

Open Report on behalf of Debbie Barnes OBE, Chief Executive

Report to:	Councillor M J Hill OBE, Leader of the Council (Executive Councillor: Resources, Communications and Commissioning)
Date:	07 September 2021
Subject:	Customer Strategy
Decision Reference:	I022418
Key decision?	Yes

Summary:

This report sets out a proposed Customer Strategy to support the achievement of our ambition to provide good value Council services. It seeks to engage, listen, and respond to our customers and involve them in designing our processes and services to better meet their current and future needs. Co-designing our services will enable an efficient customer journey, ensuring we put customers first and that they receive a good quality experience when interacting with us.

Recommendation(s):

That the Leader of the Council approves the adoption of the Customer Strategy 2021-2024 in the form set out in Appendix A.

Alternatives Considered:

1. The Council could operate without a Customer Strategy. However, this would limit the Council's ability to coordinate and align activities around current and future customer needs and ensure the delivery of the benefits contained in the action plan.

Reasons for Recommendation:

The Customer Strategy will help residents to access services and ensure that they are designed to meet both their current and future needs. The strategy supports customers to be able to transact independently at a time and place that suits them, whilst still ensuring that those with the greatest need are able to access services through traditional

means. The Customer Strategy is one of a number of strategies that are being developed to enable the Council to achieve its outcomes within the Corporate Plan alongside the Digital, Community Engagement, People, and Business Intelligence Strategies.

1. Background

The Corporate Plan sets out what we want to achieve for our residents and local communities. We know that expectations continue to change in relation to when and how customers want to access services. There is a need to ensure a good quality customer experience, whether over the phone, online or face to face. In addition, customers want to be able to engage with us at a time and in a manner which suits their personal situation. This is increasingly through digital means. The strategy reinforces our drive to use existing and emerging technologies to become more efficient and accessible to the public, thereby increasing community participation, and enhancing the overall customer experience.

Overview of the Customer Strategy

The Customer Strategy (attached at Appendix A) sets the following vision:

“We will deliver strong, joined up services that are designed to ensure we are able to meet our customer’s current and future needs”

Our research has told us that customers want to have more flexibility on how and when they interact with us to enable them to operate independently and deal with us at a time and in a way that meets their needs.

The strategy and supporting action plan set out how we will enhance our services to provide easier access and improved end-to-end solutions. The Customer Strategy builds on the aspirations of the Digital Strategy and the People Strategy to ensure that we have the right tools and skills in place to consistently deliver a high-quality customer experience. We know that our customers want to be able to transact with us in a convenient, efficient and increasingly digital manner as well as being able to find out information and seek reassurance where necessary. The strategy helps to enable customers to become more self-sufficient and ultimately seeks to reduce demand in our contact centre.

To achieve the outcomes of the strategy, services must be simple to access and customers must have confidence that the technology that they are using meets their needs. We know that customers don’t like numerous levels of telephone menus, robots that don’t understand them or complicated forms that require them to search for additional information they don’t have to hand. We will therefore need to use modern technologies to ensure their experience is simple, quick, and trusted.

However, it is recognised that Lincolnshire is diverse and not all customers will either choose to interact with us digitally or have the skills and confidence required. The strategy

therefore continues to maintain and where appropriate enhance other access channels, including telephone interactions and face to face meetings, to enable access for residents.

The strategy has been developed with three core priorities:

1. **Customer Experience** – putting our customers at the heart of what we do, and ensuring our employees are clear and fair when communicating with customers
2. **Voice of the Customer** – ensuring a strong customer voice across the organisation, working with customers to improve the way that we do things
3. **Our Future Offer** – Enabling the Council to be in the best possible place to determine the right operating model from 2024 onwards

Customer Experience

This element of the strategy seeks to ensure all our teams provide a good quality experience to our customers and that it is not seen as purely the role of the Customer Service Centre (CSC). Whilst many services already have a strong focus on the customer, the strategy seeks to bolster this and ensure a consistent approach.

We want to make it as easy as possible for customers to know what they are entitled to and to be able to access our services. A customer's journey may involve multiple teams or working across partners. Through the Customer Strategy we will work across our teams, with partners, contractors, and suppliers to help deliver joined-up services based around customer need rather than the needs of individual teams or the systems we use. Our Customer Charter will set out the standards around how we engage with customers, whether internal or external, focusing on the way we communicate, behave, and treat each other respectfully.

By promoting self-service, we will reduce our cost of direct service delivery. We will continue to offer the flexibility of different routes to deal with us; however, it is recognised that some services will be more appropriate to be provided digitally than others. By moving transactional interactions to digital channels allows us to spend more time working with those customers who have more complex needs.

Voice of the Customer

We want to build on our current levels of engagement with customers to understand their views and to help improve our service delivery. This builds on the principles set out within our proposed Community Strategy. To support this, we will develop a community of customer advocates who will support us in designing and delivering services to meet our customers' needs. This will see us working with customers to build, test and improve solutions based on what matters to them and where we can enhance the experience.

Being more proactive with our customers will help us understand how things are going and enable us to resolve any problems before they become major issues. We will do this through responding to their feedback and using data to find better ways of doing things. Many areas across the Council already obtain valuable feedback on the services we

provide, and we will work to consolidate this information and improve the feedback loops we have between different teams.

As we make improvements we will go back to the data, checking for positive impacts, and look for further opportunities to enhance our offer.

Our Future Offer

Our contact centre is currently managed on an outsourced contract that comes to an end in 2024. We therefore need to give some thought to our future operating model. This includes the size and scale of the operation, the use of supporting technologies and whether we can best meet customer needs through an in-sourced or outsourced provision. Work is already underway to evaluate options in this area. We will be seeking to refine our operations between now and 2024 so that we have a more efficient and effective solution in place by the end of the existing contract. This will see us working actively with Serco to improve our services, as well as drawing on the actions within the Digital Strategy and wider transformation agenda to modernise operations.

Consideration will also be given to the most appropriate performance measures that will be used in the future to ensure best value and high levels of customer satisfaction.

To achieve the higher levels of performance and satisfaction, we expect that our future operating model will utilise data more effectively to predict customer needs and the services customers want to receive from us in the future. This will allow proactive promotion of key information and access channels at the right point in time. This will be supplemented by appropriate benchmarking activities to assess our performance alongside other public and private sector organisations and to help us to continually improve how we deliver better customer service in the future.

Engagement

In developing the Customer Strategy, we have undertaken engagement to ensure our priorities are aligned to the customer.

Engagement with staff performing front facing roles dealing with customers, senior managers, staff at the CSC and two sessions with members has been completed. Through the Serco Experience Lab, targeted customers have been interviewed to gain their views on what they consider good service should look or feel like and how they would want to interact with us in the future.

Wider engagement with residents was carried out through the community engagement team from 17 May to 18 June 2021. In summary, from the responses received, this evidences that:

- Having knowledgeable staff who are able to resolve the issue is a reflection of good customer service.

- Customers wish to retain a choice of how to contact us and not be passed around to get the answer they need.
- A significant proportion of contacts are either to find out information or to complain about something.
- Over half of respondents were concerned about moving more towards digital and there being fewer staff to support them if needed.

With the above feedback in mind, our Customer Strategy has been developed to provide a framework from which we can build upon our current strengths to provide the best experience when dealing with us. Our strategy will support us to actively engage, listen to and respond to our communities whilst promoting innovation and technology to meet changing expectations, ensuring we continue to provide good value services into the future.

In addition to the Customer Strategy at Appendix A, an Action Plan has been developed which will be a live document kept under regular review so as to be responsive to our growing understanding of our customers' needs. A copy is attached for information at Appendix B.

2. Legal Issues:

Equality Act 2010

Under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, the Council must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the Act.
- Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
- Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

The relevant protected characteristics are age; disability; gender reassignment; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex; and sexual orientation.

Having due regard to the need to advance equality of opportunity involves having due regard, in particular, to the need to:

- Remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by persons who share a relevant protected characteristic that are connected to that characteristic.
- Take steps to meet the needs of persons who share a relevant protected characteristic that are different from the needs of persons who do not share it.
- Encourage persons who share a relevant protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity in which participation by such persons is disproportionately low.

The steps involved in meeting the needs of disabled persons that are different from the needs of persons who are not disabled include, in particular, steps to take account of disabled persons' disabilities.

Having due regard to the need to foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it involves having due regard, in particular, to the need to tackle prejudice, and promote understanding.

Compliance with the duties in section 149 may involve treating some persons more favourably than others.

The duty cannot be delegated and must be discharged by the decision-maker. To discharge the statutory duty the decision-maker must analyse all the relevant material with the specific statutory obligations in mind. If a risk of adverse impact is identified consideration must be given to measures to avoid that impact as part of the decision making process.

The Customer Strategy has been developed to improve access and the quality of services to our customers. It enhances the channels available and provides greater choice, support and independence to customers. It will support those with protected characteristics to be able to interact with the Council in a time, place and manner that meets their needs.

Joint Strategic Needs Analysis (JSNA) and the Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy (JHWS)

The Council must have regard to the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) and the Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy (JHWS) in coming to a decision.

The Customer Strategy will see a positive impact on the health and wellbeing of individuals through its links with both the community and digital strategies. It will enable improved access to services and where necessary, enable greater support to those in need.

Crime and Disorder

Under section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, the Council must exercise its various functions with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent crime and disorder in its area (including anti-social and other behaviour adversely affecting the local environment), the misuse of drugs, alcohol and other substances in its area and re-offending in its area.

The strategy will enable the voices of communities to be heard and services to be better targeted including communities experiencing crime and disorder and services designed to address those behaviours.

3. Conclusion

Our Customer Strategy will enable Lincolnshire County Council to achieve the following outcomes:

- Enhance the skills of colleagues to deliver a high-quality customer experience.
- Enable customers to operate independently and interact with the Council at a time and manner that best meets their needs.
- Share information to enable communities to thrive, be sustainable and progressive.
- Engage with our customers to ensure we design services to meet their current and future needs.
- Utilise the principles of our Digital Strategy to enhance the ways our services are accessed and delivered.
- Use modern technologies to ensure digital channels are effective and efficient whilst still ensuring that those unable to interact with us in this way receive the help and support they need.
- Ability to meet changing expectations whilst ensuring good value services.

It is therefore recommended that the Leader of the Council considers the content of the draft Customer Strategy and approves its adoption by the Council in the form as detailed within Appendix A.

4. Legal Comments:

The Council has the power to adopt the Strategy in the form attached at Appendix A.

The decision is consistent with the Policy Framework and within the remit of the Executive Councillor.

5. Resource Comments:

Delivery of the Action Plan to implement the Customer Strategy is expected to be achieved within existing resources including those committed to this purpose in the Transformation Programme.

As services evolve as an outcome of the Strategy and Action Plan, any changes in the capital or revenue resourcing requirements will be monitored and reviewed through the Council's normal budget setting and medium term financial planning processes.

6. Consultation

a) Has Local Member Been Consulted?

Not Applicable

b) Has Executive Councillor Been Consulted?

Yes

c) Scrutiny Comments

The decision will be considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board at its meeting on 26 August 2021 and the comments of the Board will be reported to the Leader of the Council.

Members have been engaged in developing the Customer Strategy at two workshops in June/July 2021 with 24 councillors attending. The Leader of the Council and Councillor Mrs S Woolley, Executive Councillor for NHS Liaison, Community Engagement, Registration and Coroners, have been collaborated with, in developing the proposed Customer Strategy.

d) Risks and Impact Analysis

An Equality Impact Analysis (attached at Appendix C) has been completed on the strategy and the benefits that will be achieved through implementing our action plan are predominantly positive, including greater accessibility to information and services, at a time and place that suits the customer, through a range of different access channels.

It is acknowledged that across Lincolnshire there are areas of poor digital connectivity and pockets of individuals or communities who may not have the technology to access services through digital; however, to support these individuals we will not be removing access via telephone or where required face to face services.

Our customer digital offer is being developed to enhance our service provision and increase opportunities for access.

7. Appendices

These are listed below and attached at the back of the report	
Appendix A	Customer Strategy
Appendix B	Customer Strategy Action Plan
Appendix C	Customer Strategy Equality Impact Analysis (EIA)

8. Background Papers

No background papers within Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972 were used in the preparation of this report.

This report was written by Andrew Hancy, who can be contacted on 01522 554031 or andrew.hancy@lincolnshire.gov.uk.