

Customer Service Strategy



Foreword

Customer service – the national context

Customer expectations are continually rising in all aspects of life. In private enterprise, business is increasingly focussing on customer service in order to gain competitive edge as the internet and growth of the information-rich society has given consumers more choice and led them to become more demanding of the organisations that they purchase from.

Businesses and government are both striving for efficiency. Part of this efficiency drive has been towards centralised customer contact in large contact centres which, in private enterprise, have often been offshore. Recently, however, there has been a consumer backlash against what has been seen as a step too far. Local knowledge and local business is again coming to the fore as even the largest businesses advertise their local customer service.

This council is committed to the principle of the local authority delivering top quality customer service, across all functions, to all local residents and businesses across all access channels. Further, and to facilitate this, it remains committed to directly delivering a locally based customer services function.

However, it is not just about the customer service operation. Frontline employees in all sectors are the face of the organisation, no matter what it is they do – whether it be in shops, leisure centres, waste collection or contact centres or any other customer-facing role. The frontline service is the point at which the customers' rising expectations need to be met.

It is in this climate of rising overall expectations, increasing pressure on costs and a demand for fair, equal and locally provided services, tailored to the diverse needs of a wide range of communities, that Gateshead Council needs to deliver excellent services to residents.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Mick Henry'.

Councillor Mick Henry
Leader, Gateshead Council

The Local Government context

Local government is changing fast. The last ten years have been characterised by a constant process of change, focused on the need for improvement in service delivery, customer service and local accountability. The rigour associated with external inspection and increasing devolution has led to an increasing emphasis on competence, efficiency and processes.

At the same time, wider customer and stakeholder expectations are changing. There is a demand for faster, easier contact, and mobile ways of working and communicating are changing the way individuals lead their home and working lives, leading to increased demands for flexible, personalised citizen centric services.

Local councils need to respond to these changes. The development of the new performance management framework, and an increasing move towards devolution from central government provides a number of opportunities to go beyond service competence – to achieve excellence, to transform, and to innovate. In particular, the introduction of a new National Indicator to

specifically measure avoidable contact is indicative of an increasing focus on the value of customer service and the impact that good or bad service can have on local communities. The Community Empowerment white paper proposes new duties for Councils, specifically including a requirement for all frontline employee to be trained to answer customer queries relating to the local democratic system.

The challenge in the 21st century is to move away from **incremental** change, and to focus on innovation as a means of achieving **transformational** change. As a result of technological advances, local government is now much more able to gather data on when and how citizens use services, and what they think of them. The challenge is to use this data to match service delivery to need.

Customer service in its wider sense is the first contact our communities will have with the council, and so it plays a hugely important role in shaping opinions. It is vital for providing channels of communication and opportunities for residents to engage with the local council.

What is driving changes in customer service?

An enhanced role as a “place shaper”

Local councils have been given a statutory role in improving well-being, in making communities safer and stronger, in changing lives. The role of the local council, as the democratically accountable body, in driving forward change at a local level has been recognised and enhanced. Local councils increasingly have a community leadership role, and local Councillors, as community advocates, are being asked to play a bigger role in shaping the nature of places, not just the delivery of services.

Increasingly complex working environments. Increasingly there is a focus on achieving impact, and a recognition that achieving change is often the result of complex overlapping policies and priorities. Smarter working, better networks and the shared use of data and intelligence are key requirements to facilitate this type of partnership activity. Local councils are increasingly working to influence and enable others, to create the right conditions for investment and change, but delivering less and less themselves. This commissioning or convening role is becoming an increasing factor.

Devolution

The Government is now moving away from a regime based on centralised targets and performance to one based on locally negotiated and agreed priorities. With more freedoms at a local level comes more responsibility, and new duties to engage and consult. Increasingly the local council is becoming the hub of a ‘new localism’, a new network of organisations with shared objectives and resources.

Doing more with less

Local government has been required to deliver year on year improvements in efficiency, review and improvement, through the principle of Best Value and the recommendations of the Gershon Review and the Varney Review, but there is now a need for more fundamental change, driven by innovation at all levels and in all ways – people, processes, and technology.

Choice and personalisation

A new role for local government emphasises the need to respond to customers and in particular for a citizen focus. Improving the quality of service provision demands new ways of measuring customer satisfaction, as in all large organisations. In local councils, however, this is also reflected in the need to engage individuals and communities at a neighbourhood level, particularly as communities are becoming more diverse. Understanding the differing needs of these increasingly diverse communities and delivering change at a grass roots level for whole communities, not simply those who have direct contact with the council, is vital.

A criticism that has, rightly or wrongly, been levelled at local authorities in the past is that they have been slow to adapt to a changing environment. In order to address this potential issue, the combined impact of these changes is that the 21st century local council will look different to that perceived to exist in some areas in the 20th century....

20th Century

Hierarchical
Centralised
Bureaucratic
Deliverer
Service focused
Competence
Outputs
Doing

21st Century

Flat
Devolved
Streamlined, Flexible
Mixed Economy
Area focused
Excellence
Impacts
Enabling

What does this mean for Customer Service at Gateshead?

First and foremost, it means that the council cannot rely solely on the people in the Customer Services function to deliver excellent services to residents and businesses in the borough. The approach that the council needs to take is one of a shift in the culture of the council from a service-led organisation to a customer led organisation.

There are four important guiding principles that need to be addressed across the organisation to make this happen, and each Service needs to adopt the principles into their own delivery. Clearly, the Customer Services department has a role in ensuring it leads the way in demonstrating the principles, and acts as an enabler for the rest of the organisation. It continues to be a priority for the council that most frontline contact migrates into this function, to improve service to residents and to deliver value for money. It is also important for Customer Services to continue to deliver effective customer service hubs and satellite centres throughout the borough and continually improve customer service.

It is, however, in the rest of the organisation and especially those services with a large customer facing presence, where the impact on customers will be felt most. It is these contact points where the community interacts with the council and where the changing needs of local communities will be felt most acutely.

Vision 2030 and the Corporate Plan have guided the development of the Customer Service Strategy. Customer Services provide support for all of the Big Ideas in Vision 2030 and the six Corporate Plan objectives, and there are particularly strong links to the Corporate Plan objective of “Serving Our Customers”.



Progress since the last Customer Service Strategy

The council has made good progress in the implementation of the last Customer Service Strategy, published in 2004. A corporate contact centre has been established, services are migrating in and more and more customer requests are being dealt with at the front line. A new customer relationship management system captures contacts from customers and facilitates faster and easier transactions with them. Five Service Centres have been opened in the Borough to deal with face to face contact from residents in their local area, one in each Neighbourhood Management area.

Since implementation in 2006, the Customer Services unit has handled in excess of 2,000,000 requests from customers, and external inspectors have noted that customer service delivery at the council has improved, with one review citing the customer service operation as “exemplary” and “leading edge”. Customer satisfaction surveys show that over 95% of those surveyed are either satisfied or very satisfied with the service they received.

Several areas of the council have achieved external recognition and awards for the high levels of customer service they offer to residents and businesses alike. Efficiency and value for money in customer contact has been enhanced with over £250,000 cash savings and over £150,000 of service improvements being made.

Significant progress has been made in many areas, for example in Local Environmental Services, where requests for services are now being handled electronically and Revenues and Benefits, which is using new technology to match customer demand to employee resources.

The launch of “Adult Social Care Direct” has transformed the way that customers access social care services. In terms of employee development, over 200 frontline employees have enrolled and completed NVQ2 courses in Customer Service and this will continue.

In its widest sense, Customer Service is of vital importance in delivering against all the council’s corporate priorities and against the three promises:

Delivering excellent services

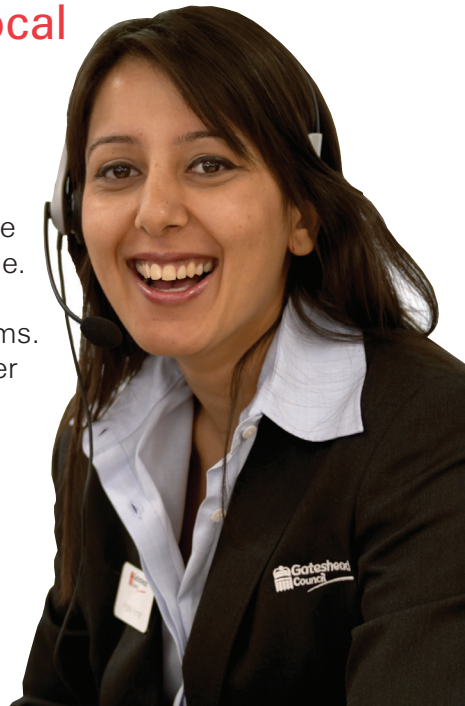
- Centralising major pockets of customer contact and using modern technology to speed up customer interactions.
- Opening service centres in each neighbourhood area in the borough, providing more access points for local people to contact the council and request services.
- Introducing self-service technology, enabling service requests to be entered and tracked by customers on the council’s website.
- Introducing a Customer Relationship Management system to reduce avoidable contact and customers having to repeat information each time they contact the council.
- Redesigned processes for a number of high volume services such as bulky waste collections and school holiday activity bookings, to make them more accessible and effective.

Making Gateshead a better place

- On-street information kiosks providing access to a range of council-based and commercial information i.e. news, travel, entertainment.
- Increasing the number of ways in which residents can report community safety and environmental issues, on the telephone, face to face and via the Internet.

Listening to local people

- Improved communication channels face to face and via the telephone.
- Providing new feedback mechanisms.
- Introducing customer satisfaction surveys.



Implementation of the 2004 strategy has contributed significantly to these goals. However, there is more to be done and services will continue to be integrated into the customer services function in order to deliver against the three promises. However, it is now no longer enough to have a Customer Service Strategy focussed on the Customer Services department.

The new national performance framework and in particular the new national indicator relating to avoidable contact applies not just to Customer Services but to every major council service with a significant frontline presence. Delivering quality services and excellent customer service is the responsibility of every employee and the Customer Services Strategy needs to be renewed in order to recognise this.

The Guiding Principles

The four principles on which Gateshead Council's services should be based are that services should be:

1) Effectiveness

This is about the council listening to what customers need and putting the means in place to ensure that when customers contact the council, employees have the tools that they need to deal with the request. A key element of this principle is resolution at the front line – customer-facing employees across the council need to be given the tools and skills to deliver services to customers, making them more accessible to more residents.

Outcomes:

- Service promises to customers are clear and unambiguous
- Resolution at the front line
- Robust information processes
- All customer facing employee have access to information
- Dealing with people, not transactions
- Confidence and competence is equality and diversity issues
- Equality of service and equal levels of satisfaction across communities
- Opening times that match customer need

2) Value for Money

Customer Service should not be at any cost. The council should deliver services to its customers that are efficient, well managed and measured and that are supported by appropriate technology. This principle is about ensuring that the residents of the borough get good value for money in the services that they request and that efficiency of services can be measured and improved.

Outcomes:

- Performance monitoring is responsive, constructive and used as a base for improvement
- Targets are relevant, achievable and linked to improving service delivery
- ICT and systems are business led and support service delivery
- New technology is adopted where efficient to do so
- Processes are streamlined and bottlenecks are removed.
- Services are delivered with appropriate speed.
- Avoidable contact is reduced

3) Accessibility

As well as being accessible and efficient, council services should be approachable. This principle is about ensuring that services are available when and where residents want them and that arrangements for service delivery are built around what is best for the customer where they live. It is about providing local people with a local voice.

Outcomes:

- Customers can reach us easily in a way they want
- Communication mechanisms are tailored to the needs of diverse communities
- Partnerships are used for service delivery where appropriate, for example with the local health services
- Communities are engaged with in a 2-way dialogue to shape and deliver services with those services designed around customer need.
- All employees are trained in, and aware of the importance of equality and diversity in the delivery of services
- Area and Neighbourhood working is adopted

4) Continuous Improvement

This principle is related to value for money but is different in that it ensures that the services provided not only provide value for money but that they are of appropriate quality and that a culture of customer-focussed continuous improvement is embedded in service delivery. It also ensures that customers are involved in service design and redesign.

Outcomes:

- Service supply is matched to demand as far as possible
- Frontline services organised to reduce transfers
- Continual analysis of avoidable contact, wasted/repeat work and elimination of it
- When things go wrong, service recovery is rapid. Remedies for customers are clear and unambiguous

- There is regular evaluation of services, incorporating the views of customers
- Services are shaped and reshaped to match the changing profile of residents, and are flexible and adaptable.
- All employees are trained in the council's customer service ethos and what it means for delivery of their service and for them personally
- Services aim for, and achieve, the Customer Service Excellence standard

The key is a balance in all of these areas. There is little point in an efficient service if customer cannot access it, or an approachable service which is not delivered effectively. In delivering our customer service strategy, we will ensure that each service is analysed individually and then designed/re-designed and delivered in the most appropriate way for that service. This is not a one-size-fits-all approach.

Areas of Focus – Action Plan

There are four specific, actionable ways in which Services can work towards achieving the outcomes in the principles detailed above. It is important that whilst Customer Services has corporate ownership of the strategy, it is individual Heads of Service that take ownership for delivering this action plan in their service areas as each Service will have different specific actions that need to be taken to realise the outcomes within this Strategy.

1) Service Development

- a. Transforming customer access – council services easily accessible through one front line point of contact for most services. This, in most cases, will involve transitioning customer contact into the Customer Services operation.
- b. Dealing with as much as possible at the front line.
- c. Reducing avoidable contact.
- d. Services are reorganised around the customer rather than around business processes.
- e. Timed appointments are offered to customers where a visit to their home is required or when they need to visit a council office.
- f. Performance is monitored from a customer perspective and meets their needs.
- g. Economies of scale are realised.

2) Technology Development

- a. Maintaining and extending use of new technology to increase efficiency and to improve both flexibility and accessibility.
- b. Increasing the number of ways in which customers can request services and track the requests they have made.

3) Neighbourhood based Development

- a. Develop the number of access points throughout the borough and the range of services that can be accessed through them.
- b. In principle any council building that is open to the public is a potential customer access point for council services.

4) Employee Development

- a. In order to deliver the Strategy, employee training and development will be vital.
- b. Recognised courses in customer services should be offered to frontline employees alongside equality and diversity training and training in the local democratic system.
- c. A focus on joined up service delivery across all council functions.
- d. A culture of customer focus should be evident in all employees.

