

I. Introduction

This strategy is intended as a guidance document for the council, setting out the roadmap and key work streams that we need to address if we are to become truly customer focussed. It is not intended as a customer facing document but rather is for internal use.

The council has a vision to make Central Bedfordshire a great place to live and work. Critical to us achieving that vision is our ability to deliver value, choice and excellence in services to our residents. We know that our residents are increasingly expecting to get services online and expect to receive similar levels of service from the council as they do from the multitude of other providers that they deal with.

That expectation suits our purposes as well – customers who are able to use unmediated channels to self serve are also accessing services in the most cost effective and efficient way, enabling scarce resources to be diverted to meet the needs of some of our most vulnerable residents. However, we also know that it is some of our most vulnerable residents who are also the most ‘digitally deprived’ and we are absolute in our commitment that customers should receive a great service, no matter which channel they access services through.

We are increasingly aware that simply transacting online is only step in the value that we can create for our customers – we want also to be able to create value by proposing services or information that they may need, or by joining up with other providers. For example if a customer registers a birth on line, they should also be given details of library books and services for infants, and booked in for the first vaccination with the NHS.

Finally, we know that truly customer focussed organisations learn from their mistakes in a self critical, transparent and systemic way and that process is also described in this strategy.



Cllr Maurice Jones
Deputy Leader of the Council
Executive Portfolio Holder for Corporate Resources

II. Setting the scene

The focus in our early years of this Council has been to create a stable organisation, get the basics right and turn around poor performance. We are now entering the second phase of our development where our focus will be to continue to make Central Bedfordshire a great place to live and work.

Over the last four years, customer satisfaction increased from 32% to 72% (Sept 2013) and this strategy is designed to ensure that we continue to improve resident satisfaction with the council through delivering an excellent customer experience. To make this a reality we need to have a holistic understanding of our customers' needs and preferences, to be obsessed with their experience regardless of which Council services they are using and to focus on improvement.

We recognise that the day to day interactions our customers have with the Council and its services, whether that is the image we project face-to-face, over the telephone or in letters, how we speak to our customers, or the way services are accessed, will be critical to their perception of us as an organisation. Through this strategy, which builds on our values, we seeking to demonstrate our commitment to provide our customers with the best and most cost effective experience possible and one which meets their needs and is easily accessible.

We looked at some of the 'best in class' organisations for customer services. First Direct – although belonging to one of the most unpopular industries – banking – regularly beats John Lewis and others to be top rated for customer satisfaction and listens well to customers.

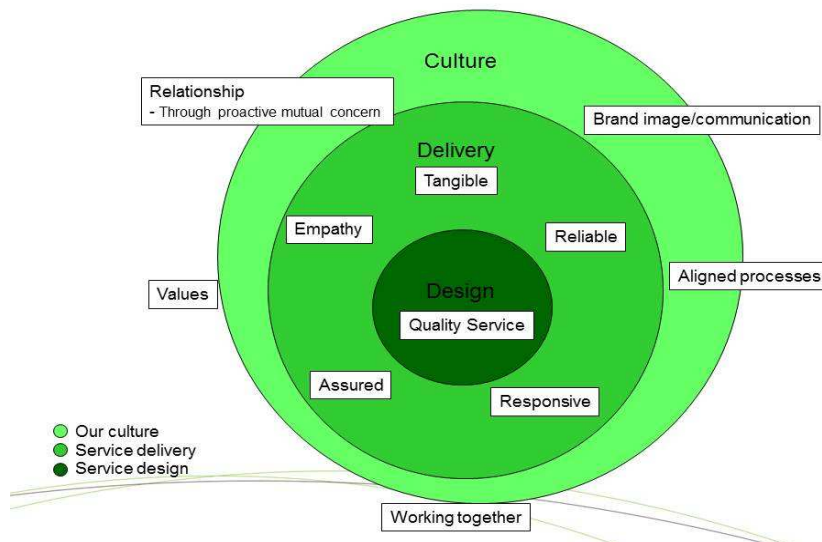


Source: First Direct; Alan Hughes, former CEO, First Direct

III. Being “best in class” on customer focus

We know that to achieve great customer service we need to design great services, and then deliver them in excellent ways, and on top of that have an organisational culture that supports excellent customer service – only when all these are aligned and delivered will we be succeeding.

This diagram shows how these three rings of customer satisfaction interact and support each other



Our aim is

To create an excellent experience of the Council for all our residents by putting the customer at the heart of everything we do.

To deliver on that aim, in implementing this strategy we will:

- Be evidence led – our services will be informed by customer insight.
- Be joined up in our approach – anticipating customer needs across the Council and the wider public sector.
- Be inclusive – nobody will be disadvantaged if they cannot or choose not to use digital services.
- Enhance all our channels - so they are easy and a pleasure to use.

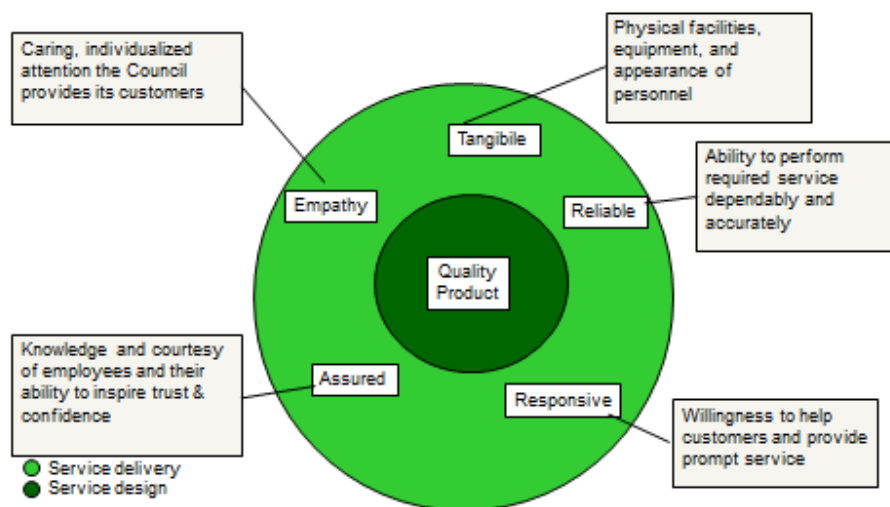
- Innovate – exploiting technology creatively and in line with customer preferences (e.g. mobile ready and interactive).
- Keep it simple – creating processes that avoid unnecessary or duplicated effort on the part of customers and of staff.
- Empower our staff – to take ownership and make decisions
- Be proactive with our customers – keeping them informed and engaged through their journey of contact with us.

The ways in which we design and then deliver our services is going to become increasingly important as we implement this strategy.

The ‘product’ or service that we deliver will need to be increasingly tailored to meet individual customer requirements, but it is not enough to simply have a good quality product – the WAY in which we deliver our services is of equal importance, and that includes both the environment in which the service is delivered and the capability of our staff to attend to customer needs.

This diagram shows the elements that we need to address;

We particularly need to focus on improving service design and the ways in which we deliver our services



IV. Workstreams

We have set four workstreams for ourselves in the pursuit of this strategy. They are:

- a) Knowledge and Insight
- b) Channel Optimisation and Shift
- c) Culture and Capability
- d) Incentivising Behavioural Change

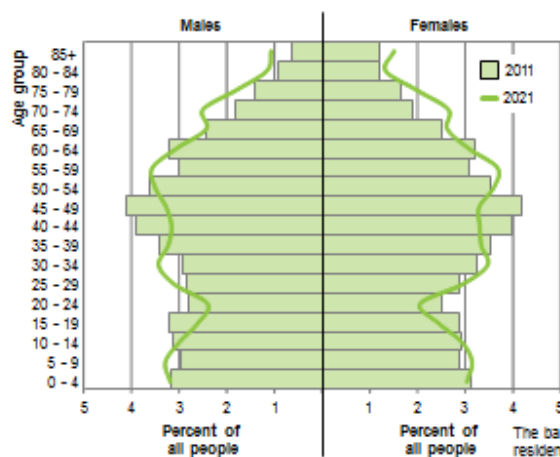
Further detail on the content of each workstream follows;

A. Knowledge and Insight

If Central Bedfordshire Council is to become truly customer focused we need to understand:

- The nature of the population – the social economic and demographic profile of our residents, for example our growing elderly population:.

By 2021 more of our residents will be in older age groups



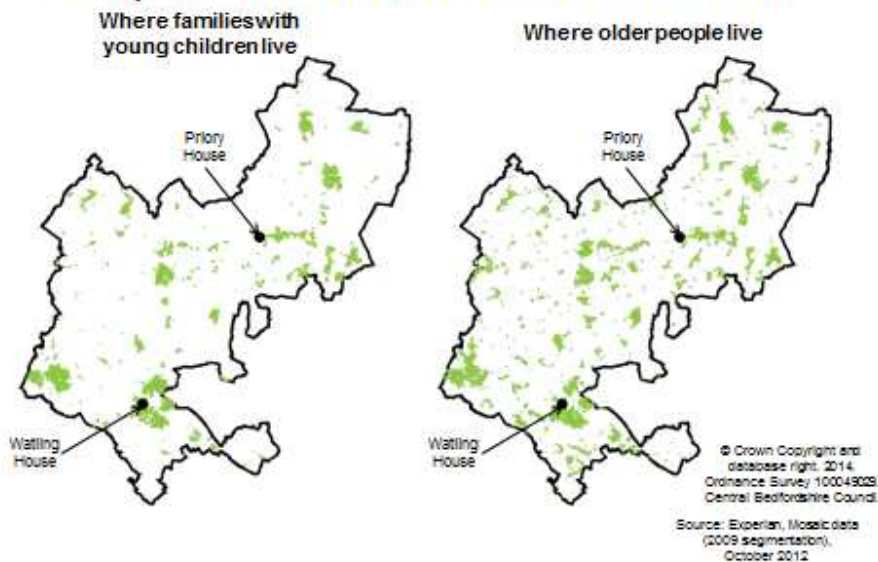
- By 2021 a bigger proportion of our residents will be elderly
- The proportion of older working age residents will also increase, while the proportion of young people will decrease.
- This creates challenges for service delivery and we will need to adapt our communication channels to reflect the changing needs of our residents.

The bars in this chart show the age profile of our residents in 2011, while the lines show how this will change by 2021

Sources: 2011 from Office for National Statistics, Mid Year Estimates; 2021 from Central Bedfordshire Council, POPGROUP population forecasting model 2011

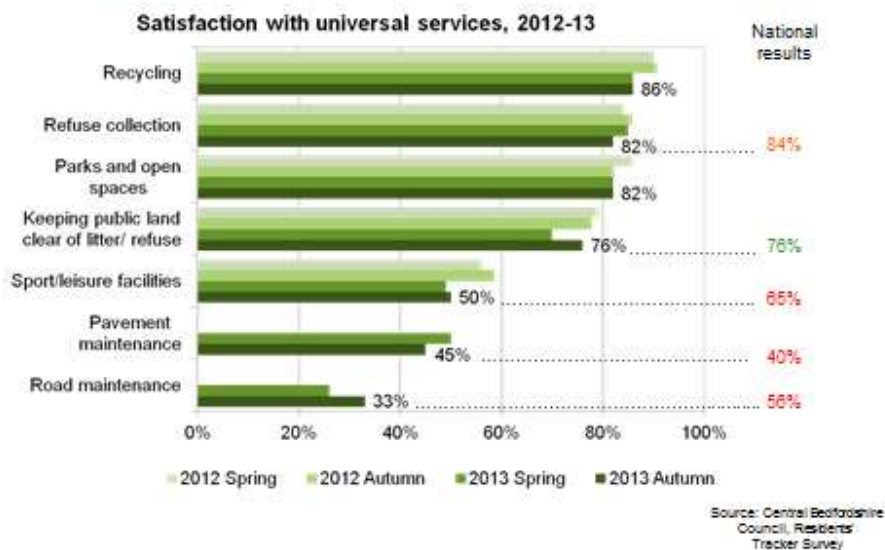
- Where and how people live across Central Bedfordshire, for example the distribution of different household types;

More older people live in villages compared to families with children...



- Their perceptions of individual council

We may need to do more to improve satisfaction in some areas



services;

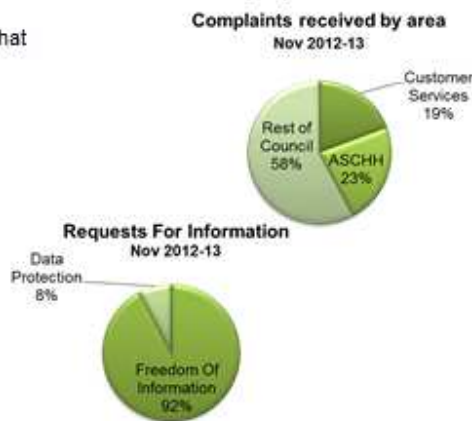
- Their perceptions and experience of accessing the council (channels).

1. Complaints and compliments

Complaints and compliments are the life blood of customer feedback and understanding the customer experience. At the moment we can sometimes treat them as a bit of a pain, a process to be completed. And we have no overview of them because different directorates deal with them in different ways – we have to find a system for containing, categorising and dealing with complaints so that they do not repeat.

How we deal with customer feedback at the moment

- Only one directorate – Adult Social Care, Health and Housing has a process for ensuring that all complaints have an action plan associated with them.
- Children's Services have procedure that sets a maximum 20 working day timescale for dealing with complaints
- 66% of complaints overall are being dealt with in 20 working days or less



We also don't tend to focus on compliments and positives, which are equally important to us.

In fact we should publicise both complaints and compliments – complaints on a 'You've said, we've done' basis and compliments to showcase to the public the great work that our teams are doing.

The channels available to our customers to complain or compliment can be clunky and paper based – it would be helpful to have an online channel. A confident organisation might even allow customers to give feedback anonymously.

In addition the current feedback loop is incomplete in some cases – where a service failure has been identified we do not have a consistently applied methodology to identify, contain, analyse and correct the root cause so that it does not happen again – see the section on reducing rework.

It is fundamentally important that the quality and timeliness of response to complaints and compliments is good. We need to have clear standards for teaching us all how to respond to customers who have taken the time and trouble to complain to us or to compliment us and a programme to ensure that these standards are taught and adhered to.

A complaint or a compliment allows us a moment of reflection and of checking back on how we are doing – in that sense it is a precious gift and we should see it as such. The systems and technology we might put in place to deal with complaints will enable us to put time and effort in the best place, automating key parts of the process.

This should allow us to put our efforts into the value added parts of the process ensuring that those responding are given time to establish the full picture and not losing sight of the value of a face to face discussion with the customer or others affected.

Staff awards create powerful opportunities to highlight compliments and good work, and so a corporate approach to these, building on the directorate approach will be worthy of consideration.

2. Other sources of insight

It is not only compliments and complaints that give us ways of learning from our customers – we have multiple examples of individual services getting great insight – for example the Great Library Debate has given us a wealth of feedback – and there are many more examples. The customers who gave us feedback on libraries are the same people who pay their council tax, have children in our schools, elderly parents, and have their bins collected and so on. We need to widen our approach to the feedback we receive from our customers so we are seeing much more of the whole picture as individual residents experience it.

Customers have told the Housing Service they like the idea of short films being used, to explain how to do things, like applying for council housing. We are producing ten YouTube style videos, involving our customers in the making those films, so our tenants are talking to other customers about what to do.

B. Channel Optimisation and Shift

The Council's customer base is large and diverse. All residents and businesses are served by the Council, as are the people who travel through the area. In the past we may have tended to segment services, with individual areas devising their own access channels such as helpdesks or helplines.

We are seeking to change this one service/one channel approach in recognition of the fact that:

- Many customers use multiple services and seek to do so easily and efficiently

- Expectations are changing. The range and quality of on line services, offering information and transactions on a 24/7 basis, leads consumers of public services to expect similar service value from their council.

1. Understanding channels

Our channels are the methods by which customers access services and information from us.

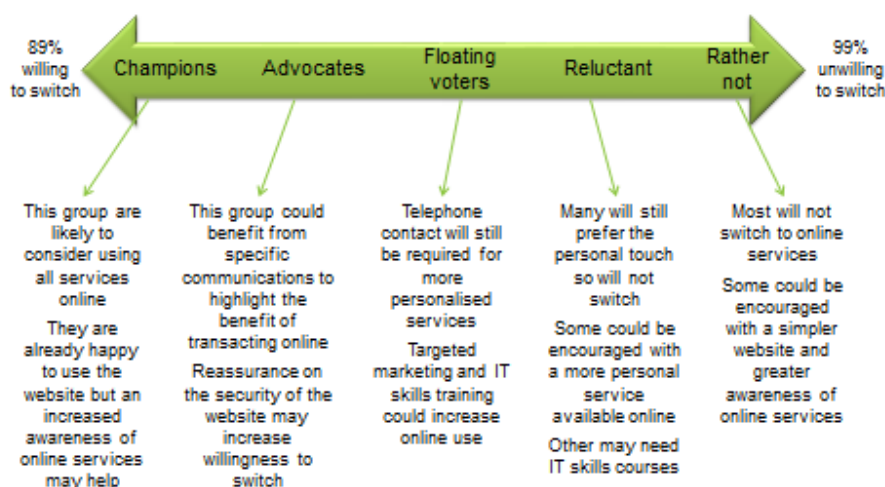
They are currently

- face to face (in our Customer Contact Centres),
- telephone (through the call centre),
- video (through our Customer Access Points),
- email (to the call centre),
- Social media (principally Facebook and Twitter),
- Our App (for reporting street scene issues),
- Our website (mostly for information but also for reporting and booking appointments),
- Other websites such as Directgov,
- Our other service centres such as libraries,
- direct to the back office – planning for example
- Face to face in the customers home – principally but not exclusively in relation to social care

At the moment we have a tendency to have a ‘one service, one channel’ approach – this does not give customers choice in how they access services or information and means that channel shift potential is limited. We need to map in more detail the ways in which customers use our current channels, and what their preferences and experiences are. We have some data on this and we could make better use of it in thinking about how to optimise the channels we have.

Willingness to change varies by each of the customer groups...

- However, the willingness to change varies greatly depending on the customer group, and the level of support needed for each group is different:



When we have this clearer insight we should be able to prioritise customers so that we deal with the most 'in need' customers in the quickest and fullest way, with perhaps say those customers who merely need to be signposted to a service being directed to a low cost channel in order to give more time and attention to customers with complex and/or sensitive needs.

We have not previously used texting as a channel but it clearly could have huge potential for us in quickly and simply contacting customers with information or confirmation of for example appointments. Similarly the social media channels have value that will continue to grow and which we need to exploit better.

We will clarify the channels that are available to customers and give some better understanding of which are most suitable for which type of transactions, and give clear information about this in a consistent way. We probably need to end the 'golden numbers' as intelligence shows that not many customers understand them.

We will ensure that we are where possible driving channel shift, so that customers where possible are accessing services in the most cost effective and efficient way.

Where possible, channels need to be optimised in order to signpost customers onto further services – for example a web search on cycle routes might lead us signpost to Travel choices, or Bikeability or even local cycling clubs.

When we understand our channels and how customers use them better, we should be able to optimise the resource allocated to various channels and multi-skill staff so that services are available across multiple channels.

Example: People who apply for council housing will soon be able to self assess whether they qualify for housing, online. The self assessment will tell them what their priority is and register them on the Housing Waiting List if they are likely to be offered a home. If not, advice will be provided about their alternative options and what they should do next.

2. Reducing rework

Key to optimising channels is reducing rework. Rework is unnecessary work that we do because we didn't get it right first time, it includes things like customers reporting a missed bin collection, or customers chasing a service such as housing benefits. We don't currently collect information on how much of what comes through the call centre is rework, but we suspect it is a high proportion.

Key to us avoiding rework is us understanding what information we could and should be publishing on our website to avoid customers having to ring us to ask. And of course along side having the right information, we also need to put time into optimising our web search facility. This means we need to redirect resource from dealing with customer enquiries and to creating

better information. Key to achieving this is using language and taxonomy that customers recognise – not ‘local government speak’ such as ‘Environmental Services’.

In places, the information on our website does not actually match what happens ‘on the ground’ for example the information on rules for our household waste recycling centres is not being implemented consistently on the ground.

We need to ‘crowd source’ from our employees where the experience of living in Central Bedfordshire and using our services does not match up with what we tell customers on our website, and eliminate the anomalies. This will mean re-engaging with the web content managers.

In order to avoid rework we need much better insight into how our customers are experiencing our services to pinpoint where rework is happening. This will mean the implementation of customer feedback loops rather like the star rating system we get on Amazon or other websites, as well as the creation of discussion forums using social media

Capturing the ‘voice of the customer’ in this way will enable us to reengineer our processes.

3. Self service

We will also want to help customers to help themselves rather than refer back to us – part of this is access to information as described above but we also need to give customers the tools they need to work out how to fix what has gone wrong. Our customers are looking at video sites such as YouTube for instructions on pretty much everything – there is no reason why we cannot give video guides to some of our services.

4. Customer contacts

We know that, for some of our customers, being in contact with us is a valuable source of human contact in what would otherwise be a lonely time. Reducing rework will also involve giving those customers another source to which they can turn to have a chat or be in contact, one that is more appropriate and can put them in touch with the resources they need to help them be less lonely. This might include Silverline – a new national phone line for lonely people.

5. The business community

We are acutely conscious that the business community in Central Bedfordshire is made of customers who can often find it frustrating and time consuming to understand what services are on offer and what rules they need to comply with. We have made a start with our ‘Business Survey’ but this aspect has not received the attention it deserves and it will be a key action in the plan to reduce rework.

C. Culture and Capability

The plans associated with this strategy address a range of technical and operational issues. And it *is* vital that our systems support change. However, unless the people within the Council have the commitment and skills to increase our customer focus, we may fail to deliver sustainable change.

These people include:

- Our Members – elected to represent and serve their communities
- Our staff – employed to design and deliver services to the public
- Our third party suppliers – contracted to provide services to our customers on our behalf.

Specifically we will:

- Build customer focus into recruitment, induction and development processes.
- Ensure customer focus is built into team meeting agendas so that all managers are working with their colleagues on reviewing performance against their customer standards.
- Develop a back to the floor programme for leaders across the organisation so that they experience first hand customer service in action.
- Explore staff awards and other mechanisms through which we can highlight good work and celebrate excellence in service to our customers.

1. Developing our culture

A key attribute and asset of Central Bedfordshire is that our employees, and indeed the political and managerial leadership of the council, are passionately committed to achieving great customer service.

What we need to do is continue to support that positive culture and empower our staff so that they can go beyond organisational boundaries to really meet customer needs.

Empowering staff is not only about culture – it is also about us

- designing systems and processes which support staff to do their jobs better,
- helping staff to understand where they can have the flexibility, and
- giving staff the right tools and right environment for success

...creating a virtuous circle where staff are more able to meet customer needs, we are a high performing council, and staff have high morale as a result.

In this context, our values are very important – we need to do more to reinforce these and bring them alive, because everyone in the organisation will need to commit to them to bring them alive in dealing with customers. In the context of our values, a fundamental mind shift for some will be the change to becoming more outcome focussed – thinking of the issue from the customer’s perspective rather than perhaps a narrower professional view, and considering how to ‘make it happen’. We sometimes hear responses which are more negative than that, and the officers giving those responses will need to be supported to consider the impact that that has.

It will be important for us to confront the mistakes that we sometimes make in a positive way – learning from them and seeking feedback and insight into how we can make things better in the future. In the truly customer focussed organisation that we aspire to be, our employees should not fear the consequences of making a mistake or saying ‘sorry’ as long as the mistake was caused by a genuine desire to do the best for the customer – this will encourage staff to ‘go the extra mile’ where necessary without fearing repercussions.

Giving front line staff the power, tools and skills they need to work on the work they are doing, to improve it through understanding performance data and through listening to the voice of the customer will be a critically important contributor to securing buy in and commitment.

Example: As part of a new approach to co- regulation the Council is continuing to work with tenants on the recently established scrutiny panel. Tenants have already investigated how we can do better to resolve anti social behaviour problems. By working with staff, mystery shopping and talking to customers the tenants have produced 20 recommendations to improve the service.

2. Developing our capability

Building skills and capability around customer services starts at recruitment and through induction, describing the skills (including letter writing and literacy) and capabilities (addressing the point, saying sorry) in person specifications and testing for them in recruitment through to being explicit about what is expected in induction processes.

For managers, it is particularly important that expectations and standards are established right from the start. Managers get measured against a standard which is customer focus and they need to be clear what this means.

Uniquely in local government, professionalism can get in the way of good customer responsiveness – employees may feel that maintaining professional standards and not admitting to mistakes (and therefore liability) is a way of defending the council and their profession – this is usually wrong and we need to say so.

Customer service should be a standard item on team meetings – we will be reviewing the standard we achieve and the level of complaints and compliments as a matter of course.

For leaders in the organisation, nothing beats the value of going ‘back to the floor’ and seeing the customer experience first hand. A programme of visiting the call centre or our face to face centres and listening in will be established, along with encouragement of ‘back to the floor’ visits. We could consider learning from call recordings in our learning.

What are the key customer services skills?

- Ability to succinctly convey messages and information
- Tailoring messages to audiences
- Presentation skills
- Communication skills

- Communication with customers to try to avoid complaints in the first instance
- Soft skills – need to be considered
- Listening
- Process improvement
- Not forgetting the face to face interaction options when surrounded by technology
- Communications training
- Encouraging skills development – e.g. skills development within teams, rotation of the chair role
- Building confidence
- Learning – from call recordings

To equip our teams to give better customer services we need to develop our approach to 'knowledge' so that there is a repository of the information needed to deliver right first time, including all of our customer services policies and procedures being readily available to employees.

Finally our Customer Charter has been refreshed and is appended to this report, it will be socialised within the authority and kept live within the organisation.

3. Making third party suppliers comply with our strategy

We are an organisation with a large supplier base, many of whom are also directly delivering services to our customers – we need to do more to demand and ensure excellent customer service from our suppliers. Central Bedfordshire Council commissions over £180m per year via third party suppliers, who deliver a range of services such as care homes, refuse, recycling, highways, ground maintenance, repairs and leisure services on behalf of the council.

It is important the customer experience is consistent and seamless end to end. This requires our partners to work hand in glove with the council, demonstrating the same level of commitment for delivering our customer strategy, and demonstrating behaviours which underpin a customer centric organisation.

The council will require our 3rd party suppliers to adopt the same vision and values when delivering services to Central Bedfordshire Council's citizens and customers including how and when customers access service.

As part of the Council's drive to continually improve the customer experience from our 3rd Party suppliers, we have introduced the supplier engagement review programme. This programme will comprise of a contract review requirement with each of our suppliers. By looking at, for example, communication, customer satisfaction, delivery the council will monitor and enhance the delivery to the customer, including key elements such as environment, equalities, improvements to service, innovation, price and quality standards, better service and value.

This review will not only focus on achievements made in these areas over the last year, but also ideas and proposals for the future years.

In this way, customers can rely on the council to delivering excellent services because we will apply our standards throughout the supply chain.

D. Incentivising behavioural change

Many of our objectives require change within the Council, either to systems, processes or culture.

However, the Council also has goals that require our customers to change.

Such changes might relate to personal behaviours: in public health, the Council has objectives to improve health outcomes in relation to smoking related diseases, obesity and teenage pregnancy.

We also seek to encourage and incentivize resident behaviour in relation to environmental and financial objectives (e.g. recycling, use of sustainable transport and payment by direct debit). Increasingly we aim to influence the way in which customers consider and chose services for themselves.

For example, the Care Act places increased responsibility on the council to inform and advise all residents in relation to care services, and we seek to influence customers' use of access channels so that, in line with their needs, they are directed to the channels which will serve them best and cost the council the least.

Our refreshed Customer Charter

We promise to:

- Resolve enquiries promptly and the first time you contact us. Where this is not possible, we will keep you informed on when you can expect a response.
- Listen to you, ask for your views and act on your feedback to improve our services.
- Be open and honest and explain our decisions.
- Apologise when we make a mistake and put things right.
- Accept your right to complain and guarantee a considered response.
- Treat you and your property with respect.
- If we can't help, we will make every effort to direct you to someone who can.
- Develop channels that are easy to use and make more services available on-line to give you quick and easy access at your convenience.
- Improve our services and processes so that you don't have to make any unnecessary calls or visits.
- Use plain English, avoiding jargon and explain things clearly.

We would like you to:

- Visit our website at the first instance. The website contains the most up to date information and most enquiries can be resolved at centralbedfordshire.gov.uk.
- Contact our Customer Service Centre if you need to speak to one of our advisors to resolve your enquiry.
- Give us the information we need to help you.
- Treat our employees appropriately and with respect.
- Help us to improve by giving us your views and suggestions

E. Our Customer Standards

By accessing our web site you will be able to:

- **Report** missed bin collections, noise nuisance, fraud and more.
- **Pay** for council tax, housing rent, planning applications and more.
- **Request** a bulky waste collection, removal of an unwanted vehicle and more.
- **Apply** for services such as blue badges, jobs and school admissions.
- **Access** information on council services and your local community.
- **Ask** for help to use our website including easy navigation.

If you contact us by telephone we will aim to:

- Answer your call within 20 seconds.
- Tell you our name when we answer.

- Our staff will guide and assist you to resolve your enquiries through our website where appropriate.
- Resolve your query at the first point of contact.
- Where this is not possible, we will explain why and let you know when you can expect a response.

If you contact us by email, we will aim to:

- Acknowledge receipt of your enquiry within one working day.
- Provide a full response to your enquiry within five working days or, advise you if your enquiry relates to statutory timescales, or may take longer if it involves consultation with partners.
- Reply using plain, jargon free language.

If you contact us by letter or fax we will aim to:

- Acknowledge receipt within 3 working days.
- Provide a full response to your enquiry within ten working days or, advise you if your enquiry relates to statutory timescales, or may take longer if it involves consultation with partners.
- Reply using plain, jargon free language.

If you visit us in person:

- Greet you within five minutes of your arrival.
- Ensure you are seen by a member of staff, who can deal with your enquiry, within 15 minutes of your arrival, where you do not have an appointment.
- Arrange for a private interview room if necessary.
- Accommodate any additional needs you may have.

Our visits to your home:

We appreciate that it is sometimes necessary for us to visit you and we will:

- Provide you, where appropriate, in advance with the name and contact details of the person visiting you.
- Agree an appointment time, where appropriate, with you and will keep you informed if a delay occurs.
- Show identification cards, with our names and photograph, on arrival and give you the opportunity to check our identity (please do not let anyone into your home unless you know them or have checked their identity).

F. Feedback and information

Access to information:

There are three main pieces of information access legislation that you can use for gaining access to different types of information, these are as follows:

- Personal data access requests should be made under Data Protection Act 1998. Response timescales are 40 calendar days from the point of identification for requests for personal information.
- Environmental information should be requested under the Environmental Information Regulations 2005. Response timescales are 20 working days for freedom of information and environmental information requests.
- All other information holdings of the Council are subject to the Freedom of Information Act 2000. Response timescales are 20 working days for freedom of information and environmental information requests.

Customer Feedback:

- You are welcome to make comments on how we deliver your services and we will facilitate that.
- Compliments - have we more than met your expectations? We like to know when we do, so we can do it more often.
- Complaints – when something goes wrong, we need to know about it so we can try to put it right, we have a clear process for complaining. We will adhere to timescales set out in the Council's Corporate Complaints Procedure.

