



SCRUTINY COMMISSION: 6th NOVEMBER 2024

LEICESTERSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL'S CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE STRATEGY CONSULTATION

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE RESOURCES

Purpose of report

1. The purpose of this report is to invite members of the Scrutiny Commission to comment on the draft Customer Experience Strategy, together with plans for consultation and timelines. The draft Strategy is attached as Appendix A to this report.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

2. The Committee received an update back in March 2024 on the Council's Customer and Automation programme activity, which set out the programme vision and approach. At that time, the programme team received feedback from the Committee in terms of how it was engaging elected Members and the community on its overall approach. This Strategy incorporates that feedback in a consistent framework for any customer service related changes across the Authority, whilst also providing transparency with customers about the Council's customer experience commitment.
3. The Cabinet at its meeting on 13 September 2024 gave approval to consult on the Council's first Customer Experience Strategy.
4. The Customer Experience Strategy aligns with all five outcomes of the Council's Strategic Plan (2022-26); Great Communities, Clean and Green, Safe and Well, Improved Opportunities and Strong economy and infrastructure. The strategy also plays an enabling role in delivering the Customer Programme within the Council's Strategic Change Portfolio; recognised within the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy 2024-2028.

Background

5. The worsening financial position for all local authorities, and changing customer behaviours and expectations, are two key drivers creating a renewed focus for councils to improve customer experience and access to services, with the knowledge that by getting it right for the customer first time, can in turn, reap efficiencies.
6. This is the Council's first Customer Experience Strategy. It aims to formalise with employees and people who engage with its services, the Council's positive vision for its customers experience and its commitment to continuously improve. It also sets out how customers can support the Authority in achieving its vision that "People will be

able to communicate with our services quicker and easier, through modern and accessible ways”.

7. The Council's Customer Programme has played a significant role in shaping the key principles that underpin the strategy, informed by the learning of activity thus far. The programme has delivered efficiencies that have resulted in improved customer experience and cashable savings through reducing avoidable contact and streamlining back office activity, securing the delivery of the £110k financial target for 2024/25 within the Medium Term Financial Strategy.
8. The draft Strategy (Appendix A) has been developed with input from a range of stakeholders, including managers and operational staff of frontline services, as well as customers who have been in recent contact with the Council via telephone, face-to-face and the website in recent months. Informal engagement activity during has provided an understanding of the current levels of customer service satisfaction, as well as customer contact preferences. Over 3,000 customers were directly contacted via SMS (text message) asking for their input, with customers visiting the Council website also invited to provide feedback, and a total of 316 survey responses were received. This insight has been used alongside quantitative data on current customer contact behaviours. The informal engagement report is attached as Appendix B to this report.

National and Local Context

9. National and local public services continue to score worst in terms of customer satisfaction, and the post pandemic world has seen digital advancements redefining customer expectations.
10. Pressure on the County Council continues to grow; the Medium Term Financial Strategy funding gap will grow to over £80m by 2027/28, the population in Leicestershire has risen by almost 10% since 2011 and in 2023/24 the level of complaints the Council received increased by 5% on the previous year.
11. Through the Council's Customer Programme, multiple projects have trialled new approaches. The Blue Badge, School admissions and Adult Social Care front door projects are all starting to see results, with other service areas such as Highways and Childrens also commencing trials. Principles that have underpinned the approaches used are now set out in the new draft Customer Experience Strategy. Through customer insight, process and technology change, projects have supported improved customer experience whilst also saving the Council money. For example –
 - within the adult social care services, the improvements made has seen the overall average call queuing time reduce from just over 19 minutes on average down to under 9 minutes since February this year (a separate report on this specific project is due for discussion at Scrutiny on 4th November 2024);
 - complaints in school admissions have reduced significantly with the proportion of customers needing to contact the Council post-application reducing by approximately 50% during academic year 23/24 compared to the previous year;

- the average end-to-end processing time of a blue badge application has reduced from 7.9 days to 3 days, over the past 12 months. This timeframe is expected to reduce further as a result of a new and improved case management system due to go live this November.

There is more work to be done to get a consistent level of customer service across all the Council's services and this new Strategy aims to enable this.

Proposal – A new Customer Experience Strategy

12. The vision for Customer Experience at Leicestershire County Council is that “people will be able to communicate with our services, quicker and easier through modern and accessible means.”
13. Modern Customer Experience strategies are more than just the digital channel, they focus on the total experience simultaneously addressing the employee workflow and the customer experience. In practice this improves the efficiency of the underlying delivery processes and reducing the channel friction points that cause frustration for customers. It also provides the foundations for consistency between the multiple channels provided enabling improved customer journeys for a range of customer types whether customers engage digitally or through accessible channels such as the telephone.
14. The Strategy is based around the following key principles:
 - a. **Customer focused:** building a culture that is aligned with good customer experience
 - b. **Accessible and inclusive:** designing services accessible to those who need them, with clear and comprehensible content
 - c. **Transparency:** in the Council's decision making and communication
 - d. **Efficiency and effectiveness:** in maximising value, addressing barriers to deliver good quality services
 - e. **Continuous improvement:** in learning, innovation, service redesign, performance, impact, and results
 - f. **Sustainable design:** in considering the environmental, social, and economic impact of the Council's customer service.

These principles are expanded on within the full Strategy document. The Council would monitor its effectiveness via customer feedback and data monitoring.

15. A key mechanism for delivering the Strategy will be through staged implementation plans that will move the Council towards a new customer service operating model; this is a detailed description of what customer service will look like across the Council at the end of the Customer Programme, including what the future structure to support good customer experience is, the council's working practices and processes, as well as the information, data and technology it requires to support effective and efficient customer service. This customer service operating model will be continuously developed from the lessons learned in delivered projects, and there will be intermediate models throughout the life of the programme in order to get to the full realisation of the vision and strategy. It provides a framework of best practice approaches to enable an evidential understanding of the customer and service areas

which can then be used to improve the service offering. This blueprint will include:

- a) continuous improvement actions
- b) investing in technology, to ensure that growing services can provide a sustainable offer
- c) spending less money in the long term, through reducing the volume of contact that requires a real time human conversation
- d) the way some customers will access services will change
- e) embedding a customer centric mindset in the workplace
- f) using customer insight data to improve customer service
- g) ensuring Elected Members (Councillors) can play their part in helping customers, and supporting them to do so

16. The Strategy will apply to all front facing services, and not just those that sit within the Customer Service Centre. Support and focus will be on those areas with high numbers of customers, for example (but not limited to):

- Children's Early Help and Social Care
- Registration Services
- Traded Services
- Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

The above is in addition to areas linked to the Customer Service Centre such as Adult Social Care, Highways, Transport, Waste, Blue Badge, Concessionary Travel and School Admissions.

17. The Strategy proposes a repeatable approach to the review of customer service processes and practices within individual service areas. This framework will ensure:

- a. the Council prioritises improvement in areas that need it most;
- b. All staff recognise the approach, speeding up reviews and ensuring there is consistency in what's considered during any change; and
- c. Any proposed change is evidence led and reflects the needs of those customers that the service is targeted at; ensuring that before change is introduced, the profile of customers accessing a service is properly understood, including who they are and what they are contacting the Council about, so that contact channels remain accessible for all.

18. Such controls help provide the assurance that change is well thought through, based on evidence, trialled and measured to understand what impact these will have on the Council's customers, and that the approach is kept under review so that this can be refined when and where required. It will also ensure that the right channel is offered at the right time, prioritising certain channels for customers with disabilities or vulnerabilities such as visual, hearing, speech impairment, learning disabilities or neurological limitations so they are still able to access Council services.

19. As a result of the Strategy, the key changes expected to be seen include:

- a. A reduction in customer complaints related to insufficient information and communication with services;

- b. Improved telephony performance including reduced call wait times and fewer missed calls;
- c. Access to information and support outside of working hours through improved online offering (for those digitally abled);
- d. The removal of unnecessary steps in the customer journey and back office process, improving response times and reducing human effort involved;
- e. A reduction in failure demand (customer demand caused by a failure to do something or do something right for the customer, for example, where a person is having to repeatedly chase for updates on a previous contact);
- f. Financial savings and cost avoidance associated with reduced contact demand where there is failure demand, and reduced processing effort, leading to the requirement for less staff;
- g. Channel shift; increasing the online take up rate which in turn frees up phone lines for those unable to go online due to their disability or vulnerability, or where they do not have access to technology and internet that would enable them to do so; and
- h. Increased customer demand in commercial service areas leading to more income.

Consultation

20. The consultation was approved by the Cabinet on the 13 September 2024 and launched on 14 September 2024. It will conclude after eight weeks on the 10 November 2024. This report forms part of the consultation.
21. The consultation is seeking the views of the County Council's customers, as well as internal staff. The term customer refers to any individual or organisation who engages with Council services in Leicestershire, including Leicestershire residents, family and friends of Leicestershire residents, visitors to Leicestershire, and a breadth of organisations, from public and voluntary sector organisations such as district and parish councils through to commercial businesses requiring Council services.
22. The consultation includes a survey, accessible online on the County Council's website and available as a hard copy or in Easy Read on request. The survey is being promoted on social media and through printed material in community locations, through circulars and newsletters. These community locations include libraries and public notice boards in locality offices. There have been multiple media publications to encourage residents to provide their input including reminders sent out to parish councils, and a random snapshot of 1,700 customers who have recently been in touch with Council services have been sent an SMS, inviting them to take part in the survey. There have been targeted email communications to staff group networks including:
 - Disabled workers group
 - LGBTQ+
 - Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME)

And targeted communications to a range of public, voluntary and community groups including:

 - Carers network
 - District Councils

- Leicestershire Equalities Challenge Group (LECG)
- Vistablind
- Leicestershire GATE (Traveller, gypsy and roma community group)
- Leicestershire deaf forum
- NHS
- Leicestershire Police
- East Midlands Ambulance Service
- Fire Service

All groups have been invited to comment on the Strategy using the survey link or by getting in touch with the programme team to arrange face to face or virtual briefings.

23. An in-person session is scheduled with Leicestershire Equality Challenge Group (LECG) for 27th November 2024, although outside of the consultation period, the session will enable the Council to ensure any implications from discussion are taken forward as part of Strategy implementation.
24. At the time of writing this report (28th October 2024) and 6 weeks into the consultation, 137 responses to the survey have been received (this is in addition to the original 316 responses to the informal customer engagement survey completed prior to formal consultation). The current profile of respondents is that 58% were a Leicestershire resident, 20% family/friend of a Leicestershire resident, 18% a County Council employee, 2% parish or district council, and 2% other.

Once the consultation closes, a full analysis of responses broken down by different protected characteristics will be undertaken to identify any specific trends in the feedback received, before final necessary changes to the strategy are made ahead of Cabinet approval on 17th December 2024.

25. Current feedback indicates:
 - a. 59% strongly agree or tend to agree with the vision, 22% strongly disagree or tend to disagree, and the remaining 19% neither agreeing nor disagreeing.
 - b. Across the principles contained in the Strategy, over 72% of respondents either strongly agree or tend to agree with these principles, with the exception of the principle relating to “continuous improvement: in learning, innovation, service redesign, performance, impact and results” which received slightly less support.
 - c. 63% strongly agree or tend to agree with the overall Strategy and 14% strongly disagree or tend to disagree (the remaining 23% neither agreeing nor disagreeing).
26. Whilst analysis is still underway, some of the key points arising from the consultation responses received so far are as follows:
 - a. Those in support generally felt it was the right thing to do, was logical and made sense.
 - b. Honest and transparent communication is important to people.
 - c. Where people are less in support of the vision, its principles and the Strategy overall, is primarily where people have doubt that it is possible to achieve this with less money, and through their dissatisfaction of how the Authority’s customer service approach currently works in general.

- d. There is a strong need for people to still be able to talk to people and to ensure contact routes are clear and in plain English.
- e. There is a need to communicate in different ways depending on the issue, for example automated responses are not always appropriate.
- f. Target setting and customer care training is needed.
- g. The Strategy sets out good ideas, as long as they are put into practice.
- h. The strategy has a strong technology emphasis, particularly in the way the principles are written; this needs to be balanced with how staff behave and act to support customers which needs to be a focus.

Equality Implications

27. An equality impact assessment (Appendix C) has been undertaken as part of strategy development, the assessment has informed the engagement and consultation activities as well as the current draft of the strategy. Once consultation has been completed, any issues highlighted will be picked up and addressed in the final draft.
28. Key concerns within the assessment are primarily associated with the protected characteristics of age and disability; such customers are at risk of being excluded if there is no human contact during a communication, particularly where services are primarily online, or if journeys are not simple to navigate or information is not clear.
- Age - Through engagement undertaken so far, those over the age of 75 are more likely to state that non digital forms of communication are a preference, although it must be noted that 50% (total of 14 survey responses) of this cohort stated that nothing prevented them from going online, demonstrating a shift in older people engaging with digital channels.
 - Disability - 79% of respondents (a total of 58 people) reporting to have a disability or long term illness classed the online channel as either very important or fairly important to them; this demonstrates the importance of making online journeys accessible for all.

It is only the minority of customers even within these protected characteristics, that are likely to need additional provisions by exception, and such routes will need to continue to be available.

Human Rights Implications

29. There are no human rights implications arising from the information contained in this report.

Other Relevant Impact Assessments

30. The Customer Programme will contribute positively to the overall environment and carbon agendas, due to reduction in paper processes and postage.

Background papers

Leicestershire County Council's Strategic Plan 2022 – 2026 -

<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/about-the-council/council-plans/the-strategic-plan>

County Council, 21 February 2024 – MTFS 2024/25 – 2027/28
<https://democracy.leics.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=134&MId=7305&Ver=4>

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

31. None.

Officer(s) to Contact

Jayne Glasgow, Assistant Director, Corporate Resources
Telephone: jayne.glasgow@leics.gov.uk
Email: 0116 3054116

Derrabella Hadley, Head of Customer Service, Corporate Resources
Telephone: 0116 3052693
Email: Derrabella.hadley@leics.gov.uk

Katy Murphy, Customer Programme Manager, Transformation Unit
Telephone: 0116 3059243
Email: katy.murphy@leics.gov.uk

Appendices

Appendix A – Draft Customer Experience Strategy

Appendix B – Informal Customer Engagement Report

Appendix C – Equalities Impact Assessment