

Leicestershire County Council's Customer Experience Strategy 2024-2028

This strategy sets out the council's ambition for customer experience, and underpinning principles by which we aim to deliver our vision:

“People will be able to communicate with our services quicker and easier, through modern and accessible ways”

We have created this strategy to ensure that:

- the focus is on our customers;
- our customers have a good experience in the interactions they have with us;
- all council staff take responsibility for customer service, not just employees in frontline services who deal with customers directly;
- we adopt best practice from within the council and other organisations;
- we maximise taxpayers' money by making sure that customer interactions add value and are efficient, in a fair and inclusive way;
- customers help us to help them by using online channels if they can;
- changes to customer interactions are managed appropriately.

Who are our customers?

Our customers are any individual, group or organisation that interacts with or receives assistance, support or guidance from Leicestershire County Council (this strategy is unable to influence customer service within individual district councils across Leicestershire).

Customer experience:

Customer experience refers to each customer's outcomes, perceptions and feelings resulting from interactions they have with our staff, systems, channels or services.

This strategy has been informed by:

- Feedback from an engagement survey that targeted over 6,000 customers who have been in contact with our largest and most frequently used services via telephone, in person and the website;
- Desktop research on other local government customer service approaches as well as national trends across all industries;

- Analysis of our local customer insight data:
 - quantitative – e.g. contact channel volumes by customer type and reason for contact;
 - qualitative – e.g. complaints, listening to call recordings (for quality monitoring), website feedback
- Successes and learning from trial activities to test the principles set out in this strategy, using a wide spectrum of service offerings (e.g. Highways, School Admissions, Blue Badge, and Adult Social Care).
- Front facing staff directly delivering to customers

Key elements in the document include:

- National context around customer experience
- Local context:
 - Our challenges
 - Who our customers are
 - How customers contact us
 - What they contact us about and their needs
- Our performance around customer experience
- Key principles and how we will deliver this
- What this strategy means in practice

National context:

The UK Customer Satisfaction Index, a national benchmark of customer satisfaction covering 13 sectors and based on 45,000 customer responses, produced by the Institute of Customer Service, has found that in 2024 customer satisfaction levels are at their lowest since 2010; public services, both local and national, scored among the worst for customer service.

KPMG report that in order to deliver the greatest value for citizens, councils must be focused on meeting the needs of individuals and delivering services in a customer focused way. Doing this has become increasingly challenging with the rising demand on services, post-pandemic backlog, cost pressures within which councils operate, and the cost-of-living crisis which has placed many households under financial strain.

The pandemic and its attendant lockdowns amplified the importance of digital channels for interaction between customers and providers of goods and services, including local authorities.

Regardless of sector, all organisations are now competing with the digital experiences that have redefined customer expectations. Customer experience is becoming increasingly personalised, as customers demand targeted offers, relevant recommendations, and seamless customer service. Experiences must also be intuitive, serving up what customers want before they have asked for it – sometimes even before they know they need it.

IBM report that before long, Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) will elevate these expectations on the part of the customer and give organisations the tools to meet them.

The Council's Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion strategy (2024-2028) points out that the move towards digitalisation of communications and contact has potential to improve access through 24/7 availability, speed, and ease of use. However, there is also the risk of leaving behind those who do not have the access to the appropriate technology or lack the skills to use it.

The Centre for Ageing Better reports a rapid increase in the numbers of people aged 55 and over now online. For example, in 2011, just over half (52%) of people aged 65-74 had recently used the internet. This jumped to 83% by 2019. Despite these increases, many people still do not use the internet, and age remains the biggest predictor of whether someone is digitally included.

Local Context:

The financial pressure on the council is growing; at year end of 2023/24 the council's Medium Term Financial Strategy gap was £33m in 2025/26, rising to over £80m by 2027/28, equating to almost 15% of service spend. With a growing population comes increased demands for services.

In Leicestershire 97% of premises have access to superfast Broadband, with the "Giga Hubs" project helping boost broadband access and speed in rural areas; installation of the first 25 Giga Hubs allows residents in our rural communities to access the fastest broadband speeds on the market at their libraries and schools.

Our county: Key statistics from our Joint Strategic Needs Assessment 2022-25

Population of Leicestershire in 2021 was 712,300, an increase of 9.5% since 2011. Leicestershire is within the top 4 local authorities in terms of growth, and the population is expected to increase by 23.3% between 2021 and 2043.

Age:

Compared with the average population of England, the population of Leicestershire is older, with a higher proportion aged 40-64 (33% in the county compared with 32.1% in England) and 65 and over (20.7% compared with 18.4% in England).

Language:

95.2% of residents have English as their main language. This is followed by Polish and Gujarati (both 0.8%), Panjabi (0.6%) and Romanian (0.4%).

Deprivation:

Leicestershire cannot be considered deprived overall; the county is ranked 137th out of 152 upper tier authorities in England for Multiple Deprivation, where 1st is the most deprived. However, pockets of significant deprivation do exist in parts of the county.

Our customers:

Our customer profiles vary considerably from service to service, depending on the reason for the customer contacting us. For example, those in touch with the council about adult social care are a roughly equal combination of professional organisations and care providers, family or friends of a person requiring support, and individuals in need of support themselves. Compare this to a Highways service such as skips and scaffolding license requests where 100% of the customers are businesses.

Summary of frequent customer groups interacting with our services:

Individuals	Organisations
General public e.g. residents and visitors of Leicestershire	Public Sector bodies e.g. Health, Police, Fire & Rescue Service, Ambulance Service, other local authorities
Adults in need of care and support	Providers of services e.g. education settings, care providers,
Children and young people – care leavers	Businesses
Family members and friends	Community organisations e.g. Parish Councils, voluntary and community sector
Parents and carers	Other regional and national organisations

How do customers contact us each month (on average)?

In Person	Phone	Email	Online
600 Visits to County Hall reception	130,000 calls	190,000 emails	300,000 web sessions
52,000 welcomed in our libraries			105,000 online transactions
11,000 visits to our 6 museum and heritage sites			1,400 messages via our social media accounts and 900 conversations
Locality Offices (figure unknown)			

Time spent on each call received can vary, depending on the type of service, the customer group, and the contact reason. It is hard to quantify the cost associated with handling contact via email and online channels, however the more automation within the end-to-end customer journey, the cheaper the cost per contact.

Customers contact us to:

- Get information and advice
- Report Something
- Request a referral
- Apply for something
- Pay for something
- Book an appointment or something else

Some contacts we receive are classed as “avoidable,” for example, where someone is chasing up on an existing enquiry or where they are contacting us about something that is not the council’s responsibility.

Putting some of our most in demand customer interactions into context (based on latest annual volumes through 2023 and 2024)

Adult Social Care and Support:

- 38,337 contacts were raised across all channels in the last 12 months about new residents needing support
- 18,272 people were supported with some form of care and support service

Education and Children:

- 23,044 applications received for school places
- Approximately 11,800 calls to children’s social care (in addition to emails and online referrals), with 7,576 children and young people supported by the service
- 12,559 calls to the Special Educational Need Assessment Team. From the Spring 2024 School Census (Leicestershire state funded schools) there were 13,056 pupils receiving Special Educational Need support and 4,360 with an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP).

Health and Wellbeing:

- 17,262 people accessing health and wellbeing services (e.g. stop smoking, weight management, first contact plus, local area coordination, warm homes, and health inequalities)

Roads, Transport and Parking:

- The Highways and Transport service is broad in its operations, ranging from road maintenance, road signs and markings right through to streetlighting. Over 44,000 Highways-related contacts, with 53% of this contact via the Website.
- Roads and Transport, and Winter (flooding, gritting) are the most popular social media topics of conversation

- 16,000 Blue Badge applications, with almost 80% applying online and the rest using our telephone assisted route (12%) or a paper application (7%).
- 7,510 calls received about bus passes for senior citizens and those registered disabled; with 58, 000 new Concessionary Travel Pass applications.

Trading Standards:

- 2,671 trading standards issues reported
- 1,313 incidents of advice given to businesses
- 100 licenses issued.

Registrars (births, deaths, marriages):

- 2924 registered births
- 4113 registered deaths
- 2509 registered marriages and civil partnerships.

Environment and Planning:

- 96% of waste permits were applied for online (42,253) and 4% completed over the phone (1,867).
- During 2023 calendar year we had 1.23m customer visits to our waste sites
- In 2023/24 we had approximately 11,500 visits to our Waste Transfer Station in relation to our chargeable trade waste service.

Jobs :

- 11, 848 Council job applications.

Our performance around customer experience:

There are currently no standard customer service metrics in place across all our services, standardised performance indicators exist where a service is part of the centralised Customer Service Centre (for example school admissions, highways, transport, waste, blue badge, concessionary travel and adult social care), however, Customer Service activity extends beyond the Customer Service Centre with individual teams operating their own approaches to customer service. However, while an average of 72% of calls are handled, 20% are missed and the remaining 8% are ended by customers before speaking to an officer. When looking at individual services, the performance can range considerably, with many services performing better than this overall average, and some performing worse.

For those customers calling our highest demand areas, the average call queue time varies, with most customers waiting between two and five minutes to speak with a council officer, this average queue time increases to just over ten minutes for our busiest service the adult social care “front door”. Although during peak times call wait times can be considerably higher.

The cost of handling each contact varies depending on the service area due to the nature of calls, as well as the channel used. As a crude estimate, the cost to answer all external calls

received over the last 12 months was over £2m; a further cost can be associated with outbound calls made to customers, and the cost associated with handling email and online transactions where there is processing effort involved.

The level of preventable customer contact (i.e. contact that could have been avoided if we had improved the way we had communicated with the customer earlier in their journey with the council) has not been quantified across all services. For those services that have been studied more closely, the proportion is anywhere from 20% to 70% of avoidable demand.

There were a total of 318 respondents to the Customer Experience Survey shared with customers this summer (July and August 2024).

Respondents found the following channels to be very important or fairly important to them:

- Telephone: 92% of respondents
- Email: 90% of respondents
- Face to face: 58% of respondents
- Online: 72% of respondents
- Paper/post: 45% of respondents

A common theme from customers was that the channel didn't necessarily matter, as long as it was appropriate for the contact type, and that the channel on offer works.

When asked the question, "What if anything, prevents you contacting the council online?", the following responses were given:

- The online service is not sufficient: 32% of respondents.
- The online service is not easy to use: 33% of respondents.
- Lack of access to a computer or mobile device: 4% of respondents.
- Lack of confidence in using digital services: 12% of respondents.
- There is no one that could help me: 12% of respondents.
- Not applicable – nothing prevents me from contacting the council online: 27% of respondents.
- Other: 15% of respondents (those selecting other voiced a preference to speak to a human mainly due to confidence is going online and/or due to the nature of the enquiry they need help with)

This tells us that if we get the online offering right, and ensure it is accessible for those that can go online, there is a good opportunity to increase online uptake across many of our services.

General themes from the feedback tells us that:

- We need to be more responsive; follow up before being chased multiple times.
- We need to take more accountability where timeframes aren't met.

- If an issue cannot be resolved online, there should always be the option to speak to someone.
- We need to speed up decision-making.
- We must improve internal communication between departments.

Some degree of dissatisfaction with LCC customer service was expressed by 445% of respondents, with satisfaction levels varying between services. There is clearly a need to bring customer service levels up to a consistent standard, whilst we also recognise that there may be some response bias in the results, with less satisfied people more likely to respond to the survey.

Complaints:

- The Complaints Team received and processed 3597 separate enquiries in 2023/24: a 5% increase on the year before. Reasons for complaints vary from service to service and can be anything from poor communications and lack of timeliness in response, or delays in meeting statutory timescales, through to customer care and perceived helpfulness of staff. It must be noted that the level of complaints is sometimes influenced by external factors such as the availability of goods or services; a separate piece of work as an outcome of this strategy will be needed to separate out and report on the proportion of complaints that are specifically customer service related.
- 90% of all complaints were responded to at Stage 1 within our corporate policy timescales of 40 days. 61% of all complaints that went to Stage 2 were dealt with within our target timescales of under 20 days. This is an improvement on the previous year but still requires improvement.

Freedom of Information (FOI) Requests:

- 1,190 FOI requests were received in the 12 months to March 2024.
- 975 FOI requests were closed within the designated timeframe (20 working days)

Key Principles for improving our customer experience, and how we will deliver this

Our principles have been developed to ensure customer contact with our services is accessible, efficient, cost effective and responsive to the needs of our customers. In summary, the strategy will meet the needs of our customers and enhance the overall effectiveness of the council.

Our principles set the direction for council-wide improvement when interacting with customers.

Customer focused: building a culture that is aligned with good customer experience

- We will seek to see the world through our customers eyes, seeing the customer journey as one;
- We will put customers at the centre of what we do, engaging with them to understand their needs, and making feedback easier to give;
- We will tailor services to meet the specific needs of customer groups;
- We will use data and insight to understand our customers;
- We will regularly review, and update services based on experience, feedback and awareness of changing needs;
- We will be clear about the services we offer, timelines for getting in touch or decision making, setting realistic customer expectations.

Accessible and inclusive: designing services accessible to those who need them, with clear and comprehensible content

- Ensure that services are easy to access;
- Provide several ways of getting in touch with us to cater to diverse needs;
- Alternative arrangements in place for those not able to access our services digitally;
- Our approach will be people centred ensuring accessibility for the diverse range of customers we support;
- Online uptake is encouraged through joined up, simple to navigate journeys.

Transparency: in our decision making and communication. We will:

- provide clear information about how services are delivered and how customers can engage;
- communicate in ways that keep customers updated, using automated responses where possible;
- be clear up front on what customers can expect;
- be explicit about what we can deliver and when;
- be transparent about response times.

Efficiency and effectiveness: in maximising value, addressing barriers to deliver good quality services, we will:

- be led by the “customer journey”;
- streamline and improve service delivery;
- remove unnecessary steps or duplication;
- utilise data and technology to enhance operational efficiency;
- ensure that customers can contact services at a time that suits them through 24/7 online offerings;
- give the right answer, first time;
- use data and insight to understand our customers;
- monitor efficiency of customer service through consistent metrics across all our services;

- give our staff the right skills and tools to respond effectively to customer demands, expectations and needs.

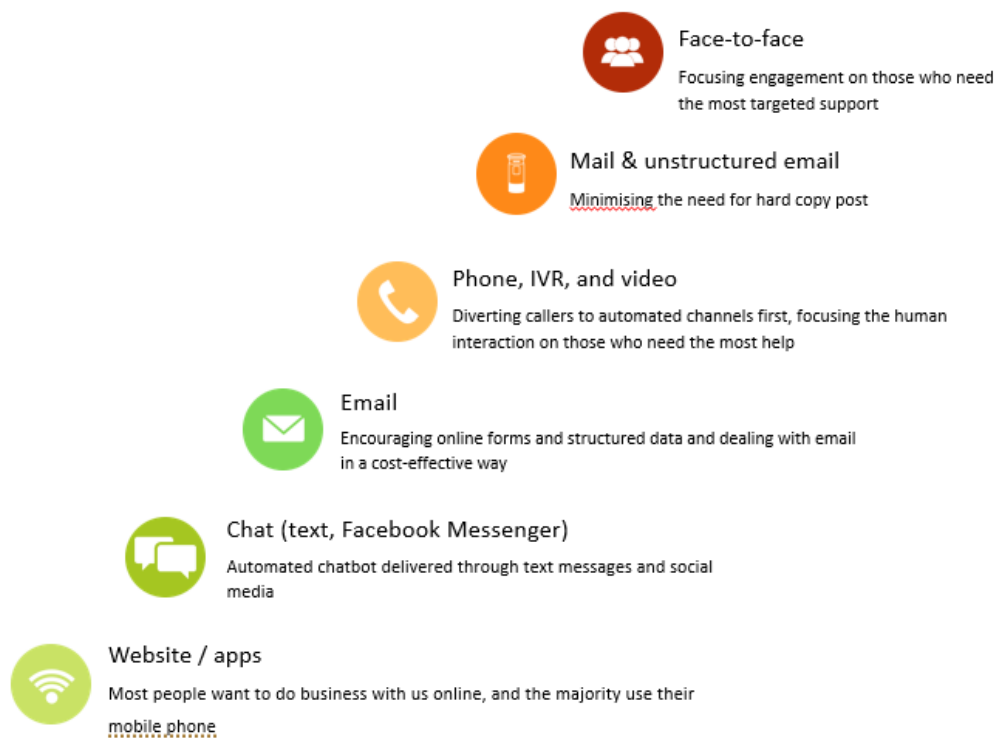
Continuous improvement: in learning, innovation, service redesign, performance, impact, and results, we will:

- encourage innovation, embracing new approaches and technologies that will improve customer experience;
- optimise our technology platforms to simplify the customer journey;
- automate ways of working to reduce manual processes;
- clarify how customers can access services;
- build digital processes that are accessible and easy to use.

Sustainable design: in considering the environmental, social, and economic impact of our customer service, we will:

- embed customer centric practices into service delivery, so that improvements have lasting impact;
- promote environmental responsibility within our practices; reduce paper and postage wherever possible;
- deal with customer contacts in the most cost-effective way.

Our channel strategy is fundamental in ensuring we can support our overall aims. Giving customers access to the right channel at the right time is key to ensuring a better and more efficient experience; we will route customers to the most appropriate and cost effective channels across based on the service and customer group. The following diagram illustrates this approach as a stepped hierarchy of service response via website, email, portal forms, chat bots and live interaction. This approach aims to ensure that the organisation's staffing resource is properly prioritised for those customers who most need it.



How will we know we have got it right?

We will be informed by...

What our customers tell us:

- That they are able to do what they need to;
- That finding information is easy;
- That processes are simpler;
- That they are kept informed, without the need to chase us for responses;

What the data shows:

- Increased satisfaction;
- Improved responsiveness within achievable timescales;
- Reduced repeat contact;
- Fewer people needing to call us;
- More people using our online services;
- Reduced cost per contact.

What our staff tell us:

- They can see things from the customer's perspective;
- Processes are simpler;

- We are able to help customers more quickly;
- Reduction in manual workarounds;
- Increased job satisfaction.

Feedback received during consultation for this strategy:

- We welcome all comments and feedback on this strategy.

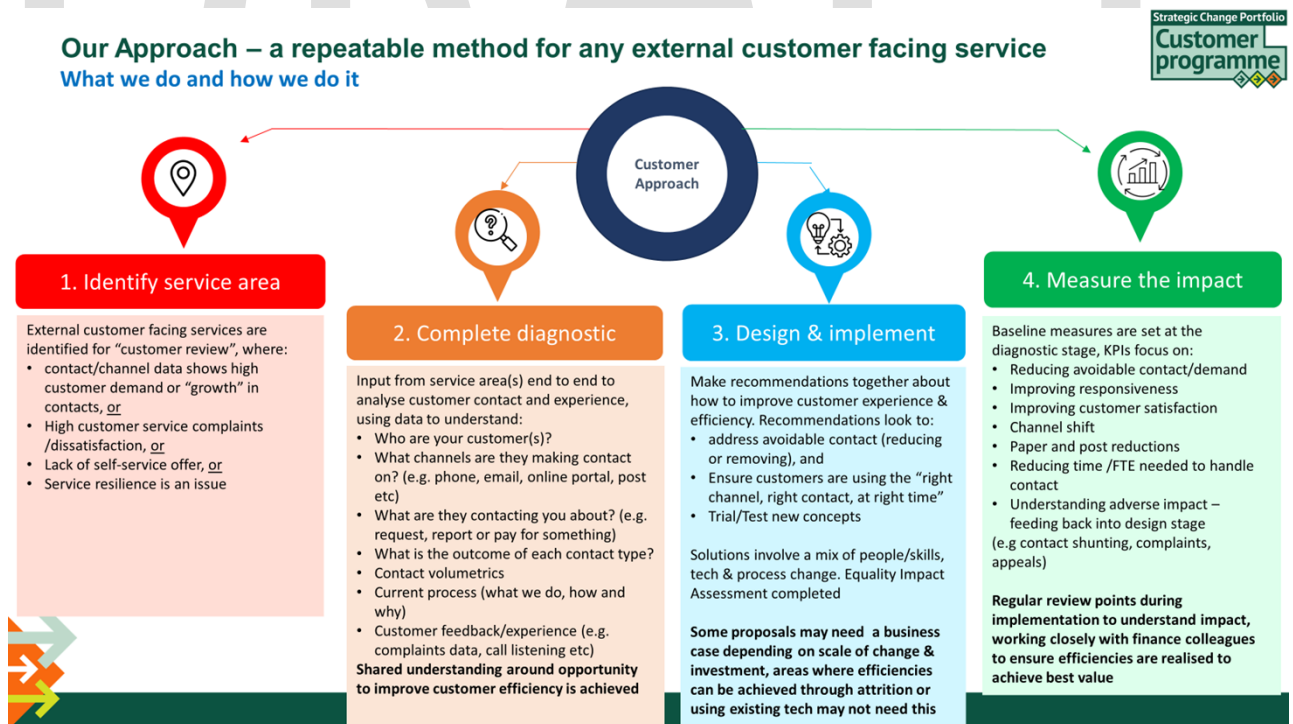
Customer service targets linked to the above, will form part of improvement plans for individual services that are frequently monitored and reported.

What this strategy means in practice

As an organisation, we will have to think differently about the way we interact with customers. To do this we will develop a customer service blueprint and associated action plans containing the following elements:

Continuous improvement actions:

- Continue to undertake service reviews using our repeatable review framework (see below), which will determine any change in customer service:



Taking a repeatable approach to customer service reviews will ensure:

- we prioritise improvement in areas that need it most;

- we have an approach that staff recognise, speeding up reviews and ensuring there is consistency in what's considered during any change; and
- customer needs are fully understood by the service areas that are serving them.

Invest in technology, to ensure our growing services can provide a sustainable offer:

- We will need to invest in modern technologies, showing a clear return on investment and saving on additional staff later.

We will spend less money in the long term:

- We will reduce the volume of contact that requires a real time human conversation resulting in the need for less staff.

The way some customers will access our services will change:

- Prioritise face to face or telephone contact for those unable to access services online and those who do not have the digital skills or equipment to do so.
- Those customers that do have the skills, access to equipment or someone that can help them will be encouraged to use our online services.
- Improved digital offerings will mean that those that can go online, receive a seamless service, getting up to date information without the need to wait to speak with someone or post paperwork to us.

By embedding a customer centric mindset in the workplace, we will:

- Support our staff in understanding their responsibilities and demonstrating the necessary skills through general awareness raising, as well as specific learning and development;
- highlight staff who are key customer service professionals, and support them to act as advocates across the council;
- ensure clear ownership of contacts with customers until they are resolved, keeping customers informed throughout;
- lead by example, demonstrating customer-focused behaviours in our actions and decision making;
- use internal communication tools to share customer insight and success stories.

By using customer insight data to improve our customer service, we will:

- report on our customer service performance via consistent data and metrics, spanning the whole organisation, supported by the right technology;
- invite customer feedback on our services as a standard;
- look to insights gained to inform periodic monitoring, business improvement and service planning;

- employ data and technology to help the council support customers better and faster.

We will ensure that Elected Members can play their part in:

- raising service issues;
- feeding back on our customer service;
- sharing ideas for improvement;
- representing the voice of our customers.

We will support Elected Members in these roles by:

- providing quarterly performance monitoring information about customer service across the organisation, and how this strategy is working in practice;
- offering information from service areas on significant changes that impact the customer experience.

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