need
- own the end-to-end customer journey so that we understand the services and experiences you are receiving from us
- use data to understand you better and personalise services that meet your needs
- improve our data sharing practices making sure that you only need to tell us your information once wherever possible
- use data available to us to predict your needs and come to you before you need us
- promote and encourage those who can transact digitally to have access to our online services that have proved so vital during the pandemic
- develop MyAccount, helping us to understand your interactions with us
- listen to you by providing a forum for our residents to give us feedback on our services
- collect more comprehensive customer satisfaction feedback from you and respond by using it to redesign services around you

Connected - We connect with our customers effectively and efficiently, we will

- make sure that the basics are working effectively
- aim to resolve your query at the point that you raise it, wherever possible
- seek to manage demand so that you don't need to contact us unnecessarily
- build in ways for you to feedback to us when you need to
- keep you up to date and be informative so that you don't need to contact us again
- provide local customer access for residents living in rural areas
- reduce the number of touchpoints across the council and signpost you to the most direct way you can access the services you need
- deal with issues raised with Councillors in a fair, efficient and consistent way

Empowered - We empower our staff to meet our customers' expectations, we will

- ensure that all staff have the right customer service skills
- treat our customers with empathy, respect and courtesy
- instil a customer service culture across the organisation to improve the customer experience
- cross-train our officers so that they can deal with your queries in the best way and give you the information and support you need
- promote a culture of accountability where our well-trained officers use their best judgment and exercise their discretion in resolving issues
- improve our training around hidden disabilities to help our staff deal with complex and vulnerable users and their needs
- provide assistive technology for our staff, allowing them more time to spend with you, the customer
- learn when things go wrong, review our processes end to end so that we are better able to serve you better next time
- improve our customer service performance management and reporting practices to promote a culture of transparency and accountability, and embed an approach of continuous improvement across the council
- spend more time over the phone with those who need extra support, which we can only do by shifting transactional contact online
- train our officers to be better equipped to resolve your issues at first point of contact, keeping you informed of what to expect along the way
- invest in our digital team who will be empowered to make changes that benefit the customer

Service delivery - We provide excellent quality and value to our customers through better designed services, we will

- ensure that we have dedicated owners of the customer experience within directorates/teams to ensure that the end-to-end process meets your needs
- share clear and transparent service guidelines so that you know what to expect from us
- join up similar services for a seamless customer experience
- improve our customer satisfaction capture and surveys to get more informed feedback on how we are doing from your perspective
- be pro-active in our approach, meaning if we know you are likely to be eligible for services such as free school meals, we'll let you know
- make use of customer journey analytics to understand the customer experience and use this information to identify issues and resolutions for the future

- systematically review processes within priority service areas using lessons learned from elsewhere to step up customer improvements across the organisation
- use a governance process to maintain consistently high customer services and a culture of continuous improvement
- take an agile approach to making customer improvements, meaning we trial solutions at low cost before delivering them fully
- apply best practice in customer service and look at industry trends to offer a great customer experience
- review our service level agreements/contracts with our providers to make sure their customer service standards and timescales are aligned with our ambitions
- improve our demand forecasting and business planning processes so that we allocate our resources more effectively

Partnership - We improve the customer experience by working with partners, we will

- use our professional curiosity to understand your needs and proactively make referrals to 3rd parties where helpful
- improve the North Somerset online offer, making it easier for you to navigate through the services and partners available to you
- co-produce and test services with you and other interested parties to make sure the services we provide work for you and support those with additional needs
- work with the 3rd sector and regional partners to support those who need it the most
- work with Town and Parish councils to ensure that we provide the service that you need

Digital - We will maximise digital technologies to support a 24/7 customer experience, we will

- continue to modernise, using digital tools and technologies to enhance the customer experience
- use digital technologies to allow us to deal with your requests and enquiries more quickly
- listen to you to understand how you want to communicate and interact with us digitally
- maximise digital technologies to allow us to spend quality time with those who need it the most and deliver cost-effective services
- pilot new technologies and test them with you first to see what you think

- provide online assistive technologies to help you to find your way through our services and navigate to the correct place
- use technology to automate processes where efficient to do so
- continue to invest in our websites to promote a better online experience and ensure that our digital assets are accessible and easy to use, so that you can find what you need and access services easily
- make greater use of data and intelligence to capture customer contact, meaning more time is spent providing the services you need
- watch and review technological advancements that are on the horizon to ensure that we are abreast of new anything which could help us to deliver a better service