

Herefordshire Customer Service Strategy

Decision maker: Cabinet Member Finance, Corporate Services and Planning

Meeting date: Thursday 7 December 2023

Report by: Cabinet member finance and corporate services;

Classification

Open

Decision type

Key

This is a key decision because it is likely to be significant having regard to: the strategic nature of the decision; and / or whether the outcome will have an impact, for better or worse, on the amenity of the community or quality of service provided by the authority to a significant number of people living or working in the locality (two or more wards) affected.

Notice has been served in accordance with Part 3, Section 9 (Publicity in Connection with Key Decisions) of the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Meetings and Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012.

Wards affected

(All Wards);

Purpose

To approve and adopt the Herefordshire Council Customer Service Strategy

Recommendation(s)

That:

- a) Cabinet approves and adopts the Herefordshire Council Customer Service Strategy.**

Alternative options

1. Do nothing. If the strategy is not adopted, the council will continue to operate a fragmented approach to customer service and will not derive maximum benefit from the use of technology to improve the service provided to customers.

Key considerations

2. The way residents work and live today is evolving fast, with digital technology having an impact on everyone's lives. Many public service users now expect access 24/7 to services. It is widely recognised that public services need to radically transform to keep pace with the digital evolution and customer expectations as well as finding new ways to add value.
3. Demographic trends, rurality, financial pressures and a need to improve performance in services are key drivers for change and can to some extent be mitigated through the effective use of alternative methods, including, but not limited to, digital tools and technologies.
4. As part of the ongoing transformation of council services programme, , analysis of the current customer offer has been carried out. This identified that:
 - a. The current model is a decentralised customer offering with a significant volume of transactional, low-complexity demand. Services receive a high volume of transactional demand that could be triaged at the front door. There is limited opportunity to self-serve with technology not being deployed to effectively enable increased self-serve or explore automation opportunities.
 - b. Staff in service teams organise their customer contact service differently across the council. This has led to a fragmented service, different operating hours and varying levels of customer experience. There is evidence of duplication of effort by staff handling high levels of transactional demand at service level. The Council currently operates 7 contact centres, with the central switchboard operation, delivered by customer services.
 - c. Digital self-serve opportunities, where they exist, are not currently maximised and often lead to resource intensive 'back office' processes. This manual processing is compounded by the number of follow-up contacts that are often required.
 - d. In terms of telephone contact, there is limited data regarding the content of calls to understand how demand can be better managed.
5. The Herefordshire Council Customer Service Strategy ("the Strategy"), as set out in Appendix A, sets out the council's commitment to enhance the customer offer. Through the Strategy, the council aims to:
 - a. increase the number of services available on-line, so customers can access them 24/7
 - b. provide an improved and consistent customer experience
 - c. maximise the use of technology to improve customer access
 - d. use customer insight and feedback data to develop and enhance service delivery
 - e. secure high customer satisfaction levels
6. The customer contact model will be simplified and standardised across the council. Information and advice on the council's web site should effectively signpost customers. Accuracy and consistency are fundamental to achieving that aim. By enhancing the options for

self-service, the council will ensure that its human resource can focus on supporting those unable to use digital means and/or with complex queries.

7. The Strategy provides the framework for the customer transformation work. A prioritised list of customer processes based on volume has been identified. Each of them will be analysed and improved in the next 12 months in order to maximise efficiency and effectiveness.

Community impact

8. The Strategy has been developed in line with the aim within the County Plan to “enhance digital connectivity for communities and business”.
9. Customer expectations have grown and they now expect a quality on-line service with options to speak to a person. We aim to provide an excellent, consistent experience regardless of channel.
10. Supporting our residents to become confident dealing with us on-line helps them to be more independent and find the information they need.

Environmental Impact

11. Herefordshire Council provides and purchases a wide range of services for the people of Herefordshire. Together with partner organisations in the private, public and voluntary sectors we share a strong commitment to improving our environmental sustainability, achieving carbon neutrality and to protect and enhance Herefordshire’s outstanding natural environment.
12. The use of digital technology as part of improving the customer offer for council customers supports the delivery of the council’s environmental policy commitments. It is a key enabler in supporting low carbon activity with the provision of information digitally reducing the need for printing and postage.

Equality duty

13. 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.

14. 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. Organisations who deliver services on our behalf will be made aware of their contractual requirements in regards to equality legislation.
15. The council's website, as the main source of information and advice, will conform to all the relevant accessibility standards. Access to council services through digital self-service will ensure that people can access services at a time that suits them. The council will still maintain telephony and face to face contact for those unable to access digital means and/or for complex queries. This will ensure that all services are accessible to all whichever route they use. . In addition, residents who do not have access to digital can visit a library where staff will be able to assist them where required.

Resource implications

16. There are no direct financial implications of adopting the Herefordshire Council Customer Services Strategy. Any future work to improve processes which may require investment in systems or other support will be subject to securing financial investment at the time and in line with a robust business case.

Legal implications

17. There are no direct legal implications arising as a result of this report.

Risk management

18. The following risks have been identified;

Risk / opportunity	Mitigation
Exclusion of residents with no or limited access to digital	Maintain face to face customer routes for contact
Current systems unable to support new ways of working	Development of fully costed business cases to secure necessary financial investment
Resistance to adopting new ways of working within the organisation	Robust communications plan and commitment of Corporate Leadership Team to drive new approach.

Consultees

19. Political Group consultation was held on 11th December 2023 and their feedback has been included in the paper and in the Customer Service Strategy.
20. The Political Group attendees were supportive of the approach described within the Customer Service Strategy. The feedback received was:
 - The inclusion of the ownership of queries
 - Ensuring equality of experience whichever route a resident uses
 - Inclusion of provision for access to terminals to support residents accessing services online

- Inclusion of reference to the other delivery partners that Council uses such as Hoople, BBLP, Waste Provider, etc.
- Reference to how data will be utilised to deliver intuitive solutions

21. No public consultation was undertaken at this stage as this is an internal review of service operation.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Herefordshire Council Customer Service Strategy

Background papers

None identified

Report Reviewers Used for appraising this report:

Please note this section must be completed before the report can be published		
Governance	john Coleman	Date 11/12/2023
Finance	Karen Morris	Date Click or tap to enter a date.
Legal	Emma-Jane Brewerton	Date 07/12/2023
Communications	Click or tap here to enter text.	Date Click or tap to enter a date.
Equality Duty	Harriet Yellin	Date Click or tap to enter a date.
Procurement	Lee Robertson	Date 30/11/2023
Risk	Click or tap here to enter text.	Date Click or tap to enter a date.
Approved by	Hilary Hall, Corporate Director Community Wellbeing	Date 15/12/2023

Please include a glossary of terms, abbreviations and acronyms used in this report.