



Decision maker:	Cabinet member health and adult wellbeing
Decision date:	10th February 2020
Title of report:	Engagement Standards Update
Report by:	Assistant Director Corporate Support

Classification

Open

Decision type

Non-key

Wards affected

(All Wards);

Purpose and summary

To approve revised customer service standards which outline the methods of contact and expected response time. This update is based on increased use of digital contact and introduces new standards including notice period on temporarily closing offices, standard consultation periods and dealing with unreasonable behaviour. The standards are published on the council website to outline what residents should expect when contacting Herefordshire Council. Whilst these standards cover general contact with the council there will also be different requirements which will be in legal frameworks (e.g. freedom of information requests) which will be outlined separately. The standards have been set to realistically balance the council's resources with reasonable response time.

Recommendation(s)

That:

- (a) The objectives of engagement standards in paragraph 11 are accepted; and**
- (b) The updated standards outlined in paragraph 16 are agreed.**

Alternative options

1. That the standards are not updated. The standards as already published on the council website ([link](#)) can remain as they are which would be acceptable in terms of generally still being relevant. However this is not reflective of the recommended changes which bring the standards up to date and relevant for increased digital contact.
2. That the response times for enquiries are reduced. This is possible but would challenge the organisation in meeting those expectations considering resources and demands on services which have to deal with safety and safeguarding as a priority.
3. That the council does not have any published standards. Authorities have gone down this route. However, having standards does two functions – one, so there is an expectation communicated to residents; two, that officers and members know what is expected of them in terms of engagement with residents.

Key considerations

4. It is the case that the majority of people will need very little contact with Herefordshire Council as part of their everyday lives whilst the council continues to deliver services often behind the scenes. Through its contact with residents the council aims to enable people to access services they need as independently as possible whilst providing vital support during different stages of people's lives. This links to the council's "strength based" approach that emphasises people self-determination and strengths.
5. The revised standards are concerned with how people access services and information when they need to. There will be many different types of interactions between residents and the council ranging from regular interaction to one-off contact to report a fault or pay a bill. For the purpose of the standards the focus is on day to day services interacting on general areas of contact rather than engagement or care services needing different types and levels of contact. Any statutory requirements are superior to the general standards outlined in this report, and different processes will be in place for particular service areas with their own processes and related time table – these are outlined by the relevant service areas on the council website and provided information.
6. The nature of how people interact with their council has changed considerably and will continue to change. The use of technology, especially internet access, has created an opportunity for residents to be able to access information for themselves rather than rely on a person at the council - it means people can complete their contact at a time which suits them via the web as the council increases the range of online services. Online communication is also cheaper for the council meaning that resources can be targeted at greatest need and the increased use of social media means that information can be shared quickly and effectively – especially important at a time of crisis such as adverse weather.
7. However, the council also recognises that not everyone has the means, the skills and the wish for their contact to be digital. Though 93% of adults in Herefordshire had used the internet in the last 3 months (Office of National Statistics–2019) that leaves around 11k people who have not and may never use online communications. The people who don't use the internet tend to be older in age and cost can also be a barrier for all ages. Therefore, the council aims to retain its face-to-face customer service in Hereford and corporate phone contact (along with specialist phone services for safeguarding reporting).

8. The “Talk Community” programme will also provide face to face, proactive and interactive services in locations as a way of addressing a combination of needs of an individual.
9. Engagement relies on two way communication and co-operation - by working together the council and the resident can complete a task, resolve an issue, or report a fault with the public becoming the “eyes and ears” in the county which will help others.
10. Whilst the council will share positive messages and information, the council often has the task of ensuring the public meet legal compliance and enforcement regulations – these can often be unpopular and confusing but are in place to benefit the wider community (e.g. planning regulations, data protection, health and safety, illegal trading, blue badge misuse).
11. The objectives of engagement standards are as follows:
 - **Quality contact:** resolve a query and issues as soon as possible treating people with respect and understanding, expecting the same in return.
 - **Digital accessibility:** for digital contact to be the first choice communication method including working towards easy use web transactions whilst recognising that some people will still need face to face and phone contact.
 - **Recognise difference and being open:** recognise people’s specific needs and be transparent as to why a decision is made and a course of action taken.
12. Important in delivering the objectives is being clear of the approach and expectations between the council and the people using any service as below:
 - Treat people with dignity and respect, and expect the same consideration in return.
 - Respect people’s privacy and confidentiality, and every consideration given in managing people’s data.
 - Listen and respond to concerns, and act to resolve queries where the council has power to do so.
 - Prioritise resources to deal with areas of high risk, specifically danger to the public and where the most vulnerable in the community may be affected.
 - Provide an interpreting service for customers who do not speak English or where English is not sufficient.
 - Design services in mind to be accessible by disabled people and ensure reasonable adjustments are made where needed, including information in alternative formats on request (e.g. large print and Braille).
 - Welcome feedback on practices to make sure the council are offering the best service possible next to the resources available.
13. Working Together helps the council achieve the best service possible and use the resources to greatest effect residents are asked to:
 - Consider if a query can be resolved online before phoning or visiting.
 - Keep appointments, or let the council know with as much notice as possible if unable to attend.
 - Reflect on the impact of your behaviour on others – if at all aggressive or intimidating, customers will be asked to modify behaviour but if it continues contact will cease and the unreasonable behaviour policy will be implemented. This includes threatening behaviour (in person, on the phone, email or social media) which could be considered criminal.

14. Open Authority means that the council aims to be transparent regarding decisions and information mindful of legal requirements. There are a number of ways information is shared:
- Information, forms and advice published on the council website.
 - As a matter of course scrutiny, cabinet member and cabinet reports are published in advance of meetings and decisions taken, with minutes published within 10 working days of meetings taking place; the reason for any information being exempt or confidential clearly given. Ability to attend meetings and ask questions at committees and influence scrutiny work programmes.
 - Publication of transactions over £500 and publish contracts register.
 - 95% of Freedom of Information (FOI) and Environmental Information Regulations requests (EIR) met within timescale.
 - Publish facts and figures on Herefordshire held by the council.
15. Feedback is welcome whether someone is happy or unhappy with the service provided, through:
- A [compliment](#).
 - Participating in [consultations](#).
 - A [formal complaint](#) if not satisfied with the standard of service, action or lack of action.
 - A [children's complaints](#) specifically made by, on behalf of, or in respect of children.
 - Specific comments on [adult social care and health care](#) services.
 - Contacting the [Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman](#) relating to a mistake made by the Council, poor or no service, unreasonable delays and/or bad advice.
 - Contact the Independent Regulatory Challenge Panel which provides an independent means for any person to complain about the actions of [Health and Safety Executive](#) (HSE) or Local Authority (LA) health and safety regulators.

16. The below table outlines the changes from the current standards to those proposed:

Current	Proposed update	Why change
As more services become available via this website, you can access information and transact online immediately, 24 hours a day - including making payments . There are now a number of ways you can directly report a fault or issue online . This means the reporting will automatically pass directly into our back office systems.	Web: As more and more services become available via the internet, customers will be able to access information and transact online, keeping website "down time" to a minimum for making improvements and cyber secure.	Updated text and commitment to limit "down time" of the website.
If you visit us in person at our Hereford customer service centre , someone will see you as soon as possible to establish who the best person is to help you - there may be a queue at busy times. If you need to see one of our specialist officers we will advise you of approximate waiting times or arrange an appointment for an alternative time.	If you visit us in person at our Hereford customer service centre , someone will see you as soon as possible to establish who the best person is to help you - there may be a queue at busy times. If you need to see one of our specialist officers we will advise you of approximate waiting times or arrange an appointment for an alternative time.	No change.

<p>You can contact us using our online contact form selecting the relevant query and service area. By choosing this method an email will be directed to the right service and your query should be dealt with more quickly. A response to a general email or letter will take in the region of 10 working days if a response is needed (or default to legal requirement for certain services).</p>	<p>E-form and Email: there are specific e-forms on the website that can be used to communicate with the council or email address for the service. Unless stated or statutory timescale, a response if needed will be within 10 working days.</p>	<p>Slight change of text in saying "within 10 working days" rather than "in the region of 10 working days".</p>
	<p>Electronic contact: The council will use electronic messaging including email as the default response to a query, though understand that phone contact is sometimes appropriate and a statutory requirement for post for some areas.</p>	<p>This is to reflect largely current practice and make clear to staff and residents that email will be used by default and moving to different forms of electronic messaging to help communication with residents. This is rather than post that is more costly, takes longer and uses print / paper resource. There will still be some services that are required to use post but that will be based on statutory requirement. Residents can request to have post communication.</p>
<p>We will respond to phone calls as soon as possible, though at busy times calls will be held in a queue until an operator is free, telephone 01432 260000. Payments can be made via the phone through an automated process available 24 hours a day, telephone 01432 260200. If relevant and required, a specialist officer will normally call you back within five working days.</p>	<p>Phone: If a return call is relevant and required a response will normally be made within 5 working days, even if a holding response is needed whilst further investigation takes place. This could involve leaving a message and three attempts to make contact if a message cannot be left.</p>	<p>Refined text though retaining the 5 working day response. Additional is the point regarding 3 attempts to make phone contact.</p>
	<p>Out of office messages: message for phone and email to include out of office notice with the date due back in the office and alternative contact telephone number if away for more than 2 working days.</p>	<p>New requirement for staff to ensure an out of office voice and email message is used.</p>
<p>Please keep appointments, or let us know, with as much notice as possible, if you are unable to attend. If an appointment is not kept without notification of cancellation we will assume the issue is resolved.</p>	<p>Missed appointments: It is understandable that sometimes it is not possible to attend an appointment with the council and if that is the case this should be cancelled 24 hours previous to the appointment. If there is a non-attendance without cancelling it will</p>	<p>Updated text so clearer regarding missing appointments.</p>

	be considered the support is no longer needed and a reappointment will not be automatically rearranged.	
A response to a general email or letter will take in the region of 10 working days if a response is needed (or default to legal requirement for certain services).	Letters: if letters are someone's preferred and required method of contact a standard 15 working days response to allow time for postage.	The time to respond to a letter has increased from 10 to 15 days. This is to recognise the process for receiving and sending post.
<u>Consultation</u> - take part in our consultations. Most consultations are available to complete online.	Public consultation: consultations to be published on the council's website with at least a 6 week consultation period, with a summary of findings also published.	The update gives a standard for consultation period of at least 6 weeks.
	Temporary change of availability: the council will give at least 2 weeks' notice of change of opening or contact hours with emergency closures only in exceptional circumstances (e.g. emergency incidents, safety for staff and customers).	New standard to address any bad practice giving short notice access to a service or sites.
We will try to respond to your questions sent through social media channels where we can provide a quick answer, or signpost you to the correct web page or service. For specific service queries and requests please use our online contact form .	Social media: the council will use social media to distribute notices and information of relevance. The council will not automatically respond to posts but will try to clarify misinformation.	Text updated to make clear that the council will not respond to every social media post.

Community impact

17. The revised standards aim to give the community clarity regarding contact with the council. This includes supporting feedback, openness and treating people with respect. In effect the approach is to be an "informed friend" who has access to a range of services and information that would be of use to a resident shared in a positive way. In the same way residents to be the "eyes and ears" in the county providing feedback and information to help the council do its job.
18. Changes regarding availability of services as outlined above would require a record of decision published on the council website giving the reasons for a temporary closure.

Equality duty

19. Under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, the 'general duty' on public authorities is set out as follows:

A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to -

- (a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
 - (b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
 - (c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
20. The public sector equality duty (specific duty) requires us to consider how we can positively contribute to the advancement of equality and good relations, and demonstrate that we are paying 'due regard' in our decision making in the design of policies and in the delivery of services. The engagement standards will support the council in demonstrating its commitment to the equality duty, as it commits the council to considering "reasonable adjustment" and alternative formats to improve accessibility of our services. One area where it has been identified as a possible issue is digital access by older people. To mitigate this the council retains its face to face customer service function in Hereford and its call centre, along with the development of the Talk Community approach.

Resource implications

21. There is no direct financial implication for this decision. There is limited additional burden for officers to deliver on the standards compared to what is already in place. However, it should be noted that there is a risk (see below) that demand on services could lead to the standards not being met.
22. The development of the council website and creating more digital services has a financial impact if considerably expanded. This will be considered as part of a separate decision if additional investment is needed.
23. Where relevant built into new commissions will be the requirement to at least meet the engagement standards outlined by the council.

Legal implications

24. The revised customer services standards sets out the council's commitments and service standards that can be expected when the council is contacted. It identifies criteria that council staff can use to assess and report on their performance and ensure they are providing a good service.
25. A service should review meeting the service standards to support learning and improvement within the council.

Risk management

26. The risks are outlined below:

Risk / opportunity	Mitigation
That the council is not able to meet the new standards based on resources.	The burden of meeting the standards is not greatly different from the current standards.

Reputational damage based on the standards not being met.	This is an accepted risk balanced with the ambitions in producing the standards in providing clarity for residents.
That staff do not follow the standards.	The revised standards give opportunity to remind employees of expectation of engagement with residents. The standards will be promoted via internal communications.
Additional complaints as the standards are not met.	This is an accepted risk which will allow the council to understand where there are inadequacies / demand pressures within services.
The public knowing about the standards.	The standards will be published on the council's website; paper versions available at Hereford Customer Service Centre and in libraries.
Performance not being measured	This is an accepted risk as not a single tool to measure all contact across the council. However, if a concern is raised the standards are not being met this can be investigated.

27. These are risks within services across the organisation.

Consultees

28. Internal consultation.

Appendices

None

Background papers

None identified

Term	Definition
FOI	Freedom of information request
EIR	Environmental Information Regulations
on-line services	Services that are provided through the internet
Office of National Statistics	Independent producer of official statistics and the recognised national statistical institute of the UK.
Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman	Considers complaints about councils, all adult social care

<u>Care Ombudsman</u>	providers and some other organisations providing local public services.
<u>Health and Safety Executive</u>	National organisation aimed to reduce work-related death, injury and ill health.